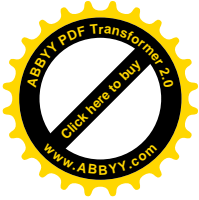


MONSTER LOVE

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Prologue

From the private papers of Richard Will, Ten Beacon Hill, Boston, Massachusetts.

"Becoming a vampire was the best thing that ever happened to me. The very, very best. Which is why I don't understand all the literature, how the vampires are usually these moody fellows who rue the day they ever got bitten, who pray for some illiterate European to plant a stake through their ribs. Rue the day? If the mob hadn't torched my killer the next night, I'd have kissed his feet. I'd even have kissed his behind!

"After all, what else was there for me? Take over the farm when my father died? No, thank you. Farming is back-breaking work for very little reward, and even less respect. And I could hardly endure being in the same room with my father, much less work for him the rest of my life. (Punch first and punch second, that was my dear departed papa's motto.)

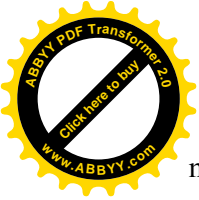
"Lie about my age to join the army, and get my head blown off? (All so sixty years later we can ignore the Holocaust and pretend the Germans are good guys?) But back then, if you didn't fight you were a coward. Of course, two wars later the young men were encouraged to go to Canada, to avoid responsibilities to their country. If they fought, and lived, their reward was to be spit upon at the airport. It just goes to prove, nothing changes faster than the mind of an American.

"No, life wasn't exactly a bowl of fresh peaches. I was in a box, and each side of the box was equally insurmountable. I wasn't the only one, but I was the only one who noticed the shape and size of the prison. I was always different from my chums. At least, I think I was...it was a long time ago, and don't we always think we're different?

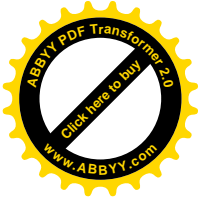
"So when Darak—that was his name, or at least the name he gave me—bought me a drink, then two, then ten, I didn't turn him down. What did I care if a stranger wanted to help me forget about the box? I was big—twenty-three years working on a farm made for a big boy—and if he wanted to get inappropriate, I was sure I could handle it.

"Yes, there was homosexuality in the forties. People like to pretend it's a modern invention, which always makes me laugh. Anyway, I figured Darak wanted to see what I had inside my drawers, but I had no intention of showing him—what men did with other men was none of my concern. Of course, my drawers weren't what held his interest at all.

"I'd been supremely confident I could toss Darak through a window if I needed to, which just goes to show I was something of a naïve moron when I was a boy. Darak took what he needed from me, and never mind pretty words or even asking permission. He stopped my heart and left me on a filthy floor to breathe my last. The last thing I remember was a rat scampering across my face, how the tail felt, dragging across my



mouth.



"I woke up two nights later. It was dark and close, but in a stroke of luck I hadn't been buried yet. I didn't know it then, but the town's only mill had blown up, and there were forty bodies to be interred. Plus they'd cornered Darak and set him on fire. Yes, things had been positively hopping in the small town of Millidgeville, pop. 232 (actually 191 now). They were in no rush to get me in the ground. They had more important things to worry about.

"I was thirstier than I had ever been in my life. And strong...I meant only to pop open the door to the coffin, and ended up ripping it off the hinges. I lurched out of the coffin and realized instantly where I was. And I knew what Darak was...I'd read Bram Stoker as a teenager. But even through the mad haze of my unnatural—or so it seemed to me then—thirst and the disbelief of my death, the main thing I remember is the relief. I was dead. I was free. I silently blessed Darak, and went to find someone to eat.

"Being a vampire is wonderful. The strength, the speed, the liquid diet...all solidly in the plus column. The minuses—no sunbathing (so?), sensitivity to light (sunglasses fixed that nicely), no real relationships other than those of a transitory nature (callgirls!)—are bearable.

"I miss women, though. That's probably the worst of it. No more sunsets? Phaugh. I saw plenty of them on the farm. But I haven't had a girlfriend since...er...what year is it? Never mind.

"I can't be with a mortal woman, for obvious reasons. She'd never understand what I was, what I needed. I'd constantly fear hurting her—I can lift a car over my head, so being with a mortal woman is not unlike being with a china doll. And being dead hasn't affected my sex drive one bit. I was a young man of lusty appetite, and while I still look young, my appetite has increased exponentially with my age.

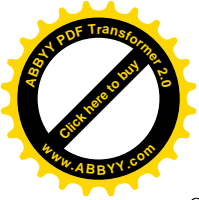
"I've only met six other vampires in my life. Of the six, four were women, and let me tell you, they were complete and unrepentant monsters. They ate children. Children! I killed two, but the other two got away. I could have gone after them, but I had to get the child to a hospital and—well, I wouldn't have wished their company on my fiercest enemy, much less welcomed them to the marriage bed.

"Yes, I'm lonely. Another price to pay for the eternal life and the liquid diet. But I'm young for a vampire—not even close to a hundred yet. Things are bound to look up. And even if they don't, my patience—like my thirst—is infinite."

Chapter One

A monkey. A fucking monkey!

Janet Lupo practically threw her invitation at the goon guarding the doors to the reception hall. Bad enough that one of the most eligible werewolves in the pack—the world!—was now off the market, but he'd taken a pure human to mate. Not that there was anything wrong with that. Humans were okay. If you liked sloths.



She stomped toward her table, noticing with bitter satisfaction the way people jumped out of her path. Pack members walked clear when she was in a good mood. Which, at the moment, she was not.

Bad enough to be outnumbered a thousand to one by the humans, but to marry one? And fuck one and get it pregnant and join the PTA and...

The mind reeled.

Janet had nothing against humans as a species. In fact, she greatly admired their rapaciousness. Homo sapiens never passed up prey, not even if they were stuffed—not even if they didn't eat meat! They'd kill each other over shoes, for God's sake. They had fought wars over shiny metals and rocks. Janet had never understood why a diamond was worth killing over, but a pink topaz was hardly worth sweating about. Humans had fought wars over the possession of gold, but iron ferrite, which looked exactly the same, was worthless.

And when humans started killing, watch out. Whether it was "Free the Holy Land from the infidels!" or "Cotton and Slave's Rights!" or "Down with Capitalism!" or whatever was worth mass genocide, when humans went to war, your only chance was to get out of the way and keep your head down.

But marry one? Marry someone slower and weaker? Much, much weaker? Someone with no pack instincts, someone who only lived for themselves? It'd be—it'd be like a human marrying a bear. A small, sleepy bear who hardly ever moved. Fucking creepy, is what it was.

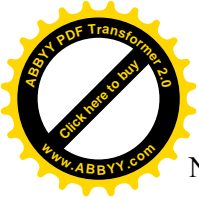
And there was Alec, sitting at the head table and smirking like he'd won the lottery! And his mate—uh, wife—sitting next to him. She was cute enough if you liked chubby, which the boys in the pack did. A bony wife wasn't such a great mother when food was scarce. Not that food was scarce these days, but thousands of years of genetic conditioning died hard. Besides, who wanted to squash their body down onto a bundle of sticks?

Okay, there wasn't anything wrong with her looks. Her looks were fine. So was her smell—like peaches packed in fresh snow. And the bimbo knew what she was getting into—her old lady had worked for Old Man Wyndham, way back in the day—so the whole family had experience keeping secrets. But to call a sloth a sloth, the new Mrs. Kilcurt was not pack. Wasn't family. And would never be, no matter how many cubs Alec got on her.

Jesus! First the pack leader—Michael—knocked up a human, and now Alec Kilcurt. Didn't any of her fellow werewolves marry werewolves anymore?

"Dance, Jane?"

"I'd rather eat my own eyeballs," she said moodily, not even looking to see who asked. Why was she going to her table, anyway? The reception wasn't mandatory.



Neither was the wedding. She'd just gone to be polite. And the time for that was done.

She turned on her heel and marched out. The goon at the door obligingly held it open. Which was just as well, 'cuz otherwise she'd have kicked it down.

* * * * *

Janet vastly preferred Boston in the spring, and as cities went, Boston was not awful. Parts of it—the harbor, the aquarium—were actually kind of cool.

Thinking of the New England Aquarium—all those fish, lobsters, squid, and sharks—made her stomach growl. She'd been too annoyed to eat lunch, and when she had walked out of the reception, she had also walked out on her supper.

She turned onto a side street, taking a short-cut to Legal Sea Foods, a restaurant that did not suck. She'd have a big bowl of clam chowder, and some raw oysters, and a steak, and a lobster. And maybe something for dessert. And a drink. Maybe three.

A scent caught her attention, forcing a split-second decision. She turned onto another street, one much less crowded, curious to see if the men were going to keep following her.

They were. She hadn't seen their faces, just caught their scents as they swung around to follow her on Park Street. They smelled like desperation and stale coffee grounds. She was well dressed, and probably looked prosperous to them. Prime pickings.

She turned again, this time down a deserted alley. If the two would-be robbers thought they were keeping her from supper, they were out of their teeny, tiny minds. She could easily outrun them, but that would mean kicking off her high heels. The stupid pinchy shoes cost almost thirty bucks! She wasn't leaving them in a Boston alley. If push came to shove, she'd bounce her stalkers off the bricks. Possibly more than once, the mood she was in.

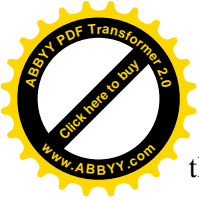
"Halt, gentlemen."

Janet jumped. There was a man standing at the end of the alley, and she hadn't known he was there until he spoke up. She hadn't smelled him, even though he was upwind. When was the last time that had happened?

He was tall—over six feet—and well built, for someone who wasn't pack. His shoulders were broad and he definitely had the look of a man used to working with his hands. He had blond hair the color of wheat, and his eyes—even from fifteen feet away she could see their vivid color—were Mediterranean blue. He was wearing all black—dress slacks, a shirt open at the throat, a duster that went almost all the way to his heels.

And—what's this now? He was squinting in the poor light of the alley, and slipping on a pair of sunglasses. Sunglasses—how weird was that, at ten-thirty at night?

"I have business with the young lady," Weirdo continued, walking toward



them. His hands were open, relaxed. She knew he wasn't carrying a weapon. He moved with the grace of a dancer; if she hadn't been so fucking hungry she might have liked to watch him prance around. "Much kinder business, I think, than you two. So be on your way, all right?" Then, in a lower voice, "Don't be afraid, miss. I won't hurt you. Hardly at all."

"Stand aside, four eyes," she snapped, and with barely a glance, she stiff-armed him into the side of the building and hurried past. She had no time for would-be muggers, and less for Mr. Sunglasses-At-Night. Let the three of them fight it out. She had a date with a dead lobster.

Behind her, Sunglasses yelped in surprise. There was a flat smack as he hit the wall, then slid down. She'd tossed him a little harder than she meant—oopsie—and then the other two jumped him, and she was out of the alley.

She could see the restaurant up ahead. Just a few more steps and she could order. Just a few more...

She stopped.
Don't you dare!

Turned.

C'mon, enough already! They're human...it's none of your business. She started back toward the alley. Sunglasses was a weirdo, but he was vulnerable to attack because of what she had done. Yeah, they were human, but it was one thing to mind your own business, and another to turn your back on a mess you helped make.

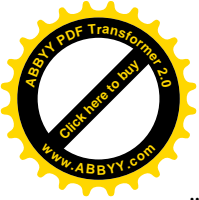
You moron! Who knows when you'll get to eat now?

"Fuck off, inner voice," she said aloud. People thought the outer Janet was a bitch; God forbid they should ever meet the inner Janet. She stepped into the alley to help, and was just in time to see the second mugger crumple to the filthy street. The first was half in and half out of the dumpster. And Sunglasses was hurrying, hurrying toward her, licking the blood off his knuckles. "As I was saying before you tossed me against the wall, I have business with you, miss. And where on earth do you work out?"

She was so surprised she let him put his hands on her shoulders, let him draw her close. He smiled at her and even in the poorly lit alley she could see the light gleaming on his teeth. His very long canines. His fangs, to be perfectly blunt. He had fangs, and it wasn't even close to the full moon.

"What the hell are you?" She put a hand to his chest to keep him from pulling her closer. His heart beat once. Then nothing.

He blinked at her. "What? Usually the lady in question is halfway to fainting by now. To answer your question, I'm the son of a farmer. That's all."



"My ass," she said rudely. "I came back to give you a hand—"

"How sweet."

"—but you're fine, and I'm hungry."

"What a coincidence," he murmured. He tapped a sharp canine with his tongue. Beneath her palm, his heart beat again. "My, you're exceedingly beautiful. I suppose your beaux tell you that all the time."

"Beaux? Who the hell talks like that? And you're full of shit," she informed him. Beautiful? Shyeah. She wasn't petite and she wasn't tall—just somewhere in the middle. Average height, average weight, average hair color—not quite blonde and not quite brown—average nose, mouth, chin. She could see her average eyes reflected in his sunglasses. "And you'd better let go before I hit you so hard, you'll spend the rest of the night throwing up your teeth."

He blinked again, then smiled. "Forgive the obvious question, but aren't you a little nervous? It's dark...and you're quite alone with me. Why, I might do anything to you." He licked his lower lip thoughtfully. "Anything at all."

"This is really, really boring, fuck-o," she informed him. "Leggo."

"I decline."

She brought her foot down on his, felt his toes squish through the dress shoe. Then she knocked him away from her with a right cross. This time, when he went down, he stayed down.

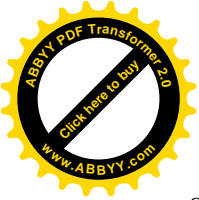
Twenty minutes later, she was happily slurping the first of a dozen oysters on ice.

Chapter Two

He knew he was lurking like a villain in a bad melodrama, but he couldn't help it. He had to catch her when she came out of the restaurant. So he was reduced to watching her through the restaurant window from across the street.

Richard rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. It didn't hurt anymore, but if he'd been mortal, it likely would have shattered from the force of the woman's punch. She hit like a Teamster. And swore like one, too.

She was stunning, really very stunning with those cider-colored eyes and that unique hair. Her crowning glory was shoulder length and wavy, and made up of several colors: gold, auburn, chestnut...even a few strands of silver. The silky strands gleamed beneath the streetlight and made him itch to touch them, to see if they were as soft as they looked.



She had been fearless in the near dark of the alley, and he'd become utterly besotted. He had to see her again, take her in his arms again, hear her say "fuck" again.

Ah! After a five-course meal, here she came. And look! She had spotted him instantly, and was now stomping across the street toward him. Her small hands were balled into fists and her lush mouth was curled in a snarl.

"Fuck-o, you don't learn too quick, do you?"

"You're marvelous," he said, smiling at her. There were few people on the street at this hour, but the ones who were around caught the tension in the air, and did a quick fade. Most mortals had zero protective coloring, but something about the proximity of a vampire put their wind up, even if they weren't consciously aware of it. "Just charming, really."

She snorted delicately. "I see you're heavily medicated, on top of everything else. Get lost, before I belt you in the chops again."

"You came all the way over here to tell me to go away?"

A frown wrinkle appeared on her perfect, creamy forehead. "Yeah, I did. Don't read anything into it. So blow, okay?"

"Richard Will."

"What?"

"My name is Richard Will." He held out his hand, hoping she wouldn't be startled by his long fingers. Most people—women—were.

"Yeah? Well, Dick, I don't trust people with two first names." She stared at his outstretched hand, then crossed her arms over her chest.

He let his hand drop. "And you are...?"

"Tired of this conversation."

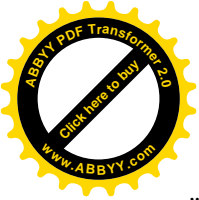
"Is that your first name or your last?"

Her lips curled into an unwitting smile. "Very funny. You never answered my question."

"Which one?"

"What are you? Your heart..." She started to reach for him, then let her hand drop. "Let's just say you should get your ass to a doctor, pronto."

"You know what I am." He bent toward her, and was thrilled when she didn't back off. "In your heart, you know."



"Dick, as my family will tell you, I don't have a heart."

He rested his palm against her chest, feeling the rapid beat. "Such a lie, dearest." She knocked his hand away, and sounded gratifyingly breathless when she said, "Don't call me that."

"I have no choice, dearest, as you never told me your name."

"It's Janet."

"Janet...?"

"Smith," she said rudely, and he chuckled. Then laughed, a full-blown guffaw that sent more stragglers hurrying away. "What the hell's so funny?"

"Don't you see? We simply must get married. Richard and Janet... Dick and Jane!"

She gaped at him for a long moment and then, reluctantly, joined him in laughter.

* * * * *

"So you don't like the new wife?"

Janet moodily stirred her coffee. It was after midnight, and they were the only couple in the coffee shop. "It's not that I have a personal problem with her, she's just...not our kind, is all."

"She's Polish?"

She snorted a laugh through her nose. "Nothing like that...I'm not that big a bitch. It's hard to explain. And you wouldn't believe me anyway."

He grinned, flashing his fangs. "Try me."

"No way, José. I want to hear about you. I didn't know there were such things as vampires. Assuming you're not some pathetic schmuck who filed his teeth to get the girls."

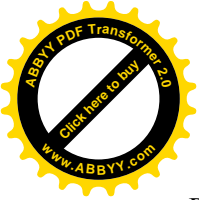
He considered lifting her, in her chair, over his head, but decided against it.

Among other things, it was unnecessary. She knew what he was, oh yes. She had felt his heart. And he had felt hers. "I didn't know there were such things either, until I woke up dead."

She leaned forward, which gave him an excellent view of creamy cleavage in her wine-colored dress. "How old are you?"

"Not so old, for a vampire. Not even a hundred yet. And as it's not polite to ask a lady her age—"

"Thirty-six."



Perfect. Giggling girlhood was left behind, she was closing in on her sexual peak, and the best was still ahead. He tried very hard not to drool.

"I'm the old maid of the family," she was saying. "Most of my friends have teenagers already."

"You have plenty of time."

She brightened. "See, that's what I always say! Just because we're trapped in this damned youth-obsessed society doesn't mean we have to do everything in our twenties. What's the fucking rush?"

"Exactly. That's what I—"

"Except my family thinks totally differently," she said, her shoulders slumping.

"They're very in-the-now, if you know what I mean. Sometimes there's...there's fights and stuff and you never know if today's your last day on earth. There's lots of pressure to make every single day count, to cram everything you can, as often as you can. Nobody really stops and smells the fuckin' roses where I come from, you know?"

"That's fairly typical of...of people." He'd almost said 'of mortals', but no need to push things. As it was, he had a hard time believing this conversation was taking place. She'd insulted him, pounded him, knew what he was, and was now having coffee with him. Amazing! "If your life span is so brief—what? Seventy years or so? Well, of course you want to make every minute count."

"My family's lifespan is even shorter," she said moodily.

"Ah. Dangerous neighborhood?"

"To put it mildly. Although it's better since...well, it's better now, and I just hope it lasts."

"Which is why you can take care of yourself so well."

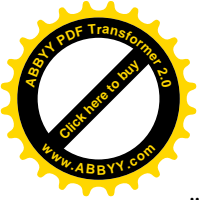
She cracked her knuckles, which made the lone counterman cringe. "Bet your ass."

"Indeed I would not." He stirred his coffee. He could drink it, though all it would do was make him thirstier. Instead he played with it; he enjoyed the ritual of cream and sugar. "How long are you in town?"

She shrugged. "Long as I want. The wedding's over, so we'll probably hang out for a couple days, then head back to our homes."

"And home for you is...?"

"None of your fucking business. Don't get me wrong, Dick, you seem pleasant enough for a blood-sucking fiend of the undead..."



"Thank you."

"...but I'm not opening up to you with all my vitals, no matter how good-looking and charming you are."

"So my powers of attraction aren't completely lost on you," he teased.

She ignored the interruption. "And if you don't like it, you can stop dicking around with your coffee and get the hell gone."

"I cannot decide," he said after a long pause, during which he guiltily put his spoon down, "if you're the most refreshing person I've ever met, or the most irritating."

"Go with irritating," she suggested. "That's what my family does." She glanced at her watch, a cheap thing that probably told time about as well as a carrot. "I gotta go. It's really late, even for me." She laughed at that, for some reason.

He leaned forward and picked up her warm little hand. The palm was chubby, with a strong life line. Her nails were brutally short, and unpolished. "I must see you again. Actually, I would prefer to spirit you away to my—"

"Creaky, musty, damp castle?"

"—condo on Beacon Hill, but you're quite a strong young lady and I seriously doubt I could do so without attracting attention. So I must persuade you."

"Damned right, chum." She jerked her hand out of his grasp. "Try anything, and—"

"I'll vomit my teeth, or be split down the middle, or my head will be twisted around so far I'll be able to see my own backside—" She giggled. "—yes, yes, I quite understand. Have dinner with me tomorrow night."

"Don't you mean 'let me watch you eat while I play with my drink'?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"Because," he said simply, "I've decided. You're refreshing because you're irritating. Do you know how long it's been since I've had a nice conversation with a lady?"

She stared at him. "You think this has been a nice conversation?"

"Nicer than 'Help, eeeeeek, stay away you horrible thing, no, no, nooooooooooo, oh, God, please don't kill me!' I can't tell you how many times I've had that conversation."



"Serves you right for being a walking wood tick," she said. "Dinner, huh? On you?"

"Of course." Possibly on you, he thought, suddenly dizzy with a vision of licking red wine off her stomach.

"Mmmm. All right. I'll admit, it's nice to be myself with a guy and not have him be such a fucking Nancy boy whenever I say something the least bit—"

"Fucking obscene?"

She giggled again. "But you gotta tell me all about waking up dead, and what it's like to be on a liquid diet. And how come my family didn't know about you and your kind?"

"Why would your family know about my kind?"

"We're pretty far-flung. There's not much going on the planet we don't know. So you'll feed me, and we'll talk. Deal, Dick?"

"Deal...Jane."

"I find out you've got a dog named Spot, dinner's off," she warned.

Chapter Three

The phone rang, that shrill "pay attention to me!" sound she hated. She groaned, rolled over, groped for the phone, and knocked it off the hook. She relaxed into the blessed silence, which was broken by a tinny sound.

"Hello? Jane?"

She burrowed under the covers.

"Jane? Are you there? Janet. Hello??"

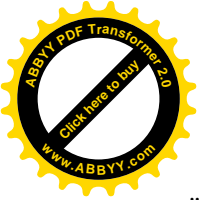
She cursed her werewolf hearing. Tinny and faint the voice might be, but it was also unmistakable. "What."

"Pick up the phone," the telephone receiver squawked. "I want to make sure you're getting all this."

"Can't. Too tired."

"It's six o'clock at night, for God's sake. Pick up the phone!"

She muttered something foul, and obeyed the caller. "Whoever the hell this is, you'd better be on fire."



"It's Moira, and I practically am...the high today was eighty-two. In May!"

"Moira."

"You should see what the humidity did to my hair."

"Moira."

"I look like a blonde cotton swab."

"Moira! This is fascinating, but you sure as shit better not be calling me to babble about your for-Christ's-sake hair. What do you want?"

"It's not what I want," Moira went on in her irritatingly cheerful voice. "It's Michael. The big boss wants to see you on the Cape, pronto."

Finally, the silly bitch had Jane's attention. Her eyes opened wide and she sat straight up in bed. "Michael Wyndham? Wants to see me? How come?" And on the heels of that, a panicked thought: What'd I do? And resentment. Come, girl, good dog, here's a treat for the good doggie.

"Mine is not to reason why, girly...and neither is yours. I suggest you get your ass out here yesterday."

Jane groaned. "Aw, fuck a duck!"

"I'll pass."

"I've got a date. Today." She squinted at her watch. "Tonight, I mean."

"You do?" Moira sounded—rightfully so—completely astonished. She modified her tone, too late. "I mean, of course you do. Sure. It's only natural, a...a lively and...er...opinionated young lady like yourself. With a date on a Saturday night. Yep."

"Cut the shit, you're embarrassing both of us." Young lady. Right. Moira was at least ten years younger. Half Jane's size (and weight). Twice the brains. Calling Moira a silly bitch was only half right. "Fuck! I don't need this now. You don't have any idea what it's about?"

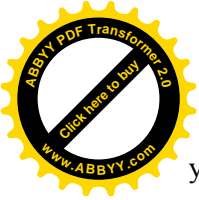
"Um..."

"Come on, Moira, you and the boss are practically litter-mates. Spill."

"Let's just say that in his newfound happiness with mate and cub, our fearless leader thinks it's high time you settled down—"

"No, no, no!"

"—and he's met just the right fella for you," she continued brightly. "He's sure



you'll hit it off."

"Doesn't the head of the pack have anything better to do than fix me up on yet another stupid blind date?" She could hear plastic cracking, and forced her fingers to loosen around the receiver.

"Apparently not. Now tell the truth; the last one wasn't so bad."

"He cried like a third grade girl when I beat him to the kill."

"Well, you did hog all the rabbits yourself. Tsk, tsk."

"Figures," Jane grumbled, swinging her legs over and resting her feet on the floor. "The first halfway decent guy I meet in forever, and the boss wants me to blow him off to meet some new dildo."

"Sorry," Moira said, sounding anything but. "I'll leave the dildo part out when I tell Michael you're on the way. And now, having imparted my message, I'd say something like 'have a nice day', except I know you—"

"Hate that shit. Bye." She hung up and resisted the urge to throw the phone against the wall. Fuck. Fuck fuck!

She'd been so excited about dinner with Dick, she'd had a hard time getting to sleep. She'd finally dozed off near dawn...and slept the entire day away. Now she had to beat feet for the Cape, of all places...fuck!

She did throw the phone. But it didn't make her feel any better, not even when it shattered spectacularly against the wall.

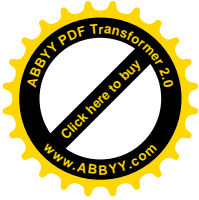
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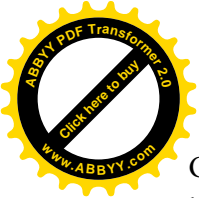
She was tapping her foot on the curb, waiting for the sloth-like doorman to hail her a cab. She could hail her own damned cab, thanks very much, but when in Rome, do what the sheep do. Or something like that.

She'd packed like a madwoman and it showed—she could see the corner of her dress sticking out of the suitcase. Aarrgh! Fifty-nine ninety-nine at Sears, and she'd probably never get to wear it again. Like clothes shopping wasn't an unending horror anyway—now she'd have to go again.

And Dick. She felt really bad about up and leaving town. He'd think she stood him up. Like that would happen. He was ridiculously good-looking but, even more important, she could talk to him. Not be herself—not completely—but close.

Shit, she couldn't even be herself with the pack; they'd written her off as an old maid a decade ago. Pack members mated young, dropped kids young, and died young. And she didn't want kids, which, among her people, made her El Freako Supremo.





Getting knocked up—assuming your mate could get you pregnant without getting his bad self hurt—was one thing, but then you were a slumlord to a fetus for ten endless months. At least the humans only had to suffer for nine. Even worse, you puffed up like a blowfish and ate everything in sight, then squeezed out a kid during hours of blood and pain...blurgh.

And afterwards! Just the thought of having to tote around a l'il nose-miner who cried and screamed and puked and shit—and that was just the first week!—was enough to curl her hair. She hadn't liked kids even when she was one. The feeling had been mutually—and heartily—returned. She'd felt that way at eighteen, twenty-three, thirty, thirty-four. Sure, kids were necessary—for other people. Janet preferred to sleep late, and wear clothes that hadn't been puked on, and not watch her language.

"Where to, ma'am?" the doorman asked, breaking her anti-infant reverie. He was ineffectually flapping a hand at the occasional cab. She could have hailed four on her own by now. Shit, she could have jogged to the airport by now.

"Logan," she practically snapped. It wasn't Door Boy's fault she'd been ordered to leave town, but the big boss wasn't here for her to take her anger out on him. "Quick as you can."

+++++

She thought about leaving a note for Dick, and reluctantly decided against it...better find out what Boss Man Michael wanted, first. And if it wasn't life and death, she'd let him have it, and who gave a rat's ass if he was the pack leader? She had a life. Well, before yesterday she really hadn't, but he didn't know that. It was his privilege to snap his fingers and have any one of them come at a dead run, but it was hers not to like it.

observed the doorman shivering and realized the sun had nearly set, and the temperature had dropped a good ten degrees. Still, it wasn't that cold. And why did the kid look like he was ready to drop a steaming load into his trousers? She was irritated, but not at him...surely he knew that.

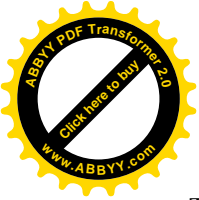
God, the reek the kid was giving off! Like mothballs dipped in gasoline. His fear—his terror—burned her nose. It put her wind up and she cupped her elbows, shivering. From grumpy to edgy in less than five seconds...a new record!

The ball dropped and she understood a half second too late. She was spun around and had time to take in burning blue eyes before there was a walloping pain in her jaw and Dick turned off the lights. And everything else.

Chapter Four

He didn't care. He really didn't. She was fine, and if she wasn't, who cared? He hadn't hurt her. Not really.

He checked on her for the eleventh time in sixty minutes, and was relieved to see the bruise on the underside of her jaw had faded to a mere shadow. Guilt rolled off his shoulders like a boulder.



To save time and steps—if he left he'd just be in here five minutes later—he sat down in the chair beside the bed. He cupped his chin in his hand, leaned forward, and watched her sleep.

Jane scowled, even in the throes of unconsciousness. It would have made him smile, if he hadn't felt so angry and betrayed.

Betrayed? All right, tell the truth and shame the devil...yes. Betrayed! And angry and sick at heart and furious with the little twit tied to his bed. Most of his anger was directed at himself, it was true, but he had a nice helping saved for Miss Jane.

She'd fooled him; that was all. A simple thing, but unforgivable. She made him believe she accepted the monster, when in fact she most assuredly had not. The duplicitous wretch agreed to join him for dinner to placate him, then made arrangements to slink out of town like a thief. If he hadn't shown up early to escort her to dinner, she would have disappeared and he might never have known what had become of her. Would have wasted years of his life worrying about her fate.

Instead, he'd taken in the situation at a glance, and acted accordingly. Well, all right, that was a rather large lie. He had panicked—all he could think of was to get her home, stop her from leaving him. Leaving town, rather. And in his panic, he'd smacked her when he only meant to tap her. The one bit of luck was that it had happened too quickly for the lone witness—the doorman—to see much more than a swirl of cloth. Dusk and speed were his friends, even if Jane was not.

And that was the rub of it. He'd allowed himself to forget, for one evening, that he was the monster in the fairy tales. He had forgotten there could be no relationship with a woman other than the most carnal type. He wouldn't have vampire women, and mortal women wouldn't have him. Well, that was fine. That was just fine. He was a monster, and was done pretending otherwise.

But Jane would pay for making him forget. She'd pay for making him think, however briefly, that he was a man first and a beast second.

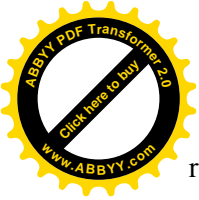
Chapter Five

Jane groaned and tried to roll over. The phone was ringing. It would be Moira, telling her to get her ass to the Cape. She couldn't see Dick tonight. She had to answer the phone and tell Moira to go fuck herself, and then—

Wait.

That had already happened. So why was she still in bed?

She opened her eyes and tried to sit up. Three alarming facts registered immediately on her brain: a) she couldn't sit up, and b) she was tied to a bed. She was, in fact, c) tied down in the same room with an annoyed vampire. And not a prayer of



room service.

"Ohhhhhh, you idiot!" she howled. If she could have slapped her hand over her eyes, she would have. If she could have slapped him, she would have. As it was, her ankles and arms were spread wide and tied to each poster of the bed. "Do you have any idea of the trouble you've landed me in, numb nuts?"

Dick, sitting in the chair next to the bed, blinked at her. He did that a lot... a long, slow, thoughtful blink when he was taken by surprise. It was like a stall for time, or something. She used to think it was kind of cute. "I shouldn't have expected maidenly protestations," he said after a long pause.

"You should expect a fractured skull, you undead idiot! What the fuck am I doing tied to your bed? Is it your bed? It damn well better be your bed! If I'm in some strange dead guy's bed your ass is grass!"

He brought a hand up to his chin... then got up and abruptly left. She used the chance to yank at her bonds—no good. They were soft, like cloth, but amazingly strong. Were her bonds lined with bubble gum, or what?

She strained to hear, and, very faintly, could hear muffled laughter coming from about thirty feet away. Dick had trotted out to the hall to have a giggle at her expense—fucking great.

The door was thrown open a moment later, and when Dick returned, he was stone-faced. "Sorry about that. I thought I left something on the stove. Now where were we?"

She kicked out at him. The bonds let her leg leave the bed, but not by much. "We were talking about how you're going to die a painful and horrible death—again! What the hell have you trussed me up with?"

The left side of his mouth twitched. "It's elastic lined with titanium wire. It won't hurt you if you pull on it, but it's impossible to break. Even I have trouble breaking it, and I'm quite a bit stronger than you are."

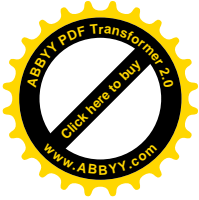
Wanna bet, Dead Man Walking? "Do you have any idea—aarrgh! I'm supposed to be meeting my boss right this minute! What time is it?"

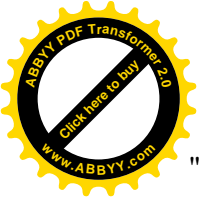
"About two a.m."

"Aaaarrgggghhh! Jerk! I'm five hours late!"

"Another date?" he asked silkily.

"No, Deaf and Undead, I told you. My boss called—well, he didn't call, one of his lackeys did—and told me to get to the office, pronto. And when he says jump, we leap, dude. I didn't have time to leave you a note, but I would have come back!"





"Sure you would have."

Jane was so annoyed, she felt like biting herself. Instead, she yanked impotently on her bonds again. "Yes I would have, dill-hole!"

"Your boss calls you on a weekend, and you must drop everything and race to his side? Really, Janet. I was expecting a better story than that."

She snarled at him. If he made her much madder, she'd start barking at the goddamned ceiling. "Jesus, to think I was actually looking forward to seeing you! And this is how you take rejection...pervert!"

Something flashed in his eyes then. Way down deep. She was suddenly reminded of the lake back home she used to do laps in. The blue water was pretty and inviting, but the lake was spring-fed, and freezing cold, even in July. You didn't know how cold it was until you committed yourself and jumped. Then you were stuck, and you got moving or you froze.

"So you admit you rejected me?"

"No, doorknob! I told you the truth. You can believe it or you can go fuck yourself."

"Is there a third choice?"

"Yes...untie me so I can make a phone call!"

"I decline."

"You can't just keep me here like a...a..." She practically spat the word. "...pet or something."

"Can't I?"

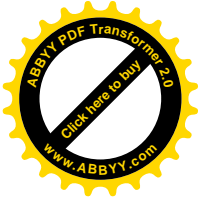
Suddenly he was standing over her, casually unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it off his shoulders. Her eyes widened until they felt like they were practically bulging. "What the hell are you doing?"

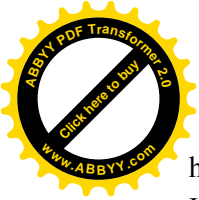
"You're a bright girl. You'll figure it out in a minute."

"Don't you dare!"

"I dare much, now that my heart—" He cut himself off abruptly, and she heard the click of his teeth coming together. What the hell was going on with this guy?

Off came the trousers, the socks, the underwear. Nude, Dick was exceedingly yummy...long legs, broad shoulders, and a tasty flat stomach that made her think about hot fudge sauce and whipped cream. His chest was lightly furred with blond hair two shades darker than the hair on his head. His muscle definition was excellent and she





had a sudden, maddening urge to touch him, see if his skin was as smooth as it looked. It would be, she thought, like velvet encased in steel. Or marble...he was quite pale.

He reached out and flipped off the light...click. She consciously dilated her pupils and could see him again, a pale blur in the dark. A blur with glittering blue eyes.

She felt his cool hand on her thigh, then his fingers were nimbly unbuttoning her dress. She kicked out again, to no avail. He popped open the clasp on her bra—stupid front clasps!—and with odd care, gently tore her panties down the middle. She hissed at him. Twelve bucks at Victoria's Secret! The bitch's secret was that she marked up her underwear by 600%!

"You are an asshole," she said clearly.

"True enough." He pulled her panties free and spread her dress wide, then pushed her bra out of the way. "Umm. Very nice."

"Go fuck yourself, perv."

"I'd rather not...besides, you're here, so why should I have to? We have hours until sunrise." He chuckled. It sounded like cold water flowing over black rocks. "And Jane...I'm sooooo hungry. I've been waiting and waiting for you to wake up."

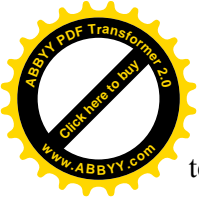
"I hope I poison you. I hope you choke until your lungs explode. I hope my blood burns your windpipe. I hope—"

"I get the gist. I hope that the next time you agree to spend the evening with me, you keep your word." Then he was on her so suddenly she didn't have time to pull in air for a gasp. She braced herself as best she could for his brutal entry, for teeth and blood and pain. Oh, when I get out of here I'm going to use your vertebrae for dice. See if I don't. And I won't cry, either. So there.

His mouth skimmed her jaw, and she felt him lick her jugular and nibble gently at the tender flesh. His cool hand closed over her breast, pressed against her warm flesh, and she felt her nipple harden against his palm. Then he was kissing her throat, the middle of her chest, and her stomach. She felt his thumbs on her cunt, spreading her wide, and she felt his tongue snake inside her. The shock of it nearly bent her up off the bed. His mouth was cool, but quickly warmed, and she flinched back, thinking of his sharp canines.

But there was nothing to fear—or there was, but she quickly forgot it as waves of heat started from her crotch and radiated upward. His tongue was flicking in and out of her little tunnel, stabbing her clit, and then he pulled back and licked...excruciatingly slow licks that made her shake. She gritted her teeth as hard as she could and locked away the sounds she wanted to make. So he wasn't being a hard guy—fine. This still wasn't her idea. It still wasn't any different than smacking her around or shoving her up against a dirty alley wall or—or—

He stopped. He pulled back. She started to relax, then felt the sharp sting as he



teeth broke the skin over her femoral artery. She gasped—she couldn't help it—and tried to jerk away, but his hands held her fast.

His fingers smoothed the soft pelt between her thighs, and then he was parting her lips again, and stroking her throbbing clit. One of his fingers dipped inside her while his thumb pressed gentle circles around her increasingly slick flesh. Meanwhile, his mouth was busy on her inner thigh, and she could hear soft sucking.

This went on, and on...she quickly lost track of time. She was screaming inside. Whenever she started to get close, he somehow knew, and his fingers would still, or pull away entirely. His mouth never stopped. Then he'd resume again, careful not to push her over the edge. After a while she still wasn't making any sounds, but the bed shook with her trembling.

At last he was sated. He pulled back, then bent to her and gave her a long, leisurely lick. "Ummm. You're so wet. I love that. And you taste soooo good. Everywhere, it seems. Your blood is really rich. What on earth have you been eating?"

She ground her teeth at him for answer. She felt his pelvis settle over hers, heard him chuckle. "Your rage could set the room on fire—better than being cold, I think?"

She didn't dignify that with an answer. Besides, if she opened her mouth—what might she say? She was horribly afraid she might ask—beg—to be fucked. Hard. For a long, long time. Her cunt throbbed. Her thigh throbbed. It wasn't pain, it was sheer yearning. She had never needed to come so badly.

When she felt him start to enter her, it took every ounce, every drop of her willpower not to strain to meet him. She resisted by listing his many odious offenses inside her head.

That part of him was warm. And hard, and huge. His cock was parting her slowly and gently, and she had a quick thought: He has to be gentle...he wasn't, a few times before, and he hurt his partner. That's how he knows to tongue fuck, first. But that thought spiraled away into confusion as he shoved, and she felt him slam into her. She made a sound, some small sound, and his mouth was instantly on hers. She could taste her lust, and her blood, and then he was whispering into her mouth, "I couldn't help that, I'm sorry—am I hurting you?" His hands were fisting in her hair and now he was groaning and thrusting, and her breath was coming in harsh gasps.

"Please," she groaned. "Please—" Don't stop. Don't ever stop. Harder. More. Faster. Please. Please. Please.

He groaned, too. "I wanted to hurt you but not like...I'll make it up to you, my own—" She heard him grind his teeth...and then he stopped so suddenly he was rigid with the strain of it. She was afraid to move, to breathe, but it didn't matter, he did the unthinkable anyway—slowly pulled out of her. She closed her eyes and whimpered as he went, hating herself for it even as she knew she could have done nothing to quell the sound.



"Jane. Tell the truth, love. Am I hurting you?" She felt his hand caress her cheek and opened her eyes. His teeth were set so hard his jaw trembled. Here was a perfect opportunity for revenge. And she couldn't do it.

"Twice," she whispered.

He bent closer, dropped a kiss to her shoulder. "What?"

"Twice. This is my second time. Ever. In my life."

"You—what?" She could have laughed at his horrified expression, if she hadn't been ready to claw his eyes out for not letting her come. "Oh, Christ! I had no—I thought you—you seemed so tough I was sure—"

Tough? Sure. Real tough. She'd grown a shell around her soul the night she lost her virginity. The night she, in her ardor, broke her lover's back. It had happened on the last day of her freshmen year in college, and her then-boyfriend, as far as she knew, was still in a wheelchair. It was the first and last time she'd chosen someone who wasn't pack. It was, in fact, the last time she'd chosen anyone, until tonight. And she hasn't exactly chosen this, had she?

"You can't say Christ," she whispered. "You're a vampire."

"One of the many myths," he whispered back. He stroked her hair. She could feel his cock on her leg, throbbing impatiently. It didn't give a fuck if she was hurt or not. It had business to get back to. And so did she. "Jane, why did you try to run away from me?"

"I didn't, dimwad. I told you the truth."

"Hmm."

"Now will you please finish and untie me?"

"Pick one."

She nearly screamed. "What?"

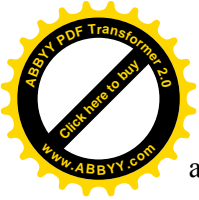
"Pick one." He tapped her clit with a teasing finger. "And I'll do it." He kissed her again. He ducked down and licked her nipple, then sucked, hard. In their bonds, her hands curled into fists. "Whichever one. I'll do it. Thoroughly."

"I hate you," she nearly sobbed.

"I know."

"Finish."

"Oh, thank God." In an instant he was pushing his way inside her again, and for



a half second she understood why he had been concerned—the friction was delightful, so delightful it was just this side of pain. Then he was pumping his hips against hers and it became more than delightful; it was exquisite.

"Kiss me back," he said into her mouth. "Give me your tongue."

Half-blind from the swamping pleasure, she did so. He sucked on it in time with his thrusts and she could hear someone making high, whimpering noises, and realized with amazement it was her making those silly bitch sounds. The bed thumped in time with their fucking, and then he tore his mouth from hers. "Now," he hissed in her ear, "come now." Then he pinched her nipple, hard, and that spun her into the most powerful orgasm of her life. She could actually feel the spasms ripple through her

uterus, and the world got dark and fuzzy around the edges for a few moments. Above her he stiffened and for a moment his grip was painful. "God, my God, Jane!" Then he shuddered all over, and he relaxed as she felt him spurt deeply inside her.

She dozed for a few minutes—it had been a stressful few days. She came all the way awake when she realized he was stroking her lower lip with his thumb. "Get the fuck off me now."

"Ah, you're back. I thought you were being uncharacteristically quiet."

"Off. Now. Hate you. Kill you."

He burst out laughing, which did nothing for her temper. She strained mightily and managed to roll him off her. "I'm sorry, love, it's rude to laugh. But most women in your position would be fetal with shock, sobbing into the bedspread. All you can think about is how to get your teeth into me."

"And how you might taste," she added silkily.

"Umm...well, there are ways to answer that question..."

"Anything you put in my mouth, you're gonna lose."

He sighed. "I suppose it was too good to last. Pity we're only compatible in bed."

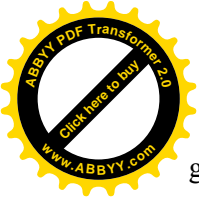
"Compatible in—you raped me, asswipe! Do you have any idea what my family is going to do to you? What I'm going to do to you?"

"I did rape you." He tweaked one of her nipples. "At first."

She blushed with shame. He saw it, and it moved him whereas her death threats did not. "No, you're right—I forced you. None of this was your idea. You're still tied up, for heaven's sake. You don't have anything to feel guilty about."

She was, absurdly, grateful for the lie. Not that she had any intention of showing it.

"I feel very guilty that I didn't break your neck in that alley when I had the chance now let me



go!"

"Sorry, Jane. You had your chance to be free, and you chose to stay."

"I did not—"

"So stay you will, and just like this, until..."

"Oh, what, what? Christ, you're driving me crazy!"

"...until you agree to be my wife."

Long silence, broken by, "You're on drugs."

"Only if you are. Is that why your blood is so rich? God, it was like wine. I don't think I've ever felt better," he said giddily. "I had planned to fuck you and eat you and turn you out into the street in the wee hours of the morning without so much as an 'I'll call you', but now I'll never, never let you go. You're a rare jewel, Jane. An emerald, a ruby."

"I'm tied to the bed next to a crazy person," she mused aloud. Thinking, Never drank from a werewolf before, eh, buddy? Interesting. If you become addicted to me, that could be

useful. "And as far as being your wife—you've probably heard this from all your other rape victims, but I'd rather be dead."

"Undead," he said brightly. "Well, we've got time for that. You're still in your prime. Although I have no intention of becoming a widower in forty or fifty years."

"What?"

"Oh, I won't insist upon it right away, but probably within the next ten years or so, I'll definitely have to turn you into a vampire."

An undead werewolf? What's next, Frankenstein's Monster coming over for dinner?

"You're out of your fucking mind."

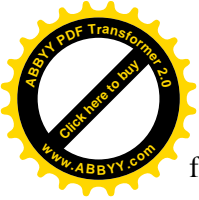
"Apparently so," he said cheerfully, and kissed her, and left her.

Chapter Six

Richard knocked modestly—absurd, given what he had just done to her—and opened the door. She was staring at the ceiling, and didn't look at him when he came in. He nibbled his lower lip and tried to distract himself from the sight of the lovely Janet, spread-eagled on his bed. It was amazing—he'd just spent over an hour with her, but he could have taken her right this minute. And again. And then again.

He was carrying a tray full of savories. She smelled it and sat up as much as her bonds would allow. "Feeding time at the zoo," Jane said moodily. The spot on her thigh where he'd fed from her was purpling. He stifled an urge to kiss it, and beg her





forgiveness. She lied, he reminded himself. And you're the monster.

"Oh, hush. No one in a zoo eats so well. See? Lobster bisque and biscuits and a steak and milk and if you eat everything, chocolate ice cream."

"That's a ridiculous amount of food," she said, staring at the tray.

"I've seen you eat, my love. I'm going to let you out of your bonds, but before you hit me over the head with the tray and flee for the hills, I should explain that there are no fewer than three bolted doors—all English oak—between you and the street. You'd never get through them all before being caught. And you must be starving. Surely it's more prudent to eat and plot revenge, right?"

She drummed her fingers on the bedspread and stared up at him. Her eyes went narrow and flinty, but at last she said, "I'm starving."

"Eat, and then a hot bath...sound good?"

"And then what?"

"And then agree to be my wife."

"Don't," she practically snarled, "start with that again, dicklick."

"Ah, a blushing modest bride, how refreshing. I can see you're contemplating homicide—try not to spill the soup."

He set the tray down on the table, and unsnapped her ankle bonds. Then he seized the footboard and tugged the bed away from the wall. She could have done the same thing herself, but couldn't help but be impressed—not bad for an undead monkey. He walked to the headboard, reached behind it, and in a few seconds had her wrists freed. She was off the bed in a bound, pulled the shreds of her clothes off and let them flutter to the floor, then made a beeline for the tray.

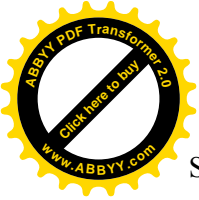
"I brought you a robe—"

"Who cares?" she said with a mouthful of biscuit. "You've already seen me naked."

"Uh—" You're gorgeous. You're distracting. If you prance around in that sweet little body you'll have your hands full. You have soup on your chin. "As you wish."

He sat down across from her and watched her eat. She ate like a machine, seeming to take no enjoyment from the meal. Refueling, the better to kick my ass. Well, so be it. He

deserved that, and more. And he was a fast healer. Let her do her worst. "Why did you break our date?" he asked abruptly, and surprised even himself—he had no idea he was going to say such a thing until it was done.



She grunted irritably. "We've been over this."

"Jane..." Again, he had no idea what would come out of his mouth, but plunged ahead anyway. "Jane, if you tell the truth, I'll unlock those three doors and will walk you back to your hotel. Just admit that you were afraid of me, that you were only pretending to accept what I am, and—"

Her gaze locked on his like a laser. "My name is Janet Lupo," she said coldly. "I'm not afraid of any man. And. I. Don't. Lie."

He actually felt the chill coming off her. Absurd! She was half his size, even if she had twice the mouth. Her gaze was odd, almost hypnotic. With difficulty he broke her challenging stare. "Well," he said at last, "perhaps you can understand why I have difficulty believing that your 'boss' would insist on your free time, and why you would have to drop everything and rush to meet him at a moment's notice."

"Pack rules."

"Beg pardon?"

"Pack...rules...dumb...fuck. Am I stuttering? I'm a werewolf. My boss is the head werewolf."

He laughed, then ducked as her soup bowl sailed over his head. "Oh, come now, Janet! Because you know I am a vampire, you've decided I'll believe that you're a werewolf? I'm that gullible? There's no such thing, and you know it well."

"Says the bloodsucker!"

He was still chuckling. "Nice try."

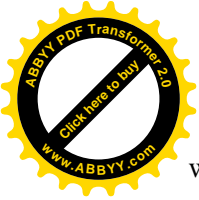
"If you could think about something besides your dick for five seconds, you'd see it makes sense. My strength, my speed..."

"All well within the range for homo sapien...albeit the high end."

"You've been dead too long, Dick. The average homo loser can barely lift the remote control. My rich blood? That's from a diet high in protein. Raw protein, during the full moon."

"Ah, the full moon. It's a few days away, but I suppose I had better take care when—"

She slammed her fork down; the table trembled, then was still. "The full moon is eight days away. And when it comes, you're going to get a big fucking surprise. Your little oak doors won't hold me then. I'll be out of here—possibly eating your head on my way out the door—and you'll realize you fucked up, bad. You'll know I was telling the truth the whole time, but you couldn't see past your stupid injured male pride. I'll be gone forever, and you'll have the next hundred years to realize what an asshole you



were."

This was so convincing, he actually panicked for a moment. To add drama to her little speech, she stopped eating, walked to the bed, got under the covers, and faced away from him the rest of the night. She never said another word, or looked at him, not even when he tempted her with a brimming bowl of frozen custard.

Chapter Seven

He was right. The doors—this one, anyway—were oak. Thick and heavy, with the hinges on the outside where she couldn't get at them. She threw her shoulder a few times—okay, thirty—into the door, but it barely rocked in its frame. "Fucking Brit wood," she mumbled, rubbing her aching shoulder.

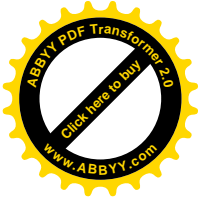
She'd prowled around her cage for the last couple of hours. It was a gorgeous room with plush wine-colored carpet, a soft queen-sized bed with about a zillion pillows, and a truly glorious attached bathroom (free of all razors and other sharp things, she was sorry to note). But as far as Janet was concerned, if you couldn't leave, it might as well have a cement floor and bars on the window.

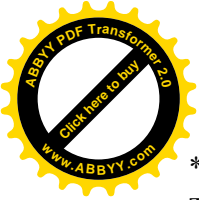
She went through the bureau and found several robes in her size, in various materials. No real clothes. No television, either, but several books. She saw some classics—Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Tolstoy—as well as—too funny!—the entire collected works of Stephen King. She supposed she might stand half a chance if she threw Hamlet at Dick as hard as she could. She'd gotten the drop on him before, in the alley, but wondered if it was possible now. He didn't believe she was a werewolf, the stupid dickhead, but he'd be careful. He thought she was one of the monkeys, but he respected her anyway. If he wasn't such a fuckstick, she could have really liked him.

She wondered what the pack was thinking—what boss-man Michael was thinking. Probably that she'd been run over by a train or something. Death was about the only acceptable reason for skipping a meeting with the big dog. Interestingly, that thought—she'd unwillingly disobeyed a command from her pack leader—brought no anxiety. In fact, it was kind of nice, knowing Michael wanted her on the Cape, and here she was, still in Boston.

If only Dick hadn't been such a beast. If only he hadn't been so nice about being such a beast—he might have wanted to really hurt her, but he sucked at it. She remembered him pulling out of her when he thought he was too big for her...remembered the excellent food, and the large quantities of it. The absurd marriage proposal. Absurd because...well, just because.

If he wasn't such a dick, she could start to like him. But nobody—fucking nobody—snatched Janet Lupo from the street, tied her down like a dog, and did whatever he wanted. He'd pay. She would have to wait for her chance, but it would eventually present itself. And then he'd better watch out for his guts, because she meant to have them on the floor.





* * * * *

The smell of eggs basted in butter woke her up. Before she could open her eyes, she realized Dick was under the blankets with her. Then she felt his mouth on her neck, felt brief pain as his fangs broke the skin. She tried to push him away, but he pinned her

down and held her to the bed while he drank. She had no leverage and could only lie beneath him while he took from her.

"You piece of shit," she said directly into his ear.

He laughed against her throat. "That's the problem, Jane m'love. If you screamed or fainted or cried, I'd have no interest in you—I'd want to be rid of you as quickly as possible. But you're fearless, and furious, and it works on me like an aphrodisiac. Which is why you have to be my wife."

"I'd rather eat my own heart."

He licked the bite mark on her neck, then nuzzled the tender spot. "That's a rather disturbing visual. Did you sleep well? I admit I was astonished you weren't lying in wait ready to strangle me with the sash from one of your robes."

"I'd rather wait until you dropped your guard. Then you'll be sorry." She said this with total confidence.

He rested his forehead against hers. "God, you're delightful."

"I'm going to skin you alive, you fucking undead monkey. Then I'm going to set your skin on fire. Then I'm going to roast your skinless body over the fire I made with your skin."

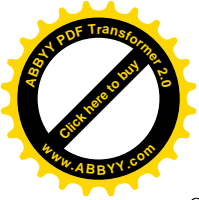
"And so ladylike, too! Umm..." His cool mouth closed over one of her nipples, and she brought her fist down on top of his head, hard. Then yelped when he bit her. "Sorry," he said, rubbing the top of his head. "That was you, not me. You hit me so hard my teeth nearly clacked together."
"Just you wait," she said ominously.

He kissed her wrist, her pulse point, and then the crook of her elbow. She balled a fist and got ready to sock him again.

"Jane, as delightful as last night was—for me, anyway—I'd rather not tie you up again." She punched him square in the face, a poor blow with her lack of leverage, but his head rocked back, which was gratifying. He went on as if nothing had happened. "So let's make a deal, you and I. I won't tie you up, and you won't fight me. As of now," he amended.

"You won't tie me up?" she asked suspiciously. "But I have to let you fuck me?"

He looked pained. "Yes, you have to let me fuck you."



She pretended to think it over, but it was an easy decision. She could stand almost anything but being tied down. It went against her very nature, made her want to bite somebody. "Okay. I won't punch, and you won't get out the elastic bubble gum."

"And you'll kiss me back."

"Forget it."

"All right, then, I will do all the kissing for both of us." He smiled at her, put a hand on the back of her neck, and pulled her to him.

"What, I can't eat first? This deal blows."

"Later, Jane. I'm begging you." His mouth was slightly warm, and his tongue slipped past her teeth to stroke her own tongue. She felt his hand cup one of her breasts, testing the weight of it, and then his thumb was rubbing her nipple.

She wriggled, pushing more of her breast into his palm. "So, the quicker you get off, the quicker I can have eggs?"

He sighed. "You're really killing the mood here."

"What mood? I'm a prisoner, for fuck's sake. And I'm hungry," she whined.

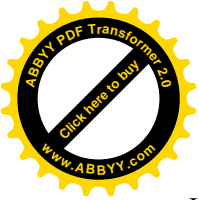
"Oh, for—" But he let go of her and she bounded off the bed. She wolfed down her breakfast—eggs, six strips of bacon, four pieces of toast, and two glasses of milk—in five minutes while he laid on the bed and watched her with his fingers laced behind his head and a mildly disbelieving look on his face. She got up, wiped her mouth with a napkin, tossed it over her shoulder, and climbed back into bed.

"All right, then," she said, infinitely more cheerful.

He smiled at her. "All right, then." He reached out, took her hand, and led her to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, they were in his giant bathtub and the floor was soaked. Her legs were spread wide and resting on each rim of the tub, and she was gripping the sides so tightly her knuckles ached. Richard was beneath the water, nuzzling and tonguing and fingering her cunt. He'd been down there for five minutes, and she was about ready to lose her fucking mind.

Now his tongue was inside her, and one of his fingers was worming into her ass. She'd never been interested in assplay—the idea had always grossed her out—but the sensation of his long finger sliding up inside her while his tongue darted and stabbed and licked her cunt made her throb. She had no control over her reflexes, she simply started to thrust her hips at his face. Her muffled groans (for her teeth were tightly clenched) bounced off the bathroom tile.



He rose, water dripping down his marble-white skin, and grinned at her. He pulled her up to him and growled, "Now you'll kiss me."

She did, without hesitation. He sucked her tongue into his mouth as he pushed her thighs wide, as he took himself in hand and rubbed his cock against her sopping cunt. She moaned into his mouth and strained toward him. He tore his mouth from hers, sought her neck, and she felt him bite her just as his cock thrust inside. The combination of sensations—slight pain, swamping pleasure—made her come so hard she bucked against him, and another gallon of water sloshed over the side of the tub.

"Ummmm," he said against her throat. "Oh, that's very good. I could do this all day."

"Better...not..." she managed. "It'll kill me."

He laughed and leaned back. She was still spread up against the sloping end of the tub; they were connected only by his cock. He ran his hands over her soapy breasts,

smiling as she groaned again. "Oh, you are going to marry me," he said huskily. "Believe it."

"Why don't you...stop talking...and finish fucking?"

He grinned, flashing fangs, and obliged. When he finished she was indecently satisfied, and there was only a few inches of water left in the tub.

* * * * *

Later, he brought a second breakfast. "After that half an hour," he explained, "even I could eat a few more eggs."

"Not bad for a dead guy," she said casually, pretending she wasn't still throbbing. The man had a fiendish touch between the sheets—or in the tub—and that was a fact. "I'm sure the ladies like you all right, when you're not being such a jerkoff."

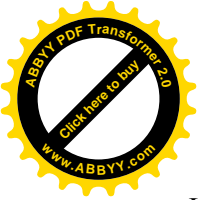
He didn't answer, just sat down across from her and watched her eat. After a few minutes, he started drumming his fingers on the table.

"Yeah, that's not gonna get annoying. The kidnapping and the fucking I can take, but not the nervous tics. Cut it out."

"Why only twice?"

"What?"

He was nibbling thoughtfully on his lower lip and watching her. "Why was last night only your second time? You're in your thirties. You should have had hundreds of experiences by now. It can't be a dislike for the act itself—you're sexy, responsive, and open to new experiences. So what's the explanation?"



Her mouth was suddenly dry—weird!—and she gulped some juice. "None of your goddamned business."

"Did he hurt you? Because if he did, I'd be delighted to track him down for you and teach him a richly deserved—"

"Am I speaking a language you don't know? I said it was none of your business." Her hand was shaking. She put the juice glass down with a bang and hid her hands under the table. "And even if it was, I don't want to talk about it. Especially with you."

His eyes were narrow, thoughtful. "Ah...you hurt him. And felt needless guilt ever since—Jane, for heaven's sake. Whatever you did, it was an accident. You didn't mean it."

"Are you deaf? I said I don't want to talk about it!" The glass zoomed at his head; he ducked and it slammed into the far wall. Orange juice and broken glass sprayed everywhere.

"All right," he said calmly. "We won't talk about it."

Her hands weren't the only thing shaking. She grabbed her elbows and squeezed; clenched her teeth to stop them from chattering. She was morbidly afraid she might puke, and soon.

He got up from his chair, came to her, and scooped her up as if she was a child. For a wonder, she didn't try to pull his eyeballs out of his head. "You're tired," he soothed. "You've had a rotten week. Why don't you take a nap?"

"Why don't you go fuck yourself?"

"Can't we do both?"

She chuckled unwillingly.

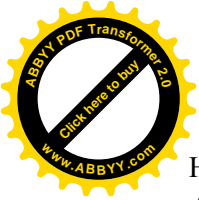
Chapter Eight

Two nights before the full moon, and she was actually torn.

Torn! It was almost like she was dreading her impending escape. Which only proved a steady diet of rich food and amazing sex lowered I.Q. points.

Every day, he asked her to tell him the truth, promising to let her go if she did. And every day, she told him the truth...a lie would have choked her. She hadn't broken their date by choice. She had wanted to see him again. And she almost didn't hate him.

That one she kept to herself.



He hadn't tied her up since that first night. And she hadn't tried to attack him. Another example of her quickly-lowering I.Q. When they were between the sheets (or in the bathtub, or on the floor in front of the fireplace), the last thing on her mind was leaving. But far more disturbing, when they weren't between the sheets, the last thing on her mind was leaving.

And it wasn't that she was thinking with her pussy instead of her brain. Well, it wasn't just that. Because to be perfectly honest, what, exactly, was she going back to? To be at Mikey's beck and call? To hang out with a group of people who disapproved of her, then go home to her lonely bed? The pack didn't much want her, and she sure as shit didn't want someone who wasn't pack, someone who was fragile—who would break if she really let loose.

Dick fit the bill admirably, and he approved of her—to the hilt! He thought everything she did and said was swell. She could have farted on him and he would have rhapsodized about it. In fact, she did... after a particularly strenuous sexual marathon and when she was relaxing in his embrace. Relaxing a little too well, in fact—she really cut one. Quick as thought, she pulled the blankets over Dick's head, trapping him with the noxious odor. Cursing, he finally freed himself, and then they both laughed until they cried.

She rolled over on her back and stared at the ceiling. It was getting rapidly dark in the bedroom; the sun would be down in a few more minutes. She'd adjusted nicely to his schedule, and now slept her days away. Frankly, she preferred his schedule—she'd never been much of an early riser.

He'd be here any minute. Any minute. She felt a tightening in her stomach and was disgusted with herself. Just thinking about him—about his long fingers and his mouth and his tongue and his cock—was making her wet. Some prisoner. Now she had Stockholm Syndrome. Except it was more like Bimbo Hypnotized By Bad Guy's Huge Cock Syndrome.

And then later he would bring amazing food, and they'd talk about everything and anything. And he'd read to her—they were halfway through Salem's Lot, which he seemed to think was a comedy—while she paced. She liked books but couldn't stand to

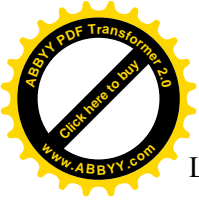
sit still for the hours and hours required to read one. Or they'd wrestle, and once she'd thrown the leftover apple pie at him and they'd had a food fight that ruined the drapes.

Jane sighed. If it was just his dick, it wouldn't be so bad. She could always buy a vibrator. No, it was Dick. She really, really liked him. More than any guy she'd ever known, and she knew a lot of fellas. And she was having a helluva time remembering she was a prisoner. In fact, she didn't think Dick remembered much, either.

* * * * *

Her vision doubled, trebled...then her knees buckled. Luckily she was bent over the footboard, so she had some support.

Dick let go of her waist and pulled her back onto the bed. "That was...sweaty." Panting lightly, he flopped over on the pillows. "Jane, your stamina knows no bounds.



Look at me; I'm actually out of breath. And I don't even need to breathe."

"My stamina? Look who's talking. We've been at it since—holy shit, the sun's gonna be up in another hour. You'd better beat feet back to the coffin, old man."

He snorted. "It's a bed, not a coffin. It's one of the guest beds, in fact. You're in my coffin, so to speak."

"So why don't you sleep here?"

"I've been thinking about it." He propped himself up on one elbow, bent to kiss her shoulder, then said, "More and more, actually. In the beginning I dared not leave myself at your mercy, but now I wonder."

"What the hell are you talking about? You take longer to say something than anyone I've ever met."

He didn't smile at her bitching, like he usually did. "I'd be quite helpless, Janet. If you, ah, decided to be angry, there's nothing I could do until the sun went down. And the tables in here are all made out of wood...so are the chairs. It wouldn't be difficult for someone with your determination to fashion a rudimentary stake."

She'd never thought of that. She couldn't believe she'd never thought of that. "Oh." She mulled it over for a minute, then said, "Well, I don't especially want to stake you in the guts."

"The guts I wouldn't mind so much. How about the heart?" She rolled over and rested her chin on his chest. "There either. I dunno, you're okay. When you're not being a total shit. Stay, go, I don't give a fuck."

"Well, I can hardly turn down such a warm invitation." Still, he glanced nervously at the table in the corner before climbing under the covers. "Ah, well, here goes nothing. Climb in next to me."

"I have chicken grease under my nails," she pointed out.

"So, we'll take a nice hot shower together later tonight."

"Sounds like a date." She snuggled in next to him and rested her head on his shoulder. His body was still slightly warm from their earlier exertions and, as she pressed closer to him, remained that way.

"Ahhhhh," he sighed. "You're better than my electric blanket."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. You should write for fuckin' soap operas," she grumbled, but inside she was glowing. He was trusting her with his life. He knew he was easy prey, and he was going to sleep anyway. It spoke volumes about his true feelings for her...and her status as his "prisoner".



Well, shit, she thought, drifting into sleep. Her palm rested over his heart, which beat once or twice every minute. Maybe there's hope for us after all.

Chapter Nine

Richard woke, as he had for the last several decades, just as the sun slipped past the horizon line. He felt Jane's head resting on his shoulder and smiled. A wonderful way to start the evening. And he was warm, so delightfully warm. She was better than a hot tub. He'd have to do something really nice for her for not killing him. Like...let her go?

He couldn't. He knew it was the right thing to do, knew he had no business keeping her as a sort of mid-sized boy toy, but every time he thought of his condo emptied of her refreshing presence, he wanted to shiver. Hell, he wanted to go for a walk in the sunshine.

He couldn't even pretend it was about revenge anymore. Even if she had lied, they were square after that first night. No, he was keeping her because he was a selfish monster and he couldn't bear to let her go. To be brutally honest, he was thrilled she was sticking to her story, because it gave him the perfect excuse to keep her.

The fact that he wasn't pinned to the bed via a table leg through his rib cage spoke well of her feelings for him. He was as hopeful as he'd been in—what year was it? She had her chance for vengeance, and hadn't taken it. And he doubted his lovely Jane was in the habit of passing up a chance to avenge herself. Was it possible she'd forgiven him? That was too unrealistic to believe, but perhaps there was hope. Perhaps—

"No! No, God, no...aw, jeez, Bobby!"

She was screaming. Screaming in her sleep. He was so startled he nearly jumped off the bed. Never had he heard his Janet so terrified, and so young. She sounded like a teenager.

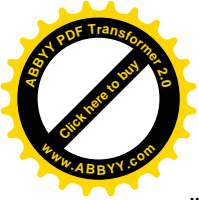
"I didn't—Bobby, don't move, I'll get an ambulance, oh, God, don't die, please don't die!"

She was clawing at him in her sleep. He caught her hands and squeezed. "Jane, love. It's a dream. It's not real." Anymore, he added silently. His chest and throat felt tight. Whatever had happened, it had been horrible. Awful enough to scare her away from lovemaking for years and years.

Her eyes flew open. He was shocked to see them filling, and then her tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. "I didn't mean to," she sobbed.

"Of course you didn't."

"They told me it wasn't a good idea—that monkeys are fragile—I didn't listen." She made a small fist and thumped it against his chest. "Why didn't I listen? Oh, we were having such fun—it didn't even hurt, and I thought it was supposed to hurt the first time. And then I started to come and I wrapped my legs around his waist and squeezed and—and—"



"Janet, it was an accident." Monkeys? Odd slang—he had never been able to keep up with it. Had she broken the boy's ribs? Had they been in a precarious position, and had fallen, and perhaps the boy had...? Well. Whatever had happened, he was thoroughly

certain of one thing. "You didn't mean to hurt him, Jane. You never would have hurt him. You've got to let this go." He was stroking her back while he soothed her and she finally relaxed against him. He added jokingly, hoping to see a scowl, "Besides, you don't need to worry about such things with me. You could set me on fire while you were having your way with me, and I'd be fine the next day. Before you ask, though, I'm really not into that."

She jerked up on one elbow and stared at him. Her eyes were smudged with tears, bloodshot, and enormous. He thought she'd never looked so pretty. "That's right," she said slowly. "I was thinking about that last night and you...I can't hurt you. You can take whatever I dish out."

"And have been," he added, "for several days now. See, look!" He showed her his arm where, in her agitation, she'd clawed off ribbons of skin. It was nearly healed.

Oddly, she was still staring at him as if she'd never seen him before. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before, Dick."

"You've had other things on your mind. Now, that's enough crying over a fifteen year-old accident you couldn't help," he said briskly, hoping she agreed. He couldn't bear to see her cry. He rolled out of bed and stood up, casting about for a way to distract her. "How about sushi and maybe some vegetable tempura for breakfast?"

She perked up immediately. "I like raw fish," she said. "I like steak tartare, too, but I like it better with steak, not hamburger."

"Sounds like we have lunch figured out, too, m'love."

"But first we have to shower," she said, almost shyly.

He laughed, bent to her, picked her up, and kissed her. "Yes indeed. You are filthy. And so am I. I foresee lots of scrubbing in our future."

"Fucking pervert," she snorted, and he cheered inwardly, knowing she was back to herself.

* * * * *

For the second night in a row, Richard woke up warm and content. He had made up his mind as dawn broke in the wee hours of the morning, as Janet cuddled up to him and snored softly in his ear. Today they would go out. He'd take her shopping and buy her a ridiculous amount of clothes. Clothes, lingerie, priceless paintings, pounds of steak tartare—whatever she wanted. He knew in his heart she wouldn't run away from him, and it was past time he let her out of his bedroom. She had been admirably patient, and it was time for a reward.



He stretched. He didn't really need to—he always woke energized and hungry and raring to go—but enjoyed the sensation. Yes, they would go shopping and she would bully the sales clerks and it would be delightful. Then back to his place for a light lunch and some energetic lovemaking, and possibly a nap, or more of Salem's Lot. Yes, it was all—

Where the hell was Janet?

He'd been groping absently for her while he'd been thinking, but she wasn't in his bed, and the bathroom light was off. He could hear her on the floor, gasping in—pain? Was that pain?

In the second before he looked, it seemed like every malady mortals were prone to raced through his brain. She had appendicitis. He'd knocked her up (it was supposed to be impossible, but who really knew?) and she was having a miscarriage. She was having a heart attack. A brain embolism. A kidney shutdown. God help him, he was as afraid to look as he was afraid not to.

He looked. Janet was on her knees beside the bed, panting harshly, and her back—it almost looked like the knobs of her spine were moving. Her hair was hanging in her face in sweaty tangles, and her nails were sunk into the carpet. His feet hit the floor with a double thud and he reached for her. "Janet, I'm getting a doctor. I'll be right—"

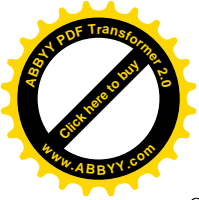
A low, ripping growl froze his hand in mid-reach. And then—so fast, it was so quick, he blinked and it was done—she sprouted hair and her nose turned into a long snout and her eyes went wild and she was leaping for the door.

She bounced off it, but he was alarmed to see it actually shudder in its frame. She coiled and leapt again. And again. He remained sitting on the bed—he was afraid if he stood he would fall—and stared at her. Janet was a dun-colored wolf with silver streaks running down her back. Her eyes were the same color as when she was a biped, but now they were glittery and homicidal. He remembered how she paced when he read, how she couldn't seem to sit still for long, and realized that in this form she was claustrophobic.

Chunks of the door were leaping off the frame and falling to the carpet each time her body hit the door, but at this rate it would take at least ten minutes and she was likely to damage herself. He got up and walked to the door on legs stiff with shock, fumbled with the lock, dropped his key twice (all the while dodging her small wolf's body—she never stopped, she completely ignored him, he doubted he was even a cipher to her now), and finally swung the door open.

He ran after her to do it again, and again. Then she spotted the bank of windows facing west and lunged toward them. He dived, and managed to catch her back left leg just as she was coiling for a leap that would take her through the window. She spun and he had a dizzying glimpse of what looked like a thousand sharp teeth as she growled.

"We're three stories up," he panted, clutching her while at the same time trying not to break her leg. "You'll never survive the fall. Well, you might but—Janet, don't go!"



She snapped at his fingers. Wrathful growls bubbled up out of her without pause, or breath.

"Please don't leave! I was wrong and you were right—God, you were so right, I was a blind fool not to see it. Please don't leave me."

She snapped again, her jaws closing about a centimeter from his flesh. A warning. Probably her last warning.

"I can't bear it without you. I swear I can't. I thought I was content before but it was a lie, everything was a lie, even why I was keeping you was a lie..."

His grip was slipping. He talked faster.

"...but you were right, and you never lied, not once, not even to get away, and Janet, I will spend the rest of your life making it up to you..."

She was almost free, and he was afraid if he let go to get a better grip, he wouldn't be fast enough.

"...but please...don't...go!"

She went.

He lay on the floor in his study a very long time. It seemed too much work to get up, find the broom, and start sweeping up the broken glass. He owned the building anyway, so who cared? Who cared about anything?

He couldn't believe she was gone. He couldn't believe he—who prided himself on possessing at least a modicum of intelligence—had let this happen.

My name is Janet Lupo.

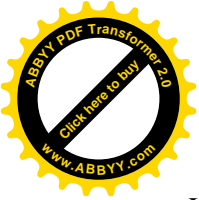
Had done such things, and to such a woman.
I'm not afraid of any man, and I don't lie.

What had he been thinking?
My name is Janet Lupo.

How could he have been so blind?

My name is Janet Lupo.

So stupid and arrogant?
The full moon is eight days away. And when it comes, you're going to get a big fucking surprise.
Oh, if there was a God this was a fine joke indeed. He had finally found the one woman he could spend eternity with...



Your little oak doors won't hold me then.

...and he had kidnapped her and raped her and kept her and ignored her when she spoke the truth.

You'll realize you fucked up, bad.

He'd demanded she admit to being afraid of him, and when she wouldn't, he assumed it was a lie.

You'll know I was telling the truth the whole time, but you couldn't see past your stupid injured male pride.

His stupid injured male pride.

I'll be gone forever, and you'll have the next hundred years to realize what an asshole you were.

He would have cried, but he had no tears.

Chapter Ten

Three days later

Jane rolled over and stretched. Then shrieked in anger as she fell three feet and hit the cement with a smack. She'd curled up on the base of the statue in Park Square, promptly gone to sleep, then forgotten about the drop when she woke up. Why don't I ever remember this shit until it's too late? she thought, rubbing her skinned elbow.

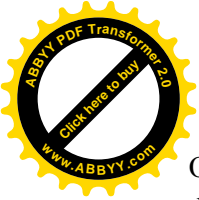
She was pleasantly tired, and would be for the next couple of days. It was always like that when she chased the moon. She also felt very new, almost husked out. Purified. Whatever.

She stood, and shivered. Step one: find clothes. Spring in Boston was like spring in Siberia.

She marched up to an early-morning commuter, a businessman obviously cutting through the park to get to the subway. He stared at her appreciatively as she approached, but she had eyes only for his cashmere topcoat. "How-" was all he had time for before she belted him in the jaw and mugged him.

She had made her choice as a wolf, and would carry it out as a woman. She didn't have to wake up in the park, naked and alone. Or yesterday, in an alley. Or the night before that, beneath the docks by the harbor—ugh. She didn't think she'd ever get the smell out of her hair.

There were only a hundred safe-houses in Boston, as well as acres and acres of woods owned by pack members. She could have romped there and woken to clean clothes and a hearty breakfast. But as a wolf she had avoided all those places and her kind. The beast knew what she wanted. Now it was time to get it.



Of course, she didn't know where Dick lived, exactly. It's not like she scribbled down the address with her paw on her way out the window. Luckily, there were ways and ways. She might not have a super nose like some of her kind, but the day she

couldn't sniff up her own backtrail to a den was the day she'd jump off a fucking bridge.

It didn't take long, but her feet were freezing by the time she got there. Dick lived in a dignified brownstone condo that was probably built the year the Mayflower landed. She shifted her weight back and forth, stuck her hands in her stolen pockets, and looked up at his window. The glass hadn't been replaced; there was a large piece of cardboard taped into the frame instead. Guess it took time to order that fancy old-fashioned stuff. Except for the rumble of an early morning delivery truck, the street was quiet.

"Scuse me. D'you live here?"

She looked. The delivery boy was holding three brimming grocery bags, and looking glum. "Yeah. Why?"

"Well, thank God. 'Cause I've been making deliveries for two weeks, but the last couple days nobody ever takes the food in, and it goes bad or gets swiped, and it's just a waste, is all."

Ah, so that's where all the sumptuous feasts came from! Dick had the food delivered, and cooked the meals for her. Yum. "I was gone for a while," she told him, "but now I'm back."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the owner's fiancée." She shook her head. It sounded just as weird out loud as it did in her head. "Do I have to sign something?"

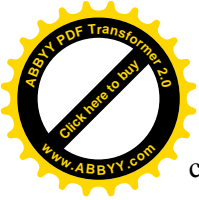
"No. He's got an account with us."

"Then get lost."

"Nice!" But he set the bags down, slouched back to his truck, and pulled into traffic without looking, in typical Boston fashion. Which was good, because it wouldn't do for him to watch her break into the house.

"Well, shit." That had been considerably easier said than done! Dick's front door wouldn't budge, and she was reluctant to break more of that expensive glass. He might not be so thrilled she came back. She had a vague memory of him grabbing her and begging her not to go, but it was more like a dream. She didn't trust her wolf-brain to factually interpret human emotions.

She smacked herself on the forehead. Dummy! Why was she trying to see him in the daytime? Even if she got in, he wouldn't exactly be a thrilling conversationalist. He'd be holed up in his bedroom, dead to the world—literally. Until then, she might as well



chat with a rock. Still, it would have been nice to swipe some clothes.

Oh, well. The coat was plenty warm enough, and she didn't give a fuck how many people stared at her feet. At least she was in a big city, instead of some rinky-dinky small town...the yokels always loved something new to gawp at. She just had to kill another ten hours until the sun set. Thank God for the Barnes & Noble café.

Chapter Eleven

Richard slumped in the chair beside the fireplace. He'd been sitting in this room every evening since Jane had left. It had been the last place he'd seen her.

He was starving, and didn't care. He deserved to go hungry. And the thought of leaving—of perhaps missing her if she came back—was unbearable. What if she was hurt? What if she needed something and he was out assuaging his thirst? Who are you kidding? She's gone, fool. You did everything but toss her out the window yourself.

True enough. Still, he waited. It was the only thing he could do. He'd never insult her by trying to find her and convince her to return. Return to what? An unnatural existence with a monster? And what in the world could he ever say to her? "Janet, dear, sorry about kidnapping you and raping you and keeping you and all but calling you a liar to your face, kiss-kiss, let's go home." As the lady herself might say, "In a fuckin' pig's eye."

"Dick! Stop with the fucking sulking and open the front door!"

Oh, Christ, now his inner voice sounded like her. Bad enough he was starving, but it appeared he was slowly going insane as well.

"You son of a bitch! You piece of shit! I trot my ass all the way back down here—twice!—and you keep me standing out here on this freezing sidewalk?"

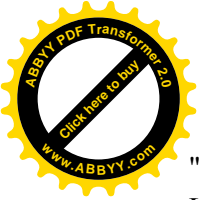
He buried his face in his hands. How he missed her!

"I am going to rip your heart out and pin it to the bedroom wall with a swizzle stick! I'm going to yank the fixtures out of that stupid bathroom you're so proud of and shove them up your ass!" Wham! Wham! Wham! "Now let me in before I lose my temper!"

That's no inner voice, Richard. I ought to know...I'm your inner voice.

He jumped up so quickly his head actually banged into the ceiling. He barely felt it. He clawed for the doorway, raced through it and down the hall, down three flights of stairs, fumbled for the bolts and locks, and flung the door open.

Janet stood on his front step, flushed and out of breath. Her little fists were red from the cold, and from banging his door. She was wearing a man's overcoat roughly six sizes too big for her, and three large grocery bags were at her feet. She was scowling.



"Well, finally. Don't sulk on my time, all right, pal?" She stomped past him. Like a zombie, he picked up the groceries, then slowly turned and followed her. She shrugged out of the coat and headed straight for their—for his room. He watched her naked form sway back and forth as she went up the stairs like she owned them. "Food," she said over her shoulder on her way up. "I could eat a cow. In fact, I think I did, night before last."

By the time he brought her tray to the bedroom, she had showered and toweled off. She strolled out of the bathroom and sniffed appreciatively. "Oooh, yeah, that's the stuff. I could eat two steaks."

"They're both for you," he said automatically. "Why...how...why...?"

"You sounded a lot brighter when you thought I was a liar." She brushed past him and jumped for the bed, landing in the middle, lolling like a queen, and favoring him with a smirk. "Ah, the mileage I'm gonna get out of this. Let's start with your whole smug speech about how just because you're a vampire, there's no such thing as werewolves. That sound like a good place to you?"

"Janet—"

"Or we could touch on why it's not a good idea to kidnap people when they're on their way to an important meeting."

"Janet—"

"Or we could go into all the times you asked me to tell the truth, and I did, and then you didn't believe me, and then you—"

He fell to his knees beside the bed. He had to grit his teeth for a few seconds to keep his jaw from trembling. "Janet, why are you here? Why aren't you with your family?" His voice was rising, but he was helpless to stop it. "Why didn't you head for the road and keep going? Why are you back?"

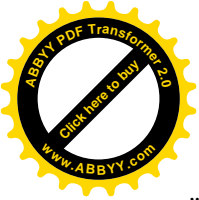
She frowned. "You're taking the fun all out of this. I've been looking forward to it for days. I need to see some major-ass groveling, pal."

He didn't speak.

She sighed. "What, I gotta get out the hand puppets? You haven't figured it out? Dick, you're my family now. I never want to go back there. Cape Cod in the summer—yech! Tourists cluttering up the roads, the beaches, and the mall—and you get in trouble if you eat them. Can't even take a little bite to discourage them from coming back..."

"Janet."

"I'm serious! Anyway, if I stay with you, I don't have to go back. I didn't realize how unhappy I was with them until I fell in with you. I'm not pack anymore, I'm yours. I mean—if you want."



"Is this a joke?" he almost whispered. "Is it a trick to get even? Because while I wouldn't blame you—"

"Oh, hey, I'm a bitch, but I'm not, like, a sociopath! That'd be a rotten thing to do. I love you, you stupid fuck. I'm not going anywhere. Except, of course, for a few days a month. Think you can put up with that, you undead dope?"

"I've been waiting almost a hundred years to hear those words. Well, not those exact words." He reached out and pulled her down onto his lap. They sat on the floor while she cuddled into him like a bad-tempered doll. "Oh, Janet. I missed you so much. And I was such a fool."

"Yeah, a real arrogant asshole."

"Yes."

"Completely unreasonable and jerkish."

"And then some."

"And you're really, really sorry."

"So unbelievably sorry."

"And totally unworthy of me."

"In a thousand ways."

"And you're gonna buy lots of food and get a house in the country so I don't have to hunt in the city."

"The refrigerator is full and I already have a house in the Berkshires."

"Then that's all right," she said, sounding quite satisfied. She stretched her legs out and wiggled her toes. "Um...the steaks are getting cold."

"So am I."

She giggled and turned so she was straddling him, then hooked her ankles behind his waist and kissed him on the mouth. Slowly, she cupped the back of his neck and brought his mouth to her throat. "Hungry?" she purred.

He thought he would have a seizure. She had come back—she loved him—she would stay—and now she was freely offering him blood. Soon the Palestinians and the Israelis would make peace, and Janet would willingly enroll in charm school.

He sank his fangs into her throat without hesitation—he couldn't have held back if



he tried. He could feel her breasts pressing against his chest while her blood warmed him from the inside out. She was wriggling against him—now her fingers were at his zipper—now her warm little hand was inside his trousers, clasping him, stroking him. He groaned against her throat.

"You did miss me!" She shoved him back and he was happy enough to lie down for her. He stopped feeding and licked the bite mark. Her glorious breasts were jiggling in his face and he couldn't recall ever being happier, not once in his long, long life.

She seized his cock with delightful firmness and raised herself above him. His arms went around her waist as he guided her to him.

Entering her was like slipping into luxurious oil. Her head tipped back and she said "Ummmmm...that's good, I missed that," to the ceiling.

He stroked her breasts, running his fingers over her firm nipples, marveling at the softness of her skin in contrast with her strength and stamina. She'd jumped three stories and there wasn't a mark on her—and he was certainly looking! Not a bruise, not a scratch. She healed almost as quickly as he did.

"You're gorgeous," he said.

"You're just saying that to get laid," she teased.

"In case you haven't noticed, I am getting laid."

She snorted, then began to rock back and forth. He noticed an odd, sudden reticence about her and wondered about it—then suddenly realized she had likely been on top when she crippled her first lover.

"For heaven's sakes," he said with mock disgust, "can't you go any faster than that? Any harder? I'm about to fall asleep down here."

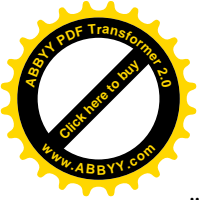
She was so astonished she nearly fell off him. Then she made the connection and smirked. "Okey-dokey, dead guy. Here we go."

They ruined the carpet. They didn't care. Toward the end, she was screaming at the ceiling and he could feel his spine cracking—and didn't care. Her legs were around his waist in a crushing grip, her arms around his neck, cutting off his air—and he wanted more. He told her so, insisted on it, demanded it, then bit her ear. He could actually feel the temperature change within her as she reached orgasm, felt her uterus tightening around his shaft. That was enough to tip him dizzily over the edge.

They weren't able to speak for several minutes, until Janet finally managed, "Oh, cripes, I think that should be against the law."

"It probably is, in at least three states."

"My supper's cold," she complained, making no move to stand up and get the tray.



"So, I've got a microwave. Why did I even cook it? I doubt you'd have minded it raw. A werewolf," he mused, stroking her thigh. "Even after I saw the truth with my own eyes, I could hardly believe it."

"That's because you're kind of a dumb-ass sometimes."
"I have to take this from a foul-mouthed tart like you?"

She pounced on him, nibbled his throat. "I'm your foul-mouthed tart, so there."

"Excellent." He kissed her nose. "So...how do you feel about being an undead werewolf?"

She groaned. "Let's talk about it in ten years, all right? Let me get used to the idea of not being pack anymore first."

"It's a date. Will they come after you?"

"I have no idea. No one's ever voluntarily left before. I doubt the boss would really mind—he's softened up since he got hitched—but I s'pose I should tell them I'm not dead."

"Tomorrow."
"Yeah. Tomorrow."

"We've made our own pack, Jane. We're two monsters who do as they like, when they like. Everyone else had best stay out of our way."

"Ooooh, God, I love it when you talk like that..."

"How about when I do this?" He leaned down and nibbled on her impudent nipple, running his tongue over the velvety bumps of her areola.

"Oh, God."

"Or this?" He sucked hard, and nipped her very, very lightly.

"Ummmmm..."

"I love you."

"Ummmm. Me too. Don't stop."

He laughed and bent to her warm, lush flesh. "Not for a hundred years, at least."

"We'll figure something out."

Epilogue



From the private papers of Richard Will, Ten Beacon Hill, Boston, Massachusetts.

"I'm in love! No entries of late—too busy. Too much to do just to keep up with my lovely monster. She's everything I ever wanted and, even better, I appear to be everything she ever wanted.

"No more time to write today—we're breaking in a new chef. He's used to catering large office functions, so he should be able to keep Janet satisfied.

"I suppose I'll give up this journal very soon. I realize now I wrote in it as a way to stave off my loneliness. No need for such distracting tricks any longer.

"Must go—my bride has just playfully tossed a marble bust at my head to get my attention. I think I'll chase her down and spank her."