



Chapter One

EGON

I whirr down the back window of my black hybrid Rolls. My nose twitches at the welcome scent of snow. I admire the moon, almost full. Tonight will be a good night to drive out of the city and into the forest. I have only one appointment ahead of me this evening, and it won't be complicated. I figure I'll be able to get away before midnight. I whirr the window up and settle back into the seat.

Aksel, my driver, catches my eye in the rearview mirror. "Thinking of a run, Alpha?"

"Of absolutely nothing else," I confirm, my inner wolf eagerly anticipating bounding on four legs over new snow later this night.

My spirits lift higher when we turn into Montague Street. I'm glad to be back in my London neighborhood with its stately white row houses, black wrought iron fences, and neatly swept streets. The afternoon has drained to dusk, and the street lamps are already glowing against the sapphire sky. I take a deep breath and decide it's the clean air I most appreciate.

I'm returning from Mongolia. The steppes were a magnificent place to open negotiations. Unfortunately the business concluded in Ulan Bator where the environment is less magnificent at this time of year. It's smoky season, otherwise known as winter, when the yurts on the north side of the capital pour their wood fire ash onto the city. It reminded me of the stories the elders tell of the time in London, over a hundred years ago, when factories in the East End belched gases into the air to mix with the coal fire ash pouring from house chimneys all over the city. At that time these same streets were soupy and foul smelling. I'm not one to romanticize them.

The Rolls stops in front of Hanover House. I thank Aksel and get out, my overcoat draped over my arm. Aksel will take care of my luggage. I've been away three months, the usual time it takes for unrelated packs to form solid bonds. I run my eye over the impressive façade of the hotel that has served as my pack's international headquarters for the last two centuries. I take the six steps to the graceful entry.

Heavy brass and glass double doors open to my arrival.

"Welcome home, Alpha," the doormen say in unison.

I nod and smile. "George, Johann. It's good to be home."

I step into the lobby and onto the Axminster carpet. The space impresses not with size but with perfect proportions and the warmth of walnut paneling burnished with time and care. The registration desk stands opposite the entryway, its counter a sweep of polished marble. On the left is a cozy sitting room. At the moment it's

empty, as is the lobby, which was why the doormen were comfortable to greet me by my pack title. If humans had been in the vicinity, they would have addressed me as Mr. Hanover.

And the scent is perfect: sandalwood and civilization

I cross the space and acknowledge the two receptionists on duty. They also greet me as Alpha.

Straight ahead is the dining room where the guests have breakfast. The back wall is a series of French doors opening out onto a terrace garden on the other side of which is the British Museum. The silhouettes of the up-lit trees in the garden are stark and sculptural against the November sky. To the right of the dining room is a longer corridor leading to the hotel barroom. To the left is a shorter corridor ending with a door whose brass sign reads Employees Only.

I turn left. Hardly two steps later, an erotic image pops into my head. What appear are pleasingly plump thighs, creamy white skin, and an enticing flare of hips. I easily push the image aside. However, I'm surprised. I regularly feed my sexual appetite, but I'm usually more in control of it, especially when I have more important things on my mind.

Returning my focus to those more important things, I go through the door. At the sound of my arrival, my Beta comes out from the back office, grins broadly, and strides forward.

"Alpha!"

"Bardulf," I reply, returning his strong clasp.

"Happy to be back?"

"More than I realized," I admit, handing him my overcoat. "Just before pulling up here I had a craving to go to Hanover Forest this evening once I finish my appointment with Pyotr. Please join me?"

"With pleasure." Bardolf hangs the coat in an antique wardrobe. "You managed to finalize the meeting with him for tonight, then?"

"Nine o'clock. He's coming here."

"Have you eaten?"

"I'll have Rudolf take care of that for me once I'm upstairs. All I really need now is the report you've prepared and any news beyond the spare facts you've supplied me over the past few months."

While forming my bond with the Mongolians, I followed protocol. I focused my attention on my Khalkha hosts and spent as little time as possible communicating with my home pack.

Bardulf ushers me into the back office. I take my place behind my massive walnut desk. Bardulf goes to the sideboard, pours out two glasses of whisky, and places one of them at my right hand. Then he chooses one of the club chairs in front of the desk. When Bardulf is seated, we raise our glasses and take a sip. I nod at the folder in the centre of the desk. It's marked G4S.

"Everything here?"

"Most of it you already know or can guess," Bardulf says, "but I laid it all out so you and Pyotr could look at the specifics together." He adds a bit ruefully, "Business is good."

I stifle a sigh. "Humans," I say with a touch of rancor. "Of all the animals to be in charge of the planet"

"Quite," is Bardulf's response.

I shake my head. "We're happy to provide them security when they need it." I place my hand atop the folder and say, "Thank you for this."

Bardulf nods. "As for the news, let's see... in the neighborhood there were the usual pain in the arse repairs on Southampton Row, and a bomb scare at the British Museum, easily diffused now that the bobbies are more open to help from our canine squad, especially in our own neighborhood."

"Ah, small mercies," I confine myself to saying.

"They still think we run an animal protection charity. Anyway, we've hired three new employees in your absence, all lower level so we didn't bother to consult you. The repairs on the third floor have been finished, along with the renovations to the bathrooms on the fourth floor. Anything else? Maybe some carpeting decisions, things like that. The designers are on it."

I don't need to know the details, but I do like to be kept up to date on the condition of the property. I ask after Bardulf's mate and cubs and receive the news they're all well. Our talk turns to mild gossip. There were the typical squabbles among various members of the pack, but nothing out of the ordinary, and nothing Bardulf wasn't able to handle in my absence. All seems in reasonable order.

When we've finished our drinks, I stand up, take the folder and say, "Well done, good work. Going home now?"

He shakes his head. "Just a few more odds and sods to tick off my list."

I drop my hand on his shoulder as I pass by him. "We'll meet up later for a lovely late-night run in the woods."

I leave the offices and take the back stairs, two by two. As I flip through the pages in the folder, another erotic image invades my thoughts. This time it's the fresh scents of springtime and the sounds of soft, sultry laughter, with pretty pouty lips beckoning to me. Liquid heat pours through me. I fend off these sensations.

When I reach the sixth floor and step out into the corridor, I can already hear Wulf's howling behind the door to my flat. I hasten my step and take the precaution of taking off my tie and suit jacket.

The door is opened by Rudolf who bows to me with dignity. My massive brown wolfhound, Wulf, greets me with far less decorum. Before great paws fall on my shoulders, I manage to hand over the folder, my tie, and suit coat to Rudolf. Then Wulf and I are rolling on the floor of the entryway, reacquainting ourselves with one another.

"We're not like humans, you know, Wulf, who can do new business over the course of a few weeks or even a few hours. We have to spend time with packs we make alliances with. You understand that, don't you, boy?"

Wulf growls, telling me he doesn't want to think about the reason I've been gone so long. I glance at Rudolf. He's watching our noisy wrestling match with an air of resignation. He knows he'll soon receive a ruined dress shirt to repair. When Wulf has shaken off his loneliness, I'm allowed to get up. As I do, I unbutton my shirt. Handing it to my long-suffering butler, I say, "My good man."

Rudolf accepts the offending article of clothing and enquires, "Food first or your bath?"

I look down at myself, considering the slobber now covering me. "I'll bathe first. Then, food, please," I say, suddenly ravenous. "Make it a thick steak with a side dish of carrots and parsnips." I realize I'm very hungry. "And add two baked potatoes with butter and sour cream. Oh, and put the folder on my desk in the media room. I'll eat in there."

Rudolf accepts the orders with a nod and disappears. I take the hall to my suite, with Wulf trotting along behind me, tail swishing. Under Wulf's watchful eye, I take a quick shower. Then I look in the mirror and pull on my chin. Deciding Pyotr won't care if I show up at our meeting with scruff, I spare myself a shave and put on fresh clothing. I snap my fingers for Wulf to follow as I go back down the hall. I cross the lounge, pass through the dining room, and go into the media room.

I seat myself at my desk and Wulf luxuriates at my feet. Reopening Bardulf's two-part report, I skim the first part, which lists the assignments where G4S werewolf packs are deployed around the world, first by continent then by individual country. All is in excellent order, and business is good, as Bardulf said, sadly so.

"We do protect animals, don't we, boy?" I say as I stretch out my hand and scratch Wulf behind the ears. He growls his contentment. "The ones we protect are the humans, and we protect them from themselves. But we're certainly not a charity."

Governments, industries and even individuals hire G4S when populations experience social unrest caused by war or climate change. Given the famines in the developing world due to extreme weather, climate change now provokes war, just as war contributes to worsening climate conditions. Hundreds of G4S werewolves were sent to protect various clients following Hurricane Katrina. I myself, as well as other high-level officers, went to the US following Superstorm Sandy. Refugee camps in Kenya, home to hundreds of thousands of people who've fled conflict and drought, are under G4S security, as are places in India. Bringing in the Mongolian packs is going to be a great help in bolstering G4S forces in Central Asia.

Werewolves, with our discipline, strength, heightened senses, and sharp reflexes, are the ideal weres to blend into human populations and maintain control when necessary. Unfortunately last year several European leaders had been either too ignorant or too arrogant to think of security during the Syrian refugee crisis. Finally Pyotr and I pooled our resources and sent in forces without the humans being the wiser. The situations at the borders of Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary had been bad, as had certain events in Germany, but they would have been a good deal worse without the clandestine operations of G4S and Securitas.

My meal comes. I feast on blood-red meat and turn to the second part of the report, which is less stellar – not only because the international agreements on carbon emission reduction are not as stringent as I would have liked but also because I can read between the lines. The bloody werecats think they still have all the time in the world to address global ecological problems. They're excellent negotiators – really the best – but only when they buckle their lazy arses down and actually negotiate. In the meantime, the werewolf alliances Pyotr and I have created in the Ice Cap, Arctic, and Boreal are doing all they can to support alpine and tundra reforestation to offset industrialisation in India and China.

Just as I'm finishing with both the food and the report, another erotic image pops into my head. This time it's graphic, and I have no choice but to go with it. It involves another plump beauty, but I switch her out for a leggy blonde, exactly the kind of woman I like. A second blonde enters the picture, but I substitute her as well. For a three-way I want a brunette. I indulge the satisfying scenario until Wulf jumps up and begs for a scrap of steak, thereby dispelling my fantasy. I have a passing thought for calling a geisha service when I return from my midnight run.

To distract myself I pick up the remote and log onto my preferred newsfeed. It comes to life on the flat screen on the wall facing my desk. No surprise: the world is as chaotic a place this evening as it was the day before. After sifting through a few reports, I log out. I still have time before my meeting with Pyotr. I want activity. I decide to roam the hotel.

In the entry hall it takes quite a lot of explaining before Wulf catches the idea he's not what I need now in terms of companionship.

I inform Rudolf of my plans and head into the corridor. This time I choose to take the steps on the opposite side of the hotel from the offices, namely the ones that lead most directly to the hotel barroom. As I tread down, I feel better already, less restless. I come to the ground floor stairwell, push through the door to the hallway, and stop dead in my tracks.

Mate.

I scent my mate. No, it can't be. I don't have a mate. I surely would have found her by now, since Hanover males regularly mate by the time they're twenty-five. In my case that's eight, nine years ago already.

I try to clear my head, but the scent remains, capturing every thought, every feeling. Wild berries, earth, fresh lake. The most alluring, appealing, seductive combination in the world. My wolf howls and is ready to dive right in. I take a deep breath. The scent is exquisite. Layered. Rich. Juicy. Feminine.

It's coming from the barroom. I take the next few steps and pause on the threshold. I cast my gaze around the scant collection of people lounging around at this hour. I see three women scattered among the tables, each seated with a man. Another two women are perched on the high chairs at the bar, flirting with the single men. I catch the scents of their various lotions and creams and perfumes, none of the layers well combined, mostly cloying. My mate is definitely not one of them.

Then I look behind the bar and lock onto The One. A seism of shock ripples through me followed by a strong wave of confusion.

Bloody hell!

Chapter Two

EGON

I withdraw into the corridor. I need a moment to compose myself. I need more than a moment to quiet my inner wolf who does not want to be calmed. The beast is frolicking wildly.

I need to get away, quick. I go down the corridor, heading toward the office, trying to sort through colliding thoughts. Is the presence of my mate in the hotel the reason I've been having intrusive sexual fantasies since arriving? But she isn't my mate. She can't be.

First, she's human.

Second, she's a redhead.

Third, she's a good stone overweight.

Fourth – I can't think of a fourth with my wolf acting like a wild pup just reaching maturity. But he's no inexperienced whelp. He's always game for our sexual encounters and enjoys them, but now I wonder why I haven't noticed before now my wolf has never initiated one.

Too much to take in at once.

Before opening the door to the front office, I pull myself together. When I enter, my Beta looks up from his desk, surprised, "Alpha? Anything wrong?"

I make an effort to control my expression. I thought I already had, but perhaps an odd emotion is still visible. I smile. "No, no problem. Just extra time. Your report was so well done I didn't have much more to do than read it. It occurs to me now to have you tell me about our three new employees. I should have asked earlier."

Bardulf seems to think this a reasonable request. He gets up and goes to the cabinet. I seat myself at my desk. Bardulf pulls three dossiers and puts them in front of me. Then he sits down in his usual club chair.

I have to suffer through the details of the first dossier. While I leaf through it, Bardulf gives me the run down on the new handyman. My wolf's tail is thumping madly with impatience.

The second is the one I want: the bartender, Misti Shaw. Good God, even her name is wrong. Misti with an 'i' and an unremarkable last name. At least now I know she's twenty-six. From my one glance at her, I would have said she was younger.

"I see she started working here right after I left the country," I remark. "Almost three months ago, is it?"

Bardulf gives the question some thought. "Two and a half."

"Human."

Bardulf shrugs. "We have other human staff."

“True.” I peer through the pages. “I don’t see previous bartending experience in her record.”

“She didn’t have any. Said she’d work for free for a week, and if we didn’t see an uptick in either the number of customers or customer satisfaction, then we could part company, with neither party the worse off.”

Unusual. “And there has been an increase, then, of what?”

“Both the number of customers and customer satisfaction. Misti’s an excellent mixologist. Original.” He pauses then adds, “Friendly, too, just the right amount.”

As the owner of international luxury hotels, I’m aware of the importance of a high-quality mixologist. As the Alpha of the most powerful pack in Europe, I would not have guessed bartending skills would be prized in my mate. But apparently there’s no telling what physical appearance or worldly gifts my mate would have.

“I see.”

Bardulf continues, “The women, especially, love her cocktails. The men, well, the men just like her.”

My wolf howls so loudly I have to grip the arms of my chair to prevent myself from jumping up and shooting back to the barroom. I clear my throat before noting with puzzlement, “I see she lives in Montague Street.” I look more closely at the number of the address. “Didn’t I hear something about that property changing hands just before my trip?” I look my Beta in the eye. “A woman who can buy property on this street doesn’t need to work for a living.”

Bardulf nods, as if understanding where my thoughts are headed. “Wilde House will likely never come on the open market, which is too bad, but we’ve both agreed it isn’t necessary for us to own every property on the street. In any case, when old Mrs. Wilde died almost four months ago now, her only heir was a grand nephew, a Mr. Blackthorn Wilde.”

Bardulf, along with our Guardian, keeps close tabs on the goings-on in the neighborhood. He’s doing his job.

“Turns out he was keen to get his hands on the place,” he continues, “so he hurried up the legal process. Our neighborhood is known for being dog friendly, and he’s a dog lover. He has mastiffs.”

I smile faintly. Our neighborhood is exceptionally dog friendly, and mastiffs are perfectly welcome. “The Wilde family has no relation to Miss Shaw, then?”

“None. I checked.”

“And where is she from?”

“Her last address was Tower Hamlets.”

Better and better. My mate is from working class London. I gesture for my Beta to continue with the story of Miss Shaw.

Bardulf says, “She moved into the neighborhood just a few weeks before she came here to apply for a job. She’s the house sitter. Or, rather, her younger brother is Wilde’s dog sitter. Poor bloke has some kind of handicap. She didn’t say so exactly, but I inferred it. I also gather he’s a dab hand with dogs.”

I hardly know what to say. I’m having difficulty taking in the unexpected outlines of my mate’s life – if she is, indeed, my mate, which I’m not yet willing to accept.

“Bottom line, Alpha,” Bardulf says, “I don’t think she’s one of those rich werewolf rumor nutters who sniff around our side of town from time to time.”

I crack a laugh accompanying the thought *It might have been for the better!*

“If she were,” Bardulf goes on, “I would have caught a whiff of it and sent her packing. I vet every employee thoroughly from every angle, especially the humans.”

“I know you do,” I say, as calmly as I can, “and I’m glad to hear Miss Shaw checks out in all respects. Well, then, on to the next.”

Questions concerning Miss Shaw remain. However, I can hardly ask them without giving offense, as if I think Bardulf has not properly done his job, or without giving my own thoughts on her away, which I’m not yet disposed to doing. I try to turn my attention to the particulars of the third new employee Bardulf is describing. It’s difficult to do so, torn as I am between wanting to hightail it to the barroom and wishing for a travel replay where my return to Hanover House would be mate-free.

Apparently Bardulf finishes what he has to say, because a small pause falls before he breaks it by asking, “Any concerns about the new valet, Alpha?”

I gather my thoughts. I turn my lips up and shake my head. “None. You’ve taken care of everything as impeccably as usual. I thank you.” So saying, I rise. I push the employee files to one side. “It’s almost nine o’clock, so I’ll be off.”

“When I’m done here, I’ll stop by the barroom and say hello to Pyotr.”

“Very good.”

My human side toys with the idea of moving my meeting with Pyotr to anywhere other than the barroom, but I decide this hard-drinking Russian werewolf would balk at the suggestion, even if I assure him alcohol would flow wherever we were. Besides, the barroom, with its soft ambient lighting, dark wood paneling, and graceful semi-circular marble bar, has the perfect atmosphere for friendly negotiations.

And friendly they are. The weres around the world feel no need to align themselves to the geopolitical landscape governing human affairs. European and Russian werewolves aren't adversaries, we're strong allies. I consider Pyotr one of my best friends outside my pack, and I trust him completely.

In addition, my wolf is frisky and wants our mate. So, the barroom it is. I text Rudolf to send down the folder Bardulf prepared for this meeting. Several steps before reaching the threshold to the entrance I catch her scent. I close my eyes and breathe in blueberries and raspberries and a riverbank at the moment of the spring thaw. My wolf is ecstatic. My human is mighty curious. I open my eyes and remember what Bardulf said about men liking her.

I look into the bar area and scan the scene. Alarm courses through me when I detect how many men are sniffing around her. My wolf wants to run in, knock her down and claim her here and now. I can't do that, but I have to find a way to protect her and mark her as mine. The plan I come up with isn't ideal. Normally I wouldn't violate the privacy of one of my employees, but my mate is my mate, and I have to get my wolf under control before he overpowers my human side.

I retrace my steps, go through the dining room and push through the green baize door opening onto the kitchens and staff rooms. I go into the female locker room, am happy to find it empty, and easily sort through the multitude of scents to find her locker. I pick the lock, open the door, and take out the fresh white backup shirt to her staff uniform. I run my hands over the front and back, rub the sleeves against my neck. I make sure to leave no wrinkles. When my scent is on it enough to mark her as mine, I put the shirt back, relock the locker, and leave the way I came in.

Now to meet Miss Misti Shaw.

I enter the barroom and quickly scan the patrons sitting on the high chairs at the bar. I look for a patsy. I choose a man who's sitting with his back toward the entrance and who's perched in a way to suggest he might be on the verge of having one too many. I go straight to the bar and take the space next to him. He's drinking red wine. Perfect.

Miss Shaw is turned away, with her hands on her hips, surveying the backlit shelves of alcohol. Her hair is plaited in a braid that falls halfway down her back. The light from the shelves catches bright filaments of copper and bronze among the soft rusts and russets. I have to admit her hair is beautiful even though I've never been partial

to gingers. With one hand she grabs a bottle of vodka. Her other hand closes around a bottle of American bourbon. As she reaches, the straight knee-length dove grey skirt of the hotel uniform stretches over her shapely backside.

She turns and registers my presence as a newcomer with only a glance and a fleeting smile, as if to say she'll tend to my order in a second. Then she works on both drinks at once and, with deft turns of her wrists, serves them up to the patrons seated several chairs away.

When I first glimpsed her, I judged her figure to be ample. I see now it's also hourglass. She's curvaceous. I admire the way her dove grey vest fits over the crisp white shirt. The peach-and-grey striped tie enhances the delicate glow in her cheeks and the pale pink of her lips. She wears no make-up. I'm beginning to understand my wolf's taste. Too many men in the room are on the prowl, and my wolf is understandably anxious. I firmly suppress a desire to growl as a way to warn the prowlers away.

She moves back to stand in front of me and asks with a professional smile, "What can I get you?"

I look into gorgeous green eyes and have to swallow the sudden lump in my throat. "Hello," I say, stretching my arm over the bar, "I'm Egon Hanover."

She takes my hand, shakes it, and immediately lets it go. Her pretty lips smile with pleasure. "Mr. Hanover, how happy I am to meet you!"

"I'm glad," I say, maintaining eye contact, waiting for her pupils to dilate with arousal and her translucent skin to blush.

"I know you'd left just before I started working here," she says, "and I've heard a lot about you in your absence. I was told you'd make an effort to meet the new employees first thing, and you didn't disappoint!"

"Every person who works at Hanover Enterprises contributes to our success, so it's a privilege for me to get to know everyone. I understand from Bardulf – ah, you probably call him Boss – that you've settled in here."

"I have," she says, glancing around. She catches the eye of her fellow bartender standing at the other end of the bar and trills her fingers at him. She turns back to me and says, "Thomas is ace. I've learned a lot from him, and the servers on the floor are the best."

I'm puzzled. Her sparkling green irises remain fully green. Her skin keeps its milky glow. She's responding to me as nothing more than her employer.

A moment later she says, a bit too cheerfully, as if she feels something awkward

between us, “So, what can I get you?”

I really do need to pull myself together. “A single malt, two fingers,” I say, pointing at the bottle of my favorite Glenlivet.

Before she turns away I knock my foot against the chair legs of my patsy. The patsy obliges by wobbling and tipping his glass. Red wine pours over Miss Shaw’s sleeve.

“Oh!” she says in surprise and dismay. She looks up at me, with a quick, apologetic glance, as if she were responsible for soiling her uniform.

The patsy makes some noises to the effect that he doesn’t know how he came to be so clumsy, and he looks down at the floorboards, as if they hold the answer. I pat the hapless man on the back and tell him not to worry. To Miss Shaw I say mildly, “There’s no harm. Accidents happen. They’re the reason everyone has spare kit. You have a fresh shirt in your locker, do you not, Miss Shaw?”

She brightens at that. “Of course,” she says, with relief. She looks at me for instruction.

“Go now and change,” I say. “The bar isn’t very full at this hour, and Thomas can handle anything in the ten minutes you’ll be gone.”

She nods, clearly happy with this solution. “I’ll give him your order and then I’ll go change.” She goes off, without a backward glance.

I select a table in the corner with the best view of the entire barroom as well as the entrance. I sit down to consider the unusual situation I now find myself in. I don’t like manipulating my mate, but I also can’t deny the heat and happiness flooding through me at the thought she’ll soon be wearing my scent. I watch the men eyeing her departure. Hyenas, all of them, as far as I’m concerned. I know I’m right to mark her, to protect her.

If someone had ever pressed me to describe my likely mate (which no one would dare do), I would have said she’d likely be a sophisticated Continental werewolf or even werewixen, slim and muscular, either blonde or brunette, and the Alpha female of a classy pack. I would have also guessed she’d recognize me as her mate as quickly as I’d recognized her as mine. Until this moment my hazy ideal remained unarticulated.

Although I’m having difficulty revising my mate’s social profile, I have no difficulty revising my bodily ideal. I can easily imagine holding handfuls of soft flesh rather than sleek muscles. Her scent is already enough to let me know she’s luscious. In addition to which, my wolf has never been so exuberant. However, my human cannot help but note that her accent is working class, her educational history is far from distinguished, and I wonder whether she has family beyond a possibly dotty

brother who likes dogs. Pack is important to me. Call me a snob, but I have my standards.

The real problem is her lack of immediate response to me. Perhaps, being human, she needs something stronger than my presence to arouse her. Being surrounded by my scent on her shirt is sure to bring results. For the short term, however, I'm still more concerned to protect her.

Chapter Three

MISTI

I like mixing the smart cocktails where I can get creative. The vodka soda with a lime twist is bog-standard – not much for me to do. So is the bourbon, which only needs the right-sized snifter. I call all mixed drinks Library School and all neat drinks Ian's Certification. I give them these nothing-fancy names to acknowledge the worth of fixing them for the patrons who want them. They're the bread and butter of my job, and I serve them happily.

But I prefer when a regular gives me free rein with the words, "Your choice, Miss Shaw!" and I can have a little fun with bitters or ginger or exotic citrus. I name these cocktails according to how I read my customer at that moment: Better Luck Next Time, No Slut Shaming Here, Suffering Bastard; or, depending on my own mood, something more like Isn't Life Grand? I'm thinking of drawing up a menu for signature Hanover cocktails and taking it to my upcoming three-month performance review week after next.

The thought of this review flies right out of my head when the new patron standing in front of me stretches his arm across the bar and identifies himself as Egon Hanover, my employer. The moment I take his hand to shake it, my first thought is: *So that's what animal magnetism is!* I immediately shut down my response to him before it even starts. I have no use for such nonsense.

The encounter goes well enough until Mr. Radley spills red wine on my sleeve. Even then Mr. Hanover is nice about it, and he suggests the obvious solution I should have thought of myself, which makes me think he's rattled me a bit. I do have the presence of mind to salt the stain. I leave the barroom by way of the service door. I'm happy to have a few minutes away to get my head straight.

In the locker room bathroom, I take off my vest, tie and shirt, and dampen the salted stain with some cool water from a sink. I bung the shirt into the proper laundry bin, leaving the blotted sleeve hanging outside where it will be noticed. I slip into the fresh shirt and put myself together again. Once back in place behind the bar, I should be on my game again. However, I'm overly aware of Mr. Hanover sitting at a table in a corner. It's like I can *feel* his presence, even though he's a good twenty feet away.

I glance over at him. During the time it took me to change my shirt, another man has joined him. He seems to be as big as Mr. Hanover who is at least six feet if not more, and both men are very muscular. But there the comparison ends. Mr. Hanover is all that's dark: black hair and eyebrows, dark brown eyes, swarthy skin. His companion is all that's light: bald scalp fairly glowing in the ambient light and pale skin. His eyes are likely blue.

Mr. Hanover is mighty attractive – no, I *really* don't want to think about him in that way. Fortunately I've had a lifetime of practice squashing unproductive thoughts. I fancy men and all, and even had a boyfriend once. But Mr. Hanover? Off limits. Tonight I feel I need extra help to distract myself, so I bend down to retrieve my purse from a low cabinet, fish out my phone and press the remote camera app. The effect is immediate. The moment I see Ian in the sitting room of our attic flat, stretched out on the floor with Felan and Farkas, two huge dogs, lying at his side, I find it easier to divert my thoughts from Mr. Hanover.

Focus on your goals, girl, and your job. Steady on!

When I look up, Mr. Radley says, kindly, "Sorry about that, love. I didn't mean to spoil your shirt. I'll be happy to take care of any cleaning expenses."

Mr. Radley is not my favorite customer, because at times he's too familiar. Not long after I started working here, he creeped me out by mentioning he knew where I lived. He said he saw me coming out of the house where I have my flat. The comment seemed a bit stalker-y. At the same time, I do live in the same, relatively short street where I work, so it's not so weird a customer might see me go in or out of that house. Whatever. On the score of over-familiar men, I know how to take care of myself. It's just that I'd prefer not to all the time.

However, Mr. Radley's apology sounds unexpectedly sincere, which makes it easy to respond to. I hold out my arms, displaying my spotless sleeves, and say,

"No cleaning expenses. Hanover House takes care of everything concerning staff uniforms. It's one of the many things I love about my job. But thanks for the offer." I look at his glass. "I was about to ask if you wanted another, since you lost so much by accident. But I see Thomas must have come by and sorted you."

He nods. "So, tell me. Do you have to pay for your uniforms?"

I shake my head and slip my thumbs under the shoulders of the vest. "Everything covered, even the custom fitting." The moment the words are out of my mouth, I regret them.

On other nights, I've caught the way Mr. Radley runs his eyes over me from time to time, with particular attention to my breasts. So I hardly need to draw his attention to my body. But to my surprise, he says merely, "Slap-up establishment," and

proceeds to engage me in conversation with nothing suggestive. As I go about my tasks, the comments he makes to me over the next little bit are ... I'm having difficulty finding the word ... respectful, maybe?

Then it comes to me. The word is *avuncular*. I saw it once in a book and looked it up. It means 'like an uncle.' I feel a bit posh to have thought of it.

I then begin to notice that the men – young and old, regulars and newcomers – treat me less like a target and more like a sister or a daughter or a niece. I've never felt threatened by the kinds of looks they give me or some of the questionable things they've said to me. I can handle myself, as I've said. Still, this newfound eyes-off approach is a welcome change, and I don't have to try so hard to be both warm and professional while keeping my distance. This means I can devote more energy to ignoring the tug on my attention from the corner where Mr. Hanover is sitting.

Every time I feel my thoughts drifting toward him, I tap my remote camera app. It does the trick every time. Seeing Ian snuggled with his dogs makes me happy.

Then comes a mad, mid-evening rush, which demands endless rounds of Library Schools and Ian's Certifications. I even make one I name Scofflaw for an older gentleman and one I name for myself (just to give myself extra focus) On Task. With all this activity, keeping my goals front and center is easier.

When the boom tapers off and all the patrons are happy and some of them a bit bosky, I take a breather. Leaning against a serving ledge under the shelves with the alcohol, I survey the lively scene in front of me. I have a white cloth soaked with water and drink spills wrapped around my hand. I put it to my nose and breathe in. Strange thing, I feel a little better, less distracted, less likely to let my thoughts turn where I don't want them to go. Odd, that, but putting the cloth to my nose works.

I must have done it often enough to attract Thomas's attention. He sidles over to me and whispers, "Trying to get a buzz? Since we can't drink on the job, it looks like you're resorting to sniffing it."

I laugh and let my hand fall. "I don't like the hard stuff much, but maybe I do like the fumes."

"A drink after work tonight, then? I think we deserve one, after the tidal wave that just hit us."

I consider. "A beer maybe, yeah. But only after I get out of this uniform. Oof, enough already."

"Walk you home afterwards?"

Thomas has a girlfriend, Christina, and I take his offer in the spirit it's meant to be,

namely companionship. "Yeah, thanks."

I glance around the room and happen to see a young woman, dressed to kill, approach Mr. Hanover's table. She's turned to him, apparently speaking to him. I can't see his face, but he says something to her to make her turn on her spike heels and flounce off. I look quickly away.

The next moment Thomas nudges me. "Mr. Hanover just put his elbow on the table and raised his index finger. When I pointed to me, he shook his head and pointed to you."

I don't want to go over. I'm tired and feel my guard flagging. But I don't have much choice. I take a quick peek at my app, get a little shot of happiness and a jolt of strength. Before leaving the bar, I ask if Thomas knows Mr. Hanover's friend.

"Mr. Medved. A Russian bloke. They do business together. Not sure what."

I leave the bar and walk across the room. Before I get to the corner, another woman drifts over to Mr. Hanover's table, thereby blocking my view of him. The momentary eclipse of his direct force is a relief. This second woman also beats a hasty retreat, and now the table is only a couple of feet away.

Standing in front of them, I turn first to Mr. Hanover's companion. I put my hands in prayer position and bow forward slightly. "Mr. Medved, a pleasure to meet you. I'm Misti Shaw."

Mr. Medved's eyes are, indeed, blue. He smiles. He's an attractive man, and fortunately there's no pull. At least I'm not in for double trouble. He reaches out. His touch on my forearm is friendly. "Nice to meet you, Miss Shaw."

I glance at the ice bucket with its bottle of vodka now only half full. "Perhaps you'd like me to refresh the ice? It's mostly melted."

"Yes, dear, very thoughtful."

Mentally steeling myself, I turn to Mr. Hanover. "Sir, what can I get you? Another drink?" I glance at his empty glass then back at him.

He shakes his head and smiles. My goodness, he has a compelling smile. He says, "I'm done with spirits for the evening. Please tell the chef Mr. Medved and I are ready for our late evening meal. He'll know what to do."

Shite, even his deep, rumbly voice gets to me. And those eyes. I redouble my efforts to resist him. "I'll be happy to tell him. Shall I tell him to bring it around to you himself?"

Still smiling, he shakes his head again. “No, Miss Shaw. You can serve it.”

“My pleasure,” I say and almost choke. “Right away.”

I pick up the ice bucket and shot glass and return to the bar, feeling two intense gazes on my back and wishing I had said anything other than *My pleasure*. A *Very well* or a *Certainly, sir* would have done the job. I tell Thomas to relay Mr. Hanover’s message to the chef. Then I take the vodka bottle out of the bucket, dump out the old ice, scoop in the new, and wedge the bottle back in. I grab a frosted shot glass from the fridge.

Brilliant. Now I get to walk back and forth to them twice more. Once to deliver the fresh ice bucket, another to serve their food.

I manage to perform my duties, relying heavily on glimpses at my app and whiffs of alcohol soaked cloths, but the effort to resist him is costing me. When I notice yet another woman dangling herself in front of his table, I hope he’ll choose her and leave. It would be a great help.

When it’s just gone eleven, Boss comes into the barroom. Mr. Hanover and Mr. Medved get up to meet him. The three men leave, but not before Mr. Hanover catches my eye just before he disappears around the corner. The look I get knocks me for six. But then finally, *finally* he’s gone, and I can relax.

An hour and a half later, the floor servers leave, and Thomas and I figure we can close up. Before I wipe everything down, I go and change into my street clothes. I happily bin my relatively clean shirt and hang up my vest, skirt, *and* tie (just for good measure) in the area for dry cleaning.

Wearing jeans and a jumper, I felt much better, more like myself, less distracted. The clean up goes smoothly. When Thomas and I finish, we draw our beers and plop ourselves down at a table near the bar.

“Great night,” Thomas says by way of a toast.

“For tips, yeah,” I have to agree, clinking my glass with his and taking a welcome sip. “Otherwise” I gesture with my pint glass. “You were right about the drink. I need to unwind before going home.”

“I’m in no hurry. Christina’s exams are coming up, and she’s just as happy to have me out of the way while she burns the midnight oil.”

We discuss Christina’s veterinary coursework. She’s in her third year, still pre-clinical. I’m in awe of anyone with that amount of real education. I’m mostly self-taught, which I know is not the same thing as real education. Thomas’s friendship and Christina’s career choice are two more reasons I love my job. I’ve discussed with

Christina Ian's love for dogs. She's helping me think through ways to find a professional veterinary path for him, although it isn't going to be easy.

We finish our beers and leave by the front entrance. We wave our good-byes to the night staff. We walk four doors down Montague Street. It's a beautiful street, well lit, neat and clean and safe. Snow has begun to fall.

"A light dusting is predicted for the city," Thomas says, "with more to fall in the north. I always like snow this time of year."

I look up. "And the moon looks like a big bright shiny shilling with a dent in its rim."

"Poetic," Thomas comments.

I smile. "Must be because I read a lot. Well, here we are, then."

We say good night. I go through the gate and take the path to my side door. I drag myself up the four flights to the attic flat. I make sure not to wake Ian, sleeping on the floor by the sofa in the sitting room. Once in my room, I fall onto the bed, clothes on, face down. Before I spark out, my last thought is:

Cor, I'm knackered.

Chapter Four

EGON

Miss Shaw serves us our bowls of the chef's specialty venison stew. She sets a basket of farmer's bread between us and asks, "Do you gentlemen need anything further?"

"We're set for now, thank you," I tell her.

She nods and leaves. While Pyotr and I gaze at her retreating form for a good few seconds, I can sense her relief, her self-consciousness and her resistance.

I look away first and pick up my spoon. Before I can take a bite, Pyotr clears his throat. Meaningfully. I look up to see his raised brows and polite smile. His expression holds a touch of inquiry and the most subtle, most irritating hint of smirk.

"So, Egon, do you care to tell me about it?"

He's switched to German. It's the language of the home and the common language of werewolves worldwide. It's also a centuries-old tradition to discuss pack matters in German. When speaking of our business in a public setting everywhere but Germany and Austria, the German language gives us an added sense of privacy, although at

the moment Pyotr and I are secluded enough at our table.

I put my spoon down. "What did you expect me to do?"

"How did you get your scent all over her?"

I explain my ruse. I do not explain that it worked to cause the other males in the room to back off, but it has not quite succeeded in arousing Miss Shaw. There is no need to explain what is perfectly obvious to any Alpha.

"Well!" is all Pyotr says. Then, tersely, "Interesting development."

"If you say so."

We tuck in. I don't think Pyotr will drop the subject, and he doesn't. After taking several bites, he says, "I see her appeal. She's beautiful. Magnificent, really, in the effort she's putting forth to resist you."

I grunt my displeasure. "I'll wear her down."

Pyotr considers this. "Human males sometimes court their females."

This time my grunt is a laugh. I've heard of the practice. Courting a woman seems as useless as a Japanese tea ceremony, where it might take an hour or more to get a cup of tea. I can have a cup of tea anytime I want and as many cups as I want. I've never had to court a woman before, human or were. It seems particularly odd to court one's own mate.

"Do you have a sense of how she fits in – other than her obvious attributes and the fact you recognize her?"

I shake my head. "I'm still getting used to the idea I have a mate. I would not have guessed of all the females in the world.... No, frankly, I'm flummoxed."

"She's strong."

"True. Also human."

"It's not unheard of. There's probably a good reason she's yours. There always is."

I cannot imagine what it might be. Since I have no way at the moment to get to the bottom of the matter, I change the subject to our various global security teams. We dig into the stew and the review of Bardulf's report. I give Pyotr my assessment of the Mongolians, who share a northern border with the Russians. The packs on both sides of the border have been wary of one another for centuries, so I was the one to go in and get the Khalkha packs on board. I'm happy to report I was successful.

Pyotr expresses his pleasure and his thanks then gives the conversation a darker turn. "There's been an incident."

I understand instantly, although I haven't heard the pack term *incident* in years. "You're sure it qualifies?"

"Unfortunately."

"So, not the work of a rogue werewolf?"

"Definitely not. My Guardian confirmed it."

"Where?"

"Regent's Park."

Next to his haunt in St. Johns Wood. "That's bad. Who's the victim?"

"An elderly lady, apparently out walking her dog. Broad daylight. A passer-by, an elderly man, found her body behind a bush and called the police. It's sure to be all over the news in the morning – and could well be all over social media by now." Pyotr takes out his phone, checks a few sites then places it face down on the table. "Nothing yet. It's unlikely the gent got out his phone and snapped a photo, but you never know. The older folk all do Facebook with their grandchildren, so they're not completely unsavvy social media-wise. I'm hoping pictures of the victim don't surface."

"The news will be bad enough, but pictures would make it worse." We're quiet for a moment, imagining what the media would do with a gruesome picture of a human body apparently mauled by a wild animal in the middle of a city park. Then I say, "Could be an isolated incident. Nothing to think there's a werewolf baiter out there – yet. Still, even an isolated incident is cause for concern."

"My Guardian caught the scent of blood within fifteen minutes of the murder and arrived on the scene at the same time as the police. He was there soon enough to pick up some scents before they were disturbed but not all of them, and he was able to glimpse the body. The mauling was not done by one of us and looked like the work of a dog, even slightly odd for a dog. He detected a human scent as well, again a bit odd. The moment he told me, I decided to delay my return to St. Petersburg until you and I determined a course of action."

I nod my thanks. "But can we do much more than wait to see if a second incident occurs?" I try not to let anger overtake me, as horrible possibilities play out in my mind. "Three incidents in a row, and London will be in an uproar. We're likely to have full-blown werewolf hunting on our hands." I growl in disgust. "It's like the

anti-semitism that arises from time to time in Europe and elsewhere. Why? Ignorance. Prejudice. The difference is, everyone knows Jews exist. In our case, no human can be sure we exist, unless we let them into our packs – and that’s because they’re our mates and not our enemies.”

We don’t need to go over the reasons weres of all species keep themselves to themselves and why the were-community as a whole is tight. History is littered with cases of were-young wandering off, being seen mid-shift by a human and then captured. What horrible thing comes next depends on the era: in old Germanic times a were, if caught, would be buried alive; in modern times he or she could become the object of a science experiment, also surely leading to death or subjected to other kinds of cruelty. It’s likely humans on the planet exist who would be tolerant of weres in their midst. But, thus far, the mass of humanity has not evolved far enough for the were-community to wish to make our presence known to the world.

Pyotr and I also don’t need to rehearse the unfortunate source of the prejudice against werewolves in particular. A hundred and fifty years ago a werewolf in London went on a two-day rampage that left fifteen mauled bodies in its wake. Making things worse, a human saw the lone wolf shift into his human form. The werewolf’s pack quickly caught the rogue and properly disposed of him. However, the human printed a broadsheet describing what he saw and sold it on the street. Most people thought he was off his rocker, but enough people believed him, and dozens of anti-werewolf societies sprang into existence.

Only two societies are still active today, and Guardians from all packs keep regular tabs on both. On the one hand, Werewolf Watchers has evolved over the years into a drinking club whose score of members are hipsters brimming with irony and the belief that werewolves would be the most smashing animals on the planet, if only they existed. On the other hand, Keep London Safe From Werewolves is dead serious about the need to guard the world against us and the desire to eradicate us, if only they could find us. For the past hundred years and more, KLSFW membership has held steady at five. Apparently when one wazzock dies another is born. Neither society is considered much of a threat.

But now it’s possible someone wants to stir things up, and this is how it would start: make a murder look like a werewolf killing, get the old rumors swirling and try to flush us out. It only takes one mad hatter. It could be the blogger Werewolf Hunter trying to drum up business for his site, which currently has under a dozen subscribers. Would he go so far to stage a killing made to look like it was done by a werewolf? Thus far none of our Guardians have judged him or his blog to be cause for concern. They’ll now be revisiting the issue.

I say, “Let’s hope for good forensic work on the part of our police force.”

Pyotr says, “Let’s also hope for a good break.”

A moment later Bardulf stops in the barroom. I suggest we repair to the office to discuss the disturbing new development of a potential werewolf baiter. As we leave the barroom, I give my mate a last look over my shoulder. I'm glad she catches it.

On my midnight run I have many thoughts to take with me. The possible threat to the werewolf community looms, but this news is swamped by the discovery of my mate. Hiring a geisha later tonight is now off the table, because my wolf wouldn't stand for it. My human isn't keen anymore, either. The only woman I want now is my mate, although my human has no cause to be in love with her. So my run is not just for pleasure. I need it to work off excess energy. As my four feet fly over fresh snow, my primal brain schemes to find ways to get next to her, so I can frolic around her and make her mine.

I'm to have my chance the next morning.

Chapter Five

MISTI

I peek my head out my bedroom door and see Ian still asleep. He's sprawled out on the floor by the sofa. He's always liked to sleep on the floor. I'd prefer him to use the sofa-bed as his bed, now that we have one and because that's what it's made for. It would also make him seem more normal. But I pick my battles, and if he's happier not bothering to pull out the bed part from the sofa, it's fine with me.

In these past few weeks he's been sleeping later in the morning than usual. I think he's going through a growth spurt. I decide not to make him breakfast before I go out, because I don't want the noise of my movements to wake him. Instead, I'll make my trip to the market quick and hope to be back before he wakes up. I'll fix him breakfast then. I love to cook for him.

I still can't get over what a wonderful flat this is. There's one bedroom, which I use, the sitting room with a kitchen in the corner, and a bathroom that's the best. It's old, but it's big and clean.

I tiptoe across the sitting room and collect my coat and handbag from the stand next to the front door. I ease myself out as quietly as possible, go down the four flights of stairs, and exit the side door. The air is crisp. I breathe deeply and savor the invigorating feeling. I used to fear the onset of winter, but this feeling of dread is far in the past. For many years now we've had a warm place to sleep every night.

I go through the gate and turn right onto the sidewalk toward Great Russell Street. Straight ahead I see a sight that causes me to go all jangly inside.

Mr. Hanover has just stepped out of his front door.

I quickly turn and begin walking in the opposite direction, toward Russell Square. I'll take the long way around to the shops on Southampton Row. No way do I want to cross paths with my absurdly attractive employer. I pick up my pace, although I don't think he saw me. I want to get away, but I don't want to attract attention to myself by running.

I'm about to slip around the corner when I hear a deep voice behind me.

"Miss Shaw, how nice to encounter you again."

The sound of his voice streaks down my spinal column to my toes. He's right on my heels, so I can't pretend I haven't heard him. I try to collect myself before I turn to greet him. I summon a smile.

"Mr. Hanover, hello," I say, striving to meet his eye and stay calm. "Yes, a pleasant coincidence."

"On your way to errands, I'm guessing?"

I gesture vaguely toward Southampton Row. "Yes, a spot of shopping at my favorite greengrocer and baker."

"I'll accompany you," he says. His words are simple. They sound ominous.

"Just a quick trip, you know. I need to get back home as quickly as possible."

"I'm sure you do."

I glance at him to check his expression. Is he mocking me? I can't tell. And now I can't think because I'm distracted by the pull I feel in his presence. Last night I thought he was attractive with two days' growth of beard. Clean-shaven he's breathtaking. Not conventionally handsome. Just. What? *Just*.

"Please tell me," he says, after we've taken a couple of paces together, "how you came by your interest in bartending. I've now had a chance to read through your employee file, and I see no previous experience."

My stomach falls to the pavement. Here I was fearing he might want to chat me up. Instead, I should have been fearing for my job. No reason not to be forthright. My fight to keep my job gives me the strength to resist my attraction to him.

I smile. "That's right. I have no previous experience. But I like to cook, and one recipe book I found at the library – it was just before moving to this side of town, in fact – had an appendix of cocktail recipes. I was fascinated by the idea of maraschino cherries, of all things, and decided to make my own. And I liked the idea of mixing alcohol with herbs and fruits enough to encourage me to put in my application at

your hotel." I feel the urge to natter on about how well things are going on the job, but I put a clamp on my tongue. The less said on that score, the better. Then, "Have you heard complaints about my lack of experience?"

His smile is gentle. "Not at all, Miss Shaw. In fact, I've heard our customers are completely satisfied with your skills. I'm simply wanting to know how you're getting on, if you're all settled in."

"Yes, fairly well settled in, sir."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now, what would be on your shopping list, I'm wondering."

Is Mr. Hanover making conversation? My goodness, I think this is small talk.

Thoughts of Ian keep me afloat. "I'm going to make a frittata this morning. If that sounds very grand it's because I'm in an Italian cooking phase. One of the secrets is for everything to be fresh, especially the eggs."

He continues to smile. "Please tell me more."

Right. I tell him about the little herb garden I've started on the kitchen sill. I have basil for pesto, rosemary and thyme for everything else. Parsley is a must. While he listens, he keeps his eyes on me. I'm disconcerted, but since we're outside in plain view of the world, I'm able to keep my cool. The topic carries us to Southampton Row, where I'm hoping I can take a polite leave from him.

While we're standing on the corner waiting for the light to change, he says, "Please join me for some coffee or, if you prefer, a cup of tea. I'm sure the frittata can wait."

Our gazes lock. I cannot look away. I am now straining every nerve to fight my attraction to him. I've long been able to dampen and outright ignore the unpleasant things that have come my way in life. It's a strange twist to find myself needing to do the same with the pleasant. Pleasant? Too weak a word. Mr. Hanover commands my attention and desire. He's irresistible. But I'm no pushover. Resist him I will.

While I'm recruiting my forces to say no, a buzz comes from his chest.

He slips his hand into his overcoat and pulls out his mobile. He looks at the screen, frowns slightly then puts it back. The traffic light turns green. He takes my elbow, and we cross the street.

"You have business to attend to?" I ask, not unhelpfully.

His gaze upon me is unwavering. "I do. But it can wait, Miss Shaw."

I have the oddest sense he's daring me to have another bash at getting rid of him. I

don't think it would work, and I do like being with him, but I'd be crazy to prolong this encounter. I prove my craziness by saying, "In that case, a cup of tea sounds just right."

He still has his hand on my elbow as we go down the street. He remarks, "Now I understand how your love of cooking, growing herbs, and your interest in bartending go together. Do you like making the cocktails?"

"They're my favorite."

"They're too fussy for me, and I've never understood their appeal."

"Whisky drinkers don't," I say, with a laugh. "You're purists."

He looks at me, his gaze warm. "Do you know all your customers' drinks?"

"Of course. Mr. Radley drinks cabernet only from California, mind you, while Mr. Scott drinks cabernet only from France. Miss Thomas is stuck in the last decade with her Cosmo, while Mrs. Benson drinks a *very* dry martini."

We pass Starbucks. He evidently does not want to stop there. We continue on.

"Do you know all your customers' names?"

"It's not difficult," I assure him. "The Hanover House bar has a large and loyal clientele. And you must know that a bartender's second most important skill is good listening."

He seems interested by this observation, which means that his gaze on me heats up.

I manage to stifle a blush and answer calmly, "Yes, we're psychotherapists who get paid in tips."

"And what do you know of psychotherapy?"

"What I've read in books."

"Tell me more."

He turns us around a corner and into a lane with a cozy teashop. I'm in the midst of giving him the run-down on what I know about our regulars without betraying private confidences, when his mobile buzzes again.

He stops and pulls it out of his coat. He reads the message. He drops my elbow and returns an answer. He looks annoyed. He shakes his head then turns to me.

“I have to return to the office. It can’t wait. I’m sorry to disappoint you.” The look in his eyes is penetrating. I feel the heat rolling off him. My tummy flip-flops. My innards melt. I’m tingling in girly places. “I’ll make a point of seeing you again this evening at the bar. In the meantime, may I escort you home?”

I still have enough wits about me to say, “I came here to do some shopping.”

“Ah, right.” He bows. “I will see you later then, Miss Shaw.”

When he leaves, I’m disappointed, but I also heave an inward sigh of relief. Last night he was just plain compelling. This morning I found him easy to talk to, which only makes him more attractive to me. Would another half-hour in his company over tea have pushed me over the edge and into his arms?

This intriguing question engenders another: Will I be able to resist him tonight?

Chapter Six

EGON

I could not avoid meeting with Bardulf. When a terrorist bombing near one of our security zones occurs, I cannot justify spending time over something as useless as a cup of tea with my ever-reluctant mate, as much as I enjoyed her company. I have growing respect for her strength. I now find her singularly beautiful, desirable in all ways, except that I still don’t understand how she fits with me or my pack. Perhaps because she’s human, I need to get to know her better. Pyotr would laugh to hear me admit such.

My human side tries to imagine my feelings for her without the distraction of my wolf’s wild lust. It’s difficult, but I give it a try. I recall that Bardulf said the women like her cocktails and the men just like her. Yes, I can see she’s likeable. She knows everyone’s names. She knows their drinks, their jokes, their families, their troubles. Hm. *Liking*. That’s a new one for me where a woman is concerned. It strikes me as a thoroughly human emotion, one with low heat. *Not* my style, but perhaps it’s hers.

Around noon I leave Hanover House to begin a series of meetings with Alphas across the city to deal with the other looming crisis: a possible werewolf baiter on the loose in London. The moment I step out the front door, I’m surprised to see Miss Shaw again and so soon – also not surprised, since we’re close neighbors. This time she’s across the street, walking arm in arm with a young man who is tall and lanky with long dark hair, almost shaggy. They’re making their way toward Great Russell Street.

I head toward the intersection at Montague and Great Russell where I’ll intercept her. I text Pyotr my change of plans for the afternoon. Priorities are priorities, and he’ll understand. This time I’ll not let anything get in my way. And we’ll go well

beyond liking.

A few feet before I arrive at the intersection, I hear screeching car brakes in the street next to me and a woman's voice wailing "Ian! Ian!" The next thing I know the young man – more of a boy, really, and one who's too thin for his height – has run up to me. He gets down on all fours, right there on the sidewalk, and presents his neck.

I look down at the boy and have a first inkling of what is going on, but my impression is too unformed to verbalize. Looking up and over at the stricken face of Miss Shaw, who's weaving around the stopped cars in the street, my immediate thought is to end the situation as quickly as possible. I reach down and lift the lad to his feet. I enfold him in my arms for a brief moment and growl for only him to hear, letting the vibrations from my chest calm the poor boy's agitation.

By the time I let the boy go, Miss Shaw has arrived. "Ian love, you can't just dart into the street." She pulls him into her arms. "Mr. Hanover," she says, looking at me apologetically, "this is my brother, Ian. He's not like this normally. Maybe it's not a good day for him." She turns back to the boy in her arms. Her voice is soft and loving. "Are you all right?"

Ian nods.

She looks around to see if any passers-by noticed Ian's peculiar behavior. Of course he attracted a curious glance or two. However, I made sure this strange event was over almost as soon as it began, and I see Miss Shaw assess the situation as little harm done. She turns back to me and says, "We'll be going on our way now, Mr. Hanover. We didn't mean to trouble you."

"No trouble," I say. "I was just going to lunch. I'd be honored if the two of you would join me. Would you like that, Ian?"

Ian nods enthusiastically.

Miss Shaw hesitates. I can sense her feelings, smell them more like. Her emotional state is equal parts discomfort I witnessed Ian's behavior and continuing resistance to my pull. She's even a bit tired after this morning's effort with me. She glances at Ian, clearly a happy boy, then back at me. She'll accept the invitation, reluctantly, only because Ian wants it. I see her summon her courage, which she evidently has in abundance. She says firmly and with no apology,

"The only restaurant Ian wants to go to is Spaghetti House." She turns and gestures toward Great Russell Street. "It's in an arcade on the other side of Bloomsbury Square Gardens. We walk by it regularly, and sometimes I read him the menu posted outside. He'd like to try the spaghetti Bolognese. To me the minestrone has always sounded appetizing." Her smile is weak. "We're in our Italian phase, you see."

Under normal circumstances I would never darken the door of such a common establishment. Under these circumstances, I say promptly, "Excellent idea. Spaghetti House it is."

We cross Great Russell Street and make our way through Bloomsbury Square Gardens, whereupon Ian wants to pet every dog in the park. His antics are entertaining to watch. The dogs are clearly excited to romp with him in the few inches of snow on the ground. During one of these playful passages, Miss Shaw says to me,

"Ian has a gift. I saw it when he was very young. It's almost as if he knows what dogs are thinking and feeling."

I laugh softly. "I see what you mean."

She glances at me quickly, perhaps to see if my expression reveals any trace of judgment. As if to mitigate any disapproval of Ian I might hold she says, "It's because of him we're so well situated now." Her voice holds simple pride.

"How so?"

"We used to live on the other side of town. We've always taken outings to other parts of town when we ... when ... when the weather is fine –" my guess is she was about to say *when we can afford it* – usually to a park, you know, so Ian can play with the dogs. And then last summer –"

Here she's interrupted when Ian lopes up to us, tugs on her sleeve, and points to the arcade across the street.

"Hungry?" she asks.

He nods vigorously then looks at me and tips his head to the side in a *Let's go* gesture.

We proceed to the restaurant. Because our attention is now on crossing the street then getting inside the restaurant and situated, there's no occasion to finish her story. I'm eager to hear all about it. I'm fascinated. A new side of Miss Shaw is opening up.

The hostess leads us to a booth, places the menus on the table, and turns to go.

That's not how this works for me. I give the hostess my overcoat then help Miss Shaw with her coat and scarf, then Ian, and hand their outerwear to the hostess as well. I place a hand on the hostess's shoulder and establish eye contact. "Please bring us the vegetable soup and two plates of spaghetti Bolognese. We'll give our drink order to the waitress. Send her over please." I lift my hand from the hostess's

shoulder. "Thank you." Now she can go.

She shifts our coats to one arm, gathers up the menus with her free hand and leaves. Miss Shaw slides into the booth and draws Ian next to her. I sit across from them. Only when we're settled do I encourage, "Then last summer...?"

Her bright green eyes widen. "Oh, right. We came to Bloomsbury Square Gardens, and a man – Mr. Wilde – saw how good Ian is with dogs. On the spot he offered us free lodging in the flat in his attic in exchange for dog sitting, which he said was more than worth it to him not to have to pay a kennel on the days he goes to work. Mr. Wilde is at home today, so Ian has the day off. His schedule is irregular."

"So, it's just my luck I ran into you this morning, and now you and Ian are free at the moment."

She looks quickly away, embarrassed. To cover it she continues, "Yesterday, for instance, Ian had the dogs in the morning and then all evening, but mid-day Mr. Wilde was home and took them on a long walk. He's a consultant of some kind. Chemical industry, I think."

"You have an excellent arrangement."

"The best!" she agrees then looks at Ian. "And it's all because of you."

The waitress appears. It's water for Ian, hot tea for Miss Shaw, and a beer for me. I ask for Leffe on draught. It seems the waitress is on the verge of saying they don't stock Leffe, but she wisely folds her lips then says, "Right away." I'm sure she'll figure out how to get me what I want.

I return to the recital of the adventures of Miss and Master Shaw. "Very fortunate to have free lodging," I say then ask, "No family to move in with, then?"

Miss Shaw shakes her head. "Our parents died a couple of years ago."

I firmly suppress my laugh. She's told me a bald-faced lie. Mates never bother to tell lies to one another, because they can smell them.

"In a car crash," she adds. "That is, our father and Ian's mother. My mum died when I was little, and so Ian and I share a father. That's why we have the same last name but don't look alike."

More lies. However, her lies are not sour, they're sweet.

"Soon after we moved into the neighborhood," she continues, "we were walking by Hanover House, and Ian told me to go inside and see if there was a job. At least that's what I interpreted him to say." She glances at me quickly. "It came down to what I

was telling you earlier, you know, about how much I like to read recipes and to cook and to mix things.” She stirs the spoon in her soup. “So I went inside and asked, and it all worked out.” She smiles at Ian. “So, you see, he gets all the credit for how well off we are now.”

Ah, now she’s back to telling the truth. And she’s having increasing difficulty fighting her arousal in my presence. I’m beginning to detect it in her eyes, her breathing, and her scent.

At this interesting moment, Ian says, “Omega.”

Miss Shaw looks at him in surprise. She grasps his hand then explains, “I gave Ian the nickname Omega. He knows the Alpha is the dog top in the pack and the Beta is second in command. I’ve told him he’s the Omega of his own special pack and that it’s the most important letter.”

My first inkling has become a certainty. The sign was there from the moment the boy presented his throat to me as a sign of his submission. By telling me his name just now, he’s as good as recognized me as his Alpha.

Ian is a werewolf, a very damaged one, but a werewolf all the same.

Chapter Seven

MISTI

So many daft things are happening at once I don’t know what to think. First, from what I can tell from other tables, the hostess at this restaurant doesn’t normally take care of the patrons’ coats or take food orders. Then our drinks come almost immediately with the food not far behind, hot and steaming. It’s not as if the sauce and the minestrone aren’t already made, and this place is called Spaghetti House, so surely the spaghetti is always ready. But, still, this is prompt service like I’d never expect.

Even more, I can hardly believe Ian actually spoke to a stranger. Only one word, but one is more than none. And, oh blimey, there’s the inconvenience of Mr. Hanover’s animal magnetism, which is absolutely the only way to describe whatever it is. And whatever it is, it’s a force of nature. Last night was a trial of my strength. This morning I was foolish to accept his offer of tea, because I depleted so much energy at first resisting him. At least then I got a reprieve. And now? Well, now I don’t know what to think, and I’m stuck across the table from him.

I may not know what to think, but I do know what to do, and that’s to attend to the conversation.

After Mr. Hanover wishes us “Good appetite” he asks, “What did Ian do, exactly, to

earn Mr. Wilde's admiration that day in the park?"

"Mr. Wilde has not one, but two huge mastiffs. We saw them in the park that day, straining on their leashes. I was terrified of them, but not Ian. He went right up to them, and it was almost as if he began talking to them. The man offered Ian the job on the –"

"Dewlap black as sea coal," Ian says.

Once again I'm surprised. No, this time I'm astonished. A whole phrase. I hug Ian. "That's right, love." I wriggle my fingers under my chin and say, "Dewlap is the skin that hangs under the chin. On mastiffs it's enormous."

"I'm aware of the term," Mr. Hanover says with smile – he has an extremely nice smile – then adds, "You're surprised, because Ian is shy and normally doesn't talk to strangers."

"That's right," I reply, perhaps betraying a bit of further surprise at his ready understanding.

He remarks, "'Dewlap' is a big word and the phrase 'black as sea coal' is pretty."

"It comes from a story I've read to him, more than once, I might add. It has a mastiff named Baskerville. Anyway, on the spot, Mr. Wilde offered us –"

"Soul," Ian says.

I laugh now, truly delighted, and nudge Ian with my shoulder. "You're talkative today, aren't you? Yes, the main character of the story says there's a spot behind the ears where large dogs keep their souls, and that's where you must scratch them. Ian loves that part."

I try to take a few bites of soup. I succeed, more or less. Eating in front of Mr. Hanover is difficult. Doing everything in front of Mr. Hanover is difficult. I'm glad I brought up how Ian is the one who pointed me in the direction of Hanover House, not because I need for Mr. Hanover to understand how capable Ian really is. He's passed no judgment on my unusual brother. But I want to return to the topic of my job. I figure honesty is the best policy.

I screw up my courage, put my hands on the table, and look Mr. Hanover square in the eye. "I need my job. I like my job, but I also really need it."

Mr. Hanover looks interested.

I'm hoping he'll stop doing to me whatever he's doing to me. Maybe he's not conscious of it. No, he knows exactly what effect he's having on me, because I'm

feeling the same sock to my gut I felt when he glanced at me upon leaving the barroom last night and again this morning on Southampton Row. I plunge on.

“Now we’re living rent free, and I’m able to save a lot. My job at your hotel is so good I’m thinking – hoping – to begin Library School next year and then find a way to get Ian some kind of veterinary credentials. A special school of some kind, maybe. My fellow bartender, Thomas – he was the one on duty with me last night – well, his girlfriend is in veterinary school, and she and I have been thinking of ways Ian might go about it.”

All Mr. Hanover says to this is, “Admirable.”

“The absolute best thing about the job is that I’m so close to home. I never know if Ian will need me. So it’s a great relief to me to be on the job, knowing I’m not far in case something arises. Of course, when Ian is surrounded by dogs, nothing will arise. But, still.”

“How old is he?”

“Eighteen,” I say, knowing I’m pushing it.

His focus cuts to Ian. His gaze is meditative. He looks back at me, and I can see plain as day he knows Ian is not eighteen. Okay, in reality, he’s sixteen, well, *almost* sixteen, but I can’t take chances.

Now I put it out there, plain. “I would hate to lose my job or have to quit for some reason.”

I’m hurtling toward disaster. My jumper is too hot, and I’m feeling increasingly squirmy in my skirt and tights. He could have any woman in this restaurant. I’m catching some of the looks he’s attracting. I’m hoping he’ll give me a break.

After a moment he says, “Yes, I see. I understand.” His smile is slight. Then he looks at Ian’s nearly empty plate and says, “He has a good appetite.”

“It’s difficult to keep food in the fridge and the cupboards!” I say, joking. Mostly, anyway.

Mr. Hanover looks around for a waitress and lifts his finger. One comes running. How does he do that? When she’s at the table, he says, “Please bring the young man a steak medium rare and an order of steamed broccoli. Can you do that for us?”

It turns out she can. She leaves.

I don’t like this. “Ian has enough to eat at home. Really.”

"I'm sure he does." Mr. Hanover looks at my soup bowl. "However, since I've been making you talk so much, you've hardly eaten half, so there's time for Ian to have more. I recall being his age. A bottomless well, isn't that right, Ian?"

Ian's response is growly without actual words, but it's a response. I'm half thrilled, half puzzled he would speak in a normal way with a stranger, which in his case means answering a question. He and I don't have what most people would call actual conversations, where we take turns talking. He doesn't come up with things to say on his own, and he doesn't respond normally, but he understands everything I say, and I understand his expressions and gestures and noises. I fill in a lot of the blanks on his side. From time to time he blurts things out he's heard before. Sometimes they're on topic, like what he brought up from our favorite book, *The Secret Countess*, about dewlap and so forth.

I've read what I can about his condition. He doesn't have autism or Asperger's because he's very social and maintains eye contact. He's also warm and has great feeling for others, humans as well as dogs. I don't think he has Tourette's, either, where people have uncontrollable tics and make random animal noises. Ian occasionally growls, but the sound is always very, very soft, and he seems to be in control of it. When he does decide to say something, he doesn't have problems with pronunciation. It's just that he doesn't usually choose to talk. Someone with his history is bound to have a problem or two.

Mr. Hanover is talking to him, mostly about food. Ian is clearly rapt. Then Mr. Hanover changes the subject.

"I have a wolfhound named Wulf I'd like you to meet."

Ian shakes his head.

I jump in, horrified. "I think what Ian means, Mr. Hanover –"

Mr. Hanover very gently interrupts me. "Miss Shaw, Ian evidently thinks poorly of the name I've given my wolfhound. He would like my Wulf to have a grander name, something more like ... what was it? ... Baskerville."

Which way is up? Is Mr. Hanover an Ian whisperer? He understood exactly what Ian meant, and I don't know how that's possible. The worst is, his kindness toward Ian is turning me on even more. I'm in serious trouble. So now about all I can do in the present situation is to shut up and eat my soup.

Mr. Hanover returns his attention to Ian. "My Wulf is a handful, and since I travel so much, he gets lonely. I would dearly love to spirit you away from Mr. Wilde, but since he found you first, I'm afraid I would create an unfriendly atmosphere on an otherwise very friendly street. But I would like you to meet Wulf and then you can give him a pet name that's only for you."

Ian's steak comes. I'm thinking that, for him, it's his birthday and Christmas and every other wonderful day of the year rolled into one. Mr. Hanover instructs Ian on the best way to cut his meat. Ian is visibly pleased with the attention. I'm melting into a puddle. I struggle through my soup.

Mr. Hanover continues to interact with Ian, which means Mr. Hanover talking, still on the theme of proper diet. The meal comes to an end. The bill arrives. The moment I put my hand on my handbag to get my purse, Mr. Hanover reaches across the table, rests his hand heavily on my forearm, and says,

"Please know you are my guests. Now, here is what we're going to do. We'll return to Hanover House. I'll have my man bring Wulf down to the lobby so Ian can meet him. Then we'll all go out for a walk. It's the best I can do at the moment."

I am unable to look away from his gaze. I'm absolutely riveted by the intensity. I realize I'm supposed to make some kind of response, because after several long moments of silence, he asks,

"Do you understand?"

Not really. "Yes."

He laughs and removes his hand from my arm. I fail to find anything amusing, but he's smiling and shaking his head. When he takes out his phone and sends a couple of texts, I pause to consider what *It's the best I can do at the moment* means. I get sod all. It's a mystery. He puts his phone away, settles the bill, and requests our coats. We leave.

On our way to the restaurant, I walked in the middle with Mr. Hanover on my left and Ian on my right. On the way back, Ian is in the middle, and Mr. Hanover has his arm around Ian's shoulders. Ian is beside himself with happiness. My heart is breaking, because I've never been successful in finding male company for him. I haven't tried too hard either I have to admit. Maybe I've feared most people find him strange, and I've let my fear get in my way.

But I should be happy for him now. I am, but my emotions are such a wreck, I hardly know what I'm feeling. By the time we cross the threshold of Hanover House and step into the lobby, I don't know whether I want to run screaming down the street or tell Mr. Hanover he can do whatever he wants with me.

What he does with me is to usher me into the pretty sitting room on the left of the lobby and says, "Please have a seat. A tea tray will be sent around momentarily."

I've always imagined sitting in here. It was beyond me to have also imagined having tea. I unwind my scarf and take off my coat and choose a comfy chair at right angles

to the main sofa. Mr. Hanover remains standing at my side.

A giant wolfhound trots into the room ahead of an older gentleman who looks every inch a most excellent butler. Ian gets on his knees and wraps his arms around the large dog's neck, and that's all it takes to get an active game going that's little more than a tangle of arms and legs and fur.

Mr. Hanover places a hand on my shoulder. I feel his touch down to my toes. "Miss Shaw," he says, "I'd like to introduce you to Rudolf."

Given the pressure on my shoulder, I cannot rise from my seat, but I can extend my hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rudolf."

We shake. "A pleasure, Miss Shaw."

When Mr. Rudolf steps away, Mr. Hanover bends down and says softly, "You'll address him as Rudolf, no need for Mister." Then he leaves me to join Rudolf.

Boss arrives. He nods his acknowledgement of me but is more interested in Ian. He stands with the other two men to watch the good sport on the floor. Judging by their expressions none of them thinks it at all unusual. In fact, I notice they're all inclined to smile. Boss comments. I can't hear what he says. I'm not even sure he's speaking English. Mr. Hanover looks at him and nods. Before Boss leaves, they exchange a long regard. From my perspective it looks meaningful.

I feel suddenly nervous, for no reason I can put my finger on.

Mr. Hanover turns his head to look at me. I draw a deep breath to calm myself. It only partially works. At this exact moment the tea tray arrives and is placed on the table in front of the sofa and my chair. In addition to the tea service are a plate of biscuits and pots of marmalade, lemon curd and clotted cream. I'm relieved not to have to serve. Mr. – that is – Rudolf does the honors. I get my cup first. Mr. Hanover is second. He remains standing, sipping his tea and watching Ian and Wulf.

After a few moments he leans forward and drops his hand on Wulf's nape. "There, boy, let Ian enjoy his biscuits now."

Wulf gets up on all fours and sits next to Mr. Hanover, looking up at him in adoration. Ian crawls over to the table. Embarrassed, I immediately put my cup down and slide onto the floor next to him. I choose a biscuit and put a dollop of lemon curd on top. I put it on a small plate and take a napkin – my goodness, they're cloth – and whisper into his ear,

"I'm not going to feed this to you. You take the plate and sit up on the chair like a proper person. I'll be right here next to you on the sofa."

Thankfully Ian does as I tell him, and I slip up and onto the sofa. While I prepare biscuits for Ian, Mr. Hanover and Mr. Rudolf exchange conversation, mostly about the weather. They deem it perfect for an afternoon walk, since snow flurries are beginning, and Wulf will be in his element.

When it seems Ian has eaten his fill, Mr. Hanover says, "Let's bundle up and take that walk."

Mr. Rudolf has come prepared with the leash. Handing it to Ian he says, "Wulf doesn't need it, but we put it on him because it makes the people in the street and the parks more comfortable."

Ian understands. With Ian and Wulf in the lead, the four of us go out and decide Bloomsbury Garden Square is just right. I shove my hands in my pockets. I'm afraid Mr. Hanover might want to link arms or something, but he doesn't try. Once we're at the park and Ian and Wulf are off cavorting, Mr. Hanover slows our pace and says,

"Please tell me the story. The correct one, if you please, with no lies."

I'm pretty sure I know what he means. I hesitate.

"Your love for Ian is pure and fierce," he continues. "Only a monster would separate him from you. I will not be calling the social care services to report you. But Ian is a minor, you and he are not related, and I do want the story."

Still I hesitate.

I think he stifles a sigh before he continues, "You and I have a couple of things to discuss, but it's one at a time and in a fitting order. The most important topic right now is Ian." After a brief pause, he adds, "You are an unusually brave woman, and I hope your courage extends to being able to trust me."

This sounds very ... important. I discard the idea Mr. Hanover is plotting the world's most elaborate seduction. It's the oldest of the old for a seducer to get to his target through the target's loved ones. First, Mr. Hanover's interest in Ian seems genuine. Second, I'm probably ripe for the plucking without any elaborations at this point. No, no, I'm going to resist. I definitely have it in me. I want my job. I will fight for my job. Either way this encounter goes, if he fires me, I will slap him with a harassment suit so fast he won't know what hit him.

Mr. Hanover breathes in. He breathes out. His breath hangs as a crystallized wisp for a moment before it evaporates. Then he looks away and up into the sky. I sense he's poised perfectly between patience and impatience.

I come out with it. "Some people would say I stole Ian."

Now, here's something. The moment I begin telling my story, I'm no longer bothered by my inappropriate attraction to the man at my side.

Chapter Eight

EGON

"I see," I say. "Some would say you stole him. What would you say?"

"That I rescued him."

I wait and let her gather her thoughts.

"I saved him," she says more firmly, "from evil people."

She's looking into the middle distance. Her response to me has shut down. I'll deal with that later. Right now she's reliving a very dark past. She's feeling pain and fear, but the pain and fear are overtaken by urgency and determination. I want to ask her who the evil people were, but this is a detail she'll tell me if she wishes. Clearly, whoever they were, they were abusing the boy.

"How old is he now?"

"Fifteen, almost sixteen. By my count."

"And how old was he when you, ah, stole him?"

"About two. I don't know his birth date because before I smuggled him out, I didn't know his name, so I couldn't take his file." She shrugs. "We were in the same orphanage."

"And how old were you? Maybe thirteen or so?"

"Old enough to know what was right," she says quickly then frowns. "But not old enough to fully understand it might have been better for him if I had acted earlier. When I first had the plan to steal him, it was February, and I didn't know if we could make it in such weather." She looks around at the snow falling, considering cold weather conditions.

"How long did you wait, then?"

"Until the night of the day when I felt the first hint of warm in the air. It was April 4, so that's my birthday for him. Now that I'm an adult and know more about human development, I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and think *If only I had taken him earlier and spared him two more months of*" She trails off. She's still debating her decision and berating herself, all these years later.

My heart wrenches in tandem with hers. "I'm sure it was difficult for you two after you escaped the orphanage, so perhaps it was wise to wait."

She turns to look me, level, as she did in the restaurant when she was telling me to back off because she needs her job. The difference is, at the restaurant she was in a defensive position. Now, I see green fire in the depths of her eyes. My Alpha mate has roared to life.

Her smile is steely, her voice confident. "The moment we left the orphanage, we left all our difficulties behind."

I stop and look at her. I'm momentarily struck dumb. She has told me the absolute truth. Whatever she had to do to survive on the street with a very young boy, who was likely sick and broken, she did not experience as difficult. With every passing second she becomes more extraordinary. When I find my voice, I say, "I'm glad to hear it."

She appraises me, as if she's trying to determine the truth of my comment. She accepts it, if a little warily. I have many truths to tell her, one of which is I will never lie to her.

We begin to walk again. She's far in the past. "They were beating him. A little boy. A toddler. Beating a toddler." She holds up her hands. Her expression is bewildered. "It makes no sense. And you see how sweet he is."

I'll be able to explain to her – hopefully, before the afternoon is over – that baby Ian must have shown signs of shifting from time to time, and his caretakers, in their ignorance, tried to beat the beast out of him. Beginning to shift at such a young age and all alone is unusual, but Ian is an empath, and he's unusual in many respects. Bardulf confirmed my assessment of Ian's gift when he heard the rare synchrony between Ian's and Wulf's growls, which means Ian communicates with canines in general. I'm curious to see how far his gift extends.

"I was one of the older children," she continues, "one who wasn't mentally or physically impaired. I was sent to school to learn to read and write so I could do clerical jobs at the orphanage, like filing. That winter I had deliveries to make to the boys' side of the wards, and one time I heard a little boy crying then whimpering. I heard ..." – here she puts her hand on her chest and looks over at Ian playing with Wulf in the snow – "I heard what he was saying. I understood him. Not in words, of course. And so I began to make my plans."

If I had lingering doubts yesterday that the improbable Misti Shaw was my mate, they have been thoroughly dispelled throughout the course of this day. So much for my initial human prejudices. I am in awe of her. I am humbled by her. My human is as in love with her as is my wolf.

I would feel the same if the child she rescued were human. Her courage, resourcefulness and strength would have been reason enough for me to want and need such a partner. However, the fact she's brought us a precious werewolf is all the more awesome and humbling. Ian is not a Hanover. We would have known if one of our cubs had gone missing. But he's one of us now, and as I see him playing, he knows it, too, on some level, even if my mate does not yet. In the next day or two I'll send out a notice to the wider werewolf community asking if any pack lost a cub sixteen years ago. We may be able to track down his origins.

Thoughts of his pack family lead me to thoughts of hers. I ask the provocative question, "Is your birth name Misti Shaw?"

She swerves her gaze to mine and replies cool as you please, "That's the name on my National Insurance number card."

I laugh. She's given me an undeniably true response – and has as good as admitted she stole her NI card along with Ian. All my snobbery vanishes. I now see the name Misti Shaw as the representation of her courage and resourcefulness. Everything about her is beautiful. Of course, I still want to know her family background and help her to reconnect with them, if I possibly can.

I don't break eye contact. I simply quirk my brows and state non-verbally *Finding out your real name, little one, will be as easy as asking you.*

She looks away. Her emotions are churning madly. She's sensing something more than simple attraction is afoot between us but can't quite figure out what. Her attention shifts to Ian and Wulf, who are running toward us, with Ian beaming ear to ear. Wulf is clearly enchanted by his new playmate.

When they're next to us, Ian tugs on my sleeve. He looks up at me and says, "Churchill."

"Excellent choice," I say, understanding perfectly he's given Wulf his own pet name, as I suggested he do.

My beautiful mate looks at me with wonder and warmth. Ah, there it is. Her attraction to me is rekindling. Then she turns to Ian, cups his face with her hands and tilts his forehead down to touch hers. She kisses him on both cheeks and links arms with him.

"I read to him," she explains. "He likes stories with animals, of course, but he likes everything really, including history."

I take Wulf's leash, and in this fashion we return to Hanover House, chatting amiably about the vagaries of history and various British PMs.

I know what I want, and I'm going to get it. I know what she wants, and I'm going to make sure she gets it. When we enter the lobby, I take off Wulf's leash and hand it to Ian. Then I lead my group to the lifts. I never use the lift, but at the moment it's the most expedient way to get four bodies to my flat. I press Up. I note my mate is confused.

Just as the doors open, it dawns on her what I'm up to.

"Oh, no," she says. "This isn't -"

"It *is* right, and I know what I'm doing."

Her laugh is more of a snort. "I'm sure you do. I'm more interested in what I'm doing, and I'm not doing -"

I'm standing behind her. It's easy to get her in the lift. I give her an encouraging push.

"Hey, no shoving," she says.

She's a stubborn one, but her resistance is crumbling. She heaves a sigh, a very heavy and meaningful one. She's mine.

I met her yesterday for the first time around nine o'clock in the evening, and it's now about two in the afternoon. A quick calculation tells me I've known her for seventeen hours, meaning her resistance has lasted a good sixteen hours and fifty-nine minutes longer than any other woman I've wanted. Another hour would have killed me. Another minute.

Once inside, the doors close. I press 6. Then I pull her back to my front and cross my arms over her breasts. I unwrap her scarf and begin to unbutton her coat. Then I unbutton mine.

"Crickey," she says, perhaps surprised by the degree of her arousal. She's gone beyond aroused and is now outright needy. She turns to look at me and murmurs, "Might as well have a little fun."

Her eyes have just that light of desire and demand I had not realized I've waited my entire adult life to see. I want to lose myself in her gaze, but I have a couple things to do first. Once I've freed her of her coat and shrugged out of mine, I say,

"Ian, tell me something."

Ian's attention is diverted from Wulf.

“Do I have your permission to kiss your sister?”

He nods.

“I mean a very specific kind of kiss.”

Ian looks interested.

“I’ll demonstrate.”

With that I let our coats fall to the floor and turn my mate toward me. I take her luscious body in my arms and press my lips to hers. She’s everything I could want, and the kiss is everything I’ve heard the kiss of a mate would be. At contact, a spark jumps to life, sizzles and grows. She is soft and responsive and becomes ever more soft and responsive with every passing microsecond. What’s more, her scent surrounds me, caresses me, intoxicates me. Last night and earlier this afternoon I perceived it as earth and young berries and water at the time of the spring thaw. With her scent now blending with mine, it becomes more of a lake in early summer thick with wild brambles and marsh lilies. It’s warm and inviting and mine alone. I plan to swim in it all afternoon.

I’m vaguely aware the lift stops and the doors open. A few moments later the doors whisper closed. Now I have to pay attention to what I’m doing and get us all where we need to go as fast I can make it happen.

I reluctantly break the kiss and hit the 6 button before the lift is called into service. The doors open again. I grab our coats, get Ian and Wulf out first then wrap my arm around my mate’s waist. The four of us head down the hallway.

Now for the verdict. “Your thoughts, Ian?”

He turns and looks first at me then at his sister then back at me. I don’t know what he knows about sexuality. His expression holds a hint of embarrassment he doesn’t quite seem to understand. Werewolves are sexually active creatures and demonstrative with their mates, even in public. I’m guessing because my mate has been so affectionate with him, he’ll easily fit in with us. To answer my question he smiles shyly and nods. Then he returns his attention to Wulf.

“You’re horrible,” she tells me, “using my own brother against me.”

“You liked the kiss.”

“A little too much,” she acknowledges, glumly.

I laugh. I seem to laugh a lot around her. I’m still in a state of surprise and delight – the reality of her existence has not yet fully sunk in. Whatever is causing me to laugh

in her presence is also causing me to feel light. This realization brings a further round of surprise and delight because before she entered my life I would not have said I felt heavy.

The four of us enter my foyer, where Rudolf is on hand. The look on my stolid butler's face tells me everything I need to know about my mate in relationship to my pack. He must have suspected something when he met her downstairs, but now it's clear to him who she is – not because I've never brought a woman here before, rather because my transformed emotions are surely visible, as is normal. Rudolf's face hardly moves a muscle. There's only the merest quivering around his mouth to suggest he's suppressing a broad smile. It's what I see in his eyes that's so revealing. He's feeling happy for me, yes, but the lion's share is relief. And the relief is thumping great. I'll have to think about that later.

I hand Rudolf our coats and say, "Ian will keep Wulf company for the rest of the afternoon. No need to send Wulf to the kennel to run with his pack. He can do that tomorrow. Please feed Ian whatever he wants. He's sure to be hungry after playing in the park."

Rudolph nods.

"And please let Bardulf know where I am in case of emergency. Let's hope there won't be any in the next few hours."

Without wasting further words, I put my hands on my mate's shoulders and walk her down the hallway to my bedroom suite.

She turns her head. Her gaze meets mine. "The next few hours?" she asks, torn between puzzlement and excitement.

I grin. "You have no idea, but you're going to find out." It's not a boast. It's a promise. I inhale her arousal, so I'm thinking my job will be easy and very enjoyable. I step up our pace.

"No shoving, I said," she reminds me.

"Hurry up," I growl, getting ahead of myself. "The hallway is too bloody long."

She turns to look at me again. I can see from the gleam in her eye she has responded to my growl. My wolf is very eager to present himself to her, and I want to be honest with her.

At my bedroom, we go in, and I kick the door shut. She's in my arms, and I say, "I need to tell you something."

"No, you don't," she says with impatience.

“Yes, I do. It’s about me. It’s about what’s inside me.”

Her arms are around my neck. She looks up at me, and I’m dazzled by the light in her eyes. “I know what I need to know about what’s inside you. You’re strong and reliable, and – and –” she looks amazed by her own realization “– I trust you. You’ll be good to me and protect me, and we *really* need to get on with this.”

The beautiful urgency in her voice and her shining eyes stained black are enough for me. Her arousal is strong and straightforward, and she’s unafraid. But she’s not a werewolf, and I may have to be gentler with her at first than I was anticipating. Establishing her sexual experience is the most immediate priority. I’ll let my wolf out to play when we’ve bonded.

With my hands still at her waist I kiss the top of her head then lean back to look at her, “Tell me, have you had any bad encounters along the way?”

“No, no bad encounters.”

“Any good ones?”

“I had a boyfriend.” She scrunches her nose. “Once. And not for long.”

I see. “He made a disparaging remark about Ian and promptly got the boot.”

She looks at me with her gorgeous green eyes now stained black and says, almost in disbelief, “Gosh, you’re good.”

“I am, little one.”

She blushes, partly because she’s very aroused and partly because she thinks my endearment is disingenuous. I’ll convince her otherwise. This is the moment to pull the jumper up and over her head to reveal her magnificent body. She’s wearing a plain camisole. Off that comes too. Her bra is similarly plain. I cup her breasts then slide my hands down her curves to her waist. Her skin is beyond beautiful. I say,

“Perfect. Your body is perfect. I want to see all of it. May I?”

She nods. I get busy. Her skirt and tights and booties come off. Her knickers match her other articles of underclothing. I imagine the lingerie I’m going to buy her. But naked will always be better, with all her satiny milk white skin revealed.

I unbutton my shirt, whip my belt out of the loops, toe off my shoes, get rid of my socks. I wrap my arms around her. She slips hers through mine. I take another delightful, delirious kiss. I unhook her bra and slip it off. Her knickers go the way of the bra.

I turn to sit at the end of the bed. She's seated on my lap, her back to my front, her legs straddling my thighs. I have an unobstructed view down the beautiful curves of her body and admire the small thatch of fire between her legs. Red is now my favorite color.

"Your clothes?" she asks.

"They're keeping me in check. You first."

I rub my cheek along her throat. I nip at her neck. I would dearly love to bite her, but I can't until I have her permission. Entranced by the sight of my hands traveling down her body, I stroke her. I caress her breasts, lovely handfuls. Her nipples, palest pink and several shades lighter than her lips, are already peaked. I pinch them for extra stimulation. I'm starting to get the sensation of feminine pleasure, as if it's being telegraphed into my muscles and nerve endings. The moment I skim my fingers down and into the folds between her legs and bring her clit out of hiding, I moan in unison with her, because I can feel what she's feeling.

Now I understand mate attraction. My sexual encounters until this moment were one-sided, and I experienced only my own pleasure. Feeling hers now takes me to heaven. I'll roam around there a while. I'm in no hurry beyond my ability to control myself. I'm receiving so much satisfaction from her pleasure I'm sure I can hold on for a good little while.

With one hand I slip my fingers around her clit, her wetness, and her entrance. Slip and slide. Slide and slip. It's luxurious. I take my time. I'm rewarded with a clench of pleasure around my fingers. I inch my way down and around to the tight rosebud just out of sight and press firmly. Her moans are my moans. I know exactly where she is in her ascent because I can feel the rush and throb of her blood, the teetering edge of her constrictions and contractions then the glorious explosion followed by a tumbling wash of bliss. I press my fingers against her quivering opening so that I can enjoy it, too.

I've never had it so good, and now it's only going to get better. I lift her up, flip the covers back, and toss her on the bed to her squealing delight. I get the rest of my clothing off then dive into the most delicious stream, muscular and still quivering or perhaps quivering anew. With her thighs wrapped around me, I swim upstream in exultant exertion as far as I can go before flinging myself off the highest precipice.

I stay in as long as I can. Before I slip out, I lift her arms over her head and rub my nose in her armpits. The happy thought floats into my head that she's capable of far, far, *far* more than human liking. As I drift along in the scents and sensations, I'm sure I no longer want to live life without my passionate mate.

Chapter Nine

MISTI

Rational thought is not possible at the moment. It's probably not necessary, but some part of me would like to make sense out of what just happened. Maybe later. For now I'll just enjoy the feeling of being turned inside out and having my innards and pink bits massively massaged, satisfied and satisfied again and filled to the first edge of overfilled. I'm even feeling a little greedy. He's still inside me, so I squeeze my thighs together to get another little milk of pleasure from him.

My action rouses him to rub his nose along my nape and neck and shoulders. He seems to prefer to keep his lips around my head rather than on my lips. He likes to nip more than he likes to kiss. I don't mind the preference. However, I really liked the kiss in the elevator. It was sweet and hot at the same time. So was the kiss before he took off my underwear. But whatever he wants is fine with me. Maybe I can take the initiative and kiss him on the lips, if that's what I want. At the moment I'm too tired to make the effort. About all I can do is to breathe him in. He smells amazing. Woodsy.

We disentangle. He turns toward me with his head propped on a hand. The sheet is bunched around us, but I'm able to see most of his body, which is corded with muscle. The sprinkling of soft hair across his torso gets thicker in a vee down to his groin. His skin makes mine look whiter, or perhaps mine makes his look darker. He rolls toward me, and now his hands are all over me. No matter where they go, his fingers always end up lodged between my nether lips, thereby producing little zips and zaps of sensation, further impeding rational thought. But I've already come to the conclusion I don't need rational –

I push him away and sit bolt upright. I pull the sheet up to cover my breasts and tummy rolls. He shifts up so his torso rests against the headboard. He reaches out and snatches the sheet from my breasts.

"Hey!" I protest.

"I like to look at you."

I frown.

"Get over it," he says, his gaze roaming over me then demands, "What thought darted through your head just now?"

I blink. What startled me just now is suddenly not my most pressing concern. I ask, "Am I still supposed to call you Mr. Hanover?"

He looks at me a few long moments before he says, "We'll get to that. Now, surely, this question is not what caused you to sit up."

“No,” I admit, “it’s rather I just realized we didn’t use protection. It’s ... it’s irresponsible.”

“You’re not in heat, so you don’t need to worry about pregnancy.”

“You can’t know anything about my period.”

“I can and do. Furthermore, you’re not sexually active, so I have no fear of getting a sexually transmitted disease from you. And I have too much responsibility on my shoulders to risk such a disease myself, so you can be sure I have a clean bill of health. Have I calmed your fears?”

No, because maybe he’s a sociopath. I’ve heard they sound completely reasonable, which is why they get away with what they do. I nod. “Yeah, no worries.”

He shakes his head and rolls his eyes toward the ceiling. He utters a cryptic, “Soon.” Then, flatly, “The sooner the better.”

He reaches out for me. Without quite knowing how it happens, I’m flipped over and find myself face down. The man is all muscle. When he tossed me on the bed to begin our previous round, he did not strain with my weight. Now he’s kneeling on the bed, straddling my thighs. He hoists my hips in the air, splays my legs, and gets his thighs between them. He reaches around to grasp my breasts. He tweaks my nipples. The pleasure is intense. Then he bends over me and slides his nose down my spine to my butt cheeks but doesn’t stop there, and when he sticks his nose in my crack –

– I wriggle to get out of this humiliating position. I mean, my armpits were one thing. This is another.

He rears up and spanks me. Not hard, I admit, but I’m further humiliated – and further turned on. I’m also angry. From my very awkward position I turn to look at him looming over me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting to know you.”

“Ick.”

His gaze is very penetrating. He presses his erection against my open arse. He doesn’t break eye contact, and I can’t look away.

“Tell me, little one, what do you think I’m going to find when I reach your pretty pussy?” He moves both hands from my breasts and trails the tips of his fingers down my torso to my tummy, tickling me in a way that I don’t know whether I want to press into his touch or escape it. His fingers continue. Embarrassed, excited, I know

exactly what he's going to find.

"That's right. I'm going to discover you like what we're doing. And nothing about you or your body is unpleasant or distasteful to me. So. I'm going to continue. Just enjoy it."

He sticks his nose back in my crack and runs the length. His fingers reach my clit from the front. That's it. This won't take long. My bum is completely available to him. I should continue to be embarrassed but I'm so aroused I don't have room for any other sensation. I'm drilling down to the core of being. I can't imagine being apart from him. This is animal magnetism, industrial strength. He licks my clit from behind and then runs his tongue to the base of my spine and trails it back down again, swirls around my rosebud. A few seconds later I'm saturated in pleasure and quivering on his face, and I can tell he likes it. It feels wonderful. It even feels meaningful, like I've let go and trusted him.

He shifts back and enters me. I revel in the pleasurable stretch and have a darting thought he'll take me in my arsehole next, and I'm going to like it, too. Then no thoughts trouble my attention and I blend my pleasure with his. We travel as one out onto a long horizon where we move through liquid fire and arrive at blazing ecstasy.

That's not the end of things. His stamina amazes me. He's constantly attentive and, yes, he takes interest in every orifice. I'm hardly aware of the passage of time, but there comes a moment when I see the room darkening slightly with the setting of the sun as it's filtered through the sheers at the windows. The drapes aren't closed. I'm vaguely aware of the luxury of the room, which means I'm returning to my surroundings and awareness.

I untangle myself from his arms and scoot a bit over to my side of the bed. He lets me go with a nod and a lazy smile. I sense he's at maximum satisfaction. And if he's not, I am.

I sit up and bring the sheet with me. He follows suit and once again takes the sheet away. I grab at it.

He holds it out of my reach. "You're a goddess, and I like looking at you."

Goddess. I try the idea on for size. "All right." Then I voice my real concern. "Do you think Mr. – that is – Rudolf can communicate with Ian, if Ian needs something?"

Instead of answering my question, he grins. "I don't know how long we've been here, but my guess is this is the longest you've gone without thinking about Ian, including when you're asleep."

I smile and shrug. "Maybe."

“I wouldn’t have bothered to try this” – he twirls his index finger to indicate our surroundings – “without Ian under the same roof. Your peace of mind, little one, was the only way I would be sure to have you all to myself. And I did.” His grin is very self-satisfied and –

Wolfish. That’s what it is, wolfish. I say impulsively, “You’re a wolf.”

He seems pleased. “Now that you mention it – ”

“The Big Bad Wolf,” I clarify. “You found the way to make me stray from the path.”

He reaches out and plays with my hair. My braid is a complete mess. He further unplaits it and combs his fingers through the lengths. “Of all your fairy tales, Little Red Riding Hood is the one I like least.”

“My fairy tales? Aren’t they yours, too?”

“Not that one. Wolves have many qualities. One, they mate for life.”

“Oh. That’s nice.”

“And two –”

A sharp knock on the door interrupts him, and a voice calls through the wood, “There’s been another one.”

Instantly alert, he throws back the covers. He bites off an angry, “Bollocks.”

“Is that – ?” I wonder.

“Yes, Bardulf, my B – your Boss.” He looks at me then swears again. He’s gathering his clothing. Then loudly, “Coming.”

He dresses hastily. He looks back at me, frowns to see I’ve drawn the sheet up to my chin. He opens his mouth then closes it, perhaps in frustration. He glances at the door then back at me. He shakes his head, again perhaps in frustration.

“We’ll pick up where we left off. Not sure when. This is an emergency, but hopefully it won’t take long. At least I had time to –” He doesn’t finish his thought. He shoves his shirttails in his trousers and picks up his belt.

As he goes to the door, he grabs his shoes and socks and says, “Stay here.” Opening the door, he repeats, as if the matter is settled, “Stay here.”

Then he’s gone.

Well.

Now what?

I have no intention of staying here. When I woke up this morning, I would never have thought my day would get loopy and then turn even loopier. I have no idea what's going on here, and I'm sure I can't figure it out while I'm here. I need some distance. Also, I think Ian has had quite a lot of stimulation, and he might be better off at home now, too. Thinking of Ian always steadies me. Okay, good. Rational thought has returned.

With my mind functioning again, I can get dressed. I'd like to clean myself up, but I want to get out of here more. What to do about my hair? I rebraid it to the best of my ability. When I'm halfway presentable I peek out the door. The hallway looms like a long Walk of Shame. Fortunately it's empty. It's going to be embarrassing to have to deal with Rudolf, but it's not like he doesn't know what we were doing. Who are 'we,' anyway? Me and Mr. I'll Get Back To You On That.

I reach the foyer. I see Rudolf waiting for my appearance around the corner in what looks to be the lounge. It's spacious and beautifully decorated, and now I really want to get out of here as quickly as possible.

"Ian?" I enquire.

"He's in the kitchen."

"I'll just take him, our coats and my handbag, please."

Rudolf pauses. "Were you given instructions to leave?"

"I wasn't given any instructions." I figure this porker won't truly make my nose grow.

For all he lacks expression, he manages to look surprised. "You weren't?"

"No," I say as innocently as possible.

To this he says nothing, yet I have the sense of his continuing surprise.

"Well! Ian and I have a few things to do at home. And, ah, do you happen to know what time it is?"

"Yes, ma'am, five thirty."

"Right, thanks. Then I'll be at home until a little before seven, that is, if Mr. Hanover

asks.”

“Mr. Hanover?” he echoes. His surprise had shaded into confusion.

Bad presumption on my part, apparently. Why would Mr. Hanover ask about my whereabouts? I hold up my hands as if to say *Forget it!*

He asks, “He knows where you live, I trust?”

Now I’m the one confused. “Oh, yes,” I say brightly, “a couple doors down in Montague Street. Then after that I’ll be – Oh! Ian, there you are.” With Wulf prancing happily along beside him. “Well, we’ll be going now.”

I can’t get us out of here fast enough. I say our good-byes in words. Ian gives them in hugs. He includes Rudolf in his affection. We leave.

As we go down the hallway Ian says, “Churchill.” Between Hanover House and Wilde House he says “Churchill” five more times. I count them. They bring his word count for the day to an astounding thirteen, and I don’t care that six of the words happen to be the exact same one. He said seven different words during lunch. His previous word count high for a day is three. Often it’s one or two. Usually it’s none. So today is off the charts.

When we go through our little gate and take the side path to our entrance, I can see Ian is over the moon. I know it’s the best day of his life.

Not sure how to categorize it for me. It’s been good, no doubt about it, even great. But loopy, too.

Chapter Ten

MISTI

Before leaving Mr. Hanover’s flat I already decided to go to work tonight. If I don’t show up, they’ll be shorthanded. It’s Friday, and the bar is sure to be busy. Even if I had decided not to go to work tonight, I can’t call Boss to give him a head’s up to find a replacement for me, because he’s probably as caught up as Mr. Hanover in whatever emergency just occurred. *Another one*, Boss said.

Going to work is the ethical thing to do.

Ian and I get to our flat. Tacked on the message board next to our front door is a note from Mr. Wilde. I read it aloud:

“I’ll be out for the evening with Felan and Farkas, so Ian doesn’t need to come get them until tomorrow morning around 7:00. Mr. W.”

“Oh,” I say, disappointed. I immediately reconsider my decision about work tonight.

When Ian first started taking care of the dogs for Mr. Wilde, he did so only during the day. Then when I began working at Hanover House, I was anxious leaving Ian home alone, so I bought a couple of house cams and downloaded the remote app, so I could monitor the situation. It wasn't long before Felan and Farkas started staying with Ian in the evening, sometimes late into the night, and Mr. Wilde didn't seem to mind. So, now when I'm at work, the purpose of the app shifted from me being sure Ian is okay to me entertaining myself from time to time. Whenever Ian is with the dogs, I know he's okay. But if there are to be no dogs this evening

Ian makes some noises, but none of them sound like disappointment. He shrugs. He even smiles. Then I see a sparkle come into his eyes. When he opens his mouth, I know what he's going to say, so we say in unison,

“Churchill.”

Fourteen! Fourteen words in one day. I laugh in joy and hug him to me. Then I ruffle his hair. He's getting so tall. He's growing up. I have to recognize that. And today he took great strides. I'm confident he'll be just fine on his own this evening. He's had a good Churchill fix. I certainly don't have to worry about him getting hungry. He's been well fed, and we do have food in the house at the moment.

Ian unlocks the door. He always locks and unlocks the door when we go in or out together. He has his own key, because I would never dream of locking him inside when I'm at work and anything could happen. He's proud of his door duty.

We step into our flat. I hang my handbag on the stand next to the front door. We throw our coats over the hooks.

I tell Ian, “I'm going to head to the shower.”

He shakes his head and pulls on my arm. He goes to the bookcase and takes out *The Secret Countess*. I'm a sucker for it.

“Of course! You quoted it to Mr. Hanover at lunch, so it's on your mind. I'll take my shower later, love. I have time now to read a passage or two. Which one do you want?”

We flop down on the cushy sofa, and I open the book. Ian snuggles close to me, closer than usual. I let him pick the passage. I'm not sure he can read, but I do know he has a good memory, because he knows exactly where every passage is. I'm surprised by the one he chooses now, because he's never chosen it before.

The hero, Rupert, accompanied by Baskerville comes upon the heroine, Anna, while

she's washing herself in the lake on his property in the light of the silvery moon.

I read, "She might get into trouble, Rupert reasoned with himself, for there was a place where the tree roots went deep into the lake. *I'd better stay.* But there was no question of her getting into trouble; he knew that perfectly well. She swam easily and somehow, across the silent water, he caught her delight, her oneness with the dark water and the night.

"It was when she finally turned for the shore that Nemesis overtook her in the form of Baskerville, who, finished with chasing his rabbit, bounded over to the water and barked for all he was worth. She began to berate the dog, her voice low and husky and a little bit afraid, while she endeavored to wrap herself into her towel. Baskerville, suddenly recognizing her, made matters worse by leaping up and trying to lick her face'."

Rupert steps onto the scene here, and he and Anna have a conversation. It's a short passage, hardly four pages. When I come to the end, Ian has me read it again. As I do, I notice him sniffing my neck. He's never done that before while we've been reading. This passage has a comic touch, a mildly provocative touch. Mostly it's sweet, as is the whole story.

I finish the second reading. Ian sniffs my neck again then points to the place in the passage where Rupert watches Anna washing herself. He wants to hear that for a third time. Goodness me, I understand. His interest in the book has moved away from Baskerville and toward Anna, naked with her waist-length thick black hair. I look at him and smile.

He's going to be sixteen next April. He saw the kiss Mr. Hanover and I exchanged in the elevator. He was even invited to watch us and to give his opinion of it. Now I understand why he didn't want me to wash off whatever scent is surrounding me. His eyes are shiny and bright and curious.

Should have seen this one coming! My baby really is growing up. Some day soon he'll be a man. He's interested in girls, not in me but in Anna. She'd be perfect for him. I wonder if there's a woman out there who would love him as much as I do. I hope he finds her.

I read the lines he wants. I put the book down on my lap, "Enough?"

He nods. He takes the book and holds it.

I take my shower. My shift starts at seven o'clock and ends when it ends. I'm both well rested and energetic. Three hours in the sack has health benefits.

When it's time, I kiss Ian on both cheeks and leave him with my usual, "Be good!"

I go out our side entrance and down the path. When I unlatch the gate, I pause to look up. The moon is hanging low. The dent in the silver shilling has filled out. This winter moon is so fat and full I fancy it will be slow to rise tonight. The air is crisp. There may be another round of snow flurries in the offing.

As I make my way to Hanover House I think back over things I'd rather not. Part of the weird and admittedly wonderful experiences I had with Mr. Hanover this afternoon was when I told him the truth about Ian and me. I've never told anyone the truth about us before. Perhaps I was prompted to do so because I agreed with him only a monster would separate Ian and me, and I know Mr. Hanover's not a monster. I also know he was genuinely interested in Ian and our story. I don't know why, anymore than I could know why he could be so sure where I am in my menstrual cycle. The phrase 'in heat' he used is odd, as well. However, he was right. I'm at the end of this month's cycle and will get my period in the next few days.

Thoughts of my body's functions, Ian's sexual awakening, memories of our past freshly exposed earlier today pull me back. But I refuse to think about the Old Bat (and I refuse to ever think of her with her real name). If I'm going to be pulled back, I'll stop at the week before I rescued Ian. It was busy one day with two paid staff and two volunteers. Office procedures were usually lax, the paperwork often sloppy, and everyone always overworked. I should never have had access to the information I did.

While I was filing a fair few documents in the main office, I came across a stack of ten dossiers. They needed to be prepared to mail off to government offices. I saw one marked *Misti Shaw*. I knew the girl but hadn't seen her for a few weeks, so I opened it. The first page was the proper orphanage form. Behind it were her birth certificate, NI card, and death certificate. Cause of death: pneumonia. She was a year older than me at the time, poor thing, which I figured would be a good thing for me, since it would be an advantage to be a year older. Without further thought, I knocked her dossier behind the desk. I then asked permission to mail out the remaining dossiers. I never worked so quickly to get nine dossiers in their envelopes, addressed, and into the mail bin before anyone counted them.

The next day I retrieved Misti Shaw's dossier from behind the desk. Another four or five days later, I figured out a way to sneak into the boys' ward before evening lock-up. In the dead of night I took Ian and broke out of his dorm window. The moment he wrapped his skinny arms around my neck, I knew we'd be all right.

The authorities could search for me, Saoirse Ahearn, all they liked. They didn't even know to go looking for Misti Shaw. As far as Unholy Cross (I will never call it by its official name) orphanage was concerned, Misti was dead and gone. The British government believed she was alive and well.

Over the next two years we managed to figure out how to keep warm, fed and relatively clean. And I do mean *we*. No one will ever believe me, but Ian helped me as

much as I helped him. He did especially well for us in the spring, summer, and autumn finding places to camp out in parks. In winter he was also good at finding the best nook in the Tube to hide out in. It was fortunate he was already potty-trained. Diapers would have been difficult. I had to learn how to steal. He was a natural.

We spent a lot of daytime in public libraries. We moved around the libraries, so no one would know I wasn't in school on a regular basis, and I tried to make it look like I was doing schoolwork and tending to my younger brother. The first time I read him a book, I could tell he understood. Thereafter, we were able to explore the world in words. We liked Limehouse District Public Library best.

Then came our first big break. After I turned sixteen according to my NI card, Mrs. Barrows, one of the motherly librarians at Limehouse, asked if I wanted to earn a few pence doing odd jobs around the library. I loved the work, always with Ian at my side. Over the months, she figured out we were homeless, and she offered us a room in the back. There was even a toilet on the hall, and she never turfed us out. We were on our way.

Here's what I've learned. First: evil finds evil, and good finds good. Ian and I left evil behind at Unholy Cross and have found good. Second: there's a difference between educated and smart. We're not educated, but we're smart. Third: it's good to have a reason for living. Ian's mine.

I'm glad I have work ahead of me this evening to turn my thoughts from the past and toward the future. At Hanover House I go through the employee's entrance, don my uniform, and get myself behind the bar. Before stashing my handbag, I get my phone out and tap the camera icon. Ian's stretched out on the floor, with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. From my camera angle it looks like he's smiling. I put the phone away.

I'm ready for anything. What I'm about to get is a load of flaming rubbish. That, and a barroom fairly full by eight o'clock. The evening is on track to become a corker. Tips are already flowing.

Mr. Radley is sitting front and center at the bar. He gets the rubbish going by saying, "The moon is full, and the werewolves are coming out tonight. That's what everyone's been saying since this afternoon."

I've got my hands full, filling orders. My query is somewhat absent, somewhat amused. "Everyone?"

"I follow a blogger named Werewolf Hunter, and just this afternoon he put up a post predicting a slaughter in London tonight."

So, 'everyone' is one blogger. "Has a lot of followers, does he?" I ask next, still

keeping conversation going without thinking about it too much.

“Two days ago it was a handful,” he tells me, “and today it’s thousands.” He takes out his phone and swipes. Then he holds it up for me to see. He points to a number in the lower right of the screen. “This is his follower count, and you see the number soaring by the second.”

My eyes widen. My attention is caught. “Blimey. What’s going on?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“No, what?”

He tells me, with some gusto, about the mauling of an old lady yesterday in Regent’s Park then another one just a few hours ago in St. Johns Wood, an old man. He scrolls some more then turns the screen toward me. I rear my head back from the truly ghoulish photos.

These murders are news to me. We don’t own a telly. The first mobile I bought was after we moved into Mr. Wilde’s house, and I decided I could afford the luxury. I have the cheapest plan and use it only to look at the remote camera and to text with Mrs. Barrows and a girlfriend from the old neighborhood.

Mr. Radley continues, “The mauling yesterday was during the day but in the park, so it was probably easier to kill undetected. The one today, again in the middle of the day, was on a street, St. Johns Wood Terrace, if you please. Still no witnesses!”

I’m trying to understand. “But ... but ... werewolves?”

“You’ve heard of them, certainly.”

“Of course.” Library shelves are full of werewolf stories. I never chose any of them, because I figured it was better to read Ian stories of real animals. “How can you know a werewolf is the killer?”

Still holding the screen in my direction, he asks, “Could a human do this?”

I peek at the pictures. They are gruesome. I don’t know what to think.

The man seated next to Mr. Radley joins in. “Yesterday’s killing in the park wasn’t as clear cut. But today, well! A wild animal can’t show up in the middle of the street, maul someone then disappear. Only a werewolf could come and go like that. One minute a wolf, the next a man, and no one the wiser. So, now we have two killings in a row, out of the blue. It’s a sign of bloodlust.”

I don’t see the logic. “The two murders occurred in grand neighborhoods. Are you

sure robbery isn't more a motive than bloodlust?"

Mr. Radley says with an air of expertise, "Werewolves are rich and always live in the best neighborhoods."

I don't know how he knows this or what it proves. We're in a rich neighborhood, too. I'm stuck on trying to find the logic. If werewolves existed, I'd think they'd go out of their neighborhoods to do their killing. Right, then, I have a job on, so I leave the two men to wang on about fantastical creatures.

As I serve up my Library Schools and Ian's Certificates I discover that the topic of werewolves is at the center of almost every conversation around the bar. As the drinks flow and the crowd becomes a throng, I pick up the sense everyone is out tonight because of the werewolf story circulating. Fear and excitement waft. The atmosphere is electric. In honor of the occasion I dub one of my cocktails Werewolves of London.

I learn a lot from the snatches of conversations I catch as I move around the bar area. It's not difficult to piece together the big picture. There was a werewolf rampage in London long ago, there are werewolf-watching societies today and then there's the Werewolf Hunter blogger. At first I'm skeptical of him, because it seems mighty convenient for a blogger to predict a slaughter by werewolves when he himself might be the killer. But, yeah, such a smoke screen is too convenient, and I overhear a clot of people at one end of the bar saying how the blogger has tons of witnesses to confirm his whereabouts across town in Stepney and Cheapside during the times of the two murders.

At one moment Thomas and I are next to one another, mixing our drinks.

"So, what do you think?" he asks.

"I think everyone's daft. An effect of the full moon, I'm guessing."

"You don't believe in werewolves?"

I'm a bit surprised. "You do? Have you ever seen one?"

"No, but I'm willing to believe. Don't you believe in things you've never seen?"

I smile. I believe in angels and spirit guides. "All right, I see your point."

That's all we have time for.

Not much later I'm searching the shelves for a particular brand of vodka, and I *feel* him. Just like that. With my back to the door, through nearly wall-to-wall bodies, I'm sure Mr. Hanover has entered the room.

I turn and see him making his way through the crowd. I can read his facial expression and even his emotions. They're complex. When he makes eye contact with me, I see his concern and anxiety shift to relief and annoyance. Oops, I feel a bit sorry about his annoyance, like it's my fault he's feeling that way.

Chapter Eleven

EGON

Bardulf had no choice but to come get me. The timing's bad, but it could have been worse. When I leave her side, I'm satisfied we've established our essential bond, but I'm far from satisfied she remains in ignorance of the essential facts, and I'm sorry now I didn't insist on telling her about me. But her beautiful body, her beautiful eyes, and words of trust did me in. I'm eager to return to her, but I can't allow that eagerness to impair my judgment or the care I take in dealing with my own large extended pack and all the other lesser packs.

Guardians of the packs all over the city, regardless of size, have been on high alert for the past twenty-four hours. Since early this morning I was meeting with as many packs as possible. With my sudden change of plans noontime, Pyotr took up a lot of slack. Now many of us are out of our houses, providing the eyes and ears and noses for our community as a whole. If the human community but knew it, today they're rubbing shoulders with more werewolves than they could ever suspect to exist.

Our good ground game allowed a couple of us to be on the scene within five minutes of the St. Johns Wood Terrace mauling. Two Hanover females were out and scented the blood in the air. They were the first on the scene and immediately rang Bardulf. Only then did they ring the police.

As we leave Hanover House, Bardulf gives me the run down. "Our females concurred only one human was involved in the killing. They also agreed two dogs had done the mauling."

"Yesterday only one dog was involved, no?"

"No telling, since Pyotr's Guardian picked up the scents when they weren't as fresh. Unfortunately, our females couldn't tell the breed, but they could sense the dogs' scents were muted to make it seem as if only one was involved and mimicked to the scent of a human, though not perfect."

I say the obvious. "Definitely the work of a werewolf baiter, one who chooses to prey on the elderly, as if they're expendable. The worry is how far the baiter will go."

Now that I'm back in action in the late afternoon, Pyotr and I, ferried by Aksel, finish meeting with every Alpha around London. We are assured no rogue is in our midst.

We were confident in Pyotr's Guardian's assessment the Regent's Park mauling was the work of a human and a human-trained dog. However, with a media uproar in the making, we have to be one hundred percent certain the werewolf community is united, off any human's radar and, most importantly, innocent.

We know what's going on in the blogosphere. We see plainly what's going on in the streets. I would have thought the news of a werewolf rampage in the making would keep people in their houses tonight. But, no. Humans are an unpredictable lot. Or, maybe, they're overly predictable. Citizens of old Rome relished the lion fights in the Coliseum. Perhaps my fellow Londoners are hoping for a similarly bloody show tonight and are playing the odds they won't *be* the show. From my point of view, I'm glad my mate and our new cub are off the street and safe.

When Pyotr, Bardulf and I are satisfied street security is in place all over the city, Pytor heads to a further meeting, while Bardulf and I return to Hanover House. We bound up the stairs and enter my flat to encounter Rudolf who seems to be in a state of some consternation.

"Everything all right?" I ask.

Before Rudolf can answer, Wulf, sensing my arrival, emerges from the far regions of the flat and bounds across the lounge. I greet him briefly then look around for Ian.

"Where's the boy?" I ask.

Rudolf has all the appearance of being stuffed. "He's left with Miss Shaw."

"Left?" I say, incredulous. "After I told her to stay?"

Rudolf looks mortified. Bardulf won't meet my gaze. No one in my pack defies my orders. Then, again, she doesn't know she's in my pack.

Rudolf says without emotion, "She said you gave her no orders."

"Bugger." She lies a lot. That's about to stop. I'd like to berate Rudolf for letting her go, but it's not his fault. He can't countermand my mate, especially when I'm not around to say otherwise.

He makes a clean breast of it. "She also referred to you as Mr. Hanover."

Poor man. He's confused. My mate would never refer to me that way. She and I just didn't get to that part of the conversation.

"Don't worry. Did she tell you where she was going?"

"Home, and she said you know where she lives."

“I do.”

Bardulf and I leave. Bardulf goes to the offices to keep tabs on the situation on the street. I walk over to Wilde House. Although her scent is unexpectedly faint, I follow it to the side path. The side door is unlocked. I go up the stairs to the top. I knock and get no response. I knock again with the same result. Now I’m a trifle worried. The lock to their flat is a joke. I open the door, step inside, flip on the light and look around.

It’s not bad. It’s warm enough. It’s also neat and clean, if somewhat sparsely furnished. A book is lying open, spine up, on the sofa. I pick it up and read the pages the book is opened to. So this is the story with Baskerville. I look at the title. Never heard of it. I put it back down.

I survey the situation. On the floor to one side of the sofa is a pile of sheets and blankets. It’s Ian’s bed. It doesn’t surprise me he sleeps on the floor. I cross the main room and poke my head in my mate’s bedroom. It smells divine.

I’m not happy about the situation, but I’m not worried because I have a good idea where they are. So I close up and retrace my steps to Hanover House. I get Bardulf from the office and together we go to the barroom. I’ve never seen it so packed. The scents in the air are a dense tangle. It’s not easy to detect hers, but I can’t miss it, and I know she’s here. I make my way to the bar.

I’m ten feet away and, even through this crowd, I have her complete attention, solid eye contact. Good. It means she’s bonded to me. I even like the stab of guilt she feels – tiny but there. She knows I’m cross, meaning she registered my command to stay put and understands the significance of choosing to ignore it. We’ll work on that.

No point trying to talk through this hubbub. I crook my finger and gesture for her to come around to the front side of the bar. She bends down and grabs her handbag. I tell Bardulf to take my mate’s place as bartender.

My Beta is the best. He rubs his hands together in delight. “On it. And I’ll call in some kitchen lads to help back here. I see Thomas is drowning.”

I move toward the end of the bar she’s coming around. When she’s within arm’s reach, I grab her hand and pull her toward me.

“Get Ian,” I say, “and we’re going upstairs.”

“He’s at home.”

I put her in front of me, place my hands on her shoulders, and scrum our way through the crowd toward the entrance. “No, he’s not.”

“Yes, he is.” With her free hand she gropes in the handbag slung over her shoulder and retrieves her phone. She holds it up for me to see, taps an icon then utters, “Oh!” I’m looking at a dark screen, and I feel her first flutter of fear.

She taps again. It looks like a camera app. Again, nothing. “He was there when I checked in not much over an hour ago.” She reconsiders. “Much more than an hour ago.”

“He’s not at your flat,” I repeat, “because I was just there.”

“You were? How did you get in?”

“Your locks do not qualify as locks.”

“Oh. How long ago?” She’s getting panicky.

“Five minutes. Lights off. No sign of him.”

“He’s never done this before.”

“Never?” I’m surprised. Our young are able to be on the street alone at age of four or five, but rarely do we let them because it upsets humans who usually want to call the police to report a stray child. But at Ian’s age? How odd. There’s a problem here, but I have to keep a cool head, if only for my mate’s sake.

We’ve made it through the waves of bodies. Now in the hallway we have space to move. She turns to me. I keep my hands on her shoulders.

She looking up at me with all her love for Ian in her eyes and, yes, her love for me, at least in part, because she knows I value him. “He changed today. I’m happy for his changes and so ... so grateful to you! But – how can I explain this? – he’s never before *wanted* to go outside without me. And he wants to now. To find – to find, oh dear, he’s so unusual I’m worried he may get into trouble. You see, before tonight, the only times he’s ever been outside without me is when he’s tending to Felan and Farkas, Mr. Wilde’s dogs.”

At mention of these two names my blood runs cold.

She immediately perceives my emotional state. “What?” she says, her panic rising. “*What?*”

Too many pieces fall into place at once for me to be able to explain. Until this moment I had not thought through the implications of a young male werewolf growing up completely outside the werewolf community. I’ve never heard of such a case, so I couldn’t know what to expect. But I now understand Ian has never fully

shifted before, and this circumstance is compounded by a full moon and a human maniac on the loose. I will not tell her Felan is the Irish word 'wolf' and Farkas is the Hungarian word 'wolf'.

"Wait here," I say as calmly as I can. "And I mean it."

She nods solemnly.

I make my way back to the bar and get Bardulf's attention. "Round up Rudolf, the young woman who brought us tea in the sitting room this afternoon, and anyone else you can think of who knows what Ian looks like. He decided to go out for a walk tonight."

Bardulf's eyes widen. He calls to Thomas, "I'm leaving, but don't worry. Reinforcements are already on the way."

As the two of us go back through the crowd, I decide our strategy. "Your team will fan out in the direction of Bloomsbury Garden Park, a likely destination for Ian. My mate and I will go toward Wilde House. It has a large and secluded garden, making it another likely destination for Ian."

I don't know how to think like a damaged sixteen-year-old werewolf, but I can think like an undamaged one. I factor in the information he's never gone outside before unaccompanied by a human or dogs.

Once back in the hallway, Bardulf goes on ahead. I take my mate's hand and lead her through the hotel. There's no time to fetch overcoats. As we cross the lobby to the front door, I take off my suit jacket and spread it over her shoulders. I fend off her objection by saying,

"Believe me, I'm better prepared to deal with the cold than you."

She doesn't protest. The doors are opened for us, and we go down the six steps to the sidewalk. I take her hand, and we head toward Wilde House. I prick up my ears. I don't detect anything yet. Our pace is brisk, but the cold can account for that, so I don't have to worry we're attracting attention. If anything, my jacket draped across her shoulders makes me look chivalrous. I look up. The moon is high in the sky.

"I know you know something," she says after a few paces.

I shake my head. "Only a suspicion."

The next second my suspicion becomes a certainty. A werewolf's hearing is better than a human's. It's even better when we've shifted but, still, in human form we can hear what humans don't. I now hear mewling attempts to howl at the moon garbled with fear and pain. I hear dogs growling.

I hasten our pace. My mate is nearly running.

I'm mulling over the way the human killer knows how to mask the scent of his dogs, how to make them smell more like humans. I add it to Mr. Wilde's profession in chemistry and the fact my mate's scent was so faint around the outside of his house, when I should have found it strong. I'm guessing the same reason is why I didn't catch Ian's location first time around. Wilde House is wrapped in artificial human scent. Now that I'm focused on it, I can tell, yes, it's a bit off.

"The house?" she asks.

"The garden," I answer.

We blow through the gate. I hear dogs snarling. I hear a man's voice cackling gleefully,

"I knew it! I knew it! And in my own house, too."

Before we round the corner to the back of the house I see quick flashes of light pierce the moonlit darkness accompanied by the refrain, "I knew it! I knew it! Now I've got proof, and you're done for!"

I'm glad I've already shed my jacket. I've got the scent of the situation, Ian's confusion and fear, Wilde's blood thirst, dogs salivating for the kill.

I strip.

I shift.

I leap.

Chapter Twelve

MISTI

I step around the side of the house and into the garden bathed in moonlight. So much happens at once I can hardly sort it. The only emotion I can register is fear prickling through my whole body. Beside me an enormous brown wolf leaps into the air as if he sprang from below the earth on powerful haunches and split the ground.

During the second the wolf sails through the air I see Mr. Wilde holding onto the leashes of Felan and Farkas. Their bared teeth gleam wickedly in the dark. They strain madly against their leashes. Mr. Wilde rants and raves. Light flashes from his mobile. He's taking pictures of –

– a strange figure standing in the middle of the garden. My fear intensifies. He’s the same height as Ian and has a similar face, but it’s distorted, like his nose has elongated. His shirt is ripped. His arms are as distorted as his face. Muscles bunch in odd places. Fur has sprouted, but perhaps my vision of his fuzzy outline is a trick of the moonlight.

The strange figure is making animal noises of some kind. I’m not sure what animal. He appears to be frozen in pain, perhaps startled by the cruel light of the flashes. Then I hear him whimper. I know that whimper. My fear dissolves into horror at what might happen to him and transforms into an urgent desire to comfort him.

This infinite second of time elapses. The powerful wolf descends on Felan and Farkas. I watch, horrified, fascinated, as he rips their throats out. He turns next to Mr. Wilde, emits a low growl, and places his great forepaws on the man’s shoulders, knocking him to the ground. The back of Mr. Wilde’s head hits the paving stones, and his body goes limp. I can’t tell if he’s dead. I also can’t tell if the wolf deliberately turned him so he would fall on the stones rather than the grass inches away. It does seem deliberate when the wolf pads over to the mobile that flew from Mr. Wolfe’s hands during his fall and kicks it across the grass in my direction.

It comes to a stop a foot in front of me. When I bend down to pick it up, I see Mr. Hanover’s clothes in a disorderly pile on the ground next to me. I look up and over at the large wolf. He’s looking directly at me, his gaze steady. I don’t quite believe it yet but at least my fear is receding. My nerves are now tingling so intensely I’m shaking. I have to remember to breathe. I have the presence of mind to slip the mobile into my bra. It needs to be hidden.

As if I have not witnessed enough in the past three seconds, what I see next is so extraordinary it weakens my knees in awe. The large wolf goes to the strange figure still standing frozen and distorted in the center of the garden. The wolf walks slowly around the frozen figure, brushing his powerful body around the boy’s legs. He goes slowly, round and round, unhurried and patient. Round and round.

In the light streaming down from the heavens I see the strange creature – I must now acknowledge him as Ian – transform into the wolf that must have been inside him all along, his clothes but shreds on the ground beside him. The larger wolf nuzzles and nudges him, walks with him back and forth, as if showing him the way of it. Then together they walk toward me. The larger wolf steps aside. The smaller one remains.

He’s looking up at me. I know him like I know myself. I see all his pain and sweetness. It’s the same pain and sweetness I first heard in his little boy’s voice. I fall down to the ground and wrap my arms around his neck. He’s warm. His fur is thick and soft. His heart is beating madly. It’s bursting with love for me, for the wolf who helped make him a wolf, for the beauty and gift of his life, now complete.

I begin to weep into his neck, releasing all the concern I've always had for him. My tears of sadness for him blend into tears of joy for him. I know he'll be all right from now on. No more pain, only sweetness.

"I didn't know," I tell him. "I didn't know. I didn't know. But I tried. I did my best. I hope you know that."

His answering growl is more like a contented grumble. He doesn't need words to let me know how happy he is, how much he loves me.

Standing above us I hear Mr. Hanover say, "We have to move fast. You two can catch up later."

I look up. Through my tears I see he's dressed.

He kneels down and whispers into my little wolf's ear. Of course, my smart little wolf understands. Then Mr. Hanover takes a few strides across the grass, picks up the tatters of Ian's clothes, and returns to us. By the time he's back, I'm hugging a naked boy on all fours.

Mr. Hanover fishes in Ian's trousers pockets. "Here are your keys," he says to him, "and take these clothes. Hide them well then get dressed and come back down. I'm ringing the police, and they'll be here in a few minutes."

Ian trots off, completely untroubled by his nakedness.

To me he says, "You've got Wilde's phone in good keeping?" He then takes my hand and leads us toward Mr. Wilde's still inert body.

Oh, so that's the way it is? I'm cool. No, wait, I'm really not. I dig in my heels.

He stops with me. He smiles. I see the light of love in his eyes. "Yes, we're going to talk about it. However, not now. We don't have time. But first things first: mates can always tell when the other one is lying. Just so you know."

"Mates?" I ask.

He looks at me. I'm steel to his magnet. He answers, with conviction, "Mates."

I guess that's settled. I also like being steel.

He pulls me toward Mr. Wilde who is beginning to stir. He kneels down and gives the man another quick rap on the head to keep him immobile a little longer and grabs the remains of a leash, which was mangled along with the dog that wore it. It's impossible to tell Felan from Farkas in their current state. They're gory, and I'm wondering if gore is something I'm going to have to get used to. I'm sad for the dogs.

They had to be killed, but they didn't deserve their fate. Mr. Wilde is the evil one.

He rolls Mr. Wilde's body over so his face is to the ground and lashes the leash around the man's crossed wrists to secure him. Then he stands, takes out his mobile and calmly rings the police.

When he's finished, he slips his mobile back into his pocket. He asks, "Now that you've had a moment or two to absorb things, how are you feeling about Ian?"

There's only one word. "Ecstatic." My thoughts and emotions are otherwise a jumble. "As for myself, of course, I'm still taking it all in. 'Astounded' might cover it. How did you know about Ian?"

"On some level I knew the moment I met him, but I fully realized it at lunch."

I'm in a whirl. All I can say is, "And here I'd been thinking my day couldn't get much loopier."

He enfolds me in his arms. I surrender to the comfort. Snow starts to flurry. He hugs me tighter. He's as warm as toast.

Chapter Thirteen

EGON

I'm glad Ian's quick and already back down by the time the Detective Chief Inspector and his two Detective Sergeants arrive, hardly five minutes later. My right arm is around my mate's waist, and my left arm is on Ian's shoulder. We present a united front.

I withdraw my right arm to shake hands. "DCI Gorman, thank you for coming so quickly."

"Mr. Hanover, thank you for being on hand for this –" The DCI glances at the three bodies, a human and two mangled dogs, lying ten feet away. He has no words to describe it. "You and I have always worked well together. I know how much you value the safety of your neighborhood."

After I shake hands with the detectives, the four of us begin to make our way to the scene of the crime – if crime, it's going to be judged to be – leaving my mate and Ian behind.

"I was walking Miss Shaw and her brother home just now," I explain. "They live in the attic flat of Mr. Wilde's house. We heard strange noises from the garden and naturally came to look."

We form a circle around the three bodies. I squat down and nudge Wilde on the shoulder. When he opens his eyes, I help him to his feet and untie his hands.

He's disoriented for a few seconds before his eyes bulge out and, as I could predict, he flings his arm and extends an accusatory finger in my direction. He begins to spew, "He's a werewolf. A werewolf, I tell you." He looks around then points at Ian. "He is, too! And she is! They're *all* werewolves."

I tell the DCI, "Yes, this is part of the noise that drew our attention, the other part being the dogs snarling." I look down at their carcasses. Quite a nice job I did, precise.

"*He* killed my dogs, ripped their throats out!" Wilde continues. "My Felan, my Farkas, my babies. Look at what he did!"

"When we came in to the garden," I say evenly, "Mr. Wilde became very agitated. At the same time the dogs turned on one another. It happened so fast I think Mr. Wilde got confused. When he started lunging after Miss Shaw, he and I got into a fistfight. I'm afraid I knocked him down and thought it best to tie him up until you got here, in case he was dangerous."

"It's a lie. A pack of lies! A pack of *werewolves*! I have the pictures to prove it." Wilde is becoming crazed, just as I'd hoped. "It's around here somewhere, my mobile. You idiots," he says to the DCI's detectives, "find the mobile. It's here in the garden."

The Chief Inspector nods to them. "May as well search."

The two detectives spread out, their torch beacons skimming across the covering of snow.

I motion to my mate and Ian to come over. "If you want a tip, Miss Shaw's brother, Ian, is Mr. Wilde's dog sitter. He expressed concerns – that is, he expressed it in his own manner, which means he has a speech impediment and doesn't talk much – the dogs were not well trained. They had a mean streak."

"More lies!" Wilde interjects. "Lies piled upon lies! My dogs were perfectly trained. Trained to hunt werewolves! I have *pictures*! My efforts are noble. I've worked to flush them out. And it worked, I can tell you, it *worked*!"

The DCI draws a deep breath. "Mr. Wilde, I've heard you're relatively new to this neighborhood, and I'm here to tell you I value all the citizens in my patch. I also have to tell you, you're not helping your case. The less you say right now, the better."

Ian and my mate join us. Ian is eyeing the dogs with great displeasure. They were going to kill him. He's shaking his head. The look on his face is eloquent. He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to.

“Ian was, furthermore, concerned,” I say, “that he was not in charge of the dogs either yesterday afternoon or this afternoon, and when he heard the news of the two recent murders, he began to suspect these dogs were involved.”

“The boy is a half-wit,” Wilde says, evidently ignoring the DCI’s recommendation to stop talking. “He can’t think two human thoughts in a row. That’s because he’s a werewolf!”

The detectives return to our circle, empty-handed. They report, “No mobile in the garden.”

“*He* took it,” Wilde accuses Ian.

Ian holds his arms away from his sides, as if inviting a pat down.

The DCI cuts a glance my way, asking permission.

I’m as cooperative as possible. “It’s all right. We’re happy to allay Mr. Wilde’s fears and to help him calm down.”

At this Wilde becomes incandescent. He can hardly form articulate speech.

The detectives pat Ian down and, of course, find nothing. My mate decides to be helpful. She holds out her handbag and opens it, saying, “I don’t mind. Really.” The detectives are embarrassed, but they flash their torches inside. She takes out her own mobile, holds it up to them, and opens it with her passcode. They shrug.

I think it’s a jolly good idea to join in the fun, so I take my mobile out of my trousers’ pocket and hold it up for their inspection. I want to wrap this up. I’m not wearing an overcoat and my mate’s wearing my suit jacket, leaving me in shirtsleeves. I’m not cold, but with the snow falling, I have the excuse to say,

“You see I wasn’t expecting to be out and about more than a few minutes, so I’ll be direct: you may find in your forensic evidence that the DNA of the hairs on these dogs matches any hairs that might be on the two bodies in your morgue. You may also wish to search Mr. Wilde’s house for chemicals whose traces may also be on the two bodies. I hope that’s all.”

“Mr. Hanover,” the DCI says, “I thank you for bringing to our notice what might have developed into a string of murders. All of London will thank you.”

“I need no thanks, no publicity.”

The DCI nods wisely. “I know you value your privacy and will respect it. No need to mention your involvement to the press, but I will ask you for an official statement

later. Well, now. You've been a great help, as usual. More than the usual type of help, but then this is more than the usual situation. Come along, then, Mr. Wilde. It's down to the station with you for your statement."

"They're *werewolves*," he spits. "I've already made my statement."

The DCI says to me, apologetically, "I hear about such cases from time to time. People wanting to stir up old stories." He shakes his head. "For what reason? And worth resorting to murder? I don't understand." He adds, bemused, "Werewolves."

I hold up my hands, as if I'm as befuddled as he is.

The DCI says to his detectives, "We have work to do, lads. Body bags for the dogs, and so forth." He shakes my hand in parting, pats Ian on the head. "Well, then, good night, and thank you. Go along now and get somewhere warm."

With the sounds of Wilde's renewed ranting receding, my family and I go home.

Epilogue

MISTI/SAOIRSE

The walk back to Hanover House is beautiful. Snow has begun to fall in earnest, frosting treetops and houses, making the world magical under the brilliant moon. People are spilling into the streets. The atmosphere is festive. Perhaps I'm imagining it, but it's as if the death of the killer dogs and the taking into custody of the murderer has released the fear circling through London and has left only the excitement. Exuberant snowball fights are breaking out on various corners, accompanied by shrieks of delight and laughter.

Ian is on my left, my mate (strange concept!) is on my right, and their bodies function like my personal furnaces. I now understand why Ian did so well all those winters, resisting the cold. I'm warm and happy and still in a state of some shock, but mostly just happy. Elated, really.

We're halfway home, and he asks, "Tell me, little one, what's your real name?"

I'm struck by an odd question: What will be more difficult to adjust to: the fact that the two great loves of my life are werewolves or that I can't lie to my mate? Lying has been a way of life for me. It's served me well. It's served us well. Saying my real name for the first time in over thirteen years seems a good place to start with telling the truth. I say,

"Saoirse Ahearn."

"Surshay Ahearn," he repeats.

“That’s right, Saoirse. I’ll spell it for you.” And so I do. I now see the upside of truth telling among mates, because it works both ways. I ask, “Why did you want to know?”

“Because perhaps we can find a way for you to reconnect with the Ahearns. Your roots have to be somewhere in Ireland, I’m guessing? And I want to know the real you, although I’m thinking you’ve done the name Misti Shaw proud.” He repeats, “Saoirse. Pretty. Mostly I’ll call you ‘little one’.

I’m put in mind of something. “And what am I supposed to call you?”

“‘Alpha’ but only when we’re around other werewolves. Otherwise, it’s Egon. And from now on you’ll obey my orders.”

“No I won’t,” I say. And no way am I going to call him Alpha. “Just to remind you, I’ve taken care of myself very well for a very long time.”

At this moment Ian chimes in, “Omega!”

The word count for the day is fifteen! I wonder if Ian will start talking more now, become more of a normal ... well, he can’t be a more normal human being ... maybe a normal werewolf, then? No, I don’t care. I never loved him through pity. I always had concern for him, of course, but my concern has already fallen away. The love remains.

My mate’s response to Ian’s pronouncement is to let go of me and grab him for a quick wrestle. “You’ll go on your first run tonight, Omega! With me, my Beta, and Pyotr, a white Russian wolf who’s a friend of mine. I’ll give them the good news, and we’ll all celebrate together. And you can howl at the moon all you’d like. How does that sound?”

Ian’s eyes are bright and shining.

My mate turns to me and says, “As for not wanting to call me Alpha, you’ll get used to it.”

“What, mates can read one another’s minds, too?”

“Emotions. I felt your resistance.”

“For a good reason. I don’t want or need to follow your orders.”

“The only orders I’ll give you are for your safety. That’s my job. I attend to the safety of everyone in my pack, and the orders I give are for safety, which includes orderly conduct of pack business. What someone decides to eat, wear, read, do in life, and

whatever else is not my business.”

“You have no objection if I want to go to Library School?”

“No, why would I?”

“So, only safety, then?”

“That’s right, and I won’t have to give you a lot of orders on that score. Let’s hope today was an exception, and we won’t have a similar incident for many years, which means I won’t be giving you an order for the same number of years. Incidents arise quickly and unexpectedly, so obedience has to be quick for safety, you see?”

I’m thinking about it.

He sighs. “I haven’t convinced you. Let me say the same thing another way. Once you understand the roles of the various members of our pack, you’ll see how we operate is not to order people around or control what they do on a daily basis – only on an emergency basis. Better?”

I’m getting the idea, but it’s still foreign to me. However, I do know he’s telling me the truth.

He smiles. “So. Want to give my name a try?”

“Alpha?”

“I need a little more conviction.”

“Hmmm, let’s see Alpha.”

He makes an equivocal gesture. “Could be better, but that’ll do. By the way I want cubs. I’m hoping you do, too.”

I’ve never really thought about having children, but I can imagine it now. “How many do you want?”

“As many as you’ll give me. It’s up to you. As I’ve said, I only make the decisions concerning safety. Oh, and one more thing.”

I’m all ears.

“If you’d like to turn, let me know, and I’ll bite you.”

Turn? I notice he’s looking speculatively at the spot where my shoulder meets my neck. Does he mean, turn into a werewolf? “Does it hurt?”

He laughs. "I can't lie. Yes, it does, but only briefly. You don't have to decide this minute. Take all the time you want."

We arrive at Hanover House. Ian goes up the six treads before us. He has a slight swagger in his step I've never seen before. Will I ever want to become a werewolf? I don't know. When I look at my mate, I do know one thing: I'm surrounded by love. He lowers his lips and gives me one of his hot, sweet kisses. Snow falls in a veil around us.

THE END