



**The Keeping**  
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# THE KEEPING

By  
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Other works by this author:

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The Mating

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## Adult Reading Material

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This book is a sequel to *The Mating*, my first werewolf story. Many people became enamoured with the characters in that book and kept asking what happened to them. Ryne especially seemed to capture readers' imaginations and so, in response to those many requests, this tale was written. I hope you enjoy the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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## Prologue

Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.

The room was silent, except for the ticking of the grandfather clock that stood majestically near the doorway and the faint sounds of the old man's breathing. To look at him, one might wonder if he was alive or only a wax figure; his eyes were unblinking and the rise and fall of his chest were barely perceptible. His gnarled hands rested lightly on the arms of the chair in which he sat, their occasional tightening the only real sign of the emotion he was feeling.

Pale winter sunlight, so typical of early January, was valiantly trying to brighten the large, cluttered room. Its weak rays crept past the heavy velvet curtains and cast a beam across the floor, creating a bright swatch in the otherwise gloomy interior. Small specks of dust drifted lazily on the faint air currents before settling on the laden surfaces of the tables and shelves.

Sculptures, figurines, and books, covered every flat inch of the room. Similarly, artwork filled the dark panelled walls, yet the gentleman in the chair still deemed his collection to be paltry and inadequate. Or, at least he'd felt that way until now. Years of searching and gathering everything related to his favourite theme had finally paid off.

The faintest movement near the corners of his mouth would let an astute observer know he was pleased. Over the fireplace mantel hung his latest acquisition. Studying it with care, his gaze traced over the subject matter, analyzing and assessing. A quiet grunt and a slight movement of his head was the only acknowledgement he gave that here was what he had spent his whole life looking for.

"That will be all, Franklin." His voice was deep and strong despite his years, instantly commanding respect and obedience.

A man, dressed in the formal garb of a butler, stepped out of the shadows that clung to the edges of the room and bowed at the waist. "Yes, Mr. Greyson. If you need anything else, just ring." Silently, the servant picked up the step ladder he had used to hang the picture and left the room, quietly shutting the heavy mahogany door behind him.

As Franklin's footsteps faded into the distance, the older man stood and advanced towards the fireplace. His steps were sure, his stride long—no decrepit shuffling for him, despite his years and the aching of

his joints. Clasp ing his hands behind his ramrod straight back, he stood in front of the framed photo.

Excitement was bubbling inside him, though his calm countenance gave no sign. This was what he'd been searching for. Everything else in the room was now worthless; his priceless statues, the expensive glossy books, paintings by renowned artists; they all paled in comparison to this one piece.

"Proof." He whispered to himself, his eyes alight with a fire that had been missing for years. "After all this time, I finally have proof." Reaching out his hand, he traced the name scrawled in the corner of the picture matte. "Whoever you are, Ryne Taylor, you've made me a very happy man."

After those few words, he fell silent again, contemplating the subject matter of the picture. He'd acquired it two months ago and had spent the intervening time examining it, studying angles, looking for shadows, measuring length and distance, pouring over minute details with a magnifying glass. There was no refuting what he'd found. Now the amber eyes in the photo glared at him, challenging and arrogant, almost as if they knew his plan and were daring him to try and execute it.

Eventually the man looked away, staring at the thick carpeting beneath his feet. A dry chuckle rumbled in his chest. "I can't hold your gaze. You're not even here, and still you manage to be dominant." Shaking his head, he made his way back to his chair and sat down heavily. Picking up the phone, he dialled a familiar number, and then waited impatiently for someone to answer, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair. When the call was finally answered, he wasted no time on pleasantries.

"Greyson here. I need to talk to you, Aldrich ... What about?" He gave a short bark of laughter while looking up at the picture again. "A wolf, of course."

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*Stump River, Ontario, Canada — 700 miles Northeast of Chicago*

Ryne wiped his hands on a greasy rag and pulled down on the hood of the aging pick-up truck. He sauntered to the far side of the garage and pitched the filthy rag in the garbage. "Filter's changed, Ben. Anything else?"

Ben Miller looked up from the service desk, where he was totalling the work orders. “Nope. That’s it for the day. Thanks for coming in to help.”

“No problem. I can use the extra cash. That money pit I bought wants new plumbing.”

Ben rubbed the back of his neck as he contemplated the man before him. Not for the first time, did he wonder why a young fellow like Ryne Taylor would choose to live in a god-forsaken place like Stump River. Not that Ben didn’t like his hometown, but he was aware of its limitations. No night life except for the local bar and Wednesday night bingo at the church. A two-hour drive to the next largest community. Young people *left* Stump River, they didn’t move here.

Mind you, George and Mary Nelson were mighty happy that Taylor was bucking the trend. He had bought their crumbling house and the large parcel of land it sat on. There hadn’t even been any quibbling over the cost; he’d paid the asking price without batting an eye. The sale had provided the town with nice bit of gossip to help pass the winter, as well as allowing the elderly Nelsons to retire to Timmins, a larger urban centre, in relative luxury. Ben looked around his small business and smirked. Maybe Taylor would buy his place, too, should he ever decide to retire.

Watching Ryne get cleaned up at the nearby sink, Ben couldn’t help but feel a touch of envy. All the local ladies positively drooled when Ryne was in town. Even his own wife wasn’t immune. Ben had unwillingly eavesdropped on her conversation with a friend just last night and had almost felt a tad inadequate after listening to them go on about his black hair, blue eyes and ‘devilishly sexy smile’—their words, not his, of course. When they’d started to enumerate his physical attributes—broad shoulders, long legs, lean hips, and a muscular body—he’d turned the TV on real loud to drown them out.

Ben shook his head. All he saw, when he looked at Ryne, was a hard-working, confident man who knew his way around an engine. That was enough in his books. Ryne helped him out at the garage a few days each week and Ben was grateful for the assistance.

“Got any plans for the weekend?” Ryne had dried off and walked over to where Ben was working. He leaned against the counter and chugged down a bottle of water.

“The wife and daughter want me to take them into Timmins shopping. We might go to a show while we’re there, too.”

"Sounds like fun." Ryne wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and threw the bottle into the recycling bin. "I'm going to be working on the house as usual."

"It was a big project you undertook, when you bought the place."

"I know, but I like the area, and it came with a lot of land. My friends and I like our privacy."

"To each their own." Ben shrugged and handed Ryne a check. "Here's your pay. Don't spend it all in one place."

Ryne laughed while stuffing the cheque in his pocket. "Nah. I'll spread it around. Some at the hardware store and some at the bar."

"Lucy will be happy to see you, I'm sure." Ben mocked him good-naturedly as he walked out the door. Ryne merely waved and continued on his way. Lucy worked at the local bar and had been real friendly with Ryne ever since he and his friends had moved to the area a few months back.

Watching Ryne cross the street, Ben wondered about the man and the two other fellows, Bryan and Daniel, who lived with him. They weren't related, looking nothing alike, but something bound them together. At first, there'd been rumours that they were gay, but their behaviour at the bar on Friday nights soon dispelled that rumour. The local lovelies swarmed around them and they did little to discourage the attention, especially the younger two.

Ryne was a bit more discriminating. Oh, he'd been involved with a few of the local girls, before settling on just Lucy, but for the most part, he held his liquor and was usually the one dragging the other two home at closing time, provided they hadn't hooked up with some female beforehand. Ben chuckled. Business at the bar was a lot brisker since the three had moved into the community.

A few residents thought the newcomers were a bit strange, but except for the fact that they all lived together in the middle of nowhere, no one had any real complaints against them. The men were polite and didn't bother anyone. Most likely, it was as Ryne said; they'd moved here for privacy and because they liked the area. Nothing strange or mysterious about that.

# Chapter 1

*Oregon, U.S.A.*

Damn! There was a certain sick feeling in Mel's stomach as she lost control of the vehicle and it began to slide across the snow-slicked roads into the oncoming lane. A horn blared as she narrowly missed a pick-up truck but that relief was short lived as a telephone post loomed ahead. She clenched the steering wheel tighter, trying to steer into the skid; muscles tensed as she braced herself against the impact that was sure to come. When it didn't, she sent up a brief prayer of thanks.

"Stupid, snow covered roads." Muttering to herself, she felt the car straighten out of the skid, wincing as the vehicle narrowly missed a farmer's mailbox. Moving back into her own lane, she blew a puff of air up over her face causing her bangs to float up and then settle on her forehead again. Annoyingly, her long lashes kept catching in the too-long fringe of hair—she really needed to make time for a cut, she reminded herself—but she didn't dare take her hands off the wheel to push her hair out of the way. Blinking rapidly, she managed to free her lashes and clear her vision.

The forecast had called for light snow, but the weatherman was obviously an idiot and didn't know a high pressure zone from a low. Heavy white flakes were falling on her windshield and the wipers were having a hard time keeping up. Twice now, she'd stopped and wiped the accumulated white stuff from the blades. She shouldn't have trusted the fellow at the rental agency when he said the car was fine, but at ten o'clock at night, after a long flight squished between a large man and a frazzled mother with a crying baby, all she had wanted to do was get a car, escape the confines of the airport and find a room at the nearby motel. Now, she wished she'd been a bit more particular.

A road sign proclaimed that her destination, Smythston, Oregon, was rapidly approaching and she allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief. She'd had a late start, being up half the night listening to planes land and



take off and now her two hour trip had turned into four hours of white knuckle driving. She couldn't wait to get to the bed and breakfast where she'd booked a room. A hot shower and dinner, followed by a nap were going to be her reward for surviving this trip.

In the brochure that lay on the seat beside her, The Grey Goose Tea Room sounded quaint and boasted luxury rooms with home cooked meals. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of food, and she knew that even if the place was no better than a mom and pop greasy spoon, she'd devour whatever they had to offer. Her stomach was telling her it was long past feeding time. She glared at the snow that was messing up her schedule, all the while hoping her room was still available once she finally arrived at her destination. An oncoming transport trailer uncaringly doused her car in slush and Mel swore vigorously as her view of the road disappeared.

Quickly flicking the wipers onto high, she peered out of the streaked windshield and wondered once again at the sanity of taking on this particular job. It was a ridiculous assignment, but paid well, and since she was next thing to being broke, she couldn't be too choosy.

After years of working dead-end retail jobs, she'd finally gone back to school, earned her high school diploma, and then enrolled in the journalism program at Northwestern University. It wasn't the most practical course, her guidance counsellors had pointed out. If she was looking for a secure career, computers were the way to go. She'd thanked them kindly for the advice, but knew she'd never be able to sit in an office all day, every day. Being in one place too long didn't suit her—she had 'itchy feet' just like her mother, which was probably why she'd constantly drifted from one job to another. After the initial thrill of learning a new skill wore off, she soon lost interest and found herself searching the want ads for yet another new position.

At least, once she was a journalist, an employer would pay for her to move around. It wasn't a great wage, but it was something she enjoyed, and helped lessen the restlessness within her. Talking to people, visiting new locations, researching backgrounds; each day would be different or at least that's what she hoped. Right now, she was taking a year off, being half way through the four year program and completely out of funds. By juggling two waitressing jobs and writing a few freelance articles, she was hoping to make enough money to go back to school next year and finish the program.

That was why this job was exactly what she needed. A lawyer, named Leon Aldrich, had contacted her on behalf of a client—a wealthy client,

no less—to do some work as an investigative journalist. Mel had been a bit surprised to be contacted by the man, wondering how he'd come by her name. Mr. Aldrich claimed one of her college instructors had passed her name along and Mel had hesitantly accepted the explanation. It was against college rules to show favouritism, and Mel was curious as to who had put in the good word for her. The lawyer had merely smirked at her, saying she had been chosen from a number of other candidates. He added it was best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not quite sure what to make of the man, Mel had shrugged and listened to his offer. She needed the money and couldn't afford to be too choosy.

The man had presented Mel with a lucrative job offer; in exchange for a ridiculously large sum of money, she was to research a photographer named Ryne Taylor and write a piece on his life. It had seemed a bit strange at the time. The photographer in question wasn't famous or anything, but after thoroughly checking out the lawyer's references and those of his client, Anthony Greyson, she'd decided the job was legitimate and had agreed to the man's terms.

It was pretty simple. Find the reclusive Mr. Taylor. Research his life, how he chose his subjects, where he took his pictures, and who had purchased them. She was to give updates on each new development to keep them aware of her progress, write a final article, and then submit it back to the lawyer. All expenses would be paid and there was a very loose deadline.

The job seemed almost too good to be true, but if life was going hand her a golden egg on a silver platter, she wasn't going to turn her nose up at it. She frowned as she reflected on her phrasing for that last thought. For a journalist, she had certainly slaughtered the use of those clichés. She chuckled, glad her thoughts were her own and not subject to editorial criticism.

Taking note of her surroundings, she realized that she was now inside the town proper. Fumbling for the brochure at her side, she turned to the section that showed a map on how to find the Grey Goose. Placing it on the steering wheel, she glanced between it and the road while looking for street signs to help orient her.

A mere fifteen minutes later, she stood in the entryway of the quaint bed and breakfast, talking to a distinguished looking gentleman who had introduced himself as Edward Mancini.

"Yes, Ms. Greene, I took your reservation over the phone last night. I'm so glad the weather didn't delay your travel plans."

She smiled and brushed her hair out of her face for probably the fiftieth time that day—she really did need to get it cut. “It wasn’t the most pleasant drive, but I made it.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re here safe and sound. If you’ll just follow me, Ms. Greene, I’ll show you to your room.”

“Please, call me Melody.” Using her most ingratiating smile, she looked up at the man and noted in response, a faint upturning at the corners of his mouth. Personally, she didn’t care much for her name and usually went by Mel, but men seemed to like ‘Melody,’ and as a ‘wannabe’ hard-nosed journalist, she didn’t hesitate to use the fact to her advantage.

“Melody, then. And you may call me Edward. Follow me.” As she walked behind him, Mel mentally gave herself a point. Getting on a first name basis with the people you were going to interview was a great way to ensure they would be willing to open up to you—or so her college instructors had told her. And, while she wasn’t going to be interviewing this man exactly, she was hoping to extract a few bits of information from him.

As he led her into her room, she thanked him politely and noticed that he was looking at her surreptitiously. Mel knew what he would see. At five foot four, she wasn’t tall, but she balked against the label of short. Her figure was a little disproportionate, being rather too rounded up top, and bit narrow in comparison around the hips. Her legs were slim, and thankfully, due to that fact, looked longer than they actually were. Shoulder length, honey brown hair, and deep brown eyes gave her a warm, friendly look as did her generous smile.

Her college professors had told her that her friendly, girl-next-door appearance would help her make contacts and win the confidence of those she interviewed. Personally, Mel longed to be a drop-dead gorgeous, sophisticated reporter, who could wrap an interviewee around her finger with a mere bat of her eyelashes and some pithy repartee.

It was impossible for Mr. Mancini to know what she was thinking, but for some reason the man’s lips twitched as he finished giving her a once over. He made no comment however, merely nodding his head and exiting, softly pulling the door shut behind him.

As the locking mechanism clicked into place, Mel turned to examine her room only to catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror. A mortified groan escaped her. No wonder Mr. Mancini had trouble keeping a straight face. Her hair was a mess, her coat was buttoned crooked, and

there was a smudge of chocolate from her make-shift lunch smeared across her chin. Her shoulders sagged; so much for being sophisticated.

Shrugging off her coat, she sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her boots off before flopping backwards on the mattress. Oh well, even if she looked a mess, Edward seemed to like her, and that meant he'd most likely be willing to talk to her when she started doing her research.

As she stared at the ceiling, she ran over her mental checklist on 'how to be a journalist.' Establish contacts—check. Be friendly so the other person will open up and talk to you—check. Listen attentively—umm, not quite a check.

Mel gnawed on her lip. That was always the hardest part for her. She tended to be a bubbly, outgoing sort who loved to talk and was always forgetting that she wasn't supposed to interrupt the interviewee with her own random thoughts. In her mind, she tattooed the words 'shut up, Mel' across her brain, while ruefully acknowledging that it probably wouldn't help.

Last on her to-do list was reporting the real story without personal bias creeping in—another partial check. 'Report the facts,' the instructors had always told her, 'not opinions.' Unfortunately, Mel tended to have lots of opinions about almost everything, and found it hard not to state them. Well, she inwardly shrugged, at least for this assignment all she needed to write was a straightforward report on a person's life. A photographer wasn't likely to be involved in anything controversial and his life couldn't be that interesting. After all, the man took pictures of flowers and wildlife; she doubted she'd be able to muster much of a personal opinion about that!

The final report wasn't due for several months, so once she'd tracked the fellow down and interviewed him, she'd have plenty of time to write his life story. Writing was what she did best and those were the courses where she'd received her highest marks. Words seemed to flow through her mind and onto the page in an unending stream. In fact, writing too much tended to be her biggest failing in that area. Luckily, it shouldn't be a problem in this circumstance, she decided. The report didn't have to fit the confines of a newspaper column, so she'd be able to ramble as much as she wished... provided Mr. Taylor had anything in his life worth rambling about!

Lying on the bed, she absentmindedly studied the design on the ceiling and thought about what she'd discovered so far. At first, she'd done the most obvious—searching Ryne Taylor's name on the web. The internet hadn't turned up much; he was a photographer of some minor

renown specializing in nature photography. A few art galleries had shown his work with sales being modest. The picture that had sparked her benefactor's interest had been purchased at Bastian's Fine Art Gallery. It was located just a short drive from the man's last known address, which was in Smythston, Oregon. The previous week, she'd phoned the gallery, but the call had produced very little information. Yes, they had sold a Ryne Taylor photograph to a Mr. Greyson. No, there was no information available to the public about the photographer himself.

The fact that the information wasn't available to the public meant that there was information available; Mel just needed to find a way to get her hands on it. Unable to find an address or phone number for the mysterious Mr. Taylor, she was resorting to what was affectionately called 'old fashioned leg work.' Hence, she found herself travelling half-way across the country in the middle of February to this small non-descript town.

Stretching, she ran her hands through her hair and forced herself to sit up. While she would prefer to be investigating someone on a tropical island, her present location wasn't all bad. Giving a small bounce, she deemed the bed comfortable and looked around the room, for the first time taking real note of her surroundings.

Decorated in turn of the century elegance, the room had gleaming wood and rich hues throughout, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Aside from the mirror that had revealed her less than perfect appearance, there was a small fireplace with a love seat in front of it, a breakfast table and two chairs, a bed, night tables and a dresser. A door to the side of the room appeared to lead to the bathroom, which made Mel recall her earlier desire for a warm shower and a meal.

Calling the front desk, she arranged for the delivery of a meal to her room. While it was being prepared she headed for the shower, emerging fifteen minutes later wrapped in a white terrycloth robe, and feeling considerably refreshed.

Her timing was perfect. A knock on the door signalled the arrival of her meal and her stomach rumbled in anticipation. Thanking the slight girl who wheeled the cart in, Melody spared her a momentary glance. The girl had dark hair and green eyes; a pretty thing, only slightly younger than herself.

"If you need anything else, just call downstairs and ask for me. My name's Elise."

"Thanks, Elise." Mel lifted the lid off her plate and inhaled the delectable scent of steak cooked to perfection. "Have you worked here long?"

"For about four months. I usually just work in the tea room but Mr. Mancini asked if I'd help out up here this weekend. There's a 'flu bug going around and he's short-handed."

Mel forced herself to ignore her meal in favour of cultivating yet another local contact. Four months was long enough for Elise to have possibly encountered the elusive photographer. "This seems like a lovely place. Do you get lots of business?"

"It's steady. Lots of locals stop by downstairs for lunch and a few rent rooms up here for weekend getaways or if they have company and need a place for guests to stay. And, of course, we get a few travellers such as yourself. Where are you headed?"

"Actually, I'm a free-lance journalist and I'm researching local artists for an article." That was the story Mr. Aldrich, the lawyer, told her to use. He didn't want anyone knowing who she was really working for. Mr. Greyson liked to keep his life and his interests private.

Elise smiled at her. "Be sure to check out Bastian's Gallery, then. It's just down the road and they show quite a few of the local artists."

"Thanks. I'll put them at the top of my list." Even though she'd already planned on going there, she didn't want to hurt Elise's feelings.

Elise nodded and Mel noticed how she was rubbing her stomach. Hmm, was the girl coming down with the 'flu, too? Or, was she pregnant? Mel recalled how a fellow waitress, Nicole, had always been rubbing her belly when she was expecting. Eyeing Elise speculatively, Mel wondered if there was a slight thickening of her waist. It was hard to tell, with the apron wrapped around her. Oh well, it really wasn't any of her business.

"Well, I really should get back to work. I hope you enjoy your stay here." Elise headed towards the door.

"I'm sure I will. It's been nice talking to you, Elise." Her stomach chose that moment to rumble again and she pulled a self-deprecating face.

Elise laughed softly and pulled the door shut behind her.

With Elise on her way, Melody sat down to enjoy her dinner. As she'd suspected, the food was delicious and soon her plate was empty. With a satisfied sigh, she sat back and checked her watch. It was five-thirty. She could walk down to Bastian's Gallery and see what information she could dig up about Ryne Taylor, but she was tired. Being charmingly casual, while making subtle inquiries, seemed like too much of an effort at that moment. A nap was eminently more appealing.

Getting to her feet, Mel heaved her suitcase up onto the bed and dug out an old t-shirt to sleep in. It wasn't fancy, but then again no one was going to be seeing her in it and it packed easily. Shaking the wrinkles out, she took off her robe and pulled the grey t-shirt on. Her skin immediately raised into goose bumps as the cool cotton slid over her body. She shivered and pushed back the duvet, climbing between the crisp sheets and curling up into a shivering ball. Soon her body heat was warming the bed and she felt her muscles relaxing. Stretching out, she sighed and closed her eyes. She'd just take a little nap and then...

## Chapter 2

Sun streamed in through the lace covered curtains and fell upon the table situated in front of the window. It glinted off the highly polished, wooden surface, and cast a cheery glow over the whole room. The brightness made Mel squint and grumble against the assault on her vision. Her little nap yesterday had been much longer than she'd intended. Despite sleeping for over twelve hours, or perhaps because of it, she felt exceptionally groggy that morning. Perhaps, it was due to the fact that this was the first time, in what seemed like ages, that she had actually been able to get a decent night's sleep. Whatever the reason, her body was reluctant to let go of the wonderful sensation of resting in a warm cloud of eiderdown and fresh linen.

Back home in Chicago, her little apartment had intermittent heating, a lumpy mattress and paper thin walls. The latter provided her with the privilege of hearing the tenants on all sides of her arguing, watching TV or engaging in... er... physical relations, at all hours of the day and night. That, on top of working two jobs in an effort to try and raise money for her education, meant she was chronically bleary-eyed and over-tired. Friends told her to move, but being situated by the El—elevated train tracks—meant the rent was cheap and with the building located mid-way between her two jobs, she felt she could suffer through the inadequacies of her dwelling with the ultimate goal of being able to afford better some day.

But now it appeared all that would be behind her much sooner than anticipated. Blinking sleepily, Mel propped her chin up with her hand while sipping her coffee and pondering yet again the providential turn of events that had landed her in her present situation. Researching this photographer was going to be a piece of cake and the substantial wind-fall the assignment was paying would mean she could quit one of her jobs and go back to school earlier than planned. With any luck, today she'd find out where Ryne Taylor resided and tomorrow she would be



on her way to his home. A few days of talking to him and the preliminary part of the job would be done.

A smile passed over her lips as she thought of how Mr. Taylor would react when he finally heard the news that he was the focus of an article. He'd probably welcome the attention given him. After all, trying to make a name for yourself in the art world was no easy task. Perhaps, Mr. Greyson even wanted to become the photographer's patron and the article was destined to be published in some fancy art magazine. Mel brightened at that thought since it would help her own career along, too. Hmm... Mr. Taylor and she might both end up benefitting from their encounter in ways neither could even dream of at the moment.

Feeling the caffeine finally activating the synapses of her brain, Mel began to take a more active interest in the happenings outside her window. The snowstorm had passed by overnight and the sun was causing the temperature to rise. Icicles dripped from the eaves and the fluffy white snow of yesterday was slowly melting into a miserable, soggy mess. Early morning commuters drove slowly down the narrow downtown streets, streams of slush spewing behind them. Snowploughs must have been working during the night, as piles of snow lined either side of the roadway. Merchants were out shovelling walkways and spreading salt on icy patches so that customers wouldn't slip and fall while purchasing their wares.

A silver pick-up truck pulled in near the curb in front of the Grey Goose and Mel watched the scene below her with increasing attentiveness. First, a tall dark-haired man climbed out. From her second storey vantage point, she could easily make out his features and her heart beat a little faster in appreciation of his male beauty. He circled the vehicle and opened the passenger side door, reaching in and lifting a woman out and over the piles of snow onto the safety of the sidewalk.

Mel smiled; Good-looking, strong, *and* chivalrous. Observing the man tenderly kissing the woman and then lingering to watch her walk away, she sighed with envy, her hidden romantic streak making itself known. The fellow was obviously smitten. Wasn't that just the way? The good ones always seemed to be taken.

The woman turned to wave at the man and Mel caught a brief glimpse of her face. It was Elise, the girl who had brought in her meal last night. What a lucky little thing she was, to have a man like that! Hmm... Maybe she should ask if he had a brother. Mel wrinkled her nose and shook her head, quickly dismissing the idea. Nah—hunky men usually didn't go for the-girl-next-door types such as herself. They were after

sultry beauties and sexy models that would look good hanging off their arm.

On that depressing note, Mel stood up and began to dress. The local businesses would be open for customers soon and it was time she got to work looking for information about Mr. Taylor. First, she would stop by the art gallery and see if she could wheedle any information out of the sales associates. Then, if that was a dead end, she'd search out Edward Mancini, and maybe even Elise. There was always the possibility that the photographer had stopped by the tea room for lunch when he was at the gallery making arrangements for the sale of his photographs.

She wished she had a picture of the man, or at least a description. It was always easier for people to recall someone from a photo rather than from a verbal description, which she didn't have either, she glumly acknowledged. Mr. Aldrich hadn't given her much to go on, beyond the man's name and occupation. Oh well, the town wasn't that big. Maybe it was the kind of place where everyone knew everybody's business.

Taking a final sip of her coffee, she put on her coat and left the room, her spirits high in anticipation of a successful morning.

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Three hours later, Mel was back at the Grey Goose, sitting in the downstairs tea room, determinedly crunching a breadstick and totally unaware of her elegant surroundings. The potted plants, the period furniture, the soft music in the background, were all lost on her as she wallowed in her own bad mood. She knew her frustration was evident on her face, but quite frankly didn't care. Her morning optimism was gone and replaced by the starkness of reality.

After oohing and aahing over dubious artwork and schmoozing with the people who worked at Bastian's, she was still no closer to finding anything out about Ryne Taylor. The staff at the gallery had been friendly and admitted that they had sold some of his work, but no one was willing to talk about the man himself. All Mel had been able to garner was that there was a bit of a black cloud hanging over the whole topic. A few sly hints were dropped about a former, now missing, sales associate having had an affair with the man and somehow misdirecting the proceeds from the sale of Taylor's work into her own account, but that was all she could discover.

When she'd first heard that little tidbit, the journalist in Mel had perked up her ears. This sounded like a mystery worth investigating. It had all the right elements; a missing person, a steamy affair, pilfered funds... But when she'd tried to question them for more specifics,

everyone had become uneasy; their barely suppressed enjoyment over the titillating scandal disappearing behind suddenly shuttered expressions. Mel instinctively felt they were hiding something, but what? Finally, the gallery owner himself had come over and glared at his workers, who had taken one look at his disapproving face and scurried off to the far corners of the establishment. Once they were gone, he'd addressed Mel coolly, informing her in the politest of tones that she was keeping his employees from their work. Unless she was intending to buy something, perhaps she should be on her way.

Realizing that she had broken a basic rule of journalism and been too pushy, too soon, Mel left, all the while mentally kicking herself for alienating what was presently her only sure source of information. She knew she was supposed to be patient and not appear as if she was pumping people for information, but it was just so frustrating. Pregnant pauses made her fidgety and usually she ended up filling them, totally defeating the purpose. Those people had the information she needed somewhere in their records. Why wouldn't they share? Surely, Mr. Taylor would welcome the publicity, if he only knew it was available to him!

Grabbing another breadstick, Mel bit into it angrily. She imagined that right now Mr. Bastian would be asking his employees what she had wanted to know. Quite likely, he'd even instruct them not to talk to her anymore. Bastian's, she thought glumly, was going to be a dead end.

She'd glossed over that fact when she'd called the lawyer, Leon Aldrich, half an hour ago, to report her findings. He'd been rather peeved that she hadn't checked in last night, claiming to have been concerned about her safety. While she'd explained about being tired and the poor driving conditions, she'd inwardly acknowledged the real reason for his attitude.

Aldrich appeared to be waiting for her to abscond with the large cash advance he'd given her. He didn't seem too keen on her, nor on his client's interest in Ryne Taylor, for that matter. Mel knew Aldrich felt she was under-qualified for the job, but Mr. Greyson had picked her out of all the other applicants. The sour look on Aldrich's face when he delivered this news, made it obvious that the wealthy man was ignoring his lawyer's recommendations. It was strange how Aldrich seemed to have taken an instant dislike to her; Mel usually got along with almost everyone. Maybe it was because she was spending his client's money on a project that he felt was foolish.

Whatever the case, Mel hated reporting to the man. He always made her feel guilty and desirous of a thorough washing that would remove

any traces of their interaction, even if it had been only over the phone. This morning was no different. She'd stated the facts as succinctly as possible; she'd arrived safely at the Grey Goose, had been to Bastian's, but unfortunately hadn't found any new information. Her next move was going to be checking the archives of the local paper. Aldrich had reluctantly agreed with her plan and she'd hung up, feeling his disapproval oozing down the phone lines.

At least now that the unpleasant task of talking to the man was over, she was free to sit and brood about her morning in relative peace and quiet. Mel was doing so with great success, mowing down breadsticks and leaving a little array of crumbs all over the white linen tablecloth, oblivious of her surroundings. When a shadow fell across the table, she gave a start, having forgotten she was in a public restaurant. Looking up, she saw Elise standing beside her.

"Hi! You look a bit down. Having a bad morning?" Elise's concerned inquiry immediately made Mel feel a bit better. Here, at least, was one friendly face.

"Yeah. I was at Bastian's Gallery all morning. There's one particular artist that I'm trying to get some background on for my article, but I struck out."

"And they didn't have any information for you?" Elise seemed rather surprised by the fact.

"Well, they said they didn't, but I think they're holding out on me."

"That's strange. Wouldn't an artist welcome publicity?"

Mel snorted. "You would think so."

Someone called Elise's name and she glanced over her shoulder. "Oops, my order for table three is ready. Here's the menu. Our luncheon specials are listed on the front. I'll be back in a minute to take your order."

Mel watched Elise's retreating form, thinking she could ask her about Ryne Taylor. Bastian's was a dead end, but maybe the local people knew something about the man. After all, he had lived in the area before disappearing off the face of the earth. Determined not to be quite so eager for information this time, she purposely engaged Elise in casual conversation when the girl returned.

"I saw you getting out of a pickup this morning. Was that your husband?"

"Yes." Elise rolled her eyes and appeared exasperated. "Kane's so over-protective right now. He wouldn't even let me drive in by myself this morning because of the snow."

“You mean he’s not always like that?”

Elise blushed prettily. “Well, a bit, but it’s getting worse now. I just found out that I’m pregnant and I swear, he’d have me sitting with my feet up for the next eight months if I didn’t demand otherwise.

Mel grinned inwardly. She’d been right last night when she had seen Elise rubbing her stomach. “Eight months? So you really did just find out. Those home pregnancy tests are getting more and more accurate, aren’t they?”

“Pregnancy test?” Elise frowned. “Actually, Kane just scented that...” She stopped and looked flustered for a moment. “I mean, Kane just... er...” Someone called her name again, and she appeared relieved to have a reason to abandon the conversation.

Sipping her water, Mel pondered what Elise had meant to say. Kane just scented... what? ‘Scented’ was a strange word to use. Dogs scented things, and from the glimpse she’d had of the man, he was anything but a mutt. For all that she’d love to pursue the conversation, it obviously made Elise uncomfortable, so Mel decided to drop it before risking alienating what was possibly her newest source. Elise’s husband, while gorgeous, was not her primary concern.

Eventually, Elise returned with the lasagna Mel had ordered. She looked a bit leery, as if fearing further questions. Trying to reassure her, Mel commented idly on the weather and Elise started to relax. Through the course of the meal, Mel kept the conversation light whenever the waitress happened to stop by her table offering more water or breadsticks. By the time she finished the meal, Elise was chatting easily to her once again. Deciding to make her move, Mel cautiously introduced the subject that was foremost in her mind.

“Well, I suppose I’d better hit the streets again and see if anyone is willing to talk to me about the local artists.”

“Who, in particular, are you interested in?” Elise asked idly, while writing up the bill for the meal.

“A local photographer, named Ryne Taylor. He used to live around here, but no one seems to know where he went.” If she hadn’t been watching, Mel probably wouldn’t have noticed the way Elise’s fingers suddenly gripped the pen tightly. “Do you know anything about him?”

“Ryne... Taylor did you say? No, I don’t believe I do. Of course, I only moved here in October.” Elise shrugged and kept her eyes on the bill.

“Oh. That’s too bad. Well, I’ll just ask around town then.” Mel could sense that Elise was lying, but having learned from her experience at

Bastian's, decided not to press the issue, in case she needed the young woman for something else in the future.

Elise handed her the bill and turned to leave, but then hesitated. Mel watched as she chewed on her lip. The server seemed to be gathering her courage before turning and posing a question in an overly casual voice. "Why are you asking about this particular photographer? I've never heard of him, so his work can't be that good."

"Someone who bought one of Mr. Taylor's pictures raved about the quality of his work, and I thought I'd better check him out."

"Oh." Elise frowned and traced an idle pattern on the table cloth with her finger. "Um... do you know what the subject of the picture was? If it was displayed at Bastian's, I might have noticed it once when I was shopping in the mall."

Mel hesitated, but could see no problem in admitting the truth. "I've seen a few of Taylor's pictures but not that one in particular. Supposedly, though, it was a picture of some wolves."

Elise swallowed hard and nodded. "Well, I have to get back to work. Maybe I'll see you later." She looked at Mel briefly, worry apparent on her face, and then left.

"Right. Later." Mel raised her hand in a perfunctory salute then narrowed her eyes as she watched Elise walk briskly away. The girl knew something, the question was what? What was the mystery surrounding this photographer and his present whereabouts?

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Mel spent the afternoon at the Smythston library, looking through back issues of the local paper for any mention of Ryne Taylor. He did have an exhibit a year ago, but the article didn't include a picture of the man, nor any other useful particulars. She rubbed her forehead in frustration. Obviously, the man was very ordinary or there would have been some mention of him. But, if he was so ordinary, then why were the gallery and Elise withholding information about him? It wasn't as if her article would harm him. There was no malicious intent.

And, as far as she knew, her benefactor, Mr. Greyson, just wanted background on a favourite artist. Maybe Greyson felt Mr. Taylor was an up-and-coming talent, and wanted to purchase more of his work as an investment, before the pictures became too expensive. Whatever the reason, she was being paid handsomely for the job—a job that wasn't progressing very satisfactorily and would leave her with nothing to report to Mr. Aldrich, if she didn't get moving. Arching her back, she pulled out yet another edition of the paper and got back to work.

Several hours later, Mel stood on the steps of the library, muttering under her breath and contemplating her next move. There must be a way to find Taylor. She had long ago dropped the honorific 'Mr.' when thinking of the man—he was now just plain 'Taylor' in her mind. Anyone who was causing her this much frustration wasn't deserving of the extra title.

She shoved her hands in her pocket and tilted her face to the sky, wishing inspiration would descend upon her. A few snowflakes were drifting lazily down and catching on her lashes, causing her to blink rapidly. If she hadn't been feeling grumpy about her unproductive day, Mel might have appreciated the lacy white precipitation. As it was, she merely brushed the flakes from her face, stomped down the steps and along the sidewalk, morosely noting how her pant cuffs were becoming soaked from the slush. She was heading for the post office now, in the vain hope of finding a lead there.

Possibly, some mail was still being delivered to Ryne's old, local address. The local postmaster would need to redirect it to his new location, so maybe there was some information to be had from that sector. Privacy laws would likely prevent her from having access to what she needed to know, but at this point, anything was worth a try.

Pushing open the heavy metal and glass doors, Mel entered the buff coloured building and glanced around. The 'lovely' impersonal atmosphere that habitually permeated of all government offices greeted her. Scuffed terrazzo flooring, a bedraggled fig tree, and bland paint were the extent of the decorating in the cavernous space. Post office boxes lined two walls and several kiosks stood in the middle of the room, displaying posters and various government brochures. At the far end of the room, people stood in a trance-like state waiting for their turn while others huddled around a nearby table, writing addresses on packages or affixing stamps.

Deciding that she'd have a greater chance of success if there wasn't a long line, Mel pretended to peruse the various posters while keeping an eye on the number of individuals awaiting service. No one spared her a glance, everyone seeming to be busy with their own agendas. The outer door opened, letting in a rush of cold air, causing the various papers and pamphlets to rustle in the breeze before settling down again. Mel glanced towards the source of the mini disturbance and was surprised to see Elise entering with her hunky husband. They appeared to be having a heated discussion, and some inner voice told Mel to make herself scarce.

Quickly positioning herself on the far side of the kiosk, she strained to hear what the two were saying. Their voices were low, but she managed to catch most of the conversation.

"I said I'd never heard of him, but I don't know if she believed me or not." Elise whispered to her husband. Mel frowned. What had Elise said his name was? Kyle... ? Ken... ? Kane! That was it.

A male voice rumbled in reply. "And you say she mentioned the wolf picture?"

"Uh- huh. She said that someone had told her about it and now she wants to write an article on him."

"Damn! I knew that picture was bad news. I've tried to get it back without letting anyone know why. Hell, I've even offered to buy it for an exorbitantly ridiculous amount, but the agent representing the buyer claims it's not for sale at any price. Whoever owns it must know its significance."

"Maybe not. We might be jumping to conclusions. It was a good picture and possibly someone likes it simply for its artistic value."

Something growled and Mel had to resist the urge to peek out from her hiding spot. Did they have a dog with them?

"Kane! Shh! You know better than to do that in public." Elise admonished and Mel frowned. Apparently the man had been doing the growling. That was a strange habit.

"Sorry. It's just that this is my worst nightmare. Someone discovering—"

Elise interrupted her husband and Mel nearly started growling herself. Discover what? Inwardly, she urged Kane to continue, but of course he didn't. Elise spoke in soothing tones. "Even if the owner of the painting is suspicious, there's no way they'll ever discover where the picture was taken because the land is private. You've never allowed outsiders into the territory unsupervised. And we've covered Ryne's tracks carefully. After the debacle of the missing payments for Ryne's other work, Bastian's doesn't want to be sued, so they're bending over backwards to keep us happy. They won't say anything. And the rest of the pack has always kept a low profile. No one really knows much about Ryne, least of all, where he moved to."

Kane muttered something indiscernible and the two moved out of hearing range.

Mel inhaled deeply and tried to quiet her pounding heart. These people knew where Ryne was and there really was some form of mystery surrounding the man and his photograph. Not for the first time, she



wished she could have seen the picture in question, but the lawyer who had hired her said his client didn't allow casual viewings. She decided it must be something pretty special to warrant all the money that was being spent just to find the photographer.

After what seemed like an interminable amount of time, Mel saw that the line consisted of only Elise and Kane. Edging closer, she buried her head in a brochure and eavesdropped some more.

"Good afternoon, I'd like to mail this to Ryne Taylor in Stump River, Ontario, Canada. How much will that cost?" Mel hazarded a peek and saw Elise place a package wrapped in brown paper on the ledge. As the postal worker weighed the package, the girl smiled up at her husband. "Do you think Ryne will like the sweater I bought for his birthday?"

"He'd adore a potato sack if you sent it to him." Kane sounded a bit disgruntled and Elise laughed.

"Kane, I can't believe you're still jealous of him. You must know there's nothing between us. I'm having your child and I love you."

He bent over and kissed her cheek. "I know and I love you, too. It's never been a question of your affections. It's Ryne's interest in you that bothers me."

"He was just joking, Kane."

"Possibly, but like I always said, once he gets his own mate..."

The conversation stopped as the postal worker announced the cost of mailing the parcel. Kane paid for the postage and the package was set to the side, being too large to fit in a regular mail slot. Mel watched them leave while tugging at her ear to try and fix her hearing. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn Kane had used the word 'mate.'

Shaking her head to clear it of the questions floating about in her active imagination, Mel approached the counter and smiled at the frazzled woman behind the counter. "Hi! I was wondering if you could help me..." She paused as her gaze fell upon the package that sat only a foot away, awaiting mailing. It had Ryne's address printed neatly on the front in large block letters. Cha-ching! Jackpot! Okay, now she just had to distract the woman in order to get a good look at the label.

"Yes? You were wondering...?" The worker raised her brows, prompting Mel to continue.

"Oh, sorry. Yes... um... I was wondering if... anyone had turned in my car keys. I dropped them here yesterday."

"I wasn't working yesterday, but I'll just go check out back." The postal employee gave her a distracted smile and turned away. Mel leaned forward, craning her neck in order to see the address on the

package clearly. RR#1, Stump River, Ontario, Canada. Stump River? What kind of a name was that? And Canada? Good lord! Hearing the postal worker returning, Mel quickly finished memorizing the address and was leaning casually against the counter by time the woman returned.

“Sorry. There were no keys turned in yesterday. Are you sure you lost them here?”

“Well, it could have been on the street, but with all this snow...” Mel shrugged. “That’s okay. I have a spare set.”

The woman eyed her suspiciously. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No, I’m just passing through. Thanks for your help, though.” Mel started to walk away in case the woman began asking more questions. She wanted to get that address written down before she forgot it. Too bad it wasn’t more specific. A rural route, or RR address, could cover a lot of territory, but at least now she had some idea of where to look.

As she walked back to the Grey Goose, she began to plan her strategy. First she’d call Mr. Aldrich with an update. Then, she’d leave for home early the next morning. It would probably take her about a week to re-search Stump River, Ontario and look for any record of Ryne Taylor in Canada. Her previous search had focused on the United States since she’d never imagined the man would actually leave the country. It seemed sort of drastic. What possible reason could he have for heading so far north? Was he hiding something or was he hiding from someone?

Mel felt a little burst of excitement inside of her. Thus far, this assignment had only been appealing because of its monetary rewards. Researching an artist just hadn’t seemed that interesting. But now that an actual mystery might be involved, it was much more exciting. She wondered what Taylor might look like. If the fates were with her, he’d turn out to be attractive, like Elise’s husband. She snorted derisively. Dream on, girl. Guys like that didn’t grow on trees. Knowing her luck, this photographer would be seventy years old, balding, and pot-bellied.

# Chapter 3

*Stump River, Canada. Two Weeks Later...*

Ryne sat quietly, nursing his drink in the local pub called The Broken Antler. Its name came from the old and weathered set of moose antlers that dangled precariously over the entrance on a rusty chain. At one time, there'd been an actual moose head adorning the front of the building and the pub had naturally acquired the name 'The Moose Head.' But when decay finally set in, and the trophy tumbled to the ground during an exceptionally windy storm, only the antlers remained in one piece. Armand St. John, the owner of the dubious establishment, was an eminently practical man and salvaged the almost intact, yellowing rack, hanging it over the door and renaming the pub to suit.

A dry chuckle escaped Ryne's lips as he watched Armand working behind the bar, simultaneously serving beer, laughing at a customer's off-coloured jokes and keeping a watchful eye over the activity on the floor. The bartender's name really didn't suit him at all. Armand St. John sounded like some effete interior designer and the bartender was anything but. Closer to seven foot than six, his body structure was like that of a bear and his appearance was not far off either; curly black hair peeked out of the collar of his shirt and covered the top of his head and the lower half of his face, his acquaintance with a barber or scissors obviously but a distant memory. A genial sort, he ruled the pub with an iron fist, acting as bouncer when the locals got too rowdy and providing a listening and sympathetic ear when needed.

The establishment, like its owner, was rough around the edges but basically a decent place. It was clean but not fancy, the wooden floors scarred from years of use and the walls decorated with plaques, a few dartboards and some questionable artwork ranging from movie posters, dogs playing poker, to a few poorly done oil paintings that some whispered had been painted by Armand himself, though no one dared to ask.

It was Friday night and the usual crowd had swelled due to the hockey game playing on the big screen TV that Armand had proudly installed a few months earlier. The favourite team was in danger of being out of the running for the playoffs and everyone had gathered to lend moral support. By some miracle, they were up three points and shouts of excitement rang out from all corners of the packed room. Waitresses scurried through the crowds, trays of beer, hotdogs, and pretzels skillfully balanced over their heads. Miraculously, they avoided the erratic movements of the patrons and managed to complete their jobs without mishap.

Ryne was thankful that smoking was banned in public places in Ontario; otherwise the room would likely have been a sea of haze and have smelled like an ashtray. As it was, those who craved nicotine kept entering and exiting the bar regularly, getting their fix and then coming back in while shouting questions about what had happened in the game during their absence. The constant opening and shutting of the door meant that gusts of cold night air kept swirling inside, ensuring that the smell of sweat, beer and fried onions was thoroughly distributed around the large room.

The heat from dozens of bodies, the flickering lights from the TV screen and the sounds from a myriad of conversations bombarded Ryne's senses. He let it all wash over him as he sat in the far corner, content to hide in the relative peace and darkness it offered. His eyes were half closed as he watched the activity around him, his breathing deep, and even, his body appearing relaxed. He was in his own isolated bubble, detached from his surroundings, yet still aware on some instinctual level, in case something occurred that required a quick reaction.

Hockey was a fine game, the company was good, but tonight he had no interest in either the sport or in socializing. It was only at the insistence of his friends, Daniel and Bryan, that he'd conceded to leave the house. Lately, he'd been feeling out of sorts and he was sure they were trying to cheer him up, not only as part of their duty as friends, but because they were tired of dealing with his moods.

Maybe the problem was the fact that it was his birthday, and he was another year older. He didn't feel older, despite what the calendar said. Tired, yes. Older, no. The renovations on his house were extensive and almost every waking hour was spent trying to repair the place. It was hard work, but he didn't mind it. Sitting and doing nothing all winter would have driven him insane. The work gave him a purpose, even if it wore him out. So yes, he *was* tired, but that wasn't the problem.

Taking another sip of his beer, he thought about the package he'd received in the mail this morning. His sister-in-law, Elise, had sent him a sweater for his birthday and a collection of cards from other members of the pack. It had been nice to read their well-wishes, but now he was feeling melancholy, missing the family he'd left behind when he'd moved here. It wasn't as easy as he'd thought it would be, striking out on his own. The hard work and lack of money weren't that difficult to deal with; it was the absence of an extended family. He was used to being part of a large group and now there was only himself and his two friends. They got along fine, but sometimes the large house he'd purchased seemed empty and cold. Lately, he'd find himself looking around and imagining what it would be like to have happy voices and friendly faces filling the place.

Shifting in his chair, he absentmindedly watched a leggy blonde walking by his table for the third time. She gave him a thorough once over and flashed a smile his way. Automatically, he grinned back and winked, even though he had no real interest in her. After all the years he'd spent carousing, such a reaction was ingrained into him.

Hmm... Maybe, the problem was that he needed to find a permanent companion. It was spring after all; time for all healthy males to look for a mate. The only difficulty was that no one appealed to him as much as his sister-in-law did. She was a sweet thing, usually quiet and trying to please everyone, but with a strong, feisty side to her as well; it just didn't appear that often. He quirked his lips as he thought about how much he enjoyed provoking her, seeing her temper flare and her cheeks start to flush. Elise was lovely, with big green eyes and dark brown hair that fell about her shoulders in a glossy sheet. Her voice was soothing and her smile could brighten even the darkest of days. Too bad she was madly in love with his half-brother, Kane.

They made a great couple and Ryne knew he'd never have a chance with her, but still some part of him longed for a partner like Elise. He snorted ruefully and took another swig of beer, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. It was all a pipe dream; someone like Elise would never put up with him. There were too many rough edges to his personality for a girl like that. His sense of humour was too off-beat, he was too impulsive and too quick to anger. Mind you, once he made a mistake, he owned up to it and faced the consequences, but then again, that was what any real man would do.

This made him think of last fall's debacle. His then girlfriend, Marla, had turned out to be a scheming bitch, intent on forcing Kane into selling

his land to an oil company just so she could get her hands on the proceeds through computerized bank fraud. The woman had even stooped to murder to get her own way, killing the man that had been like a father to both himself and Kane. She then pitted brother against brother, for a while totally alienating them from each other. Ryne had found himself an unknowing participant in the whole affair and still mentally kicked himself for how he'd allowed her to manipulate him. A nasty piece of work, the woman had even planted evidence so he'd have to take the blame for her misdeeds. Luckily, Elise had put two and two together and foiled Marla's plans.

Once things settled down after the whole affair, Ryne left the area. While there were no hard feelings between himself and Kane, he felt the need to make a fresh start. When he'd noticed the ad for a large parcel of land in Stump River, he'd jumped on the chance, basically purchasing the place sight unseen.

He had no regrets, beyond missing his former pack. The place needed lots of work, but it was his and there was plenty of room for growth with the possibility of purchasing even more land in the future, as the aging population moved to larger centres that supplied more services for seniors. Yes, it had been a good move.

Ryne glanced toward the bar to see how Bryan and Daniel were fairing. The two tended get a bit rowdy at times, and for all that Ryne hated playing the heavy, he felt a certain responsibility towards them. More than once since coming to Stump River, he'd had to step in and remind them to toe the line. After all, he was in charge of this grand undertaking and he wouldn't tolerate their stupidity messing up his plans.

The younger men had asked to come with him when he announced he was moving here. Both had been eager to make a fresh start after circumstances in their own lives had turned sour. Ryne was grateful for their help and companionship, even if they did irritate him at times. He watched them, indulgently. Right now, they seemed to be behaving. Each had an arm around the waist of some local beauty and he was sure he knew how their evenings would end. At lot of wild oats were sown around Stump River lately, and as long as the 'oats' didn't start to grow and cause a population explosion, it was fine with him. As a preventative measure, he stared intently at the two men, and as one they sensed his attention, swivelling their heads to look his way. Meaningfully, he raised his eyebrows and nodded towards the girls. Daniel immediately dropped his gaze and nodded, indicating he'd follow the rules. Bryan

smirked and raised his beer in a mock toast before tilting his head in acquiescence.

Ryne couldn't help but grin at the fellow's mock impudence. He and Bryan hadn't known each other long, but the two had forged a good relationship. Bryan liked to push his buttons, but knew when to back off. He was also Ryne's right-hand man and could be depended on to watch his back if the going got rough.

Armand looked up at that moment and caught Ryne's eye. He nodded in response to the implicit question. Soon another beer would be in front of him. He'd already had several and was planning on having several more, drowning his sorrows in the golden liquid. Tomorrow, he'd regret the action, but for tonight, it seemed to be a good idea.

The beverage appeared in front of him and he looked up to thank the server. An impressive cleavage met his eye with a name tag affixed to it, proclaiming the owner of the bosom to be Lucy. Interest stirred low in his body and he moved his gaze up higher. Lucy had full red lips and big baby blue eyes that seemed to be stripping him naked. His body twitched in response to her silent invitation.

Ryne felt his lips begin to curve into a predatory grin and he snaked an arm around her waist pulling the woman down onto his lap. He and Lucy had become well acquainted in the few months since he'd moved to Stump River. Possibly she was the distraction he needed tonight. She giggled and ran her fingers through his hair, wiggling in his lap.

"Is it time for your break?" He rumbled into her ear.

She glanced towards the bar. Armand had his back turned, watching the game; their team was on a power play. Lucy leaned forward and nipped at his ear. "I don't think Armand will mind if I spend some time with a lonely customer."

Ryne smirked and stood up, quickly leading the girl down the dark hall towards the employees' washroom. He barely had the lights on in the small room before she was pulling at his clothing. Reaching behind her to turn the lock, he growled as an animalistic hunger surged through him. He pushed her back against the wall and kissed her roughly.

In no time at all, they were coupling. Lucy legs wrapped around his waist as he grasped her buttocks and thrust into her. The beast inside him wanted out, but Ryne kept a firm rein on himself. It wasn't safe to let himself go completely, not when this was just a casual relationship that would lead nowhere. There were parts of him that were too dark to reveal to the likes of a girl such as Lucy.

Lucy was digging her nails into his back and sucking on his shoulder, her release obviously close. Ryne moved faster, pounding into her; her bleached blonde curls and large breasts bouncing up and down from the rhythm. She threw her head back, crying out as her orgasm hit. He continued to rock his hips until she was done. Then, with three more hard thrusts, he found his own release, grunting with pleasure as his seed spilled from his body.

He quickly withdrew and Lucy kissed him, gushing about how good it had been. Murmuring appropriately, he turned to the toilet, removing the condom and cleaning himself up. In the mirror, he could see Lucy making herself presentable. Once they were both dressed, she kissed his jaw and whispered in his ear.

"Happy birthday, Ryne. Bryan and Daniel told me what day it was, so I thought I'd better give you something."

"Why thanks, Lucy. It was the perfect gift for the man who has everything." He responded with his trademark grin, patting Lucy's rear and giving her a kiss before she left the bathroom and headed back to work, a satisfied smile gracing her face. Ryne stayed behind, leaning against the wall of the darkened hallway, thinking about what had just happened.

He wasn't sure if he should thank the other two men or hit their heads together for interfering in his life. They probably meant well, and noticing that he was sitting by himself in a dark corner, decided to cheer him up by sending Lucy over. Usually a romp with the waitress would have raised his spirits and he'd spend the rest of the evening enjoying her company. But not tonight. Sure the sex had been good, the release of tension easing his mood somewhat, but a night of bantering with the blonde didn't hold its usual appeal.

Running his hands through his hair, he considered what could possibly be wrong with him. Maybe it wasn't his birthday, or missing the family or the fact that it was spring and he was alone. Maybe it was the phone call he'd received two weeks ago. It had been gnawing at him ever since Kane contacted him, letting him know that some woman was in town asking about a man named Ryne Taylor.

At first, Ryne had laughed. Lots of girls asked about him and as long as she wasn't pregnant... Kane had cut through his laughter by announcing that she was there because of the picture. His brother hadn't even had to say which picture. Instinctively, he knew.

Ryne was a photographer and he had no qualms about admitting that he was good. There'd been a few showings of his work and some minor



critical acclaim bestowed upon him. Last fall, when he'd needed money, he had instructed his then girlfriend, Marla, to sell all of his pictures with the exception of one. Even though their relationship had turned rocky, he'd had faith that Marla would be professional and do her job. The woman had worked at an art gallery and he thought she'd be able to get a fair price for the photographs. Of course, like everything else touched by the bitch, it had all gone wrong. His pictures had sold, but Marla stole the proceeds. Worst of all, she'd sold the one picture he'd expressly said not to show to the public. Now the picture was out there somewhere, and everyone was just waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop.

He hadn't told Bryan and Daniel yet, but if someone was inquiring after him, and mentioning the photo, it could only mean one thing. The secret was out and now he had to prepare for the fallout.

## Chapter 4

It was the middle of March. Spring was making its presence known and the snow was finally starting to melt in Northern Ontario. Bits of green were poking out of the ground and buds were beginning to swell on tree branches. The air contained that indescribable quality of warmth and promise that the last of the wintery weather was past and fairer days were ahead. On the local radio station, the forecaster happily babbled away about seeing flocks of tundra swans overhead as the birds made their annual return migration north, while his co-host squealed with delight over the appearance of a robin in her backyard. Their positive mood should have been contagious, but Mel was too busy dodging potholes on the road to appreciate the wonders of the changing season.

Not for the first time, did she curse Ryne Taylor, and whatever demon had possessed him, when he decided to move to Northern Ontario. Apparently, Stump River was in the middle of nowhere, beyond decently paved roads, fast food restaurants, and shopping malls. With the exception of a few small farm houses, Mel would have thought there was no one even living here. It was a least an hour since she'd passed through a town, if the small group of houses clustered around a gas station and a general store could even be called something that grand.

The gas station attendant had assured her that Stump River was 'a nice sized place, just down the road a ways.' Mel had grave doubts about the man's idea of a 'nice size.' After all, he'd also assured her the road was fine, only suffering some slight disrepair due to the spring thaw. As the car lurched and then bounced through yet another series of craters, Mel swore. Her teeth were clicking together and her head was almost brushing the roof as she joggled up and down in the driver's seat. Yeah, right. The road was *perfectly* fine. She snorted. Sure it was fine, if you were looking to spend a ton of money getting your car repaired, and then visiting a chiropractor to have your spine realigned. Thankfully, she was driving a rental. Her own vehicle, at its advanced age, would never survive this rough treatment.

On the other hand, at least her car had decent seats; the rental did not. This fact pointedly came to her attention when a loose spring poked her in the rear for what felt like the hundredth time that day. She was sure that area of her anatomy would never forgive her for the rough treatment it was enduring. Shifting into a relatively more comfortable spot, Mel wondered if Taylor was actually a harbinger of bad luck rather than good fortune. Yes, she was being paid well, but both of her 'field trips' to find him had resulted in her facing bad driving conditions, to obscure towns, in poorly maintained vehicles. Oh well, there was no turning back now, and surely her luck was due to turn around soon.

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Twenty minutes later, Mel pulled into a parking space along the main street of Stump River. She turned off the ignition and sighed with relief that the bone-rattling journey was finally over. She wasn't made for 'roughing' it; the lack of smooth roads and the absence of washrooms and coffee shops on every corner, had her feeling like she'd fallen into some kind of time warp and was now trapped in the back of beyond.

Yes, she knew she was being a tad melodramatic but her head ached and her body was stiff—what she wouldn't give for a soothing latte right now. Ruefully, she surveyed her surroundings and fought off despair. Small town—one point. Fancy coffee—zero. Well, she could try to look on the bright side. At least, it was larger than the last community she'd passed through.

From her vantage point, Mel checked out the street to the right, which was approximately two blocks in length. A small medical clinic was at the far end of the town. It was rather new from the look of the brick and the clean white sign hanging in front of it proudly proclaiming its hours of operation. Next in line was a small diner simply called 'Ruth's' Red checked curtains hung in the window and wooden planter boxes stood on either side of the door awaiting planting. A church with a modest spire and a small graveyard beside it came next, then a cenotaph, and finally a barbershop followed by a few houses. Swivelling her head to the left, she noted that she'd parked beside the local newspaper office. A sign in the window proclaimed that publishing occurred every Wednesday and you must submit your items for inclusion by closing time on Mondays.

A rather disreputable looking bar caught her attention next, and she quickly skimmed over it, having no intention of ever setting foot in such a place. Located beside it, was a gas station that had one set of pumps and two bays for car repair. Several vehicles were parked around it.

Some were still in decent shape, while others seemed to be defying the odds by still being on the road despite advanced rust damage.

Through her rear-view mirror, Mel could see a general store, which seemed to be the main hub of activity at the moment; several people entered and exited even as she watched. It also had signs indicating it was the location of the post office and the catalogue order store as well. A hand painted sign pointed to the rear and proclaimed unisex hair designs were available around the back.

Light traffic moved up and down the street, which sported the grand total of one traffic light. Chuckling, Mel noted a dog sitting patiently on the curb as if waiting for the light to change colour. Sure enough, when the signal turned green, the canine stood and went on its way. A few pedestrians were also crossing the road, though they were less law abiding than the dog and unabashedly jaywalked across the town's main thoroughfare. At least one person slowed their pace and took a moment to look her way, apparently realising that her vehicle wasn't a local one and hence someone new must be in town.

Welcome to Stump River, she muttered. A place where everybody knows your name. The idea of such a small community made her vaguely uncomfortable, but on the other hand, it would probably help in her search for Taylor. If the man had lived here for more than a week, the locals probably knew all of his life history.

With this thought in mind, she bravely climbed out of her car and headed towards the building beside her. It was the home of the Stump River Gazette. Hopefully, the local reporter would know exactly where Taylor lived. Perhaps, someone there would also be instrumental in helping her locate a place to stay overnight. She crossed her fingers, praying that there were rooms to rent locally, not looking forward to the idea of travelling that so-called road every day for the next week or so while she conducted her interviews.

A bell jingled merrily as she entered the small building housing the inner workings of the Gazette. The scent of newsprint and old coffee hit her as soon as she stepped inside. A brief look around the room indicated that it was a stereotypical small town newspaper. Past articles were pinned to the wall along with posters for free kittens and an upcoming fundraiser. Three wooden chairs sat waiting for someone to sit in them and a tired philodendron graced the corner near an ancient cast iron heater. Midway across the room, an old laminate counter divided the work area from the customer service zone. Behind it, a middle-aged woman sat frowning at a computer screen, the piece of technology rather at

odds with its surroundings. A short distance from the computer station, a man of similar age was engaged in a conversation on the phone, occasionally jotting notes as he nodded at something the caller must have said. He glanced Mel's way and raised a finger, indicating he would just be a moment.

Mel leaned against the counter and waited patiently for the man to finish his business. It was a short wait and soon he was strolling over to talk to her.

"Good morning, ma'am. How can I help you?"

"Hello. My name is Melody Greene. I'm looking for Ryne Taylor and I was wondering if you'd be able to tell me where to find him?"

"Ryne, eh?" The man rubbed his chin thoughtfully and Mel absent-mindedly noted how the overhead lighting shone off his mostly balding head, the shiny area being surrounded by a greying fringe. "Well, it's Saturday so he won't be in town today. His place is about ten miles away, on Stump Line. Are you familiar with the area?"

"No. It's my first time to Stump River."

"I thought so, since I couldn't recall having seen you before. My name's Josh Kennedy, by the way." He reached across the counter and they shook hands. His grip was firm and friendly, a polite smile gracing his pleasant face.

"Pleased to meet you. Is Taylor's place hard to find?"

"Well, it's set back in the woods and the driveway is easy to miss if you aren't looking for it. Is he expecting you?"

"No, not really. It's a surprise." Mel felt it best to keep her cards close to her chest for the time being in case these people were as inclined to keep her away from her goal, as Elise and her fellow townsfolk had been.

"Uh-huh." Josh looked her up and down as if he knew something.

Mel swore his eyes lingered on her waist and she felt herself blushing. The man obviously thought she was an abandoned girlfriend—possibly even a pregnant, abandoned girl friend—looking to find Ryne. It made her wonder about the photographer. Maybe he wasn't seventy and pot-bellied, after all. Could the term 'playboy' suit him instead?

"Well, I can draw you a map, but I'll warn you. Ryne and his friends aren't overly fond of visitors to their house. They have no trespassing signs posted all over the place."

Friends? Mel felt a bit surprised by this, for some reason viewing the photographer as a brooding recluse. She wondered who the friends were and how many lived with him. A girl friend, possibly, since Josh obviously thought she might be last year's rejected love interest.

While she wasn't pleased with the assumption that she was a discarded girlfriend, at least it let her know that Taylor was probably under fifty and not totally unappealing to look at. The idea perked up her spirits a bit.

The woman had abandoned her computer, now possibly thinking that a newcomer was more interesting than whatever article she was writing. As she approached the counter, Mel decided she was a perfect match for her co-worker; both average height and weight with grey sprinkled throughout their hair. She had the same friendly, inquiring smile as the man did, too. "Who's this, Josh?"

"Melody Greene. She's looking for young Taylor."

"Ryne?" She laughed softly, shaking her head. "You and how many others."

"Pardon?" Mel wasn't quite sure what the woman meant. Were other people trying to do research on him as well?

"Every single female below seventy, and a few who aren't, have tried to catch Ryne's attention." She grinned mischievously. "He's a looker, I'll say that. And he knows how to charm the ladies."

"Beth." Josh gave the woman a warning glare and she responded by hitting him lightly on the arm.

"Josh, you know I'm still smitten with you even after twenty-five years. I just look at the man. It's strictly hands off." The two exchanged a look, and Josh pulled Beth into a one armed hug. Mel felt uncomfortable, as if she was intruding on a private moment. She turned to study a poster on the wall, trying to ignore the emotions zinging through the air between the two.

Josh cleared his throat and Mel shifted her gaze back towards him. Beth, who must be his wife or at least a long-time companion, was returning to her desk. It was easy to see that she had a light blush on her cheeks and her eyes sparkled.

Mel felt a twinge of envy over their relationship, but forced herself to focus on the matter at hand. "If you could draw me a map to his house, I'd really appreciate it."

"No problem, Ms. Greene. If you just watch carefully for the names on the mailboxes, you should find Ryne's place without too much trouble." Josh pulled out a piece of paper and began to sketch a simple map, pointing out landmarks along the way. By time he was done, Mel felt she'd be able to find Ryne's house easily.

"Thanks." She folded the paper and carefully tucked it into her purse. "I was also wondering if anyone had rooms to rent. I'm planning on

staying in the area for at least a week and was hoping I wouldn't have to do the two hour commute from Timmins every day." Timmins was the nearest community of any size that offered much in the way of accommodation.

"Actually, we have a few cabins we rent out in the summer. They're not fancy, but since it's off-season we can give you a good deal." Josh looked over his shoulder and spoke to Beth. "We could open up a cabin for this girl, couldn't we?"

Beth looked up from her work. "Sure. I could take her out there right now. There's no rush on this article."

Mel grinned, pleased at her good fortune. "I'd really appreciate it. Is there a grocery store where I could buy some supplies?"

"Brown's General Store probably has everything you need. I'll show you where it is on the way to the cabin." Beth grabbed her purse and coat, and soon they were on their way.

The Kennedys' cabins were about five miles outside of town, located at the back of their property, but secluded from view by a thick woodlot and backing onto a forest. There were three of them; each set a nice distance from the others. Made from logs, they sported a stone fireplace located in a cozy open-plan kitchen and living-room, a small bathroom, and a bedroom.

"The fireplaces are safe to use and there's wood stacked beside the cabin. I'll turn on the electricity for you, but I'm afraid there's no phone hooked up." Beth explained as she dug out a set of keys for her guest.

Mel peered into the small bath area, pleased to note a refurbished claw-foot tub, complete with a rainforest shower head. The kitchen had a microwave, stove and fridge and the bed appeared to be comfortable. "This will be perfect. Thank you so much."

"I should be thanking you. These cabins sit empty for a good part of the year. We get a few vacationers in the summer, some spring fishermen, and some hunters in the fall, but that's about it. You're a bonus. Because of you, I might be able to convince Josh that we can afford that new dishwasher I've been eyeing up in the catalogue."

Chuckling at the woman's practicality, Mel bid her goodbye and went back to the car to get her suitcase and laptop computer. It would be nice to have a temporary home base. She'd flown into Toronto two days ago, taken a smaller flight to Sudbury yesterday and had spent the day driving to Timmins and doing some sight-seeing. The area really was beautiful with incredibly blue skies, a myriad of waterways and miles upon miles of forests.

Inhaling deeply, she appreciated the cool crisp air that seemed to contain more oxygen than her urbanized lungs had ever thought possible. Used to the staler air of city life, she found this to be almost intoxicating and eagerly looked forward to taking a few walks in the forest during her time here. Mel eyed the heavily treed area situated behind the cabins and wondered how safe it was. Were there many dangerous wild animals in there? She'd have to ask when she stopped in town to get groceries.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was almost noon. Quickly, she finished emptying the car, locked the cabin door, and drove back to town. The small diner she'd seen earlier would probably serve a good lunch; the thought of food was rather appealing at the moment. After that, she'd drive out to Taylor's, introduce herself to the man, and maybe even arrange an interview schedule. Once that was done, she'd get some groceries and head back to her cabin.

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Standing outside the locked gate, Mel furrowed her brow and considered the situation. While at the diner, she'd checked a phone book and there was no listing for Ryne Taylor. Contacting him at his house seemed the next best solution, but it wasn't going to be as easy as she'd thought. Signs stating 'No trespassing' and 'No Hunting' hung in clear view, but so was the mailbox with the name Taylor printed in block letters. The man she wanted to see was somewhere behind that gate and she needed to get to him. She could leave a note in the mailbox, but making personal contact with him seemed important.

She got out of the car and approached the gate, giving it an experimental shake. It creaked slightly and the 'No Trespassing' sign slipped a bit to the side. Hmm... Chewing her lip, Mel considered the idea that had popped into her head. What if the 'No Trespassing' sign fell off the gate? If it was lying face down in the mud, then she couldn't see it and no one would be able to blame her if she went on the property, would they? Her conscience pricked her, but she firmly ignored it in favour of achieving her goal. Glancing up and down the road to ensure that no one was about, she grabbed the sign in her hands and pulled.

At first it was resistant to its imminent removal and she pulled even harder. Leaning back, she used her weight to aid her efforts. There was a screeching sound as the nails began to give way, then suddenly Mel found herself stumbling backwards, the sign clenched in her hands. Unable to regain her balance, she felt herself falling and scrunched her face in anticipation of the pain that would surely accompany her sudden



stop. Surprisingly enough, the impact with the ground was softer than she thought it would be, probably due to the fact that she'd landed in one of the few remaining snow-banks that were heaped along the side of the road.

Mel lay on her back and stared up at the sky, regaining her breath before easing herself into a sitting position. Bits of snow were sliding icily down the back of her neck and she reached around to pick them out of her collar. Well, at least the sign had come off. Gingerly, she stood and moved about, checking for injuries. Besides a slight tenderness around her backside, and some bruising to her ego, she felt all right.

Checking again to make sure no one was around, she approached the gate once more and dropped the 'No Trespassing' sign face down on the ground. Her rental vehicle was pulled to the side of the road already, so she wasn't blocking traffic if she left it there for a little while. Not that there was much chance of traffic in such an out of the way location. She hadn't passed a single house on her way here. It really was an isolated area. Still, if Taylor specialized in photographing nature, she supposed it made some sense for him to immerse himself in his subject.

Shifting her purse onto her shoulder, Mel studied the gate. It was made of wood and almost a foot over her head. She considered going around it, but a fence extended from each side for about fifty feet in either direction. Beyond that, a large ditch filled with water from the melting snow formed an impressive barrier to keep people off Taylor's property. There was a slight gap along the bottom of the gate, but Mel knew she'd never be able to wriggle underneath. Going over it appeared to be the only option.

She jiggled the gate once more in the vain hope that the lock would pop open. Of course, it didn't and she made a mental note to learn how to pick locks, before taking on another such assignment. Then, giving a resigned sigh, she began her ascent. Grasping the top of the structure, she pulled herself upwards, while trying to gain a foothold on the latch. It wasn't the most dignified sight she was sure, but at least she was wearing jeans and not a dress. With a good deal of huffing and puffing, she finally managed to pull herself to the top of the gate and sat astride the structure, catching her breath and savouring the sweetness of success.

The feeling only lasted a moment however, since the top of the fence was decidedly uncomfortable to sit upon. Cautiously, she swung her leg over and stared at the ground below. It suddenly seemed much farther away now that she had to jump down. Mel wasn't overly fond of

heights and while six feet wasn't that high, her stomach still gave a funny little lurch as she contemplated her next move. Realizing that delay wouldn't make things better, she took a deep breath and jumped.

The landing was less than stellar and she wouldn't get any points for form or grace. She ended up on her hands and knees in a muddy patch on the driveway. Wincing, she got to her feet and brushed ineffectively at the mud on her pants. Her hands were filthy and her efforts at removing the mud were only making matters worse. Looking around, she decided to make use of the remaining snow and scooped up a handful using it to wash off the mud. It was cold and stung, but at least the filth was gone from her palms.

Drying her hands on her coat sleeve, she hitched her purse over her shoulder and happily set off down the driveway. At least the hard part was over. Walking to the house and talking Taylor should be a breeze in comparison.

## Chapter 5

Twenty minutes later, Mel hobbled over to a fallen log and sat down not even caring if the crumbling mossy surface stained her pants or not. Her optimistic spirits were seriously flagging. The fashionable knee high boots, which had seemed eminently suitable in that they made her look taller, were not designed for long walks down an unpaved driveway. She couldn't even begin to count the number of times she had twisted and wobbled as her four-inch heels made contact with lumps of gravel, throwing her off balance.

Rubbing her sore ankle, and wiggling her protesting toes, Mel frowned, wondering how much farther she'd have to walk before reaching the house. She peered ahead but the drive twisted around yet another bend, obscuring her view of what might be ahead. Compressing her lips, she shook her head. There was obviously something strange about this man. No one in their right mind had this long of a driveway.

When she had first started walking, Mel had taken interest in her surroundings. She had no great knowledge of nature but even she knew that the trees were mostly evergreens with a few deciduous varieties thrown in for good measure. They grew close together, their branches stretching and blending, partially blocking the view of the sky and shading the ground below. Because of this, the temperature seemed much cooler than it had in the more open, sun-drenched space of the road. Still, her coat, combined with the exercise of walking along quickly, had kept her sufficiently warm.

Now that she was sitting, the cold was beginning to seep in, rising up from the cool surface of the log she was perched on, while the dampness of the air began to penetrate through her layers of clothing. Mel rubbed her hands together briskly as she looked around and tried to gain her second wind. Now that she was deeper into the forest, there was considerably more snow lingering on the ground, though some bare patches did exist. Little animal footprints could be seen here and there and she

wondered what type of wildlife lived in the area. Nothing too large, she decided based on the size of the tracks.

It was quiet, and beyond the occasional chirping of a bird, the only sound Mel could hear was her own breathing. She inhaled deeply, appreciating the crispness of the air, the scent of pine, and the faint mustiness of the damp ground. The peacefulness seemed to engulf her and she could feel her earlier tension and frustration slipping away. Maybe Taylor wasn't so crazy. There was a certain sense of calmness, of being one with nature, when you sat in a place like this. She wondered if he'd taken many pictures of the woods yet and if this was where the wolf photograph had originated.

This thought reminded her that she had a job to do and Mel heaved herself up from her temporary seat. Her feet protested, but she promised them a nice long soak in a hot tub if they'd just carry her a little farther. She'd only walked a short distance when she sensed something different. A feeling of unease washed over her; a certain prickling of her skin, an awareness that the atmosphere of the forest seemed to have changed suddenly. The birds were quiet now and the air seemed charged.

It was a ridiculous thought, considering she was in the middle of nowhere, but it felt like something was watching her every move. Looking around, she peered into the depths of the trees, but only saw trunks and underbrush, patches of snow and muddy ground. Nonetheless, she hurried her pace. Years of living in the city had ingrained in her the idea that walking alone in deserted parking lots or alleys was a bad idea. The concept probably transferred to forests as well.

The feeling of anxiety grew and she walked even faster, her senses heightened. She was aware that her breathing had quickened and a faint layer of sweat was forming on her skin. Wiping her palms on her pant legs, her gaze darted from side to side as she stumbled down the drive, no longer watching where she placed her feet. A noise to her left had her whirling around to face the source and her breath caught in her throat.

At first, all she was aware of was teeth. Large, shiny white teeth with pointy ends designed for puncturing and tearing flesh. Then her focus widened as she noted black noses and gleaming eyes, surrounded by thick fur. A pair of very large guard dogs were staring at her, licking their chops as if she just became the main selection on tonight's dinner menu.

Some instinct told her they weren't too pleased to see her—or maybe they were; she'd be a change from a diet of dry kibble, she thought

inately as she stood frozen in place. A low rumbling sound came from one of them and snapped her out of her statue-like state. They were holding their heads low and had raised the fur on their backs. She was sure she'd read somewhere that indicated an attack was imminent. Mel started to back away, not wanting to lose eye-contact. The fact that these might not be dogs was niggling at her mind but she shied away from examining that thought at the moment. Adding additional reasons to fear for her life would not be helpful at this point.

Slowly, the beasts followed her, exactly matching her pace. Icy terror was working its way through her body despite the rapid beating of her heart. Surely, her blood should be rushing through her veins right now, oxygenating her muscles in preparation for flight? Where was that adrenaline rush everyone talked about? That super human strength that came out of nowhere when faced with horrible danger? She blinked, realizing that her vision seemed to be blurring, the world was darkening. Oh great. Passing out in fear. How lame was that? If only she'd had sufficient coffee fixes today, Mel lamented to herself, she would have been better able to cope with the situation.

Shaking her head and refusing to give into the panic invading her system, Mel continued to back away. She kept one eye on the creatures stalking her, while shooting glances from side to side, looking for a sturdy stick to grab onto and use as a weapon. It wouldn't be overly effective, but it was better than defending herself barehanded.

Just when she thought she saw a suitable branch, her heel came down on a large stone. Her foot twisted to the side and she lurched to the left, flaying her arms wildly as she tried to maintain her balance. Fear made her overcompensate and instead of righting herself, she made matters worse. As she stumbled against a tree trunk, the animals took exception to her sudden movement. They rushed towards her, barking and howling. Mel opened her mouth, inhaled deeply, and resorted to the age-old solution of screaming for help at the top of her lungs.

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Ryne groaned as the sound of howls and barks penetrated his alcohol soaked brain, forcing him from his sleep. He was seriously hung over from last night and was contemplating the benefits of death over the way he was presently feeling. Dark thoughts ran through his mind as he determined the source of the noise that had dragged him from blessed oblivion.

Obviously, Bryan and Daniel were out acting like idiots and it was the last thing he needed today. If they wanted to go out hunting, it was fine

with him, but keep it quiet. No rabbit or squirrel or whatever they'd cornered, warranted that much noise. He rolled over and winced as his head pounded. How many beers had he consumed last night, anyway? It was all sort of blurry. The favoured team had won the hockey game and everyone had started buying rounds and then... ?

Gingerly, he opened one eye and squinted against the assaulting rays of light that streamed in around the window shade. He swore and let his eyelid fall shut, raising his hand to his throbbing head. At least his stomach wasn't protesting the treatment he'd subjected it to. Having a cast iron stomach was one of the genetic benefits his parents had passed on to him.

The sounds from outside continued, and he was muttering darkly under his breath when a scream pierced the air, drilling into his brain with unmerciful sharpness. He shot upright, ignoring his protesting body and swung his legs out of bed. Some corner of his mind noted that he was still dressed in last night's clothes and only needed to slip on his shoes. A second scream followed the first, and he was out the door before the sound even died out. What the hell were Bryan and Daniel doing? They were scheduled for patrol duty and shouldn't be fooling around. He muttered darkly about their demise as he ran down the front steps, moving with surprising ease for someone who, just moments before, was feeling like death warmed over. They knew better than to bring a female here. And what were they doing to make her scream like that?

Both the howls and the screaming stopped abruptly before Ryne was even at the end of the sidewalk. He froze and cocked his head to the side, trying to catch any sound that might indicate what was happening. Footsteps approached—two individuals—one set sounding a bit heavier with some shuffling mixed in, almost as if the walker was carrying something. Ryne crossed his arms and leaned against a nearby tree. There was no point in him rushing down the driveway when it was obvious that they were coming to him.

It only took moments for the source of the footsteps to appear. Bryan and Daniel came into sight, glaring daggers at each other; obviously they'd had one of their famous arguments about who was at fault for the most recent predicament they found themselves in.

Bryan was carrying something—no, make that someone—in his arms. From the way the arms and legs hung limply, it was obvious the person was unconscious. Narrowing his eyes, Ryne realized the 'someone' was

a woman and no doubt the origin of the screams that had woke him up. Shit!

He straightened from the tree he was leaning on and widened his stance, his whole demeanour conveying his displeasure. The two men looked up and noticed him. Immediately, they slowed their pace as if trying to delay something unpleasant. Ryne sneered. How right you are my friends. This *will* be unpleasant.

As soon as they were within hearing distance, he began. "What the fuck did you do this time?"

Daniel ducked his head and shuffled his feet. Bryan kept his head up, but averted his gaze. "We found her on the propriety."

"And you decided to what? Go hunting with her as the prey?" Ryne raised his brow and snorted derisively.

Bryan flushed, but didn't back down. "No. We just thought we'd scare her off. You know, chase her a bit and she'd run back to wherever she came from."

"Your plan doesn't appear to have worked very well since she's now here at the house." Ryne folded his arms and jerked his head towards the unconscious woman. "What happened?"

Daniel decided to speak, shooting glances up at Ryne as he spoke. "We... um... we stalked her a bit and she was backing up towards the road, but moving real slow—"

"So we thought a bit of noise might hurry her along—" Bryan explained. "But then she tripped or something, just as the barking started and she began screaming—"

"And then it was the weirdest thing, just liked you'd see in a cartoon." Daniel jumped in, his wonder at the event he was describing causing him to momentarily forget he was in trouble. "She turned to run, and bang!" Clapping his hands together, he gestured to show what happened. "She ran right smack into a tree and then just sort of slid down the trunk." He shook his head. "I never thought that sort of thing happened in real life."

Ryne bit back the chuckle that the mental picture evoked. "Is she all right?"

"I think so. There's a lump on her head and that's why we brought her here. We didn't think we should just leave her lying there on the ground." Bryan shifted the woman in his arms.

"Bring her inside and we'll check her out." Ryne tightened his lips as he turned and stalked back to the house. They couldn't have just

approached her like normal human beings and told her she was on private land, could they? Oh, no. That would make too much sense.

Once inside, Bryan laid the woman down on the sofa and Daniel disappeared, only to return with a damp washcloth and the first aid kit. Kneeling beside the sofa, Ryne nodded his thanks. Daniel was a good kid, he just didn't think sometimes.

Gently, Ryne brushed the unconscious woman's hair from her forehead and probed the bump on her head. It wasn't too large, but the skin was broken, no doubt from contact with the rough bark on the tree. Her skin was warm and soft to the touch, he noted absentmindedly. Inhaling deeply, he took in her scent and stored it for later analysis before proceeding with the first aid treatment. He washed off the area and applied a bandage then leaned back to study his patient.

Her hair, spread out upon the cushions, was a shade between blonde and brown. Incredibly long lashes lay against her cheeks and her mouth was wide and full. The faintest dusting of freckles showed across the bridge of her nose making her appear quite youthful. His gaze worked its way down her body and he noted her nice-sized breasts and slim waist, the way her jeans clung to her shapely thighs before disappearing into knee-high leather boots. He concluded she probably wasn't as young as he initially thought—maybe mid-twenties.

Ryne looked back up at her face and studied it more carefully. She wasn't strikingly beautiful, nor blatantly sexy, but there was something appealing about her. Glancing at her mouth again, he wondered what her lips would feel like against his own. He frowned. Where had that thought come from? He didn't go for the girl-next-door-type; real women who knew the score were more his style. Women like Lucy, he added. Some sex, some fun, and then we're done; that was how he operated. Giving his head a shake, he decided that his hangover must be muddling his thinking.

Something nudged his shoulder and he looked up to see Bryan gesturing towards their visitor. Her eyes were showing some movement behind her closed lids, indicating that she was coming around. While he was relieved that she didn't seem to show any signs of permanent damage from her experience, he started to ponder what he'd do with her, once she woke up.

If luck was on his side, she'd apologize for trespassing and leave. Worst case scenario, she'd start screaming 'sue' and threatening to call the police about the dangerous animals he kept. The thought of dangerous animals had him clenching his fists. He stood and moved to the



kitchen next door, indicating that the other two should come with him. Standing in the doorway, so he could still see the couch, he began to rip a strip off the other two men.

"That had to be the most stupidly, idiotic idea you two have had in ages. Trying to scare her off? Why didn't you just say it was private property?"

"We didn't mean any harm." Daniel began.

"I'm sure you didn't, but look what happened anyway. This isn't like back home, you know. We don't have people in the right places to help brush things like this under the carpet. It's just us three against the rest of the community, and we have to blend in, not draw attention..." Ryne listened to himself talk and wondered when he'd suddenly become the heavy. Hell, he sounded like his foster-father used to after he and Kane had pulled some stunt or another. The thought brought him up short and he exhaled gustily. After a moment of silence he rubbed his neck awkwardly and glanced at the other two. They were waiting quietly, eyes downcast. "Just... just... don't do it again, okay?"

"We won't." They looked up at him sheepishly and Ryne relented.

He gave dry chuckle and punched Bryan lightly in the arm. "I thought you were supposed to be the smart one." He mocked.

Bryan shrugged. "Yeah. But she was kind of cute. I was sort of thinking that once she was near the gate, I'd show up and 'save' her from Daniel. She might have been... grateful, you know?" He winked and Daniel laughed.

Ryne did too, but inwardly he felt his hackles rise. Something about Bryan's statement bothered him, though he didn't know exactly what. "Why don't you two go see if you can make something for us to eat? I'm starving." They nodded and headed towards the fridge. "Oh, and brew up a large pot of coffee. I'm still feeling a bit hung over from last night."

With the other two busy, Ryne headed back into the living-room and sat in his recliner facing the sofa. The initial coolness of the leather felt good given his less than prime state of being. Not for the first time, did he wonder why he kept accepting all the drinks sent his way. He knew the locals were somewhat in awe of his capacity for alcohol—he could hold way more than the average human—and he suspected there might be some bets going around about who would be the first to drink him under the table. It would never happen, but still, he should be more careful. Drawing undue attention to the ways in which he was physiologically different from his neighbours was not a good idea.

He leaned his head back and switched his attention to his present concern; the girl lying unconscious on his sofa. Through half-closed eyes, he watched and waited while speculation ran through his mind. Why had she been on his land? She wasn't a local. Stump River residents would never go walking in boots like hers. Maybe somebody's relative, visiting for the weekend and out for a stroll? Possibly. After all, who else would have a reason to be roaming around Stump River?

## Chapter 6

Mel opened her eyes and blinked, momentarily confused. Where was she? Her dumpy, little apartment in Chicago? No, that was last week. This week she was in Canada, looking for that photographer. She'd driven to Stump River and rented a cabin and then... Oh damn! She sat up quickly and immediately regretted it, clutching her head as it throbbed in protest.

"I wouldn't move that fast if I were you." A deep, sexy voice spoke to her right and she turned her head to see who owned it.

"Ow!" Her head protested again and she grasped it in her hands, propping her elbows on her knees. It seemed too much of an effort to hold her head up unsupported. The recent events, which had resulted in her present pain, came rushing back to her, sending a jolt of fear through her system. A quick inventory revealed that her head appeared to be the only area of damage and her body slumped in relief.

"See? I told you not to do that." The voice laughed dryly and she was immediately annoyed that this person, whoever he was, found her pain amusing. Squinting, she stared across the room trying to get a good look at the fellow. Unfortunately, the angle of the bright light entering through the window cast him in a shadow and she only could see his outline.

"Sorry. I don't usually take advice from complete strangers." Mel replied sarcastically, thinking the man must be a total jerk. She had just survived an animal attack and was suffering from a head injury, for heaven's sake! Where was the sympathy she deserved?

"You don't talk to strangers? Aww... What a good little girl you are." He mockingly praised her using a tone of voice most often associated with young children. Then, without warning, he switched to a harder, more accusing, form of speech. "Too bad you don't follow the rules when it comes to wandering onto someone's land, completely ignoring the 'No Trespassing' signs."

She didn't respond for a moment, recalling how she'd removed the sign so that she could claim ignorance of its existence. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound; she'd try to bluff her way through this. "I didn't see any sign. Where was it?"

"Right on the gate that blocked the driveway you walked down."

"Really? Hmm... I didn't notice it. Maybe it fell off." She concentrated on brushing some dust from her pants to avoid looking his direction.

"And maybe it had some help from you."

Mel gave a non-committal shrug and kept silent. He continued on in the nasty, mocking tone he seemed to favour.

"And of course, the six foot high *locked* gate, didn't give you any clue that you should stay out?"

"Not really." She cast a saccharine sweet smile in his direction. "Though, of course, if there'd been a sign stating that there were vicious dogs roaming free, I would have been more cautious."

"Dogs? Those weren't dogs. They were wolves and you're lucky they didn't rip you to shreds." He sounded quite pleased to deliver that piece of news.

Mel swallowed hard. She'd had a sneaking suspicion they weren't dogs, but thought she'd throw the idea out, just in case. If the man owned dogs that were out of control, she could always threaten to sue him, if he got nasty about her trespassing. Now, with that gone, she had to acknowledge how much danger she really had been in. Guilt and a ton of regret for her impulsive actions also came into the mix. She knew she should have gone back to town and tried to make a proper appointment with Taylor, rather than sneaking up on him. Her college instructors would berate her over this stunt, if they ever heard about it.

Sitting up a bit straighter, Mel faced the mystery man head on, thinking she should try to smooth things over a bit, for the sake of the interview she hoped to get. Before she could even open her mouth, everything got a bit dark and her vision blurred. Feeling the blood drain from her face, she clutched the cushion she sat on and closed her eyes until her equilibrium settled. Damn, but this wasn't going at all the way she planned. Like many of her ideas, it had seemed like a good one at the time. She was supposed to be confidently walking up to Ryne Taylor's house, knocking on his door, and coolly requesting an interview. Taylor's surprise at her unexpected presence would have had him immediately agreeing to her request.

Instead, she knocked herself out and wound up talking to this ill mannered person, whoever he was. At least he wasn't Taylor. From the way everyone spoke, the photographer was a bit of a lady's man and likely had smooth banter down to a science. Unlike someone else, she added, glaring towards the chair housing her tormentor.

He must be one of the people who lived with Taylor. Good lord, how did the photographer put up with this fellow's sarcastic attitude? She'd only known him for less than five minutes and already wanted to smack him. True, she shouldn't have trespassed, but he needn't be so nasty about it.

"Hey, are you all right?" The man leaned forward, possibly concerned over her sudden pallor.

"Yeah—" Mel flicked a glance his way and stiffened in shock. His change in position had brought his face out of the shadows and he was visible for the first time. Mel was sure her eyes were playing tricks on her. Before her sat one of the most gorgeous men she'd ever seen. Messy black hair hung across his forehead, while a day's worth of stubble darkened his jaw line. Deep blue eyes, a straight nose, and a firm mouth completed the picture. Sexy and dangerous were the two words that immediately sprang into her mind as she gazed at him.

A second reason for her surprise was that he was almost a carbon copy of Kane, the husband of the waitress at the Grey Goose. Mel had only seen Kane briefly, but he'd left a definite impression on her. The man before her had different coloured eyes and his voice was different, but otherwise the two men were very similar; they had to be brothers or at least first cousins. Narrowing her eyes, Mel began to connect the dots and an unnerving thought came to mind. Was this man that she was verbally sparring with, Ryne Taylor? No, he couldn't be. Elise's name tag had declared her surname was Sinclair and she seemed like the type to assume her husband's surname; Kane Sinclair's brother would be a Sinclair as well, wouldn't he? But then again, there was always the possibility... She sighed heavily and decided she'd best find out. Starting the introductions, she stated her name.

"I'm Melody Greene."

He ignored the implicit social norm that would have him supplying his name in return and glowered at her. "And why, Melody Greene, were you traipsing all over this property?"

"I wasn't traipsing all over, just walking down the driveway. And I'm here because I want to talk to Ryne Taylor."

A nod was the only response she got. Not even an eyelash flickered.

Under her breath, she cursed him. Was he, or wasn't he, Ryne Taylor? His reaction certainly gave no clue either way.

"Why do you want to talk to him?"

Mel noted the use of the word 'him.' Ah-ha! So this person wasn't Taylor. She considered answering his question truthfully, but decided that, no matter how sexy he might be, she didn't want to share anything with the man. He was just too damn annoying. If he wasn't willing to even provide his name, then she wasn't going to give away any extra information either. For all she knew, he even might try to sabotage her attempts to talk to the photographer out of pure spite. "That's between the two of us." She added a bit of a mysterious smile and watched with satisfaction as the man's eyebrows rose in surprise. Make what you want of that, she thought to herself.

Abruptly the man stood and switched topics. "It's time for you to go."

"Pardon?" The sudden change left her feeling confused.

"You need to leave. I trust you can make it back to your car by yourself?"

"Well, yes. But..."

He merely extended his arm towards the doorway.

A wave of temper, at his cavalier dismissal, washed over her and she knew her cheeks were flushing. "Fine." She snapped the word out. Spying her purse lying near her feet, she snatched it and jumped up, only to stagger as her head once again protested the sudden change in elevation.

A gusty sigh filled the room as the man reluctantly caught her and steadied her on her feet. "Obviously, you're in no shape to operate a vehicle. I suppose I'll have to drive you home." With that, he scooped her up in his arms without even so much as a 'by your leave' and walked out of the house.

Mel knew her mouth was opening and closing like a fish gasping for air, but she couldn't begin to formulate the words needed to express sufficiently both her surprise and indignation. Finally, choosing the direct route, she issued a succinct command. "Put me down!"

"No." He didn't even look at her and continue to stride down the driveway, his long legs covering the ground at an astonishing pace.

"Let me go!" She struggled, pushing against his chest. He merely tightened his grip. Doubling her efforts, she began bucking and kicking her legs. It made her head throb, but at least he took notice and stopped walking. "Thank you. Now put me down."

"You aren't steady enough on your feet to walk the length of the driveway at the speed I want you to go. Nor are your boots suitable for walking on gravel. Now be still, before I throw you over my shoulder. Hanging upside down won't do your head any good, but if that's what it takes..." He began to shift his grip on her and Mel had no doubt he'd make good on his threat.

"Fine." Crossing her arms, she pointedly stared straight ahead, gritting her teeth when she felt his chest quiver against her body. He was laughing at her!

The rest of the journey passed silently. It was strange how quickly he covered the distance, the scenery seeming to fly by her. Probably, it was an after effect of hitting her head. Her visual perception was likely a bit off.

They finally arrived at the gate and he set her down. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the gate, relocking it after they'd passed through. He looked at her rental car and then at her. His hand extended, implicitly asking for the keys. Mel rolled her eyes, but dug them out and handed them over, quite sure that he would have no compunction about taking her purse and rifling through it, if she refused.

Stalking over to the car, she got into the passenger side, put on her seatbelt, and folded her hands in her lap. The annoying man followed at a much slower pace, climbing in, adjusting the seat and mirror, before finally putting the key in the ignition.

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Kennedys'. I've rented a cabin from them. If you turn left—"

"I know where they live." He answered shortly, his lips pressed together, forming a tight line.

After that, the rest of the ride passed by in an uncomfortable silence. When they finally arrived at her temporary home, Mel barely waited to get the keys from him, before jumping out of the vehicle, eager to be away from the exasperating man. She grabbed the bag of groceries from the back seat of the car and hurried towards the cabin, but a sudden thought had her stopping and reluctantly turning around. He was leaning against the car watching her, an enigmatic expression on his face.

"Umm... How are you getting home?"

"Don't worry about it. I can get a ride if I need one."

"Oh..." As much as it irked her to do it, her mother had raised her with manners. "Thanks for driving me home."

"It was the easiest way to get rid of you."

The smirk on his face washed away all her good intentions and she snapped out an angry retort. "You have to be the rudest man I have ever encountered."

He grinned and dipped his head in acknowledgement. "Thanks. I try my best."

"And you certainly succeed! I'm eternally grateful that this is the last time I'll have to see you."

"Really? After tearing down that sign, climbing the gate, walking almost half a mile, and facing a pair of wolves, you're giving up on me?"

"What?" She had a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"I'm Ryne Taylor, Melody Greene."

Mel felt her mouth drop open then she snapped it shut and quickly turned away fighting for composure. Why did these things always happen to her? Yes, the man was being purposely aggravating but she still needed to work with him. She slowly shook her head in despair, completely at a loss as to how she'd repair the damage. Pasting a conciliatory look on her face, she turned around and opened her mouth to begin to say... something, though she didn't know what... only to gasp. He was gone!

Looking up and down the road, she couldn't see a single trace of him. What the... ? Turning in a circle, she scanned the area. Nothing was in sight, except what appeared to be a large black dog... or maybe another wolf... running through the woods behind the cabin.

All too wary of canines due to her recent encounter, Mel wasted no time hurrying into the cabin. As she slammed the door shut, she was thankful that she'd changed her plans earlier on and bought groceries before going to Taylor's. There was no way she was going outside again. She'd had enough encounters with animals for one day, thank you very much. Taylor, wherever he was, was on his own!

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Ryne headed for home, loping through the woods and enjoying the chance for a run. The exercise was clearing the alcohol residue from his body and the cobwebs from his brain, though there weren't too many of those left after his encounter with Ms. Melody Greene. She was an impudent little thing; trespassing on his property and then insinuating that he had vicious animals on his land, trying to twist events around so it became his fault she ran into a tree. No doubt, she'd probably try to threaten him with a law suit.

He wondered why she hadn't asked him about her 'rescue' but decided she was probably still slightly 'out of it' from the bump on her



head and not thinking clearly yet. No doubt at some point in time it would dawn on her that someone had 'saved' her from the vicious canines. How he'd explain that, he wasn't quite sure. Maybe he should make Bryan and Daniel come up with the solution, since it was their fault to begin with.

Grinning, he thought how insulted Bryan and Daniel would be when they learned that she'd initially considered them to be dogs. And the look on her face when he'd said 'wolves' had been priceless. If he'd told her the whole truth, and said 'werewolves' she would probably have passed out again from shock. It would almost be worth it, just to see her in that state. But the Keeping was one of their most fundamental laws. Breaking it on a whim was a serious offence; even pups knew better than that.

From his earliest memory, he could recall his mother drilling the Keeping—as they commonly called the law—into his head. Non-weres could never know their true identities. Ensuring the pack's existence remained hidden from the human population was their first duty. Of course, out of necessity, some humans were aware of the truth, but selecting who to reveal the secret to, was carefully considered by the Alpha and his council, and had to be for the overall good.

Telling Ms. Greene she was in the Alpha den of a werewolf pack was definitely not in their best interests.

Ryne slowed down his pace, not tired, but thirsty. Damned alcohol always left him feeling dehydrated. Pausing by a stream, he took a drink, savouring the cold water as it cascaded down his dry throat. The spring thaw was on, causing the waterways to swell as the snow melted. Just last week, ice had covered this particular stream almost completely, with only the smallest trickle of free running water visible. Now it was a foot wide and by next week, he'd have to wade through it, rather than jump over it.

Bending to take another swallow, he absentmindedly noted his reflection; black fur, gleaming white teeth and bright blue eyes. Ah, you are a looker, he mocked himself. The female had noticed it, too. After all these years, he was very aware that women found him attractive and used it to his advantage whenever necessary. He wondered why he'd felt the need to provoke his unexpected visitor rather than charming her, as he usually did. It must be the fact that he was still hung over, he decided.

Finishing his drink, he licked the remaining water drops from his muzzle and continued running towards home, still thinking about the

young woman. Why did she want to see him? He'd certainly never met her before; he wouldn't forget someone that looked like her. She was a cute little thing—not his usual type, of course—but still cute and worth a second look. If he was looking to settle down with a human, she might be worth considering, but a permanent mate wasn't in his plans at the present time, despite his drunken musings of the previous night. There was enough to do trying to establish his territory without having to worry about a female.

Sure, he wanted the pack to expand, but he wasn't planning on being the one responsible for that—at least not for awhile. Bryan and Daniel were randy enough, though. They could locate mates and provide the pups. He'd just keep finding willing females to help him release his sexual tension, whenever the need arose.

But enough of that. Melody Greene was here looking for him and he was pretty sure it wasn't just for the pleasure of his company and a quick roll in the hay. It had to be something to do with that damned picture. After all, what were the chances of two different strangers looking for him in the course of a month; one in Smythston a few weeks back and now one in Stump River? She had to be the same person, but how had she found him? He and Kane had gone to great lengths to bury the trail that connected them. Ms. Greene must be one hell of an investigator and incredibly determined if she'd been able to ferret out his whereabouts.

His house came into view and he paused in the backyard, phasing back into his human form before walking to the building. The smell of frying chicken and fresh coffee drifted towards him causing his mouth to water. He inhaled deeply, savouring the smell, but then frowned. What was that other smell? Oh. Right. Ms. Greene's scent lingered in the air too. Damn. Grimacing, he hoped he'd be able to get rid of her. He didn't need the type of complications she represented.

## Chapter 7

Mel put off calling Aldrich as long as possible. She had nothing positive to report and hated lying to the man, since she was sure the lawyer saw right through her attempts at evasion. During the job interview that she'd endured with him, she'd felt his eyes on her as if he'd been trying to delve into her brain to find every little secret she'd ever had. The background information he'd required had been extensive; family background, medical history, school records, letters of reference, a police background check... Given the large amount of money involved, she supposed he couldn't be too careful, but it had seemed a bit excessive. However, his employer, Anthony Greyson, hadn't become a wealthy man by entrusting his money to just anyone.

She still recalled sitting in the upscale office, trying to remain calm as Aldrich interviewed her and gave a few generalized hints as to what the job might entail. His demeanour had made her feel like she was on trial. He'd ask questions nicely then moved on to a new topic, only to suddenly revert to the previous train of thought and re-ask the same question with slightly different wording and an accusing tone of voice. Mel knew she had nothing to hide, but still felt guilty and nervous. At one point she'd almost felt the need to confess to stealing Timothy Hawthorne's chocolate bar in fourth grade! Thankfully, she'd controlled the urge, but somehow she was sure Aldrich already knew the truth.

Aldrich was an imposing man, not because of his size—being only average height and weight—but because of his appearance and demeanour. His greying hair was always too perfect; his eyes were a pale ice blue while his face was impassive, only the faintest hint of a smile or frown gracing his thin lips. The man seemed cold and calculating, and Mel hoped she'd never end up on his bad side. After making a few notes on her answers and double checking her contact information, he'd dismissed her, leaving her with the impression that she'd failed the interview. It was with great surprise that she'd received a phone call a few weeks later, saying she had the job. Her surprise was even greater when

she discovered that Aldrich worked for Mr. Anthony Greyson, head of Greyson Incorporated.

Anthony Greyson was a well known business tycoon in the Chicago area. His name was synonymous with wealth and success, yet he led a life shrouded in mystery. Very few people ever saw him and even when he entertained, it was rumoured that he only put in a perfunctory appearance before disappearing into the private depths of his mansion. Some said he was involved with the mob. Others claimed he led a double life and had homes all over the world where he assumed other identities. The tabloid stories about the man were even more ludicrous and not even worth mentioning.

Whatever the truth about Greyson, the idea of working for him was both intriguing and intimidating. Mel just hoped that she managed to complete the job to his satisfaction. If he was going to become a patron of the arts, then maybe he would employ her again, asking her to do even more research on other up and coming artists. If he wasn't pleased with her work... Well, she didn't even *want* to let her thoughts go there!

With this in mind, Mel realized that she'd better keep her end of the bargain. Picking up her cell phone, she placed the call, only to smile in relief when she discovered that her phone couldn't pick up a signal. Well, that solved that problem, she decided, happily snapping the phone shut. Who would ever have thought that bad service could be a blessing? She'd have to call when she was in town tomorrow. Aldrich couldn't complain about her lack of contact, if there were no means of communication available to her.

Tossing the phone back into her purse, she set about preparing herself a quick meal, humming as she moved about the small kitchen. She'd bought easy to prepare foods and soon had a plate of grilled chicken strips and cooked veggies on the table. With no TV to watch, she amused herself by reliving her encounter with Ryne Taylor, adding pithy comments that she wished she had been clever enough to say at the time.

In her mind, the man was soon overcome by her quick repartee, and eagerly agreed to an exclusive interview with her. He was also careless with his comments and her clever questions soon had him on the verge of revealing what she had dubbed 'the great mystery'; the reason why he basically appeared to be in hiding, and why the wolf picture seemed to be so important.

Mel snorted at her imaginings. It wouldn't happen that way. Taylor was no pushover. Instead of trying to annihilate him with her scathing

remarks, she should be thinking of ways to win him over with her pleasant personality so he'd be willing to talk to her. Usually, she got along with everyone, but for some reason, he seemed to bring out the worst in her. Well, no matter; she'd just have to try harder to get on his good side. Right now, she didn't have any great hopes that such a thing would occur in the near future, but it was all she could think of at the moment.

Once dinner was done, she investigated the delights of the large claw-foot tub. It was big enough, and deep enough, that she could completely submerge with only her head and neck above the water line. It was at times like these that Mel actually enjoyed being a little on the short side. A lanky model would have her knees and shoulders sticking out over the top of the tub. Chuckling at the mental image that accompanied the thought, Mel leaned her head back and let the relaxing warmth creep into her body.

Steam rose about her, coating her face in dewy dampness. Her hair would be curling and frizzing soon; since no one would see her, she didn't really care. The heat was turning her skin pink and she stuck one foot up out of the water, wiggling her toes and observing their appearance. She needed to redo her polish, she thought lazily before letting her foot sink beneath the water line once again. Bubbles drifted by, gathering around her neck and clustering in little islands that floated here and there in response to the slight current she created whenever she moved.

It was a great tub. Almost big enough for two. Idly she speculated at the chances of meeting anyone locally to share the tub with. The odds were probably slim. Still she daydreamed about someone sitting behind her. She'd lean against his chest and he'd wrap his arms around her, cupping her breasts and pressing wet kisses to her neck. His hands would drift down over her stomach to her thighs and then... A dreamy smile spread across her face as she lived out her own little fantasy.

By time the water had cooled, both her brain and her muscles felt like mush. Mel barely had the energy to get out of tub and drag herself into the bedroom. Throwing on her traditional sleepwear of an old T-shirt and a pair of fuzzy socks, she crept into bed and curled up into a ball, quickly drifting off to sleep.

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As was so often the case in bad dreams, she was trying to run, trying to escape, but her legs felt like they were stuck in quicksand. She pulled on her limbs, forcing each slow, plodding step, knowing that the terror behind wasn't suffering from the same impediment. The air was cold

and damp, tree branches slapped against her face as she made her way through the dark woods. Whatever was chasing her, was getting closer; its heavy footsteps sounding louder and louder. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Hot breath hit her neck, long canines bit at her, tearing her clothing and piercing her flesh. Struggling to escape, she swung her arms wildly, gasping in surprise when her hand encountered something solid and warm. Now fingers clutched her upper arms, pulling at her, forcing her to turn around and face the horror that was attacking her. Heart pounding, she clenched her eyes shut. Like a young child, she hoped if she couldn't see it, it wasn't there.

"Look at me!" A strong voice commanded her and she was helpless to refuse. Of their own volition, her eyes opened and she looked up into the face of the wild beast that was tormenting her. Light gleamed off of its long teeth, their whiteness accentuated by the black fur that covered his face. Her gaze travelled higher and then froze as it locked onto its bright blue eyes. They stared at each other for what seemed like ages and then the wolf's face began to shift and take on a human form.

His hazy features refused to come into focus, but his eyes remained clear and deep blue. He gazed at her, a low rumble emanating from his chest. Mel tried to inch away, still fearful, but her limbs refused to cooperate. The man leaned closer. She tried to say something, but he covered her mouth with his, kissing her softly.

It was strange; she knew she was dreaming, but everything seemed so real. The slight roughness of his hand touching her skin, the warmth of his breath, the softness of his lips... Mel felt herself relaxing and sighing as she sank into the kiss. Okay, the nightmare was turning into a sex dream now, and it promised to be one of the best ones she'd had in ages. Giving a slight wiggle of delight at this unexpected turn of events, she prepared to enjoy the fantasy her mind was concocting for her.

Without warning, their location changed. No longer in the woods, she was now in her bed at the cabin and the man was still with her, kissing her quite thoroughly. He nibbled on her lower lip and then sucked on it before kissing her deeply again. His body pressed hers into the mattress and she enjoyed the feel of his hard muscles and long limbs entwining with her own. She wasn't exactly sure when the covers had disappeared, but it didn't matter. There was enough heat generating from him to keep her warm.

She felt him working his hands along the bottom of her t-shirt and moaned encouragingly when he finally touched her bare stomach and

hips. He left off kissing her and moved lower, trailing his lips down her throat and capturing her nipple in his mouth. Her t-shirt quickly grew damp, and the combined warmth of his mouth and the roughness of the material had her gasping in pleasure.

Heat pooled between her legs and she moved restlessly. As if knowing what she needed, he moved his hand to her core, brushing against her soft curls and then cupping her femininity. Heat radiated from his hand and she wiggled against his palm, aching to feel his fingers between her folds.

Gripping his back, she began to whimper with need and he finally relented, stroking and teasing her eager flesh. Mel felt herself growing wet, the aching need increasing. When he finally slipped a finger inside her, she nearly cried out in joy. He was tugging at her other nipple now, the pleasure-pain shooting down to her core and combining with the sweet torture of his fingering. Her breathing grew ragged and she felt her back arching off the bed, her muscles tightening and straining until the tension burst in a sweet wave of release.

Panting, she lay on the bed with her eyes closed, faint tremors still coursing through her. The mystery man brushed a warm kiss across her brow. The mattress shifted as he stood and then blankets softly fell over her. Smiling, she murmured her thanks and rolled onto her side, exhaustion beginning to take over. Wishing to cuddle now, she reached out her arm to pull her phantom lover to her side, but couldn't find him. Forcing her eyes open, she looked around blearily, but the room was empty. Letting her head drop back onto the pillow, she frowned, but then memory kicked in—it had just been a dream. With a disappointed sigh, she fell back asleep.

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The sound of the alarm ringing in her ear jerked Mel awake. She threw her arm out and groped wildly for the source of the annoying sound, grunting with pleasure as she made contact and silenced the evil piece of technology. Allowing herself a moment to reorient with reality, she lay there recalling her dream. Wow! It was, without a doubt, the best sex dream she'd ever had. The sensations had been so real, the release fantastic. Giving a yawn and a stretch, she gave a satisfied smile—way to go imagination! Pulling back the covers while simultaneously swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, she gave a final yawn and stretch while feeling around with her feet for her slippers.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Mel stumbled to the kitchen and turned on the coffee maker, pleased that she had thought to prepare it

the night before. While the blessed drink brewed, she headed to the bathroom for a shower. Her dream had left her feeling sweaty and a bit sticky.

Adjusting the water, she peeled off her t-shirt and stepped under the hot spray. The feel of the water sluicing over her was heavenly and she wished she could just stand there and revel in the sensation. Mindful that the cabin probably used well water, she quickened her ablutions, not wanting to waste what was probably a limited supply. With practised speed, she washed herself and her hair, removed stubble from legs and arm pits and turned off the water, pleased with her efficiency. Her apartment in Chicago had a precarious hot water system and she'd learned how to make the best of what was often a scarce commodity.

Wrapped in a terry cloth robe, she grabbed her t-shirt and headed for the bedroom, intent on tucking the garment under her pillow for use the next night. Casually folding the make-shift night shirt, her hands stilled as she stared at the front. That was strange. Two distinctly wrinkled spots stood out on the front, right where her breasts would be. Huh? She frowned and ran her fingers over the area, recalling her dream from the previous night. Her imaginary lover had suckled her through the t-shirt, but it hadn't been real so how... ? A blush washed over her face. Had she been groping herself in her dreams? That would explain the wrinkled material... sort of... Gnawing on her lip, she wondered what other explanation there could possibly be, but none came to mind. The idea that a man had appeared in her room and made love to her while she slept was utterly ridiculous.

Giving her head a shake, she finished putting the t-shirt away and made her bed, then went in search of her coffee. The wonderful smell of fresh caffeine was floating through the small cabin, perking up her senses and further activating her brain. Leaning against the counter, she contemplated her day.

She'd have to contact Aldrich and let him know that she had found where Taylor lived, but hadn't yet made an appointment to interview him. That was the truth. Her contact with the man yesterday didn't need to be part of the report.

Mentally, she gave herself another kick for trying to sneak onto the man's property. It had been foolish and amateurish, more suited to a cheap spy novel than a journalist who had a paying client. Being impulsive had always been her downfall and she kept hoping that with age, she'd finally learn to control herself, thus avoiding incidents like yesterday. So far, maturity wasn't helping.



Maybe she could blame her mother, she chuckled. The woman wasn't there to defend herself and she had been flighty in her day—and still was, if the truth be told. Mel loved her mother dearly, but the woman was in the habit of just picking up and moving with no warning, simply because something had caught her fancy. Usually it was a man, but sometimes it was a charitable cause, something she'd seen on a travel show or the need to undertake a new career like pottery or bee-keeping. While she'd been young, her mother had tried to curb her gypsy ways, but once Mel was grown, the restlessness had returned.

Mel understood. She had the same feeling herself to a lesser extent; always looking for the one thing that would 'fit' and fill what seemed to be a void inside her. She hadn't found it in any of her previous relationships or jobs, and hoped this current endeavour was the right one.

Her mother was still searching for meaning in her life, presently living in Florida with a man named Fred, and doing something with sea-shells—Mel didn't really understand the enterprise and knew better than to ask. The explanation would be long and complicated yet leave her with no clearer understanding for the telling.

Sometimes Mel wondered if her mother would have been more settled, if her father had stayed around. Of course, that hadn't happened. Her mother had merely been a week-long fling for the man. He hadn't left a number or an address and probably didn't even know or care that he had a daughter.

It didn't really matter to Mel though. Her mother had raised her by herself and they'd survived, just the two of them. There had been no grandparents to lend a hand, but friends had rallied around and Mel had grown up surrounded by her mother's good friends that became her honorary aunts and uncles. Frowning, she realized she hadn't seen some of those people in almost a year. Maybe when this job finished, she'd make time for a visit...

Mulling the idea over in her head, Mel dressed and prepared to head into town in search of a phone to call Aldrich. Afterwards, she'd try to contact Taylor again, by more conventional means this time. With any luck, he wouldn't be the kind to hold a grudge...

## Chapter 8

For some reason, Mel found herself driving by Ryne's property, rather than heading straight to town. She hadn't consciously decided to do it, but had been day-dreaming about nothing in particular and the car seemed to have a mind of its own. Once she realized where she was, she resolved to drive right on by, even as her foot was depressing the brake pedal and her hand was shifting the car into park.

She sat in the idling car, staring at the locked gates and chewing on her lip, not at all sure why she was here. A repeat of yesterday was definitely not in the cards, so what would she gain by staring at the locked gate? Nothing really, but something drew her to this place. Could it be the fact that Ryne was behind the gates. Possibly. There *was* the hint of mystery that seemed to surround the man, and she'd always loved solving puzzles. What was so important about this man that Greyson was paying her to get information on him? Was it just his photographs or was there something else? And why was Ryne so obsessive about his privacy? A padlocked gate, a half mile long driveway, living in the middle of nowhere in an out of the way town that few people had ever heard of... It all seemed a bit excessive to someone such as herself, who'd lived most of her life in the city surrounded by people. Maybe, if she ever got to interview the man, she'd get some answers to those questions.

Well, sitting here speculating wasn't going to do her any good. Mel lifted her hand to the gearshift and was just about to put the car into drive, when she noticed someone walking down the road. She hesitated for a moment as a little stab of excitement shot through her. A friendly conversation with one of the neighbours might prove to be useful. Neighbours in small towns knew things about each other, didn't they? Eagerly, she awaited the arrival of her possible information source.

It was soon evident that the approaching figure belonged to a man. He was tall, good looking and around her age, with sandy blonde hair and hazel eyes. His stride faltered when he saw that she was obviously

waiting for him and she wondered momentarily if he was about to turn around and retreat. His hesitation was brief, however. Soon a wide grin spread across his face and he walked up to her jauntily.

She rolled down her window and called out a friendly greeting. "Hello. It's a lovely morning, isn't it?"

"Sure is." The man stopped beside her car and looked down at her, his brows raised in inquiry. "I'm surprised to see you... I mean... someone out here. We don't get too many visitors."

"I imagine not, given how off-the-beaten-path it is. Actually, I'm interested in meeting Ryne Taylor. I've heard he lives here. Do you know him?"

The man seemed to be suppressing a chuckle and Mel quickly glanced at her face in the rear-view mirror. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had something on her face accidentally. Nope, all was clear. Maybe the guy was just the cheerful type.

"Yeah, I know Ryne. He's my Alph... Er... friend"

"So you live around here?" Mel felt her spirits perk up. This man just might prove to be a fount of knowledge about her photographer.

"Uh-huh. I actually live with him. We've been together for about five months now."

"Really?" Hopefully, her shock didn't show on her face. The idea that Taylor might be gay had never crossed her mind. Darn, it was always the cute ones. She felt herself inexplicably wanting to pout over the fact, not that she'd really been interested in the man of course! But still...

Something niggled in her brain. No. That couldn't be right. Taylor couldn't be batting for the other team. From the way everyone spoke, he was a ladies' man. A switch hitter? Nah... This fellow must mean something entirely different by the term 'been together' than the popular vernacular. Refocusing, she gently probed for more information. "So it's just the two of you?"

"No, Daniel lives with us, too. I'm Bryan, by the way."

She nodded her head, and shook the hand he extended towards her, and offered her name in return. Not quite sure what to make of the situation, she decided it wasn't any of her business anyway. Her main focus should be on meeting Taylor and getting him to agree to an interview. Possibly this person was her way in. "Well, I'd really like to meet him. I've seen some of his pictures and he's an amazing photographer. Do you think he'd be willing to see me and discuss his work?"

Bryan hesitated, then shrugged. "He's not much of a talker, so I wouldn't count on it, but you never know."

“Could you give me his phone number so I could call him? I didn’t see a number in the phone book, but maybe it’s under your name?”

“No, it’s a private number. I suppose I could ask him for you. Do you have a phone number he could reach you at?”

Mel shook her head regretfully. “My cell is having some trouble picking up a signal, and the cabin I’m at doesn’t have a phone hooked up... oh, but he could leave a message for me with the Kennedys and I could get back to him!” She hoped Beth wouldn’t mind and made a mental note to ask her, as soon as she got back.

Bryan nodded. “The Kennedys? Sure. Everyone knows who they are. That should work.”

“Thanks. It’s been nice talking to you.” She started the car, gave a cheery wave, and drove off. Glancing back in her mirror as she went on her way, she was surprised that there was no sign of Bryan. Apparently, he moved just as fast as Taylor did!

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Back in town, Mel made her way to the diner, recalling from yesterday that it had a pay phone in the entrance way. She listened to the rings while twirling the cord around her finger and mentally rehearsing her report. Finally, the answering machine picked up. Aldrich wasn’t in the office. Relieved, Mel left a message, thanking her lucky stars at being able to avoid talking to the man. He really did give her the creeps.

Hanging up the pay-phone—she was surprised to find that they still existed in the cellular world—she turned to stare around the crowded diner. It had an ‘L’ shaped dining area. A row of small tables lined the windows that faced onto the main street. Next there was a row of stools by a counter, behind which you could get a glimpse into the kitchen through a serving window. Along the side, leading towards the back was a long narrow area with row of booths on one side and various small tables on the other. It was mid-morning and it appeared many of the locals had stopped in for coffee after attending Sunday services at the local church. This, too, might be a good place to pick up some information on Taylor.

Moving to the counter, Mel chose an empty stool and hopefully ordered a cafe latte only to receive a blank stare from the waitress. With a sigh, she settled for regular and turned in her seat to take in the atmosphere of the diner. A myriad of food scents tantalized her nose; cinnamon, pancakes, bacon, frying onions... The sound of dishes clattering in the kitchen, the hiss of grease as it sizzled on a griddle... It was all comforting and familiar, reminding her of her own waitressing jobs back in

Chicago. Nostalgically she thought of her fellow waitresses, the regular customers, Joe the cook, the long hours, the lousy tips, her sore feet... Hmm, maybe she wasn't feeling so nostalgic after all.

Pushing thoughts of the 'good old days' aside—because quite frankly, they weren't that good—Mel let the buzz of voices wash around her as she sipped her coffee and pondered how to pass the time while she waited for a response from Ryne. Absentmindedly, she began to follow the different threads of conversation.

"And then I said to him, if that's how you feel... "

"My back has been so much better since I got that new mattress... "

"If you really want your engine overhauled, I'll contact Ryne... "

"So then she had the nerve to... "

Wait! Back up. Hadn't she just heard Ryne's name mentioned? Mel swivelled the stool she was perched on and scanned the crowd for the source of the conversation. Two women were talking at the first table. A group of elderly men sat by the next. At the far corner, a group of teens had congregated and on the far side of the counter, two men... Yes. It was them. Discreetly, she shifted over one spot and tilted her head in their direction, thankful that she'd always had good hearing.

"Ryne's busy fixing up that old place of his that he bought from the Nelsons, so he doesn't have a lot of spare time, but I know he needs the extra money to pay for repairs." The man talking was in his mid-fifties with a bit of grey at his temples. Mel noted that his hands showed signs of hard work, their strength and capability evident even as he cradled a cup of coffee in them. Despite the relatively new soft grey jacket he wore, Mel could tell that this was definitely someone who knew about physical labour and from the faint traces of grease around his nails, she determined he was probably an auto mechanic. She gave herself a point for her deductive skills and then turned her attention to the second man, who she judged to be a farmer.

"Thanks Ben. I love that old truck and I don't need it right away... if Ryne could even work on it in his spare time that would be great. I don't care when it's done."

"All right then. I'll give him a call... or better yet, he'll be in town tomorrow. He covers for me on Mondays, running the gas pumps and doing repairs, so I can catch up on the paper work from the previous week. I'll talk to him, and if he's interested, he can stop by on his way home and look the old girl over, see what he thinks needs doing... "

The two men tossed some change on the counter and walked out, still talking. Through the window, Mel watched as they parted ways, one

getting into a car, and driving off, while the other—Ben—walked across the road towards the service station, pulling a key from his pocket and unlocking the door.

A dog came bounding out and Mel recognized it as the one she'd seen yesterday, waiting to cross the road. She smiled and wondered how Ben had managed to train the dog to do a trick like that. To the best of her knowledge, dogs were colour-blind, so how did it know the difference between a red light and a green one? In her mind, she could see the man squatting on the ground at the curb, talking to the dog and explaining the intricacies of safely crossing the road while the dog nodded solemnly, absorbing this new knowledge. Shaking her head, she watched as the animal in question bounced around, no doubt excited for some company.

The waitress came by to top up her cup of coffee and must have noticed that Mel was watching the man and his dog.

"That's Ben Miller and Harley." The woman gestured with the coffee pot towards the activity across the street.

"He's a nice looking dog. A lab?"

"Yep. About three years old. He's supposed to be a guard dog, but he's too darn friendly and not overly smart. If anyone were to break into Ben's place, the only thing Harley would do, would be to drown them in drool."

"I think he seems pretty clever. Yesterday, I noticed him waiting for the light to change before crossing the road." Mel questioned the waitress's assessment of the animal.

"Yeah. That is sort of strange. He never used to do that, but about a month ago he ran across the road and almost got hit. Ryne—he's a guy that works for Ben—saw it and scooped up Harley, took him to the corner and in less than half an hour had him trained to use the light. Strangest thing we ever saw. The whole town was talking about it. Josh Kennedy—he owns the local paper—even ran an article about it, but Ryne didn't want any credit or to have his name mentioned. Said he didn't have time to talk to all the dogs in the area, but he'd tell Harley to spread the word." The waitress laughed. "That Ryne can be so funny sometimes."

As the woman wandered off to serve another customer, Mel sipped her coffee thoughtfully. So, Ryne worked on cars and was some sort of 'dog whisperer' as well as being a reclusive photographer. It was a rather eclectic collection of skills and she wondered what else he had hidden up his sleeve. She couldn't wait to talk to him and find out.

Hmm... Did he only work on Mondays? It would be helpful to know, in case she needed to track him down, especially since she couldn't call or visit his house. Deciding that the waitress seemed to be a likely source of information, she plotted how to find out more about the man.

Next time the server made her rounds, Mel was ready. "I was wondering if you could recommend someone who could look at my car tomorrow. It was making this funny noise when I started it up this morning."

The woman smiled at her and nodded her head towards the window. "Right across the road where you've been staring is where you want to go—Miller's Service Station, though we just call it Ben's. He does good work and his prices are fair."

"Great. It must keep him busy though, running the whole thing himself."

"Well, his son, Greg, helped him out for quite a few years, until he headed off to college, but Ben was real lucky 'cause soon after the boy left, Ryne moved to town."

"Ryne?"

"Uh-huh. Ryne Taylor—the guy I was telling you about who trained Harley. Ben hired him to work part time. He moved here back in November and knows his way around an engine—and around a woman too, if you know what I mean." The woman winked and sighed dramatically. "The man is the stuff dreams are made of."

Mel grinned as her mind flitted back to her own dream last night. Was Taylor as talented as her dream lover? This woman seemed to think so... Frowning, Mel wondered if she had personal experience with Taylor's sexual prowess and wondered why the idea miffed her. Taylor was a job, that's all. What he did, and with whom, was no concern of hers. Getting a firm grip on her wandering mind, she focused on the waitress. "Thanks for the information."

"You're welcome. Oh, and you'll see the oh-so-sexy Ryne tomorrow if you take your car in. He works Mondays, Wednesdays, and sometimes on Fridays if Ben's real busy."

"You seem to know his schedule quite well." Mel sipped her coffee and eyed the woman speculatively.

"Yeah. Ryne and I are good friends. He comes in here a lot and to the bar too. That's my second job, working at the Broken Antler."

"So he's your boyfriend?" A pang of jealousy shot through her and she frowned.

“Sort of... . I mean, we see each other, but Ryne’s not the type to be tied down, you know?” The woman shrugged, tucking a stray lock of bleached blonde hair behind her ear.

Mel made no comment, merely nodding.

Leaning her hip against the counter, the waitress appeared to be settling in for a long conversation. “You just came to town yesterday, right? Melody’s your name?”

“Melody Greene. But you can call me Mel.”

“Mel it is, then. Beth Kennedy was in earlier today and told me how she’d rented a cabin to you. She was all excited because now she can order a new dishwasher and Josh can’t—” Her train of thought was interrupted by a bell ringing, signalling that someone wanted service at the cash register. The woman sighed. “Damn, that’s for me. Well, I hope you enjoy your stay.”

Mel nodded. “I’m sure I will. Thanks for your help... er... ” She checked the woman’s name tag, before continuing. “Lucy.”



## Chapter 9

Mel headed back to the cabin, making a brief stop at the Kennedys' first. It was a modest brick rancher with a few shrubs in the yard and some spring bulbs beginning to poke their way up through the ground. She rounded to the back door and hoped the husband and wife team didn't think she was too presumptuous, just assuming they'd take messages for her.

As it turned out, they didn't mind and in fact, Bryan had already called with a response for her. Taylor was considering her request and would let her know in a few days. Thanking her temporary landlords, Mel hid her disappointment at the vague response. She climbed back in her car and drove around the woodlot that separated the Kennedys' house from the rental units.

Parking her car, she sat inside the vehicle, a cloud hanging over her head as she mulled over Taylor's response. He would 'consider' it! Let her know in a 'few days!' Who did the man think he was? Rembrandt or something? This was a big break for him! If Greyson liked the article, Taylor could be famous. His face and his work might become recognized throughout the art world. There could be gallery displays and talk-show interviews. He could charge exorbitant prices for his photos. People might even commission him to take pictures. This interview could lead to great things. Why was he balking? Most people would jump at the chance for free publicity!

Mel wondered what could possibly be holding him back. Was it his experience with Bastian's Gallery? Perhaps they had promised him publicity and it had somehow gone all wrong. There was that hint of gossip she'd heard; something about an affair with a sales associate who had disappeared and missing money... Her eyes widened as a thought occurred to her. Had Ryne flown into a rage, murdered the woman and was now hiding out? It certainly would explain his reticence!

Forcing herself to rein in her imagination, she tried to consider her theory with calm logic. He wasn't eager for an interview, but that didn't make him a criminal. The woman was missing, but maybe she'd run off

with the money to some tropical island. And Ryne was *considering* an interview not flat-out refusing. Surely, a murderer would have said no right away.

Feeling relieved that her wild imaginings were, in all likelihood, just that, she climbed out of the car and wandered over to the edge of the cabin where she stared at the forest beyond. It was frustrating, having to wait—especially since patience wasn't her strong suit, but grinding her teeth and getting all in a stir would serve no purpose. Willing herself to relax, she inhaled deeply, letting the crisp early spring air invade her lungs. Taylor was getting under her skin and he wasn't even here; that would never do. She needed to calm down and take things one step at a time. There was no firm time line. Just because she, herself, had decided on a week in Stump River, didn't mean it couldn't take longer. Aldrich said Greyson would allow her up to a year to complete the task if need be. Maybe Greyson knew something about Taylor already—such as the fact that he was shy and didn't like interviews. That would explain things a bit.

Leaning against the side of the cabin, Mel tried to resign herself to the idea that she would probably be here longer than she thought. She consoled herself with the fact that it didn't really matter—well except for the lack of decent latte. No one was waiting for her in Chicago. She had quit both of her waitressing jobs and paid her rent for the next month. Maybe she should look on her time here as a vacation. Aldrich couldn't complain if she had nothing in particular to report. Having to wait for Taylor's decision wasn't her fault.

Closing her eyes, she made herself focus on the sensation of the warm sun beating down on her. After a long, snowy winter it felt good to absorb the rays. By the time summer came, she'd be back in Chicago with waves of blistering heat bouncing off the pavement and everyone would be worrying about the UV levels. See? Here was something positive. For this moment in time, she could just enjoy the sun.

With her eyes closed, her other senses heightened; the solid wood of the cabin behind her, the slight breeze that caused her hair to brush against her cheek. In the distance, birds were twittering and an occasional squirrel chattered. Water steadily dripped off the edge of the roof and hit the ground in a dull rhythm as the remaining snow, trapped in the eaves troughs, melted.

She could feel the coiled tension unwinding from her shoulders and her jaw. Why had she allowed herself to get so upset over Taylor? It

didn't really matter if he took his time making his decision. As long as he eventually agreed, that was all that counted.

Mel gave a little chuckle. As a matter of fact, the longer he took the better. It meant more down time for her. She could do some writing; put some polish on articles she wanted to submit for publishing. Maybe she'd even get a repeat of last night's dream—now *that* was something to look forward to.

Pushing off from the wall, she glanced down and noticed a few bits of green poking out of the ground. She frowned, not being a gardening expert, and wondered what might be growing this early in the spring. Crocus maybe? She bent down to take a closer look and then nearly fell back in surprise. Large paw prints were evident in the mud right under her bedroom window. Even more surprising were two sets of large human foot prints—just two. One set was facing towards the cabin, and the other was facing away. Mel stood and studied the surrounding ground carefully. There were no human prints leading to her cabin, nor away. How could that be? The ground was soft and even her slight weight was leaving indentations in the soil.

Stepping back, she studied the roof line, the location of the porch, and the walls of the cabin. Could someone have come down off the roof? Possibly, but how did they get up there? It was quite high and she saw no sign of a ladder. Technically, she supposed a very determined person could even have stood on the porch and then scrambled to the window without touching the ground. The cracks and crevices between the logs would provide toe and finger holds, but why would anyone go to all that trouble? It made no sense. And why were they outside her bedroom window?

A frisson of fear jolted through her as several unpalatable possibilities popped into her head. Regardless of how they got there, someone had been peering in her bedroom window. Had they watched her sleeping? Changing her clothes? Mel shivered and wondered how much screening the thin curtains on the window provided. She hadn't even checked if they were closed properly, thinking that it didn't matter, out here in the middle of nowhere. What if the person had come back and broken in while she was gone today? What if they were still inside? Looking at the cabin with something akin to horror, she backed away until she was halfway across the yard, then turned and ran to the Kennedys', intent on calling the police, just in case.

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Mel pounded on the Kennedys' door and almost immediately Beth appeared, a paint brush in her hand. She'd been repainting the bedroom when Mel had stopped by earlier and was still engaged in the task from the looks of things.

"Melody? I'm surprised to see you again. Is something wrong?"

"Well, sort of. I think... I mean, there's a possibility... You see, there were these footprints..." She was having trouble catching her breath and organizing her thoughts after her headlong flight.

"Slow down; you're not making any sense. Come on in and sit down and we'll talk about whatever has you so upset."

Mel gratefully collapsed onto the kitchen chair and pushed her tangled locks back from her face. Running definitely had a detrimental effect on her hair, which was why she avoided the activity whenever possible, she thought inanely. A bubble of hysterical laughter threatened to escape and she squelched it back down. Why was she worrying about her hair at a time like this, yet alone laughing about it? Beth was already looking at her like she was half crazy. No need to add to her suspicions by giggling away like some school girl.

Composing herself, she took a deep breath and explained what she had discovered in a relatively calm and collected manner. Beth frowned and called Josh into the room—he'd been watching TV in the den and staying out of Beth's way while she painted; this was one of the secrets to their long and successful marriage, the woman had informed Mel earlier.

After hearing the details, Josh frowned and decided to take a look around himself. "No point in calling the police just yet. This is a small town and we don't have our own police force. The OPP—the Ontario Provincial Police—are in charge, but it's a large area and it could take up to an hour for a patrol to get here depending where the nearest cruiser is. I'll check the cabin out and if someone really has broken in, then we'll call."

"But what if someone's in there?" Mel twisted her hands in agitation. She didn't want Josh to face an intruder. What if the criminal was armed?

"Honey, did you have anything valuable in there?"

Mel mentally searched her luggage. "Not really. Just my laptop."

"Well, then. He's probably long gone, if robbery was his motive. It wouldn't take long to search a small cabin and steal a laptop"

Reluctantly, Mel agreed, but told Josh she'd go back with him so that if there was trouble, she could run for help. Beth had him take a baseball

bat along for protection, just in case. He'd scoffed at the idea, but gave in to keep her happy.

Josh made small talk on the way to the cabin, showing no signs of being worried about what he would find. "So did you manage to find Ryne's place yesterday?"

"Um... Yes, I found it. The map you drew was very helpful." Mel didn't mention the little adventure she'd had afterwards. As it was, she was sure Josh thought she was over-anxious and worrying about nothing. There was no need to add to his dubious impression of her.

"I've been by his place a couple of times, but never up to the house. He bought the place from the Nelsons. They were an older couple who wanted to retire to Timmins. Everyone in town figured the place would be on the market for years—no one moves to Stump River, you know. So we were all surprised when Ryne bought the place practically the day it went on the market. Why he and his friends moved up here, none of us can figure out. Mind you, we're not complaining. It's nice to have some young blood in the town."

Mel murmured non-committally and filed that bit of information away for future reference. It wasn't much, but compared to what she already knew about the man—which was next to nothing—well, she'd take what she could get.

By this time, they'd arrived at her cabin. While Mel stood some distance away, Josh went inside and looked around then came back out, with an I-told-you-so expression on his face. "There's no one inside Melody. And no sign that anyone but yourself has been in there."

Breathing a sigh of relief that some pervert hadn't been going through her underwear drawer, she led Josh to the side of the house, pointing out the mysterious footprints.

"See? There's one set facing each direction, like someone entered and then exited, but there are no other prints showing how the person came or left."

Josh rubbed his chin. "Well, that is a bit puzzling. Let me think about it." Just as she had, he stared at the ground, the roof, the walls, and the porch." He got down and pressed his hand to the ground, observing the imprint it made in the soft mud. "Huh... Only explanation I can think of is that the ground was frozen when this fellow came around. It still goes below freezing most nights, but the ground nearer the house would have been softer from the heat seeping out—these cabins aren't very energy efficient, you know—so his prints would show here, but not farther away."

Mel nodded slowly. It sort of made sense. "But why was someone here in the first place?"

Shrugging, Josh wiped his muddy hand on a handkerchief he pulled from his coat pocket. "Most likely a transient. He was probably looking for a place to spend the night or wondering if there was anything worth stealing. You know, I'm not a skilled tracker or anything, but these prints could be days old. See how the dog prints are on top of the man's? No telling exactly, when any of these were made."

"Are you sure they're dog prints? Couldn't they be from a wolf?" Mel was thinking of the wolves she'd encountered on Ryne's property. Had they tracked her here?

"Wolves? I suppose. But they don't usually come near town unless the hunting is really bad, and the winter wasn't that harsh this year. Nope, these are most likely from a stray dog."

"Oh... Okay." Mel felt a bit deflated as well as relieved at the logical explanation Josh had come up with. As usual, her imagination was getting the best of her. She wasn't exactly sure what she thought was going on, but it hadn't been anything as mundane as what Josh had come up with. "Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"No problem. I know how skittish you ladies can get. Better to check it, like Beth said. Then everyone can rest easy." With a nod of his head, Josh headed home.

Mel watched him leave and then went inside. She walked into her bedroom and looked around. Everything was as she'd left it. Approaching the window, she pushed the curtain aside and stared at the casing. It was old, but in good repair though there didn't seem to be a locking mechanism. Crime in Stump River probably wasn't a major concern so no one worried about locks on windows. She'd heard that rural areas could be pretty lax when it came to home security.

She chuckled. What would they think if they ever saw her apartment in Chicago? She had deadbolts, chains, a keypad, and a peep hole to check who was at the door... At times, she felt like she was in a prison, but crime rates were high. If you didn't want to become another statistic, you did what you had to.

Experimentally, she tried to open the window and was surprised when it slid open with hardly a sound. Josh obviously kept the cabins in good repair. She pulled the glass down and studied it carefully. There were fingerprints on the glass pane. The first set were obviously her own, but who owned the others? Had Josh tested the window? He might have, but she didn't think he'd mentioned it, nor had she heard

the window sliding up and down. Of course, she hadn't been listening for it either and it was very quiet.

Biting her lip, she stepped back and jerked the curtain into place. Had someone been in her room last night? Watched her sleeping? Touched her? Kissed her? Intimately caressed her? The very thought made her skin crawl and bile rise in her throat. She rushed to the bathroom and leaned against the sink, panting and sweating, willing the contents of her stomach to stay down where they belonged.

After a moment, she began to regain control of herself. She leaned over the sink and splashed cool water on her face and then grabbed a towel to absorb the droplets. Staring into the mirror, she patted her face dry while noting her pale skin and dilated eyes.

This is ridiculous, she scolded herself. No one was in your room. It's like Josh said; the footprints are probably old. No one was here—it's just your darned imagination working overtime. A bit of trivia popped into her head and she stood up straight, the beginnings of a smile forming. As a matter of fact, it couldn't have been last night. She remembered hearing the weather report on the radio while driving back to the cabin. It said that the temperatures had been above freezing the previous night. The ground would have been soft. Anybody out there would have left lots of footprints, not just one set. Feeling relieved, she stuck her tongue out at her reflection and mentally chastised herself. See? It was nothing. No one was there except your phantom lover.

With a much lighter heart, she breezed into the sitting area and pulled out her laptop. There was no phone so she couldn't access the internet, but she could work on a few articles that she had started awhile back. As she plugged the machine in, Mel decided to ask the Kennedys about getting the phone hooked up. At least she'd have access to dial-up. It would cost a bit, but she could justify the expense to Aldrich. He wouldn't be pleased about having to wait for her reports nor would he like having to leave messages for her with the Kennedys. The man was way too uptight for that sort of arrangement.

Mel happily settled down and spent the rest of the day working, totally unaware of the controversy she was creating in various locales across the continent.

# Chapter 10

Ryne glared at his Beta then abruptly turned away to stare out the window. Bryan was just teasing him, but his comments were hitting a little too close to home.

"Aww, come on Ryne. If she's just a human female, then why are you letting her get under your skin?" Even with his back turned, Ryne knew Bryan was smirking.

"How many times do I have to tell you? She isn't getting under my skin."

"Of course not. I just imagined the fact that you kept Daniel and me away from her yesterday."

"The less she saw of the pack, the better." He answered in clipped tones.

"And naturally, you had to drive her home."

"She was dizzy. It wasn't safe for her to drive."

"Well, what about going to see her last night?" Ryne turned, ready to deny the accusation, but Bryan just shook his head and kept talking. "You said you were going to see Lucy, but it wasn't her scent on you when you came home. And I talked to Lucy today at the diner. She didn't see you last night."

"All right." Ryne sighed gustily. "I went to see the girl, but only because she had a head injury. I got to thinking that she was alone and could have a concussion. Someone had to check on her, to make sure she didn't fall into a coma."

"Yeah, right." The two men stared at each other for a moment. Ryne's face darkening while Bryan just kept grinning wider and wider. "Face it, boss. She's caught your fancy. Why fight it? The way I see it, she's here for a week or two. Use the time to your advantage. Bang her a few times and get her out of your system."

The comment didn't sit well with Ryne and he growled a warning.



Bryan threw up his hands and backed out of the room. "Okay, I get the message. I'm dropping the subject for now. Don't go all Alpha on me."

As the door slammed shut, Ryne relaxed and slumped down on the sofa, rubbing his face with his hands. What was the matter with him? Bryan was right. Melody Greene was just a human female. She was cute, but irritating, nothing that special really. So why was she running through his head?

He couldn't believe what he'd done last night. The idea of her alone with a head injury had bothered him all evening. After pacing restlessly, and driving his friends crazy with his miserable attitude, he'd announced he was going into town to see Lucy. And he had planned on seeing her—a romp with Lucy usually left him feeling relaxed and mellow. It was just that he was going to check on Ms. Greene first.

After parking the car down the road, he'd changed into his wolf form and silently padded up to her cabin. No one had noticed him sniffing around the building. When he had heard her ragged breathing, he transformed back to human and peered in the window. She was lying in bed, obviously distressed, and without thinking, he opened the window and climbed in.

She was apparently in the throes of a nightmare, thrashing about on the bed. He had gripped her shoulders, turning her over and commanding her to look at him, thinking that if she wasn't dreaming, she'd feel better. It was only later that he realized how foolish he'd been. What if she had completely woken up? Seeing him, uninvited in her bedroom in the middle of the night, would have had her screaming the house down. No amount of fast talking could have explained his way out of that one.

Thankfully, she'd only partially opened her eyes before closing them again, a blissful smile on her face as she relaxed against him. Then, without him even realizing it at first, his wolf slipped past his guard and took over. He found himself pressing a soft kiss to her lips, just offering comfort, of course. Only it hadn't stayed that way. She'd kissed him back and before he knew it, he was lying on top of her, caressing her, while she moaned in pleasure.

He should have stopped then; he knew it, but his wolf didn't care. She'd tasted so good; the smell of her arousal had thrown all common sense out of his head. The feel of her body pressed against his, her soft sighs and smooth skin, the way she moved under him, needing him, begging him in her sleepy voice...

Ryne could still taste her, still remember how her pebbled nipple had felt against his tongue, still recall the slick moisture that had seeped from her body onto his hand as he moved his fingers within her. Her body had clenched around him, her head thrown back, and mouth opening in a silent scream as she came. It had been such an erotic sight, watching her orgasm. Her uninhibited response had left him hard and aching, but he'd wrenched back control from the beast within, knowing he couldn't ease his discomfort with her.

Instead, he'd covered her up and left. Once outside, he'd morphed back into a wolf and run through the woods until he could run no more; the ache in his body replaced by exhaustion. For a moment he had considered visiting Lucy as he had initially planned. She would have taken him in, regardless of the late hour, but he had no heart for it. The very idea seemed wrong; to go from one woman to another. He had some scruples. Not many, but they were there.

And so he'd headed back home. At least Daniel had been in bed, but Bryan had still been up, watching a movie. Ryne had known he must look a mess, his hair tangled, his breathing rough, the smell of sweat and sex emanating from him. Their gazes had locked and Ryne, even though he was Alpha, had shifted uncomfortably under his Beta's gaze. Bryan hadn't said anything. He'd merely sniffed the air, frowning until he placed the scent. After giving him a considering look, Bryan had simply nodded and turned back to his movie.

Ryne had stood in the entryway, inexplicably unsure of what to do. He'd felt the need to explain and even opened his mouth to do so, but then shut it again. How could he explain what he himself didn't even understand? Instead, he had slowly walked to his bedroom, climbed in-to bed and stared at the ceiling most of the night.

Melody Greene was bad news. No, not the girl herself, but what she represented. Ryne was too smart to be able to attribute her arrival to coincidence. Just a few weeks ago, some woman had been in his old home town of Smythston asking about him. Now, a woman was in Stump River, also wanting to see him. In all the years that he'd openly shown his photographs, no one had ever wanted to interview him, except for the local paper. But now that he had basically vanished, there was a sudden interest.

If he was vain enough, he might have thought that his talent was finally drawing interest from the art world. While it was a possibility, it was more likely that the interest being generated was because of that one damned picture. God, he wished he'd never taken it, let alone had it

enlarged and professionally mounted. Why hadn't he left it as a snapshot in a family album?

Sighing deeply, he steepled his fingers and pondered what he should do about the problem Melody Greene was about to create. He hadn't told Bryan, but just minutes before his friend had come in, Ryne had called his brother Kane to double check some facts about the inquisitive person who'd been asking about him. He'd been hopeful that it hadn't been Ms. Greene, but of course that would have made things too easy. Instead, Kane had confirmed that it was the same person and that had led to a very uncomfortable conversation about options.

If he ignored her, would she go away? Instinctively he knew she wouldn't, not given the fact that she'd travelled all the way to Stump River—and he was still puzzling over how she'd found him. For some reason, she was extremely interested in him, either due to her own curiosity or because someone was paying her. Most likely it was the latter. She'd been too shocked when he'd mentioned the boys were wolves—correction when he'd told her the supposed 'dogs' were wolves. There had been no 'ah-ha' moment passing over her face, no hint of prevarication. If she really knew what she was looking for, she would have figured it out then and there. While she might be a bit quirky, she wasn't stupid. Her repartee with him proved that.

So, how to proceed? Did he grant her an interview and tell her a bunch of lies? No. Lies could trip you up too easily. He couldn't tell her the truth. It went against The Keeping and he didn't know if she could be trusted. Just a generation ago, the solution would have been simple; kill her and dispose of the body. She'd become simply another statistic. A young woman travelling on her own mysteriously disappears in the wilderness. Her car is found, abandoned by the side of the road. Years later, bones turn up and the verdict would be that she'd left her car, possibly to take a picture and got lost or was attacked by wild animals. It was efficient, but in this day and age more likely to lead to complications, especially if she had a family that might come looking for her.

Ryne smiled grimly. Death was still a possibility—neither he nor Kane had ruled it out—but it was always a last resort. They'd both agreed on that before ending their conversation. Leaning his head back, Ryne studied the ceiling and hoped for inspiration. The Keeping was their most important law. It wasn't just a matter of what he wanted to do. It existed to protect the whole pack, even the whole race. Their safety took precedence over the individual every time. If Melody Greene became

too nosey, if it appeared she was on the verge of discovering the truth, well then...

Getting up, Ryne walked over to the cupboard where he kept the liquor. Pulling out a bottle of whiskey, he took a swig, not bothering to dirty a glass. The golden liquid burnt as it slid down his throat and joined the knot that was forming in his stomach. "Here's to you, Melody Greene." The sound of his mocking toast filled the silent room. "Why the hell did you come here, and fuck everything up?"

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*Chicago, Illinois*

Leon Aldrich sat stiffly in the burgundy plush chair. It was directly in front of a large, leather topped desk. As per usual, the room was dimly lit and on the cool side, despite the fact that there was plenty of money to pay for electricity and heating. Aldrich took no note of his surroundings; the shelf-lined walls filled with leather bound books, the stone fireplace, the expensive Persian rug spread out over old oak flooring. He knew they were there, but instead of glancing around, he stared straight ahead. His hands rested on the report in his lap, his finger beating an impatient tattoo on the manila cover.

Anthony Greyson watched his lawyer with grim amusement. The man never indicated his displeasure by word or expression, the tapping of his finger the only sign that he wasn't happy with Greyson's decision. Finally tiring of waiting for the man to break—he never did—Greyson shifted in his chair and spoke. "So is there anything else to report?"

"No, sir. Ms. Greene's file remains unchanged. She has a distant though cordial relationship with her mother. There are no close friends nor romantic interests enquiring about her."

"And her father?"

"Still listed as unknown."

"Good. Just wanted to make sure she hadn't been lying on her application."

"If she had been, I would have discovered it before she got this far into her assignment."

Greyson snorted. No, of course not. Nothing got past Aldrich, which was why he'd hired the man in the first place. Sharp as a pin and as close mouthed as a clam. "And her 'assignment' is progressing?"

"If you can call it that. She is in Stump River." The man seemed to want to sniff derisively at the name of the town. Greyson watched intently for any sign of an emotional response, but none came. After the

briefest of pauses, Aldrich continued. "She has discovered where Taylor purportedly lives, but claims she has yet to make contact with the man."

"Claims?"

"There was something in her voice that made me wonder, but since it was just a message on the answering machine, it wasn't possible to question her."

Greyson nodded. "It's to be expected. And all our research shows Taylor isn't interested in publicity. Hopefully, Greene can get under his natural radar."

"I hope you're right, sir."

"I know you do, Leon. You think I'm a crazy old fool to spend my time and money on this. But if I'm right—and I'm sure I am—the payoff will be well worth it."

Aldrich stood and set the manila file on the edge of Greyson's desk. "If that's all, sir, then I'll be on my way."

"Yes. You're dismissed. Franklin will show you out." He moved to ring the bell.

"That won't be necessary. After all these years, I know the way."

Greyson barked in laughter as the lawyer left the room. That pathetic attempt at humour was the closest thing to a human response that he'd forced out of Aldrich in months. He leaned forward and picked up the file, thumbing through the contents until he found the page he wanted. "Ah, Ms. Greene. Whatever will become of you before this is over?"

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*Smythston, Oregon*

Kane put down the phone and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was happening. What he'd most feared for years, hoped against with every fibre of his being, was finally occurring. He clenched his fist, uncaring that his nails were digging into his palms, tiny drops of blood appearing.

It was beyond his control now and he didn't like the feeling at all. He was Alpha. This sitting back and waiting went against his nature, yet he knew reacting could cause the cards to tumble even faster. All he could do was sit and wait while playing out the various scenarios in his head.

The ball was in Ryne's court. He trusted his brother to make the right decision, to do whatever needed to be done. Kane just hoped it wasn't the worst case scenario.

The door to his office opened and he looked up. His mate, Elise slid in and locked the door.

“Am I disturbing anything?” The warmth of her voice washed over him, soothing his fears and worries with her calm tone. It had always been like that, from the first time he’d seen her. She’d been young and frightened by his sudden appearance in her life, but something had attracted them to each other.

“You disturb me, but in all the right ways.” He pushed aside his concerns and extended his hand. She came to him, settling in his lap, and snuggling her head against his shoulder. “To what do I owe the honour of this visit?”

“I was lonely.” She pouted up at him and blinked her eyes innocently.

“Lonely? Or lusty?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her, knowing that the hormonal changes from her pregnancy were sending her libido into overdrive.

“Both.” She laughed and then pulled his head down for a kiss, tracing his lips with her tongue.

Kane groaned and opened to admit her, while grabbing her hips and shifting her body so that she straddled him. Pulling her shirt free, he worked his hands under the material while she sucked on his tongue. Her skin was warm and smooth. He moved his hands higher, searching for the clasp of her bra and was pleasantly surprised to discover she’d neglected to put on that piece of clothing. He broke away from the kiss and looked at her questioningly, while moving his hands to cup her breasts. She purred in pleasure.

“It seems you forgot something when you got dressed.”

“Uh-huh.” She winked at him. “I forgot something else, too. No panties.”

Unable to help himself, Kane growled and picked her up. Setting her on her feet, he made quick work of divesting both her and himself of clothing. Clearing his desk top, he laid her on the wooden surface then leaned over her. He nibbled on her neck and collarbone before working his way down to her breasts and then her stomach. Pausing there, he kissed the slightly rounded surface. His child was in there.

Kane pressed his ear to Elise’s belly listening intently. Sometimes, he was sure he could hear its heartbeat, despite that fact the Nadia, their resident nurse-practitioner, said it was way too soon. He gently rubbed the skin and whispered “I love you” to the child within.

Feeling Elise’s fingers combing through his hair, he looked up and flushed, feeling slightly embarrassed. She was smiling at him tenderly. “I love how much you love our baby already.”

He surged to his feet and bent over her, bringing his face close to hers. "I love his mother just as much."

"I know." She barely managed to get the words out before he captured her mouth with his.

Soon they were lost in the throes of passion. Elise's legs wrapped around him as he moved within her, responding to her urgings. When he'd first realized she was pregnant, he had tried to alter their mating, thinking she was now too fragile for such a vigorous workout. Elise would have none of it. Their love making, for the present, remained as wild and as passionate as always. Her moans and sighs of pleasure matched the rhythm of his thrusts, until they turned into cries of release. Her body tightened around his and Kane gave a guttural cry as he too reached his climax.

Afterwards, he picked her up, grabbed a convenient afghan that was on an armchair, and wrapped her in its warmth before sitting down to cuddle in his chair. Elise nuzzled his neck. "Why were you looking so worried when I came in?"

Kane hesitated to tell her, but knew she'd find out one way or another. It was better coming from him. "Someone has found Ryne and is asking about his pictures."

Elise stilled her movements and pulled away, looking up at him with solemn eyes. "The same person who was here?"

He nodded.

"It could be totally innocent. She said she was just writing an article about artists."

"Would she travel all the way to Stump River, if that's all it was?"

Biting her lip, Elise shook her head. "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing... yet." Kane sighed heavily. "Hopefully, Ryne can deal with it and it stops there."

"But what if it doesn't? What if she's working with someone? What if they come here looking for us?"

Kane shifted uncomfortably, not wanting to say the words, but knowing he must. "The Keeping is our most important law. Not just for us, but for our people everywhere. It's kept our kind safe from persecution and allows everyone to live in peace. We can't ignore it just because it's inconvenient."

"Inconvenient?" Elise pushed away from him and abruptly stood up, protectively clutching her belly and the unborn child within. "Our lives, the lives of the pack members..." She choked on the next words. "The life of our child—those are more than inconveniences, Kane!"

“I know.” He got to his feet and wrapped her in his arms, rocking her gently back and forth. “I know. I don’t want our way of life to end. I don’t want to be responsible for ordering the deaths of our friends and family.” Kane put his finger under her chin, forcing her to look at him. He offered what little reassurance there was. “If it comes to that—if it appears that they will find us—we’ll send as many of the young away as possible. Other packs will take them in. Just enough of us will remain behind to make it look real. The humans will say it was just another cult suicide, and whoever these people are that are searching for us will be left with no evidence.” Elise whimpered and he hugged her even more closely. “The Keeping is law. Our existence remains secret, even if it means death.”



# Chapter 11

Mel parked her car on the main street and turned off the engine. It was Monday morning and traffic in Stump River was light. A few vehicles were parked in front of the various businesses; pedestrians strolled down the sidewalks at the kind of leisurely pace you'd never encounter in the hustle and bustle of Chicago. For a moment, Mel absorbed her surroundings, lost in wonder at the differences between the lifestyle before her and what she was accustomed to. There were no exhaust fumes, no angry commuters gesturing rudely at each other, no screeching brakes, no high rise office buildings blocking the view of the sky. Life here appeared so simple and quiet, almost a throwback to a different time.

She stared around for a few moments before focusing on the building directly across the street—Miller's Service Station. The low brick building was white and had a red and blue sign that proclaimed the name of the owner and hours of business. One set of gas pumps was in the front and two large bays for repairing cars were located to the side. A front office with a large plate glass window offered a view inside—no metal bars to prevent break-ins, Mel noted idly. Someone was moving about inside, though with the glare from the sun, she wasn't sure who. Was it Taylor? Lucy, the waitress, said he worked on Mondays, so the chances were good that he was in there. Now, what was she going to do about it? There'd been no message from him this morning, not that she'd really expected there to be one, but she'd hoped.

Since he hadn't contacted her, she assumed he was still undecided about the interview. The question was, should she go over there and talk to him? If she did, maybe she could convince him to agree. On the other hand, maybe he'd get upset, thinking she was pushy, and flat out refuse. She furrowed her brow, weighing her options.

When no clear answer came to mind, she struck the steering wheel in frustration and then yelped. She'd hit the horn by accident and it was honking... continuously. Startled, Mel stared at the wheel for a moment before her brain finally kicked in and she began frantically jiggling the

annoying feature. By the time she stopped the noise, everyone in the entire two block expanse of downtown Stump River was looking her way. Even Josh and Beth Kennedy were standing in the doorway of the Gazette. Giving a shy wave at her temporary landlords, she sunk down in her seat knowing her face was flushing with mortification.

Hopefully, the little incident didn't make the front page of the paper. After all, not much seemed to happen in a town of this size. A stuck horn on a car could be big news. As she hid from view, Mel pictured the headlines; *Foreigner Creates Havoc in Downtown Core*. She shook her head ruefully. Damn, this never happened in a movie when the heroine hit the steering wheel. Why did these things always happen to her? Rubbing her sore hand—the steering wheel had been harder than she'd expected—she reflected that the person in the movie never hurt their hand, either.

After several minutes of hiding out below the dashboard, Mel slowly sat up and looked around. Everyone had gone about their business. Traffic was moving normally and no one was staring out of their windows wondering who the idiot in the blue car might be. Relieved to no longer be the centre of attention, she got out of the car and headed into the diner. There was no point in sitting outside, when she could be inside drinking coffee and possibly eating a Danish. Food could be such a source of comfort, she mused. Besides, since she'd have a perfect view of the service station, she could put it on her expense tab as 'surveillance.'

Five minutes later she was sitting ensconced at a table, happily munching on a fresh cherry cheese Danish and drinking a cup of coffee. She'd ordered a half decaf-half regular mix, since she was trying to cut back on her caffeine habit and was feeling rather pleased with herself for her efforts. Eyeing the thick, fresh baked Danish slathered in icing, she wondered if she should have ordered it with half the calories, if only such a thing were possible. Still, she had to eat to keep her strength up, and there were cherries in the pastry, so that must mean it had some redeeming qualities. Surely at least one vitamin or antioxidant had survived the baking process. Mel laughed at her own train of thought; she'd do anything to justify her favourite foods!

Licking a stray bit of icing off of her finger, Mel checked out her surroundings more carefully than she had the previous day. The diner was bright and clean, with white counters and red vinyl covered seats. Red checked curtains hung from the large plate glass window, tied back so as to not obstruct the view of the street. A white board had daily specials

listed on it, and a glass display case showed a variety of homemade baked goods.

It was only moderately busy inside the establishment, with just one waitress and the chef on duty. Mel had inquired about Lucy when she arrived—she'd liked the waitress when she talked to her yesterday—but discovered that Monday was her day off. Disappointed, but not daunted, Mel started up a random conversation with Ruth and Al, the waitress and the chef, who turned out to be co-owners of the business as well. Both were sitting at the nearby counter, idly chatting with customers before the noon hour rush.

By time she was done with her Danish, she'd learned that the citizens of Stump River liked Ryne, Bryan, and Daniel. Ruth reported that the local women drooled over them.

"All three are definite hunks and very talented lovers, if even half the rumours can be believed." Ruth told her in a stage whisper, the thin knob of hair on top of her head bobbing up and down as she nodded emphatically. The woman's cheeks were stained pink as if uttering the words alone were enough to turn her on and she was dramatically pressing her hand to her meagre bosom.

Al had scoffed at Ruth's description. "Quit all that foolish talk, Ruth. They're all 'real men,' not like those sissies you watch on your soap operas." Al rubbed his bristly chin and leaned back, his elbows propped on the counter. "Those three fellows are honest, hard-workers. I've seen them hauling supplies at the lumber yard and they barely break a sweat. More important, they know the value of silence and don't go around talking your ear off, like some folks do." He stared pointedly at Ruth as he made that last comment. She responded by hitting him on the shoulder and shooing him into the kitchen to start heating up the soup for lunch. He complied but not before pinching Ruth's bottom.

Mel laughed softly to herself as she listened to the banter between the husband and wife team. It seemed to be a relationship of opposites. Al was short, well-rounded and a man of few words while Ruth was tall, on the thin side and appeared to love a good gossip. They seemed to bicker quite a bit, but she could tell by the looks they exchanged, that they cared deeply for each other. Stump River seemed to be the place to find solid marriages. Josh and Beth, Al and Ruth... She wondered how many other such couples were in town. Ryne and Lucy? Were they close to tying the knot? Mel frowned wondering why that idea had popped into her head.

Probably because the man in question was right across the street from her, she decided. He was putting gas in a car for a little old lady. From her vantage point in the diner, she watched him chatting away to the customer while providing basic service to her vehicle.

It was hard to miss how his black t-shirt clung to his torso, giving an excellent view of his muscles as he moved his arm back and forth while cleaning the windshield. When he bent over to check the oil, Mel saw how his tight rear-end filled out his low-slung jeans—no plumber’s crack there, she chuckled to herself.

He stood up and laughed at something the woman said. The whiteness of his teeth was apparent even from across the street and Mel was sure she could see a twinkle in his amazingly blue eyes. An unexpected wave of desire hit her and she blinked, realizing that she was actually leaning forward, as if trying to get closer to the man. Possibly sensing someone was watching him, he looked up, staring straight across the street at her.

Mel drew back and snatched up the menu from the table, pretending rapt interest in its contents. Surely, he hadn’t seen her ogling him? She peeked over the edge of the menu, and then hid again. He was still looking her way! Mortified at being caught acting like a school girl with a secret crush, she wondered why she was so intent on checking out his physical attributes. Yes, he was good looking, but she was here to do a job, and it didn’t include lusting over the man. Perhaps, it was all hormonal. It had been quite a while since she’d been with someone, so of course, a hot looking guy would seem even more appealing than usual, regardless of his personality.

Briefly glancing across the road, she experienced a mixture of relief and disappointment, when she noted that the customer had left, and Taylor was no longer outside. She exhaled, blowing a stream of air upwards, causing her bangs to ruffle in the breeze. Fanning herself with the menu, she regained control of her wayward thoughts and focused on her real purpose—surveillance.

Sitting up straighter in her seat, she took a calming breath, straightened her clothes, and then casually glanced across the street. Darn! He was still inside and she’d wanted one more peek... No! Stop that. He was the next best thing to an interviewee, and getting involved was never a good idea. It skewed your perception of what the person told you during the interview. Besides, Taylor was involved with Lucy and Mel didn’t poach on another woman’s territory.

A little voice felt it was important to point out that the waitress had left Mel with the impression that the two had a rather loose relationship; it seemed more a 'friends with benefits' type of thing... Mel pulled a face. It didn't matter either way. Sure, the man was good looking—sort of a sexy, bad-ass kind of a guy—but she didn't really know him, and the little bit of conversation they'd had, hadn't been that cordial. Lucy was welcome to him... wasn't she? But if that was the case, then why did the idea of him being with the waitress, irk her? She realized that she was scowling and determinedly cleared her expression.

Figuratively throwing her hands up in despair over her own confusing thoughts, Mel drained her cup and checked the time. She was surprised to find that it was eleven-thirty. The diner was starting to fill with the luncheon crowd and, since she wasn't really hungry, she probably should go, so there would be room for other customers.

Getting to her feet, she picked up her purse and stepped outside. It was another beautiful spring day, and having nothing better to do with her time, Mel decided to go for a walk. The main street was only two blocks long, but there were a few side streets as well. With a smile, she set off to explore the little town.

Forty-five minutes later, she found herself standing in front of Miller's Service Station having discovered almost all of what the little town had to offer. Now, she faced the same dilemma with which she'd started the day; did she go in and talk to Taylor or leave him alone? Nibbling her lip, she weighed the pros and cons of each course of action.

"Adding 'stalker' to your list of crimes now?"

The sound of a deep, male voice speaking behind her had Mel giving a little scream and turning quickly. Unfortunately, she lost her balance and started to fall backwards, tipping off the curb and stumbling onto the street. Simultaneously, several things happened. A horn blared, Ryne grabbed her, pulling her flush against his body and a truck whizzed by.

It had happened so quickly, all she could do was gape up at him.

"Suicidal, too?" Ryne was staring down at her, his expression somewhere between anger and exasperation.

Mel was mesmerized by the intense blue of his eyes and only slowly became aware of the way their bodies fit together. Her mouth was level with his throat, her hands pressed to his chest and his hips snugly cradled her stomach. She could see his throat move as he swallowed, feel the strong beating of his heart, and smell the very male scent of him wrapping itself around her. Unthinkingly, she allowed her fingers to

spread out over the hard planes of his chest, while her gaze focused on his lips. They were firm, the lower one slightly fuller and curved into a... a smirk?

Suddenly recognizing the situation she was in, Melody looked him in the eye. He was laughing at her—oh, not out loud—but she could tell from his expression, he was laughing at her. She struggled to step away, but he merely locked his arms more tightly around her.

“Let me go!”

“That’s all you ever say to me.” He sighed and pretended to pout.

“That’s because you’re always grabbing me!”

“And you’d rather I let you fall into the street, right into the path of a delivery van?” Ryne tilted his head questioningly.

Mel stopped struggling as the gravity of what almost happened hit her. “No. I suppose I should thank you.”

Ryne nodded and looked at her expectantly.

“What?” Mel frowned and then realized what he wanted. She huffed, still thoroughly put out by the man, even if he did save her life. “Okay. Fine. Thank you, Ryne Taylor, for pulling me to safety. Now let me go.”

“Is that all?”

“All?”

“Just a thank you? Saving your life surely deserves something more... personal... tangible... than a mere ‘thank you.’ Actions speak louder than words, you know.” He winked at her and then grinned evilly.

Mel closed her eyes and counted to ten, knowing exactly what he wanted. All right. She’d kiss him and then, if he didn’t let her go, she’d knee him in the groin. Opening her eyes, she stood on tiptoe and placed a chaste kiss on his lips. At least it was supposed to be a chaste kiss. No sooner had their lips touched than Ryne immediately took control.

Using one of his hands to cradle the back of her head, he angled their mouths, pressing his lips to hers, stroking the seam of her lips with his tongue. Of its own volition, her mouth opened in response to his implied request. His tongue skimmed the smooth inner surface of her lower lip before venturing deeper. Words couldn’t even begin to describe the sensations that coursed through her. Mel’s entire body tingled and she pressed herself closer, wanting even more contact with him. A moan escaped her, desire starting to uncurl within. She was trying to work her hands free in order to pull him closer, when suddenly she found herself standing a foot away.

She blinked in surprise. “What?”

Ryne smirked, seemingly cool, and unaffected by their encounter. "Okay, so you're a trespasser, a stalker, have suicidal tendencies, and you're a sex maniac."

"Sex maniac!"

He nodded. "You're the one that kissed me."

"But you said..." Mel sputtered, unable to finish the sentence, she was so enraged.

"I said something tangible would be nice to go with the thank you. It could have been a cup of coffee or a handshake. You just assumed it was a kiss."

Mel narrowed her eyes and glared.

"You also disturbed the peace this morning." He folded his arms and gave her a look that was reminiscent of the one given her by the police last time she'd been caught speeding. "That was your horn, wasn't it?"

"Ooh!" Not even realizing what she was doing, Mel stamped her foot in frustration and Ryne burst out laughing. She gave him an 'I wish you would drop dead' look and turned to leave only to find herself jerked back when he grabbed her arm.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?" He'd stopped laughing, but was still smiling.

Mel tugged on her arm and spoke through clenched teeth. "I'm leaving before I do something I'll regret."

"Really? So you don't regret anything you've done up to this point, like trespassing, or stalking me, or kissing me?"

It took Mel a moment to figure out that he was implying she'd enjoyed kissing him. For a brief second, she considered denying it, but figured he'd somehow or other twist that around, too. Instead she switched to one of his other accusations. "I'm not stalking you."

"No? You scaled my gate on Saturday. You parked outside my place on Sunday—my friend, Bryan, told me about that one—and today you've sat in the diner across from where I work and watched every move I made. Sorry, honey. That's stalking."

"I was not watching every move you made."

"Correction. You couldn't see inside the building but every time I stepped out, I could feel you watching me."

"You were only out once." Mel folded her arms and affected a pout, staring blindly at the building behind him, rather than looking at his irritating—but oh so handsome—face. After a brief moment she winced, realizing she'd just given herself away. If she hadn't been watching him, how would she have known he only came out once? Damn! If he was

paying attention—and she was sure he was—he'd have the goods on her!

"Stalker." He taunted back. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. His hands were casually tucked in his back pockets and he had a look of infinite patience on his face, as if he'd wait forever until she conceded.

Mel exhaled gustily and ran her hands through her hair, pushing it away from her warm face; their verbal sparring was causing her to feel hot and flushed. "All right. I was sort of... stalking you."

Ryne grinned happily. "See? That wasn't so hard to admit. You know, I've never had a stalker before."

"Really?" She was surprised that someone with his amazingly good looks had never been followed around by a woman.

"Nope." He headed inside the service station and she hurried after him, intrigued. "Most women take one look at me and just openly throw themselves at my feet."

Mel snorted and rolled her eyes. "Not conceited much, are you?"

Now inside the building, Ryne turned to face her, leaning against a workbench. "I prefer to call it having a healthy self-esteem." When she raised an eyebrow at him, he just laughed. "So, Melody Greene, aka stalker girl, I hear you want to interview me." He suddenly looked serious and it took Mel a moment to switch gears and organize her thoughts.

"Um... yeah... I mean, yes... Yes, of course. I do want to interview you."

"Why?"

The coldness of his eyes sent a shiver down her spine and Mel had to wonder where the man she'd just been talking to had gone. Eyes that cold could belong to a murderer. Maybe he was responsible for that missing sales clerk! No, she'd already decided that wasn't a plausible theory. Still feeling a bit nervous, she licked her lips and gave a carefully worded answer. "Well, I'm trying to write a paper on up and coming artists and I've seen some of your work and thought it was good. Really good."

Ryne didn't say anything. He just gave her a considering look, as if trying to decide whether or not he believed her. Abruptly he stood up, his movement bringing him into her personal space. She stepped back and swallowed. Something about him seemed threatening, over-powering, and she found herself staring at the ground, unable to meet his eyes. What sounded like a rather satisfied rumble came from his chest and she dared to glance up at him. He was still staring at her, but it wasn't so



scary now. It was more a look of interest, as if he found her puzzling, but fascinating. Mel swallowed and cleared her throat.

"I... I think the interview would be beneficial to your career."

"You'll need to convince me of that."

"Well—"

He interrupted, reaching around her to grab his coat, which was on a hook beside her. Mel jumped back as his arm brushed against her breast and electrical waves went through her. Ryne didn't seem to notice and talked as if there'd been no contact between them. "I'm done here; I only work until noon on Mondays. Meet me for supper at The Broken Antler at six-thirty. You can convince me then."

His sudden change of topic, once again had Mel floundering. She hurried after him as he walked out of the building. "The Broken Antler?"

"Uh-huh. It's the bar next door. They have great burgers, hotdogs, chilli, chicken fingers—that sort of stuff."

Not sure what else to do, but agree, Mel nodded. "All right. Six thirty."

Ryne didn't respond. He simply walked away, got in a black pickup truck, and drove away.

# Chapter 12

Ryne headed for home, mulling about his encounter with Melody Greene. He hadn't meant to approach her—to interact as he had—but seeing her standing just yards away, he suddenly found himself walking towards her and starting a conversation. Damn his inner wolf!

She was a funny little thing, and not about to back down from him either. Chuckling, he thought of how easy it was to tease her. Mind you, she'd held her own, dishing out some good comebacks. Sparring with her was fun, invigorating even. He liked a woman who kept him on his toes and she certainly did that. There was a fire within her, as well. A grin spread across his face as he recalled how her cheeks turned pink and her brown eyes flashed with temper.

On some level, she appealed to him physically as well. He'd sensed his wolf humming in approval when he'd carried her from his house the other day and then today, when she'd kissed him... Ryne recalled the feel of her lush breasts pressed against him, her hot mouth moving under his, her soft sighs tickling his ears—thank heavens he'd had enough sense to break it off when he had. For a moment during the kiss, the memories of pleasuring her while she slept had taken over and he'd been tempted to continue where he'd left off. It was a good thing he'd pushed her away before she noticed his arousal. Ryne shifted uncomfortably in his seat, the path his mind was following still having an effect on him. Seeking to quell his growing erection, he turned his thoughts to less pleasant matters.

The girl claimed she wanted to interview him because she'd liked his work as a photographer, but he'd sensed some deception on her part. Between werewolves, lies were hard to detect, but humans were less adept at hiding their true selves. The dilation of her pupils, the tilt of her head, a certain quality of voice and breathing patterns, all led him to believe that Ms. Greene had told him a part truth, but not the whole truth. How had she tracked him down? What was she hiding? What was her real agenda?

He stopped the truck as he reached the gated edge of his territory. Climbing out, he dealt with the lock, drove the truck through, and then secured the gate again, pausing for a moment to enjoy the scenery. Tall pines rose up on either side of the driveway, acting like sentinels that guarded the privacy of his home. Unlike much of the surrounding area, this forest was untouched and unharvested. Decaying logs, the remains of ancient trees, were scattered on the ground in amongst young saplings and strong maturing conifers. Patches of snow were still visible but Ryne knew in another month ferns, wild flowers and other forms of natural vegetation would carpet the forest floor. Already, signs of animal life were increasing as the temperatures warmed. Tracks from a myriad of creatures tattooed the muddy ground while birds chirped and twittered overhead in the trees. This would be his first spring on his own land and he was anxious to explore his domain without a concealing blanket of snow. A wolf needed to become one with his territory, knowing every wrinkle in the land, the placement of each plant. Like a lover, he would watch it breathe and grow, sensing its moods, caring for it, guarding it against those who dared to trespass. He inhaled deeply, taking in the earthy, woodsy scents. *Mine*, both he and his wolf declared.

Ryne knew some of the locals wondered about his obsessive need for privacy, the large gate, the plethora of warning signs, but no one was pressing for answers. That was one nice thing about Stump River. The people were friendly, but not too nosey, seeming to be content to leave each other alone. Maybe it was all part of their Canadian heritage. When researching the country, he'd read about their concept of being a 'cultural mosaic' where individuality was encouraged rather than a 'melting pot' that expected everyone to blend in and conform. It was one of the reasons he'd chosen to move here. With any luck, people would leave him alone and his 'culture' would be allowed to flourish alongside that of the other citizens. Provided someone didn't mess it up.

This brought his thoughts back to Melody Greene. Frowning, he climbed back in his truck and drove towards the house. Which pictures of his had she seen? He didn't care about the sunsets or the birds or the wildflowers. It was one particular picture featuring his brother Kane in his wolf form that worried him. Anyone studying the picture—at least anyone who knew anything about wolves—would immediately see that the animal in the picture was unique, a brand new species, in fact. Well, technically not a *new* species—werewolves had existed since the beginning of time—they were just adept at keeping their existence hidden. Of

course, there were rumours and supposed sightings, but most of those were attributed to hysteria and folklore.

It wasn't hysteria, Ryne thought to himself. He did exist. His family and friends, his whole species existed, and flourished, but only due to carefully guarding their secret. It hadn't always been that way. Long ago, werewolves had been hunted to the very brink of extinction. That was when the Book of the Law had emerged; the product of his people's desperation. The few remaining packs had gathered and banded together, creating a set of laws, which, if followed, would safeguard their existence. And since that time, it had worked. True, in the beginning there had been terrible sacrifices—complete relocation of every pack in order to make a fresh start, whole packs needing to be destroyed when the careless or defiant actions of a few led to their discovery, actual pack wars erupting when one group refused to bend to the law—but those difficulties had merely created greater determination in those that remained. Eventually, the universal good had outweighed the losses. Their existence had faded from human memory until only a few whispered rumours remained.

For the most part, his people had lived undetected over the past couple of centuries. Alliances between packs had strengthened their common bond, the need to be careful, to avoid excessive attention, became ingrained into their way of life. Peace and prosperity was enjoyed by all; the dangers of the past were now but a distant memory for most. Who would have thought that a simple snapshot might undo centuries of progress?

Ryne recalled the day as clearly as if it were yesterday. He'd been out taking pictures and had come across his brother in his wolf form. On a whim, he'd snapped a picture of Kane, and when he'd seen how well the picture turned out, he'd enlarged it, and had it mounted. It was supposed to be for the family, not publicly shown, but his ex-girlfriend had taken it, and then sold it, and now... Well, the exact severity of the fallout had yet to be determined.

According to Kane's report, Melody Greene had told Elise that she'd heard of his wolf photograph, but hadn't actually seen it. But was that the truth? Did she know the significance? Had she realized, or had someone told her, that it was probably the only picture of a real live werewolf in existence today? And if she knew, what did she plan on doing about it? Or was she really just interested in his work for its artistic merit? It was a possibility, but he was too much of a realist to hope for

that. The worst case scenario was that she would figure out where the picture was taken and use the information to find Kane and his pack.

Ryne clenched his hands around the steering wheel. He couldn't allow that to happen. The idea of his entire family entering into a suicide pact in order to preserve the safety of their race was unthinkable. He'd do whatever he had to do in order to save them. If need be, the secret of that location would die here in Stump River.

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Mel checked her watch. It was exactly six-thirty. She stood outside the Broken Antler and nervously wiped her sweaty palms on the legs of her jeans. Hopefully, what she was wearing was appropriate. Meeting with someone for an interview would usually call for more professional attire, but considering the location Ryne had chosen, that hadn't seemed too suitable. Instead, she'd settled on dark wash jeans and a pretty T-shirt with some chunky jewellery for accent.

Clothes weren't really that important to her, but knowing you looked good and were dressed appropriately did provide a boost of confidence. And confidence was what she needed right now. She didn't usually go into bars—at least not ones as seedy looking as this one—by herself. Hopefully, the interior was in better repair than the exterior. Taking in the faded paint, cracked cement and the burnt out lights in the sign, Mel decided the location matched Ryne's personality—very rough around the edges.

The man was sarcastic and rude plus she could tell he enjoyed taunting her. How she'd ever survive interviewing him, without doing him bodily harm, she wasn't sure. If it wasn't for the large sum of money already in her bank account, and the promise of more to come, she might actually back out. However, she'd made a deal with Aldrich and his client, Greyson, and she wasn't a quitter. Though, as she eyed a boarded up window and the shards of glass on the ground below it, perhaps now was the time to start? She wondered if the window been broken because someone was thrown through it, and gulped at the very idea.

A breeze swept down the street and she shivered—her denim jacket was not providing much protection against the cool evening wind. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed the handle and yanked open the heavy wooden door while eyeing the antlers that hung drunkenly overhead, hoping they wouldn't fall on her. Luckily, they only swayed slightly and Mel quickly scooted inside, not wanting to tempt gravity, nor the old rusty chain that suspended them.

The interior of the bar was slightly better than she'd hoped. It appeared clean, though the smell of beer and fried food overwhelmed any scent of cleaning fluid that might have confirmed the fact. For the most part the decor was unremarkable and could have been located anywhere on the continent. As she'd expected, the lighting was dim, the air stale and pedestal tables with worn chairs were scattered about the large room. One wall contained a big screen TV, another had racks of pool cues and dart boards, while a bar occupied the third wall. Rows of glasses and bottles of liquor lined shelves backed by an old mirror that had seen better days. In front of the spirits, a large, dark-haired man, who closely resembled a bear in a plaid flannel shirt, stood lazily drying glasses. He was talking to the patrons who sat around the scarred wooden structure of the bar. A quick perusal told her that none of the men there were Ryne.

Mel shifted her gaze from the room's decor and began to examine each table, wondering if Ryne was here, or if she'd arrived before him. Seeing no sign of him, she twisted the strap of her purse in her hands, considering her options; sit at a table or at the bar? A few patrons were glancing her way with mild curiosity, but most just ignored her. Still, she felt conspicuous and moved towards the bar, eyeing a seat near the wall with a good view of the door. She'd sit there and wait for Ryne to arrive.

Settling onto a bar stool, she smiled politely at the man beside her and then fixed her gaze on the door. Minutes ticked by and she shifted uncomfortably. What if he stood her up? She furrowed her brow. No, this had been his idea. He'd be here... wouldn't he? Nervously, she began to nibble on her lower lip, wondering how long she should wait. Unexpectedly, a large hand attached to a very hairy arm appeared in her peripheral vision and she instinctively jerked away, spinning around to see who it belonged to.

"What can I get you, little lady?" The bear in the flannel shirt was the owner of the arm. His deep gravelly voice had a bit of an accent, possibly French, she decided. He seemed to be looming over her and she fought the urge to cringe.

"Nothing, thank you. I'm just waiting for someone." Mel smiled politely and made to turn away when he spoke again.

"And who would that be?" When she hesitated, he smiled at her revealing a mouthful of large teeth that seemed all the whiter for the black facial hair that grew profusely on his chin. "I know everyone who lives here."

"Er... Ryne Taylor."

“Ryne, you say?” He chuckled and Mel had a feeling from the look on his face that a lot of women had sat in this very spot waiting for Ryne. “Well, you won’t have to wait long.”

“Really?” Again Mel tried to turn towards the door, but the bartender—his name tag said Armand—gently took her by the shoulder and spun her bar stool to face the far corner of the room. A movement in that area caught her attention. As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, she realized it was caused by the man she was looking for. He was leaning back casually in his chair, drinking beer and studying her with an impassive expression. As she made eye contact, he nodded and took another swig.

“Thank you.” She gave the bartender a tight smile and hopped off the stool. She could feel him watching her progress across the room, but shrugged it off, focusing on her target instead.

Weaving between the partially filled tables, Mel wondered how long Taylor would have left her cooling her heels before coming to get her. The man really was insufferable. When she finally reached her destination, she was sure the anger inside her would have steam rising from her collar. She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to it.

“Sit.”

Frowning at the command—she wasn’t a dog, after all—Mel pulled out a chair and plunked herself down, all the while wondering why she was complying rather than defiantly remaining on her feet. Her temper rose even further when she noted the smirk on the man’s face. Well, she’d deal with that right now!

“And a good evening to you, too. Why thank you. Yes, I’d love to have a seat. What a gentleman you were, to come and meet me at the bar, like that. Oh, it’s lovely to see you again, too. What’s that? The rest of my day? It was fine, thanks for asking.” Mel held a mocking conversation with herself.

Ryne blinked and raised his eyebrows.

“That, you insufferable jerk, is how most people start out an evening. It’s called polite conversation.” Mel chastised him, not about to put up with his rude behaviour.

Slowly, he took another swig of beer before responding. “Well, you seem to know how it’s done all on your own, so why should I bother?”

“Because...” Mel stopped herself and snapped her mouth shut. He was doing it again. Getting her all worked up with his little games. She wouldn’t get caught by that again. Tonight, she was a professional.

"Never mind." Settling back in her seat, she forced a polite smile on to her face and said nothing.

Minutes ticked by and silence reigned over the table. Ryne sipped his beer and Mel stared at the TV trying to appear as if the newscast, about a now disgraced sports figure, held her riveted. She kept her hands tightly clasped in her lap and fought the urge to fidget. Finally, relief came. With her peripheral vision, Mel saw Ryne signal the server. When the woman approached the table, Mel turned ready to greet her as a long lost relative.

It wasn't a long lost relative, but at that moment, Mel was sure the woman was the next best thing.

"Hey, it's Mel!" The server grinned and Mel grinned back, pleased to see a friendly face. It was Lucy, the waitress at the diner from the previous day.

"Mel?" Ryne looked at her incredulously. "That's the name of a guy who comes to fix your toilet."

"No it's not. It's a perfectly respectable nickname for Melody." Mel defended her name hotly while Lucy lightly hit him on the head with the menus she was holding.

"Ouch! Cut that out, Lucy." Ryne grabbed the woman's wrist and took the menus from her. "That's no way to treat a customer. You keep that up and I'll complain to Armand."

"Armand won't do anything; I have him wrapped around my little finger. You just be nice to my friend, Mel." Lucy didn't seem in the least worried by Ryne's threat. She pulled her wrist out of his hand, planted a quick kiss on his cheek, and sashayed away, calling over her shoulder. "If he gives you any trouble, you come see me Mel."

"Thanks, I will." Mel felt considerably better after the exchange and turned to face Ryne. This time she was the one smirking. Knowing that she had an ally in the building gave her more confidence. He was staring at her again, but his expression seemed friendlier than it had when she arrived.

"Mel." He seemed to be trying the name out as he looked at her. Finally, he shook his head. "Nope. You just don't look like a Mel. To me, you're a Melody."

"You and my mother." Mel sighed.

"Your mother?"

"Yeah. My mother's sort of a free-spirited, hippie type. She was going through a song writing stage when I was born and decided to call me Melody."



"I like it."

Mel blinked, surprised by the sincerity of his comment. "Well... that's good, I guess." She giggled as a thought struck her. "I suppose I should be thankful that Mom wasn't in her sewing and quilting stage at the time or I might have been called bobbin or thimble."

Ryne's rich chuckle ran over her like a warm breeze and his countenance suddenly seemed less imposing. Mel felt the tension easing in her shoulders and she smiled as she looked at the man seated across from her. Here was the man that Beth and Ruth had been talking about—the sexy, charming heartthrob that had put the female population of Stump River into a stir. His eyes were twinkling and his grin showed off white teeth, which contrasted wonderfully with the stubbly shadow that was appearing on his lower face. It was enough to melt the coldest of hearts; Mel felt hers give an extra thump and suddenly her mouth seemed dry.

Thankfully, Lucy returned with cutlery and glasses of water. As the waitress took their orders, Mel had a chance to compose herself. Ryne might be hot, but he also seemed arrogant and she had no intention of feeding his already inflated ego. Having managed to get herself under control, and with the ice broken between them, they settled down to some friendly banter as they watched TV and ate. Mel made her pitch as to the benefits of an interview and Ryne asked friendly questions about her life. By the time they had finished eating, Mel decided that Ryne could be reasonably polite if he put his mind to it. Maybe interviewing him wouldn't be quite the ordeal she'd imagined it would be.

When he excused himself from the table, she watched him cross the room, her chin propped in her hand. He really did have a nice tight rear, she thought to herself.

"Mighty fine butt, eh?" Lucy nudged Mel, shaking her out of her trance. The waitress had come to clear the table and must have noticed the direction of Mel's gaze.

"What? Oh. Yeah. Sorry." Mel felt embarrassed, recalling that Lucy already had dibs on the owner of the fine butt.

"Sorry for what?" Lucy glanced her way while gathering their dirty dishes onto a large tray and wiping down the table.

"Well, for... you know." Mel shrugged. "I mean you and Ryne..."

Lucy chuckled and sat down in Ryne's seat, propping her feet up on an empty chair from the next table. "Listen Mel, Ryne is a good looking man. If you didn't notice, I'd have to wonder about you."

Mel relaxed, happy that Lucy didn't think she was trespassing. "Thanks for understanding. Have you known him long?"

"Ever since he moved here back in November." She reached out and stole some popcorn from the complimentary basket on the table. "I still remember the day he and his two friends—Bryan and Daniel—walked in. Everybody in the whole place just sort of froze and stared, women and men alike. Ryne stood looking around the room—I swear he made eye-contact with every person there—and then he just ordered three beers, walked over here and sat down like he'd always lived here. After a few minutes, everything returned to normal. It was sort of weird, you know?" She shrugged and crunched more popcorn.

"I agree. That was sort of strange, wasn't it? I mean, I walked in here and no one noticed."

"Yeah, I don't know what it is about those guys, but they sort of command attention, especially Ryne. Bryan too, but in a different sort of a way. Daniel's still young, but he gets his fair share of respect as well."

"Daniel? I haven't met him yet."

"Oh he's a real sweetie. Kind of quiet, but really nice. He looks to be around eighteen, I'd say. Works part time at the lumber yard, so does Bryan, for that matter."

"And Ryne? How old is he?"

"That I do know!" She winked knowingly. "We... er... celebrated together a few weeks ago. He just turned twenty-seven. I'm not sure how old Bryan is."

"I met him the other day outside Ryne's place. He seemed friendly."

"Oh, he is and he has a good left hook on him, too."

"Left hook?"

"Yep." Lucy picked up Ryne's glass and took a sip. She glanced at Mel and winked. "Ryne won't mind sharing."

Mel was anxious to hear more about Bryan fighting—after all if she was going to be interviewing Ryne, she'd be around his friends and if they were violent, she'd like to know. "So, Bryan fights a lot?"

"No, not really. It was just that one time, but it was mighty spectacular. They'd been here about two weeks and it was a really busy night. A group of bikers had stopped in and were hanging around the pool table, giving all of us girls a hard time. One of them wouldn't leave this one girl, Annie, alone, so I went over there to try to help her, but the guy just shoved me away and his friends grabbed me. I called out for Armand, but suddenly Ryne and Bryan were there. Bryan slugged him and sent him through the window—that's why it's boarded up now."

Mel was sure her eyes were the size of saucers. The pool table was at least six feet from the window. She could just imagine how hard Bryan

must have swung to move a man that distance. No, on second thought, Lucy was probably exaggerating. Most likely the fellow was standing in front of the window to begin with. Still, she was curious to hear about the rest of the encounter and prodded for more details. "And what about Ryne?"

"Well, somehow he managed to take out the two who were holding me. It all happened so fast, that no one could figure out what happened, exactly. One minute the guys were grabbing at me and the next they were flat out on the ground. And Ryne didn't even have a scratch on him." Lucy shook her head, obviously still in wonder at the occurrence. "Anyway, the other bikers were just sort of frozen, like they were really scared. They just backed out of the room and drove off, leaving their friends behind. Then Ryne and Bryan helped clean up the mess, dragged the two that were on the floor outside and made sure Annie and I were okay. Armand let us leave early. Bryan drove Annie home, and Ryne walked me home..." Lucy grinned. "I gave him a big thank you once we got to my place, if you know what I mean."

Mel did know what she meant and again wondered why the idea bothered her. She wasn't a prude. People had sex; she knew that. It was just... She struggled to explain it, but came up empty.

# Chapter 13

Ryne stood in the darkened hallway that led to the bar's washrooms. He had a perfect view of Melody or 'Mel' as she called herself. He snorted. It was a ridiculous name for a female and she was definitely a female. The way her jeans clung to her ass and her t-shirt stretched over her breasts, left him in no doubt of the fact.

He'd planned on being as rude and sarcastic as possible this evening, goading her into getting mad and stomping out or at least rethinking wanting to interview him. But then Lucy had come over and he'd heard the name 'Mel' and... Well... His great intentions had somehow been sidetracked. She was proving to be pleasant company, and seemed genuine in all that she said. There was no hint of deception about her tonight. Maybe he'd been wrong this afternoon when he thought she was hiding something—he hoped he was. Melody was sort of growing on him. His wolf rumbled in agreement.

Right now, Lucy was talking to her. He strained his ears, trying to make out what they were saying over the blare of the TV and the laughter of the crowd at the bar. Unfortunately, there was too much background noise for that to be possible. Narrowing his eyes, he considered his next move. He was still concerned about the possible implications of her being in Stump River, but a voice inside his head hinted that sending her away so quickly wasn't in his best interests. Getting to know your enemy was always a good strategy and if she wasn't here, who knew what she'd be up to? No, keeping her in Stump River, where he could keep an eye on her, was a better plan.

He'd managed to find out a bit about her, interviewing her without her being aware. She was working her way through school, her car was on its last legs, she lived by herself, and her only relative was a mother in Florida. There was nothing apparently threatening in what he'd discovered so far, but he tucked the information in the back of his mind for future examination.

Lucy was leaving the table now. Ryne knew he'd have to return soon or Mel would think he'd run out on her. Running out wasn't what he planned on doing. No, he was going to stick extremely close and find out what she was really up to. He'd decided to grant her an interview—an edited version of course. In that way he'd be nearby in case—he didn't want to think too deeply about that right now, but as Alpha he needed to face reality and so forced himself to continue the thought—in case something needed to be done. The idea of carrying out the Keeping was no more palatable now, than it had been earlier on.

Pushing off from the wall, he sauntered across the room to where Mel was waiting and sat down. "I see Lucy was keeping you company."

"Uh-huh. She was telling me all your dirty little secrets."

Ryne stiffened in his chair, suddenly wary. "Such as...?"

Mel looked at him strangely. "Nothing bad—it's just a figure of speech, you know."

Mentally kicking himself, he relaxed and tried to cover his mistake. "Well, with Lucy you never know."

"Relax. She was actually quite complimentary to you. Apparently, you and your friend Bryan saved her and another girl from the clutches of some big, bad bikers."

Casually slouching back in his chair, Ryne felt a wave of relief wash over him. Of course, Lucy didn't know any of his secrets; she wasn't even aware that he had secrets. It was just that this whole damned situation had him on edge. He cast an easy smile at Mel, keeping his lids lowered so she'd have no glimpse of his inner turmoil, and raised his hand towards the bar. Armand nodded, catching his request for more beer. Ryne was always amazed at how the man could catch the smallest flick of a finger when it involved the ordering of liquid refreshments, but could turn a completely blind eye to some of the other, more dubious goings on that occurred at the establishment.

"So," Mel prodded. "Are you going to tell me about the bikers?"

"There's really nothing to tell. They were a bunch of losers. We took care of them. End of story."

"Ah, you're modest." She tilted her head and there was a mocking edge to her voice.

"But of course." He smirked and picked up the beer that had silently arrived in front of him.

Mel leaned back and appeared to be studying him. Ryne remained calm under her scrutiny, watching her, noting the expressions flitting across her face. He could see that he puzzled her. She didn't know what

to make of him. Staring at her pupils, he tuned into her breathing, and inhaled her scent. Suppressing a smile, he acknowledged the fact that she was attracted to him. Was she aware of the fact? Possibly, on some level. What would she do, if he pushed the limits? Weighing the benefits and consequences, he decided that if the opportunity presented itself, he'd conduct a little test.

Finally, Mel seemed to have come to a decision about him. "You know, Ryne. I think you're bipolar."

"Oh really? And how did you reach that stunning conclusion?"

"Well, first of all you live behind this fortified gate in the middle of nowhere, with a private phone number and, quite frankly, it was almost impossible to verify your existence. So on one hand, you're an obsessive recluse."

Ryne gave a half shrug. She was partially correct.

"But then, when I finally meet you, you have this nasty attitude, you're rude, and you keep goading me with your comments, so that makes you a sort of a bad-ass character."

"Would that be a *sexy*, bad-ass character?" He wiggled his eye-brows at her and then leaned forward into her personal space, leering.

Mel pushed him back, looking exasperated. "There! That's what I mean—that kind of thing." She took a deep breath before continuing. "And then, you can actually be nice at times. Like at dinner tonight, and when you saved Lucy and, I suppose, you were even being nice when you drove me back to the cabin the other day."

"And don't forget that I didn't press charges for trespassing. That was nice of me, too."

Mel just rolled her eyes and ignored his comment. "So you can see what I mean. You're bipolar."

"Actually 'bi' means two and you described three sides of me. Though, I don't think there is such a thing as tri-polar. Hmm... Maybe I have multiple personalities." He sipped his beer while attempting to look thoughtful.

Throwing up her hands in despair, Mel exhaled loudly. "Whatever. The point is, you're very confusing. It's going to make interviewing you and presenting an accurate portrayal very challenging."

"And do you like challenges?"

"Well... yes. If things are going too easy, it gets boring."

"Then I guess I won't bore you."

She sat up straight and looked at him happily. "So does that mean you'll let me interview you and write an article on your work?"

Ryne hesitated before speaking, not wanting to appear too eager, which he wasn't anyway. It would be better if she thought she was wringing the information out of him. "Probably. I'll let you know for sure in a few days."

"Oh, that's great!" Mel beamed initially and then frowned. "A couple of days? Exactly how many do you consider 'a couple' of days? Two? Three?"

"Something like that. Maybe more." He bit back a smile as he watched her struggle to maintain her composure. She wasn't good at waiting, he decided. Maybe it was time someone taught her the benefits of patience; he was ready to volunteer to do the teaching. Eventually, she exhaled slowly and nodded. Satisfied with himself for having the last word, he drained his beer, checked his watch, and stood up. "I need to get going. There's a kitchen that's waiting for me to start renovating it in the morning."

Pulling on her jacket and grabbing her purse, Mel stood too. "I should be going too. Where do we pay?"

"Never mind. Lucy put everything on my tab."

"Oh, but I can cover the cost. I'm the one that wanted to talk to you."

Ryne shook his head. "No. I pay. Add that to my list of character traits. I'm old fashioned. When I eat out with a lady, I pay." He noticed that she seemed taken aback and was pleased to have once again thrown her off balance. "Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

"You don't have to. I'm just parked..." Mel's voice trailed off as he stared at her, silently willing her to follow his commands. Not surprisingly, she caved in, giving him a quick, tentative smile, as if she wasn't sure what to make of him. "All right, you can walk me to my car."

Pleased that she'd obeyed, he put his hand in the small of her back and guided her out. She was certainly a tiny thing. He'd sensed that when he carried her from the house the other day. Now, as she walked beside him, he noted that her head barely reached his chin. Recalling their earlier kiss and how her body had fit snugly against his, he decided it was the perfect height for him.

All was quiet in downtown Stump River, most of the residents contentedly relaxing in their houses while the various businesses presented darkened windows and locked doors to the few individuals still moving about. One lone car was waiting patiently for the town's only stop light to change to green before continuing on its way to destinations unknown. As the car drove away, its wheels made a faint hissing sound that eventually faded into nothingness as it disappeared from sight.

With the car's departure, they became the only two people on the otherwise deserted street. The faint clicking of Mel's heels on the damp sidewalk was the only sound to break the silence. Overhead the sky was clear of clouds. A crescent moon was hanging low over the silent town and a few stars were starting to make their existence known. Mel shivered in the cool night air; it was still early enough in the spring for the evening temperatures to drop close to freezing after sundown. Ryne noticed that she was chilled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, sharing his body heat. At first she resisted, but eventually relaxed into him. He speculated as to whether she was feeling more at ease around him, or if her need for warmth was outweighing her desire for independence. Either way, he didn't mind.

Adjusting his stride to match her shorter one, he relished the way their thighs occasionally brushed together. Her arms were folded in front of her and, as he glanced down, he noted with a distinctly male appreciation, the fact that she was unconsciously causing her top to gape at the neck, allowing him a satisfying glimpse of her cleavage. Ryne found himself inclining his head towards hers. The scent of her shampoo tickled his nose and he inhaled deeply trying to place it... Green apples, possibly? Whatever it was, it mixed well with her own natural scent as it drifted upwards and wrapped around him.

Her car was, in fact, parked just a block down the road from the Broken Antler and they reached it sooner than he would have liked. As she turned to face him, he leaned in close until her back was up against the vehicle.

"Ryne?" She looked up at him sounding uncertain, as if she wasn't sure what his intentions might be.

Well, he'd thought earlier on that he'd like to run a test to see how attracted she was to him. This was his opportunity. He cupped her face and ran his thumb over her bottom lip, noting how her eyes started to darken. Pressing a bit closer, her breathing hitched and he could see the pulse at the base of her throat quicken. Yes, he definitely affected Melody. He should stop now that he had his answer, but once again his wolf had other ideas.

Slowly, he lowered his head, gauging her response. When their lips were almost touching, he paused and waited. Mel made an indistinct little sound and stretched her neck the tiny amount needed to bring their mouths into contact. Gently, he brushed his lips back and forth across hers, savouring the sweetness of her breath as she exhaled, the softness



of the plump surface, and the tingle of sexual awareness that bounced between them.

He withdrew and let his eyes lock onto hers. They gazed at each other, questions and uncertainty quivering between them, but overriding it all was a desire for more. Of one accord they kissed again, mouths opening to taste and tease. Ryne wrapped his arms around her, drawing her in closer and, in response, he felt her moving her hands move up to clasp his shoulders.

Plunging his tongue into her mouth, he stroked her sensitive upper palate, the soft inner surfaces of her lips, absorbing the essence of her. He withdrew and she followed, exploring him a bit more tentatively and he moaned in encouragement. Breaking away briefly, he tilted his head to change the angle of their connection. She whimpered at the momentary separation and he reassured her with another deep kiss.

She worked her body even closer to him and he widened his stance, feeling the heat pooling in his groin. Experimentally, he brushed against her and she reciprocated. His excitement grew. He grasped her butt, and flexed against her, a low growl escaping his throat. For a moment she seemed to be responding, but then abruptly froze before starting to struggle. Now she was pushing him away, ducking her head to avoid his attempts at nuzzling... It took a minute for his brain to register her withdrawal. Dropping his hands to his side, Ryne stepped back and took a deep, calming breath, forcing the animal within back down. Silence stretched between them. Clearing his throat, Ryne attempted to speak.

"No?"

Mel brushed her hair from her face, looking everywhere but at him. "I... I just met you and I don't hop into bed with a guy the first time I meet him."

"Well, technically this is the third time we've met. Once at my house, at noon today and now for supper." He quirked a smile at her, hopefully hiding how much the encounter had affected him.

"Nice try, Taylor." She shook her head and slid a glance his way.

He shrugged and shoved his hands in his pocket, responding in an indifferent tone. "I didn't think it'd work, but figured I'd give it a shot."

She cocked her head to the side and then gestured between the two of them. "My getting to interview you wasn't contingent on the outcome of this, was it?"

He snorted, feeling somewhat offended. "Do I look like I need to blackmail women into sleeping with me?"

An embarrassed flush crept over her face, but she continued on. “No, but in some of the journalism courses I took, they warned us about sexual involvement with interviewees. It can make things pretty sticky sometimes.”

Ryne opened his mouth to say something crude and sexual, but caught her expression and stopped. She’d obviously realized that what she had just said was the perfect opening for him to make one of his usual comments. He hated being predictable, so said nothing. After a moment, she continued.

“Well, thanks again for the meal. I’ll be waiting to hear your answer in the morning.” Mel looked at him hopefully.

“In the morning.” He nodded and opened the door for her. She slid inside and he pushed the door shut. With a final puzzled look in his direction, she drove off. Ryne stood there until her tail lights disappeared, before starting towards his own vehicle.

It would be a great night for a run, but turning into a wolf in the middle of Main Street—even if no one seemed to be about—was definitely courting trouble. Instead he climbed into his truck and drove home, mulling over the events of the night.

# Chapter 14

Mel was having trouble sleeping. She lay on her back, enumerating all of the positives around her that should be contributing to a blissful state of slumber. The bed was relatively comfortable, the temperature correct and there was no noise outside to bother her. She wasn't thirsty, nor did she need to go to the bathroom. Even her feet were warm, due to the presence of her favourite fuzzy socks encasing her lower extremities.

So, if everything was perfect, then why did her mind refuse to turn off? She flopped over for what seemed like the twentieth time and firmly closed her eyes only to pop them open again as thoughts of Ryne filled her head yet again. She wasn't sure exactly when her mind had made the switch from referring to him as 'Taylor' to calling him by his first name, but they seemed to be on a more personal level now, and he was no longer just an anonymous, but annoying research project.

Correction. He was still annoying, but she was learning to deal with it. The main problem—beyond getting him to agree to an interview—was figuring out what to do about the physical attraction that threatened to arise between them. As she'd said before, she didn't 'poach' men from other women and Lucy was involved with Ryne in some way.

Ryne inexplicably found her attractive. The bulge pressed against her stomach had been undeniable and the heat of his kisses hadn't been faked. She knew she wasn't ugly, but neither was she drop dead gorgeous. Her brown eyes and hair that was some shade between blonde and brown were just ordinary. Similarly, her features were okay; an average sized nose with the faintest smattering of freckles, a wide mouth with a friendly smile. Again, just ordinary. The only slightly interesting thing about her might be her breasts, which she always thought were disproportionate, but not in a fake 'I've-had-augmentation' kind of way. Nope. In her opinion, there was nothing about her that should attract someone as hot and sexy as Ryne.

Perhaps the man just went after any female that didn't make him gag. It was a possibility. Some men did seem to have the need to sow more than their share of wild oats. Mel often suspected her father was that way, but never mentioned the fact to her mother. Her father was the only taboo topic between them and even to this day, Mel had only the sketchiest information about him. Not that it mattered; it was just that sometimes she was curious. With a slight shake of her head, she dismissed her father and returned to the more interesting topic of Ryne Taylor.

Without a doubt, the man was attractive and just the idea of having sex with him had warmth pooling between her legs, but it wasn't in the cards. Maybe after the interview—if he did go along with the idea—it would be a possibility. However, there was Lucy to consider. Mel liked the woman even though they'd only talked twice. The waitress wasn't exactly refined, but there was something likeable about her. Lucy was open and friendly. She didn't try to put on airs; she was who she was. In fact, Lucy was almost too nice for someone like Ryne who seemed more of a 'love 'em and leave 'em' type.

Mel tried to picture Ryne in a long term relationship, with a wife at his side and little kiddies playing at his feet. The image quavered in and out of focus in her mind. She frowned. Somehow she was putting herself in the wife position. No. That wouldn't do. Erasing the very idea, she rolled on her stomach and buried her head under the pillow, forcibly pushing Ryne out of her head. She began humming a popular tune, but grunted in disgust when she realized it was a mushy love song and she was getting all hot and bothered by it.

Throwing back the covers, Mel got up and stomped into the kitchen. Taking a glass from the cupboard she got a drink of cold water and then stood in front of the window, pressing her warm cheek to the cool smooth pane. The night here was much blacker than it was in Chicago. With no street lights or neon signs to hold back the night, it shrouded the world in complete inky darkness. It was calming, but also a bit frightening to think that, except for the Kennedys, there was no one around for miles. And without a phone, she had no way of summoning help, unless she ran along the path through the little woodlot in the dead of night...

A shiver passed over her as she realized how truly alone she was. Just herself, the darkness, and whatever animal life existed in the forest behind the cabin. She set the glass down on the counter and walked to her bedroom, intent on climbing back into bed and hiding under the covers,

but for some reason, found herself peeking out the bedroom curtains instead.

The view from the kitchen had been that of the woodlot, but this room faced the actual forest. She recalled the footprints—both human and canine—that she'd found the other day and searched the murky darkness for any sign of life. The moonlight was dimmer now than it had been when Ryne had walked her to her car; no doubt clouds were starting to roll in as the forecast had called for rain. Still, as her eyes adjusted, she could just make out the shadowy shapes of tree trunks and a few low slung bushes.

For a moment, she thought she detected something moving. It was just a sense of the shadows shifting near the base of a tree, and maybe a glint of something shining, but then it was gone. For long moments, she waited and stared, but saw nothing. With a sigh, she let the curtain fall back into place. It was just her imagination, thank heavens. There was nothing dangerous out there, at least not to her. Probably the little rabbits and squirrels that were regularly prey had a different perspective, but she had nothing to be concerned about.

Ignoring the little niggling worry in the back of her mind, Mel climbed into bed, wiggling around until she found a comfortable spot. With determination, she closed her eyes and began reciting several soliloquies from Shakespeare that she'd had to learn in school. As usual, she only made it partway through Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' before sleep overtook her.

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Mel spent the next few days in what she dubbed 'interview limbo' while waiting for Ryne to make his final decision. It irked her to wait, but she sensed this was some sort of test. If she pushed too hard, he'd refuse, just to put her in her place. And so, with unaccustomed patience, she waited.

Her days fell into a lazy pattern. She'd sleep in, drive to town, and spend the morning at the Gazette where Josh and Beth were allowing her to hook up her laptop to their internet connection. The hoped-for phone line connection at the cabin had yet to materialize and Mel strongly suspected the phone company just didn't want to be bothered travelling all the way to Stump River for one service call. Still, the absence of a phone at the cabin had one benefit; Aldrich couldn't contact her.

Phoning the lawyer was the part of the day she most dreaded. Around noon, she'd leave the Gazette's offices and walk around Stump

River—which didn't take long, but helped fill up her day—and then head to the diner to place the dreaded call to Aldrich.

The calls followed a predictable path. He'd ask about her progress, she'd report she was still waiting, the lawyer would make some condescending comment, and the conversation would be over. It was barely five minutes, but felt much longer and left her feeling deflated.

In happy contrast, once she'd done her duty, she rewarded herself by having coffee and conversation with Ruth, Al, and Lucy.

A running joke had developed between them. Everyday she'd ask for a different type of coffee and they'd hand her a cup of plain black. Purposely, she made her requests more outlandish each day, enjoying their expressions as she explained the intricacies of each variety. Today's lesson was on one of her favourites, a caramel macchiato venti.

"So you see Al, then you take freshly steamed milk, vanilla-flavored syrup, a double shot of espresso and top it with caramel sauce. Oh, and of course the key is to *slowly* pour in the milk to create layers of different coloured liquid."

The chef rubbed his stubbly chin and nodded slowly. "Yeah. Right." As per usual, he was leaning against the counter, his slightly stained apron stretched over his rounded stomach. He reached back and flipped on the coffee maker. "One black coffee, coming up."

Mel giggled, loving his deadpan expression.

Ruth just shook her head, taking a cup down off the shelf and placing it beside the brewing beverage, ready for filling when the time came. "It beats me that you city folk have nothing better to do than to spend your time finding ways to mess up a perfectly good cup of java."

"Ah Ruth," Mel teased. "You haven't lived until you experience drinking coffee properly prepared by a barista."

Straightening her uniform on her boney frame, Ruth sniffed, but patted Mel's shoulder. "I'll survive just fine girly, don't you worry. The men on my soap operas give me a better jolt than caffeine any day."

Lucy wandered over just then, and Mel settled into her favourite seat for a bit of gossip with the friendly waitress, all the while keeping a watchful eye on Miller's service station in case Ryne should emerge. He did occasionally, to fill gas tanks, wash wind shields and check oil, but never to come across the street and agree to an interview.

Mel was positive Ryne knew she was there. A couple of times, she even thought she caught him glancing her way, but he always went back inside, leaving her fuming and irritably drumming her fingers on the countertop.

The time spent at the diner wasn't a total waste, however. Ruth and Al enjoyed regaling her with tales of small town life. Mel was actually writing some of the amusing anecdotes down, toying with the idea of composing a series of articles about the place.

Lucy was all for the idea when she heard about it. She'd lean against the counter, a pot of coffee in one hand to give the impression that she was working, while conspiratorially whispering tidbits of scandalous yet amusing information on the various patrons of Ruth's Diner and the Broken Antler. Mel was surprised that for a town where nothing seemed to happen, so much actually took place. It was amazing, the activities that occurred at the bar and behind closed doors.

Despite her enjoyment of the coffee, company, and conversation, Mel was fed up waiting for Ryne. It was already Friday and she'd made absolutely no progress with regards to her real 'mission,' which was learning about Ryne Taylor.

"If he doesn't come over and talk to me today, I'm going to march across the street and strangle him," Mel confided to Lucy.

"I'll cheer while you do it." Lucy agreed.

"You two have a spat or something?" Mel looked at her new friend with concern.

"Nah, we don't have that type of relationship—nothing to really argue over when it's just about good sex, you know?" She poured more coffee into Mel's cup. "Nope, the problem is he hasn't been around to see me since his birthday and he promised me a month ago, he'd stop by and fix the leaky faucet in my kitchen."

"Not the reliable sort, is he?"

"What man is?" Philosophically, Lucy shrugged and then pointed out the window. "Hey, there goes Harley. I just love watching him cross the street." The two women paused their conversation to watch the dog wait and cross at the light. Once he was on the other side, he turned and walked up to the diner, and pawed at the door.

"What's he doing?" Mel queried.

"Beats me, this is a new one." Lucy walked to the door and opened it. "What do you want, Harley?"

Harley walked inside as if it was part of his daily routine, came right up to Mel, and dropped a piece of paper in her lap. The paper was rather wrinkled and sticky with drool.

Gingerly, Mel picked it up, avoiding the worst of the slobber. There was a message addressed to her and despite the ink smearing a bit from the dog's saliva, it was still quite readable. "It's from Ryne! He says he

wants to talk to me about terms. I should be at his house at noon tomorrow. The gate will be open and he'll provide lunch." She happily clenched the soggy note in her hand. Finally something was happening. "This is great news. Thanks, Harley!"

The dog woofed and sauntered out of the diner, heading back towards the traffic light. Mel glanced across the street. Ryne was standing by the door of the Service Station, his arms folded. Despite the distance, they managed to make eye-contact. He nodded and went back inside, ruffling Harley's fur as the dog returned from his mission.

"Well, that's good news for you, isn't it Mel?" Lucy grinned at her. "And when you see him, remind him about my leaking faucet, will you?"

Mel nodded, rereading the note and wondering what the 'terms' might entail. It was going to be just a straightforward interview about his life, nothing that special. Did he want a cut if she sold it to a magazine? That could be tricky, since Mr. Greyson was paying her. She'd have to ask Aldrich about that.

Finishing her coffee, she thanked her friends and headed back towards the Gazette. She was going to e-mail Aldrich about this latest development and ask his advice about Ryne's possible terms. Mel knew that Aldrich would be peeved about the e-mail, having made it plain that he preferred phone conversations, probably so he could 'read' the speaker's tone of voice. Oh, well. Too bad for him. She'd suffered through talking to him once today. He'd have to make some concessions to modern technology.

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Noon the next day found Mel driving down the road that led to Ryne's house. She'd stopped in town to call Aldrich. He'd emailed her back yesterday, his message terse and simple; call me. And so she did. While he'd tried to hide it, she was sure Aldrich hadn't been expecting her to get an interview with Ryne and it pleased her no end to prove the man wrong. When she'd mentioned Ryne setting terms, Aldrich was adamant that no mention of his client should occur.

Aldrich was a clever sort, she had to admit. He suggested that if Ryne questioned what publication she was submitting the article to, she could claim it was a school assignment that she was completing for extra marks and that only a professor would be reading it. Mel agreed the story was a good one, but felt a bit guilty about the fact that she couldn't be upfront with the photographer.



She firmly squashed her misgivings as she approached Ryne's home. Just as he promised, the gate was open. Slowing down, she made the turn and looked around, surprised that he'd just leave it open like that when he was so obsessive about his privacy. Anybody could have just driven in.

Shrugging, she decided it wasn't any concern of hers. All that mattered was that she didn't have to climb over the top of the darn thing and she was safely in her vehicle, where no wolves could get at her.

The drive from the main road to his house was a bit eerie. She kept recalling her earlier visit and the wolves that had chased her. Obsessively, she peered into the woods on either side for signs that they were watching her. Of course, there was nothing to see, but acre upon acre of forest.

It was turning into a cloudy, dreary kind of a day with dark clouds rolling across the sky and the threat of rain evident in the dampness of the air. As she travelled deeper onto the property, the trees blocked even more of the light and the twisting, turning driveway began to seem as if it would never end. A slight tinge of panic was building inside of her. When she crossed a little bridge, Mel started to wonder if she might be lost. She didn't recall going over a stream the previous day.

She slowed her pace, steering around several potholes along the way. The spring thaw was making a mess of the driveway, similar to the road she'd driven on to get to Stump River. Taking her time, she decided being a few minutes late was preferable to explaining to the rental company why the vehicle's suspension was messed up. Finally, after what seemed like an interminable amount of time, the trees began to thin and a house came into view. She brought the car to a stop and put it in park, staring at the photographer's home, with a feeling of dread.

# Chapter 15

Mel sat in her car and stared at the house. The sidewalk was cracked and grass was popping up between the broken cement slabs. The lawn was filled with weeds and the remnants of flower beds could barely be discerned among a tangle of old vines and leaves. A lone tree stood to the right of the building. Its branches stretched out like greedy hands and a hole in the trunk reminded her of a gaping mouth.

“Perfect for Halloween,” she muttered.

Averting her gaze from the creepy tree, she began to study the actual house. It was massive and stood out like something from a horror flick, complete with a dark stormy sky and a spooky forest in the background. Two stories high, not including the attic, its wooden siding was a weathered grey where it wasn't hidden by ivy vines that seemed to be trying to slowly choke the entire building.

Over the front porch there was a rickety looking balcony, access being provided by a set of French glass doors complete with cracked glass. Extending from either side of the main part of the house were two large wings of rooms, each with eight windows that seemed to stare blankly and bleakly back at her. Mel couldn't even begin to speculate how many rooms the house might contain.

The slate roof appeared to be new and sported a widow's walk along the top surrounded by a wrought iron railing. Mel could almost picture some tragic heroine pacing back and forth, wringing her hands in despair before throwing herself to the ground in a suicide attempt.

The style was... well... Mel wasn't sure. It appeared as if some Victorian architect had taken bits and pieces from several designs and centuries and then thrown them all together. It wasn't a pretty house; a more apt description would be 'uniquely interesting and in definite need of repair.' Obviously, Ryne and his friends were working hard to fix the place up, hence the new roof, but there was still a long way to go.

Stepping out of her car, Mel stared at the structure, craning her head back as she walked towards the front door. On her previous visit she'd

been rather disoriented and hadn't paid much attention to her surroundings, but now she was taking in every single feature. Two sets of long thin windows flanked the front door and she was surprised to see that there was a stained glass panel over the top of the entrance. The steps were new and the front door had been refinished. She took a moment to admire the carved surface before raising her hand to knock.

Just as she was bringing her fist down, the door swung open and she suddenly found her hand held firmly in Ryne's.

"Trying to hit me already?" He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"No, that comes later, after the fifth time you annoy me. Right now, I'm just knocking on your door, but if you insist on opening it when my fist is up... well, I can't be held responsible now, can I?" Mel smiled with fake sweetness, while trying to retrieve her hand from his grip. He didn't let go; somehow she'd known that he wouldn't. Instead he used his hold to pull her inside.

"Good. I thought we'd save that rough stuff until later, once we're better acquainted." He leered at her.

Mel bit back the retort that sprang to her lips. Sternly reminding herself that she was here for an interview and needed to be professional, she forced a smile instead. "I was pleased to get your message and I'm sure, whatever your terms might be, we can come to some form of satisfactory arrangement."

He dropped her hand, his face suddenly becoming serious. "I hope so. I don't like interviews. I prefer my privacy, but with you, I think the easiest way to regain my peaceful lifestyle is to give you what you want."

She stared at him for a moment. Ryne was not a happy camper and she wasn't sure why. Her tactics hadn't been that pushy, had they? He had no reason to dislike her, but for that brief moment, she was sure he did. Waves of something—anger? Hatred?—seemed to be rolling off him. Hoping to get on a positive footing, Mel tried to smooth things over with a smile and a conciliatory tone.

"I promise this will be painless. Just a few questions, some background information, and then I'll leave you alone."

Ryne grunted and she wasn't sure whether he was agreeing or scoffing. Before she could decide, he turned and indicated she should follow him.

They walked down the hallway and Mel noted her surroundings. Wooden wainscoting covered the bottom of the walls while the upper half showed just a few remnants of old flocked wallpaper. Both the

wood and plaster seemed to be in the process of being stripped down in preparation for refinishing. Looking up, she noted the embossed tin ceiling. Even with its layers of peeling and bubbling paint, she could make out the fine workmanship. Decorative mouldings framed the ceilings and surrounded the doorways and the windows. They, too, showed signs of age, some broken and scarred; all in definite need of some attention from sandpaper.

It was obvious that this had been an elegant home in its day, but years of decay and neglect had taken their toll. Ryne had a big project ahead of him, if he intended to restore the home to its former glory. What had he mentioned the other day? Renovating the kitchen? She supposed he was doing the most crucial areas first, hence the new roof and step. Probably the plumbing and electrical had been the next on his list.

As if reading her thoughts, he turned to the left and led her into a room, flipping on the lights. New fixtures immediately sprang to life, filling the area with brightness. Along one side of the room a large entertainment centre, complete with a flat screen TV, was centred on the wall directly across from an overstuffed leather sofa. Two matching recliner chairs were on either side. Chocolate brown paint covered the walls, accented by white window mouldings and an area rug in varying shades of green. There were no blinds or curtains on the window, but Mel supposed that being in the middle of nowhere, there was no need to block the neighbours out. A fireplace, flanked by bookshelves, occupied the fourth wall and from the look of the partially burnt logs, they used it to help heat the room.

"This is nice." She commented as she looked around. It needed a few pictures on the wall to give it a more homey feeling, but for three men on their own it was eminently suitable.

"Thanks. It's where we relax." He nodded towards the sofa. "Have a seat."

Mel sat down on the overstuffed piece of furniture and immediately felt herself sinking down into its depths. It was soft and comfortable, but she wasn't quite sure how she was going to get back up again without assistance. Adjusting herself as best as she could, she looked over at Ryne. He hadn't sat down yet and was pacing back and forth in front of the windows.

"So..." She began slowly. "What are these 'terms' you were thinking about."

He stopped and studied her for a long moment and she had to force herself not to start twisting her fingers nervously. She'd almost decided he wasn't going to answer, when he finally spoke.

"I have complete control over what you write and want to see a list of questions ahead of time so that I can consider which ones I want to answer."

She straightened and opened her mouth to protest. Who did he think he was? Before she could speak though, he continued, still staring at her, no doubt reading her reaction to his words.

"At any time, I can veto the entire article if I choose and you will leave Stump River immediately. You are not allowed to ask my partners questions about me either. If you don't like the terms, you can leave now before we even start."

Mel snapped her mouth shut and thought the situation over. Really, she had no choice. If he didn't want to be interviewed, then there was nothing she could do about it. Slowly she nodded, an idea already forming in her head. He wanted control over the questions he answered and his two friends, but she could still ask the other residents of Stump River for information. He'd lived here for five months. Surely in all that time, he'd let things slip to the local merchants.

"All right. I'll make up a list of questions and have it to you by tomorrow. Would one day be long enough for you to read them over and have some answers ready?"

"It should be sufficient. If not, I'll let you know." He seemed to relax a bit. "Okay. With that business out of the way, can I give you the grand tour?"

Pleased to feel the tension between them leaving, even if she didn't completely understand why it existed in the first place, Mel agreed. When she struggled to stand, Ryne laughed and grabbed her arm, pulling her up to her feet. The heat from his hand burned through the thin material of her light sweater and she was sure that if she looked, there would be a mark on her skin from the contact. Sneaking a peak at his face, she wondered if he had felt anything unusual, but Ryne was already letting go and was heading towards the door. She hurried after him.

"We put a new roof on as soon as we got here and then had an electrician rewire the place. The plumbing in the kitchen, my bathroom downstairs and one of the upstairs baths has been redone, but not the laundry room." He called the information over his shoulder as he headed towards the back of the house. "Right now I'm working on the kitchen."

Mel found herself in a large spacious room. The floors were old worn beige linoleum and the walls were a hideous shade of pea green. She couldn't help, but wrinkle her nose at the decor.

Ryne laughed. "Yeah. That's how I feel too. I have all of the cupboards down and new ones should be arriving later today or tomorrow. New appliances are coming as well. After that I'll tackle the walls."

"What about the floor?"

"I was going to go with tile, but then someone told me it's really cold and hard on your feet, so instead I'm going with hardwood."

Mel nodded in approval. "It'll match the rest of the house." She wandered towards the window and looked out back. The yard was massive, but obviously overgrown. "A bit of a jungle out there, isn't it?"

"The previous owner, Edith Nelson, was an avid gardener in her day, but apparently the last few years she didn't feel up to taking care of it anymore so it really got out of hand." Ryne rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know much about gardens and I have no idea when I'll find the time to do anything out there. For the time being, it will just have to stay a jungle, I guess."

"If I lived around here, I'd love to try my hand at that. During one of her many careers, my mother had a little garden centre and I worked there while I was in high school. I don't know that much about plants but it was still fun. I haven't had a chance to do anything like that for quite a while. My garden in Chicago consists of some sickly weeds growing between the cracks in the cement. Your yard would be an interesting challenge."

"And you like challenges, do you?"

"I think you asked me something like that before, and the answer is still yes."

Ryne gave her a half smile before leading her out of the kitchen to the next room. A fireplace, an arm chair, and a sofa made up the sparse furnishings. "This is technically considered the dining room, but I'm using it as a living room right now, since the real one has drafty windows and broken floorboards at the moment."

Mel looked around the room with a sense of familiarity. This was the room she'd woken up in during her initial attempt to meet him. "Will you turn it back into a dining room some day? It's an awfully large space."

"Well, I hope to have a large... er... family and lots of relatives visiting eventually." Abruptly, Ryne moved towards the doorway and Mel had to hurry after him.

By time they stopped to discuss different features and his vision for the renovations, it took almost an hour to go through the whole house. If he ever got everything done, it would be an impressive home. She just wondered if he would finish it while still young enough to enjoy the fruits of his labours. Still, he had achieved an impressive amount in the five months that he'd lived here. From the sounds of it, only the wiring and plumbing had been hired out. He and his two friends were planning on doing everything else by themselves. Mel wondered if the other two men were around, since she hadn't seen nor heard them yet.

By now they were back in the kitchen and Ryne had her sit at the table while he rummaged in the fridge. "Lunch isn't fancy. Soup, sandwiches and a salad are the best I can do right now with the kitchen torn up like this."

"That's fine. You didn't have to feed me, though. I could have eaten something at the diner in town."

"You could have, but this is more private. We can talk without half of the town knowing our conversation."

Mel laughed softly. "It is a rather small place. I suppose not much happens, so a visitor in town is big news."

Ryne agreed as he stood at the stove reheating some soup. "Uh-huh. If you sneeze in Ruth's diner, the nurse at the clinic is waiting with a thermometer by the time you step outside."

"I'm surprised you moved here, since you like your privacy so much. It's obvious that people take note of what everyone else does."

"They do." He acknowledged. "But only what happens in town. They leave you pretty much alone at home and for the most part, if you don't want to talk, they respect that. People are friendly and concerned, but not maliciously nosey."

Mel wondered if Ryne thought she was maliciously nosey, but decided not to pursue the point. Right now they were getting along quite well and she didn't want to ruin it. For whatever reason, his earlier mood had passed and he wasn't being sarcastic either. It would be nice to relax and just have a normal conversation.

That was exactly what they did. Movies, books, and decorating ideas flowed around the table as they ate the simple meal. Mel felt relaxed and answered his casual questions about her schooling and her upbringing. Thankfully, he didn't mention the interview she wanted and she didn't either. The story that Aldrich had told her to use wasn't firmly embedded in her brain yet, and she wanted to go over it a few times

before trying it out on Ryne. Somehow she suspected that he'd easily sense deception on her part.

She was just raising her cup of coffee to her lips when a loud crashing sound filled the room. Her hand jerked and the hot liquid spilled onto her clothes. With a yelp, she stood up and pulled the material away from her skin. Ryne was immediately at her side, yanking at the sweater and pulling it over her head.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" She sputtered, ineffectually trying to pull the top back down. It was no use. Ryne had it over her head before she could even finish the question. Good heavens, but the man was fast! Mel crossed her arms protectively across her chest.

"I'm keeping you from getting seriously scalded. You can't leave that hot material on your skin." He was working at the button on her jeans and she batted at his hand while stepping away from him.

"It wasn't that hot. There's only a spot or two on my pants and if you touch me again, I'll kick you in the balls." She glared at him, embarrassed and angry at his presumptuous behaviour.

"Relax. I have no designs on your body... at the moment." He paused and leered at her ample cleavage.

Mel shifted her arms in a vain attempt to cover more of herself, but knew it was useless. There was just too much of her to hide. At least she was wearing a decent bra. Glancing around, she spotted a tea towel and snatched it up, wrapping it around herself.

Ryne had now moved to the sink and was soaking a cloth. Once it was wet, he approached her and flicked up the towel, pressing the wet cloth to the hot pink skin of her stomach. The cloth was ice cold! Giving a startled cry, Mel tried to step back, but Ryne simply grabbed her and held her in place. Once again she found herself sputtering wordlessly not sure if she should be protesting him touching her or the coldness of the cloth.

Pre-empting any comment from her, he spoke sternly. "Be still. It's important to cool a burn immediately. Now hold this cloth while I stick your sweater in water so it doesn't stain." He grabbed her hand and pressed it to her stomach so she could keep the cloth in place.

"Oh." It was a small comment, but the only one that came to mind. The cool rag did feel good and Mel let herself relax a bit. Apparently Ryne had nothing else in mind, but tending her burn. She watched him fill a large bowl with water and plunge her top into it. "How do you know how to do that? Treat a stain, I mean?"



He glanced over his shoulder at her. "I'm twenty-seven and I've been doing my own laundry for quite a while now."

Mel nodded. "What was that noise?"

He nodded his head towards the window and Mel looked out to see rain pouring down. She hadn't realized how dark it had become. "We're having a spring storm, it looks like. The wind has really picked up. I wouldn't be surprised if one of the older trees in forest fell and that's what the sound was."

She giggled. "So if a tree falls in the forest and nobody is there, it still makes a noise?"

He chuckled back. "How's your burn?"

Mel took the cloth away. Her skin wasn't nearly as pink now. "I think it's better."

"Good. I'll wet the cloth again and you can hold it on for a bit longer. You should cool a burn for ten minutes."

"First aid training?"

"Something like that. I've lived in places where it pays to know how to take care of simple injuries." He fixed the cloth for her. "You wait here. I'll go upstairs and get a shirt for you to wear. As enticing as the tea towel is, I assume you don't want to drive home in it."

"Ah—no. I think that would definitely give the people of Stump River something to talk about."

Ryne left to find her a shirt and Mel moved to stand by the window, staring out at the pouring rain. It was raining heavier by the minute and becoming harder to even see across the yard. Something flashed by the window and for a moment she was sure it was a pair of wolves, but that was ridiculous. What would wolves be doing out in the rain, running around the house? Surely, they'd hole up in a cave or a burrow or wherever they made their home. She shook her head. No—she was just imagining things.

A door slammed, the noise coming from the back entryway just off the kitchen. She could hear male voices laughing and then two very damp, scantily clad men entered the room. When they saw her, they came up short and fell silent. Mel stared at them speechless. At one point she believed she'd said that good looking men didn't grow on trees; apparently that wasn't quite true in Stump River.

# Chapter 16

Both of the men before her were amazing specimens; tall and lean, with well defined muscles. She watched, fascinated, as little rivers of water cascaded down their bare chests, rising and falling over the well developed abdominals. Some drops were lost in the indent of their navels, while other luckier ones travelled even lower, disappearing below the waist band of their shorts. Said shorts were sopping wet and clinging to their bodies, hinting at the interesting anatomy hidden beneath.

Tearing her gaze upwards, Mel felt her face flush with embarrassment and hoped they hadn't noticed the direction of her eyes. Unfortunately, from the smirks on their faces, she strongly suspected they had. Both men appeared to be around twenty and had blonde or light brown hair; it was so wet at the moment, it was hard to determine the exact shades. Their heights were comparable, though the one with hazel eyes carried himself in such a way, that he seemed the larger of the two.

He was the one that moved first, stepping forward, his hand extended.

"Hi! I'm Bryan. We met out by the road the other day."

Realizing she was basically ogling them, Mel gave herself a little shake and accepted his hand. "Sorry, I didn't recognize you at first, with you being so wet and nearly naked..." She let her voice trail off, feeling her cheeks growing even hotter as he laughed lightly.

"That's okay; it's always nice to be appreciated. You're Melody Greene, right?"

She nodded. "You can call me Mel."

"Mel is good with me." He gave her a friendly smile and she lost some of her initial embarrassment. Giving his head a nod to the side, Bryan introduced his companion. "This is Daniel."

The man in question waved lightly. "Nice to meet you."

Mel noticed that he had the most amazing eyes. They were a deep liquid brown, the kind that made her think of rich cafe mocha with pools of melted chocolate on top. He seemed like he'd be the quiet sort, but

not in a way that made you think you could walk all over him. It was more like he was a deep thinker. She smiled kindly at him.

Bryan cleared his throat and she brought her attention back to him. "I see you and Ryne have had an interesting afternoon."

"Interesting?" His comment puzzled her. "Well, we talked a bit and he showed me the house."

"Uh-huh. I always like a game of 'show and tell' myself." Bryan gestured towards her with his hand. Mel frowned, not getting his meaning at all. He chuckled. Reaching forward, he flicked the edge of her makeshift shirt—also known as a tea towel—and Mel gasped. She'd completely forgotten she was shirtless and barely covered. She crossed her arms protectively over her chest and struggled to not blush, yet again. Good heavens, her blood pressure had never had this much of a work out before!

"Hey! No need to be embarrassed." Bryan grinned. "I—"

"Bryan!" A low growl followed the utterance of his name and Bryan underwent a complete transformation. The grin disappeared and he seemed to shrink down. He turned to face the speaker, tipping his head down.

"Ryne, I was just—"

"I know what you were just doing. Keep your hands to yourself. Both of you get upstairs and dry off. And don't forget to clean up the puddles you undoubtedly left all over the floor."

Both men almost slunk out of the room, leaving Mel gaping at Ryne who stood in the doorway holding a shirt in his hand. His stance, his expression, the way his hand was fisted, all screamed aggression. He kept his eyes fixed on the other two until they were out of sight. Shifting uncomfortably, Mel spoke hesitantly.

"They were just introducing themselves to me. Neither one did or said anything wrong." She tried to placate Ryne, not sure why he had sounded so angry and dominant. The reaction of the other two was puzzling as well. Why did they put up with his attitude and allow him to order them around, as if they were naughty children and he was their father? Even if he owned the place, that was no way to speak to grown men.

Ryne's response was delivered in a sharp tone. "They know better. I told them to keep their distance."

"From me? Why?"

"I have my reasons." Ryne abruptly changed the topic. "Here's a T-shirt to wear."

Mel took the offered clothing and turning her back, she somehow managed to shimmy into it without losing the towel. Once she was decently covered, she pulled the towel from underneath the shirt and hung it over the back of a chair. By the time she'd finished, Ryne seemed calmer but Mel was still anxious to get away from the man. He was just too unpredictable for her to feel comfortable around him. "I suppose I'd better go. I'll type up a list of questions and drop them in your mailbox tomorrow. That way you won't have to leave the gate unlocked."

"Actually, I'm in town tomorrow. I work at Miller's on Wednesdays."

"All right. I'll drop it off there." She looked around, found her purse, and started to head towards the front door, keeping the conversation light for fear of setting him off again. "Thanks for lunch and the tour of the house. It really is an interesting home. When I first saw it from the outside, it seemed sort of spooky, but now I can see it has potential."

"Thanks." He seemed cordial enough now, and Mel felt herself relaxing marginally. They were at the front door now. Her hand was on the door knob ready to open it when Bryan walked down the stairs, rubbing his hair dry with a towel.

He was whistling unconcernedly. Surprisingly, the younger man didn't seem to bear a grudge for the way Ryne had talked to him, merely grinning and offering a bit of advice. "I wouldn't go out there if I were you."

Ryne raised his eye brows in query and Bryan continued. "First of all, it's raining so hard, I doubt if Mel could see to drive. Secondly, there's a large tree that fell down across the driveway about halfway to the road. There's no way you can get a car around it."

"You mean I'm stuck here?" Mel couldn't keep the squeak of surprise out of her voice. She didn't believe this. This was the sort of thing that happened in books and movies, not real life.

"I'm afraid so." He turned to Ryne. "Daniel and I looked at it, but it will take all three of us, and probably a chainsaw, to move it out of the way." Bryan shrugged and wandered on his way, seeming completely unconcerned by the situation.

Mel turned to Ryne, all thoughts of his earlier bad temper washed away by a sudden pressing need to leave. She was his guest and she figured he had certain obligations towards her. Rocking back and forth on her heels, she looked at him expectantly. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, do something." She fluttered her hands at him, as if shooing him on his way.

Instead of moving, he put his hands in his back pockets and then shrugged. "If the road is blocked, it's blocked. Like Bryan said, it'll probably take all three of us and a chain saw to clear the road. Those trees are massive."

"I heard him. I mean, why aren't you getting your coat and umbrella and whatever else you need to go out there and get to work?"

Ryne looked at her as if she was crazy. "Because it's pouring rain and quite possibly it will start to thunder and lightning. I don't know about you, but I've always heard you don't stand outside playing with power tools in the middle of a storm."

Mel regarded him for a few minutes, blinking slowly as she processed his words and their implications. When it all made sense, she slumped back against the door and closed her eyes, shaking her head slowly side to side in denial. "So I'm stuck here for how long?"

"Probably until morning." Ryne glanced at his watch. "It's almost four now. By time the rain stops, it will be getting dark and too late to do anything."

She whimpered and opened her eyes, looking at him resignedly. "As I recall from the tour of the house, you don't have any spare rooms do you?"

"Well, technically there are lots of rooms, but as you saw, they're sealed off because the windows aren't air tight and there's no furniture in them either." He winked at her. "Don't worry. You could always sleep with me."

That comment had her standing upright, indignation spreading through her. "If you think for one minute that I'd—"

"Hey, I'm just teasing. The couch is pretty comfortable." He grinned cheekily. "And if you change your mind, my bedroom is right next door."

Mel didn't find that overly amusing or comforting. Ryne did have a bedroom right down the hall from the entertainment room, complete with its own bathroom and a connecting door to his office. The other two men slept upstairs. "Thanks, but I'm sure I'll be fine all on my own."

"You never know; you could have a bad dream." He had a certain glint in his eye that made her feel he knew something she didn't know, but for the life of her couldn't figure out what it might be.

Resigned to her fate, Mel made the best of things. She helped make a simple pasta supper and did the dishes. When they all decided to spend the night watching a movie, she volunteered to make the popcorn and

carried the bowls and cans of pop into the entertainment room. Ryne remained calm, even a bit charming, giving no sign of his earlier bad mood. Bryan and Daniel also acted as if the incident had never happened. Slowly, Mel relaxed, coming to the conclusion that it was an issue between the three men and if it didn't bother them, then she wouldn't dwell on it.

After putting the movie into the DVD player, Ryne sat on the couch beside her while the other two settled in the recliners. She noticed that while they spoke to her, they also kept their distance and never looked at her directly. Mel couldn't help but wonder what Ryne had said about her that would have them acting so oddly. Why did he want them to stay away? Was he afraid that she'd ask them questions? That must be it, she decided. The man really was way too caught up in this privacy thing.

That made her think back to the conversation she'd overheard between Kane and Elise. Kane had been worried about the discovery of something and it had to do with one of Ryne's pictures. She decided it was most likely the one that Mr. Greyson had. Now what could be so special about a picture of a wolf? Whatever it was, Ryne didn't want her finding out about it. And quite probably Daniel and Bryan were aware of the secret too, otherwise why would Ryne want to keep her away from them. Hmm... It was all very puzzling. Hopefully, if she set her questions up carefully enough, Ryne would reveal something that would help her figure out the little mystery.

Speaking of mysteries, she glanced back at the TV screen and then hurriedly looked away again. The men had picked the movie and, of course, had chosen a horror flick complete with mass murders, blood, guts, undead monsters and a hapless female who spent a lot of time screaming and wandering into places she'd be better off staying away from, all in the middle of a storm. Mel shook her head. What woman would be that clueless?

Another blood chilling scream came from the speakers and even without looking, Mel was aware of the mutilated body parts on the TV screen. She fought to suppress a shudder, hating this type of movie. Almost every man she'd ever dated thought the more guns and gore in the script, the better. What was wrong with a nice romantic comedy? A little hugging, a little kissing, a few misunderstandings, and then, a 'happily ever after' ending!

Beside her, Ryne shifted on the couch and Mel tried to imagine him watching a chic-flick. Hmm... There'd be a girl snuggled up beside

him, her head on his shoulder while he gently played with her hair. Frowning, Mel realized the girl was herself. Darn! That was the second time, she'd found her imagination creating scenarios depicting the two of them. What was going on?

Out of the corner of her eye, she studied him, wondering exactly what it was about Ryne that her subconscious found so appealing. His dark hair looked thick and soft and had a slight curl to it where it brushed his collar. She wondered how it would actually feel, if she were to run her fingers through it. In contrast, a shadow of stubble graced his jaw and she was quite sure it would be rough against her skin. Her gaze moved upward and she noted fine laugh lines at the corner of his eye, and the strong brow above. Just in time, she caught herself reaching up to trace the feature with her fingers.

Clasping her hands together to prevent any further slips, she inhaled deeply ignoring the tingling in her hands and chanted 'don't touch, don't touch' over and over to herself. Her deep inhalation had made her more aware of his scent, a combination of spice and woods and maleness. With him sitting so near, she could feel the heat coming off of him and fought the urge to snuggle up close, just as she had in her fantasy moments before.

Damn, what was the matter with her? So what if he was the sexiest man she'd seen in ages. Getting all hot and bothered over him was not part of the game plan, no matter how much her body might wish otherwise. She snuck another look his way, and noticed the corner of his mouth twitching. Quickly averting her eyes, she stared blindly at the screen.

A moment later, she felt Ryne leaning towards her. Out of the corner of his mouth, he whispered to her. "See anything you like?" Her audible gasp caused him to chuckle darkly. Crossing her arms, she compressed her lips and studiously ignored him. Thankfully, the closing musical score was now playing. The camera zoomed in on a particularly gruesome corpse as a background for the credits and she shuddered in distaste. Sensing Ryne looking her way, she pasted a nonchalant expression on her face. There was no way she'd let him know the contents of the movie bothered her; she'd never hear the end of it.

The other two stood, and between yawns, carried on a discussion about the special effects they'd just seen.

"Oh man, when that body ripped open—have you ever seen such realistic looking organs?" Bryan enthused as he gathered the empty popcorn bowls.

"Yeah and that zombie was awesome. The makeup was so real. I wonder how they got the rotting flesh to just sort of hang there." Daniel followed Bryan's lead, gathering the pop cans and then heading into the kitchen. Mel gulped, forcing herself to *not* think about rotting flesh and realistic organs. She got to her feet and hesitated as to what to say.

Ryne was placing the DVD back in its case. He looked over his shoulder at her. "You okay?"

"Sure. Never better." Mel put on her perkier attitude and snatched up the pillow he'd set out for her earlier. "Can't wait to go to bed and get a good night's sleep."

She was sure she saw a smirk pass over Ryne's face before he nodded. "All right. If you need anything, you know where I am."

Mel hugged the pillow and waggled her fingers at him. With one more assessing look her way, he left the room.

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Sometime during the night, Mel woke with a start, her heart pounding. She lay there, trying to separate dream from reality, to convince herself that she was awake and no longer running through the woods being chased by a pack of wolves. What was it with wolves lately? Wolves had never figured prominently in her life before. Now they were in pictures, walking around her cabin, cornering her in the woods and even chasing her in her sleep.

She withdrew her arm from under the blanket and brushed her hair from her sweaty forehead. Her hand was shaking with leftover fear. Pushing herself upright, she hugged her knees to her chest and tried to calm down. The room was cool and she shivered slightly, pulling the blanket closer. Ryne's t-shirt was long enough to cover her adequately, but not overly warm. For a moment, she considered putting her jeans on again, but decided against it; they fit too tightly to make for comfortable sleepwear.

The house was still; everyone apparently asleep, except for herself. Rain beat down outside, tapping on the windows. An occasional flash of light and a slight rumbling of thunder let her know that Ryne had been right. A storm had rolled in.

As it got closer, lightning flashes would briefly illuminate the room, casting weird shadows on the wall. Mel shivered again, but this time due to nerves. There was nothing in the room with her, she knew that, but she'd never liked shadows. They always took on ominous shapes, turning harmless daytime bits of furniture into scary creatures of the night.



A tapping sound began to make itself noticed and she stiffened, trying to locate its source. It seemed to be coming from the window. Carefully, and oh so slowly, she moved her head in that direction, wondering what she would see. Of course, there was nothing there, but still the tapping continued. Her overactive imagination began to kick-in and Mel sought to suppress it with the weight of logic.

The house was quite old. It probably shifted and groaned all the time, the noises actually becoming comforting to those who dwelled within. She speculated how many people had lived—and died—within the walls. Had they been happy? Or had tragedy touched their lives? She amused herself for a moment, populating the house with servants and children, husbands and wives. Did the spirits of the people remain, watching over the next generation?

Mel was never really sure what she believed when it came to spirits and ghosts. Logically, she knew they didn't exist, but sometimes she'd read something and wonder. Right now, she was wondering. It was a perfect night for that line of thought, after all. Storms and ghosts seemed to go together. In fact, this was very similar to the movie they'd watched tonight.

The tapping was growing louder, forcing itself into her awareness again. What was making it? Mel's fertile mind began to come up with answers. Possibly there was some mystery surrounding the house; a long ago resident out in a storm and locked outside, shivering as the rain soaked their clothing. They had gone from window to window, tapping away, trying to gain someone's attention so they could come in out of the cold and wet.

Her palms were damp with sweat now and she surreptitiously wiped them on the blanket covering her. She was trying to be as quiet and as still as possible. No point in drawing attention to herself... just in case. Nervously nibbling on her lower lip, Mel noted that the wind was picking up as the storm got closer. It howled about the house, the sound rising, and falling like the cry of a wolf. Were there wolves outside the house, even now? Mel gulped at the very idea. Maybe wolves had always plagued this house! This new idea took root in her mind.

What if the person tapping at the window never made it safely inside? What if they had been purposely locked out as a punishment? And maybe, while they were outside, a band of hungry wolves had come by and attacked! The person would have screamed for help, but no one came to save them. In fact, the occupant of the house might have sat in this very room, listening to the pleas for help, laughing insanely as the

dastardly plan came to fruition. Outside, the ill-fated victim would have known all this, and with their dying breath, placed a curse on everyone in the house. Now, every time it stormed, the horrible scene replayed and the victim came back, seeking revenge on whoever was inside refusing to let them enter...

The storm was almost over top of the house now. Lightning flashed, repeatedly illuminating the room then plunging it back into darkness, while thunder shook the whole house. The tapping was picking up speed. Mel's heart was pounding faster too, her breathing ragged. Clutching the blanket tightly in her hands, she darted her gaze about the room, expecting some evil entity to leap out at her at any moment.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. This was ridiculous; she was a grown woman. What she needed to do was to get up and investigate. She gathered her courage and tried to throw back the covers, but her hand refused to cooperate and merely grasped the blanket more tightly.

Scowling, she considered the situation. All right, so she was afraid. There were options open to her. She could stay where she was, getting increasingly more scared or she could go find Ryne—except he'd tease her about it unmercifully. Neither idea was overly appealing. Another flash of lightning illuminated the room, and she spied the fireplace.

Ah-ha! If memory served her correctly, a set of fireplace tools were by its side. The poker could be used as a weapon. Not giving herself time to chicken out, Mel leapt off the sofa and dashed towards the fireplace. Her only goal was to grab the poker before something grabbed her. With more speed than grace, she made her way across the room, stumbling into an end table and causing the lamp on top of it to wobble dangerously.

"Damn!" She'd tried to grab the lamp, but only succeeded in stubbing her toe on something. Abandoning the lamp in favour of her throbbing foot, she let it crash to the ground. She hopped up and down whimpering in pain while simultaneously glancing over her shoulder towards the window. A burst of light filled the room and she was sure she saw the shadowy shape of a person by the window. Through the noise of the storm, the sound of footsteps reached her ears. Oh God! It was coming to get her...

A scream ripped from her throat and she turned abruptly in order to grab the poker, only to crash into something hard. Hands grabbed at her and she screamed again, hitting and kicking in an attempt to elude whoever was holding her. Arms tightened around her as she lurched to the side, the suddenness of her movement knocking her opponent off

balance. Together they landed on the floor, and she found herself pinned under a heavy body, her assailant's fingers pressed tightly over her mouth. Luckily, her one arm was free and she swung it with all her might towards her attacker.

As her fist connected with a solid wall of muscle, pain shot through her hand and both she, and the person she'd hit, emitted a shocked 'oomph.' The only difference was that, while she stopped her assault to focus on the throbbing in her hand, the other individual merely flinched and grabbed her arm, effectively immobilizing her.

"Are you crazy, woman?" A deep voice rasped in her ear.

Mel froze. Somehow, even through her fear, she recognized that it was Ryne on top of her. Ceasing her struggles, she blinked up at him, relieved to see a comparatively friendly face—well, friendly compared to the undead creature she'd been imagining. He cautiously removed his hand from her mouth.

"You're not going to scream again, are you?" His hand still hovered near her face, obviously ready to cover her mouth, should the need arise.

She shook her head.

"Good, because my ears are sensitive to high pitches. I'll probably be deaf for the next few days because of that scream." He shifted so that his body no longer pressed flush against hers. Instead, he was straddling her. "Okay, what got you so worked up that you started screeching and wrecking my entertainment room?"

"I..." Mel's mouth suddenly went dry. Now that she was no longer staring at his face, she got a good look at him. Oh. My. Gosh. Ryne was on top of her. A nearly *naked* Ryne was on top of her! The flashes of lightning illuminated his body in amazing detail. Starting at his broad shoulders, her gaze ran over his muscular chest, noting the flat brown nipples, the faint trace of hair, the well defined abdominals, and lean hips. Black boxer shorts covered his lower half, but hung low enough that she could see the beginning of an interesting 'v' that disappeared below his waist band. Under the cover of the boxers... well... a certain something pressed against sensitive portions of her anatomy.

She gulped and forced her eyes back up to his face only to discover he was glaring down at her impatiently. Oh, right. He'd asked her a question. Now, what was it again? Umm... Ryne wanted to know why she was screaming. Well... Now that she was no longer alone, the danger her imagination had conjured up had faded into obscurity. Mel blushed, feeling rather foolish and looked away, biting her lip. Unfortunately, Ryne didn't relent despite her obvious discomfort. He just sat on top of

her staring down. Mel licked her lips as she realized he wasn't about to give in to her silent plea. "Er... I heard something."

"Such as?"

"I know you'll think this is silly, but... it sounded like someone was tapping at the window and..."

"And your imagination took over?" He quirked an eyebrow at her and Mel felt herself flush even more. At least it was dark so he couldn't see—

The thought wasn't even completely formed when the lights went on, exposing her to Ryne's gaze. She winced at the sudden brightness. Couldn't anything ever go her way?

"Hey, what's going on down here?" Looking up, in the direction of the voice, Mel saw Bryan leaning in the doorway, his hand on the light switch. Muscles rippled across his bare chest and his pyjama pants hung low on his hips. Her heart gave a lurch as she realized nearly naked hunks surrounded her. Unfortunately, none of the hunks seemed as impressed by her, as she was by them. This latest one appeared to be laughing as he took in the scene.

"Nothing. Go back to bed." Ryne didn't move from on top of her and Mel shifted, trying to give him the hint that he really should move.

"Doesn't look like nothing to me." Bryan continued. "More like the two of you are about to get it on."

"Sorry to disappoint you, my friend, but it was nothing that interesting. Mel thought she heard a noise at the window." Ryne completely ignored her efforts to dislodge him.

Mel stopped struggling, instead twisting her neck so she could better see Bryan. "Yeah, something was tapping at the window and I was getting up to investigate."

A grin started to spread over Ryne's face, as he called her on the veracity of her story. "Really? The window's the other way. It looks more like you were coming to get me to save you."

"Well, I wasn't. I was going to get a poker from the fireplace and take it with me for protection." Mel lifted her chin, daring him to doubt her.

Ryne tossed her a disbelieving look while Bryan crossed the room to check the window. He quickly returned. "Well, you did hear something Mel. The window is leaking and there's a steady drip landing on the floor. I'll get a bucket to catch the water."

As Bryan went to get a bucket, Ryne leaned forward, a teasing glint in his eye. He spoke in a voice that was menacingly slow and creepy. "I've

heard that evil drops of water often stalk fair young maidens in the middle of the night.”

“That’s not funny.” Mel pushed ineffectually at Ryne’s thighs. “Will you get off me?” She hissed.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m quite comfortable.”

“Well, I’m not. Now get off!” She noticed that he’d focused his eyes on her chest and she could only imagine what he must be seeing; the t-shirt wasn’t that heavy and the room was cold.

Bryan walked in carrying a bucket just as she spoke. He chuckled. “Mel, would you mind waiting until I’m gone? I’d rather not be here to see Ryne ‘getting off.’ We’re good friends and all, but I don’t particularly want to witness his sexual exploits.”

Mel was sure her face was as red as a tomato by now. She crossed her arms protectively over her chest, while chastising Bryan. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it!”

Bryan said nothing else, merely setting the bucket in place and walking out of the room snickering.

# Chapter 17

Mel awoke wrapped in a cocoon of warmth. She sighed contentedly and snuggled in closer to the source of the heat. Mmm, now this was the way to wake up. Funny, she'd never realized how comfortable her body pillow was before. It smelled good too—sort of spicy and masculine...

Wait. That wasn't right. Her pillow smelled like the lemon-fresh scent of her laundry soap. She moved her fingers, exploring the surface beneath her... uh-oh. Last time she checked, her body pillow didn't have a rib cage. This was not good.

Cautiously she opened one eye and saw a muscular pectoral just inches from her face. Oh great, what had she done now? Without thinking, she gathered her strength and pushed hard against the body that was pressed to hers, twisting away with the intent of creating as much space, as fast as possible, between herself and the person beside her.

As escape attempts went, it was highly unsuccessful. She barely made a quarter turn before strong hands caught her, pulling her back.

"Not so fast, sweetheart." Ryne's voice was rough with sleep.

Yep. Just as she suspected. She was in Ryne Taylor's bed and he was in it as well. Finding herself effectively trapped, Mel looked up at him and scowled. After last night's incident, he'd refused to let her stay alone, claiming she'd just have more bad dreams and he didn't want his sleep disturbed anymore than it already was. Of course, she'd protested and in the end, the annoying man had simply picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

Once in the bedroom, he'd dropped her onto the mattress, turned off the lights and climbed in beside her before she even had her wits about her. His arms had held her tightly against him, thwarting her attempts to leave. In the end, under the threat of being tied and gagged—he wouldn't really do that would he?—she'd finally stopped her struggles. Lying stiffly at his side, she'd listened as his breathing fell into a steady rhythm, indicating he was nearing sleep. At some point, she must have

dozed off too, though her intention had been to sneak out as soon as he slept.

"I see, from the frown on your face, that you aren't a morning person." Ryne rose up on his elbow beside her. His dark hair hung messily about his face and the morning stubble on his chin made him appear more handsome than ever.

How dare he look so sexy first thing in the morning, Mel thought to herself. She scowled thinking that her own morning appearance was probably less than appealing. It just wasn't fair!

"Tsk, ts. I can't have a grumpy woman in my bed. I have a reputation to uphold, you know." A crooked grin appeared on his face and his eyes twinkled with devilment. "I definitely have to do something about this." Without another word, he tilted her chin up and kissed her.

In shock, Mel gasped which provided him the perfect opportunity to slip his tongue into her mouth. Instinctively, she struggled, but he merely chuckled against her lips and continued on with the kiss, using his weight and superior strength to keep her in place. She pushed against his shoulders, and twisted her head trying to break free, with no effect. Annoyingly, even as she began pummeling him with her fists, she realized her lips were moving against his, returning the kiss.

Ryne lifted his head and grinned down at her. "Ah, no more scowl, but... hmm... still not quite the look I was hoping for, maybe..." Suddenly, Mel found her arms pinned over her head.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Experimenting." And with that, he kissed her again. This time it was slow and gentle, his lips pulling and sucking on one of hers, tenderly nibbling then licking. Abandoning her mouth, he trailed his lips lightly over her jaw to her ear. Taking his time, he left butterfly kisses on her forehead, down her nose, across her cheeks before finally settling on her mouth once again. Mel felt every nerve ending tingle to life as something inside her instinctively responded to him.

At some point, she had stopped her struggles and was now kissing him back with growing enthusiasm. Ryne lifted his head and whispered into her ear. "You liked that didn't you? Me, holding you down."

That jolted her to awareness. No—this couldn't be happening! Mel grabbed onto a remaining bit of sanity and wriggled, trying to work herself free again. Ryne moaned in approval and shifted his attention to her neck, his teeth grazing the skin there. He rolled so that his body only half covered hers, his leg insinuating itself between hers. She could feel his erection pressing against her thigh, hot and heavy. For the first time,

she became aware that he was nude. The realization had her struggling even more, but perversely, her resistance was increasing her own excitement; the touch of domination proving to be highly erotic.

Her blood was thrumming through her veins now; her heart was pounding. An intimate ache grew within her. Struggles to escape became undulations, inviting him to explore and satisfy the need she could no longer deny. A thrill ran through her as he rocked his swollen member against her and his hand brushed her stomach. With a sigh, she gave in to the craving inside her.

After that everything got a bit blurry. At some point, her wrists had been freed and she was able to wrap her arms around him, splaying her fingers over the hot muscled surface of his back. Ryne grabbed the edge of her t-shirt and worked it up to her armpits. He pressed their bodies together and her breasts compressed against the solid wall of his chest. The scattering of hair abraded her skin and made it tingle.

He nipped at her chin and nuzzled her neck; the feel of his hot breath trailing across her collar bone, sending shivers up and down her spine. Working his way down her body, he buried his face in her cleavage while rhythmically kneading her breast. Mel moaned in pleasure at the feel of his calloused hand on her soft skin. Her nipple stiffened as he drew his thumb back and forth across the taut peak before giving it a little pinch and twist. Pleasure shot through her and she felt moisture gather between her legs.

It had been so long since she'd been with someone; since she'd felt that sweet release. Tension quickly built within her as she thought of Ryne's strong muscular body possessing hers, of wrapping her legs around his waist, her fingers digging into his back while his long thick shaft moved within her...

Suddenly she realized that she had parted her legs and Ryne was probing her with his finger. When had she lost her panties? And did she even care? Stroking her silken folds, Ryne gently slid a digit into her and she gasped, jerking at the onslaught of sensations. He moved his finger in and out, barely brushing against her sensitive spot. The feeling was incredible yet left her squirming and pleading for more.

"Patience, Melody." Ryne murmured against her breast before enveloping her aching nipple in his hot mouth.

She arched her back as the sensations caused by his sucking mixed with the stroking of her swollen nub. Need was coiling inside her and she abandoned his back in favour of gripping the bed sheets. He switched to her other nipple and she began to whimper, tremors starting



to build. His stroking changed pace and he added another finger inside her, then a third. With the extra thickness stretching her, Mel went over the edge, convulsing as her release swept through her from head to toe, leaving her panting, and limp.

"Hmm... A much better morning expression; all happy and relaxed." Ryne smoothed his hand down her body, sounding much too smug. If Mel hadn't been so pleasantly relaxed, she would have slapped him. Not knowing—and probably not caring—about her thoughts, he continued on in a teasing tone of voice. "But, you look so much more relaxed than I do and we really should be a matched set, don't you think?" With that, he put on a condom, moved over her and settled between her thighs.

"Again?" Mel managed to make her mouth move.

He chuckled against her lips as he leaned down for a kiss. "Yes. Again." Mel felt him probing and pressing against her, sliding into the mouth of her tunnel, as if testing her ability to receive him, before pushing forward inch by inch until he was fully sheathed.

The feeling of fullness was delicious and Mel was sure her eyes were already rolling back in her head. When he began to move, her already sensitized body quickly responded. With just a few strokes, he had her panting again, pulling at him, craving more and more until the second wave crashed over her leaving her writhing in ecstasy.

Vaguely, Mel felt Ryne finishing then collapsing on top of her, a contented rumbling sound emanating from his chest. Hazily, she thought it was a curious reaction to good sex but found it innately comforting in some way. She was too satiated to follow through on the thought any further. Wow! It had been ages since she'd had sex, and for some reason, she didn't remember it being quite this good. She lay there enjoying the aftershocks and letting her mind drift. Only when Ryne moved did she force herself to actually begin to gather her thoughts together.

"Now this is how a man and woman should look and feel in the morning." Ryne planted a quick kiss on her before rolling away. Mel tipped her head to the side and watched him get out of bed and head towards the garbage. The muscles in his back and thighs rippled and flexed as he crossed the floor. What a great specimen, she thought lazily. And just imagine, I've only know him—her thinking screeched to a halt.

Oh. No. Reality sunk in. She'd just had sex with Ryne Taylor! Ryne Taylor who she was supposed to be interviewing. Ryne Taylor who she didn't really even know and wasn't even sure if she liked! Good heavens, where had her brain gone?

She blinked and realized that she was staring at Ryne and he was staring right back at her, a half-smile gracing his face.

"From the look you're giving me, I'd say that the after effects of morning sex don't last long with you, do they?" Ryne strolled back to the bed and sat beside her, appearing completely unconcerned that he was naked. Mel flushed and averted her gaze from his body, though it wasn't easy. "Still, I suppose I have enough time to try it again. Maybe that happy mood would stick around longer with one more orgasm. What do you think?"

Mel jerked as she felt him run his hands down her body. Her *naked* body. Oh God, she'd forgotten that she was naked. Well, almost naked. Her T-shirt was bunched up under her arms, but the rest of her was bare. Realizing that even her legs were still splayed, Mel quickly brought them together and tugged the t-shirt down to cover herself.

"Not in the mood for more?" Ryne flicked the end of her nose. "Well, if you change your mind, let me know. I'm going to take a shower, get dressed, and then go see about clearing the driveway." He stood up, took a step towards the bathroom, and stopped. "Do you want to join me? The shower stall is large enough."

"No!" Mel barely managed the strangled response, totally mortified at her own behaviour. Ryne just chuckled and left.

Sitting up, she pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She'd just had sex with a man she barely knew. That wasn't like her. It wasn't like her at all. What had she been thinking? Well, she hadn't been thinking, that was the problem. She'd only been feeling and it *had* felt good. Hmm... When was the last time she'd had sex? Furrowing her brow, she searched through the past year, surprised to find no one had interested her sufficiently to reach that level of intimacy. Okay. That explained this morning's aberration. A long period of abstinence had short circuited her common sense. But now that she'd had her bit of fun, she'd be fine. No more nookie with Ryne!

Feeling somewhat better, she got out of bed and eschewed observing her surroundings in favour of looking for her panties. When she found them, they were in shreds, so she hurriedly stuffed them in the garbage pail. This was just great. She'd have to go commando. She began to pull open the drawers of Ryne's dresser looking for a pair of track pants or shorts. She might not have underwear on, but darned if she'd walk around with no pants at all!

After finding a suitable pair of shorts, she snugged them around her waist as best she could. They were still a bit big and rode low on her

hips, but with the t-shirt hanging halfway down her thighs, it wasn't noticeable. Ryne came out of the bathroom just as she was pushing the drawers shut. He had a towel slung around his hips and little drops of water clung to his chest. Mel felt her knees go weak.

"Making yourself at home, I see." His blue eyes twinkled as he grinned at her.

Nervously, she pushed her hair from her face. "Umm... yeah. I hope you don't mind, but I needed—"

"No problem. Help yourself." He casually brushed past her, pulled open a drawer, and took out some underwear.

Realizing he was going to get dressed in front of her, Mel turned her back just as he pulled the towel off. It landed lightly on the bed beside her and she gave a little start.

"Still shy after all we've shared?"

"Yes!" Mel heard her voice crack and winced. She cleared her throat and gathered her courage to speak. She wasn't sure of the proper protocol for this type of a situation. "Um, about this morning..."

Ryne placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. Mel gave a surprised squeak and scrunched her eyes shut. He gave a quick bark of laughter. "You can open your eyes. I'm dressed." He waited patiently until she complied. She stared up into his handsome face. His blue eyes were intense yet there was a shadow to them as well. What was it? Caution? Regret? Unable to interpret it, she focused on his words instead.

"Melody, this morning was fun. It was great sex and maybe we can do it again, but that's all it was, okay? Now I'm going to get the guys and move that tree from the driveway. Feel free to use the shower—I set a towel out for you—and look for something to eat in the kitchen. We'll probably be back in about an hour if all goes well."

With that, he kissed her forehead and left.

She watched him leave, her mouth hanging open, only one thought in her head.

Jerk!

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Mel stood in the entertainment room, staring out the window. She'd showered, found her bra and jeans, and dressed, though she still felt strange not wearing panties. Every step she took had the crotch seam rubbing against her sensitive core—definitely not comfortable. Nor was it comfortable thinking about Ryne and how they'd parted. He'd

basically blown the whole incident off and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Her first instinct had been to be angry at him, but then her more practical side had intervened. They didn't have a relationship, so she had no right to any sort of anger or hurt. The thought that he was actually interested in her had briefly flashed through her mind, but his words upon leaving the shower had squashed that idea. It had just been sex; fulfilling a need they both felt at that moment. Even if it wasn't the sort of thing she usually did, it obviously was for him. Remaining casual about what happened would be the best course of action. Yes, the sex was good, but now it was time to focus on the real reason she was seeking him out, the interview for Greyson and the money it would bring her.

After finding the makings for some toast in the kitchen, she poured herself a cup of coffee and wandered around the house trying to fill her time. She checked out the view from various windows, found it unremarkable, and then decided to investigate the book shelves. Books could tell a lot about a person, she mused as she began to scan the titles. Horrors, mysteries, war stories, ancient history... Which ones were Ryne's and which ones belonged to the other two?

She pulled out several old leather bound books, their titles barely readable due to age, and sat down to look through them. One was entitled *Mythology and Cryptozoology*, while another was on *Lycanthropy*. In the second book, the sections dealing with werewolves were the most worn and someone had made notes in the margins, underlining certain passages. The penmanship was bold, written in black ink, and she wondered if it could be Ryne's, though the topic didn't seem like one he'd pursue.

Studying the comments, she chuckled. Words such as 'idiots' and 'as if' were written near some of the illustrations of werewolves. "Almost got it right" was penned near a passage about the effects of the full moon and the word 'allergic but not deadly' was beside a bit about silver bullets. It almost appeared as if the owner of the book took the topic seriously. She raised her eyebrows at the thought of any intelligent person believing such stuff. Get a life, she muttered. Still, it was interesting that people would devote so much time to create such a realistic myth. Having nothing better to do, she started to read.

It proved to be quite fascinating and she was surprised to hear the sound of voices approaching the house. Mel shoved the books back on the shelf and grabbed her coffee cup. Intent on heading to the door to check on their progress, she took a sip from her cup and grimaced. It

was cold. Changing direction, she went towards the kitchen instead. The guys could let themselves in. She needed fresh coffee.

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Ryne entered the house and ran his hands through his windswept hair. Typical spring. After an unseasonably warm two weeks, last night's storm had blown in a cold front. A northerly wind whipped over the land causing the tree branches to sway and the remains of last year's leaves—still wet from the rain—to blow about, their damp, clammy surface hitting against his legs and face more than once.

Removing the tree hadn't been very hard work; still he was glad to get back inside. Cold weather didn't bother him, but he hated the wind. It swirled a myriad of scents around him, confusing him as to the direction of their source. Sound distorted as well and the bits of debris flying by made him over-alert to the movement around him. Yes, all in all, windy days made him feel as if he was losing touch with some of his senses and he didn't like the experience at all. It made him jumpy and irritable.

Now that he was inside, he could relax again—well almost. He sniffed the air catching the scent of fresh coffee and Melody. When last he'd seen her, she'd still been flushed and smelling of sex. His inner wolf rumbled approval at the idea. He'd had more beautiful and more experienced women, but the sex this morning with Melody had been... different. There was something about her that appealed to him.

Unfortunately, therein lay the danger. The last thing he should be doing was getting involved with a nosey journalist. He needed to keep a clear head around her; watching what he said, analyzing her questions for any hint that she knew what he really was. One slip on his part, or by Bryan or Daniel, and their cover would be blown. If that happened, he knew what he had to do, and being involved with the girl would just make the task all the harder.

This morning—having sex with her—had definitely been a mistake on his part. It hadn't been planned, but when she'd frowned at him... Well, he wasn't used to having women frowning while in his bed, let alone in his arms. It was supposed to be just a bit of teasing; a few kisses and caresses—but once he'd started, he hadn't wanted to stop. Not one used to denying himself, he'd let his lustful wolf take over.

Self-retribution had followed once he was in the shower and had a clearer head. 'Bad move, Taylor,' he scolded himself. She could be—very possibly was—the enemy. His plan of giving her a quick and highly abridged interview didn't include having sex. He was supposed to be acting like an ass, offensive and uncooperative so that she'd hurry

on her way. With this in mind, he'd purposely been a jerk towards her this morning, brushing off the encounter, no tender words... Hurt and confusion had been evident in her eyes and, while he wasn't the most sensitive of guys, he usually didn't treat his women that way. Still, he'd steeled himself to do what was necessary and left her thinking the worst of him, despite the fact that his wolf was moving restlessly within him.

Maybe he should have just told her to go away in the first place, but from what he'd observed thus far, Melody wouldn't give up that easily. At least this way he knew what she was doing and could dole out measured bits of information—enough to make it seem real, but never anything important. Yes, it was still the best plan. He just had to keep his mind focused on the possible threat she could pose, rather than her other interesting qualities.

Setting his jaw, Ryne firmed his resolve and went off to find his unwanted guest.

# Chapter 18

After leaving Ryne's house, Mel went home, changed her clothes, then tried to concentrate on a list of questions to ask the man. Forcing all thoughts of their early morning encounter out of her head, she tried to view him as dispassionately as possible. What should she start with? He was a reluctant participant, so she didn't want to put him on the defensive with the very first question. Hmm... Tapping her pen against her lips, she considered the problem, then settled on the tried and true; basic background. There was nothing threatening about that. Date and place of birth seemed pretty safe, followed by where he grew up and what schools he attended. Then she could move on to his work inquiring about how he had started in photography and did he have any formal training. After jotting down her ideas, she sat back and considered the situation further.

She tried to imagine herself as someone interested in nature pictures. What would she want to know? Why was he interested in nature photography rather than people or buildings? How did he choose his subjects? What kind of cameras did he use? Were there special techniques that differed from other forms of photography? Any special considerations? Oh yes, and the locations. How did he select them and where had he taken pictures previously? Aldrich had conveyed that Greyson was particularly interested in the locations of the pictures. Personally, Mel didn't think it was that important, but she wasn't the one paying for the article now, was she?

The true story of the missing sales associate and the pilfered money would be interesting tidbits of information, but Mel scratched them from her list. If she asked, then Ryne would know she'd been talking to the people at Bastian's Gallery in Smythston. For some reason, she felt it prudent to not let him know she'd been there.

Setting her papers aside, she contemplated the rest of her day. It was noon by time she'd left Ryne's, declining the offer of lunch which had been enthusiastically delivered by Bryan and Daniel and only

grudgingly acknowledged by Ryne. He hadn't pressed her to stay, nor acted as if anything had happened between them, so Mel decided he really had just wanted sex—the asshole. The man obviously never had any real interest in her; she'd just been a convenience, someone to help him relieve his morning hard-on. Well, that was fine with her. She could be just as blasé about it as him. After all, she wasn't going to be in Stump River that long anyway. Just don't expect a repeat performance, she added darkly.

A glance at her watch told her it was only three o'clock. How should she spend the rest of the day? There was no TV to watch and the card games loaded on her computer were beginning to bore her after a week of playing them each night. If she'd had an internet hook up, she could have done some research on Lycans. It was a fascinating fantasy world that people had created and she planned on spending some more time reading up on the topic tomorrow, just out of curiosity.

Mel picked up the romance novel she'd been reading, but after a few pages, set it down. Since her encounter with Ryne, the sex in the story just wasn't that interesting anymore. She stared out the window at the woods. The wind had finally died down and the sun shone brightly. Maybe she could take a walk.

Without further thought, she grabbed her coat and stepped outside. The temperature was cool, but not so cold as to prevent her from enjoying the day. After spending most of her life in the city, the idea of having nature just outside her door was rather exciting. Mindful of the possibility of wolves, she decided not to walk too far, keeping the cabin in sight.

As she tromped along, Mel tried to view the land as Ryne might, from a photographer's point of view. Light and shadows, angles and background, unusual subject matter. It was amazing that, when she actually looked, there were a lot of things to see in the forest. Kneeling, she peered at some moss growing on the side of a tree. Up close it was actually rather interesting; tiny little fronds of bright green clinging to the rough grey bark; and the bark itself was so textured and varying in shades. She ran her hand over the moss and then the trunk, marvelling at the contrasting feel of each. With an eye out for minute details, she continued exploring the edge of the forest near the cabin, pausing every few feet to examine some new wonder that she'd never noticed before.

By the time she was finished, an hour had passed and Mel was full of enthusiasm for nature photography. In fact, she was itching to try some herself and wondered how much an inexpensive digital camera would



set her back. She'd have to ask Ryne when she saw him next. A frown passed over her at the thought of the man. The way he kept blowing hot then cold—make that somewhat friendly then rudely sarcastic—made him difficult to deal with. Half the time she actually liked him, but the rest of the time, she just wanted to give him a good swift kick. Well, she'd ask him about the camera *before* she kicked him.

Her stomach chose that moment to rumble and she realized that, aside from some toast and several cups of coffee, she hadn't eaten yet that day. The thought of cooking wasn't overly appealing, so she decided to head to town and see what Al was cooking at Ruth's. She hurried back to the cabin, grabbed her purse and keys, and drove to town to placate her grumbling stomach.

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Parking the car outside the diner, Mel suddenly hesitated, her hand on the key. Lucy would be inside, working. Damn! How could she have forgotten her new friend? Double damn! Mel closed her eyes as guilt washed over her; she'd had sex with Lucy's man this morning and broken one of her own basic rules: no poaching. What kind of a person was she, to let something like that completely slip her mind? She almost hit the steering wheel in frustration, but caught herself at the last moment, not wanting a repeat of the 'stuck horn' incident. Instead, she curled her hands into fists, her nails digging into her palms. The pain was a welcome penance for her misdeeds.

Through the window, she could see Lucy serving the various tables. The woman was laughing at something one of the customers said, while skillfully balancing a heavy tray of food in one hand and pouring coffee with the other. Lucy really was something. Once you got past the slightly ungrammatical speech, layers of makeup, bleached blonde hair, and too tight tops, there was a warm, generous person underneath. A person who willingly offered friendship to a newcomer... and Mel had betrayed her.

Ryne and Lucy were... Well, Mel wasn't quite sure exactly what they were, but they were something. And now she felt awful. Ryne was Lucy's property, despite what the woman might say otherwise. Who in their right mind wouldn't want Ryne? Lucy had seen him first and so it should have been hands off. Mind you, Ryne laid his hands on Mel first, but she didn't do much protesting. Mel's stomach clenched. Why hadn't she thought of this sooner? And what should she do about it now? If she told Lucy, the woman would be hurt, yet if she didn't tell her, someone else might.

Would Ryne say something to the waitress next time he saw her? No, he didn't seem like the kiss and tell type. But what about Daniel and Bryan? They both knew something had gone on this morning, if their knowing grins were any indication. Mel flushed remembering how Bryan had looked at her and winked. Still, they probably wouldn't mention the matter to Lucy, either.

Okay. So the only way Lucy would find out, would be if Mel told her and she certainly wouldn't do that, would she? But if she didn't, it was lying by omission and Mel didn't like to lie to her friends. Yet the truth might hurt more than the lie. Minutes passed while Mel wavered back and forth. Finally, she huffed in exasperation at herself, got out of the car and went inside, deciding to gently broach the subject of having lunch with Ryne yesterday and gauge Lucy's reaction. If there was any spark of jealousy then... well... she wasn't sure what she'd do, but at least she'd have a better sense of Lucy's feelings.

Entering the diner, Mel slid onto her usual chair, picked up the menu, and studied it, all the while watching for Lucy out of the corner of her eye. It was busy in the diner, no one apparently wanting to cook on Sunday night. Good, Mel thought. Lucy would have less time to spend chatting. Stiffening her spine, Mel made a selection and waited, with only a minor sense of impending doom, for the waitress to arrive.

"Hey Mel! You don't usually come this late. Did you have a busy day?" Lucy bustled up; a blonde curl bobbing up and down beside her ear was the only evidence that the woman had been working hard this shift. She leaned her hip against the table top as if she planned to stay for a few minutes.

"Umm, yeah. I was busy working on questions for my article."

"The one with Ryne? How did your meeting go with him?" Lucy's eyes sparkled with interest.

"Meeting?" Mel could feel heat creeping up her neck. The meeting was what had started the whole mess.

"Yeah—the one Harley delivered the message for? Or did the big storm keep you from going? I heard there were some trees down across the roads and some power lines too." She frowned and tucked the wayward curl behind her ear.

Mel swallowed, but forced herself to answer calmly. "No, the storm didn't stop me from going to Ryne's house." It only kept me from leaving, she added in her head.

"Great. I've never been to his place—oh damn! Table six wants more coffee. I've got to go. Do you know what you want? The chicken parmesan is really tasty."

"That sounds good." Mel agreed not recalling what she'd previously selected, just thankful Lucy had to leave before she asked any more questions.

"Great. I'll be back in just a minute." As she walked away, Lucy yelled Mel's order into the kitchen and the cook grunted in reply.

Mel nibbled on her thumb nail and when she realized what she was doing, clutched her hands together in her lap. She hardly ever chewed her nails anymore, which just went to prove how guilty she was feeling over Ryne. Hopefully all the customers in the diner would be very demanding and leave Lucy no time for idle chatter. Squeezing her eyes shut, she sent up a little prayer to that effect and then slowly opened her eyes to check the results of her missive.

As per usual, it had the exact opposite effect that she'd hoped for. A table of eight diners were standing up preparing to leave and two smaller parties were also showing signs of finishing their meal.

"Here you go, Mel. Enjoy. I'll be back later to chat." Lucy breezed by and set a plate of food in front of her.

With little appetite left, Mel placed her napkin in her lap, and picked up her utensils. Half-heartedly she began to cut the chicken into small pieces, but only pushed them about her plate, making a show of actually caring what was in front of her. Damn, damn, damn. Why had she given in to Ryne this morning? If only she'd been stronger, if only she'd thought before she'd acted...

"How's that dinner?" Al called out to her from the serving window between the kitchen and dining area, causing Mel to start in surprise. She looked at her plate. The food was now in small enough pieces that even a baby could eat it.

"Delicious." Mel answered Al's question, pasting a smile on her face, and popping a piece of food into her mouth. She chewed with feigned enthusiasm. It probably tasted wonderful, but at the moment she was sure sawdust would have been just as palatable. Taking a sip of water, Mel washed the chicken down then stared unseeing at the food in front of her again. To tell Lucy or not to tell Lucy, that was the question. Now, if she only knew the answer.

She ran through the imaginary conversation in her head. "Hey, Lucy. I have something to tell you. I'm really sorry. It wasn't supposed to happen, but... I had sex with Ryne this morning."

"What was that, Mel?"

Mel blinked and realized Lucy was standing in front of her. Oh no! Had she really spoken those words out loud? Surely not.

"You had sex with *who* this morning?" Lucy grinned, slid into the empty chair opposite Mel, and leaned in close, resting her elbows on the table top. She was obviously eager for a juicy bit of gossip.

"Er... no one."

"You had sex with no one? You mean you were... um... self-servicing?"

"No!" Mel felt heat rising in her face at the assumption.

"Hey, no need to be embarrassed. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. If you're all tensed up and—"

"Lucy!" Mel slunk down a bit in her seat and hoped no one could overhear the conversation.

"Then who? And don't give me any of that 'no one' business. I can see a love bite on your neck."

Mel clapped her hand to her neck. She hadn't notice that when she took a shower!

Lucy giggled, sounding immensely pleased with herself. "Gotcha! Relax, there's nothing there. I was just tricking you into revealing the truth. You did have sex with someone, though. Now give. Which local stud got lucky?"

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Mel stared down at the table and whispered the truth. "I'm really sorry, Lucy. I hate to have to be the bearer of bad news. I didn't mean to but... I had sex with Ryne." Mel winced, waiting for the fallout. When none came, she hazarded a peak up at her friend.

A quizzical look graced the waitress's face. "So... ? What's the bad news?"

"That I had sex with Ryne."

"You're kidding me, right? Sex with Ryne is never bad." Lucy cocked her head to the side and frowned.

Not sure why Lucy wasn't grasping the gravity of the situation, Mel explained again. "The sex wasn't bad. It was great. But it was with Ryne. *Your* Ryne."

Lucy blinked. "Well of course it would be with my Ryne. He's the only Ryne around here that I know of... Oh!" She gave an amused snort. "Did you think I was going to be upset? Mel, I already told you we don't have that kind of relationship."

"I know what you said, but... I still thought that maybe you were just saying that."

"Mel, we're just 'friends with benefits.' Ryne's a nice guy, but he's not the one for me. Hell, he might not be 'the one' for anyone; he's too much of a player." She shook her head and smiled reminiscently. "When I first met him, I wondered if maybe he was the right guy, but he isn't. He's a good man, but I want someone who'll take me away from all this." She flourished her order pad and gestured around the room. "Not some guy who's planning on spending the rest of his life in Stump River."

"You don't like it here?" Mel furrowed her brow, trying to understand what the woman was saying.

"Oh, I like it fine, but I also want to make a new start. Here, I'm just good old Lucy. All the guys... er... know me, if you get my drift, but none of them really want to settle down with me." The server's eyes suddenly seemed lonely and a bit wistful. Mel reached across and grabbed her hand, somehow knowing that behind her happy, carefree facade Lucy had more than a few scars on her heart.

"Lucy, you're a wonderful person. Any man would—"

Shaking her head, Lucy interrupted Mel's attempt at offering comfort. "No Mel, not 'any man' at least not here in Stump River. But someday, when I save enough money, I'm going to move to a big city like Toronto or Montreal and make a new start for myself. Find some guy who thinks I'm more than just a roll in the hay." She gave a determined smile. "Don't get me wrong. The people here are good to me, but I want more. I *deserve* more."

Mel looked at her friend, taking in the tilt of her chin and her slightly narrowed eyes. Her heart swelled with pride in the woman. Lucy *was* more than people thought she was. "You're right Lucy. You do deserve more and if I can help..." She let the sentence trail off, not sure exactly what she could do, but willing to offer her services. The two women's eyes met and Lucy nodded, obviously understanding the sentiment.

She patted Mel's hand. "Now enough about me. It's you I'm worried about. If you want Ryne, you go for it, just don't be expecting a lot more than getting your teeth rattled. He wouldn't purposely break your heart, but he's not into long term commitments. Keep that in mind."

Mel brushed Lucy's concerns away. "It was a onetime thing. I'm here to interview him—it's a job, that's all."

"Nothing saying you can't enjoy your work." Lucy stood up and winked.

“Well, maybe... but I doubt it. All we’ve done so far is argue—well, except for this morning. Besides, I’m pretty sure I’m not his type.”

Lucy gave her a once over. “I don’t know... I’ve noticed him watching you on and off this past week, when you weren’t looking. He’s had his eye on you.”

“Really?” Mel felt a ridiculous gush of happiness at the idea of Ryne taking notice of her.

“Uh-huh. If you play your cards right, you might just get lucky more than once.” With another wink, Lucy went on her way.

Mel watched her leave and mulled over the conversation. Lucy had basically told her to go after Ryne and that Ryne might be interested in her. She wasn’t really sure how she felt about that fact, but knew, from a logical point of view, she shouldn’t even consider Ryne in any light other than that of the subject for an article. But still, fantasies were nice... Suddenly, her appetite came back in full force and she began to eat with gusto. Al really did make good chicken parmesan, she thought as she happily munched away.

# Chapter 19

Ryne arrived late at Miller's Service Station on Monday morning. The kitchen cabinets he'd ordered had arrived at the house just as he was leaving and he'd stayed to double check that the order was correct. Ben wouldn't care that he'd been delayed, but Ryne hated being late. As he climbed out of the truck and made his way to the service bay, he decided he'd have to try to get in early or work a bit longer one day this week to make up the time.

"Hey, Harley." He greeted the black lab that wiggled with joy at his appearance, ruffling his fur and giving a quick scratch behind his ears before sending him to tell Ben of his arrival. Harley was a good dog and Ryne enjoyed the happy-go-lucky beast. When they'd first met, Harley had whimpered and hidden whenever he came around, but once the dog understood Ryne was a benevolent Alpha, they'd gotten along just fine. Not that he could truly 'talk' to the dog, as the locals were fond of saying, but he understood and used some universal canine body language to communicate.

Sending the dog on his way, Ryne headed for the office to check the day's work orders. Pulling out the buff coloured pages from his mail slot, a white envelope tumbled to the ground. Bending over, he picked it up and turned it over in his hands. Only his name appeared on the front. Even as he tore the flap open, Ryne had a sneaking suspicion as to what lay inside.

Yep. True to her word, Melody—he would never be able to think of her as Mel—had left him a list of interview questions. It had been too much to hope that she'd forget the whole thing. As he scanned over the outline, his face grew grim. Where was he born? Where did he grow up? Where did he go to school? How many people were in his family? All those questions had to be vetoed. He couldn't take a chance that she'd associate him with Kane's pack. How he chose his subjects—that was okay. Camera techniques—yep, he'd discuss those. Where he took

his pictures—no way. No one could ever discover the wolf picture had been taken just outside Smythston, Oregon.

Rubbing, his forehead, he tried to ease the headache he could already feel building. This wasn't going to be easy. He'd have to come up with some cock-and-bull story as to why he wouldn't answer what were basically simple questions.

Ben Miller sauntered in, Harley leading the way and wagging his tail, obviously pleased to have completed his mission. "Hey Ryne, you look worried. What's up?"

"Nothing much Ben." He folded the list and stuffed it in his pocket, then bent to pat Harley as a reward for following orders.

Ben nodded towards Ryne's pocket. "That letter you were reading—it was from the new girl in town—Mel, I think her name is. Anyway, she was here bright and early wanting to give it to you so I said I'd make sure you read it."

"Thanks Ben." He turned to go.

"So, is she your new girl?"

Ryne rolled his eyes, but turned to face his boss. Ben didn't usually indulge in idle gossip so maybe there was some point to this conversation. "Girl? No. Melody isn't my new girl. She wants to interview me about some pictures I took a while back."

Ben nodded. "That's what I heard. I also heard someone say you were planning on leaving with her, on heading back to the States because you're really a famous photographer."

"Famous? Hardly. If I was, would I be working here?"

"Now don't be putting down this fine establishment of mine." Ben unsuccessfully tried to look affronted. "But I suppose you're right. If you were famous, you wouldn't have started fixing up the old Nelson place or be getting your hands dirty, changing oil for me. I just wanted to check to make sure you weren't planning on suddenly taking off with that girl and leaving me in a lurch."

"Rest assured Ben. I have no plans of taking off with Melody. Stump River is where I'm staying."

"Good to know. Now quit standing around here yakking and get to work." Ben headed back towards his office and Ryne shook his head. Nothing ever happened in Stump River, so Melody's presence was a big event and lent itself to the production of rumours. He just hoped the attention died down when Melody left. The last thing a werewolf pack wanted was attention.



By time noon rolled around, Ryne had a few ideas of how to avoid certain questions that Melody had on her list. He just hoped he'd be able to pull it off and that she'd accept what he said at face value and not press too hard for more details. Mentally, he rehearsed his plan. Keep things light and simple. Don't be too friendly. Give her some basic information and send her on her way as quickly as possible. And, no more sex!

He still couldn't quite believe how he was acting towards her. First there'd been the incident at her cabin, when he had snuck in during the night and then yesterday morning... His judgement seemed to be slipping where she was concerned, his wolf side pushing to the foreground. That usually didn't happen. Sure, the beast wanted out, but he'd always kept it in check, until now. So, why was he suddenly having all these conflicting feelings? What was it about Melody that drew him to her? Her warm brown eyes? Her lush breasts? Her quirky personality? Whatever it was, he needed to keep it under control. The woman could very well turn out to be public enemy number one as far as his people were concerned. Involvement with her was nothing but bad news.

As if on cue, Melody wandered into the service bay. She was wearing a denim jacket, tight jeans, and a loose red top that was gathered at the base of her throat by a tie and then flowed over her full breasts to her waist where it swirled gently every time she moved. Ryne wondered if he undid the bow at the neck, would the top fall from her shoulders and puddle at her feet leaving her bare. He felt a grin spread over his face at the idea and clenched his fists to resist the temptation to see if his theory was right.

Obviously unaware of his thoughts, Melody absent-mindedly played with the string that held her top in place, drawing his attention to the rise and fall of her breasts. "Hi! Did you get the list of questions I left? They're pretty simple, so I was wondering if you were ready to start on them today."

It took Ryne a moment to realize she was waiting for an answer and forced his gaze away from the interesting activity of her fingers. "Today?" He pondered the question. There was no reason to delay any longer. He'd done that all last week just for the perverse joy of annoying her. But now the time for games was over. The sooner she was gone, the better. "All right. Today is fine. I'm almost done work; I just have to put my tools away."

"Great!"

"You can wait over there." Ryne pointed towards a group of chairs by a set of vending machines selling pop, chips, and various chocolate bars.

He watched as Melody made herself comfortable—well, at least as comfortable as the old plastic chairs would allow—and then concentrated on cleaning his tools.

Grabbing a rag, he wiped down the wrenches, removing dirt and excess grease, before arranging them in the proper drawers of the tool cabinet. A sound behind him drew his attention and he saw Melody was buying a chocolate bar. The look of happiness on her face as she peeled back the wrapper made him smile. From what he'd seen of her so far, she was seldom without coffee in her hand. Apparently, when the coffee was unavailable, she moved on to chocolate. She was a funny little thing.

Concentrating on finishing his job, he locked the tool box and put the keys away. Moving to the sink, he turned on the water, poured some hand cleaner on his palms and began to work the industrial strength soap into his hands. Soon the layers of grease and grime were washed away and he dried off.

Melody had just finished her treat when he walked over to her.

“Ready?”

She nodded in agreement. “Do you want to talk at the diner or...?”

He hesitated for a minute. At the diner, everyone would be eavesdropping and the chance of his neighbours interrupting with questions of their own was highly likely; it was something he wanted to avoid. “No. There’s a nice little place near the cenotaph with a couple of benches. We could sit there.”

Giving a quick nod, Melody stood and picked up her purse. He ushered her out, calling a goodbye to Ben who was still working in the office. The older man grunted in acknowledgement and Harley gave a woof before settling down to finish one of his many naps.

They walked in companionable silence down Main Street. A few people called a greeting or waved from their vehicle as they drove past. Ryne nodded in response thinking that within half an hour everyone would be talking about him and the ‘new girl’ in town. Oh well, she’d be gone soon enough and he’d no longer be at the centre of the rumour mill.

Sitting down on the bench, Melody pulled out her steno pad and a pen. Ryne braced himself, hoping his answers would be sufficiently convincing to keep her from probing too deeply.

“Ryne, we’re going to start with some simple background information, like date of birth, where you grew up, what your childhood was

like—that sort of thing. It will give readers a more rounded picture of you; make you more real to them.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Melody blinked at him. “Um... why?”

Ryne assumed his most arrogant expression. “Because, I did not truly *exist* before photography.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me.” He shifted uncomfortably, feeling like an ass. It was such a dumb answer but he really hadn’t been able to think of anything else.

“Yes, I did, but... what does that mean?”

“That my life before I started taking pictures was of no importance; just a vast wasteland of ill-spent years trying to find my real passion, my real reason for existence.”

“Are you pulling my leg?” Mel set her pad and pencil down in her lap and gave him a weird look that seemed to be half laughing disbelief and half fear that he really wasn’t joking.

“No. I am not. Next question.” He stared at her, allowing his wolf to show in his eyes, demanding she accept his word as law. There was a flicker of something in her eyes, an acknowledgement, or recognition of his position and then she dropped her gaze, even going so far as to slightly tilt her head as if offering her throat. Curious behaviour, Ryne thought. Most humans just looked away or cowered. Hmm. Brushing the little idiosyncrasy aside, he relaxed the force of his will.

Melody gave a sigh—it sounded like she was relieved to be released—and then cleared her throat. “All right. So no background information. Um... do you have any formal training in photography?”

“No. One day I was out running in the woods and when I stopped to rest, I just really started to look closely at my surroundings. The intricacies of nature’s designs, the variety of hues; they all captured my imagination. The next day I brought a camera with me and started taking pictures.”

“Really?” Melody sat up straight, excitement washing over her face. “The same thing happened to me yesterday afternoon. I was out walking around the cabin, and trying to see the forest the way you might and it just hit me. I really wished I had a camera so I could try some different shots.”

The enthusiasm in her voice caught Ryne's attention. He noted how her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks glowed. Before he realized it, he heard himself not only offering to lend her one of his digital cameras, but to take her on a hike and show her some photography techniques.

"Oh, that would be just awesome. When?"

"How about today?"

"Sure, though..." She paused and looked down at her feet.

Ryne stifled his laughter. Her boots were the same four inch heels that she'd worn sneaking onto his property that first day. "Definitely not the proper footwear. Tell you what. I'll go home and get a couple of cameras and meet you at your cabin in an hour. That way you can change into some hiking clothes." He flicked the tie on her top and watched how the bow relaxed slightly revealing just an inch more skin. A low growl rumbled in his throat as he recalled running his lips over the smooth slope of her shoulders.

"How do you do that?"

Melody's question had him giving a start. He'd been so intent on her skin that— "Sorry. How do I do what?"

"That rumbly thing with your throat. I've never heard a man do that before."

Ryne felt himself flushing slightly and tried to casually pass it off. "Oh, it's just one of those weird habits people have. Some guys give a wolf whistle when they see a pretty girl. I... er... growl."

"Oh." She paused and seemed to be thinking over his answer, then brightened. "Then you think I'm pretty?"

He smiled, noting how nicely she blushed. It wasn't an all over red, just a stain of pink along her cheek bones. "Yeah. I do." Leaning forward he gave her a gentle kiss then stood abruptly. "I'll just go get those cameras."

"Sure. I'll see you in a while."

As he strode away, he glanced back. Melody was still sitting there with her fingers pressed to her lips. Damn! He'd done it again. What was wrong with him?

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Back at the cabin, Mel had pulled on a heavy sweater over her red cotton top, ditched the fashionable boots, and put on sneakers, complete with a pair of extra thick socks. She hesitated over a winter coat, but decided if she was walking, the denim coat would keep her sufficiently warm.

Sitting on the steps, she waited for Ryne to arrive, excited to try some nature photography and to see him again. She hadn't been sure how their meeting would go, but she had forced herself to not think about their sexual encounter and to just treat him as a casual acquaintance. Despite what Lucy had said, Mel wasn't so sure that Ryne saw her as anything more than a warm body to have sex with. A secret part of her hoped there was more, but logically she knew she shouldn't hold her breath. Her main focus—as Aldrich had pointed out to her during her daily report—had to remain on getting this article done. Mr. Greyson was hoping for more than 'I'm still waiting.'

At least now she could tell the lawyer that she'd started. Mind you, Ryne's answers had been less than satisfactory. That whole 'I didn't exist before photography' bit was just too corny, like something out of a badly written script. Yet, even though she knew it was ridiculous, something in the way he looked at her, the tone of his voice, the angle of his head—it had compelled her to obey, to not question... It was just weird. Even now, she couldn't imagine asking him again. Well, it had been an 'airy fairy artsy' type of answer, but she supposed it might be acceptable to those who truly lived and breathed art. Hopefully, she'd be able to get enough information with her other questions that no one would notice a certain lack of background detail.

Ryne's truck pulled up to the cabin and Mel got to her feet, walking over to greet him. He gave her apparel a once over and then nodded in approval.

"Much better. Here's a camera you can use. It's an older model that I have just as a backup, but it still takes a decent picture."

Mel looked at the small digital camera. Ryne might think it was out of date, but to her it appeared relatively new. He showed her how to use the zoom, flash and shutter speed adjustments. "Of course it's only four megapixels, but that's sufficient for a starter like yourself."

"Megapixels?"

"Yeah—it's sort of like how precise or clear your picture will be. Usually, the more pixels, the sharper the image. The term comes from combining the words 'picture element.' You know how pointillist artists, like Seurat or Van Gogh use a bunch of little splotches of paint to create a whole picture? Well, millions of pixels combine to create an image."

Ryne continued to explain the intricacies of modern photography as they walked through the woods. He also gave her pointers on looking for focal point, watching shadows and a myriad of other small details

that she'd never considered before. By the time they headed back to the cabin, she had a much greater appreciation for taking pictures.

"I hope you know that you've ruined me. I'll never be able to just point and shoot again with a disposable camera from the drug store." She laughed up at him as they stood by his truck, their shoulders lightly touching.

"You won't be the first woman I've ruined." He quirked a smile at her, but Mel felt her happy mood suddenly sour at the mention of his womanizing ways.

She stepped back and stuck out her hand. "Well, thank you for your time. Maybe we can continue the interview tomorrow."

Ryne looked puzzled. "What's the matter, Melody?"

"Nothing's the matter, and my name is Mel."

"No. To me, you're a Melody." He ignored her outstretched hand and much to her surprise pulled her into his arms. Once she was pressed flush against him, he questioned her again. "Now what's wrong? One minute we're laughing and enjoying ourselves and the next, you're the ice queen."

Mel compressed her lips tightly, reluctant to explain herself, but once again feeling compelled to bow to his wishes. It was strangely annoying, this effect he had on her. Against her will, she found herself explaining. "You mentioned all the women you've... er... ruined. And it reminded me that I'm just here for a little while and I have a job to do. Getting too... um... friendly with you is a bad idea."

Ryne's arms tightened around her briefly before letting her go. This time he was the one to step back. Mel immediately missed the contact with him, but pushed the feeling away. Bad Mel, she told herself. You slipped up the other morning, and just now you forgot again, but no more!

"You're right. Our getting involved the other morning wasn't the best idea, but..." Ryne hesitated, appearing conflicted, almost as if he didn't want to utter the next idea. "That doesn't mean we can't at least enjoy each other's company, right? There'd be no harm in that. After all, sitting around a table somewhere just asking and answering questions won't be a lot of fun." He gave her a half smile and winked.

No harm. Mel repeated the words inside her head, not sure if she believed them or not. Looking at the man in front of her, there was no way she could conclude he was harmless. Dangerous—yes; harmless—no. But, she did need to finish the interview and it was much more pleasant to have a friendly conversation...

"I suppose..." She thought for a moment, then made a face. "You're right. I was just over-reacting. I guess our little 'encounter' yesterday morning threw me off." Feeling herself flush, she forced herself to continue. "It's not the sort of thing I usually do."

"Really?" Ryne reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. His fingers felt cool against her warm cheek. "I'd never have known. You seem to have a natural talent in that area."

Mel blinked at him, processing the comment, totally unsure if she should feel honoured or insulted.

Ryne gave a short laugh, obviously pleased at having confounded her, and chucked her under the chin before getting into his truck. Once inside, he rolled down the window. "You can keep the camera while you're here. Play around a bit with the different settings and see what you can do. There's a cable in the case so you can download any pictures you take onto your laptop."

"But won't you need it?" For the moment, Mel gave up on sorting out her feelings and focused on what he was saying.

"No. Like I said, it's my back-up. I hardly ever use it. The batteries are rechargeable, but I put a fresh set in before coming over, so you should be good for a while."

"Well, thanks. I appreciate this." Mel hesitated before asking about seeing him again. "Um... Can we get together again?" Seeing the evil twinkle in his eye, she quickly clarified. "For another interview session that is?"

"Sure..." He paused, seeming to think of something. "If I can ask you a question."

"What is it?"

"How did you find me? Here in Stump River, that is. I've kept a pretty low profile."

Mel swallowed hard. She didn't want to admit that she'd been watching Kane and Elise at the post office in Smythston and then snooped through the mail. Falling back on a tried and true answer, she smiled nervously. "Reporters never reveal their sources."

"What kind of an answer is that?"

Thinking quickly, she snapped back at him. "It's came from the same category that 'I didn't exist before photography' did."

He narrowed his eyes. "Pure bullshit to avoid answering, in other words."

"Worked for you." Mel raised her brows and inclined her head.

Ryne grunted then gave what appeared to be a reluctant grin. "I'll be in town again on Wednesday. I work until four. We could have dinner at The Broken Antler again and talk then."

Mel nodded and with a wave of his hand, he drove off.



## Chapter 20

Ryne pulled up in front of the house and turned off the engine. He made no move to get out; his mind occupied with other more important things, specifically, Melody Greene. For some strange reason, he had difficulty staying focused when he was around her. The real reason he was spending time with her—to keep an eye on what she was doing and to monitor the information she gathered—kept slipping from his mind.

Unexpectedly, the afternoon had turned out to be fun. Melody was an enthusiastic companion, eager to learn about her new found interest. He chuckled, thinking of how she'd furrowed her brow and bit her lip while absorbing what he told her. Then when she'd snapped a picture and the image appeared on the screen, her delight had lit up her whole face. There was a natural artistic streak within her. When she set up a picture, she seemed to know how to frame the shot and take the best advantage of the light and angles.

It was also interesting to see how she seemed to have an instinctive affinity to nature. This was surprising in someone who had purportedly grown up almost exclusively in a big city. Yet, the wonder in her eyes when she'd crouched beside him, examining the pattern on leaves and the path of an early ladybug, was real. More than once, he'd caught himself reaching out to grasp her hand as they walked along in companionable silence, soaking in the world around them. He'd enjoyed spending time with her, sharing his passion.

And speaking of passion, her nearness had stirred him more often than he really cared to admit. Her scent had filled his mind, making it hard to concentrate on taking pictures and explaining photographic theory. In reality, all he wanted to do was to throw her down on the ground and taste her sweet lips one more time. The sex between them had been great and, even though he knew any involvement with her was dangerous, he was eager to experience her once again.

Maybe it was the element of danger that was drawing him to her. She was like a forbidden fruit and he'd never been one to toe the line any

more than he had to. While his logical mind said no, his wolf was telling him yes. Burying himself between her thighs, filling his hands with her curves, tasting her, smelling her; the very idea of Melody was consuming him beyond reason.

Ryne felt as if there was a battle raging within him. As Alpha, the needs of the pack came first. He knew the law and what was at stake. The actions he might have to take were spelled out clearly. Yet despite this knowledge, his wolf kept urging him towards the woman, pushing all other concerns into the background. What was it that his wolf knew, that he didn't? Usually, they were of one accord, but now a dichotomy seemed to be developing within him. It was something he had never experienced before and didn't know how to handle, yet handle it he must. The situation was too crucial. Who knew how many lives were depending on the decisions that he would make over the next few days? Having his mind clouded with lust was unacceptable.

He clenched the steering wheel and tightened his jaw. When he set out on his own, he knew he wanted to create his own pack, to be Alpha, to use the power within him. Well, now he had his wish and he'd live up to his obligations, no matter what his personal inclinations might be. And so he'd continue to see Melody, answer her questions as slyly as possible, maybe even bedding her again if he thought it was needed to keep her distracted from what was under her very nose. Then, when he was sure she'd bought his story, he'd send her on her way.

*'But what if she doesn't 'buy your story' and keeps poking around?'* The wolf inside, questioned him angrily. *'What will you do then?'*

Shaking his head, Ryne growled at himself. "Whatever it takes," he answered back. "I'll do whatever it takes."

With that, he climbed out of the truck and slammed the door shut. Bryan and Daniel were inside supposedly installing the cabinets that arrived this morning. He'd better see how they were doing. They meant well, but enthusiasm didn't always translate to solid construction.

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Ryne spent the rest of the day, and most of the next, helping with the installation of the cabinets followed by new countertops and a sink. By the time the job was finished, the kitchen looked considerably improved; the tempers of the three men, however, were not. The walls of the old house were less than plum and there had been considerable trimming and shimming required—a tedious and frustrating process at the best of times—before the job was complete.

Standing in the room surrounded by the scent of new wood and the gleam of marble countertops, Ryne knew it had been worth it. This was a kitchen suitable for his vision of the future. He could see it filled with pack members; some lounging at the breakfast bar, others busy at the stove. It would be loud and friendly—.

“Hey Ryne, Bryan and I are heading up to the Broken Antler for dinner and some fun. Armand has a pool tournament arranged. Want to come along?” Daniel popped his head through the door way, still buttoning his shirt and obviously fresh from the shower.

Glancing down at himself, Ryne recognized his own need to clean up. Bits of sawdust still clung to his pants and pricked his skin where it stuck in the sweat of his chest and arms. “Nah. I still have to get cleaned up and then I want to go for a run.” He shrugged his shoulders and stretched his arms, feeling the tightness of his muscles. The work in the house was taxing, but still not enough to ease the tension within him.

“Suit yourself. If you change your mind, come in to town later.”

“I might, but if I don’t, behave.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and laughed. “Don’t we always?”

“No.”

“True, but it’s more fun that way.”

Ryne faked a growl back at him, then shook his head as the boy turned on his heels, and hurried out. It was good to see the kid loosen up a bit once in awhile. Daniel was far more serious than Ryne had ever been at that age.

Scratching his chest, he grabbed a broom and began the tedious task of cleaning up sawdust, discarded nails, scraps of lumber and bits of packing materials. The other two would have helped if he’d asked, but he didn’t mind the time alone. Besides, they’d worked hard the past two days, and deserved some kind of a break.

He heard the door slam as his companions left, laughing about their plans for the night. Soon the sound of a vehicle starting floated inside followed by the crunch of gravel as it began to move down the driveway. Ryne paused in his sweeping and listened until the sound faded into the distance, then sighed and resumed his task. The house echoed with silence now that they were gone, the faint scrape of the broom against the floor the only sound. It was both calming and lonely, if such a combination actually existed.

For a moment Ryne regretted turning down their offer, but other thoughts weighed too heavily on his mind to make him a suitable companion for the night. He still hadn’t told Bryan and Daniel about his

concerns over Melody. They viewed her as a delightful little pest and had given him no end of teasing about her while working on the cupboards. Good naturedly, he gone along with them. There was no use giving them cause to worry when nothing might come of it. If the need arose, then he'd inform them.

Giving the kitchen a last glance, he propped the broom and dustpan in the corner, then headed towards his bathroom to take a shower. He'd get cleaned up, then take a run around the perimeter of the property to check for signs of intruders. If he planned his route properly, he'd end up just a mile or so from Melody's cabin, not that he intended to stop by, he assured himself. No, last night during the sleepless hours he'd spent tossing and turning, he'd come to the conclusion that his association with the woman had to be short and sweet. He'd give her the briefest of answers on Wednesday, declare that he was through, and send her packing. It was the safest course of action for all involved.

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Mel sat in her cabin staring blankly at the computer screen, waiting for it to download the pictures that she'd taken with Ryne the previous day. She frowned at the screen wondering why it was taking so long; there seemed to be a lot more pictures in the file than she thought there should be. Idly she wiped a bit of dust from the screen with her finger, contemplating the fact that she really should buy one of those little laptop cleaning kits when she got back to Chicago. Maybe she'd check out Brown's General store when she was in town tomorrow—for such a backwoods type of location, it did seem to have quite a varied product line. Adding that to her mental to-do list, she glanced at the screen and sat up straight, a look of anticipation spreading across her face. Ah, the pictures were done downloading.

Disconnecting the camera from the laptop, she put the cable away and tucked the camera back into its carrying case, mindful of the fact that it was just a loan. Then, turning back to the computer, she found her picture file and began to scroll through, looking for her nature shots, anxious to see how they'd turned out. Scanning down the menu, she found the proper folder and opened it up. A bubble of happiness grew within her as she examined the fruits of her labours. Darn, but the pictures weren't half bad!

After going through the photos twice, she gave herself a congratulatory pat on the back. For a beginner, she felt she'd done pretty well and was eager to show Ryne how they'd turned out. Hmm... Maybe she'd even take a few more on her own and surprise him with how well she'd

remembered what he taught her. Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was only four o'clock—plenty of time to go for a walk, snap a few pictures and be back home before dark.

Closing the folder with her pictures, she noticed another folder just above it. Now what had she put in that one? She really did need to sit down one day and organize her hard drive with proper labels, she muttered to herself. Quickly clicking the folder open, she scanned the contents. That was strange—she didn't remember taking any of these pictures. Huh... and who were those people? As her finger hovered on the mouse, she suddenly realized that these must be pictures Ryne had taken and never erased from the chip. She'd accidentally downloaded them with her own. Well, she'd just delete them later, she decided, pushing away from the table without further thought. She wanted to get outside and take more photos while the light was still good. Chuckling, she thought of the phrase she had just used—'while the light was still good' made her sound like she really knew what she was doing.

Grabbing the camera and her coat, she headed outside. From the top of the step, she surveyed her surroundings, considering which direction to head. Hmm... There was a stream not far away; Beth had told her about it. Thinking it might provide an interesting bit of subject material, she headed that way.

A half an hour later, she sat crouched beside the stream, tired from her hike—these people had no concept of 'not far away'—but pleased with what she was seeing. Recent rain had swelled what she'd been told was a small lazy stream, into a swiftly moving waterway that could almost be dubbed a river. Still, the location provided a number of possibilities and Mel spent quite a bit of time trying to capture images of water drops splashing upwards around rocks and partially submerged bits of log. Occasionally a leaf or bit of grass would go floating by, twirling in the current and bobbing up and down.

Feeling adventuresome, Mel carefully picked her way along of set of makeshift stepping stones that led almost to the middle of the stream. The water and bits of mud that had washed up onto them, made them somewhat slippery, but she was confident in her ability to keep her balance. After all, she could walk on four inch heels. This couldn't be that much trickier, could it?

Placing each foot carefully on a relatively flat surface, she bent forward, intent on taking a picture of an old weathered log. The water was eddying around it, and the light danced off the surface, shimmering like so many diamonds. It would make a lovely shot.

Slowly she bent her knees to get the proper angle, then she framed the shot in the view finder. Yep, that was it. She snapped a few pictures, before shifting the camera ninety degrees to get a different angle. Even better. Zooming in, she focused on a leaf that was momentarily caught on the edge of the log and, when it finally worked its way free, she stood to watch its progress as it moved down stream. A slight movement to the right had her swinging her head to the side. There at the base of a pine tree sat the largest wolf she'd ever seen. It was as black as the night except for intense blue eyes that seemed to stare right through her.

"Oh my gosh!" She gave a startled cry and instinctively stepped backwards, remembering too late that there was nothing to step back onto. The stomach lurching sensation of falling filled her as she tipped backwards barely having time to utter a cry before her head submerged. Icy coldness wrapped itself around her, her clothing quickly becoming saturated and heavy, tugging her down towards the bottom of the stream. At the last second, she thought to keep her hand up in the air attempting to save the camera from a watery grave.

The soft, silt of the river bottom cradled her body for but a second then something hard grabbed at her arm and hauled her upward. Her head broke the surface and she gasped, coughing and sputtering as her lungs sought to simultaneously inhale oxygen and expel water.

Stunned she found herself set on her feet, hard hands gripping her upper arms. For a moment she simply stood dripping and gaping, too surprised to even push her wet hair from her face. Thankfully, someone else did it for her. Blinking, she realized that she was staring at Ryne. He did not appear happy.

"What the hell were you doing this time?"

"Huh?" Mel registered that he was yelling at her, but she wasn't quite sure why.

"What kind of an idiot stands in the middle of a swollen stream in the height of run-off season? Don't you know how dangerous that is?"

As she recovered from the shock of what had just happened, her temper began to flare. "Idiot? I'm not an idiot! I was perfectly fine until that wolf—Oh damn!" She looked desperately side to side, trying to locate the beast. "We have to get out of here. There's a wolf somewhere nearby." Mel took a step and then froze, unsure of which way to go. The cabin was to the right, but so was the wolf...

"Wolf? What wolf?" Ryne sounded puzzled.

"The wolf that was right over there!" Pointing towards the trees, Mel glanced at Ryne to see if he was looking where she was pointing. He wasn't. Instead, he was frowning at her.

"Mel, there was no wolf here unless... Did you see Harley? He was out walking with me." Ryne quirked an eyebrow at her.

"No. It wasn't Harley; it was a wolf, really. I saw it..." She faltered under his disbelieving gaze. "Well, it looked like a wolf." She crossed her arm and pouted.

"I suppose, if you were really intent on taking a picture you might make that mistake." Ryne appeared as if he was about to pat her on the head as if she was a foolish child.

Compressing her lips, Mel sloshed over to the edge of the stream, shivers starting to wrack her body. "Where's Harley now?"

"He probably ran off when you started to yell. He's very sensitive you know."

"Yell? I didn't yell, at least not that much." She was now shaking so hard that she could hardly get the words out. Ryne shook his head, pulled off his jacket, and wrapped it around her. "You don't have to do that." She protested and tried to hand him back the piece of clothing. "You're wet too."

He ignored her and shoved her arms into the sleeves and zipped it up. "Don't worry about me. It's only my pant legs and besides that, I hardly feel the cold. Come on, let's get you home." Ryne moved to pick her up, but Mel put out her arms, shaking her head.

"Uh-uh. I can get home perfectly well by myself." She set off for the cabin at as quick of a pace as her soggy shoes would allow. Behind her, she could hear Ryne huff in exasperation before following.

By the time they reached the cabin, the brisk walk had warmed her a bit, but she still longed to get out of her wet clothes and into a warm shower. Ryne apparently had the same idea, for he walked right in and headed towards the bathroom and turned the shower on. Exiting, he looked around the room, spied her robe, and threw it at her. "Here, get out of those wet clothes and take a shower while I make you a cup of tea."

"Coffee."

He stopped mid-stride. "What?"

"Make it coffee. Nice and strong."

He rolled his eyes, but smiled at her and Mel scooted into the bathroom, a warm feeling filling her despite the cold clothes and her chilled skin.

By the time the hot water had run out, Mel felt considerably better. She pulled on her terrycloth robe and exited the bathroom, sniffing appreciatively as the smell of fresh coffee greeted her. Automatically, she turned towards the kitchen, but a sound behind her, drew her attention. It was Ryne, propped up in her bed.

His upper half was naked, his lower extremities hidden by the covers. He was sipping a cup of coffee and appeared to have made himself quite at home.

Mel folded her arms and frowned at him. "Why are you in my bed?"

"My clothes were wet and I had nothing to wear. I didn't think you'd appreciate me wandering around in the nude. Besides, despite not minding the cold, a dunking in ice water left me a bit chilled. It's warmer under these blankets."

"Oh." It did make sense. Wracking her brain, Mel tried to think of anything she'd have that he could wear, but came up blank. "Sorry, but there's nothing here that would fit you."

"That's all right. I started a fire going and spread my clothes in front of the fireplace. They'll dry eventually."

"Wouldn't you warm up faster if you were in front of the fire too?"

"My clothes are draped all over the chairs. There's nowhere to sit and the floor is hard."

Nodding, Mel stood undecided about what to do. Should she go stand in the living room and leave him alone? It seemed a bit rude, but just standing here while he lay in her bed didn't seem right either. She also needed to get dressed, but wasn't going to do that in front of him.

Possibly sensing her indecision, Ryne patted the space on the bed beside him. "Come, sit here, and keep me company." When she hesitated, he pulled out the big guns. "I have a cup of coffee here for you." He gestured to the bedside table and she zeroed in on the steaming cup. In mere seconds, she was sitting beside him, sipping the dark liquid, and sighing appreciatively.



# Chapter 21

Mel leaned back against the headboards and stretched her legs out in front of her. Searching deep inside, she silently repeated her mantra while looking for inner peace and tranquility—well not really, but she thought it sounded better than ‘trying to ignore the hottie beside her.’ She purposely kept her eyes fixed firmly forward. With studied nonchalance, she sipped her coffee and wiggled her toes, noting she needed to redo the polish.

“Hey, I’m over here.” Ryne waved his hand in front of her face, but she merely tilted her head so that she could see around it. “What are you doing?” Ryne reached over, grasped her chin, and turned her head so she was looking at him.

“I’m ignoring your presence in my bed.” She jerked her chin free and looked away.

“Oh.” He seemed to consider the fact for a moment, and then frowned. “And why would you want to do that?”

“Because, just yesterday we decided that this—” She slid a glance his way and gestured between the two of them, “isn’t a good idea. I’m only here for a few more days—provided you cooperate, that is. We need to maintain a professional relationship.” Mel crossed her ankles, inhaled deeply through her mouth and then slowly exhaled through her nose... or was it supposed to be in through the nose and out through the mouth? Darn, but she could never get those relaxation techniques right! Grimacing, she realized that trying to relax the ‘correct’ way just made her feel more tense.

“Huh.” Ryne nodded and looked away, sipping his coffee. “So you’re just going to act like I’m not even here?” His tone was casual, conversational even, as if it really meant nothing to him at all.

“Yep.” She nodded emphatically and sipped her coffee again, savouring the taste. Darn, but the man did brew a good cup of caffeinated bliss.

“Bet you can’t do it.”

"Bet I can." She sensed him watching her and lifted her chin in determination.

"Nope. You can't." His voice was irritatingly smug.

"I can so."

"Can't."

"Can."

"Okay."

Mel turned her head fractionally and looked at him. Ryne had given up too easily. There was something akin to an impish gleam in his eye, but then he smiled blandly at her and shifted so he was staring at the wall, seeming to be content to just lie there. She slowly turned away and stared at the wall as well.

Silence stretched between them, only broken by the faint crackling coming from the fireplace in the other room. Mel amused herself by imagining that she was the heroine in the romance novel she was reading. The front cover showed the woman lying on a fur rug in front of a fire, a devilishly handsome man leaning over her. Their lips were parted, eyes half closed, passion obviously hanging heavily in the air. Of course, both persons were delightfully unclothed, though carefully placed arms and a raised knee hid all the interesting bits.

Mmm... What if that man was Ryne? And what if she was the woman? Mel recalled the feel of Ryne's body pressing down on hers; how her legs had wrapped around his lean hips while her hands skimmed up and down his muscular back. How would he look stretched out in front of the fire, the flickering light emphasizing his sculpted muscles? She felt herself growing warm at her musings and snuck a peek sideways to check out what the man beside her was doing. Shockingly, Mel discovered that Ryne was staring right at her, a wicked grin on his face, as if he knew the erotic direction her thoughts had taken.

Mel jerked her eyes away and stared straight ahead. With her peripheral vision, she was sure she could see Ryne's nostrils flaring as he inhaled deeply. Pressing her legs closer together, Mel had the uncanny feeling that he could scent the arousal that her imagination had conjured up, which was ridiculous of course. He had no idea how she was feeling.

Licking her suddenly dry lips, she forced her mind to abandon that oh-so-interesting train of thought. It wasn't prudent when they were lying half naked in bed together. Mel wiggled her toes again, trying to focus on mundane matters and not on the man beside her. A lock of hair was falling in her eyes and she brushed it away, then began twirling the

hair around her finger. Hair. That was a safe, distracting topic. She'd trimmed the bangs herself a few weeks ago, but all in all, it was getting way too shaggy. A good cut was what she needed, maybe even a new style. Highlights? Or a totally different colour? Shifting a bit so she could see Ryne better, she sought his opinion. "What do you think I should do with my hair?"

"Hmm?"

"My hair. It's really getting long and there's no style left. Do you think I should just get new layers put in it or go for a complete change? I could dye it red or even black. Maybe cut it really short, a bit spiky on top? I don't want anything that requires too much work, though. You know, it needs to be something simple so I can just wash, add a bit of product, dry, and go." She knew she was babbling, but the silence between them was too hard to handle. Setting her cup of coffee down, then shimmied around so that she was sitting cross-legged, facing him.

"Um... I think it looks fine."

Mel noted he had a sort of dazed look about him. Hairstyles probably weren't his cup of tea, but since he was man, she'd figured his opinion was worth exploring. "I've done it all, you know; Short, curly, straight, streaked, long... I've always heard that men prefer longer hair, but I don't know why exactly. What's your opinion?"

He stared at her for a moment then shook his head. His lips were twitching as if trying to hold back some form of emotional expression. "It's sexier."

"Really? How so?"

Ryne set his coffee cup down and turned so that he too was facing her, a mischievous grin on his face. "Because, you can run your hands through it." He demonstrated. "And use it to pull a woman closer." Which he did, and then leaned in close to whisper against her lips. "And, when you're having sex and the woman's trailing her lips all over your body, the feel of her hair brushing softly against your skin drives you wild."

"Oh!" Mel squeaked out a response as Ryne gently brushed his lips back and forth over hers. He'd buried his fingers in her hair and was now leaning back and using her long tresses to slowly pull her down on top of him. Once he was on his back and she was leaning over him, he deepened the kiss. Vaguely, Mel noted how her hair provided a curtain around them, blocking out the rest of the world. Mmm... Long hair did have its advantages she thought as she slid her hands over Ryne's chest.

"I won." He whispered against her lips.

"Hmm? Won what?" She traced his lower lip with the tip of her tongue.

"The bet." He nuzzled the curve of her neck, inhaling deeply.

"What bet?" Mel guided his face back up.

"That you could ignore me." Ryne cupped her face and stared into her eyes, the hint of a teasing twinkle apparent.

She furrowed her brow briefly. Was it worth arguing over? Not at the moment... The waves of sensations zinging through her were more important. "Doesn't matter. This is more fun."

"Mmm... I agree." He traced her cheekbones with his thumbs before combing his fingers through her hair to hold her head.

Leaning in closer, she flicked her tongue over his, savouring the taste and texture of him. Gently she bit his lower lip, pulling softly before soothing it with a soft kiss. Ryne growled his approval and his hands clenched her hair more tightly before releasing it. He kept one hand on her head while sliding the other down her neck. Using his fingers, he brushed them delicately over her ear and jaw, before pushing the neck of her robe open so he could tease her collar bone.

Mel shivered in delight at the lightness of his touch and how it brought all her nerve endings screaming to life, begging for more. Shifting so that her knees straddled his hips, she leaned closer, rubbing her torso against him while trailing kisses over his face. She raked her teeth along the column of his neck and felt his throat vibrate against her lips as another growl rumbled up from his chest. The sound brought a wave of warmth to her lower body; how he made that sound and why it turned her on, was a mystery, but at that moment she didn't really care.

Frustrated at the bed sheets and clothing that separated them, she made no protest when Ryne pushed her robe completely off her shoulders. It fell down about her waist, leaving her breasts bare and exposed to his scrutiny. A combination of the cooler air and the heat of his gaze had her nipples pebbling and she whimpered with the need to feel his mouth around them.

As he cupped her breasts in his hands, she pulled at the sheets covering him, muttering in frustration as she realized she was sitting on them and they wouldn't move any farther until she moved. Rising up on all fours in preparation for doing just that, Ryne reached up and held her upper arms to still her movements. Mel looked down, questioning his actions.

He avidly studied her for a moment and possessively ran his hands down her ribcage to her waist where the tie of the robe stopped his

journey. A half-smile played over his face and Mel contemplated his expression. There seemed to be something wild and untamed lurking just below the surface.

"I love how you look, standing over me like that." He moved his hands back up and caressed her breasts, thumbing her nipples. "You should see your eyes. They're burning with desire, glowing... You remind me of a she-wolf—" Abruptly, he stopped speaking and a frown appeared on his face.

His comment touched her sense of humour and Mel chuckled, leaning back on her haunches. "Is that a polite way of calling me a bitch?"

Ryne stared up at her. For a moment he seemed puzzled or disoriented, but then he shook his head. The wild look faded and, if anything, he now appeared regretful. "No." A heavy sigh escaped his lips. Grasping her by the hips, he lifted her off and sat her down beside him. Then he swung his legs over the side and sat with his back to her. He rubbed his face roughly with his hands. "You're not a bitch. Far from it. But I am a bastard. I just meant to tease you a bit and things got out of control." There was a pause and then he seemed to force out one final word, as if he wasn't accustomed to uttering it. "Sorry."

Mel watched in confusion as he stood and walked towards the door, the sight of his taut rear-end and muscular thighs doing unspeakable things to her insides. "Where are you going?"

"To see if my clothes are dry. I think I should head home now." And with that he left the room.

Blinking slowly, she processed his message. He was leaving. Right in the middle of everything. Right after getting her all worked up, he was leaving! Giving an exasperated huff, Mel pushed her hair from her face and clambered off the bed. She pulled her robe shut, straightened the covers, and picked up the empty coffee cups. For a moment she stood in the middle of the room, unsure what to do.

Half of her was hurt, that he'd walked away like that, while the other half was relieved that he'd had the common sense she lacked. Still another half of her—wait a minute. She frowned; that was too many halves. Well, whatever. There was some anger mixed in there too. Anger at herself for wanting him and at Ryne for being such a jerk. 'Teasing her!' Ha! The joke wasn't funny. He needed to keep his hands, lips, and oh-so-yummy body to himself if he wasn't going to follow through.

Intent on informing him of just that, she marched into the living area only to freeze when she saw him, still naked, leaning over her laptop. It

was one of her little quirks, but she didn't like people messing with her electronics.

"What are you doing with my computer?" She winced at the accusing tone of voice she had used and was just preparing to apologize when she realized that Ryne ignored her question and countered with one of his own.

"Where did you get these pictures?" He gestured towards the screen; his tone of voice was sharp and angry, with something else thrown into the mix. Puzzled, she could only come up with 'fear.'

Well, so much for feeling guilty over her own rude comment; his was even more surly. She walked to the table and peered over his shoulder. It was the file of pictures she accidentally downloaded from the camera and explained as much to him.

"Did you look at these?"

"No, not really. What are they? Part of the next Ryne Taylor exhibit?" Her attempt at lightening the mood fell flat. Ryne just scowled at her and tightened his mouth. Sighing gustily, Mel started to explain. "I just opened the file, wondering what it was, skimmed over a few, and when I realized they must be yours, I just left them, end of story."

He glared at her for a moment, seeming to search her face for... something. Finally, he grunted appearing satisfied with whatever he saw. Turning back to the computer, he quickly deleted the file.

Mel held back her initial indignant reply that he had no right to just delete things from her computer. They were his pictures after all and she should have erased them right away. Seeking to keep the peace, in the spirit of ensuring a future interview, she apologized. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snoop. I was just downloading the pictures I took and I didn't think to see if there were other photos there. Your pictures are still on the camera, though; I didn't erase the chip." She looked around, grabbed the camera from the table where she'd set it upon returning home and handed it back to him. "Here, you can have it back."

Taking the camera from her outstretched hand, Ryne looked as if he were about to say something, but then thought better of it. Instead, he turned and headed towards the door.

"Umm... Didn't you forget something?" Despite the tense mood that had filled the room, Mel couldn't keep a tinge of amusement from her voice.

"What?" He had his hand on the door knob, his back to her.

"Clothes?" A snicker escaped her lips, despite her best efforts to keep it back.

His whole body went rigid and he turned, shooting her a filthy look before grabbing his clothing from in front of the fire. "I'll get dressed outside." With that, he left carrying his clothes in his arms.

Well! Mel wasn't sure what to think about that. At least there were no neighbours nearby to wonder why a naked man was getting dressed in front of her cabin. She giggled again. It sure beat the traditional gnomes and pink flamingos as far as lawn ornaments went.

Walking over to the computer, she sat down in front of it, her mood sobering again. Staring at the screen, she chewed on her lip. Why hadn't Ryne wanted her to see his pictures? It couldn't be because they were bad shots, he didn't strike her as having a perfectionist streak in him, and besides, the few she'd seen had been perfectly fine.

Furrowing her brow, she tried to recall the images on the screen. The one he'd seen—the one she'd left open on the computer—had been of a lake. Before that, there was a house, an older couple, a woman by a lake, a group of people, a butterfly on a flower... That was all she could recall. It seemed pretty innocuous. There was no reason for him to get all bent out of shape like that. Sure, he was heavily into maintaining his privacy, but she hadn't purposely gone snooping and the pictures didn't really show anything... Or did they? Had she missed something significant? Or were there important photos that she hadn't viewed yet?

Too bad he'd erased the file. Just for curiosity's sake, she'd love to have another look. It would certainly make Aldrich happy if she could come up with something specific about the man. She winced, thinking of his disparaging comments when she'd reported Ryne's 'I didn't exist before photography' answer. He'd been even less impressed than she was, insisting she needed to be more pushy when delving into Ryne's background. Even worse, Aldrich threatened to have Mr. Greyson cancel her contract and demand the money back. That had sent a wave of fear down her spine. His cold accusing voice echoed in her head.

"Excuse me if I'm mistaken, Ms. Greene, but isn't an investigative reporter supposed to actually *investigate*? Not just sit around and wait for the subject to hand over the information. From where I sit, all you've done is tiptoe around the man. Hardly earning your keep now, are you? Especially considering how many zeros were on that cheque. Don't be surprised, if things continue as they are, to find Mr. Greyson initiating legal proceedings with the aim of obtaining a full refund of all monies paid, up to and including this date. Unfortunately, you'll be out of pocket any expenses you've incurred up to now, but that's what happens when you don't deliver what you promise."

With that the man had hung up, leaving Mel madly calculating how she'd cover the rent on the cabin, the cost of the plane tickets, the car rental...

Mel's stomach quivered nervously. She didn't have any money beyond what Greyson had given her. She'd been living hand to mouth before getting this job and used her small savings to pay her apartment rent a month in advance. But what was she supposed to do? If Ryne didn't want to talk, didn't want to share, well then... A thought popped into her head as she stared at the computer screen. An internal battle raged, even as her hand manoeuvred the mouse across the screen. Ryne didn't want her to see those pictures, obviously worried they'd reveal some personal information, but... She bit her lip as she double clicked on the recycle bin icon and stared at the deleted, but not yet erased file.

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Ryne, unabashedly naked, headed across the open space that served as the front lawn for Melody's cabin. His clothes were still damp and the idea of putting on wet denim was repugnant. Glancing around, he walked over to a bush and shoved the clothes underneath, pulling some leaves up to cover them. Satisfied no one would notice the clothing until he returned to collect it another day, he headed into the woods, and once concealed behind the trees, closed his eyes and brought his wolf forward.

Even with his eyes shut, he could sense the air shimmering around him, knew that if he opened his eyes, the images he saw would be momentarily distorted as if looking through a cascade of glitter in a snow globe. It was only a momentary phenomenon and then the world righted itself. Giving himself a shake to adjust his fur, he stretched his front quarters and then his hind before picking up the camera in his mouth and heading for home.

Luckily the boys would still be out at the bar and not see him return home naked. Oh, the teasing he'd get over that one, if caught. For the most part it was a source of pride that pure-blooded Lycans could change and magick back whatever they'd been wearing when they shifted. Only the teenagers, during their first few changes forgot that crucial step. Of course, those who were the products of 'mixed matings' weren't as lucky. Human genes, no matter how many generations back, interfered with the transfer of magical abilities, one of the first to be lost being the ability to shift forms while clothed.

Other tricks, such as sensing auras and mind-reading between mates varied considerably depending on the purity of the blood line. A few of



the aristocracy had supposedly even been able to appear and disappear, though Ryne had yet to encounter anyone who had actually seen the phenomenon occur.

Ryne knew his mother was pure-blooded, but hadn't seen his father since he was two and had little knowledge of that side of his heritage, though the man must have been of relatively good stock, given Ryne's own abilities. The pack was somewhere in the southern states, but his mother had never spoken of what happened there between herself and his sire. Ryne had never inquired. He and his mother didn't have a close relationship; his bastard of a step-father had seen to that, dragging them all over the country from pack to pack, neglecting them, and flying into fits of rage...

Memories from the past brought a snarl to his lips. Thankfully his mother, in a moment of clarity, had finally left Kane and himself with her home pack before heading off with her unstable mate. Ryne never knew what she saw in the man, but she'd given up her children rather than leave him. The only good thing Ryne could say about his step-father was that he'd sired Kane, his half-brother.

Kane... Damn, Ryne hoped there wasn't a picture of his brother on the camera. How could he have been so careless as to not erase the memory chip before lending it? Of course, he'd never thought Melody would download all the pictures on to her computer, but he should have anticipated the event. At least, Melody said she hadn't really looked at the pictures and he'd sensed no deception in her aura. The damage had been contained, but who knew what slip-up could happen next? He really needed to send the woman packing before she stumbled on to something she shouldn't.

## Chapter 22

Greyson stared at the wolf picture making a show of being lost in thought. He knew Aldrich was waiting for an answer, but he wasn't inclined to hurry. The damned man could wait. It didn't matter that time was money. Money was the least of his worries, he had too much of the filthy stuff as it was. Aldrich would get paid for his time and if he had other clients waiting back at his stuffy downtown office, that was too bad. He shouldn't have scheduled them in for the same day. The lawyer knew, when he had been hired, that all other clients would have to take a back seat. Greyson Inc. didn't pay out the exorbitant fees that Aldrich demanded just to be told they didn't fit into the lawyer's schedule.

He listened to the faint sound of creaking leather. Good. Aldrich was shifting in his seat. The man was getting impatient, but didn't dare say so. Suppressing a chuckle, Greyson kept his back turned. Aldrich was becoming too full of himself. It was time to put the lawyer back in his place and show him who was really in charge. Another minute or two and maybe he'd put the man out of his misery.

In the meantime, Greyson amused himself studying his picture. The animal held its head regally, challenging the onlooker. Its amber eyes conveyed an intelligence that no normal wolf could possibly possess. Ah... but then it was no normal wolf. He knew that and now, he suspected Mr. Taylor did as well. This no longer appeared to be a case of an unwitting photographer snapping an idle picture that turned out to be one in a million. Taylor's evasive answers, his reticence to be interviewed, all pointed to one thing. He knew.

Suddenly swivelling his chair around, he caught the lawyer off guard, surprising a sour look on the man's face. A perverse thrill filled him.

"Ha! I caught you, Leon. Sneering at me behind my back!"

He had to give Aldrich credit; the man's features were now as bland as oatmeal. "Of course not, sir. A slight case of allergies. I was merely attempting to discreetly sniffle.

“Good try Aldrich, but I know you think I’m an arrogant bastard and you’re right, I am. So sneer if you want and I’ll keep you waiting as long as I want.”

Aldrich had the good sense to not argue back, merely inclining his head.

Greyson chuckled, pleased that he had yet again proven he had the upper hand. “So, Taylor’s giving cock-and-bull stories to avoid answering questions, is he?”

“Those are the words Ms. Greene employed.” Aldrich seemed to shudder slightly at the inelegant phrasing.

“And Ms. Greene?”

“She still seems to be ‘trying’ in her own inimitable way, to conduct an interview with the man. Her success rate, however, is deplorable. A more seasoned reporter—”

Greyson cut the other man off. “A more seasoned reporter would be asking too many questions both of us and Taylor. No. Ms. Greene’s perfect for the job, in more ways than one.”

“If you’d inform me of her ‘unique qualifications,’ as I believe you called them, then I might feel more comfortable with her completing the job.”

Narrowing his eyes, Greyson slowly rose to his feet; the sound of his chair scraping against the floor was ominous. He leaned over the desk towards Aldrich, the solid oak creaking slightly as he rested his weight on his fingertips. It was a look and a stance that had turned many captains of industry into quivering idiots. Greyson knew the effect and used it indiscriminately. Intimidation was one of his favourite tools. “Your ‘comfort’ is of no concern to me, Leon. I will tell you what I wish to tell you, nothing more.”

To give the man his due, Aldrich didn’t flinch. His fingers tightened slightly on the arms of the chair and he blinked twice in rapid succession, but that was all.

Damn, but the man was good, Greyson acknowledged begrudgingly. Of course, if he hadn’t been good, the lawyer would never have made it this close to his inner circle.

Curving his lips into the barest semblance of a smile, Aldrich answered, his voice as calm and steady as ever. “But of course, sir. Foolish of me to forget that fact.”

Greyson slowly sank back into his chair and turned to face the picture again. “Foolish indeed, Leon. Foolish indeed.”

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Wednesday dawned with Mel's feelings in a distinct muddle. She lay in bed, tired and sexually frustrated after a night of dreaming about a certain nude photographer prancing about her yard taking pictures of pink flamingos that were being chased by gnomes riding on black wolves. In between each photo shoot, he'd pull her close and kiss her senseless, only to walk away because she wasn't a she-wolf.

When she wasn't having weird dreams, Mel had been awake wondering what to do about the pictures on her computer. Having waffled back and forth last night, in the end she hadn't looked at them, but still wasn't sure that she eventually wouldn't give into temptation. She supposed it all depended on how reticent Ryne proved to be during their interview. Mel knew she had to have something to report and the photos might be her only source of information, if Ryne continued to avoid talking to her.

Maybe she should be more forceful and demand he sit down and answer a few simple questions. Yet, even as she considered the idea, her gut told her Ryne didn't respond to demands. He'd do whatever he wanted and if she pushed too much, he'd push back even harder. He'd only agreed to a very restricted interview because... well... she wasn't exactly sure why. Possibly he'd been feeling benevolent towards her at the time? If that was the case, the status of today's interview would be up in the air.

Ryne had been in a bit of a snit when he left last night. Would it carry over to today? Would he renege on their dinner altogether or just the subsequent question and answer session? Mel wasn't sure and had no way of contacting him to find out. She supposed she'd just show up at the Broken Antler and see what happened.

Crawling out of bed, she turned on the coffee maker, and took a shower, washing herself with more vigour than necessary as her thoughts went back to Ryne. Damn, but the man confused her. One minute he was sarcastic, and the next he was all sex appeal and kisses, then sort of broody... It made her angry and frustrated since she never knew what to expect. She was also angry at herself for responding to him as she did. It wasn't like she was some sex starved nymphomaniac... well, okay. She *had* been a bit sex-starved, but really, where was her self control? And besides that, she had a job to do which she wasn't doing very well, as Aldrich had so kindly pointed out. But it was only because Ryne was being so difficult. Grabbing a towel, she exited the shower and dried off.

Running her hands through her hair, Mel wished she was the calm logical sort. Surely then she'd be able to figure this out. Inhaling deeply,

she tried to push Ryne, Aldrich and the interview from her mind. There was nothing she could do about it right now so she should spend her time more profitably.

Focusing on her reflection in the mirror, she studied herself. There were shadows under her eyes and she used a bit of concealer to hide the effects of her sleepless night before dabbing on a touch of blush. Well, at least she wasn't so pale now. Her hair, still damp from the shower, was a tangled mess. Grabbing a comb and hair drier, trying to tame it into some semblance of order, with little success.

As she'd told Ryne, it really was too long. Finally, she gave up trying to create a style and twisted it into a messy bun on top of her head, secured in place with a clip. A few stray strands fell about her face in soft curls so she tucked them behind her ears, knowing they would probably work free before she even left the cabin, but not really caring that much. Who was she trying to impress anyway?

Dressing in jeans and her favourite red top, Mel grabbed her laptop and purse, filled her travel mug with coffee, and headed out the door.

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The bell tinkled softly, as she pushed open the door of the Stump River Gazette. Beth looked up and smiled with considerably more enthusiasm than she usually did; she got to her feet, and hurried across the room.

"Mel, I'm so glad you're here! Can you do me a favour? Josh broke a tooth last night and had to go into Timmins to get it taken care of and it's Wednesday. The weekly paper has to be delivered and I was hoping you could man the office while I do the rounds?" She paused for breath and looked at Mel with hopeful expectation.

Only momentarily taken aback by the rush of information, Mel agreed. "Sure, I'd be happy to help out. You've been letting me hook up to your internet every day for free; this is the least I can do."

"Oh thank you! I was thinking I'd have to lock up the office. It's not like we get a ton of business, but I still hate not to be open, just in case." Beth beamed and looked like the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders.

"Just tell me what I have to do." Mel placed her things on a table at the back that the Kennedy's had set up as her temporary 'office.' Rubbing her hands together, she walked back to the front counter, pleased to be able to pay them back in some small way for the hospitality they'd shown her.

“Well, it’s pretty simple. A few people might come in to buy a copy of the paper—it’s a dollar—and possibly a few advertisers might stop in. If they feel there was a problem with the layout of their ads, or if they want to buy more space, just get their name, make a note of what the issue is and say I’ll get back to them. Umm...” She looked around for a minute obviously thinking if there were any other jobs. “Answer the phone and take any messages and, of course, if a ‘really big’ story happens, grab a camera from my desk drawer and go take a picture of it.” Beth laughed. “Not that we ever have any real news, but you never know!”

With that she gathered up a bundle of papers and left.

Shoving her hands in her pocket, Mel looked about the office. So... she was in charge. For a moment she surveyed her domain, rocking back and forth on her heels and wondering what to do. Since there really was nothing to keep her busy, she headed to her own table to set up her laptop. From what she’d observed over the past week, life was pretty calm at the paper. She could easily do a bit of work while simultaneously watching the front counter.

In no time at all, she had her word processing program up and running, the outline of her article on Ryne before her. Hovering her fingers over the keys, she wondered what to type. She knew so little about the man. Wracking her brain, she decided she could include a bit about how he was renovating that big old house. Mentally she formed a picture of the place and began to record some ideas.

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By mid-morning, Mel had answered the phone four times and sold about a dozen papers as well as writing down a concern about a misspelled name in one of the articles. She’d also exhausted her meagre knowledge of Ryne’s home renovations and had even listed the names of some of the books she’d found on his library shelf. That information was probably of no value, she told herself, but you never know.

Saving the file, she connected to the internet, thinking she’d pass some time there learning more about Lycanthropy, having recalled that Ryne had a book on the subject. Soon she was immersed in the subject, still finding it hard to believe anyone would spend so much free time creating a mythical world inhabited by people who turned into animals. It was utterly ridiculous, but still fascinating, fiction. There were even sites that you had to apply to, complete with proof you were a werewolf, before they’d allow you access to the data in certain sections.

Mel shook her head as she examined the application form. They wanted your family tree so they could prove your blood line—as if! Still,

it was a cute gimmick. She wondered if anyone ever actually applied and what would happen as a result. On a whim, she decided to fill one out. If nothing else, it would give the webmaster a chuckle that someone had actually tried.

She just finished pressing send, when Beth returned. She plopped down beside Mel with a happy satisfied look on her face. "Hi! How'd you make out?"

"Just run off my feet." Mel winked. "Did you get all your deliveries made?"

"Yep. No problem, though I did have a few people standing by their mailboxes wondering why I was late. The delivery of the Gazette is the high point of the week, after all!" Beth laughed and then leaned forward to look at Mel's computer screen. "Lycans? You're interested in shape shifters?"

"Not really. Mostly, I'm just fooling around, seeing what's out there on the topic. I saw a book on it and thought I'd check it out. This site—Lycan Links—is the most realistic I've found yet. Not only does it list all these great fictional stories featuring Lycans, but there's a 'myths and facts' area and FAQ." She snorted as she pointed out the next bit. "Look here. This is where you'd go to help Lycans find jobs, immigration assistance, find physicians; you name it. Of course, I can't access most of these areas because my application hasn't been approved yet."

Beth examined the page and frowned. "You didn't really tell them all about yourself did you?"

Mel snorted. "No. They just wanted to know my family tree—I had to 'prove' I was a werewolf—but since I don't know my father, it was pretty sparse." When Beth raised her eyebrows, she hastened to reassure her. "And no, I don't think I'm a werewolf. I was just curious about what would happen. You know, does anyone ever respond to this type of thing? What would the response be? It's harmless fictional stuff."

Nodding, Beth still looked a bit concerned. "I suppose, there's no harm in that..."

"Beth, don't worry. They have my name, my mother's name, when and where I was born, and my e-mail address, that's it. No phone number, no street address, or anything else. I haven't opened myself up to an attack by ravaging wolves or a cyber weirdo. Besides, I bet nothing will even come of it. There are tons of sites like this, created by avid fans of paranormal stories. It's all just for fun. No one really believes in it."

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Mel helped Beth around the paper until noon, then went for her daily walk that was fast becoming a habit. As she passed by Miller's Service Station, she tried to see if Ryne was working. If he was, she could stop in and ask about tonight. Unfortunately, she saw no sign of him. Instead, Harley came out to greet her and she crouched down, spending some time telling him what a good boy he was, even if he did scare her the other day.

"Yes, Harley. You scared me, yes you did. You scared me down by the river yesterday." She baby talked to him while scratching his silky ears. He half closed his eyes, his tongue lolling out to one side, showing how pleased he was with all the attention.

"What's that about Harley down by the river?" A deep male voice spoke beside her and Mel looked up to see Ben Miller watching her. They hadn't been introduced yet, so she got to her feet, stuck out her hand and went through the formalities. Once that was taken care of, she explained her comments to the dog.

"So you see, when I looked up and saw Harley, I thought he was a wolf. It scared me and I slipped into the water." She bent over and rubbed the dog's chin. "But you didn't mean to surprise me, so I forgive you, Harley." Harley thumped his tail as if he understood what she was saying.

Mel stood up and smiled at Ben. "I'm just glad he made it back home by himself. That's quite a distance for him to travel."

Ben rubbed his neck and looked puzzled. "I don't know exactly what you saw Ms. Greene, but it wasn't Harley. He was with me all day yesterday. I took him to the clinic for his rabies shot and then kept him inside afterwards."

"You did?" Mel felt her jaw slacken. "You mean that might have been a real wolf?"

"Could be, or a large stray dog. All I know for sure is that it wasn't Harley."

"But Ryne said..." She let her voice trail off and furrowed her brow. Had Ryne really said it was Harley? Yes, she was pretty sure he had. But why would Ryne lie? And what animal had she seen? Knowing she wouldn't be satisfied until she had some answers, she decided to query the man's whereabouts.

"Ryne said what?" Ben looked at her curiously, obviously wondering about her half finished statement.

"Er... nothing. Is he working today? I need to talk to him about something."



“No. He called in early this morning and asked to switch his day to Thursday; said there were some things he had to take care of today.”

Mel nodded. “All right. Thanks for the information.” With a final pat on Harley’s head and a nod to Ben, she slowly crossed the street, heading towards the diner. This definitely deserved some thinking and a very large, very strong cup of coffee.

## Chapter 23

Mel sat in the diner, only providing absentminded answers when Ruth and Al spoke to her. Thankfully, the two were in a heated debate about possible changes to the diner's menu and only looked to her for an occasional grunt or nod that she was still listening.

"We need to diversify, Al! We've been serving the same thing for the last ten years. Tastes change. People want fancier food with sauces and exotic names; isn't that right, Mel?"

"Uh-huh." She nodded while wondering why Ryne would want to pretend that there wasn't a wolf, or at least a wild dog present, when there really was. It made no sense.

"Our customers are the same ones we've always had, Ruth. They like the food, they know what we have to offer, and that's why they keep coming back. You like what we serve, don't you, Mel?"

"Yep." Mel gave Al a smile and then returned to her musings. Was Ryne hiding something, beyond his 'I didn't exist before photography' background? Or had he somehow arranged something that looked a bit like a wolf and set it there to scare her? But why would he do that? And what had he used? And where had he hidden it afterwards because there hadn't been anything there when she got up out of the water. Maybe he was some type of witch and had conjured up a wolf. Mel snorted at the idea. There was no such thing a magic. She rubbed her forehead, trying to massage away the beginnings of a headache, while ignoring the great menu debate that was going on around her.

Thankfully, Ruth and Al finally moved their argument into the kitchen and she no longer had to feign interest in what they were saying. Unfortunately, Lucy arrived to take their place. Apparently, the waitress was more observant than her employers for she plunked down beside Mel and looked at her earnestly.

"So what's wrong with you, hon? You look like you're miles away. Not still brooding over me and Ryne, are you? 'Cause if you are, there's really no need."

"No. It's not that, at least not much." Mel glanced up at Lucy. "Even though you say you don't care, I still feel sort of weird about it."

Lucy scrunched her forehead as if thinking hard for a moment. Then her face cleared and she smiled. "Have you ever found pair of jeans or shoes that you really liked?"

"Yes." Mel answered slowly, not at all sure where this was going.

"Well, you like them and try them on, only they're a bit tight, but you like them so much you buy them anyways. Then, when you get home, what do you do with them?"

"Um... I put them in the closet."

"And?"

"Well, sometimes I try them on at home, just to see if, by some miracle, they finally fit." Mel gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Of course, they never do, so I just stick them in the back of the closet."

"So, what happens eventually?"

Mel thought of her jam-packed closet at home and the annual spring purge that she always performed. Items that were too worn were discarded while clothes that she didn't like or that no longer fit were given to friends or charities. "Eventually, I admit they'll never fit and give them away to someone."

"Exactly!" Lucy leaned back in her seat, folded her arms, and smiled in a smug, self-satisfied way.

Blinking, Mel pondered what her friend had just said, but finally admitted defeat. "Lucy, I have absolutely no idea what my bad shopping habits have to do with you and Ryne, or me feeling guilty."

An exasperated look passed over the waitress's face. "But don't you see? Ryne is my pair of shoes that don't fit! He's gorgeous and I like having him, but he's not really made for me. So rather than hanging on, I'm giving him to a friend so she can see if he's right for her or not. Understand?"

Mel stared at the other woman and then chuckled. "You know Lucy, that's a very good analogy."

Lucy made a show of buffing her nails against her chest, nose in the air while attempting to look superior. "I thought so."

Gently nudging the waitress with her shoulder, Mel smiled at her. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better."

"And did it work?"

She considered the situation she was in. Yes, she felt more secure in the fact that being involved with Ryne would not hurt her friend's feelings. However, Ryne and his behaviour still had her in knots. She

forced a smile though, not wanting Lucy to think her efforts were wasted. "Yeah, I guess I feel a bit better."

Lucy gave her an assessing look. "You feel a bit better, but not great. So, what's still bugging you? Maybe I can help with that, too."

Mel traced a pattern on the tabletop with her finger, hesitant to speak her concerns, but really wanting another opinion. Lucy had just proved she was the sensible sort, so Mel decided to take the plunge. "Do you think Ryne is honest? I'm not talking about stealing or something like that. I mean, honest as in telling the truth."

"Ryne? Well, I suppose I consider him honest. He's always been up-front about relationships; never promising me, or any of the other local girls, anything beyond great sex as far as I know. Why? Do you think he's stringing you along?" Lucy frowned at her.

"No, no. It's nothing like that. He was very blunt about our... er... encounter. I mean honest as in telling the truth, or making up stories."

"As far as I know he's never told me an outright lie—well, except about coming to fix my leaky faucet, but that's more of him being busy and forgetful than lying I think. So, what's going on?"

Mel sipped her coffee, before answering. "I'm not sure. The other day he told me something and I'm pretty sure he knew it wasn't true."

"Was it to, you know, protect your feelings? Like when a guy says you don't look fat in a sweater, but you know damn well that you do?"

Mel snorted, but considered the situation. Would lying about Harley being there have protected her feelings in any way? No, not really. She shook her head at Lucy and the other woman continued.

"Well, was it a lie of omission? Like he didn't say anything or he left something out? I know Ryne's real private and he's great at avoiding questions and changing the topic, when he doesn't want to answer you."

"Maybe. I don't know. It wasn't really that kind of a situation..." Mel let her voice trail off, for some reason reluctant to actually explain the whole incident. "I think it's just something I'll have to work through in my head."

Slowly, Lucy got to her feet. "All right, but if I can do anything for you, just let me know, besides more coffee, that is." She tagged on the last bit because Mel raised her cup hopefully. While pouring her a refill, Lucy added one last point. "I don't know what's going on between you two, but I do know that my gut tells me Ryne's a good man and I'd trust him with almost anything."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Mel took a sip of the warm brew and nodded appreciatively at her friend. "Good as always, even if it isn't a—"

"Cafe mocha, whipped cream, with shaved chocolate curls and a cinnamon stick." Lucy cut in and finished Mel's thought, looking rather pleased with herself. Mel knew her face must reflect her surprise and the waitress giggled. "I've been reading up on all those fancy coffees you keep talking about." With that, she walked away to see to the other customers.

Once she was left to her own devices, Mel tossed the Harley-wolf incident round and round in her mind. The only possible reason she could think of him lying about the wolf, was that Ryne hadn't wanted to frighten her. Yet, that didn't make total sense. When she'd first met him, after nearly being attacked by wolves on his property, he'd seemed to relish telling her about the vicious beasts and the damage they could have inflicted. Hmm... That was another strange point. Ryne had shown absolutely no concern over the presence of a wolf and—a thought just popped into her head—how had he 'saved' her from the wolves on his property? Just before she'd knocked herself out, they'd been howling and snarling, yet Ryne never mentioned chasing them away. And how did one scare off two wolves, anyway?

Furrowing her brow, Mel wondered once again why, all of the sudden, wolves were figuring so prominently in her life. Draining her cup of coffee, she decided to head back to the Gazette and do a bit more work on her laptop. She'd compile a list of everything wolf related that had happened lately and see if any pattern appeared. There probably wouldn't be one, but it was a way to spend some time before heading over to the Broken Antler. Ryne hadn't left a message cancelling their meeting, so maybe he'd show up. And if he did, well, she'd have some very pointed questions for him.

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Ryne sat in the small donut shop and studied the man across the table from him. The fellow's story was solid and there was no scent of deception. Just the usual amount of nervousness and fear that any wolf would feel when meeting an Alpha for the first time. His gaze shifted to the far side of the seating area, where, at another table, two young women and an infant sat awaiting his decision. Both females kept their eyes downcast, one quietly humming to the child cradled in her arms while the other, possibly sixteen or seventeen years of age, nervously tore a napkin into pieces.

"So, tell your story again?" Ryne shifted his attention back to the male before him.

The man replied quietly and respectfully. "As I said, there was a change in leadership. The Alpha and I did not agree on the mating of my younger sister. He saw her and desired her, but such a union was not... pleasing to her and she was too young, anyway. As a result we had a... falling out."

Ryne nodded. It was commendable that that the fellow wasn't bad-mouthing his old Alpha, even if the leader had been a bastard from the sound of it. "So you moved to Canada from Spain. That's quite a distance. Was there no pack in another part of Europe?" He sipped his coffee and observed the man over the rim of his cup.

"My previous Alpha has much influence with the European packs. We thought it best to make a completely new start."

"And you chose my pack, how?"

"The registry, of course. We thought that, as a developing pack, you might be more willing to accept us. We wouldn't represent a drain on your resources or space."

Ryne nodded in understanding. The more established packs were often reluctant to accept outsiders, especially when there was little opportunity to expand the territory on which they lived. Wolves might be social animals, but they also needed room to roam. His pack—all three of them, he inwardly chuckled—didn't face such problems. Stats would show there was considerable space around Stump River and he'd listed as being open to accepting new members. Many packs were harder to join than the most exclusive human country club, birth, or bonding being the only possible avenues in.

"What was your position in your old pack?"

"I was a scout." The man lifted his chin slightly, obviously proud of his job which entailed constantly patrolling the territory, keeping tabs on neighbouring packs, and warning the rest if there were intruders.

"Good. We can use help in that area." Ryne smiled at the man for the first time. "How are you at construction work? Ever done any carpentry?"

"A little... Does this mean, you accept us?" His tone was cautious, but Ryne noted a slight flush of excitement showing under the man's swarthy skin.

"Yes. Welcome to my pack, Marco Lobero." They shook hands across the table and Ryne stood, gesturing towards Marco's family. "Come and introduce me to your mate and sister."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was five o'clock. Mel sat at the bar in the Broken Antler, morosely sipping her beer. She didn't like beer and wasn't sure why she'd ordered it except, when Armand approached her, she'd been too in awe of the giant man to think.

"Bear." It was the first word that had popped into her mind and out of her mouth, upon looking at the man. Trying to cover up her faux-pas, she'd quickly coughed and then said "I mean beer."

Armand had smirked and Mel had a sneaking suspicion that the man had known exactly what she'd said and found it highly amusing. Still, he hadn't commented, merely placing a glass in front of her. Nervous at being alone in a bar, Mel drank the first glass much faster than intended. It had given her something to do and kept her hands occupied, as she continuously scanned the room for any sign of Ryne. When the first glass was gone, another had miraculously appeared in front of her. At first she'd been going to protest, but the firm look Armand gave her, had her quietly accepting the offering.

That had been two beers ago. Ryne still wasn't here and she'd given up looking expectantly at the door every time it opened. Sighing, she knew she should just leave, but some small part of her held onto the hope the he would still come; that he'd just been delayed.

What kind of a masochistic person did that, she wondered. Here she sat, alone in a bar, waiting for a man who didn't have the decency to tell her he'd be late or unable to come at all. Not only that, but he'd lied to her about the wolf by the stream, and she strongly suspected there was something fishy about the wolf attack on her first day in Stump River. On top of those sins, there was the fact that he had given a ridiculous answer to a very basic and harmless question about his background.

'Didn't exist before photography' indeed! He'd been mocking her, just as he'd done so many times before. Why did he have to be so difficult? And why had he been all in a snit about those stupid pictures she'd accidentally downloaded? Why had he suddenly walked away, just when things were getting interesting between them? He'd had sex with her, then brushed her off, then teased her by getting into her bed, all naked and hunky. Mel felt herself getting aroused, just at the thought of the man being between her sheets. She shifted on the bar stool, trying to ignore the excitement building low in her belly.

"You okay, little lady?" The bear was back, leaning against the bar and staring down at her from his incredible height.

"Sure, I've never been better." Mel tried to put on a happy face and lifted her glass to take another sip, only to find it empty. She set it down and pouted. Darn, it was all gone, just when she was starting to actually like the stuff.

"No problem. Have another." The bartender placed another beer in front of her and Mel smiled up at him. What a nice man, even if he did look like a bear! She told him so and he laughed. It was a booming sound that filled the whole room, causing several patrons to turn and look their way. "Thank you. So, if I'm a nice man, care to tell me all your troubles? I'm a good listener."

Mel considered the idea while eyeing him up and down. He was big and hairy, but in a friendly, overgrown teddy bear kind of a way. "Well, you see—"

"Mel!" A friendly voice spoke behind her and an arm encircled her shoulders. Mel looked up wondering who was behind her and saw Bryan grinning down at her.

"Hey Bryan!" She peered around him, spotted Daniel as well, and waggled her fingers at him.

Bryan slid into a seat beside her. "What are you doing here all by yourself?"

Mel felt her mouth droop. She didn't want to bad-mouth his friend, so just shrugged.

"That's what I want to know." Armand added. "She's been sitting here for over hour, all alone and drowning her sorrows.

"An hour? You mean you didn't read Ryne's message?" Bryan stared at her quizzically.

"Message?"

"Yeah. I left it at the Gazette for you when I went to pick up a copy of the paper. Beth said you weren't in yet, so I... " His voice trailed off and he got a funny look on his face. "Oh man, I'm in deep trouble now."

"Why? What's wrong?" Mel, Daniel, and Armand spoke simultaneously as they watched Bryan dig frantically in his pocket, finally pulling out a crumpled bit of paper.

He handed the paper to Mel, then folded his arms on the bar and buried his head in them. "I am so dead."

Mel opened the note and blinked at it. The scrawl that passed for writing was hard to read given the dim lighting and the wrinkled state of the paper. Nor was the legibility improved by the way her eyes kept going in and out of focus, as the effects of the beer she'd drunk took further hold.



Armand plucked the note from her hand and read it out loud. "Melody, I have to go out of town. Meet me at six."

"Oh, well that explains it." Mel glanced at the clock on the wall and frowned. It was a typical round-faced time piece except for the fact that all the numbers were a five rather than the accepted one to twelve. Underneath there was a caption declaring "this bar opens at five.' Huh. She supposed that was funny. Right now, however, it was just annoying, because it really was five, or at least she thought so. Scrunching her face, she studied the clock carefully; the big hand was at the...

Obviously noticing her confusion, Daniel reached over and patted her shoulder. "Yes, it really is five o'clock, so Ryne won't be here for another hour."

"Well, that's just great. I've sat here for a whole hour for no reason and now I have to wait an hour more." Mel growled in frustration and lightly smacked Bryan on the back of the head.

"Hey, that's not nice." He lifted his head and glared at her.

"Neither was forgetting to tell me." She propped her chin on her hand.

"We'll make it up to you, won't we, Daniel?" Bryan sat up straighter and glanced at his friend.

"Sure, but just remember when Ryne shows up, none of this was my fault." Daniel threw up his hands, indicating an abdication of responsibility.

Bryan scowled. "Glad I have your support."

"Any time." Daniel grinned and then guided Mel off the bar stool. "Come on, Mel. Let's go wear off some of that beer and play some pool. Armand, can we have some food?"

## Chapter 24

Ryne hummed under his breath as he approached the Broken Antler. Damn, but it had been a good day. New pack members, what more could he want? They seemed like a nice family and were staying in Timmins for a while until temporary housing could be found in Stump River. Marco's mate was Olivia and the baby was Angelo. The sister, Tessa, seemed quite nervous, but Ryne supposed given the fact that the last Alpha had been trying to force a union, it was understandable.

At first, Marco had wanted to come back with Ryne, but there weren't enough rooms prepared at the house just yet. Also, in order to keep people from wondering too much about the new arrivals, Ryne had decided that they should appear to not really know each other at first and then gradually develop a friendship.

"Otherwise, the townsfolk might become suspicious as to why I'm suddenly importing families to Stump River and housing them at my place." He'd explained. After checking that the family had all they needed, he'd given Marco the job of contacting the registry. Soon the underground Lycan network would be in motion, working on the necessary documentation to smooth over immigration laws. No one would ever be able to question the family's sudden appearance in a new country.

Ryne spotted a familiar pickup truck parked nearby. The boys were in town. Bryan and Daniel would be pleased with his news. He hadn't told them why he was going to Timmins, though he suspected Bryan had a good idea. The boy might enjoy a good time, but he was no dummy, able to read his Alpha's mood with a high degree of accuracy. Ryne appreciated that quality. It saved time, not always having to explain himself.

Pausing outside the Broken Antler, Ryne went over his plan, if you could call something so simple a plan. He was going to explain to Melody he'd changed his mind and the interview was now cancelled.

She'd protest, but he was sure he'd be able to get her to comply. For some reason, she bowed to his Alpha will almost instantaneously.

He felt a tinge of regret at having to cut off their relationship this abruptly, but it was for the best. Now that he had even more pack members to watch out for, the need to remain out of the limelight had intensified.

As he contemplated Melody leaving, he felt a wash of anger flow through him, strong enough that he stopped in his tracks. What the... ? Giving his head a shake, he leaned against a nearby building and rubbed his hands over his face in frustration; this was happening too often. His wolf was forgetting its place, which meant lurking in the background and only coming out when called. The rough texture of the wall dug into this back and he welcomed the feeling and the distraction it provided. Keeping his senses busy, kept his wolf busy. If the beast was sufficiently occupied with assessing the sensations around it, his logical human self could regain control.

Slowly, he felt himself calming and relaxed his tightly coiled muscles. He took a deep breath and began to analyze the situation. Okay, what was upsetting the balance inside him? This had been happening on and off all week, his inner wolf fighting for dominance, affecting his moods, leading him into actions he would normally think twice about, such as bedding Melody even though he knew she was a potential threat.

If he didn't know better, he'd think his wolf was a tad love-sick; all moody emotions and more randy than ever. But Mel wasn't a werewolf, so that explanation fell short. To be sure, weres and humans occasionally met and fell in love, but it followed a more slow, mushy, 'human' pace.

When werewolves met, the attraction usually grew quickly, though not always. He recalled that his brother, Kane, claimed he and Elise took a while to form a bond. Mind you, that was an arranged mating, so Ryne suspected that circumstances skewed events a bit. Of course, in the end the two fell in love and were now inseparable.

A car passed by and honked its horn. Automatically, Ryne raised a hand and waved, not really knowing who he was waving at, but Stump River was friendly that way. The noise had brought his focus back to the immediate situation, Melody, and his wolf's attachment to her.

It wasn't safe. It made no sense. There was no future in pursuing a relationship with the girl, so his wolf might just as well give it up. They were not having Melody, not anymore, no matter how much growling and protesting went on. An unsettled feeling roiled around inside him,

but he set his jaw and pushed off from the wall. Covering the remaining distance to the bar in a few steps, he grasped the door handle and entered.

All the usual scents and sounds swirled around him. Sweat and beer, oil for frying, colognes... The room was dimly lit, the glow from the big screen TV casting a bluish hue over the people and furniture near it. It was a typical Wednesday night crowd, not packed, but still sufficient bodies that it took a few minutes to find whoever you were looking for.

Ryne narrowed his eyes, scanning the crowd and searching the scents. Was Melody here yet? He was a few minutes late and she'd been prompt last time. Ah-ha! She was by the pool table with Bryan and Daniel. Pushing his way through the crowd, he made his way over to his friends.

As he drew nearer, he could hear Melody's excited voice accompanied by Bryan's laughter and the guffaws of other males. He frowned. What was going on?

Quickly covering the last few yards, he shoved between the shoulders of the gathered crowd and stopped short. Melody was playing pool. That in itself was not so shocking, but her appearance was. With a practised eye, Ryne scanned her and concluded that she was more than a little tipsy. Her face was flushed, her eyes a bit unfocused. She was giggling away, as if there had never been anything funnier than leaning on a pool cue and wobbling back and forth with a distinct lack of balance.

Before he could move, Melody leaned over the pool table to take a shot and the crowd erupted in approving catcalls. She looked up at her fans and smiled, batting her long lashed and giving her ass a little wiggle, which elicited even more cheers. Then, frowning in concentration, she stuck the tip of her tongue out of the corner of her mouth and lined up her shot. Ryne took in the angle and arrangement of the balls. It would be difficult, but a skilled player could feasibly clear the board. Somehow, he doubted Melody fell into that category. Ignoring the game, he looked at her instead.

Her hair was pulled up on top of her head in some form of knot though quite a few strands had escaped and fell about her face in interesting little ringlets. She exhaled, arranging her mouth so that the poof of air went upwards and lifted the curls for a moment before they settled back in place. Ryne noted that she wet her lips as her arm drew back, ready to strike the ball with the cue. She was wearing that red top he'd admired the other day, the one with the draw string around the neck.

He shifted his gaze to the neckline and stiffened. The tie was undone and the top was gaping open, giving everyone assembled an unrestricted view of her bountiful assets! Little wonder they were cheering! A rumble rose in his throat. No one should be looking at her, except him. Stepping forward, intent on hiding her from prying eyes, Ryne didn't even notice that she'd made her move and the balls were rocketing across the pool table before tumbling into the pockets.

The crowd cheered and Melody stood up grinning, raising her arms in victory.

"Way to go, Mel!" Bryan whooped in obvious delight. "All right everybody, time to pay up!" He pulled a piece of paper and pencil from his pocket and looked expectantly at a disgruntled looking group of men.

Daniel grabbed Melody by the waist, gave her a congratulatory peck on the cheek, and then spun her around. "I knew you could do it, Mel! Three games in a row!"

"Daniel!" Ryne's voice cut through the general air of jubilation like a knife, his fury a tangible thing.

Despite the noise of the crowd, Daniel seemed to have no difficulty hearing his Alpha's voice; his response was immediate. The boy froze and unceremoniously let go of Melody who stumbled at the sudden lack of support.

"Ryne! You're here." Daniel winced even as he spoke and took a step back, his expression wary.

"And not a moment too soon. Did you forget my instructions?" Ryne snarled and flashed his eyes towards Melody before staring at his pack mate again. Daniel gulped and nudged Bryan who was busily collecting money from one of the patrons, not having noticed the general stillness that fell around the pool table. Bryan looked up, paled, and backed away.

*Good. Get away from the girl.* Ryne nodded in a brief acknowledgement of their obedience before focusing his attention on Melody. She was still looking a bit tipsy, but smiling happily none the less at the small group of men gathered around her. One was shaking her hand while another congratulated her, patting her on the back. Someone pressed a kiss to her cheek— No! They had no right. Without caring what the crowd might think, Ryne reached out and grabbed her by the arm, yanking her to his side. Despite the protests of those gathered, he strode across the bar, hustling Mel along with him.

He moved swiftly down the long dark hallway that led to the employee's washroom, but when he reached the door his hand hovered over the handle. No, not here. Moving farther along, he opened another door and stepped inside. The sign proclaimed it to be Armand's office, but he didn't care. Kicking the door shut, he flicked the lock and turned with a growl to face the surprised woman by his side.

"What the *hell* do you think you are doing?"

Melody blinked at him owlishly, and then frowned. "Are you angry with me?"

"Angry? I'm... " He clamped his mouth shut unable to put into words the multitude of emotions he was feeling at that moment. She'd put herself on display, let other men touch her. On top of that she'd been drinking and who knows what might have happened with her inhibitions all... un-inhibited! Breathing heavily, he fought to remain in control.

"Ryne? Don't be upset. I didn't lose any money. I won all the games." She was sliding her hand up his chest while staring up at him earnestly. He closed his eyes as delicious little frissons of electricity erupted along the pathway her hand had travelled. "What's wrong? I was just waiting for you." A hiccup escaped her lips and she giggled.

Ryne wrinkled his nose at the smell of beer on her breath. "You've been drinking."

"Uh-huh. Armand gave me beer. Lots and lots of beer because you didn't come at four like you said and I was waiting and waiting and waiting." She shook her head disapprovingly and made tsking noises before ruining the whole effect by giggling again.

Letting go of her arm, he ran his hands through his hair while trying to remember that he was angry with her. Melody was adorable when she was a bit drunk. Ringlets swished back and forth as she shook her head and he longed to wrap them around his finger. He forced himself to remain stern. "I left you a note, saying I'd be late. It's your own fault if you arrived too early."

Her lips formed into a pout. "No, it's not. Bryan never gave me the note. Oops!" She clamped her hands over her mouth and stared up at him wide-eyed. Whispering between her fingers, she continued. "I wasn't supposed to say that, 'cause we don't want you to be angry. You won't yell at him, will you?"

Suppressing a growl, Ryne agreed. "No I won't yell at him." Kick him in the ass maybe; put him on the night watch for a month, possibly. But yell at him? No.

"That's good." She grinned at him, happy once again. "See? You can be nice when you want. You're not always an ass-hole."

"Oh really?" He folded his arms and stared down at her. If she wasn't acting so cute, he'd have ripped a strip off of her for that comment, even if there was a grain of truth to it. "And how have I been an ass-hole?"

"Well you won't talk to me about your work, and when you do, you give stupid answers. Then you lied about Harley and you keep getting me all worked up by being nice and sexy, and then suddenly you're cold and sarcastic. And you left me sitting in the bar by myself for hours and hours..." By now Melody's happy mood seemed to have faded and she was scowling at him. She ended her statement by shoving against his chest and turning to leave.

"Oh, no you don't." Ryne grabbed her arm and hauled her back. "You're not leaving yet. We have to talk."

"We have talked. Now I remember why I was mad at you and I want to go." She huffed and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes.

"No!" His wolf was stirring restlessly again. The female was defying him, trying to leave. He pulled her closer to him so that their bodies were touching.

"Stop that." Melody squirmed in his arms and he chuckled at her feeble attempts to escape him. The sound apparently pissed her off because next thing he knew, she'd kicked him in the shins.

"Hey!" Instinctively, he moved back and she kicked at him yet again. Ryne lost his balance and fell backwards, but not before grabbing Melody and pulling her down with him. They landed on an old couch that creaked in protest at the sudden application of weight. "Why you little... !" Ignoring his throbbing leg, he wrapped his lower limbs around hers, stilling her movements. When she began hitting against his chest, he held her even tighter. Melody opened her mouth and realizing she was about to scream, he silenced her by clamping his mouth over hers.

Her struggles pleased his wolf and he began to kiss her thoroughly, plunging his tongue into her mouth while moulding her body against his with his hands. He pulled her hips into firm contact with his while holding her head in place with the other. Melody's struggles lessened and he sensed a change in her. No longer was she fighting against him, she was struggling to get closer.

Ryne relaxed his grip and shifted so that she was on her back and he was partially on top. She ran her hands up and down his chest, tugging at the bottom of his shirt. He obliged her by sitting up and pulling off

the offending piece of clothing, tossing it over his shoulder. As he leaned over her again, she used her fingers to explore the exposed skin. Melody flicked his male nipples before raising her head slightly and licking at them, eliciting a groan from deep inside him. For a moment he stilled, enjoying the sensation of her hot wet tongue lapping at him. Softly, she skittered her fingers down to his stomach, and he quivered from her gentle touch, feeling his manhood springing to life in response.

Suddenly, something inside of him roared, spurring him to take action. With quick precision, he stood and stripped off his clothing. Melody gasped as his throbbing erection was revealed and he smiled at her obvious appreciation of him. He reached down and tugged off her boots before easing her jeans over her derriere and down her long slender legs.

At his urgings, she sat up and tugged off her top, then moved to unhook her bra. Ryne noted how her hands slowed when she saw him watching her avidly. A blush of pink swept over her and she lowered her eyes.

“Ryne, I...”

Giving her no time to think or worry, he placed one finger on her lips. “Shh... Let me.”

He sat beside her, his hips brushing hers on the narrow couch. Cupping her neck in his hand, he kissed her tenderly while brushing the curves of her breast with the back of his other hand. Obviously wanting more, Melody pushed herself against his hand and he caressed her through the silken cups of her bra. She purred her delight.

“Do you like that?” He smiled against her lips and she nodded her head enthusiastically. She clutched his shoulders tightly, her fingers digging deeper into his flesh. A rumble of approval echoed in his chest at the sensation. *Yes, she is clinging to him, just as she should.* Continuing to kiss her languorously, he released his grip on her neck and used his other hand to deal with the back clasp of the bra, all the while stroking and teasing her exposed flesh.

The material loosened, falling forward and Ryne drew back, ending the kiss. He watched with avid interest as the cups slid downward revealing her lush curves. Already her nipples were peaked with arousal and he longed to feel their stiffness against his palm; in his mouth. Making quick work of the bra, he palmed the soft flesh, rumbling his approval of the warm weight. He flicked the nipples with his thumbs then bent forward to suckle first one and then the other.



Melody whimpered in appreciation, digging her fingers into his hair and lifting her hips towards him in an age old invitation. A rush of pride swept through him; she wanted him. He made short work of her panties then brushed his hands over her lower curls. There was moisture seeping out, ready to receive him. Pressing between her lower lips, he flicked her sensitive flesh and she moved against him, moaning with need. Delving further, he tested her opening, finding it hot and wet, begging for his possession.

"Ryne. Please." Melody panted her appeal, clutching at him, trying to pull him to her. Needing no further invitation, he shifted so that he was between her legs. He slid his hands under her shoulders and rested his weight on his forearms. His arousal brushed against her temptingly moist flesh. She whimpered in response.

"Do you want me?" He growled against her throat as he raked his teeth over her soft skin.

"Yes... I want you. I need you now." Melody whimpered and squirmed under him.

Her desire pleased him, but his wolf wanted more. "Then show me. Show me how much you want my possession. Take me and guide me inside your body." He half closed his eyes and watched as she slid her hands down his body and hesitantly touched his throbbing erection. A shudder passed through him as she caressed him, her thumb sliding over the head and then down the vein underneath. It was exquisite torture, the feel of her hand, the sight of her holding him. She spread her legs wider, bending her knees and tilting her hips before guiding him to her opening.

Ryne pressed forward until the head was buried in her. Melody's eyes closed and her lips curved. He paused and her brow furrow. She looked up at him. "Don't stop."

"You want more?" He teased her with the slightest movement forward before stopping again. "Then what do you need to say?"

A needy sound arose from her throat. She slid her hands to his buttocks and tried to pull him closer. "More. Please Ryne. I need more."

He nipped at her ear and whispered darkly. "Do you want me to take you? To fill you? To be so deep inside you that you can't tell where you end and I start?"

"Yes!" Her head moved restlessly, her nails digging into his back. His wolf relished the erotica pain and finally gave in to the overwhelming need to possess her. He gathered himself and then thrust into her until he was buried to the hilt.

Heat and tightness surrounded him and he shuddered in pleasure. Melody felt so good, the walls of her tunnel pressing against his sensitive flesh, caressing him, holding him, as if she'd been made just for him. For a moment he stayed still, appreciating the sensation. He looked at her and saw that her lids were heavy, her lips slightly parted as she sighed in contentment. Shifting his weight to one arm, he brushed his hand across her cheek and down her neck to where a vein throbbed. Fascinated, he stared at the pulse point. With each beat, a feeling grew and thrummed inside of him. He could feel his canines lengthening and a voice in his head urged him to mark the woman he now possessed. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, drawing her scent into his lungs, feeling her heat surrounding his body. Licking his lips, he bent forward and nuzzled her throat. *Yes, yes, that's it. Bite her, mark her...*

He opened his mouth to comply with the instinctive demand, then hesitated, some last remnant of reason making itself known. She didn't know; she might not be willing... Damn, she was possibly the enemy! Ryne drew his head back, feeling his ardour fade, but then she opened her eyes and smiled up at him, gently rocking her hips. His body responded and he pushed his concerns to the back of his mind; he'd deal with them later, right now there was a more urgent need. Slowly, he set the rhythm, watching her face and moving accordingly. She rewarded him with soft cries and smiles, little frowns of concentration and clutches of her fingers.

Slowly, he picked up the pace and Melody met him stroke for stroke. He went harder and deeper, his balls hitting against her bottom, her panting cries urging him onward. Sensation built within him, a tightening in the base of his shaft, a growing tingle. Knowing he couldn't last much longer, he moved with even greater determination, the couch creaking with every thrust.

"Oh, oh... !" Melody stiffened, her limbs began to tremble, and then her back arched as her body clenched around him.

As her orgasm ripped through her, he allowed himself his own release. Grunting in pleasure, he twitched inside her, spilling his seed before collapsing on top of her.

## Chapter 25

For a moment they both lay still, appreciating the aftermath of great sex. Heavy limbs, a pleasantly relaxed feeling, a sheen of sweat helping to cool overheated bodies. Ryne reluctantly shifted his weight, pulling himself away from the sated woman beneath him. Resting on his side, pressed against the back of the sofa, he stared down at his companion. Melody had her eyes closed, a happy smile curving her lips.

He felt his own mouth forming a similar expression. Contentment filled him and his wolf. *Good. This is how it will be from now on, the animal inside murmured. No more talk of sending her away.*

No sooner had the thought passed through his mind, than he swore. Damn! He had no business smiling at the likes of Melody Greene. Whether innocent or not, he'd come here with the express intention of severing all connections with the woman. Instead he'd ended up having sex. What the hell was wrong with him? Was he ruled by his brain or his instincts?

Melody stirred and of its own volition, his hand reached out to gently brush damp curls from her forehead. Slowly she opened her eyes and stared up at him. He bit back a gasp at the tender emotions evident in her eyes. She smiled up at him, then mimicked his movement, brushing his hair from his forehead before curving her hand to cup his cheek. He leaned into her caress for but a moment before hardening his resolve and pulling away with a frown. Melody opened her mouth as if to speak, then froze. The happiness drained from her expression and her hand fell to her side.

Ryne knew he was the cause of her abrupt mood change yet couldn't bring himself to remove the scowl from his face. This was all wrong; himself and Melody, his wolf, the Keeping, new pack members. He shook his head. There was no equation that could make them work together and so he scowled both in anger and frustration at the hand fate had dealt.

“Oh crap! You’re doing it again.” With surprising speed, she slid away from him, half falling onto the floor before catching herself and stumbling to her feet. She looked around and snatched up her clothes, turning her back to him while she quickly dressed, all the while hurling accusations over her shoulder.

“What is wrong with you? What kind of a man glares at someone he’s just had sex with? And don’t tell me that it wasn’t any good, because I know you got off!”

Ryne stood as well, saying nothing to defend himself, nor offering a kind word to relieve her emotions. He reached for his pants, slowly pulling them on. Idly he noted that his nudity didn’t bother him as much as her own obviously did. As her body disappeared from sight under layers of clothing, he wanted to protest, but didn’t. It was better this way. He wouldn’t concentrate properly if her delectable body was before him.

Once she was dressed, she turned to face him, arms crossed in a defensive gesture. “What are you? Some kind of Jekyll and Hyde?” She gave a brief, dark laugh. “Do you enjoy messing with my mind this way? One minute you’re so nice and the next you’re scowling like I’m a mass murderer or something. Which is it Ryne?” When he didn’t answer, her eyes started to cloud with tears. “Do you even care a bit about me or am I just conveniently available when you want sex?”

A wave of guilt washed over him as he saw the hurt in her eyes. He didn’t enjoy treating women this way. Hell, he *never* treated them this way. He loved women; the way they looked and talked, the quirky way their brains worked, the scent and feel of them... Sure, he wasn’t always a roses and pretty words kind of guy, but he had his own code of chivalry towards the fairer sex and it didn’t include blowing hot and cold like this.

“Melody, I—” He stopped not sure what to say. Could he tell her that his inner wolf lusted after her, but because she might be the catalyst that brought about the destruction of his pack, he had to push her away? Not likely. Thankfully, she didn’t notice his hesitation.

“Never mind. Whatever you have to say, I wouldn’t believe anyway. After all, you can’t even give me an honest answer about a dog!”

“What?” Her comment about dogs caught his attention. It made no sense to him whatsoever.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m leaving. I’ll... I’ll talk to you later about the damn interview.” She turned on her heel, grabbed the door handle to throw the wooden panel open... or at least that’s what it looked like

she'd planned on doing. Unfortunately, she hadn't noticed the door was locked and merely succeeded in wrenching her arm by pulling on the unyielding handle. Muttering under her breath, she dealt with the lock and stormed out of the room.

*Wait. She can't leave...* She just did, so deal with it, he snarled at himself. Pulling his shirt over his head, he dropped onto the couch and leaned back, exhaling loudly. Staring at the ceiling of Armand's office, he noted the spider web in one corner and a few stained ceiling tiles. There must be a leak on the roof, he thought idly. Maybe he'd offer to fix it as a sort of a payment for using the man's couch without asking, not that Armand probably cared. No doubt the bar tender had used the couch for similar purposes a time or two.

Damn, but he'd screwed up big time; Ryne scolded himself, not even cracking a smile at the bad pun he'd unintentionally made. Whether she knew it or not, Melody had a thing for him and it was more than just the fact that he was a sexy, handsome devil, he was sure of it. For some reason, she actually seemed to like him and now he'd hurt her feelings. The worst part was that there'd be no 'making up.' In fact, he had to figuratively kick her again, by cancelling the interview and sending her on her way.

It was for her own good, as well as his pack's. There was some alternative agenda associated with the interview, he was sure of it. And whatever it was, it would likely endanger her, as well as his people, if he let this continue. He was being cruel to be kind, he told himself. Sure she'd be angry, but if she left, everyone would be safer and that was more important than her hurt feelings.

Well, sitting here wasn't solving anything and the ambiance wasn't going to improve his mood. Ryne took in the dark panelling, over-filled filing cabinets, and truly bad paintings on the wall. He chuckled wryly as he studied the landscapes. Armand might have the soul of an artist, but his talent was better suited to serving beer. Heaving himself to his feet, Ryne went in search of just that.

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Back into the main part of the building, Ryne immediately headed for the bar. He leaned against the wooden structure and stared at himself in the cracked mirror that backed the liquor shelves. His face appeared to be set in stone, cold and unfeeling. It wasn't how he felt inside, not even close, but it was a suitable mask to present to the world. Allowing anyone to know how he really felt at this moment was unacceptable. Alphas did not show weakness.

Armand set a beer in front of him and quirked an eyebrow. "What gives my friend? You came in looking happy enough and in less than five minutes you were taking the little lady out back. That usually results in a happier expression than the one I see. Was she not cooperative?"

Ryne gave a dry laugh. "No, she cooperated. We had a... falling out afterwards."

"Ah, clingy was she? She didn't listen to your warnings beforehand." Armand nodded wisely. The bar keeper and he had shared numerous conversations about women, so the man knew Ryne's policy. It wasn't the case this time, but Ryne wasn't about to correct him.

"Something like that." Glumly, he took a swig of beer and turned to face the room. Near the pool table, Bryan and Daniel were racking the balls, preparing to play another game. They were showing no ill effects from his earlier growling. In the far corner, a few men were playing darts while half watching a rerun of last week's hockey game. There was nothing to hold his interest, so he returned to brooding. Was Melody still here? He really should tell her the interview was off. That way she could pack up her things tonight and leave first thing in the morning. A quick break would be safer for everyone involved. He closed his eyes and discreetly sniffed the air. Her scent lingered, indicating she was probably still in the building. Good, he could say his piece here rather than driving out to her cabin. Scanning the length of the bar, he searched for signs of her.

Armand gave him a nudge. "The little lady is at the far end of the bar, if that's who you are looking for."

Nodding his thanks, Ryne started to get to his feet, but Armand placed a restraining hand on him. "What?"

"It might be best if you gave her some time to cool down. She looked angry when she came back from your little encounter and, my friend, I do not believe her mood has improved substantially. This might not be the best time to approach. An upset woman is not to be taken lightly."

"Normally, I'd agree with you, but the sooner I make this break, the better." He glanced at the bar keeper then looked away. Armand was studying him with a puzzled expression.

"You are brushing her off so quickly? Why?"

Sighing heavily, Ryne tried to avoid the question. "Armand, maybe I'll be able to later, but not now. It's too damned complicated."

The large man scowled at him before shrugging. "It is your choice. It is wrong, but it is your choice." With that, he grabbed a bottle of whiskey and went to serve another customer.

Huh! Armand had certainly made his feelings known. Shit, the bar keeper didn't know all the facts and had no right to judge.

Ryne turned his attention back to the spot where Melody sat. She was tracing rings in the spots of water on the bar, occasionally nodding in agreement to the men who stood around her chatting. Obviously, her success at the pool table had made her a bit of a local celebrity. For a moment, he pondered the irony of the fact that getting tipsy had probably improved her game.

A light was almost directly over her head and the beam illuminated the gold in her hair. It seemed to glow as did her skin, giving her an almost ethereal quality. With his keen sight, he was able to detect how her lashes swept down over her cheeks. They appeared a bit darker and spikier than normal as if tears had recently pooled in her eyes. An ache in the region of his heart was accompanied by a wave of regret. While the logical part of his brain told him that the present situation was no cause for guilt, the other half was heaping chastisements on his head.

Something one of her groupies said had her to looking up and Ryne could see the sadness in her eyes. Oh, she was trying to hide it, laughing politely at the man's comment, but it was there and he was the cause. And now, he was going to add to her misery. With great reluctance, he pushed off from the bar.

Walking over to where she sat, he shouldered his way in beside her, ignoring the protests of the men gathered there.

"Melody—"

"Hey man. You can't just barge in here. Me and the boys were talking to her." A rough voice spoke to him and someone pulled at his arm.

Ryne didn't even turn around, merely shrugging the hand off. He tried again. "Melody—"

Not even looking his way, Melody responded. "Just go away, Ryne. I have nothing to say to you."

He leaned his elbow on the bar, bending a bit in an attempt to see her face more clearly. "Well, I need to talk to you."

"Too bad." Melody looked up at him this time, and he saw the anger and hurt in her eyes. He reached towards her instinctively, but she leaned away avoiding him. Her obvious rejection of him cut deeply, even if it was what he deserved.

"See? She doesn't want to talk to you. Now get away from her." A burly man sidled up, placing his arm around Melody's shoulders, and glaring at Ryne. A look of discomfort passed over her face and she shrugged out of the man's grasp.

"I don't think she's too keen on you either." Ryne pointedly stared at the man's arm that now lay limp at his side.

"Will both of you just leave me alone!" Melody's cheeks were flushed and there was a tinge of desperation in her voice.

Armand must have noticed it too, for Ryne saw him begin to move down behind the bar towards where a small crowd had started to gather. The possibility of a fight always spread like wildfire through the establishment. Tonight was proving no different.

Seeking to avoid a confrontation, Ryne merely curled his lip at the man, biting back a growl, before shifting his focus back towards Melody. He'd just quickly say his piece to her and then leave before things got out of hand.

Unfortunately, the man wasn't following the same script. "Don't turn your back on me. I'm not through with you yet!"

Irritated Ryne faced the fellow. The events of the night had shortened his temper considerably. *How dare this person interfere?* "Listen, buddy..."

He barely had the words out of his mouth, when the man swung his meaty fist. Only years of practice enabled Ryne to instinctively shift enough so the punch hit his shoulder and not his face. Unfortunately, he didn't even have time to brace himself and as a result spun around from the force of the blow. The momentum propelled him towards Melody. Some instinct must have warned her of impending danger for she raised her arms defensively in front of her face. As his body impacted with hers, they both fell to the ground, the bar stool collapsing under the sudden force. Ryne landed on top of her, her elbow shoved up into his face. A sickening scrunching sound filled his ears accompanied by a wave of pain as his nose broke. Blood gushed, running into his mouth and down his throat. Melody gave a cry. Shouts erupted around them. Chairs scraped across the floor and soon several people were reaching down, grabbing at the two of them.

Giving his head a shake, Ryne pushed the helping hands away and surged to his feet. His mouth tasted of copper and he spat the bloody liquid onto the floor. Using his arm, he wiped the blood from his face, then searched the crowd for his attacker. He'd only seen the man for a



few moments, but it was enough; the image and scent were imbedded in his mind. In moments, Ryne located his target.

A rage such as he hadn't experienced in years came over him. With a roar, he swung at his attacker, sending the fellow spiralling across the room. Without even thinking of his audience, Ryne rushed after the man. *Who did this person think he was, to not only strike an Alpha, but touch his female as well? The punishment must be swift and heavy. His wolf growled menacingly. I will be satisfied with nothing less.*

Yet even as he grabbed the man's throat, he was attacked from behind. Turning to face his latest adversary, he met a set of glowing eyes. Strong hands held his shoulders while another, equally powerful pair grabbed at his arms, trying to drag him away. His rage grew, his muscles bunched. *Who were these that sought to keep him from his rightful revenge?*

He snarled a warning and prepared to strike, then a noise caught his attention. A cry... *his female!* A glance in the direction reassured him that she was being helped up, not hurt. There was blood on her arm; her face was pale...

"Ryne! Come on, man. Snap out of it."

An urgent voice penetrated the wildness that consumed his brain and he jerked his eyes towards the speaker... Bryan?

"That's it. Look at me. Get control of yourself."

Ryne blinked and shook his head. He felt the rage subsiding. A quick glance showed him that the man who had attacked him was unconscious. Across the room, Lucy appeared from somewhere and was guiding Melody to safety, cradling her arm in a towel while expertly weaving a path through the various brawls that seemed to have erupted around the room.

"We need to go. If anyone sees you up close right now, your eyes will give you away. And if they don't, your teeth will. Your fangs are showing." Bryan began tugging at Ryne's arm. "I'll stay here and take care of things. Daniel, take our wildman home before he does any more damage."

Daniel answered in the affirmative and Ryne suddenly found himself outside the bar, heading towards the pickup. He dug in his heels and stood still.

"No. I need to go back and make sure Melody is all right."

Daniel, in his usual calm manner, gently tugged at Ryne's arm. "She's fine, Ryne. Lucy is taking care of her. You can talk to her in the morning. It's more important that we get you home."

Shrugging off the boy's hand, Ryne rubbed his hands through his hair in frustration, not wanting to listen to the logic of Daniel's argument, but knowing he must. Daniel was right. He'd been in fights before, but he'd never lost control like that in public. The sooner he was out of sight, the sooner people would begin to forget. Bryan would stay behind fulfilling his Beta role by helping Armand break up the brawl. Knowing Bryan, he'd probably use a liberal application of free liquor and some carefully worded suggestions, to lead the bar patrons into doubting what they had seen. With any luck, by morning the story would just be that of a usual fight over a woman. No one would recall the ultra human speed at which he'd crossed the room, nor the distance he'd thrown the man. And his broken nose... well, it would heal by morning and everyone would assume it had just been a bleed.

Finally nodding agreement, he followed his pack mate to the truck and headed home.

## Chapter 26

Melody winced as she dressed the next morning, her injured arm stiffly responding to her commands. Her back wasn't happy either, telling her in no uncertain terms that it didn't appreciate how she'd landed on the floor last night with a large man on top of her. Neither was her rear end overly pleased with its part in acting as the initial point of impact. She had a headache from too much beer, her eyes were gritty and her mouth tasted like... well, she didn't even want to think about that.

A hot shower, several cups of coffee, and the liberal use of both mouthwash and toothpaste helped alleviate some of her woes, but the gash on her arm wasn't being as cooperative as the rest of her anatomy. Her arm throbbed from the cut she'd received the previous night. When Ryne had crashed into her, they'd both fallen to the floor and the bar stool she'd been sitting on had shattered. Somehow, a sharp piece of wood must have cut her arm, though she didn't recall exactly how it had happened. At first, she'd thought the blood had all been Ryne's. Her elbow had ended up in his face and she was sure she'd broken his nose, given the amount of blood that had been present.

Initially, she'd been stunned, lying on the floor, not sure what was going on around her. Dimly, she'd been aware of a roaring noise and a rush of movement... When she'd managed to sit up and look around, Ryne had already been across the room seeming intent on giving pay-back for the punch he'd received. Meanwhile fights were breaking out all over the room. Having never been in the middle of a brawl, it had held a sort of macabre fascination. Fists were flying; furniture was being knocked over and thrown about. Grunts and shouts; blood and saliva, spilt drinks... The sights and sounds had been overwhelming and she'd done her best to scuttle backwards towards the relative safety of the bar. Searching the sea of angry faces, she'd spotted Bryan and Daniel. They were making their way over to Ryne, probably planning on restraining

him. Unfortunately, she lost sight of them when Armand had stepped in front of her.

The bar tender must have watched the whole incident start and was aware that she was on the floor somewhere. He'd pushed the crowd away from her, effortlessly lifting her to sit safely on top of the bar before wading into the various skirmishes, yanking the participants apart by the scruffs of their necks. Mel was so engrossed with what was going on around her that it had taken a few minutes before she noticed the nerve endings in her arm had started to protest. Glancing down, she saw her arm was covered in fresh blood—much of it hers, not just Ryne's. The cut had begun to throb and burn painfully. Tears pricked her eyes and were sliding down her face by the time Lucy, who'd just arrived for her shift, rushed over to check on her.

Grabbing a towel from behind the bar, Lucy had helped stem the bleeding and then led her to a relatively quiet area near the back. Once there, she'd cleaned the cut before applying bandages and then offering a ride home. Mel declined, not feeling up to answering the slew of questions that were probably percolating in the waitress's mind.

As she'd made her way towards the door she'd paused once to scan the crowd. Most of the fights had wound down and many of the former participants were helping to tidy up, merely avoiding the few who were still pushing and shoving each other. Surprisingly, there had been laughter coming from various locations, as if it had all been in good fun. Even Armand had chuckled once or twice, though his expression soured when he spotted the cracked frame on one of his paintings.

She'd watched as Bryan approached Armand and placed what appeared to be a consoling arm on his shoulders, while talking quietly. Armand nodded and took the painting down, tenderly cradling it in his arms. As he headed towards the bar, he'd called out a crowd-pleasing statement. "A free drink for everyone. Bryan is buying!"

The patrons had cheered and gathered around the young man, thumping him on the back. Bryan smiled in return, giving high fives and looking thoroughly at home being in the thick of things. Mel searched the crowd again for signs of Ryne or Daniel, but neither appeared to be there. A faint wave of concern swept over her, but she ignored it. They must be all right or Bryan wouldn't be buying drinks. Besides, she was disgusted with Ryne and he didn't deserve her interest.

Over the heads of those gathered, Bryan suddenly looked up and made eye contact with Mel. Even from a distance, she could sense his concern for her, so she'd nodded and given him a half smile as a means

of reassurance. Slowly he'd nodded back and she was sure he was trying to convey that the other two men were fine. Someone jostled him and he'd turned away, switching his attention to those crowded around him.

Mel chose to leave then. She wondered why Bryan was buying everyone a drink, but decided it was all part of some strange male bonding ritual and really none of her business.

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When she'd finished reminiscing about the previous night's escapade, Mel rinsed out her coffee cup before gathering her supplies for the day. She checked that she had her list of questions for Ryne then shouldered her purse and headed towards the car with a determined stride. Thankfully she'd left her laptop at the Gazette over night; it made for one less thing to carry when she only had one fully functioning arm.

As she drove into town, she gave herself a mental pep talk. Today was the day. No more delays. No more distractions. Ryne Taylor was going to answer her questions whether he liked it or not. She was sick and tired of his little games. It didn't matter how charming and sexy he was, there was no way she was putting up with his avoidance tactics any longer. Obviously, he was only interested in her for sex; last night had proved that. Oh, he'd warned her. Lucy had warned her. She'd even warned herself. She'd have to give the devil his due, he excelled in the love making department, but he was definitely not interested in anything deeper. But some crazy little corner of her mind had hung on to the hope that Ryne really did have feelings for her. Well, she thought, that certainly wasn't the case.

So she'd do her interview, pack her bags, and head back to Chicago. Aldrich might not be pleased that it wasn't as in-depth an interview as his employer wanted, but if Ryne was going to be difficult, there was no way she could force him to talk. If Greyson was unhappy, she'd give him some of the money back. It had been a healthy sum and even if she returned a couple of thousand, there would still be sufficient left over for her needs.

She parked in front of the Gazette and gathered her purse and notepad. First she'd check her e-mails, and then see what flights were available. At noon, she would call Aldrich to tell him she'd be back in a few days. The man would press for a specific date and time, but she wasn't feeling inclined to tell him since he'd probably demand she visit his office the minute she stepped off the plane. Well, too bad for him because it wasn't going to happen.

Mel grinned, pleased with the no-nonsense attitude she was developing. It would serve her well, when she hunted down Ryne. No more Ms. Nice Guy. Uh-uh.

Beth looked up from her computer when Mel entered. She stood up and began talking like a circus ringmaster. "And here she is; the star of last night's brawl and the Queen of the Pool Table... Mel Greene!"

Mel winced, feeling the heat of embarrassment flood her cheeks. "So I guess that means you heard about what happened at the Broken Antler?"

Beth walked over to the counter and propped her chin in her hand. "Nope. Don't know a darn thing about it." Then she winked.

Rolling her eyes, Mel plopped down in one of the chairs near the front of the office, absentmindedly wiping a bit of dust from the leaves of the neglected philodendron that was on the table beside her. "I suppose the rumour mill has been working overtime since last night. Tell me the worst, Beth. What are they saying about me?"

"Only that you were roaring drunk, turned into some form of hot, sexy pool shark and won a wad of cash by beating some of the best pool players that Stump River has to offer."

"What?" She sat up straighter, abandoning the plant and focusing her attention on Beth. "I was *not* roaring drunk. Maybe a bit tipsy, but I still had complete control over my faculties. And I'm *not* a pool shark, it was just luck. And the 'wad of cash' was loose change, for heaven's sake!"

"Darn, I was afraid of that." Beth affected a pout, but then brightened. "You didn't deny the hot and sexy part, though!"

A vague memory of wiggling her tush before taking a shot during the impromptu pool tournament flashed through Mel's mind. Damn, but she'd forgotten that part. And there was something about being too warm and loosening the tie on the front of her shirt... She clapped a hand to her cleavage wondering how much she'd been showing off. Feeling a wave of heat rising to her face, she fought for composure while secretly dying inside. Of course, then there was what happened with Ryne afterward! It certainly eclipsed a little hip wiggling and cleavage display.

"Er... I might have been a little less inhibited last night, but I did nothing inappropriate in public." That was, strictly speaking, the truth. No one needed to know about Armand's office. Being 'screwed and then scorned' by Ryne was her own personal humiliation and heartache.

"So I suppose the story about Ryne and Billy Watson fighting over you, and wrecking one of Armand's paintings is false, too."

Mel nodded emphatically. "I don't know if the fellow was named Billy or not, but he and Ryne weren't fighting over me, I'm sure. They probably have some sort of history or it was one of those guy things. Ryne doesn't care enough to fight over me and I'd never met the other man before. As for Armand's picture, that might be the grain of truth in the whole story. He was looking at a broken picture frame when I left."

"But what about your arm?" Beth gestured towards the large bandage on Mel's forearm. "Something must have happened for you to end up with an injury."

"I think I cut it on the bar stool. Some of the wood probably splintered when it broke." She rubbed the area around the wound. "It still stings, but it's not serious. It should be healed in a few days."

The other woman sighed in obvious disappointment. "Well, I guess that means I have to delete most of what I wrote this morning. It's too bad. You could have been front page news."

Narrowing her eyes, Mel studied the other woman, wondering if she was joking or not. Given that this was Stump River, where nothing ever happened, there was a strong possibility she wasn't. Just to be sure, Mel clarified the matter. "Well, I'm sure something else exciting will happen before next week's edition."

Beth shrugged and then straightened from where she'd been leaning on the counter. "You never know..." Wandering over to the coffee maker, she filled two mugs with the freshly brewed beverage and handed one to Mel, who had moved to join her at the back of the office. "So, what are your plans for today? The usual web surfing, walk about town and then coffee at Ruth's?"

Mel accepted the mug before sitting down at her work station and powering up her computer. "Not exactly. I've made up my mind that Ryne's giving me a full interview today whether he likes it or not. He's been stringing me along ever since I arrived here and now I'm putting my foot down. No more delays."

"Maybe he's been dragging his feet, so you'd stick around longer." Beth gave her a speculative look over the rim of her cup.

"No," Mel let her shoulders slump as she admitted the truth. "I sort of wondered and half hoped that was the case, but last night... Well, let's just say I found out otherwise."

"Are you sure? I don't know Ryne well, but he seems to be paying you a lot of attention. You've had dinner together, been out to his house, people have seen you sitting together at the cenotaph..." Beth numbered off the interactions on her fingers.

"What is this? Am I under twenty-four hour surveillance or something?" Mel looked at her aghast.

"No, just staying in a small town." Beth chuckled and pulled out a box of cookies from her bottom desk drawer, taking one before politely sharing.

Mel took one as well and nibbled on it thoughtfully. She didn't like the idea that people had paid such close attention to what she'd been doing. It was sort of like being under a microscope. Perhaps that was yet another reason to head back to Chicago. There, no one noticed anything; you were completely alone despite being surrounded by hundreds of people. A slight grimace passed over her face. Somehow the thought wasn't as comforting as it was supposed to be. Turning her attention back to Beth, she addressed the issue of the town's gossip. "Well, despite what everyone thinks they've seen, there's really nothing between Ryne and myself. As a matter of fact, once I'm done with him today, I'll probably be leaving."

"Really? Gee, that's too bad. I've enjoyed your company." Beth looked disappointed for a moment, but after a second or two smiled and started cajoling her. "If you'd stay longer, I'd be able to talk Josh into getting a new sofa with the extra rent money!"

"Well, with a request like that, how could I not?" Mel laughed, just as Beth had probably intended her to. "Don't worry; you might not be rid of me as fast as you think. I still have to see what flights are available back to Chicago." Mel set down her coffee and pulled her chair into place in front of her computer. "Where's Josh today?" She asked idly while waiting for the internet to hook up.

"He's home, still complaining about his tooth, the big baby!" Beth shook her head. "I told him to stay away, because I didn't want to hear him whining all day after listening to him all last night. He said if it quit hurting by noon, he'd do a bit of work around the cabins, trimming bushes and a doing few repairs."

Mel nodded in acknowledgement of the information and went to her e-mail account. She'd check for any messages and then try to book a flight home.

"Will you be heading out to Ryne's when you're done here?" Beth finished her snack and put the box of cookies away.

"Actually, someone told me last night that he was working at Miller's today, to make up for being away yesterday."

"I wonder why he was out of town." Beth's eye sparked with interest. "Maybe it's something worth reporting!"



"I have absolutely no idea, but let me get my interview out of the way before you start to question him." Mel answered distractedly while staring at the computer screen. "Now this is funny."

"What's that?" Beth scooted her chair over to take a peek.

"That website I applied to yesterday sent me a reply. They're considering my status as a 'Lycan,' once more research on my background is completed. I can expect to hear back from them in two to four weeks." Mel sat back in her chair feeling perplexed. "Now that's just weird. I thought it was all a hoax."

Beth giggled. "So you might become a card carrying member of the Lycan community?"

"I guess so."

Both women shook their heads at the utter ridiculousness of the idea and then turned back to more important matters. Beth tapped away on her keyboard, writing articles about local happenings while Mel checked out flight information. After a few searches, she discovered there was a flight out of Toronto with seats available Friday night and another on Saturday. Mel chose the Saturday one, thinking that she'd like to spend part of the day in Toronto shopping at the Eaton's Centre, a large shopping mall in that city's core. If she had time, she might even go to see a show.

She hovered the cursor over the accept button, feeling a moment of regret. Once she clicked on the icon, she was effectively saying goodbye to Stump River forever. There was little chance that she'd ever return to see Lucy or Beth or Al or Ruth or Armand... When she thought about it, it was surprising how many people she'd come to know in such a short time. Back in Chicago, she didn't even know the name of the people who lived next door and they'd been there for months!

Her mind had purposely skirted away from thinking about Bryan and Daniel. She hadn't seen them that often, yet in some ways she viewed them as the brothers she had never had. It had been fun hanging out with them last night, well, at least until Ryne appeared. Would she miss him? Firming her jaw, she gave an emphatic mental 'no.' The man wasn't to be trusted and the sooner she was away from him, the better. Before she could change her mind, she clicked the 'accept' button and watched the screen flash her confirmed flight. The ticket would be waiting for her at the airport. Mel wondered why that fact made her feel slightly ill.

Checking her watch, she pushed her chair back. It was time to find and confront Ryne. There was no point in putting it off. They'd parted

badly and she really didn't want to see him, but getting it over and done with was the best plan; sort of like removing a bandage... fast and clean. Once she stated that the interview had to be done today because she was leaving, he'd see that she was no longer willing to play along with his little games. Oh, he'd probably protest and make excuses, but she wouldn't stand for it. Even if he was working, he could still answer her questions while he pumped gas and changed tires. With her steno pad of questions firmly clutched in her hand, she bid farewell to Beth and headed out the door.

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Aldrich leaned back in his leather chair and stared out his office window. His feet, encased in highly polished designer shoes, were propped up on his desk while the fingers of one hand idly twirled an engraved, gold-plated pen. His other hand held a receiver lightly to his ear as he listened to Greyson's instructions.

The view from his fifteenth storey window was impressive, though Aldrich hardly ever bothered to notice it. This type of location was just one part of the prestigious perks that came with working for such a wealthy man like Greyson. He was, after all, one of the wealthiest men in the country. It was a far cry from where he had started his legal career; a small office in a rundown three storey walk up. He'd been fresh out of school, in debt up to his ears and eager to make his mark on the world. Note the absence of the word 'idealistic.' Aldrich smirked. He'd never been idealistic. A realistic view of how the world worked was his main advantage. Know where to be, who to talk to and when to look the other way; that was his motto and so far it had served him well. Hence, his job with Greyson Inc.

A few drops of rain fell on the glass, drawing his attention to the weather. The sky was grey and overcast, matching his mood perfectly. Greyson was being more difficult than ever and Aldrich was stretching his patience to the limit as he attempted to remain calm and unflappable. While he'd never openly admit it, he found the tycoon a tad... difficult... to handle. He'd been working for the man for five years now and still never knew what to make of him.

The man was rich, powerful, moody, and more than a little eccentric. Today it was one of his eccentricities that were giving Aldrich a headache. Honestly, how the man had ever managed to amass a fortune was a mystery. He had no sense of the value of a dollar, squandering money on foolish projects, ignoring the safety of priceless art objects...

"Are you listening, Aldrich?" The voice barked down the line at him and Aldrich momentarily removed the receiver from his ear.

"Yes, sir. You were explaining that you'll be incommunicado for five days." He didn't add that it was a monthly ritual and there was no need for the phone call. Humouring clients was all part of the job.

"Good. Thought you'd dozed off in that cushy office I pay for."

"No, sir. I'm just taking note of your instructions. You will be unavailable for the usual five days. The west wing of the house is sealed and all but a skeleton staff will be given a long weekend. No one is to enter the estate, except emergency personnel in the event of a fire or some other such tragedy. If that is the case, the Ryne Taylor photograph is to be saved first." He hesitated to speak what was on his mind, but given that Greyson was on the other end of a phone line and not in the room, Aldrich decided to be bold. "Sir, the chances of a fire are negligible and, if such an event were to occur, other pieces of your collection are worth considerably more than that one picture."

"I don't care. They belong to me, and like everything that I own, I decide their fate."

"Of course, sir." Aldrich allowed himself the luxury of rolling his eyes. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"The girl, Melody, make sure she does her job. I'll expect an update on her progress the next time I call."

Aldrich bit his lip. He'd like to say 'Progress? What progress?' but knew better. Greyson seemed to feel she'd do the job to his satisfaction. It was best to let the man have his way. If Greene messed up and blew the assignment, well... Aldrich would be able to whisper an 'I told you so' once his employer was out of earshot.

"And Aldrich? I'm holding you personally responsible for the success of this project."

"But... !" Aldrich sat up straight, his feet hitting the floor and the chair squeaking in protest at the sudden movement. The injustice of the statement had him almost sputtering. It wasn't fair. He hadn't chosen the woman. If she failed, it wasn't his fault.

"Ha! Made you sweat, didn't I, Leon?"

Settling back in his seat, Aldrich sneered before answering, but his voice held no evidence of the fact. He hadn't come this far, without being able to exercise considerable self-control. "Another of your jokes, sir."

"Maybe. I'll let you think about it while I'm gone."

The phone went dead and Aldrich slowly set the receiver down. Greyson had to have been joking. There was no way he could be held accountable for that girl's incompetence, especially since Greyson himself had hired her, despite his advice to the contrary.

Aldrich sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. Greyson liked to play games with him, and this was, quite likely, one of them. Still, the old codger was unpredictable. Hmm... Just in case, he'd better pay extra attention to Ms. Greene and her assignment. She couldn't be allowed to mar his impeccable record of service.

## Chapter 27

Ryne glanced at himself in the side-view mirror as he bent down to accept payment for the gas he'd just pumped into the car. There was no sign that his nose had been broken the previous night. No bruising or swelling, and the bridge was as straight as it had ever been—thank goodness weres healed quickly. Daniel had done a good job dealing with him last night. His pack mate's calm and logical manner had been what his angry wolf had needed. Ryne made a note to commend the boy—no, make that 'man.' Daniel was maturing and Ryne knew he needed to quit treating him as a kid, give him more responsibilities. As a matter of fact both Bryan and Daniel were quite competent. The problem was, being a small pack, in a quiet town, there really wasn't a lot that needed doing and so they tended to slack off. Their occasional shifts at the lumber yard left them with a lot of free time. Maybe with the arrival of the new members...

He turned his attention back to the occupant of the car—Mrs. Swain—and accepted the money she handed him. She was eighty if she was day and the personification of a sweet old lady, down to her silvery grey hair, bifocals, and floral print dress. He always spent extra time chatting to her since he knew she lived alone.

"I heard all about you, you bad boy." She smiled up at him, her eyes twinkling with merriment behind her thick glasses.

"And what did you hear?" He played along, knowing full well what was coming since every customer so far had said the same thing.

"You were fighting over that new girl in town." She shook her head and tsked at him. "And here I thought you only had eyes for me."

"Mrs. Swain, they are rumours, nothing but vicious rumours. You know I'm waiting for you to turn sixteen so I can start courting you." He pressed a hand to his chest and tried to look besotted.

It must have worked for she giggled girlishly and patted his cheek before leaving. He watched her drive away, noting how she carefully looked both ways at the traffic light before sneaking through on the red

with a slight squeal of her tires. What a little rebel, he chuckled to himself.

After depositing the money from the sale in the till, he returned to the service bay where he'd been changing tires. He'd only taken two steps into the work space when he froze. Over the smell of oil, tire rubber, and exhaust, he detected something else drifting in through the open bay doors. Melody. Her scent was sweet and feminine with just a hint of green apples. Turning, he saw her determinedly walking across the parking area towards him. Her jaw was set and tilted upward. In one hand she was tightly holding a steno pad, while the other seemed to have a death grip on the shoulder strap of her purse.

Damn! He'd been hoping to avoid this for a few more hours, though why he didn't know. It wasn't going to be pretty, no matter when it happened. Steeling himself for what must be done, he walked to the entrance and leaned against the door frame.

When she was a few feet away, she caught sight of him and stopped.  
"Ryne."

"Melody."

They stared across the open space for a few moments, assessing each other as one might before entering a battle. He wondered what she was thinking. Her eyes were narrowed, her lips compressed. An aura of determination surrounded her. She'd definitely come here expecting to kick his ass, he decided.

"I'm not here to talk about yesterday. That's over and done with. All I want is to finish this interview and then I'll leave you alone." She waved the steno pad at him while delivering her message in clipped tones, with no emotional undertones. He mentally congratulated her on her self control.

Shoving his hands in his back pockets, he shrugged and set out to be as obnoxious as possible. "What interview?"

"The one you agreed to give me about your work."

"Yeah, well... I've changed my mind." Ryne let his gaze slide away and feigned interest in the truck that was parked across the street. He detected a slight change in her breathing pattern and wondered how she would respond.

"You've changed your mind? Just like that? Can I ask why?"

"Ask away. I may or may not answer." He looked at her blandly.

"But we had an agreement. You said—"

"I said I had complete control and I'm exerting it. I've decided I don't want to be interviewed. I don't want or need the publicity and you're

not paying me, so... it's off. Sorry you wasted your time." He shoved away from the door frame and stood straight. "If you don't mind, go home. I have work to do."

"But that's not fair! I've done nothing to warrant you cancelling our agreement. In fact, I've been very patient and spent a lot of time waiting for you, humouring you... I've never complained about all your teasing and innuendo. It's only fair that you give me a bit of your time in return." He could tell she was close to losing control. Her breathing was rapid, the colour rising in her cheeks.

"Life's never fair, sweetheart. You were... moderately... entertaining, but now you're bordering on boring. It's time for you to leave."

"I'm not leaving until I get my interview!" She stepped into his personal space, poking him in the chest with her finger. He had to give her credit. Very few people were brave—or foolish—enough to do that. It was fortunate that he had a soft spot for her. The last person to poke him in the chest like that had ended up with cast on their hand.

Ryne loomed over her, keeping his eyes narrowed, his expression cold. Even before he spoke, he saw how Melody responded to his aura; there was a faint tremor running over her and she had difficulty maintaining eye contact. Good. She was nervous and unsure of him. He pressed his advantage, delivering his message in icy, clipped tones.

"You're very lucky that I have such good control over my temper. Most people wouldn't be walking away from an encounter like this." Casually, he reached forward and chucked her under the chin, causing her teeth to click together. "Now, run along little girl, before my benevolence disappears and I take exception to your attitude." He heard her gulp and gave a minute nod of satisfaction. She was definitely getting the message. Feeling he had done his job, he turned and went back inside, completely ignoring her.

Even with his back turned, he was aware of her continued presence. He bent over to pick up a ratchet and glanced behind him. She stood there gaping at him, no doubt processing what had just happened. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her snap her jaw shut then toss her hair back from her face before striding inside. Oh great, he muttered under his breath, now she's going to try and show off the fact that she had a backbone. Why couldn't women be meek and obedient, running the other way when a wolf growled at them?

He kept working, resolved to ignore her, even when she stood directly behind him.

"Where did you grow up?"

Ryne didn't answer.

"What schools did you go to? Do you have any family? Do you see them often? What do they think of your work?"

Clenching his teeth, he yanked the rear wheel tire off the car he had up on the hoist, and then sent it rolling towards a pile destined for recycling. Turning, he grabbed a new tire, forcing Melody to step back in order to not get hit.

Appearing unfazed, Melody continued her barrage of questions, waiting only a moment after each before asking a new one or rephrasing an older one. Where had he lived previously? What were his favourite colours? Did he have a favourite artist who he admired? Where had he sold his art? What was his first camera? Where had he taken most of his pictures? What was his favourite picture? Did he plan on another exhibit in the future?

Finally, Ryne had enough. He turned with a snarl and grabbed her upper arms, "I said there would be no interview." He accompanied each word with a little shake. Her hair swished back and forth as her head bobbed, the scent of her shampoo wafting around him. He steeled himself against its enticing effects. "Now get it through your stubborn head before I do something I'll regret." The last word was accompanied by a backwards shove and he released her arms. Without the support of his hands she stumbled and he restrained himself from reaching out to steady her, despite the fact that his wolf was growling angrily at him.

Brushing her hair from her face, she glared at him, but stepped right back up to confront him once again.

"This interview is important to me." Her chin was stuck out, her face belligerent.

"And it isn't to me."

"There's a lot riding on it. Finishing my education—"

He snorted. "Do I look like I care?"

"If it's money you want, maybe I could work something out..." Her tone changed. Ryne could see her mind racing and wondered what she'd come up with. From things she'd told him earlier, he assumed she had no cash reserves. Hmm... He could use that against her right now.

"Forget it. You don't have enough money to cover what I'd want and if you think the sex we've had can be used as a down payment, forget it. You weren't that good. It wouldn't buy you five minutes of my time."

She gasped at the spitefulness of his statement and for a moment he thought she'd slap him, but, he had to hand it to her, his Melody was never predictable. Instead, she tried to kick him.



Ryne easily sidestepped the blow that was aimed at his groin. In response, he grabbed her wrist and twisted her arm behind her back. Using it to keep her under control, he dragged her close so their bodies were pressed together. Pitching his voice as menacingly as possible, he growled a warning. "That wasn't funny sweetheart. Little girls, who play those types of games, better be prepared for the consequences."

Before she could protest, he gripped the back of her head and delivered a punishing kiss. He ravaged her lips, ignoring her whimpers. His tongue invaded her mouth, dominating her, demanding her submission. There was no tenderness, no concern for her pleasure. She struggled against him, but he pulled her arm up tighter and she gave a cry of pain, before finally stalling. Releasing his grip on the back of her head, he ran his hand insultingly over her body, squeezing her breast then pulling her hips against his so that he could grind against her. A tear trickled down her cheek; he tasted the saltiness but hardened his heart. Mercy didn't enter into this; others were depending on him to get rid of Melody. Lives hung in the balance. Personal feelings had no place in the situation he was faced with.

When he could literally smell the fear coming off of her, he ended the kiss and hissed into her ear. "Now listen closely Ms. Greene. There will be no interview. Not now. Not ever. No matter how many times you plead and beg and spread your legs for me. It's not going to happen. My suggestion is that you go back to where you came from and forget you ever heard about me because if I see you around here again... Well, I'll let you finish the sentence."

Ryne allowed her to pull away fractionally, the threat hanging in the air between them. He could hear her heart pounding, her rapid breathing. There was an aura of hurt and fear and anger around her; it was exactly as he had planned.

She stared up at him for a moment, then spat in his face and pulled herself completely free. He made no move to grab her nor to wipe the spittle from his cheek.

"You bastard."

"And don't you forget it." He winked, blew her a kiss, and walked away, nonchalantly grabbing a socket wrench and started to loosen the nuts on the next wheel he needed to change. His sensitive hearing conveyed the story that unfolded behind him. Melody stood watching him, her breathing ragged. There was a slight hitch to it, as if she'd like to cry, but wouldn't allow herself the luxury. Finally, he heard her spin on her heel and stalk away muttering obscenities about him under her breath.

Once she was out of hearing range, he let the tool fall lifelessly to the ground. The sound of metal hitting cement echoed through the cavernous space of the garage. It was a cold, lonely sound and reminded him that he stood alone in the dim and damp space. He ran his hands through his hair. That had been God awful. Hurting her like that was the last thing he'd wanted to do, but there was no other way. She couldn't be here when the Loberos arrived. And the longer she stayed, the more attached his wolf got to her.

The beast inside him had been wily these past few days; first convincing him there was a logical reason to keep Melody around, then encouraging him to agree to the interview. Supposedly, he was to have been determining her motives... In actual fact he'd done only the barest minimum with regards to investigating. Instead, his wolf had led him into a crazy relationship with the woman, one that should never have even started.

He compressed his lips. It was over and done with now; he'd sent her on her way and hopefully she wasn't masochistic enough to return. So far, she'd given no indication that she knew about werewolves. As long as it stayed that way, he could let her live. He had a few contacts in Chicago that he'd use to keep loose tabs on her activities. If it looked like she was going to head back to Smythston or start investigating him again, well—his hands clenched into fists—that would be have to be the end of her.

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Mel walked with quick angry steps down the length of Stump River's main street. She wished it was longer because she was quite sure that two blocks wouldn't be sufficient for her to have vented her anger or to get a handle on the sense of betrayal that filled her soul. How dare he just cancel the interview? How dare he say she was only 'moderately' entertaining? And as for spreading her legs! Could he have been any cruder than that? While they had never really exchanged tender words, she'd somehow believed there were some gentler feelings growing between them. Now, after the way he'd just used her... Blinking rapidly, she pushed back the tears. He wasn't worth ruining her mascara over! The man was a jerk, a bastard and a... a... well, she couldn't think of anything else at the moment, but when she did, she'd add it to the list.

She was storming up the other side of the street now and Ruth's was right ahead. Well, she'd better make her call to Aldrich and tell the miserable man she was heading home. At least she was angry enough

that there was nothing he could say that would upset her any more than she already was.

Pulling open the door with more force than necessary, she went to the pay phone and jabbed at the buttons as she dialed his number. It only rang twice before he picked up. Giving him no time to talk she launched into her speech.

"Mr. Aldrich, it's Mel Greene. I'm leaving Stump River and I'll be back in Chicago in a few days. I'll contact you then."

"Can I assume that your trip has been successful and you've met your objective? That you've discovered the necessary information regarding Mr. Taylor?"

She gave a short, ironic chuckle. "Oh yeah. I've discovered lots about Ryne Taylor."

"Good. I'm both surprised and pleased to hear that. I'll see you in a few days."

She didn't bother to correct his assumption that what she'd discovered about Ryne was relevant to her assignment. "Right. Bye Mr. Aldrich." She hung up and then wondered why she always felt the need to say 'bye' when she didn't even like the man. Damn her mother for instilling manners into her subconscious!

Turning abruptly, she walked right into Lucy. The woman appeared to just be arriving for her shift.

"Fancy seeing you here this early, Mel. You're going to throw my whole day off schedule."

"Sorry. My plans for the day took an unexpected turn and I had to make my phone call earlier than planned." Mel wandered over to her usual seat and plopped down, crossing her arms in front of her.

Lucy automatically set a cup in front of her and then headed towards the back to hang up her coat. She called a question over her shoulder. "I've been meaning to ask you, who is it that you call every day? Not that it's any of my business, I'm just wondering."

"It's this guy named Aldrich. He's sort of like my supervisor and I hate calling him. He's always super critical and never happy about anything I tell him." Mel shouted her response at Lucy's back.

Ruth poked her head out of the kitchen at that moment, spied Mel, and started wringing her hands. "Mel, what are you doing here? You're never early! Oh this just messes up everything." She seemed agitated and kept peering into the kitchen behind her.

Taken aback, Mel apologized. "I'm sorry. Do you want me to leave?"

"No, no need to do that." Ruth wiped her hands on her apron and took a deep breath.

"Are you sure, because I could just..." Mel started to stand and Ruth rushed forward shaking her head.

"Don't do that dear, it's just..." She paused and then burst into speech. "It's just that Al and I planned on surprising you. I went on the internet and found a bunch of recipes and Al and I've been practising making those fancy coffees you're always talking about. We were all set to surprise you today. When you asked for one, I was going to be ready to hand one over."

"Oh Ruth, that's so sweet of you." Mel stood and gave the woman a hug, wincing when her arm came in contact with Ruth's boney frame. "Where's Al, I want to thank him, too."

"Oh, he's out back arguing with our meat supplier; the hamburger has been too greasy lately. He'll be out shortly."

Mel sat back down, absentmindedly rubbing her arm.

Lucy returned and noticed the gesture. "Hey, how's your arm doing?"

"Still sore." Mel extended the limb and was surprised to see that it showed red around the edges of the bandage.

"That doesn't look good. I think you're developing a bit of an infection." Ruth shook her head. "I have some antibiotic cream in the back that will fix it right up. I'll just go get it."

After Ruth had doctored the wound to her satisfaction, Al appeared and Mel thanked him for his efforts in learning how to make 'fancy coffee.'

"Nothing's too good for my favourite girl." He rubbed his chin self-consciously, but then grinned sheepishly at her. "You liven things up around here. Ruth and I reckon we're in a bit of a rut."

"That's right." Ruth nodded, beaming. "We're going to try to expand our customers' horizons and make some special dinners every Saturday and Sunday. Maybe even fold the napkins all fancy like I see in the restaurants on my soap operas."

Al rolled his eyes at this comment, but said nothing, merely grunting that he had to return to the kitchen to start work on the lunch menu. Ruth followed, after insisting that Mel keep the antibiotic cream, just in case.

Mel watched them go sadly. "I'm going to miss them."

"Miss them? Are you leaving?" Lucy looked up from the silverware she was wrapping in napkins.

"Yeah, it's time I headed back home."

"But, you've not finished your interview with Ryne, have you?"

"No. He changed his mind and isn't granting me one."

"Why that dirty bastard." Lucy glared across the street to where Ryne was backing a car out of the service bay.

"My sentiments exactly, but it will be nice to get back home." Mel tried to sound positive, but in truth the idea of her dumpy little apartment surrounded by concrete, pollution and too many people held little appeal.

"I'd like to go to Chicago some time. It must be pretty exciting." Lucy sounded wistful and on the spur of the moment Mel made an offer.

"Would you like to come back with me for a visit? You can stay with me and I can show you the sights."

Lucy's whole face lit up. "Do you mean that?"

"Sure, why not?" The more Mel thought about the idea, the better it seemed. She didn't really want to go back to Chicago, but if Lucy was with her, it wouldn't be so bad. "Can you get some time off? Maybe a week?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. I haven't taken a vacation in years. Let me just go check with Ruth and Al and then I'll call Armand. Oh, I'm so excited!" Lucy hurried out back, grinning ear to ear.

With Lucy gone, Mel allowed herself a few minutes of doubt and self-pity. She was really in a pickle now. Once she was home in Chicago, Aldrich would want to know what she'd found out and when the article might be ready. He wouldn't be pleased to learn that there was no article because Ryne had backed out. And then there was the whole issue of the cash advance. Last time the subject came up, Aldrich had basically said that if she didn't produce, she'd have to return everything. All expenses would have to come out of her own pocket. Unfortunately, said pocket had nothing in it.

She caught herself chewing on her thumbnail, but was too worried to feel guilty about falling back into old habits. Staring across the street, she wondered if she dared ask Ryne one more time. Maybe if she begged and told him that she really needed to earn the money this article would bring... No. She couldn't do it. Not only would it be pointless, but her pride wouldn't allow her to grovel like that, not after the way he had treated her.

There had to be another solution, but what?

## Chapter 28

Lucy was ecstatic about being able to get some time off work and with amazing ease. Mel obtained another ticket to Chicago, even though it did mean rebooking for Friday rather than Saturday. It was almost a ten hour drive to Toronto, but by taking turns behind the wheel, they'd get there in plenty of time to catch their flight if they left by mid afternoon.

While Lucy packed, Mel headed back to the Gazette to say her good-byes to Beth. She offered to pay rent for the rest of the week, but Beth had refused, saying it wasn't fair for her to pay when she wouldn't be using the cabin. Mel didn't argue the point, since she was in serious doubt as to her finances. If Greyson started legal proceedings in an attempt to retrieve the entire advance, she didn't know how she was going to survive. Hopefully, she could get her waitressing jobs back, but all thoughts of finishing her education in the near future would have to be put on hold. On top of that, the rent on her apartment was only paid until the end of the month, after which she'd be searching for friends who had couches she could crash on.

Mel drove back to the cabin to do her own packing, spending much of the drive mulling over various scenarios for her future; none of them were very appealing. She'd known she was taking a gamble when she accepted this job, but it had seemed like such a perfect opportunity. After years of scraping by, she thought her life was finally turning around. Instead, she was in a worse mess than ever.

A depressed feeling settled over her as she parked the car in front of the cabin and climbed out. She stood for a moment looking around, knowing she'd miss the place. Surprisingly, she had come to enjoy the peace and solitude the location offered. Far from feeling that she was in the middle of nowhere, there was a certain sense of homecoming once she got over the initial culture shock. The sounds of the birds, watching the trees slowly turn green as spring deepened, the fresh air... There really wasn't anything about this experience that she hadn't

enjoyed—well, except for her encounter with the wolves and that jerk, Ryne.

Just thinking of him made her blood boil and she straightened and slammed her car door shut. The sound echoed through the quiet, and was followed by the sound of someone calling her name. A quick visual search located Josh near the rear of the cabin, his hand raised in greeting. Mel waved back and then watched as he bent over to pick something up before walking towards her. She waited for him to get within earshot before calling out.

“Hi Josh. Beth said you might be doing some work outside the cabins. I see she was right.”

“Yep, too nice a day to be stuck inside so I thought I’d just do a bit of tidying up and start to get ready for the summer visitors.” He coughed and looked a bit embarrassed. “Er... I found something under the bushes back there that you might want to take care of.”

“Really? What would that be?” Mel couldn’t think of anything outside that would concern her, but took a step towards where Josh had been working.

“Oh, you don’t have to go get it. I have it here.” He finished crossing the distance between them and handed her a rumpled bundle. It appeared to be a set of men’s clothing. Hesitantly, Mel accepted the offering, not sure why Josh thought she needed to ‘take care of them.’

“Um... thanks?” She examined the clothing. It looked vaguely familiar.

Josh nodded and cleared his throat. “I recognize the shirt; it’s Ryne’s. Apparently, you two must have been... well... you know, and he forgot to collect his stuff afterwards.” He rubbed his neck and looked everywhere, but at Mel. “I didn’t think it was warm enough outside yet for that sort of thing, but you young folks are made of sterner stuff, I guess.” He shuffled his feet and coughed again. “Anyway, I’ll let you give those back to him. I’ll just... um... go finish up around the other cabins” With that, he headed on his way, leaving Mel staring at the clothes she was holding.

She scrunched up her face, trying to figure out how Ryne’s clothes ended up under the bushes. Last time she’d seen that shirt on him, he’d been... Mel paused and felt her jaw drop. He’d been wearing it on Tuesday when the whole ‘wolf by the river’ fiasco had happened! Ryne had stormed out of the cabin buck naked carrying his clothes and claiming he’d get dressed outside, but... apparently he hadn’t.

Surely, Ryne hadn't walked home in the middle of the night without any clothes on! Even up in northern Canada, there must be rules about that kind of thing. And how had he got home anyways? It was miles to his house, but there hadn't been a vehicle parked any place that she could see, nor had she heard the sound of an engine. So he must have walked home, but... naked? There couldn't be any other explanation. He'd left with those clothes in his arms and she couldn't imagine that he would've just happened to have a spare set waiting for him at the edge of the woods.

She gave her head a shake. Ryne had mentioned that he liked to run through the woods, but doing so naked at night when the temperature was near freezing... Well, that was just too weird and emphasized why she needed to get away from Stump River. Ryne wasn't only a bastard; he was some kind of perverted nudist-flasher type as well.

Walking up to the cabin, she set the clothes on the floor by the door, not quite sure what to do with them. After the way he'd treated her, there was no way she was going to do him any favours and go out of her way to return them. Maybe she should just throw them in the garbage. It was what he deserved. Deciding to think about it, she went to the bedroom to start packing.

It didn't take long to gather her things from the bathroom and closet. In no time at all, the room was stripped of her presence. Taking a last look around, she zipped up the suitcase and set it by the door before taking the sheets off the bed. Unfortunately, she wouldn't have time to wash the bedding Beth had left her, but she didn't think the other woman would mind.

When she lifted the pillows to remove the cases, she spied the T-shirt she slept in folded underneath. Oops! Almost forgot that, she muttered to herself. As she picked it up, she recalled the erotic dream she'd had on her first night in the cabin. It had been extremely satisfying, but unfortunately, one of a kind. Closing her eyes, she pressed the shirt to her chest and allowed herself to relive the memory. Mmm... Her imagination had certainly out done itself when concocting that man. Everything had been so realistic...

Suddenly, a horrible thought entered her mind and she snapped her eyes open. Oh no! Surely not! But... A feeling of dread swept over her as a theory developed in her mind. Could it have really happened? She hurried into the main room and stared at the pile of Ryne's clothes. If the man was willing to run home naked in the middle of the night, would he also be the type to creep into a bedroom?



Her skin crawled at the idea that Ryne—still a stranger at that point—had touched her so intimately. As she contemplated the possibility, her breathing accelerated and panic tightened in her chest. Calm down, calm down, she told herself. It might not be true. Forcing herself to breath slowly, she tried to figure out how Ryne could have entered her room. There'd been only one set of footprints and all those wolf prints... Of course Josh said they were old prints and it had something to do with the frozen ground being farther from the cabin... But the weather forecast had said it was above freezing... Mel ran an agitated hand through her hair. None of it made sense. Why would Ryne... ? And how... ? A shudder swept over her as mental images formed of the man looming over her as she slept.

She made herself push the thoughts from her mind. The hows and whys didn't matter; what was important was the fact that she was lucky enough to be getting away from Ryne sooner rather than later. After all, if she stayed around, who knew what weird, abnormal thing he might have done next? The very idea spurred her to action. As fast as possible, she finished tidying the cabin and packing her car, now more anxious than ever to leave Stump River—and Ryne Taylor—far behind.

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Ryne was thankful that there was a rush on tires that week. It kept him busy all day and gave him a chance to work out his anger without damaging anyone or anything. His encounter with Melody had left him in turmoil as his head argued with his wolf over what had occurred. Hours of lifting tires and struggling with rusted bolts and nuts had taken the edge off his mood so he was able to present a relatively calm face to the world.

As he put away his tools and began to wash up, Ben wandered in with Harley at his heels. The dog immediately went over to Ryne and wagged his tail, fawning around his legs. Ryne scratched his ears and gave a low rumble of approval that had Harley sighing happily. The beast licked his hand before flopping down on the ground, obviously feeling that all was right in his world now that he had the Alpha's approval.

"See you got a lot of work done today." Ben had a stack of completed work orders in his hand. "I'd have thought that fighting over that girl last night, would have left you all tired out, but if anything you've worked faster than ever."

Biting back a sigh, Ryne explained the situation yet again while inwardly grumbling; didn't these people have anything better to do with

their time than gossip about what he did? “I wasn’t fighting over her. I was just trying to talk to her, and Watson took exception to the fact. He swung at me first.”

“Uh huh.” Ben nodded, but Ryne could tell he didn’t believe the story. “Well, whatever. Thing is, she seems to be a nice girl and you could do worse. She likes Harley, after all.”

Harley lifted his head and thumped his tail at the sound of his name.

“Funny thing though,” Ben continued with a puzzled frown on his face. “When I was talking to her yesterday afternoon she told me this story about seeing Harley out in the woods and thinking he was a wolf. I guess, she’s never seen a real wolf before, because Harley doesn’t look much like one, if you ask me. Anyway, I told her it couldn’t have been him, since I took him to the vet clinic on Tuesday for his rabies vaccine and then kept him inside for the rest of the day.”

Ryne froze, his mind racing and connecting the dots even as Ben kept on speaking.

“She had a funny look on her face then. I guess she realized she must have really seen a wolf. You know, you could use that to your advantage, boy. Tell her that there are wolves around, but you’ll protect her.” Ben chuckled. “Not that you need help with women. Anyway, I just came back here to tell you to take tomorrow off. You got us caught up on all the pending jobs. I figure with that big house you’re fixing up, you can always use some extra time to work on it.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure. Thanks Ben.” Distractedly, he took his leave of the older man and loped out to his truck.

He drove home, functioning on autopilot, too busy thinking about what he’d just discovered. Melody had mentioned something about him not even being honest about a dog. At the time, the comment hadn’t made sense to him, but now it did. She knew it wasn’t Harley she’d seen by the river and she knew he’d lied, but had she made the ultimate connection? Given how she’d been acting this morning, he thought not, but it still made him feel on edge. Hopefully, he’d offended her sufficiently that she’d be only too happy to forget everything about her experiences in Stump River. There was a sinking feeling in his stomach but he did his best to ignore it.

If things went according to his plan, Melody would be gone by tomorrow night at the latest. With her out the picture, he’d be able to focus on what was really important; his new pack members. He’d have to inform Bryan and Daniel about their arrival, look for suitable lodgings for the family, and find Marco a job... Ryne forced a smile to form even as his

fingers clenched around the steering wheel. This should be a joyous time, yet he was filled with a sense of foreboding.

Realizing that he was now in front of his house, he shut off the engine and went inside. The television was blaring as per usual, making it easy for him to locate his pack mates. Stalking down the hallway, he stood in the doorway to the entertainment room and took in the sight before him. Daniel was sitting in the corner, his head bobbing in time to whatever song he was listening to on his mp3 player while typing away on the computer. Bryan was lazing back on the sofa, his feet on the coffee table while he idly flicked from station to station. Yep, some werewolf pack they made; he definitely needed to give them more work to do.

Ryne walked up to Bryan and kicked his feet off the table, grabbed the remote and turned off the TV.

"Hey! I was watching that!" Bryan stood up, his expression indignant and attempted to snatch the remote back.

"Pack meeting." Ryne spoke tersely and nudged Daniel. The boy looked up and immediately unplugged from his music.

"What's up, Ryne?" Daniel looked at him curiously. They seldom had 'pack meetings' since it was just the three of them.

Ryne leaned against the fireplace and surveyed his friends. "You know how I was away yesterday? I was meeting a family—the Loberos—and..." He paused for effect. "They're going to join our pack."

It took a moment for the news to set in, then Bryan and Daniel gave out whoops, leapt up and high-fived each other.

"Hey, that's great! It's been too quiet around here." Bryan was grinning from ear to ear.

Daniel smiled, his response slightly calmer, but still showing his pleasure. "Yeah, it'll be nice to have more members. I miss being part of a big group."

Ryne's mood momentarily lifted as he watched the happiness of the other two. Wolves were pack animals and it had been a strain on everyone being such a small group. Thankfully, the townsfolk had unknowingly helped fill the emptiness, but it still wasn't quite the same as being around their own kind. He gave them a few minutes to enjoy the news all the while knowing he'd have to put a damper on things.

"So, how many are coming?" Daniel sat back down but kept his eyes fixed on his Alpha, obviously eager for more information.

"Four in total. Marco, his mate Olivia, and their son, Angelo, as well as Marco's sister, Tessa."

“Ages? Jobs?” Bryan actually looked the part of a Beta at that moment, already trying to figure out how the new members would be assimilated into the pack.

Ryne was pleased to see a serious side in Bryan. When he’d taken the young man on as his Beta, it had been a question of necessity rather than a belief in Bryan’s innate abilities, but he was showing signs of growing into the role. Just look at how he’d handled the little incident at the bar, smoothing things over so no one was any the wiser.

Realizing that he hadn’t yet answered Bryan’s question, Ryne shared what he knew and ended with a half mocking warning. “And Bryan? Give Tessa a break. She’s had a hard time and doesn’t need you sniffing around her the minute she arrives.”

Bryan actually looked offended. “Hey, I wouldn’t do that to a pack member. She’s family now.”

Nodding, Ryne pushed away from the wall and began to pace the length of the room. “There’s something else I have to tell you. It’s about Melody—Ms. Greene.” He shoved his hands in his back pockets and lifted his chin. “I’ve severed ties with her.”

“What? You’re kidding? After last night?” Neither Bryan nor Daniel looked like they could quite believe what they’d just heard.

“Yeah, especially after last night.” Ryne rubbed his neck and sighed. “Uh... thanks for helping out last night. You both did good... real good. But it just re-emphasized to me that my wolf is getting too attached to her and it’s too dangerous to have her around. She’s here to ask questions about me and I can’t take the chance that some day she might fit the pieces together.”

“The Keeping?” There was no smile on Bryan’s face as he uttered the words.

“Yeah. We have new pack members joining us and I have a responsibility to them.”

“Mel seems harmless enough,” Daniel added quietly.

“That she does.” Ryne stared out the window, a vision of Melody’s big brown eyes and soft golden hair forming before him. He turned away from it and tightened his jaw. “But looks can be deceiving. A while back, I was talking to Kane and he said a reporter had been looking for me in Smythston, specifically mentioning the wolf photo. It was Mel.”

The other two looked solemn, knowing the story behind the picture.

Bryan spoke first. "Why didn't you say something when she first came? All you said was to stay away. We figured it was just a territorial jealousy thing your wolf had going."

Ryne felt a bit sheepish. "In part it was, but mostly it was caution. I wasn't sure if she knew anything about Lycans or if she was just a reporter with a bee in her bonnet about me. Either way, I decided to wait and watch for a bit, to see what she did and then make my decision." He shrugged and tried to hide the regret he was feeling. "I'm pretty sure she has no suspicions, but, as I said before, I'm done taking chances. This morning I sent her packing."

"Um... Ryne?" Daniel looked worried. "There was an e-mail today from the Registry."

"Really? About the Loberos?" It was the only reason Ryne could think of at the moment.

"No. Someone from this area was going through the Lycan site and made an application for membership. They wanted to know if we were aware of anyone in the area who was a shifter."

Bryan frowned. "How would the Registry know it was from here?"

Daniel rolled his eyes. He was the 'computer geek' out of the three of them. "The IP address. When someone gets an e-mail, you can usually get a general idea of where it came from by right clicking on the sender. You go to view message source, find what IP address it's from, and then do a search where it's located. There isn't a specific home address, but a general area appears. I didn't think much about it, when I read the e-mail this morning—I figured it was probably a hoax. You know, some kid playing around, but now, from what you've said about Mel, I'm not so sure."

Ryne felt a chill wash over him. Had Mel been searching for information about werewolves? Was it because of the slip-up he'd made over Harley? Or was it just a coincidence as Daniel had said, some kid fooling around?

Slowly, Bryan frowned and walked over to the book shelves. "That reminds me... I didn't think much of it at the time, but that night Mel slept over, she might have been looking at the heritage books. When I was straightening up in here the next day, I saw they were just shoved back on the shelves." He pulled the books out and looked at Ryne. "I thought maybe you'd been looking at them and wondered why they weren't put back properly, since you're usually so careful with them."

Ryne shook his head. "I haven't had time to look at them in weeks." He strode across the room and plucked a book from Bryan's hand,

checking the title. It was Lycanthropy. Raising the book to his nose, he took a sniff. A faint trace of Melody's scent remained. Grimly, he clenched the book in his hand. "I think we have a problem."

## Chapter 29

Ryne pulled into the parking area in front of Melody's cabin and forced his jaws to relax. The drive over had been accomplished at record speed, but the pressing urgency he felt inside left no time for the niceties of traffic laws. He had to find Melody as quickly as possible, ascertain what she did, or didn't know and deal with it swiftly. Curses had tumbled from his lips the entire length of the drive. His complacency, his arrogance, his lust... all three had combined and conspired against him, causing him to ignore his duties as Alpha. And now, because of him, the lives of his pack and Kane's could very well be at stake. But no more. Firming his resolve, he climbed out of the truck and slammed the door.

Long, determined strides carried him to the door. He forced himself to control his knocking. Pounding on the door, as if trying to break it down, would only increase Melody's reluctance to talk to him. Due to his performance earlier in the day, he'd be lucky if she didn't slam to the door in his face. Not that it mattered. She'd talk to him, and tell him what he needed to know, whether she wanted to or not. At this point in time, he wasn't above using some strong interrogation techniques if needed. If she was innocent, she'd just add it to his already lengthy list of sins. But, if she knew more than she should... Well, it didn't really matter then, did it?

There was no response to his knocking and he strained his ears to hear sounds of movement inside. After a moment, he determined she either wasn't home, or she was sleeping. Checking over his shoulder to ensure no one was watching, Ryne strategically applied force to the door and it popped open. Once inside, he listened again, but the small cabin was silent. He scanned the kitchen area, then quickly made his way to the bedroom, only to freeze in the doorway. The bed was stripped, the closet door open revealing empty hangers. Pulling open the dresser drawers, he swore. Melody had already packed and left.

A frustrated growl rose in his throat and he ran his hand through his hair, agitatedly contemplating his next move. Her scent was still strong, so she hadn't been gone too long. Would she stop in Stump River before she left? Possibly. Melody had made friends with several of the residents and he couldn't see her just leaving without saying goodbye. Maybe he could catch up to her in town.

He ran to his truck and hopped in. Gravel spewed from beneath his tires as he gunned the engine and headed towards Stump River, determined to find Melody before she left. He had to discover what she knew and, if necessary, ensure that she never left the area to spread the information further.

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Ryne parked behind Miller's Service Station, and jogged across the road. He'd check the diner first, then the Gazette. Surely, between the two places, he'd find Melody or at least information on where she'd gone and when.

Pulling open the door, he stepped inside. Absentmindedly, he noted the supper crowd was just starting to wander in, the general din slowly rising as debates were held about the various menu selections while Al banged and clanged his pots and pans in the kitchen. Blocking out the noise, Ryne scanned the tables. Melody wasn't there and he felt his jaw tighten in frustration. Forcing a casual expression, he wandered up to the counter and sat down hoping Lucy was on duty. He hadn't talked to her much recently, his attention having shifted to Melody, but he was sure the waitress would be willing to chat and share some information with him.

"Hi there! Can I help you?" A cheery young voice spoke behind him and he swung around surprised. He'd been so intent on looking for Lucy, he'd missed the presence of the other waitress. Pencil and order pad clutched in her hands, a young girl of about seventeen stood smiling at him expectantly.

"Yeah... I need to speak to Lucy."

"Sorry, but she's gone on vacation. I'm filling in for her. Do you want to see a menu?"

Gone? Lucy was always here or at the bar. Ryne frowned and stared at the girl's name tag. Tabitha. She probably wouldn't know anything useful about Melody. Who would? Ruth? Maybe. "Um... is Ruth available?"

"Probably... I didn't do anything wrong did I?" The girl looked nervous. "This is my first time waitressing and—"



"No. Everything's fine." He pasted one of his most charming smiles on his face to reassure her. "I just need to ask Ruth a question."

"Oh. Okay." Tabitha looked relieved. She grinned at him and scurried off into the kitchen.

A moment later Ruth appeared, wiping her hands on a towel. "Oh! It's you, Ryne. I wondered who that girl was talking about. She was practically giddy about the 'hunk' who wanted to talk to me." Ruth chuckled. "I should have known it was you or one of your friends. What can I do for you?"

Impatient over the time he'd already wasted, Ryne got right to the point. "I need to find Melody. Do you know where she is?"

"Well, you just missed her by a bit. She and Lucy left around four-thirty."

"Left? For where?" He struggled to keep the sharp urgency from his voice. Apparently he was only partially successful as Ruth cast him a puzzled glance before answering.

"Chicago. Mel was heading back home for some reason—she never did say why she was going so sudden like." Ruth frowned before continuing her train of thought. "Anyway, Lucy was going with her for an impromptu vacation. It'll do Lucy good to get away for awhile, don't you think? That girl works way too hard. And she'll be a help for Mel, too, seeing as how the girl wasn't feeling good when she left."

"Melody was sick?" Ryne frowned, not sure why he cared. Her health wasn't his concern. He just needed to know how much she'd discovered about his people.

"No. She had a cut on her arm from that fight you were all in last night and I think it was infected. I had her put some salve on it but by the time they were ready to go, she was complaining of it aching and having a fever and chills. Al and I both tried to talk her into staying and going to the clinic. She could have left first thing tomorrow morning, but she was determined to go. I suppose it was hard enough to get that last minute seat for Lucy and then there was her boss to deal with too."

"Her boss?" Ryne's brain went on high alert. Melody had said she was here of her own accord because she was writing an article about him. There had never been any mention of a boss, only college professors. Damn! She'd been lying to him all along. Why hadn't he caught on to the deception? Her aura had never screamed 'lies' to him... He tuned back in to what Ruth was saying, in case she had any further information that he needed to know.

"Yeah. Some guy named Aldrich, I think. I overheard her telling Lucy that the man was really hard to please and I don't think she was exaggerating. You know, she reported into him every day that she was here? Just like clockwork, she'd come in, place a call—it was always short—and then she'd sit down for some coffee and a chat." Ruth sighed. "We're going to miss her. She was nice young thing, wasn't she? Too bad she had to leave so suddenly."

"Yeah. Too bad." Ryne stood up and distractedly thanked the older woman before heading towards the door. "Um... thanks for the information. I'll, uh... talk to you later."

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Kane gripped the phone more tightly and vaguely acknowledged the cracking sound as the plastic casing began to break under the strength of his grasp. He'd had a sense of foreboding the minute he'd heard Ryne's voice. The longer they talked, the worse it became and he felt the need to confirm the dreaded message. "You're sure she knows about werewolves?"

The sound of heavy sighing met his ear before Ryne spoke. "I'm almost certain. Everything points that way; the fact that she was checking out the books was bad enough, but if she's actually trying to get into the website... Well, she must have strong suspicions. And then I messed up by letting her see me as a wolf and then trying to pawn it off as a dog. Damn! I knew better, I just..."

Gritting his teeth, Kane knew social protocols would have him uttering platitudes, but right now he had none. His brother had effectively been playing Russian roulette with all their lives and if the man had been in the room with him right now, he'd probably be ripping his throat out. Instead, he had to be satisfied with firing accusing words at his brother. "Yeah. You should have known better. You were supposed to deal with her; make sure things never got this far. What the hell happened?"

In his mind, Kane could see Ryne running his hand through his hair in frustration. "I don't know. When I'm around Melody, my wolf starts to take over and I find myself doing things I know I shouldn't."

"Your wolf? Is it looking on her as a mate?" Kane frowned at this possible complication.

"Damned if I know. I'm not into this life-long mate thing. That's your area of expertise. And right now, quite frankly, it doesn't even matter. The Keeping outlines my course of action."

"One I seriously doubt you'll be able to uphold if your wolf is intent on claiming her. I'd better take over."

The snarl that echoed down the phone lines left Kane in no doubt as to Ryne's feelings on the matter. "You'll stay the hell away from her. This is my problem right now. Besides, it isn't safe. So far, she doesn't know who you are. She doesn't know it's you in that damned picture. All she has is the knowledge that werewolves exist."

"And does she suspect that you're one?"

There was a pause. "Possibly... She might be suspicious."

"So what do you propose to do, if she's already on her way back to Chicago?"

"I'm following her there. I'll find out what she knows and take the necessary steps."

"If your wolf lets you."

"It will. I'm in control."

"If that were the case, things wouldn't have gotten this far." Kane knew he was pushing, but he had to be sure Ryne was capable of carrying out his duty.

"That's a low blow."

"But the truth."

Silence followed, then quiet words. "Yeah. I fucked up."

"And?"

"It's not an issue anymore. The needs of the pack are more important."

Kane detected a certain steel-like tone in his brother's voice, but this was too important to leave to chance. A blunt warning never hurt. "Just remember that or I *will* take care of it myself."

A low growl was his response. "I need some information from you."

"Such as?"

"Can Elise check the books at the Grey Goose and see how Melody signed in? I want her address in Chicago, her phone number, her credit card... anything Elise can find. You never know what might prove helpful if Melody turns into a runner."

"I'll call you with the information as soon as we have it."

"Make sure you call me on my cell phone. I'm leaving for the airport in less than an hour. If I'm lucky I'll be able to get a stand-by seat to Chicago."

"All right." He hung up, not bothering to say goodbye, his anger, and frustration roiling about in his gut. The decision to let Ryne deal with this on his own, was debatable, yet Kane knew the more wolves that were involved, the greater the danger of discovery. Inaction ate away at him as he played out various scenarios out in his head, none of them

pretty. If Ryne's wolf was looking for a mate, his judgement could be impaired. Yet, Ryne was an Alpha, biologically programmed to protect his pack. The question was, which instinct would win out? Narrowing his eyes, Kane considered the situation before pulling a heavy book from the shelves.

Flipping through the yellowing pages of the Book of the Law, he found the passage he wanted.

*The keeping of our secret is a wolf's primary duty. Threats of exposure must be swiftly eradicated. Should more than two outsiders learn of our existence, dispersal of the young will begin immediately. Remaining members will obliterate all evidence of the pack's existence. Humanity is a disease covering the earth, a force that cannot be fought. Better that a few should die to stop the scourge, than to risk the perishment of all.*

# Chapter 30

The young woman hummed to herself as she sat feeding documents into the paper shredder in an upscale law office. She was just a temp, and as usual, no one left her any real or important work to do. Filing, shredding, a bit of typing and answering the phone; it was pretty easy and that's the way she liked it. Working full time wasn't on her agenda. Nope. She planned on finding a rich lawyer and settling down as soon as possible. Too bad this particular job didn't hold any matrimonial prospects. The lawyer she was temping for was a grumpy old man—fifty if he was a day. Still age and looks wouldn't matter if he was rich enough... She gave the office an assessing perusal, adding up the cost of the decor and factoring in the location. He might be a possibility. Unfortunately, he was in court and not scheduled back for several hours. Oh well, that left her plenty of time to do her work as well as wander the halls looking for eligible professionals. It was always a good policy to keep her options open.

She took a moment to check her appearance as it reflected in the window. Her blonde hair was up in a respectable knot at her nape with a few tendrils falling about her face and her makeup appeared flawless. Giving a satisfied smile, she stood, thinking maybe she'd go for a little walk and see who might be in the halls or gathered near the elevator...

The phone rang and she answered it, automatically falling into a smooth, professional mode. "Good morning. You've reached the law office of Leon Aldrich. Ms. Matthews speaking. How may I help you?"

"Put me through to Aldrich." A male voice barked the order at her.

"Mr. Aldrich is out at the moment. May I take a message?"

"No. You may not. Where's Ms. Sandercock?"

"She's away at a funeral. I'm filling in for her for a few days."

"Humph! When will Aldrich be back?"

Ms. Matthews opened her mouth to respond. "I—"

The caller cut her off. "And don't give me any of those annoying answers they teach you at business college. I hate it when people tell me

*'they can't really say.'* Of course you can say! You know damned well when he's coming back. It's written in his day-planner on his damned desk. Now get up, walk into his office and check."

"I'm sorry, sir..." Ms. Matthews quivered at the vitriol in the man's voice, but did her best to withstand it.

"No, you're not sorry. But you will be once I tell Aldrich that you didn't follow my orders. Do you know who I am, girl? My name is Greyson. Anthony Greyson. I own the building you're sitting in. Hell, I probably own the apartment you live in, too. And I know I own Leon Aldrich. Now if you expect to ever work in this city again, you'll do as you're told... now!"

Ms. Matthews jumped as if the man was actually in the room barking orders at her. Some instinct told her that every word he had spoken was true. She scurried into Mr. Aldrich's office and checked the planner on his desk, then relayed the information to Mr. Greyson.

The man's tone of voice changed, becoming calmer, almost pleasant. "Good. I like the way you follow orders, girl. Now is there anything else written in his book from yesterday or for the next four days?"

"Mr. Greyson, I'm not sure I should tell you—"

"Are you defying me, girl?"

Gripping the phone tighter, Ms. Matthews swallowed hard. That mean, dangerous edge was back in the man's voice. She looked around nervously, sure he was nearby which of course he wasn't. It just seemed that way. "No, sir. Of course not. Just let me look... Okay, he has only one message on yesterday's date. It says 'Greene called. Returning. Next few days. Report.'"

"Ahh... That is good news. Unexpected, but good. All right. Now you may take a message for me. Tell Aldrich that I will want Ms. Greene's complete report delivered to me in four days time. Got that?"

Ms. Matthews scribbled the message down. "Yes, sir. You want Mr. Aldrich to deliver Ms. Greene's report."

"Excellent. Now what else does he have written down?"

She flipped through the next few pages of the planner. It was blank. "There's nothing there, sir. I believe I heard him mention something about going away for the weekend."

"While the cat's away... Thanks you, Ms... Er... What was your name?"

"Matthews, sir. Mary Matthews."

"Right. Thank you, Ms. Matthews. You've been most helpful. I like to keep close tabs on my employees. Tell me, which agency did Aldrich get you from?"

"Richardsons." She answered hesitantly, not sure where the conversation was going.

"I'll keep that in mind and recommend you to some of my other employees when they need a temp. I think, Ms. Matthews, you and I might work well together."

"Together, sir?"

"Uh-huh. I'll be in touch. Make sure Aldrich gets that message."

The man hung up without even saying goodbye and Ms. Matthews slowly put the phone down, frowning. She wasn't sure, but something was telling her that Mr. Greyson might want her to do a bit of snooping for him. It didn't sound exactly on the up and up, but Greyson probably had lots of wealthy people working for him. Lots of wealthy, young, eligible people... A smile curved her lips as she considered the possibilities.

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Aldrich walked into his office and flicked on the lights. It was six-thirty and he was tired. The damned judge hadn't wanted to call a recess for the weekend; making them stay until all evidence was presented and arguments given. Well, the man could spend his weekend deliberating legal points if it made him happy. All Aldrich wanted was a quiet weekend away at his cottage by the lake.

Walking to his desk, he scanned the messages the temp had taken. Nothing important there, thank goodness, except... He paused over the very bottom slip of paper. Greyson had called and wanted the complete Greene report in four days. What... ?

He frowned. Why would Greyson think there was a complete report? As far as the man knew, Greene was still in Stump River attempting to get information out of Taylor. His gaze fell on his day-planner. It showed yesterday's date and he knew it had been turned to today's date when he'd left that morning. That could only mean that someone had been in here checking it.

Aldrich tightened his jaw. Either Greyson had stopped in for a visit—which was highly unlikely since the man was leaving today—or he'd phoned and bullied the temp into going through the planner. It wouldn't be the first time it had happened. Pacing the room, he wondered what to do. Greene had said she was returning, but there was

no mention of a completed report. Hell, he'd be surprised if she had ten words down, but he couldn't tell Greyson that.

Greyson had hinted that he would hold Aldrich responsible for the success of Greene's assignment. It might have been a joke, but with that crafty old coot, you never knew. Aldrich stared around his well appointed office noting the leather furniture, and expensive art on the wall. Then he considered his European sports car and the penthouse suite he'd inherited when Greyson's last lawyer no longer needed it. He shuddered slightly, recalling how the former lawyer suddenly closed his practice and left town, leaving no forwarding address; at least that was the official story Greyson Inc. told anyone who asked. Aldrich had helped construct the tale, ensuring everything was nice and tidy.

Everyone involved in the little 'misunderstanding' had an alibi and there were no inquiries from the former lawyer's family or friends—Greyson preferred to hire employees with no outside ties; it smoothed over complications if things 'didn't work out.'

Yes, Aldrich knew only too well the fate of his predecessor, especially since he'd been in charge of the cover up. The gardener had been only too happy that Mr. Greyson had re-landscaped the backyard of the estate—supposedly in preparation for the yearly charity dinner hosted by Greyson Inc.—and never questioned the extra large hole that was purportedly dug for the new evergreen. Nor had the man wondered why said evergreen was planted overnight rather than during the day; like most of Greyson's employees, he had known when to turn a blind eye to strange happenings.

He had received a tidy bonus for the way he'd handled the situation; there was no body, no evidence and no questions were ever asked. He hadn't dared inquire why the lawyer's services had been... terminated. Now he wondered if perhaps he should have.

Damn! He crumpled the message in his fist. There was too much at stake and he wasn't about to let a slip of a girl mess it up. He narrowed his eyes as he considered his next step.

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The journey from Stump River was... interesting. Mel took the first shift driving, getting them as far as Timmins before the throbbing in her arm forced her to abandon her role as chauffeur. Lucy however, was only too happy to take over. It turned out she was a bit of a speed demon behind the wheel, weaving in and out of lanes, passing transports and viewing speed limits as helpful suggestions rather than rules. While not usually a nervous passenger, Mel was only too thankful that the



pain killer she'd taken made her a bit sleepy, causing her to sleep on and off for most of the journey.

It was well past midnight when they arrived in Toronto. Realizing she was soon going to be short on funds, Mel had tentatively suggested they rest in the car at the airport rather than getting a room. Lucy agreed, viewing it as all part of the adventure. Tipping back the seats, they dozed until dawn then used the airport facilities to tidy up and prepare for their flight.

Mel tried not to draw attention to the fact that she was feeling progressively worse. She wasn't even sure if the airline would let her on the plane if they suspected she was really ill, in case whatever was wrong with her turned out to be contagious. Of course, the problem was just the cut on her arm—what else could it be—but would the airline listen to her explanation? No, it was best to keep things quiet.

While Lucy browsed for magazines, Mel snuck another peak at the cut. It was still hot to the touch and the redness was spreading, but the wound didn't seem to be weeping at all. In fact, the cut was nearly healed, which was more than a little puzzling. To be truthful, her whole body felt... different; tingling as if each individual cell was up to something. A dull headache had been her constant companion for the past two days as well, and she had the strangest feeling of paranoia; as if there was someone else was in her head and privy to her thoughts.

She popped another pain killer and loosened her collar as a wave of heat came over her again. Wiping her brow with a trembling hand, she pasted a smile on her face when Lucy re-appeared with two coffees and several magazines.

"Here, this will make you feel better. It's one of those special blends you always talk about." Lucy sat down beside her, pressing a cup into Mel's hands.

Mel thanked her and took a sip, waiting for the familiar rush that only a good cup of coffee could bring. The rush, unfortunately, was more of fizzle and she sighed heavily. Just her luck, the first cup of coffee back in civilization and it was a dud. Resignedly, she continued to drink the beverage, wondering if it was the fever that was making the coffee taste different or if the upscale coffee chain had managed to mess up one of her favourite drinks.

After what seemed like an interminable time, their flight was called. Mel stood, pleased that she'd had to change from her original Saturday flight to the one on Friday—Saturday's hadn't been able to accommodate Lucy. The thought of being home in familiar surroundings seemed

immensely comforting and the sooner she was back in Chicago the better.

Boarding went smoothly, thank goodness, no one even giving her more than a cursory glance as she settled into her seat. As the flight took off, Mel closed her eyes and idly listened to Lucy chattering away. The pain killers had taken effect and she was pleasantly fuzzy headed. It actually took her a few moments to realize that Lucy had finally grown quiet. Opening her eyes and turning her head, she noticed the other woman was frowning and nibbling on her lip.

"What's the matter?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing." Lucy looked away, but Mel could tell something was wrong. The other woman was seldom quiet for long.

"Come on, tell me. Are you feeling air sick? Because if you are—"

"No! No... It's just... well... I was wondering what he was up to."

"Ryne?" Mel sat up straighter. Why was Lucy thinking about Ryne? Hadn't she been assured there was nothing between them?

"No! Armand."

"Armand?" Mel couldn't keep the surprise from her voice. She hadn't been expecting that.

"Yeah. He was sort of upset that I was leaving."

"I thought you said he was okay with you taking time off?"

"He was... It's just that when I went to leave, he... well... he kissed me."

"Oh." Mel absorbed the information. "And...?"

"Armand's never kissed me before." Lucy picked at an invisible piece of lint that must have been resting on her pant leg.

"You mean, you and he never...?"

Lucy made a wry face. "Nope. We never."

"But I thought you said you'd... well... you know... with everyone."

"Well, almost everyone, but not Armand. I've teased him and ignored him and practically thrown myself at him, but he never responded. I'd actually wondered if he might be gay or celibate or something, but now, I don't know what to think!"

Mel sat back and frowned. "Gee Lucy, I don't know what to tell you. Maybe he's had a secret crush on you all this time."

"Then why did he have to wait until I was leaving to do something about it?" Lucy folded her arms, her face a study of consternation.

"Well... maybe he needed the idea of you leaving to shake him up a bit."

"I don't know... I suppose it's a possibility."

Studying her friend's face, Mel watched the myriad of emotions that passed over it. Hmm... it appeared that Lucy had a crush on the bearish man but now that he seemed to be finally returning her interest, she didn't know what to do about it, especially given the timing. "How would you feel about it, if Armand had his eye on you?"

Lucy furrowed her brow, considering the idea. "I'm not sure. For years I've been saying that I want out of Stump River so I can make a fresh start, but then again Armand is really good to me..." She gave a confused whimper. "I just don't know."

"Well, this week away might be the perfect time to get things in perspective."

"Yeah, maybe so." Lucy was silent for a moment, before turning the tables on her companion. "And how do you feel about leaving Ryne?"

"Ryne?" Mel snorted and turned away, folding her arms across her chest then wincing as her arm protested the motion. "I don't want to ever see him again. He's nothing but a lying bastard." Something inside her quivered as she spoke the words, almost as if part of her was protesting the thought, which was ridiculous. After the way he'd treated her, the things he'd said; nothing could redeem him in her eyes.

"Ouch! Is all that anger just over him backing out of the interview?"

"Yes... No... Some of it is and some of it is because of stuff he said." Mel took a quivering breath as the hurt she felt bubbled to the surface. "He said I was only moderately entertaining and that... well... I wasn't worth very much in bed."

"Ryne said that?" Lucy looked aghast. "I don't believe it."

"It's not the sort of thing I'd imagine."

"No... Of course not, but... there must have been a reason. Ryne's not usually quite that rude. He isn't exactly what people would call refined, but usually he's a decent guy."

"Not with me, he isn't." Mel glowered at the back of the seat in front of her as Ryne's words echoed in her head.

"Well, I wasn't there, so I don't know exactly what happened, but I bet there's something else going on. Something we don't know about that made him act that way."

Mel shook her head, unwilling to hear anything that might exonerate the man. Lucy sighed and turned away, probably realizing that her companion wasn't in a receptive mood. A silence fell between them and Mel became lost in thought over recent events. It kept her occupied for the remainder of the flight but by the time they landed in Chicago, she had no clear answers as to what demon had made Ryne act as he did. From

the look on Lucy's face, the other woman hadn't been successful in her musings, either.

Suppressing a derisive snort, Mel stiffly rose from her seat and prepared to depart the plane. Wasn't this just fine and dandy. Here she and Lucy were ready for an exciting week together exploring Chicago, and instead of planning girl friend fun, they'd spent the last few hours dwelling on the men they'd left several hundred miles away.

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They survived the wait at Immigration and even found their luggage with minimal difficulty. Luck continued to be with them as they easily got a taxi-cab and headed towards their destination—her apartment. Lucy enjoyed the ride, exclaiming over the large buildings, multi-laned highways, and throngs of people. By time the trip came to an end, even the taciturn driver was smiling over her enthusiasm. As they climbed out of the cab, Mel was uncomfortably aware that her neighbourhood was going to be a let-down for her friend. The rundown buildings, weedy cracked sidewalks and the constant rumble from the nearby public transit was quite a change from Stump River. However, Lucy either didn't care or notice, instead chattering about what she hoped to do during her visit.

After climbing the stairs—the elevator was out of order again—Mel unlocked her apartment door and pushed it open. Stale air wafted into their faces, only slightly more pleasant than the scent in the hallway, where the smell of boiled cabbage was predominant.

"Here we are, home sweet home." Mel ushered Lucy inside and shut the door, automatically chaining it, and turning the various locks.

"I don't think I've ever seen that many locks on a door. Do you use them all the time?" Lucy stared in apparent amazement.

Mel nodded. "Yep. This isn't the safest of neighbourhoods. The crime rate is high; theft, drugs, assaults... You can't be too careful."

"But what about the people next door? What if they want to pop in for a visit? All that locking and unlocking must get tiring."

"Lucy, quite frankly I don't even know the names of the people next door..." She paused and then qualified her answer. "Well, I do know one person's name but that's only because I hear the woman calling it out when they're..."

"Having sex? You can hear that? Ew!" Lucy wrinkled her nose and Mel laughed at her obvious distaste.

"Yeah. I agree. The walls are pretty thin, but the rent's cheap." Mel flopped down on the sofa and closed her eyes. Travelling was tiring at

the best of times and this infection, or whatever was wrong with her, seemed to be draining all her energy. If she didn't feel better by morning, she'd have to go to a clinic; there went more money she didn't have.

"You look all done in, Mel. Why don't you go to bed? I can take care of myself."

Forcing her eyes open, she tried to sound perky for the sake of her guest. "No. I invited you to come with me. Just let me rest for a few minutes and then I'll head to the corner store and get some groceries."

Lucy folded her arms and raised her brows. "Nonsense. You rest. I can go out. It'll be my first adventure in Chicago."

It was a short lived argument and soon Mel was lying in bed while Lucy left to purchase food. The cool sheets felt good against her hot skin and she began to relax, enjoying the first bit of peace and quiet she'd experienced in several days.

Her eyes drifted shut only to snap open when she heard a voice beside her. Startled, she sat up and looked around, but no one was there. Grumbling about noisy neighbours, she glared at the adjoining walls. She debated banging on the plastered surface but knew from previous experience it would do little good. Instead she flopped back down and put the pillow over her head, determined to get some rest. A moment later, the voice spoke again, the murmuring indistinguishable, yet definitely nearby. Mel stiffened, feeling the hairs rising on the back of her neck. There was definitely someone speaking, another presence close at hand. Slowly she removed the pillow from her face and glanced nervously about, trying to determine the source. It wasn't coming from the walls or the dead clock-radio beside her bed, yet there was no doubt she was hearing a voice. A shiver ran over her as she recalled the dubious stain that had been on the carpet when she'd moved in. Had it been blood? Was her apartment haunted?

As soon as the idea popped into her head, she scoffed at her own foolishness. No, she wasn't going down that road again, not after what happened last time at Ryne's house. Taking a deep breath, she concentrated on the sound. Hmm... It seemed to be... inside her head? But how could that be?

She tugged on her ear and gave her head a shake before listening again. There! It was definitely a voice! Furrowing her brow she tried to decipher what was being said, but the sound faded away to nothing. Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the voice was gone. Mel swallowed and pushed her hair from her face with a shaking hand. Was she losing

her mind? No. Of course, not. She was overtired, that was all. Rest was what she needed.

Latching onto the idea like a lifeline, Mel forced herself to calm down. Plumping her pillows, she wiggled into a comfortable position, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. No voices resounded in her head. A relieved smile crept onto her face. Yep, overtired, that's all it was. Her muscles relaxed and she sank into the softness of her mattress. Sleep, glorious sleep... everything was calm and quiet... she was just on the edge... drifting away... Darn! The phone rang and her eyes popped open.

Well, she wasn't getting up to answer it. Whoever was on the line could just leave a message. She rolled onto her side and firmly shut her eyes again. Unfortunately, as much as she tried to ignore it, Mel's curiosity clicked in and she couldn't help but strain to hear who was calling when the machine turned on. Aldrich's supercilious voice filled the room.

"Ms. Greene? Pick up the phone... .." Immediately, she identified the voice as belonging to Mr. Aldrich. He huffed when she didn't comply. "I know you're home. You can pretend you aren't, but rest assured I have my sources... . Fine. Play games if you wish, but I'll still expect you at my office at ten o'clock tomorrow morning with a complete report. No excuses, unless you're prepared to face legal proceedings for the return of the funds advanced to you. And make no mistake; I have the papers here on my desk, ready to be filed. By time I'm done with you, you won't have a penny left."

Mel groaned. Wasn't this just great. How had the man known she was home? It hadn't been three hours since she'd stepped off the plane. He must have spies at the airport. Well, it was fine and dandy for him to want a report, but there wasn't one! Mr. Ryne-pain-in-the-ass-Taylor had only given her the most meagre details about himself. All she really knew was how he took pictures. How in heaven's name was she supposed to write a report when the only information she had...

Hmm... Mel nibbled on her lip as she considered a possible solution. Those pictures from Ryne's camera were still on her computer. While she'd never looked at them, she hadn't dumped the recycle bin, either. Maybe... Dragging herself out of bed, she found her laptop and turned it on. If she studied the pictures carefully enough, she might be able to gather enough information to satisfy Aldrich, at least for a while. What Greyson would think of the report was another story since she'd never dealt with him in person, but she'd cross that bridge when she came to it.

Opening the picture file, she leaned close to study the images trying to ignore the wave of guilt that washed over her. Ryne hadn't wanted her looking at these. Mel hesitated, glancing around her apartment. The furniture was old, the decorations cheap; it wasn't much, but it was all she had. The thought of losing everything she owned gave her a sinking feeling—what would it be like to start over, with absolutely nothing?

She furrowed her brow. Surely, Ryne was over-reacting. Letting the world know a little bit about his life wasn't such a bad thing. Still trying to convince herself that she wasn't doing anything *that* wrong, Mel began to analyze the images on the screen.

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It was four in the morning. Mel rubbed her gritty eyes and then arched her back before clicking on save. The report—such as it was—was complete. She'd read it over again in the morning before printing, but didn't think there was much else she could add to it.

By examining the pictures on her laptop and noting their sequence, she'd been able to piece together a plausible background for Ryne. Much of it was supposition, but if the man didn't grant interviews, who would ever know? And there were *some* concrete facts. His work on cars and the restoration of that house were facts. He'd mentioned running, and by the look of his lean muscled body—she suppressed the physical response the image invoked—he must be into fitness. The photography lessons he'd given her had provided insight into his techniques and even his street-crossing lessons with Harley showed a love of animals. Mel was actually rather impressed with herself over what she'd managed to piece together.

In some places, she had really stretched things. A picture of an older couple in front of a large house had her writing that he had a large extended family, and wanted a big family himself one day. After all, she reasoned, why would he have purchased that oversized monstrosity outside Stump River, if he was going to live there all alone?

Their dinner at Armand's had allowed her to state that he enjoyed life's simple pleasures; cold beer, time spent with friends and a good movie... Her more 'personal' experiences with him, and his sexual prowess, however, were definitely *not* included. Some things just weren't meant to be shared!

The piece de resistance of the whole report was her deduction regarding where Ryne took his pictures. Mel knew that for some reason Greyson was extremely interested in that point and felt he'd be pleased with her sleuthing. The background, clothing, numbering of the pictures and

even the weather, led her to believe all were taken on the same day somewhere near Smythston, Oregon. Even more exciting was the fact that in one picture, she was sure she saw wolves in the distance. The image was fuzzy, but unmistakably some form of canine. If Greyson was looking for where a certain wolf picture had originated, she was sure she'd found his answer.

Just to cover herself, she'd generalized that while Ryne worked mostly in the Oregon area, he never revealed exact locations. This, she said, was because of his great commitment to the environment and his desire to prevent people from disturbing the delicate balance of nature in the places he worked. It was a bit sappy, but any person who claimed 'they didn't exist before photography' could very well say something like her final statement.

Mel stared at the picture that had wolves in the distance. Something niggled in her brain when she looked at it, as if there was something she should know or remember. Unfortunately, the harder she tried to bring the thought into focus, the more it faded away. With a sigh, she gave up and shut down the computer. She was too tired to think. Maybe in the morning she'd be able to figure out what it was about that picture that called to her.

Yawning, Mel stood up, hoping the sketchy report would satisfy Aldrich and get him to leave her alone for a while. Heading towards the couch—she'd told Lucy to sleep in her room—she shed her robe and lay down, intent on getting a few hours sleep before going to see the lawyer. As she tried to get comfortable on the old and lumpy couch, she bemusedly realized that at some point during the night, her fever had broken. Thank heavens for small mercies.



# Chapter 31

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" Lucy stared at Mel with a frown. "You still don't look so good."

The two women were leaning against the kitchen counter sipping coffee and preparing to start their day. Mel, however reluctantly, had to head off to meet with Aldrich, while Lucy was going to spend the morning taking a bus tour of the city that Mel had recommended.

Rolling her eyes, Mel reassured her friend, yet again. "Honestly, I'm fine. The fever broke last night. My arm's not as sore. It's just a lack of sleep and nerves over this meeting that are making me look less than prime. I'll go see Aldrich and give him this report while you take a tour of the city. Then we'll meet back here for lunch and go shopping."

"Why don't you just e-mail the report and come with me?"

Mel sighed. "I wish, but Aldrich hates e-mail. He wants face to face contact. I think he likes to watch people squirm." Noting Lucy's concerned expression, she added a light laugh. "Don't worry. I'll be fine."

"Well... if you're sure."

"Go." Mel made shooing motions with her hands. "You know you want to take the Chicago Gangster Tour and see where Al Capone hung out. If you don't leave now, you'll miss the bus."

It took some doing, but Mel finally had Lucy out of the apartment and on her way. Gathering her purse, the report on Ryne and a jacket, Mel left as well, though with considerably less excitement than Lucy had. She really didn't want to see Aldrich and she really didn't want to give him the report. It just seemed so wrong. Even if Ryne was a jerk, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was betraying his trust.

Her mental debate lasted all the way to Aldrich's office and continued as she sat in the intimidating reception area, waiting to see him. At least, being a Saturday and outside usual business hours, the secretary was absent. Mel could still recall the feeling of disapproval that had emanated from Ms. Sandercock, Aldrich's personal assistant. Sitting in her presence had been distinctly uncomfortable. A young paralegal breezed

through and cast a friendly smile her way, before grabbing some files and leaving again. Idly, Mel wondered if the young woman would end up as nasty as her employer after a few years under his tutelage.

Shifting in her seat, Mel fiddled with the report; curling the corners with her fingers then trying to press them flat. An incredibly ugly clock ticked away on the wall, its sound accompanying the bland music that was piped in from hidden speakers. It was a far cry from sitting and waiting in the Broken Antler. At least there, Armand would be giving her beer to drink. Maybe that's what she needed right now. Some alcohol induced bravado to get her through her encounter. An inelegant snort escaped her as she contemplated Aldrich's response should she stumble into his office tipsy and wiggling her ass. She doubted he'd be as amused as the patrons had been at the bar the other night.

She stifled a sigh and smoothed the wrinkled papers in her hand. The longer she waited the worse she felt about giving her findings to Aldrich. Something about the man made her uncomfortable. She crossed her legs and inhaled deeply before staring at the neatly typed pages for what seemed like the hundredth time. She owed no loyalty to Ryne, not after the way he'd treated her. Yet they had a verbal agreement giving him final veto.

A sound from Aldrich's office caught her attention. He must have finished whatever it was he'd been doing. Mel straightened in her chair and bit her lip before impulsively folding the report and shoving it into the inside pocket of her jacket. The pages crinkled slightly as she leaned back in the chair, trying to appear casual. She'd play it cool; feel Aldrich out as to his client's intentions with regards to Ryne and then she'd hand over the information... maybe.

The door to Aldrich's office swung open. Mel rose to her feet and gave the lawyer a tentative smile. "Good morning, Mr. Aldrich. I got your message and came over as you requested."

What might have been a smile, passed over the man's lips as he greeted her with his usual arrogance and lack of manners. "Of course you came; what other option did you have?"

Feeling it was a rhetorical question, Mel didn't answer, instead entering the lawyer's inner sanctum and sitting down in a low slung chair in front of his desk; it forced her to look up at him, somehow increasing his intimidation factor. She remembered the room from last time, when she'd interviewed for the job; leather, wood, what was probably a beautiful view, if one wasn't so over-powered by the occupant of the office. She was sweating again. Had the fever returned or did the lawyer just

make her that nervous? Surreptitiously, she wiped her hands on her pant legs and waited for Aldrich to speak.

Unfortunately, he didn't. The annoying man just sat there, casually leaning back in his leather chair, fingers steepled, staring at her blandly. His eyebrows raised in the faintest hint of inquiry. Mel licked her lips and wondered what he was waiting for. She shifted nervously and refolded her hands, met his gaze then looked away. Why didn't he say something? Finally, unable to stand it any longer, she broke the silence between them.

"Well, I'm back." She winced. What an idiotic comment. He could see she was back. She was sitting right in front of him!

"So you are. A stellar comment, Ms. Greene. I can only hope that your observations on Mr. Taylor are equally... profound."

"Well, about that... "

Aldrich sat up straighter. "You do, of course have a report for me."

She could feel the pages poking her in the ribs, each jab like a prod to her conscience, reminding her that their existence was her fault. For whatever reason, Ryne didn't want people knowing much about him, and by creating the report she was going expressly against his wishes.

"Um... "

"Yes?"

"I was wondering what exactly Mr. Greyson was going to do with the report?"

The lawyer's eyebrows shot up. He was obviously unused to being questioned. "That is really none of your business. Mr. Greyson did not hire you to delve into his personal motivation."

"It's just that Ryne—Mr. Taylor—was reluctant to share much about himself. He likes his privacy."

"Artists, authors, movie stars... A certain amount of celebrity is part of their job description. Some degree of privacy must be sacrificed if they wish the public to buy into their product. I'm sure Mr. Taylor knew this when he began his career. Now he must 'suck it up' as I believe you young people are fond of saying."

"I know celebrities have to—"

"Ms. Greene. I do not have the time, or the inclination, to debate the issue. Kindly hand over the report and let's be done with it. I have other appointments today."

"No... "

"No?"

"No. I... I want to think about this some more."

"You *do* have a report, don't you?"

"Yes! Of course! It's just—"

"If you've been paid to write a report, Ms. Greene, then you have a legal obligation to hand over said report. If you chose not to, you may not like the steps I will be forced to take in order to gain ownership for my client." Aldrich stood up and rounded the desk. His tone was no longer that of a bland and boring lawyer, nor was his face impassive. A nastiness was had crept into it, making Mel feel nervous and bringing with it a wave of nausea. Her head started to spin and her skin prickled all over.

Swallowing hard, she stood and backed around behind the chair she'd been sitting in, gripping its back to keep her balance. The papers in her pocket seemed to crinkle with betraying loudness as she moved and she instinctively clutched her hand over them. Aldrich seemed to zero in on the gesture and stalked closer, his eyes narrowed and his tone threatening.

"You *will* hand over those papers or live to regret it, Ms. Greene. The power wielded by Greyson Inc. is not something you should take lightly."

An unexpected flash of anger sparked inside her. Mel was surprised to feel the sickness being pushed aside. It was almost as if some beast was within her, ready to snarl at this person who dared threaten her. Speaking with much greater conviction than she felt—or at least than she thought she felt—she threw back her shoulders and raised her chin. "Back off. I'll give it to you when I'm good and ready and not a minute sooner." With that she whirled around and stalked out of the office, catching a vague impression of Aldrich's shocked face before slamming the door shut.

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The noise of the terminal washed over him as Ryne strode across the concourse, his long legs covering the distance to the exit in considerably less time than his fellow passengers. Of course, the fact that his face was set in a deadly scowl also helped matters along, as the swirling mass of humanity took one look at him and quickly stepped out of his way. The small tote slung over his shoulder, held the few essentials he'd tossed in it before making a hasty departure from Stump River.

After speaking with Kane, he'd had Daniel searching the airlines for a last minute flight to Chicago, then drove like a maniac to Toronto only to arrive too late for the Friday flight. Thankfully, there had been a seat

available on Saturday and he was now where he needed to be, which was in Chicago on Melody's trail.

As much as he hated abandoning his new pack members, he needed to deal with this situation quickly or there could very well be no pack to worry about. Bryan and Daniel were capable of carrying out their duty in his absence. His instructions had been specific for each of the possible scenarios that might evolve. At best, he'd be home in forty-eight hours happily helping the Loberos get settled. If the worst case scenario came to pass... Well, the evening news would tell that tale; sensational stories of murder and mass suicide always made the headlines.

The bright sun made him squint as he stepped outside and settled into the long line of people waiting to catch a taxi-cab. He could push his way to the front—a warning growl and a hard stare would keep anyone from protesting—but he was trying to keep as low a profile as possible. And so he joined the line with barely suppressed impatience and spent the time reviewing his plans while arguing with his inner wolf over their wisdom.

Despite what he'd told Kane, he had doubts about his ability to deal with Melody dispassionately. Inexplicably, his wolf had started to bond with her, ignoring all reason. Melody was human. There was no reason for his wolf to respond to her; it never had to any of the other human females he'd bedded. Why did it have to become difficult now, when he needed to be at his most ruthless?

"Hey, do you want that cab or not? We don't have all day here!"

A disgruntled voice broke into his reverie and Ryne realized he was finally at the front of the line. Climbing in the back of the waiting vehicle, he gave the driver the address Kane had texted to him and then sat brooding over what he might have to do. He didn't know Chicago all that well and it would make things much more difficult. There were people everywhere and he imagined most were just waiting to be witnesses and report any strange goings-on, hoping for a few minutes of fame on the local news.

Somehow he'd have to lure Melody out of her apartment to a remote location. If he questioned her in her home, she might become suspicious. Actually, given how they'd parted, she might not want to talk to him at all. He grimaced, thinking of that last unpleasant conversation. Had he known he would still need her cooperation, he might not have been so harsh.

The cab pulled up in front of an apartment building and Ryne stepped out onto the sidewalk. He paid the driver then surveyed Melody's

home. To say it was rundown was being too generous and the neighbourhood... A grimace of distaste passed over his face as the smell of exhaust and garbage bins wafted past. How could she stand to live in such a seedy environment?

He walked up the steps and entered the building. Of course, there was no security at the entrance. A quick glance toward the yellowing 'out of order' sign on the elevator told him it hadn't been working for quite some time. Taking the stairs, he easily climbed the five flights, not feeling in the least winded when he reached his destination. With studied casualness, he strolled down the hallway, scanning the numbers on the doors until he came to Melody's. Sounds drifted around him; blaring televisions mixed with arguing voices and crying children. Her apartment however, was silent.

Ryne tested the door knob only to find it locked. He considered his options then decided to just force his way in—at this stage, subtlety wasn't a consideration anymore. A glance up and down the hall revealed no prying eyes, so he grabbed the knob and rammed the door jam with his shoulder. Not surprisingly, the wood quickly gave way and he entered her home.

Melody's scent surrounded him the minute he stepped inside. He paused and closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. A low rumble emitted from his chest as the delicious smell filled his nostrils and nourished his spirit. His wolf stirred with excitement. *The female! Where is she?*

I don't know where she is, he answered himself, just be quiet. He peeked in the bedroom and bathroom, noting that Lucy had obviously been there at one point, her scattered clothing, as well as her scent betraying her presence. A few papers were scattered on the kitchen counter and he flipped through them. Mostly junk mail, a few bills, nothing of importance, but... ah ha! On a nearby table, her laptop was open and still on. He sat down in front of the machine and checked the start menu for recent activity.

His name leapt off the screen, as did a certain picture file, which he knew he'd deleted. Why that little bitch! She'd somehow managed to get more copies of his pictures. Anger flared as he moved the mouse to open the file with his name on it. Quickly he scanned the document, amazed at how much she'd managed to piece together. The more he read, the more he scowled and by time he reached the final paragraphs, he was ready to hurl the machine across the room. There it was in black and white. She knew he'd taken the pictures in Oregon.

Ryne felt the colour drain from his face. How many connections and assumptions had her agile brain come up with? If she knew about Oregon, did she know about Kane? Did she know that the wolf in the picture was actually a werewolf? And was she, at this moment, off telling her boss, Aldrich, that not only was Ryne Taylor a werewolf, but that a whole pack resided in Smythston? His mind filled with images; hordes of scientists and TV crews, men with tranquilizers and guns, gawkers and protestors, all descending on Kane's pack.

They'd surround the territory; breach the perimeter, possibly wondering why there was no resistance. The invaders would approach the deathly quiet houses, cautiously entering, only to find bodies. Dead bodies. Strewn about the house. In the bedrooms. In the kitchen. In the games room where the pack used to gather... Cold lifeless bodies that would stare with unseeing eyes at the invaders who had unknowingly precipitated the massacre.

All identifying papers would have been destroyed. Kane would see to that. The nameless corpses would be studied to no avail and then buried in unmarked graves, their identities forever lost amid the swirl of rumours that would arise. Words such as cult, brainwashing, and mass suicide would be bandied about. Pictures and stories would be plastered in newspapers and magazines, across TV and computer screens around the world...

Ryne's mind focused on one image; Kane and Elise lying dead in each other's arms, their hands on the small mound that would have been their first born. He shook his head. Surely Kane wouldn't allow Elise to stay; he'd send her away... yet would she go? Not likely. Elise was devoted to her mate. She'd refuse to leave.

A feeling of fury and terror such as he'd never known washed over Ryne. This was all Melody's fault and he'd make sure she would pay. Pay for each life that was lost, each pup left orphaned. When his wolf howled in protest, he ruthlessly crushed it. He was icy cold, his mouth dry. His brain could barely function. Feeling detached from his body, he watched as his hand reached for the phone, dialled a familiar number and brought the receiver up to his ear. His lips barely responded to his command to speak.

"Kane? Start the dispersal."

# Chapter 32

After speaking with Kane, Ryne had searched Melody's computer, ruthlessly deleting information. When he came upon Aldrich's address and the name Greyson Inc., he made note of it before erasing the rest of the relevant files. Melody was probably with her co-conspirator at this very moment. With any luck he'd catch them together. He would deal with both of them at the same time. Filled with ruthless determination, he pushed away from the computer, wiping his prints from the keys before exiting her apartment. In a similar manner, he cleaned the door handle, just in case. His finger prints weren't on file anywhere, but you could never be too careful.

Should anyone have cared, it was a reasonable pleasant day for early spring. The sun was shining, pollution levels were low, and the noise—for a large city at least—was moderate. A gentle breeze was drifting down the street. As he stepped outside of the apartment building, Ryne froze and sniffed the air. Melody! She was nearby. He stepped back into the shadows of the doorway and searched the street for her. There she was, about half a block away, walking quickly towards his location.

Making a split-second decision, Ryne decided to let her come to him. If he confronted her on the street, a passer-by might notice, but the building's foyer was relatively more private. He strongly suspected that her neighbours were not members of the Good Samaritan club and would probably turn a blind eye to anything that happened rather than getting involved. In other circumstances, he might have found such callousness disturbing, but right now it worked in well with his plans.

As she got closer, he noted that something was off about her appearance, though he couldn't put his finger on it. She was moving differently and he was sure he detected slight shivers wracking her body. Now what could that be about? His wolf whined in concern and he had to restrain himself from stepping forward and going to her.



Instead, he backed farther into a corner close to the stairwell. Once she was completely inside, he'd have her. The outer door opened. A sliver of bright sunlight fell across the dull terrazzo floor and for a moment, her profile was perfectly silhouetted. He could see the curve of her cheekbone, the fullness of her lips, her cute nose... His wolf slipped through his defences once again and rumbled in approval at her proximity. *Yes! We are together again!*

"Melody." Ryne stepped out of the shadows. She started and stared at him in shock.

"Ryne! What are you doing here?" Her voice sounded raspy, but he didn't have time to wonder why; she was already backing towards the door.

He moved quickly, grabbing her arm and dragging her towards the stairs before she could reach the doorway. She gave a cry of pain and struggled against him.

"Let me go!" Melody tried to kick him, but he was prepared for the move by now and pulled her flush against him, wrapping one arm around her. She wriggled in an attempt to free herself and Ryne heard her inhaling in preparation for a scream. He clamped a hand over her mouth and manoeuvred so that she was pressed between him and the wall. Her struggles had her body rubbing against his, causing his body to become aroused. Without meaning to, he nuzzled against her, inhaling deeply. Her scent was heavenly, but... He frowned. Something was different. Sniffing again, he tried to place what it was.

Suddenly he gave a muffled cry of pain. She'd bit his palm! Jerking his hand away he opened his mouth to chastise her, but she spoke first.

"What are you doing? And why are you sniffing me? What are you, some kind of a dog?" Melody was pressing hard against his chest. She was breathing rapidly, heat radiating from her, yet at the same time she was shivering, her voice quavering as she spoke.

Grabbing her upper arms, Ryne held her away from him, studying her curiously, his earlier anger momentarily put aside by the new information coming at him from his senses. Her skin was pale, her eyes glassy and slightly unfocused. If he didn't know better, he'd say she was...

Melody stiffened, gave a cry of pain, and went limp. Ryne reacted without thinking, scooping her up and running up the stairs to her apartment. Shouldering the door open, he laid her down on the couch and then stared at her nonplussed. What was going on? She was unconscious and convulsing slightly. He sniffed again and swore. Damned if she didn't smell almost like a werewolf, but how?

Not knowing what else to do, he picked up the phone and dialled the number for Kane's nurse practitioner, Nadia.

"Nadia? Ryne here. I have a question for you."

The woman was a no-nonsense sort who revelled in the knowledge that she could make even the fiercest Lycan put its tail between its legs. She answered in clipped, impatient tones. "Ryne, I don't have time for your nonsense. Kane's just put everyone on high alert and I'm too busy—"

"Too bad." Ryne wasn't in the mood for her attitude and had no compunction about throwing his authority around. "Listen to these stats. Female. About twenty-five years old. Unconscious. Giving off heat like a blast furnace. Slight convulsions. Eyes were glassy and unfocused before she collapsed and she seemed to be in some sort of pain."

"Ryne, I don't—"

"And she smells like a wolf."

His last statement stopped the woman's protests. "Twenty-five, you say? Hmm... Rather old for undergoing her first change... What's her family background?"

"How the hell should I know?" He ran his free hand through his hair. "Nadia, up until five minutes ago, I thought she was a pure-blooded human, but for some reason her scent's changed since I last saw her and now it's distinctly werewolf."

The woman snorted. "Well obviously, she wasn't fully human. There must be some recessive were-genes in her background and something triggered them. Did you bite her during sex?"

"No! I didn't bite her."

"Was she having sex with another were?"

Ryne thought of Bryan and Daniel, but knew they hadn't been near her. Hell, if they had, he'd rip their throats out. "No. Just me."

"Well, something happened. It would take a combination of at least two bodily fluids and sometimes three to activate latent genes." She listed them off. "You'd need semen, saliva, and or blood; are you sure you didn't nip each other by accident?"

Thinking back to the last time they'd had sex, Ryne replayed the scene. He'd dragged her into Armand's office. She'd been drunk, almost playful at first before they'd started to argue. When Melody had tried to leave, his wolf had taken over. He'd pulled her back and they'd struggled before... A groan escaped his lips when he realized he hadn't used a condom.

"We had sex and I didn't use a condom, but I'm sure I didn't bite her."

“What about in the period following? Could there have been an accidental blood exchange in, oh, say—the next twelve hours? As long as there were traces of semen in her body, a blood exchange could still trigger her recessive genes even without saliva.

Accident? The word had Ryne swearing under his breath as he thought about the bar fight. He recalled falling and landing on top of Melody. His nose had gushed blood everywhere and later on, hadn't he noticed Melody with a bloody cloth on her arm? Was it possible that his blood had seeped into her wound? Picking up her arm, he pushed her sleeve out of the way. A faint scar marred the creamy surface of her forearm. When he sniffed the area, he had his answer. Damn!

“Nadia, the mystery is solved. I know how it happened, now what the hell do I do about it?”

“It sounds like her body is trying to adapt to the cellular and chemical changes it's experiencing. That's tough on anyone, but since it's the full moon tonight, her body is also trying to undergo its first transformation and she's not ready for it.”

He tightened his grip on the phone. “So what's going to happen?”

“She'll have bad spells like this, interspersed with moments when she feels relatively fine, but in the end she'll either live or die, depending on how much her body can handle. There's nothing you can really do about it. If anyone were to ask before attempting this type of thing, medical advice would strongly discourage any genetic changes during a full moon. It's way too risky.”

“Yeah, well, this wasn't exactly planned.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “So I just watch her and twiddle my thumbs? That's the best advice you can give?” Ryne stared down at Melody's pale face, hating the helpless feeling that was washing over him.

“Pretty much. Try to keep her calm. Cool cloths for the fever. Aspirin not Tylenol—that stuff's going to be deadly to her from now on.”

“How long before I know if she's going to make it?”

“It depends on the individual and how many generations back the connection is. Best guess is between two to five days from the initial introduction of the triggering agents.”

Ryne did the mental math. The fight had been Wednesday night. It was now Saturday morning. About two and half days. He sighed heavily. “All right. Thanks Nadia.”

Nadia's voice softened slightly. “I hope it goes well for your friend. Does she have anything to do with the alert Kane has placed us under?”

“Yeah. Sort of.” He hung up the phone without further explanation and started to pace the room. Shit! Now what was he supposed to do? Melody was turning into one of his kind, but how would she react to the news? Ryne knew of instances when those recently changed embraced their new life while others refused to accept it, eventually going rogue and having to be terminated for the good of the pack. What category would Melody fall into? And did it really matter? She’d already betrayed them.

Ryne sat down beside her and brushed his fingers over her soft lips, tracing her brow and marvelling at her long lashes. *Perfect. She’s just perfect for us*, his wolf murmured. He ran the back of his hand over her cheek. The skin was hot to the touch. Yes, she might be perfect for his wolf, but what about the pack? He had to think of them first. She was the source of their current predicament.

His earlier rage surfaced. He’d told her there was to be no interview yet she’d expressly gone against his orders. Defying an Alpha, betraying the pack... Curling his fingers around her slender neck, he considered his options. It wouldn’t take much to end all this, just a quick twist and...

Ryne could feel her pulse fluttering against his fingers. His own heart was beating heavily, his pulse drumming in his ears, blocking out all other sounds. He licked his lips and stared at her lovely face one more time before bringing the image of Kane’s pack to mind. The good of the pack took precedence; he knew the fact as well as he knew his own name. One last time, he caressed her soft skin with his thumb and then watched with detachment as his fingers started to tighten...

No! He couldn’t do it! Pulling back his hand, his shoulders slumped in defeat. Hell, what kind of a weakling Alpha was he? The safety of his pack came first. *But she was his female!* The argument bounced back and forth. *There had to be another solution. The pack could run, hide...* No. If the humans found nothing, they would keep searching; rumours would grow, rewards offered... He and Kane had discussed it in detail. Only by finding something, would the searchers truly believe the supposed ‘lead’ was a hoax.

*He could just kidnap Mel; carry her off...* And hold her captive for the rest of her life? *Eventually she would come to accept her fate...* But what if she ever escaped? She’d have to be under around the clock supervision. And then there was Aldrich...

The door suddenly opened and he was forced to abandon his conflicted thoughts. Jumping to his feet, he turned to face an obviously surprised Lucy.

"Ryne, what are you doing here?"

"Hi, Lucy. I... um... "

She walked up to him and kissed his cheek, before moving to take her coat off. "Never mind. I know the truth."

"You do?" He stiffened, assuming the worst.

"Of course. You're sorry for your fight with Mel and came here to make up."

"Uh... Right. That's it." He latched onto the lifeline she'd unknowingly handed him. "I'm here to make things right."

Lucy nodded, glancing at Melody lying on the sofa, her face quickly changing from a happy to grin to real concern. "Oh, is she sick again?"

"Yeah. She fainted coming into the building and I carried her up here. She has a fever. I was just going to give her an aspirin."

"I'll get some from the medicine cabinet." Lucy turned to go.

"No. I already checked. There isn't any. Um... why don't you sit with her and I'll go to the store." Ryne felt the need to get away for a few minutes and think things through. Lucy's arrival had just thrown another curve into this mess.

"Sure. I'll take care of her while you're gone. Don't worry."

Ryne nodded, gave Melody a lingering look, and took his leave.

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Lucy bustled about the small apartment, caring for her patient. She eased Mel's jacket off and hung it up, then got cold cloths to bathe her face, all the while thinking about Ryne's unexpected appearance. It was so sweet that he'd come all this way to see Mel. Whatever argument they'd had couldn't have been all that important; they'd be able to work out their differences. Grinning, Lucy tried to picture Ryne down on his knees apologizing, but then shook her head—no, it wouldn't happen. The man was too arrogant for that, but his heart was in the right place. He and Mel would work things out and make a fine couple when all was said and done.

Noises were coming from next door and Lucy grimaced, recognizing the sounds. Well, someone was getting lucky. It made her think of Armand and how she'd yet to share a bed with him. Was there a future for her in Stump River with the bartender? She furrowed her brow and wandered to the window considering her own future. Should she finally make the move she'd always talked about and live in a big city like this?

Staring down at the street, she watched the traffic going past, people hurrying along the sidewalks never even acknowledging the other pedestrians. A train rattled by and the whole apartment shook. If she left Stump River, would her new home be this impersonal? Yet wasn't that what she wanted? To make a new start where no one knew her or her reputation? It might be exciting...

A long black vehicle pulling up at the curb caught her attention. It screamed wealth and power from its shiny chrome to its tinted black windows. It reminded her of something a crime boss might drive, and she wondered who the occupants were here to visit.

The phone rang beside her and she answered, still idly watching the vehicle below.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Greene?"

"No, this is her friend, Lucy Chalmers. Can I help you? "

"Kindly put Ms. Greene on the phone."

"I'm sorry; she's not well right now. Can I take a message?" Lucy glanced over at her friend who was moving about restlessly and muttering in her sleep.

"Tell her to quit playing games with me, Ms. Chalmers, if that's really your name."

"What do you mean, if that's really my name? Why would I make up a name just to answer the phone?" Geez but this town was filled with weirdos.

"Never mind. I know what Greene is up to. If she thinks holding out will get her even more money, she's sadly mistaken. Either she hands over whatever information she has in the next two minutes, or I'm coming up to get it."

"Coming up? Where are you?" Lucy had a sinking feeling that she already knew the answer.

"I'm parked right in front of the building. As a matter of fact, I can even see you standing at the window."

Lucy gave a squeak of surprise and jumped towards the middle of the room. How dare this person act like a Peeping Tom! She prepared to give the man a piece of her mind, but then thought better of it, having heard all about gangsters and crime lords on her tour that morning.

"Listen, Mel's really sick. And I don't know anything about a report. Why don't you come back tomorrow? She'll likely be feeling better by then, and you can talk all about it." She used her sweetest, most cajoling voice.

“Nice try, but it won’t work. You have two minutes.” The phone went dead.

Lucy dropped the phone and spun around not knowing what to do. Oh dear Lord, she was in the middle of some sort of crime spree! She’d wanted some excitement, but this was taking things a bit too far. She dared a peek out the window, looking up and down the street for Ryne, thinking he might know what to do, but of course there was no sign of him. Typical man, never there when you needed him! Of course, what did she expect, when he hadn’t even fixed her faucet like he’d promised! Well, she firmed her jaw, she’d just have to defend herself and Mel as best as she could.

Glancing about the small apartment for some form of weapon, Lucy finally found a large carving knife and a heavy frying pan. She was pretty sure she’d never have the guts to use the knife so left it and took the pan instead. Testing the weight of the frying pan in her hand, she took a defensive position by the door.

After what seemed like ages, Lucy heard footsteps approaching down the hall. Flexing her fingers, she checked her grip on the frying pan and braced herself for what might come. The steps paused outside; Lucy took a deep breath and held it as she watched the handle slowly turn. Letting out the breath and taking another to steady her nerves, she waited for the door to open slowly. Instead, it swung inward with enough force to make her jump. Taking no time to think, she swung the frying pan with all her might towards the newcomer. Unfortunately her aim was off and she missed her target, hitting the wall with a resounding clunk.

Before she could comprehend what was happening, something hard hit her across the head and she fell to the ground stunned.

After that, everything was a kaleidoscope of pain, sounds, and blurred images, as she drifted in and out of consciousness. She had the impression of something warm and sticky running down her face and pooling about her cheek where it pressed against the floor. Some instinct for self-preservation kept her from moving or making any noise during those times she was awake. Vaguely she heard a man’s voice talking as if on the phone.

“Aldrich here. I’ll be at the Greyson estate in an hour ... That’s right. I’m inspecting the state of the property and I don’t want to be disturbed ... Greyson’s incommunicado, but if you insist that I contact him, well, let’s just say that the fallout will be on your head ... I knew you’d

see it my way. Have the gates open. Remember, no one is to be outside.”

A clicking sound seemed to indicate the phone being hung up, and through her lashes, she watched feet walking towards the sofa. Someone grunted, the sofa squeaked. An arm dangled near the ground... Mel? Was someone moving her? But why? And where to? The man’s voice, hadn’t he said the Greyson estate? The feet shuffled by her. The door shut and the apartment was quiet now.

Lucy forced her eyes open and stared at the tile floor in front of her. How long ago did she see those feet? Had she passed out again? The pool of blood spreading out around her head was much bigger than she remembered. She needed to tell Ryne. He’d save Mel. A hint of laughter escaped her lips as she slowly moved her hand, dipping her finger in the blood. How cliché. This was just like in the gangster movies; she was leaving a message written in blood. G – R – E – Y – S...

She tried to focus, but her eyes were drifting shut despite her desperate attempts to stay awake. Darkness was creeping in again. Tired... so tired. It felt good to quit struggling, to drift away where there was no pain, where no one knew about her past. Hmm... There was a pinprick of light ahead, flickering warmly, beckoning to her. Should she go? It might be nice for a change...



# Chapter 33

Ryne trudged up the stairs to Melody's apartment, his thoughts dark and heavy with indecision, regret, foreboding... It was more than the usual unease caused by a full moon. Young Lycans, in their first year of transformation found the effects impossible to resist, but mature wolves, such as himself, were much more controlled. If circumstances allowed, a wild and raucous celebration of the celestial event was an entertaining way to let off pent up energy. But not this month; at least not for him nor the members of his pack or Kane's. Circumstances could hardly be less conducive for a celebration.

His head throbbed dully and he was thankful for the bottle of aspirin clutched in his hand; he'd almost forgotten to get it, having spent the last half hour aimlessly walking around the neighbourhood, lost in thought. He'd almost done it; carried out the Keeping. It was the right thing to do, yet he doubted he'd be able to live with himself afterwards. What he needed was real proof that she was turning on them. Possibly she hadn't told this Aldrich person. Ryne hung onto that faint bit of hope with two hands. If she hadn't told anyone and she was now a werewolf herself, well then...

The initial steps he'd have to take were easily determined. First he'd send Lucy off on some complicated errand to ensure she didn't return too soon. Once she was out of the way, he'd wake up Melody, using whatever means necessary, so he could grill her about what she knew and who she'd told.

Tracking down her boss, Aldrich, would likely be next on his list. He'd have to cross check what Melody had told him to ensure she'd been truthful; at this point Ryne knew he couldn't afford to trust her word completely, too much as at stake. So he'd find Aldrich but... Therein lay his stumbling block. How was he supposed to track down Aldrich while at the same time keeping Melody under observation?

The cold, logical part of him said to just drag her along, regardless of her condition, but not only did his wolf howl in protest at the idea, it

wasn't easily accomplished. Even in a neighbourhood as seedy as this, a cabbie would question someone carrying an unconscious woman about. If it wasn't for Lucy, he could leave Melody by herself and hope that her condition didn't worsen while he was gone, but Lucy was a factor. He couldn't keep her occupied forever and leaving Lucy in charge of Melody was tricky. What if Melody transformed in the other woman's presence? Or took a turn for the worse and Lucy called 911? The complications that would involve brought another knot of pain to his already throbbing head.

There seemed to be no easy answer and he didn't have the luxury of time. Not only was Kane waiting for his call, but the longer he took figuring out this mess, the farther the information could be spreading.

Still pondering the problem, he approached Melody's apartment, only to come to a sudden halt. All his senses went on high alert as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Something was wrong. The smell of fresh blood filled the air, overpowering everything else. Around him the sounds of daily life continued; the human inhabitants apparently oblivious to the danger around them, but to him the evil oozed down the hallway, as palpable as a living thing.

Cautiously, he traversed the remaining distance to Melody's door, then cocked his head and listened. His keen hearing caught the barely perceptible sound of breathing inside. Slowly he reached out and nudged open the door while testing the air for subtle clues that existed under the scent of blood. The acridness of fear lingered as did the unmistakable odour of another male. Possessiveness flared inside him and he fought to keep it from clouding his judgement.

Lazily, the door swung open about a foot, squeaking on the partially broken hinges that were evidence of his earlier break-in.

"Hello?" He called out the greeting in a casual tone as if unaware of any problem.

There was no response. Somehow he wasn't surprised.

Muscles tensed and ready to respond, he pushed the door open wider and stepped inside. The door responded quickly to his shove until the presence of something unexpectedly stopped its inward motion. As it bounced back towards him, Ryne swiftly turned to see what was impeding its movement. There was nothing at eye level and his gaze immediately dropped to the ground.

There was a heartbeat of silence, then a savage growl erupted from his throat at the sight before him.

"Lucy!" He breathed her name out in shock.

The woman was lying in a crumpled heap surrounded by a pool of blood. He dropped to his knees to check for a pulse. Pressing trembling fingers to her throat, he detected the faintest hint of a throb. It was weak, but offered some hope.

Grabbing the phone, Ryne dialed 911 while visually searching the apartment for signs of Melody. When the operator came on the line, he rattled off the needed information, hanging up without answering the superfluous questions peppered at him. He had no time to talk.

Swiftly, he completed a circuit of the apartment, confirming what he already suspected; Melody was indeed gone.

“Damn! I shouldn’t have left...” Muttering self-retributions, Ryne returned to Lucy’s side. He knelt beside her, feeling more ineffectual than he had ever felt before. He was Alpha, his job was to protect, to nurture and defend, yet despite his desperate wish to do something for his dying friend, he was helpless. As his hands hovered uselessly over her body, he noted a partial message written on the floor; Greys. What could that mean? Ryne furrowed his brow and stared unseeing across the room. Greys... The word niggled at his memory, but why? His gaze lighted on Melody’s laptop. Greys... Greyson! The name was in one of the files he’d found. Shit! Whoever had injured Lucy must have something to do with that damned report she’d written.

A change in Lucy’s breathing caught his attention; it had been shallow before but now it seemed uneven. His heart thumped heavily as he stared at her pale face and blood soaked blonde hair. With trembling fingers, he brushed her cheek, leaning forward and softly calling her name. There was no response. He swore vilely. It wasn’t right that she was hurt and possibly dying. This wasn’t her problem. She’d never done anything mean or hurtful. Lucy was warm and giving to a fault, always happy... The backs of his eyes pricked as he recalled her teasing, the way she’d sashay across the room with a tray of drinks in her hand and a smart comment on her lips. He blinked rapidly. Compressing his lips, he wished he could do something for her; that he could stay and hold her hand, but the lives of so many hung in the balance. He needed to find the truth on the off-chance that he could halt the Keeping before Kane took the final steps.

Reluctantly, he rose to his feet, moving to the sofa and sniffing where the smell of the unknown male lingered. A scent and a probable name; he tightened his mouth at the meagre clues he had to go on. In a city this size the scent would be impossible to track and the name Greyson meant nothing to him. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

The sound of approaching sirens filled the apartment and he started, realizing he had to leave quickly or risk being caught at the scene of the crime. He felt like a cold-blooded bastard leaving Lucy alone, but staying was too risky. Time was of the essence and his presence would do nothing to help her. Quickly scanning the room for any last minute evidence, he grabbed the laptop just in case there was pertinent information still stored there.

He crouched one last time beside Lucy's body. She was still breathing, though barely. "I'm sorry, Lucy. I'm so sorry. You didn't deserve this." He pressed a brief kiss to her cheek, and then stood up. With one final backwards glance, he slipped out of the apartment and down the back stairs.

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Melody's scent and that of the unknown male were inextricably blended, so Ryne could only assume she and the man were together. Whether or not she'd gone willingly he didn't know, but right now it was a moot point. The trail disappeared at street level, lost in the myriad of other smells that filled the city's air. Ryne really hadn't expected otherwise; tracking in Chicago wasn't like running through the woods in Stump River. Working on his only other clue, he went to a phone booth and looked up Greyson Inc. Of course, the phone call got him nothing but a tape recorded message asking what extension he wanted. Taking a stab in the dark, he chose public relations.

The woman he spoke with gave him a nice overview of the company; Greyson Inc. was involved in a wide variety of industries both at home and abroad. It was public minded, hosted several charitable events and the owner was Anthony Greyson. Mr. Greyson was an extremely private person who never granted personal interviews.

As he hung up, Ryne smirked. It wasn't much, but at least he had a full name to work with now. Narrowing his eyes, he considered his options. He could try to find out where Greyson lived or he could try to locate this Aldrich person who was supposedly Melody's boss. How were Greyson and Aldrich connected? Ryne couldn't imagine a man of Greyson's public stature being personally involved in abducting Melody from her apartment; there was too much chance of scandal and Greyson didn't seem like the type to get his hands dirty. If that was the case, was Aldrich his flunky?

Ryne stared at his surroundings trying to determine his next step. He was on a busy corner with traffic whizzing past him. Music blared out of open car windows, snatches of conversations barely audible as masses

of humanity surged across busy streets. Some were power walking, their minds probably intent on making a deadline while others stopped at a trendy coffee house. A sudden idea had Ryne's eyes narrowing.

At one point Melody had told him how she liked to sit in coffee houses, sipping her favourite brew and surfing the net. Giving a half smile, he decided to use that glimpse of big city life to his benefit. It was time to call in the reserves and spread the work out.

In less than half an hour, Ryne was settled anonymously in the back corner of an upscale coffee shop, exchanging information with Daniel over Melody's laptop. The boy was only too pleased to have a reason to attempt hacking into the Greyson Inc. website. While Daniel did his part, Ryne used the address for Aldrich that he'd copied down earlier to obtain a phone number for the man's office. A phone call there might reveal something useful.

Aldrich wasn't in, but his paralegal was. Using his sexiest voice and some well placed flattery, he charmed the woman into sharing several interesting pieces of information. Apparently, Aldrich had been scheduled to meet with Melody and had unexpectedly left shortly afterwards. Since then, the lawyer had called in to cancel the rest of the day's appointments. Hmm... A bit too coincidental, Ryne decided.

The computer chimed; Daniel had information for him. He bent over the laptop and they began to compare notes, piecing together a plausible theory. Aldrich was Greyson's lawyer, his name appearing in several court documents as a legal representative. His duties also appeared to include carrying out a variety of odd jobs for the wealthy man. Greyson was reported to be an art connoisseur, with a special interest in wolves. Connecting the dots, they concluded Greyson had Ryne's photo, and knew—or at least strongly suspected—that it wasn't an ordinary wolf. Melody had been hired through Aldrich to do the leg work. But did Melody know why? Right now, Ryne didn't really care. Finding her was more important; she was the key to plugging the information leak.

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Aldrich slowly drove to the back of the Greyson estate, keeping a watchful eye out that none of the employees were wandering the grounds or peeking out windows. No one should be about. When Greyson was absent—or incommunicado as he liked to call it—most of the employees were given an extended holiday. Still, Aldrich believed in caution and so he made his way along the twisting driveway at a leisurely speed more suited to checking the general condition of the estate, which was the story he was using if anyone dared question his presence.

The unconscious woman on the floor in the back was covered with a light blanket, so prying eyes would have no clear idea as to what he was transporting.

The far back corner of the expansive grounds contained a seldom used shed that had once housed garden tools. Several years back, Aldrich had suggested a newer building be constructed in a more convenient location. The gardener hadn't protested abandoning the ramshackle hut in the least. A new home for his gardening tools, re-landscaping being done; the fellow was ecstatic.

No one noticed or seemed to care that the old abandoned shed was repaired rather than being torn down. Doors and windows were reinforced and the walls were strengthened from the inside to form an impenetrable structure. While vines and long grass grew around the building, almost hiding it from sight, the interior was fitted with a small generator and wireless communications, all cleverly concealed by old potting tables, benches, and tool hooks. The rough wooden floor hid a trap door leading to a secondary underground safe room. It even had an escape route that led through the sewers before emerging in a drainage ditch near the edge of the nearby woods. As Aldrich had explained to Greyson, one should always be prepared for the unexpected and a conveniently located hideaway might be useful at some point.

Greyson had liked the idea immensely. In fact, it was this little hideaway that had secured Aldrich's present spot as one of Greyson's closest confidants. As far as Aldrich knew, only he and Mr. Greyson knew of the shed's secret purpose, which was why it was perfect for his present purpose.

Ms. Greene had to be kept somewhere. Aldrich wasn't stupid enough to take her back to his office or even to his own home. There was too great a chance of someone seeing her, and he wanted no link between the two of them. Snatching the woman had been impulsive on his part, but the presence of her feisty friend had thrown him off. Why hadn't the woman cowered and cried in the corner? If she hadn't swung at him when he wasn't expecting it, he wouldn't be in this mess.

He'd come to Greene's apartment with the express purpose of using intimidation to gain access to the Taylor report. When the other woman had attacked him, he'd reacted instinctively, old habits from his youth springing forward. Few knew that Leon Aldrich had grown up on the 'wrong' side of the tracks. His average size frame, bland appearance, even the way he conducted himself, led others to believe he was merely an intellectual—no one realized he knew how to handle a street fight.

Yes, he'd been tough in his younger years but he was also smart; smart enough to know he'd end up dead if he didn't get out of the hell-hole he grew up in. So he'd studied, got a scholarship and a degree, then carefully buried that past with a name change and a few forged documents. His present persona was staid, pompous and gave no indication of ever having known what it was like to claw one's way up out of the gutter. Aldrich liked the image and intended to keep it.

Unfortunately, he now had to do some quick work to ensure no stain of wrongdoing touched him. The frying pan wielding woman wasn't going to make it—Aldrich knew that much blood wasn't a good sign—and so he'd been forced to scoop up the Greene woman, rather than brow-beating her where she lay. Leaving the scene of the crime before anyone noticed his presence had taken precedence.

So here he was, thankful Greyson was away and that he had a nice safe place to stow this uncooperative person. He was sure he'd be able to get the report from her and have it ready for Greyson's return. She didn't look like the kind to hold out against persuasion for an extended period of time. Once the report was in his hands, well... Ms. Greene would likely be 'leaving town' just as the former lawyer had. It was regrettable, but in the grand scheme of things, the woman was expendable.

Parking the car, Aldrich double checked that there was no one about before quickly lifting the unconscious woman from the back seat and carrying her into the shed-turned-safe-room. She murmured as he moved her, lashes fluttering and muscles twitching. Good, she was waking up. He could begin to question her about the report and its contents.

Not for the first time, did Aldrich wonder why the old man was so interested in wolves. It went beyond a mere hobby, more like an obsession and lately he'd latched onto Taylor and the wolf picture he'd taken. Aldrich had spent more than a little time trying to determine his employer's motivation. As yet, he'd been unsuccessful. Perhaps, something in Ms. Greene's report would provide some illumination. He didn't like not knowing what drove the people around him.

He set the woman on one of the low slung benches. There was no need to use the hidden room below. Once he had the outer door shut, he proceeded to gently slap her cheek.

"Come now, Ms. Greene. Enough of this. You need to wake up and hand over the information on Mr. Taylor."

"Hmm?" Her eyes partially opened and she stared at him blearily before closing them again. "G'way... tired."

"No, Ms. Greene, I will not go away. Not until you cooperate." He grabbed her shoulders and forced her into a sitting position. Obviously realizing he wasn't going away, she opened her eyes completely and frowned at him.

"Mr. Aldrich? What's going on? Where am I?" Mel rubbed her eyes and looked around the room.

Satisfied that she'd stay upright, Aldrich let go of her shoulders and stepped back, assuming his usual pose of powerful arrogance.

"Where you are is of no concern. Why you are here should be obvious. You didn't think you could defy Anthony Greyson and not suffer the consequences did you?"

"Consequences?"

"Yes. Consequences. It was decided that you represented too great a flight risk and measures needed to be taken to prevent any such action."

"A flight risk? I'm not some criminal out on bail, you know."

Aldrich kept his face bland while inwardly rolling his eyes. Even ill, the woman was feisty. Why couldn't things ever be easy? His weekend away was being wasted arguing with a chit of a girl. "Yes. A flight risk. Your background shows that in the past you've frequently moved about the country. We can't have you leaving without fulfilling your obligations to Mr. Greyson first."

"I wasn't planning on leaving. My friend is with me. We're spending the week sightseeing and shopping." She rubbed her head and furrowed her brow. "My friend, Lucy, she'll be wondering where I am. I was supposed to be meeting her back at my apartment for lunch, but I don't remember much after leaving your office."

"I have no idea where your friend might be. She is not my concern; the report is. Now—"

Mel interrupted. "Wait! I did leave your office. I remember walking into the apartment building and someone called my name... It was Ryne; he's here in Chicago!" She looked around as if expecting to see him lurking in the corner.

"Taylor is in town? Now that's interesting news." Aldrich pulled at his lower lip, puzzling over this latest bit of information. Maybe he could use it to his advantage. Mr. Greyson wanted information on Taylor, but would he be even more pleased to have the man himself? He'd have to consider that point.



# Chapter 34

Kane paced the length of his office, running agitated hands through his hair. Ever since receiving Ryne's call, he'd been on the phone informing other packs to expect an influx of refugees. That had been the easy part, now he had to decide who lived... and who died. His mind skittered away from that unpalatable point; for the moment he'd concentrate on those who would be sent out first. Of course, the pups would be spared, the expectant and nursing mothers too. Young families, strong males... Each group would need a leader, someone they could turn to during the difficult times ahead as they tried to assimilate into a new pack, but who did he choose?

A few had already stepped forward, volunteering to stay behind. Helen had been one of the first; she was the wife of the late Alpha and, as she'd said, her life was empty without her mate. Kane understood and agreed, but the others... John, his beta, said he'd remain, but Kane had refused. The man had a mate and a young son. Besides, John was a good leader; he could easily handle being in charge of a group.

The door slammed open behind him and he turned, ready to growl at the unannounced intruder. Instead, his growl turned to a greeting. Elise stood framed in the doorway, the sunlight streaming behind her, casting her in an angelic glow. That was how he saw her; his angel, his mate. She was the gentle softness, the comfort he turned to, understanding, giving...

"What the hell are you thinking, Kane? I won't do it!" Her uncharacteristic venom shocked him and he stared at her in surprise.

"Elise, I'm busy. I don't have time right now..."

"Then you can damn well make time. We need to discuss this. You can't just order me to leave!"

It was then that he noticed the piece of paper in her hand. She'd been out when he'd gone to tell her to pack for the dispersal. He tightened his jaw. "You're pregnant. Of course you're leaving."

"And I don't get any say in this?"

Kane was tired, stressed; he didn't need an argument. He stared out the window. "I'm Alpha. You'll do as I say."

"No. I won't go."

A rebuke was ready on his lips when he turned to look at her and noticed the watery shimmer of her eyes. He stepped towards her. "Elise—"

"I won't go Kane. I won't leave you." She had folded her arms tightly around herself, but her chin was lifted in a sign of defiance.

He walked over to her and gathered her close, resting his chin on top of her head. "Elise you have to go. Think of our child."

"Growing up in a strange pack, without a father?"

"At least he'll still be alive."

"But what kind of life will it be? Another Alpha's son won't be easily accepted. He'll be viewed as an interloper, a potential threat. The others will be wary of him."

Kane rubbed his hand over the slight curve of her waist. "As they should be. My son will be an Alpha one day. He'll lead his own pack...

But only if he's given the chance to grow up." He leaned back and touched Elise's chin, forcing her to look at him. "It's your duty to ensure our child survives."

Elise bit her lip. "I don't want to lose you... "

"And you might not. This could turn out to be nothing, but we can't take the chance."

She ran her hands over his chest and Kane closed his eyes, taking the moment to revel in the exquisite sensations she could create with just the simplest touch. How he'd miss this.

"Kane, can I at least stay until the final call comes? It will be torture, being away from you, not knowing what's happening." Her voice trembled as she spoke and she tightened her fingers on his shirt until they were clutching the material.

Kane groaned as he opened his eyes and saw tears beginning to slowly drip down her cheeks. He cupped her face, trailing his lips over the damp surface. "Shh, don't cry." How desperately he wanted to tell her that everything would be all right, that there was no need for tears, but it would be a lie. His heart ached just as hers did; the very idea of being separated from her was eating away at the core of his being. He pressed his mouth to hers, offering his comfort and his love, all the while hoping against hope that Ryne was making progress.

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It was a stab in the dark, but something had told Ryne to head to Greyson's estate if he wanted to find Melody and her boss. The city was too big to search, so following his instincts seemed as good a course of action as any. He informed Bryan of his plans and reaffirmed the protocols to follow should he fail to check back in. Daniel was to continue to search for information on Greyson and Aldrich; the packs needed to know everything they could about the men they were up against.

Satisfied that he'd done all he could, Ryne hailed a taxi and gave the address for Greyson's estate.

As he sat in the back, Ryne stared unseeingly out the window. The driver wove in and out of traffic, the vehicle swaying slightly from side to side or jerking forward when brakes were suddenly applied; shouts of annoyance and coarsely worded threats were tossed between drivers. Ryne let it all wash over him, lost in thought.

His wolf desperately needed to find Melody; to know that she was safe. The thought of her alone, going through the change with no warning, no one to comfort or explain, ate away at his gut. Would her body and her mind accept what was happening to her or would she fight against the inevitable? What if she refused to accept it? Or if the effects of the full moon forced her body to transform before it was ready? Nadia said not everyone survived. The thought sent icy fear washing over him.

Yet, did it matter? The cold logical part of his brain forced him to examine the idea. If she knew of the secret—if she'd already spread the word—then she was as good as dead anyway. Wasn't it better to die from the rejected transformation than from his hand? Could he actually look her in the eye and deliver a fatal blow?

He was Alpha. He knew his duty and yet... Images of Melody danced before him. Her big, brown eyes and long lashes, the way she'd lift her chin and narrow her eyes before delivering some acerbic comment. Her quirky humour, her knack for getting into trouble. The wonder in her eyes as he pointed out the intricacies of nature. The way she looked under him, lost in the throes of passion...

Ryne tightened his lips. The throes of passion; there hadn't been enough of that. Twice he'd taken her; both times had been hurried, unexpected. How he longed to have the chance for a slow drawn out mating. A chance to explore every inch of her body, to taste her, to have her crying out in need for the relief only he could give. He'd bury himself between her thighs and sink his teeth into her...

That thought brought him up short. A blood bond was out of the question. Mating as well. He didn't mate; he had sex. Mating implied something permanent and he couldn't see a city dwelling, coffee swilling reporter type settling down in Stump River. Not that he planned on asking her to, of course.

Ryne shifted in his seat. Hell! Who was he trying to convince here? He was lying to himself. He knew it. The fear that had gripped him since finding Lucy was more than just fear of the Keeping. It was fear for Melody, for her well-being. He grimaced. Admitting the truth to himself was probably a mistake; it would only make things harder in the end.

Sighing heavily, he noted his surroundings. They'd left the city core behind some time ago. Houses were spread farther apart and situated on expansive lawns. He checked a road sign as they drove past; almost there. A wooded area was coming up to the right. It seemed as good a place as any. He signalled for the driver to pull over.

"This isn't the address you wanted." The driver commented and glanced back at him through the rear-view mirror. "Greyson estate is five miles up the road. I've driven past it before, but never gone through the gates. Apparently it's real showy. You know that guy?"

Ryne grunted in a non-committal way and handed over some money, choosing to ignore the man's question.

"Right. None of my business. I'm just paid to drive." The man tucked the money away and shrugged. Once Ryne was out of the vehicle, he drove off without a backward glance.

Ryne watched until the cab was out of sight, thinking that in Stump River he'd have been questioned to death about his motives. Big cities did have their advantages after all, he thought wryly as he stepped into the woods. Double checking that no one was about, he changed into his wolf form.

His padded feet made minimal noise as he ran through the small grouping of trees that constituted a 'woods' in city terms. By Stump River standards it was barely worth mentioning, but nonetheless, Ryne was thankful for the cover it provided. Daniel's research showed the Greyson estate was walled on three sides; the fourth was comprised of this long narrow strip of trees. Ryne was assuming there would be some type of alarm or motion sensor along the perimeter, but his animal form should be able to slip through undetected.

The trees were beginning to thin when his nose picked up a familiar scent. His wolf wanted to sing out with joy, but Ryne forced himself to

be silent. To the best of his knowledge the sound of a wolf howling wasn't common in Chicago and he didn't want to alert anyone who might be about. He inhaled deeply, revelling in the way Melody's scent wrapped itself around him. It made his heart beat faster, his blood rush through his veins, bringing his body to life.

Slowing his pace, he tried to pinpoint the exact direction from which the scent was coming. It was a windy day. He hated the wind, the way it made the scents swirl around. His nostrils flared as he tested the air once again sorting, dismissing... There! It was coming from a structure about half a mile away. It appeared to be an abandoned shed, almost invisible due to being covered in vines and surrounded by overgrown shrubbery. Ryne was certain she was in there, but... he analyzed the air again. She wasn't alone. There was someone else... The stench of the male was unforgettable. A low growl rumbled up from his chest.

He could exact his revenge now; revenge for Lucy, for Melody. His wolf moved into hunting mode, stealthily approaching the small building, carefully gliding from shadow to shadow. His muscles were tensed and ready for action. Every sense was alert, searching for signs of movement, listening for clues as to what might be happening inside.

At first, the voices were indistinct. One was lower pitched; obviously the hated unknown male. The other was softer, hesitant, confused... Melody! At least she was awake; that knowledge provided him with some small degree of comfort.

Ryne returned to his human form and pressed his body against the wall, carefully peeking inside through a dirty window. He could see the back of an elegantly dressed man and, just beyond him, Melody was sitting on a bench. Her eyes were narrowed and she was frowning. Ryne focused on the conversation, trying to determine what was going on.

"Come now, Ms. Greene. Your scruples are going to get you into trouble. Life isn't simply black or white. It's a myriad of shades of grey. Situations such as this are so ambiguous. I totally understand how you might feel some form of misplaced loyalty to Mr. Taylor, but think about it. He reneged on your agreement, forcing you into this untenable circumstance. There is no longer any obligation on your part to uphold a verbal agreement. We can easily avoid any further... unpleasantness, if you'd just be reasonable." The man—whether it was Aldrich, Greyson or some other player Ryne had yet to encounter—was negligently leaning against a table.

Ryne noted the whiteness of Melody's knuckles as she held onto the edge of the bench on which she sat. He surmised she was still feeling ill,

still fighting the effects of the approaching full moon and the genetic changes taking place inside her. He wished he was beside her, offering comfort, explaining the strange feelings and thoughts that were no doubt going through her at this moment. He watched as she shook her head before speaking.

"You know, this doesn't make any sense to me. Ryne Taylor is just a photographer. No one goes to these lengths to get a report on a guy who takes pictures."

"As I've told you before, it isn't your place to be asking questions." The man lifted his chin and stared down his nose at her, as if daring her to make another query.

"Sorry. Asking questions is part of my job. There's something strange about this. All along I thought it was just eccentricity, but now, you've basically kidnapped me—"

"Kidnapped? That could be considered slanderous, Ms. Greene. You have no proof that you've been kidnapped. For the past several hours, you've been delirious with fever. This is merely a safe place to stay until your condition can be properly assessed. Who knows? You might be contagious with some strange disease you picked up in the wilds of Stump River. You don't want to risk infecting an unsuspecting public now, do you?"

Melody looked around. "A safe place? In a garden shed? Come on, Mr. Aldrich. Do you really expect me to believe that?"

From his position outside, Ryne nodded, noting the name Melody had used. So this was the mysterious Aldrich that she had called every day. Well, she definitely didn't appear to be in league with him at this point.

Back inside the building, Aldrich shrugged. "It was convenient."

Ryne weighed his options. He could easily slip into the shed in his wolf form and attack the man, who he now knew was Aldrich. The problem was, he still wasn't sure what he was dealing with. From what she'd said, Melody didn't know what she'd stumbled into, unless she was lying; at this distance, he couldn't tell for sure. Aldrich appeared to know the real story; he just needed the report to confirm his facts. And then there was the mysterious and wealthy Mr. Greyson. Ryne knew in his gut, that the supposed art collector had it all figured out. The question was, how to get to him?

A sound from inside drew his attention. Melody was groaning and clutching her stomach. His wolf leapt inside him, and before he realized what he was doing, he was rounding the corner and pushing open the

door of the shed. The sound of his arrival drew the attention of the other two.

“Ryne!” Melody looked up, pain etched on her face.

“Mr. Taylor? How kind of you to stop by.” Damn, but Aldrich was fast. Ryne chastised himself as he saw the gun now pointed at his chest. In the brief second that he’d used to look at Melody, the other man had drawn the weapon. Shit! His wolf’s attachment to Melody was going to be his downfall, he just knew it.

Adopting his most annoyingly arrogant manner, Ryne leaned against the door frame and sneered. “Yeah. This looked like such a nice little place; I just had to see inside.” He kept a bland expression on his face as he tried to ignore the gun. All too well, he remembered the burning pain of the last bullet wound he’d sustained. At this close a range, the shot could be lethal and if he was even just seriously injured, he’d still be unable to help Melody. Best to not irritate Aldrich too much.

“That was an ineffectual attempt at humour, Mr. Taylor.”

“Yeah? Well, what did you expect? I’m a photographer, not a comedian.” He shrugged and looked casually around the room, slowly shifting closer to Melody under the guise of checking out the atmosphere of the shed. “You know this place could use some fixing up. A few of my pictures on the wall could go a long way towards improving the overall impression of this room.”

“Ah, yes. A photographer. Hmm... I wonder how an ordinary ‘photographer’ managed to follow me here; I was very careful.” Aldrich narrowed his eyes, seeming to consider this new turn of events.

Ryne watched nervously as the man ran his finger back and forth over the trigger of the gun, giving an imperceptible sigh of relief when the movement eventually stopped and the lawyer shrugged.

“At this point, how you found this place is irrelevant. Though I will figure it out eventually—can’t have any loose ends now, can we?” What might have been a smile flickered over the man’s face. “Your wolf picture has been a source of fascination for my client, Mr. Greyson. Would you care to speculate why?”

“Not really.” Ryne watched as Aldrich’s finger flexed on the trigger again. The man was not quite as calm as he would have others believe.

“Mr. Taylor—”

A sudden scream from Melody cut him off. Both men turned to stare as she crumpled to the ground, her face twisted as if she were in agony. The air around her shimmered like waves of heat rising from hot pavement. Her form wavered in and out of focus and for a brief moment a

wolf appeared in her place before shifting out of focus and returning to that of a young woman.

"Melody!" Heedless of the gun wielding man, Ryne rushed across the room and gathered her shivering body in his arms. Beads of sweat trickled down her face as she panted, barely conscious, while spasms wracked her body. Instinctively, she curled into a ball, wrapping her arms around her middle. He could only imagine the pain she was experiencing as her ill-prepared body tried to readjust to its changing form.

"What...?" Aldrich stared for a moment before seeming to gather his senses about him. "Well, well, well... Now, this does make things interesting doesn't it? Hmm..." He rubbed his chin. "Might I speculate, Mr. Taylor, that the issue at hand is not so much photographing wolves as it is... werewolves?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Ryne smoothed his hand over Melody's trembling form. "There's no such thing as werewolves."

"Mr. Taylor, I am neither blind, stupid, nor subject to hallucinations. As a matter of fact, something of this sort was actually one of my theories when considering Mr. Greyson's avid interest in wolves, but I passed it off as too fantastical for serious consideration. I now see that I need to revise my thinking."

Ryne kept his face bland, ensuring he did nothing to confirm the man's suspicions. He slowly eased Melody to the floor. If Aldrich was busy speculating, then maybe he could...

"Ah, ah, ah! I know how your mind is working, Mr. Taylor. Lunging for this gun would be a serious mistake, especially since we have so much to discuss." The man leaned back against the old potting table. "Now, let me see if I can figure this out. You took a picture of a werewolf and Mr. Greyson somehow realized this. Did you know your subject wasn't what it appeared to be?"

Ryne quirked his brow and snorted derisively. "I'm a nature photographer, not some guy into Hollywood special effects, or an eccentric old man on the edge of senility."

"Mr. Greyson will be seriously offended when he hears of your disrespect." Aldrich mocked.

"I'm trembling with fear."

"And so you should be. My employer is not a man to be taken lightly. But I digress." Aldrich gave a tight smile before continuing. "Mr. Greyson is immensely curious as to where you took that picture. Now, I can see why. If we find that location, our chances of capturing a real live



werewolf increase astronomically. The money that would be paid for such a specimen is mind-boggling.”

Ryne forced himself to not flinch or tighten his fists, despite the fury raging inside him. The man was talking as if his people were little more than animals to be bought and sold.

“The one thing that has me puzzled though, is how Ms. Greene fits into all of this. She’s obviously some form of werewolf herself. Why didn’t Mr. Greyson just use her? He chose her specifically for the job, so he must have had some knowledge of her background.” Aldrich stared at Melody with a furrowed brow. When he continued, he seemed to be talking to himself. “This requires further analysis before I make my next move. It’s no longer an issue of obtaining a report to keep Mr. Greyson happy. It’s a question of whether or not I tell him about what I’ve discovered.”

He smiled coldly. “Working for Mr. Greyson has opened a number of doors for me, but he also likes to believe he has me on a leash. With Ms. Greene under my control, I’ll be able break free.” Standing, he focused his attention on Ryne. “Tell me, does she do this changing thing often? Is it under control?”

Clenching his jaw, Ryne made no reply.

“Nothing to say? Is it that you don’t know the answers? Or possibly, you’re in shock yourself.” Aldrich paused and snapped his fingers, his eyes widening as if he suddenly came upon an amazing discovery. “That’s it isn’t it? You didn’t know your girlfriend was an animal until this very moment. I must say, you seem very calm about the fact.” A speculative look came over the man’s face. “Tell me, did you have sex with her?”

A growl threatened to escape Ryne’s chest as Aldrich’s gaze slowly went over Melody as if stripping her naked. How he wanted to wipe that leering expression off the lawyer’s face. Only the knowledge that any reaction on his part might further endanger the packs, kept him from reacting.

“Tell me, Taylor, what’s it really like... fucking a bitch?” Aldrich stepped closer and laughed darkly when Ryne shifted so he was in front of Melody. “Don’t worry. I have no plans to do her... yet. Though it might be an interesting experience.”

The civilized veneer seemed to slip from the man’s face and he now reminded Ryne of some of the more unsavoury people his stepfather had associated with; thugs and petty criminals, ‘friends’ who would stab you in the back if the price were right. Hmm... It would appear there might

be more to Aldrich than met the eye. Ryne stored the information away; it paid to know your enemy.

Aldrich played with the trigger of the gun, seeming to relish having someone under his power. His dark eyes narrowed as if gauging the response to his comments, looking for a reaction, a sign of fear.

Ryne wasn't about to give the man the satisfaction and forcibly relaxed his muscles, assuming a careless pose. His forearm rested on his bent knee and he blinked at the man slowly, conveying the attitude that he was unimpressed with the other man's posturing and rhetoric. "Are you through? This is really getting tedious."

For a moment Aldrich's face began to flush at the insult—Ryne cursed himself for not keeping his mouth shut—but then the moment passed. The man's face cleared and the smooth cultivated tones of the successful lawyer reappeared. "I see you're going to be difficult. Well, luckily time is on my side. Mr. Greyson won't be back for a while, so I'll be able to leave you two here to think things over. Possible when I return, you'll be feeling more cooperative. Hand over your cell phone." He waited with his hand extended and the gun at the ready. When Ryne finally complied, Aldrich nodded and left, bolting the door behind him.

# Chapter 35

“Aldrich! Is that you? Dammit man, what the hell are you doing on my property?” The voice of Anthony Greyson boomed across the lawn, obviously startling the lawyer who had just exited the supposedly abandoned hut at the rear of the estate. To give the lawyer his due, he composed himself quickly but Greyson still had the satisfaction of knowing he’d caught the man off guard. His amusement faded though, as he pondered what possible excuse Aldrich might have for being where he shouldn’t be.

“Mr Greyson, sir! I’m surprised to see you. I thought you’d be gone for a few more days.”

“I never said I was gone. Merely that I was incommunicado. There’s a difference, Leon. As a lawyer, you should know that.”

“I do, sir. It’s just that the reports stated—”

“I know all about your ‘eyes and ears’ that report my movements to you. But they only see and hear what I wish. I left, and as soon as they reported me gone, I returned.” The older man rocked back on his heels, secretly enjoying the flabbergasted look that briefly passed over the other man’s face before it disappeared behind a carefully schooled expression. Greyson loved playing mind games with those around him; people thought they could pull the wool over his eyes, that he was an old man in his dotage. Ha! He was sharper now than he’d ever been.

“I beg your pardon, sir. I never meant—”

“Don’t start boot-licking now, Aldrich. You watch me. I watch you. Neither of us got where we are today without hedging our bets. It’s smart business, even if it is damned impertinent of you.”

Aldrich nodded, but Greyson noted how the man’s eyes were assessing him. It appeared Leon might be getting too comfortable in his role, maybe even considering usurping his master. Well then, it was definitely time to consider a little shake up. He gave the lawyer a steely look. “Just remember I sign that pay cheque you’re so fond of, and no matter

what you think you know about me, I know even more about you. If I wanted to make you squirm like a worm on a hook, I could."

The lawyer didn't even so much as blink, but Greyson was sure Aldrich's busy mind was wondering exactly how much his employer really knew about certain past indiscretions. Good, let him sweat a bit. People got too damned complacent; they needed to be kept on their toes.

"A worm on a hook, sir? Not a pretty picture. I'll certainly do my best to avoid inciting such a circumstance."

Greyson guffawed before turning serious. "Your attempts at humour are pathetic, but even still, you amuse me. Now, why are you here? I believe my orders were quite specific. All non-essential staff were to be off the estate for five days. Last time I looked, you weren't essential to the running of this place. Explain yourself."

"I was checking on the state of the safe room. Ensuring it was up to date and in running order in case you ever need it, Mr. Greyson."

"Humph." He narrowed his eyes and stared at the man he sometimes called friend. In his life, friend and foe were often two sides of the same coin. Which side was Aldrich right now? He glanced towards the hut. Did his peripheral vision catch Aldrich giving his finger a nervous flick or was it merely a shadow from the leafy branches overhead? Hmm... "All right. It's a good enough reason. Damned efficient of you. But next time I say to stay away, I mean it."

Aldrich bobbed his head. "Will you still be 'incommunicado' for a few more days, sir?"

Greyson stared past the lawyer towards the main house. He might be getting old but his eyesight was still keen enough to pick out the window in the upper right-hand corner of the west wing. There was a flicker of movement there—just a flash of white—but it was enough to let him know he needed to get moving. He drew his gaze back to the lawyer. "That's right. No contact. And don't you dare let on to anyone I'm here. You won't like the consequences, if I discover this information has become public knowledge. Now clear out."

"Of course, sir. Except... I do need to make a few adjustments to some of the equipment in the safe room. It will cause less suspicion if I do it now, while almost everyone is away."

He studied the lawyer. Something was off, but what? Movement in the upper window of the main house drew his attention again. Damn! There was no time for this. "All right. But I want you gone by sunset. Understood?"

“Perfectly.” Aldrich nodded serenely as he pulled open the car. “I’ll just go get what I need and return in about an hour. You’ll never even know I was here.”

“Make sure of it.” Greyson watched Aldrich get in his car and drive away at a sedate pace. Once the car was out of sight, he turned and studied the small camouflaged hut that housed his secret safe room. Leon was checking the equipment and would be back to fix it. Uh-huh. He rubbed his chin, weighing his options before heading back to the house at a brisk pace. Aldrich might be up to something but it would have to take back seat to the more pressing matters that were awaiting him at the main house.

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Ryne stepped back from the door, where he’d been eavesdropping on the conversation outside. The walls appeared to be reinforced and if it hadn’t been for his keener than normal hearing, he’d never have been able to make out what had been said by the men standing some several feet away. It would seem that Aldrich might be planning on double-crossing Greyson, since no mention of Melody or himself had been made. A falling out among the enemy might work to his advantage.

He turned to check on Melody. She was resting, her eyes closed, obviously exhausted from the stress and pain of a partial transformation. If she’d been a full-blooded werewolf, the first change would have been slightly uncomfortable but not painful. In fact, once one got used to it, transforming was actually a pleasant feeling of release, rather like a small orgasm. Unfortunately, Melody’s body wasn’t ready for the experience. Some cells were changing, others weren’t. She likely felt as if she was being torn in two.

Not knowing what else to do, Ryne began circling the room, hating the feeling of being trapped. His wolf required space and freedom; confinement went against his very nature. Testing the window, the door, and the walls, he began looking for any weakness in the structure. Using his elbow, he tried to shatter the glass in the window but it seemed to be some form of bullet proof or shock resistant substance. Similarly, the door and walls resisted his attempts to break them down; the only thing he managed to do was bend the door handle out of shape and give himself a sore shoulder. A frustrated growl rumbled up from his chest. Yep, this was definitely a safe room. While it was designed to keep people out, it also served to keep people in.

He rubbed his aching joint and sat down on the floor next to Melody, brushing her hair from her forehead. Her breathing was even; the sleep

was natural rather than the unconscious state she'd been in when he left her apartment. How many hours ago was that? He glanced at his watch, having lost track of time. Okay, he still had an hour before needing to check in with Bryan. It was cutting it close, but there was still time so that was one positive. Unfortunately, after that everything else went straight to hell.

Kane was waiting for his call. His brother would be anxious, not wanting to disperse the pack but not willing to risk their safety by waiting too long. Ryne ground his teeth and cursed Aldrich for taking his phone. The dispersal was one thing—if it happened, the members could be called back, but how long would Kane wait before issuing the order to destroy the remaining pack? A knot formed in Ryne's gut as he contemplated what would happen if he didn't make that call in the next few hours.

Leaning his head against the wall, he inhaled deeply and forced himself to be calm and logical as he puzzled over who knew what and the implications of each bit of knowledge. How many people did he need to find and silence? Together Aldrich, Greyson, and Melody each had possession of a plethora of truths, half-truths, and misconceptions. Out of the three, Melody knew the most; she just wasn't aware of it yet. In a way, that made her the most dangerous to the safety of his kind. How she reacted, when the pieces of the puzzle fell together, would determine her fate.

Beside him, Melody stirred and pressed closer to him. The simple gesture made his heart beat faster. In her sleep she still trusted him, but how she would feel once she was awake might be a different story. When she'd first seen him at her apartment building, she hadn't been pleased, no doubt still feeling the sting of their parting words. And, even though she called out his name when he had charged into this room, it was probably due more to surprise than any actual joy at his presence.

Loathe to disturb her, but knowing they had an hour at best before Aldrich returned, he gently shook her awake. He needed to figure out if she was really an innocent in all of this, explain about the transformation, formulate a plan to get out of here in one piece and then deal with those who knew more than they should.

"Melody? You have to wake up. We need to talk."

"Hmm? Ryne?" She blinked at him sleepily, her brow slowly furrowing as awareness returned. Ryne could tell, by the expression on her face, the moment she realized where she was. Pushing herself upright,

she brushed her hair from her face and looked around at her surroundings. "What the hell is going on? Why are you here? And why am I here?"

Ryne helped her up sit up, steadying her until she found her balance. "Well, it's complicated."

"Complicated?" She glowered at him. "And, why do I suspect that the complications are mostly your fault?"

Her tone of voice irritated him and he snapped back at her. "Well, some of it is, though strictly speaking, your presence is what started everything."

"Me? I didn't do anything!"

"Yes, you did. You kept insisting on interviewing me."

"So? It's a perfectly reasonable request!"

"Which I chose to decline. You should have just gone away." Ryne chose to take a hard line with her. If he pushed enough, he might get to the truth behind her presence in Stump River and Smythston.

"Gone away! After chasing you half way across the continent? I don't think so! There was too much money involved."

Ryne pounced on her statement. "Ah-ha! So now we have your real motive. You said the interview was for a course you were taking. That you were just interested in my art. But that's not the whole truth, is it? You're in this with Aldrich!"

Melody huffed and looked away.

He pressed his advantage. "I'm right, aren't I? That's why you won't look at me. You lied about the interview. What was the real reason you were trying to find me?" He grabbed her shoulder, forcing her to face him.

She compressed her lips before sighing and giving in. "All right. I'll tell you, especially since it appears Aldrich was lying to me or has gone off his rocker or something."

Ryne settled back and crossed his arms. He kept his eyes carefully trained on her so he could gauge the truth of what she was about to tell him.

"This rich guy named Greyson wants information on you—I was never really told exactly why; they just hinted that it might be for an article in an art magazine and that he was this big collector who liked your work. Anyway, Aldrich was in charge of interviewing people for the job and somehow got hold of my name. I was surprised I was hired because he didn't seem to like me, and I'm still just a student. But, for whatever

reason, I was offered the job. It paid a small fortune; enough that I could quit working and go back to school full time, so I took the assignment."

Ryne narrowed his eyes, considering the information. It seemed too simple. "If that's the case, then why didn't you just tell me?"

"Because secrecy was one of the conditions of the job." She shook her head. "I know, I know; it sounds suspicious, and I did wonder, but the money was too good to pass up. And then, when you didn't want an interview, Aldrich started to threaten that Greyson would sue me for the return of all the money, even what I'd already spent tracking you down." Melody rubbed her hands up and down her arms as she stared about the small room. "It was just an interview with a nature photographer, for heaven's sake. Nothing that earth shattering. I figured it was easy money; what could possibly go wrong?" She snorted inelegantly. "Now look at the mess I'm in!"

"Yeah, well..." Ryne rubbed the back of his neck. "In normal circumstances, an interview with a nature photographer would be a simple job." Her aura let him know she was speaking the truth so at least part of his concerns had been dealt with. Now came the hard part; breaking the news to her about werewolves.

Melody fixed her eyes on him, a speculative look on her face. "But you're not a simple photographer, are you Ryne?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what? Do you smuggle drugs in the picture frames? Are you in debt to the Mob? Wanted for murder? Robbing a bank?"

"No. Nothing illegal."

"Then what?"

"Well..." Ryne tried to think of any easy way to tell her, but knew they didn't have time to beat around the bush. He might just as well spit it out. "You see... I'm a werewolf."

Melody blinked at him then gave a distinctly un-amused laugh. "Right and so am I. And when there's a full moon, I get all furry and start howling. Come on, Ryne. Give me a break. I feel like crap because... well... I don't know why, but I do. The point is, I'm just not in the mood for stupid stories."

"I'm not joking. I really am a werewolf and so are you. Well, technically you're only partially a werewolf since you're still undergoing cellular changes, but eventually you will be."

Ryne watched as she got a funny look on her face and then began to ease away from him. "You actually believe those books I saw in your



house, don't you? And I bet you're a card carrying member of that Lycan website I came across, too."

"We don't really carry cards, but yes, my name's on the registry."

She threw her hands up in the air. "Oh this is just great. I'm locked in a room with a wannabe wolf-boy and some psycho lawyer is trying to 'persuade' me to hand over a report about said wolf-boy."

"Stop with the wolf-boy crap and get rid of the attitude." Ryne felt his patience wearing thin. It had never been one of his strong points, and Melody's mocking was stretching it to the limits. "This situation is serious. A lot of lives are at stake, not just ours, and we don't have that much time before that fucking Aldrich returns. There *are* werewolves. I'm one. You are becoming one and Aldrich wants that report so he can find other packs and do God only knows what to them."

His tone of voice caught her attention and she sobered. "You really believe this stuff, don't you?"

"Not only do I believe it, I live it, every day. And soon you will, too." He saw her open her mouth to comment but headed her off with stern words. "Let's cut to the chase. I'll do a little demo. You will not scream or pass out or do anything else clichéd. You will sit, watch and then we'll discuss the situation in a calm, rational manner. Got it?"

She nodded and Ryne couldn't help but allow a fleeting smile at the way she just shut up and listened when he went into Alpha mode. Damn, but that made for a nice change. Stepping back, he brought forth his wolf. Around him, the air seemed to shimmer, his vision temporarily blurred, then just as quickly, it cleared and he was looking up at Melody's gaping face. He couldn't help but give a delighted yip and wag of his tail at being able to rub her face in her disbelief. However, the situation was too serious to spend time on such childish actions. Quickly, he transformed back and sat back down.

"Wow."

He raised his eyebrows at her bland response and waited expectantly for further comment. When none came, he frowned. "That's it? Just 'wow'? No questions? No 'how'd you do that?'"

"Oh, I have questions. Lots and lots of questions. Like, what kind of drug did you or Aldrich slip me? And why? I mean, sure you might have this fantasy life thing about werewolves, but why do you have to drag me into it?"

Ryne growled in frustration. "You weren't drugged. You really did see me change into a wolf and as for why I'm dragging you into this... well... you're becoming a werewolf, too."

“Right.” She snorted. Her disbelief was obvious and irritated him no end.

“Think about it! You’ve been inexplicably ill for the past few days—”

“It’s not inexplicable. It’s from the cut on my arm.”

“Well, the cut was part of it, but didn’t you notice how quickly it healed? And haven’t you wondered why, if the cut is gone, that area of your arm is still sensitive? And what about the fevers that come and go? Or what about this—have you been hearing voices in your head?”

That one got to her. Ryne noticed how she paled at the mention of voices. So her wolf had been awakening and trying to make itself known. She probably thought she was losing her mind. Little wonder she was in denial right now. Melody probably thought her grip on sanity was rapidly slipping away and she was fighting it tooth and nail. The thought of her distress softened his attitude towards her. He inched closer and spoke softly.

“It was an accident. A freaky accident that mixed my blood with yours and awakened some hidden werewolf genes in your system.”

“I don’t have werewolf genes—” There was a touch of anger in her tone that let Ryne know he might be getting through to her.

“I beg to differ. Somewhere in your family tree there must be a werewolf; maybe a parent or a grandparent.” Melody started to speak but then paused and seemed to be thinking. Good, at least she wasn’t totally rejecting the idea. He pressed his advantage. “The genes might have stayed dormant for your entire life and you would have shown only trace characteristics, if you hadn’t become involved with me.”

“Trace characteristics?” She spoke distractedly and Ryne wasn’t really sure how much she was taking in, or if she was in shock and just operating on autopilot. He suspected the latter. Whichever it was, he didn’t have time to waste and ploughed onward delivering even more information.

“Trace characteristics include better than normal eyesight, acute hearing, and sensitivity to smells. A strong immune system—I bet you were hardly ever sick as a child and never visited the doctor.” He watched carefully and caught her slight flinch. “There’s also a tendency to instinctively submit to alpha personalities even when you don’t want to and you tilt your head a bit to the side exposing your throat...”

Ryne could tell her mind was racing, sifting through past incidents that had seemed trivial at the time, but in the light of the information he was delivering, became significant.

Mel gave a short laugh, shook her head, and rubbed her temples with her fingers. She seemed to be talking to herself. "This is just so weird. I can't believe I'm having this conversation. I am awake, aren't I? It's not just another dream, is it? Because sometimes I have these really real dreams. There was this one about wolves and then the wolf became a man and..." She stopped and blushed.

Ryne knew exactly what dream she was talking about and tried hard to keep a straight face. Somehow he didn't feel this was the time for confessions of that nature. "We're awake. It's not a dream. You haven't been drugged. Now listen while I explain..."

# Chapter 36

“Cassandra! I told you to stay away from the windows. It’s still light out and the sunshine could bring on another migraine.” Greyson stood in the doorway, looking at the young woman who occupied the upper room in the west wing of his mansion. Her dark hair was pulled back in a long braid, revealing the paleness of her skin. Her cheeks were slightly sunken and dark shadows showed under her eyes. He tried to not let his worry show.

“I’m sorry, Uncle. It’s just such a sunny day, I thought it would be nice to go outside.” She obediently moved back and let the heavy velvet curtains fall shut.

Greyson stepped into the room and gently took her by the elbow, leading her back to bed. “In a few more days, when the danger of another migraine has passed, you can go outside. Did you take your medication? I’m surprised to see you awake.”

She looked up at him with a tentative smile. “I forgot.”

He cupped her cheek, noting the stark difference between his gnarled hand and her soft youthful skin. She was such a beauty, just like her mother. “You know what the doctor said. Prevention is the key. It’s a monthly treatment; five days of pills and then you’re fine for the rest of the month.”

Cassandra reached out and squeezed his hand before stepping away. “I know. It’s just... ” She blushed. “Maybe I should see another doctor.”

“Doctor Friedrich is the finest physician money can buy. You know what he told you. Every girl’s body is different. This is how you react to the monthly changes—”

“All right, Uncle! Stop, just stop.” Her face was flushed with embarrassment. “I’ll take the darn pill. Anything to keep from having this conversation again.”

“Cassandra, I’ve known you since you were a baby—.”

"But I'm not a baby anymore. And my bodily functions aren't a subject I wish to discuss with you."

Greyson chuckled. "Of course. At seventeen, you're so very, very old."

"Almost eighteen."

"I stand corrected." He kept his voice even, resisting the urge to chuckle. Ah, the young. Always wishing to be older.

"Old enough to want some privacy in certain areas." She folded her arms and pouted.

"And you shall have it, once you take your pill and get back in bed." Greyson kept his voice gentle, but firm. For a moment, she stared at him defiantly and he noted how the green in her eyes darkened when she was upset. After a moment, she looked away, sighing.

"One of these days..." She muttered under her breath and she went to the bedside table, swallowing the disputed medication.

He nodded in satisfaction. "I'll be back to check on you later. Rest, like you're supposed to."

"That's all I can do when I'm on these pills. They make me so sleepy and I have the strangest dreams."

"An unfortunate side effect, but well worth the benefits achieved."

Cassandra stuck her tongue out at him, but quickly changed the childish reaction to a grin, she hopped into bed and picking up a book.

Greyson closed the door and rested his palm on the handle for a moment while shaking his head. She was a minx, but the light of his life. Who would have thought that a crusty old man such as himself would have been blessed with the care of one such as her? He smiled reminisciently, thinking of the joy she'd brought him over the years.

At first, he'd been unsure of how to handle the tot, but with the help a few trusted employees, he'd muddled through. He made sure Cassandra had the finest of everything; clothing, private tutors, individualized lessons for sports and art, vacations around the world... And all along, he'd managed to keep her out of the public eye. Only a few hand-picked employees interacted with her; she always travelled separately from him. It had worked perfectly until two years ago. Then, as she approached adulthood, he found that he needed to have a closer hand in her supervision. Unfortunately, even this situation wouldn't work for much longer, and then what?

He wanted her to remain an innocent, naive little girl as long as possible, but she was tugging at the reins, becoming headstrong, questioning... Even taking her medication was becoming a source of friction.

He grimaced. The nurse should have been watching her more closely. Who knows what could happen, if Cassandra missed a dose?

Letting go of the handle, he strode down the hallway, in search of the nurse. He'd have to remind the woman that if she didn't carry out her duties any better than this, then she might have to be... dismissed.

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Cassandra listened to her uncle's retreating footsteps and then grinned. She reached into her mouth and pulled the hated pill out from its location between her cheek and gum. There was a nasty taste in her mouth since it had partially dissolved. Rats! Her plans to make it through the cycle un-medicated were going sadly awry.

The nurse her uncle hired never left the room until at least half an hour after each pill was taken. Obviously the woman was suspicious and wanted to ensure that even if her charge did manage to keep from swallowing the pill, it would dissolve in her mouth. It was only by surreptitiously resetting the clocks and 'accidentally' breaking the woman's watch, that Cassie had managed to get her out of the room believing that there was still an hour before medication time. She'd planned on flushing the pill down the toilet and then claiming she'd taken it on her own when the nurse returned. Unfortunately, her uncle had appeared first and Cassie had never been able to lie to the man. Well, at least she wouldn't be quite as muzzy headed as usual.

Not for the first time did she wonder about the mysterious migraines everyone insisted that she had. Honestly, she couldn't recall being sick the first time it happened, but apparently she had been, for suddenly her uncle had her meeting with a doctor who talked in medical babble, gave her a few cursory pokes and prods and then issued instructions for monthly treatments.

She didn't have many friends and there was really no one to talk to about the situation, but her research on the internet led her to believe that something wasn't normal. She'd started her monthly cycles quite late for modern females—just around her sixteenth birthday. And strangely enough, they only occurred every three months, with only minor spotting in between. Migraines could accompany menstruation, but the medications she took made her almost comatose, too groggy to do anything and strangely unaware of what was going on around her. Somehow, that just didn't seem right.

Dr. Friedrich, in her estimation, wasn't much of a doctor either. He hadn't really examined her. Not that she wanted him too—the man gave her the creeps—but looking in her eyes and ears and poking her stomach

through her clothing really couldn't give him much of an idea as to her internal functions, could it?

Cassie knew her uncle loved her and spared no expense when it came to her care, but... Something wasn't right and she was determined to figure out what it was. Her first step was supposed to be going without her medication, but so far that wasn't working. Still, she'd managed to avoid most of this dose. Hopefully, she'd be able to figure out a way to miss the next one as well.

Cocking her head to the side, she listened carefully. Good. No one was coming. She climbed out of bed and made her way to the window. Carefully easing the curtain aside, she took a peek. What was happening at the small hut near the back of the property? Earlier in the day, a car had been there and her uncle's lawyer had carried something inside. Then her uncle had talked to Mr. Aldrich for awhile and the man had left, leaving the bundle behind. Her curiosity was piqued and she longed to sneak out and see what was going on.

She chuckled, thinking about how her 'spying abilities' had served her in the past. Uncle tried to keep her sheltered from the world and his life, but she knew more than he suspected. For example, she knew about Mr. Aldrich even though Mr. Aldrich knew nothing of her. She'd spied on several of their meetings, not really understanding what was going on, but enjoying the trick she was playing on them. As of late, her spying wasn't so much a game as a desire for knowledge. There was a mystery surrounding her very existence and she was determined to find out what it was.

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Melody had listened in stunned disbelief as Ryne spouted information about werewolves, the mixing of body fluids and genetic heritage. It was preposterous of course. Her father, whoever and wherever he might be, wasn't a werewolf. Her mother and grandparents weren't either. Nor was she turning into one. Yet, Ryne sounded so sincere and there was the weird hallucination she'd just had where he'd changed into a wolf... She'd pinched herself several times, trying to wake herself up, but of course that only worked in fiction.

The whole situation made her head spin, and she was starting to ache all over again. If he said another word on the topic, she was sure she'd scream. She leaned her head back against the wall. "Ryne, stop it. Please. I can't take any more of this."

Immediately he stopped the pacing around the room that he'd been doing while lecturing her. Sitting beside her, he felt her forehead. "You're pale and getting fevered again."

"Yeah. This infection or 'flu or whatever—"

"I already told you what it was. Your body is undergoing changes at the cellular level." He sounded almost angry with her that she didn't believe his tall tale.

She licked her lips, suddenly too tired to argue. "Sure. Whatever. I hurt. My head is swimming. Even my vision is blurring."

Ryne suddenly gripped her shoulders and made her sit up straight. "Blurred vision? Any tingling?"

Melody frowned and thought about it. "A bit. My hands and feet."

"That's a sign that you're about to transform. Fight it! Don't give in. It's too dangerous for you to shift yet. Your body isn't ready."

"Fight it? Fight what? And how?"

"It's a full moon tonight. Like I was telling you, the moon has an effect on us. The younger you are, or the closer you are to your first change, the greater the pull. You have to hold off as long as possible until your body is able to handle it."

"Easy for you to say. How do you propose I do that?" Mel bit her lip as a wave of sensation swept over her. It was strange, like someone was pouring sand all over her, bringing to awareness nerve endings she'd never realized existed.

"Concentrate on being human. Think about your body as it is in a human state; how it feels and moves. Don't focus on the tingling, that will only quicken the transformation."

As soon as Ryne said to not think about it, her traitorous mind began to concentrate on nothing else. The strange feelings slowly began to build inside her. Her limbs began to tremble.

"Melody!" Ryne gave her a shake. "I said don't think about it!"

"I'm trying, but I need a distraction! When you say *don't* think about, I can't help *but* think about it."

"Fine." He made a rumbling sound and the next thing Mel knew, she was in his arms, his lips locked on hers. At first, she stiffened in surprise, but then as he slid his tongue over hers, she began to relax, kissing him in return. The sensations that had been crawling up her arms and legs faded from awareness as Ryne caressed her back.

Mmm, it felt so good to have his warm, hard body pressed close, to have his tongue stroking hers while his hand cupped her breast. She inhaled the scent of him, the taste of him, the rumbling sound in his



chest... Mel popped her eyes open. Rumbling, growling... The wolf by the river... The paw prints around her cabin... !

She pulled her mouth from his and pushed him away. "You're a wolf!"

"Yeah. I'm a werewolf. That's what I've been telling you." He moved to pull her close again, but she braced her hands on his chest.

"No. I mean you really are *a wolf*; a furry, four legged, howling-at-the-moon wolf!"

"So?"

"I saw you. At the river. And those were your paw prints around my cabin. And... Oh my God! You snuck into my cabin one night, didn't you?" When he looked away, she shrieked and hit him. "Pervert!"

Ryne winced and covered his ears. "Hey! No screaming. My ears are sensitive."

"But you molested me in my sleep." She smacked him again and he caught her hands holding them to his chest.

"I just stopped by to check on you because you'd hit your head. I didn't like the idea of you being by yourself, but when I arrived, you were having a bad dream. My wolf sort of took over and tried to offer you some comfort."

"Comfort! Is that what you call it?" She struggled against him, glaring. "I could have you arrested! And don't give me any of that 'he made me do it' stuff. That's so juvenile."

"When you're wolf is fully formed, you'll be amazed at what it can do, if you don't keep it under control."

"So control it!"

"I've been trying, but you have me so twisted into knots that it hasn't been easy."

"I do?" She stilled her struggles and studied him.

He gave a half smile.

Mel pursed her lips as if considering the information, then shook her head. "No. You're trying to distract me from the main point which is you invaded my room while I was sleeping and... and... touched me!"

Ryne zoomed in and planted a kiss on her lips. "You liked it. You had an orgasm. Don't deny it."

"Well, yes. But—"

He silenced her with a long, slow kiss. When he finally moved back, he whispered against her ear. "When we get out of here, I promise to give you a lot more orgasms."

Mel shivered at the wickedly erotic images that his words brought to mind. "But back in Stump River you said—"

"Shh..." He laid his finger over her lips. "I said lots of stupid stuff, trying to get you to go away so you wouldn't get caught up in the Keeping."

The statement quickly sobered her mood as she recalled parts of his earlier lecture. She shifted away from him. "Is it really that serious? You have to kill people if they find out your secret?" He nodded. "So... what about me? I know. Are you going to kill me?"

"Well, we do let a select few know of our existence, if it benefits the whole pack. And we screen those people very carefully."

She gulped. "Do I qualify?"

"In normal circumstances, probably not. But given the fact that you're transforming into one of us—"

Mel started to protest that there was absolutely no way she was becoming a werewolf, but then stopped. If he believed she was transforming, then that meant she was safe. Okay, she'd deny it in her head, but outwardly... She pasted a smile on her face. "So I'm immune to the law."

"Unless you refuse to accept your transformation and start telling everyone or go rogue, letting others see you changing, things like that."

"Nope. Not me. I promise to keep mum." She put her hand up as if making an oath and then mimed zipping her lip. After all, even if she told people, who would believe her? "So what happens again, if Aldrich and Greyson tell other people?"

"If it appears the secret has been spread to others, the pack that has been discovered enters into something akin to a suicide pact."

Mel shuddered as the import of what was going on finally sunk in. "So basically, I've endangered your whole family by interviewing you?"

Ryne stood up and began to pace again. "I started it by taking that photo of Kane in his wolf form and then not guarding the picture closely enough. When Greyson bought it, he must have examined it closely and discovered certain anomalies between Kane's wolf form and that of a real wolf."

"But Greyson must have suspected that werewolves existed ahead of time. Most people don't look at an unusual picture of a wolf and say 'Hey, there's something different about this one. It must be a werewolf.' Normal people don't think that way."

"Well apparently Greyson does because that's the only reason I can think of for him to be searching for me. My pictures are good, but not

that good. Not good enough to spend thousands of dollars on finding me just to interview me.”

Mel stared at the floor, thinking for a moment before speaking. “Aldrich was really insistent that Greyson wanted to know where you took your pictures.” She looked up at Ryne. “He must want to find more werewolves!”

Ryne nodded grimly. “That’s what I’m thinking, too. And if we can’t stop him, my brother and his whole pack will self-destruct rather than let Greyson find them.”

# Chapter 37

Kane drummed his fingers on his desk, checked his watch, then stared at the phone, willing it to ring. Why hadn't Ryne called yet? Surely, if he'd taken care of the leak, it would be over and done with by now. A burning knot of fear settled in his gut. Something was wrong, he knew it. Had Ryne been unable to find the girl? Or had she already told others of her discovery? Possibly she'd arranged for Ryne to be captured? Kane sensed Ryne had an affection for the girl, even if he was unwilling to admit it. But did the girl return those feelings or was she merely playing him for a dupe? Had she lured him into a trap where he was, even now, fighting to escape and warn the others of impending doom?

His expression became stony as he firmed his resolve. He was Alpha. It was his job to ensure the safety of his pack; waiting would only heighten the danger. Picking up the phone, he punched in the needed numbers and waited impatiently for his Beta to answer.

"John? Ryne missed his check-in. We're not waiting any longer. Contact the group leaders and have them gather those assigned to them ... No ... No exceptions. I want everyone on the dispersal lists packed and out of here within the hour ... Yeah ... We'll hold on as long as possible back here. I won't make the final decision lightly ... I'll break the news to Elise and make sure she's in front of the house waiting for the van ... Yeah, good luck to you, too."

He hung up the phone and walked wearily to the door. His hand rested on the knob as he paused, contemplating what he'd say to his mate. She didn't want to leave, but there was no way he was endangering her life and that of his unborn child by letting her stay, despite her pleas. But how do you begin to convince someone you love to leave you behind to face almost certain death? And how did you bid that person farewell, when you knew it would be forever?

For a moment he gave his emotions free rein. Surprisingly enough, it was anger that came to the fore. Anger at Melody Greene for her snooping; for searching out Ryne and asking questions. Anger at Ryne for not

dealing with her swiftly and ruthlessly. He was angry that he'd never see his unborn child. And that he'd never hold Elise again or feel the incredible oneness that occurred when he slid his body into hers and they gently rocked together...

His breathing hitched as he imagined the loss of that deep connection. It was like a knife, cutting into his very soul. He wondered how his death would affect her. Would she know the moment he died? Feel an aching emptiness in her heart? If only there was a way to spare her that pain, he would take it; but as his life force seeped away, would he be strong enough to maintain a shield between their minds? He hoped so...

With a heavy heart, he exited the office and went in search of Elise.

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Greyson eased himself into his favourite chair and sighed. He seldom allowed himself the luxury of feeling tired, but his concern over Cassandra was slowly wearing away at him. The girl was beginning to ask questions and he wasn't sure how he would answer them. For so long he'd shielded her from the truth; once she learned of it, would she accept it? Perhaps he should have told her years ago, but the danger had been too real; she'd been too young to be trusted not to tell someone.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a key and unlocked the drawer in the table to his right. He eased it open and lifted out an envelope and a picture from within. The envelope was his Last Will and Testament and left everything to Cassandra. He'd written it himself using sufficient legal mumbo jumbo to make it legal and unbreakable. Only a few people knew this copy existed. Another sealed version was at Aldrich's office, but even the lawyer didn't know it's true contents. Greyson had never told the lawyer about the girl, and if he had his way, her existence was going to be kept a secret as long as possible. His life and business associates would not be allowed to taint her as long as he was alive. He put the will back in the drawer and focused on the picture. His gnarled fingers trembled slightly as he traced the features of the woman in the photograph.

"Ah Luisa, you'd be proud of the girl. She looks just like you and has your fighting spirit, too." He cleared his throat as emotion overcame him. "I wish you were here to see her, to guide her. You left her in my care and I've done my best, but now... I'm not sure what to do anymore."

He stared intently at the picture as memories unfolded...

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*Spain. Eighteen years ago...*

He usually didn't walk home, preferring the luxury of his limousine, but he'd wanted time by himself to dwell on his most recent success. Taking over the small Spanish import-export business gave him another toe-hold in the country. It was part of his master plan to get his hands on the parent company—a large conglomerate with connections in several European nations. If done carefully enough, with little fanfare, no one would realize that he had a controlling interest in the voting stock until it was too late to stop him.

The streets were mostly deserted which wasn't surprising given the late hour. His driver was tailing him, a respectful two blocks away, ready to pick him up when he tired of his solitary stroll. Noise drifted out of small establishments as people laughed and sang, enjoying friendship and frivolity. He firmed his jaw. What a waste of time. So what if it's New Year's Eve? Transactions needed to be done, fortunes built; commerce waited for no one. A small voice insisted that commerce also made a cold friend, but Greyson pushed the thought aside. If he needed companionship, he could find it. The flash of diamonds and a bottle of champagne would have women hanging off of him, should he so desire.

Shoving his hands in his pocket, he hunched his shoulder against the cool wind and walked on. A scuffling sound from an alley caught his attention and he turned to stare into the murky depths. Nothing moved and he turned to go when a soft cry sounded. He wasn't usually one to get involved, so he had no idea what inspired him to walk down the alleyway.

His steps echoed off the pavement; the stench of garbage causing him to curl his lip. He searched the shadows and then he saw it. A face, pale and battered, blood smeared across the cheek, one eye swollen shut, the other filled with fear. It was a young girl and she shrank back as he approached.

Greyson stared around, looking for signs of her attackers, suspicious that this could be a set up. What better way to distract a wealthy victim, than to present him with a helpless female and then attack when he was otherwise occupied. However, there were no signs of movement, no sounds except the girl's laboured breathing.

He crouched beside her, murmuring reassurances in Spanish while assessing the damage. Her arm hung limply at her side and her leg was twisted grotesquely, both obviously broken. Greyson considered himself a hard man, the suffering of others didn't bother him, but when he observed the girl protectively clutch her good arm around the swelling at

her waist, even he was moved. What kind of bastard would beat up a pregnant woman?

“Who did this to you?” His voice was harsher than he intended and she cringed. With effort, he forced himself to speak in a gentler tone. “Who hurt you? I’ll call the police and ensure the villains are dealt with.”

Panic flared in her eyes. “No! No police! Please, tell no one. Just help me up.” She struggled to move and he firmly held her in place.

“Don’t be ridiculous girl. Your leg’s broken. You can’t move.”

She raised her chin. “Yes, I can. I got myself this far—”

“Then you’re a fool. You’ve probably damaged your leg irreparably and will limp when it heals.”

“I might be a fool, but I’m also a survivor. I will live for the sake of this little one.” She rubbed her stomach and glared at him defiantly.

Greyson suppressed the flicker of pride that arose within in him. Damn, but she was a fighter. He liked that. “Fine. You want to live for the child. Well then, give it a chance. Let me help you.” Holding out his hand, he kept his gaze steady as he stared into her liquid brown eyes. The girl hesitated and then placed her hand in his. As his fingers closed around her fine bones, he knew he was lost. Somehow, in a matter of minutes, the girl had done what others had spent years trying to do. She’d slipped past his protective shield and made him remember that he did have a heart.

Things happened quickly after that. He called for his car to be brought around and they drove to his house. She refused a hospital and barely agreed to have a private physician look at her. Amazingly enough, the doctor stated she was bruised, but otherwise fine. Greyson declared the man a fool, whipping back the covers—much to the girl’s embarrassment—and demanding that he look at her broken leg. The doctor raised his eyebrows and Greyson managed to muffle a cry of surprise when he realized that the broken leg was no longer broken.

For probably the first and only time in his life, he’d gaped like a fish, only the silent plea in the girl’s eyes keeping him from commenting on the startling phenomenon. The leg had been broken, he knew it. And her arm was fine, too! As he stared at her face, he noted that even the cuts and bruises seemed less severe, some barely noticeably. Once the physician had left, he demanded an explanation. Shouts, tears, even threats ensued before she finally crumpled under the force of his personality and explained.

At first he refused to believe her story, but the more she spoke, the more it made sense. Her name was Luisa and she was a Lycan or shape-shifter. She'd been promised to her pack's Beta, but fell in love with another. When it was discovered that she was with child, her lover had been killed and she was severely beaten for her transgression. That night she ran away, knowing her child would be taken from her and that her own future would be nothing, but misery.

"I shouldn't be telling you this. But," she explained. "They would kill me anyway, in the end. You don't betray the ruling family as I did, and live long afterwards." She moved to get out of bed. "Thank you for giving me a place to rest. Unfortunately, my presence endangers you and your household. I'd better leave before they track me here."

Greyson scoffed. "You'll stay in bed until I decide you're well enough to get up. And I have half a dozen armed bodyguards, so your werewolf friends don't worry me."

"You should be worried. Two of Pablo's enforcers could take out all your bodyguards in seconds. The threat they represent is not to be dismissed."

He could tell her fear was real. Well, his business was done anyway. "Fine. Then we'll leave as soon as my private jet is ready."

"Leave? For where?"

"America, of course."

"There's no 'of course' about it! I barely know you. I'm not travelling halfway around the world with a man I just met." She folded her arms and glared at him.

"And what's the alternative? By your own admission, it isn't safe for you here. How far will you have to run before you're out of the reach of this Pablo you so fear?"

Luisa was silent for a moment before reluctantly acquiescing. A few hours later, they were in the Greyson Inc. jet, heading to the States and leaving the danger behind, or so he'd thought.

The next year had been the happiest he'd ever known. Luisa was his constant companion, and the child she eventually bore was like his own. Baby Cassandra—named after his mother—was his delight and life couldn't have been better. If at times, Luisa seemed a bit distant, he put it down to being tired. A newborn was a great deal of work, after all.

Cassandra was four months old when Luisa came to him with her plan. She wanted to go back to Spain to see her family. Werewolves, she explained, were social creatures. While she loved him, she also missed her family and wanted them to know about the baby. He doubted the



safety of this course of action and they argued bitterly before he finally gave in, though not without taking every possible precaution.

They would stay in Portugal near the border and she would cross over, quickly visit her parents and then return. It would be a quick, secretive meeting. Greyson wanted to go with her, but she insisted he stay behind to watch Cassie. He argued for her to take bodyguards, but she would only agree to one person, following at a distance, so as to not draw attention to herself...

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"I never should have let you go," he whispered to the smiling woman in the photo. "I knew something would happen. How those murderous bastards ever got wind of your presence, I'll never know." Greyson swallowed hard and pushed aside the memory of finding her broken body dumped in a ditch alongside that of the lone bodyguard. They'd both been mauled to death.

He'd wanted revenge, but fear for Cassandra had him fleeing the area instead. If they ever found the baby...

A light tap on the door had him hurriedly putting the picture away and straightening in his chair. "Come!"

Franklin, his butler, entered the room. The man was one of the few persons Greyson trusted implicitly. They'd been together for years. "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. Cook is wondering how many for dinner."

"Just myself, Franklin. She can send a light meal up to Cassandra's room, but she might not be awake enough to eat it."

"Very well, sir. And how is Miss Cassandra this month?" Franklin had been with him even before Luisa and Cassandra entered his life. He knew the whole sordid tale.

"The medication is working. No sign of a change yet."

A smile spread across the butler's usually passive face. "I'm glad to hear it, sir. I'm not sure what we'd do if she ever did transform." The man hesitated and then spoke again. "Have you had any news about finding a pack here in the States?"

"I'm on the trail of one. It looks promising."

Franklin fidgeted nervously for a moment. "Begging your pardon, sir. But how do you know an American pack would be willing to accept her?"

Greyson tried to hide his concern by clearing his throat. "I don't. That's why I've sent someone else in ahead of time. To test the waters, so to speak and see if they're receptive or not."

The butler nodded. "That would be Ms. Greene."

“Correct. Their reception of her will let me know if it’s safe to have Cassie approach or not.”

“But what of Ms. Greene?”

“If she safely makes contact, all the better for her. If she doesn’t, well... collateral damage does occur. It’s regrettable, but the woman isn’t my primary concern. Cassandra is.”

Franklin nodded again. “True. I’ll tell cook about dinner.” He gave a slight bow and left.

Rubbing his chin, Greyson considered the situation. Given what Luisa had told him and the cold facts of how she’d been treated by her own kind, he was reluctant to introduce Cassandra to other werewolves. Unfortunately, he also recalled all that he’d seen during his time with Luisa and the information she’d shared with him about transforming with the moon, blood bonds, fertility cycles... He couldn’t just let Cassandra flounder through life scared and uninformed. She needed the support and guidance of her own kind. After all, how long could he keep drugging her to prevent a complete change before she balked? The potent sedative that ‘Dr. Freidrich—a well payed actor—prescribed was doing the job for now but for how long? Already the girl was questioning subtle differences between herself and her peers.

Yes, finding a pack to accept her was the best solution. He wouldn’t live forever and she couldn’t be left alone. Wolves needed a pack. The trouble with that was their damned laws and secretive way of life. After all, you couldn’t just go out and advertise! And so, he’d spent the last seventeen years looking unsuccessfully for evidence of packs. Unsuccessful that is, until he purchased the Taylor picture. Now he knew there was a pack out there. The question remained, where?

Melody Greene was his hope. Aldrich scoffed at his choice, but after viewing secretly taped footage of her, Greyson knew she was the one. He’d watched the videos of her, fascinated by the subtle signs she was showing, signs he would have passed over if he hadn’t watched Cassie growing up. The way she lifted her head slightly and sniffed the air, the way she cocked her head to listen... Greene didn’t know it, but she had a werewolf someplace in her background.

It was an unexpected turn of good fortune, finding Ms. Greene. Greyson reasoned that if she found a pack and was accepted by them, then there was an excellent chance that they would accept Cassandra too. Once he knew their location, he’d establish Cassandra in a house in the area—with secret body guards strategically living around her of course—and then wait and watch for them to sense her.

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Melody had joined Ryne in pacing across the small room. The strange feelings inside her had subsided again; she refused to dwell on their meaning since she had a sneaking suspicion they meant that a certain arrogant werewolf was right and she was on the verge of transforming into one of the beasts. No, it was just too fantastical to believe. Instead, she'd concentrate on how to get out of this room before Aldrich returned.

"So, what are we going to do?"

Ryne ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know. I can't break us out of here."

"I thought werewolves had all these superhuman powers and stuff."

"Well, we do have keener senses and are relatively stronger and faster than humans, but there are limits. Bullet proof walls being one of them."

"Oh." She was sort of disappointed in that one. If she was going to be a werewolf—which she wasn't, she reminded herself—she'd hoped for a few more benefits than just being able to smell things really well. Where was the advantage in that? Mel suppressed a shudder as she imagined being keenly aware of the scent of public washrooms, garbage, and the cabbage her one neighbour was so fond of cooking. Ugh! Giving her head a little shake, she licked her lips and looked around for a sink suddenly realizing that she was thirsty. Strangely enough, there didn't appear to be one. Hmm... "Hey, Ryne?"

"Yeah?" He was examining the door hinges.

"You said you overheard Mr. Aldrich calling this a safe room, right?"

He grunted in acknowledgment.

"And if this is a safe room, people are planning on being holed up here for a while, correct?"

"That's usually what they're constructed for. What are you getting at?" He turned and looked at her.

"So shouldn't there be supplies? Food? Water? Communications? Maybe even a bathroom?"

He frowned and then stared around the room. "You're right. There should be. But there isn't."

"You know, it was always rumoured that the gangsters had secret rooms and hidden escape tunnels. Maybe Greyson has one in this place." She got up and began pushing the bench aside, stamping the floor with her foot, listening for a change in sound that might indicate a tunnel.

Ryne joined in the search, checking out the centre area of the room, then moving aside a table. Melody was near the window when her

stomping produced a hollow, drum like sound. They both looked at each other and grinned.

Melody dropped to her knees and Ryne rushed over to help her, both running their fingers over the floor, searching for a seam or finger hold. Soon they were pulling back a section of floor board.

"You were right!" Ryne smiled up at Mel as he lifted the heavy wooden panel. It revealed a dark tunnel leading to somewhere under the shed. He lay flat on his stomach and peered into the darkness. "It looks like there's a room down here. I'll go and check it out. You wait here."

Mel nodded in agreement. Usually she'd balk at being left behind, but she didn't like dark closed-in spaces and was still feeling a bit off. Just this once, she'd let Ryne have the fun.

After a moment, his voice echoed up at her. "It's a short tunnel and then there's a room at the end. I think there's also a way out through the sewer."

The sewer? She wrinkled her nose at the idea, picturing creepy crawly things and filth. "I'm not so sure about that, Ryne. There are probably rats down there."

"Ah, come on!" His voice held a teasing quality. "You're a big bad wolf now. You're not going to let little rodents best you."

"I'm not a werewolf!"

Ryne appeared at the entrance to the tunnel, shaking his head. "You'll have to face the fact sooner or later."

She folded her arms and gave him a mutinous stare.

"All right. We'll leave it for now." He rolled his eyes and held out his hand. "Come on down, Melody and don't worry. I'm big and bad enough for both of us. No rat in its right mind would bother me."

Reluctantly, she sat down and dangled her feet into the hole. "Whoever said rats are in their right mind?"

# Chapter 38

Aldrich slowly drove through the massive gates that marked the entrance of the Greyson estate and made his way to the safe room at the back of the property. He'd gone to his apartment to gather the small tool box he used to maintain his various listening devices and surveillance cameras. After all, he'd told Greyson he was adjusting the equipment, and he wouldn't put it past the man to check up on him.

Yes, Greyson was a suspicious bastard, but then he wouldn't have gotten where he was any other way. It was a cut-throat world and Aldrich had a grudging respect for his employer in that regard. On the other hand, the man was cold-hearted, arrogant, and likely to turn on you the minute you let your guard down. At present he was in Greyson's good graces, but it was a tenuous position at best. Greyson made a bad enemy, so Aldrich had sucked up, kowtowed, and carried out every task the man had set before him.

But not anymore. Melody Greene was going to be his ticket out. She was a werewolf and if Greyson was interested in werewolves then there had to be money in it somehow. Money was the only language Greyson understood. Some even rumoured that his heart was a bank vault. Well if that was the case, Leon Aldrich was about to make a personal withdrawal. He'd take the girl and tuck her away in his cottage—after all, he wasn't getting to use the place for relaxation as he'd planned that weekend; he might as well make some use of the expensive piece of property. Once she was secured, he could start putting out feelers among his old contacts, people associated with the black market who would know where he could get the greatest profit from her sale. Private collectors, scientists... Who knew where there might be a market for such a specimen?

Alternatively, he could keep her. Put her on display, charge admission, even rent her out... Briefly he'd considered the idea but then decided against it. A quick turn over would be the easiest way. Aldrich had a feeling that Greyson would be less than pleased when he realized

Ms. Greene never returned with a report. If he had the money from her sale stashed away, he could leave at a moment's notice if it appeared Greyson was going to lay the blame on him.

A less clever person would try to disappear along with Ms. Greene, but Aldrich knew if he suddenly quit, Greyson would be suspicious. It was better to stay around for a few months and then hand in a carefully worded resignation before slipping away to enjoy the fruit of his labours.

Aldrich smiled as he parked the car, noting it was about an hour until sunset. Greyson wanted him gone by then and he would be. He'd planned everything down to the last detail; had all the angles covered. Now he just had to get rid of Taylor, collect the woman, and be on his way. He stepped out of the car, the little tool box in his hand, and casually looked around. Excellent. No one in sight.

Pulling out the key, he unlocked the door, keeping his gun at the ready. He suspected they would try to attack the minute he entered the room. Ha! He was no fool, he was ready for them. Flexing his fingers on the gun, he took a deep breath, turned the handle, and then in a rush shoved the door open.

Muscles tensed, he braced himself for the attack. Somewhere in his mind he registered surprise that it wasn't happening immediately. His gaze quickly skimmed the room as he wondered from where the ambush would occur. Suddenly, the sweep of his eyes came to an abrupt halt. There was a gaping hole in the floor. Dropping his arm to his side, the gun dangled useless from his fingers. Damn! They found the escape tunnel.

Aldrich pocketed the gun and ran his hands agitatedly through his hair. This wasn't part of his plan! For a moment he let his fury get the better of him as he slammed his fist into the wall then kicked the table. Then, exerting the self-control he'd cultivated all his life, he pulled himself together and considered the options while rubbing his sore knuckles. He inhaled and exhaled deeply, forcing himself to focus on the end goal... He narrowed his eyes as his thinking came into sharp focus. They hadn't won yet. There were always other options if one was just clever enough and persistent enough to find them.

He widened his eyes as a possibility occurred to him. The route through the sewers was convoluted, involving crawling through sludge and pulling open a series of grates. There were also a few dead ends if one took the wrong turn. However, the above ground route to the culvert where the sewer ended could be traversed in but a short length of time.

Smirking, Aldrich exited the safe house and locked the door before taking off through the woods to the drainage ditch where his werewolf would be emerging.

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Cassandra rolled over in bed, cautious to not make any sounds that would indicate she was awake. She eyed the crack of light that appeared beneath the door that connected her bedroom to the sitting room. The faint sound of voices let her know that the nurse was engrossed in her favourite television show. In the week that the woman had been employed by her uncle, she hadn't varied in her routine, always watching the latest craze in reality shows at this time. Since the program lasted an hour, Cassandra calculated that she had plenty of time to sneak out, check the small hut at the back of the property, and be back in bed without anyone noticing her absence.

While it was still light outside, her room was dark due to the heavy curtains on the windows. This would work to her advantage on the off chance that anyone peeked inside to check on her. Climbing out of bed, she arranged her pillows to mimic the shape of a body. Then she drew the covers over them and stood back to admire the effect. It was a juvenile trick, but since everyone insisted on treating her as a child, she had no other recourse.

After giving the covers a final twitch, she hurriedly pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, slid her feet into her running shoes, and peered out the window.

She analysed the view. The trees cast long shadows in the late afternoon light; Cassandra's attention was caught by the vehicle parked on the gravel near the hut. Hmm... There was Mr. Aldrich's car. And he was exiting the hut and heading off through the woods. Now that was peculiar. Perhaps she'd follow him first rather than checking out the hut. Casting a final glance at the door to the sitting room where the nurse was likely still engrossed in watching TV, she exited her room and stealthily crept down the hallway.

There was an old dumb-waiter at the end of the hall. No one ever used it. In fact, its existence was almost forgotten. Cassie had used the fact to her advantage several times. Despite its age, the miniature elevator worked smoothly due to her application of baby oil to the pulleys and gears. With practised ease, she climbed in and lowered herself to main floor, just inside the kitchen pantry. Holding her breath, she listened as she heard Franklin speaking to Cook.

"Mr. Greyson will be eating by himself tonight."

“And Miss Cassandra?”

“He said you could send a light meal up to her room, though he doubts she’ll be eating much.”

“Poor dear, plagued with such dreadful headaches.”

“Indeed. Oh, and don’t forget to send something up to the new nurse.”

Cassie heard the cook tsking in what sounded like disapproval.

“Some nurse. She’s just here because she thinks it’s a cushy job. Hardly good enough for our young miss.

“I believe Mr. Greyson might be inclined to agree with you. I overheard him chastising her just half an hour ago. Apparently, Miss Cassandra changed all the clocks on her and the woman didn’t even notice.” Franklin spoke in a conspiratorial tone and Cassie clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. For all his supposed dignity, the man loved a good gossip and was nothing but a teddy bear inside.

Cook laughed. “Serves her right. You have to be on your toes around our little miss. She’s a sneaky one.”

With that the two servants could be heard walking away.

Cassandra opened the door a crack and peeked out. Seeing that the coast was clear, she jumped down, landing lightly on the balls of her feet. After closing the door of the dumb waiter, she quickly headed towards the rear exit.

Knowing exactly where all the sensors and security cameras were, she began the careful process of avoiding each device as she made her way towards the woods where Mr. Aldrich had disappeared from sight. It was the long way around and would give him a considerable head start, but it couldn’t be helped if she wanted to avoid detection.

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Greyson put down the financial reports he was trying to read and rubbed the back of his neck. He always got a strange feeling there when something was wrong. His mother had said it was the fairies trying to warn him of danger. At the time, he’d scoffed; his mother’s old Irish tales had meant nothing to him. Yet, over the years, he’d learned to trust that tingling feeling. It had kept him from bad business deals and at least one attempt on his life. The last time he had ignored the sensation, his beloved Luisa had died.

Pushing back his chair, he stood and concentrated on the feeling. On occasion, he’d get some indication as to where the trouble might be coming from, but usually it was just a sense of unease that made him extra alert to those around him and their possible motives.



Nothing, he thought, was happening tonight. No business deals. No guests. Hmm... Perhaps he should check on Cassandra. Maybe the little minx was up to something. As he climbed the stairs, a horrifying possibility crossed his mind. Had she only pretended to take her pill earlier on? Was she on the verge of transforming?

Greyson quickened his pace. The nurse was with her, but had no idea as to the girl's true condition. He wasn't about to trust such sensitive information to a temporary employee, and all the nurses were temporary. If he kept one around too long, they might become suspicious of the medication...

He gave the briefest knock on Cassie's door before pushing it open, without waiting for a response. A sigh of relief escaped him when he saw the lump in her bed. Turning to go, he noticed the window curtain had been pulled aside. Now that's strange, he mused. Hadn't he watched the girl close it? Pivoting on his heel, he studied the bed again, then stalked over. The lump was too large, too uniform... He yanked back the covers and found a row of strategically arranged pillows.

"Damn that girl!" He exploded, contemplating what he'd do when he finally got his hands on her. Didn't she realize the danger she was putting herself in? Logically, he knew she didn't, since she believed she merely suffered from migraines. But the part of him that was scared to death for her wellbeing wasn't yet willing to acknowledge calm reason. He threw the covers to the ground in fury.

On the off chance that she was still in her suite, Greyson barged into the sitting room, surprising the nurse who was biting her thumb and hugging a pillow as she watched TV.

"Where's Cassandra?" The barked question had the nurse jumping to her feet.

"In her room, resting. Just like always, sir."

"Like hell she is!" Grabbing the woman's arm, Greyson dragged her into Cassie's room and shoved her towards the bed. "Look. Pillows! Dammit woman, when did you last check on her?"

"N-n-not too long ago." The nurse stammered, nervously twisting her hands together.

"Well it's been long enough for her to slip out on you!" Greyson fumed as he tried to figure out where his young ward might have gone. Remembering the crooked curtain, he strode to the window and looked out. Cassie had been staring at something earlier today, but what? He studied the view and realized the small safe house was visible from this window. Had she seen him and Aldrich talking earlier on? If so... He

rubbed his chin. Aldrich's car was back. Could Cassie have gone to investigate? It was worth checking.

Turning he saw the nurse still hovering near the bed. The woman was useless. "You're fired. I want you out of here in less than an hour. Understood?"

The woman nodded, then burst into tears and ran from the room.

As Greyson hurried down the stairs, he considered calling the security guard that had remained on duty to help in the search for Cassandra. When he reached the main floor, he hesitated. What if she had transformed into a wolf? No, it was too dangerous. It was better that he looked himself. She'd listen to him, no matter what form she was in.

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Mel and Ryne crawled on their hands and knees through the sewer pipe. To Mel, it seemed like they'd been doing this for hours. Her knees were complaining from the unaccustomed use and her palms were screaming for mercy as tiny nicks and cuts abraded their surface. The bottom of the pipe was covered in a sludgy substance that hid rocks, twigs and other sharp bits of debris. It also made disgusting sucking sounds each time they moved as if it was trying to keep them from escaping its slimy clutches. Ryne insisted it wasn't a sanitary sewer, but rather one that was used to collect runoff from rain water. Mel dearly hoped he was right, but had her doubts given the stench that permeated the air.

At least they were no longer commando crawling on their bellies like they had been initially. After making their way through a series of mesh gates, the pipe had widened to a more comfortable height and they were now on their hands and knees. Finally off her belly and able to open her mouth without fear of ingesting the disgusting muck that splashed in her face, Mel made her feelings known.

"Ryne if we ever get out of this pipe, I'm never listening to another idea of yours again."

"I didn't hear you come up with a better one." He paused in his crawling and looked back at her over his shoulder. The lighting was almost nil, but Mel managed to make out his filth splattered face.

"Well, if you'd listened to me, we wouldn't have turned left at that last junction."

"So I made a wrong turn. With the fumes down here, I can't scent which direction fresh air is in coming from."

"But I said we should have gone right. If you'd listened to me we wouldn't be crawling backwards out of a dead end right now. We might even be out of here."

"It was only a short detour and besides usually werewolves have an impeccable sense of direction."

"Yeah, if they know where they're heading in the first place. We have no idea where this tunnel might be taking us."

"So, in other words, you think you could do a better job leading us?"

Mel hesitated. Could she? "Maybe... It probably couldn't be any worse."

"Fine. When we get back to the junction you're in charge."

"Oh." She hadn't really expected him to agree, but wasn't about to back down from the challenge. She kept crawling in reverse until they reached the relatively more roomy 'T' where the tunnel branched off. Wiggling herself around, Mel headed to the right and Ryne followed behind. He was soon muttering under his breath.

"Now what are you complaining about?" Mel peeked under her arm to look at him.

"Your feet are splashing this muck up into my face."

She smiled knowing he probably couldn't see. "Oh. So sorry. It's not like I had to put up with that when our positions were reversed and you were in the lead."

Ryne grunted, but kept quiet after that.

They crawled along in silence for a while. Mel mulled over the idea of turning into a werewolf, still not totally convinced, but realizing that perhaps, just in case, she should try to be open to the idea. It surprised her that she hadn't freaked out more when Ryne changed in front of her, but she supposed the clues had been there all along. Her subconscious must have been processing and accepting them for a quite a while so that when she was told, it wasn't too big of a leap to acknowledge werewolves existed. As for turning into a werewolf herself, if she did actually have those genes within her, then there was no use crying and complaining about it. It was a done deal.

Mel was, if nothing else, practical and decided she'd just make the best of the situation. In a way, it was sort of sexy, the idea of shifting shapes. She wondered if her strength would increase to a level similar to Ryne's, or if being a werewolf with mixed blood created certain limitations. Hopefully, it would tone her muscles and increase her metabolism so she could eat as much as she wanted without any adverse effects. A smile

spread across her face at the idea of being able to add whipped cream to her cafe mochas and not feel even the slightest twinge of guilt.

Lost in that happy thought, she suddenly let out a shriek as something cold and slimy grabbed at her ankle.

"Shh! Are you trying to let everybody within a ten mile radius know where we are?"

She looked back realizing that it was Ryne's hand grabbing her lower leg, not some sewer monster. "What?" Frowning in irritation, she jerked her leg away.

"We're getting near the end of the tunnel!"

Mel peered ahead, but saw no sign of light. "How do you know?"

"The air's different."

She sniffed. It still stunk to her. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. It's slightly fresher which means an exit is coming up."

For a moment she contemplated gloating that she was the one to lead them to the exit, but Ryne continued speaking, and the opportunity passed. "When we get out, I have to find a telephone fast. It must be past my check-in and Kane will be worried sick. I don't want him doing anything rash."

She furrowed her brow, trying to recall all that Ryne had told her. "He's your brother, right?"

"Uh-huh. And if I don't contact him soon, he's going to assume the worst. He's probably already dispersed most of the pack. I have to tell him to hold off on phase two. There's still a chance I can fix this mess."

"Faze two? That's where they all..." She hesitated to speak the words. "Take poison?"

She could almost make out Ryne's grim expression. "Yes. The pack self-destructs so when outsiders come looking for a bunch of werewolves, they'll only find dead bodies."

"But wouldn't autopsies show that they weren't human?"

"No. When a werewolf dies, within minutes the trace elements of magic that make us what we are disappear."

They were both silent for a moment then Ryne sighed heavily. "Anyway, as we near the entrance, be as quiet as possible just in case anyone is about."

Mel nodded and resumed crawling as quickly as possible, all too aware of the deadline they were operating under.

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Helen wrapped her arm around Kane's waist as the last of the vans drove out of sight. She patted the Alpha on his back, offering what little

comfort she could. He'd just watched most of his pack leave, including his mate and unborn child. The feeling of loss must be incredible, even worse than when her Zack had died. It had been difficult—for weeks she'd been inconsolable; the aching void within making her wish she too were dead. But at least she'd still had her daughters and the rest of the pack. For Kane, however, he was on the verge of losing everything. It was an Alpha's worst nightmare. Sworn to protect his pack, the feeling of failure would be overwhelming.

"Kane?"

"Hmm?" His gaze didn't leave the driveway, despite the fact that it was now empty.

"Do you want me to go around and hand out the vials?" It was a grim job, handing your friends a packet of death, but she'd do it, to spare him. Kane had been good to her and she owed him. When she'd found herself widowed and no longer Alpha female, Kane could have insisted that she leave, but he hadn't. Instead he'd let her stay in the pack house and keep many of her previous duties. The familiarity had been a great comfort to her until she'd found her feet again.

"No, I'll do it. It's my job." He finally looked at her and gave a half smile. "You know Helen, I keep thinking that if I stay here and look hard enough, I'll still be able to see them; that they won't really be gone."

Helen gave him a one armed hug. "I know. When we buried Zach, you had to drag me from the cemetery. As long as I stood there, he seemed nearer. By walking away, I had to admit to the fact that we were separated forever."

Kane looked down the road once more. "Helen?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you believe in an afterlife?"

"I think so. I can't believe that a love as strong as mine was for Zach can just disappear. I like to think that it somehow lives on and we'll be together again."

"I hope you're right, Helen. I hope you're right."

# Chapter 39

Ryne watched the darkness of the tunnel slowly dissipate as the entrance approached. Apparently the sun hadn't set yet. Melody gave a tiny squeal of excitement and crawled even faster, the movement of her feet kicking the filthy water into his face more than ever. He slowed his pace, dropping farther behind her to avoid the splashing sludge.

When she reached the end of the tunnel, a relieved sigh echoed back towards him. Ryne smiled watching her climb out, while thinking she really had been a trooper throughout their underground journey, especially since he strongly suspected she didn't like dark, enclosed places.

He could see her legs as she stood at the tunnel's entrance. She lifted one foot as if to step away, but then stopped mid-stride. He paused, somehow sensing all was not well though unsure what it might be. The answer came soon enough as he heard Aldrich's self-satisfied voice.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? Why, it's my runaway werewolf bitch. Very naughty of you to try to escape me. Where's Taylor? Hiding in the tunnel behind you?"

"No! Um, I mean he was behind me for a while, but..." Ryne could almost hear Melody's mind sorting through various scenarios that might explain his absence. Keeping his ears tuned to what was going on outside, he slowly began to move deeper back into the pipe.

"Speak up girl? Where is he?"

"Well, he started to follow me, but he's scared of small dark tunnels and rats so he went back."

Ryne bit back an oath. He was not afraid of the dark! Still, it was quick thinking on her part.

"You won't mind if I check out your story will you?" There was definitely doubt in Aldrich's voice.

Ryne heard footsteps approaching and scooted even farther back into the pipe. A sliver of light played off the walls, but didn't reach where he was. Aldrich must have had a small flashlight with him, perhaps the

type that also served as a keychain given the fact it wasn't very powerful.

"See? I told you he was too chicken to follow me." Ryne could just picture the smug look on Mel's face.

Aldrich's laugh was tinged with derision. "I should have known. Those artsy types are usually nothing but insipid weaklings. Never mind, I locked the door of the safe house so he can't get out that way. I'll finish him off later."

Melody spoke again. "Listen Mr. Aldrich, I don't have your stupid report with me, but if you let me go back home, I can print a copy for you."

"Even if I still wanted the report, it wouldn't be a wise move. I imagine the area is cordoned off as a crime scene by now."

"Crime scene? What do you mean?"

"Didn't I tell you? Your friend—I believe she said her name was Lucy—surprised me when I went to your apartment. Unfortunately for her, I have very quick reflexes. When I left, she was next thing to dead, lying in a pool of her own blood."

"No!" The pain in Mel's voice was undeniable.

Ryne had to steel himself not to rush out and comfort Mel. He hadn't told her about the waitress, wanting to spare her the grief for as long as possible. Damn Aldrich! The fucking bastard sounded almost happy to share the news with Mel. Maybe it was even a strategy on his part, delivering bad news just to unnerve her so that she'd be too shocked to think. Soundlessly, Ryne moved closer to the entrance again, trying to assess where Mel was in relation to the lawyer. The man probably had some kind of weapon, so just rushing out might be dangerous. Mel could get hurt and, in her newly transforming state, she probably didn't have sufficient healing abilities to deal with any kind of serious wound.

"So you see we can't go back to your apartment. However, the report is of no importance to me now. That was Mr. Greyson's project. Mine is quite different. You, my dear, are what I'm after."

"Me? Why?" From his new location, Ryne could just make out Mel's shocked profile.

"Aldrich!" Another voice entered the mix. It sounded winded, as if that person had been hurrying. Ryne had to restrain himself from poking his head out to see who had arrived.

"Mr. Greyson, sir. I wasn't expecting you."

"Dammit, Aldrich! Have you gone mad? I gave you orders that no one was to be here and now I find you traipsing all over my property! I've killed people for less and you damned well know it. Now what are

you up to? And... That's Ms. Greene isn't it? Why the hell is she in the middle of the woods with you?"

"I—" It seemed Aldrich was about to explain when Greyson interrupted him.

"Don't give me any of your bull crap, Leon. I'll deal with you later." Greyson's tone softened when he spoke next. "Ms. Greene, I'm happy to finally meet you in person. I take it you have my report on Taylor?"

"Not really, Mr. Greyson. You see—"

This time it was Aldrich who interrupted. "Both of you shut up. Greyson, stay where you are—she's mine. I don't know what your plans were for her, but she's going to make me a very rich man."

Obviously unused to such disrespect, Greyson blew up at the lawyer. "How dare you speak to me like that? If you're not careful, I'll have you terminated, just like your predecessor. Now, put that damned gun away and watch your impudence. And what do you mean rich? You told me she was basically penniless!"

There was a certain quality of delight in Aldrich's voice. "So you really don't know? Curious. Who would have believed a coincidence like this would occur? She's a werewolf, you old fool. The first damned werewolf ever captured."

Ryne chanced a brief glance outside. Aldrich hadn't put the gun away, though it was partially lowered as he glowered at Greyson. Greyson was staring at Mel with what could only be described as excited interest. "Really? She's a full werewolf?" He swung his head back to look at Aldrich. "How do you know?"

"I saw her start to change." The man seemed so self-satisfied that Ryne had to grit his teeth.

Greyson sounded urgent, almost desperate, as he addressed Melody. "Ms. Greene, I have to talk to you! I knew you had at least some wolf in your background, but I never suspected this. There are things I need to know, things you have to tell me!"

The sound of a gun being cocked had Ryne tense. Aldrich issued a warning. "Lay off, Greyson. She's mine. Any information she has belongs to me."

Melody began to move out of Ryne's field of vision. He frowned for a moment, but then realized she was walking away from the drainage pipe in a slow circle. A smile spread across Ryne's face. Without their knowing it, Melody was manoeuvring Aldrich and Greyson so that their backs were to him! He mentally congratulated her on the plan. It would make



it much easier for him to take Aldrich by surprise. His smile faded however, as he noted the quavery sound of her voice.

“Listen, I don’t know what the hell either of you are babbling about. For the last time, I’m not a werewolf! I’m just a reporter—a student reporter at that!”

Ryne bit his lip in concern. The stress of finding out about Lucy and of having a gun pointed at her was starting to show. Could it trigger a transformation as her inner wolf fought to rise up to meet the present danger? It was also getting later; he could feel the pull of the full moon himself and knew Melody would soon be helpless in the face of its power. Not willing to wait any longer, Ryne glanced outside, noticing the lengthening shadows cast by the surrounding trees. A grim smile graced his face. The encroaching nightfall was providing him with some cover. Seeing the others were focused on Melody, he silently slipped out of his hiding place, to the relative safety of a nearby bush.

Melody flicked a glance in his direction before concentrating on her adversaries again. However, it was enough for their eyes to meet; the brief look was sufficient. He knew she was ready for whatever course of action he took. Shifting into his wolf form, Ryne crouched, muscles tense and ready to strike.

Greyson seemed to be ignoring Aldrich. He looked beseechingly at Melody. “Ms. Greene. Please. I promise I won’t tell anyone about you. I... I know about the Keeping; how you protect your secrecy by eliminating those who have stumbled upon your existence. If you feel you need to take my life, so be it, but first hear me out. I need information about your people, not for myself or monetary gain, but for my ward, Cassandra. She’s one of you, though she doesn’t know it yet.”

Aldrich had a stunned look on his face as he stared at Greyson. “Your ward? What ward? Who—?”

At that moment, Ryne leaped out and tackled Aldrich. Greyson shouted. The lawyer’s gun went off and a scream echoed through the night.

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Bryan stared at his cards, supposedly concentrating on his poker strategy. In reality, he didn’t even see the cards before him; it was the image of the clock that floated in front of his eyes. It was well past the scheduled check-in time but Ryne hadn’t called. The phone was working, there were no text messages, no e-mails. Where the hell was their Alpha?

Kane was wondering the same thing. Just half an hour ago he'd had a blistering conversation with the other pack's Alpha and was glad he wouldn't be in Ryne's shoes when the two finally talked. It was understandable that Kane was on edge; having a vial of liquid death in front of you while you waited for the call to drink it, would be enough to sour anyone's mood.

Ryne would call. Soon. Bryan kept the positive thought foremost in his mind, despite the weight in his stomach that increased with each minute that past. What could be keeping him? Surely, Mel wouldn't have turned on him. Not Mel...

"Are you in or out?" Marco's voice brought him out of his reverie. That morning, he'd invited Marco and his family to check out Stump River, thinking it would help to fill the time. Olivia and Tessa hadn't come; the baby was fussing and Tessa was too nervous. Marco, however, had welcomed a chance to see his new home and, having had the grand tour, was now keeping them company as they awaited Ryne's call.

"Er... out." Bryan folded his cards and threw them down on the table.

Marco reached out and flipped them over. It was a full house. "Is this is how you play poker in Canada...?"

"Sorry." Bryan ran his hands through his hair, then roughly pushed his chair back. "I can't concentrate. I keep waiting for the damned phone to ring."

"As do we all." Slowly Marco gathered the cards and began stacking the chips. "Have patience. He will call."

"But what if he doesn't?" Daniel looked up from the computer game he was playing. His face reflected his worry.

Bryan studied his friend, noting the anxiety in his voice, how his muscles were tensed. Daniel was as worried as he was but... Damn! He was Beta, and while Ryne was gone, he needed to take responsibility for the safety and well-being of the pack. That included putting on a brave face, even when he didn't really feel it. Lifting his chin, he straightened and spoke in a firm, confident voice. "Marco is right. I'm was just being a nervous old woman. Of course, Ryne is fine. He's gotten through worse scrapes than this. By now he's talked to Mel, found out there was nothing to worry about after all and they're reconnecting, if you know what I mean." He ended the comment by wiggling his eyebrows and giving a knowing look.

"Reconnecting?" Marco frowned over the word, then grinned. "Ah! Ryne y Mel estan haciendo el amor."

Daniel visibly relaxed and gave a brief chuckle. "If that means they're having sex then, yeah."

"Our Alpha is—how you say—a ladies' man?"

"Something like that." Bryan smiled realizing that Marco was trying to lighten the mood as well. He sat down again and tried to keep the conversation going. "So, what was your old Alpha like?"

Marco snorted. "He is a bastard and not fit to rule."

Bryan leaned back, propping his feet on the table and folding his arms behind his head. "A real nice guy, then."

For a moment Marco looked confused but then seemed to grasp the sarcasm of the statement. "Yes. A real nice guy. He allows no discussion or debate; pack meetings are never held unless he is issuing orders and anyone who disagrees, 'disappears' without a trace."

"He kills them?" Daniel set down his computer game and leaned forward, obviously intrigued by the tale.

"There are no bodies, but everyone knows." Marco narrowed his eyes, his voice sounding bitter.

"And no one tries to stop him?" Bryan found it hard to believe that in this day and age, a pack would put up with such treatment.

"Many have tried and have died in the attempt. Most of my pack have learned through experience to endure the misery and live in hope for the day he finally grows old and weak. A few, such as myself, have dared to leave, but it is dangerous."

Daniel frowned and seemed to study Marco intently. "You left for Tessa, right?"

"Yes. For her and for my son. It is no way to live. I wanted better for them."

Bryan frowned. "I'm surprised he's that powerful, at such a young age."

"Who said he is young?" Marco queried. "Pablo turned forty-five this year. He's been Alpha for almost eighteen years now."

"Forty-five? And he was after Tessa? No wonder you wanted to leave." Daniel shook his head looking disgusted. "Why doesn't he have a mate already?"

"He's had three, but they were all 'accident prone.' I was not willing to risk Tessa having a similar 'accident'." Marco clenched his fist and a muscle in his jaw throbbed.

Bryan got up and clapped a hand on Marco's shoulder in a gesture of support. "I'd have left too, man." He wandered to the window and

stared outside. "You'll find things are really different here. Ryne is a great Alpha and he's real easy to get along with."

"And even if you mess up, he doesn't stay angry for long." Daniel chimed in.

Marco nodded. "I look forward to getting to know him better when he gets back."

Right, Bryan thought as he surreptitiously checked the time and then looked at the phone, willing it to ring. When he gets back...

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Cassie ran as fast as she could towards her uncle's house. Her heart was pounding so loudly that she couldn't hear anything but its thump. Frantically, she kept looking behind her while trying not to stumble over the exposed tree roots that criss-crossed the ground.

She'd been hiding behind the trees, eavesdropping on the confrontation that seemed to be taking place between her uncle, Mr. Aldrich and a young woman named Ms. Greene. The conversation hadn't made much sense, but she'd listened intently when her uncle began claiming she was like the woman, the one they said was a werewolf. It had seemed ridiculous and she even questioned her own hearing until she saw a man crawl out of the culvert and turn into a wolf! The wolf had attacked Mr. Aldrich and as the lawyer fell to the ground, his gun went off.

It had seemed like a scene from a horror movie. The wolf snarling; its teeth gleaming. A surprised cry coming from her uncle and then... Oh God! The flash of light and noise as the gun discharged. Her uncle falling... The image of a bullet hole, like a third eye in his forehead, bits of blood spattered on his face as he dropped to the ground. Her knees grew weak at the memory and she paused for a moment, clutching a tree for support while trying to gather her strength and force her panicked mind into some form of order.

She hadn't known what to do. Naturally, she'd screamed. Who wouldn't? And then, as she'd stood transfixed by the unfolding events, the wolf had actually looked up at her! Its eyes seemed strangely intelligent as if it were noting what she looked like and planning her fate. That one fact had leaped out at her, even though the look had been momentary. In that instant she recalled her uncle saying werewolves killed those who discovered their secrets. Mr. Aldrich had found out, and the wolf was attacking him. And she'd just watched the man change into a wolf, so now she knew the secret, too. Of course, she'd be next in line!

Pushing off from the tree, she ran to the house as fast as possible. She entered through the front door; all thoughts of stealth forgotten. Time

was of the essence now. She had to get away. Quickly she entered her uncle's office and yanked open the drawer where she knew he always kept some spare money. She grabbed a handful of bills before rushing upstairs. In her room she threw open drawers and closets, grabbed a gym bag and began randomly throwing clothing into it. In the bathroom, she swept the contents of the vanity in on top of her clothes, grabbed her purse, and thundered down the stairs.

Franklin must have heard her for he appeared in the front foyer, looking concerned. "Miss Cassie! What's wrong?"

"Franklin, Uncle is—" Her voice caught on a sob and she was unable to get the word out. Even as Franklin stepped towards her, she was reaching for a set of keys from the hall table. "I'm sorry. I can't stay. He saw me."

"Who miss? Who saw you? And where is Mr. Greyson?" Franklin peered behind her as if trying to find his employer. When the man in question didn't appear, he walked towards Cassandra, his arms held out in front of him. "Why don't you just calm down and let me help you?"

Cassie shook her head and backed away, tears streaming down her face. The man had been her confidant for years, but this was too dangerous. She couldn't tell him, couldn't endanger him. "Franklin, I'm sorry!" She spun around and ran out the front door to the converted carriage house where the cars were kept.

Behind her, she could hear Franklin calling her name, but she didn't stop to answer. Yanking open the door to the garage, she pressed the remote control that opened the large external doors, then hurried to her car. Throwing her bag in first, she slid into the seat and started the engine. Impatiently, she waited for the garage doors to open, her fingers flexing nervously on the steering wheel. Come on, come on, she muttered under her breath. Her peripheral vision caught sight of Franklin hurrying towards her. Damn! Silently she asked for forgiveness, then slammed her foot onto the accelerator, the roof of her car scraping against the partially opened doorway as it shot forward. Without a backward glance, she sped away.

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Ryne saw the young girl and quickly took note of her appearance before swinging his attention back to the man beneath him. Aldrich was struggling for breath, his throat partially ripped open, blood spilling onto the ground. Ready to finish the deed, a cry from Melody had Ryne once again looking away from his victim.

Melody was curled into a fetal position, her body shaking uncontrollably, her face contorted in pain. Swiftly Ryne changed forms and rushed to her side, gasping slightly from the effort of changing forms in such quick succession. Pulling her into his arms, he murmured words of encouragement.

“Fight it Melody. Don’t give in. Think about being human. About driving your car, using your computer, drinking that damned coffee you love so much.” He rocked her back and forth praying she could maintain her form. Looking around, he realized sunset was just minutes away. The time of the full moon was almost upon them! Nadia’s words rang through his mind. ‘In the end she’ll either live or die, depending on how much her body can handle.’

How much could she handle? Ryne knew the pull of the moon only too well. The need clawing inside you, fighting to get out; wild thoughts invading your mind as the wolf became dominant, fighting to take over the human side. It was an irresistible feeling that had the person reaching and striving for release. It took inner strength and discipline to resist the ancient instincts.

Yet Melody wasn’t ready; only part of her body had undergone the genetic changes needed. Could anyone live when their bone structure shifted to that of a wolf, while all their internal organs were still human? Brain signals would be speeding up her human heart to that of an animal, but how would it react to the strain? Ryne clutched her closer, knowing he wouldn’t be able to bear it if she died. Melody was exasperating and smart mouthed, quirky and headstrong, but he loved every inch of her. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, squeezing tightly. She had to make it!

Knowing he had to get her someplace dark, away from the moon’s effects, he picked her up and eyed the pipe they’d crawled through, but quickly dismissed the idea. It was too small for him to carry Melody and she was in no fit state to crawl. He glanced around for a solution, then saw Aldrich’s key chain on the ground; the little flashlight was cutting a small beam across the ground.

At least the man had proven useful for something. Snatching up the keys, Ryne gave the lawyer one last glance, before turning away. Melody needed him. He’d come back to deal with the bastard once she was safe.

Even in human form he was able to move more swiftly than a normal person might, cutting through the trees and attempting to avoid the low hanging branches that clutched at his hair and ripped his skin like the

talons of some evil creature. Ignoring the pain, he was acutely aware of Melody's laboured breathing and the rapidly setting sun. A wash of blood red was beginning to flood the sky by the time he arrived at the safe house where Aldrich had left his car. Setting Melody gently inside the vehicle, he buckled her in, jumped into the driver's seat, and sped away. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, he noted the large house in the background was ablaze with lights and there were at least two figures running in front of it. His jaw clenched and he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Where had that young girl gone? Who had she told? Beside him, Melody gave another pained cry and he refocused on driving. She needed him right now; the rest he'd figure out later.

If he remembered correctly from the taxi ride to the estate earlier, there was a shopping mall with an underground parking garage just a few miles away. The lowest level should provide a sufficient shield.

As he drove, he glanced at the speedometer. The needle crept ever higher, trees and sign posts flashing by as he ignored the posted speed limits. His heart pounded heavily, while Nadia's dreaded words played over and over in his head; 'lives or dies,' 'too risky,' 'how much can her body handle.' The phrases swirled in his mind.

Negotiating a sharp turn, something thumped against his hip. Glancing down he spied the cell phone that Aldrich had taken from him earlier. A quick look at the clock on the dashboard had him swearing. Shit, his agreed upon check-in time was past! He prayed Kane had held off, that he hadn't made any rash decisions!

Ryne fumbled with the phone, speed dialling his brother's number.

"Damn you Ryne! Where the hell have you been?" Kane's voice roared in Ryne's ear.

A wave of relief washed over him. If Kane was still alive and angry, then the rest of them were safe too! "I don't have time to explain. Just hold off. Don't do anything, hold off!" Melody whimpered beside him and he looked at her, causing the car to swerve. "I'll call you later!" He shouted the words over his brother's swearing and threw the phone down, concentrating on driving.

Shooting glances sideways, he noticed the air around Melody kept shimmering. Hell! Her change was getting closer. Could she fight it off? "Hang on Melody, we're almost there. Just a few more minutes, babe. Focus on me, on the sound of my voice."

Ryne babbled away. Teasing her, apologizing for the mess she was in, for how he'd treated her. He told her he loved her, that everything

would be all right. Bribes spilled from his lips; offerings of coffee and chocolate, giving her free rein in decorating the house in Stump River...

She was quieter now, her breathing seemed shallow, and her face was pale. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. God, how could such a string of unlikely circumstances ever have happened? He never had unprotected sex, yet around Melody, he just didn't think. And then the fight, his broken nose, her cut arm... The chances of those events occurring in the correct order and time frame were a million to one, and yet they had.

What had Nadia said? "If anyone were to ask before attempting this type of thing, medical advice would strongly discourage any genetic changes during a full moon. It's way too risky."

Yeah. Easy for her to say. He hadn't planned this, though. It was as if the fates had conspired against him. His eyes stung and he dashed his hand across them, trying to clear his vision.

'Lives or dies... dies... dies.' He shook his head, trying to dislodge the heart-stopping thought as a wave of icy fear encased him.



# Chapter 40

Kane threw the phone onto his desk in disgust.

"What's wrong? That was Ryne, wasn't it?" Helen's face was pale and there was a noticeable tremor in her hands as she pushed her hair back from her face. Like all the remaining pack members, her nerves were strung as taut as a fiddle string. She sat in a wing-back chair near the window, having chosen to spend her final hours with her Alpha.

"Yeah, that was Ryne."

"He didn't say—" She obviously couldn't finish the question, but Kane knew exactly what she meant. It was the question on everyone's mind. Was today the day they died?

"No. He said to hold off."

"Thank goodness." Her shoulders slumped and she leaned her head back, closing her eyes.

"He didn't say it was over, Helen. He just said to hold off."

"No explanation why?" Helen straightened, her expression curious.

"No. And then he hung up on me!" Kane stood up and began to prowl around the room. "I don't know what it means. Is the crisis over? Has he eliminated the threat or is there still a chance—?" He compressed his lips and ran his hands through his hair. "Dammit. I'm tired of sitting here on edge waiting for news. I have men and women all over our territory waiting for my orders. I can feel their fear, their mental pain... and I don't know what to say."

"But at least it wasn't bad news..." Helen clasped her hands tightly. "If he said to hold off then there's still a chance that everything will work out. It's a positive thing."

Kane growled, but conceded the point. "You're right. Sorry. My nerves are shot."

"And I'm sure Ryne's are too. This hasn't been easy for him, Kane, knowing that it was his picture that caused all this. He must feel horribly guilty. And if that girl—Melody—is possibly his mate, then he's been fighting every instinct he has—"

“Yeah. I know.” Kane sighed heavily and sat down again. “Patience isn’t always my strong suit.”

“Consider this training for when you’re a father. Then you’ll need all the patience in the world.”

Kane gave the briefest of chuckles, before picking up a picture of Elise that he had taken just days ago. She was wearing a loose white dress and her arms cradled the slight swell of her belly. He gently ran his finger over the picture, then set it aside. Picking up the vial of deadly poison that all the remaining pack had been issued, he twirled the blood coloured liquid within, watching as it flowed and shifted. “Yeah. Someday when I’m a father...”

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The shopping mall loomed ahead and Ryne forced himself to slow down, entering the driveway at a reasonable pace. His fingers drummed on the steering wheel as he waited in a long line of cars. Finally it was his turn at the gate. He collected his ticket from the attendant, and headed for the basement level. As the cool darkness of the cement structure closed around them, he listened intently for any change in Melody’s breathing. Was it deeper? More natural? He hoped so.

It was a multi-storey garage with a steep, winding ramp leading from level to level. Ryne concentrated on manoeuvring the twisting incline with as much speed as possible. The air grew progressively cooler as they descended and artificial lighting glowed overhead.

Finally reaching the lowest level, he drove to a poorly lit corner and parked behind a pillar, thankful that Aldrich’s black car would be relatively unnoticed in the gloom. He didn’t want anyone coming by to see what was going on.

Turning off the engine, he twisted in his seat and checked Melody. Her eyes were shut, her dark lashes fanned out over the pale shadowed skin below. She seemed more stable and when he touched her hand there was certain solidity or constancy of form; no shimmers distorted the air around her. Her muscles weren’t spasming. Slowly he unclenched his jaw. His plan seemed to be working.

Brushing his hand over her cheek, he noted that her skin was cool to the touch and her breathing was deep and even. No doubt exhausted from the strain, she had fallen asleep. He pressed a tender kiss on her forehead and then took a moment to lean his head back and thank the Lord that she’d managed to hold on.

It had been touch and go, but tonight was probably the worst. By tomorrow the moon would already be waning. With Melody one day

farther into her change and the lunar effects ebbing, it should be easier for her to withstand the transformation.

Closing his eyes, he ran through all the things he still needed to do. Calling Kane, of course, was paramount. The whole pack was waiting his report. He wished he could give them a definitive answer, but the truth was he still needed to check that Melody didn't have another copy of that report stashed away. Then he had to retrieve her laptop from the public locker where he'd stashed it. And of course, there was Aldrich. The man had been near death when he'd scooped up Melody and left. Surely no one would have arrived in time to save the bastard.

Ryne gave a dark laugh recalling the last time he had thought a villain was dead, only to have her crawl away when they weren't looking. Not this time. No assuming. He wanted to see a dead body before he told Kane things were one hundred percent safe.

Wearily, he picked up a cell phone to call Kane back. He imagined the other man was ready to rip a strip off him; after all, no one dared hang up on Kane Sinclair! About to dial, he caught sight of himself in the rear-view mirror and froze. His face was streaked with mud and his hair stood up on end. And, he didn't have any clothes on! His frantic form-shift to save Melody had caused him to miss a step. No wonder the parking attendant had given him a strange look! Giving a brief chuckle, he dialled Kane's number and braced himself for the coming onslaught.

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Cassie wearily got off the bus, dragging her small bag of possessions behind her. She ached from the stiff uncomfortable seats and, not for the first time, thought wishfully of the luxury vehicle she'd abandoned hours ago. Arching her back, she forced herself to forget the car. There was no time for regret; more pressing matters needed to be dealt with such as—she paused and surveyed her surroundings—where she was. It was obviously a bus station in a small town, but where exactly? All she knew was that she wasn't near her uncle's estate where he... She couldn't bring herself to finish the thought.

It was the middle of the night and the town was mostly in darkness. A motel across the street had a vacancy sign, so she crossed the road and entered the dingy front office. The clerk looked at her askance, no doubt wondering what illegal substance she was taking, then continued on with his phone call. As she waited for him to finish, she looked outside, catching sight of her own reflection in the darkened window; her eyes over-dilated and her face pale, framed by long unkempt hair. Shivers swept over her body as if she needed the next hit of her drug.

When the man finished his call, she explained what she needed and handed him a handful of bills. The clerk slid the key card over to her and she took it, giving a brief nod of thanks.

"I don't want no trouble, you hear? This is a clean, family motel." As he spoke, the clerk spat a wad of tobacco juice into a can on the counter.

Sure. A family motel. Cassie glanced around, noting the open can of beer on the man's desk, the porno flick playing on TV, and filthy, torn linoleum floor before looking back at him. "I won't cause any trouble." She exited the office and wrapped her arms around herself in a futile attempt to still the shakes that wracked her body.

"Damned druggies." She heard the man mutter just before the door swung shut.

As she crossed the parking lot and made her way to her room, she laughed darkly. It wasn't an illegal substance that was responsible for her present appearance. It was the damned migraine pills. She hadn't wanted to take them, but as the night advanced, the strangest feelings came over her; a tingling sensation in her arms and legs, a tension coiling inside her that made her shift restlessly as she drove. Fearful of being alone and sick while on the run from the terror she'd left behind, she'd finally pulled over and taken one of the pills. Unfortunately, a few miles later the pill had started to take effect and she'd been forced to abandon her car, realizing she was in no fit state to drive. Too scared to stay where she was, she'd found a bus station and taken the first available bus to... well... wherever she was now.

At the moment, she was too tired to care. Fumbling with the key card, she opened the door and went inside. A bed dominated the room and she stumbled towards it, desperately wanting to lie down and let the pills work their magic. For over a year, she'd hated the fuzzy, floating numbness the pills invoked. Now she craved the numbness and the deep dreamless sleep that followed. It would help her forget. Dropping her small bag of possessions on the floor beside the bed, she lay down, her eyes half shut.

The room was rundown, but appeared clean and a faint antiseptic smell lingered in the air. Shifting a bit, she managed to snag the blanket folded at the foot of the bed and wrapped it around herself.

Slowly she relaxed, her limbs feeling heavy. She'd been fighting the need to sleep for hours, not daring to do more than rest on the bus. Fear had forced her to keep watch, constantly checking if the bus was being followed and examining each new passenger that boarded. Of course the werewolf man had never appeared, but somehow she knew he

wouldn't just forget about her. If the bus driver hadn't finally told her it was the end of the road, she would have stayed on; constant movement made her feel somewhat safer.

Still, she was in the middle of nowhere. If she didn't even know where she was, then how could he? She knew there was a flaw in her logic, but at the moment she couldn't focus enough to decide what it was. Drifting in and out of consciousness, bits and pieces of the night's events played out in her mind, but it was as if she was detached, watching a movie where she didn't really care about any of the characters...

It was had been so weird seeing that man change into a wolf. There'd been a sparkling, wavering change in the air and then the man was gone and a wolf had stood in his place. It had been a massive, black creature with large white teeth. Then it snarled and leapt forward, so quickly it had been just a blur of black fur.

Her uncle had shouted in surprise and then the sound of a gun firing had filled the air. Her mind skittered away from the image of her uncle lying dead and instead focused on the wolf. The man inside the beast was still present. She knew it. Even though gore had dripped from its jaws, the eyes had been human, intelligent.

She was sure he would remember exactly what she looked like. The werewolf would hunt her down; never giving up until she was cornered and then...

A whimper escaped her lips at the thought of those large teeth piercing her skin and ripping her flesh. When she'd run, she'd had a quick glimpse of Mr. Aldrich. His throat had been torn open and blood poured from the wound. His hands had gripped the wolf's fur even as he struggled for air...

Cassie curled into a tighter ball. The floaty feeling was leaving already. Fear poured into her; fear and a crawling sensation as if her very skin was alive and had a mind of its own. The need for... something... was filling her and she shifted restlessly on the bed. Her head was starting to spin; she could actually hear the blood thrumming through her veins.

Thinking the first pill must have worn off and a migraine was looming, she sat up with difficulty and pulled her bag onto the bed beside her. Her fingers shook as she fumbled to find and open the medicine bottle. The cap came off and she spilled most of the tablets on the bed. Damn and double damn—she didn't want to waste any of them; who knew when she'd be able to get the prescription renewed. Strange, how the hated medication now seemed to be her friend.

Managing to pick one up, she swallowed it, almost gagging as she forced the pill down without water. A lamp was on the table by the bed and she reached to turn it on, but paused. Light made the symptoms worse, she'd been told. A sliver of moonlight was peeking in through a crack in the curtains and she used that to help her see the pills that were strewn over the bed. When all the tablets were accounted for and back in their bottle, she lay back down. Running her hands over her face, she tried to hold back the tears that suddenly filled her eyes. Her head was pounding. She wished she were home, but it was too dangerous now. Her uncle was gone; the wolf was after her... Her skin prickled again and she curled up in a ball once more, rubbing her hands over her arms in an attempt to ease the sensation.

What had her yoga instructor told her? Think of a happy place? She furrowed her brow. Where would she rather be right now? An amusement park? A museum? Vegas? She chuckled at that random thought, but then focused on the idea. She'd seen pictures of the place before. Bright lights, large crowds; crowds she could get lost in, so no werewolf would ever find her...

The image clarified in her mind. Gambling machines, showgirls, the hot desert, tourists... The patch of moonlight that splashed across her room became a spotlight, guiding people to their hotel, beckoning them to heed its call... A strange feeling came over her. Her whole body vibrated, it felt like her head was going to explode. She clenched her fingers around the strap of her bag, her muscles tightened and then the air seemed to shimmer...

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It was morning. Mel reclined in her seat as Ryne slowly drove the car out of the parking garage. They'd talked on and off throughout the night and she had finally accepted the truth of what he'd been telling her. She was becoming a werewolf. There'd been anger and tears; he'd apologized, even though forcing her transformation hadn't been intentional. Eventually she'd come to a sort of numb acceptance of the fact.

However, her whole life was changing now. She wasn't just Melody Greene, waitress and journalism student. Now she was Melody Greene, secret werewolf. From what she could gather from Ryne's 'crash course in wolves,' they were social creatures and lived in packs. There was an Alpha who kept everyone in line and made the important decisions, though pack meetings were held to discuss options. Full moons were a time to party and, if you were new to the whole werewolf thing like she

was, you had no control and transformed once a month. Older wolves could fight the effects if they wished, though most didn't.

It gave her a headache, trying to figure out how she'd manage. She'd have to lock herself up every month so no one would discover her secret, which would really play havoc with her job and her studies. Then there was going into heat once a season. Ryne had enjoyed explaining that one to her. Even in the darkness of the underground parking garage, she was sure he could see her face turning bright red. Just the thought of being turned on for a whole week, ready to jump the first male she saw, had her cheeks heating up.

"I know what you're thinking." Ryne leaned over to whisper in her ear, his tone teasing. He grabbed her hand as he steered the vehicle with the other.

His touch was somehow comforting, so she didn't pull away, even though his comment made her bristle. Deciding to put him in his place, she commented on his current apparel. "Actually, I was thinking how cute you look in those clothes. Short plaid golf pants are just so... you!" His expression made her laugh. "Well, you should be thankful Mr. Aldrich had a suitcase of clothes in the back and all those wet wipes. Otherwise we'd both still be filthy and you'd be naked."

Ryne grunted and Mel wisely kept silent for a while, watching the scenery. Eventually, Ryne spoke again.

"What are you really thinking about?"

"I'm just trying to figure out how I'll manage being a werewolf in Chicago."

"In Chicago?" He looked surprised.

"Well, where else would I be?"

"Back in Stump River, with me." Ryne stated the fact as if it were a foregone conclusion.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah."

"Says who?"

"Says me!"

"And what if I don't want to go?" She pulled her hand away and crossed her arms over her chest, turning to stare out the window. Ryne didn't respond and she checked on him out of the corner of her eye. He was gripping the steering wheel hard enough that his knuckles were turning white and a muscle ticked in his jaw. She looked away and they drove in silence. Finally, he sighed and spoke in a low voice.

"Why? Why don't you want to go back? Is it too quiet? You don't like my house? The lack of a coffee shop?"

She shrugged and picked at the material of the seatbelt.

"Is it me?"

His voice sounded uncertain and when she looked his way, there was a general air of hurt about him.

"Well... "

"Melody, I apologized for what I said that last day in Stump River. I didn't mean any of it. It was all because of the Keeping. You were asking questions and I couldn't provide any answers. If you found out, and then told someone else... " He sighed. "Your life was at stake. Your life and the lives of my brother's entire pack. I couldn't take the chance... "

"Why didn't you just trust me?"

"It's hard to explain. It's almost bred into us. The need to hide; to not let outsiders in; to be suspicious of human motives. Our people were persecuted for millennia, almost hunted to extinction. Centuries of distrust are hard to ignore. Even when a human is your... friend... you tend to hold back."

"I suppose... I guess I have forgiven you, though you didn't need to be quite so mean."

Ryne chuckled. "You're stubborn, Melody. If I didn't come down on you hard, you'd have just kept hanging around, trying to worm your damn interview out of me."

A guilty smile curved on her lips. He knew her so well.

"So you'll forgive me and come back?" Ryne sounded hopeful, but Mel wanted more.

"Why do you want me back?"

He shrugged. "Well... you're a werewolf now. You need a pack to help you. Going it on your own is tricky. Most lone wolves don't survive."

"So, my returning is totally for my own good." She raised her eyebrows, questioning his reasoning.

"Sure. You need a home. My pack needs more members. You like Bryan and Daniel. Oh, and did I tell you about the Loberos? They're joining us, too. There's Marco, his mate Olivia, their son—he's just a baby—and Marco's sister, Tessa. You'll get along great with them and Olivia is about your age, I think."

"Uh-huh." Mel stared out the window and fought to swallow past the lump in her throat. He wasn't saying anything about caring for her,



loving her. She'd been so sure last night, when she'd been almost delirious and fighting not to shift, that he'd said he loved her, but now...

She felt him flicking glances her way; sensed his worry, but had no inclination to talk any more. Ryne was arrogant, rude, and domineering. He was also clever and witty, courageous and strong, good looking, sexy and, when she'd really needed it, he'd been gentle and tender. Damn, she hated to admit it, even to herself, but she loved the man. Still, if he wanted her to be a part of his life he'd have to do better than he had so far and clearly express his feelings. If she gave in to him now, it would set a precedent for the rest of their time together.

Instead, she focused on herself, pondering where her werewolf genetics might have come from. It could be her father or maybe somewhere in her mother's background. Mel had never known her grandparents so it was hard to tell. Likely it was a mystery that she'd never solve, especially since they had to keep their existence a secret. After all, she could hardly walk up to her mother and say 'Hey, are there any werewolves in our background?'

Of course, knowing how off-beat her mother was, the woman would probably dive into the whole concept with both feet. Thinking of all the trouble her mother might inadvertently stir up, Mel shuddered. Yep, asking her mother would definitely not be a good idea. They didn't need another round of this whole Keeping business, after all.

In the end it didn't really matter where the genes came from. She was a werewolf now. During the night, she'd confessed to Ryne that she'd applied to the Lycan link just as a joke and hadn't believed it when they said they'd research her background to see if she qualified. He explained how it worked and she gave a wry laugh thinking of how she and Beth had said she'd become a card carrying Lycan. Little did she know it would come true!

They arrived back at her apartment building and Ryne pulled into a convenient parking spot. He turned off the engine and stared straight ahead. Silence reigned.

Mel pasted a fake smile on her face. "Well, I'm home."

Ryne cleared his throat and turned to look at her. "It doesn't have to be. Your home, that is. You could live in Stump River. With me. I... I really want you to." When she didn't answer, he shifted closer and gently took her chin, turning her to face him. He stared intently at her, his gaze moving over her features before returning to her eyes, seeming to be searching for something. Finally, he gave a half smile and leaned

closer, brushing his lips over hers. "Melody, I love you and want you to stay with me. Please say you'll come back to Stump River."

Mel smiled against his lips, a feeling of relief washing over her. Yes, she thought. It hadn't been her imagination! "Took you long enough to say it." She murmured and then she kissed him back.

"I told you last night." Ryne had the faintest of pouts on his face.

"But I wasn't sure if you had really said it, or if it was all part of the whole transformation thing. I was having some pretty weird thoughts."

He wiggled his eye brows at her. "Wanna share?"

Mel flushed. "Maybe later." Some of her thoughts had been on the erotic side. She had a feeling that her wolf was going to be lusty creature and somehow Ryne knew it.

He kissed her again, gently at first and then with increasing passion. She returned the kiss with equal ardour, burying her fingers in his thick, silky hair, relishing the feel of his stubbly skin gently abrading hers. It was only when a group of teens walked by, hooting encouragement that they pulled apart. Ryne glared at them through the windshield and the young hooligans immediately fell silent, backing away and then turning almost as one to run down the street.

Mel chuckled softly. "I wish I could do that."

"I'll teach you." He brushed the hair from her face and then moved back to his own seat. They sat in companionable silence for a moment before Ryne looked at her regretfully. "So... what about your apartment?"

She pursed her lips and exhaled slowly, staring up at the window of her apartment unit. From what she'd been told, this was where Lucy had been... injured. Her mind shied away from using a more final term, as a faint hope fluttered within her. Perhaps...

Ryne cleared his throat and asked softly, "Do you want to go in, or should I just—?"

"No, I need to do this. Lucy's my friend, too." She drew a shuddering breath and squared her shoulders. "I'll go in. I imagine the police will have started an investigation and there'll be questions to answer. What should we tell them?"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it. As a werewolf, you get lots of practice creating plausible half-truths to cover things up." Ryne gently squeezed her hand, and then opened the car door.

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The time in the apartment wasn't pleasant. It was cordoned off and a police officer was on guard. Ryne did most of the talking, the lies rolling

out of his mouth with no hesitation. By the time he was done, even Mel half-believed the tale. The police officer allowed them in so Mel could check if anything was missing; the police were operating under the assumption that Lucy had walked in during an attempted burglary.

A chalk line showed where Lucy had fallen, in case the blood stains on the floor hadn't been sufficient indication. Mel's breath hitched as she stared at the spot before forcing herself to look away and blink rapidly, holding back the tears that threatened to fall.

The apartment units surrounding hers were unusually quiet, almost as if everyone knew of the tragedy and were paying their respects. As she walked into the living room, her footsteps echoed in the silence. Bits of dust floated on a sunbeam that had managed to work its way through a crack in the curtains, its brightness a stark contrast to the general air of gloom that pervaded the space.

As she looked around at the shabby furnishings, Mel realized that there wasn't much here that she would want to keep. A few personal papers, some photographs, a teddy bear from her childhood... but that was all. She forced herself to think dispassionately, making calm, logical plans. Call the phone company, contact the landlord... It wouldn't take much time to box up her things and have them shipped to Stump River.

While Ryne talked to the officer, she walked around the rooms, trailing her fingers over the back of a chair, adjusting a crooked picture on the wall. This place represented her past; a person she no longer was. It hadn't been much of a life, but it had been hers. She'd been free to come and go as she wished. There'd been no need to hide, no secrets to keep from friends. Sure, things had been tight but it had all been so *normal*. A part of her mourned the loss.

Eventually, she made her way back to the spot where Lucy had been struck down. A wave of grief and guilt washed over her. If she hadn't offered to take Lucy to Chicago, the woman would still be here, possibly planning a future with Armand. For that matter, if she hadn't taken the job interviewing Ryne, then Greyson would still be alive and that young girl wouldn't be completely alone in the world. Even Aldrich—slime ball that he was—would still be around. Whoever would have thought that trying to interview a photographer could have led to such an end?

She said as much to Ryne after they left the apartment. He shushed her, claiming that if you wanted to lay blame, it was his fault.

"If I hadn't taken that picture of Kane in his wolf form, Greyson wouldn't have gone looking for me. Sometimes the simplest of things

can cause a landslide. The main thing is that everything you did was done in all innocence. You had good intentions, that's all that matters."

"I suppose so... Ryne?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you give me a hug?"

"Sure." He slipped his arm around her shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze as they exited the building.

"We'll need to contact Lucy's family..."

"That would be me."

"You? You're her family? But you two—"

"No. I mean she didn't really have any family. I'll take care of things."

"Oh." Something Lucy had said on the flight to Chicago came to mind. "You might want to talk to Armand. Apparently, just before she left, he indicated he was interested in her."

"Damn!" Ryne shook his head. "I always wondered about that, but the man was afraid to make his move."

"Why?"

"Well... Lucy and I were casual so it didn't matter that she wasn't aware of my true self—that I was a werewolf, I mean. But Armand, he was always afraid to get close in case it did come to mean something."

"I don't understand."

"I suppose I can tell you. Remember, now that you're one of us, you're bound by the Keeping. You can't tell anyone." Ryne waited until she nodded and even made a 'cross your heart' gesture.

"Armand is a bear."

"A bear?"

"Uh-huh."

"You mean... ? I know he's big and has all that fuzzy hair, but..."

"He's a bear. A shifter or were-bear, though he hates the fact that it rhymes."

Mel leaned back and stared at Ryne in disbelief. "A were-bear? Exactly how many other shifter creatures are out there?"

"Almost any creature you can think of, though it's mostly larger predatory animals. Tigers, panthers, lions... I think the non-predators died out pretty early, not being able to defend themselves." Ryne reached over and ruffled her hair. "So you won't have to worry about were-rats in the sewers."

She cast a dirty look his way before climbing into the car. "Hey, what are we going to do about Aldrich's car? We can't keep driving around in it."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it. I've had experience with this type of situation."

"Oh, really? Exactly what type of experience? Grand theft auto?"

Ryne merely smirked and started the car, leaving Mel to wonder exactly what else might be hidden in his background.

# Chapter 41

*A week later...*

It had taken a week before the police wrapped up the investigation into what had transpired at the apartment. It was deemed a random act of violence, the perpetrator likely looking for something to steal and Lucy had unfortunately surprised him. It grated, that Aldrich would never be blamed for the crime, but involving him would result in too many questions and it wouldn't change the end fact.

With that settled, they'd returned to Stump River with Lucy's casket. Everyone mourned the loss of the friendly waitress, especially Armand. The twinkle was gone from his eye and he literally shuffled about the Broken Antler. After the memorial service, he disappeared for a week and she wondered if he had shifted into his bear form and was wandering the woods. Were his emotions any less intense when he was an animal? Or was he scratching trees and ripping open logs, trying to work the grief out of his system? Whatever the case, he eventually returned looking a bit haggard, but seeming to have found some inner peace.

Beth and Josh ran a long article in the paper, featuring quotes from the various citizens and random pictures of Lucy at several town functions as well as a full colour picture on the front page. It was nice to have the picture, giving them a last look at the young woman they were all fond of. The service had a closed casket, Ryne having stated that Lucy was always proud of her appearance and wouldn't appreciate people gawking at her. Mel agreed it was best this way.

Ruth declared that Lucy was a hero who had been trying to protect Mel's apartment and everyone else in town concurred. It wasn't the complete truth, but Mel knew the hero part was correct. While she'd never know exactly what happened that fateful day, she suspected that Lucy had been trying to defend her.

Life in Stump River slowly fell back into its usual rhythm, though there were a few changes. Ruth's seemed quieter, the Broken Antler a bit

more subdued. On the positive side, the Loberos moved to town and that caused quite a stir of speculation. And Ryne had some business to finish off with regard to the Keeping...

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Ryne sat down with Bryan and talked to Kane. They were trying to tie up all the loose ends.

"We have to take care of Aldrich. He knows too much." Kane's voice was firm as it came over the speaker phone.

"Agreed." Ryne rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I tried to get into the hospital several different times last week, but security around him was too tight. Greyson—the guy he shot—was a multi-millionaire and there's a big investigation going on. Since the police already knew what I looked like from seeing me at Melody's apartment, I didn't dare get too close." He growled in frustration. "Too bad the butler went looking for Greyson as soon as he did. If he'd waited just a bit longer, Aldrich might have been dead before the old man found him. At least the bastard won't be saying anything right away. The report Daniel hacked from the hospital's computer states that Aldrich has been unconscious for almost a week with severe damage to his windpipe and vocal chords."

Bryan chuckled. "Too bad Mel couldn't have held off a bit longer until you finished him off." Ryne flashed him a dirty look and he quickly qualified his answer. "Not that it's her fault in anyway, of course."

"Right." Ryne glared at Bryan once more before continuing. "He'll probably keep the story to himself since without proof, people will think he's crazy, but we can't take any chances."

Kane agreed. "I'll contact a pack I know in the area. Maybe they can find a way to get someone through that security net. We'll have to try to get them to burglarize the estate as well. I want the picture back before it can cause any more trouble."

"And we'll deal with the girl." Ryne suggested.

"Sounds good to me." Kane could be heard pacing in his office.

"A bit anxious, Kane?" Ryne teased.

His brother growled in response. "You know damned well I am. Elise is still away and I need her back here with me. The sooner we get Aldrich taken care of, the sooner I can allow the dispersal groups to return home. Until such time... Let's just say, it's best to give me a wide berth."

Ryne chuckled. "You could always go visit her and 'relieve' some of that tension."

The sound of pacing ceased. "You might be on to something, Ryne."

Ryne and Bryan exchanged glances, but kept their laughter in check. Both were aware of how devoted Kane was to his mate and knew the forced separation was hard to deal with.

Once the conversation was over, Ryne sighed heavily and rubbed his hands with his face. "That young girl—Cassandra—she's just a kid and likely scared spitless over seeing her uncle murdered, let alone watching me transform and attack Aldrich."

"You said Greyson apparently raised the girl since she was an infant and knew all along she was a werewolf? I wonder where he found her and how he knew what she was?" Bryan got up and started to pace the room.

"I wondered that, too. He said he was looking for a pack for her to join."

"But she doesn't know any of this?" Bryan queried. "Hard to believe if she's about seventeen, like you said."

"I only got a glimpse of her, but I'd say she was around that age and from the look on her face, I'd say she was in shock. I think she must have been eavesdropping. You know, I thought I scented another werewolf, but I was too caught up in what was going down to have time to check it out."

"But how could she not know she's a shifter? She should have gone through her first change."

"Greyson must have hid it from her somehow; maybe he drugged her each month." Ryne shrugged. "Now that she's out there on her own, who knows what might happen. We need to find her and bring her in before an outsider figures out what she is."

Bryan had been staring out the window, but turned as Ryne stopped speaking. "Ryne, I'd like to go. I've always been a pretty good tracker."

Ryne gave him a crooked grin. "I was wondering how long it would take for you to ask. You can go. Tomorrow. Mel's going to have her first transformation tonight and it would be nice if her whole pack was here to support her."

"Tonight? But it's not a full moon."

"Nadia said, given Mel's recent genetic changes and several partial transformations, it would be best to try her first full one without the added stress of a full moon."

"So... Have you told her *everything*?" Bryan had an evil glint in his eye.



“Well, not the clothing bit. I think she might be a bit pissed off when she realizes she’s the only one in the pack that won’t be able to magick her clothes on and off.”

“Oh, I’d love to hear that conversation.”

Ryne stood and headed towards his room, where Mel was rearranging the closets to hold her things. “Who knows? If she’s mad enough, you just might. Be listening for a loud scream of fury in about ten minutes.”

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Mel awoke slowly from one of the best sleeps she could ever recall having. Smiling contentedly, she stretched, pleased to realize that her muscles weren’t protesting. Last night she’d had her first real transformation into a wolf. It had been strange, but exhilarating at the same time.

She’d shifted with Ryne in the woods—just the two of them, even though it was tradition for the whole pack to be present. However, given her half-human background she’d been told she would probably lack some of the abilities the others possessed, specifically, she probably wouldn’t be able to magick her clothes back on. The news hadn’t sat well with her, and Ryne—with a little persuasion on her part—had made some readjustments to the usual ceremonies to accommodate her.

As they gathered in the woods that night, Bryan had teased her no end over the fact that she’d be naked.

“Aw, come on, Mel. Don’t be standoffish.” He pleaded.

“I’m sorry Bryan. I’m not being standoffish, but darn if I’ll waltz around in the woods buck naked in front of you and Daniel and the whole Lobero family.”

“We won’t mind.” Bryan had laughed before dodging the punch she aimed at him.

“It’s not just me. Our Alpha made the final decision.” She tried not to sound too smug about the fact. At first, Ryne hadn’t had a problem with the idea of her being naked in the woods with the rest of the pack. He’d even gleefully teased her about the fact for a while, but she’d skilfully turned the tables on him. Mentioning that Bryan and Daniel were both good looking, unattached males had been her starting point. After that, it had only taken a few more carefully chosen words to have Ryne seething with jealousy.

“That’s right. It’s my decision as Alpha.” Ryne slid into place behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist while nuzzling her neck. “No one sees her naked except me.” He looked up and growled at Bryan who paled and backed away.

"Uh, sure Ryne. Whatever you say. We'll just... uh... wait over there." He gestured vaguely to the north.

"Make sure it's really far 'over there' where you can't 'accidentally' peek." Mel warned.

Bryan winked, shot a nervous glance at Ryne, who was still growling lightly, and then walked away calling for the others to follow him.

The change had come amazingly easy to her, however the coordination needed to walk on all fours had been a bit difficult to master, let alone running and dealing with the amplified sensations coming at her from all sides. She did more than a few face plants before managing to walk far enough to greet her pack mates who had already transformed and were patiently waiting for her on the far side of the woods.

She'd soon adjusted however and enjoyed her first night running through the woods. In fact, she'd been reluctant to return home and Ryne eventually had to pull rank, nipping her heels so she'd follow him!

Now it was the morning. She lay in bed beside Ryne, still keyed up from the experience. He was sleeping peacefully, the blankets loosely wrapped around his waist. A thought came to mind and she grinned mischievously. Carefully sitting up, she slid the covers off him, revealing his naked body. Mmm... It was too yummy to resist.

Leaning forward she licked and nibbled at his ear, while her fingers traced patterns on his muscular thigh. Ryne just murmured and shifted slightly before settling into sleep again. Mel snickered to herself and kissed his jaw while her fingers walked up his hip to his belly button where she proceeded to trace circles around the interesting indent.

Again he stirred, his lashes fluttering, but still he didn't wake up. Glancing down, she noticed that at least a certain part of him was paying attention to her. Feeling bold, she moved lower on the mattress, then recalled something he'd said to her once. Lowering her head, she brushed her hair over the sensitive flesh and planted kisses along his burgeoning arousal. That got his attention!

"Melody!" Ryne half sat up, his voice husky with sleep.

Smiling up at him, she planted a kiss on the flared tip. "I remembered what you told me about long hair and how you liked to feel it brushing against you." She brushed her hair over him to demonstrate and he trembled in response, a hiss escaping his lips.

"Mmm... You're right. Never cut your hair."

"Never?" She gave it another swish and then swirled her tongue around his quivering flesh.

“Never. Just the bangs, so I can still your eyes while you... ah!” He stopped speaking abruptly as she took all of him in her mouth. After a moment, he forced a response passed his tightened jaw. “I didn’t know I was getting involved with such a lusty woman.”

She released her treat and worked her way up his body. “Mmm... I tried to keep my lustful side a secret so you wouldn’t run away.” She murmured the comment against his chest, trailing butterfly kisses over the smooth muscular surface, while stroking his shaft with her hand.

“I never run from a challenge.” Melody noted that Ryne had closed his eyes and a blissful smile was playing over his lips. Gently, she pushed him down onto his back and straddled his legs. Running her hands up his chest, she flicked his nipples, moulded his shoulders, and then slid her hands downward again, enjoying the feel of his warm skin and hard muscles.

As she leaned forward to kiss him, she felt his erection pressing hot and hard against her stomach. The sensation made her own body respond, warmth pooling between her thighs. Instinctively, she rocked her hips and Ryne growled in approval.

He slid his hands up her arms to her shoulders, then down her back, finally cupping her ass and squeezing gently. “I love your body, Melody.” Ryne moved his hands lower still, his fingertips barely skimming her feminine folds as he reached for her thighs then slid his hands up to her butt cheeks again. Back and forth, back and forth, he ensured that his hands never actually touched her where she wanted it the most. Melody felt herself growing even wetter in anticipation.

Nibbling at his neck, then his chin, she bit his lower lip, sucking it into her mouth before releasing it in favour of exploring him with her tongue. Meanwhile, she ran her fingers over his ears and through his hair, tugging at the silken strands, her nails gently abrading his skin. Soon they were both panting, a sheen of sweat beginning to dampen their bodies.

“Ryne...” She murmured against his lips.

“Yeah?”

“If you don’t touch me there soon, I’m going to scream.”

She felt his breath puff against her mouth as he chuckled. “Well, you’re going to be screaming sooner or later, anyway...”

Melody lifted her head and stared down at him. “You sound pretty confident about that, Taylor.”

"I am." He smiled up at her and then grabbed her waist. Suddenly, Melody found herself face first on the mattress, with Ryne straddling her.

"What just happened?" She sputtered.

Ryne worked his hand under her and cupped her breast. Massaging the soft globe, he whispered in her ear. "I said you're going to be screaming soon, and we don't want to disturb the others now, do we? This way, you can just bury your face in the mattress instead of biting my shoulder like you did the other night. Not that I minded." He laughed evilly and Melody felt her face growing warm as she recalled that particular event.

Experimentally, she pushed upwards trying to lever her body, but Ryne was using his weight to keep her in place. A shiver of excitement ran through her as she realized that she was trapped.

"Do you like this?" He asked, brushing her hair aside and biting gently on her neck.

"Mmm. It's different, but yeah... I like it."

"Good." Ryne removed his hand from her breast and grabbed her around the waist. He removed his weight, lifting her hips up and leaving her shoulders down. She squirmed a bit, thinking of how exposed her most intimate parts must be, but then Ryne stroked her slick folds with his fingers and she lost all inhibitions.

"Oh my gosh, Ryne that feels so good!" Her body was quivering in anticipation. He bit at her butt cheek then lapped her juices with his tongue. When he invaded her with his fingers, she was sure she'd come right then and there. "Oh yes, oh yes..." She panted her approval as he massaged her inner walls, stimulating the sensitive nerves within.

Just as she felt a telltale coiling in her lower belly, he suddenly withdrew his fingers. She whimpered in disappointment only to gasp as she felt his hot, thick flesh invading her body. Slowly, he pressed forward, parting her flesh, retreating, then pushing in deeper. With him behind her, it was a totally different feeling than any of the other times they'd been together. When she was sure she was filled beyond capacity, he paused.

"Are you still okay?" Ryne's voice sounded tight, as if he was exerting great control over himself.

"Not if you don't start to do something about this real soon." She rocked back against him, desperately needing release.

"Your wish..." Instead of finishing the statement, he took hold of her hips and began the rhythm they both craved.

In and out, in and out; each thrust was exquisite torture as it stroked her inner walls. She clutched at the sheets, panting; her eyes squeezed shut as she concentrated on the feeling building within her. It coiled tighter with each stroke, her breathing grew more rapid, his balls slapped against her with each thrust, providing an added stimulation. Never had she believed it could feel this good...

Just when she thought she was going to explode, he stopped and pulled out. "Ryne!" She was near panic. It was so close, he couldn't stop now!

He flipped her over and knelt between her legs. His quivering erection was gleaming with the juices from her body. A drop of his seed poised near the tip. She forced her gaze away from his manhood and looked up at his flushed face.

"Why did you stop?"

His face was flushed and he was breathing hard, yet he answered her question with a question. "Remember when I told you about blood bonding?"

She forced herself to think beyond the clamouring need of her body and nodded. "Werens become connected with their mates, forming an almost telepathic bond."

"It's permanent, for life, until one of the pair dies." He drew in a shuddering breath.

"Like a marriage, but with no chance of divorce."

"Right." He paused and licked his lips. "Would you... Would you blood bond with me?"

Mel half sat up. "Are you proposing?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Yeah. I guess I am."

She gave squeal of delight and launched herself at him, completely knocking him over. "Ryne, I thought you'd never ask." Before he could answer, she was kissing him soundly.

After a few minutes, he pushed her away and sat up. "So I take it that's a yes?"

"Of course, you big dummy." She smacked him lightly. "So when? And how?"

"What about right now?" His face was suddenly serious and Mel sobered too.

"Really? Here? Right now?" Mel looked around nervously.

He nodded.

"I'd have to bite you?"

"And I'd bite you. Then we'd drink a bit of each other's blood."

She grimaced at the idea, but then stared at Ryne. She really did love him. And this was the way of his people. Well, they were her people now, too. "Okay. So, how do we start?"

Ryne chuckled. "Well, we were half way there a few moments ago. Basically we have great sex and then your wolf partially emerges and we bite each other."

"So it's animal sex? Eww!"

"No! Your canines lengthen, your eyes might glow, but your body stays human."

"Oh, that's good." She took a deep breath and then smiled at him tremulously. "I guess I'm ready then."

"You're sure?" He cautioned her once more. "A blood bond is forever."

"I'm sure." She reached up and cupped his face, tracing his cheek bone with her thumb. "I want to be with you for the rest of my life."

"Same here," he whispered as he pulled her close and kissed her reverently.

Lips slid over lips. Tongues tangled. Mel stroked Ryne's muscular back while he caressed her breasts. Soon she was sinking back onto the mattress, Ryne's weight pressing down on her as he lay between her thighs. He nuzzled her neck, then ran his teeth over her collar bone. Moving lower, he sought her pink tipped breast, licking at her nipple before suckling until it was engorged and red. Turning his attention to its twin, he repeated the process. Each pull of his lips shot down to her womb. Mel moaned and shifted restlessly in response.

She combed her fingers through his hair, gently scraping his scalp and tugging on the strands. He murmured in appreciation then let out a soft sigh as she traced the indent of his spine reaching down as far as she could to squeeze his taut buttocks.

Ryne lifted his head from her breasts, his mouth moist and red. He sat back on his haunches and ran his hands down her stomach, then traced the crease where her thighs met her body. Cupping his hands under her knees, he spread her legs wide and then stared at her moist, swollen folds.

"So hot and wet," he murmured as he gently traced the soft flesh. Gently, he pressed a finger to her entrance, sliding it in easily. He smiled up at her as he instinctively found her g-spot. "You like this, don't you?" Ryne teased her as her hands clutched the sheets, her back arching. Stroking her clit with his thumb, his finger worked its magic inside her. When her hips were flexing against his hand, he stopped and

pulled out. Shifting so he was on top her, he carefully tucked the head of his shaft inside her and slowly sank into her welcoming depths.

The sensation was exquisite, feeling his thick flesh parting her, filling her aching void until she was sure she could hold no more. Once he was fully encased, he leaned forward to kiss her. "I love you, Melody Greene."

"And I love you, Ryne Taylor." She blinked at him through the tears in her eyes. This was it. They were going to be joined for the rest of their lives.

He grasped her hand, entwining their fingers as he started to move, setting a rhythm that soon had a coil of tension growing inside her once again. There were long slow strokes, that had her sighing with pleasure, then short fast thrusts that drove her wild. Mel bit her lip, panting, reaching... Above her, Ryne was breathing heavily, his movements become harder, more forceful. He was hammering into her now, each stroke bringing her higher. Rivers of sweat trickled down his neck and she watched the path of the droplets, suddenly fascinated by his throat, by the vein throbbing wildly as his heart pumped blood to his straining muscles.

There was a pain in her jaw, but she barely registered it at first. When she licked her dry lips, she realized that her canines had dropped. Shocked, she quickly looked up at Ryne. His eyes were glowing, his mouth open, exposing wickedly long teeth. Mel gave a start as a momentary flutter of fear passed through her. "Ryne? It's starting!" Barely had the words passed her lips, when a tingling sensation washed over her.

Her body strained and trembled; she felt energy gathering inside of her. She was on the brink of shifting! Then somehow the energy refocused, turning in on itself and entwining with the twisting need inside her until she was balanced on the very edge of orgasm. Her whole body started to shake, her fingers tightened on Ryne's, her toes curled.

His hair brushed her cheek. She felt his hot breathe on her neck, his tongue licking her skin. At the same time, she began to hear a thrumming, a swishing sound... She could smell his blood, imagined its coppery taste on her tongue, running down her throat. His body possessing hers, his skin pressed to hers, his sweat blending with her own, but it wasn't enough. She needed more... She needed to taste him, to know that they were one in every way possible. And then, without even realizing it, her mouth latched onto the side of his neck, her teeth piercing his skin as she felt a sharp but almost pleasurable pain on her own neck.

Greedily she lapped at the wound, lost in an ecstasy she couldn't begin to describe.

Ryne was surrounding her, possessing her, his life force feeding her as she fed him. Her mind opened, his thoughts and feelings seeping in, mixing with hers. She felt his need, the way his scrotum tightened to his body, the rhythmic stroking, and squeezing on his sensitive shaft as he moved in and out of her, as her body milked his. There was a tingling in the base of his spine as he neared his release. It matched the unbelievable levels of desire in her. The way her heart was pounding, the aching need inside her, the tension that was so high, so tight she thought she'd die. It was close, so close... growing... heightening. Another thrust and then one more. She couldn't believe anything could feel like this; she didn't want it to end.

Faster... harder... Frantically, they moved together in a wild, untamed dance moving ever closer to the approaching the precipice. Straining... She couldn't breath... everything tightened... and then her body clenched in an orgasm so hard, she was sure she was break into a million pieces

Her vision blurred as she lost all control. Limbs shaking, she was free falling through space, jolts of pleasure wracking her body over and over, compounded by the waves of ecstasy that shot through Ryne as his seed spurted within her. Again and again her pleasure fed off his until she was screaming her release.

Sometime later, she realized she was sprawled on the bed, arms and legs spread in complete abandon. Ryne's head rested between her breasts, his leg wrapped over hers.

"Hey," she whispered to him.

Hey yourself. His voice echoed in her head and she gave a start before giggling. So this was the mental bond he talked about. Pretty cool.

"Yeah it is, isn't it?" He murmured against her still heated flesh. "Apparently, it's always strongest after sex."

"Well, I guess our bond will be pretty strong then, since I plan on having lots and lots of sex with you."

"Mmm... I like how you think Melody. I like how you think."



## Epilogue

*Back in Chicago...*

Leon Aldrich lay in a hospital bed, his eyelids half open. A ventilator pumped air through the breathing tube in his newly repaired throat. The pain medication made him groggy and the room kept going in and out of focus. In his hand he held a crumpled copy of Greyson's will. He couldn't believe he never knew about Cassandra Greyson and that she'd inherit everything. Hazily, he thought that changing the will in his favour would have been an easy thing to do, if he'd still been able bodied. Even though Greyson had added a note warning that two other copies existed, he could have searched the estate and found them.

He needed to find the girl. But how?

The sound of the door opening caught his attention and he slowly shifted his eyes to observe the newcomer. It was a nurse.

"Hello, Mr. Aldrich. And how are we today?" She chatted as she checked the ventilator and peered at his bandages. "Nasty wounds. I must say I've never heard of a wild dog attack in Chicago."

Aldrich tried to speak.

"No, no, no. You can't try to talk. Your throat can't stand the strain. If you need something, press the call button and use this whiteboard." She held the objects up for him to see and then placed them on the tray in front of him.

He blinked twice. It had been his main means of communicating until today. Two for yes. Three for no.

The nurse smiled and applied cream to his dry chapped lips. "You must be exhausted after that police interview. It was so brave of you to step between Mr. Greyson and that attacking dog."

Aldrich blinked twice again. That was the story he'd painstakingly scrawled on the white board.

Straightening his covers the Nurse continued. "I heard the police talking as they left. They agree it was an unfortunate accident; the dog jumped at you just as you fired the gun and the bullet hit Mr. Greyson by mistake. You're so lucky the beast ran off before it killed you."

Two more blinks.

She squeezed his hand. "Your secretary is here to see you. She's such a sweet thing. When I said I just needed to check your bandages and medication, she told me she'd go downstairs for a few minutes and

browse the gift shop until I was done. I'm sure she'll be back in just a moment or two." With a final pat to his hand, the woman left.

If nothing else, the woman's chatter had helped clear his thinking. He found it easier to concentrate on the problem of Cassandra Greyson. He wanted to get his hands on Greyson's money, but the girl stood in his way. As long as she was missing, the estate would be tied up. Mind you, that would give him time to heal, but once she was found, then what? She wasn't yet eighteen. Possibly, he could have himself appointed her guardian, worm his way into her confidence and then... But how to contact her? A gleam entered his eye as he noticed a newspaper lying on the chair by his bed. That might work. Slowly, he grabbed the white board and began to write.

By time he was finished, he was wet with sweat from the exertion, but a satisfied look covered his face. He ran the message over in his mind. 'Place a personal ad in all major papers around U.S.A. It should read Cassie, please come home. You're in grave danger from the wild ones. Only I can protect you. - A.

He frowned then added one more line.

There was a light rap on the door and Ms. Matthews walked in. He assessed the temporary secretary carefully, knowing she was the person who had caved in to Greyson's demands that she snoop in his appointment book. She wasn't exactly trustworthy... Damn Ms. Sandercock for still being away! Well, Ms. Matthews seemed biddable enough. She'd have to do. And she had brought him Greyson's will, after all. Not having any other choice at the moment, he made his decision.

"Hello, Mr. Aldrich." Ms. Matthews set a magazine down on his bed table. "I brought you something to read, in case you're bored. Is there anything I can do for you?"

He gestured at the white board and she picked it up.

When she was finished reading, she gave him a puzzled look. "This is the girl mentioned in the will?"

He blinked twice.

"All right. I'll have a personal ad put in the papers for you and get some extra guards posted outside this room, though I can't think why. The police were here all week..." Her voice trailed off as she copied the message down on a sheet of paper. "Oh, by the way, Ms. Sandercock called, and she's taking an extended leave. Some family business about the relative that passed away. Richardsons Temp Agency is willing to give me the position until she returns, if that's all right with you."

He blinked yes, knowing he really had no other choice. It wasn't like he was able to interview for the position.

"I was hoping you'd agree. You seem like such a nice man." She stepped closer and brushed his hair back from his forehead, letting her hand trail slowly down his arm. "If you need anything... anything at all, just ask. And feel free to call me by my first name. It's Mary, though some people use my nickname, Marla." She smiled widely and stepped away. "I'll go place that ad for you, now. See you tomorrow."

Stupid girl, he thought as she left the room, vaguely noting she had the slightest limp. If she thinks I'll fall for that act... Ha! I know her kind only too well.

*Fin*

Thank you for taking the time to read my book. Please take a moment to leave a comment at the site from which you downloaded. This book is free; feedback is the only payment I request!

## Preview of The Finding

*Preview of the next book in this series, The Finding. Look for it in the winter of 2010/11*

Cassie stood in the shadows at the edge of the alleyway, watching the cars and people pass by. No one so much as glanced at her, but she stepped back a bit, just to be sure. The street was lined with stores and small businesses, and in the distance there appeared to be a number of flashing, lighted signs with crowds milling about. If she didn't know better, she'd think it looked Las Vegas, but that was ridiculous. The bus she'd been on couldn't have travelled that far! She furrowed her brow, wondering where she might be, and how she'd ended up in an alley.

The last thing she remembered was lying on a bed in a motel, having spent half the night fleeing from the site of her uncle's death and the wolf attack. She'd taken her medication and tried to calm down by thinking of happier places; that was the last thing she could recall until waking up here, just a few minutes ago.

Her body had been wedged between a brick wall and a dumpster. A mouse crawling over her hand had stirred her from her sleep. She'd screamed and skittered a few feet away, watching in a combination of horror and disgust as the tiny creature ran into a hole under the metal bin. Then, once she was over that shock, she'd looked around frantically, wondering why she wasn't in her motel room. Her heart had been pounding, panic wrapping around her like an iron fist as she realized that there was no bed, no TV, no faded curtains; just brick walls, utility meters, bits of garbage and graffiti.

The strap of her bag had been clenched in her hand; amazingly enough there was still money inside of it, so she hadn't been robbed. And her clothing, though filthy and wrinkled, was intact which probably meant she hadn't been assaulted. Her skin crawled as she thought of all the things that could have happened to her while she was unconscious. Obviously something had occurred, otherwise how had she arrived in this place?

She wracked her brain but there was no recollection as to what might have occurred. She looked around fearfully, wondering if the werewolf had something to do with this. There was no sign of the creature but it could still be following her, ready to end her life as easily as he had ended Mr. Aldrich's.

Just the thought of the large black wolf and its blood drenched muzzle had her shivering, despite the relative warmth of the air. She stepped back into the alleyway and hunkered down by the dumpster where she'd awoken. As she leaned her head back against the brick wall, she stared at the graffiti covered sign that graced the steel door straight across from her; Chinese and Thai Restaurant, Deliveries Only. Apparently she was in the back alley behind a number of businesses. As she glanced to either side, she noted other similar doors giving support to her assumption.

At that moment a delivery truck roared down the alley and she pressed herself closer to the wall. It stopped a good distance from her hiding place, and a man got out, whistling tunelessly. She watched him go about his business, taking cartons out of the truck and handing them to someone who stood just inside a doorway. He never once glanced in her direction but she still felt the need to move. No doubt other trucks would be through here in the near future and she didn't want to be found hiding here. People would ask questions, to which she wouldn't have any answers.

She bit her lip, knowing she needed to do something, go somewhere, but it all seemed so overwhelming. How she longed to be back in the security of her uncle's home. To hear him blustering away, to see Franklin pulling faces behind the old man's back, to have Cook fussing and making her favourite meals... Her chin quivered. Oh God, how could her world have been destroyed so quickly?

A lone tear trickled down her face and she quickly wiped it away. Crying wouldn't help. Her uncle was dead and she was alone now. She had to handle this situation on her own. As she searched her mind for a possible course of action, she gave a short, wry laugh, realizing that her private tutors had never covered topics related to running for your life while being chased by a werewolf. How remiss of them!

Her brief moment of levity quickly died though as the delivery truck's engine was started up. It roared past her leaving a cloud of exhaust fumes in its wake. Forcing herself to her feet, she gave an inelegant sniff and walked back to the end of the alley, resuming her earlier hiding position in the shadows. From the angle of the sun, she could tell it was early morning. People seemed intent on getting to their work or appointments. No one was taking notice of her. The anonymity gave her some modicum of comfort.

There was a restaurant on the corner and a variety store. She bit her lip and squared her shoulders. Maybe...

"Hey there, girly! What're you doing?" A voice spoke from nearby and she jumped, backing away until her spine was against the opposite brick wall. It was a young man, probably in his early twenties. He had brown hair, blue eyes, and was dressed in respectable looking shirt and pair of pants.

Cassie clutched her bag tightly to her chest while staring at him warily.

"Are you okay?" The man had a faint look of concern on his face. "Are you in trouble? A runaway?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Funny, 'cause you sort of look like life's been treating you pretty bad." He studied her for a minute, then smiled and held out his hand. "My name's Kellen. Kellen Anderson."

Hesitantly, Cassie held out her hand. "I'm... er... Sandra." She heeded the voice inside her head that told her not to reveal too much, so she switched to another derivative of her full name.

"Pleased to meet you, er... Sandra. Strange name, with the 'er' in front of it." Kellen grinned and winked. "Never mind. I'll just call you Sandy, okay?" She nodded and he continued. "So you look like you could use something to eat and maybe a place to stay? I've been down on my luck before, so I know what it's like. Actually, I'm sort of the downslide right now since I just dropped a wad at a poker game down the road. Come on. Misery loves company. I'll buy you a meal, no strings attached." He gestured towards the restaurant.

"I... I have money." Immediately after she spoke, she chastised herself. Telling a complete stranger—one she'd met at the edge of an alleyway, no less—that she had money was not a good idea. Trying for some damage control, she qualified her answer. "I don't have much, but I can buy my own meal."

Kellen shrugged. "Sure. No skin off my nose. But at least we can sit together, right? Eating alone is no fun."

Her stomach chose that moment to growl and he laughed, holding his hands out at his side. "Hey, I'm completely harmless and you're starving. There's usually a crowd in the restaurant, so you don't need to worry. You won't be alone with me."

Cassie bit her lip and then gave a brief nod. The idea of being by herself was daunting; the werewolf could be anywhere, but surely it wouldn't attack in front of witnesses. Having someone with her, even a stranger, seemed like a good idea. Also, she needed information and right now Kellen was her only source.

“Not much of a talker, are you?” Kellen quipped as he led her across the street. “That’s okay, though. It doesn’t bother me. Listen, you might want to get cleaned up a bit. There’s a ladies’ room right inside the door. I’ll get us a table while you use the facilities.” He held the restaurant door open for her.

She gave him a brief smile. “Thanks, I wouldn’t mind washing up a bit.” As she headed to the washroom, she glanced back. Kellen was already sitting down, perusing the menu. Cassie allowed herself to relax a little bit. He seemed harmless enough...

*Three years later, in Stump River, Ontario, Canada...*

Bryan sat in front of the computer, frowning at the screen. He drummed his fingers on the desk then sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

Ryne looked up from the papers he was working on. “Let me guess, you’re still brooding about that girl?”

“Yeah, I keep thinking I’ll find something if I look long enough.”

“You’ve been working on it, for the past three years. What makes you think today will be any different?”

“I don’t know, but I just can’t let her go. You know the dangers a rogue wolf could mean.” Bryan swivelled his chair so that he faced his Alpha.

“At least she hasn’t gone rogue, though how a young kid like that is keeping her wolf under control all by herself, is beyond me.” Ryne narrowed his eyes and reiterated what they both already knew. “You traced her to that motel in Kansas—”

Bryan finished the sentence. It was a story they’d gone over many times. “And then she just disappeared. I know it was almost two weeks later when I got there, but there was no scent anywhere. No one saw her leave town. There was nothing on the surveillance cameras at the bus stop. She stepped off the bus, found a room at the motel across the street and vanished. All I found was that pill wedged between the nightstand and the headboard.”

“It was a prescription strength sedative, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Very hard to get a hold of and used only under strict doctor supervision. Definitely suitable for a werewolf but almost deadly for a human. Whoever gave it to her knew something about Lycans.”

“That would have been her guardian, Anthony Greyson. I’m sure that’s how he kept her under control during the full moon, though how he knew...” Ryne let his voice trail off.

"Well, that pill was the only concrete clue I found in Kansas. Two days later all her banking accounts were emptied from an instant teller inside a casino in Las Vegas and her credit cards were maxed out. From there it's a dead end."

"Well, you did a fine job in Vegas, getting the hotel to let you look at their surveillance video footage."

Bryan chuckled at the memory. "Thank heaven the head of security was female and she liked my eyes."

"From the story you told when you got back home, I don't think it was just your eyes she was interested in."

"There might have been a few other features that drew her attention." Bryan grinned for a few minutes but then sobered and leaned forward to study the screen again. "I was just looking at this footage that shows someone using the ATM machine at the time Cassandra Greyson's account was emptied."

Ryne stood up and moved to the computer, peering over Bryan's shoulder. "Do you see anything new?"

"Not really. It's just the same thing as always. Average sized individual, wearing jeans and a hoodie pulled up over his or her head and low across the forehead. Unisex sunglasses, chin tucked into the collar."

"The person knew what they were doing; that there'd be cameras recording the transaction."

"Yeah, there's nothing here except... See that bit of a shadow?" Bryan turned his chair back to the computer and pointed to the screen. "I think someone was standing there, watching."

"Hmm... Could be." Ryne stood up straight and shrugged. "It doesn't really help us much, though."

"Maybe not. But it means she might not be on her own. I think she met up with someone and went with them to Vegas, possibly realizing it was a perfect place to get lost in a crowd."

"But where did she go after that?"

Bryan shook his head. "Damned if I know. I checked every bus, train and plane out of there from the day of this footage and then for two weeks afterwards. There was no one matching her description."

"So she must have left by car or stayed in the area."

"Uh-huh. I've searched all over that city but there was no sign of her. And I have alerts out to packs all over the country to contact me if they see her, but no one has reported anything."

"You'd think after three years someone would have noticed a lone wolf – an inexperienced lone wolf at that. How has she stayed hidden



and managed the lunar changes? Those pills must be used up by now. Someone must know something.”

At that moment, Melody called from the bedroom. “Ryne, where’s my chocolate ice cream?”

Ryne grimaced. “Since she’s been pregnant and can’t have her coffee, she’s switched to chocolate but it’s not mellowing her mood.”

“Isn’t chocolate just as bad?”

“Are you volunteering to tell her? I survived the no-coffee rants. I’m not inciting another one!” Both men winced as they recalled Melody’s reaction when Nadia, the nurse practitioner, told her to cut back on coffee until the baby was born.

“Hey, she’s your mate and you’re the Alpha. Go do your duty.”

“Thanks, Bryan. You’re a real pal.”

Bryan chuckled as Ryne left the room and then returned to pondering the image on the computer screen. Somewhere out there Cassandra Greyson was a lone werewolf and he was determined to bring her in.

## From the same author on Feedbooks

### *Forever In Time (2009)*

She was in there, he knew it. He'd been following her for weeks and knew every move she made. There'd be no escaping him. Time was on his side. "I'm waiting, Steph. I've been waiting a long, long time."

Stephanie thought she was ordinary. Her life was stable, or at least it was until the stranger appeared. Was he the answer to her dreams or a nightmare?

### *The Mating (2010)*

Elise had no idea when she came home that day that she'd end up mated to a complete stranger. A new Alpha and the need for an alliance between packs have made her a pawn. WINNER OF THE FPSSA - BEST ROMANCE and the SKOW - BEST VILLIAN

EXCERPT: She lay beside him, staring blankly at the ceiling. The deed was done. They were mated. It didn't matter that she had no love for him nor he for her. Political alliances were more important than feelings, or so she had been told. That fact was cold comfort right now as her heart broke within her.

### *The Finding (2011)*

She discovered a dark secret, witnessed a murder and fled into the night fearing for her life. Three years later, Cassie is still hiding from her past, haunted by a dream lover and fighting to control a terrifying beast that seems to grow stronger each day. When Bryan, pack Beta, appears to claim her, Cassie is forced to face the truth of her existence. Innocence, betrayal, greed and love collide with ancient werewolf laws in *The Finding*. Third book in *The Law of the Lycans* series by Nicky Charles

### *Bonded (2012)*

Reno's a tough Enforcer for Lycan Link who finds himself drawn to Brandi but duty rules his life. Brandi, just on the edge of starting her career as a Disaster Control officer, falls for Reno at first sight, but are they really meant to be? Is it love or lust and does it really even matter? Enforcers and DCs don't get along...unless fate forces them to. *Bonded* precedes *The Mating* in the *Law of the Lycans* timeline.

*Betrayed: Days of the Rogue (2013)*

His mate killed in a horrific explosion, ex-Enforcer Damien Masterson now lives as a rogue werewolf. Grief stricken and filled with rage, what depths will he sink to in his search for revenge? And who will be caught in the crossfire? Will it be Eve, a Fae just entering the Awakening stage? Or Rafe McRae, part empath and part wolf? It's been said that a rogue Enforcer is too dangerous to be allowed to roam. A suspense driven story of love, betrayal and revenge, this latest addition to the Law of the Lycans series is a sequel to *Bonded*.



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