



Wolf at the Door



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Dedication

Thank you to all my loyal readers. You're the best!

And thank you to Heidi, my amazing editor, for your patience, hard work, keen eye and encouragement. I love working with you.

Chapter One

“Shit.” Gwendolyn Jones winced as the toes of her right foot connected with a brick that looked like it had obviously fallen from the retaining wall quite some time ago.

“What are you doing here, Gwen?” she muttered beneath her breath as she lifted her foot and bent her toes forward and back to make sure she hadn’t broken anything. If she’d known she’d be pacing up and down a derelict cemetery path she would have worn boots instead of sneakers.

Of course, she knew what she was doing here. Her job. Well, not everyone considered it a job, but she did. Gwen was proud of the stories she penned for various tabloids and magazines around the world. Her stories on the macabre and the paranormal had done well.

In the course of her career, she’d met a lot of interesting folks, including a man who believed he was an honest to God vampire. He would only meet her at night and insisted she wear a necklace of garlic for her own protection. She’d indulged the guy and had gotten enough material for several articles. He’d been harmless, if slightly off-kilter.

Usually she only met people in public places. Heck, these days the bulk of her interviews were conducted through email. But when Hector Canton had contacted her, he wouldn’t tell her anything over the phone. He would only talk to her in person, and since he was passing through her town he’d requested a face-to-face meeting. But he wouldn’t meet in public. It had to be somewhere private.

Normally she wouldn’t have agreed to such a thing, but Hector claimed to have proof that werewolves really existed. Now, Gwen didn’t believe in werewolves any more than she did vampires but a good story was a good story.

An owl hooted off to her left and the brisk October wind began to seep through her thin jacket. “Should have worn a sweater,” she muttered, while she rubbed her hands over her arms in an effort to stave off the chill.

Hector was late and she was running out of patience. She’d been pacing outside the cemetery gates for twenty minutes now. “Ten more minutes, Hector.”

Then she’d go home and treat herself to a mug of hot chocolate and curl up on the end of the well-worn sofa with a good book. She’d purchased the latest paperback by one of her favorite authors, which coincidentally enough was about werewolves. She grinned as she remembered the hot-looking guy from the cover. Oh yeah, that would warm her up in no time.

An alpha werewolf was all fine and good between the pages of a novel, but she didn’t think she’d like an ultra-tough, take-charge guy telling her what to do in real life. In fact, she knew she wouldn’t. Of course, a fictional alpha male made great fodder for hot nighttime sensual fantasies.

A sound came from off to her right. A skittering sound, like a large animal or a man hurrying across the ground. She reached into her pocket and grabbed her pepper spray. Better safe than sorry. Her other hand gripped her digital recorder. She always taped her in-person interviews so she could give all her attention to the person she was talking to without fear of forgetting any details she’d need later.

Her purse was at home. She learned a long time ago to put her driver’s license and some money in her pocket along with her keys. Her pepper spray, phone and recorder went in her jacket pockets, leaving her hands free. Just in case.

Not that she was expecting trouble. Hector had seemed a bit high strung over the phone, but not crazy. Okay, the guy obviously believed in werewolves, which meant he wasn’t quite all there, but Gwen was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. She would have felt a lot better about things if

he'd agreed to meet in a café or restaurant instead of the local cemetery.

The rustling sound reached her ears again and she squinted to try to see through the dark. The moon was almost full and gave off some light, but not enough to cut through the darkness. The old cemetery was outside town and had no lights at all.

A shiver raced down Gwen's spine and the fine hairs on the back of her nape stirred. She took a step toward her car. It was only a few feet away and she'd taken the precaution of locking all the doors except the driver's and backing the vehicle in so she could easily make a quick getaway if need be. She might be eager for a story but she wasn't stupid.

A low growl came from off to the left and she took another step back. She had no idea what kind of animals might be running around the surrounding woods. Maybe it would be smarter to just wait in the car. Just in case. As she put her hand on the door, she heard a voice calling her name.

"Ms. Jones. Ms. Jones." She tucked her recorder into her pocket, keeping it running, and left one hand on the door handle. Her other one clutched the pepper spray.

A short, balding man about two inches shorter than her five-foot-eight hurried toward her. Even in the dim light she could tell Hector was highly agitated. He stumbled to a halt in front of her and she had to put out a hand to keep him from running into her. He was sweating, his eyes darting all around him. He reminded her of a frightened mouse.

"Mr. Canton?" She couldn't believe he was on foot. He must have parked farther down the road and walked the rest of the way to the cemetery. The town was a good ten-minute drive from here. She wasn't sure how long it would take to walk that distance.

He swiped a hand over his forehead. "Yes. Yes." He stuck one of his hands into his pocket. She brought her right hand up, holding the pepper spray at the ready. This entire situation was creeping her out. Why had she agreed to do this? Oh yeah, a story.

He pulled his hand out and thrust it toward her. It wasn't a weapon, but a flash drive. She almost laughed out loud her sense of relief was so profound. She'd certainly overreacted. Chalk it up to creepy atmosphere and the cloak-and-dagger theatrics Hector Canton insisted on.

She took the flash drive and slid it into her pocket. "Can you tell me what's on it?"

"I'm risking my life. If they find out, they'll kill me."

"Who?" Her heart began to race and she peered as far as she could see into the darkness surrounding them. Was someone following Hector Canton?

"The werewolves, of course." He looked at her as if she wasn't all that bright.

"I see," she began, trying to figure out the best way to proceed with the interview. "If you know they'll kill you why are you doing this?" He obviously thought werewolves were real, so she would humor him. She'd thought he was going to be one of those guys who had excess body hair and howled at the moon—harmless but wacky. But he honestly believed in werewolves.

Now he appeared totally bewildered. "Someone has to tell the world."

He seemed so sincere she didn't have the heart to tell him no one would ever believe his story. Okay, maybe a few of the more rabid fans of some of the magazines she wrote for would, but most would simply find it an entertaining tale.

He was staring at her so intently she felt like she had to say something. "That's brave of you."

He nodded, seemingly satisfied with her praise. Gwen honestly didn't believe she was going to get much more out of this interview and decided to cut the meeting short. "Is there anything else you can tell me or is all the information on the flash drive?"

"It's all there." His agitation was growing with each passing second. His eyes continually darted from her, to the surrounding woods, to the cemetery and back again.

A dog howled in the distance, the sound stark and lonely as it echoed through the dense woods and the surrounding hills. Hector bolted fast as a jackrabbit, racing back the way he'd come. "Run before they find you." She watched for another moment as he disappeared and was swallowed up by the night. When a second howl joined the first, she jumped into her car and pushed down the lock. She didn't want to have a run-in with either a pack of wild dogs or a group of men out hunting with their hounds.

And that's all it was. There were certainly no werewolves running around. They were nothing more than a figment of Hector's wild imagination.

She took a deep breath and let it out gradually, hoping to slow her racing heart. Her hand shook as she turned the key in the ignition. The engine rumbled to life and she gave a quick prayer of thanks when it immediately started. Her car was old and not always reliable. She put the vehicle in gear and rolled down the road. There was no sign of Hector Canton, but the flash drive he'd given her was practically burning a hole in her pocket. What was on it that had him so excited?

Even as she wondered about the content, she laughed at herself. "Probably a few pictures of a wolf and some *eye-witness* accounts. That was usually the kind of *proof* she got from the people she interviewed.

There was no denying that Hector's mood had spooked her. She shook her head and scolded herself for being so gullible. A cemetery on an autumn evening near a full moon was the perfect setting to give anyone the willies. Add in a few howling dogs and a nervous man professing to believe in werewolves, and it was no wonder she was jumpy.

She turned on her CD player and sang along with Annie Lennox's sultry voice, wishing she were even half as good as the singer. She was just belting out a chorus when a black shape darted across the road in front of her. It happened so fast she barely had time to react. She slammed her foot down on the brake and then she had to fight to keep the car on the road.

"Stupid." She knew better, but it was incredibly hard to fight the instinct to try to stop as fast as possible. What had she seen? A deer? A dog? It had all happened so quickly she wasn't sure. Whatever it was, it had been really fast.

"Well, that was a rush." She clung to the steering wheel, her knuckles white. Adrenaline pumped through her body, making her limbs shaky and her stomach queasy. She took several deep breaths to calm her racing heartbeat.

She didn't like the idea of just sitting on the side of the road so she released her foot from the brake pedal and started for home again, keeping a watch on the road and surrounding area. The rest of the trip was without incident, but a couple of times she could swear, when she glanced out the side window, there was some kind of animal running through the woods, keeping pace with her car.

"Impossible. You're just spooked. It's the moonlight, wind and trees playing tricks on your eyes." Still, she was glad she'd left the lamp on over her front door. The yellow light welcomed her as she pulled into the gravel driveway alongside the cabin.

She turned off the ignition and sat there for a moment, letting her nerves settle. "Right. There's nothing to worry about." Her little pep talk helped. Some. But sitting here fretting wasn't the brightest thing to be doing.

She made certain she had her house key ready before she unlocked the car door and got out. The wind sent a batch of leaves skittering past her. The aspens swished and the pine trees swayed, their leaves and branches adding to the music of the night. It was a beautiful fall evening, the kind she usually took pleasure in. The past few nights, she'd dragged a blanket onto the front porch, curled up in a deck chair and enjoyed every moment of nature's serenade. Tonight, all she wanted to do was ge

inside and bolt the door.

Gwen was suddenly very aware of how alone she was so far from town. Her nearest neighbor was a five-minute drive down the road. For a former city girl used to people living practically on top of one another, the quiet was suddenly unnerving.

Up until a month ago, she'd lived in Chicago. But her great aunt had died suddenly, leaving Gwen home in rural Tennessee. So she'd packed her belongings and driven to Wayman's Peak for the adventure and the chance to live rent-free. She was suddenly having second thoughts about her decision.

She scrambled up the three wooden steps of her porch, not caring if she was acting irrationally. After all, there was no one around to see her. Maybe she should get a dog.

The thought was no sooner in her head when she heard a howl in the woods beyond. "Dog, not a wolf." She jammed the key in the lock and sighed in relief when the door opened. She went inside and started to shut it but stopped to stare out into the surrounding forest. The howl came again, this time sounding much closer.

Gwen slammed the door shut and drove the bolt home. A frisson of fear rushed through her as another primitive howl ripped through the night. She raced into the living room and yanked down the old shotgun that was mounted on the wall to the left of the fireplace. She didn't know much about weapons but she knew it was loaded. She'd checked as soon as she'd moved in.

She'd never fired a gun before. Maybe it was time to change that. If she was going to live so far outside of town she needed to be able to protect herself. The next time she went into town, she would ask the local sheriff what permits she needed and if there was somewhere she could practice.

Gwen stared down at her hands and gave a gurgle of laughter. She was acting like an idiot, standing in her coat in the middle of her living room holding a shotgun. And all because a man she didn't even know had fed her some crazy story about werewolves.

"Get a grip, Jones." She set the weapon aside, being careful the safety was on. The best thing to do was put it back on its rack, but she couldn't quite bring herself to do that yet. She pulled off her coat and hung it up before digging out the flash drive and mini recorder.

"Let's see what you've got." She tossed the small red drive into the air and caught it as she walked across the room to her work area. She'd jammed a desk into the corner of the dining area to create an office space. It was by a window and she loved the view of the woods beyond. Now it was pitch black, nothing but a sea of darkness.

She tugged the drapes closed.

The computer was only sleeping, so it came back to life quickly. She set the recorder aside to examine later. Maybe something Hector had said would spark an idea for an article, although she rather thought the whole conversation was a write-off.

She inserted the flash drive and clicked on the first file when they appeared on the screen. Just as she'd suspected, a picture of a wolf popped up. The next one was similar. There was also a rambling letter from Hector giving names to the wolves. "Louis and Jacque LaForge. That sounds French, maybe Cajun."

Gwen closed the letter and almost shut down the entire thing. There was a can of cocoa sitting in the kitchen cupboard calling her name. She could deal with this tomorrow. She *should* deal with this tomorrow in the light of day. But curiosity won out in the end and she clicked on the next file, which had more photos in it.

The cursor settled over the first icon and she swore as she gave in to temptation and clicked. She gasped and sat back in her chair when a picture of a half-naked man appeared. On closer inspection

she could see sharp fangs coming from his elongated jaw and the razor-like talons on the ends of his fingers.

“Right. Obviously Photoshop.” But the closer she looked the less she thought so. “Someone spent a lot of money on those fake fangs and claws. Either that or they know a damn fine special-effects makeup artist.” Either way, she was done for the night with Hector Canton and his werewolves.

Not that it was all bad. She couldn’t use the pictures because she didn’t have permission and didn’t want to end up getting sued, but she could certainly spin a few stories for some of her tabloid customers. All in all, the night wasn’t a total bust.

Time to break out the hot chocolate and her book.

A hard, heavy pounding shook the front door, jolting her out of her chair. She didn’t waste any time running for the shotgun. Had Hector followed her home? Maybe he was crazy? She knew better than to break her rule about meeting in public. Why had she made an exception tonight? Too late to be asking that question now.

She thumbed the safety off. Her palms were damp and shaky, but she swallowed back her fear. How hard could it be to point and shoot? It was like a camera. This close she couldn’t miss.

The knock came again, this time not quite as loud. “Ms. Jones?” The voice was low and deep, definitely male.

Relief hit her hard and fast. Maybe it was one of the local deputies. They often stopped by to check on her, mostly because she was new to the area, but also because she was a single woman. On her first trip into town, Margie at the grocery store had assured her she’d have all the male attention she wanted. Single women were rare in these parts. Most women were either married, too old or too young. The rest of them left for the bigger cities as soon as they were able. A single young woman was cause for talk in town.

Still, she wasn’t about to be stupid. She’d seen too many horror movies where the dumb blonde gets herself killed by not being careful. She might be blonde but she wasn’t stupid.

“Who is it?”

“Ma’am, I’d like to talk to you if I can. It’s about Hector Canton.”

As tempting as it was, she wasn’t about to open her door to a total stranger. “Come back in the morning.” She glanced at the old cuckoo clock hanging on the wall. It was just past eight but, as dark as it was outside, it might as well have been the dead of night.

“It will only take a minute. I’ll stay out here on the porch.”

She snorted, like she was stupid enough to fall for that. Gwen backed away from the front door and headed toward the phone in the kitchen. Out here, cell-phone service was spotty, but her great aunt had a land line that Gwen had kept when she moved in. No way did she want to be caught without phone service. She’d call the sheriff’s office and have them come talk to the man.

There was no noise behind her, simply a stirring of the air, but Gwen knew she was no longer alone. She whirled around, her finger tightening on the trigger. The shotgun fired just as a male hand pushed the barrel up and out of the way. The bullet harmlessly buried itself in the wooden ceiling.

Gwen screamed as the weapon was torn from her hands and tossed aside. The front door was kicked in behind her, bouncing off the wall. She didn’t know where to look. There was a stranger behind her and another one in front of her.

She lunged for the kitchen counter and the knife block. She needed something to defend herself with. Anything. One of them swore and leapt toward her. Large fingers tightened around hers, the pressure making it impossible for her to draw the large butcher knife from the block.

“Relax, *chère*. Shhh.” His breath was hot on her neck and his hand practically swallowed hers

whole.

~~She started to shake. Would they hurt her? Rape her? She couldn't think about the possibilities. She had to fight back. Her muscles, immobilized by fright only seconds before, came back under her control. She threw her head back hard and fast and connected with his face.~~

Her captor howled in pain, sending an icy-cold shiver racing down her spine. It sounded too much like the dogs she'd heard earlier.

Massive arms wrapped around her torso and pulled her away from her only source of weapons. "Dieu. There was no need for you to do that, *chère*."

She still couldn't see the man holding her but the one in front of her was hard to miss. He was huge, probably around six-four, his brown shaggy hair hanging around his massive shoulders. His golden-brown eyes stared at her and his full lips were drawn into a thin line of displeasure.

Shit. She was in deep trouble. She recognized him from the picture she'd seen only moments before. Her only option was to try to brazen her way out of this situation.

She cocked her eyebrow at him and inclined her head. "You're either Louis or Jacque LaForge. I'm not sure which." She had a brief moment of pleasure when she noted the surprise in his eyes. Then they went flat, and the expression in them scared her spitless.

Chapter Two

Jacque LaForge stared at the tempting female his brother currently held subdued in his arms. Louis's nose had taken quite a hit, but thankfully it didn't look broken. Not that it mattered. They were both quick healers and the bleeding had already stopped.

When he'd heard the shotgun blast, his only thought had been of reaching his brother. Damn Hector Canton and his big mouth. They'd stopped him long enough to give him his one and only warning and hopefully put enough fear in him to keep his mouth shut. Then they'd headed to the woman's home to find out how much she knew.

Hector was obsessed with werewolves and had made quite a bit of trouble for them. But their cousin, Armand, was already doing damage control. The man was a computer whiz, able to hack any system. A doctor's file here and there questioning the man's sanity, a few bogus reports filed with police and Hector would be in for a stay in a psychiatric hospital if he didn't leave them alone. This was his only warning, and Armand had punctuated it with a more physical threat. If Hector didn't cease and desist, they'd bury him. Literally. There was nowhere he could hide where they couldn't find him.

Jacque didn't want to hurt Hector, who was harmless enough in his own way, but no way would he allow anyone to threaten his family's safety. He'd kill him if he had to and wouldn't lose a moment of sleep over it. By the time they'd finished questioning Hector, he'd spilled every detail he knew about Gwendolyn, which wasn't much. Just where she lived and the fact that she was single.

The name was old-fashioned and didn't quite suit her at all. She wasn't really a Gwen either. The name conjured a picture of a cool business executive. The woman in front of him was much more interesting.

She was wearing faded jeans that were slightly frayed at the ends and knees and a plain blue long-sleeved shirt. Nothing fancy, but she wore it well. While the cotton shirt was molded to a pair of first-class breasts, the tight denim showcased a pair of long, shapely legs and a mouth-watering ass that he was more than tempted to take a bite out of. Her blonde hair was cut short but layered, giving her a tousled, just-got-out-of-bed look.

His cock responded on cue. He certainly wouldn't mind getting Gwen into bed and knew his brother would be thinking the exact same thing. He frowned as Louis sniffed her hair and rubbed his nose over her neck.

Jacque growled low in his throat and Louis glared at him but stopped sniffing Gwen. Jacque was thankful, because his own control was tenuous at the moment. Usually he had perfect command of his body and hormones, but the moon was nearly full and there was a sexy female right in front of him. All his senses were on high alert.

But she was obviously not feeling the same way. Right now she was spitting mad and scared. The stench of her fear burned his nostrils. He didn't like it. He wanted to smell her sweet arousal, not fear.

"I'm Jacque LaForge. My brother, Louis, is holding you."

"Please to meet you." Louis rocked her slightly from side-to-side, a sort of full-body handshake.

Jacque wanted to smack his brother up the back of his head. Instead, he focused on Gwen, wanting to calm her immediate fears. "We mean you no harm."

"Could have fooled me." Her head jerked toward her front door.

"You'll have to forgive me, *chère*. I heard the shotgun go off and got worried about my little

brother.” Louis snorted but thankfully kept his mouth shut. Jacque knew how much he hated being referred to in that manner. ~~The bastard should be thankful Jacque hadn't called him a young pup after the way Gwen had caught him off-guard and smashed his nose.~~

“You'll have to forgive me for this as well.” He walked to her kitchen phone and yanked out the cord, snapping off the plastic end. Her purse was sitting on the end of the counter and he reached for it.

“Hey, don't touch that.” Jacque ignored her protests and dug through the bag. When he didn't find what he was looking for, he turned to her and frowned. “Where's your cell phone?”

“Don't have one,” she lied.

He frowned and looked around the room, his gaze falling on her coat. She swore as he strode to it and rummaged through the pockets until he found her phone. He dropped it to the floor and ground it beneath the heel of his boot.

“Louis is going to let you go now.” Jacque inclined his head toward his brother as he walked back toward them. “We just want to talk. If you run, we'll catch you, so don't even try it.”

Louis slowly released her and stepped back to give her some breathing room. They both tensed, waiting for her to bolt.

“If you're trying to put me at ease, you're not succeeding.”

Her acerbic tone almost made him smile. There was something about Gwen that called to Jacque. He sniffed and caught a whiff of her perfume, not a synthetic kind, but the natural one that was unique to her. With her fear fading slightly, he was more able to smell her. He inhaled deeply, wanting to take her into his lungs so he'd always recognize her particular scent.

The combination of salty skin, lavender soap and laundry detergent filled his nostrils and seeped into every cell in his body. Beneath it all was the sweet scent of woman, of Gwendolyn Jones.

Jacque stiffened and every molecule in his body surged to high alert. His senses flared and he sniffed again. His wolf howled inside him, dominant and purpose driven. His fangs dropped and his jaw elongated. The urge to bite her was overwhelming. His cock lengthened as the mating heat kicked in, overriding almost all other senses and thoughts. Gwen's sweet scent twined around his body, filling him, driving him to the very brink of sanity.

This couldn't be happening. Not here. Not now.

How in the hell had he found his mate in the middle of this fucked-up situation?

Gwen screamed when his face began to contort and change, but he barely heard her. His total focus was on his brother. Louis sniffed her again. As Jacque watched, his brother's fangs dropped, his eyes began to glow and he growled.

Louis looked at him and Jacque could see the same disbelief mirrored in his brother's eyes.

Fuck, they were in big trouble. While any virile male werewolf would be sexually drawn to an attractive woman, it was extremely rare for two wolves to have the potential to mate with the same woman. It did happen every now and again, and almost always to brothers. Their only choices were for one of them to kill the other or for one of them to step aside. And since he wasn't about to kill his brother any more than his brother would kill him, there was really only one solution.

Because as much as he loved his brother, he wasn't about to let this opportunity pass him by. Gwen was a priceless gift, one he'd never expected to receive. He'd just have to make both of them understand that she belonged with him.

Gwen shook her head, denying what was right in front of her. Her high-pitched scream was cut off when Louis wrapped his arms around her middle again and squeezed the air from her lungs. She was

sweating, her cotton shirt clinging to her torso. Her heart was racing like a runaway freight train and she felt slightly lightheaded. This couldn't be happening. ~~Jacque LaForge was not morphing into some kind of wolf-human hybrid in front of her very eyes. It was impossible.~~

Yet her eyes told a different story. His jaw contorted and lengthened and a set of very large, sharp fangs dropped down from his gums. She had to be hallucinating. "How did you drug me?" She had to keep talking even though the world around her was shifting and changing in a way she didn't understand.

"We didn't." The voice behind her was little more than a growl. She tilted her head back and was shocked anew when she got a good look at the creature holding her. ~~Crap, he looked just like his brother, doing the fang thing. This was like something out of one of the stories she'd written. Only her work was total nonfiction, drawn from the minds of folks who pushed over the line of reality and into fantasy.~~

Maybe she'd written one story too many and had finally succumbed to madness.

This was so not happening. Not when things in her life were finally falling into place. Not when she finally had time to work on her dream project—a novel. She wasn't having it.

Gwen drew back her foot and kicked Louis in the kneecap with her heel. She wished she were wearing more substantial footwear, heavy-soled boots instead of sneakers. That would do a lot more damage. The action did surprise him enough that he let her go. Or maybe he let go because she'd stopped screaming. Either way, she didn't care as long as she was free.

She backed away from both men and put her shoulders against the wall so neither of them could sneak up on her. While both men continued to stare at her, their faces contorted again, this time going back to normal. She blinked, not trusting anything she saw with her own two eyes. How could she? Werewolves didn't exist. Not in reality. There had to be some trick to what they were doing.

Her legs shook but she stiffened her knees. She could not show weakness. That was the first rule of facing down any wild animal. And werewolves definitely fell into that category. Come to think of it, so did men.

Across the room on her desk, her computer hummed along, and it was only then she remembered what was on the screen. She glanced over at it, a reflex action she tried to stop, but it was too late. Both men were aware of the flicker of her eyes and they looked in the direction of her desk.

"Sonofabitch." Jacque strode toward her laptop and stared down at the screen. He quickly closed the picture and flicked through the other files that were on the flash drive.

Gwen cursed herself for not thinking to close the damn computer and hide the files before leaving her desk. Her only excuse was fear, which in her mind was a pretty damn good one.

Jacque turned to her, his dark eyes practically glowing, which was impossible. This seemed to be the night for that. "What else did he give you?"

Gwen swallowed past the giant lump in her throat. Would the police eventually find her cold, dead body lying on the cabin floor? They'd probably write it off to a break-in gone wrong. These things happened. Then they'd file her case in some metal cabinet in a basement somewhere and forget she'd ever lived.

There was no one to remember her. To say she and her parents weren't close was an understatement. She wasn't even quite sure where either of them were and didn't care enough to find out. She had no siblings, no family she was close to. Her legacy was her work and she'd barely even begun to write her book yet. This wasn't fair.

"What else?"

A shiver skated down her spine as he all but whispered the words. Jacque LaForge speaking softly

with that deadly look in his eyes was a hell of a lot more scary than any other guy would be yelling and threatening her.

“Nothing.” She was proud of the fact she’d managed to speak even one word. He growled and she sidled along the wall, trying to get farther away from him.

“Don’t be afraid, *chère*.” Louis stepped into her path, stopping her from moving past him.

Gwen almost snorted at him. Easy for him to say. He wasn’t the one being threatened by two gigantic men, or werewolves or whatever the hell they were.

She took a really good look at them, studying them intently. On the off chance she survived this encounter, she wanted to have a good description to give the police. Jacques was well over six feet tall. Both men were. She estimated around six-three or six-four. They both had incredibly wide shoulders and huge biceps. In spite of the cool weather outside, they were both wearing black T-shirts and no jackets.

Jacques’s shaggy brown hair fell around his shoulders, while Louis’s hair was cropped short. They both had brown eyes—Louis’s eyes were dark and Jacques’s were golden—and they gave her the shivers with their intensity. Jacques’s lips were slightly thinner than his brother’s, while Louis’s nose wasn’t quite as prominent, even though it was slightly swollen from the whack she’d given it with the back of her head. They certainly looked like brothers.

They were hot. No other way to put it. If she weren’t scared to death, she’d probably be attracted to both of them. Any red-blooded woman would be. The jeans they wore clung to thick thighs and firm butts and at any other time she might have admired the bulges in the front of their pants.

She shook her head. Okay, the fear was obviously making her loopy. What did it matter that the LaForge brothers were gorgeous in a dark and deadly way? They were going to kill her. They had to. She’d seen their faces, knew who they were, knew too much about them.

All the blood drained from her face. Oh God, they were going to kill her.

Reality sank in and she began to shake. Not with fear, but with anger. She wasn’t done living yet. She had so much she wanted to do. She hadn’t asked for this. Damn Hector Canton and damn Jacques and Louis LaForge.

Jacques unplugged her laptop and set it aside before he began riffling through her desk.

“Stop that. There is nothing else.” The order was automatic, but she swallowed the rest of her demands when he glared at her with those scary golden-brown eyes. She was quiet for about thirty seconds. “That’s my stuff. Stop it.” He was pawing through the drawer with the notes for her book.

He shot her another deadly glare and continued to search. Obviously, he didn’t believe her, which proved he wasn’t stupid. She wouldn’t believe her either. She had Hector’s phone number and some observations in a little notebook in her purse.

Louis walked over to the desk and began to help his brother rummage through the piles of files and notes she had stacked on her desk. Gwen couldn’t believe her luck. In their search for evidence about their existence, they’d forgotten about her. They probably thought she was too scared to try to run. She inched slowly toward the open front door, desperately trying not to make a sound.

She barely dared to breathe. Freedom was only feet away. If she could get outside, she could run and hide in the woods and maybe make her way to town. No, she didn’t have to run and hide. Her car keys were still in the front pocket of her jeans.

She licked her dry lips, keeping one eye on the door and the other on the men in the corner of her dining room. This could work. Had she locked the driver’s door when she’d arrived home? She couldn’t remember, but she didn’t think so. She’d been so scared all she’d wanted to do was get inside.

That could work to her advantage. With all the other doors locked, if she made it inside her car she should be safe. This had to work.

She was almost to the door when Jacques's head came up and started to turn in her direction. Gwen reacted immediately and flung herself through the front door. Her feet flew down the three steps and she raced to her car. Her fingers scrambled for the door handle, grasped its cool metal and popped it open. She threw herself into the front seat, slammed the door shut and hit the lock.

Her fingers were shaking as she dug out the keys and jammed them into the ignition. It took her two tries before they finally slid home.

Something heavy hit the car. Gwen cried out and her gaze flew to the front windshield. Jacques was perched in front of her like some giant hood ornament. He was crouched low with one hand resting on the hood. "Unlock the door, Gwen."

Like that was going to happen. She turned the key and the engine sprang to life. Louis stood beside the car, shaking his head at her. She prayed they didn't have any guns, although they could easily use her shotgun against her.

Gwen slammed the vehicle into reverse and hit the gas. Louis managed to jump out of the way before she ran him over. She flew backward down the narrow driveway with Jacques riding on the hood. She turned the wheel hard to the left and he flew off, landing with a heavy thud on the ground.

She almost stopped to see if he was hurt then reminded herself that he and his brother were going to kill her. What did it matter if he was hurt? Still, she was glad when she glanced in the rearview mirror and saw him climb to his feet.

"Stop being stupid." She pressed down on the gas and headed toward town. If she could get to the sheriff's office she'd be okay. Those guys had guns—lots of them—and they knew how to use them.

She'd only gone a few yards when something heavy hit the roof of the car with a thump. The metal buckled slightly and Gwen yelped, ducking low in her seat. She jerked the steering wheel and the car skidded to one side and then the other. She prayed she didn't have a wreck. She wasn't wearing her seatbelt.

"Gwen, stop the car."

Oh God, Jacques was on the roof. Not that she'd really had any doubt who it was. How the hell had he gotten there?

"He's a werewolf, stupid. He probably has all kinds of tricks," she muttered.

"More than you know," came the wry male reply. He wasn't exactly yelling, but it was close.

Shit, he could hear her. Perspiration trickled down her temple and into the corner of her eye. She blinked to clear her vision. Town was about twelve minutes away. She could make it. There was no one else on the road tonight. Damn her luck.

"Gwen, pull over."

Yeah, like she'd listen to him. She jammed the gas pedal down harder. The car bucked and rattled but sped up a bit more. She prayed it didn't sputter and die before she reached her destination. If she lived through this she was buying a new vehicle. Possibly even a truck, one with a big engine and plenty of power. She should be able to get a used one for a decent price.

God, she was really losing it. The ribbon of asphalt snaked before her, a dark, lonely place without glimmer of light other than her headlights. She tried to concentrate on her driving, but it wasn't easy knowing a werewolf was perched on her roof.

She thought she heard him laugh. But that was impossible. Only a crazy man would laugh when he was clinging to the top of a speeding vehicle.

"Turn your head to the left." She was determined to ignore the muffled command but found her

head swiveling a bit before she could stop herself. She caught a glimpse of a dark human-like shape racing in the woods on the far side of the road. Her mind said it had to be an animal of some kind, but she suspected it might be Louis.

A huge crash was followed by shattered shards of glass spilling into the car as the passenger side window was broken. Her foot automatically came off the gas and she threw up her arms to protect herself.

The car began to veer off the road and Gwen grabbed for the steering wheel, cursing herself for releasing it. The tires hit loose gravel and the car was pulled to the right, before she could stop it. The vehicle took a nosedive into the ditch and she was flung forward, her face striking the edge of the steering wheel hard as she struggled to control the crash. The car tilted to one side and Gwen went with it, her body slamming against the passenger door. The impact of the car against the bottom of the ditch made the air bags deploy, but they were too late to save her.

She blinked, trying to clear her vision, but the world was getting darker by the second. Every inch of her body ached and she tasted blood in her mouth.

“Gwen.” Someone was yelling her name but she couldn’t answer. Had she escaped her captors only to kill herself in a crash? She would have laughed at the irony, but she couldn’t summon the energy.

Her last coherent thought was to wonder if she’d managed to kill Jacque too. Her heart clenched at the mere thought and then there was nothing at all.

Chapter Three

“Is she okay?” Louis peered over his shoulder as Jacque lowered himself in through the driver’s side of the damaged vehicle. His heart skipped a beat as he reached for Gwen. She wasn’t moving and blood covered one side of her face. He could see the low rise and fall of her chest each time she took breath and he heaved a sigh of relief when he realized her heart was still beating.

Guilt assailed him. He hadn’t meant for her to crash but had planned to beat out the window and slide into the car beside her. He wanted to try to talk her into stopping before resorting to taking control of the vehicle. Instead, she’d let go of the wheel long enough to lose control. And she hadn’t been wearing a seatbelt.

Every possessive bone in his body was clamoring for him to get to her. It might be crazy, but he felt as though she belonged to him, was his to protect and cherish. Yeah, he was doing a bang-up job of that so far. Could this night get any more fucked up? Oh wait, it was more fucked up than that. His brother was attracted to her as well. Seemed Mother Nature was screwing with them, making Gwendolyn Jones a potential mate for both of them.

Jacque maneuvered his big body into the small space. He didn’t know what kind of injuries she might have, but they couldn’t exactly call the authorities, not when he still planned to kidnap her. He knew Gwen thought he was going to kill her, but he could no more harm her than he could his brother.

Except he had. It had been an accident, but that didn’t negate the fact she was injured.

“Well?” Louis was getting impatient and would be squeezing in beside him in a minute if he didn’t get moving.

“Call Armand. We’re going to need help.” Jacque ignored the residue from the deployed airbags and carefully moved her arms and legs, heaving a sigh of relief when she moaned and easily shifted her neck and body. At least there didn’t seem to be a spinal injury.

“Armand’s not far. He’ll be here in a couple of minutes.” Louis pocketed his phone before leaning in through the opening where the door had been. Jacque had torn the damn thing off in his haste to get to Gwen.

“Good. You and he will have to pack up her belongings. Everything. Leave the furniture and dishes but take everything personal. Be sure to check for a safe or any hidey hole she might have stashed evidence.” Jacque lifted her carefully into his arms, holding her to his chest for a brief moment before passing her out to Louis. He hated to relinquish her even if it was to his brother, whom he trusted more than anyone in the world.

“I’ve got her.” Louis eased back and Jacque quickly hoisted himself out of the car. Without hesitation, he took her back from his brother, ignoring the slight resistance in Louis’s arms, and began walking. They’d parked their truck about a mile down the road.

Louis raised an eyebrow but didn’t question him. Being the eldest had its perks. “What about her car?” Louis asked.

“Call Cole and Gator. Have them tow it back to our place and lock it in the shed. We need to make it look like she simply packed up and left town.” From what little Armand had been able to uncover in the short time he’d had, she just recently moved here. She probably hadn’t made too many friends.

A black truck rumbled toward them and pulled alongside. A dark-haired man stuck his head out of the driver’s window. “Is that her?”

Jacque glanced over at his cousin and nodded.

Armand gave a low whistle. "What the hell happened?"

~~"Car accident. She tried to run and Jacque chased her."~~ Louis shot him a menacing look, leaving Jacque with no doubt that his brother wasn't pleased to be leaving Gwen in his possession.

Louis went around to the passenger side, climbed into the truck and started giving Armand orders. Jacque could feel his cousin's eyes on him but didn't care. Let him look. Let him wonder. He tightened his arms around Gwen. The pack wouldn't like him bringing in an outsider, but he didn't give a shit. Gwendolyn Jones was his and he'd kill anyone who tried to take her from him.

She was moving. Gwen could feel the vibration of the vehicle as it sank into her aching muscles. What had happened? And why was she having such a hard time opening her eyes. She tried to speak but all that came out of her mouth was a moan.

"Everything is all right."

She could hear the concern in the deep male voice. A hand touched her shoulder and then her head. She winced when his fingers touched a sensitive spot.

He swore long and loud, practically turning the air blue. "I'm sorry, *chère*. I know it hurts. We'll be home soon and I'll take care of you."

That sounded nice. Now if only she could remember who he was and what she was doing in his vehicle. She was drawing a complete blank and she didn't like it. She licked her dry lips and forced herself to try to remember.

She'd had a meeting tonight. Had it been with him, the man driving? Somehow she didn't think so. She needed a visual. Not knowing who the guy was or what he looked like was driving her crazy.

Gwen forced her eyelids open and swallowed hard when her stomach protested. Okay, so she wasn't feeling too hot at the moment. Her head throbbed and her entire body hurt. Had she been in an accident?

The fog suddenly lifted from her brain, bringing her memories into sharp focus. Reality slammed home. The meeting with Hector Canton, werewolves, the LaForge brothers, her deadly flight through the night and finally Jacque clinging to her car and beating out her window. "I had an accident." Her voice was weak and thready but she was at least talking. That was a plus. She wasn't dead either. And that was definitely a major plus.

"Yes."

She managed to lift her head and stare at him. His lips were set in a firm line and his hands gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white. "That was my fault. I'm sorry you were hurt."

Gwen was having a difficult time wrapping her brain around everything that had happened. She'd been running from Jacque and his brother because she thought they were going to kill her. She knew their deepest, darkest secret. Not that she could ever tell anyone. And even if she did, they'd never believe her and she'd probably end up on the psychiatric ward of the nearest hospital.

Now he was apologizing for her getting hurt. That didn't jive with the whole getting rid of her scenario. Maybe he was lulling her into a false sense of security so she'd tell him everything she knew first.

"I have people waiting for me to contact them. When I don't call, they'll go to the police." Okay, so that was a bald-faced lie, but he didn't know that.

He shook his head, not appearing the least bit concerned. "You don't have any close family and you haven't lived in Wayman's Peak long enough to make any good friends."

Her already upset stomach clenched and nausea threatened. How could he know that much about her? She swallowed hard and rallied. "The local sheriff's office checks on me on a regular basis." The

much was true.

Jacque speared her with a look that was part pity and part something she couldn't identify. "I'll take my chances." He turned back to the road and kept driving. His lack of concern sent her anxiety skyrocketing.

"Where are we going?"

"My home." He reached out and lightly touched his hand to her face.

That didn't make any sense. "You live near here?"

"A few hours away. You've been out of it for a while."

Gwen pushed all the way upright in her seat, groaning when her head protested. She looked around but that didn't tell her anything. The road was dark and there were no signs showing where they were. They were cruising through the night in a rather large truck, the headlights spearing through the darkness.

"Take it easy," he admonished. "You should be resting."

"I probably have a concussion. I shouldn't be sleeping." That much she did know.

"I won't let anything happen to you."

Gwen laughed, but it was tinged with despair. "Too late for that."

He frowned. "I'm sorry you were hurt and scared, but I'm not sorry I met you."

Crap. She wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. Yes, he was sexy as all get out, but that didn't mean he wasn't a serial killer, or in this case, a werewolf. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Where's Louis?" The other LaForge brother had disappeared somewhere along the way. Was he still back at her house?

"He's taking care of some business."

She wasn't sure she wanted to know what that business was. The less she knew about them and the *business* at this point the better. "Look," she began. "We both know I can't say anything to anyone about what I saw or what Hector told me. They'd think I was nuts. You take the jump drive and just let me go." That sounded reasonable to her. As far as she knew they didn't know what she did for a living or at least she hoped they didn't. There was still a chance she could talk her way out of this mess.

Jacque glanced in her direction and the corners of his mouth twitched. Was the devil laughing at her?

"Let me go." God, she wished she didn't sound so desperate, but she was at the end of her rope. She didn't want to die.

"I can't." His stark words fell between them, the finality of them descending on her with the force of a hammer on an anvil.

Gwen reached for the passenger door, clawing at the handle. Better to jump and take her chances. Maybe she could give him the slip in the woods. Right now she was less afraid of the wildlife in the trees than she was of the man sitting next to her.

"Gwen!" he yelled, swearing as he brought the truck to a screeching halt on the side of the road. The door was locked and nothing she did worked. She pressed the button to lower the window. She was halfway out the opening when he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her back.

"No!" She swiveled and beat at his head and chest and whatever other part of him she could reach. He didn't fight her, didn't hurt her. Instead, he closed his arms around her and held her against his broad chest.

"Shh," he crooned in his deep, mesmerizing voice. "Don't fight me, Gwen. I won't hurt you, I promise. And I won't let anyone else hurt you either." His slow drawl wrapped around her like an embrace and his words fell between them like a vow.

She almost believed him. Wanted to believe him. But years of cynicism made it impossible. She fought him until her strength ran out, which wasn't long. Her injuries and her woozy head made it almost impossible to put up much of a battle. Still, she tried. It wasn't in her nature to give up, to quit.

When she finally stilled in his arms, he tilted her so that she was looking up at him. Even in the dark cab of the truck she could see the intense expression on his face. He didn't look angry so much as he appeared concerned. She didn't understand him. She didn't understand any of this mess she found herself in the middle of.

She blinked and he was closer. He was lowering his head, his gaze locked onto her face—no, not her face, her lips. Was he going to kiss her?

He was. Before she could decide what to do, his mouth was touching hers. There was no demand, no aggression, simply a light press of his lips against hers.

Gwen groaned as heat rushed through her body. This wasn't fair. The first guy she'd met in months that rocked her boat and it was her kidnapper. She slapped her hand against his chest, intending to push him away. Instead, her fingers spread wide, exploring the thick mass of muscles beneath his T-shirt, feeling the heavy thud of his heart.

He leaned back slightly, breaking the contact. Their eyes met—his dark and hers light. She could still feel the moist heat of his mouth against her lips and his earthy, woody scent filled the air around her. He swept his hand over her hip and settled it against her waist. Even through the layers of her clothing she could feel the heat of him penetrating her skin.

She licked her lips again and he gave a tortured groan and swooped in to claim her mouth again. He was still gentle, still cognizant of her injuries, but he took control of the kiss and set his stamp of possession on her. Gwen had never been so thoroughly kissed in her life.

Jacque probed his tongue deep, touching her teeth, the inside of her mouth, her tongue. He probed every corner, every crevice and invited her to do the same.

Gwen knew she shouldn't be kissing him, should be pushing him away and trying to escape. Whether it was the slight concussion from the accident, the shock of everything that had happened tonight or the man himself, she couldn't say. All she knew was she wanted to kiss him, wanted to feel his mouth against hers, needed it more than she'd ever needed anything else.

That was downright scary and gave her the impetus to finally shove him away. A lock of his shaggy brown hair had fallen into his eyes and she pushed it aside before she thought better of it. He smiled and it changed his entire face, pushing him past sexy into downright lethal to her senses. Oh, he was dangerous all right. If he got her out of her clothes and into bed, she'd tell him whatever he wanted to know.

She scrambled out of his lap and over to her side of the truck. Her breathing was ragged and her head throbbed worse than a toothache. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. This wasn't good. Not good at all.

She'd read about stuff like this, about kidnapping victims relating to their kidnappers. That's all it was. Nothing more. There couldn't be anything else between them. He was a werewolf, for God's sake. She'd forgotten that when he'd been kissing her senseless.

"Are you cold?" He reached into the space behind the seats and drew out a jacket, shook it out and wrapped it around her shoulders.

It was his. She could smell his outdoorsy scent on the jacket and wanted to cuddle into it and push away at the same time. Common sense won out. She was cold so it stayed. So what if she happened to rub her nose against the fabric closest to her. Didn't mean that she took comfort from his smell. Not really.

“We’ll be there soon.” He put the truck in gear and started driving again. The window on her side went up. “The door is locked and you know you can’t escape through the window. I’ll stop you.”

Reality slammed back into place and she closed her eyes to shut it out. He wasn’t her boyfriend or her date or even a friend. He was her kidnapper. She’d rest for a few minutes and come up with another plan of escape.

But where would she go if she did get away? They knew where she lived. The life she’d planned for herself crumbled around her. All her hopes and dreams of having time to write her novel disappeared in a puff of smoke.

She’d have to sell the cabin and lose herself in a large city somewhere. It wasn’t fair. But life seldom was. You rolled with whatever it threw at you and made the best of it. A lone tear rolled down her cheek and she swiped it away before Jacque could see it. No way did she want him to see he’d upset her. She was strong and resourceful. She would get out of this.

The motion of the truck and the ache in her head combined to make her sleepy. She’d rest for a few minutes. Just a few.

Jacque glanced over at Gwen, worry chewing at his gut. His heart clenched when he saw her surreptitiously swiping away a tear. He felt like the big bad wolf in the fairy tales that humans read to their children, the monster slain by the hero of the story. Those stories had never bothered him. He thought them nothing more than a bunch of lies and nonsense but, for once in his life, he wanted to be the hero. Her hero.

He growled and gripped the steering wheel to stop himself from reaching for her. He could still taste her sweetness on his lips, her seductive flavor on his tongue. The taste of her had only wet his appetite for more.

Her hand had branded his chest where she’d touched him, the heat from her fingers leaving him craving more.

His cock pressed against the zipper of his jeans, a very tangible reminder of his arousal. Jacque inhaled, smelling her soap and her sweet scent, but it was tinged with the darker spice of blood and fear. He didn’t like that. He wanted to experience the scent of her arousal. He licked his lips, practically able to taste it.

She would come to trust him. There was no other way. There were many werewolves who would view her as a threat and would seek to kill her.

He growled, the vibration filling the cab of the truck. Over their dead bodies. Because he’d kill anyone who touched her.

His phone went off and he grabbed it before it had the chance to ring a second time. Gwen was asleep again, or passed out. He wasn’t quite sure which and, considering her probable concussion, it worried him. He wanted her home where he could put her to bed and take care of her.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me.” He gave a sigh of relief when Louis’s voice came over the line. “Cole and Gator are heading here. You’ll probably pass them on the road on your way home. They’ll load Gwen’s car up and bring it home.”

“How about her house?” He knew she wasn’t going to like having to give up her home and freedom. She was obviously fiercely independent. But it had to be done. He’d deal with the fallout later.

“Armand and I have everything packed. The refrigerator and cupboards are empty. Her front door is fixed and the house is locked up tight.”

“Good. That’s real good.” He glanced at Gwen but her sleep was undisturbed.

“We’re heading out now.” Louis paused for a brief moment. “How is she doing?”

Jacque wished to hell he knew. “Physically, not great, but her injuries don’t seem to be serious. She needs a few days to recover. I won’t know more until I can have a better look at her.” It went without saying that they couldn’t take her to a hospital. “Mentally, I’m not sure. She tried to jump out of the truck.” He paused. “I was doing about fifty-five at the time.”

“What?” Louis’s disbelief echoed his own.

“Yeah, she still thinks we’re going to kill her.”

“Haven’t you told her differently?”

Jacque almost smiled. “I don’t think she believes me.” Her courage still astounded him. He’d known men—heck, he’d known other werewolves who hadn’t shown half the strength and resiliency that Gwen had. She was quite a woman. And she was all his.

“She will. We’ll keep her safe.”

His brother’s vow was a reminder that he wasn’t alone in this. Louis wanted Gwen as much as he did. That could be a problem. Only time would tell.

“See you in a couple of hours.” He ended the call and tucked the phone away. By the time Louis and Armand arrived, he wanted Gwen cleaned up and tucked safely into his bed.

His wolf settled inside him, sensing the rightness of that as much as the man did. “I’ll take good care of you,” he promised the sleeping woman. Whether she realized it or not, she belonged with him and he’d do whatever it took to keep her.

Chapter Four

Jacque kept one eye on the hallway leading toward his bedroom and the other one on the two men leaning against the kitchen counter. Armand and Louis had arrived only minutes ago with a truckload of Gwen's stuff. It hadn't taken the three of them long to unload the boxes and suitcases and stack them in the large storage closet at the end of the hallway.

"How is she?" Louis had stopped at the doorway of Jacque's bedroom and stared at Gwen for several long minutes, but he'd left her alone, not wanting to disturb her.

Jacque raked his fingers through his hair and shook his head. "Slight concussion, but I don't think it's too serious. Bruises and a few scrapes. She needs sleep and time more than anything."

He fisted his hands to hide the slight trembling. The thought that a woman could bring him to his knees was preposterous. Yet, it was true. Gwen had been passed out when he'd arrived home. On one hand, he'd been grateful not to have to hide the whereabouts of his home from her. On the other, he'd been deeply concerned that she'd been sleeping for so long.

She'd stirred momentarily when he'd placed her on his bed. She'd opened her eyes, blinked and sent him a sleepy smile before drifting off again. That little communication was enough to reassure him that she wasn't in any immediate danger.

He'd undressed her. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. Okay, that was a huge lie. Of course he wanted to undress her. He was a red-blooded male and she was all woman. But that still wasn't why he'd done it.

His cock might have been standing at attention, ready to rock and roll, but he'd been far more concerned about her injuries. It hadn't taken him long to remove her sneakers and socks and set them under the bed. Her jeans had proven to be a bit more of a challenge as the material clung to her long legs. He'd been sweating by the time he'd gotten them off her.

Jacque swallowed hard at the memory of her lying there in her shirt, bra and silky white panties. He'd wanted to howl and bury his face between her thighs. Instead, he'd finished stripping her, doing his best not to stare at her ample breasts. No, he hadn't noticed at all that they were the perfect size for his hands or that her nipples were succulent and ripe like raspberries. Nor had he noticed her very kissable lips. For the sake of his sanity and her modesty, he'd made sure the shirt he'd dressed her in was covering her before he'd reached under it and tugged her panties off, wanting her to be comfortable.

"Jacque?" His cousin was giving him a strange look and Jacque pulled his attention back to the men.

"As I said, there are some bruises on her arms and legs. Nothing seems to be broken." Jacque did his best to ignore the raging hard-on pushing against the placket of his jeans. He hadn't had this much trouble with control since he was a horny teenager long, long years ago.

"You checked her over?" Louis crossed his arms over his chest and shot a glare in Jacque's direction.

"Oh, yeah." The memory of her naked body was burned into his brain for all eternity. He'd slept with plenty of women in his lifetime. He'd never pretended to be a saint. But never had a woman affected him the way Gwen did.

"Bastard." Louis shoved away from the counter and began to pace.

Armand stared at one brother and then the other, noting the growing tension between them. "What

the hell is going on?”

“Ask him.” Louis waved at his older brother and continued to pace.

Jacque wanted to do nothing more than go into his room, lie next to Gwen and hold her in his arms. But there were too many problems that needed to be dealt with, what was going on between him and his brother being the most important.

Armand looked at him and raised one eyebrow in silent question. If it had been anyone else, Jacques would have told him to fuck off. But Armand was like a brother to them and he was going to be around so he deserved to know the truth. “She’s a possible mate for both of us.”

“Shit.” Armand gave a low whistle, his straight black hair shimmering in the light as he shook his head. “Leave it to you two to do things the hard way.” He walked over to Jacques and slapped him on the shoulder. “But it is a good thing. To find a mate is something to be celebrated.”

“Not everyone will be happy about it,” Louis pointed out as he stopped and turned toward them. “She’s human.”

“There’s a possibility—” Armand was cut off before he could finish.

“No!” Both brothers spoke at once, their voices joined as one.

“No,” Jacques said again. “We will not risk her.” He glanced at his brother, who nodded in agreement.

“Too many die during the conversion process,” Louis pointed out. “Simply being bitten by a werewolf won’t necessarily turn you into one. You know that. It’s very rare it happens that way and about ninety-nine percent die during the transition. Werewolves are born of other werewolves, plain and simple. Plus, I don’t think that is something Gwen would even consider right now. She thinks we’re the big bad wolves and are going to kill her.”

“That’s not too far off the mark.” Armand held up his hands in mock surrender when both brothers growled at him and flashed their fangs. “You know it’s true. Many in the pack will want her dead. They don’t want to dilute the bloodlines, nor do they want outsiders in the pack.”

“Which is the very reason we broke from the pack and moved to North Carolina to start our own.” Jacques could still remember the long yelling matches with his overbearing father. “They would rather stay in the dark ages and die out than embrace the modern world and new ways.” It was what had finally driven Jacques, Louis, their cousin Armand, and two others to break away and start a new pack far away from New Orleans.

He missed the swamps and bayous of his childhood, but he’d come to embrace the deep woods and mountains of his new home. Plus, he was his own master here, not having to bend his will to tradition that made no sense to him.

“He’ll still find out.” There was an underlying threat to Armand’s words that had Jacques turning on his cousin.

“And who will tell him? You?” Pure, undiluted fury sped through his veins like molten lava, penetrating every cell in his body. His nails grew while his jawbone cracked and began to elongate.

“Don’t be an ass.” Armand took an aggressive step closer. “Your father has spies everywhere. You know as well as I do he’s been monitoring us since we left.”

Yes, Jacques did know that. No one walked away from Pierre LaForge unless he let them. He’d expected his two sons to toe the line and do exactly as he wished. That was his right as alpha of the pack. But Jacques and a few others had chafed for far too many years under the oppressive yoke and finally had broken off. He hadn’t spoken to his mother in the two years they’d been gone. His attempt to contact her had been thwarted by his father.

Jacques felt his body return to normal and was chagrined at his aggression toward his cousin.

Armand was on his side. Always had been. Their father was a mean sonofabitch, but Armand's father was even worse. Remy LaForge had never accepted the fact he would never be alpha, would always play second fiddle to his older brother. He paid lip service to his alpha in person and took his disappointment out on his family. Everyone knew that, but no one had ever done anything about it. Armand would bear the scars of that neglect for the rest of his life.

"I know." He reached out and pulled his cousin to him, giving him a quick, tight hug before releasing him. The apology went unsaid and was immediately accepted.

"If you two girls are finished sharing your feelings, can we get back to Gwen?" Louis's taunt broke the tension. Armand raised his middle finger toward his cousin.

"You can have a hug too." Jacque managed to keep his face deadpan. "I wouldn't want you to feel left out."

"Assholes." Even as he said it, there was a grin tugging at the corners of Louis's mouth.

"Back to business." The night was quickly waning and Jacque had no idea how long Gwen would sleep. "I cleaned up the cut on her forehead. Thankfully, it's not deep and doesn't need stitches. I put bandage on it." He'd hated that any of her blood had been spilled and that it was his fault. He'd done his best to remove the dried blood from her short, silky hair. Jacque swallowed back his anger. "Did you find any other incriminating information?"

Armand nodded. "She had some notes. She'd also recorded her entire conversation with Hector."

His blood ran cold when he thought about that getting posted online. "Anything else?"

"Our girl has an interesting profession." There was a world of possession in the way Louis spoke about Gwen. Jacque didn't like it, but he understood. If his brother's feelings toward Gwen were anything like his own, he knew Louis was on edge, volatile.

"Don't keep me in suspense. I can tell you're dying to enlighten me."

"She's a writer." Louis rocked back on his heels as he gave his brother the rest of the news. "She writes about the paranormal for all kinds of magazines and publications."

"Shit." Jacque rubbed his hand over his face and took a deep breath. "So she knows more about us than she let on." For some reason, he was hurt and angered by that when he had no right to be. She didn't know him or his people. Why should she care if she hurt them?

"I don't think so," Armand interjected. "From what I can tell, she's met and interviewed a bunch of people like Hector, folks that believe in all kinds of things. Hell, from what I read, I think she might have interviewed a vampire, a real one. I didn't think those reclusive bastards talked to anyone. But I don't think she actually believes in any of it herself."

"Then why does she write it?" Jacque couldn't quite understand that.

Armand shrugged. "It's a way to make a living. Louis drove us back and I spent those hours going through her laptop files and some of her papers. Like most people, she's fascinated by the thought of the paranormal but she doesn't seem to buy into it."

Louis laughed. "She obviously got more than she bargained for."

"What do you plan to do with her?" Armand asked.

Jacque wished to hell he knew.

Gwen woke slowly, as though climbing through a thick fog. She hurt all over. She bit her bottom lip to stifle a moan as she rolled onto her side and stared at the blackness surrounding her. She was in a bed. That much was clear. But it wasn't hers. The sheets were crisp cotton whereas hers were flannel. She shivered and pulled the covers more firmly around her to try to stave off the chill.

She blinked and slowly the outline of furniture became clearer. There was a window not far from

the bed and the moonlight filtered in. Within seconds, her eyes had acclimated, making the room appear somewhat lighter.

Where was she?

She swallowed hard and ordered her thoughts. The last thing she remembered was being in a truck with Jacque heading down the highway. This must be his home, and since she obviously wasn't dead, he must not be planning on killing her anytime soon. The fact that she wasn't locked in a basement or creepy cellar was also encouraging.

"If you get out of this you'll have tons of ideas for your book." Whispering made her feel not so scared and alone. She pushed herself upright, trying not to groan aloud when her muscles protested. The car accident had left its impact on her but she knew she was lucky. She could have easily been killed.

Her head throbbed and she raised her hand to touch her forehead, frowning when she felt a small bandage there. A long sleeve flowed down her arm. Gwen froze. She wasn't wearing her own clothing. She yanked back the covers and stared down. She was wearing a man's shirt and she was naked beneath it.

She swallowed hard. Surely he hadn't assaulted her. She would have remembered that. Wouldn't she? Common sense came to the fore to assure her that hadn't happened. The only physical effects she felt were from the crash.

But someone had stripped her clothing from her and put her in this men's shirt. Someone had seen her naked. Had touched her arms and legs and probably more. The idea of being that vulnerable to a virtual stranger made her stomach queasy.

She rubbed her hand over one of the sleeves and a woody scent rose from the fabric. *Jacque*. It was his shirt she was wearing. She recognized the smell and it made her toes curl. She should take it off on principle alone, but she wasn't sure where to find her clothing. Better to be wearing something of his rather than have to run around butt-naked.

It was time to figure out what was going on. She shifted her legs over the side of the bed and waited until a bout of dizziness passed. No doubt about it, she had a slight concussion. She hoped it wasn't a serious one because she needed her wits about her.

The ends of the sleeves fell over her hands so she took a moment to fold them back until they were cuffed halfway down her forearms. It took her longer than she thought it would to manage such a simple chore. She was so tired. All she wanted to do was lie back down on the bed and go to sleep.

"Time to move," she ordered herself. She eased her feet onto the floor and used the bed for support as she stood. Her knees wobbled slightly but held. The cold from the wood floors seeped through the soles of her feet and she wished she had a pair of socks.

There was a rather large dresser off to her right. Not a bad place to look. She felt no qualms about carefully opening the dresser drawers and looking through them. There wasn't nearly enough light to see by and she didn't want to risk turning one on and attracting attention. By feel alone, she found a pair of sweat socks in the second drawer and some silk boxers in the third.

She wanted to cry at the thought of having to bend over to put on the items, but better a pain in the head than a bare butt and cold feet. Yes, the shirt covered her and fell to mid-thigh, but Gwen still felt exposed.

She carefully perched on the edge of the bed and drew on the boxers. They were big and fell to her hips when she stood. She grabbed them by the waistband and held them up. This wasn't going to work. She thought for a moment and then twisted the fabric, knotting it at the side. It wasn't perfect but it would do for now.

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