

The Werewolves of New Orleans

By [Terry Leatherwood](#) <t_leatherwood@peoplepc.com>

Rated: PG-13 (violence)

Submitted: December 2019

Summary: A frigid February sends Lois and Clark to New Orleans, Louisiana, ostensibly to write a simple travel piece on the Big Easy during Mardi Gras. But the mission Perry has actually sent them to perform – investigate the murder of an old friend – brings challenges the couple has never before faced.

Story Size: 63,443 words (349Kb as text)

The familiar characters of this story are not my own but are the property of corporate entities (DC Comics, December 3rd Productions, ABC, etc.) other than myself. This work is a labor of love and is presented with no expectation of remuneration.

I want to thank Brianna Edgeworth for all of her hard work in editing this beast (pun intended). She made some excellent suggestions, some of which I actually used. This was important, because I bravely (or foolishly) posted this without any Beta review. So thanks again, Brianna. You deserve more applause than I can include here.

Prologue

Paul was close to the end of his endurance but he knew they couldn't stop, not even for a moment. Their pursuers were bound to catch up to them, despite the head start they'd gotten. It was a desperate race against time, against the enemies who had posed as his friends, against death itself.

His companion's condition had to be worse than his. She was nearly twice his age and had led a sedentary life for the past several years. If their pursuers didn't catch them and kill them, this race to safety through the shallow bayou might be her undoing. He'd already lifted her from the mud and water once. She was slowing him down, making it easier for them to catch him.

But he couldn't quit, couldn't just leave her here, even if it meant his own survival. Not now, not when he'd thrown away everything he'd held sacred for the past three years.

"You got to come!" he urged her. "We almost there!"

She slipped in the mud and fell again. This time she barely kept her head out of the fetid water. "Can't – go – leave – me," she panted. "Save – self – go—"

"Not on your life!" he hissed. "I don't be leaving you!"

"Can't – keep up – with you—"

Something rustled in the woods above the bank of the small bayou. "You come with me!" He knelt down and grabbed her under the arms. "The police station just over that levee! We can make it!"

"Can't – see it – too – too dark."

"Don't have to see it! I know it's there. Now get y'self up! Move, old woman!"

She let him drag her upright and they staggered a few more steps, splashing through the algae floating on the surface. After a moment she added her meager strength to his efforts, and they headed toward the shallower bank of the bayou.

They were making better time now. The police station was just over the rise of the bayou's left bank – he hoped. If they hadn't gotten turned around in their frantic flight. If he recognized the

land at night, when everything looked different. If that was the right levee.

He didn't know her name or what she'd done to be condemned. He wasn't sure if he'd survive this night whether she reached safety or not. All he knew was that he had to try.

The fog parted before them and he saw the glow of light from over the levee. "Look!" he whispered in her ear. "There! It be the police station! We almos' there!"

They stepped out of the water and began climbing the bank. His legs were stiff and sore and every step hurt, but he refused to quit. He refused to allow this woman to die.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged. "Come on! We're almost there! We'll be safe!"

She grabbed his shirt and pulled herself along with him. "Thank – you," she panted. "You're a – a good man."

He frowned but didn't stop. He wasn't a good man. He was just tired of being bad. And he had to do this one last good thing before he died.

Suddenly she fell out of his embrace and thudded to the ground. He lurched to a stop and bent down to pick her up again and everything went black.

He tried to inhale but only found foul water in his mouth. Frantic for air, he scrambled for a handhold and found a tree root. As he coughed brackish liquid from his throat, he pulled himself up onto the bank of the bayou and took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to think around the throbbing coming from the back of his head.

What had happened?

He rose to his hands and knees and felt something soft and squishy under his left hand. When it didn't react to the pressure he put on it, he knew it wasn't something alive that might hurt him. He picked it up and brought it closer to his face so he could identify it by the wan moonlight.

Then he wished he hadn't.

He threw the section of intestine in one direction and turned the other way to vomit. As his stomach emptied itself, he heard something moving slowly toward him on the bank above him.

He looked up, knowing what he'd see if not who.

A tall, rangy man with immense shoulders, wearing a long black duster and a flat-brimmed black hat with a silver band, knelt down near the young man's head. <You should not have taken her, Paul,> he said in continental French. <It only made things worse for her and – well, there is no way we can trust you now, is there?>

Paul closed his eyes and shook his head. He knew what was coming, that there was no escape for him now. <No,> he sighed. <You cannot trust me.>

The tall man gently placed his hand on Paul's shoulder. <For the sake of your past service, I will make it quick.> He paused to breathe for a moment. <And for what it is worth, I am sorry.>

Paul nodded. <Thank you, my lord. I understand. Will you tell my mother what happened?>

The tall man paused again and sighed. <No. I will not.>

And then Paul was dead.

Lead investigator Robert Gautreaux shook his head. He'd worked in the Homicide division for eleven years, as a uniformed patrolman for twelve years before that, and had grown up in the New Orleans area. He'd seen people attacked by alligators or ravaged by dogs, and once there had been those two hikers who'd been mauled by a rogue cougar. He'd never figured out where the big cat had come from, either, only that the officer on the scene had barely managed to kill it with his service pistol before the beast could claw him into hamburger.

He'd also seen far too many people killed, butchered, and savaged by other human beings. His life in the bayou country had

shown him both how wonderful most people could be and how barbaric others could be.

But he'd never seen anything like this before. Not on the job, at least.

Cause of death for the young man was easy to determine. His neck had been broken by someone who was extremely strong and quite skilled in killing. His body still lay half-way in the water of the small bayou, and the young officer who was standing over the body with a long stick, guarding it from fish and turtles and other scavengers, was careful not to look up the bank toward the levee behind the station house. Robert didn't know his name, but he had the look of the academy's most recent graduating class – except for his wide eyes and pale complexion.

Identifying the other victim was going to be difficult.

The coroner, Dr. Walter Smith, had found enough body parts to pronounce the second victim to be female, probably fifty to sixty years of age with poor muscle tone, and had probably not been particularly attractive in life.

With her body torn into a dozen or more pieces and scattered over the bank of the levee, she wasn't very attractive in death, either.

Smith looked up from where he was kneeling. "Robert, would you come and take a look at this?"

Robert shook his head. He couldn't count the number of times he'd reminded the coroner that his first name was pronounced "*Row-bear*" in the French manner, with the emphasis on the second syllable, yet Smith refused to remember. And this wasn't the time to make of it an issue.

"What do you wish for me to see, eh, Walter?" asked Robert.

Walter lifted up a bloody piece of flesh. "This is the lower left leg of the second victim. It ends just below where the leg would meet the knee joint." He pointed to the icky part. "Note how the flesh has been severed rather raggedly but straight, as if this were one cut instead of several cuts. And the ends of both the tibia and fibula are also broken off along the same plane."

Robert knelt down close enough to see but not close enough to touch. "Meaning what?"

Walter frowned. "I think it means that her leg was severed by one single blow, one that tore through both flesh and bone."

Robert didn't like the way that sounded. "Like a sword or an axe, maybe?"

Walter shook his head. "No. More like a ragged blade on a hydraulic press. I don't think this leg was cut from the rest of her body. I think it was torn away, almost as if it had been bitten off."

Now Robert really didn't like what he was hearing. "Do you say that a wild animal killed her?"

"I'm not saying that at all. A wild animal would have eaten something or carried away body parts, but the only part I haven't found yet is her left forearm. Except for a few gnawed places where those opossums were nibbling on the remains when that young man found the bodies, there are no indications of animals feeding here. It's almost eight in the morning now, and these deaths probably happened right here between three and four o'clock this morning."

"You are certain these body parts were not simply dumped here? Perhaps as a statement to the police?"

Walter sat back on his haunches. "There's too much blood here for that. We've found fresh blood all over the bank, way too much for a body dump. She was killed right here."

Robert took a deep breath and stood. After a moment, Walter followed suit and pulled off his latex gloves.

Robert didn't want to ask, but he knew he had to know.

"Walter, have you any idea who or what killed this poor woman?"

Walter didn't look at Robert. "I know that she was probably disemboweled first, then her limbs were removed, then her throat was torn out and her head separated from her torso. And I'm pretty sure from the blood evidence on the ends of the severed limbs that

her heart was still beating when they were being removed." He finally fixed his gaze on the homicide investigator. "But I can't tell you how any single human being could physically do this. There had to be a group of them, maybe five or six, all working on her at once, and working very quickly, using tools that would make a lot of noise and be difficult to carry."

The detective frowned. "Yet we have found no footprints, no tire tracks, no indication that anyone other than our two victims were here last night. How could someone have done such a terrible thing without leaving any evidence of it?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

Robert grimaced and looked up at the cloudy sky. "How long – I mean – when did she die?"

"I assume you're asking me which wound killed her?" Robert nodded and Walter rubbed his face with one hand. "Any of them would have been fatal after a few minutes, but the method used to remove her limbs crushed the severed ends of her blood vessels and prevented her from bleeding out quickly. Much as I hate to say this, it appears that she was still alive and probably alert when her throat was ripped out."

Robert closed his eyes and breathed a quick prayer. Let it not begin again, he asked. Not again. Please.

Walter tapped him on the elbow. "What will you tell the press?"

Robert opened his eyes and looked at the tops of the trees across the bayou. "As little as possible. I suggest that you refrain from repeating to anyone what you have said to me just now. The last thing we need in this city is a panic like—"

Walter waited for a long moment, but when Robert didn't continue, Walter just nodded. "I'll start working on the identification of the victims as soon as I get all the body parts in the ambulance."

"I hope that, at least, goes well."

"It should. The young man is fully intact except for a couple of turtle bites, and we just found the woman's head a few minutes ago."

Something in Robert's stomach opened onto a black abyss. "Where was her head?"

Walter grimaced and pointed. "Funny thing. Not 'ha-ha' funny, of course, but most unusual. We found it almost at the top of the levee, facing the police station. Her hair was pulled back away from her face, almost as if it had been arranged that way." He lowered his arm. "I think we've learned all we can here. It's time to load them up."

Robert nodded once and Walter took a step up the bank. "Walter?" said Robert.

"Yes?"

"When did you come to New Orleans?"

"Let's see, I was hired away from the Little Rock, Arkansas coroner's office fourteen years ago, in nineteen eighty-six."

"So you were not in the city in nineteen seventy-two?"

"No. I started my residency in Fayetteville that year. Why?"

"No reason."

Walter paused, but when Robert moved down the bank toward the intact body, he climbed the levee and waved for his assistants.

Robert stopped beside the young officer standing guard. "Are you well, young man?"

The boy gulped. "I'm – I'm just fine, sir."

He wasn't, of course, but Robert wouldn't call him on it. "Dr. Smith is going to place this young man's body in his ambulance. Would you be so kind as to return to the station and tell your commander that we are almost finished here? And that I will check in with him before I leave?"

The young man turned and Robert read "D'Aquisto" on his name tag. "Yes, sir, right away."

Officer D'Aquisto walked downstream about a dozen yards, far enough to get clear of the worst of the blood splatter, then

scrambled over the top of the levee. Robert hoped that the young man would stick with police work. He'd overcome his natural revulsion to seeing something so horrible and done his job well. Perhaps the young man might even help him solve this case quickly.

Yet Robert feared that this was only the beginning. The horror he'd seen twenty-seven years before seemed to have returned. This death was too much like so many of those back then, and as a youth he'd railed against the police and the politicians and the press for suppressing the truth.

But now that he was faced with it himself, he understood. This news could not be made public, lest the city – perhaps the entire state – fall into a panic. He only hoped they could contain the carnage this time.

Stopping it altogether was surely a vain hope.

He paused, inhaled, and let the foul memories come again, the ones he sought to banish with time, activity, hobbies, and the occasional soused weekend.

In nineteen seventy-two, fifty-eight people had died in ways similar to the way this unidentified woman had died the night before. Twenty-seven more had disappeared and had never been found. The killings and the disappearances had begun during Mardi Gras that year and had halted abruptly seven weeks later, after Easter. Some people had blamed the hippie population which convened almost daily in Jackson Square, playing guitars and bongos and singing songs of love and peace and drugged euphoria.

But the city had grown since then, had absorbed many new people, and things were not as they had been.

Except, possibly, for one thing.

Death stalked the city yet again. Rougarou – the one called Loup-Garou by some, especially the Cajun natives – had returned to New Orleans.

And Robert could not combat the menace alone. He needed help, and he would begin with the coroner, then make a phone call to a certain number in Metropolis.

He laboriously climbed the bank and guided the doctor off to one side. "Walter, I must speak with you on a matter of grave importance."

Smith lifted an eyebrow. "From almost anyone else, I'd consider that a pun of very poor taste. What's on your mind?"

Robert glanced around. No one paid them any undue attention, yet he felt that they were being watched. "Not here. I will meet you for lunch at my home at twelve-thirty. Tell no one where you are going or who you are meeting."

Smith nodded toward the ambulance. "I take it this has to do with our guests of honor this morning?"

"Take it any way you wish. But please come to my home for lunch today. And tell no one. It is most important."

"A matter of life and death, eh, Robert?"

Robert took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No, Walter. It is far more than that. It is a matter of survival."

Chapter One

It was a cold, dreary February day in Metropolis, the kind of day very few people liked to see. It had been preceded by a number of similar cold and dreary days. The snow, which continued to fall even after five of those dreary days, and the ice, which re-formed every night after the sun's meager heat vanished, had snarled traffic for days. Despite their continuing best efforts, the city's weather response teams had simply been overwhelmed by the Arctic blast.

The hospital emergency rooms were filled with people who'd gotten hurt in minor traffic accidents caused by the weather or who had simply slipped and fallen. The only real positive was that the city's blue-collar criminals seemed to be iced in just like the law-abiding citizens were, so Superman hadn't done much crime-fighting in the past week. He'd been quite busy at the many

vehicle incidents for the first two days, but even that workload had been reduced to a trickle lately, and the police seemed to be on top of things in that area. It almost seemed as if the entire population of the city had decided to hide their heads under their blankets and wait out the long spate of winter weather. Even the Broncos beating the Falcons in the Super Bowl, played on the first Sunday of the month, failed to arouse the city from its hibernation.

Clark had deliberately walked close to Lois for several days, expecting her to slip, but she'd fooled him and hadn't taken a single misstep since the storms had buried the city under the frozen precipitation. Her decision to wear flats and rubber boots had helped, of course, but Lois was young and athletic, strong and agile, and she never wobbled one time. And it was indicative of her awareness of the dangerous weather conditions that she never once complained about him hovering over her.

The Planet had printed a full slate of stories since the weather had hit, but the only local item which had received much play was the weather itself. The clogged-up city seemed to be stuck in neutral when it came to local news. Nobody's snitches could come up with anything worth working on. Even Bobby Bigmouth had come up dry for three days in a row, a record for him, and Clark – over Lois' objections – had bought him a pity Chinese dinner from Shanghai Express.

So Clark wasn't too surprised that Thursday morning when Perry leaned out of his office and called for him.

"What's up, Chief?"

Perry sat down behind his desk and leaned back in his chair. "It's been slow, news-wise, for a few days now, even though we've been short-staffed because of the people who haven't been able to get in to the office. There's a lot of sitting around and being unproductive out there right now."

Clark frowned. "And you want me to do something about that?"

"Yes, I do." Perry turned the chair sideways and handed Clark a folder. "I want you and Lois to go to New Orleans on a working vacation. I want you two to soak up the sights and sounds of the city, get a feel for what's going on with the people, and give me some quality reporting on Mardi Gras and Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday and Lent and how the people there feel about it. You know what I mean. And you need to leave today, if possible, since Fat Tuesday is just five days away."

Clark frowned and tilted his head. "We can do that, Perry, but wouldn't this usually be something the travel department would do? It sounds like you're asking us to do a standard tourist piece."

"You're right. What I just handed you is a standard travel piece, one that either of you could knock out in half an hour without breaking a sweat."

Clark waited for a moment, then said, "But there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

Perry fixed Clark with a gimlet stare. "Close the door, son, then sit down."

Clark did so. "What's really going on here?"

Perry leaned back again. "Do you know what I was doing in nineteen seventy-two?"

"No, not specifically. I know you were reporting instead of editing, but that's about it. Why?"

"Well, part of that time I was in Southeast Asia. Part of the time I was in Beirut." He swiveled his chair to one side and looked at the wall. "And part of the time I was in south Louisiana, right in the heart of Cajun bayou country."

Clark nodded. "Okay, but I still don't understand."

"Read what's in that file. And don't tell anyone what it says."

"What? Why not?"

"Read it now. You'll understand why before you're finished."

Perry stood and closed the blinds to his office, both on the inside windows and the outside ones. Clark began reading.

And he couldn't stop.

Clark lifted wide, horror-stricken eyes to his boss. “This can’t be true! I mean, I know you’re not lying to me or even kidding me, but – Perry, this is sickening!”

Perry sighed. “I wish you were right and I was kidding you. But I was there, son, and I took some of those pictures. The five of us – me, the chief of police, the coroner, the editor of the Picayune Times, and a young lady cop – all took an oath to keep this a secret amongst us and to contact everyone in the group if it ever happened again.”

Clark looked down at the file for a moment, then the import of Perry’s words penetrated his mind. His head came up again and his voice quivered. “You mean – it’s started again?”

“I don’t know for sure. But Evelyn Carstairs – she was the lady cop – is still down there. She’s – sorry, she was the official New Orleans police department liaison to the governor’s office in Baton Rouge, and an accomplished immunologist associated with the Center for Disease Control.” Perry’s expression hardened. “She was found two mornings ago, murdered just like those folks in the file you read.”

“Oh.” Clark leaned forward and put the file on Perry’s desk. “This almost sounds personal. Your reaction, I mean.”

“In some ways it is. I was just a little bit in love with Evelyn back then. Of course, I was already married to Alice, and – well, nothing happened between us, and I think it worked out well. But we’ve kept in touch over the years – professionally, of course.” His voice hardened. “And having an old friend of mine ripped to shreds and left to rot in a bayou gets me riled up.”

Clark blinked, then asked softly, “And her killer used the same MO?”

“Identical. Far as anyone can tell, it’s the same person or group of people.”

“That’s hard to believe, Chief. Twenty-seven years is a long time between killings.”

“I know. But that’s what it looks like.” He rubbed a hand across his face. “Evelyn was a good cop, a good scientist, and an honest person. She deserved a lot better than – than what happened to her.”

Clark was silent for a long moment, then he asked, “Has anyone ever figured out just what killed those people back then?”

Perry fixed Clark with a firm stare. “The locals call it Rougarou. That’s a slang Cajun word for werewolf.”

Clark’s eyebrows lifted again, this time in surprise. “Werewolf? Can I ask now if you’re kidding me?”

“I know it’s hard to believe. Shucks, I’m not sure I believe it myself. But even after nearly three decades, I haven’t been able to come up with another explanation that fits the facts.”

“Yeah, Perry, but – werewolves? Come on!”

“How many things have you seen just since you came to Metropolis that you can’t explain without resorting to some kind of supernatural justification? There was Lois’ old boyfriend from Ireland who had those magic emeralds and tried to turn himself into a Druid priest. Almost did it, too. There was Baron Sunday and his voodoo hoodoo. There was that murdered woman whose ghost you thought possessed Lois for a short time. And don’t forget those Yi Chi bracelets that girl used against Superman. So how hard is it to believe in werewolves?”

Clark’s mouth opened but nothing came out. He didn’t want to agree with his boss on this subject, but it was hard not to see the man’s point. And that didn’t take into account all the weirdness Clark had seen during the years he’d been a world traveler prior to his arrival in Metropolis.

He finally nodded. “Okay, say I buy werewolves as a possible explanation. Is this the real reason you want to send us to Louisiana?”

“Yes. But I don’t want to alarm any civilians down there. This information is just between you, me, and the desk.”

“And Lois.”

Perry shook his head. “For her own sake, I’d rather she not know about this just yet.”

Now Clark shook his head. “No. If she goes, she gets the same background as I do. I refuse to put my wife and partner in a potentially dangerous situation without giving her all the information she needs to have.”

“Now, son, wait a—”

“I’m not bending on this one, Perry. Either she gets all the background or we don’t go as a team.”

The two men stared at one another for a long moment, then Perry sighed and nodded. “You’re right. I wouldn’t want to walk into that – that slaughterhouse without knowing about it beforehand, and I won’t do it to one of my reporters.” He stood. “You get with travel and set up the flight as soon as you can get there. Rent a car and drive to an open airport out of town if you have to, but get down there fast. I’ll brief Lois while you’re doing that. And touch base with Jimmy before you go. He’s got a couple of electronic gizmos to give you.”

“Will do, Chief.”

“And Clark?”

Clark stopped in the doorway. “Yes?”

Perry hesitated, then said, “I want to make sure that Superman goes with you as backup.”

Clark frowned at his boss, but Perry’s face gave nothing away. “I’ll make sure he meets us there, Chief,” Clark finally replied.

Perry had expected Lois’ reaction to be on a par with her husband’s, but she fooled him by sitting and thinking about the information he’d given her for a full two minutes. Finally she took a deep breath and said, “I’m going to accept what you’ve told me as a working hypothesis, Perry. I know you wouldn’t come up with ‘werewolves’ as a reason for all this without going through all the more reasonable alternate explanations.”

“Just because I haven’t come up with something else doesn’t mean there isn’t something else,” he responded. “I want the two of you to have all the available information, but I also know that the people who put boots on the ground learn a lot more than what’s in the initial briefing real quick.”

She frowned. “That’s kind of a military way of putting it, don’t you think? If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to make me extra cautious.”

His eyebrow twitched. “If it’s not what I’m afraid it might be, all it’ll do is make you a little more cautious than normal. And as impulsive as you are, that won’t hurt you. If you’re actually going up against Rougarou, though, it’s not nearly enough.”

Her head tilted to one side and her eyes twinkled slightly. “I haven’t failed to come back from a mission yet, oh wise and mighty Captain.”

Perry’s voice hardened. “This isn’t like investigating Intergang, Lois. This is more like infiltrating a terrorist organization, where one tiny slip kills you instantly and there’s not enough body left to find, let alone enough to bury.”

Her expression sobered. “I know. We’ll be exceptionally careful.” She lifted the folder and put it back on his desk. “Do you have anything more recent than this?”

“Not really. Your contact will be the parish coroner, Dr. Walter Smith. Your cover story is that you met his son in Metropolis and he recommended his dad as a local guide. I’ll give you some info on his son Wayne Smith when Clark comes back. And it’s all real, since Wayne is cooperating with us and will back you up all the way. The doctor has everything for you down in New Orleans. Just remember to look like travel writers instead of criminal investigators. That way you’ll be less likely to draw the wrong kind of attention.”

She nodded. “I understand. When do we leave?”

“Clark will have that info when he gets back from Travel

Services. Pack for warmer temperatures and try to enjoy yourselves while you're down there."

She stood and smiled. "We will, Perry. I've never been to New Orleans before. What's it really like?"

He sighed. "At her best, the Big Easy is beautiful and lively and fun all around the clock. At her worst, she makes Suicide Slum look like Centennial Park." He pointed a stubby index finger at her. "So you two be extra careful down there."

As it turned out, they had to take an icy and fairly scary cab ride to the railroad station to catch a southbound passenger train. They rode it until almost midnight as far as Maryland to get a scheduled flight out, and the overnight layover in Birmingham to catch the morning flight took another six hours.

There were, of course, no rooms to rent anywhere near the airport at that time of the night, and their Planet budget didn't cover an extra motel stay.

As much as Clark disliked riding in an airborne metal tube, he disliked far more being trapped in an airline terminal with Lois Lane where the only things open were a dirty pizza shop and a bar with its insipid prerecorded lounge music turned up too loud. He debated calling Perry to tell them that Superman had "happened by" and flown them to New Orleans, but his good sense won the argument and he didn't.

When the wheels finally came up on the airliner and the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign flicked off, Lois immediately leaned her seat back and whacked the knees of the man behind her. "Hey!" he snapped. "I'm sitting here, lady!"

She spun in the seat and glared at him over the headrest. "Look, mister, I've just spent the night in the terminal sitting on hard plastic chairs with sharp edges while waiting for this plane to board. I haven't slept in twenty-four hours. I'm frazzled, cranky, and I think I may be PMSing. I'm a black belt in Tai-Kwon-Do and I'm studying another fighting discipline you've never heard of. Now do you want to sit back and enjoy the flight or do you want your next of kin to collect on your life insurance?"

Clark watched the man's eyes fall open in shock. "Uh, no, lady, no problem, just let me know next time, okay?" As Lois continued to glare at him, he shrank back into his seat and whimpered, "Please?"

Clark tapped his wife on the shoulder and she grunted, then slowly turned around and settled herself into her reclined seat. After a few moments her breathing evened out and she seemed to be asleep, so Clark leaned over his seat and quietly said, "I want to apologize for my wife, sir. Sometimes she goes a little overboard."

The man pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I feel for ya, buddy. My ex was a lot like that, except it was all the time instead of just once a month."

Clark suppressed a laugh and turned to face forward again. This trip was starting off on some very interesting notes, he mused.

The landing was smooth and they picked up their luggage without incident. As they exited the terminal, they saw a middle-aged man holding up a cardboard sign that had "C. L. Kent" printed on it with a Sharpie. They waved to him across the tiled meeting area and he waved back with surprising enthusiasm.

Lois suppressed a sigh and muttered, "I was so hoping for a shower and some sleep in a bed."

"Well, maybe we'll get lucky and he'll take us right to the hotel."

The man smiled and waved. "Mr. and Mrs. Kent! Welcome to New Orleans!"

Clark offered his hand. "I assume that you're Dr. Smith."

The man took it and shook enthusiastically. "Oh, call me Walter, please! Any friends of Wayne are friends of mine! Is this all of your luggage?"

"That's it," Lois agreed. "And call me Lois and him Clark. From everything Wayne told us, we feel like we already know you."

"Fine! That's just fine! Let's get you two settled in your hotel. I hope you don't mind being close to the action downtown."

"That's what we're here for," said Clark.

Smith tipped the skycap who loaded the luggage and helped Lois into the back of the car. It wasn't quite a limousine, but it was more than a taxi, with one bench seat facing forward where she and Clark sat, and one facing to the rear. He climbed in, closed the door behind him, sat in the rear-facing seat, and tapped on the glass partition. "Take these good folks to the Omni Royal, please."

"Very good, sir," the driver responded.

Lois frowned. "I thought we were booked into the Quality Inn downtown. The Omni sounds more expensive than the suits at the Planet want to pay for a couple of reporters."

"Nonsense!" Smith boomed. "The Omni has several excellent restaurants on site, many more amenities, and is close to nearly everything worth seeing in the Crescent City." He leaned forward and grinned. "I'll take care of the cost differential. The manager owes me some big favors. Your 'suits' need not be concerned." He leaned back again. "Besides, I'm a typical New Orleans transplant who hasn't seen a third of what's best to see, and I've been here for sixteen years. It'll do me good to show you around. I'll learn almost as much about the city as you will."

Lois gave him her best incandescent smile. "Thank you, Doctor. If you knew what we've been through these past twenty-four hours—"

"Ha! Think nothing of it. Except for enjoying the comfort of one of the city's finest hotels, the pleasure is all mine."

Clark smiled at him. "We still want to thank you, Dr. Smith."

"You're quite welcome, my young friend, you're quite welcome. And do call me Walter. Calling me 'Doctor Smith' makes me think of the old 'Lost in Space' television show from the sixties, and I hate to be associated with a villain. Oh, look, we're already on I-10. You'll be relaxing in your rooms in no time. Now I want the two of you to rest this afternoon. You're going to need it."

"Oh? Where are you taking us tonight?"

Smith's grin nearly split his face. "Tonight, Mr. Kent – excuse me, Clark – we will dine at Nola's, just a short walk from your hotel. I hope you packed your appetites!"

The good doctor continued in his tour guide persona until the bellboy – who was tipped generously but not extravagantly – closed the door to their top-floor room. Smith then walked to the window and pulled the curtains apart as Clark pulled one of Jimmy's devices out and surreptitiously scanned for hidden microphones and cameras. And he supplemented the scan with his own senses.

Doctor Smith was waxing eloquent about the upcoming Mardi Gras parade when Clark put the small box back in his pocket. "All clear," he said.

The doctor stood by the window and waved once more as if emphasizing a particular item of interest, then closed the curtains with a flourish.

His smile vanished like a donut at a cop convention. "What did your *Monsieur LeBlanc* tell you?"

Lois frowned. "LeBlanc? Who's that?"

Clark leaned close and almost whispered, "Translate French to English. Mr. White."

After a moment, Lois nodded. "Should have picked up on that. I guess I'm really tired."

"My apologies," said Smith. "I suppose I've internalized more Cajun culture than I thought. You'll have the rest of the morning and this afternoon to catch up on your sleep. Now please bring me up to speed."

Lois glanced at Clark, who nodded and began briefing Smith on the meager info they already had as Lois checked out the extravagant bathroom. When she finished washing her hands in the marble sink fed by gold-plated fixtures, she shook her head at the opulence and rejoined the two men.

“And that’s all we have,” said Clark. “Do you have anything to add?”

Smith shook his head. “No more murders – at least, none like Ms. Carstairs’ death. But we have had an upswing of disappearances from the homeless population. They might simply be relocating to take advantage of the upcoming festivities, but they might not.” He suddenly looked surprised. “I almost forgot to tell you. If you need any official police assistance, please contact Robert Gautreaux in the homicide division.” He dug into his pants pocket and pulled out a business card. “This is his contact info. His first name is pronounced Row-bear, like the French say it, with the emphasis on the second syllable. He plans to stay out of the official picture as long as possible, but he said that you are to call him if you need any help or if you can’t get in touch with me for any reason.”

Lois took the card and read it, then handed it to Clark. “Thank you,” she said. “Now, since we’re exhausted travel writers who intend to be fed lavishly at dinner, how about you let us get some sleep?”

Smith smiled and his good-time tour guide persona re-emerged. “Of course! You two should lie down and rest. I’ll call for you at seven-fifteen. Our reservations are for eight, so that should give us plenty of time for a leisurely stroll to the restaurant.” He turned and headed for the door. “Oh, the dress code is essentially business casual, so sneakers are out but you needn’t dress formally unless you wish to do so. Until tonight!”

And he was gone.

Lois turned to Clark and said, “Am I really that tired or is he a bit overbearing?”

He smiled back and tugged her close so she could lean against him. “A little of both, I think. Do you want to take a shower before you lie down?”

“Yes! That shower stall is big enough to bathe an entire jazz trio with their instruments.”

He grinned wider. “Does that mean that you want to save water and share?”

She shook her head. “Tomorrow, probably. Right now, no. I need to get to sleep as soon as possible or I won’t be a very good dinner companion tonight.”

He turned her gently towards the bathroom and gave her a soft shove. “In that case, my lady, you get first dibs. I’ll put away our clothes while you’re in there.”

“Thanks, darling. You’re just so super sometimes.”

Clark gave her a mock frown. “Just sometimes?”

She paused in the doorway and smiled softly. “At all the best times, my love.”

Chapter Two

Lois leaned back and put her hands on her tummy. “That may have been the best restaurant food I’ve ever tasted in my entire life.”

Smith smiled. “As I warned you, Nola’s may ruin your palate for any other food. Every time I eat here it’s a complete delight.”

She reached out and patted her husband on the wrist. “Well, I have an advantage, Walter. I married a terrific cook, so I’m sure I’ll see some version of tonight’s meal on our dinner table after we get home.”

Clark waved his free hand lazily. “Aw, shucks, honey, you’re embarrassing me.”

They shared a relaxed laugh just as someone’s cell phone rang. After a moment, Smith said, “Oh! That’s for me!” He pulled out the phone and checked the caller ID, then said, “I’m terribly sorry,

but this is official business. I must take this.” He stood and put his chair under the table. “Please forgive my horrible manners.”

Lois waved at him. “Don’t worry about it. Reporters have to be on call a lot, too.”

The doctor put the phone to his ear and said, “Smith here. What’s up?” Then he walked toward the restaurant lobby.

Lois smiled and leaned close to Clark. “Can you hear him?”

Clark picked up his wine glass and swirled the remainder in the bottom. “No. Too much ambient noise in here. I can’t pick his voice out of the background chatter.”

She nodded and leaned back. “I hope he doesn’t have to leave us. He’s actually pretty entertaining now that I’ve gotten some sleep.”

Clark chuckled. “I know what you mean. For someone who claims not to know that much about the city, he’s a fount of interesting information. I think I could write two columns and a sidebar just on what he’s told us tonight.”

The waiter chose that moment to lean in. “*Madame, Monsieur*, would you care for the dessert? We have several chocolate specials available this evening.”

Lois laughed. “Not tonight! I’m about to burst as it is! But we’ll have to come back before we leave. You can ply me with chocolate desserts then.”

“*Oui, Madame*,” he said. “May I refill your coffee?”

“No more for me. Clark, are you game?”

“Yes, please. One more for the road.”

“*Oui, Monsieur*.”

As the young man glided away, Doctor Smith returned without his smile. “I’m terribly sorry, but I have to go to the office. We have a – a special guest coming in.”

“I’m sorry. Someone you knew?”

“No, but I need to make a call on whether or not this was a murder. Again, I apologize, but this is something I must do. Part of the job, you know.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Walter, we’ll make out. We’re not far from the hotel, so I think we can manage to find our way back.”

“Good. I’ve already signed the check, so you won’t have to wash dishes before you leave. Oh, if you aren’t quite ready to turn in, there’s a place to hear some local bands just a few blocks from here on the corner of Decatur and Iberville. The French Quarter Pizzeria and Bar is hosting live shows all this week. Drop by and give whoever is playing there tonight a listen if you’re so inclined. The concierge can give you directions.”

She glanced at her husband, then nodded to Smith. “Thanks. We just might do that. In fact, we should do that. It’ll give us a better handle on the local color.”

“Of course. And it’s a safe part of town, as long as you stay in the lighted areas.” He leaned closer. “Of course, you’d know about such things from living in Metropolis, wouldn’t you? Now that’s a place I’d love to visit. Perhaps I could even meet the famous Man of Steel!”

Clark and Lois both laughed with him. “Yep, that’s Metropolis, just one big tourist trap.”

“I didn’t mean that disparagingly, Lois. I hope you know that. New Orleans isn’t exactly perfect either.” His phone beeped at him. “Oh, dear, I really must go. I’ll call you tomorrow morning between eleven and twelve at your hotel, assuming that’s all right with the two of you?”

They glanced at each other again and Clark answered. “Sounds good, Walter. Talk to you then.”

They found themselves sitting outside the pizza bar, listening to a quartet of dreadlocked black musicians playing a mix of soft blues and jazz. The drummer and bassist were locked in the pocket together, and the guitarist sang harmony with the girl at the keyboard when they weren’t dazzling the audience with their flights of melodic majesty. The night was unusually warm, even

for New Orleans, so Lois and Clark doffed their light jackets and leaned into each other.

As the group finished their first set and stepped away to a burst of applause from the audience, Lois said, “I can’t believe that guitar player! His left hand is barely moving but he’s playing notes I didn’t know were on the instrument.”

Clark nodded. “That bassist moves his hand over the strings like a spider, too. And he never plays too much or too little. These folks have been together for quite a while.”

Lois smiled and turned her head, then dropped her smile. “Clark! Skinhead alert. Three of them coming up behind the band and they don’t look like fans.”

He nodded. “I’ll just wander over in that direction and tell them how much I enjoyed their music. Maybe that will keep the peace.”

“I hope so.”

She watched her husband slide almost awkwardly between the nearest thug and the tiny keyboardist. He gestured wildly to show his appreciation of the music and ‘accidentally’ bumped into the closest skinhead. He then turned to help the man up and somehow managed to push one of his fellow morons into a fire hydrant where he banged his knee and fell, then stepped on the third man’s foot and rolled it over just enough to make him grab the fence along the sidewalk to stay upright.

Their pride dented and their momentum blunted, the three young men apparently decided that tonight wasn’t the appropriate time to demonstrate their inherent racial superiority. They turned and limped down the street in the direction they’d come from, tossing the occasional imprecation over their shoulders at Clark or at the musicians.

As the band smiled at Clark and quietly thanked him for the helping hand, someone sat down beside Lois.

She turned to face the newcomer. “I’m sorry, but that’s my husband’s chair. And he’s very particular where he sits.”

The tall, slender young woman licked her fingers and smiled thinly. “I can see why he would be, Ms. Lane.” She put her hand over Lois’ bare forearm and pressed it against the table. “But I need you to come with me. There is something you must see.”

“Listen, honey, I don’t – oh!”

The girl’s hand suddenly thickened and grew hairier. Her fingernails hardened and lengthened to suggest claws, and the girl’s wrist bent in one of the few angles the human wrist is not designed to bend.

Lois’ mouth opened in alarm and she glanced up at the girl, who exhaled sharply and sucked in a breath past gritted teeth. “Please don’t make me do that again. It’s hard enough to stop there without having to do it twice.”

Lois looked back down at the girl’s hand. It looked human again. “That hurt.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“No, I mean it hurt me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t do it to hurt you, Ms. Lane, but I needed to get your attention.”

“Well, you’ve got it.” Lois lifted her eyes to the other girl’s face and nodded. “I guess we’re taking a walk together.”

The girl smiled. “I guess we are.”

Clark smiled at the dreadlocked keyboardist again. “I’m sorry about that. I really came over to tell you how much I enjoyed your music.”

The girl smiled at him enigmatically. “Thank you, sah,” she said, her voice still musical. “But we got no problem wit those three. Dey just want to have fun wit us.”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

She leaned closer. “Yes, you do. And we thank you for bein’ a good man.” She glanced around and her smile disappeared. “Sah, you should go an’ be wit you lady. I be thinkin’ she need you.”

He looked over at their table.

No one sat there.

“Go!” the girl hissed. “You mus’ follow dem! An’ be careful!”

He narrowed his eyes at the unusual young woman, but there wasn’t time to delve into her mystery at the moment. He skittered to the table, hoping that Lois had left a note or some other indication –

She *had* left something.

Clark touched the small dark wet spot, smaller than a dime, on the table beside Lois’ purse and brought his finger to his nose.

It was blood.

He pulled his glasses down and checked out the immediate area. No more blood spots popped up, but the area was too crowded to be certain that no one had a foot on another sample.

He tried sniffing for her perfume, but there were too many other scents in the area. He picked up cologne, aftershave, perfumes, multiple varieties of food, various blends of coffee, soaps, laundry detergent, deodorant, various intensities of body odor – the air was far too thick to single out Lois’ scent.

He tried listening for her heartbeat, but again there were too many other noises in between. People talking and laughing and crying and occasionally yelling, forks and knives scraping against dishes, brakes squealing, engines running, air conditioners struggling against the humidity – again, too much background to sift through.

Think, Kent! he commanded himself. Think of a way to find them!

Them?

He spun on his heel, looking for the keyboardist whose accent had sounded more Jamaican than Louisiana Creole, but he saw only the drummer checking his cymbals for the proper angles. The dreadlocked young woman was out of sight, and there was no time to find her and ask for more information.

He bundled Lois’ purse with their jackets, then jogged to the corner of Decatur and Iberville and looked around. He still didn’t see her.

Or – them?

Why “them?” Why did the girl tell him to follow “them?” Who was the other person?

It didn’t matter. He still had to think of a way –

Think. Of course!

He stopped and stilled his mind, then called out to Lois mentally. After a moment he felt a response. It wasn’t enough to hone in on her location, but at least he knew she was still alive and alert. And she seemed to be moving at a pretty good pace.

Another call gave him a direction to follow. They were moving south toward the river.

Which didn’t make sense. If one of their old enemies had followed them from Metropolis to New Orleans, taking Lois from a public restaurant to kill her was a dumb move. Kidnapping her might be a slightly smarter move if he knew who had taken her, but it still didn’t make sense to him. Someone from out of town would have few resources along the river, which even in the city was a place most law-abiding people avoided, especially at night. And a local wouldn’t have any reason to take her.

Unless –

Unless that local knew why they were really here.

He checked for traffic and loped across the intersection, heading south. He was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

Lois would have been lost in the first hundred yards if the tall young woman hadn’t been pulling her along. She had no idea where they were or where they were headed. The city looked nothing like Metropolis, and the bad feeling she’d had since she’d seen – or thought she’d seen – the other girl’s hand change shape was getting worse.

Then Clark touched her mind.

She wished she could give him more information than “I’m okay and moving south,” but the link they shared was more an emotional pulse than a telephone line. She knew he’d start looking for her as soon as he could, and she needed as much information as she could get.

“Where are we going?”

The tall girl glanced back over her shoulder. “To meet some – some people.”

The girl abruptly changed direction. Lois didn’t follow her right away and bounced off a rough stone wall. “Ow!” She grabbed her left elbow and felt a warm dampness. “Could we slow down a little?”

“It’s not a good idea to keep these people waiting.”

“What people? Why do they want to see me?”

“They’ll tell you when they see you, Ms. Lane.”

“Okay. Since you know my name, how about you tell me yours?”

The girl glanced back again, this time with a sly grin on her face. “Call me Ishmael.”

“Very funny. What’s your real name, Ishmael?”

The girl stopped, licked the fingers of her right hand, and looked both ways at a T-intersection of alleys, then pulled Lois to the left. “You can call me Jane.”

“Okay, Jane. What’s your real name?”

The girl stopped so abruptly that Lois walked into her. “Don’t you ever stop asking questions?”

“Don’t you get tired of dodging them?”

The girl glared for a moment, then chuckled. “Point for Lane. Jane now serving, love-fifteen.”

They started off again with a yank on Lois’ wrist. “Are we there yet?”

“We’ll be there when we—”

Lois suddenly found herself slammed against a stone wall with one of Jane’s surprisingly powerful hands over her mouth. The girl put her lips against Lois’ ear and softly whispered, “If you want to live, make no sound.”

Jane slowly took her hand away. Lois tried to breathe silently as she focused on ignoring the sudden pains she felt from the rough wall and the scrapes on her arm. They seemed to be pressed into a small concave opening in the wall, something like an outdoor alcove. Lois hoped it was a good hiding place. Jane, who seemed to be someone who could deal with most anything, was obviously not happy about the possibility of being found by whoever was out there in the gloom.

Lois strained to hear something, anything, but all she picked up was something that sounded like the scrape of a shoe and a muttered phrase that might have been French and might have been almost anything else. This part of the city struck her as being unnaturally silent.

Lois counted seven of the quietest breaths she’d ever taken before Jane silently moved around her and leaned her head into the alley. Jane tilted her head as if listening, then lifted her face as if smelling the air around her.

Then she moved into the alley and grabbed Lois’ elbow and wrist. “Come on,” she whispered. “I think they’re gone.”

Lois considered asking who “they” were and why Jane didn’t want “them” to find the two women, but she didn’t. Right then, the most important thing in her mind was to get to wherever Jane was taking her. Clark could more easily find her if she wasn’t moving. And there would be more people there.

That, of course, assumed that Jane was taking her to see actual people.

Clark could feel Lois not far away, but he was having trouble getting a directional fix on her. Either she was moving in something other than a straight line or their mental link was useless as a homing beacon. He considered flying over the

buildings until he found her, but he didn’t want to risk their identities as long as she didn’t seem to be in immediate danger.

He turned yet another corner and was startled to see two men spin around to face him. They were on opposite sides of the small alley, and they didn’t seem to be happy to see him.

<We have been following this fool!> said the younger man in machine-gun French. <We have lost the others because of him!>

<Take care, Andre,> said the other. <You know our standing instructions.>

Clark lifted his hands. “Hey, guys, sorry to bother you. I’m just looking for a friend.”

The younger man answered in clear, unaccented English.

“And you think your friend is here?”

“I don’t know. I must have gotten turned around. Can you give me directions back to Canal Street?”

The older man said, “Of course. Turn right on the next street and travel seven blocks—”

<Roger! He has seen us! You know what we must do!>

<No, Andre. Let him go.>

<No! He is mine!>

Suddenly Andre stood behind Clark. “You are in the wrong place at the wrong time, my unfortunate friend.”

There was no way a normal human could move that quickly. Even Clark had been taken by surprise. If they weren’t Kryptonian – and he didn’t think they were – they might be the werewolves he hadn’t wanted to believe existed.

Clark turned slowly. “Look, if you want me to leave, just say so and I’ll leave.”

Andre smiled lopsidedly and purred, “You should have left before you got here.”

Then he swung an open-handed roundhouse slap at Clark’s head.

Clark ducked and slid to his right. “I didn’t come here to fight you, mister.”

Andre’s smile widened. “Perhaps not. But we do not always get what we want, now, do we?”

The older man appeared between them, facing his companion. “Andre! Stop this at once before it is too late!”

“It is already too late!”

Andre shoved Roger to one side and leaped at Clark, who grabbed him by both wrists and fell back into an overhead leg throw. Andre skidded up against a wall and scrambled to his feet. <Ha!> he shouted in French. <This one thinks he can fight!>

Roger grabbed Clark around the chest from behind and pinned his arms against his sides. As Andre raised a fist – no, a paw – to strike, Clark jammed his elbow into Roger’s belly, then shoved them both backwards to avoid Andre’s swing. Then Clark swung his fist up and back into Roger’s head. The man went limp and fell in a heap.

Andre jumped again and Clark swung an uppercut into the man’s face. He felt bones crunch in his target’s jaw as the suddenly furry man awkwardly crashed into Clark and slid formlessly to the ground.

Clark skittered several steps back and looked at his assailants. They both appeared to be normal humans once again, but for a few moments during the fight both of them had changed into something different, something almost canine. And even though the older man had been reluctant to fight, he hadn’t hesitated to grab Clark from the rear once his companion had attacked.

Cautiously, he bent down to check both men. They seemed to be breathing normally, and a quick x-ray vision check of Andre’s jaw showed a clean break which was already healing itself even as Clark watched. It was almost frightening to see the broken bone knit itself back together again.

If these men weren’t werewolves, he’d hate to run into the real thing. A normal human might not have survived that blow, and Clark breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn’t killed either of them.

He also made a mental note to apologize to Perry when he saw the editor again.

He doubted that they would listen to reason once they regained consciousness, so he resumed his course toward the river – and, hopefully, toward his wife.

Chapter Three

Jane – or whatever her name was – stopped in front of what looked like an abandoned warehouse and gently pushed Lois to the door, then knocked in a pattern Lois didn't recognize. "I assume we're here," said Lois.

"Yes," Jane replied. "And now you'll see what you need to see." The young woman looked directly into Lois' eyes. "I promise you, I won't let them hurt you. I tell you this as under the yew. Will you believe me?"

"Under the yew? What does that mean?"

"For us, the yew tree is sacred, and any vow spoken under the yew is a binding oath. Violating it doesn't mean shame or a slap on the wrist or even a shunning. It means death."

"That's – intense." Lois frowned. "It's a little late in the game to ask me to trust you. I really don't have any choice but to play along with whatever game you're running."

Jane dropped her gaze as if caught with her hand – or paw, in this case – in the cookie jar. Then the opportunity for conversation ended as the door opened inward and a short young man leaned out.

"It's about time you got back—" he broke off his comment and stared at Lois.

"This is Lois Lane, a reporter from the Daily Planet in Metropolis," said Jane. "Ms. Lane, this little cutie answers to Gawain." Jane ruffled his hair. "I like to call him Queequeg."

"Cut it out, Jane!"

Lois lifted an eyebrow. "You're Ishmael, he's Queequeg, and I suppose this building is the Pequod?"

Jane's eyes seemed to see something far away. "I hope not. Moby Dick sank that ship and all the small boats it launched, remember? And only Ishmael lived to tell the tale."

"Does that mean that you think there's something threatening you here? Or are you talking about some other time and place?"

Jane tilted her head to one side and almost smiled. "My, but you are perceptive, aren't you? Everything we've heard about you appears to be true."

The young man opened the door wider and stepped back out of the way. "Can we at least have this conversation inside? It's not safe out tonight."

Jane gestured for Lois to step inside. As she did, Gawain stiffened. "Jane! She's bleeding! You can't take her to Arthur like that!"

"What? Where am I bleeding?"

Jane stopped and closed the door, then sniffed the air near Lois. "Oh, wow, I'm sorry. I guess I ran your arm into that wall a little too hard."

Lois reflexively reached for her purse, then remembered that she'd left it on the table at the café. "I don't have anything to clean myself up. Now what?"

Jane frowned, then turned to the young man. "You go tell Artie we're here and that Ms. Lane has an open scrape on her arm and they'd better behave themselves."

"What? I can't leave my post! And I sure can't tell them what to do!"

"You can deliver a message." Jane took him by the shoulders and shoved him along the hallway. "I'll watch the door until you get back. Now get going."

Jane watched the youth leave, then turned to a smaller door and opened it. Inside, Lois could see a toilet and a sink, neither of which was anywhere near new. But they were clean, which surprised her, and she noted the shelves beyond the toilet which

held folded hand towels and soap.

Jane motioned to Lois to come closer. "Let's see if we can clean that up a bit."

Lois looked around at the hall. "I hope you have some antibiotic ointment."

Jane grinned. "Sorry. We don't need it. But the soap will help, and I have a roll of gauze that should cover it." The taller woman turned on the water, then added, "You won't get blood poisoning between now and the time you get back to your hotel room."

Lois hesitated for a moment, then stuck out her arm and allowed Jane to clean it. The young woman worked quickly and efficiently, and Lois took the time to examine her more closely.

She stood several inches taller than Lois and had wider shoulders and hips. But the young woman didn't appear at all fat. Her jeans and t-shirt covered a trim frame, and the open long-sleeved shirt she wore over the t-shirt gave her an air of sloppiness that Lois had decided was just a cover, a way to divert attention from herself. Her tennis shoes were worn but sturdy, and she'd moved with both grace and restrained power on the short journey to the warehouse.

Jane finished wrapping the gauze around Lois' forearm as Gawain came stalking back. He stopped in front of Jane with balled fists at his sides. "You lied to me."

Jane pressed down the last piece of tape on the gauze and began putting away the first-aid supplies. "Sorry, no."

"You told me Arthur sent you out to find her!"

Jane looked at him like Lois used to look at Jimmy Olsen and said, "No, I said that Arthur wanted to talk to her."

"You let me believe you were just going to find out if she was here in the city!"

Jane shook her head. "I was just taking the initiative, Henry."

"Stop that!" the boy cried. "My name is Gawain!"

"Okay, fine, your name is Gawain. I suppose Artie wants to see us now?"

Henry, aka Queequeg, aka Gawain, gritted his teeth and took a deep breath, then blew it out slowly. "One of these days, Jane, you're going to go too far. And I hope I'm there to watch the fur fly."

Lois couldn't tell if the two of them were close friends who were kidding each other, if they truly hated each other, or if it was something in between, but she wasn't unhappy when Jane took her uninjured arm and guided her down the hallway and away from the anxious and irritated young man.

When they were well out of earshot of the door, Jane said, "Let me fill you in on what's going to happen. You're going to meet Arthur, the self-styled ruler of our band. He'll probably have Gwen beside him. Don't antagonize her. She's not in a good place right now."

Lois nodded, wondering what Jane meant. "Don't tick off Gwen. Got it. What else?"

"There'll be several more there, but unless you start a fight with one of them – and I think you're way too smart to do that – the ones you'll have to pay attention to are Arthur and Gwen. They'll decide what happens next."

Lois stopped short. "What do you mean? What are they going to decide?"

Jane rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Sorry, that sounded way more melodramatic than it should have. They won't hurt you. I promised I wouldn't let them hurt you and I meant it. They're scared right now and they think you're here to hunt them down."

"What? Hunt them down? Blast it, Jane, I'm a reporter, not a big-game hunter! What do you—"

"Shh! Keep your voice low and don't get excited. It stirs up the youngsters." Jane tugged on Lois' arm again. "Come on. We can't stay here."

"Wait a minute! You said they were scared? Of me? I'm no threat to them!"

“Assuming that’s true, they don’t know that. Your reputation as an investigator precedes you, and that makes you way more dangerous to us than you might think.”

Lois closed her mouth and followed Jane closely. After about a dozen steps, the hallway opened onto a foyer with stairs climbing upwards and double French doors on the far wall. Jane opened the doors and stepped through, then wiggled her fingers at Lois to follow.

Lois glanced around and saw a two-story room stuffed with books, some of which looked very old at first glance. It was, or had been at one time, a library for a wealthy person or family. Two roll-top desks were pushed back-to-back in the middle of the room, and there were three – no, four overstuffed chairs arranged to face the pair of desks. Each chair was backed by a faded print on the wall. Even with all that furniture, the room was large enough to hold a stand-up meeting of the entire Planet day shift reporting team.

Two of the chairs were occupied.

The intensity in the room was at odds with the apparently relaxed attitude of the five people who either rose from the chairs or turned to face Lois and Jane as the latter closed the doors behind them. Lois looked around and saw no hint of welcome in their faces.

I’m in real trouble here, thought Lois.

After a long moment, the tallest man in the group stepped closer and looked her over as if deciding whether or not to offer a bid at auction. The woman with shoulders wider than Jane’s crossed her arms and glared at Lois as if issuing a challenge.

Jane finally broke the silence. “Artie, Gwen, this is Lois Lane. You wanted to talk to her, right?”

Another man, one who reminded Lois of a younger and even oilier Claude, said, “Thank you, Jane. You may go now.”

Then Jane crossed her arms and slid closer to Lois. “No way, Lance. This woman is under my protection. I gave her my word that she’d be safe.”

Lance snorted. “How droll! Our little Jane is playing guardian to a human!”

The tall man came back into Lois’ line of vision. “Is this true, Jane? Have you offered her your protection?”

“That’s what I said, Artie. My word as under the yew. No one touches her.”

“Of course,” Lance said, “that assumes that you survive this session.”

Both Arthur and the unnamed woman with big shoulders spun as if on gimbals and leaned toward Lance. The woman snapped, “If Jane has offered this woman her protection, Lancelot, then we shall honor it!”

Lance seemed to be disconcerted by the display in front of him. “Of course, my dear Guinevere,” he said as he backed up with his hands open and held out from his sides. “I assure you, I meant no offence.”

Lois frowned. She had Gawain, Arthur, Lancelot, and now Guinevere. Were these people role-playing using characters from Camelot? Were they just using the names or were they playing the characters true to the legends? And if so, were they really sane?

Then another question occurred to her. The scene she’d just witnessed reminded her of a nature documentary she’d seen some years ago on pack behavior among wolves. Sometimes, the show’s narrator had said, a younger male would challenge the alpha male for dominance. Unless the alpha responded firmly and the challenger backed down, they’d end up fighting.

And if the challenger did back down, he’d often challenge the alpha again, later on. To Lois, it looked as if it wouldn’t be long before Lance challenged Arthur once again.

No one else spoke for a moment, then Arthur turned to Lois. “I can see how this episode tonight might have upset you, Miss Lane. Please do not be alarmed. We will honor Jane’s guarantee of

protection without reservation or exception.”

Guinevere stepped forward. “Would you like to sit down? I assume that you are thirsty. We have some very nice wine, or perhaps you’d prefer something non-alcoholic?”

Lois hesitated, then said, “Thanks. But what I’d really like to do right now is find the ladies’ room.”

A wave of soft laughter floated through the room, and a significant measure of tension dissipated. Jane tapped Lois on the shoulder. “I’ll take you. Wouldn’t want you to get lost.”

They slipped out of the French doors and turned down a hall beside the staircase. Lois replayed the moment in her mind and realized that all of the people in the room had laughed except for Lancelot.

Lois would keep an eye on him, for all the good it would do her.

Clark touched down lightly on the roof and frowned. Now that he’d found Lois, how could he get her out of the house without compromising his secret identity? He knew that Lois knew that he’d never allow her to come to harm, secret or no secret, but they had often discussed such a predicament, and they had agreed that he wouldn’t reveal himself to be Superman unless she was in immediate danger and he had no other reasonable choice.

Now he wasn’t sure what to do. It seemed that the tall woman who’d escorted Lois into the house had guaranteed her safety, and that the man who seemed to be in charge had agreed to honor the guarantee, but just how binding was that promise?

As Lois and Jane left the room, one of the men turned and began speaking in classical French. *<I do not approve of this course of action, Arthur,> he said. <This will only lead to difficulty for us all.>*

An imperious blonde woman snapped back in the same language, *<Have a care, Lancelot! Arthur rules this house. You are here on his sufferance – which sufferance may be revoked at any moment.>*

<My dear Guinevere, I would never allow myself to suffer Arthur’s displeasure. My only thought is for the safety of this house and those within.>

Guinevere’s lips parted and she actually growled at Lancelot. Arthur stepped forward and touched her elbow. *<Thank you for your support, my love, but Lancelot must be allowed to speak freely. His point of view must be respected, if only to make us consider alternatives.>*

Lancelot smiled smugly. Guinevere straightened and gritted her teeth for a moment, then said, *<Arthur, you know he wants your position. He wants to rule this house.>*

Arthur smiled. *<Of course I know. I also know that he wants you, my dear, and that there is a part of you which would welcome such a joining.>*

She spun so quickly Clark thought he’d blanked out for a few microseconds. *<Arthur! Surely you don’t believe that I would—>*

<No, no, of course not. I am only observing and commenting. Had you and he actually coupled, one or both of you would bear the scars for quite some time. You might even have been crippled by the experience.> He smiled thinly. *<Or Lancelot might now be crippled. One cannot be certain.>*

The woman stared at Arthur long enough for Clark to think that she might attack him, but she twirled away and stalked to the far side of the room where another woman leaned in and whispered something Clark couldn’t catch. Arthur watched her go, then ambled to the other side of the room and poured a glass of liquid from an unmarked bottle.

Lancelot moved cautiously towards Arthur, but stopped about two steps away. *<It seems that not all is well in the royal suite, my liege lord.>*

<Do not force me to make an example of you, Lancelot. Shall I prepare for you a drink?>

Clark shook his head and wondered if these people lived on the edge of open conflict all the time or if the current situation – whatever it was – had shifted the group dynamic.

He tuned in again to hear Lancelot's reply. *<Not necessary, thank you. Neither the example nor the drink.>*

Arthur lifted his glass as if examining it. *<Do you not trust me?>*

Lancelot smiled thinly. *<Would you freely accept a beverage from my hand?>*

Arthur sipped at his drink. *<Probably not. But then I am not a sneaky, underhanded murderer of innocent old women.>*

The smaller man's eyes narrowed and his smile vanished. *<I did not kill that woman at the levee, Arthur. I had nothing to do with it. I do not know who did it, although I suspect it was the Patriarch.>*

<The Patriarch is not in New Orleans.>

<I believe that he is.>

<None of us have seen him. Have you?>

<No. But—>

<Have you any hard evidence of his presence?>

<A dismembered body on the levee. That is his style, his signature method of killing for revenge.>

<It could be a – how is it said here – the cat which copies another?>

Lancelot switched back to colloquial English. "Copycat. Yeah, it could be a copycat killer, but I don't think so. Do you know who investigated that killing?"

"The county coroner was on the scene that morning," replied Arthur, also in English. "He's competent but a bit shallow."

"The detective was Robert Gautreaux."

Arthur's eyes widened. "What?"

"I thought that would get your attention. He was on the scene with the competent but shallow coroner, who went to our friend Robert's house for a long lunch that day. Then Robert made some calls, one of which was long distance to Metropolis. And do you know who lives in Metropolis?"

"That's enough—"

"Another old friend, Perry White, who just happens to be the employer of our lovely guest tonight. Interesting, isn't it?"

Arthur smashed his glass onto the bar where it shattered loudly. The other people in the room snapped their attention in his direction, and Guinevere slowly walked across the room toward him.

"Arthur? What's wrong? What happened?"

Before Arthur could respond, Jane opened the door and led Lois back into the room. Jane looked toward Arthur and stopped in her tracks. Lois stepped around her and glanced around.

Clark dug his hands into the thick shingles under his feet and began pulling up enough of them for him to enter. It was time for him to make some kind of appearance – maybe a truly dynamic impression –

A sudden hiss made him stop.

Then he relaxed a little. It was only a cat, creeping along the roof silently, as only cats can do.

A smile touched his lips as the solution to his quandary bloomed in his mind. That was how he needed to appear – suddenly and silently, as if on cat's feet.

Lois all but felt the difference in pressure in the room. Something had happened during the time she'd been in the bathroom, and it wasn't good. Guinevere lowered her head, then lifted it slightly and glared at Lois from just under her eyebrows. The woman's hands flexed twice as if she were stretching her claws.

Arthur stood beside a bar, his eyes fixed on the shattered remains of a broken glass.

Lancelot stood near Arthur but farther away from Lois'

position, with something like a smile playing on his face.

Jane lifted her hand. "I don't know what just happened, but I have given my word. I will not allow harm to come to Lois Lane tonight."

"Neither will I."

Every head snapped around to stare at Clark, who leaned against the door frame in the far wall of the room. His face wore a half-smile and his hair was ruffled.

And he wasn't wearing his glasses.

Lancelot took a quick step in his direction, but Clark lifted his index finger and wagged it at the smaller man.

"Uh-uh, pal. I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"No?" snarled Lance. "And why not?"

Clark shrugged. "Well, I guess you should ask Andre and Roger that question."

Every jaw but Lois' dropped open. Jane recovered first and demanded, "How do you know those names?"

"They tried to stop me in an alley a little while ago." Clark gave him a bland smile. "I think they're probably awake by now, though."

Guinevere put her hands on her hips. "Do you mean to tell us that you defeated both of them? A human, alone and unaided?"

<I did not start the fight,> Clark replied in flawless French, *<but they gave me no choice.>*

<Liar!> shouted Lancelot. *<You could not best the two of them at once!>*

"You want some, loudmouth?" Clark said in English. "Come at me and see what happens."

Lois heard Arthur inhale, but before the man could speak, Lancelot had launched himself at Clark.

And before anyone else could intervene, Clark had the man face-down on the hardwood floor, his right hand wrenched up between his shoulder blades.

"Try to change and I'll snap this arm," Clark bit out.

Lance stopped struggling and tapped the floor three times with his free hand. When Clark didn't release him, he said, "I thought you would – ow! – you would understand that gesture. I submit!"

Clark looked at Arthur. "Are you in charge here?"

Arthur crossed his arms and smiled. "I often delude myself that I am, yes."

"Is he going to jump me again if I let him go?"

Arthur caught Lance's eyes with his and stared for a long moment. Then he said, "No, he is through fighting for now. Aren't you, Lancelot?"

"Yes! I'm through fighting! Now please release me!"

Clark let go of his opponent's wrist and stepped away. Lancelot slowly crawled to his feet as he flexed his arm and massaged his shoulder. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't make me regret it."

Guinevere opened her hands and stepped closer to Clark, then inhaled deeply through her nose. After a long moment, she tilted her head to one side and said, "I do not recognize him, Arthur, but I suspect he is far more than he appears to be."

Clark grinned. "Give the lady a cigar."

"I do not smoke, *monsieur*."

"Then allow me to clarify myself. For the next few days, the part of Clark Kent—" he spun into a maelstrom of red and blue before stopping with his cape swirling around his legs "—will be played by Superman."

Lois realized she was gaping at him and closed her mouth with an audible snap. She'd give him a piece of her mind later on for revealing his secret identity to these whackos.

Then she realized – he hadn't. All he'd said was that Superman was disguising himself as Clark Kent for the next few days. It was an inspired move, too, one sure to give them an automatic defense against these werewolves.

And—

The doubts in her mind were gone, she realized. The evidence was in. She was convinced. These people really were werewolves. “Okay, people,” Lois called out, “or whatever you call yourselves, listen up. Superman and I came here to investigate some rumors about werewolves in New Orleans. My husband is in a safe place where you can’t get to him. If anyone has any ideas about hurting me, you’ll have to go through Superman to do it. And I don’t recommend that course of action.”

Arthur turned to her and crossed his arms. “Very well, Ms. Lane, I accept your statements at face value for the moment, especially since I have no recourse. What is it that you wish to discover?”

“Who killed Evelyn Carstairs?”

“We do not know, Ms. Lane. Lancelot suspects that the Patriarch is responsible, but I do not believe that he is even in the city.”

Lois frowned. “Who’s the Patriarch? You say that like it’s a special title of some kind.”

A fourth member of the group, a broad-shouldered older man, stepped forward. “The Patriarch, he be leader of the Naturals. They don’t like us much at all. Think we in their way.”

Superman shook his head. “We don’t know who or what you’re talking about, sir. Can you give us more detail?”

The man smiled thinly and nodded. “I am Alphonse Thibodeaux, pronounced tee-bo-do, like in the Hank Williams song, and I was born here in N’Awlins in eighteen-sixty-nine.”

“That’s enough!” snapped Arthur.

Thibodeaux’s soft Cajun accent turned thick and hard. “It ain’t near enough if you want these folk to help us! If you don’t tell them I will!”

The two men glared at each other for several long breaths. Lois glanced at Superman, who was watching the tableau before him without moving anything but his eyes. She glanced at Jane, who had pulled her lips back and clenched one fist – one which looked quite a bit hairier than it had a few minutes before. And Lancelot had stopped smiling. In fact, he looked almost alarmed, but by what, Lois couldn’t tell.

Finally Arthur exhaled sharply and straightened. “Very well, Alphonse. You may relate your tale, but know that if it rebounds to our harm, you will pay the price.”

“I been payin’ my own way for a long time now, Arthur.” The older man turned to face Lois. “Young lady, I will tell you my tale. Hope you don’t scare easy.”

Lois glanced around the room, then offered Alphonse a wan smile. “I don’t – at least, I didn’t think I did before I came here tonight.”

Thibodeaux chuckled. “That be a right smart answer. You just listen up, girl-child, and hear what I gonna told you.”

Chapter Four

Alphonse Thibodeaux walked to the bar and poured himself a snifter of brandy. “Got to keep my mouth wet, else I might not talk so clear.”

“Or else you’ll be too drunk to speak clearly,” grumbled Lancelot.

Thibodeaux ignored him. “Ms. Lane, here be how it happen. It was early one morning when I was forty-two years old, ‘bout nine or eight year after the War Between the States, me near wore out before my time for workin’ so hard and eatin’ so poor, I found a girl beside a bayou near my home. I lived in an old plantation house south of the city then, and it was *magnifique*. That be to say ‘magnificent’ in American.”

Lois nodded. “I know a few French words, sir.”

“Maybe so, but us Cajuns don’t always talk like the French you Yankee folk learn about in school. Never you mind ‘bout that. That house was old but solid, even if the land around it mostly swamp. Not there no more, got bought out by developers. I was

sad when they tear it down for a parking lot. Anyhow, I find this young woman, her clothes all wet and torn, and she bleeding from a jagged cut on her shoulder.”

He sipped his drink. “This some good brandy, Arthur. Anyway, I took that young woman into my house and put her in a bed upstairs. She be delirious, talking ‘bout how some dog or wolf gonna find her and kill her. Me and the maid took turns sittin’ with her, tendin’ her shoulder and givin’ her a little food and cool water, maybe a little wine sometimes. She don’t die, and her shoulder seem to heal, and she don’t get worse. But she don’t get better, either, for almost a month, like she been hurt inside her head.”

He turned and slowly walked across the room to stand beside the older woman. “One night, just before the moon turn full, the maid she come running outta that room like the Devil hisself been chasin’ her. She scream somethin’ ‘bout a big wolf at the window, never mind they been in a room on the second floor what got no balcony or outside steps. And she just about pass out when she grab me at the bottom of the stairs.

“I take hold of a double-barrel shotgun, ‘cause no matter what goin’ on up there I gonna protect my home and all who be in it. I run up the stairs and bust through that door and I see this girl kneeling on the covers and laughing, not one stitch of clothes on her, her arms around the neck of the biggest wolf I ever heard of, and Cajuns can lie ‘bout such things like nobody else.”

He swirled his brandy and looked down into the glass. “I lift my shotgun and pull the trigger and that big wolf spun quick as a house cat and hit the floor, but I done shot him and made him bleed. Made him bleed bad. But before I can shoot the other barrel into him, that girl come flyin’ at me and bite me on the hand.”

Alphonse held up his scarred left hand for Lois and Superman to see, then lowered it. “I hit that girl in the head with the barrel ‘cause she don’t let go of me no matter what I say. She hit the floor at my feet with her head busted in, dead. While I was fightin’ her off, that big wolf, he lunge at me and bite me just above the knee and I shoot him in the head with the other shell. I break that shotgun and put in two fresh shells, but the wolf, he already dead too.” He shook his head. “I still be real sorry ‘bout that girl. She didn’t need to die like that. Maybe I coulda helped her, if only I knowed about what she was startin’ to be.”

Lois cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, Mr. Thibodeaux, but I don’t understand what you mean. What was she – starting to be?”

He lifted his eyes to her and said, “A werewolf, Ms. Lane. One of the Turned.”

Arthur crossed his arms and softly said, “Please, Alphonse. Just tell the story without excess drama.”

“But I don’t get the chance to tell it to somebody what ain’t heard it already too often, Arthur. Let me tell it my way.”

Arthur gave him an irritatingly superior smile and spread his hands in a ‘go ahead’ gesture. Thibodeaux nodded back and continued. “As I was sayin’, Madame Lane, Monsieur Superman, this girl and this wolf both be dead in my upstairs guest room, and me sittin’ on the floor leanin’ against the wall with my hand half-crushed and bleedin’ bad and a bad wolf bite on my leg. My maid – her name was Mimsy – she finally come upstairs to see if anybody left alive. She found me and bandaged my hand and my leg, and with her husband Jeremiah they took that dead girl and dead wolf out back and burned the bodies in a deep pit, then fill up the pit with dirt. I took to my bed, sick with fever.

“Two weeks later, that young man with the pretty blond hair what call himself Arthur now come to my front door. That day, he call himself Doctor Montrose. Mimsy let him in and brought him up to me, and when she left he tell me I got bit by a werewolf and now I gonna be one too.”

He paused both for dramatic effect and to gauge his audience. The rest of the company knew his story generally, but only Arthur had known the details. He hoped someone besides their guests would ask the obvious question.

Gwendolyn did not disappoint him. “Did you believe him, Alphonse?”

“Not at first, no, I don’t believe. But he show me how he change from man to wolf and back again, right there in my bedroom. I thought I be crazy with fever from the bite on my hand, but he convince me that my hand gonna be okay. And it was – sort of.” He lifted it again and flexed it as if testing it. “I can use that hand better now than I could before I find that poor unfortunate girl, but I still got that scar where she sink her teeth in. I think maybe it was ‘cause she not all the way turned yet, and ‘cause I got turned at the same time.”

Alphonse downed the remainder of his drink. “And that be the tale of how I come to be what I am now.” Then he looked straight at Lancelot. “I never hear about you, young Lancelot, how you be turned. You not a Natural, eh? So when you be turned?”

Lancelot furrowed his eyebrows and leaned in Alphonse’s direction, but Arthur stepped forward and smiled. “And *Monsieur* Thibodeaux has been a faithful member of our little family ever since then. We have hunted together, defended the group together, and kept our true natures hidden from human society since then.”

Lois looked from one man to the other, a puzzled expression on her face. “I don’t understand. If you’re trying to stay hidden, why did this woman on the bayou get killed? Who killed her? And who’s the Patriarch?”

Arthur opened his mouth, but Alphonse said, “Let me tell this part also, please.” The blond man nodded and took a step back. “They some werewolves what get born from other werewolves. They call themselves the Pure-Born or the Pureblood, or sometimes the Naturals, and they hate us, call us pretenders and fakes and craven and worse. But mostly they call us Turned Ones ‘cause we start out life as human. The Pure-Born ain’t never been human, got no idea what it’s like to be human, and mostly they think themselves better than human. Think humans be their natural prey.”

Lois’ eyes had gotten larger as he spoke. “You mean,” she almost stammered, “that there are werewolves in New Orleans who feed on humans?”

“Not all the time, Ms. Lane,” answered Guinevere. “This particular pack travels like a band of gypsies, hunting in Canada or the Pacific Northwest or the huge cities on the East Coast. Sometimes they visit Mexico or Central America. I do not doubt that at least some of the Bigfoot sightings in Oregon or stories of Chupacabra in Mexico are actually sightings of the Pureblood, laughing up their fur-filled sleeves at the fools they hunt and devour. This group has not been seen in south Louisiana for almost three decades.”

Alphonse took up the tale again. “Their leader name himself the Patriarch. He be a cruel one with no compassion for anyone or anything. I fought him once, and if Arthur and Lancelot don’t be there to help me, he kill me.”

Superman spoke up for the first time. “So let me get this straight. Natural-born werewolves can have baby werewolves, or any of you can bite a human and turn him or her into a werewolf, right?”

“Not quite,” said Arthur. “Only the Pureblood can Turn someone. Our bites and scratches only cause normal wounds, although we don’t carry the bacteria a normal wolf does. Any wounds we inflict usually heal cleanly.” He looked Superman in the eye and added, “And we do not kill humans without the most compelling reasons.”

“What about feeding?”

“We do not feed on humans, Superman. We hunt for fresh meat when we can get it, but our prey is deer and rabbit and such. It is only the Patriarch’s pack and a few others like them who engage in such abominations.” He sighed. “You know, Alphonse, you have all but convinced me that this old woman’s murder might indeed be the work of the Patriarch. I can adduce no other logical

explanation.”

“Told you.”

“Never mind that!” blurted Lois. “What about that young man the police found with his head almost twisted off?”

The blonde woman spoke for the first time. “I assume you have seen most of the werewolf movies of the last century, Ms. Lane? Almost all the information in them is false. We do not become slaving, ravenous beasts when we change, and we are not compelled to change at the full moon except for the first full moon after being bitten. After the first time, the change is voluntary, although the compulsion to succumb grows stronger the longer we resist it. We can live for three to five hundred years after being turned, assuming we experience a natural death.” She smiled without humor. “Such an event is vanishingly rare.”

Jane cut in. “I’ve heard rumors that the Patriarch can change into that half-wolf half-human beast form.”

“Rumors only with no proof, Jane, and you know this. It is a legend at best, a story to frighten young pups at worst. But please allow me to continue.” The older woman stopped and walked to the bar, then poured a drink and tossed it back as if it were cool water. “If we die in our full canine forms, Ms. Lane, we do not revert to human. Both the Pureblood and the Turned heal from non-fatal injuries quite quickly and completely. Alphonse is the only one of us who bears a scar on his body from an injury. Though we are stronger and faster than a normal human, as I said, we do not transform into huge, vicious, absurdly muscular bipedal beasts with little to no self-control.” She put the glass down, then crossed her arms over her chest and looked away, then back at Lois. “If the Patriarch is indeed here, however, that murder was his work. As Lancelot has said, it fits his method of execution.”

Alphonse saw Madame Lane’s eyes change slightly. He followed her line of sight and noticed that Jane had turned her head and looked down. He wondered what Jane knew that would make what Teresa had just said untrue.

The out-of-state reporter refocused her attention on the bitter blonde. “But who was he? The male victim, I mean.”

The other blonde woman answered. “Probably one of the humans who learned about the Patriarch’s pack and, instead of running away, decided that he wanted to be a part of the group. Some criminal gangs have begun as human slaves to werewolf packs and then broken away. By that time, the gangs are too well known to be dealt with permanently, and the pack will slay one or two gang members to prove their dominance, then move on to redder pastures.”

“And you are?” Lois demanded.

The woman straightened and nodded regally. “My apologies for not presenting myself. My name is Teresa Wilding. I am not from Louisiana, and I’m sure you haven’t any humorous comments concerning my last name which I have not already heard too many times.”

“Yeah, probably not,” breathed Lois. “Uh, wait. Do you guys have human groupies too?”

Arthur shook his head. “No. I have no personal knowledge of any group of Turned Ones who keep human – ah, ‘groupies,’ as you term them. We prefer to remain invisible if at all possible.”

Alphonse watched the man and woman absorb the information they’d been given. The woman’s face slowly morphed from astonishment to guarded acceptance, while the Man of Steel’s expression remained a granite mask, with only a thinning of his eyes to hint at his thoughts.

After nearly half a minute of waiting and thinking, Superman stepped closer to the woman reporter and said, “So all of you are Turned, right? None of you are born werewolves?”

Silence descended as if a net had been dropped on them. Alphonse deliberately kept his eyes on Superman, whose face grew darker as the moments passed.

Finally Jane said, “No. I’m a Pureblood.”

Superman turned to her and nodded. “I thought so. Your scent is slightly different.”

Jane glared at him. “Are you telling me that I stink?” she snapped.

“Not at all. Your scent is different from the rest, like two varieties of the same perfume are different. All of you have slightly different individual scents, but yours has a – a hint of forest musk, for want of a better term – that the others lack. I’m not sure a normal human could tell the difference.”

She relaxed and put her hands in her back pockets. “Okay. Sorry for reacting like that. I tend to get those kinds of insults from both sides. You know, ‘you stink of the Turned’ or ‘you smell so superior,’ that kind of thing.”

“Really? Then it might be that you’re all more human than you might like to believe.” Superman turned to Arthur. “What happens now? Are you going to let Ms. Lane go free, or are you planning to fight me for her?”

Arthur gave him a Luthor smile, all oil and slime. “I assure you, sir, that we never intended harm to Ms. Lane. In fact, I did not even intend that she meet us tonight. Our lovely Jane accomplished that feat on her own initiative.”

Superman nodded. “So, she’s free to go?”

“Of course. Do you require a guide to return her to her hotel?”

“I can find it.” He gestured to the reporter and followed her to the door she’d used earlier in the evening.

Jane lifted a hand. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

Superman stopped. “I don’t promise to answer it, but, yes.”

“When you did that spin thing earlier, where did your other clothes go?”

“A quantum reality separate from this one that I can access by moving at relativistic speed.”

Jane’s eyes grew wide – and, surprisingly, so did Lois Lane’s eyes. “You’re kidding!” blurted Jane.

“Superman does not kid.” He reached past the reporter and opened the door. “You might pass that on to the others of your kind.”

Jane snorted. “The other Purebloods don’t like me very much.”

“I meant anyone else in your – social group – who might want to challenge me. I have no intention of intruding on your social structure just to see what happens, but I won’t allow anyone to murder wantonly. And I also have no intention of allowing any werewolf to intimidate me or harm Ms. Lane.” His gaze swept the room. “Not any werewolf, regardless of his or her origin. Everyone clear on that concept?”

Everyone but Lancelot nodded or murmured assent.

Superman’s glare focused on Lancelot as he languidly poured another glass of brandy.

The glass never made it to his lips. It burst into shards as he held it.

“Ow!” Lancelot shook his hand and blew on it. “That hurt!”

“You hurt my feelings by not paying enough attention to me.” The Man of Steel crossed his arms and glared at the haughty werewolf. “I advise you not to make that mistake again.”

Lancelot might have lunged at the blue-clad man a second time had Arthur not glided between them. “He understands fully, Superman. Any future contact between you or Ms. Lane and our pack will be completely peaceful on our part.”

“Good.” With that, the hero swept out of the room, leading Lois Lane along the corridor.

Alphonse refilled his glass and drained his drink as Teresa examined Lancelot’s hand. “It’s not burned,” she announced, “just red with a bare hint of blisters. You’ll be fine before tomorrow. You’ve hurt yourself worse while cooking.”

“It is the principle of the thing, my dear,” he ground out. “The nerve of that man, scalding me in that manner!”

She dropped his hand and leaned back. “It was less damaging

than him slapping you across the room, I think. Given what I’ve heard of his strength and what I saw him do to you just now, I doubt that any of us could best him in a fight. For that matter, all of us together might not be able to defeat him.”

Arthur bent to examine one of the larger fragments of Lancelot’s glass. “He would not even have to touch you to defeat you, if this is any indication.”

“I will not tolerate being treated in such a callous and cavalier manner!” Lancelot snarled back.

Arthur’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I believe that Superman will treat each of us, and all of us, however he wishes, Lancelot.”

“I wasn’t speaking of him,” replied the other.

Arthur nodded slowly. “I see. Thank you for your candor, Lancelot. May I suggest that you be more polite to physically superior beings in the near future?”

Lancelot glared at Arthur for a long breath, then spun on his heel and stalked from the room.

Alphonse smiled to himself. Superman surely hadn’t come to the Crescent City to roil the waters in their little pack, but that was what he had done. But then, maybe it was time to stir the soup a bit. The pack had gotten a bit stale under Arthur’s leadership, and while Lancelot was probably not a good choice as his replacement, there were others who might do as well.

A pity that girl Jane was a Pureblood. Now that girl held a world of promise. All she needed was a good teacher.

And if Alphonse could do anything, he could teach.

Lois didn’t speak until they were high in the air above the city. “Well, that was different.”

Superman turned a granite visage to her as he began circling upward. “This isn’t like anything else we’ve ever dealt with, Lois. From now until we leave, we’ve got to appear to be married while in public but only friends in private.”

“Huh?”

“We’ve both showered since the last time we made love, so our scents aren’t on each other. I couldn’t have pulled off that ‘subbing for Clark’ routine if that weren’t true. It was one of the reasons I mentioned that Jane smelled different, to let them know that my sense of smell was at least as acute as theirs is.”

He stopped and hovered while she thought about what he’d said. His reasoning was logical, and it fit the evidence they had, including the testimony they’d gotten from Alphonse and the rest.

“Okay,” she finally said. “We’ll play monk and nun until we leave the city.”

“It’s more than that. We’ll have to behave as if we’re bugged all the time except when we’re in the air. Wolves have far more sensitive hearing than humans, and if they hear us being inconsistent we could blow our secret identities.”

“My secret identity being that I’m really Superman’s wife?”

He nodded. “Your life is more important than that secret, but not a whole lot else is.”

She thought some more, then nodded back at him. “Agreed. So what do we do now?”

“We go back into the police and newspaper archives and start looking for anything and everything to do with the murders in the early seventies. It might give us a lead on who or what to look for.”

“And if the purebloods find out who you really are?”

He gazed deep into her eyes. “That’s the risk we take to find the truth. It’s the same risk we’ve taken against Intergang, against Lex Luthor, against Diana Stride, and against everyone else we’ve ever come up against. But we can win, Lois, because together we’re stronger than either of us is alone.”

She leaned closer to his shoulder. “I almost wish you could take care of this one by yourself. I don’t mind telling you, I got a little scared back there before you made that dramatic entrance.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “This isn’t a Superman-only

situation. I need your investigative skills, your ability to put together things that don't look like they match up, your intuitive leaps of illogic, your determination to ferret out the truth. Either of us could do this alone, Lois, but it would take too much time. More people are going to die unless we solve this quickly. This is a case that needs both of us, one that demands that we blend our talents."

She sighed. "And what do we do when we corner this Patriarch? Are you going to kill him?"

He paused, then shook his head. "No. I will not deliberately take a life. And that includes werewolves who might take it into their furry skulls to make a meal out of you." He straightened and turned toward their hotel. "I will, however, defend you against all and sundry evildoers, so long as I shall live."

She chuckled. "I don't remember that being part of the marriage vows."

"Wasn't. I just made it up."

They shared a smile and a hug as he descended to a darkened alley.

Andre was terrified. He had never seen the Patriarch this angry, and his companion had already paid the price. The man wearing the flat-brimmed hat and black duster had backhanded Roger off his knees and against a wall, where he slumped as if boneless to the pavement, unconscious and bleeding. Andre knelt where he had been, still quivering with fear.

"Now," growled the tall dark man, "let me ask again. What happened to the two of you? I do not believe that a single human could defeat any one of my followers, much less a pair of them! And not even Jane could have defeated you both at once." He reached out and lifted Andre to his feet with one hand. "Tell me," he whispered roughly, "exactly what really happened to you, and why you have failed in your mission."

"M-m-my lord, I beg of you! It happened just as Roger said!"

Andre felt the big man draw back a hand and he braced himself for the blow.

It didn't land.

The big man released Andre so quickly he collapsed back down to his knees. "Tell me the story again."

"Y-yes, my lord. Roger and I were patrolling, just as you had instructed us, when we found a human male in the alleys. I thought — we thought to question him. I attempted to soften him up first, but he defeated both of us bare-handed." Andre dropped his gaze. "My lord — never have I seen anyone move so quickly or felt anyone strike so hard."

"Really?" growled the big man. "He struck you even harder than I have?"

Andre closed his eyes in fear, then nodded. "Y-yes. My lord. Even harder than you."

Again, the expected blow did not land. Andre opened his eyes to see his chief glare at him, not in anger but in deep study. The truth had been told, even if it had been an unpleasant truth. He did not — could not — flinch from the scrutiny. To do so might mean his death.

"You speak the truth."

Andre nodded once. "It is so, my lord."

The big man stepped back and frowned for a long moment, then pointed to two of the willing human slaves standing behind Andre with their heads bowed. "You two! Yes, you! See to Roger's health. Give him a comfortable bed and a fresh meal. I will speak with him later to apologize for not believing his tale. And you will tell him that, else he will wonder why he is treated so well."

He turned to Andre and lifted him to his feet. "The same with this one. They both had the courage to tell me something they knew I would not wish to hear." He grasped Andre's shoulder and nearly crushed it. "You have both proven yourselves faithful. I will

not forget this."

Andre jerked his head up and down in relief. "Thank you, my lord Patriarch."

"Go now. Be refreshed. I wish to find this man who defeated two of my best without assistance. I must taste his scent with my own nose, see him with my own eyes. We will speak again at a later time."

Andre never bothered to wonder if the Patriarch could stand against the man who had defeated both himself and Roger at the same time. He was too glad to be forgiven, and too relieved to be out of the Patriarch's direct line of sight.

Those at whom the Patriarch looked too long often did not survive to tell the tale.

And it was too soon for Andre to execute his plan. The time was not yet right. Soon, though, the time would indeed be the right time.

Chapter Five

Lois slept fitfully that night.

It should have been wonderful. For the first time since she and Clark had met, they were together in New Orleans enjoying the luxury of an excellent hotel, feasting on the finest French cuisine she'd ever imagined, and now she was lying in the arms of the most wonderful man in the world.

But there was the chance — a good chance, now that she'd thought about it — that someone or some — thing — was listening to them while they lay in that delicious bed. And because of that, not only was Lois not sleeping well, Clark wasn't sleeping at all. He was lying on the bed, his head propped up under several pillows, and using his senses to probe the rooms near theirs. She could tell because the tension in his shoulders hadn't lessened since they'd turned off the lights.

Just before four o'clock, she sat up. "You need to get some sleep."

"I can stay awake for several days at a time if I have to."

"Yes, but you wouldn't be at peak efficiency."

"My less-than-best is still pretty good. I can stay awake."

She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "You don't have to. You can sleep while I sit up and watch." She reached for her robe and belted it on without leaving the bed. "Besides, I think I'm done sleeping tonight."

He reached out and brushed her hair once. "I'm sorry."

A soft smile she knew he'd see, even in the dark, floated out to him. "Don't be. None of this is your fault. And this is how it needs to be this time. We'll have to take care of each other."

He sighed softly. "All right. But you wake me by eight, okay?"

A gentle chuckle accompanied a ruffling of his hair. "If you insist, my dear. You just relax and let Mama Lois take care of you."

He pulled two of the pillows from under his head and wrapped his massive arms around one of them. "Good night, Lois."

"Sweet dreams, Superman. I'm going to get dressed, so don't listen too hard. Trust me, okay?"

She heard his voice relax into a sleepy smile. "I trust you." He nestled his head deep into the pillows and muttered, "See you in the morning."

Instead of keeping the banter going, she rose and moved into the front room, carrying an armload of clothes. As she dressed, she realized that she was hungry. Breakfast was too long to wait, so as she buttoned her shirt she decided to make a call to room service.

"Hello?" she whispered. "This is Lois Lane in room—"

"Ah, Ms. Lane," the woman said. "This is Audrey at the front desk. I hope you and your husband are enjoying your stay."

"We are, yes, but I'd like to order something from the kitchen."

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry, but we won't have a cook here for

another hour. Would something from our deli menu be acceptable?"

Lois frowned, then said, "Yes. Bring me a steak sandwich, rare, with a Cobb salad and a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew. Oh, and make the sandwich double-meat."

"Ah — one moment, please." Audrey covered the phone and spoke to someone beside her, probably another desk clerk. Lois could hear every word the girl said as she asked if they had what it took to complete Lois' order. Funny, thought Lois, the girl sounds almost afraid for some reason. She could almost smell the apprehension over the phone.

But that was ridiculous. Smells aren't carried by phone lines. Must be the excitement of the previous night and her heightened imagination brought on by meeting not just one werewolf, but an entire — what, pack? Coven? Herd? Club? Confederation? What was the proper term for a gathering of werewolves?

She smiled to herself. If she had any sense, she'd be terrified.

Audrey chose that moment to uncover the phone again. Lois caught part of a sentence in the background, something about rogue carnivores that Audrey apparently didn't think was funny, then the young woman said, "Ms. Lane, we'll have that in front of your room in ten minutes. Will that be okay?"

"Of course," Lois whispered. "But my husband's still asleep, so please don't knock. Just slide a sheet of paper under the door when you get here. I'm in the front room and I'll see it."

"Oh, of course! I will bring it to your door myself. I hope you enjoy your early breakfast."

The meal came and the paper slid under the door. Lois opened the door and signed the receipt, then smiled at Audrey, who whispered, "Thank you, ma'am. Enjoy your meal."

Lois inhaled deeply, relishing the scents. "It'll do for a snack until something more substantial comes along."

The young woman's smile faltered for a moment, then she nodded and turned to the elevator. Lois closed the door behind her and sat down to eat.

The meal surprised her — or maybe it was her perception of it which surprised her. The deli sandwich was fresh and loaded with trimmings, most of which she discarded as she tore into the steak. She picked out and ate the chicken and egg from the Cobb salad, then smiled as she remembered past meals when she had done the opposite. The Mountain Dew had been delivered in a bowl of ice, so she simply pulled the top off and drank from the bottle.

When she finished eating she felt better, though not completely refreshed, as if something had been missing. Then she realized that the steak had been cool, not warm, and it had been cooked. Raw would have been better. Next time she would order the sandwich with the steak uncooked—

Her eyes bugged out and she jumped to her feet as she realized what she was thinking. Alphonse Thibodeaux' scarred left hand burst into her mind and she snatched her own hand to look for wounds.

A small scab on the back of her left wrist stared back at her. It was the same wrist Jane had grasped at the street bistro. Neither of them had noticed the blood at the time, nor had they noticed it when Jane had dressed her elbow scrapes at Arthur's place, but her skin had been punctured.

Her elbows—

Lois yanked the wrappings off her left elbow and ran to the bathroom. In the mirror she could see that there was no evidence of any scrape on her arm. A quick check revealed that her right arm was also smooth and unmarred.

She was a quick healer, but nobody healed that fast.

No normal human did, anyway.

There was only one logical conclusion. She'd been infected with whatever virus or bacterium or microphage or magic spell had transmitted the affliction to others. She was now a Turned

One.

In the words of Alphonse Thibodeaux, Lois Lane was starting to become a werewolf.

Arthur sat in one of the oversized chairs in the room where Lois Lane had been interviewed earlier that night, the room where Superman had demonstrated his complete dominance over their pack. Now Arthur was left to deal with the fallout of the incident, and it was apparent that he needed to give these disparate personalities a common thread of purpose.

But it wouldn't be easy. There was Alphonse and his smug smile, Lancelot and his bruised ego, Gwen with her hackles raised at all of them, Teresa fondling a glass of brandy and thinking hard about something and giving no hint of what it might be, Jane flicking her flinty eyes across each of them in turn, and Gawain glancing nervously at each of them while trying hard not to be noticed. During the best of times they didn't always get along smoothly, and this was surely not the best of times.

It was a recipe for disaster.

Leaders lead, he reminded himself. Sometimes a leader must lead in order to remind his followers who that leader really is.

He rose to his feet. "Everyone prepare to leave. We must move our base of operations immediately."

Jane frowned. "Andre and Roger aren't the only sentries out there. We load up to move and the Patriarch will know it almost as soon as we walk out the door."

"We're going underground. We'll use the old sewer system to move to the safe house across the river."

Guinevere shook her head. "That house is too small for all of us. We'll be found out in days, if not hours."

Arthur gave her his best trust-me smile. "Not if we don't reveal ourselves. We won't go outside at all for several days. We have enough food here to tide us over."

Teresa downed her brandy in a single gulp. "So we run away again." She placed the snifter on the table beside her chair and folded her hands together. "That's prey behavior, Arthur. We might as well hang a sign on the front door inviting the Patriarch's clan to have us for dinner." Her voice hardened. "Literally."

Lancelot spoke from his seat in the corner. "Arthur is correct. We must move. And the house on Delaronde will function as a base of operations."

Jane frowned more deeply. "You sound like you want to fight them."

"Oh, I most certainly do want to fight them." Lancelot rose to his feet. "But not like the old days, Jane. No pitched battles in alleyways or bars or empty warehouses. We don't have the manpower — or, more accurately, the wolf-power — to win a muzzle-to-muzzle war. I was thinking more about a guerilla campaign."

Arthur hated to give credit to others. He especially hated to give any to Lancelot, his chief rival in the pack. But the idea of making slash-and-run attacks against the Patriarch not only appealed to him, it dovetailed nicely with his own still-developing plans to fight back against the Naturals.

He smiled. "That's actually a good idea, Lancelot, provided we can operate with a minimum of risk. We must all participate in the planning, though, or we'll be picked off one by one. And we mustn't be operating solo, either, not if we all want to survive this conflict."

"As long as we remember what happen out in Prescott," Alphonse said. "Story is that the Patriarch and his bunch wipe out the whole pack of Turned Ones there, and they was four o' three time more'n what we be."

"We are deficient in numbers only," replied Arthur. "We are more intelligent and cunning than the Arizona band was, and we will act as a team. But this will remain a vague plan unless we arrive at our new hideout undetected."

“Almost anything’s better than just sitting here waiting to be attacked,” Jane offered. “Let’s get going.”

The Patriarch stalked down the alley where Andre had directed him. He closed his eyes and let the scents of the place wash over him. His eyes drifted shut and his nostrils flared.

For a moment, the stench of humanity that he imbibed almost overwhelmed him. He could picture the hookers, the pimps, the drug dealers, the muggers and their victims, even the occasional police presence, all vying for supremacy in the narrow passage. Their terror and passion, their anger and desperation, all swirled together to form a pastiche of scent images that both disgusted and thrilled him. It was as if an ever-changing work of art was floating by, tantalizing him with the promise of the hunt to come.

The thought reminded him of his purpose here. He needed, if he could, to isolate the scent of the man who had fought off both Andre and Roger. The statement still sounded unbelievable to him, but he was certain that neither Andre nor Roger was lying. A being who could do that had to have a distinct and readily identifiable musk about him.

Perhaps he was a newcomer to the Patriarch’s territory, looking for a pack to take over instead of building one on his own. Some Purebloods behaved that way, and it was necessary to remain wary of them. He’d never met one who could defeat him in one-on-one combat, but he refused to believe that he was the strongest werewolf who had ever lived. No one ruled forever, either in the human world or in his. One day, like an aging lion beset on all sides, he would go down fighting, defeated by a younger and more powerful challenger.

That day was not today, however.

He took off his hat as he drifted along the alley and pulled his hair back from his face. Another lungful of air told him other tales of greed and corruption and man’s cruelty to his fellow man. Humans were weak, no better than frightened sheep. No wonder they were prey to the Patriarch and his kind.

He sifted through the various smells until—

There! He’d found it!

He’d found Roger and Andre. And there was another spoor, fainter yet more distinct than the others. In Andre’s musk, there was more than a hint of hunger and thrill of combat. In Roger’s, a touch of anger and surprise. In both of them, he sensed sudden shock and quick pain.

The third man’s scent told him almost nothing, except that he had recently bathed, probably in one of the better hotels in the city. There was no fear, no shock, no sudden burst of adrenalin, no fight-or-flight reflex – he might as well have been performing a yoga routine.

That made no sense to the Patriarch. Any man suddenly attacked by two other men would be surprised, at least, almost surely afraid, and would leave traces of excitement and tension in his sweat. Yet this man displayed none of that. It was as if a martial arts master had entered the alley expecting this fight to go just as it had.

Or if an amazingly powerful werewolf were sizing up his opposition.

Whoever this man was, he was a danger to the clan, a wild card in the deck which might show up in any hand at any time. The stranger had to be brought to heel, had to be contained before he incited dissension in the pack. The Patriarch’s rule must never be questioned, never be challenged, especially not by a family member. It would be the prelude to dissolution of everything he’d worked so hard to construct. And no one – not the mysterious stranger, not the resourceful but baffling Jane, nor the effeminate but surprisingly effective Turned One Arthur – would be allowed to interfere with his plans.

He looked back and signaled for two of his human slaves to follow him. Neither of them could stand and fight the stranger, but

they could cover his back as he tracked the man’s spoor through the alleys and streets. And they couldn’t blow the pack’s cover as normal humans by suddenly shifting form in a moment of surprise.

With his flat-brimmed hat back in place and his duster billowing around his legs as in a Western movie, the Patriarch began tracking the stranger. The man had rarely taken a straight course, nor had he stopped anywhere for any length of time, so following his sign wasn’t difficult even in the dim light of early evening—

Wait. What just happened?

He’d lost the trail. Impossible, but he had.

He reversed his course until he detected the scent again, then sought for an alternate trail. He checked to be certain that the man had not been picked up and carried from that point – no. There were no other trails intersecting his, only the stranger’s weak but definite scent overlaying everything else. The trail ended in the middle of the alley. It didn’t fade, it hadn’t been erased or covered up.

It – simply stopped.

How could it have just stopped?

There were two walls within leaping distance of the scent’s terminus, although after examining both he knew the man hadn’t climbed either of them. There had been no branching off from the main trail, and it didn’t feel as if his target had doubled back on his own path. There would have been some indication of a second spoor, some previous branching of the trail. No other scent masked that of the stranger. And there was no fresh evidence at all of a vehicle into which the man might have climbed.

It was as if he could fly.

The Patriarch backtracked several yards and knelt down to examine the trail more closely. There was something in the stranger’s spoor, something almost inhuman, something that eluded the hunter. The man might have been a daywalker, except that there was no hint of bloodlust in his scent, not even back at the fight with Andre and Roger.

And a new thought prodded him back on his heels. Why had the stranger allowed his victims to live? Had the Patriarch been the intruder, he would have crushed the life from both men as a statement of his strength and power. Was this new player a coward who had been surprised? Was he simply very cautious? Or was it possible that the intruder was making a greater statement – that he feared no one, whether human or Lycan?

He stood and glanced around him. His two human companions had each taken up a position behind and to one side of him, watching both his back trail and his flanks, just as he had trained them. Either one was a match for nearly any other human in the city, with or without the weapons they carried, and together they could slow down an attacking werewolf long enough for the Patriarch to turn and defend himself. They would not survive such an encounter, of course, but they were compensated well enough in money and physical pleasure to ensure their loyalty to him. It was the only positive item in his day thus far.

He considered going on blindly to look for Arthur’s pack’s residence, but decided against it. He didn’t want to precipitate an incident with them, not yet, not without backup and not without more planning. He didn’t fear the Turned Ones, but he was cautious enough to decline a fight he knew he couldn’t win by himself and which would not further his plans to dominate the entire city.

He liked New Orleans. It was a good hunting ground, and he wanted it all for himself and his followers. As much as he looked forward to killing Arthur and his mate, it was too early in the timetable for that move. There were still loose ends to tie up and revenges to take before he assumed total command of the Crescent City and its surroundings.

He considered shifting to his lupine form, but quickly discarded the notion. He could learn nothing else by doing so. Nor

would changing to his intermediate form, the wolf/human/monster hybrid, give him any new information. And since his human followers had never seen him in that guise, it might frighten them into fleeing – or worse, betraying him to the authorities. He was not yet ready to face the city’s police force. Soon, certainly, but not today.

It was time to leave. He would learn no more in this place on this day.

Their hotel suite was comfortable but too small for pacing the floor, so Clark simply floated over the table, the couch, the desk, and anything else in his way. After a few minutes he began walking on the walls, and made one complete circuit of the room on the ceiling.

Without consciously thinking about it, Clark waited for Lois to decide whether to laugh or complain, but she did neither. In the same tone she used when he dragged his dirty cape across the floor, she said, “I hope you aren’t leaving footprints up there where the maids can’t reach.”

“Huh?” He stopped and looked around, then righted himself as he floated down to the floor. “Sorry. I kind of forgot where we were.”

“Did you sleep well?”

Her calm question threw him for a moment, but then he decided to behave as if nothing utterly bizarre had happened the previous evening. “Uh, yeah, I did. Not long, but I do feel refreshed. Thanks for watching over me.”

She stood and walked toward him, her eyes troubled. “There’s something I need to tell you, but I don’t know how to say it.”

He took her hands and guided her to the couch. “The best way is to just say it, Lois. I’m a big boy and I can take it.”

She shook her head. “No boy is this big. I think we need to talk to someone about – about what happened last night.”

A strong impression that she’d been about to finish her sentence differently pressed on his mind, but he pushed it to one side. “Okay. Whom do you recommend we see?”

She smiled thinly and patted his cheek. “That’s my grammatically correct Clark.” Her smile faded. “We need to talk to that cop, the guy with the French name.”

Clark nodded. “I have his card in my wallet. Do you want me to call and let him know that two big city reporters from the frozen North are about to invade his quiet little life?”

Her eyebrows bounced once and her smile made a comeback. “Sure. Just let him know somehow that we’ll be talking about werewolves. That ought to make his day.”

Robert Gautreaux put down the sheaf of notes from the previous two nights’ police reports, thankful that no one else had been found torn to shreds. But he knew that it only meant a delay in such deaths, not an end to them. Or, perhaps the manner of Evelyn Carstairs’ murder had been an outlier, a blip in the city’s normal ebb and flow and not to be repeated.

He dropped his face into his palms and leaned on his desk. The probability of that being the truth was so low that, like Spock and the Royal Fizzbin, he couldn’t compute it.

He blew a wet raspberry at his hands and straightened. Star Trek was an escape for him, not a lifestyle, and the threats the Federation had faced were imaginary. The possibility that the Patriarch was back in town was all too real.

A knock on his door startled him and the attractive young female detective in her late twenties, assigned as his administrative assistant, leaned into his office. “Excuse me, Inspector, but there’s a call for you on line two. Something about a pair of travel writers from Metropolis.”

“Travel writers? You know that I have not the time to squire travel writers around the city, Melody. Tell them to get a map from the tourist bureau.”

She sighed and gave him a sympathetic smile. “They mentioned that Dr. Walter Smith suggested that they contact you personally, sir.”

Robert frowned at her. “Walter? What on earth could he be thinking, sending them to me? I need distractions like that right now like I need another ulcer.”

“Yes, sir,” Melody replied. “Shall I give them a very polite brush-off or make an appointment for them?”

Robert sighed deeply. “What time is it, anyway?”

“You’re in early again, sir. It’s just three minutes after eight.”

“Very well. Tell them – do you know where they are staying?”

“Dr. Smith booked them into the Omni Royal.”

Robert’s eyebrows rose and his eyes cleared. These were the people he’d asked Perry to send.

He couldn’t let Melody know that, though. “Let’s see, they’re close to the French Quarter, so how about Jimmy J’s? It should not be too Cajun for them.”

She smiled softly. “I’ll tell them, sir. What time will you meet them?”

“Let’s say – hmm. Eight-forty-five. That is a good compromise, I think, for all of us.”

“I’ll relay the message, sir. Will you need backup? Or a sudden emergency back at the office to tear you reluctantly away from your newest best friends?”

Robert smiled despite his exhaustion. “No, I think not. I am sure I will be fine. Thank you for the offer, however.”

“Yes, sir. And – don’t hesitate to call me if you need me.” She started to close the door, then paused. “For anything.”

The door clicked shut and Robert smiled to himself. If only Melody Brennan were ten years older. Or if he were ten years younger.

Or – maybe their age difference didn’t really make any difference. He’d have to review the department regulations on officers dating other officers, especially those within the same precinct.

His eyebrows drew down again and he frowned at himself. That would have to wait until after the current mess was over and done with. He couldn’t risk being distracted by a possible romance right now, or even a misunderstanding about romance. Something like that would hamstring him when he most needed to be free to act, both from within the law and without it.

Usually, the band members spoke to each other in a kind of pidgin shorthand that mixed English, Cajun French, and a kind of mixed patois descended from several African languages and Caribbean tribal tongues. It added to their performances by shortening their necessary interchanges and amused the customers, and amused customers tipped better, especially when they were slightly inebriated.

Tonight, however, they were not performing.

The ritual was mainly for their own peace of mind and they all knew it. The half-sung, half-chanted words of the 145th Psalm floated out of all of their mouths, each one trading harmony for melody effortlessly and almost unconsciously, until it rose to the final verses and resonated against the walls and rafters of the old chapel.

The LORD guards all those who love Him, but He destroys all the wicked.

My mouth will declare Yahweh’s praise; let every living thing praise His holy name forever and ever.

The bass player was the first one to take off his instrument. “That was good, Jolene, that was very good. I think we are as ready as we can be.”

The slight keyboardist nodded. “I agree, Dorian. I only wish we had been more ready that night at the café. We might have prevented some of this.”

“We could not have stopped it,” said the guitarist. “All we

may do now is pray that the intentions of the evil ones rebound upon them and harm them instead of their intended victims.”

Jolene shook her head. “We can do more than that, William. We can stand in the gap between evil and good. We can encourage the warriors for righteousness and actively oppose those who battle for their unrighteous master. And we can say more than whispered warnings to men whose loved ones fall into danger before our very eyes.”

The drummer grunted. “Can’t fight a werewolf. Human or lupine, any one of them would take all of us without breaking a sweat.”

Dorian turned and faced his bandmate. “This is not a physical fight, Bruce. This is a battle on a higher plane, one where the weapons of war are not physical but spiritual. You’re right, we can’t fight them, but we can support those who do.” He put his hand on his hips and slowly turned to look at the other two in turn. “I was a paramedic in Iraq during Desert Storm. I lost some patients, but I never refused to go after anyone, no matter how hot the firefight was. And I’m not changing now.”

William lifted his hand. “Peace, Dorian, please. I agree with you wholeheartedly. All I meant was that we are not physical warriors. Bruce is right, we can’t put up our fists to fight the bad guys this time, but we can do lots of other things.”

Jolene nodded. “And one of the things we need to do, gentlemen, is help that tall young man who thwarted our Aryan friends the other night. He is much more than he appears, and before this is over he will need our help.”

Bruce stood and put out his right hand, palm down. “I’m down with that, y’all. How about it? All for one and one for all?”

William, Dorian, and Jolene put their hands atop his. William nodded. “This is the most dangerous thing we’ve done together as a group, people. We may not all come through this.” He turned as if seeking some sign of hesitation in the eyes of the others, but seemed to see nothing but determination. “Very well. Together.”

“Together,” they intoned.

“Ready?” asked Dorian. “One-two-three—Disciples!”

Their hands lifted together as if they were about to run onto a football field and win one for the Gipper. But each one knew that their unity originated in a loyalty for someone who was far more than a mere human.

They were Disciples of the King of Kings. And they were totally committed to their mission.

Chapter Six

Clark and Lois sat together at the outdoor table at Jimmy J’s, their fingers pointing this way and that, laughing as they playfully fought over who would write what in the spiral notebook on the table between them. Robert actually heard them before he saw them, their sharp East Coast accents cutting through the softer Cajun murmur all around him.

He hoped they were better than they looked. Of course, Perry would not have sent them had they not been very good. And since they were supposed to be working as travel writers, their current behavior suited them. It was good camouflage, too, since only a master strategist would expect an enemy to hid in plain sight on a mission.

Maybe they were a lot better than they looked.

The man said something Robert didn’t catch that made the woman convulse in laughter, so that he was standing beside their table before either of them reacted to his presence.

The man smiled and offered his hand as he stood. “Inspector Gautreaux, I presume? I’m Clark Kent, and this is my wife Lois Lane. Won’t you join us?”

Robert smiled and sat with Lois to his right. “Please, my first name is pronounced Row-Bear, with the emphasis on the bear. When I hear Inspector Gautreaux, I look around to see if someone from the Pink Panther movies is pursuing me.”

The couple laughed again. “Too close to Inspector Clouseau, I suppose?” Lois asked.

Robert nodded. “Yes. I’m afraid I watched too many of those movies as a youth.”

“Oh, they were really popular in Kansas,” Clark said. Then he put on the terrible French accent he used to quote movie dialogue. “‘Does your dog bite?’ ‘No, Monsieur.’ The dog chomps Clouseau on the leg and he yells, ‘I thought you said your dog does not bite!’ ‘That is not my dog, Monsieur.’” Clark dropped the accent and laughed. “I think that’s my favorite bit in all of those movies.”

Robert grimaced as the others chuckled. “What I remember is being called Clouseau on the first day by the Police Academy sergeant and then having to respond to that name for the next three months.”

Lois smiled and patted Robert’s right hand with her left. “I’m sorry, but we’re not from around here. Everything is new and different for us. Which is a wonderful segue into our real purpose. This is something of a working vacation for us, and we need to go back home with a good travel story. We want to help your city boost its tourist income, and we want to get another article printed, so I think we can help each other.”

Robert barely heard the woman’s words. His attention was on her left hand, where a small scab rested near the back of her wrist. It was of a shape and color he’d seen before, although never this small and never just one alone. He forced himself to glance up at her face.

Her mouth smiled but her eyes glittered with constrained power. As he looked, she removed her hand from his and all but whispered, “Clear?”

Her husband lifted a glass of tea to his mouth and said, “One watcher. He’s been across the street on the bus bench reading the same page of the paper since the inspector parked his car. And I’m pretty sure I saw him when we left the hotel this morning.”

Then she said the words which almost unmanned Robert.

“You think he’s from Arthur or the Patriarch?”

Jaime Miller didn’t like his current duty. He thought that keeping a watch on the reporters was a waste of time, and nothing he’d seen during his first morning shift had altered his opinion. They were behaving as he would have expected a pair of travel writers to behave. They walked the streets with their eyes up and roving across the buildings. They took pictures with the cameras hung around their necks. They sampled food from all along their route and sipped at a number of different drinks. And they finally stopped for breakfast at a new place, one which catered to tourists and therefore was off limits to a proud native like Jaime.

He’d thought about leaving and telling the Patriarch that the reporters were harmless, but then he saw the homicide cop join them. It was all he could do not to jump up and run away.

What little he could hear from them from across the street was innocent. Their faces and their body language betrayed no tension or fear. They were either exactly what they appeared to be or some of the best actors this side of Hollywood. If the cop hadn’t sat down with them, Jaimie wouldn’t have bothered to stay.

But this? This he needed to report, and quickly.

Jaime Miller had begun life in New Orleans twenty-three years before and had never left except for short trips to nearby towns on the Mississippi delta area, but all he’d known of the Patriarch’s clan had been hearsay until a couple of months before. His father – who had never bothered to marry his mother – was spending fifteen to twenty-five years as a guest of the state of Louisiana for armed robbery, aggravated assault, and battery. It was his third major felony conviction, and unless something unusual and unlikely happened, the young man wouldn’t see the man who called himself Jaimie’s father for more than a decade.

His father had been the source of the tales of Rougarou for Jaimie. They had given him chills and shivers and a few sleepless

nights as a boy, but he'd discounted them as he'd grown older. So it had come as something of a shock when he'd met Andre, the man who'd recruited him into the pack as one of their human servants, and Paul, a youth he'd known years before in junior high school. Jaime had thought it was a big joke at the start, little more than just another gang affiliation, but then he'd watched the Patriarch and three of his closest followers chase down that old woman with Paul and kill them.

Paul had died quickly.

The woman, whose name he'd never learned, had died all over the bank of the levee.

And Jaimie had learned the truth. Rougarou was real. And Rougarou would slaughter him without mercy or hesitation if Jaimie crossed him.

So Jaimie wouldn't cross him. Jaimie would grovel and bow and serve his master and live to share the fruits of his victories. He'd do whatever the terrifying man-wolf-thing told him to do.

And someday soon he'd be someone important, unlike his loser father. Jaimie would be an important sub-leader when the Patriarch took over New Orleans. He'd tell others what to do and when to do it, and he'd finally receive the respect he'd been unfairly denied all these years.

Another laugh from across the street jerked him from his woolgathering. The couple stood and shook hands with the cop, then went in different directions. The couple walked down the street, pointing and exclaiming and taking pictures like tourists. The cop walked back to his car, then drove away. None of the them looked in Jaimie's direction.

For a moment he was pleased.

Then he realized that they hadn't looked at him because they'd made him. If not, they would have at least glanced his way a couple of times as they looked around. He didn't know how they'd spotted him, but they had. He was so used to being invisible to the people around him that he'd made some kind of mistake somewhere.

He had to report in.

Robert drove around the corner without looking at the young man who'd been watching the Kents. If he was dumb but persistent, he'd follow the couple. If he was lazy, he'd quit following them and go home.

If he was really smart, he'd realize that they'd known why he was there and go report to his lord and master.

Robert didn't know the young man's name, but he knew the type. He was young and tough but brittle and prone to break if pressed hard enough, full of righteous anger for the way the world had mistreated him, and he'd sell both grandmothers for a bottle of booze, a fast car, and a fast girl.

Robert glanced in his rear-view mirror and saw the youth fold the paper and walk away, not following Clark and Lois. That was good. Or bad. Depending on what he did next.

But the young man was not his concern now. He needed to pick up the Kents in six minutes. His car was the only place he trusted not to be watched or bugged, and they could speak freely in it. If there were no traffic problems, he'd make the rendezvous at just the right time.

He glanced at the fuel gauge and noted that he had nearly three-quarters of a tank left. Plenty of time to speak and plenty of time to hear.

He especially wanted to hear about that scab on Lois' hand. It simultaneously amazed him and terrified him. She couldn't be turned, not this quickly, but if not, where had the mark come from? If she was turned, why wasn't she snarling at everything around her?

He remembered her eyes. They had glistened with controlled frenzy, chaos under iron restraint, violence begging to be released. He'd seen eyes like that nearly thirty years before, but never in

someone sitting calmly at a restaurant table. The man he'd shotgunned to death at age fifteen had had eyes like that. Robert had seen them shining at him over the body of a prostitute who hadn't quite finished dying.

Robert's fear bubbled up inside him. He was about to invite an infected woman into his car – a place from which, if she decided to rip his throat out, he couldn't possibly escape.

Jane and Theresa walked into the small kitchen as Arthur stirred his coffee. Theresa tossed a pair of bloody driving gloves on the cabinet beside him and growled, "Souvenir for you, oh fearless leader."

He inhaled the fragrance without picking them up. "I love the smell of bloody clothing in the morning. It smells like – victory."

Jane gave him a crooked smile. "We're not to the victory stage yet, Artie, so don't light your cigar now, but it's a step in that direction."

"Good. Do you want to tell me how you acquired this lovely artifact?"

Theresa growled deep in her throat. "How do you think we got them? We killed one of the Patriarch's pack."

"That's what I wanted to—"

"It was just before sunup. We pulled him off his motorcycle when he stopped for a traffic light at Slidell and Bellerville."

Arthur started. "That's near an elementary school."

Theresa averted her eyes. "Yes. Martin Behrman Elementary. We think he was at the school looking for breakfast."

Arthur's eyes snapped to Jane, who nodded in agreement.

Theresa continued, "The noise of his motorcycle's engine masked our approach. He was on the ground before he reacted, but he was too late. I opened his abdominal cavity with my claws. Jane twisted his head and broke his neck. We both crushed his chest and shredded his heart. And we planted the false scents you gave us." She reached out and took Arthur's coffee. "That's one less we have to deal with."

She stalked toward her bedroom, slurping at the hot beverage in the cup.

Jane looked at Arthur. "I know that you know this, but she really hates killing, even when it's justified. It might not be the best idea for you to send us out together again."

He sighed. "I know how she feels, Jane, and I understand. Truly, I do. But who else would go? Guinevere is known to all of the Patriarch's clan, as am I. Alphonse is as likely to try and reason with one of them as he is to fight. And Gawain is willing but still young and inexperienced. I leave it to you to choose your next mission partner."

"You left out Lancelot."

Arthur chuckled. "You would have to watch your back twice, once for the Patriarch's pack and once for him."

"I don't care. Next time I go out, I want him with me."

"As you wish." He turned and reached for a fresh cup. "Do you think I should speak with Theresa or let her work through this on her own?"

She licked her fingers as if out of reflex. "You know her, Arthur. She hates killing even though she understands the necessity for it. She won't betray you or let you down. But she pays a high price whenever she lets her lupine nature take over. Of all of us, she feels it the most when she takes a life."

"Her conscience troubles her?"

"Sneer if you want to, but when Theresa kills, she feels like it robs her of another piece of her soul."

"I was unaware that werewolves had souls. There are many who—"

Jane leaned forward and glared at him. "Call it superego, call it soul, call it conscience, call it guilt, call it whatever you want! I wish I could care about people as much as she does. I don't know her backstory, but this life is a lot farther from her old life than

anyone else's here! And when she kills someone she loses another piece of herself from the part that's still human inside her!" She straightened and took a deep breath. "I don't think you can understand that. I do know that you don't. And that's a shame, because of all of us she's still the closest to being a real human. I don't want her to lose that." She spun and walked away, muttering, "I don't want to lose that."

Arthur pursed his lips in thought. It was good to be reminded of the dynamics of the group, even to have pushed in his face the reasons his followers did what they did, why they felt the way they did.

And he understood Theresa better than Jane suspected. He and Alphonse were the only ones who knew about Theresa's former life, because they had been the ones to find her after she'd been turned.

It was back during the Roaring Twenties, that decade of excess before the forced austerity of the Great Depression. Arthur and Alphonse had been camping in eastern Kentucky after a trip from New Orleans to check out the werewolf pack structure in New York, a trip which Arthur considered a waste of time and effort. Just as dawn was breaking, and before the morning coffee was on the fire, a small white-tailed deer had flashed past the edge of their camp, sprinting as if being pursued by a pack of rabid tigers.

But it wasn't tigers the deer was fleeing. It was a barefoot young blonde woman whose sparse clothing was shredded to rags, her slender legs flashing as she ran with impossible speed after the deer. Alphonse suggested later that her focus on her prey was the reason she hadn't noticed, or had deliberately ignored, the two startled men sitting at a campfire in the woods.

Moments later they heard the crash of a tackle along the game trail. The deer bleated in terror and tried to get away. High-pitched growls and snarls filled the air, and after just a few moments the sounds of the struggle were replaced by the sounds of feeding.

They padded through the woods, still in human form, to watch the young woman gorge herself on fresh venison. "New Turn," Alphonse whispered, to which sentiment Arthur nodded his agreement.

Then Alphonse asked a very interesting question. "Where's the Natural what supposed to teach her how to live now?"

"I don't know. If she was deliberately left in this state, someone has committed a grave sin."

"Maybe it be a accident?"

"Perhaps," mused Arthur. "If she has turned feral, or if this is some bizarre training regimen, we must leave."

But when the young woman finished feeding, instead of burying her kill or just slinking away, she knelt beside it and wept bitter tears. It was not characteristic of any newly Turned One he'd ever heard about. He turned to Alphonse, who appeared to be as surprised as he.

Arthur softly approached the young woman and knelt down several feet away, out of her immediate reach. "Excuse me," he whispered.

She spun on her heels and braced herself to attack, but hesitated when she saw his calm posture. Quietly, Arthur said, "I am not here to hurt you. I would like to help you if you will allow me to do so."

Her cultured voice surprised him. "You cannot help me. I am possessed."

"Possessed?"

She wiped her bloody hands on the remnants of her soiled clothing, then tried to wipe the tears from her eyes. "There is a demon within me that takes over at times and causes me to do — to do such horrible things as this. I know of no other explanation save that I am possessed by this evil spirit."

He shook his head. "I doubt that very much."

She wiped her nose and bloody mouth with the edge of her

ragged dress. "Oh? Then I suppose you have a reasonable scientific explanation for what I just did."

"I have an explanation, but it is neither scientific nor reasonable."

She glanced around, then focused on Arthur again. "I would like to hear it while I am still in my right mind. Assuming that I am, indeed, in my right mind."

"I believe you are as sane as anyone else you have known in your life. Before I explain, however, please allow me to ask you some questions." He waited for her to nod. "Were you attacked and bitten by a large animal recently, say in the last four to six weeks?"

She frowned. "Yes. My husband — he and I were — we —" She sat back on her heels and sobbed for a moment. "Please forgive me. A beast attacked us and — and killed my husband and ravaged me quite badly. I did not expect to live, but for some reason God did not take my life."

"I am truly sorry for your loss."

"Th-thank you."

"Now, another question if I may. Some days after your initial ordeal, did you have a terrible dream where you became a beast similar to the one which attacked you?"

The blonde stared at him. "How do you know this?" She leaped to her feet. "Are you in league with the devil who perpetrated this foulness upon me? Was the beast under your control? And are you now planning to entrap me in your hellish schemes?"

Arthur didn't move. "None of your accusations are true, madam, although I understand how you might come to those conclusions. Please tell me what manner of man was your husband."

His soft demeanor and his formal speech seemed to calm her. "He is — he was a — a Baptist missionary to Central America. We met and married two years ago while he was on furlough from the field. We were planning to return to Costa Rica in two months — no, it would be only a matter of days by now." She moved her arms as if to cover herself. "Please forgive my rude state, sir. I have been — indisposed for some time."

He didn't laugh or even smile at her quicksilver mood changes or her sudden modesty. "There is nothing to forgive, Madame. What has been done to you is a terrible thing, but I know of no method by which it can be undone. In this, I am helpless to aid you." He slowly stood up. "I can, however, offer you sanctuary from those who do not understand your condition. I can teach you how to control your impulses and your dreams. And I can help you deal with your new life. All you need do is come with us."

Her face betrayed her interest. "You speak soothing words, sir. But I would much prefer to be healed and take up my own life again."

The sympathy in Arthur's voice was real. "I am sorry to tell you this and in this manner, but that is impossible. You have contracted a — a disease, for want of a more precise term, and it is one which has no cure."

"You are saying that — that I am to die?"

"To your old life, your old friends, your previous manner of living, yes. But you can live a long and fruitful life if you embrace the changes which have been forced upon you. I can help you to do that."

Her eyes flashed. "As your concubine, I suppose?"

"Not unless that is what you truly wish. I would rather describe it as a new family ready for you to join it. I cannot force you to come with me, nor would I attempt to do so. But your alternative is to stay in these woods or some other place like it, hunting for your food, searching for temporary shelter, and avoiding human contact. Eventually you will be discovered, and I cannot predict your fate beyond that. You might be taken prisoner. You might be forced to be some man's plaything." He paused as

her hands hooked into claw shapes. She apparently realized what she was doing and lifted them to waist level, stared at them for a long moment, then forced herself to relax.

Arthur waited for her to return her attention to him. “Or you might simply be killed, either by accident or by design. It is your choice, Madame.”

He waited as she thought through her options. Then she stepped closer to him. “You do not paint a pleasant scene, sir, but it appears that your offer is the least threatening of the paths set before me. For now, at least, I will accompany you and your companion.”

“Thank you. His name is Alphonse, and mine is Arthur.”

She stepped closer and offered her hand for a shake. “I am Theresa Wilding. If you have any spare clothing, sir, I would appreciate the loan of it.”

Arthur nodded and took her hand. “I believe we have some things which will fit you. And we will stop at the nearest town to purchase more appropriate garments for you as soon as we are able.”

Their hands separated and she stood tall and confident before him. “I am at your service, sir. Within reason, of course.”

He nodded and looked into her eyes. There was no hint of humor there. Nor could he detect any fear.

This woman’s fires were banked and controlled, but there was steel in her makeup. Perhaps she would survive the transition to her new life.

Theresa had not only survived, she had thrived. She had become the spiritual guiding force of the pack, the heart and soul of the group. She was the one who had found Gawain and convinced him to join them. She was the one who had stood unconditionally with Alphonse when Lancelot wanted to cast the older man out.

And now she was the one who was most pained by their guerilla war against the Patriarch. The role suited her even as it hindered Arthur’s campaign. Nevertheless, he would not exchange her for any three Turned Ones he had met over his nearly three hundred years. She was far too valuable to them all – not only for her physical skills, her vast courage, and her commitment to the pack as a whole, but for her heart.

Arthur hated to admit it, but Jane was right. Theresa was the heart and soul of the pack, and they couldn’t afford to lose her. She was as vital to their success as Arthur himself, if not more. They would not – they could not – be the same without her.

Chapter Seven

The Patriarch paced along the wall of the abandoned warehouse and repeatedly punched his fist into his open hand. Roger stood off to the side, his head down and his eyes fixed on a point in the floor. He had never seen his pack leader so angry.

The Patriarch stopped in front of Roger and took two deep breaths, then said, “Tell me once more what you found. And this time tell me what you believe happened.”

Roger shuddered and nodded once. “The city police found Bertrand mauled to death this morning. One of our servants on the police force contacted me to tell me of the killing and allowed me to examine the body.” Roger looked directly at his master. “No human is strong enough to have torn him into pieces in that manner. Nor would he have allowed a pack of dogs to close with him and attack him. He was slain by at least one werewolf. I believe two of them were involved.”

The Patriarch put his hands on his hips and looked away for a moment, then faced Roger again. “Were you able to identify his attackers?”

“I am not certain – this is only my opinion.”

“I have asked you for your opinion, Roger. I value it. Tell me who you believe attacked Bertrand.”

“I – I believe it was two of Arthur’s pack.”

“But you are unsure?”

“There were many other scents overlaying theirs, my lord, not all of them human. Many humans handled his body before I was allowed to examine it. And the city morgue is filled with death and disinfectants. I was not able to make certain.”

The Patriarch sighed. “Did you catch any identifiable scents, some spoor to which you might attach a name?”

Roger paused, then shifted nervously. “My lord, I believe that Jane was involved. And I am even less certain that about the second scent, but it may have been the Turned One called Theresa.”

“The one with Arthur’s pack?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Are you sure enough for a Tribunal?”

Roger shook his head slowly. “No, my lord, I am not. It is possible that both Jane and the other simply found poor Bertrand and examined him briefly. I do not think it likely, but I cannot say that it did not happen in that way.”

The pack leader nodded slowly and turned away from Roger. He clasped his massive hands behind his back and asked, “And what was Bertrand doing near an elementary school at that hour of the morning?”

“I – my lord, I have not spoken to him for several days. I do not know.”

“Once again, Roger, I ask you for your opinion. As I have said, I value it.”

Roger hesitated, then shuddered. “My lord – it is possible he was there to feed.”

The pack leader sighed. “You believe he did this despite my orders to everyone not to take any children? Despite my explanation that doing so would bring undue public attention to our activities?”

“My lord, this is only my opinion—”

“And one which I appreciate and respect. I believe your assumptions about Bertrand are correct.” The Patriarch spun on his toes and faced Roger again. “I will issue new orders. And they will be obeyed! If not, I will personally execute anyone who contravenes my will. Is this understood?”

“Y-yes, my lord!”

“Good. Tell this to all. No one is to go hunting alone. Hunt in pairs and do not take any women or children. All kills must be made at least eight miles from our headquarters, whether that is here or somewhere else. All will remain here during mid-day. And there will be no more drunken midnight parties at Jackson Square.”

“I will relay your instructions, my lord.”

“Good. Oh, Roger, one more thing before you go.”

“My lord?”

“Bertrand’s body. Was it merely broken or had something fed on him?”

“Er – I believe the police report mentioned a feral dog which fled as the officers approached. There was some – some small evidence of feeding, but nothing to indicate that a werewolf had tasted him.”

The Patriarch nodded. “Thank you. You may go now.”

Roger turned and hurried out to relay his lord’s commands. Whoever was harassing them had interfered with at least two night feedings in the past week, and now one of their number was dead. It was a serious blow to both the power of the pack and to the Patriarch’s prestige, and, by extension, Roger’s position in the pack as his closest lieutenant. A threat to the leader’s position was a threat to Roger’s very life.

Unless, of course, he began forming alliances with other pack members in case something truly terrible happened to the Patriarch.

He would have to be very careful and move very slowly,

especially at first. And he would have to appear to be loyal while building a power base which would enable him to survive should a coup take place within the pack. He also reminded himself that the Patriarch's concern had not been aimed toward Bertrand's death, or even toward avenging his murder, but toward the safety of the pack in general. Individuals were not important to the Patriarch, except where the pack leader's position and power were concerned. It was the way of the wild wolf, but not necessarily the way of Rougarou. Bertrand's murder would have an impact on the pack beyond the loss of one individual. The situation was becoming both a threat to them all and an opportunity for an ambitious wolf.

Ah, well, Roger had never really liked Bertrand very much anyway.

Clark and Lois walked to the corner of Chartres and St. Louis and stepped directly into Inspector Gautreaux' classic Ford Thunderbird, with Lois in the passenger seat and Clark in the back. They both scanned the area as Robert drove north on St. Louis toward Rampart.

"We are free of listeners now, so anything you might wish to tell me would be more than welcome news."

Lois sighed. "I don't think anything we tell you is going to be welcome news."

"Nevertheless, it is information needed for the upcoming battle. Please tell me all that you have learned since you arrived in our fair city."

Lois hesitated. She and Clark had briefly argued about how much information to give the inspector. She wanted to tell him everything, including her suspicion about her werewolf infection, but Clark didn't. He seemed to think that they could handle that aspect of the case on their own, and she admitted that he had a point. They'd faced druids, voodoo priests, ghosts, aliens from multiple worlds, death sentences, Kryptonite, the Prankster, Luthor – more times than either of them wanted to think about – and they'd always come out on top.

But this was different. This time her very essence, the things that made her Lois Lane, the qualities about her which she knew Clark treasured the most, were at risk. The possibility that she might lose him because she became someone else – something else – was too frightening to contemplate. They needed all the information they could get, and they had to share everything they had in order to get it.

But maybe not right away.

So she started off slow. "We had a nice time the first night. We listened to a great little four-piece band at the French Quarter Pizzeria, and then we met a pack of werewolves."

The policeman didn't flinch or freeze. Nor did he laugh. He made the right turn onto Basin Street and followed the curve alongside Louis Armstrong Park. After a long moment, he said, "Which pack did you meet?"

"They were led by a guy calling himself Arthur, as in King Arthur of the Round Table. You know, sixth century England? There was a woman they called Guinevere and a young man who insisted his name was Gawain. They wanted to know why I was in the city."

Robert nodded. "So they already knew who you were?"

"Yes. I don't know how they found out, though. They didn't tell me that."

Robert sighed. "They have contacts in the police department. I would not be surprised if they already knew about our meeting this morning."

Clark leaned forward. "Do you think that young man across the street was from Arthur's group?"

"I do not know for certain, but I suspect not. Arthur rarely employs normal humans for such tasks. Were I forced to make a cash wager, I would quote high odds that he was one of the

Patriarch's human servants."

Lois' head snapped toward him and she huffed in frustration. "I still don't get that. I've had two different people tell me that this – this murderer has humans who work for him of their own free will. Who would do something like that?"

Robert glanced at her as he turned east onto the I-10 access road. "There were many who held pistols to the necks of civilians and shot them over graves they had just dug themselves after the Nazis invaded Russia, *Madame*. Hitler and Goebbels did not visit those atrocities on those people all by themselves. And the Soviet state slew many millions of its own people, simply because too many people feared the things Stalin had proven that he might do to them."

She shuddered. "Yeah, you're right. Thanks for reminding me how evil humans can be."

"I am at your service, *Madame*."

"Yeah, about that, just call me Lois, okay? You say 'Madame' and I look around for an older woman walking down a line of pretty young girls and pointing out their features for the slimy men who want to rent them for a couple of hours."

Robert chuckled. "Very well, Lois. May I redirect our conversation and ask you who guided you to the other werewolves?"

"She called herself Jane. I don't know if that's her real name or if it's a play on Jane Doe or what. She introduced herself to me as Ishmael at first."

Robert frowned. "Ishmael, as in the book of Genesis?"

"No, Ishmael as in Melville's *Moby Dick*. She seems to be into dark humor."

"I see. Monsieur Kent – or may I address you as Clark?"

"Clark is fine."

"Thank you. Clark, did you meet any of these people?"

"I met everyone Lois mentioned except Gawain. I think he was watching the front door. And we also met an interesting man named Alphonse Thibodeaux and a rather standoffish woman named Theresa Wilding. In fact, she was the only one besides Alphonse who gave us a last name."

"Was there anyone else?"

Clark hesitated, so Lois answered, "Yes. A man with a seductive smile and a superior attitude who called himself Lancelot. I don't think that he and Arthur get along very well."

Robert nodded. "That is my impression also. But it is my strong belief that this group is not responsible for the two murders which brought you here."

"They claimed that they don't kill humans," Clark said. "I think I believe them. Of course, that means that the one they called the Patriarch is probably to blame." He stopped, but before either Robert or Lois could speak, he continued. "And I met two of the Patriarch's group, too. Their names were Roger and Andre."

This time Robert reacted. He jerked the steering wheel and Lois thought they were going to drift to the shoulder before he corrected himself and settled down to drive again. "You met both Roger and Andre? Together?"

"Yes."

"And you not only survived the encounter but you are uninjured? *C'est difficile à croire, mon ami*."

"He said he's not sure he believes me, Lois."

"Yeah, I got that. Tell him why he should."

Clark hesitated. "Are you sure about that?"

"If you don't, he'll have a harder time believing anything else we tell him."

Robert gave Lois a concerned glance. "You have more to tell?"

Clark sighed. "Yes. Clark Kent is safe. I'm really Superman."

Robert blinked several times, then looked at the dashboard and pressed the accelerator pedal to recover the speed they'd lost as he'd processed the new information. "I apologize. I was not aware

that – that the great and powerful Superman was also an undercover operative.”

Despite the situation, Lois giggled. “The ‘great and powerful Superman,’ huh? You make him sound like the man behind the curtain nobody should pay attention to.”

“Yes, I suppose it – wait. Ah, *mas oui*, of course. If no one pays attention to you, if no one believes you to be a threat, then you will be better able to protect Lois. You are a veritable – or perhaps I should say, a living – purloined letter, *Monsieur* Superman.”

“That’s me, hiding in plain sight where you least expect to see me.”

“Tell me, did you reveal yourself to any of the werewolves?”

“To Arthur’s pack, yes, but not to Roger or Andre. They were both unconscious when I left them.”

Robert nodded. Then he smiled. Then he chuckled deep in his chest. Then he laughed out loud and slapped the steering wheel three times with one hand. “Oh, that is such a joke on them! Their mighty lord and master, the Patriarch, will not believe that a single human bested them, at least not at first, and then he will seek you out as if you were a rival! He will refuse to believe that any intelligent being, either werewolf or human, would refuse to exercise such power to exalt himself!”

“I guess most Naturals are pretty egotistical and self-centered.”

“Indeed, most are, Lois. There are a few who do not prey on humans, but usually they are either driven from their packs or slain outright.”

“I guess Jane is more unusual than I thought.”

Robert lost his humor. “You know that she is a Natural? And that the rest of Arthur’s pack, including Arthur, are all Turned Ones?”

Lois held up her left hand and showed him the scab. “Yes. I’m quite aware of their relative statuses.”

Robert nodded and licked his lips, then pulled off the Interstate at Elysian Fields. As he turned under the highway to retrace his path, he said, “I feel that I must ask you a question, Lois, but I wish for you to know that I intend no offence. Do you – have you noticed anything – different about yourself lately?”

Here it was, the big question. She couldn’t very well backtrack now, even with Clark sitting in the back seat all stiff and frustrated and wide-eyed. “Yes. I’ve been infected with whatever it is that turns humans into werewolves.”

“I see. May I risk another question?”

“Ask me anything you want.”

“Very well. Have you – have you completed your first transformation yet?”

Clark hissed and shifted in the back seat. “Calm down, Superman!” Lois snapped. “We have to be honest with Robert if we expect him to be honest with us.” To the inspector, she said, “No, I haven’t transformed. I think that being close to Superman inhibits the changes my body is trying to make. And before you ask, neither of us has any idea why that might be so.”

Robert nodded. “I see. That actually fits in with the research Evelyn was doing on the Turned Ones. She was trying to isolate a rapidly mutating virus which temporarily rewrites the DNA of the human victim into whatever DNA resides in werewolves. That seems to be the thing that allows them to transition, as she called it, into wolf form. Her biggest problem was that she lacked sufficient data and samples from newly infected subjects.” He tapped on the steering wheel with one finger. “Perhaps there is something about Superman which defends against this virus, or even attacks it. If so, *Monsieur*, you are probably immune to it.”

“I hope so,” replied Clark. “I know you don’t want to see a super-powered werewolf.”

Lois tried to get them back on track. “Let’s stick a pin in that and debate it later, okay? Alphonse said that Naturals can make

humans into Turned Ones but Turned Ones can’t make more werewolves by biting people.”

“That appears to be true. It allows the Naturals to have some control of the Turned Ones. The Naturals also sometimes use the Turned Ones as expendable soldiers in their battles against other packs of Naturals. As you might imagine, it makes relations between the groups quite tense.”

“I don’t think that’s what the Patriarch wants in this case.”

“No, it is not. Lois, you must understand that the Patriarch is different from most werewolves. He wants power over werewolves and humans both, but he is willing to work slowly and build for the future instead of just living from meal to meal. He has lived long enough to see others destroyed by their bloodlust and greed, and he is determined to end his days as the de facto ruler of the Gulf Coast, if not the entire south-eastern United States.”

The car was silent for a moment, then Lois said, “At least he’s thinking about the big picture.”

“That just makes him more dangerous,” Clark replied.

“That is true.” Robert sighed as he flipped his turn signal on and changed lanes for the exit he wanted. “But perhaps we can stop him.”

“You’re going to arrest a werewolf?” scoffed Lois.

“No, my new friends. We must destroy him.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

Robert sighed deeply. “There is a legend among the Turned Ones that the Patriarch can assume a form half-way between the human and the wolf. I do not know if it is true, nor do I know if the Naturals know of this. Supposedly this half-animal cannot be easily killed by gunfire, assuming it truly is possible.”

“One of the women in Arthur’s pack mentioned something like that,” Clark offered. “She certainly sounded sincere when she denied it.”

“The Turned Ones find that Hollywood form amusing,”

Robert answered. “They do not take it seriously.”

“But you do,” Lois muttered.

“I do. I believe that any werewolf who defeats the Patriarch must be able to transform thus in order to fight him on anything like an equal basis.” Robert slowed and guided his car down the exit ramp. “Perhaps one of Arthur’s pack might be persuaded to hazard this partial change.”

No one spoke for a long moment, then Clark said, “Lois, no.”

“Me? Wait a minute, Superman—”

“Don’t tell me the idea didn’t occur to you. Have you any idea how angry at me your husband would be if you tried a crazy stunt like that? He’d figure out a way to kill me slowly and painfully.”

“Come on! I haven’t even shifted the first time yet! What kind of crazy woman do you think I am, anyway?”

“One who risks her life on a regular basis to fight for truth and justice.”

Robert tried to defuse what sounded like an old argument. “I must agree with the *Monsieur* Superman. Such a course would hazard many lives, not merely your own. Please do not attempt it.”

Lois threw up her hands. “Hey! You’re arguing with someone who agrees with you, guys! Can we just drop the subject?”

“As long as you drop it too,” replied the disguised hero.

Robert slowed to a stop in front of Jimmy J’s and pretended not to hear Lois’ defensive mutterings. He did not know her well, but he did not completely believe her protestations of non-intent to try to change into that beast form.

And if he knew anything about the male of the species, neither did Superman.

Lancelot leaned against the door frame and tossed a torn sleeve onto the kitchen table in front of Arthur. “Here you are, my liege. Another trophy from the Patriarch’s clan, taken by deadly force as usual.”

Arthur looked past Lancelot. “Where is Jane?”
Lancelot heaved a great sigh. “I regret that I must bring you sad tidings, Arthur.”

Arthur felt himself pale. “You don’t mean – they killed Jane?”
“Killed our Jane? Oh, no, no, not at all. They laid not a paw on her.”

“Then what is the bad news?”

Lancelot moved to one side as if presenting a contest winner. “That is the bad news. Our lovely Jane has returned hale and hearty, no less healthy than when she began this sortie last evening.”

Jane elbowed Lancelot in the chest as she walked past him. “Smartass. See if I let you walk in first next time.” She stopped beside the table and grinned at Arthur. “Your idea worked like a charm, Artie. We came out of the sewer drain and picked off five of the Patriarch’s human groupies before dawn.”

Arthur nodded. “I presume you made certain of their identities before you dispatched them?”

“Of course,” answered Lancelot. “With Jane in her wolf form and I in my human, they were disoriented by our assault and became easy prey.”

“And before you ask, yes, Lance and I did it quickly. No torture, no long, drawn-out shredding of limbs or intestines, no agonizing while bleeding out. I doubt the whole thing took more than fifteen seconds. And none of our targets even got off a scream.”

Arthur nodded and relaxed slightly. Two Turned Ones could defeat a single Natural under most circumstances, especially if the Natural were taken by surprise, but the Patriarch’s new tactic of pairing up members of his pack made anything other than a massed attack too risky. Arthur’s band didn’t have the numbers or the tactical advantage for such a strike. But taking out their human servants was as easy as scaring turtles off a log, and would sow fear and mistrust among the rest of the enemy pack’s willing turncoats.

“Where did you find them?”

Lancelot sat down and lifted one foot to the table in an exaggerated pose. “We followed them to a night club on Bourbon Street, one of those dark places with loud music and girls for rent. Our five targets settled for one freelance girl each and set out on a path in the direction of the Patriarch’s lair.”

“We think they were going to be food for the pack,” added Jane.

Lancelot grinned and lifted one index finger. “Before you ask, Arthur, the men were making salacious suggestions to the young ladies, who were, I must admit, giving back as good as they got. And we did not injure a single one of the lovely ladies.”

Arthur’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “What?” He rose from his seat. “You revealed yourselves to those women?”

Jane shook her head. “Not really. We took down the men in a hurry, but neither of us changed shape in front of them. The girls were too shocked to make much noise, and just before we left, Lance called me to him and told them – in a very good Boris Karloff voice – ‘Not a word to the police, ladies. Else the demon hound of Hell shall pursue you to the end of your brief and terrified days.’ I gave them a really effective Hound of the Baskervilles snarl, then we turned and ran off into the crowd on Bourbon Street.” Jane opened the refrigerator and took out a soft drink can, then licked her fingers and opened it with a single claw. “Given the vomit noise behind us and the stink of fear and urine coming from those women, I doubt the Patriarch himself could identify us.”

Arthur shook his head. “I continue to marvel at your audacity, Jane. That is something I would expect from Lancelot, but not from you.”

“Adapt and survive, Arthur,” Lancelot put in. “Now we wait and see how our opponent chooses to meet this latest challenge to

his power. Jane, my love, would you hand me a soft drink, please?”

“Get it yourself, Boris.” Then she swept out of the kitchen and headed toward the common area.

Lancelot grinned at Arthur and switched to French. *<She is truly a firebrand, our Jane. I would be honored to mate with her.>*

<If you were to attempt it, such an act might be your last. Jane is not ours to do with as we wish. She is a free agent.>

<Yes, I know.> Lancelot rose to fetch his own soda, opening it with the provided tab on top of the can instead of a claw. *<And that continues to be a source of puzzlement to me. Why did she join the pack to begin with? And why has she stayed so long? She is not the type to seek out danger, nor does she hunt humans. That in and of itself sets her apart from every other Natural I have ever had the misfortune to meet. Nor does she seek to lead our pack.>* He leaned forward on his elbows. *<Please do not misunderstand me, Arthur. I’m most grateful that she is on our side and not that of our enemies. But this is a conundrum I cannot solve on my own.>*

Arthur picked up the bloody sleeve and sniffed it. *<Unfortunate choice of deodorant. No wonder he had to purchase his women.>* The sleeve fell to the table. *<As to Jane’s ultimate motivation, Lancelot, I cannot enlighten you because she has never shared it with me. I know only that when she has concluded her self-assigned mission, whatever it may be, she will leave us.>*

Lancelot switched back to English. “In that case, I hope I’m around to see it.”

I hope we’re all around to see it, thought Arthur.

Chapter Eight

The Patriarch didn’t like delays. His human pets should have returned half an hour ago, bringing dinner with them. He wasn’t enthusiastic about sending these most unreliable minions on such a sensitive mission, but the pack’s visibility in the area was still too high. He couldn’t seem to get them to understand that the more people saw them, the more danger they were in. Even Andre and Roger, his two closest lieutenants, were looking at him from the corners of their eyes. And he could read doubt in them – doubt not in the pack, but in the Patriarch himself.

He growled to himself. He didn’t want to purge the pack. He’d spent too much time and energy training and shaping them all to follow him and obey him under any and all circumstances to start over with a revamped crew. But if things didn’t turn around soon, he might be forced into it.

His problem, of course, was how long to wait. If he began a purge too soon, when most of the pack were still considering what to do and whom to follow, he would alienate the survivors by appearing to lead by intimidation. That never worked in the long run, either in the human arena or the lupine. But if he waited until he’d lost most of them, he wouldn’t be strong enough to lead after the purge, nor would the pack be strong enough to accomplish his purposes. It was a balancing act high above the ground, no net below him. It was as if he were walking on razor wire, blindfolded and with no clues to his relative location between either anchor.

He’d always been able to sense the right time before. But now? Now he was unsure, off balance, and puzzled. The other campaigns he’d led had ultimately become open battles between packs. He’d never faced a guerilla war aimed at his own followers before, and Arthur’s constant nibbling at the edges of his pack were taking a toll on all of them.

He felt the change in mood before he heard it. Their human slaves were bringing dinner directly to them. It was another change in his usual practice, since leaving body parts strewn around a lair tended to attract all the wrong kinds of attention. But none of them had eaten for two days and they were too hungry to be allowed out on their own.

He looked up as he sensed the mood shift again.

Roger walked hesitantly into the old basement and said nothing. One of the others grabbed his arm and called his name, but Roger shrugged him off and came directly to his master.

And the Patriarch could read fear in every step.

“What is your news, Roger?” asked the leader of the pack.

Roger’s mouth opened for a moment, then closed, then opened again. “They – they’re dead.”

The Patriarch sat up slowly, trying not to appear too startled. “Who is dead?”

Roger swallowed and blinked twice, then said, “Our human servants. They’re all dead.”

For a long moment, silence reigned, then Beatrice, one of the younger ones, demanded, “You mean someone killed our dinner?”

The general murmuring began immediately. The Patriarch lifted his hand for silence. When he got it, he spoke softly. “Beatrice speaks out of turn, Roger, but her question is valid. Who is dead?”

“Our – our slaves. They’re all dead. All killed.”

He forestalled the shocked murmuring with another upraised hand. “How did they die?”

Roger took a deep breath. “It was difficult to tell. Two died of bites to the throat, but two others had their necks broken by what appeared to be a human using some martial arts moves. And the fifth – the largest and strongest – was strangled by human hands. There were – the fifth one wore ripped bite marks on his upper arms as if a large dog or a werewolf had knocked him down and held him in place.”

A shocked silence greeted these words. “What happened to the ones who were to be our dinner?”

“They were not injured, as far as I could tell. They were, however, terrified, and they voided their stomachs and bladders and bowels at the scene. I tried to follow the attackers, but they melted into the late-night Bourbon Street crowd and vanished.”

More murmurs, some of them angry. He had to regain control, so he stood and looked over the pack. All of them quieted, but not immediately, and some did not appear to be as docile and submissive as he preferred.

He’d deal with that later, after they’d fed. “Roger, were you able to identify the attackers?”

“I – I think it was Jane and one other of Arthur’s pack, but I cannot be certain. The stench from the women who were with them blocked much of the scent trail, and I was unable to discover where they had lain in wait for the group. It was as if they had—” He broke off when he saw his master’s thunderous expression.

“As if they had done what, Roger?” he hissed.

“N-nothing, my lord! I ask forgiveness. I am often given to flights of fancy.”

“Tell me of this flight. Do you have any idea where they hid?”

Roger visibly steeled himself and straightened. “I believe they were waiting on a nearby balcony, my lord, and dropped down among the group as it passed by. But as I said, I cannot be certain. I was unable to investigate the scene fully, and there were no clear scent trails.”

The Patriarch glared at him for two long breaths, then slowly nodded. “I understand. I myself am puzzled and frustrated by these continued strikes at us. We shall have to plan a suitable response to this tiny band of ragged cowards, but for the moment my hunger overpowers everything else.” He lifted his head and almost howled as he shouted, “Come, my friends! To the slums of New Orleans! We shall dine heartily tonight!”

The entire pack responded with snarls and growls and their own howls. The prospect of a live feast had them wide-eyed and slavering, and the Patriarch knew where a sizable number of homeless prey congregated for the night. As long as he protected his acolytes and fed them bountifully, he would be their leader, and they would follow him blindly.

They were his once again.

For the moment.

Lois laughed as she caught the string of beads thrown from the float. There were innumerable women around her – young, old, alone, in pairs, in groups, with men, without them, drunk, sober, buzzed, straight, stoned out of their minds – who were burdened down with the cheap necklaces because they were willing to bare their breasts to the young people on the floats. Doing so was a long-standing tradition during the Mardi Gras parade, even one happening two days early, but she wasn’t willing to embarrass herself in that way. All she’d done was tug the shoulder of her shirt over about an inch and the man on the float had laughed and tossed her a necklace.

Besides, she knew Clark wouldn’t let her strip in public.

Then an evil thought hit her.

Who cared what Clark thought? All she had to do was lift up her shirt and be showered with beads! She could brag to Lucy about what she’d done to earn them, and these guys didn’t care about one woman’s boobs over any other woman’s. Most of them wouldn’t even remember the parade the next morning, let alone one lone woman’s unadorned chest.

Hey, maybe if she pulled her shirt and bra off and threw them away they’d let her up on the float. She still looked good enough to pull a stunt like that. A couple of the floats had already rewarded such daring with short rides down the block. And it would be easier to apologize to Clark after than get his permission beforehand.

Get his permission? What was she thinking? She din’ need no stinkin’ permission!

She crossed her arms and grabbed the hem of her pullover shirt to lift it—

And Clark grabbed her from behind and carried her away from the parade. “Lois!” he hissed in her ear. “Get hold of yourself!”

She snarled incoherently at him and slammed her head into his nose. Then she rammed her elbow into his stomach and scratched at his hands, all to no avail. One foot found a nearby brick wall and she tried to shove him backward. What was the idiot doing? Why couldn’t he let her do what she—

The realization of what she’d almost done shocked her into immobility. She might as well have been doused with a cooler of ice water. She’d almost stripped to the waist in public! What was she doing? What was she feeling?

She collapsed in tears as Clark held her up. He helped her into the mouth of an alley and said, “It’s okay, honey, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” she sobbed. “I can’t – I wasn’t in control! I knew what I was doing and I just didn’t care!”

“It’s just the party atmosphere, Lois, the Mardi Gras parade, the excitement—”

“No!” She found her footing and stood. “You and I both know what’s really going on! That scratch infected me! We have to go see Arthur’s pack again! We have to find out how to stop this!”

He stiffened. “We can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

She grabbed his shirt collar and pulled his face close to hers. “Listen to me!” she snarled. “I’m not in control of myself! I can’t go back to Metropolis like this! Clark, I – I’m starting to dream about chasing down and eating rabbits and cats and nutria! I can smell things no human should be able to smell! You felt how strong I am just now! Tell me that was normal!”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to.

“I don’t want to be a werewolf,” she whispered fiercely. “I want to be plain old Lois Lane Kent, ace reporter and senior partner to the second-best reporter in the country. I want to go home to Metropolis and not worry about turning into a vicious, mindless animal and ripping some intern’s throat out because she smiled at you.”

“You’ve had those thoughts? Really?”

“I seriously considered biting our waitress’ face off tonight.”

“But – but she was just being polite! She didn’t mean anything! And I wasn’t attracted to her at all!”

She gritted her teeth angrily. “I know that! But you can’t stand next to me for the rest of our lives, ready to grab me if I try to do something stupid!” She forced herself to relax. “Clark, please. If anyone can help me, Arthur or Jane can.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but said nothing for a long moment. Then he shook his head. “I don’t like it.”

She released his shirt and leaned back slightly. “Neither do I, darling. But I don’t see any real alternative.” She touched his cheek. “We have to go see them together. We’ll make them understand that I don’t want to be a werewolf. We’ll make them tell us how to stop it.”

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “All right. We’ll pay them a visit.”

Clark landed them softly on the roof of the house where they’d first met Arthur and his pack, just about where he’d first broken in to make his dramatic entrance. As he lowered his glasses and scanned the building with what Lois still called his ‘vision gizmo,’ he huffed out a sigh. “Empty. Nobody’s home. Elvis turned out the lights when he left this building.”

“I want to take a closer look.”

Surprised, he lifted his head to her and spread his hands wide. “Just how close do you want to get?”

“I want inside. Maybe I can sniff out something they left behind.”

“You do recall that you’re with Superman, right? The guy with all the super-senses?”

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. “I remember. I also know that you can’t always smell things through walls or roofs. I want to take a closer look.”

He shrugged and began pulling up shingles. “I hope you know that I’ll be right behind you.”

“I’m counting on it.”

He put his arm around her waist and let her put her foot on his. They floated down together to the second floor landing and landed softly. “Okay, Lois, here we go. Down the stairs and to the left—”

“No. You stay here. I’m going on alone.”

His eyebrows danced on his forehead. “I don’t think so. There’s no human or canine presence here, but that doesn’t mean someone didn’t leave a few booby traps behind.”

“I’m not a booby,” she replied sharply.

He tried to defuse her rising tension by softly taking her hand and tugging her closer. “I know that. I’m just being overprotective, I guess.”

She slid next to him and wrapped her arms around his chest. “No, you’re not, you’re being the best you that you could ever be, and you’re trying to protect me.” She leaned back a little and gazed up at him. “But you can’t protect me from this. I have to take this – this thing, this new ability, whatever we call it, take it out for a few trial runs so I can be certain that I can maintain control. And I need you there as my safety line.”

Her voice softened and her eyes grew even deeper. “I will never stop needing you to save me when I’m in over my head. You’re my hero and I love you for it. But I can’t hold you back from doing what you have to do, and you can’t walk in lockstep with me everywhere I go because I dive in without checking the water level.” She slid her hands down to his and stepped back still holding them. “Please. Just stay here and watch me. I can’t use any of the wolf inside me when we’re this close to each other.”

He held her gaze for a full three seconds, then slowly nodded once. “Okay. I’ll just keep watch here. You go do that voodoo that you do so well.”

Her head tilted to one side without smiling. “You do know where we are, don’t you? New Orleans, the voodoo capital of the USA, remember?”

“Sorry. Just trying to lighten the mood.”

“And I love you for that, too, but I’ll have to laugh about it later. Wish me luck.”

Luck can run out, he thought, but he didn’t say that aloud. She held his hands long enough to take a deep breath, then she dropped them and sprinted halfway down the first flight of stairs. She skipped the landing by vaulting over the handrail and landing cat-like on the flight below, then almost leaped the rest of the way to the next floor.

Clark was startled. He’d always known she was a good athlete and was aware that she had kept up her martial arts training – she’d actually made him pay attention during their recent sparring sessions – but this display of quickness, agility, and contained power startled him. He watched as she slipped quietly but swiftly through the lower floor, leaning slightly forward as if she were a hunter testing the scents about her.

She coursed through the ground floor, leading with her nose as she padded softly down the hallway. Suddenly she froze beside a closed door. He watched as she examined the doorway with both her eyes and her nose, then he tensed as she slowly opened the door and slipped inside.

All he could see at that point was the top of a flight of stairs and an occasional bit of Lois as she ghosted down to the basement. Old house, stupid lead-based paint, he fumed. If she doesn’t come back into view soon he’d—

She took a turn and reappeared in his special sight, stopping at another doorway near the middle of the basement wall, this one a metal door with a heavy lock on it. Then she sent a shiver down his spine as she turned, looked directly at him, and gestured for him to come to her.

He couldn’t help but believe that she’d known exactly where he was in relation to her, and that she’d known that he’d been watching her like a hawk.

In a moment he was beside her as she examined this new door. “They left through here,” she said, “and I think they took all their gear with them. What’s on the other side?”

He peered through the door and huffed. “It’s an old tunnel that probably started out as a sewer. I can tell by just looking that neither of us is going to be able to follow any scent trail in there.”

“That nasty, huh?” she asked. He nodded. “Well,” she sighed, “I guess we go find one of the Patriarch’s crew.”

He frowned. “You know how bad an idea I thought this was, right?”

“You made your opinion quite plain.”

“Kick that up by a factor of about a hundred.”

She sighed. “Look, Clark—”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“You can protect me.”

“Not if all of them hit us at once.”

“Then I’ll fight back.”

He put his hands on his hips and stepped directly in front of her. “And do what? Are you willing to kill one of them? I guarantee you they won’t take it easy on you!”

She held his gaze for a long moment, then nodded. “I see your point. We won’t go looking for them.”

Clark relaxed and pulled her to himself. “Look, I’m just as scared as you are. Maybe more. I don’t think – I can’t imagine us not being together for the rest of our lives.”

She snuggled closer. “You won’t have to. I promise you that.”

His arms tightened around her as the glass-half-empty part of his mind muttered, There are no guarantees in life, baby.

Even though he’d skipped breakfast after hearing of this new incident, Robert Gautreaux was physically sick.

Nineteen dead.

All of them dismembered.

And all of them squatters in the same building.

Every bone the searchers found bore non-human tooth marks. The long bones of the legs and arms had been cracked and the marrow sucked out. Most of the muscle tissues and internal organs were gone, and the few remnants of soft tissue displayed tear marks and the evidence of tremendous shear force. This was no cult killing or cannibalistic celebration.

Rougarou had struck once again.

Robert stood beside the door of the condemned property and watched the ambulance attendants, hollow-eyed and pale, carry stretcher after stretcher outside. The number of victims was an estimate based on the number of crushed, bloody skull pieces which were strewn about the old factory. Robert's hands shook as he contemplated the possibility that there were more victims – or, worse, that some had been carried away while yet living.

That was a fate he judged to be worse than the Nazi Holocaust murders he'd mentioned to Lois Lane two nights before.

So far, the media hadn't caught wind of this massacre, but that could not last. Someone would mention a husband or wife or adult child who was a police officer or nurse or ambulance driver who had come home crying or in shock. Someone would notice the number of ambulances pulling up to the morgue and disgorging – the word made Robert's stomach turn over again – the remains of the victims. Someone would have to put names to the various puzzles of bone and tissue they had found.

And someone would have to put a stop to the vile creatures who had done this horrible thing.

The only positive – and it was a horrible one – was that all of the dead seemed to be homeless, the invisible people of modern cities, the closest social class to the Untouchables of traditional India existing in the Western world. The only ones who would miss these victims, the only ones who would feel their loss, were the others like them, others with no material wealth, no jobs, no influential friends who would harass the police or local politicians to do something to avenge them.

Robert didn't know what to do next.

The city's police chief was a good man and a good cop, but he had to play the political games Robert hated passionately in order to keep his position. Additionally, the man hadn't been in New Orleans the last time the Patriarch's pack had ripped through the city, and he regarded things such as tales of werewolf massacres as so much alcohol-fueled nightmares. Telling Chief Douglas Barnaby that Rougarou had perpetrated this horror would, at best, get him suspended. More likely he'd be transferred to some administrative position until he found another police force in another city willing to hire him. Either way, it would be an exercise in futility.

It did not occur to him that Arthur's little pack might be indirectly responsible for the charnel house in which he now stood. There weren't enough of them to kill this many without allowing some to escape. And he firmly believed that Arthur had told Lois Lane the truth, that his pack did not hunt or eat humans. The thought that they might have pushed the Patriarch into this action by denying them other food did not cross his mind.

He needed to talk to Superman. The hero was the only person in the city Robert trusted enough to solicit his advice. Maybe Superman would take pity on them and help them rid his city of this scourge.

He reached for the phone, then hesitated. If he asked Superman for help, it would soon become common knowledge among the others in the precinct. It would be only a few days, perhaps even a few hours, until Chief Barnaby heard. Barnaby would call Robert in for a chat and possibly suspend him if he even hinted at the word Rougarou. There was too much risk, both personal and security-wise, to call Superman directly.

He put his face in his hands for a moment, then his head popped up. Walter.

That was it. He would contact Walter and ask him to pass a

message to Clark Kent, asking the reporter to come to Robert's precinct. He would avoid the danger of allowing his suspicions – no, his certainty – about werewolves to become office gossip fodder. Walter would be most busy sorting through the latest batch of victims, of course, but Robert was certain that he would recognize the urgency of this request.

He pressed the intercom button. Melody Brennan responded at once. "Yes, sir?"

"Please place a call for Dr. Smith in the Medical Examiner's office to call me at his earliest convenience. It is important."

"At once, Inspector."

Louisa D'Amour answered her phone from a standing position beside her desk. "ME's office, can you hold? Thank – what do you mean 'no'? We're kinda backed up down here and – oh, you're police? You want who? No. No way, honey. Dr. Smith is up to his butt in dead bodies right now and everybody's pitching in. They've even got me doing Diener duty and I'm an admin, not a gurney jockey! A message? Sure, just let me find – got it. Go ahead." Louisa listened and scribbled for a moment. "Got it. I don't know when he'll get a free moment today – you already told me it was urgent! Police business? What do you think we're doing down here? Okay, fine! I'll give him the message as soon as I see him. I gotta get back to work."

Louisa dropped the phone into its cradle and jammed the message paper into her lab coat pocket. She had every intention of giving it to Dr. Smith as soon as she saw him.

Then someone pushed a gurney into her thigh and she stumbled. Her left hand shot down to keep her from falling and hit something wet and squishy. Louisa yanked her hand away and blood splattered on her face.

"Sorry, Lou," the young man muttered. "You better wash up right now."

Almost frantic, Louisa turned and half-ran to the washup sink to get clean. No telling whose blood that was, no telling what communicable diseases might be trying to invade her skin at this very moment. She dropped her coat on the floor and kicked it under the sink, then turned on the water and began scrubbing every exposed part of her skin. She'd grab another lab coat when she was done, and she planned to fill its pockets with latex gloves.

She never gave the message another thought.

Rather than return to their hotel, Clark and Lois wandered toward Jackson Square. Lois held her husband's hand all the way as if she were drawing strength from him. It seemed to be working – her color was better, her heart rate was down close to normal, and a ghost of a smile played across her face.

He heard the music and gently tugged her in that direction. "You're taking me to a concert?"

He tilted his head to one side and smiled. "I think it's the band we saw that first night. The keyboard player told me you needed my help and I want to thank her. Besides, we could use a short break."

Lois leaned closer. "You didn't tell me you'd talked to the keyboardist. You're sure she told you I needed help?"

"Actually, she said that you needed me. I'd like to know how she came to that conclusion."

"Huh. I think I want to know, too."

"Well, then, why don't we sit down and enjoy the gentle Caribbean island rhythms they're playing for us?"

He looked around and saw that they weren't the only ones who were enjoying the soft sounds the band was producing. Lois smiled at him and lifted his hand in hers, then led him to the ledge around the fountain about thirty feet from the band's setup. They sat and absorbed the music as Lois swayed gently to the soft beat. She closed her eyes and seemed to surrender to the music, apparently secure in the knowledge that Clark would keep her safe

no matter what.

The band came to the end of the piece they were playing with a slightly bluesy piano riff. The people clapped enthusiastically, then laughed as the bass player leaned into his mic and said, “Thank you, *mes amis*, thank you. Your applause warms our hearts. However, that is not what warms our stomachs.” He picked up an upside-down water cooler bottle and turned it to show the home-made label. “As this says, we cannot eat our instruments, so we encourage you to donate what you feel is appropriate. I promise that it will go to food, clothing, and shelter, nothing else.”

Their audience laughed and clapped again. Clark led a number of people walking up to drop both handfuls of coin and folded bills into the bottle. His ten dollars led the donations, but it wasn’t the largest of the session. When the traffic in front of the band died down, he said, “You know, you guys might be the only sober musicians in the city tonight.”

The guitarist and drummer smiled widely. The bass player rolled his eyes. But the keyboardist chuckled. “Thank you, sir. You are probably correct.”

The bassist tilted his head at Clark and said, “There are some specific reasons for our being sober tonight. Aside for our shared distaste for inebriation, I mean.”

“Really? Can you tell me what some of them might be?”

The keyboardist’s smile remained but her eyes changed. “We need to speak with yourself and your wife together, please.”

“Um – what happened to your accent?”

“It is useful for our music and our dealing with the majority of tourists. I was born in Monserrat and lived there until the volcano erupted in 1995. My family fled to New Orleans to work and to survive. I speak fair English, Cajun French, a smattering of Spanish, and some bits and pieces of several tribal languages. But this is not urgent information.” She leaned forward ever so slightly. “Our speaking with you and your wife is, however, most urgent.”

Clark looked at each of their faces and saw the same thing in each one, a gentle determination to complete some kind of mission. After a long moment, he turned and gestured for Lois to join him.

She stood, still smiling, and ambled to his side. When she took his hand again, he said, “Dear, these folks want to speak with us.”

Her puzzlement showed. “Both of us? Together?”

“*Oui, madame*,” the keyboardist said. “We must bring you a warning.”

Instead of asking what the warning was, Lois said, “What do you think you know about us? Why are you warning us?”

The guitarist switched off his microphone and walked toward her, still holding his guitar over his shoulder. “Jolene – the piano girl – gave your husband a warning the first night you were here. Unfortunately, we were too late to stop your misfortune. We’re glad, though, that he was able to find you and protect you.”

Clark felt Lois’ temper swelling, so he put his arm around her shoulders and gave her an affectionate squeeze – only slightly harder than normal. “We’re waiting for the warning,” he said.

Jolene, the keyboardist, lowered her voice and said, “We know you have met werewolves in this city. We urge you both to do anything and everything you can to keep them from departing. There are people here who have fought them before and can deal with them, but only if they do not leave the city. This is urgent.”

Lois’s temper deflated, but not her intensity. “Fine. Let’s say you’re on the nose with all this. Why are you telling us? Shouldn’t you tell the people who can deal with them instead?”

The bassist said, “Those folks already know what’s going on and what they need to do. But you two need to help them. With you two working with them, their chances of winning the upcoming battle increase significantly.”

“The two of us?” blurted Lois. “What can I do against them?”

The drummer tapped his sticks together softly and said, “More

than you know or believe. Don’t worry, you both will know what to do when the time comes.”

“When will that be?”

The drummer shook his head. “We don’t know exactly when, but we believe it will be soon. Very soon. And when you act, you must not hesitate. Your enemies will give you no quarter. Mercy is not in their vocabulary.”

Clark and Lois stared at the band for a long moment, then as if on cue turned to look into each other’s eyes. Lois was the first to nod, then Clark joined her.

He extended his hand across the keyboard. “Thank you, Jolene. We will heed your warning. We’ll be ready when we need to be ready.”

Jolene took his hand on both of hers and exhaled deeply. “Thank you, sir. Now I believe that the two of you should take this opportunity to rest. There may not be another for a long time.”

“Thanks,” Clark replied, “we’ll do that. We’ll see you again soon.”

The keyboardist smiled sadly and released his hand. “I certainly hope so, sir. I also hope that is a promise which you would not be prevented from keeping.”

Chapter Nine

Lois had sat in the chair across from the darkened TV for more than two hours as the daylight slipped away, moving only occasionally to a slightly different position. Clark had been worried at first until he realized that she was deep in thought. And because she was focused on something – probably their current predicament – he moved as little as possible and was silent when he did move.

Finally she unfolded her legs from beneath her and stood in front of him. “I know what I have to do.”

He handed her a tall glass of ice water. “What’s that?”

She took the glass and drained half of it without stopping. “Since we can’t find Arthur’s band, and since finding the Naturals would just start a fight—”

“I’m glad you see it my way.”

She shrugged. “Don’t get cocky. Even a busted clock is right twice a day.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Her glance at him carried whimsy for a moment, then shut down. “I have to change.”

His eyes narrowed and he took the glass back. “I hope you’re referring to your wardrobe.”

“You know I’m not.”

He shook his head sharply. “That’s a terrible idea, Lois. And that’s if everything goes like you want it to. Otherwise it could be a complete, total, utter, unmitigated disaster.”

“I’ve got to be able to take care of myself. I always have and I don’t want to give up that control.”

“But—”

“Shh.” She put her index finger on his lips. “I know how dangerous this is. I’m counting on you to keep me grounded, okay?”

“I won’t know when to step in and try to stop the transformation!”

She smiled softly. “Of course you’ll know. You always know. You’ve rescued me from dozens of imminent death situations since we met. You won’t let me down now.”

His heart shrank in on itself as if liquid nitrogen were being poured on it. “Lois, please don’t—”

Her hand fell away from his mouth to cover his heart. “I trust you with my life. I always have and I always will. I know that you’ll protect me.” She smiled up at him. “And I trust you to protect ‘us,’ the ‘us’ that we’ll always have.”

Of course, he thought, she’s going to do it. Even if I weren’t here, she’d still try.

Silently she guided him to the head of the bed and pushed him until he sat down. “I want you to stay there unless I call you. Okay?”

He held his breath for a long moment, then nodded without breaking eye contact with her. “I’ll stay until you call for me. Or until I think you’ve gone too far.”

She nodded. “Fair enough. Now, in order to do this, I’ll have to undress, so don’t get any amorous ideas right now.”

He made a show of sighing with disappointment. “If you really insist.”

She smiled and moved to the foot of the bed. “If you weren’t here, I wouldn’t try this.”

The thought that had he not been there, she would have already been forced to transform slapped him in the cerebral cortex. She was right again, he mused. She had to try this, no matter how dangerous it was.

Lois turned her back on him and stepped to the foot of the bed, then stopped and shed her clothing. As she walked closer to the door, her posture shifted until she stopped moving and leaned forward, her forearms seeming to lengthen as her knees turned around to face the wrong way and her thighs bent and formed an extra joint.

Clark nearly lost it at that point. Being told that a human could transform into a wolf was one thing – really believing it was something else entirely. And watching it happen to the woman he loved more than his own life almost pushed him into rushing toward her and enveloping her in his most protective embrace.

Somehow he held his ground and just watched.

Her hair flowed back along her skull and her ears crawled up the sides of her head, elongating into points as they went. Her waist seemed to move up her body as her legs shortened. Suddenly she dropped to all fours and groaned.

The groan turned into a growl and she filled her lungs with air. Now!

Clark flung himself at the beast his wife had become and tackled her. She squirmed and snarled and fought back with preternatural strength. It was not unlike trying to wrestle a polar bear without bruising it.

Her struggles suddenly ceased as the almost-lupine shape in his arms stiffened and then began shaking. “It’s me, Lois!” he whispered in her ear. “It’s Clark. I’m here for you. I’ve got you and I’m not letting go!”

The almost-wolf creature he was holding abruptly went limp and began panting. As he watched, she transitioned from an almost-wolf back to being a human woman. The pattern of her panting changed from that of an exhausted dog to that of an exhausted woman. The fur beneath his hands faded like morning fog on Hob’s Bay. Her skin was suddenly damp, clammy human epidermis again. She moaned as if she’d just been dropped from a tall building and not been caught by her husband.

“Lois? Lois! Are you okay? What can I do? How can I help?”

She rolled her head so she could face him. Still breathing deeply, she managed to say, “That – really hurt. I mean – it really hurt. Like knives gouging – way down – deep inside my bones – and fire under my skin – kind of hurt.” She collapsed against his torso. “After that – I think – childbirth will be – be a breeze.”

He gently kissed her forehead. “I think that’s enough of that, don’t you?”

Her eyes opened. After a couple of tries, they focused on him. “Not yet. Need to – try again.”

“What? Again? But you just—”

She nodded and found his face with her eyes again, more quickly this time. “As bad as the pain was, Clark, I – I almost controlled it. I almost had it. I just – didn’t think it would hurt so much.” She leaned her head against his massive chest. “It surprised me, that’s all.”

He shook his head. “No. You can’t. I thought – I thought for a

second that I – that I’d lost you.”

She smiled and touched his face. “I don’t think there’s any place I could go where you couldn’t find me.”

He choked back a sob and said, “As long as – as both of us are alive, that will be true.”

“I know. Now I need a favor from you.”

“Anything. Anything at all.”

“Just pick me up and put me on the bed. I’ll be more comfortable there than here on the floor.”

He exhaled deeply. “Done and done. And then you need some sleep.”

She nestled her head against his chest. “Just a couple of hours. Then I need to try it again.”

He lifted her and floated her to the bed. “No. It’s too much for you.”

“I have to, darling. I have to be able to control this change. It may be my only chance to stay alive.” She caught his hand as he pulled the sheet up to her chest. “Promise me that you’ll let me try again later.”

He was so mad at her for endangering herself that he wanted to punch her.

He was so proud of her for facing something this terrible head-on that he wanted to lead a parade for her.

He was so frightened that she’d be hurt that he seriously considered flying her straight to STAR labs and ordering Bernie Klein to diagnose this – this thing threatening her life and fix it immediately.

He loved her so much that he did exactly as she asked.

She went through the change three more times, and each time even Clark could see that the process became less difficult for her. Not that it was easy – it just didn’t threaten to rip her psyche to shreds like the first time.

The second change took her to the point of becoming a wolf before she reached out to her husband to rescue her.

The third change dropped her to all fours before she whimpered like a kicked puppy and took a single step toward him.

The fourth time – the last time, Clark promised himself – Lois’ body was gone and a wolf stood in her place. The animal panted for a long moment, then shook itself and stood tall. But when it looked at him, there was real intelligence in its eyes.

“Lois?” he whispered. “Are you in there?”

The animal yipped once and nodded its head. Then it sat down on the carpet as if proud of what it had just accomplished.

No, thought Clark, that’s not an “it.” That’s my wife, the woman I love.

Then a horrible thought struck him. What if she couldn’t change back?

“Lois? Can you change back without – without me being there to help you?”

She tilted her head as if to say, Silly human, of course I can.

And she did.

Watching the transition from animal form to human was just as jarring as seeing it happen the other way around. Her fur faded back into her skin, her muzzle shrank to form a human nose and mouth, her ears flowed down the sides of her head to their original position, and her hind legs bent unnaturally until they were pink and smooth again. The most obvious evidence of her exertions was the sweat that dripped from her earlobes and chin.

She finally lifted her normal face to her husband and smiled wearily. “I did it,” she panted. “I really did it. And I can control it from now on.”

“You mean – you can become the wolf—”

“Any time I choose, yes. I told you I could control it.” She chuckled wearily. “Eat your heart out, Teen Wolf Michael J. Fox.”

His arms wrapped her up in his loving embrace and he wept silently for what she’d been forced to undergo. And he promised

himself that he'd make sure this ordeal had not been in vain.

Gawain looked both ways before crossing Hamilton just north of 5th street. The next block was Ocean Avenue, and he was sure he could find some trace of the Patriarch's pack near the wooded area to his right. The news of the homeless massacre had already made its way to Arthur's safe house, and in the babble of anger and disgust it created, he'd slipped away.

He was tired of being treated like a mascot. He hated Jane's verbal pats on the head, Lancelot's false smiles and demeaning remarks, and Guinevere's patronizing dismissal of his abilities. He might be the newest member of the pack, having only been turned twenty months earlier, and he might be the smallest, but he was beginning to hold his own in the sparring sessions with Jane and Arthur. He was also the one most familiar with the Big Easy as she was today, not as she had been decades before.

And he wanted to be a hero. Maybe then Teresa – or even Jane – would smile at him with admiration instead of condescension.

A faint scent came to him, along with the sound of something moving in the wooded area. He stopped and crouched, then decided that what he heard was a small alligator looking for water. The scrape of scales over dirt and wood was unmistakable once you'd heard—

He felt himself falling and realized that he'd been hit in the back of the head. His cheek smashed into the ground and he heard himself grunt with pain and the force of the impact.

So much for being a hero.

Then the stars disappeared from the sky. He smelled something caustic and lost consciousness.

"I say we hit them now while they are torpid from stuffing themselves!"

Arthur shook his head. "We are too few, Lancelot, and we do not know where they have hidden themselves. We stand a much better chance of being wiped out than we do of destroying them."

"We cannot allow this atrocity to remain unpunished!"

Guinevere shook her head. "I feel as you do, Lancelot, but Arthur is correct. What you propose is understandable, but it is a suicide mission. If we had fifty more with us – or even thirty – I would support you, and I suspect Arthur would also. But our half-dozen against the Patriarch's pack? None of us would survive the battle."

If it were possible, Lancelot became even more frantic. "Then what? I ask you all, what do we do? How do we respond? We cannot sit here and do nothing! Our actions in denying them food and in killing a few have pushed them into this unspeakable crime! We are partly responsible for those deaths! Teresa, where are you going?"

"To relieve Gawain at the front door. I would rather watch for our enemies than hear you plan our extermination."

"Do you care so little about the innocents who have died by their fangs?"

Teresa's eyes narrowed and her fists clenched. She spun on her heel, then stalked toward Lancelot and stopped inches from his face. "I care," she hissed. "I care more than you know. You care because your life is in more danger and you are closer to exposure and being hunted to your death by normal humans. I care about all the people who will never see their loved ones again, those who will not see tomorrow, who cannot even see tonight's stars! So do not attempt to justify your pleas for self-preservation under the banner of righteous vengeance! Not to me!" She bared her teeth and snapped at him once. "With others you may risk such a course, but never test me thus again!"

Her nostrils flared and she rose on her toes as if ready to attack him, then spun on her heel again and stomped toward the front door. No one spoke for a long moment, then Jane sighed deeply.

"We'll get them, Lance. We will take them down. We'll have

to do it slow and steady, but we'll get them. We'll put enough pressure on them that the Patriarch will get desperate enough to either leave town or come out in the open. If he leaves, it will cost him prestige and power. If he comes out, the humans will realize who he is and go after him. Either way, we'll hurt him."

She stepped to the middle of the group, her voice harder and firmer. "But we have to play the long game. We have to be the guerillas in this war. Every one of us wants to rip the Patriarch apart and spread his organs along the bank of a bayou. I know I do. But if we try it now, we'll all die, and we probably won't kill him." Her body seemed to deflate. "That's not a trade I'm willing to make right now."

Lancelot muttered under his breath for a moment, then fixed Arthur with a piercing stare. "Fine. Assuming Alphonse agrees with everyone else, I'm willing—"

"Where's Gawain!"

Teresa's sudden appearance and shouted query startled everyone. Arthur frowned and replied, "He's supposed to be on lookout duty."

"He is not there and has not been for at least an hour!"

For a long moment, the only sound was Teresa's anxious breathing, then Jane covered her face with her hands. "No, no, no!" she wailed. "That stupid, stupid, stupid kid!"

They all knew what he'd done. And why. And that there was no help for him.

If he survived, he'd return on his own. If not—

If not, his death would be yet another reason for them to destroy the Patriarch and his band.

Slap.

Slap.

Double slap.

Gawain's eyes cracked open.

He didn't recognize either the man or the woman standing over him.

The man nodded. "Try the smelling salts."

Isn't that what they wave under a boxer's nose when—

The acrid odor assaulted Gawain and jarred him into a less unconscious state.

"Aahh! Who're you? Wha'm I here?"

The woman capped the vial and put it in her pocket. The man said, "I'm glad you're back with us. My name is Roger, and this is Bernice. We need for you to answer some questions, then we'll tell you anything you want to know."

That sounded like a good deal. "Ya, sure."

"Do you know someone named Arthur?"

"Arrer?" Something was wrong. They shouldn't be asking about Arthur.

"Yes, Arthur. Is he your pack leader still?"

Gawain's head cleared a bit more and he realized that this man – Roger, his name was Roger, need to remember that – knew he was a werewolf and that he was part of Arthur's pack. But how could he know that unless—

Roger and Bernice were also werewolves. They were with the Patriarch.

They were Naturals. And he was their prisoner.

Dismay filled his heart. He'd found what he'd sought, but he knew he wouldn't survive long enough to use the information or pass it on.

Bernice leaned closer. "He's coming around, Roger. He knows who we are and that we know who he is. I think we can talk to him now."

Gawain tried to shift his position on the floor but couldn't. He suddenly realized that his hands were bound in front of him and there was a collar around his neck, and it was poking his skin with sharp points.

"You know what that is, don't you, boy?" Roger taunted. "You

change, you cut your own throat and drown in your own blood. You struggle, same thing happens.” The older werewolf smiled. “Now you will answer my questions, yes?”

It was the smile that tipped the scales, the same insulting, dismissive smile the rest of them had shown him when he told them that he wanted to take a more active role in the pack, the isn’t-he-cute-when-he-tries-to-be-adult and he’s-too-young-to-take-seriously smile.

He’d show them.

He’d show everyone.

Gawain slowly took a deep breath, then let it burst out in one last howl.

Bernice lurched backward away from the blood pooling on the concrete around the young werewolf’s neck. Already his breathing had ceased and his blood had stopped spurting. Nor were his paws twitching. He was dead.

She panted as if her lungs might burst. “Did you – did you see that? He – he knew! He knew changing would kill him and he still did it!” She gagged for a moment, then controlled herself. “I’ve never seen anything like that before!”

“Nor I,” whispered Roger. “Nor I.”

“What – why did he do that? What made him do that?”

Roger shook his head as he removed the bloody contraption from the dead wolf, then dropped it to the ground beside the young man’s body. “We must inform the Patriarch immediately. If such a one as this youth would willing die for Arthur, it means their small pack is far more dangerous than we thought.”

“Yes. Yes! We must tell the Patriarch! He will know what to do! He will lead us to victory!”

Roger stood and put out his hand for Bernice. “Yes, of course he will. Our all-powerful, all-knowing Patriarch will surely have the solution for this conundrum, as he has for all our problems.”

Bernice took his hand and stood, then followed Roger into the night, too shaken to hear his sarcasm. Nor did she recognize it when she and Roger reported Gawain’s suicide to the Patriarch.

Bernie Klein’s voice came through the phone as bone-dry and he didn’t sound amused in the slightest. “Werewolves.”

“That’s right. Werewolves.”

“Lois, you can’t be serious.”

Lois controlled her quick anger and sighed again, knowing that Bernie’s doubt wasn’t directed at her but at what she’d said. “I know you don’t believe me, but I still want you to analyze a blood sample.”

“For what, werewolf residue? Blood cells with little tiny hairs and teeth? Even if I wholeheartedly accepted what you’re telling me – which, of course, I don’t – there’s no scientific test I can run to check that!”

Count to ten, she told herself, then remember that you need him. “Bernie. Listen to me, please. We’re going to give you as much research as we can about the transformation process. Someone down here in New Orleans was working on identifying some kind of DNA change that turned regular people into werewolves. We need you to try to figure out whatever causes the change and see if you can come up with something to reverse it.”

The line was silent for a long moment, then Bernie said, “Are you finished now? Because I don’t have time for practical jokes this month. The weather is still nasty and we’ve been down at least twenty percent of our workforce every day. I have legitimate projects with hard completion dates backed up in the queue and I don’t have time to indulge in gags, pranks, or hijinks. Now unless you have something—”

“It’s my blood!”

“Wh-what?”

She hadn’t intended to tell him that. She and Clark had agreed not to tell Bernie Klein whose blood he’d be analyzing. They

didn’t want to prejudice him in any way.

But the cat – or, in this case, the wolf – was out of the bag now. “It’s my blood, Bernie. I got scratched by a werewolf and I’ve already changed into my bow-wow form and turned human again twice. This is not a joke, a prank, or any kind of put-on, and don’t you dare ask me if it’s a shaggy dog story. It’s for real. Now can you do the analysis or not?”

The line was silent again, then Bernie said, “I’ll do it myself. I assume you’ll send Superman with the research and the sample?”

“As soon as we can.”

“Good. Please pack the blood sample in an insulated case. And if you could furnish me with both electronic and hard copy versions of the research you mentioned, that would help a lot. I’ll start as soon as he gets here.”

Some of the weight on her shoulders lifted and vanished.

“Thanks, Bernie. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Let’s hope that’s true. Now hang up and get started on that printout. If the person you’re talking about spent any serious time analyzing the data, Superman will bring a goodly amount of paper with him. Oh, and make the blood sample the last thing you do. For this, the fresher it is the better it will be for testing and analysis.”

Clark hadn’t wanted to leave, of course. Lois had had to promise to behave herself while he was gone and *not change* for *any reason whatsoever*. She loved him for his concern about her, but she’d been getting into and out of difficult situations for more years than she’d known him. Of course, none of those situations were quite as existence-threatening as this one. So she had every intention of doing exactly what she’d promised to do – stay in the hotel room and pretend to be invisible.

He’d made one quick trip to the New Orleans satellite STAR Labs location to pick up the insulated blood carrier Bernie had asked them to use, along with a small-bore needle and a six-pack of blood vials. The trip had taken less than ten minutes, including Bernie’s last-minute instructions on finding a good vein in Lois’ arm.

Ten more minutes to pack the printouts and draw the blood, something that was easier than either of them had expected, then he was gone again after all but demanding that Lois repeat her promise to him.

“I’ll have to stay for a while so Dr. Klein can verify the effect my aura has on the mutation process. But I’ll be back here as soon as I possibly can be.”

Lois grinned. “You do remember that I printed Evelyn Carstairs’ notes, don’t you? And that my father is a doctor who pushed me into pre-med until the middle of my sophomore year? I understand that stuff about as well as you do.”

He shook his head and tried to return her grin. “All right. I guess I’m just a bit nervous about all this.”

She lifted one eyebrow and tilted her head in an attempt to ease the tension in the room. “And I’m not?”

“No, Lois, you don’t – I’m sorry, I phrased that poorly. I’m – I’m afraid for you – for us. All I can think of right now is that – that wolf sitting by the hotel room door where you used to be.” He shuddered. “And I don’t think I could take it if – if Bernie can’t fix this.”

She put her hand on his forearm and leaned close. “Listen to me. We will overcome this obstacle. We’ve beaten everything else we’ve come up against in our lives, and as serious and dangerous as this is, we’re not letting a little thing like me being a werewolf come between us. Now scoot up to the roof and get going. The sooner you get there, the sooner I’ll be what passes for normal for me.”

He gave her a longing look. “I like it when you’re as normal as you can be.”

She grinned back and shoved him gently. “You and me both,

flyboy. Now get going and don't stop for any cats in trees.”

Alphonse was getting tired. His wolf form would have been more energy-efficient, but a regular person walking his big dog, even without a leash, was far less alarming to any pedestrians in this part of town than two humans anxiously searching for something, especially this close to nightfall. Besides, Teresa was working harder than he was, casting desperately about for Gawain's scent and whimpering when it threatened to fade out.

Then they turned the corner and found the dead wolf.

Teresa froze in place and gulped, then bounded to the body. She sniffed it anxiously and nudged it several times with her muzzle, then lay on her stomach and changed to her human form, naked and draped over the stiffening corpse.

Alphonse pulled her dress out of his shoulder bag and slipped it on her as best he could as she pulled Gawain's bloody head into her lap. She stroked his head between his ears twice, then pulled him close and began wailing at the darkening sky.

A small woman rose from a pile of cardboard not fifteen feet from them and stared. Alphonse stood and took a step toward her. To his surprise, she didn't turn to run, nor did she take her eyes off Teresa's mourning.

He reached into his pocket to pull out some money to give to her, but she said, “I seen it. I seen it go down.”

Her accent was Cajun, so Alphonse left his hand in his pocket and spoke to her in that language. *<Madame, are you well?>*

<Yes. I'm fine.>

<If I may ask, what do you mean? Did you see what happened to – to our beloved pet?>

Her eyes snapped to his and she continued in heavily accented English. “That ain't no dog, mister. It be a dead Rougarou.”

He sighed, then responded in English. “For the sake of continuing our conversation, I will not contradict you. But please, did you see what happened?”

The woman looked at Teresa again, who was still weeping. “A man and a woman caught a young man and they strap him in that – that torture thing on the ground.” She pointed out the harness and sighed. “Then they wake him up and try to ask some questions and he – he *change!* He change just like that woman there, just backwards. He lay there and howl and turn into a wolf and that torture thing cut him and he bleed real bad and then he be dead.”

Alphonse risked another step closer. “Please do not be alarmed, *Madame*. We mean you no harm. But did you hear the man and woman speak their names?”

She nodded slowly. “*Oui*, I hear. The man, his name be Roger. The woman, she be called Bernice. They ask that young man about somebody name Arthur.”

Alphonse nodded back. It wasn't unexpected that the Patriarch would know – or at least suspect – who was harassing his pack, but it wasn't good news. It meant that they would need to be even more careful from now on, pick their battles and victims with even more caution.

They couldn't afford to enter a war of attrition with the Naturals. They didn't have anywhere near the resources to succeed in that kind of fight.

But now he had to get Teresa away from Gawain's body, and her grief was far from spent. When it was, there was a good chance that she would be too full of rage to listen to reason. Perhaps Guinevere or Jane could perform that feat of near-magic.

First, though, he had to ensure that this street dweller would tell no one else about what she'd seen.

“Madame,” he finally said, “I must ask a great favor of you. I must ask you to keep to yourself this – this thing that you have seen and not tell anyone. It would not be healthy for us if you did.”

She gave him a disgusted sneer. “You kill me too? I can't stop you if you do.”

He shook his head. “No, of course not. I ask because we can deal with this tragedy more effectively if there is no one else around to interfere. May I count on your discretion?”

She snorted and put her hands on her hips. “Who I gonna tell? Who believe me if I do?”

He smiled thinly. “You have a point.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out some folded cash. “May I thank you in a more practical manner?”

Her hands dropped and she stared at the money as if it were a snake. “You can't buy me. Ain't that much money in the city.”

“Please forgive me, Madame, I have expressed myself poorly. I do not wish to purchase your silence. I wish to thank you for telling me your story as you saw it. Your cooperation will help us find and punish those guilty of this crime.”

She stared at the money for a long moment, then finally nodded. “You put it like that, it be just fine. I take it and bid you welcome.”

He handed it over with a smile. “Thank you, Madame. I hope this will help you to eat well for a time.”

She gave him a partially toothless grin. “If not, I just burn it. Been chilly at night lately.”

He bowed. “Then I bid you adieu, Madame.”

What he'd just learned was more than worth the hundred or so dollars he'd given the old homeless woman.

Now they'd have to make a more overt move against the Patriarch. The choice to hide and wait had been taken from them.

Chapter Ten

Lillian slowly made her way toward the southeast side of the great city, searching for any of Arthur's pack. She'd begun her assignment with enthusiasm, confidence, and the thrill of being selected for such an important assignment.

“Seek out any of Arthur's followers, my dear,” the Patriarch had said. “Find them and give them a message from me. Tell them that I would like a truce between our packs. This constant sniping at one another will generate only mistrust and more death between us. We can sustain more losses than they, but I do not wish to lose any more of my followers. We must have peace.”

She knew she'd looked and sounded just a little doubtful. “Of course, my lord. I will accomplish this task for you.”

He'd leaned down and gently placed his hands on her upper arms. “Fear not, my dear Lillian. They will not harm you any more than one of our own would harm you. Remember, you carry my child within you. You are therefore inviolate.”

The Patriarch's assurances had carried her about halfway to her target neighborhood, but her doubts had crept in again as she went her way. Arthur's pack members were all renegades, were they not? And would renegades honor the ancient ban against harming a gravid female? Was she truly as safe as the Patriarch had assured her she would be?

Lillian was one of the youngest and smallest of the werewolves in the Patriarch's group. Her status as his primary mate gave her some stature and prevented much of the harassment she might otherwise have suffered, but during feedings she often came away with the leavings from the others.

The raid on the warehouse and its aftermath, however, had provided her with her first truly filling meal in several weeks. She had quickly found a liver which was almost intact, and because of the cornucopia of food available, none had tried to take it from her. She could still taste the nectar of that wonderful meal. For the sake of her unborn pup, she hoped it was a harbinger of better times ahead. Certainly she'd been treated more gently once her pregnancy had become common knowledge.

But reflecting on her recent good fortune would not protect her from danger.

Her steps grew more cautious, her eyes darting from side to side. She was the first female of the pack in sixteen years to have a

child quicken in her womb. The Patriarch would not risk his own offspring's life, even for such an urgent and important mission. She had to trust him, believe in him, know that she was safe.

Of course, taking unnecessary chances was still unwise. Many fates might befall her in this part of the city, fates that were not visited upon her by Arthur's pack.

She glanced around her and moved toward one side of the alley where the wall seemed more solid and continuous. It was wise to limit the potential avenues of attack an enemy might—

A sudden metallic clanging startled her and she spun to face the threat, her hands extended like claws. They would not catch her unawares and take her without—

And then an orange tabby cat leaped from an open trash can and sprinted to a broken basement window. It was apparent that the cat had dislodged the lid and sent it crashing to the asphalt below. It was hunting, just as Lillian's packmates had been. It had a small rat in its mouth which was still trying to get away from the hunter.

She smiled and shook her head. That would be a good story to tell to her cub when it was old enough to understand. He or she would laugh at Mother's silliness at being afraid of a feral cat. Even one so small and weak as she could not be hurt—

The sudden blow to the back of her head stopped all thought and she collapsed boneless to the concrete.

Pain returned first.

Lillian's head ached abominably and her mouth tasted fuzzy. She tried to swallow and found that she could not do so around the cloth between her teeth. She lifted her hands to free it from—

The stabbing pains in her neck and the sudden wetness on her skin frightened her.

She tried moving her legs very slowly, but the stabbing pains returned. Even turning her head was a bad idea. The small punctures would bleed for a short time, she knew, but if her injuries did not worsen she would heal quickly. But why was she in this position? Who had restrained—

Someone grabbed her upper arm and yanked her to a seated position. The spikes around her neck probed for and found more blood. She blinked to clear her vision and glanced around her.

There were three of them. One man and two women.

The blonde woman with broad shoulders and a fierce cast to her face grabbed her hair and pulled her upward slightly. The man said, "Teresa, please. We cannot communicate with a corpse. We must allow her to tell us why she is here."

Teresa snarled once, then dropped Lillian back to the hard surface. The tall, slender woman with long dark hair knelt down before her. "Will you permit me to remove your gag? I must tell you that we can't allow you to shout for backup or for the police. If you are determined to call for assistance, you won't survive long. Do you understand?"

Lillian felt her eyes bulge. They were not going to honor the covenant! Even if she delivered her message as her lord wished, they might kill her and leave her to rot. Her only chance at survival was to do exactly what they told her to do.

After a terror-filled moment, she managed a small nod that did not force the sharp points around her neck into her flesh once again. The kneeling woman untied the wrapping around her mouth, then slowly tugged the cloth out of her mouth. Lillian coughed twice, then took several deeper breaths to calm herself.

It almost worked.

The man took the tall woman's place on the ground in front of her. "Now, young lady, you will tell us your name."

Her eyes flickered between the man and the brunette woman. She softly said, "My name is Lillian."

The man nodded. "Good. Lillian, I would like to introduce you to our little group." He indicated the blonde woman. "Teresa you have already met. This is Jane, and my name is Lancelot. Would

you tell us why you are wandering around this part of town?"

She shifted her feet to a slightly less awkward position. "I was not wandering, sir. I have been looking for either Arthur or Guinevere. I have a message for them."

Lancelot smiled. "I see. You may deliver your message to us. We will make certain that Arthur hears it."

She licked her lips for a moment, then decided that she had little choice in the matter. "I – I bring an offer of a truce from the Patriarch."

Jane tilted her head and crossed her arms. "A truce from the Patriarch? How noble is he to grant us this boon. Please, tell of this most generous offer of truce from such a great one."

Lillian heard the woman's sarcasm but didn't understand it. Perhaps she'd misheard or misunderstood Jane's meaning. She stared at the tall brunette, trying to read her expression.

Lancelot reached out and tapped her nose once. "You might communicate telepathically with others in your pack, Lillian, but we have no such faculty. Please tell us what the great and powerful Patriarch is offering."

Sarcasm again, but less biting. Perhaps it was less of a threat, perhaps it was deliberately understated to reinforce Jane's sharp comment. Either way, it didn't matter.

She composed herself and began. "To Arthur, leader of his pack, from the Patriarch, the leader of his pack, greetings. The recent unpleasantness between us need not continue, and in fact must end if we are both to continue to rule our respective peoples. We propose, therefore, that Arthur and any two of his packmates he might choose meet with the Patriarch and two packmates chosen by him at a neutral location to discuss the issues separating us from our brothers. We wish to live in peace and harmony with all Rougarou in and around the city of New Orleans. The losses we have inflicted on each other must end now. More deaths would benefit neither of us. We await your answer with the anticipation of peace between us."

Lancelot stood and looked at his companions. "Well, now we know. What do you think Arthur's response will be?"

Jane frowned at Lillian and inhaled deeply through her nose. Then her eyes widened.

Before Jane could speak, Teresa snatched Lillian almost upright by the hair once again. The inward spikes on the collar created fresh wounds on her neck and she moaned in pain.

"Truce?" Teresa snarled. "The Patriarch suggests a truce between our packs? What would the conditions of this truce be? Who would enforce them? Would the mighty Patriarch forebear to murder and consume human beings? Would he protect them from the danger of other werewolves? Would he consume only wild animals brought down by a pack hunt?" She slammed the girl's head against the bricks behind her without releasing the hold on her hair. "Tell me how many you killed in that warehouse massacre! Tell me of the throats you tore out, the beating hearts you clawed from the chests of the living, the limbs you severed and whose marrow you sucked! Tell me that you considered how many families would mourn their deaths! Tell me that you have thought about the lives you and your packmates ended that night!"

Jane put her hand on Teresa's shoulder. "Teresa, wait—"

"I will not wait! I say we should release her from her restraints and let her run! We will then hunt her as she hunted those people! We will rend her—"

"She's pregnant!" shouted Jane.

Teresa dropped Lillian as if pregnancy were a communicable disease, then took two steps back and turned away. She stood breathing deeply and flexing her hands into claw shapes as Lancelot knelt before Lillian again. "The Patriarch was wise to send you to meet us. We will not harm you. When we leave, you will be no more injured than you are at this moment. And I personally apologize for your pain and fear. Had we known of your condition earlier, none of this would have taken place." He

reached out and touched her chin. “Do you understand what I have said to you?”

She let her own breathing slow before she answered. “Yes. I understand.”

“Good,” he said. “I assume your master wishes that you carry a reply back to him.”

“Yes, please.”

Jane lifted a finger. “Just a minute. Are you carrying the Patriarch’s child?”

“I am,” she replied with a touch of pride. “It is the first child to be quickened within the pack for sixteen years.”

Jane gave her a cold glare. “I advise you to guard your cub closely when he is born. Not all in the pack will be as pleased as you obviously are.”

Lillian didn’t know how to respond, so she turned her face back to Lancelot. “Sir, are you authorized to give me a reply on this matter?”

His slight smile puzzled her for a moment, then he began speaking. “My companions and I are authorized to respond.” He leaned closer to her, his face still wearing that odd smile. “You may inform your lord that there will be no truce between us. There will be no peace unless and until he either publicly renounces any future plans to hunt and consume humans or he leads his pack away from this city. Until one of these eventualities comes to pass, we will continue to resist his predations and his atrocities.” His mouth lost the smile and he showed his teeth. “Give him that message, girl! Understand?”

Lillian was shocked. It was not the reply she had expected, nor was it the one her lord had advised her to prepare for. It was tantamount to a declaration of all-out war between the packs, one which Arthur’s band could not possibly win. Hostilities would surely end with their group wiped out to the last member.

Of course there would be casualties on the Patriarch’s side too. And Lillian might become one of them, along with her cub. The prospect of her child’s death frightened her more than the thought of her own mortality.

Lancelot stood and walked to Teresa’s side and muttered something to her that Lillian didn’t catch. Jane squatted before her and said, “We aren’t going to injure you, Lillian, but we can’t let you follow us back to our den or alert others in your pack that we’re here. I’m certain someone will come along soon and let you out of that restraint, and then you can go home with little or no damage. Nothing permanent, at any rate.”

Teresa spun around and came back. “Do you know where we acquired the restraint you now wear? Do you?” She knelt and brought her face close to Lillian’s ear. “It was on the young member of our pack who gave his life rather than tell your fellow carrion hunters anything they could use against us. His name was Gawain. Did you know him?”

Fear lanced through Lillian’s heart again. “N-no! I did not!”

“He was brave enough to change to wolf form while wearing this device. It killed him in seconds. So if you think you can escape by shifting form, you are fatally mistaken. Someone must deliberately release you.” She stood and growled at the girl. “And none of us will perform that service for you. Let us hope, for the sake of the message you carry back to your lord, that the someone in question is favorably disposed to your continued existence.”

Teresa spun and marched away. Lancelot and Jane shrugged at each other and set off after her. They caught up within a few strides and stalked to the next intersection, where they turned and vanished from Lillian’s sight.

Lillian was uncomfortable, and no amount of shifting in place gave her any kind of real relief. The sun was far past its zenith and her thirst was becoming acute. Once again she directed her mental attention to her cub, and once again she was satisfied that there was no immediate danger. Of course, she needed to be released

from her restraints as soon as possible.

Movement to her right caught her attention. She hoped it was the orange tabby coming back for seconds. Or one or more of its cousins hunting for an early dinner. If so, she was in little danger – a cat that size would hesitate to attack her even if she did not move to defend herself.

Then she saw one of them emerge from cover. Two more followed close behind.

They were feral poodles.

Poodles had been bred in Germany as waterfowl hunters and retrievers. Their narrow muzzles could fasten onto any exposed flesh, and its bite would penetrate the thickest skin or heaviest feathers. They were not to be ignored as individuals and could be deadly when hunting in a pack, even one as small as this.

They appeared to be an all-female pack. The largest one, the leader, might have topped the scales at thirty pounds after a hearty meal. The other two were slightly smaller but still armed with sharp teeth and a powerful bite force for their size. They were underweight and malnourished but still dangerous.

Had she been free, they would have fled from her appearance. But she wasn’t free and they seemed to know it. Lillian would make an excellent meal for them, and the rest of her corpse would attract all sorts of scavengers. She might even feed the cats she had hoped to see.

The lead poodle cautiously crept closer, testing the scents in the area. It seemed to sense the spoors of the three who had bound her here, and it backed away for a long moment. Then it appeared to decide that the scents were old and she was alone.

It inched closer, holding its head low and growling deep in its throat. The other two followed in jerky fashion, apparently still somewhat spooked by the old scents. But the trio made slow but sure progress toward her, and she knew they wouldn’t help her by chewing on the leather portions of her bindings.

The leader stopped perhaps ten feet away and stared at her, its mouth open and its tongue licking its lips. It seemed to brace itself for a final rush and attack, and that’s when Lillian snarled at them and jerked her hands in their direction.

It seemed to work for a moment. The dogs scampered back and stopped halfway to their original hiding place. Lillian hoped desperately that the fresh scratches she’d inflicted on her neck would not tempt them to ignore her warning.

Then the leader barked twice and retraced its steps toward her. The trio came faster this time, and when she growled and stamped one foot they stopped for a moment but didn’t retreat. They came closer, creeping almost side by side, their eyes lit up for the feast to come.

Lillian was close to panic when they finally charged.

She was sure she and her cub were about to die.

Then a huge wolf appeared as if out of nowhere and snarled at the approaching pack.

The poodles panicked. The leader fell over itself trying to stop, then scrambled away at frantic top speed. The other two had peeled off in opposite directions, yipping in fear.

The wolf turned to her and tilted its head as if making a decision to either kill her or allow her to live. Then it shifted form and Andre appeared before Lillian’s eyes.

His only garment was a pair of spandex shorts that fit him quite closely. He sat back on his heels and looked at her again, then smiled and shook his head.

“You are fortunate that I found you in time, Lillian,” he said. “It would have been difficult to tell the Patriarch that you had been slain by poodles.” He smiled and shook his head at her. “A most embarrassing fate.”

She exhaled with relief. “I thank you, Andre. Would you mind releasing me from my bindings?”

He took a small canteen from his hip and placed it on the ground. “Let me free your hands so that you may drink. Then you

will tell me what Arthur said to you in return.”

As soon as her hands were free, she grabbed the canteen and pulled the top off. The water inside was lukewarm and tasted a bit stale, but it was more than she’d had all day. Half of the contents were gone when Andre gently took it from her and capped it.

“You must not drink too much at once, Lillian, lest your stomach rebel. Please, tell me now what Arthur’s response was.”

Her eyes found the concrete between them. “I did not speak to Arthur himself. I was assaulted by three of his pack before I could find him.”

“Three, you say. Did you get their names?”

“Yes. The man was Lancelot and the two women were called Jane and Teresa. Teresa threatened to slay me until Jane told her I was with child.”

“I see. What did Teresa do then?”

“She turned and walked away from me. She was violently angry over our feeding last night. She made viscous accusations to me, and I believe she was trying to justify my death to herself. She also mentioned someone called Gawain who she said had died at the hands of some of our pack.”

“Very well. Did you deliver the Patriarch’s message to them?”

“Yes. I—” She coughed once. “May I have another drink, please?”

“Of course. Not too much, now. It might upset your stomach, remember.”

“Thank you.” She tipped the canteen up again and took two more gulps, then swished the last mouthful around before swallowing. “That is much better.”

“Good. Please resume your narrative.”

“Of course. Um – might you release this collar for me? I do not know how it is fastened and I cannot see it.”

“In a moment. Tell me how they responded to the offer of a truce.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She turned her head away from Andre and said, “They emphatically – almost violently – declined any offer of truce, any offer to meet and discuss conditions, or any offer of peace. Lancelot said that the war would go on until the Patriarch either renounced human prey or left the city. The women did not voice their opinions on the offer, but neither of them disagreed with Lancelot’s response either by word or deed.” She sighed. “I fear that the conflict between our packs will continue.”

Andre shook his head. “I thought that would be their response. It is unfortunate for you that you were the one chosen to communicate the offer to Arthur. Of course, anyone else would surely be dead already. I cannot imagine that anyone in your place would have been left alive.”

“I agree with you.” She gestured at the collar again. “Would you release the collar, please? It is most uncomfortable.”

“Let me take a look at it. Ah, yes, I see it now.”

“Thank you. The spikes on the inside – wait, what are you – Andre, you are hurting – Ahhh! No! Please!”

The last word came out bubbly, accompanied by blood that was draining into her throat and forced out of her mouth. Her grabs at her attacker’s wrists were ineffective. Andre’s twisting grip on the collar forced the spikes into her neck and through her esophagus. The tight fit of the collar choked off her breathing and shoved the long points on the sides into her carotid artery and jugular vein. She bled out in slightly more than half a minute.

He held his grip for two long breaths after she’d slumped limply to the sidewalk and stopped breathing. Then he tenderly unfastened the collar, the waist restraints, and the ankle bindings. She had, in his mind, died poorly, without trying to shift to wolf form – not that it would have saved her, of course.

Andre rehearsed in his mind how he would tearfully bear the torn and bloody body of the Patriarch’s lover to the pack. He would tell them that Arthur’s pack had ignored the ancient

covenant that pregnant females were safe from attack and had killed her without mercy. He would insist that Lillian’s murder was Arthur’s answer to the Patriarch’s offer of a truce. And he would have her dead body in his arms as proof of their perfidy.

The killing would infuriate the pack and force the Patriarch to act. He might give in to his natural anger and order Arthur’s pack found and wiped out, or he might have enough self-control to issue a mortal challenge to Arthur or his designated champion. Either way, Andre would have the opportunity to overthrow the Patriarch almost at his leisure. If the pack were to swarm after Arthur’s group, the Patriarch might be injured or even mortally wounded during the battle. A werewolf on werewolf single battle would almost surely result in Arthur’s death, although he was cunning enough to strike some telling blows of his own before succumbing.

Even if the Patriarch retained enough control over both himself and the pack and repeated his offer of truce, it would be his undoing. Lillian’s death would push the tide of pack opinion against any treaty or truce with Arthur’s band. It was an ideal plan, one which offered almost no risk to himself. All he needed to do was to wait for the opportune time to execute it.

It was a shame that she had to die in this way. Had she survived the coming coup, he would have slain the Patriarch’s issue when it was born and impregnated her himself as soon as possible. By that time, he would have taken at least five other females as mates and fathered cubs by them. Like an African lion, he would rule his pride from a position of strength and not by negotiation and coddling of the weak. His rule would be spectacular and history-making.

He could taste the victory already. It was sweeter than any taste of blood.

Lois’ midday nap in Clark’s arms had been heavenly, but there was something else she needed to try. And she didn’t think her husband would approve.

Think, nothing. She was dead solid certain he’d forbid her furiously.

So she stretched and reached for the ceiling with one hand, then turned a smiling face to Clark. “Hi. That was heavenly.”

“You were asleep for about two hours. Will you be okay for a while?”

Her lips found his nose and playfully nipped at it. “Sure. You have someplace you need to be?”

“I’m afraid so. Superman made an appointment with Bill Henderson to meet with him about a gang that’s selling protection on the South side. Clark dug up some information about a possible Intergang connection.” He sat up. “I’ll probably be there for a little over an hour, and then I’ll have to go over to STAR Labs and check with Bernie. He’ll probably have some preliminary results by then.”

Her smile faded a bit. “It must be maddening to talk about yourself in the third person so often. Do you ever wish you really were two people?”

“No, not really. If I were, you’d have two handsome and aggressive men wanting to sleep with you. And I’m not sure you could handle two of me.”

She laughed. “You’re right, one Clark is all I want or need. Or can keep up with.” She made shooing motions with her hands. “Now go and keep your appointment. I’ll wait for you here.”

“Promise?”

This time she smiled and touched his cheek. “There’s no one else I want to be with, so yes, I’ll wait for you. That’s a promise.”

He sighed. “I can’t wait to get back to Metropolis with you. We’ll probably have to take some personal time off to make up for being celibate here.”

“I’ll hold you to that. Now go so you can get back here fast!”

He rose and spun from sleep shorts into the Suit, then peeked

out the door of the suite before super-speeding to the stairs. A moment later, Lois heard what sounded like a small clap of thunder. He was gone.

And she had her opportunity.

She threw back the covers and took off her T-shirt and shorts. The middle of the room was a good place to do this.

She bent down and ended up on all fours, then willed herself to shift into her wolf form.

It was easier this time. It took less than fifteen seconds for Lois to vanish into her lupine guise. She sat down and experimentally wagged her tail.

It tickled.

She looked around and was once again amazed at what she could see as a wolf. Her color perception was skewed a bit – she couldn't see colors as brightly – but her vision was sharper, able to pick out details of things at greater distances than she normally could. Her hearing was more acute, too – the squeaky wheels on one of the maid's carts on the floor above drew her attention for a moment.

Her head was heavier now than as a human, but the thicker neck easily supported the extra weight. She thought it would also help her if she decided to hunt small game in this form.

The thought to hunt for fresh meat was tempting, but that wasn't her purpose at the moment. It was time for the experiment.

She shifted back to human form and stood erect. She noticed she was breathing deeply, probably as a result of the stress of the change, but after a few breaths her respiration returned to normal. She thought back over her impressions as she changed form, and she realized that there seemed to be a point in the human-to-wolf process where there was a – a fork in the road, so to speak. It was as if she could have altered the process and changed into something else.

Lois wondered briefly if any of the other Turned had ever noticed that little bump, but then she decided that they either hadn't noticed or had decided to ignore it. They'd either been told too often that there was only one wolf form or it never occurred to any of them to play with their new skills. There was risk in experimenting with the process so soon in her experience as a Rougarou, but there wasn't time to explore it at her leisure.

So she remained upright, shut her eyes to concentrate, and started the change again.

When she got to the fork in the road – the decision point – she pushed herself on the second track. This time she didn't fall to all fours. This time she stayed upright.

This time she added height and muscle.

It finally ended. She lifted her head, her eyes still closed, and took a deep breath. She could feel her chest expanding, and she lifted her arms to her sides.

Her eyes opened to a riot of color and fine definition. It was as if the best of both human and wolf vision was blended together into her sight. She brought her arms in front of her to see long, powerful fingers tipped with what appeared to be razor-sharp talons. A glance to the floor showed wide, almost prehensile toes on size eighteen feet.

She turned and looked into the mirror on the wall.

Yep, she mused, I look like Ray Harryhausen and Tim Burton collaborated on a werewolf movie and came up with a truly scary specimen. She estimated her height at about six feet, three inches. There was no telling how much she weighed – it was as if all the non-essential tissue in her body had been transformed into bone, muscle, and sinew.

Her head was elongated and her jaws were long and firm. She wondered if she could cleave through bone with one bite.

Almost on its own, her muzzle opened and snapped shut. Yep, she thought, right through solid bone.

Her ears were the most wolf-like feature she bore, aside from the thick fur. That fur covering hid her skin, but she still looked

female from the front. She wondered for a moment if her rear end still looked great. A brief but revealing costume would be in order to keep her from having to strip naked in public.

She tried some slow-motion Tae Kwando moves. They felt smooth and powerful, strong and controlled. She was willing to bet real money that none of the werewolves she might meet were black belts.

I bet no one would spar with me now, she thought to herself. The image of Lin Chou squaring off against Lois in this form was almost funny.

The little slice of humor relaxed her and reminded her that she was in control, not the beast she presented.

This would be the form she'd assume if she ever had to fight one of the Naturals. According to Jane, what she'd just accomplished was impossible. There was no way a regular werewolf could stand up to her in this form.

It was time to be human again.

The reverse transition was a bit painful, but easier than assuming the beast form. In seconds, a naked Lois Lane stood in the middle of her hotel room, sweaty and a little ripe from her exertions. A shower was in order.

She didn't dare let Clark figure out what she'd been doing.

Chapter Eleven

The reports filtered in to the inspector's office at an almost leisurely pace. Taken separately, the bloody deaths of the big dog and young pregnant woman weren't related. But Robert had seen the girl's autopsy report and the dog's necropsy summary. Both had died of puncture wounds around the neck. It was a pattern he'd seen nearly three decades before – a pattern of damage inflicted by a werewolf restraint, a device he'd found around the neck of an older man who had looked panicked even in death.

The two deaths, added to the slaughter of the homeless, spelled serious trouble. Something very terrible was about to happen, and he would stop it from infecting his city or die in the attempt.

Robert thought hard about his next move. He had a lot of options, but most of them were more dangerous than helpful. And only one would deliver this beloved New Orleans from the terror that was the pack of Naturals led by the Patriarch.

He needed Superman. Walter had never called him back, and it was past time to try an end run. He had to be direct.

He tapped the intercom. "Melody? I need a phone number, please."

"Oh captain, my captain, I exist only to serve."

"Now is not the best time for such humor, Sergeant Brennan. I need the room of Clark Kent and Lois Lane at the Omni Royal, please."

Melody's voice immediately flipped to a formal tone. "Right away, sir. Any particular message?"

"No. I need to speak directly to *Monsieur* Kent."

"Consider it done."

In less than a minute, his phone rang. "*Monsieur* Kent? This is Robert Gautreaux."

A woman's slightly gruff alto voice answered. "Sorry, Inspector, Clark isn't here right now. Can I help?"

He hesitated, then decided that she'd work harder to find the hero if she understood the urgency. "I doubt that you have learned of this, as it has not been released to the media. There has been a massacre of homeless by werewolves in an abandoned warehouse on the south side of the city. I am morally certain that the Naturals led by the Patriarch are responsible for this atrocity."

There was silence on the phone for a long moment, then she said, "I'm afraid we have a problem."

"Oh?"

"Yes." She hesitated again, then said, "Superman is in Metropolis with blood and tissue samples of a werewolf. He'll be

working with a scientist there for several more hours. And there's no way to speed up the process."

Robert muttered something quite rude in French, then said, "I must apologize for my poor choice of words. We do not know where the Patriarch's pack is located, and we need to find them as soon as possible. If they relocate before we do find them, more innocents may die before we discover their whereabouts." He sighed deeply. "At this moment, I know not what to do."

"Then let me help."

"You? Help? How could you – no! Madame Kent, this is very dangerous! It is why I need the Superman!"

The calm but firm voice in his ear soothed him. "You don't have him, but you do have me. Now tell me what you need done."

He ran his hand over his face. "I do not believe that the Superman would think it wise of me to involve you so directly."

"This isn't his call, Inspector, it's mine. I can offer logistical support your department doesn't have. And if all you need is someone to track one of the packs, I can do that with my newly enhanced smeller. I wouldn't have to put myself in the line of fire."

What Lois said was true, but—

He put the phone receiver on his desk for a long moment and thought hard. He thought about how difficult it would be to find these bloodthirsty werewolves without help.

He thought about how angry Superman would be when he discovered what Lois Lane was proposing.

He thought about the woman whose life he'd tried – and failed – to save when he'd killed that werewolf twenty-eight years ago.

He thought about how much it would hurt when Superman pulled his arms off.

He thought about the bodies he and his people had helped to transport to the morgue so they could be reassembled for identification and burial.

The last thought tipped the scales for him. He picked up the phone receiver and said, "Please meet me in half an hour at the same Jimmy J's where we met before. I will take you to the assembly area, from which we will launch our operation."

"Can we make it about forty-five minutes? I have a quick errand to run. Got to buy something very important."

"Very well. Please do not be late. We must move as soon as possible."

"Don't worry. I'll be the good-looking tourist eating a double-meat sandwich."

Robert sighed and hung up. He raised his head to see Melody standing in the doorway. "How long have you been listening?"

Her expression was as hard and fierce as he had ever seen.

"Long enough to know that you're going to paint a bullseye on yourself again." She stared at him as if daring him to disagree with her. "Anyway, I'm coming with you. You'll need someone to watch your back."

"But—"

"No buts, you big he-bear! I'm going!" She spun away from the door and stomped down the hall.

Robert shook his head in wonder. Why did the women in his life insist to willingly approach mortal danger and tweak its nose?

Superman paced in front of the mass spectrometer in Bernie's lab, obviously trying not to ask yet again how much longer it was going to take, but Bernie anticipated him. "About twenty-five more minutes, then anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour in the DNA analysis phase, then another two hours for sample comparison and exposure to your aura, so no, you can't leave yet."

Superman stopped pacing and turned. "I didn't say a word."

"You didn't have to. Your body language is screaming that you want to get out of here and go back to New Orleans."

"I do. I really, really do." He wrung his hands together. "You know what will happen if I leave Lois alone too long."

Bernie huffed with frustration. "No, please, tell me what will happen."

"She'll find something to get in trouble over and put herself in danger and I have no idea where she'll be if she leaves the hotel room and—"

"Stop!" Bernie snapped. "I didn't think you wanted to go back for some smooth jazz or Delta blues."

Superman waved his hand. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Lois is just so unpredictable – I never know what she's going to get mad about or where she gets some of her amazing leaps of logic or intuition or just lucky guesses and – and it scares me."

Bernie stood and put a hand on the hero's shoulder. "I understand. But you need to be careful how you express that – or who hears you express it, especially in the way you just did."

"Huh?"

He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "You sound exactly like a man afraid for his wife."

Bernie had expected that Superman would stand straighter and wipe the worry from his face, assuming his usual "disinterested superhero" mien. Instead, he turned to the scientist and kneaded his hands in front of himself. "That's exactly what I am right now. I need your help." His expression was almost desperate. "Please."

It was that last "please" that almost broke Bernie's heart. If he didn't already know The Secret, he thought, it wouldn't be a secret anymore.

He put his hand on Superman's hands and stilled them.

"Fretting about this process won't make anything go faster. Why don't you call Perry White and fill him in? I'm sure he'd love to know what's going on."

"Oh, yeah, that's sure to go well. 'Hi, Perry, it's Clark. No, Lois is still in New Orleans, trying not to turn into a werewolf. How do I know that? Because I'm here with Bernie Klein, who's trying to find a cure for her. I'll be helping him here for a few more hours.' I guess you don't know Perry well at all."

Bernie frowned as fiercely as he could, which, he knew, wasn't very fiercely. Although he tried. "I told you in the beginning that this is going to take as long as it takes. Now you can either give yourself a super-ulcer, something I can't treat, by the way, or you can use this time to be productive." He pointed at a wall phone behind the hero. "Make the call, Clark."

Superman stared back for a long breath, then smiled thinly and nodded. "You've been taking Mad Dog lessons in secret, haven't you?"

"Yes. Now make that call."

Superman saluted the scientist. "Yes, sir!"

The Patriarch sat away from the rest of the pack, thinking hard, analyzing the threats his own now faced. They had risked exposure with the raid on the homeless squatters. None had escaped, but there was no way the policeman – Robert Gautreaux – would fail to deduce the identity of the perpetrators. The filling meal had calmed them, but Lillian's sudden and violent death had spread confusion and fear throughout the pack.

Over and above that, he wasn't sure he believed Andre's story. It had sounded too pat, too rehearsed. He had no corroborating witnesses to verify his story. And Andre's ambition was plain to see for those willing to look deeply enough. Oh, he couched it in terms of protection of the pack and support for the Patriarch, but ultimately it was the Patriarch's position he craved.

Roger, his other lieutenant, was no different. He went about it in a more political way, but he also lusted for the top leadership position. It was a toss-up as to which one held the greater sway, and if the Patriarch were to allow them to battle each other, it would split the pack. Between the exit of the loser's followers and the loss of some of his faithful as a consequence of not controlling his lieutenants, he wouldn't have enough strength remaining to accomplish his goals.

A similar outcome was highly probable if he were to make an example of one or the other. He was certain he could overcome either man alone, but if they were to join forces and battle him, they might defeat him, even with his special advantage. None of the others could assume the half-way form, the mystic beast shape, and he'd been careful to allow no one in the pack to discover his hidden talent. He was confident that he could kill either man, but again, that eventuality would split the pack, this time into three factions, among whom would be no peace. The humans would see the three groups fighting an open war and would surely retaliate with overwhelming force, something that would kill many if not most of his werewolves and possibly wipe them all out.

None of this took into account Arthur's small pack. Under other circumstances they'd be of no real danger to him, but as things now stood, Lillian's death – allegedly at their paws – had introduced yet another factor in the emotional cauldron of the pack. Before they had been a bother, a mere irritant, but now they were viewed as a viable threat, one which required swift and thorough vengeance. And the Patriarch was certain that neither Andre nor Roger had foreseen this outcome, one which was eroding each man's support a little bit every day. Roger had to make his move soon, and he wasn't ready. Andre wasn't either, but he was so hungry for power that he might move anyway.

The situation was untenable and he saw no clear path to victory. His next step, though, was apparent to him. He needed to either neutralize Arthur's pack or destroy them utterly. And there was surely a way to lure them to a battleground of his choosing.

Yes, yes, he could visualize it now. McDonough Memorial Park would be ideal. Bernice and Allan could lay a scent trail to lead Arthur's pack to their deaths. The abandoned apartment building across Alix Street would shield them from the humans in the area, as would the small stands of trees at the park's corners. They would die as prey, and the Patriarch would remain in control. The victory might even convince Roger and Andre to bide their time and wait to attempt to unseat him.

He smiled at the thought of the power he'd reclaim within the pack and their redoubled willingness to follow him.

Perhaps it was better that he couldn't know that a wild card in the form of yet another player would soon crash the party.

Lois motioned to the inspector behind her to join her. "This is where Gawain died," she said. "I'm picking up two more scents, but I can't tell who they are."

"Are they werewolf scents?"

"Yes. They have the same flavor – Superman called it a musk – that Jane's scent carries. I'm also picking up what I believe is fear from the one I think is the younger one." She knelt and pointed. "They came from that alley, carrying Gawain to this point. I think they were going to interrogate him, but he changed and chose to die." She stood and wiped her hands. "They probably didn't get any information from him."

"Can you follow the trail of the two who left the area?"

She nodded. "Yes. For a while, anyway. Depends on where they went and how many pepper shakers they sprinkled over their back trail."

"Then let us do so while the sun is still high. I estimate that we have perhaps five hours before they might leave their lair and venture out to feed again."

Lois shuddered. "Then let's find them as soon as we can. You want to signal your team?"

He lifted his radio. "Able to Baker. Following trail. Do not contact with voice unless attacked."

"Understood," the voice returned from the radio speaker. "We have you in sight. Watch for sentries. If we need to contact you, we'll double-click. Baker out."

"Understood. Able out."

He gestured for Lois to precede him. She picked up the small

carry bag she'd brought with her and set off down the narrow street. "Just how secure are your communications, Inspector?"

"The Patriarch has never used electronic communication technology before," Robert said quietly, "but there is always a first time. As to security, we are on a non-police frequency not assigned by the FCC to any person, business type, or group. There is only a small chance that they will hear us coming."

"Let's hope he's running true to form."

Robert nodded once and gestured for Lois to lead off.

She took him down the narrow street to an intersection, looked both ways, then stopped and frowned. Robert moved just behind her. "Is there a problem? Have you lost the trail?"

"No. In fact, it's almost too clear." She inhaled deeply and looked left. "I don't think they took any real precautions to hide their scent trail." She turned and looked at him. "You guys may be walking into a trap meant for Arthur's band."

Robert lifted his AR-15 assault rifle. "Then we will have to shoot very straight and very quickly."

"It might have to be real quick," she returned. "I'm picking up vague scents of what I think are Turned Ones."

"Arthur's pack?"

"I hope that's the only other pack in the city. Gonna get crowded otherwise." Lois looked pointedly at the radio at his belt. "You are going to warn them, aren't you?"

He paused as if thinking, then nodded. "You are correct." He lifted the radio to his mouth and pressed the 'talk' button. "Able to Baker. Possible ambush ahead. Go on highest alert. Do you copy?"

As soon as he released the button, "click-click" issued from the speaker. Lois nodded. They seemed to understand that the more noise they made, the more of them might die.

He nodded to the street. "Please proceed, Lois. And please remember that you are a non-combatant. I cannot risk a civilian being injured during an unofficial police operation."

She smirked at him. "You mean the chief of police doesn't know you're on a werewolf hunt with a dozen other officers?"

"He does not. And I must request most forcefully that there be no press coverage of this incident, irrespective of the outcome."

She gestured for him to follow and she started off down the rough sidewalk. "I can't make that promise, Inspector. I'll have to talk to my partner and get the final word from Perry."

"Ah, the esteemed editor *Monsieur* LeBlanc. I will accept his judgment on whether or not his beloved Daily Planet will be recognized as the nation's premier source of information on werewolves."

She threw a glare at him over her shoulder. "You've made your point, okay? Let's focus on finding these murderous maniacs."

He didn't respond. Lois kept testing the air around her with her nose as she slowly walked up the street. She could see a small wooded area ahead that would provide cover for a meeting – or for an ambush.

She froze as she saw two men and a woman sneaking along the street side of the woods.

She sensed Robert freeze behind her. The three sneaks – who moved with alarming agility and stealth – faded through the perimeter of the woods and disappeared without looking back at the small armed group approaching their position.

She slowly moved back against an abandoned building, the detective right behind her. "Robert!" she hissed. "I think those woods up there are the site we're looking for."

He lifted his radio to his mouth. "Possible target site spotted. Close up and be silent."

Lois turned to him and whispered, "Tell me you're not going in through those trees!"

"No, that would be suicide." He pointed to a building on the left of the woods. "That is an abandoned apartment building. The second and third floor apartments have balconies. We will

infiltrate through the building and place the Patriarch's band within enfilade fire."

"In what?"

"Enfilade. It means we will be able to fire on them from more than one direction, and they will not find cover from fire on the left without exposing themselves to fire on the right." He gave her a sardonic look. "Does the *Madame* not approve?"

She frowned at him. "Fine. You know what you're doing. Mind if I watch?"

"Whatever for?"

"For the story I may or may not write."

He listened as the rest of his team approached from behind. After a long moment, he shrugged. "I cannot stop you without risk of alerting our targets to our approach. Only – please, I beg of you, do not expose yourself to danger."

She lifted her eyebrows in mock surprise. "Who, me? Danger and I are complete strangers. Never met before. Don't know what you're talking about."

Robert obviously didn't believe her. Nor did the thirtyish woman behind him. She looked ready to shoot Lois in the head if she did anything that put her boss in peril.

Lois wondered if he was just her boss or if there was something else going on between them. Or, maybe the woman wanted something to be going on and didn't want to lose her chance at Robert because of Lois.

It didn't matter at this point. "Let me make sure they don't have sentries in the building, okay? I can sniff them out before you run into trouble."

He hesitated, then shook his head. "*Non*. Let us turn into the next alley on the left. It will lead us directly to the apartments." He turned to the woman and whispered, "Melody, you and Samuel will follow me. Antoine, you lead the rest through as soon as I signal you that we are safe. Lois, please stay with Antoine's group for now."

Lois nodded back at him. For the moment, she'd do what she'd been told. At least now she knew the name of the woman who'd shot ice daggers at Lois with her eyes.

Arthur looked around for a possible escape route and saw only angry werewolves in human form. Perhaps following that spoor wasn't the best idea he'd had lately.

Lancelot edged closer to Arthur and muttered, "I think we might have a problem."

"Just the two of us or the entire pack?"

"All of us, Arthur. Jane included."

Arthur nodded slightly. "I agree. What was the first indication of our peril?"

"The toothy snarls on all of those Naturals."

"Ah, yes, we do seem to be totally surrounded, do we not?"

Guinevere backhanded Arthur on the upper arm. "We are in mortal danger and you two are joking? You are both insane!"

He didn't react to the slap. "I was under the impression that insanity was a prerequisite for leadership of such a band as ours."

Guinevere ground her teeth but didn't speak. Then the ranks of Naturals facing them parted and the Patriarch stepped into the circle facing Arthur. "I presume that you call yourself Arthur?"

Arthur nodded. "I answer to that name, yes."

The big man thundered, "Do you know why you were led to this place?"

Arthur slowly looked around at the angry expressions on the werewolves facing them, then said, "I do not believe that we have been invited to afternoon tea."

The Patriarch stared at him for two long breaths, then his face slowly morphed into a grin. "Under other circumstances that might be humorous, my counterpart. But I am certain that you understand why none of us will laugh with you today."

Lancelot lifted his hands. "Arthur might know why you're

planning to destroy us, but I assure you that I do not. Please enlighten us."

That statement set the pack of Naturals off. They started shuffling in place and growling audibly. Two shifted to wolf form and laid their ears back.

The Patriarch turned and raised his hands. "Hold! Hold, I say!" He waited until the pack quieted down, then turned back to Arthur and said, "Lillian came to you with an offer of truce. She came as a gravid female, protected by the ancient law which forbids the death of one carrying an unborn pup. Yet you murdered her!"

"NO!"

The scream came from behind Arthur. He glanced over his shoulder to see Jane stalking toward the Patriarch. She passed Lancelot's right shoulder and stopped just out of the Natural pack leader's reach.

Jane spread her feet and faced the big man with fingers curled as if they were claws. "I tell you this now as under the yew! Lancelot, Theresa, and I interviewed Lillian together! She told us of your offer of truce and we gave her our response! We left her, bound by the same apparatus with which you bound Gawain of our pack, but when we left her she was alive and healthy! And the three of us remained together until we returned to our lair! None of us took her life!"

A young female shouted, "Then what happened to her?"

"You are Bernice, yes?" Jane asked.

"I am! And I demand to know what happened to my friend!"

"We don't know what happened to her, Bernice," Jane said.

"By the sacred yew tree, she was alive and healthy when we left her. Until this moment, I did not know she was dead."

"You expect us to believe that! Why should we accept your vow? You violated the covenant and killed a pregnant werewolf!"

"No! We didn't! I swear it!"

"You will not see a Tribunal! You will all die!"

"Will you listen to me? Just for a minute? Please!"

Bernice was so angry that she was spitting at Jane instead of yelling at her. The rest of the pack began edging toward Arthur's small band in an almost Brownian motion. The Patriarch put his hands on his hips and allowed a thin smile to show. If nothing stopped them, they would rip the pack of Turned Ones to small pieces within moments.

Then a woman's voice called out from above them. "Hey! Hey, you clowns! Shaddup a minute!"

The members of Arthur's band snapped their eyes to a second floor balcony behind the Naturals where a young brunette woman leaned on the railing. She was wearing a pair of what looked like tight red Spandex bikini shorts and a dark blue elastic bandeau top. A few of the Naturals followed Teresa's or Guinevere's line of sight and also stared. Slowly the others followed suit.

All but the Patriarch. His smile vanished and he stared at Arthur. "If this is some trick you are attempting—"

Arthur pointed over the Patriarch's head and said, "I have no idea who that is."

When she had the attention of both packs of werewolves, she waved gaily and smiled. Then she vaulted over the railing and dropped more than twenty feet to the grass below and landed in a crouch. She straightened and smiled again. "How about that?" she all but burred. "I sure stuck that landing, didn't I?"

Jane suddenly leaned over Arthur's shoulder and whispered, "That's Lois Lane!"

"What? But how – she can't be! Normal humans can't make that leap!"

"She's Turned," insisted Jane. "I don't know who or when, but Lois Lane is now one of us!"

Still smiling, the brunette walked through the outer perimeter of Naturals and headed directly toward Arthur. She stopped in front of him with her back to the Patriarch. "Hi again, folks. Looks

like you have a slight problem here.”

Arthur didn't answer. He saw Lois before him, he'd seen her leap from a second story balcony, but he didn't quite believe his eyes. Then Lois turned and said, “Hi, Teresa. Sorry, I still don't have any original ‘wild’ jokes. I guess that's just too easy a pun.”

“What is this talk of wild jokes!” the Patriarch growled.

Lois turned to face him. “Oh, just jokes on her last name.”

“Last name? Werewolves do not have last names!”

Lois crossed her arms. “She does. It's Wilding, in case you're interested.”

The big man smiled cruelly. “I am not interested. Please destroy this one, Bernice.”

With a snarl, Bernice took two steps and swung a roundhouse punch at Lois' face. Lois dropped to a crouch to dodge the punch and thrust out her left hand into Bernice's lower belly. Bernice folded like a novice boxer hit in the stomach and dropped to the ground holding her abdomen and gasping for breath.

“Nathan!” snapped the Patriarch.

A medium-sized man ran at Lois with lethal intent. At the last moment, Lois grasped his outstretched hands and turned to throw him over her hip to the ground. He bounced up and attacked a second time.

Lois' left round kick caught him in the side of the head and staggered him. Almost before Arthur could realize what had happened, she turned and hit Nathan with a spinning back fist. The blow appeared to break his jaw and he fell to the ground near Bernice without moving.

Jane took a slow step past Arthur. She spoke slowly and deliberately. “Lois? Have you been practicing really hard?”

Lois brushed her bangs away from her eyebrows and grinned. “Yes, actually, but I'm really glad for the advantages you gave me.” As Jane goggled at her, Lois added, “You still licking your fingers?”

Jane, thought Arthur. Jane had Turned Lois without realizing it. She must have licked her fingers and touched one of Lois' open wounds before their first meeting. There were no visible bite marks on her body – and Lois wasn't wearing enough clothing to hide such marks.

Apparently Jane had also infected Lois Lane with terminal insanity. There was no other explanation for her behavior.

He wondered if Superman would blame him for her death.

Chapter Twelve

Bernie Klein walked over to the chair where the Man of Steel sat, draped over it as limp as a wet dishrag. His breathing was shallower and more rapid than normal, too. The superhero was kneading his hands together as if trying to wring quantum energy from the atmosphere.

Bernie put his hand on Superman's shoulder. “Just a half-hour or a little less, then we'll be done.” Superman didn't lift his head. “Honest. Just two more exposures of the mutating cells to your aura and I'll have all the data I need.”

He still didn't look up. “And then you'll be able to cure Lois?”

Bernie sighed and removed his hand. “I won't know that for certain until I analyze the results, but the preliminary data looks very promising. I believe we'll be able to reverse her condition without permanent harm.”

“You're sure?”

Bernie hesitated, then said, “No, I'm not sure. I am quite hopeful, though.”

Superman hunched his shoulders and leaned forward. “I just hope we're in time.”

“What? Why would you say something like that?”

Superman leaned back in the chair and lifted teary eyes to his scientist friend. “You knew about our mental link, didn't you?”

Bernie nodded. “I know it's not like an on-demand telephone hookup, but you can send little snippets of information back and

forth.”

The hero's hands lifted to his eyes and traveled down his face to his chin. “For the last two hours or so, I've been getting some ‘little snippets’ from her. Mostly it's about her emotional state.”

Puzzled, Bernie said, “You say that as if it were a bad thing.”

He stood and faced the wall, away from Bernie. “Right now, she's both excited and a little scared, about like she is when she's getting close to cracking a dangerous case or catching a crook in the act. There are also little hints of something more, something I've never gotten from her before. It's almost as if – as if she's hungry for something, and it's not food.”

“You told me she was in the hotel room and that she'd promised to stay there until you went back.”

He spluttered a sardonic raspberry. “With Lois, any promise to stay out of trouble automatically comes with the attached qualification that it won't apply if there's a really big story out there to be written up. That's how she's gotten a lot of her banners.” His face hardened. “That's also why I've had to swoop in and rescue her so many times.”

Bernie inhaled deeply through his nose and stepped into Superman's line of sight. “Then let's finish these tests so you can go back to New Orleans and rescue her.” Bernie took the hero's arm and dragged him over to the desk on which his notes and preliminary results rested. “I don't want to be the reason you think you're late for a rescue.”

Clark looked at his friend and smiled slightly. “Thank you, Bernie. Thank you very much.” Then he gestured at the desktop. “Come on, these results won't record themselves.”

Lois turned and smiled to the big man ten feet from her. She took in his regal bearing, his flat-rimmed black hat, his long duster, and decided this escapee from the Western movie villain factory needed to be deflated a little. “Hi. You must be the one they call the Patriarch. You mind if I just call you Pat? The other's kinda archaic nowadays and pretty clumsy, too, don't you think?”

Two other men stepped to the Patriarch's side. The older one seemed just to watch her. “My lord,” the younger one snarled, “allow me to eliminate this – this irritant!”

“Hey! That could hurt a girl's feelings! Be nice, buster!”

He took a step toward her. “Andre!” snapped the Patriarch. “Hold your place!” The younger man ground his teeth, but stepped back. “Now, young lady,” the Patriarch purred, “would you please explain yourself?”

Lois walked almost within his reach and stopped with her hands on her bare hips. “Sure. My name is Lois Lane. I'm a reporter with the Daily Planet. I'm here on assignment with my husband. We're looking for werewolves, and surprise!” She waved her hands around, then put them back on her hips. “I think I've found the mother lode. So to speak, of course.”

The big man inhaled through his nose. After a moment, his eyes widened. “You are a member of Arthur's pack?”

“Nope. I just came into these talents a few days ago. They're turning out to be very useful. For instance, I followed you here.”

He tilted his head to one side. “Why?”

She frowned at him and said, “I just told you. I was looking for werewolves.”

The young man who'd begged to eliminate her slid to one side, obviously trying to sneak up on her. The Patriarch nodded. “I see. Do you believe that you will be able to write your story?”

This was working out better than she'd hoped. “As long as this guy—” she lifted her left hand and pointed at Andre “—doesn't ‘eliminate’ me.” Her arm fell to her side. “And if he tries, I'll have to hurt him.”

“As you did to Bernice and Nathan?”

“That's on you, Pat. You sent them after—”

She broke off, spun away from Andre's wild attack, then punched him in the kidney. He grunted hard and turned, his arms

spread and his hands curled like claws.

Lois assumed a front stance, left leg forward and right fist back, her left hand extended, open and ready. He bluffed a charge and she shuffled to her left, then he approached again and she shuffled to the right. Andre smiled, showing his teeth, and charged directly at her.

Instead of dodging again, Lois met his attack with a straight right to the face and a left-hand knife strike to the throat, delivered at lightning speed and in bang-bang sequence. Andre stumbled past her and went to his knees, coughing and holding his neck with one hand. Lois stepped quickly to him and gave him a side heel kick to the back of the neck.

Andre flopped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Melody Brennan looked at Robert Gautreaux and shook her head as Lois jumped down from the second-floor balcony. “That is one crazy lady, don’t you think? She must have bought those – clothes – before we rendezvoused. That had to be what she was carrying in that little bag.” Melody blew air between her teeth and almost smiled. “She sure has their attention now.”

He leaned back to make sure they were still in the shadowed area of the apartment. “I am not happy about this, Officer Brennan. Actions such as the ones Madame Lane has undertaken make it impossible for me to – for us to control the situation. We must now wait for her to do whatever it is she plans to do.”

Melody looked around her rifle’s sights at Lois’s taunting of the Patriarch. “I think she plans to commit suicide in a very bloody manner.”

Robert gritted his teeth. “If that occurs, we must make certain that her sacrifice is not in vain. Pass the word to lock and load quietly, and to pick a target but keep the index finger away from the trigger. No one is to shoot before I give the word.” He held her gaze for a moment, then took her hand in his. “If for some reason I am unable to give that word, I am counting on you to give it in my stead.”

Her eyes wanted to leak and her mouth wanted to give voice to a joyous laugh. She forced herself to maintain discipline and remain professional. He cared for her! He trusted her to watch his back! And he’d made her his second-in-command!

Somehow she tore her eyes away from his face and slipped backward to pass the word to the other groups of officers in the second-floor apartments. No one objected to her delivering the message. Every man and woman simply nodded and checked weapons. A few pulled extra magazines from their cartridge belts and placed them within easy reach.

She slipped back to Robert. “Have I missed anything?”

He pointed to the ground on either side of Lois. “She has defeated two werewolves from the Patriarch’s pack already. I believe – yes, a third now challenges her.” Melody watched, amazed, as Lois quickly dispatched the bigger and stronger man with moves a normal human could not duplicate.

Melody breathed a short prayer of thanks that Lois was already married. Melody could not stand ten seconds against one as skilled and powerful as she.

Lois watched the man she’d just put down for a long moment, then turned to face her main opponent. “Okay, Pat, let’s get something straight, all right? You keep sending them at me one at a time and I’ll keep knocking them down. Nobody’s dead yet, but if your guys don’t give me time to control my strikes, that might change.”

“Enough!” roared the Patriarch. “Troublesome female! I will defeat you myself!”

Lancelot called out, “As human or wolf?”

The Patriarch turned and glared at him for a long moment. Roger crossed his arms and said, “Does it really make a difference, Lancelot? My lord the Patriarch cannot be defeated by

either a small woman or a small wolf. He might not need to shift form to slay her.”

“You’re on, bigmouth!” Lois yelled. “Fifty bucks says he can’t beat me no matter what form he takes!” She looked at the Patriarch and smiled. “What’cha waitin’ for, bud, a in-graved invitation?”

The huge man swung a massive fist at her head, one Lois would later insist whistled through the air. She ducked and rolled to her right, away from his follow-up stomp. Her own foot lashed out before she stood up and struck him on the outer edge of his left kneecap.

The Patriarch stumbled slightly and bit off a cry of surprise. He straightened and glared, then gathered himself and leaped at the smaller woman.

Lois, who had assumed a ready stance as she’d withdrawn the kick, jumped to her left and kicked the big man in the floating ribs as she passed him. He crashed to the grass and bounced, then with an angry growl he leaped to his feet and roared at her like the Predator had roared at Arnold.

She stared at him for a long breath, then laughed.

Lois heard the muttering in the pack of Naturals, a few wondering why their lord had not already torn this fool stripper’s head from her body and feasted on her heart and liver. The Patriarch apparently heard it too – his head snapped in their direction and his eyes widened for a moment.

Then he turned back to Lois and gave her a cruel smile in return. “You had best come to some understanding with your maker, Lois Lane. You are about to die.”

She blew a raspberry at him and said, “Pictures or it didn’t happen!”

He didn’t answer. He just shifted form.

His clothes were either flung away or ripped apart as he transformed. In moments, the biggest wolf Lois had ever seen was drooling at her.

But he wasn’t looking at a human form. Lois had changed also.

His fur was jet black while hers was dark brown with silvery highlights. His tail might have knocked down a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, while hers might brush loose dirt off a stoop. His muscles rippled as he eased forward – hers bunched taut under her skin as she scampered back.

Even with her life on the line, Lois once again noticed the differences in her vision, her hearing, her sense of smell, her balance and perceived agility while in this form. She diverted some of her attention to her attire and found that the spandex shorts and elastic top had indeed stayed with her. True, they didn’t quite fit, and she might have a couple of embarrassing moments when she shifted back to human form, but it was better than being naked.

The huge wolf growled long and low at her, then lunged forward with his jaws open. She waited until the last nanosecond, then skipped to the side as his head tracked her movements and his teeth snapped together inches from her ear.

As he drew back to snap again, she lunged at him and gave him a bloody bite on his left side. He whirled and snarled and charged again, and she leaped aside again. She lunged at his near hind leg – the same one she’d kicked as a human – and bit the joint hard. The big wolf went to the ground with Lois on top, and he curled at his middle to rip out her entrails with his jaws.

She dodged away and howled at the big wolf. She hoped it sounded like she was mocking him.

Apparently it did. The larger pack gasped almost as one. Guess nobody ever dared to taunt him before, Lois mused.

She heard one of the two who’d flanked the Patriarch just moments ago call out, “My lord, allow me to assist!” The big wolf glanced to his right at the man and snarled, then turned back to Lois.

Who, once again, wasn't there.

It seemed that when it came to fighting, these werewolves knew only face-to-face straight-ahead brute strength and ferocity. They didn't appear to understand that a number of quick, sharp blows to a vulnerable spot were just as painful and debilitating as one hammer blow. This time she raked his left side with her rear claws while balancing on one forepaw. It was the same side she'd bitten earlier, and he jerked away with a roar of pain and anger. She took advantage of his loss of focus to bite that hind leg once again.

Before his jaws could close on her, she skipped away again. Her Tai Kwan-do and Yi Chi training was coming in very handy. True, due to her lack of thumbs she couldn't use everything she knew, but she could adapt enough techniques to her wolf form to slowly win this fight. And the Patriarch knew it. She could see it in his beady eyes.

Then the moment she'd been waiting for came.

The Patriarch had suffered enough. The bites on his leg and the bleeding tears against his ribs would heal in minutes – if only he could keep this insufferable upstart from repeating her blows against him. Or if he could close with her and rip her throat out.

But it didn't appear that she would allow that to happen.

He paused for a moment and weighed his options. He could continue the wolf-on-wolf battle and eventually overpower her, but that would take too long and would exhaust him, leaving him vulnerable to an attack by another. He could already feel the strain on his body's resources.

He could resume his human form, challenging her to do the same, but she had already proven that she could dish out punishment and evade his attacks in that shape also. His endurance in human guise was not superior to his wolf's remaining strength, and he doubted he could defeat her quickly as a human. It was probably his worst option.

But he had to win, and it had to be done quickly. He didn't want to reveal his beast form to his followers or to Arthur's band at this time, but it seemed he had no choice. That form was his secret weapon, the ace up his sleeve, the dagger in his boot. He would assume it and rip her whining body apart with his jaws.

He backed up and shifted.

It hurt – it always had – but he persevered until he stood, towering over the other human shapes, ready to reach out and destroy this stinging gnat. He would—

There was no wolf before him. Nor any human.

For the first time in his long life, he faced another beast like himself.

Lois saw the shock in the Patriarch's eyes and lunged at him before he could shake out of his stunned stupor. Her left fist smashed into his torso, followed immediately by her right hand thrusting up at his lower jaw. The heel of her hand struck the underside of his mouth, and she both felt and heard the bone in his mandible crack.

He staggered back a step and Lois knelt to launch a spinning round kick at his calves. Her right heel impacted his right lower leg and tore his foot from the ground. Before he could regain his balance, she leaped up and kicked him in the same side she'd punched a moment before, then came down and punched him twice more in the same place. She felt bones crack beneath the blows.

His right hand swung and the back of his fist caught her skull just above where the temple would be on a human, barely in front of her ear. She went down, stunned, and rolled away, scattering Arthur's band from the center of the clearing. By the time she regained her feet, the Patriarch was on one knee facing to her right, holding his side and visibly grimacing.

The fight wasn't over and she knew it. She waited for him to

make the next move, taking the chance that he wouldn't allow himself to appear to be injured worse than he really was. And she needed the time to make both of her eyes focus on the same target.

He finally lurched to his feet and limped toward her, his right elbow held against his side as if protecting his ribs. She could use that.

She faked to his right, got him to turn that direction, and danced to his left. Before he could react, she kicked the knee on that side, the one she'd bitten as a wolf. She felt the ligaments rip and tear, heard bones snap, saw his eyes roll up in his head with the pain.

He crashed to the earth with a groan and a grunt.

For a tiny moment – no longer than a few microseconds – she braced herself to leap on him and crush his throat with her jaws. It would be easy. He was badly bruised, had at least three cracked ribs, a broken jaw, deep bloody scratches on his left side, broken bones and torn ligaments in his knee. He wouldn't be able to defend himself from an attack by a timid chihuahua puppy.

She could take the Patriarch's throne from him. It would be easy.

And none of his pack would help him now. She'd kill him and assume her place as their pack leader and make them stop killing humans. The thought of ruling them all made her giddy. She swept her eyes across the werewolves in human form before her and bared her fangs. None of them would dare challenge her. None could defeat her.

All she'd have to do is change into the beast—

And with that thought, realization came as a wave crashing over her.

She couldn't kill him. She couldn't. It would solve nothing and present far more problems to her than she could handle. Not to mention how Clark would react when he learned that she'd taken the Patriarch's life. No, killing this madman was not the answer for her.

She'd beaten him in combat, beaten him soundly, in each of his three forms. He wouldn't dare offer to fight her again so soon. She'd offer her protection to Arthur's band for however long it took to separate the two packs. And maybe Bernie would know how to free her from this – curse? Disease? Condition? Blessing?

If not, she knew she'd eventually have to change into the wolf again – she'd be forced to by her animal nature. She let herself consider how Bill Henderson would react when he found out that a werewolf was haunting the Metropolis night, protecting the innocent and challenging evildoers. Oh, yeah, the hilarity would last until somebody pulled out a pistol and shot her in the head. Then Clark would have to bury her in the local pet cemetery.

She sobered quickly. That thought was all it took for her to make the decision. If Bernie could remove this thing, this – whatever – that made it possible for her to change species, then she'd do whatever was necessary to make it happen.

She shifted back to her human form and stared at the fallen Patriarch. Suddenly Jane and Teresa appeared on either side of her, their hands tugging on her top to cover her breasts. She realized what they were doing and lifted her elbows until they finished.

"Thanks, ladies. I guess I got distracted."

Jane grinned at her. "No problem, Lois. We've all had that problem. You should try distracting your husband that way when you see him again, though. That's a pretty neat trick."

"I'm not so sure he'd think it's that neat. Maybe I'll just stick to being a normal woman around him."

"You wear that outfit and he'll love it. Not sure I like the color combination, though."

Lois chuckled briefly. "It was all I could find on short notice."

"Miss Lane?" Teresa cleared her throat. "I – it appears that I owe you a most sincere apology."

Lois frowned in confusion. "An apology? What for?"

Teresa tensed and said, "It appears that I spoke wrongly when

I said that the – the creature form you took last was not possible to assume.”

“Ah.” Lois grinned. “Not a problem, Teresa. At least I didn’t lose all my self-control.”

She held Teresa’s startled expression with her eyes for a moment, then chuckled again. Teresa slowly smiled back and relaxed ever so slightly.

Lois wondered how long it had been since the woman had smiled at anyone or anything. Then she looked at the Patriarch again and met his pain-filled gaze. She took a step forward and resumed her hands-on-hips pose. “I think you owe me fifty bucks, pal. And I’m not taking your check.”

This time Teresa led the laughter.

The Patriarch couldn’t believe what had happened to him.

He lay defeated, at his opponent’s mercy. And he knew that few, if any, werewolves understood the concept of mercy. Surely this one, so recently Turned, would not refrain from ending his life as he lay helpless before her.

He waited for her killing blow – a blow which did not land.

His gaze rose to view Lois Lane in human form again, laughing softly with two of the females in Arthur’s band. He heard her taunt concerning the wager she’d suggested and the louder laughter which ensued. None of that small group appeared ready to attack him in his defenseless state.

He still could not accept the fight’s outcome.

He managed to turn his head and saw Andre coughing and struggling to stand straight. The Lane woman’s blows had injured him also. He called to his lieutenant. “Andre?” he croaked. “Andre, I require your assistance.”

Instead of helping him, Andre gave him a look of pure hatred. From behind him, Roger said, “I do not believe that either of us will assist you in rising, my lord. You must stand on your own.”

The huge beast sank back to the ground and began shifting back to human form. Despite the pain, he forced himself to be silent. When he was almost finished changing, he growled, “Give me a few minutes to heal and I will continue the combat with this usurper.”

“Ah, but she is not intent on replacing you, my lord,” Roger said smoothly, “else you would now be carrion. If you were to battle a true usurper, that one would have to come from within your own pack.”

The Patriarch’s eyes widened of their own accord as the import of Roger’s words hit him. If he did not rise to defend himself against Roger, and possibly both Roger and Andre, he would not only lose his position in the pack, he would be killed where he lay.

It would not happen today!

With a massive force of will, he stumbled to his feet. His injuries had not yet healed, yet he would momentarily be forced to fight his lieutenants to the death. But he would face the challenge, not allow it to come to him as if he were helpless as a newborn cub. He would fight, and fight well.

He would not die quietly. In fact, he did not plan to die at all.

Jane read the situation and realized they were too close. “Arthur!” she whispered fiercely. “Move everyone back!”

Arthur met her eyes and nodded, then carefully touched Lancelot, Guinevere, and Alphonse in turn. When he had their attention, he gestured with his head for them to follow him. He retreated at least twenty feet before he apparently judged the distance sufficient.

Jane, meanwhile, had gotten Teresa’s attention and started her to join the others. Lois, however, didn’t respond to Jane’s increasingly more intense tugs on her arm. “Lois!” she whispered in the other woman’s ear. “We need to get away from them before the fight starts!”

Lois turned and frowned. “What fight?”

“The fight to decide who leads this pack of Naturals!” She pulled Lois back two steps and continued at a lower volume. “Roger and Andre will probably attack the Patriarch together and try to kill him. If they succeed, they’ll either announce that they’ll be co-leaders of the pack or they’ll turn and fight each other to the death. If they fight each other, it’s likely that each one’s followers will start fighting too, and we don’t want to get caught up in the melee. Now come on!”

Lois stopped and twisted away from Jane’s grasp. “That’s not why I fought him! I wasn’t trying to kill him or have someone else do it! I fought him to keep everybody alive!”

“You can’t stop what’s about to happen! Now get over her and help me protect Alphonse and Guinevere! I can’t do it alone!”

Lois finally allowed herself to be pulled the rest of the way, but she kept looking back over her shoulder at the big man standing erect, daring his challengers to advance as if he were the dominant male of a large pride of lions. Jane looked and wondered how long the wounded Patriarch would last. There was something leonine in his stance, his appearance, as he struggled to keep both challengers in view before him. Jane almost felt sorry for him.

Almost – but not quite. Somehow, some way, the Patriarch would pay his blood debt to her this day. Jane had sworn it would be so.

If Roger or Andre didn’t kill him, Jane would.

Chapter Thirteen

Roger locked eyes with Andre for a moment, then nodded. It seemed that Andre would remain in human form for the coming combat, so Roger would assume the wolf shape and attack. Even the best human fighters had very little chance against a coordinated attack by a competent bare-hand fighter and an angry police dog.

And none of these combatants were ordinary.

Andre blocked a punch from the Patriarch, something he normally could not have done. The pack leader’s injuries from the fight with the brash Turned One had both slowed and weakened him considerably, and he could not avoid Andre’s counter-punch to the face. Nor could he dodge Roger’s tearing bite to the back of his right thigh.

The big man was hamstrung. It was now but a matter of moments.

The Patriarch swung his open hand down at Roger and slapped the wolf away from his leg, but then he fell backward and shouted in pain. Andre jumped on his chest and slammed his feet down on the big man’s rib cage while Roger skittered to his target and clamped his jaws across his former leader’s throat.

A huge fist swung up and pounded into Roger’s side. Andre heard the ribs snap as the wolf howled in pain and released his hold. Andre took advantage of the distraction and thrust his fingers into the punctures in the big man’s skin. He reached deep and ripped the Patriarch’s neck wound further open. He saw the Patriarch’s blood begin to pour out.

The Patriarch swung his other fist into Andre’s face and knocked him away. The big man rolled over and tried to rise, but his multiple injuries were too much even for his great frame and single-minded determination. He put one massive hand against the tear in his throat in a vain attempt to slow his bleeding – one of the attacks had torn a large artery.

His face was pale and his breathing was rapid and shallow. His eyes lost focus and half-closed. His great hand fell from his neck and flopped to the ground. His massive torso leaned over from the waist and he slowly toppled head-first to the grass, then fell to his left.

He let out a deep sigh and was forever still.

The Patriarch was dead.

Roger slowly resumed human form and looked at Andre. He

was as Roger, standing still, panting, wiping blood – both the Patriarch’s and his own – from his face, wondering what the next move would be. A false move might trigger a werewolf riot, something neither of them wanted, nor was it something from which either could profit.

Then yet another voice, this one with a Cajun accent, shouted, “Everyone remain still! Do not move! Raise your hands to shoulder level and do not attempt to transform!”

A tall blonde woman dropped to all fours and began to change. A single rifle shot rang out. She fell to one side with a huffing sound and reverted to fully human form. She rolled over on her back and reached upward as she inhaled. Then the woman’s hand fell to the grass. She slowly exhaled and did not move again.

“I did not wish to do that!” the Cajun voice shouted. “There are twenty-five automatic weapons aimed in your direction along with six high-powered rifles! Remain still if you wish to live!”

With the cost of disobedience abjectly displayed before them, no one else moved. Roger had no idea what would happen next.

From his kneeling position at the upstairs window, Robert turned and gestured at Melody to move closer. When she put her ear next to his lips, he whispered, “Put the two bolt-action rifles at either end of the apartments and have them aim at opposite ends of the group. Have the rest move down to the lower floor in pairs, waiting until each pair walks out of the building, until we have ten in front of the building. You will go in the last pair. I will go first.”

He made as if to rise, but she put her hand on his arm and held him down on his knee. “No, Robert. Please. Let me go with you.” He hesitated in surprise, and she added, “I told you I would watch your back. You must not force me to break my word.”

He looked into her eyes and saw something more than he’d expected, something far more than fear for her boss – something deeply personal. His reflexive denial evaporated and he nodded. “Very well. Pass the word to move as I have indicated. Come back here when you are finished and I will give you the handcuff carrier. You and I will lead them to the arrests.”

She almost smiled, then nodded slowly and slipped away.

Just like a woman, he mused, involving her heart in a dangerous mission. He wondered if *Monsieur* Kent thought of his wife in that fashion.

He really needed to review those department rules on fraternization.

Jane half-turned to Lois and urgently whispered, “Did you know this was the next item on the agenda?”

“No, I didn’t,” Lois answered. “I knew Inspector Gautreaux and his people were in the apartments, but I didn’t know their plans.”

Guinevere slipped to Lois’ opposite shoulder. “Does the doughty Inspector Gautreaux intend to arrest all of us or only the Patriarch’s band?”

“No idea,” Lois returned quietly. “All I really know is that they have a bunch of AR-15s and a couple of .30 caliber bolt-action rifles. And every one of them has a pistol and lots of ammunition for all their weapons.”

Guinevere sighed. “So attacking them is not a good idea?”

“I wouldn’t advise it. They get attacked by what they pretty much know are werewolves and they’ll open up with everything they’ve got. The werewolves might win that fight, but a lot of them would be dead.” Lois glanced at either end of the formation of Naturals, then turned to Gwen. “I really hope the Naturals understand that.”

Lois watched Guinevere out of the corner of her eye. The blonde woman turned and gestured behind her. As several officers exited the apartment building and covered the werewolves with their weapons, Arthur stepped in front of Lois and turned to face his pack.

“My friends,” he said, “I urge each of you not to resist the officers as they perform their duty. We must cooperate fully if we wish to survive. I will ask that, if we are arrested, we occupy a cell or cells separate from the Naturals. This will—”

A lupine snarl sounded behind him. Arthur shouted, “Get down!” and suited his actions to his words. Lois quickly joined the small pack on the grass as several rifles barked and a few shouts of pain echoed in the small clearing.

After a few moments, the police officers stopped shooting and shouted for the unhurt werewolves to raise their hands. Lois risked a look and saw four, perhaps five silent and still bodies on the ground and at least five others who were down, wounded but moving around. Both Roger and Andre were among the wounded. The officers moved in pairs to each werewolf and ordered him or her to kneel and place hands behind his or her back. One officer held a weapon on the subject while the other snapped the cuffs in place. Occasionally one would return to Melody’s position beside Robert and reach into a carryall at her feet and pull out several more sets of cuffs.

As they moved through the pack, Lois noticed a flutter of red in her peripheral vision. Oh, good, she thought, he’s finally here. Must have heard the gunfire.

After a long moment, Superman floated down from the sky beside the Inspector. “Hello again, Inspector. Do you need any help?”

Robert smiled for the first time. “Thank you, Superman. If you could simply remain at the ready in case of trouble, we will proceed with our tasks.”

Superman looked around at the still forms on the ground. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here a bit sooner.”

“You had important business to attend to. We cannot blame you for anything that did not go as we had initially planned.”

Superman pointed at the largest body. “What happened to him? I don’t think he was shot, like these others were.”

Melody squeaked, “It was Mrs. Kent!”

The hero’s eyes grew huge. “You mean Lois Lane?”

“Yes, her! She fought the Patriarch and defeated him alone!”

Superman took a step toward Melody. “You’re telling me that she killed him?!”

“Killed him? Oh, no, of course not! She merely defeated him. Two members of his own pack turned on him and killed him. Lois Lane left him broken and defeated, but still alive. She refused to take his life when she had the opportunity.”

The hero relaxed a bit and released a breath he’d apparently been holding. “Okay, I understand. Where is Ms. Lane now?”

Melody pointed with her rifle. “Behind the main group. She’s the one in the impromptu bikini.”

From her prone position, Lois saw her husband’s eyebrows rise as he spun to look for her. She knew the moment he found her because his jaw fell open.

She sat up in the grass and pulled her knees up, then wrapped her arms around her legs and tilted her head at him. The members of Arthur’s pack stood and took one or two steps back from Lois as Superman approached.

Superman assumed his usual hands-on-hips pose, then nodded to Arthur. “Hello,” he said pleasantly. “Looks like your folks came through this ordeal fairly healthy.”

Arthur nodded back. “Yes, save for young Gawain. He was our only casualty.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Arthur. He seemed like a nice kid.”

Teresa folded her arms over her chest and said, “He was indeed a nice boy. I only wish I had shown him more patience. Perhaps he would still be with us had I done so.”

Superman lowered his hands to his sides and spoke softly. “I’ve had to learn that no matter what I do or how hard I try, I can’t get everything right and save everybody all the time. And I

can't go back and fix what I missed. All I can do is learn from my mistakes and the situations I get into and determine to be better in the future." He paused as if waiting for Teresa to speak, but she didn't. "It's hard, I know. But you won't make the same mistake the next time, assuming that whatever you're talking about really was a mistake. It's possible that there was nothing you could have done to save Gawain. I don't know. All I do know is that focusing on what went wrong will stop you from seeing what went right."

Lois saw a tear slip down Teresa's cheek. She thought about trying to comfort her, but Jane beat her to it. The two women slipped further away from the group, Jane guiding the quietly weeping Teresa to a nearby pecan tree.

Superman stepped next to Lois and reached out his hand. She looked at it for a moment, then at his face, then gave him a pixie grin and took his hand. She bounced up from the grass and brushed herself off.

The hero crossed his arms and slowly shook his head. "A strapless blue elastic top and red spandex bikini shorts," he said. "Wait till I tell your husband about this."

She shot him a mock glare. "You're just jealous because this color scheme looks better on me than it does on you."

Behind her, both Guinevere and Lancelot snorted.

Arthur's pack watched the police handcuff all the surviving werewolves from the Patriarch's pack. Then Arthur cautiously approached the inspector — not because the human male appeared threatening, but because the body language of the female beside him was all but shouting from the rooftops that she would gleefully shoot down anyone who attempted to harm the inspector.

He stopped about six feet from the man, the woman's rifle muzzle pointed at his belly. "Inspector? I am called Arthur."

"I am Robert Gautreaux, New Orleans Police. I am, I think, pleased to meet you, sir."

"Thank you. Can you tell me what plans you might have for myself and my friends?"

"That depends. Were you associated in any way with the mass murder of the homeless group earlier this week?"

"Absolutely not! We do not take the blood of humans, Inspector, only prey animals from the swamp and the surrounding woods. In fact, that act of barbarism precipitated this ultimate conflict between our forces."

Robert nodded. "That was my understanding. We have no plans to arrest any of you."

"Thank you. We will depart now from—"

"However," Robert broke in, "given that this firefight was directed against a band of actual werewolves, and given that it is impossible to silence all who were here or who are providing either medical care for the wounded or post-mortem care for the deceased, the city is not safe for you now. For your own safety, I must ask that you leave New Orleans as soon as possible."

Arthur stared at Robert for a moment, then spoke very precisely. "I was about to say that we will depart from this area of the country by mid-day two days from today, if not earlier. You may believe me or not, Inspector, I care not which." He relaxed slightly and continued. "We must return to our current safe house, pack our belongings, and somehow make arrangements to inter one of our number who perished during this internecine conflict. After that is done, however, we will be gone."

Robert nodded. "Thank you. I do not ask this of you out of fear for what you might do, but out of concern for what might befall you. I offer you my sincere condolences for the loss of your companion, and I truly hope that you find peace at your destination."

"Thank you. And I hope the young lady behind you remains as in control of her weapon as she seems to be at this moment."

Robert glanced over his shoulder at Melody, who didn't move or flinch at all. He almost smiled at Arthur and said, "That is my

hope also. She earned the second-best rifle score at this year's inter-precinct competition."

Arthur matched Robert's almost-smile. "Then we would be wise to exit her sphere of influence as quickly as we are able."

Robert shifted his rifle to his left hand and extended his right to Arthur. "Go in peace, each and all of you."

Arthur took the hand and gripped it firmly but not painfully so. "I thank you, sir. I wish the same for you and yours."

They released the handshake and stood facing each other. After a few seconds, Robert softly said, "Were the current circumstances different, sir, we might have been friends."

"Perhaps." Arthur nodded once. "Good-bye, Inspector. I doubt we shall meet again."

They walked back to the safe house in relative silence, speaking only about the weather or local traffic patterns or people on the sidewalk approaching them. Nothing of any importance was discussed until they had each procured a beverage according to individual taste. Jane sipped a cream soda, Guinevere and Lancelot a glass of wine each, Teresa a glass of ginger ale, Alphonse a beer — Jax, of course, brewed and bottled in Cajun country — and Arthur had a tall glass of ice water.

Arthur moved to the living area, followed by the others. They stood in a rough circle, silent and almost brooding, until Teresa lifted her glass and said, "To Gawain. May we always remember him fondly."

"Hear, hear," the rest responded.

"And may he know the rest he never found in life," Teresa finished.

Each one sipped his or her drink, then slowly each person found a place to sit. Guinevere landed beside Arthur on the couch, while the others sat separated from each other. No one spoke for almost two minutes.

Arthur finally cleared his throat. "I dislike breaching our quiet moment, but we must prepare to leave the city. We must now decide where we will go and how we will travel to that destination." He looked at each one in turn. "This is something we must all agree upon. I cannot dictate this, nor can any one of us. This must be a unanimous decision."

Lancelot leaned forward in the recliner he'd claimed for his own. "Why must we leave, Arthur? The Patriarch is dead, killed by his own. His pack is mostly in custody, and those who are not are as dead as he. We no longer need fear being hunted and killed for not being Rougarou from birth."

"What you say is true, but the police do not want us here," Arthur returned. "We have been asked — politely ordered, really — by Inspector Gautreaux to vacate this part of the country, largely for our own protection. Werewolves of any stripe are too visible at the moment, and we are in danger here."

Lancelot clunked his glass down on the side table and stood abruptly. "I do not care to be ordered about by mere humans. I do not care that the police fear us. We do not hunt and kill humans!"

Teresa huffed. "Really, Lancelot? What of the humans we slew during our conflict with the Patriarch?"

He spun and glared at her. "They were the Patriarch's willing servants! They are merely collateral damage in that war! Had they remained apart from the Naturals, no harm would have come to them!"

Before Teresa or Arthur could snap back, Jane barked, "Enough!"

The rest turned to look at her. She tilted her cream soda up and drained it, then stood and crushed the can. "Arthur is correct, Lance. The pack has to leave. You stay, you're going to be targets for frightened humans who can't tell the difference between Naturals and the Turned, because to them there's no difference." Jane looked to her right and tossed the empty can into the nearest waste basket. "You've got to leave, go someplace where no one

knows who you are. Maybe you can form an alliance with another pack of Turned Ones, set up a cooperative for mutual defense and hunting privileges. But that can't happen here."

The room was silent for a moment, then Guinevere said, "Jane, dear, why do you say 'you' instead of 'we'?" Are you not accompanying the pack?"

Jane sighed, then shook her head. "No. I have someplace else to be."

Alphonse said, "Jane, honey, can you tell us why you leave us?"

She ran a hand through her hair and pulled it back behind her head, then let it fall. "I suppose it doesn't make any difference now.

"You folks took me in over fifty years ago, when I was a scared and lonely nine-year-old girl. You knew I was a Natural, yet you had compassion on me and took care of me, taught me how to live without murdering humans, taught me to treat them as equals and with respect. You knew something bad had happened to me, but you never tried to force me to reveal it."

She rubbed her face with her hands, dislodging a few tears that had nestled in her eyes. "Best I can remember, I'd been on my own for about three weeks when Alphonse found me. I don't think I've ever told you how much that meant to me, Alphonse. When I was ten, I wanted to marry you."

"Thank you, Jane," Alphonse said quietly.

"I grew out of that infatuation, but I never stopped loving all of you for saving my life and never asking anything special from me. You treated me like one of your own, and I'll never forget that. Never."

She turned to face Arthur and Guinevere. "I know I've caused a few problems for you, being a Natural in a Turned pack, but I thank you again for giving me a home. You're the closest thing to family I've had since that day I was nine and lost my parents."

Teresa stepped over to Jane and put her hand on the other woman's shoulder. "Jane, I think you're working up to telling us something we don't know but probably should. I can tell it's a difficult thing to speak of. May I help you in some way?"

Jane sobbed once and took Teresa's other hand in both of hers, then brought it to her cheek. "You just did. Thank you."

She slowly released Teresa's hand and took a step back. "You know I stayed with you because I had something I had to do. Well – it's done. It didn't happen like I thought it would – I didn't do it – but now that the Patriarch is dead, my quest is over."

Guinevere stood and took a step toward Jane. "Why were you on a quest to slay the Patriarch, Jane?"

Jane lifted her distressed face to the others and straightened to her full height. "My parents and I were living with a small pack of Naturals in southern Alaska in 1942. There were eleven adults and four children, and we almost never took humans. And before you congratulate me for being so enlightened, it was partly because there were so few humans in the interior and partly because we didn't want to be hunted down and wiped out by surviving humans." She paused, then said, "We never considered that we might be attacked by others like us."

Arthur's eyes grew wide. "You mean – other werewolves – other Naturals – attacked your pack?"

She nodded. "That's exactly it. The Patriarch led the raid. He brought about thirty others with him. All eleven adults and three of the kids were slaughtered, some of them after they tried to surrender. The kids – that was the worst."

Teresa shook her head. "You needn't tell us anything more."

Jane broke down and wept for a few seconds, then wiped her eyes again. "I was playing hide-and-seek with the other kids. They couldn't find me because I was up in a tree behind an old eagle's nest. You couldn't see a kid up there from the ground. I saw – I saw the attack begin. I was too startled to shout a warning, and the other kids were dead almost before I knew it. The Patriarch saw

my parents running toward him to defend the little ones, and he – he killed them. He morphed into that beast-thing form and – and killed them like a human swatting a fly. Then – he laughed." She seemed to realize her fists were clenched. She stared at them for a moment, then opened her hands but didn't relax them. "In less than a minute, I was the only survivor, and I was too scared to breathe."

Lancelot stood, his own eyes damp. "Jane, I – I never knew – I am so sorry."

"You didn't know because I didn't tell you. Any of you. That's when I vowed before the yew to see the Patriarch dead." She slumped a little and put her hands in her jacket pockets. "My vow is fulfilled. I have no reason to stay."

Teresa smiled sadly and stepped in front of Jane. "Yes, you do," she almost whispered. "We love you and we want you to remain. We need you as much as you need us. We would not be the same without you."

Then Teresa shocked everyone else in the room, but most especially Jane, when she put her arms around the younger woman and embraced her. Arthur watched Jane's eyes bulge and her mouth fall open. Then she grabbed Teresa as if holding on for her very life.

Their tears intermingled as first Guinevere, then Alphonse, then Arthur surrounded Jane and embraced her. Even Lancelot murmured his appreciation for her presence.

Guinevere stroked Jane's hair. "We all agree that you should stay with us, Jane. Will you agree also?"

Jane's eyelids crushed shut and she burst out weeping. With her face buried in Teresa's shoulder, she nodded hard.

Then she enveloped Teresa with her long arms as if she'd never release the other woman.

Like the Grinch, whatever passed for Arthur's heart loosened and warmed. He silently agreed that Jane should stay with them. She had more than earned a place among the members of his pack.

And a place in each of their hearts.

Epilogue

Lois turned and watched as Arthur gathered his pack to leave. None of them spoke to her, but all of them save Lancelot gave her meaningful nods and whispered thanks. She surprised herself by missing them already.

Maybe it's the knowledge of their shared fate, she thought. Maybe I'll find them and join them if Bernie can't fix me.

She dismissed the terrifying thought. Bernie had to fix her.

If he can't—

A tap on her shoulder derailed her depressing train of thought. Her head and body spun to face the intruder, her fists raised in a ready stance.

But it was only a grim-faced Superman. "Ms. Lane," he said, "may I take you back to your hotel room?"

She relaxed. "Sure. I don't have a reason to stay. As long as we make a stop in that second-floor room—" she pointed to the balcony from which she'd first leaped "—so I can pick up my other clothes."

He lifted her into his arms, then into the air. Without another word, he set her down on the indicated balcony and waited while she retrieved a small zippered carryall. Lois paused for a moment and looked into his face, but couldn't read his expression. As he lifted her again, she tried to brace herself for bad news from Dr. Klein.

When they were moving toward the hotel and were several hundred feet above ground, he said, "Bernie hit the jackpot."

"What jackpot? I didn't know he played the lottery."

He gave her his usual strained-patience look. "No, I mean that he found a way to reverse your condition."

She felt herself stiffen. "You – you mean – I won't be a – a werewolf anymore?"

He allowed a small smile to form. “Not if you don’t want to.”
“Great! What do I have to do?”

Superman’s head tilted and he frowned slightly. “This may be difficult for you.”

“I don’t care! Just tell me!”

She suddenly realized they were losing altitude. “I’ll tell you in the room,” he whispered.

As they touched down on the balcony, the maid who was inside making the bed saw them, jumped straight up and shrieked, and ran smack into the door trying to escape. By the time Lois walked into the bedroom, the young woman had mastered the door latch and had scampered down the hall, still making high-pitched inarticulate noises.

Lois laughed despite her nervousness. “I guess that’s a new experience for her, seeing Superman bringing a girlfriend to a room via the balcony.”

“We’ll have to call the desk and explain what happened, that Superman brought you up here then zoomed off to fetch Clark and left almost immediately.” He sped to the door and engaged the privacy lock, then sped back to Lois’ side. “Later. We’ll call later.”

He gave her a sexy leer, then turned and pulled the curtains across the balcony doors. Then he spun out of the Suit and finished directly in front of her.

All the way to bare skin.

Shocked, she goggled at the expanse of muscular male pulchritude. Clark put his hands on his bare hips in a Superman pose and said sternly, “Dr. Klein’s prescription, Mrs. Kent, is to spend the next one hundred hours – consecutive hours, mind you – in the intimate company of Superman. He’s to go where you go, eat beside you, stand next to you when you brush your teeth, be with you when you change clothes, shower with him beside you, and wearing as little clothing as possible for the duration of that time.”

Lois stared at her handsome husband for another moment, then purred, “Bernie said no clothing?”

“Well, to be honest, he said everything I just said – except for the clothing part. That was my own addition to the prescription.”

She grinned naughtily. “In that case—” she pulled the blue bandeau top over her head and dropped it on the floor “—we need to get started—” she shimmed out of the red spandex bikini pants “—on Bernie’s prescription as soon as possible.”

He embraced her and kissed her enthusiastically.

She responded with equal enthusiasm.

When they came up for air, he whispered in her ear, “You are a woman after my own heart, Lois Lane Kent.”

She wrapped her hands around his bare backside and squeezed. “That’s not all I’m after.”

They kissed again and didn’t stop expressing their undying love for each other until they slowly floated down from the ceiling and soft-landed atop the bedcovers.

Lois nestled into Clark’s arms and sighed. “You know, husband of mine, you still make me go ‘Wow.’”

He kissed her nose. “Me too.” He lifted his head. “Hey, are you hungry? I can order room service if you want.”

She reached up and touched his cheek. “I think what I really need is a shower. And you’ve got to stay with me, remember?” She sat up and booped his nose with her finger. “Coming, Superman?”

He sat up and kissed her again. And it was not, by any means, a solo effort.

His lips still touching hers, he murmured, “You set the water temperature and I’ll lay out the extra towels.”

She pulled back and tried to glare but failed. “Extra towels? How wet do you think I’m going to get?”

He smiled and slid off the bed, holding her in his arms. “They’re for any excess water we splash outside the stall.”

She smiled back and wrapped her arms around his neck as he

carried her toward the shower. “Then let’s get this cure started!”

He paused and grinned. “I thought we already had.”

She laughed and pointed to the bathroom door. He pushed it shut with his foot and leaned over to let her adjust the faucets.

I’m going back to just being me, Lois thought. No more changing physical form. No more open-faced triple-meat sandwiches. No more urges to bite flirting waitresses’ faces off. No more dreams about chomping into raw rabbits or pulling down deer in flight. No more fighting angry werewolves.

And lots of unclothed reality with her sexy husband. This trip had a shaky beginning, a pretty rough middle, but it couldn’t have ended any better.

They spent five days working on her cure. “Just to be on the safe side,” she told him. Not that he argued with her, of course.

They never did find those musicians again. Not that they looked all that hard.

Perry watched Clark and Lois walk down the ramp to the news floor together. The freezing rain and snow had stopped over the previous weekend, and the temperatures were rising above the late February average and melting the accumulated ice. The city was still due for some clean-up, but most businesses were fully staffed once again, less anyone who’d gotten injured or sick during the visit of the Siberian express. Even Ralph was back at his desk.

He glanced at the clock. Two-thirty-eight. They weren’t really late, because technically they were returning from an out-of-town assignment today and weren’t required to come in until tomorrow. But he needed some up close and personal closure from his two best reporters, so he gestured for them to come to his office.

“What’s up, Chief?” Lois asked.

“Just a little follow-up on your travel piece. Good work, you two. Come on in so we can talk without everyone else listening in.”

He turned and sat behind his desk, then motioned to the door with one hand. Clark closed it and pulled two chairs closer to the desk. Perry picked up the unmarked folder on his desk and pulled out some paper.

“Y’all know what this is?”

Lois frowned. “I assume it’s our story from the Big Easy. The real one.”

Perry put the sheets of paper down on his desk and sighed. He looked at Lois and Clark sitting opposite him and felt the weight of his years. “I’ve read that thing all the way through at least four times since you emailed it to me from New Orleans and I have not changed my mind. That, kids, is a completely unbelievable narrative.”

“We know, Perry,” Lois said, “but every word of it is true.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it at all. I believe every punctuation mark.” He pushed his chair away from the desk and stood. “You know, of course, that we can’t print a word of it.”

“We know that too,” Clark answered. “But we both thought you needed whatever closure you could get from the truth.” He hesitated, then added, “I’m sorry we never could prove who killed Evelyn Carstairs, although we’re both pretty certain it was the Patriarch.”

Perry nodded, then said, “Lois, I assume from this narrative that you’re back to full health. Am I right?”

She tipped her head to the right in an abbreviated shrug. “Better, I think. I don’t have my enhanced wolf-level strength any more, but I feel stronger and more agile than I did. Lin Chou says that I’ve gotten quicker, too. I don’t know how long it will last, but I plan to enjoy it while it does.”

Perry stood and slowly walked to the wall where several of his memory photos hung. “You’re sure the pack of Naturals is neutralized?”

“Maybe not permanently,” Clark answered, “but I don’t know

what else the police and city courts could have done without going public with everything or shooting them down where they stood. There's one judge who was in on the whole secret – we still don't know his name, Inspector Gautreaux refused to tell us – and he explained to Andre and Roger that they could leave the state or face trial for multiple first-degree murder charges. And he didn't give a plugged nickel for any of their chances if that happened. In fact, we were told that the judge all but guaranteed the death penalty for every one of them if they went to trial."

He drifted along the wall until he ended up in front of the group photo from his New Orleans adventure nearly three decades before. "I guess they didn't call his bluff."

Clark leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. "I got the impression that they didn't believe it was a bluff, not with the two dozen twelve-gauge riot shotguns pointed at them."

Perry made a sound that might have been a sigh, might have been a chuckle. "You wrote that one group went south to Mexico and the other ended up on the Canadian Pacific coastal area."

Lois shrugged. "That's where they said they were going. We don't know if they actually went to those locations."

Perry sighed. "More Bigfoot and Chupacabra sightings coming, I guess."

"Probably," Clark replied.

Without turning, Perry asked, "Did Superman not follow up on that?"

"Sorry, no," Lois said. "He was a little busy turning me back into a normal human. Besides, you know Superman has no law enforcement authority in Mexico and not much in Canada. Either country is thrilled if he helps at a natural disaster, but they'd rather deal with bad guys their own way." Perry turned as if about to say something, but Lois added, "I think it's short-sighted, but life's too short to argue with idiots."

"That's a truth if I ever heard one. Where did Arthur's bunch end up?"

"Central Canada, I think," Clark responded. "Good hunting there, all wild animals. They weren't any threat to humans, but the situation was just too dangerous for them to stay. And I'm pretty sure that tall Natural girl, Jane or Ishmael or whatever her real name is, went with them."

Perry nodded, then asked, "Did any of the other Turned ask to be – I don't know what to call it – de-wolfed?"

Clark almost hid a grin. "No. Discounting the fact that Lois would have been somewhat put out had I offered—" he paused to field a fake glare from Lois "—they've all been werewolves for decades, so putting them back into human society would not be a kindness. They don't have any real modern professional skills, no background to check, no modern education, the few financial resources they have aren't quite legally clean, and if anyone learned they used to turn into really big dogs and kill wild animals for their meals, either their sanity would be questioned or, worst case, their lives would be in danger."

Clark's face turned pensive. "On top of that, Bernie said that his prescription for Lois probably wouldn't have worked if she'd been a Turned One for another week. Maybe not if she'd been one for two or three more days." He looked at her and took her hand. "I'm so thankful it wasn't too late for her."

"Me, too," Lois breathed. Then she leaned in for a brief but meaningful kiss.

Perry smiled slightly as his two best reporters momentarily left his office without moving from their chairs. After a moment, he cleared his throat and said, "Okay, you two, you need any more time off? You did give me a great travel piece, with a terrific birds-eye review of the Mardi Gras parade, so you're caught up here."

Lois turned her smile to her boss. "Sure, if you're offering. I'd love a chance to catch up on my sleep."

Perry gave her a mock-frown and growled, "A hundred-plus hours in that luxury hotel and you need to catch up on your

sleep?"

Lois grinned and snorted at the same time. Clark smiled shyly and blushed a little.

Perry took pity on them. "Fine! You have the rest of the week and the weekend. Will five straight days be enough for you? Or will you still be tired?"

Lois' face went blank, all but her eyes, which opened ingenue-wide. "Oh, no, I'm sure I'll be rested by then."

"Uh-huh. Okay, you two reprobates get out of here! Enjoy your time off, because everything comes with a price. And that price is a record number of front-page headlines starting next week!"

Clark stood and gave him a sloppy salute. "Got it, Chief."

"And no cheating!"

Clark frowned. "Cheating?"

"Superman stories don't count, y'hear?"

This time they both snorted. Lois grabbed Clark's hand and pulled him toward the office door. "We got it, Chief. Real stories from real reporters." She opened the door and almost pulled Clark off his feet. "See you Monday!" she called.

Perry watched her lead him to the elevator bank and punch the "down" button. They were the best, he thought, and the best for each other. Kinda like Alice and me.

Only a little more so.

He shook his head. They weren't the only reporters on staff. The paper wouldn't go under if the byline of Lane and Kent took a brief sabbatical. He'd make sure of it.

But it was good to know that Superman wasn't dominating that relationship. Lois had always been her own woman, and despite her obvious love for Clark, she still was her own woman. Nor did Clark disappear into her. They were truly a whole that was more than the sum of its parts. It was wonderful to watch, and even more wonderful to be a small part of it.

He turned back to his desk. He had to start marking up tomorrow's morning edition. The New Orleans travel piece would fit perfectly in the Sunday morning edition.

The real story would go home with him tonight and reside in his safe for the rest of his life.

He might let Alice read it if she cajoled him sweetly enough and swore to keep it a secret.

THE END