

When Were & How!

Moon Struck



JEANETTE RALEIGH

When, Were, & Howl
Episode 1: Moon Struck

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Books by Jeanette Raleigh

The Zombie Cowboy Two-Step

Death Knell (as J.B. Raleigh)

Dark Visions: First Love

When, Were, & Howl: Bundled

Episodes 1, 2, & 3 (Each Episode is
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When, Were, & Howl 3: A Tryst of Fate

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Fallen: A Steampunk Novel

Chapter 1

After a full moon weekend spent locked in the closet for my own safety, I walked into the office on Monday morning to find my monitor broken on the floor with stapler, desk caddy, and papers strewn about. A sane person would think the office had been broken into. A sane person would be wrong.

I clamped down on my anxiety and tried to think of where to start. My brain was still in a muddle while I came down from my animal high. The full moon doesn't lend itself to clear thinking.

That's when I heard the noise.

The first sound was a growl, low and deep. That would be my boss, in his office doing...well. I might have been afraid hearing that kind of growl but for the hard bumps that followed and the whine. The man sounded like a wolf even in human form.

Then I heard sloshing kiss sounds and moans, feminine. His moon tryst was still in the office at ten o'clock in the morning?!! I felt a few pity tears rise up and pushed them down hard. No way would Rob see me crying at work. No way in hellooooo...what was that on my desk?

I stepped over my upside-down inbox and stared at the desk, *my* desk.

Claw marks gouged along the top and a few wolf hairs stuck on the corner where *someone* had chewed up the leg of the desk. I swallowed rage when the woman in the adjoining office giggled. Would this be the rest of my life? I spend the moon night locked away, panicked and terrified only to walk into an office that smelled of wet fur. To top it all off, I have to deal with THIS?

The tears started to flow then, and I grabbed my purse and headed for the door. Rob could do without me for the day. The real estate market had tanked so hard, he could probably do without me for the year, maybe even the decade. Another growl and a giggle and I

couldn't get out fast enough.

I must have made noise opening the door because just as I was slipping out, a deep voice bellowed. "Jen, is that you out there?"

Sighing and wiping my face, I smiled just to give my voice the impression that I was in a good mood and called out with as bright a cheer as I could muster. "I'm here."

I heard the sounds of whispered voices and furniture moving. That would be Rob, no doubt looking for his pants or shirt or underwear. After a few seconds, muffled laughter as the woman no doubt realized how badly ripped up her clothes had become. This isn't the first time Rob brought the full moon to the

office. But this was the first time I had a front row seat.

Apparently sex on a desk is much more thrilling than out on the lawn. Of all the weres, wolves tend to release more pheromones than the average shifter and are often found humping the nearest leg when it comes to changing shape. I'm not being fair. I've never actually seen a werewolf hump a leg. I've just seen and smelled the office once Rob has finished with it after a full moon.

Rob opened the door, letting the slight blonde with disheveled hair walk out first. That's being too polite—she looked like she put a finger in an

electrical outlet. Chivalry is not dead. I think he was hiding behind her. Her blouse was a button off and the woman had to hold the collar to keep her breasts from falling out. I would no doubt find that button when I helped Rob clean his office.

“Hi Jen.” Rob smiled, a sweet sheepish smile that would have melted any anger I might have felt on an everyday normal kind of day. Not today. I started shaking, speechless, afraid that if I did say a word, it would start with tears and end with throwing sharp or breakable objects in the general direction of Rob’s head. When I didn’t answer, Rob said, “I’m really sorry about your desk. Full moon. You know

how it gets sometimes.”

Only I didn't know. I really didn't. I pretended because the alternative was to humiliate myself and tell Rob what kind of animal-were I was.

I nodded and looked away. The woman looked at me somewhat proud and embarrassed all at once and said, “Call me.”

Rob glanced from her to me in silence.

The woman frowned when she noticed.

Staking her claim, she grabbed the lapels of his disheveled shirt and pulled him to her, throwing her lips on his. If I weren't so angry, I might have been

impressed. I cleared my throat. Rob glance sideways over her head with a raised eyebrow, and I got the distinct impression he was showing off or something. Was he trying to make me jealous? Because it was *so* working.

I averted my eyes before the simple liplock could turn into a potential replay of the office demolition, but Rob gently set his hands on her shoulders and pushed her firmly away.

The woman giggled and Rob said, “Take care.” Which in wolf terms meant, *Goodbye and don't expect a call.*

After the woman left, I stared at the desk. “Rob, you...” I broke off. I'd seen Rob's office demolished a half dozen times over the past few years, but this

was the first time for my desk.

“Only once.” Rob wore a button-up short sleeve shirt, slightly wrinkled and deep blue which showed off his arms and shoulders. Rob had that classic handsome look, and all that howling at the moon kept him in shape.

Speaking had become difficult with the ache in my throat which was sure to give way to the flood of tears hovering in the back ground. Rob would ask why and in no way would I answer. I knelt by the desk, turning my back to him and started to pick up papers with a rage that left my hands shaking.

Rob knelt beside me, picking up a stapler and a pile of folders. His

previous happy smile darkened now to concern. I didn't mean to make him feel bad. I mean last night was probably one of the best nights of his life and I shouldn't take it out on him. I just hated that most *weres* were totally free on moon nights while some of us weren't. And I had a crush on Rob that I'd been trying to get over since the day I was hired.

Rob put a hand over mine as I righted a plastic bin. "Are you okay?"

I started bawling. Not a light polite shedding of tears. They all came out at once. These were not sad tears. Not at all. Sometimes a woman cries anger when she can't strike out. I didn't want to hurt Rob. It's just that the office had

always been a place that was mine, where I wasn't judged for being what I am. I never felt embarrassed with Rob. Sniffling, I said with sharp biting words. "Did you have sex on my desk?"

I couldn't tell Rob the other half—how jealous I was of the beautiful werewolves he paraded into the office. Why should I want him anyway?

"No. Of course not."

"Fine." I spat the words out as the tears rose again.

"Jen, we need to talk." Rob really didn't like to talk. So when he said that, I knew it was a concession to the fact that I needed to talk. Rob was raised a gentleman even if he didn't pull it off

himself three days out of the month.

We found an unlittered space on the floor and sat with our backs to the wall, the way children would sit. *Weres* tend to be less formal than non-were adults. I've always wanted to ask certain questions about things like that but then someone would start asking a few questions of their own. And I didn't admit to being a mouse, not anymore.

“What’s going on? I’ve never seen you this unhappy before?” Rob looked comfortable on the floor, even after a night of rough sex. Usually I’m better at hiding my dissatisfaction with his choice in women. Of course, usually they were gone by the time I arrived.

“Nothing. I’m just having a bad

day.”

“My last assistant enjoyed late Moon-days.” That’s what the weres called the morning-afters. Everyone tended to sleep in.

“Was she a *were*, too?” I always wondered about Rob’s last assistant. Rob trained me in the job himself, so I figured her departure was fairly abrupt.

“A wolf, like me.” Rob chuckled. “Sometimes she called in the next day. Not often enough for me to say anything about it.”

“Maybe one of these days I’ll call in and see how you like cleaning the office by yourself.” If I sounded bitter, I think in this case I had a right to be. Had

Rob's desk been marked by another *were* the way mine was, he would have thrown it out and bought a new one. I contemplated doing my work on the floor.

Rob looked hurt. I didn't even feel guilty, I was still so mad. What he said next really threw me. "I know you're a *were* too."

"What?" I squeaked. I thought I had hidden it from everyone except my family and closest friends.

"Helloo? Werewolf? I can smell it on you, but I can't quite place the animal. You don't seem to enjoy it much. You should get out and live a little."

My face flamed with shame. I thought about giving my notice, but Rob

was already doing me a favor by keeping me on. We hadn't sold a house all month and spent most of the day playing the stock market with what Rob called Monopoly money. It was his play money, real enough, and he played to win. I actually loved my job. But now I wondered when I would leave. It was a matter of time before he found out the rest. I would never be able to live that down. Not with a wolf.

Shrugging, I told a half-truth. "It's got nothing to do with being a *were*. My grandma wants us all to come over to dinner Saturday. I just dread it and didn't really enjoy the weekend."

Rob looked relieved that the blame

for my mood didn't rest solely on his shoulders. "Oh, well, that's easy enough. Don't go."

"I've learned the hard way not to avoid family functions. Grandma took special pleasure in bringing the whole family to my two bedroom apartment one weekend when I didn't show for one of her family gatherings."

"You're kidding!" Rob's thousand-watt grin made me smile in spite of myself.

"Not at all. I was legitimately sick and while I'd heard stories from my parents about missing family night, I was the first to learn that this kind of treatment was generational."

"Your family certainly sounds like

wolves. Mine is close, too.”

“Close? The matriarchs in my family are control freaks with nothing better to do than make their progeny suffer.” My anger burnt out, I sighed and rubbed my eyes.

“Are we good?” Rob had used his allotment of words for the day.

“We’re good.” I wanted to clean up before unlocking the office. Many of our customers were shifters, and while everyone else adjusted to the special hours without much fuss, having anyone walk into an office that looked ransacked was an embarrassment we could do without.

I nodded. “Can I have a new desk?”

Maybe we can keep this one as a spare for the next time you go crazy?”

Rob's eyes crinkled and I found my heart in my throat. Falling in love with the boss is a bad idea. In case I didn't get it, I reminded myself again by peering at the mess in the room. “We can go late this afternoon. We'll have to get you a new monitor anyway.” Rob cleared his throat, looking at the one sideways on the floor. I've actually got a table cover you can use in the meantime if you want.”

When he admitted this, my eyes jerked up at him. “You have a table-cover for the desks? This isn't the first time?” He buys used monitors at a tiny independent computer store around the

corner knowing they're wolf fodder and has a mini-server in the coat closet for his own computer so he won't accidentally destroy it. I guess I shouldn't be surprised by the tablecloth.

It was Rob's cheeks on fire this time. "I've tried to be careful with your desk. I..." Rob was at a loss for words.

"Is that why your last admin quit?"

"She smelled so good. Every time I walked into the office with my girlfriends, I seemed to find her desk the most suitable. I mean, it was just a piece of furniture."

"One she worked at every day." I retorted. Rob's blue eyes widened every

so slightly, and somehow he managed to look ashamed and amused at the same time. “The tablecover will cover the scratches.”

“Are you sure? If it smells or anything, we’ll go to the furniture store and get you a replacement right away. I have a one o’clock appointment and want to get the office in shape before then, but maybe we can slip time in to go desk shopping before.”

“You’re a werewolf. You know it smells. And see? You left some of your fur behind.”

“Okay, we can fit a trip into our schedule.”

“Hey, I know about all your appointments and you don’t have

anything on the calendar.” Rob wasn’t the sort to lie, so I believed him. It’s just that I’m his assistant and with the lack of business we’d been having, you’d think I’d know.

“I met someone in the market for a house last night. Not to worry. He’s were-friendly.”

“We’d better get the office in shape then. I really would like that new desk before we have visitors.” I couldn’t believe anyone would sit at a desk with Rob’s wolf scent all over it, especially a person with such an evolved sense of smell, but it occurred to me that the previous assistant perhaps knew Rob’s weaknesses and played on them, maybe

even enjoying his scent.

I imagined her rubbing her own scent on the desk near wolf time and driving him crazy. If I changed into a descent animal, I'd consider the same thing. That's a lie. I wouldn't really. I'm too much of a prude, but the idea is thrilling.

Speaking of scent, I may not be a wolf with extraordinary olfactory nerves, but Rob smells good, a spicy warmth that envelopes the office. There is no way I'm going to work at a desk that Rob's been near. Even mice go into heat.

Chapter 2

After we righted equipment and returned staplers and tape dispensers to their proper locations, I tackled the files. The awkwardness had lifted, and Rob and I were back to talking as if nothing happened. I don't hold a grudge long.

Picking up a stack of sticky notes, I glanced up. Our eyes met and suddenly I imagined those brightly colored little squares in places no man would want them and started giggling.

With broad shoulders and deep blue eyes, Rob probably would have melted

the sticky right off the paper anyway. I giggled harder. Rob glanced up from righting a chair. “What?”

Some things were not meant to be said out loud. “I’m just having an Ali moment.” Alison Carter or Ali for short is my best friend, and if I’m thinking of a man covered in sticky notes, it’s her fault—somehow.

Rob cleared his throat, uncertain how to change a subject that has not yet even been broached. Of course, as a real estate agent, Rob was a great verbal wordsmith. “We don’t have an appointment until one. Your desk would go perfectly in the corner of my office. We’ll put a chair there for show.”

“That would be good.”

What I really wanted to say was, *Do you need me to smear some perfume on that desk so that you'll keep using it and stay the heck away from mine?*

I enjoy spending time with Rob. He's a bit of a cut-up. Funny. Not mean-funny the way some people are, but goofy funny. No one would think it looking at him. He looks great in jeans, but only wears them on Friday. His chest is broad and he has an easy charm that makes him a ready target for all of the single women in the city. He doesn't seem at all like the kind of guy who might be interested in geeky pursuits or in making funny faces. He spends weekends painting model ships and

swimming. Get him alone and away from the business crowd, and he cracks me up.

He really turned on the charm at the furniture store. I know he felt bad about me walking in on well, him and that other werewolf. He was trying to make it better for me. I forgave him without trying. It's not like we're dating or anything. It's not like I have any claim to his heart.

I shut off the part of myself that thought I might actually care what he did on moon nights and concentrated on finding a good solid desk.

But I wasn't beyond teasing him. Rob pointed out a beautiful desk with a dark walnut finish. It was better than the

one he had in his office. “What do you think of that one?”

I trailed my fingers along the side of the desk, weighing his height and frame to the size, “It's a bit big, don't you think?”

“It's perfect. You'll have room for all of your files.” Rob grinned.

He set himself up for it, so I asked, “How big do you suppose it is?”

Rob rattled off a few numbers by the foot.

I nodded and with a cheerful smile said, “Hmmm...maybe I *could* find fitted sheets in that size. I'll take it.”

He didn't quite know how to take that joke. He laughed, but as we were

walking out of the store, a strange look passed his face and he turned to me, “You were just kidding?”

“About what?” I asked.

“Putting sheets on the desk.” Rob held the door open for me, looking a little troubled.

“Stay away from my desk.” I was firm, but kind and gave him a dazzling smile when I said it. It was the tone my grandmother used when one of us kids misbehaved and the same smile. Too bad I didn't have any peanut butter cookies to go with it.

“Yes, Ma'am.”

By the afternoon the office looked reasonably put together with all of the large items, computers, staplers and tape

dispensers, in their proper place and wall hangings rehung. Yes, *someone*. I won't mention names since we all know it's Rob, but *someone* pulled the calendar and a motivational poster off the wall.

The furniture store delivered my desk, and restoring the office was actually a lot of fun. Right on the hour, Francis Edwards, vampire extraordinaire, strolled in.

In case you were wondering, I'm bitter about vampires, too. They get great press in the movies, but most of it is spin. No one in their right mind would choose to kiss a walking corpse. I'm sorry, but there, I said it. A vampire is a

blood-drinking dead thing that needs someone else's life to animate itself.

From what an acquaintance told me at an office Christmas party (the job before this one), vampires weren't interested in kissing humans either, unless they got something out of it, and I'm not talking sex here. She acquired this knowledge through personal experience of the kind I hope never to have.

Anyway, my own personal feelings aside, Francis definitely looked the part, jet black hair, pasty complexion, and lips far too deep a shade of red for my liking. He must have had lunch before coming. I guess I should be grateful.

Rob opened the door with that ever-

charming smile lighting up his face.

“Come in. Can I get you something to drink?”

I wanted to shout at Rob. *Are you crazy? You don't just offer a vampire beverages. I've had a bad enough day without being someone's slurpy.* Guess I was wrong because Francis accepted a coke.

Rob likes me to sit in on his appointments, generally to take notes and get an impression of the customer's needs. I'm pretty good at that. I fidgeted under the gaze of ancient eyes. Francis stared a lot, and I had the feeling that I was just a speck of curious flotsam in the chain of life compared to a vampire

like Francis who by legend has probably lived a thousand years.

In reality, I have no idea how long a vampire lives. What I do know is that sunlight doesn't affect them much, other than to do what any other source of light does and point out the flaws a reanimated corpse has, such as a certain inflexibility in the facial muscles, kind of like botox.

The plastic vampire face really gives people the heebie jeebies. I tried very hard not to stare at Francis, particularly the lines in his face, but I caught a glimpse now and then with my not-staring. I'm pretty sure that's the real reason vamps prefer the night-time. That and people get drunk at night and a drunk

is generally easy to feed off of.

I'm not sure how many people have been to an open casket funeral. I went to my grandfather's. He was missing the essence of him, that spark of spirit or soul that living people have. Watching Francis was like looking at someone who had lost that essence and yet still talked and moved and even drank soda.

When I saw the way Francis moved his tongue around the soda can, I finally figured out why creative types started the fascination with vampire sex.

Francis knew how to work his tongue. Still, cold and dead is cold and dead.

When Francis told us what he was looking for, I'm sure my face reflected

the shock. He told us that he wanted to buy a ranch. “I need enough acreage to raise a couple of horses, cattle, chickens, dogs, the whole works.”

The whole works, as if he were ordering a burger. The look on Rob’s face was priceless. He recovered quickly, though. Me? I’m afraid my mouth just hung there a few moments wondering if I would ever shut it again. I said, “Chickens?”

Francis smiled, disconcerting on a vampire with those plastic-looking laugh-lines, but the smile was in his eyes, so I guess it was genuine enough. “It’s been a life-long dream. Once I joined the undead, I thought the dream lost. Vampires are not known to be

ranchers. But I'm just not satisfied with life as it is and I want to make a change."

Now that fascinated me. I had to ask. "What are you going to do with the cows?"

Rob scowled at me, but I pretended not to see. Hey, I was curious.

"Whatever is normally done with cows. I'll raise them for beef." Francis spoke with that smooth knowledgeable affectation that most people take when they are pretending confidence they don't have.

I nodded without further comment. I wouldn't cost Rob this commission even if he did make wild passionate love on

my desk with someone else, leaving wolf hair and spots to show for it.

Francis went on and on about his requirements, and I asked pertinent questions every now and then while writing everything down on a yellow pad. Rob did most of the interviewing. That's what it's like, interviewing for a perfect house. Our discussion went smoothly and Rob showed Francis a few properties online. A brown hair was stuck to the monitor, and I felt a wild giggle when Rob brushed it off, shuffling papers as he did so to draw attention to left hand while his right hand did the deed. To his credit, he didn't even seem the slightest bit embarrassed.

Chapter 3

I knew better than to skip out on Grandma's dinner. I showed up promptly at five. Grandma opened the door with a welcome smile. "Jen, how good to see you. It's been ages." Our last dinner was two months ago. She opened her arms and gave me the standard family hug-greeting.

I looked around the room with an internal sigh. Most of the family sat perched in the living room in a pre-dinner prelude to the torture some poor soul would later endure. I could only pray it wasn't me. They took turns.

"How are you?" That from cousin

Nate.

“Fine.” I tried not to smile sarcastically. I needed to practice my smiles in the mirror so I seem more genuine in my discomfort.

My brother walked out of the kitchen, and I waited for the punch line. He always had one. “Hey, Jen, we got you some string cheese.” He tossed me the package. At least Mom put an end to the jokes about traps. I think she feared that one day my animal self would forget and take cheese from a trap or maybe just imagining me stuck to a tiny board with a broken neck was enough. Hey, I don’t carry the plague like some rodents I can mention.

“Are you, like, ten? It’s not even

funny anymore.” I hung my coat in the closet.

Grandma never stepped in when Todd started in on me. Mom did in a passive kind of way. “You are too old to tease your sister.” Todd was a wolf, former basketball star, and he graduated summa cum laude with a business degree. I’m the mouse dropout of the family. Dad put an arm on Mom’s shoulders and looked disappointed. I’m hoping his disappointment was aimed at Todd.

I once overheard Grandma’s lecture to my mother, and she clearly said that if my mom had conceived on the first night of the full moon, I wouldn’t have turned

out the way I did. I was six. It didn't take me long to realize why my family was ashamed of me. I made the childish mistake of talking about my were-animal with a couple of wolf-children down the street. After proudly telling them I was a mouse, the round of teasing lasted years.

Just the other day, I saw one of those neighbor kids at the grocery store and ducked back down the aisle to avoid an uncomfortable conversation. I'm hoping they mostly got over it, but the humiliation still sticks with me. Most people think I'm a regular non-were human unless they smell the animal on me after the moon the way Rob did. And I'm happy to let them believe it.

After a few minutes of getting

reacquainted with the family, Grandma called dinnertime and we went into the dining hall to eat. The table we ate around was massive and the floor plans for Grandpa's dream house were clearly built around the family's need to entertain large family dinners. I think it's a pack thing, and maybe that's why I'm such a misfit. Everyone else seems to enjoy the get-togethers.

Instead of grace, we go around the table youngest to oldest and say something we're thankful for. My niece, Piper, started with innocent importance. "I'm grateful for my puppy, Truffles." (The irony is that family pets tend to get along with *weres* although my brother

was never allowed a cat or dog for obvious reasons. When I change, I'm not much larger than the average mouse.)

And away we go. I'm fairly young in our family structure, so my turn came quickly. I froze. What am I grateful for? Two months ago I said my job, and while I could always repeat my answer, it wasn't true anymore, was it?

Todd tapped his fork on the plate. "Trick question? Hurry up, dinner's getting cold."

Annoyed, I said the first thing that came to mind. "Flannel pajamas." I stared Todd down until his turn. He picked his girlfriend Camilla. A few congratulations from family members who were hearing about her for the first

time and then the rest of the family finished the ritual. That ordeal over, we started eating.

Most of the conversation revolved around Camilla and an invitation for her to join the next family dinner. I thought I'd gotten away free and clear until Grandma said. "So, Jen, have you found anyone to bring home to the family?" Grandma alternated between siblings.

"No, no one special." I hated the way everyone looked at me with pity. I have my flaws, but I'm all right. My face is pretty, even if I do shift into a mouse.

Uncle Jack made things worse. "You don't have to hide from us. There's no shame in dating a non-shifter,

as long as he's good to you.”

Good old Uncle Jack. He didn't mean to dump propane onto a roaring fire, he just had a knack for explosive material.

“I'm not embarrassed. I'm just not dating anyone.”

Grandma started to argue with me, as if she knew. “Now, Jen, we're a family...”

“I'm not...and for the record, I'm not embarrassed to be a mouse either. It's not like I can help it.”

The table grew quiet. The younger kids were looking around trying to figure out the silence. Between the plate staring contests and uncomfortable glances, I figure I finally brought the raw nerve out

into the open. I'd spent so many years playing along, but I was tired of it. "May I be excused?"

Those two seconds between asked and answered seemed an eternity. If I had stormed out without protocol, the next three years worth of gatherings would be filled with added innuendo and jokes, unless Todd miraculously grew up.

While Grandma dished lemon meringue pie with slightly brown crusted tops, I washed the dinner dishes, scrubbing a little more dramatically than required. Putting a piece of lemon meringue aside for me, Grandma patted my shoulder. "You'll find the right

person when the time is right.”

My sister, Andrea, brought in a few more plates and grabbed a towel to dry the ones I had already started. We hand-washed at Grandma’s house.

“You’re being a bit oversensitive. Grandma asks everyone those questions.” She said in a low voice.

“It’s different for you. You can give a running tally of your job and your husband’s accomplishments and your kid’s grade points. Mom and Dad should have stopped with you.”

“Jen!” Andrea sounded truly horrified. Maybe she was.

I shrugged and changed the subject. “Can I ask you something?”

Andrea slid the plates into the

cupboard. “Sure.”

“Have you ever, you know, done it with a wolf in wolf form?”

“Well, sure, that’s part of the experience.” Andrea tucked her hair behind her ear with a far-off smile, probably thinking of a few rolls in the grass.

“What if you married a non-shifter? I mean with wolves being so..ummm.”

Andrea laughed. “You should probably ask someone else. I’ve always been active on the full moon.”

“Why is that? Is the desire really that bad?”

“Yeah. Not all full moons, but during the spring, it’s hard. That’s why

Mom and Dad were so careful with us at moon-time when we hit puberty.”

“But a wolf wouldn’t force himself on another wolf, right?”

“No, of course not. Unless they are human rapists. We’re still people underneath the fur. You know that. Believe me there are plenty of wolves willing, and when you find your mate, everything changes.”

“How so? Don’t you worry that you’ll be cheated on with all of the hormones?” Again, thinking of Rob.

Andrea shook her head. “The desire is focused on your mate. Werewolves don’t sleep around once they find the person they are meant to be with.”

Andrea stopped drying and turned with a

frown on her face. “Where is this coming from?”

“Nowhere, I was just curious.” I twisted the dishrag and looked out the window.

“You’re in love with a wolf!” Andrea grinned, her voice carrying outside the kitchen.

“Shh...I am not.” I whispered. “I was just curious.”

“Look,” Andrea pulled me close and put her mouth against my ear, whispering. “Don’t ever tell anyone I told you this, but there is a mix of herbs we can take to reduce desire during moon-times.”

“Why is it a secret?” I whispered

back.

“Werewolves are supposed to run the pack and find their mate, but nowadays women have careers and don’t necessarily want to mate right away.”

“I may be part of the family, but I’m not part of the pack.” I released the drain a little too hard and splashed water up. I’m twenty-four years old and this is the first time I’ve heard about how the full moon affects wolves and special herbs.

“Maybe not pack, but you need to mate just like everyone else. Don’t think the interest stops when you get married, though. You know how it is.” Yes, I did. Like being a tiny bug in a giant spider’s web, and every strand tugged by a

different member of the family.

“Why didn’t anyone ever say anything? I’m just finding all this stuff out now?”

Andrea bit her lip and smiled, a habit she had when something amused her. “You never really seemed to have the same problems other *weres* had. And you take everything so personally I don’t think anyone wanted to bring it up.”

“I don’t.” My protests were loud enough to get the attention of the family and Andrea shushed me.

“Come over tomorrow night and we’ll talk more.” Andrea glanced over her shoulder at the table. “Too many wolf ears. Yeah, that means you.” She

said to Piper on her way back into the dining room. Piper giggled and squirmed.

“What are you going to talk about Mama?”

“Aunt Jen has some problems at work that we’re going to discuss.” She thought she was covering well for me, but I turned a deep red and gave myself away. Andrea saw my face and pressed her lips together with an impish grin.

Chapter 4

Another Monday reared its ugly head much sooner than I possibly could have imagined. Sometimes it feels like there are two Mondays in the week...they seem to come with such speed. My stomach was in knots when I showed up at the office. I'd been that way for a whole week.

Andrea didn't help. *I'm in love with him.*

Now I knew. That whole deep depression every time he cuddled up to a hot wolf was more related to my feelings for him than my own self-hatred. I dreaded work, not knowing what to

say, dropping paper clips in mid-clip, spilling cocoa on the brand new keyboard, and in general turning red and blustery when Rob asked anything, which goes back to the not 'knowing what to say' part.

I suppose I should have faced my feelings long ago.

And here I was again, feeling awkward, and rather put out that a week had flashed by so quickly. In three more Mondays, I might get to experience the same joy of rebuilding the office. I thought of putting dog repellent at the entrance. I wondered if that stuff really worked. Of course, Rob would know not only what it was, but who was responsible for it. Not the best idea. But

I needed a good idea and fast.

“Morning Sunshine.” Rob strode into the office with laptop case in one hand and bag of doughnuts in the other. Did I mention how much I love him? He brings doughnuts when I'm down.

Somehow my lips quirked up. Maybe I should have made him work for my good mood, but I'm just not that kind of person. I gave my best cheery greeting. “Good Morning.”

This was the day that we were going to have it out. That brow of Rob's doesn't just furrow over anything. He took off his jacket and unbuttoned his sleeves, rolling them up without a word. The last time he did *that* the

conversation turned to the color pink. It sounds weird, but Rob asked me to please not wear a particular pink outfit, which is rather a personal request considering that he's my boss and believe me, there is *nothing* wrong with that outfit.

Anyway, with furrowed brow and unbuttoned sleeves, I wondered if this conversation would cover black pencil skirts or the awkwardness between us. I was betting on the awkwardness.

“I thought maybe we could talk.” Rob said in the tone that conjured images of dental drills and bleeding ulcers. What he really meant was that he'd sit very still and wait until I spilled my innermost thoughts in the awkward

silence.

I tucked a strand of curly hair behind my ear and practiced my best Homecoming Princess smile. It was a dream I'd had once, to be popular and loved. I'd practiced in the mirror for weeks, just in case by some miracle I had been picked, but the pack ruled and queen and court were combination wolves and human.

Not a mouse, raccoon, ferret, or porcupine to be found. If nothing else, I gained a killer smile, which came in handy at times like this. "Sure." I said. "Okay."

Rob turned and walked into his office. Safe in my leather chair, hiding

behind my rather spacious new guilt-purchased desk, I waited. He probably wanted me to follow him in, but I was just ornery enough to stay where I was. Boss or no boss, I needed a better work environment.

When I didn't immediately follow him into his office, Rob rolled his chair out. A werewolf giving up the high ground, now that *was* something. If nothing else, Rob liked me well enough to keep me.

“Look, I'm sorry about last week. If I could do it over, I would.”

I wanted to say, “It's okay.” But it wasn't, or “You're forgiven” but for what? It's not like I was his girlfriend or wife or anything important in his life. I

shrugged, “Bad timing.”

“Bad timing? You've been tripping around me for a week. What is going on?”

But he knew. I knew he knew. He knew he knew. He probably even knew I knew he knew. And now I was a little mouse running on a little wheel in my mind wondering if I could safely jump off. I love you, Rob? The funniest thing happened over the past few months...I fell in love. Hey, did you hear the one about the wolf and the mouse.

But did he like me back? Ah, the question for the ages. And I was of the firm opinion that happy chat or not, he would make the first move. And that

move would probably include the word 'friends' or maybe the notorious, 'I'll call you'.

It was in his eyes. He wanted me to tell him I cared for him, so that he could have it all out in the open and let me down easy. But how? We spend hours alone together, and believe me this love-in-the-dark strangeness is nothing compared to the strangeness that would occur if I brought it out into the open.

“I'm just having some trouble with this whole office liaison thing.” The truth in its entirety wrapped with a pretty bow, and with a safe 'I' word.

Rob didn't say a word. Not a single word. He just sat there staring at me.

“Well?” I couldn't stand him just

sitting.

That seemed to wake him up.

“Why? Do you have feelings for me?”

Rob asked.

He went there. He really did. That's a wolf for you. No sense for cowering in the corner and waiting to see what happens.

“Feelings?” I sputtered. “Are we going to talk about feelings?” This was the moment when a witty rejoinder would have come in handy.

Unfortunately, I'm not fast on my feet.

“Our conversations used to feel comfortable.”

This time I think my smile was rueful, and my eyes probably had that

puppy dog look which is an unfortunate side-effect of caring. “I know. I'm sorry. Can't we just put this conversation on hold awhile?”

Yeah, like forever?

Rob nodded once and stood. “Has the new ad come through for approval?”

Phew. Back on solid ground. “Next Tuesday.”

We both knew the answer to that one, but it put the conversation firmly back into the business sphere where it belonged and desperately needed to be.

Chapter 5

“Can you do me a favor?” Famous last words. Or more accurately, the last words would be *Sure, what do you want me to do?* And I would do whatever was requested which would lead to chaos and an untimely demise.

I decided to play this request cautiously. “The last time I did a favor for you I was up to my butt in snow without hat, gloves or boots. I could have gotten frostbite.”

“That was five years ago. Besides, it’s just for a few days. I just want you to

hold onto something for me.” We sat in a coffee shop, the kind with green walls and hanging lights and a counter full of baked goods and a coffee fountain. The smell of coffee and cinnamon wrapped me in comfort. Too bad my best friend had to ruin the mood.

I would do almost anything for Ali. My record, criminal and otherwise, proves it. She looked at me with pleading eyes that would have been more fitting coming from a deer than a raccoon. We can't all be wolves.

Ali and I got the short end of the magic pile, but I'm the only one complaining. Ali thinks being small allows for heightened entertainment. Of course, she is a raccoon, and tends to

have the playful and somewhat rascally nature such a creature would have.

“Is it illegal?” I could think of several things Ali would ask me to hold onto, and every one of them ended with a jail sentence.

“No, of course not.” Ali had the good sense to look offended (purely for the benefit of the people in the coffee shop overhearing the conversation). Ali and I both knew her tendency to stray outside the lines of legality, and I was always trying to drag her back into a safe and sane world.

“Dangerous?” I trust my friend—mostly. But I know her too well. Ali had that guilty look about her.

Ali looked out the window, seemingly lost in thought. I knew she was avoiding my question.

“Well?” I wanted to say no instead of qualifying the request, but for all the trouble Ali has gotten me into, I have to admit a part of me enjoyed it, except the evening we spent at the police station after taking a nice long dip in the public pool—after hours of course.

I love swimming and the breaking-in part was actually loads of fun. Waiting for Mom and Dad to show up and community service; however, was not. Not to mention Grandma’s lectures in front of the family for two hours over the course of two separate family

dinners. She then asked me to invite Ali over for the third dinner.

I hid Ali from Grandma for a half-year after that incident worried that Grandma would harass her, and Ali would start laughing when Grandma's voice started squeaking with displeasure. Grandma's a wolf through and through, but I come by my voice honestly. And that would be the end of the only friend I ever really had, at least the only one who knew the real me.

Ali habitually caused trouble. I had good reason to say no up front. She grinned at me, the toothy kind of grin that tells me she has been up to no good and I'm either the clean-up crew or going along for the ride and then leaned in,

whispering as if we were planning to rob a bank.

At least she answered the question honestly. “Yes.” It’s dangerous. Not the object itself, but where I got it. Definitely.”

“And where did you get it?” I tried to be nonchalant, but Ali and me were the kind of *Weres* who could change at will, independent of moon cycle, time of day, or anything else. Not that I enjoyed being a mouse, but sometimes being very small had advantages. Apparently being a raccoon is loads of fun. When I’m not jealous of wolves, I’m jealous of Ali and her raccoon form. At least she seemed to enjoy it.

“The creepy old guy that lives off Grady road.”

“The haunted house?” We both called it that, although personally I don’t believe in ghosts. It’s just an old Victorian with white paint peeling, dark windows, and gnarly trees out front.

“That’s the one. I think he’s a sorcerer.” Ali’s eyes lit up with enthusiasm and somewhere in those brown sparkles my fate had been written out, hopefully by hand and in pencil so that I could erase it and start again.

“And he just gave it to you?” This is where knowing your friends comes in handy.

“Well, no, not exactly.”

“Then you stole it.” I tried to look like Grandma then, but I’m afraid my eyes are not piercing enough.

“Kind of.”

“How is that not illegal?”

“Because it doesn’t belong to him.”

I made Ali backtrack and tell me the whole story. The gist of it was that she stole an amulet from a wizard that lives in the haunted house at the edge of Grady Way. Initially it was something of a lark. She liked breaking and entering as a raccoon to see what she could get away with. I think something of our animal natures comes out in human form as well, which leads me to believe that mice are not as timid as folklore would

make them out to be.

While in the house, Ali watched the wizard use the amulet to shapeshift. He was practicing different shapes. A rumor had been circulating in the were-community that one of our experienced shifters had lost their power to shift by some magic. Ali decided that the gossip must be true and waited until the house was empty to steal the amulet back.

And that's where I came in.

“So, you're afraid this guy will kill you, and you decided that I make a better target?”

“You do make a smaller target, but he saw my car and tracked me to my house and even accused me of taking it. Do you believe the nerve of that guy?”

Ali is not the most logical of individuals. She was truly and honestly offended.

My internal compass was pointing toward yes. I know it sounds crazy, but somehow I have enough of the mischief-maker in me to like the idea of stealing a wizard's toy or at least possessing a stolen wizard's toy. Instead I asked, "And if I said no?"

"I would sleep in my car for the next few weeks." I have to hand it to Ali. She always had a plan B, C, and D.

"Fine. I'll do it."

Ali pulled a paper bag out of her pocket and handed it to me under the table. Anyone watching would think we

were in the middle of a drug deal or something from the secrecy and glances we made around the coffee shop to make sure no one was looking.

I peeked inside. The amulet looked a bit like a lumpy rock hanging on a cord, not even a cool leather cord or a silver chain, It seriously looked like twine. Okay, so it wasn't valuable. Not only would the keeper of the ugly little talisman not want it back, they'd probably thank Ali for stealing it. I carefully studied her face. Okay, so the joke wasn't on me. She was wearing her utterly serious expression. She really wanted my help.

Chapter 6

Rob wanted to take me with him to scout out a few of the properties he had found. He usually goes alone, but I figured he wanted to apologize for last week and lunch with an outing definitely qualified as a satisfactory apology. We had a small office, but when I was out, Rob called in Shelly, a retired real estate agent who helped him get started years ago. She didn't mind filling in a few times a month.

Spokane itself was a bit crowded for what Francis needed, but some of the outlying properties would work perfectly. The first few stops were too

small and immediately crossed off the list. Our third stop was a three bedroom one-story a few miles outside of Cheney.

The style was a seventies family home with a master and guest bathroom, newly updated. While we did the walk-through, I said, “This is a nice one.”

Rob looked out the window to view the pine trees scattered on the property. “Too close to the freeway.”

“You can’t even tell.” Well, I couldn’t, anyway.

“He’s a vampire. They’re a sensitive sort.” That figured. The great thing about picky buyers is that they know exactly what they want because they’ve researched, which also means that if you can find exactly what they

want, you'll make a sale. Finding the perfect place was the hard part.

I marked my page with an arrow down and wrote the word freeway next to it. "Okay, what's next?"

Rob grinned and his whole face lit up when he looked at me. I found my stomach do a flip flop. I sighed. This was Andrea's fault. She was the one who told me I was in love, otherwise, I wouldn't have noticed how good he looked this morning. Well, I would have noticed, but only in my heart, not my head. "About fifteen minutes away we've got a really good prospect."

I used to be really comfortable talking to Rob. We would talk about

music and books, the latest in politics or art. He was intelligent and fun. And now that I suddenly felt butterflies when he was next to me, I couldn't string two words together, even after the talk we had about feeling comfortable around each other. Awkward.

A long stretch of highway and all I could think of was how much I wanted to be back at the office hiding behind my computer. Rob noticed. How could he not? "What's going on?"

I sighed. Some conversations are just not appropriate for the workplace. Of course, Rob hasn't exactly followed workplace etiquette but that's not my problem. Well, it is...

I answered in the only way I could.

“Nothing.”

“Oh.” Rob seemed upset, and I felt sorry for him, but what else am I supposed to say? He took a deep breath, looked like he was about to say something, shook his head and then put his foot on the gas. We were up to ten miles over the speed limit and Rob’s limit is usually five over.

“You’re going a bit fast.”

I was trying to be helpful but he took it badly and growled under his breath.

Rob took a deep breath and then said, “Look, do you want to go with me on the next full moon?”

My heart leapt in my chest and I had

to force myself to stop and think. Just because I like a fellow does not mean that I should date him and look what happened to those other girls in the office. What the heck was going on here?

Rob asked me out on a full moon. The idea shocked me. I almost said yes—wanted to say yes. My Grandma's favorite phrase passed down from her grandma came to mind...fiddlesticks.

“Can't we go out on a day that isn't a full moon?” I felt a small constriction as my throat tightened. I wanted to cry, mostly because I knew things that Rob didn't. I knew that I belonged to the rodent, not the lupine family. And I also knew what werewolves thought of other

weres, the un-wolfy kind.

“How will we know if we’re meant for each other?” Rob asked.

“The same way anybody knows.” I stared out the window at the trees flashing by.

Rob’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. I wondered if he was angry with me. He turned his head for a moment, and the anguish I saw in his eyes shocked me. Rob was in love... with me. He swallowed and turned back to the road. “I thought. Never mind.”

We missed our turn, but I was in no way going to tell Rob that now. I softened my voice, wondering if I had hurt him somehow with my brusque

attitude. “Please tell me.”

“I just thought I saw something a few days ago.” Vague, but I knew what he meant and it scared me.

“And you think a tumble on the desks will tell you if it was real?” I tried to be cool, but my whole body ached with loneliness. I’d never been with another were. I’d kissed a few humans before, but that’s as far as it went. I wouldn’t even know what to do on a moon night. I hardly know what to do at any other time. I ached to be held.

Rob didn’t answer. He just stared at the road. I tried to relax, to lean back in my seat and pretend that it didn't matter. Well, at least I could get us going in the right direction. “We missed the turn a

few miles back.”

Rob nodded and pulled off the road along a muddy turn-off next to a field. He drove the whole way to the house in silence. I wanted to make it better, to say something to take back my sarcasm, but I knew that the end result would be the unveiling of my limitations and I've had enough rejection.

I needed help. Ali was definitely not the person to go to with a problem like this, but maybe my sister Andrea could help. I hoped so, because otherwise, I'd be spilling some top secret information for nothing.

Chapter 7

Andrea's husband worked as a night shift security guard at a manufacturing plant. The kids went to bed at nine, leaving Andrea plenty of time to explain the ways of the wolf to me. We hadn't been close as kids. Not that Andrea teased me the way Todd did or anything like that. Andrea was just too old to pay much attention. I spent time with my niece and nephew, of course, but I still felt awkward at times with the family.

I flopped on the sofa with a frown. "He asked me to go with him on moon night."

Andrea nodded, her eyes filled with

compassion. Andrea was the only one in my family who really understood how painful the mouse shifting thing was for me.

“I asked if we could go another night and then I insulted him so much that he didn’t even answer.”

“Jen, you can’t spend your life pushing people away. The shift is only three days out of the month and you let it run your life.”

“He asked how we would know if we were meant for each other. And you said that wolves run in packs on the full moon until they find their mate, so I’m obviously not mate material anyway. Besides, he brings his trysts to the office and he’s not exactly careful about who

finds out or how he leaves the office.” My heart ached even as I spoke. I knew she was right. Every person I knew had experienced at least a boyfriend, maybe even a few kisses. Sixteen and never been kissed? Try twenty-two. Okay, so I had kissed, but that was it.

“If he’s already caught your scent and you really *are* meant to be his mate, then all the time he spends with other wolves will only hurt you when he finally notices, and it looks like he has.”

“Didn’t it hurt *you*? Knowing how many other women Cal’s been with?” I didn’t understand the process and never wanted to. Now I had to find a way to let Rob down easy and somehow keep our

professional relationship comfortable.

“It really is different for you, isn’t it? What do you do on moon nights?”

Andrea turned on the lamp next to the easy chair and settled in. We were drinking tea, mostly because Andrea banned soda from the house, and my ginger ale addiction would have to wait.

I sipped the peppermint tea and shrugged. “I lock myself in the closet and wait for the change. I stay there until it’s done.”

“Why on earth would you do that?” Andrea looked horrified and I couldn’t understand why. She had been part of the moon night rituals after all.

“I always have.”

“But you’re not a child anymore.”

Andrea looked shocked and I remember now that she left the house while I was still in junior high. How could she know that my moon habits hadn't changed?

“It's not safe. I'm the smallest were-type and any number of things could happen to me.” The oddest thing was that Ali often talked me into changing to mouse form outside the full moon. I didn't mind being a mouse as long as the world wasn't full of werewolves.

“That sounds like dad.” Andrea's thin grimace and her frown gave away exactly what she thought about my self-imposed prison.

“You've never had a wolf trap you

between his paws. I snuck out once and felt more like a chew toy than an adventurer.” Years and years ago as an adolescent mouse, I made my great escape which ended with a terrifying moment when some jerk of a wolf decided to mess with me. For the wolf it was all in fun, but when your entire body is the size of someone’s mouth, such play is excruciating.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything? We could have guarded you or something.”

I never intended to give away the humiliation I felt at overhearing what Grandma really thought of me. I kept my feelings of inadequacy as close as a heartbeat for so long that when I started

talking, it felt that my throat would close up from the dust of disuse. Somehow I managed to keep going. I told Andrea everything. My fears. My faults. How I got by on Moon nights.

When I finished, the compassion in Andrea's eyes gave me some comfort. "I'm sorry. I knew some of the kids picked on you, but I didn't realize how much it has affected you. Frankly, I was always jealous."

"You, what?" I stared at her. Jealous of me? What crazy world was this?

"You change at will and into a form that no one else has. The reason everyone teased you is because they

secretly wanted to be a mouse, too. When you and Ali got in trouble for sneaking into the classrooms after hours and drawing wolf butts all over the chalkboards, people in *my* school were talking about it. And believe me, it was with the kind of awe reserved for hot guys in leather jackets.”

Hmmm...I was cool, at least to someone. Why couldn't anyone have ever told me?

I remembered the story she was talking about. Ali and I were caught by virtue of hair, specifically raccoon hair. The windows were those crank and lift up from the inside windows that old brick elementary schools seem to have. One of the teachers left the window open

a crack, which was all we needed to get through. Since it was a crescent moon weekend, the raccoon hair puzzled teachers until word leaked to the parents and Ali's parents realized what had happened.

Ali, true friend that she is, took the blame alone and was scheduled to detention for two weeks after school. She argued, quite reasonably, that since she had talked me into the trespass, that she should take the punishment. Nonetheless, I showed up at detention and my name was added to the annals of troublemakers. The wolves that weren't offended thought it funny, although one of the elderly teachers who taught music

seemed greatly put out by it, at least by the exquisite disappointment she expressed.

As I recall, Andrea came home from school that day in a snit because I had embarrassed her horribly in front of her classmates. “You were really jealous?”

“You have no idea. Sometimes I still am. You don’t even care what any of the elders think. It’s like you can exist outside the pack and still be part of it.”

“I don’t feel part of it. I feel alone.” I sipped my peppermint tea, feeling a strange sense of dislocation, as if everyone had seen my entire life in a completely different way than I had. “So what should I do about Rob?”

“It’s your boss?” Andrea bit her lip

and looked off into the distance.

Apparently this was a dilemma that took more reasoning than the typical brush-off.

“Yeah.” I looked uncomfortable. Of course I know how stupid getting involved with Rob would be. And I also knew that the office was far too small for the slightest bit of drama. I worked with the guy every day.

“How well do you like him?”
Andrea asked.

“I like him well enough. We talk about all sorts of things and he’s always polite even when I insult him.”

“So why insult him?”

“He had sex on my desk. That’s

where this all started.” I felt the blood rush to my cheeks.

Andrea started laughing. I’m talking full-body laugh, the kind you get when you’re punchy from lack of sleep and every silly thing sounds hilarious. I was confused. I mean, it’s kind of funny, but not worth rolling on the floor over.

“That guy has it bad for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“When the change is taking affect, we like to find a spot where we feel safe, usually somewhere familiar. He probably started noticing you in human form. If he had sex on your desk, he was trying to be closer to you even while he was with someone else.”

“Well, I’m not the first receptionist

he's done this to." I'm sure I tried not to sound as indignant as I sounded.

Somehow this was worse, the fact that it really did mean something and that he had done it before.

"Maybe they spent a full moon together and realized it wouldn't work between them. Maybe your desk is more comfortable." Andrea smiled and it was a little too broad for my liking. My sister was enjoying this far too much. And the sad thing? I wasn't. You'd think being in love is a wonderful experience. Not when it's one-sided agony.

"Wolves know with the moon. If you want to date a werewolf, you'll have to spend at least one full moon with him

before he'll take it to the next level.”

“You mean marriage.” The word sounded strange in my mouth.

“That's exactly what I mean. You have to decide for yourself what you want. But I'd give him the moon night. What's the worst that can happen?”

The worst that could happen? I could become mouse pastry, my last vision of the big bad wolf's tonsils. Not a likely scenario, but definitely in the realm of possible worsts and a really bad way to go. My sister's advice, boiled down, was to go on the full moon date.

Had any little animal weres disappeared on the full moon? I didn't know. Maybe because we never exactly

advertised what we were, except Ali, she didn't care if the world knew she was a raccoon.

Chapter 8

The amulet hung in the back of my closet on a hanger with my belts. Maybe not the best place for a magical item of questionable usefulness. The problem with Rob had me opening the closet before bed and considering the potential. If I used the amulet, couldn't I change into a wolf, run the full moon with Rob and maybe cheat destiny a little?

I'm not a magic user except for the were change. I've never met a sorcerer, wizard, witch, or even held a magical item before now. Still, my hand itched to pull the amulet out and give it a go. It

belonged to the shape shifters before, and maybe if I played with it a little, I could find a way to return the magic to its rightful owner.

Really, I'm not that altruistic. I was just deluding myself, giving my reflection a little more polish in the old self-image department than I really deserved. But it was enough. Another full moon come and gone, but this time, the office was spotless. Not even the stapler out of place the next morning. Rob was a grumpy wolf that morning.

That evening, staring at the ceiling in the dark after yet another day of awkward non-conversation with Rob, I decided to try out the amulet and see if maybe, just maybe, I could turn into a

wolf. And then of course, return the amulet and do all that other good and honorable stuff that a person should do.

Throwing the covers back, I turned on the light and peered into the closet. Did I mention, all these thoughts were running through my head in the middle of the night? I grasped the cold metal with a decisiveness I barely felt. The vivid purple center seemed just the right color to me. I fumbled, pulling it over my head, anxious to have it on and half-sick at the thought that it might not work. I longed to be a wolf.

I stared at my hands. Nothing. No wolf paws, no turtle pads, no furry rabbit's foot...I guess I'm not that lucky.

I went to stare in front of the mirror.

Yep, that was me, and still in human form. Good looking if a bit round in the face, button nose—must have gotten that from the mouse side of the family, wherever that was. I waited. Nothing.

If anyone would understand the insanity of taking such a risk, it was Ali, and while she might not understand an eleven o'clock phone call, she was all I really had.

“Yrmph?”

Guess I woke her up. “Hey Ali, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Jen? Hey, what’s up? Are you okay?” I guess calling your best friend in the middle of the night might lead one to the conclusion that things weren’t okay.

“I’m fine. I just, well, this is kind of embarrassing...”

“More than catching your lab experiment on fire senior year?”

She would bring that up. “Hello? That was five years ago. No, I put on the amulet.”

The phone was dead silent. I waited for a minute. “Ali, you still there?”

Ali’s quiet voice barely above a whisper spoke across the line. “Jeez, Jen, what happened? Are you half and half?”

I flushed, grateful she couldn’t see it across the distance. Half and half. I hadn’t considered some of the more interesting problems that might arise

with putting on an unknown amulet. “No, it didn’t work. I was just wondering if there were words or something that I’m supposed to say?”

“How would I know? I just stole the thing.” Ali sighed, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in it. It’s a fair bet that she wanted to try the amulet out first and was just waiting for the next weekend when we were together. Ali would of course have wanted me as backup in case anything went wrong.

“Sorry to wake you up. I was just hoping you knew.”

“Why not say *I want to be a penguin* while you’re wearing it and see what happens? Want me to come over?” Ali’s voice had that rough quality from

just waking up and from the lack of enthusiasm, I could tell it was a friendly gesture on my behalf and not because she was really interested in coming. Ali turned her nose down at the wolves, so I suppose the amulet was just a source of amusement more than anything else.

“No, I don’t want to keep you up. I’ll try it out and let you know tomorrow.”

“Okay, hey, if it works, let’s get together tomorrow and experiment a little?” Ali’s voice brightened, and I could only imagine the kind of trouble she was planning. I would be the guinea pig (the wolf if I was lucky.)

“Sounds good to me.”

I hung up the phone and with rash enthusiasm and ran back to the mirror in the bathroom. With all the energy, positive thinking, and goodwill I could muster, I spoke aloud. "I want to be a wolf."

Nothing happened. I laughed at myself for believing in a lump on a string. How crazy of me.

Pretty colors shifted along the amulet's surface in the bathroom light. The lump might be unformed, but it sparkled randomly, just little lights here and there. I wore it over my pajamas and went back to bed, wide awake. Grabbing a book, I started to read, every now and then fingering the amulet.

I looked at the clock. It was almost midnight. Stretching, I closed the book, and pulled the amulet back to look at it. Feeling a fool, I closed my eyes. “I want to be a wolf.”

For several seconds nothing happened. Another let down, but I was used to it by now. I turned off the light and closed my eyes, rolling on my side. The feeling of disappointment was almost crushing.

But then, something changed. My body started to itch, a burning itch like a thorn-scratch after picking berries. Nothing at all like a normal change would feel.

I ran to the bathroom and watched in

the mirror as my eyes started to change, lightening to a glowing green and then yellow. Most wolves had yellow eyes. Mine stopped short at yellow-green, but then my body started to change, too, so maybe the eyes kept right on changing later. I would have Ali take a picture of me in wolf form just so I could see what I look like, and then I thought leaving evidence might not be so stellar an idea.

Being a wolf took a small bit of getting used to. Running on four wolf legs was a little awkward compared to the scurry on mouse legs, but not enough of a difference to throw me back to the toddling days of young childhood.

I ran around the house like a hyper dog or a cat on catnip. My paws flew as

I skidded across the linoleum of the kitchen. I'd wanted to do that since I was a kid. While Andrea and Todd mourned for the lack of pets in the family, during the full moon Todd would play like a dog. From what I've seen with the neighbor's dogs, they weren't really that different.

I tried out everything, sniffing the wood on the table pine (yum), wagging my tail. Forgetting myself for a moment, I howled, you know the kind of wolf howl every kid practices as a human but only werewolves can really pull off. Suddenly I realized that an angry neighbor would probably call the landlord if I didn't shut my mouth. After

exhausting myself with play, I figured I would change back to human and go back to bed. Ali and I would experiment more tomorrow night.

The amulet had vanished when I changed form. Instead of an amulet I wore a collar that stuck to my neck. I barked. “I want to be human.”

Nothing happened. I tried everything. I started by putting my whole soul into the positive thinking wish to be human. And after several minutes of heavy wishing, I realized that even positive thinking must have limits. Who knew? After sniffing around the house in case I lost the amulet in my wild run, the reality of my situation settled in.

Whining, I put my face on my paws.

Ali would find me tomorrow. And then I realized...I had to go to the bathroom. I was in for a long night.

Chapter 9

There is nothing more annoying than an alarm going off, that is, except an alarm that you have no way of shutting up. I awoke to shrill beeping in wolf form and rubbed my head against the buttons trying to move *on* to *off* all the while my ears aching with the sound. I had a new respect for dogs.

I'm a smart woman and I know all about the hazards of electrocution; however, even I have my limits. I took the cord in my mouth and praying that I didn't chew through and kill myself, yanked it out of the wall. With the

strength of my tug, the table fell over with the lamp following suit, breaking the bulb. And suddenly I felt a little more compassion for Rob and the utter destruction of his office. Overall, the relief of silence outweighed any guilt or distress over a broken lightbulb.

Jumping up on the bed, I curled up face to tail. Hmmmm...my tail smelled *good*. Was that normal? I sniffed a few more times and smiled, falling back to sleep, my bladder still aching, and hoping that the day would pass quickly and Ali would show up to help me out of this mess.

The ringing phone woke me the second time. I jumped off the bed and padded to the purse. Snuffling inside, I

snapped at the phone, trying to grab it with my teeth and pull it out of the bag and discovered that as dexterity went, I preferred mice to wolves. Sure, a wolf's paws were bigger, but a mouse's paws were almost hand-like in comparison.

I never did get the phone out of the purse. Once it stopped ringing the smell of the incredibly strong peppermints in my purse was too much to bear.

Padding around the room, I sniffed everything. It was almost like a sixth sense, like being psychic or something. Wolves have 3D nostrils. It's the only way the whole symphony of smells can be explained. Plastic, ick. Wood, hmmm. Rob's choice in furniture

makes more sense now. His desk was real wood, and only sported one claw scratch. Only his receptionists and his girlfriends, if you can call them that, would ever know how *that* happened.

My need to pee increased painfully with every circle around the house and I started to wish that my apartment was on the first floor, because at that moment, I was ready to jump through a window.

Doorknobs are not made for animals. How did dogs stand it? The changing-closet in the bedroom was closed, and the woodchips and newspapers were made for much smaller puddles, anyway.

I thought of how my parents had handled lock-ups when my siblings were

young, and the repeated admonishment to go to the bathroom before a change, kind of like they would before a car trip is a familiar memory, as are the accidents my brother had as a young wolf. I guess when we were young, I did a fair amount of my own teasing. Maybe he's never gotten over my calling him pee-pup. I couldn't lose my bladder now, and if I ever did, Todd could NEVER find out.

Plunking my furry butt on the bathroom floor, I waited. The smells of the bathroom were odd. The water in the toilet smelled exceptionally good. Saliva started to drip along my jowls, even while I wondered if I could jump up with my paws on the lid to go. Would

falling in the toilet be better than watering the floor? Some questions were never meant to be asked, much less answered. This is what I get for impatience and lack of research.

The growing desperation was silenced by a knock on the door.

“Jen? Jen? Are you in there?”

Thank God! Rob found me. Maybe he could call Ali and figure out how to turn me back. I ran out of the bathroom, barking and yipping. I threw my paws up on the door and yapped, hoping he would somehow know wolf-speak in human form.

“Hey, puppy, is your mistress home?” Rob called through the door.

I started whining and scratching the

door. It gave me a new respect for four-legged creatures. As a mouse, I never really felt the need to communicate, except once with Ali when I was spinning in circles on a ceiling fan. We mime to each other in animal form. And to this day, I'm convinced Ali knew what I meant when I begged her to turn the fan off. She was in human form, having put me on the fan to see if it would feel like a merry-go-round. It did, but I almost slid off, even with the little handle bars we attached to the top.

I yowled some more and Rob started pounding on the door. "Jen? Are you okay?"

Suddenly I heard blows on the door.

Rob was trying to force his way in. Just as quickly, the noise stopped. I whimpered, trying to get him to keep going. The door could be fixed. I just wanted out.

Hearing Rob's footsteps on the stairs, my ecstasy at being rescued fell to despair. Sighing, I snuffled a little and went back to the bathroom to wait for that defining moment—the moment when I couldn't hold it anymore.

I heard a keylock in the door and raced to the front of the house. The landlord and Rob were talking about me.

“Thank you so much. This really isn't like her. I just hope she's okay.”

I thought, *If you'd open the door, I'd be fine.* Pet deposit be damned. No

one ever mentions the pet deposits. *Weres* pay a bit more down than the average human. As a mouse, I managed to be convincingly human and skip the pet/*were* deposits. I ran through the door the minute Rob pushed it open, springing a leak at the second set of stairs. Here I was dribbling down the stairs while Rob and the land lady stared. Not my finest moment.

Yelling behind me, Rob hurried down the stairs. He could see I was a wolf, but I don't think he believed it was me. Wolves are more constrained with the ability to change than most weres. Size seems to be a factor since the bears and large cats have the same trouble.

Werewolves only change on the full moon.

I ran to the back of the complex, hoping for a bit of privacy while I piddled. No such luck. I was mid-stream when Rob turned the corner and as embarrassed as I was, there was no stopping my body. Still, Rob had no idea the wolf watering the lawn in front of him was his receptionist.

“Jen doesn’t have a dog.” The landlady was a middle aged woman, pleasantly plump, with deep brown hair that had a natural curl to it. She wore rectangle glasses a bit small for her face.

Rob smell really good, better than he did when I was just human. “She’s never mentioned it. This one’s a wolf

though. Doesn't smell normal either, almost as if she's a wolf that is not a wolf." Did I mention that some of our traits carry from form to form? Human werewolves have a great sense of smell.

"Maybe one of her friends dropped by for a visit. Jen's a good tenant, so if this is temporary thing, I'll forget I've seen it."

I love my land lady. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You'll never know how much...really. I felt practically giddy. Maybe it was the wolf form.

"I'm sure Jen will appreciate that." Rob grinned. "Can you do a quick check of her place? I don't think she's

diabetic, but Jen's closed off sometimes and doesn't really talk much about personal stuff. Something is definitely wrong. It's not like her to miss work."

"What?" I think it came out more as a whine or maybe a howl. I really didn't mean to say anything. I am not closed off. I'm not.

"We'll check and make sure she's okay. Hey, little pup, wanna go back inside?" My landlady smiled at me and knelt on the ground putting her hand out. No, please, the indignity.

I barked and ran up the stairs to my apartment, without even looking back to see if I was being followed. The door was closed and I tried to push with my paws. No such luck. So I sat down and

waited. People walk slow.

Rob waited outside while my landlord checked the place. I guess he was afraid he'd find me passed out on the floor naked or something. Baying the way dogs do for ambulances, I walked toward Rob and then walked backwards and then forwards again, trying to tell him it was okay to come in.

Rob gave me a thinking look and tilted his head to the side. Like I said, some traits carry between forms. "Jen?"

I did one of those rowlfs that dogs do and put my head on my paws, nodding. Rob called out to the landlady, stepping into my apartment. "Looks like we found her."

“Even if she is, Jen’s not in human form, I can’t let you stay. I mean, in case it’s not her.” The landlady watched me, looking for any indication of who I might be.

“I’ll take her to the office. Can you grab a change of clothes out of the drawer.” When he saw the look of doubt, Rob said, “I’ll explain everything if you have any trouble with her.”

“Trouble with me?” Well, that was annoying. Everything I tried to say came out in a jumble, like a howling yawn.

Rob took charge. “Okay, Jen, get into the bedroom and change back to human or we’re going to the office with you as a wolf.”

Change form? Nope. As much as I'd love to. I ran to the coffee table and picked up my keys in my mouth. Ewww. I tasted dirt, metal, rubber, and plastic. After running to the door and looking back for good measure, I sat on my haunches while Rob took the sweatshirt and sweatpants from her hands. Really? Sweatpants?

Oh, Oh, God! I wanted to hide under the bed. She grabbed my flaming bright pink granny panties. He is my boss you know. And good looking, which is totally beside the point. I didn't even try to say it. I knew my landlord wouldn't understand a thing I said, and from the way things were going, I just might die

of humiliation before ever changing back
anyway.

A random thought crossed my mind.
He knows I peed on the steps.

Chapter 10

Rob wrote a giant alphabet across several sheets of paper. Being a wolf, he seemed to have a knack for the size and spacing needed. He sat with his back to the wall in nearly the same place we had been during the post-moon-morning.

The first questions were easy enough. Am I Jen? Yes. Am I okay? Sure. Do I need anything? No. (So I lied. I needed help, but I wasn't going to come right out and ask him for it.)

There is something I would like to get out in the open right now. Rob smelled good. Not pleasant good or

sweet good, but desirous hungry delicious good, and being in the confined space of his office made the scent so much stronger.

I focused on the letters.

The collar was starting to chafe. I scrabbled at it with my paw, trying to pull my head through. Rob unbuckled it, and set the collar on the floor, next to the letters. I sniffed it, but the look and feel was so different from the amulet, I wasn't sure they were the same thing.

“Jen, what’s going on? Why don’t you just change?”

Using an alphabet paper-form of a Ouija board sucked. The response took a long time, so I limited myself to one word replies. “Stuck.”

“What do you mean? You can’t change back to human?” Rob said it in a shocked quiet voice and his voice was so gentle I melted.

Whining, I ran to the letter Y. That was all that was needed. “I’m sorry. I’ve never heard of this happening. Has it happened to you before?”

I touched the letter N and feeling sorry for myself and longing for comfort, I slowly padded to Rob and put my head on his knee. That was a mistake.

Rob scratched my ears absently, probably trying to think of something he could say that would make me feel better. Instead, I felt something else, something deep. Before this, he was just

the handsome boss I had a crush on, but when Rob touched me like that, I felt so safe and so...

I know I said that he smelled nice and I felt desire for him, but this was different. While he scratched my head and I leaned against his leg, my heart was full. I loved him. My love came out in a pathetic little whine.

Rob misunderstood. "It's okay. You'll change back eventually."

I don't know how long we sat together, but I am fairly certain he enjoyed the closeness, too, because he sat very still just scratching my ears. To his benefit, he kept his hand to the area of my head and ears. I just leaned against him and enjoyed the company.

Strange what you could get away with as an animal. This kind of togetherness would have been awkward any other way. I think we were both afraid that if we moved too much the spell would be broken, and we'd be two separate people going in opposite directions again.

The phone rang and Rob stood. "I better get that."

I sighed. My ears perked up when I heard Ali. Her concern came off high-pitched. She's like that when she's worried, and Rob interrupted her obvious list of concerns. "I found her. She's here, but Ali, she's in *were*-form and she can't change back."

I must have gotten a heightened sense of hearing from being in wolf form, because I heard Ali swear, and it was a word I can't use in polite company.

Chapter 11

Ali arrived around four o'clock. Her shift at the warehouse ended a half-hour before. Rob had given me a chew toy from a drawer to keep me busy during the morning. It worked surprisingly well, maybe because his scent was all over it.

One look at me and Ali laughed. Offensive, but I couldn't exactly bite her. "You can't blame me for this one. Where's the amulet?"

Uh-oh. The expression on Rob's face as he looked from Ali to me made

me want to cringe. “Amulet?”

Rob had heard a few stories. Sometimes when we went out, Ali would pick me up after work and inevitably run into Rob who was closing up the office and of course she let a few misadventures slip. Not the worst, thank God, but enough.

Ali tossed her coat on a chair and sat down with a sigh. “Sorry, I’ve been on my feet all day.”

Rob wasn’t to be put off. “What’s this about an amulet?” He sounded angry.

Ali looked up at Rob, wearing the most innocent expression I think I’ve ever seen. “Her change was inspired by an amulet. I got it from this friend of a

friend. Said it was shifting magic and you could be anything you wanted.”

Rob’s face seemed to freeze in an angry scowl as he stared at me and then turned on Ali. “Do you have any idea where an amulet like this comes from?”

Ali pretended ignorance. “Well, I would assume a magician or wizard or someone with power.”

Rob paced the room his hands waving in the air as if he were making a speech, which I guess he was. “A close friend of my dads, someone I look up to, lost his ability to change because of some wizard stealing his power, probably in the creation of an amulet like this. And you two...I don’t even

believe this. It's traitorous. Jen, how could you?"

I felt so small then. So very much like the mouse whose skin belonged to me.

Ali came to the rescue. "Hey, don't yell at her like that. She didn't know."

"She already can shift. Why would she try to use someone else's ability?" Please don't tell him. Please, please, please, please, please. My heart raced as I waited for her answer.

"First of all, we didn't know it belonged to someone else." (This was a lie, but Ali being a troublemaker by nature, tended to lie very well provided an actual explanation wasn't needed.) She continued, "Furthermore, Jen had

nothing to do with the amulet. She was just holding it for me for a few days. We had no idea what it would do, only that it gave off a weird energy.” (Another lie. Ali’s grace under pressure is a thing to behold. She usually gives it away with too much imagination. This time, her lying was fantastic.)

Rob’s accusing tone cut me to the middle of my heart.

“You put on an amulet with no idea what it would do? Where is it now?”

With my head down and with a slight growl that accidentally slipped, I walked to the letters still spread across the floor. My initial plan was to make

Ali do all the talking, but this was something only I could answer. Grateful that speaking was out, I put my nose on the letters—*disappeared*. *But now I have a collar.*

Ali stood up in a burst of frenetic pacing as she circled the room. A small fanciful part of me wanted to chase and nip at her heels. Rob was still sitting on his desk, having pushed the phone off to the side. He was so tall the tips of his feet touched the floor.

“There has to be something we can do.”

“We’ll go to Dirk tonight. Maybe he knows how his power was taken. What will you do if we can’t find a way for you to change back?” Rob was still

angry. I could tell.

I sighed, the kind of sigh only a large furry animal could make and sat down on the letter D. It didn't mean anything. I just happened to be standing over that letter at the time.

“We could tell your parents you fled to Hawaii and everybody else that I adopted a new pet.” Ali joked.

Rob lost some of his tension and joined in. “Or that you married a vampire and moved to Greenland.”

He'd hurt my feelings, though, and I was in no mood to laugh. Let the growling commence. I even showed teeth and snapped. And best of all, Rob flinched.

Chapter 12

Dirk's mansion could have been featured in *Cribs* or *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. A private paved road, just large enough for two cars, passed by the front yard which featured a stand of pines and a water-fall type fountain trickling water into a rather large pond. With my head hanging out the window, I could smell the algae and pine and the wind ruffled my fur in a way that made me happy to be alive. The front face had faux-stone siding up the first half of the house and for such a large house, I thought it austere.

Rob had managed to reach Dirk on

his cell. Apparently he traveled a lot and just happened to be in town this week. When Rob told him of the amulet and my dilemma, Dirk asked us to come over right away. Not for my benefit. No, Dirk asked Rob a lot about where we got the amulet, and whether we could confirm that the amulet was driven by 'his power', and a whole bunch of other questions that seemed nonsense to me.

The garage faced the side of the house and looked large enough to fit four cars wide. Rob parked on the furthest side of the pavement, before opening the side door for me. I hopped out and padded around the car, a large part of me urgently longing to run through the grass.

The door opened before we even took three steps from the car and a gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair stepped out. I wrinkled my nose. He smelled fake with that bright cologne and I wondered if that was why Rob liked me so much. I didn't wear a lot of perfume such was my allergic reaction to it. Some perfumes gave me a roaring headache. "Thank you so much for coming. You're looking well. Did your father ever get that kitchen remodeled?"

"Sure did. Unfortunately, my mom thinks lavender works in a kitchen. This is Ali and Jen." I felt a little guilty when Rob pointed me out. After all, I might have taken this guy's mojo. One thing for

sure, when he got it back, he'd change his cologne. It was hard to tell from wolf-angle whether Rob was smiling, but he seemed to relax now that his problem (that would be me) had been transferred to Dirk.

“So you're the girl who's caused all this trouble. We'll go to the back of the house. My changing rooms are back there and Jen will find quite a bit to interest her I think.” Changing rooms? What, were we going to a closet?

We followed him back and sure enough, they were changing rooms. Chew toys, rawhide, leather strips, and old shoes. Must have a foot fetish, that one. Human furniture, second-hand, lined the walls of the large room. I

wanted to ask if he had wolf parties in here, but I think I knew the answer. I smelled at least a dozen different wolf scents.

“Have a seat.” Dirk waved with an expansive gesture and then said pointedly at me. “You may sit on the furniture in this room.”

How nice. My sarcasm was lost in silence, but I jumped up on the couch where Rob sat and put my chin on his leg, my thinking brain realizing what a mistake it was while my doggie brain wanted some comfort. Maybe being a wolf was just a really good excuse to get closer.

With a happy sigh, I turned a circle

and settled in, having slept very little the last night. It was time for a nap.

Rob scratched my ears and the weight of his hand coaxed my eyes closed. Ali sat on the other side of Rob, unusually quiet. Dirk and Rob started talking about Dirk's youngest daughter... bo-ring...until I found myself dozing. Rob's hand felt warm against my head and the scratches behind the ears, well let's just say, I understand a dog's enjoyment of the ear-scratch now.

I fell asleep.

Someone was shaking my paw.

“Jen,”

I opened my eyes.

“We wanted you to be awake for this. Dirk found a book that might help us

change you back.”

Suffice it to say Dirk's fantastic magical book basically said to put all of your energy into the form you wished to take and speak aloud your intent. I did all those things. I did them again with Rob, Ali, and Dirk watching intently, with the collar back on. I didn't particularly like that collar. The more I wore it, the more I struggled to remove it.

Did I change back? No. Dirk gave us a couple of possible contacts.

We were in Dirk's library when Rob made the calls. His first two contacts fizzled. They didn't know anything about amulets or spells.

One was a werewolf who, like Dirk, had lost his power. He and Rob were chatting about me. And wolf ears pick up everything, let me tell you. Like Rob, this guy was angry, a more personal pissed-off state. And so, he asked Rob if he could talk to me.

“She's a werewolf right now.” Rob said into the phone for which I was slightly grateful. I would have been completely grateful if they hadn't been talking about me at all.

“I just need a minute.”

I nodded, which in retrospect I shouldn't have done.

Rob put me on speaker. The werewolf turned unmagical blasted me.

“You ruined my life. I haven't had a moon night in twelve months. Twelve!” That was the start of his rant. And since I didn't feel personally responsible, I growled back, snapping at the phone until the man formerly known as a werewolf stopped talking.

“Jen disagrees with you.” Dirk said bluntly. Somehow I seemed to disagree better as a wolf. In human or mouse form, no one really seemed to mind a difference of opinion from me.

Rob's tiny half-smile told me he was proud. It was a smile filled with affection and not a small bit of amusement. I wondered what amused him about me snapping at some random guy on the phone. “One more call to

make.”

The guy couldn't help at all. Just a bitter ex-wolf.

On the last call a woman answered the phone. She sounded sultry and sexy, with a husky voice. After Rob explained the problem, I expected the same unhelpful comments that we'd gotten before. Instead, we got an invitation to her house.

Rob said, “It's quite a drive. Are you sure we can't discuss this on the phone?”

“I need to see the magic used, and I don't make house calls. Bring Jen and the amulet here.”

Did I not get a choice in the matter?

Why should we go see some lady with a hot voice on the other side of the state? I certainly didn't see the point. But then again, I didn't want to spend the rest of my life as a wolf.

Chapter 13

We drove to Seattle that weekend to meet the hedge witch Dirk recommended. Her name was Gisele Madison. I'm not exactly sure what involves being a hedge witch, which is probably just as well. Rob carried my collar in his laptop case now, because I couldn't stand to wear it.

The drive was long and tedious. As a human, I loved car trips. As a wolf they were intolerable. The motion of the car made my stomach queasy. And it was boring. I couldn't converse, and Rob wasn't talking either. Ali would have

understood and kept me company with stories, but she had to work.

After we got out of town and were driving through the rolling hills, Rob rolled the window down. I stuck my head out and felt free, like I could breathe again. With my new wolfy nostrils, I smelled the different types of grasses and the little animals in their burrows. And the wind ruffled my fur in just the right way. From that point, the trip was much better.

The hedge witch lived along I90 near Issaquah. Her house was rather non-descript, at least from a wolf's perspective, but the garden was lovely and wrapped all the way around the house.

Sultry voice or not, I expected a frumpy little woman with gray frizzy hair tied back in a kerchief. What I got was an incredibly tall woman in a smart grey pant suit with a genuine grace in her movements. She wasn't just pretty. She was gorgeous, the kind of woman men dream of being with. The blonde highlights in her hair looked natural, and her smile was just a little too cheerful for me to be happy about it. She also smelled good.

After inviting us in, she took the seat next to Rob and flirted shamelessly with him, as if I didn't exist. My heart hurt to watch. It took all of my will power not to growl at her. When she put a hand on

his arm and started to make her move, I didn't snap off her wrist. Instead I put my head on Rob's lap, right under other his hand and gave my best territorial glare.

“Oh.” Gisele raised a manicured eyebrow and tilted her head just that little bit. “I'm afraid your friend hasn't been given appropriate lessons in manners for a werewolf.”

That time I growled.

Rob used the tip of his finger to scratch the silky part of my nose. It felt surprisingly good and soothing. “I asked her to accompany me on the next full moon. I believe she sees you as a threat.”

I could have died of embarrassment right then. Rob certainly had a lofty

opinion of himself. It surprised me that his brutal honesty worked. Gisele removed her hand and we went back to business. “The amulet. Did you bring it with you?”

Rob handed her the collar. “When she changed into a wolf, the amulet disappeared, but she was wearing this.”

Gisele hissed when she took the collar into her hands. “Powerful magic. Dark. Very dark. Three wolves lost their power when this amulet was made. Three cats lost their lives.”

She wasn't talking about regular cats. These were were-cats. I just wanted to know how to stop the spell. My stomach felt queasy knowing people

died to make it, and I wanted to rip the thing off. Rob must have read my mind. “How do we turn Jen back and return the wolves' power?”

As she looked me over, Gisele wore a haughty expression. “You must find all three wolves. When they put on the amulet and say a spell, their power will return to them. I will write down the exact words for you. The amulet should disappear with the third wolf and Jen will turn back into a human.”

I didn't like Gisele. It wasn't just because she was tall and perfect or even because she thought she was better than me. She just had this way of making me feel small. Even as a wolf, I felt like a mouse in her presence, which

technically I was, but I shouldn't be made to feel it. But she was a predator, in a way that a mouse like me did not appreciate. I watched her watch Rob, and I realized that she was interested in him.

Running to the door, I turned and looked over my shoulder at Rob. He laughed. That's what I like best about him. He's charming even when I'm not.

“Wait. I know you don't like me, Mouse. You will stay the night here. The maker of the amulet is hunting for it. I'll help you hide. I'll create a potion that helps you hide. One night is all I need.” Her smile was false. As a wolf, I could read her scent, her being. She wanted

Rob. Wait, what did she say?

She called me Mouse. My soul roared at the indignity. It was what I was. She named me truly. And now Rob would know. And we wouldn't ever go on the moon tryst date. Not that I planned on going, but I wanted to.

“Jen?”

I felt as if I couldn't win. We needed Gisele's protection. Dirk's description of her power and her willingness to help meant that we needed to stay the night. I dipped my head. It was the best I could do. Gisele slid closer to Rob. I watched while she leaned forward and whispered in his ear, and I heard exactly what she said, “Are you sure she's the one? You could always save that date with her for

another month. We could have a glorious time.”

Rob was listening to her words, but looking in my eyes. With a shake of his head, he said, “I've made my choice. Wolves stay firm you know, when testing for a mate. I'm going to test her next.”

Wow, that made me feel special, like a tube in a laboratory filled with disease. Testing the girlfriend. It was a good thing Andrea explained this to me in detail or I would have slipped out the door with my tail slinking below my legs and run so far away that I never saw Rob again. But I knew that it meant he wanted me. He wanted to see if we were mates,

and only because he thought we could be.

So I just sat there and pretended I couldn't hear what they were saying as they whispered back and forth, as he took her hand and removed it from his leg.

“Whatever you say, Sweetie.” Gisele stood abruptly. “Well, let me show you to your rooms.”

Her house wasn't overly large. There were exactly three rooms. The master bedroom on one side of the kitchen and the two smaller bedrooms across the house next to the living room. Those two bedrooms shared a bathroom. What concerned me was that she gave me the master bedroom...and

worse, it looked like a guest room for a dog, with doggy furniture and a rather large pet blanket. And she gave Rob the bedroom next to hers. This lady was trouble.

We both had overnight bags, with hopes to do a few tourist stops once I had turned back to a human. Neither of us anticipated a long drawn out problem with the amulet. After taking a moment outside to do my business, I followed Rob into his bedroom.

“I'm sorry. I don't allow animals in that room or in my room. I'm sure you understand.” Oh, I understood. Rob with his handsome smile and chiseled werewolf body could stay next to the

witch. This was a total set up.

I stopped at the threshold of his room and sat down, putting my tail just at the edge of the door, but not a hair over.

“That's okay. There's plenty of room in the master for both of us.” Rob leaned down and patted my shoulder.

Gisele's mouth fell open. To say she looked shocked was an understatement. “I'll just be downstairs finishing the masking spell.”

For my part I hoped it worked. She was somewhat upset to be foiled in her pursuit, and I wouldn't put it past her to mess up the spell now that her fun was ruined. Also, it felt a little too convenient that she knew exactly what

had to be done to reverse the amulet. How would a witch know that? Unless she'd made amulets before.

Rob wasn't one to be pursued. It's probably why he wanted me. It's not like I've been easy for him to get to know, even after months working together. I was surprised when he accompanied me to the pet room.

The pet beds were new. Perfect for a were-anything, the room didn't work for a human. After Gisele went downstairs, he slipped outside to grab his sleeping bag.

I went into the pet bathroom and discovered a huge tub with buttons on the bottom, specially built to a wolf's

needs. I pressed the button and water filled the tub. It was just the right temperature, which for a wolf was a little cooler. As the tub filled with water, another tube squirted bubble bath in from another angle. I love bubble baths.

I was busy splashing in the tub, rolling upside down. There were some really cool things about being a wolf. The water smelled so fresh. Not exactly like water, but like something else, something more, something better.

I'd left the door open. It's not as if I could have closed it anyway with paws, but it didn't matter because I wore fur which in the wolf world was as good as clothes. Rob chuckled when he saw me

in the tub. And then he pulled out his cell phone and took a picture. I hoped it was a good one because he sure as heck wouldn't get another tub picture of me again.

“Jen, would you mind if I shut the door for a minute? I'm going to change.” Rob looked a bit awkward and I realized that we were going to spend the night alone together. Hmm...I'd imagined it several times before, but never quite like this. I barked what I hoped would be a cheerful response. He laughed and our eyes met, then he closed the door gently while I went back to my bubble chasing pursuits. After that, I had the tub to myself.

He opened the door a moment later, looking good in a blue t-shirt and shorts, and I found myself wondering what he looked like as a wolf. Maybe I could run with him on the moon as a wolf, if we didn't resolve the amulet situation.

I went into the corner of the bathroom and shook from head to tail. Rob pulled a hair dryer out of my bag, “You'd best get dried off before sleep.”

Now that I faced a hair dryer as an animal, I discovered something. They are loud. My ears were far too sensitive now. But we managed and I felt clean and refreshed when Rob lay down in his sleeping bag. I longed to lie down next to him...or at least at the foot where a

regular pet would lie.

But I felt shy. And I didn't know if he wanted me there. So, I curled up on the doggy couch with my head tucked over my butt.

Pretending to be asleep, I stared into the dark, but of course I was awake. My ears heard whispers in the dark of things I could not place. Rob experienced the same discontent and shifted back and forth in his sleeping bag. By morning, we were both tired and cranky. Coffee sounded good. The witch poured milk in my metal bowl. I sniffed it a few times. It actually smelled okay. So no coffee. At least she wasn't trying to poison me...yet.

I drank the milk without complaint,

feeling grateful that Rob looked worse than I did. He had hair sticking up on the side of his head and wore a grumbly expression from all that tossing and turning.

There is no etiquette for licking milk out of a bowl. I felt awkward and very much on display, probably because Gisele watched me carefully while I drank. I sniffed the bowl again for good measure, then looked under and around just to make sure that there wasn't some witchy thing attached. All clear.

She handed Rob a bag of herbs on a leather thong. "Wear this around your neck."

She attached a similar bag to the

amulet collar and reached for me. I side-stepped and growled.

“Fine.” She handed Rob the collar. “Make sure she wears this. I've spelled it to make it more comfortable. If your moon tryst doesn't turn out, look me up.” She smiled and it was genuine and soft, and she looked too good for having stayed up all night, much too good. But we never had to see her again. So I finished my milk and thumped my tail on the linoleum floor when Rob finished making pleasantries. He knelt down at my side and his hands on my neck felt right even while the collar felt oh so wrong.

He watered his hair down in the bathroom before we carried our stuff out

to the car, ran a comb through his hair,
and suddenly it was as if he'd never lost
any sleep.

It was like magic. I loved watching
him.

Chapter 14

After a comfortable night asleep on Rob's couch, I waited while Rob did a house showing and met with clients to list their house. It was going to be a slam-dunk. The house was in a good neighborhood and would sell quickly.

Waiting for the day to end so that we could get on with fixing me was the only hard part.

The moment finally came. I'd never see two men look so eager. Apparently being a werewolf must be awesome because they truly waited on the porch like two kids whose father had just come home from a business trip with presents.

Dirk introduced us to the guy that yelled at me on the phone and we got down to business. I wore the collar with the little brown pouch swinging under my chin. Trust me when I say the tooth mark in the leather was mostly an accident.

When Dirk leaned down to remove my collar, I nearly bit him. Talk about hackles rising. I wasn't expecting it and something about him just rubbed me wrong. With my canines showing, my growl meant business. It made no sense even to me, but I did not want Dirk touching me.

Rob knelt beside me, unbuckling the collar. His hand ruffling through my fur

comforted me. "It's okay, Jen."

"You want to go first?" Dirk stepped back, a quick flash of anger smothered with a smile that didn't quite fit. He wanted to be in control, and I wasn't playing nice. I decided I didn't much like him.

I watched the man wrap the collar around his throat, a doctor from a small town forty-five miles south, he took a deep breath when Rob handed him Giselle's spell. With a husky voice he read the words from the piece of paper Giselle had written out, words that made no sense by the way. Witches.

A flash of light followed the last word and he changed from man to wolf and then back again. That made sense

since wolves only changed on the full moon.

“Do you have your power back?” Dirk held out his hand for the collar.

He gave Dirk the collar, saying, “I’ll know soon enough.”

Dirk inspected the holes along the leather and touched the mojo bag. The urge to bite him grew, but I held my temper. Apparently I’m a territorial wolf. I had no idea I could be like that.

Dirk put the collar on, the change flashing for a moment to a wolf with a feral gleam in his eyes. We stared at one another, playing a dominance game in that instant that sent adrenaline shivering through my body. And then he

was human again.

Dirk pretended nothing happened. He asked, "Have you thought about how you're going to find that third wolf?"

Werewolves met regularly at the full moon and since they ran in packs, somebody should have known if a wolf lost his power. Dirk only found one other wolf missing his power.

Being without vocal chords really stinks sometimes. I had an idea. Something life as a mouse had taught me. When a person is embarrassed by something, they tend to hide it. As I did my mousiness. Maybe this wolf hid his loss in silence.

I woofed at Rob and then spent a good half hour trying to tell him what I

thought. I'm a horrible mime. Ali would have understood. Rob asked for computer paper and we had to do the whole alphabet thing again, just so I could tell him my idea, which turned out to be a good one after all.

“You know, we do have wolves who have disappeared from the pack runs recently. I know a few are sick, but the rest might just be in hiding. Let me make a few calls.”

Dirk left the room, handing Rob the collar. Rob played with the leather pouch, his fingers trailing the bite marks. He was watching me furtively, and now that I could see him through wolf eyes, I knew the wolf within was intrigued by

me. I smiled, the kind of grin that made my tongue fall out. This time, Rob's smile reached the crinkles in the corners of his eyes.

Dirk returned with a list of names, some with phone numbers and addresses, some without. There were seven people on the list.

“I have it on good authority that this first one is holed up in a barn. You'd best check that address out first.” Dirk winked at me. It made me feel slimey. Some people should not wink, Dirk being one of them.

Rob took the list and thanked Dirk and we were off.

I'd love to say that we immediately caught the guy and gave him his wolf

back and we all lived happily ever after. The next time I let Ali talk me into anything...I'm talking the slightest trip to get our hair done or even a quick stop at an ice cream shop, I'm going to remember the barn on Hawktail Road and the crazy man inside.

I've long thought that Rob had sixth sense about life. He just seems to know when to call for help. We drove to the barn. Ali was already waiting, her hair swept back into a pony tail. For her this was the middle of the night, but as much trouble as Ali can get me into, I have to admit, she's always there to help get me right back out again.

“Thank goodness you're closer to a

solution. Jen's grandma is driving me crazy. She was actually waiting at the top of the stairs in front of my apartment door last night. She knows something's up.” Ali took off her sun glasses and slid them into the case. Now up close, with the rings under her eyes, no raccoon joke here, I could tell she hadn't been getting enough sleep, probably covering for me.

I yipped, and what I said was, “What exactly did you tell my grandmother and will I be able to join a family function without ridicule when this is all over?”

After years as friends, language is almost secondary. Ali tossed her sunglass case through the passenger

window which had been slightly rolled down and said, “Hey, don't worry about me. I'm an accomplished liar. As a matter of fact, your grandmother is now happily convinced that you are on a cruise with a new boyfriend, who happens to be a hot werewolf. I didn't drop any names, so you have plenty of room to embellish.”

Rob lifted an eyebrow and smirked. Yes, that's right. He smirked. I realized then that he planned to be the hot werewolf in the story. And Ali just scratched my head and stepped by me as if she'd solved world hunger on her own. I let her be patronizing in that moment because she was my best friend and I

could hear a growl coming from the barn, an inhuman growl, and by that I mean, the werewolf was a wolf, in wolf form, and not on a full moon.

You know how barns have those openings in the second story with large doors? To throw hay down, I suppose. Well, this wolf growled at us from the barn. Rob stepped in front of me. Seriously. I'm in wolf form and could hold my own a lot better than he could.

“I'm going to open the door slowly, and I want you to both to get in the car.” The effect was lost when he glanced over his shoulder to Ali to find a raccoon with a cheeky smile where a lovely young woman once stood. She greeted him with a chattering laugh and

scampered under the car and out the other side, drawing the werewolf's attention.

In my limited world view, I thought that a wolf standing on the second story of anything would have to run down the stairs to get down from such a height. As I say, limited. The wolf in question dropped out of the opening like it was nothing. It occurred to me then that most barns had ladders. He couldn't have gotten out any other way. And he was running after Ali, snarling and foaming at the mouth.

No wolf was going to eat my friend. Even if she deserved it.

With a growl of my own, I leapt

past Rob who yelled, “Jen! Jen, get back here!” He cursed like a rapper. Hell might have been mentioned a few times. It's hard to say, my focus was elsewhere.

There comes a moment in everyone's life when a decision must be made. A stupid, horrendous, really bad decision. This was my moment. Teeth bared, I knocked down the other wolf at full speed, snarling and snapping while we rolled in a tangle of fur and teeth.

He grazed my neck with his teeth and I growled and tried to sink my teeth into his. He tasted like manure. Like the barn. It was gross. So I didn't bite him. And he missed biting me. All around, not a great way to start off Round 1 in werewolf vs. werewolf.

The wolf shook himself away, his fangs bared while he stalked around me. I did the same with no intention of giving him the chance to look elsewhere. He could kill Rob or Ali in a single snap and from where I stood, the guy acted crazy.

Rob spoke very calmly in a soothing voice and I imagined he'd be a good father, even for the early morning feedings. I shook myself. We hadn't even gone on a first date and I was writing our future together. How pathetic.

In the meantime, the wolf was listening. His head was cocked and he stood still. I waited. And then the wolf

bolted, not for the barn nor toward Ali or Rob. There was only one direction left for him and he took it.

Ali regained her human form, and Rob and I explored the barn. We found a cardboard sign asking for help and a dirty backpack. I nosed around, but there wasn't much else to find. There was a tunnel through the hay and I worked my way into it only to find a burrow that apparently the werewolf slept in.

“Jen, are you almost ready to leave?” That was Ali. She sounded a little worried. That meant her raccoon sense was giving her a warning. And she and I listened to those warnings of hers. We'd been saved from maiming

and arrest a few times when her tingly sense gave us cause to flee.

I scurried back out from the tunnel, laughing because this time, I was a wolf. Usually my trips down small areas involved some amount of fear and a healthy dose of caution. I felt powerful, strong, invincible. And my hindquarters itched. I scratched at the spot while Rob and Ali argued over whose house I'd be going to next.

Apparently, Ali wanted a sleepover...Rob did, too. It's nice to be wanted.

They agreed to meet at Ali's (which meant Rob lost the argument), and we'd regroup from there.

As Rob pulled onto the gravel road, I saw the wolf loping back to the barn. We'd left his cardboard sign and backpack intact. Ali might not be the most law abiding person on the planet, but she is compassionate. She took a few dollars out of her purse, which made Rob feel guilty, so he took a twenty out, and we left it for the wolf.

My neck itched. I tried to reach back with my fangs, with my claws, with anything. Why was everything itching all of a sudden?

I should have known another lesson in humility was coming. I was a mouse, for Pete's sake! How much humility do I need?

“Jen are you okay?” Rob asked.

“Grrr ..yip.” Which was my version of. “Rob, can we please not talk about the fact that my shoulder itches, my tail itches, even my belly itches. Maybe I'm allergic to hay.”

Of course, he just heard “Grr..yip” and started talking about how I'd feel better after a shower and that we could cross this guy off the list.

Ali lived in a small one bedroom apartment. It was a cozy little place. But one *were* to another, I can tell you, she was very patient when she discovered exactly what my little problem, err, problems were.

She was watching me try to scratch

and she knelt beside me, ruffling her hands through my fur. “Uh, Rob, if you want to take Jen home with you, that would be cool with me. I'm sure she'd be more comfortable in a larger house.”

Okay, Ali was using her smarmy voice. What was going on here?

Rob fell for it. He grinned, “I thought we'd have to roll dice or draw cards. You want to come with us to the park tomorrow? We're going to try the next name on the list.”

Ali's knees creaked when she stood. “You know, I'd love to, but I have to work tomorrow and I really need to get some sleep.”

The universal signal for 'Please get lost.' Ali didn't use it much. She'd lived

her life half-exhausted. Only as her special best friend in the whole world did I know this. Maybe she had a lead she didn't want to share or she was planning to revisit the wolf and cause trouble.

Ugh. Now my neck itched. This was beyond annoying.

With hurried goodbyes, Rob led me out of Ali's apartment. Glancing back over my shoulder, I do believe Ali was smirking at Rob.

“Ali sure changed her mind fast. She must have realized how tired she was once she got home.” Rob rolled the window down for me. At least I could enjoy the wind in my face while we

went.

We were past the halfway point to Rob's house when his cell phone rang.

“Rob here.”

“Hey, Rob, it's Ali.”

She sounded smug.

“What's up?”

“Jen has fleas.”

The coward disconnected the call. I whipped my head around, feeling frantic not only on my own behalf but for Rob as well. She could have kept me and helped me hide it from Rob.

Now I was a bug ridden disease carrier. How horrid.

I whined. Rob tossed the phone onto the seat next to me. “So you heard?”

I nodded and felt like crying.

Everything had gone wrong for me.
Fleas. A pestilence. Fleas?!

A warm hand rubbed the top of my head. “It happens to the best of us.” Rob said. I'm not sure if he meant it. I figured once I turned human again, I'd ask. I'd sure feel better if he'd gotten fleas at least once.

Chapter 15

I waited in the car while Rob stopped at Were-Mart. For a Were to buy flea shampoo is kind of like a human buying hemorrhoid cream.

Embarrassing. Personal. Humiliating. But people get hemorrhoids, and werewolves get fleas. So do weremice, but I've never had the pleasure until now.

Rob was a great sport. He bought the flea shampoo while I leaned my head out the window watching people come and go. People aren't inclined to pet animals outside of a Were-Mart. Can you imagine petting your neighbor? It's

just not the polite thing to do.

After a few minutes, Rob returned with a brown bag which he threw in the back seat. "Well worth it if I get to keep you with me for the night." Rob's not one to speak first and think later, but that statement came out a little more intimate than he'd planned and his cheeks turned rather pinkish.

I giggled, which must sound enough like laughter in a wolf because Rob started laughing, too.

The tricky part came with the actual shampooing. I wouldn't walk into Rob's house with fleas. I sat down on the stoop and no matter how many times he told me to come in, I shook my head and stayed put. It's hard to win an argument

when the person you're arguing with isn't talking and isn't budging.

So Rob said, "What do you want me to do?"

I tossed my head in the direction of the brown bag hoping he'd guess.

"Shampoo outside? The water will be freezing." He waited for me to change my mind. When I didn't he grabbed the shampoo bottle and followed me outside.

It's funny but the whole ride home, I was wondering how I was going to get the shampoo on. I wanted Rob to help me. And I didn't want to ask. I mean, shampooing for fleas is not at all attractive or sexy or anything like that.

But it is intimate.

I never day dreamed about my first shower with Rob, which is probably just as well as it would have been a disappointment. After a line of shampoo along my back, I was lathered and sprayed. Neither Rob nor myself was comfortable with him touching the tummy area. We weren't that close yet. I wondered if we ever would be, and then reminded myself to stop thinking about it.

He avoided my hind areas. With my luck that's where all the fleas were hiding. As he lathered my back, Rob said, "Well, at least you'll have a funny story to tell your kids."

I was glad to be in wolf form.

Because I had no idea how to respond to that.

Then he turned on the hose.

And sprayed me.

I howled.

Awoooooooooooooooooooooo. It was so cold.

Rob's shirt was half tucked into his jeans and he shrugged, "I told you it would be cold. You can go in and take a warm shower if you'd like."

He squirted me again with a spiteful grin.

Well, that was not at all sporting. I ran up really close to him and shook from head to toe, letting the cold water beading up on the tips of my fur splatter

all over him. He wasn't dressed in real estate clothes today anyway, so I figured he was fair game.

With a laugh, he sprayed me back, which was terribly unfair since I had no hose or even a tiny little water pistol, but I used what I had and shook again, letting the water fly everywhere until he was soaked.

“Okay, you win.” Rob laughed, shutting off the water. He cocked his head and looked very wolfish when he said, “You know? I never realized how much fun you were.”

I might only have wolf teeth to smile with, but what he said went right to my heart, so I used my canines to full effect. Nothing exciting happened that

night. We didn't discover we were soul mates or anything. Rob picked out some movies for his home media system with the help of my veto votes, and we spent the evening watching movies. The television is a bit different as an animal. The colors look different and the sounds are sharper.

Rob didn't actually mention the fleas again, and I was able to forget for a while what happened.

Rob let me sleep in his play room, a room fully stocked for the times when his wolf was out to play.

Chapter 16

The morning went smoothly and without incident. I felt content hopping out of the passenger door. I yawned, showing my teeth while waiting for Rob to unlock the office. I'd slept all night and here I was ready to nap all day. There was a blessing to having wolf paws.

I should have known something would happen to ruin my plan of a quiet day curled up where the sun streams through the window. Even I wouldn't have guessed that my grandmother would be tracking me down on a Tuesday.

My grandmother came striding into

Rob's office at precisely 9:00 A.M, which is technically our opening time.

Before she even saw me, Grandma was admonishing me. "Jen, when a family member calls, the polite thing is to call back. I've been looking for you all over town." Grandma paused when she actually looked around the office and didn't see me.

When I heard her voice, I'm afraid my instincts might have had me diving behind the huge sofa Rob put in his office to make it look more homey and elegant. Yes, I was well-hidden before Grandma saw me. The couch itself isn't terribly comfortable. The back and cushions were too stiff.

With a laugh Rob whispered,

“What happened? Did you miss dinner?”

Out loud he called to the other room. The darker part of me wanted to glimpse his backside as he went to greet Grandma but I'm afraid from where I hid, I could only see his dress shoes.

He greeted her warmly and invited her in to have coffee with him. If she accepted, he would lead her right to the couch where I was hidden and being the werewolf she is, she'd smell me. Would she recognize my scent as a wolf? I'm not sure how, but my Grandma knows things.

And then I'd have to come out of hiding. I could just see him merrily introducing Grandma and cringed. In a

way it would be cruelty beyond measure, because I was now exactly what she wanted me to be, a wolf.

I should have given Rob more credit.

Rob swooped in and charmed my Grandma. I listened discreetly, from my hiding place. When she agreed to coffee, he grabbed his coat off the rack. "I know a great little place down the street. Jen loves the coffee cake."

"Speaking of Jen. She hasn't been answering my calls. And don't tell me she's vacationing in Hawaii. That friend of hers needs to practice lying a little more. She gets too enthusiastic for the story."

That was Ali in a nutshell. If we

ever got caught at anything, it was because Ali was the one spinning the tale to get us out. Her explanations were fun to listen to, though, so I've never had reason to complain.

“Jen's okay. She asked for a week off to sort some things out. I just spoke with her this morning.”

“Well, the whole family is on alert, so the next time you see her, you tell her to call me.”

What? For me? Family on alert is not necessarily a bad thing I suppose. It's to keep anyone from falling through the cracks when they're having a rough time. But I've never had anyone worrying about me before. I'm the steady

one, the one who attends all family gatherings without question, even if they do make me miserable....mostly because the alternative would be more miserable.

The last time we were on family alert was when Aunt May broke her leg. We took turns taking her shopping and helping her quilt, reading stories. I grew quite fond of Aunt May and even now spend a few hours dropping by every now and then to help her quilt.

“I'll tell her. She's not supposed to check in for a while, so don't worry if you don't hear from her in the next few days.”

The door shut on whatever my Grandma murmured. It was probably a

threat to hunt me down if I didn't make the requisite phone call.

Wiggling out from my hiding spot, I returned to my warm place in the window where the sun was streaming in. As a wolf, I had enough fur to keep me warm. It wasn't long before the sun felt too hot. So I traipsed back to the shade.

Rob spent a long time out with my Grandma. Bored, I pushed Rob's nerf football off the top of the desk and started tossing it around the room with my teeth. It might sound a bit childish, but imagine being stuck in a pair of rooms with absolutely nothing to do. It was the nerf ball or my sanity.

I may have gotten a little carried away.

The nerf ball sustained damage. Major damage. The kind of damage a nerf ball gets when chewed and drooled on and thrown and pounced on. And when a little piece came off, it seemed just the thing to hold the battered toy between my two paws and gnaw on the end. Something about chewing really feels good to the canine teeth.

I'm lucky Rob returned to the office alone, because I didn't hear him come in. Here I was thumping my tail happily destroying his favorite office toy when I hear, "My football. My favorite office stress reliever."

To be fair, his distress looked genuine. I had no idea a silly little ball would mean so much to a grown man. It's not like it really did anything but sit on his desk or maybe get tossed in the air a time or two when he was on the phone with a client.

I grinned, showing the clean white teeth recently refreshed by chewing on his favorite toy.

“Jen, you can't play with a man's ball like that.”

Giggling, I ruffed, “I'll buy you another one.” Somehow my attempts at reconciliation were lost in translation.

Rob trudged to his leather chair and sort of fell into it. I think he was at wit's

end, honestly.

“Your grandmother didn't believe a word I told her. She thinks you're hiding.”

I just tilted my head with the nerf ball between my paws and let my tail strike the floor a few times, just to let him know I was listening. It's not like I could do anything about my grandma anyway. And she was the least of my worries. Having paws and the ability to chew nerf balls into tiny pieces of fluff didn't appeal to my expectations of an idealized future, and yet I felt content and satisfied.

“She asked me several personal questions, ranging from my salary to if I wanted children. I think she knows I'm

interested in you.” That got my attention. My head jerked up and Rob and I maintained eye contact for a good fifteen seconds.

Andrea.

Of course she would tell everyone about my crush after a family alert regarding my status as a missing person. Maybe they thought he dumped me and I ran. I'm just lucky they trusted Ali and Rob when they said I was okay. Otherwise, I might have ended up on flyers all over the neighborhood and a police report with my description, which would have included my weremouse description, a humiliation I'd never live down.

Of course Grandma would come and scope Rob out herself.

I shrugged and gave Rob what I hoped to be an innocent look.

He just shook his head and mourned his nerf ball, “That football makes up for your desk. You know I had that for three years.”

Wow, a whole three years. I bet it's a collector's item by now. I picked up the ball, hoping there wasn't too much drool and dropped it at Rob's feet. I understood dogs a lot better now. I was giving him a message. Something that said, “Here's your toy back. Thanks for letting me play with it. I'll probably take it again even if you don't want me to.”

He picked it up without wincing.

There are some benefits to working with a werewolf. Rolling it around in his hands, he seemed to be inspecting each gouge mark carefully. Nerf balls aren't exactly made of sturdy material.

Rob's hands were much too large for the toy. With a grin he tossed it rather sharply right next to my face. I snapped sideways and caught it in the air, chewing it a few times to hold on properly.

“Your grandma told me you're a mouse-were. It's no reason to avoid going out on a date with me...if that's what it is. If you really don't want to go out, I won't say another word.” The

innocent hope on Rob's face eased the tension in my soul when he said mouse.

I nearly choked on the ball. Ratted out by my own grandmother. I felt humiliated and shy, relieved and nervous all in the same breath. He knows. He still wants to go out. Maybe he was just trying to make me feel better. But he looks like he still wants me. At least now the truth was out.

Chapter 17

Francis turned out to be as annoying as those vampires in the movies who want to suck your face while they are sucking your blood. Apparently, he had a thing for me. What kind of thing, I can only guess, because he wasn't forthcoming. It wasn't lust or love, probably not even snack-related, which left what? I hid from Francis when he stepped into the front room.

Rob is usually the one who tells me that a visitor was coming, but this time, I smelled and heard him about the same time that Rob did. I hid under the couch which gave me a view of my office,

which is also the reception area.

The vampire stood with a slack mouth staring at my desk. I wanted to knock on his head and ask if there was anyone home. I might have sighed from my hiding place because Rob looked in my direction suddenly with a frown and a raised eyebrow. He has classic features, a smooth jaw line, just the right amount of cheek and nose. And those beautiful eyes. And that silky black hair with a bit of a wave. I sighed. Definitely love.

“Where's your assistant?” Francis blinked a few times. Guess there was someone inside.

“She's busy.” I do believe Rob gave me a secret smile just then when he

said, "It's hard keeping up with her. I have a few houses I think you'll like. Would you like to see them?"

Looking at my empty seat, the vampire nodded slowly. "That would be fine."

"Shall we take my car?" Rob opened the door and held it for Francis. "I'll be down in just a second. I need to grab my phone."

Grabbing his keys, Rob unlocked the bottom right-hand drawer of his desk. I'd known from the first day of work that the drawer was off-limits. After his wild nights, I had a rather vivid imagination of what kind of kinky sex objects might be locked away only to be

brought out in the light of a full moon.

I felt a sense of shock when he slid open the drawer and pulled out a beat-up stuffed teddy-bear. As chew toys went, this was the ultimate. He tossed it toward the couch where I was still hiding, “I'm sorry, Jen. I have no idea how long this will go. I'll call Ali to come over, so you're not stuck here alone.”

It was useless to tell him that I'd be fine. I woofed and that was about the end of it. I'm not sure if he expected me to crawl out from under the couch then and there, but I had concerns that Francis might pop back in at any moment. Vampires are unpredictable at times. Still, a sale is a sale. And things were

quiet. I could manage.

Once Rob had gone for the second time, I crawled out from my hiding place under the couch. I suppose I was lucky. Even another weremouse boss would have forced me to take vacation or go without pay in a similar circumstance. Still, I couldn't help feeling as if the universe were against me.

Scooping up the teddy bear in my jaws, I padded to my new favorite place in the office, a comfortable little corner with a large wolf-sized pillow. It was something of a shock that Rob let me use his pillow. Wolves just don't allow other animals onto their bed, at least not from what I've seen in my family. Maybe

he really did like me.

I circled a few times before settling. Sniffing the teddy bear a few times and gnawing a bit on the end, I settled in for a nap.

Chapter 18

Rob had crossed a one more name off the list while Ali and I removed two more. We met up again at Ali's house. She yawned for a good thirty seconds, and Rob convinced her that he and I could finish with the list.

The next name on the list was a teenage werewolf by the name of Tyler Baker. His house was a small one-story in a crowded part of town. Rob was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, so at least he didn't look too badly out of place. With the window rolled down, I could hear everything they said.

A woman with graying hair swept

back in a braid answered the door.

“Whatever it is you're selling, I don't want it.”

“I'm not selling anything. We're looking for Tyler Baker? He's missed a few of the full moons and we wanted to make sure he was okay.” Rob used that super-smile that could charm a cactus.

“I'm so glad you stopped by. I'm at my wit's end. Tyler is adopted, and none of the rest of us have the full moon changes. He stopped going because the changes stopped. I don't know what to do.” She opened the door wider, “Tyler is at that werewolf park. ”

Rob handed her his business card. “We're going to swing by the park and see if we can talk to him there. If we

don't run into him, can you have him call this number? We may be able to help him with his problem.”

The woman took the card, “Thank you. He's been so depressed lately.”

“Ma'am, any wolf who loses their ability to shift is bound to get depressed. If we're able to get his wolf back, I'm sure he'll be happier.” Rob would know. I never thought I'd miss being a mouse if it came down to it, but I suppose I would.

“I hope this helps. Would you like to come in for a few minutes? I just have a few questions.”

Rob looked over his shoulder. Just in case he needed permission, I nodded.

“Maybe for a few minutes.”

I waited in the car for an eternity in wolf time. In human time, it was only twenty minutes. Afterward, we drove to the park where werewolves are most likely to roam during full moons. The park is huge with ample room for us were-types to cavort in. As a mouse, I never had much use for it. This was actually the first time I'd even been there.

Trails wove in and out of the trees and the werewolf park was in many ways a forest playroom for wolves.

“It's rare to find humans lingering about here. I'll just walk along one of these paths. If you can use your nose to sniff out the humans, we should be able

to find him if he's here.” Rob said.

It was nice of him to actually come to the park with me. He'd suggested going home and waiting for Tyler to call, which was a whine-worthy moment in my opinion. But I only whined a little. Tired of four legs and drool, it was time for a cure.

A few scents caught my attention, the first a cologne that seemed promising. I followed the scent through the park, only to be disappointed upon discovering a middle-aged man instead of the teenager I was hoping for.

His skin was normally dark, but in the light he seemed almost gray, and he wheezed when he spoke.

“Are you a...” He gulped a breath and then another. I frowned or at least did the wolfish version of a frown. Something was wrong here. I stepped forward while he struggled for another breath, “*were* or pet?”

“Awoo” I leapt onto the bench next to him.

He coughed and struck himself in the chest. “Sure wish you were a *were*. I think I need help.”

He was having a heart attack. I put a paw on his hand and howled for all I was worth, hoping I wouldn't upset him. Rob would know it was me. He would come and then he could call for help. The howl probably carried some panic.

That's how I felt, frightened and helpless. He looked bad. Something about the way he struggled, the way he seemed to force his head up every time he took a breath.

“Name,” He winced and gasped, “Ned.” It took all his breath just to say those words.

I would have told him to save his air if only I had words.

I howled again. A lady came running out of the woods. Strange. I thought my panicked howl would only bring Rob. She stopped when she saw me and looked like she would turn around.

Ned stared off into the distance. “What a strange...”

And that was all he said. Ned's head fell to his chest and he didn't say another word. I tried to put my head by his chest to hear his heart but I couldn't even tell if I was close enough and his head got in the way. I howled again.

This time the woman turned back and ran up to the park bench. She touched Ned's hand. "Are you okay?"

Rob sprinted out of the trees from the other direction. He was at the bench before the woman decided she hadn't felt a pulse.

"I think he's dead."

Pulling him off the bench, Rob started CPR. "Call an ambulance."

I paced back and forth, feeling

helpless in my wolf paws. A couple ran out of woods. "I can help."

When Rob felt for a pulse, there was still no heartbeat.

Ned. His name is Ned. The thought kept running through my mind. It bugged me so much. Maybe if I had been human, I could have helped him right away and he wouldn't be laying there without a heartbeat. At least the ambulance would have been there sooner.

But then if I were human, we wouldn't be in the park. Maybe Ned would have died alone.

"Help is coming." That from the lady on the phone. She wore a pink jogging suit, a strand of hair had fallen out of her pony tail. I thanked her

silently for not turning completely away the second time I howled.

Rob was dripping with sweat. I'd never seen such a determined look before. He was wasted on real estate. He would have made a great paramedic.

Ned still looked grey. It was so strange. I had been talking to him, exchanging words and then there were no more words. I felt so young. No one close to me had ever died, and the feeling that somehow this person was dying stunned me to the core. I'd never seen anything like this. I felt a strange shock, almost awe that life could come and go so quickly.

When I heard the sirens, I whined.

It was a natural impulse, one I couldn't control. Did anyone think of meeting the paramedics in the parking lot. I barked once and sprinted for the ambulance, hoping I could make myself understood once I got there. At least in a *were* park, they would be more likely to follow me.

A police cruiser and fire truck pulled into the parking lot first. The ambulance was still coming.

From the pathway, the woman in pink ran waving her hands. "Over here."

I trotted alongside the firemen until we neared the park bench. Rob was red and dripping, his sleeves were pushed up and there were sweat stains under his arms. I was so proud of him.

When the fireman took over, he staggered away, wiping his forehead. Scanning the crowd, he found me weaving my way to him and came over.

“He's been down a long time.” Rob said in a whisper to me.

I was glad to have the kind of vocal chords that didn't work with words, because I had no idea what to say. I made a little noise in the back of my throat. Rob scratched the top of my head, and we watched.

The paddles didn't work the first time. I felt an incredible sinking in my heart. We were all drawn like a magnet to the lifeless form on the grass. The second jolt worked, coinciding with the

arrival of the ambulance team.

“Shall we go?” Rob's words were quiet beside me. I'd forgotten he was standing there.

I nodded. My whole soul felt quiet, and I longed more than anything for home.

Chapter 19

Rob drove in absolute silence, his every action, whether a stop or a blink accompanied with a grim expressionless stare. The seats in the passenger side were really too small for me to comfortably lie down, so I sat staring out the window, letting the wind blow in my face. Every now and then I'd look over to check on Rob. He pretty much just stared straight ahead. If he looked my way, I didn't catch it.

Ali called, but Rob ignored the phone, and she went to voicemail.

He parked the car and unlocked the front door in silence. By now, I was

used to the idea of staying at his house, but Rob was really freaking me out.

He didn't say a word. Stepping into the house, he tossed his jacket over the chair and strode to the master bedroom. Maybe he'd forgotten I was human under my fur, a very un-were thing to do, but he sure wasn't acting like himself.

I finally barked a question, which sounded more like "Roo?"

He stopped and looked at me, a frown on his face, and now I could see that he hurt, one of those deep emotional hurts that people live with, often in silence, often alone. Only the eyes reveal that kind of pain. His voice was soft, "I'm sorry, Jen. I just need to be alone for awhile. There's a remote on the

couch that works pretty well with paws.”

He stepped into the bedroom and shut the door, leaving it open just a crack.

My wolf ears heard him pulling clothes out of his dresser drawer and stepping into the shower. To Ali, a crack in the door is an invitation, but inviting myself into Rob's shower when he was feeling sad didn't exactly sound like a good idea. Again, to Ali, maybe it would. To me...not at all.

He'd actually showed me the remote earlier in a tour of the house. They make all kinds of special tools for the wereanimals with giant paws who are

unable to manipulate small objects. I turned on the television, but truly couldn't care less what was on.

I wasn't listening to the T.V. at all. The shower was off now, but the door still closed. I heard Rob climb onto the bed. Then he wept.

Padding to the door, I nudged it open. Sure, he wanted to be alone, but in a spur of the moment decision, I ignored his request. His head was hidden in his arm and his shoulders were shaking. I put my nose on his hand, just to let him know I was there.

Rob stilled. "You can come up with me if you want."

That was all the invitation I needed. I jumped up and burrowed next

to him. He welcomed the comfort. His shoulders relaxed.

We cuddled quietly for a long time.

Rob said, “Grampie Joel died of a heart attack a few years ago. There were witnesses, and none of them knew CPR. They weren't even willing to try.”

Rob loved his Grampie Joe. He was always telling stories of Grampie Joe and his canoe, or the trip to Yellowstone. The fireworks fiasco in the field where all of the fireworks were accidentally lit off at once, while his grandpa sent the kids running for cover. His grandma still talked about that. At the time she was sure one of the grandkids had gotten killed by a roman

candle.

I knew his grandpa died, but I never heard how. I stayed close to him, making comforting wolf sounds.

“Not one person even tried.” The anger bled into Rob's voice, the frustration of a time and place that could not be repaired. Those bystanders could not go back and change the moment, but neither could Rob.

I listened quietly and waited.

“While I was in that park, I forgot who I was trying to save. When I took all of those classes, it was because of what happened to my Grandpa. I was counting and compressing and seeing Grampie Joe's ribs under my hand. But it wasn't him.” Rob closed his eyes and

took a deep breath, "I'm sorry. I'm fine."

We had moved from grief to tough guy in a single moment. I snuggled next to him and let him feel whatever he wanted. His eyes were closed. I knew he was exhausted, emotionally and physically from the day. He fell asleep while I wondered how strange it was that I was here lying next to Rob feeling comfortable. I seemed to fit there, although I had to wonder if I'd still fit as my human self.

I guess life-saving is a draining activity. After spending an hour watching Rob sleep, I hopped down, thinking that the day hadn't gone terribly bad, considering that we had actually

saved a random stranger's life. That doesn't happen often in a lifetime.

In the meantime, food sounded pretty good, and earlier in the day when Rob opened the fridge for the milk, I happened to notice a raw steak sitting on a dinner plate to defrost. By now, it should be defrosted.

As a were-mouse, I never ate anything like raw meat, so this would be a first. Rob actually fed me raw hamburger the night before. “Just try it. A wolf's tongue loves it cold. I just can't explain it.”

So I sniffed the hamburger for a few minutes before nibbling the tiniest corner. Wow, it was fantastic. Butcher's meat. The grocery stores

added chemicals and water and red dyes. Werewolves didn't go for that sort of thing and tended to buy direct from farmers or from the butchers. I didn't dare ask if they ever bought live cows to hunt.

But that was yesterday and I was hungry today. Here I was standing in Rob's kitchen and I realized, I didn't know how to open the refrigerator door. He had to have some kind of mechanism for a wolf to open. That's how werewolves work. Their houses have alternative exits and entrances, and their cabinets and appliances are upgraded for easy access.

I tried to get my snout in between

the empty space of the handle, but my nose was too big. Pushing didn't work. Nor did pulling. A growling stomach was not helping matters any and no way would I wake up Rob for something this trivial. No, there had to be a way.

Stepping back, I bent my head with a slight twist, so that I could look at the door from every angle. After several minutes of stalking the refrigerator door, I tried pulling the bottom of the door open with my paw. It was then that I noticed a strange little lever.

Rob had mentioned something about it when he was standing in the kitchen pulling the milk out of the refrigerator, but Ali was in the living room going a hundred miles an hour about some

problem at work, and unfortunately, it was Ali to whom I gave my undivided attention. Best friend versus food. What else could I choose?

I put my paw on the lever and the ingenious little device pushed the door open. Carefully lifting the steak from the plate I carried it over to the platter on the floor. The refrigerator turned on. I shut the door before returning to my steak.

What Rob said is true. To a wolf's taste buds, raw meat is like eating candy. The flavor of incredibly fresh meat assaults the senses and leaves a euphoric feeling afterward. Even as an animal, I'm not a gulper. I ate slowly and

thoughtfully, chewing my food as properly as a canine can manage.

After polishing off the last of it, I drank from the aluminum water bowl until the fur around my face was soaked. No self-respecting werewolf would drink water out of plastic. It's one of the most repulsive tastes on the planet, though in human form, I never could tell the difference. Rob could, but then werewolves have heightened senses when compared to mice.

The side of me that follows Ali into random adventures wanted to go jump on the bed and curl up with Rob. The other half, who sits at Gran's dinners and tries to live a normal life decided that caution was a better choice. Caution won out,

and I ended up asleep on the wolf bed in the corner.

That's how I heard someone rattling the door in the early hours of the morning. Silently, I snuck to the door, lifting my bulk to look through the peep hole, which was just that little bit too tall for me to see through. My sense of smell came to the rescue where my eyes failed me. I could smell something, and it smelled rotten, not like rotten eggs, but more like the smell of burger that has been in the refrigerator a day too long. Just that faintest whiff of something wrong.

A faint whiff is enough.

I growled. It was low and menacing

and really something to be proud of.

The rattling stopped. We waited. Me on one side and the strange smelling fellow on the other. I heard footsteps and a car start, and the smell was gone.

Rob had stacked a pile of alphabet letters in the living room. Originally the plan was to have a sit down, man to wolf, if we couldn't find Tyler. Obviously, our encounter in the park changed all that. I pawed at the letters. At least all of the lights were still on. Rob tended to turn all of the lights off at bedtime, except for a small light over the stove.

Nosing through letters isn't the easiest thing to do, and a wolf's sight isn't made for reading; however, once I

managed to get my teeth on a letter, I could carry it to just the right spot to relay my message. There were a few misspellings. It's not because I don't know how to spell. I'm actually really good with that sort of thing. But I ran out of d's. The message was simple. I just said. "Intruder at door. Smelled bad."

It would have been tempting to sneak out the wolf door and chase after the car, but I was too realistic to think I would actually catch the person, and I didn't want Rob to worry when he woke up, which he probably would the minute the door hit my tail.

Wide awake and bored, I waited. It occurs to me that I've never been bored

as a mouse. It might be all the terror. It's really hard to be filled with apathy when something as small as a cat is dangerous. But as a wolf? Boredom. I slept for a few hours waiting for Rob.

Watching him wake up was fun. First, his hair really sticks up. When my brother sleeps, his hair sometimes looks matted or messy, but nothing like Rob's. I must have had a silly smile on my face, because he quirked an eyebrow at me with his own cheeky grin. And then there's the bleary-eyed scrubbing of the hair, which sort of explains why it's all sticking up in the first place. Perhaps I've never mentioned how exquisitely fine Rob looks in a white t-shirt and boxers. I ended up drooling all over

myself.

“Mornin’” A bit of a mumble, but then Rob's not a morning person. I don't know a werewolf that is.

“Arooo” I'm getting the vocals down at least.

He read my message first. Unlocking the door and pulling it open, the first thing he did was sniff the air, frown, then sniff again. He stepped outside and stalked around the house, which is a strange word for a man alone, but the way he walked around the house reminded me of someone on the hunt, which he was. But whoever came for a midnight visit was long gone.

“Please wake me up next time.”

I nodded once. There probably wouldn't be a next time anyway.

That satisfied Rob. Having checked all he could in the meantime, he switched gears, heading into the kitchen. Uh-oh. "I've got a surprise for you," Rob said as he opened the refrigerator door. He stopped, jaw dropping just that tiniest millimeter and then he swiveled his head to look at me.

And I have a surprise for you. No steak for breakfast. Sorry. My eyes might have reflected a slight bit of guilt, perhaps conveyed the message that steak was really too good of a thing for a wolf like me to pass up. He pulled the empty dinner plate out of the fridge. "I was

going to make steak and eggs.”

That was the moment when I was supposed to feel sorry. Did I? No. This was one of the few times I had the upper hand. Everyone knows, even human and vampires, that werewolves like to eat, always meat, preferably raw. I never asked if werewolves liked to chase their food first, mostly because I was small enough to fear being the appetizer.

That was another topic of conversation that never came up in the family. The only time I asked my mom about being eaten, she started crying. I guess the concept had been weighing on her mind as well.

All that aside, I was acting within my nature. And he had been asleep.

What else was I supposed to have for dinner? Okay, so maybe I was feeling more than slightly guilty.

Rummaging through the refrigerator, Rob pulled out eggs and a package of bacon. “We'll still have a good breakfast.”

Watching Rob deal with problems from infinitesimal to gargantuan made me realize that my heart was a smart organ, as organs went. I didn't plan on falling in love with him. From a logical perspective, the whole idea was ridiculous. And totally wrong.

But I liked spending time with him. I liked the way he teased me when I leaned against the window after a long

drive from a house-showing. Long being relative. In my world, over ten minutes is reason enough to start using the window as a head-rest, especially now that I was in permanent animal mode. He always spoke with gentleness and kindness, and sometimes when he thought I wasn't paying attention, he'd watch me with this affectionate smile.

I loved that smile. And here he was making breakfast for me, with hair sticking out on one side.

I added one more positive trait to the list. Rob didn't yell at me for eating the steak. Men seem to have a thing for meat. It's inherent I guess. Never get between a man and his meat. But here Rob was pulling pans out of the

cupboard and turning on the burners as if I hadn't committed the ultimate sacrilege. Maybe there was hope for me. I decided I'd have to go on the moon date with him, even if he broke my heart afterward.

Chapter 20

Just a regular day at the office.

Head on my paws, I watched Rob type on the computer, talk on the phone. I never would have guessed that life as a wolf would be excruciatingly boring. Then again, I was a wolf cooped up in a tiny two room office. What did I expect?

When I couldn't take it anymore, I growled. Not even a polite, *here I am, please pay attention to me* growl. No, it was more of an *I'll rip your leg off if you don't listen to me* growl. The way Rob glanced up meant that my growl didn't scare him, not a bit. Actually, at this moment, he was amused, and I have

no idea why.

He stretched and yawned, slowly pushing himself up from the chair and slowly walking to the door. I say walk. As slow as he was going, it could have been a creep or a crawl. He was definitely trying to annoy me.

I bolted out the minute the door opened. Our office only had the tiniest little green lawn in front and the surrounding ambience was concrete, cars, and glass. I wanted out. In a big way. Even in the open air, I felt claustrophobic, larger than the inside. Bored. Bored. Bored.

“Jen, are you okay?”

I stood panting in the grass, then I shook my head.

“We have a buyer coming in an hour.” Rob couldn't afford to call and reschedule.

Nodding, I stood on the grass, wondering if Rob ever felt trapped. “So you're okay with us staying?”

I nodded again and thumped my tail. Tails were rather important in the animal world. It's rather amazing that humans get by without them.

Opening the door, Rob asked, “You ready to come back in?”

First I shook my head, my signal for 'no'. Then I pushed my nose forward and back to tell him that he should go ahead. “Okay. If you need me, just call.”

I smiled. It was a wolfish smile. I

missed my human one. Although Ali tells me I'm cute, I've always looked at myself and thought 'bleh'. Not that I'm ugly, at least I wasn't. Attracting a man, even a werewolf, as a wolf was impossible. Even if we were both running as wolves, the man inside the wolf would have to like me.

Ten minutes before the couple was scheduled to arrive, Rob opened the door. "Jen, it's time to come hide.

Ugh.

An hour behind the couch. And surely they could smell me. I mean I had fur and all. What kind of message was that sending. With a whine, I ran to the back of the building and hid in the bushes, then barked.

“No, I can't see you. If you want to hide there, that's fine.” Rob called back.

Which wasn't an exact translation, but close enough.

After an eternity of looking at my wolf paws and digging in the cool dirt under the brush, they finally left. The man was tall and well-dressed. His hair was greying at the sides and he was just a bit overweight, though not enough to be a real issue. The woman wore her makeup the way women who have to look 'the part' do. She either went to a great plastic surgeon or was a dozen years younger than her husband.

I waited until they were long gone to come out.

“Jen, it's not uncommon to have extra energy as a wolf. I need to pick up some flyers at the printers. I can drop you off at Lost Ranger Park while I run errands, if you need some time to run.” Rob wore his leather jacket and looked ready to go, so I hurried to scrub my paws off in the grass.

Strange how accustomed I was getting to hanging my head outside of car windows.

The park was completely empty. Rob opened the door. “Be back in a few hours. This is the whistle I'll use.”

Rob's whistle was shrill and pierced my ears. I whined and pawed at my ear. Rob grinned ruefully, “I'm

sorry.”

At long last. Speeding off toward the trees, I looked back once to see Rob watching me. He hadn't even started the car. With a wave of my paw, I turned, tearing up the grass with my leaping strides. How good it felt to be free.

I ran off the tracks and deeper into the woods. The air smelled so fresh and the trees whispered their greeting to me. All was right with the world, and I was just where I needed to be. I felt a strange sense of euphoria and wondered if I truly wanted to be human again. But of course, it wasn't all playing in the woods. There were the long waits for the bathroom or for Ali or Rob to finish what they were doing. And the mind-

numbing boredom. But at this moment, I was free!

Woods aren't boring. I sniffed the trees. I jumped into a stream and splashed in the cold water, leaping out on the other side when I was done. The bushes grew denser and I forged my way into the dense undergrowth like an explorer.

Running under the bushes and dodging the limbs, I smiled and panted at the same time. This was what I needed. It never occurred to me that danger would lurk in the park, not until a trap sprang closed on my paw.

It hurt, but the trap was humane, not one of those paw-breaking types. Still, I

was running and tumbled over myself in a sudden halt, so my body ached and I think I pulled a muscle in my shoulder. A trap like this doesn't belong in a were-park. I sniffed the metal encasing my paw, looking for a way out. Spring loaded, there had to be a release switch somewhere.

The trap wasn't baited, and it was hidden off trail in the undergrowth. Maybe the trapper wasn't looking for any wolf in particular. I'd run a long way and might technically not even be in the park anymore. Perhaps a private citizen had grown tired of the wolves, but were-people have the same rights as anyone else. Kidnapping is kidnapping.

I howled and howled, barked and

whined until my throat gave out. No one came to help. My throat hurt. I pushed and pulled, tugged and tore at the device, but nothing worked.

My heart sank when I heard Rob's whistle. Such a faint sound that I knew the distance between us was great. He wouldn't find me easily.

I howled or at least attempted with my exhausted vocal chords, and I don't know if he heard or not, only that after a series of whistling spread out over a rather long period of time, the whistling stopped.

We'd arrived at the park in early afternoon. When the sun sank over the hills, I was still there, trapped and

waiting for someone to come.

Sometimes I heard the whistles or calls, and I howled my reply. My voice was strong enough that a few times, I think they heard me. But no one came.

My paw, the one in the trap, lost feeling and was getting that tingly sleep feeling. I opened and closed my paw to get blood flowing, all the while hoping Rob would find me.

Late into the night, I heard chattering and lifted my head to find Ali chattering at me. She wore a tiny backpack, a gift from me. It was specially fitted for her by a seamstress who specialized in were-clothes. For those of us who could change without the full moon, it was a chancy proposition changing back.

Having a little backpack with clothing helped. And a tiny flashlight, which helped even more.

I did some roo-roo type of barking, glad to see her. My throat still ached. She changed to her human state. From her backpack, Ali pulled out a pair of slinky pants so form-fitting that they were just one step up from nudity, but were easy to carry. She also carried a tank top and underwear.

After dressing, Ali knelt with the flashlights shining on the metal searching for a way to release the trap. I felt a deep relief when my paw released from the cage. Then she tore it out of the ground.

I limped in a circle, stretching my paw and the shoulder to which it was attached. With the blood flow coming back into my paw, I felt like a million teeny tiny pins and needles were being poked lightly into my paw. I shook it. Ouch.

Pulling out her cell phone, Ali dialed Rob. “Hey Rob, I found her. Her foot was stuck in a trap.”

My wolf ears picked up Rob's voice. He asked if I was okay and where we were.

“She's fine. Ummm...somewhere in the middle of the woods? I have no idea, but we'll just walk back the way we came.”

Rob said, "I need to see the area. This is werewolf territory. There shouldn't be traps anywhere at any time." Boy did he sound angry, hopefully not at me. Technically it wasn't my fault, even if I did manage to find the only wolf trap in acres and acres of forest. And then it occurred to me...maybe there was more than one trap.

Wolves ran these parts every full moon. The werewolves who lost their powers couldn't remember how or what happened, but surely a werewolf park would be a great hunting ground.

Rob was still talking, "Just stay put. Do you have any landmarks?"

Ali's problem with authority usually

stopped short at friends, but Rob was being bossy just then. Ali cut him off. “We're freezing out here, and Jen's limping. I'll bring you back tomorrow. I'll be able to find it easily. I've got tonight and tomorrow off anyway.”

Shoving the cell phone in her pocket, Ali muttered, “I hate my job.”

She must have read my mind because she looked in my direction. It's not that easy just applying willy-nilly and hoping something sticks. I've got a mind to go raccoon permanently and live off the land.

I wolf-sighed. One of the heavy kinds of exhalations that speaks of exhaustion and uncertainty. Ali threatened to live off the land once every

month or so, but lately she sounded like she just might mean it.

Digging through dumpsters for lunch just didn't appeal, and I doubt she'd get enough food any other way. But that was a discussion for another day, when I had vocal chords and the will to use them.

Shoes were too heavy for Ali to carry in raccoon form, so in bare feet, she picked up the trap, unhooking it from the chain that held it in place. It's amazing what our bodies will do for us given the chance. Her feet were tough, not that the occasional rock or sticker didn't bother her, but she managed to walk many a mile without footgear and she and her feet survived to tell the tale.

The last thing she pulled out of her pack was a cinnamon stick. She broke a piece off and dropped it on the ground near where the trap had been set. “Be just my luck if I can't find the thing tomorrow. We'll leave a trail, just in case.”

She strode confidently back in the direction we had come while I loped beside her. I thought she knew where she was going. Sometimes people get that look, like they know exactly what they're doing. Except this time, she didn't.

The trees all started to look the same after a while, and Ali dropping pieces of cinnamon here and there didn't do much to convince me, even if Ali did

have a strange gift for finding her way.

One of the park lights saved us. I was dragging tail by the time we reached the path.

“See, we'll make it home safe and sound.”

I didn't reply. We were used to long moments of silence. After all, we both changed form outside the full moon. She laughed. “What an adventure. You can come to my house when we're done. Rob looks pretty beat up. I think he needs a night of pure sleep.”

My throat still hurt, but I gave a bark of agreement.

Rob paced along the sidewalk near the cars. The parking lot was nearly empty with a few stragglers driving

away.

“Thank God!” Rob knelt beside me and wrapped his arms around my neck. “You have no idea how worried I've been.”

Ali looked around, “Wow, your buddies sure cleared out fast.”

“Most of them have to work in the morning. As soon as you called, I told them you found her. Well, Jen, let's head home. I could sleep for a week.” Rob yawned, his eyes watering.

“Wait a minute. I have two days off and a new wolf bed. Jen is staying with me.” It's probably a good thing I didn't have a leash attached to my collar or Ali would have been tugging on me to pull

me away.

“She's been missing for hours. I'd feel better if she was safe at home.” It was hard to see in the twilight, but I was certain Rob was wearing his stubborn face.

“My apartment is safe. And I've been searching for her the same number of hours you have. Plus, you've been hogging her. I haven't really gotten to spend any time with her in days.”

With a sigh, Rob said, “Fine, she can stay with you tonight.”

I felt ambivalent about the way it all turned out. On the one hand, Ali knew me better and we'd spend the evening watching chick flicks and eating popcorn. Even if my wolf-form couldn't

tell her exactly what I was in the mood for, she had a good idea what I liked.

On the other hand, I was frustrated that Rob didn't try so hard to fight for me. He seemed to like my company. Was he just being nice?

Back to the first hand, Rob knew Ali well, understood how unreasonable she could be and probably decided it wasn't worth the fight. But no one asked me. And tonight I really wanted to stay with Rob. Not enough to make a fuss, so I limped along with my aching paw.

I decided not to be mad at Rob and hopped in Ali's car with a goodbye scratch on the ears. An ear scratch feels surprisingly good. Mice never get their

ears scratched.

Chapter 21

Ali and I fell asleep watching *Were-Dreams*, a television show which is more soap opera than anything else. I didn't usually sleep with any electronic stuff running. I liked the computers off, the television off, the lights off...everything off. This night I was just exhausted enough not to care.

I stayed with Ali for a couple of days. Nothing exciting happened on Thursday, unless you count getting your paw stuck in the couch cushion exciting. Rob left a message that he'd spoken with Tyler who would meet us in the park on Saturday. Ali worked Saturday evening,

so she and Rob decided that I'd go to his house on Friday night.

Friday morning was a different story. Grandma stopped at the office. When I wasn't there, she called on Ali. Did she use the telephone? No. Not Grandma. She had to see Ali and make sure I wasn't hiding in the bathroom or something.

The smell gave her away. Grandma has a vanilla smell, very light and soothing, the kind of scent a werewolf could tolerate. When she rang the doorbell, I froze because even through the door, that scent trumpeted the announcement of her arrival.

Before I had even decided whether to hide or not, Ali answered the door.

She's not one to care what anyone else thinks. If it was up to her, she'd just as soon tell Grandma the whole truth and be done with it. Thank goodness Rob already helped set the precedent for hiding me.

But then, there I was, grinning at my grandma with canine teeth and wondering if she recognized me.

“Ali, where's Jen? Something's up and I want to know what it is.” Great! Now what do we do?

Ali must have been thinking the same thing because she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. I shook my head.

“Wow, you're out early. Have you

met my new dog? Her name is Spoof. She does a lot of cool tricks.” Ali was still wearing pajamas, the fuzzy, flannel kind with large pink and blue snowflakes. It was ten o'clock in the morning, which on a night shift schedule is far too early to be awake—which is probably why Ali looked so tired. Normally she would have gone to bed at 8:00 and slept until early evening. Her schedule was totally screwed up thanks to my problems.

Grandma didn't seem to notice or care about Ali's new dog. “Ali, is Jen in danger?”

Ah, an easy question, but Ali smiled sweetly when she answered. It was the smile that she gave when she was

covering something up, her lying smile. She said, “No.”

Of course, my grandma didn't believe her. “Ali, if you don't tell me where Jen is this instant, I will see to it that you both regret it for years to come.”

I could only imagine what kind of punishment she would dream up. I may have whined. It was a slip of the tongue. Ali tucked a curly strand of hair behind her ear, a deadly earnest expression on her face. She did not take threats well. This could turn into a full blown battle. And Grandma would call in the troops. I could just imagine my parents and Andrea and of course my brother all lined up to harass Ali and Rob until they

spilled.

“She has Chicken Pox.” Ali blurted out.

It was probably a good thing Gran didn't look over at me just then. I'd put my paws over my head. Chicken Pox. That was the worst explanation ever. The worst. Seriously.

She was my best friend. I could let this disaster slide. One had to have allowances for a best friend's quirks.

“She's at her apartment?” Grandma asked.

“Well...” Ali hesitated, “Not exactly.”

“Well exactly where is she?”

“My mom's house.”

Here I stood over the abyss, the

large pit of lies that Ali had dug in an attempt to keep my Grandma off my scent. It occurs to me that the reason Ali so frequently blurts out the worst truths is because she's so horribly bad at lying. It's the drama. Her poker face is great, and she can weave a fantastic tale. Unfortunately, no one in their right mind would believe her.

Grandma sure didn't." Well, then, we're going to see your mom."

"I'm sorry. I can't do that." Ali said.

Grandma is not only a werewolf, but the matriarch of the family. Her piercing stare is enough to make the strongest wolf crumble. It's a good thing Ali changes to raccoon. With the whole

pack dominance thing, she'd be telling Grandma about the time we cut school in fourth grade to sneak into the zoo. Not the safest thing we've ever done. The zoo is full of the kind of animals that would love to eat a mouse for dinner. You'd think the were-people wouldn't allow the entrapment of fellow animals, but the majority see animals the same way people do, as dumb beasts without emotion or reason. I'm more of a rebel.

Back to Ali and Grandma.

Grandma's eyes had bulged and her face transformed to a feral anger. Oh dear. "What did you say?" The words were enunciated very carefully. Ali had better have a different answer this time.

I cringed.

“Grandma Ann, A woman your age can't be too careful. Shingles aren't anything to play with.”

“Jen does not have chicken pox.” Grandma took a step forward. I could see now why Grandpa always let her have her way about things.

“Okay, you want the truth?” Ali looked at me again. The way she was glancing at me after every question, I'm surprised Grandma didn't figure it out anyway.

She took a deep breath, the kind of inhalation a person might take before walking the plank. Whatever Ali was about to say, I knew, I just knew, it wasn't going to be the truth. She'd never

be able to crawl her way back into Grandma's good graces if she kept going, not that either of us had ever exactly been Grandma's favorites.

I barked and jumped to my feet, placing myself directly in front of Grandma.

Looking over my shoulder at Ali, I couldn't help but notice her relief.

With a weak wave of her hand and a rather ironic and dismal smile, Ali said, "So this is Jen."

If Grandma's brows drew together any tighter, they'd be up and down on her face. I really didn't know a woman could scowl so much. I should have. After all, I've been dealing with her my whole life.

It's like the boy who cried wolf, except in this case, Ali was the habitual liar who no one would believe, which isn't fair because Ali tells the truth more than most people. She's just a really bad liar and when she lies, it's a rather memorable event. Most people lie softly, with a garnish of the truth to make it palatable. Not Ali.

“Ali, I don't appreciate being lied to. I'm going to be speaking with your mother. And I don't care if Jen is an adult, when I find her, I'm going to put her on such a tight leash she will wish she was young enough to be grounded.” See how unfair it is. Why am I in trouble because Ali is such a huge liar?

But I know why. It's as much a punishment for Ali as for me.

Grandma turned to leave, and she was so mad her hands were shaking. Only Ali could get that kind of extreme reaction out of people. I flew past her and put a paw on the door. Then I turned and blocked the entrance.

“Get your wolf out of the way.” Grandma said. Her eyes were lit with fury and I knew

“Wait. I'll tell you the truth.” Ali sank onto the sofa, her eyes down on her lap. That's not Ali's style at all, which will probably make her believable. She gave a huge sigh, “You're not going to like it.”

Grandma turned slowly. In the

scary movies, she'd be the bad guy who just discovered the hero hiding in the closet. At least, that was my first impression.

“I already don't like it. Is that boyfriend of hers in on it, too?”

Boyfriend? Oh no.

“He's technically not her boyfriend yet, but they're well-suited to one another if it gets to that.”

“Cut the beans. Where is Jen?”

Ali grabbed one of the sofa pillows and tugged at the fringe, her fingers weaving in and out. A definite change of tactics. “You have to promise not to yell at her when she gets back. She made me paw swear never to tell. This is a

serious breach of our friendship.”

“I promise.”

Wow, Ali was totally wrapping Grandma around her little finger. The whole “promise not to yell” and “breach of friendship” elevated Ali's lies to truth. But Grandma's promise came too easy. She never yelled. She just slowly lowered her voice and spoke the words ever more clearly until you had to lean in to hear. Then she'd tell you how disappointed she was. This kind of trick works with pack animals. Not so much with mice, but then I always felt a little bad for disappointing her. That aside. When Grandma promised not to yell at me, she could still give me an excessively long stern lecture and not

technically break her promise to Ali.

Ali must have been quiet a whole minute. Grandma took the seat opposite her on the couch and waited her out. I hoped Ali was using this time to come up with a really good lie, because the truth sure didn't work. Imagining the trouble chair in Grandma's den, I winced. This could be a losing proposition either way.

“Jen wants to go to college. She's touring schools on the east coast for a culinary arts degree.”

As lies go, that wasn't a bad one, except for the expectation of a follow-through. Culinary arts was a huge stretch, but it was at least believable.

Maybe once I was human, I could convince Grandma that I really had been a wolf for a while. Or that I decided not to go to college because it was too expensive. Too bad she didn't believe I had chicken pox.

“Why not WSU? That's a fine school.” Here we go. Just because my dad and brother go, I'm expected to as well.

“Only the finest culinary arts schools will do, which is why she flew to New York.” Ali bit her lip and raised her eyebrows with a hopeful smile, the kind which screamed untruth.

“But New York. That's so far away. We'll never see her.”

Ali actually found a sad face

somewhere in her acting repertoire and said, "She needs to be her own person."

That part was true. Getting a unique identity in a pack family was hard.

"Why can't she be her own person close to home?" Grandma sounded like she was ready to grab the next flight to New York and track me down. Funny, I practically sat at her feet.

This is where I expected Ali to start arguing. She surprised me by saying, "I know. That's exactly what I told her. I wanted her to go to Eastern, at least for a few years. She can always transfer later."

And then she and Grandma were discussing how hard it would be if I

ended up going to school halfway across the country. Ali had to polish it off with a corker, “Of course, if she attends school that far away, there will be no hope for anything with Rob.”

It's rather annoying to listen to your grandmother and best friend discuss your love life. I tuned them out and daydreamed about a move to New York.

Chapter 22

After Grandma left, Ali threw herself on the couch and said, “Culinary Arts” and started laughing. Reflecting on the last meal I'd prepared as a human, egg noodles and parmesan cheese, I chuckled, too.

After wiping her eyes, Ali said, “I'd better warn Rob.”

She gave him the two-minute version. Hanging up the phone, she studied me. “We have the whole afternoon.”

Uh-oh. When Ali starts talking

about how much time we have, it's usually because she's cooked up an adventure, which I had to admit was more fun than hanging around waiting for Rob or even worse, hiding because he entertained clients.

I wagged my tail and lifted my eyes, waiting for the germ of an idea to build.

“This is the only time you'll ever be a wolf.”

Presumably that was true. Where was she going with this?

“The water park just opened. We sneak in, slide down one of the big slides, and sneak out.” Ali's face was flushed and her eyes bright, just like a crazy person's.

This was an ancient idea. At the age

of fourteen, Ali proposed the adventure. I declined. The proposition changed with a dozen variations. We'd paid as patrons, scouted and marked the entries and exits. I'd drown. No matter how many times I slid down the slide as a human, I thought of myself as a mouse, tiny and in the way, and factored in the amount of water—too much. And then the odds that some kid slid down just as I jumped. The adventure would kill me.

As a wolf, my hesitation wasn't as legitimate. But the collar with the stupid mojo bag was a dead giveaway.

Hmm...I watched my own thoughts, my emotions, my excitement. I'm going to do this. After years of fear, I'm going to

slide down the superslide as a werewolf.

I nodded, but then pawed at the collar. We couldn't have anything that marked us.

“That's a good idea.” Ali said.

She removed the collar. I can't tell you how good it felt. When this is over, I'm never wearing a necklace or turtleneck shirt or anything like it again.

“I need to hide it someplace safe.” She walked around her little apartment, opening cupboards. In the end, she taped it to the wall in her closet.

The protection gone, I started to have misgivings. Not enough to call off the adventure, but a healthy dose of worry. Nothing new. Every time Ali

dragged me (willingly) to experience a new way of looking at life, I worried about my health, my status as a law-abiding citizen, and whether my family would find out, usually in that order.

Ali looked just like a pixie when she readied herself for these things. Her smile spread from ear to ear and with her curly hair, that's all she needs. Wearing her pink pocket shorts and a tank top, she grabbed her keys and her backpack, "Ready to go?"

I jumped up and followed her out.

At the water park, Ali drove around until she could get a parking spot by the exit and entrance. An easy escape was key to the success of these kinds of

things. “We can't leave together, I'll be back to human. You'll have to sneak out and wait for me.”

I shrugged, knowing there would be no sneaking, but it didn't matter. The four-legged ran faster than the two-legged. Anyone who has ever chased a dog knows that the only reason a dog is caught is because he's tranquilized or ready to come home.

“Trunk or door?” Ali asked.

I nosed the trunk.

Some of our plans failed when well-meaning passersby 'helped'. They shut the door, forcing a premature change from mouse or raccoon to human. In the end, Ali left the trunk open but down as requested and the doors closed.

A trunk was more easily ignorable, and I could jump in to hide.

“Ready?” This was the culmination of years of thought and planning. Two video cameras in the parking lot, one over the cash register. Three attendants in the front, two at the slides, the concession stands clerks, a lifeguard on every slide. The golden scheme Ali worked toward for years.

“Let's do this.”

She set her backpack at just the right angle. Ali loved getting into things. She discovered early on that having a container to carry her clothes around gave her that much added protection. As lookout, I stood on my hind paws and

circled once, then gave a single bark. Ali shifted into raccoon and struggled into the backpack, an amazing feat in and of itself.

We slunk along the edges of cars and then when the cars ran out waited for an eternity until a car load of teenagers and a couple with their children parked. Once the group of teenagers started for the entrance we fell in behind them. They joked about us following, and one obnoxious brat threw his empty plastic bottle at us. So much for mixing in.

The parents and their three kids paid for their tickets at the front of the line, the youngest two barely old enough to swim. Ali dodged with a loud chitter

in front of the nearest group, then slid into the park, leaving the children pointing and the teens laughing. The attendant started after Ali with a walkie-talkie, and I made my move. As a mouse, my entrance would have gone unremarked, but with Ali acting as a distraction, I ran ahead of the groups and into the park.

The water park was busy enough that a crowd formed a line at each of the slides. Ali in her plans decided that a direct run to the slides was the best case scenario. The park was designed to make use of a natural hill, which made our infiltration of the water slides possible. A twenty foot climb up a

ladder wouldn't do for a raccoon or a wolf, but a five foot ladder for the twirly slides or a platform for the straight and fast slides were entirely doable.

The last plan to my knowledge entailed a single slide into the pool and a brilliant escape. But we cut in line and jumped easily onto the slides and the water gurgled and sprayed onto our fur and suddenly I just didn't care that a dozen lifeguards were yelling and congregating at the side of the pool to watch. We swam to the lip of the pool and pulled ourselves out. Ali first. But I was right behind. I shook myself and grinned.

And we ran back up the hill, just the way we did as little kids pulling our

sleds up the hill at Brierson's Farm. A few of the guys wearing company polo shirts positioned themselves to block us. I bared my teeth as if to bite and then dodged at the last minute, and we went again. And again. And again. Studies show that heady emotions can make a wereanimal more apt to forget themselves. Something akin to hyperactivity where decision making and logic became subdued in favor of emotion. Personally I think it's just because we've discovered a taste of freedom and feel more likely to escape without getting caught.

Now the crowd was calling across the pool, giving advice to the life guards,

some running around the pool to catch us, others watching the crowd to make sure people were safe. My head said it was time to go. My heart wanted to stay and play until the park closed or they caught us.

Criminals always regret that last score, the one that got them thrown in prison. It was time to go. With a howl to Ali, I sounded the retreat. We fled the pools, running down among the concessions. One lady with a hotdog came around the corner, and I skidded forward, bumping into her. She screamed. I'm talking an ear-piercing scream, and dropped her hotdog.

After all the playing, I was hungry. Now, I've never been a believer in the

five second rule. Normally if it hits the ground, I throw it away. But the hotdog hadn't been bitten yet, and landed right inside that little checkered carton that hot dogs come in. I snatched the hot dog, gulping it down and scrambled out of the way.

The problem with grand retreats is that there is always some poor soldier who gets stuck behind. I lost Ali. She's quite good at evasion. And when she decides to go incognito, she disappears into the strangest hiding places and quickly, too. One minute she's there. One minute gone. I ran.

Once the retreat had been declared, our agreement was to meet back at the

car, and wait for the other party to show. Not that waiting would be a problem for me. I couldn't drive the car home anyway. And no matter how many times I'd been stuck waiting in an awkward place, Ali was always there waiting at the end. Our friendship existed solidly on trust and similar interests.

Most of the crowd nearest the slides lost interest once I was out of view. They went back to the lines at the slides, eager to resume their own play, at least I assumed they did because I didn't end up with an entire horde following me. However, a few very determined lifeguards chased me.

I decided to circle back to the

concessions in a large loop. This would give me time to watch for Ali, and create more distance between myself and my would-be captors. I slipped in between the two concessions, listening to the chatter.

Catching my breath, I waited until I heard, “Here! The dog's here.” A little girl, probably around seven pointed at me. Panting, I grinned, poking my head out the back of the concessions. I dove around the corner and down to the next stand and sidled in between the two, waiting, waiting.

“Where'd he go?” So just because I'm a wolf I'm a *he*. Well, I didn't have time to set the record straight. Most of

the voices came from the front side of the concessions. I poked my head around back again. No one in the back. The bathrooms were just down the way. I would sprint down back down the hill again, behind the bathrooms, and out the gate. I waited just one more second, and one more.

“There he is.”

And bolted.

So fast the fence was a blur. By the time anyone had pointed me out, I was down the hill and swerving around the corner. The men's bathroom door stood open. Ali held the door. “Get in here.”

I slid across the wet floor, totally grossed out. The place stunk and paper towels overflowed from the receptacle

and littered the floor. Bad enough I peed on concrete at the beginning of this wolf fiasco, but now I was probably sliding all over it. Perhaps karma had come full circle.

Ali closed the door. She was wearing a t-shirt and underwear but no pants. “Hurry, into the stall.”

She locked the door to the stall and sat on the toilet, than hoisted me up. My paws overlapped her shoulders and my hind quarters kept slipping.

“Shh...try not to move.”

I chuffed. It was as close as I could come to an answer when we were in hiding.

As predicted the door burst open a

minute later. “Anyone in here?”

“I am.” Ali lowered her voice just that little bit. She sounded just like a ten-year old boy...good thing she wasn't wearing toe-nail polish.

“You seen a dog run through here?”

“Yes. He ran by the bathrooms before I came in.” I closed my eyes. It was so hard to stay perfectly still, but this moment was crucial.

“Thanks kid.” The door to the bathroom closed.

Sharing a bathroom stall, even with your best friend, is an awkward thing. When the questioner was long gone, Ali whispered, “I don't have any pants. I washed them after the park and when I was packing forgot to put them in.”

I giggled. Silently. Mostly it came out as me shaking with a few hiccups. Ali helped me down and unlocked the stall, then locked the door to the outside. That seemed the safest plan for now.

“I'm going to call Rob.”

What? I shook my head. Not Rob. There are a few things a boss shouldn't know about an employee. Unfortunately, Rob already knew most of those things. I really didn't need him to show up here and adding one more negative to the Jen-list. Especially when the only thing I didn't like about Rob was his moon trysts, which were apparently normal to the process of werewolf mating. And we

were wet and not looking our best, although I did make a cute werewolf if I did say so myself.

Ali scrunched her hair up and squeezed as much water as she could out of it. With every word spoken as a whisper, she said, “Your grandma?”

I shook my head violently.

“Andrea?”

I shrugged, although it had not escaped my attention that all of the people Ali mentioned were in *my* family. But then she'd worn out her family already. The last big problem Ali asked for help on, her father said, *You got yourself into this mess. You get yourself out.*

My family it was. Ali dialed

Andrea's number. Apparently it went to voicemail. Ali said, "Hey, it's Ali. Can you call me as soon as you get this message?"

Some people are tied at the hip to their phones. Andrea's not that type. She'd as likely leave her cell on the kitchen table for a week before noticing it had lost its battery charge.

Ali called a few more of our friends, but no one was available. She mentioned Rob's name again. I thought about the time and how long we had until the park staff rotated through cleaning the bathrooms or circled back in the search. Finally reason took precedence over humiliation and I nodded.

“Thanks. I was starting to run out of options.”

She could have become a raccoon again, and we could have run out of here and changed in the car, but changing didn't lend itself to a speedy getaway.

“Rob?” If she wasn't trying to be quiet, she probably would have put the phone on speaker, so that my embarrassment could reach new heights.

“Can you bring a pair of jeans to the water park?” Ali twisted her hair around her finger in a sleek wet curl.

Rob mumbled something. There must have been water in my ear because I couldn't quite hear what he said. I shook my head to clear the water out of

my fur and then sneezed.

“Uh-huh, that's the one.” Ali stepped back, wiping her neck and glaring at me. I gave her the toothy wolf grin.

“We're in the men's bathroom, the one near the concessions. The door's locked. Knock three times, then once, then three times. When I unlock the door, hold the pants out and I'll grab them, throw them on, then we need to sneak Jen out of the park.”

“What are you doing in the water park?” That time, I heard Rob.

“Long story. Please hurry. The park staff is looking for us.”

My haunches were tired but I remained standing. Even if my butt fur

already slipped in the nastiness that was the bathroom, I had no desire to repeat the experience. Someone tried to open the door once. Ali yelled out, "I'm changing. Can you please use the other bathroom?"

"Open the door." A gruff manly voice ordered.

"I'm sorry. I can't just now. It will be about ten minutes. There's another restroom just on the other side of the park. It's not far."

I tilted my head in a quizzical *Why did you say anything?*

Ali said, "You can bet there's someone around here with keys. I don't want anyone finding the park staff until

Rob gets here.”

So far, playing in the slides was well-worth hiding out in a smelly bathroom. But the wait was interminable. I know Rob's not a slow driver. I've ridden with him. He must have hit every red light on the road.

Ali was feeling the same thing. At least twice *she* said, “I wish he'd get here.”

Finally the tell-tale magical knock. Three-One-Three sounded on the door. Ali unlocked the door and a very large hand, one I was familiar with thrust a pair of my sweats through the door. Ali threw them on in lightening speed.

She opened the door a crack and hissed, “Rob, come in here.”

Looking bewildered, Rob slid through the door, locking it behind him. “The park's back to normal. Everyone's talking about the excitement about the raccoon and the dog, but they've stopped searching. How are we going to get Jen out?”

“Here's my plan. We open the door and Jen makes a run for it, out of the gate. If she's not followed she jumps into my trunk. If she is, then she runs out of the parking lot and down the street to the corner with that bus stop. We leisurely stroll to the cars. If Jen hopped in great, if not I'll pick her up on the way out.

Rob's eyebrow twitched slightly. “Fine. We'll meet at my house.”

Ali shivered, “I need a hot bath first. Can we get dressed in real clothes and then come over?”

I watched the two bouncing conversation back and forth like a ping pong ball and waited for Rob to show some sign of annoyance or displeasure. What I didn't expect was for him to chuckle as Ali stepped out to take point. A few seconds later, she rapped on the door and I was off and running.

Turns out the staff, while not on high alert, was still watching for me. One look over my shoulder revealed three men on the chase. I exited the gates, jumping over the turn styles because some enterprising soul had blocked the

entrance with cardboard, as if that would stop a wolf. It was probably a major pain for the patrons as well, because the attendant had to remove the cardboard every time someone left. Then I fled into the parking lot.

Ali's car was not an option. Too many people not only watched me leave, but decided to follow along and see where I went. So I ran straight out of the parking lot and down the street as planned. I could still smell the bathroom though, and looked forward to a bath, preferably with rose soap.

Sitting near the bus bench, I felt content. Adventure complete without major mishap and the chase over. The euphoria of exercise was starting to kick

in, and I was feeling good.

Rob pulled into the bus parking zone and opened his passenger door. “Hop in.”

I probably wouldn't get a better pickup line from him. Well, our plans had gone sour enough times, Ali would understand. I leapt into the pickup, staying on the floor because I was wet and gross.

He was driving his backup car, which was a beat-up truck that no real estate agent would drive anywhere near a client; however, as Rob once explained, it's great for off-road adventures and moving.

I refused to walk into his house

having slidden through the water in a public restroom. Instead I went to the hose and sat next to the spigot. “Just a second.” Rob threw on his grubby clothes.

He turned the hose on in the front first and hosed me off. I mimed to him flea shampoo by flicking my paw on my ear.

“You want me to be careful of your ears?” Rob asked, his head tilted.

I shook my head and then nibbled at my fur the way an animal does to get something uncomfortable out.

Rob just stared at me and shrugged.

Words would sure be useful at this point. I put my head down and then rubbed my paws over the top, as if I

were washing my hair.

“Shampoo!” Rob said.

I nodded.

By the time my fur was scrubbed and polished, soaked and rinsed, Ali drove up. She smelled like she'd taken a shower, even if she hadn't gotten the soak in.

“Playing dirty, Rob?” Ali said.

“I'm the rescuer, I make the rules.”

Rob crossed his arms which really showed off his arms and shoulders.

“You didn't warn me.” Ali teased.

“And let you squeal in front of me and steal the moment?” Rob asked.

I was confused that it was a moment. I was wet and scraggly, chased

out of a place I didn't belong, and I smelled of a guy's bathroom, an indescribable scent made only worse by the wolf-powered nose. But Rob thought it was a moment. I grinned.

Ali followed us inside, and we finalized plans for the next day. When Rob went to the bathroom, she snuck the collar back on me. I could have gone another year without seeing the thing again.

Tyler was coming to Rob's house instead of the park on Saturday. One more day and I would be a woman again. I'd see myself in the mirror again. I had no idea how much I would miss my own body when I put on that amulet and wished my body away.

Now, I was grateful to be getting it back again. One more day.

I dried off inside on the furnace register. The hot air was just a bit too toasty with my fur, and I turned every now and then to get a new side. Ali, Rob, and I shared dinner while Ali recounted our adventures at the water park.

Somehow I thought he'd react the way my family would, with disapproval and a frown. He surprised me with his laughter and avid curiosity. I swear he envied us. I guess from a distant perspective we must seem like rebels. We're more like immature children, were-folk who haven't had the decency

to grow up. That's my family talking, not just Grandma either. Mom and Dad's lectures ran along those same lines.

The evening felt like magic to me. I fell asleep on the doggy-bed excited for the next day.

Chapter 23

Tyler arrived a few minutes before eleven o'clock. He and Rob chatted about werewolf things. Rob invited him to breakfast and while we ate, Tyler asked all kinds of questions a parent would normally have long answered. Not that Tyler was without knowledge. A few of his werewolf friends at school filled him in on most of it.

I could barely eat. Finally, I would be free! This inability to shift between human and mouse really hampered my enjoyment of life, except for the water park. That was great.

But there were other problems. For

example, Rob never eats sweets. And it's so much trouble to spell out chocolate cookie only to have him spend an hour explaining why werewolves in wolf form shouldn't eat chocolate.

I didn't make puppy eyes or whine to change his mind. It occurred to me that even if I convinced him that cookies were an absolute necessity, he'd just drive to the nearest grocery store and buy packaged cookies. Ali and I make our own cookies with the freshest of ingredients.

I'd had some good times as a wolf, don't get me wrong, but I was anxious to get back to human form. So while I pushed sausage around with my nose, Rob explained pack life and invited

Tyler to the half-moon barbecue for his own pack.

And then it was time. My heart sped while I danced on my paws waiting. Rob mistook my eagerness, “Jen, do you have to go outside?”

No—I just wanted this over.

Rob unbuckled the collar and handed it to Tyler. The collar remained in collar form as it had before. I wondered if it had anything to do with the mojo bag, which may or may not have worked. We didn't exactly have any problems when I took it off to slide at the water park.

“Put it on and take your wolf back.” Rob said.

Tyler nodded and gently grasped the collar. A haze of light swirled around Tyler, and he laughed as the change took him and said, "I'm back." And then he was a wolf for just a moment and then, like the others, came back to human.

The collar disappeared in a haze of light and in Tyler's hand was the amulet. He handed it back to Rob his face lit with a bright enthusiasm we hadn't seen before.

"Thanks. I can't thank you enough."

Rob congratulated him and we waited. Nothing happened. I put my face on my paws. If three cats died to make the amulet, maybe the magic still trapped me somehow. It's rather embarrassing to admit, but I whined a little, just a teeny

whine barely noticeable, but enough to make a point of my distress.

“We'll figure it out Jen. Don't worry.” Rob said, and I would have felt better, except he looked extremely worried. His brow hardly ever has worry furrows, he's just not the type. But here he is with a crinkled up forehead telling *me* not to worry.

Still I was glad when Tyler left and Rob scratched my ears, “I won't be able to scratch your ears when you're human. There are a few decent things about being a wolf.”

I didn't dispute that, but I'm sure I could manage without an ear scratch once I became human again.

“Ali promised to show us the trap

today. Are you still up for it?" Rob tucked the amulet in his briefcase. I couldn't stand to have it near my throat anymore. I hated the thing with a passion.

Rob wasn't being inconsiderate of my feelings. Having wolf traps set in a park designed for werewolves is a huge deal. All of the packs in the area planned to send as many helpers as possible

Werewolf packs are like church groups. When the clarion call goes out, help appears en masse. Over one hundred people were milling about the park when we arrived. Unfortunately, a few of them wanted to pet me.

I growled and bared my fangs, and

Rob warned them off. He didn't tell them I was his office assistant. And I was grateful for that. There were a few stories I would never live down if the truth got out. This was one of them.

Although many of the folk who turned out to help were wolves and could only change at the full moon, a small group of other were-animals arrived. When a were-hound appeared, Rob pointed him out to me.

“That's Jose Sanchez. If anyone can track the trapper today, he can.” Jose stood with a group of werewolves in human form. He wagged his tail just like a normal dog. Funny how we seem to take on the characteristics of our animal cousins.

An older gentleman with white hair, a clipboard, and a bullhorn called for attention. In an instant, the crowd hushed. He called for the trackers first.

“That's us.” Rob said. I'd missed Ali in the crowd because she was already in raccoon form. It's not as easy to see or even smell when a hundred people are milling about. Many of the tracker group had already taken their animal form.

“This raccoon here will lead you to the first trap. She marked a few spots on the way with cinnamon. If you smell it, you're on the right track.”

Ali chittered and stood on two legs to get a good view of her team. With a

nod, she skittered toward the woods. The crowd of animals started after her. Ali and the group in fur didn't wait for those still in human form. They needed to get to the location and start tracking the hunter before the trap clearers went in.

I stayed with Rob and heard some of what was happening with the remaining crowd. The pack leader gave a speech then started calling out pack names and sectors.

By the time Rob and I arrived at the point of my trapping with the other humans, the hound had already bayed a find.

Chapter 24

Even though my life as a weremouse has at times been fraught with danger and perhaps an adventure or two, I've never suffered from any major problems or faced anything truly evil. When we followed the werhound into a twisted part of the forest, I expected to find something innocuous, maybe a teenager playing pranks who truly didn't realize how dangerous his actions were to the werewolf.

But the shed with the three large cages gave me a cold chill. The cage design indicated a preference for wolf,

but human shackles attached to one of the bars. I howled my question, frustrated and unable to express my anger, *How many werewolf have gone missing?*

The hound changed into human form, a middle aged man, short and stocky with a balding head and freckles. I turned my head until he put on the jeans and the sweatshirt one of his friends handed to him. He shook his head, "This is a bad business."

"Did you get anything from the scents?"

"Three men, humans with no werewolf in them spent a fair amount of time here. They've had several wolves, a bear, two dogs, and three cats in the cages. One of the cats didn't actually

have any werewolf. I smell vampire. Not in the cages and only faintly, but it's there. Also, air and earth magic, although that one hinders the reading.” He pointed to me. I gulped, feeling simultaneously guilty and offended.

Rob glanced over his shoulder at me, “Is the smell exact? We've been struggling to undo a curse that's turned my friend here into a wolf. So far, the change has been permanent.”

The man knelt by me and sniffed the air. I so wanted to curl my lips at him and give him the sneering wolf face. But he was helping, so I was nice. “One of the magic smells matches, but there's more than that magic in play here.”

By now the leader of the pack, the man with white hair had arrived, “I called the Moon Patrol. They'll be here to investigate.”

The Moon Patrol was the werewolves' affectionate name for the police, specifically the teams that handled werewolf problems. Usually a combo pair with a wereperson paired up with a human person. I glanced over at Ali who had remained in raccoon form. She gave me a quick nod and slipped out.

Which made complete sense. We'd only been out of high school a few years and Ali, if not notorious, would be recognized by at least eight of the Moon

Patrol officers. On five of those occasions, we were shuffled along to our parents. But it still made sense for her to disappear, because if they started questioning her, she would lie, even if this was a wonderful time to tell the truth.

Rob and I waited.

Meanwhile, the group scouring the forest for traps brought them into the shed, dumping them in front of the cage. As the pile grew, some of the werewolves in human form looked distressed.

Most of the trackers left or changed into their human selves. I was the only animal left in the room, which could have been awkward, but no one made a

big deal about it.

The Moon Patrol took forever to arrive. I practiced sniffing, catching all of the cat scents and even discerning the one that didn't turn to human. Unlike the bloodhound, I couldn't smell magic. Maybe they should start calling them magichounds.

Nothing exciting happened. The Moon Patrol took notes and asked questions. The only surprise I got out of the whole thing was that a few of the patrolmen actually dismantled the cages themselves.

We left while the investigation was still in full swing. The disturbed look on Rob's face told me he wasn't done yet.

He opened the door for me and waited for me to jump in.

Ali popped up from the backseat, “What took you so long?”

To his credit, Rob merely raised an eyebrow and scratched his chin, “You don't have a car of your own?”

“I parked in the gas station down the way. This trap thing is probably connected to the amulet. So I was thinking we could all head over to the wizard's house.” Ali pushed herself up and grabbed her seatbelt, hooking it in the latch with a single swish.

“Return to the scene of the crime? No.” Rob shut the passenger door, walking firmly around the car.

“But Rob...”

Rob didn't let Ali get another word in. "No."

"But."

"No."

I barked, mostly to tell Rob that he was in a losing battle. Sure, he said no. And in a few minutes he'd drop Ali off at her car, then she'd go alone. Ali never let a little word like 'no' stop her.

As for me, I was getting tired of the snout and the paws. At some point, I desperately wanted to have my own face back, preferably before I turned gray.

Ali crossed her arms. "Fine. I'll stay home tonight, but I'm taking Jen with me."

Which meant that we were planning

another escapade.

“Is that okay?” He asked me.

I nodded.

“No more water parks?” Rob lifted an eyebrow.

Who, me? My furry face broke out into a crazy grin. He scratched me behind the ear. We were both getting too used to those little touches.

Moments like this being a wolf isn't so bad.

“No water parks.” Ali put just the right inflection for boredom, sounding exactly like a disgruntled teenager, which is probably how she felt. But I read more into it. Yes, Ali had a plan in mind, something that required a bit of subterfuge. I wondered what we would

be doing in an hour. Not hanging out at home. But how to break into a wizard's house...that's the question.

Rob's a pretty smart fellow and he frowned at Ali the way a parent might. That frown that says, *I know you're up to something. I just can't prove it yet.* But he let us go, driving away with a wave once he'd dropped us off at Ali's car.

“That was way too easy.”

I wasn't so sure about that. Rob had his expressions, too. And when he dropped us off, it was with the full and complete expectation that Ali was up to something. I wouldn't be surprised if Rob ended up at Ali's apartment. Too

bad Ali didn't understand me when I said, "He knows."

But it didn't matter. We were two peas in a pod when it came to trouble. Either way, we were heading to Grady Road to check out the wizard's house. I felt silly even saying the words in my head.

Chapter 25

Last year, someone broke into my uncle's house. They smashed his television, stole a bunch of Aunt Celia's jewelry and made a general mess out of everything. Since then Ali and I curtailed our trespassing. Seeing the fury and helplessness that followed an incident like that gave me an inkling of what it felt like. That and now that I was out of high school and have a full time job, I'm more aware of the consequences of my actions or so I tell myself.

Following Ali through the trees toward the back of the Grady haunted house, I realized that I was the only one

to feel that way. Ali had continued her activities without me and felt right at home sneaking through the woods.

Following a raccoon through trees was much easier in wolf form. As a mouse, I often struggled to keep up. Accustomed to having to wait for me, Ali moved slowly until she realized that I was keeping up just fine. Once she figured out she wouldn't lose me, she gave a huge raccoon grin and sped off through the trees without a care in the world. With a yip, I chased after her, enjoying my moment on four legs, though deep in my heart I felt a thrill of fear at the same time, the worry that I would forever be a wolf.

Ali dashed up a tree growing beside

the house, up along a branch and dropped onto the roof. She trotted along the roof to the window overlooking the back yard. The quick drive by didn't do much for my confidence. Just because the driveway was empty didn't mean the house was.

I tried a few times to climb the tree but gave up. Ali shrugged and scampered away. The plan was for her to let me in anyway. But I couldn't help thinking that a wolf was ill-suited for this kind of activity. For the first time in a long time, I missed being a mouse. I mean, I always like the human half of me, but it never occurred to me how many times Ali and I used our animal

selves to get into trouble. Had I been a wolf, our friendship would have been different. I realize that now when watching from the ground while Ali slipped into the house after finding a window cracked just that tiniest bit. As a mouse, I'd be in the house already. We'd be in it together.

A few minutes passed before the back door opened. "Come on in. Nobody here but us *weres*." Ali's human hand opened the door, but she was already shifting back. She loved to be a raccoon. Of all the weres, she's one of the few who hadn't spent at least a night cursing the full moon for rising at an inopportune time.

The time for thinking had come to an

end. I slid through the door following the raccoon tail that was even now disappearing up the stairs. Ali dashed into the master bedroom and stood in the middle of the room on her hind feet, waving her hands at the shelves.

Appalling. And also fascinating. The shelves held a dark magic that gave a girl the willies. I sniffed the room. It smelled musty, like an old cellar. The walls must have been papered back in the forties because the wall paper was ancient and peeling in the spots where I could see.

I also smelled a spicy cologne that I'd smelled back in the park when we were clearing out the traps. Whining I

lifted my nose and sniffed again. Here, the smell was overpowering. Ali nodded. She'd smelled it, too. We weren't done here. Ali checked each and every shelf, poking her nose behind jars and pawing things out of the way to see.

We found nothing of interest there. Ready to leave, I whined at the door and pointed my snout toward the exit. Ali shook her head and ran to the next room. What was she trying to prove? She found a den with a desk and desktop on the floor. With a single push of the paw, Ali turned it on. As neither mouse nor wolf would I have had the dexterity to do that.

She flashed back to human and I

turned my head, while she grabbed the mouse and logged onto the computer. No password. I guess people have an expectation of privacy in their own homes. She opened the browser and started looking at browser history and tabs, then carefully searched the processing programs. “Quite the gamer.”

I couldn't very well answer, but if I could, I'd say something like, “That's nice, now can we get out of here?” I'm all for adventure and everything, but I had never actually spent this much time in anyone's house before. Commercial buildings, yes, but not a home.

I whined.

“Remember 682 Spencer Avenue.”

Ali shut down the system and turned back into her furry raccoon self.

In my head I said 682 Spencer over and over and over. My ears pricked up. I heard a car and this wasn't the kind of neighborhood where cars drive by. I yipped. Ali nodded and we both fled, running down the stairs and out the back door. Her car was parked down Haverson Road. But we never made it. I felt myself flying through the air and hanging upside down.

Here's the crazy thing. Nothing was holding me up. No net. No rope. No nothing. There I was hanging in the air growling at the wind and swearing. My

cuss words sounded like barks, but believe me, I know some really good words. The best ones I save for truly dire predicaments such as this one.

“Well, well, well, well, well.” The words came from a haughty male somewhere behind us.

I twisted my head. If only I were human. There were so many things I wanted to say right now, starting with a joke about the pointy hat. I'm not kidding. He had a pointy hat that sat back on his head the way cowboy hats do. He was young, sported acne and a robe that would make Gandalf jealous.

“Come on down.”

The air seemed to fall out from under me and I felt myself falling in

slow motion. The pads of my feet softly touched the dirt. I scanned the forest, watching Ali crouching in the shadows, ready to spring with claws flashing. I shook my head. No sense in both of us getting caught.

“Come inside. We'll have a coke and talk about the future.” His robe caught a bit at his knees while he walked. I had the feeling that somehow I had stumbled into a Comic-Con Convention. But he really needed to lose the hat and find a light saber.

My legs turned and stumbled after him. Not of my own will, and that scared me. I yowled and felt the pressure on my legs release. Stumbling

a bit, I followed him under my own control.

“Sorry about that. I didn't know if you'd come willingly. You pose a bit of a problem, especially since returning the power.” He looked over his shoulder while he spoke, his nose just that little bit too long and a shock of too long hair falling over his brow.

I whined with a question mark, hoping he'd catch on.

Who said wizards were stupid. He knew exactly what I was trying to say. “We're in huge trouble. Me because I lost the amulet. You because you had it last. It's a shame it's not in your possession now. We could be done with this.”

He took out a pair of cokes and a bowl and a cup out of the cupboard. Grabbing a can opener from the refrigerator, he broke open the bottles and poured them, one into the bowl, one into the cup.

“Ice?”

I nodded. Seems we were going to be civilized. Plus, I have a weakness for Mexican coke. It tastes better, maybe because it comes from a bottle or uses real sugar. Either way, I no longer feared the wizard. But when he turned and stared out the window with a fierce rage burning in his eyes, I gulped air trying not to shake in my paws. Okay, he really *was* scary.

“The magic didn't touch your friend. I don't need her.” With a flick of his wrist, the wizard turned to the ice maker, grabbing a handful of ice to split between the cup and bowl.

That wrist flick meant something. Before, when my legs followed his bidding, he'd made a strange little finger movement in the air. I edged toward the window, trying to look outside, hoping to see if Ali was okay.

“Do I look like a killer?” The bowl shook slightly as he put it on the floor, his eyes wide with that crazy gleam.

I closed my eyes and gave a quick head bob, wondering if he truly was capable of murder and hoping Ali safely

escaped harm.

“Then you know to stay put. I need to find my grimoire on were-magic.”

Downing a gulp of coke, the wizard slammed his glass on the table, then ran up the stairs two at a time. I sniffed the bowl. It smelled good. It would however, be incredibly embarrassing to die by poisoning in a stranger's house.

When he came down the stairs, he didn't actually walk, but seemed to glide on air. I'd never seen anything like it. My mouth must have been hanging open.

“Drink up. I promise if I kill you, it'll be interesting. I'm partial to sword play myself. I won't poison you.” He murmured while he flipped pages, his brow furrowed while he tried to find

what he was looking for.

“You'd think grimoires would have tables of contents, but no. And the handwriting is atrocious.”

Deciding that he was several kinds of crazy, I sighed and waited.

“I said. Drink. Up.” Suddenly my head felt as if something had grabbed me from the neck and forced my face into the bowl. I sneezed, breathing in while Coke went up my nose. That's how far he'd forced my head into the bowl, all without touching me.

How humiliating. My nose burned from the carbonation in the pop, and the hair on my snout felt sticky. I refused to drink. *Just get close enough to bite and*

I'll tear your arm off. That's what I said in my head. And I would. I was that angry.

Taking away someone's freedom of choice is an act of evil, pure evil. That's how I knew that he had killed before. I didn't need to hear it. I was experiencing his lack of compassion.

When the strange clamping on my neck eased, I jerked my head up, growling.

“Get over yourself. Ah, here it is.” He drew a circle in the air with his fingers and said a few words in a language I'd never heard before. It didn't sound like Latin. When he finished, he said, “Now we can have a real conversation. You just say what you

want in wolf speak and the spell will interpret.”

“Is Ali safe?” I barked. A lovely voice, like a soft chime asked the question.

“You sound like an angel.” The wizard's mouth was open and he seemed more than a little awed.

“That's not my voice. Is Ali okay?”

“The raccoon? Yes, I just flew her over to the car. She's locked in now and quite perturbed I can tell you.”

I felt profound relief, trapped as I was, I now knew that Ali was safe. I could deal with anything else that came my way.

“How do I become human again?”

He gave me a dismissive look, “Um...you wish yourself human again? It's not rocket science.”

“I did. It didn't work.” My yowling was once again converted into angelic voices. I wish I really sounded like that. Words can't describe the beauty of the voice that the spell created.

“Then I guess you're stuck. Where is the amulet?” The way he hunched at the table, the way he watched me bothered me.

I'm not as good a liar as Ali, but I've been known to throw one around here and there. I decided to make it a big one. “I'm wearing it.”

The angelic voice must have made

me sound truthful because he tipped the glass back again and wiped the corner of his mouth, “That's why it didn't work. You lost it. That explains a few things. One of the witches must have found it.”

“Witches?” I didn't really want to give away the fact that I'd run to a lady with a hex bag for help.

“Yeah, they've been asking for were-magic. You'd be surprised how many non-weres are looking for a quick switch to the animal kingdom.” Pushing the hair out of his eyes, the wizard frowned.

“I don't care about the amulet. My friend stole it as a prank. Now I'm stuck as a wolf and I really really need to be human again. Please.” It felt strange

pouring my heart out to a sociopathic wizard who treated me like a puppet. But I'd finally found someone who knew what was going on, and I really needed help.

“The only way for you to be human again is to put the amulet on. Do you remember where you lost it?”

So he didn't believe me. He tried to trip me up with that question. Lying the second time was more difficult. I felt certain deep inside that he could see through my falsehoods, “As far as I know I'm still wearing it. I don't know where it is. Can you find it with magic?”

I took a deep breath, hoping the answer was no. I didn't want Rob

anywhere near this psycho, even if the crazy wizard was playing nice now.

“No. This isn't good. Look, I'm going to let you go, but you and your friend need to lie low. Find a place to hide and stay there. I'm serious. Don't be traipsing through the wolf park making yourself known to people.”

“You followed us in the wolf park?” In wolf, it sounded like a yelp. Somehow the angel voice made me sound sultry. I thought it would be awesome if I could talk to Rob with that voice, but remembering the way it felt to be forced to move on my own, I decided even if I could, I would never use magic against Rob. And that angelic voice felt like a weapon.

“I have eyes and ears there. Look, I'm not your problem. I'm just house sitting, but you set off alarms coming into the house and I'm going to have to tell them something. You don't have the amulet. You don't know where is, and if you stay, they will kill you.”

“So, you're letting me go?” My internal self was screaming at me. Just run, Jen. But nothing made sense here. Why would he capture me just to offer me a drink and chat for three minutes about the amulet.

“Yes.”

“Why can't you do your magic and turn me human again? Your magic made

me like this.”

“I'm just a kid, okay?” He completely lost it then, ripping off the wizard's hat and throwing it on the table. “All of the magic is borrowed. I don't have any of my own. I can't help you. I was planning to keep you here until they came, but...” He swallowed, “Your voice is so pretty. I think I would like you in human form. And I don't want to be the one. Just go. I'll look for the amulet. If I find it I'll let you borrow it just once to wish yourself human with all of the magic you have and go to sleep. You'll be human again.”

“If you don't have magic, how do you know and how did you force me to do things?”

He looked tormented. “It was my birthday present. I was the only member of my family without magic of my own. I have the most dexterity. Every single one of my spells hits exactly how I want it, but I don't have any power. My brother gave me were magic for my sixteenth birthday. Go.”

I ran for the door, wondering if he'd lied to me as I lied to him.

Ali waited for me at the car. She was already in human form and dressed, and when I jumped up to the car window on my paws, she was pulling a knife out of the glove box. She screeched and jumped, opening the door. “Jen, I've never been so glad to see anyone before.

What happened? Are you okay?"

"Arf."

The magic voice appeared, shocking both of us, "I'm fine."

"Whoa." Ali forced open the door. "Thank goodness. I've been trying to open these for an hour. Where did you get the cool voice."

"A spell. Teenage wizard without power. It's a long story."

"Well, you can tell me on the way home. Do you think the spell will last that long?" Ali's cell phone rang. She grabbed it, looked at the screen and threw it in the back seat. "We'd better get home. Rob is going to kill me."

"Or me." It was strange hearing the voice translating my yipping barks, but

as we traveled home, I told Ali the whole story.

“And he just let you go? I bet they're bugging the car. That settles it. I'm not answering the phone. I'll take you straight to my apartment and we'll call Rob from there.”

I whined, used to my voice going straight to wolf without stopping for human. The angelic voice spoke, “Get the phone and call Rob back.”

“Fine. She turned the key in the ignition before reaching to the back seat. Rob was now on her speed dial, which says a lot about the past few days.

“I've been sitting here for an hour. Where are you?” Rob sounded peeved.

Not my problem. Not my fault. I'm only the wolf in the passenger seat. I grinned at Ali. Her smile at me was wholly mischievous and I must admit my wolfish grin no doubt egged her on.

“Rob, you're not going to turn into one of those stalker boyfriends, are you? I mean, you *do* trust Jen, right?”

I howled. The voice said, “Ali!”

Rob was absolutely silent. For a second I thought we lost the connection. By now Ali was driving on the highway, which in our state was illegal. But staying any longer in the vicinity of the house creeped me out, so I couldn't really complain too much.

“Ali.” Rob's voice was very distinct, very calm, very crisp. And he

meant business. I felt a happiness well up when he said, “Jen isn't able to fend for herself as well, which means you're responsible for her safety when she's with you. You promised that you were going to the apartment. I'm standing in the parking lot, and I don't see you.”

“Jen, Rob's at the apartment. He's being a jerk. We could eat his share.”

Eat his share? Sneaky. It's never good to start a relationship with a lie. I kept my mouth shut. Wolf or not, with that strange voice, I didn't want to join forces with Ali against Rob, even if he was sitting at her apartment waiting for us. Yep, Ali gave herself away again. She's transparent at times.

“If you must know, we're at the restaurant. Hang tight. We'll pick something up for you.”

Rob grumbled a little and Ali hung up on him. “Happy now?”

“Why did you lie to him?” That angelic voice was really annoying. She should have sounded appalled, but the tone came out soft and sweet. What if I wanted to yell? Would the angel voice yell with me? I determined to stop thinking of it as the angel voice. The fake voice would work better, even if this new spell cast on me did sound musical.

“I lie to everyone. Do you think he knows? ” We were on the outskirts of

town. I, for one, was grateful to be away from that place. Ali didn't wait for my answer, but kept on talking. "And I'm more interested in why that wizard kid let us go. He's clearly more powerful than either of us. Do you think he's tracking us?"

"Yes to both questions." My wolf voice growled. The fake voice chimed. And my head started aching with a fierce sharpness, so I put my head down on my paws and closed my eyes.

Rob waited for us, looking decidedly unhappy. Ali handed him a take-out Styrofoam container with a bacon cheeseburger and garlic mashed potatoes. She'd ordered for all of us. Ali and I ate in the car, chewing and

swallowing as fast as we could to make an honest lie. My head still hurt, and Rob's lips were pressed so tightly together, I was afraid he'd forget to breathe.

“Want to come up?” Ali asked, the face of innocence.

Rob, container in hand, nodded. He didn't seem to know whether to be angry or embarrassed for being angry. Ali's comment about him stalking me put him on the defensive, and I felt personally responsible for it. Kind of like she was my pet who escaped and bit someone.

Not that Ali is usually so caustic, but I think she's worried about me and taking it out on Rob. Of course, he's

doing the same thing. Maybe my best friend and my boss just don't like each other very much. That would be sad as I am incredibly fond of them both. But thinking about it just makes my head pound worse.

I curled up at the feet of the big chair and put my head down. Sleep might cure what's ailing me. I feel sick.

“Are you okay?” Rob is the one to notice that I'm not feeling too chipper. I shake my head, not trusting my fake voice to keep her mouth shut.

“Jen has a headache.” Ali answered for me, throwing herself onto the couch.

Rob put a hand in front of my nose. He smelled so good, I leaned forward. “I'll get you some water. You might be

dehydrated.”

I didn't think that was the problem. Maybe the invisible hand that grabbed my neck or the fact that I was a walking pile of spells might have had something to do with it, but water did sound good. He brought me the water, then proceeded to eat his dinner. His cranky attitude changed about halfway through. Rob needs to eat regularly. For me it's sleep. I'm easy to get along with until I've stayed up too late, then watch out.

While I gulped water wolf-style, Ali said, “Rob, where's the amulet?”

“In my laptop case. With one hand, he unzipped the bag next to the recliner he was sitting in and pulled out the

collar with that ugly hex bag attached. He handed it to Ali. I ignored them both. Guess I was dehydrated. Water sounded better than whatever Ali had in mind.

“Jen, we're going to try this again. Wish really hard tonight and you'll be back to normal tomorrow.” Ali knelt beside me, so I lifted my head and let her put on the collar. I hated that thing with a passion. And my head still hurt, even after drinking all that water. Once the collar was on, I slurped up more water, not caring anymore that Rob was in the room and ignoring the conversation between the two.

When I finally finished drinking, I wanted sleep more than anything else. I

will admit to being pathetic. I actually went and laid down at the edge of the recliner with my head on Rob's feet. Fortunately he was still eating, so the footrest was down.

“You two are getting cozy.” Ali teased with a smile. I would have bared my teeth and growled at her, but my eyes were closed, and Rob had chosen just that moment to scratch my head.

“Don't make things awkward for us.” Rob's fingers lingered on the top of my head.

All too soon he was leaving, and Ali and I were left to our own devices. Normally, we'd be popping popcorn and watching movies, but tonight I just didn't

feel well. I crawled onto the bean bag that Ali let me sleep on as a wolf and curled up. I fell asleep rather quickly. Ali had just turned on the television and asked me what I wanted to watch. It occurred to me that I hadn't said a word since the car, and as I drifted off, I wondered if the fake voice was still with me.

I did wish to be human as sleep overtook me. I'm not sure if was with every molecule of my being, but I thought it.

When I woke up, it was as a wolf. Given the past few days, that wasn't so shocking. Having a teenage wizard puppet master sitting on the couch three feet away did shock me. He was eating

popcorn with Ali and I feared that she'd become his latest plaything.

“Do you want some more? There's a lot left in the bag.” Ali paused the movie. We air popped popcorn into brown bags, then dumped butter and salt and shook the bag until the sides were greasy. Apparently while I was sleeping, she found a few more interesting guests and followed our tradition on her own.

“Sure! Thanks.” Wizard boy handed his bowl to Ali and I lifted my head, wondering what I'd missed.

“What is *he* doing here?” I hadn't lost the voice. It translated perfectly.

As she poured popcorn into the

popper, Ali lifted her head. The helpless rage in her eyes gave me all the information I needed. Now I regretted saying anything. My head pounded with pain, and my eyes felt dry.

“Alex is joining us for a movie.” The monotone words didn't belong to Ali. She was being controlled. It scared me that someone could have that kind of power over someone else. And poor Ali. She values her freedom over anything else.

I watched Wizard boy. So his name was Alex. He relished his power over her. The smile on his face as he touched the brim of his hat creeped me out. I closed my eyes and put my head on my paws. This was not giving up by any

means. I didn't know exactly how much power Alex had. If I pretended not to be a threat, he'd focus on Ali. Maybe he'd get too close and I could get the hat from him.

I hoped Ali understood. It's not like I could communicate my plan to her.

“Jen, don't you want to eat some popcorn?” Ali asked in monotone. She was fighting him.

With my eyes still closed, I said, “I don't feel well. I'm just going to rest.”

My wish to be human had failed. On top of that we had an unwanted house guest who turned people into robots. It was the middle of the night and I felt horrible. Things couldn't get much

worse.

“You need to take that leather pouch off the collar. The amulet won't work as long as the bag is hanging from it.” Alex watched me with interest. I'm pretty good at reading people. He was telling the truth, wrapped up in a pretty lie. I had the feeling that I was still wearing the collar because of the protection in that leather pouch, whatever it might be. Alex would have torn it off otherwise. He longed to have the amulet back, unable to hide his avariceness.

“Mmmh-hmmmm” I pretended a lack of interest in his words.

“Too much opposing magic. I bet you feel like someone took a mallet to your head.” Alex leaned back on the

couch with an awkward affectation. He wanted to be cool. He wanted to fit in, but he couldn't. He didn't belong here with me and Ali. And it was obvious.

The whine of the popcorn popper filled the room. It was a surreal feeling. My life was completely upside down, but the sound of the popcorn starting to pop was such a normal thing. I didn't answer. With my eyes closed, I waited. There had to be a moment when Alex would be busy with the popcorn. A moment when he would be occupied.

I closed my eyes, refusing to say another word.

“Your popcorn, Sir.” Sir? I opened one eye just a sliver. Was this the

moment? The wizard hat two leaps from my jaws, but I knew it was just that little bit too far, especially feeling the way I did.

“I'm thirsty. Get me a drink.” He waved his hand with a flourish. Ali gritted her teeth and looked to me helplessly. While the wizard watched her, I stood, carefully, silently. She turned and walked to the refrigerator, her limbs jerking.

Ali grabbed the carton of milk. The wizard, his head turned to watch her, complained, “Not milk. Soda. Root Beer. Ginger Ale. Something fizzy.”

Paws are rather nice for silent treading. With his head turned, I padded a few more steps and then a few more. I

felt a bit like a kid playing red light green light. Only the first red light would mean disaster. Ali must have seen what I was doing because she was fighting him now. Her hand shook as she grabbed the butter. A few more steps.

“You're supposed to listen.” The voice was stern. And rather scary. Those who feel entitled to take without remorse or consideration of another are some of the most terrifying people on the planet. And this guy was like that. Young though he was, I knew he'd kill us if we stopped entertaining him. That is, if I didn't stop him.

Ali grabbed a can of root beer, and

smoothly opened it, returning to the couch at a run and pouring the sticky drink all over Alex. If I weren't going stealth mode, I'd have cheered her on. Instead, I took the opportunity to leap the rest of the way to the couch, grabbing the tip of his wizard hat in my teeth.

Ali whooped, "Pull it apart with your teeth. Watch out!"

Behind me, I felt movement, almost like a sixth sense, and I jumped out of the way just as Alex came crashing over the couch after me. I ran down the hall and into Ali's bedroom with the intent to crawl under the bed. Unfortunately, I did not fit. Alex was at the door before I could think. I jumped onto the covers, my tail knocking over the book on the

bedside table. My paws got caught up in the quilt, but I had a firm grip on the hat. When Alex's hand grabbed the top of his hat, I yanked bath, tearing it from his hands and jumped off the edge of the bed, running back through the hall.

Ali opened the door, "Jen, get that hat to Rob. I'll take care of things here."

I fled her apartment building, the pain in my head now pounding to the tempo of my feet hitting the ground. I ran along the back fence, following it to the exit. The only flaw in Ali's plan was that Rob's house was a twenty minute drive from Ali's apartment. The way I felt, there was no way I'd be able to run all that way. Trotting down the street, I

discovered a park with a merry-go-round, swing set with two swings, and a slide among several trees. The park was empty and in the center was a gazebo, which looked very inviting.

Deciding to rest in the gazebo, I started with the brim of the hat and tore into it with my teeth, treating it like a chew toy. Eventually I managed to poke a hole in the top. The cone had a thicker starched cloth that kept it from being wholly floppy. From there, the cloth ripped easily. The collar chafed again, and I wanted to pull it off, but as dogs are well aware, collars are not easily escaped. With the collar, I felt more like a dog than a wolf, subject to the whims of people who cared for me.

Tearing the wizard's hat into bits probably took a few hours. The cloth looked so harmless, but I didn't want to take any chances. The ground under the bushes was manicured and soft. With a mouthful of destroyed cloth, I trotted to a spot under the bushes and started digging, flinging dirt out from behind my paws. The activity was strangely enjoyable and my head hurt less now. I dropped the first bit of cloth into the hole. I ran back and forth from gazebo to bushes until the entire pile of scraps was piled in the hole, then I buried the fabric.

No need to involve Rob at all. I decided to return to Ali's now that we

were safe from the hat. And if she needed help with Alex, I wanted to be there for her.

Retracing my steps, I returned to find her door shut and everything quiet. The sun had set and the apartment lights on, tall posts with round globes softly glowing on top. The lights in Ali's apartment were on, but I couldn't tell if she was still there. What if Wizard boy had kidnapped her or worse? It would be my fault for not going straight to Rob like she wanted me to.

My tongue was hanging out of my mouth and dripping. That's what I get for rushing. But I felt so much better. The hat must have been making me feel sick. Or maybe the compulsion related

to the hat. Either way, I was almost back at full strength. Still, the only way in was if someone let me in. I stood on my hind legs and pawed at the doorbell. Finally the bell chimed.

“Just a minute.” It was Ali's voice. But was it monotone? I had no idea. And then the door was open.

“I'm so glad you're back. Where's Rob?”

I barked that I never went to get him. I sounded wolfish without a special voice anywhere. Guess the hat was for more than forcing someone to make popcorn. Shrugging I stepped across the threshold.

The apartment was a mess. Not a

mess like a few things out of place, but the recliner was overturned, the coffee table shoved aside. Several of Ali's favorite statues scattered across the floor in various states of brokenness. In the center of it all, Wizard boy himself sat on a kitchen chair unconscious with a bleeding head wound. His arms were bound behind his back and a gag tied in his mouth.

“You can't just keep him here.”

Of course, Ali didn't understand a word I said. But seriously, I didn't like what I was seeing, even if Alex deserved it. And she didn't look any better. Her face was swelling with what looked like a black eye and a swollen cheek, and her hair was half out of her

pony tail.

“I got him. He's still alive. Wasn't sure at first.” Ali rubbed her hand on her pajama bottoms nervously, her other hand hidden. “Where's the hat? Maybe we can force him to walk to the car and dump him back at his house.”

I shook my head and mimed with snapping of jaws and tearing of paws exactly what happened to the hat. Ali got my drift, “Oh, that's a shame. I had plans for that hat. Where are the pieces?”

No way. No way would I *ever* tell Ali where I buried that hat. She's my best friend and all, which is why there are certain things I know about her. One

of those things is that Ali is better off without the temptation. Much as I love her, she can't be trusted with an all-powerful puppeteer wizard's hat. Not that she'd do anything purposely evil, but the accidental evil would break her.

“I don't know what to do.”

Well, that was a first. Ali's the plan maker. But when I look back on some of her best ideas, my steering this direction or that improved all of them. Ali might shove off and row, but I get us where we need to go.

That's when I noticed Ali's hand bleeding. She'd been keeping it at her side, and using her body to block the injury. I pointed my snout to her hand.

“Oh, this? Just a bit of glass.”

Things got rough.”

That's when I heard the sirens.

Ali winced. “Those police cars are probably for us.”

I put my head on my paws. Could this get any worse?

We didn't have time for anything. Before I knew what was happening, officers were at the door. Ali limped to open it, and that's when I noticed she was barefoot and her foot bruised. She put up quite a fight.

She opened the door slowly.

“Ma'am, are you okay?”

Ali shook her head. “No, Sir. A man attacked me. I tied him up. I'd like to press charges. He tried to force

himself on me.”

I frowned. That last part was a lie. At least in part. But I couldn't question her. I couldn't say a word.

Alex was taken in an ambulance. Ali told her story and I realized when she talked about the way he forced himself on her, that yes, he really had forced himself on her. Remembering how it felt to be out of control, I realized that every word she said was the literal truth.

I felt lonely for Rob. He was probably asleep by now. It would be nice to feel his hand behind my ears or at my shoulder. Small comforting gestures that somehow exuded safety.

It was almost dawn when we finally

closed our eyes, the apartment secured, though still a mess. I wondered what the day would bring.

* * *

We slept in late and I wanted to try the collar again with the protection removed. The words Alex said kept going through my mind when I finally opened my eyes in the late morning . He couldn't be trusted, but maybe the witch lady with her protection bag wasn't helping us so much either.

Ali spent the morning picking up the apartment. She still walked with a limp and the bruise on her face looked awful.

I wished I could help her. I felt useless without hands. In the end, I pushed around some of the furniture for Ali and held the dustpan.

It was quite a shock when the door opened and Alex stepped in. His hair was crusted with blood and stuck to his head, and he carried a baseball bat.

“You girls really don't know who you're messing with.”

I wanted to cry. Not from sadness so much, but from utter frustration and general crankiness. Right now I would even take being a mouse. At least then I could find a quiet place to hide.

Ali's phone sat on the arm of the sofa. Snatching it with my mouth, I jumped the couch and carefully dropped

it at her feet, silently apologizing for the slobber. There are some things that even a best friend should not be forced to endure. But Ali was as close as close could be, so I guess she'll learn to live with it.

I spun back determined to be a block between Ali and Alex.

“I filed a complaint with the police. You're going to jail.” Ali said behind me. I was facing Alex, so I just had to assume she was also making the phone call.

“You're so cute. What did you say? I forced myself on you?” He held the baseball bat with both hands. And I knew that he could kill either of us with

one swing.

Ali started talking behind us. “Yes, we're in trouble.”

Seeing the cell phone, Wizard boy pulled the bat back with murderous intent. This little punk was not going to kill my best friend. With a growl, I leapt for his arm, snapping my jaws. He shrieked.

My teeth closed on the arm holding the bat. Ewwww. He dropped the bat without a fight and I released his arm. To be honest, I didn't bite as heavily or thickly as I should have. Our very lives depended on a firm and steady bite, but truthfully, I let go as soon as he did and while I definitely broke the skin, I let go before his arm started bleeding.

“You bitch.”

Technically he was right. Still, I didn't care for his language. I snapped at him again, forcing him back. Ali tucked her phone into the breast pocket of her pajamas. I always wondered what those could possibly be used for. Now I know. “Time to tie you up again.” Ali said. “That or my friend will chew you to death.”

Alex started crying. I was as surprised as the next person, which was Ali, and she looked fairly surprised. He swiped at the tears with the hand that wasn't injured. I wondered if I'd done him any real harm, but seeing the bat on the ground and remembering Ali's

injuries, couldn't bring myself to care.

“The wizard's hat doesn't belong to me. They'll kill me if they discover it missing.”

A wolf's eyebrows don't have quite the emotional range that a human does. Still, I'm sure my expression must have been somewhere between quizzical and incredulous. Ooops. Guess he's in for a rough time. Still, not my problem. Except for the slight discomfort of having yet again to deal with a homicidal sociopath with magical tendencies.

“Jen, can you keep him occupied for a few minutes?”

With a nod I growled at Alex and settled my body on top of the bat. If he

were at all creative, Alex could have come up with a thousand weapons in Ali's house. He struck me as an underdeveloped teenager, perhaps a boy who had spent his life spoiled, never forced to live in a world where someone else might have different needs or desires. But he was close enough to adulthood to know better. So as he swiped at tears bemoaning his existence, I growled again, just to be clear that all was *not* forgiven and I might just bite his leg so that he had a matching set.

Ali came out of her room in jeans and a sweatshirt, socks, but not shoes. She carried ropes and a bungi. “Okay, let's try this again.”

Alex sniffed, “Please don't tie me up. My brother will kill you when he finds out.”

If his brother was anything remotely like Alex, I was officially worried. He might not have emotional fortitude, but as a magic user and person without a moral compass, an older and more experienced version of Alex was something to be avoided.

“You've really got to stick to a method. You can beg or you can threaten but mix the two and everyone gets confused.” Ali looked exhausted. Her hair was sticking out every which way and her pajamas were ruffled.

“Which one will work?”

“What will it take for you to leave us alone?” Ali leaned against the counter at a safe distance. She'd chosen to negotiate. If I were human, we might be having an argument right now on whether to tie him up, with my vote a tight knot that he wouldn't be able to escape.

“Return the hat and amulet to me.”

I laughed. It was borderline hysterical, I will admit. As a wolf, it sounded more like a low chuff.

“The hat is gone and I'm not returning the amulet until Jen's human.” Ali twisted the rope in her fingers, not so much as a threat but as something to do. For Ali to be threatening, she needs to be in raccoon form. With those long

claws and the nasty snarl she manufactures, she's managed to scare off security guards.

“I already told you how to make her human again. She's wearing protection for any form of magic, even the natural kinds.” Natural being were-magic and such.

“Rob will be here soon. What should I tell him?” This she directed at me.

I barked, “The truth.”

Too bad angel voice was buried with the hat. I wanted her to understand me that time.

Ali shrugged, “Don't worry I'll think of something.”

“Can I sit down?” In all of the

excitement, I'd forgotten about his head injury. Not that it made me feel sorry for him or anything.

“Don't try anything.” Ali grabbed a kitchen chair and handed it to him, every muscle tensed. She was expecting him to use the chair as a diversionary tactic. I could swear she looked disappointed when he thanked her and sat down.

We waited in a standoff for what seemed an eternity before the doorbell rang. Rob answered. “Do you have any idea what time it is?” He groused when he stepped inside, then he turned to me with his sunshiny smile and said, “Hey Jen.”

“Sorry.” Ali didn't sound sorry.

She never does. It's just a word she uses when things go wrong.

“What are you going to do to me?” The tough kid act was long gone and now he sounded scared. Of Rob—and he's a big pushover. Ali's the scariest of us, if you get down to the person most likely to actually do something sinister to the kid.

“We're going to wait.” Rob closed the door and locked the deadbolt, looked at Ali, looked at Alex, and with a half grin said, “Let's start with frozen peas. Ali, do you have anything like that in the freezer?”

“Why would I keep frozen peas?” Ali grimaced. I love peas myself, especially with mashed potatoes. “You

can't be hungry for peas at five in the morning.”

“For your face.” Rob strode across the room with an exasperated sigh.

He frowned at the contents of the freezer. A pint of ice cream, frozen waffles, orange juice, a package of burritos. In the end, Rob grabbed a couple freezer bags with the zippy function, filled them with ice, and handed one to Ali and one to Alex. Wizard boy was looking worse with each passing moment.

Ali studied the ice dubiously. “No harm in trying.”

Rob waved her to the couch. “You look ready to fall down. Take a nap on

the couch. I'll watch the prisoner.”

I'm the reason Alex didn't make a move for the door. I'm scary when I draw my teeth back into a snarl.

It was incredibly strange. We all waited in the apartment together as if something would happen. I wondered if Rob called the police. He seemed to have everything in check. And he was waiting for someone to show.

Sure enough, a knock on the door stirred the strange silence.

Ali's eyes were closed, so Rob opened the door.

My throat tickled in a low growl. I couldn't help it. *She* was standing there, in a black leather mini-skirt with legs that went a mile. She wore a tight black

leather jacket over a shockingly bright pink blouse. To a man, she was hot. To a woman, she was competition. “Ah, yes. That is a problem.” She said, looking at Alex.

Alex had paled and he looked like he might faint. He said, “I didn't give up any secrets.”

“What do I care for secrets?” Her mouth might have formed the words, but I knew without a doubt she cared very much to protect her secrets.

“Well, now that we've caught the miscreant, I guess you don't need that protection bag anymore.” Boy, did she walk fast in heels. She was kneeling in front of me with her hand reaching for

the bag before she'd even finished talking.

I'm not proud of myself for my actions. As far as I knew at that moment, she was an ally. Still, I bit her. I don't like people reaching for me. I have a rather large circle dedicated to personal space. I'm sure it's somehow related to my being a mouse among wolves. At any rate, I bit her and she pulled her hand back. I stepped away, growling.

“Jen, she's on our side.”

I lifted my lip, letting my teeth show. Snarling lifted my spirits. I've never been able to do anything like that. Mice don't snarl. And in human form, I never could quite look menacingly enough. And I was jealous.

“It's okay. If you could just remove the collar from her, I'll take it and the boy and everything will go back to normal.”

Ali was sitting up now, looking around with a groggy, confused look. Rob was stepping toward me with the intention of doing just what the nice witch asked. What if I was stuck in this form forever? The witch clearly showed interest in Rob during our earlier visit. I was surprised she wasn't flirting and falling all over him now. But her eye was on my collar.

I turned tail and dashed to the end of the couch, looking over my shoulder to see what Rob would do. He nodded

once.

“Jen doesn't want to let go of the collar just now.”

The witch smiled at me, saccharine sweet and ugly. I grimaced, but stared at her with a tail wag, just because I could. “Others will come for her. The sooner you rid yourself of the magic, the better.”

“Doesn't she still have protection?” Rob asked, noting the bag hanging from the collar. Personally, I couldn't wait to have the collar off. Timing was everything. And now wouldn't be the time to lose whatever protection I might have.

“Yes, but I'm afraid this one called his brother. My little warding spell won't do anything to stop one like that.”

I didn't trust her. It was probably just jealousy. Her hair, dyed in platinum strands glinted with the light, and her makeup was perfect, which made me wonder why I cared so much to be human again with my brown curly hair, although I suppose my face was cute enough.

“Jen?” Rob asked.

I shook my head. Nope. Not giving up my amulet. At least not until I changed back to human.

The witch smiled and touched Rob's shoulder. Ali put a finger to her lips when I growled involuntarily. “If you run into any more trouble, give me a call.” I swear her glare at me was

accusatory, but what exactly was I being accused of? Growling out of turn? I didn't even break the skin. As bites go, it was more of a nip.

In all this Alex remained tight lipped. I glanced at the baseball bat lying on the floor behind the couch. No, I wouldn't feel sorry for him, either. When the witch said goodbye, he stood and followed her out. Her butt was perfectly rounded in the leather, and I glanced at Rob to see if he caught any of those haughty butt moves.

His eyes were locked on mine, and he was smiling. I found myself returning the smile. In that moment, we shared something. I'm not sure exactly what.

After the door shut, Ali said, "What

do you think she will do to him?”

“Probably lecture him about showing us mortals his power.” Rob dropped into the recliner and I padded over and put my head on his knee. We all looked horrible.

“Jen doesn't trust her.” Rob scratched my ears and the longing I felt in that moment was too much. If I could only be human. I wanted so much to tell him everything that had been happening. I felt so alone. So powerless in this wolf form.

Ali remained silent. Which meant that Ali didn't have an opinion yet. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Was it just petty jealousy?

We sat that way for at least an hour, too weary to move. Finally Rob stretched and stood, “I’m going to take Jen home with me.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Ali lifted the ice from her face, her eyes boring through Rob.

Ali, shut up. Of course it’s wise. With a doggy sigh, I just waited for her to talk Rob out of it.

“Jen needs to stay with someone she can trust until we can figure this out. You work tomorrow. We’re past the full moon, so I’m sure Jen and I can handle one more night without too much awkwardness.”

I thumped my tail and grinned. Ali

nodded and sat up. “Jen, come here for a minute.”

Without knowing quite what Ali had in mind, I went to her. She reached to the collar and after a few tries, released the hex bag. “I think this is preventing the change. Remember to think human before you go to sleep.”

“Rob, can I keep this?” Ali held the bag up.

Rob shrugged, “Uh, sure.”

We stopped for breakfast in a small diner where Rob picked up a pair of chicken fried steak breakfasts. He drove to the office where we ate. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I smelled the hashbrowns. Rob caught up on his emails, yawning all the while.

Meanwhile, I dozed on the floor by the window. I liked the feel of the sun on my fur.

Right before lunch the phone rang and Rob answered. It was the witch. I heard her ask about the hex bag. Rob answered, "Yes, she's safe. I'm not sure why you'd show the spell as deactivated."

A lie. Rob must have his doubts about her as well. I missed what she said then, but got the gist of the conversation when Rob said, "You turned him into a rabbit?" He laughed, the twinkle in his eyes gave me an achy feeling in my stomach. It might have been indigestion, but I think it was love.

“I'll call you if we have any unexpected visitors.” Rob snapped the phone closed.

He stood and stretched, yawning again. He even made yawning look hot. “It's been a rough few days. Wanna head home?”

I leapt up and pattered over to him.

* * *

At Rob's house, I followed him around while he did chores, washing dishes, starting laundry. He made a frozen pizza for dinner. As a wolf, the only part of the pizza that looked any good was the sausage. When Rob

finally settled on the couch, I sat awkwardly on the floor until he smiled at me with a look of welcome in his eyes.

“You can come up if you want. You’re in animal form anyway, so you know...” Okay, what did he mean by that? On the full moon he might like me well enough, but for the rest of the time, I would just be his pet. But I did understand. We could just be us this way.

I hesitated. Still, he looked so comfortable on the couch. I jumped to the spot where he made room and curled up against him, my head on his chest, thinking that usually animals only got the ends where the feet go.

We watched television together and I felt his heart beating strongly against my ear. Rob had fallen asleep, and the moment felt so good to me. Maybe wolves don't cry, but I felt my eyes tear up. How long have I wanted to be right here in Rob's arms, and here he was, available and affectionate, but only because I was an animal. It was like a bad joke. For years I longed to be a wolf and now I only wanted to be return to my normal self again.

I fell asleep with all of that longing bottled up inside me, murmuring of my desire to be human again.

Chapter 26

“Jen? Jen? Wake up.” Sprawled across Rob’s body, I opened my eyes and with a shock reminiscent to plunging into a pool of ice-water, I realized I was also human and naked.

Blushing furiously, I pushed away. “Oh, Oh Crap, I’m sorry.”

Then Rob’s face turned a few shades of red. “Jen, I thought you liked me. I wouldn’t have suggested this otherwise. I never thought you’d change back.”

I was still close enough and the sorrow in his eyes, and the longing in my soul sent me plunging into deep waters

again. Touching his cheek lightly, I leaned into Rob and kissed him, my first real kiss. I mean my first adult one where I knew what I wanted. “I do like you. I like you a lot.”

It was then that I knew I was hooked...and maybe he was, too. He kissed back, tentatively, gently. Not the hungry way I saw him kiss his office tryst last month. He blinked and smiled, his hand caressing my hair. “We’ll take it slow.”

I kissed him, putting all of my love into it. I knew then that he genuinely cared for me.

I eased away feeling awkward warmth, and I couldn’t help but think that

we were starting something that would last. Yes, like every woman, I had flaws, but they were mine, and I loved them.

The End

For more adventures with Rob, Jen, and Ali, read *When, Were, & Howl: Vampires Bite*.

Dear Reader,

With this latest edition of the *When Were & Howl* series, I have made significant additions to the story line. The covers on the old series are

rainbow with a black shadowed wolf and will not carry the new storyline. If you've accidentally purchased one of these after the release of the new series, please contact me at the email below.

If you'd like to sign up to hear about new releases and contest information, please email me at fiction@jeanetteraleigh.com with Newsletter Request in the subject line.

* * *

Excerpt of The Zombie Cowboy
Two-Step

Chapter 1

Thursday afternoon at the saloon. That's all Wyatt wanted, a quiet moment every week to drown his sorrows and numb pains best left forgotten. Then he could return to his life as a sheriff. He'd picked Red Bluff in the Nebraska territory to live. A quiet town with a few rough weekends when the miners got rowdy. And now he wanted to live his days in peace, in the shadow of the mountains.

He built his home in the midst of a field scattered with pine and spent hours sitting in a chair on his back porch trying to find peace. Even in the silence of a warm summer day, that kind of

solitary contentment was hard to come by. Cold, hard memories, bitter loneliness, an ache so cold he swore his heart was frozen, all these things fought the warm peace of the valley. When the memories forced him off the porch, Wyatt went to the stables.

That Thursday by midday, he was in the stables rubbing down Annabelle and filling her trough when the owner of the mercantile rushed in blustering. His home was as busy as the Docs when an emergency hit. Bill was a puffy man with thick jowls made all the thicker by the dainty gold glasses that rested on his nose. "Stage coach was robbed this morning, east of town."

Wyatt closed his eyes and took a

deep breath, the acrid smell of horse manure and hay filling his nostrils. He'd picked Red Bluffs because the railroad towns in the south drew the dangerous types, the outlaws hoping to rob a train and the rough men seeking work. The riots and lynchings and gun fights and uprisings centered in the busy towns far away from Red Bluff. All those robberies and lynchings were supposed to happen somewhere else to someone else.

The sheriff was on friendly terms with the driver, an older fellow who was as smart as a whip and a card-shark to boot. Wyatt asked, thinking that his friend might have been killed, "What

happened to Jerome?”

Bill removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. “In the back of the store. Didn’t know quite what to do with him. The feller’s not right in the head. He’s been going on about the walking dead. Not a scratch on him, though.”

“The walking dead?” Wyatt felt his stomach lurch as he closed the stall door with a final thud, his mouth firmly set. “I’d best see him.”

Bill nodded and together the two men walked down the compacted dirt street to Bill’s shop. Wyatt brushed by the bolts of cloth and sacks of flour on his way to the small kitchen nestled cozily behind the shop. There in the back

of the mercantile Jerome huddled on a stool staring at the floor with his hands curled into fists. Not a muscle on the driver was relaxed. He looked scared. Scared the way a boy felt when he was picking up a bayonet and walking with the column just minutes before his first battle.

When he saw Wyatt, Jerome cried out,” The Clayton gang...they weren’t human, Wyatt. They was once but not no more. They got red eyes and smell like the grave..” Jerome stared wildly at Wyatt his voice hoarse as if he’d screamed himself to a whisper. “Jim Clayton. He’s got red eyes. Red eyes.” His voice seemed to echo in the

tiny room.

Wyatt wondered then why everyone looked to him for help, asked him to solve problems no man on Earth could solve. But this was Jerome. If it was strange that the Clayton gang hit a stage coach when they had been robbing the trains and banks, then Wyatt supposed the insanity had a reason. But what Jerome said about red eyes and the smell. That brought back memories of the war Wyatt left buried on a wooded hill a long time back.” Where were you when they hit?”

“A couple miles from the Summer place. The carriage overturned and the horses were screaming. I ran for the treeline before they could see me.”

Jerome's clothes were muddy and his face scratched where he'd gone through a bramble”

“What happened next?” Wyatt didn't want to hear. He knew he didn't. But somehow he asked the question.

“I looked back once I was hidden in the trees. If they saw me, they didn't care. They stumbled like drunkards and howled like animals and started at the horses, I saw a man take a bite out of Ranger's ear while the horse was still trying to clear the harness. Ranger kicked him solid, but he didn't even feel it. Went right back to the horse. I ran. I had a gun and I could have stopped them but I ran.” Tears spilled

down Jerome's cheeks. The salty man spare of words and slow to show any emotion.

“Jerome, I can promise you, running was the only thing you could have done. One man against three and if the horse kick didn't stop them, a gun wouldn't either. I can help you home if you want.” Wyatt offered. He didn't relish the thought of driving Jerome all the way out to his ranch, not on a Thursday when he allowed himself to drink until the pain stopped. But for Jerome, he would.

“I live out in the boonies. They'll come for me.” Jerome's voice rose to a shrill sound that Wyatt had sworn could only come out of old Mrs. Hopper down

the street.

“You can sleep here tonight. We’ve got a cot. Thirty cents if you’re willing.” Bill was always on the lookout for more money and it helped that Rebecca liked Jerome. Or at the very least didn't dislike him.

Jerome nodded, a little of the fear easing from his eyes. “That would be best, I think.”

Wyatt’s brow furrowed and he stood, hat in hands, trying to think of the right words to soothe Jerome. Nothing came. “Well, you take care, then.”

Jerome tilted his head back, looking Wyatt in the eye with feverish sincerity. “Wyatt, don’t you go tonight.

There's not enough time before now and sunset and you don't want to meet them in the dark. Promise me you'll wait until the morning."

"The Clayton gang is long gone by now, but I'll wait." Wyatt told himself that he was doing it for Jerome, but Wyatt had reasons of his own to fear the gang. As for the undead, well, Wyatt feared them most of all.

Wyatt walked into the saloon, hat in hands and boots clattering across the floor. Missy Prince flushed while pouring a whisky straight for a kid young enough to be her son and smoothed her hair.

The sheriff, smooth-faced with

rather short hair and a cowlick right at the crown of his head, looked nothing like the straggly men vying for Missy's attention on a rowdy Friday night, and she decided the first minute of the first second she saw him that Wyatt was the man for her. That was three years past. Unfortunately, he didn't know it yet.

Missy dreamed of another life. When she poured drinks, she imagined her own bar, a clean one without muddy prints or unmentionable splatters on the floors. Oh how she detested spittle. That was another thing she liked about Wyatt. He respected the floor. The worst he'd done was tracked in some mud on a rainy day and what man didn't.

Wyatt swung his body on the high stool with an ease that sent Missy's heart fluttering. Smoothing out her hair, blue black and dark as a crow's feather, Missy straightened her dress. She noticed old man Tate moving in to take Wyatt's order and hauled her pleasantly plump body across the room.

“Wyatt. So wonderful you stopped in. What can I get ya?”

Wyatt turned, the tiny lines at the corner of his eyes crinkling with his smile. It wasn't a special smile just for Missy. He as like as not gave the same smile to the mangy mongrel in the stables, but Missy took special note of it anyhow. The white dusting of his

sideburns where Wyatt had grayed ahead of his time made him look distinguished. His brow furrowed and Missy could tell something was bothering him when he said, “Missy Prince, are you still haunting this old saloon with your pretty self?”

Missy warmed with the compliment, shallow though it was. Wyatt said such things to her every Thursday night, but not once asked her to open herself up to him in any way, verbal or carnal, nor did he pay more than brief attention to her regardless of how hard she tried to get him to notice. Missy was a selective whore, only performing when she was really short on cash and only with men who caught her

fancy.

Wyatt was so handsome, Missy had a mind she'd give herself to him for free. He never asked, not once, but she never let Wyatt see her sell herself to anyone, either, so she figured she had a chance. As far as he knew she was a friendly bar maid.

Wyatt stared into his drink, ignoring Missy's flirtation. Normally he'd flirt back a bit, but not tonight. His mind and heart weighed sore heavy on him and Missy watched his vacant stare with growing unease.

“What's got your belt in a buckle?” Missy leaned across the counter and Wyatt glanced down the line

of her cleavage against his own power to stop it.

“Clayton’s gang stole a few horses and then robbed the coach, just outside of town.” Wyatt threw back his drink, relishing the sting in his mouth, the burn down the back of his throat.

“This town?” Missy’s eyes, the color of a roan...a man could drown in those eyes. Wyatt might have seen an expression of concern, had he been able to think clearly between his drinking and her flirting.

“A few miles back. Jerome escaped clean away. Course he ran before they could grab him. Said the Clayton brothers smelled like death and their faces were pale as milk.”

Missy played with the ribbons on her bosom and Wyatt followed the movement, the fidgeting. That girl was set to reel him in like a trapper baiting a den. No sir. He'd not be another ribbon on her bosom.

“I heard the sheriff three towns over shot Jim Clayton dead.” Missy sighed and stopped fidgeting. Wyatt was the stubbornest man this side of the mountains. She'd lured Tommy with the blue ribbons. Wyatt would require stronger bait.

“That's the problem. That right there.” Wyatt's pale blue eyes gazed off into the distance, his jaw slackened, and then he shivered. “You ever see

something...wrong?”

“Like what?” Missy leaned in. She loved it when the lads started telling war stories and backwoods adventures.

“Ever seen a dead man walk?”

That got Missy to thinking of old Hiram Blackfeather, with his flyaway white hair and translucent skin. The man tottered about like a tumbleweed in the wind. He never seemed quite alive to her, but then Wyatt was talking about something else.

Missy shook her head. “Don’t reckon I have.”

With a hand on his cowboy hat, Wyatt rose from his seat.

“Now you just wait a minute, Wyatt Stillman. Don’t you think you can

start a story like that and then just leave it there.”

Missy slid a drink to him before folding her arms across her ample chest.

A shame to hide those beauties even for a minute. Wyatt shook himself out of his reverie and sat back down.

“Well now, I suppose I can tell you a bit. There was this one time in the war...”

Wyatt settled back into his seat and the bar quieted. Everyone wanted to hear Wyatt’s tale of tragedy and woe.

“The cannonballs were flying. Made a man scared to move any direction. Me and my buddy stayed back in the trees. I’m no coward, but I wasn’t

as eager to die as some.” Wyatt put an elbow on the bar and rested his chin on his hand, deep in thought.

Missy grabbed his glass and poured another, wiping the counter with a cloth that’d seen better days. Wyatt paused a moment in his story to wonder why she bothered.

“Never gave much thought to the dead before. Plenty of thought to dyin’” Wyatt shifted, straightening up and staring into his glass, sloshing the amber liquid around as if to see answers written at the bottom.

“Did you think you were going to die?” Missy settled in next to Wyatt while one of the gentlemen in the back sidled closer as Wyatt’s voice lowered.

“When a man’s layin’ in mud as thick as butter and watchin’ men twitch and holler while bullets whiz past his ear, he gets to talkin’ to his Maker. I didn’t want to die. That’s a fact, but for a while there, I thought it might come to my sorry hide in a mass grave.”

“How close did you come?”

Missy asked breathlessly, leaning forward with just that slight parting of the lips, pretty lips, but they’d sure kissed a lot of men.

Wyatt smiled. “Aw, shucks, we’re not talkin’ about me. We’re talking ‘bout another feller. Don’t reckon I knew his name, but he lay not ten feet from me under a twisted old tree

bleedin' and cryin' for his mama.”

“What happened then?” The kid drinking whisky shouted from the corner table.

“Well, he died. I know it. I saw him breathe his last and all day watched the flies land on him, but I stayed down.

Wyatt sloshed his whisky once more before tipping it back. Boy would he be drunk by the time he was done with this story. Maybe even drunk enough to play the fool and hunt the Clayton gang tonight. A man would need a lot of whisky to go playin' with the dead.

“The night was miserable. By the time dark was at its deepest, the fighting had passed us by. The fields were

littered with screaming men. The smell, it was like walking past the butcher's shop but these weren't no cows. And I shook so hard my teeth rattled, even soaked as I was in sweat. Longest night of my life.”

The saloon took on that eerie quiet feel a place has when something too big for words is happening. Not the smallest whisper crossed between the men. Not the scuffle of a boot or the clanging of a glass.

“The next morning I watched a shell of the fellow get up. His eyes,” Wyatt stared into the distance before swigging the last of his whisky. “The feller was dead and his eyes were

empty, like they was starin' but not at anything in this world. Well, this feller picked up his rifle and walked down the ridge just like he planned to join the fight.”

“Did he?” Old Man Tate hovered at the bar, waiting for the story's end.

“Nah, he found a corpse and started gnawing on it.”

Missy laughed then, bright and explosive and waved a hand in front of her face to pull in air. “Whooo, Wyatt, you had me going there for a while. Dead man picked up his rifle and went gnawing at the other men like a rat. I thought you were going to tell a real honest war story. That's some tall tale.”

Nervous laughter broke out as the miners turned away from Wyatt and went back to their drinking.

But Wyatt never finished what he had to say. That boy on the battlefield wore a hole the size of an apple where his heart should have been. No one walked away from a wound like that. And even now, on moonless nights, Wyatt woke in a cold sweat from dreaming about that boy's eyes and the sounds of slurping when he bent over another dead soldier. It was no tall tale. And his heart pounded while the saloon relaxed back into laughter and quiet conversation.

Putting on his hat, Wyatt tipped it

in Missy's direction.

“See ya round. You take care of yourself”

Wyatt left the bar eager to sleep off the whisky and cold images flashing through his brain. The yipping of a coyote didn't bother him none. It was the dog at the mercantile slurping up his dinner that left Wyatt with an icy sense of foreboding.

Thank you for reading