

Loup Garou



Gaule
Farmer

**LOUP
GAROU**

by

Gayle Farmer

Loup Garou

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This book, like all the others I've written,
is dedicated to my husband, Jeff, my best friend,
who always believed in me.

Special thanks to Fred West
hugs,
Annabelle

LOUP GAROU

Prologue

Swamp sounds saturated the warm steamy night. The bugs chattered and hummed, beating relentlessly against the dim porch light. The river lapped at its banks, home to frogs and other aquatic denizens. The indolent roar of an alligator echoed through the night.

The moon rode the bright sky, dodging in and out of the puffy clouds. Sluggish breezes flowed overhead, whispering of the night to come and adventures that awaited. They built steadily, waxing and waning like the orb they emulated. They began a low moan, in concert with the soft rushing sound of cypress fronds rubbing together.

Darius strode through the house, aimless, wandering from room to room, kicking anything that got in his way, including Arnold, his best friend in the world. With a peculiar cry, the abused feline jumped onto the back of the sofa, every hair on his ink-black body standing on end. Back arched, he hissed.

Oblivious to Arnold, he continued to pace while his mind seethed and his needs grew. The collar of his shirt constricted his breathing and he fumbled at the top buttons, finally wrenching them off and baring his chest in one vicious ripping move. His hands formed grotesque paw-like fists, and he pounded one into the other, enjoying the sickening thud of flesh smashing against flesh.

Heavy sighs wafted through the cypress trees now. The breeze had increased in volume, causing their long snake-like limbs to quiver and set the lacy Spanish moss to dancing in the warm gusts.

The rhythm of the water slapping against the nearby dock set his nerves on edge, and he almost shrieked when he stubbed his toe on the end table, overturning the lamp that sat on it. The heavy brass stand hit the oak floor with a shuddering

crash and glass shards from the broken bulb skittered across the room in all directions. Arnold scampered for the bedroom, hissing and spitting as he ran.

The hunger filled Darius as his pace increased and he could stand it no longer. With a howl of fury, he jerked the front door open, almost ripping it off the hinges. The humid summer night wrapped its moist clammy arms around him as he burst onto the porch. The insects ignored him and continued their nocturnal concerts; bullfrogs filled in the base notes like banjos. The bayou sang her siren song, calling him as she did on nights like this. It was a call he could not resist.

He charged down the steps and across the narrow lawn to the dock. Heavy footsteps took him to the end where he tethered his small trawling boat. He released the ropes, pushed away from the dock and fired up the engine. It hummed to life as though anxious for the next adventure. He turned the bow toward the channel, keeping the throttle slow.

The full moon popped out from behind a cloud, turning the face of the lake to a glittering mirror. Darius raised his eyes to the pale glowing orb, feeling the changes taking place in his body. He glanced at the heavily matted hair growing on his hands and the curved, talon-like nails. He threw back his head back and howled.

The mellow sounds of jazz rose in the air and mingled with the smoke that drifted across the room in lazy spirals. The *Blues Tube*, unknown in the heady circles of New Orleans jazz, served up a variety of musical talents that pleased the locals and occasional visitors without the exorbitant cover charge found elsewhere. A frequent haunt of the mid-thirties crowd, the club often hosted clients looking for entertainment of a different kind.

The skunky aroma of pot mingled with cooking odors, a variety of perfumes, and sweat. Ladies of the evening sat at the bar, occupying the three seats nearest the door. They scouted the trade, hoping for a kind and generous john to make their

night prosperous. Their pimps lounged against the back wall, vigilant, protective of their merchandise.

Roli Mabel, a Cajun of unknown age, occupied a two-top behind the little stage, his briefcase resting against the table leg. A low-level drug dealer, he provided weed, coke and meth to an ever-increasing number of regulars. Privacy wasn't really needed at the *Tube*, whose owners believed in a laissez faire attitude to say the least, but it made the tourists a bit more comfortable when illegal activity wasn't right in their faces.

Two women in their early thirties sat at the bar, holding hands. They'd been partners since junior high and were a fixture at the clubs in the area. Their singing voices and soulful harmonies put the crowd in mind of Joan Baez, and their increasing number of fans had earned them a permanent place at the *Tube* years ago. Scheduled to go on in a short while, they enjoyed the brief respite before starting their forty-five minute gig.

The musicians took the stage and began their warm-up routine, with the girls to follow five minutes behind.

Bebé disengaged from Lise and gave her arm a quick pat. "I'll be right back, Sugar. I left the tape recorder in the car. Order me another drink, huh?"

Darius tied the boat to a tree limb growing out of the riverbank, lowered himself into the knee-deep water and moved toward shore. He kept his worlds separated, conducting his hunting expeditions far from his other life. The chance of recognition in his current state was hard to imagine, but ever careful, he exercised due diligence, limiting his forays to isolated areas.

The *Tube* was a common and favored hunting ground, offering easy prey in various states of incapacitation. Although of enormous strength when in his wolf state, he preferred quick and quiet to an attention-getting fight.

Best of all, the area surrounding the bar bordered on the waterway, giving him easy access to the parking lot. Thick shrubs and a tangle of trees and prickly undergrowth combined to keep most folks away. He waited in the shadows for his next victim.

The band, now in the early stages of warming up, offered random guitar riffs, the mellow tinkling of the piano and the mournful cry of the sax.

Lise finished her drink and glanced at the door, curious. What could be taking Bebé so long? She ordered two more drinks from the bartender and carried them to a small ledge next to the bandstand. Singing was thirsty work.

She picked up both wireless microphones, laid them on the music stand and glanced at the clock over the bar. *Could I have missed her coming back? Restroom, maybe?* She ran her tongue over her full lips and headed for the ladies room. Little more lipstick couldn't hurt.

From his spot behind the concealing cypress, Darius watched Bebé cross the parking lot to her car, unlock it, and bend down into the back seat.

She smelt him before she actually saw him and froze. He shoved one knee between her legs, threw an arm around her neck and brought his face next to her cheek, yellow eyes glowing with hunger and lust. He growled low in his throat, wound his paw through her hair, grasped it and jerked her head backward at an impossible angle. With the other paw, he ripped her blouse open, baring her breasts.

Golden eyes wide, he brought his muzzle to her face, sniffing her, savoring her smell. He licked her lips once, twice, then snuffled again, sliding his tongue deep into her gaping mouth and tasting her with long probing darts. His ears flattened to his head as his lust mounted. He pulled her head back farther still, eyes boring into hers for a long moment before he flipped her onto her back and gathered her in his arms. His lips quivered

and a slow trail of saliva dripped from his muzzle onto her naked breast. He licked her lips again, snapping and growling under his breath.

“Oh, God. Loup garou,” she moaned as he pulled her from the car. “Loup garou.” Eyes rolling in her head, she fainted.

Overcome with lust, he could hardly contain himself as he carried her into the swampland toward the river and one of his many lairs.

The women were important to him in many ways but he could not, as yet, control the urge to kill them after mating. Although a full-grown adult in his regular life, Darius was but an adolescent in his altered state, and like most juvenile werewolves, he allowed his sexual urges to overcome his better sense. It was time to overcome his lethal compulsions and think ahead.

They were all potential mates and he needed offspring to carry on his blood, he knew that. But the passion generated during the act overwhelmed him and he broke their necks.

Shocked, Lise came out of the restroom alone, her eyes darting around the capacity crowd and then to the bandstand, willing *Bebé* to be there. She checked the clock over the bar, again while a chill swept her body in waves. Where the hell did she go?

The bandleader lifted his shoulders and made a *what next* face at her. She gave him the signal to play a short opener and headed to the car. Something was wrong, that’s for sure. No way she’d miss a performance and disrespect her fans like that.

Lise hurried out the door, down the steps and across the parking

She saw the passenger door hanging open and skidded to a stop well before she reached the vehicle. The hairs on the back of her neck tickled like something alive and she instinctively crossed her arms over her chest. The interior light still burned,

casting ghastly shadows across the blacktop, but it was dim, indicating a battery drain. The door had been open for several minutes.

“Bebé? You out here, darlin’?”

No one was in the car, at least not sitting up. Her teeth began to chatter. Anything could be hiding on the floor, hunched down, waiting to spring at an unsuspecting victim. Sweat poured down her cheeks and her innards turned to water.

Oh, dear God. Please, please, sweet Jesus.

Lise moved to the side of the car, still some twenty feet away, but clearly able to see the empty interior. She started to call Bebé again and then realized there was no point. Frantic and scared to death, Lise ran back into the club to the first phone she could find.

Like all the other girls, he couldn't resist playing with her after he'd finished. For the most part, the act itself and the length of time it took to satisfy him killed them, but when they survived, he'd play with them, unwilling to end the encounter. He had some exquisite games, but not tonight. She had not survived the mating ritual, but he broke her neck anyway, secured her hands and legs, and took her out to the waterway.

He stuffed her body under one of the trees that lined the bank, wedging it between the long roots that went from the stately old trees deep into the water. Chances of discovery or any connection to him were nil. The alligators took care of that.

Darius walked along the riverbank and gloried in the solitude, the isolation. He felt at one with the creatures that lay in the water or along the bank. No one spied on him or followed him. Only one person knew this part of him even existed. It gave him a strange feeling of power like no other and he chuckled, imagining the expressions on the faces of those who saw him on a daily basis. He strolled along the water's bank, heading for the little trawler tied up a bit further downstream.

He enjoyed the light sloshing sounds the stream made in the inky darkness as he reminisced about the past hour. It reminded him of the frenzy, the ecstasy he'd achieved with her. It went on forever, that delicious sound, and the ripping flesh, accompanied by the insatiable lapping rhythm, aroused him once again. Unable to resist, he threw his head back and howled.

Detective Vic Perina pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and picked up the tape recorder between thumb and index finger.

“Did you touch this tonight, Ms. Gaston?”

“No, sir. I didn't go near the car. That's what Bebé came out here to get, though; the recorder. We planned to try a new song tonight and the harmonies are tricky. She wanted to tape it, see where we could improve.”

“I want to take it back to the precinct and let the forensics guys go over it, see what they can come up with. When they're done, you can have it back.” He slipped it into a plastic baggie and turned to Lise. “Ya hear from Bebé, give us a call straight away. No sense us spinnin' our wheels for nothin' while she's out havin' a good old time.”

“I don't know where she is or what she's doin' but one thing for sure. She ain't havin' a good time. She's serious about her work, the fans are everything to her, and to imagine she went out to the parking lot five minutes before show time, with a packed house waitin' to hear her sing, an' decided to take off with some dude is ridiculous. Never happened. For one thing, we're lesbians, been together fifteen years, so just forget that whole idea, detective.”

“Shit, gal, who the hell do ya think cares?” He looked at her with thinly veiled disgust and shrugged.

Forensics Specialist, Frank Harris was as superstitious as any good young Cajun could be. While a professing Catholic, he

also had strong beliefs steeped in the culture of Voodoo worship. Only twenty-three and a recent graduate from the police academy, he took his job seriously. He closed his computer down for the night, gathered the papers off his desk and read the words once again.

Several hairs recovered from the car identified as belonging to the canine family, probably the girl's pet.

Other than that, the car was clean. No signs of a struggle and no other evidence had turned up. He played the tape recorder for the tenth time, still not believing his ears, and pocketing the device, headed upstairs to have a chat with Detective Perina.

“Okay, Captain, I hear what y’all’re sayin’ an’ I agree. We’ll get right on it. Yes sir, goodnight.” The detective hung up with a scowl that changed to a smile as Harris entered the office. “What’s happenin’, Frankie?”

“I don’t know what this means, boss. Hard to figure out, but it don’t sound good, y’know? I’m not sure what it is, but it’s really weird. Take a listen, you tell me.”

Expression grim, Harris hit the play button and leaned up against the desk, listening to the noise of scuffling, low growling and what sounded like fabric tearing. There was another loud grumble or growl, followed by harsh tortured breathing and the sounds of scratchy material rubbing against the voice plate of the recorder.

Perina, more than a little frustrated, turned to Harris, his hands raised in exasperation. “What?”

“Wait for it, boss.”

“Oh, God. Loup garou,” said the female voice, gasping and quivering in panic, but completely understandable. “A loup garou.” Then there was silence.

“What the hell?”

Harris and Perina stood there motionless, staring at each other.

“What the hell’s that mean, boss? That has to be the last thing that gal ever said. What ya figure it means? Wolfman? I mean, did she frickin’ say werewolf? What the hell’s with that?”

Perina glanced at the younger man, a strange expression on his face. "After y'all been doin' this as long as I have, nothin surprises ya. Point a fact, this here ain't the first loup garou in my career."

He pulled his keys from his pocket and unlocked the bottom desk drawer. From deep in the back recesses, he removed an old-fashioned revolver and a metal case, which he also unlocked. He opened the lid and there, snuggled in individual notches nestled nine silver bullets. Three empty slots caused Harris to comment.

"What happened to the others, boss? Did ya bag ya a werewolf?"

"That I did. Hope I'm still as good a shot as I was then, cause them critters is fast."

Frankie's eyes lit up, his mouth spread in a huge grin. "Get outta here! Ya mount it? Where's it at?"

"Ya don't get to mount 'em, Frankie. They turn back once they die, y'know. That's why ya most generally never see 'em unless they're charging at ya. Ah man, them critters can move. An strong? I'm sayin'."

"Wait 'til I get home and tell my Emmy. She won't believe me."

Perina stared at his young friend, eyebrows raised and nodded. "Once they get the taste, they're never satisfied. Crazy buggers."

He picked up the gun and one by one, inserted the silver bullets. Now only three remained in the case. He yawned. "Let's call it a night. I'm beat."

"Me, too," Frankie said, and both men headed for the parking lot.

In the distant bayou, a wolf howled where no real wolf lived. "Like I said, once they get the taste...."

Chapter One

“I really need a break.” Ella lifted her empty glass, stared at it in amazement and signaled Al for another. “Truly, absolutely. I’m buzzed out. I haven’t had more than five hours sleep a night in so long, I can’t remember. The holidays were the biggest we’ve ever had, but I figured once Christmas and New Years ended, we’d roll back into a normal rhythm.”

“Yeah, right. God, what’s normal? And since when did January and February become big wedding months in LA? Five in two months, can you believe it?” Terry patted her growling stomach and got to her feet. “I’m going to see what Chef has left over. Can I bring you something?”

“You know what I like, sis, whatever, and a little salad with blue. Thanks. I’m just going to sit here and decompress.”

Al arrived with her martini and a question. “The entire restaurant’s empty and the book is closed. I’ll turn off the sign and lock the security doors if you want.” He peered at her in feigned concern. “You look frazzled, girl. Probably should be home in bed. If I get a vote, I’d love to go. Got a date, looks good.”

She waved a slender white arm at him in tacit agreement. “Sounds like a plan to me, Al. Shut everything down and have a good night. Oh, and can you turn on the news? I’d like to see if we’re all still here. The way I feel, I might not know the true story.”

His chuckle rumbled as he approached the bar, picked up the remote and pointed it at the TV. He brought the device back to her table, patted her arm and smiled. “Catch’ya on the flip side, boss.”

“Uhuh,” she murmured with a nod, already engrossed in the latest televised race across the LA freeways as some felon tried to evade police. Every time she watched one, she’d giggle in memory at the hilarious Cris Rock skit where he cautioned, “If

ya run from the po-lice and they gotta come chase your ass, ya can bet they're bringin' an ass-kickin' with'em."

Strangest thing, sometimes they *did* get away, just often enough to keep the hope alive. They'd ditch the car, hide out wherever and outwait the cops. Sometimes the driver simply wouldn't give up, preferring to duel it out in a gun battle, which never boded well for the perp. *Death by cop* the media had come to call it, right there on the TV for your viewing pleasure.

She shook her head and shrugged as this one came to a peaceful end. The driver opened the car door and threw himself down on the ground, hands clasped behind his head. No doubt, he knew the drill. Two officers stood over him while a third handcuffed him. Go, Rampart. Another takedown for the LA boys in blue.

The next newsworthy item involved the robbery of a fashionable jewelry store just off Rodeo Drive. Third time in as many months, and the irate owner was vowing retaliation on the next perp.

Now there's a guy who could use one of our dogs. I'll have to make sure to tell Jim.

With a chuckle, she muted the TV and closed her eyes while her stomach rumbled a tune, waiting in quiet anticipation.

Terry had a flair for artful presentation, often creating platters at the level of *chefs-d'oeuvre* that drew comments of awe from Chef, who was not easy to please, let alone impress. She had no training but what he'd given her, but he had studied for decades under the best, and he considered her his protégé. Therefore, he was determined to teach her every trick he knew. Her successes were direct reflections on him and she never passed up the opportunity to give him the credit.

His training sessions, both intense and thorough, brought out her latent creativity, causing him to share every plating secret he knew. He was rightfully proud when she referred to him as her mentor.

When it came to anniversaries or wedding receptions, Terry went all out, creating works of art almost too beautiful to

eat, and her eye for composition turned out exquisite arrangements that included a variety of edible flowers. She'd taken on the job of plating design for all their special events and developed quite a name for herself in a town not easy to impress.

The society page columnists and the journalists at the gourmet magazines knew her on a first name basis and often found themselves dining at Ella's as guests for lunch or dinner.

Many times her presentations graced the top featured weekend layouts, her spectacular arrangements showcased next to some beaming bride who smiled into the camera as her wedding reception went down in local social history. They adorned the front page of the Sunday society section of several LA newspapers, enticing every woman in Hollywood without a live-in staff or club membership to get in line.

Before long, every bride in a 90-mile radius wanted her reception held at *Ella's*, hoping their wedding might get a featured spot in one of the papers.

Mercifully, most brides could not afford a reception at *Ella's* but the myriad who could haunted them months in advance, vying for the best dates, the best times. It wasn't long before Terry and Ella knew every society matron and hostess in the county.

Terry had started a trend and was wholly to blame for the increase in their wedding receptions.

Ella came back to reality as Terry wheeled the cart to their booth. She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "Thought the gypsies got ya!"

Upon seeing the cart close up, she exclaimed, "Good God, girl, you must be hungry."

"Ravenous and so are you. You just don't know it yet." Terry popped something into her mouth and made crunchy yummy sounds. "Well, I hardly know where to begin. Owing a restaurant is a kick, and Mondays are the best. It seems Chef had just hit his stride when the customers stopped coming. I caught him red handed out there with so many treats it's ridiculous.

Tomorrow's happy hour should go down in history. Check out these Oysters Rockefeller. I mean, so plump, and oh, don't bother with that face. I was just being polite, anyway. They're all for me. Those little lamb sliders are out of this world, and try the crab stuffed 'shrooms, El. I just ate one ... to die for. And the scallops. Guess it's seafood night tonight."

Terry slid into the booth, pulled the plate toward her, picked up the fork and squeezed lemon on the oysters. She smacked her lips at Ella and dug in. Sounds like *hollandaise*, *so sweet*, and *I love basil and garlic*. It went on through all six oysters.

Single serving dishes littered their table and by the time they'd finished, not a morsel remained. They burrowed into the deep padding, not sure if they could move. Sated, unable to even smile, Terry leaned back against the leather seat, closed her eyes and sighed.

Ella slanted her eyes as far toward Terry as she could without turning her head. "He's really good, isn't he? Chef."

With slow deliberation, Terry raised her wineglass in salute. "He's an unnumbered Wonder of the World. I can't imagine what he's doing here. All I can figure is he's killed someone somewhere, probably in Paris, and just wants to keep a relatively low profile. Why else would he work with us?"

"Humph! Maybe it's because he earns a yearly salary with six figures in it. Maybe because he's the undisputed king of his small but very elegant and may I say state-of-the-art domain and I cater to his every freakin' whim." She made soft kissy sounds and lapsed into silence with a chuckle.

After a while, Ella let out her breath in a slow hum. "It has to be murder, I agree. It's the only answer, really. Probably over a purloined sauce, like that incredible remoulade he, oh God - maybe it's that cheese puff thingy he does with the crab and caviar? I could see it, a murderable provocation, for sure, stealing that kind of recipe. Makes my mouth water just talking about it, but who would dare?"

She leaned deeper into the booth, yawned again and closed her eyes. “He takes them home with him every night, y’know. The recipes. They’re in that metal box he carries around. I offered to let him put them in the safe. The look he gave me, I swear.”

Terry opened one black eye for a moment. “He’s been here almost ten years. Aren’t those ours? Isn’t that like proprietary information? Like the stuff you create on the job belongs to the company, right?”

“You’re gonna tell that to Chef? Really? You gotta be kidding. Well, they can only hang him once.” She gurgled at the idea and winked at Terry.

“Ha, you’re right there. No point in even broaching the question. Not a wise move.” She glanced at the clock and shrugged. “Wonder where the guys are. Lenny usually calls if he’s going to be this late.”

Jim sat on the veranda with Ella, staring at the sun rising over distant mountains and drinking their morning coffee. She looked so tired his heart went out to her. There was no reason she had to work so hard and it was really beginning to piss him off.

Surreptitiously, he watched her lift her cup. It seemed like an effort and this from a woman who reminded him of the energizer bunny only a year ago. The dark circles under her eyes didn’t help and even her wonderful hair looked a little peaked. Too much beauty parlor and processing. She needed to let it just hang, be normal.

“Hey, gorgeous, you sleep okay? The last six months have been wild between the detective business, and the restaurant. You look a little tired.” He knew this was dangerous territory and tried his best to combine solicitation and admiration in the same sentence.

She raised black eyes to him, a quizzical look on her face. “What? I’m showing my age?”

He gaped at her a moment as his heartbeat increased and then settled. “Whoa. It just blows me away when you don’t wear your contacts. I think this is like the third time I’ve seen you without them. Uncanny. You could be Terry, especially with your hair down like that.”

Ella chuckled. “When we were kids, before I needed glasses, we’d fool people all the time. Our folks were the only ones – they could tell us with our backs turned.” She chuckled again, drained her cup and refilled it from the carafe before her.

“It’s the first of the month, time to change to a new pair, so I took them out last night just for a treat. Feels good to sleep without them. Then this morning, I didn’t want to bother. I’d really hoped to sleep in a bit, but it’s the coffee. I smelled it perking and couldn’t wait, not another second. One sniff was all it took.” She took another sip, smiling at him over the lip of the cup. “I’m tired, though. Guess I am getting old. We’re turning forty in a couple of months, y’know.”

“Old my foot. You just work too damned hard, the both of you, and there’s no need for it. I know the restaurant is your baby, but you can hire someone to do the daily grind stuff. Your core staff, Chef, Al, the head waitresses, they have the whole routine down pat. Short of a fire or an earthquake, they should be able to do it all, including scheduling.”

Ella made a fussy face and turned toward him. Before she could say a word, he spoke.

“Look, the choice is yours, of course, but well, how would you like to take a long spa holiday? Some serious retail therapy? Pick the place and we’ll go. The restaurant really needs a good makeover anyway – the carpeting in the dining room would benefit from a thorough spring-cleaning, but replacement would be even better. Really, honey, and the walls look tired, too. Maybe a fresh coat of paint would jazz things up. It’s been at least five years. What’cha think? I’m all for a major renovation, do our part to prop up the economy. God knows it’s a cash cow, made a fortune last year. This might be the time to put in that outdoor fire pit and back patio. I loved that idea, but there never seemed to be time. Now is a good time, right?”

Ella yawned, raising slender arms above her head in a contagious stretch. He caught her hand on the way down and held it, kissing her palm.

She sighed. "I have to admit it, I'm bushed. Terry and I were talking about it last night. And truly, one time is as bad to shut down as another. Never a good time. And you're right, I'm a control freak, because all I need to do is find a new host and I won't have to work at all, not really.

"Replacing Terry will be much harder. She's a true *garde manger*, that's what Chef calls her, and she's got another spread running in the *Sunday LA Dining News*. Photos from the Harrington wedding reception, in case you're wondering, remember that one? I told her she was becoming a frequent contributor. Really, I'm so proud of her. I've got feelers out on an assistant for her, too, so I've been thinking along similar lines. I've got a friend in Florida, Heidi Tassone; talented sous chef. I'm hoping to coax her out here. Great gal." She drained her cup and poured another, topping off his as well. "A trip sounds great, actually. What do you have in mind?"

Grin wide, he rose and squeezed her shoulder. "Get the contacts in, baby. Wait until you see. I'll be right back."

She tittered in excitement and headed for the bathroom. New contacts in place, she ran a comb through her hair and pinned it up on her head, grinning in anticipation. This was a big deal. While Jim wasn't anyone's definition of a hermit, he usually left things like planning trips and vacations to her, at least for the most part.

Except for that golf tournament out in Palm Desert, she couldn't remember a single vacation he'd ever planned and that one turned into a thriller for sure. She glanced in the mirror and nodded. *Here comes forty and I look like I need a vacation.*

Jim returned clutching a dozen brochures in one hand and a couple of travel magazines in the other. He tapped the photo on the first magazine and said, "How about that?"

"Switzerland? Whoa."

“We could ski. The air is clear and clean.”

“And cold.” She slid a quick glance at Jim, sighed and began leafing through the brochures. “We already live on the ocean, so that doesn’t thrill me and I hate the cold.” She discarded brochures for Europe, Hawaii and Tahiti, moving at a good and rather disappointing pace until she reached the last two, one for Charleston and one for New Orleans.

“Tour the Antebellum South. Enjoy guided river tours, visit plantations and mansions that predate the Civil War. See history preserved, learn what it was like to live during the days of Gone With The Wind.”

She discarded the brochure for Charleston and continued to read about New Orleans, silently this time, eyes widening as she absorbed more of the details.

“This one includes a boat tour and Amy wouldn’t like that, but we could still do it by ourselves. We could fly in, get involved in a tour if we need it, although knowing us, we’d do fine on our own. I’ve always wanted to go to New Orleans, just not at Mardi Gras. That’s over, right? Easter?”

“Yep, not too long ago. It’s too far to drive, but we sure could fly down and rent a van. Terry and Lenny will want to come along. That way we can shut down the PI office and give the staff a nice vacation, too. Imagine it, two full weeks and there’s so much to do in that area. From what I hear, the food is spectacular.”

She turned to him and grinned. “Another busman’s holiday, huh? It’s true, though. I love to check out the different cuisines, see alternative ways of doing the same basic dish. You’ve got a date, sweetie. I know Chef will enjoy a couple of weeks off. He’s getting a little worn around the seams, too. Yes. Let’s just shut down for two weeks, everyone can de-stress and then we’ll open with a vengeance, a new look and a menu with Cajun cookin’. Well, a couple of Cajun dishes. Small plates. I’m not sure the Hollywood crowd is up for mudbugs.”

Chuckling, Ella pulled her cell from her pocket and made eyes at him. “Let me see if they’re awake yet. What kind of time frame are you ... hey, Sis. Jim and I’ve been talking

about taking a vacation. Sound good to you? The restaurant needs renovating, paint, carpeting, the whole deal. We can close down the PI office as well and give everyone a nice two-week vacation. Jim and I are thinking about a couple of weeks in New Orleans. Sound good to you guys?"

They'd had a particularly good lunch crowd on Tuesday, so the mood was upbeat as Ella called the staff meeting to order. Everyone who worked there attended, including Chef and Al. Eyes wary, they waited to see what Ella had to say at this most unprecedented meeting.

"To cut to the chase, kids, we're closing down for two weeks, last meal served Friday night. The restaurant really needs a good facelift and we're putting in a couple of new things, including an outdoor patio with heaters and micro-mist. All this will take time and we're aware of that. We'll continue to pay your salaries plus 30% to offset loss of tips. We'll maintain all your benefits, including accrued vacation, which will not include the shutdown time, and your medical insurance will remain in force.

"Please check with the local catering companies and see if you can get some additional work to cover this time. I'm sorry for the inconvenience this will cause many of you and if there were any way we could revamp the restaurant and keep it open, we would. Unfortunately...." She spread both hands in front of her and shrugged.

The mood was surprisingly positive. The last several months, with its numerous special events and banquets, as well as the normal clientele, had kept them hopping and a subtle sigh of relief whispered through the staff. They'd made great money and now they'd have some time to enjoy spending it.

"Gotta tell ya, Ella, sounds so good to me. And just so's ya know, this gal's gonna spend two weeks stretched out at the beach. R&R sounds fine to me."

Two of the bus boys chimed in with plans, and before it was over, Ella had a standing ovation. The meeting broke up shortly after that. One hour to the dinner shift and there was still a lot to do.

Chef Guy Gadious sat across the desk from Ella, a stern look on his face. “Eet is good thing you’re closing, Madame. Eet is in zee eyes, m’dear. Zey are tired. You are taking a vacation, oui? To New Orleans wiz Terry; she told me all stories.” He brought his fingers together and kissed the tips.

“Ah, za cuisine for to die. I am quite green wis envy.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew half a dozen business cards. “Zees places, you must go for samples. Mon Dieu, es magnifique. Ask za server to make your presence known to zee chef wiz zis cards. On za back of each, I have signed wis a note. Bon appetite!”

He rose with a smile and pulled another paper from his pocket. “Also, I have zee wish list for zee kitchen. Zis is what I need it, must have and where to buy. Thank you and bon chance.” He put the list on the desk with the cards, took her by the shoulders and kissed both cheeks. “See you in two weeks and bon voyage.”

It was a little after two on Thursday and the word that they’d be closed for two weeks took its toll on business. They had only twenty dinner reservations tonight and half a dozen for tomorrow. Ella considered closing after tonight.

The twins had talked of nothing but the upcoming trip, where they’d stay and what they’d do since they made the decision Tuesday morning.

Terry’d wanted something swank, preferably with a pool and an in-house spa within walking distance of the French

Quarter. That's what Chef recommended they do, and he would know.

However, hotels of that nature had grave reservations about not one but two big dogs of dubious and unfortunate reputation. Therein began the dispute that soon went viral.

"We're going to have to rent a house or a condo. They go by the week, so that won't be a problem, and since this isn't their season, we should be able to find something nice that's close in and still good for the dogs." Ella continued to leaf through the travel catalogue, making note of the rentals that suited their needs.

"*What?* You're bringing the dogs? Don't you ever get sick of planning every damned thing we do around them? I mean, what's with that? Maybe you don't care, but I get good and sick of it! Sick of it." Terry turned to her twin, dark eyes flashing in anger.

"It's like, *oh, we can't go on a cruise. What would we do with the dogs?* That's bull! They could go to the farm and play around with Rudy. It's not like we're talking about jamming them into a kennel at Pet Stop. God Almighty, it's worse than having a herd of kids."

Mouth forming a perfect O, Ella gaped at her for a moment and then pursed her lips. "*A herd of kids?* Since when do you not like Amy and Tony? When the hell did that happen?"

"*What?* Oh, no you don't! I never mentioned whether I liked them or not. My opinion of them is not under discussion. You know I like them. I love them. What I said was, why do they have to come with us everywhere, all the time? You always do that, El. Try to throw me off. Not this time. I'd really like an answer, if you have one."

"Well. She's ... they're family. How could we do that? Go off and leave them?"

"See, this is what I mean. We're not talking about jail, a canine prison. Rudy would have a ball with them, you know that. I just don't understand why every move we make has to be...."

Conversation ended as a sleek black form glided off the sofa and approached the girls, ears flagging, head cocked. The doberman shoved her sleek muzzle under Ella's hand and whined, concerned at the raised voices.

"Did you hear that?" Ella said in a singsong voice. "Is that old Terry a meanie or what, Ames? Can you believe what she said? Your feelings are hurt, aren't they, girlie?"

The dog stared at Ella, head tilted, tiny little growlish moans starting in her throat. She raised her long muzzle and a low little woo-woo answered the question, ears fluttered like hummingbird wings. Short stubby tail rotated.

"And after all the great things you've done for her. It sounds like she's just an ingrate, doesn't it? What a grouch."

Straight man to the clown, she waited for the dog to react. As if on cue, woo's came at a regular cadence now, some louder, some softer as she talked in tandem with Ella about Terry's treacherous words.

Terry stared at Ella and Amy, slowly shaking her head. Completely engaged and playing their parts, they fed each other like practiced dancers, and when Amy rose on her hind feet and began to twirl, Terry gave up.

"Ah, y'know, you two outta take it on the road, I'm not kidding. Talk about original." She got to her feet and headed for the door. "We've got a meeting in three minutes with the decorator. Be sure to bring Amy so we can get her input." The door closed behind her.

The travel agent droned on. "In the end, we only found four that would meet your requirements, but they're all very nice. The first..." Ella shifted the phone on her shoulder and glanced at the computer screen as the attachments rolled by, showing the rentals available. They were all fine, but nothing

jumped out at her. She glanced at Terry who shrugged noncommittally.

The agent continued, “Now we never did discuss the B&B idea, but I’ve got something that might appeal to all of you. Only a miracle could have made this place available on such short notice, but a wedding scheduled for next weekend was called off and The Retreat is available.”

The photo showed the typical architecture of the area, including tall columns, lots of wrought iron, and trees and flowers they’d never see in California. They noted the size of the suites, the prime location, easy access and the privacy and all kinds of perks. It was just the thing.

“Well behaved dogs welcome, see? Sounds good to me, Sis. What say?”

Terry agreed and they made the deal.

Two weeks spent at a Civil War era mansion brimming with antiques and lots of old, New Orleans history that had a five star rating and boasted about its fabulous and authentic Creole and Cajun dining. What’s not to like?

Chapter Two

Amy stalked out of her shipping crate with as much dignity as she could muster, cast a withering glance at Tony and showed her teeth. The accommodations had not been to her liking, both cramped and solitary as they were, and the noise level in the baggage compartment put her in a vile mood, as evidenced by the expression on her face. He, on the other hand, had circled his crate twice, collapsed in a heap and slept through the whole flight. Amy would remember that.

Ella reached down and stroked the sleek black muzzle. “Did you have a good trip, Ames?” She fastened the leash to the dog’s collar and handed her a cookie. “Sorry we had to leave you in the baggage compartment.”

Terry stared at her twin. “Next time Amy gets to fly first class. She so deserves it, right?”

Amy raised baleful eyes at Terry, then Ella, the cookie still clamped between her front teeth. She carried it that way through the terminal to the waiting rental van.

Jim slid the door open and motioned for the dogs to hop aboard. Amy made direct eye contact with him, spit the cookie onto the pavement and leaped into the van.

“Bitch.”

He slid behind the wheel, watching Amy in the rearview mirror. “She is something else.”

Ella shrugged and settled into her seat. “She has her reasons. Segue, but I’m glad Terry and Lenny are renting a car. We won’t be taking the dogs everywhere and it’ll be a lot easier to get around in something smaller.”

Just then, Lenny pulled up beside the van and rolled down the window. He grinned at Jim and said, “Lead on, McDuff.”

Time-wise, New Orleans was two hours ahead of Los Angeles, and they adjusted their watches forward to 4pm. The

map estimated a forty-minute drive to the B&B and by the time they turned down the long driveway to the Retreat, Ella was humming the theme song to Tara.

“Oh, honey, drive extra slow, okay? I really want to see this for the first time. Just imagine what it must have been like to drive up in a carriage drawn by a pair of matched grays.” She giggled. “Like those Herring prints I love.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? I never realized how green it is here and can you feel the humidity? It’s only the middle of spring. August here must be something else.”

The driveway curved its way through tall cypress. Their vines intermingled with Spanish moss that hung off their limbs like Christmas garlands. The final turn revealed a huge, three story colonial house, six columns across, with wrought iron decoration around each window. The first floor veranda circled the house, a vibrant array of shrubs and colorful flowers skirting the perimeter.

The second and third floors had wide promenades that crossed from one side of the front of the house to the other. Night-blooming jasmine wove its way up the pillars and French doors stood open to show gauzy white curtains softly fluttering in the light breeze.

“Oh, my God, Jim. Isn’t that just beautiful?” Ella stared at the balconies, imagining young ladies with intricate hairdos and colorful exquisite gowns strolling in splendor or entertaining a beau at one of the many tables that dotted the expansive terraces.

They pulled to a stop at the bottom of wide, sweeping front stairs and got out of the car, happy to stretch.

The double doors opened and a man in elegant blue livery walked across the veranda and down the stairs, his step light and graceful, smile wide and welcoming. His facial structure and skin color reminded Jim of Harry Belafonte. He smiled in return and shook the extended hands, first of Jim and then Lenny.

“Enchanté, Madame. I’m Charles Barberi, your host. Welcome to the Retreat.” His eyes widened and he moved back a step or two as Amy and Tony jumped down from the van.

“Oh, my, aren’t they ... big. Are they friendly?”

Ella snapped her fingers and called Amy to heel. “They aren’t exactly pets, but they’re sociable. Go ahead and make a fist and extend your hand so she can smell it.”

He did as instructed, a wide smile parting his lips as Amy offered a pleasant sniff. “Well, aren’t you just a regular lady. Not to mention gorgeous. I figure we’re safe from invasion.”

Ella joined him in his chuckle. “Yeah, no problems there. Her name is Amy, the other one is Tony and I’m Ella Sessions. Nice to meet you.”

“Welcome to the Retreat, Ms. Sessions. My name is Charles Barberi and my family and I are delighted to be your host for the next two weeks.” He turned as he heard the door of the other car close. Terry walked toward them, gazing around, lost in the serenity of the estate.

“Twins,” Charles said succinctly, a twinkle in his eyes. “And you must be Mrs. Browning. Enchanté, Madame. I’m your host, Charles Barberi.”

Two young men in their late teens rounded the side of the house pulling a luggage cart. Charles introduced his sons, Raul and Pierre, who nodded with wide grins and began to load the cart.

In the treetops, the birds sang greetings to the approaching evening, while insects buzzed in the flower gardens and the nearby swamp echoed with the sounds of bullfrogs and alligators.

They made small talk for a short while and then Charles led them up the wide steps to the veranda above.

“I think the rental agent told you about the unique situation we find ourselves in. We had a wedding scheduled ... booked the entire estate for a full ten days from arrival to departure. We’ve done a lot of those over the years and it’s quite

common in the spring, except three days ago the bride ran off with another and the entire arrangement ended. That was a first, I assure you. We have two couples booked in for the weekend, but other than that, you'll have all the privacy you could ask for."

"Their bad is our good. I'm in the hospitality business, too, so I know what you mean. Terry and I own a restaurant in Hollywood, and things like that happen. We're both exhausted and look forward to being pampered and it's obvious we came to the right place. What fabulous reviews you get."

Ella glanced around the spacious foyer, noting the large fireplace along the wall; sofas flanked both sides and easy chairs intermingled throughout the room. A large and impossibly green fern filled the fireplace, fresh potted flowers lined up on both sides, their aroma subtle and sweet.

"We can't wait to hear all about the estate. It has quite a history, I understand."

Charles smiled. "My wife will tell you all the stories. Her family built the Retreat in 1790." He led the way across the foyer.

"Since the choice is completely yours, I'd like the opportunity to give you a tour and you can choose which suite you prefer. They're all unique. Please." They followed him past the piano, down the hallway to the left of the foyer and onto the elevator.

"We installed this about twenty years ago. Hauling the bags got to be an ordeal, plus the guests like it better. Of course, if you're into presentation or exercise, feel free to use the stairs. We'll check out all the suites and you get to pick."

They got off at the second floor.

"This suite, complete with dressing room, has a private back patio removed from view of the driveway. Originally, this was the schoolroom for the children."

He led them down the hall to the end. This suite was a good bit larger than the first, with a sitting area and oversized ensuite. The French doors opened to a wide veranda and steps led down to the garden below.

“This is perfect with the dogs and all. We’ll take it.” Ella slid a quick glance at Terry, relieved to see her continue to shop.

“We have suites upstairs, as well. Please follow me.” Charles led the way to the elevator. “We’ll go to the third floor next.”

Ella noticed the smirk on Charles’s face and wondered if she’d picked too soon.

“This is the master suite, an extremely spacious area with a full sitting room, microwave and mini-fridge in the alcove, and the ensuite includes a whirlpool bath. Most notable, I think, are the views off both balconies.”

Before he’d finished, Terry spoke up. “This one will be perfect for us.” She slid a bland gaze at Ella and grinned.

Twilight fell on the quiet plantation as they settled into comfortable chairs on the back veranda. The house gave them the option to dine in a variety of places, and they chose this spot so they could watch the sun set.

Charles, now dressed in black livery, brought their requested pitcher of lemon drop martinis and four icy glasses. His daughters followed close behind, one with an assortment of pâté, sliced cheeses and tiny little brioche, still warm from the oven. The other bore a basket of fresh sliced fruits and a bowl of green and purple grapes.

A tall, regal looking woman approached the table with baskets of aromatic hot bread direct from the oven. She paused a moment and introduced herself before placing the baskets on the table.

“Bonsoir, et bienvenue. I am Charles’ wife, Louise LaRue Barberi. Welcome to the Retreat. If there is anything you need, even the slightest thing, please give us the opportunity to supply it. We are at your service.”

Large amber eyes rimmed with thick black lashes dominated the small pointed face. Her glorious skin was the color of a rich roux and her raven hair, woven as it was into an

elaborate chignon, completed the exotic presentation. The French accent was predictable. Like her daughters, she wore a long dress from the Civil War era.

She turned to Ella. “Madame, the buzzer next to your knife indicates to the kitchen that you would like us to begin dinner prep. We are happy to await your pleasure. Also, use it to call for another round of drinks or anything else you might wish. Bon appétit.”

Jim leaned back in his chair and drew in a deep breath. “It’s incredible, isn’t it?”

“Can you imagine what it was like to live here back in the day?” Lenny chuckled, broke off a piece of brioche and smeared paté on the chewy morsel. “I bet this place has some stories.”

“The trees and flowers are incredible, and the silence.” Terry leaned back and gazed at the silvery moon, surrounded as it was by an eerie ring. She smiled at Lenny and took his hand. “The view from our room is something else. I’m going to sleep like the dead.”

She turned to Ella. “The dogs got settled into your suite for the night? I notice they didn’t join us for dinner.”

Ella refused to continue arguing about dog issues. She’d won the war, so there was no point in maintaining the skirmish. “They’re enjoying some quiet time.”

Surprised at her tone, Jim glanced from Ella to Terry and finally to Lenny, eyebrows raised. Lenny shrugged.

Even though they were two hours ahead, the hectic week of closing the restaurant and the PI offices had taken their toll and they looked forward to a good early night’s sleep.

Martini pitcher empty, Ella shrugged. “I’m going to start the ball rolling here and see what happens.” She pushed the buzzer and finished her martini. “I can’t wait another minute.”

Both daughters appeared and offered them finger bowls and warm towels. They removed the glasses and plates and put

them on a sideboard. Fresh silver laid and four wine glasses offered; the wine bottles nestled in an ice bucket.

“I know it’s a prix fixe, but do you know what’s on the menu?” Jim glanced expectantly at the doorway, waiting for something else to happen.

Ella grinned at him, a coquettish look on her face. “Part of the great deal we got had to do with eating the wedding feast. All things considered, I think we came out on the upside of that one, too.”

The candles burned low in the warm night as the staff served their dessert. Eyes wide, Terry stared at the Peach Melba on the plate before her and shook her head.

“I can’t. Really. I can barely breathe as it is. What a fabulous dinner.” She took tiny sips of her Grand Marnier, allowing the liquor to slide down her throat unassisted. “I need to go to bed now. Really.”

Chapter Three

The sign above the door read *Darius LaRue – Antiques, Treasures and Collectibles*. Saturdays were always the busiest and he hoped for brisk sales. He'd recently acquired some exquisite jade pieces and one, a leopard, really caught his eye.

The cat stalked its prey, small domed head lowered between sharp prominent withers, fangs bared. Its tail hung down between muscular hind legs, the left foreleg poised in mid stride, motionless. Round ears tight to its head, the cat prepared to spring off the black marble base. He'd priced the cat at 300% over his cost and hoped for the best.

Placed as it was in a prime visual area, he figured it'd be gone before lunch and sighed, wishing he could keep it. In truth, each piece in the store was superb. He'd recently returned from an extended buying trip and hadn't even received all his new purchases yet. His anticipation grew as the hour approached nine.

The UPS truck came each morning without fail. Always something coming or going. He had several boxes and cartons to ship today, and expected a very special delivery from Jamaica.

Darius hated Mardi Gras, hated the drunken revelry and constant noise that oozed it's way over from Bourbon Street like the plague, infecting this normally sophisticated and elegant boulevard. It irritated him no end. Royal Street was its antithesis, except during Mardi Gras, when partygoers overwhelmed the French Quarter and environs like a hurricane and their debauchery made him nauseous.

In addition, while it didn't have any real effect on him, the plethora of crosses, the lead-up to Lent, the whole Catholic depravity thing just turned him off. He closed the store, took the entire month off and used it to travel, picking up a variety of art objects, vintage jewelry and clothing, and sculpture from all over the world. It was a complete business write-off and what he lost in sales during his absence he made up in the third and fourth

quarters without his having to endure the riotous behavior of that most abhorred of holidays.

Now, with partygoers gone and a beautiful late spring in bloom, he welcomed sophisticated and cultured visitors like the young woman who stepped through his door. She ignored the sign that said *No food or drink inside, please* with the disdain it deserved and gave him a brilliant white smile.

She pulled strawberry blonde hair to one side and pointed to her long neck. "I'm looking for something special in earrings. Could you show me what you have, preferably in silver? I'm partial to turquoise."

After draining her cup, she placed it on the counter and moved down the row, gazing at the trays of jewelry in the display case.

Darius leaned to the side and picked up the cup, wincing. "Are you finished with this?" He gazed at her, large golden eyes wide.

"Oh, yes. Thanks. I really like this pair here. May I see them?"

He dropped the cup into a trashcan, unlocked the display case and pulled out the requested pair.

"I see you have an educated eye. Those are original design, one of a kind. I got them from a silversmith in Acapulco just last week. They are incredible, aren't they? See the veins running through the stone? Superb. If you like his style, how about these?" He placed another pair on the counter and removed them from their box. "Same artist. The intensity of the greenish veins running through the turquoise – the sprinkling of gold flecks, and I love the setting. They are one of a kind, exquisite, incomparable. You have the neck to carry them." He placed another pair on the swatch of black velvet and nodded. "Now these are totally different, much lighter in design, and equally gorgeous, I think. The rose gold is quite intense, and the pink of the rubies is fabulous. Another pair that few can carry due to the length, but you could." His smile as he placed the chandler shaped earrings on the swatch of black velvet.

With a squeal of delight, she held them up to her high-set earlobe. “Oh, they hang perfectly. I want them, too.” She pulled them from their display card, glanced at the price, then picked one up and inserted the post, then the other. She tilted her head flirtatiously and gave a little shake.

“Oh, my, they’re incredible. I really didn’t get a chance to look around ... what other wonderful pieces do you have?” She approached the jade leopard, a look of rapt appreciation on her face.

“I’ll take both pairs on the counter plus the ones in my ears, and oh my, where is this gem from? It’s stunning.”

Darius placed the jewelry by the cash register and walked from behind the counter to her side. She looked up at him and grinned, waiting.

“This piece is from India. It is truly museum quality, and comes with a Registration of Authenticity for the quality of the jade. It’s here on consignment from the sculptor and so there’s not much wiggle room on the price. It’s quite expensive, as you can see, but I consider it a true investment. Short of a worldwide depression and even then, it will only appreciate and you’ll make money if you ever sell. Really, it’s that good.”

“It’s gorgeous, it really is. Talk about perfect timing. My father’s birthday comes up next month. He loves jade and leopards are his favorite cat. I’ll take it.”

Darius glanced out the window as the UPS truck pulled up and parked. He sighed; the statue hadn’t even made it to lunch. First customer in the door.

“I’ll need the particulars for shipping or are you taking it with you?” He reached in the drawer under the cash register and pulled out a clipboard. “Are you visiting or do you live here?”

“Please ship it. I’m here to meet a friend from college. We’re going to do a lot of sightseeing, walk around the city and take in the shops and restaurants. I came in three days ahead of schedule to do a little early exploring. She’ll love this place, especially the vintage jewelry, so we’ll be back.” She nodded, glanced once more around the large shop and then gave him her father’s address for shipping.

“Do you live in Hollywood, too?” Darius filled in the information on the form and taped it to the front of the box. “Return address?”

She handed him a business card along with her American Express and nodded. “On Beverly Glen. You ever been to California? It’s really cool. It has just about everything anyone would want to do. Great shopping. You ought to open another shop on Rodeo Drive.” She dimpled at him and fanned her face. “Whew, less humidity, too. Bet it’s something else down here in the middle of summer.”

He chuckled in amusement. “Savannah Layton. What a lovely name. And yes, I’ve visited on several occasions. There is a sculptress I get a lot of unusual pieces from and an emerging artist who shows great promise, in La Jolla. I’ve got my eye on him, too.”

“I love La Jolla, beautiful town. I dated a guy who lived there. It has incredible beaches and lots of trees that aren’t palms.”

“I have a black and white photo of the Mormon Tabernacle that is absolutely ethereal. It was taken from a boat not too far off shore on a foggy night. Fog shrouded the ground floor, so the rest of it, the spires and all, were lit and clearly visible. My description does not do it justice. I mourn the loss of a fine photographer and good friend.” He paused a moment and shrugged. “Are you staying nearby?”

“At the Royal St. James, just up the street.”

“Ah, very nice choice. There’s a wonderful little bistro on the opposite corner called *Le Cher*. Has the best happy hour in town. I highly recommend it.” Darius paused, watching her from under long dark eyelashes. His pulse began to race and he drew a deep breath. “Would you be interested in joining me there tonight?”

“Sounds like a lot of fun.” She extended her hand. “I’d enjoy that very much. What time is good for you?”

“It starts at five and fills up quickly. I can close down a couple of minutes early and get over there in time to get us a prime table.” He grinned at her, exposing pearly white teeth.

She blushed, the sudden infusion of pink to her café au lait tan brought out the bright blue of her eyes. Full, bow shaped lips turned up at the corners when she smiled. "I'll be there."

He handed her the bag containing the earrings and her receipts and nodded. "Until then. Enchanté."

Darius watched her cross the floor and leave the store, light golden-red hair swinging around her shoulders, and glanced again at the UPS form. *Savannah Layton*. What a wonderful name. Lyrical.

Once again, he thought seriously about his future. He loved his work, his life was just what he wanted and living alone filled his needs for the most part. The lonely times encouraged his solitary nature, making him increasingly withdrawn and self-absorbed. He lived on a lunar cycle and as the moon waxed and continued through the full stage and a little beyond, he changed. He needed a mate, a lifelong mate. It was as simple as that.

Lost in thought, the sound of the front door bell startled him. A woman popped her head inside, a questioning look on her arresting and very attractive face. "I have a large but extremely well behaved dog. Can I bring her in?"

Darius blinked at the Doberman, whose expression went far past curious. Her ears flipped up and down and her eyes studied his. The short stubby tail began to wag.

"She's certainly welcome. Oh, my, she's good-looking. What's your name, beautiful?"

As though she understood every word, Amy grinned at him. Ella stared at the normally aloof dog and shook her head. "Well, this is Amy. She's usually not that...."

The dog swaggered over to Darius, grinning from ear to ear. She sniffed his shoes and his pants, then finally shoved her long muzzle under his hand for a pat.

"If I hadn't seen that, I wouldn't believe it. She's not supposed to do that."

"Ah, they instinctively know things. They can smell a kindred spirit. Most big dogs act this way with me. There was a

little mutt-dog once, from the pound. He didn't, but he was the exception."

"She'd be in timeout forever if Rudy or Jim saw that. Remarkable." Terry glanced over her shoulder and began to peruse the merchandise on the front wall, remarking on what looked like an Aztec carving she really liked.

Ella called a reluctant Amy to heel and followed Terry.

Darius maintained a respectful distance, close enough to answer their questions without being intrusive. His eyes travelled over Ella, from her gorgeous burgundy colored hair, worn in a simple ponytail, to the vibrant peach of her sun kissed skin. He liked what he saw.

Terry paused, bending closer to the glass case, back to Darius, her hair brushing her shoulders. "Look at this chain, Ella. Gorgeous, huh? Oh, and that rose gold band with the diamonds? So delicate. Can I see that, please?" She looked up and gazed at Darius, dark eyes glittering.

He blinked, really seeing her for the first time. "Oh my, identical twins. I just noticed it, actually." He paused a moment and shrugged, smiling. "That is one of the nicest pieces in the store. Another of my finds from Argentina by an artist of rare taste and talent." He spread a piece of black velvet on the counter and lay the chain from end to end, pointing at the delicate artistry. "Truly a beautiful work."

Ella pointed at an ankle bracelet that would give Jim a chuckle. She didn't care for them one way or the other, but Jim really liked them. She nudged Terry. "Look at the clown's heads."

Darius placed it on the velvet square next to the chain. "They aren't clowns. Technically, that particular costume is called a motley and the man wearing it is referred to as a motley fool, otherwise known as a court jester. They're very popular here, especially during Mardi Gras."

"Oh, I have to have it." Ella started rooting around in her bag.

“Absolutely one of a kind. This particular artist died last year, so there won’t be any more of his work coming along.”

She held it up for closer observation. “Look, Sis, each face is different. It’s just outstanding.”

Darius nodded and she handed over her credit card. He ran it through the machine and gave it back, eyes creased in a smile. “You’re the third Angelino today. What’s going on up there, rain?”

Both girls laughed as they collected their purchases. “No. We’re just having a bit of down time. Gotta de-stress before we get back into the rat race.”

“You couldn’t get better weather than we’re having right now and there are all kinds of great things to do outdoors, plus the food’s out of this world. I’m always here, so if you ladies need help finding anything, need directions, just stop by. I’ll do my best.” He turned to the dog and reached out his hand. “Enchanté. Nice to meet you, Amy.”

Dark eyes alight, she sat and extended her paw. Darius held it lightly for a moment and then smiled.

Ella gaped at the dog. “I swear, I still don’t believe it. Okay, Ames. Heel.”

They waved goodbye, walked out onto Royal Street and continued up the sidewalk until they reached the top of the block. They stopped to look around, noting a variety of places they had yet to visit.

“What a fox that guy was and those whoa!” Terry stopped in front of a display window and gazed with longing at an arrangement of Hermes bags, belts and accessories that took center stage.

Beautifully handcrafted, butter-soft leather goods, ranging in color from scarlet to the deep red of oxblood to creamy caramel blonde and sporting the signature, top-of-the-line hardware, they glistened in their satin nests, so outrageously expensive that carrying one would make most women blush.

She twisted away from the window, glanced at Ella, turned back and shrugged. “One of these days, I will have one. Just a little one. You know me and ‘must do’ stuff. Once in her

life, every woman should own a red sports car and an Hermes bag. Not necessarily at the same time, but that would be nice. Look at that black one.”

Ella stared in the window, nodding in agreement. “If that yellow one ever goes on sale.... We could buy one and share it. I mean, like who would ever know?” She linked her arm through Terry’s and moved her away from the window.

“Getting back to that dude, he was very exotic to say the least, and a yummy tan. He kinda reminded me of that Gardner McKay from *Adventures in Paradise* remember him? Had that boat, *The Tiki*, and he mostly sailed around Tahiti in the skimpiest speedo I ever saw. Reverse something there, all the profiles against the setting sun, remember? God, what a doll. He was mostly on display.”

“You’re drooling, El, but yes, I remember him well. Reruns from the early sixties. The black hair and blue-gold eyes. A very refined bad boy in a really gorgeous sexy body.”

Ella shrugged, her attention drawn to the restaurant across the street. A white-uniformed busboy positioned a sandwich board that boasted today’s fare. The name rang a bell and she turned to Terry.

“Hey, let’s check out that place. I think it’s one of the ones Chef gave me a card for. And yes, that guy’s definitely a fox. Love black hair on men.”

They stopped to check and sure enough, there in her wallet lay a card for *Le Cher* and a note on the back in French. A small elegant sign directed them to follow the flower-lined path to al fresco seating and the host’s station at the rear.

Ella grinned as they entered the vine-covered terrace. “Oh, isn’t this beautiful, Terry? I’m hoping this is what our new patio will be like. Micro mist and heaters and hardly any rain. Should pay for itself the first season.”

The maître de greeted them with a smile and reached for menus. “Bon jour, Mesdames. Two for lunch?”

Ella handed him the card and returned the smile. “Would you please give this card to your chef with our regards? We’d like to make reservations for dinner this evening at eight, if that

is convenient. Do you welcome well-behaved pets?" She indicated the dog at her side and shrugged. "She has a twin. Perfectly trained. You'll never see them."

Terry swore under her breath and heaved a long noisy sigh.

The host glanced at her in question and then nodded at Ella. "Oui, Madame, we will set you up in the back, over there." He pointed at a secluded table in the corner. "It is most excellent for people watching because of a slight decline of ze floor as we go downhill. It will be reserved in your name, Madame Sessions." He repeated his anticipation at seeing them later and cautioned them to come hungry.

Terry stomped back down the path to the sidewalk, puffing. "It really gets old, Ella. We go every damn where with the dogs! That's such a beautiful place in there, so romantic. I want to get dressed up and wear my new outfit. But no, we have to sit in the back of the place because of the damned dogs. I want to sit up front and see what's going on. And what if we decide we want to walk around, go to a couple of clubs? Here comes the canine contingent into some jazz lounge? Can't we leave them back at the plantation?"

"That's where poor Tony is right now. I don't think it's right to leave them alone all day in a strange place and then leave them at night, too. It's just wrong."

Terry scowled. "I already *told* you that, El. Of course it's not right. I couldn't agree more. That's why they should be at the damn farm with Rudy, not here with us. I said it from the get-go. Oh, and didn't Amy just *love* the trip down, by the way. And there's just too much to do that they can't come to. Like a cruise! Lenny and I really want to do that."

They lapsed into silence, window shopping and doing their twin thing.

"Okay, make ya a deal," Terry said, after they'd walked several blocks without speaking. "I agree about leaving them all

day and all night, too. That's not fair to such good dogs, and they are so good. I never said they weren't good!" She threw an arm over Ella's shoulder and gave her a hug.

"Plus, *Le Cher* did reserve a really superior table for us, don't you think? I'm no cinematographer, but just looking at the location, we should be able to get great pictures for Chef's book. I give in on tonight, but dammit, El, what about it? Can we compromise? Let's make dinners just us, huh? We can take them with us during the day."

Whenever thus appealed to, Ella capitulated across the board. "Promise. The dogs seem to have settled in quite well, so I'm probably worried about nothing. She's like my baby." She glanced down at Amy and stroked the sleek black head.

Terry nodded, expression solemn. "You need a baby. A real one."

They walked along the sidewalks, gazing in windows, often stopping to check out the merchandise. Some of the stores carried such unique and incredible products, they'd stop to stare in surprise and awe before moving along to the next shop.

Dime store voodoo masks nestled next to original, one-of-a-kind china motleys, potions for all ailments known to man, and charms to ward off evil spirits. Tattoo artists, their original artwork exhibited on their arms, and psychics and seers stood between French couturiers and world famous jewelers.

The dappled sunlight dwindled as the sun moved beyond the tall trees that lined the boulevard.

"You having fun, El?"

"Oh yeah. Jim's loving the golfing, says Lenny's taking to it like a pro." Ella laughed, remembering Lenny when they'd first met him. "I wouldn't have thought it'd be his thing."

"Believe me, I was shocked, too. I'm really looking forward to dinner tonight. What a darling place that was. What are you going to wear?"

“I’m not sure yet, but if it has a waistband, it’ll be elastic, that’s for sure.” Ella sniffed. “I saw their menu, which was grand on its own, but I bet we get something *especial*. You know chefs, always outdoing each other. We should go home with a tummyful. And a whole lot of pictures for Chef. He’ll love it.”

“I agree, and I’m open-minded and all, ready to be swayed, but after last night’s dinner, their chef is going to have to perform a miracle. Who knew that something called mudbugs could be so good?”

Terry rolled her eyes at her sister with a grin and shrugged. “They were outstanding, and that gumbo? Incredible. Who do you think does the cooking at the Retreat?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll tell you one thing. That kitchen, in fact, the whole place runs like a Swiss clock. Of course, it’s only us there right now, but they’re smooth as cream, aren’t they?”

At the bottom of her purse, Ella also found Chef’s wish list and the store he wanted her to use. Several hundred dollars later, his tools of the trade were on their way to Hollywood.

By noon, hungry and thirsty, Ella picked up her cell and called the Retreat. One of the many things included in their package was local transportation. Ten minutes later, Pierre picked them up where he’d dropped them that morning, a wide smile on his face. “So, did you ladies have a good time today?”

They climbed aboard the jitney, settling their packages on the floor and chattering about their morning. They asked him about the trees and flowers, the customs, what had happened at the Retreat during Katrina and a host of other things.

Like a regular concierge, he had all the answers ready, and when they mentioned *Le Cher*, even though he pulled a face because they would not be dining at the estate, he admitted the bistro’s food was unbeatable.

Amy trotted behind the jitney, enjoying the exercise and learning her way around.

Darius watched them walk away, his pulse racing as it never had before, his mind wandering in strange places. He'd never felt this way until recently and the sudden urgency puzzled him. What was this rushed need, this frenzied drive to find a mate ... and no, it was much more than that.

He wanted a wife. He could live either life, but it would have to be one way or the other. And he could do that, overcome the syndrome, whatever it was, *lycanthropy*. He had complete control when he wanted to exert it, thanks to his special potions and such. The transformation was up to him.

At least for the most part, anyway, and the bad days didn't exactly sneak up on him. The cycles of the moon were no secret, not to him or anyone else.

He remembered Savannah, the bright blue eyes, the pale gold-blond hair. She'd set this process in motion and at first it seemed she'd make the perfect wife. Cultured, educated, appreciative of many of the things he valued. Savannah, the perfect wife. It sounded strange to his ears and he hesitated, unsure. It would mean permanent changes in his lifestyle. She was very young, for one thing, no more than twenty-three, and that almost twenty year gap bothered him a good bit. He valued maturity and experience, and she had neither. Still, she was very beautiful and perhaps he could mold her into the perfect mate.

However, once those twins walked into the shop they captivated him and a new idea formed. There were two distinct paths before him, choices as divergent, as opposite as up is from down.

Both twins spoke of husbands, a problem Savannah didn't have, so if a wife was the object, then she fit the bill perfectly, but if he looked for a mate, mates, the establishment of a pack and a legacy, then he needed Savannah, Ella, Terry. And Amy.

Chapter Four

Jim shrugged into a light linen dinner jacket and adjusted his collar. “Are you and Terry having speaks? I noticed an unusual chill in the air. What’s up?”

“We’re better, although I figure she’ll pull a face or two with the dogs coming with us tonight.” Ella inserted the new earrings and tilted her head. “You like?”

“Muchly.”

She wore her hair up as usual, but added beautifully carved ivory combs she’d found in the French Quarter. They made great contrast to the hints of plum that ran through her dark burgundy hair.

“I know you agree with her about the dogs going to see Rudy, but two weeks is too long, hon. Amy’d never get over it and, well, I wouldn’t have a good time. But really, if you prefer, we can leave them here tonight. They’ll be fine.”

“Oh, I really don’t care. Tony gets such a kick out of crowds, he’ll have fun and Amy’s attached to your hip. Yeah, let’s take them if they’re welcome.”

The French Quarter hummed in that special time of transition. Shop lights changed the look of the streets, and the second story residences, unnoticed in the daylight came to brilliance as twilight dimmed to black. French doors wide open to catch the delicious evening breeze, the light lace curtains rising and falling in tempo.

Tony strode down the street at Jim’s heel, ears up, watching the crowds. He and Jim had enjoyed many nights like this together. Something cool always happened. He whined under his breath and continued to look around.

Alert as well, Amy shadowed Ella like a third leg.

Arm in arm, Lenny and Terry strolled behind them.

“I think we’re quite safe, don’t you?” There was a chuckling sound in her throat as she tried to maintain. “I figure it would take a small contingent of Marines to overpower us.”

Lenny frowned at her, lips pursed. “Would it be too much to ask what the hell is going on? You and Ella have been sniping at each other since we got on the plane. What’s up?”

She made a chagrined face as the color crept into her cheeks. “It just gets old, Lenny. It’s like Amy’s attached to her hip. Everywhere we go, people stare at us and sometimes they point. It’s weird and I know it’s not me. It only happens when Ella and I go somewhere with the dog. She’s not exactly a little Yorkie, y’know.”

Ernest blue eyes sought hers; she had to be kidding. No, she wasn’t. He hesitated. “Oh, I see.” Discretion being the better part of valor, he turned his gaze to the storefronts and grinned.

The dog? Couldn’t it be that they stare because you two are drop-dead gorgeous bookend twins? Nah, has to be the dog.

The less he got involved in the whole thing the better. They’d been married long enough for him to know that the relationship between Ella and his wife was positively mystical at times and no good ever came to anyone who interfered.

The Maître d’ nodded at Ella in recognition put the menus back on the podium and bowed lightly. “Madame Sessions, bon soir. Chef bids me tell you that it will be his distinct pleasure and delight to serve you this evening and hopes you approve of his selections. When he read your card, his expression, ah mais oui, it was quite something to see. I know you will enjoy. With your permission, we will take photographs of you and the delicacies we serve. Chef François wants to ensure that Chef Guy can participate as much as possible.”

He led the way across the terrace to the reserved table in the corner while most of the diners paused to gape as two large dogs paraded past them.

They disappeared under the table and the foursome had barely settled in when the chef approached them wearing a tall white hat and an immaculate white jacket. He crossed the terrace in ceremony, a wide smile on his lips, stopped at their table and bowed.

Chef François Robillard introduced himself with panache and after much finger kissing and hand shaking, offered a bottle of wine to Jim and Lenny for approval. An animated discussion ensued that included reminiscing about his time at the Paris Cordon Bleu with Guy. While he decanted, he kept up a running conversation about the meal he'd designed just for them. Wine poured, he excused himself.

He returned moments later with a tureen of something, and an entourage of busboys with bowls, accruements and things in baskets. Chef filled their bowls with steaming seafood bisque, topped each serving with a dollop of crème fraiche and made a teepee of crab strips and avocado.

As Chef François placed the soup before her, Ella sighed. "Oh how I wish Guy could be here to enjoy this meal with us. What a beautiful presentation." She pulled out her cell and took a quick picture of the bowl.

Chef Robillard made direct eye contact and nodded. "Thank you, Madame. That would be very interesting indeed. Yes, Guy would like to be here now." He slid a quick glance toward Jim and Lenny. "It would be something to see. Bon appétit."

Jim and Lenny guffawed and immediately went back their soup, eyes down.

Terry shook her head several times, ignoring them and rolling her eyes. "Oh, we've got to get this recipe... I know I taste cognac...."

Ella cocked her head, eyebrows up and whispered, "Remember our earlier discussion regarding the reasons why Chef Guy works for us in the first place? Remember?"

Tittering, dark eyes dancing, she nodded. "Yep. Murder."

Jim glanced at Ella. "Our chef? Guy? Murder? Whose murder?"

"Last week we decided ... the stuff he ... magic man, he's so good...." The girls continued to interrupt each other between sips and bites.

The next course arrived, accompanied by Chef François, and more discussion of the different dishes and their preparations arose, the pros, the cons, good and bad. Cajun versus Creole. Good to his word, one of the busboys took photos of Chef's service, featuring each course and showing a different aspect of the restaurant in each picture.

Jim and Lenny continued to eat, catching each other's eye from time to time and nodding, more than happy to be edged out of the conversation.

"Well, they could be lawyers. Talk about a bore." Jim kept his voice low and watched the expression on Ella's face as she listened to some catchy bit of info that she had to take home.

Lenny grinned. "Or doctors. I think this is lots more fun. Golf was good today. More tomorrow?"

"Indeed."

They continued to eat while the chef entertained Ella and Terry with tales of past recipe derring-do, embellished as most Frenchmen will with much arm waving and nodding. Eyebrows hopping like Groucho Marx, his expressions ranged from wild to extravagant, followed by a variety of gestures he deemed appropriate. And so the story unfolded, course by course.

Enthralled, the other diners ate small bites and eavesdropped unabashedly. They'd lucked into dinner and a show. The entire clientele had their eyes fixed on the chef, mesmerized by his performance and wondering who in the world these people were that commanded such unique attention.

Under the table another unusual event occurred. Rather than going to sleep as was her habit in situations like this, Amy lay on her stomach, front legs stretched out, hind legs drawn up under her like a marble lion on the steps of an ancient temple in Greece. She knew Darius was there the moment she entered the restaurant and now lay under the table, staring at him. His table was close enough that she caught his smell above all the competing odors and her tail quivered.

Tony watched Amy for a while and then went to sleep. Although bred and trained at the same farm, they were worlds apart in temperament.

Tony loved dealing with people. He and Jim had worked this kind of crowd for the last six years, rounding up runaways and kids that had slipped between the cracks. Tony had plenty of street cred and his moves, part of an urban myth that wove its way throughout the LA underground, gave the gangbangers and the druggies pause.

A legend in his own time, he could never live up to his reputation in the real world, but no one knew it, not even Tony.

Hey, man, ya gotta watch out, 'cause there's this big black badass bastard of a dog workin' the hood with some PI dude. I seen 'em just the other night, man. Dog weighs hundred pounds, maybe more, walks on his hind legs when he wants to and when he puts his face up at ya an' starts that snappin' shit at your nose? It's all over but the shoutin', baby. All that growlin' and spit flyin'. All over. Who needs a frickin' nose?

Amy served only as Ella's guard dog and companion and rarely if ever interacted against people, but when she did, like Tony, she took no prisoners.

In the other corner, Darius sat in the shadows with Savannah Layton, enjoying their cocktails and appetizers. He faced the entrance and recognized Ella and Terry when they arrived. The coincidence was strange, but there they were, accompanied by husbands and another big dog, a male. They had reservations and, as evidenced by the reception the chef gave them, very much anticipated.

He removed his arm from Savannah's shoulder and shifted position in the booth, seeming to turn toward her. In reality, his view of the twins improved and he watched them as they talked and dined.

Savannah kept up an interesting commentary on a variety of things and as long as he nodded with encouragement

at appropriate times, she required little else but the sound of her own voice.

Amy continued to inch her way toward Darius. Both paws emerged from under the table, followed by a long sleek black head. Sharp ears fluttered up and down as she made eye contact with her new friend. Her tail wagged harder and she whined.

Jim saw her start across the floor and turned toward Ella, outraged. “What the hell’s going on with Amy? Get her! What the hell? Call her.” Before he could blink or utter an astonished word, he watched Amy stroll over to Darius like the hostess, and sit at his feet.

Ella saw it as the same time. She snapped her fingers, getting the dog’s attention, made a fist and pointed to the floor next to her foot.

Busted, Amy hurried back to the table, fully aware that she’d broken the law. Laws were clear. Even puppies knew laws. *Sit. Stay.* Laws were not to be broken. Ears pinned to her head, she dove under the table and snuggled with Tony for solace. She was a *bad dog*.

Face the color of an old beet, Jim struggled not to get up, drag Amy from under the table and strangle her right there in front of God and everybody. Livid, he glanced from Ella to Lenny, hyperventilating.

“What...?” He croaked, cleared his throat several times and swallowed his entire glass of water. “Someone, please. Please, tell me what the hell just happened? What did she just do? Forget the liability. Forget her history....” he choked again, unable to go on and glared at his wife.

Ella placed a gentle hand on his arm and shook her head. “It’s okay, Jim. I can explain, really. That’s not the first time she met him. That’s Darius. He owns the shop where I bought the earrings and she did the same thing there. I couldn’t believe it. Ask Terry. She just strolled up to him like an old friend, gave

him a good sniffing and then asked for a pet. Honest, I still can't understand it."

His color slowly receded and breathing nearly normal, Jim stared at her. "It's not okay, Ella. Ever. Why didn't you tell me? That, I mean, she crawled from under the table brazen as brass and meandered across the room to visit someone she just met? In a place full of strangers, she just walks off? Really? Surely you can see my concerns."

Terry leaned forward, about to put in her two cents. Lenny quickly grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. She leaned back and stared at him, raising her eyebrows. He returned a miniscule shrug. She picked up her wineglass and sipped.

Darius enjoyed Jim's discomfort at Amy's behavior. He waited for the perfect opportunity, one where he could have maximum impact with minimum notice. Chef had just served their dessert and made his adieux. The show ended on a flambé note.

He turned to Savannah. "You see the people at that table over there, where the dog came from? They're new patrons who spent a good bit of money at the shop today and I want to say hello to them. I'll be right back. Please excuse me." He smiled and patted her hand.

He glided out of the booth with an easy grace and approached their table. Ella looked up with a smile and nodded, greeting him warmly. "I see Amy came over to say hello, Darius."

"Indeed she did. Beautiful dog."

Jim started to huff as Ella introduced him and Lenny to Darius. Then Savannah popped up at Darius's side.

Smile wide, she chortled and introduced herself. "It is you! I knew it. Mr. Sessions, right? We met at the Briarwood Club a couple of weeks ago, remember? You're golf friends with my dad."

Jim and Lenny rose to their feet. “Hi, Savannah, how are you? Are you on spring break from college? How’re your folks?”

“Good, good. Please, sit, eat, and yes. Oh, and with them it’s always something. Always busy, you know how they get around. Coming in from Paris tomorrow. His birthday’s next month ... the big *six zero* and mom’s got a bash planned for him that’ll rock the planet. Or at least Beverly Hills. No doubt your invitation is in the mail. And yes, I’m loving every minute of it here. Checkin’ out the Crescent City, takin’ in the sights and delights.”

They chatted a little longer and then Darius tucked Savannah’s arm in his and bade them goodnight.

It was well after ten when they decided to head back to the Retreat. Amy slunk out from under the table, head down, pressing against Ella’s thigh and trying to keep as much distance between her and Jim as possible.

Jim opened the back door of the van and ordered the dogs inside. As Amy jumped up, he grabbed her by the neck and flipped her around, grabbing her by both cheeks.

Voice a low growl and dripping menace, he pushed his face toward hers until their noses almost touched. “You *ever* pull a stunt like that again, and I don’t care *where* we are, you and I are going to the mat. Ya got that? You are a bad dog. Bad dog.” He gave her muzzle another hard shake. “Go lie down.”

Bad dog. Amy shuddered. No one had called her a bad dog since she’d tinkled in the kitchen, and that was a long time ago. Amy crawled to the corner of the van and closed her eyes in disgrace.

Darius escorted Savannah to her hotel, kissed her hand and said goodnight. More than anything else, he longed to be alone in his apartment with a glass of brandy and some quiet

time to think. He knew she was disappointed, expecting that he'd come into the hotel lounge for a nightcap and dancing. He couldn't deal with the distraction and bade her goodnight.

From their earlier conversation, he knew the twins would be in New Orleans for two weeks. It was more than enough time. He'd make sure to run into them during the day and become someone they viewed as a friend.

He continued down Royal Street to mid-block, stopped at a side door, unlocked it and stepped inside. After resetting the bolts and the security alarm, he headed for the back of the building. The ornate wrought iron staircase leading up to his apartment gave a fabulous view of the shop below and he'd strategically positioned his best treasures for eye appeal in both areas. Quick steps took him to the French doors facing the street.

Darius drew the curtains and opened the doors to the night. He moved to the sideboard, picked up a bottle of brandy and a snifter and took them out to the balcony table. He'd retrieved a selection of imported chocolates from the sideboard and tuned his stereo to his favored listening music. Mind whirling with possibilities he sighed, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes a moment.

It was one of his favorite places in the world, even considering how much he travelled. Its colorful and varied history and culture whispered to him as it had done since childhood. Exquisite art stood on display everywhere the eye could see, and complimented the diverse and exquisite architecture spanning hundreds of years. Yes, he loved this little corner of the world best, although there were other areas that called to him as well.

He sipped his brandy, watched the tourists stroll along the streets and began to make a plan. Ella would have to be first and that was fine with him. She was young enough, strong and resilient. It would take cunning to fool her, but he'd never met a woman of any age, married or single, that he couldn't captivate in a matter of minutes. With Ella secure, Terry would be easy

prey to any story he dreamed up as long as it involved finding her sister. His only concern was getting rid of Jim and Lenny.

The taking of other men's wives didn't bother Darius, but he had no desire to ignite some kind of firestorm inside the New Orleans cops. They didn't know he existed, had never uncovered even one of his victims and no missing persons report had ever been filed that connected to him. With a new plan in the offing, he didn't want to draw attention now, after all these years of secrecy.

If he followed through with this plan, he would begin a line with Ella and Terry that would never end. Once he turned them, and nothing could be easier, they would become increasingly more wolf-like and less human. Within one full cycle of the moon, the transition would be complete and his pack would form. Like him, they would pursue normal daily lives, but on those nights when the moon was full, they'd follow his lead for the full cycle, including hunting together and bringing in more potential members for the pack.

Chapter Five

Detective Vic Perina bent over the reports on his desk, trying to tie them together and make some connection with the recent MP issued for Bebé Contrelles. Her disappearance made the eighth such report in his jurisdiction in the last five months.

Although none of the girls had any connection to each other, they frequented one or another of the outlying jazz clubs and bars that dotted the bayous. Mostly of color, they ranged from twenty-one to thirty. Only two had verifiable employment. The others walked the streets, some on their own, which probably accounted for their deaths.

With no bodies and nothing to go on but missing persons reports, cases like these often fell to the bottom of the stack. Without some irate relative or friend banging down the doors, other crimes took precedence as they occurred. New Orleans had a very high crime rate and was a violent place to live in or visit. Make a wrong turn here, run out of gas there and you had a good chance of biting it.

Lise Gaston was one such relative who refused to let go of her loved one. She met the detective Monday morning in the precinct waiting room, a scowl on her face and tears in her eyes.

“She ain’t come home and not a word from her. That’s not like her, Detective. You found out anything?”

“Come with me, Ms. Gaston. I got a couple a questions I’d like to ask ya.”

She followed him to his cube and agreed to a cup of coffee, adding an extra sugar. After stirring it once or twice, she ignored it.

“Because the bodies have not been recovered, much of what I’m about to tell ya is privileged, undisclosed to the public, but I think y’all might be able to help.” He turned the photos to face her. “Recognize any of these women? The majority of them disappeared after a night out drinking. All of them, actually.

“Most were actively engaged in prostitution or drug dealing, but two were just out with friends for the evening. Thing is, we ain’t got no bodies. Incredible. Like, where do ya hide eight full-grown women? Got any ideas?”

Mouth hanging ajar, Lise shook her head. “No, of course not. Are they all locals?”

“More or less.”

“Folks miss ‘em?”

“Not so’s ya’d notice. The two younger gals, yes. One was celebrating the birthday of a friend. They had dinner and drinks, five of ‘em, out to the *Blues Tube*. Her other friends got home fine, but this one? Never seen again. Other gal out with friends to a movie. No connection, not between any of ‘em. They’d only got reported after they missed work. No family living with them.”

Lise shook her head, tears glazing her eyes. She raised an index finger, started to speak and then shook her head again, expression bleak, desolate. “You don’t expect to find her, do you, Detective? I’m never gonna see Bebé again, am I? It’s all over.”

“Ah, Ms. Gaston. There’s always hope. I know how....”

Lise rose to her feet, unsteady, face ashen, her lips a strange shade of violet. “I really gotta get home.” She started to hyperventilate, the rapid rise and fall of her chest alarming to see. “She was my whole life.”

Perina hurried to her side, grabbed her elbow and steadied her until her breathing resumed normal. “Did you drive, Ms. Gaston? I’ll have an officer take you home. You can pick up your car tomorrow. Alright?”

She spoke through clenched teeth. “I was too upset to drive. Took a taxi.”

Perina popped his head outside his cube and flagged down patrol officer Hedges. “Can you take Ms. Gaston home? She’s too upset to take a taxi.”

“Sure, boss.” Hedges stood there while Perina patted Lise’s arm several times in reassurance.

“Thank you, Detective Perina. I appreciate all the....” Like she’d run out of gas, she just stopped talking and started down the hall, Hedges right behind her.

Ella sat at the breakfast table, the dregs of her second cup of coffee and crumbs from a delicious scone the only evidence of a partial meal. The formal gardens spread out before her, the various aromas and textures filled her with easy contentment. She sighed, stroking the strong shoulders of the dog at her side. They glanced up as they heard Terry cross the veranda.

“Hey, Sis, you have a good sleep?”

Terry grinned. “Absolutely out of this world. Best bed ever. You?” She took the chair next to Ella and stretched long, slender arms high above her head.

“Let’s go back to the French Quarter, shall we? Jim said they’re playing 36 holes so they’ve pretty much given us the day off. Again.”

“Sounds great to me.” She eyed the crumbs on Ella’s plate. “That looks good. What’cha have for breakfast?”

“Oh, just the first course. Fresh fruit and the most delicious cherry scone I’ve ever tasted. I mean, really. The food here is beyond excellent.” Ella gave a light push to the buzzer. In moments, Louise Barberi and her older daughter emerged, pushing a cart laden with a variety of treats.

With a wide smile, Louise nodded at Ella and Terry. “Am I correct in assuming that you are ready for your breakfast?”

“Oh, yes,” Terry said as a variety of waffles, pancakes and hot grits appeared on their table accompanied by fresh fruit, yogurt and strong, fragrant coffee.

Louise put the second carafe on the mini hotplate and left, their service completed.

Ella sprinkled brown sugar on the bowl, added a pat of butter, some thick cream and gave it a stir.

“I love eating outdoors. There’s nothing like it, in my opinion.”

Yummy sounds followed fluttering eyelashes, her mouth emitting steam. “Hot. So good.”

She drew rapid cooling breaths in, exhaling slowly. “That’s why I’m so tickled we decided to offer patio dining at the club, aren’t you? Imagine, fifty additional seats. Like that’s big. I always wondered why we never utilized that back space, and heaven knows there’s plenty of excess parking, so that’s not a problem.” She blew on the hot cereal and nibbled. “Just slipped between the cracks, I guess. Oh, that’s good, Terry. Grits. Who knew?”

“I always thought it was a good idea, but we never really talked about it except that once.” Terry tapped the top of her soft-boiled egg, expertly uncapping it with the tiny silver scissors. She added butter, salt and pepper and dug in. “Having the area set up that way, north facing and all, it’ll never get direct sun. And the fire pit, how the guests will love that on a chilly LA night. We’ll use it year round, except when it rains. You ever think about salad bar stuff?”

Ella’s eyes widened, lips a perfect O. “Lunches will double and I bet brunch, too. Dinner will explode. We should make the expenses back in a year. I hope. We’ll need at least eight more workers. Chef will have a cow if we don’t give him some additional experienced kitchen help.” She hesitated and then ate another spoonful of grits. “We hit the jackpot here, too. That’s so good.”

They ate in silence, enjoying the muted birdsong and the dappled rays as the sun peeked in and out of the trees.

When she could eat no more, Ella leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

“Anyway, Jim mentioned that if we could somehow get hold of that lot next door, we could really expand.”

“Isn’t that one held by some underworld dude? Lenny didn’t go into details, but the whole thing sounds unlikely. At least he says so. But you never know. People move, they die, things change.”

“Hmm. This is true.

Darius drank another cup of coffee and gazed at the street below. It was so different from last night, energized in a different way. Already several patisseries had opened for business and the smells of baked goods and strong coffee filled the air. Early risers, joggers and those with a job waiting for them walked down the street, containers of something in their hands, a day full of possibilities before them.

“Well, that sounds fine with me. I want to go back to that shop with all the great period jewelry and stuff. On Royal, wasn't it?”

“The guy Amy liked? Darius? He had some awesome imports as well as originals from that silversmith from Arizona. I'm wondering if Jim can stay off the golf course long enough to take a look at the merchandise Darius has. He might want to beef up the stock in the pawnshops. Some of it's getting stale, I think. Maybe they could trade off stuff for a couple of months. Present it to a different audience? I have some ideas, a good plan. You want to hear it?”

She paused and slid a glance at Terry from under thick black lashes. “As for Amy, I'm going to leave her here with Tony today. There's a quaint little bistro in the French Quarter I wanted to try but they don't have a patio, so no dogs. It's called Sur Panache, remember it, there on the corner? They have six different kinds of soup each day. You know me and soups. I gotta go at least once.”

“You always were soupy!” Terry dodged a slap and grinned. “Let me get my purse and change shoes and I'll meet you in ten minutes.”

Ella and Terry entered Darius's shop just a bit before eleven. They'd already acquired several shopping bags, but the hunt for great stuff officially began there.

He greeted them with a warm smile and asked if they might like a café au lait. They accepted and he returned shortly with exquisite little demitasse cups and saucers in his hands.

"These are but a few of the remnants I saved from an incredible set of Waterford bone china I bought in England many years ago. I managed to secure a complete service for twenty, believe it or not, and the owner threw in several specialty pieces as well as a dozen of these cups and saucers. They'd been in his family for generations. Can you imagine parting with it?" He held it up to his eye, the shadow of his fingers clearly visible through the wafer-thin translucent cup. "Exquisite."

Ella smiled in agreement. "Oh, my, that shade of red; ruby, I guess it is. It's stunning and the gold on the rim is superb. Absolutely gorgeous. And you have a set of twenty? Are they for sale?" She glanced at Terry, eyebrows raised.

His amber eyes, surrounded by thick dark lashes, caressed her, roaming from her lips to the curve of her cheek, to the hollow in her neck just below her ear.

"Not any longer. The entire service sold out in the first week, although not to the same person. One purchase for twelve settings and two for four. I've never seen anything like it and I wasn't giving them away, believe me. All I have left are these three, and the three mates in the cabinet. I cannot part with them." He shrugged over his left shoulder. "Alas, I regret selling any of the collection, but I'm in business. Would that I could afford to be a true collector. I'd keep it all."

He shrugged, gazing at Ella, eyes now hooded and languid. "No Amy today, I see. She's a real sweetie, but I fear our connection was distressing to your husband. He seemed quite upset at her reaction to me."

Ella looked up to find his eyes fixed on hers. "Well, see, that's part of the problem. She's not a sweetie or a pet. At least she's not supposed to be. Amy's my guard dog and she's never supposed to interact with anyone but me. Not only is it a serious

break in her training, it means her attention isn't on me like it's supposed to be. It's completely beyond strange, especially for her, to make up to a stranger."

A light scowl flitted across his face, soon replaced with his usual pleasant aspect. "Oh my, that's so odd. Why would you need a dog like that? Surely that's a bit over the top."

"Not at all. She protects me. We own a club in Hollywood, handle a good bit of cash each night, lots of strangers come and go. I originally got her to protect me while I make the bank deposits. She turned into a friend as well and everyone in the neighborhood knows about Amy and Tony. They keep us safe."

"Wow, I never thought of that. Much of my business in credit cards, but I still have a good bit of cash around, even with Mardi Gras over. I can get more than a hundred people a weekend. Perhaps I should consider getting one. I already carry a gun, but a dog would be good backup." He patted the slight bulge on his side that they'd not noticed until then.

Before Ella could respond, Terry interjected. "It's just a precaution, at least for us. We own a breeding facility and our husbands train and sell them for a variety of jobs. It's kind of a family thing." She moved closer to Ella and continued.

"We have several of them and I'm getting my own when we get back to town. Guard dogs. Attack dogs, actually. You saw the other one at the restaurant, right? Tony. He's something else. My husband's dog, Cricket? We left her at the farm for a tune-up, but she's gorgeous. Rust colored." She paused and then grabbed Ella's arm. "Well, it's good seeing you again, Darius, but we have to run. I'm hungry. Really need something to eat."

Eyebrows up, Ella turned toward Terry, only to nod in agreement.

"I'm ravenous, too." She glanced back at Darius and smiled. "We'll be back when we're less ... preoccupied. Hopefully with my husband, if I can pry him off the golf course. We also have shops much like yours. He might want to do some restocking. Talk with you about getting a dog."

“Always a pleasure to welcome you, ladies. Have a great day.”

Ella'd hesitated as they sauntered across the floor to the front door, hand on the knob, listening to Terry babble. It was so out of character it gave her serious pause. *Something about Darius sure has her fur up.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched her twin. She didn't know what, but something had Terry rattled. She returned her gaze to Darius as a tepid breath of fresh air entered the open door. The sun seemed less bright, the sky more gray than blue.

A feeling crawled up Ella's back and rested there on her shoulder, screaming in her ear.

“What the hell was...?”

“Shut up.”

“What?”

Arm in arm, they walked a bit farther up the block and then Terry whispered, “My God, did you see the way he looked at you? I know exactly how a salmon feels. Or a nice rack of lamb! He's a vampire or some freakin' something like that.”

“What did you just say?” Ella tittered. “You're crazy. What the hell does that mean, for God's sake? I'm an attractive woman, already. Men pay attention to me all the time, but it doesn't mean they see me as a midnight snack or some tidbit, just there for the tasting! Eeuw. That is not my image.” Her tone became testy as they waited for the light to change.

“It's all those crappy romance books! You read the worst junk. I keep telling you, it warps your whole outlook ... and what's with the face?”

“I'm not talking about this walking down the street, damn it. Lead the way to that soup place and we'll talk when we get there.” Dark eyes wide, Terry looked back down the street to see Darius staring at them. “And drop a gear, would ya? He's watching us.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Why are you being so rude?”

“Just hurry up.”

The restaurant had just opened, so they had their choice of tables. Terry chose one at the back of the room, as private as it got. They each ordered a personal carafe of wine and the bread and soup special.

“Would you please tell me what’s wrong? I’m so tense I could jump right out of my skin. What the hell is going on? Why are you acting like this?”

Terry would begin, but every time she’d start to talk, the waiter would arrive, or the busboy, first with their water, their wine came soon after and then plates, followed by bread sticks and finally the meal itself. Ella was on her last nerve. She waved a breadstick at Terry, expression irritated.

“You damn well better say something pretty quick here because I’m about to explode. I repeat, what the hell was that? Is it because Darius flirted with me?”

Terry was the most considered thinker Ella had ever known, but this part of her sister she rarely saw. Knee-jerk reactions? Histrionics? Truth to tell, that was more her thing than Terry’s.

Nah, it never happened before, even as a kid. Always the level, the thoughtful and measured response. Until today. This urgent need to get away from Darius shook Ella to her foundations. No crazy feminine reactions here, no girly stuff. In Terry’s mind, something was terribly wrong. She thought they were in danger and that was enough. She’d given Ella more than one concrete example over the years. It was a bad idea to ignore her *feelings*.

“Flirted, you say?” Eyes like pools of ink, Terry stared at her twin. “My God, guys have been *flirting* with us since we were twelve, and that’s not what I meant at all. And El, believe me, he was *not* flirting. It went way past that.” She paused, took several sips of soup and shook her head, almost as though to distract. “Are you saying he didn’t scare you? Really?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding. Scare me how? Why?”

“When Jim looks at you like that, I know exactly what he’s thinking and so do you. Perfectly normal to look at your wife that way when you’re horny.”

A rose blush climbed Ella’s cheeks. “Oh, gimme a break. He didn’t look at me that way.” She paused then, eyes half-closed as she remembered the wide full lips, the golden stare so familiar, so intimate. “You’re giving me the creeps.”

“I mean too, El. I’m serious now, please listen to me. This was so different it’s hard for me to describe. You must feel it, the intensity. It was intimidating, or maybe dominating, controlling. I don’t know, but sexually charged in a very alluring kind of way. It’s hard to describe, but he really scares me deep down.”

Ella pressed a hunk of bread into the garlic and oil mixture, swished it through the vinegar and sighed.

“Okay. Now that you mention it, bring it to my mind, I know what you mean because he looked at you the same way.”

“He did not.” Indignant, Terry shook her head. “You’re just trying to turn the tables.”

“Oh, yes he did, too. Maybe it’s the twin thingy. Gets to some men like that.”

“Nope and he wasn’t flirting, either, but I can’t come up with a better word for it. He was like, well, salivating or something, quite animalistic, but it was all with his eyes. Damn it, I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. Since you didn’t like the analogy of the salmon, or the lamb, excuse me if I don’t have a perfect description, but El, it ... he gave me the frickin’ creeps.”

Ella leaned back in her chair and tapped the short end of a bread stick against her lips. “Okay, I’ll bite. Give me your ideas, your worst-case scenario. What did you say earlier? Vampire?”

Terry blushed, raised defiant black eyes to stare at Ella, but refused to back down. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Seriously? I’m wondering if he isn’t *in character* in some weird New Orleans type charade, an eccentric approach, like the way all the staff at the Retreat dresses in period

costumes. Maybe he fancies himself some kind of vampire, but if so, he failed vampires 101. They only come out at night.” She tittered again in spite of herself.

“Okay, if not a vampire, what then? How do you see him? Besides, vampires have evolved, y’know. They come out in the day, too, now. Oh, and they’re over that stake through the heart thingy. They’re the latest rage in romance novels.”

“See what I’m sayin’?” Ella made a face and shrugged, an engrossed expression in her eyes. “I don’t know what connection to make as yet, but that business with Amy still has me spooked. And it wasn’t as though he started it, either. She just strolled up to him like he was an old friend.” Ella pursed her lips and hesitated. “He touched her collar, Terry. At the very least, she should have snarled. Instead she offers her paw?”

“I know, so weird, huh? What is she? Six? A little long in the tooth to be making such a complete break in her training, don’t you think? I mean, it reminded me of the way she is with Al, like a playmate, except she’s known Al all her life. I expected her to start a game of chase or something.”

“Did you happen to see if Tony had any reaction to Darius at the restaurant? I couldn’t tell a thing from where I sat.”

Terry shook her head. “He lay right next to me, but he never got out from under the table, that’s for sure. Not until Darius came over. And even then, he stayed close to Jim’s leg, but I felt him move. Felt like he wagged his butt, although that’s impossible.”

Ella stared at her. “Felt like he wagged his tail? You’re kidding.”

“Well, like I said, of course not. It just felt like that.”

“*It felt like wagging?* If Tony acknowledged Darius, too, that’s way past coincidence. It’s full-on bizarre. I wonder what Rudy would say. I guess we’d better tell Jim, keep him in the loop.” At that point, she leaned back to allow the busboy to clear her plate. He left them with the remains of their wine.

“On the other hand, I don’t think he’ll be pleased. Maybe the less said the better. Chances are we’ll never see Darius again. No need for Jim to worry about him.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Lenny said he’s still mad about the whole thing and how he thought Darius got a real charge out of the way Amy pissed him off. Like they’d worked it out together or something, although that’s absurd. Mostly, I don’t trust him, and those eyes? So unusual. He reminds me of a photo I saw of a timber wolf. Big gold eyes.”

Ella poured the last of her wine into her glass and glanced at her watch. “They’re just like Louise’s. What say we get back to the Retreat? Solange said they have great trails along the stream and boats. A nice leisurely walk sounds so nice. Maybe Pierre can give us a tour of the bayous. Does that sound good to you?”

“Absolutely. I’m kind of tired. We can just hang out by the pool as far as I’m concerned, although I can’t see eating dinner down there. Formal service on the verandah sounds made to order.”

Ella grinned and nodded several times. “Jim and I wanted to eat at the plantation tonight, just kind of laze around, y’know? Maybe we can get Louise to tell us some stories. I bet that’d be fun.” She pulled her cell out and input the number for the Retreat, giving Pierre the address where he could pick them up. He’d be there in twenty minutes. The girls ordered dessert and iced coffee.

Darius balled his hands into fists as he watched them walk up the sidewalk, lips pursed in a tight line. This was not the way it was supposed to go, damn it. He’d been on the verge of inviting them to lunch and they would have accepted, when Terry spooked without warning. He had no idea why, but that’s what she did. He replayed the scene in his head but nothing sparked, not even a hint.

He’d made some offhanded remark about Amy being an attack dog, something like that, and in a blink, they’d left the store. He flipped the sign to *closed for lunch*, locked the shop door and followed them at a discreet distance.

It was unseasonably warm for late April and the humidity made him sweat. The sidewalks were just crowded enough that he could easily hide if Terry or Ella should look behind them, but they didn't. He rounded the corner just in time to see them enter Sur Panache, a familiar bistro. Darius sprinted across the street, cloaking himself in the shadows the buildings cast on the pavement. He entered one of his favorite patisseries in the whole city, happily situated directly across from Panache. He took an empty table by the window, his eyes riveted on the door.

"Just the cheese plate and a glass of pinot Blanc," he told the waiter. "I may have to leave suddenly, so please bring the check as well."

He'd just about polished off his lunch when a private jitney pulled up to the restaurant. The open slatted sides and bench seats, much like a large golf cart, gave the passengers the opportunity to enjoy the view. It wasn't long before Ella and Terry exited the bistro and climbed aboard, smiling and chatting with the young man at the wheel. The royal blue chevron on the side of the driver's door said *The Retreat*, but Darius already knew who the jitney belonged to. He stared in a combination of joy and disbelief as his cousin drove off with the girls. It was too good to be true.

Chapter Six

At their request, Pierre took the scenic route home. He drove down country lanes overhung with ivy and Spanish moss, dotted with plantations, those relics of a lifestyle hundreds of years old. He wove his way through the byways and back roads to the far entrance to the Retreat.

“This area is so rich in history, what with all the different cultures and beliefs that are part of the area. What are your favorite stories? Any hauntings or things like that?” Ella leaned back in her seat, enjoying the somnolent feeling of the lazy afternoon, a full belly and a nice glass of iced sun tea from the cooler.

“Most of us are Catholic here, so we have many longstanding superstitions that come from all over Europe. When you add in the Haitian and African cultures, the Creoles, plus the indigenous natives, you get a real montage: voodoo spells, dolls and rituals, zombies, loup garou, different potions, juju charms and the folklore carried down through the generations. There are tales of swamp creatures that prey on women, of monsters that steal young children, and the living dead, of course.” There was the hint of laughter as he continued.

“New World converts were often ignorant and turned to Voodoo, Shamanism and the black arts in the hopes of contacting the dead for support. Some still seek power through evil spirits or casting spells, but today they mostly want to reach a loved one. Is that what you mean?” He stared at Terry.

“Yeah, kind of. Do you have vampires here?”

Ella guffawed. “Did you just say that? Really?”

Terry scowled. “You know what I mean. Like in Transylvania, they tell stories about their vampires. Or werewolves, a variety of spirits, I guess, like your swamp things.” She tossed a glance at Ella, nodding. “Like, up in Seattle and such, they have Big Foot sightings.”

Ella threw her head back and roared. “Yep, they sure do. Daily.”

“Well,” Terry said, not appreciating the laughter. “You hear about it all the time.”

Ella started to hic, speechless.

“Ah yes, we have those things here, those spirits. In French, a werewolf or wolfman is called a loup garou.”

“A rougaroo?” Ella asked, pronouncing it as he did.

“Yes. They’re believed to be humans who, after being bitten by a werewolf, also become a lycanthrope. They usually run in packs, but they can be solitary. They hunt in the swamp and get their victims from the areas near where they live. Or so they say.” There was a light snicker in his voice.

“Do they only come out at night?”

“No, Ma’am. They’re nocturnal hunters, quite versatile and incredibly strong, but they live normal lives during the day, so the legend goes. It’s only during the full moon cycle that they change. Stories abound, many contradictory, about their physical looks. Some are fur-covered, some not. They may have the body of a man but the face of a wolf. Some walk upright, others run on all fours. Some can do both, it appears, although that would require a good bit of skeletal elasticity.” Pierre laughed outright. “It’s my mother y’all should be talkin’ to. She knows so many stories, and since she believes them, she’s more detailed.”

“Do you believe in them?”

Pierre shrugged, his expression bland. “Not so much, Ma’am, but anything is possible, I’m sure.”

Rather than approach the Retreat by the driveway, he continued along the wide trail that paralleled the stream. He stopped at their request to watch a large bull alligator sunning himself on the bank. Unperturbed, the animal ignored them and yawned.

“Look at them choppers,” Terry said, parodying the scene from *Romancing the Stone*, and snapping her teeth together.

“Woof, how’d ya like to have to deal with him?”

“He’d make some great shoes and a couple of matching bags. Otherwise, not.”

They continued toward the estate, watching the birds on the water, some fishing, some just standing like beautiful statues in the warm dappled sunlight.

Ella leaned forward as they pulled to a stop in front of the stairs and pressed several bills into his hand.

“Thanks for the great ride home, Pierre and the super stories. We really appreciated it. Can you tell your mother we’re dining at the plantation tonight? If dinner at eight works for her, we’ll be there.”

Ella and Terry exited the jitney and climbed the steps to the veranda.

Darius chuckled. It had to be some kind of sign. He watched his young cousin stop the jitney in front of Sur Panache to pick up Ella and Terry. The girls climbed aboard and soon the cart pulled into the street and disappeared around a corner. He signaled to the waiter for another glass of wine and pulled his cell from his pocket.

Ella sat on the terrace, a glass of merlot in one hand, a paperback in the other. She tried to scowl at Jim as he strolled toward her.

“What?”

With a huge grin on his face, he said, “I aced one, Ella. Honest to Pete! Lenny was right there. Boy is he toasted I got a hole in one.” Jim poured himself a glass of wine. “Tomorrow we play....”

He stared at her as little bursts of light went off in his head – husbandly early warning signals.

She turned to stare at him.

“But that’s the end of it, then. Tomorrow it’s over, just a three-day tourney. It’s only Thursday, so we have many more

days here. It's all good, right? So what did my little sugarplum do today? Do I have any money left?"

She smiled and patted the chair next to her. "We had quite a day actually, and I'll tell all about it at dinner, but a hole in one? That's so cool. What was the par?"

"Four!" he virtually shrieked, and needing no further encouragement, launched into a stroke-by-stroke rendering of the game. She smiled, blue eyes crinkled at the corners.

He wound down gradually, thankful for a wife who would allow him to rave after a particularly exciting day.

"So, wench," he said, nuzzling her ear and making purring noises. "Where are we dining tonight?"

"On the downstairs terrace at eight." She gave him a soft lip nip and chuckled. "Why?"

He pulled her into his arms, kissed her neck and then glanced at his watch.

"Oh, look, it's only five-thirty. I need a shower. Would you care to join me?" He made eyes at her, smirking, voice low and seductive. "You and me, babe. How about it?"

She gazed up at him, batted her eyelashes and grinned.

"Bonjour, Louise. How are you this afternoon?"

"I'm fine, Darius, and you?"

"Good, thank you. May I come over in a little bit? You have some interesting guests that I'd like some information on."

"Bien sur, absolument. I'm free now. Come whenever you wish. They're both here. I can introduce you."

"Not at this time, Louise. I don't want them to know about me yet."

There was a slight hesitation. "Oui. I see. Then come around to the back entrance. I'll wait for you in the kitchen office."

"I'll see you shortly. Merci."

They embraced and offered the requisite cheek-kisses.

“Cousin Louise. Always so good to see you. We let too much time pass between visits.”

Head tilted to one side, eyes twinkling, she smiled. “Indeed, we do. What makes this day different? What does my handsome cousin need that I can provide?”

Darius glanced around the kitchen and the hall leading to the main house and lowered his voice to just above a whisper. “Are we alone? I mean to speak to you in the utmost confidence.”

She raised a long, slender forefinger to her lips and motioned him into the office, indicating the large leather sofa. She closed the door behind them and approached the table where several carafes of wine waited. “Still red, I take it?”

“Oui. Merci.”

She offered the glass and took the chair next to him, waiting patiently as women of her kind have done throughout eternity.

He took a sip and batted large golden eyes, so like her own, veiled in thick black lashes. With a sigh, he handed over a small plastic baggie containing his fingernail clippings and hair.

“I want you to cast a spell that makes both women fall in love with me. It’s time I begin my legacy, and I want them as mates.”

Her face went blank for a moment, and then resumed its normal expression. “You want gris-gris? A doll?” She rose from her chair and walked to a painting on the far wall. With a light hiss, the large portrait slid aside to reveal a substantial safe. Louise spun the dial and then opened the door to expose a large and cavernous space filled with jars, books and objects individually wrapped in black cloth. She selected several items and placed them on the table, holding up matching medallions hanging from short gold chains.

“Strong gris-gris. We can put your hair here.” She pressed the hasp and opened a small compartment. “So. I’ll give them to the women and the spell will begin. I have potions as well.”

“When will the spell take effect? I need something quick, as the moon cycle began last night.”

“I’ll make the dolls tonight and after Charles and the children are abed, I’ll cast the spell. I’ll give them the potion with their morning juice. What about the men?”

“I’m not sure yet. Perhaps a veil to dull their eyes to what is going on around them? I’ll leave that choice up to you, dear Louise. So the women will be receptive on Friday? That is perfect, truly excellent.” Darius got to his feet and smiled. “Merci, my dear cousin.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. “And for you.”

She took it and nodded. “May I show you out?”

He offered her his arm. “Au revoir, Louise. We shall speak soon.”

“Bonne nuit.”

Terry and Lenny sauntered down the grand staircase and across the marble foyer to the terrace. Jim and Ella sat at the table enjoying cocktails and hors d’oeuvres and the incredible shadow show conducted by the flickering lights of the hurricane lamps.

“Talk about an entrance,” Terry said with a chuckle. “Down is bad enough. Imagine walking up those stairs wearing a long gown with hoops? I bet that staircase has some stories to tell.” She grimaced at Ella. “I see the dogs are dining with us tonight.” She stared at Lenny for a moment and then shrugged. “Evening, Tony; Ames. So nice of you to join us this evening. Are you enjoying your vacation?”

They wagged their tails but didn’t get up from their places on the veranda.

Terry took the chair next to Ella and reached for her glass.

They sat in comfortable silence, listening to chirping insects and night birds calling. The sun set in a furious blaze of glory and disappeared behind the trees. Night descended.

“I heard you had quite the golf game, Jim. Lenny said it was something to see.” Terry raised her glass and grinned. “Mazel tov! Way to go.”

They continued to chat about the game when Louise appeared. She waited for a moment and when Ella nodded, she came forward.

“Good evening. I hope you had a wonderful day. For supper tonight, we’ve prepared a selection of Cajun and Creole food for your pleasure. If you are ready to begin?” Her voice trailed off, again waiting for Ella to nod.

“That would be wonderful. We can’t wait.”

“Very well, Madame.” She left only to return almost immediately with a serving cart bearing a fragrant tureen of gumbo, a covered dish and four bowls. While she served them, she kept up a commentary on what they were about to eat.

“This particular recipe has been in my family since before the War. We caught the crawfish in our stream this morning. The broth is simmered for hours and just before service, we add the crawfish. The oysters tonight are from our stream as well ... does anyone have the allergy?” She nodded at their reply. “They are also fresh-caught this morning, coated in a bit of this and a bit of that and fried to a golden crisp. You will enjoy the crunchy outsides while the inside contains the prize. The entrée is grilled sea bass with a lemon and brown butter almondine sauce.”

When she’d served them, she turned to Ella. “When you’re ready for the next course, Madame, please ring the bell.”

Terry watched her leave, a quizzical expression on her face. She made eye contact with Lenny and raised her brows. “Y’know, this whole *Gone with the Wind* thing? It was kind of quaint at first, the formal manners and way of speaking, the old days and the old ways.” She blew on her spoon and took in a spoonful of gumbo. Her lips contorted and tears shot out of her eyes. Index finger raised, she made quick little in-and-out breaths, her eyes squinted. “*Hot!*”

Ella stared at her, lips drawn into a circle. “Good grief, Sis, you okay?” She glanced down at her bowl and began to run her spoon across the top of her gumbo in circles, cooling it. Nodding, she brought the spoon to her mouth and blew gently.

“I got the picture and I know what you mean about the manners, too. It’s like she’s in character, but it’s in a time that we don’t, well, hmm. I don’t particularly like to remember that time, do you? I never had a thing to do with slavery or racism and it ticks me off sometimes when everyone gets painted with the same hundred-year-old brush.”

“Strange, really. She’s subservient, but in such a haughty way, it’s really quite condescending.” Lenny touched the tip of his spoon to his lips then forged ahead. “The only thing is it’s to be expected. It’s a reenactment of those pre-Civil War times and it’s exactly what this place represents. Remember, the brochures talked about the New Orleans of the Antebellum South, taking a trip back in time, so I guess this is to be expected.”

Jim nodded, dipped an oyster in some crème fraiche and popped it in his mouth. “Oh, man, that is so good.” He swallowed and took a sip of wine. “Guess we can’t blame them for it when it’s exactly as advertised.

Lenny chuckled. “Wouldn’t exactly feel right if they all ran around in typical restaurant black and whites, would it? Still, it gets old for an extended stay like ours, but it’d be great for a long weekend. I agree it’s wearing thin.” He took another spoonful of gumbo and nodded at his plate.

“On the other hand, the food is outstanding. I love crawfish. I think they’re so much better than shrimp.” He finished chewing the sweet tasty morsels, cast a quick glance at Jim and grinned. “Down in these parts, *they calls ‘em mudbugs.*”

Terry chuckled and stopped the progress of fork to mouth. She inspected the speared crawfish, searching for defects or whatever before popping it into her mouth.

Ella chuckled. “It’s all delicious, no matter what you call it. I hate Oysters Rockefeller, too loose and slimy, but when they’re fried up all crispy like these, oh, man. And that aioli dressing? Umm. Maybe we can get a recipe for Chef.”

Terry chuckled. "It's crème fraiche, the sauce. Can you believe they eat alligators down here? And frog legs? Well, it just goes to show you how good strange things can taste."

They worked their way through a beautiful grilled sea bass and by the time Louise served their bread pudding, they declared the meal the best they'd ever eaten. They ate a spoonful or two to be polite, far enough past full that they felt guilty and leaned back in their chairs, comfortable and at ease. They barely noticed Louise place sniffers in front of them. The waxing moon, surrounded by a misty aura, rode in the starry sky, dodging clouds and playing hide and seek.

"Allow me to offer the perfect finish to a spicy supper. Apricot brandy sours, frozen. Please enjoy."

She smiled graciously, nodding as they commented on certain parts of the meal that particularly pleased them. They voiced their gratitude for the special courtesies Pierre extended in sharing his knowledge and taking such good care of them.

She withdrew two necklaces from her pocket and smiled at Ella and Terry. "Also, please accept these keepsakes as a remembrance of your time here at the Retreat." She gave them the medallions, brilliant tawny eyes glittering in the candle light. "It's a ritual at Retreat, a way of showing our pleasure in welcoming you into our home. We hope you will return again."

Louise turned to Jim and Lenny, nodding. "Not to feel left out, please accept this token of our respect and appreciation." She handed them pewter key chains with the letter R in the raised center of one side of the disc, an etching of the plantation on the other.

Chapter Seven

It was a bit after nine when Terry stumbled out of bed. Her head felt like something with sharp teeth nibbled at the back of her eyes. She attributed it to sleeping late.

She'd wakened at six, just long enough to kiss Lenny goodbye and wish him luck on the course and then slid back down the tube for another three hours sleep. It was something unheard of for her, and now she sported a low-grade headache.

I just need a cup of coffee and something to eat.

She stretched, heading for the bathroom and her morning routine. Scant minutes later, she pulled on a pair of white shorts and a lime green striped shirt and headed downstairs for breakfast.

She half expected to find a note from Ella regarding her tardiness, but there she sat, hair free about her shoulders, floating in the light breeze. One look at her face told her everything she needed to know.

"Sorry I'm so late, Ella. Had a miserable night."

Ella shook her head and offered a weary smile. "Me, too. I just got here moments ago." She flicked the pot with a pink fingernail. "Coffee's fresh. Got the slows today, I guess."

"You didn't sleep so well either?"

She cupped her hands, cradling her coffee. "Not a bit. Had all kinds of strange dreams. Bet I kept Jim up, too. How about you?"

"Pretty much the same, but I haven't a clue why. Usually when I go to sleep, it's a solid stretch, maybe one potty stop, but last night I never really got to sleep. I mean, I *know* I slept, but I don't feel it. Weird."

Louise appeared at her side. "Good morning, Mrs. Browning. Fresh squeezed orange juice." She put the glass on the table and smiled at the girls. "What sounds good for breakfast? I have lovely fresh fruit, and the scones are just

coming out of the oven. How about a little medley, an assortment of treats from the kitchen?"

Ella chuckled. "That juice is out of this world. I'd love another glass, some more coffee and anything else you bring us. It's so beautiful out here, I might not move until lunch."

"It really is wonderful here. You've given us some incredible memories." Terry finished her entire glass in a series of swallows. "I love the pulp, and it's so tangy. Wonder what kind of orange they are. Certainly not California."

They tittered, their spirits picking up as they saw the platter she bore. An arrangement of fruit and cheese accompanied by individual servings of yogurt and finely chopped nuts competed with the fragrance of warm cherry scones.

"No, not California. In fact, all of our fruit and most of the produce comes from a grower in Texas. He's incredible, everything organic, and he furnishes top quality to different bed and breakfast hotels and long-term hotels in the area. His peaches? Dear me, almost too good to eat."

"You've spoiled us rotten. Really, this is the best vacation I've ever had. Are you busy right now?"

"Never. I'm at your disposal. What do you wish?"

With a slight frown, Ella shrugged, glancing at Terry. "Well, girl-talk mostly, a little gossip? Please join us at the table. We've been looking forward to hearing some of your stories about the New Orleans of old since we booked this trip. As an authority, you know what it was like, their daily life, what they did every day."

"It depends on whose daily life you mean and which era. American Indians inhabited the area for centuries, establishing little settlements all along the gulf and the riverbanks ages before New Orleans was founded. Or Plymouth, for that matter. In the early days, only the dregs of humanity lived here and it was much like a penal colony, inhabited by the scourges of mankind.

"Over time, when the slave trade peaked, the population was mostly colored and far flung in its cultural origins. A variety of religious cults flourished as more immigrants, mostly Roman

Catholic, settled the surrounding areas. Farther in toward town is the oldest African American neighborhood in the United States. Free people of color, including freed slaves, came here and gathered in Faubourg Tremé.” The clear note of pride in Louise’s voice encouraged the girls and they continued to ply her with questions.

“That’s a good bit before the Civil War, wasn’t it?” Terry popped a bright red strawberry into her mouth and grinned.

“Indeed, it was. Unlike most areas in the South, people of color had been able to buy land here since the 18th century. They held jobs, local public office, owned land and considered freedmen. As the city grew and the port became more important, immigrants from Haiti and the surrounding areas came here to work, as did the Chinese. We didn’t have a color problem until the North got involved.” She paused a moment and then went on. “We were hauled along with the rest of the South, even though there were very few slaves still in this or any of the surrounding parishes.”

Ella refilled her cup and glanced up at her. “How about folklore and voodoo? There’s a strong history of it in New Orleans, isn’t there? Swamp creatures, all kinds of things like that. I remember reading a bit about it in the brochures. When did that start?”

“About the time when so many immigrants came to work and live here, shortly before the War. They all brought their personal religious beliefs and their own ways of worship. That’s when voodoo and a variety of different cults established themselves here.”

“How about during the Civil War? What was it like then?”

Louise continued to stand before them, tacitly ignoring their invitation to sit without making a point of it.

“We refer to it as the War of Northern Aggression and it was very different for us here than much of the rest of the South. Our people of color were often cultured landowners and businessmen, some as well as or better educated than their white

counterparts. It was a tolerant area with a laissez faire attitude where everyone worked together and got along. We had no problems.

“The War brought a multitude of sins along with it, as well as the obvious - death and destruction. In a town that had once accommodated numerous different ethnic backgrounds and cultural beliefs with happy abandon succumbed to the drumbeat of war, bloodshed and carnage. Class and racial hatred flourished and soon strife existed where peace had lived.”

Louise raised her glance to the pantry entrance in time to see one of her daughters beckon her. “Oh, dear. It seems they need my assistance in the kitchen. If you’ll be here for lunch, I’ll tell more tales if you’re interested.”

The girls agreed and Louise disappeared down the passageway.

Darius pushed the door open with his toe, shifting the last of the loaded grocery bags in his arms. He kicked it closed and headed for the kitchen.

He put bags of fried chicken, beef patties, cheese, bread and eggs in the refrigerator along with four bottles of chardonnay. Packages of noodles, rice and a dozen large cans went to the shelf above the counter. On the bottom shelf of the cupboard, he placed four large bottles of cheap merlot and a dozen liters of bottled water next to some pots and pans.

The cabin, while affording every necessity, was secluded and often gloomy in its mossy shroud. The appliances worked well and the bath was more than functional, but luxury had no place here. It was unimaginable as a normal dwelling, rough-cut and almost primitive, with no fresh running water. As a hideout it suited his transformational needs very well because isolation was a must, and the further off the beaten track the better. Darius reveled in the seclusion.

The small bedroom contained a queen-sized bed, a nightstand and lamp on either side, and a chair. He pulled a

plastic box from the closet, removed a set of sheets and a blanket, and stripping the old bedding away, changed everything out. *Might as well start out fresh.*

From his pocket, he removed two of the jujus Louise had given him that morning and placed them under the mattress, along with a spray of dried herbs. They would work in conjunction with the spells and potions already operational.

This was his first experience at establishing a pack and he had no mentor, no living example to follow, to question, only the books of legend and folklore and they were few.

It was long ago, but he remembered it as one would expect, with clarity and a vividness that rivaled the present moment. A solitary stroll along the river had been his only intent, perhaps a drink or two, some music and a light dinner. That an ordinary evening and a chance encounter could be his undoing, could produce such a catastrophic and life changing condition still amazed him and for a long time he'd railed against the truth.

Surely he could resist, and he would fight it as best he could, but in the end, he always succumbed.

No longer interested in fighting his nature, he capitulated. He was what he was and might as well embrace it. Starting tonight.

Chapter Eight

Ella stared at Louise's retreating back a moment, a small frown creasing her forehead. She grimaced, finished her coffee and got to her feet.

"I feel so edgy, Terry. I don't know what's wrong with me but I'm about to jump out of my skin." She ran both hands rapidly up and down her arms. "Let's go for a walk. Something."

They crossed the veranda and took the stairs down to the garden, walking in silence until they were out of earshot.

Terry stared at Ella and felt the hairs on her arms rise. She grabbed her hand and whispered, "You're giving me a fit, Sis. What's up?"

"I don't know, dammit. That's what I mean. I just feel like hell. Really crappy, terrible, and worse than that, I've got the frickin' creeps and I don't know why." Ella rubbed the sides of her arms again with vigor although the temperature hovered in the mid-80s. "Like I'm coming down off a bad drug. I'm having awful dreams, too."

"I know what you mean. Like a goose walked across your grave." Terry slipped her arm around Ella's waist. "Is it about Louise?"

"She's involved in some way, but I don't know how." Ella shook her head, expression perplexed. She ran rough fingers through her hair, a lifelong reaction to stress, and stared at Terry.

"It's crazy and I don't know. Not really. It isn't the right word, but all I can come up with is scared. Like I'm *afraid* of her and there isn't a reason in the world for me to be, but I am."

Terry chortled, eyes tilted up at the corners. "You? Afraid? Get outa here. You aren't afraid of anything."

"I told you it wasn't exactly the right word. It's more like, well, an instinctual fear, primitive or something, almost like she's after me or something. Are you honestly telling me you don't feel anything strange from her?"

“Of course I do. This whole trip is beginning to be a downer. I wasn’t going to mention it, but since you did, well, what I liked so much when we first got here is what’s wearing so thin now. Charles and the kids are just fine; lovely, actually, especially Pierre. But Louise? Like this whole idea that somehow we’re supposed to get down on one knee and apologize for some war our forbearers fought in – or not! It’s nuts. And I’m a Californian! I have no dog in this fight!”

They continued down to the creek and took the elevated wooden pathway to the left. The boards rode several feet above the vegetation, allowing them to walk along the stream without getting their feet wet and muddy.

“I don’t care for Louise. She’s very off-putting, challenging. When we first got here, she was obsequious and she still is. *Madame* this, *Madame* that. It’s almost like she’s baiting us, like she’s waiting for one of us to say ... *I had nothing to do with that* ... which I have no intention of doing, by the way. *War of Northern Aggression?* Don’t ya just love it? I refuse to engage in that debate. Boring old news. I came down here to rejuvenate, not engage in a cultural battle that ended a couple of hundred years ago. Still, it’s a strange way for a B&B owner to treat her guests, don’t ya think? Word of mouth being the best advertisement and all that? She knows about our restaurant. We could turn a lot of business her way.”

Ella shrugged, gazing across the swampland to the river beyond. “Maybe it’s just us. She’s got the most exquisite manners and honest to God, she’d breathe for us if she could figure out how. I mean, fresh sheets every day, fabulous food and drinks, great wine at the push of a button? Incredible service . Don’t get me started.”

“I feel the same way about the hospitality, it’s wonderful, but there’s an undercurrent or something. It’s subtle. Like she’s playing a part for us, a role she thinks we want her to play, maybe? Like what Lenny said? Still, she’s strange, no matter what else.”

The boardwalk continued beside the river, at times giving them wonderful opportunity to see the native birds,

standing in the water, and fishing for lunch. The alligators dotted the banks, sunning themselves and grunting at each other.

“She’s very attractive, don’t you think, and Charles, too. The whole family is so exotic looking. The kids are striking. I wonder if they’re of Haitian descent. That could account for the gorgeous skin. I’ve never seen a color like that anywhere else, have you?”

“Genetics. It’s in the cheekbones, my hairdresser always says. Not sure what he means by that, but anyway, I’d say yes. Definite Caribbean influence. Maybe Jamaican?”

They watched the water drift slowly by as egrets and other waterfowl stood in the stream. Occasional bellows from the alligators made the hairs on their arms rise.

“How’re you feeling, Ella? You don’t look so hot.”

She shrugged. “I was exhausted when I got here, and the first day or two it was nice just to rest and do a little shopping.” She pursed her lips and made a face. “But the last couple of days, I have to admit I don’t like being a golf widow. That’s not why I came down here. I know Jim deserves a vacation, too, so I have to be fair. Still, I don’t know why, but it just jerks my chain, all this golf. It’s not like they can’t do that at home when we’re both so busy at the restaurant.”

Terry hesitated. “It kinda pisses me off, too, if you want the truth. Lenny promised that today was the end of it, and we still have five more days, so I guess that’s fair, don’t you? He mentioned that we could do an overnighter on one of those paddle-wheel boats, take a little cruise down the gulf, or maybe up, not sure. Anyway, sounds like fun, huh?”

Ella sighed. “Yeah, it does, actually. They also have dinner cruises where you can go up the Mississippi, don’t know where to, exactly, but that’d be fun, too. What say we go back to my suite?”

They turned and headed back up the walkway. “We can sit on the back patio and research the different trips on the net. You brought your laptop, right?”

“Indeed.”

“Me, too. Then let’s get to it. We’ll tell Louise to build us a fruit plate and a pitcher of lemon drops and keep them coming.”

Sounds of tinkling laughter wafted up to the veranda as the girls mounted the stairs at the Retreat.

Out of sight in the tall shadowy shrubs, she watched them walk up to Ella’s room, golden eyes hooded, hidden behind her half-closed lids. *Any moment now, they’ll be calling for lunch and drinks.*

Lenny grinned at Jim as his last ball dropped into the hole. “You’re on a roll, my friend. Another excellent game. Dude, I am impressed. Let’s go to the clubhouse and have lunch. On me.”

Jim put his club back in the case and stared at Lenny, green eyes dancing. “You like to live dangerously, I take it. Maybe Terry’s okay with it, but Ella is not happy about all the golfing and time away from her. I got a cold shoulder last night when she found we had this last game today. Not good, nuclear winter ahead. Let’s go and eat lunch with them. It’s not that late.” He glanced at his watch and shrugged. “We’re fine.”

Ella and Terry had already made great inroads into the pitcher of lemon drops when they heard the guys come into the suite. They’d also found several boat tours that sounded perfect, and waved them over for ideas and approval.

“Look here, Jim. Mississippi river style paddleboats. How’d you like to go on an evening cruise? This one departs at 4pm tonight, travels up the Mississippi past all kinds of little hamlets and plantations, stuff like that. Cocktails and appetizers are available throughout the cruise. Dinner is optional and served at seven, followed by music and dancing. We return to New

Orleans at 10pm. Doesn't that sound perfect? Not too long, not too short. What do you think?"

"Book it," he said. "We have plenty of time to grab a bite to eat and a shower, right? Can we get a ride down to the harbor?"

"Sure. Pierre can drive us, probably pick us up, too." Ella reached for the room phone. "Hello, Louise. Jim and Lenny just got in and we're hoping for sandwiches, something light for lunch. Could you prepare a selection of meats and cheeses, maybe some crudité? We'll dine on our patio. Yes. Another pitcher, please, and thank you."

Louise appeared shortly with the rolling cart. "I took the liberty of including something with a little more substance, just in case. Please enjoy." She placed a tureen and bowls on one side of the table, a platter of deli meats and cheeses and a basket of fresh rolls, croissants and condiments at the other. The fresh pitcher of lemon drops remained on the cart.

As she was about to leave, Ella said, "Oh, we'll be dining out tonight. We're taking a paddleboat cruise and it ends at ten. Can Pierre take us to the harbor to make the 4pm boarding and then pick us up at the end?"

For a split second, Louise's expression mirrored her distress. Her mouth popped open only to close immediately. "Ouf. Certainly, Madam. We can arrange that for you. Which cruise is it? We can make your reservations as well."

Ella gave her the particulars.

"The choice is entirely yours, of course, but the cuisine on the boat will be a disappointing mediocre at best, although they do have passable cocktails. If you would enjoy it, I will prepare you a feast and you can dine here on your return if you prefer."

They all agreed to a late dinner and Louise nodded. "I'll tell Pierre to be in front at 3:30. That will give you plenty of time to board." She put the pitcher on the table, and left with the cart.

“So how was the golf game?” Ella finished the last of her soup and popped the last smidgen of sandwich into her mouth.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Jim said, “Fine, hon, just fine. What did you girls do today? Spa day? Shopping? Honkytonk?” He chuckled, hoping for a smile.

She spooned another helping of chowder into her bowl and shrugged, her voice low. “Nothing much. Took a little walk along the river. We kinda slept in, actually. Low biorhythms or something.”

Solicitous, he leaned forward and peered into her face, green eyes filled with worry. “Are you alright? You sound, well, and you look tired.”

Ella stared at him, lips pursed.

“Well, y’know what I mean, of course. Like not relaxed. Which is one of the reasons why we’re here, so you can get rested up.” Backpedalling like mad, Jim cast a frantic glance at Lenny, begging for a bailout.

“Actually, I was just about to ask you the same thing,” he said, turning to Terry. “You both seem to be a bit under the weather. Not your usual perky selves.” He beetled his eyebrows at his wife, something that usually got a giggle. Today it garnered only a stony silence, not even getting a grin.

“Look, if this is about the golf, we’re really sorry, but it’s over. We’re yours for the rest of the vacation. You’ll get tired of us before long.” Jim took Ella’s hand, hoping for some response but it lay in his, unresponsive.

With a sigh, he poured another lemon drop, topped off Ella’s glass and then selected a couple of little sandwiches and another helping of chowder. “Ella, you want some more? Terry?”

Both girls shrugged.

Not easily intimidated, Lenny shook his head. “Okay, look. If you gals’re pissed about the golf, just say so, huh? Let’s get it off your chests and then be done with it so we can have a nice day.”

Lenny gazed at the twins with his best homicide detective look, refusing to lower his eyes or feel guilty.

Identical faces turned to him, full lips puckered, foreheads creased in a frown, piercing eyes, blue and black, stared him down.

Lenny never blinked. "So girls? What's the beef?"

"Oh, I see, Lenny. Pat the little girls on the head and then just dismiss anything we might be feeling? We'll just shine it, right? Right?"

Ella turned toward Jim, blue eyes snapping fire. "Say something!"

"This chowder is fabulous. You should have some more."

Ella got to her feet, Terry right behind her. "That's it. I need a nap."

"Me, too."

Jim picked another couple of the little finger sandwiches, expression quizzical. "I think that went quite well, don't you?" He popped one into his mouth and began chewing.

Lenny chose a slice of rare roast beef on a tiny croissant, topped it with a slice of warm brie and shrugged. "Pretty much as expected, I guess, although I thought they'd stand and fight. That leaving thing, it's not in character for either of them. In fact, the entire conversation was strange. I mean, they're about as steady a pair as I've ever seen."

He chuckled and popped another tidbit in his mouth. "Of course, Ella has that laughing thing going on when she gets scared, but this is not like that. Tell ya the truth, if I didn't know better I'd think they were on something."

Jim's eyes literally bugged. "Oh, boy, I'm not touching that with a ten foot pole. If you even allude to Ella that you think she's on drugs, we might as well shoot ourselves right now and be done with it."

"You're right and I do know better. Still, all those years dealing with druggies. I've seen it all, and there's something going on. I just can't nail it."

Jim leaned back in his chair, eyes hooded. "I've seen it, too, now that you mention it. Ella's restless at night, which just started since we got here. She's having dreams and I don't think they're good. So, maybe they're reacting to something we're eating?"

"I guess it could be a really low-grade flu bug, but how likely is that? Still, they're not acting sick. It's more like they're mad or something, depressed. In the end, I think it's probably the golf. Still...." Lenny finished his drink and got to his feet. "Discretion being the better part of valor, I'm going to see if Terry will let me in the bed. A nap sounds good."

"Uh huh. Smart, too."

Pierre pulled into the main parking lot for the harbor and followed the procession of cars as they wound their way toward different piers.

The huge cruise ships dwarfed the paddlewheel boats as they moved on down the river. Smaller pleasure craft, their running lights twinkling, joined in the parade.

Pierre stopped the jitney in front of the *Spirit of New Orleans* pier and smiled. "It's a beautiful evening. Y'all have a great time. Shall I come back at ten or wait for a call?"

"Ten's great," Ella said. "Your mother is preparing us a late supper."

They swung down off the golf cart, waved goodbye and headed toward the dock. Joining the line for boarding, they chatted, enjoying the warm evening and anticipating their cruise.

"I'm glad we decided to eat back at the house. Louise offered to fix us a cold seafood supper that sounded great. One thing I'm not into is buffets. I know it's crazy, but it seems like any time I eat at one, I get sick." Ella glanced at Jim. "Especially ones like this, where you serve yourself."

“It’s fine with me. We had such a great lunch, I’m not even hungry, but I could use a drink. What’er you in the mood for, wench? What’s your pleasure?”

She tittered and took his hand. “Not sure yet. No more lemon drops. No one can compare to Louise, even Al.”

Jim grinned and pulled her hand through his arm. “You look wonderful tonight. I love that shade on you, like a ripe Persian melon. Delicious.” She leaned into him, hugging his arm.

They strolled to the bar where Lenny and Terry waited for their drinks. The bartender handed her a bowl-shaped glass laden with fruit and sporting a colorful umbrella. The other glass, a tall bourbon and soda for Lenny, paled in comparison.

Terry chortled. “I’m in the mood for a fufu drink tonight, a pina colada. What can I say?” She took a sip and rolled her eyes with delight. “Scrumptious.”

Ella shrugged. “I’ll try one.”

“You won’t be sorry.” Terry took another sip and grinned at Ella. “Mmm.”

Drinks in hand, they headed for the upper deck and a good vantage point to watch the boat leave the harbor. No sooner had they arrived at the railing than a not so subtle shudder set the paddlewheel to turning, slowly at first, then increasing in velocity. Freed from the restraining ropes, the boat drifted sideways into the river toward the fast moving current.

The deck thrummed under their feet as the prow of the venerable old lady rose and picked up a bit of momentum. She caught the current and the wheel increased its speed. They headed into the middle of the river and made their way downstream, surrounded on all sides by a flotilla of other boats.

The sun set in a smoky haze of glory, its blood-redness cloaked by fleecy clouds that wandered across the darkening sky.

They merged with the parade of other cruisers strolling the wide decks and enjoying the music and lights. Gaiety permeated the night and white-gloved waiters passed among them, bearing trays of appetizers and frosty cold glasses of champagne.

Large plantations and ante-bellum mansions lined the river, clearly visible and lit up like Christmas trees dotting the darkness with festive lights.

Terry bit into a puff of something and raised her eyebrows. “Hmm. Disappointing.” She put the other half of the puff on her plate and tossed it into the trash.

“You’re just a spoiled little foodie,” Lenny said.

“Perhaps I am.” She winked at him and grinned. “Still, not good. Chef has no fear from the food in this quarter.”

“Louise, on the other hand,” Ella said, a chuckle building in her throat. “She’d give him a run for the money. Can you imagine them in the same kitchen?”

“Somehow I don’t see them getting along.”

“At least they both speak French.”

“What’s that song he keeps singing when he’s in a good mood?”

“La Marseillaise. It’s the National Anthem of France.”

“Vive la France.”

“To Casablanca,” Jim said and hoisted his glass. They all laughed.

The paddleboat rolled down the middle of the river as a jazz band warmed up on the dance deck. They made their way back to the stern, climbed the steps to the promenade deck and sounds of music.

They danced the evening away under a panoply of blinking stars while the moon dodged in and out of the clouds.

Chapter Nine

Darius steered his little motorboat to the outermost end of the Retreat's dock, pulled alongside and secured his rope to the tie ring at the far end.

He stepped out of the boat and took a deep breath, peering into the inky blackness surrounding him. The humidity made the air sticky and the odors of the night rose from the swamp in waves, wafting through the air. The chorus of bugs singing along the riverbanks and the incessant croaking of frogs blended into the evening symphony.

The waxing moon gave scant light as it dodged in and out of the large puffy clouds. He glanced at the scampering orb and stifled the urge to howl.

Noiseless, he hurried down the wooden boards to the lawn leading up to the plantation. The huge house stood on the rise, cloaked in darkness, no lights visible, not even in the landscape.

Darius smelled her before he actually saw her and his lips lifted. He scanned the dense foliage as he approached the steps leading up to the veranda.

"Cousin," she said, stepping out of the shadows.

"Greetings, my dearest Louise." They embraced and he growled as they kissed each other's cheeks.

"Does everything go according to plan?"

"It does, but not before I made a miracle happen. They had planned to go on a dinner cruise tonight, but I persuaded them to dine here afterward rather than on the boat. Their food is wretched anyway. I fed them well, dosed their cocktails heavily tonight and then put another gris-gris spell on Ella. They will not wake."

She led the way up the stairs and across the paving stones to the French doors leading into the old mansion.

"Have you considered what to do with the dogs? It might be easier to get Terry than Ella."

“I want Ella first, but you’re right, it’d be less problematic without the dogs. Still, once Ella’s gone, Terry will be frantic to find her. Besides, Amy and I are friends. It’ll work out as planned.”

Darius followed Louise through the dark, familiar rooms, as comfortable in the house as she was. She paused midway across the large foyer and spoke in his ear.

“Although the lift is very quiet I suggest we walk up the stairs. The suite they’re in has the rear exit with steps leading down to the back lawn. If you stay to the path, the shadows from the trees will give you cover. You can cross the lawn to the boat dock without fear of being seen.”

They climbed to the second floor and turned toward the suite Ella and Jim shared.

Darius folded a number of bills into a small bundle, wrapped it in an emerald green cashmere scarf and handed it to her.

Gracious as always, she nodded, accepting the gift. “You honor me, Cousin. You know I hold you in the highest esteem.”

She kissed his cheeks and nodded again, staring into his eyes for a long moment. “I’ll wait out here should something go wrong. Be swift and bon chance.”

With a nod, he opened the door to Ella’s suite and disappeared into the shadows. He knew this room well and needed but a moment to acclimate to the minimal light. Darius maneuvered around the sitting room furniture and entered the bedroom.

Ever on alert, Amy met him at the door, ears perked, eyes wide, tail rotating. She knew who approached.

Tony stood up long enough to see that Amy was happy and collapsed back onto his bed.

Although their training as guard dogs was identical, the Dobermans performed entirely different duties in real life. Tony worked in the field with Jim, recovering runaway teens, felons

and the odd terrorist, often having to engage physically with his perp. His was the interactive, rough and tumble street life and he loved every moment of it.

Amy's sole function was to protect Ella and she never willingly left her side.

This particular set of events and the repercussions from it, would stand out forever as a pivotal moment in her life. There was no precedent with which to judge this current and truly impossible phenomenon. And yet, there it was and she knew it.

How could she have ever imagined the repercussions?

To have guests in the middle of the night was unheard of in her normal life, but still, what was night to a dog? And this was not a stranger. She'd recognized her new friend's scent before he entered the room and wagged her way across the bedroom to greet him.

Darius bent down, took the dog's face between his hands and brought his nose within inches of hers. He held her thus while they exchanged aromatic breaths. Aquiver, Amy licked his lips. He returned the lick with one of his own, still cradling her head between his hands. They remained that way for another long moment, and then Darius let go of her face and made strong direct eye contact.

Go lie down, Amy.

She sighed, turned around and returned to her bed, a move not lost on Tony, who'd watched the whole performance, captivated.

Darius stepped across the room to Ella's sleeping form. He pulled back the covers, wrapped the top sheet around her and picked her up as effortlessly as he would a dishrag. He gazed at her face, felt his passion build and headed for the French doors.

Ears perked in agitation, Amy whined and showed her teeth at such actions. A stiff ridge of black hair rose on her shoulders and spine, and cocking her head in question, she watched him carry Ella onto the veranda. She jumped to her feet

with her head lowered, and lunged forward as if to follow him outside.

Darius turned and paused briefly, stared at her and then closed the doors in her face, snarling at her in response. *I'll bring her back soon.*

Amy lay on her mat, panting, her head cocked and ears fluttering in hopes of picking up sounds of Ella's return. Periodically, she'd stare at Jim. Nothing. She trotted across the room, sniffed around the doors and gave them a head-butt, whining in frustration. Ella should have been back a long time ago. *He lied.*

Tony joined her, a quizzical expression furrowing his brows. He raised his muzzle, sniffed, and unable to discern any danger, returned to his mat.

By morning, she was frantic, pacing up and down the room and peering through the French doors. Finally, she went over to Jim and began to jostle his arm.

That looked like fun to him and Tony joined in, licking his ear several times and bumping his shoulder, too.

Jim responded with a groan and turned over, ignoring them.

With the sun well risen, a desperate Amy took the only course she knew and jumped on the bed next to Jim. When she started to paw at his body, he mumbled and rolled over. Encouraged, Amy began to lick his face, all the while making little clicking sounds in her throat.

He opened one eye enough to see her and muttered, "Get down."

She redoubled her efforts, whining and growling, refusing to obey him.

"Damn it, Amy, knock it off. Ella? Make her..." He glanced at the empty place beside him, and sat up in bed enough to get the dog to stop bugging him. "Ella, are you in the bathroom? And you! Get down!"

He glanced at the clock in disbelief. 9:33? *Talk about sleeping like a log.* He raised his arms over his head and stretched, yawning wide. *Coffee. Gotta get some coffee.*

The silence in the suite made it obvious Ella wasn't there. Jim placed both feet on the floor and blinked several times. He had just enough of a hangover to swear off drinking once again.

Amy jumped from the bed and began to talk to Jim. Her whines and growls punctuated by an occasional howl brought Tony to his feet. He cocked his head, listening, and his hackles rose as he alternately stared from the door to Amy and finally at Ella's empty place.

Although Tony knew better than to get on the bed, he'd watched with avid curiosity as Amy pounced on Jim. No telling what his reaction would be. As expected, he sat up, listening as Amy frantically tried to tell him about Ella and the man who took her. Tony made low rumbling sounds in his throat, joining Amy in her rant.

Jim stared at the dogs and a chill settled in his stomach as he listened to their tirade, saw the body language. A quick check of the empty bathroom and sitting area confirmed his fear. The French doors that led out to the veranda remained closed. He pulled them open, noted the coffee carafe on the table and hurried outside. *That's it. She went for a walk. Took a cup of coffee and went for a stroll.*

Both cups sat next to the pot, untouched. Jim poured what was obviously the first cup. He sipped slowly, mystified. Never in a decade of marriage had Ella ever done this. Not to walk on the beach, not to walk anywhere. She wasn't much of a walker, and to go anywhere alone without Amy or her first cup of coffee was impossible. Totally out of character.

The chill returned to his stomach and little tentacles of fear crackled through his insides. He finished his coffee in a series of swallows, refilled his cup and went back into the suite. "Where's Ella, Ames? Where is she?"

The miserable dog gave him a piercing stare, her hackles beginning to rise. She stared at the veranda, lips lifted to show all her teeth, and started that low sobbing woo-woeing sound, her ears laced to her head, tail clamped.

Jim picked up the house phone with a shudder and dialed the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mr. Sessions. This is Louise. How can I help you?”

“Have you seen my wife?”

“Oui, Monsieur. She took one of the golf carts and went into town to do some shopping and try a little bistro she’d seen. I was to give you that message when you awoke. She expected to return in time for lunch.”

“Did she mention why she didn’t take her dog?”

“No, sir.”

“Are Mr. and Mrs. Browning awake?”

“They called down earlier. They’re taking their coffee on the main veranda. Shall I bring another carafe for you?”

“Thank you, that’d be fine.”

Jim dressed in shorts and a golf shirt, slipped into his loafers and headed for the stairs. He took them two at a time, Amy and Tony right behind him.

Lenny and Terry sat with cups in hand, a platter of fruit to one side, coffee, juices and a pitcher of cold milk on the other.

“I’ve been run over by a truck,” Lenny said unceremoniously. “I gotta cut back on the brandy or something. On top of everything else, it gives me heartburn.” He refilled his glass of milk and began sipping again.

Terry simply nodded in greeting, eyes closed to slits as Jim took the chair next to hers.

“So where’s Ella?” she asked. After quick perusal, she selected a long pineapple spear and bit into the sweet fruit.

“She went into town to shop and have breakfast at some little bistro.”

Terry straightened in her chair, staring at Jim in disbelief. “*What?* Get outta here. She went without me? Or Amy?”

She popped a bright red strawberry into her mouth and glanced at her watch, a frown creasing her brows. “That’s so weird. Did she leave you a note or something?” Eyes wide, fully awake now, she stared at Jim. “She never goes anywhere without Amy.”

“Well, she did this time.”

“Says who?”

“Louise. She said Ella took one of the golf carts and went into town. Maybe the place she wanted to eat didn’t have a patio. Did she ever mention a place she wanted to eat? A particular restaurant?”

“This is really strange, Jim. We’ve been to the French Quarter every day since we first got here. She liked a lot of the shops, several in particular, actually. Maybe I ought to go into town and try and find her.”

Before Jim could respond, Lenny said, “It doesn’t sound to me like she’s lost. She’s not missing because Louise saw her go and we even know where. Evidently, she got up earlier than the rest of us and decided to take advantage of a little alone time. What’s the big deal? She holds her liquor better than I do, that’s for sure.” He cradled his head in his hands.

“Since the day they met, Amy has never willingly left Ella’s side. I swear, she sits outside the bathroom door, waiting! But today, in a strange city with a dicey reputation, she didn’t take Amy? Do you know how strange that is? You think she’d leave Jim or me a little note. It’s not like her.”

Bloodshot blue eyes sought Jim. “Maybe Ella wanted to go to a place that doesn’t have outdoor dining. Besides, there’s no need for protection here, she’s on vacation. She’s not at the club counting money and making the deposit.” He glanced at Terry, the lightest frown creasing his brow. “There’s no reason to think she’d go anywhere new, is there? You’ve been with her on her trips into town, right? Do you think she’s apt to take risks?”

Terry shrugged. “No, not at all.”

They sat back, considering Lenny’s words. Jim pulled his cell out of his pocket, surprised for a moment at the dark faceplate. He’d forgotten to turn it back on after they left the boat. A review of his messages showed nothing from Ella in two days. He hit her cell number, only to hear it go over to voicemail. She’d forgotten to turn hers on as well.

“Her phone’s off. She’ll probably realize it soon and give me a call.”

Terry reached for the house phone and stared at Lenny with concern. “Honey, you need something to eat. How about waffles or French toast? Something sweet?”

He peered at her from under his brows. “Eggs Benedict, please, home fries crispy and a Bloody Mary.”

She glanced at Jim for his order.

“Make it a double, please.”

She lifted the phone from the receiver and gave Louise their order.

The pitcher of drinks came almost immediately, accompanied by the required condiments. That the Benedicts came so quickly caused Terry to wonder whether she read minds. Her anticipation of their needs was positively eerie. When she remarked on it to Lenny, he rolled his eyes, enjoying his breakfast too much to pause for a rebuttal. It could wait.

Louise replaced the pitcher of drinks and began to clear the plates. An invigorated Lenny handed her his plate with a smile and asked, “Do you remember what time it was when Ella left?”

She paused to consider, then raised her eyebrows and shrugged. “Perhaps eight-thirty? I didn’t notice the time, exactly. I offered to make her a cup of coffee, but she said she wanted to wait until she got to the patisserie. She took one of the golf carts and went into town.”

“How did she act?”

“Act? Her behavior was consistent with all I know of her. She smiled as she left and said I should tell Monsieur

Sessions she would return for lunch.” Louise stared from Lenny to Jim and for the first time a frown appeared.

“Is something wrong with Madame?”

“No, I guess not,” Terry said, placing her hand on Lenny’s arm. “It’s just strange. What did she have on?”

She gazed at her in consternation, a puzzled look on her face. “I was working so I didn’t look at her except in passing. I’m not really sure. Shorts, white, I think. You might not remember, but we have additional guests here for the weekend. I was preparing their breakfast when Madame came down. She stayed but a moment.”

“Thanks, Louise.” Terry turned toward Lenny. “I could use a shower. I’m going upstairs.”

They got into the lift, stopping at the second floor long enough to let Jim off. “When you’ve showered, come on down to my suite. I have something I want to discuss.”

They nodded in agreement and continued to their floor.

Terry closed the door behind her and walked close to Lenny. Voice lowered to a whisper, she said, “I’m sorry, but something’s wrong here. Ella would never leave like that, and how hungry could she be?” She led the way to their private patio.

“Give me a break. She could get anything she wanted here, we all can attest to that. And even so, we were up by nine. Why wouldn’t she check to see? And what’s the rush? Couldn’t we all go there for lunch later? We’ll be here for several more days. Sorry, but something doesn’t add up. And leaving Amy behind? Not a chance.”

“What about the not having a patio excuse? Does that work?”

“Not really. Depending on where the place was and sheer luck that early in the morning, she could park right in front and leave Amy in the golf cart. I mean, 8:30am is not exactly high traffic time and it’s certainly cool enough. She said she’d be back here for lunch, right? Nah, we’re missing something. I just wish I knew for sure.”

His voice took on a conspiratorial tone. “I see your point. I never thought of it that way, but you’re right. So what do you think is going on? Where *did* she go?”

“Well, I’m not sure, but Jim’s birthday is coming up in a week or two. Maybe she saw something really special on one of our visits and decided to get it.” Terry rolled her eyes in his direction and shook her head. “And now, all of a sudden, she can’t trust me to keep a secret? So she literally sneaks out of the house, leaves Amy but no note, and goes off to town alone? I don’t buy it.”

“Amy is pretty big to go into the shops, I’ll give you that. Could she be going somewhere that Chef suggested, some different place?” He shook his head before she could reply. “Nah, she’d want to do that with the rest of us. She’d want to bring him home some pictures at the very least.”

“I know Ella like the back of my hand and I’m telling you she’d never be so thoughtless, never pull any kind of stunt that would worry us to death like this. Jim must be ready to scream.”

Lenny glanced at her, eyebrows raised and pulled a beer from the mini-fridge. “True, but there’s no denying the fact that she’s gone. For the record, I don’t believe she went out for breakfast anymore, either. Never really did.”

He opened his beer and took a long swallow. “You’re right, it’s strange. Are you doing alright with this?” He took her hand in his and patted it.

“So far I’m okay because I keep telling myself she’ll be back soon. But if she isn’t here for lunch, I’m going to change from okay to frantic in a blink. It’s just so not like Ella, and give me one good reason why she hasn’t called yet.” She glanced at her watch. “How hungry could she be?”

Lenny sighed. “I can’t argue that. Since you’ve been here, is there anyone she made friends with or seemed likely to meet for coffee?” He chuckled at the absurdity and gazed at his wife. “And yes. I agree the idea is ridiculous. Ella just doesn’t do stuff like this.”

“The only one was that guy, Darius, who made friends with Amy, remember?”

He drew a blank and shook his head. “Friends with Amy?” He chuckled. “I don’t think so.”

“He was at the restaurant that first night we went to town for dinner, you remember? We ended up taking both dogs? They seated us at a special back table on the patio and that cute chef that knows Guy, where we had the great gumbo, remember and Ella had them take all those pictures? Darius was there with a date. Anyway, he came over and said hello. In fact, if I recall correctly, didn’t Jim know the girl?”

Mind still elsewhere, Lenny blinked, nodding several times. “Oh, of course, I remember now. Savannah ... something. Her father was a client of ours. When you golf, it’s a very small world, isn’t it?”

More than an hour passed before they joined Jim in his suite. They knocked and walked in to find him sitting on the patio, morose, a large black dog on either side of his chair. He waved the cell phone at them as they approached and shrugged.

“You heard anything? Not a word here all morning and it’s already 11:30. It’s not just me, right Terry? This isn’t Ella. I’m scared to death and I don’t even know why. I just feel like hell.”

Terry hesitated a moment, slid a quick look at Lenny and nodded. “I’m scared too, Jim.”

Chapter Ten

The dark was darker than anything she'd ever known, ever knew existed. It personified every meaning of the word that she could imagine. Isolation, seclusion, loneliness, fear, and those endless dark nights of the soul, full of brooding, loss and unfinished journeys. A feeling of lethargy overwhelmed her, but in a good way, a comforting and soothing way.

The bubble she floated in contained all she needed. The memories of family and friends, long ago recollections that felt so fresh, so real that they filled her with joy. Only the feelings mattered now, and she surrendered to the ones that made her happy and gave her peace.

She remembered there was a pony, a dappled gray one, with big dark eyes. His name was Sugar and she loved him. They rode along the beach and sometimes into the surf.

There was another pony and another little girl with them, both familiar.

Who are they?

You're Ella. The other little girl is your twin, your other self. In a way, she's you, too. Her name is Terry and she looks just like you. She's your best friend.

The familiar voice, like the words, came to her from some long forgotten dream, comforting her.

It was a mix and a blur, with scenes from different parts of her life entering in sharp focus to take center stage for a prescribed time, only to fade away without conclusion, replaced by new scenes.

Where am I?

It was so important to know for several reasons, but she couldn't remember where she was or how she got here.

Muzzy headed, she tried, but drew a blank on just about everything.

Her name was Ella, she knew that, and she had a twin sister, Terry. The name rose to her lips in a whisper, unbidden.

Terry, help me!

She waited for a sound, some response. Nothing came.

Okay, so where am I?

She repeated it aloud, half expecting someone to answer, but of course, she was alone.

Are my eyes open? It's so dark I can't tell. She placed a forefinger on her closed eyelids and sighed.

Okay. So why are my eyes closed? Am I sleeping? No, I'm drugged.

The more she considered the possibilities, the more she had to admit it. She was high on something. She didn't do recreational drugs, so high on what?

In some corner of her mind, she tried to remember her limited experience in college. Had she any sort of comparison, even by hearsay? Before the thought ended, she knew the answer no, was not really. While her experience might be limited, her knowledge was quite extensive.

The feeling sounded similar to mushroom or mescaline trips she'd heard about from friends, but without the physical reactions and side effects that always accompanied them.

Over the years, she'd known many people who dabbled in recreational drugs like coke or speed, and she'd smoked her share of pot, but this wasn't that. If anything, it reminded her of really good hashish. Dizzy but in a really neat way. She sighed again.

In the end, she decided it didn't matter anyway so why bother to think about it. Ella started to giggle.

"I'm asleep and I'm dreaming." She spoke aloud, at least she thought so. She couldn't hear herself, though, not really. It was more like talking in her mind. With every fiber of her being, she tried to open her eyes.

Forefingers right above her eyelashes, she struggled and finally felt a fluttering under her fingers. She tried harder and soon succeeded in opening them to slits.

The moon danced through the clouds, shining bright through the window one moment, cloaking the room in shadows the next. She saw enough to confirm what her senses already

told her. She'd never been here before. She drew a deep breath and wrinkled her nose, noting the odors and sounds of the swamp and the river bordering it.

What in the world are those groaning noises, and that smell? God! I've never smelled ... aargh. Certainly not in Hollywood. Where the hell am I?

For the connection more than anything else, she ran both hands down her arms and across her stomach to her thighs. She was naked except for her panties. That didn't mean much because that's how she always slept. But she wasn't just sleeping. Someone must have brought her here, but how strange was that? Carry her somewhere almost naked? And who? Who would do that?

Or had she come here on her own and simply undressed and gone to bed? More weirdness. Was it suddenly her habit to go to strange places and sleep there? Not a chance in the world. *Ella Russell didn't sleep around.* All these questions and no answers.

Sometime later, she woke again. Ella extended her left arm, but the mattress continued past her reach. Her right hand found the edge of the bed and dangled over the side for a moment. She sat up and then swung her legs to the floor. Eyes fully functional in the streaming moonlight, she made out the table with its lamp and a chair beside it. She leaned over and turned on the light, but so feeble was the bulb, it was little better than a candle.

A piece of cloth that turned out to be a sheet lay across the chair, trailing to the floor. She picked it up and finding its fragrance soothing and familiar, wrapped it around her body like a sarong.

Where are my shoes?

She glanced around the floor of the small room, but to no avail. No shoes.

Give me a break, man. That's as impossible as it gets. I never go barefoot. Where are my shoes? Her agitation mounted

as she felt the dirty gritty floor under her feet and cringed. *Oh, shit.* She opened the door to what had to be the rest of the house.

A table in one corner held a pile of old magazines and newspapers. A club chair sat at right angles to the sofa. With a flip of the wall switch, the room became dimly visible. Ella glanced around the tiny space, realizing there was little possibility of losing anything here, even a pair of shoes.

Behind a closed door lay a bathroom so basic it had just the barest of necessities that included a toilet, sink and shower stall. Through an archway was the kitchen, consisting of a sink, a microwave, a fridge, a three-burner hotplate and a toaster oven.

She opened the only other door in the shack and almost stepped into the river. Nothing but the narrow porch, the final wooden steps and a firm hold on the railing kept her from a tragic mishap. She spun around, tightened her grip on the post and shuddered to think about what might have happened.

Her throat ached and her heart beat with such painfully erratic thumps, it occurred to her she might be having a heart attack. She clung to the post, breathing through her nose and having a lot of trouble trying to remain upright. Her knees continued to buckle but her breathing finally settled and the urge to vomit subsided.

Ella staggered back across the porch, slammed the door behind her and tottered into the room, collapsing on the sofa in a terrified heap. She clutched her chest and willed her heart to slow down. There were no answers, but the questions scared her so much she was numb, frozen stiff.

Where the hell am I? My God, it looked like a swamp out there. Her heartbeat finally slowed but her throat continued to ache and she went to the kitchen for water. She picked up one of the bottles, unscrewed the cap and drank freely. The water soothed her parched throat and calmed her as intended. She leaned against the wall, eyes half closed as her head began to swim again.

Whatever it is that's going on, it'll be easier to deal with in the morning. This is a nightmare, it has to be. Tomorrow will be better.

She finished the bottle of water and walked back to the bedroom, turned off the light and lay down on the bed. Moments later, she slept.

Chapter Eleven

Jim, Lenny and Terry sat on the veranda studiously not looking at each other. The bloody Mary pitcher had long since been replaced, first by lemonade and then by martinis.

Lenny stared from Terry to Jim, brow furrowed, lips clamped in a tight line.

“We aren’t going to be able to ignore this much longer.” He glanced at his watch. “It’s almost three and we haven’t heard a word from her. To state the obvious, it’s just not Ella.”

“You know better than anyone how our hands are tied, Lenny. We won’t even be able to make a missing person’s report until tomorrow. And every second counts in something like this.” Jim worked his wedding ring around his finger, as though it provided some connection to Ella.

“That’s the worst part about it, all the time we’ve wasted sitting around here.” Terry got to her feet and picked up her purse. “I’m going into town and see if anyone’s seen her.”

Lenny stared at her, sorrow etched in his face. “Honey, don’t; there’s no point. Ella didn’t get caught up in breakfast, shopping or anything else. If so, she’d have called long ago.”

Tears oozed out of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she stared at her husband. “We can’t just sit here and do nothing. I’ve got to do something.”

Her lower lip quivered and she blinked in an effort to stem the flood of tears that made her dark eyes glitter.

Lenny glanced at Jim, whose numb, stricken expression and slack jaw made him wince. It didn’t get much worse than this. He picked up the house phone.

“Hi, Louise, it’s Mr. Browning. We’re ready for some snacks or something to chew on whenever you get around to it. Something like a cheese and fruit plate would be great.” He hung up the phone and cuffed Jim’s arm. “It’s going to be alright, buddy. We have to make plans, starting with something to eat. Can’t run on empty. In the interim, let’s begin to map this whole

thing out, starting with when we came home last night, see if we can find any inconsistencies or unusual things.”

Jim nodded. “We had a great supper and too damned much brandy. Then we went to bed. I was gone before my head hit the pillow, but Ella was even faster. I don’t remember anything until Amy woke me up, pawing at me.”

Terry resumed her chair. “We were right behind you. I barely remember going to bed, and never moved again until morning.”

“Me, too,” Lenny said. He leaned back a moment, chin cupped in his hand and then extended his forefinger to Terry. “That’s actually unusual, hon. No trips to the bathroom?”

“Not that I remember, and you’re right. I usually have at least one potty visit a night. Guess I was too bombed to feel the urge.”

“Okay, there’s one thing out of the ordinary. Did you...” He put a finger to his lips as he heard the elevator door open and the dining cart make its way to the veranda.

Louise greeted them, a look of mild consternation on her face. “Madame has not returned?” Long swooping eyebrows rose as she set out service for four, placing plates, bowls and silverware before them, the one lone setting off by itself. “That is so strange considering the hour.”

“No news at all, and it is strange, isn’t it?” Lenny gazed at her, face expressionless. “We’re really becoming quite concerned. We’re going to file a police report in the morning. Is there anything more you can tell us about your conversation with her?” He scrutinized her face, watching her expression, the movements of her eyes.

Louise remained composed and at ease. These were his first impressions and they hadn’t changed. Regardless of her facial control, she was lying about something and he knew it.

“As I mentioned earlier, we hardly spoke. She wanted a golf cart to go into town and have breakfast. I told her they were out by the garage with the keys in the ignitions. Simply pick one and go.”

She placed platters of the requested cheese and fruit plate and one of thinly sliced rare roast beef on the table along with a basket of sliced crispy rolls, cups of broth for dipping and a large bowl of salad.

“Did she leave alone, Louise?”

The woman blinked, large golden eyes suddenly hooded, cloaked. Immediately she shrugged, full lips drawn into a thin tight line. “Alone? Well, of course she was alone. I’m not sure what you mean. It was quite early in the morning. Who else might be with her?”

“Well, she was alone when you talked to her, but did she have plans to meet anyone or mention someone she knew in town who might be meeting her?”

“She offered neither explanation or excuse, sir, and indeed, it is not my place to question Madame as to her plans. Please remember, you are our guests here, but she is not a friend. We spoke only in passing. I was busy preparing breakfast at the time. And now, I have other guests to serve. Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“No, thank you, Louise.”

She turned the dining cart around and headed for the elevator without a backward glance.

Terry started to say something but Lenny put his finger to his mouth for silence. “Have some salad, darling. The dressing is delicious.”

They heard the elevator close and knew they were alone.

“What a stone cold bitch,” Terry said between clenched teeth. She stared at the exit where Louise disappeared into the elevator, took several sips of her drink and turned to Jim and Lenny, eyes narrowed.

Jim shook his head. “Not so much as a polite word of interest or sympathy. She could at least pretend.”

“She lied.”

Jim and Terry stared at Lenny, eyes wide.

“What?” they said in unison.

“She lied. When I asked her if Ella was alone, she blinked. Now blinking is involuntary, but it can be controlled to

a degree. On the other hand, her pupils contracted at the same time and that's something you have no control over. Add to that, her body language got very defensive right then. Actually, it was a wildcard question, a lucky guess. I mean, we know Ella left alone, but Louise *reacted* as though she hadn't. All my years on the force tell me she knows something important. I think she's withholding vital information. Now we just have to get her to divulge it."

"My God, how can this be, and why? We're total strangers to her. Why would she do that, lie, mislead us? I have such a bad feeling about this. How could this happen? What the hell is going on?" Terry started to wring her hands.

Jim pursed his lips, forehead creased in wrinkles. "What gets me most is Amy. She worships Ella and I promise, wherever she is, she went willingly or Amy would have taken the guy out, we all know that."

Terry pushed the empty bowl away from her and glared at Amy. "But she *didn't*, even though she *should* have. And guys, believe me, Ella didn't leave on her own without Amy. She always takes her everywhere, and I don't believe for a minute that she decided to leave her here and go to a strange restaurant in a town we don't know. It's all so beyond bizarre - what does it mean? And look at Amy. She gives me the willies, crying under her breath all the time and acting crazy, pacing around the place and smelling the air like that. Look, see? Just like that. It's like she's waiting for Ella to get back."

They stared at the Doberman, her muzzle pointed straight up as she seemed to taste the air, jaw slack, ears flat to her sleek skull. Strange keening sounds issued from her throat, cries of dread and anger and something else. Guilt? Remorse? Retribution?

"It's so much more than that, Terry. She's really afraid," Jim said, voice so low it was almost a moan. "I've never known Amy to be scared of anything, but she is now."

Terry began to cry, short little gasps that shook her frame and caused the tip of her nose to turn red. She wiped her

eyes with a napkin and shuddered. “I haven’t said anything before because it makes me sick, but I’ve been getting little things, snippets or something, of Ella ... *from* her, actually. It’s like she’s calling me, talking to me, but it doesn’t make any sense.”

“What do you mean? What’s she saying?”

“Well, it started with silly stuff, dumb things. Our first ponies, Sparky and Sugar. We couldn’t have been ten, and we used to ride along this beach. It was so rough and rocky people didn’t go there to swim or lay out, but the path down to the ocean led off a trail behind our house. We’d go down there a lot. It was one of our favorite childhood places.”

“Did anything happen there, something strange or scary?”

“No, we had a ball. It was our favorite thing to do, ride, especially on that beach. We did it right up until we went to college, even with the show horses. Our trainer used to have a cow when....” Her voice choked with tears, trailed off to silence.

Lenny tented his fingers in front of his lips. “Oh, baby, don’t cry. We’ll find her, I promise.” He stroked her arm in solace then turned to Jim. What would Amy do if Ella told her to go lie down or something? Gave her the command to stay. Would she?”

“Well, yes, of course. But why would Ella do that? Are you saying you think she, like, ran away or something?”

“Nope, not at all. I’m saying that Amy would obey Ella. Now what if someone came in here with a gun, and abducted Ella. Amy would continue to obey her, right?”

They all stared at the dog, whose demeanor was a study in misery, so fearful and despondent she gave them the creeps.

“Yes, of course,” Jim said, his voice sounding hopeless. “But why would Ella go willingly? I was right there. Why didn’t she holler or something?”

“Maybe the guy threatened to kill you if she caused trouble. It’s about the only thing I can think of. Feisty as Ella is, I can’t imagine anything else.”

Jim threw his hands wide. “But how would he get close enough to the bed to wake Ella in the first place? Amy’d raise hell, at the very least, and Tony was right here, too. Insane. Never happened, Lenny.”

“Then she’s lying through her teeth, that Louise! If Ella left here last night, regardless of how, then she never saw her in the kitchen this morning. The whole story about a golf cart and going to some bistro was a ruse to set us on the wrong path. All lies!” Terry jumped to her feet and started to pace, hands clenched into fists. “But why? This is absolutely the most crazy, unbelievable situation I’ve ever heard. Why would she lie about seeing her leave? Who is she working with and why pick Ella, someone unknown to them. I mean, we’re on freakin’ vacation, for God’s sake. We don’t know a soul in this whole miserable place but Louise and her family.”

“You know Darius.” Jim stared at Terry. “You both do.”

She paused in mid-stride, mouth a perfect O. “Know him? Well, that’s not exactly right, Jim. We don’t know him, not really. He owns a store downtown and we bought some of his things. He was very friendly, typical of a person in his line of work. Outgoing, y’know? Told us about a couple of good restaurants to try, also the cruise, as well as some shops for vintage things. Ella’s into that all of a sudden. I think she’s looking for some retro stuff to bring back to the restaurant. Anyway, that’s the extent of our *knowing* him.”

Lenny shook his head. “I’m mystified. It’s the best thing and the worst thing about knowing the person involved. We really do know what she’d do and what she wouldn’t. Where she’d go alone, even with Amy, and what might entice her to leave the dog behind. It keeps us from looking at every possibility.” He got to his feet and nodded. “Let’s go have a chat with Darius.”

Terry grabbed his hand as they started across the veranda. “I want to take one of the golf carts rather than ride around on the big jitney with one of the boys. Louise said they’re for our use and they’re ready to go.”

They went down the steps to the garden below, Amy at Jim's heel. When he turned away from the river, she left them and bounded across the lawn to the boat dock. Terry followed her, amazed at her antics.

Amy sat at the end of the dock, clearly agitated. She chewed at the air for a moment, salivating, her sleek black brow furrowed with wrinkles before she turned and trotted back over to Jim. The sharp pointed ears, now flat against her head, fluttered periodically as she shivered. Reminiscent of the posture of a sphinx, she sunk to the ground, haunches underneath her, long front legs stretched out. With slow deliberation, she stared at Jim until they made eye contact. Amy closed her eyes, raised her muzzle to the sky and howled.

"Oh, my God," Terry said, stooping beside the wretched dog. She stroked the head, the strong powerful neck and sobbed.

Lenny pulled her into his arms, caressing her hair, trying to comfort her. "Ah, sweetheart, I know you're scared. I'm so sorry. We'll find her, I promise." His words choked to a stop as he held his weeping wife.

"Amy, heel." For the first time in years, she obeyed him and getting resolutely to her feet, she came to heel. Jim bent down and took her face between his hands. "It's okay, Ames, we'll find her. And I promise, you'll get your chance. Just stay on guard." He rose, patted her once more and walked back down the dock to the garage, Amy beside him.

Off to the right stood a huge stable that had once housed thoroughbred hunters and plantation walkers. Equines long gone, it now sheltered dust-covered cars and golf carts in need of repair. Ancient oaks and magnolia trees shaded the barn, the surrounding lawn and the carts. Lined up in a row, starting with the two jitneys, the carts waited in close formation. From their arrangement, they realized that Ella must have taken the last one in the row.

“Damn,” Lenny muttered, getting onto the back row seat with Terry. “I hoped to see a break in the spacing, something that would show one of the carts was missing. No way to tell as they are now.”

Jim made eye contact with Lenny through the mirrored visor that crossed the entire windshield of the cart. His voice shook. “I don’t think she ever came near the carts. She’d never leave alone, certainly not without Amy. We’ve finally acknowledged that, so let’s keep it in mind while we go through the motions. What did you make of Amy’s behavior on the dock?”

Lenny raised his eyebrows at the question, staring at Jim and then Terry.

She shrugged. “It’s just incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s clear she believes that Ella left by boat. I mean, she went right past the river walk and directly onto the dock. That means boat. And before you ask, I’ve never known Ella to sleepwalk, even when we were little, so discount that.”

“I agree. She’s never done it that I know of. So? What?”

Lenny frowned, usually bright blue eyes shielded behind half-closed lids. “As long as we’re taking it like men, we have another grave concern. It doesn’t look like a kidnapping, at least, not with the intent of ransom. In cases like that, the kidnapper usually wants to make the connection, get the loot and split before anyone around him gets wind of a problem. No yelling, no escape attempts. One thing we know about Ella is she won’t go quietly, so she’ll put up a good fight....”

Terry gasped, her mouth hanging open. “*Shut up!* Don’t you even *allude* to the possibility that ... that....” She gagged and buried her head in her hands. “Please, please, don’t talk like that. She’s my other life, I can’t....”

Lenny pulled her to him and hugged her. “Baby, I’m sorry. I just was talking to Jim like we do about cases and I forgot you were here. I’m so sorry, hon, and of course she’s fine. Ella will have us laughing about this one in the end.”

“Liar.” Terry burst into tears.

His face a ghastly shade of gray, expression haggard and drawn, Jim leaned back in his chair. Eyes fixed on Lenny, he attempted to speak several times, his mouth working; soundlessly he began to cry.

Chapter Twelve

They pulled into a convenient spot just up the street from Darius's shop. Amy's demeanor changed as she recognized where they were. She walked at Jim's heel, head up and sniffing, trying to catch something in the air, some clue.

Jim stopped in front of the shop and gaped at the sign. *Closed for Inventory.*

"Isn't that convenient," Lenny murmured, surreptitiously trying the locked door.

Terry shook her head. "He made a point of telling us the first time we came in that he'd just returned from vacation. He talked about how he hated Mardi Gras, all the drunks and the revelers, and that he always closed at that time. He shops all over the world, I guess, restocking his items for the season. Isn't this their season? Where would he go? What's going on?"

"Sweetie, it doesn't say he went anywhere or that he'd be gone very long, even. Just says inventory. Maybe there's a rear entrance on the side street." Lenny turned down the little alleyway, Jim and Terry right behind him.

"It's quite likely that he lives in that apartment upstairs. For all we know, he's in some back room as we speak, tagging new merchandise. Let's see if there's another entrance."

He saw the door halfway down the side of the building, and hurrying to it, he knocked several times but got no answer. "No point in trying the lock. He's surely got a good security system."

Jim took the lead as they rounded the corner, suddenly realizing Amy wasn't with them. Instead, he saw the morose dog stretched across the floor of the cart, too despondent to move. They climbed over her and headed back to the plantation.

Louise watched them leave in the golf cart, and knowing she had at least several minutes of privacy, entered their suite to conduct a quick search.

A check of the closet yielded the purse hanging on a wall hook under the dress Ella had worn on the cruise but no cell phone. *Where's your cell?* More frantic searching revealed nothing of importance. Where was her cell? She surely didn't have it on her when Darius got her. Clutching the purse to her breast and hating Darius with every fiber of her being, she continued to curse him.

You left her handbag, you moron! Imbecile! What were you thinking?

She pulled her cell from her pocket and left a voicemail. "Cousin! It is vital! I must speak with you on an urgent matter. Please meet me tonight after dark. Without fail. I'll be waiting." Louise closed her cell, put it in her apron pocket and leaned up against the wall. Her heart pounded in a staccato beat and her mouth was so dry from fear she swallowed convulsively.

She cursed her cousin in steady patois as her head spun. It was all just too much. She almost gave up then, would have except for her children, who deserved to live out their legacy without this stain upon it and her poor long-suffering husband.

How could she? And poor Charles – she swore....

Another deep breath and she hurried onto the veranda, down the back stairs to the lawn below. She entered the ground level back door, scooted past the sub-kitchen to the cellar below and tucked the bag behind a row of cans and jars at the rear of the room.

No matter how thoroughly they search the main house, they'll never have reason to come down here. Besides, by the time they get this far, it'd be too late anyway.

Louise felt the tears of fury gather, felt her helplessness and banged her fist on the table in despair. *Always Darius! Always trouble!* It was over, or almost. Her only hope was getting Darius to comply with her wishes.

When it came to Ella's disappearance, they all knew she lied and all for different reasons.

Mrs. Browning knew her sister would not go alone. She'd wait for her, or at the very least leave a note. No reason for Ella to ever go off alone.

Mr. Sessions knew that Ella would never leave the dog behind no matter what. They went everywhere and it was an ingrained habit.

But it was Mr. Browning most of all, who spooked Louise. The set of his icy blue eyes, the way he watched her, lips set and unflinching, just a retired LA homicide cop on a mission, doing what he did best. Even before they found out that Ella would not return for lunch, he did not believe her.

Now here she was in yet another caldron of her own making. Why had she done anything but shrug and claim ignorance? They were busy, how would she know? But oh no, our dear Darius, we must protect him, shield him always. She lifted a lip and ground her teeth.

Why did I do that? Such a blatant lie and for no reason! Why?

While they knew she lied to them, they had no idea what motivated her, let alone where or what her connection might be. She wasn't sanguine with it, and to this very moment cursed herself for getting involved in the first place. She could have shrugged her shoulders and feigned ignorance when they questioned her. It was what they expected her to do. No reason to get involved in any way and yet she had. It probably would prove her undoing; indeed, it already had.

It wouldn't be long before they questioned her again and she couldn't risk her family's inheritance, its security, for another of Darius's wild schemes. This time it was enough. She was finished.

Darius peered out the white wispy curtains at the street below and watched them leave the side door and return to the golf cart. His lips lifted and he showed his teeth, growling under his breath. He twitched several times, unable to concentrate on anything but the upcoming evening. The moon would be at its

zenith tonight and the combination of that and Louise's spells would bring his dreams to reality.

He and Ella would become one and fulfill his legacy. He snarled again as he saw them drive off, his jealousy of Jim overwhelming. One day, he and Jim would go toe to toe. He began to howl and then clapped both hands across his mouth to stifle the sound.

Night settled on the Retreat and twilight faded to black.

Amy lay on the edge of the veranda, Tony beside her, both dogs invisible in the inky shadows cast by the shrubbery. She whined under her breath, and bringing her muzzle next to his, licked his neck several times and then pressed her forehead into his shoulder with a mournful sigh.

Tony whined in reassurance and returned the licks. He froze then as she jerked her head up, suddenly alert. Head cocked, ears fluttering up and down, she stared at the river, hackles bristling.

In one smooth, seamless motion, she rose, listening. Her keen sense of smell brought the familiar scent, and lips quivering, she bared her teeth in expectation. Amy glanced quickly over her shoulder at Jim. She hesitated a moment and then stared back at Tony. He was all she needed and silent as a wraith, he rose as well and followed her down the stairs.

Amy trotted toward the river, keeping to the cover of the dense shadows thrown by the towering trees and thick shrubs. Tony stayed right behind her. They reached the edge of the lawn and sought shelter in the intense darkness beneath a huge magnolia tree. Muzzles raised, they sniffed the breeze, searching for a certain particular scent, waiting and expectant.

Over the years, they'd worked some rough cases together, but Jim and Ella always made the calls. This time they were alone with only their training and their instincts to back them up.

Amy had a plan and it was a good one. Silent and stealthy, they crept to the edge of the shadows, invisible. They crouched, waiting and they didn't have long.

Louise closed the back door and took the path down to the river, heart pounding with fear and anger. Darius had to bring Ella back tonight, it was their only hope. The spells she'd cast, the gris-gris, and the potions she'd made and that Ella had been taking for three days now, would distort her memory, leaving huge gaps that she might never fully recover. They could pull it off if he would agree to bring her back tonight.

He had to, they had no choice, because if he didn't, Jim would go to the police tomorrow and that would be the beginning of the end, for Darius and for her.

They were due to leave for LA the day after tomorrow. Once Ella returned, the problem would disappear with time and distance, and while they would not be satisfied with the outcome, would never have their questions answered, surely, they would let it all go. Ella just had to be back tonight. Otherwise they were lost.

Darius cut the engine as soon as he moved from the shadows into the moonlight. His blood raged and as he assumed more of his wolfen appearance, he fumbled with the lines that secured the boat to the dock and cursed his dear cousin for commanding him to meet her. And there was no doubt in his mind, it was a command.

Normally, he would not expose himself to anyone as his transformation grew, but Louise had seen him many times thus. He growled under his breath and lifted his muzzle, hoping to scent any waiting danger, but the breeze was at his back and offered nothing.

He hurried down the dock and across the lawn. As he neared the path toward the house, there came a rustling and Louise appeared.

“Cousin,” she said, voice shaking with agitation. “We must speak. We have a terrible problem. Mon Dieu! The men are onto us.” She grasped his shoulders, quickly offering both cheeks.

“Impossible. How?” Kisses exchanged, he peered into her eyes, expression intense.

“You kidnapped the wife of a private investigator, Darius. And the other one, he’s a retired LA homicide detective, so he has all kinds of cop connections, even here in N’Orlins! They will not give up until they find her or she comes back, Darius. They’re going to leave no avenue unexplored and then they’re going to go to Vic Perina and you know what happens next? You get a visit from a man who will be your demise! Mon chéri, he’ll find out if y’all don’t bring her back at once, y’hear?” Her voice rose with the urgency of her words.

“I can’t do that, Louise.”

“You *must*, Cousin.” She stared into his eyes, so like her own and nodded several times in rapid succession. “Ouí, Darius. You can and you will. You know what happens next if you don’t. Now where is she? At one of your little trysting places? Vic’s going to pin those other murders on you, Dari, you know that. It wouldn’t take much to make a connection, especially for him. He knows us all so well, I’m surprised he hasn’t already paid us a call. When he does, you’re finished. There goes the shop, your little walks on the wild side each month, your travel. You’ll lose it all, my cousin.” Louise twisted her hands in distress, glancing back at the house, fearful of discovery.

“You will lose me and I will lose you. And why? All in an effort to assist you in your folly? If you’ll just bring her back you can find someone else, someone with no connections to cops. Please, I beg of you. What difference does it make in the end which woman you chose?”

Even in his heightened state of arousal, he knew she was right. Vic would track him down and then they’d kill him, no doubt about it.

“All right, Louise. I see your point, but you must help me. I can’t do it alone.” He paused a moment, staring into the face of the one he trusted above all others. “I’ll come back later tonight and you can follow me in your boat. We’ll bring her back to Retreat and leave her on the veranda or lawn, somewhere they’ll find her easily. I can’t imagine what she’ll say when she wakes up, but it’s of no consequence.”

“Thank you, Cousin. It’s the best thing for all of us. When do you think you’ll return?”

“Give me a couple of hours or so to ... do what I must, and then I’ll return, but really now, you must give me leave. I need two hours at the most. You’ll be watching?”

“I will.” She hesitated. “Be safe, my beloved, my heart.”

Amy crouched, her fangs bared as she slithered down the trail behind Darius. Tony played the point man, already in place several yards on down the path. He prepared to ambush the man as he approached the dock. Then the most amazing thing happened. Darius dropped to the ground and started walking on all fours, his body or at least parts of it, transforming into that of a wolf.

Tony crept out of the bushes, still cloaked in darkness. Snarling, head lowered, he braced himself and then launched for attack. He landed directly in its path, and so startled the wolf it howled at him.

Tony cocked his head, ears up, and glanced at Amy. His man had just turned into a wolf. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. Now what?

Darius made quick eye contact with Tony, and then searched the area, trying to find Amy. He knew she was there somewhere and raised the golden ruff of fur that protected his throat in anticipation of her charge.

He twitched an ear as a sound came to him, the light rustling from the path behind him. She was a formidable foe

alone and with backup like Tony, Darius started to regret his moves.

She stood ten feet from his hip, growling low, eyes squinted, ears laced tight to the sides of her head, hurling epithets and accusations at him, plentifully interspersed with growls and teeth snaps.

Amy, I'm going to bring her back tonight. She's all right. I promise.

You liar, I will kill you! She lowered her head and began to stalk him, all the while muttering under her breath, firing questions and demanding answers. *You took her away from me. Why? You said you would be back soon. Where is she?*

If you kill me, Amy, you'll never find Ella. I promise to bring her right back.

Darius realized it was too late to reason with her. After all, Amy was just a dog. He'd broken her trust and there was no going back, no second chances. She didn't believe him.

He raised his head and howled. They'd flanked him and he was finished, still, he chose that moment to make his final stand.

He rose on his hind legs with a roar and dove for Tony's throat. Before he could make contact, Amy struck him full force in the side, bowling him over and pulling out a chunk of flesh and fur. Tony jumped on him, grabbing hold of his shoulder.

She spat, clearing her mouth, and went for him again, diving for his foreleg, hoping to break it and cripple him. She closed her jaws over the thick bone and clamped. He shrieked and let go of Tony; she felt him grab the back of her neck. The wide studded collar protected her, and given that opportunity, she twisted in his hold and chomped down on his unprotected throat. She started to jerk her head back and forth in rapid, side-to-side motions, powerful jaws finally severing his carotid artery.

Blood shot out in all directions, spraying both dogs and the lawn for a five-foot radius.

Tony connected with Darius's haunch at the same time, quickly hamstringing the rapidly changing and now convulsing wolfman.

Jim and Lenny arrived just in time to see the last of the transformation, which Lenny photographed with his cell, disbelieving eyes wide.

They'd heard the thrashing in the bushes down near the river but discounted it as no more than an alligator settling in for the night. They resumed their conversation about Ella and their morning visit to the New Orleans cops, but the howls, soon followed by shrill wailing cries, sent the hairs on Jim's neck straight up. He'd leapt to his feet and scanned the veranda, looking for the dogs.

"Tony? Amy?" He ran inside the suite to ensure they hadn't gone to their rugs for the night and hurried outside again. They raced down the stairs toward the sounds that by then had changed to intense growling, snarls and loud gurgles. They rounded the corner and came upon a scene out of a nightmare.

Amy and Tony stood guard on either side of whatever lay sprawled in a pool of blood. The body twitched once more and lay still. All around the ground lay chunks of fur and pieces of flesh where the dogs had torn at it.

Terry arrived last, puffing with exertion. She took one look at Darius and shuddered. "Oh, God, oh no. No, please, Lenny. I...."

He grabbed her, shielding her from the carnage on the ground and blessed the dark that cloaked what would be a horrendous scene tomorrow at daybreak.

Louise stood above them, hidden amidst the tall shrubs, so horrified she was unable to move or even call out, rooted to the spot as Darius took on both dogs. It ended as she feared and for a moment, she felt faint.

She watched Terry and the men hurry back up to the house, the dogs in tow, most likely to call the police. They mounted the stairs and passed out of her sight.

Still lightheaded, Louise began to retrace her faltering footsteps, needing somewhere to sit and gather her wits. A rustling and thrashing sound in the grasses below her caught her attention. The gulping sound, followed by heavy chomping grunts, made her blood run cold.

Her ears rang and white crackling lights blazed in her peripheral vision as she saw the impossible. A large bull alligator carried what was left of Darius's body in his jaws. He headed toward the river at a good pace, and with several strong propelling steps, slithered into the water and disappeared with his dinner.

Chapter Thirteen

Jim's abrupt stop at the top of the veranda steps almost brought Terry to her knees as she plowed into him. Lenny caught her, held her as they gaped at the shadowy lawn. A new sound echoed from below, a cracking, chomping sound and they turned, staring over the railing at a nightmare.

There on the lawn, spotlighted by the full moon, was a huge bull alligator, the legs and one arm of the corpse sticking out of his mouth. He threw his head up with a snap, further stuffing the body down his throat and took off across the lawn to the riverbank, disappearing into the murky waters.

"Holy shit! Just like Jurassic Park!"

"Oh, I, God, ohh..." Terry crumpled in Lenny's arms and would have fallen head first down the steps if he hadn't been holding her.

"Go on up, Jim, and do what you have to do. I want to get her to the sofa." He patted her cheek, hoping she'd be able to walk. When she didn't respond, he picked her up, carried her across the veranda and into the suite. He settled her on the sofa and pulled off her shoes.

Jim had both dogs in the shower, hosing them off until their short crisp coats ran clear. A quick wipe down with a towel and he sent them to their beds with strict instructions to stay.

He picked up the house phone and ordered a pitcher of drinks. As the events of the night replayed in his head, he couldn't even move, so riveting was his fear. His stomach roiled and his hands shook.

Was it possible ... could that have happened to Ella when she went for a golf cart? Oh, God, dear God, no, please. Did some alligator snag her and....

His head swam, and for a moment, he thought he might be sick. He drew several deep breaths through his nose, trying to control his ragged breathing. *Oh, Lord, please, please bring her home safe.*

He never heard Lenny join him, nor Solange wheel the cart across the veranda. She placed the requested pitcher and glasses on the table, as well as a nice selection of little sandwiches.

Lenny nodded as she poured their drinks. “No Louise tonight?”

The girl shook her head with a shy smile. “Non, Monsieur. Mama is taking her rest. She starts her mornings quite early.”

“Oh, what time is that? I’m a morning person as well. I’d love to know how early she could deliver coffee, for instance?”

“She begins kitchen prep at five and breakfast is available for delivery from six on. Coffee service en suite is available upon request. Just buzz through to the kitchen and we’ll bring it right up.”

“Thank you, Solange.”

“Ouí. Bon soir.”

Lenny watched her get into the elevator and leave before he spoke. “This is the eeriest place I’ve ever been in my life. It’s like every question, every answer is anticipated and rehearsed. The service is impeccable, everything is, and yet here we are in the middle of something that I can’t even name. What the hell was that tonight?”

“You’re asking me? Nightmare stuff ... who was that guy? And for God’s sake, why did the dogs go after him? Amy’s a wild card, always was, but Tony? He’s a frickin’ rock. I can count on him in any situation, you know that.” Jim shivered again and downed his drink. “And what the hell was he changing from? And of course, with that alligator eating the evidence, we’ll never know. God, how gross was that?”

“Not fun, but I’ve seen worse, believe me. Poor Terry.” He got up and checked on her, and finding her sleeping with deep normal breathing and a regular pulse, sighed with relief and returned to the veranda.

“So, what are we going to do, Lenny? I’m still in shock. You’ve got more experience in this kind of situation, what do you think?”

“Well, without the body there’s little if anything to do. We can tell the cops what we saw, back it up with some sketchy cellphone photos and hope they buy it. And if they do, then what? Obviously, what the dogs killed was another dog. I saw it, so did you. Who or whatever he might have changed into we’ll never know now. Wonder if it was that Darius guy? Terry thought so.”

With a wry grin, he reached into the deep pockets of his cargo shorts and pulled out three furry lumps, samples from the fight. “We should be able to tell a lot from DNA tests on these. I’m just not sure what to do with them. There’s no point in not giving the N.O. cops one of the samples, but I want to send one to a friend up at the L.A. crime lab. She should be able to get me some good info pretty quick.” Lenny sighed and refilled his glass. “One thing for sure, we have to keep one for ourselves. As for Ella, we get them involved in her disappearance first thing tomorrow morning. It’s already been too long.”

Louise took the back stairs two at a time, her heart hammering in her throat, and put an ear to the upper door. With great stealth, she opened it a crack and peered around the jamb. At the far side of the kitchen, Solange and Francine chatted together as they prepared sandwich trays and a pitcher of cocktails.

There was still a chance she might pull this off, but only if she could get to her bedroom undiscovered. She just had to play her cards right, and when Solange and Francine left with the cart, she darted through the door and headed for the side stairs. She’d be home free as long as she didn’t run into Charles or one of the boys.

By the time Louise entered her bedroom, her gasps were audible. She scurried over to the bathroom, closed the door and threw up in the toilet.

Finally able to stand upright, she slid the locks on the door in place and for the first time in more than an hour, felt some small semblance of control. She backed against the wall and allowed herself to catch her breath.

The chattering of her teeth infuriated her but she could not stop the tremors. Her breathing returned to normal and before long, she walked to the back of the L-shaped room and lit the candles on the tables in the dressing room. Dozens of reflections glowed in the mirrors that lined the three walls from floor to ceiling. They soothed her spirit and helped her regain her center.

What should I do now?

Her immediate thought, and the easiest course, was to do nothing. Without the body and her connection to it, she had no need to explain her relationship to Darius, let alone acknowledge that she saw him tonight. Stick to the simple easy story she'd already told so many times. Ella left in one of the golf carts, end of story, at least for Louise.

It would take forever to find her, but wherever she was, Darius had made provision for her, that much was certain. She'd added her potion to several dozen bottles of water that he said he'd left her, as well as ample amounts of tainted food. The question now was where. He'd owned several little shacks along the river and the dozens of tributaries that branched off in all directions. It would be no mean task for sure, but it still could be done, just not by her. She'd have to hire someone and she had no idea who.

Ella dreamt of Jim, a light smile on her full lips. She murmured his name, reached for him, and realized with a start that he wasn't there. She woke to a single shaft of sunlight

bouncing off the water. It danced across her closed eyes, flickering and sensual.

Unlike her usual languorous awakening, she came to with a jolt, and peered from one half-opened eye, confirming what she already knew from last night's limited exploration ... she was no longer at the plantation.

She had no idea where she was. Her dry mouth tasted funny and she swallowed several times, trying to work up some saliva. *Oh God, please let there be coffee.*

Ella slid her legs from under the coarse sheet and sat up, surprised at the sparsely furnished bedroom. Closer inspection revealed an empty chest of drawers inside the closet. Still no shoes, and nothing that resembled a shirt. She wasn't particularly modest, but the idea of walking around a strange house topless made her feel vulnerable. She picked up the sheet draped across the chair, shook it out and fashioned a sarong.

Well, that feels better. Now for the kitchen.

Ella picked her way across the floor, steering clear of little piles of whatever that had gathered on the linoleum. When she got to the kitchen, she was surprised at the bounty before her and gaped at the stocked cupboards. A dozen liter bottles of water, bread, crackers, a large jar of instant coffee, a variety of boxed noodles and sauce and six bottles of merlot, her beverage of choice.

What the hell is going on? Party time?

The fridge, small though it was, held a bag of fried chicken, several hamburger patties, cheese, eggs and deli meats as well as condiments. The entire idea stunned her, but before anything else, she needed coffee.

The water coming out of the tap smelled as bad as it looked, so she opened a bottle of water, poured some in her cup and put it in the microwave.

She took the hot coffee to the front room and stared out the window at the lazy river. There were only two explanations for the food. Either some poor soul actually lived here, and could be arriving at any time, or someone had kidnapped her and

provided food for her for at least a week. With any sort of frugality, the food would last two weeks.

Ella had no memories of getting to the shack, not even much of last night's events, except for the clear recollection of almost falling into the river. She remembered it vividly enough to cause shivers, and feeling a light film of perspiration on her upper lip, she drained her cup and went to the kitchen to prepare another.

Fresh cup in hand, she opened the front door, but didn't step forward. Instead, she took a firm hold on the side railing and glanced around. Sunning itself on the porch step was a juvenile alligator, probably no more than four feet long. Ella let out a terrified screech and the frightened youngster rolled into the water and disappeared.

Oh, my God, where's the mama?

She peered into the water, trying in vain to spot reptilian reinforcements, but evidently they'd left. Ella lurched back inside the shack and closed the door with a bang.

Perched on the edge of the sofa, she tried to figure out what to do. She felt faint and her head swam a bit, but chalking it up to her close encounter, she dismissed the feeling. At least at first.

Halfway through her second cup, she paused, allowing the liquid to sit on her tongue and actually taste it. Was she imagining or was there a faint taste that shouldn't be there? Of course, it was instant coffee, wretched at best. She glanced at the familiar, nationally known label on the jar and swallowed again.

A quick inspection of the bottles in the kitchen cupboard showed that while they were full, they'd been opened previously. Every damned one of them! She slapped her hand on the table, furious that she hadn't noticed they'd been tampered with earlier and then wondered what difference it would make. She had to have water, even if it was drugged.

Chapter Fourteen

Detective Vic Perina hung up the phone and prepared to greet his first visitors of the day. He rose as Terry, Lenny and Jim paused at his open door. Hand extended, he introduced himself and offered them seats and cups of coffee.

“My secretary says y’all want to report a missin’ person. Can ya fill me in on the details?” He placed a recording device on his desk and nodded. “Always helps to refresh my memory down the road. Okay, let’s begin. Who’s missing?”

“Her name is Ella Sessions and she looks just like me. She wears blue contacts, but her eyes are really dark brown like mine,” Terry said.

“When did she go missing?”

Jim shrugged. “We don’t know exactly. We’re staying at the Retreat and the last person to see my wife yesterday morning was Louise Barberi. She said Ella left about 8:30 in a golf cart. She planned to have breakfast at some patisserie and be back to the plantation by noon. She’s still not back. Something is wrong, I feel it.”

“Y’all in town for a visit, right? Did ya try her cell? She has her cell with her, right?”

“No, she doesn’t. I didn’t find it until I went in to take a shower. It was in the pocket of her dressing gown. She’d hung it on the back of the chair. I brushed against it with my towel just hard enough to make it fall. I heard it hit the tiles. It was just a lucky accident, but now I know why she hasn’t called me.” Jim rolled his eyes like a panicked horse. “She’d never leave without her cell, at least not willingly. She’s been kidnapped. There’s just no other explanation why she’d be away this long without calling me or her sister.” His eyes teared over and he bowed his head.

Detective Perina leaned back in his chair, tented his fingers and sighed. “That makes a difference, Mr. Sessions, but what if she thought it was in her purse all along? You said she’s got it with her, right?”

“I have no idea! I didn’t find it, but what difference does that make? Purse or not, she’s still gone!” Jim nodded several times, getting more agitated by the moment.

The detective picked up the phone, spoke briefly, and before long, a man carrying a sketchpad and a laptop entered the office.

“Hi, Patterson. I’d like you to take several photos of Mrs. Browning here, an’ do a sketch you can duplicate for handouts.”

He nodded at the detective and motioned Terry to follow him to a chair along the white wall.

“Please sit there, in profile.”

She followed his orders, finally turning to face the camera.

“Thank you. Now how similar are you in looks to the missing woman?”

“We’re identical twins. She wears blue contacts, but we weigh the same and have the same length and color hair.”

He nodded, removed several pencils and began to sketch Terry, again using both profiles and a full face. It took less than ten minutes, and when he’d finished he gathered the camera and the sketches and prepared to leave.

“Make copies for all the beat cops for handouts, Patterson, and shoot me up a dozen or so for my detectives. Put the photos on the noon news.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Detective,” Jim said, interrupting him. “Tell them I’m offering a hundred thousand dollar reward for her safe return, no questions asked.”

“A hundred grand? That should get some attention.”

“I hope so. And there’s one more thing or two.” He turned toward Lenny and raised his eyebrows.

Lenny nodded at the detective, removed his cell from his pocket and activated the photo mode. He handed the phone to Perina. “This is real, I swear. We did not alter the photos in any way. Go ahead and page through them.”

Perina stared at the first picture of two black dogs fighting with what looked a lot like a large wolf, at least in general, but clearly it wasn't a real wolf. In obvious disbelief, he clicked through the photos and watched until the dogs vanquished what now looked almost like a man, or what was left of him. Tufts of flesh and fur, ripped and torn during the fight and evidenced by the gaping wounds on the man's corpse, lay scattered on the ground.

"Where's the body?"

"Just keep watching."

"*Son of a bitch!*" Perina gaped at the screen, eyes wide in astonishment. "Are y'all tellin' me that a 'gator carried off the victim's body?"

"Yes, sir. It's exactly what happened."

"Oh, my Lord. God rest his poor lost soul." Perina paged through the remaining photos three more times before he was satisfied.

Finally, Lenny placed two plastic baggies on the desk in front of Perina.

"Are those what I think they are?"

"I'd imagine so. There were several pieces, but I picked up the ones with the most amount of flesh and blood."

Perina took a pair of gloves from a package in his drawer, snapped them on and removed one of the evidence samples. His nose wrinkled in distaste at the pungent feral odor of the specimen.

"Smells like a wolf or a big cat. Something wild, that's for sure."

He stuffed it back in the bag, sealed it and picked up his phone.

"Ms. Manning, can ya come in here, please?"

Moments later, she stood in the doorway. "Yes, sir?"

"Would ya see that these get down to the lab straight away? I want DNA testin', anything they can get me, and it's urgent they get back fast, y'hear? Lean on 'em. Hard."

"Yes, sir." She took the bags from him and departed without another word.

Perina leaned back in his chair, slowly shaking his head from side to side. With a shrug, he nodded at Lenny.

“One at a time, please. So, what do ya think ya saw?”

Lenny glanced uneasily at his wife. “Well, we didn’t see what started the fight, of course. We were on the upper veranda and didn’t even go down to the lawn until we heard the sounds of them fighting. The dogs, they had what looked like a wolf of some sort, they had it down on the ground. It ... they were already fighting with the wolf, I guess. I didn’t know there even *were* wolves in New Orleans. Maybe it’s a natural thing, I don’t know. Anyway, the dogs won the fight and the wolf or whatever was in his death throes and he was like, well, shape-shifting.” Lenny moved uncomfortably and glanced at Jim.

So did the detective. “How about you, Mr. Sessions? What did you see?”

“When I got there, the wolf was already on the ground. He was down, thrashing around, and his hind leg, that is to say his right leg, it like straightened or something, went from a hock to a knee, from a canine shape to a man’s leg. He was turning into a man. Same with one of its arms - his arms. Never saw his face so I couldn’t identify him. I’ve never seen anything like it before in my life.”

“Y’all know anything about werewolves? Know any of the folklore from ‘roundabout these parts? It’s a diverse culture, steeped in voodoo and all kinds of witchcraft and such beliefs.” Perina glanced from Jim to Lenny, realizing they had little to offer.

“I had a varied career in homicide as an LA detective. I thought I’d seen it all, but I’ve never dealt with anything like that shape-shifting stuff, whatever that was. That happen around here much? I was stone cold sober and I know what I saw. I have pictures and a second eyewitness, but still. How about you?”

“This is not my first werewolf experience. Round these parts, we call them loup garou. I shot one once, but when they turn back into humans, there’s nothing left of their canine form to show or examine. That makes this case so unique. Maybe it’s

because the fur and stuff came off the body before it died or changed. We'll see." He paused for a moment and then turned off the recording device.

"How about y'all show me the scene. Let's take us a trip out to the Retreat, see if Louise can shed any light on what's going on. She has quite a story in her own right."

Louise stared down at the commotion in the yard and felt her stomach pitch. The police car had stopped at the bottom of the main stairway and she whispered a fervent prayer of gratitude that the other guests had already left on the next leg of their trip. The arrival of the gendarmes never boded well with the guests.

Her heart started to pound, pulsing in her neck and making her stomach turn again. Next week they hosted another wedding celebration with twenty paid guests, ten days in length, and whatever problems Ella and Darius caused had to be over by then. *Mon Dieu!* One way or another, it had to cease.

The wedding would take place at the Retreat, with an additional guest list of one hundred expected for the ceremony and reception. A fortune hung in the balance; well over eighty thousand dollars was at stake. She had to satisfy Vic Perina's fears and right away. This nightmare had to end today. Why did she ever agree to work with Darius on this crazy scheme? Why did her love for him so cloud her judgment? She ended that thought, knowing as she always had why she went with Darius and why she always would.

As prepared as she ever expected to be, she glanced in the mirror and patted her hair. Resolute, she turned toward the elevator and her unwanted guest, her long skirt swishing as she walked.

Charles Barberi descended the wide front stairs with a broad smile and an outstretched hand.

“Vic! Always such pleasure to see you, my friend. What brings you out to the Retreat this morning?”

Before he could respond, Jim, Lenny and Terry rounded the corner of the building after returning the golf cart to its plug-in on the line. Charles saw them and nodded, lips pursed and an expression of sorrow on his face.

“Ah, ouí. Monsieur, may I extend you my sympathies? And Madame? Any further news?”

Charles glanced at Perina then back to Terry. “I did not know, hadn’t heard about Mrs. Sessions until my return late last evening. Please accept my regrets. Any word from her? Louise only gave me the basics this morning.”

Without waiting for a response from the detective, he offered his arm to Terry and bowed in deference.

“Madame, what can I bring you? Perhaps something on your terrace? Anything? What do you wish? How can I serve you?”

Terry blinked back sudden tears and glanced at her watch. “Thank you, Charles, how very kind. Maybe you could bring us some sandwiches and soup. I leave it up to you. And iced tea or something on the veranda, please. I’ve really got to sit down.”

She saw Louise get out of the elevator. “Have you heard...?”

The look on her face ended the conversation. Terry sighed and lowered her voice. “Along with that iced tea, Charles, we’ll take a pitcher of lemon drops.”

Chapter Fifteen

Louise nodded to Terry as she left and then swept across the room, slender hands outstretched toward her old friend, smile wide.

“Always so good to see you, Vic. Any word? Have you found her? This is incredible. Never in all our years has anything like this happened.” She heard herself babbling and immediately turned toward Charles for help. “Shall I get breakfast started or do you want to?”

“Whichever you prefer, Louise.”

“I’d like to stay here and talk to Vic a bit if you don’t mind. The girls are in the kitchen. They can serve. I already did most of the prep work, if you’ll just put on the final touches, I’d appreciate it.”

“Actually,” Perina said, “I need to talk to you both, but not together. Charles, go on ahead and get whatever Ms. Brownin’ ordered. I think she’s in need a somethin’ to eat. I’ll visit with Louise awhile.”

“Jim,” Lenny said, turning away from the others. “Let’s go up to see how Terry’s doing and leave the detective to his work.”

He led the way to the elevator, closed the door behind them and hit the button. “He wants to talk with them alone, get a feel for what they know, their alibis, get with his gut instinct. Then he’ll probably talk with them together. Besides, my poor Terry. She’s not doing so good. No sleeping last night, just nightmares, thrashing around, cried a good bit. I wish I could do something.”

“You’re right, of course, let’s see how she feels and then we have to talk. I’m on the verge of screaming myself. We’ve got to get Perina to light a fire under his guys, Lenny. We’ve got to find Ella.”

“He’ll talk with us before he leaves. We’ll find her.”

Jim's voice quivered and he cleared his throat, green eyes filled with horror. "God, Lenny, I'm scared stiff. It's like I'm coming apart at the seams. That alligator, do you think he got Ella, and no one even...."

"Oh, Lord God Almighty! Please don't say that around Terry. She'll freak out for sure. Really, that'd be the last straw. She's hanging on by her fingernails as it is. I know it's crossed her mind, how could it not? But saying the words ... don't think about it, buddy. You're killing yourself."

He ground his teeth in fury, voice a hiss. "So what *do* I do? What *can* I think otherwise? She didn't run away, she didn't leave me, you've got to know that! She loved me! We adore each other."

Jim burst into long-swallowed tears, unable to hold back another moment. His body shook and he buried his head in the offered shoulder. "Someone could be hurting her, right now! She could be crying for me! Oh, God."

Lenny patted his back several times, swallowing his tears as well. This could just as easily be Terry and in some uncanny way, he knew it with certainty. Was she next?

Jim pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. "I don't know who, let alone how, but someone came into the Retreat in the middle of the night, walked into our room, right in front of two trained guard dogs and kidnapped Ella." He paused, gulping back tears. "Did you hear the absurdity of what I just said?"

Lenny furrowed his brow and shook his head in disagreement, at a loss to make an adequate response. "That's not how it happened, my friend, it couldn't have. No way anyone, not even me, could come into your room and pull something like that off without at least a hell of a lot of barking." He hesitated, unsure, watching his friend's face, he sighed from the bottom of his soul.

"But Jim, if no one kidnapped her, and we all agree she didn't leave you, then what *did* happen?"

"Son of a bitch, Lenny! I don't know and that's what's got me so frustrated ... and when I get over all the things that

didn't happen, I, oh God, I come back to that frickin' alligator! It's the only thing that makes sense. It's hard to believe that Ella did that, went into town to shop, but at least it's feasible; it *could* happen. Someone walking into our bedroom and taking Ella away is impossible on the face of it. So, what do we do now?"

Lenny shook his head in silence, speechless.

Louise led the way to a shady table on the patio, her long skirts rustling as she moved, and indicated a chair. "Let me ring for some tea, mon ami."

"If it wouldn't be any trouble, coffee would be better for me, thanks. Black is fine."

"And you think I could forget that?" Smiling, Louise picked up the house phone and gave the instructions. Solange arrived in moments with two carafes.

She poured for Vic and handed him the steaming, fragrant cup, golden eyes wide.

"What can I tell you? The case is serious, oui? But what can have happened? Where would Madame go?"

"Best coffee in the world, Weezie." Perina looked up with a shrug and made eye contact with his old friend. They went back a long way and he knew her well.

"That's what we need to find out, an' what I'm here to talk ta y'all about today, kids, too. Understand you were the last person to see Ms. Sessions. Tell me about it."

"Not much to tell. She came through the kitchen while I prepared breakfast. I was surprised to see her so early, especially after the late supper they'd enjoyed, but didn't give it much thought past that. She asked for access to a golf cart and I told her to help herself. It's the last time I saw her." Large eyes glanced at him in studied innocence, hoping to read his reaction to her words.

"How'd she act that morning?"

"I understand what you want, Vic, but I didn't know her, short of her preference for food and beverage. You know how it

is in this business, they're in, they're out. She's at the Retreat as a paying guest not a friend. She seemed fine, like always."

"She didn't seem to show any particular emotions, not upset or angry, nothing like that? Nervous, excited, on edge? How about the husband? Could they have had a fight?"

"Sacré bleu No! Not that I noticed. This is a business, you know it well and these are strangers to me. I don't know them. In all your summers working here, did we ever make friends with any of them? Non." She paused and laid a hand on his arm. "Forgive my lack of manners, mon cher, I did not mean to raise my voice. As you can imagine, I am quite distraught by this whole course of events. At first, I thought she was just out seeing the sights and having a nice breakfast. Time has a habit of getting away from you when you're shopping. When she didn't return for dinner...." She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "If I may speak freely, this will be terrible for my business if it ends up ... badly. It could be our demise. Catastrophic for my family, my children. Their inheritance up in smoke."

Perina frowned at her, eyebrows almost meeting at the bridge of his nose.

"Can you imagine any other way it can turn out? She didn't even take her cell, Louise. Y'all don't go outta the house without that stuff, leastways my wife never does. And this gal's goin' shoppin' in the Quarter without her cell? How'd she expect to stay in touch?"

She wrung her hands in agreement, brows furrowed. "I have no idea and that's just the point. I don't know this woman, we have no connection at all. For all we know, she thought she had it. It doesn't make sense to deliberately leave her cell, you're absolutely right there, especially in a strange town that has some ... questionable areas."

"I hear they had a late supper on the patio. Did you serve it?"

"Not all of it. I was tired and since it was so late, once I served their supper, I left the girls to finish the service. I do the breakfast, the girls served them."

“Did anything unusual happen that night? Any chance that someone could have gotten access to the house and kidnapped Ms. Sessions?”

“Of course not, Vic! You know we have excellent security, always state-of-the-art.” Louise stared at him, perplexed. Her expression changed “On the other hand, my suite is on the other side of the house, so I wouldn’t necessarily hear anything, I guess. But still, no, that didn’t happen because when I got up in the morning, I disengaged the alarm system and unlocked the doors. I remember it clearly. From there, I went into the kitchen. I was still there when Madame came down several hours later.”

“Well, if anything comes to mind, call me, y’hear?” He drained his cup and realized the carafe was empty. “Say, let’s you and me go to the kitchen and relieve Charles. Believe it or not, another round of that great coffee would be much appreciated. Ya always made the best coffee, Weezie, right from when ya was a lil’ gal.”

Ella woke up for the third morning in a row with a dry mouth and a queasy stomach. She’d cut back drastically on her water intake and had polished off a bottle of wine for courage, but fear fluttered up and down her spine in unending waves.

Over the course of the long afternoon, she finally capitulated. There was no back door to the shack. She went over every inch of the back cupboards, hoping for something that would get her closer to the shoreline, but came up empty.

The narrow porch went across the front of the shanty and continued about a third of the way down the left side of the house toward the back. A ring in the planking showed itself to be a boat tie-up.

Her estimate of the distance to the tree line and the beginnings of what might be land had to be twenty feet, maybe farther than that, and the thought of getting into the water barefoot made her skin crawl. Scared and disoriented, she started

to cry. She had to come up with a plan, something she could pull off. She couldn't just sit here.

The damned alligators lived all over the place, probably nested under the house, and she didn't have a chance of getting to shore in one piece. She could hear them thrashing around in the water sometimes and it made her want to shriek. God, that's how I'll sound, like a beached whale, flopping around in the water. They'd be on me in a second.

She'd seen them so often they were hardly a shock anymore, although her teeth still chattered at every encounter. Back in the shack, desperation took over and she began to shiver, although it must have been at least 80 with high humidity.

Exhausted, she'd sat on the sofa and tried to think. Okay, her major problem was whatever the hell was in every damned thing she drank. No more water.

She went into the kitchen and checked the food in the fridge. Obviously, the eggs and bread were fine. Same with the boxes of crackers, but how long would she be able to go on eating such dry things without water. At the back of the cupboard, she found treasure. Half a dozen cans of corn, three cans of whole tomatoes and five cans of whole potatoes. If she played her cards right, she should be able to get enough water from the cans to keep it together, at least until the food ran out.

What incredible irony. When she thought of all the great meals she'd eaten over the years, knowing her last would probably be eggs and potatoes just doesn't seem fair.

Chapter Sixteen

Detective Perina grinned at Charles. They'd been friends since second grade, grown up in each other's homes and considered themselves adopted family members. He'd known Charles even longer than Louise, and clapped him on the back in a hearty embrace.

"You're lookin' good, dude. An' considerin' the eats y'all're rakin' in each night, it's a tribute to your exercise routine that ya look so good." Vic grabbed his ample belly, gave it a pinch and shrugged.

"Can't say the same for me. Come on an' let's chat. Sit down here. I know ya weren't even in town at the time, so ya can't give me any real stuff, but bein' such a good listener, maybe ya could'a picked somethin' up, hmm? What's with these Californians? Figure there's a chance she got miffed at the old man and just skipped back to LA without comment?"

Eyes down, Vic took one of the chairs, gesturing to Charles, studying him under his eyelashes. Something was off here, too. He just didn't know what yet.

"It's a disaster and I truly have no clue. They were here for a ten-day stay, typical guests, inquiries about where and what to eat and drink, great shopping sites, cruises and tours. You worked here, you know what I mean. After that, they usually don't ask us much or interact. They don't want to make friends, thankfully, even if we were inclined. I know Pierre took the women to town several times, but when I spoke to him, he said there was nothing unusual. He liked them, said they were very friendly and talkative, and inquired about the area, where to shop. They wanted names of the good native places to eat. He said they laughed a lot, tipped well and seemed very happy. No problem on that front."

Charles stared at his old friend a moment, shrugged and sipped his iced tea. "Strange is such an inadequate word for the situation, but it's the only one I can think of. They come here for a vacation, complete strangers, never been here before; they

seem quite happy and content and one morning a woman ends up missing? After a romantic twilight cruise, cocktails and dancing, and to finish it off, a midnight supper here that Louise assures me rivaled the Queen's. And she runs off? Disappears? To what, do you think?"

"I'm sayin' it's downright queer. Makes no sense whatever."

"Indeed, I will go further. Madame Sessions is a fine specimen of a woman, believe me, she is. Nonetheless, no matter how well cared for, she's still a mature, middle aged woman. I would imagine thirty-eight or so. Not exactly what the sex traffickers are combing the streets for, *mais oui?* And that, of course, is sad to say. Some men have no taste. They yearn for the green, the untried, what a waste when before you ... but I digress. Who wants her for the sex trade? Non. Besides, who even knows she's here at Retreat, and how could they know our setup so well that they could come in and steal her from one of ten possible suites on three floors without setting off the dogs or the security system? Non. Never happened, *mon ami*. And again, why? It's impossible on the face of it. For whatever reason, she left as Louise told you she did. And why would she lie, to you of all people? We are family."

That thought had crossed Perina's mind a dozen times since he'd first heard from Jim and Lenny. He knew Charles and Louise very well. He leaned back in his chair and gazed at his old friend. "What're ya saying?"

Charles paused again. "Mon Dieu! I hate to be put in this position. The notoriety! We do not seek this kind of attention. You know us. We keep a low profile. But maybe this vacation was the perfect ploy for Madame to rendezvous with a lover in a strange area and disappear without a clue? What else could you say? She wasn't kidnapped. Kidnapped means a ransom and we've not heard a word from anyone, *oui?* This wasn't a little girl, some *ingénue*, easily led astray by a gypsy band or a bunch of druggy gang bangers. Most of all, she had that big dog by her side every moment."

Charles leaned forward and stared into Vic's eyes. "Have you seen it? Her? What do *you* think happened that Amy just stood by and watched someone take her mistress? Who took her? Aliens? God Almighty? And all without a sound. Didn't even wake her husband, who we assume was asleep by her side."

The detective shook his head several times, hitting another brick wall. Charles was telling nothing but the truth as he knew it.

"Lots of that stuff's crossed my mind, too, Charles. 'Specially with that dog. An yes, I seen her. Handsome specimen, no two ways about it, big girl. No way in hell would I want to tangle with her, an the other'n's bigger even. Shit. To pretend a stranger came into that room, scooped up Ms. Sessions an walked off with her is pure fantasy, man, bullshit."

They looked at each other as old friends often do and nodded in unison. Vic said, "So, considering that, do ya really think she just ran off with some LA boyfriend an left the rest of us to figure it out? Truly, just between us. Really?"

"How could I know except that it makes sense when nothing else does? It's like asking Louise if Madame was acting normal. How could we know what her normal was? But one thing I do know, sometimes women, well, with the hormones and PMS, and I know I'm sounding like a sexist, but sometimes Louise gets so strange, y'know, moody and such. How about Nellie? Bet y'all have some similar stories."

Vic guffawed lightly and nodded. "Who knows, huh? All these gals are of an age, and, well. I don't know. Makes a hell of a lot more sense than to imagine that someone walked into her room and kidnapped her from under her dog's nose. Not happening, my friend. Impossible."

They sat quiet for a moment and the moment drifted on to several. Finally, Charles said, "Truly, you can depend on it. If I knew anything, I would tell you, mon ami, but I do not. I was in Baton Rouge, so I can only surmise. No matter how many avenues my mind wanders to, I come back to the only thing that makes sense.

“Unless you believe that Louise, for some reason, lied about her leaving in the morning, and why would she do that? Considering Ms. Sessions is a total stranger, what would motivate her?” He shrugged. “Louise told you the simple truth. Madame came down to the kitchen early that morning, requested a golf cart and left. Where she went and with whom, who knows. Now, that’s what I think happened.

“If you do believe Louise lied and did not see her in the morning, the only other explanation is that Madame left the plantation in the middle of the night, of her own volition, without a sound, not even alerting her own dogs. Of course, they are so well trained, if she’d left them with strict orders to stay, that’s what they’d do. Did. If you want my best guess, that’s what happened – if we choose not to believe Louise. But of course, I do believe her. Now why Madame left or whom she was meeting, I haven’t a clue, but there’s really no other answer. She left because she wanted to and doesn’t intend to return or she would have already done so.”

Perina sighed. “I hate to say it, but I agree. I believe Louise. Besides, what other explanation is there? Change of subject, here, but you know anything about a loup garou hanging around these parts? Lookin’ at it from a different angle, Ms. Sessions is one of a string of gals that’ve gone missing over the last six months. Real regular spate of ‘em an all within a five mile stretch along the river.”

Charles paused a moment and then shook his head. “Louise is the one you should ask on that score. I haven’t heard anything but if something’s going on, she’ll know of it. How many women are involved?”

“Nine, so far.”

“Mon dieu! Nine? That’s incredible. Any clues?”

“One or two. Not much.”

They turned when they heard a serving cart, guided by Louise, head towards their table.

“If you’d like a break, Vic, I have excellent chowder here, fresh bread, some salad. Please join us.”

He glanced at his watch, amazed. "Roundin' near lunch time. That's mighty fine of ya, Louise. Yes, I'll be delighted to accept the invitation, an please join us if ya can."

She filled three bowls with the steaming soup, served them and took a chair across from both men, clearly making it easy for him to question her if he chose.

The hot soup grabbed their attention at first, then he said, "Charles an I've come to the conclusion that she's run off ... who with or why, we're not sure. There really isn't anythin' else that could'a happened. The dogs make that case clear. Now I have to figure out how to tell that to the family. Sometimes I hate my job." He took a mouthful of soup, chewed for a moment, making appreciative yummy noises.

"Frere Raul's recipe. I'd know it anywhere." Eyes tilted at the corners, Vic smiled at the long ago memory.

"Are the alligators visiting these parts, Weezie? I know that's a possibility none of us wants to think about, but there's the river. Not much of a stroll."

Louise's spoon slipped from her fingers, clattered against the bowl and landed on the table. She covered her face with long-fingered hands and shuddered. "Please, mon ami, must we? When we're dining?"

Charles leaned forward, solicitous. "We must consider it sometime, my dear, it's not a trifle. A woman is missing. Vic and I discussed many possibilities, but they did not fit the circumstances. However, if one of the creatures came upon her while she was getting a golf cart ... I, that is to say we...."

Charles moved to her side and patted her shoulder as the blood drained from her face. "We don't know, of course, we probably never will. Don't cry, dear."

She raised agonized eyes to his and whimpered. "If this gets out, Charles, and it becomes public knowledge that one of our guests died while getting a golf cart ... Mère de Dieu! I cannot bring myself even to say it. We are ruined."

Eyes hooded, Perina said, "How about any loup garou, Louise? Seen any of 'em hangin' around?"

"What? A loup? Here? When?"

She swayed in place as the color drained from her face. She implored Perina, her voice a whimper. “Please, you must not say that, even in joking. It would be the end of us. You must know that!”

Chapter Seventeen

Lenny watched the police cruiser pull away from the bottom of the stairs and head down the long, winding driveway. Moments later, Jim's cell rang. He took a quick look at the faceplate.

"Hello, sir." He hesitated and then nodded, now staring at Lenny. "We can do that. Yes. We'll be there right away."

"What?"

"That was Perina. He wants us to come down to the station for a chat. He sounds like he's onto something. Where's Terry?"

"I just checked in on her. She's napping. Poor baby, she's hardly slept since Ella ... left. I'm not going to wake her. With any luck, she'll sleep for hours." He pulled a notepad and pen from his shirt pocket, a cop habit that he'd never broken, and scribbled on it. He propped it up on the table and nodded at Jim.

"Let's go."

Lenny hopped behind the wheel of the golf cart and turned to Jim. "He say anything about new clues, something more than we already know?" He glanced at his friend, concerned when he simply shrugged. "I think you might be prepared for some questions that are going to piss you off."

"The spouse? I know."

It was Lenny's turn to shrug. "Natural assumption and accurate 85% of the time. That's why the spouse is always a suspect. But these circumstances are so unique, so bizarre, I doubt if he'll do more than the minimum. He's got copies of the photos we took the night that whatever it was that the dogs ... anyway. Just a heads up. Be cool."

Brilliant green eyes glazed with tears, Jim sighed. "My poor sweetheart. I just know an alligator got her! There's no other...." He began to cry in silence, his suffering and anguish all the more pitiful because it was mute.

Lenny swallowed several times, his throat a painful reminder of their mutual loss and what it would do to Terry

when she finally faced the truth. He batted his eyes several times and wished he could cry, too.

Detective Perina ushered them into his office and closed the door. Jim and Lenny sat in chairs across from his desk, and for a long moment, no one spoke.

“I have some information that normally would not be shared, but seeing as y’all have a unique background, maybe fresh eyes would help.” He heaved a sigh and opened a folder on his desk. One by one he took the photos and placed them in a row.

“This here is confidential. Eyes only stuff, okay? What’cha see here?”

“All these women are similar in type and build although the ages do range.” Lenny pursed his lips. “Similar facial features, the long dark hair as well, but they cross several racial lines. Serial killers usually don’t do that.”

Jim sat on the edge of his seat, perusing the photos. “You think Ella fits in with this group, Detective? In what way?”

“I hardly know where to begin, but here we go. Round about near a year ago now, these women started disappearin’. No connection to each other in any way past the obvious. They all disappeared, didn’t leave a trace. Like poof, literally. No signs of a struggle when we can identify where they went missing from, no tire or footprints, no eye or even ear witnesses. Nothin’. Has to be a crime of opportunity and they’re the hardest to solve.”

“Are there new clues or are you just adding Ella to the list?” Lenny’s voice, no longer sympathetic, took on a strident tone. “This investigation’s been open for almost a year and you have no clues? That’s frickin’ incredible.”

“Well, I didn’t, up until I got those photos from your phone. Those dogs ... your dogs, killed a werewolf.” He slid the preliminary state toxicology report toward them and grunted. “Then, as luck would have it, a ‘gator comes trottin’ outta the bushes and eats the ... whatever it was by that time.” His

mirthless chuckle sounded like chalk on a blackboard. “Ya can’t make this shit up.”

“You son of a bitch,” Jim said, leaping to his feet, face purple with rage. “You know that’s what happened to my poor wife and you’re joking about it?”

Fearing Jim was about to suffer a stroke, Lenny grabbed his arm, pulling him back into his chair. Jim continued gasping and panting.

Expression full of pity and concern, Perina said, “No sir, I do not. On the contrary, I don’t know if she’s dead at all. We just have to find her, if she’s alive, but it ain’t gonna be easy.”

The blood drained back out of Jim’s head so fast he went lightheaded. Face white as a sheet, he grabbed Lenny’s arm and leaned toward the desk. “Wha?” He gulped. “What did you just say?”

The detective rose to his feet, hit his intercom button and told his secretary he’d be out of the office for the rest of the day. “Y’all come with me. We gotta talk in private and we can’t afford more hysterics.” He cast a baleful glance at Jim and shook his head. “Let’s go.”

Every town and hamlet has special places where its cops can go to eat, drink and talk unmolested. River Rock was just such a place, offering peace, quiet and dark corner tables reserved for cops and total privacy.

Drinks ordered and delivered, the detective leaned forward, face set in stern lines and glared at Jim. “See, this here is why we usually don’t involve the families. I know the agony y’all’re goin’ through an I sympathize from the bottom of my heart, but we don’t have time for that now, okay? I need to tell ya a lotta stuff that ya gotta listen to, an then we gotta make somethin’ out of it, and quick. Okay? Listen up. An Jim, down your drink and get a grip, y’hear?”

From this step forward, Vic walked on shaky ground on so many levels, he didn’t even know for sure which one ranked

the highest. He had no alternative, though, he knew that, too. His only hope was Lenny and his influence over Jim.

“Okay, continuin’ where we left off, the missin’ gals. The last one we know of went out to the parking lot of a club ‘round here, searching for her tape recorder in her car. She was scheduled to go on stage in ten minutes and yet disappeared without a trace, ‘cept for one thing. Somehow, whether in the struggle or who knows why, she hit the record button, an twice she said the words ‘loup garou.’ Twice. Listen here.” He put the small pocket recorder on the desk and pushed the button.

“Oh, my God. Loup garou,” said a female voice, gasping, quivering, but completely understandable. “A loup garou.”

Perina waited. “Need to hear it again?” He played it three more times before Lenny was satisfied.

Jim’s chin rested on his knuckles, unable to take in such an abrupt shift in direction when his mind was already in overload. He glanced at Lenny.

“Okay, detective, I got it. So you think that this woman was referring to the same ... entity, for lack of a better word, that the dogs took down? Fascinating. Do these things happen frequently here, werewolf sightings and such? Seriously, if I hadn’t seen what I saw, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. With the amount of time that’s passed, if I didn’t have the photos to refresh my memory, I’d discount the whole frickin’ thing.”

Perina returned the sarcasm. “Except, of course, you can’t. Because you do. So now, ya know what? We follow the trail.” With another deep breath, he finished his iced tea and poured a fresh glass.

“First, y’all need some background. I’ve known Charles and Louise since we were little kids. They’re first cousins. Their mothers are sisters, but they were raised very differently. She grew up at the Retreat. Charles lived in town like I did, next door neighbors, actually. We hung out all the time. Anyway, somewhere along the way, probably in grade school, Louise and

Charles really got to know each other. They became fast friends, and by the time we were in junior high, they were inseparable.

“They fell in love in their senior year and decided to marry. Both sets of parents were more than happy, like ya’d expect in a close knit family. The family approved the wedding, everyone did, except the Church, of course. Even here.... Anyway, Charles moved into the Retreat after they married and worked pretty much in the same capacity he does now. When her mother died, shortly after her weddin’, Louise became hostess, performin’ those duties as needed. Her father died about ten years ago and she inherited the plantation. Nothing’s changed in a hundred years.”

He hesitated a moment and shrugged. “Louise and Charles have another cousin in common, although only second degree. His name is Darius LaRue.”

Chapter Eighteen

Ella tossed and turned on the bed, lost in dreams that turned into nightmares. There was the other, the one who looked like her. Thoughts of her brought the peace and comfort she so badly needed right now. Those special fleeting memories in her life, precious moments snuggled in a calm warmth. She never wanted to let go.

Words would form, ideas would jell while memories jumbled together just long enough to develop an ether about them and then disappear in a mist. She was in terrible trouble, she knew that, although her grasp on reality faded in and out. Random thoughts flitted through her mind. There was a name, one name, but she couldn't bring it. One name that meant safety.

She wanted to scream it out loud, that much was clear. The effort to produce the sounds was more than she could muster.

Terry! Terry, can you hear me? Please come get me. Please help me.

Terry rolled over, murmuring as she brushed a lock of hair from her mouth. Her facial expressions mirrored her dreams and a trembling lower lip soon replaced the light smile. Tears dampened her cheeks, pooling on her pillowcase before melting into the soft down. She relaxed, willing the feelings to come back, to strengthen and encourage her.

"Ella," she whispered. "Are you there, Sissy?" Straining to shut out all the sounds but those of her dreams, she tensed like a violin string, listening.

EI? Water clearly flowed, moving with soft little waves, lapping, gently beating ... against what? Rocks? The shoreline? A dock?

Ella, where are you?

Terry awoke with a start, sitting up so fast she felt light-headed and woozy for a moment. She blinked several times,

overcome with a terrible thirst, and got to her feet. She pulled a bottle of water from the ice bucket and drank it down.

From her suite, she had a clear view of the wide green lawns and the river below. She walked through the open French doors onto the welcoming patio, studiously avoiding looking at the place she'd last seen Darius, the dogs and the alligator.

How can all this grace and beauty, the charm, hide away such horror? Or is it really the key? To what?

Except for her gut feelings that would not be silenced, she had nothing to go on, no reason not to believe Louise, and yet she knew the woman lied. Knew it to the bottom of her soul. It was one of those girl things, something you instinctively recognize, maybe, who knew, but Louise lied. That was a fact. The question was why. She didn't physically kidnap Ella, they all knew that. So who was she protecting?

With nothing but her instincts to go on, Terry accepted on face value that she'd never seen Ella that morning. So what *had* happened and why did Louise lie in the first place? Did she have some reason for incriminating herself? Why admit to seeing Ella when she had not? She'd brought the attention onto herself when it never had to happen, but she did, so why? She'd lied. *Why? For whom?*

Suddenly hungry, she called down to the kitchen for a fruit and cheese plate and then went in search of Lenny. She found his note on the table and shrugged, pissed off they'd left her but grateful for the much needed nap.

Moments later, Solange arrived with a tray of assorted cheeses, deli meats, fruits, a loaf of bread and a pitcher of lemonade. "Can I bring you anything else, Madame?"

"That looks fine. Is there any problem with me going for a little boat ride?"

"Non. Shall I alert Pierre that you desire his services?"

"No, that's fine. I just want to go out alone for a bit. Thank you." She nodded, dismissing Solange.

Just then, a distinctive sound of clicking nails on the wood floors followed by a low whine announced that Terry had company.

“Ah, Ames. How’s my girl, huh?”

The despondent dog crossed the floor, head down, ears clamped tight to her head. With a sigh, she sat at Terry’s foot, staring up at her.

Softly, slowly at first, Amy began to talk. The deeper, guttural sounds of anger and sorrow soon traded places with higher keys until her notes sounded like a flute. Terry knew what this was about. She’d seen Amy like this before, well, not like this, actually. Amy always talked to Ella like that just before they’d dance.

Together they walked to the French doors and stared at the river. The hairs on Terry’s neck rose in unison with the hackles on the dog’s back.

Amy’s voice rose higher, and then, like the notes themselves, she abruptly broke off to resume the deep, throaty, other-worldly sounds she’d started with, filled with anger and fear.

“That’s it, we’re outta here!”

Terry hurried back to the table and retrieved the heavy plastic wrap that had covered the bread, cheese and fruit. She packed the food up like a sack and ran into the suite, emptied her purse of all but her cell and filled it with half a dozen bottles of water, and the lunch.

“Ames! Let’s go get Ella!”

Terry hurried down the dock, her heart thumping against her ribs. There was no reason to be so afraid and yet she was, deathly, horribly afraid. *Why?*

Nausea turned her stomach as acid filled her throat. Sweat poured down her face and soon her light cotton top was damp.

What the hell is going on?

Amy ran down the dock to the largest boat available and jumped into it without hesitation, causing a good bit of rocking. She woo-wooded at Terry, as if to urge her on and stared pointedly downstream, ears fluttering like hummingbirds.

Terry! Hurry, please hurry!

The plea hit her so hard she staggered.

“I’m coming, Sissy,” she said between panting breaths.
“We’re both coming. Hang in there.”

She jumped into the boat, unhooked the tie-ropes and started the engine. The boat responded to the throttle and moved out into the middle of the river at a good pace and realizing their speed was excessive, she throttled back, now moving at quarter speed. When they came to the first little stream, she turned left, but it didn’t take long to see this creek went nowhere.

Back on the river, they moved along, waiting for the next tributary on the left. They’d traveled to the end of five such fingers and made the turn for the sixth when the most incredible feeling came over Terry. She sat straight up, her chin raised, eyes wide.

“*Ella?*” she shrieked. “*Ella!*”

This was not a dream, not this time. Ella heard it, echoing through the caverns of her mind. Still half asleep, she flung her legs over the side of the bed. There it was again! Her name.

Terry!

Legs wobbly, she tottered to the front door and flung it open. The vision made her blink in joyous disbelief. There was Terry steering a boat and Amy sitting in the prow, watching. Without thinking, she screamed, “Amy!”

The dog leaped to her feet, rocking the boat and almost upsetting it. She spied Ella standing on the porch and leaped into the river. Strong powerful shoulders rose above the water as her legs moved like pistons, propelling her toward the porch.

There was a splashing sound under the house as the sleeping alligator awoke. It glided toward the creature who’d dared to disrupt its sleep.

Amy hit the porch step with a resounding bang and grunted. Long front legs scrambling, she stared in adoration at Ella, who grabbed her by the collar and jerked her onto the porch and into the house. Seconds later, the alligator attacked, huge snout spread wide.

The dog turned to challenge it with furious, staccato barks and snapping teeth, the sounds echoing over the surrounding water like cannon fire.

The alligator, remembering the recent barrage of cans, plastic bottles and other hurtful things, as well as the loud, screaming noises that accompanied the attack, moved back off the porch. It wasn't hungry, after all, and slithered back under the house to resume its nap.

Terry cut the motor and turned the boat toward the shack. "Is there somewhere I can tie up?"

Ella pointed at the little space on the side of the house. "Over there, to the side, there's a ring. It's the best place to get out, too. Watch out for Oscar. I think he might have a roommate."

Ella began to titter, her relief at seeing Terry so complete that for a moment she feared it was all a dream.

"Don't you even start, Sis. Let me get out of this boat first." Terry wound the rope into the ring, snugged it up to the dock and stepped out. She bent down to retrieve her purse and hurried down the porch and into her twin's arms.

Chapter Nineteen

Detective Perina paused as the waitress delivered their sandwiches and a fresh round of drinks.

“Like I said, her father died about ten twelve years ago and she inherited the plantation. Nothing’s changed there in a hundred years.”

Perina drained his glass and shrugged. Left eyebrow arched, he said, “Includin’ she’s a voodoo sorceress, just like her mama.”

“A *what?* What kind of bullshit is that?”

“It’s true, Jim. She’s a high practitioner now, whatever they call themselves, casts spells, makes up potions, all that stuff; juju dolls, gris-gris. Crazy shit. She grew up with it and it’s as real to her as Sunday Mass, maybe more.” Perina shrugged again and glanced from Jim to Lenny.

“I know y’all’re not used to this kinda talk, but religion plays a big part in the N’Orlins way of life, an with Louise havin’ kin in Jamaica an Haiti, well, it seemed bound to happen that she’d fall into the old ways, Catholic raised or not. Plus, her mama.... Anyways, as we grew older, we went different directions, married up, raised kids. We don’t socialize.

“My Nellie don’t like Louise one little bit, so there was that. Plus, our jobs are very time-consumin’. Still, Charles an me, we get together ever’ couple a weeks for lunch. ‘Bout a year or so ago, he mentioned he’s concerned a cousin of hers, Darius, was spendin’ a lotta time at the Retreat alone with Louise. She’s got a place off her suite that’s set up like a voodoo shrine, has a private entrance where folks come that don’t wanna see or be seen, y’know?”

Eyes narrowed to slits, Jim leaned forward. “I don’t want to be rude or anything, but what the hell does this have to do with my *wife* disappearing? Please get to the point! I’m about to lose it here and then I will have to strangle you.”

“Sorry, sorry. Okay, by the time I’m talkin’ about, Louise was a practicin’ *malfacteur*, a sorceress who does black

magics, casts evil spells, curses an such. Charles thought Louise was givin' him potions because every time he'd leave, Darius'd give her money. He'd personally seen it twice, and knew where his wife kept her private stash and the amount kept increasing."

Lenny frowned. "I thought they had such a good marriage. Why was he spying on her? Did he find anything special, anything that might explain where Ella is?"

"No! They do! They adore each other. It comes from the *secrets*, the unimportant little things that folks hide for who knows what reasons. Makes a person nosy! In what's otherwise a humdrum life, now somebody's got a secret. Charles may be a devout Catholic, an he is, but his curiosity leads him to searchin' for answers if for no other reason than just to know. As husband an wife, they trust each other totally, believe me, it's nothing like that. It's just him snoopin', an a good damn thing for y'all, too, I'm sayin'!

"When he got back from Baton Rouge, Louise was in a fit. She's scared to death that if something ... well, let's leave it that it won't be good for business. Bein' poor panics her more'n anythin' else. An', well, she's all babblin' at Charles, talking in that *patios* crap they do, an' goin' on about how this time Darius went too far, an what was she gonna do, the kids' future, just wild crazy talk. Scared him to death as y'all can imagine. At first he tried to comfort her, but it's his life goin' up in smoke, his kids future, too, an he's rightly upset."

"God Almighty, man, say something!"

Discomfort at revealing a confidence as well as a genuine concern for Jim's next move made the detective hesitate.

"Well, I figure the fellowship got kinda intense there. Guess he mighta took a hold a her, an next thing ya know, it all comes tumblin' out. How Darius was a loup ... a werewolf an how he'd spirited Ella away in the middle a the night, right outta the Retreat, an how a frickin' alligator ate Darius when he last come to visit Louise, and what the hell! Who's gonna believe this shit?"

"She doesn't know we saw it, too?"

“Nope, neither’ a them do, an I didn’ let on any diff’ rent. I gotta get ta the bottom of this right quick an friendship’s got no place in the middle.”

Lenny peered at the detective and spoke between clenched teeth. “So what did they tell you?”

Perina made eye contact with Lenny and then glanced at Jim. “Louise said that Darius had several shacks along the river and down them little tributaries and that she figured he took Ms. Sessions to one of them. She admitted to making potions for him to use to keep Ella sedated an quiet an she cast spells nightly to keep her lethargic.”

Jim’s voice sounded like gravel in a box. “I will kill her if something happens to my wife. Count on it.” Dark emerald eyes bore into Perina’s. “You better get me to Ella, and quick, or we’re ... I’m ... going to...” He started to choke, causing both Perina and Lenny to purse their lips and glance down. His agony was so profound it was impossible not to feel.

“We’ll find her. Just a matter of time.”

Jim and Lenny hustled down the police station steps and sprinted for the golf cart. They hopped in and headed back to the plantation and a long overdue conversation with Louise.

They found her in the kitchen, preparing lunch. One look at their faces made her blanch and she turned to her daughters, speaking in quick, clipped French.

“Gentlemen, let us talk in private.” Louise led the way to a small room off the back kitchen. Head bowed, she opened the door and gestured them inside.

“Where is my wife, Louise?” Voice a hiss, Jim leaned toward her, glaring and insistent.

“Monsieur, please. Truly, I do not know. Darius owns many properties, shacks really, that he used for a variety of ... things. I know she’s at one of them although I do not know which. I told Detective Perina everything and I assume he’s told you. There is nothing further to add.”

“Then perhaps it’s time I tell *you* something. I have plenty to add.” Jim loomed over Louise with menace, his physical aspect so threatening, Lenny moved closer, ready to intervene if needed. “You’re going to prison for kidnapping. I won’t rest until you’re tried and convicted, but that’s not all. I’ll ruin your family, permanently. That’s not an idle threat, believe me. You brought this on yourself through greed or whatever, but I promise, if Ella is hurt, I’ll use my assets, and they are considerable, to tear you to pieces. I won’t be satisfied with just seeing you in jail. I’ll destroy Charles, your children, everything you have. You’ve ruined my life and now I’m going to ruin yours. You’ll spend the rest of your days in prison and your family will be living under one of the levees, homeless. I’ll buy your stinking plantation and then I’ll burn this place to the ground and destroy everything in it. It will be as though you never were, never existed.” His voice was almost gentle now. “Do you believe me, Louise?”

She gazed at him for the first time, wide golden eyes half closed but glowing. “Oui, Monsieur. I believe you. I probably would do that same in your position, probably worse. Still, I have told you everything I know.” She looked past them and nodded, the faintest of smiles on her lips. “I’ve been waiting for you, mon ami.”

Vic Perina stepped into the room, expression somber. “Louise Barberi, you are under arrest for complicity in the kidnappin’ of Ella Sessions. Ya have the right to remain silent....” Chagrin clear on his face, he continued reading Louise her rights.

When he finished, she nodded and placed her hand on his arm. “Mon cher, I understand this is something you must do. Please grant me this last? May I go upstairs a moment? I need to speak with Charles. I’ll be right back.”

He agreed with great reluctance. “We’ll wait right here for ya. Please don’t tarry.”

Louise left the room, rushed up the back stairs and entered her suite. She started to lock the door, shrugged and hurried to her prayer room. One black candle flickered on the altar. She knelt before the little shrine, crossed herself and began praying to the Virgin for intercession. Finished, she rose to her feet, opened a small drawer and withdrew a handgun. She prayed again, this time in French, put the gun to her temple and fired.

“*Son of a bitch!*” Perina yelled as the sound of the gunshot ricocheted through the house, echoing in their ears.

Stunned, Jim and Lenny stared at each other a moment, then turned and followed the detective up the stairs. Solange and Francine stood in the corner, their arms around each other, crying.

“Well, shit,” Perina said, glancing at Jim and Lenny. “Looks like I’m gonna be tied up here for a while. Nothin’ for it.”

He glanced in pity at the weeping girls and drew a deep breath, dreading the hours that lay ahead. On top of everything else, he’d be the one to comfort Charles.

“Solange, honey, where’s yer daddy at?”

She flew into his arms, sobbing.

Lenny interrupted him before she could answer. “Detective, we’ve got some things to take care of. I’ve got my cell.” He turned toward the door, propelling Jim in front of him. “We’ll keep in touch.”

They made their way to the front of the house and the elevator. “Terry might still be asleep, but I need to check in. If she’s awake, she’s gonna be pissed off that we left her. I don’t want to do it twice.”

Jim got off at his floor. “No problem. I want to bring Amy and Tony along. Meet me back down here and we can get a boat and start our search.”

“Will do.”

Jim opened the door to his suite, half expecting to see Ella sitting on the sofa, or out on the veranda, reading. Of course, the room was empty, but his stomach did an anticipatory jig as he entered the bedroom.

Tony lay on his rug, ears up, tail rotating. He got to his feet, stretched and approached Jim for a pat.

“Hey, buddy. Where’s Amy?” Jim glanced around the room, amazed at her empty rug. “Did she take off on you again?”

Tony did the two-step in place, his front nails clicking on the tiles. He knew the name Amy as well as he knew his own. The beat increased.

Just then, Lenny burst into the room, face aghast. “Terry’s gone! Looks like she dumped everything in her purse onto the bed except her cell. I can’t find it anywhere, so I figure she has it. What the hell is going on? All the bottled waters are gone from the hospitality bucket and the platter on the table doesn’t have a scrap of food on it, she even took the garnish! Nothing left. Just a serrated knife. I figure she ordered lunch and took it with her.”

“And took it with her,” Jim repeated, musing under his breath. “Maybe she found a clue to where Ella is? Can’t imagine what, but still. What else? Did she leave a note?”

“Not that I could find, but she left under her own steam, I’m sure of it now. And if Amy’s with her, that’s good.” Panting slightly, Lenny tried to catch his breath. “Right?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure she’s not here, but let me call her anyway.” Jim pulled his keys from his pocket, placed a small cylindrical sphere to his lips and blew three short toots and one long.

Although virtually inaudible to the men, Tony just about turned inside out, so strong was his reaction. He barked several times, his ears fluttering like hummingbirds as he grinned at Jim.

When Amy did not respond, he gave Lenny a raised eyebrow and wiggled the whistle. “This is the new one that Rudy’s been raving about. Distinct to a trained dog for half a mile radius. No way in hell Amy’d go that far on her own. She’s

with Terry, I'm sure of it, and that's really good. When we get within range, she'll respond by barking, just like Tony did, and she'll protect Terry with her life."

Both men hurried across the veranda and down the outside steps. They looked away as they came abreast of the place where the alligator took Darius, hopped onto the dock and rushed to the end. They selected a large, eight-seater and climbed aboard. Tony sat in the bow, right in front of Jim while Lenny manned the wheel.

"Perina said to go left, downriver. There isn't much seclusion if you go to the right. Heads into town."

Lenny maneuvered the boat away from the dock and picked up speed as they entered the river current. "How many times will you need to blow that whistle?"

"Hard to say. For one thing, she'll hear it before we hear her bark, unless she's right on the water. Echo might help, but I'm not sure. This is a field test for this thing. Never used it before."

Jim gave several quick hand signals to Tony, raised the whistle to his lips and called Amy again.

Tony quivered, finally crouching down in the bow. When the sounds stopped, he rose up again, panting, bright dark eyes scanning the banks of the river. He waited, ears cocked. He knew what the whistle meant. Jim was calling Amy.

They came to the first tributary, which ended not far from the river. No shacks. They went on by and once again, Jim blew the whistle. Tony's tail rotated like a helicopter blade and his whole body quivered.

"What's wrong with Tony?"

"Poor guy. I told him to maintain silence, but the whistle excites him so much he's having a hard time."

They passed several small fingerlets, all too small to support the solitude and isolation required. Jim blew the whistle again.

Then they heard it, all three of them at once. It was faint but Tony had no doubt. He turned, placed his paw on Jim's knee and extended his claws, digging in like a cat.

"That smarts, dude," Jim said, removing the paw. "Throttle back, Lenny, that's Amy."

The boat reduced speed and Jim gave another toot, followed almost immediately by another bark, this one much closer. They came abreast of another tributary and Jim said, "Turn here, Lenny. I'm sure. Look at Tony, he hears her, too."

Chapter Twenty

Terry plopped the heavy purse on the table and grabbed Ella for another hug. They cried for a while, murmuring, and then Ella said with a croak, “Did you bring water? I’m so thirsty.”

“Yes, here.” She fished the bottles out of her purse, snapped the cap off one and handed it to her twin.

Ella drank with deliberate, languid sips, allowing the water to hit her stomach slowly. Last thing she needed to do was lose it. “My God, that’s good.”

“How long has it been since you last ate or drank?” Terry pulled the plastic wrapped food from her purse and placed it on the table. “How about some fruit and cheese? They just brought it up from the kitchen, so it’s fresh. Do you have a knife to slice the bread?”

She shook her head and continued to drink. Twelve ounces of clean, untainted water began to do its job. Ella cleared her throat with a croak and picked up a slice of watermelon.

“This place is like prehistoric, Sis. Oh, God, that’s so good.” Tears of gratitude for the simple pleasure of eating the fruit overcame her and she cried. Then she started to laugh.

“You won’t believe it. Wait until you see what passes for a kitchen. And the bathroom, dear God. Antique gross in a nasty way. I figure the water’s from the river, so I’ve never tried, but the faucet in the kitchen is positively disgusting.” She closed her eyes for a moment and grinned. “I bet I smell gamey. Can’t remember when I last showered.”

“It’s so good to see you, who cares how you smell. Although I have to admit, I miss your Parisian perfume.”

Ella just rolled her eyes at Terry and picked up another piece of fruit. “Oh, that watermelon.” She squinted with pleasure and laughed again. “Such a simple thing.”

Ella led the way to the small room, steady after an infusion of good water and fruit, and opened the only drawer. It

contained nothing but little packets of salt and pepper and paper napkins. “The electric went out the second night, and I just about lost my mind. I’d made a sandwich and a helping of salad and put the plate on the table when the lights went out. It was not even dusk yet, thank God, so I could find my way around, and thankfully there was a whole drawer full of candles, so at least I wasn’t all alone in the dark, but I’ve never been so scared, man.”

Her voice quivered and she moved into Terry’s arms again. Slowly they began to rock in a way they’d always known.

“You’re all right now, Ella. The guys will find us, I know it. Besides we have a boat, we have Amy, we have each other. We’re just fine. You’re just fine.”

“I am. I know it because you’re here. I ... it was just really awful being out here all alone in the dark, and without electric, everything in the fridge spoiled, not that there was much left.” Next, she threw open the cupboard and gestured at the large supply of cans.

“I figured I could drink the juice along with the fruits and veggies. Could last for weeks, really, only someone forgot the can opener! How the hell do you get in there without one? No ring-top, no knife, nothing to open it with. They ended up making great weapons. The alligator. She’s eaten at least two cans, maybe more. I’m starved. Finished my last slice of stale bread yesterday. Oh, and there’s something wrong with the water in the bottles I had. It’s drugged or something. Sorta like acid but not really. At least, from what I heard. Hallucinations and stuff, colors. Weird.”

“Please, honey, you’re babbling. Here, come back and sit down and eat. It’s enough for four, but don’t rush or you’ll just throw it back up.”

Terry pulled her cell from her pocket and flipped it open. No signal. She cursed, shaking her head. When had she last plugged it in? She threw it back in her purse in disgust and ripped off several hunks of crusty bread. She pushed the fruit and cheese toward Ella, who wasted neither time nor ceremony.

She ate at a steady pace, listening while Terry went on about their search, their suspicions of Louise and her statement that Ella'd left in the morning in the golf cart to go into town.

"I don't remember anything about that. Nothing." She paused to enjoy a chunk of pineapple, obviously thinking about what Terry said, and then continued piecing things together.

"Louise said I left in the morning, left in a golf cart? Without Amy? No note or anything to you guys? That's positively insane; it never happened." She shook her head vehemently. "I clearly remember the cruise – we had a lot of fun, and the supper Louise prepared for us was astonishing, out of this world. I swear I was asleep before I finished undressing. After that, I don't remember anything until I woke up here."

"You don't remember how you got here? Seriously, not even a little bit?"

"Nope, not even snatches. I was pretty well lit by the time dinner was over. I don't remember anything after falling into bed. Maybe even before. But I never left in the morning like she says. Never happened."

"We don't believe Louise for a moment. We think someone came in after we'd all gone to sleep and took you right out of bed. Personally, I think it's Darius; it has to be."

Ella's mouth made an O of disbelief.

"Really, think about it. I honestly doubt that Amy'd let me carry you out of your bed, at least not without making a hell of a racket. But she didn't make a sound and neither did Tony, come to think about it. Now that's odder than odd, you must admit. And Jim was right there next to you."

She watched as Ella continued to eat, nodding in approval. Some color had returned to her cheeks, and her eyes were focused and clear. It was a good sign and Terry forged ahead.

"That's not all. Darius came to the Retreat last night, not too long after sundown. Jim, Lenny and I sat on your back terrace, talking about you, what might ... well, and we heard this terrible screeching sound, growling, I mean, animal fighting sounds. It was terrible. Jim was scared to death for the dogs and

we all ran down the steps toward the noise. The guys got there a lot quicker than I did and there on the ground, well, er ... Amy and Tony had killed a wolf. At least, it was a wolf when the fight started.

“I arrived in time to see it turning into Darius, at least what was left of him. We snagged the dogs and hurried back to the suite, and right as we reached the top of the stairs, we heard another God-awful commotion coming from the same place, and, well, this is gross, but a huge alligator charged outa the bushes, grabbed up his body, swallowed him a couple of times and took him to the river.”

Ella's face turned a peculiar shade of green and they both were quiet a moment.

“A werewolf? Is that what you mean?” Ella paused before swallowing a bite huge raspberry. “You saw it?” She started to titter. “You finally got your monster!”

“Don't you dare! Don't even start with that. It sure looked like him and Lenny has photos of it changing on his cell. Amazing. And that alligator? Just picked him up and off he went. So frickin' gross.”

Both women were quiet, reflecting, perhaps.

“They're all over the place, y'know. Alligators. There's at least one living under the house. Always check the porch before you step outside.”

“*What?*” Black eyes as big as saucers, Terry stared at her. “You're kidding, right?”

“Nope. Not even a little bit. It's a big one. The mama. There's a juvenile, too, but he's shy, thank God. Only saw him twice.”

Sated, a considerably improved Ella leaned toward Terry. “So how'd you find me?”

“I was sleeping and I heard you calling me in a dream. I could hear water lapping and then, well, Amy. She just stared out the door at the river and we kinda did a mind thingy, I guess. Don't know what....”

As though on cue, Amy leaped to her feet and began to bark in sharp, strident tones. Motionless, she sat, ears perked

high, her head tilting one way then the other. She waited for another moment, and then resumed her position, muzzle on Ella's foot. No sooner had she settled when she jumped up again, bumping Ella's leg.

"What the hell? Amy, quiet!" Ella glared at the dog and then at Terry. "God, my nerves are shot. Come here, baby girl, and lie down. I'm sorry I hollered at you."

Amy stopped barking but she stared at the door with undeniable intensity.

Ella got to her feet, approached the door and giving the order to sit, she opened it and glanced around the porch. All clear.

"Amy, it's all right, girl. We'll figure something out, but right now you have to be quiet. Mommy doesn't feel too good and there's nowhere to potty."

Amy stepped out onto the porch, eyes focused on the turn in the river. She barked once more, unable to resist.

Probably due to a sugar overload from the sudden ingestion of fruit and cheese, Ella felt lightheaded and leaned against the doorframe for support, eyes closed.

Amy stood at her knee, pressing lightly. Ears still cocked, she watched and waited. Another sharp bark escaped her lips before she regained control. Like Tony, she recognized the whistle and wriggled with delight. It was okay now. Jim was coming.

A boat trolled up the river, its course carrying it near the shack.

Amy waited next to Ella, expectant, but got the shock of her life. She heard it before she saw it, that dragging, scuttling sound and when it lurched around the corner of the shack and charged down the porch. Amy shoved hard against Ella's stomach, upsetting her balance and causing her to fall backward into the shack.

For the third time in as many hours, the alligator awoke, and this time it was pissed. The earlier uproar had already interrupted its sleep and it swam from under the house, looking for trouble. It slithered up the little ramp past the moored boat, clearly picking up vibrations on the other end of the porch. It crept to the corner of the house, paused and rose tall on its thick stumpy legs. In a blink, it whipped around the corner of the shack and rushed Ella and Amy. As it opened its snout, the woman disappeared from view.

It gave a vicious sideways swipe and connected, sending Amy headlong into the river. It followed close behind, perhaps feeling a twinge of hunger.

With a hoarse shout, Jim yelled, "Oh, my God, Lenny! Did ya see that? Son of a bitch. That was Amy. That frickin' alligator just threw her in the river!"

Tony saw and didn't need to wait for a referendum. He hurled himself into the water and landed on the alligator's back, his thick hard nails digging in and scratching its leathery hide as he bit and tore at the alligator's head. The creature dove and Tony slid into the water.

Aware of the secondary attack and the arrival of reinforcements, the alligator let Amy go and whirled for Tony. The agile dog dodged to one side and dove out of sight.

Ella and Terry stood on the porch, shrieking at the dogs, at the men, and hurling a barrage of cans at the alligator. Amy swam to the steps, and dragged herself onto the porch, panting, a large bloody gash in her side. She placed her body between the girls and the river, and turning, snarled and snapped at the alligator, hideous sounds coming from deep in her throat.

Tony came up for air right then and so did the alligator. By this time, they were so close to the shack, the girls made contact several times, bombarding the angry reptile with cans and bottles and screaming at it.

The alligator charged the porch, jaws wide. Without hesitation, Amy jumped on it, quickly disappearing under water.

Lenny rose from the wheel and shouted at the girls to get inside the shack. He pulled his gun from his waistband, took deadly aim and squeezed off two shots. Both bullets connected, entering the alligator's head. The third entered its belly as it began to do a death roll, Tony still held in its jaws. With a roar, it let the dog go and leaped out of the water, Amy clamped to the base of his tail.

Another series of shots rang out and the alligator was still.

Two sleek black heads popped to the surface. Tony and Amy climbed onto the steps of the porch and collapsed at their feet.

Moments later, a police launch whipped around the curve, blue and red lights flashing. It made an abrupt turn, causing waves of water to sweep over the porch and into the shack.

A man with a megaphone said, "Cease fire, cut your engine and identify yourselves."

"We're Lenny Browning and Jim Sessions. Is Detective Perina with you?"

"No, but he sent us. What 'n the hell're y'all shootin' at? Sounds like Yankee hostilities has resumed."

"Just killed an alligator. It attacked my dogs." Jim nodded at the door of the shack where Terry and Ella bent over the dogs, checking their wounds.

"We're going to tie up at the shack, get our wives and then we're going to need a vet. Can you help with that?"

"Yes, sir. Y'all can go in this boat. I'll have my men bring in those two."

Tony raised his head and whined as Jim stooped over him. "What a good boy, so brave."

Jim glanced at Terry, who pressed a towel over Tony's stomach, a question in his eye. Lips tight, she raised the towel

and showed him the wound, pressing again to staunch the blood. She bowed her head as her tears flowed.

Ella and Jim embraced in silence. Later they'd talk, but right now, they had to get to a vet as fast as possible. Jim bent over, slid his arms under Tony's hip and shoulder and picked him up with a grunt. Terry kept contact with the wound and the three of them boarded the police launch. Ella and Lenny followed, with Amy close behind.

As the launch pulled away from the shack, the officer motioned to Jim. "I called ahead an' we're takin' y'all to the police vet. Won't be more'n five minutes an' they're waitin' on ya."

Jim could only nod, so overcome with fear and remorse he couldn't speak.

Chapter Twenty-One

In deep distress, Amy leaned heavily against Ella's leg, unable to lie down, although twice she tried. Each time she did, she'd cough and a great bubble of blood would erupt, frothing her lips pink and her eyes would close. Amy was in dire straits.

The police launch glided into a dedicated slot in the dock in front of a low gray building. Several people gathered at the edge, stretchers waiting and ready for the stricken dogs. Two men stepped into the launch, took one look at Amy, scooped her up and laid her on the stretcher.

"This one's in shock. Get her to Ops 2 and prep."

The head surgeon nodded and moved to Tony's side, took one look at his stomach and blanched. "Ah, son of a bitch, oh man. Ops 3, STAT!"

Ella started to cry again as she watched the men settle Amy on the stretcher. Isolation, drugged water, fear, hunger, periodic alligator attacks and weird dreams paled in comparison to this horror.

This cannot be happening! Not my Amy! Her best friend, her protector, her hero. If Amy died....

The dog groaned once and lay still.

Ella sat in her office and finished counting the night deposit, adding to the piles, cash here, checks and credit card receipts there, neat little stacks that grew, ready to go into the bank deposit bag. Task done, now came the fun. Deposit later, first we dance!

Amy stood next to Ella's knee, doing the two-step in anticipation. She knew what came next because it happened every morning and it never varied. She tilted her head and barked in excitement, an impossibly high note for such a big dog.

So high this time, even she seemed embarrassed, and chased her stuffed toy for a moment, but only for a moment.

She threw it in the air, whirled in place, caught it and then dashed into the lounge, skidding to a stop at the brand new, state of the art jukebox. It had all the best tunes, all Amy's favorites and she glanced at Ella with a grin.

"So, how do we feel this morning, Ames? Hollywood Nights? No? Ohh, how about Stairway? Ya wanna wind on down the road – to be a rock and not to roll?" Ella laughed and hit a button. "Na, I know what you want."

As the high organ notes came pouring out of the speakers, Amy howled in ecstasy and began to twirl in place, waiting for Ella to join her in the Walk of Life.

Ella sang at the top of her lungs while following a rather vigorous arobic dance routine.

Here comes Johnny singing oldies, goldies BeBopaLula, baby, what I say.

Amy rose on her hind legs, dancing in place, dolly clenched in her teeth, paws raised to her muzzle. Periodically, she'd touch Ella's side, twirl, and go down on all fours for a race around the room before she came back to dance again. It was her favorite form of exercise and she'd do it for hours.

Ella came back with a moan, put her arms around Jim's neck and dissolved in tears. Sobs came from so deep they didn't sound human and then merged with keening cries like a mother who's lost her baby.

"I can't stand it! I wish I'd died in that stinkin' cabin. Oh, Jim, I can't. I just can't lose Amy."

He held her close as tears coursed down his cheeks, causing him to hide his face in her hair. If she saw him cry, that would be the end of it, because it looked like they were going to lose Tony, too.

Vic Perina sat behind his desk, Charles in the chair opposite him.

Charles wiped his eyes, shaking his head in disbelief. “I still can’t believe it. Why would she do that? And in front of the girls? They’ll never forget.... How could that be her last move, her legacy for them?”

“She was in a lotta trouble, Charles. She was guilty of aidin’ an’ abettin’ a kidnappin’ an’ withholdin’ information about the commission of a felony. Shit, man, we’re talkin’ Federal crimes, prison time an’ lots of it, an’ she confessed it all to me, but there was so much more. I think she hoped if she killed herself then Jim would not pursue action against y’all, but she was wrong about that. I’m sure of it. That guy’s so fired up, there’ll be no stoppin’ him if somethin’ happens to his wife. D’ya have any idea where that damned Darius mighta’ taken her? Shit man, if we don’t find her....”

The phone on his desk rang and he hesitated, debating before answering it. “Perina here, what?”

He lurched up out of his chair and stared at Charles, a smile of relief on his lips.

“She’s all right? Released her after examination? Hot damn! Yes, that great news. What...? Ah, yes, well, that’s too bad. Still, it’s good news about Ms. Sessions, really excellent.” He nodded several times, listened a bit and hung up.

“They found her. Just like we suspected, he had her holed up in a shack down one of them fingerlets off the river. Dogs actually found her, but they got hit by a ‘gator. They got tore up pretty bad from what I hear. They’re in surgery, but I’ve yet ta meet a dog that ... well, never mind. I hope they’re okay.”

Charles rose with Perina, his face gray with sorrow and fatigue. “If you need me, Vic, you know where to find me. Now I have to go home and see about burying my poor wife and finding words to console our children.”

Vic watched his lifelong friend leave the room, tears seeping from his eyes, a handkerchief covering his trembling mouth. It seemed like Charles had aged a decade right in front of

him, and every line and sorrow of the last week etched forever in his face.

Epilogue

Vic Perina sat on the patio off his dining room and stared at the full moon and the twinkling stars overhead. Tonight he dined alone. His wife, Nellie, was away on a family emergency in Baton Rouge, and death, even that of an old and frail uncle, must be respected. He'd be batching it for the next four days at least, maybe longer.

He raised the bottle of beer to his lips and drank deeply. He heard the steak sizzling on the grill and checked his watch. Not long now.

All the condiments he favored sat on the table along with utensils, a little salad and a thick piece of buttered wholegrain bread Nellie'd baked for him. His customary bucket of ice-covered beers sat conveniently to his right.

What a damned day. Not only did they recover Ella Sessions, it looked like both dogs would survive their incredible ordeal. He still couldn't believe it, and remembering his visit to the vet, closed his eyes, lips pursed in sorrow for their valiant and heroic efforts that would be visible on their bodies for the rest of their lives.

Amy bore long jagged teeth marks on her ribs, but the gator hadn't broken bones. She was sore and in a lot of pain, but expected to make a complete recovery. The other dog wasn't doing as well, but the vet had upgraded him from critical to guarded. His age didn't work in his favor, but his fantastic physical condition compensated enough that by evening, after several hours of recovery from surgery, Tony awoke. Upon seeing Jim and Ella, he sighed and went back to sleep, content.

The good news just kept pouring in. During their cursory investigation of the shack, his men found a den under the house with no less than three decomposed bodies. Whether the alligator had killed and stored or whether it'd been fed was yet to be determined, but Vic bet this was all Darius' doing.

He'd bet his pension that when the DNA reports came back on the bodies, they'd match up with three of the missing girls he had open cases on. He planned to have all the vacant shacks along the river checked to make sure other bodies hadn't been similarly stashed.

Vic couldn't wait another minute, and salivating, plucked his filet off the grill and closed the lid. The first bite melted in his mouth and he smiled. A liberal addition of salt and he was ready to go, chuckling at the imagined look and comments Nellie would make if she could see him pouring salt on red meat. Ah, it was a treat for him and besides, he was sick of fish and chicken.

About half way through the wondrously solitary meal, he heard the lonely howl of an alpha wolf, full, guttural and deeply masculine.

He supposed it was Darius, became certain a moment later when a decidedly feminine voice returned the call, lilting and melodious, coming from somewhere just to the north.

How very strange.

Here we live in an area without indigenous wolves for well over two hundred years. Suddenly, Darius and Louise die and now we have two. How very interesting.

Hello, cousins.

Vic chuckled, sliced another piece off the last of his steak, popped it in his mouth and leaned back, chewing. He raised his eyebrows at nothing and listened.

Undoubtedly, they were together and he wondered how long she'd been a werewolf and whether Charles knew.

Their music, eerie and silvery, flute-like, continued to fill the dark night. Wavering, lilting, getting closer.

He grinned wide, eyes half-closed, vindicated. Dogs and gators be damned. Everyone knew the only way to kill a werewolf was with a silver bullet.

Vic cracked another beer, took several long swallows and shifted in his chair, watching the waning moon as it scudded across the sky, dodging in and out of the clouds.

He knew this wasn't over, not by a long shot, but at least they'd found Ms. Sessions unharmed, and the dogs would be fine with time. They'd all be leaving the plantation first thing in the morning to catch a flight back to Los Angeles early that afternoon.

Once they were out of his hair, he could concentrate on his next plan. Having an ex-homicide cop and that loose cannon of a husband rampaging all over the place didn't help matters any, especially with Jim threatening Louise with total destruction if Ella didn't come home.

He figured that's what pushed Louise over the edge. She'd probably be alive today if Jim hadn't scared her so bad. Still, in the end, knowing her as he did, he figured she would have done it anyway.

She had a lotta prison time ahead of her, and the shame, the notoriety would ruin business and her family would be disgraced. If she'd lived through it, she'd be an old woman when she got parole.

A suicide, on the other hand, could be handled, manipulated, made into some great secret tragedy, spoken of in whispers and allusion that would only add to the mystique surrounding Retreat.

Once they left, he planned to spend a good bit of time at the plantation, give Charles some support and find out what he knew.

He had several murders to solve and it looked to him like what started out as a solitary loup garou had expanded into a wolf pair. No doubt Darius would want to enlarge his pack and ensure his destiny.

Vic sighed, finished his beer and stretched. He looked across his back yard at nothing in particular, full, sleepy and ready for bed. As he turned, out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed something move in the dense foliage that separated his property from the river.

He blinked hard and looked again. A pair of large golden eyes fixed on his, the stare hard and unwavering. A short moment later, a second pair of identical eyes studied his in recognition. They almost seemed to smile.

Slowly, softly she began to sing a dirge in that wavering peculiarly wolfen sound. She glared at him and lifted her lips to show long, sharp fangs. Her menace was so tangible and profound, Vic took an involuntary move backward.

Darius joined her in song, mesmerizing the man and causing him to forget the first caution he'd shared with young Frank Harris regarding werewolves.

Them dudes is fast, an strong! I'm sayin' and they can get ya in a blink.

And then, suddenly, they were there, upon him, ravening, feeding, but not unto death, no. Darius had plans and so did Louise.

Two pairs of large gold eyes stared at Vic. Then they howled.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed *Something Wicked*, the most recent of the *Sessions & Browning* series. If you haven't already done so, perhaps you'd enjoy reading the books in order, starting with *Secret Lives*.

SECRET LIVES

A wave of fear swept over Jim, settling in his stomach. This was going to end up being a bad night. Was Bob in the car too? If he was, why? There was no way in hell he would miss his big day in court tomorrow. Surely they were not planning to drive back home tonight. Then it hit him with a jolt. He jumped away from the car, both hands clenched in fear.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," he said, jerking the nozzle from the gas tank. "Oh God, please let me be wrong. Son of a frickin' bitch." He slammed it in place, jumped into the car and sped back to the road. She wasn't talking because she couldn't.

The windshield wipers struggled to keep his vision clear as he roared up the hill. Reaching into the console, he retrieved his handgun and slid it into his jacket pocket.

If he had not been alert, he probably would have missed it altogether in the thick falling snow. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the distinctive red sports car flying down the hill in the opposite direction. It was past him before the knowledge clicked. Bob's Jag. It had to be.

"Dear God. Please don't let me be too late."

He reduced his speed to a crawl, unable to see more than a few feet in front of him. Inching up the hill, he pounded the steering wheel in impotent fury as gusts of wind buffeted the Suburban. He actually passed the Escalade before he saw it. He pulled over to the side of the road and backed to within inches of Terry's front bumper.

Jim turned the ignition off, grabbed his heavy parka from the back seat, and shrugged into it. He glanced down at the

tracking device in his hand before slipping it into his pocket. She was nearby, that was for sure.

As Jim got out of the Suburban the wind hit him, almost jerking the door from his grasp. He grabbed it with both hands and slammed it as swirls of snow masked his view. He hurried to the dark car, gun drawn as he peered through the opaque passenger window.

The door was unlocked and the dome light came on, showing him the empty interior. The keys hung in the ignition and a purse sat on the floor, tucked under the lip of the front seat. Jim put his gun back in his pocket, retrieved the tracking device, and closed the door.

“Terry,” he yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth. He looked down at the ground, squinting. With no footprints visible on this side of the car he ran to the driver’s side and noticed slight indentations in the snow leading to the rear. Jim followed them to the edge of the hill. He scanned the forest and screamed her name again. The wind whipped the words from his mouth.

He reached the brink of the hill, unable to see any distance in front of him in the driving snow. The steady increase in the beat of the receiver told him he was on the right track. His feet slid out from under him a couple of times, and once he went down on his knees.

When he reached the bottom of the hill, Jim glanced at the device; judging by the pulse, she was very close. He slipped it back into his pocket and cast frantic looks from side to side, unable to see through the heavily falling snow. He fell to the ground in a panic and started digging in the drifts, jamming numb hands into the accumulated undergrowth.

“She’s only been out here for a couple of minutes, for God’s sake, she can’t be buried too deep. Terry!”

He almost shrieked when he found her body and pulled her to him, horrified. She was soaking wet, wearing only a light sweater and thin wool slacks. He tapped her cheek as he searched her body for signs of violence. No blood past the scrapes and cuts she probably got rolling down the hill ... no

broken bones that he could see. She was out cold, inert. Had Bob dragged her or was she unconscious from the fall? It didn't matter at this point.

Jim looked up the hill, drew a deep breath, and then looked back down at Terry. She had to wake up. Strong as he was, he was not sure he could carry her up the steep, snowy hill. He called her name as he shook her. He whipped off his heavy parka and stuffed her in it, zipping the hood over her head.

"Terry, wake up. We're going to freeze to death if we don't get out of the snow. Terry!"

She moaned and opened her eyes. "Jim?"

"Yes, Terry. Try to stand, honey, it's okay. Just lean on ...Terry?"

He lifted the unconscious woman in his arms, amazed at how light she was. Maybe he could do it. He wrapped his right arm under her armpits, set her on her feet and pressed her back tight to his stomach. In this position, he could push her in front of him with his thighs as he climbed.

She was limp in his arm, lurching in front of him like a stuffed dummy, taking one agonizing step after another. The movements caused her blood to pump, increasing her heart rate, and she moaned several times.

Twice they fell, but the stands of small trees actually helped, giving Jim handholds and things to seize onto. They were less than half way up the hill and he was breathing hard, a painful stitch like fire pierced his side. He leaned against a tree, trying to catch his breath, Terry propped in front of him like a rag doll. Her head lolled from side to side as she began to regain consciousness.

"Jim?" Her voice was woozy and out of focus.

"You're going to be fine, Terry. Try to help me, okay? Here we go."

It felt like forever before they reached the road. Jim's heart pounded from fear and exertion as he leaned her up against the side of the Escalade. His breath came in quick hard gasps as he tried to slow his painful heartbeat. His chest was on fire and the stitch in his side felt like a burning stake. He could barely

feel his soaked, steaming clothes, marveling in some obscure part of his mind how amazing it felt to freeze and perspire at the same time.

LETHAL INTENT

Twenty minutes passed before an exasperated Devon finally opened the door. “I’m sure you don’t realize it, but there are five exterior doors on this side of the building alone, and the harbor lights are all over the place.”

“Sorry about that. I’ve never been here before.”

Devon waved a hand. “Excuse me, Jim. I don’t mean to be rude. This is the wildest night of my life and I’m a bit on edge. Equally worrisome is my mother. This is not how she usually spends her evenings; it’s a wonder she hasn’t keeled over from fear. Positively harrowing.” He ran a hand through his hair, lips pursed.

“And what could Joe possibly have on his computer worth dying for ... several people dying for? I knew the man well and he did not indulge in anything illegal, trust me. He didn’t even speculate. His honor, his code of fair play, his behavior; nothing warrants this. And by the way, earlier you asked me if they’d mentioned Delia. Are they all together on this thing? Did Delia kill Joe?”

They entered the elevator and Devon punched the button for the eighth floor.

“We’ve only had the chance to read one file, but it looks like it. Joe uncovered her connection with the art thieves, did some research on what pieces she stocked your galleries with and uncovered several big problems. When Lenny finishes the case he’s doing now, from tomorrow on we’ll be free to concentrate on Joe’s murder. By the way, how’s your mother doing?”

“It hasn’t hit her yet, but when it does, she’ll need me. That’s why all this aimless wandering up and down the corridors trying to find you made me grumpy.” He looked down at the

lacerations on his swollen hands and shook his head wide-eyed. “Plus, I’m in pain; they’re killing me. It’s a first.”

“Imagine what his face looks like.” Jim glanced at Devon, amused.

Devon straightened his shoulders and nodded. “I acquitted myself quite well for my first fight.” He looked at his bruised knuckles, then at Jim and nodded again. “Really.”

“I can believe that.”

“Well. I’ll get even better.”

“I have no doubt.”

The elevator opened with a swish. They stepped out, turned left and stopped midway down the hall. Devon slid the card in the slot, removed it and opened the door.

Jim studied the entry as they walked into a small foyer. The hall to the left presumably led to the bedrooms. A desk with a green accountant’s lamp and a computer hookup shared space with a phone.

Across the room, Joan sat on the sofa and stared out the huge window at the stars, a glass of wine in her hand. She turned toward them, smiled and waved in welcome. Her voice, slightly slurred, matched her facial expression.

“It was terribly rude of me, I know, and I apologize, but I’ve made great inroads in the bottle of merlot. So much so, I called down to room service to get another, as well as a substantial number of hors d’oeuvres. I haven’t had a thing to eat all day but lobster. I’m starved.” She patted the sofa next to her. “Please, join me.”

Devon sat beside her, staring earnestly at his mother’s wine glass. “Perhaps you might want to wait for the food to arrive.”

She leaned into him and grinned, eyebrows raised in a coquettish glance. “You’re not the boss a me.”

“But really, Mother, don’t you think you’d better wait?”

“Wait for what? Tonight I was kidnapped in a foreign country, shanghaiied to some ... I don’t even know how to describe that building they kept me in, and threatened to within an inch of my life. As if that’s not enough stress, I have to watch

you beat the tar out of some guy with a gun, yet, and you think I should wait before I finish my wine? What for, the end of the world? A tsunami? You know an earthquake is coming?"

She gazed at him, lips quirked in a smile. "I'm a big girl now, Dev. I don't need you to monitor what I drink and besides, it's been a rough night."

Joan grinned at Jim then, turning her attention on Tony. "What a magnificent creature. I've always loved the Doberman, best watchdog out there, I think. I had one as a child. What's his name again?"

"This is Tony," Jim said with a chuckle.

"So, Tony, you're quite a hero dog, aren't you?"

Tony cocked his head this way and that, listening to her. His expression showed the interaction as his ears raised and lowered in rapid succession. Round amber eyes gazed at her.

"He's not supposed to pay any attention to you. At least that's how he was trained. After living with Ella and Amy for a year, he's lost a bit of his touch."

Joan gave a snicker. Heavy-lidded dark eyes sought Jim's. "Off his touch? Lost ... he took care of business tonight." She turned her eyes to the dog and extended a hand. "Hi, Tony. You're my hero."

The stumpy tail wagged as the dog shared his attention between Jim and Joan. He whined under his breath and wagged harder.

Jim shook his head. "Spoiled as rotten as Amy, aren't you? Okay, go say hello. Be nice."

As Tony approached, Devon rose putting his body between Tony and Joan. "No, Mother, he bites. I really don't...."

"Hush, Devon, you're my hero, too."

Tony sat by her side, eyes half closed, basking in the gentle touches, the scratching under his collar. His tail wagged his hips as he grinned, every tooth in his head showing in a delighted doggie smile.

There came a knock on the door, followed by a muffled cry of "Room Service."

Jim rose, snapped his fingers at Tony and whispered, “I don’t want anyone knowing we’re here.” He and Tony walked quickly to the hall and hid in the dark.

FIRESTORM

The girls watched the antics of the bears as they dove into the icy pool for their live dinners, coming up with a wiggling fish in their powerful jaws. They meandered down the walkway and headed to the restaurant, deep in thought.

Molly glanced at Beth and shook her head. “What did you make of Sam?”

“Sweet, fun to talk to and he’s even hotter close up.” She grinned at Molly and shrugged. “Great bod and just right with the muscles. I hate that bulked up look, y’know?” She puffed up her cheeks, rocked back and forth and made sounds like a mad monkey. “But him? I like his looks, muchly. Plus, he’d just shaved. Man, I hate that prickly look. What makes guys think girls like that?”

Molly nodded, continuing to scan the crowd. “Beats me; some stupid actor started it, I guess. Actually, the grunge look really turns me off. Can you imagine the breakouts you’d get after kissing someone like that? Eeuw, not my bag, but you know what? He’s a lot older than we first thought. I bet he’s at least twenty-five.”

“Give me a break. Nah, I bet he’s only, like, eighteen. He’s just starting college, so how old is that...eighteen? Isn’t that right?”

“You can start college at any age, and I’d guess at least twenty ... he just looked older, he seemed older. Well, when you consider we’re only fifteen, twenty is older. I can’t imagine what he sees in us.”

They walked along in silence. Finally Molly said, “The more I think about it, the more I mean it ... I don’t like him. There was just something off.”

“Why are you obsessing about this?” Beth said. “He seemed very nice and friendly. Besides, who cares; it doesn’t really matter. We’ll probably never see him again.”

Molly chuckled. “I wouldn’t bet on that. He really liked you.”

“Give me a break. You know that’s just silly.”

They approached the host station at the restaurant and Molly gave her name for the reservation.

“Please follow me.” He led them to a large corner table in the back of the room. Beth chose the chair next to the high bank of windows, Molly at her right. The host placed five menus on the table and left.

“Can I ask you a question?” Beth glanced at her friend, eyebrows up, her face wearing a puzzled expression. “Why don’t you like Sam? You’re usually a really good judge of character, so it’s making me wonder. Is it anything in particular or just one of your famous feelings?”

Molly grimaced and leaned back in her chair. “Well, famous feelings, I guess. I don’t know the first thing about him, but neither do you. He gives me the creeps, like he’s playing with us or something. And yes, it’s kinda like that, sort of a premonition. But mine often turn out right, huh? How about that Maggie? I told you she was a witch from the get-go.” She took a long sip of water, shrugged at her best friend and continued.

“Sam is, I don’t know, it feels like he’s lying about something and I still think he’s way too old to be interested in us, don’t you?”

Beth exaggerated her yawn. “I’m not even sure he is interested. What makes you think that, anyway? He was just making conversation. Once you told him we had to meet your family for lunch it seemed to me like he lost interest. You’re making too big a deal out of a whole lot of nothin’, Mol. I just figured he was new to the area, maybe wanting to make some friends. You know how that is. I didn’t think he was pushy or anything did you? He just seemed friendly to me.”

“Well, for one thing, even if he did think we looked his age, once he found out the truth, you’d think he’d bail. We’re, like, jail bait, y’know? Kids!”

“If you think about it, Molly, that’s just about what he did do. Once we refused to have lunch with him, it didn’t take long for him to split.”

“That’s true, I guess,” she said, nodding but not convinced. “And isn’t it strange he wanted to eat with you so bad he invited us both on his treat? Like, that’s a ton of money to spend on strangers he’d never see again, and so odd to include me....” Her voice crackled and she waved her hand at the waiter. “Can you bring us some lemonade?”

She took a long sip of the frosty drink, shaking her head. “Man, I was so thirsty, I couldn’t say another word.” She cleared her throat and grinned at the icy pitcher. “That’s great. Anyway, I suppose he might have just bumped into us at the polar bear exhibit, but we first noticed him when we got our waffle, remember, early this morning? The next time we saw him was at the climbing wall, and like you said, maybe it’s a coincidence, but Beth, maybe he followed us, picked us out of the crowd. Maybe? And if so, why?”

“Oh, Molly. You make it sound all creepy and stuff. Where’s that coming from? He’s new in town and only wanted to make friends, even just for the day.”

“But that’s the thing, part of what I’m saying. We’re not friend material for a guy that age ... he’d consider us kids. You know that as well as I do. I mean we’re only three years older than Danny and I can’t imagine willingly spending a second with a kid his age, especially not like that. Y’know what I mean? Why’s he wasting time with us when all these college girls are here and available? He’s a good lookin’ dude and obviously has money, so why bother with two kids? I wonder what Dad will say?”

Beth’s eyes flew open. “Oh, my God, you’ve gotta be kidding, right? Don’t you dare ... God, don’t tell him, Molly. If you tell him, we’re gonna have serious issues for the whole summer. For one thing, we’ll have to stay with them for the rest

of the day ... them and Danny the Pre-teen Pervert. Don't spoil ... speak of the devil, there's the little brat now."

Danny started shouting at them halfway across the dining room. Beth turned and stared pointedly out the window, refusing to even look at him.

"I got to ride the roller coaster twice. Man that ride is such a charge." He made exaggerated motions with his hands as he collapsed into the chair next to Beth. The table rocked lightly as he continued. "I went down all the hills with my hands up. It was cool. So fun. Did you do that ride yet?"

Beth ignored him and continued to stare out the window at the throngs of people walking around the park and wished she were anywhere else but at a table in a packed restaurant listening to Danny rant. He'd actually touched her arm once in his excitement and her expression as she turned toward him grew deadly. Ice-blue eyes stared at his fingers, willing them to rot off. Slowly she brought her gaze to his. "Don't you ever touch me again."

Beth closed her eyes and turned back toward the window. She blinked in startled surprise when she realized Sam had caught her eye. He waved to her, smiling. Beth blinked again to rid him from sight, but there he stood, continuing to smile, index finger beckoning.

The waitress arrived to take their orders. Molly asked for the fried chicken basket and then it was Beth's turn.

"I'll have the hamburger platter, please." Beth handed the menu off and glanced back out the window. Sam had moved closer to the building and now stood no more than ten feet away, still summoning her.

She frowned slightly then rose from her chair and picked up her purse. "I have to go to the ladies. I'll be back in a minute."

"You want company?" Molly asked, beginning to get out of her chair.

"Nah, stay here and visit with your folks. I'll be right back."

COLD FUSION

The Russian kidnapers held a quick confab and sharp angry words passed between them. The tallest seemed to be in charge, and he turned to Arnie. Wintry green eyes stared, unblinking, attempting to intimidate. Arnie matched the stare with one of his own.

“Dr. Baker, I ask you, please. Don’t be so provocative. You know we mean nothing personally. Our government is determined that yours will not reach a goal which will once again diminish our position in the world. You must understand we cannot allow that to happen. It is our earnest hope that you will cooperate with us and turn over the formula to my country. We don’t need it for ourselves, considering the oil we’ve just tapped into, but we won’t let your country return Russia to a second place position. You cannot be allowed to stand in our way as we secure control over Europe.”

He approached Arnie, bright eyes wide, almost insolent. Like a cat watching a bird, he gazed at his prisoner. “We have accurately portrayed our position, now you must evaluate your own. You will either give us the formula ... we will give you two weeks to finish, or we will be forced to kill you and your wife. I hope you understand the seriousness of your situation.”

Arnie matched the stare. “I understand your position completely. There’s never been a doubt in my mind.” He glanced at the men who were so convinced they had the upper hand and grinned. “Okay, let me see if I have this right, gentlemen. You say you’ll set us free as long as I deliver the completed formula within the two-week time frame, right? You know that is impossible just as I know you will never release me and my wife. I can’t conceive of how you would expect me to believe that? Under what guise could you imagine that someone as smart I am would buy such a pile of shit?”

Arnie shrugged and grinned wider. “What you’re saying is that you are going to kill me and my wife in two weeks because you also know I can’t complete the formula in that

amount of time. Why not just tell the truth, lay it out on the table? And why wait? We all know the result will be the same. I can't do what you want." He grinned again, showing small white teeth.

They waited for him to say more and when he did not, the green-eyed man known as Reike beckoned with a toss of his head. "Please follow me, Doctor."

He led the way down a flight of stairs that opened to a large, nicely furnished family room with fireplace. In the far corner, under a window covered with thick wrought iron bars was a workstation complete with his personal laptop, printer and a stack of CDs and files. Arnie's eyes widened in recognition but he didn't remark on that oddity. He already knew the answer.

"Where's my wife?" Arnie glanced at the closed door on the other side of the room and cocked his head at his captor.

Reike nodded. "She's in there." The man hesitated and shrugged. "There is no way out of here, so don't waste your efforts in trying to escape. The bars are set into the windowsill with cement. There is a small kitchen around that corner and the refrigerator is stocked with sandwiches and sodas. Coffee is in the cupboard as well. Use your time in an efficient manner, Doctor. The clock just began."

Reike turned and walked back up the steps as Arnie charged into the bedroom to find Candace. She leaped from the bed, a wide smile on her battered lips as he approached.

"Are you okay, honey?" He engulfed her, shaking, tears squirting from his eyes.

"I'm much better now." She cried into his shoulder as he held her close. "How's Sara? Is she okay? They'll go after her next."

"She's fine, honey. Let me look at you." He smoothed her hair away from her face, covering it with gentle kisses. He glanced at her black eye and cut lips and cheekbone. "Those dirty bastards hit you? Did they do anything else...?"

She grinned, plucky as always and pursed her puffy lips. "You should see the other guy. He grabbed me real rough, y'know, and I gave him an elbow in the side, so he slapped me in

the face. I delivered the best crotch shot ever scored. He hit the floor like a felled tree.”

“Toe tip?”

“Yep.”

“Good girl. Then what happened? What did they do to you?” His index finger gently caressed her damaged cheek. “Hurt?”

She took his hand and kissed his fingertips. “His buddy backhanded me a couple of times and I slipped and fell against the side of the fireplace. I bled a lot, so I figured to capitalize on it and pretended to pass out ... scared the shit out of the bunch of them, let me tell you. The guy that hit me just about got his lights punched out by the leader ... tall guy, really insane green eyes.”

They walked into the large room and sat on the sofa. As she passed by, she grabbed a pencil and a pad of paper off the desk.

“Oh, sit here on the sofa with me. It’s so good to see you, Arnie.” She turned to face him and began to scribble. I think the room’s bugged.

He nodded, reached into his jacket and pulled out his palm pilot. He input a message and shifted it in his lap so she could read the face. How many of them are there?

BLIND TRUST

Kip and Suzi met him at the door, in no better spirits than when he’d left them earlier. Suzi gave an appreciative whine and shook herself several times as he stroked her head.

Kip sat tall, almost aloof, as if to underscore the misery she felt. She kept making eye contact with Rudy and then staring down the hall at nothing. After the third or fourth time, as though to assist a not very bright child, she nosed his hand, gazed at him again and stared at the dark hall.

Finally, in desperation, she took his hand between her teeth in a touch so light as not to burst a bubble and led him into Cathy’s closet. Releasing his hand, she ran to the back, scratching at the rug and snuffling, interspersed with loud

sneezes. Rudy called her off to the side, seeing for the first time the bits of plaster and paint littering the floor.

Kip never took her eyes off Rudy as he studied the floor, taking samples and putting them in a little envelope. Frustrated, she ran over to him, snuffling, and then as pointedly as an animal could hope to do it, made direct eye contact with him and slowly looked up at the hatch in the ceiling overhead, drawing his gaze with her. It took three more tries before he looked up.

A variety of emotions raged through him as he followed the dog's stare.

"Oh, my God! Good girl, Kip."

It didn't take him long to find a ladder in the pantry. Donning a pair of latex gloves, Rudy lifted the hatch cover, not particularly surprised that it opened without a problem. He hoisted himself onto the ledge of the hatch and checked out the attic. The fire escape ladder lay in a pile by the hatch, a small bag of tools, including a flashlight and some twine beside it.

A clear trail on the dusty floor led him to the condo next door. A hole large enough to shimmy through had been cut in the dividing firewall between the units. He followed the trail to the end and lifted the hatch without regard for who might hear him. He knew the unit was empty.

Opening the other hatch, he shook his head as the proof stared him in the face. There stood the waiting ladder, clear evidence that the dude had easy and obvious access to Cathy. This should be enough to get a search warrant. Rudy replaced the cover and hurried back down the passageway, through the hole in the firewall and back to Cathy's apartment.

He scurried down the ladder and took Kip's head in his hands. "Good girl, Kip. Good dog. Sorry I underestimated you. Now I know what happened to your lip. Good girl."

He let her go, rushed into the kitchen and hit the condo office button on the phone.

"Yes, this is Rudy Clark. Is Desiree Collins still in the building? Thank you and please tell her I'll be right down."

“Nothing yet, I take it.” Desiree nodded at Rudy, indicating the chair by her desk. “How about the police?”

“I have no confidence in them. If I expect to get her back, I’ll have to do it myself. Now, what’s he look like? Be as thorough as you can.”

Desiree leaned back in her chair, a faraway look in her eyes.

“He’s around 5’10”, medium build, in pretty good shape ... no gut. Dark wavy hair, medium length, no beard or moustache, nothing spectacular in the looks department, pleasantly plain, but nothing to call attention to except the most incredible eyes I’ve ever seen in my life. They’re green, very clear and big. They’re unforgettable. Other than the eyes, though, he’s regular. Nothing stands out.”

“Did he ask about Cathy, mention her in any way?”

“He didn’t have much to say about anything. I asked him some questions, he answered, but that was about it. Didn’t volunteer much. He seemed shy with me, almost uncomfortable. I found it particularly strange the way he checked out the condo. Most people, when they get ready to spend that kind of money, are interested in the furniture, the appliances, what comes with, but not him. He went directly to the bedroom, checked out the closet and the patio off it, turned around and told me he’d take it. His interest in the view, ostensibly his reason for renting the unit, sure didn’t show. He never even went outside.” She shrugged. “Strange dude.”

“Do you have a clear photo of him on the security tape?”

“Right here.” She handed him several photos, pushing them across the desk.

“He looks vaguely familiar, but I don’t know whether it’s from seeing him here somewhere, or at one of the local stores. Shy guy, huh, eyes down like that.”

“That’s how he acted with me; he was almost bashful, y’know? Strange for a man who’s a paparazzi. I always think of them as aggressive and pushy, getting in people’s faces like they do. Who knows? Maybe he just doesn’t want anyone to

remember those eyes.”

Dejected, Rudy got to his feet. “Thanks again for your help.”

“Any time, just let me know what I can do.”

SOMETHING WICKED

“Good morning, miss. I’m Lenny Browning and this is Jim Sessions. We’re investigating the murder of Kate Richardson and wondered if we might....”

“Let me see some ID.”

Lenny slipped his business card through the cracked door, which opened just far enough to reveal his PI license.

The door closed momentarily while she slid the chain from its guard. It opened to a truly spectacular sight. A young woman in her mid-twenties stared at them with piercing black eyes fringed with thick, bristly lashes, her short black hair styled in a modified spike. Skin the color of cream without a hint of color to her cheeks emphasized her Goth-like appearance.

A black midy tank top and a pair of workout shorts left nothing of her astonishing body to the imagination, including multiple piercings in both ears and belly button. Her white platform clogs added at least three inches to her already impressive height.

“Come in, please.” She stood aside and indicated they could enter. They followed her through the kitchen to the living room, eyes surreptitiously scoping out the tastefully furnished rooms.

Jim introduced himself, taking her extended hand.

“My name is Peggy Packard. What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“We’re working this case for a private client and wonder if you can answer a couple of questions for us.”

“I’ll try. Please, make yourselves comfortable.” She glanced at the dining room table and took a seat.

Lenny opened his briefcase and pulled out a tape recorder. "You don't mind if we record this, do you? Helps with the memory."

Peggy shook her head. "No problem for me. I'll help in any way I can."

"Okay, then let's begin. You were here when the incident occurred?"

"Incident? How ... quaint. Yes, I was here when my friend was murdered."

Lenny blinked twice, cast a quick glance at a mesmerized Jim and continued. "What were you doing at the time? Getting ready for work?"

"No. I work out of the condo here. I'm a CPA. I was getting ready for my morning run on the beach. Just finishing my juice."

"How well did you know Kate Richardson?"

"Well, we had good times together, close neighbors, y'know? Friends. Had a lot in common. We both liked to take in the beach, do some jogging, like that. We often rode horses up at Griffith Park. Neither of us have a guy right now, so we'd go get a bite for lunch on weekends, take in a movie and dinner, stuff like that."

"From the police report, you stated you heard something. Like what?"

"Yeah. I'm an early riser. To me, with the sunrise being so spectacular, who can sleep? I was finishing my glass of juice, just about to walk down to the beach and take my usual jog when I heard this boom or bang next door. Hard to describe, but something hit the floor." She waved at the walls and smiled. "They're pretty thick, don't build 'em like that anymore. Anyway, it was kinda muffled, but I definitely heard something sizeable fall. From the skating, I know the sound. After that, nothing."

"Skating? What's that mean?"

"I'm into roller derby. I'm captain of the LA Slammers. They call me The Pack."

Jim leaned forward and smiled, green eyes crinkled at the corners. "I thought I recognized you! I was working a runaway case several months back; kid was obsessed with roller derby. Parents thought she might go to watch the skating, and wanted me to keep an eye out there at the arena. Saw you skate several times. You girls really put on a show."

"That's nice," Lenny said, eyeing Jim, eyebrows elevated. "So, Peggy, when you heard that noise, what did you do?"

She returned her attention to Lenny and shrugged. "Well, I didn't do much, actually. Finished my juice, made a potty stop and got ready to go. I didn't hear another sound, and after a minute or two figured maybe Kate just dropped something, y'know, something like that. But when I came back from my jog, maybe only twenty minutes later, I knocked on her door and got no answer. I called her cell and went to voicemail, same with the house phone and yet her car was in the lot, just like it was when I went on my jog. That wasn't necessarily a big deal, but in this instance it was, 'cause you guys found her, and, well...."

"Can you remember the cars in the lot?"

"I remember everything. Photographic memory, true story. Okay, her car, my car, and the two couples downstairs each have a car. Full house, everybody present and accounted for."

"How about the street, what did you see there?"

"Hmm, well, I wasn't really looking, y'know." She stared into the distance then, as though reading something invisible. "Okay, there's a newer blue Lexus, one of the big ones, parked across the street, directly opposite the condo. Right in front of it is a black Honda, lowered, dark tinted windows, that gangsta look, y'know? Behind the Lexus, near to the corner, a, shit, I call 'em toasters. I don't know what they are called, they're so dumb looking. Anyway, a newer silver one. On our side of the street there's an old red van. Behind it is a Mustang." Peggy hesitated, eyebrows moving slightly. She blinked, and then turned her gaze to Lenny. "Not much help there, I guess."

“Were any of the cars familiar, even if you didn’t know the owners?”

“All except the Lexus and the toaster. That old van? I think a guy’s living in it. Surfer dude most likely, long blond hair, darkest tan I ever saw. He’s getting regular, coming for days at a time, y’know? Surf’s up. The Honda, it belongs to some Mexican kid, comes and goes real regular and so does the Mustang, like frequent guests, like that.”

“Okay. You never saw the drivers of the Lexus or the toaster? So, they were there when you left to jog. How about when you came back?”

She never hesitated. “The Lexus and the Honda were gone, but toaster was still sittin’ there, rest of them, too.”

Jim chimed in. “So, what’s the plate number on the Lexus? I’m assuming it’s a California issue.”

“It is. 325 are the numbers. I didn’t see all of it, but the letter in front of the numbers was F. At least I think so, but maybe E. That’s all I saw from that angle.”

“It’s a great start, Peggy, and you’ve been a big help.” Lenny rose and extended his hand. “If anything else comes to mind, you get an idea or if that car shows up again, please give us a call. Good luck in your next derby.”

“I’ll front ya tickets any time ya want to come out to the arena.” She grinned. “And I’ll keep an eye out for that car. If I ever see it again, I’ll give ya a call and you can put the cuffs on him.”

I hope I’ve whetted your appetite enough that you’ll want to read all the books in the series. Happy reading,

Gayle



Amy's voice rose higher, and then, like the notes themselves, she abruptly broke off to resume the deep, throaty, other-worldly sounds she'd started with, filled with anger and fear.

"That's it, we're outta here!"

Terry hurried back to the table and retrieved the heavy plastic wrap that had covered the bread, cheese and fruit. She packed the food up like a sack and ran into the suite, emptied her purse of all but her cell and filled it with half a dozen bottles of water, and the lunch.

"Ames! Let's go get Ella!"

