

Michael walks the line between our world and the world of the supernatural. He handles problems that other can't. He's a werewolf for hire. But if he's not careful he might bite off more than even a werewolf can chew.

Blood Curse: Werewolf for Hire Book One

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A wolf has to look out for his pack...

I could see them now. They were in the trees just ahead of me, set up behind some bushes so they'd have a good view of anyone approaching the van. Sam was tied to a tree behind them, blood dripping from his mouth and a nasty looking cut above his left eye. They couldn't have been at this long, the blood hadn't even started to dry. Sam started to stir and groaned loudly. At the sound, the man closest to me stood up, hunched over and made his way back to where Sam was tied up.

"That's it Gringo" he said as he drew a nasty looking machete. "You ain't making anymore noise... ever." He smiled wickedly as he brought the blade up, preparing to strike down on the side of Sam's neck.

I snarled and leapt at him. I was in motion before he could start to bring the blade down. Unfortunately, I waited a hair too long. He heard the snarl and turned, managing to get his other arm up in time to block my jaws from locking onto his throat. He had the machete ready and brought it down on me. I knew it was coming and rolled, still locked onto his arm with my jaws. The blade cut into my back haunch but he was the one that screamed as my mouth filled with blood from the torn flesh of his arm....

Blood Curse

A Werewolf for Hire Novel

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this book to two people both of whom are very important to me. The first person is my wife Fiona, for all her love and encouragement. The second person (but no less important) is my maternal Grandmother, Serena Nichols. She helped my parents raise me and was always there supporting me, no matter how much I screwed up. I miss you Granny.

Chapter 1

The man in the grey suit was good, I'll give him that. The first punch he'd thrown had been a feint to put me off balance for a side kick to the ribs that would put a man in the hospital, if it connected. As it was, I was just barely able to recover my balance in time to sidestep the kick and close with him. I managed to catch the outstretched leg with my left arm. Having an opponent's leg is not as much of an advantage as you would expect when you are fighting someone who is well trained. Sure enough, Grey Suit grabbed at my free arm in an attempt to flip me off of him. I lifted his leg as high as I could and kicked the side of his left knee. The angle was good and the knee gave out allowing me to knock him off balance and drive him forcefully into the stone wall behind him. He was dazed at this point and a quick jab to the temple put him out. It would have been no problem to finish him, but that wasn't necessary and I didn't need anymore blood on my hands, even if it was just another hired gun.

I patted him down and quickly found a Glock 10mm pistol in a fancy shoulder rig along with two spare clips of ammunition. I checked the gun's clip and tucked the weapon into the waist of my pants at the small of my back. With my shirt pulled down it wouldn't show to a casual observer and it was within easy reach if needed. I had my own side arm, a Beretta 9mm, but I liked Glock pistols and it wouldn't hurt to pick up a spare. The fact that it would be untraceable to me was just an added bonus.

I dragged Grey Suit's limp body along the edge of the wall until I came to a row of hedges about 15 yards further back from where we were. I thought about it for a minute more and checked his pockets. Sure enough there was a key card there. A quick look in his wallet revealed a small slip of paper with a four digit number on it. This was either his pin number for his bank account or the access code that goes with the key card. I took both the card and the paper and smiled. Sometimes people are too predictable. I then took a small bottle of ether from inside my black jacket and dabbed a bit

onto a cloth. I held it over his mouth and nose until I was satisfied he'd breathed in a good dose. Between the concussion and the ether, I figured I'd have at least a couple of hours before he'd be in any shape to tell anyone what happened.

The lighting along this side of the villa's wall wasn't great. From my earlier surveillance I knew that the darkness was a temporary illusion. If the alarms were tripped, the whole area for 50 yards around the villa would light up as bright as day in the glare of dozens of high-powered halogen lights mounted along the top of the wall at 30 foot increments on all sides. Right now, only every third light was on. I guess even crime lords have to worry about the electric bill sometimes. Whatever the case, the shadows made it much easier for me to move undetected along the wall. I just had to be careful in the bright regions every 60 feet or so.

Having Grey Suit's key card made getting into the compound much simpler. He'd come out of an access door on the back side of the wall encircling the villa. This was the side I'd made my approach on simply because it is the least watched. The fact that only about 20 yards from the wall is a sheer cliff face that drops off about 100 feet into the Pacific Ocean made this the road less traveled. In my book the road less traveled is the path trouble always chooses, but then sometimes I'm a cynical bastard.

I slid the key card into the slot next to the number pad by the door. Once the card was in, a tiny LCD screen blinked to life and asked for my pass code. I typed in the numbers on the paper and was pleased when the small red light on the pad flashed green and I heard the click of the bolt disengaging. I had some equipment with me in a small backpack that would have let me make short work of bypassing the lock, but I never look a gift horse in the mouth.

I opened the door cautiously. According to the hand drawn map I had, this door actually led into the kitchen area of the main house. It was well past two in the morning and I didn't expect to meet anyone in the back pantry of the kitchen, but that didn't mean I shouldn't be careful.

A light was on in the first room I entered. It was a small storage room for dry goods. Since I'd mapped this out as my planned route

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of access to Don Ramirez's office on the second floor, I was glad to see that so far the building was laid out exactly as it appeared on the drawings I had. As I made my way through the rest of the servants' areas on the first floor I found that my maps were worth their weight in gold. I'd have to remember to thank Sam when I got back. I don't know where he gets all his information, but he definitely came through on this one.

It took another 30 minutes or so for me to move through the house and make my way upstairs. The tricky part was once I reached the upstairs office itself. The alarm system for the house and surrounding grounds was geared towards keeping people out. Once inside, you didn't have to think much of it. I'd had to dodge a couple of other "Grey Suits" on my way up here and it was their job to see to security inside the building. Except that was not the case for Ramirez's office. He was in Las Vegas for the week, meeting with several of his "known associates" as the dossier called them. I didn't have a clue what the meeting was about and I didn't care. All I did know was that he was not going to be home again for several days and getting what I had come for was much easier with him out of the way, or so I hoped.

The map showed his office at the end of a short hallway. Sure enough, there it was behind two heavy double oak doors. Another key pad was installed in the wall next to them I briefly considered trying my luck with the pass key I had, but decided that I didn't want to risk tripping the alarm if Grey Suit didn't have authorization to open those doors. I proceeded down the hall and stopped at a door to the left of the office. This was an administrative office for Ramirez's personal assistant and, if the map was right, it held a connecting door. There was no visible alarm system, but just to make sure, I ran a quick sweep with another toy I brought along. This one detected the kind of magnetic fields used in most alarm systems. When I was satisfied it was clear, I tried the lock. Oddly enough it was open. So I simply walked into the assistant's office. It was a neat, well organized little office with very nice, if not overly flashy, furnishings. As I shut the door behind me, I noted the several other doors in the room. One door on the right connected her office

with Ramirez's, and there were two to my left, a supply closet and a bathroom.

The lights in Ramirez's office were not on, but there was a large fish tank positioned between the two doors on the left that was lit up brightly to show off the tropical fish inside. Salt water fish, what a nightmare to keep those alive. Of course I generally consider the only good fish to be the one sliced up for my sushi. I did appreciate the tank for one reason though as it cast its eerie, quivering bluish glow around the room, providing enough light for me to work by.

I knelt by the door to the main office and examined the lock. The same style keypad as the others. I took off the small backpack I'd been wearing and pulled out what could best be described as a mutant palm pilot. The big difference between it and a normal palm, besides the fact that the hardware and software inside had been significantly upgraded, was the thin, flat ribbon cable running from the palm's top and ending in a card almost exactly like the one I'd removed from Grey Suit. I inserted the card in the security slot and started the program on the palm.

While the program ran through all its voodoo-witch doctor electronic magic, I pulled a small box from my bag. This contained a fingerprint kit which I used to dust the key pad. It quickly became apparent which numbers were the commonly pushed ones and I paused the palm's program and entered that data. When it started up again, the palm ran for less than a minute when it stopped and the light on the keypad flashed from red to green. I smiled as I heard the faint "click" of the lock opening.

I opened the door so slowly that it took a full minute for me to get it wide enough to look into the room. There was some light coming in from a large bay style window in the back of the office revealing the expensive looking furnishings within. Heavy antique chairs with leather cushions; a huge, intricately carved oak desk with a black marble top; and a fireplace to one side with a carved marble mantle that matched the desk top. I used a small mirror to check the areas I couldn't see without opening the door further. I didn't see anything, so I cautiously entered the room.

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I found what I was looking for right away. On the wall opposite me there was a large portrait of a strikingly handsome man posed holding a Winchester rifle in his arms and surrounded by hounds. The face in the painting was Ramirez, but the artist had taken some probably not unadvised artistic license when it came to his body. The man in the painting looked like a professional athlete ready to spring into action. The real Enrico Ramirez hadn't sprung into action for anything other than dinner for quite a while. I gave the frame of the painting a tug and it swung out on concealed hinges to reveal the small wall safe hidden behind.

The safe was electronically locked with yet another combination keypad. I was about to begin the tedious process of cracking the safe when the double doors to my right burst open. The room must have been sound-proofed because I should have heard the three lugs coming a mile off. Dressed in loose fitting camo-pants and jackets, and carrying automatic weapons (the venerable AK 47 assault rifle favored by third world thugs everywhere) they had kicked open the door. One had his rifle leveled squarely at me as the other two began to advance, smiling evilly as they came closer with their weapons raised.

Chapter 2

“Step away from the safe and keep your hands where I can see them.” The one by the doorway barked at me in thickly accented Spanish.

I speak Spanish fluently but I decided to go for a quick feint. If you are going to escape a situation like this, your best chance is in the very first few minutes while your opponents do not have you fully under control and don't know your capabilities.

“I don't understand you! I'm here from the gas company to check your wiring!” I said slapping the biggest, stupidest grin on my face I could manage and backing away from the men approaching me. “You've gotta hell of a squirrel issue here, let me tell you.” I continued and pointed at the safe on the wall.

The man in the doorway was still watching me with his gun casually pointed in my general direction. He obviously felt like I wasn't a real threat since I had no visible weapons and they outnumbered me three to one. “Hands up, you stupid ass or I'll kill you now!” he growled and motioned with the barrel of his rifle.

As the two men had approached slowly, I'd been backpedaling to keep my distance... until I felt my back hit the desk. I stumbled a little, like it caught me off balance. Then everything happened at once. The goons coming in at me took the stumble as an opening, and moved in quickly to grab my arms, each dropping his gun to let it hang by a strap from his shoulder. I had reached back with my hands as if to steady myself and grabbed the handles of two leaf-bladed throwing knives I had tucked away in gravity holsters on my back under my jacket. A snap of the clasp holding each knife in place and they dropped smoothly into my hands. As the first thug grabbed my left arm above the elbow with both hands, I brought my forearm up and stabbed him in the right bicep. The knife went in up to the hilt and, needless to say, he let go and grabbed at his now useless arm to remove the knife, the point of which was sticking out the other side.

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The other one had stepped directly between me and the man at the door. As I stabbed the one on the left, I twisted, pulling that arm the rest of the way free and I brought up my right arm, holding the other knife. The twist had put the second man on my right side. He bear hugged me, actually picking me up off the ground and pinning my upper arms. I was still able to move my lower arms and I stabbed down and back with the knife in my right hand as hard as I could. I felt it sink into his right thigh and my hand jarred as the knife hit bone. He dropped me as one of his hands grabbed the knife and the other groped almost blindly for me. I grabbed the grasping hand with both of my own and twisted his wrist sharply down and around, locking the arm at full extension and forcing his shoulder down.

The man by the door charged in with his gun pointed at me but not firing. I had control of the man with the knife in his leg and was using my leverage to maneuver the bigger man, keeping him between me and the barrel of the rifle. As the door goon got closer, I shoved with all my strength against the locked arm of *Mr. Knife-in-my-leg* and he stumbled backwards. Only the grip I had on his arm prevented him from falling. Gravity and inertia were there to pick up where my arm left off when I let go and he fell backwards into the third man as he advanced. I grabbed another knife from my belt and threw it into the third goon who was already recovered from his stumbling collision and was raising the AK-47 to fire.

The distance was short for a knife throw, not more than six or seven feet and the knife hit home right where I intended. The blade was now sticking out of the gunman's right shoulder just above the arm pit. The rifle fell to the floor as I leapt, slamming into him hard and knocking him over. I followed him down and grabbed his greasy hair on each side of his head. One quick slam and he was out. Unfortunately the man with the knife in his arm had extracted it and was coming at me with it gripped in his left hand. I was still on all fours on top of the now unconscious man. Instead of rising up, I rolled left and kicked out, catching his knife hand on the inside as I rolled. The knife flew from his hand and stuck in the wooden paneling of the wall a few feet from the safe.

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Despite losing the knife, the man kept coming, yelling out a comment about my mother that I won't repeat and I am fairly certain isn't true. I ducked under a clumsy haymaker punch he threw with his good arm, and the ridge of my hand met at the base of his skull in a sharp chop before he could recover. He went out and I turned my attention to the last man, the one with the knife in his leg. He wasn't moving and I could see that he'd landed badly and was also out cold.

I checked the hall and didn't hear any alarms or see anyone coming, but that didn't mean much. I closed the double doors and picked up one of the discarded machine guns. The lock on the doors was splintered but the handles were still in place. I took the gun and hung it by its strap over the door handles then twisted it and looped it again over the door handle. A quick spin and it was tied off tight. I didn't think it would hold long, but the doors were sturdy and it should slow down any visitors. I jammed one of the nice leather backed chairs under the other door at an angle, and then I returned my attention to the safe.

No time now for subtlety, I rummaged in my backpack and pulled out a sealed tube. I snapped off the end and curled it like a toothpaste tube spreading a thick gray paste in a line around the edge of the safe's door. When that was done, I squeezed out a bit extra into a little mound in the corner and stuck a small silver cap in it. I sidestepped with my back to the wall and pressed the button on a small transmitter. If you were hoping for a jarring explosion, you'd be disappointed by the exaggerated pop and sizzle that followed. After about 15 seconds, the thermite derivative and magnesium detonator had done their job and the safe door thumped loudly to the floor, its edges still glowing white hot.

It was a fairly large model for a wall safe, with three small shelves inside. The first shelf held several bundles of cash in various currencies; I skipped over this and went to the second shelf. It held what appeared to be a gold plated Ruger Nighthawk pistol, and ammunition for it, as well as a black velvet box, the sort you'd use to hold a very valuable piece of jewelry. The third shelf held the prize I was after. Six small figures, each about the size of a Barbie

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doll, two female, four male. Each had a tag tied to the leg stating a different name and each one had a small pouch tied neatly around its neck. I didn't know what each pouch contained specifically, but I knew it would be hair, nail clippings, a vial of blood (with anti-coagulant mixed in) or some other similar item collected from the person named on the tag. I reached for the figures. The next thing I knew, I was laying against the far wall, smoke rising from my gloved hand. The fingers of the gloves were now burned and cracked, but at least my fingers didn't show any signs of damage.

I got to my feet a little unsteadily, and decided that I'd been luckier than I thought considering the force of the ward had knocked me across the room. I went back to the safe and studied the contents again. Nothing inside the safe showed any sign that it had even been disturbed.

I pulled a small crystal on a silver chain from my front pocket. I should have done this before I messed with the safe at all, but I had been so distracted by the mundane that I forgot the whole reason I was here and what that could mean for security.

I held the crystal close to the money on the bottom shelf and the assorted contents of the second shelf. Nothing from the money but I did get a faint glow when the crystal was near the ammunition. Probably cursed bullets. Mean son of a bitch! Even if you survive the shot, you get stuck with some other bit of nastiness. I moved the crystal up to the third shelf and it glowed brightly when I waved it near the figures. The glow faded as I moved the crystal farther from the figures. I smiled. I may not be able to conjure a puff of smoke, but I know sloppy warding when I see it.

I removed the biggest item in the small pack I was carrying. The intricately carved wooden box looked like a fine cigar box but was covered in a writing I couldn't understand and had finely worked silver hinges and clasp. I opened the box, triggering a spell laid on it. The runic writing lit up in a pale green color. I reached into the safe and slowly pulled out the shelf that the dolls were resting on. Sure enough, it slid out just like it was designed to (adjustable shelves are handy). I tipped the contents of the shelf into the cigar box.

The box did not look as though it would hold all the figures, but they fell unceremoniously into it without a hitch. Then, just because, I took the second shelf out and dumped its contents in as well. I only wanted the ammunition and the gun, but until I had a chance to have Tabitha look at the bullets, and figure out what was on them, I wasn't going to even touch them. Despite my earlier mistake, I am generally much more careful when dealing with magical items.

I took one last look into the box before closing it. The gun, ammunition, figures and the velvet jewelry case were all jumbled inside with what appeared to be plenty of additional room. I closed the lid and watched the writing flash from green to red and then the glow faded. The silver clasp was now tarnished and looked rusted. When I held the crystal next to the box there wasn't even a spark. A deck of magician's playing cards wouldn't read as mundanely as the box. Perfect.

I placed the box back in my bag, and threw the cash from the safe in on top of it. Waste not, want not, I always say! Now I just had to figure out how to get out of here. At that moment, I heard a banging at the door and a number of voices apparently shouting from outside (good sound proofing). An intercom on the desk barked to life with the sound of an authoritative voice speaking in heavily accented English. "Gringo, you can get out of here alive if you open the door and give up. Otherwise we gonna come in and you are never gonna come out!" His thick accent would have made his words sound comical, except for the deadly nature of the situation.

I dragged one of the unconscious men over and laid him out across the foot of the door. He was a heavy guy and made an excellent dead weight.

"Hey gringo, don't be a damn fool. Give up and you might just get out of here alive, heh. What do you say?" He paused. "I'll give you one minute to think about it.

Just what I needed. Tuco from "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly" threatening me in marginal English. I checked the side door to make sure it was locked and that the chair I placed in front of it was secure. I took my backpack off, and stripped off my clothes. I

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stuffed them into the pack with everything else except the Glock I'd taken earlier. I chambered a round in it and stepped around the desk. The view from the window was excellent. I could see for miles in the pale light of the half moon. The ocean waves rolling in the distance, the security lights that had been dark when I came in, now blazing to life lighting up the courtyard below and the grounds outside. Oh yeah, and a whole lot of guys with guns running around both inside and outside the villa's high stone wall.

I stepped back from the window and bunched up the straps on the backpack, putting both of them in my mouth. I raised the Glock and first shot five random rounds into the double doors behind me. I shot high and figured I wouldn't hit anyone on the other side, but at the same time it would most likely startle them and give me a bit of confusion to work with.

Sure enough, a second after I stopped firing, the door began to splinter as it was hit by heavy fire from the other side. In the confines of the room the sound was deafening, and the shrapnel from the door was whizzing dangerously around me, but I was already on my way out. I emptied the rest of the rounds in a quick spasm of fire directed at the window behind the desk. I dropped the gun even as the last spent casing popped from the side ejector slot.

The window had shattered outward under the fire and I leapt as hard and far as I could. I willed the change as my feet left the ground and felt my body shift. It wasn't an instant change, but it didn't have a lot of dramatic movie effects either. If you were looking up from the courtyard 20 feet below as I leapt out, you'd see the shape of a medium sized man, and then it would be like I went out of focus and by the time you finished blinking to clear your eyes, the man was gone and only the shape of a large wolf would remain.

If you kept watching, you'd see that wolf, with a backpack in its muzzle, land gracefully in the courtyard, right in front of two startled men, and then bound off before they could react. By the time the men in the house had broken into the office and gotten to the shattered window to look out, they would just catch a glimpse of

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the wolf leaping to the top of a truck and from there over the high wall and out of sight. Tell me I can't make an exit when I have to!

Chapter 3

Because of the dramatic escape and dash across the countryside to the forest, I was forced to abandon the small boat I'd rented to get me to the base of the cliff unobserved. I wasn't too worried. I'd rented the boat from a local fisherman. It was an unmarked piece of junk and I didn't see any way it could be traced back to him or me when it was found. I'd paid the man \$100 U.S. to use the boat, no questions asked. That was easily more than twice what it was worth.

The woods near the villa were thick, dark and (to a human) scary looking. When I am a wolf my perceptions change accordingly. I saw the area as extremely inviting. It would hide me from my enemies and allow me to hunt with ease if I so desired.

With my hearing and other senses enhanced, the gloom of the forest was as clear as day. I could hear shouting and motors, even the occasional gun shot, from a few miles behind me. Those noises faded as I quickly moved deeper into the wilderness. I looked up through the trees and found the moon. Based on its position, I was actually running ahead of schedule. I relaxed my pace from a run to more of a decent trot and took in my surroundings.

Men had come into this forest recently hunting. I could smell the stench associated with gunfire and death. Modern weapons don't emit the clouds of smoke that old style black powder guns did, but cordite still leaves a distinct scent. Soon enough I came upon the body of a deer. It was a doe; she'd been shot through the chest twice by a high powered rifle and it looked like she'd died almost immediately. Out of curiosity I sniffed around a bit more and found where the hunters had been. There had been three men, all drinking heavily from the taint their scents carried. They had been hiding out behind a thicket of bushes barely 50 feet from where the deer lay. I honestly don't know how they could have been quiet enough for the deer to wander that close to them without realizing they were there, but I guess it was their lucky day.

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I don't object to hunting. I can't without being hypocritical. Part of the nature of my gift (to some it's a curse, but not to me) is that I do have certain urges that must be satisfied from time to time. So once or twice a month I will hunt in the forests near my home. I will hunt, kill and feed. It is not pretty or nice, but it is, pardon the pun, the nature of the beast. This however was not true hunting. This was needless slaughter. If you kill it, you should eat it. The wolf in me, or I guess the "me in the wolf", understood this concept clearly and was sickened by the pointless death.

I jerked my head back the direction I'd come from. I could hear movement and voices behind me. They were not that close, but I was wasting my lead sniffing around instead of heading for the alternate rendezvous I'd set up.

I sniffed the air and took a moment to figure out my bearings in the woods. Soon enough, I caught wind of what I was looking for and bolted off to my left away from the approaching men.

It took me less than ten minutes to cover the remaining few miles to the rendezvous. I'd found the little-used dirt road the night before when I'd scouted the villa out in wolf form. The van we were using looked like an old UPS van, right down to the crappy brown paint on it. Hell, for all I know it was an old UPS van. I could make out its shape through the trees even before I came to the edge of the woods around the road.

I was still a good ten yards or so from the tree line when the other smells around the van finally cut through the stench of patchouli incense, a small brazier full of it was set up and burning behind the van to act as my homing beacon should I need it. (With the wind on my side I could smell that awful stuff at a range of five miles easily). I should have picked up on it earlier, but I hadn't. I dropped my bag and crept silently forward.

The van was there, but I couldn't see Sam. He should have been there waiting for me. But I could smell him; he was here or at least nearby, and then I picked up something else about his scent. It was mixed with blood. The hackles on my back rose and my teeth came out of my muzzle in an evil, silent snarl. I moved along the tree line outside of unaided human sight until I was about 30 yards up the

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road from the front of the van. No sign of anyone around so I bolted across the lane into the woods on the other side and proceeded back towards the van. That's when I heard them. They were speaking quietly in Spanish and I cursed the patchouli for covering their scents. I was just going to have to breakdown and get a GPS system for stuff like this. It is the twenty-first century after all.

"Hector said to hold him," the first voice said in just above a whisper.

"Well he's held isn't he?" another voice sharply replied. I heard a sound like someone smacking an uncooked steak against a marble counter.

"Stop it man! If you bust his jaw up, he won't be able to talk."

"Does it matter? What can he say that we don't know? This is private land and he was trespassing, so we shoot him and dump the body out in the woods. These are the boss's lands; the police don't come here without an invitation. Why are we even bothering? When the other one shows up, we grab him and we are heroes man."

I could see them now. They were in the trees just ahead of me, set up behind some bushes so they'd have a good view of anyone approaching the van. Sam was tied to a tree behind them, blood dripping from his mouth and a nasty looking cut above his left eye. They couldn't have been at this long, the blood hadn't even started to dry. Sam started to stir and groaned loudly. At the sound, the man closest to me stood up, hunched over and made his way back to where Sam was tied up.

"That's it Gringo," he said as he drew a nasty looking machete. "You ain't making any more noise... ever." He smiled wickedly as he brought the blade up, preparing to strike down on the side of Sam's neck.

I snarled and leapt at him. I was in motion before he could start to bring the blade down. Unfortunately, I waited a hair too long. He heard the snarl and turned, managing to get his other arm up in time to block my jaws from locking onto his throat. He had the machete ready and brought it down on me. I knew it was coming and rolled, still locked onto his arm with my jaws. The blade cut into my back

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haunch but he was the one that screamed as my mouth filled with blood from the torn flesh of his arm.

As a wolf, I weigh in at more than 300lbs of muscle, bone and razor sharp teeth and claws. So when I hit him, he went down. I shook my head violently back and forth and was pleased when I tore away from him with a mouthful of moist flesh from his forearm. He continued to scream as I jumped from his prone form just in time. I'd seen the other man begin to move in my peripheral vision, and saw him level his gun. He would have probably put a bullet neatly through my back if I hadn't jumped. Instead, his shot went through where I was a second before. Since I wasn't there, the bullet carried on to the next possible stopping point, which was the prone man's chest.

"Oh Jesus, Miguel!" the first man spat as I charged in on him.

He was still in shock from shooting his friend and I slammed into him like a freight train. No subtlety here and no mercy. Like I said, when I am the wolf, my perceptions change. He was an enemy and had hurt one of my pack. That was enough for me and I was more than enough for him. He screamed as I let the wolf in me have his way. Fortunately for him it didn't take long for the screams to stop.

I rose with the taste of blood filling me with fury, and howled into the dark night.

Chapter 4

I sniffed around Sam and determined he was OK, just out cold. My back leg hurt, but not badly. The machete hadn't hit with much force because I was too close. Even as I watched, the blood flow was abating and the wound beginning to close. Popular myth is that werewolves can only be killed by silver. That is not the case; however, we are extremely hard to kill. The mystical forces at work in the gift allow a were to heal from most wounds much faster than a normal human. The only time this isn't true is when the wound is inflicted with silver. That is where the myth got started. Silver itself won't kill me, but it will stop the gift from allowing me to heal quickly. Fortunately, these lackeys hadn't been carrying silver weapons. Who did unless they were gunning for one of my kind?

I ran back into the woods and picked up my discarded pack, checking that the box was still inside. I'd hate to have to go doubling back looking for it. After I was satisfied that I hadn't lost anything, I trotted back to the truck. Once I'd cleared the trees, I changed back to my "normal" self. I didn't bother getting dressed; instead I raised the sliding door on the back of the truck and climbed in.

The inside of the truck was two rows of shelving bolted to the outer wall with an alley in the middle holding a couple of folding chairs. I maneuvered into the thin area between the shelves and found a box with extra clothes on the floor. I pulled on some loose fitting jeans and a pair of running shoes, then picked up a first aid kit from a case on the side wall above one of the shelves.

I dropped my pack onto the other shelf and headed back out to where Sam was still slumped over against the tree. I stopped by the body of the first man and picked up his machete. Sam's arms were pulled behind him, and his hands were bound together behind the tree with some kind of nasty looking knots that appeared to get tighter as he had pulled on his hands to get free.

I used the blade to split the rope while making sure Sam didn't fall over. His hands were red and the skin around his wrists where

the rope was digging in looked torn up and angry, but I didn't see any sign of any real damage to his hands as I worked the knots loose.

After his hands were free, I took a capsule of smelling salts out and broke it under his nose. Sam snorted lightly once, then got a good lungful of the ammonia smell and started to life.

"God bless, Michael! You took your sweet time getting here!" he said shaking his head and pushing the salts away from him. "It's a good thing you showed up when you did too, I was getting ready to really open up a can of whoopass on those two sons of bitches."

Sam was smiling when he said that and I figured he was OK, although he did need me to help him stand up and walk him back to the van.

He glanced briefly at the bodies of the two men as we went by but didn't say anything. I appreciated that a lot more than he probably realized. When we got to the truck I put him in the passenger seat and then caught a glimpse of myself in the side mirror. Blood was all over my chest and my face below my cheekbones. There was a splattering of it on my arms that I'd noticed but I hadn't picked up on the real gore. I turned and went to the back of the truck. I dug out a gallon of distilled water and a couple of rags and began to clean up. The blood was still wet so it came off easily. When I was finished cleaning up, I dropped the rag on the ground. I wasn't worried about any CSI types checking out this crime scene.

I got a couple of bottled waters out and took one to Sam. He smiled and took it from me. I downed half of mine as I walked over to the driver's side of truck, started it up and got the hell out of these woods.

I didn't want to do it, but I'd killed again. In the back of my mind I could feel the wolf in me pacing around like a caged beast. The wolf had reveled in the killing and the taste of blood and I could feel his anger. Not at the men we'd killed, but at me. The wolf didn't understand why I cared that I had killed them. The wolf's view was a simple one, they hurt one of the pack, they were enemies, they died. No remorse, no pity, and no understanding for

Blood Curse

why it was that the man didn't feel the same way. I paused for a second and prayed quietly to myself. A quick prayer for the dead, for my soul and most of all a prayer that I never stopped caring that I had taken a life. The day I stopped caring would most likely be the day the wolf would run free and the man would become a memory.

Chapter 5

It took us the better part of two days to make it back across the border. We drove across the interior of Mexico for a day and then up. There hadn't been any real sign of pursuit. Sam had acquired a police scanner and we heard one report that a couple of poachers on a private nature preserve near the small coastal village of Sigundo had killed two of the volunteer rangers in the park. Apparently, we had been poaching deer in the preserve and had shot and killed the two unarmed volunteers when we were discovered. The only description of the poachers was that we were Americans and that we were most likely traveling in a van.

I got the feeling that Ramirez's men were grasping at straws to try and catch us. The men I'd knocked out could piece together a description: white male, mid-thirties, about 5'10, in good physical condition, close cropped brown hair; but they really didn't have a clue where I'd gone. They were assuming the van the other two men had found (and obviously called in) was my getaway vehicle, but they didn't even have a description of Sam or the van beyond "another white male driving a beat up old van."

We ditched the van at a small mission just outside Juarez. The head of the mission, Father Antonio Dominguez, was thrilled to have such a vehicle in good mechanical condition and he assured us it would be put to good use. Although I am not Catholic, I had Father Dominguez hear my confession. I didn't confess about the killing, but I confessed to the desires I'd felt about it and he told me to be strong.

"There is darkness and light in us all, my son." He paused and looked at me through the lattice divider in the confessional. "It is the choices you make that set the path you walk. Some people think it is the other way around but they are just making excuses. Do what is right and righteousness will follow. Via con Dios, my son."

That afternoon we crossed the border. We had hiked into Juarez and picked up our car from a secure garage I rented for the occasion. Then we crossed over into the US at the El Paso boarder checkpoint.

Blood Curse

We had come in as technical consultants visiting Juarez to set up a new security system for one of the automotive suppliers springing up in the area. A few U.S. dollars in the right hands and we even had all the right paperwork, including signed purchase orders from our client. Sam handled those details. I am good at a lot of stuff, but not the “playing it cool” to get the fake documentation. That was all Sam’s gig.

Sam called Tabitha from his cell phone once we were across the border. Turns out for all his technical skills and masterful hands at shady dealings, he hadn’t handled our cell phone plans so well and they had stopped working the minute we crossed over into Mexico last week. This was the first time he’d been able to check in with her since the night of the job. After the initial briefing, they started talking about some personal stuff, so I decided to take a break and give them some alone time on the phone.

They are quite a pair. Tabitha is a witch and a damn good one too. I don’t know how she’d hooked up with Sam. He was a mundane and the folks who live on our side of what we call “the magic line” don’t tend to date outside the community. Since the mundane world doesn’t even know or, more to the point, doesn’t really want to know that there is a magical world, it makes for tough revelations if you intermingle. Not that it doesn’t happen, but I’ve heard of a few cases where someone couldn’t handle knowing about the other world that exists outside of their neat little ordered, high tech, “got-to-get-to-work-by-8am” world. Generally those folks end up with a healthy cocktail of anti-psychotic drugs and regular visits to the head doctor. Sometimes though, it goes really wrong and there is death involved. Unfortunately, more often than not, it’s the one from our side that usually gets hurt. Sometimes it’s just the pain of a break-up, but it can also end violently when their scared partner does something unexpected. So when they pull the gun, raise the hammer, light the torch or whatever, we aren’t ready for it. If the person is lucky, they get arrested and go to jail or die with their partner. If they are unlucky, they get away with it and someone from our side is allowed to seek justice. That’s usually a lot worse on them than prison or a quick death, believe me.

Nic Brown

When Sam got off the phone we got back on the road. It was about another ten hour drive to Dallas and I wanted to drop Sam off, ditch the equipment and take a long rest. It turns out that two out of three would be as good as it gets.

Chapter 6

I had left my car at Sam and Tabitha's place and was going to pick it up when I dropped him and the equipment off. They have a ranch about an hour south of Dallas near Italy, Texas. It's a ranch pretty much in name only. They had a lot of animals running around on it, but mostly the 4000 acre estate had been planted with trees by Tabitha's father about 25 years ago. This meant they had a small forest full of restocked wildlife. I loved it and with their permission I spent most nights of the full moon roaming the grounds around their home. Tabitha's father had been a wizard of some power and had laid down an enchantment around the grounds. Nothing obvious, but it made a person who wasn't invited onto the grounds feel a strong urge to leave, and it made animals inside their land feel a strong urge to stay. This gave them privacy and a natural sanctuary.

Tabitha was waiting on the porch for us when we pulled in. As always her beauty struck me. She was almost six feet tall and somehow managed to combine a well defined runner's physique with all the alluring curves a man could ask for. I was also struck by how different she and Sam were. They were both of a similar height, with Sam edging her out by no more than an inch (not at all if she wore heels). She had dark skin the color of fine chocolate, complemented by her long dark hair that usually rode in a ponytail that dangled to the small of her back. Sam on the other hand had the pale complexion that favors so many natural redheads. His hair was cut close to the scalp in an almost military regulation buzz cut. Although not fat, Sam was not anyone's idea of a well cut man. Tabitha on the other hand, was well muscled and often went running with me when the opportunity arose.

"What the HELL have you done to my husband you sorry bastard?!" she said with a sideways grin on her face as she jumped the steps of the porch and grabbed Sam in a fairly passionate embrace. It probably would have been more passionate if Sam hadn't been wincing as she hugged him close.

“Hey, I thought chicks dig guys who come home with battle scars!” Sam protested after they finally parted and then added, “Go easy on the ribs honey. They encountered some size 12 men’s footwear repeatedly the other night and I still don’t feel too great.”

“Seriously Michael, I didn’t realize when Sam told me he’d seen some action that he was really hurt.” She was now giving me a gaze that was bordering on angry.

“I’m fine Tab, in fact I wouldn’t be if teen-wolf over here hadn’t made a very timely entrance.”

I looked Tabitha right in the eye and didn’t blink. “I did my best to keep him out of harm’s way but honestly Tabitha, you know as well as I do that we all take risks in this.”

I didn’t break the gaze and kept my expression neutral. Tabitha wouldn’t bat an eye at putting herself in danger, but she was sometimes a mother hen to Sam and if this was going to be an issue I’d rather get it out of the way now than deal with it later. I depended on both of them a lot. They were among the few real friends I had and if it was a problem then I would have to find someone else to help with the work.

“I know Michael; I guess I just worry because I wasn’t there to protect his sorry ass.”

“Hey! My ass isn’t sorry, I’ve been working out.”

Tabitha ignored this and came over and hugged me. I tried to ignore that I was being pressed thoroughly into some of the nicest of the before mentioned curves she had to offer.

“You brought him and yourself home and that is what’s important.” she said kissing my forehead and letting me go.

“Now, come inside and let’s get the holding box into my study. I want to...” She had turned and was leading the way into the house when she suddenly stopped and turned back to us. I almost ran into Sam as I was fumbling for the box within my bag.

“Honey what’s wrong?” Sam asked as we both saw the look on her face. Her eyes were staring at the bag in my hands and looked like two chips of dark ice. She was concentrating hard and had started mumbling under her breath. Suddenly she stopped.

Blood Curse

“Michael! Throw the box on the ground in front of you RIGHT NOW!” she yelled and started towards me.

I didn’t wait. I yanked the box out and as I did, I saw that the runes on the outside were glowing again, a fiery red now, and smoke was starting to rise from them. As I dropped the box, I realized that part of the red I was seeing was the wood around the edges of the runes burning, yet the box did not even feel warm to the touch.

“Step back from it, Michael! Sam! Go and get my bag out of the study... Hurry man!” She never took her eyes off the box and even as I backed away, she knelt down beside it. We were halfway up the large driveway in front of their house and as I watched Tabitha pulled a hunk of chalk out of her jeans and quickly drew a circle around the box, which was now smoking considerably from all over, almost like a piece of charcoal.

When she completed the circle, she stood, drew a small Swiss army knife from her other pocket and pricked her thumb with it. A couple of drops of blood swelled up and she hunched back down and said something in Latin that I couldn’t understand as she touched the blood to the edge of the circle. The chalk blazed to life like a gunpowder trail where the blood had been placed and it burned a pale green flame that raced around the circle from both directions to meet on the other side forming a ring of green fire on the concrete around the box.

The instant the circle of flame completed, the glow from the runes started to fade.

I stayed back and watched. This was her show and I was just watching from the bench.

A few moments later, Sam came running out with an old style, black leather doctor’s bag and handed it to Tabitha. She sat it on the ground near the circle and began rummaging through it, occasionally setting small items aside.

“I was going to open the box in my study, but when I checked the wards on it they triggered something else” she explained as she continued digging in the bag.

“Michael, what else did you put in there, besides the dolls I mean?”

I thought for a second. “Sam told you the dolls were warded against someone touching them right? Well they didn’t think to ward them against movement, so I scooped them out on the shelf they were resting on and dumped them into the box.”

She had stood up and was clearly becoming impatient with me. “And then what else did you put in there? I set this up to deal with simple protection wards in a very general way, but if you put something else in there, it could cause a reaction with the spell.”

I was feeling a little defensive. “Hey, you didn’t warn me about...”

“Yes Michael, I did. You just don’t pay enough attention. Now did you put anything else magical in the box?”

“Yeah I did. I used the crystal to check the safe’s contents and I found a pistol and some bullets. The bullets had some kind of spell on them; my guess would be they are designed to curse the person who is hit with them.” I added trying to be helpful. “I thought they might be something useful...”

“YOU BROUGHT CURSED BULLETS IN THAT BOX!” Tabitha paced over to me and started poking me in the chest with her finger, pushing me back.

“You...are...the...most... careless... reckless... sorry excuse for a...” each word was being punctuated with a poke in the chest that drove me back step by step until I was back against the van.

I had my hands up and was trying to calm her down, when Sam broke in. “Tabby let it go for now, what do we do about the box?” His voice sounded pained and worried.

Tabitha stopped poking me and turned back to the box, then stomped over to it mumbling something I couldn’t quite catch but could tell was derogatorily aimed at me. I started to approach when she turned and pointed at me. “You stay over there Michael. I don’t want you or Sam near this thing until I can open it safely.” All the anger was gone from her voice and she had taken on a perceptible air of cool, calm command.

Blood Curse

As I watched from my position by the car, she took a container of kosher salt out of her bag and walked in a large circle pouring it in a line at her feet. When it was complete she stepped into the circle and in a much deeper voice than she had any right to use, began chanting rhythmically. (I need to take a Berlitz course in Latin sometime; it makes hanging out with spellcasters more fun if you know what they are saying). Then she said to us, “Don’t break this circle unless I tell you to. I am going to cancel the inner circle and open the box. I don’t want anything to get past me if I can help it.” She then bent down and used the heel of her hand to smear the chalk circle. The green glow faded from the broken circle but as it did, the circle of salt she’d laid down began to shimmer in a much fainter green.

At this point I noticed that although the runes on the box were no longer glowing, the box itself was still smoking. The smoke rose and spread out within the circle, but as it reached the edge it stopped and began moving upward as though in a chimney. It was a neat affect and part of me pondered how high up the smoke would have to travel before it was released to the open sky? It had already created a cloudy layer about a foot above Tabitha that stretched at least ten more feet into the air and was inching its way higher.

Sam had walked wide around the circle and joined me by the car. I started to say something to him but decided to keep my mouth shut and watched as Tabitha pulled out a pentacle necklace she had been wearing on a silver chain under her shirt. I couldn’t see it clearly from where I was, but I’d seen the necklace before. The amulet on the end was a five pointed star with a blood red ruby set in the center. The star was pure gold inlaid on a silver disk with a raised ring of platinum around the edge. That had cost more money than I wanted to consider, but it was one of the items Tabitha used the most and the purity of the heavy metals and the gemstone made it an excellent focus tool for her and she kept a “reserve” of magical energies stored in it, just in case she needed a little boost.

Tabitha pulled a small cloth sack tied with a leather cord from her black bag and opened it. She took a pinch of something powdery out and began to sprinkle it over the box.

“That’s crushed communion wafer” Sam whispered to me. “She’ll spread a layer over the box and then she’ll do a cleansing spell to make sure the box is OK to touch.” He described the actions to me even as Tabitha proceeded through the ritual. The box had completely stopped smoking at this point and looked really no worse for the wear.

Once finished with the powdered wafer, she moved her hands and produced an old fashioned silver key, the kind you’d expect to see going into a jail cell door in an old western. She touched the key to her lips then tapped the latch on the box and said “Open”.

The rust and oxidation that covered the latch and hinges of the box seemed to dissolve right before our eyes like frost melting off a window in the heat. Once the latch and hinges were restored to their original silver luster, Tabitha nonchalantly flipped the latch up and opened the box.

I guess from all the fuss I’d expected a demon to come shooting out like a maniacal Jack- in-the-box, but when she opened the lid nothing happened. She looked into the box and then reached behind her for her bag. She pulled out a set of heavy looking iron tongs like I’d seen in a blacksmith’s shop, only smaller. Tabitha reached into the box with the tongs and began drawing the contents out.

First she removed the black jeweler’s necklace box and laid it on the ground next to her bag. “What was in this box Michael?” she asked as she turned to study it for a minute.

“I don’t know, I didn’t have time to open it, but I decided since I was robbing the rich, and in this case the criminal as well, I would take it. If it’s in a safe, it has to be worth something right?” I shrugged and smiled as I said it. Tabitha snorted and turned back to the holding box.

The next item out was the Ruger Nighthawk Pistol. The gold plating on the gun caught the sunlight and shined brilliantly as she turned and placed it next to the jeweler’s box.

She reached back inside and there was a sharp flash of light. Tabitha didn’t even blink as far as I could tell and proceeded to pull one of the dolls out of the box. She looked over at me “You were right. The wards on this stuff are strong but not well made at all.”

Blood Curse

As if to prove this she picked up the doll she'd just pulled out and held it in her hand.

"First off, they were warded as a group not individually, so just the act of putting them in the box where they could roll around and move apart weakened the spell." She examined the doll in her hand. It was a figure of a soldier, maybe a new G.I. Joe or something like it.

"Secondly, I was able to break the warding quite easily. This wasn't a complicated spell; it's almost what I'd call an "off the shelf" protective spell. Hell, that son of a bitch Ramirez could have read it from a scroll and cast it himself for all the subtlety to it." She studied the doll some more and continued, almost like she was lecturing us. "Now the work on these poppets on the other hand..." she held the doll out for us to see "is clearly the work of someone who knows a lot about hoodoo"

"Hoodoo? I thought those were voodoo dolls." I asked.

Tabitha looked at me and smiled "Voodoo is a religion, Hoodoo is the folk magic associated with it. You don't have to practice Voodoo to use Hoodoo magic, but it does make the work easier and stronger."

She set the doll down again and drew out the remaining figures in the box. There were no more flashes of light, but she still used the tongs. Once all the figures were out she reached in for the bullets. There were 24 of them standing in form fitted holes on a small rectangular wooden tray. She set them down away from everything else and then examined them without touching them.

"Did you notice the markings on the bullets?" she asked as she looked at them.

"No. Like I said, I was kind of in a hurry and just grabbed the rest of the stuff on the spur of the moment"

"Come over here and look at this, but don't break the circle around us." She slid the holder over towards the edge of the circle.

Sam and I both dutifully stepped over and hunkered down to have a look. The rounds had a typical brass casing around them to hold the charge and the bullet itself, but upon closer inspection I could see that is where the similarities ended. Unlike a normal

round with a soft lead bullet in the end, these looked like they were made of some kind of ceramic composite with symbols carved into the outer shell.

“I’m betting whoever did the poppets also put these together.” The ceramic is hollow and based on these markings; the bullets are going to have a drop or two of a nasty potion inside them.” She pulled one of the bullets out of the tray with her long fingers.

“You sure you wanna do that honey, I mean what about the markings?” Sam said nervously. He was always nervous around magic. He was a tech guy through and through, and very few techies dealt well with the much less orderly world of magic.

“They’re fine, they would only become dangerous if you broke them open and then ingested the contents, or if the potion inside were to enter your bloodstream through say, a bullet wound.” She continued to examine the shell. “Master work I must say. Someone paid a lot for these, because this is no parlor magic; this Hoodoo is in some ways even stronger than the force on the poppets.”

“So what happens if they hit you?”

“Well, think of it as a virus,” she explained. “If the potion enters your system, you’re infected. Depending on how it gets in you may have a couple of hours before it kills you, if that is, the bullet didn’t do the job on the initial entry. But it would kill you dead as a doornail, and then you’d wake up to find your soul had gone walk-about and your body was now a zombie”.

“Zombies, like *Night of the Living Dead*, I’m gonna eat your flesh zombies?” I was a bit taken aback by this revelation. I’d encountered a lot of strange supernatural creatures, but never the living dead.

“Sort of like that, but the victim won’t wander around looking for a flesh sandwich, it would be more like intense hypnosis, but with the side affect of slow physical decay. I’d say the corpse could serve as a functioning agent for several months before they lost mobility, if you could put up with the smell that is. They’d be pretty ripe after about a week.” Tabitha wrinkled her nose at that.

“I don’t get it though” I asked as I stood up “if the spell or potion or Voodoo...”

Blood Curse

“Hoodoo” Tabitha corrected.

“Whatever. If the magic doesn’t activate until the potion meets blood, why the light show with the box just now?”

“I don’t know but everything seems calm enough now.” She stood, picked up all of the various items and placed them inside the confines of her black bag. Unlike the box I’d brought the dolls back in, the bag wasn’t enchanted to be bigger on the inside than on the outside, so various items were sticking out of the top where she couldn’t close it. Tabitha stood and broke the outer salt circle with her foot and stepped across the line. The smoke that had been hovering like a cloud in a bar dissipated into the atmosphere as she headed into the house.

“Sam, be a dear and hose off the driveway will you? I don’t want that salt damaging the concrete.” She was walking towards the house now with the bag held in both hands.

“So Michael, since you caused all this trouble, I think it’s only fair you take us to dinner. What do you think?” She was on the porch now waiting patiently at the front door to their house. I jogged up and opened the door for her since she didn’t want to risk spilling the bag.

“Fine, fine, Wendy’s or McDonalds, I hear the dollar menus at both have really improved” I said grinning as she pushed past me.

“In your dreams puppy dog. We’re having steak....”

Chapter 7

We got back from dinner late. Sam and Tabitha offered me one of the numerous spare bedrooms in their place, which was a whole lot bigger than even two packrats like them needed but I declined. It had been a week since I'd slept in my own bed, so I thought it best to head home.

Tabitha would finish examining the contents of the box and once that was said and done, we'd contact our client about turning over the dolls and collecting payment. Apparently Ramirez was using "Hoodoo" to give him some control over a few very influential people. He didn't strike at them directly. Rather, he hit a close family member like a child or a spouse. Do, vote, or pay what he asked and he could end their paralysis, coma, blindness.... Whatever affliction that had suddenly struck them would vanish, only to reappear the next time he needed something. Nasty business and I was glad to throw a wrench into his works, especially since our client was going to pay us very well for neutralizing the threat. Precautions can be taken against that sort of thing before the connection is made, but once it is in place you have to break it before you can do anything else about it.

Home for me was a small ranch-style brick house in a nicer section of the metropolis of Grapevine, Texas, one of the numerous suburbs of Dallas, just north of the DFW (Dallas-Fort-Worth airport for the uninitiated). It wasn't much, but it was more than enough for me since I was on my own again.

I'd had a much bigger place, more in line with the often lucrative nature of the freelance work I did with Sam and Tabitha, but I'd ended up losing it and most of my personal net worth when the now ex-Mrs. Michael Warren had headed for the hills one bright warm day almost a year before. Shelly handled all the book keeping and when she made up her mind to leave, she made sure that she got more than her fair share of the mutual assets. That, her lawyer's skill and my lawyer's damn near criminal incompetence, resulted in a

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less than equitable divorce settlement. Hell, the way things had gone, if we'd had kids the court would have ordered that my DNA be removed from them as part of the settlement. I said earlier that it doesn't always work out too well when folks from the OS get involved with folks from the mundane world. Well sometimes it doesn't even help if you're both from the other side. Natural wolves mate for life; werewolves - well, we aren't always that lucky. It's the civilized side of us I guess.

Anyway, my place was on a couple of acres of land in a residential development. It wasn't the high end of town but it was clean, the neighbors were quiet and that counted for a lot. The front of my house was an open yard but I had the entire back fenced in with an eight foot high brick privacy fence with an electric gate. There was no garage in the front, so I drove around the back access way and opened the gate from my car with the remote. As the door to the garden/driveway swung open, the door to the garage started to rise and the lights came on in the house. I love modern conveniences.

I couldn't pull into the garage as I intended however, because of the man sitting in one of my lawn chairs blocking the entrance. He wasn't alone either. Two rather menacing looking individuals stood just behind him, one to the left and one to the right. I stopped abruptly. They didn't react noticeably to my slightly jarring stop.

I didn't immediately get out of the car. I decided to take a moment and consider my options. Automatic lights had come on when I'd pulled in and I could see most of the garden quite clearly. Other than the plants I'd set out and a few bits of lawn furniture (minus the chair which my visitors had moved into the garage for their own use), the garden to my left was empty. To my right was a narrow bit of space between my car and the fence, so I wasn't too concerned about anyone hiding on that side.

I put the car in park but left it running and the headlights on. I reached into the glove compartment and pulled out my personal Beretta 9mm. I flicked the gun's safety off and chambered a round. My guests weren't overtly bearing arms against me, but they had entered my home uninvited. This told me two things. Number one:

they were not vampires, which in and of itself was a good thing. I knew a few of those folks and didn't relish the idea of dealing with three of them by myself in my backyard, or anywhere else that wasn't in broad daylight for that matter. Number two: they wanted something from me. If they were here just to find something of mine, I'd say they would not have had a hard time finding it. After all, they'd broken into my house without setting off any of my alarms, and the system Sam had put in for me was no slouch job either. If they were here just to kill me... well they sucked at being stealthy, that was for sure.

I had the Beretta in my right hand and was about to open the door when I paused to take a closer look at them. The men on the left and right both had the look of hired help, and not the kind that works in the garden either. They were wearing well-made but not too well fitting dark suits that seemed just a hair loose for them. I figured the suits were cut to allow for a bit more freedom of movement. Despite the loose cut, it was obvious that there was a lot of muscle under the clothes and they carried themselves with an almost casual menace. Since the shorter of the two was at least two inches clear of six feet, I supposed they might look casually menacing even if they were in oversized bunny costumes. Then I noticed that I could see a shoulder holster strap on the one on the left, so they were most likely carrying, even if I couldn't see exactly what. Honestly, I would have been more worried if they weren't carrying guns. In this kind of situation, a gun was a reassuringly mundane threat.

I could see that the one in the middle was built smaller than his associates but since he was sitting and they were standing, it was hard to tell how big he really was. He also had a more casual taste in clothes, wearing a well tailored pair of pants and collared shirt, but no jacket. His right hand rested on the head of a cane with a carved silver end. I couldn't make out what the head of the cane was, but for some reason I got the feeling it would be a wolf's head. He was a mature man, with grey intermingled in his jet black hair, and his features were all sharp edges, as if carved from a piece of flesh colored obsidian. Our eyes met for a moment and that's when I

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noticed the most striking feature about him: his eyes didn't look quite normal. In fact, the irises were blood red. I knew he couldn't really see me, not with the headlights shining in his face, but I still got the distinct impression that those red eyes were cutting through the glare to meet my gaze.

I opened the door of my car and wished for a minute I'd borrowed one of Sam's trucks. I drive a very nicely restored 1968 Camaro SS Convertible and if this didn't go well, it was currently the only thing between me and them. I really need to pick up a better daily driver car I thought for the 100th time as I stepped almost entirely out of the vehicle. I kept my right hand, with the Beretta, concealed inside the car as I stood behind the door. A gun with any kind of real power will poke holes right through most car doors, this one included, but some cover was better than no cover at all.

"The garage sale isn't until next week guys, so maybe you should consider explaining what exactly you are doing in my home." I was trying to keep the anger I felt out of my voice and out of my head by doing a quick mental calming exercise my Kung-Fu instructor had taught me.

The two bruisers didn't bat an eye. The man sitting in the chair between them looked at me for a moment and his face lit up with a warm and friendly smile, which never quite reached his red eyes. "Mr. Warren, I must apologize for the intrusion, but..."

"But nothing." I cut him off and drew my pistol out leveling it at him "I think it's time for you gentlemen to leave"

Both of the big men had moved faster than people that size should be able to. They drew their guns as I pulled mine into view and, before I was done speaking, each had managed to sidestep at least five feet further to the right and left of the man in the chair. They were clearly professionals, not just big guys given guns; it showed in the way they instinctively moved. Their new positions had also made a quick double shot on my part almost impossible. If I went for one, I'd be wide open to the other.

"As I was saying Mr. Warren, I apologize for the intrusion, but I would like to speak with you about some matters of interest to both

of us.” He waved his hand absently over his shoulder and the two men lowered their guns but did not holster them, or step back to their original positions. A small concession on their part and it was certainly not enough to make me relax my stance... or lower my gun.

“Well it’s your dime. Start talking.”

“A mutual acquaintance, Mr. Tomoki Ikeda of the Nippon Trading Consortium, suggested that you might be able to help with a problem that my employer is having.”

We had done some work for Ikeda-san on a number of occasions. The Nippon Trading Consortium handled a lot of special imports and exports in addition to the untold tons of touristy trinkets, shoes, and gadgets that they were known for bringing into North America. Last year, we’d helped him out when a rogue wizard had killed a couple of couriers working for him and made off with an heirloom sword of some considerable value. The fact that the sword was enchanted and could cut through steel as if it were cardboard just added to the fun. I had proof it worked because it took my mechanic three weeks to find a matching replacement door for the one that clumsy-assed spell-slinger had chopped in half when we tracked him down. It wouldn’t be any trouble for me to check this guy out with Ikeda-san so he had upped his believability level some with that reference.

“I’m still listening,” I encouraged, and motioned with the gun for him to continue.

“You are known Mr. Warren, as a man who can get things of a delicate nature done. My employer has a problem and believes that a man of your reputation could take care of it.” He was smiling thinly at me as he continued; it was the kind of smile that made daisies wilt.

“What do *you* believe?” I asked eyeing him more carefully.

“I do not believe in reputations without evidence and so far Mr. Warren, I have not been impressed....”

It was at that moment that I caught the scent. Even when I’m human, I still have slightly better than average sight and hearing, but my sense of smell is easily twice as acute as that of a normal person.

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I wondered if I was being set up here as he talked, because I had picked up the smell of sweat. A woman's sweat. I twitched my head left and saw a blur of motion. I spun and brought the gun up, not to fire, but to block a downward slashing sword blade that was approaching parts of me that are allergic to being split open with sharp metal objects. I caught the blade with the underside of the barrel and it ran down catching on the trigger guard rather than cutting my hand to ribbons, as I brought the gun around in a sweeping arc that intercepted the blade and continued down and to the right.

Even as I deflected the sword with my right hand, I stepped in towards my attacker. She was small and wiry, dressed in some loose-fitting black clothes that helped her blend into the darkness around her. She'd swung the sword with her right hand and my deflection had put her off balance. She had a lot of momentum behind her from moving in and striking which I used to my advantage as I grabbed her sword arm above the elbow and unceremoniously guided her past me and headfirst into the open car. The sword blade had run under the car and been levered out of her hand as she went face first into the passenger seat.

I didn't even slow down as I dove forward and rolled hard to get past the side of my garage. I'd had the gun jarred from my hand and lost it during the block. Since I was now unarmed, I wanted to get out of sight as fast as possible.

One of the big men came rushing after me. I had rolled when I landed and come up in a fighter's crouch just around the corner. He obviously hadn't expected me to stop and fight, so he barreled after me in hot pursuit, which ended abruptly when I brought my right knee up into his midsection, grabbed his gun hand and wrenched it up and to the left. His gun popped out of his hand and into mine in one fluid motion. I also noted with satisfaction that I'd broken his thumb and trigger finger with the move.

Although I was now once again armed, I was also still out numbered and off balance. The other one hadn't followed his friend immediately. Instead he'd moved straight out of the garage and was moving behind my car to come in wide on me. I brought up the gun

and aimed. It was a Sig P239 9mm with a silencer attached. How considerate. I squeezed off a round that caught the man by my car in the upper left hand corner of his chest just inside the shoulder. He spun off balance and fell behind the car. I rolled around the corner diagonally so I would have line of sight on the man in charge and came up in a tight crouch, gun out. He was out of his chair and waiting inside the garage door for me. He turned the head of the cane he was carrying and drew a short, but lethal looking, sword from the shaft. Before he could bring the blade to bear on me I dove forward and came up with the barrel of the Sig sticking into his chest just below the ribs, my other hand catching his sword arm. I had him. Then I felt cold steel on the back of my neck. I turned my head slightly to the side to see that the woman had recovered her sword and had snuck up behind me. She was pressing the tip of her sword, a katana I noticed, into the skin of my neck to the left of my spine. The pressure was enough that she had drawn a drop of blood and I felt it trickle down my neck into the collar of my shirt.

“I think that y’all might call this a standoff.” The woman’s southern accent was thick and would have made Scarlet O’Hara feel positively cosmopolitan. I would guess Georgia or South Carolina by the sound of it.

“Now Mr. Warren, I’d appreciate not having your blood splattered all over my clothes. I like this shirt, and it’s such a bother to clean, so if you will kindly lower your gun we can avoid any further nastiness.” He was calm and collected, and it annoyed the hell out of me.

“I’ve got a better idea.” I said, standing slowly with the gun still against his stomach. “You have little Miss Southern Belle here put her sword away and I won’t create an asshole bypass in your gut.” I had a lot of adrenalin running through me right now, and I had to work to try and sound as calm and collected as he did, but I think I pulled it off.

I also noticed that the other two of his three stooges had gotten back on their feet and come over. The man I’d shot must have been wearing body armor because I could see as he stepped up next to me that the bullet had gone through his jacket and shirt, but there was

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no blood anywhere to be seen. The fact that both of these guys were now back in the game, although one couldn't use his right hand, eliminated any advantage I'd gained from the earlier fight.

"My opinion of you has changed for the better Mr. Warren. You handled yourself extremely well. Please don't force me to reassess my judgment based on stupid bravado. Now, why don't we all calm down?"

As he said this, I felt the pressure on the blade ease off, which was good because I was continuing to leak from the little hole in my neck. When the blade backed off I could feel the small wound began to close. I wouldn't have wanted to see if I could heal before I bled to death if she stuck that thing through my neck, but at least I didn't have to worry about the little cut. I just hope that the girl hadn't noticed that the small hole she'd made in me was now closed. That kind of observation gives away a person's edge, and I didn't have many to lose.

I decided to play it cool and raised my hands letting the gun dangle from my finger by the trigger guard. "Alright, let's all play nice."

The man with the broken fingers reached out with his left hand and reclaimed his weapon. If his left hand was his off hand you couldn't tell it by the way he handled the Sig Saur pistol, although he couldn't re-holster the weapon since his shoulder rig was set up for right handed use.

"Now we may continue with our business," the older man said as he returned to the center of the garage and seated himself. As he passed, he neatly scooped up the sheath/cane portion of his sword and in an eloquently simple motion concealed the blade inside the cane once more. The silver figure on the end of the cane was not a wolf's head as I'd expected, but some kind of predatory cat, a cougar or something similar. Thinking about it his motions had the fluidic grace of one of the big cats as he smoothly spun on his heel and dropped silently into the chair. The hair on the back of my neck was standing up as I realized that he was something other than just a man. What I didn't know, but he was definitely something. Now

that I had a chance to smell him, I could almost taste the “otherness” in his scent.

“Mr. Warren, I won’t dally around the point and do please sit down. You’re making my neck hurt.”

As he said this, the heavy with the two good hands reached onto the wall behind him and pulled a folding deckchair down from where it had been hanging on my garage wall. He unfolded it and placed it in front of me. I started to decline, but decided that I might do well to go along with him for a bit, if for no other reason than to hope their guard would drop a little and give me a better chance.

“Well, let’s get this over with,” I said as I took a seat across from him.

“My employer, who wishes to remain anonymous for the time being, asked me to come and assess the accuracy of Mr. Ikeda’s recommendation. You’ll have to forgive the dramatics, but I needed to learn a few things for myself.” His red eyes stared intently into mine without blinking. Now that I was closer to him I could see that his pupils were actually small vertical slits, almost but not quite like cat’s eyes. He was definitely something other than human and he wanted me to know it. It’s too easy these days to cover a feature like that with colored contact lenses.

“I don’t like games and your “learning a few things” has not put me in the best of moods.” I decided to play a card here and I allowed myself to change slightly. My eyes shifted from their normal brown to a golden color, as my ears became pointed. I can control how much of the change I take on to some degree and this wasn’t the earliest stage where I could stop the transformation but I figured since he wanted me to know he was more than human, I could return the favor. My nails were longer, harder, and sharp like claws and even though he couldn’t see it, hairs had sprung up across my back. I leaned forward with my hands clenching the sides of the lawn chair until the thick plastic arm rests cracked.

“So get to the GODDAMN point before I really lose my temper.” My voice came out thicker and deeper than normal, and my incisors, now long and pointed, gave me a slight lisp. The growl I emitted under my breath added to the effect nicely. The two

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heavies had moved back to their flanking positions behind the man while he had been speaking. I was satisfied to see that they were shaken up by my little display. Wolves can smell fear; it changes a person's scent, giving it a bitter edge as adrenalin pumps into the system. They were scared. Either they were even better trained than I thought, or they had been warned about the possibility of me "wolfing out" beforehand because despite their fear, they didn't freak out.

The man with the red eyes, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice anything and with a quick motion produced a business card from his jacket. He laid it on the arm of the chair and stood as casually as if he were excusing himself from the table. I don't like this guy one bit.

"Mr. Warren, we will bid you good night. In your mailbox you will find an envelope containing one thousand dollars. Think of it as compensation for your trouble tonight or as a retainer for your services. Whatever you want to consider it, the money is yours. That is my business card." He motioned to the card he'd left. "If you are interested in hearing my proposal, come by my office tomorrow."

He began walking out of the garage, tapping his cane on the ground with each step of his left leg.

"As I said Mr. Warren, I came here to learn a few things and I have. The rest can wait until tomorrow when you're in a slightly better mood." The heavies fell in line behind him and the three of them walked towards the gate. He paused and turned to look back at me. "Do stop by around 1pm tomorrow Mr. Warren, and please come alone. Our business is not for your associates." He added with a bit of menace in his voice "I have other things to attend to and my time is not to be wasted."

I stood and watched as they walked away. Then my eyes fell on the girl. She was casually leaning on the front fender of my car next to the open door watching me, and making no move to follow the others.

As they disappeared around the corner of the gate and out of sight, the girl pushed off the fender and walked towards me. To tell the truth, she swayed her hips and seemed to float in my direction.

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She had pale white skin and dark eyes, black like a raven. Her long hair was as black as night but it caught the light and almost seemed to shimmer. She'd undone a small black ribbon that had tied her hair back. She shook her head and the hair fell around her shoulders. She looked to be in her mid twenties and had I not seen her fight and move earlier, I would have thought she was a model moving on the catwalk as she came and stood toe to toe with me. I'm not a tall man, but the top of her head was not quite at my eye level.

I should have been on guard; she'd just tried to cut a piece out of me after all. But I didn't do anything except stare into her dark eyes as she put her hands on my shoulders. She smelled now, not of sweat, but of honey and sex. Her hand glided behind my neck and I didn't resist as she pulled me down and kissed me on the lips. It was a good kiss. A really good kiss. The kind you hope for at her front door after a first date. It was the kind that says "the date's not over, come in and play," and I honestly don't know how long it lasted. When it was over, she stepped back from me and smiled. I don't think I'd felt this way (after a kiss since) I was a teenager. She continued to back away from me slowly and I just stood there like a lump watching her go. So much for all my training and experience. That had just taken a hike to some remote part of my brain as I studied her face. I was trying to place it as a photo in my mind. Her features were delicate, an angel's face, belying the way she'd come after me earlier.

"I like you," she told me, only with her accent it came out "Ah lahk you." She then turned and gracefully ran back towards my car. She jumped, did a handspring off the fender, and propelled herself into the air through a graceful flip, to land on the top of my fence in a crouch. One part of my mind registered that feat as an amazing display of strength and coordination as she stood. She was easily keeping her balance there on the ten or so inch wide edge. The rest of my mind was occupied just watching her as she turned and looked back at me, those dark eyes shining in the moonlight like those of a wolf. I don't know if it was a trick of the moonlight or what, but her eyes no longer appeared black. They were golden.

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“By the way, my name is Ciara and I do hope to see you tomorrow.” She winked at me and gave me a half smile. Then she was gone in flash of motion over the fence, off into the night.

I stood there for a minute watching the place where she’d been. It took me a while to realize that at some point during that exchange, I’d reverted completely back to human form. I needed a cold shower and a beer in a bad way.

Chapter 8

When I finally recovered my wits, I transformed about a quarter of the way into wolf form. I didn't feel like shedding my clothes, and that was as far as I could go and still move comfortably in them. I did a walk around my small fenced in yard. In this form I could track by smell as well as most domestic dogs, that is to say, I could follow scents if they were fairly fresh. I had no trouble finding where they'd come in. The young lady, Ciara, had vaulted the wall next to the gate, bypassing the electronic lock and alarm. She had then admitted the others and proceeded to open my garage by hotwiring the keypad outside the door. Once they were in, she'd gone back over the wall on the other side of the yard.

Although my house sits on only two acres it is relatively secluded from my neighbors thanks to the trees and vegetation that border all the properties in the area (one of the reasons I chose this place was the privacy it afforded me). So she'd just had to wait there until the time was right to come back in. I also noted that her scent definitely made her out to be a were, but I couldn't peg what kind. Wolves are definitely not the only animals that have mystical links to man in this way. There were were-forms of many different predator mammals like the big cats, bears, and others. There were also some of those animals who could turn into humans, but they rarely chose to associate with people, human or otherwise. From their point of view very few good things ever seemed to come associating with man, so I guess they didn't see any difference just because they could take human form.

My mind wandered back to Ciara and I smiled again at the thought of her, then shook my head and decided to stop that right then and there. I hadn't even gone on a date since Shelly left and I was letting my little head do way too much of the thinking. Christ, she'd tried to kill me! Of course, come to think of it, so had Shelly: nine times in fact before our pack-master had "called her to heel" on the issue. I hadn't seen Shelly in almost a year and that was definitely the first real kiss I'd had in a long time, but this was not a

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social scene. At best, the situation with my visitors was business and at worst, I suspected I could have a lot of trouble on my hands. I needed to have my head screwed on straight even if nothing else got screwed or I could wind up dead.

I retrieved the business card the man had left on the chair in the garage. I barked out a laugh when I read it. *Daniel S. Tremain Esquire, Attorney At Law*. I knew he wasn't human, he's a lawyer! I laughed again and checked the address on the card. It was an area on the outskirts of Dallas proper. I slid the card into my front pocket and went around to the mailbox by my front door. Sure enough, inside it was an envelope with ten one hundred dollar bills. I tucked the envelope with the cash into a pocket and went inside to check my house.

When I was satisfied that no other beautiful women or hired thugs were going to pop up and try to kill me, at least not tonight, I checked the time. It was almost 2am and I was pretty damn tired. I would wait and call Sam and Tabitha about all this tomorrow morning. I skipped the shower for the time being and went straight to the beer and then bed. After all, I had an appointment tomorrow afternoon and I wanted to be ready for it.

Chapter 9

“**Y**ou sure you don’t want us to go in with you?” Tabitha asked for about the eighth time since they’d swung by my place that morning to pick me up.

“No, I’m going to meet with him alone just like he asked. If they wanted me dead, they could have pushed the point last night, but they didn’t.” I didn’t mention the fact that at one point the woman who called herself “Ciara” had me dead-to-rights with her sword at my throat. I also left out the kiss. I don’t have a lot of secrets from Sam and Tabitha, but I don’t have to tell them everything either.

We’d pulled into the parking lot of the office park where *Daniel S. Tremain Esquire* had his office. It was actually a series of brownstone townhouses that looked older than I was and that had been turned into offices. There were several dental practices, a psychologist, a realtor, and at least three other attorneys. I idly wondered if they were renting these offices or if they bought them. Everyone knows real estate is where the money is.

Sam, who’d spent the ride over using his cellular broadband connection to dig for information about this Tremain character on his laptop, spoke up.

“Well, I haven’t found a lot, but it looks like he’s been practicing law in Texas for the last 5 years, mostly real estate, but he’s also handled some criminal court matters and a large number of civil cases.... Wait a second... AHA! I’ve got it. I checked the public records for cases he represented. He doesn’t work for a firm per se. It’s him and a staff of paralegals. They farm out the work to some other firms, it looks like....”

“Get to the point Sam!” I have to cut him off sometimes or he’ll go off on a tangent and forget where he was originally going

“Oh, right.... Like I was saying, he shows up as the legal counsel on a number of cases and in every single one he’s representing D&L Enterprises. It’s a privately-held company, and I’m having some trouble digging up much about it. But one thing I already found out is that they own this whole office block. In fact...” he paused while

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he typed some more. "...They seem to own every building in about a two block radius as well."

Sam stopped typing and looked up at me with some concern on his face.

"He said his employer wished to remain anonymous. Well, it looks to me like D&L is his only employer and even then it's not clear."

"Thanks Sam. I'll keep it in mind, for what that's worth." I winked at him and Tabitha as I exited the SUV. After I closed the door, I leaned back in. "I appreciate you guys coming along."

Tabitha waved a dismissive hand at me and smiled. "Don't sweat it, Michael. We're a team right?"

"Well yeah, but this technically isn't team business. This whole thing has been addressed squarely at me," I noted.

"Since when does that matter? Just remember that we're helping you, so if you make any money off this, you have to share!" Sam was grinning like a kid when he added this. The bruises and scrapes from our last job were still visible, but noticeably faded on his face.

"We're family and you know it," Tabitha said as she reached over and touched my cheek. "Now get going! You'd be late for your own funeral if we didn't drive you everywhere." She paused for a second, "Seriously though, Michael, be careful."

I smiled and gave a mock salute. "Ma'am, yes ma'am." Then it was my turn to look serious. "You guys be careful too. If it looks like trouble, don't wait for me. If worst comes to worst, take off and call Detective Lambert and the rest of Dallas's finest to come in guns blazing and save the day." Tony Lambert was a friend of ours from way back and I trusted him. He also owed me enough favors that he'd come and help if we needed him to.

I turned to walk in, stopped again and took off my sports coat. I'd opted for a cross between dressed up and dressed down for the meeting. I was wearing a nice sports coat, pants and button down shirt, but no tie. Of course the clothes were well cut and double-seamed so I could move almost as freely in them as in my gi from Kung Fu. My sensei had beaten a number of lessons into my head, and one of them was that you were rarely attacked while wearing

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your sweats or gi, so you should always dress in clothes that don't restrict your movement, every now and then you should also train in them as well. Good advice. I'd seen a number of incidents where competent fighters had been bested by the restrictions of their clothes as much as by the people they were fighting.

Inside the sports coat, I had a shoulder holster rig with my Beretta 9mm under my left arm and two fresh clips under my right. I took the holster off and dropped it and the gun back through the open window into the front passenger's seat where I'd been riding. Tabitha gave me a puzzled look.

"They will most likely take it away before the meeting anyhow and I'd rather they not handle it."

I turned and put my sports coat back on as I walked towards the door, not really giving them a chance to protest. I had mixed feelings about this whole thing. I didn't like the way they approached me. I don't like being tested, and I don't like people invading my privacy. However, curiosity killed the cat and I was hoping that satisfaction would bring him back. I was going to go and find out what was on Mr. Tremain's mind. As I walked towards the door of the building I tried very hard not to think of dead cats coming back to life. Maybe I should have used another idiom.

Chapter 10

Tremain's receptionist kept me waiting just long enough for me to know that I'd been kept waiting, and then she showed me into his office. The office itself was about what I'd expected; it reminded me of the Don's office in "The Godfather". Lots of bookshelves, a small cabinet to the left containing assorted expensive-looking decanters of various liquors, a very large, dark oak desk and a comfortable looking, high backed leather chair.

The only framed item I noticed in the whole room was a Law Degree on the wall. It was from Harvard. Tremain didn't seem to go in for the usual "love me wall" that most lawyers I know have, to show how well connected they are to their clients (pictures with politicians, celebrities, business leaders etc). In fact, I didn't notice anything that was of a personal nature on the walls or his desk. It was a nice office, expensive furniture, expensive looking receptionist, but the overall impression was that of a generic office.

Tremain was standing by a small window, looking out over a park behind the offices. I guess if you pay for a nice office, the view had better not be of a dumpster. "Beautiful day isn't it, Mr. Warren?" he casually inquired as he turned from the window.

"I enjoy days like this. Pity the weather is changing" he continued and walked over his hand outstretched.

"Well, seasons change, and so does the weather," I replied and grasped the offered hand. His grip was strong; stronger than I would have expected from his build. I also noticed that today, unlike the night before, his eyes were a dark brown with no hint of the red irises. I could see the raised edges of contact lenses and figured that the eyes may still be red, but they were not on display today.

He motioned for me to sit down in one of two smaller leather chairs facing his desk from the left side. I took the first chair, and sat watching him as he moved around his desk to sit in the high backed chair and swivel it towards me. He was smiling, and just like before, the smile never reached his eyes, making it seem more practiced than natural.

“I’m pleased that you decided to take my invitation, Mr. Warren. My screening can be a bit... thorough. None the less, we had checked you and your agency out before deciding to approach you.” He looked at a flat panel computer display on one side of his desk and began reading from it.

“Dark Cloud Security Consulting & Investigations, specializing in handling unique security issues for businesses and individuals.” He paused “You and your associate Mr. Samuel Edwards started the agency four years ago. Prior to that, you and Mr. Edwards spent a number of years in Eastern Europe in the employment of....”

“I know my resume Mr. Tremain and I’m impressed that you’ve done your research, but I’d prefer to know what you or, more specifically, D&L Enterprises, wants from me.”

Tremain’s smile disappeared for just a second at the mention of D&L, but it reappeared so fast that it almost could have been my imagination. I’d gotten under his skin a little by not coming into this blind. Hell, if he’d really done his homework, he wouldn’t have been surprised. Sam had a knack for digging up information.

“Very well, Mr. Warren. I have a need for your services to find someone. I am not a detective. However, I am aware that you and your associates are, among other things, licensed as private investigators.” He leaned back in his chair and reached into his desk drawer. He produced a large envelope and passed it to me. I opened it and found a stack of papers with an 8x10 color photo of a strikingly handsome young man in his late teens or early twenties staring back at me. The young man looked very familiar and after a moment it hit me why.

“So is this Ciara’s brother or some other close relation?” I asked holding up the photo.

“Very good indeed, Mr. Warren. It is Ciara’s brother. Her twin brother, Caleb Underwood. He and his sister are in my employ as assistants. You might actually call them protégés, and unfortunately, I have misplaced Caleb.” When he said that, his face turned grim. Unlike his smile, Daniel S. Tremain, Esquire’s scowl did reach his eyes. He didn’t need to practice this look in front of a mirror; it was natural for him. “He was investigating some prospective business

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for one of D & L's holdings in Kentucky, and was last seen two days ago. I would like you to find him." He motioned at the envelope and documentation. "Everything you need to get started is in the file I've given you."

"I know this is a bit obvious, but are you sure the young man hasn't just decided to take a few days for himself and forgot to tell you? Sometimes people don't want to be found until they are ready, you know." I watched his face as I asked this, but the expression had returned to neutral and he didn't give anything away that I could see.

"If that is the case, Mr. Warren, then I would like you to find him and confirm that he is well. I have my concerns for his well-being."

"What about the police? Have you filed a missing person's report with them yet?" I thought I already knew the answer, but I had to make sure.

"I do not wish to involve the police at this time," was all he would say on that point.

"I'm aware that you normally charge \$75 per man hour spent on an assignment, plus expenses and a predetermined completion bonus." He produced a checkbook from the same drawer the envelope had come from and tore off a check that he'd already made out and passed it over to me.

I regarded the figure on the check and looked back at him "Exactly how long do you expect this job to take Mr. Tremain? This is a lot of money for a retainer."

He regarded me for a moment "That is a lot of money, I expect fast results and I'm willing to pay for them Mr. Warren. Find Caleb before the full moon and report his whereabouts to me. If you can do that, you will receive an additional \$25,000 plus all of your expenses of course."

I whistled. That was a pretty good fee. Of course, the full moon was in four days so that didn't give me much time, if I took the job. "I'll have to speak with my associates about this before I accept." I flipped through the information in the files.

“Does this explain why the boy needs to be found before the full moon?” I asked indicating the papers in my hand.

“No.” he said flatly, making no effort to hide his displeasure with the question, his mouth drawn into a thin line. “In fact, I’m surprised you would ask. You have guessed Ciara’s nature I’m sure. Let’s just say that Caleb and his sister share the same issues you have with that time.” That made sense, but not entirely. I’d had a good nose full of Ciara’s scent but now that I thought about it, I should have been able to pick up on what she was, but I couldn’t. Each type of were leaves a distinct mark on the scent of their human form. My scent is unique, just like anyone else’s, but if you smelled me and another werewolf, you’d pick up a common underlying tone. I’d encountered just about every type of were and had a good memory for scents, but I didn’t know this one. Of course “just about every” is not the same as every, so I let it go for the moment and went back to the conversation at hand.

“Issues with that time of the month? Do you think I need Mydol for my PMS or something?” Then I thought about it. During the full moon, you might say that weres as a group have a biological imperative to change into our other selves. You can hold it in if you absolutely have to, but that takes a lot of will power and it drains you a lot. If you give into it and let go, then it’s like a good endorphin high. The problem is that during those three days, the day of and the days before and after the full moon, the other side, the animal side is really strong and you can easily lose yourself to the urges. That’s when “accidents” happen. Those kinds of accidents tend to lead to a lot of attention from the general public, and nobody from the other side wants that.

“I believe you understand why it is important for us to know where he is and that he...,” He paused here, considering the best way to phrase it “...Has his wits about him. If you do not wish to take the job, tell me now Mr. Warren. As you know, time is short and I will have to have someone else deal with it if you will not.”

I thought for a moment and asked, “You obviously have your own resources, why not send Heckle and Jeckle from last night? Or send his sister to find him?”

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“Ciara is too close to the issue. She isn’t even aware of what our business with you is and I would prefer that it remain that way.” He gave me a significant look, and I got the message loud and clear. “As for my other associates, they tend to be the hammer where the scalpel is required. One must use the right tool for the job, Mr. Warren, and your experience and your nature make you a better fit in my opinion. If I send someone else, then it will not be so much to find him as to clean up, and I would prefer not to do that.”

He stood up, walked back over to the window and looked out. “Please decide if you are going to take the job by 4pm today. There is a ticket for you to fly to Lexington, KY at 7:15pm tonight. You’ll find that a hotel and rental car have also been arranged in your name. So decide quickly, and call my secretary with your answer. She will either cancel the check or give you the travel arrangement information. Either way, I am growing weary of this now Mr. Warren. Good day.” He never looked back at me, but continued to stare out the window.

I made my exit without a word. I had a lot to mull over and not a lot of time to do it. I jogged back to the car and told Sam to drive to my place; I’d fill them in on the way. I’d made my mind up before I’d left the building. I didn’t like the way I’d been brought into this, but I also had some sympathy for Caleb’s situation. Plus, if I ran into Ciara again, it would be better to do it as the guy who’d tried to help her brother out of whatever jam Tremain had gotten him into. One has to be practical sometimes. I laughed to myself and said to Sam and Tabitha, “I’ve gotta pack.”

Chapter 11

The weather in Kentucky was miserable. It was early November and it was cold and wet. I'd checked the forecast and the rain that was falling outside the hotel my first morning there was supposed to stop by the afternoon, but the high was only expected to hit about 50 degrees. I hate fall weather.

I had gone over the details of the job with Sam and Tabitha at my place while I packed. Tremain had asked me to come to the meeting alone, but he'd hired us as an agency so the implication was that I was free to involve the others. More to the point, I wouldn't have done it if I couldn't involve them; it's stupid to work alone when you don't have to.

I thought about asking one of them to accompany me, but Tabitha was still working on our last job. Apparently there was more to those poppets that we first thought, and she was troubled by the way the holding box had reacted at her house that day. So for the time being she was out, and Sam needed to do some follow up work at our office. He also didn't want to leave Tabitha alone while she was working on the contents of that box. I didn't mind him staying behind. He had already started compiling information for me on the case.

I'd checked my email when I got up and he'd obtained Caleb's cell-phone records and credit card transactions for the last month. Everything stopped three days ago. His last call had been to Ciara, and the last time he'd used any of his credit cards had been at a restaurant in Eastern Kentucky called "Billy's BBQ Pit". I also had a list of other places he'd hit while he'd been in the state.

Caleb had arrived in Lexington and gone straight from the airport to Blackstone Horse Farm near Versailles (pronounced VER-SALES. If you say it like the city in France it is named for, you get the kind of look a dog gives you when you swap treats from hand to hand to fool it). According to Tremain's file, he was at the horse farm to arrange for the sale of several horses at the Keeneland November sales. This was big business, with buyers traveling in

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from all over the world. From the information in the file, Blackstone had five of their horses up for bids in the sale. They were expecting a couple of those horses to bring in at least \$250,000 each. Not a bad bit of change.

Tremain's secretary/assistant had booked me into the same hotel where Caleb was registered. I decided to start with that and I'd check with the front desk. He had eight messages waiting, but they weren't at liberty to give me any details. Since Tremain wanted to keep this low key, I didn't push the issue.

"I know he hasn't checked his messages yet," I put on my most winning smile and asked the young man behind the counter, "but could you just ring his room for me and see if he's in?"

"Certainly sir. One moment please." He picked up the phone and pressed four keys. From my angle I could see he'd typed in the five then paused and punched in three-one-one. He let the phone ring for a moment and then hung it up.

"I'm sorry sir but it appears that Mr. Underwood is still not in. Would you care to leave him a message as well?"

I considered it for a second and then reached for the phone in his hand "Sure, I'd love to."

He dialed the room again and after it rang five times, it kicked into the hotel's voicemail system.

"Hey Caleb, this is Michael Warren. Daniel Tremain asked me to come by and see you about the horse sales. I'm in room four-o-six, gimme a call." I passed the phone back and thanked him. Then I headed for the elevator.

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I found his room on the third floor with no problem. It was about 9:30am and I saw a maid further up the hall making her rounds. I knocked on the door knowing that no one would answer, but this made me look less suspicious loitering by the door.

The maid finally went into one of the rooms further up the hall to continue her work. As far as I could tell, she hadn't given me a second glance. I was wearing my "working" leather jacket. I call it

that because of all the extra pockets it has that allow me to carry a lot of stuff without looking like I have anything on me. I pulled my specialty palm pilot out of one of the oversized inside pockets and inserted the card attached to it into the key slot. The pilot didn't have to work long until the little light by the key card slot turned green and I slipped into the room.

Caleb had not put the "do not disturb" sign on the door before leaving so the maid service was still cleaning the room on a regular basis. It was a pretty nice room, but not a suite or anything too fancy. I wondered absently about Tremain's travel per diem. After all he had one of his protégés staying in an average king size room, the same as they'd booked me into.

The first thing I did was pick up the hotel phone and dial the voicemail system. I listened to all the messages carefully, but most of them were just hang-ups except for three. The very first message was simply, "Sheik Rashid Al Fidel will see you in the lobby now, Mr. Underwood." This one was left on Saturday, the last day he'd been seen. The other two were one from Ciara wondering why he hadn't answered his cell phone and the one I'd left from the lobby earlier. I hung up the phone and turned my attention to the rest of the room.

His suitcase was on a small stand next to the dresser. It was a hard sided case and the top was open and resting against the wall, displaying the contents. I poked through them, but didn't find anything more interesting than a small sack to the side containing some dirty socks. Most of the clothes were missing from the case. It held only socks, underwear, (briefs for those who care), and toiletries. I looked around and found the bulk of his clothes hanging in the closet next to the bathroom on the hotel-provided hangers.

He had three conservative looking business suits in dark colors, a couple of pairs of khaki trousers, and a number of dress and more casual button down shirts. I checked the pockets of the suits but they were empty.

I found a laptop case in the closet, but that too was empty, except for the peripheral equipment: power cord, a couple of writable DVDs in cases, one empty DVD case, and a wireless mouse. I

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pulled the case out and set it by the door. The DVDs might have something on them, but I wouldn't know until I got back to my room and could look at them on my computer.

There was a small table/desk in the corner by the television and I went over and checked it. Next to the phone was a hotel notepad that had obviously had something written on it and torn off. I put the notepad in my jacket pocket to look at later. I hoped I'd be able to do a rubbing with a pencil and see what was on it, but I didn't have a pencil with me right then, I mean come on, who carries a pencil these days?

I didn't think there was much else for me to find here so I started tidying up after myself. No sense leaving it looking like someone had gone through the room. As I was walked around the bed, I noticed that it wasn't sitting straight. It was at a slight angle. I hadn't picked up on it before. I gave the end of the bed a shove and the mattress and box spring slid back to be flush and even against the wall.

This made me curious so I picked up the corner of the box spring and lifted it up. I could see that the frame of the bed was actually like a large wooden box with crosshatches to add support to the bed. A lot of hotels use this style because it's cheap and keeps stuff from piling up under the beds.

I followed my hunch and moved the bedding over until I could look under it. Under the foot of the bed in one of the spaces between the supports was an open laptop computer with a small box wired into the back. I guessed this was the one that went with the case I found. I took the laptop and the box out, and set them on the table in the corner, then I looked under the rest of the bed. I didn't see anything else, so I fixed the bed and turned back to the laptop.

The laptop was a pretty nice high-end job, very small and lightweight. It was switched off and wouldn't come on again. The battery was dead. I guessed. I took a pen that was next to the phone and used the tip to push the recessed manual release for the DVD RW drive. The door to the drive popped open revealing a DVD inside. I took it out. It was a writable disk like the others I'd found in the bag. I pulled the empty case I'd found out of the bag and

turned the label inside the cover over so I could tell this disk apart from the others (none of them were marked). Then I stuck all the disks in the largest inside pocket of my coat.

I next turned my attention to the box that was with the laptop. It was definitely some kind of RF/Wi-Fi receiver, based on the antenna sticking up in the back. I looked it over and found it had video plugs on the back next to the USB port. The plugs were a standard set-up for AV with red, yellow and white, the yellow being marked as video out and the other two audio outputs. There were no inputs on the box.

I'd seen this before. It was a receiver for a wireless camera. From the looks of it, this was an off-the-shelf job, nothing custom, so the range would be less than 100ft and it wouldn't be able to push through a lot of physical interference, so I guessed the camera was in the room. Sure enough I found a tiny camera mounted on the top of the frame of a stock hotel print of a clipper ship sailing in calm seas. If you weren't looking for it, you'd probably never notice it, but it wasn't that well hidden. This wasn't a professional bug job. I was guessing Caleb wanted to tape something and didn't want the other party to know. If a professional was bugging him, then the receiver wouldn't be a laptop under his bed, they'd have either one of the rooms next door or the rooms above or below this one. Otherwise, it would be too hard to retrieve the recordings undetected. Plus this looked like a fairly cheap camera set up with a wire hanging from the back as an antenna. Definitely not professional work.

I took the computer and camera equipment and packed it into the laptop bag. I made sure the bed was back in place and that the room looked as it did when I came in and I turned to head out with the bag.

There was someone outside the door. I hadn't been paying too much attention, but now I saw a shadow below the door jam. I put the bag down by the door again and dropped down flat to look under the crack. I wasn't going to use the peep hole. Anyone paying attention on the other side would see my head block the light and know I was looking.

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What I saw was a set of black wheels with a pair of comfortable looking sneakers walking around them. I picked the laptop back up and put it over my shoulder and opened the door. It was the maid I'd seen earlier. She was just getting ready to come in and check the room to see if she needed to clean it and she clearly hadn't expected anyone to be inside the room. She took a startled step back and said something in Spanish that I didn't quite catch.

I read her name tag quickly and said to her in Spanish, "I'm sorry I startled you Maria, and thank you for taking care of my brother Caleb's room." Most of the time, everyone ignores the help, but they tend to see a lot more than we realize. She looked around the hallway nervously and then replied rather quietly.

"It's my job sir, but I really haven't done much. The room has not needed cleaning since Saturday." She glanced from my face to the bag on my shoulder and eyed me suspiciously. "Do I need to clean it now sir?"

"No, my brother is still not back yet," I said, stepping all the way out into the hall and pulling the door shut behind me. "I was wondering if you've seen anyone around here looking for him lately?"

She eyed me more suspiciously and said "I've worked the last nine days straight and I saw your... brother..." she emphasized the word in a way that told me what she thought of my claim of kinship, "...many times. He was always having his lady friends over. Is he in any trouble?" she asked rather nervously, again looking back and forth down the hall. "He is a very nice man and I hope he is alright, he tipped me everyday that he stayed in his room." She sounded generally concerned.

I reached into my pocket and pulled a twenty and put it in her hand. "He's fine and thank you for keeping an eye on him for me. You don't happen to know any of his lady friends' names do you? Are any of them guests here at the hotel?"

She smiled briefly and made the money disappear somewhere under her apron. "I don't know any of them sir, but I know that one of them is not from around here. She's a foreigner." She said the last word with a bit of disdain in her voice that I found to be amusing

coming from someone who most likely immigrated herself. “I haven’t seen her in a couple of days either.”

I thanked her for her help and started up the hallway. Then I paused and turned back to her. “Maria, I was hoping you’d do me a little favor. Could you please keep an eye on my brother’s room for me? I’d like to know if anyone else comes to see him, especially his lady friend.” This time I produced a fifty dollar bill and her eyes widened as I handed it to her.

“I will let you know,” she said and did not hide her pleasure at receiving the “tip”. I thanked her again and continued down the hall to the elevators. I don’t like the way people generally dismiss “the help”. I guess I’d spent too much of my time in that role when I was younger and working my way through school to not dislike it. However, it did mean that unless someone was directly asking them, a lot of times they would not tell their boss about strange things, like my visit to Caleb’s room, on the off chance that it might come back to haunt them later. It also meant that many times people would say things in front of the hired help that they shouldn’t, simply because they forget that the maid or gardener or whomever isn’t a piece of furniture.

I had decided to head back up to my room and see what I could find out from Caleb’s laptop, and to see if I could find a pencil. I figured I could work on this for a bit and then head out to follow up with his contact at the Blackstone farm. Tremain’s secretary had already called and made me an appointment to meet with him that afternoon. Tremain had made it clear that most people were not in the know about my job, but the farm manager, a Mr. Bartholomew “Barty” Sizemore, was one man who did know and was supposed to help me out. I hoped he would have something for me.

I was going over all the information I had in my head while I waited for the elevator to arrive. Hotel elevators always seem to be twice as slow as any other place and this one was proving to be no exception. As I stood there, two other guests had joined me in my wait. It was the familiar ding of an elevator arriving that pulled me out of my own thoughts and I stepped up to the door waiting for it to

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open. As the doors parted, and I started to enter the empty elevator, all hell broke loose.

Chapter 12

As I started to step into the elevator the two people waiting with me suddenly made their move. The one behind me on the right took a step and kicked the back of my leg. My leg collapsed under me and I went down on one knee grabbing at the side of the elevator door. The other man hit me in the back of the head with something hard. I don't know what it was but I saw a burst of light in my head when he hit me and I was a sack of potatoes at that point, falling forward into the elevator.

I was dimly aware of them moving around me and one of them rolled me over. I started to stir and received a solid kick to the stomach for the trouble. I then felt them messing about with my jacket but I couldn't really tell what they were doing. I could hear a woman's voice yelling in Spanish and then the world went black.

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I don't know how long I was actually out but it couldn't have been more than a minute or two. The maid I'd been talking to earlier, Maria, had me propped up against the back of the elevator. Her cart was wedged in the door. She was shaking me, saying in Spanish, "Get up! I startled them but they may come back! Please get up!" The urgency in her voice was apparent; she was scared. Hell, I would have been scared too I guess except my head was too busy exploding every time she shouted at me.

"I'm up! I'm up!" I said in what I hoped was a reassuring voice. (I suspect it sounded more like a pitiful whimper). I waved her off and tried to stand up. I had to brace myself against the back of the elevator, but I made it up. They had hit me pretty damn hard. I think I'm lucky that my brains appeared to be mostly intact.

Maria helped me stand and pulled her cart into the elevator with us. "Which room are you in?"

I started to answer her and then I felt like I was going to throw up, so I pushed the button for the 2nd floor. The door shut and we

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dropped down a floor. I steadied myself and told her the room number. When the door opened she pushed her cart out into the hall ahead of me and checked in both directions.

The hallway was clear and she motioned for me to come out. We moved down the hall as casually as possible but I was still dizzy from the blow to the head and I didn't want to go to fast. We got to my door and I had to fumble around for a minute looking for my keycard before Maria reached past me and opened the door with her housekeeping key.

I scanned the room quickly to see if anyone else was inside. When I was sure it was clear we went in. I immediately stumbled to my right and into the bathroom where I had the chance to revisit the morning's complimentary breakfast... or what was left of it anyway. I ran the tap by the toilet and after I'd cleaned up, I held a damp cloth on the knot forming on the side of my head. I was already feeling better and thanked God that I had the gift. As bad as I felt, if it weren't for my supernatural nature and healing I'd probably still be out cold or maybe even dead. Whoever they were, they weren't fooling around.

When I came out of the bathroom, Maria was waiting with a bucket of ice. She'd wrapped some more ice in a towel and gave it to me. "Put this on the back of your head and lay down. I'm going to call the hotel manager and have him contact the police." She had already picked up the phone and pressed the "0" key.

I reached over and pushed down the receiver. "I'd appreciate it if you kept this between us." I pressed the ice pack onto the knot. I was feeling a lot better and wasn't dizzy anymore. "I'm OK and I'd prefer if we didn't complicate things any."

"But sir what about your bag? They ran off with it." She looked worried and had not put the receiver down yet; she just held it in the air between us. "We have to let the manager know and call the police!"

Son-of-a-bitch! They must have hit me harder than I thought. I hadn't even realized the bag was missing. Inwardly cursing my own stupidity, I kept my expression and voice calm as I gently took the receiver from her hand and put it back on the phone's cradle. "Like I

said Maria, I don't want any complications. Thank you for helping me out, but they really didn't do that much damage."

She looked at me very seriously and asked, "How's your head? I saw the way they hit you. They were big men, and the one who got you in the back of the head was wearing a pair of brass knuckles on his hand. You should not even be awake. You need to go see a doctor."

"I have a thick skull, ask my ex-wife." I put on my most winning, cockeyed grin. "I'm fine and there wasn't anything in the bag that was that important." I hoped that was true. I could feel the DVD cases inside my jacket, so I still had something. I gestured towards my own laptop which was sitting on the desk/table next to the TV. "You see, all they got was my bag and some of my paperwork... nothing that important, and I don't want to spend half my day with the police filling out reports. Those guys are long gone." Maria started to say something else but thought better of it.

She shrugged her shoulders and sighed, "Alright sir. It's your stuff they took." She turned and started to walk out of the room. I stopped her with a hand on her shoulder which made her jump a little.

"Maria, you've been an angel. Thank you." She blushed at that and just muttered, "It was nothing sir. Take care of your head." She closed the door behind her. I followed and locked it after her. I took the ice pack from my head. The spot where I'd been hit was still tender, but the swelling was almost completely gone. I figured in an hour I wouldn't even have a sore spot.

Now that I had a few minutes, I sat down on the bed and thought over what had happened. People don't get mugged in the third floor hallway of a Hilton hotel; this was definitely "work related". But what happened? Were they specifically after me or was it the laptop from Caleb's room? I was inclined to think they were after me because I didn't see how they could have known I'd gotten it. I had been in the room about 30 minutes, but that wasn't long enough for somebody to show up, unless they were extremely close to begin with.

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I pulled out the note pad from Caleb's room and tried to make out what had been written on the top sheet before it had been torn off. It looked like a phone number, but I couldn't tell for sure. I looked around and realized I didn't have a pencil here either, so I'd have to pick one up somewhere else to do a rubbing on the pad. "Who the bloody hell uses a pencil these days?" I asked the room. Not surprisingly, the room didn't reply.

I noticed the clock by the bed. "Damn it!" I said and sprang up. I needed to get going if I was going to be on time to meet Barty at Blackstone Farm. I needed to clean up a bit first though, so I washed up, and started for the door. Before I left, I closed my laptop and put it in its bag. I moved the box-spring on my bed to one side, opening up a space in the frame underneath and tucked my laptop into the hole. Hey, it had kept Caleb's laptop from being found; surely it would work as well for me if someone came in. I plucked a hair from my head, licked my fingers and used the spit to paste the hair to side of my closed suitcase. If someone did go through my things, I hoped that would clue me in. Of course, that assumes they don't just trash the place, but I like to keep a positive attitude.

Before I left the hotel, I made a quick stop by the 3rd floor where I'd been jumped. I concentrated and allowed my self to change partially into the wolf, once I'd made sure no one was around. I have a good sense of smell when I'm human, really good as I'd mentioned, but this was a well traveled spot and I needed something a little better to pick through the mess. Sure enough, I was able to catch first my own scent, then I pulled Maria's out and after a minute of sniffing around, decided that I had the scent of the two men who'd attacked me. I'd been able to pick them out because of Caleb's scent still on the laptop bag. When they'd taken it, they'd left a trail of their scents mixed with his. I didn't have time to follow it now, but I might later. Like I said, I try to keep a positive attitude, and I had a feeling those two would show up again one way or another.

Chapter 13

Since I was billing expenses for the trip back to Tremain, I'd upgraded my rental car from a Ford Taurus to one of the new retro-styled Mustangs. I liked the look of the cars and the V-8 I was driving had quite a bit of muscle to it. I enjoyed driving the car, but I was regretting my decision now. A bright red hot rod was not the kind of low key vehicle you wanted to be driving if someone was following you, and I was pretty sure I'd picked up a tail right outside the hotel.

Of course the person following me hadn't chosen a very nondescript car either. It was a silver Porsche Boxster that stood out in the crowd. I thought about trying to lose him but unless he was an absolutely awful driver, that would be tough. Real life evasive driving is a lot more dangerous and far less effective than movies and T.V. would lead you to believe. Plus, I figured if I played dumb about him following me, the chance might present itself to learn something from them.

I drove at a fast, but not breakneck speed, around New Circle Road, the main loop around the city, until I got to Versailles Road and headed out of Lexington towards the farm. All in all it was a fairly pleasant drive, since the rain had cleared up and the sun was out.

A couple of miles from town on the road to the farm was an honest-to-God castle sitting on a hill off to the side of the road. I'd read about it in a magazine in the hotel. It had been built in the 1970's by a rich industrialist for his wife who'd promptly left him and taken enough of his money that it had sat unattended for nearly 30 years. Now some other rich guy had bought it and was restoring it. It was something interesting to see, but I still think some folks have more money than sense. I decided to use viewing the castle as an opportunity to confirm whether the Porsche was tailing me.

I glanced back and saw that the car was still behind me. It was about a quarter of a mile back matching my speed pretty well, so when I slowed and pulled over on the shoulder at the castle, just to

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take a touristy look at the thing of course, my tail had little choice but to either pull over or pass me.

He slowed noticeably, but continued driving. I tried to see into the car but the windows were tinted and I couldn't make out anything. I watched as he sped up and disappeared over the next rise in the road. I stayed where I was for a couple of more minutes, in fact I took a couple of photos of the castle. Come on! How many castles get built in Kentucky! When I was done, I pulled back onto the road and headed for the farm.

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My tail reappeared somewhere between the castle and the gate at the entrance of the farm. I was sitting at an intercom box waiting for someone to decide about letting me in when I noticed the Boxster was back. It had pulled off the road a couple of hundred yards behind me. Whoever it was wasn't trying too hard not to be seen, but they hadn't run right up and introduced themselves either.

I didn't have long to think about the Porsche, because a tinny male voice came through the intercom speaker. "Welcome to Blackstone Stud, Mr. Warren. Please follow the road up to the main office and park in the visitors' parking marked off on the left."

Even before he'd finished speaking, the metal gates parted, sliding to either side on a track inlaid in the concrete.

Once I'd driven past the gate, it started closing again almost immediately, leaving me to follow the road up to the main house. The grounds were immaculately maintained with the kind of rolling hills and white fences that you see in all the postcards. The picturesque image was completed by the horses I could see in the fields around the office and barn... if you could call the building a barn that is.

From where I'd parked I could see the main barn clearly and it was as finely built as any building I'd seen. In fact, I might not have recognized it for what it was if not for the sign identifying it. I would conservatively guess that the barn I was looking at was worth

at least half a million dollars or more and that was without ever even seeing inside of it.

Of course the office itself was no slouch. It was essentially a large two-story house made in the same expensive-looking stone as the barn. There is a lot of money in the horse industry, I thought, as I got out of the car. The other cars in the lot only emphasized the wealth.

I could see your standard Chevy pick-ups and a few ATVs coming and going around the barn and some of the outlying buildings, but there wasn't a car in the small office lot that didn't cost less than \$50,000, and they all looked brand new.

I walked the three short steps that lead to the covered porch which ran the length of the building. I hadn't made it halfway to the door when it swung open inwards and an extremely tall man in jeans and an expensive looking silk shirt came out.

Bartholomew Sizemore stood about 6'6 and looked to be in his fifties, with a jovial, if weathered, looking face that belied the strength I felt in his grip when he wrapped one of his coarse hands around mine in greeting. I returned the firm grasp without trying to take it up a notch for the sake of my male ego.

"Michael Warren, I presume." A broad smile happily split his face in two.

"That's me. And you must be Bartholomew Sizemore." I returned his smile.

"Oh hell son, nobody calls me Bartholomew...." He said his name with an almost prissy voice "...Except for my wife when she's trying to piss me off... which come to think of it is most of the time," he added and winked at me. "Call me Barty. You go by Mike?"

I kept smiling as I replied, "Now that's what *my* ex-wife calls me when she wants to piss me off. I go by Michael."

He laughed. "Michael it is then." He stepped around beside me, clapped me on the back in a friendly if rather-bone jarring way, and guided me into the office. The front door opened up into a very nicely furnished atrium with a reception desk across from the door. Everything was done in dark woods from the furniture to the

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paneling on the walls (real oak paneling I noted). An attractive blonde woman sitting behind the desk asked me to sign in on a registry. As I signed it, I noticed that the farm did not have that many visitors to the office and I saw Caleb's signature six lines above my own. The date and time showed he was last here Saturday at 11am. The day he was last seen.

After I'd signed in, Barty led me up some stairs behind the reception desk, into his office on the second floor. The furniture matched what I'd seen in the rest of the building. He motioned for me to have a seat in a leather chair opposite the desk. I was reminded of Ramirez's office in Mexico briefly, as I sat down, especially because of the large windows behind his desk, offering him a picturesque view of the farm's main barn and the paddocks beyond.

Barty opened a cabinet next to the desk and pulled out a bottle of Blanton's Reserve bourbon. "You care for a libation Michael?" He was grinning. "Sorry. I only allow myself a drink at work on certain occasions, and one of them is when I'm meeting with folks. It's only polite to offer them one after all." I'd nodded at his offer so he handed the first glass to me. "Drink it straight." He looked stern. "This is good bourbon and you don't want to mess it up adding coke or some other crap to it."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Kentucky is known for horses, bourbon and basketball, right?" I took a sip of the drink. It was good bourbon, smooth enough that drinking it straight didn't cause me to lapse into a choking fit.

"So Barty, this is quite a set up you guys have here. Are all horse farms like this?"

"No, not all of them, and they all have their own flavor, but we've been really lucky the last few years. Our breeding program has been paying off in spades with two Derby Winners in the last five years." Barty was beaming as he continued.

"You make a lot of money from winning races, but the real money comes when you can put those winners out to stud." Barty waved a hand, indicating various paintings of horses around the office, each with a brass nameplate under the frame. "These five

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horses alone have brought in over fifteen million dollars in the last decade and they are just some of our program horses.”

“I’m impressed Barty. I honestly don’t know much about the horse business, but it seems you guys have been lucky.”

“Oh hell son, luck ain’t got a damn thing to do with it.” If he hadn’t still been grinning ear to ear, his tone might make you think he was mad, but it was just excitement and pride.

“I’ve been with this farm for nigh on 30 years and we’ve built one of the best thoroughbred breeding programs in the state!”

It was obvious that Barty was passionate about the business and he continued on for a while, talking about bloodlines, breeding and the state of the industry. Although interesting, it was not really relevant to the job at hand, but I carried on politely listening until something he said caught my attention.

“...Sheik Al Fidel was here just last week.”

“Was that Sheik Rashid Al Fidel?” I remembered the name from the message I’d heard in Caleb’s room.

“Yep, that’s the sum ‘bitch.” Barty looked thoughtful for a minute. “I hadn’t forgotten why you’re here, by the way. I just get carried away sometimes talking, but come to think of it, Caleb was dealing with him quite a lot this trip.” At that moment, the shapely receptionist buzzed him to let him know our lunch had arrived. “I figured you hadn’t had a chance to eat, so I had Beth order us some lunch before you got here. There’s a nice place up the road that delivers to us.... You ain’t a vegetarian, are you?”

I had to suppress a laugh at that. If my other nature had its way, all I’d eat was meat, and cooked would not be the order of the day. “No, I’m not a vegetarian,” I assured him with a smile as we both stood up and went out into the hall. He led me downstairs to what was essentially a dining room off of the main entrance. Someone, Beth I assume, had set out some plates and silverware and we sat down for a lunch of medium rare prime rib and baked potatoes. There was also a pitcher of sweet tea which I helped myself to. This lunch was better than my last two dinners.

We carried on talking while we ate and I decided to see what Barty knew about the Sheik.

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“Oh, he’s a character that one. I’d put him at about your age, around thirty five or so. Actually has a harem of girls he keeps with him. I’ve only seen him out with three or four at a time, but I’ve heard tell he has around twenty girls all in their late teens to mid-twenties. Some of them travel with him. Others live out at his farm in Winchester. One lady, a bit older also travels around with him.... Well I say she’s older but it’s hard to tell. I thought she had some grey in her hair, but it’s actually black with streaks of pure white in it.” He paused for a second as if deciding whether or not to tell me something. “She acts as his personal secretary and I guess you’d say his harem wrangler. Her name is Dariya Volkova. Russian I think, or from one of those former Soviet Union countries. Most of the Sheik’s women are, I guess. Supermodels are a dime a dozen there and they’ll take what they can to get out.” He was shaking his head and smiling wistfully as he said it.

No one else was in the room but Barty leaned in to me and, looking around as if to make sure he wouldn’t be overheard, lowered his voice. “She is a knock-out. Tall, toned, long dark hair, except for the streaks of white. Not too stacked up top, but what she has looks damn good and you could bounce a quarter off her ass it’s so tight.” He chuckled at that and carried on. “I’d say she was the perfect woman except she’s the meanest bitch I’ve ever met.” The words came out almost as a hiss. “They’ve been out here a lot over the last few years. The Sheik wants to build a world class stable of horses so he’s been buying up champions and breeding them like there’s no tomorrow. I’ve seen her when she thinks no ones around. She is heavy handed with the girls. Scares the hell out of them, and she treats most folks like they work for her. I’ve dealt with people like that before. Hell the Sheik is a spoiled rich asshole when you get right down to it, but it’s not just that. I’ve never said this about anyone and really meant it, but Michael that woman is evil. That’s the only way I can describe her; pure evil.”

Barty continued. “At a party once, the Sheik sent her to deal with one of his girls. The girl had too much to drink and was being a bit of an ass, but hell she wasn’t old enough to be drinking anyway, so what’d you expect? Well Dariya goes and says something to her and

I swear that girl turned pale as a sheet and just went and sat on a couch for the rest of the evening. That girl didn't get up once until they were ready to leave and then she followed them out like she was walking to her execution. While Dariya was talking to the girl, the Sheik, he leans over to me and says, "You know her name, Volkova, it means 'of the wolves' in Russian." I tell you what, I believe it." He shivered a little as he sat back and finished off the last few bites of steak.

After he downed half a glass of the tea, he carried on. "Caleb comes to Kentucky pretty regularly and he and this Dariya woman seemed to hit it off during one of his trips a few months ago. In fact, she went to Keeneland with him to watch the races one afternoon. Caleb, he's no horse man, but he knows his business pretty well, and I'll tell you this, they weren't going there to talk business." Barty waved his fork in the air expressively to emphasize his point.

"That's a bad move if you ask me. Dariya may or may not be one of the Sheik's ladies, but I know those Arab guys are touchy as hell about their women. If the Sheik thinks she's his, he wouldn't cotton well to havin' some other fella playing her field if you know what I mean." He winked when he said the last bit.

"You think Caleb was playing her field?" I had a suspicious feeling I already knew the answer.

"Oh son, that boy's main requirement in a woman is a pulse, and Dariya may be a stone cold bitch but she is one of the best looking women I've ever met. I told you I thought she was older because of her hair? Well, she is older than the girls the Sheik normally keeps, but she's also hotter than anyone of them, that's for damn sure. Pity she's such a bitch."

He shook his head. Then Barty stood up, wiped his chin and grinned. "Michael I'll tell you this, I honestly think that Caleb and that woman have something going on, and I'll also tell you that I think any man that gets involved with Dariya Volkova is in for a world of trouble."

I stood up and returned the smile. "Barty, she sounds like hell on wheels. When can I meet her and Sheik Al Fidel? I think we're all going to have so much to talk about." My smile turned a bit vicious

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and I think Barty's opinion of me wavered based on the worried look he had on his face.

"He's invited some of the folks from the farm to his spread in Winchester; it's called "Little Gévaudan," tomorrow evening for a big shindig before the sales. He'll have folks from a lot of the local farms there along with a ton of guests. He does this before every sale. I'll see if I can get you in with us." I didn't doubt he'd come through. So I had a party tomorrow night, the wolf was coming out, and the hunt was ready to really start up.

Chapter 14

It was still two days until the actual full moon, but I was already feeling the effects. The sun set that evening and the urges were hitting me, but I needed to work out a few things about the day's events before I gave in.

I'd spent the rest of the afternoon at the horse farm talking to some of the workers in the office, including Beth Everman the receptionist. While I was talking to Beth, I caught a scent. It was very faint and since I couldn't change to improve my senses, I couldn't be sure, but I thought I could smell Caleb's scent on her or more likely on some bit of her clothes. Sure enough, she had a jacket draped over the back of her chair and as I eased around her desk while we talked, I had picked up his scent a more strongly on it. Most of the time a scent will get washed out of clothes after they are laundered. Modern cleaning chemicals do a wonderful job of leaving nothing behind but the fresh scent of pine. The jacket, however, was the kind of article that didn't get washed as often so it still held a little of his smell mixed into Beth's very womanly scent. I'd say they would have to have been fairly intimate for such a transfer to occur. So far our conversation had been very general about Caleb. She hadn't seen him since last Saturday when he'd been by the office.

"I heard from some of the folks that Caleb is a bit of a ladies man. What do you think?" I'd kept my tone casually but I could see her tense up when I asked it.

"I think he has been around, but he's really not my type." She could have given Scarlet O'Hara a run for her money with the accent she was pouring on; a lot of guys might find that attractive, I thought it made her sound like she'd been hit in the head one too many times as a child.

Despite her dismissal of the idea, I pressed on. "So if I was to say that you two had been seen together outside of work..."

Her eyes turned frosty as she glared up at me. I honestly thought I saw frost forming on the windows behind her, from the iciness in

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her voice “I’d say you’ve been talking to some folks who don’t know what they are talking about.” She paused then continued, her accent becoming even stronger with her anger. “Besides even if, and I do mean IF you understand, I were interested in him, which I’m not and never have been, well that Volkova bitch has him tied up in knots. Caleb hasn’t been around for a few days and I’d be willing to bet he’s off somewhere with her.” The next bit she whispered under her breath and a normal person would have missed it, but I distinctly heard her as she hissed “The fucking whore.”

“So you have no interest in him besides work?” I was picking up something new in her scent, another of the bitter flavors that a human’s smell can take on, like an aftertaste. This one was a mix of jealousy and loathing. I’d smelled the combination before and it was unmistakable. Something had happened between Beth and Caleb and she believed that Dariya Volkova had come between them.

“Mr. Warren, I have a lot of work to do.” Her tone had become flat and impersonal, but her scent still carried the strong bitter flavor of her emotions, even if her voice did not. “I’ll have to ask you to excuse me while I get back to doing my job. Have a pleasant afternoon.” The last bit carried a tone that told me that her idea of a nice afternoon for me would be a close encounter with a truck, and I figured that I had a few more pieces to the puzzle.

By the time I’d left the farm, it was almost dark. I pulled the Mustang back out onto the main road and almost immediately the Porsche Boxster was back on my tail. Traffic going back into Lexington was light compared to the outbound traffic (I guess people came into Lexington for work from the small surrounding towns, not the other way around) so I made pretty good time back to the hotel.

I didn’t bother with any attempts to lose my tail. I decided instead to see who they were. It was a bit of a drive back to the hotel and the Boxster stayed with me the whole way. Just before the hotel, I turned into the parking lot of a convenience store and pulled up to one of its gas pumps.

In my rear view mirror I saw the Boxster pull off the road into the parking lot of a McDonalds next door and turn off its lights

waiting for me to move. I got out and went ahead and filled the car up with gas. When I was done, I went inside and paid the young lady at the counter. With a wink, I turned and bolted through the door marked “Employees Only.”

I burst into a store room/office and bolted past an older guy sitting at a desk reading one of the porn magazines off the shelves out front. Porn guy just sat there with his mouth open as the girl was yelling after me. Meanwhile, I plowed right past him and found what I was looking for: an exit on the back side of the building.

I hit the bar on the door and it swung open. The soured smell of old milk and garbage was thick in the air and I was faced with a pair of dumpsters with some very foul looking puddles in front of them. I turned right and went up a small hill between the store and the McDonalds’ parking lot. There were thick bushes separating the two lots, but I tore through them like they weren’t even there, turning sideways and letting my leather jacket take the brunt of the abuse. My clothes still took a bit of a beating, but the damage wasn’t bad.

I hunkered down next to the first car parked by the spot where I came through the bushes. I was about 50 feet from the Boxster, which was parked at an angle to match the marked spots in the lot, the front end more or less facing away from me. I moved cautiously up the line of cars, not quite in a crouch. It was dinner time at McDonalds and I didn’t want to attract any more attention than I already had.

I felt inside my jacket and found my Berretta 9mm. The weight of the gun was a reassuring tug on the left side of the coat. I undid the single snap that held the holster shut and positioned the gun for a quick draw. I’d had this coat custom made, and one of the features, aside from a wealth of hidden pockets, was a built in holster. It wasn’t the most practical item because it allowed the gun to flop about more than a conventional shoulder rig, but, unlike a shoulder holster, it kept the gun out of sight plus I could take the coat off and appear unarmed.

I was now only about ten feet behind the Boxster and I noticed that it had a Texas license plate. That startled me a bit. The car

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could be a rental, the one I am driving has Nebraska plates, but either way, I was expecting this to be something local.

The brief time that I paused thinking about the implications of a Texas plate was the second that I should have been moving. The Boxster, which had been quietly idling, sprang to life and violently reversed out of the spot. I had to leap onto the trunk of a sedan parked next to it to avoid the rear bumper breaking my legs in half at the knees.

The car stopped abruptly after the nose was facing the exit and then zoomed out of the parking lot, making a young couple leaving the restaurant jump out of the way, bags of burgers and drinks flying everywhere.

I ran in pursuit, but the sports car was going for all it was worth and had already shot up the street. By the time I got to the end of the parking lot, I could just see the tail lights flash red as the car zipped, tires screaming, around a corner two blocks up.

I turned around and helped the kids to their feet.

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT ABOUT?!” The boy shouted at me as he helped his girlfriend up.

Neither of them seemed the worst for wear and I just shrugged my shoulders. “Oh you know. Some guy with a mid-life crisis doesn’t know how much juice his new toy has,” but the boy was already busy trying to calm the girl down and didn’t hear a word I said. She was crying about her pants, which just a short time ago had been white, but were now torn and stained with various bits of their dinner, grime from the pavement and a touch of blood from a badly scraped knee that looked much worse than it was. Otherwise she’d have been howling in pain, not in anger about her clothes. The thought that she should be happy to be alive didn’t seem to come into her equations about the unfairness of life and the vengeance it seeks against her personally. I didn’t feel like getting into it with her, so I left them and jogged back to my car, which was still parked at the pump next door.

A quick glance in the convenience store showed the guy with the porn magazine had come out of the office and was giving it to the girl behind the counter with both barrels. She apparently had enough

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of it though because when I looked back as I was pulling away from the pumps, I saw her land what looked like a resounding smack on the man's pudgy face, throw her apron down and storm out the front door. I had to laugh as I pulled out of the parking lot. I hadn't gotten even a whiff of scent off the car, but, if it had been the two guys from this morning, they probably wouldn't have run off when they saw me. That, coupled with the Texas license plate, left me with many more questions than answers, but at least it had been an interesting day so far, and it wasn't even fully dark yet.

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I pulled into the hotel parking lot shortly after 7:00, and it was dark outside. I'd seen no further sign of the Boxster and guessed he'd either given up for now or had found a better vantage point to watch me from. Whatever the case, the moon was out and I was feeling twitchy as hell. I'd already checked the surrounding area and the University of Kentucky had a very sizable stretch of private land not two miles distant. It was for agricultural research and was perfect, with several hundred acres of woods running along the back of the farm they used for studying this-and-that related to crop growth in the state.

I planned to go in and change into my sweats and go for a good jog over to the farm. Then I would let the wolf come out to play for a while. I hadn't had dinner yet and although as a man the thought sickened me, the wolf was looking forward to finding a deer for his evening meal. The beating I'd taken earlier in the day had left me sore and tired and giving into my other nature for a few hours would be the best thing for me. Like I said, at the full moon, the wolf in me exerts more power. Even though it was still a couple of days off, the pull was strong and if I have to I can contain it, but I figured there wasn't any point in putting myself through it.

When I got to my room, I found that someone had been there while I was out. The scent I picked up was the same as one of the men who jumped me that morning. He'd been careful. There was nothing obvious to indicate that someone had been in the room, but

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most people don't think to worry about their scent. Of course, the fact that the hair I'd pasted across the opening of my suitcase was now missing would have been another clue, but it just confirmed that my visitor had snooped into my things. There was another scent as well. A woman's scent that I had not encountered before. One more for the mental filing cabinet.

I checked under the mattress and box spring and found the laptop was still intact. I debated whether to go ahead and look though it, but I wanted to clear my head first. The longer the moon was out, the stronger the urges become and I was having to devote a good portion of my concentration to not having hairs pop out all over me like the old movie versions of the Wolfman.

I thought about Caleb and Ciara. They would both be experiencing the same feelings I was, assuming Caleb was alive of course. This led directly to me thinking about Ciara and how good she looked, waving a samurai sword around, trying to kill me.... Yeah sometimes I worry about my tastes. That's probably why I'm divorced.

The wolf was pacing inside my head. Thinking of Ciara was arousing me and that in turn was feeding the animal side of my nature. To be blunt, I needed to fuck or kill something soon or I was going to start looking like an alcoholic pacing outside a bar waiting for it to open.

I made sure nothing was missing from the search and then I called Sam. I brought him up to date on what had happened that day including the Boxster and asked him to do some digging for me on Sheik Rashid Al Fidel and his secretary Dariya Volkova. After I got off the phone, I changed into a loose-fitting sweat suit complete with hood. I put on a small backpack to hold my wallet, phone, gun and a few other essentials and then exited the hotel.

The minute I was outside, I broke into a solid run, not quite a sprint, but much faster than a typical jog. I covered the two or so miles to the edge of the farm in about 15 minutes and wasn't even breathing particularly hard. I'd "wolfed out" to some degree during the run, which made it easier on me. I wasn't too worried about being seen. The sweat suit covered me pretty much from head to toe

except for my face and it was dark. The only thing anyone might notice was my eyes. They definitely weren't the eyes of a human. But other than a couple of cars that passed me without taking any notice, I had the whole road to myself.

There was a ten foot high chain-link fence about 20 feet from the edge of the road marking the beginning of the research farm's land. I slowed my pace and followed the fence line for about half a mile. This took me past the areas with street lights and traffic, onto a more rural part of the road. Once I was past the lights and to the area where the land on the other side of the fence was actual woods and not cultivated land, I sped up and angled over to the fence. I leapt at it from about 10 feet away and caught the top of the fence, vaulting myself over into the trees that stood waiting a few feet past it.

I stripped and stuffed the bag with my clothes. I pulled a small plastic trash bag out of the pack, stuffed the pack into it and tied it. I then gave in and changed completely into the wolf. The change happens almost in the blink of an eye, a magical shimmer, like one of those computer morph special effects and it is done.

I was feeling a great sense of release, as if a clamp that had been around the base of my skull had been loosened. What I still didn't feel though, was satisfaction. I hadn't addressed the wolf's needs yet. I sniffed the air and caught the scent I was hoping for. There were deer in the woods and they were fairly plentiful. I didn't smell any other serious predators in the immediate area, an added bonus.

Before leaving, I quickly dug a small hole with my front paws, dropped the bag into the hole and covered it. Then, to make it easy to find I marked it... that is to say I took a leak next to the hole. This would tell other animals not to mess with what was buried here and it would make it easy for me to find later.

I sniffed the air. I smelled a number of things. The ground was still wet from the rains that had fallen the day before, and there was a tinge of death in the air from the rotting fall leaves on the ground. I caught a whiff of what I was looking for, prey, and began a steady trot through the woods, quietly following the scent.

It didn't take long for me to find the source of the scent I'd been following. I was down wind from him and the light breeze carried

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his musky smell right to me. It was a mature buck deer with a full rack of horns. He was poised, nibbling on some kind of small berries from a low bush about 50 feet ahead of me.

It's funny when I think about it. As a man, the idea of hunting for sport disgusts me. To kill without meaning or purpose. As a wolf, I'm still disgusted by sport hunting, but somehow the animal part of my brain doesn't consider my hunt to be for sport. I guess it is not. It is part of the natural order of things. But that begs the question of what is natural when you are a supernatural being?

Vampires would say that all hunting is for sport. The sport of the hunt gives them what they need from their prey. Of course most people don't understand what they need is not just blood. Vampires need their victims, human or animal, to feel fear, arousal or some other strong emotion. If they don't, then the blood doesn't have the right kick. The kick they need is adrenaline. They can live off blood that isn't infused with it, but it's like living on bread and water when you could have a steak and wine. Filling, but not satisfying.

The same is true for my kind. Weres need the hunt as much or more than the meat itself. I actually know a couple of vegetarian weres if you can believe that. But they still hunt when the moon is full. Now it was my time.

I moved quietly forward through the light brush on the ground. I was close now, and my mind was focused in a way that is hard to describe. All that existed in my world was me and the buck. I was now only about 30 feet from him and my breathing was slow and deep, filling my lungs so the muscles would be ready to spring. The buck, unaware of the danger, still grazed contentedly on the berries.

As I drew even closer, my nose was filled with nothing but his scent, my ears with nothing but his sounds: his breath, the crack of dried leaves under his feet, the beating of his heart. Then, the buck's primal senses must have made him aware that danger was nearby because he stopped grazing and raised his head. He scanned around himself; the eyes passing over me without seeing where I lay hunkered down in the shrubbery.

In an open field, I would have leapt for him already. I could take him from this distance without much trouble. But not in the confines

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of the trees. There were too many obstacles that could come between us before I could make the kill. I had to close the distance with him or risk losing him and spooking any other prey for a good mile around in the commotion. So I waited for him to relax and go back to his final meal before I moved again.

After a minute or so of looking around, the buck again lowered his head to the bush and resumed his meal. I inched around to the left to put myself more directly behind him. As I moved I felt his scent leave me as the hairs on my back moved with the changing wind.

The sudden change in the wind's direction carried my scent to him as it took his from me. His head flew up, nostrils flared, as he recognized the smell of a predator. I still could have had him but I froze as well. The shift in the wind had given me away to him, but it also brought a new smell to me, one that stank of death.

The rotten fetid smell drifted to me, the odor filling my mind with images of death and carnage, blood and decay. That was not all the scent carried. Under the rot, the smell held the same flavor that was in my own scent, the hint of a predator on the hunt.

The buck bolted away from the bush in a desperate attempt to save its own life. It knew death was nearby and wanted no part of it. I leapt out of my cover, seemingly in pursuit of my prey, but once clear of the entangling brush I spun and faced the way I'd come. The buck would live a while longer, but I wasn't so sure about myself. My hackles up and teeth bared in a snarl of challenge, I looked back into the darkness behind me.

My vision as the wolf was phenomenal at night. Although the colors were washed out in the darkness, I could see them plainly coming towards me through the trees. Three figures moving more quietly than should be possible. They were not on the ground; they were in the trees, leaping from tree to tree almost like monkeys. I noticed that although they were humanoid in shape, they had long talon-like claws that they used to grasp the trees as they landed on them.

I also realized that they weren't just moving quietly; there was no sound coming from that direction at all. When I'd first seen

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them, they were maybe 100 feet away, but as they hopped from tree to tree they were closing fast. I knew they weren't human, but I wasn't sure what they were. Their eyes were slightly larger than normal and were solid black like coal. Their skin was covered in scales like a lizard and their shoulder and hip joints were sharp and protruding. There was webbing between their fingers and toes. They reminded me of the monster in "Creature from the Black Lagoon" except for their heads, which had a thick mane of disheveled black hair and an elongated mouth with what looked like a snake's tongue darting over rows of sharp, shark-like teeth. Great! Just what I needed!

I thought that last bit to myself as I turned and bolted at a 45 degree angle away from them to the right. I wanted to make it to the edge of the woods near where I'd come in. Going straight away from them would take me deeper into the unknown woods. I was fast, but they were close and picking up speed, not even pausing as they leapt from tree to tree, easily closing the gap as I was hampered by the thick undergrowth on the ground.

After less than a minute, I realized that all the sound around me had disappeared. I couldn't even hear my own breath as I ran. I risked a look over my shoulder and saw one of the things touch down on a tree to my left and then dive towards me claws extended and its mouth open, teeth bared for the attack.

I jerked myself to the right towards him and leapt, twisting away from him in the air. His claws on his left hand raked the fur on my side but didn't draw blood as I slipped past him. Unfortunately, the other two were a touch farther back and were able to instantly react while the first one regained its footing.

One of them went diagonally up into the trees above me as the other jumped straight into my left side knocking me off balance and sending both of us into a spin. I'd seen him coming but couldn't do much more than try to roll with the hit to lessen the force of the blow.

Although the thing was light, maybe 100 pounds, it had a great deal of momentum on its side when it slammed into me and we both went rolling across the ground. As the thing hit me, I changed into

my hybrid form. The wolf was the best hunter but for the close fight I needed arms and humanoid legs. Its claws dug into my thighs and shoulders as it latched onto me and I felt a burning pain as it tore into my flesh. I'd gotten my arms up and had the creature by the neck with one hand, the other digging my own claws into its bicep to try and break some of its hold as we rolled uncontrolled through the trees.

We were moving fast and slammed straight into the side of a thick oak tree. Luck was on my side because it was the creature that hit the tree with what felt like a nasty crack, leaving stunned for a second. I still had its throat and I didn't waste my chance. I dug my claws in and ripped with all my might, removing about a third of the thing's neck in a spurt of yellow gore. I saw the creature's face scream silently as the foul smelling bile that it used for blood splashed out onto the ground.

Unfortunately the other two creatures were there almost immediately, and before I could recover they had grabbed my arms, one on each side. I'm strong, in my hybrid form I'm real strong, but they held me fast. I was still on the ground recovering and they'd locked my arms, pushing me down with one hand on each wrist and the other pushing above my elbows to lock the joints.

I struggled against their grip but it wasn't doing any good. They forced me down onto my stomach. I turned my head so I wouldn't have a mouth full of dirt and saw the first creature laying not five feet from my face. It was still thrashing about and clutching at its ruined neck, but it wasn't making a sound.

There was still no sound at all and I began to wonder, (amazing where your mind will wander when you expect to be dead in a few moments) if I'd gone deaf. Then it was like someone threw a switch. Suddenly the sound was back. I could hear the rustling of the leaves and underbrush as the first thing continued to roll around on the ground. I could also hear the sounds of my own struggles. The things holding me weren't making any obvious noise, but I picked up their breathing now, and something else, foot steps coming towards us from behind me.

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“My, my, what have we found lurking in the forests tonight?” It was a woman’s voice, a clear soprano with just a hint of an accent, not enough for me to place it right off, but it was there. She was speaking casually, with a touch of amusement in her voice, as though this was all some interesting game she was playing.

“Whatever shall we do with this dangerous beast?” She continued in the same tone.

“Why don’t you let me up and we’ll talk about it?” I growled. In this form I can still speak but not without sounding rough. I’d considered changing back into my human form, but that would leave me more vulnerable and I wasn’t quite ready to surrender yet.

“Oh no, no, no, my bad little doggy. You don’t need to be getting up yet. You might hurt yourself struggling with my Dracors and we can’t have that now can we? No, you are just fine where you are for the moment.” She then began speaking in a guttural tongue I had never heard before; I almost wouldn’t have thought it was the same person speaking the change was so abrupt. I felt the two “Dracors” tighten their grip on me. One of them put his foot on my back between my shoulder blades and braced himself, pressing down with enough force to make it impossible for me to move my head. My only consolation was that the first Dracor had stopped moving and appeared to be dead.

I could hear the woman moving around my prone figure but she still hadn’t come into view. I felt hands on my head and neck, slender fingers braced on the back of my skull as the other hand probed around my throat. I felt some thing cold sliding through the fur of my neck and when it slid all the way around I heard it click.

“There. A nice new collar for my pet.” Her voice was right in my ear when she said this and then the whole world caught on fire and I started to burn alive.

Chapter 15

My whole body was burning from head to toe. It was as if someone had poured gasoline on me and lit a match. I knew I'd been released because I could feel myself rolling on the ground, thrashing my arms and legs wildly trying to put out the fire that my eyes could not see. I don't know how long the burning lasted, but it felt like an eternity until, just as suddenly as it had come, it was gone.

I lay on my side panting, trying to recover my wits and I looked down at my hands. I was shocked to see that despite the burning pain I'd felt, the skin of my hands was whole and unmarked. Then I realized that at some point I'd changed back to a man.

I was more surprised by the change than by the realization that my skin was not blackened and flaking off. The fact that the pain had disappeared without a trace so quickly told me that despite the sensation, I wasn't really burned. I rolled over and started to get up. I made it to a crawling position and had to stop because I was honestly too weak to rise any further so I just stayed there with my head hanging down.

A pair of black leather boots trimmed with silver tips and buckles, the real thing not plated metal, (I can tell the difference), appeared in front of me. I lifted my head slowly, my gaze following up the leg. The silver buckles were spaced evenly up the outside of the boots and the top ended just below the knee. The legs in the boots looked fit and toned and I'd guess the owner was at least 5'10 or taller. I didn't get to see much higher because one of the boots flew forward and the silver tip split a cut in my chin as my head jerked back from the blow.

"Don't look at me unless I tell you to, pup, or I'll have to discipline you more. I know your kind and how to hurt them... a lot." There was acid in her voice as she said the last. I really wanted to lift my head in defiance, the hell with the consequences, but unfortunately the kick had been well placed and I was a lot weaker than I thought. I could feel the cut on my chin; it stung and burned a

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little. Although it wasn't deep, it was bleeding quite a bit and I knew it would have to heal naturally, the silver tip of her boot made sure of that. I slumped back to the ground and lay there imagining how I would defiantly raise my head at the bitch in charge... as soon as I could, that is.

"Pick him up and bring him" she said to the remaining Dracors. "Gently now, he shouldn't give us any trouble." she added as the two remaining creatures picked me up by my arms and began dragging me through the woods between them. I was nude and in human form again so I was glad they lifted me enough so that only my lower legs were actually dragging the ground. It wasn't exactly rough but it was doing a good job of skinning my legs up pretty badly as they pulled me along.

I'd have to ask Tabitha what the Dracors are, assuming I see her again, I thought glumly. They reminded me of a type of third rate demon I'd run into before; good for "muscle" but no real power. Not too hard to summon, easy to control... well, easy for a summoned creature from hell. The only catch is that these demons usually require human blood regularly to remain on this plane of existence. The kind of people who use summoned demons for hired help generally find the blood of innocents to be a small price to pay. In fact, the work the demons do usually takes care of the requirements all by itself.

I don't know how far they dragged me, but the pain from the repeated cuts on my legs caused by the rough ground and undergrowth was helping me focus better. Whatever the woman had done to me, it had sapped all my strength and left me feeling like I hadn't slept in days.

Focus on the pain. I took it and used it as an anchor to drag my mind out of the cloud of weariness that was trying to overcome me. I remained as limp as possible because I didn't have much strength to struggle and I didn't want them to know that I was still conscious. I would let them do the dragging and hope for an opportune time to try and make a break for it.

We came to the edge of the woods near the chain link fence that ran along the outside of the forest by the main road. I could see in

front of me fairly well from the angle they were holding me and I watched the woman walk past. This was the first chance I'd had to see her and I kept my eyes almost shut in hopes she wouldn't notice that I was awake. I couldn't see many of her features; she was wearing a hooded cloak that came down to about mid-thigh. She was lean and moved gracefully. I revised my earlier estimate and put her at about 5'6 without the boots. The cloak was a deep black and made her almost invisible where there was nothing but night behind her.

Stopping a few feet before the ten foot high fence that formed the perimeter of the University's land, she extended a pale muscular white arm before her with her palm face up. She began speaking softly and I saw a pale yellow glow rise around her hand and shimmer like smoke rising gently off her fingers. She was still speaking in a very low voice and I couldn't actually make out what she was saying. As she spoke the glowing grew more intense.

As I watched, the yellow glow on her hand began to flow out towards the fence in a sinuous tendril. When it reached the fence, it touched the top bar and like an octopus tentacle, wrapped around it. With a groaning of metal, the fence bent outward until the tip where the mist had latched on was flat on the ground. I'd figured she was a magic user based on the pain she'd caused me earlier and because you usually don't get mundanes controlling demons, even foot soldiers like these Dracors. It's too dangerous.

She lowered her hand and stepped through the bent fencing. The Dracors dragged me after her and followed her as she strolled casually down the side of the road towards a full-sized black Hummer parked just off the blacktop.

I had a feeling that the odds of my escaping would drop to nonexistent if I let them put me in the vehicle, so I began to muster the strength I'd recovered and readied myself to make a break for it.

She'd opened up the back passenger side door of the Hummer and was walking around to the front as the Dracors started to lift me to put me in. One of them let go completely and the other repositioned to hold me under my arms as he maneuvered my dead weight into the vehicle.

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I suddenly swung both my feet up and braced against the top of the door's frame. I then shoved with all my might and found the desired effect. Where I'd brought my body up, I was above the creature's center of gravity and he was slightly off balance from trying to load me into the Hummer, so the shove toppled him over backwards, bringing my weight down on his head as my shoulders slammed his face into the ground.

I rolled backwards and came up in a fighter's crouch as the other beast came at me. It reached and I ducked inside as I shifted my stance to avoid it. I'd made a fist with the second joint in my index finger pointed out and I struck it right in one of its oversized black eyes. The creature's eye popped horrifically, covering my hand in a nasty clear liquid.

It screamed in rage and clutched at the socket where the ruined eye dripped, as I brought my heel down on the side of its knee. These things were strong and their skin was tough, but they didn't seem to have a skeletal structure any better than a man's as the knee joint snapped and the thing went down.

The first creature had gotten up but was still a bit dazed, mouth open and tongue out scenting the air like a snake. I jumped up and kicked it square in the jaw below its open mouth. The mouth snapped shut on the creature's tongue causing it to bite off the half that was out even as the front teeth splintered. It staggered backwards, falling into the open door of the Hummer. Both of the Dracors were down and I bolted for the opening in the fence. With a magic user behind me I wouldn't stand a chance out in the open unarmed.

I decided to go back to wolf form to cover the ground faster, but when I tried to change I was instantly engulfed in the burning pain from before. I couldn't see or think. I fell to the ground and thrashed about helplessly. It felt as if the skin of my body peeling off as it blistered and cracked from the heat, only the pain continued past the point where true fire would have destroyed the nerve endings.

Finally the pain stopped, and just as before, it stopped as quickly as it started. I was almost startled by the sudden, complete lack of pain. I rolled over and tried to stand but I couldn't even lift my head

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more than a few inches. All my strength was gone. I was looked back towards the Hummer and I could see the Dracor I'd kicked in the mouth coming towards me, its face covered in yellowish slimy blood. I noted with some satisfaction that most of its front teeth were either missing or broken badly.

"I hope you don't have dental, you fuck" I said in a very weak voice as the thing loomed over me. It didn't make any move to attack or restrain me; it simply stood over me looking down at me with gore dripping from its mostly ruined face.

"The next time you try something like that, little dog..." The woman from before was approaching and would have finished threatening me, except the hilt of a knife suddenly appeared in her shoulder. She screamed in pain and spun sideways leaping back towards the Hummer. If the knife wound had seriously hurt her I couldn't tell it by the way she was moving. The Dracor standing over me had lunged off out of my field of vision in the direction the knife must have come from. I heard the sounds of a brief fight and then a thump as I watched the broken toothed Dracor's head roll to a stop in front of me. The stump of the neck looked like it had been cut with a razor.

The Hummer roared to life and sped off. I decided that it had been a long day and with that I passed out.

Chapter 16

I could smell coffee as I slowly woke, but I couldn't see anything when I opened my eyes, it was too bright. The light dimmed and I started to try and sit up, but before I could get very far a blurry shape was over me and gently, but firmly, pushing my shoulders back down against what felt like a very comfortable bed.

"Sugar, you don't wanna be doing that just yet. Lay still for a few minutes until your head clears." My vision was improving rapidly, but I didn't need to see to know that voice and accent.

"I know you want to get me into bed Ciara, but you really didn't have to go through all this." I smiled weakly as I said it and my vision had cleared enough to see she was smiling down at me although her expression showed that she was worried.

"After what you've been through honey, I don't think you'd survive it if that's what I was after." She quipped back at me, then took a damp cloth and laid it on my forehead. "You are not in the best shape right now, trust me, I wasn't even sure you'd survive removing the collar, but if I hadn't you'd have died for sure." Her voice remained quiet and calming as she brought a glass of cool water over and gave me a sip.

"You've been out for about 12 hours, but you needed the rest and eat something. Your physical injuries weren't that bad, but removing the collar drained a lot of your strength. Give your body a few minutes to recover, then you need to have some food." When she said that it was as if she'd awakened a bear from a cave, my stomach growled and I felt like I could eat a horse.

My vision was completely clear now and I could tell we were in a hotel room somewhere. The curtains had been drawn, but the light coming in around them told me it was daylight. Based on what she'd told me, I guessed it was around lunchtime. My head was still swimming as I looked around. There were a couple of trays of food, room service I guessed, on a small table to the right of the bed. Ciara had taken a seat in a chair at the table and was eating a sandwich off of one of the trays.

She was dressed in blue jeans and a plain white blouse with her hair dark hair pulled back behind her head in a ponytail. I watched her eating for a minute or so and then decided to try and sit up.

I was feeling a lot better already and I was able to sit up and swing my legs off the side of the bed pretty easily. She looked at me and smiled, putting the remains of a sandwich down and crossing her hands on her lap as she watched me. I took a moment to make sure I felt OK, and then I stood up. A small wave of dizziness hit me, but I was able to get that under control pretty quickly. It was then that I noticed that I was dressed, at least from the waist down, in my sweat pants from the night before.

She saw me looking and smiled brightly. "It wasn't too hard for somebody with a good nose to find where you'd buried those clothes and I figured it would save you some hassle if I brought your stuff back with us." She then added in a coy voice, "Besides, I'm a good southern girl and I wouldn't want people to talk now would I sugar? A naked man in my hotel room would not do my reputation one bit of good." Her eyes twinkled and she winked as she said this, motioning for me to join her.

"The rest of your stuff is over there on the dresser. You've missed a couple of calls on your cell phone, but I didn't think it would be proper for me to be answering your phone for you. People do talk about that sort of thing too you know." I couldn't tell if she was kidding or not, but I got the feeling her reputation wasn't really that high on her list of concerns.

I was hungry and wanted to eat, but instead I walked over to the dresser and retrieved my sweatshirt, pulling it on and checking my phone. The numbers showed I'd had three calls, two from Sam & Tabitha's number and one from Tremain. I thought about checking the voicemails that the screen showed I had, but I decided that could wait a while longer. I turned back to Ciara, who was happily plowing away through the food on the tray in front of her.

"You do know why I'm here right?" I asked as I sat down across from her.

"Why yes I do. Tremain hired you to find my poor dear brother who's gone missing. Oh and you must do it before the full moon

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tomorrow night or the consequences will be dire I'm sure." She didn't stop eating as she casually rattled this off.

"I take it you're not worried about your brother then?" If she was, she was hiding it pretty well.

"Oh, I was worried enough to come down here and follow you around to see what you could dig up. Do not misunderstand me Michael. I love my brother, but Caleb would be pissed if he thought I was snooping around his business. Overall though, I'm not too concerned. He can take care of himself pretty well." She poured us both a cup of coffee from the small pot sitting on the table. It was not one of the cheap packs that hotels provide; this smelled far too good for that.

"However, despite the fact that my brother is capable of handling himself quite well, he does occasionally get in over his head. That's why I'm here. From the looks of the folks who were after you last night, I'd say this may be one of those times. Do you know that lovely woman with the lizard men?"

"No, but I have an idea who she might be. She called the lizard men 'Dracors'." I said as I began to dig into a plate of sausage and eggs that was begging for my attention. "By the way, thank you for saving my ass last night. What was the deal with that collar she put on me?"

Ciara stopped eating and stared at me for a moment. "That collar..." her words came out like they made her sick at her stomach, "...is a nasty piece of work." She got up and walked over to the dresser where my things were, and opened the bottom drawer. She took out a black bag with a drawstring closure and opened it. From the bag she removed a silver band about one inch wide with a hinge in the back and a simple lock mechanism in the front. I caught it when she tossed it to me.

Despite the fact that I'd been wearing the thing, this was the first chance I had to actually see it. It was made of pure silver with runic writings around the outside of it. I didn't feel anything strange about it just holding it. The lock was just a simple latch release, I started to close it and Ciara was across the room and grabbing it away from me so fast it startled me.

“DON’T!” she shouted as she snatched it. “It becomes active when it’s closed and Sugar, you don’t want to be holding it when it’s active.”

“What exactly does it do? I know it caused me a hell of a lot of pain but....”

“It’s a control collar, designed specifically for shifters. Once you have that on or even if you’re just touching it when it’s active, you can’t change. If you are in your other form, it tears you back to human. I think you felt how pleasant that was.” She took the collar, placed it back in the bag and returned it to the dresser.

“When you shift, certain magical energies are released. That thing...” she waved a hand at the drawer, “...not only stops the change, but it captures that energy and stores it like a battery. A magic user who isn’t a shifter can then take the energy and use it themselves. They can also control when and if you change.” She sat back down across from me and shivered slightly.

“The thing is that it doesn’t just pull energy when you change. It draws it out of you continually at some level. Leaving you weak and if you push yourself too hard it can kill you.” She smiled at me. “That’s why I had such a hard time getting the thing off of you. It’s like a leach and you’d pumped a lot of energy, including a good bit of your life force into it. I had to figure out how to do it without letting it drain you dry.... That would’ve been bad.”

“I guess it would’ve been pretty bad at that, thank you.” I had wolfed down half the food on the plate while Ciara filled me in on the collar. We didn’t talk much more while I finished the rest of the meal. When it was all gone, I felt like my old self. My head was clear and the aches and pains I’d been feeling when I woke up were gone. The only reminder of last night that showed was the small cut on my chin, which would heal up in a few days. It would’ve pretty much healed instantly if the wound hadn’t come from silver. As it was, nature would have to take its course, but that was OK. Ciara joked and said she liked a guy who looked like he’d been fighting. I told her I’d see what I could do.

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After the meal, I picked up the rest of my stuff and we headed out of her room and down to her car. She had a room at a Days Inn near the interstate and said she'd drive me back to my hotel.

We left the room and started down the hall for the front of the hotel. "I'm going to help you look for Caleb," she said simply and I decided I wouldn't argue with her. First off she'd pulled my ass out of the fire as it were, and secondly, although I'd only met her a couple of times, she had made quite an impression on me, and I honestly liked being with her.

"That's fine Ciara; I'm not some hot-headed hero in an action movie. You've proved you can handle yourself, so I will appreciate the help." She started to say something else but I cut her off. "That doesn't mean you can do what you want. If you are going to help me, then you have to work with me and follow my lead." I said the last as we walked out the front of the building into the parking lot.

The weather was sunny and surprisingly warm for the season. I paused for a second and took a deep breath of the outside air. "Where's your car?"

She pointed to a spot just down from the entrance and I wasn't at all surprised to see a silver Porsche Boxster in the space she indicated. I turned and frowned at her. "Do you know how much trouble you caused me snooping around after me like that?" In reality it hadn't been that much trouble for me, although it had caused a lot of trouble for a certain convenience store clerk, but sometimes it's good to have the high ground.

Ciara put her hands on her hips and glared back at me. "I wanted to see if you were actually doing anything sugar or if you were just down here screwing around. I decided you must be doing something right or that woman and her pets wouldn't have been after you." Then she surprised the hell out of me by smiling, reaching up and pinching my cheek and then lightly bouncing off to hop into the car. She was giggling the whole way and called back to me "We gonna go or are you gonna stand there all day catchin' flies?"

I jogged over and got in the little car. I hadn't ridden in one before and was surprised at how roomy it was for what Sam called a "European skateboard". Ciara started it up and zipped the car out of

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the parking space before I even had my seatbelt on and then laid about a 40 foot stretch of rubber peeling out as we shot forward out of the parking lot, and bounced onto the main road. Maybe her helping me wasn't such a good idea after all....

Chapter 17

I resisted the urge to get out and kiss the ground when we pulled into my hotel's parking lot about 10 minutes later. The trip may have taken about 10 minutes, but if we'd even been in the same zip code as the posted speed limit it should have taken 20. At least I hadn't minded her music. She was listening to some techno-gothic stuff by a group called The Cruxshadows. I think it was my turn to surprise her by knowing who they were and naming the songs we'd heard. Hey, I like techno-goth music. Sue me. However, the volume she played the "Fortress in Flames" CD at had forestalled any serious conversation about the case until we actually got to my room at the hotel. As we approached the door I stopped her with a hand on her arm. I scented the air for a moment.

"Hang back a second, I smell something, or rather someone, that shouldn't be here. I think I have a guest in the room." I'd whispered this to her in an almost inaudible voice but she nodded. I figured since she was a were she'd be able to hear it.

"Are you packing?" I asked as I retrieved the Beretta from my bag and then affixed a highly illegal, but very effective silencer to the end of it. I had a permit to carry concealed weapons but silencers are not something good gun owners, even ones with private investigator licenses, are supposed to have. However, I didn't want to involve the police at this point and gunfire in a hotel had a bad habit of involving them whether you wanted to or not.

She hadn't answered my question, but was instead looking at me curiously. I sighed and mouthed "Do you have a weapon with you?" It is hard to whisper and convey exasperation at the same time but I thought I did an admirable job.

Her eyes widened in understanding. She nodded and reached behind her back to pull out two leaf-bladed knives. She tossed them in the air and caught them both expertly in her right hand. I was more impressed that I hadn't noticed the knives when we'd been coming in from the car; I'd been admiring the way she filled her jeans out and hadn't seen a hint of a knife, let alone two, on her.

I smiled and then added, "You need to watch more cop shows so you can pick up the lingo."

"Sorry sugar, I don't watch TV. Besides I don't need to worry about my street cred, you're the one that keeps getting your ass whipped," she retorted in an equally low whisper.

"So how are we gonna do this?" As she asked I could see the subtle change in her demeanor. She had what I would call her "game face" on and it was my turn to follow suit as I quietly pulled back the slide on the Beretta to cock it.

"Just follow my lead, but don't kill anyone unless you have to, and that includes me!"

I crept up to the door keeping an eye on the peephole. There was light behind it, so if anyone stepped up to the door to check outside, I'd see it go dark. Not the most perfect sign, but any little bit might give you an edge.

I slid my room key home into the door lock. It was an electronic keycard system and the small light turned green on the door indicating it was open. I debated whether to go slow or fast on the opening for a second and picked fast if for no other reason than because I'd had a bad couple of days and felt like taking it out on someone in a most satisfyingly violent fashion. I threw the door open and dove in, tossing myself to the left against the wall so I could cover the alcove with the bathroom and the rest of the room. Ciara was beside me immediately, the hand with the knives raised, ready to let them fly as we both scanned the room.

It appeared empty, but I caught the smell of the two men who'd jumped me in the hall the day before. The scent hung strongly in the room, too strong for them to have been gone for very long, but it appeared we'd missed them. I still proceeded cautiously, motioning for Ciara to check the bathroom as I moved into the room to cover the far side of the bed.

I was just about to come around to check the bed when Ciara came out of the bathroom. "Did you know there is a dead guy in your bathtub?" She asked in a matter of fact voice just as I realized there was a body lying behind the bed as well. I knelt down and checked for a pulse. I found none. I recognized him immediately as

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one of the two men from the day before. I hadn't had a great look at him then, but the smell was distinct and so was the faint coppery smell of blood. He was laying on his back staring up at me with glassy, unblinking eyes. He couldn't have been dead long. There was a smell of death on him, but it was faint. He'd been shot in the chest. I could see the hole in his shirt right where the heart would be, but there was very little blood for such a wound.

"Got one here too," I said. I started to draw my hand away from his neck when the corpse suddenly grabbed my arm and yanked me off balance down on him. I yelled to Ciara but she didn't respond as I struggled with the thing. I'd caught the floor with the hand that held the gun and was holding myself off of it but my finger was trapped in the trigger guard and my leverage was poor. It was trying to pull me down or itself up to bite me but my knee was in its shoulder keeping it pinned. It was a weird sort of Mexican stand off. It couldn't get me unless it let go and I couldn't move away unless I freed it by removing my knee.

I decided to go for a third option and changed into my hybrid form. The extra strength made up for the lack of leverage as I pulled my left arm away from it. The corpse did not let go and I heard a sickening wet snap as the bone in its forearm snapped in a horrific compound fracture, poking a jagged edged bone out of the flesh and through the sleeve of its shirt.

The corpse took no notice of the gruesome wound and continued trying to hang on with the arm. Its grip was still solid, so I had to wrench my arm free. It never let go and the thing's hand and arm, almost to the elbow, came off, clinging disgustingly to my arm.

It was still trying to get at me but my knee in its shoulder was holding the thing down. It swatted at me with the stump of its arm, getting some gore on my sweatpants. I couldn't rise all the way up or I'd be out of balance to hold the thing, but I was able to look over my shoulder to see what was happening with Ciara.

Apparently the other body was feeling just as lively as this one. It had grabbed Ciara by the neck from behind and lifted her off the ground. She had grabbed the thing's hands to keep it from strangling her, but the pressure of being held up by the neck was

choking her and she was turning red. Before I could even think about moving to help her, the air around her shimmered for a moment and suddenly her features had compacted, her eyes golden with slit pupils. Claws on fur-covered hands tore the flesh of the zombie creature but, like the one under me, the thing didn't seem to care how much it was injured. Then her claws dug deeply into the thing's hands and she pried them from around her neck, dropping to the floor. She rolled away and came up in a crouching fighter's stance to face it.

Her features were feline and she had a fine black fur covering her skin. It was as dark and sleek as her hair in her human form. She was a were-panther and, in true form to her nature, she lashed out at the undead creature. Ciara struck upwards with the claws of her right hand swiping a furrow of deep cuts across its chest. Then from the height of the upswing, she turned her palm over and raked it across the thing's exposed throat. Her strength and speed were impressive and the creature's head fell backwards like an open PEZ dispenser as she half-decapitated it in a single strike.

The undead thing staggered backwards and grabbed at its head which was now hanging behind it like a discarded hat staring at the ceiling. It finally grabbed the sides of its head and pulled it back up onto its shoulders and then staggered towards Ciara. Leaning forward slightly to keep the head in place, it grabbed her by her shoulders. I guess the sight of the thing pulling its head back up from an obviously fatal wound had stunned Ciara for a moment, but the instant it touched her she was back in a blur of motion.

The Zombie was at least a foot taller than her and as it grabbed her shoulders, Ciara reached inside its arms and latched on to its biceps. Her claws tore through the thing's clothes and the flesh underneath, rending out great gobs of skin and muscle in a single move, causing it to release its grip. She wasted no time and sidestepped the thing leaping onto it from the side. She grabbed it by its head and tore the skull the rest of the way off in one move as she landed behind it. The headless thing staggered a couple of feet forward and then fell over on to the carpet. I noticed that its wounds were not bleeding at all.

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The creature under me was still struggling and I had been paying too much attention to Ciara's fight. It thrust its stump of an arm into the thigh of my leg above the knee where I had it pinned. I gasped in pain as the sharp end of the bone stabbed into my leg, drawing blood. I grabbed the stump with my left hand and pulled it out, it had sunk a least an inch deep into my upper left thigh. I kept a hold on the arm and stood dragging it up with me, before throwing it across the bed.

It twisted as I threw it and landed on its stomach with its feet pointed towards Ciara. Before it could begin to rise, she leapt on it and grabbed it by the top of the head with one hand, ripping its throat out with the other. This did not seem to stop it anymore than it had the first one she fought, but a quick yank with the left hand finished the job, removing the thing's head as cleanly as she had the first one. She studied the head for a moment and, when it stopped moving, she dropped it by the body.

Ciara reared back her head and made a growling noise, the likes of which I never heard before. I could only describe it as orgasmic. She leapt at me, catching me by the shoulders and knocking me into the wall. She had returned to her human form during the leap, and was kissing me deeply as one hand ran under my sweatshirt and the other to my wounded thigh. I turned back to my human form and returned her kiss passionately. My mind was a blur with lust. The attack had brought my system to a fever pitch of excitement and Ciara's sudden advance tipped the scale. I was completely lost in the moment, running one hand down her back and the other behind her head pulling her into me.

We somehow staggered over to the bed, still locked in our embrace and rolled across it. Clothes came off in flurries of motion and she flipped me onto my back and mounted me in one deft movement. I can't ever recall a more desperate, heated, passionate sexual encounter and as she rode me, she moaned in ecstasy. I don't know how long we were at it, minutes or hours, but I felt her shudder in orgasm and she leaned over, biting me on the neck as she came. This sent me over the edge and just as I started to come she jammed her finger into the still open wound on my thigh!

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I yelled out in pain even as a wave of pleasure passed over me. She bit into my neck and I felt her draw blood there. She rose up, with me still inside her and licked a bit of my blood off her lower lip.

“Not bad for a wolf, I’ve never been with one of you.” Her voice had taken on a soft, husky timbre. Then she brought her hand up to her mouth. The index finger was red with my blood from the thigh wound, and sticking the finger in her mouth, she licked the blood clean from it. “Not bad at all sugar and I honestly needed that. Between all this killing and the full moon I’ve been about to burst.” I hoped she was talking about the sex and not about the blood that she’d just seductively removed from her finger. There are plenty of attractive females in this world whose idea of a good time includes exsanguination for their mates, and not all of them are supernatural either.

I put that unpleasant thought out of my head and lay back rolling my eyes. “I’m not sure what to say Ciara, that was amazing....” I stumbled around for more words and just when I knew what to say she leaned over and kissed me again. She rose up a second and said “Shut up and get ready for round two.” Then she bit my ear and we started again. Whatever I was going to say would have to wait for later.

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S ometime, and what a time it was, later we were cleaning up the room. The two corpses had proven a lot easier to get rid of than I'd expected. They'd turned to dust while we'd been... busy, so I just collected their clothes and wrapped them in one of the bed-sheets. I'd found Maria working down the hall and she'd gotten me some clean sheets and had agreed to vacuum up the two large piles of dirt in my room. To cover the "no questions asked part" I produced another \$50 for her troubles. She didn't seem to take it as anything out of the ordinary, so I didn't make a big deal either. Although her lack of reaction made me wonder what other people in this hotel have asked her to clean up before.

I'd rifled through the clothes before wrapping them up to be disposed of. The guy who'd been in the bathroom was named Larry Jansen and the one by the bed was Tyler Brown. Besides their driver's licenses, they had day passes to the horse sales at Keeneland that identified them as employees of Little Gévaudan, Sheik Rashid Al Fidel's farm. That made sense to me because a lot of arrows in my mind were starting to point towards the Sheik and his girlfriend. Hopefully Barty would come through with the invite to the party so I could check him out. If not, I'd still pay him a visit, but it wouldn't be as social.

Ciara decided to have a quick shower while I made a few phone calls. I had two voicemails, one from Tremain asking for a status update. That one could wait. The other was from Tabitha and she sounded worried so I decided to call her first.

She picked up her cell before it had rung a second time.

"It's about damn time you called us back, Michael. What are you getting yourself into up there?"

"Nice to talk to you too, Tabby. I've had an interesting time since I spoke to Sam last night. I'll fill you in on it in a minute. Did you guys find out anything about Sheik Al Fidel or his associate Dariya Volkova?"

“Oh we have quite a bit for you. The Sheik makes most of his money in oil. No surprise there. But he seems to have a real passion for horses. Sam emailed you a dossier on him, but nothing in it is too unusual. I did notice something odd though and followed up on it. The Sheik is the only son of an only son and we couldn't dig up one photo with him with any of his family. No pictures of him with his father or grandfather, but also no pictures of the grandfather and father together. Further, we couldn't find any references to them ever even being seen in public together. All the documentation is clean, but I swear it's like the Sheik just appeared 10 years ago. Funny enough, he showed up about the time his father, Sheik Arshad Mahmood Al Fidel, reportedly became severely ill with an undisclosed ailment that ended up hospitalizing him, in a private hospital of course, for two years almost immediately after Rashid showed up. Arshad never recovered and died in the hospital from “illness related complications” but the records we could access aren't worth squat since they are from Saudi Arabia. A Sheik could have his death certificate say “died from wounds suffered in a battle with a dragon” and no one would ask questions.”

Tabitha paused for a minute and I could hear her typing something, presumably into her computer, then she continued. “Almost the same exact story for the way his grandfather, Sheik Mustapha Rashid Al Fidel, died. A sudden drawn out illness took him out of the public eye. Only his son was too young at that time to take over the businesses, so one of the Sheiks aids ran everything. Officially, the old Sheik died of his illness and left everything to his only son when the boy turned 19. We don't know the real story, but there is no record of the Sheik appearing in public for the boy's entire life. Curious stuff if you ask me.”

“So what are you thinking? Could this be the same guy trying to cover something up? Maybe he's a vampire and he's hiding the fact that he doesn't age?” I thought this was unlikely. Vampires don't generally like to be such public figures as Sheiks. Vampires leaned towards the reclusive millionaire side, the kind who are rarely seen. They did not generally live the jet-setting playboy lifestyle of an all too-wealthy Sheik with a harem in tow.

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“Not likely,” Tabitha said as she continued to type. “I’ve found way too many photos of him out in broad daylight; at horse races, sales, hell, even a couple on the beach tanning. You know vampires don’t tan well, Michael.” She chuckled at the last bit and I did too, but that still left me wondering about his behavior. “Although, the photos I’ve seen...” Tabitha continued “...do show a striking similarity in appearance not just between father and son, but also between the grandfather and the current Sheik. They don’t look exactly the same, but it doesn’t take much imagination to think they could be the same person with just a few cosmetic changes.”

I had logged onto my laptop and downloaded the email file from Sam while I was talking with Tabitha. It contained financial information, some public and some not so public, but the Sheik didn’t seem to be into dirty money. Then again when your net worth from legitimate business is in excess of \$2 billion, why bother with stuff that could lead to you ending up in jail. I just skimmed it while we were on the phone, I’d go through it more later.

“What about the sheik’s mother or grandmother for that matter? What happened to them?” I asked.

“I thought you might be curious and sure enough according to official records both the mother and grandmother died during childbirth. The Sheik’s mother was listed as Sameera, no last name given but she wasn’t married to the father, most likely a harem girl. I couldn’t find anything else about her. Nothing at all on the identity of the grandmother, not even a name on the birth certificate.”

This was getting interesting. “What about the Volkova woman?” I asked as I opened a much shorter dossier file on her that was also in my inbox.

“There isn’t much information on her available through mundane channels. She’s 32 and was born in Georgia... the country not the state. She attended school in Tbilisi, the capital, until she was 16. After that she disappears from any records until she showed up with a Georgian passport entering the U.S. as a business manager working for the Sheik about five years ago.”

My ears perked up. “You said not much available on her through “mundane channels”. Does this mean she has some not so mundane background too?”

Tabitha continued typing away in the background as she replied. “Well, I posted a couple of inquiries about the Sheik and Dariya on some of the boards I’m a member of online and one of the covens in Eastern Europe replied they’d had a run in with her in Bosnia. It seems the Sheik’s harem is made up of mostly girls from former Soviet Union countries. That isn’t surprising, considering the amount of white slavery going on there, but he apparently doesn’t go for buying his women; he wants them to come of their own accord.” She made a huffing noise after she said that. “I guess that makes him less of a pig but not by much. Anyway, she was with him there on a trip to find some new girls, and there was a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Tabitha was sounding ominous and when a witch sounds ominous, you are smart to listen close.

“I’m not sure. The coven members wouldn’t post details on the board or even in private emails to me. This is a group of pretty well-connected women on the other side and they are scared of her. That’s all I could get out of them.” I could tell by her tone that this was the thing that worried her most, and it started raising the hair on the back of my neck too. For one person to scare a coven of witches is not a common occurrence.

I’d glanced through the files Sam and Tabitha had sent and decided there wasn’t much there that Tabitha hadn’t covered. I then filled her in on the events of the night before. By the time I got to the zombies in the hotel room she was slowing me down so she could take notes.

“I need to examine that collar Michael. It sounds dangerous as hell. You said Ciara got it off of you?” I could hear some disbelief in her voice.

“Yeah, I don’t know how, I was out cold.” I admitted.

“Watch her Michael; she has to be a magic user of some kind. Just because she’s a were doesn’t mean she can’t have other talents,” Tabitha warned. I considered that for a minute. No one had

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set any rules, but it seems that the beings on the other side of the line as we call it tend to run towards specialties. If you were a magic user that was your thing, if you were some sort of supernatural being (shape-shifter, fairy, vampire, whatever) that was your thing. You didn't see a lot of mixing of the two. In fact I had a lot of supernatural acquaintances but I couldn't think of any case where a supernatural being was also a magic user. The two things didn't seem to be mutually exclusive, but it's sort of like a football player who moonlights as ballet dancer; they just don't go together well.

I listened closely to the water running in the shower and then lowered my voice to say, "I hadn't thought much about it but you may be right. I'll watch her closer." I brought my voice back up to normal levels and continued "So have you and Sam got everything squared away with those poppets we stole from Ramirez down in Mexico?"

"No, not yet. I've been working on breaking the linkages between those dolls and the people attached to them. I know we were only paid for the one, but I can't leave anyone with a black magic noose literally tied around their neck!" Tabitha was sounding defensive.

"I wouldn't expect you to, but is it that bad?"

"Yes, it is exactly that bad. Those poppets are tied to the victims tightly. I'm having a hard time breaking the connection without harming the victims. If I leave it, the work I've done on the connections will literally heal itself back and the connection will become stronger. I have to perform the final separation ritual tomorrow night during the full moon."

"Now I'm confused. I thought you'd just need to pull the associated item off of them and destroy the dolls."

Tabitha almost jumped through the phone. "GOOD GOD MAN! If I did that the people connected to the poppets would be dead! For that matter, if anything happens to these dolls before the ritual is complete, the folks at the other end will most likely die of shock. I don't know who Ramirez hired to work this hoodoo, but they knew their stuff, that's for sure." She paused for a minute and continued. "Michael, thinking about it, I can't come to Kentucky until after the

ritual. If I don't complete it tomorrow night I'll have to start from scratch and wait for the next full moon. I don't want to risk it with those people, plus as long as they are actively linked, Ramirez may be able to track us. I've been blocking it since you brought the poppets in, but that was a tracer spell that was hitting us the other day, and a powerful one."

"So I guess you and Sam hopping the next flight to Kentucky is out then?" I said this in a noncommittal voice, but I was hoping to have a little backup.

"I'm sorry Michael. I need to stay here and I need Sam's help. I'll make a couple of calls and rustle you up some help. I have connections all over the place thanks to the miracle of the internet, but no, I can't leave this unfinished."

"Well, I guess I'll have to enjoy all the mint juleps myself then. What about the collar? You wanted to look at it right?"

"Yeah, did you take a holding bag with you?"

I reached over to my laptop bag and removed the small black bag from it. "Of course, how else would I get my guns through airport security?" I asked brightly.

"I give you a magical item that took days of work to create and you use it as a gun case! God, you were raised in a barn weren't you?"

"Nope. Remember I was raised by wolves." I could practically hear her smiling at that and then added, "You want me to put the collar in the bag and Fed Ex it to you?"

"That sounds like a plan, just make sure the bag is tied shut really tightly and use the string I gave you for it. If someone else gets the bag they won't be able to open it without some major spell-work."

I dug around in the laptop case until I found the string she was talking about. It worked as some kind of a verbal combination lock. Once it was tied around something, it couldn't be opened without the right word being spoken. It wasn't indestructible, but mundane tools wouldn't do much to it unless you had some heavy duty bolt cutters. It was a handy item to have and it made the holding bag into

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a sort of magical strong box that definitely wouldn't open accidentally.

We wrapped up our conversation about the time Ciara came walking out of the bathroom.

She was toweling her hair dry as she walked in and I just stopped and stared at her. Although I'd just been with her, I hadn't had much opportunity just to admire her and now as she glided into the room, drying her hair and smiling brightly at me, I could feel myself becoming aroused. She walked over and planted a kiss on my forehead as I sat at the desk holding the phone. She turned and walked to the bed picking up her clothes, and started, much to my regret, to put them on. I continued to stare until I heard my name being shouted from the small speaker of the cell phone. I hadn't hung up on Tabitha yet and she was yelling "MICHAEL! Are you still there? Are we done?"

I recovered and put the phone to my ear again. The hand holding it had somehow slipped down to my side. "Yeah, sorry Tabby, we're done. Thanks for the info and when you have a local contact give me call."

"Who's Tabby?" Ciara asked with an arched eyebrow as she pulled her jeans up and fastened them.

"She's one of my partners. She and her husband work with me." I said as I watched her continue to get dressed. I don't know how but she was making putting clothes on look almost as good as taking them off.

"Oh, well I heard part of it, so who are we contacting?" She was buttoning her blouse and I shook my head to bring myself back on focus.

"She has some friends in this area, and one of them might be able to help us deal with the person who put that collar together."

She furrowed her brow and looked around the room for a minute.

"Where'd you put the collar?"

"It's safe. Tabitha needs to look at it so I'm sending it to her".

I think Ciara was about to say something when my cell phone rang. She smirked as the theme to "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" played in a tinny tone through the phone's small speaker.

"I meant to tell you I liked your ring tone." She said smiling at me as I checked the number, it was Tremain.

I clicked the accept button. "Warren," I said into the phone, I knew who it was, but I don't count on the caller ID being right all the time, that can lead to embarrassing situations.

"Mr. Warren, I'm used to having people return my calls a bit more expeditiously, especially when they are on my payroll." Tremain sounded annoyed. I didn't care. He hired me for a job but he didn't own me.

"I'm not on your payroll, Mr. Tremain. I'm an independent contractor working for your law firm if you want specifics." I corrected in what I hoped was an annoyingly polite voice.

"Don't split hairs with me, Mr. Warren. You'll find I have little patience for that. Now, I would like you to update me on the current situation, but first, is Ciara there?" I'd held the phone away from my ear slightly and it was obvious that she could hear his side of the conversation because her eyes grew big and she began shaking her head from side to side.

I didn't miss a beat when I answered, "I don't know if she's here in Kentucky, but she is not here with me. Have you lost her as well?" I decided to put him on the defensive on the subject of Ciara so he wouldn't press it.

"Ciara can be a bit impulsive, Mr. Warren, and although she isn't aware of the specifics, she does know that her brother is missing. I don't want her to become involved in this business. Ciara has other duties to discharge. So if you do see her, make sure you inform me and direct her to contact me immediately. I didn't hire you as her babysitter, but I expect you to obey my instructions on this matter. Have I made myself clear, Mr. Warren?"

"Clear as a mountain stream. Now what else would you like to know?" With that I went into a brief recap of what I'd found out. I left out the attack but indicated that there might be some supernatural elements involved.

While I was on the phone with him, I had my laptop out. I pulled out the DVD cases I'd picked up in Caleb's room. As I continued to rehash what I'd seen, I opened the case that was on top. The label in

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it was backwards. This was the one I'd taken from the DVD drive on Caleb's laptop. When I was done talking with Tremain, I hung up the phone as I slid the disc into the DVD drive and waited while the laptop decided what was on it. Ciara had finished getting ready and joined me at the desk.

After a minute of whirring noise from the DVD drive a folder menu popped up. There were a number of video files, each labeled with a date with a couple of letters right after it. I clicked on the first one, and a moment later the media player was showing a medium resolution view of a hotel room I didn't recognize. As I watched Caleb walked into the camera's view and was followed closely by a short brunette who, like Caleb, was wearing only a smile.

I paused the video and looked at Ciara. Her face was a stone mask staring back at me. "I have a feeling this is going to be a bit rough. Do you really want to see it?" I knew the answer but I had to ask.

"I'm aware that my brother had a thing for taping his activities on occasion. Let's watch and see if there is anything on it that will help us." Her voice was flat and emotionless as she said it, but it was her choice, so I clicked 'play'. I also realized that, despite our earlier activities, I was actually starting to blush a bit as we continued to watch the video.

It looked as though Caleb and the young woman had just come from a shower or bath because they were dripping wet and they proceeded to use aerobic exercise techniques taught in the Karma Sutra to dry themselves off. I fast-forwarded the video up to the point where they finished and watched as the girl hopped off of Caleb and walked off screen. Caleb sat up, stretched, and then picked up a small device that looked like a TV remote. He looked right at the camera and winked, then pushed a button on the device and the video abruptly ended.

The date on that file had been about three weeks earlier. In fact it was just a few days before Caleb would have come to Kentucky on his most recent trip. I scanned the file names and found several that were dated after his arrival. "I don't feel like spending all day watching your brother's homemade porn, so I'm going to skip to the

files made after he arrived in Kentucky. If there's anything we can use here, it will be from the files made after he got here." Ciara nodded and I clicked on the one from two weeks ago.

Once again we got a shot of a hotel room. I recognized this one as the one Caleb was using here. This time the picture started with Caleb already in bed, lying fully clothed on top of the sheets. It looked like he was putting something away on the bedside stand. I believe it was the remote he'd used previously, but I couldn't get a good look at it. Just as he finished and rolled onto his back, a blonde woman walked into the camera's field of view. You couldn't see her face, but she had a slender shapely figure and was dressed in a fairly conservative looking skirt and blouse. She had a jacket that matched the skirt in her hand and tossed it onto the foot of the bed and placed her fists on her hips in a pose that struck me as "huffy".

Her voice sounded tinny through the laptop's speakers as she spoke. "What are you doing there darlin'? You don't need to have the TV on to stay entertained do you?" She turned to face away from him, directly at the camera whether she knew it or not, and bent over placing one hand on the ground and reaching back to smack herself on the ass. I recognized her. It was Beth, the receptionist from Blackstone Stud.

Even though she was moving with the slight stagger of someone who'd had just one or two too many, she still put a lot of womanly sway into her actions as she stood back up. Caleb was assuring her that she was the center of his attention as she moved out of frame for a moment and then I could hear music start up and then she sashayed back into view. She started to do a striptease for Caleb. She was moving, mostly but not entirely in time to the music. If he had any care about the fact that she wasn't keeping to the beat, Caleb didn't show it as he happily watched her disrobe and gyrate for his amusement.

I made what I would call a tactful choice and began fast forwarding through the video. Although she wasn't saying anything, I got the feeling the video was making Ciara uncomfortable. That didn't surprise me. If I had a sister, I don't think I'd want to sit and watch her go at it with someone either. Also, I didn't think there

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would be much dialogue missed at this point anyhow. The source of the music must have been very close to the audio pick up for Caleb's little home video system because it was effectively drowning out the other sounds in the room.

This one ran longer than the first video we'd watched and the counter showed a full 45 minutes had passed before they were done fooling around. I could tell that Caleb didn't want Beth finding out he was taping them because he didn't move to turn off the tape despite the fact that they were obviously finished and just talking. This wasn't a bad thing from my perspective. They had not been doing a lot of talking up until now and I didn't think I'd pick up anything useful until they did. I resumed normal play speed and turned up the audio.

"....So Barty said I should go with you to the sale," Beth was saying as she lit a cigarette and offered one to Caleb.

He waved a hand at the offered smoke dismissively and then made a sour face as he said, "You can't go with me babe. I'm meeting the sheik and we're going to be talking business in his private box. He doesn't...." Whatever it was the Sheik didn't do was lost as Beth rolled over and started screaming at him "DON'T YOU FUCKING LIE TO ME YOU SORRY SON OF A BITCH!" She had thrown the covers off the bed and hopped up, storming around the room gathering up her clothes in what I would best describe as a thundering silence. Caleb regarded all this with a smirk.

"God, calm down, I ain't messing with you baby, I'm going to be in the Sheik's private box and he has told me to come alone." Caleb was trying to explain as he got up and started dressing.

"You sorry fuck. You're just going to see that uppity bitch of his. Admit it!" She wasn't shouting now. She had her clothes and was getting into them as fast as she could.

Caleb was much less hurriedly pulling his pants up and fastening them. "Dariya hasn't got a thing to do with this honey. You know I don't even like her." Caleb had said this to Beth's back since she wasn't facing him and from his amused expression I got the feeling

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that he really didn't care if she left in a huff or not. He was done, so she could go. Swell fella.

I guess Beth felt the same way. Once she had her clothes on, at least enough to be decent, she stomped out of the camera's view and I heard the slam of the hotel room door. Caleb stood where he was a second then shook his head and walked over to the night stand by the bed. He pulled out the remote then looked right at the camera and said "Dariya baby, you're gonna love this." Then the screen went black.

Chapter 19

I reviewed the one other video from after Caleb arrived in Kentucky. I think her brother's casual callousness towards the women he slept with, more than the actual pornographic nature of the videos, was getting to Ciara. She stopped watching them with me and made a couple of phone calls of her own. I politely put on a pair of headphones so she could have a feeling of some privacy, but just to be on the safe side I kept the volume low enough that I could still listen in on her side of the conversation.

I didn't like being sneaky this way. I hadn't known her long, but I was really taking a shine to Ciara. As big as the supernatural community was (and if you knew how big it really was, you probably wouldn't sleep well at night) it was not everyday that you got to hook up with one of your own. That takes a lot of pressure off of you in a relationship since you don't have to worry about what they'll do if they find out you aren't "normal".

Ciara's first call was to Tremain. That one didn't last long. She told him she needed some time alone to take care of some personal business and if he had a problem with that, he could "fuck off". I didn't think she was going to get any employee of the month awards from Tremain for that, but at the same time the nature of the relationship between Tremain, Ciara and Caleb still wasn't clear to me. He'd called them his "protégés" but other than Ciara working as one of his heavies, I hadn't seen any indication that she did anything for him at all. Caleb, at least, was handling business dealings for Tremain, or at least for his organization. I didn't quite get the deal. Whatever the case, I don't know many people working for attorneys who can tell them to "F-off" and not end up looking for other employment. Then again, maybe he needed them more than they needed to work for him. On the other hand, Tremain has resources of his own, so why was he bringing in an outsider to deal with the problems? My head was starting to hurt from thinking about it all, so I decided not to worry too much about the human resource issues faced by Tremain.

This did make me think that I may have been following the wrong track though. I'd picked up that Tremain wasn't mundane when I first met him, but maybe he needed them as weres for the supernatural muscle they offer. If Tremain was a magic user or one of the other, less physical races, weres would make excellent heavies for him, and most of the time they made even better bodyguards. Even in human form, weres are stronger, faster, and have better senses than a comparably built human. It would surprise the hell out of anyone if they saw someone Ciara's size bench press 500lbs, but I would have guessed she could do it without breathing too hard. That kind of surprise gives quite an advantage in a lot of situations, trust me.

I put that all out of my head as I continued to scan through the videos we hadn't seen yet. The one shot the next day after Caleb and Beth had their little scene was an attractive red headed woman. I noticed that Caleb had left an envelope with some money in it on the nightstand and the young lady picked it up and put it in her purse as she was leaving. There had been all most no talking at all during that session. The red head had picked up the envelope, looked in it briefly and smiled as she walked out, telling Caleb to call her anytime he needed some more company.

Ciara was on the phone again while I watched Caleb and the red headed call girl. I picked up that she'd called Blackstone Stud and was talking to Barty. They apparently knew each other but I didn't pick up much else. Ciara had started pacing as she talked and this carried her out of earshot half the time. She finally came over and motioned for me to take the phone. I paused the video and took the offered cell. "Hello, Michael Warren."

"Michael, it's Barty. Look, you were saying you wanted to meet the Sheik. Well you can come with us to a party he's having out at Little Gévaudan tonight. I haven't told Ciara this. You can bring her if you want, but Tremain'll have my ass if he finds out I knew she was messing around here. So if she comes, it's on your ass. All I knew was that you were bringing a date. Fair enough?" I decided

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that Barty wasn't much for beating around the bush and that was fine by me.

"That works. What are the arrangements?" I pulled out a piece of paper and jotted down all the details.

I was about to end the call when Barty piped in. "By the way, it's a formal thing tonight. You got a suit and tie you can wear?"

"I can dig one up. Do I need to get a tux?" I asked and I thought Barty was having a seizure for a second by the way the phone broke up with a mixture of laughing and coughing. Like a lot of older men I knew in the south, Barty had that throaty smoker's cough you get after a number of years at two packs a day. He probably didn't think anything of it, but listening to the way his burst of laughter lead to a burst of coughing, and the fact that he didn't even seem to notice, made me wonder if Barty would be around much longer to manage the farm.

When Barty finished his laughing and choking fit, he carried on. "Hell son, I ain't worn a tux in 30 years, and I sure as hell ain't gettin' married again tonight. Just wear your suit and if you're bringing Ciara tell her she's gotta dress like a lady, not like someone who just fell of the bus from West Hollywood. The Sheik's pretty particular about how women dress around him, at least in public. He's not all in your face Muslim or anything where he makes them cover their faces, but the Sheik might take offense if she isn't dressed nice."

I chuckled at the thought of Ciara going off on anyone who tried to ask us to leave a party before she was ready. I'd seen her tear up a pretty mean zombie just a couple of hours ago, I didn't think rent a cops would stand a chance. "I'll make sure she is suitably dressed Barty. Thanks for digging this up for us." I disconnected the line and passed the phone back to Ciara.

After I told her we were going to a party at the Sheik's farm that night, I mentioned Barty's warning about the dress code. This brought a wicked grin to her face "I guess I'll just have to go in black leather mini-skirt with a white lace bra and a bondage collar on. I mean I don't want to seem too uppity now, do I?"

“I don’t think you could look anything but uppity if you went wearing a Nun’s habit.” I regretted saying that right away because of the gleam in her eye. Why is it that I now thought we’d be going to a costume shop to pick up a Nun’s outfit on the way to the party? “Seriously though, Ciara, we’re going to find out if they know anything about your brother’s disappearance, not to make a social statement. We don’t want to draw undo attention to ourselves, and offending the host is classified as undo attention. Conservative and classy are the words I’m hoping to use to describe your attire. Does that work for you?”

“Yes...” Ciara rolled her eyes as she said it, “I know the drill and I’ve got clothes that fit the occasion just fine. You think I’d really do something stupid like that? Despite the circumstances of our past encounters, I can play the part of a lady out on the town quite nicely thank you.” I could tell she was actually a little annoyed by the jibes, but we both let the subject drop.

“Come on, we’ve got a lot to get done before tonight, not least of which is picking up your appropriate clothes. Plus, it’s past lunch and all the exercise this morning, good and bad, has made me hungry,” I said with a wink at her as I grabbed my jacket. Reviewing the last video was going to have to wait.

Chapter 20

We grabbed a quick bite to eat and then headed out to take care of errands. I dropped the collar off at a Fed Ex pick-up box with an inner smile. If the guys handling this knew what was in it they'd probably have a fit. Not that they'd believe it if you told them but if they saw it for themselves, well... that's always a different story. Tabitha called just before we sat down for our late lunch and gave me the name and address of a woman in Lexington she had dealings with named Annette Quirey.

Apparently Annette was a practitioner along the same lines as Tabitha and she was working on a couple of items for me. Tabitha gave me an address and said to stop by there sometime after 5pm and she would have something for me. I almost choked when Tabitha told me the "donation" that was expected for the service, but as long as I could get a receipt, I didn't mind spending Tremain's cash.

We had some time before 5 o'clock but Annette's shop was on the other side of town from us so we went straight to Ciara's hotel to change for the party. I'd brought what she called my "Sunday-go-to-meeting" suit with me and I quickly changed into it while she got ready. Once again, my mouth dropped open at the sight of her.

Ciara came out of her bathroom wearing a stunning black evening dress that left one shoulder bare and draped delicately off the other. It had a slit up the side that showed more than enough of her toned legs to keep my attention. The material itself was almost translucent in places with stylish opaque areas strategically placed for the right effect.

The effect was so right in fact that we ended up having a quick but very satisfying session of messing up our nice clothes and then had to hurriedly get ready again and head out to Annette's shop. Although I was surprised to see that Ciara put her jeans and white shirt back on instead of getting back into the evening wear. "I'll put that stuff on closer to the time. Honestly, some fellas would have you wearing pearls to a swap-meet," she explained as she put the

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dress into a carrier bag and packed the rest of her stuff to go with it into a small duffle.

We headed out to my car and loaded her duffle into the trunk and hung the dress in the back seat. I'd insisted that we drive separately coming over, but heading out we took my car, the vivid memories of Ciara's earlier driving spurring me to chivalrously offer to drive.

We made up some time on the drive over. Traffic was surprisingly light crossing town and I'd mapped out where Annette's shop was on Google before we left the hotel. The "shop" was actually in one of Lexington's older strip malls on the north side of town. The sign over the shop said "Quirey's Health Foods". It was an old-fashioned style wooden sign with intricately carved vines and flowers surrounding the raised letters. Despite the large plate glass display windows on both sides of the entrance, it was almost impossible see into the shop itself from the outside. This was due to the display windows being filled with dozens of potted plants. Some of them were in large pots on the floor, the rest were spread out over free standing dark wicker shelves that filled the space. I don't know much about plants, and although I recognized a few exotic herbs on some of the shelves, most of the plants were a mystery to me.

It was about ten minutes to five, and the sign on the door said the shop hours were 10am to 5pm Monday to Fridays, so I went ahead and opened the door. The smell was the first thing I noticed. It was a heady mix of different spices, herbs, and just a touch of marijuana, but all of those scents were tiny compared to the predominant smell of patchouli incense burning inside the shop. I hate patchouli, and when you have the nose of a werewolf, a smell you hate is ten times worse.

A bell hung on a piece of bent metal rang as we opened the door and there was a sign directly in front of us that said: "Watch out for *T-Rex*". Almost as soon as I'd finished reading the sign, a small brown ball of fuzz shot out from one of the rows of shelves heading right for the door. I didn't pay much attention to it, but Ciara darted a hand out and scooped up the little mess of hair just as it would have gone out the door. It was a small, light brown dog, a

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Pomeranian, and it immediately began yipping as Ciara brought it up to her face and looked it in the eyes. It stopped yipping and stretched out to lick her face. Despite what some fiction would make you think, animals, at least domestic ones, tend to love weres. I guess it's the combination of human and animal in our scent, but we tend to make friends with pets really easily. That's not true for all supernatural beings, but it is one break the weres caught.

"Oh I'm glad you caught T-Rex. He's a terror for getting out that door. He always runs for it when he hears the bell." The voice came from a woman wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt that read "My other car is a broom". She'd popped up from behind a display counter along the wall to our right from the door. She had short cropped blonde hair and looked very muscular.

She walked around the counter and reached out to Ciara taking T-Rex, the Pomeranian from her.

"We have an appointment to see Annette Quirey. My name is Michael Warren and this is my associate, Ciara Underwood," I said and then added, "We're friends of Tabitha Edwards."

The woman looked us both over for a minute and I noticed that she paid a little more attention to Ciara than she did to me. Then she smiled brightly and said "I'm Annie, Annette's what my tax forms say." She tucked the dog under one arm, scratching its chin with the hand holding it as she extended the other to shake my hand. I took it and was surprised by the strength in the grip. If her toned physique didn't already advertise it, her handshake made it clear this woman was in great shape.

After shaking both our hands, she maneuvered between us and locked the shop's front door, flipping the sign in the door window from "Open" to "Closed".

"I don't want any interruptions while we're talking," she said as she walked back between us. "Now, why don't you all follow me into the back."

She led us through the store, which was set up like a small grocery store. We passed shelves of vitamins, supplements and other health aids and then we got to the back of the store where there was refrigerated shelving like you'd see holding cold beer in a

convenience store. The contents were mostly soy milk products, tofu, and some liquid supplements as well. So far I hadn't seen anything unusual at all.

We came to a door marked "Employees only, do not enter" and she stopped to pull a key out of the pocket of her sweatpants. As she inserted the key, I saw a small flash like a spark of static electricity and I knew that the key worked more than just a mechanical lock. The door opened silently and she took us up a narrow flight of stairs to the second floor. The door at the top of the stairs simply said "Do Not Enter" and she took a different key out. She said a few words under her breath as she put the key in the lock.

I noticed this time that the spark was brighter and it gave off a red light instead of the silvery, electric flash of the last door. The door at the foot of the stairs was simply magically sealed. This door had defensive warding on it, and in the tight confines of the stairwell, a good defensive ward would be a stone cold bitch to get past.

"You'll have to excuse the mess up here," she said as she opened the door. "I do a lot of work from this part of the shop."

One look at the room and it was obvious what she was talking about. The upstairs was an open loft that must have been almost as many square feet as the ground floor store. The room had regularly spaced windows and in each of them was some kind of planter or small green house with exotic looking plants in them. Between the windows were floor to ceiling bookshelves. Some of the shelves held books; others held jars, vials, small boxes and other various odds and ends that one would expect in a working witch's kitchen.

The far wall of the room was plumbed with a number of large hand sinks like you'd see in restaurants, and there was an oven and cooking range as well. All four burners on the range had expensive looking cookware pots on them and two were visibly steaming. There were several large rectangular work benches parallel to the sinks and they were covered with any number of items that would be at home in a laboratory, a kitchen or a horror movie, depending where your eyes fell on the table.

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The front half of the room where we had entered looked as though it had been purposefully left clear of any furniture or other items, aside from those on the peripheral shelves. The floor was tiled all around but there were two slightly raised wooden platforms set about four feet apart in the center of the open space. They weren't very tall, maybe four inches high, but they were about 5 feet square each and as we walked through the room towards a small table and chairs just beyond them, I could see circles, and various symbols carved into the wood. I noticed that the circle on the left was inlaid with gold and it had a pentagram inlaid in what I could tell was real silver in its center.

"Nice lab" I commented casually as Annie showed us to a couple of comfortable high backed chairs around a small coffee table.

"Thanks. Like I said, this is where I do most of my custom work." She winked at me as she gestured for us to sit. She went over to the stove area and returned with a tray containing small Asian style cups and a matching tea pot. She poured green tea into each glass and passed them to us, taking the last one for herself as she sat down.

"Tabitha told me what you have encountered," Annie started off with no preamble as she sipped her tea. "The best way to counteract those collars is to not touch them at all." Her voice was flat. She then got up and walked to one side of the room where she had a computer and printer set up. "Come over here and look at this." She was now pointing at a picture of the collar on her computer screen. I recognized the picture. I'd snapped several shots with my digital camera and emailed them to Tabitha before I'd called her. I'd made sure to get shots that showed all the runes etched into the outside of the device.

Annie clicked on a section of the photo and enlarged the markings so they were easily identified. "Tabitha identified some of the markings as Georgian writing. The other symbols are commonly used by Gypsies in the Carpathian Mountains. It's an interesting mix of regional magics to invoke the effect. I haven't seen many mixtures of styles like this."

“So this is from Eastern Europe?” Ciara asked indicating the photo of the collar.

Annie cocked her head to one side and contemplated this for a second. “I doubt it was made in Eastern Europe. If you look at the piece and disregard the markings, it looks like a simple silver choker. Notice at the back it has the small welded loop... that is for a chain. Nothing big, mind you, but a symbolic chain. If you disregard the markings and its obvious magical properties, you’re looking at a high-end bondage collar.” She looked at both of us for a second and then said, “I don’t intend to answer any questions about how I drew that conclusion so quickly by the way. That is personal.” She looked back at the photos. “I’d say this was a piece of mundane bondage gear that someone who learned the arts in Eastern Europe used to make the binding collar you encountered.”

Ciara and I considered this for a minute and then I piped in with the important question. “So can you give us anything to counteract it, or protect us from it?”

“Your best bet is to not let anyone touch you with one. This is some dark magic designed specifically for use against weres. If the collar is on or touches a shifter while the lock is closed, the shifter will revert to their human form. You already picked up on the nasty part about it being a battery for the mystical energies of the shifting, well that’s not all.” She walked over to a table and picked up a small golden bracelet. “My best guess based on the markings is that the first two effects are automatic when the device is active. However, the writing indicates that there should be a linked object, probably a bracelet or ring.” She tossed the bracelet to me. I caught it and studied it for a moment. It was a plain gold circle with a small metal clasp at the bottom.

“You could link something like that to the collar if it was made of the same metal. The clasp at the bottom of the bracelet is for a thin metal chain. During the making the bracelet or ring would have to be physically linked to the collar by a chain. Once completed however the chain would not be needed. The person wearing the linking bracelet would be able to force the collared were to change back and forth at will. They would also track the collared were and

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inflict a great deal of pain on them just by willing it. The collar is not a mind control device, but neither is a whip and whips have been used to make slaves do what they're told for centuries.

"Most importantly, the wearer of the bracelet can tap the energies drawn from the collared were. It wouldn't be pleasant, but the person wearing the control object could force the were to change back and forth until they had literally drained all of the life-force from the victim. It wouldn't take that many changes, I'd say between 15 to 20 depending upon the person, for it to be fatal. The amount of energy they'd collect would be... significant."

Ciara was looking worried and I asked "So what could someone do with this energy?"

"Mr. Warren, we're talking about a mixture of human life force and supernatural residue. A practitioner of the darker arts, and make no mistake this is the dark arts plain and simple, would be able to use the stored power to augment spells, or as a catalyst for a ritual. Hell, that kind of energy has any number of magical uses, take your pick." Annie looked at us both and we could tell that the implications of it worried her.

Hell, the implications worried me. The power drawn into the collar was more than just the human life-force, it was also the mystical energies involved in the were transformation. The mixing and harnessing of that power made for dark energies far in excess of even a human sacrifice. In other words, if a collar were fully charged through the death of a were, it would be like a nuclear device for the magic user controlling it. This was not good at all.

"So you've already said the best defense is not touch one of these collars, but do you have anything that can help if we are touched or worse, collared?" I asked.

"There isn't anything I can do about the automatic effects. If a collar is active and you touch it, you will revert. I might have something that can help you though." Annie walked over to one of the tables near the sinks and pulled a long thin box from one of the drawers. When she turned I saw it was a box of common kitchen plastic wrap and she was smiling as she said, "This'll be a bit expensive and I'll need a thimble full of blood from each of you, but

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I think this is just what you need.” Ciara and I exchanged worried looks as Annie reached down and pulled the leg of her sweatpants up to reveal a small silver dagger in an ankle holster. She drew it and walked towards us smiling. “Come here kids, we’re gonna have some fun....”

Chapter 21

The Sheik's farm, Little Gévaudan, was anything but little. I guess if you compared it to the Gévaudan region of France, you could say it was smaller, but I wasn't sure you'd even be right there. We'd met up with Barty and Beth at my hotel after finishing up with Annie. We needed to go together since there was one invitation for "up to four representatives of Blackstone Stud Farm".

Barty was looking extremely uncomfortable as he drove us in an SUV owned by the farm. It was a Cadillac Escalade which Barty explained was owned purely for going out and "puttin' on airs" for prospective buyers. His discomfort stemmed from a couple of sources. One was driving a "sissy truck" like the Caddy. To Barty, if you can't wear muddy boots in it, it's for sissies. The other reason was the finely tailored suit he was wearing. He'd told me the farm paid for it and it was standing policy for him to wear the expensive suit to functions like this.

Ciara had changed back into her stunning black evening dress and had put on a silver chain necklace that wove an eye catching pattern on her exposed skin. In the center of it was a small amulet with the shape of a woman etched into it. I commented about the silver and she just smiled and told me she didn't expect anyone to attack her with her own jewelry and that I should mind my own business. Fair enough I guess, but I knew I wouldn't wear silver jewelry if I could avoid it.

Before Barty and Beth arrived to pick us up, I'd asked Ciara if she was OK going that night due to the approaching full moon. I knew I was not feeling anywhere near as twitchy as I normally would this time of month, but I figured the drain the collar had placed on me the night before had taken some of the bite out of the wolf in me.

Ciara toyed with the amulet of her necklace and smiled again. "Thanks for the concern there sugah, but I've got everything under control"

I figured if she wasn't worried about it, then it wasn't my place to worry about it, but the full moon was tomorrow night and weres have to satisfy their nature sometimes, one way or another.

The attractive blonde receptionist, Beth, rounded out the group. As if to counter Ciara's black dress, she wore a daringly cut white dress with a neckline that stopped just shy of her navel. I wasn't sure what was keeping her fairly sizable breasts from falling out of the thing every time she moved, but I did find myself watching her a bit more than I should. I think part of it was having seen her in the video earlier that day. I'm a guy after all and sometimes you just have to look at what's on display.

Beth seemed extremely excited about going and I guess I could understand why. This was supposed to be quite an event. Although I'd never heard of the Sheik before this trip, he was quite well known in the Kentucky area. He apparently had given an exorbitant amount of money to a number of local charities over the past few years and was known for hosting "gala events" just about every time he came into town for more than a few days. From what Barty had told us, this was the party to go to for all the "horse people". He'd also privately mentioned to me that Beth was going to take the opportunity to try and stop being a receptionist and start being a trophy wife to one of the numerous successful bachelors if she had the chance. He smirked when he said this and gave me a crooked grin.

"I tell you what Michael, she's a piece of work and if one of these pencil dicks is smart enough, he'll have himself a pretty good catch," he said to me in a conspiring whisper while Ciara had been getting ready. "She's a lot smarter than she might appear, and a lady like her deserves better than what she's got."

I was honestly surprised to hear Barty say this but I could tell by his tone that he was sincere, so rather than argue the merits of marrying for money over love and all that, I just nodded in agreement as we waited on Ciara.

As we drove to the farm, I did note that Beth was definitely giving me and Ciara the cold shoulder. She'd made a subtle point of not speaking directly to either of us during the drive over. My guess

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was that she was still annoyed about me poking my nose in her personal life the day before. I also figured that whatever animosity she had towards Caleb, at least she seemed to have developed some animosity for him from what the video had shown, most likely carried over to his sister just by relation. Whatever the case though, it didn't particularly bother me. Besides, if she kept her nose in the air she was less likely to notice that I wasn't quite looking her in the eye when I addressed her. That was one low cut dress she was wearing, after all.

We arrived at the head of the private drive to Little Gévaudan and stopped at a small toll-booth like guard house built of brick. It was set just inside of the first set of gates to the property. You had to pass through the outer gates to get to the booth. At the booth we were stopped and had to show not only our invitation but photo I.D. as well. As we reached the booth the gates behind us closed, effectively locking us in until they either cleared us or had us do a turn around and leave. Either way we were stuck until they decided what to do with us. After the rather large and imposing looking guard checked our IDs and our invitation thoroughly we were cleared. At that point a second set of gates in front of us opened to allow access to the drive up to the Sheik's mansion.

In addition to the neat little two-gate security "airlock", I'd noticed the fencing along the road as we'd approached. You couldn't easily see it from the main road due to trees planted all along the roadside, but aside from the white wood plank fence that was the staple of traditional Kentucky horse farms, there was a worked stone and brick fence about 40 feet from the plank one. This gave room to work the horses around the farm between the two if the trainers so desired, but also created what I noticed was a neat little security buffer of cleared ground that anyone approaching the fence would have to cross after they'd negotiated the first fence and the tree line.

The inner wall was topped with what looked like a line of iron works cast as roses and vines, but if you looked closely you could see that the metal work along the top was as much a deterrent to any would-be climbers as it was for decoration. Metal thorns were

clearly visible on all the surfaces and with my sharper than average eyes I picked out the glint of stainless steel razor wire along the base of the iron works on the backside of the fence. The overall impression I got was that the Sheik was taking pains to make his security set up look much less effective than it really was.

I'd also noticed that the guard who'd checked our IDs, and his partner who had circled the Escalade and noted its license number, were both carrying semi-automatic pistols in waist holsters. This wasn't surprising, but what most people wouldn't see without night vision goggles were the four additional security guards standing unobtrusively on either side of the road just out of the light. They were dressed all in black body armor and carrying HK MP5 submachine guns held at the ready. The weapons weren't great for long range, but in the confines of the "airlock" between the two gates, they could chew up anyone pretty effectively. It appeared the Sheik didn't mind spending money on guns and shooters.

I studied the grounds of the farm as we drove along the private road to his mansion. From what Barty had explained the actual farm was behind the mansion. There wasn't much of a front lawn because most of the grounds were planted with light woods. The spacing between the trees allowed grass to grow nicely but it was more like driving through a forest than through someone's farm.

The road wound around in the trees in a circuitous route that made what would have been about a 1/2 mile as the crow flies into almost two miles of driving. As we wound our way through the light forest, my keen eyes picked up movement several times. Roving guard patrols, dressed in the same black "commando" style outfits that their friends at the gate had been wearing. It wouldn't be easy to go sneaking around on these grounds, that was one thing I was certain of.

The Escalade finally came out of the trees around the house and I was genuinely impressed. To say the mansion was excessive would have been an understatement. The road straightened as we left the trees and approached the house through a series of well-manicured hedge rows with marble fountains and statues liberally spaced along

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the way. The area was lit almost as bright as day by halogen lights running discretely along the tree-line around the open area.

The house itself was an odd mix of Gothic and Greek revival architecture, with marble columns lining the front and spiraling towers that were at least three stories high at each end. The whole thing reminded me more of an exclusive mental hospital I'd seen in New England a few years earlier and it wasn't much smaller than that come to think of it. Combined with the way the mansion was hidden in the woods on the farm, the whole effect was quite imposing.

The large double front doors were open and there were people in fine dress milling about just outside. Valets dressed in black pants and blue blazers descended on the Escalade as we pulled to a stop at the front of the house. They opened the doors to the SUV and helped both Ciara and Beth out. One of them got into the driver's seat, handed Barty what I assume was a claim ticket for the SUV, and the vehicle quickly disappeared to wherever all the other guests' cars had been taken.

Beth smiled brilliantly at one of the valets and the young man blushed. Then she took Barty's arm and they headed for the open front doors. Ciara took my arm and we followed close behind. Ciara leaned in and whispered to me, "She sure does seem to have a cob up her ass about the two of us sugar. You think she had something to do with whatever happened to Caleb?"

I could detect some worry in Ciara's voice. She'd been playing like her brother disappearing wasn't a big deal but her scent and the way she spoke both told me that she was extremely worried.

"I don't know," I admitted reluctantly in the same low whisper as we climbed the marble stairs to the front door. "One way or another though we'll find out, that I promise you." I felt Ciara squeeze my arm as I said the last and noticed that she relaxed some.

"Come on Sugar" I said in a passable imitation of her southern accent "We've got to go be sociable..." then I grinned wickedly at her and added "At least until we can start snooping around in places we shouldn't be." I winked and with that we entered the party.

Chapter 22

The foyer to the mansion was huge, stately white stone with marble statues around the walls in small alcoves. The large room was thick with guests in fine clothes milling about everywhere you looked. The overall effect was a lot like something out of a movie.

Once inside, a pair of attractive young women in uniform skirts and tops that matched the valets appeared and offered to take our coats. Barty and I both hadn't bothered with an overcoat but the Beth and Ciara both had wraps which they handed over to the young ladies in exchange for claim check tickets.

The majority of the men in the room were older. Besides the hired help, I think I was one of the youngest men in the room. To counter that, the women in the room all seemed to be under the age of 40 and dressed to impress each other more than the men. I saw a lot of expensive jewelry and also so much perfume and hairspray that my sensitive nose almost couldn't stand it. Ciara also wrinkled her nose; I guess the overwhelming scent was getting to her as well.

It seemed that most of the first floor was open for the guests and there were people just about everywhere we looked, mostly talking in small groups or taking turns at food and drink buffets. We followed Barty and Beth through a door to the left and found ourselves in a very large library. Aside from being at least 50 feet from end to end, the room was also about two stories tall. The far side was one long stone worked wall with a huge fireplace set into it. The wall to our right had bookshelves from floor to ceiling with a catwalk about halfway up and spiral stairs at either end. The wall to the left was a series of bookshelves as high as the ones on the right, but with tall, viewing windows spaced evenly between the shelves. This side had no permanent catwalk, but a set of ladders on rollers fixed into each section of shelving. The wall behind us was fine dark oak paneling with paintings of horses and horse related activities covering the surface.

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A long buffet table was set up in the middle of the room and a number of guests were walking around it, loading plates with expensive looking entrées which I noticed hungrily included a vast variety of sushi and sashimi. Despite my love of meat, I also had a strange passion for the Japanese dishes that involve raw fish.

I nudged Barty. “Before we start meeting and greeting, I want to try some eating.” With that I led Ciara over to the buffet and picked up a plate. The plates were a fine china pattern and as I eyed the table, I decided that whatever else the Sheik might be, he had good taste in food.

Barty and Beth joined us and after we had filled up our plates, we ducked off to the corner to the right of the door to enjoy the food and scope out the crowd. It didn’t take long for me to empty my plate and now that the eating was out of the way, it time to get down to business. While the others finished their plates, I scanned the room more carefully for familiar faces. The only apparent door to the library was the one we’d come in through and there were people constantly drifting in and out.

I knew Dariya Volkova as soon as she entered the library. Although I’d never actually seen her, I recognized her from a photo in the files Tabby had sent me. She was wearing a blood-red evening dress that molded to the curves of her body in a way that was not too painful to look at. The dress covered her shoulders but had a neckline that showed enough of her assets to peak the interest, but not stop any hearts either.

I noticed that she wore a rather expensive looking gold necklace with a large ruby set into a pentagram at its center. It seems Dariya doesn’t mind showing her affinity for “the arts” as some would call it, even at what might as well be a gathering of the Southern Baptist convention. Kentucky was a notch, if not the buckle of the Bible-belt and the people in the horse industry here were known for their conservative nature, so it surprised me that Dariya would display what is often taken for a satanic symbol amongst this crowd. That spoke of either arrogance or confidence that, as the lady of the house, she wouldn’t have trouble.

Dariya wasn't alone. Following behind her were five stunningly beautiful young ladies, all dressed in similarly daring gowns that showed a whole lot of skin in all the right places. The oldest of them didn't look over 18 and the youngest probably 15 at a guess. It didn't take a genius to figure out that these were some of the Sheik's harem girls. The way they followed Dariya with their heads down quietly walking through the party was the other clue. She walked them past the table with the food and sat down in a comfortable looking chair next to the fireplace. The girls lined up in front of her and she said something to them that I couldn't make out through the general noise of the party. Dariya apparently finished her speech and then waved her hand and the girls scattered quickly, relief obvious on their faces. Two of them made straight for the buffet and started loading plates with food. The others headed towards the bar.

I guess no one was carding at this event as I watched them get drinks and start laughing and talking to each other. The exception was first girl to reach the bar. She turned and took the drink she'd received back to Dariya. Without saying a word and with her head down so as not to meet the woman's eyes, the girl put the drink on a small table next to Dariya's chair where it would be within easy reach. The girl backed away with her head down and then after a few steps turned and scampered back to the others by the bar.

I leaned into Ciara and whispered in her ear. "Why don't you go see if you can pick anything up from those three girls standing near the bar. I think they are part of the Sheik's harem and they may know something useful."

Ciara nodded slightly as she studied the trio and put her plate down on a nearby tray before heading for the bar. I looked around again and then said to Barty, "How about you introduce me to Ms. Volkova, Barty? I think she looks lonely sitting over there." I nodded with my head in her direction and Barty smiled.

Beth immediately smacked him on the arm "Don't you dare go anywhere near that bitch Barty! You know how I feel about her and you're with me tonight."

Barty, to his credit, didn't seem the least bit phased by Beth's sudden turn of anger. "Darlin' we're here on business and she is part

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of it. If Michael wants to meet her then we're gonna meet her, that's it."

Beth turned her anger in my direction and started to smack me the same way she had Barty. I twisted to the side at the last second and she stumbled sideways as the rather forceful blow went through empty air where I'd been a second before. She didn't say anything but stared daggers at me. I met her stare with a level gaze and then just because she was pissing me off I let my eyes change. In an instant they went from a warm, human brown to a rather sinister looking golden color that reflected the light in what I knew was an evil way. Beth made a startled "meep" sound and looked at Barty then back at me. I'd changed my eyes back when she looked back. She did a double take and then, visibly shaken, announced that she was going to go powder her nose and scampered off through the door we'd come in. Barty looked at me disapprovingly. "Don't be hard on the girl Michael, she can be a bit bitchy but she's a good kid."

"Barty, I don't even know why you brought her along, but that's your business as long as it doesn't interfere with my business. Now come on." I started towards where Dariya was sitting.

Actually, sitting wasn't what she was doing. It looked more like Dariya Volkova was holding court. She sat sipping her drink while people walked up and paid their respects to her. None of the men or women coming up to her stayed to talk for more than a moment or two. Just long enough to flatter her in some way and then clear off. There was a loose sort of line waiting to see her. It was more a cluster of people that had gathered since she sat down. The ones at the front would break off as an opening appeared and proceed over to Dariya. It was odd, but I guess it was expected of good guests.

I can be a good guest when I want to be, but I wasn't in the mood so as an older couple disengaged themselves and moved away, I slid diagonally in cutting off an unhappy looking overweight man with salt and pepper grey hair.

"Miss Volkova, isn't it?" I said stepping up and offering a slight bow of my head. "My name is Michael Warren."

She looked up with an expression of mild amusement. She was looking just past me at the overweight man who had turned back to some of his friends in the crowd and was making comments that he didn't think I could hear about, among other things, my parentage.

She extended a long slender arm and I took her hand and kissed it. I also took a deep breath of her scent. She was wearing a mild perfume and the smells of the food, drink and den of humanity in the room all combined to make picking her scent out difficult. I thought I had it, and one thing I noticed was just how nice she did smell.

"Ah, Mr. Warren, I had heard you would be attending tonight. I've so been looking forward to meeting you... in a social occasion." She smiled as she said this, but none of it reached her eyes. Her accent wasn't particularly thick, but I could detect the Slavic influence on it. I also recognized it right away and a chill ran down my spine. I hadn't been 100% sure with just her scent alone because of the clutter of smells in the room. But now I was certain that Dariya Volkova was the one who tried to collar me last night and here I was kissing her hand.

"Please, call me Michael." I'm pretty good at masking my emotions, and I was working very hard at playing the ignorant, amiable guest. "You have me at a disadvantage though Miss Volkova."

"Michael, I insist you call me Dariya, and I'm sure I have you at a number of disadvantages, but which one are you inquiring about?" She definitely looked amused, like a cat playing with a mouse. As she spoke, she reached for her drink. When she extended her arm I saw a silver bracelet, fairly plain, but my eyes picked up the tiny runes carved into it, and the small clasp at the bottom. It was the control bracelet for the collar.

"Well... Dariya, you seem to know who I am, but I only know that you are the personal assistant of Sheik Al Fidel. What makes me worthy of note?" I cocked an eyebrow as I said this and tried to look the part of the charmer.

"Oh, come now darling..." Her accent came out strongly on "darling" making it sound like "dahlink" and it reminded me of

Blood Curse

Natasha from Rocky and Bullwinkle. “Your reputation precedes you. You were hired to come to Kentucky and investigate the disappearance of Caleb Underwood, or so you believe.” She was smiling evilly as she said this and I had to work very hard to mask my surprise. She knew more than I expected and I couldn’t decide if it was the casual way she laid it out in the open or the knowledge itself that disarmed me more.

“I will tell you this Michael; I’m as interested in finding sweet Caleb as you are. He and I have unfinished business.” She sipped her drink and continued. “Walk with me darling. I wish to speak with you about how we might help each other, and I don’t think this is the place to do it.”

When she stood, an unspoken signal went out and suddenly the five harem girls all rushed up and stood to one side in a line with their heads down. “Go and play, pets,” she said and the girls turned to leave as quickly as they’d come.

Unfortunately for a pretty young brunette with green eyes, Dariya did not mean for them all to leave. The older woman’s hand snapped out like a striking snake and caught the young girl by the chin as she passed within reach. She lifted the brunette’s chin and guided her to stand between us. I could smell fear radiating off of the girl in waves strong enough to cut through the swirling confusion of scents filling the room from the party. The girl was trembling slightly and would not meet Dariya’s gaze as the older woman spoke to her. “Petra, my sweet, you will go and find your master and tell Rashid that I am entertaining Mr. Warren and would like him to join us when he can. Is that clear?” Her words had sounded sweet as honey, but her tone was cold and she’d pinched the girl’s chin, hard, for emphasis.

Petra kept her eyes downcast as she gave a slight bow. “Yes mistress. It will be as you command.” She turned and hurriedly made her way through the crowd, exiting the room almost at a run.

Dariya turned her attention back to me and shrugged slightly. “Good help is so hard to find. Now if you will follow me.” She indicated towards the door and started to walk past me.

“Dariya, what would you say if I were to decline your *invitation*?” I stressed the last word heavily and she turned slightly to look at me. “I wouldn’t say anything my dear boy, but I do believe your friends might be a bit disappointed in you. After all, they would expect you to behave a social function and not do anything that might cause a scene for one of them, now wouldn’t they?” As she said this she gestured with her chin and I saw that Beth, who was blissfully unaware of anything as she attempted to charm a man in a well tailored suit, was now unobtrusively surrounded by four rather bulkily muscled men dressed in the same style blazers that the valets had worn. I also noticed that I could see the butt of a semi-automatic pistol wink into view as one of the men shifted.

“What about all of your other guests, Dariya? Surely you don’t want to cause a scene for them?” I had stepped slightly back from her as I said this and was weighing my options for extracting us from the room. I had kept track of Ciara during all this. She was again chatting to the harem girls since they’d returned to that area near the bar. We made eye contact and I nodded slightly and flicked my eyes to the door to the room. Ciara was quick on the uptake and excused herself from the young ladies and began moving towards the door. That just left Beth and Barty to deal with and I couldn’t see Barty at all.

“As I said darling, we wouldn’t want to cause a scene now would we?” Dariya’s accent grew more pronounced as her anger became more evident and the last came out as “vould vee?”

I didn’t feel I had much choice so I bowed my head slightly then grinned “No I guess *Vee Vouldn’t*”

Dariya sniffed and turned and we both began to walk out of the room. Things were moving along in ways I hadn’t expected and the bad feeling in my stomach wasn’t due to the quality of the sushi either.

Chapter 23

I don't know what I was expecting really. Dariya Volkova was obviously a witch of some power who at least dabbled in the black arts; the magic in the collars and her associates, the Dracors, confirmed that. Not to mention, she works for an unimaginably wealthy Sheik and despite her looks, I don't think her job is just to be his secretary and occasionally warm his bed. In the movies, the villains have an underground lair with jump suited minions or flying monkeys and such to do their bidding so what was in store for me?

Maybe this was just the waiting room outside the lair, but she had led me through the mansion to a game room on the second floor towards the back of the house. There was a huge old-fashioned pool table that was the centerpiece, but other "gentlemanly" games were scattered around the dark paneled room.

Dariya was seated across an octagonal poker table from me sipping a glass of dark wine she'd fixed herself at a bar in the corner of the room. She offered me a drink. I accepted an unopened bottle of imported beer. I didn't trust her to fix me something herself but I also didn't want to seem too rude or suspicious until I knew exactly what was going on.

"You understand that last night was not anything personal. It was an opportunity and I could not pass it up." Dariya said as she ran her finger around the edge of her crystal glass generating a tone that was just at the right pitch to annoy my sensitive hearing.

"And your two associates who were waiting in my room. Were they business as well?" I asked as I popped the top off the beer on an opener I found on the side of the table near a well placed cup holder.

"Their job was simply to keep tabs on you, Michael. I'm assuming since they didn't return that you killed them or are they in some other way indisposed." She'd stopped her finger and the tone coming from the glass faded.

Interesting. I'd assumed that for some reason she had arranged for their zombification as a trap for me, but that didn't fit with what

she was saying. Zombies are not good for undercover work. They smell too bad and have a nasty habit of eating the people they follow. Of course that was assuming she was telling the truth.

“Let’s just say you will probably need to call a temp service and see about getting a couple of guys to fill in for them. Maybe on a temp-to-perm basis.” I decided a clear head was worth more than even one beer so I pretended to take a sip of the beer, but covered the mouth of the bottle with my tongue then placed the bottle in the holder on the table’s side where it would be out of the way.

Dariya picked up her drink and paused with it right at her lips. “Pity. I never cared for Larry, but Tyler was rather handsome.” She drained the glass and smiled at me, but her eyes remained hard. “You seem a smart man Michael. I’d like to discuss some business with you.”

“I’d like to discuss Caleb Underwood. I understand you two were... intimate”.

“HAH!” Dariya’s laugh came out like a bark and she reached under the table and pulled out a deck of cards, slitting the plastic wrapping on them with one long fingernail. “If you mean we were fucking, you’d be right. But he was too much of a boy for me to be *intimate* with him.”

She cut the deck, her eyes never looking down at the cards. Her hands were a blur of motion as she shuffled then dealt out five cards to each of us.

“So what’s the game?” I asked picking up the cards and looking at the hand I’d been dealt. It wasn’t good.

“I thought you liked playing without knowing the game. Tremain seems to think so since he dealt you into ours,” she said coyly as she looked at her own cards.

I pulled three cards from my hand and tossed them into the center of the table. Dariya eyed me for a moment and expertly flipped three new cards off the top of the deck over to land in front of me. I slid them into my hand and eyed them. I now had a pretty good hand, then I realized I had the “dead man’s hand” aces and eights.

Blood Curse

Dariya took no cards herself and leaned across the table. She was now clearly turning on the feminine charm, and I had to admit it was quite appealing. “You know you can fold and walk away from the table.”

“What does it cost me to fold?”

“Right now, nothing. You can walk away.” She dealt another five cards to the empty space to my right. “You can also play a new hand, one that would be profitable for both of us.” She shifted and her dress dropped from her left shoulder. She wasn’t quite indecently exposed from this angle, but it was close. “Of course profitable can mean any number of wonderful things.”

Dariya Volkova looked damn hot right then. The fact that she’d tried to use a black magic construct to enslave and possibly kill me not one day before was jumping up and down somewhere in the back of my head begging for attention, but I was finding myself drawn to her. I felt like a ship spinning in a whirlpool and she was the blackness waiting for me at the bottom, the pull was inescapable even though I knew it could drag me under.

She laid her hand down and rose. She seemed to float around to me like a dream and I didn’t even realize I’d stood up until I suddenly found her in my arms. I felt her body through the dress; it was smooth and toned and where the dress was cut low in the back I could feel her soft skin almost burning me with heat where I touched her. She was suddenly all I wanted. The wolf in me howled. He’d found his legs again and was pacing my mind looking to get out and claim this woman as a mate. I was too busy with her at the moment to care, but I did keep the animal part of me in check with some small part of my will. I didn’t know how long that would last. I could feel my will fading and I also could somehow tell that Dariya wouldn’t care. Man or beast, she wouldn’t give a damn and that excited me even more.

In the very far back of my mind a tiny voice was telling me that this was not right at all. The feelings were too strong, too sudden. This wasn’t love. It wasn’t lust. It was something else. It didn’t seem to matter. Even as the alarm bells went off, I moved deeper under her spell... SPELL! The part of me that still had some reason

screamed at me and now the wolf in me howled too. There was rage mixed with animal lust in my mind and it was an anchor. Realizing it was a spell of some kind didn't free me from it, but I focused on the animal rage.

The anchor wasn't enough to keep me from sliding further under and most of my mind could care less. The words floated in my mind, drowning out the reason in me... Give in! Let go! Take her! Love her! Have her now! They were compelling and pushed the other thoughts away like a tank rolling through infantry, but reason remained and I tried desperately to lock onto it.

I was suddenly aware that I was no longer standing. We were on the floor and she was on top of me, straddling me. Her dress was pulled down off her shoulders exposing her firm breasts. I was rocking with her, feeling her, wanting her. She had my face in her hands bent over kissing me. The wolf howled in lust and helpless rage and I knew if I had her that I would be lost to her will and I didn't care. Anything for her. Anything.

My eyes lustfully rolled over her body and stopped on her right shoulder. There was an angry red line about an inch and a half long with two small black stitches in it. That was the place where Ciara had thrown... Oh God I had to have her!

NO! The voice was screaming in my head. The wound on her shoulder Ciara had made it saving me from Dariya last night. Dariya had tried to make me her slave. I could not do this.

Then she reared back up reaching down to my belt and I saw it between her breasts hanging on a thin gold chain. A small heart shaped locket glowing faintly red. How had I not seen this before? All I could think of was my need to have this woman. The glow faded from the locket. The wolf howled again and despite myself I started to change, I felt the muscles in my arms and legs shifting. As I shifted towards becoming the wolf my senses heightened even more and I reached up, hands with hair visibly growing longer on them and cupped her breasts fiercely. In one motion, I spun us over so I was on top and at the same time grabbed the locket ripping it from her neck as we spun. By the time we'd finished the roll, I was the wolf in full form, my clothes ripped to shreds by the change.

Blood Curse

Dariya screamed not in fear but rage as the discarded locket fell. It was on the ground next to us as the wolf was over her and it glowed red like molten metal. There was a blinding flash.

The world spun like a top for a second and my vision doubled. We were still seated across from each other at the table. Dariya was slumped over face down. There was smoke or maybe steam rising from the cards discarded in her hand. They were not the same as the cards from the deck we'd been playing. They were burned and smoldering around the edges. Laying face up I could see her hand and it was...interesting. One card had a photo of me, taken sometime the day before I was guessing by my clothes. The next card had the symbol for man on it and what looked like a drop of dried blood. It was burned less than the other cards in the hand and was accompanied by a card with the symbol for woman with another drop of blood smeared in the symbol's center. The final two cards were scorched black but I could see the faint outline of words on them.

I then noticed the cards in my hand. One of the aces I'd held was the ace of hearts, and in the center where the picture of a heart had been was a heart shaped hole. It looked like it had been burned out.

It was some kind of compulsion spell, or love spell that she'd tried to use on me. I stood up, shakily, but at least I was standing. I walked around to her side of the table and checked Dariya's pulse. It was there, but weak. I figured she took the backlash of my breaking the spell pretty hard. She wasn't dead, but she would be out for a while.

I plucked the cards with the blood and photo from her hand and stuffed them in my pocket. I figured they were burned out, but no sense leaving that for her. Where had she gotten my blood? The fight yesterday. I'd been in and out of it a lot after she'd collared me, plenty of time to collect it then. She had a small hand purse on the table next to her. I checked it. No lipstick here. It contained a small vial of red blood still liquid and fresh. I unscrewed the top and sniffed. My scent was there with the copper smell. This was mine. I

Nic Brown

stuffed the vial into the pocket with the cards and I considered Dariya's limp form lying over the table.

"Next time I'll deal."

Chapter 24

The noise from the party was a clear, steady hum as I explored the second floor. The game room seemed to be one of the few rooms on this floor that wasn't a suite, and most of the suites were occupied at the moment. Apparently the genteel horse aristocracy of Kentucky wasn't above sneaking off for a quickie at a party. I'd passed several doors that my acute hearing told me had two, or in some cases more people behind them, engaging in acts that were probably illegal in this part of the country.

I came to the stairs at the center of the hall. It was a grand staircase leading down to the first floor and the party. People clustered around the foyer at the base of the stairs chatting and doing the things that people do at this type of gathering: talk business, drink, try to hook-up.

I saw Ciara loitering by the library door in view of the stairs. An overweight man with a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other was standing next to her, animatedly telling her something but I couldn't tell what over the noise. He was gesturing with both hands causing dark wine to splash carelessly out, narrowly missing Ciara. The wine did not narrowly miss a dignified looking older woman who was just exiting the library. In fact it hit her square in the chest making an expanding purple cloud on her white evening gown.

Ciara stifled a laugh and that's when I caught her eye and motioned for her to come up. She excused herself from the overweight man who was now busy trying to calm the other woman down. He wasn't having much luck and didn't even notice Ciara move off to join me.

"Where's our hostess?"

"Temporarily indisposed. I don't know for how long, but she was out pretty hard. I figured we could look around while we have the chance then make our exit. Do you know where Beth and Barty are at?"

"I called Barty on his cell phone after you left and let him know the deal. He's in the library keeping tabs on Beth. Beth is still

chatting up a Frenchman who doesn't appear to understand half of what she says, but is fascinated with her chest." Ciara took my arm and we moved down the hall out of sight of the landing to the stairs.

"She'll be OK with Barty watching her. What happened to you?"

I gave her the Cliff Notes version. I left out Dariya's comments about Tremain; she was most likely just trying to mess with my head anyway.

"So she was trying to charm you?"

I shrugged "I don't know what it was but it came very close to putting me in her pocket. If she used something like that on your brother, I'd say he'd do anything she asked him to. I think it would have worked on me if she'd had a better connection to me, if we'd actually had sex, and all the indications are that she and Caleb had some sort of relationship, so he'd be more vulnerable to that kind of magic than I was."

We continued down the hall checking doors as we went. The few that we found open were more guest rooms. If the Sheik wanted to have company, he sure had the room for them.

At the other end of the hall we found a small elevator. I pushed the call button and heard the elevator begin to move. It was coming down from above us. I didn't notice how tall the building was. I guess they needed a service elevator for something.

The call light went off and the door to the elevator started to slowly open. I was looking back down the hall the direction we'd come to see if anyone was coming. I could see shadows moving on the wall across from the top of the stairs. Someone was coming up. I grabbed Ciara's arm and we ducked into the elevator just as it finished opening. I didn't think they could see the door from the stairs so I punched the door closed button and as the doors shut I looked over the options. There was one floor above us, the ground floor and then an unmarked button which had a key card slot next to it. Secured access. This would be the floor we needed to visit.

"What are you doing?" Ciara asked leaning in to watch as I ran my hands around the card reader slot and over some of the other elevator controls.

Blood Curse

“Just getting a feel for her.” I said as I took out my wallet. I pulled out an American Express card. Ciara was looking at me as I pulled it out. “Hey, don’t leave home without it!”

“Quit fucking around. It looked like who ever came up the stairs was heading this way as we ducked in.”

“Relax. This will only take a second.” I peeled back the small shiny holographic sticker on the card and exposed two tiny Chinese characters that had been carefully carved into the card. I closed my eyes and concentrated my thoughts on the card. I could feel the tiniest bit of energy flow from me into the card and the characters started glowing.

Ciara’s eyes got wide as I slid the card into the card reader. “What are you...?”

“Shhh! I have to concentrate.” I pictured the unmarked button lighting and granting us access. There was a beeping noise and I tried the button again. It flashed off and on for a second and I focused and pushed more of my own energy into the card. After a second the light on the unmarked button came on and stayed on. The elevator jerked for a second and then started moving slowly down.

“Neat trick. How does it work?”

“I don’t have a clue, but Tabitha gave me a couple of them before I left for this job. She and Sam have been working on them. It’s a magical lock pick for electronic locks.”

“That’s not possible. You can’t mix magical energies and technology like that. It would short out the card reader at the very least.”

“Like I said, it’s something Tabitha and Sam have been working on. It’s not perfected yet.” I didn’t bother to point out that it was working.

The elevator was definitely moving down and it was moving slowly. We ticked past the ground floor and then the indicator above the door went from showing a digital “01” to “- -“. I guessed we’d gone down three stories based on the speed from the 2nd to 1st floors, when the elevator stopped moving.

“Get ready,” I said. Ciara flattened herself against the left wall and I against the right. There was a “ding” and the doors slid open.

There was no immediate alarm and no-one started shooting into the open elevator doors so we took this as a good sign. I pulled the card from the slot and tucked it back into my wallet as we both leaned out to take a look at where we were.

The elevator opened into a small, dimly lit alcove. There were cushions on shelves built into the walls on either side of the door, and a low shoe rack with enough space for at least two dozen pairs along the wall the elevator was built into. A cedar lattice wall across from us had double doors set into it. The light for the small room was coming in from the room beyond, but I couldn't see very well from where we were to get any details.

Ciara and I slipped out of the elevator. I scanned around for a second and grabbed a couple of cushions off one of the shelves. They were brightly colored with intricate patterns stitched into them. I'm not an expert, but I could tell they were of Middle Eastern design and they matched a large rug I noticed stretched out on the floor of the small room.

The cushions had an expensive look and feel to them which didn't keep me from stuffing them into the closing elevator door to keep it open. They weren't the best choice for the job and for a second I thought they would not be thick enough to stop the door and it would just close on them and rise, but it didn't, it held.

I joined Ciara looking out through the cedar lattice at the room beyond and I couldn't quite suppress a little gasp. It was a garden. The whole room seemed to be modeled after a desert oasis. The lighting above was panel lighting, like you'd see in an office, set into the ceiling, which was a good 30 feet above us. However, these weren't office fluorescent lights. They were giving off far too much light, and the light had that fine, yellowish tint to it that you sometimes see from bulbs that are designed to simulate sunlight.

There were fig trees, palm trees, and small bushes and plants I couldn't name everywhere. The floor looked to be of worked sandstone, with a velvet carpeted path leading into the trees. Off to one side I could see water falling from the mouths of a trio of carved

Blood Curse

lion heads set almost at the top of one wall. The streams merged about halfway down to form a waterfall that emptied somewhere out of sight beyond the bushes.

“This is some garden.” Ciara whispered to me as she looked from side to side through the lattice.

“Yeah it is. I bet his utility bills are a bitch.”

Ciara gave me a sideways glance and shook her head in resignation, and then she tried the handle of one of the double doors in front of us. It clicked open easily and, since we couldn’t see anyone around, she eased it open and stepped out into the cavernous room.

Once we were actually in the room, we could get a better feel for the size of it. My guess was that it at least ran the length of the house, and possibly more. The wall with the lion’s head waterfall was to the right. The wall to our left looked more like a cave wall and I estimated that it was actually beyond the front of the mansion above. “This is a big garden,” I said, although I knew that was a bit like saying, “The Titanic was a big boat.” Hey, they don’t pay me to be witty all the time.

The carpeted path curved off into the trees and bushes. Along the wall where the elevator was located there, were several more sets of double doors. Most were solid wood. One other set was cedar lattice, like the one we’d come from. I peeked through and saw that it was a storage area for sacks of what looked like fertilizer and gardening tools of all sort.

“What now? I don’t like the idea of running around down here all night. What are we looking for?”

“I don’t know what these people are up to, but Dariya at least is definitely up to no good where I’m concerned. She was somehow involved with Caleb and other than that connection, it’s like your brother disappeared off the face of the Earth. I’m working with what I’ve got and following my nose. Now this obviously isn’t the guest room. Let’s see if we can find anything of use here.” With that I started down the carpeted path that led into the trees.

The plant life was thick, shading out the strong overhead lighting and if one didn’t know better you could almost forget that it was

nighttime in Kentucky in late fall, and that you were underground. The air was hot and dry despite the waterfall emptying into a small pond nearby. There was a cleared area around the pond with real sand, like a small beach. In fact, someone had set up low beach chairs around the pond's edge and it was obvious that people had recently been here by tracks and disturbance of the sand.

We carried on walking up the path until we came to a large clearing in the center. The temperature had risen noticeably as we'd gotten closer to what I estimated was the middle of the room, if you could call this a room, and I could see why. Directly overhead, the lighting had switched from the bright panels we'd seen elsewhere to one high intensity circle of light mounted in the ceiling. Directly below it was a large circular tent. For all the world, it looked like something out of "Lawrence of Arabia" with its low sides and slanted roof. I half expected to see a camel come poke its head around the side of the tent to complete the picture.

When we saw the tent, we both stopped and looked at each other. "This is too weird, who the hell puts up a tent in their basement?"

Ciara shrugged at my question. "I don't know, uber-rich Arab Sheiks who own horse farms in Kentucky apparently. Besides, who the hell has an artificial oasis in their basement? Now come on, let's get out of here; I'm getting a bad feeling about this." She was looking around a bit nervously as she said it and I decided she was probably right.

We turned to go back up the path and saw movement in the trees back the way we came. Damnation! I should have been paying more attention. The problem was that the air that was circulating had us upwind from where we came from. If whoever it was had been coming from the direction of the tent, then we'd have picked up a scent. I was acting as though the path behind us was secure and that was a mistake.

Ciara and I had stopped dead in our tracks looking. "I make it out to be at least four people from the sounds and they are either real big or packing really heavy," Ciara said in a low voice only I could hear, as her eyes darted around the area of the tent.

Blood Curse

“I’d assume packing heavy and looking for us. Over there!” I said in an equally low pitched voice and pointed to the right of the tent. The pool from the waterfall emptied into what looked like a creek. Who the hell has a creek in their basement I thought as I grabbed Ciara’s arm and we ducked out of the clearing and leapt over the water. There was a row of hedges that almost touched the wall. They were thick but Ciara simply hiked up her dress, made a running leap and cleared them. I didn’t have that much agility in my human form so I settled for crawling through a thin spot near where she landed.

Ciara was smiling down at me evilly as I emerged on the other side of the hedge. “What took you so long, Fido? I thought you wolves could move?”

“Hey, I’m here alright. Geeze! Give a guy a break!” I said in a low voice. “Now stay quiet and get serious. We’re not armed and this could get ugly. Without any more thought, I took off my tie and stuffed it into one of the jacket pockets, then I took that off as well. We had very good visible cover here, but if someone started shooting we might as well have been out in the open.

Once I was out of the jacket, I unbuttoned the first few buttons of my dress shirt to free up my movement some more. If I had to change, I wouldn’t get as tangled up in what I was wearing now as I would have with the whole thing on. We both squatted down and I turned my jacket around and draped it across my front to black out the white of my shirt.

Ciara’s dress wouldn’t show much and as I’d learned earlier, she could be out of it pretty damn fast if she wanted to, so I didn’t worry about her being able to change if needed. Instead, I focused my attention on the clearing with the tent. We’d lost sight of most of the path but we could hear them coming and I’d guess they’d have seen us by now if we hadn’t moved when we did.

The first of them came into view and I drew in a breath. It was a Dracor. Apparently the silence that had surrounded them was not an inherent talent of the creatures, because this one was stomping around and snorting like an angry bull. Dariya may have used some kind of masking spell to dampen the sound around them when we’d

fought the other night. If that was the case that would explain why this Dracor at least, was about as stealthy as a jumbo jet.

The Dracor was hunched over and sniffing the air in great snorts like a pig. The creature's forked tongue was darting in and out of its mouth, also reminding me of a snake. I wondered if it sensed things with its tongue like a snake or if that was just a reflex.

Another Dracor lumbered into the clearing a moment later and joined the first. It was followed by two men dressed in the black combat fatigues and carrying the same style MP5 automatic weapons that their associates at the front gate had been using.

Ciara and I both smelled the air. We were downwind from the party and the Dracors' stench came to us smelling, strongly of rotted meat and decay. The creatures didn't seem to be the best at tracking, however, and they simply darted around the clearing outside the tent but not really approaching our position. Ciara tapped my leg and showed me a small perfume bottle she had in her hand and then made a motion like sprinkling it on the ground and winked at me. I don't know what was in it, but it had apparently been something to mask or dilute our scent to the things behind us. I don't know when she'd spread it, but I was glad.

"Damn things have lost the trail," one of the men said and grasped a handset for the radio he was wearing right below his shoulder. He leaned into it and I heard a static pop. "Central, this is unit 2. We've lost their trail in the Sahara room. Over."

There was a pause and then a female voice piped in through the radio "You had better find them again and quick. We can't have them running around down there. Did they enter the tent?"

The man on the radio pointed quickly at his eyes with two fingers and then at the tent. The second man knew what he wanted and immediately went forward and checked the only visible entrance in the tent's side. He looked back at the first man after a second and shook his head.

"Negative Central. It looks like they either doubled back on us or continued on to the North West entrance. No sign that they entered the tent. Over."

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“Fools! We should have had guards down there.” The woman’s voice came back. “We’ve secured the other two. Hold your position and guard the tent. Check in every five minutes until they are found. Unit 1 is moving to your position from the North West entrance. Once they meet up with you, continue the search. Check every inch of the Sahara room. There aren’t that many ways out and they haven’t had much time.”

“So do we leave someone to guard the tent after Unit 1 arrives?”

“Leave one of the Dracors, but make sure the damn fool beast doesn’t go tearing in there. Remember, they need specific orders or they will do what they want and that usually results in property damage or death, and I’m not in the mood to clean up either. Which reminds me... we need both of our *guests* alive. If they’re killed, or even seriously injured, you won’t have to worry about retirement, or what you’ll have for your next meal for that matter. Do I make myself clear?” The voice on the radio was tiny, but I recognized it by her accent quite easily. Dariya had said the last in a way that, even though she was on the radio made me think if he said anything other than yes, he might not live to regret it. She probably wasn’t happy about what happened to her earlier and would have no problem taking out her frustrations on the hired help.

“Understood ma’am,” he said a bit nervously and clicked off the radio. “Frank, get over here.”

The other armed man, Frank I assumed, trotted over. The two Dracors continued sniffing and walking around the clearing but they didn’t seem to be making any progress in finding us.

“Tell that stinking beast to guard the tent.” He made a face like he had a bad taste in his mouth as he indicated the closest of the Dracors. “Make sure it understands not to enter the tent, and for God’s sake make sure it knows not to kill them if they show themselves.”

Frank nodded, turned back towards the tent and then lowered his MP5 so it was hanging by the friction strap. He reached with both hands into the top of his shirt. He dug around for a second and then pulled a necklace free from underneath it. The necklace had a small medallion of gold hanging from it and he held this up to his lips as if

he was going to kiss it. Instead he began speaking into it. Immediately, the two lizard men stopped wandering and trotted up to him. They stood before him absolutely still as he continued speaking into the medallion. I could only make out a few words, but he was definitely speaking English as he instructed the creatures. Interesting. If the odds weren't so long, I'd be tempted to make a grab for the necklace.

Ciara touched my arm and pointed to the right. I saw three men in the same style combat gear as the first two come into view. I didn't see anymore Dracors. The first guard met the newcomers halfway and they talked, but I couldn't hear them at all. "You done with that damn thing yet?" the first guard said turning back to regard his partner.

Frank lowered the medallion and covered it with one hand, like you would a phone receiver to keep the person on the line from hearing what you said. "Gimme a minute. I've gotta make sure these dumb fucks understand their jobs or they'll fuck it up." He removed his hand and resumed giving the Dracors instructions. After a minute more, both beasts bowed their heads for a moment and turned back towards the tent. One went to the doorway and began pacing in front of it. The other one lumbered along behind Frank like a pet dog, as he joined the four guards and they proceeded out of view beyond the tent.

Ciara tapped my arm and mouthed, "Now what?"

I winked at her and took off my shirt.

Chapter 25

The first time I'd run into Dracors I'd gotten my clock cleaned pretty well. It wasn't all one sided of course, but there had been at least three of them and a wizard. Still, a beating is a beating whether the fight was fair or not, and my pride was still sore. So when I leapt from our concealment behind the bushes as the wolf, it was more than just business. I wanted payback.

I was aware of Ciara just to my left as I bounded towards the creature. She was a sleek black panther moving with a fluid grace next to me. I put my thoughts of her out of my head though because the wolf had to be focused. That part of me didn't have the same kind of hurt pride that my human side did, but it held its own loathing for the Dracor. Wolves, even werewolves, have a place in the world. Dracors don't. They are strictly from the other side. Although many things are supernatural, most have a place here in this world; the Dracors do not. The wolf in me sensed it. The Dracors were just wrong.

Whether it was right or wrong for this world, the Dracor guarding the tent had its own agenda and apparently it didn't surprise easily because I had barely hit the ground from my initial leap when it was in motion towards me, all teeth, claws and bad smell.

The distance was short and we met in a furious rage of slashing and biting. If the thing had orders to take us alive, it wasn't showing any signs that it cared as it swiped at my neck. I twisted my body around the blow and came in under it, but its other arm swept up and I got a mouthful of forearm instead of the soft tissue of my goal: the thing's throat.

The Dracor flung the arm I had clamped down on, trying to shake me off and when I wouldn't let go, it spun and threw me to the ground. I hadn't expected it to be able to toss my weight around so easily and wasn't ready for that. Stars exploded in my head as the thing slammed into the floor with me, but I held its arm tight in my jaws, feeling the dark liquid it called blood filling my mouth with an

awful taste. I may have been holding on, but that was all. The force of the blow had knocked me mostly senseless and I needed a second to shake it off.

The Dracor was having none of that as it brought its free arm up to strike while I was still dazed. Just as the arm began to descend, a streak of living black death shot over me and with it went the Dracor's arm in a spray of foul, black, blood. I didn't know if it had been bitten, torn or sliced off, and I didn't care. I recovered and tore my own pound of flesh from the thing's other arm and then went for the throat again. This time it couldn't do anything to stop me as I tore the soft tissue away. It hadn't even been 30 seconds since the start of the fight and now it was over. For all the ferocity and gore, there had been surprisingly little noise.

Ciara, the panther, was sitting on her haunches licking at one of her front paws like some sort of giant and satisfied house cat. I had a mouth full of the foul bile these things used for blood and had to gag and spit to clear the filth from my mouth.

I looked back and Ciara was again human. She strolled casually back to where we'd been hiding and reached through the bushes to retrieve our clothes. I watched a moment, marveling at her beauty and grace. But beauty and grace weren't the only assets which were currently being displayed. Ciara seemed to have no modesty at all as she reached down to get the bundle of clothes in a manner reminiscent of the unrealistic but tantalizing poses women were always made to assume in Playboy pictorials.

I forced myself to look away from her and check our perimeter. Nothing was moving around the tent and I couldn't hear anyone either. I didn't know how big this place actually was, but I couldn't hear the guards and the other Dracor. Nevertheless, I knew they were around. I sniffed the air, but the stench of the Dracor we'd killed was enough to make my stomach lurch threateningly and prevent me from smelling anything else.

Ciara strolled up carrying my pants. "Anyone else around, Fido?"

I growled low in my chest but she reached down and scratched me behind the ear. Wow, no one had ever done that before and I was

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in heaven. In fact, she started laughing as my back leg began kicking.

She stopped after a second and I returned to my human form standing up and taking my pants from her as I did. “Now I know why dogs like that,” I said as I pulled up the pants.

“If you’re a good boy, I’ll scratch your belly next time,” she said with a wink.

“Don’t start anything you can’t finish, sweets. Now, help me with that thing’s body. I want to get it out of sight.” We dragged the Dracor’s body over to the area where we’d hidden and stuffed it unceremoniously into the bushes and out of sight.

We walked back to the tent, Ciara, looking for all the world like she was still at the party upstairs, except sans shoes. I hadn’t bothered to put on anything but my pants so I wasn’t quite as fashionable as her, but I also wanted the freedom of movement.

The tent was a heavy burgundy canvas with one set of flaps tied shut for an entrance. I pulled the two cords that held it shut and one of the sides fell open to the interior.

Inside the tent, the air was hot and dry. The fabric of the tent’s roof, although appearing the same from the outside, wasn’t as thick as the sides and you could see light through it from the oversized fixture directly above it. This coupled with a few strategically placed holes in the top gave the area enough light to see by, albeit in a reddish hue. The ceiling was high enough that we only had to duck to enter the tent. Once inside, we could stand easily.

The tent was more spacious than I’d expected. It was also completely empty except for large Persian rugs covering the floor and cushions strewn about along the sides. “Why would they guard a tent with nothing in it?”

Ciara shrugged. “Let’s look around and see if we can find anything.”

We each moved around, pushing cushions aside and poking to see if we could find a clue about the purpose of the tent. Of course I didn’t understand the purpose of this whole underground garden. It was obviously bigger than football field, but why go to the expense and trouble?

“I’ve got something,” Ciara had kicked back the corner of one of the many Persian rugs that covered the tent’s floor. I could see a curving line of silver that, when we moved the rug completely, showed a circle for working magic like the ones at Annie’s shop. Of course it could have just been a circle set in the floor, but no-one with knowledge of the supernatural would have gone to the trouble to imbed a five foot wide, pure silver circle in a sandstone floor without good reason.

We moved the other rugs and found two more circles. These were cast in gold, flanking the silver one on the left and right. I also noticed that the silver circle was in the center of the tent.

“Any ideas about this?” Ciara asked indicating the circle in the stone floor.

I shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine, but I’m sure it’s for casting magic of some sort. But why three circles I don’t know.”

“It’s three circles, Mr. Warren, because there are three subjects involved in the ritual,” a heavily British accented voice said from behind us.

We spun around to find Sheik Rashid Al Fidel standing in the entrance to the tent. Even before we could move, the two human guards we’d seen earlier came in, weapons trained on us.

“Now if you and Ms. Underwood would be so kind as to please raise your hands and not move in any threatening manner, my associates here will not be inclined to see how many lead bullets it takes to kill a werewolf.” The Sheik smiled as he said this, although there was no good humor in the smile. It was more a stretching of rubbery lips over an otherwise emotionless face. He then took a seat across from us on one of the poofy cushions that filled the tent.

The guards in the doorway moved further into the tent, never lowering their guns or taking their eyes off of us. Once the guards were out of the entry way, more people began filing in.

“How the hell did all these people come sneaking up on us?” I whispered to Ciara and before she could even acknowledge my remark, one of the guards had taken a quick step forward and brought the butt of his MP5 crashing into the side of my head. The world burst into a bright flash of light and the next thing I knew I

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was on my hands and knees staring at the floor and Ciara was kneeling next to me keeping me steady. I felt as if I was going to throw up and the room, or at least the floor that I was looking at, was spinning slowly counterclockwise. I closed my eyes and took a couple of breaths and when I opened them, the spinning had stopped and I was able to slowly stand up. Ciara, looking understandably nervous, rose with me, keeping a firm hold on my arm just above the elbow until I was steady on my feet.

“I do apologize for that. Sometimes my security staff is a bit over zealous. I would advise that you avoid talking amongst yourselves. It makes these gentlemen nervous and you’ve seen how they act when they suspect you are up to something.” The Sheik made a gesture with his hands as if to say, “What can I do?” and again gave his polite rubber-lipped smile.

“Now. Please do have a seat, Michael. I have a number of things I’d like to discuss with you and your lady friend”.

I stumbled a little as we moved forward. My head was swimming but it did give me a chance for a quick look around the tent while I caught my balance. I hadn’t been knocked out, but I must have been dazed a bit longer than I thought because the tent, though not small was feeling a bit crowded. Dariya was sitting on the floor next to the Sheik and behind them stood a pair of guards armed with MP5s but holding them at rest just casually in our direction.

Behind us were two more guards, each with his weapon aimed at us from the hip. They were flanking us just outside of easy reach. At this range, they could cut us in half and they had carefully positioned themselves so their fire wouldn’t hit anyone else. I knew they would not hesitate if we moved on them.

I also noticed that, aside from the Sheik and Dariya, Barty and Beth were in the tent. They were standing to our left with one guard standing behind them. This made it an even 10 people in the tent and four of them had automatic weapons. Not good odds at all.

The sheik again gestured at the cushions behind us and I finally sat. The only practical way to sit was cross-legged, but this would slow me down getting up. “You don’t have a chair do you?” I asked.

“I am sorry, but I built this oasis to be a retreat for me. It is modeled after the place I was happiest as a child and we did not have chairs. Don’t worry though. The cushions are quite comfortable.” The Sheik regarded us for a moment as we sat there in silence.

“Where’s Caleb?” Ciara suddenly asked. Her voice was calm, but I could catch the scent of fear coming from her. I sniffed the air a bit more, but there were too many people I didn’t know for me to pick out anyone else’s scent distinctly. In fact, other than Ciara, the strongest scent I got was sweat and gun oil coming from the guards behind us.

“My dear, I do not know where your brother is. Honestly, even if I did know, I doubt I would tell you. He and I had business together. Business which you and Michael will now have to *assist* me with in Caleb’s absence.” He emphasized the word *assist* in a way that made my skin crawl. Somehow assisting sounded like a very dangerous thing to do. The wolf was pacing inside my head. Patience. Now wasn’t the time. Patience.

“Do you really expect me to believe you?” Ciara asked incredulously.

The Sheik threw back his head and laughed, but it was a humorless laugh that seemed more for effect than anything else. When he spoke, his voice held an edge of anger to it. “Do you really expect me to care? If so, I’m sorry you’re mistaken. Your brother’s disappearance has caused some problems for me. Problems which your timely arrival will fix.” He smiled slightly and this was the first real smile I’d seen on his face. It was just a slight raising of the lips but, unlike his earlier perfunctory smile, this one held feeling and it made his features look dark and foreboding.

“So what do you want with us?” I figured the direct approach would work best at this point. My head was mostly clear now and the longer I kept him talking, the longer I had to figure a way out of this mess.

It was Dariya who answered me, a look of cold fury on her face. “There is no *us* to it. We want you, my dear boy. You are going to stand in for Caleb tomorrow night.” Her voice softened a little,

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taking on a sultry tone. “Of course I may have you stand in for him tonight as well...” She was almost purring. “I’ve never had anyone successfully resist my charm the way you did earlier and it has been a very boring week since sweet Caleb vanished.” The way she went from sounding furious to aroused in the span of a two sentences was not helping my belief in Dariya Vokova’s sanity.

“My dear, you may have him if you want him, but he is not to be harmed. I need him strong and with all his wits about him.” The Sheik said leaning forward slightly to regard me. “I actually think you may be a better choice, Mr. Warren, You have more experience than Caleb and I think your background better suits you for my needs.”

“And what are *your needs*? Come on Rashid. What is your game?”

“You may address me as Sheik, or Sheik Al Fidel. To do otherwise Mr. Warren would be impolite and...,” he gestured and the guards behind us both stepped forward and put the muzzles of their MP5s against the back of my head, “...unwise.”

At that I snorted and, thanks to years of martial arts training, sprung to my feet from my cross-legged seat on the floor. The guard behind me didn’t expect the move and stumbled back a step. Both guards behind me raised their guns at me again, but I noticed no-one was pushing a gun barrel into the back of my head anymore.

“Bullshit, Sheiky baby. You just said you need me alive and unharmed. Now I want some answers. What the FUCK is going on around here?”

The guards didn’t appear to know what to do. They’d also heard the order to Dariya and didn’t want to act. The Sheik was looking furious. I guess when you get your way all the time; it is tough when someone sticks it to you, even a little. His face reddened for a moment and then his features returned to their almost lifeless calm. In a flat cold voice that didn’t match the red coloring he’d taken on earlier at all, he said, “You’re absolutely right Mr. Warren. I do need you whole and relatively intact. Frank, would you be so kind as to shoot the pretty blonde woman who accompanied Mr. Warren’s party tonight when I count to three.”

“One....”

It all happened fast. Beth’s eyes widened in shock as Frank the guard stepped up. He drew back the bolt on his MP5 and raised it to his shoulder aiming it squarely at Beth, who was a deer in the headlights staring at the black hole at the end of the gun’s barrel. Barty made a lunge forward to get between Beth and the gun, but his selfless gesture was cut short by the guard who’d been behind the pair. He had started moving when the Sheik had ordered Frank to execute Beth and he delivered a kick to the back of Barty’s leg. The kick landed just as Barty stepped with his other leg and the big man toppled over forward splayed out on the ground with a gasp.

“Two....”

Frank hadn’t even blinked at the commotion. I glanced over at Ciara, a look of horror on her face and back at Beth. She was still as a statue, a look of terror on her face.

“Thr....”

I threw my arms up. “Alright, alright *Sheik Al Fidel...*” I had to bite my tongue to be nice but I couldn’t let him kill her. “I get the idea. Don’t shoot anyone.”

The Sheik held up his hand in a stop gesture towards the Frank, who immediately went from aiming the gun at Beth to a parade rest stance with the gun pointed at the floor between Beth and Barty. “I’m so glad you understand your position better, Mr. Warren. Remember, I need you, not the others....” He gestured again and Frank stepped back to his original position to the side. “I’m also pleased to see that you take exception to harm befalling any of your friends. Ciara has some value to me, but these two didn’t... that is until I confirmed that you do indeed care what happens them.”

“Frank, escort these two *guests*,” he said, indicating Barty and Beth, “to some of our special guest accommodations.” The guard stepped forward and gestured with his gun. Barty had struggled back to his feet, apparently none the worse for wear after the fall, and put his arm around Beth’s shoulders. Frank the guard motioned them forward and followed them out of the tent, his gun aimed casually at Barty’s back. Beth hadn’t made a noise during the whole incident. She was in shock and was only moving because of the

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gentle pressure from Barty guiding her out. I was pretty sure this whole *hostage at gunpoint* thing was new for her.

Barty stopped in front of me for a second and looked at me. The guard came up short and when our eyes met, he said, “You take care son, but don’t get any of us killed.” He reached out and squeezed my shoulder for just a second with the arm that wasn’t around Beth.

I nodded at him and then the guard poked him in the back with the gun and pressed them on forward and out of the tent. As the flap of the tent opened briefly to allow their exit, I saw a Dracor pacing listlessly back and forth outside. Nothing is ever easy.

The commotion seemingly forgotten, the Sheik clapped his hands once. A pretty young girl dressed like a belly dancer from a cheap film ducked into the tent before the flap had even finished closing from Barty and Beth’s exit. “Bring some refreshments. There’s no reason we can’t all behave in a civilized fashion now that my guests understand their position.” The girl bowed and curtsied at the same time in an odd sort of movement of supplication to the Sheik and then did the same gesture, though not quite as low, towards Dariya. Then she was gone as quickly as she’d appeared.

The Sheik put a hand casually on the Dariya’s inner thigh as she sat next to him and said, “Now Mr. Warren, I think it is time that we discussed your future.”

Chapter 26

As dungeons went, this one was very nicely made and well equipped. I don't know if you could really call a room like this a dungeon if it's not under a castle or something, but it fit the purpose of one as far as I could tell. It followed the well-established "dungeon motif" with its bare cinderblock walls and low lighting. There was a work bench on one side of the room that had an assortment of sinister looking instruments shining with the radiance of polished surgical steel even in the room's dim light. On the wall above the bench was a selection of larger tools that ran along the same lines of precision pain infliction as their smaller cousins on the table top. I considered them for a minute more and shuddered inside.

The instruments on the wall and table were not the room's only disturbing feature; they were just the one that had my immediate attention. The room itself was about 20 feet wide and easily twice as long. Currently, the only light was coming from one bare bulb hanging from a wire in the center of the room. There were more lights but they were not turned on. Six banks of fluorescent lighting were set into the room's suspended ceiling at even intervals. If they were on, this would be a bright, if not cheery room. Those lights and the suspended ceiling didn't seem to fit the room though. Who has a suspended tile ceiling in a dungeon?

Directly below the hanging bulb was a steel table about seven feet long. The only place I'd seen this kind of table before was in a morgue, it had holes in it and grooves to facilitate the draining of fluids, blood specifically, from the table top. The table was plumbed with tubing leading from a collection basin on its underside to the floor. The tubing emptied into a long grilled drain that ran most of the length of the room. The floor of the room, bare concrete, sloped slightly downwards towards this drain. When it was time to clean up, the whole room could be easily washed down with what looked like a garden hose attached to a tap by the door. Very convenient.

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The room was spotlessly clean. The clean appearance didn't fool my enhanced sense of smell though. Underneath the smells of ammonia and disinfectants was a distinct and very strong smell of blood. The coppery scent was almost like a background noise to the other scents. It was that smell I'd picked up first when we entered the room.

Despite the room's obvious use for torture, it was the sight of Beth and Barty chained to the wall across from the table that made me think of it as a dungeon. Barty was slumped over, held up only by the manacles that had his arms chained above his head. At first I'd thought he might be dead, but I could see his chest rhythmically rising and falling as he breathed. He had a few bruises on his face and a cut over his right eye.

Beth was awake and looking nervous and disheveled but unhurt. She hadn't looked up when the door had opened and it was only when we walked further into the room that she glanced up and her face briefly lit up when she saw me. That light faded almost immediately when she saw the guards flanking me and Dariya walking a few steps behind.

"Chain him up over there with the other two for now. Don't worry Darling, you won't have to stay here long," Dariya cooed at me as she watched the guards shackle me to the wall. "Remember Michael, if you decide to try to escape, that will not be good for the health of your little girlfriend. This would be unfortunate. I don't want to see anything happen to her either. She is, after all, sweet Caleb's sister, but that won't stop the Sheik from having her killed if you don't cooperate."

It was odd watching Dariya as she talked. She was definitely a stone cold bitch, but when she spoke of Caleb she actually seemed to soften up a bit. Her scent also changed slightly, giving off a faint aroma that I could best describe as an animal lust.

My considerations of Dariya Volkova's libido were interrupted as the guards closed the manacles on my wrists and around my ankles. They restraints were narrow metal, like handcuffs, and the guards fastened them on tight enough to hurt just a bit. My

circulation wouldn't be bothered but I wasn't going to slip out of them easily either.

"Do you really think the Sheik's plan will work, Dariya? I mean, come on, it sounds very fairytale like to me," I said as the guards backed away from restraining me.

"It's no more a fairytale, as you put it darling, than werewolves, witches and demons, but to answer your question, yes I think it will work. In fact it was my idea." She smiled wickedly. "If it does work, the Sheik will pay me handsomely for the job and I shall retire, to someplace less rural I think".

Dariya paused and looked distant for a moment as if in thought. "If it doesn't work, well.... I'm sure I can come up with someone or something else that will. After all, the Sheik didn't just hire me for my looks darling." Her accent was coming out strongly again, I'd figured out that was a bad sign.

"Think yourself lucky we need you strong for tomorrow night or I'd have slapped that collar on you already and have you begging me for... well, maybe you aren't so lucky. If I don't kill them, the men I choose, do usually beg for something...." She looked like the cat that ate the canary as she eyed me while the guards backed away.

Then she walked up and stood right in my face. "I do have something for you, Michael." She pulled a small silver bracelet from her pocket. There was a clear gemstone of some kind mounted at its center, otherwise the bracelet was unremarkable. She put it around my right wrist and snapped it shut just above the manacle.

"This is to prevent you from changing while I'm away. It works a bit like the collar, only its use is much more limited. Please don't try to change while you're wearing it. If you do the pain will be immense and you will accomplish nothing." She reached up and stroked my cheek with the back of her hand as she said this, then, as her hand pulled away, she slapped hard across the other cheek. I felt a drop of blood coming from my lip, she'd really hit me hard. She reached up and wiped the drop away with her finger then stuck it in her mouth and licked it clean.

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“That is because I don’t have time to break you now and it pisses me off. I’m used to getting my way with men and, if you live long enough, I will have my way with you.”

“You’re a piece of work Dariya. But I think I’ve already proved it takes more than a few parlor tricks by a second-rate caster like you to get me to lower my standards that much... babe.” I smirked as I watched the expression of rage on her face. I wanted to push her. She wasn’t that stable and if I could get her riled up enough she might screw up in her anger and give me some kind of opening, but as fast as it appeared, the emotion washed away and her scent was nothing but excitement.

“Do you know what really gets me hot, Michael?”

“Drowning kittens? Animal husbandry? Ripping those little tags off mattresses? Am I getting warmer?”

“Pain.” she said calmly. She darted forward. I was expecting something like this, but she didn’t come at me like I hoped. In a blur of motion, she was at Beth and she brought her knee up sharply into the chained woman’s stomach. Beth gasped as all the air was knocked out of her lungs. Dariya studied her face for a moment as Beth strained and gasped for air. Then as she turned to leave she casually reached out and grabbed the last two fingers of Beth’s left hand where it dangled limply in the restraints.

Snap....

At first, Beth couldn’t scream because she had no air in her lungs. She made choking gasps and a very pitiful squeaking noise until she finally passed out a few minutes later. The two fingers Dariya had broken were sticking out at an odd angle from her hand. The pinky finger was turning a nasty dark bruised color, much worse than the one next to it and I wondered if it could be fixed.

Dariya had broken the girl’s fingers in a quick, sharp, and obviously well practiced, move and then simply walked out of the room without giving it an apparent second thought. She had paused at the door and looked over her shoulder at me. “Remember Michael, I can do what I want with your friends and what I want isn’t very nice”.

Nic Brown

I didn't say anything as she closed the door. What could I say?
She was right.

Chapter 27

I waited a few moments until I was sure Dariya and the guards were no longer outside the door and then took stock of the situation. They had left one man outside on guard duty; I could hear him breathing and smell his B.O. through the thin gap under the door. Barty was still out cold, as was Beth, but at least they were both alive. I should have gotten them to leave when I had the chance but I'd misjudged the Sheik and thought he wouldn't mess with them at the party.

It had been at least four hours since the meeting in the tent and I figured it was getting close to dawn. We were still underground, I wasn't sure where relative to, or how far from the main house. They'd done a good job keeping me disoriented when they'd brought me down here. I did notice that I hadn't seen anymore of the Sheik's pet demons, the Dracors. This was good. My guess is that they weren't the best for guarding "guests". That kind of minor demon had a habit of forgetting orders when it got hungry. Thinking about it, aside from the Dracors and Dariya, I hadn't seen any other supernatural types here. I still didn't know about the zombies that had been in the hotel room (what seemed like weeks ago) but they had to come from somewhere too.

My next problem was Ciara; I didn't have a clue where she was. I also didn't know if I could trust her either, which pissed me off. I liked her and even though I'd only known her a short time I felt comfortable with her at my back. I guess I could ask my ex-wife about my judgment in women but she'd be biased.

I still didn't know what had happened to Caleb or where he'd had disappeared to, but I'd learned just how many people's plans he'd upset and was surprised. Then of course there was Tremain. I was glad I'd gotten him to give me an advance payment for this job because if I had my way, he wouldn't be in any shape to pay me when all was said and done.

Of course, at this point I was still chained to the wall in the underground lair, (I'm going to have to get a lair at some point it

seems very diabolical) of a cursed Sheik and his marginally sane girlfriend, the wicked witch of S & M. Yeah, it was that kind of day.

Barty started stirring and moaned lightly. I was about to ask him if he was alright when he suddenly started coughing and winced sharply. My guess was they'd roughed him up and cracked some ribs, but I really couldn't tell from here.

"Damn! I feel like I've been rode hard and put up wet," he said when he finally lost the urge to cough.

"What the hell did you drag us into boy?" Barty was staring at me across Beth's still unconscious body dangling between us.

"I'm still wondering that myself, Barty, but first off, are you OK?"

"Oh hell boy, I feel like crap but I've felt worse after falling off a horse and working the next day..." he coughed again and spat a nasty looking glob of phlegm and blood on the floor in front of him. "I'll be fine."

His face darkened as he took in Beth's condition, his eyes fixing on the mangled fingers on the girl's left hand.

"So what did those bastards do to Beth's hand?"

"Actually, it was the bitch of the bunch, Dariya. She was teaching me a lesson."

"Well boy, you better have learned it..." his voice was steady and so was his stare as he continued, "...because anything else happens to that girl and it's coming out of your ass." Barty's normally amicable demeanor was long gone; I guess being chained to a wall and beaten can do that to a person. Whatever the case, I could sense that this wasn't a blustering threat. It was a simple promise and I filed it away under *things to worry about later*.

"Where's Ciara? I thought she was with you?"

"She was for a while. The Sheik and Dariya kept us together while they explained what they wanted from us. When they were done with that, he took her somewhere else and Dariya was kind enough to escort me down here."

"Speaking of explaining, you care to let me in on what's going on around here. You can start with why the Sheik has men in lizard

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suits working for him and end with how the hell we're getting out of here."

Barty was in a bad spot and deserved a straight answer so I spent the next ten minutes giving him the Reader's Digest version of what was going on. I didn't leave out much and I could tell he wasn't buying most of the magic portion, but that was his choice. I had a feeling he'd see enough before we were done to convince him. I hadn't mentioned my dual nature yet though.

When I was done, Barty shook his head and looked at the ground for a minute. Then he said "Alright, Michael. Assuming you ain't a fucking bonkers, and I'm willing to go that far because of what I've seen, what does he want from you and Caleb?"

"He wants a champion. Someone to fight in his place during the full moon tomorrow..." I thought about the time and amended myself, "I mean tonight."

"A champion? What the hell are you talking about boy? This ain't some game and don't bullshit me neither boy, I ain't buying half of what you're selling anyway."

I thought for a minute, trying to figure out the easiest way to explain what the Sheik had told me, and I couldn't think of any way that didn't sound crazy. "OK, from what I understand, Sheik Rashid Al Fidel is under a blood curse." Barty's face took on a more skeptical expression but I pressed on. "His family line for the past three generations has been under this curse. Apparently his grandfather, Sheik Sidhier Al Fidel, made a lot of enemies in his day. He also, like his grandson, had a liking for ladies from Eastern Europe. This was during the Nazi occupation of much of Europe. The Nazis were taking gypsies by the score to concentration camps right along with anyone of Jewish decent. Some of the prettier gypsy women were taken by officers as "hostesses" for their own amusement or to be sold as slaves for profit. Sheik Sidhier was apparently a supporter of the Nazis in North Africa and as such he was able to come to some arrangement that not only allowed him to make money from the Nazis, it also gave him a good supply the most beautiful, if slightly used, of the gypsy women."

Barty interrupted me. “And where exactly did you learn all this from? I didn’t think you knew the Sheik from a horse’s ass before the other day?”

I had to smile at this. “Where do you think I’ve been for the last few hours? While you guys have been hanging around down here, the Sheik decided to give me a history lesson. You know, the bad guys always do something like this in the movies.” I added with a slight smile.

Barty made a grunting noise that I took as his indication to continue. “So anyway, I guess this worked out for him pretty well for the Sheik’s granddad for quite a while. Until, that is, he took one particular young gypsy girl. Rashid said he doesn’t even know what the woman’s name was, but she didn’t appreciate his hospitality, and I’m quoting Rashid there. I’m sure it wasn’t really that hospitable. Anyway, the girl became pregnant, which wasn’t supposed to happen since the Nazis had a nasty habit of sterilizing the women they took for sex, but none the less, she became pregnant with the Sheik’s child.” I paused and studied Barty for a moment. He was following along and looking a bit less skeptical.

“Sheik Sidhier was excited. He was going to have a child. He had a wife and a number of willing mistresses, but none had borne him an heir and he was getting on in years. Of course this didn’t do anything for the gypsy girl’s station, except that she was fed well and kept in the nicest gilded cage the Sheik could arrange. When she had the child everyone was even more surprised. She had twins; a boy and a girl. Well, the Sheik only wanted a son. He had no concern for his new daughter. So he took the boy and let the gypsy girl have her daughter back. This is where it gets a bit shaky and Rashid either wouldn’t or couldn’t explain how but the girl escaped into the desert with her daughter and the Sheik thought that was the end of her and let her go. It wasn’t.”

Barty shook his head for a minute and interrupted me. “Does this damn sob story have a point? I mean what the hell! The sheik is holding us hostage so he can tell you about his Nazi-loving grandfather? Gimme a break!”

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I smiled again. “Yeah, I was wondering where all this was going too, but if you want to know why we’re stuck here, you have to hear the rest of it.” Barty nodded for me to continue so I did.

“Remember I said the girl escaped? Well she didn’t go far. She wanted her son as well and she came for him on the night of the full moon a few weeks after she left. It was the same full moon cycle that we are in now, called the Hunter’s Moon, and she waited for it because although she was young, she had the spark for magic and had been taught it from an early age. While she was a prisoner she didn’t have any way to use her skills that would help her, but after her escape she had time to work on it. She managed to sneak in undetected all the way to the child’s room, but she was caught by some guards, and cornered before she could escape.”

“The Sheik was furious. He considered his not coming after her when she escaped to be a gift, a small kindness for the mother of the son he’d always wanted. Her attempt to “steal” the boy back enraged him and he ordered his guards to slit her throat. Apparently she had been ready for the possibility of being caught because even as they moved in for the kill, she began speaking a curse. Her death curse was punctuated with the spilling of her blood as they cut her throat open. The curse was simple and yet very powerful, you have to understand. That kind of magic draws its power from the darkness, from hate, rage, and in this case the gypsy girl’s own life blood as she was literally a human sacrifice.”

“Well, what did the damn thing do?” Barty didn’t seem to like me pausing for effect in the story.

“It was a bloodline curse. An old one. It meant that the Sheik would never have another child, and that if he touched his child, ever, he’d die. He didn’t buy, it but when he went to pick up his son, the moment his flesh touched the child’s, he died. It wasn’t just some heart attack either. Apparently he started convulsing and began to bleed from his eyes, ears, nose, mouth, etc... and he didn’t stop until he was dead.”

“So what does this have to do with Sheik Al Fidel?”

“It was a bloodline curse, Barty. I know this is tough to swallow, but this is magic we’re dealing with, not a poison or a disease. The

curse didn't die with the Sheik. It was passed on to his heir and it continues to pass from heir to heir. The men of Sidhier's bloodline can only bear one child, and if they ever touch that child, they die. The boy, Al Fidel's father, was raised by the Sheik's advisors and they explained the curse to him when he was old enough to understand. Years later, when he had a child, he was careful not to touch him. But the passage of time and watching his son grow without ever touching him took there toll on Rashid's father's belief in the curse. So by the time Rashid turned 21, it had been over 40 years since Sidhier's death and Rashid's father decided there could be no more truth to it, so he hugged Rashid and he died exactly like his father had before him. Nasty stuff."

"So where do we fit into all this?"

This time I had to chuckle a little. "Well, you and Beth fit in as hostages, I fit in as Caleb Underwood's stand-in and if I fail or refuse, then they may try Ciara, but I don't know if they can use her."

"Stand-in for what? You said something about being a champion. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Dariya is convinced she knows a way to break the curse. I don't fully understand the workings behind it, but apparently the plan is to summon a demon, a nasty being from another plane, and then I have to slay it in unarmed combat while wearing the collar. By slaying a demon in this way I can absorb its energy through the collar. The demon they are summoning is somehow related directly to the curse and Dariya can then use its energy to power a ritual that will break the curse."

"So why you, or Caleb? Why not use some hired guns?"

"Because you can't use a weapon of any kind for the ritual to work. You also can't do it magically. If it was that easy, hell, everyone would be conjuring demons and mowing them down with machine guns to collect their energy!" I had started straining my hands in the restraints towards my neck and scratching at it as we talked.

"So you expect me to believe that you are going to fight a demon with your bare hands and if you kill it, the Sheik's girlfriend is

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going to use you like a battery to power some kind of voodoo shit to break a curse?"

"Not voodoo. Voodoo is very different from this, but essentially yeah, that about sums it up."

"Well I don't know what you're on but the lot of you are freaking nuts!" Barty was shaking his head and looked like he'd pretty much given up. "Of course since you're all crazy, I figure we're as good as dead when it's all said and done." He was looking at Beth who had moaned slightly. She was still out cold, and her broken fingers were looking pretty bad even from my vantage point.

"Oh, I'd say even if I'm not crazy, which I'm not by the way, that we're dead meat if we hang around here. The Sheik is going be up for kidnapping to at the very least if we live to tell the tale. Somebody as connected as Sheik Al Fidel could probably buy his way out of it, but the damage to his reputation would hurt him just about as bad and you can't fix that as easy." Barty was watching me as my scratching paid off.

"What the hell are you doing?!?" he looked pretty shocked and I don't blame him. To him it looked as if I was pulling the skin off my neck in one long strip.

"I'm about to show you a little bit of magic." I winked at him as I finished pulling the flesh-colored strip from around my neck. It was about two inches wide and had been double-wrapped around my neck. Once I'd pulled it completely free, the color changed from matching my skin to transparent.

"What in the world is that?"

"It's kitchen plastic wrap, with a little something extra thrown in for good measure. I told you about those collars? Well I didn't plan on coming into this without a way to avoid them." I held one end of the strip in my teeth and the other in my right hand and began looping it around my wrist. When I had the wrap completely around my wrist, I pushed the loose end against my forehead trying to get it to stick from the spit that was on it from my mouth. It finally stuck, and almost immediately the plastic wrap around my wrist glowed dimly yellow for a moment and then seemed to melt into the bare

skin of my arm above the restraining bracelet and manacle. You would never have known anything was there.

“Now’s the hard part,” I said as I began pulling my arm down until I’d forced the bracelet and manacle over the spot where the wrap had disappeared. Once it was in position I began to try and change.

I was hanging a lot of hope on the magic of the bracelet working similarly to the magic of the collars, but I didn’t have much choice. It was either this or spend the rest of the day hanging here waiting for the ceremony to start at sundown tonight.

Dariya had said it would hurt and it did. The bracelet was designed to stop me from changing and to make it painful to try and I think I would have fallen over if not for the restraints holding me to the wall. Sweat was beading on my forehead and I felt like I was running up hill underwater, but I could feel the energy building. The spell on the kitchen wrap was a neat touch. Like the collars, it tapped the power when a were changed. However this had very limited capacity and when it was full....

The enchanted wrap around my wrist reached its capacity and flared briefly in a clear white light that made me squint my eyes shut. I felt my arm drop from the restraint and when I opened my eyes, my right arm was free and there was no sign of the bracelet or the manacle that had held me. The chain that had been attached to the manacle was hanging loose on the wall. The last link in it, the one that attached to the manacle itself was melted into an unrecognizable lump of carbon-scored steel.

I looked to the door but didn’t see any sign that the guard outside knew what had happened, and despite the light show, there had been almost no noise other than my grunts. I shook my right arm to get the blood flowing in it again and smiled at Barty, who was looking at me, his mouth hanging slightly open. He was stammering to say something but I guess he couldn’t think of what to say, so finally he snapped his mouth shut and watched me.

“That’s handy. I expected it to just burn out the bracelet, not get rid of it.” I said looking at my arm. Of course it was also hell on my clothes as the sleeve of my dress shirt now ended midway between

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my elbow and wrist in a jagged, singed edge that was smoking slightly.

“I’ll have to remember to tell Annie thanks!” I added as I checked the restraints on my other arm. They were as tight and undamaged as the ones on my legs, but I had a free hand and more importantly I was free of the bracelet.

“Barty, you asked why Caleb and I were the ones Al Fidel wanted to fight his fight.”

“Yeah....” Barty was looking at me and sounded very cautious as he spoke. I think he sensed that I was going somewhere he wouldn’t like.

“Well don’t yell out or anything, but this is why...” and with that I changed. From Barty’s perspective I would have looked out of focus for a second and when I came into focus I wasn’t quite human anymore. I’d changed halfway into the wolf and I felt the power and strength in me.

Barty didn’t yell out, but he was backing as far away from me as his bonds would allow. He looked like he might freak out at any second and start trying to gnaw his arm off to get away.

“Relax Barty. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m going to get you and Beth out of here, as soon as I get loose. Now stay calm.”

Hearing me speak, even if my voice sounded like gravel in a bucket, seemed to ease him up a bit. The last thing I needed was a guard coming in to see why Barty was screaming while I was still mostly shackled to the wall.

I examined the handcuff-style manacle around my wrist. It was not a cheap knock-off. This was a quality job and despite my now enhanced strength, I couldn’t break it open with one hand. So I twisted in place and went to work on the spot where the restraint’s chain was attached to the wall. The chain attached to a U-bolt that was, in turn, welded to a solid metal plate bolted to the wall by four thick bolts.

I had some slack in the chain on my restrained arm now so I could bring both arms around to pull on the chain where it met the U-bolt. It wasn’t budging but I began pulling harder and twisted my legs to bring the strength in my hips and upper body to bear as much

as possible, Unfortunately after a couple of minutes struggling, I knew it was no good so I had to think for a minute.

I turned back to my human form and looked at Barty. I could smell a tinge of fear in his scent that hadn't been there earlier, but other than that he was controlling his emotions pretty well.

"So what the hell are you exactly?"

"You couldn't guess from that little show?" I shrugged. Doesn't actually surprise me, most people in the mundane world have their belief in the supernatural beaten out of them by society by the time they are in their teens. It's one of the reasons that the people and creatures from the supernatural world are still able to exist. I mean, you guys outnumber us by an estimated 100 or more to one ratio, so despite all the various advantages we have individually, it is your mass unbelief that protects us the most."

Barty was looking confused. "Sorry. I'm lecturing. Barty, I'm a werewolf."

"Huh, you mean like in the movies and stuff?"

"Not exactly like in the movies, but basically yes. Caleb and Ciara are also weres, but they aren't wolves like me. They are panthers."

"I thought you guys had to be wolves..." He was shaking his head a little like he didn't believe he was having the conversation.

"No. A were is a type of shape shifter that has the ability to take on the form of a specific animal." I was now unbuttoning my shirt with my free hand and struggling out of it and the rest of my clothes as I talked.

"Usually weres are some kind of predatory animal. There are different theories about this but the common legends you've heard about the spread of the condition are partly true. The bite of a were may pass on the gift, or curse depending on your belief. That's why I believe most weres are predators. I mean, how often have you heard of someone getting mauled by rabbit or a cow?" I had my shirt off as much as I could and it now hung bunched up from my left arm. I kicked off my shoes and socks and began working on my pants. I figured the more I explained the easier this might be for Barty to accept, so I carried on while I finished stripping.

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“No one really knows the origins of the condition, but my money would be on magical genetic research. Sort of like using science to manipulate genetics to create something new, only instead of science, magic was used. That seems the most logical thing to me anyway, but what do I know?” I had my pants and shorts bunched up around my feet now and I looked at Barty levelly.

“Stay calm. I’m going to change again, but this time I’m going all the way into my other self. I’m a pretty big wolf, but my paws should be able to slip out of all these manacles...” and with that I transformed into the wolf.

The cuff on my wrist was still fairly tight, but I was able to slide my front paw out of it. The leg restraints fell straight off, since ankles are thicker than my wrists to start with, they had plenty of slack in them when I changed.

Now that I was free, I did a quick and silent reconnoiter of the room. In my wolf form, the scent of blood I’d picked up as a human became much sharper. The wolf in me liked it because it was tinged with fear. Fear put adrenaline in the blood and that made it all the more attractive when you went in for the kill.... I stopped myself. It was almost the full moon and the bloodthirsty side of my nature was reveling in the horror that had happened. I shook my head for a moment to clear my thoughts. It would be easy to give in to that and if I did, I would start killing for the sport of it. Then I’d stop being human and I tend to like being human. I hadn’t sold my soul yet for gold, so I didn’t plan to give it away for the cheap thrill of killing either.

I loped over to Beth, who was still out cold, and I stood up on my hind legs. With my paws propped on either side of her I sniffed. Barty started fidgeting and telling me to get away from her. I ignored both him and the animal lust that being this close to her mostly exposed body was generating in me, and examined her with my heightened senses.

She wasn’t in shock which had been my first fear; shock can be deadly if it isn’t treated. However, she had suffered a minor amount of rough treatment, a few small cuts and bruises. Other than her

fingers she could pass for someone who'd just had a bad night out on the town.

I silently trotted over to the door. The smell of the guard outside was strong, coming through the small gap under the door. From here I could easily make out his breathing. It was regular and relaxed. He wasn't asleep but I'd guess his mind was somewhere other than on his duty right now. I sniffed and listened more intently for another few minutes to make sure there was no-one else outside. When I felt sure he was alone, I stood up on my haunches and used my front paw to flick off the lights. Then I began to lightly scratch the door to get the guard's attention.

My light scratches weren't doing the trick. His mind must have been further from his job than I thought. So I began scratching the door a bit harder, which made me feel oddly like an oversized house dog that needs to be let out to pee. Finally, the guard moved towards the door to investigate. I listened closely again. I didn't know, but I suspected he had a radio or something else to check in with and if he reported this rather than just investigating it, I'd have to change my plan.

Fortune favors the foolish more often than most people think and I heard a key slide into the door's lock. I backed away behind the opening door as it slowly swung inwards.

From behind the door I couldn't see the guard, but I knew where he was by his shadow under the door from the light of the hall. I saw the barrel of his MP5 become visible as he entered. He stopped and my sensitive hearing picked up the sound I was waiting for. He was feeling on the wall for the switch to turn the lights back on.

I leapt, hitting the door hard with all my weight. The guard must have been caught completely off balance because the door didn't even slow down when it hit him. In fact, it didn't stop until I heard the sickly but satisfying snap of bones. I could also smell fresh blood coming from him as I rebounded off the door and out onto the floor in front of it, twisting to face the guard.

What I saw surprised me. He'd turned to face the wall while looking for the light switch and my unexpected leap had knocked him head first into the doorframe. To tell the truth, he was pretty

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lucky. The bone I'd heard breaking was his gun arm as he'd fallen with the weapon still extended inside the room. The door was heavy wood with a metal frame. If his head had gone into the room instead of out as he fell, his neck would've broken for sure.

I sniffed at him briefly and then poked my head into the hall. We were the only door on this side of a short hallway. There were several doors across from us. About 20 feet to the left there was a set of elevator doors; the same distance to the right; a set of double doors.

I came back in, reverted to my human form, picked up the discarded MP5 and dragged the guard's unconscious body into the room. I shut the door. A quick check showed the guard had a fancy walkie talkie, a set of standard keys, a keycard, and two spare clips for the MP5. He also had a 9mm Beretta piston in a holster with two spare clips.

I laid his equipment out on the table in the room's center and then walked over to Barty.

It took a few tries to find the right key for the cuffs on his restraints. Once he was free, he rubbed his wrists briefly then twisted his back. I heard it pop like gunfire and winced slightly. It may have felt good but it reminded me of the sound of the guard's arm breaking moments before.

Barty checked Beth out, careful not to disturb her more than he had to, then turned to face me. "Well, I figure I don't have much choice but to trust you. I mean if you want to kill me, you've got the guns and you're a goddamned werewolf! So what the hell do you plan to do?"

I had to smile at his no-nonsense attitude. I'd met a lot of people who would have lost it at the point of being chained to the wall, let alone learning about the other world and actually seeing a man change into a wolf all in one night. Winking, I turned to the table and picked up the Beretta. "You ever use one of these?"

"I don't have much use for those little wussy 9mm jobs, but I know how to use one." A grin cracked on his own face as I checked the gun's safety and then passed it over to him. He pulled back the

slide, chambering a round and tucked the weapon into the waist of his pants behind his back.

I then took a look at Beth. Her breathing was shallow but steady. The fingers Dariya had broken were swollen and badly bruised but they looked like a clean breaks, both between the knuckle and first joint of each finger.

“You gonna let her down?” Barty asked suspiciously.

“Yeah. While I undo her restraints, you clear off the table there” I indicated the table at the center of the room where I’d just stacked the guard’s equipment. I released her feet first and she slumped forward. I held her up by the waist and undid the cuffs on her hands. She unceremoniously flopped over my shoulder, and I held her injured hand to keep it from smacking into me.

I laid her down on the table and looked her over again. Aside from her fingers, some bruising, and a couple of small scratches, she was actually in very good shape. I motioned for Barty.

“I don’t want to leave her fingers like that. It could cause them to heal wrong and deform her hand. Grab that roll of duct tape and see if you can find a pencil or something.” I nodded towards the work bench by the wall where I’d seen the duct tape sitting to one side. Even in a dungeonesque setting, there is nothing as handy to have around as duct tape.

Barty found what I needed almost immediately and brought over the tape and a wooden ruler. I broke it in half. Then I took the halves and pressed the broken ends against the table to knock off the loose splinters. I then proceeded to wrap the ends with the duct tape to make sure they were safe.

“This isn’t the best for a splint, but it’ll have to do. We don’t have long before someone shows up to check on us or to relieve that guard.”

I moved around the table to Beth’s injured hand and gently slid one of the pieces of ruler under it. “Now, I want you to hold her by the shoulder and have your hand ready to go over her mouth. She may wake up and scream when I set her fingers and I don’t know how far that sound would carry so on three hold her and cover her mouth”.

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I'd pulled her arm out straight with the injured hand laying palm down. When Barty was ready, I took hold of her forearm and gently took the broken digits in my hand.

"One..."

Barty was sweating and his eyes were wide and nervous but they stared into my own.

"Two..."

He was leaning over her, ready to put his weight on Beth to hold her still. His hand was just an inch above the unconscious woman's mouth, poised to stop her yells, but not wanting to upset her breathing if he didn't have to.

"Three..."

I pulled the injured fingers straight with a quick sharp tug and lined them up straight as much as I could. Barty had clamped down on her mouth as Beth moaned, but she didn't come to, so we had a bit of luck there.

When I was satisfied with the way I'd set the fingers, I placed the ruler pieces above and below them so they ran the length of digits and her hand. Then I wrapped the whole hand in duct tape, immobilizing it as best I could.

"That'll have to do." I said to Barty and I pointed to the door.

"I need to get you two out of here and then find Ciara. Can you carry her? I'd just as soon we not try bringing her around unless we have to."

"Yeah, I can manage her no problem. Hell, I've lugged heavier feed sacks than this. But you better do something before we go." Barty had a serious look on his face and wasn't sure what he wanted. Then, he started chuckling at me and said, "Either change into a werewolf again or put on some pants. You keep running around like that and you'll get your pecker shot off!"

I looked down because I hadn't even noticed that I wasn't dressed. I felt my face flush a bit and went over to where my clothes were laying and got my pants. Once I had those on, I stuffed the two extra MP5 ammo clips into my front pockets, one on each side. The gun had a friction strap and I pulled it over my shoulder, letting the weapon dangle under my arm.

I then noticed a note pad and pen on the corner of the work bench. I took the pad and wrote down Tabitha and Sam's name and phone number. "When you get out, don't call the cops. They won't believe you, and even if they did, I doubt they'd be much real help. I want you to call this number and ask for Tabitha or Sam Edwards. They work with me. Tell them I need help and explain the situation." I paused for a second as I handed him the paper with the numbers. "If they don't believe you or think you are on the up and up, tell them that those bullets I picked up in Mexico don't appear to be the only ones around. That should convince them you're on the level. You got it?"

Barty looked tired and nervous but he nodded "Yeah, I guess so. Are these two characters werewolves too?"

I smacked him lightly on the shoulder smiling. "Come on man. Everyone isn't a were. She's a witch and he's my I.T. guy".

I turned back to the equipment we'd picked up. The radio had been silent the whole time and I checked it again. It had a bud dangling on a cord and I put it in my ear to listen in. I didn't hear anything yet, but with any luck when they started jabbering, I'd pick it up. Clipping the radio to the waist of my pants, I went to the door.

I cracked it open a little and couldn't see or hear anyone, so I opened it further. The hall was clear. I concentrated for a second and changed halfway into the wolf. My "wolfman" form allowed me to still use my hands and I was pretty sure the MP5 would be handy at this point.

I sniffed the air in the hall. I didn't pick up Ciara's scent. She hadn't been brought down here.

"Barty...." My voice was rough but he could understand it. "Pick her up and follow me. Stay quit and about ten feet back from me. If something happens, try to get her out on your own and I'll distract them. Don't wait for me if we get separated. Get yourself and Beth to safety, then call my friends and they'll tell you what to do."

He nodded again and I turned and started off down the hall towards the elevator.

Chapter 28

Getting out of the basement proved to be a tougher job than I had expected. At least the job was made easier by the lack of security cameras in this area. I'd guess that the thinking was to keep the area secure and not use cameras which would leave a record of anything that went on in the dungeon. Then again, they could have just been hidden and I hadn't noticed them. Either way, I didn't hear the alarm being raised as we inserted the guard's keycard into the elevator call panel at the end of the hall.

After a moment, I heard the elevator start to descend and I motioned Barty to come up with Beth. He'd been hanging back at the door, with Beth on his shoulders in a fireman's carry and despite his burden, he moved with surprising speed to join me.

"WAIT!" I thrust an arm back pinning Barty and his burden to the wall. I could hear movement inside the elevator. It wasn't empty. Barty stayed flat against the wall on the side with the keypad; I darted across to the other side just as the doors opened.

Two guards stepped out and immediately noticed Barty with Beth on his shoulders standing there. They brought up their guns but before the muzzles were even fully raised I grabbed them both by the collar of their shirts and yanked backwards as I planted a side kick into the back of one guard's knee. He went completely down and I heard a wet popping sound. He'd dislocated his knee cap in the fall.

The other guard I pulled completely around and slammed into the wall behind us. He had both hands on his MP5 and they, along with the gun, were pinned in place between his chest and the wall.

I looked back over my shoulder at the first guard and he was rolling on the floor, both hands on his damaged knee. With him occupied, I pulled the other guard away from the wall. His nose was bloody and broken, and he looked like he was about to faint as I turned him around to face me. My mouth was open to reveal the sharp canines of my wolf form as I growled in an inhuman voice, "If you wake up and I'm here, you're dead." I smelled urine coming

from him as I slammed him back into the wall with more force than the first time. He slumped to the floor in a heap.

The other guard hadn't been paying much attention to our little scene and I honestly didn't blame him. Even through the material of his uniform pants, I could see the protruding knee cap on the side of his awkwardly bent leg. He was cursing and yelling as he lay on his side, trying to straighten the damaged leg.

Barty was watching the whole scene wide-eyed. I stepped up and gave the man a kick in his stomach. With the wind knocked out of him, the hall was suddenly quiet except for his gasps as I bent over and struck him across the jaw. His eyes rolled back in his head and he stopped struggling.

"Did you k-kill him?" Barty asked looking at the now still form on the floor.

I looked up at him and he flinched back. The wolf in me was showing in more than just my appearance. I wanted to kill them, and I wanted to kill Barty, and I actually shook for a moment as I forced the wolf in me back and regained my composure. I changed all the way back into my human self. It had been a rough night and the urges were getting stronger. Time to be more human.

"No..." I was pleased my voice didn't quiver as I spoke. "Neither of them is dead. I just knocked them out. I may look like an animal but I am man and I don't kill unless I have to." With that, I bent over and took the MP5s from both guards and pulled out the clips. Then I reached into the trigger guards on both guns and pulled the triggers sideways until they could no longer move. I tucked both of the guards pistols into the back of my pants where I could reach one with each hand.

I pushed the call button on the elevator again. The doors had closed during our scuffle but the elevator had not gone back up yet. I motioned for Barty to get in with Beth first, then I followed. I thought about hiding the two guards, but decided against it. If we were going to get out, it had to be soon.

"You gonna be able to manage with her?" I asked as the doors quietly closed and I pushed the button marked as the main floor.

Blood Curse

There was sweat beading on his forehead, but Barty's voice sounded relaxed. "I don't have much choice. Besides, she ain't that heavy anyhow."

I figured Barty could manage. Despite his grey hair and lined face, he was big as a horse and looked just as strong. Plus, I got the feeling that even if I offered to carry her, he wouldn't let me. I could smell the fear coming off of him. He was putting up a good front but I could tell he was warring within himself. Right now his need to escape outweighed his fear of me and what I could do. If the scales tipped the other way and he tried to get away on his own then we'd all be in trouble.

The ride up was slow and I ran through a few breathing exercises to calm myself and tried to relax a little. After almost a full two minutes, the elevator slowed to a stop. Barty, Beth still out cold and draped over his shoulders, stepped to the side against the wall of the elevator. I did the same with the MP5 raised and pointed at the door as it slid open.

The elevator opened onto a hallway very similar to the one we'd left down below. The main difference was that this one had small tables along the walls between the finely polished oak doors on each side of the hall. I looked at the one closest to us and saw a small brass plaque on it that simply stated "Security".

There was a small slot in the door for a keycard and I figured it wouldn't hurt to try this one out. The small red light by the reader blinked from red to green as I inserted the card and quietly opened the door.

The cramped security office revealed two men dressed in more casual but still obviously uniform clothes. They were sitting in front of two banks of monitors, each set up at a 45 degree angle in the corner. From my vantage point behind them, I could see all of the screens. They showed various areas of the house on the left side set and the grounds around it on the right. I noticed that the screen farthest to the left at the top showed Barty, Beth still over his shoulders, standing in the hallway outside looking in through the open door behind me.

Nic Brown

The guard watching the left hand side noticed this too, as he started to stand. “Kevin, who the fuck is...”

I pulled the slide on the MP5 back with a satisfying click that made the rising guard and his partner freeze.

“That is a couple of guests from the party last night.” I said as they turned to face me, their eyes going from mine to the muzzle of the gun in my hand. “Despite the Sheik’s most gracious hospitality, I think it’s time these guests were leaving. Where is our car?”

The two men exchanged a quick look and one made a stealthy move to reach behind him as he pointed with his other hand at the monitor saying, “You can see it...”

I closed the gap between us in two quick steps and before he could finish his move, I brought my elbow up hard to the side of the guard’s head. There was a good bit of momentum behind that blow and the guard fell to the floor in an unmoving heap. I didn’t even pause as I followed through on the motion and jammed the MP5’s barrel into the first man’s chest.

“I can find it on my own if I have to, but if you’re helpful I might leave you tied up instead of beaten into unconsciousness.” I pressed the barrel into his chest until he was bent awkwardly over the desk behind him. “Well, what’s it gonna be?”

“W-which one was it?” the guard asked with his hands in the air. “I can bring up the garage camera here.” He pointed with one of his raised hands at the monitors.

“Do it.” I turned my head slightly and saw Barty still standing outside the door. “Barty, come in here and close the door behind you.” He did and set Beth down in one of the vacated office chairs. There was a first aid kit on the wall next to a fire extinguisher and he got it down and began rummaging through it.

The guard switched one of the monitors from the grounds over to show the exterior of a long stone building with a number of large roll-up doors along the side. He pressed a button on the console and the screen spilt into four sections, exterior front and back and two views of the interior. There was a line of expensive looking cars visible inside the building. I indicated one of the screens. “Can you make that one bigger?” I asked pointing at one of the interior shots.

Blood Curse

“Barty, is that one yours?” I was pointing at the only Escalade I could see.

Barty looked up as the view switched to a full screen showing the row of cars and then began to zoom in on the Escalade. “Yeah, that’s ours.” He said and I looked a bit closer at the image, the vanity plate was visible, “BLKST6”. Barty turned his attention back to the first aid kit. He’d pulled a number of items out and was fussing around Beth who was starting to come to.

“Barty, make sure she stays quiet and doesn’t panic. It’ll be a big help if she isn’t luggage for the rest of this, but not if she freaks out. Don’t tell her about me by the way. I wouldn’t have told you except I couldn’t get loose without changing.”

“Michael, as far as I’m concerned I didn’t see a damned thing. Hell, if I start spoutin’ off about this I’ll end up in the nuthouse so fast it’d make your head spin.”

He turned his attention back to Beth. He’d laid out some pain killers on the counter next to him.

The whole time I’d had my hand on the back of the guard’s neck applying enough pressure to the nerve cluster there that he was discouraged from doing anything. I tightened my grip enough to make him wince. “Alright my friend, you’re going to tell me all about the security for this place and then, you’re going to take us to our car.” He was looking up at me and I let myself change just a bit. His eyes grew wide and he started talking so fast I almost couldn’t keep up. He didn’t dare look higher than my mouth. I was smiling, showing the sharp canines that didn’t belong on a man.

Chapter 29

The guard's name was Jeff, and now Jeff was our unwilling companion as we walked out through one of the numerous employee doors of the Sheik's mansion. The sky was an eerie color in the pre-dawn twilight and I was starting to feel pretty tired. Barty looked OK, but Beth was not doing very well. In fact, she looked like the walking dead as they shambled behind us, Beth leaning on Barty for support.

Barty had brought her around with some smelling salts while I learned all about the security systems and guard rotations for the Sheik's farm from Jeff. Beth was especially out of it. I'd had a couple of broken fingers before and knew that it must have hurt like the devil, but Beth didn't show any signs that she felt a thing. She didn't show many signs of life at all and I decided that whatever those painkillers were in the first aid kit, they weren't aspirin.

The only one of us who didn't seem to be showing any signs of fatigue was Barty. Despite having carried Beth and having apparently been beaten himself, he seemed sharp and alert. He helped Beth along with one hand and had the 9mm Beretta out and in his other. The gun was at his side, barrel pointing down. He'd said he didn't have much use for little pistols like the 9mm, but he carried it like he had some training. I'd have to ask him about that later. For now the big issue was getting to the car.

I had learned from Jeff that the Sheik had more people on his security staff than some of the small counties around here had police. He'd also explained that there were twice as many guards on duty all this week than was normal. It didn't surprise me when Jeff said it was all due to the "event" scheduled for tonight.

I had Jeff by the arm just above the elbow and was applying enough pressure that he would wince every now and then, but he kept moving, leading us along a cobblestone foot path that ran between the main building and the first of the many barns around the estate. I casually looked up at the camera mounted on the corner of the barn as we approached. It was completing a slow arch of the

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area and slid smoothly over our group, its silent eye keeping vigil. Of course it was a pointless vigil. I'd found the video recording system in the security office and put all the cameras on a 10 minute loop. Anyone with access to the feeds would see the same footage over and over. That was good, but as the sky outside grew lighter, I knew that precaution would soon start working against us if anyone noticed it was still nearly dark on the video feeds, but getting lighter and lighter outside.

It wasn't far to the garage building. It was a stone and wood building that matched what I'd seen of the other buildings on the property. If it weren't for the roll up garage doors that ran down one side, I wouldn't have pegged it for a garage. I glanced at my newly acquired watch. It wasn't a great timepiece, but the unconscious guard wouldn't need it. Based on what I'd seen on the video monitors and the schedule Jeff had provided, I'd been timing our progress carefully so we were moving between passes of the two sets of roving guards that walked this part of the estate. I paused our little group and sniffed the air. Other than us, I couldn't pick up anyone nearby.

We moved around to the side of the garage and Jeff used his keycard to open the door for us. There were service lights on inside, but otherwise it was fairly dark. It was still too early for anyone to be working on the cars, so we had the place to ourselves.

Barty walked Beth over to the Escalade and leaned her on the passenger side door.

"Where are the keys?" He asked looking a bit desperate. I hadn't thought of that. Where were the keys?

"They're over there," Jeff said before I asked and he pointed to a metal lock box over a desk. A white board next to the lock box showed the cars in the garage and had various bits under each vehicle's name. I noticed that the column for the Escalade said "Scrap ASAP" under the vehicle's ID.

"I've been a help, right? You're going to let me go now, right?" Jeff was rocking from foot to foot nervously as he looked at me.

"Stop rocking! You're giving me a headache." I looked around the garage quickly. Sure enough, I found what I was looking for. I

Nic Brown

grabbed Jeff by the back of his neck and marched him over to a large metal locker standing against the back wall. The locker contained coveralls and shop towels. I picked up one of the towels and smiled at Jeff. "Say Ahhhhh...."

-

With Jeff nicely tucked away in the locker, I joined Barty at the SUV. He was standing half in, half out of the Escalade, leaning over the open door. "We out of here now?" he asked as I approached. I noticed that he still had the gun in his hand that rested on the door frame.

"Yeah, we're gonna go, but I have to come back...."

"Son, I don't give a rat's ass what you do. If you want to come back here that's fine, but I need you to get us out of this mess. Now." I could smell the nasty mixture of fear and anger welling up inside him as Barty looked over his shoulder into the back seat. Beth was sitting with her head back and mouth slightly open staring out the side window. He looked back at me. "Beth needs to get to a hospital. Come on Michael. Let's go." He slipped all the way into the big SUV and closed the door.

I checked the guard's watch again. If we were getting out of here, it had to be now before the morning shift came in all bright eyed and bushy tailed. It had been over an hour since we'd gotten out of the basement; someone was going to find that we were gone soon and raise the alarm. I walked over to one of the roll up doors and pressed the button for the opener. The door began sliding up as I came around and got into the Escalade on the passenger's side. Barty had the big vehicle moving before I even finished closing the door.

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The sun was up now and there was a light mist hovering just above the ground as we drove around the grounds. We passed a number of farm workers who paid us absolutely no mind as we

Blood Curse

wove our way around the service roads of the estate. I'd brought a small map with us from the guards' office and directed Barty as we cautiously drove through the grounds. Barty's speed kept inching up and I had to remind him several times not to go too fast. With the tinted windows we could pass as anyone unless they looked too closely at the SUV, and I didn't want to give anyone a reason to.

The farm and adjoining estate were huge and it wouldn't be hard to get lost heading for one of the limited number of exits to the place. When we'd come in last night, we'd only driven through the front quarter of the farm's grounds. The area from the main house and up to the entrance was wooded. The tree cover ended just past the house and from there it was all fields, and farm related buildings. We passed one structure that stood out, not because of how it looked, which was the same as all the other buildings, but for its name; the breeding shed. Of course from the size of it, it was obviously a bit more than a shed, but I knew how much money there was in breeding champion horses so the large, somehow sterile looking, wood and stone building caught my eye.

Just past the ill-named "Shed" we approached one of the service entrances. The gate here was all business. An unattractive barred gate blocked the road. On either side was the high stone fencing that ran around the entire farm. Two guards were standing watch here, well; maybe 'standing' was stretching it a bit. One was sitting in a small booth to the right of the gate, while the other leaned in to look at whatever was on the small television I could see glowing inside.

The two guards were so engrossed in watching the small television that they paid no attention to us until we arrived right at the gate. The one inside never even looked up as the other came over and motioned for me to roll down the passenger side window.

The guard leaned in the window and I could smell his stale breath most unpleasantly as he spoke. "Hey ya, where you going? We didn't hear that anyone was coming out the east...GAA!?" his words were clipped off sharply as I thrust my fist up into his throat. His eyes were wide and he staggered back a step. He was trying to shout but all he could do was make a clucking sound, one hand

grabbing his throat while the other slapped at his side trying to draw his pistol.

I didn't wait. I slammed the Escalade's heavy door open and it hit him on the side knocking him down. I followed the door, and went, not for the prone guard, but for the one in the small booth. He'd looked up at the sound and was standing up and drawing his own weapon.

He had the 9mm clear of its holster and was out the door of the booth by the time I got there. He didn't get much farther though as I grabbed the top of the gun and twisted it sharply to the side until the butt of the gun pointed at the sky and the guard now stood on his toes trying desperately to relieve the pressure and pain that this was causing him as my other hand came up and locked his elbow. I twisted harder and felt the man's wrist snap. As he yelled in agony, I yanked him forward and planted a knee in his stomach. He fell forward and I struck the back of his neck with a chop. He didn't move after he landed.

I went into the guard shack and looked around a moment. It didn't take long to figure out how to open the gate. I went back to the Escalade and shut the door as I leaned in through the still open passenger side window.

"Barty, I want you to get out of here with Beth, once you can get to a phone, call my friends at the number I gave you. Tell them that I'm in serious trouble and need them here now. Give them all the details you can remember of this place."

"What are you going to do, Michael? You need to come with us." I could honestly see concern in the older man's eyes when he said this; I guess he had decided about how he felt regarding my other nature.

"I've gotta go back in and find Ciara. If they don't have me to do the ritual, then they'll fall back and use her. I need to get her out of there and put an end to this whole mess."

Barty pulled out the piece of paper I'd handed him earlier with the number on it to and studied it for a moment. "Do you really think your friends in Texas will be able to get here in time to help you?"

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I smiled. “Remember Barty, werewolves aren’t the only things that go bump in the night. Tabitha can get here pretty damn quick if she has to. You just make sure they understand about the ritual and when it is going to take place.”

“Well, when is it going to happen? Hell, all I know is that it’s supposed to be tonight.”

“Barty, this is magic we’re talking about here. They call midnight until one the witching hour for a reason you know....” I winked as I turned and headed off towards the main house at a trot.

Michael walks the line between our world and the world of the supernatural. He handles problems that other can't. He's a werewolf for hire. But if he's not careful he might bite off more than even a werewolf can chew.

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