



Wolf Moon

Nora Roberts

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Prologue

Italy

Somewhere in the Piedmont Mountains

LIKE a brush tipped in twilight, the setting sun shimmered across the valley and daubed silver-edged shadows into the forest. Those last flaming rays wouldn't linger, but would soon slide away to hide behind the peaks and leave the sky a soft, purpling blue.

Simone hitched her shoulders, shifting the weight of her backpack as she watched night creep across the wild reaches of Valgrisenche.

At least she was pretty sure that's where she stood. She'd wandered off the path—such as it was—hours earlier. But she didn't care. She'd come for the adventure, for the thrill. For the freedom.

And if she was a little lost in a remote area of the Italian mountains, so what? She was *in* the Italian mountains, and that's what counted.

In any case, she had her compass, her guidebooks, and all the necessary supplies. Tomorrow, she'd cross over into France—*France*, she thought with a quick hiking-boot boogie.

If the mood struck anyway, if she didn't decide to linger on this side of the border another day or two before she continued her journey. This glorious and personal journey.

She'd camp, but not yet. The light was fading, but the sunset was so spectacular, painting reds and golds over the western sky. She'd always thought twilight the most magical of times. A breathless hush that should be savored before it bled away to night.

So she'd follow the sunset for a while, fill her lungs with the sharp tang of pine from the forest, and watch the dying sun sink onto, into, behind the snow-covered peaks.

She'd been right to come after the summer season, right to take this one year to indulge in everything she'd dreamed about all of her life.

She'd tasted pasta in Rome, gotten drunk in Spoleto, bought an ornate silver cross from a vender in Venice, and had a foolishly intense three-day love affair in Florence.

But most of the time she stayed off the beaten path, enjoying the hikes through the valleys and hills, through the fields of sunflowers, the vineyards.

For a full third of her eighteen years she'd been trapped in the city, imprisoned by fate, and the system. She'd been forced to follow the rules

and had marked each day since her twelfth birthday as a day closer to freedom.

Now she was here, following a dream. Her parents' dream, she knew. She was living it for them. If they had lived, they would have come long before this. They, the three of them, would have seen and tasted and smelled and experienced.

She fingered the heavy cross hanging around her neck and watched the last rays of the sun drip beneath the peaks.

They would have loved it.

She settled her pack more comfortably and began to walk again. There was too much energy inside her to settle down for the night. Stars were already winking on, and the sky was mirror clear. She had her flashlight and could follow her nose and compass until she was tired.

Another hour, she told herself, then she'd pick a spot and call it her room. She'd make a few notes in her trip diary by moonlight.

It was warm for October in the mountains, and the exercise kept her comfortable with just her faded jean jacket. Nearly six weeks of hiking had added muscle to her usually spindly frame.

Her cousin, a full year her junior, had already started to sprout breasts when Simone had moved into the tidy, regimented house in Saint Paul. And Patty had never tired of needling her over her lack of shape.

Or of tattling on Simone over the most minor, and sometimes fabricated, infractions.

So she'd learned to get along, coast along, and count the days.

Take a look at me now, Patty, you buck-toothed bitch. She flung her arms out, cocked one in an exaggerated muscleman flex. I'm practically buff.

She'd cut her sunny blond hair short before she'd left Saint Paul, done it herself as a kind of ritual—and for practicality.

Less hair, less to deal with while traveling. It was growing out a little shaggy around her triangular face, with the bangs spilling into her eyes and most of the rest shooting up in spikes. Maybe it wasn't precisely the best look for her, but it was *different*.

She thought it might be fun to treat herself to a haircut in Paris. Maybe have it dyed magenta. Radical.

Her sturdy boots rang over rock, shuffled over dirt, as the full white moon began to rise.

It was bright enough to turn off the flashlight. She walked by moonlight, dazzled by the huge ball of it sailing over the indigo sky,

charmed when a wisp of cloud slipped over the white, then vanished again.

Watching it, she began to sing Sting's "Sister Moon." At her feet a thin fog began to slither and smoke and crawl, like snakes, around her ankles.

When the howl rose and echoed, she stumbled to a halt. The chill lanced straight into her belly, a blade of bowel-freezing ice. Instinctively, she looked behind her, did a clumsy circle while her breath puffed out in a muffled scream.

Then she laughed at herself. Stupid knee-jerk reaction, she told herself. It was probably a dog, somebody's dog running around the woods. And even if it was a wolf—even *if*—wolves didn't hunt people, or bother them. That was Hollywood stuff.

But when the howl poured through the air again—close, was it closer?—every primal nerve went on alert. She quickened her steps, dug into her pocket for her Swiss Army knife.

No big, she lectured herself. If it was a wolf, it was just out looking for rabbits or mice, or whatever wolves liked to eat. Or it was hoping to make a date with another wolf. It was not interested in her.

How far was the next village? she wondered, and broke into a jog, her muscles protesting as she punished them up a steep rise. She'd just get to the village, or a house, a farm. Something that had people and light and noise.

Out of breath she paused to listen and heard nothing but the whisper of the pines with their silver edges etched by the light of the swimming moon.

Her shoulders started to relax, then she heard it. A rustling. There was movement in the trees, stealthy, stalking that made her think of Hollywood again. Slasher flicks and monster movies.

But it was worse when she could see, thought she could see, the vague shape of it. Too big to be a dog. And the moonlight glinted off its eyes, fierce and yellow as it melted into deeper shadows with a thick, wet snarl.

She ran, ran blind and deaf with a primal, heart-strangling fear, ran through shadows and moonlight without any thought of direction or defense, only of escape.

And never heard it coming.

It sprang out of the dark, leaped onto her back and sent her pitching forward in a full out, knee-and-palm-ripping fall. The knife sputtered out of her hand, and with harsh, breathless shrieks she tried to claw forward.

It tore at her pack, and the feral, hungry sounds it made turned her limbs to jelly even as her feet scrabbled for purchase. Something sharp raked her arm. Something worse pierced her shoulder.

The pain was black and bright and, combined with the fear, had her body heaving up, bowing and bucking against the weight on her back.

The smell of it, and of her own blood, choked her as it dragged her over.

She saw what couldn't be, a nightmare monster rising over her in the hard light of the moon. Its long, sleek snout was smeared with blood, and its eyes—yellow and mad—glinted with a horrible hunger.

Her screams rang out as she slapped and beat against it, as she saw its jaws open. Saw the flash of fangs.

Again, it sank them into her shoulder, and the pain was beyond screams, beyond reason. Weakening, she shoved at it, her hands pushing into fur, and feeling the raging heart beneath.

Then her fingers clutched at the silver cross. Sobbing, gibbering with terror, she rammed it into that slick pelt. This time the cry wasn't human, wasn't hers. Its blood spilled onto her hand, and its body jerked on hers. She hacked again, babbling insanelly, her eyes blind with tears and sweat and blood.

Then she was alone, bleeding in the dirt, shaking with cold. And staring up at the full, white moon.

Chapter 1

Maine
Eleven years later

As she did once a month, Simone loaded her truck with what she thought of as her lotions and potions. She whistled for her dog, waiting until Amico bounded out of the woods where he'd been treeing squirrels—a favorite pastime—and raced over the lawn to leap into the cab of the truck.

As he always did, he sat on his end of the bench seat and stuck his big brown head out the window in anticipation of the ride.

She flipped on the stereo, shoved the truck into gear, and started the nine-and-a-half-mile drive into town. The distance was deliberate—not too far from town, for her own convenience. And not too close, for her own preference. Just as the town of Eden Springs was a deliberate choice.

Small, but not so small that everyone knew everyone's business. Picturesque enough to draw tourists, so her enterprise could, and did, profit by them.

She had her solitude, the woods, the cliffs and work that satisfied her. She'd seen as much of the world as she wanted to see.

She headed for the coast, windows open, the September breeze pouring in while Coldplay poured out. Her hair, sun-kissed blond, danced. She wore it straight, so that the blunt tips stopped just above her shoulderblades. A convenient length she could leave loose or pull back, could play with if she was in the mood, or forget if she was busy.

Her eyes were a gold-flecked green that suited the diamond points of her chin and cheekbones. Her jeans, boots, leather jacket were all comfortably worn and covered a body that was ruthlessly disciplined. As was her mind.

Discipline, Simone knew, was the key to survival.

She enjoyed the ride, a small pleasure, with the smell of the sea salting the air, the scent of her dog warming it. The sky was bold blue and brilliantly clear. But she scented rain, far off, over the water.

It would come by moonrise.

Houses grew more plentiful and closer together as she passed the halfway point between her place and town. Charming Cape Cods, tidy

ranchers, old-fashioned saltboxes. People were starting to spread out, edging closer to her isolation.

Nothing to be done about it.

She checked her watch. She had an appointment at the vet's—a little detail she was keeping from Amico as long as possible. But there was plenty of time to make the delivery, deal with whatever needed her attention, before walking Amico down to the office for his exam and shots.

Traffic thickened, such as it was. Beside her, Amico let out a little yip of joy. She knew he loved watching the other cars, the people inside them, the movement, nearly as much as he loved romping through the woods at home and harassing the wildlife.

She turned down a side street, then another, easing down the narrow roads before turning into the miserly back lot of her little store.

She'd called it Luna and had selected its location as precisely as she did everything else. This part of town boasted plenty of pedestrian traffic—local and tourist.

She was deliberately early, before either her manager or her part-time clerk would arrive. It would give her time to unload, to check her inventory, make any adjustments she wished.

After she'd parked, she let Amico out, gave him the command to sit, to stay. He'd no more break command than he'd sprout wings and fly.

Carting boxes, she opened the back door, then whistled for him. He darted past her as she carried cartons into the shop. She drew in the scents of rosemary and chamomile, subtle hints of tansy and hawthorn. Dozens of fragrances ran through her senses as she set the newest stock on the counter.

Clear, square bottles of varying sizes were full of lotions and creams, bath salts and gels. Their colors, soft or bright, illuminated the dim light.

There were soaps and balms, perfumes and tonics. All made by her own hand, from her own recipes, from her own herbs.

That would be changing soon, she thought, switching on the lights. Couldn't stop progress. Her on-line service was beginning to boom, and she would need to hire more help, pass some of the production on to others.

There was money to be made, and she needed to make it.

She went out for more stock, piling boxes up. Then began to unload them.

The skin care products always sold well, she noted. And the bath products were buzzing out the door. She'd been smart to add a few drops

of food coloring to the Irish moss shower gel. Customers liked those deep colors.

Candles were so popular she was thinking of starting another line of them.

She spent a happy hour replacing or adding to stock and allowed herself a glow of pride and satisfaction. Failure, she told herself, had led to success.

And sooner or later, she promised herself, she'd find what she needed most.

"Okay, baby." With considerable regret, she pulled the leash out of her bag. Amico looked at it, looked at her, then lowered his head as if she'd threatened him with a bat.

"I'm sorry, I know it's insulting, but rules are rules." She crouched down to clip it to his bright red collar. "It's not that I don't trust you." Her eyes stayed on his as she leaned in, nose to snout. "But there's a leash law, and we don't want any trouble. Soon as we get back," she murmured, rubbing her cheek against his fur, "it comes off."

She crossed to the door, slipping her sunglasses on against the sparkling light. "This is going to be a tough day for you," she said as they began to walk along the sidewalk. "But you've got to keep healthy, right? Fit and trim? Dr. Greene just wants to take care of you."

She took the two and a half blocks slowly, to give Amico time to prepare for what was, for him, a very unhappy experience. And she walked slowly for herself, to prolong this rare stroll along a sidewalk where there were people going about their business and their lives.

"I'll scramble you eggs when we get home. You know how you love eggs. I'll put cheese in them, and this will be just a memory. Then we—"

Her head came up with a snap, and Amico heeled automatically. She caught a scent, elemental and male, that had her system on quiver. The tickle low in her belly became an ache.

And he rushed around the corner, dark hair flying, worn canvas high-tops slapping pavement in a sound that to her ears was like gunshots.

He skidded to a halt, avoiding a collision, then grinned. A slow, lazy, sort of how-ya'-doing grin.

She saw his face—could see nothing else. Dusky skin over strong bones, haloed by a waving mass of damp black hair. His mouth looked as though it had been etched on his face, sculpted there. His eyes were brown, a deep, sumptuous brown. She could see them through the dark lenses he wore.

She knew them.

“Hi. Sorry.”

His voice was like a stroke on bare flesh and had her blood swimming into her head.

“Running late. You one of mine?”

The dizziness was passing into something else, some deep and painful need. “Yours?”

“You my eight o’clock? Ah . . . Simone and Amico?”

“Dr. Greene is . . .” She could feel a sound, primal and desperate, clawing at the back of her throat.

“Ah, didn’t get the notice?” With a shake of his head, he opened the door to the vet’s office. “We had some problems with that. I took over a couple of weeks ago. Uncle Pete—Dr. Greene—had a bout of angina about a month ago. Aunt Mary put her foot down about retirement. He still consults, but I moved up from Portland. Been wanting to anyway. Gabe,” he said, offering a hand. “Gabe Kirby.”

She couldn’t touch him, didn’t dare, and had the wits to give Amico a hand signal. The dog sat and politely offered his paw.

With a laugh, Gabe accepted. “Nice to meet you. Come on in.”

He stepped inside the waiting room and spoke directly to the woman manning the desk. “I’m not late. My patient’s early, and we’ve been outside getting acquainted.”

“You *are* late. Four minutes. Hello, Simone. Amico!” She had a wide face, crowned by a curly mop of hair in a shade of red never seen in nature. “How you doing, handsome?”

Simone gave him the release sign so he could prance around the desk to be petted.

“ ’Morning, Eileen.” Discipline, Simone reminded herself. Discipline meant survival. Her voice was cool and calm. “I’m sorry to hear about Dr. Greene.”

“Oh, he’s fine. Time for fishing and sitting in his hammock. Only downside for him is Mary’s watching his diet like a hawk. And she’s threatening to make him sign up for a yoga class.”

“When you see him, tell him I said to take care of himself.”

“Will do. I see you met this one.”

“She talks about me like that because I got under her feet every time I visited when I was a kid.” He was leaning against the desk, casual, all the time in the world, but his eyes stayed on hers, and she saw the alertness, the intellect, and the interest.

“Are we set up for Amico?”

“All set.” The phone on Eileen’s desk began to ring. “Don’t worry, Simone. He’s young, and has trouble getting moving in the morning, but he’s a good vet.”

“I was not late,” Gabe said again, turning toward the exam room. “Come on back. So, tell me, Amico, how’ve you been feeling? Any complaints?”

“He’s fine.” She concentrated on regulating her breathing, on focusing on her dog, who began to quiver when they entered the exam room. “He gets nervous before an exam.”

“That’s okay. Me, too. Especially when it involves s-h-o-t-s.”

She managed a smile. “He doesn’t like them.”

“That’s ’cause he’s not crazy, right, boy?” He crouched again, running his hands over Amico’s face, his body, down his legs, giving him a playful rub, while—she noted—those long-fingered hands checked his frame, his bones.

“Handsome dog. Good healthy coat, clear eyes. Beautiful eyes,” he amended, smiling into them. “Somebody loves you.”

There was a rock on her chest, pressing on her heart so that it tattooed like a trapped bird. But her voice was cool and clear. “Yes, I do.”

“Let’s get your weight, pal.”

Before Gabe could lead the dog to the scale, Simone snapped her fingers, pointed. Amico stepped onto the scale.

“Smart dog. And in fighting trim.” He took the chart, made some notes. And was humming some tune under his breath.

What was it? “Pretty Woman,” she realized and couldn’t decide if she was flattered or embarrassed.

“We’ll get him up on the table. Will he give me any trouble when I check his teeth, his ears?”

“No. Amico, *su*.”

Obediently, the dog bunched down, then jumped onto the table. “*Sedersi. Restare.*”

“Cool,” Gabe said when Amico sat. He was grinning again, straight at her, all interest. “Is that Italian?”

“Yeah.”

Gabe picked up his otoscope, shone the light in Amico’s ears. “You Italian?”

“Part of me.”

“Me, too, somewhere back on my mother’s side. You guys lived here long?”

“Almost three years.”

“Nice place. I used to come up and hang out with my uncle when I was a kid. Loved being around the animals. Still do. Good boy, you’re a good boy.” He offered Amico a couple of doggie treats.

The dog looked at Simone, then gobbled them when she gave the go-ahead command.

“Healthy, too. We’re going to make this part as quick as we can. You want to take his head, talk to him?”

She stepped forward, concentrating on the scent of her dog, on the scent of the cat and the human who’d just come into the waiting room. On the smell of antiseptic, on the aromas from the back room where pets recovered from surgery.

Anything but the scent of the man.

She murmured in Italian, in English, stroking Amico’s ears, telling him to be brave. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Gabe pinch some of the dog’s skin and slide the needle in.

Amico blinked, quivered a little, but made no sound.

“There now, worst is over. You’re some dog, Amico. Some good dog.” He pulled out more treats, and both man and dog looked at Simone for approval.

“Go ahead, Amico.”

“So, he’s bilingual,” Gabe said as Amico delicately nipped the treats out of his palm. “Did you train him yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Do you—”

“Sorry, we really have to go. Amico.” She gestured to the floor, clipped his leash back on his collar. “Thank you.”

Simone hurried out of the office, calling a good-bye to Eileen. “I’ll have Shelley bring down a check for the exam and shots. I’ve got to go.”

“No problem. Just—” Eileen pursed her lips as the door slammed behind Simone. “Well, she was in a rush.”

“Yeah.” Gabe crossed to the desk, shot a smile at his next patients. “Be with you in just a minute.” Then he leaned down close to Eileen, spoke under his breath. “I want you to tell me everything about her, as soon as we’re clear in here. No detail is too small to escape my interest. But just tell me this for now. Is she married, engaged, involved?”

“None of the above—that I know about.”

“Good. Life is worth living.”

Outside, Simone walked quickly, working to fill her senses with anything at hand. Exhaust fumes, the aroma of bread from the bakery, the heavily pine-scented aftershave of a man who bustled by her.

Her hands wanted to shake, now that she could relax—a little—that rigid control.

She'd never experienced anything like this before, but she knew what it was. Lust and longing and desperate need.

She'd never seen Gabe before, but she'd known him. Recognized him.

Knowing she couldn't face anyone, not yet, she circled the block, avoiding her own shop and going straight to her truck. Inside, she gave herself one more minute, resting her head on the wheel while Amico nuzzled her cheek in concern.

She'd recognized the one thing she could never have.

A mate.

Chapter 2

IN eleven years, Simone had lived in seven locations. It had been her hard and fast rule not to allow herself to become overly attached to any place, anything. Anyone.

She had two goals in life. The first was survival; the second to find a cure for the infection that lived inside her. To accomplish these goals, she needed to live apart. Be apart.

She had no family—or those she'd left behind in St. Paul eleven years before were no more interested in her than she in them. She couldn't risk neighbors, friends, lovers. Intimacy, or even the pretense of intimacy, was far too dangerous.

She hadn't expected to become so fond of this little slice of Maine. She'd lived in the wide open spaces of Montana, in the towering forests of Washington, on the windswept coast of Nova Scotia. None of those places, or any of the others she'd settled in briefly or had passed through, had spoken to her like the green New England forest, the long, rocky beaches, the rough cliffs of eastern Maine.

So she had stayed, breaking her own policy, and had begun to think of the house she'd chosen for specific and practical purposes as her home.

Then she'd seen him, scented him, spoken to him. Now she was afraid she would have to move on, again, rather than risk the consequences.

But she believed she was close, on the brink of finding the answers. She'd believed it before, she admitted. She'd let her hopes rise, only to see them dashed again and again, when the moon took her.

She could avoid him. Avoidance of people was a well-honed skill. She knew how to deny herself. There were other vets. And if her body required sexual release with a partner, she could find another man easily enough. She'd done so before. A quick coupling in the dark, simple and basic as food or drink.

There was no good reason to see Gabe again, and nothing to be gained by thinking of him.

Work was all she needed.

The kitchen of the old house was a hive of activity. Simone made use of the oceans of counters, the bulky stove, the computer with its list of products and their formulas. She liked the sunny brightness of the room as much as its practical layout. The woman she was craved the sun as much as what was inside her craved the moon.

She liked to work here in the mornings, simmering herbs on the stove, infusing them, drawing in the scents as she cooked or crushed or grated. She experimented here as well. Customers could be fiercely loyal to the standards, but they enjoyed, and paid for, new products.

She thought the new hand gel, with its base of seaweed she gathered herself at low tide, was going to be a hit.

The more she made from her business, she reminded herself as she filtered the cooled liquid into a bowl, the more she had to invest in her other work. Her personal quest.

She moved around her kitchen, checking pots, bowls, bottles, with her hair pulled back in an ancient scrunchie, her feet bare, her old shirt draping over the hips of her jeans.

While she worked she listened to Robert Parker's latest bestseller on audio. Her company consisted of characters in books or movies, songs on the stereo. Those, and Amico, were all she required.

All, she reminded herself, she could have.

Spenser kept her entertained, amusing and intriguing her, until she broke for a walk and a light lunch.

Amico raced away, then ran back again as she wandered into the woods. So, it would be the woods today and not the cliffs. Just as well, she decided, as it had been awhile since she'd checked her No Trespassing signs, and her reaction to Gabe had reminded her of boundaries.

Mosquitoes buzzed around her as she walked. They never bit her. She supposed insect instinct warned them not to snack on her blood.

She sat in the cool shade by her skinny and twisty stream to share with her dog the egg salad sandwich she'd made.

Blood was the issue, she thought. The key. It was blood that ran both man and beast. She'd studied hematology, had countless books and web sites on the subject. She'd spent years researching blood infections and viruses, but she was no doctor.

She hadn't seen a doctor in nearly eleven years. She didn't dare. In any case, she was in perfect health—except for that pesky blood disease that turned her into a mindless, raving beast for three days every month.

But other than that, she thought with a half smile, she was good to go.

She hadn't done so badly for a woman of her education, means, and disability. She had her own business that kept the—ha ha—wolf away from the door. She had her own home, a loyal canine companion. She had an enormous stockpile of audio books, CDs, DVDs, which were often better company than humans anyway.

She'd seen a fair chunk of the world and lived a relatively normal and contented life for a lycanthrope.

She took out the two pills she'd made, studied them. If this latest formula worked, she could be cured. She could be free of the moon.

Or not.

She popped them, washed them down with the fresh lemonade she'd brought along. She'd know in another few days. And if the newest dose didn't work, another would eventually.

She'd never stop trying.

Once she'd thought she'd go insane. But she hadn't. She'd wondered if death was the only escape, but death was the coward's way. She'd overcome her own disbelief, doubt, and despair. She'd beaten loneliness and anger and grief.

What was left was determination.

"Could be worse, right?" she murmured to Amico, lazily stroking his fur as they both drowsed in the dappled light. "It could be a couple hundred years ago. Then I'd be hunted down by the villagers and shot at with silver bullets."

She drew out the heavy cross she wore under her shirt. "Or it could've killed me." She turned the silver so it caught a wink of sunlight. "Being dead's a hell of a lot worse than eating egg salad in the woods in the afternoon. But lazing around here isn't getting any lab work done."

She gave Amico a quick rub before she stuffed the trash and her travel mug into the canvas sack she used as a lunch bag. Wandering back, she took time to pick some wildflowers, some berries, all useful in her work. When her gathering bag was full, she cut through to take the short way home.

She caught the scent along with Amico. Both woman and dog went on alert, and as Amico let out a soft, warning growl, she laid a hand on his head.

She needed a minute to muster her defenses before she walked out of the woods to face the man she most wanted to avoid.

He stood by a truck, so much shinier, so much trimmer than hers, it looked like a toy. The sun gilded him, or so it seemed to her, so that the light shimmered around him, caught at the ends of his hair and lit him like a flame.

Desire burst through her like a flood, carrying the dangerous debris of love and hope and longing. It would swamp her if she allowed it. Drown her.

So she wouldn't allow it, any more than she'd allow herself to hide in the woods like a frightened rabbit.

She spoke quietly to Amico, releasing him from his guard stance so he could trot forward and greet the visitor.

He glanced over at the dog's approach and grinned the way she knew animal lovers grinned at big, handsome dogs.

"There you are, big guy. How's it going? Whatcha doing?" He leaned over to stroke and scratch, and Simone felt saliva pool in her mouth at the way his hands glided over fur.

"Where's your girl?" He looked up, spotted her. "Hi."

"Hello." She crossed the lawn, keenly aware of the warmth of the sun, the tickle of the breeze on her skin. The scent of his soap—just a hint of lemon there.

"Been out for a walk? Gorgeous day for it."

"Yes."

There was cinnamon on his breath, sweet and appealing.

"I was about to dig up some paper, leave you a note. I had a house call nearby. Anemic goat."

"Oh."

"Nice place. Quiet. Great house. Got any coffee?"

"Ah . . ." She appreciated direct; it saved time. But she hadn't been expecting it. "No, I don't. I don't drink it."

"At all? Ever? How do you stay upright? How about tea? A soft drink? Water? Gatorade? Any social beverage I can use as a prop to have a conversation with you."

"About what?"

"Pretty much anything." The breeze ruffled through his hair like gentle fingers. "Come on, Simone, don't make me slash my own tires so I can ask to use your phone."

"Don't you have a cell phone?"

He grinned again, and shot a few more holes in her shield. "I'll claim the battery's dead. It might even be true."

Safer, smarter to send him away, she reminded herself. But where was the harm, really?

"I have fresh lemonade."

"I happen to love fresh lemonade."

She turned toward the house, careful to keep the dog between them. "I don't know of any goats, anemic or otherwise, in the neighborhood."

"I only had to drive eight or nine miles out of the way to be in the neighborhood. It really is a great house. Kinda spooky and mysterious

with those gables and their witch's-hat roofs. I like spooky old houses.”

“So do I, apparently.” She took him around the back so they'd enter directly into the kitchen. When she took the key out of her pocket, he made no comment. But she could see in his eyes he wondered why she'd bother to lock up just to take a walk in her own woods.

“Wow.” He took a long, sweeping glance at the kitchen, its long counters, sparkling enamel pots, the hanks of hanging herbs, the bottles and bowls all lined up like a military parade. “Some room. Smells like a garden, and looks like one of those kitchens you see on TV cooking shows.”

There were two backless stools at the center island. Gabe slid onto one comfortably, while he continued to study. The cabinets were all fronted with pebbled glass. Through it he could see more bottles, all precisely labeled. More of what he assumed were cooking tools, supplies, ingredients.

Dishes were limited to a couple of plates and bowls, a few glasses and cups. From the looks of it, he thought, the lady didn't do much entertaining.

“How'd you get into herbs?”

She took down one of the glasses before going to the refrigerator for the pitcher of lemonade. “An interest of mine I decided to turn into a profit.”

“I went by your store yesterday. Classy place. Interesting, too. The main thing I know about herbs is oregano tastes really good on pizza. Thanks.” He took the glass she offered. “What's that?”

He nodded toward one of the hanging herbs.

“Prunella, also called heal-all.”

“And does it? Heal-all?”

“In a gargle, it's good for sore throats.”

“He's watching you—and me.” Sipping lemonade, Gabe glanced at Amico. “Waiting for you to tell him if he can relax or if he should stay ready to escort me out. I've never seen a dog more tuned to its master.”

“Meaning I haven't decided whether to relax or escort you out.”

“Pretty much. The thing is, I felt, well, this pop the other day, soon as I saw you. This kind of It's-about-time-you-showed-up deal.” He shrugged, bumped the toe of his high-top on the side of the counter as he shifted. “Sounds weird, but there it is. And it seemed to me you felt something, too.”

“You're attractive,” she said evenly. “My dog likes you and his judgment's excellent. Naturally, there'd be some interest. But—”

“We don’t have to get into butts, do we, and muck it all up?” He propped his elbows on the counter. He had long arms, she noted, and a few fresh scratches on the back of his left hand.

“Let me give you a quick rundown. Thirty-three, single. Brushed close to the concept of marriage once, but it didn’t stick. Grew up a city boy with a country boy’s heart, and can’t remember not wanting to be a vet. I’m a good one.”

“I saw that for myself.”

“Doesn’t hurt to reinforce. I like baseball and action flicks, mystery novels. And I’m probably a little overattached to *The Simpsons*, but I don’t see anything wrong with that. Hurts no one. I can cook as long as it means a microwave, and the biggest crime that I’ll admit on such short acquaintance is copying Ursella Ridgeport’s answers for a U.S. history final in high school. We got a B.”

She wasn’t used to being charmed, or surprised. He was managing to do both. “But . . .”

“Tough nut.”

“I don’t really socialize.”

“Is that a hard and fast rule or more of a blueprint? Because there’s this restaurant up on Bucksport—you are a carnivore, right?”

“And then some,” she murmured.

“Well, they have these amazing steaks. Nice change from the local seafood. It’s just wrong to sit down to one by yourself, so you’d be doing me a big favor if you went with me.”

Oh God, did she have to like him as well as want to rub her naked body all over his? “And I should do you a favor because?”

“I can’t concentrate properly on my work for wondering about you. You don’t want my patients to suffer because you won’t chow down on a steak with me.”

She took his glass, carried it to the sink. “Do you have a dog?”

“Actually I have dibs on a puppy from a patient’s litter. Mom’s a mixed breed I’ll spay in trade for the pup. I lost my dog, Kirk, to cancer about six months ago.”

“I’m sorry.” She turned back, had to check the urge to touch him. “It’s very hard.”

“He used to sing.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sing, along with the radio, especially if it was something soulful. “Dock of the Bay” being one of his favorites. I miss that. He was sixteen, had a good life. It’s never long enough, though.”

“No, it’s not. Kirk? Are you a *Star Trek* addict as well as *Simpson*-obsessed?”

“I claim the right to teenage geekdom when I named him.”

“You were never a geek. Guys who look like you may flirt around the edges of the geek universe, but they never get to its core. Too busy gathering up girls with names like Ursella.”

His smile was easy, and appealingly sly. “She was brainy and beautiful, what could I do? I’m a sucker for brains and beauty and it seems for girls with exotic names.”

“My grandfather’s name was Simon. It’s not such a stretch.”

And that, he thought with some pleasure, was the first personal thing he’d wheedled out of her. “Simone.” He took a long breath. “It just sings. Simone, with the beautiful green eyes, have dinner with me. Don’t make me beg.”

Instinct was what she knew—its dangers. But she followed it, moving around the counter, facing him when he swiveled toward her on the stool.

She moved quickly, before rational thought could overcome primal need. Taking his face in her hands, she swooped in, and crushed her mouth to his.

Chapter 3

IT was like being pitched headfirst off a cliff, then discovering you'd sprouted wings.

The shock slammed into him first, then the speed, then the soaring thrill. He wasn't aware he'd moved until he was standing, until his hands were tangled in her hair and his heart was pumping its life away against hers.

The heat of her poured into him until his blood smoked and smoldered, until his senses were stunned by it. So that he stood, reeling, when she nudged him away and stepped back.

"The dinner invitation was just another prop. You want to sleep with me."

"What?" He heard the words, but with the majority of blood drained out of his head, he was having a hard time comprehending them. Had there been that much gold in her eyes before? So much gold the green was like a haze under it? "Ah . . . I'm just going to sit here another minute, if it's all the same to you. Feel a little punchy."

He looked down at the dog who sat as he had since they'd entered. Like a soldier on guard duty.

"No. Yes."

It was her turn to look confused. "What does that mean?"

"No, the dinner invitation wasn't a prop." His eyes, so rich and brown, fixed on hers. "I'd like to spend some time with you, get to know you. And yes, I want to sleep with you. Did you take a course to learn to kiss like that, or is it just innate? And if it's the former, where can I sign up?"

"You're funny," she decided.

"Feeling pretty funny at the moment. I also feel, with some embarrassment, that my pupils have turned into little hearts. Due to that, I'm now prepared to beg."

The taste of him, virile and passionate, with that charming hint of cinnamon, was still on his lips, on her tongue. She wanted to snuggle up against him and sniff his neck. "I don't do well with people."

"You're doing fine with me. Top marks down the line."

She shook her head. "You asked about me, didn't you? Around town. So, what's the deal with this Simone? What's the scoop on her? And you'd have heard she keeps to herself, doesn't mix much. Nice enough, but a little strange."

“Close enough. And if you asked about me, you’d have heard that Dr. Kirby, he plays his music or TV too loud most nights. He’s almost always late for his first appointment. Just a few minutes, but time’s time. And he’s no Doc Greene, if you ask me.”

“A couple of years, you’ll be Doc Kirby, and I’ll still be the weird herb lady who lives in the woods outside of town.”

“A woman of mystery.” He lifted his hand, played his fingers over the ends of her hair. “Did I mention I like mysteries?”

“You wouldn’t like mine. But I’ll have dinner with you. Here, tomorrow night. I’ll cook.”

He blinked at her, then the corners of his mouth quirked. “Really?”

“Yes, but now I have to get to work. So go away.”

“Okay.”

He got up immediately. Smart, she decided. Smart enough not to press his luck or give her a chance to change her mind.

“What time tomorrow?”

“Seven.”

“I’ll be here. Any chance of you telling Amico to stand down so I can kiss you again.”

“No. Maybe tomorrow.” She walked to the door, opened it. “Good-bye.”

He walked to the dog first, held out a hand. He saw Amico’s eyes slide toward his mistress before he lifted his paw to shake. “See you, pal.” He crossed to the door, stood for a moment studying her face. “ ’Bye, Simone.”

She locked the door behind him, then moved through the house to the front windows to wait for him to drive away.

A test, she told herself. That’s what it would be, a kind of test. To see how she would handle the evening, being with him. Just an experiment.

And what a lie that was.

Still, it didn’t have to be a mistake, she assured herself. If she was as close as she hoped to a cure, it wasn’t such a risk.

Besides, she’d taken risks before. She’d taken lovers before.

But not a mate, she reminded herself.

She’d wanted him, wanted the taste and feel of him. That most basic and natural of human needs. But what was inside her had wanted him, too. What was in her had wanted to sink fangs into flesh, taste his blood.

Not to feed, that instinct she understood. But to transform. To turn him into what she was, so she was no longer alone.

That she would never allow.

Hurrying now, she went to the basement door, and took the key she wore along with the cross around her neck. She unlocked the door, turned on the lights, then with Amico beside her, locked the door behind her.

Besides its location, the kitchen, the woods, one of the biggest selling points of the house had been its large basement.

She'd bricked up the windows, had installed fluorescent lighting. She used the old shelves, where preserves and cans had once been stored, for supplies.

She'd installed a television, a VCR, a computer, and a work counter to add to the long workbench left there by the previous tenants.

There was a sofa and a cot though she rarely used them. And a large refrigerator used primarily to preserve samples. The freezer was stocked with meat.

A security alarm system warned her when anyone approached the house while she was burrowed in the lab. It rarely happened, but the reassurance was worth the cost.

The floors were concrete, the walls stone, and thick. An old cast iron washtub stood in one corner. A small, efficient laboratory ranged under one of the bricked-in windows.

At the far wall was a cell, eight feet long, six feet wide.

Released, Amico went to his cushy dog bed, circled three times, then settled in for an afternoon nap.

Simone booted up her computer and sat to make some notes. It was important, she told herself, to detail her reaction to Gabe. It was different, and that made it an anomaly. Any change in her condition—physical, emotional, mental—was religiously recorded.

I'm in love! she wanted to write. *His name is Gabriel Kirby, and he has beautiful hands and makes jokes. When I kissed him I felt so alive, so human. He has beautiful brown eyes and when they look at me something lights up in my heart.*

But she didn't. Instead she noted down his name, his age, and occupation, added salient details from both their meetings, and termed her feelings for him a strong physical and emotional reaction.

She noted down what she'd eaten that day, and added the time she'd taken her last dose of pills.

She used the washtub and soap of her own making to scrub her hands. All the while she tried to keep her mind a blank, to keep hope in check.

Moving to the counter, she pricked her finger, then smeared two drops of blood on a slide.

She studied it through the microscope and felt a little bump of that restrained hope. There *was* a change. After nearly a decade of studying her own blood, she couldn't mistake a change.

She shifted the slide to her computer and began an analysis.

The infection was still present. She didn't need technology to tell her what she *felt*, but there was a slight increase of healthy, normal cells.

She brought last week's sample on screen for a side-to-side study. Yes, yes, there was change, but so little. Not nearly enough after three full months on this formula.

There should be more. She *needed* more. Maybe increase the dose again. Or adjust the formula itself, increasing the amount of skullcap, or the sarsaparilla. Or both.

She let her head fall back, closed her eyes. Eleven years, and she'd barely begun. Herbs and drugs, experimental serums obtained illegally, and at great cost.

Prayers and charms, medicines and purges. From witchcraft to science, she'd tried everything. And still the change in her blood was so slight it would make no difference when the moon rose full.

It was she who would change, in pain and misery. Locked by her own hand in the cell to hold the monster she'd become. Guarded by the only thing in the world she could trust without reservation.

The dog who loved her.

For three nights she would pace that cell. It would pace—snarling and craving the hunt. A fresh kill. Hot blood.

All the other nights she was a woman, just as caged.

She longed for love, to be touched and held. She craved the connection, craved knowing when she reached out a hand would be there to take hers.

But she had no right, she reminded herself, to long or to crave. No right to love.

She should never have let him into her home. She'd breathed him in, she thought, and had breathed in the vision of what could be if not for that one moment that had ripped her life to pieces.

And now that she had, she was ready to weep and wail because her progress wasn't enough. She should be rejoicing that there was progress at all.

And she should get to work on making more.

She worked late into the night, stopping only to feed Amico and let him out to run. Locked in her lab, she adjusted her formula. When the pills were ready, she noted the time. Swallowed them.

She shut down her lab, locking the basement door behind her before going out to whistle for Amico.

But first she stood in the dark, under that three-quarter moon.

She could feel its pull, its light, teasing fingers that reached out for her in these last nights before the change.

In the quiet, she could hear the sea throwing itself against the cliffs, and knew if she walked there this close to the change, she would need no light to guide her. Her night vision, always sharp since the attack, grew stronger yet as the moon waxed.

The perfume of the water came to her, salty and cool. She ached, everything about her that was human ached that there was no one beside her, no one to share the quiet and beauty of the night.

She stood alone, whether it was here on the porch, on the cliffs, deep in the woods, she was in a cage. And she had searched for the key for eleven long years.

Why shouldn't she be allowed to feel love when it came like an arrow in the heart? Why must she be denied the pain and burn and joy of it?

Whatever she was thirty-six days a year, all the other days, all the other nights, she was a woman.

Standing alone, she heard the flight of wings—the hunter—deep in the woods. And the sudden scream—the hunted—as talons pierced flesh.

And on the simple porch of her quiet house, she scented the blood. Fresh and warm.

Could all but taste it.

Chapter 4

“YOU’LL still be a guy,” Gabe assured the cocker-terrier mix as he prepared for surgery. “Balls don’t make the man.”

He imagined if his current patient could talk, the response would be: *Yeah? Hand me that scalpel, doc, and let’s try that theory out on you.*

“Might seem a little barbaric from your standpoint, but believe me, it’s all for the best.”

He used warm water blankets to offset any chance of hypothermia. The pup was young, barely eight weeks, and there were risks and benefits of neutering this early. Pediatric tissues were friable and needed to be handled very carefully, but the youth of the patient made precise hemostasis easy.

After he’d prepared the field, he made his midline incision.

He worked precisely, his hands deft and practiced. He had Michelle Grant on his surgery CD player, figuring it would soothe the puppy, unconscious or not. He kept an eye on the puppy’s respiration as he operated, then began to close.

“Not so bad, right?” he murmured. “Didn’t take long, and you won’t miss them.”

When he was done, he made notes on his chart and had his surgical assistant prep for the next patient. While a fresh drape and pads were being put into place, and instruments laid out, Gabe stayed with the pup in recovery.

The patient woke quickly, with a little tail wag when he saw Gabe.

“Eileen?” He poked his head out into the waiting room. “Call Frankie’s mom and tell her he came through fine. We’ll keep him here until about noon, then he’s good to go.”

Barring emergencies, Gabe scheduled surgeries from seven to eleven one morning a week. Most of his patients would be ambulatory and able to go home to their family before the end of office hours. Some might need to be monitored.

It wasn’t unusual for him to spend the night after surgery in his office.

At noon, he scarfed up some of the sweet and sour chicken Eileen had ordered for him, eating at his desk while he went over charts and made follow-up calls about patients.

And thought, when he had two minutes to spare, about Simone.

What was there about her? She had a fascinating look. Not really beautiful, certainly not in the classic sense, not with so many angles. At the same time all those points and planes gave her face a sharp and vital look.

He liked the way she looked in jeans and boots and the way her shirt had been frayed at the collar and cuffs. How she smelled like her kitchen, like some strange, secret garden.

Then there was that smile, slow and reluctant to bloom. It made him want to tease it out of her as often as possible.

Whatever it was, when he was around her, he couldn't take his eyes off her.

She was a little cool, or shy. He hadn't decided which. Or she had been until she'd planted that blood-thumping kiss on him in her kitchen.

And where had that come from? He pushed back in his chair now, propping the bottom of one foot on the edge, rocking back and forth as he stared up at the ceiling and relived the moment.

One minute it seemed she was on the brink of shooing him out her door, and the next she's kissing him brainless.

And brainless was exactly the term. His mind had snapped right off, so it had been all heat and sensation, all taste and texture.

She was a loner, a woman—according to his sources—who didn't make close friends. Did her business, caused no trouble, and kept to herself, with her terrific dog. She owned a business, provided the stock, but she didn't run the operation. She never, or almost never, mixed with the customers. Details were vague. Where she'd come from no one could say for sure.

She was a mystery tucked into an enigma and surrounded by a puzzle. And that, Gabe admitted, might be some of the attraction on his part. He loved to find things out.

Maybe she was only interested in sex, and would use him, ride him at a gallop until he was quivering with exhaustion.

He thought he could probably live with that.

Grinning, he went out to take his afternoon appointments. And underlined his mental note to buy wine and flowers before heading out of town.

SHE wasn't thinking about him. Her mind was too occupied to make room for dinner plans with a man. Her latest blood analysis showed no improvement. The virus was still viable, still thriving in fact. It simply mutated to adjust to the invasion of the serum.

She'd succeeded in stimulating the B cell, and she knew from previous tests the cell divisions had begun. But they hadn't continued, not long enough for the plasma cells to secrete sufficient antibodies to bind to the bacteria.

The infection was still there, raging.

She'd seen this before. Too many times before. But this time she'd been so hopeful. This time she'd been so sure she'd been on the edge of a breakthrough.

She'd done another DNA test and was even now carefully studying the results. It made her head ache. Lab work depressed her, though it was almost second nature to her now. She considered, as she had before, selling her business, relocating yet again. And taking a job as a lab tech. She'd have access to more sophisticated equipment that way, more resources, more current information.

The reconditioned electron microscope had cost her thousands. A top-level lab would have new equipment. Better equipment.

But there would be questions she couldn't answer, physical exams she couldn't take. Day-to-day contact with others she wasn't sure she could stand. She'd been through all that before, too, and it was much, much worse than being alone.

To be with people, watching them go about the blessed normality of their lives and not be a part of who and what they were was the most damning aspect of her condition.

She could handle the pain, she could handle the violence that ripped through her three nights every month. But she couldn't stand the lonely unless she was alone.

She'd promised herself years before, when she'd understood and accepted what had happened to her that she'd find a way to a cure. That she'd be normal again before her thirtieth birthday.

Thirty, she thought with a tired sigh, seemed a lifetime away at eighteen.

Now she was nearly there, and the infection still brewed inside her.

And she was still alone.

No point in whining, she reminded herself. She'd only just begun to try the new formula. There was still time before the full moon. Still time for the serum to work.

"Put it aside, Simone," she told herself. "Put it aside for a few hours and think normal. Without some normal, you'll go crazy."

Think about dinner, she decided as she went upstairs again. Spaghetti, hold the meatballs. Red meat wasn't a good idea this close to the cycle.

At least not with company around.

She was having company, not voices reading a book, or faces on television. Human company. It had been a long, long time since she'd allowed herself to have dinner with a man. Much less in her own territory.

But it was good. It was normal. She had to continue to do normal things, every day, or when she was well, she wouldn't know how.

So she started the sauce, using her own herbs, letting their scent fill the air of her home.

And she cleaned, housewifely chores combined with a meticulous search to be certain anything pertaining to her condition was locked away.

She cleaned and tidied rooms he had no reason to visit. In what she considered her personal media center, she scanned the room: huge cushy sofa, the indulgence of an enormous wall screen TV.

Would he think it odd that among the hundreds in her collection, she owned every movie available on VHS or DVD on werewolves? She wouldn't be able to explain to him any more than she could explain to herself why she was compelled to watch them.

She shrugged it off and arranged fresh potpourri in a bowl.

Then she groomed. A long shower, creams for her skin. She'd leave her hair down. Loose and liberated. Turning at the mirror, she brushed the weight of it off the back of her left shoulder and exposed the small tattoo of a full moon.

That had been a young, foolish act, she thought now. Branding herself with a symbol of her disease. But it served to remind her of what she was, every day. Not just at the full moon, but every day. And when she was cured, it would remind her of what she'd survived.

She dressed simply, casually in shirt and trousers, but selected soft fabrics. The sort men liked to touch. The silky shirt of silvery gray caught the light well—and would catch the eye.

If she decided to take Gabe as a lover, she was entitled, wasn't she? Entitled to pleasure and companionship. She'd be careful, very, very careful. She'd stay in control.

She wouldn't hurt him. She wouldn't hurt another human being.

She closed her fingers around the cross, felt the heat of the silver against her skin.

Back in the kitchen, she took another dose of her pills before setting the table. Were candles obvious or simply atmospheric? And if she had

to debate something that basic, she'd gone much too long without human company.

Her head came up, as did Amico's, and seconds later the sound of tires on gravel was clearly audible. The dog went with her to the front door, sitting obediently at her command when she opened the door.

It blew through her again, just the look of him. And that twisting need inside her mocked all her claims about control and care. He carried a bag in one hand, and a bouquet of tiger lilies in the other.

In all of her life, no one had brought her flowers.

"Hi. I come bearing."

She took the lilies. "They're beautiful."

"I've got a big rawhide bone in here, if it's okay."

"Thanks, but I don't want to spoil my dinner."

He laughed, and with his lips still curved, leaned over the flowers to touch his lips to hers. "Okay, we'll just give it to the dog. But we get to drink the wine. Didn't know what was on the menu, so I've got white and red."

"Don't miss a trick, do you?"

"My mother raised no fools."

He glanced around the living room. The walls were painted a deep, warm green. Like a forest, he thought. The mantel over the stone fireplace where flames simmered held iron candlesticks and pale green candles he was betting she'd made herself. The furnishings were sparse, but what there was, was all color and comfort.

"Great painting." He gestured toward the oil over the fireplace. It was a forest scene, deep with shadows, and a lake gone milky with the light of a full white moon.

"Yes, I like it."

There was other art—all of places, wild, lonely places struck by moonlight, he noted. There were no people in any of the paintings, and no photographs at all.

"Got a thing for the moon," he commented, then glanced at her. She studied him, he thought, as the dog did, speculatively. "The art, the name of your shop."

"Yes, I have a thing for the moon."

"Maybe we can take a walk out to the cliffs later. Take a look at it over the water. I don't know what phase it's in, but—"

"Waxing, nearly full."

"Cool. You know your moons."

"Intimately."

“Okay if Amico has the bone?”

“Offer it.”

Gabe pulled it out of the bag, held it out. “Here you go, boy.”

But Amico sat, making no move. Then Simone murmured in Italian, and the dog leaned forward, closed his teeth over the bone, wagged his tail.

“That could’ve been a raw steak, I imagine,” Gabe commented, “with the same result. That’s some dog.”

“He’s a treasure. I’m in the kitchen. We’re having spaghetti.”

“Smells great. And it shows how clever I was to pick a couple of Italian wines.” He patted the bag he carried as they stepped into the kitchen. “This Chianti’s supposed to be fairly amazing. Should I open it?”

“All right.” She handed him a corkscrew. “Dinner’s going to be a little while yet.”

“No problem.” He pulled off his jacket, then opened the wine. He set it and the corkscrew aside. “Simone. This is going to sound strange.”

“I’m rarely surprised by strange.”

“I was thinking today, trying to figure why I’m having such a strong reaction to you. And I can’t. So I thought, maybe it’s just sex—and what’s wrong with that? But it’s not. Not when I’m standing here looking at you, it isn’t.”

She got down two glasses. “What is it then?”

“I don’t know. But it’s the kind of thing where I want to know all sorts of things about you. Where I want to sit down somewhere and talk to you for hours, which is weird considering we’ve only had two conversations before. It’s the kind of thing where I think about how your voice sounds, and the way you move. And that sounds lame. It’s just true.”

“But you don’t know all sorts of things about me, do you?”

“Next to nothing. So tell me everything.”

She poured the wine, then got out a vase for the flowers. “I was born in Saint Louis,” she began as she filled the vase with water. “An only child. I lived there until I was twelve—dead normal childhood—until I was twelve. My parents were killed in a car accident. I got out of it with a broken arm and a concussion.”

“That’s rough.”

There was sympathy in his voice, but not the maudlin, pitying sort. Just as there was comfort, but not intrusion, in the light touch of his hand to her arm.

“Very. I moved to Saint Paul to live with my aunt and uncle. They were very strict and not all that thrilled to have a child thrust on them, but too worried about image to shirk their duty. Which is all I was to them. They had a daughter close to my age, the detestable and perfect Patty. We were never even close to being friends. She, and my aunt and uncle, made certain I remembered who the daughter was, who the displaced orphan was. They were never abusive, and they were never loving.”

“I’ve always thought the withholding of love is a kind of abuse.”

She looked over at him as she began to arrange the lilies in the vase. “You have a kind heart. Not everyone does. I was provided for, and I did what I was told, for six years, because the alternative was foster care.”

“Better the devil you know?”

“Yes, exactly. I bided my time. When I was eighteen, I left. There was insurance money that came to me then, and a small trust fund from the sale of our house in Saint Louis. I planned to go to college. I had no idea what I wanted to do or be, so I decided to take a year off first and do something my parents had always talked of doing. To tour Europe.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, alone.” She sipped her wine now, leaning back on the counter. Had she ever told anyone even this much before? Since the night everything changed for her?

No, no one. What would have been the point?

“I was thrilled to be alone, to have no schedule, no one telling me what to do. It was both an adventure and a pilgrimage for me. I backpacked through Italy.”

She lifted her glass in salute. “This is very good. Anyway, when I came home, I developed an interest in herbs. I studied them, experimented, and started a little Internet business, selling skin and hair care products, that sort of thing. I expanded it, eventually moved here and opened the store. And here I am.”

“There’s a big chunk of stuff between backpacking in Italy and here I am.”

“A very big chunk,” she agreed, and took out fresh vegetables for a salad.

“Where else did you go besides Italy?”

“Circumstances made it necessary for me to cut my trip short. But I did see a bit of Italy and France before I came back home.”

“What circumstances?”

“Personal ones.”

“Okay, speaking of personal circumstances, have you ever been in love?”

“No. Superficially involved a few times. Sexually involved a few times. But I’ve never been in love. Until maybe now.”

She continued to slice mushrooms, very thin, until his hands came to her shoulders. “Me, either,” he murmured.

“It’s probably not love. It doesn’t really happen at first sight.”

“What do you know?” He turned her to face him. “You’ve never been there before.”

“I know it takes more than this.” This leap of the heart, this yearning. “It takes trust and respect and honesty. And time.”

“Let’s take some time.” He lowered his head to rub his lips over hers. “And see if we get the rest.”

“Time.” She pried a hand between them to ease him back. “That’s a problem for me.”

“Why?”

“To tell you that, I’d have to trust you, and be very honest.” She managed a smile. “And I haven’t had enough time to know you to do that.”

“We can start with tonight.”

“That’s what we’ll do.”

He lifted her hand from between them, kissed it. “Then we’ll work on tomorrow.”

“Maybe we will.”

Chapter 5

IT was extraordinary to relax in her own home over dinner with a man who not only attracted her on so many levels, but who also made her feel as if it were something they'd done before, and could do again, whenever she liked.

Someone who made her feel normal. Just a woman, eating pasta and drinking wine with a man.

For a few hours, she could put the waxing moon out of her mind and imagine what it could be like if her life was ordinary again.

"How'd you find this house?" he asked her. "This spot in Maine?"

"I like space, and it had what I was looking for."

"You lived in Montana." He watched her as he twirled spaghetti onto his fork. "They've got boatloads of space out there."

"Maybe too much." She shrugged a shoulder. "I liked it there, and I enjoyed the . . . I guess you could say the texture of the land. But it was too easy to cut myself off, and I reached a point where I understood the difference between being self-sufficient and private and isolation. Have you ever been out West?"

"I spent a wild week in San Diego on spring break once."

Her lips curved. "That doesn't count."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd been there. Anyway, I'm glad you decided on the East Coast, on here. Then again, if you'd stuck a pin in a map and ended up in Duluth, I'd've found you."

"Duluth?"

"Wherever. It wouldn't matter." He reached over, laid a hand on hers. "Do you believe in fate, Simone?"

She looked down at his hand, strong fingers over hers. "Obsessively."

"Me, too. My mother's always after me. Gabriel, when are you going to settle down with a nice girl and give me grandchildren? When my grandmother hears her, she tells her to leave me alone. Leave the boy be, she says, he's already in love. He just hasn't met her yet. Now that I have, I know exactly what she means."

"It's a long way from a spaghetti dinner to settling down. And you don't know that I'm a nice girl."

"Okay, tell me the meanest thing you've ever done."

Blood, spurting warm into her mouth, devouring prey while the mad hunger, the wild thrill of the hunt burned through her like black fire.

She only shook her head. “I can guarantee it tops cheating on a history test. My trip to Europe . . .” she said slowly. “Things happened there that changed me. I’ve spent a long time dealing with that, and trying to . . . find my way back.”

“A mad affair with a slick Italian who happened to be married with five children?”

“Oh. If only. No adulterous affairs. No affairs that mattered.”

“Something makes you sad under it all. Who hurt you?”

“I never knew him. But the good that came out of it is, once I dealt with it, I swore I’d never hurt anyone in the same way. Never.” She rose to begin clearing. “Which brings me to you.”

“Are you afraid I’ll hurt you?”

“You’d be the first who could, because you’re the first who matters. But—”

“Hold that a minute.” He got to his feet, crossed to her. With his eyes on hers, he took the plates out of her hand, set them aside. “I can’t promise not to do something stupid, or screw up. Life’s full of stupidity and screwups, and I’ve got my share. But Simone . . .” He took her face in his hands. “I’ll do the best I can. And my best isn’t half bad.”

“I’m afraid of you,” she murmured. “And for you. And I can’t explain.”

“I’ll take the risk. How about you?”

He leaned in until his mouth found hers, until he found the answer.

That punch of need, a stunning blow to the system, left him shaken and reeling. It was as if he’d waited all his life for this one kiss, that everything that had gone on before was just a prelude to this single meeting of lips. As the ache followed, he drew her closer, delved deeper. Dark and dangerous and heady, the taste of her invaded him. Conquered.

“Simone.”

“Not yet, not yet.”

She needed more, for what she drew from him was hope. It was light. Bright strong beams that vanquished the shadows she lived with, day after day. Strength and heart and sweetness, the essence of him streamed into her. And soothed.

“I need you too much.” She pressed her face into his shoulder, memorizing his scent. “It can’t be real. It can’t be right.”

“Nothing’s ever felt more real, more right, to me. Let me be with you.” His mouth moved along her jaw, taking small, tantalizing bites. “Let me love you. I want to feel what it’s like to be inside you.”

She let out a half laugh. “You have no idea.”

Take him, her mind murmured as his hands moved over her. Be taken. What harm could it do? Maybe love was the answer. How could that be any more irrational than the rest?

Here and now, she thought, while his scent was buzzing through her senses, while she could hear the urgent beat of his heart, feel the heat of his blood swimming just under his skin.

And what then? How could it be love, how could it answer anything when it was a lie?

“Gabe.”

“Don’t think. Let’s not think. We’ll just . . . oh, *hell*.” Cursing, he drew back, dug his phone out of his pocket. “Sorry. Don’t move. Don’t think. Yeah, Gabe Kirby,” he said into the phone.

She saw his face change, that light of lust and humor clicking off into concern. “Where? Okay. No, calm down. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Keep him warm, keep him still. Ten minutes.”

He shoved the phone back in his pocket even as he reached for his jacket. “Sorry, emergency. I’ve got to go. German shepherd, clipped by a car. They’re waiting outside my office with him. I don’t know how bad, or how long. I could—”

“Don’t worry.” She hurried with him to the door. “Just go. Take care of him.”

“See me tomorrow.” He turned at the door, pulled her into him for one quick, hard kiss. “For God’s sake, see me tomorrow.”

“Yes. Tomorrow. Go. Good luck.”

“I’ll call you.” And he was already running to his car.

She watched him pull out, speed away, then sagged against the doorjamb. The dog was in good hands, she thought. Caring ones. And it was best he’d been called away. Best for him, and for her.

He gave her hope, she thought, and what could she give him but shock and pain? Unless, she told herself and ran her fingers over her silver cross, she found the cure.

“Let’s get back to work, Amico.”

She worked through the night, and just before dawn curled up with Amico on his bed for a few hours sleep. The wolf dreams came, as they often did when the moon was nearly full and her system too tired to resist. So she dreamed of running through the night, power pulsing through her, hunger gnawing at her belly. She dreamed of hunting, following the scent, her eyes so keen they cut through the dark.

In the dream she had only one purpose, and no restrictions of conscience to bind her. She flew through the night, free to take what she

willed with fang and claw.

Tracking, stalking the one she wanted. In that last leap, she saw his face, the terror, the revulsion in his eyes. And when she bit into his flesh, she knew nothing but pleasure.

She woke with Gabe's scent on her skin, and her own tears on her cheeks.

SHE sought him out. To do otherwise would be cowardly. No dream, no matter how horrid, would make her a coward now. Before she went by his office, she swung into Luna with fresh stock.

She'd timed it to arrive just shy of opening. Though she heard Shelley wandering around in the front, Simone moved quietly, working in the storeroom.

The music came on, the New Age-type of instrumentals Shelley seemed to think went best with the tone of the products. It didn't matter to Simone if she played Enya or Iron Maiden, as long as the products moved.

She needed more equipment for her lab, more of the drugs she could only get, and at a vicious cost, through the black market.

And if the risk she was preparing to take with Gabe turned around to slap her, she'd need running money.

She heard the footsteps approach, then Shelley's startled yelp when her manager opened the storeroom door.

"God! I didn't know you were back here. You scared the life out of me. Amico! You sweetie." Shelley crouched down to exchange friendly greetings with the dog.

Shelley was five-feet-nothing. All dramatically streaked brown hair and energy, with a pretty freckled face and a flair for drama. She wore bright colors. Today's choice was grass green cropped pants and a fitted jacket, and lots of clattering bracelets.

Even without her heightened senses, Simone figured she'd have heard the woman coming from a block away.

She was the open, chatty, cheerful sort Simone thought she'd have enjoyed being friends with, if she allowed herself friends. Someone she'd be able to sit down with, over drinks and a lot of laughs. As it was, they got along well enough, and Shelley, with her vivacious personality and organized soul, was an ideal choice to manage the shop.

"Didn't expect you to come by until next week," Shelley said.

"I finished some stock, and since I had a couple of errands in town, I thought I'd bring it by now."

“Great. Hope you made more of that new potpourri. Autumn Forest? It’s already flying out the door, and we’re running low on the eye pillows. Simone, I love the new hand cream—the seaweed stuff. It’s like magic, and I’ve been—har har—hand-selling it like mad. I was going to send you an inventory list today.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“You look fabulous.” Cocking her head, Shelley studied Simone’s face. “Charged up, I’d say. Got some other new magic cream you’re not sharing with the rest of us yet?”

Did love show, like it did in storybooks and novels? Put stars in your eyes, roses in your cheeks? “No, but I’m working on a few things.”

“When you’ve got it bottled, I’ll be happy to try it out, whatever it is. Want some tea? I’m making some of our Lemon Twist.”

“No, thanks. I have a couple of errands, like I said, then I need to get back.” She hooked on Amico’s leash. She started out, then hesitated. “Shelley, let me ask you a hypothetical.”

“Fire away.”

“If you were interested in someone, a man—”

“I’m always interested in a man.”

“So when you are, very interested, and there’s something about you that you’ve made a strict policy to keep private, do you feel you have to open that door, to be completely honest?”

“Pretty heavy hypothetical.”

“I guess it is.”

“I’d say it would depend on the private thing. If it’s like I did ten years in the federal pen, then I’d probably spill it. If it’s more like I had liposuction, well, I’m entitled to my little secrets.”

“So the more important it is, the more necessary it is to be honest.”

“Well, if I’d had lipo, I’d consider that pretty damn important, but yeah. But I’d say it hinges on just how deep the interest is, on both sides.”

“That’s what I thought. Thanks.”

She’d have to judge it, Simone ruminated as she walked Amico toward the vet’s office. She’d have to be sure her own feelings, needs, hopes, weren’t coloring her perception of his.

If he loved her, she had to tell him before things went any further. Not only because it was right, but for his own protection.

If it was just infatuation on both their parts, she could live with that. She’d lived with less. Then she would keep her secret and enjoy him within her own safety zone.

Outside the door, she crouched to reassure the dog. “Just a visit, that’s all. Quick in and out, and no exam for you.”

She walked in just as Gabe walked out of the exam room beside an enormous, bearded man holding a tiny yellow kitten in his massive hands.

Their eyes met, and she knew infatuation, on her part at least, didn’t come close.

“Trudy’s all set,” Gabe said, giving the kitten a scratch behind the ears. “No more table scraps, even if she begs.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

As he moved toward the desk, the kitten arched her back, hissed at Simone.

“Jeez, lady, sorry. She’s a little upset, is all.” He gathered the kitten close to the barrel of his chest as she spat and arched. “Your dog probably made her nervous.”

“No problem.” Simone moved aside, knowing it wasn’t Amico that made the cat nervous.

“Come on back. Five minutes,” he told Eileen, then grabbed Simone’s hand to pull her into the exam room.

“I was just—” But he stopped her words with his mouth, had her sliding into the kiss, dropping the leash so her arms could lock around him.

“Me, too,” Gabe murmured. “All night. If you were about to say thinking about you.”

“Actually, I was going to tell you . . . Now my brain’s fuzzy.”

“While it is, let’s escape out the back door, run off to the woods, and make love like rabbits.”

“I think there was a rabbit in your waiting room.”

“Oh, yeah. Muffy. Why do people give animals such embarrassing names? All right, we’ll be adult and responsible.” But he nipped her earlobe first. “Office hours end today at five. I can be at your place by five-fifteen. Then we’ll run into the woods and make love like Muffy.”

“That sounds close to perfect, but I need a couple of days.”

“Well, I’ll have to take some vitamins, but I’ll do my best.”

He made her laugh, and for that alone she might have loved him. “I applaud your optimism, but I meant I need a couple of days before I see you again. I need you to give me until Saturday.”

“How about lunch today? Hold the sexual marathon. Just lunch.”

“Saturday. Around four. No later than four-thirty. Please.”

“Okay. But—”

“I need until Saturday. And I need you to tell me if you love me. Or if this is just physical for you. And it’s all right if it is—just physical. I’ll sleep with you, because I want you. No strings, no promises. I don’t need them. But if it’s more, I want to know. Not now.” She touched her fingers to his lips before he could speak. “Not now either way. Saturday.”

“You’re a strange and fascinating creature, Simone.”

She picked up Amico’s leash. “I really am. How’s the German shepherd?”

“Beanie? See what I mean about names? He’s a lucky dog. Contusions, lacerations, and a broken tibia. He’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad to hear it. You’re keeping patients waiting, I should go. I’ll see you Saturday.”

“Don’t cook.” Reluctant to let her go, he took her hand again. “We’ll order pizza or something.”

“Or something,” she repeated, and drawing her hand free, walked away.

Chapter 6

SHE locked her doors, set her alarms, turned off the phone. For two days, she lived in the lab, snatching sleep only when her body refused to function, even on the stimulants she risked taking.

She boosted the dose of burdock, added blue flag, and though she knew it was dangerous to ingest untested mixtures, pumped more of the black market drugs into her system.

When the result made her ill, she dragged herself back to work and tried a different formula.

She felt a little mad.

And why not, she thought, as she crushed hawthorn with mortar and pestle. She wished she were mad, that all of this was in her mind. She bombarded her system with echinacea, drinking it as a cold tea, following the advice in the Nei Jing, that hot diseases should be cooled.

And still she felt heated, a furnace burning inside her, as she studied her own blood under the microscope, as she ran endless tests.

But the cycle was upon her. She didn't need a window, didn't need to see the sky to know the sun was going down. She felt that pull, the inescapable grip of the moon, inside her as strongly, as surely as hands digging into her belly.

She took the final steps, steps she'd taken three times a month, every month for more than a decade. The restlessness, the tingling rush was already crawling over her skin, creeping under it, like little demons lighting torches in her blood.

She locked the cage door behind her. Sat on the floor as Amico took his place by the basement steps. There she meditated for the time she had left, struggling with her mind against the monster that crouched inside her, waiting to become.

When the change started, she fought it, battled against the pain while sweat sprang hot over her. Discipline. Control. She sat, quivering, her eyes shut, her mind and body as still as she could manage.

Then she was being ripped to pieces. Torn out of herself; torn into herself, with the hideous sounds of her own bones snapping, mutating, lengthening while her flesh stretched to accommodate the impossible.

Her vision sharpened. She couldn't stop it. So she looked down in horror with eyes now more yellow than green as her fingers extended, until gold fur coated them, and the lethal claws protruded.

She screamed, with no one to hear, she screamed against the pain and the fury. Screamed again when the fury became a dark and horrible thrill. Screamed until the scream became a ululant howl.

HE'D never known days to be so long, or nights to be so dark and lonely. He'd called her a dozen times—maybe more—but she hadn't answered. All he'd gotten for his trouble was that smooth and cool voice of hers telling him to leave a message.

So he'd left them—nonsense ones and urgent ones, frustrated ones and silly ones. Anything, he'd thought, to nudge her into calling him back.

He was a crazy man, he could admit it. Crazy to see her again, to touch her again. To have a damn conversation. Was that too much to ask?

But no, she had to be all mysterious and unreachable.

And more fascinating to him than ever.

Probably part of her master plan, he decided as he drove through the rainy Saturday afternoon. Make the man a lunatic so he'd promise anything.

And well, maybe he would.

He felt lightning-struck.

There were flowers on the seat beside him. Yellow daisies this time. She just didn't strike him as the red rose variety of female. And a bottle of champagne. The real thing.

He was already imagining them sitting on the floor in front of the fire drinking it, making love, talking, making love again, dozing off together only to wake and slide into love and murmurs once more.

He'd turned his schedule upside down to get off midafternoon on a Saturday. And he'd pay for it with extra bookings through the following week. But all that mattered was that she was waiting for him.

He pulled up beside her truck, grabbed the champagne and the flowers, then ran through the rain to her front door.

She opened it before he could knock, but his smile of greeting faded when he saw her face. There were bruises of fatigue under her eyes, dark against the pallor of her skin. And her eyes looked over-bright, feverish.

"Baby, you're sick." Even as he lifted a hand to check her forehead for fever, she stepped back.

"No, just tired. Come in. I've been waiting for you."

"Listen to Dr. Gabe. Lie down on the couch there. I'll make you some soup."

"I'm not hungry." But she would be. Soon. "Those need water."

“I’ll take care of it. You should’ve told me you weren’t feeling well. I’d have come out to check on you. Have you seen the doctor—the people doctor?”

“No need.” Since he wanted to fuss, she let him. Gave him a vase when they reached the kitchen so he could fill it for the daisies. “I know what’s wrong with me. I made you some coffee. Why don’t you—”

“Simone.” He dumped the flowers in the vase and turned to take her shoulders. “I can pour my own coffee. Go lie down. Whether you’re hungry or not, you need to eat something, and then get some rest. Once you do the first, you’re going upstairs to bed. I’ll bunk on the couch.”

“Not much of a date.” She shifted to tap the bottle of champagne he’d set on the counter. “And what about this?”

“We’ll put it in the fridge and we can open it when you’re feeling better. And if that’s not by tomorrow morning, I’m taking you to the doctor.”

“We need to talk.”

“You can talk when you’re horizontal. Got any chicken noodle soup around here?”

He turned away to open cupboard doors in a search. There was rain in his hair, little beads that gleamed against the black. She could smell it on him, smell the freshness of him while he poked through her kitchen to find something to give her comfort.

He’d brought her champagne and flowers and wanted to make her soup.

She stood, pierced by something sweeter than pain. And threw her arms around him, pressed her cheek into his back.

“You’re one in a million. Oh God, I hope you’re my one in a million.”

“I want you flat on your back, and not so I can have my way with you. I’m going to ply you with condensed soup instead of French champagne, then tuck you safely into bed, while I keep watch on the couch.”

He turned around, touched his lips to her forehead in a way she knew meant he was checking for fever.

“If that’s not love, Simone, I don’t have a name for it.”

“Forget the soup for now, but thank you. Come in and sit down. There are things I have to tell you, and there isn’t a lot of time.”

Now his face was nearly as pale as hers. “Are you seriously ill? Is something wrong with you?”

“I have . . . we’ll call it a condition. It’s nothing you can imagine, and it’s not life-threatening. To me. Come sit down, you’ll want to sit down, and I’ll explain.”

“You’re starting to scare me.”

“I know.” She kept her hand in his as she led him to the living room. Everything looked so cozy, so simple, she thought. But it wasn’t, couldn’t be.

It was the biggest risk she would ever take, but there he was, the most important prize she could ever hope to win, sitting on her sofa looking edgy and worried.

He would look worse than that when she finished. And when she finished, he would either be hers, or he’d be making tracks.

“It happened in Italy,” she began. “I was eighteen. Just. So happy to be on my own for the first time. Everything was ahead of me. You know how it is?”

“Yeah.” He reached for the throw over the arm of the sofa, and tucked it over her lap. “You think you own the world, and all you have to do is start collecting.”

“Yes. I was . . . stifled is the way to put it, I guess, with my aunt and uncle. I behaved as they wanted me to behave, was very careful to do what was expected. Otherwise, I didn’t know what would happen to me. So I was quiet, studious, obedient. And I marked the days on my mental calendar until I could turn the key on that lock and run. There was money coming to me when I turned eighteen. Insurance money, a little trust. Not tons of money, but enough to see me through, to give me some freedom, to finance that trip to Europe I wanted so desperately. And I’d worked summers since I was sixteen, squirreling away as much money as I could. I was going to go to college, but I deferred for a year. At eighteen, it seemed I had all the time in the world, and the possibilities were endless.”

Her fingers were plucking at the edge of the throw. He took her hand in his, soothed it. “You said you went alone.”

“I wanted to be alone, more than anything.” How viciously ironic, she thought, that she’d gotten that wish. “To meet people, yes. To sit in cafes and have brilliant conversations with fascinating people. And I did, the way you do at that age—or think you do. I wanted to see Rome and Paris and London, and all the little villages in the countryside. I wanted to sit in a pub in Ireland and listen to music. I wanted a lot.”

He shook his head. “Not a lot. You wanted to be happy. To be yourself.”

“God, yes. I wanted to touch everything, see everything. Absorb everything. I’d dreamed of it for so long, and there I was, staring at the Duomo in Florence, drinking wine and flirting with the waiters in Rome,

sitting on a hilltop in Tuscany. No structured tours for me. No structure at all. I was done with that. That's why I was hiking in a remote area of the Piedmont in the fall, a few months after my eighteenth birthday. Alone, watching a glorious sunset, walking as twilight came, soft and so lovely. It was incredibly romantic, and peaceful and exciting all at once. I was going to hike over to France."

"Oh, baby." Instinctively he squeezed her hands. Someone had hurt her, she'd said. And she'd never known him. "Were you raped?"

"No." Not quite true, she realized. What else to call the invasion of her body, the horror? "Not . . . not sexually." She paused a moment. She was stalling when she needed to get through it all quickly. And yet, didn't he have to know the whole of it? Didn't she need to make him see it, believe it?

"I should've camped near one of the villages, or gone to a house or farm. Something. But I was eighteen and immortal, and I wanted to experience the night in the mountains, alone. The full moon. I heard something, and I thought, Oh Christ, is that a wolf? Are there wolves up here? But a wolf wouldn't be interested in me. Then I heard it howl. I felt the fear strike across my neck like an axe, even when I told myself wolves didn't bother people. People weren't their prey."

She tossed the throw aside, pushed to her feet, moved to the fire to poke at the logs, even though she knew the flame wouldn't warm her. "It was all very quick. I walked faster. I could hear my boots ring on the rock. I had my Swiss Army knife in my pocket. I remember digging for it. I saw it—the shape of it—and I ran. It came at me from behind. My backpack saved me. It knocked me flat, and I could feel it tearing at the pack, and its breath on the back of my neck."

She rubbed her arms, rubbed them hard, and kept her eyes focused on the leaping flames. "The sounds it made—hungry, wild. Inhuman. I screamed. I think I screamed. I lost my knife. It wouldn't have helped me anyway."

She turned back, knew she had to face him with the rest. His eyes were riveted on her. "I must've fought, but I remember it clawing me, and the pain was beyond belief. Beyond that when it got its teeth into my shoulder. It might've killed me then, and it would've been over. But I had this."

She drew the cross out from under her shirt, let it dangle from the chain. "I stabbed at it with this cross, out of panic and pain and desperation. I only saw it for an instant, and then not clearly, but I hacked the point of this cross into it, and it screamed. I lay there alone,

looking up at the moon. I don't remember after that, I must've passed out. They told me hikers found me in the morning, and carried me out of the mountains. They told me I was lucky I hadn't bled to death. Luckier, they said, than the man they found dead. But the strange thing about him was he was smeared with blood, but only had two small wounds. A puncture wound in his cheek, another in the jugular."

"Self-defense, Simone. You had to—"

"No, wait. I have to get it all out. He was a hermit, they said. This man they found dead and smeared with blood. A strange, strange man who lived alone in the hills. It must've been he who attacked me, but wasn't it odd that my wounds looked to have been inflicted by some sort of beast? The claw marks, the bite in my shoulder. But look how quickly they were healing. Yes, I was a very lucky girl."

"Simone." He got up slowly to go to her, took her shoulders in gentle hands. "Was he HIV-positive? Did he have AIDS?"

"No. But you're on the track. It's about blood. I stayed in Europe, I went on to France. In a couple of weeks I felt better, better than I ever had in my life. A month after the attack, I was camping again. Alone. Thank God, alone. As the sun went down, I started to feel restless, hot and feverish. Too much energy. Nerves sparking under my skin. There was a tearing pain, like something was ripping me from the inside out. I felt it come, felt it claw through me, out of me. Become me. And I hunted, I smelled the flesh, the blood. Only a deer. I fed on it, and the kill was as thrilling as the feast."

"You were hallucinating."

She pulled her hands free, couldn't allow him to touch her now. "In the morning, I woke naked, covered in blood, over a mile from my camp. Curled up beside what was left of the deer. The next night was the same, and the night after, I tied myself to a tree. I went to a local doctor, told him something was wrong with me. He found nothing in the exam. I was healthy, but he'd do a blood test. Before he sent my blood off to the lab, he looked at a smear under the microscope. He was puzzled. Somehow the sample must have gotten contaminated. He couldn't explain it. Couldn't explain how there came to be canine blood cells along with human. It wasn't possible, some sort of mistake.

"I took the blood sample and left. Got back to the States. Took the sample to an American doctor. What the hell did some guy in France know? But the American doctor was just as puzzled, wanted to know where I'd gotten the sample. Who or what was it from? I got out, I ran. I read everything I could find about blood conditions, diseases, infections.

And I thought about what had happened to me in the mountains, about the silver cross. I knew. I knew from the night when I changed, but how could I accept that? That Hollywood horror movie? I'd prove it was something else."

"Simone, let's sit down. You need to sit down."

"No." She batted his hand away when he reached for her. "*Listen*. A week before the next full moon, I rented a cabin. I bought chains, and a video camera, a tripod. When it was time, I set up the camera, shackled myself, and sat on the floor to wait. When it happened, I tried to fight it, but it was too strong. In the morning, I had the tape. I watched myself, watched it happen to me. I stayed there all three nights, afraid to go anywhere, see anyone. After the cycle, I went to the library, and found the name for what I was. Lycanthrope."

"Simone." He took a long, quiet breath, and though she tried to turn away, his hands rubbed up and down her arms. "You were attacked, traumatized. You've turned the man into a beast, a monster—because that's what he was. A predator, but human. Lycanthropy is a psychological disorder."

"It is if you *think* you turn into a wolf. If you *do*, it's a physiological disorder. You don't believe me." She touched a hand to his cheek, knowing it might be the last time he would allow it. "I don't expect you to. I'd be worried about you if you accepted all this on just my word."

"I believe you were attacked, and hurt, and forced to defend yourself. And the shock, the trauma of what happened to you, especially at such a vulnerable time of your life, caused severe emotional distress. I can help you. I want to help you."

"You think I'm crazy," she stated. "But you're not leaving."

"I don't think you're crazy, I think you're troubled. Why would I leave when being with you is what I want most?"

"You need to see. You needed to hear what I've told no one else, and you need to see what I've allowed no one else to see. And once you do, if you're done with me, I won't blame you. But I need you to come with me now, give me just a little more time."

"I want to help you. I think I can help you if—"

"God, I hope you're right. Just come. I need to go downstairs. It'll be sunset soon."

He went with her, with the dog patiently trotting behind them. She unlocked the basement door, relocked it when they were on the other side.

She heard him catch his breath when he saw her lab, the cell, the cameras and equipment below.

“You’re shocked,” she began. “And you’re confused.”

“That’s the mild take. For God’s sake, Simone, I’m not going to believe you’re some sort of mad scientist, or the female version of Oz.”

“Oz?” She stopped, goggled at him. “Oz, from *Buffy*? You watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?”

“I caught it a couple of times. Okay, yeah, so? It makes a lot more sense for me to watch a well-written television show than for you to think you’re a werewolf.”

“Actually, I prefer the term *lycan*. Werewolf brings up images from old horror movies. Lon Chaney or whoever tromping around in the fog in a pair of tight pants, on two legs. *Buffy* got it closer to reality.”

“Oh yeah, reality.” He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, and she watched his struggle for patience. “You can’t keep living like this. If you trust me enough to tell me all this, then trust me enough to let me find the right doctors, the right treatments for you.”

“A picture’s worth a couple of million words. There are tapes.” She moved to the camera and tripod. “I record every change, study the tapes to see if there’s any improvement, any alteration. You can study them for yourself if you like. Or use the equipment here, study the blood samples.”

“You’re medicating yourself.” He gestured toward the vials, the herbs, the bottles of pills. And his patience snapped. “Goddamn it, Simone, this has to stop. It’s going to stop.”

“My fondest wish.” Odd, she thought, the more angry he became, the calmer she was. “If nothing happens after sundown, I’ll do whatever you want me to do. See any doctor, have any test, check myself into the nearest padded room. I swear it.”

“Damn right you will.”

Yes, she thought, the calmer she became—and glanced over with what was nearly a smile. “You’re pushy when you’re mad. Interesting.”

“I can get a lot pushier.”

“I can’t remember the last time anyone was actively angry with me, or upset for me. I’m going to have to decide if I like it. All I ask is that you give me the next twenty minutes, and that you promise—swear to me—no matter what happens, you won’t try to get within five feet of the cage.”

“You’re not locking yourself in there.”

“Twenty minutes. It’s not that much to ask when I’ve given you my word that I’ll do whatever you think best if you’re right, and I’m wrong.”

He tossed up his hands, a kind of silent and frustrated acquiescence.

“Amico won’t let you approach the cage, but I don’t want him to have to hurt you. Promise me.”

“Fine. You’ve got my word. I won’t go near the cage. And in twenty minutes, you and I are going to sit down and figure out the best way I can help you.”

“All right.” She stepped to the camera, turned it on. “The keys to the basement door are there, on the table. If you want to go, I understand. Just lock up behind you. Take this.” She drew off her cross. “Leave it if you go. I can’t get out,” she continued, walking to the cage and working the combination on the first of three muscular locks. “I can’t work the combinations in my lycan form.”

He cursed under his breath, but she heard him. With the door open, she turned, kept her eyes on his as she unbuttoned her shirt. “You’ll think you can help me when it begins, but you can’t. If you try to rush the cage, Amico will stop you.”

She stripped off her shirt, unhooked her bra.

His eyes narrowed. “Simone, if this is some sort of kinky and unique seduction, it’s—”

“Keep your word,” she interrupted, and stripped off her jeans. “I don’t see any point in ruining good clothes three times a month.”

“Practical. And really beautiful.”

She closed the cage door, set the first lock. “You won’t think so in a few minutes.”

She wanted to pace, to move. That restless fever was creeping over her skin. But she stood still after the locks were set. “There’s a slide under the microscope. I left it for you to see. Not the electron microscope—we’ll deal with that later.”

“You have an electron microscope?”

She nearly smiled as she heard the surprise in his voice, saw the glitter of interest over his face as he took a closer look at her equipment.

“Later. Go ahead, have a look at the regular slide. Tell me what you think.”

“There’s a naked woman standing there behind bars, and you want me to play with your chemistry set? Not that it isn’t a kick-ass chem set, but the naked woman’s got it beat. Hands down.”

She heard her own laugh, rested her brow against the bars. “I keep falling for you. Just have a look.”

Obliging, he walked over, bent to the microscope, adjusted the focus. “Blood sample,” he murmured. “Weird cells. Some sort of infection. Not rabies—not exactly. I’ve never seen anything like this.” Intrigued, he shifted his stance. “At first glance, it’s . . . it’s not canine, but it is. It’s human, but it’s not. Where did you get this?”

He straightened, turned toward the cage. And his heart leaped into his throat.

She was covered in sweat, shaking, with her fingers clamped around the bars. And those fingers were . . . wrong. Too long, too . . . tensile. With the nails sharp and black. Her eyes were on his, and full of sorrow, full of pain, and starting to shimmer. Not with tears, he saw—or not only with tears. There was something fierce and raging burning through the wet.

Some sort of illusion, he told himself. Some sort of elaborate trick. “Simone—”

“You swore.” She hissed out the words as he instinctively moved toward her and as Amico growled low and barred his path. “Stay back. Don’t come near me. God. Oh, God!”

He saw her bite her lip, bite through it as if to hold back a scream. The blood trickled down her chin, and the chin itself began to *stretch*, to lengthen and narrow. Even as his rational mind refused what his eyes saw in front of him, he heard something hideous, like bones grinding.

Then she did scream, collapsing onto the concrete floor, falling onto all fours as her spine arched and cracked, as fur—gold and thick, spread over her skin.

No illusion. No trick. And still impossible. “Mary, Mother of God.” He stumbled back, rapping his hip against the table so that bottles and vials clanked.

And what was in the cage threw back its head, its long sleek throat working as it howled with a terrible joy.

Chapter 7

SHE woke as she always did after the change. Disoriented and achy. As if she'd barely recovered from a long, debilitating illness.

And she woke hungry. Ravenous, which at first puzzled her. Until she remembered she hadn't put any meat in the cage with her. A foolish point of vanity, she supposed. She hadn't wanted Gabe to see her feed.

Gabe. She curled a little tighter into herself, a full body compress over the misery. He'd seen now. He knew now. He'd never be able to look at her the same way again, not with desire or affection. Certainly not with love.

But if she hadn't misjudged him completely, once he was over the shock and the horror, he might be able to help.

She made herself get up. She could smell the wolf still. The scent of it clung to her skin long after her body was hers again, and the stink of it, even after so many years, turned her stomach.

She would take a long, hot shower, scrub it away. Then eat and work. And wait. If he came back, she thought as she unlocked the cage, what she'd done would be worth the cost. He wouldn't love her, not the way she would always love him, but he would help her. The kindness in him would demand it.

If she was wrong, if he didn't come back, she'd relocate again. Maybe go to Canada this time. He might tell someone, of course, but no one would believe him. Still, it would be better all around if she moved away, settled somewhere else.

She tugged on her jeans, then stopped with her fingers on the button of the fly as she stared at Amico's dog bed.

Amico sat on the wide cushion, watching her, waiting for her command. Beside the dog, Gabe was sprawled. Sleeping.

She wasn't disoriented now, she was simply dazed. Without thinking, she finished dressing, shut down the camera. She released Amico from his guard stance with a whispered command. Even as the dog stood, Gabe stirred.

His eyes fluttered open. She wanted to stroke his cheek, his hair. His eyelashes. But she kept her hands at her sides as she crouched down.

"You stayed."

"Huh?" His eyes were bleary for a moment, but she watched them sharpen even as he rubbed his hands over his face, back through his

tousled hair. “Yeah. Must’ve conked for a while. Who’d’ve thought it? I could use coffee.”

“I’ll go up and make some.”

“What time is it?”

“Early. Just after dawn.”

He glanced at her wrist. She wore no watch. “How do you know?”

“I always know.” She straightened, reminded herself to maintain some distance, for both their sakes. “I’ll put coffee on, then I need to shower. You’ll have questions. I’ll try to answer them.”

“All right.”

She went up the stairs with the dog beside her. But she didn’t look back as she unlocked the door, or when she closed it behind her.

Silly for her hands to shake now, she thought. After all she’d been through, all she’d endured, she would shake and tremble now? She spilled grounds on the counter as she measured them out and left them there. She’d clean them up later. All she had to do was make coffee—a simple, everyday task—then she could shower. She needed the heat, the soap, the cleansing.

She needed time alone before she faced the pity and the condemnation she would see in his eyes.

She heard him come in. “It won’t take long,” she said quickly. “Help yourself. If you’re hungry, I’ll—” She jerked back, stepped far back when he reached for her. “Don’t. Don’t touch me now. Its scent’s still on me.”

Moving fast, she unlocked the back door, jerked it open to let the dog out. The air was full of mists and morning scents, and made her want to weep.

“I’ll be down in a few minutes.” She had to force herself not to run.

She started to strip when she reached her bedroom door, peeling off clothes, heaving them aside as she rushed into the bathroom. Her breath was snagging in her throat, tearing out in gasps when she turned the water on as hot as she thought she could bear.

Yes, she wanted to weep, but couldn’t have said why. He’d stayed, and his compassion was more than she could ask. More than she could expect. So she only braced her hands against the tile when she stepped under the spray of water. And squeezed her eyes tight against the useless weakness of tears.

She lifted her head again, slowly, when she scented him, and her eyes were already searching when he nudged back the shower curtain.

“I could use a shower myself,” he said casually and took off his shirt.

“Don’t.”

“No point in being shy now. I’ve already seen you naked.”

He stripped down, stepped in behind her. “Jesus, hot enough for you?”

Her body went rigid when he trailed his fingers over her shoulder, over the only scar she bore from the attack. The bite that had changed her.

“How can you touch me?”

“How can I not? And what’s this here?” He skimmed those fingers over her other shoulder, and the small tattoo of a full moon.

“A reminder, that it’s always part of me. I need to—” She broke off, shook her head. When she reached for the soap, he took it first, and began to lather her back.

“Let me give you a hand.”

“Don’t be kind.” Her voice broke. It took all her will to mend it again. “I need a little time to settle before I can deal with kindness.”

“Okay, check the kindness.” His lips glided over her damp skin, just at the curve of neck and shoulder, as his soapy hands slithered over, and up to find her breasts. “What’s your stand on lust?”

“You can’t want me now.”

“I can’t begin to tell you how much you’re mistaken on that point. Turn around, look at me.” He didn’t wait, but took a firm hold, shifted her. Water streamed over her, pulsing over the sleek blond hair. It was the shame in her eyes, the same he’d seen when she’d waked him, then again in the kitchen, that told him she needed more than his love, more than any hopeful words he might offer.

She needed his desire.

“I’ve got just one question right now, and that’s why do you avoid saying my name?”

“I don’t.”

“You do. Why?”

“Because names are personal. Because I thought it’d be easier to walk away, for both of us.”

He eased her back, back against the shower wall, with his hands running over her, down her flanks, up her sides, through her hair. “Say it now.” His lips touched hers, retreated. “Say my name now because nobody’s going anywhere.”

“Gabe.” She shuddered back a sob. “Gabriel.” Threw her arms around him. “Gabe.”

“Simone.” And now his mouth crushed against hers, not in kindness, not with patience, but with a hunger and demand that struck the shadows from her heart.

“It’s not pity,” she managed as his greedy hands explored, and took.

“This feel like pity to you?”

“No.” On a laugh, a moan, she arched back to let his mouth feast.
“No.”

Her body was long and sleek, the muscles taut and tight, the skin soft as rose petals drenched in dew. She was trembling again, but now he knew it was arousal that shook her. Need that brought her mouth to his in an endless kiss, of warm, wet lips, and seeking tongues.

Steam billowed, but the almost blistering heat of the water was nothing now, a chill compared to the fire that kindled and burst through him.

He pressed his mouth to the scar on her shoulder in a gesture of acceptance. Whoever, whatever she was, she was his. And he wanted every part of her.

“I need you so much.” She locked herself around him. “I didn’t know I could need anyone this much.”

“It’s just beginning, for both of us.” He gripped her hips, and she braced for him, opened for him, watched his eyes as he slipped inside her. He took her slowly, deliberately, even when her vision blurred and he wondered if he would burn up before release. Took her while her head fell back, when she cried out.

And when her hands slid limply down his wet back, and her long, low groan slithered over his skin, he took them both.

IT was the first time she could remember feeling self-conscious with a man. Shyness wasn’t a part of her nature, but she felt oddly shy now as she dressed in front of him. “I know we need to talk.”

“Yeah, we do.”

“I have to eat. I need to eat.”

He stepped closer, tipped up her chin. “You need sleep, too. You’re exhausted.”

“I will, I’ll sleep. Later. I’ll go fix breakfast.”

“I’ll do it.”

“No. I need to do something. Keep my hands busy.”

She went down, got out eggs. Because she wanted Amico to understand Gabe’s place in the house, she asked Gabe to feed him.

“I didn’t think you’d be here this morning.”

“Where did you think I’d go?”

“Anywhere but here.” Because her system still craved meat, she started bacon in a skillet. “You saw what I am. But you’re here, and you haven’t said anything.”

“I saw what happened to you, and I’ve got a lot to say. I’ll start off saying I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t watched it happen. I could have watched all the tapes you have—and I scanned a number of them through the night—but I wouldn’t have believed it. It’s not the sort of thing you’re supposed to believe when you’re an adult. And sane.”

When she said nothing, he moved to her, touched her lightly on the shoulder. “It hurt you.”

“The change is painful, yes.”

“Have you tried painkillers, sedatives, something to ease the transition?”

“From time to time. They don’t help all that much, and they don’t stop the change. Nothing does. Yet.”

“You’re trying herbs.”

“That’s how I got into them. Combatting, I thought, the unnatural with the natural. I’ve tried spells. Witchcraft, voodoo, charms, potions, and lotions. Medical science, paranormal science. I’ve had eleven years to try.”

Eleven years, he thought. Alone. How had she stood it? “Have you found anyone else with the same condition?”

“No. You’d be amazed how many people think they’re lycanthropes. There are web sites devoted to it, and all sorts of tales of wolfmen and women. But I’ve never found anyone who’s actually infected.”

“Interesting term. Infection.” He sipped his coffee while she broke eggs into a bowl. “I read some of your notes. A blood infection, one that alters DNA, and somehow combines with the canine. A rabid infection that not only resists but prevents antibody production.”

“A type of blood infection. But it’s not rabies.”

“No. A distant cousin. Where did you get the drugs, Simone?”

“Illegally. Through the black market.”

“You can’t keep medicating yourself this way, using experimental drugs—and not all of them for humans—with unknown side effects or consequences.”

“I can’t think of a side effect or consequence more injurious than howling at the moon every month.”

He closed a hand around her wrist until she stopped and met his eyes. “How about psychosis, paralysis, stroke, embolism? Let’s try death.”

“I’ve considered all of that, and the risks are worth it.”

“Alone, in a basement lab.”

“What’s the alternative?” She pulled her arm free, whipped eggs with a vengeance. “Going public? Taking a trip to Johns Hopkins, for instance,

and saying, hey, guys, check this out?”

“Between two extremes is a lot of space, a lot of options.”

“Going wolf every month is pretty damn extreme, and so would be the talk-show bookings I’d get if this ever gets out.”

“You’d be a real crowd pleaser on *Letterman*. Stupid Pet Tricks would never be the same.”

The laugh snorted out before she could stop it, and half the stress pressing on her shoulders melted away. “You can make jokes?”

“Sorry, baby. I—”

“No. You can make jokes.” She set the bowl down long enough to clutch his face in her hands and press her lips hard and quick to his. “I’ve been looking for a miracle, and it came running around a corner at me. You didn’t leave. You touched me, you made love with me when I thought you’d be revolted by me.”

With a sigh, she poured the eggs into the skillet. “And you’re standing here waiting for me to cook these stupid eggs and making jokes. You’re rational. I’m amazed you can be here, be funny, be rational after what you saw.”

Because it was there, he picked up a strip of bacon she’d set on a plate and singed his fingertips. “I’m not going to tell you I wasn’t freaked,” he said as he tossed the bacon from hand to hand to cool it. “Still am, but I’m working through it.”

“Bottom line, okay? Bottom line, I can’t possibly go through mainstream options. You were freaked, Gabe, because that’s what I am. A freak.”

“You’re not. You have a disease.”

“And if I don’t find a cure, I’ll be like this all of my life. If it doesn’t drive me mad, or to suicide, I’ll live a very long life. One of the happy benefits of this condition is robust health. Ridiculously. I haven’t had so much as a sniffle since I was eighteen. And injury? Try this.”

Before he realized what she was doing, she laid her hand against the side of the skillet. He was on her in one leap, yanking her hand clear.

“What’s wrong with you? Let me see. Where’s the first aid kit?” He tried to drag her to the sink and couldn’t budge her an inch.

“Stronger than I look, especially in cycle. Just like I heal very quickly, abnormally. Look.” She held her palm up. “Just give it a minute.”

He watched, fascinated, as the ugly burn, fiery red from fingertip to wrist, turned healing pink, shrank, and disappeared.

“Nice trick.” He breathed in, breathed out. “Don’t do it again.”

“I’ve thought of killing myself,” she said calmly. “But that’s giving up, and I’m not ready to give up. There’s a cure, and I have to find it.”

He turned her healed hand over, kissed her palm. “We’ll find it.”

She turned back to the stove, scooping eggs out before they burned, and struggled to curb her emotions. “Why are you so willing to accept, and more than accept, to help me? To stand here this morning, talking about this, what should be horrifying and revolting to you while I fix bacon and eggs?”

“A lot of reasons. One? The bacon and eggs is because I’m hungry. Another is it’s tough not to accept what you see with your own eyes. Then, the scientist in me is pretty damn fascinated—then add a little irony. I mean, wow, the vet and the werewolf. Sorry, *lycan*. The vet and the *lycan*. It’s like kismet.”

“If I could have gotten out of that cage last night, I’d have ripped you to pieces. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.” He thought he did understand, quite a bit. “You tried to get out for a while. Threw yourself against the bars. Without your amazing super healing powers, you’d be black and blue this morning. And I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I was scared shitless, even when you settled down to pace the cage, snarl and howl. You know what else I felt?”

She shook her head, kept her eyes averted as she dished out breakfast.

“Staggered, humbled, moved beyond words that you would trust me that much. Even honored, Simone, that you’d share with me something you’d kept from everyone else for more than a third of your life. You had that much faith in me. Then we come to the big, overall reason I’m standing here this morning talking about this and hoping we’re going to be digging into those eggs in a second. That would be because I love you.”

Chapter 8

FOR the first time in days she slept easy. Maybe it was hope, or love, or having Gabe dozing beside her for a long Sunday morning nap, but the changing dreams didn't follow her.

Before he'd opened this door inside her, she would have considered sleep during the cycle a waste of valuable time. Now it was a renewal of energies and strength, and she woke rippling with both.

She was surprised to find him gone, and like a love-struck moron raced to the window, sighed with relief when she saw his truck still in the drive.

"Well, Amico, look at me." She patted her chest so the dog could happily leap up, plant his paws on her shoulders while she scrubbed her hands over his head. "A lycan in love. Broke a big promise to myself, didn't I? Never get emotionally involved, never get emotionally attached. Not with anything, not with anyone. Broke it with you, too, though, and that's worked out, right? God, don't let me ruin his life."

She danced with the dog, one of his favorite games, then dropped down to wrestle with him before going downstairs to let him out for a run.

Fall was biting at the air, and its nip had turned the trees to gold and red, pumpkin orange and burnt yellow. Fall meant the sun set sooner, and the nights stretched longer and longer. Soon her hours as a wolf would rival her hours as a woman.

She would have less and less time to work, to be, and more time trapped inside the beast.

She wished for summer, endless summer with its long, bright days and short nights. How she dreaded the coming of winter, and its bleak, white moons.

She closed the door, closed it out. And followed Gabe's scent to her lab.

"Hey." He took a long look at her, the sort that seemed to drift casually over her face but measured every inch. "I'd hoped you'd sleep longer."

"I don't sleep much during cycle. I generally have dreams. They're disturbing." He was surrounded by books, hard-copy files, and the computer screen was filled with an analysis of one of her blood samples. "What are you doing?"

“Boning up. Got to go a ways to get current here. Did you ever consider going into medicine? Your case notes are excellent.”

“I’ve done some lab work here and there, but it was self-serving. I’m happier making herbal soaps and skin cream. I like the smells and textures. Labs are cold, and sterile. If I—when I,” she corrected, “find a cure, I never want to look through a microscope again.”

“I guess that scratches any idea of you working with me.” He pushed back in the chair, and however light his tone had been, she saw something darker on his face. “I need to talk to you about some of your experiments, and the fact that you have, with some regularity, ingested poisonous substances.”

“I’m careful with the amounts and the combinations. Cancer patients are routinely bombarded with poisons.”

“Simone—”

“I have to kill what’s inside me. I can’t do that with aspirin, for God’s sake.”

“And from your notes,” he continued in that same steely tone, “I’m aware you’ve considered the possibility that if you kill what’s inside you, you go right along with it.”

“I don’t want to die. I don’t have a death wish. I got over that. On my twentieth birthday I drew myself a hot bath. I drank three glasses of cheap white wine. I got the razor blades. I had Sarah McLachlan on the stereo. I was ready to do it, to end it.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I realized it’s bullshit. What happened to me isn’t fair, it isn’t right, it isn’t even natural. But so what? I’m not just going to lie down and die because of it. But if I die fighting it, fine.”

“I’m completely crazy about you,” he stated calmly. “Terminally in love. And being a selfish sort, I’m not going to have you die on me and leave me shattered, heart and mind, over the loss of the love of my life. So let’s eliminate poisons and untested drugs for the moment, and focus on less radical solutions. I see that you tried a rabies course in 1999.”

“Obviously, it failed.”

“Yeah, but there’s a lessening of manic behavior, of violence in the tapes following the course. You noted it yourself.”

She cocked her head, arched her eyebrows. “Funny thing, though, I’m just not content to be a friendlier sort of lycan. And if you studied the tapes and notes, you’ll see while less agitated, I wouldn’t have sat politely and offered my paw to you if you’d offered me a nice treat. I’d have bitten your hand off and eaten it along with the Milk-Bone.”

“It’s still something to pursue. And while you’ve been dealing and studying and living with this, you haven’t spent years studying veterinary medicine, or practicing it. I’m going to do some homework with the Center of Veterinary Biologics. See if I can get an angle there. And I want a sample of blood after the change.”

“Just how do you propose to do that? You get within a foot of the cage, I’d be the one drawing blood. Yours.”

“Not if you’re sedated. I’ve got a tranquilizer gun out in the car.”

“You’re going to *shoot* me?”

“Yeah.” He pushed back enough to prop a foot on the table. The casual position, the hair tousled around his face, made him look like a man discussing where they might have dinner later. “I’m hoping you’ll get on board with that. But if not, I’ll do it anyway. You won’t be able to object once you’re locked up.”

“Amico would—”

“Be sedated, too, if necessary.” And there was that steel again, she noted. “You can either give him the command to obey me, or I’ll give him a nice nap while I do the work. We need a sample from you, Simone, in lycan form. For comparison, for study. You’ve never taken one. Just as you’ve never been able to try any of the drugs or serums on the lycan.”

“Well, I could hardly—”

“No, you could hardly.” He nodded, and his face was set. “But I can. It’s time you let Dr. Gabe take a swing.”

SHE WAS terrified. Not for herself; she’d long since become immune to fear for herself. But for him. What if the tranquilizer only appeared to work, or wore off while he was still in the cage with her?

They’d argued over it, over every objection she had. But the sun was setting, she was in the cage, and he was coolly loading the tranquilizer. “Use a double dose,” she told him.

“Who’s the doctor here, Blondie? You ever tranquilized a werewolf?”

“Have you?” she shot back.

“Nope, but I’ve done my share of dogs. Horses. Cats. Cows. Pigs. All manner of reptiles, including a python. Why in the name of all that’s holy and right would anyone want a python for a pet?”

“A lycan’s not a pet, or a damn farm animal. Up the dose, Gabe. Please.”

He looked over at her, and his face went tight with worry. “It’s starting,” he said, softly.

Did he think she had to be *told*? Did he think she couldn't *feel*? It was burning through her, fever bright, scorching her bone and blood. He would look at her with pity now? In minutes she'd be strong enough to tear him to pieces, to rip out his throat and drink his blood. And he dared feel sorry for her?

Come closer. Yes, closer. She would take him, not for the kill, but for the change. That's what she wanted, wanted most, deep in the belly of what lived in her. Deep in what she was she wanted him. Like her.

To mate madly.

"No! Oh God, no!" Hands clamped on the bars, she reared back, twisted with pain and terrible desire. She heard herself shouting, until the words became snarls.

He had to wait, wait until the change was complete. And made himself watch it—heart thudding, hands trembling. He heard her begging him not to come near her, not to unlock the cage, until her words became thick and garbled. Until they weren't words at all.

And she was *it*. The thing that paced the cage, claws clicking on concrete, fangs gleaming in the hard lights. This time it didn't throw itself against the bars, but watched him, with a calculating patience in those mad eyes.

He stepped closer, as close as he dared, with Amico at his side, growling low. "Sorry, baby," Gabe mumbled and fired the dart.

It struck the lycan low on the right side. It went wild then, leaping, spinning as it tried to reach the source of the sting. As its movements became sluggish, Gabe walked over to pick up a sterilized syringe for taking blood, and another filled with the serum he'd helped Simone mix that afternoon. He gathered other vials, a scalpel, a stethoscope, then noted the time.

On the floor of the cage, the lycan lay unconscious. Just another patient, Gabe told himself as he approached the door. Using the combinations Simone had given him, he opened each lock. Sweat was pooling at the base of his spine as he eased the door open.

He took its pulse. Its fur was soft, silky, like her hair. He listened to its heart rate. Strong and steady. Recording it all for the tape. He took the blood next, automatically pinching a fold of skin before sliding the needle in. He watched its face—fierce and strangely beautiful—and when he saw no reaction, breathed a little easier.

Briskly now, he took skin samples, hair samples. He measured its length, and wished fleetingly he'd thought of a scale to get its weight.

But he wasn't certain he would've been able to lift the dead weight of a full-grown female lycan onto a scale in any case.

He injected the serum, and because he loved her, stroked his hand, once, down the length of its body.

"Maybe you'll sleep through the rest. Give you a little peace." Rising, he stepped back, closed the cage. Locked it. He took his samples to the worktable, prepared slides.

For an hour he studied them, made notes, and entertained theories.

When he glanced back at the cage, it hadn't moved. It should be coming around by now, he thought. He couldn't have been that far off in the dose, in his gauge of its weight. He thought of the serum, and had a moment's panic that Simone had added something to the formula while he'd been upstairs.

He was at the cage door again, his hands on the first lock, when he checked himself. It was breathing, he could see that. He'd wait another thirty minutes, then if he had to go in, he'd take the tranquilizer gun with him.

He turned away again, hesitated.

It was Amico's ringing bark that had him spinning.

It moved like lightning. From prone to crouch to leap, all in one blurry move of speed and power. He saw its eyes, bright, alert. Yellow rimmed in red. He stumbled back. The claws that speared through the bars raked his biceps before he fell and rolled out of reach.

Barks, snarls, growls, bounced off the walls as he lay panting, his hand gripped on the wound. In the cage, it rose on its hind legs, spread out on the bars, and howled in rage.

"How could you be so careless?"

Because she was on a tear, Gabe sat while Simone removed the bandage and examined the wound he'd already treated. She'd smelled his blood, and the antiseptic, before she'd been out of the cage at sunup.

"I wasn't careless." Nearly was, he thought as he remembered that he'd nearly unlocked the cage. "And it's far from the first scratch I've had in the line of duty. You should've seen the chunk this toy poodle took out of me my first year in practice."

"It's not a joke."

"Who's joking?" He shoved up his other sleeve, pointed to the mark just under his elbow. "Look at that scar. Little son of a bitch had teeth like a shark."

"You turned your back on me."

“It.” He’d decided it was best all around to make that distinction clear. “Yes, I did. My mistake. But between Amico, and my own catlike reflexes, all I got was a couple of scratches.”

“Gouges.”

“Semantics. Either way, no permanent damage, right?”

It was a question, and one she was sure he’d wrestled with for hours. Alone. “No. It takes a bite. Teeth into flesh, saliva and blood. This will hurt.” She examined the wounds—four long gashes—and decided she couldn’t doctor it any better than he had. Foolish of her to think otherwise. “It’ll probably scar.”

“Just add it to my collection.”

“It could have been much, much worse.”

“I’m aware.”

“No, you’re not. And that’s my fault.” She turned away, going to the kitchen door to fling it open. Autumn mists made the trees look as though they were floating in a low-riding river. Winter, she thought, creeping closer.

“I wouldn’t have killed you. I knew, from the minute I saw you, I knew what . . . and I should’ve told you. What’s in me is primal. And blood—to hunt and feed—isn’t the only primal need. I wouldn’t have killed you,” she repeated, and turned back to him. “I would have changed you. I would have made you like me. I wanted that.”

He rose himself, walked to the stove for more coffee. She could see she’d shaken him, given him something to consider that hadn’t crossed his mind. “You think telling me that is going to have me heading out the door?”

“No. You have feelings for me, and you’re invested in this now. But you can’t trust me.”

“Right on one and two, wrong on three.” He set the mug down with an impatient snap. “I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, what you cope with every hour of every day. It’s beyond imagining. I’ve watched you, I’ve watched the tapes, and I’m looking at you right now wondering if I have half the guts you do. Primal, you said. It’s primal, and its instincts are to survive, to feed, to mate. It’s not to blame for that, and neither are you.”

“I should’ve told you.”

“You just did. Things are moving fast between us,” he said before she could speak. “But the fact is we haven’t been in this situation very long. This very intense and strange situation. I haven’t told you I once had a one-night stand with a woman for no other reason than she was there.

Actually, it didn't qualify as a night, just a couple hours of serious banging. I didn't care about her, forgot her name the next morning. It was primal. Going to hold it against me?"

"Men are pigs. Everyone knows that." She stepped to him. "I've never loved anyone before. I don't know what to do about it."

"We'll figure it out along the way." He leaned down to brush his lips with hers, then sank in, held on when her arms came around him hard. "We'll figure it all out. We've got four weeks before the next full moon. Let's see where it takes us."

Hope hurt, but how could she tell him?

"I've got to get back to my place, clean up, get to work." He kissed her again before easing away. "But I'll be back, right after office hours. I'll bring pizza."

"Pizza's good."

"And we'll get started on some serious figuring out."

Chapter 9

SHE hadn't known what it would be like to have someone in her life. Someone to share with—the little things, the huge ones. To have someone who made her laugh or think, who shrugged off her bad moods or slapped her back with moods of his own, was all a kind of miracle.

She'd told him once she hadn't been happy since she'd stood in the mountains of Italy and watched the sun set. He'd just smiled in that slow, pleased way of his, and told her they'd go back, to that exact spot one day.

He brought the puppy, a rambunctious bundle of fur and energy he named Butch. Initially Amico was too dignified and territorial to acknowledge the presence of another dog, much less a scrambling puppy. But within a week, he was romping and playing with the pup as if Butch was his personal pet.

Normal, Simone thought, all so normal with dinner on the stove and dogs in the yard. Nights making lazy love, or desperate love. Conversations over wine with music on the stereo. Candles she'd made herself flickering while they danced, and a low fire in the hearth while the October wind moaned at the windows like a lonely woman.

Normal, if you forgot the hours they spent working in the lab, in a room with a cell and the smell of wild animal in the air that nothing could quite disguise.

If she ignored the dreams that began to chase her as the moon waxed toward full.

She saw a raven one morning, sleek and black, pecking away at the seeds in her feeder. The sky was painfully blue overhead, and though the trees were long past their peak, some leaves clung stubbornly on, so they flamed in the sun. It was beautiful, the sort of scene that deserved to be captured by lens or canvas. The bold colors of those last dying leaves against the pure and harsh blue of the sky.

But she watched the raven, glossy black wings, and when she felt what was in her stir, as greedy as the bird, she knew the past weeks of work had made no difference.

“You change with the moon,” Gabe said as he prepared another sample on a slide. “Which has some logic. Body chemistry, tides, the lunar cycle. But that doesn't explain why you have these sensations, the heightened senses and so forth outside the three-day cycle.”

“It’s always there. It’s part of me, in the blood.”

“In the blood,” he agreed. “An infection, and one that, so far, resists the cell-cell interactions that produce antibodies. We’ve gone—or you had before I came along—a long way toward identifying that infection. A mutant form of rabies.”

“That’s too simple a term.”

He could hear the fatigue, the discouragement in her voice. “Sometimes simple is best. This infection has altered your blood chemistry, your DNA. And when you change, that chemistry, that DNA is altered again—slightly, subtly, but when we put the samples side by side, scanning the incredibly cool electron micrograph, the change is apparent.”

“Not that earth-shattering. The DNA is more distinctly canine when I’m in lycan form.”

“Think, Simone, don’t react. Think.” He picked up a mug, taking it for his coffee, and drank down her herbal tea. “Ugh,” was his opinion before he put it down, and grabbed the other mug.

“*Any* change in DNA is earth-shattering. It should be frigging impossible. But yours changes every month. And look here.” Sipping his coffee, he went to the computer to bring up an analysis. “Look what happens when we dose the blood with the antidote. The cells mutate again. They’re not just fighting off the antibiotic, they’re morphing, just enough to make it useless. What we have to do is fool them.”

“How?”

He reached over to stroke her hair. “Working on it.”

But she was following him. “If the cells thought they were being attacked by one thing, and reacted—or tried to react—then a secondary antidote could be administered. Sort of like catching them in the cross fire.”

“That’s the idea. We need to find two, not one.”

“It’s a good idea.” She liked the way his hand ran casually over her butt when she stood. “I’ve tried something similar before, mixing a mild sedative in with antibiotics. Valerian and skullcap, wolfsbane—”

“No wolfsbane,” he interrupted. “No poisons.”

Scowling, she gulped down tea. “I know what I’m doing with herbs.”

“No question about it.” To keep her off balance, he yanked her onto his lap. “God, you smell good. You always do, then there’s that skin. Relax a minute. What herbs do you take to relax?”

She struggled not to sigh. “Chamomile’s good. Lavender.”

“How about for an aphrodisiac?”

“Fenugreek.”

He laughed so hard he nearly dumped her on the floor. “You’re making that up.”

“What do you think I’ve been putting in your coffee every morning?”

With another laugh, he squeezed his arms around her. “Well, keep it up. That way we’ll never be a bored old married couple.”

She jumped away as if he’d jabbed her with a poker. “Married? What are you talking about?”

He stayed where he was, that same easy smile on his face. “Didn’t I ask you yet? Where’s my to-do list?” He patted his pockets.

“I can’t get married, Gabe. It’s not possible for me.”

“Sure it is. We fly to Vegas, find a tacky chapel—a personal fantasy of mine—and do it while an Elvis impersonator sings “Love Me Tender” off-key.”

“No.”

“All right, scratch the Elvis impersonator, but I insist on the tacky chapel. A boy can’t give up all his dreams.”

“I can’t marry you, anyone. I can’t even consider it as long as I’m like this.”

“Try a little optimism, Simone. We’re going to find the cure. Whether it takes a month, a year, ten years. While we’re looking, I want a life with you. I want to live here with you, and say things like, oh yeah, my wife has that great shop a couple blocks from here.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. “It could take ten years. It could take twenty.”

“And if it does, we’ll have our lives, we’ll live them and for three nights a month, we’ll adjust them.”

“I can’t have children. Well, I don’t know if I *can*’t,” she said before he could respond. “But I couldn’t risk it, couldn’t risk passing on what’s in me to a child. Blood to blood.”

He sat back, and she could see he hadn’t thought of it, not yet. “Okay, you’re right. There’s adoption.”

“Oh, *think*, Gabriel! How do you explain to a child that Mom’s got to go lock herself in a cage now, so she doesn’t kill anyone. How could you chance the possibility that something could go wrong, some slip, and I’d hurt an innocent child?”

“I think there might be ways to manage all that, but I understand what you’re saying. There are a lot of happy couples, Simone, who can’t have children, or choose not to.”

“Gabe.” Her voice, her heart, her eyes softened as she moved to him, touched his cheek. “You’ve got kids and white picket fence all over you. I can’t give you that, and I won’t put you in a position where you’re unable to have them.”

“There’s something you’re not factoring in, and it’s starting to piss me off.” He shoved to his feet, took her arms under the elbows and brought her up sharply to her toes. “I *love* you. Love means you stick when things are hard, when they’re weird, when they’re sad, when they’re painful. I’m with you; get used to it. You’re scared of marriage, fine.”

“I’m not scared, it’s—”

“I’ll talk you into it eventually.” He jerked her forward so their bodies bumped, so his mouth clamped over hers and muffled her curse. “I can wait.”

“You’re living in a fantasy world.”

“I’m sleeping with a werewolf, what do you expect?”

She wouldn’t smile. She wouldn’t laugh. “Try this. Just how would you introduce me to your family? Your mother?”

“I’d say: Mom, this is Simone, the woman I love. Isn’t she beautiful? Smart, too, and enterprising. Damn good cook. I’d skip the part about you being a—ha ha—animal in bed, because moms don’t need to know everything. What else? Oh yeah. She speaks Italian and has a great dog. Three nights a month, she isn’t fit to live with, but other than that she’s perfect.”

“I may be the lycan,” she said after a moment, “but you’re the lunatic.”

“We’re all victims of the moonlight.” The computer alarm pinged. “Time for your next dose.”

He walked over to pick up a vial and fresh syringe. Saying nothing, Simone rolled up her sleeve. There was no mark from the morning injection. The tiny puncture had closed less than a minute after the shot.

He banded her arm, flicked the vein. “No, don’t look at the needle, look at me. I told you it hurts less.”

“It doesn’t hurt when you do it.”

He smiled as he slid the needle under her skin. “Just take a minute. I love your eyes, have I told you that? The way the gold flecks over the green, like little spots of sunlight. When we make love, when I’m inside you, the green gets deeper, the gold brighter. I’m going to spend my life making your eyes change, Simone.”

“Sometimes I think I’m imagining you, making you up inside my head so I don’t go crazy.”

“I am too good to be true.” He disposed of the needle, slid his hand down her arm to take her pulse. “How do you feel?”

“Fine. The same.”

“No dizziness, nausea.”

“No, nothing.”

He bent over the table to make notes. “No urge to chase your tail, hump my leg?”

“Ha ha.”

“We’ll give it another thirty minutes, then check your vitals, take another sample.” He walked back to her, rolled down her sleeve himself, buttoned the cuff, then pecked a kiss on her wrist. “Let’s go walk our dogs.”

THE wolf came with the October moon. The Hunter’s Moon. It came again, howling in with the Beaver Moon of November, pacing its cage, yearning for blood though for the three nights clouds covered the light and left the sky black as death.

December came, bringing snow, and its long, cold nights.

They adjusted the serum, and within ten minutes, Simone was shaking with chills and fever.

“I was crazy to let you pressure me into upping the dose before we tested it.”

“I’d have injected myself when you weren’t here.”

“I know. You’re burning up.” He tucked the blanket around her more securely as she lay on the cot he’d brought down so he could sleep during the cycle. “You’re up to a hundred and six. You need a hospital.”

“I can’t. You know I can’t. One test, and it’s over for me. You know what they’ll do to me.” Her restless hand gripped his, and felt like burning sticks. “I’ll be a freak. It’ll pass, Gabe. It’ll pass.”

“It’s too high. We’ll get you upstairs, into the tub. Cool you down.”

“I dream.” Her head lolled on his shoulder even as her body shook. “I can smell you when I dream. Smell you in the dream.”

“It’s all right,” he soothed as he carried her up the first flight of stairs.

“Dreams? Are they dreams? You can’t run fast enough. I love when you run, and I smell the fear. It’s delicious.”

“Ssh.” He gathered her closer, both dogs trailing behind, whining as he carried her through the house, up to the second floor.

“Stalking, hunting. I can taste your blood before I bite. It fills my throat. I want to drown in it.”

He laid her on the bed, hurried into the bath to fill the tub with cool water. She was writhing on the bed when he came back, like a woman aroused by a lover.

“Like me. Finally like me.”

He stripped her, and she began to convulse. He had to strap down every instinct not to gather her close, to wait—and pray—while the seizure ran its course.

The dogs knew, he noted. Young Butch quivered as he growled and backed away; Amico snarled low as his hackles rose. They knew what he could see.

Her eyes were wrong. Not just gold flecks now. The gold was spreading, taking over the green. He dragged her up, caging her against his body as she flailed. He could *hear* the change, the shifting of bones.

Prayers for both of them raced through his mind as he laid her in the cool water. “Simone, listen to me. Simone. You can fight this. It’s not time. It’s the fever. You have to hold on, hold it off, until we get the fever down.”

“I can’t. I want. It wants. Get out. Run.”

“Look at me, you look at me.” There were claws under the water, clicking against the porcelain. “Fight back. You’re stronger, you’re still stronger.”

“The knife. The silver knife. In the dresser, I showed you.” Her hand, tipped with sharp black claws, clamped over his arm. Drew blood. “Get it. Use it.”

“Not now. Not ever.” His blood dripped into the water, stained it. “I love you. *Fight.*”

Her head reared back, her face, narrowing, lengthening, was a mask of pain and struggle. Then she went limp, would have slid under the water if he hadn’t steadied her.

“No. We’re not using that formula again.”

“Listen to me.” She felt woozy, weak, but herself as he helped her into a robe. “I’ve never been sick, not a day since the attack. Look.” She dragged up the loose sleeve of the robe, showed him the faint mark where the needle had bit her skin. “It’s healing, but not quickly, not as quickly. It *means* something.”

“Yeah, it means I might’ve killed you. And it means that formula, that dose, brought on a dangerously high fever which in turn brought on a seizure, which in turn brought out the wolf—or nearly. A full week before the cycle.”

“It was weaker. You said I was stronger. I heard you, and you were right. It fought to get out—to you, to take you, Gabe. But it didn’t. It couldn’t. I was stronger.”

“Yeah, and you look like you could go two rounds with a toddler and lose.”

“I’m not saying I don’t feel it. In fact, I really want to lie down.”

To simplify, he scooped her up, carried her across the room to the bed. “I used to think guys carrying women around was sexist. Funny how perceptions change.”

“I’ve never been so scared.” He rested his brow on hers. “Even the first time I saw . . . Do you understand, Simone? I’ve never been so scared. I thought I was going to lose you.”

“You helped me win. I’ve never won before. It’s heady. It wanted out, and I stopped it. If I can win once, I can win again. We can win.” She turned her cheek to his. “I never really believed it. I pretended to, ordered myself to, but inside, I never believed I could win. We have to do tests. Right away.”

“You stay in bed. You’re still running a low-grade fever, and your color’s not good. I’ll get what I need, and you can rest here while I run tests.”

“I can rest downstairs.” She twined his hair around her finger, smiled. “If you carried me.”

Chapter 10

“It was sick, too. That’s why it fought to get out, why it couldn’t quite make it.”

She’d recovered quickly, was already up, pacing the lab, studying slides and computer analyses with her robe flapping around her legs.

“Isn’t it more to the point that you were sick, and the fever—another sort of infection—allowed it to manifest without the lunar cycle.”

“It’s one in the same—*that’s* the real point. The fever, and we should have gotten a blood sample while it was spiking, caused the change, but weakened it, gave me the chance to fight it off. It was sick, it was scared. It can die. I don’t know why I never thought of this before.”

Her eyes were bright again, almost fever-bright, when she whirled to him. “This could be the answer.”

“You need to slow down.”

“No, we need to speed up. There’s still time before the full moon to bring it out again, in a weakened state. To use that moment, Gabe, when I’m between human and lycan form.”

“Which means injecting you with a drug that shoots your body temperature to dangerous, potentially fatal levels. Which causes a fever that could result in brain damage, paralysis, stroke, even death.”

“There’s no risk of brain damage until the fever hits one hundred and eight.”

“You were at one hundred and six and climbing,” he snapped back. “For God’s sake, you had a seizure.”

“I came back. *I* came back. And with more controlled circumstances, we could lessen the dangers. Gabe, they’re doing tests now, and having a lot of success with treating cancer cells with iron oxide, heating the cells and giving them a fever. Magnetic fluid hyperthermia. I read about it.”

“You don’t have cancer, Simone.”

“But using that theory, we could attack the lycan cells. What are they but a form of malignancy? And it has a faster metabolism than mine. You concluded that yourself.”

What he hadn’t concluded until now was that the cure could kill her. “It’s not safe, Simone, not even close to safe. And this kind of risk isn’t worth your life. We can work with it, yeah, start researching and testing on this theory. But I’m not pumping something into your system that could kill you.

“It’s progress,” he said more gently and reached out for her. “A big step. We’ll work the problem.”

SHE knew he was right. Logically, scientifically, rationally. They could and should do more tests, make further studies, continue to run computer analyses.

They could keep spending nearly every night in the lab focused on her condition, swimming in equations and formulas and theories. And dreading the full moon.

She was sick of it. Sick of herself.

She lay beside him, unable to sleep.

It had been easier when she’d been alone, when she’d been able to carve everything else away and concentrate only on herself, her mission. Her Holy Grail. It had been simpler when she’d had only a well-trained and devoted dog to engage her affections. Then she didn’t have anyone else to consult, anyone to worry about, anyone to consider.

Anyone to love.

She hadn’t wasted valuable time on lazy Sunday mornings, or foolish conversations, on daydreaming impossible plans for an impossible future.

She should break it off, push him away, convince him that she didn’t love or want him. She could do it—in heat or in cold. Pick a fight, be vicious and cruel. Or simply freeze him out with disinterest. She’d be better off, and so would he.

And that was ridiculous.

Sighing, she turned on her side to study him as he slept. She wasn’t that stupid, and she was far from that unselfish. She had no intention of giving him up, of insulting the love they shared by denying it, or of damning herself to an empty, rootless one-dimensional existence.

She had her lover in her bed, her wounded warrior who even now bore the badge of the gouges she—it—had given him. He slept on his left side, always, and sometimes in the night he’d manage to maneuver himself so that his body was nearly diagonal over the mattress, his right leg hooked over hers, just above her knees.

How could she give that up?

Their dogs slept curled together at the foot of the bed. Gabe’s cell phone was clipped into its charger on her dresser. His shaving cream stood beside her mouthwash in the medicine cabinet, and his clothes were mixed with hers in the hamper.

No, she'd never give it up. She wouldn't throw away the gift of love, or the treasure of normal he'd brought to her life. But neither would she watch it erode, gnawed away by the demands and violence of what lived inside her.

She knew what she had to do, not only to keep what they had, but to open the possibility for more.

WHEN he left for work, after a routine morning, a wonderful morning, of muffins and dogs, kitchen kisses and his last mad rush out the door, she locked herself in the lab.

The test she ran she wouldn't tell him about—until after. Using a lycan blood sample Gabe had taken, she poured a few drops in a petri dish, then heated it to 106 degrees.

They didn't like it, she mused, studying the cells. But they adjusted.

But when she added the serum, the cells struggled with form. They absorbed it. That metabolism, she thought again. Fast and hungry and mistaking the serum for fuel.

“Yeah, eat it up. Eat hardy. Have seconds, you bastard.”

She made notes, began a computer analysis, then let out a cry of despair when the cells reverted to their former state.

“It fights it off. Damn it!” She thumped a fist against the table, caught herself. “Think. Think. Feeds, weakens, sickens. How long did it take?”

She checked the time, then flipped through files until she found Gabe's notes from the episode the night before.

And saw how it could be done.

IT took most of the day to run each step, to wait for results, to analyze. She prepared the syringes, labeled them, then sat down to write Gabe a letter she hoped he wouldn't have to read.

It's nearly sunset. There's so little light in December. Do you know they call the December moon the Full Cold Moon? It is, the coldest of moons and has always been—for reasons I can't understand or explain—the hardest for me to face.

The Full Wolf Moon is not until January, but they've all been the wolf moon for me, since the first change. I hope—no believe—I won't have to face another wolf moon.

I know you'll be angry, and you'll have a right to be. We're a team, you and I, and that union happened so unexpectedly for me. So beautifully. I'd gotten so used to sharing myself only with the ugliness, the violence

and pain, I may never have shown you, or told you, often enough, well enough, what you mean to me.

Everything, Gabriel. Just everything.

I wouldn't have gotten this far without you and won't be able to finish without you. So we're still a team. I'm starting without you. I have to, but the finish will be in your hands. The only hands I've ever trusted besides my own.

I found the answer. I believe that with my heart, my mind, my gut. I know it's dangerous and might cost me more than either of us wants to pay. A calculated risk. Last night you said the risk wasn't worth my life.

I didn't have a life, Gabe, until you. I had a few weeks, precious weeks, of freedom and joy and adventure before I changed into something that can never be free. Because of that, I learned to be lonely, not just to accept it, but to like it. To want it. I learned not to think beyond the moment, the immediate needs, what had to be done. I lived for the cure, and even if I'd found it, alone, I'm not sure I would've changed.

But I have a life now, and it's worth any risk.

I've already changed, and I won't lose what I've become, or what I might yet be. I want this life with you, a family with you. I want to walk in the moonlight, to revel in the light of the full white moon with you.

Help me.

Do you know, I've never said those two words to anyone but you? They're more intense somehow than I love you.

I'm not doing this for you. Don't you hate when someone does something you don't want and tries to justify it by saying they've done it for you? I'm doing this for me. And asking you to finish it for me.

And if we fail, please know that I've lived more, been happier, felt more real in these past few months than ever in my life.

I love you,

Simone

She sealed the letter, left it under the pillow of the cot. Then, taking the syringes, went into the cell. She clamped her ankles, then her wrists in the shackles she'd drilled into the wall that afternoon. And sat down to wait.

HE'D been feeling off all day, as if somehow a splinter had gotten wedged just under his heart. He wanted to get home, sit on the sofa next to Simone with their legs all tangled together and have a beer. He wanted to look at her face, hear her voice, maybe reassure himself that everything was all right between them.

Which was stupid, he knew. Hadn't she turned to him that morning before either of them was fully awake. Sliding over him, he remembered as he turned into the drive. Surrounding him. Hands, lips, hair, skin.

But there'd been an urgency about the way she'd moved over him, a desperation in the speed. The same urgency, the same desperation that had been in her hand—Simone's lovely human hand with its beastly black claws—when she'd gripped his arm the night before.

The wound throbbed a bit, as if it wanted to remind him, and he found himself snatching up the white roses he'd brought for her and hurrying toward the door.

It was already dark, and fresh snow had fallen that afternoon. Just an inch, just enough to make everything look clean and white in the moonlight. He glanced up before he went inside, looked at the nearly full ball riding the sky.

It looked, to him, cold and pitiless.

Inside it was warm and fragrant. He knew now she even used herbs and plants to clean. Beeswax and soapwort, wood sorrel and hazelnut kernels, so the house always smelled like a garden or a forest.

He tossed his keys into a bowl and called out a greeting as he wandered back toward the kitchen. She wasn't there, nor was there anything simmering on the stove.

He'd gotten spoiled in that area. He could admit it and without shame. He was a guy, after all, and if there was a guy who didn't like coming home to a beautiful woman and a hot meal, well, Gabe pitied him.

He glanced toward the kitchen door, and everything inside him shrank when he saw she'd left it unlocked.

He knew, even before he leaped for the door and bolted down the steps, he knew.

And even then, what he saw shocked him.

She'd chained herself to the back wall of the cage. But she'd left enough play to be able to work the syringe. Butch bounded forward, barking a greeting, only to scramble back away at Gabe's shout.

"It's done." Her voice was utterly calm. "I need your help now. I need you to—"

"Where are the keys?" He was storming into the cage, yanking at the chains. "Where are the keys to these goddamn things?"

"You won't find them in time. Please listen to me. Listen while I'm still lucid. Be furious later."

"Too late." He braced a foot on the wall, and though he knew it was impossible, tried to pull the bolt free.

“You need to administer the other dose. There, in the safety case. You need to wait until the change, until the moment we’re trapped together, fighting each other—until the moment I let it think it’s won. You’ll know when. I know you will.”

“Damn it, Simone.” He heaved the chain against the wall. “You could die here, chained like an animal.”

“Don’t let me.” She hadn’t meant to say that, to put it on him, but the fever was already burning through her. “I did the labs, Gabe. I worked all day, and I found the finish to what we started last night. To the cure you helped me find. To the cure you’d already found.”

“Supposition, theorem, not conclusive.”

“You found it. I read all your notes, and you knew this was the way. It can adjust to the fever, but it takes time. The fever weakens it first. Both parts of me will be sick, all but helpless.”

He crouched in front of her. Her face was already flushed with fever, slick with sweat. Her eyes glassy from it, but still her eyes. “Tell me where you put the keys, Simone. Let me take care of you.”

“The second injection—” Her body shook, and the words scored her parched throat like acid. “Will destroy it, but only when it comes out, nearly out. Nearly out, Gabe. While it’s still fighting, still sick. And out of its natural cycle. It’s too strong with the moon. That was your conclusion, and it’s mine.”

“What’s in the second injection?” He gripped her arms, dug fingers in when she shook her head. “I won’t do this blind, Simone. I’ll sit right here and let it have me first.”

“This isn’t a damn O’Henry story. I cut my hair, you sell your watch.” Irritated humor flickered over her face. “Jesus. Wolfsbane. Wolfsbane’s the primary. It’s apt, isn’t it?”

“Poison.”

“Not enough to kill me, I promise. I want to live, and I can’t keep living this way. Wolfsbane. Legend says it repels the werewolf.” She managed a laugh. “Let’s make it true. Kill it, Gabe. Kill it for me. I swear I’m not going to let it be the last thing I ask of you.”

When she began to seize, he buffered her from the wall so she wouldn’t injure herself on the stone. For the longest sixty seconds of his life, he watched her convulse.

When her eyes cleared again, she groped for his hand. “Wrote you a letter.”

“Ssh. Let me check you out.”

“It’s almost Christmas. I want a tree this year. I never bother. December’s the hardest. Put up a tree. Lights.”

“Sure.” Her pulse was rapid, thready. “We’ll pick one out tomorrow.”

“You could be like me.” Her voice was hoarse, and under it, sly. “We’re strong. Amazing, powerful, free.”

Her eyes were changing, and the smile that peeled back her lips was feral.

“Fight it off, Simone. Stay with me.”

“Sooner or later, it wins.” She arched up, into the pain or away from it, he couldn’t tell. And when she went limp again, her eyes glittered—tears over the rage. “Don’t make me go back.” She gritted out the words. “Please, love me enough to do this. Help me.”

She fought. Her body stretched and retracted, her face narrowed and filled out again. Claws dug into the concrete floor, and left her lovely fingers bloody.

It was burning her up, he could see it. Sapping her. Killing her. But still, she battled, and he could hear panic and rage in the snarls when the wolf struggled to surface.

Gold fur sprang out of her skin. Long, vicious fangs gleamed. He could see her under it, the shadow of her in the eyes, in the painfully human expression as the snout began to form.

“I love you, more than enough.” He took the syringe, and with terror riding in his heart, plunged it through fur and hide.

It screamed. Or she did. He couldn’t tell any longer. What was chained to the wall began to roll and buck, a woman, a wolf, then a terrible combination of both. It snapped at him, vicious fangs spearing from its mouth. It wept, human tears spilling out of feral eyes.

Blood trickled from the wrists, the ankles as the violent jerks had steel biting into flesh. And this time when it howled, it was a cry of agony, and terror.

When it collapsed, there was only silence.

He could hear the dogs now, he realized. He’d forgotten about them. They whimpered outside the cage. But inside, there was only Simone, pale and still as death.

There was a pulse. The faint, quick beat nearly broke him, so that his body shook when he laid his lips on hers. He made himself get up, go to the cot for the blanket, the pillow. Finding the letter, he took it with him. He made her as comfortable as he could, checked her pulse again, her heart rate, then sat beside her to read.

WHEN she woke, it was in her own bed, with a low light burning. She ached, head and body, and only stirred to try to find comfort.

But the hand that laid on her brow had her opening her eyes. Seeing him.

“I found the keys. Here.” He lifted her head, held a glass to her lips. “Drink. It’s just water for now.”

It tasted like ambrosia. Weary, she let her head rest on his arm. “Forgive me.”

“We’ll get to that, believe me. How do you feel?”

“My head aches. Everything hurts. My . . .” She lifted her arm, frowned at the bandage over her wrist.

“You cut yourself up some.” His voice was very strange to her ears, a tremor under the calm. “It’s not serious, but it’s bound to be sore.”

“It is. How long was I out?”

“Three hours, twenty-three minutes. I’m vague on the seconds.”

“Nearly three and a half hours? It’s still sore.” She started to tear at the bandage, but he gripped her hand.

“Don’t. You’ll have it bleeding again.”

“It hasn’t healed.”

“The human body’s a miracle,” he said lightly. “But you’ve got to give it a little time to mend after an insult.”

“Human.” Her lips trembled. “It’s gone. I can feel it.” She pressed her hand to her heart, to her belly. “Or more accurately, I can’t feel it. We have to run tests, be sure, but—”

“I did, with blood samples you so obligingly provided. You have very pretty blood cells, Simone. Very pretty, normal blood cells. Healthy cells.”

Her breath caught on a sob, then she let it free, let him gather her close while she wept.

“Next time I come home to find you shackled to the wall, I expect it to be an invitation for a little friendly bondage.”

She managed a watery laugh. “You got it.”

“I read your letter.” He drew her back to kiss her cheeks, her lips. “You’ve got tonight off, to rest and recoup, but tomorrow, we’re going to get started on that life.”

“Okay.” She shifted so he could brace his back against the headboard, and she could settle into the curve of his shoulder. “Who’s going to watch the dogs when we go to Vegas?”

WHEN the December moon, the Full Cold Moon, rose icy white in the black sky, Simone stood in snow up to mid-calf and breathed in the night.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen it,” she said and linked her fingers with Gabe’s. “I put pictures and paintings of it in the house, but they’re nothing compared to the real thing. I could stand here and look at it for hours.”

He reached over to pull her watch cap fully over her ears. “Except it’s freezing out here.”

“Except for that.” She laughed and swung around to lock her arms around his neck.

Behind them her house—*their* house, she corrected—was brilliant with festive lights. And the tree they’d decorated stood framed in the window, sparkling.

She laid her head on his shoulder and watched their dogs plow through the snow. All they needed, she decided, was that picket fence.

“I’ve got something for you.”

She could stay like this, she thought, wrapped around him in moonlight, forever. Just a woman, held and being held, by the man she loved. “What might that be?”

He took the ring out of his pocket, then drew her hand down so they both watched him slide it onto her finger. “Elvis is next. This seals the deal.”

“It’s beautiful.” The joy of it closed her throat, burned her eyes. The silver band—he’d have known she’d want silver—was ornately carved with stars and half-moons. And the stone, round and full as the moon, was a delicate blue-white.

“I ditched the diamond route, too traditional. This is moonstone,” he told her. “It seemed the right thing for us, for me to give it, for you to wear it while we’re making that life together.”

“You asked me once if I believed in fate.” She spoke carefully and still tears thickened her voice. “Now more than ever. And I wouldn’t change anything that happened to me, not a moment of it.” Laughing, she threw her arms out, spun in a circle. “You gave me the moon.”

He caught her, spun them both. “I’ll work on the sun and the stars.”

“We’ll work on them.” She lifted her hands, the moonstone sheening on her finger, and laid them on his cheeks. “I’ve really wanted to do this.”

She crushed her lips to his, warmed them with hers while the beams of that full cold moon turned the snow a glowing blue-white.

