

A man with a beard, wearing a dark beanie and a dark jacket, stands in a room with a brick wall. He is looking to the right. The room is decorated with film strips: one runs diagonally across the top left, and another runs vertically down the right side. A window with a metal grate is visible behind him.

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FRAMED

One

After hitting the snooze button three times, Nick knew it was time to get his ass out of bed, but it wasn't easy when he couldn't pry his eyes open. He was on the verge of deciding it was really more trouble than it was worth when he remembered what day it was. Thursday. Meaning a weekday. Meaning he had to be in the office before his father called at ten.

He didn't absolutely *need* to be there. If he missed it, Antonio would only laugh it off and rib Nick about his busy social calendar. If there was one thing worse than disappointing his father, it was *not* disappointing him because he expected nothing better. For the past year, Nick hadn't missed a single "morning check-in and update" call when Antonio was out of town. Breaking that record now would just make it easier to screw up the next time.

Nick blinked hard. Threads of gummy sleep sealed his eyes shut. He rubbed them and tried again. Laser beams of sunlight pierced his eyeballs. Goddamn it, he'd forgotten to shut the blinds again. He always slept in the guest cottage while Antonio was away—he hated rattling around in the big house by himself—and the window here was perfectly angled to catch the morning sun. Sadistic designers.

He lay there, eyes closed, feeling the tug of the dream he'd woken from. Nick shivered. Not a good dream, that was for sure. Something about being in a hospital as nurses brought in trays of sausage, ham and bacon. He'd kept protesting he couldn't eat it because he was Jewish, which he wasn't, but the meat had smelled old and spoiled. As for the nurses, he couldn't remember what they'd looked like—didn't even think he'd been paying attention. Definitely a nightmare.

As he yawned, he caught a whiff of his breath against the pillow and almost gagged. The blinds hadn't been the only pre-bed routine he'd forgotten last night. First stop—the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Shading his eyes, he lifted his head. Pain stabbed through the back of his skull. He moaned and dropped back to the pillow. Shit, how much did he have to drink last night? He opened his eyes. Last night . . . What the hell had he even *done* last night?

For a moment, he couldn't remember, then it floated back. After work, he'd taken visiting clients to dinner. Purely schmoozing—Nick's specialty—but he always limited his alcohol intake to one glass of wine, in case he was called upon to talk shop, a task that, for him, required a clear head.

After the meal, he'd been reluctant to go home to the empty house, so he'd found a coffee shop, and worked for a couple of hours on his laptop. To drink, he'd had . . . For a moment, the memory went blank. Then a picture formed. He'd had a caramel latte. That would explain the god-awful taste in his mouth, but it didn't account for the pounding head.

After the coffee house . . . He closed his eyes and struggled to recall. He'd worked until eleven . . . no, he'd left earlier. He hadn't been feeling well and caught a cab home. The trip was hazy, the walk into the guest house hazier still.

A seemingly unconnected memory flashed. A newspaper article he'd read. About bars letting people take drinks into the bathroom. The strange headline had caught his eye, but as he'd read the story, the concept made perfect sense—letting women take their drinks to the bathroom rather than leave it where someone could slip a date rape drug in.

He *had* left his coffee, not to take a piss, but to grab a couple of cookies when his stomach started growling. Still, his back had been turned, coffee left unattended behind him. And there had been a girl there checking him out. He hadn't reciprocated because he'd been busy working. Okay, not so much because he was working as the fact she barely looked out of high school.

That explained the pounding head and fuzzy memories, then. He'd been drugged, probably that girl slipping god-knows-what into his coffee. Whatever she'd expected, it probably hadn't been watching him lurch from the coffee house, green-faced and ready to puke.

He pushed up and sat on the edge of the bed, head hanging, eyes squeezed shut as he willed the marching band in his skull to take a breather. When he opened his eyes, the room dipped and spun. Oh, this was going to be fun.

He put his hands on the bed, braced himself, counted to three, then pushed up. He made it halfway before his pounding head screamed for mercy and he collapsed backward onto the mattress. Only his head didn't strike the mattress. It came to rest on a cold, clammy pillow.

He reached back and touched icy skin.

“Holy shit!”

He scrambled up so fast his feet tangled in his discarded clothes and he fell onto all fours. For a moment, he crouched there, just breathing. If his head still hurt, he didn't feel it.

Then, slowly, he rose and turned around. There was a woman in his bed. Naked. Normally, not a problem. Or a surprise. But then, normally, they didn't have a gashes across their throats or a halos of blood drenching their pillows.

The dream flew back. Those endless trays of pork.

“Oh, God. No way. No fucking way.”

His gorge rose, bile filling his mouth. A lifetime as werewolf, thirty years of weekly Changes, and he'd never *killed* a human, much less eaten one. He'd never even been tempted, no matter how wasted or hungry he was. The others felt the pull and took precautions, but he'd never had to.

Now, after all these years, he'd finally fucked up. He hadn't bothered to Change this week, with Antonio away—another thing he hated doing alone, but it'd never been a problem.

His gaze slid back to the dead woman. He forced himself to take a good look, fighting to remember her. But the harder he looked, the more his gut swore this wasn't what it seemed.

Yes, there was a lot of blood, and her throat was ripped open, as if he'd accidentally Changed and killed her. But he'd killed enough deer and rabbits to know what a wolf's bite looked like, and this clean cut wasn't it. Her throat had been sliced, not torn.

Despite the blood, there was no other sign of injury, certainly not of feeding. He circled the bed, coming up on her side. Gritting his teeth, he slid his hands under her icy flesh and tilted her up. Her back was clean. Not a single bite mark.

With a deep whoosh of relief, he lowered her onto the bed. Then he examined her neck. Her throat had clearly been slit with a blade. He glanced around the room. No weapons in sight. No knives in the guest house at all. And even if he'd found one, he couldn't make a cut that clean.

The cut wasn't just "clean" in the sense of being straight. It was bloodless. Around the wound, sure, blood streaked her skin. And the pillow was soaked with it. But the wound itself was a furrow of white flesh.

As he leaned over her, the dream kept flashing back, all those endless trays of sausage, ham and bacon. Something smelled like pig. He straightened fast, shuddering.

No, he really *did* smell pig.

Swallowing his distaste, he bent over her and inhaled. A pause as he struggled to analyze the smells—never one of his strong suits. Another sniff, then he pressed his finger against the still damp blood and lifted it to his nose.

Pig's blood.

Why would someone—?

His gaze returned to the slice across her neck. Whoever put her here had dumped blood on the pillow because that wound wasn't going to produce any. He touched her arm again. Cold. He'd had enough experience with death—albeit animal death—to know her body shouldn't be completely cold if she'd died in the last six hours.

As he stepped back, his foot caught clothing again. Not his this time—not unless being drugged had revealed a hidden longing for pink blouses with bead-trimmed collars. He picked up the shirt. The fabric was stiff—new. He checked the size. Twelve? A snort. Nothing against a size twelve—he'd take a twelve over a two any day—but the woman on the bed wasn't more than a six. And with her pierced navel, tattooed ankle and manicured nails, she wouldn't be caught dead—or alive—in a blouse that showcased the softer side of Sears.

Another smell wafted back from dreamland. The hospital.

He leaned down and sniffed again. There it was: the distinct smell of a hospital. He'd never stayed in one, but the scent had been ingrained in his brain for thirty years, after an endless afternoon spent in a waiting room after Clay jumped down an elevator shaft on a dare. A dare he'd made. He'd never forget those long hours, certain he'd killed his best friend. And he'd never forget that smell.

So he'd been drugged in the coffee shop, come home and passed out. Then, while he lay unconscious, some mutt or other supernatural had put a stolen corpse beside him, cut her throat, and drenched her pillow in pig's blood, to convince him he'd Changed and killed her. Did they think a werewolf wouldn't know what a real kill looked like? Couldn't tell the smell of pig's blood from human?

Shaking his head, he picked up the phone, punched in the 315 area code, then stopped. He was the victim of the lamest frame-up job ever . . . and he was calling the Pack for help? Please. Even he could handle this. If he did need to call Jeremy in, at least he'd make sure he'd cleaned up and gathered all the facts.

He hung up the phone and set to work.

Two

The first thing Nick did—after brushing his teeth—was clean up. Hiding the body was the worst. He wasn't squeamish, and he knew how to do it. As a Pack werewolf, you never know when you'll run into a mutt and have a body to get rid of. So even if Nick had never done it alone, he knew the basics of disposal. He wrapped her in the sheets, carried her into the woods on the property and buried her.

It was a quick job. Too quick, and that was the problem. This “body” was the remains of a person, someone with parents, maybe a husband and kids, and treating her like a bag of trash made him feel like shit. If she'd been in a hospital, her friends and family would know she was gone and would perform the proper services without a body. Still, it wasn't right.

With the body went the clothes—even if they'd never been on her—and the pillow and sheet. There was no blood on the mattress, but he switched it with one in the house, just to be sure. When Antonio got home next week, he'd tell him what happened and let him decide whether the mattress should be replaced.

Nick cleaned up as best he could—washing surfaces, vacuuming the carpet—but he knew it probably wasn't necessary. You didn't need to watch CSI to know that an autopsy would show

the woman had been dead before her throat was cut. Even the most haphazard investigation would identify her, and the hospital she'd vanished from.

Whoever put that woman in his bed had no intention of calling the cops and reporting the “crime.” They just wanted to make the threat. Blackmail. It could be a human—Nick certainly had the money to make a good target. But if his blackmailer knew him, he'd know that the easiest way to get Nick would indeed be with a woman in his bed—maybe the mistress of some mobster or a sixteen-year-old who had said she was twenty-five. A dead woman meant his blackmailer was exploiting another vulnerability: his dual nature.

It made sense then that his blackmailer was also a werewolf. When he'd sniffed closely, he picked up the intruder's scent. Whoever dropped off the body wasn't a werewolf, but that only meant he'd been smart enough to hire some lowlife to do the body dump, then killed him. It had to be a mutt, either trying to get money from the richest family in the Pack or information from the member reputed to have the lowest IQ.

Nick had heard the jabs about his intellect before, and while he told himself it was all relative—of course he'd seem dumb compared to a genius like Clay—this was too much. Did some mutt honestly think he was so stupid he'd find an ice-cold corpse in his bed, stinking of hospital disinfectant and pig's blood, and believe he'd killed her?

That stung. But he hadn't been tricked, and that was the important part. Now all he had to do was wait for the blackmailer to make his move . . . and they'd see who was the fool in this game.

Nick was late getting to the office, but when his family owned the company, late was relative. He was inside, computer on, jacket off, coffee in hand, when his father called, and that was all that mattered.

The call was supposed to be a business update. Any concerns? Questions? Issues? Truth was, if there were problems, Nick would never hear about them. A fleet of managers handled the day-to-day running of the New York plant and office, and they all had Antonio's cell phone on speed dial. Most had been with the firm long enough to know that Nick wasn't the go-to guy for problems. Someone to hook up with for a drink and a laugh? Take along to charm clients over dinner? Sure. Business matters? No.

Over the last few years, Nick had been working to change that, but he'd also been working to accept that he'd never take his father's place. His goal instead was just to understand the business well enough that those managers *would* bring problems to him when Antonio was away.

As for the call, Antonio got business out of the way quickly, moving on to the real purpose of the call: catching up. How was Nick doing? What was he up to? A twenty minute chat, all about nothing more important than sharing their day.

Nick's relationship with his father was complicated. Typical for werewolves. With their slow aging, they started playing with relationship labels early in life, so no one would question why a teenage boy was bringing a father who looked twenty-five to parent-teacher day. With only sixteen years between them, that had been all the more important. Nick had grown up calling Antonio "uncle" in public, dad at home, Antonio sometimes, and almost exclusively as he'd entered adulthood.

While Nick usually shared everything with his father, that morning he didn't mention the woman in his bed. If he had, Antonio would have been on the first flight home to handle the

problem and protect his son. Nick would solve it alone and Antonio would be pleased, and while maybe Nick was a little old to be worried about making his father proud, it *was* a complicated relationship.

When the call ended, he wondered whether he'd get the blackmail notice here or at home? Would it be a call or a package? Either way, it was bound to be interesting. He smiled. Nothing like a little blackmail to spice up a dull work week.

He connected his flash drive and downloaded the files he'd been working on last night, before being drugged. A few keystrokes and the layout for a new college recruitment package appeared.

His job wasn't analyzing market statistics to determine the best way to attract bright young minds. Someone had already done that. Nor was he creating the incentive package or determining which programs to target or even writing the brochure copy. Someone else had done all that too. Nick's part was designing the layout—presenting the information in a way that was readable yet eye-catching, business-like yet fun.

Ten years ago if anyone had offered him this job, he'd have been horrified. And insulted. Making recruitment packages look pretty? Revamping the customer website? Designing print ads and sales brochures? Exactly the kind of superficial, artsy job one would expect from a rich industrialist's playboy son.

The company hadn't always been so wealthy. It had done well enough, started over two hundred years ago in Italy, moving to New York at the turn of the century. A parts manufacturing business—very dull, very low-key, profitable enough, perfect for a family whose werewolf lineage traced back to the earliest recorded days. Then, when Nick was a boy, his father had seen the industry of the future: computers. His grandfather had scoffed. The

company had a small technology division, but Dominic considered it a failure and planned to close it. Nick could still hear their impassioned debates, sometimes degenerating into shouting matches. Eventually his grandfather gave the tech division a year's grace period, probably to teach Antonio a business lesson.

Today, the technology sector was their biggest division and the entire company was twice as big and as profitable as it had been in his grandfather's day. That was the example Nick grew up with. That was the success he aspired to. No matter that he lacked his father's foresight, ingenuity and business acumen. The genes had to be there—it was Nick's job to find them.

Twenty years of passionate ideas and crushing failures. Whether it was Nick's first grand scheme or his tenth, Antonio gave him the money, advice and support he needed, and never blinked at the losses. When Nick finally realized he was never going to have that grand revolutionary idea, he'd been furious with his father for humoring him. But he soon realized Antonio thought the projects made Nick happy, and if it made Nick happy, he was behind it one hundred percent.

Three years ago, hunting for his place in the business, Nick surfed the customer site and was appalled. It was perfectly serviceable, but ugly as hell. Definitely not a site to attract clients or young employees. When he'd made a few suggestions, Antonio suggested he take it on. Nick declined. A Sorrentino fussing with graphic design? Humiliating.

But over the next few months, he kept returning to that site, sketching out ideas, and finally agreeing to work with the designers and programmers, if only to guide them in the right direction. Two years later, he wasn't head of graphic design. Wasn't even a manager. His office was in the executive suite, but within those walls, he did the same work as kids in cubicles downstairs. And he didn't care. He'd found his niche.

So at 11:15, he was on the phone with a fifty-five-year-old copywriter, breaking the news, as gently as possible, that his upbeat, hip copy for the brochure read like it was written by a fifty-five-year-old trying to sound upbeat and hip. The guy wasn't getting it. That was fine—how about a chat over drinks this afternoon? In person, in a social setting, Nick could get the guy to relax, stop worrying about impressing the boss's son, understand his point and make the changes.

He was setting a time when his secretary dropped off a courier envelope. He watched her leave, ass shimmying against her tight short skirt, and he sighed, making a mental note to check the progress of his request for a new secretary—an older secretary, preferably *much* older. Not that he minded the eye candy, but screwing your secretary was so cliché.

Janine had been with him a month now, and from day one, let him know she was willing, able, even happy, to provide extra services. The more he ignored her overtures, the shorter and tighter the skirts got, and the farther she bent over in them. There was only so much of that he could take. Time to get Janine a new job—and a raise so she didn't take it personally—and then, when she was someone *else's* secretary, he could reward himself for his good behavior.

He was still thinking about Janine as he opened the envelope . . . as he pulled out the page within . . . as he read the first few words . . . Then she evaporated from his brain. He reread the typed note.

Did you get my surprise this morning? 12 noon, Pensacola Coffee.

Below, in handwriting, was the restaurant address, as if the sender got to the FedEx depot, feared Nick might not be able to handle looking up an address himself, and added it. At least *Nick* wasn't stupid enough to go through the bother of printing a typed note . . . only to hand-write on it.

He shook his head, flipped to a web browser and did what he'd been avoiding all morning—tracking down the woman in his bed. After fifteen minutes of searching, he found twenty-eight-year-old Anita Wills, dead from an apparent overdose, her body disappearing from the hospital where they'd tried to revive her. It was a thankfully short article, with no mention of grieving parents or children to make Nick feel worse than he already did. Putting a name to the body was bad enough. He wondered whether there was some way of returning her body, when this was over. He'd check with his father and Jeremy, but suspected the answer would be “no.” He'd just have to live with it and remind himself *he* hadn't killed her.

Nick jotted down the woman's and hospital's name as ammunition against his blackmailer, should he try to deny where the body came from. Then he checked his watch, pushed to his feet, and grabbed his coat.

Three

Nick walked past the coffee shop for the second time, inhaling deeply. He couldn't smell another werewolf's scent, but he wasn't sure he could pick out a lingering trail in the air anyway. He couldn't drop to all fours and sniff the ground on a public street. Clay would—he didn't give a shit who saw him. Nick gave a shit.

He pushed open the door and walked in, and the moment he did, he smelled the man who had dumped the body in his bed. His nose might not be good enough to recognize a stranger's scent in a public place, but he'd know that god-awful cologne anywhere.

The place was exactly the sort where he'd expect to find a guy doused in overpriced "designer" cologne—a cut-rate Starbucks knockoff with scruffy baristas who looked too stoned to remember how to make a cappuccino. Nick passed the counter without stopping.

The shop was packed, loud and noisy. Not his style, but probably a good choice for a conversation he wouldn't want overheard. He found his quarry with one sweep, his nose following the cologne.

The first thing he noticed was the man's foot, stretched into the aisle. Black loafer, tan pants and two inches of glaring white sports sock between them. Nick shuddered and lifted his

gaze. It didn't get any better. The guy had a pinched face topped by a dead muskrat . . . or really badly cut hair tousled with a fistful of gel. And he wore a chain—a thick, gold one. Fake gold, though Nick wasn't sure it would be less hideous if it was real.

As Nick crossed the room, the man's gaze fell on him and he grinned, waving Nick over, more gold flashing from his rings.

"Glad you could make it," he said. "You got my package?"

"Which one?"

The man laughed, thumping the table. "That's good."

Nick sat. "And you are?"

"It isn't important."

Nick met the man's gaze and tried to channel Clay's cold menace. "I think it is."

Nick winced. He sounded as convincing as Hugh Grant auditioning for the Sopranos. He expected the man to laugh, but he jerked back, hands rising, as if Nick were about to vault over the table and grab him by the throat.

"Hey, just kidding, okay? Paul. You can call me Paul."

Nick considered holding onto the upper hand and demanding an explanation. But he knew better than to push his luck, so he settled for a quiet—quietly menacing, if he was lucky—"What do you want from me, Paul?"

"A favor."

"And if I refuse?"

Paul smiled. "Then the pictures go to the cops."

"What will you tell them? That I killed a woman who died in a hospital?"

Chagrin shattered Paul's smile. Then a crafty gleam lit his mud-brown eyes. "No, see, I knew that wouldn't work. So I'm not going to tell them you killed her. I won't tell them anything—just give them pictures of you in bed with a dead woman. Imagine what they'll think about that."

Nick preferred not to. That was one sexual transgression his reputation would never survive. He was sure the misunderstanding could be cleared up, but what mattered was the process. No werewolf could afford to have cops digging through his life. He knew what Jeremy would say: if it came to an investigation, they could handle it, but Nick should do everything in his power to avoid that.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"A favor. One particularly suited to your . . . wolfy talents."

Wolfy? So Paul knew he was a werewolf. Nick's heart sank, taking with it all hopes that this was just a garden-variety human blackmailer targeting a rich playboy. He only had a moment to feel those pangs of disappointment and dismay before he realized what Paul had said. A favor suited to a werewolf. Shit. He wanted someone killed.

Nick swallowed, then coughed to hide it. He'd deal with this. He just needed a few minutes to prepare. He bought himself some time by asking, "So how did you find me?"

"In the Yellow Pages. Under W." Paul laughed. When Nick didn't, he leaned forward. "W. Get it?"

Nick's expression didn't change.

Paul rubbed his hands. "Right. Um, well, I got your name from one of those, what do you call them? Those who aren't part of your special group? Curs?"

Mutts. But Nick didn't correct him, just kept the guy talking while he struggled to prepare for what was coming.

"And he just gave you my name?"

"Well, I had to pay him. I said I needed a, uh—" He glanced at the empty tables beside them, then wrapped his hands around his cup and leaned forward. "—a wolf. He'd have done it himself, but he wasn't right for the job. I asked him who he'd recommend. He gave me your name."

Nick would be flattered if he didn't know that the mutt just wanted to screw someone from the Pack with this. "Best for the job" just meant "easiest to blackmail."

"The guy you talked to, it was Brian McKay, wasn't it?"

"No, Tyler Lake."

As Paul said the name, he winced and mouthed "shit," realizing Nick had been fishing, and he'd bitten. Nick filed the name away. He'd give it to Jeremy later so they could handle this little "security leak."

As Paul sipped his coffee, Nick took a deep breath. Nothing to be gained from prolonging this. It wouldn't get any easier.

"So you want me to . . ." he said.

"Seduce my wife."

Nick's fingers bit into his thighs, and he struggled to keep his expression neutral as he waited for the rest. Seduce my wife . . . and kill her. He couldn't do that. No matter how much trouble he was in. He just couldn't.

But an investigation could also threaten his father and his Pack. It was his duty to protect them. Everyone in the Pack had killed to protect their secrets. Everyone except him. So now,

when it was his turn, could he just say “sorry, guys, you know I can’t kill an innocent human” . . . and let them do it for him? Because that’s what would happen. If the threat was too much, someone else would have to do it. Someone else would have to deal with the guilt.

It took a moment for him to realize Paul hadn’t said anything more.

Nick wet his lips, then prompted, “Seduce your wife . . .”

“Well, my ex-wife. Or soon-to-be ex. The divorce hasn’t gone through so we’re just separated.”

“You want me to seduce her and . . .”

“Take pictures, of course.”

Nick’s heartrate glided back to normal as it all became clear. “Pictures you’ll use in the divorce.”

Paul frowned, as if this thought hadn’t occurred to him. A glimmer of “hey, there’s an idea” flashed through his eyes, then he shook his head. “Since we’re already separated, it wouldn’t matter if she was fooling around. Besides, she’s not asking for alimony or anything.”

“So you want photos to . . .”

“Give to my buddy, Darren.”

Nick tapped his fingers against his thigh, not wanting to look dense by failing to make some obvious connection, though he was pretty sure it wasn’t obvious.

“Your buddy . . .”

“Ex-buddy, which is how I got the ex-wife.”

Ah-ha. So Paul’s wife had dumped him for his friend, and now he wanted to show his buddy what it felt like. If it were Nick, he’d wash his hands of them both. Not that he would ever need to worry about that. All three of his current girlfriends could strip in front of Clay and

promise him a night of mind-blowing sex, and Clay would just stalk out, find Nick and tell him it was time to get new girlfriends.

Nick wasn't keen to get involved in this sordid soap opera, and he really didn't relish the idea of poaching on another guy's territory, but compared to killing an innocent stranger, this was a cakewalk.

Unless . . .

He looked at Paul, taking in the fake gold chain, the god-awful hair cut, and imagined what kind of woman would marry him. Nick wasn't too concerned with looks, but every guy has his limit, and if Mrs. Paul was some skanky biker chick . . . Nick was all for exploring new territory, but that was pushing it.

"She works in the city," Paul said. "I'll get her schedule for you. For now, here's a photo."

Nick steeled himself, looked at the photo and blinked. The woman smiling back looked more schoolteacher than biker. She wore a green turtleneck that kept her green eyes from fading behind stylish glasses. Skin so creamy perfect she could make a living selling facial cream. Dark hair pulled back tight—too tight, making her soft features severe. A little prim for his tastes, but he could already envision getting those glasses off, letting that hair down, touching that perfect skin . . .

This might not be such a bad deal after all.

Wait a second. Hadn't Paul said a werewolf was "particularly suited" for this job? What did that have to do with seducing his wife? No sense beating around the bush. Nick asked the question pointblank.

"She has a thing for . . . you guys," Paul replied.

"Thing? You mean she's had lovers who were . . ."

“No, no. Never even met one. But she reads a lot of those werewolf romances.”

“Werewolf romances?” Nick said, certain he’d heard wrong.

“Sure. Haven’t you heard about those? Human women with werewolf guys? Really popular.”

Nick waited for the punchline.

“Anyway, Rita goes through these phases. First, it was bad boys, so she hooked up with me. Then she starts reading these paranormal romances and decides a—” A look around, but no one was near now. “—Druid isn’t sexy enough, so she screws off with Darren. He’s half-demon, like her. Now I hear she’s into these werewolf romances. She makes Darren growl in bed and bought this fake wolf-skin rug to screw on.”

“She . . . told you this?”

“No, Grannus did. My Druidic deity.”

Nick had no idea what that meant, but nodded as if he did.

“So do we have a deal? An exchange of photos, yours for mine. I’ll give you the negatives, too, and that’ll be the last you ever hear from me.”

Nick considered it. Or, at least, tried to look as if he was considering it. Truth was, he didn’t see that he had much choice. The thought of seducing a woman and taking pictures made his skin crawl, but there was no question of not doing it, and letting Paul send those photos to the police.

As for the photos themselves, getting the negatives didn’t necessarily mean Nick would have all the evidence. What was to stop Paul from making copies? Or having taken more shots with his cell phone? Did he think Nick was too stupid to consider that possibility? Or was *Paul* too stupid to think of it?

Nick wasn't about to dismiss the last possibility, which meant he wasn't about to mention it and give Paul the idea. But he'd have to cover his ass—get something on Paul that he could use for counter-blackmail, if the guy tried to get more mileage out of those photos. As for *how* to do that, he had no idea. He'd need time to think about that . . . after he said what needed to be said.

“You’ve got a deal.”

Four

Now Nick just had to seduce a woman and this whole mess would be solved.

It wasn't that easy, of course. He still had to deal with the possibility that Paul would double-cross him. And he'd have to make sure Tyler Lake was punished for leaking his name. While his first thought had been to let the Pack take care of Lake, now that he'd seen how easily the main problem could be resolved, he was tempted to look after the whole thing himself.

But that would come later. For now, he had to concentrate on part one: the seduction.

Back at the office, he ran a quick search on werewolf romance. He used another computer, of course. He wasn't sure which would be worse—being caught researching werewolves or reading romances.

A quick scan of a few stories told him “romance” wasn't exactly the right word. He remembered reading stuff like this as a kid—books and magazines “enjoyed” under the cover of night. These had better stories and were, generally, better written but they had a lot in common with his old reading material.

Not that he had a problem with that. If women liked getting a buzz from this—and maybe learning new techniques—then he was happy to reap the benefits . . . just as long as they didn't

expect any guy—even a werewolf—to provide the marathon sessions described. Sure, being a werewolf gave Nick extra energy, and at forty-four he still had the stamina he'd had at twenty—which was saying a lot—but reading those stories was almost enough to make him feel . . . inadequate.

He shuddered, closed the browser and declared his research at an end. He had what he needed—proof that Paul wasn't lying about the existence of werewolf romances. And he had a good idea what might attract some women to them.

Nick had no intention of exploiting Mrs. Paul's werewolf fetish—he didn't need to resort to that—but he wasn't above using the stories to get an idea of what she was after. It was like checking out a potential girlfriend to discover the best tools to woo her.

It seemed the main attraction was appeal of “the beast within.” Nick could manage that. Pull out the edge he usually kept hidden. Rough it up a little. Just a little, mind you. Dominance games weren't his style, and he wouldn't fake it, no more than he'd pretend to love opera for a woman.

That was one thing his dad had taught him: be honest with women. A rule that covered everything from not lying about liking opera to not saying “I'll call you in the morning” when he had no intention of doing so. No woman entered Nick's life with the expectation of anything more than, in crudest terms, a “fuck buddy”—someone to hang out with, have fun with and have sex with. No commitment. No expectation of exclusivity.

Plenty of guys thought they needed to lie about commitment, that for anyone with two X chromosomes, sex was given only if there were wedding rings on the horizon. But saying that no woman was happy with friendship and sex was like saying women didn't read the kind of

stories he'd seen on the web. It was just a matter of finding the right ones, being honest and staying honest. And that was what he planned to do with Mrs. Paul. At least, as far as he could.

He wasn't going to rush into this. Seduction took time and effort and while Nick was clearly on a schedule, he'd give himself twenty-four hours, ample time to find Mrs. Paul—Rita—and get a good sense of her. Where did she work? Did she arrive early or late? What did she do after?

Watching prospective lovers came naturally to Nick. It was the hunting instinct. He knew that. He didn't follow them around, just posted himself someplace public and watched. He supposed it could be called stalking, at least in a wolf sense, but he never used the word. He called it research.

Clay scoffed at that. He said that as long as Nick didn't trail women around, gathering private information with the intention of forcing his attentions, then it didn't fit the human definition of stalking. Nick wasn't so sure.

It was easier for Clay. It always was. When he went off in one of his rants like that, Nick just listened, nodded . . . and did his own thing. Clay didn't care. He'd made his opinion known and that was all that mattered.

Mrs. Paul—Rita—was certainly attractive. Even prettier in real life. But as Nick watched her tongue lash a server for a spotted glass, he knew if he'd been scouting her with genuine interest, he'd have moved on by now.

He set two tables away from Rita and two friends, in a little bistro next to her office, where they'd gone for wine after work. She wore a past-the-knees skirt, a blouse buttoned to the top, and glaring red lipstick on thin lips that stretched thinner every time a man glanced her way, her glower saying "don't even bother, buddy."

The bistro was pack and noisy, and overhearing her conversation wasn't easy, but it didn't matter. Nick had tuned out five minutes ago. From the moment Rita walked through the door, she'd been complaining—about her boyfriend, her boss, her landlord—and he only needed a sidelong glance at her expression to know she hadn't stopped.

After thirty minutes, her friends made their excuses and their escapes. She'd lingered, finishing her wine slowly, defiantly, as if to say her own company was just fine, thank you. When she left, Nick waited until she stepped out the door. Then he fished a silver compact from his pocket and hurried after her.

Rita stood on the curb, surveying traffic as if preparing to cross.

"Miss?" Nick jogged up behind her. "I think you dropped this."

She scowled at the compact, as if it was a piece of rotten fruit.

"I think you dropped his inside," he repeated, flashing his friendliest smile.

"That is not mine."

She enunciated each word, punctuated with a lip curl, as if offended he'd think such a thing belonged to her. It was a perfectly good compact. Expensive, classic and classy. From her photo, he'd imagined she'd like it.

He closed his hand over the offending object and offered another smile, this one tinged with wry embarrassment. "Sorry. I could have sworn—"

“Goddamn it!” She flung a hand at a passing cab. “You made me lose a taxi. Do you know how hard it is to flag one in this city?”

He could point out that the cab’s light was off, meaning it already had a fare, but he suspected she knew that.

“Here, let me get you one. Two minutes, tops.” His disarming grin now. “You can time me.”

“No, just—” She waved him off, stepping away. “Just go away.”

She strode off to her office, three doors down, leaving Nick squelching the urge to check his deodorant.

Well, at least now he knew how a woman like that ended up with a loser like Paul. The only question was why, after she dumped him for his buddy, he hadn’t breathed a huge sigh of relief and decided his friend would be punished enough.

Nick had nothing against women who stood up for themselves, knew what they wanted and what they didn’t. He liked strong women. Tough women, even. But ball-busting was a whole other matter.

This job was going to be a lot harder than he thought. He tried to call it a challenge, but he wasn’t like Clay and Elena—he didn’t really like to be challenged. A straight, easy road would be boring, but he preferred meandering slopes and curves to hairpin bends and roller-coaster hills.

Instead, he reminded himself of those werewolf “romances” Rita liked to read. Any woman who was into that couldn’t be quite as cold as she seemed. Or so he hoped.

At home, Nick looked up more of those stories, hoping for insight into how to thaw Rita. He'd started to think that showing a glimpse of "the beast within" just wasn't going to cut it. Hell, at this point, he'd be lucky if he could get close enough to let her see it.

After a few readings, he thought he might have the answer. Most of the guys in these stories were a lot more, well, *alpha* than he was. There were more than a few arrogant bad boys in those pages.

He envisioned calling Elena and saying "hey, think I could borrow your hubby for a day? I need bitch-bait." Elena would go for it. She'd think it was hilarious. And Nick had to admit there was something deeply satisfying about the thought of unleashing Clay on Rita. A few minutes in his company and she'd realize that rude, arrogant bad boy werewolves weren't really all they were cracked up to be—at least, not when you were on the receiving end. She might even decide a laid-back nice guy like Nick wasn't really so bad after all.

He wouldn't do it, of course. Well, maybe as a last resort. But for now, the thought heartened him enough to declare he was ready for another run at Rita.

Five

When Nick awoke the next morning, his resolve had only strengthened. This was his mess and he was going to clean it up. When he'd first discovered that meant having sex with an attractive woman, then he was willing to take one for the team. After meeting Rita, the prospect wasn't quite so alluring, but he had to suck it up and get the job done.

Even if he wasn't keen on the prize, the thrill of the hunt should help get him in the mood. It had been a while since his first play for a woman hadn't at least peaked her interest. He could always use an opportunity to expand his repertoire of seduction techniques. Practice on Rita and use them later for a woman he really wanted.

Rita probably wasn't as bad as she seemed. She'd obviously had a rough day. Once he got to know her, he'd find that special inner quality that would get his motor running.

Or so he prayed.

He went to work that morning, but only to check in with Janine and tell her he'd be doing research outside the office all morning. She could contact him by cell. Then he took his laptop and set up temporary office in the Starbucks across from Rita's office.

He nursed a cappuccino for three hours. No one complained. One young barista even came over, topped up his drink and slipped him a muffin. He was an attractive, wedding-band-free guy in a suit working in their front window. In a business district filled with single women, that wasn't loitering—it was advertising.

It was lunch time when Rita finally appeared. He watched as she went into the same bistro where she'd had a drink the night before. Then he slid off the stool, watching out the window for her as he repacked his gear. He made it out the door just in time. Rita had bought take-out and was already heading back to her building.

He cut across the busy street, loped up behind her and caught the door as she was opening it.

"I can get my own—" she snapped before glancing over her shoulder and seeing him. "Oh, it's you. Which part of 'get lost' didn't you understand yesterday?"

She tried to make that her parting shot, yanking on the door to disappear inside, but he held it fast. Now, for the first time, she gave him a once over. Quickly the first time, then another, slower look. So far so good . . .

"No, I'm not stalking you," he said. "I work down the block, at Donovan and Myers, and I'm afraid I made a bad impression last night, so when I saw you—"

She pulled on the door again, that flicker of interest fading fast. When he didn't let her open it, she said, icily, "I would like to get into my office."

“And I would like to apologize.” Nick gave another easy smile, but with a note that wasn’t so polite. “I’m sorry you missed your cab last night. I hope I didn’t inconvenience you *too* much.”

His tone was laced with sarcasm. More than he intended and he braced himself for her to snap at him. Instead she released the door.

Was it his imagination or did interest spark behind those glasses? He moved closer. Too close, looming over her. He *didn’t* just imagine her breath coming a little faster.

Alpha male, he reminded himself. *Channel the alpha male*. He paused, waiting for that inner core of aggression to surge. Nothing happened. *Okay, then. Fake it.*

“I’m going to take you to lunch,” he said.

“I bought it already,” she lifted her bag, swinging it, lips curving in a smile that she probably considered coy.

“Not any more.” He snatched the bag, baring his teeth in a grin.

Now it was her turn to pause. He could see her resolve faltering. “I’m seeing someone . . .”

“Are you?” He looked around. “I don’t see him here. Are you warning me?” Another flash of teeth. “Or asking if you can invite him?”

Now that one should have earned him a slap. But her lips parted and she leaned toward him—

“Rita?”

Nick glanced over to see a middle-aged woman, brows knitted with concern. He eased back, his smile morphing into one of his natural ones. The woman’s forehead smoothed, but her gaze was still wary as she approached.

“Did you get your lunch, Rita?” she asked.

Rita's scowl returned, words clipped. "Yes, I did."

Nick passed her the bag. He knew he should say something, but was momentarily stumped. Too friendly, and he'd lose Rita's attention. Too sharp, and he'd arouse the older woman's suspicions.

He settled for meeting Rita's gaze, calling on that inner wolf to seep through while his tone remained light. "As I was saying, while that lunch does look good, I'm sure I can come up with something better."

A glint of teeth. Rita sucked in her breath.

"Rita?" the other woman said. "We really should be getting inside. Our meeting starts—"

"I know when our meeting starts."

The older woman's gaze chilled. "Did I mention Darren called you this morning? He left a message with Brianna."

Darren. The boyfriend. Damn.

Rita looked up at him. "I have to go."

Another teeth-flashing smile. "I understand. Why don't you give me your card—"

"I shouldn't." She tried again, firmer. "I really shouldn't."

The older woman shot him a glare almost as cold as one of Rita's, then bustled her inside.

Nick circled the block, walking fast, trying to clear his head. He told himself he'd been close and he'd just need to bump into her again, but he knew that was bullshit. If he'd been that close, she'd have found a way to slip him her number. He'd waited outside the building for fifteen minutes and she hadn't shown.

Close? No. He'd just stepped onto the playing field, and the moment an obstacle arose, he'd been stumped, unable to move past it.

He wasn't an alpha male. He just wasn't. He could fake it, be more assertive than usual, but that wasn't enough. He'd seen the way she'd looked when he'd held that door shut, when he'd moved into her personal space, cornering her. That wasn't alpha. That was "call the cops and prepare the restraining order." And she'd gobbled it up.

If he had to travel further down that road to finish this thing . . . He shuddered. Travel any further in that direction and there was no way he could finish it. He wasn't—

His cell phone rang. One glance at caller ID and he let out a curse.

"Hey," he said as he answered. "Sorry I wasn't there for your call this morning. I've been racing around, trying to finish this campaign . . ."

"Is everything okay?" his father asked.

"Oh, sure. It's chugging along. Ran into some trouble with one of the writers, trying to sound like he's twenty—"

"I don't mean the campaign. You were supposed to have lunch with the Cheungs and show them around New York this afternoon. Bill just called—"

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit. I'm so sorry. Is it too late?" He checked his watch. "I'd made reservations at . . ." He racked his brain. "The Plaza. For one. That's right." Another watch check. "I can still make it. Just tell them . . . No, wait. I'll call and tell them—ask them—to meet me there. I'll get someone to pick them up—"

"Nick?"

"Hmmm?"

"Is everything okay?"

“Sure. I’m just—I’m sorry. Totally slipped my mind. I’ll fix this, then I’ll call you back after lunch.”

He signed off and took a deep breath. God, he couldn’t believe he’d done that. He didn’t even want to imagine what Antonio was thinking right now. Shaking his head, seeing Nick backsliding, all the hopes he’d built up in the last couple of years, seeing his son finally growing up and playing a role. Trying not to feel a pang of disappointment. Telling himself it was a one-time slip . . . and knowing it almost certainly wasn’t. Nick reverting to being Nick. As immature and unreliable as ever.

That settled it. No more messing around. Go to lunch and do his duty, then come back and do his other duty. Seduce Rita, whatever it took.

An hour later, Rita stepped into the hall and found Nick standing there. Her eyes widened.

“How’d you—?”

He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the stairwell. She didn’t even put up a token resistance. He tugged her into the corner, her back to the wall, standing so close her breasts brushed his chest.

“How’d I get in here?” He flashed his wolf grin. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. I thought maybe no didn’t really mean no.”

“It did,” she said. “I really have to go.”

It took almost ten seconds for her to follow-up that statement with action and even then, she only slowly sidestepped. When his arm shot out to stop her, she squeaked, her gaze flying up to his, her eyes widening, all traces of the ball-buster from the night before gone.

“I really have to go,” she said, her liquid gaze on his, lips parted, breathing fast. All but fluttering her damned lashes and threatening to swoon.

She put her hand on his chest and gave the smallest push. He didn’t budge. That didn’t seem to be the response she wanted, though, her lips pursing in a small moue of disappointment.

She pushed harder. Confused, he started following his instinct and stepping back. Her lips pursed more, eyes narrowing in a flash of anger. Her hand shot up.

Again, instinct kicked in and he caught it. She let out a small mew, and he started to drop her hand, apology flying to his lips, when she looked up, face lifting to his, eyes once again dark with desire.

“Please don’t hurt me.”

He dropped her hand so fast she blinked. He stepped back, fighting the urge to shudder.

Okay, that was it. Duty or not, there were some things he *couldn’t* do.

“You’re right,” he said. “You do have to go.”

“What?”

He smoothed his shirt. “I made a mistake. Now go on back to your boyfriend.”

He braced himself for the lash of her fury. But she just froze, as if in shock. Then, her eyelids fluttered, and the smell of her excitement surged.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was mean to you earlier. I was naughty. You have every right to be angry and want to punish—”

“Leave,” he said, stepping back. “I want to leave.”

She bit her lip, eyes dark with lust. “That’s not very nice. Get me all worked up and then just walk away. That’s just . . .” She met his gaze. “Nasty.”

He turned and headed for the stairwell, fighting the urge to break into a run.

“You know where to find me,” she called after him.

He took the steps two at a time.

Six

Rita didn't want your garden variety alpha male. What she wanted . . . well, he wasn't even going there, just hoped for her sake she never found it because he was damned sure it wasn't going to be what she expected.

What the hell was she reading anyway? Not the same "werewolf romances" he had. Sure, there had been dominance play, maybe mild BDSM, and while that wasn't his thing, he could fake it if it meant getting this mess cleaned up. But there was a big difference between "tie me to the headboards" and . . . that.

When it came to sex, Nick considered himself an omnivore. If a woman wanted something a little kinky, he could get into it, and decide later whether he wanted to come back for more. But combine a serious turnoff with a woman he could barely work up an attraction to? This job wasn't getting finished without a whole bottle of Viagra.

Even if he knew where to *get* Viagra, he wasn't doing this. Sex with an attractive woman? Sure. Take pictures for her ex? After meeting Rita, he'd decided she'd probably earned a little humiliation in her life, so he could justify it, even if he wouldn't be proud of himself later. But

when it meant playing out a scene that disgusted him, he looked back on the whole deal with “what the hell was I thinking?”

This wasn't working. He needed to confess his predicament to the Pack and say . . .

And say what? *Sorry, I won't whore myself for you guys? You've killed for me, and it's not like I haven't had sex with more women than I can count, but this is different. I have standards. Now, if I give you this guy's phone number, can you look after it for me? I'd love to help, but I have a hot date tonight.*

Nick ran his hands through his hair and groaned. There was no way out of this that wasn't going to make him feel like shit. That wasn't going to *make* him a shit.

He could run to his friends and ask them to cover for him, knowing it meant killing for him. Or he could degrade himself with a woman who made his skin crawl. If the choice was between hurting himself and hurting his friends, there wasn't a choice at all.

He could only hope there was an easier way to finish this. Paul said Rita would go for him because he was a werewolf. He'd hoped to avoid that angle, but maybe, rather than acting like her idea of a werewolf, he could simply admit he was one, and she wouldn't need all the “extras” to get her motor running.

He called Paul's cell phone.

“You want *what*?” Nick said, loud enough to turn the heads of the couple seated beside him.

He prayed he'd misheard. Having sex with Rita would be demeaning enough. But this? No, he *must* have misheard.

“The deal was for a photograph—” he began.

“Yeah, of a werewolf having sex with my ex. Key word being *werewolf*. You need to be in wolf form, obviously.”

Obviously? Obvious how? The thought had never entered Nick’s mind. Sure, the thought of having sex in wolf form *had*. It did almost every time he Changed with Elena. Smelling her, watching her run in front of him, tail flicking up, feeling his body respond, wishing Clay was a little more of the sharing type . . .

But that was wolf-on-wolf.

“Hey, I’m sorry for the misunderstanding,” Paul went on. “You didn’t need to go through all that seduction shit. Just tell her you’re a werewolf and she’ll be down on all fours waiting.”

“Waiting for a wolf.”

Paul chuckled. “Yeah. Like I said, when Rita gets her mind set on something, she goes full out. She wants a werewolf, and she wants him wolfie. My deity, Grannus, told me Darren even tried to, you know, accommodate her, by bringing in this big dog and—”

“I get the picture.” Actually, he was trying very hard *not* to . . .

“Well, it didn’t work. She’s got this thing about wanting to do it with a wolf, this . . . fetish.”

There was a word for that, and Nick was pretty sure it wasn’t “fetish.”

As Paul continued, Nick realized that he could screw Rita in wolf form and hand him a video, and it wouldn’t matter. All this was just a test to see how much leverage his blackmail threat would buy him. “Oh, could you seduce my ex and take pictures? Wait, no, let’s make it seducing her as a wolf . . .”

Sure, Paul wanted to humiliate Rita and his buddy, and that photo would certainly do the job. But that was only the beginning. He was probably already thinking of how handy a

werewolf pet would be. Thug, bodyguard, assassin . . . He hadn't gone through all that trouble of staging a dead woman in Nick's bed just to exact revenge on his ex-wife and ex-friend.

The solution was obvious. Kill Paul. That's what Clay would do. But he wasn't Clay. He needed to find his own solution for this problem.

He told Paul he'd have the photos by morning.

At eight-thirty the next morning, they were in a parking lot as Paul examined his prize.

It was a damned good Photoshop composite. Nick was an excellent judge of women and had a good idea what Rita would look like naked. Browse some porn on the web, find a decent likeness on all fours . . . Then stake out Rita's office and take some pictures at the right angle for a head shot. Finally, take a self-portrait of himself as a wolf, appropriately positioned.

The result was some of his best graphic work. Of course, like any composite, it wasn't perfect. There was something not quite right in the shadows and shading. But Paul studied it, and studied it some more, and when he finally asked, "Is it real?" his tone said he was ready to take Nick's word for it.

Instead, Nick said, "Does it matter?"

Paul looked up sharply. "What?"

Nick met his eyes with a steady stare. "You wanted to show your buddy a picture of your ex having sex with a wolf. Isn't that what that is?"

"Well, yeah, but if it's not real . . ."

"Does it look real?"

Paul's mouth opened and closed. Nick's gaze didn't waver and that, he realized, was really all it took. A cold, steady stare. The same one a wolf Alpha would give an Omega who dared to question his authority.

Paul swallowed. "Yeah, okay. It's good. So, um . . . Oh, right." He pulled an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Nick. "The photos and the negatives."

Nick took the envelope. "One more thing. That werewolf who told you about me, McKay. What did he give you on me?"

"You mean Tyler Lake? He told me your name, address, where you worked . . . But don't worry. I'm getting rid of that too."

Nick started to turn, then stopped. "You said you didn't ask Lake to do it because he wasn't right for the job. Why? He's a werewolf."

Paul laughed. "Sure, but have you *seen* him? Rita might have a thing for werewolves, but she's not blind. That guy's so ugly my dog wouldn't fuck him."

"Huh."

When Nick didn't move, Paul wiped his hands on his jeans, his brow beading sweat. "So, uh, if we're done here . . ."

"Do you know how I can get in touch with Lake?"

"What?"

"I can't let him get away with giving out my name to anyone who asks for a werewolf. I need to hunt him down and beat the crap out of him."

Paul's hands flew up. "Jesus, no. If he finds out I told you, he'll—"

"Beat the crap out of *you*?"

“I’d be lucky if that’s all he did. That guy is seriously fucked up.” He took a deep breath and eased back. “Anyway, I don’t know where he is or how to get in touch with him.”

“That’s okay. My Pack will.”

Nick turned to go. Paul leapt forward, catching his arm. Nick looked down at his hand. Paul quickly released it.

“Sorry, sorry. But please, don’t do this. He’ll kill me. You know he will.”

Nick considered it. He spent five minutes considering it, letting Paul sweat, enjoying the stink of his fear, waiting until it hit just the right level, then, “I do need to teach him a lesson. But . . . I suppose could say I figured it out who told you on my own.”

“Oh God, thank—”

“But . . .” Nick took his keys from his pocket. He cycled past the keys, past the flash drive, to a newly added device. “If you ever contact me again? For anything? Or give my name to anyone?” He pushed the playback button on the tiny voice recorder.

“You mean Tyler Lake?” Paul’s tinny voice said. “He gave me your name, address . . .”

Nick pushed the stop button.

“Lake won’t like that,” Nick said. “And he’s also not going to like the part about him being too ugly for your dog. He’s a bit sensitive about his looks. A guy like that? He’s liable to make sure you aren’t too pretty either before he kills you.”

Paul looked like he was going to be sick.

Nick continued, “So, now, you’ll take that photo and you’ll be happy with it, real or not. Then you’ll get rid of my name and number and forget you ever met me. Agreed?”

Paul agreed.

“Tyler Lake,” Nick said. He lay on the sofa, phone in one hand. “I need to find him. Can you help with that?”

“Um, sure,” Elena said. “But why . . .?”

“Apparently, he sold my name and number to some guy looking for a werewolf.”

“Shit!” Her voice sharpened, and he pictured her scrambling upright. “Forget Lake for now. The first thing we need to do is find whoever he told and look after—”

“Done.”

A moment of silence. “You’ve . . . taken care of it?”

“In my way. The guy was a Druid, so he already knew about werewolves. He was just using that to blackmail me. He put this dead woman in my bed and took pictures, threatening framing me for murder.”

“What!? How—? No, just hold on. Clay and I will—”

“No need. I handled it.”

The line went quiet.

Nick laughed. “Stunned to silence?”

“No, I just . . . Handled it how? What—?”

“I’ll tell you all about it later. Right now, I need to take care of Tyler Lake. And that’s one thing I won’t argue about accepting help with, if you and Clay don’t mind a weekend away from the kids, hunting a mutt with me.”

“Love to. But . . . About this Druid and the blackmail. Are you sure . . .? Is everything okay?”

Nick smiled and stretched. “Everything is just fine.”