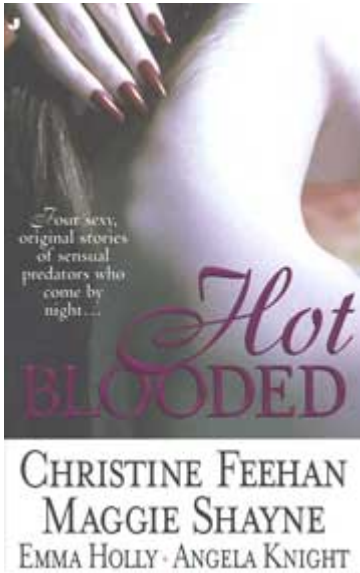


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FROM HOT BLOODED ANTHOLOGY

AWAITING MOONRISE

By

Maggie Shayne

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Awaiting Moonrise

MAGGIE SHAYNE

Chapter 1

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MIST rose from the rain-soaked pavement and wound its way upward, tangling in the endless veils of Spanish moss. A Hollywood director couldn't have come up with a more likely setting, although Jenny supposed she should be wearing heels that would *tap-tap-tap* over the macadam and turn her ankle when she ran, instead of her royal and teal Nike cross trainers. And a flowing white dress would be more atmospheric than the jeans and loose, gauzy top. The blouse *was* white, though, and floaty enough to create the right affect. It was important to wear white. She wanted to be seen.

The plantation house was a solid half-mile back along the narrow road that meandered through the dark bayou. There wasn't a streetlight or a vehicle in sight, and the moon was full, though tough to see through the low-level fog. The air was so heavy that her skin and hair had been wet as soon as she'd left the house. Not with sweat, though that followed soon enough. Midsummer in Louisiana had the same feeling she imagined swimming in a bowl of hot soup would have.

Something rustled in the trees.

She stopped, turned to look toward the trees along the roadside, where the sound seemed to have come from, as she slowly unzipped the waist-pack that was concealed by the loose material of her blouse. She couldn't see a damned thing, though the mists seemed to move differently there.

Her hand closed around the cool metal of her flashlight, but she didn't take it out. Shining a light in the creature's eyes would only frighten it away. She let the flashlight go and dug deeper, finding the rough diamond-patterned grip of the gun instead. She tugged it out of the bag, but not out from under the soft white gauze of the blouse. If the beast saw it, would it know it for what it was? She couldn't be sure.

So she stood there, with deer scent wafting from her shoes, and she waited. Human bait.

The wind, as heavy and hot as a lover's breath, picked up, causing the mists around her feet to swirl and rise. Her heart beat faster. The grasses and brush moved—or something moved them. She strained her eyes to see. And then, in one burst of motion, the animal exploded out of the trees and raced toward her. She jerked the gun up fast, and damn near darted the wild boar before she realized what it was and stopped herself. The barrel-shaped animal, grunting and snuffling, scuttled past her and crossed the road, vanishing into the swamp on the other side.

She stood there, the tranquilizer gun still in her hands, arms outstretched as if about to fire, and felt the nervous laughter bubble up in her chest. Slowly, she lowered her head, her arms. God, she'd almost bagged herself a pig.

The low, deep growl came from behind her, and her laughter froze in her throat. It was close. Dammit, why had she let her guard down? She lifted the gun again, turning at the same time.

Too late. The thing hit her like a linebacker, bringing a set of razor-sharp claws across her chest even as

her back slammed onto the hot pavement. The gun went skidding across the road. She lay there, staring up at the thing, as amazed and awestruck as she was afraid. Maybe more.

It half crouched over her, panting quickly, a soft growl emerging with every exhalation. The face was misshapen, the jaw elongated while the nose seemed abbreviated. Its face wasn't as hair-covered as she'd expected. The eyebrows were full and thick, the eyes deep set and dark. The hairline seemed to extend further down onto the face than it would on a human, and its chin was covered in hair, like a beard. It was dark, coarse hair. Not fur, not exactly.

It had, she realized as she lay there, waiting for death, beautiful eyes.

But was it human?

She forced her own eyes away from its dark brown ones, and examined the rest of its body. Hands, very humanlike, except for the thick layer of hair coating the backs of them. The palms were smooth, hairless. Claws curled from the ends of the fingers. Claws that cut, she thought, momentarily acknowledging the pain in her chest. Its torso was unclothed, muscular, hairy, with bits of tattered white material clinging here and there. Its lower extremities—wore jeans.

She blinked and looked again, but they remained. Denim jeans, torn and dirty, but there. So much for her theory that the sightings were of some previously undiscovered species. The jeans told her otherwise. Animals didn't routinely wear human clothing.

But just how human was it?

"Can you understand me?" she asked, forcing her voice to come out clearly, if not quite calmly.

The beast leaned closer, its dark eyes moving over her body. It seemed, she thought, to be looking her over as thoroughly as she'd been doing to it. But its gaze stopped on the front of her, and she glanced down and saw three bloody tears in her blouse, and in the flesh beneath.

She lifted her head, found those eyes waiting there. It bent still closer. She thought it might be catching the scent of her blood. Of her. And it was changing, even as she watched, the body altering in the darkness, the snout elongating.

"I mean you no harm," she said.

It growled loudly and leapt at her, would have landed fully upon her if she hadn't reacted instantly. She lifted both her legs and thrust her feet against its chest with all her might. Its forward momentum halted, the creature shot backward so fast that its feet—paws—left the pavement a second before its entire body landed there. It didn't look like it had before. It was a wolf now, and she wondered vaguely if it had been all along. But she knew better than to question her own senses.

She jumped to her feet, scrambled for her tranq gun and spun around with it aimed and ready.

The creature was gone. She caught a glimpse of the wolf leaping a ditch with a graceful power that took her breath away. It landed easily, never breaking its stride. The bayou and the mists soon swallowed it up.

"My God," she whispered. "It's real."

She touched the wounds on her chest, wincing in pain as she did. Damn, those cuts were painful. They were also fabulous. Physical evidence!

Looking around the road, seeing no sign of danger, she replaced the gun in her pack as she dug for the more important items. The flashlight, a mini-camera, sterile bags to collect samples. Maybe the creature had left a few hairs behind. She photographed the area, marked it with a discreet orange chalk X, noted the time. She was disappointed when she found no samples. She had been so close, too. Why the hell hadn't she reached out and plucked a few hairs when it had been leaning over her?

As she packed her stuff back up, she went still as an unearthly howl came floating on the night from somewhere far away. It was, she thought, the most heartbreaking sound she had ever heard.

AT 8 A.M. when the doctor arrived at the small town's only clinic, carrying a half-full cup of coffee and looking a bit bleary-eyed, she was there waiting. He glanced at her when he walked through the reception area. She wasn't sitting, but instead pacing the waiting room. He stopped short, eying her from head to toe, and making her so self-conscious she ran a hand through her short red curls and wondered if they were standing on end.

"I hope you're the doctor," she said. *And damn*, she thought, *I really mean that*. He was the best-looking man she'd seen in six months.

He held her eyes as if he'd heard her thoughts, then turned away to glance toward the receptionist behind her desk.

"She was waiting outside when I got in, and that was a half-hour ago," the woman, whose nameplate read SALLY HAYNES, told him, shaking her head.

He looked back at Jenny again, and she shivered just a little. "If it was an emergency you should have gone to the—"

"The ER, I know. It isn't that kind of an emergency."

"What kind? Medical?"

"Could we talk in an exam room?"

He lowered his head. "Sure. Follow me."

Sally held out a fresh white lab coat, and he took it as he passed, pulling it on as he led the way to the first exam room. He tugged a stethoscope from his shirt pocket and draped it around his neck on the way. Once in the room, he nodded at the paper-covered table. "Have a seat while I wash my hands." Then he glanced at her. "I do have time to wash my hands, don't I?"

She nodded once, so he went ahead and scrubbed, dried with paper towels, tossed them and finally turned to face her again. Then he went still, seeming surprised that she had taken off her blouse. The way he looked at her, you'd have thought she was wearing a black lace negligee instead of a serviceable white bra and a pair of blue jeans.

"What, you've never seen a half-dressed female before, Doc?"

He didn't even pretend not to look his fill. "It's just that patients usually wait until I tell them to undress before doing it. Not that I'm complaining."

She should have been offended. She really should. "I'm in a little bit of a hurry."

"Shame," he muttered. Then, frowning, he moved closer, and she thought he was finally seeing the angry red scratches across her chest. "That looks nasty. What happened?" He moved still closer, leaning in. She felt his breath across her breasts and told herself it was not turning her on.

She knew what the scratches looked like. There were three of them, deep enough in places to qualify as cuts, raked across her skin, from just above the left clavicle to the upper part of the right breast.

"Something with big claws took a swipe at me."

"That much I could have guessed." He turned away from her to open a cabinet, and began setting items on the stainless steel tray beside her. Gauze pads, sterile water and alcohol, antibiotic ointment. "What was it, a dog?"

"Not exactly."

He pulled on latex gloves and began carefully cleaning the cuts. She winced as he worked, but was secretly glad of the sting. Without it, she'd have been enjoying his touch way more than she should. "So what, exactly, was it?"

"I don't know yet. But if pressed, Doc, I'd say it was a lycanthrope."

He grinned suddenly, tried not to let the chuckle escape. "You're another werewolf hunter, hmm? Come down here looking for the loup-garou?"

"I'm a professor at Dunkirk University. I'm here doing research."

"A professor of what?"

She cleared her throat. "Cryptozoology."

This time he couldn't contain the laugh. It escaped, and she flinched and shot him an angry look. He stopped in mid-chuckle. "I'm sorry. It's just—you didn't really come down here to research werewolves, did you?"

"I came down to determine whether there might be a previously unknown species of mammal hiding out in the Louisiana bayou."

"Sounds so much more rational your way," he told her.

She shrugged. "Well, rational or not, something attacked me on the road last night. And I can tell you, Doc, whatever it was, it was no *known* species."

"And the moon, *was* full."

"Are you making fun?"

"Just stating a fact." He frowned, more serious now. "Whatever it was, it did a number on you. This is no laughing matter. It could have been rabid."

"It wasn't."

"You can't know that for sure."

"Doesn't matter. I've been immunized."

"Against rabies?"

"Of course. I have a masters in zoology and a Ph.D. in veterinary medicine. I have been immunized against just about anything you can think of that can be transmitted from animal to human."

He took a step back, seemingly satisfied that the wound was thoroughly clean. "You're a vet, huh?"

"Mmm-hmm."

Pursing his lips, nodding slowly, he reached for the ointment. "So it's safe to say you could have patched this up yourself."

"Could have. Didn't want to."

"Why don't you stop playing games and tell me why you're really here?"

She was surprised. She felt her eyes widen as they shot to his. He'd startled her by being so direct. "I wasn't playing games, doctor. I had planned to come and see you anyway, and I simply thought as long as I was here, I'd get myself patched up. Okay?"

"Okay." He began smearing ointment over the cuts. She began wishing the latex gloves were not between his fingertips and her flesh. "Why were you coming to see me anyway?"

"To ask you how often you see patients with marks like the ones on my chest."

He shrugged. "I haven't seen a chest quite like yours in a long time," he said, without cracking a smile. Totally inappropriate—the way he was looking at her breasts where they swelled over the top of the bra. And yet it made her warm all over.

"You know that's not what I was asking."

He didn't look away from his work. She thought his hands were moving way more slowly than necessary, smoothing that ointment on her cuts, rubbing it in, his touch soft and erotic. "How often, Doctor?" she managed to ask. Did her voice sound slightly hoarse to him?

"Not more often than would be considered normal."

"These kinds of attacks are what you call normal?"

"Scratches are normal. People get them in numerous ways. Tangling with thorny bushes, angry cats or rambunctious dogs, falling on a lawn rake. Getting a little carried away during sex." He pushed a bra strap down over her shoulder, then pulled the cup away and downward, exposing her breast completely.

It wasn't exactly unnecessary, she told herself. The scratches did continue an inch or so beyond the fabric. What was unnecessary was the way her body reacted to his intense scrutiny, and the way her nipple tightened in the chilled air of the exam room.

When he licked his lips, she almost moaned.

"Did any of those other patients with scratches ever claim they were attacked by a werewolf?" she asked, but her voice was barely more than a whisper.

His eyes still on her breast, he put a little more ointment on his gloved hand. "Not a one. Until now."

She blinked slowly. "You wouldn't lie to me about that, now, would you?"

"Not on your life." He met her eyes, held them as his hand moved to massage the ointment over her breast. He had, she thought, beautiful eyes. Dark and intense and full of sexual promises that didn't need to be spoken aloud. His fingers brushed her nipple and she bit her bottom lip.

"So do you suppose you'll turn into a werewolf now, too?"

His voice, too, had lowered, turned rough.

He was teasing her now, with his words as well as his fingers, and she wasn't objecting. Shivers tiptoed up her spine. "I don't know. The mythology says it has to be a bite for that to happen, but—"

"He didn't bite you, then?"

"N-no."

"Damn stupid werewolf, if you ask me." Again his fingers flicked across her nipple.

She sucked in a breath and drew back, just a little. With more regret than she could even believe, she tugged the bra's cup back into place.

He sighed as if he regretted it, too. "So just what does a hundred-pound redhead do with a werewolf, once she finds it?"

"Study it. Talk to it, if that's possible. Try to learn what it is, how much of the folklore is true and how much isn't."

He smirked a little, lowering his eyes.

"I take it you don't approve of those goals?"

He shrugged. "Lie back and I'll bind you up." He caught her quick look. She knew damn well he'd intended the double entendre. "Bandage your cuts," he corrected.

She laid down on the table, and he unrolled soft gauze over the ointment-daubed scratches. "What would *you* do?"

He smoothed tape over the gauze to hold it in place. "I'm a doctor," he said. "I suppose I'd try to help it,

if that were possible. Cure it, if that was what it wanted. And I'd keep its secrets, either way. Not write them up for some scientific journal and my own fame and glory."

"Is that what you think I'm after? Fame and glory?"

"Isn't it?"

"No," she said. He finished with the bandages, never baring her breast again. She sat up, and he handed her the blouse.

"Well, that's good to know." He didn't sound as if he believed her. And he watched her while she pulled her blouse on, watched her while she buttoned it.

"Thank you for patching me up," she said.

"It was my pleasure." He put extra emphasis on the word "pleasure."

"Don't be too sure about that."

He met her eyes, silently acknowledging that he got the message, loud and clear.

Chapter 2

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JENNY walked back to the sprawling white plantation house and went inside to find the crew—three grad students who thought they were smarter than her and one department head who knew he was—gathered in the dining room, munching on pastries and slugging down coffee.

"Where have you been all morning?" Professor Hinkle asked in his usual tone—the one that always seemed to insinuate something, never quite letting on what.

"Interviewing some of the locals in town. No hits, so far." She wasn't about to tell him about her lycanthropic encounter and subsequent visit to the hotter-than-hell doctor. He wouldn't believe her about the werewolf anyway. No, not until she had *proof*.

"Did you see anything last night?" Carrie asked. She was the most gullible. Believed everything until it was proven false, when the ideal cryptozoologist practiced the opposite. She had a long way to go.

"Wild boar," she replied. "Ran out of the woods at me so suddenly, I almost darted it."

Carrie grinned. Mike and Toby exchanged smirks that said only a woman would be so jumpy. Right, she'd like to see one of the "twins" come face-to-face with that thing from last night. They'd have jumped right out of their matching chinos and Ralph Lauren polo shirts. They were unrelated, but wore nearly identical ultrashort, slightly gelled hairstyles, one a little blonder than the other. The two were practically clones as far as she was concerned. Not only in style choices, but in attitude and arrogance. She was well aware they'd only signed up for this program because they thought it would give them four easy credits. Or maybe they were both planning a masters thesis that would attempt to debunk her profession.

They wouldn't succeed.

"So, how's the research coming?" she asked, turning her attention to the eager pupil.

"I found tons of stuff!" Carrie said, reaching for the notebook that was never far from her side with one hand and flipping her expertly cut hair with the other.

"Yeah. Fairy tales and folklore," Toby sneered. "Nothing legitimate."

"Folklore is what led us to the giant gorillas, Toby."

"Here we go with the giant gorillas again."

"Until scientists began taking the local legends seriously, no one believed they existed, but they do. They'd been living in the jungles for centuries, and only those natives who lived among them knew the truth. No one believed them, just as no one believes people today when they see something strange and have the nerve to tell someone about it."

"Right."

Carrie shot the boys a killing look, and opened her notebook to a page of neatly typed text. "I've got reams of stuff here. Most of the sources include legends about how to kill them with a silver bullet, but some take that a lot further. They have to be decapitated and burned afterward."

Jenny shot her a look. "Carrie, if we find a specimen we certainly won't be looking for ways to kill it."

"I figured—you know, just in case."

Jenny moved closer, taking Carrie's notebook from her and carrying it to the table. She grabbed a beignet from the tray of pastries on the table, filled an empty china cup with fragrant, steaming coffee and flipped through pages.

"To become a werewolf," she read.

"Oh, great," Toby said. "Recipes."

Jenny smiled a little, because it was close. "On the night of the dark moon, or the third night of the full, betake thyself to a place far from the haunts of man—deep in the forest. There, draw a circle no less than seven feet in diameter, and within it draw another of three feet. Within the smaller circle, erect a tripod of iron, and from it suspend a cauldron of iron, and fill the cauldron with water taken from a stream in which three wolves have been seen to drink. Build a fire beneath, and when the water boils, add to it any three of the following herbs: blind bluff, devil's eye, bittersweet, devil's dung, beaver poison or opium.' "

"I daresay," Professor Hinkle remarked, "a few whiffs of the steam from that brew might convince any of us we'd become a werewolf."

Jenny almost gasped. Had the old sourpuss actually made a joke?

"The only real ingredient in there is the opium," Toby said. "That other stuff is made up."

"Oh, you're dead wrong there," Jenny corrected. "These are folk names. Blind bluff is poppy. Devil's eye is henbane. Bittersweet is solanum. Devil's dung is aesophetida, named quite aptly, for its smell."

"And beaver poison is hemlock," Carrie put in. "Keep reading, Professor Rose. It's fascinating."

She shrugged. "After that it says to strip naked and rub your body all over with an ointment made from," she glanced at the page to find her place, "the fat of a freshly killed feline, mixed with opium, camphor and anise seed."

"Clever," the professor said. "The camphor would open the pores, allowing one to absorb the opium more quickly."

"Then 'wrap thy loins in the hide of a wolf, speak the charm and await the advent of the unknown.' " She nodded. "How many of you have taken anthropology classes?"

All hands went up, including the professor's, though his came with a sarcastic look.

"Good. Now, think back and tell me what this recipe reminds you of."

"Oh, oh, I know!" Carrie said. "It's just like what some shamans of various cultures do. They ingest a hallucinogenic, and go on a journey into the other realms. Shape-shifting is often a part of the experience."

Jenny nodded. "Good. Any other similar examples?"

Mike raised a reluctant hand, then looked at it sheepishly and spoke up. "The so-called flying ointments used by witches?"

"Bingo. Animal-fat base, fly agaric being the most commonly used active ingredient. So what does this tell us about this particular account of turning oneself into a werewolf? Where did this author get his information?"

They looked at each other blankly.

"He got it from someone who was into magic. A shaman or sage or village witch. What he's talking about is magic, not reality. We are scientists. Is the creature we're looking for something that was created by cat fat and opium? No. The only things created by that blend were hallucinations. What is our werewolf, then?"

She held out her hands, palms up.

All together, the three students intoned, "A previously undiscovered species."

"Precisely. So what can we get out of this?"

"Not a hell of a lot?" Toby suggested.

"Not a lot, but some. We can learn that the creature in question dwells in very deep forests, avoids humans when possible and is somewhat manlike in appearance. See that's the key. Take the folklore, sift out the impossible and take a look at what's left. The solid stuff that can lead you to the truth."

"But, Professor Rose," Carrie asked, "what if the werewolf really was created by some kind of curse, some kind of magic?"

"Carrie, you're a science student. There is no such thing as magic. The sooner you get that through your head, the better you'll do." She shut the notebook. "Now, I want you to go through these notes, pick out all the fantasy and magic and compile what's left for me."

"I'd like copies of those notes as well, Carrie," Dr. Hinkle added. "Before you do any deleting."

"What about us?" Mike asked.

"You and Toby do some more canvassing of the locals. Ask them what they've heard about the loup-garou. Tape-record their answers so you don't inadvertently leave out something I can use," Jenny told him.

"And what do you plan to spend *your* morning doing, Professor Rose?" Hinkle asked.

"I'm going out into the woods to see if I can find any sign of an unknown species. You're welcome to come along, professor, but you'll need good hiking shoes and a backpack for supplies. I plan to go deep into the forests, and the terrain won't be gentle."

"Far from the haunts of man?" he asked, smirking.

"Exactly."

It was, of course, an outright lie. She was going into the woods along the roadside, where she'd encountered that beast last night. She might be able to see clues in daylight that she hadn't seen in the darkness. She didn't want or need Hinkle looking over her shoulder, second-guessing her every move and constantly looking for something to use against her.

It would suit him just fine if her proposal of a cryptozoology department at Dunkirk University—a department she proposed to head up herself—be annihilated as soon as possible. He hated the idea.

He hated her.

"You coming?" she asked, glancing at him.

"Of course not. You know better. I'll just stay here and read through your notes."

She smiled as if that thought didn't make her nervous. It shouldn't. Like Al Capone's accountant, she kept two sets of books. No one saw her private thoughts.

"I'll see you later then," she said, turning to go.

"Don't forget the feline fat," he called after her, then he chuckled at his own lame joke, while Toby and Mike laughed obediently.

Puppies, Jenny thought. She would have called them were-pups, but that would imply they were half-man, and she didn't think they qualified.

She jogged up the stairs to her rooms to change clothes before heading back to the place where she'd seen—what she'd seen last night.

Mamma Louisa was in the bedroom, busily making the bed, her head wrapped in a pure white turban, her blouse and skirt just as white. Spotless, bleached and in stark contrast to her dark skin.

Women of her size didn't wear a lot of white up north. Jenny thought it was a shame. Mamma Louisa looked good. Big and beautiful and proud. She carried herself like royalty.

She looked up when Jenny walked in and sent her a smile. "I can come back later," she said, the bayou thick in her voice.

"No, no, don't stop. I'm just grabbing a few things and heading back out."

"All right, then. How is de research goin'?"

"Fine. Better than fine, actually." Jenny turned to the dresser, tugged open a drawer and found a T-shirt. Then she peeled her blouse over her head, facing the mirror.

"*Osé, osé, osé,*" Mamma Louisa whispered urgently, and when Jenny met her eyes in the mirror, she saw that the other woman's gaze was on her own bandaged chest. "What happened to you last night, *chère?*"

Dammit, how could she be so careless? She pulled the T-shirt over her head quickly. "Nothing—it's just a scratch. I brushed up against a thorn tree."

"Did you, now?" The woman eyed the blouse that was lying on the floor beside the bed—white fabric with a few tears and some dried blood. She took a single step toward it, and Jenny rushed forward, getting there first and snatching it off the floor and wadding it up.

"Somethin' there you don't want me to see, child?"

"I'm not used to being waited on, Mamma Louisa. It makes me uncomfortable to have someone picking up after me."

"You prefer to tend your own bedroom from now on, then?"

"Yes. Yes, actually, I do."

Mamma shrugged. "Well, I be paid good money to keep the house and do the cookin' for the guests here, Miss Jenny. But if it makes you uneasy, I stay clear of your room. . . and your secrets."

"I have no secrets."

She nodded. "I'll let Eva Lynn know, so she'll stay out of your rooms as well." She started for the door, leaving the bed half-made, but when she reached the door, she paused.

"There be things out there, *chère*. Things you would never believe. Things that ought to be left alone."

Blinking out of the shock those words caused, Jenny raced forward after Mamma Louisa left the room and closed the door behind her.

She yanked the door open and lunged into the long corridor. "Wait. What do you know about this?"

But Mamma Louisa was nowhere in sight.

Chapter 3

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JENNY knelt on the spongelike ground and forcibly resisted the urge to release a shriek of joy. In front of her, clear as day, was a footprint sunken into the moist earth. It was too large and too oblong to belong to an animal, she thought. The creature hadn't been a wolf when it had left this track, but it hadn't been a man, either. She supposed the print might belong to a bear, though that would be more rounded. Perhaps a gorilla, but there were no gorillas running wild in the bayou. None she knew of, at least. She would run it through the computer to make sure, and she was trying hard not to jump to conclusions in the meantime. It was tough, though, to maintain her scientific skepticism in the face of such a discovery.

This could be major.

She shrugged off her backpack, unzipped it and removed supplies. She mixed the powdered plaster with bottled water until it was just the right consistency, then carefully she brushed loose bits of grass and dirt from the print. Finally, she poured the plaster into it and stood back to wait for it to harden.

As she waited, she looked around. She stood in a wooded area several yards from the road. She'd started off in the direction she thought the creature had come from last night, then moved in a half-circle around the spot where she'd first seen it, increasing the size of her search area, inspecting the ground and trees for any sign at all of wildlife. And she'd found it, too. A raven feather. The tracks of a wild pig, probably the one she'd encountered last night. A few bristly hairs stuck in the bark of a tree, probably where that same pig had scratched a pesky itch. And near the place where the swamp met the dry land, a long, smooth patch of mud that was probably a gator slide.

And then, the footprint.

Kneeling, she checked the plaster. Still wet.

The sound of a vehicle's motor brought her head up again, and as she searched for the source, she frowned. It wasn't coming from the road, which was behind her, but from somewhere ahead. Was there another road skirting this patch of swamp and woods?

As she strained to listen, the motor cut off, then a door slammed.

Someone was out there. She gathered a few large, leafy plants and laid them over her plaster cast to keep it out of sight, then shouldered her pack and started forward, deeper into the woods. Fifty yards, then sixty, and just when she thought was going to find nothing, she saw it. A square shape within the trees, almost perfectly camouflaged—a log cabin.

Frowning, she moved closer, peering through the trees until she had a clear view of the little house. It was charming, with a cobblestone chimney and green painted window shutters, with moon-shaped cutouts in each of them. The door was green, too, a deep, piney color that blended well with the surrounding foliage.

The car in the driveway was a familiar one—the same dark-brown jeep she'd seen when she'd left the doctor's office this morning. Frowning, she double-checked the plates, saw the MD tag on the corner.

"Did you come for me?" a deep voice asked.

The voice came from right behind her, and startled her so much she nearly jumped out of her skin as she spun around. He stood there, looking at her, not even cracking a smile.

"What are you doing here, Professor Rose?"

She released the breath she'd sucked in, before it could burst her lungs. "Sheesh, you scared the daylights out of me."

"That's what happens, I suppose, when you are caught sneaking around on private property."

"I wasn't sneaking around! I was working. And what are you doing out here, anyway, making a house call?"

He shook his head slowly, holding her eyes. "I came home for lunch. I do that sometimes."

Jenny licked her lips and tried to calm her racing heart. "You... live here?"

"And you don't. So again, I have to ask, what are you doing here?"

He seemed awfully irritated for someone who'd seemed as into her as he had earlier. She couldn't hide her disappointment. "Look, I didn't know it was private property. There are no signs—"

He pointed, and she turned her head to see a posted: no trespassing sign tacked to a nearby tree.

"Okay, so I wasn't looking for signs, or maybe I would have seen them."

"Then what were you looking for?"

She didn't answer.

"The loup-garou?" She didn't miss the sarcasm loaded onto the word. "They only come out at night, Professor Rose. But I would have thought a woman of your expertise would know that."

"That's what the folklore says. I don't take anything as fact until I've found proof of it, though."

He nodded slowly. "So is that what you're out here looking for? Proof?" He narrowed his eyes. "Or is this where you had your... encounter last night?"

"Not far from here," she said. "Out on the road."

"I see."

She drew a deep breath, then sighed. "I've really pissed you off, haven't I? I'm really sorry about the trespassing, Doctor..." she searched her memory for his last name. She was sure she'd seen or heard it this morning, but—

"La Roque," he said.

"Right. La Roque. It's not my habit to traipse around on private property. It really isn't. I always ask permission before walking on private land. I insist my students do the same. I just—I was overzealous and forgot my protocol." She held his eyes, hoping he could see the sincerity in hers.

He studied her face as if weighing her words. When he spoke again, he said the last thing she expected to hear. "You want to come in? Join me for lunch?"

For some reason she thought of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. At least he didn't say he wanted to have her for lunch, she thought grimly. She wanted to get back to her plaster cast, which should be hard enough by now, but he lived here. He could have seen or heard something, especially if the creature frequented this area. She couldn't pass up the opportunity to pick his brain, and she thought he knew it.

Besides, now that he'd decided to accept her apology, that look was creeping back into his eyes. The one that heated her blood.

"Sure," she said at last. "I'm kind of surprised you would ask."

"You shouldn't be. Or didn't you get the message back there in my office that I would like to see you again while you're in town?"

She licked her lips. "I... yeah, I did."

With a nod, he moved past her, leading the way out of the trees and into the clearing that surrounded his cabin. She noticed that the long driveway angled back out, probably to the road. She scanned the ground as they walked, straining her eyes in search of any other odd tracks, but the ground was hard and dry. Not a good medium for footprints.

He opened the door, then stood aside to let her enter first. She did, and stopped just inside, looking around at the cozy cabin. The living and dining rooms were combined in one large, open space, with a cobblestone fireplace at one end. The room was open to the peak, log rafters at intervals. A loft took up half of the upper part, its floor forming the ceiling of the small kitchen.

"This is a great cabin."

"It suits me."

"Very private, out of the way."

"That's what I like best about it." He walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge and began taking items out of it. "I'm having a ham sandwich. That okay with you?"

"Fine, if you hold the ham."

"What?" He looked at her, puzzled.

"I'm a vegetarian."

He blinked slowly. Then, finally, he smiled. It was like a light dawning on his face, and it reached his eyes. "That's almost funny. A vegetarian werewolf hunter."

"I'm no hunter, Dr. La—"

"Call me Samuel. We don't stand much on formality in these parts." He yanked tomatoes and lettuce out of the fridge, a brick of cheese, a jar of locally produced gourmet mayonnaise, and a package of deli-sliced ham.

"Samuel. Is that what your patients call you?"

"Only the ones I all but seduce during an exam," he said softly.

She shot him a look. His eyes were smoky. "And are there a lot of those?"

"You were the first. Should I apologize for being so far out of line?"

Holding his gaze, she shook her head slowly.

"That's good, because I wouldn't mean it if I did."

She had to avert her eyes, it was getting so hot, and the way his hard, strong hand was cupping the tomato was making her shake. "So what do your patients call you?" she asked, just to break the tension.

"Mostly they call me Doc Rock. They think it's funny."

"But you don't?"

He shrugged. "Call me Samuel."

"Okay. So Samuel, were you home last night?"

He put her sandwich together first, slicing hunks from a huge loaf of bread, and laying them on a paper plate, before adding the mayo, veggies and cheese. "What time?" he asked, not even glancing at her as he worked.

"Must have been around nine or a little after."

He nodded, putting the top slice of bread on the sandwich, slicing it diagonally, setting the plate aside and beginning work on his own. "Is that what time you bumped into the werewolf?"

"That's what time I encountered an unknown species of mammal. What it is, remains to be determined."

He nodded slowly, finishing his sandwich and then bringing both plates to the table and setting them down. "I was sound asleep. No witnesses of course."

"You live alone, then," she asked.

He met her eyes, a little spark appearing in their dark-brown depths. "Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. I mean, I do when I'm home. Right now I'm sharing a house with three grad students and a doctor of zoology with an attitude."

"The Branson Estate, right?"

She nodded.

"Have you seen anything... interesting there yet?"

Frowning, she searched his face. "Like what?"

He turned away, returning the veggies and meat to the fridge and removing two cold beers while he was there, opening them both. He didn't answer, only shrugged.

"Come on, Sam, spill it."

"Samuel." He sat down, handed her a bottle of beer, took a swig of his own. "I'd rather show you than tell you."

"Now you're just teasing me. Not to mention changing the subject."

"I didn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary last night, Jenny."

She warmed a little at his use of her first name. "Oh." She took a bite of her sandwich.

"Aren't you going to ask me the rest?"

She chewed, swallowed, washed the food down with a swig of beer. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. You want to know if I changed under the light of the full moon, went out on the hunt. You want to know if I chased a wild boar out of the woods, then changed my mind about my prey when I caught a glimpse of you out there, all alone."

She swallowed hard, her blood having gone cold. "That's silly."

"Is it?"

She shrugged, lowering her gaze. "D-did you?"

He licked his lips. "What makes you think I'd remember it if I had?"

She shrugged and looked away, but when she looked back again he was probing her eyes with his.

"You really shouldn't walk that road alone at night, Jenny," he said. "It's not playing fair."

"What... what do you mean?"

He reached across the table, stroked a little path over her cheek with the tip of one finger. "You're beautiful, young, tender... I don't know a wolf who could resist just a little taste."

Blinking fast, shivering from the power of that touch—just one finger trailing over her skin shouldn't make her shiver like that!—she lowered her eyes. "Are you coming on to me, Samuel?"

He drew a deep breath, lowered his hand. "As hard as I can, Jenny. Do you mind?"

Lifting her eyes again, she met his. He was smiling now, that intense, almost predatory look gone. "You're handsome, and single, and a doctor. Why would I mind?"

His smile grew. "This is unusual for me. I don't usually get to see a woman naked before asking her out."

"I was only half naked."

"Well, there's always the follow-up appointment."

She laughed softly, warming to his teasing tone. "Tell me again that you really don't behave this way with all your patients."

"If I did, I wouldn't have a license for long. No, Jenny, I'm not nearly this unprofessional. I swear it. I guess there's just something about you." He smiled again, slowly this time. "You bring out the beast in me."

She tried to laugh it off, but a chill raced right up her spine. She returned to eating her sandwich, and he watched her. Watched every bite she took, watched her chew, watched her swallow and lick her lips. He watched her like no one had ever watched her before. When she put the beer bottle to her lips and tipped it up to drink, his eyes were glued to her mouth, and she felt almost stripped naked the way they looked at her.

He made every single part of her body tingle with awareness, all without even touching her. Those eyes—they were powerful.

She set the bottle down. "I should go."

"You haven't agreed to go out with me yet."

She thought maybe she'd rather stay in with him, but she couldn't very well say so. "How about tonight?"

He nodded. "I'll be at your place at six. We'll have dinner. And maybe I'll show you some of the secrets of the Branson Estate."

"There's a full moon tonight," she whispered. "I really should be out patrolling, keeping an eye for the werewolf."

"The moon rises at nine twenty-two tonight. I promise I'll kiss you goodnight long before then."

Her stomach knotted. "What makes you think I'm going to let you kiss me?"

"Oh, I'm going to kiss you. Consider yourself forewarned."

His eyes were on her mouth, and she was fighting the urge to lean across the table and press it to his. She pushed her chair away from the table, got to her feet. "I really have to go." Because if she stayed here much longer she was going to start tearing off her clothes.

"Have a good afternoon, Jenny. I'll see you at six."

She started for the door, then paused. "Samuel, the others—the grad students and Dr. Hinkle—they don't know about what happened last night. I'd just as soon keep it that way."

"You didn't tell them?" he asked, getting to his feet, coming with her to the door. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "I wanted to have proof first."

"You think they won't believe you."

"I don't know if they would or not. Just—don't say anything about it if you see any of them tonight, okay?"

"Your secret's safe with me," he murmured. Then he opened the door and was distracted by something beyond her. When she turned and saw the giant dog loping toward them she almost jumped. Then she looked again and realized it wasn't a dog at all. It was a large black wolf.

"Mojo! There you are. You're late for lunch," Samuel called.

She stepped out of the way as the wolf raced past her into the house and leapt on Samuel, standing on its hind legs, paws to his chest. Samuel ran his hands through the animal's lush, deep fur.

"My pet, Mojo."

"He's a wolf."

"Just garden variety, I swear."

She nodded, patting the dog on the head with a hesitant hand before turning to go.

"See you later, Jenny."

"Thanks for lunch." She left the cabin in a rush, hurried back into the woods and as soon as she was out of sight, stopped to lean back against a tree, hug her arms, close her eyes and ask herself just when in her life she had ever been as turned on as she had been just now. He had barely touched her. My God, she was trembling.

She took a few breaths, tried to steady her frayed, tingling nerves and finally got moving again, heading back to the site where she'd left her plaster to dry.

When she got there, the leaves she'd placed over the footprint were gone. The plaster was missing as well, and the footprint itself had been smeared beyond recognition.

Chapter 4

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WHEN she returned to the plantation house, she crept in quietly, using a side door and hoping not to encounter anyone on the way to her rooms. She was upset, shaken and still trying to remember the events of the day exactly as they'd happened. First, she'd created the plaster cast. Second, she'd heard the vehicle. Third, she'd moved away from her precious footprint, leaving it unguarded, in order to find the source of the noise, and she'd crept up on the little cabin in the woods, and the by-then-silent Jeep. And fourth, Samuel La Roque had come up behind her.

Behind her.

Why hadn't he just got out of his Jeep and gone into his house? It wasn't as if she'd made any noise that would have alerted him to her presence. What had possessed him to creep into the woods, past her, and then come up behind her? And most important of all, had he been the one who'd sabotaged what might have been the most important discovery of her career?

She moved through the kitchen, where Eva Lynn was mixing some thick, fragrant batter in a big metal bowl. She smiled hello, her face a younger version of her mother's flawless complexion, her body more slender and willowy. Like her mother, she dressed all in white, right to the turban on her head. She didn't say a word, sensing, perhaps, that Jenny wished to slip in unseen. She just nodded knowingly and returned her attention to her batter.

Jenny pushed open the swinging door to the back stairs and took them up to the second floor. The stairs continued on to the third floor, where Eva Lynn and Mamma Louisa lived. But Jenny stopped at the second-floor landing, pushed open the door and stepped into the massive hall, with its black and red velvet runner, its gold-painted stands, mirrors and vases and its mini-chandeliers dangling every few yards from the high ceilings. She crept along the hallway to her room, wiping sweat from her brow. No AC in the hallways. Just the rooms themselves. The hallways were like saunas, almost as thick with wet heat as the outdoors.

She stopped outside the door to her room. It was standing slightly open, and she was certain she had closed it when she'd left.

Frowning, Jenny pushed the door gently, opening it a little farther. Dr. Hinkle sat at the small table in the sitting room portion of her suite, squinting at the screen of her laptop, which hadn't been left on.

She stepped inside and cleared her throat.

He looked up fast, clearly startled. For just an instant, guilt clouded his pinched face, but it vanished just as quickly. "Have a pleasant expedition?" he asked, as if he hadn't been doing anything so much as out of the ordinary, much less dead wrong.

"What the hell are you doing in my rooms?"

He lifted his brows. "Going over your notes, supervising your handling of this project, which is exactly what I was sent here to do, Professor Rose."

"You could do that without invading my privacy and going through my personal things."

"How?" he asked with an innocent shrug that was patently false. "The files are on the computer, and the computer was in here."

"I would be happy to provide you with a copy of all my files on diskette or CD, whichever you prefer: all you have to do is ask. But my room, Dr. Hinkle, is off-limits."

"I am the ranking scientist on this mission," he reminded her. "Not to mention the head of the department."

"But how long would you be, if I were to call the dean right now and tell him I caught you sneaking

around in my bedroom?" She smiled slowly. "Sexual harassment is such an ugly term. I'd hate to use it if I didn't have to."

He lowered the lid on the laptop while rising to his feet. "You win, this round at least. I'll stay out of your rooms."

"I think I'll keep them locked from now on, just to make sure."

"One would almost think you had something to hide, Professor Rose."

She stepped aside, opening her door wider so he could leave.

"Why are there password-protected files on your hard drive?"

She shrugged. "Those are my diaries. I fill those files with romantic daydreams and other girlish things that wouldn't interest you in the least."

"Why am I certain you're lying?"

"Maybe you just have a suspicious mind. At any rate, it's no concern of mine. I'd like to shower and change clothes now, if you don't mind..."

"What did you find on your expedition this morning?"

She met his eyes and kept her gaze steady and strong. "Not a thing."

He smirked, then turned and left her bedroom. She closed the door, intending to do exactly what she'd told him she would do, take a shower and rinse away the sticky heat of the bayou. But as she started across the room, something crunched under her shoes, making her look down. Mud, dried mud. Cussing silently, she heeled off her shoes and wished she had taken them off when she'd first come into the house. Shame on her for tracking up the place like that. She left her shoes near the door and started across the room again, but more dried mud crumbled under her socks, and she realized it was scattered in places where her muddy shoes had never been.

Narrowing her eyes, she scanned the sitting room, and then the bedroom floor, seeing bits of it everywhere. That nosy old buzzard had been all through her rooms. What the hell was he looking for?

And where had he been, that he'd managed to get swamp mud on his boots?

Maybe it hadn't been Samuel La Roque who'd sabotaged her and stolen her evidence today, after all.

ON Saturdays, Mamma Louisa and Eva Lynn went off duty at noon and didn't have to work again until Monday morning. When there were guests in residence, the two spent all Saturday morning cooking and baking and shopping to be sure there was plenty of food in the house while they were off duty. After all this was Louisiana: there wasn't much that was more important to a host than keeping the guests well fed.

So they were already gone when Jenny came down the stairs at 5:50 p.m. She'd spent the afternoon making notes of everything that had happened that day and storing them in one of the password-protected files on her laptop. She'd located the key to her suite of rooms, hanging from a hook just inside the bedroom door, and she'd locked the rooms up when she'd left.

She thought her privacy would be safe tonight. It had better be.

"Wow," Carrie said when she reached the bottom of the stairs. "You look great. What's the occasion?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "Hot date?"

"What are you talking about?" She glanced down at her clothes, a simple, tank-style dress in white cotton: a belt made of turquoise beads hung loosely around her waist and dipped downward at one side; a matching strand of the big turquoise stones around her throat, and one at each ear; flat, brown sandals that didn't go with anything, and no nylons at all. It was too hot for nylons.

"You put your hair up," Carrie said, nodding toward the normally wild red curls that Jenny had scooped into a comb. They tumbled from it like a waterfall, but were at least out of her eyes. "And... you're wearing makeup."

"I am not wearing makeup. What would be the point, it would only melt off in ten minutes."

She was lying. She'd applied a very light touch of shadow, slightly darker than flesh toned, and a coat of mascara. She'd darkened her lips with tinted lip gloss that tasted like cherries, and told herself it was because *she* liked the taste.

"So who's the lucky guy?"

She shrugged and was saved from having to answer when the twins walked in from the kitchen, each carrying a plate of leftovers. They stopped when they saw her, and Mike said, "Holy shit," and Toby said, "Are you wearing anything under that?"

"Keep it up, you two, and I'll toss you out on your asses without a credit to show for it."

They grinned, exchanged glances, shrugged and continued on their way.

"This is strictly business," she told Carrie, who was now eyeing the dress as if she too wondered what was underneath. "This guy lives near... one of the areas where our creature has allegedly been sighted. I am having dinner with him so I can pick his brain, and that's all."

"Sure it is. Is he gorgeous?"

Jenny pursed her lips. "Where is Dr. Hinkle, anyway?"

"Took his dinner up to his room. Said he needed quiet time tonight. And I'm not gonna say a word to him about this, because it's none of his business. But I wouldn't count on the same from those two morons. So *is* he gorgeous?"

The doorbell chimed. Carrie spun around and ran for it so fast her hair flew like a comet's tail behind her. She jerked the heavy door open without even asking who was there, and stood there blinking up at Samuel. "Yep. He is," she said.

"Pardon me?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said quickly, and stepped aside. "Come on in."

He did, then he saw Jenny coming across the room toward him, and he stopped moving, maybe even stopped breathing. He just stared at her, and when his eyes slid down the soft, clingy dress, she got the feeling he didn't have to wonder what she wore underneath. She got the feeling he knew what was under there. Or more accurately, what wasn't.

"Hello, Jenny," he said. But the tone of his voice and the look in his eyes said more.

"Hi." Since when did she speak in a throaty whisper?

"You look—" He shook his head, licked his lips.

"Thanks."

He slid a hand around her bare upper arm and led her out the door. As soon as they were out of earshot, he leaned close to her. "Hungry?"

"Yeah, I am."

"For food?"

She looked at him quickly, and he gave her an evil smile. "'Cause the way you look tonight, Jenny, I'm thinking I'd be happy with you as the main course."

"Let's just start with dinner, Sam."

"Samuel."

"Right." He opened the passenger door of his Jeep and she slid inside. He watched her move, stared at her legs, then leaned in so close she thought he might kiss her right there, only to buckle the seat belt around her.

The breath stuttered out of her.

"You smell like cherries," he whispered. "I love cherries." Then he closed her door and went to his own, got behind the wheel and drove.

Chapter 5

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THE restaurant was quiet and dark, even though the sun hadn't yet set outside. The dinner rush hadn't begun, but for the doctor, a table was ready and waiting in a dim corner where not another table was occupied. Candles glowed on the table, and soft music wafted from unseen speakers.

She noticed when Samuel met the waiter's eyes, nodded and mouthed the word "perfect."

The waiter held out her chair for her, and Samuel stood until she was seated. Then he took his own seat and ordered wine. The way the candlelight lit his eyes was almost eerie. They glowed.

"This is a beautiful restaurant," she said, trying to break the tension that seemed to hover in the air

between them. The car had been filled with it.

"For a beautiful woman."

She smiled a little. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

"I don't believe in wasting time. I used to. Used to wait for things to happen at their own pace and try to be patient, and calm. Keep things... toned down."

"And that changed?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

With a little shrug, he said, "Because I changed, I guess. I learned the thrill of going after what I wanted, no holds barred. And of living life in a way that lends itself to relishing every single moment. There's a lot to be said for instant gratification."

"That might be true. But what happens when you can't get what you want?"

He smiled slowly. "I always get what I want."

The waiter returned with the wine, showed Samuel the bottle then poured a bit into his glass. Samuel sniffed it, swirled it, tasted it and then gave a nod. The waiter filled both glasses and left the bottle, in its ice-filled silver bucket, on the table.

"Try the wine."

She took a sip. "It's good."

"No. Not like that. Experience the wine, Jenny. Smell it, taste it. Feel it sliding over your tongue and down your throat—relish the moment."

She lifted her glass again.

"Close your eyes, think of nothing but the wine. Open your senses."

She did as he said, trying to focus everything on the wine, though it was difficult with the man sitting across from her, absorbing her attention in a way no wine would ever do. She smelled the wine, let its scent fill her, then took a slow sip and held it in her mouth to taste it thoroughly before swallowing. The wine's taste remained on her tongue even as its warmth spread through her belly.

"Mmm." She opened her eyes to see his fixed on her face.

A throat cleared nearby, and Jenny looked up to see the waiter standing ready with two menus in his hands. "May I tell you about our specials?" he asked.

Samuel let his eyes tell her to answer for them both. She said, "No, I know what I want. I've been dying for some authentic gumbo. Do you make a vegetarian version?"

"Of course. A wonderful choice," he said, then turned to Samuel.

"Steak. Rare."

"And which of our sides do you want with that?"

"None. Just bring the steak."

The waiter turned and hurried away.

Jenny watched the doctor closely throughout the meal, and she found that his words were more than just talk. He really *did* seem to relish every taste, every smell, every sound. He seemed to relish *her*. Looking at her. Watching her.

"Dessert?" he asked when he'd finished the entire steak and pushed the plate aside.

"No, I couldn't even finish this vat of gumbo they brought me." She glanced down at the food remaining and felt a little guilty. "It was delicious, though."

He smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed it." He lifted a hand without turning his head, catching the attention of the waiter, who was facing in their direction, across the room. Whether he somehow knew the man was looking at them, or just got lucky, she couldn't guess.

"Yes, is everything all right?"

Samuel nodded. "We're ready to leave now." He slipped a bill into the man's hand. Jenny couldn't see what it was. "We're taking the bottle with us. Tally it up and keep the change."

"Yes, sir," the waiter said. From the look on his face as he tucked the money away, it must have been plenty. "It's been a pleasure serving you, Dr. La Roque." He nodded at Jenny. "And you, Professor Rose."

She was surprised he knew her name, but she only smiled back at him and slid out of her chair. Samuel came around the table, slid a hand around her waist and let it rest on her hip as he walked close beside her, out to the Jeep.

"You don't believe in lingering over dinner, do you, Samuel?"

He looked down at her. "I hope you didn't feel rushed. It's just—I'm eager to show you around the plantation, and we don't have all that much time."

"It's fine. I'm eager to see it. I've been staying there several days, and I really haven't had a free second to explore the grounds. What I have seen is breathtaking, though." Somehow, she thought it would be even more so in this man's company. "How is it you're so familiar with the place?"

"I've lived here all my life," he told her matter-of-factly. "And... it once belonged to my family."

She turned toward him, surprised. "I didn't know that."

He nodded. "A hundred years ago. My great-grandfather lost it. It had been in the family since the eighteenth century."

"How? What happened?"

He shrugged, sending her a sidelong glance. "Gossip, rumors. He was driven out of town for his alleged crimes. Had he returned he'd have faced a hangman's noose. The place was deemed abandoned and confiscated by the state, then sold at auction."

"That's terrible." She tipped her head to one side. "What was he accused of doing?"

He paused, not answering right away.

"I'm sorry. Was that a rude question?"

"No. Not at all. I just... prefer not to sully our time together with talk of past tragedies."

She nodded slowly. "I doubt anything could spoil this evening for me, Samuel." She could hardly believe the words came from her mouth, almost bit her tongue. But then again, why be coy about it? She enjoyed being with him.

He reached across the car to stroke a slow path down her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Don't be so sure," he whispered. And before she could ask what he meant by that, he said, "Here we are."

She looked out her window, but saw only rolling fields lined by woods. "This isn't the plantation."

"It's the southernmost border. And the most interesting spot." He got out, came around to open her door and took her hand. She hesitated. "What's wrong, Jenny? You think I've brought you out here to hurt you?"

"Of course I don't think that." She got out of the car, rubbed her arms. "It's just... kind of creepy out here."

"Alone, with a man you barely know, a man who has been wanting to take you since the moment he laid eyes on you."

She met his eyes. "I'm not the kind of woman who has sex with strangers."

"I never thought you were." He moved a step closer. "But I'm no stranger, am I Jenny? Something inside you knows something inside me. Something inside you craves me, just the way I crave you."

She lowered her head. He moved closer, lifted her chin, stared into her eyes. "You do, don't you?"

She nodded mutely.

"Good," he said. "That's good." And then he pulled her hard against him and kissed her. His mouth covered hers, pushed hers open. He closed his hands on her backside and held her tight to his groin, so she could feel how hard he was, how badly he wanted her.

She couldn't resist the heat flooding her—God, he set her on fire. She twined her arms around his neck and wriggled her hips against him. She opened her mouth, and let his tongue probe and taste and lick all it wanted. This was madness—sweet, hot, delicious madness.

Finally, with a deep growl, he lifted his mouth from hers, dragged his gaze from her eyes to look past her, at the sky. "It's dark. The stars will be coming out soon."

"I've changed my mind. I don't have to work tonight, I—"

"Sssshh." He stroked her hair, her face. "Of course you do. You have a commitment to keep, and so do I. And that leaves us no time to do what we both want to do. But there will be another time. I promise you that."

She wasn't sure she would live that long.

"Besides, I haven't shown you what I promised. One of the secrets of this place. Come."

He turned, taking her by the hand and leading her across the field, through a patch of woods.

"Listen," he said.

She stopped walking, listened. At first, she thought she was hearing a heartbeat, a deep, pulsing heartbeat as if of the earth itself. But then it came more clearly, and she frowned up at him. "Is that... a drum?"

He nodded, tugging her forward. Soon they were walking along the banks of a river, wide and deep, and there were voices floating on the night air in addition to the beat of the drums. She saw light in the distance, the light of a fire.

"What is this?" she whispered.

"Shhh. You must be quiet now. Come."

He led her closer, until they were both crouching in the trees just beyond the glowing circle of firelight. She saw men beating huge, painted drums in a rhythm so compelling she felt her body tugged to move. She saw women, wearing white skirts and turbans, dancing. And then she caught her breath, because one of those women was Mamma Louisa.

She leaned closer, only to feel a strong hand on her shoulder, tugging her back into a hidden position.

"Is that... Voodoo?"

He nodded. "Mamma Louisa is a Voudon priestess." He nodded. "See how the others give her plenty of space? Watch, they won't stop the dancing until she does."

She watched Mamma Louisa, glorious and beautiful, round and lush, moving as if she'd become one with the driving beat of the drums. She was incredible. Her dance, beautiful and erotic.

"She's the housekeeper at the plantation."

"I know. Her family has always worked there."

She swallowed hard. "Should I be worried?"

He frowned at her. "I thought you were an educated woman, Jenny. It's only a religion. Don't you know

that?"

"Knowing it and living under the same roof with it are slightly different things, Samuel." She looked longingly at the firelight, the dancers moving around it, the glow it cast on their faces. "Can we let them know we're here? Talk to them?"

He shook his head. "It would be an invasion. We're uninvited."

"It isn't an invasion to be out here watching them like this?"

"It is. But it's the kind of thing I figured you'd have to see to believe. Besides," he said, tracing a slow path along her forearm with his fingertips. "It made a great excuse to get you out in the middle of nowhere alone."

The drummers pounded faster, harder.

"It worked," she whispered, and she felt the reverberations of the drums echoing in her chest. The drums and the firelight, the sight of the wild dancing, were heady. It made her want to join in the movement. Her body rocked a little in time, hips twitching irresistibly as she crouched in the bushes beside Samuel.

"There's something compelling about it, isn't there?" he asked her, leaning so close she could feel his breath on her neck.

"It's enticing. Almost... irresistible."

"Yes."

Again his breath was warm—hot—on her neck. She turned her head just a little, to look into his eyes, and she found him so close her lips brushed his with the movement.

He made a sound deep in his throat, and kissed her.

Chapter 6

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HE drew her up until she was standing, all the while exploring her mouth with his tongue. He moved her backward until her back was pressed to a tree, and he crushed his body to hers, pinning her there.

His breathing was harsh and heavy. Hers was rapid and shallow. She threaded her fingers into his hair as his mouth moved, hot and hungry, from her lips to her jaw, to her neck, where he sucked at her skin, bit it gently.

He'd said there was no time for this tonight. But, God, she was going to go up in flames if she didn't make love to him soon.

He seemed to have forgotten his earlier words anyway, as his hands moved between them to cup her breasts through the dress she wore. Then he shoved the straps from her shoulders and pushed the dress downward, baring her breasts to his rough hands. He covered them, squeezed them, lifted them as he slid his mouth lower over her skin, sliding from her neck, to her chest, to her breast. He took it into his

mouth, sucking until she moaned softly. When her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling his head harder to her, he bit down, teeth closing sharply on her nipple. Then he did it again, and matched the sweet pain with his fingers on the other breast, pinching, tugging until she was shaking all over and wriggling her hips shamelessly against his erection.

One hand slid up under her dress, found her center, and didn't even hesitate to invade. Shocking, the sudden feeling of his callused fingers on her, opening her, entering her. She rocked with the invasion, taking as much as he gave her. Three fingers, four, she didn't know. She only knew his thumb was ruthlessly working her while his fingers drove in and out, and his mouth and teeth tormented her breast. His teeth bit down hard, then his tongue licked away the hurt, and then he bit down again, harder than before. She rocked her hips, taking his fingers in and out, riding his hand.

His mouth left her breast, but his free hand took its place there, pinching and twisting and pulling. He leaned close to her, whispered in her ear, saying things that made her even hotter. And when she exploded with the force of the orgasm, he kept working her, making it go on and on and on.

He was still holding her, still kissing her, when the blood stopped pounding in her ears, and it occurred to her that the drumbeat no longer echoed in her chest. It was just her heart pounding now. She was standing with her back braced against a tree, and his body was pressed tight to hers. Her dress was hiked up higher than her hips, and she was breathless and burning. He'd returned his hands to her hips, and his mouth to her mouth.

She didn't remember pushing his shirt off his shoulders, but it was. Her hands ran over his hard shoulders and chest, and then her lips followed suit. He moaned, his fingers dragging through her hair.

She lifted her head away. "The Voudons have gone home."

His eyes opened slowly, revealing a predatory gleam.

"My heart's pounding so hard, I thought the drums were still beating."

His gaze seemed to clear, his brows drawing together. Passion faded slightly, and some kind of worry replaced it.

He withdrew his arms from around her, and she shivered in the sudden chill while he squinted down at his wristwatch in the darkness. Jenny righted her dress. "What's wrong, Samuel?"

"The time... I—"

"Look," she whispered. "The moon's rising."

His head came up fast, eyes spearing her, then he turned to follow her gaze. "No..."

Jenny put her hand on his shoulder, longing for his touch, his arms around her. "It's all right."

"I... lost track of the time."

"I did, too. It's my fault as much as yours." She moved in front of him, sliding her hands up his chest.

He turned away again, this time pushing his hands through his hair as he lowered his head. "Go back to the car, Jenny."

She frowned. "But—I don't understand."

"Go!" His hands clenched in his hair, his face pulling into a tight grimace.

"God, Samuel, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

He dropped to his knees, right there in the forest. He seemed, suddenly, to be in excruciating pain. Jenny hovered nearby, unsure what to do. Every time she touched him he jerked away as if her touch burned. "Samuel?"

He fell forward, hands pressing to the soil, head hanging down between his arms.

"Samuel, what can I do to help you? Please." Tears choked her. She got in front of him, crouching low, running a hand over his hair. "Please, let me help you. What can I do, Samuel?"

He lifted his head, and his eyes gleamed with yellow light. He uttered a single word, that drew out into a growl. "Run."

His face—God, his face was... changing.

Jenny backed away, one step, then two. She couldn't take her eyes from him. His hair twisted and lengthened. His face contorted, deep wrinkles appearing where none had been before. His lips pulled away from his teeth, and incisors, no—canines—gleamed in the moonlight.

She turned, and she ran. Roots sprang up to trip her. Limbs swiped at her face from every tree. She crashed through the woods headlong, unsure which way to go, thinking only of escape. She couldn't tell if he—or it—was pursuing her, but she felt as if it was. Chills raced up her spine, the back of her neck tingling as the fine hairs there stood on end.

Which way is the road? God, where the hell is the car? Did he leave the keys?

Her foot caught on a root and she smashed face-first into the ground. Scrambling to get to her feet again, she heard a low growl at her back.

"Oh, God!" She rolled onto her back, and saw it. A huge black wolf, front paws splayed widely, back legs bent, ready to spring. Its teeth were bared, its eyes on her.

Never taking her eyes from the wolf, she clawed the ground, her hand closing around a limb. She brought it upward, knowing by its lack of weight that it would make a poor weapon against such a powerful animal.

And then, suddenly, the wolf's stance changed. It shifted its gaze upward, looking at something beyond Jenny.

"Go, now!" a woman's voice said. "Oya commands it! Go!"

The wolf's ears perked forward, and then suddenly, it turned and loped gracefully into the dark woods.

Only then did Jenny dare to turn and look at the woman who stood behind her. Mamma Louisa stood there, looking like a tribal angel. She held something in her hand, a red pouch of some kind that bulged

with its contents and had feathers and stones dangling from its drawstrings.

"Come, child. Get up on your feet. We're not safe, even now."

She hurried to obey, while Mamma Louisa stood there, eyes scanning the trees around them, the pouch held up like a weapon. When Jenny was beside her, she turned. "This way."

She followed the woman in white over a path that meandered through the woods, along the river's edge, wondering where on earth they were going, right until she saw the welcoming lights gleaming from the windows of the plantation house up ahead. Mamma Louisa led her right to the back of the house, through the kitchen entrance door and up the back stairs to the third floor. As they moved through the door at the top, she found herself in a cozy living room. Rattan furnishings, stained a deep brown color and stacked with jewel-toned cushions, littered the room. One wall sported a hardwood stand, draped in a brightly colored cloth, its entire surface filled with fascinating objects, statues, stones, crosses. In its very center was a shrine with a dark-skinned Madonna enthroned within it.

"Sit, child," Mamma Louisa said, nodding toward one of the comfy-looking chairs. She locked the door behind them and then turned and came to her, eyes concerned. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

"No. I don't think so."

All the same, the woman was examining her. She ran her hands over Jenny's arms, eyes sharp and probing. She repeated the process with her other arm, then lifted her hair and examined her neck and ears. Kneeling, she inspected Jenny's legs, even her ankles. Every bit of exposed skin was subjected to her scrutiny.

"What are you looking for?"

"The mark of the wolf." She nodded as if satisfied. "Your dress is torn here. Better let me see the skin underneath."

Jenny didn't know why she complied so easily, but she did. She lowered the strap of the dress, exposing her shoulder to Mamma Louisa's steady gaze.

Finally, the woman nodded. "Nothing, it's good, you escaped without injury." She met Jenny's eyes. "The wolf didn't harm you, then."

"But it was no ordinary wolf, was it Mamma Louisa?"

The woman's gaze shifted so quickly Jenny knew she was going to lie. "What else could it have been?"

"A werewolf. The loup-garou."

"Every child knows there's no such thing."

"But you know different."

She moved to her altar, then opened a cupboard underneath. Jenny saw mason jars, filled with herbs and roots and other things she couldn't identify.

"You've seen the wolf before, haven't you? You know about it."

The other woman shrugged, removing several jars and setting them upon the altar. "I know some things."

"Will you tell me? The things you know?"

She straightened, closing the cupboard, a small red pouch in her hands. It was empty. "Some things are better left alone, *chère*." She opened her jars, taking a pinch of this and a bit of that and dropping it into the red pouch. She added a gleaming black stone and then knotted the drawstrings while chanting something in a language Jenny didn't know. She held her hands over the bag and whispered what sounded like "Ah-say, ah-say, ah-say." Then she bought the pouch to Jenny, pressed it into her hands. "Keep this with you. Don't be without it. It will keep the wolf away."

Jenny looked down at the pouch. "What if I don't want to keep it away?" She lifted her eyes to Mamma Louisa's. "I came here to find the werewolf, to prove it exists. I can't do that unless I see it again."

"You saw the wolf with your own eyes, *chère*. What more proof do you need?"

She shrugged. "Photographs. A sample of its fur, or its blood. A footprint." She shook her head. "If I could get hold of the carcass from one of its kills, something it's fed on, I might be able to extract a DNA sample from the saliva."

"Mmm," Mamma Louisa said slowly. "If it kills you, maybe it leaves some spit on your remains, eh?"

"It's not going to kill me."

"It's a wolf. It's nature is to hunt, to kill."

"It's also a man."

She blinked, but didn't look away this time. "Your science tells you that?"

"No. My science tells me that would be impossible. But I saw it. I saw it change..."

"Then you know who he is? The loup-garou?"

It was Jenny's turn to avert her eyes. "You mean you don't?"

"I'm a powerful woman. What I know puts me in no danger. What you know—might. He's a killer, a predator."

"How do you know he's preyed on anyone?"

Mamma Louisa shrugged. "It's as I said. It's the nature of the wolf to hunt, to kill."

"But that's not the nature of the man."

The older woman arched her brow. "You wish to think of this thing as harmless, then?"

"I only want to know the truth before I judge a man a killer."

"That kind of thinking will only make you his next victim, *chère*. Take the 'gree-gree.'"

"The what?"

"The gris-gris bag, take it. Keep it tucked inside a pocket and take it out only if your life is in danger."

She nodded, getting to her feet and taking the bag. "I have to get to work," she said. "I've got a lot to do tonight." She rose and started for the door.

"Take the other door, *chère*. It leads down to the main house." Mamma Louisa pointed at a second door, on the opposite side of the room.

Turning, Jenny paused. "I don't quite know how to thank you. If you hadn't shown up when you had—I don't know what might have happened."

"You do," she said. "You just wish you didn't."

Chapter 7

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SHE entered every detail of her encounter—except for the name of the shape-shifting doctor—in her computer's password-protected files, watching the clock the entire time. Maybe, she thought, she ought to take the precaution of telling someone what her passwords were, just in case anything happened to her. Just in case Mamma Louisa was right, and Samuel was a killer.

She closed her eyes, battling the shiver that chilled her marrow. In her mind's eye she saw him, Samuel, the man, his eyes burning with passion, hunger, longing—for her. And then she saw the wolf, with its teeth bared, and its eyes gleaming with a far different sort of hunger.

Which was real? Which was true? Could both of them truly live within one being? One man? Was it a constant struggle—the animal against the human? Would one eventually win out over the other? And if so, which would win? .

She had to know. Not only because it was her job, her life's work, but because—because she cared about Samuel. And maybe that made no sense, and maybe she'd only just met him and all of this was based on nothing more than the most intense chemistry she'd ever felt with any man in her life. Or maybe it was something more. Samuel told her that there was something inside her that recognized something inside him. It felt—it felt very much as if that were true.

When she finished entering all the data, describing all she'd seen in as much detail as she could, she changed her clothes, donning a comfy pair of jeans and a ribbed baby-blue tank top. She pulled thick cushy socks and running shoes onto her feet.

Then she took out her trusty backpack and double-checked its contents. The good camera, with high-speed, low-light film. The bottles of water, compass, flashlight. The plaster-cast kit, plastic bags and test tubes for collecting samples, tweezers, sticky-tape. And most important of all—the guns. One, the tranquilizer gun, was already near at hand, but the other was locked away in her briefcase, protected by a combination dial lock.

She spun the lock open and retrieved the revolver. She flipped open the cylinder and checked the six

rounds she'd had specially made. While the bullet casings looked perfectly ordinary, with their coppery hue, the tips of the bullets—the parts that actually flew toward a target when the trigger was pulled—were pure silver.

Clapping the cylinder closed again, she tucked the gun into the most easily accessible side pocket of her pack and yanked it up over her shoulders, but then she paused. Almost as an afterthought, she picked up the red gris-gris bag, and added that to the backpack as well. Finally, she headed out of the house.

Long before dawn, Jenny had gained entry to Samuel La Roque's cabin. The door had been locked, but she had no compunction about breaking in, especially after knocking and making enough racket that he would have surely come to the door had he been home. She entered through a side window, breaking the glass from a single pane, and reaching through to free the latch to open it. Before climbing inside, she whistled, called for Mojo, the doc's oversized wolf-dog, but there was no sign of the animal around. Then and only then did she clamber through the window, closing it behind her. She took a look around, just to assure herself that she was alone, and even took the time to sweep up the broken glass, before tossing a log on the fire, and finding a comfy spot to wait out the remainder of the night with her backpack right at her side.

Unfortunately, it was a little too comfy in Samuel's overstuffed easy chair. Especially with the fire's warmth reaching out and wrapping around her like a warm blanket. She only realized she'd fallen asleep when the dull thump at the front door startled her right out of her chair. She was on her feet before she even came fully awake. When she did, all was silent. She hugged herself, eyes glued to the door, every sense on alert.

The knob jiggled just a little. Then there was a low moan, and a soft sound, as if something slid over the door.

Swallowing her fear, Jenny yanked the gun from the backpack at her side, then moved forward very slowly. She reached for the doorknob.

A soft snuffling sound, then a low bark almost made her hit the ceiling. She jerked backward three steps, then hurried to a side window to peer out.

She could see the wagging tail of Samuel's pet. It was standing on the door-stoop, head down, but she could only see the back of it.

Dare she open that door to see what was going on outside? It was still dark, but not fully. The distant sky was beginning to pale to gray, and the moon was nowhere in sight. Not that she'd ever once believed the moon had to be visible in order for a man to assume wolf form. Nor even that a man *could* assume wolf form under any circumstances. Still...

Mojo had been friendly before. It might be different now, however.

The wolf barked again. A friendly, if urgent-sounding yip, aimed at the door, from the sounds of it.

"He's a wolf," she told herself aloud. "It's not as if he doesn't already know I'm in here."

Tucking the gun into the back of her jeans, she moved to the door, gripped the knob and opened it just a crack.

Then she flung it open the rest of the way, because Samuel was lying at her feet, completely naked, his

pet nuzzling and licking at his face, pushing him as if to get him up.

For just an instant she could only stand there, staring at him. He looked like a fallen, battered God—Lucifer after the fall. The lines of him, the planes and angles—he was stunning; he was perfect.

She dropped to her knees, hands gripping Samuel's warm, hard shoulders, rolling him carefully onto his back. His chest was sculpted, powerful, his belly lean. "Samuel? Are you all right?"

His eyes were closed, but she wasn't sure if that was because he was unconscious, or because they were cut and bruised and swollen. "My God, what happened to you?"

"Why are... you here?" he asked, his words broken, hoarse.

"Waiting for you."

He tried to get into a sitting position, and she gripped his forearms and helped him as he struggled to his feet and limped into the house with his dog dancing around his feet. She winced in sympathy with his pain and closed the door. He said, "It's nothing, I'll be fine in a few hours."

"Some doctor you are. It'll be more like a few weeks."

"I need... my bed."

"You need a hospital bed. Yours will have to do for now." She kept hold of him as they made their way to his bedroom. "Hold on." She peeled back the covers on the huge bed, a rustic four-poster made of knotty pine logs.

As soon as the blankets were out of the way, he fell facedown onto the bed, his head turned away from her.

Jenny tugged the covers over him again. "Is anything broken, do you think? Is there anything more serious than cuts and bruises?"

He said nothing. Not a word.

"Samuel?"

Nothing.

She rounded the bed so she could see his face, and watched the slow, steady rise and fall of his powerful back as he breathed. Gently, she reached out, brushed a wisp of dark hair away from his forehead.

"Samuel."

She didn't know what had happened to him, but she could guess. She imagined that the same kind of behavior that would constitute hunting, or even frolicking for a wild wolf, would mean physical exhaustion for a human being. The branches and twigs that snapped against the fur-covered hide of a wolf would leave welts on a human.

But it looked as if more than that had happened. It looked as if he'd run a gauntlet of sadists armed with

whips and clubs. It looked as if he'd been beaten to within an inch of his life.

Sighing, she got to her feet, only to feel the brush of Mojo's head on her leg. She looked down at the animal, and it whined plaintively. Jenny stroked the dog's head. "It's okay, Mojo. I'm not going to leave him, if that's what you're asking."

The animal seemed relieved, its jaw falling open and tongue lolling between sharp teeth, almost like a doggie smile.

Jenny went into the bathroom just off the bedroom, found a washcloth, towels, soap and some antiseptic ointments. There was even a tube of old-fashioned liniment. Carrying them all back into the bedroom, she dumped them on the bedside stand. Then she hurried out to the kitchen, rummaged in the cupboards until she located a large basin and filled it with the hottest water she could bear on her skin.

She took the water with her back to the bedroom, set it on a chair and poured antiseptic into it until it turned a mustard-tinted brown. She settled herself on the edge of his mattress, shaking her head at the scratches and cuts on his back as she pulled the covers away. Then she dipped the washcloth into the hot water, squeezed it out and began the slow, gentle work of washing him.

The cuts, scratches and scrapes on his back were numerous. There were a couple of punctures, tiny ones, and she even found a thorn poking from one of them. That put a delay on her work as she paused to locate tweezers, then removed the offending thorn, and made sure plenty of the antiseptic got into the tiny wound it left behind.

After washing one section of his body, she applied ointment to every scrape and scratch, ointment and bandages to the larger cuts. She paused over each bruise to gently rub liniment into it.

When she finished with his back, shoulders and arms, she moved lower. His buttocks were covered in injuries as well, mostly bruises, and she worked there just as diligently, even if not quite as calmly. He had a perfectly shaped butt and rock-solid thighs. She couldn't resist touching him as she worked, running her hands over him, knowing he would never know the difference, and wouldn't mind if he did.

He felt good. She liked the smooth feel of his toned skin and hard muscle beneath her palms.

Finally, she moved on to his feet, the soles of which were not a pretty sight. Nothing more sensitive than the sole of a man's foot. Well, almost nothing.

She worked on him for a long, long time, losing herself to an almost hypnotic state induced by the act of rubbing, caressing, healing him.

She rolled him onto his back, as carefully as she could, and started all over again. And ministering to the front of him was even more interesting, even more arousing and exciting. She ran her washcloth, and then her hands, over his chest, exploring and touching every inch of it. Touching him this way, this freely, this boldly, made every part of her body come alive. Every nerve ending tingled. She savored him, the way he had taught her to savor her meal last night. The feel of him, the sight of him, the smell of him. The sound of her palms brushing over his skin. The sound of her heart pounding in her chest. The sound of him sighing in contentment in his sleep.

Carefully, she leaned closer, pressing her lips to his chest, daring to part them, to taste him, just a little flick of her tongue. He would want her to do it. She knew he would.

He groaned deep in his throat, and his arms came around her, pulling her into the bed. He was hard and far stronger than she'd have given him credit for being, as he rolled her over and covered her body with his. He took her mouth, and even while she began to protest that he shouldn't, that he was hurt, and should wait, he began working her clothing free.

His strong hands slid over her waist, to the bottom of her tank top, then slid upward again, lifting the fabric with them higher, baring her belly, and then her breasts. He pressed her arms upward, so he could strip the blouse away, and then he paused, staring down at her.

"You're hurt," he whispered.

"It's nothing—branches and briars when I ran through the woods."

"I frightened you."

"Not you," she told him, pressing her hand to his cheek. "The wolf."

"But I *am* the wolf." He closed his eyes and lowered his head until his lips brushed gently over the scratch on her collarbone. He kissed the length of it, then kept moving, finding her breast and kissing it as well. When he tended the nipple with soft, teasing kisses, her blood heated beyond endurance.

"Samuel," she whispered.

He took that as encouragement, changed tactics, taking her nipple into his mouth, suckling now, tugging and nibbling.

She threaded her hands in his hair to urge him onward. And he obliged her, even while he slid his hand over her belly and undid her jeans. Then he kept going, down the front of them, inside her panties. His fingers found their target, and parted and probed.

She moved against his hand, even as her own hands traced the contours of his skin, his back and shoulders, so broad and firm, smooth beneath her palms.

He slid her jeans lower, and she kicked free of them, as eager as he was to be rid of any barrier between his flesh and hers. Then he lowered himself between her thighs, and she wrapped her legs around him. His hardness pressed to her center, but he paused, waited there, and he kissed her mouth and then opened his eyes. "Don't be afraid of me, Jenny. I'd never hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of you."

He sighed as if in relief, and then gently slid inside her. Jenny felt the very breath driven from her lungs as he filled her, and she held him tighter, tipping her hips to receive him.

After that, she lost her ability to think or reason. There was only pleasure, the delicious friction and stroking rhythm of the two of them, moving within and around each other. He moved faster, held her to him more tightly. His kisses grew more feverish and the words he whispered into her ear hotter as her body twisted into a tight little knot of need. And finally, he pushed her over the edge of release. Every part of her quivered and trembled. She cried his name out loud and clung to him while the waves of pleasure washed through her. And she felt the same intense sensations rippling through him as he held her beneath him.

Finally, her body uncoiled, the muscles relaxing as warmth and a sense of perfection suffused her.

"My God," Samuel whispered, carefully rolling to one side and then gathering her into his arms as if she were something too fragile to be real. "My God, it's never been like that before."

She snuggled in his embrace, nodding her agreement, and knowing that it would never be like this again, either. Not with any other man but him.

Chapter 8

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JENNY lay cradled in Samuel's arms as the sun rose higher, slanting its beams through the windows to paint her skin in heat and light. Sex with Samuel had been the most intense experience of her life. Desperate, even rough, at times, and then so tender it brought tears to her eyes at others.

"How do you do it?" she asked him softly.

He'd opened the bedroom window. As the sun heated the room, a warm bayou breeze played with the sheer white curtains. "Do what?"

She shrugged. "You were exhausted, hurt."

"Not anymore."

She averted her eyes, fighting a blush.

"I'm not kidding, Jenny. Look at me. Look." He sat up, letting the sheets fall away from his powerful chest, lifting her with him. When she was upright, she let her gaze travel over his chest, and then she frowned. Lifting her hands, she touched the spots where, only a few hours earlier, cuts, scrapes and bruises had made her wince in sympathy. But there was nothing there. The places where she'd rubbed ointment and liniment, looked as perfect, as flawless, as the rest of him.

Frowning even more deeply, she put a hand on his shoulder, turning him so she could see his back. But it was the same there. Even the worst of the bruises, a huge purple blotch on his hip, had faded until it was barely visible.

Blinking in confusion, she let him return to his former position.

He was staring at her face, but she couldn't hold his gaze.

"We haven't talked about... about what you saw happening to me, last night. I never... I never meant for you to see that."

"What, exactly, *did* I see, Samuel?"

He looked away. "You know what you saw. You saw me, changing forms. Becoming... the wolf. I'm the one you've been looking for."

She closed her eyes. "Then it's true. It's... you're a... God, I can't even say it. It's too outlandish to be

real."

"I'm the werewolf, the loup-garou, the shape-shifter. It's me. I'm the one you've been looking for, Jenny. The only question is, now that you've found me, what do you plan to do about it?"

She lifted her eyes slowly, met his and was amazed at the amount of courage it took to do so, and not look away. "Will you cooperate with me? Help me with my research?"

"By answering your questions? Yes, if you'll keep my name out of it."

She swallowed hard. "What about videotape?"

He held her gaze steadily. "You think I'm insane? Or just suicidal?"

"Samuel, I'd protect you. I'd never let anyone—"

"No. What I go through, what I become—no, it's personal. I can't think of a moment more private than those three nights a month, when... when it happens. I can hardly stand the idea that you watched it happen. I couldn't bear to let you tape it."

"Samuel, you don't understand. This is my life's work."

"Jenny, *you* don't understand." He cupped her cheek in one hand, gently, lovingly. His eyes beamed his feelings into hers. "This is my *life*."

She lowered her head, drew her knees up to her chest, sitting up in the bed. "If you don't cooperate with my research, how can you ever hope to find a cure?"

"Who says I *want* a cure?"

She looked him, wide-eyed. "Don't you?"

He was quiet for a moment, his gaze turning inward.

"Samuel?"

"I don't know. I don't... I just don't know, all right?"

"My God, Samuel, how on earth could you even consider wanting to stay like this if you don't have to?"

He shook his head slowly. "How could I not? Look at me, Jenny. My senses are sharper than they've ever been. Sharper than they ever could have been, if the family curse hadn't found its way to me. Before the changes began, I was... I was barely alive. Going through life in a kind of a complacent daze. Now, I experience everything, *I feel* everything."

His eyes sparkled when he talked about this thing. She couldn't believe it, hadn't even considered that he might see this affliction as having a positive side. "Are you in control of what you do, when you... change?"

He lowered his gaze. "I don't know. Afterward, it's... it's difficult to remember what I've done. But don't think I'm not watching for signs. There have been no unexplained injuries, no violent deaths, no one

reporting that they were attacked. I have to believe that, even as the wolf, I'm incapable of causing harm to another human being."

"But you don't know that for sure."

With a heavy sigh, he conceded the point. Then he lifted his eyes to hers. "I could have hurt you, that night on the road. But I didn't."

"I guess the scratches across my chest don't count, then."

"I can't believe I intended to harm you. Not you, Jenny." He made a halfhearted attempt at a smile. "Maybe I was just trying to get your blouse off."

The joke fell flat for her. "I'm sorry, Samuel, but I can't laugh about this. You came after me in the woods last night. If Mamma Louisa hadn't come along when she did—I don't know. I don't know what might have happened."

"Mamma Louisa?" She heard the change in his tone when he repeated the woman's name. He sounded... angry. "Tell me what happened," he said.

"I fell. You—the wolf was crouching, poised as if to spring. Its teeth were bared, hair on its neck bristling up, and it was growling. It did not appear to be friendly, Samuel. Not like..." She glanced at the floor, where Mojo lay napping on a braided throw rug. "Not like Mojo. I was sure I was done for."

"But it didn't hurt you. I didn't hurt you."

She nodded, admitting that much was true.

"What happened next?"

"Mamma Louisa said something—an incantation or something. She waved her little red gris-gris bag around, and the wolf just ran away."

He sighed, shaking his head. "Ironic that she should be the one to step in."

Jenny frowned. "Why?"

He didn't answer, and she touched his face, turned it toward hers. "What has she got to do with this, Samuel?"

"Everything. It was her family who put this curse on mine. Her great-grandmother started it all, taking out her vengeance against my great-grandfather with Voodoo magic."

"Vengeance?"

He nodded. "God knows he had it coming if he did what... what her family claimed he did. My greatgrandfather, Beckett Branson La Roque owned the plantation back then. He inherited it from his mother's family, the Bransons. Mamma Louisa's family, the DuVal's, worked for him just as they'd worked for his mother's family. Her great-grandmother, Celeste, was the matriarch of the clan then, and she was also a Voudon priestess."

She nodded, listening, rapt.

"They said my great-grandfather raped a girl, Alana DuVal, Celeste's daughter. Mamma Louisa's grandmother. She was only sixteen."

"Do you believe it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know why she would have made it up. My grandfather never admitted it, but more importantly, he never denied it." There was a long pause. "Yeah, I believe it. But it doesn't really matter what I believe. Celeste believed it, and she avenged her daughter's innocence by cursing my ancestor and my line. In each generation, a La Roque male will be possessed by the spirit of the loup-garou, until there are no more males born."

"The curse dies with the line."

He nodded.

"Do you think Mamma Louisa knows how to remove it?"

"Of course she knows how—but she won't. I've asked her, believe me."

"Then you *do* want to be rid of it." He shot her a look. "You said you'd asked her," she rushed on. "You wouldn't have asked if you didn't want it gone."

"Early on, I thought the curse was the end of my life. I hated it. I fought it. I raged against it. But over time, I learned to live with it. And over a little more time, I began to realize that it wasn't all bad. I even learned to... to embrace it."

"But you may not have to."

"It's a part of who I am now, Jenny." He climbed out of the bed, paced away from her, then turned suddenly. "It's made me a better doctor."

Jenny frowned. "How?"

"I don't know. The heightened senses, maybe. The sharper instincts. I can tell what a patient's problem is even before I've run tests to confirm it. I spot potentially fatal complications before they happen, and I'm able to avert them." He shook his head. "I don't want to give that up."

"And you don't want anyone to know. But they will, Samuel. Eventually, the people around you are going to catch on. How are you going to deal with that?"

He shrugged. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

She closed her eyes.

He came back to the bed. "I know you're disappointed, Jenny. I know it would mean a lot to your career to make a case study out of me—but it would be the end for me. I'd be hunted by superstitious fools wanting to kill me and pursued by scientists wanting to study me. My life would be over."

She couldn't argue with him. "When I came here, searching for the creature, I was convinced all I would

find, if anything, would be an animal. An unknown species. I never for one minute thought the myths would be true—that a human being could change forms, or that a curse could be the cause. I've never believed in magic."

"And now that you've seen the living proof of it? How is that going to change your approach to this, Jenny?"

"I don't know. I have... I have to rethink everything." She got to her feet. "I should go." She got out of the bed, tugging the sheet around her, then bent to retrieve her clothes from the floor.

"Jenny."

She paused, not looking at him. "I won't tell anyone, Samuel. When I decide what I have to do, I'll let you know first. Before I do anything at all, I'll talk to you. I promise."

He nodded. "For some reason, I believe you." Then he came closer, slid his hands over her bare shoulders, squeezed gently. "But that's not what I was going to say."

"It isn't?"

"No."

"Then... what?"

He turned her to face him. "Just... this." He kissed her, softly, slowly and thoroughly. When their lips slid apart, she relaxed against his chest and he held her to him. "It hasn't been this way for me in a long time. With a woman, I mean. I've... I've been afraid to let anyone get too close. But with you, I just—it was like I had no choice. Something else took over."

"The wolf?" she asked softly.

He tipped her chin up, looked her in the eye. "My heart, I think."

A lump formed in her throat, making it hard to breathe and impossible to speak.

"I've handed you the loaded gun, Jenny, with the silver bullet already in the chamber. I'm trusting you not to pull the trigger."

He kissed her again, then with a sigh, walked into the bathroom.

Jenny heard the shower running a few minutes later. She didn't want to see him again before she left, because she still didn't know what the hell she was going to do. She would keep her word to him, she vowed. She would tell him her decision, once it was made.

God, she felt like an assassin for even considering moving forward with her work, making a study of him, perhaps without his consent. There had to be some way she could keep his identity secret. She had to at least consider the possibility, weigh the options. How could she not?

She threw her clothes on quickly and headed back to the plantation while he was still in the shower.

Chapter 9

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"WHAT are you working on?"

The voice, coming from so close behind her, made her jerk her pencil across the sketchbook. She drew it to her chest protectively and shot a look over her shoulder. "Dr. Hinkle. What are you doing in here?"

"I'm the project supervisor, Professor Rose. I'm supervising." He nodded at the pad. "No use hiding it, I've already seen." Then he yanked it from her and took a closer look.

"My door was locked."

"I have keys to every door in this house." He was staring at the sketchbook where she'd been drawing, from memory, the way Samuel had looked as he'd changed. She wasn't certain why she'd been drawing it. She just had to get it down, to get the image out of her head and to try to make sense of it all.

"So you saw it again last night?" Hinkle asked.

"I didn't see anything. This is just doodling." She took the pad back. "And I thought I made it clear that I didn't want you in my rooms."

"Is the drawing based on... anyone you know?"

"You're changing the subject. I'm going to file a complaint with the university if you don't stay out of my rooms."

"Bears a striking resemblance to the town doctor. What's his name? La Roque?"

"You're being ridiculous."

He shrugged. "You went out to dinner with him last night, according to Toby. Did you spend the night, Professor?"

"What are you talking about? I came home last night."

"Yes, after your date."

"It wasn't a date. It was research. I wanted to know if there had been any patients coming in with unexplained injuries."

"And have there?"

"No. None."

He nodded. "I never saw him drop you off."

"I felt like a walk." *God, he was catching on.* More than before, she realized Samuel was right. If she pursued this, it would be impossible to protect his identity for very long. And she wasn't sure why, but she

felt an instinctive fear of Dr. Hinkle learning the truth.

"And then you left again," he said. "I checked, later on. You didn't sleep here."

"So you were sneaking around in my bedroom in the middle of the night, when you thought I'd be sound asleep? God, what were you thinking?"

"Where did you spend the night, Jenny?"

She bit back her anger—it wasn't going to dissuade him. "I went back out to the woods. According to all we've got so far, this creature—if it exists at all, which I'm beginning to doubt—is nocturnal. I was hoping to spot it." She shrugged, sighed. "No sign of it, though. I say it reluctantly, Dr. Hinkle, but I'm ready to concede that you may be right. We might be just wasting our time down here."

He shrugged. "We have one more night to produce results. The moon is still full, you know."

"Yes. I know."

"If there are no results, I'm pulling the plug on this project. We'll pack up and head back to the university tomorrow."

She nodded, and tried to hide her relief. If he knew—if he had an inkling, there would be no way he would consider ending the project. Then again, why would any sane person believe a man could become a wolf? "Maybe that's for the best." She felt like crying. All her work, all her research; just when she was so close to success, she was throwing it all away. But she couldn't base her personal success on the destruction of Samuel's life. It would be unfair. Besides, as illogical as it seemed—she felt something for him. Something powerful.

"I must say, Jenny, I'm surprised. You don't usually give up so easily."

She shrugged and tried to inject her demeanor with some enthusiasm. "Who says I've given up? There's always tonight."

"Yes. There's always tonight."

There was something in his eyes when he said it, something that frightened her.

As soon as he left the room, Jenny pulled up every one of her password-protected files and deleted them. She'd made her decision. She would make her name, her career by discovering some legitimate unknown species of animal. Not by exploiting a man who was doing his best to live his life under the heavy burden of a curse.

She wasn't even sure she believed in curses, but she knew who to ask. And while she'd decided not to continue her research using Samuel as a subject, she hadn't decided to leave him alone entirely.

She thought she just might be able to help him.

Tucking her laptop into her shoulder bag, she took it with her. She wouldn't let it out of her sight again until she'd had the hard drive replaced and demolished the old one. Traces of her files would remain there, even though she'd deleted them. She knew that. She headed to the kitchen, where she found Mamma Louisa kneading bread dough.

Without even looking up, the older woman said, "Hello, *chère*. I suppose you're lookin' for me?"

"Yes."

"He know you're talkin' to me?"

There was no point in asking who she meant. Jenny was well aware by now that Mamma Louisa knew the identity of the loup-garou. "No. He says there's no point in talking to you, that you've already refused to help him."

Her head came up, eyebrows raised. "He said that?"

She nodded.

"Hmmp. Arrogant, know-it-all doctor, anyway." She made a fist and punched the dough.

"You mean you didn't refuse?"

"I told him the truth. I can't remove the curse. Only one who can is the one who put it on him in the first place. An' my great-grandma Celeste is long dead by now."

"Then there's no hope for him?"

She draped a dishtowel over the ceramic bowl of bread dough and set it near a window where the sun beamed through. Then she grabbed another towel to wipe the dough and flour from her hands. "Always there is hope, *chère*. Your doctor, he stomp away from me when I tell him I can't remove the curse. He didn't ask what I *could* do. I figure he don't want my help—maybe don't deserve it."

Jenny felt hope spark in her heart. "Then there is something you can do?"

"Don't know. Not until I try. Not gonna try until he apologize, and ask me proper."

"That's certainly reasonable."

"Stubborn man don't seem to think so." She shrugged. "Even so, I don't know if I can help him."

"But you'll try?"

"He apologize, I try. It's all I can do."

"It's enough," Jenny said. "It has to be."

JENNY tried phoning Samuel three times, only to be told he was busy with patients and unable to come to the phone. She finally drove to his office, but one look at the packed waiting room was enough to deter that effort. It was crowded with sniffing kids and wheezing elders and everything in between. She was about to leave, when Samuel came out, spotted her and waved her closer.

She wove her way through the waiting patients and wondered why it gave her such a thrill to see him again. "I can see you're busy," she said. "I don't want to interrupt."

"I can take a minute." He smiled at her. "I knew you were here—felt you. That's why I came out." Then he turned to the receptionist. "Sally, get Mrs. Finny set up in room one and tell her I'll be in shortly." Taking Jenny's arm, he led her into a hallway, all the way to the end, and then into a small room where the desk was almost an afterthought to the comfy overstuffed chairs, table and coffeemaker.

She went in before him, but didn't sit, turning to face him instead. As soon as he'd closed the door behind him, she said, "I deleted all my files. I'm not going to pursue this. Not on a research level, at least."

He frowned and studied her face. He looked a little bit wary. "But you *are* going to pursue it."

"Not if you say no. But Samuel, I think I can help you. I spoke to Mamma Louisa, and she—"

"Mamma Louisa won't help me. I already told you that."

She shook her head. "You asked her to cure you, not help you. And she told you she couldn't, not that she wouldn't. There's a big difference between what she said and what you heard."

His frown deepened. "Did she tell you something different?"

"Yes. She said that only Celeste could remove the curse, but that she might be able to do something to help you."

"Help me in what way?"

"She didn't say. She's not even sure she can, but she's willing to try." She shrugged. "*If* you will apologize for losing your temper with her, and ask her nicely."

He looked angry for a moment. Jenny put a hand on his shoulder. "Samuel, she's not the one who put this curse on your family. You can't blame her for that any more than she can blame you for what your great-grandfather did to Alana DuVal."

His face eased slightly. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. And I did stomp off in a huff when she said she couldn't help me. Haven't spoken to her since." He grimaced. "That was two years ago."

"It's time to let that go. Make amends, if nothing more."

"All right." He sighed. "Jenny, I've been thinking... about what I said before, about not wanting a cure." He turned away from her, pushing a hand through his hair. "I want to keep seeing you. I want—I want you in my life. Somehow. And if giving this thing up is what it takes to make that happen, I'll do it."

She smiled a little. "You'd do that for me?"

He shrugged. "I'd miss running wild with Mojo and howling at the moon," he said with a teasing look. "But I'd miss you more. I'd miss never knowing what could have been, what could have happened between us." He lowered his eyes. "I think you might be the one, Jenny."

The words sank into her heart like warm sunlight. Her throat tightened so much she could barely force air through, and when she did speak, her voice was tight with emotion. "I wouldn't ask you to change your life for me, Samuel. This has to be your decision. Not mine."

"But..."

"I think you might be the one, too. I'm not going to walk out of your life because of what you are. God, what you are is... is what I fell for, you know?"

He seemed relieved. "You really mean that?"

There was a tap on the office door. "Doctor, your patient is waiting."

He licked his lips. "I have to—"

"I know. Look, at least meet with Mamma Louisa. Amends need to be made whether she can help you or not, and whether you decide to accept her help or not. At least talk with her."

He nodded. "I will."

"We'll need privacy," Jenny said quickly. "Come to that same spot where you took me last night. That grove where the Voudons danced. I'll bring Mamma Louisa. Meet us there."

"No later than eight," he said. "Before the moon rises."

"Understood. Eight it is." She started for the door, but he stopped her with an arm around her waist, pulled her close until her body was pressed to the front of his and kissed her mouth. It was a hungry kiss; he used his tongue, probed and delved and tasted. She twined her arms around his neck and kissed him back just as eagerly.

The knock at the door came again, and reluctantly, he let her go.

JENNY went back to the plantation and battled the worst case of nerves she'd ever had in her life. She invented tasks to keep Mike and Toby busy, set Carrie to work doing more research and tried hard to hide her jittery mood from Dr. Hinkle, though he behaved like her shadow all afternoon.

He suspected something—she was sure of it. And the way he stuck to her all day made her wonder how she would manage to slip away from him tonight.

By the time Mamma Louisa was serving them all dinner in the formal dining room, Jenny was ready to climb the walls. She hadn't even managed to let the woman know about tonight's plans. Every time she got Mamma Louisa alone and started to talk to her, Dr. Hinkle showed up like some lurking demon. She would catch a glimpse of him from the corner of her eye, or suddenly feel shivers up her spine, and turn to find him not far away.

During the meal, Jenny managed to catch Mamma Louisa's sharp eye, and she hoped, to send a message, slanting her gaze toward Dr. Hinkle. A moment later, she knew the message had been received. The large woman bent to set a fresh pitcher of ice water on the table and tipped it into Hinkle's lap.

He yelped and jumped to his feet, his pants soaked through. "Damn, woman, what are you thinking?"

"I'm so sorry, mister! Eva Lynn, honey, bring towels!"

Eva Lynn raced in from the kitchen with large white towels in hand. Hinkle snatched one from her and stomped toward the stairs, with the younger woman on his heels dabbing at the back of his pant legs, even as Mamma Louisa glanced at Jenny and inclined her head.

"I'll help you until Eva Lynn gets back," Jenny said, for the benefit of the other three at the table, and then she hurried to the kitchen.

"You wanted to speak to me, yes?" Mamma Louisa said. "Without the old man listenin' in."

"Yes." She glanced back toward the closed door. "I spoke to Samuel, and he admitted he was wrong to have treated you as he did. He wants to apologize, and he'll be grateful to hear about any help you can give him with his... problem."

"Mmm. I'm surprised the stubborn fool gave in so easily." She searched Jenny's eyes. "You're good for him, I think. So? When do we meet him?"

The woman's instincts were amazing. "Tonight, eight o'clock, at the grove where I saw you last night."

Her eyes narrowed. "You think it's safe? To be so close to him at night, when the moon is still full?"

"He's fine until moonrise, Mamma Louisa. That won't be until after nine. Is an hour enough time for you to do... what you need to do? To help him?"

"If I can't help him in an hour, I can't help him at all. I will go with you, child. Now go, get back to the table before that nosy man comes snooping again. He been watching you like a hawk all the day long."

"I know."

"Don't you worry. We gave him the slip, all right. Whooeee, but how he jump when that ice water hit his man parts!" She smiled from ear to ear.

Jenny grinned, too, but wiped the smile away as she returned to her seat at the table and continued with her meal.

At 7:30, she was in her room getting ready to go, when someone tapped on her door. Fearing it was Dr. Hinkle, she almost didn't answer, then decided she had no choice. When she opened the door, she found Carrie standing there.

"Finished with all that research already?" Jenny asked.

"Um... no. I just... I wanted you to know something."

Frowning, Jenny let her in. Carrie closed the door, looking nervous. "What is it, Carrie?"

The girl cleared her throat. "When you went into the kitchen, tonight, with Mamma Louisa, Toby left the table."

"Where did he go?"

"I can't be sure," Carrie said. "But he might have gone to the kitchen, too. I started to go for another towel, to mop up the water that was still in Dr. Hinkle's chair. And it looked as if... as if he was listening

at the door. But like I said, I can't be sure. He saw me and hurried off toward the living room, and I went back to the table."

Jenny closed her eyes. This wasn't good.

"Where is he now?"

"Downstairs, working on his computer."

"And Dr. Hinkle?"

Carrie shrugged. "He went out a few minutes ago. I didn't dare come to you until he left, the way he's been hovering over you all day."

"And now he's suddenly stopped hovering."

"That occurred to me, too," Carrie said. "I think Toby told him whatever he overheard in the kitchen. I saw them talking awhile ago, huddled in a corner, keeping their voices low. Are you in any kind of trouble, Professor Rose? Cause if I can help..."

Jenny glanced at her watch. "Keep the twins busy. Downstairs, for the next ten minutes. Can you do that?"

Carrie nodded hard. "Can you tell me what's going on?"

"No. I'm sorry, but it's not my secret to tell."

"Is it... the werewolf?"

Jenny smiled and smoothed a hand over Carrie's hair as if she were a small child. "Don't be silly, hon. There are no such things as werewolves."

Carrie looked puzzled but rushed away to do as Jenny asked. Jenny took the back stairs up to the third floor and knocked on Mamma Louisa's door.

When the woman opened it, she said, "Ready to go, then?"

"Not quite. I need to take a look in Dr. Hinkle's room before we leave. But we'll have to be fast."

"I never like that man anyway." Mamma Louisa dipped into a pocket and pulled out a jangling ring of keys. "Let's go see what secrets that man be keepin'!"

Chapter 10

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JENNY felt as if every hair on her body were standing on end as she crept through Dr. Hinkle's suite of rooms. Mamma Louisa stood just outside the door, in the ornate hallway, keeping watch. Not that it was going to be much help, should the good doctor return. There wasn't any other way out of the rooms, just that one door. But at least she'd have some warning.

She went to the desk that was set up in a window-lined alcove, glanced through the papers that were spread over it but found nothing. She flipped open the laptop computer and checked for the most recently opened files, but again, found only the most mundane reports on the project.

She tried the desk drawer and found it locked.

Turning toward the door, she whisper-shouted for Mamma Louisa, who poked her head into the room, eyebrows raised.

"The keys to this desk. Do you have them?"

"No, missy. The doctor, he make sure he have the only set."

That nailed it, then. If Hinkle had anything he wanted to hide, the desk had to be where it was. Mamma Louisa came the rest of the way into the room, eyes on the desk drawer, lips moving to form soundless words as she reached a hand out. She leaned over, blew on the drawer's handle and tugged it open.

"How the hell—"

"You were mistaken, *chère*. The draw' wasn't locked at all." Turning, she hurried back to her post in the hallway.

Jenny swallowed down the rising sense of disorientation. She'd seen so many things since coming here—things her practical mind and her education told her didn't exist—*couldn't* exist. And yet, she couldn't deny her own senses. She'd *seen* Samuel's face and body twisting into something else. And she knew this drawer had been locked tight moments ago.

Now, she was staring into it, at a leather-bound volume. Beside it was the plaster cast she'd taken of that paw print in the woods. Then he *had* been the one who'd stolen it! Carefully, she took the book out and opened it, seeing pages upon pages of handwritten lines. Each page was dated. It was a journal.

Frowning, she flipped pages, reading a few lines here and there. Her own name jumped out at her, catching her eye. "Jennifer Rose is the best I've ever seen, the best I've ever worked with. But I must never let her believe I support her theories. In fact I need to prove them wrong, discredit her, even while I use her to lead me to what I need."

She blinked. Good God, he'd practically gushed about her skill in her field. To her face he'd never done anything but criticize, belittle and condemn her work. It was foolish, not a real science, fraudulent even.

She nipped more pages.

"I knew she would find it! Here, at last, I have the full ritual."

Below those words, she saw an outline, like a recipe, titled, "Becoming a Werewolf."

What the hell?

She read on, recognizing some of the portions from research she'd gleaned, other bits Carrie had ferreted out from various sources; still others were entirely new to her. She skimmed the lines. Third night of the full moon—that was tonight. There was a list of herbs, each one with a checkmark beside it. She

knew the rite required a fire, but this list gave the precise instructions for the type of wood to burn, and the kinds of leaves to use to kindle the fire. It gave astrological requirements as well—moon in Scorpio, conjunct to Saturn. Beneath those, today's date was jotted down.

And near the bottom of the list of items needed, was one that made her blood run cold.

The pelt of a werewolf.

Oh my God.

She slammed the book closed and taking it with her, turned and raced out the door and down the hall to the stairs. Mamma Louisa was right on her heels.

"What is it, child?"

"Hinkle—he thinks he can make himself into a werewolf!"

"But... but the only way he can do that is to be bitten by one, and then he'd have as good a chance of dying as of changing... unless he's found a spell. But for that he'd have to—"

"To kill Samuel, after the change," Jenny said. "He needs the pelt."

Mamma crossed herself and muttered a prayer as the two women burst into the living room. Carrie leapt up from the couch where she'd been sitting with Mike and Toby. "My God, what's happened?"

Jenny ignored her, going straight to Toby, gripping his shoulder hard. "You followed me to the kitchen earlier tonight. You eavesdropped on my conversation with Mamma Louisa." She held up her free hand as he started to deny it. "Don't even, I don't have time for your lies. Just tell me, did you report what you heard to Dr. Hinkle?"

"I didn't—"

"I swear to God, if you lie to me now I'll get you thrown out of school on charges so scandalous no other university will have you, even if I have to make up every one of them. Don't think I can't do it! This is life and death, Toby, now talk!"

He stared at her, his eyes widening. "You wouldn't—"

"You try me."

Pursing his lips, he swallowed hard. "All right. All right, I listened in. I told Dr. Hinkle what I heard. That you and Mamma Louisa were to meet someone in the grove down by the river at eight."

"He's got a head start," Jenny whispered, releasing him and turning her gaze to Mamma Louisa's. "God, he'll beat us there, and kill Samuel."

Carrie gasped. "Dr. Hinkle's going to kill someone?"

"No, *chère*?" Mamma Louisa said. "He can't kill him, not until after the moon comes up. Not until after the change. To kill him before that would serve no purpose."

Jenny nodded. "Then there's still time." She ran for the door as Carrie and the twins shouted questions after her. She made it to her car, surprised when the considerably older, and much heavier woman jumped into the passenger seat only a split second after her. She was fast.

Jenny drove, and watched the sun sink below the horizon. Darkness gathered around them, and she felt as if the entire world were holding its breath, just waiting for moonrise.

THEY'D exited the car and were making their way through the woods to the grove, when Jenny heard the gunshot.

A scream ripped from her throat, and she broke into a run, with Mamma Louisa, a large drawstring bag over her shoulder, racing to keep up.

The path twisted and meandered through the thick, dense forest. She could barely see where she was going, and yet something pulled her on. Some sixth sense, tugging her the way magnetic North tugs a compass needle. She ran, barely able to see her feet hitting the ground ahead of her. She ran, heedless of the branches smacking her face and raking her arms. She ran, and then she saw him.

The wolf lay very still, so still she was nearly upon it before she realized what it was. She fell to her knees, her hands sinking into the thick, soft fur. "Samuel," she whispered. "God, no." She felt warm, thick moisture and lowered her face to the fur, hugging the animal gently. "Samuel, please?"

A soft whimper sounded in response.

Panting, Mamma Louisa caught up, fell to her knees and tore open her bag. She took out flashlight and pointed it at the animal.

"He's still alive," Jenny said softly.

"Mmm, but Hinkle-man got what he wanted, though. Look there." She moved the light, revealing a strip of flesh, red and bleeding, on the wolf's side.

"My God, what did he do? What did he do to you?"

The wolf whined again, a plaintive, pain-racked sound that made her heart twist and her stomach convulse.

"We have to help him, Mamma Louisa."

She nodded, handing the light to Jenny, and taking more items from her bag. Herbs, rattles. She worked over the animal, chanting softly. As she did, Jenny used the light to find the bullet hole, high on the front shoulder. She tore a strip from her own blouse and wrapped the wound. "He'll live," she whispered. "I think it's too high to have hit the heart. I don't think there's internal bleeding." The animal's strong pulse told her as much.

"My God, what's going on out here?"

At the male voice, Jenny looked up, only to see Carrie and the twins standing in the path staring down at the suffering animal in horror. "You followed me?" Jenny asked.

"Of course we did," Carrie said. "You said it was a matter of life and death. She stared at the animal with wide eyes."

"Is that—is that a werewolf?"

"No." Mamma Louisa answered firmly. "This is an ordinary wolf."

Jenny's hands stilled in the deep fur. She looked closer. "My God, you're right. This is Mojo!" She hugged the wolf gently, then lifted her eyes to Mamma Louisa's. "Dr. Hinkle shot the wrong wolf!"

"Dr. Hinkle shot this poor animal?" Mike asked.

"The moon hasn't yet risen," Mamma Louisa explained. "The wolf Hinkle sought is still in human form." She closed her eyes, tipped her head back, rocked slowly on her feet. "Hinkle-man, he realized that even as he tried to skin the poor creature. But the man came. The man came—only moments ago, when the gunshot rang out and the wolf pet cried. The man came, and Hinkle-man hid and waited. When the man bent over the wolf, Hinkle hit him hard, on the head. Knock him out. Took him away."

She took the light from Jenny and shone it on the ground. "Look there. One man, dragging another."

"Hinkle's taken him."

"Mm. He'll hold the man until the moon comes. Until the change comes. And then—"

"Then he'll kill him, and perform his sick ritual." Jenny turned her gaze to the three young people. "Dr. Hinkle plans to turn himself into a werewolf tonight. It's all here, in his journal. Unfortunately, he has to murder an innocent man to do it."

The twins exchanged glances. Toby took the journal from her. "I'm sorry, Professor Rose. We—we trusted him. We had no idea."

"Neither did I."

"What can we do?" Carrie asked. "How can we help?"

Jenny looked down at the suffering animal. "Can you get Mojo to the town vet?"

"Mojo?"

She nodded toward the wolf. "He's a pet. A beautiful animal. Please help him."

"We'll take care of it." The two boys knelt beside Mojo, gently picking him up, one on each end. Mamma Louisa had removed her white bandana and torn it apart to make bandages for the animal's skinned flank. Poor creature. It whimpered as the boys carried it away, but they moved as carefully and gently as they could.

Alone with Mamma Louisa, Jenny faced her. "Where did Hinkle take Samuel?" she asked. "How can we find them?"

The older woman dug in her bag and took out a beautiful, glittering crystal suspended from a string. She let it dangle until it was still, then watched as it began to swing. The motion was barely detectable at first,

but grew steadily. Finally, she gave the string a snap, caught the crystal in her hand and said, "This way."

IT seemed to Jenny as if it took forever, before she smelled the smoke. Then, gradually, she saw the faint glow, and then the dancing firelight in the distance. She picked up the pace and tried hard to move quickly, but quietly at the same time. The two of them crept up to the edge of a tiny clearing, and peered from the trees.

Jenny spotted Samuel. He lay on the ground, his hands and feet bound in front of him. He was barely conscious, eyes flickering open and closed, and there was blood coming from his head, glistening in the firelight as it trickled over his face.

A tripod had been erected over the fire, and a cauldron hung from it. Steam rose from the cauldron as its contents boiled, and the scents of herbs filled the air. Close by, Dr. Hinkle sat on the ground, completely naked. He was rubbing something gooey over his arms and chest. Jenny wondered if it were feline fat and felt her stomach lurch. God, how many innocent animals were going to have to suffer to satisfy Hinkle's insanity?

"What do we do?"

"He's made a circle," Mamma Louisa pointed at a ring of what looked like salt, on the ground. "I can break it. Come."

She took a feather fan from her bag and used it like a broom, sweeping the air before her as they crept forward. Hinkle sat with his eyes closed, chanting the words of his spell.

As she reached the ring of salt, Mamma Louisa said, "Open!" and swept the fan in the air and then over the ground, brushing the salt away and stepping inside. Jenny followed, then froze as she saw the glowing sphere of the moon rising above them. She spun around, and saw Samuel, bound there, jerking spasmodically against the ropes as growling sounds emerged from deep in his chest.

At the sound of Mamma Louisa's command, Hinkle's eyes flew wide and he sprang to his feet. "You get out of here!"

Mamma Louisa shook her head.

Beyond her, Samuel was changing. His eyes rolled and his back arched as his facial muscles contorted. The rope at his wrists snapped in two.

"In the name of Oya, in the name of Yemaya, I cast every negative force from this circle! I call in goodness. I call in white light. I call in protection!"

"No! Get out, I say!" Hinkle crouched low, reaching for something, and when he rose again he lifted a gun.

"Look out!" Jenny shouted.

But even as she said it, the wolf leapt, hitting Hinkle squarely in the chest. The gun flew from his hands, and the shot it fired went wild.

Now Hinkle was on his back, with a snarling, fiercely powerful wolf standing on his chest, growling. The

two women stood there, staring, and Jenny knew full well there would be nothing either of them could do to prevent the wolf from tearing out Hinkle's throat. Not physically at least.

Swallowing hard, Jenny knew she had to try to reach the man she loved, before he made himself a killer.

"Samuel, I know you're in there," Jenny said softly. "I know you can hear me. Mojo is alive. He's at the vet, getting treatment even now. And this man will never hurt anyone again, not when I testify as to what happened here tonight."

The wolf looked toward her. Its eyes... they were Samuel's eyes. Mamma Louisa reached into her bag, and Jenny held up a hand to stop her. "No. No, you don't have to use magic. He won't do harm to a human being, I know it. Just wait."

The wolf growled, deep and low.

"Don't hurt him, Samuel. You're a healer, not a killer."

The animal looked back down at the man on the ground, then at her again.

"I love you, Samuel," she whispered.

The wolf focused on Hinkle's face, leaned very close, so close the man must have felt the animal's hot breath on his skin, then it let loose a series of sharp, angry barks and growls and snapped its jaws within an inch of Hinkle's face, before it turned, and leapt to the ground. It didn't run off as Jenny had expected, but only moved beyond the fire's light and curled on the ground in the shadows.

Jenny ran to snatch up the pieces of fallen rope and the gun. Then she made Hinkle put on his clothes while she held the weapon on him. "What the hell were you thinking?" she demanded as he dressed. "Why would you want to do something so insane?"

He looked up at her as he buttoned his shirt. "I'm aging, Jennifer, or hadn't you noticed that? Young, sharp professors like you are coming in. Pushing me out. I miss my youth, my vitality. I've read the accounts. With the wolf inside me, I'd be young again, strong as a man half my age."

"Wonder how fast you'll age in prison. Maybe you should have considered that."

He shook his head. "You tell anyone about this, I'll reveal Samuel La Roque for what he really is."

"Then you won't end up in prison after all." She smiled softly. "It'll be a mental institution instead."

She handed Mamma Louisa the ropes. The other woman tied him up while Jenny held the gun. Then the two women led him out of the circle of salt and set him on the ground beside a tree. Mamma Louisa returned to the fire in the center of the circle, and using her shawl as a pot holder, took the iron kettle from the tripod. She carried it a few yards away and poured its smelly contents on to the ground. She left the kettle there.

When she returned to the circle, she dug into her bag and tossed handfuls of herbs from various jars onto the glowing fire. The smoke they emitted was fragrant and good.

She turned then, her eyes falling upon the wolf that lay near the circle's edge.

It rose, as if it knew what to do, and paced slowly to her.

Nodding her approval, Mamma Louisa looked to Jenny. "Go, watch over Hinkle-man and let me do my work."

Jenny nodded. "Samuel never got the chance to deliver that apology he owed you," she said.

"He saved me from that one's bullet. I say that's as good as an apology. We be even now. Go."

Jenny left the circle of firelight and stood near Hinkle, the gun still in her hand just in case. Mamma Louisa sprinkled fresh salt in the area where she had brushed it away, completing the ring again. Then she moved to kneel in front of the wolf, her hands pressing to either side of its head as she stared into its eyes and spoke to it earnestly.

The wolf whined as it stared intently back at her, and finally, it lay down at her feet. It didn't fight when she spread her shawl over it, and it lay still there while she moved around it, gesturing and chanting, shaking her rattles, sprinkling it with herbs and salt and lifting her hands skyward to call on her gods. She moved faster, and her voice grew louder and her rattles shook faster, until the noise reached a pitch Jenny was sure could be heard all the way back at the plantation. And then and suddenly, with a loud whoop, Mamma Louisa yanked the shawl from over the wolf.

Samuel lay there, naked, shivering, maybe a little disoriented. He blinked up at Louisa as she nodded in approval. Then she swept an opening in the circle with her feather fan, and waved Jenny closer. Jenny hurried to Samuel. As she sank to her knees beside him, he said, "It's still in me. I can still feel the wolf in me."

"Yes," Mamma Louisa told him, handing him the shawl so he could cover himself. He sat up, knotting it around his hips. "The wolf still lives in you. But now, Samuel La Roque, you are in control. You can become the wolf, but only when you want to—or when you lose control of your emotions. It will be difficult at first, as the wolf seeks to take you, especially when the moon is full. But it will grow easier in time, as you make your will stronger and stronger. It is the best I can do for you."

He closed his eyes, drew a deep breath. "Thank you, Mamma Louisa." Then he opened his eyes and gazed steadily at her. "I'm sorry. For what my great-grandfather did to Alana."

"I'm sorry for what my great-grandmother did to avenge her." She gave him a nod, then took the gun from Jenny's hand. "I take the Hinkle-man from here, *chère*."

"Alone? But..."

Mamma Louisa gave her a smile, and nodded at something beyond her where Hinkle sat near the tree. Jenny turned, and saw the entire group of Voudons gathered in the woods nearby, awaiting their priestess's word. "My people, they know when I need them. Don't you worry." She nodded, and two strong men rushed forward, gripping Hinkle's arms and hauling him to his feet and back through the woods.

Mamma Louisa followed and the entire group vanished into the woods.

Samuel got to his feet. He looked like some kind of woodland god, with the white cotton knotted around his hip and his magnificent chest bare. He reached for her.

Jenny went into his arms, relishing the feel of his skin against her body, against her face as she laid her cheek on his shoulder.

He held her for a long time, then he said, "Did you mean what you said before? That you love me?"

She shivered all over. "Yes. I don't know how it happened so fast, Samuel, but it did. I love you."

"Even though I—I might occasionally run with Mojo, and howl at the moon?"

She trailed a hand over his face. "Mojo might have to take a few months off, while he heals. But after that, I may just join you." She stared deeply into his deep, brown eyes. "I love all you are, Samuel. All of you. I love your wolf side, your wild side, and I swear I'll always keep your secrets."

"Just as I'll keep yours. I love you, too, Jenny."

He kissed her deeply, passionately, held her tight to his body as he lowered them both to the ground. As he peeled away her clothes, and she tugged at the shawl that covered him, Jenny heard him growl. She growled right back, and nipped his lip with her teeth as he moved his body to cover hers.

Somewhere in the distance, she heard a wolf howl.

And a few minutes later, she joined in the song.