

Only Human
EILEEN WILKS

Chapter 1

HE DIDN'T HAVE much face left. Lily stood back far enough to keep the tips of her new black heels out of the pool of blood that was dry at the edges, still gummy near the body. Mist hung in the warm air, spinning halos around the street lamps and police spotlights, turning her skin clammy. The smell of blood was thick in her nostrils.

The first victim, the one whose body she'd seen four days ago, hadn't had his face ripped off the way this one had. Just his throat.

Flashes went off nearby in a crisp one-two as the police photographer recorded the scene. "Hey, Yu," the man behind the camera lens called.

She grimaced. O'Brien was good at his work, but he never tired of a joke, no matter how stale. If they both lived to be a hundred and ran into each other in the nursing home, the first thing he'd say to her would be, "Hey, Yu!"

That is, assuming she kept her maiden name for the next seventy-two years. Considering the giddy whirl she laughingly called a social life, that seemed possible. "Yeah, Irish?"

"Looks like you had a hot date tonight."

"No, me and my dog always dress for dinner. He looks great in a tux."

O'Brien snorted and moved to get another angle. Lily tuned him out along with the rest of the crowd—the curious behind the chain-link fence, the uniforms, the lab boys and girls waiting with their tweezers and baggies and fingerprint gear.

They'd arrived almost as fast as she had, which said something about how nervous the brass was. That a crowd had assembled in this neighborhood said something about everyone else's nerves. Spilled blood often drew people the way spilled sugar draws flies, but not in this area. Here, people assumed that curiosity came with a price tag. They knew what a drive-by sounded like, and the look of a drug deal going down.

The victim lay on his back on the dirty pavement. There was a Big Gulp cup, smashed flat, by his feet, a section of newspaper under his butt, and a broken beer bottle by his foot. Defensive wounds on the right arm, she noted. Something had torn right through his jacket. There was blood on that hand, but she didn't see any wounds.

His other hand lay about ten feet from the body, up against the pole to the swing set.

A playground. Someone had ripped this guy's throat out in a playground, for God's sake. There was a hard ache in Lily's own throat, a tightness across her shoulders. She'd seen death often enough since she was promoted to Homicide. Her stomach no longer turned over, but the regret, the sorrow over the waste, never went away.

She crouched, careful of the way her dress rode up on her thighs, and studied the focus of all the activity.

He'd been young. Not young enough to have enjoyed those swings anytime recently, though. Twenty or less, she guessed, maybe five-foot-ten, weight around one-eighty. Weight-lifter's shoulders and arms, powerful thighs. He'd been strong, perhaps cocky in his strength—used to fighting, probably used to winning.

Strength hadn't done him much good tonight.

Whatever had torn out his throat and made a mess of his face had left the eye and cheekbone on the right side intact. One startled brown eye stared up at nothing from smooth young skin the color of the wicker chair in her living room.

He was wearing a red T-shirt, black hightops, black cargo pants, and a black jacket.

Gang colors. Not that she thought this was a gang killing. The bloody paw prints leading away from the body were a pretty good clue about that.

A pair of size eleven shoes, black and dusty, moved up beside her. They were connected to long, skinny legs encased in uniform trousers. "Careful, Detective. Don't want to get your pretty dress dirty."

Lily sighed. Officer Larry Phillips was half of the patrol unit that had been first on the scene. She hadn't run across him before—the San Diego PD was too big for her to know many beat cops. A few minutes spent taking his report had given her a pretty clear picture, though. He was pushing fifty, still on the streets and sour about it. She was female, twenty-eight, and already a detective.

In other words, he didn't like her. "This is your turf, Officer. You know him?"

"He's one of the Devils."

"Yeah, I got that much." She stood and glanced up at him. Way up—he was a long, stringy man, well over six feet. Of course, Lily had to look up to meet almost anyone's eyes. She'd persuaded herself that didn't irritate her anymore. "You think you could look at his face instead of his clothes and see if you can ID him?"

"Why? This wasn't a gang killing." He had a toothpick in his mouth. She found herself staring at it, waiting for it to drop, wondering if it was glued to his lip. "Not even murder, really." Three years ago a case like this would have been handled by the X-Squad. Now it went to Homicide. "The courts say otherwise."

He snorted. The toothpick didn't budge. "Yeah, and we know how smart those bleeding heart judges are. According to them, we're supposed to treat the beasts like they were human. That mess at your feet proves what a great idea that is."

"I've seen uglier things done by men to other men. And to women. And I still need an ID."

Another cop joined them, this one young, short, with shiny black hair and a greenish cast to his complexion—Phillips's partner, the other half of the responding unit. "I, uh, I think it's

Carlos Fuentes."

Phillips raised one scornful eyebrow. "You basing that ID on his shoes? Not much else to go on."

"It looks like him around the eyes. I mean the eye. And the build is right. Fuentes is supposed to be good with his knife," he added. "Fast."

"Was he left-handed?" Lily asked.

"No. No, I'm sure he was right-handed. That fits—it's his right arm with the defensive wounds. If he were attacked by a dog—"

"Dog?" Phillips was incredulous. "You think a dog did this?"

"It could have been," Rodriguez insisted. "You always tell me not to jump to conclusions. Well, until they run the tests we won't know that this was done by a—by—"

"A lupus," Phillips drawled. "That's what we're supposed to call them now, right?"

"It could have been a rabid dog. Or one trained to attack. Maybe Fuentes was meeting someone, making some kind of deal. When it went sour the other guy sicced the dog on him."

Phillips made a disgusted sound.

She flicked a glance his way. Phillips wasn't much of a partner if he wouldn't take the time to educate the kid. Lily looked back at the younger officer. "Where's Fuentes's knife?"

"I don't..." His voice trailed off as he looked around. "He must not have had time to draw it."

"Right. Now look at the body, and think. You said he was good with a blade, and fast. He's right-handed, so when some animal comes at him out of the darkness, he uses his left arm for defense. Like this." She flung up her own arm. "He reaches for his knife at the same time. And the beast didn't pay any attention to the defensive arm. It knew he was reaching for a weapon. Went for his right hand, bit it off, and spat it out. Dogs don't do that."

His throat worked as he stared at the corpse. "If—if it had been trained to go for the right arm..."

"It bit the hand off," she repeated patiently. "And flung it away. You can't train an animal to do that. What's more, Fuentes looks like he could have bench-pressed three-fifty or better, but he couldn't even slow the beast down."

"Where do you get that?"

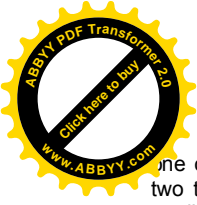
"Observation. Aside from the blood and the body, you can't tell there's been any kind of fight here. The beast hit him quick and hard. He might not even have had time to know his hand was gone. He had good instincts, though. He tried to pull his head down, protect his neck. That's when he lost some of his face. Then it ripped out his throat."

The rookie was looking sick. Maybe she'd pushed reality on him a little too firmly.

"Now, now. You're not supposed to say 'it,'" Phillips said with heavy sarcasm. "We have to say 'he' now, treat 'em like people. Full rights under the law."

"I know the law." She turned away and frowned. A van from





one of the TV stations had pulled up. Dammit. "I need you two to join the uniforms at the entrance. I don't want any media ghouls messing up my crime scene."

"Sure thing, Detective." Phillips gave her a mocking grin; turned, then paused and took the toothpick out of his mouth. When he met her eyes the mockery and anger had faded from his, leaving them dead serious. "A word of advice from someone who put in some time on the X-Squad. Call them whatever you like, but don't mistake the lupi for human. They don't think like we do, and they're damned hard to hurt. They're faster and they're stronger, and they like the way we taste."

"This one doesn't seem to have done much tasting."

He shrugged. "Something interrupted him, maybe. Don't forget that they're only legally human when they're on two legs. You run into one when it's four-footed, don't arrest it. Shoot it." He flicked the toothpick to the ground. "And aim for the brain."

Chapter 2

LILY'S EYES WERE gritty and hot the next morning when she made her way through the mass of desks in the bullpen. It had been two in the morning when she'd returned to her little apartment on Flower Street.

The lab crew had put in an even longer night, though. The preliminary report was waiting on her desk. She settled into the battered chair that was just beginning to adapt its lumps to her own bottom, took a sip of her coffee, and skimmed it quickly.

It held one surprise. For some reason they were holding off on the complete autopsy "pending official notice." Her eyebrows went up. What did that mean? Otherwise it was pretty much what she'd expected. No blood other than the victim's, no tissue. A few hairs. At least they'd been able to establish that the attacker had been one of the Blood, though.

Science depended on things happening a certain way without fail. Water boiled at 100°C at sea level, no matter who did the boiling. Mix potassium nitrate, sulfur, and charcoal together in the right proportions and you ended up with gunpowder every time, no random batches of gold dust or baking soda to confuse matters.

But magic was capricious. Individual. The cells and body fluids of those of the Blood—inherently magical beings—didn't perform the same way every time they were tested. Which made it possible sometimes to identify the traces magic left in its wake, but played hell with lab results.

Still, the lab tech had been able to determine that the blood in the wounds had been contaminated by magic, probably by some body fluid from one of the Blood. Saliva, obviously, but the tests couldn't confirm that.

The report did list some negatives. Lily snorted when she read them. No one with a functioning brain would have suspected a brownie anyway, and gnomes were timid and ex-

remely rare. Gremlins could be nasty, but there hadn't been a gremlin outbreak in southern California in years. Besides, they were way too small. The damage she'd seen last night hadn't been inflicted by a gremlin pack.

What the lab work couldn't tell them, the other physical evidence did. Lily knew very well which species they were dealing with—one of the lupi.

Werewolf.

She sat back with a sigh, turning back to the first page to give the report a more thorough reading. The man at the desk next to hers tilted his head back and howled.

"Cute, Brunswick," she said without looking up from the report. "Very lifelike. You been tested?"

The woman at the desk behind Brunswick snorted. "Him? You've got to be kidding. Lupi are supposed to be virile, charismatic, sexy as hell—"

"Hey, I'm sexy! Just ask my wife."

"They're also tomcats."

"Can't call a wolf a cat."

"Don't nitpick. You know what I mean—they'll stick it anywhere, anytime, to anyone who'll let 'em. You want me to ask your wife if that's true, too, studmuffin?"

Two of the nearest men laughed. Brunswick was protesting his innocence when Lily's phone rang. "Homicide. Detective Yu speaking."

"You're wanted in the chiefs office."

It was Captain Foster. She knew it was him—yet her first reaction was that this was a prank. It had to be. A lowly detective with only two years on Homicide was not summoned to the office of the chief of police. "Chief Delgado, sir?"

"How many chiefs do we have?" he snapped. Which was a bit unfair—there was only one chief of police, but there were several deputy chiefs. "He wants you there right away."

The line went dead. Lily gave the phone in her hand one incredulous glance, then set it down and stood.

The chief's office was, naturally, on the top floor. There was no point in speculating about why he wanted her, she thought as she punched the button for the elevator. And proceeded to do it anyway.

For once the elevator arrived immediately. She stepped on, brooding over what the summons might mean. It had to be something to do with last night's homicide.

Maybe Delgado wanted her for a press conference. The media were in a feeding frenzy. But Delgado usually handled that sort of thing himself when it was a major case. He might ask her captain to participate, but it was unlikely he'd want her.

The line between her brows deepened as the elevator let people on and off. Finally they reached the top floor.

Could the captain have told Delgado why he'd given the investigation to one of his newer detectives? No, she couldn't believe that. Foster was too careful. He hadn't even spoken of it to her in so many words.

Lily had only been to the top floor once before. The carpet

was thicker here, the lighting more subtle. The hallway had doors with brass nameplates and ended at an office with living plants and framed pictures on the walls.

The pale oak desk was ruthlessly neat. The woman behind the desk was a sixtyish civilian named Adele Crimmings, a.k.a. the chief's enforcer. Lily had heard dozens of stories about her. She had sharp eyes, a crisply tailored blue dress, and white hair cut so short it looked as if she'd recently completed basic training.

"He's expecting you," Ms. Crimmings said when Lily identified herself. She touched a button on her desk, announced Lily's arrival, then nodded at her. "Go on in."

Delgado had a big corner office with wooden blinds at the tall windows. His own desk was larger than his secretary's, and nowhere near as tidy. He was seated there, a small, trim man with coppery skin stretched tight and shiny across flat cheekbones. His tie was a very dark brown with narrow gold stripes. His suit jacket was on the back of his chair, and the sleeves of his white dress shirt were rolled up. He had very little hair on his forearms.

Delgado wasn't alone. Another man stood in front of one of the big windows, his back to the room—an Anglo, judging by the color of the skin on the long-fingered hands. A rather pale Anglo, for California.

He was at least six feet, slim, and standing utterly motionless. His arms hung loose at his sides, his feet didn't shift, his head didn't turn as she entered the room. Shaggy brown hair waved past his collar. The sunlight glanced off that ordinary brown hair, igniting it, drawing a burnished halo around his head. The casual elegance of his black slacks and loose black jacket fairly screamed money. The cuffs of his shirt were black, too.

The man in black, she thought with a mental sniff at the dramatics of it. She wondered if he was an actor or a director. And was annoyed to notice that her pulse had picked up.

"Detective Yu," Delgado said. "Thank you for coming."

"Sir."

"I have someone here you need to meet. You'll be working with him," he said as the other man, at last, turned to face her.

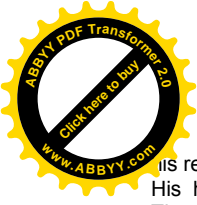
Lily's breath caught in her throat as she saw the narrow face, the tilted slashes of the eyebrows, the slightly sallow skin, and the cool gray eyes that met hers with no trace of a smile. It was a striking face, stark and clean, the lines of it swept back the way stone is smoothed by wind. Not handsome, but not a face one would ever forget, either.

She knew him. Knew who he was, at least. She'd seen his photograph often enough, though he was certainly no movie star or director. Most recently, she'd seen it in the file she'd started four days ago. The one on the first killing.

Her heart pounded and her eyes widened in disbelief. "You want me to work with a werewolf?"

BY THE TIME Rule turned around, he was fairly sure he had





his reaction to her scent under control. Or at least concealed. His heart was thudding against the wall of his chest like Thumper introducing himself to Bambi.

I can't possibly know. Not for sure. Yet her scent... Fear and exaltation filled him. He studied the face of the woman he'd never believed he would meet.

Something in the smoothness of her face, the sleek roundness of her body, appealed to him. Her eyes were as black as the braid that hung down her back. And greatly irritated at the moment. She would move well, he thought, and wanted to see her move.

There wasn't a great deal of Lily Yu physically, but he had the sense that quite a lot of person had been packed into that trim, tidy form. She wore plain black slacks and a jacket the color of the poppies that dotted the hills in the spring. He smelled the metal-and-gunpowder odor of the gun concealed by that jacket.

No fear scent, though. That intrigued him. Even Delgado gave out a whiff of fear in his presence, though he controlled it admirably. That, and the fact that she'd risen to detective at such a young age, told him the dainty packaging was misleading. A man who didn't look beyond that packaging might mistake her for doll-like. He wondered if any had been foolish enough to say so—and if they'd drawn back a stub.

Metaphorically speaking, of course. Humans didn't respond so vigorously to insult. "Obviously you recognize me," he said.

"Detective," Delgado snapped. "Your captain assured me you didn't suffer from racial prejudices."

"Sorry, sir." Those pretty black eyes slid from her chief to Rule. "My apologies, Mr. Turner. The old-fashioned term slipped out. Or should I say 'Your Highness'?"

"My title is used only among the clans and by journalists. Strictly speaking, it doesn't translate as prince. That is merely the closest approximation." Her skin was ivory—not the bland pallor of one who avoids the sun, but a dense, saturated color. She smelled wonderful, very female, the muskiness of her skin faintly overlaid with soap. No perfume. He smiled slowly. He hated perfume. "You may call me Rule. I would like it if you did."

Delgado cleared his throat. He looked irritated, which Rule understood. This was his territory, and they were ignoring that. "Detective Yu," he said firmly, "this is Rule Turner, prince of Clan Nokolai. Mr. Turner, Detective Lily Yu."

"Mr. Turner," she said with a curt nod.

That put him in his place, didn't it? His smile widened.

Delgado was speaking. "Mr. Turner spoke with the mayor last night. He offered his expertise. Obviously he has an intimate knowledge of lupus culture and, ah, habits. He will cooperate fully with you."

"Pardon me, sir, but I'm unsure exactly what that means." Delgado's eyes flickered to Rule. Knowing the man's discomfort, Rule took the burden of explanation from him. "Initially, at least, it means we must visit the morgue. I need to

smell the corpse."

Chapter 3

LILY LEFT THE chief's office fifteen minutes later, confused and irritated. Now she knew why the autopsy had been held up, though.

Maybe Rule Turner could identify the killer from the scent he'd left on his victim's body. Maybe not. She couldn't take his word at face value. People lied. They did it all the time, to protect small hurts or embarrassments as well as for more serious reasons. But if he claimed to identify the killer, that would be information, whether it was true or a lie.

She had to figure out his goal, what he had to gain by helping them investigate. Lupi weren't exactly civic-minded about cooperating with the police. Of course, Rule Turner was politically active on behalf of his people, something of a spokesman. Not to mention a favorite of the gossip mags.

He was also a civilian. Lily did not like working with civilians, but she could concede the necessity at times. Her confusion had little to do with her professional irritation.

Those eyes ... she'd never heard that it was dangerous to look into a werewolf's eyes. But there was a great deal she didn't know about them, wasn't there?

The man beside her kept pace silently. At least, she supposed that was the right word for him. Could you be a man without being human? Never mind, she told herself, moving briskly. The courts had ruled that lupi had the same rights and obligations as other citizens... when they were in human form.

His human form was pretty devastating, she admitted silently. Or maybe that was an aspect of his magic, whatever it was that enabled him to turn into a wolf. Or gave him no choice. Legend said that werewolves couldn't avoid the Change at the full moon.

"You move quickly, Detective," Turner said as they reached the elevator.

She jabbed the down button. "Habit. People with short legs learn to move fast, or we get left behind."

"Is that what it is?" He sounded thoughtful. "I thought you were trying to leave me behind. You're not happy with Chief Delgado's instructions. I'm afraid I disturb you."

"You annoy me," she corrected. "Cocky, arrogant men usually do."

"Arrogant, perhaps. Cocky is for puppies."

"You said it, not me. Where were you last night between ten o'clock and eleven twenty-five?"

"At a party with about twenty other people. A party at the mayor's house."

So much for wiping the amusement out of his eyes. "Were you there when the mayor was called? Is that how you heard about the second killing so quickly?"

"Yes. The mayor asked for my assistance."

The stupid elevator was taking forever today. She punched

the button again. "If you're ready to start acting as an expert consultant, I have some questions."

"Of course. I hope they're personal." He stroked his hand down her braid. "Lovely. It feels as soft as it looks."

The shiver that ran up her spine was as distressing as it was instinctive. She stepped away. "None of this is personal, and you need to keep your hands to yourself."

"I'll try."

"You'll have to do better than try."

"We are a profoundly physical people, Detective. It's difficult for us to remember that others don't have the same need to touch and be touched that we do."

She lifted a scornful eyebrow. The Nokolai prince had been mixing and mingling with normal humans quite regularly at events from San Diego to Hollywood to Washington, D.C., for the last few years. He knew perfectly well how to behave—when he wanted to. "And here I thought you were hitting on me."

"That, too, of course. Will you go out with me tonight?"

Her lips twitched before she could stop them. Maybe his existence wasn't illegal anymore, but that smile ought to be. The way it spread over his face was a crime—so slow and intimate, as if smiling were a sensual indulgence to be savored, not rushed....

The elevator finally arrived. Three people got off. She stepped in quickly.

He followed. "What impersonal questions did you want to ask?"

"I know lupi have a toxic reaction to silver, because the X-Squads used to use rounds made from a silver alloy." A very expensive alloy. She had a round in her clip right now, having requisitioned it and two more after the first killing. "What about garlic or crosses?"

"No and no. Old wives' tales." He pushed the button for the basement level, which held the parking garage. The elevator doors shut.

"I thought it might be. I'm afraid a lot of what I know is the sort of garbage spread by movies like *Witch Hunt*"

"At least you know it's garbage."

He was tense. She wasn't sure why she was convinced of that—he stood easily, spoke smoothly, and that remarkable face was still, unrevealing. "I've also heard that lupi are claustrophobic."

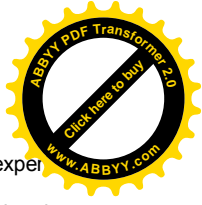
"It's hardly a phobia. We simply prefer open places."

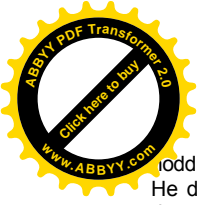
Not small, enclosed spaces. Like an elevator. Abruptly she pushed the button for the next floor down, and the elevator slowed.

"Why did you do that?" he snapped.

"There's no reason for you to be uncomfortable. We can take the stairs."

The elevator halted smoothly and the doors opened. Two people were waiting to get on. The woman was a civilian, fortyish and plump—a clerk or secretary, from the look of her. Lily knew the man slightly, a Vice officer named Burns. She





nodded at him.

He didn't notice. He was staring at Turner. If he'd been a dog, his hackles would have been raised. The woman was staring, too. But the expression on her face was entirely different.

The tableau lasted only a second before she and Turner got off, the other two got on, and the elevator doors closed. She glanced at him as they started down the hall, wondering if he'd noticed the woman's reaction. She had to look up, of course. He was too blasted tall.

He was looking straight at her, those rainy-sky eyes amused and knowing.

"You tend to evoke a reaction from people, don't you?"

"Usually. Why don't we start my expert consultation with listening? You can tell me what you think you know about lupi and I'll correct any misinformation."

"Good enough." The door to the stairwell was metal with the usual red Exit sign over it. She reached for it.

Somehow he was there before her, opening the door and holding it for her. He hadn't seemed to rush, yet he'd moved very quickly. Lily stopped, studying him. He looked elegant and not at all civilized in spite of his trendy black clothing.

"Legend says lupi are fast. Really fast."

He just smiled.

Something shivered down her spine. She got her feet moving and didn't speak again until they both were on the stairs, headed down. "I know the legal history best. Until 1930, the only federal law related to lupi was the one making it a crime not to report someone, ah, afflicted with lycanthropy. State laws varied widely. Most of them treated lupi as humans who had a dangerous disease. Some called for them to be killed outright. Then Dr. Abraham Geddes proved that lycanthropy could not be transmitted, as had previously been believed."

"The Change isn't catching," he agreed mildly.

"Right. It's an inherited condition. Folklore and experts alike agree that the trait is sex-linked. There are no female lupi."

"True."

"I guess the experts can't be wrong about everything. Anyway, soon after that came Carr v. the State of Texas. The Supreme Court's ruling effectively made lupi legally human, but with a congenital disease, one that, well..."

"Makes us mad. Incurably insane. We were locked up, if discovered. Usually in chains."

"Yes. Well, that was some time ago. There continued to be a good deal of debate about whether lupi were human. Some of those of the Blood are obviously nonhuman, of course."

"Gremlins, brownies, the odd pooka or banshee."

"Pookas? I thought they were—never mind." She shook her head. Later she could ask if pookas were really extinct or not. They'd reached the fourth-floor landing. He was still moving easily. She was, too, though her heart rate was up slightly. She wondered if he could hear it. Lupi were said to have extremely acute hearing. "In 1964 Dr. Beatrice Pargenter discovered a serum that inhibited the Change, and everyone

who considered lycanthropy a disease applauded. It was considered an enormous, and humane, breakthrough. Congress passed the registration laws, which remained in effect until five years ago."

"You do have your legal history down."

"I've boned up."

Rule Turner's forehead was smooth. No tattoo, nor any sign that one had been removed. The authorities had used a special, silver-infused dye to tattoo the registration number, since the body of a were would otherwise have healed the tiny wounds inflicted by a needle within minutes. "You never registered, did you?"

"Why, Detective, I do believe that's a personal question."

"And I do believe you're obnoxious. That's a personal comment, by the way. I understand the drug was very unpopular with the lupi."

"Since the side effects ranged from vertigo to nausea to impotence—yes, it was unpopular. But even if they'd been able to refine their damned drug, no one wanted it."

His voice had lost its subtle balance between seduction and mockery. The emotion she heard was real, and personal.

They'd reached the subbasement. He pushed open the door and held it for her, as he had before. She went through it, uncomfortably aware that he was inviting her to expose her back to him.

The parking garage looked like others everywhere—gray and ugly. The air was hot and smelled of exhaust fumes. The light was flat, fluorescent, and grimly bright. "You didn't want to give up the Change."

"We no more wish to give it up than you would want to be chemically lobotomized. Still, I suppose it was an improvement over being killed or castrated."

She paused, startled. "Castrated?"

"Ah. A gap in your legal history, Detective." His eyes were oddly pale in the artificial light. "Yes, for a few years some states dealt with 'the lupi problem' the way scientists have dealt with fruit flies—by rendering us unable to breed. It was considered more humane than shooting us on sight, like rabid dogs."

He radiated anger, far more than the glimpse she'd had before. His face was taut with it. An old anger, she thought, but one that hadn't lost any of its power over time. Over the castration? Yes, she decided. His people had been killed, imprisoned, chained, drugged, tattooed, but it was the castration that made him vibrate with suppressed rage. Had he been...

No, that was stupid. According to the file on her desk, Rule Turner had two sons, by two different mothers. Neither of whom he'd bothered to marry.

Even if he hadn't been a lycanthrope, he would so not be her type. She nodded to the left. "My car is this way."

"Mine isn't. I prefer to drive myself."

"Life is full of these little disappointments." She started walking without waiting to see if he followed.

After a bare second's pause, he did. "Are you used to having your way, Detective, or simply testing my willingness to cooperate?"

"I'm used to driving myself. California hasn't allowed the kind of vigilantism you described for over three decades, you know." And never castration.

"Which is one reason my clan chose to settle here."

Lily knew about the Nokolai enclave in the mountains outside the city, of course. She'd gone there shortly after the first murder—and been turned away at the gate, politely but firmly. It was outside the city limits, so she lacked the authority to insist she be allowed inside. The lupi were a secretive people. Not without reason, given the persecutions of the past. But

those persecutions hadn't been entirely without reason, either.

Before the change in the laws, the enclave had masqueraded as a religious commune. Most people knew differently now, but they didn't realize that the land that made up the enclave was owned by the Nokolai chief personally. So was the other property Lily had found—a ranch in northern California, some choice L.A. real estate, and several condos here in San Diego.

The Nokolai chief was a rich man. His son seemed to do pretty well for himself, too.

She stopped at a plain white sedan that looked like a dozen others lined up beneath the low ceiling. He stood on the other side of the car, waiting for her to unlock it. Their eyes met. Her spine tingled. "There's a bill due to come before the House this fall," she said. "The Species Citizenship Bill. According to what I've read, you're strongly in favor of it"

"Interested in politics, are you?"

"The Supreme Court ruling already gives you citizenship. The Species Citizenship Bill won't change that, but it will declare lupi and others of the Blood nonhuman."

"But entitled to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship whether we're on two feet or four." He studied her face a moment, then nodded as if he'd confirmed something. "You don't approve of a law that would treat a beast as a person."

"I don't understand why you'd want to be declared non-human!"

He lifted those tilted eyebrows. "I am a lupus of Clan Nokolai. What else matters?"

Arrogant bastard. Lily swung her door open and slid inside. She could well believe he was royal. She could also, all too easily, believe he was a predator.

She let him in and started the engine. He slid in beside her and, after a second's hesitation, reached for the seat belt.

It occurred to her that a car was another small, enclosed space. She punched the buttons to let down the windows.

"Hope you don't mind," she said casually. "I like fresh air."

"Not at all. I'm sure the air will grow fresher soon."

At the moment it smelled of oil, exhaust fumes, and hot concrete. Heat rose in her cheeks, but she didn't think he'd





notice. She was, quite literally, thick-skinned. Neither bruises nor blushes showed much. "Do you really think you'll be able to sniff out the identity of the attacker?"

"I don't know. My senses aren't as acute in this form. It's worth trying."

"A less acute sense of smell would be a blessing at the morgue." With sudden alarm, she added, "Unless you plan to, ah—"

"I won't Change. Aside from the discomfort, and the danger of doing so in these surroundings, it is not allowed. Not within the city."

"The Change is uncomfortable?"

"It can be. We are tied to nature. Changing while surrounded by buildings, concrete, and steel instead of earth and sky, is ... possible. But it exacts a price."

She thought about that as she pulled out into traffic. Had whoever Changed in order to kill done it in a park, or some other pocket of nature? "You say you're forbidden to Change within the city limits. You're not talking about the law."

"My Lupois forbade this many years ago."

"Lupois?"

"You would say 'king' or 'high prince.' Though perhaps 'clan chief is closer." He was sitting with his forearm propped on the window opening. Air streamed through, pouring itself around that narrow, sculpted face, whipping his hair around it.

She spotted a gap in the other lane between a panel truck and an SUV, accelerated smoothly, and whipped into it. The panel truck honked. Turner's hand clenched tightly on the door. Charitably, she chose to overlook that. "The Lupois is your father."

"Yes."

The Change was intensely important to him, to all lupi, from what he'd said. If the Lupois had the authority to forbid or restrict it, that was considerable power. "And do all members of your clan obey the Lupois in this?"

"I would have said yes, until I heard of the first killing. Now I don't know."

"You think it's someone from your clan."

"I don't know," he repeated, and she heard a thread of anger or frustration in his voice. "We are the only clan near San Diego, but we aren't the only lupi."

He would want it to be someone outside his clan, she thought, signaling for the turn. "I know about big, close-knit families. I come from one myself. A brother, two sisters, three uncles, four aunts, lots of cousins. Both of my father's parents are still living. Then there's Grandmother."

If he thought it was ridiculous for her to compare her extended family to a lupus clan, he didn't say so. "You say 'grandmother' as if she were the only one to bear that title."

"She's one of a kind, all right. My sister and I call her Tiger Lady—though not to her face. I'm named after her. That is, I bear the English version of her name."

"My name is Anglicized, too."

She glanced at him quickly. "Turner?"

"No, Rule. It was originally Reule. French."

"So what does it mean?" The light was about to change. She accelerated through it without quite running up the bumper of the car ahead of her.

"Little wolf." He exhaled. "Get a lot of tickets, do you?"

"No." She hadn't seen him tense this time, but out of the corner of her eye she did catch him relaxing again. She grinned. "I'm a good driver, actually. Good reflexes. Not as fast as yours, I suppose. I guess it might be nerve-wracking to have someone whose reflexes are half the speed of yours in the driver's seat."

"Only if they think they're invulnerable," he said dryly.

"You're the one who ought to feel invulnerable. It takes a lot to hurt a lupus, doesn't it?"

"Because we heal so quickly, we can take a lot of damage. But we have the same nerve endings humans do. We hurt every bit as much."

He thought of himself as a lupus. Not as a human. For the next few blocks she couldn't think of anything more to say.

Chapter 4

LILY HATED THE morgue. It was an unprofessional reaction, one she'd tried to overcome, but she had yet to set foot inside the cold, white walls without feeling repelled.

It wasn't the bodies that got to her. Nor the smell. It was what happened to those bodies here that made her skin feel two sizes too small. Autopsies were necessary. They were also the final, most complete invasion of privacy possible.

The attendant was new—at least, Lily hadn't run across her before. She was young, African American, her hair cropped very short to show off an elegant head and neck. And she was staring at Rule Turner.

Did the man have that effect on every woman whose path he crossed? "Detective Yu," she said, holding out her shield in the soft leather case her brother had given her for her birthday last year. "I understand you've got Carlos Fuentes chilled down. We need to have a look."

She blinked, then stood. "Sure. This way, Detective."

Lily's shoulders and spine were tight as she and Turner followed the attendant down a short hall.

"You don't like this place, either," he said abruptly.

She looked at him. There was strain around his eyes, and his lips were thinned. "I guess it smells pretty bad here to you."

"It's not the smell that bothers me."

The attendant spoke cheerily as she pulled on one of the handles and slid the long drawer out. "Here you go."

What blood was left in the body had settled, of course. The back and buttocks would be livid, but the undamaged part of his face, his shoulders, and his upper chest were waxy and pale. He looked cold beneath the thin sheet. And very dead. Lily's lips tightened. She glanced at Rule. "The sheet—?"

"I'll need it off."

The attendant looked surprised, then upset as she removed the sheet. That puzzled Lily. Why would a morgue attendant be upset at being asked to remove a sheet from a body? The obvious assumption was that Rule was here to identify the victim and, given the condition of the dead man's face, looking at the body made sense.

Oh. Lily's lips twitched. The young woman didn't like the idea that Rule might be intimately familiar with another man's body. Well, no one enjoyed having their dreams snuffed out. Even the brief, silly ones.

Rule bent close to the ravaged throat and sniffed.

"Hey!" The attendant grabbed his shoulder and tried to pull him back. She might have been tugging on a Buick, for all the effect she had. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Exactly what he's been asked to do." Lily took the woman's arm and firmly urged her back. "By Chief Delgado."

"He was asked to sniff a corpse?" she exclaimed, outraged.

Lily lifted both eyebrows as if the question were absurd, rather than the action. "Yes."

The attendant looked as if she would have bolted from the room if regulations hadn't called for her to remain. Lily didn't much want to watch him, either, but perversity or pride kept her from looking away.

He made a thorough job of it, smelling all up and down the body, paying close attention to the wounds and the cold, flaccid hands. He was intent, focused, and somehow still impossibly elegant. Not like a beast at all—more like a wine connoisseur about to deliver a verdict on the bouquets of various vintages.

And that thought was both absurd and macabre. Lily bit her lip to keep from giggling like an idiot

At last he straightened, met her eyes, and shook his head slightly.

"You couldn't tell."

"He was killed by a lupus," he said flatly. "Beyond that..." He shrugged. "Very little scent remains."

"We already knew the killer was a lupus."

"Perhaps you did. I didn't until now. There are some who might want to fake the slaying of men by lupi."

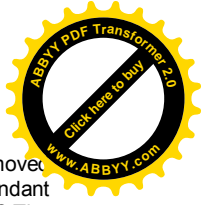
Lily remembered their audience, a wide-eyed attendant who might talk to the wrong person, like a reporter. She jerked her head, indicating she wanted him to follow, and headed for the door.

He thanked the attendant politely. She should have done that, she thought, upset and not knowing why. Had she counted so much on his sense of smell to give her a lead? That was foolish.

He caught up with her at the door and took her elbow. "I want coffee. Something to get the taste of this place out of my mouth."

Before she stopped to think, she'd agreed. Together they left that cold, bright room with its neatly filed bodies.

INSTINCT TOOK HER to Bennie's Bar & Grill. Bennie's was large, dark, and noisy, known for its cheeseburgers. As soon





As she stepped inside, Lily sighed. Usually her instincts weren't this lousy.

Bennie's was a cop hangout.

It wasn't crowded at this hour. She only spotted two faces she knew as they headed for the back, but everyone seemed to recognize the man with her. The looks she and Rule drew varied from startled to snarly. Cops were good with faces, and his was memorable.

By the time they sat in a booth near the rest rooms, she was feeling self-conscious and prickly. "I wonder if this is how a white woman felt in Selma in 1960 if she went into a restaurant with a black man."

He shook his head slowly. "Our fellow customers aren't going to take either of us out in the alley and beat us up for having dared to be seen in public together. The waitress won't even refuse to serve me."

She grimaced. "I'm overreacting, you mean."

"There are parallels. If people hadn't started refusing to sit at the back of the bus back then, measures like the Species Citizenship Bill wouldn't be possible now. Have you given any thought to going out with me?"

She blinked. "For a supposedly sophisticated man, you have lousy timing. I just watched you sniffing a corpse."

"It's a subject that will keep coming up, good timing or not."

A waitress drifted up—young, blond, and pierced. There was a ring in her eyebrow, three studs on one ear, and another ring in the belly button her midriff-hugging top exposed. She set Lily's water in front of her without glancing in her direction. Her eyes were wholly on Turner, huge with fascination ... and fear.

And he knew. Awareness of the girl's fear was there in the flicker of his eyes, the softness of his voice as he ordered coffee.

"I'll have a cup, too," Lily said, peeling the paper from her straw. "Make it blond."

The waitress nodded and left.

Lily crossed her arms on the table and leaned forward. "Is it because you're a lupus? Or do you get all this attention because you're a celebrity?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "I'm probably the only lupus she'll ever meet—knowingly, at least."

Lily nodded as a piece fell into place. "That's the reason for all the black, isn't it? I've never seen a photograph of you where you're wearing colors. Just black. You want people to recognize you. You want them to know they're meeting a lupus."

Amazingly, a touch of color sharpened those hard cheekbones. "Black is good theater."

"And your face is unforgettable. When people see you, they remember. You do the mystery bit well—a hint of glamour, the allure of the forbidden or the dangerous. That's the image you want people to associate with lupus. You're sort of a poster boy for your people."

"Thank you."

He was insulted. She grinned. "You don't like being called a boy or cocky, which is for puppies. I think you've started to believe your image."

All at once he grinned back. "Maybe I have."

The grin transformed his face, turning it from dark and disturbing to someone outrageously appealing—but someone who wore ragged jeans on weekends, played baseball with the guys, and changed the oil in his car. Lily didn't even think about trying to reply. She was too caught up in that grin, what it did to his eyes and the way it lifted her heart.

"Here you go." The waitress deposited their coffee, dumping a couple of containers of creamer beside Lily's cup.

Lily hadn't so much as glimpsed her approach. Shaken, she tore one of the creamers open and dumped half the contents into her coffee.

Had he used some kind of magic on her? Or did it just spill out from him naturally, without his willing it? If it wasn't magic ... she didn't want to think about what it would mean if she could react like that to him without any magic involved "Does magic have a smell?"

His eyebrows lifted. "It can. Why?"

"You knew the attacker was lupus. Our lab did, too—at least, they could tell it was someone of the-Blood, because magic leaves traces. I wondered if you were smelling the same kind of traces they found."

"I don't think so. Magic does have a distinctive scent, but only when it's active. When a spell is being performed, for example. What I identified was the smell of lupus, not magic itself."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about the killer?"

He frowned and sipped his coffee. She was not surprised to see that he drank it black. "He wasn't a juvenile."

"You can tell that from the scent?"

"No. The body wasn't eaten."

Coffee sloshed in her cup. She set it down carefully. "Explain."

"It's pure superstition that an adult lupus will be overcome by bloodlust and attack whatever moves. Young lupus lose themselves in the beast, but we learn control. If we didn't, we really would be the ravening beasts depicted in movies like Witch Hunt."

"So a child or adolescent wouldn't have acquired control yet."

"Not a child. The Change arrives with puberty."

She thought of a particularly improbable photograph she'd seen while waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store recently. A woman had been sitting up in a hospital bed with several blanket-wrapped bundles tucked into her arms. Bundles with puppy faces. "The National Tattler would be disappointed to hear that."

"I doubt the Tattler allows facts to interfere with its editorial focus."

"I guess not. Talk about raging hormones." Lily gave herself a moment to think by sipping her coffee. This was completely

new information. She hadn't heard it, read it, anywhere. Who would he trust her with this knowledge? Was it true? "You're saying that a young lupus kills. And eats what he kills."

"If he is allowed to, yes. But we are careful with our children. None go through the Change unsupervised."

Her lips twitched. Embarrassed, she took a quick sip of coffee.

"Something amuses you?"

"I have an odd sense of humor," she said apologetically. "I thought of those ads—you know, the public service ones—where parents of teenagers are told to nag them about where they're going, who they'll be with, all that. And I pictured one aimed for the parents of teenage lupus: 'Where are you going? Who else will be there? Have you eaten? I expect you back before the moon rises, young man!'" He burst into laughter. "You're not that far off."

A bubble of happiness lodged beneath her breastbone. She liked the sound of his laughter, the way his head went back to open his throat to it, the smooth line of his throat... uh-oh, she thought, the bubble popping. What's happening here? She poured more creamer into her coffee so she could stir it around. A light touch on her cheek made her look up, startled.

"Hey. The light suddenly turned off in your face. What happened?"

She could have told him again to keep his hands to himself, but it would have been dishonest. Somehow, between one grin and a moment of shared laughter, they'd stepped outside their proper roles and entered undefined territory.

But the very lack of definition made complete honesty impossible. She couldn't refer to a relationship that hovered over them only in potential, a heavy cloud that might hold storm and lightning—or might pass on without shedding a single drop. She certainly couldn't tell him that his promiscuity repelled her.

Lily chose her words carefully. "You have two sons yourself, I understand."

"It seems you do read the Tattler."

"Like I said earlier, after the first killing I did some research."

"On me?" His mouth twisted. "What exactly is it you suspect me of?"

She shrugged, uncomfortable but unwilling to apologize for doing her job. "You're very well known. You live in the enclave—"

"Clanhome. We don't call it an enclave."

"All right, then, you live at Clanhome, but you have a condo here in the city and you travel all over the place, partying with the Hollywood crowd, meeting with policy makers in Sacramento and Washington. You've made yourself into a public figure, and I have to think that's intentional—you're trying to replace the old stereotypes with an image you've consciously created. Of course I found out what I could about you."

One corner of his mouth tipped up, more in irony than humor.





"You're perceptive. Has it occurred to you that if I've been creating an image, whatever information is available about me would be part of that image?"

"And not necessarily true, you mean? But the image tells me things, too. Like what you want people to believe about lupi. Why does your father so seldom appear in public?"

He studied her for a moment, his mouth drawn into a thin line, as grimly expressive as those remarkable eyebrows. "You should ask him that. He prefers not to come into the city, however. You'll have to go to Clanhome."

"I tried that. They wouldn't let me inside the gates. I've called. A very polite young woman told me she'd pass on my message. You can get me in, though."

"I could get you in, yes, but just getting inside the gates won't do you any good. No one would answer your questions. You need the backing of the Lupois. Give me a few days to arrange things."

Or to hide whatever needed to be hidden. "What needs arranging?"

"My father is away right now. Wait until he returns."

The muscles along her cheeks and jaws tightened. He was concealing something, and doing a clumsy job of it. "Why can't you arrange for me to speak with people at Clanhome yourself? Aren't you in charge with your father gone?"

"It doesn't work that way." His fingers stroked up and down the mug absently.

"How does it work, then?"

"I'm not like a vice-president, able to step in if the real leader is unavailable. I'm the prince and the heir, and..." His smile flickered. "A poster boy for my people. I have no authority of my own. I simply uphold the Lupois's authority."

"Okay." He seemed to think he was telling her something significant, but nothing he'd said so far was startling. "How do you get to be prince, anyway? Is it strictly hereditary?"

"To be named prince, I had to prove three things. That I was of royal blood, yes, though we do not follow primogeniture. My father has two other sons, both older than I am."

"I didn't know that."

"Very few do. My brothers, unfortunately, did not succeed at the second test. Since a king must be able to pass on his power, the prince must be able to sire children. As you know, I have two sons."

Had he gotten those sons on their mothers in order to become prince? The possibility left a foul taste in her mouth.

"And the third thing?"

"That I could tear out the throat of any who issued a formal challenge."

That left her with nothing whatsoever to say.

His mouth crooked up on one side, but there was no smile in his eyes. "Think about it. The Lupois rules for life. If anyone disagrees with his decisions, they have two alternatives. They can try to change his mind. Or they can kill him."

Slowly the ramifications sank in. "When you say you support his authority, does that mean you're a sort of bodyguard? Or

are you more like his muscle?"

"Both, perhaps, in the sense that the army is the 'muscle' of the president. We are not a passive people, but we have great respect for honor and custom. Any member of the clan may challenge the Lupois."

"What does this challenge consist of?"

"Battle. In wolf form."

A sick certainty grew in the pit of her stomach. "A trial by combat, you mean. Your father is over sixty. He couldn't defend himself against a young opponent. You do that for him.

You answer any formal challenges to his authority."

He didn't answer, just looked at her gravely the way an adult might watch a child struggling to understand some complicated matter.

She did not like being patronized. She didn't much care for the implications, either. "How is the winner determined in one of these battles?"

"It varies, depending on the nature of the challenge and the will of the Lupois. In a serious challenge to the Lupois's authority, the winner is the one still alive at the end. Don't look so shocked, Detective. It's only illegal to kill one of us when we're on two feet, after all."

Chapter 5

THE SUN HAD set, but the sky still flew crimson and purple flags in the west. A boy who should have been inside at this hour whizzed by on his skateboard. Lily's breath heaved in her chest as she neared the outdoor stairs to her apartment. Sweat trickled down her temples and stung her eyes. Worf's claws clicked dully on the concrete beside her. His big head drooped, but he was panting happily.

Lily's dog was undoubtedly a good deal more satisfied with their run than she was.

It had been four days since the last killing. She knew little more now than she had when she had looked down at the ripped throat of the first victim, a young man whose only crime seemed to be that he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

There was nothing to link the two victims other than the manner of their deaths. She'd found no hard evidence, and only two possible witnesses. An old man and a teenage girl both spoke of seeing a tall, well-dressed man—an Anglo—near the park where Fuentes was killed. The timing fit, and the man's clothes, bearing, and race had made him stand out in an area mostly Hispanic. Neither witness had gotten a clear look at his face, but they thought he was smooth-shaven, neither especially old nor very young.

When they reached the iron stairs Worf stopped, whimpered, and looked up at her with pathetic eyes. "Forget it," she told him. "I'm not lugging seventy pounds of lazy up those stairs."

His tail waved twice hopefully. Her lips twitched. Worf was a peculiar-looking fellow. His body looked like a barrel set on stubby legs, his ears drooped along with his jowls, and his kinky fur was the color of mud. Lily's vet thought the dog

might be a mixture of Labrador, basset, and poodle. She'd found him huddled in the alley, looking pathetic and half-starved, about six months ago. He was scared of cats and he hated stairs.

"Forget it," she said again, and started up the stairs. Worf heaved a huge canine sigh and followed. They were near the top when she heard the phone ringing inside her apartment. It might be Rule.

She cursed herself even as she scrambled up the last steps, nearly tripping over Worf, who decided they were racing and tried to get to the door first. She wasn't supposed to want the man to call again, dammit. But whoever was calling, it wasn't police business—Dispatch would use her beeper.

And so far Rule had called every day, discussing the case and then asking her out.

Every day, she'd turned him down. So he just might be getting tired of calling. Which was a good thing, she told herself firmly as she grabbed the phone, cutting off her answering machine's spiel. "Hello?"

"You've been out running again, haven't you? At night, Lily. You know how unsafe that is."

Lily sighed. "Hello, Mother. I'm a big girl now, and a cop, and I keep to well-lit areas where there are people."

"None of which makes you invulnerable."

Her lips quirked up as she thought of Rule's opinion of her driving. "I had Worf with me."

"As if that lazy creature was any kind of protection! I don't know why you kept that animal. You aren't home enough to take proper care of him, and he's too large for an apartment. Besides, you know how Grandmother feels about dogs."

"Grandmother isn't living with Worf. I am." She picked up his water dish and carried it to the sink. "What's up? You didn't call to lecture me about pet ownership."

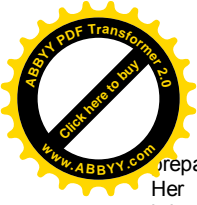
"I don't need a reason to call my daughter. But I did think it was time to finalize some of the details for Grandmother's party. It's this Friday."

Lily managed not to groan. "I know that, Mother. The cake's ordered, the invitations went out weeks ago, and it's being held at Uncle Chan's restaurant. He won't let anyone mess with his menu, so there's no point in discussing the food. I've bought a dress, and yes, I've bought a present, wrapped and ready. What's left to discuss?"

Stupid question. Her mother had plenty to say. Lily's older sister was attending with her husband, of course. And her brother was bringing his fiancée, a young woman whose virtues included the possession of a good Chinese family, a position at an accounting firm, and respect for her elders. While Worf slurped up his water and Lily grabbed a bottle from the refrigerator, she learned that her younger sister was bringing a doctor from the hospital where her older sister worked.

She also learned who each of her cousins was bringing, and their financial and family histories. By the time her mother reached the real point of her call, Lily was sprawled in her favorite chair, one leg dangling over the padded arm,





prepared for what came next.

Her mother didn't disappoint her. "So who will you be bringing, dear?"

"I haven't asked anyone." Lily slumped farther down in the overstuffed chair. "I don't see that it's necessary."

"Of course it's necessary. This is a formal party, Lily. You will look foolish if you attend without an escort. You will cause your father and me to lose face, and Grandmother, too."

She closed her eyes. The "face" argument was one she couldn't counter. "I'm not seeing anyone right now. Do you want me to ask someone from Homicide? Or there's a very nice Vice officer—his name is Lawrence, but we all call him Curly. I think he'd agree, and he might even shave, since it's formal. He works undercover a lot," she explained. "The three-day beard helps him blend in."

Stony silence greeted that bit of flippancy.

She sighed. "I'm sorry, Mother. But there really isn't anyone I want to ask."

"I'm well aware that your job exposes you to the wrong sort of men. This is only one of the reasons your father and I had hoped you would choose a more appropriate career. Who do you ever meet, other than police officers and criminals?"

The words came out before she could stop herself. "I did meet a very good-looking man a few days ago. His family owns quite a bit of land—a vineyard, a cattle ranch, some other properties. He manages some of their investments and, ah, has contacts in the government. He's asked me out several times."

"And you haven't accepted? He is single, isn't he?"

Extremely single. From what she'd heard, lupi didn't believe in marriage. "I would hardly have mentioned him if he weren't."

"I don't know what you are looking for, but you must be realistic. You aren't getting any younger, and while you're a very pretty girl you don't always take the care you might with your appearance. And your job—well, we've covered that subject many times, so I won't go into it now. You must learn to make some accommodations, dear. I suppose this man isn't Chinese, but surely you don't think that would make him unacceptable?"

"Ah ... no, he isn't Chinese. Actually, he—"

"Asking him to accompany you to the party is not a lifetime commitment. You make too much of a simple thing. Of course, I can arrange an escort for you, if you prefer. Su Lin Chen's nephew is doing very well. He will inherit the restaurant, you know—"

"Freddie Chen?" She sat up, alarmed. "Mother, if you ask Freddie Chen to escort me to Grandmother's party I'll never speak to you again. He's an octopus. A sweaty octopus. With bad breath."

"Then ask this other man. What is his name?"

"Rule—" Lily's beeper went off. "Just a minute. I've got a call." She unclipped the beeper from her belt and checked the number quickly. "Got to go, Mother. I'll call you later."

"Ask him," her mother said. "Or I will speak to Su Lin." She hung up.

The number on Lily's beeper was one she knew all too well. She had it on speed dial on both her land line and her cell phone. Lily punched it listened, asked two questions, then headed for the door, grabbing her holster on the way out.

THIS TIME THE victim was a woman. Charlene Hall had been forty-eight, African American, probably single. No wedding ring, and her credit cards were in her name. She had a California driver's license, an unpaid traffic ticket, and a whole slew of those wallet-sized school photos millions of parents buy every year.

A dozen pictures, Lily thought, her gut clenched tight with pity. All of the same two boys, taken over many years. The two pictures on top were the most recent. One showed a young man in a sailor's dress uniform, his dark face solemn, his eyes gleaming with pride. The other was a family shot minus the husband-father element. The boy who in one photo had been missing three teeth was a young man now, his smile still wide and happy. He wore a suit in this photograph, and stood behind a young woman holding a baby dressed in blue ruffles and lace.

Charlene Hall had taken these photographs with her everywhere. Even when she went for a run by the lake at Mission Trails Park.

Lily glanced at the body, almost ignored at the moment. Charlene had worn the same brand of running shoe Lily favored. Lily sighed. It was too much to hope that her mother wouldn't read about this.

There was no crowd this time, and so far no press. Just the police, a couple of park rangers, the victim, and the poor guy who'd found her. They were only twenty yards from the start of the trail near the sturdy adobe building where tourists bought sodas, postcards, and film. Charlene had nearly made it back when the killer struck.

Lily was talking with the man who'd found Charlene when Rule arrived.

"Detective?" called one of the patrol officers from farther up the trail. "This the guy you're waiting for?"

She turned. Rule stood beside the officer at the edge of the lights cast by the police spots. His face was shadowed, his expression shuttered. He was wearing black.

Rule waited for Lily to come to him. He was a patient man, he reminded himself. Which was just as well. He would need to be. If she felt what he did, she was fighting it. Maybe she felt nothing more than a sexual buzz. He rubbed his chest, but the ache wasn't one he could touch.

The scents were rich here, away from the nose-clogging odors of the city. The green smells of growing things mingled in a pattern too complex to easily yield its separate notes, but he was aware of creosote, cypress and sumac, wild mustard and cholla. The lake, invisible from where he stood, was a rich, damp presence blending water, fish, a whiff of decay.

He smelled dust and people, one or more of whom gave off the faint, sour tang of fear.

The ground was hard and dry beneath his feet. A lumpy three-quarter moon squatted near the horizon, peering at them through the dark lace of leaves in the trees to his right. He felt its pull in his blood, a song without words or notes: one long, slow pulse timed to a rhythm those around him would never hear.

He couldn't see the body. Too many people were in the way. But he smelled blood, sweet and sharp. And waste, the body's involuntary surrender to the insult of sudden death.

Lily stopped in front of him, her pretty black eyes flat and official, but the pulse in her throat throbbing. "Thank you for coming right away."

"I want the killing stopped, too."

She nodded and turned. "This way."

The smell of blood grew heavier as he followed. A couple of the people standing near the body shifted, and he saw. Shock stopped him in his tracks.

"What is it?"

His voice came out hoarse. "You didn't tell me it was a woman."

Lily's frown mixed concern with puzzlement. "Does it matter so much?"

"It matters." He wasn't over the shock yet, but the rage gathering inside would clear it away soon enough. His hands clenched.

"Why?" she asked sharply. "I know lupi are patriarchal, but use your head. Carlos Fuentes didn't have any more of a chance than this woman did. Not against a lupus."

"Forget the PC talk. You don't understand. Women... women conceive. They carry babies—our babies, human babies. We don't hurt women. Ever." The rage was rising, threatening his control. He clenched his hands tightly, throttling back the need to howl, to seek and find the one who had done this.

The need to Change.

Slowly his fists relaxed, and with the release of clenched muscles some of the need drained away. Not now. This wasn't the time or the place, but that time would come. He would make sure of it. "Whoever did this is a rogue," he said, cold and certain. "And subject to our laws as well as yours." She closed her hand around his arm as if to hold him back. "The law he'll answer to is the one I'm sworn to uphold. Not some weird trial by combat."

He shook her off and moved to kneel by the body.

It had been a clean kill, at least. The dead eyes stared up, sightless and shocked, but the woman's face itself was intact, if blood-spattered. Rule picked up one of the cold hands and cradled it gently in his, silently apologizing for what one of his kind had done, promising retribution and asking permission for what he must do. Then he bent and sniffed the gaping wound where her throat had been.

This was why Lily had asked him to come, after all. The scent would be fresh.





he first whiff told the tale, but he took his time, wanting to leave no doubt. Then, gently, he laid the dead hand back on the ground and stood.

Lily was watching. "You know. This time you could tell who it was."

He jerked his head to the left. "Walk apart with me so I can tell you."

Her eyebrows went up. After a moment, she nodded. Together they moved farther up the trail the dead woman had taken—fleeing, at the last, from one she couldn't escape.

He stopped by a scrappy little oak, its leaves whispering to each other in the breeze. They'd left the pool of light from the police spots behind. Here it was dark, and closer to the lake. That strong, clean scent cleared some of the other smells from his senses.

Lily stood close enough for her scent to fill him, too. Not close enough to touch. "What did you learn? Who was it?"

"Leidolf."

"Is that a first name or a surname?"

"It's a clan." The rage was still there, simmering beneath the surface. Waiting. "It wasn't one of the Nokolai who did this."

"You can tell by the scent?"

"Just as you could tell an Englishman from a Hawaiian by the way he looks."

She exhaled once, sharply. "So what does this mean? I don't know how to sort one lupus from another by clan. I didn't know there were any other clans around here."

"There aren't, not officially. But lupi travel on business or for pleasure the same as everyone else. It's customary for clans to offer hospitality when asked. My clan may be hosting the one who did this right now." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "We aren't that far from Clanhome, as the crow flies—or the wolf runs. He could easily have cut across the hills after he killed."

"That occurred to me. Rule." She gripped his arm. "You are not going to punish him yourself. If you want your people to be treated the same as everyone else, you have to be subject to the same laws. Justice from the courts, not private vengeance."

"Your courts have never given us justice. And this ..." He turned away, thrusting his hand through his hair. "I thought this was political, and so subject to your laws. Now ... it may be a clan matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Leidolf may be moving against Nokolai." There was so much he couldn't tell her. "It happens. Clans have warred in the past."

"Killing random humans is a mighty roundabout way for one lupus clan to declare war on another."

"My father supports the Species Citizenship Bill." His smile was grim. "Do you think only humans oppose full citizenship for lupi? There are those among my people, too, who hate the idea. Citizenship means Social Security numbers and all

those computers keeping track of us. It means limits, changes to some of our customs. They don't want to be that visible—or that subject to human law."

"Whoever did this is going to end up very visible. I'll see to that." Anger boiled up suddenly and she paced in front of him, taking short, jerky steps. "She had two sons. I don't know their names yet, but one is in the Navy. The other has a wife

and child. Once I've learned who they are, where they live, I'll have to tell them their mother is dead because someone had a political point to make."

He put a hand on her shoulder. She was all but vibrating with anger. "Killing has always been a political tactic for some. Why do you work homicide when it hurts you this much?"

She shrugged him off. "I don't know what you mean. I'm a cop. It's what I always wanted to do."

"It hurts you to see life wasted." Again he asked, speaking softly, "Why homicide?"

"Because murder is the worst! It doesn't kill just once. It throws out waves of destruction that poison so many lives."

"This happened to you. Someone you loved was murdered."

"My friend. My best friend. Sara Chen."

He ached. It took all his control to keep from reaching for her, holding her. But she wouldn't want that, not here and now.

"How old were you?"

"Seven. A man grabbed her on the way home from school one day. I saw him snatch her. They found her body a week later. They arrested him a week after that." She swallowed. "I followed it in the papers. My parents didn't like that—they thought I was hurting myself, that I was obsessed and should let it go. I couldn't."

"No. I can see that. What happened?"

"He never went to trial. The police were sloppy. They didn't secure the evidence properly. Seven months later, he killed again. That time, the cops did it right. He didn't get away with it."

She'd given him a piece of herself, something important wrenched up from deep inside where it still hurt. He lifted a hand and rubbed his knuckles along her cheek slowly, thanking her. "This woman isn't dead because you were sloppy, Lily. You know that."

She blinked. "I didn't mean ... I don't think it's my fault."

Yes, she did. But she was pulling back now, embarrassed that she'd revealed so much. "That's good. I admire your passion. And your courage."

Oh, definitely she was embarrassed now. She turned away, trying to get her cop face back. "The point is, the law has to be the same for everyone. Fuentes has to matter as much as Charlene Hall. And whoever killed them, for whatever reason, has to be stopped."

"Of course. Aside from the personal injustice of murder, if there's sufficient outrage it will affect the vote next fall. Especially if there are killings elsewhere."

She stopped moving. "You're talking about a conspiracy."

"I'm speculating. I have no evidence. But with this latest death ..." He drove his fingers through his hair. "Killing a woman will garner a great deal more outrage than killing a gang member did, won't it?"

"This is going to make trouble for you. She was killed much closer to the Nokolai Clanhome than the others. Rule, I have to talk to your father. I have to talk to a number of your people, but your father first."

"He'll be back tomorrow. I'll speak to him." He took her hand, closing his fingers around it firmly. "When are you going to go out with me?"

Her laugh was uncertain. "I mentioned something before about your odd sense of timing. We're at a murder scene, for God's sake."

He stroked his thumb along the pulse point in her wrist. "So let's agree that we have to stop meeting this way, and meet some other way. Over dinner, perhaps. I'm growing impatient."

"That's not my problem."

"I want to discuss something other than death and politics with you. I want to see your face when you're not being a cop."

"I'm always a cop."

Perhaps. But she was a woman, too. And her heart was beating fast and hard right now, like his. It took all his control to keep from bending to taste that pretty, unsmiling mouth, but he knew how little she'd appreciate that. Her people might see. His mouth crooked up. "I guess tonight is out."

"Good guess," she said dryly. But she didn't snatch her hand away.

"Tomorrow won't work, either. As I said, my father returns then, and we'll have a good deal to discuss. How about the next night? I can get tickets to a play, reservations for dinner."

She eased her hand away from his. "That's Friday night, and I'm booked. A family party—Grandmother's eightieth birthday." She started back down the path, but had taken only a couple of steps when she paused, looking back at him. The tilt of her lips held challenge. "Ah ... it's formal, a big bash at my uncle Chan's restaurant. Would you care to go with me?"

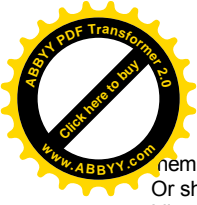
Chapter 6

LILY WASN'T SURE at what point she'd lost her mind. At six-o-seven that Friday she slicked color over her lips and tried to figure that out.

What had prompted her impulsive invitation to Rule? Hormones run amok? Her conversation with her mother earlier had put the idea in her head, but she hadn't been serious. She certainly hadn't intended to ask him. All of a sudden the idea had burst open in her mind like a flower gone from bud to bloom instantly, and she'd done it.

Maybe it had been that brief, startling gentleness he'd shown. The way he'd stroked her cheek, the softness in his voice. For a moment, understanding had shimmered between





nem, fragile and precious.

Or she'd thought it had.

Lily shook her head, turned to open her closet, which was off the bathroom, and almost tripped over Worf. "No shedding or drooling allowed," she told him firmly. "Sit."

Obediently he lowered his rear end, but continued to pant at her happily. She kept an eye on his lolling tongue as she reached for her dress.

Never mind the reason. The fact was that she'd succumbed to impulse. A flash of lunacy, she supposed. And winced. Lunacy was not a comfortable word, considering the effect a full moon had on the man she would be with tonight.

The moon would be full in three days. She'd checked.

All in all, this hadn't been a good day. She'd spent too much of it in court, for one thing, testifying against a scumbag with a lawyer bright enough to know his client's only hope was to make Lily look crooked, incompetent, or both. He hadn't succeeded, but it hadn't made for a fun morning. That afternoon she'd argued with enough bureaucrats to drive a saint to violence. Finally the Department of Health had condescended to let her copy its list of lupi living in San Diego, complied back when the government was registering them.

Rule's name hadn't been on the list. No surprise there. Neither was his father's. But eighty-seven others were. She'd barely started checking the names and addresses against the phone book to see who was still around.

Not everything had gone wrong today, she reminded herself. Neither her mother nor her grandmother had answered when, smitten by conscience, she'd called to let them know the name of her escort tonight. There was no point in hoping her family wouldn't realize who Rule was. Shoot, her grandmother read People regularly, and the magazine had done a spread on the Nikolai prince only last March.

Her mother was not going to appreciate the joke.

So why was she humming? Lily froze with the dress draped over her arm. This was nuts. Anyone would think she was looking forward to the evening.

Her dress. That was what had her humming, of course. She slid it from the hanger. Worf stood up, wagging his tail. "Sit," she told him again.

Her dress was ankle-length silk in a color that made her think of sapphires drenched in darkness, the color of the sky when dawn is barely a promise in the east. Lily had found it on sale a month ago and fallen in love. Even the sight of the price tag hadn't deterred her.

It was magnificent, she thought with sudden uncertainty as she surveyed herself in the mirror. A dream of a dress—sexy, feminine, sophisticated. Too sophisticated, maybe. She sure didn't look like a cop. Rule was going to think she'd dressed for him. He would think tonight was ... personal.

He'd be right. Nerves snapped in her middle like a string of firecrackers.

Maybe if she took her hair down she'd look more like herself.

Lily had her hands in her hair, the first pin unpinned, when

the phone rang. She stepped into her shoes on the way to the living room, the bobby pin still in her hand. She spared a glance at the clock as she picked up the phone.

Six twenty-two. Rule would be here any minute. "Hello?"

"You left a message on that infernal machine," a light, high voice said in Chinese.

"I am sorry, Grandmother, but when I couldn't reach you I felt it better to use the machine than to say nothing." Her grandmother did not approve of answering machines. She wasn't too fond of telephones, television, or microwaves, either.

"Your message said that you have invited Rule Turner to accompany you to my birthday celebration."

"Yes, Grandmother," Lily replied, careful of both her courtesy and her accent. Her command of the tongue seldom pleased her grandmother.

"He is lupus. A prince of one of their clans."

"Yes. I didn't want you to be taken by surprise."

"I have not been surprised since the Mets won the pennant. Did you tell your mother about this man?"

"I left her a message, the same as yours. I don't know if—"

"Good. Say nothing more to her." She hung up.

Lily shook her head. Phone conversations with her grandmother tended to end abruptly. Not that conversations in person were much different. She glanced at the clock. There might still be time to finish taking her hair down if she— The doorbell rang. Worf let out a deep woof and surged to his feet. Lily took a steadying breath, jabbed the bobby pin back in her hair, and turned to face the door.

Battle stations.

HE DROVE AN Explorer. That surprised her. It seemed so—well, so middle-class normal. Half the people in California drove some kind of SUV.

"I ought to sell tickets," Lily muttered as he slid into the driver's seat beside her. Rule Turner was eye candy no matter what he wore, but in a tux the impact could wreck a woman's breathing.

"Pardon?" The knowing glint in his eyes suggested he'd heard her very well.

"Never mind." She found herself watching his hands as he started the engine and took them out into traffic. His fingers were long and slim. No scars, of course, nor any little nicks or scabs. Lupi healed such things. What was more surprising was how little hair there was on the backs of his hands. She'd always thought lupi were hairy. "Listen, I'm sorry about the way Worf acted. He's usually friendly."

"He didn't like my scent. The two of us will work things out," he said as he guided the vehicle smoothly through traffic. "Once he accepts me as dominant, he won't need to challenge me."

Nor did his beard seem especially heavy, though naturally he would have shaved... wouldn't he? Did lupi need to shave?

"You're assuming you're going to see my dog often enough to work on a relationship with him."

"That's right. I am."

Her lips twitched. A sensible woman wouldn't find his arrogance so appealing. And maybe it wouldn't be, if she didn't suspect he was amused by himself, too. "So, what did your father say? Am I cleared to go talk to your people tomorrow?"

"He agreed to put it before the Council."

"What Council? I thought the Lupois's word was law."

"You might think of the Council as an advisory body, the elders of the tribe. Or maybe they're more like church deacons. The Lupois doesn't answer to the Council, but it pays to have their backing, particularly if he is considering breaking with tradition."

"I can't wait much longer, Rule."

"I know. I have a suggestion. Why don't we talk about something other than the investigation tonight?"

"Such as?"

"What do you usually talk about on a date?"

"The usual—his work, his hobbies, his ex-wives."

He clucked his tongue. "Sexism rears its ugly head. Surely there are a few men who don't just discuss themselves?"

"Well, they mostly don't want to talk about my work, unless I date a cop. And I don't date cops."

"I'm glad to hear that. Of course, I'd rather you didn't date anyone except me."

Her mouth went dry. "You don't have any right to say that. You're moving too fast."

"I'm being honest. Why don't you date cops?"

"They're lousy bets for anything long-term. Besides, it would be icky."

He grinned. "Icky?"

"You know—the way it would feel to work with someone you've ... someone who ... never mind."

"Do you 'never mind' with every man you date?" He slowed for the turn. "I ask not to condemn, you understand, but in hope."

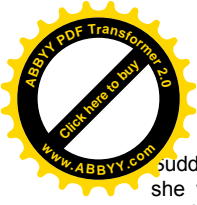
She shook her head. "There you go, jumping to conclusions. I was talking about kissing, not grappling under the covers. And how uncomfortable it would be to work with someone I've had carnal thoughts about, or who I know has had those thoughts about me."

"If you think that only the men you've dated have carnal thoughts about you, you're far more naive than I would have believed."

The husky note in his voice turned the banter personal. Intimate. She licked her lips and tried to keep things light. "Of course not. According to studies, men have carnal thoughts every ten seconds or so. Women know this. We just prefer to ignore it."

"I wasn't talking about the occasional random hard-on. I was talking about the way men react to you. You're an intensely desirable woman, Lily."





suddenly the air burned in her lungs, thick and sweet, and she was overwhelmingly conscious of her hands. Of the need to touch him—and the need to keep herself from doing any such thing. Lily looked down at her lap, smoothed the silk of her dress, and listened to her heartbeat pounding and pounding in her throat. She couldn't think of a thing to say. After a moment he sighed. "And now I've made you uncomfortable. Too much honesty too soon. What do you do when you aren't arresting lawbreakers?"

"I like to run, hike, paddle around in the ocean. I've done some rock climbing. What do you do when you aren't jet-setting around or turning hairy?"

He chuckled. "Hairy or smooth, I like to run, hike, and paddle around in the ocean, too. Climbing, though, is better done with hands."

"That makes sense. Um... I should probably warn you about my family. My grandmother knows who you are. I'm not sure my mother does—I left a message with your name— but she'll figure it out pretty quickly."

"Will that be a problem?"

"Probably," she said gloomily. "You're certainly not Chinese. If you were a surgeon, that might not matter. Or a lawyer, as long as you worked for a prestigious firm. She's very big on personal achievement. About my grandmother, though ..." Her voice trailed off.

"The one you call Tiger Lady?"

"For heaven's sake, don't call her that tonight. The closest Chinese translation is, uh, not respectful." She sighed. There was no way to explain Grandmother. One had to experience her. "Just treat her as if she were royalty."

HE WAS MAKING mistakes with her. Rule knew that, but he couldn't seem to stop. He wanted to claim her, and he didn't want to wait. But whenever he let his urgency slip out, she retreated.

Lily wasn't sure about him. That was only natural. Even if he hadn't been what he was, she would have wanted time to know him, to know her own mind. He understood. He even agreed. But his blood was up, and the discipline of years was stretched taut just by being with her.

It didn't help to know she was as attracted as he, however she tried to hide it.

Tonight's date was about as safe as a first date could be, he thought wryly as they entered the restaurant. They were on her turf, surrounded by her family. He would rather have taken her someplace quiet and private, someplace where he could look at her as much as he liked. Touching would have been nice, too. But it eased something inside him to look at the curve of her throat or the slightly crooked incisor that only showed when she grinned. "You have a lot of relatives," he murmured.

The restaurant itself was less obviously oriental than he'd expected. The tables were round, white-draped, with western place settings. A few people sat at those tables, but most

milled around—easily fifty in this room, he estimated, and there was at least one more section to the restaurant. All wore evening dress, with many of the men in tuxedos. He'd wondered about that. A tux had seemed excessive for a family birthday party. He'd worn it anyway; Lily had said the party was formal, and he admitted to possessing his share of vanity. He looked good in a tux.

"I'm not related to everyone. Just most of them." She slanted him an amused glance. "Grandmother is probably holding court on the terrace. We'd better find her and deliver this." She lifted the small, elegantly wrapped box in her left hand. "It may take awhile. You do draw attention."

It took awhile. Rule was tense, hyperalert in the way typical of this time of the month, his balance a delicate thing. Scents and sounds assaulted him with every new person to meet and charm. Outside, unseen, the moon was yet unrisen, but he felt it sliding nearer the horizon with every pulse. The sensation was pleasant, but distracting.

The discipline of years helped him stay focused on the room and the need to mask his feelings. He was helped by his curiosity about these people—Lily's people—and by his awareness of the woman at his side. That, too, was a sweet distraction pulsing through him, making even the moon's call less compelling.

It didn't take long for him to note a common theme in the comments of her relatives. The unspoken text emerged in jokes that weren't quite funny, in sympathetic comments or the blanks left by avoiding one particular subject.

Lily's family didn't approve of her job. They didn't want her to be a cop.

On their way to the terrace he met cousins, uncles, aunts, one of Lily's sisters and her date, along with miscellaneous offspring, spouses, or significant others. And he met Lily's mother.

Julia Yu was a slim, elegant woman who towered over her daughter by nearly a foot. She had beautiful hands, very little chin, several pounds of hair piled in elaborate twists on top of her head, and Lily's eyes. They opened wide when she saw his face.

She recovered quickly, greeting Rule with a polite smile.

She smelled faintly of herbal soap and hair spray. "I didn't place your name at first, Mr. Turner, but your face is instantly recognizable. I'm so glad you could join us tonight."

"I'm delighted she asked me," he said with perfect candor. Sharing Lily with all these people wasn't his first choice, but he could learn a great deal about her from her family. Especially her mother, he thought, and smiled. "Please call me Rule. Your daughter has your eyes, doesn't she? Lovely and full of mysteries. Her voice is rather like yours, too—lower than one would expect, and with the random music of a waterfall."

She blinked in surprise. "What a lovely compliment. Thank you. Lily also has something of her father's stubbornness, I'm afraid, and an unfortunate sense of humor. I'm not sure

where that comes from." Something in the look she gave her daughter freighted her next words with hidden significance. "Have you introduced Mr. Turner to Grandmother yet, Lily?" "We're making our way there now. I told her to expect him, of course."

"Ah." A subtle change in her posture told Rule some tension or worry had eased. "I won't hold you up, then. I believe your father is on the terrace with Grandmother."

Rule wasn't ready to abandon the conversation that quickly. Between Julia Yu's courtesy and her curiosity about a man her daughter might be interested in, he was able to hold her in conversation for several minutes. By the time he and Lily moved away, he'd had the satisfaction of coaxing a smile of genuine pleasure from her.

"You flirted with my mother," Lily said.

He wasn't sure if she was upset or amused. "I said nothing that wasn't true."

"You also flirted with two of my cousins, my sister, my great-aunt, and the wife of one of my brother's business partners. With every woman you've met tonight, I think. Is this a lupus thing, or is it just you?"

"It would be rude not to acknowledge a woman's beauty."

Her eyes were puzzled. "I expected you to say it didn't mean anything."

"That wouldn't be true. I..." He struggled to explain what was too basic to be fitted comfortably into words. "When I compliment a woman, it always means something. Not that I intend to take her to bed, but that I appreciate her. That I know she's a woman, and lovely."

"You meant everything you said, didn't you? You told Mrs. Masters—who must be seventy—that her pearls made her skin glow. You looked at her as if you enjoyed looking at her, and you meant it."

"Of course."

She didn't say anything more, but she took his hand. He felt absurdly pleased, as if he'd been awarded a great honor.

The rear of the restaurant overlooked the beach. The sun was slipping down the western sky when they stepped onto the terrace, an incandescent ball flipping its light scattershot across the waves it would kiss in another thirty minutes. He couldn't see the moon, but felt it hovering near the horizon to the east, a silvery song in his blood. The air was twenty degrees warmer than inside, and smelled wonderful. He breathed deeply of salt, sand, and ocean.

Rule was suddenly reluctant to proceed to the people knotted up at the other end of the terrace. "I wish we could walk on the beach together." Or run. He yearned to feel the sand beneath the pads of his paws while air screamed through his lungs as his muscles flexed and flung him along.

"Another time," she said softly, and when he looked at her he thought he glimpsed a shadow of his own longing... which, of course, was ridiculous. She had only the one form. "We may as well get this over with," she added more dryly, and nodded at the crowd at the end of the terrace.





They were halfway there when Rule stopped.

"What is it?"

Frankincense. His nostrils pinched in a useless effort to close out the toxin. Already he could feel his sense of smell closing down. "Do you truly not know?" he snapped.

"I wouldn't have asked if I did."

The smoky stench came from the knot of people directly in front of them. He shook his head, wanting to leave. "Never mind. As you said, let's get this over with."

He might as well. The damage had been done.

Chapter 7

LILY TAPPED ONE man on the shoulder and some of the others moved aside, revealing a tall chair with a carved wooden back. A velvet throw was draped across the seat and arms of the chair. A very small woman sat on that throw. She wore a long gown in Chinese red buttoned to the base of her skinny throat. A padded stool supported feet no larger than a child's, and a small brazier rested beside the footstool. It reeked of frankincense.

The woman taking up so little space in the thronelike chair didn't look eighty. Her black hair was liberally streaked with white and pulled into an unforgiving knot on top of her head. Her skin was very pale, her eyes very dark.

Had Rule been in wolf form, his hackles would have lifted.

Power. It radiated from that tiny, erect figure. Rule couldn't smell the magic on her, but he sure as hell sensed it.

"Grandmother." Lily dropped his hand to move forward. She bent to brush a kiss on one thin cheek. "Happy birthday."

"You are late. How could I enjoy my celebration without my favorite granddaughter?"

Lily smiled. "Last week Liu was your favorite granddaughter."

"Ah! You are right. Liu is never impertinent. She must be my favorite."

Two pairs of eyes met—both black, one wrapped in wrinkles, one surrounded by smooth young skin—in complete and affectionate understanding. The old woman patted her granddaughter's cheek. "I like you anyway," she announced. "What have you brought me?"

Lily handed her the prettily wrapped box. She opened it with hands that showed her age more than her face did, though the nails were long and painted screaming red. "Ah!" Her smile was as delighted as a child's. "A graceful piece, and the jade is good quality. It will go in my collection." She handed the little statue of a cat to a middle-aged woman who sat beside her, addressing her in Chinese, then turned back to Lily. "I am pleased. You may introduce your escort now."

Lily rose and moved to one side. "Zhu Mu, this is Rule Turner, prince of the Nokolai. Rule, I am honored to present to you my grandmother, Madame Bai He Tsang."

Rule knew an audience when he was granted one. He stepped forward, clamping down on the anger. "Madame Tsang, I am honored."

Keen black eyes took a head-to-toe journey over him. "So

you're the lupus my granddaughter chose to bring to my party. You're terribly pretty."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment."

"I know," he said gently, as one might to a child who flaunted her poor manners.

Unexpectedly she chuckled, and he glimpsed Lily in the amusement in her eyes. "You have style, I'll give you that. Much more durable than mere prettiness. More entertaining, too. That doesn't mean I approve of my granddaughter allying herself with you."

"Respectfully, Zhu Mu," Lily said, "one date is a very temporary alliance. And entirely my own choice."

"I wasn't speaking to you." The old woman glanced back at Rule. "I don't like the way you treat your women."

"You know nothing about how I treat my women." He couldn't smell a damned thing. Anger curled in him, stretching, trying to reach past his control.

"You are lupus. This means you treat them in the plural. I know that much. You wish to keep them ... what is the saying? Barefoot and pregnant." Her thin lips curved in a feline smile. "I hope the smoke from the incense isn't bothering you. Some people don't care for the scent."

"I can't say I notice the smell." Not anymore.

Lily glanced from the brazier to her grandmother. Her eyebrows lifted as if she'd figured out what was happening.

"Ah, do you not? I find it a trifle strong. Hong," Tiger Lady said, turning her head toward the fiftyish man to her left. "Take the brazier away. I am tired of it." Then, without another word to Rule, she began conversing with the woman on her right in Chinese.

He was dismissed. Rule wondered if he was supposed to salute or retreat backward so as not to turn his back on Her Highness. He ought to be amused, but felt more like snarling than laughing.

Lily spoke quietly. "The incense had some effect on you, didn't it?"

"Nothing permanent." He sounded more grim than he wanted to. "I won't smell anything for a few hours."

"I am sorry. Grandmother... well, she is a law unto herself. I suppose losing your sense of smell is as disturbing as it would be if I were suddenly deafened or blinded."

"It doesn't truly incapacitate me." It just made him feel vulnerable. Bereft. And angry with himself for not having obeyed his instinct to retreat to the beach. "And it is only temporary."

"Can you stand meeting one more of my relatives? My father's here. He's much nicer than Grandmother, I promise." Of course he had to meet her father. Walter Yu turned out to be a pleasant man not much taller than his daughter, with clever eyes, a wispy mustache, and gold-framed glasses. He was a stockbroker, and soon engaged Rule in talk of the market, which had yet to recover from its recent tumble. Rule had no trouble responding appropriately, but a good portion

of his attention was elsewhere.

Why hadn't Lily warned him that her esteemed grandmother was a witch?

That was an assumption, of course, but the old woman had power. That much was certain. And the use of frankincense to baffle a were's senses was common lore in several branches

of magic, as he knew from a delightful association a few years back with a green witch. Obviously Lily's grandmother had been afraid a lupus would be able to sniff out which brand of magic she practiced, which raised some interesting questions. Many spells and some branches of magic were illegal.

Did that explain the attitude of Lily's family about her being a police detective? It might be another reason Lily had chosen homicide—so she wouldn't risk being faced with investigating the old woman someday.

But dammit, she needn't have tricked his sense of smell away from him. Rule couldn't have sniffed out what type of magic the old woman practiced. That was a myth. Unless she were actually casting a spell, all he would be able to sense was her power, and he didn't need his nose for that.

Very few people realized that, though, he admitted grudgingly. It suited his people to keep their secrets.

No doubt it was unreasonable to complain if others preferred to keep secrets, too. And in truth, although the Gifted hadn't been persecuted as severely as his people, the old woman would have grown up hearing tales of burnings, brandings, purges. To be Gifted remained a stigma.

But it was difficult to be reasonable when he couldn't smell.

The buffet was lavish, but the plate he filled held no appeal. He pushed a bite of swordfish around on his plate and pretended to listen to Walter Yu discussing the euro.

Lily leaned closer and said quietly, "So, how long are you going to pout?"

"Pout?" Rule lifted his brows slightly. "If I'm not eating, it's because food lacks flavor when I can't smell it." Even humans knew that to be true.

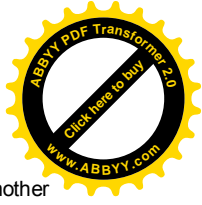
A smile tugged at her lips. "Not eating, not speaking—sounds like pouting to me. Or a snit. You did say the effects were temporary?"

His sense of humor nudged at him. "Nonsense. Princes don't pout. We may sulk occasionally, but we don't pout."

"I see." She nodded gravely. "I suppose the difference between sulking and pouting is obvious to a prince."

"It's obvious to a man. All men sulk on certain occasions." He leaned closer. "You see, if I were to kiss the place where your neck curves into your shoulder, I wouldn't be able to smell your skin. I've been thinking about that. Also the backs of your knees, and other places you would probably prefer I didn't mention. When I take you home tonight and kiss you, I want to be able to inhale your fragrance while I'm tasting you. It makes me quite sulky that I won't be able to."

He saw the small shiver that left goose bumps in its wake,





But she lowered her eyes, hiding from him. "Does this mean it would be safe to take that walk on the beach you mentioned earlier?"

"Of course not. I'm sulking, not stupid. I have other senses." Her husky laugh might as well have been teasing fingers. "Trust me, you weren't going to make it to the backs of my knees tonight."

"But the kiss . . . ?"

"You did say you had other senses."

Hunger rose, strong enough to choke out the moon's song. Yet her words relaxed him, too. Or maybe it was the look in her eyes, honest as the kiss she admitted she wanted. "Tell me. Will your grandmother feel compelled to burn frankincense every time I see her?"

"I never try to predict Grandmother. Do you expect to see her again?"

"Oh, yes." He reached for her hand and closed his fingers around it. "That is, unfortunately, inevitable. You are very close to your family."

LONG BEFORE DESSERT, Lily accepted that she'd lost her mind. She was going to have an affair with Rule. The decision hummed in her blood and made her thoughts hop around like popcorn in a hot skillet.

This risk was huge. Lupi had a closed, wholly masculine society, for heaven's sake. They were more chauvinistic than her father. They didn't even believe in monogamy. Well, she would make it clear to Rule that while they were involved, he would have to bow to her beliefs on this one issue. No other women. For however long it lasted. Oh, God. She rubbed her stomach, where nerves were jumping. No matter how sensible she tried to be, she wouldn't walk away from this unscorched.

And she didn't care. Not really.

Rule would be honest with her, she thought as she spoke with her aunt Caroline, who was a grandmother twice over now and smug about it. He would tell her if he couldn't promise even a temporary fidelity.

It wasn't as if she were going into this blind, she assured herself as her cousin Lynn complained about the man she'd been dating, her mother, and her job. Her father had taken Rule to meet someone—Larry Hong, she thought. The only one of her cousins with a career even less respectable than her own. He was a mostly unemployed actor.

Lots of women had affairs with men they didn't intend to marry. Lots of women had affairs with Rule Turner, to be specific. She was making too big a deal of this.

Then she saw Rule making his way to her and her throat went slick with need. The lights were suddenly brighter, the edges crisper, and the colors brighter. She wanted to skip or sing. Or maybe hide in a closet.

No, she wasn't making too big a deal out of this. It was big—huge, scary big.

"Would you mind if we left now?" he said when he joined her.

"I've an early appointment in the morning:"

"No," she said through a too-tight throat. "I wouldn't mind."

They took their leave of Grandmother, who was still out on the terrace. The old woman was thoroughly enjoying her party and pleased with herself over something—maybe the way she'd tricked Rule. It was hard to say with Grandmother. Lily intended to have a talk with her soon.

"Is she really eighty?" Rule asked as they waited in the small vestibule for his car to be brought around.

"As far as I know. With Grandmother, very little is certain. I really am sorry about what she did. Have the effects worn off at all?"

"Not yet. What she did wasn't necessary, but I understand why she did it."

She doubted that. "I really need to talk to her. You may have guessed that some of the information I have about lupi came from her. Obviously she didn't tell me everything she knew. She didn't mention frankincense."

The valet returned and handed Rule his keys in exchange for a few bills. "Frankincense does affect lupi," he said, opening the heavy door. "But I couldn't have sniffed out what type of magic she uses."

"You said something about that before—that magic doesn't have a smell, except when it's active. Is that true for innate magic, too?"

"What do you mean?" He held the door for her.

"Well, the sort of thing you do isn't a spell. It's innate. Does—"

Flashes—blinding, leaving purple ghosts swimming in her vision. A swarming, shoving crowd of people. Questions shouted. A microphone jammed near her face.

"How long have you been dating?"

"Does Shannon Snow know about your new—"

"Prince, what do you think about the killings?"

"—lupi really superior lovers?"

"When the chief told you to work with the werewolf prince, did he know you two were—"

"Detective Yu, how do you explain your relationship with a suspect?"

Rule recovered faster than she did. He slid an arm around her waist and started forward, smiling easily. "You've taken us by surprise, I'm afraid. I don't have a statement at this time."

Maybe it was the way Rule moved, the assurance that others would remove themselves from his path. Or maybe even reporters were wary of crowding a lupus too closely. For whatever reason, he was able to clear a path, though the reporters still swarmed close, questions popping like sniper fire.

"No comment," Lily said. And, "Mr. Turner isn't a suspect." Then, finally, they were in Rule's car, the doors closed on the avid faces, the engine started.

"I hope this was the last little surprise your grandmother had planned for me tonight," Rule said grimly as he pulled away

from the restaurant.

"Grandmother? Oh, no." Lily's fingers clutched her purse tightly. She wanted to hit something. "She's going to be furious."

"I sure as hell didn't tip the reporters."

Lily didn't say anything for a long time, turning over the facts, trying to make them fit some way other than the obvious. The valet must have been bribed to let the reporters know when Rule's car was brought up. She hoped they'd been generous—the young man would be out of work by morning. But that didn't explain how the reporters knew he was there, with her. Finally, reluctantly, she spoke. "One of them knew the chief had told me to work with you. My family doesn't know that. Yours?"

"Aside from my father, no. And there is no possibility that he phoned the press about my relationship with you."

She sighed and pulled her cell phone out of her evening bag. "Then I'd better make some calls, because someone well up the food chain at the department did."

Chapter 8

BEING AMBUSHED BY reporters had blown Lily's mood and her confidence. She'd been ready to turn Rule down when he walked her to her door, but he'd forestalled her, damn him. He hadn't even tried to kiss her, leaving her with a mouthful of arguments and no one to use them on but herself. She'd done that, all right, tossing and turning until nearly three in the morning. Finally she'd snarled, flung back the covers, and grabbed her running shoes, a pair of shorts, and Wolf's leash.

Pounding the pavement had pounded a little sense into her head. The best she could hope for with Rule was a hot affair that didn't leave her too singed when it ended. Having a fling with him could do real damage to her career now that the newshounds were watching. It might even rebound on the department. Some reporters equated investigative journalism with slinging mud at the police.

The plain, cold truth was that the price of an affair was too high.

Either reaching a decision or exhaustion had done the trick, and she'd dozed off at last. When she blinked her eyes open again, the clock read nine-thirteen.

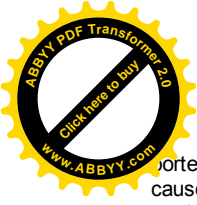
It was Saturday. All over the city, people were mowing lawns, packing the kids to the beach, hitting garage sales, or sleeping in. Lily considered anything past nine o'clock sleeping in, so she'd observed one of the weekend traditions. She intended to be at headquarters by ten o'clock.

Her first clue about what kind of day it would be came at nine thirty-five when she raced, dripping, from out of the shower to snatch the ringing phone. Her mother told her to look at the morning paper, then hung up.

It could have been worse, Lily thought when she saw the headline. Her mother might have stayed on the phone.

The article itself couldn't have been much worse. The re-





porter didn't quite accuse Lily of covering up for a killer because she was sleeping with the Nikolai prince. She just made a lot of insinuations. She also hinted at graft in the police department and possibly the mayor's office.

Then Lily saw the article below the fold. A man had been badly beaten near the scene of the second murder. In front of witnesses. Turned out he was especially hairy, and someone thought he was a lupus.

The second page had a story about the infamous lupus rampage back in '98, heavily salted with some of the more sensational lore about werewolves. Lily shoved her chair back and stood. "Dammit, don't they see what they're doing? People are scared enough without this crap."

She paced, trying to think of anything she could do that she hadn't done. Three people dead at the hands—or teeth—of this killer. One man in the hospital because the killer was still loose. And what did she have? A list of lupi registered in the city five years ago. Two witnesses who'd seen a man near the scene of one murder. And a date she couldn't repeat.

Lily scowled. It was a good thing she hadn't gone to bed with Rule. If she had, the hotheads slamming her and the department would have live ammo. Right now they were firing blanks.

She grabbed her keys and tried to be relieved about that, but the phone rang before she reached the door. She almost didn't pick it up, thinking it might be a reporter. But the caller ID told her it was her downstairs neighbor. Mrs. Hodgkin took Worf out most days around lunch so he could relieve his bladder, and sometimes at supper, too, if Lily was working late.

Mrs. Hodgkin claimed that her arthritis was acting up and she wouldn't be able to manage the stairs anymore to take Worf out.

Since the older woman tied herself into yoga pretzels regularly, Lily doubted that inflamed joints were the problem. No doubt Mrs. Hodgkin read the paper, too.

Why were people so quick to judge? They knew nothing about Rule except that he was a lupus. And they believed the myths—that lupi were indiscriminate killers. Or crazy. Or both.

The myths were based on fact, she reminded herself as she slammed out of her apartment. Some lupi did kill. Not as often as the more sensational press liked to claim, but the rampage the paper had dragged up had happened. For reasons no one had ever known, a lupus in Connecticut had gone berserk. Sixteen people dead, thirteen injured. And Rule himself had said that adolescent lupi couldn't control the beast.

Lily scowled and clicked the "unlock" a dozen feet from her Nissan.

"Ms. Yu?"

Lily turned. A pretty young teenager with a spiky haircut was running across the parking lot toward her. Lily identified her automatically: Cili Yosamoff, apartment 614A. Two younger

sisters, and a father who worked nights. She had a fondness for black—clothes, lipstick, and eye makeup.

Cili stopped in front of her, breathless and smiling. "I wondered—would you mind—I mean—oh, here!" She thrust out a pen and pad of paper. "Could I have your autograph?"

Lily blinked. "My what?"

"And maybe you could ask the prince for his, too? I mean, he's so rad, isn't he? I was just maxed out when I read that you're, like, dating him!"

"Oh. Sure." Why not? Lily thought, taking the pen and scrawling her name across the paper. Maybe the girl would decide that cops were cool, too, if one of them could date a rad guy like Rule. "I'll ask the prince to sign something for you next time I see him," she said, handing back the pad.

"Jenny is just going to die when I show her the prince's autograph." Her friend's imminent demise gave her great satisfaction. "Is it true that lupi, like, don't do drugs or alcohol or anything?"

Lily had no idea. "Absolutely," she assured the girl gravely. "They have too much respect for their bodies, in whatever form." Her name might be dirt with some people—like her mother, her downstairs neighbor, any number of reporters and fellow citizens. But it looked like she could count on support from the fifteen-and-under set. "Would you be interested in earning a little running-around money?"

"Well... yeah. Probably." Heavily mascaraed eyes blinked at her dubiously. "I guess it would depend on, you know, what you want me to do."

"I need someone to walk my dog."

AT HEADQUARTERS LILY noticed a distinct chill in the air. A sergeant who usually greeted her looked away. A patrol cop made a crack to his partner about people who would do anything for their five minutes of fame. And it was quiet—much too quiet—when she walked into the Homicide bullpen. Only three officers were there, and all were terribly busy. Too busy to look up, much less greet her.

Until Brunswick started howling.

She could have kissed him. It was so obnoxiously normal. The other man laughed and the female detective told him to put a sock in it.

"You really need to do something about that sore throat," Lily said as she sat at her desk, fighting back a grin. "You're sounding hoarse."

"I want details," he said, spinning his chair to grin at her. "Times, places ... especially times. As in, how many. Scuttlebutt has it that lupi are real gifted in the stamina department, but I—"

"You can tell us about your sex life another time, Brunswick," Vivian Shuman said, and grimaced at Lily. "Ah ... the captain said he wanted to see you in his office when you showed up."

Great. Lily sighed and shoved her chair back. "Do I get a blindfold?"

CAPTAIN FOSTER WAS a short, squat man with a round head, no neck, and all his features crowded together in the bottom half of his face. He chewed gum constantly, had a lousy temper, and was one of the best cops Lily knew.

From the expression on his face when she walked in, she could have used the blindfold.

"You're off the lupus case. Pass everything you've got to Simmons."

Her head jerked slightly and her whole body went stiff, as if someone had yanked her straight up by the hair on her head. "What?"

"You heard me. You've compromised the investigation." His mouth twisted. "Of all the dumbass stunts to pull! You couldn't find a human to date? Or just put your hormones on hold?"

"I wasn't aware my private life was subject to your approval, Sir."

"It is when I spend an hour in the chief's office trying to explain why the detective I insisted on has made more progress with her private life than her investigation. A man was beaten last night because he's got hair on his back, for Chrissake. People are scared. The mayor is scared. And you get your picture plastered all over the front page, cuddled up to a lupus closely tied to your investigation."

"Captain ..." Her jaw clamped hard on all the things she wanted to say. She started again. "Turner is not a suspect. He's solidly alibied for two of the three killings—one of those alibis being the mayor. Working with him was the mayor's suggestion, as relayed to me by the chief."

"You weren't working with him last night. Dammit, Yu, just because the man has an alibi doesn't clear him! He could have arranged the killings."

"I see. You consider him a suspect because he's a lupus."

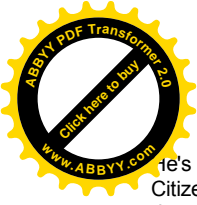
"Use your head." His jaw flexed. He was chomping down hard on his gum. "We know the murders were committed by one of his people. Even if he isn't personally involved, you can't trust him. Lupi don't exactly have a history of cooperation with the police, yet he's apparently eager to help you track down one of his people. Dammit, I shouldn't have to tell you all this."

"No. You shouldn't." Lily's anger was cold now. Icy. He was questioning her competence, her integrity. "I assume, then, that if I were dating the head of the NAACP you would remove me from any cases where we knew the perp was African American."

Foster's mouth opened—and closed. His jaw worked. He wanted badly to tell her that was altogether different. And couldn't.

She leaned forward. "Sir, I'm aware that Turner's agenda may not be as altruistic as he'd have us think. Maybe he means to misdirect me, if he can. Or even warn the killer. But I consider that a very low probability. His first priority is the welfare of his clan, with that of lupi in general a close second.





he's been doing everything possible to promote the Species Citizenship Bill that's in subcommittee now, and these killings damage its chances."

"You think he agreed to help us for political reasons?"

Lily took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I think he wants to find the killer every bit as badly as we do—only he wants to find him first. And turn him over to his clan for punishment."

Foster studied her in silence, for once not chomping on his gum. Maybe he was wondering the same thing she did: had Rule involved himself with her for the same reason he'd become involved with the investigation?

Finally he spoke. "Lupi in wolf form aren't protected by law, so he might be able to carry out some kind of vigilante justice if he gets to the perp first. But it would reflect badly on him and his people, damage his cause."

"Not necessarily." She'd thought all this out last night. "He's good at PR. Reporters love him—he's great copy. If he spins it right, the Citizenship Bill might gain backing. See, right now the Justice Department and most law enforcement associations oppose the bill. But if he makes headlines for taking justice into his own hands—legally—that could change. Can't have the reporters saying we approve of lupi circumventing the law, can we?"

She'd reached him. He started chewing again, more thoughtfully. "You think that's what he's after? Making political hay out of these murders by committing legal murder himself?"

"I don't know," she added, careful with her voice and her face, sick in the pit of her stomach. "But it seems possible."

He told her to brief him on where she was now, what she planned to do next. And before she left he told her to divide the list of registered lupi with the others who were in today and start checking them out.

The case was still hers. Lily stood. Her knees felt spongy. "One more thing. No one was supposed to know Turner was working with me. And the only people who knew he would be at the party last night were my mother and grandmother. And they didn't tell anyone."

"Trying to teach me how to suck eggs? I'm aware of the obvious. Someone leaked the story to the press. I want to know who and why. Leave that to me."

So Lily went back to the bullpen and told the other detectives they'd been conscripted. There were groans and teasing—she'd gone in to get her ass chewed out and come out with the captain's backing to pull them off their current cases. She told them clean living gave her an edge, got a couple of snickers, and waited to feel better.

She ought to be relieved. The captain had been ready to yank her off the case, but she was still in charge. Yet she felt was sick. As if she'd betrayed Rule by telling Foster what he might be planning.

And that was just stupid. She'd known Rule only a handful of days. She would ignore her stupid, cartwheeling emotions

and get on with the job.

Being a cop came first. Always.

WITHIN AN HOUR Lily had the paperwork for a search warrant ready to submit. She called Rule, but his machine picked up. She left a message. Around noon she hit the streets with six names of lupi confirmed to be still living in San Diego.

By three she'd spoken to three of the lupi on her list and eliminated one conclusively. He worked nights as a bouncer and was solidly alibied for all three nights in question. The other two were less certain. Each claimed an alibi for one of the murders, but it was possible that more than one lupus was involved. The physical evidence was inconclusive. They'd retrieved hair from two of the three crime scenes that looked alike—mottled silver and charcoal—but the lab couldn't prove that it had come from the same lupus without DNA testing. And the stuff wouldn't behave under testing. Lily really, really didn't like Rule's conspiracy idea, but she couldn't ignore it.

At five-fifteen she left another message on Rule's machine. It was nearly eight when he returned her call. "I'm sorry I didn't get back to you sooner." His voice was rough, but she couldn't tell what emotion moved him. "It's been a difficult day."

"Tell me about it. I called because I wanted to give you notice. I've put in for a search warrant to get me into Clan-home. I expect to have it by Monday at the latest." He was silent so long she wondered if her phone was working. "I told you I couldn't wait much longer."

"I have to talk to you. It will take me thirty minutes to get to your apartment."

"I'm not there. I'm working."

"At this hour? What—never mind. Just tell me where I can meet you."

She knew what she heard in his voice now—urgency. Against her will, it convinced her to see him. She gave him the name and address of a bar down the street and disconnected, frowning.

There was no way of knowing what he meant to say until she saw him, so she shoved it into a corner of her mind, climbed out of her car, and went to talk to Amos Whitburn, the fifth name on her list.

Amos Whitburn turned out to be ninety-two, and even lupi weren't proof against age. He moved well—arthritis didn't seem to afflict weres—but he was nearly blind. Cataracts. Crossing him off her list didn't take long, which meant that she arrived at the bar well before Rule did. This gave her plenty of time to wish she'd picked another spot.

The area should have warned her. It wasn't a slum, but it was on the far lower end of working class. The bar itself was what she'd expected—dark, dingy, and smelling of beer. She'd been in plenty of places like this since she joined the force. But usually she'd either been in uniform or flashing a

badge. Tonight she was in wrinkled linen—baggy walking shorts, sleeveless shell, and a loose, lightweight jacket that covered her weapon. Not exactly come-hither clothes, but it didn't seem to matter.

Lily took her Diet Coke to a corner where she could keep an eye on the room. Her stony stare worked on the first two men who started toward her—they veered away, pretending they'd been heading to the men's room all along.

The next guy was more persistent. Probably trying to win a bet, Lily thought, disgusted, as he approached. He'd been sitting with the other two.

"Hey, there, honey. My name's Biff."

Oh, surely not. Would any woman do such a thing to her child? Lily looked up. Way up.

He was huge. Six-four, maybe two-thirty. He wore a red ball cap and jeans tight enough to endanger his future offspring. His head was too small for his body, but his features were regular enough that he probably thought he was good-looking. He carried two beers in one hand, and smelled as if he'd already drunk several. His hands were the size of catcher's gloves.

"I don't want a beer, and I don't want company."

"My treat," he said genially, setting both amber bottles on the table and reaching for the other chair.

She kicked the chair away. "My mama told me never to talk to cliches."

"C'mon, honey, don't be that way. I'll treat you real nice. Ask anyone here. Matthew!" he bellowed. "Tell the lady what a nice guy I am."

The bartender looked over, bored. "Real nice."

"There, you see? I'm not gonna hurt a sweet little thing like you. Would you rather have something else to drink? Maybe a Tom Collins. Hey, Matthew, get this—"

"No. Go away. I'm waiting for someone."

"Hey, I'll do just as well! Probably better." He beamed at her, dragged the chair back, and sat down. "I'm a fun guy."

Lily put her arms on the table and leaned forward. "Let me explain. I don't want company while I wait, I don't want a drink, I don't want to dance or talk to you or look at you. You'll have to trust me on this. You won't do at all. You will get up now and go away."

He leaned back, still smiling. But his eyes lost their amiable gloss, and underneath they were pure mean. "Well, now, I don't quite see how a little bitty thing like you is gonna make me do that, if I don't want to." He rested his forearm on the table, closed his hand into a fist, and made his biceps clench. His friends—the two men Lily had sent off with the Stare—sat at a table about ten feet away. The bar wasn't crowded. They had a great view, and were nudging each other and chuckling.

Real funny, hassling a woman because they thought they could get away with it. Briefly Lily toyed with the idea of stating her price, letting him agree to buy an hour of her time, and then arresting him. She sighed. It was a pleasant





fantasy, but impractical. Instead, she reached inside the flap of her purse—and saw Rule near the door, headed for her. He was not happy.

Time to move mean-and-stupid along. She pulled out the leather case with her shield and showed it to him. "You want to leave now."

He looked at it, his heavy eyebrows pulling down.

"You heard the lady." Rule's left hand clamped down hard on Big Biff's shoulder. His fingers dug in. His face wore a curiously intent, inward expression. "But you weren't listening, were you?"

Biff's eyes bulged in sudden pain. He went stiff and made a choked sound.

"Rule!" She spoke sharply. How had he crossed the room so fast? "Don't break anything."

"Hmm?" He glanced up, his eyes meeting hers. His eyes. Dear God. The color had bled into the whites until they were wholly dark, gleaming. "Oh, yes," he said mildly. "Sorry about that. Here, let me help you up."

He didn't give Biff much choice, hoisting him bodily from the chair. The big man swayed for a second, blinking fast to get rid of tears of pain.

Just how strong was Rule?

"What the hell—?" Biff's protest was weak. He was trying to regain his swagger as he turned. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, grabbing me that—holy shit."

He'd seen Rule's eyes.

Lily shoved her shield back in her purse and stood. "I don't like it here. Too many friendly people. Let's go somewhere else."

"Hey!" Biff's voice rose. "Hey, I know who you are. You're that werewolf!"

Silence scattered like sparks around the room, striking those closest first and spreading fast. Biff's buddies shoved to their feet.

"You're right," Rule said, but he was looking at her, not Biff. His eyes still looked weird, but the whites showed at the corners again. "We need to leave."

The crowd was decidedly unfriendly now. There were mutters from a couple of men at the bar. Biffs two buddies started toward him. Lily and Rule headed for the door.

"Hey, you!" the bartender shouted. "You didn't pay for your drink!"

Lily barely slowed. "I gave you a five."

"No, you didn't. You come back and pay or I'm calling the cops."

"I am—"

"Here." Rule tossed a bill in the general direction of the bar, grabbed Lily's arm, and pulled her toward the door. He let go as they stepped outside.

It was dark and drizzling, a drab wash of grays and blacks. Parked cars lined the street on both sides, but there wasn't much traffic. Hardly any pedestrians, either. The traffic light on the corner was barely visible through the haze, a dim red

glow.

"My Explorer is this way." He set off to the left.

She thought of pointing out that her car was the other direction, decided it wasn't worth arguing over. "Don't grab my arm again."

"What?" His head swiveled. "Oh. Your gun. You want your right hand free. Sorry—I didn't think of that."

"What's the thing with your eyes?"

His voice was clipped. "I needed to Change."

"Ah ... are you okay now?"

He didn't answer. That worried her.

They'd reached the corner. The light was red and a car was coming, so she stopped. So did he. The drizzle was heavier now. Lily's clothes were damp, her face and hands wet, but the rain was warm and made her feel clean and private, alone with him on the street.

As soon as the car passed they stepped together into a shiny-wet street—without a word, both of them moving at the same instant.

Weird. Lily asked, "Is it because the moon is nearly full?"

"He was threatening you."

"Biff is a bully and an asshole, but I had things under control. Until you played macho man and your eyes went spooky."

"It excited him to force himself on you. You couldn't smell his reaction the way I could, but you must have known he enjoyed making you uncomfortable. A man who gets off on intimidating a woman in public is likely to do worse in private."

Lily wanted to understand. She wanted that with an urgency that strummed along her nerves like adrenaline, turning her skin sensitive, as if she could feel each tiny, separate drop of mist that fell on her. But there were so many pieces to him. Pieces that didn't fit any pattern she knew.

Inhuman pieces. "So," she said, trying to sound casual, "this need to Change—that's part of those protective instincts of yours? When you feel that a woman is in danger, you—"

He stopped dead, grabbed her shoulders, and said fiercely, "It was you he threatened, Lily. Not some woman. You." he crushed his mouth down on hers.

Chapter 9

LILY'S MIND WENT blank. Unwilled, her hand lifted to his cheek and found it smooth, damp, and warm. Her head tipped back. Her mouth opened to his.

His taste was like nothing she'd ever imagined—subtle, layered, clean as the wind. And necessary. She burrowed into him, the feel of his body a shock of pleasure against hers. Baffled by pleasure, buffeted by quick slaps of need, she lost her grip on herself. The sound she made held both protest and discovery.

He tore his mouth away. "Sweet Mother.", He wrapped his arms around her, tight, and leaned his head atop hers. "Give me a minute. I need a minute."

So did she. Her heart galloped madly in her chest. If she let

him go—if she couldn't touch him, feel his skin, smell his breath—something inside her would rip open. "What have you done?" she gasped. "What did you just do to me?"

His body was hard with need, but his hand on her hair was infinitely gentle. She lifted her head. He was smiling with such sweetness her breath caught.

He started to speak—then his body, already taut, quivered.

His smile evaporated. "They're coming. Half a block behind us."

She'd heard nothing and, in the rain-muffled night, saw no one. But instantly she knew what he meant. Biff and his buddies had followed them. "Your car?"

"The end of the block."

They ran, splashing in shallow puddles. But he jerked to a stop fifteen feet short of an alley and pushed her against the wet brick of the nearest wall, putting himself in front.

Two men emerged from the alley.

"No!" She shoved her way out from behind him, reaching for her weapon. "Let me handle this," she said quickly, her voice low. "We don't need a massacre here."

There was no more time to argue, to reason. Fear coated her mouth as she sighted on the chest of the nearest man, a blond guy with a droopy mustache. He held a knife in his right

hand, point up like he knew how to use it.

"Police!" she shouted. "Stop right there!"

He did. The man beside him—tall, skinny, with dirty black hair to his shoulders—didn't stop until she swung the gun barrel toward him.

"Dammit, Biff, you didn't say she had a gun!"

"She's a cop, asshole!"

That was Biff's voice, from her right. He and two more men emerged at a run from the veils of rain. Biff had a metal baseball bat. One of the others held the ragged top of a beer bottle. Lily swung her gun that way. They stopped—and the two on the left surged forward.

Rule made a sound low in his throat. "Stay back."

His voice sounded funny—soft and growly. Lily wanted to look, to see what was happening with him. She didn't dare take her eyes off the men. Very low, she said, "You watch the ones on your side, let me know if they budge."

His whisper barely reached her. "They aren't moving. Yet."

She recognized the ones with Biff. They'd been at the bar. The other two hadn't. Where had they come from so fast? "Any of you idiots done time before? Assaulting an officer, that will get you three to five years' hard time. That's if I don't shoot you," she added casually.

It almost worked: One of them muttered, another took a step back.

Then two more men came running up from the right—a Hispanic man with a knife, and a second Biff. Same little head, bland features, and oversized body. Except this one's cap was blue, and he was holding a tire iron instead of a baseball bat.





win Biffs? Sometimes, Lily thought, God had a lousy sense of humor.

The first Biff grinned a mean, gloating grin. "Hey, bro. Knew you wouldn't want to miss the fun."

"Sent Pete and Baker to flank them, didn't I? Needed to get my iron." The second Biff slapped it against his palm. "Gonna see if a were's brains look all pink and gray like a real person's."

"Were bitch," one of them spat.

Lily was intensely aware of Rule beside her, fairly vibrating with needs she didn't understand but could feel shimmering out from him the way heat radiates from hot concrete. He was very, very angry.

She reached out without looking and touched him lightly, hoping he could hold on a little longer. Wondering just how stupid you had to be to push a lupus prince to the edge of control. "If all of you scatter real quick, I won't charge you with assaulting an officer. Or shoot you. Lots of paperwork for me either way."

"Hell we aren't going to mess with you," Biff said, that mean grin fixed tight to his face. He swung the bat back and forth. "All you have to do is walk away."

Oh, yeah, they'd like it fine if she and Rule separated. She shook her head. "You don't understand about the paperwork.

If you make a move, Turner here is going to smear pieces of the lot of you all over the street. You would not believe how many reports I have to fill out about that sort of thing."

The second Biff gave an ugly laugh. "Seven of us, two of you. The odds work for me." Some of the others yelled agreement or insults involving weres, were-lovers, and how they ought to all be exterminated.

They were working themselves up. They were almost ready to move. She could see it in the way they stood, the restless movements of their feet and hands. If they attacked, there would be a bloodbath. "Well, now, I guess you don't read the papers? Or maybe you don't have a good picture of what a lupus can do, Me, I've seen what's left afterwards. This one guy had a knife. The lupus bit his hand off, knife and all, and spat it out. Then he took off the guy's face. Then he killed him."

"We've read about the killings!" one of the men on Rule's side shouted. "Lousy, filthy weres. We take this one out, we ought to get a medal."

"That's right," her second admirer from the bar said loudly. "And taking out a were's whore, that ought to be worth a couple of beers."

"I'm a cop," she said patiently over the jeering laughter while her stomach tied itself in queasy knots. "You really think you can beat me up, maybe kill me, and the other cops are going to say, 'Oh, well, I guess she had it coming'? You can't be that dumb. They'll take this neighborhood apart to find you, not because they give a shit about me personally. Because no one is allowed to make war on cops."

That worried them, but it didn't convince them. She sighed.

"Rule, I think they need to see to believe. Maybe you could show them how fast you can move."

"If I move, I'm going to kill someone." His voice was really rough now and hoarse, close to a beast's growl. "I want to kill them."

"Jesus," someone whispered. Then the Hispanic one said, "This is stupid. This is just stupid. No one said anything about killing or getting killed."

Biff sneered. "You chickening out, Bobby? Fine, you go on home, let the little woman tuck you up safe in bed."

Bobby muttered something under his breath and turned to walk away. Another man hesitated, then hurried after him.

"Hey! The rest of you gonna turn chickenshit, too?" Biff Number Two cried out. "I came to kick some butt, clean this city of at least one were-slime. You with me, Pete? Baker? Let's get with the program!" He smacked the tire iron against his palm again and started forward. Two others followed.

Lily took aim. Her head was clear, but her heartbeat was going crazy.

Across the street, a woman shrieked once. Twice. Lily didn't take her attention away from the men for a second, but they looked.

"She went back inside," Rule growled. "She'll call the cops. Some of your colleagues will be here soon, Lily."

Lily held her pistol out with both arms, one hand steadying the other. Aiming ostentatiously straight at Biff Two. "But we've still got a few minutes before they show up. You guys want me to fill out all those lousy forms, come on. Take another step."

"Hell." The one with the beer bottle threw it into the street, where it smashed. "I'm out of here."

Two more of them left, tossing out insults to make themselves feel less as if they'd lost the battle. Only Biff One and Biff Two remained, but Biff Two was furious. His brother grabbed his arm, said something low and angry to him. Biff Two shrugged free and spat at them. The spittle landed well short of her feet.

A siren sounded in the distance. That was all it took. The twins ran off.

Lily needed to holster her gun, but her hands were shaking and her arms felt like noodles. It took her two tries. Then at last she was free to turn to Rule. His eyes held darkness, corner to corner. Tension drew grooves along his face. "You all right?" she asked.

"No. Do you think that really is your colleagues on the way?" "We try for fast response time, but I doubt it. I'd just as soon not wait around and find out, though. I wasn't entirely joking about the paperwork."

"Weren't you?" A small smile ghosted across his face. "Let's go."

They made it the last half-block to his Explorer without anything happening, and in complete silence. He unlocked both doors, locking them again as soon as they were in, and started the engine. Then he crossed his arms on the steering

wheel, leaned his head on them, and shook.

Lily didn't mistake his reaction for fear. Whatever had been happening to him, he'd fought it and fought hard. There was a price to be paid for that. She unclicked her seat belt and slid over and put her arms around him.

The shakes stopped. He went very still. Then, in one of those too-fast-to-see movements, he had his arms around her, pressing her up against him as if he needed to soak her up. He ran his hands over her sides, her back. His breath was harsh

against her hair. "One heck of a meeting spot you picked for us."

"Sorry about that." Sensation chased itself over her skin like thousands of tiny shivers. Everywhere he touched came alive, and there was a tugging down low in her stomach, a pulsing beneath. "God." She clamped her hand on his arm as if gripping an anchor in a high wind. "I was so scared."

"You didn't sound it. You sounded tough. And bored, as if you did that sort of thing twice a day." He rubbed his face against her hair "But I could smell your fear. I wouldn't have let them hurt you, Lily. They would never have touched you."

"I know. I was scared you were going to kill people. And that I'd have to." Her voice hitched. She turned her face into the living cubbyhole formed by his neck and shoulder and breathed him in. Her insides seemed to be vibrating. She needed more. More touch, more skin, more connection. "I've never killed anyone. I've drawn my weapon, fired warning shots, but I've never had to aim to kill."

"Warning shots weren't going to work with them. But you handled it. You talked them down. Lily. I'm coming apart." He nuzzled the side of her neck, then licked it.

A delicious tremor shimmered through her. The air was suddenly hot. Her fingers dug into hard muscle covered by cloth, and she wanted the cloth gone. He could smell her reaction, she realized. He knew how desperate she was for him. "What is this? I feel like I'm rattling at top speed over bumpy ground. Like everything's about to shake loose. Is it you? Are you doing this, or is it me?"

"It's us." He gathered her face in his two hands and tipped it toward him. His eyes shone in the dim light. Normal eyes once more, or so close to it she couldn't tell the difference.

"Us, Lily. This is what we bring to each other. I need you." She stared at him in a vast, humming silence, her skin and bones and need a thin bridge stretching between one moment and the next, when everything would change.

"There's a hotel." His hand trembled as he brushed her hair back. "Six or seven blocks from here. It isn't what I want for you, for our first time together, but I don't know if I could make it to my apartment, or yours."

He needed her. "Yes," she said. And her voice came out clear and strong, just as if she knew what she was doing.

LILY WOULD HAVE insisted on driving if she'd been sure she was in better shape than Rule. They were lucky the traffic was so light.





ney rode in silence. She kept waiting for doubts to surface, for common sense to point out all the reasons this was a bad idea. What did sex really mean to Rule? She didn't know, couldn't guess. She wasn't sure what this meant to her, either. Though she tried to persuade herself her hunger was fueled by reaction, the aftereffects of adrenaline and danger, her decision felt vast. Like she was taking a leap off a crumbling edge, straight out into darkness.

Yet for all those seven blocks, and the minutes she waited in the hotel lobby while Rule procured a key, the urgency thrummed in her and the doubts never spoke. She wanted this, wanted Rule with a ruthless clarity that didn't shut down thought. Just dismissed it.

The hotel was about ten bucks a night above seedy, but the elevator worked, their room seemed clean, and the door locked. Other than that, Lily only gathered a quick impression of orange—a tangerine bedspread, faded peach wallpaper, a bad print of a New England autumn scene hanging above the bed. Then she was in Rule's arms.

"I want to make this right," he said, nuzzling her hair. "Ah, you smell so good. I wish you could know..." He put his hands on her shoulders, slipped her jacket off, letting it fall to the floor, and kissed her.

The urgency remained, the pleasure and the sense of having opened a door on a vast unknown. But something new lapped over her. From his mouth she absorbed the knowledge of his delight, a wordless rejoicing. His hands stroked with slow intimacy over her back, her hips, telling her they were alone now, and they had time. All the time they needed.

Still her fingers trembled as she found the buttons of his shirt and, one by one, undid them. She ran her hands up his chest to his neck, leaning back slightly so she could see his face—the heavy-lidded eyes, the smile on his beautiful mouth. And she touched his hair, ran her fingers through it, testing the weight, the curl. Such freedom, to touch as she wished.

He glanced down at her shoulder holster, his expression wry. "Would you mind taking care of that yourself? I don't like guns."

That made her laugh, and laughter made her fingers less clumsy, so she was able to unfasten the buckle and lay her weapon in its holster on the bedside table. Rule came up behind her then and put his arms around her waist, pulling her to him. He'd slid off his shirt while she took care of her weapon, and she felt the heat of his skin through the linen of her shirt. The hard length of him nestled against the small of her back.

Her breath caught. He bent and grazed his teeth along the cord of her neck. A shock of pleasure vibrated through her and wrecked her breathing. He ran his hands over her body slowly, luxuriously, breasts to stomach, pubic mound, thighs—and her vision hazed.

He unfastened her shorts and pushed them down. She stepped out of them and would have turned around, but he

clasped her to him, her back to his front, and carefully unbuttoned her top. Undid the catch on her bra, and removed it. And eased her panties down.

Then she turned and reached for his belt buckle. Her hands weren't steady. Neither was his breathing. The heat in his eyes made her fingers fumble, because she couldn't look away.

When he was as naked as she was, he said, "I don't think I can go slow. I want to. I want to spend hours on your body, but I can't. Not this time."

"Thank God." And she looped her arms around his neck, bringing their bodies together. They touched, skin to skin, and the world changed.

He lifted her, tumbling her onto the bed and following her down. She wrapped herself around him, trying to touch all of him at once while he tried to kiss her everywhere. His hand snaked down between her legs, where he stroked the slick folds. Her stomach went hollow. The muscles at the tops of her thighs clenched and quivered, a kinetic percussion with her heart pounding out the accompaniment.

She dug her fingers into his waist. Hurry. He slid up her body. Instinctively, her legs opened and the head of his penis teased her innerfolds ... the soft, silky, bare head of his penis. "Wait," she gasped. "I'm on the pill, but—"

"Are you?" He had a funny look on his face, his eyebrows all awry and his mouth pressed down. His arras quivered with strain, but he bent and kissed her gently. "You can't catch anything from me, or vice versa. Bugs don't stick around in my system."

In spite of everything, indignation pricked her. "Does that mean you've never even had a cold?"

His lips twitched. A drop of sweat drifted down the side of his face. "Afraid so. Lily ... now?"

He needed her. As any man needs a woman—in a purely human way—he needed her. Something softened and opened inside her, and she answered without words, cupping his face in her hands and lifting up gently with her hips. He pushed inside.

Full. Throbbing. Complete. Sensation pin wheeled through her, a thousand little sparks like colors spun into feeling. Her eyes squeezed closed, and the colors were there in the darkness with her.

"Ahh," he said. "Ah, Lily." And he stroked her face with his hand while he stroked her, deep inside, with his cock. "Look at me, Lily. Look at me while I'm inside you."

She opened her eyes and his were right there above her, waiting to catch her as she emerged from her private darkness. His pupils were huge. Growing. Darkness bled through his irises and beyond, pooling where white should be, a black, alien rainbow overtaking the colors she knew.

The shock of fear hit instantly, an electric tremor. But it was too late to pull back, too late to reserve any portion of herself—he was already inside her, deep inside in a way beyond the physical. Fear was only another sensation, giving

claws to the need in her belly.

"Now," she panted, digging her fingers into his buttocks. "Now, Rule."

He shuddered. As if some inner chain had snapped, he dug his hands into her buttocks, lifting her, putting her where he needed so he could pound into her. She cried out. Need surged—his, hers, the two swirled together in complex patterns disturbing the lines that were supposed to divide them.

Fingers gripped, bruised. Flesh smacked into flesh as sweat dripped, running over heated bodies as the great, greedy beast of passion took them both by the throat, shook them—then flung them out into a clear, crisp darkness.

"SOMEDAY I WANT to see you in colors. Green, maybe." Lily's head was pillowed on Rule's chest. It was damp and warm, stirring slightly with his breath. The aftershocks had faded into drowsy bliss. Later, she knew, she would question, wonder, try to understand. That business with his eyes ... but not now. Not yet.

He opened his eyes. "I must have done something wrong. You have enough breath left to talk."

Her laugh was husky and delighted. "Blue. You'd look good in blue."

He ran a hand over her hair. His voice was quiet, almost sad. "I wear colors sometimes at Clanhome. Tomorrow I'll wear blue for you."

Reality seeped back in, about as welcome as a cold trickle of rain leaking beneath a raincoat collar. And just as impossible to ignore. She propped herself up on one elbow. "You never did tell me why you had to see me so urgently, did you? It's because you're finally taking me to Clanhome. Your father is back."

"I'm taking you to Clanhome, yes. I believe my father will see you, though he hasn't said. He ..." Rule sighed. "He's been back for several days."

He'd lied to her. Though she'd warned herself all along not to believe everything he told her, learning that he had lied stripped her of something warm and important.

"I couldn't tell you." He touched her cheek. "He directly forbade me to tell you until..."

"Until what?" Hurt throbbed inside her. Honor bound Rule to obey his Lupois, whose decisions he was pledged to uphold with his own body. She knew that. And still it hurt. "Until I went to bed with you?"

"He didn't want his condition known."

"What do you mean?"

"Four days ago, on his way home from meeting with another Lupois, my father was attacked by other lupi. He was badly mauled. He nearly died."

Chapter 10

THE RAIN OF last night had vanished as if it had never been. The sky was clear and cloudless, the land around





nem seriously rumped, studded with live oak, juniper, and pines. Wind blew in the open windows of Rule's Explorer, smelling of dust and living things.

Lily wondered what it smelled like to him. She would never really know what his world was like, would she?

Returning to the real world was a bitch. She'd been mostly silent ever since they left her apartment, where she'd changed into clean clothes. But the doubts and the questions—and a few uneasy answers—hadn't waited until morning to hit. They'd plagued her last night, but they hadn't kept her from making love with him a second time, or sleeping in his arms. Even now the urge to touch him rose every so often, strong and compelling. Rather like a sneeze, she thought. If she ignored it, it went away.

But it kept coming back.

He slowed and turned off the pavement onto a well-graded dirt road. "We're almost there," he said.

"Good. Your authority does extend to getting me through the gates, I take it. Since your father doesn't know I'm coming."

"He'll see you."

"How can you be sure now, when before you wouldn't bring me to him?"

"It's complicated." He grimaced. "I lied about my father being gone because he didn't want his condition known. Everything else I told you about lupi was true. You'll need his approval to accomplish anything."

She stared at him, angry. "Everything? Are you sure?"

"Of course I... shit." He ran a hand over his hair. "I forgot. No, not quite everything."

"You admit, then, that you lied about being able to identify the clan of the lupus who killed Charlene Hall."

"How did you figure that out?"

She shrugged and looked out the window. He was wearing last night's clothes and a pair of wraparound sunglasses he'd had in the glove compartment, and he made her ache. "That's my job, figuring things out. Your father was attacked by a member of the Leidolf clan, wasn't he? You believed it was someone from the same clan, or the same group within that clan, who killed the others. So you lied to direct my attention that way."

"I didn't tell you it was Leidolf who attacked my father."

"You didn't have to." He'd told her enough. Leidolf hated the Citizenship Bill, and they'd very nearly killed its strongest proponent among the lupi—the leader of Nokolai. But what about Rule? He supported the bill, too. If his father was killed, he would be Lupois.

Fear balled up cold in her stomach. Surely he was a target, too. "Can you identify the killer at all?"

"Oh, yes. If I ever got close to him, I could. But the clan scents aren't quite as distinctive as I led you to believe. I could tell Leidolf from Shuntzu, but the various European clans have interbred too much. Not all Germans are blond, and not all Leidolf smell the same."

"But your father is sure it was Leidolf who tried to kill him."

"He recognized them," Rule said grimly.

"Them? How many—"

"You can ask him, but I doubt he'll tell you." He glanced at her, then reached out and caught her hand. "What's wrong, Lily? You've a right to be angry that I deceived you, but I think there's something more bothering you."

His fingers clasping hers felt right. Absolutely right. Lily swallowed. What was she supposed to tell him? Sorry, but I've developed an addiction to you after just one night. I have to touch you every so often, which is likely to play hell with my job. "Things went pretty far, pretty fast with us last night. There's something I'd meant to ask you. Or tell you."

"A jealous boyfriend I don't know about?" His voice was light.

"No. That's just it. If there had been a man in my life, last night wouldn't have happened. Fidelity is very important to me. You might say it's nonnegotiable."

"I see. You don't think I can—or would want to—be faithful to you."

A little bump of hope, quickly squelched, stuck in her throat. She swallowed. "Lupi don't respect fidelity."

"Normally, that's true. We consider jealousy a sin." He drove in silence for a moment, one hand holding hers, one on the wheel, staring straight ahead. "You need to see for yourself to understand. That's one reason I'm bringing you to Clanhome. So you'll understand."

CLANHOME WAS VINEYARDS and forests, steep slopes and a long, narrow valley cradling what amounted to a village or very small town. The Nokolai held roughly seventeen thousand acres, and were jealously protective of their wilderness; only a small part of the land was used or settled.

To Lily's surprise, dogs raced the Explorer as they drove down the single main street. Modest stucco, timber-frame, or adobe houses lined the dusty street and peered out from the pines and oaks covering the slope to her left. Lily saw a gas station, a small open market, a cafe, a laundry, and a general store.

And children. Laughing, playing, arguing, they raced around in swirls and eddies like flocks of birds. The youngest ones, boys and girls both, wore shorts and nothing more.

So did most of the adults she saw—the men, at least. The two women standing talking in one neatly fenced yard had added skimpy halters. A teenage girl sitting in front of the store drinking a Coke wore a loose, gauzy dress. A huge, silver-coated wolf sat beside her, panting cheerfully in the heat.

The Lupois's home was set slightly apart, perched partway up the slope at the end of the street. It was larger than the others, but by no means a mansion—a sprawling stucco home with a red tile roof and a terraced yard brimming with flowers.

Rule's son came running out when they drove up.

Lily recognized who the boy was instantly. He looked so much like his father... but she'd thought both boys lived with

their mothers.

Maybe his mother was here, too. Lily got out of the car slowly.

Rule kissed his son on the cheek, leaving his hand on the boy's shoulder when he straightened. He was tall for his age— if she hadn't known better she would have guessed him to be thirteen or fourteen instead of eleven. His eyes were darker than Rule's and shining with curiosity.

"Paul," Rule said, "I would like you to meet Lily Yu."

"Oh! Is she the one you—"

"Your mother would be unhappy with your manners," Rule interrupted gently.

"Sorry, Ms. Yu." He smiled, and some of the resemblance to Rule slipped, letting the person he was becoming shine through. "I'm happy to meet you."

"I'm glad to meet you, too, Paul." Though apparently he knew more about her than she did him. Rule had scarcely mentioned his sons.

Rule kept his hand on Paul's shoulder. The boy chattered happily all the way to the house. "Grandfather's much better today. He was sitting up in bed when I went to see him. He called me a nosy pup and told me to go chase rabbits. I said that wasn't much fun when I couldn't catch them, not being four-footed yet, and he chuckled. You know that chuckle of his." He glanced around his father at Lily. "You'll see what I mean. It sounds like when you turn the bass way up on the stereo. So I figured he was feeling better, if he was chucking instead of cussing."

"I suspect you figured right," Rule said.

The entry hall was large, tiled, and ended in sliding doors, left open, that led to an atrium. Doorways opened off both sides of the entry. The woman who stepped out of a doorway on the right was fifty or sixty with gray hair hanging in frizzy clouds to her waist. She wore running shorts and an athletic bra. Her skin was coppery, probably from heritage as well as sun, and her muscle tone was excellent. She heaved a short, put-upon sigh. "Paul said that was your car. He knows the sound of the engine, I suppose. Go on in, Rule. Your father's expecting you."

"Giving you a hard time, is he, Nettie?" Rule asked sympathetically.

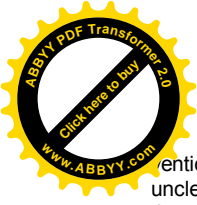
"He wants steak!" Her hands flew up in exasperation. "What he thinks he's going to do with it, I don't know. He doesn't have enough duodenum left to wrap around my thumb. I would have preferred to keep him in sleep another day, but you know him."

Lily stiffened. The duodenum—wasn't that part of the intestines? And he was here, at home, not in a hospital?

Rules glanced down at her. "It's not as bad as it sounds. He's regrowing the parts that are damaged, and Nettie Two Horses is a doctor. Nettie, this is Detective Lily Yu."

"Oh." The older woman looked her over thoroughly, then smiled. "I don't imagine I look the way you think a doctor should, but I assure you I am a real doctor. Trained in con-





ventional medicine at Boston, shamanic practices with my uncle. Chalk the outfit up to too much time spent around these heathens." Her fond glance took in Rule and his son. "Lupi are the worst patients in the world. They think that because they can heal almost anything, they don't have to listen to me. Or take care of themselves."

Rule grinned. "Guilty as charged. But I'll have a talk with your worst patient. He knows very well he can't have steak yet. Paul, why don't you and Aunt Nettie see if Louvel has any coffeecake while I take Lily to meet your grandfather?"

Aunt Nettie? As Lily and Rule started down the short hall the older woman had emerged from, she asked quietly, "Is 'aunt' a courtesy title? Nettie looks Native American, and your clan is of European extraction, isn't it?"

"Yes. Nettie is Navajo. She's married to my uncle, which of course makes her Paul's great-aunt."

Married? But lupi didn't... only, apparently one had.

He paused just outside a heavy wood door. "I should have warned you earlier. My father's injuries ... lupi heal better when our wounds are left open to the air, and infection isn't normally a problem. He's not pretty to look at right now, and he won't be wearing much in the way of clothing. Probably nothing."

"Ah..." She gathered her scrambled wits enough to ask, "Is there any ceremony or greeting ritual I should know?"

He smiled wryly. "If he were in better shape, he'd insist on kissing your hand. But no, there's no greeting ritual that applies." He opened the door.

The bedroom was large, airy, and masculine, decorated in earth tones and forest green. The furniture looked as if it had been shifted; the king-size bed was empty and shoved against a bureau. The man she'd come to see was in a hospital bed with the head raised and an IV attached to his far arm. And yes, he was quite naked, except for the patch over one eye.

He was a lot hairier than Rule. He was also a bloody mess.

The wound running from his cheek up under the eyepatch was broad and bumpy with a heavy scab. New pink skin had formed at its edges, trailing into what was left of a grizzled, rust-colored beard. The gouges along his chest and belly had been stitched, but the abdomen dipped in oddly, as though not all of the usual pieces were under the skin. Lily thought of the missing duodenum and managed not to wince. His legs and genitals seemed undamaged, and she couldn't see his left arm. His right hand had only two fingers. The rest were marked by tiny, pinkish-white nubs, and part of the palm was gone.

Rule moved into the room and bent to kiss his father's cheek. "Paul told me you were doing better. I'm glad to see he was right."

Better? If this was what he looked like after four days of a lupus's rapid healing, what had he looked like right after the attack?

"Apparently you considered me well enough for company."

The Lupois's voice was ten fathoms deep, a rumble from the bottom of that barrel chest. He gave his son a searching look. "You were right, then?"

"Yes." There was satisfaction in Rule's voice, and something Lily couldn't identify. He stood aside. "I've brought Lily to meet you. Lily, this is my father, Isen Turner."

"Come closer, Lily." The uncovered eye studied her as she approached the bed, and the chuckle his grandson had mentioned rumbled up. "Rule. We have embarrassed your lady. She isn't accustomed to our ways." He reached out casually with the two-fingered hand and draped a corner of the sheet across his loins. "As you see, Lily, I have not postponed the pleasure of meeting you without reason."

"Yes, sir." If there was a protocol for meeting naked semiroyalty, Lily didn't know what it might be. "I was sorry to learn you'd been injured. I have some questions."

"It is a trifle awkward, Lily, your being with the police."

An odd thing to say, since that was why she was here. "Rule said you recognized your attackers."

"Did I? I have forgotten. The trauma, no doubt."

"Were you attacked while in wolf form, sir?"

"I find this difficult to express politely, but since the attack did not take place in your jurisdiction, the details are not your affair."

"Three other people have been murdered who are most definitely my affair. Their killer is almost certainly connected to those who tried to kill you."

"A like-minded soul, perhaps. I assure you that the ones who attacked me did not travel to the city the next day and kill someone else."

Lily had the unpleasant suspicion he meant that his attackers had been killed. Probably by those defending him, judging by the extent of his wounds. He wasn't going to "remember" anything about the attack, no matter what angle she took. And he was in pain. Though he hid it well, it showed around his undamaged eye.

Time to finish up. "I need to question your people, sir, about these murders. Will you ask them to cooperate with me?"

He looked at her thoughtfully for a long moment. "I will call a meeting of my Council for nine o'clock," he said at last. "We will discuss it tonight."

Anywhere else in the country, people didn't hold a meeting to discuss cooperating with the police. "I understood that you had complete authority."

His mouth crooked up on the undamaged side. "We have a saying: The Lupois who rules alone soon runs out of sons. I will bring this to Council, Lily. You go with my son, let him show you around. I must require you to pretend, for now, you are not a police detective. Ask no questions related to your investigation until after I have spoken with the Council. And I..." He sighed. "I must rest, unfortunately, if I am to hold Council tonight."

AS SHE AND Rule passed from the hall to the entry way,

Paul raced past. "Bye, Dad! See you at lunch!" He yanked open the door, stopped, turned around, and added in a polite rush, "It was very nice to meet you, Lily. I'll see you at lunch, too. We're eating with Aunt Nettie and Uncle Conrad." Then he sped outside, leaving the door open.

A gnome trotted out of the atrium. No, not a gnome, just a tiny old man made of wrinkles stretched over bony angles. He had a little potbelly and a round, smiling face, and wore yellow biking shorts. "There you are!" he exclaimed, as if amazed to see Rule, and added apologetically, "Is it lunchtime? I lose track. The laundry, you know."

"That's fine, Louvel. We're eating with my aunt and uncle, I'm told. This is Lily Yu."

"Oh! Lily?" The old man trotted up, lifted Lily's hand, and, in a curiously graceful gesture, raised it to his face. He smelled it thoroughly, then dropped a kiss on it before releasing it. "Charming. Charming. Do you like chocolate, Lily? So many humans do."

"Louvel is my father's cook and housekeeper," Rule said. "His chocolate torte is legendary."

"I love chocolate," she said honestly.

"Good! I'll make you a torte." He beamed at her, then trotted off down another hall.

"Louvel is a little beyond taking care of the house on his own, but his baking is still not to be missed." Rule put a hand on her back. "I could use some coffee. You?"

She nodded.

A few minutes later she was seated in a sunny kitchen while Rule poured them each a cup of coffee. The back door stood open. They tended to leave doors open, she'd noticed. Perhaps because there wasn't any air conditioning. Or maybe they just liked things open.

Rule handed her a steaming mug and sat at the table beside her.

"What your father said about running out of sons ... does that mean someone might do that challenge thing?"

He sipped his coffee. "It depends. If he says you will be allowed to ask questions, that may annoy people but is unlikely to seriously upset anyone. It wouldn't be the first time police or other law enforcement agencies poked around in clan business."

"This isn't just clan business."

"Most people here will see it that way, though. We haven't exactly been on friendly terms with the authorities—any authorities. If, on the other hand, the Lupois rules that you are to be answered honestly and completely—"

"You mean that's an option?" She shook her head, baffled. "And if their Lupois tells them to be truthful and complete, they will be? Even if they disagree with him?"

"They will, or they'll challenge. If he does so rule," he added calmly, "I'll go with you as Lu Nuntius when you ask your questions."

"Lu Nunlius? What does that mean?"

"It's my title. My presence will be official, representing the will





or the Lupois. In practical terms, it means I'll be in wolf form." "To answer any challenges," she said flatly. "And because my sense of smell is more acute in that form. It's almost impossible for a lupus to lie in the presence of his Lu Nuntius. Rather like a devout Catholic trying to lie to a priest while hooked up to a lie detector." She considered that in silence, sipping the truly excellent coffee. "Do you think he'll tell everyone to answer me honestly?" "You said you don't try to predict your grandmother. I don't make predictions about my father, either. But I hope he does as you wish." His mouth tightened to a grim line. "He was betrayed by one of his own people. I want the traitor named." Lily was only startled for a second. Her mind skipped through possibilities, sorting her few facts into a new shape. "You think someone here—someone from his own clan—set him up." "It was an ambush. Carefully planned, and requiring knowledge that Leidolf shouldn't have had." "Someone told them where he would be." "Yes. And who would be with him. I'm hoping you'll be able to arrest the bastard so I don't have to kill him."

Chapter 11

DID SHE TRULY want what Rule thought she did?

Off and on for the rest of the day, Lily tried to answer that question. She knew what she needed—to stop a killer. Make an arrest. Turn up proof that would stand up in court. She'd play by the Lupois's rules for now and ask none of the questions burning in her, and hope he cooperated in turn.

But how far did she want his cooperation to go? Was she willing to let Rule put his life on the line in order to get to the truth? Because that's what that whole Lu Nuntius business amounted to.

In the normal course of things she didn't have a lupus lie detector along on interviews, and she did okay. So what if she had to handle things the hard way here? Cops dealt with lying or reluctant witnesses all the time.

But if she didn't find out who had betrayed the Lupois to the other clan, Rule's father would. Once he was well enough, he would look for the traitor himself, and his justice would be final—and administered by his son. There wasn't a thing Lily could do to stop it, either, if she couldn't find the guilty party first. Not if they fought in wolf form. Killing a lupus in wolf form wasn't murder.

Lily was really growing to hate that law.

After they finished their coffee, Rule changed clothes. He wore blue for her, as he'd promised—denim blue. A ragged pair of cutoffs. He looked magnificent in them, especially since he didn't wear a shirt. Or shoes, for that matter, but neither did most of the people she met that day. Lily felt seriously overdressed, but wasn't about to leave her gun behind. Since most people found a gun out in plain view distracting, she kept the jacket on.

Clanhome was a shock of toppled preconceptions.

Lily had pictured a patriarchal, heavily masculine society. Everyone knew lupus were always male and didn't marry. She'd expected to see a few women who were kept around to have babies, lend the children, cook, and clean. That's how men all over the world arranged things when they could, wasn't it?

By lunch, she'd met Rule's uncle and one of his brothers, his first grade teacher, three of Paul's friends, several dogs, and an assortment of lupus... and Nokolai. That was a surprise, though it shouldn't have been: they were all Nokolai, but only some were lupus. Because only about two-thirds of the clan was male.

When she made a rather foolish comment on the number of girls and women she saw, Rule said, "What did you think we did with our girl children? Drown them? Expose them at birth on a hillside?"

She learned that between 350 and 450 people lived at Clanhome at any given time. There wasn't enough work here to support everyone, so some officially lived here but had jobs that kept them away a lot. Others lived and worked on the clan's ranch to the north, and the rest were scattered all over—how many that might be, she didn't find out. Most Nokolai came, when they could, to the gatherings held on the winter and summer solstices. And many of those who didn't live here themselves sent their children to stay for part of the summer... and their adolescent boys for much longer. To learn to control the beast.

Lily saw a lot of children that day. The only wolf she saw was the one that had been sitting with the teenage girl when she and Rule first arrived.

She visited the daycare center, which was attached to the clubhouse. The center was run by an older woman in a wheel-chair named Oralie Fortier, and staffed by volunteers—which meant pretty much every adult at Clanhome. These people were nuts about kids. While Lily was there Ms. Fortier had to settle an argument about whose turn it was to work in the baby room—three people wanted to, and there were only two babies there at the time.

Two of the three insisting it was their turn with the babies were men.

The clubhouse had pool tables, a weight room, a smaller room where dance and gymnastics were taught, a kitchen, and a library. It was the only place on the grounds with television. When they left it, heading for the school across a lightly wooded section, Lily quit fighting herself and tucked her hand into Rule's.

He gave her a smile of such startling sweetness that her heart turned over. A second later, the panic hit.

She was in love with him.

No. No, this wasn't love, it was some kind of physical obsession created by incredible sex. Or magic. Whatever it was, though, it couldn't be love. She'd known him less than a week. He wasn't human, for God's sake. Besides, she'd been in love before, and this—this whatever she felt was different.

Deeper. Stronger.

Lily was thoroughly shaken when they reached the school, a U-shaped building with a courtyard in the center. There Rule excused himself, saying he needed to talk to his uncle. He dropped a kiss on her lips and left her with his first grade teacher.

Arthur Madoc was another surprise—a tall, narrow man with a gentle smile and the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. He'd taught first grade for forty-seven years. The school itself reminded her of country schoolhouses she'd read about, with kindergarten in one room, grades one and two in another, and third and fourth graders sharing the third room. After fourth grade, Mr. Madoc told her, the children had to go into town.

Classes in various subjects were offered during the summer. Today twelve kids aged six to nine were there for art lessons. The wilderness studies group, she was told, had already left the building.

Lily joined the budding artists, who were experimenting with print-making. She dipped leaves, twigs, and sponges in paint and dabbed them on paper. She helped other artists dip things and admired the results. And she asked questions. After her shock had worn off, she'd realized she had more than one investigation to make.

One of the little girls wanted to be an airline pilot like her mother when she grew up. One wanted to be a doctor. Another thought she'd do something with computers, while a third couldn't decide between building houses like her uncle or being a movie star.

More of Lily's preconceptions toppled quietly. "What about babies?" she asked casually, daubing her sponge in canary yellow paint. "Or getting married? Do you think about doing that, too?"

"That shade of yellow won't work with purple," the budding actress said critically. More patiently, the would-be physician told her, "Not everyone gets to be a mommy, so you can't plan on having babies. Unless you want to marry out," she added, and her expression made it clear she considered that a poor choice.

"Not always," the computer enthusiast said with the air of correcting a small logic error. "Sophie Duquesne mated with a man from Rachmanov Clan."

The future pilot rolled her eyes. "Like that's going to happen. We were talking about plans. You can't plan to mate. That's like planning to win the lottery. My dad says—"

"Time to finish up," Mr. Madoc said pleasantly. "It's past noon."

The builder's niece had been right about the yellow. It didn't look good with the purple.

When Nettie came to get her, Lily wasn't surprised to learn that Rule's uncle, not his aunt, had cooked lunch. She was surprised, though, when those she sat down to lunch with included Rule's five-year-old son, Johnny. And Johnny's mother.



"I'M NOT UPSET with him for not telling me," Lily said, handing the bright blue plate she'd just washed to Nettie, then plunging her hands back in the soapy water. "Not exactly. He doesn't owe me his life story, and besides, I knew he had children. I'd dug into his background in the course of my investigation."

"But you are upset." Nettie stacked the dried plate on top of the others in the oak cabinet. "I suppose it's one thing to know something professionally, another to unexpectedly sit down to lunch with the mother of your lover's child."

That was putting things bluntly. "It's the way he did it. Just like the way he let me arrive at his grandfather's house without telling me Paul would be there. He's putting me through some kind of tests, and I don't like it."

Nettie didn't answer.

The two of them were alone in Nettie's small, cheerful kitchen. Lily had offered to help clean up after lunch. Somewhat to her surprise, Nettie had accepted right away and delegated the washing to her. Everyone else had left after they ate, with Johnny and his mother going home with her friend, Paul to his grandfather's, and Rule's uncle back to work at the vineyard.

Rule had said he needed to talk to a few people. "You can't come with me," he'd told her. "I'm sorry, but they won't speak freely if you're there. I'll tell you what I learn."

"Will you?" She'd studied him gravely. "People hold things back. They want to protect those they care about, and tell themselves whatever they're hiding couldn't really matter." Instinct, culture, history—all would shriek at him not to reveal too much to an outsider. To human authority.

He'd hesitated. She'd had the idea he was weighing his response, making sure he could speak the truth. "I'll tell you," he'd repeated.

Nettie stacked the last of the plates. "I take it Rule hasn't told you a lot about Johnny and Paul."

"He hasn't told me anything." Lily scrubbed hard on the pot in her hand. "I didn't know they lived here. I didn't know Johnny's mother was Nokolai."

"Johnny and Belinda do live here, but Paul is just staying for the summer. In August he'll return to his mother in Washington. She's a reporter for CNN."

Good grief. Rule's former lover, the mother of one of his sons, was a reporter? "That's almost as tricky for him as having a relationship with a cop."

"Almost," Nettie agreed cheerfully. "Has it been difficult for you, balancing your professional duties with your feelings for Rule?"

Lily took a moment to think about her answer, rinsing the pot thoroughly. Nettie should have been a cop. She was alarmingly good at getting people to talk. "He and I haven't known each other long, and for most of that time our relationship was professional. It turned personal very suddenly."

"Did it? Still, I can understand if you were uncomfortable

today. Our customs are different from what you're used to." That was certainly true. Lily grinned. "I think I would have been a lot more uncomfortable if Belinda hadn't been accompanied by the gorgeous Dede." The two women had, quite obviously, been a couple.

Nettie smiled. "I'm glad you're tolerant. Not everyone is."

"Really?" She rinsed the lid, handed it to Nettie, and opened the drain. "I had the impression this was an accepted and long-standing relationship."

Nettie shrugged. "Long-standing, yes. And lupi don't consider much about sex truly sinful. But relationships such as Belinda and Dede have are discouraged."

"Why?"

"Customs usually evolve for a reason," she said vaguely, turning to put away the last of the silverware. "Dede and Belinda are good together, though, so most accept them. It's not like having a true mate, of course—but then, few are that lucky."

"True mate." Lily thought of the little girls she'd met. "Is that like true love?"

"Something like that. You seemed to enjoy yourself at the school. I thought you might like to join the group learning woodcraft for a while this afternoon. Nick is leading them. He's our woodsman."

"Sure." Lily dried her hands. She knew when she was being herded out of the way. For now, she didn't mind. It wouldn't stop her from seeking answers. "Do you mind if I ask you something personal?"

"Will it stop you if I do?"

Probably not. "I wondered how you felt about—well, the way your husband turns furry sometimes. Does it bother you?"

"Not in the way you mean. I'm a little envious. It would be wonderful to experience the world as vividly as they do." She shrugged. "But it's a guy thing, isn't it?"

A guy thing. Lily grinned and dried her hands, but her grin soon faded. "Nettie... what happens if a Lu Nuntius doesn't do what he's told by his Lupois?"

"I've never heard of such a thing occurring." Nettie smoothed lotion over her hands and held out the bottle. "Want some?"

Sometimes you let a subject get away with evading the question. Sometimes you didn't. "What would happen if one did?"

Nettie sighed. "At best, he would be banished. Not allowed at Clanhome. He would cease to exist to other Nokolai."

Lily didn't have to ask what the worst would be. She could guess.

The lupi had such final concepts of discipline.

Chapter 12

ONE LAST SLIVER of sun clung to the rounded shoulder of Bole's Peak like an incandescent fingernail clipping. The moon hung low on the opposite side of the sky, looking more shadow than substance, her solidity drained by the presence of her fiery sister. Rule hurried toward his aunt and uncle's

house, buzzing inside as if his skin were but a coat slipped on over a teeming hive of choices, chances, fears, and dreams.

When the moon rose tomorrow, it would be full. But the buzzing came from more than the proximity of the full moon. He was returning to Lily.

Night came earlier in the mountains than down in the city, but it was still later than he'd planned to return. There had been so much to arrange, and discussion had taken longer than he'd expected. So had the congratulations. But his plans had gone well, he thought. Extremely well.

It remained to be seen how well his other plans had worked, and whether Lily would be angry. No, he thought ruefully as he reached the front door, the real question was how angry she would be. Lily was not going to like learning she'd been deceived.

The second he crossed the threshold, she looked up. She'd been playing chess with his uncle. Nettie wasn't there, of course. She'd remained at his father's to make sure he hadn't set back his healing too much.

His uncle gave him a searching look, and Rule nodded slightly.

Lily stood. "All right. I've had enough of cryptic glances. What's going on?"

He smiled. The sight of her lifted his heart, even if her expression left something to be desired. And his news was good. "The Council has agreed that you are to be allowed to ask your questions. You are to be answered as honestly as if the Lupois himself posed the questions."

Her eyebrows went up. "The Council has already met."

"I'm afraid so. You made a very good impression on them."

"How remarkable of me, when I never met them." Her voice was flat with suspicion. Or maybe hurt.

"Yes, you did." He held out his hand. "Walk with me, and let me give you the explanations you deserve."

She looked at him for a long moment. Then she took his hand.

THE SKY WAS messy with sunset when they left the little house, darkening to indigo overhead. Lily didn't speak as Rule led her away from the scattering of lights that was the little village. It felt so good to be with him. She wanted to thump him in the head—hard—but still it felt right to walk beside him.

"This path leads to the lake," he said. "Though that's a rather inflated term—it's more like an ambitious pond, but lovely by moonlight. I asked the others not to take you there today. I wanted to be the one to show it to you."

"You also wanted to explain some things," she reminded him. "Not that I haven't figured some of it out. The Council meeting was never set for nine o'clock, was it?"

"No, though you weren't the only one who believed it was. They met around six, after most of them had had a chance to meet you and form an opinion."



ily had been passed from person to person, group to group, all afternoon—courteously, often with real friendliness, but after a while it had been obvious her time and encounters were being managed. She'd thought they were checking her out because they were curious about the cop Rule had gotten himself involved with—and that they were making sure she didn't speak to anyone she wasn't supposed to. "Why all the secrecy?" she burst out. "Why go to the trouble to trick me?"

"We are a secretive people. Too much so, perhaps, but we've had reason to be wary. My father knew his councillors wouldn't agree unless they trusted you. They in turn wanted to meet you without your knowing who they were. Didn't you wonder why everyone you met put you to work?"

"I thought it was a custom or something." She'd fixed tea and swung a hammer, helped clear away deadfalls in the woods, washed a baby, and swept an old woman's floor. "What did they learn by watching me work?"

"What did you learn by watching them while you worked together?"

It was a fair question. An excellent question, actually. "A lot. One of the biggest surprises was how familiar some of it seemed."

She'd startled him. "Familiar?"

"Sure. The respect for tradition, the importance of family, work, and honor, the duty owed to one's elders—that's all very Chinese, you know."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"You don't know much about my people, either." Not yet. Would he? Did he want to learn? "I also began to get a grasp of why some lupi oppose the Citizenship Bill. It will change a lot of things, won't it? Your whole governance structure is based on the challenge. Not that I like it, but it does provide a check on the Lupois's power."

"Some of my people believe the proposed law will make tyrants of our Lupois, yes. But humans evolved a system of checks and balances that doesn't necessarily involve killing each other. We can, too."

They came out from under the trees and walked for a few yards along the shore before drifting to a stop. The sky overhead was salted with stars. Ahead, moonlight spilled across water as dark as Rule's eyes had been when the Change tried to take over. "The moon is almost full."

He looked at her. "You aren't at all frightened, are you? Going for a moonlit stroll with me doesn't worry you. All of the lupi councillors who met you said you gave off no fearscent."

"They didn't give me any reason to," she said, surprised. "Neither have you. Maybe if I'd met a young teenage boy I'd have been worried, given what you said about them."

"They live separately until they learn control."

That made sense. "So—who were they? Which of the people I met today were councillors?"

"Nettie, Nicholas Masterson, Emile Hunter, Arthur Madoc,

Fera Bibiloux—"

"Fera? The blind woman? But..." Her voice trailed off as she remembered the odd feeling she'd had, sitting in the dimly lit cabin drinking tea while the old woman worked her loom, her hands sure in spite of her lack of sight. A prickly feeling, yet peaceful. Belatedly she understood that she'd been in the presence of power. "Okay, I guess I understand that. She's Gifted, isn't she?"

"Something like that. Fera said you made good tea and would be welcome to return—from her, that counts as approval. She also said that something you haven't told me is going to come as a big surprise. She seemed amused, so I gather whatever it is won't be too much of a shock."

"Ah. Well..."

"You don't have to tell me right this second." He sounded amused himself.

Her heart was beating a little too fast and her mind jittered along the surface of her thoughts like a water bug. "I'm more than a little surprised that Nettie is a councillor. I thought they would all be Nokolai."

"Nettie is Nokolai."

"Is she?" They were facing each other now, their hands clasped. "Did she become part of the clan when she married your uncle? Or does mating mean something more than marriage?"

He touched her cheek. "I should have known you would turn up a clue or two. You heard about mates."

She nodded. Hope and guesses tangled in her throat, keeping her from speaking. So much depended on the accuracy of those guesses....

"There is something about my people you don't know. Something no one outside the clans knows." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Over half of all lupi never father a child. And fertility is ... limited ... in the rest of us."

It wasn't what she'd expected to hear. "But—you have two children—"

"By two different mothers. Few women conceive by us, and of those who do, none has ever borne more than a single child."

"It's the magic in you. It screws with the results in DNA tests, too."

"You see why only a lupus who has sired sons is able to become Lu Nuntius?"

She nodded slowly.

"The outside world considers us promiscuous. In your terms, this is true. The need for children shapes us, defines us. We are seldom fertile with women of our own people, so we seek bed partners wherever we can. Not indiscriminately. We don't want our children birthed or raised by a chance-met stranger in a bar. But our survival as a people depends on those of us who are fertile siring as many children as possible."

"And you're fertile." Lily was dazed, as she'd heard gunshot victims sometimes were in the first seconds—the blow

registers, but isn't real yet. Not real enough to hurt. She remembered the men at the childcare center arguing over who got to stay with the babies. The swarms of children everywhere.

Not everyone gets to be a mommy, the little girl had told her. Not everyone—relatively few—got to be a daddy, either. "That's why lupi don't marry," she whispered. "Because to be faithful to one woman would be to betray the needs of your people."

"Yes."

Abruptly the numbness was ripped away. Pain wrenched her around to face the water, hugging herself as if something vital was leaking out, like blood from a gut wound. "I can't... I can't do it, Rule. It wasn't long ago I said you were going too fast, and maybe I'm doing that now. You haven't... but for me, this has gone too far. I can't share you."

"No!" He grabbed her shoulders, spun her around. "Lily, I didn't mean—I thought you knew about mates!"

"I thought so, too. At least, I'd made some guesses." Her voice shook and her legs weren't too steady, either. She held on to his arms. "But no one came right out and said what—" One second she was holding him and being held. The next she was rolling on the ground where he'd thrown her.

Rule howled. The eerie, ululating cry had goose bumps popping out on her flesh even as she threw her arms out, stopping her skid toward the lake. She pushed up onto her hands and knees—and stared.

He was Changing. Flickering—no, it was as if reality itself flickered, time bending in and out of itself like a Mobius strip on speed. Impossible not to watch. Impossible to say what she saw—a shoulder, furred, or was it bare? A paw; a muzzle that was also Rule's face—a stretching, snapping disfocus, magic strobing its fancy over reality.

And then there was a wolf. Huge, black and silver furred, snarling.

And three other wolves racing at them from fifty feet up the shoreline.

Lily's gun was in her hand, though she didn't remember drawing it. The wolves moved like streaks of pure speed, impossibly fast. She pushed to her knees, aimed, and fired—just as the black and silver wolf beside her launched himself at the one in the lead.

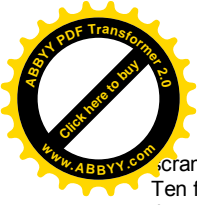
She hit the one on the left in the haunches. It didn't stop him—he still threw himself at the snarling tangle the other two wolves made. The third wolf veered toward her and leaped—huge, beautiful, and terrifying, jaws open.

Lily shot him in that gaping mouth.

The silver-alloy bullet went into the brain. The beast convulsed in midair. Lily scrambled back, but still it fell half on top of her, pinning her, smearing her with blood. And raised that bloody head and lunged for her throat.

She rammed her gun against the wolf's skull and squeezed the trigger. Blood and brains spattered, and the big body collapsed. Lily pushed out from under the wolf and





scrambled to her feet.

Ten feet away, three wolves fought. She saw them clearly in the moon-washed night. She knew which one was Rule. Though she'd only seen him in wolf form for a few seconds, she knew him. But they moved too fast, stayed too close. She circled, but couldn't get a clear shot.

Then one of the wolves—the one she'd wounded, she thought—staggered back, whimpering in pain. Blood, black in the moonlight, poured from what was left of its face. And the black and silver wolves jaws were clamped on the back of the neck of the other attacker. He shook the beast, then flung him away to fall, bloody and broken, one paw twitching.

Then he turned, snarling, on the one left.

"No, Rule!" Lily ran forward. "I need him alive to interrogate!"

She stopped beside the black and silver wolf, who stood with his head lowered, hackles raised, teeth bared. His shoulders reached her hipbone. One of them was gashed and bleeding. More blood dripped from his muzzle, and a deep growl rumbled from his chest.

Lily aimed her weapon at the other wolf. "Silver bullets," she said tersely. "Don't move." Then in a whisper to Rule, "He does understand me, right?"

The growl cut off. The big wolf lifted his head to look at her in what she could have sworn was surprise. Or maybe amusement.

"Oh, yeah," she muttered. "If you understand me, then he does. Okay. You, there—you have the right to remain silent—at least you will, as soon as you're back on two legs. You— oh, shit."

Four more wolves raced toward them along the shore.

A big head nudged her thigh. Rule-wolf pointed his muzzle at those who approached so quickly, then nodded, his mouth opening in a grin a great deal like Worf's.

"Those are the good guys, huh?" When he nodded again she breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. We could use some backup." And went back to informing the suspect of the rights he'd have when he wasn't furry anymore.

THE COUNTY SHERIFF'S office, while it wasn't much like headquarters outwardly, held a comforting familiarity for Lily. Cops were cops, even when they were deputies. She was finishing up a report, using one of the deputy's computers. Unlike her, the deputy had a tiny office to himself. The sounds that came from the bullpen weren't much different from those at the city's cop shop. And the coffee was just as bad.

When the report was done she'd email it to the captain. She'd spoken to him on the phone briefly. He'd told her that the leak to the press had come from the mayor's office—a secretary interested in helping the mayor's opponent in the next election, it seemed.

Lily frowned at the screen. The text was trying to blur on her. God, she was tired. She paused for another sip of awful coffee.

Of the three wolves who'd attacked them, two were back in human form and being treated for injuries. One was in critical condition; he'd lost more blood than a human could have survived and had gone into shock. The other—the one whose neck Rule had broken—was actually in better shape. Paralyzed, yes, but with lupi that was a temporary condition. The one she'd shot would never walk on two legs again. Or four. Lily was putting off thinking about that.

She'd been able to question the one with the broken neck before the sheriff arrived and he was taken to the hospital. He'd confirmed that they were Leidolf, and claimed that the one she'd killed had been the killer she was after. According to Rule, he'd told the truth. Lily was hoping for a little hard evidence to back that up, now that they had names and faces for the conspirators.

Some of the conspirators, anyway. The man she'd questioned insisted that the three Leidolf who had attacked her and Rule were the only ones involved in the killings, that they'd acted without their Clan chiefs knowledge or consent. They'd attacked because their Nokolai contact—whom he insisted wasn't involved in the killings—had told them about the Council meeting, thinking it was to be later that night.

The Nokolai traitor turned out to be a woman. No one Lily had met.

Lily was embarrassed. Unconsciously she'd kept right on equating clan interests with lupi, and lupi with male. She hadn't considered any of the women of the clan as suspects because they couldn't be the killer. Dumb. Lily had taken the woman into custody immediately, unsure that the lupi's veneration of women would protect her from their notions of justice.

So far, the woman wasn't talking. But she was scared—and not of the police. Lily figured she'd end up with a second witness if she could get the woman into the Witness Protection

Program. Which was what she was recommending to her chief right now.

Her fingers paused on the keyboard. Rule was here. She knew it without turning to look, without his having made a sound. She swiveled her chair.

He stood in the doorway. He wore tattered denim, not black. The last time she'd seen him he'd been furless, naked, and covered in blood—much of it not his, thank God—with Nettie calmly stitching the worst of the wounds. Lily had had to leave with her prisoners and the sheriff.

He looked a lot better now. Except for his eyes. He had the rest of his expression locked down tight, but his eyes told the real story.

She shoved the chair back and went to him.

His arms closed around her, hard. He buried his face in her hair. She knew he was breathing her in, just as she was him. After a moment she said, "How do you do that thing with your clothes, anyway? They didn't rip when you turned furry. They just weren't on you anymore."



His chuckle was real, if strained. "You never run out of questions. I don't know exactly what happens, except that they aren't part of me so they aren't part of the Change. Lily." He ran both hands over her hair. "I've never been so scared in my life. They were on us so fast, and I couldn't stop them. Not all of them. I didn't think you had a chance."

"I'm pretty fast for a human." She hugged him tightly around the waist, where he didn't have any wounds. "Maybe now you'll relax when I'm driving."

"Maybe I will." A deeply held tension was easing out of him. "I was still scared, afterwards."

She swallowed. "I know what you mean. I am, too."

"I knew you'd let me hold you again. That's the nature of the mate bond. But I didn't know if you would want me to, after what you saw tonight."

She was the one who had killed someone tonight, not him. But Lily didn't have the energy to get off on side issues. Exhaustion was turning her brain to lint. "Speaking of the mate bond... I don't know what the hell that is. We were interrupted, remember?"

"I think you've guessed the important part." He cupped her face and smiled into her eyes. "Some say the mate bond is nature's way of apologizing for our troubles with fertility. It doesn't happen often, but once in a long while, a lupus finds his mate, the woman who is so supremely right for him that no other will do. His life-mate. I knew you before I saw you, Lily. The moment you walked into the room, your scent reached me and I knew."

She swallowed. "So it's like true love, lupus style?"

He brushed a kiss across her mouth. "Very like that."

"And it doesn't cause problems? With the clan, I mean. If you have to bow out of the fertility business—"

He laughed. "I've been out of the fertility business since I met you. There can be problems, yes, but not that way. If a lupus is lucky enough to find his mate, no one expects him to keep spreading his seed around. It would be ...abomination. Like rape, or the worst form of prostitution."

"But it can cause problems."

He nodded slowly. "That's the other reason everyone was so curious about you. Just because a lupus finds his mate doesn't mean she'll be able to accept him, his people, and his ways. Sometimes ..." His throat muscles worked. "Sometimes he has to choose between his clan and his mate. But you had no fear-scent." His thumbs stroked along her cheeks. "You have no idea how important that is, how everyone rejoiced for me. Women who are deeply afraid of us often can't adjust. They may try, but they can't become one of the clan."

Happiness swelled inside her, so large and grand she had to tell him. "I love you, Rule." He kissed her, and that was delightful, but after a moment she pointed out, "You're supposed to say it back to me."

His eyebrows lifted slightly. "You know how I feel."

"Wrong answer." Her lips twitched. "This mate bond doesn't



"make everything perfect, does it?"

"No. It just makes everything possible."

A long time later he was sitting in the visitor's chair, one of those plastic devices supposedly shaped like people but that don't really fit anyone's rump. It couldn't have been comfortable. She was, though, since she was in his lap. "So, are we engaged?"

"If you like. In the eyes of my people, we're already married."

"In the eyes of my people, we aren't. So I think engaged is a good idea. That makes you part of my family. Speaking of which..." She thought about all she still had to tell him. To explain. Things that were known only within the family.

Maybe it was stretching a point to call him family before they married, but he had to know. They might have children. From what he'd said that was far from certain... but with Grandmother involved, matters often fell out quite differently than anyone expected.

And she was likely to be involved.

Some traits were passed through the male line. Some through the female. Very few of the women in Lily's family inherited Grandmother's abilities; Lily hadn't, and she didn't think anyone alive today had, either. Probably it was a recessive trait. But Lily carried that heritage in her genes. She would pass the possibility on to her daughters.

All her life she'd had issues about just who was and wasn't considered human, and here she was, more or less proposing to a werewolf. "Rule, you know that we sometimes call Grandmother 'Tiger Lady'?"

He smiled. "I can handle being related to your grandmother if you can."

"That's good. Because she's not a witch, like you thought."

"Lily, I felt her power."

"I know, but..." She settled herself more comfortably and began, "You see, lycanthropy isn't just a guy thing."

END