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VAMPIR

Fantastic Misadventure of the Supernatural



ROB ROSEN

Table of Contents

[VAMP](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Copyright Acknowledgement](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[About the Author](#)

[MLR PRESS AUTHORS](#)

[GLBT RESOURCES](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

VAMP

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Fine, the coffin in the basement was a little unusual. Certainly no more so than the mansion itself, though, or, for that matter, the humpbacked manservant that came with it, or the mysterious death of its former owner. In fact, so starts a long list of all things unusual for our unlikely hero, Jack, and his newfound and strange family, his werewolf boyfriend, the pack eager to help him, and the ancient clan that wants him dead at all costs. Know this, however, in the end, this misfit group of characters will leave you howling in the crypt aisles!

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Published by

MLR Press, LLC

3052 Gaines Waterport Rd.

Albion, NY 14411

Visit ManLoveRomance Press, LLC on the Internet:

www.mlrpress.com

Cover Art by Deana Jamroz

Editing by Steve Lenker

Print format: ISBN# 978-1-60820-878-4

ebook format also available

Issued 2013

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For Kenny, the wind beneath my bat wings

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FOREWORD

Welcome to *Vamp*! Just a few words before the insanity begins.

This novel pays homage to one of my favorite authors, Christopher Moore. Moore has long been popular for writing comic gems where his characters frequently jump from one book to another, perhaps having a minor role in one and a major role in the next, or remaining minor from story to story. If you're familiar with the returning characters, you get a nice surprise out of seeing them again, revisiting their narrative, but if you're not familiar with them, then there's nothing lost since each of his books are stand-alone novels.

Vamp continues in this tradition.

My previous novel, *Queerwolf*, had a distinct ending; there was no need for a sequel, but there were characters in the book whose stories I wanted to continue with. As with Moore's work, *Vamp* is also not a sequel. This is not a continuation of Blake, the *Queerwolf*'s, story. *Vamp* has a whole new set of zany, memorable characters to contend with, a new story to tell, but with a few of the minor characters in *Queerwolf* now rising to the forefront as major ones.

You don't need to have read *Queerwolf* to enjoy *Vamp*—not that I wouldn't appreciate it, though. In fact, the back-story is told whenever appropriate throughout the book. Still, here's a little synopsis to catch you up, just in case:

Blake, the *Queerwolf*, has powers beyond the norm of his ilk, owing to his unique genetic make-up. He's also an alpha male, which doesn't sit too well with the alpha male, Steven, leader of the gay pack in San Francisco. Since difference is dangerous to the pack, to their ways, and since the *Queerwolf* can never truly fit in with them, Blake, along with his boyfriend, Ted, must create a new pack, a pack with powers similar to his own. But there's simply no room for two packs in San Francisco, or so Steven thinks, and so he tries to obliterate this new pack, to wipe out these new powers of theirs which threaten to bring their very existence to the light of day.

Steven returns in *Vamp* to atone for his sins. The minor characters, Ralph and Mack, are now major ones, while Blake and Ted and Gramps shrink into the background. And they, as I've said, are joined by a whole new roster of crazies, brought to life—or in their cases, death—all for your amusement.

So, dear reader, I hope you enjoy what is to follow.

And perhaps, just perhaps, maybe some day the minor characters in this book will shine yet again, their stories told in greater detail, one window closed, another gladly opened.

Fingers crossed.

All the best,

Rob

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CHAPTER 1

Creepy

Okay, so the coffin in the basement was a bit of a surprise. Though, to be fair, as coffins went, it was a rather nice one, I suppose. I mean, it's not like I had a lot to compare it to, but I do know quality when I see it. Then again, everything about the mansion screamed quality, or just plain old screamed, because, much like the coffin I was suddenly confronted with, the place was creepy, or better yet, *CREEPY*.

Yep, that's about right.

In any case, as I circled it, round and round he goes, my index finger running along the metal finish, a new sensation washed over me—well, *through* me, really, like deep on down through, because it suddenly felt as though the thing was calling out to me, drawing me to it, which might explain how I ended up in the basement in the first place.

See, I'd never been to the mansion before that day. In fact, I didn't even know of its existence.

Or *his*, for that matter.

Not until his lawyer called me the week prior, out of the blue, or gray, as it were, foggy gray, in the dead of San Francisco summer. It seemed that my cousin Boris—seriously, someone actually named him that—had suddenly met his untimely demise.

“Boris?” I asked the guy on the other end of the phone, utterly confused.

“Your cousin, sir,” replied the man, the slightest accent detectable, something Eastern-European-sounding, “Boris Jackowski.”

I scratched my head and stared out the window of my tenth-story office building, the Transamerica Pyramid looming in the not-too-distant distance. Then I squinted my eyes and racked my brain. I mean, stands to reason I'd know of a cousin, especially one named Boris. “Nope, doesn't ring any bells,” I freely admitted. “You sure you have the right Jack Jackowski?”

Okay, talk about not casting the first stone, right? I mean, Jack Jackowski wasn't going to win any naming contests either.

In any case, the guy on the phone did have the correct Jack Jackowski, right on down to my social security number, birthday, and home address, which was just the start of all things creepy. (I mean *CREEPY*. Sorry.)

"You're his only living relative, Mister Jackowski," explained the lawyer, "and heir to his fortune."

Ding! went the bell in my head, or make that *gong!* or, more appropriately, considering the city I called home, *clang, clang, clang!* went my cable car. "Cousin Boris was a, um, *wealthy* man?" I managed, my voice barely registering above a hoarse whisper.

The man chuckled, which sent a chill down my spine for some odd reason, mainly because it sounded like one of those laughs you hear in the movies, just before the bad guy ties the damsel to the train tracks. "Obese understatement, Mister Jackowski."

"You mean 'gross'," I said, "'gross' understatement."

The chuckle repeated, the chill along my spine growing arctic cold. "No, sir, 'gross' doesn't even begin to cover it." Then he sighed. "In any case, as the sole living heir to his fortune, all of it goes to you: his bank account, his belongings, and his mansion."

I blinked and fought to catch my breath. "His...mansion?"

"His mansion," he echoed. "Yours, all of it."

I blinked again as I wiped the newly-formed bead of perspiration from my face. "Wait," I thought to say, shaking my head from side to side, trying and failing to push away the cobwebs. "How exactly is Cousin Boris my cousin? I have no cousins, as far as I know. No parents, no grandparents, no aunts or uncles, not a step-anything or an in-anything, nothing once, twice, or even thrice removed. Nada. Zip. Zilch on the whole cousin front." This wasn't as odd as it sounded, seeing as everyone in my family, going way, way back, was gone and forgotten, my parents killed in a car crash a few years earlier, leaving little old me to fend for his little old self, or young self, as it were.

“Boris Jackowski was your great-grandfather’s brother’s great-grandson,” the lawyer told me as a second and third bead of sweat quickly followed the first one, tickling my face as they meandered ever downward, “leaving the two of you the last surviving Jackowskis.” His sigh repeated. “Make that just you, I suppose, now, sir.”

And still I kept shaking my head, because I’d never met my great-grandfather, but I knew he was an only child, or at least that’s what I’d been told, and so I said, “My great-grandfather didn’t have a brother.”

I heard papers being rustled on the other end of the line just before the lawyer told me, again in that barely-there accent that made me suddenly think of borscht and broiled prunes, “Your great-grandfather was born in Poland in 1892, Mister Jackowski. He migrated to the United States in 1910, leaving his brother behind to watch over the family estate. Your cousin, Boris, sold said estate in 2008 and moved to San Francisco the very same year.” The papers stopped rustling as my head stopped shaking, and my heart, it seemed, for just the briefest of moments, stopped madly pounding in my chest. “He knew of you, Mister Jackowski, even though you didn’t know of him. He knew of you and your family, though none of them knew of him or his family. From what I know, sir, from what your cousin told me before his death, the two sides were estranged.”

“Until now,” I couldn’t help but add.

“In a way, yes,” he said. “Bitter irony, I suppose.”

My hand was shaking as I held the receiver, the beads turning to a torrent, because none of what he was saying made any sense. How could I not know about an entire limb of my spindly family tree, and how could I not know I had a cousin living in the same city as me, and why, I wondered, did said cousin not contact me until after his death? “Wait,” I managed, my heart suddenly kick-starting as a new thought wormed its way through, “Boris moved here in 2008?”

“Yes, Mister Jackowski,” he replied, “2008. Why do you ask?”

I gulped as I stared at the phone, eyes wide, Adam’s apple riding up and down my throat like a runaway elevator car. “That was the year my parents died.”

There was the briefest of pauses before he said, “An odd coincidence, Mister Jackowski. One family lost, one gained.”

The phone slipped out of my sweaty grip. I picked it back up and replied, “Not exactly gained, Mister, uh, Mister...”

The chuckle made its menacing return. “Bolinski,” he informed me, “Igor Bolinski.”

“Polish, too?” I asked.

“Polish, too,” he answered.

“They name them weird in Poland, if you don’t mind my saying so, sir.”

“Says the man named Jack Jackowski.”

Touché. He had me there. In any case, there was one more question in my repertoire, one that was steadily rising to my addled brain’s forefront. “Cousin Boris,” I said, “how, um, *how* did he die?”

The third and final sigh reached my ear. Too bad no one was beating off on the other end of the line to make it more pleasant-sounding. “Impaled, Mister Jackowski.”

An odd word. Sounded more like a day at the beach, and yet I knew it wasn’t. “How does one die of impaling exactly, Mister Bolinski? Did he fall on an upturned tree root, back into an exposed jagged pipe, parachute onto a spiked fence?” *Ouch, ouch, and double-ouch.*

The pause, like the sigh, made its triumphant reappearance. It stretched into infinity, though it lasted for barely the briefest of seconds. “A hunting accident,” was all he said, leaving it at that before quickly changing the subject. “Now then, I have some final paperwork to take care of before the estate changes hands. Can you meet me at the mansion in a week’s time?”

“The mansion,” I repeated. “*My* mansion?”

“Your mansion, yes,” he said, “as the master wanted.”

“The master?” I echoed, my heart suddenly galloping through a furlong.

He coughed, which, oddly, didn’t sound any less sinister than his chuckle, or his sigh, or his pause, for that matter. “*Mister*, I meant to say, *Mister* Jackowski. It was his final wish, that it all goes to you.”

And who was I to argue with a man's final wish, especially when that man was my estranged cousin? Wealthy cousin, that is, wealthy, estranged, impaled Cousin Boris.

CREEPY!

It bears repeating.

§ § §

And so I found myself at the mansion a week later. It sat nestled atop a cliff that overlooked the ocean far down below, a stately Victorian in only minor disrepair with a wide expanse of land surrounding it. There was a formidable fence around it all, an old growth forest outside of that, and enough eucalyptus trees to keep your sinus cavities open for years and years on end: potpourri on steroids. I breathed it all deeply in as I stood outside the gate, staring up at the massive home that was, by all accounts, now mine.

"Here goes nothing," I whispered as I pressed the button on the security box, "or make that everything," I corrected myself. Cue the menacing organ music.

The gate slowly creaked open, as if it really didn't want to let me in but had no other choice in the matter. In truth, I felt much the same way. I mean, my Castro apartment was nice enough, and where, all the way out here, was I going to get a drink after I got off from work? Heck, there wasn't even a nearby neighbor, let alone a gay bar. Still, I made my way up the gravel path, the stately mansion looming ever larger as I slowly approached, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. Me, not it. Though, oddly, it did seem to be staring down at me.

"Home sweet home," I groaned as I lifted the metal knocker a scant few seconds later, sending it clanking loudly against the thick wooden door. *Boom, boom, boom* I heard from within, matching my heartbeat, *boom* for *boom* for frickin' *boom*.

And then I heard the door unlock, the wood moving in reverse, before I saw a head poking out and then a hump, and not the good kind of hump, either. This one was on his back, twisting his diminutive body in an unnatural contortion, like he'd been ringing bells at Notre Dame for half his

life. “Mister Jackowski,” he grunted, staring up at me through grayish-green eyes, mouth in a snarl, teeth yellow.

“Igor?” I asked, with a gulp.

He held out his hand in greeting. “A pleasure,” he said, a yawn trumping my gulp.

Reluctantly, I grabbed hold. “A pleasure,” I replied, but the pleasure was all his. Though, by the look on his face, not to mention his hump, which seemed to have a life of its own, pleasure wasn’t really something he’d come across in quite a long time, if ever.

“Please, do come in,” he then said, the door opening further, the foyer revealed, bedecked in muted reds, velvet on top of velvet, impossibly old furniture, enough dust to completely wipe out any of the lovely eucalyptus scent that permeated the forest behind me.

“Maid have the decade off?” I asked, choking back a cough as the door shut behind me with a loud *bang*, causing me to jump in place, hand instinctively reaching for my chest.

“No maid, sir,” he replied, the sarcasm apparently going over his head. Though, at his hunched height, pretty much everything went over his head. “No maid, no butler, no cook, no chauffeur, sir, just me.”

I stared at him inquisitively. “But you were my cousin’s lawyer.”

He shrugged, sort of. I mean, what with the hump and all, it seemed sort of a difficult feat for him to successfully pull off. “Your cousin needed little, sir,” he replied by way of an explanation.

And little was what he got, I thought to myself, but said instead, “So you were his tinker, tailor, soldier, spy, so to speak?”

The shrug-in-training returned. “You left out lawyer, but yes, that would indeed cover it, sir.”

I walked past him and moved into the living room—*living* not quite the word for it, though. The room was massive, deathly still, uncomfortable-looking in its stately grandeur, with enough gilt to make Fort Knox jealous, and enough dust and cobwebs to make King Tut’s tomb seem shiny-clean in comparison. “Where did all this stuff come from?” I asked, Igor suddenly appearing at my side, which again made me jump in place.

“Shipped from Poland, sir,” came the bored-sounding response, “same as me.” He smiled—again, sort of. See, the hump even tamped that down, pounded it into submission.

“So you’re part of the estate as well, Igor?” I hesitated to ask.

He bowed by way of an answer—again, sort of. “Your room is upstairs, sir, down the hall and to the right. Dinner is at six.” He moved in reverse now, never taking his eyes off of me, my belly knotted so tight it would take a team of Boy Scouts to untie it. “When can I expect your belongings to arrive, sir?”

In truth, I hadn’t planned that far ahead yet. I mean, I had to see the place first, confirm that it was all mine. As if he were reading my mind, Igor was now pointing to a piece of paper resting atop a nearby marble end-table. I walked over and lifted it up. It was my cousin’s will, I quickly realized, mainly because it read *Last Will and Testament of Boris Jackowski* in bold letters across the top.

“Everything is legally mine,” I muttered after I read the document, that slack jaw of mine going further into limp-noodle mode.

“As I already told you, sir,” came the reply.

“But, again, where did it all come from?” I asked, “the money, this house?”

Igor suddenly stopped moving in reverse, his hump swaying just a tad, much like a bowl of Jell-O. In an earthquake. “Your family goes back many generations. Many, many, in fact, too far back to count.” Then he turned and headed out of the room altogether, adding over his shoulder (or at least hump), “This is your heritage, sir, all that remains.” And there was one of those obese understatements again, because this all was seriously *all*: millions and millions and millions of dollars of *all*, really. This wasn’t a heritage; this was the reserve for a small country, like China.

In any case, with that, he was gone, and in his place rested a new unease, a pit in my belly to go along with those knots, plus a cyclone in my head. And that pull I mentioned earlier, something drawing me to the aforementioned basement, to the aforementioned coffin.

To my unaforementioned destiny.

§ § §

I stopped circling the coffin, my index finger lifting off the metallic surface, my eyes, however, still glued to it, stapled and plastered and nailed and stitched to it, in fact. Or at least to what was inside, because that, I sensed, was what was doing the calling to begin with, the yanking at my very soul. This, I figured, was what a moth felt like when it encountered a flame. Only with me, with the coffin, it was more like a brushfire, four-alarm, teetering on an incendiary five.

And so I rested my hands on the coffin's handles and grabbed hold, the metal like ice against my flesh. *Please be empty, please be empty, please be empty.* Then I said a silent prayer and flung the lid open, like ripping a Band-Aid off a scab: quickly and with as little thought as possible. Then I said another silent prayer, this one a thank-you, because, yes, the coffin was indeed empty—um, mostly.

With trembling hands, I lifted up the casket's lone content off the silvery satin interior. It was a sheet of paper, crisp and white, the words written by hand with a distinctive script.

And so I read.

Greetings, cousin, the letter started off, the words turning my blood to ice. If you are reading this, then I fear I am no longer roaming this world and have ascended to or, more than likely, descended to yet another.

My hands shook as I continued reading, my mouth instantly going Saharan dry.

I have rested along with this note for a very long time now, knowing that this day would come, though, of course, hoping otherwise. And yet, come it has, and you, I'm afraid, are now the lone survivor of a great war.

My stomach churned so much it was a wonder I didn't suddenly shit out butter.

Sadly, I cannot help you much in this last pitched battle. Save, that is, for the one piece of information I was none too eager to leave you with, hoping beyond hope that our family secret would remain mine and mine alone as I watched over you since my arrival at this city by the bay. For only I have ever been prepared for it, prepared for what this secret entails. Still, there is

no other recourse now. If you do not win the battle, then this war of ours will forever be lost.

I fought to catch my breath as I neared the end of the letter, none too eager for what remained of it.

And so, dear cousin, this is my secret, now yours, as it was my father's and his before him, back to the very beginning of it all. And one that you must guard with your very life, guard as this coffin will guard you, if need be, as I have guarded you these past several years from those who wish us gone, ground to the dust from whence we sprang.

Then I read the last remaining words before I dropped the paper, before the world shrank to a pinprick of light and then not even that.

You see, I am a vampire, Jack, as you will be once you drink the vial in my nightstand. For if you don't, then the battle, the war, is already lost.

And so shall you be.

Just like all the others who have come before us.

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CHAPTER 2

Drink Me

When I came to, I was on the cement floor, the letter atop my chest. I stared at the paper, frowning as I rubbed my neck. “My dearly departed cousin had a sick sense of humor.”

“Nope,” came the voice that caused my body to quiver, eyes to glance up and then blink.

“What do you mean, ‘nope,’ Igor?”

He was staring down at me. “Nope, no sense of humor at all.” He paused and scratched his chin. “Though on occasion he did grin at the Snapple caps.” Then he shrugged. “In any case, I assume that he told you his little secret, judging from your now-prone position and the look of disbelief on your face.”

I groaned. “That he’s a...that I’m a...”

“Vampire,” he calmly stated, finishing the sentence, ridiculous as it sounded. “Yes, sir, he was, as are you.”

I pushed myself up on my elbows. “There’s no such thing, Igor, and besides, I don’t drink blood, and I can see my reflection in the mirror, and I love a good garlic pizza.”

He snickered, the familiar chill running down my spine at the sound of it, like nails across a chalkboard, only much less enjoyable. “And you are not some movie version of a vampire, either. You are human, you have a reflection, and, of course, you love garlic pizza. Who doesn’t?”

“And the blood?” I asked.

He nodded, as much as he could. “Oh, yes, that you drink. Some of the movie stuff is true, I suppose.”

“Except that I don’t,” I needlessly reminded him.

“Yet,” he replied, “but you will. You must, or you will die, as they all have.”

“Who?” I asked, trembling yet again. “My cousin? Was he killed?”

But Igor merely grunted. “You must drink the vial, as I am sure he’s told you to do. Beyond that, your world is yours to discover. I do not know much more than what I have seen, what I have heard. It was not his way to offer more than he had to, not the way of your kind, in fact.”

“What’s in the vial?” I thought to ask, my heart now pounding in my ears.

He turned and headed back up the stairs, only answering with, “Drink it and find out, sir, drink it and find out.”

The basement door shut loudly behind him, and I was left alone again, in silence, the coffin to my right. All in all, I quickly realized, my life as a wealthy bachelor wasn’t off to such a great start. “Where are all the scantily-clad men cavorting around the pool?” I asked with a heavy sigh. Then I pushed myself up and dusted myself off before also heading up the stairs. “Please don’t let Igor be the lone cavorter around this place,” I added, “scantily-clad or otherwise.”

Then I had myself a look around. From room to richly-appointed room I went, shocked at all the obscene wealth, at all the art—much of it, too, obscene—and at all the dust, obscene amounts of it. I mean, with all his money, *my* money, couldn’t Cousin Boris afford a housekeeper, or at least a snazzy Dyson? I sneezed as I headed up the winding wooden staircase, then sneezed again as I stared up at the crystal chandelier, which was dripping with prismatic gems, and sneezed yet again as I gazed down the long corridor, rooms on either side, doors shut, with Lord only knew what behind them.

Best guess, obscene things.

Though, of course, I knew what was behind one of them, at any rate.

“The vial,” I whispered, the words sending a jolt up my back that caused the hairs on my neck to stand on end.

I knew which room it was, too, felt it. It was like the door was pulsing, a beacon through the fog. Down the hall and to the right, just as Igor had said,

and so that's where I headed, my hand on the knob seconds later, the door giving way as I inhaled and entered, as my heart nearly burst from my chest.

The bedroom, like the rest of the house, was extravagant, the bed massive, furniture old, wooden, intricately carved, but it wasn't at any of this I was staring. It was at the portrait hanging above the bed, to the man's likeness captured within.

"Boris," I rasped, at last exhaling, my eyes laser-locked onto his, his onto me, as if he were staring down. "Nice to meet you, cousin," I added, with a nod of my head. "Too bad the circumstances couldn't have been better." Then I squinted as my eyes went up and down, left and right, across the expanse of canvas. "You don't look much like a vampire, cousin." In fact, he looked quite similar to me: same blue eyes, same aquiline nose, similar jet-black hair slicked back, cheekbones that any model would kill for, and an identical dimpled chin. "Okay, maybe a little vampirish, now that I think about it." I quickly lifted my fingers to my mouth and rubbed them across my rather dull incisors. "Just checking." Then I laughed, nervously, then laughed again when I spotted the nightstand, the top drawer just slightly ajar.

Slowly, I inched my way toward it, my neck bent down, eyes landing on the prize as my breath again got sucked in, like I'd been sucker-punched in the gut all of a sudden. The vial, as the letter had said, was there, medium-sized, slender, made of glass, and filled, I discovered, with some sort of liquid.

I lifted it up and held it to the light, the liquid thick, viscous, a deep, dark red. Suddenly, I felt like Alice. "Drink me?" I said to it. "No fucking way." Then I again gazed up at the portrait. "No fucking way, cousin. No. Fucking. Way."

I gulped as I again stared at the vial, and again as I lifted off the stopper. A third time as I took a whiff, goose bumps instantly forming up my arms as a soft moan escaped from between my parted lips. Whatever it was that was inside smelled like heaven, like sex and youth and power, like nothing I'd ever smelled before. *Intoxicating* would've been one of those obese understatements again.

In other words, just like Alice, I drank it.

Go figure.

It went down smoothly, perhaps a bit acrid, but still, down it went, every last drop, before I set the empty vial on the nightstand. In silence I stood there, staring from it to the portrait and back again, watching, waiting, listening for something, anything out of the ordinary. Only, everything felt the same. I felt the same.

Until, that is, of course, I didn't.

See, the room was stuffy, airless, still, and so I opened up the window for a breath of fresh air. Except it wasn't air that I suddenly smelled, or even eucalyptus. Or the ocean far down below, churning against the craggy rocks that abutted the nearby coastline. No, it was all that and so much more. I could, in fact, smell, well, *everything*—wait, *EVERYTHING*! Yep, that's more like it.

I could, all of a sudden, smell every animal, vegetable, and mineral, could discern what each one was, too. Could pinpoint where the nearest bunny rabbit was, the closest coyote, sea lion, dog, human, besides Igor, whose scent, suffice it to say, was unmistakably his own. Each new molecule of it that wafted up my nostrils sent my mind reeling until I was fairly panting as I stared out the window at it all. Everything, like the mansion, seemed suddenly mine for the taking.

Instantly, I turned and stared at the portrait, frowning as it, in turn, smiled down at me. "What have I done, cousin?" I groaned. "What have I done?"

§ § §

I found myself outside a scant few minutes later. I needed to get out of there, out of the room, the mansion, away from it and him. But the world was foreign to me now, different somehow than it was before. Still, I walked down the gravel path, the gate sensing me, opening up to allow my exit. So I ran through it, back the way I'd come, suddenly taking a sharp right toward the ocean, trying to clear my head of the million sounds and smells that now filled it: each one distinct, each one familiar.

All, that is, save for one, one that stood out from the rest. Unique, strange, intoxicating, pulling me toward it, positive pole to my negative, my

pole instantly rigid and thick as a tree limb inside my jeans.

I stopped dead in my tracks, my nose tilted up. “What is *that*?” I fairly moaned. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever smelled before.” I moved more quickly, running again, headed toward the scent, eager to see what this new thing was.

Minutes later, I was on a deserted stretch of beach, boulders blocking it in, the descent down impossibly steep, though strangely not too steep for me, at least not any more. There the aroma grew, blossoming inside my head, practically overpowering me, in fact. I ran toward it, the sun beating down on me, and that’s when I discovered what I’d been smelling.

Or, that is to say, *whom*.

It was a man, naked, alone, tanning himself. And oh, what a stunner he was, which was the most obese understatement out of all of them thus far. I inched in closer, closer still, but he didn’t move. His impossibly handsome face pointed skyward, hands by his sides, fingers digging into the warm sand. Again I sniffed the air. The scent was indeed coming from him, and it was like nothing I’d ever smelled before. But how was that possible? How were all the other millions of scents familiar to me, but not his?

Closer I went, until I was standing directly over him, staring down at a body etched with muscle, very nearly perfect in every regard, almost unnatural in its beauty. This was Mother Nature at her finest hour. This was Adonis on a *really* good fucking day.

And then he realized I was standing there, his eyes blinking open, so much blue that you just about wanted to take a swim in them, bluer than the sky up above or the ocean that stretched forever out in front of us. Again he blinked before hopping up, faster than I’d ever seen any man hop before. One minute he was lying there; the next he was two feet away, legs apart, arms wide at his sides, eyeing me as he bared his teeth.

“How did you do that?” he panted. “How did you sneak up on me?”

I shrugged and panted right along with him. “I don’t know. Just did. I guess you were asleep and didn’t hear me.”

He shook his head. “No. I mean, how? Because that’s not possible.”

I smiled and nodded, taking him in, and man, was there a lot to take. “And yet I’m here, and you look quite surprised.”

He paused and sniffed the air, his eyes suddenly in a slit, almost feral-looking. “What...what *are* you?”

I froze at the words. What did he mean, *what am I*, and what was he sniffing? “I’m Jack,” I said, in way of a reply. “Jack Jackowski. I live in the house above the cliffs.” Or at least soon would, I supposed.

Again he shook his head. “No, not who. *What?*”

And then I felt it, felt his mind inside my head as he sought the answer on his own. Only somehow I was able to block him out, causing him to jump an inch in reverse, to blink again in shock. “What’s wrong?” I asked, feeling his fear now, the strange, heady scent that rose off of him growing in intensity.

And still his head kept shaking, eyes growing wider, until they looked like they could pop right on out of their sockets. “I know how you snuck up on me,” he whispered, though the words reached my ears just the same, loud and clear.

“You...you were asleep,” I told him. “It happens.”

“No,” he replied, “not to me, not ever.” He wiped the sweat off his face and moved to within a foot of me, sniffing again. “I couldn’t smell you because you have no scent.” And still he kept moving forward, his hand outstretched, reaching for me before placing it on my chest. “And I couldn’t hear your heart...” the palm was flush with me now, “...because you have no heartbeat.” He looked up and locked eyes with me, nearly taking my breath away—that is to say, had it not been taken away, I quickly realized, when I drank from the vial. “You have no scent, no heartbeat, because you aren’t alive. So again, what exactly *are* you?”

I brushed his hand away. “You don’t smell right to me either,” I said, “not...not human. Not like anything or anyone I’ve ever smelled before.”

Again his eyes grew wide, shock blanketing his face. “How is that possible? How can you smell that?”

I smiled, despite the fear that was also welling up inside of me. “Beats the hell out of me, friend.”

Then he, too, smiled, despite his own apparent fear. "Steven Littleton," he said, his hand again held out, this time in greeting.

"Nice to meet you, Steven Littleton," I said, my hand in his, flesh on flesh, a white spark of lightning coursing through me upon contact. It suddenly seemed as if two men such as us had never before met, which, all things considered, was probably very much true.

"Nice to meet you, too, Jack Jackowski," he told me, "I think." His smile returned, brighter than the sun high above, and if my heart hadn't already stopped beating, it surely would have right about then. "Though it still doesn't answer the question of what the hell you are."

I nodded. "Nor does it answer what you are either." I then pointed downward with my free hand, index finger aimed at the elephant in the room, or, that is, to his raging boner on the beach. "Or why you're, um, like *that* all of a sudden."

He chuckled. "Comes with the territory," he replied, rather cryptically.

"Comes, huh?" said I, my voice syrupy, the gap again closed, his hand still in mine, his dick now in my other one, pulsing in my hand, thick and hot, alive.

"Huh," he said, face to face now, the smell of him changing, the fear diminishing, replaced with something even more exotic. "I've never almost kissed a dead guy before."

"Almost?" I rasped, my lips brushing his, which was about as close to landing on a cloud as a guy could get.

And then the kiss was sealed, his body pressed to mine, tongues doing a midair tango as the surf broke a few dozen yards away, seagulls flying high overhead, his heartbeat pounding in my ears. Which did indeed sound odd, seeing as I couldn't possibly hear someone's heartbeat, smell him from a mile away, or run down a nearly vertical cliff to get to him. Then again, I wasn't really thinking about any of those things, not while his lips were joined with mine, his prick steely stiff in my now-jacking hand, his free hand already working its way inside my jeans.

"Well?" I exhaled down his throat, eyelids fluttering open.

"Well, what?" he replied with a moan, his hand finally at its destination.

“Do dead men pop boners like that?”

He chuckled. “Not sure,” he replied, his face moving an inch away. “I haven’t seen it yet to make a fair comparison.”

My chuckle joined his, the combined sound swirling around us as I pulled further away, releasing my hold on his prick before kicking off my sneakers and rolling down my socks. “You want to see my dick?” I asked with a sly smirk. “I mean, to make it fair?”

“Well, fair is indeed fair, as they say,” he said, stroking his cock now, the wide, helmeted head already slick, glistening in the sunlight. “You’ve seen mine, I mean.”

I nodded. “And amply so.” I grabbed the bottom of my T-shirt and then raised it up and over my head, the cool ocean breeze making my nipples go instantly rigid.

He stared down at his stellar cock, and then pointed to my crotch. “Now then, let’s see its playmate.”

My smile echoed his as I unbuttoned the top button of my jeans and then slid down the zipper, dropping the denim to the warm sand before kicking them off, all while I stared at him, at his eyes of blue, at his movie-star face and Olympic-athlete body, smelling that unique aroma of his as my briefs also got pushed down and kicked off. “Better?” I asked, swinging my willie from side to side.

Again his eyes went wide. “Well, that’s one word for it.”

“Got some more?” I asked, again moving toward him, as if I had a choice any more.

“Feed me,” he replied, sending me back again to Wonderland as I fulfilled his very Alice-like wish, with him on his knees, my cock gliding down his throat, a gagging tear streaming down his scruffy cheek in no time flat.

I caressed his face as he sucked and licked and devoured me whole, as he tickled my balls and patted my belly, those pools of blue locked vise-tight on to me, all while he continued to try and pry his mind into my own. Tried and failed, that is.

“How do you do that?” I moaned, the words carried on the breeze.

He popped my prick out of his mouth and smiled up at me. "It's easy," he said, shaking his fifth limb at me. "Here, you have a try now."

I sank to my knees into the warm sand. "*That* I know how to do," I replied, "and well." I promptly proved my point, toppling him over as his cock slid inside my mouth, inch by steely inch, the smell of musk and sweat and *him* wafting up my nose. And then I opened my mind up for him, enough to relay, *This, I meant. How do you do this?*

He stared down at me, his hand in my hair, coaxing me down and around his spit-slick tool. *Better question, how are you doing it?*

Ah, and that really was a better question. How, in fact, was I doing it? But I already knew the answer. And so I thought the answer, and he heard my thought and raised me a thought in return.

I retracted my mouth and sat up. He sat up, too, and stared with a new sense of wonder at me, and me at him.

"There are no such things as vampires," he proclaimed.

I grinned and replied, "And there are no such things as werewolves."

"Huh," he huhed.

"Yeah, huh," I huhed right on back.

Then he grinned. "Think two imaginary creatures can spew together on a beach, then?"

I shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Though the logic appeared less than sound, all things considered, the hypothesis seemed worth proving. In other words, he was once again on his knees, and I was once again on my knees, and my dick was in his grip, and his was in mine, and our lips once again met as the surf continued to crash and the seagulls continued to circle and squawk. And though my day was just full of unwanted surprises, this was the lone one I certainly did not mind.

He came with me minutes later, his cock shooting a steady streak of aromatic spunk as mine gushed in response, two giant loads that met and pooled in the sand below as we both moaned and groaned into each other's mouths, our minds crashing together like the ocean and the beach down in the front row.

It wasn't those cavorting, scantily clad men I'd been imagining, but it'd do in a pinch.

Man, would it ever do.

Spent, we both collapsed on the beach, his hand in mine as we stared up at the azure sky above, both of us clearly trying to collect our thoughts. Then he turned his face toward mine. "Seriously, Jack, vampires don't exist."

I turned my face to his and replied, "Seriously, Steven, werewolves don't exist." Seems we were at an impasse.

Again he looked skyward. "Well, for two figments of the imagination, we both do come awfully well together."

I laughed, and also gazed at the heavens above. "Amen," I agreed, then added, "Now then, care to explain any of this? Because, to be quite honest, I've only been a vampire for just under an hour now, and the thought is a bit daunting at best."

"I can only imagine," he agreed, gripping my hand tighter in his. "Or not." He paused. "I was born a werewolf, always knew I was one, leader of my pack, in fact. Though it's nice to come down here from time to time, to clear my thoughts, get away from my responsibilities." Again he turned my way. "It's how I can get inside your head, too. A wolf pack hunts together as one: part innate ability, part telepathy. Throw that capacity into a human mind and *voilà*, instant connection. Except, up until I met you, only other werewolves were capable of blocking it out."

I nodded. It made sense, at least from my standpoint. "So, if you're similar to a wolf, then I must be similar to a bat in some respects. And a bat can feel the entire world around him with sonar, know what every animal and plant is without having to even see it, which is how I found you. I thought it was by smell, but maybe it was something different entirely." I turned his way as well. "Human sonar."

"Amplified to allow telepathy or to block it," he added. Then his smile faltered just a tad. "By bat, do you mean vampire bat, as in one that drinks blood? Because amplify that, and, well..."

I cringed as I shook my head. "I...I don't know, at least not yet. There was no guide book with this thing." And then I sighed. "Seems I'm all alone in this: no family, no other vampires to teach me what I need to know in order to survive." Then I paused, the sigh repeated. "And, uh, my life may be in danger, too. Someone may or may not have killed my cousin, also a vampire, and that someone may or may not be out to get me next."

He sidled in closer. "That's one hell of a definite maybe, Jack," he said. "So what, if you don't mind me asking, do you plan on doing, fly south for the winter?" He laughed, and then just as abruptly stopped. "Wait, do you think you can fly, too? I mean, I can change, look like a wolf, hunt like a wolf, think like a wolf, at least while the moon is full; maybe you have other abilities that a bat also has besides the sonar and, uh, possible blood-sucking thing."

Not to mention the whole undead thing, because, like he said, I had no heartbeat any more, no need to breathe, even. I think I was just doing it out of habit now. Still, one unknown horror at a time to deal with, I figured. "Well, I can certainly scale near-vertical cliffs easily enough."

He nodded. "Same as me, even in human form."

I sat up, the oddest feeling suddenly washing over me: joy mixed with something else, something like thirst, like hunger, and thankfully not for blood, especially not his. I jumped up, as did he, again so fast that I could barely see it happen. "Should I...should I try? Here?"

He nodded, his smile infectious. "Best place for it; no one can see us down here."

I whipped my head around and stared up at the mansion high above. "Except for possibly Igor, my humpbacked manservant."

He shook his head. "You're joking, right? Some sort of vampire humor?"

My sigh returned as I again looked his way. "Wishful thinking, but no. In any case, I doubt I have any secrets from him to begin with, so let's test these wings out, in a manner of speaking." I looked around and spotted a rather large boulder, the top of which would put me a good several feet above the sand, so if I fell, it wouldn't hurt too badly, apart from my pride. Then again, this being San Francisco, there was pride enough to go around.

I hopped up and stared down at him, and he up at me. “Try flapping,” he suggested.

With a determined look on my face, that’s just what I did. Had there been a window there, that pride I was talking about would’ve flown right on out of it, because a naked man flapping atop a boulder is about the stupidest looking thing you can possibly imagine. In any case, throwing caution to the wind, I then jumped and flapped for all of about two seconds before I landed with a dull thud in the sand below.

“Not working,” I stated as I brushed the sand off my privates.

“But fun to watch,” he retorted. “Best guess, it’s more of a mental thing.”

“And worst guess?”

He shrugged. “You fall on your ass again, but what a supremely nice ass it is.”

I blushed, or at least I would have, had I still had a beating heart to push the blood up with. In any case, I hopped back up, locked my jaw, squinted my eyes, and pushed. So worst case, I figured, would be that I took a dump right there. Only, that’s not what happened. In fact, with a little thought power on my part, my feet actually began to lift off the rock, then dangled above it, and then flew right over Steven’s head.

“Holy shit, I’m flying!” I hollered, suddenly all Sally Field-like, minus the nun outfit.

“Or hovering forward,” he amended, “but still.” His neck craned upward as I did a loop around him before coming in for a perfect landing. “Pretty awesome,” he added, patting me on the shoulder, a kiss thrown in for good measure—or a great one, really.

“I’ll say,” I purred, my cock stirring upon contact.

But my happiness, much like the life I’d had, was short-lived, because no sooner had the kiss started than it abruptly stopped. Or at least was stopped, by a spear that rained down from high up above. And that one, like the one that followed it and the one after that, missed us by a hair, and only owing to the fact that Steven was lightning-fast enough to keep yanking us out of the way, eventually back behind another boulder, where a fourth spear did thankfully little damage, except to my already frazzled nerves.

“So,” said Steven, his face in front of mine, “looks like the definite maybe that someone is out to kill you just jumped on over to the definite column, no maybes about it.”

I nodded. “Guess my hollering caught someone’s attention.”

Then he nodded. “Someone with a penchant for spear hunting.” His eyes met mine. “How did your cousin die, by the way?”

I gulped. “Impaled.”

He reached around the boulder and lifted up the most recent spear. “This would’ve done the trick, then.” He tossed it aside. “Any ideas who or why?”

“No,” I replied. “Up until a week ago, I didn’t even know I had a cousin, and up until an hour ago, I still had a heartbeat. And up until two minutes ago, I was kissing you and not dodging spears. On a bright note, however, it does appear that I’m filthy rich, so, um, glass half full.”

Suddenly another spear hailed down, landing behind us, if only by a scant few inches. “Make it a quarter full, Jack, because if you’re dead...um, deader...then you’ll never get a chance to spend any of it. On me, I mean, because I have a feeling you’re going to owe me one very soon, or two.”

I counted the spears. “Or five.” Another one whizzed overhead, buzzing in my ears like a swarm of wasps. “Sorry, six.” It was then that I missed my heartbeat, to let me know how truly terrified I really was. Instead, I merely heard his, muffled, but pounding just the same. “Any thoughts on how to escape?” I asked.

He nodded. “My telepathy goes beyond merely conversing in someone’s head, Jack.”

“How beyond?”

“The pack leader controls his pack in that way, leads their movements,” he replied. “To a degree, even in human form, I can do the same.”

“Even at this distance?” I then asked.

His nod turned to a shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve never tried to control a spear hunter from a beach beneath a nearly sheer cliff before.” He grinned, which sent a butterfly fluttering about inside my belly. “Then again, I’ve never been naked behind a boulder alongside an equally naked vampire, so

there's always a first time for everything." And then he shut his eyes and tilted his head in the direction the spears were coming from. "It's a man, alone. I can almost take hold." He popped his eyes briefly open. "Help me, Jack."

My smile matched his as I, too, shut my eyes and willed my mind into his until they were combined, locked as one. I could feel his strength grow as I joined him, could feel his mind reaching out, taking mine along with it, both of them soaring upward, feeling for the third above the cliff. And then there it was, except the stranger felt us as we felt him, and he instantly began to fight back.

"Push harder, Jack," Steven grunted. "He's obviously had training to block out a vampire, but I guarantee he's never encountered anyone like me before."

And so I pushed, willing myself into the stranger's head or at least trying to. Because rather than stay and fight, and then surely lose, I could feel him turn and run, the bond broken, the distance suddenly too great for us to bother with. "He's gone," I lamented.

Steven waited a second, his head still tilted up. "For now," he agreed. "Hurry, get your clothes, and let's get out of here."

I ran as fast as I could, which was only about half the speed of my werewolf friend. Still, soon enough, we were dressed and scaling the cliff, ducking and covering as much as possible, lest the spears and the hunter return to finish their job. And to think, my biggest worry when I woke up that morning was where I was going to spend my money first. Now, all of a sudden, neither Neiman nor Marcus seemed all that important.

In any case, aside from a few scratches, we made it back up top, alive (to whatever extent I could still say that) and in one piece. I wiped the sand from my clothes and turned to Steven. "Is he gone?"

Steven paused, blinked his eyes closed, and replied, "Just us and a few hundred seagulls." Then he stared at me again. "Did I at least get some color today?"

I laughed. "Bronzed to perfection. Me?"

He played with the ebony goatee that sprang from his dimpled chin and replied, “Um, white, Jack, very, *very* white.” Then his grin returned. “Though on you it looks...sexy.”

I groaned. “Undead and sexy, sounds like a made-for-TV movie on Lifetime, starring Susan Lucci and Harry Hamlin.”

He patted my back and pushed me toward the mansion. “Which one would be playing you?”

“Cute,” I commented, my eyes again landing on my new home, or crypt, take your pick. “Is there a two-drink minimum for this comedy show? Because I could really use a drink right about now.”

He stopped in his tracks, the smile briefly flat-lining. “Yeah, but of what is the question.”

My stomach gurgled at the thought, because, in truth, I didn’t have the faintest idea what the answer was.

§ § §

Steven hopped inside his snazzy red sports car and drove us the short distance back to the mansion. Igor rang us in, and Steven parked, just before he stuck his head out the window, his eyes again wide as he took in my ridiculously unhumble abode. “And I thought I was rich,” he said, with a long, low whistle.

I couldn’t help but shake my head. “You look like, um, *this, and* you’re rich?” I pointed to his face, and chest, and stomach, and all the rest of it as I said it.

“Yeah, but not *this* rich,” he replied, eyes still wide. “Your mansion can stomp mine into the ground without even losing a shingle.”

I chuckled and got out of the car. “Do you want to come inside?”

He nodded and also got out. “I’ve never met a humpbacked manservant before.”

I groaned at the very thought. “Trust me, you haven’t missed a thing.”

And then, sure enough, said manservant, along with said hump, appeared from behind the entry door. “Are you all right, sir?” he asked, looking

somewhat bored—him, not the hump. That, somehow, appeared rather attentive.

“I’ve been better, Igor, thanks,” I replied before introducing him to our guest. “Is there any way we can get a snack, a sandwich maybe?”

He tilted his head and looked at me oddly, which for Igor seemed fairly standard. “You drank from the vial, sir,” he reminded me. “I can tell.” Then he looked at Steven. “And this one already knows of this, too. I can also tell, mainly because you are the way you are now, and he is neither running away in panic nor worse.”

“And your point?” I asked, rather impatiently, ignoring the *nor-worse* remark.

“Um, sir, you do not eat,” he informed, “at least not sandwiches.”

Now *that* got my attention. “What do I eat then, Igor, and why has my heart suddenly stopped beating?”

A crooked smile appeared on his equally crooked face. “The two are intimately related, sir.”

“How?” Steven asked, then turned my way. “Sorry, this shit is better than a soap opera. With or without Susan Lucci.”

“Who?” asked Igor.

“Never mind, Igor,” I spat. “Just tell us. What do I eat, and why don’t I breathe?”

Igor stepped aside and allowed us in. Once the door was closed, he replied, “I know little of your ways, sir; that is how the master wished it. But I do know what you eat, because, in leaner times, *I* have often been dinner, and breakfast, and a light afternoon snack.”

Again my stomach gurgled. “Yuck.”

He ignored the comment and continued. “You do not eat, because you simply drink, sir.”

“Blood,” tossed in Steven, again playing with his goatee.

Igor nodded. “Blood, yes, and you don’t breathe because you are sustained by the blood. It is what keeps you, for lack of a better word, alive.

You do not need air or food, nor a beating heart, for that matter. You simply need the blood. Everything else is inconsequential.”

Says the man with the still-beating heart. “And where, pray tell, do I get the blood? When not from you, I mean.” *Blech.*

He shrugged, or at least semi-shouldered, quasi-shouldered. Wait, Quasimodo-shouldered. Yes, that seems about right. “The master hunted. The master drank his fill. The master returned. This is all I know, sir. The how, the where, the when, these are for you to discover. All I know is how to maintain the house.”

Steven looked around and obviously fought back a guffaw. “You sure about that?” Then he wiped an inch of dust off a nearby table, his finger held up as evidence against Igor’s remark.

In any case, I didn’t continue with that line of questioning, mainly because there was a more pressing one to deal with. “The master, my cousin, you said he was impaled.”

“Yes, sir,” said Igor, his face even sadder looking now.

“How, exactly, was he impaled?” I asked, dreading the response.

“On a spear, sir,” came the reply, my stomach again in knots, strong enough to dock a tanker with.

“Fuck,” cursed Steven, “and who speared him?”

The Quasimodo-shoulder reappeared. I’d have to remember in the future to ask him to refrain from doing it, as it was highly disquieting for everyone involved. “I found him outside. He’d already pulled the spear out before he expired, his body in a bloody heap. As to who threw it, I do not know.” Then he paused, looked away and then back up, his eyes more alert now. “Your kind, sir, they have always been hunted, from the birth of the first Jackowski until today.”

“Until me, you mean,” I said, with a groan.

He nodded. “The master, he was protecting you. Since we moved here, I mean. Now...”

“I’m on my own,” I interrupted, finishing his dismal train of thought.

The nod continued. Also disquieting, mainly because the hump seemed to nod as well, but a split second behind. "I cannot train you in your ways, sir, because I do not know them. Nor are there others of your kind, at least in these parts, as far as I know." He smiled, I think. "I fear you will have to improvise." The smile grew, as did my discomfort. "*Vamp*, if you will, sir."

Ah, so he did know how to tell a joke. Not well, mind you, but still. "I believe that's a musical term, Igor, but, yes, it does seem appropriate here, all things considered. Thank you. You're dismissed."

He bowed, mostly. "And the sandwich, sir?"

Steven's tummy loudly rumbled in apparent reply. "Yes, please." I sighed. "For one, I believe."

"Extra meat, Igor," tossed in Steven, his hand rubbing his magnificent belly, love-trail coming in and out of view. "And better make it two sandwiches."

"As you wish, sir," Igor replied, already heading for the kitchen.

I turned to Steven. "Let me guess. You never have to diet either, right?"

He grinned and continued rubbing. "Good genetics," he replied. "Besides, a wolf travels on his stomach."

"And me?" I couldn't help but ask.

He shrugged, totally and completely. Strangely, it was just as disquieting. "We'll have to figure something out."

And, yes, at the very least, I did like the way he used the word *we*.

CHAPTER 3

Queerwolf

We ate lunch in the dining room, or at least Steven ate; I merely watched, my hunger level rising with each hearty chomp he took, as the meat glided down his slender throat. And, no, I had no intention of availing myself of my manservant's jugular for my repast—at least not yet.

When the sandwiches were finished, Steven again turned his attention back to me. “Your cousin—Boris, I believe you said his name was—he must've eluded his killer and/or killers for quite some time.”

I held my guest's hand in mine, his index finger rubbing my pinky as a spark shot through my nether regions. “And your point?”

The rubbing abruptly stopped. “He was clearly trained in your kind's ways.”

I sighed at the implication. “And still he was murdered.”

His sigh was joined with a nod of his head. “Yes, and I can only assume that it wasn't too easy a task to accomplish. I mean, sneaking up on an experienced vampire must be a pretty hard thing do.”

“Seeing as I could smell you from nearly a mile away, you mean,” said I. “And he had to know what they smelled like, if they were hunting him all this time.”

The nod revved up speed. “And they found you on day one, Jack, and very nearly killed you, too.”

I repeated his sigh, his nod, and tossed in a groan for good measure. It was a dismal symphony to listen to. “So you're saying I'm doomed, right? And all before I can spend some of this unimaginable pile of wampum I'm sitting on?”

“Or learn how to vamp your way through it all, as Igor had said. Though that will take some time,” he replied. “Even a jazz musician needs to learn how to vamp before he's any good at it.”

“So you’re saying that all I really need is some time then, right?”

He paused and stared down at our intertwined hands. He seemed to like the look of them, which most certainly made two of us. “Time, yes, time to learn how to use your powers. Time to learn who’s trying to kill you, and why.”

“And where, may I ask, do I come by this time?” I inquired. “Before a spear finds its way through my heart, I mean?” I gulped at the words. Though I no longer panted, once I realized it was simply a waste of energy. And without blood, Lord only knew how much energy reserve I actually had left. In fact, it already felt like I was running dangerously close to empty: running on fumes, really.

His pause returned. I took that to mean that he had an answer, but not one to his liking. “I have an answer, but not one to my liking.” Told you so!

“And that is?”

“The moon, Jack, was full a few days ago.”

I knew what he meant by that. “In other words, you would protect me, use your abilities, if you could.” A smile broke free on my face. “Thank you just the same.”

He, too, smiled. “Don’t thank me. I can’t protect you. Down on the beach, that was just lucky, lucky that the hunter was so far away, I mean. Because my speed, my mental abilities, at least while I’m fully human, are sadly limited. Even if this killer or killers have no idea of my existence—and I pray that he, she, or they don’t, because my people go to great lengths to keep said existence a well-guarded secret—their abilities are still currently far greater. Greater than yours or mine, that is to say, seeing as they were able to kill your cousin.”

“Greater for the time being,” I reminded him, “until I can, well, *vamp* it up a bit.”

The smile remained, though it appeared a bit forced now. “In any case, you do indeed need the time and the protection, which, sadly, neither I nor my pack can offer you. In fact, we’d all be in danger then, perhaps picked off one by one, if they knew of either you or me, of my kind.”

“Then what are you suggesting?”

And with that, the smile disappeared altogether, a sour look replacing it. “There is another kind, Jack, one without any of my limitations.”

“Ah,” I ached. “A kind *not to your liking*, as you put it.”

His eyes met mine, all that fabulous blue again, blue upon blue upon blue, the butterfly in my tummy suddenly joined by the whole flitting swarm. “No, Jack, not to my liking, but they, on the other hand, or paw as it were, don’t have our weaknesses. They, I believe, can offer you the time you need, and perhaps protect us all then. Because if this hunter, or worse, hunters, are calling San Francisco home, then all of us might be in danger, especially now that they’ve seen me with you.”

I frowned upon hearing his words. “I’m so sorry, Steven, sorry for putting you and your pack in harm’s way.”

But he merely shook his head from side to side at my apology. “My kind, Jack, like yours, has always been hunted, back to the beginning. Difference, you see, has never been tolerated.”

“I see your point,” I said. “They could kill me and turn to you next, kill anything different than them. Maybe they even know about your kind and are just trying to annihilate mine first.”

His eyes watered, blinked. “It’s a possibility, Jack, and one we need to counter against. Strike while the iron’s hot, beat them to the punch.” Again he locked eyes with me, drawing me in yet again, the attraction jarringly greater than anything I’d ever experienced before. “But we need our combined strengths to do this, I fear, and yours is at a low ebb for the time being. Even now I sense it, feel it.”

“For the time being,” I repeated, eager to hear how he thought he could remedy the situation.

“Until I contact *him*,” he quickly added, the frown widening on his impossibly handsome face.

“Him?” I asked. “Is he one of this new kind of yours?”

“The Queerwolf,” he replied, with a twisted snarl, the word nearly retched up. “Lousy fucker.”

Suffice it to say, I didn’t know if he meant that last bit figuratively or literally, because with Steven, I surmised, either one was possible. Still,

truth be told, I did like the sound of it, *Queerwolf*. It had a nice ring to it, like, well, *vamp*.

§ § §

I invited Steven up to my room after that, mainly to see if he'd want to join me. Test the waters, if you will; *strike while the iron was hot*, as he put it. Though with Steven, scorching seemed more like it, seething and broiling, even.

His smile said it all, though. "Bedroom as neat and tidy as the rest of the place?" he asked, already following me up the stairs.

"Igor's not the best housekeeper, I'm afraid," I replied, "or conversationalist."

"The hump is pretty nifty, though."

"If you're into that sort of thing," said I. "You're not, though, are you?"

We reached my bedroom, which was, thank goodness, a tad less dusty, compared to the rest of the house, that is. He pulled me in tight as I swung the door open. "Nope, just into you right about now, Jack."

And damn if those butterflies of mine didn't go all psycho-swarm on me at the remark. "Humpy as opposed to humped, right?"

He chuckled, the sound rolling through me like a nine on the Richter Scale. "Exactly." Then we entered the bedroom, and he immediately sucked in his breath, and not the good kind of suck either.

"It's not that bad," I told him. "Nothing that a case of Swiffers can't fix."

He pointed to the picture above the bed. "*That's Boris?*"

I gazed at my cousin. "Yeah, why do you ask?" And I prayed that he didn't know my cousin in the same way he knew me—on his knees, I mean.

He paused, clearly thinking of something beyond my question. "I, I knew your cousin, Jack."

I nodded, gulped. *Figures*. "How, exactly, did you know him? Was he, um, gay?"

His nod mirrored my own. "I believe so," he said. "My pack, we throw a full-moon party every month. The parties are open to the public while the

moon rises. Most everyone who attends is gay, seeing as my pack is fully gay.”

My gulp returned. “And do they all look like you?” If that was even possible.

He grinned. “Werewolves tend to be rather nice-looking, by and large, Jack. Again, call it good genetics, breeding, as it were.”

“And my cousin?”

He again pointed at the painting. “Your cousin was young, handsome, and wealthy. In other words, he fit in quite nicely. Except...”

I, too, stared up at the painting, unnerving though the locked gaze in return was. “Except?”

Steven turned back my way. “Except he must’ve had a scent, an odor to him. The heartbeat we easily could’ve missed, seeing as there’s always a room full of them. But a man without a scent, a man such as yourself, the entire pack would’ve picked up on that. It’s just too glaring a detail to miss.”

“But he was a vampire,” I countered with. “So how do you explain such a scent?”

He smiled, hopped in the bed, and was prone in a flash. “The Queerwolf used a tactic on me once, one that, for the most part, failed.” The smile briefly faltered. “A scent, you see, can be masked, covered to smell like something else, in your cousin’s case, a living person.” The smile again grew bright, and I, suffice it to say, was already mid-hop onto the bed as well. “And if your cousin was at our party, masking his scent, I can only guess that he knew what we were and then lived to tell about it.”

“Or not tell about it, if I’m not mistaken, seeing as this is the first you’re hearing about it, in a matter of speaking,” said I. “In any case, he could also have masked his scent at all times, wherever he went, for whatever reason. For protection, I mean.”

Steven nodded and sidled in next to me, his warmth jumping over to my rather chilled body. “Or that, yes, but it’s a clue worth keeping in mind. And a neat little trick for you, should you have the need to also mask your scent, or lack thereof. And, seeing as there’s someone, singular or plural, looking

to do you in, then perhaps it's something worth looking into in the very near future."

I flicked off my shirt and ground my body into his. "No time like the present."

He laughed and wrapped his arms around me. "And I do so like a fast learner," he quipped.

"Then *fast*, get undressed, dude," I told him, already shimmying out of my clothes, only briefly looking out the window for any errant flying spears. Then again, considering the shaft that quickly presented itself, it wasn't something that remained at the forefront of my mind. Less so when said shaft was impaling me, and certainly not through my chest. Heck, I'd completely forgotten about those pesky spears once I was safely lost in Steven's sea of blue. Well, almost completely, considering my cousin was looking down on us all the while, and it was impossible to forget how he had met his untimely end while my end was getting pummeled by a werewolf—who in turn was fucking an undead, unbreathing, unscented vampire, namely me.

In other words, as if that list weren't plenty enough, the completely forgotten got entirely remembered, even as my cock was spewing an oceanic load onto his chest and belly, then onto the majority of my thighs, before landing atop the surrounding sheets.

One more mess to add to the growing list, I figured, but at least this one I could live with, so to speak.

§ § §

Steven stayed for dinner that night. Thankfully, if such a word was apt, Igor had a small stash of the master's vintage, um, *brew* to decant, which was a much nicer way of saying that he served me cold blood in an even colder martini glass. Steven, of course, opted for a real martini and a steak, followed by an order for another one. All from the freezer, which was for guests, as Igor told us, seeing as my cousin had no need for such delicacies. Apparently, though, Steven did. And then some.

"Where do you put it all?" I couldn't help but ask. Watching him devour it, episodes of *Wild Kingdom* flashed across my brain: lions of the Serengeti.

He patted his über-flat belly. "It gets worked off."

I patted my über-sore ass. "Yes, I've seen."

And then I stared at my still-full martini glass in an equal mixture, suffice it to say, of intrigue, hunger, and disgust, not necessarily in that order.

"Drink it already," Steven told me, in between ravenous chomps.

"It's blood," I needlessly reminded him.

"Got it," he replied, "which you, as a vampire, drink."

I looked from it to him. "What's it...what's it taste like?"

He nodded and grinned, took another bite and then replied, "Because, as a werewolf, I have firsthand experience in blood drinking?"

"To an extent, yes."

He set his fork down and put his hand over my own. "I eat meat because it's my kind's way. It is what sustains us. Blood is just nature's gravy."

I smiled at the imagery. "A nice way of putting it, thank you, but this is *only* gravy, dude, no meat." I pointed at the frosty glass as my smile quivered and then promptly vanished. "Thick, red gravy, perhaps human." That I neglected, quite on purpose, to ask Igor about. One dilemma at a time, I figured, apart from drinking my dinner with a werewolf, albeit one as stunning as Steven.

"Is your very soul on fire as you gaze upon it, Jack?" he asked, again stabbing a hefty chunk of steak with his fork.

A thick bead of saliva, perhaps all that remained of my reservoir, had suddenly formed at the corner of my mouth, his phrasing spraying gasoline onto said fire. "Uh huh."

"Then, trust me, it won't taste anything like thick, red gravy, human or otherwise."

He had a point, or, more than likely, I was just hungrier than I'd ever been in my entire life. Or what was once my life, seeing as I was, by all accounts, dead, or at least undead, the terminology still as new to me as not breathing or, as was the case, drinking blood.

Which I promptly did.

Gulp, gulp, gulp, and burp.

Then, “Holy fuck.”

He grinned as he gobbled down his next bite of steak. “Is that a good ‘holy fuck’ or a bad ‘holy fuck’?” Then he swallowed. “Sounded like a good ‘holy fuck’ to me.”

I nodded as every cell in my body came to life, as my soul, as he put it, burst into flames, as my strength renewed itself a thousand times over, until I felt stronger than I’d ever felt before: Mack Truck strong, Hope diamond strong, Suzanne Somers’ thighs strong. “That, Steven, was the be-all and end-all of ‘holy fucks,’” I replied, fairly ready to burst with vigor and enough vim to flood the mighty Mississippi.

He smiled and finished off steak number two. “Yup, I know of what you speak,” he readily admitted. “Same for a werewolf, like the phoenix rising from the flames after each and every meal. More so when the moon is full.”

Again I gulped, only this time a new troubled thought had bubbled its way up. “But what if that was human blood, Steven? What if that’s all I can drink? What if that’s all that can sustain me?” In truth, I already suspected it to be the case. Call it vampire intuition. Plus, the blood simply didn’t taste like it came from a cow or a pig, or, as the saying goes, like chicken.

He shrugged and stretched. “Then this whole vamping gig extends to hunting, I suppose.”

“Humans?” I managed.

The shrug repeated. “Easy prey, if you ask me. Slower and less agile than, say, a fox or a coyote.”

I pushed the glass away even as the remaining drops within drew me toward them. “Gross, but I see your point.”

He rubbed his ample crotch, which had suddenly grown all the more ample. “Yeah, you wanna see my *point* again?”

I leaned over and peeked down. “What if Igor walks in?”

The shrug made a third appearance as his zipper zipped right on down. “Then we pray that the hump doesn’t want to come out and play.”

§ § §

Surprisingly, Steven spent the night. Surprisingly, because while I'd never had a problem attracting men before, Steven was no mere man, or wolfman, as was the case. In fact, Steven was an entire universe unto himself, which the rest of us merely orbited around, hoping for the occasional fly-by, perhaps a crash-landing from time to time.

"You know you don't have to protect me in here," I said, rather unconvincingly, seeing as the window was barely ten feet away.

His hand went to his chin, the whiskers again turning in between his thumb and index finger. He didn't reply right away. Rather, he lay in bed next to me, staring up at the ceiling before he replied. "I'm not here to protect you, Jack." There was a sudden catch to his voice, something I could detect behind the words.

I pushed at the boner that had already begun to tent the blanket that covered us. "No?"

He turned and looked at me, his free hand reaching up to stroke my cheek. "Nope," he told me, the smile big and bright now, beguiling. "See, I've never met a man like you before. In fact, you may be the only one of your kind that I will ever meet." He winked and moved in ever closer, his face mere inches away from my own, the tenting all three-ring-circus-like. "A werewolf pack leader is a rare thing, Jack. You, however, I believe, are even rarer, like finding a Honus Wagner baseball card, an Action Comics Number 1, or a ten-carat pink diamond buried in your backyard."

Well, at least he went with pink. In other words, I took it as a compliment, but was still hedging my bets. "So I'm merely a novelty, then?"

His head quickly shook from left to right and back again. "No, Jack, a kindred spirit," he replied, his face deadly serious. "And one, in all honesty, that I'm drawn to."

I sighed at the comment, knowing full well what he meant by that. "Like Ice to Coco?"

He chuckled and brushed his lips against mine. "No, like Steven to Jack."

And the kiss was sealed.

And oh, what a kiss it was.

§ § §

The next morning was Saturday, not that Steven, it seemed, had a job to get to, even if it weren't the weekend. Nor, in fact, did I, really, seeing as I was suddenly as rich as Rockefeller. But the others, the pack that Steven was loath to talk about, all had jobs and were thankfully off for the weekend, as far as Steven was aware.

"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

He grinned and hopped out of bed, his prick swaying from side to side, eager to greet the day. Or my mouth, whichever came, no pun intended, first. Okay, so pun intended. "I like to keep tabs on those that don't necessarily wish me well," he replied, said prick inside said mouth in barely the blink of an eye. Because now that I was a vampire, as strange as that sounded to say, I moved as quickly as he did, maybe even more quickly now, seeing as my reserve tank was still somewhat on the full side.

"So, where do we find them, then?" I asked, my eyes still glued to him, because, in truth, it was nearly impossible to look away. "Werewolf lair? Underground bunker? Backwoods cabin?"

He shook his head. "Stolen boat just down the coast from here."

"They live on a stolen boat?" I asked. "Don't, um, wolves hate the water?"

His head kept right on shaking. "Werewolves fear nothing, Jack, nothing and no one."

"They don't fear you, even?" I couldn't help but ask.

And his head stopped shaking, and no, he didn't answer the question, which was an answer unto itself. "The Queewolf's grandfather lives on the boat. The pack tends to gather there in their off hours. It's what packs do. We feel more whole when we are together. Stronger, in fact, like parts to a whole, uniting as one."

A chill ran up my spine upon hearing this. "So, basically, the two of us will be entering the, well, lion's den, so to speak, when the lions will be at their strongest?"

His smile returned, but that might've been merely for my benefit, which I was just fine and dandy with. "And don't forget that these particular lions

can change into werewolves at the drop of a hat, but yes. In any case, his pack and my pack have reached a sort of truce.” He sighed. “After we tried to kill one another, that is. Like I said, difference isn’t to be tolerated, or at least *wasn’t*.”

“Peace in the valley, peace in the city, peace in your soul?”

His smile was joined with a chuckle and a bob of his prick as he finished the songs refrain. “Yeah-eh. Yeah-eh.”

And the *yeahs* were repeated as my mouth once again found its calling.

§ § §

An hour later, showered and satiated, sexually speaking, at least for the time being, we were in Steven’s car and driving toward the Presidio. The ex-military base was fairly quiet as we drove through, passing only the intermittent jogger as we found the parking lot and then the dirt road that led to the stolen boat.

Two men were on the deck as we approached, one set of eyes instantly upon us. “That *him*?” I whispered out of the corner of my mouth, already recognizing the scent, similar to Steven’s in every detail.

Steven growled in reply, eyes growing to mere slits. “No need to whisper; he can hear every word.” Then he turned to me. “He will try and search your mind, Jack. Better to allow the intrusion.”

I gulped and continued walking ahead as the pair rose to their feet. In an instant I could feel him inside my head, just as Steven had warned. It felt weird to permit such an invasion of privacy, but I didn’t put up any resistance. I needed this man and his pack. After all, my very existence depended on them.

When we were but a mere few feet apart, the Queerwolf’s eyes wide, his face suddenly pale as he stared only at me, he asked, “What *are* you?”

The other man by his side turned and asked, “What do you mean, Blake, ‘what is he’?”

The Queerwolf turned and replied, “He has no scent, Ted. No heartbeat. He is no more a man than this boat or the rocks down on the shore.”

To which I spoke up with, “I can assure you, I am all man.”

“Amen,” whispered Steven.

I grinned, despite the circumstances. “My name is Jack,” I said, hand held out.

“Blake,” said the Queerwolf, “and this is my partner, Ted.” When his hand was released from mine, he repeated. “Now, what *are* you?”

To which Steven replied, evenly, “Blake, Jack here is a vampire.”

It was only then that Blake turned and stared at Steven, and if looks could kill, most of the forest behind us would’ve been dead right about then. “A vampire?” He looked less than convinced.

Steven shrugged. “I’m a werewolf, Blake. You’re a werewolf, too, so why can’t my friend here be a vampire?” Only then did he force a smile on his face. “This is San Francisco, after all; the strangest people seem to always turn up here.”

Blake frowned and held his boyfriend’s hand. “I suppose so, Steven,” he relented. “And now that we have that settled, to what do I owe the honor?”

To which Ted added, “And how much, exactly, is this *owing* going to cost us?”

Steven’s growl returned. Obviously, he didn’t enjoy dealing with the human side of the opposing duo. Still, he remained civil—well, *civilish*, because civility didn’t seem to be Steven’s strong point. Maybe the stunningly beautiful have no need for it, I figured. In any case, my newfound friend was now made to capitulate. “Yes, Ted, in fact, we have come to ask for your, or at least Blake’s, help.”

Blake chuckled. “This should be good.”

With my heightened vampire senses, I could actually hear Steven’s teeth grinding together. “Someone or -ones has already killed Jack’s cousin, also a vampire,” he began. “Someone or -ones is now trying to kill Jack. Jack’s connection to me has already been witnessed, and it’s possible that Jack’s cousin knew of our existence.”

Blake frowned and released his boyfriend’s hand. “So you’re saying that we could all be in danger?”

Steven nodded. “It’s a reasonable assumption. Perhaps when this killer or killers is done with one group of supernatural beings, the next on the list

could be in jeopardy.”

“Namely werewolves,” Blake inferred.

“Yes,” agreed Steven, “namely us.”

It was then that I heard and smelled two more of their kind rapidly approaching, like impossibly fast. So fast, in fact, that one minute they weren’t there, and the next they were. And in full-on hairy mode, too, jagged teeth glinting in the sunlight, eyes so yellow they pulsed like tubes of glowing neon.

Instinctively I jumped backward, covering my face from fangs like daggers, from two gaping maws dripping with saliva. Though, behind the menace, I could also sense something else—fear. Steven, suffice it to say, stood his ground, or at least patch of deck, but he, too, was radiating fear. After all, these two beasts were killers, and Steven couldn’t change on a whim like they obviously could.

“I mean you no harm!” I quickly hollered, cowering in place as my knees began to buckle.

“And what of him?” growled and grunted the smaller of the two werewolves, a fiercely sharp claw pointing Steven’s way.

I stared up at Steven as he in turn stared at the menacing pair. “We’re just here to talk,” he calmly stated, though I could hear his heartbeat pounding in his chest, as I’m sure they could as well.

“About what?” snarled the other, whom I could’ve sworn I detected a trace of eye shadow on—purple, iridescent, distinctly out of place.

It was then that Blake again spoke up. “This one, the one without a scent or a pulse, is a vampire. This one, the one who tried to kill our friend Ralph here a while back, has come to ask us for the other’s protection.” Blake then turned to stare directly at Steven. “That about cover it?”

Steven didn’t so much as blink. “Yes, that covers it,” he replied. “So will you help?”

All of us on the boat now turned to stare at the leader of the pack, the Queerwolf, who was standing there, clearly thinking over his options. “How can I protect him, Steven, even if I wanted to?” he eventually said. “I can’t take an indefinite time away from work, after all. Some of us aren’t as

financially sound as others, you know, and my clients demand a certain amount of continuity from me. In fact, my pack, small as we are, all have responsibilities that would prevent us from offering this vampire his needed protection.”

Steven began to speak up, but was quickly stopped by the one known as Mack, whose name I was to soon learn. He was the one with the oddly sparkling eyelids. “I’ll do it,” he fairly barked—well, in fact, he did bark it; odd, but true.

“You will?” I asked.

“Yeah, you will?” echoed Blake.

The werewolf nodded his massively thick neck, his mane of hair quivering all the while. “I work nights. Ralph works days. We’ll take turns. Provided...”

“Provided what?” I interjected, with a tilt of my head.

Mack snapped his jaw at me, his eyes suddenly up close to mine, amber completely filling my line of vision. “Provided you can *pay*.”

At that, Steven laughed. “Oh, he can pay, all right.”

“How much?” I quickly asked, though, really, what did it matter? I certainly must’ve had whatever it was he’d ask for, and then some. And then some more on top of that, with a healthy tip added in for good measure.

Mack pulled an inch away, and I could’ve sworn I detected a smile on his ferocious face. In fact, it also appeared from that close up that, aside from the eye shadow, he was also wearing lipstick. Weird, but in the great San Francisco scheme of things, not all *that* weird. Par for the course, really.

He growled and snapped at the air that separated us. “Your protection in exchange for a pair of tits.”

“Tits?” I asked, the tilt of my head angling all the more. After all, I’d heard a lot of weird things as of late—a whole hell of a lot, really—but this one took the cake. Heck, this one took the entire bakery.

To which Ralph replied, “You heard the man. *Tits*.”

I shrugged and smiled, bewildered, but at least glad to have these monsters for protection. I mean, those spears would clearly meet their match with this duo, eye shadow and lipstick and, well, tits or not.

“Deal,” I said, hand held out to seal said deal.

But the hairy twosome were already scampering downstairs, below deck, Mack barking over his impossibly wide shoulder as they disappeared from sight, “And they better be one stellar pair, vampire.”

To which Ralph menacingly added, “Or else.”

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CHAPTER 4

Moxie

Ralph and Mack changed before the short drive back to the mansion. By “changed” I mean, of course, back into human form, picking up their previously scattered clothes beforehand. Turned out, they, too, were a couple, and, as I’d spotted, Mack had indeed been wearing makeup, as any good Barbra Streisand impersonator does. As for the tits he’d asked for, he’d been gypped out of a pair in order to rescue Ralph from recent financial bankruptcy.

“Tits equal tips,” he told me as we drove. “The more I look like Barbra, the more the customers fork over the cash.”

Steven sighed from the seat next to me, and not the good kind of sigh, either. Still, I was interested, in a purely theoretical way. “And, uh, your boyfriend doesn’t mind that his boyfriend will, uh, from the top up, look like, well, *a chick*?”

Ralph chuckled. “Trust me, the bottom down more than makes up for it.”

“T.M.I.,” shouted Steven as he shook his head from side to side, shoulders bunched up as he drove.

I stared at Mack from the rearview mirror as he reapplied his makeup, turban, and caftan. In truth, he already looked about as close to the real deal as you could get, crooked nose, crossed eyes, and all. Gave me goose bumps just to look at him. Then, once he was finished, he looked up and caught my eye.

“A star is born,” I said, with a grin.

“Happy days are here again,” he replied, also with a grin, waving his perfectly manicured hand my way.

Once again Steven sighed, his head still shaking. “And should we discuss the *main event* on this *clear day* as we drive down this *stony end*? Or,

people, do you want to *rain on my parade* and continue with this god-awful banter of Streisand hits?”

I turned to look at him. “Not a Barbra fan?”

He also turned. “Yes, just not a fan of this conversation.”

“In any case,” interjected Ralph as we drove up through the mansion’s gates, “better to get the details out of the way first.” Then he gazed up and around the property and added, “Holy cow, those are gonna be one fine pair of tits.”

Mack nodded and whistled. “With this kind of money, we can buy Barbra’s right off of her.”

“Yuck,” I coughed out as we all got out of the car, “but don’t worry, we’ll get you, as you asked for, one heck of a stellar pair.” To which I promptly added, “Provided I live long enough to buy them for you.”

Ralph chuckled. “Don’t sweat it; nothing and no one will get by Mack and me.”

Sadly, I had no reply to that.

Sadly, that is, because, just at that very moment, another volley of spears came flying out of the woods. And while we all had superior senses of hearing, a volley of spears is sure to hit its mark if it’s substantially large enough; this one, again sadly, was.

So, while three of us made it back inside the car just in the nick of time, the fourth, namely Ralph, was not so lucky. The nick was more like a gash, deep and bloody and seeping profusely.

I watched in horror as he staggered and fell, the spear embedded in his chest, quivering as he went down in a lifeless heap.

“Ralph!” sobbed Mack as we held him in place, waiting for the volley to stop. Then he changed back into a werewolf, this time the clothes ripping right off his body before he pulled away from us and ran to his boyfriend’s aid. He then lifted Ralph up and ran around the side of the mansion, disappearing in mere seconds as another volley followed the first, spear after spear jamming into the ground, until the driveway was littered with them.

“What should we do?” I asked, trembling as I turned to Steven.

“First things first,” he replied, his eyes shut good and tight. “Open up your mind, Jack. Open it up and find Ralph’s, quick.”

I did as he asked. Surprisingly, I was able to do so, mainly because Steven’s and Mack’s had instantly swirled together, joining with mine as we, in turn, joined with Ralph’s. And that’s when I felt it, a power so immense that it knocked me back into the car seat, a white-hot volt of energy that grew and grew and grew, enveloping the four of us, even though we were now at a great distance from one another.

The seconds ticked by like hours as we stayed united, until my eyes popped open just as Steven’s did. “What happened?” I managed, lost as usual.

Steven wiped the sweat off his forehead and then pointed to the side of the building, at the two heads poking around the corner. “*That* happened,” he told me.

I sucked in my breath, surprised at seeing them as they waved our way, both right as rain. “But how?”

Steven allowed the briefest of grins to break free. It was breathtaking, to say the least, had I in fact still had a breath to take. “Ralph was almost killed before,” he calmly and succinctly explained.

I nodded, seeing as I had caught that inference back on the boat. “By either you or one of your pack, got it. And?”

The smile grew wider, as did the tenting in my jeans. Dude seemed to have that effect on me. “When a werewolf changes, there’s no pain, just a separation of mind and body. And in order for the change to occur, back and forth, our bodies must be able to heal very rapidly, to mend bone and flesh.”

Now my smile joined his. “When the three of our minds united with Ralph’s, we gave him the energy to change from human to werewolf and back again.”

Steven nodded, as did my dick. “He changed, the spear popped out, and he healed, all before the weapon had its intended consequence, namely death.” And the smile reached its crescendo. “Seems like I’ve atoned for my sins, or at least one of them.” Again he pointed at Ralph, who was grinning back at us from around the corner of the mansion. “Now the two of

us need to get over to the two of them without any more spears entering through any more chests, mainly because I can't change right now. And you, we know, need all the blood you can get. Not too good, suffice it to say, for a spear to release any of it prematurely."

"Premature evisceration," I groaned, "and let's go with that *yuck* again."

"Exactly," he agreed, again shutting his eyes. I took it that he was now trying to reach into the mind of the killer.

When he eventually popped his eyes open, I asked, "Any luck?"

But he was already shaking his head. "He's up there; that much I can tell. As for his mind, it's very much sealed off, which is odd in and of itself." He grabbed my hand and added, "So for now, at any rate, we sit tight."

Heck, if it meant sitting with Steven, I had all day. In any case, as it turned out, we didn't have to wait nearly that long, or really much at all. Not once Igor, of all people, came to our rescue. Guess it's true what they say: big surprises really do come in little, humped packages. Thought *they* probably never said it quite like that.

Out he emerged, a wide metal shield covering him as he headed our way, another volley of spears quick to present themselves, all of them either missing their mark or bouncing off the metal in one loud *clank* after the next. Igor was putting his heft behind the shield, or at least his hump was, which meant that he had no problem with either the wooden onslaught or the rescue.

We were behind Igor and the shield in no time flat, and then inside a minute later, our werewolf friends quickly joining us once Igor went back for them.

I forced a smile as I looked to Ralph. "You okay?"

He managed a smile of his own, quickly followed by a thumbs-up. "I've been better, but I'll live." Then he looked up at Steven. "Guess I owe you one," he said, not appearing all that happy about it.

Steven shrugged. "Guess that makes us even, really." The two stared at one another, frenemies in the making. "You're the first werewolf I've ever done that with who wasn't in my own pack. Helped out, I mean, joined as

one.” He smiled, a flush of red working its way up his neck. “Odd, to say the least.”

Ralph also shrugged. “To say the least, yes,” he agreed, then rubbed his quickly healing wound, a reddish scar all that was visible now. “But let’s not make it a habit.”

Then we all turned to Igor as he set the heavy shield down. “Thank you, Igor,” I quickly added. “Is that...is that how my cousin met his end?”

Igor sighed heavily, his eyelids drooping as the frown sank further south on his face. “I assume so. I wasn’t with him at the time. But the spears were of a similar nature, and the master couldn’t heal like this one.” He pointed at Ralph without the faintest bit of intrigue or wonder. I guessed working for a vampire all those years took it out of him.

And it was then that I, at the very least, figured out one piece to this jumble of a puzzle. “The spears,” I said. “They’d do far more damage to a vampire than, say, a bullet, right, Igor?”

He nodded. “One would imagine so, sir.”

To which Steven added, “It’s the blood loss that would kill what is already undead, and a spear wound would cause quite an instantaneous gusher, right?”

Igor’s frown was heartbreaking. “He had none left when I found him, it appeared. A bullet wound, maybe even two, could be stitched up, perhaps even cauterized, if he had been fast enough, which he always had been before.”

“Ouch,” I couldn’t help but say. Strangely, Igor replied to that by again lifting up the shield before slamming it into my belly. I staggered, but otherwise remained upright. “Hey, what was that for?” And then the proverbial light bulb shone above my not-so-proverbial head. “Wait a minute, that didn’t hurt.”

Again the shield was dropped. “And neither would a cauterization, a stitching, or a scalpel to remove a bullet. But a spear wound, with the spear still embedded...”

He didn’t need to continue with his train of thought; I got his point, loud and clear. “But who’s throwing the spears, Igor?”

The frown remained in place. “The master never knew exactly. He could never see the thrower, could never get a sense of whom he or they were, as far as I was aware. Like I told you, though, his kind, *your* kind, have always been hunted. Sometimes the vampires win; sometimes they don’t.”

I patted his shoulder—well, mostly his hump, really. “In any case, today the vampires win!”

He sighed one final time and strode away. “Today, sir,” he droned, “today.”

§ § §

We regrouped in the kitchen: one vampire, three werewolves, plates of meat, and nary a drop of blood for yours truly, which, truth be told, I really could’ve used right about then.

“Okay,” began Steven, “first things first.”

“More meat?” asked Ralph, eagerly, with a wince as he again rubbed his remarkably still-healing wound.

Steven nodded, hopped up, and returned with another tray from the fridge. “Okay, second things second then,” he reiterated. “What do we know already? Because maybe there’s a clue we’re missing.”

I nodded. “Well, I’m a vampire, as was, it seems, a whole branch of my family tree that I never even knew existed until yesterday.” I scratched my head and watched them eat, my belly already gurgling. “And I can, to a degree, read minds, drink blood, and fly.”

Mack choked on a slice of beef. “You can *fly*?” he coughed out.

I smiled. “Well, hover, really, but still.” To which I added, “And, if that shield jabbed in my belly meant anything, I’m fairly impervious to pain, probably since, by all regards, I’m not really alive so much as, uh, living, if that makes any sense.”

“Not really,” replied Mack, “but do continue.”

I thought about it and snapped my fingers, then removed Boris’ letter from my front pocket. “And then there’s this.”

Steven grabbed it, did a read-through, and then passed it around. “So then,” he soon said, once everyone was done with it, “any questions?”

Mack lifted his hand up, the one not shoveling meat into his mouth, and asked, “Where did you find the note, and where was your cousin resting with it, as he wrote?”

I stood up as they quickly devoured their lunches. “Follow me,” I told them, and they did, the four of us walking to the basement door and then down, down, down. “See for yourselves!” I then proclaimed.

“No way,” said Ralph, eyes wide as they scanned the coffin.

“Way,” said I. “And if he was resting with the note, and this is where I found the note...”

“Then he slept in there,” finished Mack. “Um, *ick*.”

Steven circled the casket, his index finger gliding across the smooth metal finish. “Maybe, maybe not,” he said as he walked over to the corner of the room, a shovel now in his hand. Up it went and then down, hard, as in *really* hard. “Not even a dent,” he informed, looking up at us. “It’s made of steel.” Then he reached for a can of lighter fluid that he found on a nearby shelf before dousing the coffin with it. A book of matches was then handed to him from Mack’s clutch, because what self-respecting drag queen werewolf doesn’t carry a clutch around? In any case, Steven lit the fluid as we watched the flames dance across the metal, eventually dying down before petering out altogether. “Fireproof.” Then he looked at me. “Get in.”

I backed away. “Nuh-uh. You get in.”

He walked over to me and held my hand. “I need oxygen, dear one; you, suffice it to say, do not.”

Of course, he had me with *dear one*. “Fine, but no more shovels or fire, please, at least not while I’m inside.” And then I did something I never, ever thought I’d do, apart from drinking blood, flying, and having spectacular sex with an equally spectacular werewolf. In other words, I lifted the lid and hopped in, then closed the lid behind me.

It was dark and quiet inside, peaceful. Not for-all-eternity peaceful, mind you, but peaceful just the same. *Satiny peaceful*, we’ll call it, like one of those water chambers you hear of, only without the water. Also, I quickly felt with my fingers that it was lockable from the inside; best guess, air-tight lockable. In other words, we had one vacuum-sealed vampire in two shakes

of a lamb's tail, which, thank goodness, was a figure of speech, seeing as those werewolves out there would eat just about anything meaty, lamb's tail included.

Anyway, I wasn't about to take a nap, so I unlocked it, lifted the lid, and hopped back out. "Lovely," said I, looking to the three of them.

"We heard the click," informed Steven. "This sucker is air-tight and fairly indestructible. The whole mansion could come crashing down or go up in smoke, and you'd be safe and sound."

I shook my head. "Again, nuh-uh, because this ain't no Sealy, and I'm not about to start sleeping in it, spears or no spears."

Steven shrugged. "Just a thought, dude. Chill," he said, patting me on the back. "Besides, you have us; Boris only had this." He patted the steely coffin.

"Don't forget that he had Igor, too," chimed in Ralph, with a good-natured smile.

"Trust me," I said. "I've tried, but it's no good; he and that hump stay put." I was pointing to my head as I said it, imagining said hump. "In any case, let's move on."

"The war Boris mentioned in the note," said Mack, his hand again in his clutch, a fresh coat of lip gloss reapplied. "Who's this war with, who's fighting this war, and how many troops are we talking about here?"

As for that, none of us had any answers. "If I'm the lone survivor, does that make me the last of my kind?"

"Or just the last of your line?" reiterated Steven. "And speaking of which..."

"My parents ate real food, breathed real air, and didn't sleep in real coffins," I quickly told him.

"And yet *you're* a vampire," he needlessly reminded me.

"Because I drank from the vial that Boris mentioned in the letter," I told him.

He nodded his head, as did the other three. "For us," Steven said, pointing to each of them in turn, "we were all born like this. For me, it took

puberty for the gene to kick in. For Ralph and Mack here, they're genetically a bit different than I am; their gene was there, just suppressed."

"Until we met an alpha, someone to rev up our adrenaline, push us over the threshold," added Mack. "Allowed us to change as we were meant to, even without the full moon."

I looked to Steven again. "I drank the blood, and my gene got kicked in," I said. "And Igor told me that my line, my parents, were born here and had no knowledge of a family elsewhere, namely Boris and his family. Our family came to America; his stayed put in Poland. Until..." I paused, gulped, "...until my parents died."

"Until the war came to you," said Ralph, Boris' letter in his hand. "*Just like all the others who have come before us,*" he read. "The others. Boris, his family..."

"No!" I cried, shaking my head, but knowing that what he was implying was probably true just the same.

"Wolves, Jack," said Steven, "pick off the weakest first."

And still my head kept shaking. "But my parents weren't vampires."

He came over and put his hand in mine. "It's in all of you, Jack. Whether dormant or not, it is there, and all it seems to take is the right amount of blood."

My gulp repeated. "Human blood." I'd known it since the first taste. It simply had to be.

"Human blood," he repeated. "Yes, and you were drawn to it, had to drink it. It's as natural for you as it is for us to hunt, to band together as one."

I looked up at him. "They killed my parents," I stated, the anger already rising, replacing the fear and dread that had been there.

"Which is what brought Boris here," said Mack. "He had to protect you, now that he knew that the enemy, your enemy, knew of your line."

"And look what it got him," I couldn't help but say.

Mack nodded. "But he didn't have what you have, Jack."

"Moxie?"

He chuckled and patted his wig. “No, us.” Then he chuckled again. “Moxie, huh? Good drag name—Moxie Von Suckula.”

I grinned, but shook my head just the same. “Forget it,” I told him, leading them out of the basement. “Besides, Moxie Vampira sounds so much more alluring.”

Mack lifted a hallelujah hand up. “Amen,” he said, “Moxie Vampira it is then.”

“Forget it,” I repeated, the basement door closing behind us, the coffin behind it, still calling to me as it had done before.

I then said a silent prayer that if I needed it again, it would be merely for protection.

And not, of course, as a final resting place.

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CHAPTER 5

Know Thine Enemy

We returned to the kitchen, but Steven kept right on walking.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Be right back,” he replied as we watched him disappear from sight.

Mack and Ralph took a seat across from me, the smiles instantly vanishing from their handsome faces, or, in Mack’s case, pretty face.

“What’s wrong now?” I asked, my stomach sinking just a bit further, thereby nearly dragging the floor.

“Him,” replied Ralph, pointing in Steven’s direction rather disdainfully. “Look up ‘prick’ in the dictionary, and that’s your definition right there.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “Trust me,” I said, knowingly, “there aren’t enough words in Webster’s to do it or him justice.” I rested my hands on the tabletop before adding, “He saved your life, you know.”

Ralph nodded. “But not after trying to take it. All of our lives, in fact, mine and my entire pack’s. And would have gladly done so had he not been stopped.”

I sighed, sharply exhaling as I stared at the two of them. “I get it, but why did he do that, may I ask?” They didn’t reply, but the scowls remained in place. “Was it to protect his own pack?”

Mack fairly growled. “Doesn’t change the facts.”

“Sorry,” I said, “but it does. And the fact is, now he’s trying to protect me, to protect us. And, prick or no prick, I’d rather have him on my side, as well as the two of you. So can we put the past behind us and forget that he’s a prick for the time being?” Again I giggled as I remembered my *behind* and his *prick*, which wasn’t something I, in fact, was eager to forget.

Ralph smiled first. “Well, he is nice to look at, at least.” To which he got a sock in the arm as a rebuke from Mack. “I meant it aesthetically, not

pruriently.”

“Uh huh,” grunted Mack. “In any case, we’re on your side, Jack, but the jury is still out on him.”

“What jury?” the *him* in question asked as we all instantly backed away, me off my chair and onto the floor, Ralph and Mack with their canines bared. Mainly because he’d returned with one of those lousy spears in his hand, the deadly tip pointed our way.

“Drop it,” barked Mack as he leapt over to me, his chest, padded though it was, rapidly rising and falling.

Steven looked from it to us and did as was asked. “Sorry, it’s evidence.”

“Evidence of what?” asked Mack, still standing in front of me, which, all in all, meant that he was earning that pair of stellar tits of his, in spades. Or, considering where they were going, hearts.

“Just evidence,” said Steven. “Maybe there are fingerprints on it.”

“So we bring it to the police?” I asked. “Then what? We tell them that a vampire killer is trying to kill a vampire, namely me?”

But Mack and Ralph were already ahead of me on that one, and were once again taking their seats. “No,” said Ralph, “we don’t bring it to the police.”

To which Mack added, “We bring it to the *chief* of police, namely Steven’s father.”

“So, let me get this, for lack of a better word, *straight*,” I began, turning to look Steven’s way. “You look like that, you’re rich, you’re the leader of a pack of stunning gay werewolves, *and* your father is the chief of police?”

“You forgot licensed yoga instructor, but yes,” he replied. “Again, it’s the way of our kind. We seek out powerful positions, to protect ourselves, our ways, our kind.”

To which Ralph added, “Blake’s father is the Mayor of San Jose.”

“And yours?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Um, he owns a Dairy Queen,” came the reply. “But to be fair, up until recently, I didn’t even know I was a werewolf, and he still doesn’t. See, the gene usually skips a generation, and sometimes you’re not made aware of

your heritage if there's no need to know, or if your family isn't pack. That way, the secret is better kept as such."

Again I sighed, mainly because the sheer volume of information was fairly overwhelming, and Lord only knew what was to come next. Or who, I thought, as I again glanced over at Steven, his mind already melding with my own, a telltale smile spreading wide across his face as my crotch went *boing* in double time.

"Okay," I said, "so we give the spear to your father, Steven, and then he checks for fingerprints. Then what?"

He pointed out the kitchen window to the woods beyond. "You go check out there for clues while I'm at the station, see if the spear chucker or chuckers left anything behind that can tell us who they are." Again he lifted the spear, not by the base, so as not to contaminate anything more than he already had. "Know thine enemy," he added, "before they toss a spear through your chest."

Ralph and I both rubbed our own chests at the remark. "Ouch," I said. "Got it. Thanks, and good luck."

He was gone seconds later. We heard his car's engine rev up before he drove off. "You're right," said Mack, standing up. "At least he's nice to look at." To which he got a sock in the arm as a rebuke from his boyfriend.

"Fucker," said Ralph. "Now let's go check for clues in the woods, where our canine abilities should prove rather handy."

Scarily, he meant that quite literally, because their clothes were shucked off as soon as we walked outside. I watched in awe and, truth be told, just a fair bit of terror as they changed back into werewolves. One minute they were hairless—or at least well-manscaped—and then the next, Furball City.

"That takes some getting used to," I freely admitted, hand over chest.

"Says the man without a pulse and the ashen complexion," replied Mack, already on all fours, nose to the ground as he eagerly sniffed away.

"Touché," said I, my chance to vamp at last at hand, or at least *wing*. In other words, while they sniffed below, I scanned above.

Up and over I went, my mind willing me skyward. Well, at least ten feet skyward, because if I fell, I might not have felt the pain, but that didn't

mean a great many bones wouldn't get broken in the process.

"Cool," yapped Mack, glancing up at me as I hovered over him.

I shrugged and smiled. "All in a day's work, oh toothy one."

He barked and headed deeper into the woods, his partner at his side, me zooming above, all three of us with our noses sniffing, our minds scanning, looking for clues and avoiding, hopefully, any more spears.

"Smell anything?" I soon shouted down at them.

They stopped, snouts moving from left to right. "No," they said in unison. "See anything?" added Mack.

I scanned the area the spears seemed to originate from and did, in fact, spot something. "Head that way," I replied, pointing to my intended destination, at a copse of eucalyptus trees that towered over the other trees by a good twenty feet.

Quickly, I hovered higher over to them, the cool wind whipping across my equally cool skin. To say that the feeling of flight was exhilarating would be, you guessed it, an obese understatement, morbidly obese, in fact. Like a dream come to life, or undeath, as it were. In any case, it took me little time to reach the spot, seeing as I had nothing but empty space in my path. As for my werewolf buddies, they were barely two steps behind as they tore through the woods, leaping and bounding and panting all the while, shaggy tails wagging behind them.

"Up here," I hollered down as I floated onto a thick upper branch.

Not that wolves are noted for their climbing abilities, but these two had no problem, their dagger-like claws digging into the wood as they shimmied up that sucker in no time flat. "What you got?" asked Ralph, not even breaking a sweat. Though, through all that fur, it was sort of hard to tell.

"Fabric, yellow," I replied, pointing at the swatch in my hand.

"You saw this from all the way over there?" Mack asked, pointing from our starting position and then back to the tiny bit of cloth.

"Guess so," I replied. "It does stand out, small as it is."

Ralph stood on a limb off to our side and up a tad, his nose again sniffing the air. "Uh-oh," he soon groaned, thick beads of saliva dripping down his

jutting jaw.

Mack followed suit and echoed, “Uh-the-fuck-oh,” with Ralph’s echo getting joined with a well-placed *fuck*.

And then I, too, was sniffing. “What? I don’t smell anything.”

They both nodded at my comment. “Exactly, Jack,” said Mack.

Then Ralph pointed to the tree itself. “Mack and I left claw marks, and they’re the only ones on this tree. How did this yellow fabric get up here without someone leaving some sort of mark, and how come it has no scent?”

I gulped, and would’ve turned whiter had I not already been Beluga-white already. “No scent, and able to make it up a five-story-high tree without leaving a mark,” I croaked out. “Uh-the-double-fuck-oh.”

“Vampire,” said Ralph, the word like a dagger to my chest.

“Or vampires,” added Mack, that dagger twisting and turning.

“Pray for the former,” I managed.

Though it didn’t seem like anyone was listening to all my praying as of late. Maybe already being dead meant that those days were long gone.

Still, I prayed just the same.

In order to hedge our bets.

§ § §

After that, we headed back to the mansion to wait for Steven, who in turn showed up an hour or so later.

“Vampires,” he said, first word out of his mouth, a nervous spark shooting down my spine upon hearing the word yet again.

“How on earth could you know that already?” I managed.

“Are you hungry, Jack?” he replied, a question for a question.

I shrugged. “I could nibble,” I replied, “or sip, as it were.”

He nodded. “Well, *you* have a reserve here at the mansion.”

I frowned, already putting two and two together. “Let me guess,” I guessed. “Someone or -ones has been feeding?”

He nodded and grimaced, then sat down and joined us at the kitchen table. “Tourists have been going missing for months at a time, then turn up, usually in abandoned buildings, down in windowless basements, and by then, they’re always bloodless. Not a drop left in their bodies.”

“Bite wounds?” I asked, my Adam’s apple suddenly bobbing.

He pointed to his deliciously throbbing jugular. “Two deep ones.”

“Fuck,” said Mack.

“Fuck,” said Ralph.

“Fuck,” said I.

“Fuck,” said Steven, making it unanimous. “And the fingerprints on the spear match the ones found at the crime scenes. That and six other sets that have also, to date, been found. All of them rather large, so we’re probably looking at a group of men here, and none of the prints are in any databases anywhere in the world.” Then he looked up at me, those magnificent pools of blue making my head go dizzy(er). “And, um, what did you mean, how did I know about the vampires already? How did you know about them already?”

I handed him the swatch of yellow. “Found this up a tall tree. No marks leading to it, no scent, and only I could leave something up a tree without a mark or a scent.”

“You or someone like you, yes,” he glumly agreed.

To which Ralph thought to ask, “But how are the police handling this, then? I mean, I haven’t heard about a roving band of vampires until just now. Seems I’d remember hearing about something like that.”

Steven nodded and lightly strummed his fingers on the table. “Dad’s keeping it as much on the down-low as possible; not good for tourism if word got out. Plus, only he’s thinking the vampire angle, seeing as his disbelief in the supernatural is pretty nil, all things considered.”

“And the other police?” Mack asked.

“Crackpots or Satan worshipers, they figure,” he replied, “people into the occult. Humans, though, because vampires don’t exist.” He smiled and again looked my way. “Sorry, Jack.”

I shrugged. “That’s okay. Two days ago, I would’ve said the exact same thing.” Then I pointed around the table. “Werewolves, too.” To which I added, “Are there any clues, though? Any way to find them before they find us?”

He pointed to the swatch of yellow. “That’s about it.” He reached out and held it up, took a deep whiff, and then suddenly smiled such a smile as to put the Mona Lisa to shame.

“What? There’s no scent on it,” said Mack.

“No *human* scent, no,” he replied.

We all took a deep sniff of the impossibly small scrap of yellow, but nothing was causing any bells and whistles to go off, not for me or the other two. Only Steven, among us, was smiling radiantly, beautifully. “You’re not smelling anything because you’re already surrounded by the same aroma, and you didn’t smell it up the tree because of the same thing, the same scent coming off Jack here. It’s telltale.”

I stared at him with my head in a questioning tilt. “You lost me, dude,” said I. “I didn’t leave the scrap, and I certainly didn’t throw that recent round of spears, so how could the scent be the same as the one that comes off of me, seeing as I don’t even have a scent?” And it was then that the light bulb pulsed above my head. “Wait, *telltale* you said, as in *telltale* like a mansion that hasn’t been dusted, mopped, vacuumed, or steam-cleaned in decades?”

Again he nodded. “The scrap smells like this place. Mack and Ralph didn’t smell it up the tree, I surmise, because they were somewhere near to you at the time, and you already smell of it, or at least your clothes do.”

“Which means...” said Mack.

“That the vampires have been in this house,” finished Ralph.

Steven nodded. “After Boris’ death, I’d imagine.” Then he stood up, the smile in an instant vanishing. “And they might still, in fact, be here.”

And then the four of us were standing up as three heart rates began to spike. Mine, of course, stayed as flat as a Kansas highway. “The basement?” I managed. “That would be the safest place to hide. But that’s where the coffin is, and we’ve all been down there already. If they were

down there, we probably all wouldn't still be up here, alive." I glanced at my white, non-pulsing wrist. "Sort of alive, I mean." And then I noticed the buzzer on the kitchen wall and jumped up to press it. It was silent, but Igor appeared within minutes just the same.

"You rang, sir?" he asked, with a bow, mostly.

"Is the basement with the coffin the only basement in the mansion?" I asked, a might too loudly, making him, not to mention the hump, jump.

He shook his head from side to side. The hump somehow stayed in place. "No, sir," he replied. "There's a storage basement in the east wing."

"Take us there, quickly," I shouted.

To which Ralph wisely tossed in, "But get that nifty shield of yours first, please."

I nodded. "And if you have any extras, those too."

He rushed out, mostly, and returned quickly, mostly, somehow carrying five sets of shields. I guessed that he had a reservoir of strength in that hump of his, very camel-like. And then, with all of us huddling behind our protective shields, we made our way to the east wing and down a new flight of stairs, all of us sniffing for something that we knew we'd never smell, all of us searching with our minds, knowing that we'd never find them that way either.

"Now I know what Helen Keller felt like," I whispered.

"Except she could smell," Mack whispered back. "And these *things*, pardon the expression, Jack, don't even have a scent. They could be lying in wait, and we'd never know it until it was too late." In other words, Ralph and Mack were again naked and wolfen in no time flat.

Steven flinched, but otherwise stayed in place. Still, I could detect the slightest of sneers on his otherwise sedately stunning face. "You two first," he said. "You'll heal faster."

Mack grunted. "Gee, thanks."

Still, they led, and we followed. And, no, we didn't bother to whisper any more, seeing as two sets of werewolf feet, not to mention razor-sharp claws, were impossible to muffle. Wolves, it seemed, don't tiptoe and get away with it.

In any case, it didn't much matter.

The basement was empty.

Apart from the body, of course.

§ § §

"Gross," I said, slightly retching and just a tad miffed that they hadn't left a drop for *moi*. Then I looked at Igor, frowning deeply. "Do we know this guy?"

My manservant nodded as he stared down at the face. "Plumber, leaky pipes, and just two days after the master was slaughtered," he replied. "Guess he fixed our pipes and then leaked out of his own. Ironical."

I didn't see much of the irony, but neglected to say so, seeing as we had bigger problems to contend with, namely a dead plumber in my basement, and one with no blood to boot. Then I spotted the boxes scattered about. "Old clothes, same musty smell," I made note, just as I lifted the swatch of yellow up. "Guess they didn't have a problem with stealing from Cousin Boris."

Steven sighed. "Seeing as they didn't have a problem with killing Cousin Boris, I'd say that's a resounding *no*."

Mack and Ralph changed back to human form and then also borrowed some nearby clothes, not so much out of modesty, which they didn't seem to have, as much as it was freezing down there, probably. Not that cold had much of an effect on me any more, what with me being already as cold as an Alaskan winter.

"So they killed Boris," said Ralph, "then the plumber here two days later. Meaning..."

"Meaning," finished Mack, "they were waiting around, probably to see if Jack here would take Boris' place."

I groaned. "Which is how they found me so quickly, because I was barely here an hour, and they were already raining spears down on me. But why?" I asked. "Why kill off vampires if they themselves are vampires? Why kill your own kind?"

And then Ralph and Mack turned and glared at Steven, who sighed and replied, "It happens." Then he looked my way. "Boris mentioned a war in

that letter of his. Perhaps there's a feud between two clans, one that goes a good ways back in time. Maybe this other clan is killing off yours, one by one. A wolf pack would go after another wolf pack for any number of reasons: territory, food, mates. It could be any of those."

I shook my head. "Boris came over from Poland after my parents were killed," I said, a shiver suddenly squirming its way down my back. It didn't, after all, get any easier saying it, and probably never would. "And my parents weren't vampires, and neither was I until recently. We weren't a threat. And if they came from Poland, it seems they had nearer resources for territory and food and mates than coming all the way here, namely all of Europe."

"A vendetta, then," offered Mack. "That seems the likeliest answer."

"Like an eye for an eye, or in your case, a fang for a fang," added Ralph. "Maybe Boris' side of the family did something bad to this other clan, and this is their way of paying them back."

I turned and stared down at Igor. "Any of that make sense?"

But he merely shrugged, sort of. "As I said before, sir, the master did not talk to me of such things."

"But did you know of other vampires back in Poland?" Steven asked.

The shrug repeated. "I knew of the master; that is it," came the reply. "Until I met Jack here, I'd never encountered another vampire before. I did not know of any others, did not even know they existed, apart from my master and his kin before him."

"Your master, whom you followed to America," said Mack.

Igor's shrug turned to a nod. "It was my duty. I worked for the master, so I followed him."

"But did he tell you why you were moving here?" asked Ralph.

And the nod continued. "To protect Jack," he said. "That much I knew, needed to know. I was the master's spare set of eyes and ears, if need be." Not to mention jugular, *blech*.

"But protect me from what?" I asked.

Igor pointed to the lifeless, bloodless corpse. "From that," he said. "You were in danger, but from what I did not know, until now. There were others out there in the woods that I was aware of. I'd seen the spears before, knew they were out for you, for him, but I always assumed that the master was fairly invincible. Hard to kill what is already dead, I mean."

And then I, too, pointed at the corpse. "Unless you do some draining."

He grimaced. "Yes, unless that."

And then I thought of one final question, one thing he might know an answer to, seeing as he was, in fact, Boris' lawyer. "And am I the last of the Jackowskis then, now that Boris is gone? Is what he said in the letter he left me true, that I am the lone survivor?"

With that, a surprising smile appeared on his face. "Ah," he ahed, sort of phlegmy, "yes and no."

"Which is it?" asked Steven, arms akimbo as he impatiently tapped his foot on the cement floor.

Igor's smile grew wider as my frown deepened further. "Yes, you are the last Jackowski, so in fact you are the lone survivor," he said. "In that, the master was speaking the truth. And for what it's worth, I'd assume that you are the last Jackowski who can be changed as the vial has changed you."

"In English, please," spat Mack.

Igor looked at him unsurely. "I thought I was speaking English," he said. "Why, did I say it in Polish? Because that happens sometimes, what with me being Polish and all."

Mack sighed. "No, I meant, stop speaking in riddles and get to the point. You said *yes and no* to the question. That was the *yes*. What's the *no*?"

"Ah," he ahed once again. "Yes, Jack here is the lone Jackowski, unless, of course, you count, well, *me*."

I nearly swooned at the very thought. "But your name is Igor Bolinski," I reminded him, just in case I'd missed something, which, all in all, didn't seem too unlikely.

"Your great-great-grandfather was a Jackowski, sir," he said, "but his wife was a Bolinski." Then he smiled. "Well, not so much his wife as mistress and maid."

I scratched my head. "Let me guess," I guessed, which appeared to happen a lot lately. "The maid had a baby by the master of the house. The baby was kept a secret, and the house servants stayed with the family from generation to generation, ending with, of course, you."

He nodded, kind of. "I knew of my family's secret, but if the master did as well, he never said. Still, it is why I followed him to America. It is what we Bolinskis do, after all. It is what we've always done, in part, probably because we all have known of the family ties."

"But are you a vampire, too?" asked Steven, quickly sniffing and then quickly not sniffing Igor, mainly because, like the rest of the house, Igor was less than dust-free. Much less. That is to say, he, unlike me, had a scent and a pulse, slow as it might have been.

"I do not believe so," he replied.

"But have you drunk blood before?" I asked. "Human blood?"

He shook his head no. "The master drank from me, as needed. I, however, did not drink from his private stash. It was a one-way street, as the expression goes."

To which Ralph added, "But if you knew what he was and knew you were related, then weren't you even a tad bit curious?"

And still his head shook no. "I am happy as I am."

Which struck me as just about the oddest thing I'd heard all week, if ever. "But what if you're in danger, Igor? If they know of me, these other vampires, then perhaps they know of you as well."

He squinted up at me as he thought it over. "Seems doubtful," he said. "If such were the case, I'd probably be long dead by now. Same for the rest of my family, small as it now is. Easy prey, shields or no shields." He pointed to our shields, which lay scattered on the floor.

And that did, it seemed, make sense. Because if they were, in fact, going after all the Jackowskis, then Igor would've been the easiest to exterminate. *Kill off the weakest first*, as Steven had said. And then leave the strongest unguarded. Heck, he even had a target on his back, and a large one at that, wobbly though it was.

“Well, *cousin*,” I said, smiling for some strange reason. Perhaps because I really wasn’t alone any more, even if Igor was the one who made me less alone. “Guess we have a secret weapon, then, after all.”

His smile was beguiling. Frightening, yes, but beguiling, also. “I did always like the idea of flying,” he allowed. “Beats walking up all those stairs, I mean.”

My smile echoed his. “And with the added strength, look at all the dusting you could do.”

The smile just as quickly vanished. “Oh, Bolinskis don’t dust, sir,” he told me in earnest. “The hump gets in the way too much, you see.”

And that explained it.

One down, a whole slew of questions to go.

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CHAPTER 6

Desperate Times

The five of us retired back to the kitchen. Since it seemed to get used more than the other rooms in the mansion, it also seemed to get cleaned, to a degree.

“There’s one thing I wonder about,” stated Mack as we all took our seats.

“Gee, just the one?” I groaned.

“Apart from all the others, I mean,” he replied. “It’s the change.”

“From human to vampire?” I asked, watching as he once again reapplied his make-up. It seemed to relax him in a Zen sort of way. Plus, it brought out the green in his eyes, slightly crossed though they might have been.

“Yes, that,” he said, the lipstick now smearing across his upper and then lower lip before getting blotted with a napkin, the wig then put back in place, until Barbra was once again staring my way. Strangely, it was a comforting sight to see—Yentl as opposed to gentle on the eyes. “We werewolves are born the way we are. The gene is either dormant or active, but it’s there just the same. I cannot, in fact, turn someone else. But you...”

I shook my head. “Seems the same for me. The gene was dormant, then active once I drank the blood. My family, Boris’ family, passed the gene down from generation to generation. We can only assume the same is true for Igor here.” I pointed at Igor, who was picking absentmindedly at a cuticle.

Steven spoke up next. He was sitting at my side, rubbing his foot against mine, my jeans instantly tenting upon contact. “And Boris nourished off of Igor,” he reminded us, a queasy look flashing across his face. “Which did not turn him, it seems, like it sometimes does in the movies.”

I nodded. “And the corpses have, thus far, remained corpses, as far as we know.” As for the one in the basement, one problem at a time, I figured. Besides, he wasn’t going anywhere any time soon.

“Yes,” said Steven, “but perhaps that has always been intentional. What if...”

I snapped my fingers. “What if I can turn someone, if I wanted to?”

He nodded his head, the blue in his eyes sparkling beneath the overhead light. “You do your flying act by simply thinking about it; you can reach out to other people’s minds; you have a certain sonar-like ability, also through your mind.”

“So you’re saying,” reiterated my drag bodyguard, “that Jack here might be able to change someone from human to vampire if he thinks hard enough about it?”

“While he’s, um, *snacking*, too, yes,” replied Steven. “Perhaps there is an exchange of DNA during the process that needs to occur, something to make the dormant gene go active. I mean, just thinking it in order to make it happen seems unlikely. Otherwise, there would be more vampires out there, I’d think.”

“But how do we know for sure?” I asked. All heads simultaneously turned to Igor, who then looked from his fingernails to each of us in turn.

“What?” he asked. Silence enveloped the room as we waited for his brain to catch up to his hump, which seemed the most attentive part about him. “Oh,” he then said.

“If I gave you some human blood, would you drink it?” I asked, first.

He nodded. “If you asked me to, sir, then yes.”

And then I nodded, tossing in a grin for good measure. “Then what if I asked you to allow me to, um, well, *bite* you instead?”

“As you wish, sir,” he replied, bored-looking as ever. “The master did such from time to time, as I’ve told you. It’s not painful.” His standard grimace grimaced all the more. “Too much, I mean.”

I winced. “But it might change you this time, if I will it.” Though with that, as with everything I’d recently learned, I’d have to vamp my way through it. Unless there was a *Bloodsucking for Dummies* lying around somewhere, underneath the layers of dust, I mean.

He paused and seemed to be mulling it over. Though with Igor, it was awfully hard to tell. “No Bolinski has ever been asked such a thing, sir, as

far as I know.”

I nodded again and stood up. “War makes strange bedfellows, so to speak, Igor.”

“Desperate times, desperate measures,” added Ralph.

And they can't get any more desperate than sucking on your humpbacked manservant, thought Steven, which reached my mind, loud and clear. Still, I was, in fact, desperate. And it was something I needed to know if I could do, I supposed, even if it was knowledge merely for knowledge's sake. Plus, another vampire on our side might even things up just a bit, I reasoned, and with Igor's stature, *just a bit* was probably all we'd get.

And so I walked to him, and he walked to me, as the other three stared on in rapt wonder.

“Be gentle, sir,” he pled, and I winced, yet again, and slightly retched, yet again.

“No talking, please, Igor,” I told him as I leaned down, avoiding eye contact with the hump, impossible as that was to achieve. I mean, it was like standing in front of one of the Alps and seeing Switzerland beyond. In other words, not going to happen.

And then, as if on cue, I felt my teeth quivering inside my mouth, as they took on a life of their own, as they sprouted downward and sharpened to razor-sharp points. *Thump, thump* I suddenly heard, his jugular throbbing beneath my lips, the sound pounding in my ears, drawing me ever closer, our opposing poles colliding, death to life.

But it wasn't enough to merely drink from him, *blech*; I had to change him, too. Except, of course, I hadn't a clue how to do it. *An exchange of DNA*, Steven had said. *But how do I do that?* And then it hit me, or perhaps I knew it all along, instinctively. I mean, it stood to reason, if I could suck Igor's blood, *blech*, then I could also inject something in return. Maybe the plunger went down *and* up. In any case, I had to try, vamp my way through it, but try just the same.

And so my fangs sank into him, the blood instantly filling my mouth as my body pulsed in sync with his heart, my energy reserves skyrocketing in an instant, my entire body immediately on fire. It was like sex multiplied a

hundred times—or fifty, if you were talking about Steven. In truth, it felt as if I were being born anew.

But that was just the first part. The sucking was easy, but what of the injecting? For that, I once again let my mind take over, to will what needed to be done, to give to him so much more than what I was taking: a part of me, in fact, the essential part, what made me *me*.

He shook and trembled beneath my bite, his eyes rolling back inside his head, mouth agape as we stood united, my teeth buried deep inside his neck, a trickle of crimson meandering down his exposed flesh. And then I sighed when I retracted, standing over him as I stared down, watching, waiting.

“Well?” I asked, nervously.

He stared back up at me, greenish-gray eyes blinking as he wiped the fang marks on his neck with the back of his hand. “Huh,” was all he said.

“Huh?” I echoed. “Huh what?”

“You’re very handsome, you know,” he replied, rather cryptically, with an uncharacteristic wink.

I coughed and scratched my head. “I’m very handsome? Is that all you can say?” Then that light bulb of mine pulsed again. “Wait. Did you think I was handsome *before* I bit you, Igor?”

He shook his head. “I hadn’t given it much thought, sir.”

Then I pointed at Steven, the very definition of handsome. “And him?”

Igor turned his head to the side. “Oh my,” he managed.

And then I slapped my hands against my hips. “Well, that did it; I turned him, all right!” I very nearly screamed, and then I did, indeed, scream, “I turned him gay!” Because that, too, was an essential part of what made me *me*, and, baby, I was born this way. Except Igor, obviously, hadn’t been, despite what he was now. And I couldn’t even begin to imagine how many hump-chasers there were out there, but it couldn’t have been many—so poor, poor manservant.

“Huh,” repeated Igor.

“Yeah, huh,” I grunted, “but are you a *vampire*, too? That’s the question.”

The four of us leaned in to the now-silent Igor, all of us sniffing, all of us listening.

“No heartbeat,” soon said Mack, with a smile appearing on his prettily made-up face.

“And no scent, either,” added Ralph, nose twitching. “Thank goodness.”

Thank goodness indeed.

And so our secret weapon was born.

Lord help us all.

§ § §

Mack and Ralph left us soon after Igor’s change took place, saying that they had to go shopping for something, but neglecting to say what exactly. Still, when they asked Steven if he minded watching me for a while, and Steven eagerly agreed, I wasn’t about to start arguing with them.

“Take your time,” I hollered as we waved to them from the front porch.

“And bring back some hair-care products and moisturizer,” added Igor at my side. “Suddenly, I feel the need to primp.” Call it stereotypical on his part, but I wasn’t about to argue about it. Then the door closed, and Igor looked up our way, eyes glued to Steven. “Where can I find one like him?” he asked, practically drooling. Practically, because it didn’t seem like vampires drool, or cry, or spit. Though, apparently, we still come. *Phew*.

“Try Craigslist,” I told him, “in the *Man Seeking Humpbacked Manservant* section.”

Now that he was gay, however, it seemed that sarcasm no longer went over his head, or hump. In other words, he stormed off, sort of, and left us to our own devices.

“Alone at last,” Steven cooed, pulling me in tight.

Our lips met, heaven on earth really, as our tongues swirled mid-air. Then I couldn’t help but laugh, which wasn’t exactly perfect timing. “Sorry,” I apologized.

“Why the sudden jocularity?” he asked, cupping my burgeoning crotch, eliciting a moan from yours truly.

My giggling started up again. “I turned someone gay,” I replied.

He shrugged. "Maybe we should take this act on the road then," he said. "Start with Congress and see how things go."

"Aren't there enough bloodsuckers in Congress already?" I couldn't help but note.

"Good point," he allowed, "and speaking of points," he added, with a squeeze of my willie.

My giggling turned to groaning. "Yeah, seems we have spears of our own to play with."

"Do tell."

I nodded. "Or better yet, do *show*." My fly was zipping down in no time flat, my prick springing out a second later. "Ta da!"

He clapped as he stared hungrily down. "Bravo!"

I shook it and watched it sway. "That was just the first act; wait until the encore." And with that, I grabbed his hand and hurried us upstairs.

"Where are we headed so fast?" he asked, curious as to why we were bypassing the bedroom.

"One more flight up," I replied, flinging the hallway door open as we continued up, my cock bobbing all the while.

And then we reached the last door, which I flung open, the cool air hitting our faces in an instant. I walked outside, onto the roof, with Steven by my side. Then I winked at him and began to undress.

"Out here?" he asked, also with a wink as he kicked off his sneakers and lifted up his T-shirt, the six-pack revealed, with a seemingly extra set of cans.

"Not exactly," I replied, my own shirt tossed off as my pants slid down, then my boxers, leaving me in nothing but my sweat socks, all seventies-porn-like.

"Nice," he rasped, until he was as naked and hard as I was, our dicks waving their hellos and nice-to-see-yous. "Now what?"

I closed the gap between us, my hands instantly wrapped around his narrow waist, our faces millimeters apart. "Now this," I replied, shutting my eyes as I willed us upwards.

“Um, *EEK*,” he croaked out.

I popped open my eyes. “Less dangerous up here. Hard to chuck a spear this far and in this direction.”

He gulped and stared from me to the ever-shrinking mansion below. “*Less dangerous?*”

I smiled and pulled him in even tighter, our steely cocks rubbing nicely together. “Well, maybe not less as much as about the same. Still, when have you ever spewed from a few hundred feet up?” To which I amended with, and probably rightly so, “Outside of a plane.”

“You have me there,” he replied.

“Nope,” said I, my fingers tickling his satiny hole, “I have you *here*.”

He groaned and wrapped his legs around me, his cheeks splaying further apart as I quickly whipped my hand up, spit into it, and returned it, all in the blink of an eye as my index finger wiggled its way inside. Then its neighbor joined the fray. Though, of course, three was the charm. And with his muscle-dense legs tightly locking him in place, he used his free hands to deftly work the come up from our hovering balls.

So, to recap, we, a vampire and a werewolf, were floating high above San Francisco in nothing but our socks, the Pacific stretching out majestically before us with nary a cloud or fog bank in sight, my triple digits buried deep inside his stunning ass, with both of us close to shooting our loads down on the masses below. Or at least onto an unsuspecting pigeon, which, karma-like, seemed apt. And if you were to ask me if I found any of that statement odd, of course I’d say yes, but at the same time, I’d also freely admit that the company made it all, well, just about very damned well near-perfect just the same.

In other words, as our cocks spasmed and shook, as the come flew up and out and then down, down, down (way down!), my eyes popped open to take him in, his doing the same at that very same moment, and it felt like our very souls were connected as one, joined somehow, meant to be together.

“Wow,” he managed, the last beads of come taken on the wind as his lips brushed my own.

“Yeah,” I rasped. “That sure put the super in supernatural.”

He looked right and then left, as a passing seagull suspiciously eyed us, and replied, “*Natural* being such a subjective word, though.” Then he kissed me and sent every nerve ending in my body into overdrive, so many sparks shooting through me that it was a wonder I didn’t cast off lightning bolts. Then he backed his head an inch away and added, “Still, it might be nice to finish off this post-coital bliss down on the ground, or roof, at any rate.”

I shrugged and started to hover us in reverse. “’kay,” I agreed. “Anyway, I’d rather Mack and Ralph didn’t return and see us from this angle.”

Though by then, said angles were almost completely limp.

For the time being, at any rate.

§ § §

We got dressed and made it back to the kitchen just as my werewolf bodyguards returned, smiling suspiciously from ear to ear, a brown paper bag in each of their hands, one of the satchels fairly small, the other bulky and overstuffed.

“You saw us, didn’t you?” I asked, seeing as their smiles were so sheepish they just about went *baaa*.

Ralph blushed. Mack, well, he was already wearing blush, so it was kind of hard to tell. “Saw what?” they both asked in unison, shrugged in unison, and then promptly looked away in unison.

A sigh came from Steven. “Never mind, you two; just show us what you bought.”

Ralph’s blush deepened. “Well, *mostly* bought,” he replied, again looking my way.

Mack handed me his bag first. “Mine was bought.”

I opened it up and peeked inside. It was the mechanics of some sort of device, two of them, the shells already discarded. “Electronics puzzle?” I asked. “Not really my forté.”

Mack grabbed the bag and pulled one of the devices out. Thing was small: a few wires, a silver casing, and some sort of mini-speaker jutting off the top. He then flicked it on, the sound of it immediately thumping in our ears with a regular rhythm. *Lub, dub. Lub, dub. Lub, dub.*

“Why do we need heartbeat noises?” asked Steven, and then just as quickly snapped his fingers. “Ah, we don’t.” And then he pointed at my chest. “But *he* does, as does Igor now.”

“Hence the matching set,” said Mack. “They help babies sleep, makes them think they’re still in the womb.”

“Or,” added Ralph, “tricks vampire spear-chuckers into thinking they’re not hunting their fellow undead.” He too was pointing at me now, as was Mack.

Not to be left out, I pointed at myself. “So they hear my store-bought heartbeat and assume I’m not who they think I am,” I reiterated, but I wasn’t smiling as they were. “Um, just so you know, though, I could smell Steven from the mansion all the way down to the beach, which means they can probably just as easily notice that I have no scent, even from up in the trees.”

Ralph held up his bag next. “*Voilà!* New scents!”

“Cologne?” I asked, hesitantly, seeing as the bag was big, bulky, and not smelling either like Ralph Lauren or Paco Rabanne.

“Better,” replied Ralph, parting the bag open so that I could have a look inside.

I stared down, quizzically. “Clothes?” I asked, pulling a few of them out for closer inspection. “Why clothes?”

“They’re borrowed from our dry cleaner,” explained Mack, “who’s closed on the weekends.”

“And a locked door isn’t quite a match for a pair of intrepid werewolves,” I rightly assumed.

They both nodded. “Nope,” agreed Ralph.

“So these are dirty clothes?” I then asked, wriggling my nose at them.

“You need to smell like someone else, anyone else,” explained Mack. “Besides us, of course.”

“They know what you look like,” added Ralph. “Now you’ll have a heartbeat, a scent, and a disguise.”

“What kind of disguise?” I asked, nervously.

They both kept on smiling. “Wait and see,” replied Mack, suddenly looking very much like a proud mama-to-be. “Wait and see.” Then he opened up his purse and flashed me a dizzying array of tubes, bottles, and applicators, all in various shapes, sizes, and colors. “Once I’m through with you, they could pass you in the street and never know who you are.”

I sighed. “Sounds like a win-win. Only for the life of me, or at least unlife, I can’t imagine who the second win is for.”

Steven patted my back, his grin suddenly as wide as theirs. Thankfully, it was infectious, like herpes, only without the sores. “Better some makeup and a man’s wig than a spear through the chest. Plus, look on the bright side.”

“The wig will be blond?” I guessed.

“No,” he replied. “They don’t know that Igor is a vampire yet, so at least we don’t have to disguise him. Because, let’s face it, no amount of makeup is gonna make him look any different, or better.”

Ralph shook one of the stolen shirts in the air. “Or cover the, um, you-know-what up.”

To which the other three of us corrected him with a sigh and, “Hump.”

He shoved the stolen shirt back in the bag. “Exactly. In any case, you’ll just need to be a bit different-looking when you’re out in public.”

My sigh repeated, as did my standard use of sarcasm. “Yeah, which so rarely ever happens, me being in public, I mean.”

Steven again patted my back and ignored my snarkiness. “That’s the spirit,” he said. “In any case, it might be fun. I mean, I’ve never dated two guys in one before.”

The room went deathly silent at that moment. Not even a *lub, dub* broke through, and Steven knew what he’d said the moment it came cascading out of his bee-stung lips, past his mesmerizingly white teeth: *date*. He said it, and we all heard it, me especially. Still, I didn’t press the issue, or, needless to say, argue the point.

“So,” I said, cutting through the enveloping silence. “Where do we go from here, then?”

“Research,” replied Mack. “We need to figure out who these guys are first.”

“And then why they killed Boris and are gunning for you next,” added Ralph.

“And more than likely did the same to my parents,” I reminded them glumly, “and to Lord only knows how many others of my extended family.”

“And I know just the place to start looking,” chimed in the guy I was apparently dating.

And, no, I didn’t need a metal device thumping in my chest to let me know that the mere thought of that, the dating thing, was making me all light-headed, in a good way, for a change.

§ § §

Now, to say that it was, well, *unusual* to have a werewolf drag-queen Barbra-Streisand-impersonator apply makeup—mostly tanning cream to cover up all that white, plus a blond unisex wig, which Mack had picked up from home before heading back to the mansion—barely scratched the surface of it. In fact, I’d venture to say that no such statement has ever been uttered, or been thought of uttering, or shall ever be uttered again, apart from me, in the entire history of mankind. Not that the four of us were really men, in the strictest sense of the word, but still.

In any case, once the clothes, unclean though they were, were thrown on, I did appear quite different, very un-me looking, which was the point, really. And then Steven hiked the stolen shirt up and taped the faux heartbeat to my chest before flicking it on.

I was now blond, tan, and with even higher cheekbones and fuller lips. And so a new Jack was born. Or unborn, as it were, seeing as I was now un-everything: undead, unclean, and un-me. Though I did seem to now have a boyfriend, so my universe had righted itself just a tad, if you forgot the whole bloodsucking-vampire thing, which, of course, was impossible to forget, no matter how hard I tried.

In any case, with his hand in mine, I did manage a smile.

And just the slightest boner, so sue me.

“Where we headed?” I finally thought to ask, once we’d made it out of the mansion and were again situated inside Steven’s car, and after he had called his dad to tell him about the corpse in my basement, which was another sentence I’d never imagined saying before.

“Home,” replied Steven.

But before he could pull the car past the gate, Mack and Ralph were both shouting, “Stop!” from the back seat.

The car came to a screeching halt. “What the fuck!” hollered Steven. “What’s wrong now?”

I turned and stared at them, both their faces locked in what I could only imagine was anger, seeing as their jaws were clamped shut and their eyes were quite suddenly beady.

“What’s wrong?” I repeated, eyes wide.

“*Home*, he said,” replied Ralph.

“Oh, not that again,” groaned Steven, strumming his fingers on the steering wheel as he stared at them through the rearview mirror.

“Yes, *that again*,” griped Ralph. “Last time I ended up with a bullet lodged in my back, in case you forgot.”

“Ouch,” I croaked out.

“Yeah, ouch,” grumbled Ralph, “and that pack of his will *not* be happy to see us again.”

Steven turned around and counted to ten in his head, which I heard in my own. Weird, but true. “We have to stick together. Safety in numbers and all that rot,” he said. “Plus there’s someone back at my place who can help us, hopefully.”

“Hopefully?” I couldn’t help but ask.

He turned and looked my way. “Your parents were, well, sorry to say, killed several years ago, so the trail might’ve run cold. Still, it’s worth a shot.”

A chill ran up my spine, even colder than the chill that was already there, at hearing him say the word *killed*. Because, yes, I now believed that they were in fact killed, but no, I still wasn’t the least bit prepared in terms of

dealing with it just yet. In any case, if he was able to obtain even the faintest of clues, I knew we had to try. “Please, guys,” I pled, scratching beneath my wig. “I’m sure Steven won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

“Again,” added Ralph, his arms folded over his chest.

“Right, again,” I said, nodding my head, “and besides, who would attack Barbra Streisand and a dude who can sprout fangs at the drop of a hat?”

They couldn’t argue with my logic.

Sparse though it was.

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CHAPTER 7

Into the Lion's Den

So from the coast we drove, skirting the Presidio before heading south through the Castro and then up Twin Peaks, the fog rolling in and over the boob-like hills as we approached, the sky a stunning blue behind us. If the situation weren't so dire, it might've actually been a perfect day in San Francisco.

Ralph pointed first, all lackluster-like. "Home sweet home," he droned.

I stared up at the striking and massive Victorian looming in front of us. "That's where you live?" I asked.

"Family home," Steven replied, "but yes."

I shook my head. "You must've saved a boatload of orphans in a past life, and kittens, and a nun or two who were tending to both kittens and orphans."

He shrugged and pulled in through the gate, which he'd opened electronically. "Well, I do like kittens." He chuckled. "For a midnight snack, I mean."

I slapped his arm as we came to a halt. "Please, don't kid." Though I doubted he was. Steven was a lot of things—seriously, *A LOT*—but class clown, not so much.

"Right," he said, after a deep breath and a slap across his thighs. "Out we go, then."

"You mean in," said Mack, his car door slowly creaking open, "as in, into the lion's den."

I almost laughed, but was suddenly stopped when, one by one, they emerged, all of them scowling upon sight of my newfound friends, who, for their parts, were baring their teeth and growling rather loudly, the sound rumbling through me like thunder before a storm.

"Play nice, guys," I pled.

“Says the man who can simply fly away if need be,” whispered Ralph as he exited the car.

“Hover,” I corrected him. “But, okay, granted.” And then I too exited, the four of us soon staring at the lot of them, or pack of them, as it were. And oh, what a pack they were. Not a zit or a mole or a scar or an errant cowlick among them, and certainly no humps. It was like an Abercrombie ad come to life, emphasis on the *come*.

“Geez,” I managed, “how many kitten-keeping, orphaned nuns could there have been?”

Steven merely chuckled and called his pack to order. They lined up and stared anxiously at their leader, or lustfully. Hard to tell with this group, or with Steven, who seemed to have that effect on pretty much everyone. Present company, namely *moi*, very much included.

“Pack,” he said, “this is Jack. He is to be treated as a respected guest.” Then he turned to Mack and Ralph. “Same goes for my, um, my *friends* here.” The pack grumbled, every last one of them, but none dared complain. Then Steven looked to each of them until he found one in particular. “Now then, Carl, you come with us.”

A tall Nordic-looking demigod parted the ranks. “Are we going to book a trip?” he asked, oddly.

Steven smiled and headed the five of us over to the pool, which sparkled and shimmered in front of us as we sat down on lounge chairs. “Not exactly,” he replied, “but I do need your specific brand of knowledge to help us with a, well, a *project* we’re working on.”

I snapped my fingers. “He’s a travel agent.”

Carl half-scowled, half-smiled, and I only popped half a woodie. “I own my own agency,” he quickly corrected. “Three offices in the Bay Area.”

Steven simply yawned and then continued. “In any case, Carl, we’re looking for a roster, all men who’ve traveled directly from Poland on...”

I finished the sentence. “Well, let’s say the week before the ninth of August, 2008.”

Steven reached across and patted my hand. He knew what that date was; it was the day that my parents were killed, after all. Ralph and Mack

frowned and nodded my way.

“Right,” said Steven. “That doable?”

Carl scratched his chin and stared up through the rapidly-moving fog overhead. “I have a friend at LOT, the Polish carrier. I can probably get it from him, but it’s going to be a long list, I’d imagine. They fly from Poland to New York and Chicago, not directly to here. That okay?”

Steven nodded. “Just do your best, Carl,” he said, with a polite smile. “But we only need the men, and only the Polish citizens at that.” I knew where he was going with that, seeing as the war that Boris had mentioned was an old one, so it must’ve been among people who lived in relatively the same area. Boris was Polish; ergo, so was the enemy. Made about as much sense as any of this shit did.

“How soon do you need it?” asked Carl as he stood up.

“Quickly,” I chimed in.

Carl looked from me to Steven, who echoed, “Quickly, Carl.”

And then the four of us were alone again. “Smart,” commented Mack, who was lying back in the chair, attempting to squeeze out any errant rays of sunshine that managed to poke through. The views from Twin Peaks were stunning, but only if you could see them through the incessant fog. Ironic, and expensive irony at that, and so much for that perfect San Francisco day of ours, too. “But then what do we do with that roster once we acquire it?”

Steven turned his head from side to side and soon pointed to a compact mass of muscle sitting on the veranda. He was chatting to a stunning redhead who was doing pushups at the time, shirtless. Meaning, if I hadn’t already emphasized the *come*, now would’ve been a good time. “That’s Quincy,” Steven informed us. “He works for the State Department. We give him the list and see if he can find any of them still living in San Francisco. Best guess, anyone who was flying back in 2008 and is still living here will make for a good candidate.”

In other words, my boyfriend, if in fact that’s what he was, but let’s call him that, seeing as my confidence level had diminished considerably since

being surrounded by this astoundingly gorgeous group of men, was both impossibly handsome and ridiculously smart.

Suffice it to say, our children would some day rule the world.

I know, cart before the horse, but why not dream big?

In the short time I might have to live, I mean.

Astoundingly, Carl was back not five minutes later, a full smile replacing the half-scowl. “He’ll have it for us by tomorrow,” he said, “but I owe the guy one.”

“Lucky guy,” whispered Mack, but of course we all heard it, and thought it.

Carl simply shrugged, but the smile quivered northward just the same, and then he retreated back inside the house. Gone, but not forgotten. Picture Thor, thunderbolts and all, from the rear.

“How does any work get done around here?” I asked.

Steven turned and winked. “Do you think that Da Vinci stopped painting once he created his first masterpiece?”

I nodded, understanding his train of thought. “In other words, you get used to it and move on, right?”

He again reached over and squeezed my hand, a wink following the squeeze. “To the next masterpiece.”

An eddy of something akin to warmth swirled through my belly, as if a swarm of bats had taken wing in there. All in all, it was an apt analogy. “But what do we do until tomorrow?” I asked.

And it was then that his smile faltered as he leaned back in his chair. “It was risky enough coming here, Jack,” he said, by way of an answer.

And I shivered at what he’d said, staring at the pool as it rippled in the breeze. “We have to go back to my mansion,” I said. “The other vampires, they can’t find us here. Your pack, they’re all human now. Stunningly human, but human just the same, vulnerable.”

He nodded. “Pick off the weak,” he told me, yet again.

“Odd that this group could ever be considered weak,” I replied, my previous smile all but vanished, much like the sun overhead.

Steven pointed at Mack and Ralph and then at me. “In comparison, yes, and as their leader, I cannot put them in danger.” He stood and looked to each of us in turn. “But come the full moon, those vampires better watch the fuck out.”

And, yes, emphasis on the *come* yet again, spewing like Vesuvius.

§ § §

Back to the mansion we went, the car zooming through the fog that fairly enveloped the westernmost parts of San Francisco. In truth, it was hard to tell which was gloomier, it or us. Still, I did have a thought as to what we could do until we got that list of Carl’s.

“My cousin, he was rich,” I said as we drew ever nearer to the chilly Pacific.

“Not a word I often use,” said Steven, briefly turning my way, “but *duh*.”

I snickered. “No, I meant that he was rich, so he must’ve had valuables, things he hid away for safekeeping.”

“And where better to hide things,” added Ralph, “than in a safe?”

“Exactly,” I agreed, “and maybe, if we can find a safe, then we can also find some more clues, something we didn’t know before.”

“But the mansion is ginormous,” needlessly reminded Mack as he sat in back, filing his emerald-colored fingernails.

I sighed. “Then we hope that Igor knows where it is.”

Ralph snickered. “Maybe the hump comes with a lock and key.”

“Or a keypad combination,” added Mack.

“Or maybe a hidden spring,” tossed in Steven as we pulled into the driveway.

I shuddered and replied, “Well, I’m not poking at that thing to find out, so we’ll just have to find an actual safe.”

Except, of course, life is never that simple. Dare I say, *duh*.

§ § §

“Safe?” asked Igor, staring up at each of us, mostly Steven.

“Yeah, safe,” I said, “a place where he stored his valuables, or anything he needed to hide in case the place got robbed?”

But Igor shook his head no. “I’ve never seen such a thing in the mansion,” he replied. “Sorry, sir.” And with that, he was gone. Hopefully to do some dusting, but I wasn’t holding out for any small miracles. Or, in the case of the mansion and its veritable mountain of dust, large miracles, as in parting-of-the-Red-Sea large.

“So now what do we do?” asked Mack, silver compact held up as he applied a fresh coat of war paint.

I sighed and replied, “Steven and I will take the west wing; you two take the east.” And before they could object, I added. “Kitchen’s in the east, and I believe that Igor has restocked the fridge.”

I heard three stomachs gurgling, four if you include my own. Though, sadly, there was nothing in that fridge for me in that regard. Also, since I’d turned Igor, I knew I couldn’t avail myself of his jugular as Boris had; his blood now meant his life, and I couldn’t ask him for it again. And as for that stash of my cousin’s, I’d already gone through it all. So, like old Mother Hubbard, my cupboards were bare.

Newly depressed at all those dreary thoughts, I added, “Well, at least it’ll keep our minds off of things.”

Steven leaned over and pressed his lips to mine, then tousled my hair. “Or maybe we’ll find the safe and some more answers, Jack.”

“In a mansion the size of a third world country?” I replied. “How likely is that?”

“Except that you forget one thing,” he said, the kiss repeated.

“That you look stunning naked?” I hazarded, though, needless to say, that was the one thing I could never forget. Still, since we’d be alone in half the mansion, perhaps it was wise to bring it up. *Up* being the operative word, as in my dick, which was about as up as it could get all of a sudden.

“No, Jack, but thanks,” he said. “You forgot that you have the superior mind of a vampire, and that I have the superior mind of a werewolf. Surely, all that will lead us to the X that marks the spot.”

And then I had a new dreadful thought. “Unless the superior minds of the vampires who were temporarily living here already found that X and were able to break in.”

He grinned. “Were you always this morose, hon?”

“You mean before I became undead, *hon*? Or just since we found a bloodless plumber in my basement, the basement without the coffin in it?”

He chuckled. “Never mind. Let’s just start searching.” Then he looked right and left, and back and forward. “Now then, if I were a safe, where would I hide?”

And my chuckle joined his. “*That’s* the superior werewolf mind?”

He slapped my ass. “Any better ideas?”

“Start from the bottom and work our way up?”

“Always works for me,” he said with a knowing grin.

“Shock,” said I, “serious shock.”

§ § §

And so to the basement we went, yet again. Same spooky coffin, same cobwebbed recesses of my cousin’s mega-mansion, but there was nothing there. No hidden safes, no hidden anything, despite our best efforts to locate it or something akin to it.

Twenty minutes later, I looked to Steven. “This house is huge, dude,” I whined, “much bigger than my patience.”

He sighed and held my hand. “Oh, good, I thought it was just me.” Then he smiled and gave that hand a squeeze. “Time for some of that vamping of yours, I think.”

I nodded, though I hadn’t a clue what he was talking about. “I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

His smile grew by another fifty watts, lighting up the place as good as any old sunrise ever could. “That’s what vamping is all about, Jack, working your way through it, even when you don’t have a fucking clue what you’re doing.”

And still I nodded. “Um, okay, Steven, I don’t have a *fucking* clue what you’re talking about.”

He paused, clearly thinking of a way to explain it to me, or maybe he was just working out our next move in his head. Or maybe he caught his reflection in the metal casket and was admiring his phenomenal beauty, which, in truth, was exactly what I was doing while he was pausing. In any case, he soon offered, “A bat feels its way through the world. Not so much sees, but feels, sending out its sonar and waiting for the waves to bounce off something before returning with information.”

And then I got it. “So rather than looking for whatever it is we’re searching for, I should feel for it, with my head?”

He shrugged. “Sweetie, it sure beats the hell out of going from room to room in this dust-covered joint of yours.”

He had me there.

And so I closed my eyes and opened my mind. It was a very Deepak Chopra kind of moment, really. Transcendental masturbation, jacking my head instead of my cock, or Steven’s, nice as the idea sounded. Of course, instead of spunk, I shot brain waves, sending them out, out, out.

“Feel anything?” he whispered, standing by my side.

At first, there was just the emptiness, the all-enveloping black. With maybe a little Kate Bush playing in the background, because that’s just the way my brain rolls. But then, sure enough, the waves started coming back to me.

“I feel Igor, and Mack, and Ralph,” I told him. “I can...I can picture them in my head, their spatial relationship to me, to the mansion, to one another. It’s like a map’s getting drawn.” I opened my eyes and pointed to my temple. “In here.”

Steven smiled. “Funny, I can do that with my pack, especially after the change, during a hunt.” He stroked my arm. “But what of the safe, or any unseen connections to Boris?”

That was harder to focus on, of course. The others occupied space; I was able to bounce my brainwaves off of them. But Boris had no space, no being. Still, he was connected to this place. He *was* this place. And so I closed my eyes again and pushed my mental sonar through the walls, hoping to bounce them off of something less tangible.

“His presence,” I soon said, again holding Steven’s hand in mine. “It’s left a, well, a fingerprint, an indentation, I suppose you can say, like I can feel him here still. Not his ghost or anything, just *him*.”

It didn’t make a huge amount of sense, even to me, and I was the one saying it, but I felt him just the same. It brought us closer somehow, like I was meant to be there, meant to be following in his footsteps.

And that’s when I got it.

“Footsteps,” I squeaked out.

“I don’t hear anything,” replied Steven, his head quickly moving in all directions.

“No,” I said, opening my eyes again, “it’s like he left a trail for me.” Again I pointed to my head. “Something I can follow, like playing Marco Polo. Hotter/colder.”

“And down here?” he asked.

“Ann Coulter cold, dude. *Brrr*.”

He smiled and walked ahead, up the stairs and out of the basement. “And now?”

I closed my eyes and felt for the trail again. “Sarah Palin cold, but warming up a bit, like spring in Siberia.”

Through the halls we went, from room to room, my sonar bouncing off the walls, off the dusty furniture and musty bric-a-brac, going from hotter to colder and back again, which didn’t make a lot of sense, because that’s not how the game should’ve worked.

Not until he stared up, that is. “It’s not on this floor,” he said. “We must be below it.”

I nodded. “It was getting hot, sort of, around the music room, so I’m guessing it must be above there, whatever it is we’re searching for.”

We took the stairs two at a time, our footsteps echoing out in all directions. I pictured the mansion, the rooms we’d been in, and which room must’ve been above the music room. Still, Steven realized it first. “His bedroom! Of course!”

We soon stood in the doorway, staring all around. Again I felt my cousin, the feeling stronger this time, almost like I could reach out and touch him. Almost, of course, but not quite. Then again, I could see him just the same, his eyes upon me, following me.

“There,” I squeaked out, pointing up to the painting, up to Boris.

Steven shook his head. “Guess it was kind of obvious, huh?”

I shrugged. “Only in retrospect, dear one.”

He grinned and leaned in for a kiss. “*Dear one*,” he cooed, “I like it.” The kiss repeated. “And I, uh, I like you, too.”

I blushed; well, in my head anyway. Because one needs an ample flow of blood to achieve that, and, clearly, that was something I no longer had. Mine was more like a stagnant pool, and a rapidly diminishing one at that.

In any case, I hopped up and removed the picture. “Hi, cousin,” I whispered as I stared down into his eyes before setting the painting gently onto the bed.

“There it is,” said Steven, pointing to the area behind where the canvas had been hanging.

“A safe.” Only, it was like none I’d ever seen before. It was square, silver, shiny, and had absolutely no dials or handles. “Um, now what?”

“Feel your way inside, Jack,” he replied.

I nodded. “Makes sense.”

Except it wasn’t that easy. Everything else in the mansion I could penetrate, bounce my sonar off of, but not the safe. It’s like it absorbed whatever I threw at it, sending nothing back my way.

“Well?” he asked.

I frowned. “Nothing. And I guess that makes sense, because if you open it with your mind, like I’m assuming he did, then it needed to be safeguarded in some way to prevent others from opening it that same way.” My frown sagged further down my face. “It’s like making it all the way to the buried treasure after leaving the shovels at home.”

But Steven was still grinning, all Cheshire-Cat-like. “You’re leaving something out, though, something Boris couldn’t have counted on.”

I sighed. “Well, clearly, he wasn’t counting on you, so I’m assuming that’s what you’re getting at. And that dick of yours is awfully steely when it wants to be, but I doubt it can crack open a safe.” I tilted my head and squinted down at him. “Can it?”

“Let’s not chance ruining a perfectly good dick,” he commented.

“*Perfect* being the optimal word here.”

He nodded. “Exactly. In any case, Boris figured that maybe other vampires would try and break in. And since you’re a vampire and you can’t seem to worm your way through, then maybe a different supernatural being can.”

I snapped my fingers. “A werewolf!”

“Or three,” he amended, shutting his eyes as he called for them telepathically.

Minutes later, they came rushing in. “What’s up?” asked Mack, mascaraed eyes frantically scanning the room.

“That’s what’s up,” added Ralph, suddenly pointing at the safe. “You found it.”

I nodded and hopped off the bed. “Found it, but it’s locked from the inside, and apparently only Boris could open it.”

“Or so he thought,” amended Steven, the grin still evident, still beguiling, intoxicating, awe-inspiring, and a whole slew of other words ending in -ing that made my cock madly throb from within my jeans. “Change, fellas,” he then said, “so you’re at your strongest.”

Mack pouted. “But I just reapplied my makeup and combed out my wig.”

“And you look lovely,” placated Steven, “but change just the same, please.”

Mack dropped his dress to the ground and groaned. “You know, if you weren’t so devastatingly handsome, that routine of yours really wouldn’t work so well.”

Steven shrugged. “Yeah, I know. Neat, isn’t it?”

Ralph stripped off his clothes and bared his teeth, which began to protrude in an instant. “Not really,” he replied, full-on werewolf in no time

flat, hair and muscle for days. Mack was quick to follow, which had just about the same impact on me—namely, terror. And this coming from an ice-cold vampire such as myself.

“Now,” said Steven, amassing us all at the foot of the bed, all our heads turned toward the safe, “push your way inside. There have to be tumblers of some sort. Maybe if we each take one, we’ll be able to unlock this bad boy.”

And so each of us shut our eyes, right on down the line, the four of us willing our minds inside the safe. I felt them all in there, too, swirling about, able to make it through this time around, and then I heard Steven, his voice echoing within.

Against the top edge, he said. It’s a set of tumblers.

There was a pause as we all felt for it. “Four tumblers,” said Ralph, aloud. “One for each of us. If we each rotate them at the same time, they’re bound to lock in place eventually.”

“Eventually,” I moaned.

“Just spin fast,” said Mack, nudging me with his hairy arm. “They’ll line up quicker that way.”

This was the hard part, though. See, I could put my mind into seemingly anything, even the safe, now that I had their help, but actually gripping onto something was another matter entirely. It was like I was wearing telepathic felt gloves, my mind slipping each time it attempted to grab hold.

“They’re not budging,” I lamented.

“They must,” replied Steven. “If Boris could do it, then it can be done. It must just take some practice.”

“Then luckily we have all the time in the world,” I groused.

Steven released his mind from the safe, sighed, and turned my way. “Are you always like this?”

I released, too, and turned as well. “Only when a team of vampires is out to spear me in the chest; otherwise, everything is all sunshine and lollipops.”

A smile erupted across his face. “Well, sweetie, a little sunshine right about now might go along way.” Then he leaned in and whispered, “And the sooner we get this done, the sooner you can fuck me.”

I giggled as Ralph cringed.

“We can hear you, you know,” said Mack.

“Jealous,” I chided, shutting my eyes again and willing my mind back inside the safe, because fucking Steven was the ultimate motivation. Seriously, ultimate.

In other words, those felt gloves were off in a jiff.

“They’re moving,” grunted Mack, his tumblers slightly spinning right behind mine, Ralph’s and Steven’s soon following.

“Faster,” I said. “Push harder.”

And, sure enough, the tumblers all started rapidly spinning. Then, in an instant, we heard it. *Click, click, click, click.*

“*Holy fuck,*” I gasped as the safe popped open.

And still we stood there, shocked that we’d achieved what we had quite literally set our minds to. Though I doubted that’s where the phrase originated: three werewolves and a vampire telepathically opening up a safe. Still, it was one of those large miracles I’d been hoping for.

“Go see what’s inside,” said Mack, pushing me out of the lineup with his upturned paw as he growled in my ear.

I paused, gulped, and stared. If I’d had a pumping heart, it would’ve stopped right about then. Still, I had to see what was inside, what my cousin felt he had to hide from the rest of the world. So I pried my feet from their locked position and ambled forward, hopping on the bed again to see what lay inside.

“It’s a piece of paper,” I told them, a bit deflated that that was all there was.

“What’s on the paper?” asked Steven, moving to the side of the bed as he stared up at me.

I shrugged, reached my hand inside, and removed it, knowing in an instant what it was, and shocked at how far back it went.

Though not half as shocked as what I spotted off to the bottom right.

I dropped the paper. It cascaded downward and landed on the bed before Steven picked it back up.

“He knew all along,” he commented, with a snap of his fingers.

“Knew what?” asked Mack.

“Yeah, what?” added Ralph, both of them staring Steven’s way, yellow eyes glowing.

He looked up from the paper and held it up for them to see. “It’s Jack’s family tree, all the left-side limbs crossed out except for Jack and Boris.” He paused and frowned, as did I. “Except...”

Ralph squinted at the sheet and finished the sentence, “Except the right side, Igor’s, is still on there, intact. No crosses over their limbs, over his immediate family. Like you said, Boris knew.”

My frown deepened. “That’s why he never told Igor anything. That’s why he kept him so close, and that’s why he never changed him. It was to protect the last branch of our family, that and my one measly little limb.”

Steven grinned. “Not all that little.”

Mack shook his head. “Please stop.”

“In any case,” I continued, “I changed him, and now he’s in danger, as are his whole family if those killers out there figure it out.”

It was then that the man in question walked in. Uh, slumped, really. “Figure what out?” We froze as he walked from the doorway to the upheld paper. “Oh,” he managed to say. “I should’ve known; couldn’t pull anything over on the master.”

“Now what, cousin?” I asked Igor, and I could’ve almost detected a smile on his face upon hearing the word. Almost.

He looked up from the sheet and sighed. “We bring them all here, I suppose.”

“But what if the spear chuckers don’t know about this?” I pointed to the paper as I stood on the bed. “What if our plan works, and they never discover your secret?”

His sigh repeated. “And what if it doesn’t, and they do?”

Our sighs echoed his, because he had a point, humped, slouched, and wobbly though it might have been.

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CHAPTER 8

Family Reunion

We ate dinner in silence after that, or at least they ate; I watched as my belly gurgled, loudly. Then we retired to our rooms.

“This sucks,” I said as I hopped into bed.

“Sayeth the vampire.” And then he also hopped in.

“Don’t remind me.” My hand was now over my exceedingly loud stomach.

“I, uh, think I know how to kill two birds with one stone in that regard,” he said as he scooted in next to me, his hand covering my free one.

“Two birds?” I couldn’t help but ask.

He smiled, which only made my belly bubble all the more. “Yeah, one, that hunger of yours, and two, we still have that fucking of my derriere to tend to.”

And it wasn’t too difficult to add his one and two together, the sum of which didn’t sit all that well with me, truth be told. “It’s one thing to drink from your manservant,” I made note. “It’s quite another to sippy-straw from your, uh...”

“Boyfriend?”

He said it, not me, but still, and heck if my belly didn’t go all full-on tremor at the word. “Uh, *boyfriend*. Okay, I’ll go with that.” I smiled and closed what little gap there was between us, the kiss about as damn well perfect as you could get. “In any case,” I said, pulling a few centimeters away, “I can’t suck off my *boyfriend*, so to speak.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. We can always stalk the dregs of humanity down in the Tenderloin if you like, or maybe a tourist down at the wharf, a little German or Italian, for flavor?”

I very nearly retched. In other words, caught between a rock and a hard place, I chose his hard place, literally speaking. “Eeny, meeny, miny, I pick the *mo*.”

“Good choice.”

“Uh huh. Now lift ’em up and spread ’em.” Then I reached over to the nightstand and retrieved the lube and rubber I’d wisely placed there shortly after my move to the mansion. See, old habits, unlike me, die hard, because it was then that I realized I no longer needed the rubber, which Steven and I had already discussed earlier that day. I mean, for all intents and purposes I was already dead, so we doubted that any kind of virus could possibly infect me, and he, as a werewolf, was immune to human disease.

“Are you immune to heartworm, too?” I joked, tossing the rubber back inside the drawer.

He socked me in the arm. “Very funny. Now then, do you want to fuck and suck or continue with the Mel Brooks routine? Blood or borscht, which is it?”

“Well, when you put it that way,” said I, rolling over on top of him, my mouth again flush with his as our bodies ground together, cocks gliding and sliding and mashing happily away. Then his legs were, as I’d asked, up and out, his jugular throbbing beneath my already-extended fangs. I mean, talk about having your cake and eating it, too. Though the icing was sure to be a bit more protein-rich and a lot less sweet. “Ready?” I rasped.

He gulped, his heart rate suddenly skyrocketing. “For which onslaught?”

I shrugged. “Maybe it’s best if I count to three and just start sinking them both in.”

“Um, okay,” he panted.

“Three.”

“No...*faiir*.”

My cock slid in just as my teeth pierced his flesh, and suddenly it was like every Fourth of July I ever experienced melted into one, like a Disney parade on steroids. As if every molecule of my being were on fire as they joined with his. Because blood is one thing, but alpha-male werewolf blood is another matter entirely, Dom Pérignon compared to Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Toss in that stellar ass of his, and I pretty much thought I'd died and gone to heaven, if I wasn't dead already, I mean, though the jury was still out on that one.

In and out I slid, cock hovering before grinding to the hilt, all while his blood nourished me, infused me, flowed through me, and brought me back from the very brink.

"You okay?" I whispered in his ear after my fangs retracted, balls brushing against his alabaster rump, our bodies pressed up so tightly it was impossible to tell where he ended and I began.

"*Fuuuck*," he replied simply, which I took as a sign that, yes, he was okay. And then I let him have it with both guns, or at least one big cannon.

He grabbed hold of his dick as I assailed his ass, his mouth once again united with mine, tongues wrestling it out, both eager for the pin. One final shove deep, deep inside, one final jack of that stunning prick of his, and we both shot together, my come filling his ass, his hefty load flinging this way and that as our moans and groans fairly shook the walls around us.

"*Fuuuck*," he exhaled, yet again, sweat pouring down the cleft between his pecs.

I chuckled. "Yeah, you said that already."

He fought to catch his breath. "Bears repeating."

"Definitely," I said. "And again, you okay?"

He rubbed his neck, the pierce marks already healing, which was standard procedure for a werewolf, I now knew. "Strangely, right as rain. In fact, that felt, well, *amazing*. Now I know where that expression comes from."

I caressed his cheek. "Which one's that, boyfriend?" See, that bore repeating, too. The word, I mean: *boyfriend*.

He grinned and replied, "Getting fucked to within an inch of your life."

My grin mirrored his. "Probably not *exactly* where it came from, but I'll allow it." Then my grin only slightly faltered. "But I can't nurse on you for the rest of my life, you know."

He tousled my hair and bussed my cheek. "Let's just worry about the immediate future, okay? And, until we can get a handle on this, you're welcome to suck away."

"And the fucking?" I couldn't help but toss in.

He giggled. "Let me amend that. You're welcome to suck *and* fuck away."

I rolled back over as my grin reappeared in full force. "Just checking," to which I promptly added, "boyfriend."

Nope, impossible to ever get tired of hearing it. Especially when it came from Steven, or came on Steven, or, better yet, *in* Steven.

§ § §

We woke the next morning to the sound of his cellphone. It was Carl, the pack's travel agent. I quickly found a pen and some paper, and Steven wrote down the names. It was a relatively short conversation, and an equally relatively short list. Then he clicked off and looked back my way. "Eighty names," he said, "all men, all Polish citizens at the time." He took a picture of the list and forwarded it on its merry way. "Now we let Quincy at the State Department do his job."

"Impressive," said I.

He grinned. "Thanks."

I shook my head. "No, not that." I pointed down to his crotch, his dick steely stiff, morning wood none too eager to cast off its rapturous glow. "That."

His grin remained. "Like I said, thanks. I think it likes you." He stood and shook his rod from side to side, a slight breeze rising in its wake. "Actually, I know it does."

"Feeling's mutual," I readily agreed, jumping down for a good-morning kiss, on it and him both. "How long before we hear back from Quincy, do you think?"

He shrugged. "Beats me." Then he grinned, wickedly. "Any suggestions on how we can kill the time?" I winced at the word *kill*. "Sorry, I mean, any ideas on how we can pass the time away?" This time I winced at the close proximity to *pass* and *away*. "Oh, for heaven's sake, just fuck me already."

I kissed him hard and grabbed his ass. “And a good morning to you, too.”

§ § §

After a repeat from the night before, minus the blood-sucking, seeing as my storage tank was still pretty darn full, we headed down to the kitchen. Mack and Ralph were already up, devouring a meaty breakfast served by Igor, who, for his part, was looking rather weary. Even more so than usual, which really was saying something.

“Count me out,” whispered Steven in my ear. “Only one customer per neck.”

Which meant that we had another dilemma on our hands. “You need to feed, Igor,” I told him, with just a hint of worry to my voice.

“There’s nothing left in the master’s private stash,” he lamented.

“How about we rob a blood bank?” offered Mack, who, not too surprisingly, was already dressed for the day—in a dress, of course.

“I’m sure we could *will* our way in,” I said, “but there would still be hidden cameras to contend with. And the last thing we need is to get ourselves on the five o’clock news. Best guess, same for the hospitals, in terms of security.”

“Which leaves the men’s shelter,” suggested Igor. “Ample blood to go around, and no security besides the guard at the door.”

“And you know this how?” I dreaded asking.

“The master could not always drink from me,” he replied, “and variety, as they say, is the spice of life.”

I cringed, because whoever this *they* were certainly had never met Igor, nor dined on a homeless man. Then again, beggars couldn’t be choosers. Still, choosing beggars was, at least, a viable option, for Igor, I mean. Me, I had Steven, and that was variety enough. Heck, that was Baskin-Robbins with an extra flavor thrown in for good measure.

In any case, Igor had to eat, or else I’d be down one manservant, and like they say, good help is hard to find. Which must’ve been said by the same *they* as before, seeing as Igor was barely help, good or otherwise. So we stuck our faux hearts on, made me up to look less like myself, and simply

covered Igor up in a trench coat and a beret. An odd look, to be certain, but no less odd than Barbra Streisand walking into a men's shelter.

Then Steven headed out the front door, the rest of us out back, choosing to hike through the narrow stretch of woods that sat nestled between the mansion and the ocean cliffs. If the spear chuckers were watching, waiting, we figured that this was the safest bet. Plus, if they did see us, at least we'd never be out in the open, sitting ducks, or wolves, or bats, though I'd never seen a bat sit before.

Fifteen minutes later, we met up with Steven back on the road that led to the beach. "I don't normally pick up hitchhikers," he chided, unlocking the door as we all quickly got in.

"It's us, Steven," said Igor, "just in costume."

I patted him on the hump. *Ugh*. "He's joking," I explained.

"Oh," Igor ohed, "um, *ha ha*."

Which meant that we drove the rest of the way in silence, seeing as the rest of us pretty much survived on *bon mots* and witticisms, and that *ha ha* of Igor's was about as pleasant as a root canal—minus the Novocain.

Not much later, we pulled up to the shelter, the line already stretching around the block. "There's your variety," droned Mack, all our frowns once again evident. "Now what do we do? It would be wrong for us to wait in line and eat their food, especially after coming from the mansion, both Steven's and Jack's."

Thankfully, I had an answer, though I could tell it wasn't exactly to Steven's liking. "We could volunteer to serve the meals."

Ralph nodded. "Then we all get in, and Igor can sneak off and, uh, dine as well."

Mack scratched at his flowing wig and asked, "But won't whoever he, uh, *dines on* report it? Call the cops, maybe?"

To which Igor replied, "The master could make them forget, that much I know. It's simply your will against theirs, and a vampire's will always wins out. Then all you're left with is temporary amnesia and a couple of neck wounds that will probably go unnoticed in this group's circles."

Again my belly was in knots. Something about all this didn't exactly sit right with me. It was sort of like stealing. Then again, I was now stinking rich, so maybe I could assuage my guilt with a large enough donation. Plus yes, I knew full well that Igor had to eat, and it was my fault that this was the case, seeing as I was the one who turned him in the first place. Oh, what a vicious circle, yes indeed.

So out we went, one drag queen, three hunky dudes, and their odd-looking cohort up front, beret pushed down, hump out. Suffice it to say, in that mob at the shelter, we barely even stood out, which is why, perhaps, Cousin Boris also chose this place for his feedings. Smart Cousin Boris.

Fortunately for us, the shelter was always in need of volunteers, and eagerly gave us aprons before setting us to work. Though not all of us were put on the food line. Igor got kitchen duty, Mack and I got the line, Ralph was in charge of seating people, and Steven, poor Steven, got clean-up duty. Which meant that my ass was going to pay for this debacle sometime soon, hopefully, in a quite literal fashion.

Then the teaming masses were let in, and we were instantly busy. I opened my mind to Mack as we started serving the trays of food. *So much money in San Francisco, and yet so many homeless*, I transmitted.

Seems like the more some people have, the less others do. Yin versus yang, he replied. *Still, at least we're somewhat paying our way so that Igor can eat. Kind of makes me feel all right about it all*. Then he froze, ladle in mid-air, eyes suddenly locked in a squint. *Off!* he hollered inside his head.

I took that to mean that I should shut my mind off to him, though I hadn't a clue as to why. In any case, he was a somewhat experienced werewolf and I was a neophyte vampire, so off it went, to him and to anyone else. Then I scanned the room to see what had set him on edge. Except all I saw were the down and out, the dirtied, sad-looking faces, their gurgling bellies like a dirge inside my overly acute ears.

Clearly, however, something wasn't right, because Ralph, too, was suddenly looking like danger was afoot, his eyes scanning from left to right. Was Igor in trouble? Was Steven? "Do I need to take a break?" I whispered to Mack.

He shook his head. "Work. Don't talk. Don't think."

I gulped and did as he said, still at a loss as to why he was eager for us not to call attention to ourselves, because, from what I could tell, everything was normal, or at least as normal as it was going to get, considering the dismal surroundings. Though at least my electronic heart was pumping away normally, which, as weird as it sounds, relaxed me some. Probably less from wanting to return to the womb than actually missing my own heartbeat, which I knew was forever lost to me.

So I served and waited, the line seemingly endless, the food unappetizing-looking but at least nourishment to these poor people. I didn't talk, except to say, "You're welcome" to those who said, "Thank you." I didn't think or communicate in any way with my friends. Instead, I bided my time and prayed that whatever it was, or whoever it was, that was setting Mack and Ralph on red alert wouldn't suddenly start tossing spears.

Two hours later, the last man served, we cleaned up and rendezvoused back at the car, each of us separated by a few minutes, each of us still, thank goodness, all in one piece, Igor especially. "You ate, I take it?" I asked first, the group of us again piled inside.

He smiled an honest-to-goodness smile. Except the others, my compatriots, weren't smiling along with him. In fact, they were frowning from ear to ear. "What's wrong?" asked Igor. "I thought we came here so I could eat."

It was Steven who replied first. "But you weren't alone in that regard, the eating, I mean."

"Huh?" I squeaked out.

"Two others," informed Ralph, "two beings who could communicate the way we can."

"Like a party line," confirmed Mack. "The connection bad, but the voices there just the same." He pointed to his head. "Or at least here."

I slumped back in my seat. "But I didn't hear anything."

"Nor did I," added Igor.

Steven reached over and held my hand. "Perhaps we as werewolves are more in sync that way. We communicate with our minds more out of

necessity, to hunt, to work as a team, while you do so simply as a convenience. You *can*, while we *must*.”

“But who was communicating?” I asked.

Steven shrugged, and then so did Mack and Ralph. “In that group, it was impossible to tell. The aroma of filth was overpowering to our sensitive noses, so if someone didn’t have a scent, I couldn’t tell who it was, and the din of the crowd made it impossible to tell who didn’t have a heartbeat, either. So, like we said before, the shelter was perfect cover, both for prowling and for blending in.”

Then the next question, which sent a bolt of dread down my spine. “Could they tell that we were there, too?” I asked.

No one answered, at least not right away. “I don’t think so,” said Mack, finally. “When a wolf hunts, it can sense fear. It helps us to pick out the weak, the vulnerable. If the two we heard in our minds realized we were, in fact, there, that we outnumbered them, then fear is exactly what we would’ve felt. It would’ve pulsed off of them, given them away for sure.”

“And no one is chucking spears at the car right now,” added Ralph, which, of course, had Steven driving away in about a half a second, because that car of his could’ve fed the entire shelter we’d just left behind for about a week.

“So,” Mack eventually said, “at least we know two things that we didn’t know before.”

“Which are?” I asked as I stared glumly at the passing scenery.

“Your disguises work,” replied Ralph.

“And our enemies dine, at least in part, at shelters,” said Steven.

“Three things,” Igor chimed in.

I turned and looked his way, his smile still evident. “And that is?”

“Apparently, I like Chinese food.”

Steven groaned as he sped back to the mansion. “Then let’s hope he’s not hungry again in two hours.”

§ § §

Steven let us out where he'd picked us up, then parked in a lot about a mile away from the mansion. This, we realized, would be necessary until we could extricate ourselves from the mess that had been foisted upon us. No more parking at the mansion, no more entering through the front door, no more easy targets. Let those fuckers sit up in the trees waiting for me until the cows come home for all I cared. And in San Francisco we don't have cows, just a lot of bears, otters, cubs (all of the human variety), and, apparently, wolves and bats.

In any case, we were just starting to relax after our morning festivities when, once again, Steven's phone started ringing. "It's Quincy," he announced as he gazed down at the screen. "He's sending me a text." Two minutes later, he looked back our way. "*Voilà*," he said, holding the phone up, screen out. "Six names, six men who were on LOT planes the week before Jack's parents were, uh, were *killed*. All six of them Polish nationals who have remained in San Francisco since that time, all on visas of some sort or another, all with known addresses." He squinted at the screen and added, "And all living in the same general neighborhood."

"So," I said, still smarting from the word *killed*. "Now we know the whos, hopefully, but what about the whys?"

It was Igor's phone that went off next, another screen held up. "Maybe we'll know that soon enough, too."

I glanced at the screen, but the words were all in Polish. "What's it say?"

"My family," he replied. "My mother, father, aunt, and cousin, all that remain from my side of the tree, they are at the airport now, on their way here, to safety, I pray." He looked at me as he said it, almost pleading, deadly serious. "We'll pick them up at the San Francisco airport first thing in the morning, yes?"

"Of course," I replied, both nervous and excited, because while we now had four more to protect, I also now had four more members of my family that I never knew existed, four more limbs of an ever-dwindling tree. But four is better than one, I knew, five if you included Igor, which I now did.

Though, looking at Igor, it was more like four and half.

§ § §

Again we all spent the night at the mansion, Ralph watching over us while Mack worked, the reverse while Ralph slept, Steven vigilant throughout. Me, I slept like the dead. Poor choice of words, but true.

After breakfast, we all got dressed and again trudged through the woods and back to the car, fully aware, sadly, that this little trick of ours would only protect us for so long. Soon enough, they'd start watching the back of the mansion, too, because I knew they could smell us or hear us. Though for all they knew, we were all humans, all with scents, all with beating hearts. And they were after me, of course, and I, as far as they knew, had neither of those two things.

And yet we still scanned the canopy for them as we sneaked to the car, still kept our noses and eyes pointed up, our ears listening for any errant sounds.

"Maybe this is how they got Boris," Ralph whispered, though little good it probably did. "Lulled him into a false sense of security, let him come and go for days, maybe weeks at a time, and then rained those spears down again when he wasn't careful."

"And soon we'll be a much bigger group," added Mack. "How can we protect all of us then?"

There was no answer, at least not until we were back in the car and a good few miles away, heading south for the airport. Then I turned to Steven, about to ask a question when a different one presented itself. "What are you smiling at?"

He quickly turned my way and winked before speeding ever more rapidly toward my family. "I think I just thought of a solution to our dilemma."

"Which one?" I asked, with a heavy groan. "Because they seem to be mounting, one on top of the other."

"The biggest one," he replied, cryptically, not explaining any further as we found a parking space. In any case, it didn't seem like he was ready to tell us just yet, and my mind was full enough with the thoughts of my soon-to-be-extended family, so I dropped it for the time being. I mean, there was only so much I could deal with—had, in fact, already dealt with. In any case, he leaned across and held my hand before we all exited. "Don't worry, boyfriend."

“About what?” I replied, pointing to the airport in from of us. “The Poles on the way out?” Then I pointed to my still-intact chest. “Or the poles on the way in?”

“Either,” he replied, with a kiss on my cheek before the group of us exited the car and started our walk inside.

§ § §

Mere minutes later, we were standing outside security, waiting to meet my family, and in disguise, no less. With my werewolf boyfriend at my side, my humble manservant in front, and bodyguards behind, one who looked so much like Barbra Streisand it was a wonder that the entire airport didn’t start rushing him/her for autographs.

Papa, can you see me? Because, if you can, you’re probably thinking, *What the fuck?*

And then, “Mama!” cried out Igor as he pointed dead ahead.

I squinted into the throng, and then there she was, parting the crowd with her minuscule frame, or at least parting it with her hump. *Oh goody, a matching set*, I thought to myself, except the set quickly grew. “Papa!” Igor shouted next at the equally small man with the equally large hump. Like father, like mother, like son, go figure. Then toss in *like aunt*. “Aunt Gert!” No hump, just a goiter the size of Detroit. I cringed as I waited for the last shout, because Lord only knew what Mother Nature had in store for us next. And then it came. “Lothar!”

Except no tiny people with large nodules appeared. “Where?” I asked Igor.

And still he pointed directly ahead. “There! There he is!”

I scanned the throng, my eyes landing on one person to the next, searching for whatever familial freak was soon to present itself. But all I saw were Mommy, Daddy, and Gert, all of them *smilingish* as they spotted us, all of them frantically waving, protuberances included.

“Whoa,” exhaled Ralph as he spotted the fourth waving hand.

“No fucking way,” added Mack, eyes wide.

“What did the mailman look like?” whispered Steven.

Igor scratched at his beret. "What mailman? We had no mailman."

"Milkman then," Steven amended.

Igor stopped scratching and switched to nodding. "Ah," he ahed. "The milkman looked like Lothar. Funny, huh?"

Though none of us were laughing, mainly because we were all too busy staring at Lothar, who had neither a hump nor a goiter. In fact, he was about as perfect as you could get, without being Steven, I mean.

"Whoa," repeated Ralph.

"No fucking way," repeated Mack.

"Way," said I, gazing at my newly-found family. Though mostly at my cousin Lothar, because, like a moth to a flame, he was darn near impossible to look away from.

"Guess I got the brains in the family," Igor chimed in, once he realized what we were all gazing at, gaping at, gawking at. "Pretty and pretty stupid, that one is."

I fought not to pant, regardless of the fact that I couldn't. "Trust me, he gets by on the former."

"Uh huh," said Ralph.

"Uh huh," said Mack.

"Uh huh," said Steven, just as the four of them were standing directly in front of us, Igor rushing in to their waiting arms. In all honesty, it looked like the circus had just come to town, with Mack as the bearded lady.

CHAPTER 9

Welcome to the Family

We piled the Bolinski clan into a cab, paid the driver a hefty sum, and had him show them the sites, while we, back in Steven's car, headed for Twin Peaks. I still hadn't a clue what he had up his sleeve but, just the same, was content with knowing what he had hidden inside his pants. See, it's the little things in life that help us get by—or the big things, in Steven's case.

His pack greeted us as before, with animosity and bared canines. Thankfully, though, we weren't there all that long, because Steven had notified them that we were coming, the one man we needed already waiting for us, multiple supplies in hand.

"Everyone," said Steven, turning our way, "meet Glenn." Glenn, much like Carl and Quincy before him, was young, stunning, and adept at what he did, thank goodness. "Glenn is the regional president of Greenpeace."

I scratched my head beneath my blond wig. Sucker was itchy and hot. "Are we going to protest our enemy out of the forest canopy or join them up there? Because neither sounds all that wise," I noted.

Steven smiled. "What lies out in the Pacific, Jack?"

I shrugged. "Hawaii?"

He shook his head. "Farther out."

"Japan?" tried Mack.

Steven winked and nodded. "And whalers and dolphin killers, all in boats."

"You lost me," I admitted, not for the first time or, sadly, the last.

It was Glenn who replied, now pointing to the mess of equipment that he'd set down before us, the metal gleaming in the morning light, the fog yet to roll languidly in to blanket it all up. "Greenpeace jams their sonar

with these, and a boat without sonar is fairly lost, especially when hunting whales and dolphins.”

At last, the light bulb above my head again pulsed. “And bats exclusively use sonar to hunt with, too.” I hugged Steven and gratefully shook Glenn’s hand. “Brilliant!” Except it was then that the bulb flickered. “But then I won’t have any powers either, nor will Igor.”

And still Steven’s smile shone brighter than the sun, which was unnerving, to say the least. “And that, of course, would even the playing field had you no other means of protection, namely three adept werewolves.”

To which Mack added, “They’ll be flying blind, at least around the mansion.”

Glenn again pointed down at the equipment. “Here at our mansion, in Jack’s mansion, in the car.” His finger pointed from one shining object to the next. “Pretty much anywhere you need to be, and they won’t know why their sonar is on the fritz if you cover the jamming devices well enough, because they’d literally have to feel around for them now in order to find them. Which, suffice it to say, wouldn’t be too smart.”

“So we’ll be safe,” I yipped.

“Safer, at any rate,” Steven replied, stroking my arm. “And maybe it’ll allow us to attack before they can. Give us the upper hand, or paw, or wing, as it were.”

“Attack?” My yip turned to a groan. “I’m a lover more than a fighter.”

Steven grinned. “Yeah, I know.”

Mack and Ralph grimaced. “Yeah, we know,” they both said in unison. “Still,” added Ralph, “it’s either them or us.”

To which Mack amended with, “And *us* is definitely out of the question, because I’m booked solid for the next year, two shows a night, and the gays get mad when you take their Barbra away.”

“Yeah, we know,” we all said as one, most of the pack behind us included.

So back to the mansion—my mansion, which, truth be told, I never tired of saying—we headed, sonar jammers on high. “Feels weird,” I said, “like someone turned off all the lights and stuffed cotton in my ears.”

“Temporary necessity,” said Steven as he dropped us off in the woods, all the devices now in large backpacks, one on each of our backs, until we all looked much like those Bolinskis, Lothar excluded. Though he, of course, was humpy in other ways.

“Think it’s incest if it’s a distant cousin?” I asked Mack and Ralph after Steven pulled away.

Mack grinned. “You have a boyfriend.”

Ralph, too, grinned. “Who’s equally as stunning, need I remind you.”

I shrugged and started walking to the mansion. “It was a hypothetical question.”

“More like homothetical,” said Mack, now walking by my side.

“Besides,” added Ralph, now on my other side, all of us trying to walk as silently as possible, because even without sonar the bad guys still had their eyes and ears, “is he even gay?”

I stopped mid-step and frowned. “Has to be. No one can be that pretty and be straight.”

“Point taken.”

Though just at that very moment, the point taken was the one that instantly wedged itself into the ground about ten feet to my left, the *thwack* echoing in all directions. Then there was another one to my right. Then yet another just in front of us. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*. Though all, thank goodness, missed us by a great deal—a thwack-attack gone whack.

“Run!” I shouted, just the same, weaving in and around the nearby trees.

Needless to say, they did. Except, when you tell werewolves to run, even in human form, they leave you in the dust, or leaves, as was the case. In other words, they ran and then ran back and then ran again, more at my speed, which was considerably slowed down now that I, too, had no sonar abilities and a heavy jammer on my back.

Fortunately for us, however, though the spears still came flying, all of them were still far from their intended marks, most of them thudding against nearby trees or landing on the ground far away. So those nasty vampires missed us by a mile, thanks to our secret weapons, but they did unfortunately now know of our circuitous forest route. And whether or not they knew that the blond dude with the faux tan and steadily-beating heart was me or not was still up for grabs. Then again, without their sonar, all of that wasn't as terrifying any more, only slightly less so, as the spears still came whizzing by, close or not. I mean, it wasn't like I was about to stop running and shout up, "Nah, nah, you missed me!" Fun as that would've been.

In any case, and gratefully still in one piece, we made it back to the safety of the mansion, Steven included, one backpack now aimed west, the other east, one remaining in the car, and one more reserved for safekeeping.

"Fuckers," I panted, all of us again seated in the kitchen.

"But fuckers in disarray," amended Ralph, with a grin and a sandwich already in hand. "In fact, I could feel their panic. They've no clue why they can't seem to latch on to us any more, why we seemingly went blank on their telepathic screens, all our blips disappearing at once. It's like they were tossing those spears with blindfolds on."

Mack frowned just the same. "But that doesn't mean that they still can't hit us, blindfolded or not."

"Way to rain on our pride parade," I told him.

He shrugged. "Just means, as we said, we have to attack now, when they're at their weakest."

I gulped. "I've never, uh, *attacked* before. Does a really good badminton volley count?"

Steven patted my back. "Don't worry; we've attacked before." They all suddenly glared at each other, mainly because the last people they'd attacked were each other—unsuccessfully, I might add. "And we have their addresses now, and there's no way they can know that."

Though I neglected to say that they already knew so much without any way they could've known it. Like about my mom and dad, where they had

lived, emphasis on *lived*, past tense. Like where Boris had lived, emphasis on *lived*, past tense. I mean, why rub salt in the wound, especially since the wound was solely my own and clearly festering?

§ § §

Hours later and laden with souvenirs, the Bolinskis returned. We figured—hoped, prayed, and crossed innumerable fingers, toes and Mack/Barbra’s eyes—that the baddies were long gone by then, regrouping, trying and failing to figure out why their powers had suddenly gone on the fritz.

“Did you enjoy yourselves?” I asked.

“*Brr*,” replied Mama Bolinski, arms crossed over ample bosoms. “City is colder than Minsk in November, and is summertime here, no less. Crazy.” Her accent was much heavier than her son’s, but her meaning came across loud and clear.

“But pretty, yes?”

She shrugged. “Ocean is ocean. Buildings is buildings.” She shook her goodie bag my way. “And *tschotskes* here expensive.”

“What about the sourdough bread?” I was grasping at straws, because our ocean was indeed beautiful, as were our buildings, as was just about everything else in my fair, yet expensive city. In other words, tough crowd.

“*Dat* was yummy,” allowed Papa Bolinski. “But not yummy enough to get ourselves killed over.” Figures that his English was good enough to phrase it exactly that way.

Still, I was not to be deterred. “But do you know why they want me dead? Do you know who they are?”

He paused and scratched his chin, the silence in the kitchen tangible. “My family, going way, way back, we work for your side of the family. We know we are relative; they do not, or at least this is what we thought. Now we hear that maybe this is not so.”

I nodded. “I think it was for your own protection. The less you knew, the less likely the bad guys were to find out about your side of the family tree.”

“Perhaps, yes.” Now it was Aunt Gert’s turn. “Still, might’ve been nice to eat out in the dining room from time to time with rest of family and not out back with rats and bugs.”

Again I nodded, though wisely changing the subject. "In any case, one by one, it seems they were killed, my parents included, then Cousin Boris."

Now it was Igor's turn to nod. "And the master never made me eat out back."

"See," said I.

"He had a little table set up for me in my bedroom, and water to drink from the bathroom sink."

"Um, right," I managed. Like I said, tough crowd. "Be that as it may, do you know who's trying to kill off my side of the tree and why?"

Igor shook his head no, as did Mama, Papa, and Lothar Bolinski, stunning mane of golden hair swaying much like in a L'Oréal commercial. Gert's head, however, was stock-still. "Maybe I hear something when I was a little girl."

Which was hard to imagine, her being a little anything, I mean. Short, yes, but little? Hell to the no, because Gert was as wide as she was tall, which made her look more round than anything else. "What did you hear?" asked Mack, batting his false eyelashes down her way.

She shrugged. "The adults, they whisper, but I think they say that there is another clan of vampires."

"Makes sense," said Ralph to me. "Yours can't be the only one, right?"

Gert nodded. "Yes, right, as you say, but Jack's clan, they have always been vampire, going back to before anyone can remember."

"I don't understand," I told her.

"No?" she asked, head tilted to the side as she pointed at Igor.

And it was then that I understood. "This other clan, they were *turned* into vampires? But why?"

"Your family," she replied. "The people my family work for, always work for, they killed a lot of people in their day. Was easier back then. No police to keep them in line, no military. So your family kill to survive, kill *a lot*." She emphasized this last part.

Steven sighed. "And by creating another clan, it would take the heat off of them."

“Heat?” asked Gert. “No heat in Poland. *Brr*. Cold like here, colder even, though *tschotskes* cheaper.”

His sigh repeated. “I mean, people ignored Jack’s clan and went after this other one.”

She nodded. “Jack’s family led the townsfolk to this other clan, I think. They were related, distantly, poor, unprotected, easier to hunt down, after they were blamed for the killings, I mean.”

“Makes sense,” said Ralph.

“Yes, makes sense,” agreed Gert.

“So now they want revenge?” I asked. “That’s why they’ve killed off my side of the tree?”

“No idea,” said Gert, still tilting her head and her goiter. “Maybe revenge. I mean, many of them must have gotten killed.”

“But if it wasn’t for revenge,” said Mack, “then what else could it be?”

“I think I know,” said Mama Bolinski. “This thing you are, vampire, it is like curse, black magic curse. You kill all the vampires, you kill the curse.” She spat on the floor and wiped her hands. I ignored it, seeing as the floor hadn’t been cleaned in ages, and a little spit might go a long way. “You are last one, Jack. They kill you, they can go back to being human.”

“But that’s not true, that killing us all would do that,” I pretty much whined. “I think.” I turned to Steven. “Right?”

He shrugged. “Doubtful, seeing as it’s genetic and certainly not magic, black or otherwise. In any case, I think we’re forgetting something.” He turned to the Bolinskis, as did Mack and Ralph and myself. “Jack here *isn’t* the last one.”

“But they do not know this,” said Papa Bolinski.

“Yet,” I whispered, then piped up with, “and Igor is now a vampire, let’s not forget.”

The Bolinskis all grimaced, I think. Hard to tell with that lot. “Now, yes. Igor is vampire,” said Gert. “Still, maybe they don’t find this out. Maybe they kill Jack here and be done with it.”

I shook my head, not because they seemed okay with me getting killed so much as they were sadly mistaken. “No,” I said, “because even if they kill me, they’ll find that they’re not human and figure there must be others. And then they’ll find you, maybe even go after my friend Steven here and his friends, because they, too, have some magic in them.”

And just to drill the point home, Ralph added, “And once they figure out that Igor is a vampire, they’ll kill off his side of the tree, too.”

Lothar at last spoke up, his voice deep and resonating, which caused my crotch to instantly go *boing*, mainly because my crotch didn’t know of incest or care that I had a boyfriend. *Bad crotch!* “But we are not vampires,” he protested, hands crossed over ample chest, much like Gert. Except his ample was a hell of a lot nicer to look at, especially without the goiter dangling over it.

“But you are,” I told him, told them. “Your genes, what makes you who you are, have the capability to turn you like me. This other clan, I’m guessing from what Gert said, must’ve been the same way, the gene dormant before activated by my family. Flicked on like a switch, and just as easy to do.”

Mama Bolinski grumbled. “Black magic is easier explanation, I think.”

“But not the correct one,” said Steven. “And if they kill Jack, then they’ll go after Igor next, then all of you, then maybe me and my friends, who they’ve seen Jack here with.” And, no, I didn’t at all like the thought of that. Though, to be fair, Cousin Boris, too, had mingled with Steven’s pack, so that, at least, partially got me off the hook, or at least decreased my guilt by a smidge.

“So we go home,” said Papa Bolinski. “Go home and hide in hills.”

“Or,” I quickly interjected, “stay and fight.”

“As vampires,” added Steven.

Which gave all the Bolinskis pause, humps and goiters and manes of golden locks included. “We are family,” Igor eventually said, with a heavy sigh. “And, like Jack says, it is in our nature, this vampire business.”

One by one, they also sighed. “Where we stay?” asked the patriarch.

“Here,” I told him, “in the mansion, and you’ll eat in the kitchen or the dining room, not out back. All for free, *tschotskes* included.”

But Mama Bolinski shook her head. “No, not free. We earn our keep.” She looked around and grimaced. Again, I think that’s what she was doing because her grimace was fairly frozen to her face as it was. “We clean house, like family has done for generations.”

“Fine,” I just about yipped, squelching a smile of relief, that and a dust-and-mold-and-mildew-induced sneeze. “If you insist.”

“We insist,” said Papa Bolinski.

“We insist,” said Mama Bolinski.

“We insist,” said Gert Bolinski.

Then we all turned to Lothar. “Eh, maybe I find better job. You have pool? Maybe I’ll be pool boy. I hear that is good job.”

Heck, even my fake heart sped up at that one. “Yes, I think I have a spare set of Speedos for you around here somewhere.”

Steven slapped my arm. “Um, no, no pool. Too cold for pool. Maybe chauffeur, in a suit, long sleeves, and long pants. No Speedos.”

I blushed, or would’ve if I could’ve. “Can you drive?”

“Cousin Igor will teach me,” came the eager reply.

“Not in my car,” said Steven.

“We’ll buy you a car, Lothar,” I said. “I think there’s a used Yugo lot nearby.”

“Nice car, this Yugo?” he asked.

I nodded. “Finest Yugoslavian model they make.”

He smiled, which fairly lit up the room. “Yes, sounds good. *Yugo*. Lothar will like that.”

Which was all fine and good, mainly because there was no way I was letting him drive me anywhere, even in a pair of Speedos. Heck, I wasn’t even sure if Igor himself could drive all that well, or barely see above the steering wheel, or over his hump, for that matter. In any case, “Deal!” I said. “And welcome to the family!”

I hoped they’d fare better than the rest of it had.

§ § §

Now all I had to do was turn them, sink my teeth into them, suck their blood, and then flick on their genes. Suddenly, I thought back to all those old horror movies and quickly realized that Dracula never bit an ugly person. No humps or goiters, certainly. Still, I had no choice. I knew how to turn them, and it was my responsibility to do so. *They* were my responsibility.

And so, one by one, I, *blech*, sank and sucked, and, trust me, a little Polish food goes a long way. As to whether or not I also turned them gay, it wasn't something I intended on asking yet again, though Lothar did in fact seem to stare at Steven a bit more keenly. Then again, pretty much everyone stared at Steven that way, present company included, so that was neither here nor there.

Then I looked down the line at them as they each rubbed their neck wounds, all with glimmers in their eyes and thumpless hearts in their chests. Though, happily, their aromas were also now gone. Guess every cloud really does have a silver lining, tarnished as it may be.

Igor smiled and clapped his hands. "And you can fly!"

Gert shook her head. "I do not like heights."

"Trust me, you get over it." I smiled as I locked eyes with Steven. "And quickly."

§ § §

We left the family in Mack and Ralph's capable, uh, paws, Steven and I on the road again, buying up more fake hearts and stinky old clothes. Because, while the enemy no longer had sonar when it came to us, they still had eyes and ears, and potentially still strong ones at that, so we weren't taking any chances, not with what remained of my little family.

"What do we do next?" I asked him, once the car was fully loaded, his hand in mine, the car speeding down Market Street as a cool breeze flowed in through an open window.

He stopped at a red light and turned my way. "We have their addresses," he said. "It's them or us, boyfriend."

I forced a smile. “I liked how you tossed in that last word, to help make the medicine go down easier.”

“Did it work?”

I shrugged. “Not really, but thanks for trying.” Then I turned and again looked out the window, at the people crossing the street. Even with the sonar jammer of ours turned up to the max, I could still hear their heartbeats, still smell them. I could no longer listen to their minds, but, still, I knew they were thinking thoughts, were still alive. “How can I...how can I *kill* someone, Steven?”

“Technically...”

I stopped him. “No, technically they’re more alive than dead. I mean, I know my heart doesn’t pump and my blood doesn’t flow, but I still *feel*, still live my life. And now I have to snuff a whole family’s out.”

“Or they’ll do the same to yours,” he needlessly reminded me, “have done, in fact.” And then he added fuel to the fire, and rocket fuel at that. “They killed your parents, Jack, and tried to kill you already.”

He again sped down the road as I turned back his way, his handsome profile putting a smile on my face despite the awful circumstances. “You’re right, of course, but how can I do it?” And then I hesitantly asked the next question. “You tried to kill Mack and Ralph and Blake, the Queerwolf, right?”

He nodded his head. “They were a danger to my pack, to *my* family.”

“Was that an easy thing for you to do?”

Another red light, another turn of his head. “Yes, Jack. Yes, in fact, it was. But I’m a hunter, born to kill if need be.” Then he grinned. “Maybe we just need to turn that instinct of yours on.”

I couldn’t help but smile again. “Well, you certainly are good at turning just about everything else on.”

He reached over and squeezed my aching stiffie. “I can see that, but this time we fly to kill, not to come.”

§ § §

He meant it literally too, the whole flying thing. Reconnaissance work. “Know your enemy,” he said. “Don’t just charge in and hope for the kill, because more than likely they’re already expecting you, or at least have safety measures put in place.”

I nodded, knowing that he was speaking from experience. “So I fly above their houses first and then, uh, *kill*?” The last word barely made it past my lips.

But he shook his head. “There are six of them and six of you.”

And my nodding stopped. “All six of us are going to fly? Humps and goiters included?”

His nodding continued. “You are all vampires now, all in this together, equally. Like my pack, no one member is any more important than the other.”

“Save for you,” I made note.

“No,” he replied, matter-of-factly. “If I were to die, to get killed, another alpha would emerge. The pack, you see, is paramount. Same for your clan, and as a clan, you all must work for the greater good. In fact, I believe they’d say the same thing.”

Only, not quite, as it turned out a short while later.

“Gert is not going to fly,” said Gert, head and goiter vigorously shaking from side to side.

I looked to Steven, who shrugged in return. “My bad,” he whispered, seeing as he could no longer communicate with me through our minds, now that the jammers were on twenty-four-seven

“When the Germans attacked Poland,” I chimed in, “where did they attack from?”

She grimaced. “You do not play fair, Jack Jackowski.”

“And these other vampires don’t play fair either,” tossed in Mack. “And to win, sometimes playing fair isn’t all that smart a thing to do, especially when the stakes are so high.”

Gert grunted and stared down at her rotundity. Which, all in all, was the perfect word for it. “You think I can clear runway?”

I couldn't help but chuckle at the comment. "It's just mind over matter."

And then Lothar chuckled, too, which was just about the prettiest sound this side of an Adele melody. "But Gert has much matter."

To which Gert replied with an elbow to his belly. "Never mind about Gert's matter. Gert is strong, like bomber plane. Gert will smash enemy into ground." And again my floor got spat on for effect, which was something I'd have to teach them not to do. After they smashed the enemy into the ground, that is.

The rest of the family smiled and nodded, werewolves included. "But first we fly and gather information; then we smash," said I.

"Then we smash!" echoed Gert, another spit.

"Then we smash!" also echoed Mama Bolinski, with yet another spit.

"Smash!" said Papa, the spit now pooling.

Lothar shrugged. "Eh, maybe I just drive Yugo into them." But still he spat, keeping it in the family.

And then the rest of us spat, because we, too, were family, werewolves included.

"But first we mop," I hastily added, "and then we fly!"

§ § §

Which is just what we did, because, though my kin weren't necessarily aerodynamic, they were all now bats, which are, thankfully, born to fly—vampire bats especially—though we did wait until nighttime to find out for sure. And let me tell you, for once I was glad for the San Francisco fog, because a family of humped and goitered Poles flying above the city wasn't something any of us was eager for anyone else to witness, the enemy especially.

First thing we did was amass in a central location, the six houses we'd be flying over all within a one-mile radius. Each of us carried in our hands a sonar jammer, which Glenn from Greenpeace stocked us all with. Oh sure, we could've probably fit them into backpacks, but since three of us were already carrying naturally made backpacks, namely humpbackpacks, I thought it wise not to suggest that.

Then, one by one, we took to the sky, while Mack and Ralph and Steven gazed in awe, Mack waving a silk scarf over his head in solidarity.

Gert was off to my side by about fifty yards, staring down at them. “He looks like Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl*, yes?”

I squinted down at him and nodded. “More like *Funny Lady*, but yes.” Then I looked over at her as she slowly hovered away. “Good luck, Cousin Gert.”

She nodded and winked. “”Good luck, Cousin Jack.”

And then I watched as the troops dispersed. We’d each been shown the houses on maps beforehand. We knew where to fly and for how long, so we’d all return at about the same time, though none of us knew what we’d find, if anything. And with the jammers held in our hands, weapons were out of the question. Not because we couldn’t aim a gun without our sonar abilities, so much as the jammers were heavy, and we needed both hands to carry them. In other words, if someone started chucking spears our way, we were fairly defenseless.

Or so I thought.

In any case, at that moment, all I was thinking about was finding the house I was to do reconnaissance on, then do said reconnaissance and get the hell out of there, alive. Or at least as alive as I was ever going to get.

And so I hovered to my intended spot and circled. The house was small, a boxy number built in the fifties, surrounded by nearly identical boxy numbers, all in various pastel colors. There was a car in the driveway, so, I assumed, someone was probably home. I also spotted Steven’s car a few blocks away, and though I doubted there was much he could do to help, should the situation call for it, it still gave me a sense of peace knowing he was nearby. As for Mack and Ralph, I knew they were in werewolf mode now, traipsing about in the shadows, also as a just-in-case measure.

Fingers crossed that we wouldn’t need such a measure.

Though, as it turned out, we should’ve been crossing way more than just our fingers. Heck, I would’ve crossed my balls (ouch!) if I thought it would’ve prevented what was about to happen.

See, we might've had the sonar jammers, which prevented them from getting into our heads or sensing our exact whereabouts, thereby preventing them from aiming their spears very well, but, whereas I had to vamp my way through pretty much everything, they had centuries of knowledge to build upon.

In other words, as Steven had said, they were indeed expecting us and already had safety measures put in place. And it didn't much matter that we were in the sky, either, because that, as it turned out, was a weapon they could in fact turn against us.

I felt it at the same time I saw my enemy in his kitchen, adjusting dials of some sort on a metal box he had set on a countertop. One turn of the dial and *wham*, my head was instantly filled with static, loud enough to wipe out my ability to even hear myself think. And if I couldn't hear myself think, I couldn't direct my flying.

In other words, what goes up...well, the rest of that shouldn't be all that hard to figure out.

And though I couldn't feel the pain, damn if my body didn't make one loud slamming noise as I crashed into the gratefully well-placed rose bush.

Thorns and all.

CHAPTER 10

Running of the Bull

Steven witnessed my rapid descent from the sky and pulled up a minute later, throwing me over his shoulder before tossing me in the passenger seat and then speeding off. “You okay?” he asked, turning briefly my way as the car screeched and swerved around a corner.

I rubbed my side. I was battered and bruised, my meat, as it were, tenderized, but otherwise whole. “For a change, I sure am glad that I’m already dead, dude, because that would’ve hurt like a sonofabitch.”

He chortled. “Good way to put a positive spin on things, but why did you suddenly go all meteorite-like?”

I shrugged, the static in my head fading as we increased our distance from the house. “Vampire baddie switched on some device that scrambled my head somehow. All I could hear was white noise suddenly, blocking out my ability to keep myself afloat.”

He twisted the whiskers on his chin and nodded. “A bat’s ability to pick up the faintest sound, or wavelength of sound, is well-documented. The vampire you were spying on must be able to send out some sort of shortwave radio that covers the neighborhood and jams bat signals. They must turn it on at night before they go to sleep. Pretty ingenious.” He turned my way, however briefly. “Our jammers block the sonar, so no waves get returned; theirs prevent the waves from going out to begin with.”

Again I rubbed my side, a welt already rising up, blood from the thorn-inflicted wounds seeping through my shirt. And we all know how much I needed every last drop I could get. I sighed as I looked his way. “Nothing *pretty* about it, ingenious or otherwise.” I turned and again stared at the road. “And that means they were expecting me, and that we can’t ever get close to them now, at least by air. And Lord only knows what sort of traps they have on the ground.”

His nodding turned to a shake of his head. "Getting close to their houses, no, we probably can't do that, but they don't know that we know where they dine. So at least we have one trick up our sleeves that we can still whip out as needed."

I grinned at the comment. "And we do so like to whip things out." Though my grin promptly turned to a frown. "But the others, the Bolinskis, what if they all fell out of the sky just now and weren't so lucky, with a bush to land on, I mean?" Not a phrase I had ever imagined saying, or would care to repeat ever again.

The car came to a halt as Steven turned his head up. I was still holding my working sonar jammer, so I couldn't tell for certain, but I had a feeling he was opening up his mind to Mack and Ralph. Seconds later, he gulped and looked my way. "You know that Weather Girls song?"

"Fuck," I cursed. "Only, instead of men, it's raining Bolinskis?"

He nodded and frowned. "Exactly, boyfriend."

My frown suddenly mirrored his. "Are they...are they all right?"

Quick as a wink, he put the car in gear and again took off, fast. "I don't know," he croaked out. "Mack and Ralph are scooping them all up now."

Time stood still at that moment as I visualized my, well, *family* getting scooped up. And it wasn't a pretty sight to see, even if only in my head. Though we didn't have far to drive in order to find out how they were, soon pulling up to our starting point, the rear of a park, just as the werewolves arrived. Mack had Mama and Papa over his broad shoulders, Ralph had Igor and Gert, and Lothar was trudging slowly behind them all, pulling up the rear.

I dashed out of the car and over their way. "Is everyone alive?" I hollered to the werewolves, before rephrasing it with, "I mean, any deader than usual?"

Papa Bolinski spoke up first. "Hump broke the fall."

"Ditto," groaned Igor.

"Um, ditto," said Mama Bolinski, "I think." She turned her head to the still-prone Papa. "What does *ditto* mean, Papa?"

He coughed and pushed himself up on his elbows. “Beats me.” Then he rubbed his back and grumbled something in Polish.

I looked at Lothar, who, for some odd reason, was now soaking wet. He spoke up next. “I no longer want to be pool boy. Turns out, I cannot swim. Or breathe. So first thing not as important as it once was.”

I squelched a grin. “And what of you, Cousin Gert?”

She, however, was, for some odd reason, smiling full-out. “I land on vampire.” Then she laughed. “After I knock him out with sonar jammer.”

Which was what I meant earlier when I said that we were only somewhat defenseless that night, seeing as a sonar jammer dropped from a couple of hundred feet in the air is just as good as anything else to take out a vampire with.

“Is he still knocked out?” I asked, eyes wide in anticipation.

She shrugged. “Beats me, as Papa says.”

In any case, Mack and Ralph knew what I was getting at and were instantly springing away, tongues lolling out of their ferociously fanged mouths as they sped out of the park and down the vacant street, legs hurtling them so fast they were almost instantly a blur.

Gert steadied herself and stood up. “I hear this word once on HBO at hotel in city.”

I walked over and brushed the dirt off her blouse. “Which was?”

She nodded and also brushed away the debris. “Fucker.”

I laughed, despite our recent literal downfall. “Apt word.”

And then, just as quickly as they’d run away, they were now tearing back, said fucker bouncing atop Mack’s shoulder. This time I knew better than to ask the “is-he-dead” question. Instead, I phrased it, “Is he conscious?”

Mack tossed the body to the ground. “Out like a light.”

I stared down at him, his pasty face aglow in the moonlight. Dude was in his fifties, with slicked-back, graying hair. Nice looking if you were into DILFs, which right about then I was voting to change to DILKs, changing

the word *fuck* to the more appropriate *kill*. “So what do we do with him?” I managed, my throat suddenly tight.

Steven sighed and ran back to his car, returning a minute later with one of the enemy’s spears. “One down, five to go,” he said, by way of an answer.

“Yep, go ahead,” I told him, waving my hand his way in a *yep-go-ahead* flourish.

He grinned. “Nice try, but the pleasure is all yours, Jack.”

I grimaced as he held the spear my way, but took it just the same, lifting it in the air and aiming, pardon the expression, dead-center. Then I grimaced some more, sighed, counted to ten, frontwards and backwards, and then decided that twenty was a better number and started all over again, twice.

Gert grunted. “So toss it already, will you.”

I turned her way. “Easier said than done.”

The grunt repeated. “Apparently.”

Then I held the spear out to her. She quickly shook her head and goiter no. Same for Igor, Mama, and Papa Bolinski, though with humps shaking no, vigorously. Mack and Ralph were now whistling and pretending not to pay attention, which for a werewolf seemed awfully hard to do, the whistling part, I mean. Which left just one candidate.

Lothar shrugged, took the spear from me, and, quick as a flash, sent it flying. *Whoosh, thud, gasp*. Those were the three sounds we all heard in quick succession. *Whoosh* from the spear, *thud* as it cracked through his ribcage, and *gasp* as he awoke only to quickly unawake. Eyes open, and then eyes shut. Lifeless, though he was pretty much that way before the spear stood vertically out of him, quivering in the cool evening breeze as we all stared down in shock.

“You...you killed him,” I croaked out, eyes again wide as I gazed in astonishment at my cousin.

Again he shrugged. “You said we were already dead. Cannot kill what is already dead.”

“Semantics,” I replied.

“Huh?” came the obvious reply to my reply. “Anyway, can we go home now? I see in *TV Guide* that new episode of *Dynasty* is on tonight.”

I scratched my head. “That show ended last century, Lothar.”

The shrug made its third and final appearance as he headed for the car, the rest of my clan following close behind. “Not in Poland, Jack,” he said, over his shoulder. “Just starting.”

I hung back and again stared down at the speared and now-dead enemy. Apparently, piercing the heart did the trick as sure as relieving him of his blood. I guessed that, though it no longer pumped, it was still some sort of control center. Smash the storage tank and *voilà*, instant corpse, corpsekabob, corpse on a stick. Any way you said it, it was exceedingly disquieting. Steven was standing on the other side of him, punching away on his iPhone. “Who you calling?”

He glanced up. “My dad. He’ll come and get the body and dispose of it.” A minute later, call ended, he again looked my way. “Why don’t you look happier?”

I pointed to the corpsicle (nope, still disquieting). “We killed a man.”

He shook his head. “We killed the enemy, Jack. We killed a man who would have killed us all, given the chance, perhaps the man that killed your cousin or your parents.”

A grunt escaped from between my lips. “Still disturbing.”

He stepped around the corpsipop (nope) and gave me a hug and kiss on the cheek. “Look on the bright side, boyfriend.”

I sank my head into his shoulder. “What, that we have a hundred or so episodes of *Dynasty* to look forward to now?”

The hug repeated. “Uh-uh. That we found a job for Lothar, apart from when he’s driving the Yugo around, with none of us in the back seat.”

“Glass half full?” I asked.

His chuckle rumbled down my back. “Well, maybe a quarter, but at least it’s a start. I mean, dude is awfully good at spear chucking.”

And, suffice it to say, looked awfully hot while doing it.

§ § §

We regrouped back at the mansion. First thing was first—we drank. Okay, gross, yes, and, well, a bit on the gauche side, but we drained the body as best we could before we skedaddled. No use seeing all that blood go to waste, I mean, and, besides, he was quite through using it. Also, by then, we were all on our last legs, so to speak, and the homeless shelter was closed for the night.

“Strong blood,” said Papa, wiping the crimson from his lips with the back of his hand.

“Nice vintage,” added Gert. “Vampire 2012.” She smiled. “I make joke, yes?”

I laughed, but more for her benefit than my own. Because, through it tasted great and went down, as Papa had said, strong, it didn’t belie the fact that it had just recently been inside a man that we had speared into oblivion.

“In any case,” said Steven, wisely changing the subject, “we outnumber *them* now. And, like I said, we only have five to go.”

To which Mack replied by raising his newly-polished hand up. “But once they find out that one of them is no longer, well, one of them, won’t they be even more vigilant, maybe even more dangerous to us?”

Steven shook his head. “Already took care of that.”

I stopped drinking for a second and turned his way. “You did?”

He smiled and patted my free hand. “Well, my father, the police chief, took care of that, I meant to say.”

“How, pray tell?” I asked, my smile suddenly matching his. Mainly because I knew that whatever he was going to say was sure to put it there anyway; I was just beating it to the punch.

“Too bad for the dead Pole,” he said by way of an answer, forcing a solemn frown on his stunningly handsome face. “Drunk driver. Didn’t even see him coming.”

“Think they’ll believe that?” I asked.

He nodded. “It’ll be in the police report; they’ll have no reason not to. Plus, as far as we know, they never saw the flying Bolinskis, and it’s doubtful they even know about them, about us, apart from knowing about you. And if the six of them are still alive, minus one now, that means that

Boris never got close to doing what we just did, so how could you alone possibly have done it? Or at least I bet that's what they think, which also bodes well for us. So, again, their being more vigilant has been taken care of."

"Probably," I amended.

He shrugged and grinned, which made my crotch instantly throb. "Probably. In any case, like I said, we outnumber them: six vampires and three werewolves to five."

"Good odds," said Ralph.

"And getting better all the time," added Mack as he applied a new coat of gloss to his thick lips. "But I say we make them even better." He capped the gloss and winked at his boyfriend.

Ralph grinned, revealing a dazzling set of pearly whites. "Ooh, I know that look," he purred. "What devilish plot are we cooking up now?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he looked to Mama Bolinski. "Did you happen to notice anything before you fell from the sky?"

She winced as she obviously remembered said fall. "I see man in his living room."

"Outside the house, I mean," Mack reiterated, clearly leading the witness.

She paused and squinted her eyes shut. When she popped them open, she replied, "I see odd flag flying over porch. Not American flag, not Polish flag either, not from any country I've ever seen."

I grinned because I had an inkling what kind of flag it was, this being San Francisco and all. "Rainbow flag?" I asked.

She snapped her fingers. "Yes, rainbow flag. From what country is that?"

Mack giggled and patted her hand. "Oz, honey, land of Dorothy."

Mama Bolinski tilted her head. "I've never heard of such a country. Is new?"

Ralph patted her other hand. "Been around a long, long time." Then he looked again at Mack. "So we can't fly above his house or, perhaps, get within a certain square footage of it, but that doesn't mean we can't *lure* him out."

Mack nodded his head, the wig bobbing left and right as he winked his heavily made-up eye. "And we certainly have the bait for it." And then he promptly pointed at both Lothar and Steven.

"Hey, what about me?" I couldn't help but ask, slightly wounded at being left out.

"No offense, Jack," he said, "but..." And again he pointed at Lothar and Steven.

I sighed. "Yeah, yeah. I get it." Then I looked to Lothar and said, "Guess you get that Speedo after all, cousin."

Lothar shook his head. "No more pools, Jack. I no like swimming, it turns out. I sink like stone."

"No pool, Lothar," I said. "Speedo makes other apparel, and that will do just fine, I have a feeling."

Which, as it turned out, was another one of those obese understatements.

§ § §

Steven and I retired for the evening, as did all the Bolinskis and assorted other werewolves.

I held Steven's hand and stared up at the ceiling. "I killed a man today."

He sighed. "Well, really, Lothar killed a man today."

Then I sighed. "You know that's a load of bullshit, right?"

He turned his head my way. "Your cousin Boris said that this was a war. In war, there are always casualties: kill or be killed. It's not pleasant, but it simply must be this way." He squeezed my hand. "They brought this war to you, Jack; you're just retaliating."

I nodded, then pointed to my head. "Makes sense up here." Then I pointed to my heart. "But not here." And then I couldn't help but chuckle. "Figuratively speaking, since this here isn't much here any more."

He reached up with his free hand and stroked my cheek. "Wrong, Jack," he told me. "Your heart may not be pumping, but it still *feels* as it did before."

"And you know this how?"

He paused and squeezed my hand yet again. “Because I wouldn’t be feeling for you if you weren’t feeling for me. Plain and simple.”

Plain, maybe, but simple, nuh-uh, no way. Nothing was simple about us, about him, about the situation we were in. “Got it, Steven,” I said, “and, uh, thanks.” Then I turned my head his way. “But if killing one of them was this difficult, how can I kill five more?” Just hearing it as it came out of my mouth made my belly tie up in knots.

Again he paused, clearly mulling it over. Then he snapped his fingers and hopped up, returning a few seconds later, holding up his cell phone for me. “Here. What do you see?”

“Huh,” said I, now glancing down. “You took a photo of the painting of Boris.”

“And?”

I scratched my head. “And it’s a picture of a painting of Boris. How is that going to help me? There an app for talking to the dead? *Can you hear me now*, from the afterlife?”

“Nope,” he replied. “Just, next time we’re about to snuff out another one of them, have a look at that picture and remember what they’ve taken away from you.”

“So I look at the picture and anger replaces that guilt of mine?”

He nodded. “It’s a stronger emotion, more primal, so yes.”

“You were right, boyfriend,” I eventually said, after I thought it over for a few minutes.

“About what?”

“My heart may not be pumping, but it certainly does feel.”

“And what’s it feeling at this moment?” he asked, eyes staring directly into mine, so much blue that it was like looking at the sky, at the heavens, at the stars.

I reached down and placed my palm over his chest. “Same as yours, Steven, same as yours.”

He aped the gesture, his hand over my chest, still though it was. “Same as yours, Jack,” he told me, “same as yours.”

§ § §

The next morning, we amassed in the kitchen. The Bolinskis had been up, it seemed, long before the rest of us, though. Testament to this was the fact that the dust level in the living area's general vicinity had been reduced to pre-apocalyptic levels. That is to say, I could almost see the surfaces of a great deal of the furniture and much of the hardwood floors and rugs. In other words, those Bolinskis really put their backs into it—or, uh, *humps*.

"Wow," I said, grinning as I took it all in.

"Vow, indeed," said Mama Bolinski, a proud smile stretching wide across her face. "Igor is better lawyer than housekeeper, I think."

I prayed as much. In any case, he certainly couldn't be a worse one. "Thank you," I said instead.

"You are welcome, cousin," she replied. "Now, who do we kill today?"

I coughed, which was awfully hard to do with non-working lungs. "Um, doesn't it bother you to, you know, well, *kill* somebody?"

She shrugged, in her own endearing way. "Harder to clean living room and kitchen, I think."

She had me there. "But here you're just wiping out a few million dust mites. Not quite the same thing as taking a life."

They all sighed, one Pole after the other. "In home country, way back," said Gert, "we lost generations of our friends and families because we didn't have the opportunity to strike first. We were overrun before we knew what hit us."

Papa Bolinski finished where she'd started. "Now we strike first. We strike hardest. We strike last." He grinned and started in on his toast. "After breakfast, I mean, because, like I say before, this sourdough is yummy." And then he went to bite it, and promptly remembered that food was no longer his friend. Blood and blood alone for us. "Oops," he grumbled, setting it down. "Do we have any more Corpsicoke left?"

Apparently, that word seemed to put a nicer spin on it. Have a Corpsicoke and a smile; Corpsicoke adds life; things go better with Corpsicoke.

See what I mean?

I paused and stared at them all. What they were saying was exactly what Steven had been saying the night before, but now that I saw them as my family and knew that the other vampires would eagerly seek them out and do them harm, somehow it really sank in. Because the picture of Boris was one thing, but these were my flesh and blood, as alive as I was, and I planned on keeping them all that way.

So I smiled and served the remainder of the meals to them, solid food for the werewolves, liquid diet for my kin. “We kill the one with the rainbow flag today,” I said, guilt thankfully now at its lowest ebb yet. Thank goodness. “That is to say, after we use Lothar and Steven as bait.”

Lothar wiped the blood from his impossibly full lips. “Lothar not earthworm.”

“Not that kind of bait,” I informed, with a shake of my head.

“Good,” said he. “I no like worms, or pools.” He shuddered as he obviously recalled his last encounter, with a pool, at least. “What I have to do?”

But Steven had already come prepared, handing him some Speedo jogging shorts and a tank top that he had stowed in his car. Luckily for us, they were already used, so Lothar would have a scent, and an intoxicating one at that. Toss in a spare baby monitor, and he was good to go. Humanesque, so to speak. Not to mention statuesque and any other assorted -esques.

“Do you jog?” I then thought to ask.

“What is jog?”

I chuckled. “Running for exercise.”

He tilted his head to the side, all confused-puppy looking. “I thought I was driver. Driver drives. Driver does not run.”

“With Steven,” added Igor, suddenly attentive upon saying the name. “You jog with Steven here.”

Lothar smiled, which made my own smile go all halvesies. “Okay,” he said. “Lothar jogs.”

Figures.

And then he ran out of the room, only to reemerge a few minutes later in nothing but the shorts and tank. And I mean nothing more: no socks, no shoes, and, it appeared, like *really* appeared, no underwear. And my smile vanished completely. Hard-on, no, smile, yes.

“Yikes,” said Steven.

“Yikes,” said Ralph.

“Yikes,” said Mack.

“Underwear,” said I, “before you rip a seam in those things.”

“Better bait then,” rasped Ralph.

“You’re not helping,” I reprimanded.

“I’m not trying to,” he countered, “because, trust me, one look at, well, *that*, and we’re good to go. Hook, line, and sinker.”

Again Lothar tilted his head. “I do not know any of these words. Do I look good in jogging outfit or no?”

“No,” I replied.

“Yes!” shouted the other three.

Lothar stared down at me. “You are outnumbered, cousin.”

Tell me about it. “Fine,” I said, “But Steven jogs ahead of you.” No use tempting fate, I figured, or my boyfriend.

§ § §

And so, with Steven and Lothar jogging around the gay vampire’s house, and the rest of us keeping low in two cars up the street, we put our plan into action. It was a simple one, really: catch the guy’s eye, lure him away from the house and any potential weapons or traps, then spear him in the chest when no one was looking.

Um, okay, so maybe not *simple* so much as all we had, because it wasn’t like any of us, even Steven, was accustomed to formulating assassination attempts. Also, I’d do the killing this time; we simply couldn’t implicate Lothar and Steven should the plan go awry. And, as far as we knew, the bad guys were only aware of me thus far, so as to the spear chucking, that had to be my responsibility. The others would stay hidden, used only for

emergencies. Steven and Lothar would simply jog away from the scene. See, *simple*.

Only, of course, it wasn't.

Because the only thing simple about our plan was Lothar himself. Different kind of simple, though. Too bad for us, right?

In any case, it only took Lothar and Steven about nine laps around the block before the bad guy took notice. Him and half the neighborhood, more than likely. Because, suddenly, it was like Mount Olympus had sprung a leak and two of the gods were running loose—quite literally, when it came to Lothar, who looked much like ten pounds of potatoes in a five-pound sack in that outfit of his.

Anyway, the vampire bad dude was suddenly also in jogging shorts and a tank, and giving chase. This we watched, me and Ralph and Mack in our car, the Bolinskis in Igor's. Once he was led far enough away from his house and out of sight, the plan was that I'd be dropped off and spear-chuck him into oblivion. This being San Francisco, there were plenty of back alleyways, so that's where he'd be led to, prearranged by us in advance.

"Drive," I told Ralph, once the joggers had turned the corner and were out of our line of vision.

"Driving," replied Ralph, already pulling away before rounding the opposite corner, heading for the alleyway a few blocks away. A minute later, I was dropped off, spear in hand. Might've looked weird, yes, a dude with a spear, but this being San Francisco, weird, yet again, is pretty much par for the course. Heck, weird is a hole-in-one in these parts. Anyway, I was in disguise and it was early yet, so being spotted wasn't high on my worry list.

After that, I waited for the ambush. And waited, and waited some more, until only Steven showed up, alone. No Lothar, no vampire bad guy.

"What the fuck?" I whispered.

"And so answers the question of Lothar's sexuality," Steven replied, with a frown and a heavy sigh.

"You lost me," I, as usual, admitted as I tapped the spear's tip against the cement.

“Guy jogs up. Guy introduces himself. Guy invites Lothar home with him.”

I groaned. “That wasn’t the plan.”

Steven saw my groan and raised me a grouse. “Guy was cute, in case I forgot to mention it.”

And our simple plan was thrown out the window. “Now what do we do?”

He shrugged. “Wait for cute guy to spew and then drive Lothar home to change before we’re teeming with other cute guys?”

“And what if it’s a trap? What if cute guy is dividing and conquering, picking off the weakest first? Intellectually speaking, I mean.”

Steven’s groan was repeated. “Mack and Ralph can’t change in broad daylight, way too risky. And as for the Bolinskis...”

“Got it,” I interrupted him, knowing full well that the apple didn’t fall too far from the tree, Lothar being the apple. “Besides, he’s my responsibility, so it looks like it’s up to me to rescue him.”

Steven tapped me on the shoulder and grinned. “And you’re *my* responsibility, so it looks like *we’re* going to rescue him. Plus, cute guy already saw me, so not so weird to see me yet again. As for you, well, he knows who you are and will just assume you’re there to kill him. That way, no one else, namely me or Lothar, gets implicated.”

It wasn’t ideal, but at least it was something, and the longer Lothar was with the bad guy, the worse it possibly was. So, a minute later, we told the others to watch the house while we cased it. And then told them to call Steven’s father should anything appear out of place, apart from a beau-hunk in jogging attire and a gay dude with a spear.

Then we tiptoed around back, keeping our eyes peeled for any assorted landmines, booby-traps, or motion-detected laser beams. Suffice it to say, I tripped on the water sprinkler first and the garden hose second, so the only booby back there was me, apparently.

“You’re lucky,” Steven whispered as we moved nearer to the rear of the house.

“Because I have you?”

He grinned. "Well, yes, but not what I was referring to," he replied. "The bad guy, you see, is so locked in to Lothar, so to speak, that he's yet to hear the racket you're creating out here." He pointed to his head to indicate how exactly he knew this. Fortunately, he could still latch his mind on to others, namely the bad guy, but not vice-versa, seeing as he was carrying the sonar jammer, which he'd retrieved from the car before we'd started on Plan B.

In any case, a short while later we knew exactly why the bad, yet cute vampire dude wasn't hearing us out back, even when I kicked the garbage can and got my foot tangled in the same garden hose I'd already tripped over.

"Holy fuck," whispered Steven as we popped our heads up from beneath the window, now staring inside the bedroom.

"Is it wrong to pop a boner whilst gazing upon your naked cousin?" I whispered back.

He turned and shook his head. "You'd have to be dead not to." Then he coughed. "Oops, my bad."

And then we both went back to staring. And staring, and staring some more, eyes wide, mouths agape. "What do we do now?" I asked. "I mean, I can't exactly toss the spear through the window."

He chuckled and repositioned his steely prick inside his jogging shorts, which were suddenly tenting something fierce. "Jack, you can't even walk through a back yard without causing a minor fracas. Lord only knows who you'd kill, and certainly not the cute, now-raging-hard vampire in there, if you sent that spear of yours flying."

"So, again, what do we do now?"

He looked down at his throbbing tent-job, then over at mine, then inside to my cousin as his dick got worked over by the kneeling baddie, all before he sighed and replied, "Well, we could wait it out, see who spews first, us or them, or..."

"Or rescue my cousin before they spew and he gets himself killed," I interjected. "Fun as it would be, however, to spew before them." I pushed my stiffie to the side and gave it a squeeze. "Decisions, decisions."

He elbowed me and grunted, then shut his eyes good and tight. “Never mind,” which meant that he was putting his alpha werewolf abilities to use again. Goody for us; shame for my pulsing prick, though.

I stared at Lothar as his mega-cock got pumped down the vampire’s throat. He clearly looked confused upon suddenly hearing Steven’s voice inside his head, but at least wasn’t letting on. Oh, and thank goodness the sonar jammer only jammed my own abilities and not my boyfriend’s, which allowed Steven to communicate, in one direction only, in the first place. Though maybe goodness had nothing to do with it, seeing as I was watching my cousin getting some stellar head at the time.

“What are you telling him to do?” I asked, unable to look away from the scene on the other side of the glass, as my cousin face-fucked the jacking-away, bad-yet-cute vampire.

“Hold on; you’ll see in just a moment,” came the reply.

And so I watched, eagerly, and waited, none-too-eagerly, until I could see Lothar talking to the guy, but couldn’t make out what was being said. Still, I got the gist, especially when the vampire stood up and got his boxers tied around his face and over his eyes in a sort of makeshift blindfold, his cock swaying as Lothar tied the knot good and tight.

“Interesting twist,” said I.

“And about to get more so,” said Steven as we watched my cousin lead the bad guy out of the bedroom and out of our sight.

“Where’s he headed?” I asked.

Steven put his index finger to his lips and then pointed down the length of the house. In a minute or so, my naked and hard cousin appeared with the equally naked and hard bad guy. Well, maybe not equally, seeing as my cousin pretty much was unequaled, physically speaking.

“You’re on,” whispered Steven as Lothar got the evil vampire down on his knees, a lascivious smile spreading across his face.

I blanched, or at least that’s what it felt like. And then, suddenly, that spear in my hand seemed to weigh a few hundred pounds. I stood, my knees shaking, and lifted the weapon in the air, all while I thought about poor

Cousin Boris, about my mother and father, and ages and ages of extended family that had been summarily wiped out.

Did that make it any easier? Hell to the no. Still, it did give me the resolve I needed in order to do what I knew I had to do. “Kill or be killed!” I shouted as I set the spear on its trajectory.

He knew in an instant what was to happen, his back suddenly as stiff as his cock, though he had little choice but to kneel there and die.

WHOOSH! went the spear, my vampire strength sending it hurtling at a blinding speed. Then *THUD*, *CRACK*, *UUUGH*, all three sounds heard almost in the exact same instance as the force of the spear sent the vampire backwards, his unmoving body on its back, spear at a perfect vertical, boner too, blood welling up and seeping out of the wound in an oozing flash.

We three circled him and stared down, a pit the size of a well-ripened peach lodged in my belly. “That was so not fun,” I groaned, then looked up at Lothar. “And this wasn’t in the plan.” I pointed from the dead guy’s raging boner to his, which was, surprisingly, still raging—like a bull, or a herd of them running in Pamplona.

Lothar shrugged. “I jog. I baited. Bad guy is dead,” he said. “Is this not plan?”

He had me there. “Well, can you at least cover up?” Again I pointed to the elephant in the room, so to speak.

The shrug repeated as he bent down and retrieved the boxers off the dead guy’s head before slipping them back on. Though the tenting that remained left little to the imagination—or much, depending on which way your imagination leaned to.

“Vampire dick stronger than human one,” explained my cousin, making his prick sway in its skimpy confines.

“Tell me about it,” said both Steven and I at the same time.

Lothar smiled. “Maybe needs diversion.” Though, thankfully, he had something else in mind than what was on ours. He pointed to the dead guy. “Blood is still leaking. We need blood. Maybe we should get it before it all lands on grass.”

I nodded. Finally, my cousin was making some semblance of sense. And so we drained him, as we'd done the previous vampire. Wasn't easy, wasn't fun, and wasn't very neat and tidy, but at least we ended up with as much as we could, all the Tupperware in the dead guy's kitchen burped shut and sloshing red before we departed.

Same as last time, we called Steven's dad; same as last time, the police chief covered for us. This time, though, he planted some drugs in the house and filed a report that the dead guy was deported for drug trafficking. So, at the very least, his fellow bad guys wouldn't immediately be the wiser as to our antics. Or to his death, or to the cause of said death, namely me. *Sigh*.

After that, we left the scene of the crime, the body hidden until the chief got there, the blood in shopping bags, Lothar now dressed, though no less rigid.

Sigh, yet again.

CHAPTER 11

Will, Meet Way

We returned to our cars and explained to the anxious others what had happened, minus all the cocksucking and incestuous boners, before we took off back to the mansion.

“You were gone a long time,” remarked Ralph from the back seat.

I didn’t answer right away. I was still coming to grips with shock and mixed guilt. Mixed because I felt guilty for killing the bad cute guy, as well as guilty for not feeling as guilty as I felt I should’ve felt. “There were certain *obstacles*,” I eventually told him.

They let it go. The vampire was dead, so what was the use of further questions? Still, Mack had more to add to the conversation. “Two of them will now suddenly turn up missing,” he said. “Even with Steven’s father covering our tracks, they’ll quickly realize that something is wrong. Six of them down to four in a matter of days is beyond suspicious, especially when they’ve been in this country for so long and hadn’t, it appears, run into any problems.”

I nodded and frowned. “So what are you suggesting?”

“A wolf,” he replied, “takes advantage of his prey when they are in disarray.”

Steven reached over as he drove, patting my hand. “He’s right. They’ll be panicking now, not thinking clearly, and they’re weakened just by the fact that there are suddenly less of them.”

My nodding repeated as I stared out the window, at the fog that clung tenaciously to the top of Twin Peaks, cascading over the hills before settling just above the Castro. I turned to Steven and asked, “How soon before they figure out that the guy I just killed wasn’t deported?”

He shrugged. “Maybe never, at least for certain, but they’ll know something’s up when they can’t contact him. Same thing when they can’t

find the first guy my dad's covering up for us."

I turned again and stared out the window as yet another pit formed in my belly, which meant that, right about then, an entire orchard was soon to take root in there. "We'll have to kill the rest of them, then, before they can regroup, before they realize that we're picking them off, if they don't already in fact know that."

Steven chuckled ever so softly. "Finally." Meaning, I figured, *finally* I was on board with all this.

"But how?" threw in Mack.

And that, of course, was the million-dollar question.

Thankfully, I had a million or so to spare.

§ § §

We met up at our usual spot, the kitchen, meaty sandwiches offered up to the werewolves, newly-acquired blood for the rest of us. Steven went to work gathering information received from his pack as he chowed down, devouring the first sandwich before Igor could even fix the second. Still, by the time we were all done eating, he had what we needed.

"All four remaining vampires work downtown, all on visas."

"Well," I said, wiping the blood from my lips, "we can't kill them downtown, not during the day, so knowing that bit of information, at least for now, doesn't seem a likely avenue to travel down. Not unless I can sneak into a work bathroom unnoticed, chuck a spear, and then sneak out, also unnoticed. Which seems doubtful, given that I couldn't even sneak around in a deserted backyard unnoticed. So what else did you find out?"

He smiled, which, at least temporarily, made me happy, and/or horny, mostly the latter. He then continued with, "Three of them own, one of them rents."

"And?" asked Mack, already starting in on a fresh coat of lipstick, now that he was done eating.

"Well, hard to evict someone who owns..."

"But not so hard for the one that rents," I said, finishing his train of thought. "And if we can get that one out of his house, then we have fewer

obstacles to potentially encounter. Certainly, we can get him away from the protection of the radio waves if he's not at home."

Mack was now combing out his lengthy blond wig. "But how do we evict someone?" he asked.

"Will, meet way," replied Steven, pointing at me, the obvious way.

"But I don't own any houses apart from the mansion," I retorted, clearly lost, as per usual.

He rubbed his fingers together, the universal symbol for *pay up*. "Grease enough wheels, and the cart doesn't even need the horse any more."

"Clever," I allowed, "but I don't know..." He handed me a slip of paper that he'd already written on. "...the owner." I stared down. "Oh."

He finished off his milk. "Yeah, oh." Then he stood and motioned for me and the other werewolves to follow. "Time to do some greasing."

Lothar looked up from his cuticles and inquired, "More bait? Do I get new outfit for that? Shorts were nice, but suit might be nicer this time."

I started to object, seeing as the last plan, minus the B part, didn't exactly go as, well, planned, but Mack and Ralph were already pushing him ahead of us. "He can sit in the back with us!" squealed Mack. I mean, seriously, his pupils were dilating at the very thought, the squeal loud enough to draw an entire herd of pigs our way.

"Fine," I relented, seeing as I obviously had little say in the matter. "But no more jogging shorts."

Mack smacked his hip and pouted. "Spoilsport."

"Lothar likes jogging shorts," added Lothar.

"Us, too, Lothar," said Ralph, "us, too."

My sigh made its reappearance as I turned and looked at the remaining Bolinskis. "Just finish dusting. We'll be back soon."

"Finish?" barked Gert, looking rather alarmed at the prospect.

I shrugged. "Um, just get as far as you can."

"Okay," she agreed, rather lackluster-like.

"Okay," said the rest of them, also looking none too happy at the prospect.

And then we were off to an address in the Castro, which could only work in our favor. I mean, five handsome gay dudes, two on the über-stunning side, were awfully hard to ignore. Emphasis on the *hard*.

“Whoa!” the guy managed as he opened the door. “Pride parade take a wrong turn? Where’s your float?”

I removed my wallet, which I’d wisely stuffed before leaving the mansion. “No float. Business,” I replied, flashing him the major load of cash. Not that he was looking at any of it, mind you, since his eyes were on the major load of Lothar at the time, but he did welcome us in just the same.

Then it was down to business, sort of. I mean, I’d never bribed anyone before, especially in order to kill someone else, so there was a lot of hemming and hawing. Or more like whoring, as it turned out.

“Look,” said the guy, who was in his forties, nice looking, semi-balding, dazzling green eyes, and most definitely gay. “I don’t need your cash, got plenty of my own. Hence the lovely Victorian we’re all standing in right now. So just tell me what you want, and then I’ll tell you my price.”

I nodded then told him he had a tenant we wanted evicted. “That doable?”

He rubbed his chin and squinted. “Tenant’s rights. Almost impossible.” Then he grinned, mischievously. “Still might be somewhat doable, though. At least temporarily, I mean, if the place had an infestation problem.”

I shrugged and echoed his grin. “Ah, yes, I forgot to mention it. The house that’s being rented has an infestation problem.” Then I told him which house it was.

His grin grew wider, and so did the tenting in his jeans if I wasn’t mistaken. “Better call the Orkin man then,” said he. “Tenant will have to vacate ASAP. Any preferences for location and duration for his new living conditions, paid for by you guys?”

Steven spoke up next. “Marriott downtown, top floor. A week is plenty. Still doable?”

Guy’s eyes stayed glued to my cousin, glued and stapled and nailed. “Doable.”

Which meant that we now knew his price. Surprisingly, my generally daft cousin seemed to pick up on it, too. He smiled and opened his mind to mine. "Is okay, Jack. When we are alone, I will suck his blood."

"Just blood?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I didn't get to finish with that other vampire, you know," he replied, with a devilish grin.

I shrugged. At least the guy was good-looking, not to mention apparently packing some heavy lumpage in the groin area. "You sure about this?"

He replied by holding out his hand for the landlord. "Lothar, nice to meet you. You have bedroom?" Short and sweet, or at least short.

Not that it mattered, because the guy was already heading to said bedroom, my cousin still in his grip. Guess he figured that it wasn't too smart to look a gift horse in the mouth, or to turn his mouth away from a horse-hung Lothar, to restate it. "The tenant will be out first thing in the morning," the landlord said just before the bedroom door got shut behind them.

Steven grumbled. "I don't like it."

I turned to look at him. "Lothar can take care of himself. Besides, it's an easy meal for him."

Steven let loose with yet another grumble, his head hung noticeably lower. "No, that was the second time that someone went for Lothar and not me."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Must be his vampire magnetism."

Ralph, too, laughed. "Yeah, that must be it, right."

"Uh huh," agreed Mack, already pushing us out the door. "But why that hotel?"

And then it was Steven's turn to laugh as we all headed back to the car. "Wait and see, fellas, wait and see."

And, again, that's just what we did.

§ § §

Lothar returned by cab later that day. "How'd it go?" I asked as he sauntered into the newly-cleaned living room. Well, cleanedish,

cleanedesque.

“Sucked him dry,” came the reply, along with a telltale grin.

None of us inquired further as to exactly what he meant by that. I mean, he was grinning, so I was fine with whoring him off, or at least he was fine with it. Besides, all’s fair in love and war, and this was definitely a war, as my dearly departed Cousin Boris had said—or at least written.

In any case, we weren’t through with Lothar just yet when it came to this next killing. “You two will have to do this one alone, I’m afraid,” said Steven.

And, no, I didn’t like the sound of that, not one bit. “You’re joking,” said I.

He shook his head. “Afraid not. Bad vampire dude number three will, hopefully, be staying on the top floor of the Marriott downtown.”

“And?”

“And,” he continued, “the windows at the Marriott downtown aren’t sealed. Old building. So they open up.”

It was then I understood what he was getting at. “In other words, a spear can be chucked inside.” Then I looked at Lothar. “And one of us has to do the flying, the other the chucking, right? Safer bet if I don’t have to concentrate on both.”

“Exactly,” Steven said. “We wait until tomorrow night when it’s dark so no one can see you, and that high up, it’s doubtful anyway; then you kill the vampire dude and hover back home, no traps to contend with.”

“And if the window isn’t opened?” I hazarded to ask. “Or if he’s not standing in front of it?”

His finger pointed to his head. “He can most probably block out your thoughts, but it’s doubtful he has experience blocking out a werewolf’s, or three werewolves’,” he explained. “The first day we met, I tried to connect and couldn’t, but that was due to the great distance between us before he removed himself from the scene altogether. This time, he’ll be trapped in his room, and we’ll be somewhere nearby. And no one inside the hotel is going to see anyone with a spear to implicate any of us.”

“What about anyone in another room seeing us, me and Lothar?” I asked.

His smile remained. “That’s the reason I told the landlord to book a room on the top floor. You just fly up, over, down, and chuck. The werewolves do the rest—mind control to get him to open the window and stand in front of it. Easy.” He shot me a wink. “What can go wrong?”

Yeah, yeah. The foreshadowing in that seemingly innocuous statement should’ve rung some bells, set off some whistles, but I was at the time thinking a less innocuous thought. Like hovering several dozen stories above San Francisco, with spear in hand, while Lothar was holding me.

Not exactly innocuous, huh?

§ § §

We waited until the next night. We’d called the hotel and checked to make sure the vampire was there, even managing to confirm the room number, so all was good to go on that front. Now all we had to do was amass, divide, and then conquer.

Suffice it to say, they didn’t have a conquering major in college.

In any case, the amassing and dividing were easy enough. We simply drove in two cars, me and Lothar in mine, the wolves in Steven’s. They went inside as we found a dark, quiet side street.

“You ready?” I asked.

Lothar’s handsome face was cast in shadow. “To fly?” he asked. “Is fun, yes?”

I nodded my head. “Fun, yes.” Then I shook my head. “Wait, no, no fun. You just concentrate on flying and holding me, mostly the latter.”

I could see the white of his teeth as he grinned. “No worries, cousin. Lothar strong as country mule.”

Having never encountered any mules, country or otherwise, I took his word for it. And then, with spear in hand, he wrapped his arms around me from the back and took off, fast. *Woosh! Weeee!* And, yes, it was sort of fun, especially since it took no mental effort on my part, just his brute strength, of which he had plenty to spare.

Not two minutes later, we were above the hotel, staring down at the roof, a cool blast of air hitting my already cool face. Seconds after that, we were over and down, several feet outside the vampire’s room.

The light was on, a lone man in the room. “That him?” asked Lothar.

I didn’t dare try to connect my head to his, and with the window closed and the gap between us, I couldn’t smell him or hear if he had a heartbeat. “We’ll have to wait until he opens the window,” I replied, a nervous catch to my voice as I raised the spear I’d been carrying.

And so, with Lothar’s arms wrapped tightly around my chest, the spear aloft, and my eyes glued inside, I waited for our friends to act. Except my wait was exceedingly short-lived.

“Uh-oh,” groaned Lothar a mere split second later as two more men came into view.

A volt of white-hot fear suddenly ran down my spine. “Three of them,” I squeaked out. “What if it’s the three vampires? And what if Steven and Ralph and Mack try to connect to one of them and clue the other two off?”

“Uh-oh,” repeated Lothar.

And there was one of those obese understatement that seemed to follow me around as of late. Because, truth be told, I didn’t know who would come out the winner if three vampires fought against three werewolves when only two of those werewolves could change without the aid of the full moon. And what would happen to the lone wolf who couldn’t? “We have to do something,” I said, fear now gripping me even tighter than Lothar was. “We have to warn them.”

And so that’s what I did. Though, sadly, I didn’t have the sonar jammer on me any more, and they didn’t have their radio waves. Which meant that, when my brain screamed *THERE’S THREE OF THEM*, it wasn’t only Steven and Mack and Ralph who picked up on it.

“Uh-oh,” said Lothar for a third and final time as the vampires all at once turned to the window and pointed our way, fangs bared, eyes squinted in full-on glowing rage.

“Fly,” I squeaked out, then louder with, “Fast!”

He got the hint when the vampires lunged for the window and flung it open. And fast is what he went as the three of them flew out, their minds in an instant locking onto mine.

You are dead, telepathically said the first one.

Dead, intoned the second.

Dead, also said the third.

The word echoed menacingly around my head, ricocheting around my gray matter.

Lothar kept the distance between us, weaving around the downtown buildings as he, thankfully, managed to keep a tight grip on yours truly. Honestly, if my heart hadn't already made its last *kerthump*, it would have as he zoomed his way to the Transamerica Pyramid, which loomed ahead in the darkened distance.

"Why are you heading there?" I whispered.

He looked down and winked. "Hush, cousin," he said, obviously not wanting to give anything away to the three marauders who were barely twenty feet behind us, fingernails swiping the air in front of them as they fought to gain ground, so to speak, on us.

And so I hushed, the spear still clutched in my grip; little good it was doing me at that very terrifying moment. Then again, it was reassuring to have it should the need arise. And speaking of rising, that's what we were doing a mere second later, my stomach sinking as we gained altitude, the foggy night air growing ever colder as we steadily rose upward.

"You okay, cousin?" he shouted above the whoosh of air as he sped faster and faster, the vampires not losing even an inch on us, the race a dead heat, emphasis on the *dead*.

I turned from them to him. "I've been better."

He grinned, which of course made my prick go *boing*. Stupid prick. "Get ready," he said, by way of a response.

I gulped as I stared at the massive building directly in front of us, its white façade fairly glowing in the moonlight that managed to filter its way through the fog. "For what?" I hazarded.

But still he sped forward and up, our united bodies barely a few feet from the sloped surface of the famous edifice, my feet occasionally hitting concrete and glass. "Get ready!" he repeated, zooming even faster now, so fast that the structure was now one giant blur. "Shut your eyes, cousin! Now!"

Suffice it to say, when the man (behemoth, really) who's carrying you nearly fifty stories above the ground commands you to do something, you do it. *Blink* went my eyes, the lids mashed together, tight as a drum. Not that I didn't immediately know what he'd done, mind you, because the megawatt light perched at the apex of the building still managed to shine on through.

Still, neither of us was blinded, thank goodness, like those vampires suddenly were.

Oww! I heard inside my head, loudly, three times, as one by one they encountered the beam, my cousin zooming high above it, suddenly making us the tallest objects in my line of sight, the sky twinkling up above as the fog bank momentarily parted.

"Genius!" I shouted up at him as I turned and watched the vampires hurtle this way and that, frantically rubbing their blinded eyes as they smashed into nearby buildings.

"Ah," he chuckled, hovering again at break-neck speed, giving us some much-needed distance from the bad guys. "You finally realized this. Lothar is not just pretty face, you know."

Which, of course, I didn't know. In any case, I was thrilled to know it then. "We need more distance, though. So long as they can connect with my mind, we're in danger of being found."

"The mansion?" he asked, stopping in mid-air as he waited for my reply.

I shook my head. "I'd think that's the first place they'll go now, so not there." Then I reached inside my front pocket and retrieved my cell phone. "Head out to the bay," I added as I dialed.

Steven picked up on the first ring. "Are you okay?"

"For now, thanks to Lothar."

He laughed. "No fooling?"

Again I shook my head. "Took me by surprise, too. In any case, we've lost the baddies, but they know we're on to them, obviously. If not before, then now for certain. Go round up the Bolinskis and keep them safe, in case the evil Poles head for the mansion and try to kill anything that's moving."

"And where will you be?"

I didn't answer. It was still too risky. I mean, I couldn't see the vampires, but that didn't mean they couldn't hear what I was saying. "I'll be fine. Just be safe, okay, boyfriend?"

The laugh repeated. "Always am, boyfriend, always am."

And that was the end of that. Mainly because at that very moment, still flying high up in the darkened sky, we might've evaded the vampires for the time being, but a flock of pelicans was another matter entirely.

Hard to tell who was more surprised at our chance encounter, us or them, but in any case, they started squawking and snapping in no time flat, battering us with their tremendous beaks in an instant. So while Lothar managed to keep his grip on me, the same, sadly, couldn't be said for my phone or my spear.

"Whoops," I lamented as I watched them hurtle to the ground below, or what would've been ground if it weren't suddenly water. Inky, cold, choppy water. "Please don't make it three for three, Lothar."

Lothar shut his eyes and thought, *Beat it, birds*. Thankfully, they weren't accustomed to human voices with Polish accents inside their heads, and promptly did as he'd said with nary a drop of poop to be found on us. And yes, I was counting my blessings since, by and large, that was about the only one I could in fact count.

"Any idea where you're headed?" I then thought to ask.

His nodding head pointed the way. "That island looks safe enough."

I couldn't help but chuckle. I mean, Alcatraz isn't usually a place people escape *to* so much as *from*. "Well, at this time of night, at least it's deserted." And, I hoped, the last place they'd come looking for us.

Several minutes later, we came in for a landing. "What is this place?" he asked. "Looks like tenants left in hurry."

Or died trying, I thought. "Was a prison, now a tourist destination."

He tilted his head and looked at me quizzically. "People pay money to tour a prison?" he asked. "In my country, people go to beach for vacation."

I laughed, which was far better than crying. "The beaches here are cold, cousin, water even colder, and the fog barely lets up in the summer. So I guess prisons are the next best thing. Unless you're gay, and then you just

flock to the Castro instead, which might still be cold, but at least has bars you can warm up in.” And it was then that my mind locked in on the comment. *Unless you’re gay.* “Um, you are gay, right?”

He nodded and shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“But not before?” I asked.

The nod turned to a shake. “Nope.”

“That bother you?”

He paused, clearly mulling it over. “Bother me, cousin? Why should it bother me? Before I like women; now I like men. Better to want someone than no one at all, I think, yes?”

I sighed, mainly because that was some deep shit if you stopped and thought about it, and deep wasn’t something I’d given Lothar credit for. Not unless you counted the deep crevasse between his pecs, or the deep dimple in his chin, or the deep recesses of his mesmerizing eyes. “Yes,” I replied, “that’s right, Lothar. And, um, thanks for saving my life back there.”

He reached over and patted my back. “That is what family is for.”

Had I been able to feel any warmth, I was certain I would’ve felt it burning through my chest right at that moment, because I’d never had a family before, not for way too long, and certainly not one extending beyond my parents. Now I had one, odd and behumped though they were. Then I turned and stared at the city in the distance, which shone like a beacon in the night. “Now let’s hope the rest of the family is still safe.”

§ § §

Lothar and I kept on the periphery of the island, which was as cold and dark as the bay that surrounded it. I was sure there were security cameras about, so we hid in the shadows, our minds open, searching for signs that we’d been followed or found, but all we heard were seagulls, the crashing waves, and the ever-present foghorns that boomed and echoed on all sides.

“I do not think they know where we are,” offered Lothar, an hour into our vigil.

I nodded my head. “It seems unlikely. For all they know, we could be anywhere by now.”

“So we go?” he asked, standing up from his crouched position. “Back to the mansion?”

I too stood, but did not budge beyond that. “Not yet,” I told him, my hand held up, “and certainly not to the mansion. That, I assume, is where they headed when they lost us.”

And so we hunkered down, both of us staring across the great expanse of darkened bay as we thought of a new plan of action. Or at least that’s what I was doing. Lothar apparently had other things on his mind.

“Steven,” he said, “he is your boyfriend, yes?”

A spark ran up my spine upon hearing his name. “Yes, that he is.”

Lothar nodded his head and tossed a rock into the water, the ripples shooting out as I listened to it skip across. “Do you love him?”

That spark repeated, burned, sizzled its way through me. I turned and stared at my cousin. “We, um, we just met, really.” Which wasn’t an answer so much as a justification as to why I couldn’t exactly say yes or no. Aloud, I mean.

I could see Lothar’s smile despite the dark that fairly enveloped us. “Do you believe that love is eternal, cousin?”

Another odd question coming from an equally odd man, and one that I’d clearly not figured out just yet. “I suppose so, or at least it can last a lifetime, if you’re lucky,” I replied. “Why do you ask?”

His nodding continued. “If it can be eternal,” said he, “then why not also instantaneous? Two sides, same coin.”

He had me there. Still, I wasn’t ready to answer the initial question, mainly because it put a new disturbing question into my already adequately-disturbed head. “Eternal,” I repeated, the word also skimming across the blackened water. “Could anything last that long?”

His nodding abruptly stopped. “Like us, you mean?”

My sigh filled the void between us. “You feel it, too, then?”

His sigh pushed back against my own. “I feel it, cousin,” he replied. “We are both dead and alive, and what is dead cannot die again.”

“Barring a spear chunked in just the right direction.”

The sigh repeated. "Except that, yes."

I grabbed a rock of my own and tossed it out. It hopped, skipped, and promptly sank. "So back to your question then. Would it even be fair to love Steven? To love anyone for that matter if we were, as we're guessing, eternal?"

His smile returned, widened. "All's fair in love, cousin."

I looked up to the moonlit sky, the fog breaking in fits and starts. "And war," I couldn't help but add, grateful not to see any errant hovering enemies heading our way as I said it.

"Especially in war," he said, with a chuckle. "But you still do not answer the question."

I turned to him again and managed a smile of my own. "I'll let you know, Lothar, as soon as I figure it out myself."

His chuckle rumbled and crashed like the waves in front of us. "Maybe let Steven know first."

"Good idea," I said.

"Want a better one?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Duck," he suddenly whispered, pointing over my shoulder.

I gulped and did just that, the searchlight hitting our spot as we both hid behind a barricade of boulders. I listened and waited, watching for those pesky spears. And then I heard it, as did apparently Lothar, inside our heads.

We're coming for you.

CHAPTER 12

Found and Lost

I shut my mind down so that we weren't so easy to find, my face pressed up tight to the rock in front of me, Lothar's shoulder against my shoulder as we huddled there in silence. It felt much like we were two apples preparing to get bobbed.

"What now?" I mouthed to my cousin.

He lifted his head and scrunched his nose. "Not enemy," he mouthed back, then pointed to said nose. "Smell."

I did just that, and, strangely, as if things could get any stranger than they already were, I smelled a rather familiar scent. After all, I'd been surrounded by it as of late. And so I again opened my mind, my thoughts tendriling out, looking for something to grab a hold of, or someone, as was the case.

Who's there? I asked, readying myself to run or to fly, just in case.

I heard a chortle in my head. "The big bad wolf," came the snarled and quite vocal reply. "Kind of late in the evening for huffing and puffing and blowing your crumbling prison down, though."

I breathed a sigh of relief, or at least would have if I could have. "Blake," I said, then turned to Lothar. "Queerwolf."

My cousin grinned. "Is everyone in this town gay?"

Ah, another one of those obese understatements that seemed to be following me like a shadow as of late. "Close," I replied. "In any case, he's on our side." I moved from behind the boulder and waved my arms as the beam of light zeroed in on us. "Over here!" I shouted. The boat moved in closer and drew in parallel with our location before I added, "How on earth did you find us?"

"Ralph called," he replied as we hovered over and landed by his side. He shook our hands and then informed, "They saw what direction you two

were headed in and asked us to come searching. Thankfully, two men..." He gave Lothar the once-over (three times). "Two *and a half* men, I mean, who go flying over the bay are easy enough to spot with keen werewolf eyes, even in the dark and the fog."

"Thankfully," I said, echoing the sentiment. "But what happened to them, our friends? Or to the other vampires, for that matter?" I eyed him, nervously.

"Ralph said that the three vampires all went chasing after you," he replied, still eyeing Lothar, which by then I'd completely grown accustomed to. "By the time they made it from inside the hotel to the street, none of you were in sight, so they went back to your place to make sure your family was safe. Ted's heading over there right now, too, so we can all join them. Safety in numbers, I figure, or at least hope." He again turned to my cousin. "You must be Lothar."

Lothar tilted his head. "Why must I be?"

Blake again chuckled. "From what I heard, there can only be one."

"Word gets around, huh?" I asked, watching as he steered the boat back toward its dock in the Presidio.

"Boo yeah," came the reply as he swerved to miss a honking sea lion.

And then I couldn't help but laugh, despite the awful circumstances that mired the moment. "The werewolf says *boo* to the vampire. All we need is Abbott and Costello to make the scene complete."

He pointed to my cousin and grinned. "Already complete, Jack," he said, "already *way* complete."

§ § §

We found the slip and started to veer in. "Can I ask you a question, Blake?" I asked as the boat rocked against the dock.

"Ask away," he replied, turning to look my way.

I paused and nodded. "Um, how long...how long do werewolves live?"

His grin returned, joined with a tilt of his head. "Weird question, Jack."

"Weird times, Blake, but humor me, please."

He shrugged. “Like you, I’m sort of new to this, uh, *supernatural* stuff, but I am still human, so I guess I’ll live as long as I was meant to live before I became, well, *super*.”

I moved my head to the side and locked eyes with my cousin. He knew what I was thinking, even though our minds were still shut off from one another, seeing as Blake had no problem reading them if he so desired. “Thanks,” I told him, forcing a smile, then I pointed to the rescue boat beneath us. “For everything.”

The shrug repeated as he hopped off and tied her up. “Don’t mention it.”

I turned to Lothar before we too hopped off and followed. “Please,” I merely said. It was one word that held so much more.

He nodded and frowned. Whether it was because we were blood or because we were both vampires, he knew what I was asking without having to say it. The nod was because he agreed, just the same; the frown was because he wasn’t happy about it. Then again, neither was I. And yet, I knew it was the only way.

§ § §

Ten minutes later, we were in Blake’s car, pulling up to my mansion. All was quiet on the western front.

Or so it appeared.

Run! came the voice in my head as we exited the car.

Dead, said the next voice, slithering around my skull like a serpent, just as the spears came sailing overhead.

In the blink of an eye, Blake transformed, his clothes shredding off his lithe body as he instantly morphed, the hairs bursting forth, a howl and a growl forced up from his lungs as he lunged for us, taking us down behind the car as the first volley of dagger-sharp wood hit the ground right where we’d been standing a split-second earlier.

“Okay,” he panted. “Now you can mention that thanks.”

I grabbed my chest, searching for gaping wounds, but happily found none. Then I turned to Lothar as he aped the exact same action. “Okay, thanks,” I told Blake, face to muzzle with him. “Again.”

His hirsute chest rose and fell as he scanned the trees high above. “Fucking no smell and no heartbeat.”

“Tell me about it,” I lamented.

“Sorry.”

“No problem,” said I, “except that we’re trapped here. And Lord only knows how many spears they have stashed up there. So, um, maybe *problem* is correct after all.”

He growled, the sound traveling up my spine as a trickle of saliva dripped down his ferocious maw. Had I not already been terrified, I would’ve certainly been so at the sight of him. I mean, Mack and Ralph were pretty frightening to behold, post-change, but Blake, the alpha male, was nightmare made flesh and bone. And hair, lots of it. “We need a distraction,” he suggested. I turned and pointed at Lothar. “Different kind of distraction,” he amended, snarling as his eyes darted from side to side. Then he grinned, I think. Hard to tell with that jagged row of teeth of his. “I think I’ve got one in mind.”

“Just one?” I whined.

He patted my back with his mitt-like paw. “It’s a good one,” he said. “Your sonar abilities, can you tell where the spears are being chucked from?”

In truth, I had no idea, but it did make sense, I supposed. Just another thing I’d have to vamp my way through, though. “Maybe, but can’t your werewolf hearing do the same thing?”

He nodded and was instantly standing up. “Yep, but I’m going to be too busy.” And with that, he took off, so fast that I lost sight of him in a flash. In any case, Lothar and I turned our heads up and attempted to zero in on the next round of spears, pinpointing their starting places as one by one they again came raining down, whooshing all around us, the wooden weapons cracking as they smashed into the cement driveway, the noise nearly deafening all around us.

Still, fast as those spears were, they were no match for the Queerwolf. In fact, before we even knew it, he was back by our side, panting up a storm, but at least in one gorgeously feral piece. Oh, and in his arms were a stack

of those nasty spears. “Time to turn some tables, boys,” he growled, dropping them at our feet before looking up at us. “Now, where are they?”

Lothar and I pointed up into the pitch-black night. “They’re fifteen feet apart at the top of the tree-line,” I said.

“The one on the farthest right is the weakest of the three, only throwing two spears when the others throw three,” added Lothar.

Blake nodded his impossibly thick neck. “Aim for the right, then; peel off the weakest first. Then run for the side of the house while they’re, hopefully, panicking. Best guess, they won’t be expecting this and will be ducking rather than chucking.”

A tremble ran down my back. “And worst guess?”

He didn’t reply, but we all knew what the worst would be, namely a spear through our chests. “I’ll follow you two. If I hear a spear whizzing by, I’ll try and push you out of the way again.”

Lothar patted his fuzzy head. “Try hard, wolfman.”

“Queerwolf,” corrected Blake.

Lothar merely shrugged and immediately started tossing the spears in the direction our sonar had pointed to, his massive bulk sending the weapons flying at lightning speed. Mine followed right behind them, with Blake’s a second later; he aimed for the other two tree-bound baddies. And then, equally as fast, we tore from behind the car, our legs pumping as we sped to the side of the house, and hopefully to safety.

Hands again flew to chests as we dove behind the corner. One, two, three bodies landed with dull thuds on the ground where no spears could possibly reach us.

“Everyone okay?” asked Blake, his fangs retracting, hair pulling inward, bulk diminishing as his tattered clothes suddenly hung loosely off of him.

“Better than your wardrobe,” I replied, thankful again that none of us had spears sticking out of us, or at least none of the good guys. The bad guys, on the other hand, hadn’t fared so well.

In shock, they let their guards down, their minds screaming out in anger and fear as they flew to their downed comrade on the forest floor below. All three of us heard them, all three of us tuned in to the two of them—the third

of them, the weakest, forever drowned out, with at least one of our weapons clearly hitting its mark.

Leave us alone now, my mind said to theirs. *Go back to Poland while you still can.*

Never, said one.

Never, repeated the other.

You must die, said the first.

All of you must die, added the second.

I stood up and shouted. "It won't matter! You will always be what you are!"

But there was no reply, just the silence of the night and the roar of distant waves crashing along the shoreline.

§ § §

A minute later, we were entering through a side door, the entire lot of them there to greet us, relieved smiles down the line, ending abruptly with a rather obvious frown, namely my own.

"Are you okay?" asked Steven. I nodded, stifling my emotions as best I could. In truth, I ached to rush up and grab him up in my arms, but instead hung back between Blake and Lothar. He looked a bit crestfallen, but managed a grin just the same. "Thank, uh, thank goodness."

"And now there are only two of them," informed Lothar.

"We heard," said Mack, pointing to his head as he and the others did the same.

Igor spoke up next. "Shall I retrieve the body, sir?" he asked me. "Best not to waste the blood."

I smiled down at him. "Take Mack and Ralph with you, just in case," I told him, "though it seems the others have flown away for now." And then I added with as much bravado as I possibly could muster, as I stared at the werewolves in our midst, "After that, I think we can take it from here. It'll be six against two, and we know our strengths now, and their weaknesses. No use putting you all out any longer. Or, for that matter, risking your lives."

They looked up at me, confused, Mack and Ralph and Blake, and especially Steven. “Seven against two,” he added, his eyes locked on to me as mine regretfully looked away.

I shook my head and grabbed Lothar’s hand. My cousin sidled in next to me and gave it a squeeze, boring home the point as best he could. This was his reply to that *please* I’d asked him earlier. “We can take it from here,” Lothar said, adding a kiss on my cheek for good measure.

Steven’s shoulders noticeably sagged at the gesture. He started to speak up, but then promptly pressed his lips together and turned away. “As you wish,” he said over his shoulder, turning to leave as Mack and Ralph and Igor followed in his wake. He looked back one final time, eyes wide and hopeful as he added, “I’ll, uh, I’ll call you when I get home.”

But I shook my head. “It’s been a long day, Steven,” I said, rather coldly. “I’ll call you when things settle down a bit.” Inside I was crumbling, but outwardly I forced myself to appear resolute. “Thank you again, for everything.”

And in my head, I thought to myself, *I’ll be eternally grateful.*

Again he started to speak, but then caught himself, simply nodding as he left the room and then my life. Though what that word, *life*, meant any more was beyond me, beyond any of us, for that matter.

Lothar still held my hand, but more for support now, which I sorely needed right about then. Still, it was Blake who spoke up next. “That question you asked me on the boat, about how long a werewolf like me would live.”

I shrugged. “It was just a question.”

He sighed and headed in the direction of the others. “There’s obviously no love lost between Steven and me, Jack, but he deserves more than what you’re giving him right now.”

If I had any tears to cry, they would’ve been raining down my face at that very moment. Instead, I leaned into my cousin’s shoulder. “I know, Blake, but this is all I can do for now.” I blinked, paused, and whispered, “It’s for the best.”

He nodded. “Perhaps.” Then he turned to walk away.

It was then I remembered one more important thing. “And tell Mack to go order himself those tits of his, the best money can buy.” He looked back one more time and smiled, and was gone a second later.

It was then I released my hand from Lothar’s and took a seat before my legs gave out beneath me. “You did what you had to do, cousin,” he said. “For the best, as you said.”

The trio of Bolinskis stared at us in uncertainty, with Gert chiming in with, “I’ve heard of keeping it in the family, but, *blech*, this, this is no good.” She pointed at me and Lothar and made a nasty face. Well, nastier, at any rate.

Lothar chuckled. “Nah, cousin is not my type. Too scrawny.”

“Hey!” I objected, and then realized what I was objecting to and backtracked with, “Lothar’s not my type either. Too...” And not being able to find just the right word for it, I simply pointed at the great expanse of him, which took a while.

Papa Bolinski spoke up next. “In any case, you were right to send others away; this is our battle to fight, not theirs. If we die, we do not do so in vain. Such could not be said for the wolves.”

He had a point, though it didn’t make me feel any better, because, as Blake had inferred, I’d handled the situation with Steven badly. But at least I’d handled it.

Again I turned to Lothar. “Thank you for, well, *that*.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. “That is what family is for, cousin. Blood is thicker than water, yes?”

At the very sound of the word, my stomach twisted in knots. Thankfully, Igor returned soon enough, feeding us all and storing the rest for yet another rainy day. “Yes, Lothar, it sure is thicker, which is why it leaves such a nasty stain.” Again I was speaking figuratively, the stain more of an internal thing really, and just as unlikely to fade as the real deal.

Or maybe it would, in time, of which I seemed to have all too plenty of now.

§ § §

I sat in bed later that night, crossed-legged, as I gazed up at my other cousin, his image staring down at me, the eyes rather sad, knowing. “Even if I win this war of ours, Boris, what exactly would I have gained? What kind of life, if you’ll pardon the term, will I lead? And whom can I share it with?” I held up my hand as if to stop the answer. “And please don’t say Igor.”

In any case, Boris didn’t answer. Thank goodness, because it already felt like I was pretty much going cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs as it was. Not that he had the answer anyway, probably, even when he was alive. Though the phone did ring at just that moment, startling me to the quick, especially when I saw who it was on the other end.

“Steven,” I said, as I flicked my cell on, a white-hot bolt of dread rushing through my body that fairly melted me from the inside out.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know you said not to call, but...”

The word hung there, *but*, his voice reaching across the line, filled with so much apparent sorrow. And though it was killing me, I couldn’t make him feel better about what I’d done; it wouldn’t have been fair to either one of us. “You know that vamping I’ve been doing as of late?” I said instead.

“Uh huh.”

“Well, it seems that I also learned something else about what it means to be a vampire.”

He sighed. “Which is?”

The knot in my belly tightened again as I said, “A vampire needs to be with another vampire,” which may or may not have actually been the truth, but needed to be said just the same. In any case, a vampire didn’t seem to be able to be with anything or anyone else, so it appeared like an appropriate lesson to offer.

He paused and replied, “I...I don’t believe that. The heart feels what the heart feels, Jack.”

“Except I have no heart, Steven, remember? It, like me, has no feeling,” I told him, sharply, willing my voice to stay even. “You might think otherwise, but, regardless, that is the way it is. Lothar knows this, and in that, I’ve found whatever comfort I think I’ll ever be able to find.”

“Oh,” was all he could manage, though those two letters held so much more, the whole much greater than its measly parts, and it stabbed through me as surely as any of those awful spears ever could.

“Thank you again, Steven,” I said, eager to be done with it. “We’ll kill the last two, I promise, and then we’ll all be safe. My family and your pack.”

The pause returned. “Good luck, Jack,” he fairly whispered. “I hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for.”

Click went the line.

“Me too, Steven, me too.”

The door swung open then, Lothar standing there frowning. He’d obviously been listening all the while. “You don’t believe any of that, do you, cousin?”

I shrugged. Honestly, I wasn’t so sure what I believed any more. “Maybe a vampire really is meant to be with another vampire, Lothar.”

His frown remained as he moved into the room and sat down on the bed next to me. “I could hear what Steven said, about the heart wanting what the heart wants,” he said, “and I know what your heart wants.”

I stared up at him, my frown matching his. “But what it wants and what it can have are two entirely different things.”

He nodded. “We shall see, cousin, but first...”

And then I nodded. “But first we have two more vampires to kill.”

He touched his fingertip to his nose. “Binko.”

I grinned and corrected him. “Bingo.”

“Is what I said.”

My smile went northward. “Fine. In any case, there’s something I want to try first. A preemptive strike, of sorts.”

“Preemptive?”

“It means I want to strike first and prevent whatever it is they have up their sleeves next.”

“Up their sleeves? Spears can’t fit up there.”

I chuckled. “Never mind. But tomorrow you and I will be preempting together.”

“Just us?” he asked, leery at the thought.

“Just us,” I repeated. “I don’t think we’ll need the others for this.”

“And what shall we do tonight?” He rubbed his belly as he said it.

“You can’t still be hungry,” I said. “We just, uh, well, *ate*.”

But still he rubbed away, tummy rumbling. “We had equal shares,” said he, “and I am, well, not so equal.”

He had me there. Plus, with all the hubbub, not to mention the rather glum breakup with Steven, I’d barely touched a drop. In other words, my tummy also sounded much like a bubbling cauldron. “The shelter is closed, and I’d rather not go looking for bums and derelicts down in the Tenderloin, thank you please.”

He pointed up at Boris. “What did he do when he needed a snack?”

I scratched my head. “Went to someplace dark where he wouldn’t be noticed, I suppose. Someplace he could feed without being spotted or raise suspicions, but also crowded enough that he could blend in and no one would realize he didn’t have a heartbeat or a scent.”

Again his belly rumbled in complaint. “And where is such a place this late at night?”

I was already hopping off the bed before he could finish the question. I did, in fact, know of such a place, though I’d never been there myself. It wasn’t, after all, my style, not by a long shot. Then again, my style had flown out the window right about the time, well, that I had in fact flown out the window. Which was just what I was doing a scant minute later, Lothar right behind me as we quickly gained altitude.

“This is fun, yes?” he asked, soon by my side as we flew above the incessant fog, staring down at a bed of silvery white that rolled merrily along beneath us.

I’d just broken up with my boyfriend, was flying to suck the blood of some stranger, and had nearly been killed, not to mention had in fact killed someone, and he was asking me if this was fun. “Um, strangely, yes.” So

sue me. Vampires apparently have a different definition of the word *fun*. “Land in that alleyway,” I told him about five minutes later.

“What is this place?” he asked, just after we’d landed and were heading inside, the bar still rather full despite the late night hour. He turned his head from side to side as he looked around. “Is all men. Some sort of club, cousin?”

“Some sort,” I replied, then pointed to a partition against the back wall. “Snack time,” I whispered as we headed directly for it, already smelling what it was we had come for.

The partition parted, a second one just beyond, a portal to a portal. Light to dark, emphasis on the *dark*.

The room was long, narrow, encased in blackness. It was stifling hot and, by the sound and smell of it, rather full of men and sex. And, of course, blood. *Mmm*.

I can see them, but they can’t see me, yes? Lothar asked inside my head.

Chalk one up to vampire abilities. Yes, I telepathically replied, my eyes moving from one form to the next: lone men, men in twos, in threes, shirts up, shirts off, pants unzipped, open, down.

They, of course, couldn’t, as Lothar had said, see us, or smell us, or hear us, but, nonetheless, their heads turned and their eyes popped open as Lothar entered the hall-like room. He eyed them hungrily as if they were stock on a shelf.

Just suck and let’s get out of here, I willed him. He turned and grinned, a wink soon to follow. *Not what I meant*. He shrugged, and I watched as his hands inspected the inventory, his palm moving up and over and across one chest and neck and back and cheek after the next, moan after moan following in his wake. *You apparently have powers the rest of us don’t, cousin. Guess that explains a lot: the jogging vampire, the landlord, um, us, all drawn to you*.

The grin repeated. *What is phrase? Goody for me?*

Binko, I said, fingertip to nose as I, too, started my search, my belly gurgling at the proximity to so much fresh blood.

Bingo, he thought. Go, *not* ko.

I know, I know, I replied, at last finding a lone man around my own age, his hands behind his back, waiting for an opportunity. Him and me both, I figured.

My hand reached up and plucked his covered nipple. He groaned, and I moved further up, fingertips tickling his neck, my palm against his flesh, jugular beating beneath, fast and steady. I released my mind from my cousin's and locked on to the stranger's. "Forget, forget, forget," I whispered as my mouth licked and slurped, my teeth expanding, sharpening, sinking, and puncturing on through. His moan swirled around us as I drank my fill, blood again filling my meter to full.

When I turned, my cousin had already drunk and was now fulfilling other bodily needs. Go figure.

Three men were upon him, one giving mouth to mouth, the other mouth to nipple, the third mouth to engorged prick. And, yes, that too was one of those obese understatement, obese with ten extra pounds, even. Not to mention inches, because that sucker wasn't simply engorged so much as swollen, like the mighty Mississippi after a good rainfall. Like my cousin had a kickstand, which seemed like a good thing to have, since it was certainly enormous enough to topple him the fuck on over.

And yes, yes, he was my cousin. I got it, but, come on, this was like standing in front of the Grand Canyon and not looking down. And sure, my prick somehow managed its way out of my jeans as I stood there watching the scene unfold, but damn if it didn't suddenly have a mind of its own. And a hand wrapped around it, and not even my own hand at that. Again, go figure.

Lothar's eyes popped open just before he came. *Fun*, he said inside my head.

One way to look at it, I replied in kind as he shot, and I shot, and, it seemed, the entirety of the room shot, the moans and groans and sighs ricocheting around the room all at once like a cyclone of fulfilled desire. And then I wondered who would be cleaning up the mess we'd made and how much he got paid, because it clearly wasn't enough.

I stuffed my shrinking willie back inside my jeans; it took Lothar a few extra minutes to do the same. We met back on the sidewalk after that.

“No wonder you needed to snack,” I said as we headed back to the alleyway. “All your blood is flowing to one place, it would seem.”

He grinned and took to the sky. “Runs in the family.”

I flew side by side with him. “Must’ve stopped running before it hit my side of things. Maybe it needed a rest after you,” I commented. “In any case, as I said, you seem to have a certain power over people. Did you have it before?”

He shrugged and hovered higher, breaking through the fog until the sky twinkled high above. “Not like this, cousin,” he replied. “Neat, huh?”

“Neat indeed, Lothar,” said I, “but can we put it to good use?”

“I thought I was, cousin. Those men back there seemed happy enough.”

I grinned and zoomed onward, heading back home, thinking of some *other* uses for his newfound strength. Less sticky and aromatic ones, that is.

§ § §

The next morning we were up early, eager to put my plan into action, figuring it was our best chance of catching at least one of them at home. Their houses were mere blocks apart, so as I’d done before, we went *eeny, meeny, miney, mo* (the *mo* always wins, you know) and then headed there.

Well, we started to head there, at any rate, but Igor stopped us before we made it out the door. “The shields, sir,” he said, handing both of us one, the steel heavy, but thankfully so, I supposed. Best not to scrimp on protective armor.

“Thanks, Igor,” I said. “And if something should happen...”

“It won’t, sir,” he said, stopping me cold as he opened the front door for us. “Just be careful, and stick Lothar in front of you. Added protection.”

“Hey!” objected Lothar.

I pushed my cousin out the door. “They won’t try anything in the light of day in the middle of where they live,” I told him and turned to look at Igor. “Right?”

He shrugged, sort of, and shut the door.

Lothar blinked. “He wasn’t much fun when we were growing up either.”

“Shock,” said I, leading us to the car.

And then we were off. It was a beautiful, crisp San Francisco day, not a cloud in the sky or a patch of fog in the distance. Sad we couldn't enjoy it, but I had to do what I had to do. After that, when they came to their senses, we could go bask on the beach. The private beach, that is, because Lord only knew what kind of pandemonium would ensue if I took Lothar to the gay beach shirtless, or, *gulp*, pantsless. For that, I had the memory of the night before already forever etched in my brain—in wide-screen, which was the only way to view it.

"Not too late to call the wolves," Lothar opined a scant few minutes into our drive, staring out the window as he said it.

He was probably right, but I needed to do this on my own now. Or our own, at least, vampires only. "They've done enough," I said, instead. "We'll call the cavalry should the tide turn."

He looked back my way with a bemused grin on his impossibly stunning face. "In English, please."

I grinned. "That was English."

"If you say so."

We drove the rest of the way in silence, which was probably a safer bet, pulling up to the house fifteen minutes later. We didn't bother with the phony heartbeats or the fake scents. They knew about us as much we knew about them, so it seemed rather pointless now. Though of course we carried our shields in front of us, because we weren't stupid.

The house was nondescript in a small neighborhood. I didn't see any traps, though I was certain we could be spotted as soon as we pulled into the driveway. Then again, like I'd said, I didn't think spears would come shooting out at us even if they did see us. Fortunately, I was right on that account.

We didn't open the car doors, at least not right away. Instead, I lowered the wall around my mind. *We come in peace*, I transmitted. It was an oldie but a goodie and, I figured, the best way to open the conversation.

Fuck off, came the reply. So maybe my opening wasn't the best way.

Talk to us or we're going to kill you. Second best, right?

The baddie paused and replied, *We are already dead. What is not alive is dead. You already did that to us, you and your kind.*

I looked at Lothar and said, “Bitter party, table for one.”

He grinned. “Ah, I got that one. Funny, cousin.”

But the voice inside my head said, *Not laughing. Go away.*

I sighed and pushed open the car door with my foot. *Look, we need to talk, before anyone else gets...speared. Too many people have wound up that way now. Generations, if I’m not mistaken.*

Thanks to your ancestors, he grumbled.

But I am not them, I replied.

All alike, he added. *All alike, a straight line from them to you.*

Now I was getting angry. No one used the word *straight* when referring to me and got away with it. *There are six of us and two of you. If you want to make it six to zero, fine, but at least hear us out.*

A minute later, his front door opened. He was alone: no spears, no guns, and certainly no smiles and waves for yours truly. Or us truly, as was the case. Still, when he got a look at Lothar, his eyes did noticeably widen. Par, as I’ve said, for the course, but I was aiming for a hole in one.

“You have two minutes. Out here. You can leave the shields in the car.”

“Fuck that,” said Lothar, the shield held over his perfect chest as we approached.

I agreed and covered mine, too. No way was this guy...uh, vampire...to be trusted, neighbors watching or no neighbors watching. Then I started it all off. “What do you hope to accomplish by killing us?”

He grimaced and slicked back his already-slicked-back hair. Dude was certainly pulling off the whole vampire look, even at that ungodly hour. Jet-black hair, jet-black eyes, pale skin, and a bathrobe that looked much like a cape. Sinister, to say the least. “To break the curse your family carries. To set my family free of it.” He wiped his hands together. “Simple as that.”

Which was just what we’d thought. Score one for us for a change. “What we have is genetic. It is passed down from generation to generation. There is no curse. Killing us won’t accomplish anything.” Amen to that.

His grimace did a double axle across his otherwise handsome, if pallid, face. "This man here, how did he become vampire?" He was pointing at Lothar, which took a few seconds, seeing how much there was to point at.

I paused, already sensing where he was going with it. "He's related to me. His genes are similar to my own. I could only change him because of that fact," I slowly and carefully explained, making sure he understood every word. "Your family, generations ago, were also somehow related to mine and were able to be changed as well. Like you said, simple as that."

He grinned and nodded. He was getting it, thank goodness. "Is curse," he said. "You die. He dies. You all die." Then the door slammed in our faces. Guess he wasn't getting it so much, after all.

Lothar patted my back. "Nice try. At least no holes in chest, though."

I frowned and turned and headed back to the car. We drove away in silence until the distance was great enough for the baddie not to be able to hear us. "Did you look inside the house?" I asked.

He turned and nodded. "You saw it, too?"

Then I nodded, glumly. "Family photos. Him and a woman. The other dead vampires in a few pictures, also with women." I turned my attention from the road to him. "What if they all had wives, all the ones we killed?"

His frown matched my own. "Then killing the last two won't end it, cousin."

"Which is why he didn't seem too concerned that it was six against two," I made note. "And we are only six, no more, no less. What if there's a second wave of them still to come? What if this was just the scouting party?"

He patted my knee. "Don't know all the words, but get the meaning, cousin."

"Which means we're screwed."

This time he slapped my knee. "Ah, now those words I understand."

"Figures."

CHAPTER 13

The Great Mistake

“How did it go?” asked Gert as we trudged back into the kitchen, ice-chilled blood thankfully awaiting us.

“Do you know the word *shitty*?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Then shitty.” And so I explained what we’d found out.

She nodded, frowned. “I know Polish women,” she offered once I was through. “Their husbands are dying, and they do something.”

I slouched in my chair. “So you’re guessing that they’re on their way here? Reinforcements?”

Her nodding went into overdrive, goiter shaking all the while. “Guessing, yes, but is good guess.”

“Good for them, bad for us,” I corrected her.

She touched fingertip to nose. It seemed to be an affectation that pervaded my family. In any case, without Steven’s help, I couldn’t get in touch with Quincy from the State Department to see if the wives had applied for visas and were on the way, but I did, thank goodness, still have the business card for Carl, the pack’s travel agent. I hoped (prayed, really) that Steven hadn’t already told the pack to break off their association with us.

He answered on the first ring and didn’t seem standoffish, so I figured that my break-up with Steven hadn’t been made public yet. Still, as it turned out, we were fairly screwed just the same when it came to the eventual results. And not the good kind of screwed, either, the one that makes you sticky and puts a smile on your face, I mean. See, I told Carl what we looking for, namely women with the same last names as the six baddie vampires, both alive and dead. He called me back an hour later and informed me, much to my chagrin, that all had fairly common Polish last

names, and that about thirty women with said names were booked on flights heading for San Francisco within the next several days.

In other words, back to square one. Heck, as for that, it seemed that we weren't even playing on the board any more.

"Now what we do?" asked Papa Bolinski.

The six of us sat around the table, staring at our empty glasses, rings of dried blood coating the rims. "I'm open to suggestions," I grumbled, elbows on the table, chin resting in my upturned palm.

Gert grinned. "If they all here, we just go back to Poland. Can't kill what can't find."

I had to admit, she was growing on me, especially when she put her hand over my own and gave a squeeze. Not my mom's, but certainly the next best thing right about then. In any case, it wasn't an awful idea, but it was just forestalling the inevitable. So I gave a squeeze in return and replied, "They'll keep looking for us, no matter where we are, that much I'm certain of." Besides, Poland didn't seem like the ideal hideout. I mean, were there even gay bars there? Did Warsaw have a Castro District, a Castro Street? Heck, a Castro Corner? "Next?"

Igor raised his hand. "We know where they live, sir. We could bomb them."

Because, yes, I seemed to be awash in bombs lately, not. "That would work, Igor, but also kill a lot of innocent bystanders."

He shook his head, hump quick to follow. "I meant indoor pests kind of bomb, sir, like for cockroaches. Flush them out into the open, then *splat*." He slammed his diminutive fist down on the table.

I stared at him and smiled at the visual of them hacking away as they poured out into the street. "Yep, that would flush them out, Igor, but then what? Spear them in the public eye?" Then I patted his forearm. "Remember, we have to kill them on the D.L." And before they could all look at me funny, I added, "On the down low." And just to make certain... "Without getting found out."

Now they were all nodding. "So we have to lead them here," said Lothar, "out of sight. But doesn't that put us at risk, too?"

Now it was my turn to nod. “But at least we’ll have the home court advantage.” Took them a moment, but they all seemed to get it. “And maybe we can up our odds while we’re at it.”

“How’s that?” asked Gert, suddenly looking eager. I took it that her life in Poland was never this, well, *interesting*. Then again, neither had mine been before all this, and I for one missed my old humdrum, boring existence. The money, of course, helped me forget this fact, but only by a smidge. Or a few million smidges, but still.

I smiled back at her. “Before, they came, they waited, and then attacked when they could. For us, for Boris, too, I’d imagine, it was always a defensive maneuver on our part.” My smile widened. “Now we play offensively.”

“Strike first. Strike hard!” she shouted, the next of the Bolinskis to slam their fists on the table.

“Hard!” shouted Papa.

“Hard!” echoed Mama and Lothar and Igor.

It was a word that, before my transformation, always made me a bit giddy. Now, a slight bit of apprehension got added to the mix, mainly because it no longer had the same connotation. Sad for me, hopefully sadder for the bad guys and their wives.

§ § §

And so we set about to build our offensive line.

First thing was first: security. Oh, sure, Boris had some, but with just him and Igor around, it was minimal at best, especially when it came to powerful enemies like the ones we had. Our security, suffice it to say, became maximal, times ten.

Motion detectors were concealed everywhere, low and high, especially the latter. Same thing for cameras, taping all day and night; the monitors set up in the kitchen also watched all day and night. If anyone sneaked in, we’d know about it. And we’d know how many of them there were and where they were hiding, too.

Then the sonar jammers. Big suckers, the best money could buy. Thankfully, I now had the best money. Sure, it blocked our sonar abilities,

too, but the bad guys and gals couldn't hear our thoughts or sense us for well over a mile. And even if they could get onto the property, their aim would be plumb awful. Basically, it would be like shooting in the dark.

Lastly, the traps. State of the art. See, we told the installers we had a bad vermin problem. All in all, it was an appropriate explanation. It also explained why they needed to place said traps high up in the trees, lethal steel-tipped spikes easily tripped if something scampered about, or hovered over. And if the wayward chinchilla was unlikely enough to cross the property line, so be it. I could live, pardon the expression, with myself.

Then all we had to do was wait.

And wait.

And wait some more.

Days, in fact, passed as we sat in the kitchen, staring in anticipation at the wall of monitors, the alarms dreadfully silent, the screens devoid of baddies. Apart from feeding, choosing yet a different homeless shelter than the previous one, we did little else. And when you don't breathe or eat much, and have no real need for sleep or rest, *little else* can get big-time boring.

And so we practiced our spear chucking with the sonar jammers on. And if you've never seen three be-humped Poles and one with a goiter that could've registered for its own zip code, and I'm assuming only I have that unlikely distinction, then all I can say is that the SyFy Channel would've had a field day with my family. Megacroc vs. the Bolinskis. I, however, wasn't so lucky, nor could I change the channel.

Whoosh went the spears. *Jiggle* went the body humps. *Gurgle* went my belly. In other words, not a pretty sight.

Still, sturdy Polish family that they are, after a bit of practice, they were finding their marks, their spears soaring majestically through the air, splitting one log after another. *Whoosh, jiggle, gurgle, CRACK!* And that sight far outweighed the other one. Well, maybe not far, but it was a confidence booster at the very least, and right about then, we all needed a bit of confidence.

Especially knowing that the odds might no longer be in our favor all too soon.

And that *all-too-soon* happened, as it routinely does, all too soon.

The six of them, four women and the two surviving males, arrived in a vampire swarm in the dead of night, the moon hidden by fog so that you could barely see a foot in front of you. Then again, we didn't need to see or feel or hear; we had motion detectors that did the trick ever so nicely.

And boy, did they blare, shocking us all into readiness.

First we waited, though, watching the screens as our booby traps went all booby on their asses. Oh, sure, it was dark as pitch, and the infrared didn't do any good, seeing as they had no body heat, but you could still see the whites of their eyes as said eyes went wide, and could see their teeth as their mouths howled in surprise. Though pain, of course, had stopped right about the time their hearts did. Still, it was all a rather lovely spectacle to witness, even if only from the safety of our kitchen.

And then of course the rest our offensive line threw them for a loop, too. Surprised the daylights out of them, in fact, or the nightlights, as was the case. Here they thought they'd be setting up a surprise ambush and *WHAMMO*, the shoe was quickly on the other foot. Or make that, the spikes were quickly riddling their exposed bodies, shooting through hands and arms, butts and thighs, all before they knew what hit them.

"Die, evil ones!" shouted Gert, fists clenched as she thrust them in the air.

Only, despite being shot and shot and shot some more, the spikes weren't hitting any chests, mainly because all of the vampires almost instantly flung their arms up for protection. Fuckers. And then they all flew off, wobbling and dipping and swaying as they hovered away.

All, that is, save for one.

"That one," I said, pointing at the monitor. "That one is trapped, a spike through the foot, it looks like. Went on through and hit the tree behind it."

"Let's go!" shouted Lothar, already hopping up, the rest of us quick to follow before the entire family was up, up, and away.

Into the night we sped, grouped together, heading to the spot where we knew we'd find the bad guy, except it wasn't a guy whom we found. "One of the wives," I managed, coming to halt a few feet away, the others fanning out on either side of me, all eyes on the female captive who struggled to free her foot from the spike and the tree.

"Stop," Gert said to her, flinching as the captive tried to pry the spike away.

"Go to hell," said the woman, her accent thick, hatred pulsing off of her sure as heat from a flame. "You killed friends, family, generations of us. You all must die."

Way to win friends and influence people, I thought to myself. "Maybe, but that wasn't us. We just want to live our lives now and let you live yours."

She stopped thrashing and spit in my general direction, missing me by a hair. "Hah. What life? This is no life. I want heartbeat back. I want blood, sweat, and tears."

Huh, I have a related CD back home you could borrow. "Can't you just settle for peace?"

The spit repeated, wide and outside. "To hell with you and your peace. You all die, then we have peace."

It was then that Lothar acted, more quickly than any of us could blink, think, or shout. Fast as lightning, he wrenched the spike from the bloodless foot; then, even faster, he whipped it dead ahead, major emphasis on the *dead*. Because, unlike the wads of spit, this projectile found its intended mark.

I gasped as I stared at the spike-turned-dagger, now embedded in her chest as it quivered in place. Her eyes rolled back inside her head as her body slumped down, held to the tree by the thick rod of steel, and a final hiss spewed up from her lungs.

"You...you killed her," I said.

"Technically..."

I turned to look at him. "You know what I mean."

He nodded. “Yes, cousin, but there was no reasoning with her, with any of them. This way, at least, we dine.”

He had a point, and it now rested deep within an ancient pine tree. Still, even as the others freed her lifeless body, Igor soon to drain her for future meals, I knew we’d unleashed something that would come back to bite us in the ass.

Call it a vamping intuition.

§ § §

“They’ll be back,” I lamented, once we were inside the kitchen again. “They keep saying it—we all must die.”

Mama Bolinski squinted her eyes and pursed her lips. “Then they all must die first.”

She was right, of course. No more reasoning with them. That tactic was pointless. It was kill or be killed, and as I looked around the table at my family, at my flesh and stagnant blood, at their fierce determination, I smiled and nodded. “All of them,” I agreed, “every last one.”

“But how?” asked Igor. “They know about the traps now.”

I grinned. “So we build a better trap, then.”

“And what do we use instead of cheese to catch these rats?” asked Papa, his smile now matching my own until it was contagious, the long row of smiles fairly lighting up the room.

“Blood,” said I, “lots and lots of blood.”

Not to mention some good old-fashioned trickery.

See, what I’d discovered was, whenever we exerted ourselves, when we flew, when we fought, when we used our bat-like sonar, our energy got depleted much more rapidly, the need to feed brought on sooner than usual. And with that battle we’d just fought, I knew the enemy would need to replenish their reservoirs very soon. So, I figured, why not give them what they needed? Make it easy on them, in fact? Dinner for five, no reservations needed.

And so Igor gathered the flesh blood from our recent kill and poured it all in mason jars, the viscous liquid sloshing around as we loaded it inside both

my car and Igor's. Then we piled in, three of us in each car, the trunks chock-full of spears.

"Now what?" asked Lothar.

I grabbed for a jar and removed the lid, the heavenly aroma instantly wafting up our sinus cavities, pulling at our very souls, it appeared. "Better than cheese, yes?"

He groaned, which made my jeans instantly go tight in the crotch. "Uh huh." If he could've salivated right about then, I'm sure he would've. And if we were drawn to the scent, having just recently fed, I was certain that the baddies would be pulled even more so. How does one refuse sustenance, after all?

Gert tapped me on the shoulder from the back seat. "So we drive by their homes and lead them outside, yes? But where do we lead them to? They won't come back to mansion so soon, knowing what they know now, about traps."

I grinned, already knowing the answer. "Someplace dark, someplace without prying eyes, where no one will see us."

"Back room of bar?" asked Lothar, that groan of his returning, the zipper in my jeans practically bursting at the seams.

"What bar?" asked Gert. "I like bar, too, or used to. Before, I mean."

I knew what *before* she was referring to but was choosing instead to focus on the *after*. "Never mind," I replied, "and no, not the bar." Fun as that sounded, minus the backseat passenger in said bar. That image instantly blotted out the rather fetching one that had worked its way up, settling my woodie down in no time flat. "Just hold the mason jars out of the window, please, lids open. We'll zoom by their houses, a block over from each, draw them out, but ensure that they don't catch sight of us. I'm positive they'll be able to smell the blood and will follow, hopefully minus any weapons."

Then again, even if they did have weapons, we'd still have the upper hand. We were six to their five. We had time to set the trap. They were probably weak from hunger, or at least still rattled from the recent attack. All this added up to certain victory. So, with that in mind, we drove near their houses, the blood held out. Igor, close behind in his car, had his

passengers ape the maneuver of holding the jars out, until the neighborhood reeked of fresh human blood.

Seconds later, we were zooming northwest, to the darkest, most deserted nearby location I could think of.

“I do not know how to golf,” said Gert, staring at the great expanse of lawn in front of us. “What, instead of fight, we putt?”

I parked and hopped out, Igor pulling up alongside of us. “Nope, we fight,” I said. “Grab the spears and fly, one of us per tree. Ring the area as best as you can. Do not communicate, by mouth or otherwise. As soon as you see them in plain sight, start tossing your weapons.” I pointed to the darkened tree line. “Now go, and be safe.”

I watched as, one by one, they took off, hovering at great speeds, while I grabbed the blood and doused the green with it, away from our cars so they wouldn’t spot them and potentially put two and two together. Then I, too, flew for the nearest tree, to an upper branch, eyes scanning down below as I watched and waited, breathless, or at least as close as I was ever going to come.

I felt them before I saw them, felt their minds, their hunger. They were weak, as I’d suspected, in desperate need of the blood that had been wasted on the green lawn down below. And it was then, just before they came into view, that I knew something was off, because, sadly, there weren’t five of them. My mind was latching on to more than that, a great deal more, and I knew in an instant where our mistake had been.

“Children,” I grunted, causing the approaching swarm to stop in their tracks, the air around us suddenly silent save for the rustling of the trees. “Fall back!” I hollered to my family. “Back to the mansion!”

And then I heard the wail inside my head. *You killed my wife!* The sound was nearly deafening, the sadness infused with rage as he repeated it again and again and again, until my thumpless heart felt like it would shatter.

Still, I managed to flee, to fly as fast as I was able, my family directly behind me, equally as fast, and certainly faster than the weakened horde behind us. For that I was grateful, or at least would have been.

Close, so close. But close is only good enough in hand grenades and horseshoes. Too bad we didn't have the former right about then.

Because, though we were indeed faster, making it back to the mansion a scant while later, back to the safety of our home base, there was a weapon at their disposal we hadn't counted on.

"Gert!" I cried out as the front door slammed behind us.

She staggered in last, her face impossibly white, almost translucent, the pain strangely evident. Though not as evident as the eighth-hole flag pole protruding through her chest, her once-yellow blouse now a deep, dark red. They'd clearly missed her heart but not by all that much.

"Gert!" I repeated as she crashed to the floor, the wooden pole splintering in two, much of it still embedded inside of her.

I sank to my knees and cupped her head in my hand. *Oh, to be able to cry*, I thought. "Gert," I whispered.

She opened her eyes, a pinprick of blue visible, the rest bloodshot. "Bastards."

I chuckled, still gladly able to do that much. "We'll get them, Gert, every last one of them." Except, now that every last one included a whole nest of children, I wasn't so sure. I mean, women were one thing, and one big thing at that, but kids took this war of ours to a whole different level.

She winced. Perhaps a pain that severe could still be felt in some deep part of her. "Not children," she managed, before falling deathly silent.

I reached for a shard of wood and raked it across my arm, precious drops of blood quickly seeping out across my cold skin. I held the wound to her mouth and squeezed my arm. Her lips moved, but just barely, my blood keeping her in this world, if only by a meager thread. "Hold on, Gert." I pointed to Igor. "Get what's left. Anything. All of it."

Igor jumped and took off, hunched back disappearing a second later as we heard him running to the basement. He returned a minute after that, barely a few pints of blood in his held-out hands. "This is all, sir."

I stared down at Gert, at all the blood that had been lost, and knew that what we had wouldn't begin to be enough. "Everyone, find a knife and do what you can."

Mama Bolinski reached her hand out and placed it over my own, her face sad as she stared at me. “The flying, the fight, it’s already drained us, Jack. What we can give her might not be enough, might hurt us, too, make us vulnerable to *them*.” She pointed to the kitchen window, to the blackness that couldn’t hide the fact that a multitude of them were waiting, looking for a way in through our barricades. If they did that and we were weak, we’d all be done for.

Still, Lothar retrieved a knife and jammed it into his arm, his blood quickly replacing mine over Gert’s parted, cracked lips.

My wound healed almost instantly as I strode a few feet away, Igor by my side. “What did she mean, *not children*?”

He nodded and replied, “We are all the age we were meant to be, sir, the age everyone expects us to be. And will be these apparent ages until we no longer roam this earth.”

I knew in an instant what he was getting at. “The men and women, the children out there, they aren’t the ages everyone expects them to be, right?”

His nodding continued. “They despise being vampires, sir.” It was a cryptic response, but still I understood.

I forced a sigh from my lungs. Not easy, mind you. “Can we multiply, Igor? Have babies, our kind?”

“I believe so, sir,” he replied. “Boris, in fact, was a mere hundred years old or so. That much he told me once. So his parents must’ve had him post-change.”

“But if *they*...” I pointed out the window, “...hated being what they are, as we know they do, then they wouldn’t multiply, wouldn’t propel the *curse* onward. So those children...”

His nodding stopped, replaced by a frown. “Are probably centuries old, sir, ancients in child-like form.”

“Probably,” I echoed.

“It stands to reason, sir.”

“So it wouldn’t be like killing an innocent, right? Wouldn’t be like slaughtering a child?”

He stared down at Gert, still thankfully suckling from what Lothar could spare. “What do you think she would want you to do, sir?” He looked back up at me and hazarded the tiniest of grins.

“Kill them all,” I replied.

“In war, sir, there is no right or wrong,” he said, “only survival.”

Meaning, my conscience had to take a backburner to what needed to be done. Needed to be done, not just for my sake, but for my entire family’s. “Call Ralph and Mack, Igor. Quickly.”

“Not Steven, sir?”

Even his name sent an eddy swirling through my belly. And yet I’d made my bed when it came to him, and I still had to lie in it, alone. “Not Steven, Igor. In fact, just tell the wolves that we need nothing more than a diversion. Tell them not to approach the mansion, no heroics.”

He nodded. “As you wish, sir.” And then he was gone.

When Lothar looked like he spared his last spareable drop, Papa stepped in, the knife slashing through, the near-stagnant blood dripping down. Again I looked out the window, praying that our werewolf friends would arrive quickly, would be able to afford us some time to regroup.

And then we heard it, a howl, a second howl, but then more, many more, which didn’t make sense. I knew that the Queerwolf’s pack wasn’t that big, and also knew that Steven’s couldn’t possibly get from the Castro to my mansion that quickly. Still, it didn’t matter; the horde outside retreated. I felt it; they were indeed out there, and I instantly felt their minds shrinking away.

I ran to the front door and peeked outside. A moment later, Ralph came in to view from the east, Mack from the west, both of them in full-on wolf mode, panting and baring their razor-sharp canines.

“How?” I managed.

Mack grinned, I think. Hard to tell with all those teeth of his. Then he ran so rapidly that even with my keen eyesight, all I could see was a blur. The howl came next, then another, and another, all from seemingly different locations.

I looked at Ralph. "Gets 'em every time," he said, with a hairy, clawed thumbs-up. "Do you need any more help?"

I turned around and saw Mama Bolinski now perched over Gert, so aside from Igor and what little blood we had on tap, we were quickly running out of time. "A doctor," I groaned, staring back at the approaching pair.

They met me at the door and peeked past me. "You can't, Jack," said Mack, his paw on my shoulder. "There would be too many questions, and ones you couldn't possibly answer."

"Too many people would see you, Jack," added Ralph. "Because, this time of night, you'd need to go to the emergency room. And even if they treated her, they'd quickly realize that you're not..."

"Human," I said, finishing his train of thought.

"Human," he agreed, with a nod of his shaggy head. "Right."

I walked over and crouched down, my hand on her ice-cold forehead. "I can't let her die. She's all I have." I pointed to the others. "*They're* all I have."

Mack whined like a dog that had been kicked. "You heal quickly, Jack, your kind. Our kind as well," he said. "You just need to close her up and replenish her blood supply."

"Gee," I replied, with a grimace. "That all? And what if the baddies return? Then what?"

Ralph drew in closer and also bent down, picking up the knife we'd all been using. He slashed it across his arm, as we all had, and began to administer the blood to Gert. In an instant, her eyes popped open.

"Oh," she squeaked out, "high octane." She forced a weak smile on her face.

"Are you in...in pain, Gert?" I hazarded to ask.

She shook her head. "There, but distant. Like a nearly forgotten memory."

"So she can be moved," said Ralph, his blood dripping into her mouth, the smell of it so enticing that it took all my strength not to suck on his arm

as well, the others, too, by the looks on their ashen faces, all of us weak as kittens now, save for Igor.

“But where?” I asked, my head fairly swimming for need of blood, not to mention fear that the vampires would return *en masse*. “It would have to be close by and out of sight.”

Ralph stood and then lifted Gert in his arms as if she were nothing more than a simple rag doll. “Close and safe,” he said. “The boat.”

“The Queerwolf’s grandfather’s boat?” I asked.

“Just Gramps is there, probably asleep,” said Ralph. “It’ll be safe, for now. Give us some time to fix...” he tilted his head down to Gert “...this.”

I nodded, but my grimace remained. “Fine,” I said. “You’ll run with her, and we’ll fly?” He nodded as well as I set my hand on his shaggy, broad shoulder. “Okay then, and, uh, thanks.”

He was already heading out the door before I could change my mind. Then again, what would I change it to? We were sitting ducks the way things stood. “Fly quickly, Jack, just in case.”

The two of them were again a blur as I replied, “Good luck with that.” Then I turned and stared, one by one, at my family. “You heard the, uh, wolfman. Fly quickly. But stay in the shadows as much as possible. And Igor, you take up the rear; you’re the strongest now.”

It was the biggest smile I’d ever seen on his face. Not a pretty one, mind you, just big. “Yes, sir!”

And with that, we rose. In fits and starts, though, and mostly the former. In truth, it felt like being woken up out of a sound sleep and told that you had to then run a marathon. After you had painted your house and cleaned out the rain gutters, blindfolded. Seriously. Still, we were nothing if not resilient, not to mention in fear of being speared at any moment, so we did what we had to do and made it to the thankfully nearby boat about twenty minutes later.

Mack and Ralph were already there, standing to one side of Gert. Standing to the other side was an old man in his blue jammies, a worried look on his withered face. He stared up when we all came in for two-point landings (far from our usual three-point ones).

“Well, fuck me to November,” he coughed out.

“Excuse me?” I managed.

“Was just gettin’ used to the whole *wolf* thing, and now here we got ourselves some oversized mosquitoes, and nary a can of Raid in sight.”

“You must be Gramps,” I said, hand held out as I strode in closer.

“Must be,” he said. “Too bad I ain’t no Doctor Kildare, though.” Then he pointed at Gert, completely avoiding my outstretched hand, which I quickly retracted as I, too, looked down.

“No medical kit on the boat?” I hazarded.

He held out the one that was sitting hidden behind him, then held out a few Band-Aids, some gauze, some tape, and a bunch of Q-Tips. “Guess they don’t make ’em for no gaping chest wounds.”

Ralph spoke up next. “It’s not the wound I’m worried about,” he said. “She needs blood, and lots of it. And we’re all clearly not enough.”

Gramps coughed. “My grandson ate a sea lion once. Think that’ll do?”

Igor shook his head. “Human blood only, sir.”

He cringed. “Well now, don’t look at me.” He covered his neck with his liver-spotted hand. “Mine’s mostly pickled anyway. It’ll give the old gal a good buzz, but that’s about it.”

“Hurry,” wheezed the old gal in question, eyes glazing over as she stared up at me.

My stomach lurched. “Igor,” I said, turning his way, “it’s up to you. We’re all too weak. Think you can do it?”

He frowned and scratched his head, but then a strange grin bubbled its way up to the surface before he reached inside his front pocket and removed his iPhone. “Take your shirt off, Lothar,” he said, nearly in a pant at the mere thought.

“Now, Igor?” I asked. “You think this is the time for risqué snapshots?”

He nodded. “Trust me, sir. It’s late, but not late enough for, well...” He pointed at my cousin, who was already removing his T-shirt, muscled chest quickly revealed as we all stood there, eyes glued to him, Mack and Ralph ferally drooling all the while. And who could rightly blame them? Trust me,

if I had any drool left, it would've been pooling on the deck right about then.

"Now what?" I asked Igor, who had already snapped away and was now furiously typing on the pad.

He looked up a short while later, the phone put away. "Now we wait," he replied.

I groaned. "Wait? We don't have much time, Igor. How long do we have to wait?"

The grin remained there, as much out of place as the Pope in a brothel, I guess. I mean, I'd never met the Pope before, but still. "Trust me, sir, it probably won't be long."

"Probably?" said Mama Bolinski, now kneeling by Gert's head, her hand stroking Gert's cheek.

He shrugged. "Best guess, fifteen minutes at most." Then he removed the bottle of blood from inside his buttoned shirt; it was our last reserve, our last hope. He walked over and sat next to Mama and then slowly poured the red fluid inside Gert's open mouth. "This should hold her until then." He bent further down and kissed her on the forehead. "Hold on, Gert. Hold on."

Please, Gert, hold on, I thought, willing my last vestiges of strength her way, as were, I was sure, the entire lot of us, all waiting and hoping that whatever it was that Igor had done would work.

And so we had fifteen minutes to, well, operate, so to speak. Lothar and I held Gert down while Mack and Ralph yanked the remainder of the pole out of her chest. She winced, but otherwise remained as she was. Almost instantly she started to heal, the wound slowly closing in on itself. Still, it would take some time to completely close up, so we improvised a bit and wrapped her tightly in some tarp.

"That should keep whatever blood she has remaining where it is," I said, crossing my fingers as I said it.

We stood in silence after that. Intermittently, I'd look at my watch. Five minutes, seven, ten. *Come on. Come on.* Twelve, fifteen. *Hurry.*

"She doesn't look so good," said Mama, sitting on the deck now as she held Gert's hand in hers.

I turned to Igor. "Are you sure you did it correctly?"

He smiled and pointed to the dock behind us. "Oh, yes, sir."

My head whipped around as a dozen men headed our way, all jostling to be the first. But the first for what? "Who did you send those photos to, Igor?" I whispered out of the corner of my mouth as we all locked our minds onto theirs, their legs freezing in place as we took control, Mack and Ralph especially. They had, thank goodness, reverted back to human form and found some clothes below deck by that point.

"Where else would I send photos of Lothar shirtless, in the middle of the night?" he asked, the grin fast returning.

Mack and Ralph and I replied in unison, "Craigslist!"

"Men seeking men," said Igor. "They didn't have a men-seeking-fresh-blood section, but I thought it'd do in a pinch."

I walked over and hugged him, patting his, *blech*, hump for good measure. "You're a genius, Igor."

"Yes, sir," he said, "I know. Now let's drain them while Gert's still able to drink."

"Not drain completely," I corrected him, "just enough to get her back on her feet and us back in the air."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself, sir."

So, while Mack and Ralph held them in a sort of trance, the rest of us got our meters back up into the green. Then we siphoned as much as we could from all of them and jarred it all up.

"Time to send them home," I told the wolves.

"Wait!" shouted Lothar. "The blond is cute. Can I keep? You know, just for little while?"

In fact, the blond was beyond cute. Maybe not compared to Lothar, but good enough to, as he put it, keep, although we were far from out of hot water. Really, it was still scalding, bubbling, steaming. "You can post again later, cousin, when we're out of this mess."

He nodded. "Yes, you give me this Craig's number. I call later, ask for blond." He chuckled. "Only in America."

Probably not, but I didn't want to burst his flaxen-haired bubble.

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CHAPTER 14

What the Fuck?

“How are you feeling?” I asked Gert when we were all sitting on deck, staring out at the moonlit ocean, her hand in mine as the boat rocked us into a semblance of calm.

She squeezed my hand. “Better, Jack.” Then she turned and winked. “But one more minute and Gert would have met her maker.”

I held back the need to giggle as I imagined that encounter, at her maker coming to the realization that indeed, everyone made mistakes, but said instead, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

She nodded. “Glad I’m okay, too, but no more golf courses.” She pointed to the tight wrap of tarp around her ample chest. “Hole in one is not as fun as I thought it would be.”

And then I did indeed chuckle. “This family has an odd sense of humor.”

To which Gramps added, “This family is just plain old odd, boy.”

Granted, but God love ’em.

“Guess we’ll go home then,” I said, slapping my knee before standing up.

But Ralph shook his head and lifted his face in the air, followed quickly by Mack, who was doing the exact same thing, eyes scanning the land behind us as I suddenly stood frozen to the spot. “Untie the boat, Gramps,” he whispered, motioning for the rest of us to keep silent.

Gramps grimaced, but did as was told. A minute later, the engines were revving and the boat was pulling away from its dock. “Where to?” Gramps asked, over his shoulder.

Ralph and Mack both pointed to the horizon, which was just starting to come to life, the black of night giving way to a deep, dark blue, the sun yawning its way toward us. I squinted into the darkness behind us, but heard nothing, smelled nothing, saw nothing. And, yet, I knew something *or things* were out there.

Ten minutes later, with us far out into the mighty Pacific, I was again allowed to speak. “What was it?”

Mack frowned and leaned over the railing. “That swarm. Couldn’t smell them, of course, but I could hear them well enough as they flew through the trees.”

“We’re accustomed to the sound of the woods,” explained Ralph, “and that sound was new to us. So they were either looking for you all...”

“Or waiting in ambush,” said I. “Fuck.”

“Language,” scolded Gramps, pointing at the ladies present.

“Is English,” informed Gert, thinking Gramps was asking a question and not issuing a command. “Good word, *fuck*.”

Gramps grinned at her remark. “Not what I meant, but fine. *Fuck* it is then. But just the same, we can’t stay out here forever.”

I pointed south. “Mexico is nice this time of year, I hear.” I was only semi-joking. Still, I pointed in that direction. “That way, Gramps. Keep some distance from us and the coastline. When we’re in front of my mansion, we’ll stop. Maybe we can see if they’re waiting for us there.” Gramps turned the boat and headed that way. A short while later, I said, “Okay, hold it here.” Then I looked to the wolves. “Well?”

Again they turned their heads up but shrugged this go-around. “Nothing unusual,” said Ralph.

“Which doesn’t mean anything,” amended Mack, “And if they’re waiting for you and spot you as you’re flying in, you’re sure to get speared. And a spear is significantly thicker and sharper than a golf course pole, I hate to say.”

I squinted into the distance, my mansion tiny from our new vantage point. Mack was right, though; if we flew back now, they’d be sure to see us without any cover to help us along. Except it was then that I realized that we had the perfect cover all along, and lots of it, too. An ocean of it, to be exact.

“Time for some vamping,” I commented, pointing at Lothar.

Lothar stared at me, confused. “Vamping, cousin? Like with tents and marshmarrows?”

“Mallows,” I said, “marshmallows. And that’s *camping*, not *vamping*.”

He still looked confused, though. “I think spears work better than marshmallows, cousin, but if you think is good, we try.” He looked around. “Where are they?”

I sunk my head down into my hands. “Never mind,” I said before looking up. “Can you swim, Lothar?”

“Like fish,” he replied, proudly, arms akimbo, all Polish-Superman-like.

Gert guffawed. “If fish is boulder,” said she. “All that muscle sinks like stone.”

Lothar’s hands fell to his sides. “Forgot about pool before. Yes, stone is better swimmer.” Then he gazed out at the land in the distance. “Far, cousin.” Suddenly, Superman looked more like Supersissy.

“Anyone else?” I asked as Mack and Ralph both raised their hands. I sighed and tried with, “Anyone who’s not prone to fits of howling?”

Surprisingly, Igor raised his hand and then promptly pointed an extended finger at his equally-extended hump. “Buoyant.”

Who knew? “Great, then we’ll test my theory out together, Igor.”

“Which is?”

“That vampires can swim long-ass distances,” I replied, hopping in without giving it another thought, which seemed the smarter, if not entirely safer, bet.

“Well?” he asked, staring down at me over the railing—um, through the railing, really; *over* was a no-go.

I grabbed my nose and kick-dived down. With my vampire vision, I could see clearly in all directions. That far out, there were ample fish just beneath the surface, all of them giving me breathing room, so to speak. As to that, the breathing thing I mean, my guess was correct. That is to say, I didn’t need to, so I could swim indefinitely. And as for the cold water, well, I was colder than it by far, so that wasn’t a problem either. So check, check, and double-check, theory proved. Yippy for me.

“Woohoo!” I shouted as I broke the surface. Ariel had nothing on me, it seemed. Maybe Disney was missing out on the whole queer-swimming-

vampire genre. Then Igor hopped in and started doggy-paddling around me, and I soon realized that Disney was fine just as it was. Goodbye, animated Jack. “Keep below the surface,” I told him. “Once we’re at the beach, they won’t be able to see us unless they’re looking over the cliff.”

“And they’d be looking out, not over, right, sir?”

I touched wet finger to equally wet nose. “And no talking.” I then touched the same finger to my wet lips and my wet head. “Got it?”

“Got it.” He coughed up a sudden swell of salty water. “Sir.”

I turned and waved to everyone on the boat. “Wish us well,” I shouted up.

All the Poles shouted, “Well!” while the wolves merely chuckled and waved back. Then we were off, swimming like dolphins, or maybe more like one dolphin and a one-humped camel. But at least we were swimming, unnoticed, and headed back to the mansion, which we reached about thirty water-soaked minutes later.

The beach was silent, save for the breaking surf behind us and the seagulls squawking overhead. Igor and I made a run for it, and were flush against the rocks a moment later. So far, so good. Then it was just a matter of climbing up the nearly vertical wall. Suffice it say, so good turned to so-so as soon as my stumpy-legged manservant started to tackle that little obstacle. In other words, Everest wouldn’t be included in our vacation plans any time soon.

Still, we made it up, and not a spear in sight.

Not yet, anyway.

Cue the doom and gloom music.

See, after we made it over the cliff, we quickly found out what the bad guys and gals and children who really weren’t children were up to. Or down to, as was the case, because they weren’t in the trees any more, which would’ve been supremely stupid considering the booby traps they now knew about. Nope, now the entire lot of them were ringing the mansion, spaced out every fifty feet or so, massive piles of spears at their feet as they all looked skyward for us, one of them blocking the driveway, completely obstructing our way onto the property.

I tapped Igor on the shoulder and pointed back down the cliff. He frowned but turned around, scrambling down as quietly as his humped little body allowed. Thankfully, we weren't heard or found out. Not so thankfully, we were in some deep shit now, what with no home or means of protection. Deeper than before, even, and that was already Marianas-Trench-deep to begin with.

"I vote for Mexico, sir," said Igor when we were a few miles out to sea again.

Right about then, I was just about willing to second that vote, except that I'd grown accustomed to mansion-living and wasn't about to let those suckers, no pun intended, have said mansion.

"No luck?" asked Mack a short while later as we swam to the side of the boat.

"Did we have any to begin with?" I lamented as we flew back aboard.

"I'll take that as a no."

Then I explained what we'd found out. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen," I added at the end of it all. But Ralph was smiling, despite the crestfallen look on my face. "Am I missing something?" I asked. "A silver lining to our massive rain cloud?"

He shook his head, then nodded, then shook it again. Very confusing. "Can the vampires get inside your mansion, Jack?" he asked.

I thought about it and replied, "Doubtful. It's locked up good and tight, security systems on, bars on the windows, et cetera, et cetera. They can stand on the property, but can't get inside. Why?"

He replied by asking yet another question. "And how long do you think they'll stay there like that?"

I shrugged. "Until they need to feed, they can stand there all day and night, I suppose. And, knowing them like I feel I do now, that's probably what they mean to do—wait for us and try to kill us." I shuddered at the very thought.

His grin grew wider on his handsome face. "Then let's beat them at their own game."

"Lost me," I admitted, not the first time, probably not the last.

Lothar snickered. “Was thinking same thing, cousin.”

“Runs in the family,” said I. “Care to explain, Ralph?”

“Gladly,” said he, with a grand flourish. “While they are surrounding your house, who, pray tell, is protecting theirs?”

I shrugged. “Locked doors and security systems?”

“Which are fine if you’re not a thief,” allowed Ralph, Mack suddenly grinning at his side, seemingly in on the joke.

“What?” I asked. “You guys know how to break and enter, a little bit of cat burglar thrown into the wolf milieu?”

They didn’t answer, not in words, anyway. But they were both suddenly pointing at the most unlikely person among us. “Gramps?” I asked. “No way.”

And now Gramps, too, was grinning. “Oh, way, boy. Big *fucking* way, to use Gert’s favorite word.” The grin then froze. “For a price, I mean.”

“Jack is rich,” quickly added Mack.

And Gramps’ grin rose ever northward. “Then a *BIG* price.” He steered the boat, which I now remembered was stolen, to the dock, also stolen. So things were looking up, in a really fucked-up sort of way. “Plus it’s still early yet. Their neighbors will be sound asleep. Perfect timing.”

§ § §

Gramps, Lothar, and I drove to the first house, the one where we knew that one of the still-surviving men lived. As we guessed, it was deserted, not a car in the driveway or a light on over the still-darkened porch. Just as Gramps had said, it was early yet, no neighbors stirring, not even a paperboy.

“What’s the plan?” I asked as we parked the car a couple of blocks away.

Gramps grinned as he led us behind the nearby backyards. “Watch and learn, boy, watch and learn.”

I shrugged. I was fine with that, actually. I mean, I’d come up with enough plans in the prior week to last a lifetime. Or maybe that should be “afterlife-time,” or “nonlife-time.” See, not easy being the undead. In any case, we were in the vampire’s backyard not three minutes later, the sky

turning pink as I watched Gramps remove some tools from his back pocket, gloves agilely slipped over his wrinkled hands.

“What about the security alarm?” I asked.

He pointed to said alarm through a window, a red light blinking on a box on the ceiling on the other side of the door we were about to break into. “Standard model. Probably on a thirty-second delay, minute at most. Not that it’ll matter. But we ain’t robbing anyway, is we, boy?” He chuckled. “We’re just making sure they have nothing to return to, right?”

“No fires!” I shouted, then covered my mouth. “Sorry,” I whispered. “*No fires*. Don’t want to destroy the neighborhood.”

Again he chuckled. “Yup, got it. Just follow my lead, boy.” He turned to Lothar. “Boys, I mean.” Then amended with, “Um, boy and giant Polack.”

Lucky for us, it took him no time at all to jimmy the lock and even less time for us to storm inside. I was counting down the time in my head as I watched him turn on the kitchen sink to full blast. “Smart.”

“Got that right, boy.”

And then we split up, Lothar to one side of the house, me to the other, Gramps tinkling with the alarm system all the while. Then my cousin and I turned on every spigot and tap and faucet in the place, blocking the drains as we did so before dumping as many of their valuables as we could find onto the floor. Oh, a mischievous trio of Niagara Fools we were. Forty-five seconds later, the sirens were still silent. Two minutes after that, we were out of the house and still no wailing to be heard. *Phew*.

“You did it,” I whispered into Gramps’ ear as we hightailed it back to my car.

“Did I already say *got that right, boy?*” he retorted. “Because *got that right, boy.*”

I grinned and got back inside the car. It was just barely six in the morning. Before it was even seven, we’d repeated our espionage work on all their houses. By the time they made it home, their humble abodes would be wetter than the Nile Delta in monsoon season. Then maybe they’d just have to head on back to Poland, or even call a truce.

No, I wasn't holding my breath, in a manner of speaking, but it stood to reason that they needed homes, clothes, their belongings. And with what we'd done, they'd soon have none of those things. And even they must've realized that a hotel wasn't safe for them, not when it came to us. So what choice did they have? Plus, and this is a big old plus, it really did feel good to wreak some havoc on their lives. Lord knew they'd sure done the same to mine as of late.

After that, we headed back to the boat.

"Well?" asked Gert, completed mended now, the tarp lying flat on the deck, goiter at full-mast and flapping in the breeze. Oh, what a joy it was to see them both. Seriously. Who would've guessed, right?

I strode over to her and gave her a hug. "Well, it went well. How are you?"

She chuckled. "Well." Then she added, "Now what we do?"

It was a valid question. Too bad I didn't have much of an answer. I mean, it was dependent on when they found out that their houses were floating away. And then equally as dependent on whether or not they all left so we could return home. And then we'd also have to figure out a way to find out when and if they did actually leave.

And for all of this, I had but one solution.

And it wasn't one I relished using.

Not Steven, but the next best thing—or worst thing, as it were.

I dialed and waited for him to answer, then disguised my voice and said, "I'd like to call in an anonymous tip."

He laughed. "Jack, your cell phone is registered. I know it's you," said Steven's father, the chief of police. "What's up now?"

"Sorry, sir," I said, blushing, if only in my head. "I, uh, I think I found a way to get all the, well, *bad guys* back to Poland." Which I knew wasn't exactly true, but even if there was a chance of that, I knew he'd be interested. Because then there would be no more bloodless bodies found in any of the city's vacant basements and no more need for him to cover anything up.

“I’m listening, Jack,” he said with a heavy sigh, the lines of which I could read between, to mean that he already knew about what I’d done to his son.

In any case, I pushed on. “Right about now, all the homes of the, well, *you-know-whats* are filling up with water.”

He stifled a laugh that I heard just the same. “And you know this how?”

“Would you believe *intuition*?”

The laugh repeated. “Nope.”

“Um, okay then,” said I. “In any case, they are, and I’m guessing, when the, uh, the owners find out, they’ll have no place to go but back to Poland. They’ll have no safe place to live, no safe place to retreat to, no valuables, nothing.”

I could practically hear the gears turning in his head. “Okay, that sounds reasonable. Now, what is it you’re not telling me?”

Damn! “Um, they sort of have my mansion surrounded right now, and we have no way back inside until they leave.”

The laugh returned. “Now we’re getting somewhere, Jack,” he said. “So what you want me to do is wait awhile, until said houses are completely destroyed, then notify the owners so that you can return home. That about cover it?”

I nodded. “It would sound better coming from you.” Then I threw in the clincher. “And there are more of them now, sir, a lot more. And that means more mouths to feed, if you get my drift.” Because said mouths were filled with lethal piercers and a desperate need for blood.

“I get it, Jack, loud and clear,” said he. “And fine, I’ll do what you ask, on one condition.”

Damn, again! “Yes, sir?”

His sigh made a reappearance. “If you succeed, and I sincerely hope that you do, then I never want to find any more of those bodies, ever. Or else.” He growled to drill the point home.

“Yes, sir,” I told him. “No problem, sir. Got it covered, sir.” Because, thank goodness, there were enough bar backrooms to go around. “And

thanks.”

“My pleasure.” Then he coughed. “Now go make up with my son.”

Click and triple damn.

§ § §

After that, we waited not-so-patiently on the boat. I figured we’d get word from someone that the evil vampires had been told of what had happened. And even if they didn’t go back to Poland, they still had to leave my house to go check on theirs.

Which is just what happened.

Sort of.

See, three hours later, I received a call from one of the police chief’s underlings. Seems that a bunch of houses had been completely flooded out, the tenants notified, and presumably on their way to appraise the damage.

Fine; that much worked out well.

Except when we returned home—just my family, no more wolves or grandfathers of wolves, all of whom I had thanked profusely—we did in fact discover that all the flooded-out adults had abandoned my mansion, husbands and wives both.

Though, sadly for us, not the children.

“Fuckers!” I bellowed, slamming my fists on the steering wheel. “They know we can’t kill kids.”

“Not kids,” Gert reminded me from the back seat, arms folded over chest. And goiter.

I pointed at the freckled brat blocking my driveway, at the snot-nosed runt on my front stoop, at the pigtailed prima donna on my lawn, and to the four other not-kids that were all suddenly facing our way, sneers on their fresh faces, spears held aloft. “If it looks like a kid, walks like a kid, and chews bubble gum like a kid...”

The first spear flew with remarkable aim and force, cracking my windshield upon impact.

“Not kids,” echoed Gert.

“Point taken,” said I, quickly putting my car in reverse, Igor just as quick to follow, until we were all a safe distance away. “Any ideas?” I asked. “Before the adults return?”

“Kill them,” offered Lothar.

I nodded. “That’s one idea, but they outnumber us, have weapons they clearly know how to use, and are blocking our entrance to the property. Oh, and this is a big *oh*, we have no weapons.”

Gert again tapped me on the shoulder. “Yes, we do, Jack.”

I turned and stared at her. “We do?”

She smiled and nodded. “We’re sitting in weapon.”

My smile mirrored hers. I reached behind and patted her knee. “If I weren’t gay, Gert...”

She grinned and pushed my hand away. “Not my type, Jack. Now go!”

I opened my mind and instantly connected with Igor. The children who weren’t children also seemed to hear the conversation, but guess what? They didn’t, it appeared, speak English, or at least not well enough or quickly enough to understand what we were up to! Score one for the good old Stars and Stripes!

Do as I do, Igor, I thought to him, *but pull alongside of me first*. And then two cars were side by side and revving something fierce, kicking up dust behind them. *Now floor it and duck, everyone!*

ZOOOM! We two were off like race cars, minus the track. Though not minus quite a few childlike speed bumps, namely those not fast enough to fly in one direction or another, though fast enough to chuck a few spears our way, hence my command to duck. Thankfully, we all did. Not so thankfully, the glass came raining down on us in no time flat. Then it was *woohoo* for those dead pain receptors of ours.

Thirty seconds later, with four flattened bodies behind us, we pulled the cars horizontally with the mansion and crab-walked to the front door, spears hitting the building above our heads before clanging down to the ground below.

“Don’t!” shouted Igor, however, as I reached for the knob, key in hand.

“What, you want to be carried across the threshold?” I asked. “Because this shit is clearly no honeymoon.” More spears came whizzing overhead. *Clang, clang. Clang, clang, clang.*

He grabbed my hand before I could slip the key in the lock. “Wire, sir!” he shouted, pointing to a black strand at the top of the door that ran down a crack and behind the bushes. Take away our keen vampire sight, and it would’ve been almost impossible to see. But, needless to say, there was no taking away the fact that we were vampires, so, well, you get the idea.

“Fuckers booby trapped the booby trappers!” I shouted, slamming my fist into the door. “Everyone, back inside the cars!”

And so *ZOOOM!* we went, in the reverse direction. The only saving grace was that we took yet another fucking brat out. And no, any guilt I would’ve felt went right out the window, which my car no longer had. And my skin temperature was already cold enough without the added al-fresco effect, thank you kindly.

Sadly, a minute later, we found ourselves back on the main road and nowhere near my mansion. And of course, nowhere near safety.

“Back to the boat?” asked Lothar.

I shook my head and frowned. “The wolves have done enough for us already. For all intents and purposes, we’re already dead; I’d rather not add them to our roster. So where can we go where there are no people around, someplace safe and quiet where they wouldn’t come looking for us? Or, if they did, there would be no witnesses or innocent bystanders?”

Gert chuckled, which on her, sounded a bit odd. “We’re already dead, Jack, just like you said, so how about cemetery? No people around to see us. Safe place, yes? Maybe shack up in nice, quiet crypt?”

Even at that, I shuddered. Sucking blood and killing non-children were one thing, albeit big things, but hanging out in crypts was another matter entirely. Still, I sent my thought out. *Where’s the nearest cemetery, Igor?*

Follow me, sir, he replied, clearly hearing the entire conversation from his car.

Naturally, I followed until we were out of the city, away from the spears and the chuckers of said spears, which to me was a rather nice respite.

Twenty or so minutes later, we were down a tree-lined road, the tombstones present as far as the eye can see. Eerie, yes, but at least safe and quiet, just as I'd asked.

"Why here, Igor?" I asked, just the same.

He'd pulled up to a parking lot, with me just behind him, looking very solemn. Well, solemn. In any case, he didn't answer my question, just pointed dead ahead. Apt, I know. And it was then I knew where he was taking us, all of us figuring it out at about the exact same time. And that solemn look went on auto-repeat from one face to the next to the next.

The stone was larger than the others around it, black and marble, austere. I walked up and read the engraving: his name, no date of birth (no surprises there), and then a single word in all caps: VAMPIRE.

"Subtle," I said, arms at my sides as I stared down, belly in its now-standard knots.

Igor shrugged. "In life, it was a well-guarded secret, sir. I think he figured it was time to let it go." He pointed to the stone as he frowned and bowed his head. Poor guy; I felt for him. Actually, I felt for all of us right about then, me especially. Well, Boris especially, to be fair. Then I looked down the line of us, all of us paying our respects to this man, and I realized I owed Boris for more than just a mansion and a whole lot of money.

"To Cousin Boris!" I said, an imaginary drink held up in a toast.

"To Boris!" shouted Igor, louder than I'd heard him in the brief time I'd come to know him.

"To Boris!" shouted Mama and Papa and Gert and Lothar, one after the other, the voices echoing out in all directions.

"To me!" came the last voice from directly behind us.

We all turned, six jaws dropping at once.

"What the fuck?" I managed. "What the holy fuck?"

CHAPTER 15

Pray Hard

He grinned and nodded, a slight bow thrown in for good measure. “Took you long enough to pay your respects.”

I blinked, coughed, blinked again. “But you’re...you’re dead.”

His grin widened, and no, his picture didn’t do him justice. No sir, no how. Then he pointed at the graves all around us. “Such a subjective word.”

But I wasn’t grinning. “Not subjective, *dead*.” I pointed not to the other graves, but to his. “And buried. Gone.”

He moved in closer. “But hopefully not forgotten.”

“Master,” said Igor, breaking into the conversation. “I saw you; you were killed.”

Boris placed his hand on his humble servant’s not-so-humble hump. “No one plays dead better than a vampire, Igor. And all you saw was a bloody man without a heartbeat and a spear at his side.” He gave the hump a squeeze. “Good to see you again, old friend. And sorry.”

“*Plays?*” I managed between clenched teeth and clenched fists. “People have been trying to kill me, us. People have died, many people. People who weren’t vampires are now vampires. Walking, talking, blood-sucking, heart-stopped, breath-missing vampires. And you call it *playing*?” My blood, though still stagnant as ever, seethed. “What. The. Fuck?!” It bore repeating, loudly, and with significantly more punctuation.

He sighed and introduced himself down the line to the rest of us. My family, his family in fact, all simply stared in shock, shaking his hand, one by one. Then he returned to me, to my question. “I apologize, Jack,” he said, the grin at last diminishing. “Trust me, I wasn’t playing. I know how serious this all is, hence my necessary ruse.” His English was very nearly perfect, only the slightest of Polish accents remaining, just enough to multiply his sexy factor by a power of ten.

Suddenly, I felt weak. And in need of a good bloody martini, emphasis on the *bloody*. I sat down and leaned against his headstone. Considering there was no corpse beneath it, it wasn't as creepy as it sounded. "Just explain, please, and quickly. We still have a war going on, in case you've forgotten."

He sighed yet again and stared down at me. "I haven't forgotten, Jack. I've been trying to end it myself, only without spears this time."

That caught my attention. "How, exactly?"

He lifted a finger and strode twenty feet away, returning with a backpack from behind a tomb, from which he retrieved and handed over two one-liter bottles of dark, viscous fluid.

"Guess you could use this first," he said. "Last of my private stash."

I grimaced, but grabbed the first bottle just the same, Lothar the second. "Gee, ya think we could use this, huh?" I remarked, snidely, taking a deep, long swig before passing it to Gert. "We just killed a bunch of vampire children on my front lawn, you know, before they took out all the windows in our cars, before they almost blew us all to smithereens." I paused. "Uh, that is to say, *your* front lawn." Not-so-easy come, not-so-easy go.

He raised his hand, palm up, and aimed it down the line at us. "*Our* front lawn, Jack. All of ours. It was meant for family," he said, voice even, steady, filled with something I now recognized as a semblance of contentment. His hand dropped to his side. "But that's not what you're wanting to know at this moment, is it?"

Well, that was, in fact, nice to know, but he was correct. "Just tell us why you're not dead, please." I rephrased it. "Um, deader."

The grin returned. "Yeah, the terminology never gets easy. In any case, I needed for them to think I was dead after their last attempt on my, well, *life*. I needed time to find a new way to fight this war of ours. Because, clearly, the old way wasn't working."

"You mean like with my parents?" I volleyed his way.

His smile briefly faltered. "When our enemies found out about your line of the family, your parents were the first to...to go, Jack. For that, I'm so terribly sorry." He bowed his head and continued. "And that was why I

came to this country, to protect you. Because if I was here, they would concentrate on removing me first.”

Fuck, he was being noble, the bastard. “Go on.”

He nodded. “But, as you now know, killing me was no easy task. And so I knew that eventually they’d just go after you.”

“But they have gone after me, Boris,” I reminded him. “After and after and after again.”

His nodding continued. “But at least, as a vampire, you could contend with them.”

I punched the ground with my fist. “By dumb luck only. I had to vamp my way through everything.”

He grinned again. “Good choice of words, Jack,” he told me. “In any case, this vamping, as you call it, allowed for you to find out so much more than I could’ve left you in a note.” He pointed to the Bolinskis. “As you’ve discovered.” Then he crouched down, his hands on my shoulders, eyes locked with mine. “And you have done well, Jack. Killed so many of them, come closer to winning this war than I ever did.” His hands went to my knees. “But I had to do what I had to do, for all of us, and without the other vampires knowing what I was up to. They are relentless, after all, as you’ve found out.”

“Tell me about it,” I groaned. “But what is it that you had to do?”

He stood tall again. “The werewolves, they were what tipped me off.”

“So you did know about them?” I asked, my curiosity further peaked, head tilted up his way.

He smiled. “I’m rich and, well, handsome, if I do say so myself, not to mention gay, so it was impossible to stay off Steven Littleton’s radar for very long.”

At hearing his name, my very soul throbbed. Right about then, I missed him more than words could say. “Which is why you’ve been to his parties. And?”

“Yes,” he said. “And, as with our kind, his genetic differences are inherited, flicked on at puberty, I soon discovered. But it was the Queerwolf that was truly different. He was the one that led me to my conclusions, to

the path I needed to take, for all our sakes. Spying on him, which is only possible for an odorless, silent vampire such as myself, helped bring my revelation to the light of day.”

Confused, I asked, “But he’s still a werewolf, like Steven, even if he can change at will and not just with the full moon, right? So what’s the difference?”

“Big difference, Jack,” he said, the smile returning, brighter than the sun overhead. “Steven was born to be a werewolf; he had no control over that fact. But Blake, the Queerwolf, his gene, the dormant gene that makes him what he is, was not meant to be active. Had he not met Steven, it would’ve remained dormant. The same for that pack of his, all of them born with the capacity to be werewolves, but not the necessity.”

“You lost me,” I freely admitted, losing count now at how often that had happened over the last couple of weeks.

Gert grunted. “Same here.” The others raised their hands and nodded.

Boris’ smile amped up a few more notches. “Don’t you see? If the gene can be flicked on, then it stands to reason that it can be flicked off.” He turned to me again and stared deep into my eyes, sending an eddy through my tummy. “You discovered it, too, Jack, with Igor here. You flicked on his gene.”

“But you flicked mine on, too,” I reminded him.

“With blood, Jack,” he said, “And your gene was already flicked on to begin with. Had you drunk human blood in sufficient amounts, you would’ve discovered your birthright with or without my intervention. But not Igor here, or his family. Their gene, too, was dormant. Long forgotten over the generations, recessive to the point of near-extinction. It was known only by me that they were what they were, the secret protecting them from that band of killers.”

I frowned. “Until I blabbed said secret, so to speak.”

“They found out about you and your parents, Jack,” he said. “They are smart people, old, much more so than even I. So as for Igor and his family, it was probably just a matter of time before they discovered the truth, with

or without you. And as you know, time is the one thing our kind has plenty of.”

I thought of Steven again, and my frown sagged further. In our case, time was the enemy. I had too much, he not nearly enough. Still, I understood what Boris was getting at. “So you think that the gene can be flicked off, too, right?”

His nod returned. “Again, it was the Queerwolf that led me to this conclusion, Jack,” he said. “He turns his powers on and off at will. He can be werewolf or human as he sees fit; same for his pack. All of them could be human for as long as they like, provided their adrenaline levels stay at a reasonable rate, but still.”

Mama Bolinski walked in closer to Boris. “Ah, I get it now,” she said. “These bad vampires, they kill us because they think curse will be broken.” Boris smiled and put his hand in hers. “But if they can turn this, this gene of theirs off, they have no need to kill. Then war will be over.”

I stared up at him. “And you’ve been looking for a way to turn the gene off?”

He touched fingertip to nose, which at last put a smile on my face. Talk about genetic expression. “I couldn’t do that here, Jack, not with them constantly trying to kill me. So I faked my death and left you the vial of blood. And once I saw that you were okay, that you so quickly found the werewolves to help you, then I knew it was time to go looking for our salvation, ours *and* theirs.”

I jumped to my feet, eye to eye with him now. “And did you find what you were looking for?” I asked, then paused, my ears suddenly throbbing, nose sniffing. “Wait!” I hollered, snapping my fingers, my smile as wide as his all of a sudden. “You smell, Boris!”

He shrugged. “Generic soap, Jack. Cheap motel.”

“No,” I said. “You smell, as in, you have a smell.” I placed my head to his broad expanse of chest. “And your heart is beating.” I again looked up at him. “You did it, Boris! You’re human again!”

He shrugged. “Ish.”

I squinted his way. “What does that mean?”

“I’m humanish, Jack,” he replied. “I could just as easily become vampire again, if I so desired.”

Lothar moved in next, two demigods so close together it was a wonder my retinas didn’t fry from beholding so much radiating beauty. “Explain, please.”

I could actually hear Boris’ heart *lub-dub* in double time at the proximity to Lothar, but, then again, that was no surprise; he seemed to have that effect on everyone. “Again, it was the Queerwolf that led me to...” he pointed at his thumping chest “... *this*. See, ramp up his adrenaline, and he gets fuzzy and fangy.” It’d been awhile since I’d heard one of those obese understatements, but that was certainly one of them. I mean, a kitten is fuzzy and fangy, but Blake was no kitten. “With us, the blood is what does it, gives us our powers. But take away the blood...”

“And we die,” said Lothar, finishing the sentence.

But Boris shook his head. “Take away the blood from inside our bodies, yes, hence those pesky spears. But take it out of our diets and maybe, I reasoned, the gene would again go dormant. Self-preservation at its finest.”

I tapped him on the shoulder, to tear him away from Lothar. No easy feat, mind you. “But how could you do that? The thirst is too strong. Eventually, you’d have to seek out a source.”

And his smile went all megawatt brilliant again. “Here, yes, Jack,” he said. “Which is why I had to fake my death, to leave.”

“Where you go?” asked Gert. “Back to Poland?”

Boris’ head kept on shaking. “Farther, Gert. Much, much, *much* farther, to a place with no people and no quick way back to civilization.”

I forced a gulp at the thought. “It must’ve driven you crazy, not having a food source for that long.”

The shake turned to a nod. “It was like someone took a knife to my very soul and ripped it down the middle.” He grimaced, a lone bead of sweat forming atop his brow. Oh, how I missed that: sweating, breathing, everything. “But it worked, eventually. One night I went to sleep as a vampire, the next morning my heart was again pumping, and I could eat the

food I'd brought with me. Human food. And a Snickers bar never tasted so good."

"And if you drank blood again?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Best guess, vampire again."

"And worst guess?"

Then he grinned. "Vampire again. It is what we are, Jack. Dormant or not, we are vampires. But the others, our enemies, this is what they want, to be human, and this is what I can offer them now, at last."

"Salvation," I hummed, rolling the word around my tongue.

And it was then, as I finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel, that said light was extinguished, stomped out and doused with an ocean of salt water. I felt my cell phone vibrating, then looked to see who was calling me. I gasped, which was next to impossible without air in my lungs.

"Who is it?" asked Boris.

"It's one of the vampires," I said. "One of the two males we haven't killed. I recognize the name my cell phone is registering."

"Answer it," said Boris, "quick. This might be our chance."

I hit the button. "Hello?"

"You killed my wife," came the instant reply, voice like razors across the line, sharp and lethal.

"How did you get my number?" I asked.

He chuckled, the razors extending, slashing. "You found us; we found you. Takes so little, Jack," he said, then repeated, "You killed my wife."

"I'm...I'm sorry. She was trying to kill me."

He hissed into the phone. "You destroyed my house. You killed my daughter."

Oh, fuck. "She was trying to kill me, too."

"You took all that I loved away, Jack," he said, until I could actually feel those razors slicing into me. "And now I have taken all that you love away."

"You already killed my parents!" I yelled into the cell, trembling with a mix of rage and fear.

He replied, calmly, “Yes, but that is not *all* that you loved.”

I nearly fainted dead away, but, considering I was already dead away, that would’ve been redundant. “*Steven*,” I squeaked out instead.

“The werewolf is dead, Jack. Burning right now, even as we speak. Frying to a crisp, right along with that mansion of yours. And so easy to trick, too. Just had to tell him you were in danger. Like I said, so easy.” His chuckle returned, making my head swim. “You flood us, Jack, we burn you.” The chuckle abruptly stopped. “Him and your home first, Jack. You and the rest of your cursed family next.”

I dropped the phone. “Fly!” I shrieked. “Everyone, fly to the mansion!” I tossed Boris my car keys. “Drive fast, Boris, and pray we’re not too late.” As for me, I was praying the hardest.

Hold on, Steven, we’re coming.

§ § §

We flew high up into the clouds, high enough so we wouldn’t be spotted, and so fast that even if we were, we’d be no more than a blur of color against a sky of blue. Minutes away, we could see and smell the smoke, then the flames, walls of them, shooting out in all directions, the sound of it melting what was left of my heart.

Steven! I called out inside my head.

Jack, I heard, faint as a wisp. *Trapped. Help.*

We stopped a hundred yards away, moving from air to solid ground, sirens already blaring in the distance. “Hurry!” I told my family. “He’s still inside, alive. We have to save him!”

But even as I said it, I knew it was practically a lost cause. The house was very nearly engulfed in flames, the timbers already crackling and dropping, glass shattered, the roof a swirl of orange and red, the smoke fairly obliterating everything in its path. Still, we had to try. I had to try.

All of us ran up to the mansion, spreading out, looking for a way in. The heat was nothing to us; we couldn’t feel it. And the smoke didn’t matter, since we couldn’t breathe it. And yet the fire could annihilate us, use our bones for tinder. But it didn’t matter; Steven was inside there. I had to find him, rescue him.

I saw Igor fly into a broken window, the flames not all-enveloping there just yet. Lothar managed his way through the front door, kicking it in as if it were nothing more than a matchstick. The others ducked behind the house, searching for their own way. Me, I kept scanning with my mind. *Steven! Steven! Steven!* Except now there was no answer. “Please!” I wailed, out loud this time.

The fire trucks arrived just then, the men rushing out, dragging me away as the roof above collapsed, taking out a good chunk of the east wing along with it, a cloud of ash and black smoke rising in its wake.

“My boyfriend is in there!” I hollered, fighting back tears that had no way to spill in the first place.

The fireman nearest to me sighed. “The house is nearly gone, sir,” he said. “Nothing could be alive in there.”

I groaned so loudly that my very bones vibrated. Then I watched as my family emerged from behind the building, all of them singed and dyed with smoke, all of them shaking their heads from side to side. All of them, that is, save for Steven.

And Igor.

§ § §

We watched as they doused the remains in water, but by then it was to contain the flames to within the property, not to save it. That, we knew, was never going to happen, not now. So much wood, all of it old and dry. It went up too quickly. Too quickly for us, too quickly for them. Too quickly, it seemed, for Steven and Igor.

War victims, both of them.

And all my fault.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” said Boris in my ear. “I loved him, too.”

I held my stomach as it rumbled below. “I loved them *both*,” I uttered as I watched the last of the house fall in on itself, a final cloud of fire and ash and smoke belching up into the air.

My family closed in on itself, all of them surrounding me, hands on shoulders and arms and hands and back, all of them feeding in to me, to try

and fill a void that would now always be there, vacant and black and unending.

“I loved them,” I echoed, “loved them.”

The circle tightened even as the fire was put out, the hoses put away, the trucks screaming off to yet another tragedy.

“Let’s go, Jack,” said Boris, squeezing my hand in his. I didn’t even realize it was there. I could no longer feel anything, just my sorrow now, devouring me like the fire devoured our home.

I closed my eyes to the ruins and turned, only to have Gert stop me in my place. “Wait,” she said, head tilted up, then ear. “Something. Something is there.”

I turned and aped the head tilt. “Just the sound of splintering wood, Gert. Debris blowing in the breeze.”

But she shook her head, goiter moving like a pendulum in the opposite direction. “Not sound, Jack. Something else.”

Still I heard nothing, felt nothing but my own internal agony. Then I looked to the others. “Anyone else feel anything?”

But Mama shook her head, Papa, too, then Boris. Though not Lothar, not yet. He was still squinting into the bleakness that remained. “Something, Jack, something.”

“What?” I asked, so sad that my lips could barely move.

He shrugged. “I...I don’t know. Just, well, like Gert said, *something*.”

And then, suddenly, I felt it as well, like a kick inside of me. A spasm, a jolt. But what was it? I stared at what remained of the mansion, but all was black and smoldering. Nothing could’ve survived the firestorm, nothing and no one. Not a piece of furniture or a family heirloom. Not even the fireplace remained standing.

“Wait!” I shouted, so loud that a flock of pigeons suddenly took wing from a nearby surviving tree. “One thing could remain.”

I turned to Boris, my eyes searching. He knew what I was thinking. “Possibly,” he said, a flicker of hope behind the word. “Possibly, Jack.”

I took off running, all of them but Boris close behind. He was human now. We, however, were anything but. And so were Steven and Igor, I reasoned, hoped, prayed, yet again.

I knew where to run to, to hop over, to hover above as we all flung the wood and debris off the spot, all of us moving as quickly as possible, our hands black and charred and gratefully unfeeling.

“There!” I soon shouted, pointing to the cement stairs that led down to the cement basement, now clogged with water and smoke and soot, but still remaining intact.

We all flew up and down and in, standing in two feet of watery muck as shafts of light from above broke through, lighting the one item in the entire mansion that could withstand the fiery onslaught.

“The coffin!” I shouted.

The steel was hot to the touch, hot enough to worm its way through my icy exterior. Still, it was made of steel, made to protect anything inside, anything. *Something*, as Gert had said.

Lothar clamped his hand down on mine as I reached for the handle. He shook his head and frowned. “It can’t be, Jack,” he said. “Steven is werewolf. Werewolves breathe air, need it like we need blood.” He pointed with his free hand down to the casket. “No air, Jack. Maybe what is inside is not what you want to see.”

I nodded. “Maybe what is inside I have to see just the same, Lothar,” I managed, voice crackling like the wood above. “One final time,” I added, “to say goodbye.”

He released his hand from mine and placed it on my shoulder. “As you wish, cousin, as you wish.” He gave his hand a squeeze over my own. “Then we go and end this war.”

I froze just for a moment, steadying myself as I unlatched the coffin from the inside, using my mind as I’d done with the safe, before slowly lifting the lid up, the steel squeaking as it pried open.

“Finally,” came the familiar voice, his tiny head staring at us from inside.

“Igor!” I shouted, nearly overcome with joy. “You survived!”

He grinned, ever so slightly. “Hard to kill what is already dead, sir, as we’ve noted so often as of late.”

Then I heard another voice, which made me jump in place, all of us jump in place, actually. “Get off of me already,” we then heard, Igor hovering up into the air, revealing what was hidden beneath.

“Steven!” I cried, an honest-to-goodness tear welling up from my eye, pooling from some unknown source, a hidden well. “But how? There’s no oxygen in there once it’s sealed shut.”

He sat up and stared at everyone, then the remnants of my home, then at last at me, those orbs of blue as stunning as any sapphire. “Funny thing, that,” he said, a smile making its way to his glorious surface.

I pointed to the debris. “Funny, Steven? Are you sure about that?” My hand was in his now, afraid to let go, so vise-tight that I was sure I was hurting him. Though, strangely, it didn’t appear as such.

“Well,” he said, “not ha-ha funny.”

Then I heard it, or at least didn’t hear it. And smelled it, or at least didn’t smell it. “Igor!” I shouted, turning to look at my still-grinning manservant. “You suckled on my boyfriend.”

He shrugged. “Desperate times, sir. Desperate measures.”

Steven hopped out of the coffin, rubbing his neck as he did so. “Tell me about it.” Then he turned to Igor. “But thanks.”

“So you’re a...” I started, looking for the right word in my vocabulary. Only, there was none. “...a, um, *werepire*?”

His smile went blistering bright. “Queerpire, yes? Has a nice ring to it, I think.” He turned and again locked eyes with me. “A nice ring, like *boyfriend*.”

I flung my arms around him and drew him in so close that our bodies, at last, felt as one. “Like love,” I amended.

“Like love, yes,” he whispered, his lips on mine, the kiss stretching out into infinity.

Which, all things considered, was a distinct possibility.

CHAPTER 16

Prayers Answered

We emerged from the wreckage, all of us. ALL OF US. And yes, the caps are definitely necessary.

“No way,” said Boris upon seeing us approach.

“Way,” said Steven.

“Big fucking way,” amended Gert. “Now, let’s go end war. Gert has headache from all this fighting.” Which was technically impossible, but figuratively unanimous.

“Amen,” said I.

“Amen,” said Steven, cell phone in hand.

“Who are you calling?” I asked, his other hand still in mine. I hadn’t let it go just yet, afraid I’d wake up from this dream I was seemingly in.

He smiled and replied, “Reinforcements, just in case.”

And that they were, a pack of reinforcements, in fact. And, yes, a pack does indeed come in handy when you’re surrounding a house. Pretty formidable-looking, especially when you’re not expecting them, or expecting any of us, for that matter.

He opened the door, the rest of them standing behind him, all that remained from this great war of theirs. Standing, that is, in what remained of the house. Place looked like a warzone after a torrential downpour. “You can’t kill us,” he said, eyes mere slits, face in a scowl, “not in broad daylight.” Then he spotted Steven to my side, his face cast in absolute shock. “How?”

“Question of the day,” I replied. “But it doesn’t matter, not any more.”

He shrugged, the scowl etching deeper. “Does not matter. He will die soon enough. All of you will die, *have to die*.”

It was then, upon hearing this, that our ranks were broken, a lone figure pushing through to the front. “No one has to die any more,” he said, the grin infectious. Well, at least to our side of things. They, suffice to say, weren’t grinning. In fact, their mouths were agape, unhinged even.

“How?” said the man in front of us.

“Yeah, you said that already,” chided Boris.

“You’re dead,” said the man, his voice barely above a whisper now.

Boris moved his hand over his face and chest. “Apparently, not so much.” Then he added the final nail in the coffin, that phrase never having so much meaning to me before. “Take a whiff.”

The man, well, whiffed. As did all those behind him, adults and children alike, all the surviving enemies with their noses in the air, inhaling deeply. “Is trick,” said the man. “Tricked before, trick again.”

Boris closed the gap and grabbed the man’s hand before placing it on his chest. “No trick. Very much alive, as can you be, too.”

I spoke up next, looking from one to the next of them, drilling home the point as best I could. “This war needs to end, now.” *Please, dear God.*

There was silence as he stared at me, as they all stared at me, unsure of what to say, what to do. This war was an old one and all that they knew, all-consuming in fact. Still, enough of them had died to warrant a bit of enthusiasm. And a bit was all we got, not to mention, all we really needed. “You...you can break curse?”

I sighed. “There is no...” Then I chuckled, realizing they’d never believe the absolute truth. “Never mind. Yes, we can break the curse, forever.” Then I paused before adding, “Though once we break it, you’ll no longer have that. The *forever*, I mean.”

At last he smiled, which warmed my heart as sure as if it were pumping again. “Forever is too long,” he said, head tilted down. “Way too long.”

And at last my belly was no longer in knots.

“War over!” shouted Lothar.

“War over,” said the man, who was, thank goodness, no longer our enemy, the vampires behind him pouring out as all the werewolves shouted

their approval, me shouting the loudest.

And no, the war didn't end with either a whimper or a bang, but with the greatest howl you've ever heard.

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CHAPTER 17

Afterwards

Just to be safe, we cured them all immediately. I mean, we'd had enough near-misses to last a lifetime. Or a death-time, as was seemingly the case.

See, it wasn't just a mansion that came with all that money; Boris had a private jet, too. Ergo, so did I. Meaning, Disneyworld, here I come. The one in France, that is, and then Japan. Go big or go home, right? In any case, we drove them all to the jet, passports in hand. After that, Boris flew them to where he'd gone for *the cure*. A week later, he returned solo. Goodbye, good riddance.

As to what happened to them, they were dropped off back in Poland. Back to their *lives*, as they put it. All I know is, they were out of mine. Thank goodness.

"Are we getting cured?" I asked Steven, hours later, when we were alone in his mansion, in his bed, the rest of my family at the Four Seasons, pampered at long last—just like family should be.

He leaned across and kissed me. "I am what I am, and that's all that I am," he replied.

I giggled and sidled in even closer to him. "Isn't that something like what Popeye always says?"

He shrugged, the kiss repeated, again and again and again—oh, what's one more?—*and again*. "Hey, if it's good enough for Popeye," he eventually replied, my face delightfully wet.

"You mean, you're a werewolf and a vampire and that's fine by you, right?"

He stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. "I've enjoyed being a werewolf for a pretty long time now," he told me. "It's too soon to switch off the whole vampire thing just yet. Ask me again in a few hundred years."

So much was implied by that little gem of a statement, so much meaning in so few words, but damn if it didn't speak volumes. "You, uh, you know why I broke up with you before, boyfriend?" I asked, my head on his rather still chest, hoping he understood why I did what I had to do.

He ran his fingers through my hair, sending goosepimples down both of my arms. "I know, boyfriend, I know." Then he lifted his hand and slapped my shoulder. "Just don't do it again. Ever."

I chuckled. "*Ever* is a long time, Steven."

Then he chuckled. "And I can't wait to fill it all with you, Jack. Every last long fucking minute of it."

But all I heard was *long* and *fucking*.

Which is just what we did. Really long.

Obese understatement.

And, trust me, that was truly the best one yet.

§ § §

A month later, we were sitting on the Queerwolf's boat, all of us: my family; Blake's pack; his boyfriend, Ted; Gramps, too. All of us minus two glaring exceptions. Still, I knew they'd be along soon enough, and so I smiled contentedly at all of them, taking them in with so much love in my heart that I no longer needed it to beat, because it, like me, was beyond that point already.

I turned to Boris, who was at my left side, his hand in Lothar's. Okay, so they were related, but we'd broken so many taboos just by being what we were that what did one more matter in the grand scheme of things? Besides, it's not really incest if you're not having kids, right? And, trust me, they weren't; we'd had our fill of vampire children already. Same for me and Steven, who for his part had to have been somehow related to me as well, seeing as he was turned and all. Must've been some distant ancestor, we figured, two lines of supernatural beings sprung up from one, which went a long way in explaining our similar, well, *talents*. In any case, Boris was all smiles as I asked, "Any plans for a switcheroo from vampire to human again?" By then, the smell of him was long gone, the *lub-dub* in his chest, too. All it took was a small sip of blood, and *voilà*!

“Overrated,” he replied, squeezing his boyfriend’s hand.

“Amen,” said Lothar as he turned my way.

“Amen,” said Gert, to my right, her hand in Gramps’.

“Amen,” said Gramps, the latest addition to our odd little group. “Ain’t never met a human I liked all that much to begin with.”

“Besides me,” added Gert, goiter swinging in apparent delight. The thing had a mind of its own when it wanted to, and damn if I didn’t love it as much as I loved her.

Gramps touched fingertip to nose. Ah, genetics, even tangential genetics. “Bingo, old gal,” he said, bending down to kiss her hand. “And you ain’t nearly human anyways.”

And never would be again, I had a feeling. Now that they had found each other, late in life, early in death. Weirdly ironic. Gert’s love for Gramps also meant that I probably couldn’t turn anyone gay if that person didn’t have a predisposition there to begin with—some gene, latent or otherwise, I could flick on. In other words, Congress was safe from us. For the time being.

In any case, a second later we heard the telltale sound of heels clattering up the deck, followed close behind by sneakers. We all turned and stared, eagerly, smiles lighting up the boat as sure as that old silver moon high above us.

“Ralph!” I shouted. “Mack! Finally!” Mack was resplendent in a gold gown, matching beaded jacket, and a flowing brown wig, looking so much like Barbra that her own mother would’ve had a hard time telling them apart. “Hello, gorgeous,” I happily threw in.

“That’s my line,” he quipped, with a wink, “and hello back at you. Now, what did we miss?”

We all stood and circled the happy couple, Ralph stepping a foot away so that the moon could shine down on Mack like the spotlight he so richly deserved. “Cut the crap,” I said. “Let’s see the best money can buy already.”

“What, these old things?” he said, dropping the jacket to the deck, chest proudly pushed out. Like *way* out.

“They’re beautiful,” I managed, eyes wide, which they had to be in order to take them in all at once.

“And huge,” added Gert.

Mack shrugged. “This group seems to like big bodily appendages.”

I laughed, long and hard, fingertip instinctively reaching for my nose, my family all doing the same, extended family included. Because that’s what they were, always and forever. And, no, forever really isn’t all that long, not really.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Rosen (www.therobrosen.com) is the award-winning author of the novels *Sparkle: The Queerest Book You'll Ever Love*, *Divas Las Vegas*, *Hot Lava*, *Southern Fried*, and *Queerwolf*, and editor of the anthologies *Lust in Time* and *Men of the Manor*. He's also had short stories featured in more than 180 anthologies.

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The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

THE GAY MEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROJECT

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: <http://gmdvp.org/>

**THE GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST
DEFAMATION/GLAAD EN ESPAÑOL**

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: <http://www.glaad.org/>

GLAAD en español: <http://www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php>

SERVICEMEMBERS LEGAL DEFENSE NETWORK

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT). The SLDN provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by DADT and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal DADT and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of DADT.

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On the Web: <http://sldn.org/>

THE GLBT NATIONAL HELP CENTER

The GLBT National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The GLBT National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the GLBT community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can’t talk about anywhere else. The GLBT National Help Center also helps other organizations build the

infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: <http://www.glnh.org/>

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, you should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

GLBT SCHOLARSHIP RESOURCES

<http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/tell-us-about-an-lgbt-scholarship>

Syracuse University

<http://lgbt.syr.edu/>

Texas A&M

<http://lgbt.tamu.edu/>

Tulane University

<http://tulane.edu/studentaffairs/oma/lgbt/index.cfm>

University of Alaska

<http://www.uaf.edu/woodcenter/leadership/organizations/active/index.xml?id=61>

University of California, Davis

<http://lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/>

University of California, San Francisco

<http://lgbt.ucsf.edu/>

University of Colorado

<http://www.colorado.edu/GLBTQRC/>

University of Florida

<http://www.multicultural.ufl.edu/lgbt/>

University of Hawaii, Mānoa

<http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/>

University of Utah

<http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/>

University of Virginia

<http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/>

Vanderbilt University

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/>

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