

A CANADIAN WEREWOLF IN NEW YORK

MARK LESLIE

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For Paula B and Mick Halpin

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Prologue: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to New York

MY LIFE CHANGED significantly when I moved to New York. I am, of course, using the word change to denote more than one of its meanings.

Some might suggest that a young man from a small-town in Eastern Ontario would naturally experience change when moving to one the most populous cities in the world.

But it's not just about the city.

It's about an inner change that I experienced.

And, no, I'm not just talking about the metaphysical change or awakening that takes place when a person exposes one's self to the larger world and multitude of experiences and viewpoints.

I'm talking about a physical change, a sort of biological change that began in my very bloodstream.

I'm talking about the side-effects of a chance encounter with a wolf and a peculiar man a little more than ten years ago while I was hitchhiking through Upstate New York on my pilgrimage to the Big Apple.

That encounter, my only close-up experience with a wolf, is what led to my lycanthropic affliction.

And, the simultaneous encounter with a traveling salesman named Buddy led to my ability to adapt not just to the city, but to my biologically changed body.

I'd been hiking along the highway about an hour or so south of Buffalo. I had caught a ride after having just crossed over the border at Niagara Falls from a family who had a cottage in the tiny village of Ellicottville, a community on par with the town I had grown up in.

Because it was already evening, I considered staying in that small community; but I wasn't tired and had wanted to see if I could at least get to Humphrey, another town about a three hour walk East.

It was near midnight, and I'd been walking along the highway, not having seen another car for at least half an hour, when it happened.

The wolf leaped from the bushes at the side of the highway just as a car came around the bend, lighting the dark highway up.

As startled as I was from the wolf attack, the wolf itself had been startled by the approaching vehicle.

With a failed attempt to abort the attack in mid-leap, its teeth had barely broken the skin beneath the sleeve of my upraised arm as its paws hit me in the chest. Letting out a high-pitched scream – no, I'm not afraid to admit it – and also, quite terrified, I fell backward onto the black-top of the highway, the wolf coming down on top of me.

I remember distinctly thinking *this is the end*.

And, and also absurdly wondering if I had wet my pants.

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I actually thought, for an obscure moment, that the bright lights – the headlights of the car – were the lights one sees at the end of the tunnel when they are on their deathbed.

But those lights, that car, are what saved me.

With the headlights of the car bearing down on us, the wolf quickly bounded off me and across the highway rather than tear out my throat.

I'd later learned that wolves do not kill for sport, but for food or for territory. I must have been an attempt at food that night, because if the goal had been merely to kill me, it would have been over. The goal to consume me wasn't something the wolf could have done with the car approaching, so it had simply aborted the attack and run.

The driver, of course, hadn't seen the wolf attack, just that I'd been lying in the highway. He'd picked me up, a salesman eager to have someone to talk to. After hearing me tell him about the wolf attack, he'd made the singular comment, "pretty scary," and then introduced himself as Buddy.

"I'm Michael," I said.

"Hop in, Michael," Buddy said, tossing his briefcase into the back seat to make room for me in the front passenger seat. "Sounds like I came along just in the nick of time for you."

But as I quickly realized after Buddy started to regale me with tales of his travels, facts about the Empire State and his goals for retirement, I had come along at the perfect time for him, by being a pair of ears he could bend.

Man, the guy loved to talk.

Because we had been heading in the same direction and he was thirsty for company, I'd ended up bunking with him in his hotel room on the couch that folded out into an extra bed. That night I realized I had become Buddy's conversational prostitute.

And I'd ended up riding with him all the way into New York City.

I'd stayed with him again upon our arrival, engaging in another marathon conversation session in his hotel room. And, by conversation session, what I really mean was a 'Buddy talking and Michael listening' session.

Although he was a little peculiar, I couldn't have helped but like him – not only because he'd accidentally saved my life, but also because of the incredible knowledge he had dispersed, all with the innocence and wondrous thirst of a child.

Fortunately, he also knew the city well, so it was a good introduction to the city for me to spend my first night there with him.

Actually, Buddy and maintained our friendship, and he visits me every time he returns to New York, usually for dinner, some drinks, and long conversations well into the wee hours of the night – the one-sided kind he so loved.

Although Buddy never really asked me much about my personal life, he, of course, remembered how we'd met during the wolf attack, so, he often greeted me with the nickname "Wolfman," never knowing how close he really was to the truth.

Thursday August 14, 2014

Chapter One: Not Just Another Day

Waking up Naked in the Park

THIS TIME I woke to find myself sprawled naked in the grass, my shoulder nestled in a shrub and the coppery aftertaste of blood in my mouth. It was a cool morning, but humid, the unmistakable scent of the Hudson River hanging in the air.

I pulled my aching body into a sitting position and checked it over for injuries. Apart from the usual scrapes and scratches there was a nasty looking wound on my thigh. It hurt no more than a bad bruise, but it looked like a bullet hole. I ran my hand down the leg and stuck my finger inside. Yes, indeed, it was a bullet hole, the slug nestled just about an inch deep.

At least the bullet wasn't silver – now that I would have felt.

Okay, so to sum up my situation, there was a distinct taste of blood in my mouth – human blood – and a bullet wound in my leg.

Michael Andrews, what the hell had you been up to last night?

I took a look around. I was in a park on the Hudson. I could tell from the scent of the water. The early morning mist rising off the water revealed beautiful Lady Liberty

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to me in teasing glimpses, and in the distance, I could hear the patter of a pack of joggers heading away from me.

Okay, so this was Battery Park. I was on the southwestern tip of Manhattan Island. And since I was currently a guest at the Algonquin Hotel in Mid-Town, getting three quarters of the way across this island, through a metropolis of dense crowds of people, bare naked, was going to be one hell of a chore.

And there was something tingling at the back of my mind; something bothering me, like an important thing I had forgotten. There was something I was supposed to remember; wasn't there?

Given the semi-amnesia that struck me after spending time in wolf form, figuring out what it was that was lingering on the edge of my consciousness would be a bit of a challenge.

Uncovering the secrets of what exactly I'd been up to during last night's full moon, would, of course, be another.

But I was a mystery writer, and was usually able to piece it all together upon examination of the evidence. My memories as a wolf were scattered and non-linear snatches of smells, sounds, tastes, feelings and sights – not often available to my human, conscious mind. Trying to piece them together often gave me a migraine. I'd always thought that perhaps that was how I'd preserved my sanity.

Unfortunately, with my growing popularity, it was becoming easier for people to recognize me – at least in

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human form. Finding a picture of myself scampering about the city butt-naked on the cover of the tabloids was not a pleasant thought.

Was it time to move out of New York?

Growing up, reading the Spider-Man comic books, I'd always wanted to live here. I was living my dream.

In my dreams though, I'd been the wall-crawler, swinging around the rooftops and nabbing the bad guys. I'd never imagined I would be one of the monsters that Spider-Man faced down, like that astronaut who, wearing a moon rock on a chain around his neck, was afflicted with the curse of the werewolf.

But that never made sense to me. After all, everyone knows that being bitten by a werewolf is the way that a person becomes a werewolf.

Okay, maybe not everyone, because I don't know everyone. But I do know me. I'd been in the city for almost three weeks after that wolf attack before my first experience of lycanthropy.

At the time, after getting over the understanding of what had happened to me and the reality of living with it, it was desperately hard to hold a job. Sure, I wanted to be a writer – but I had to hold a job to keep an income. Holding the types of jobs I was skilled at, being a waiter or a delivery driver, was often difficult. I mean, waking up naked in strange places often left me late for work. Never-mind the times that I'd destroyed my uniform when turning into a wolf before I had the chance to get home and undress. And trying to avoid the night shift for

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several days in a row every month by calling in sick often left my employers with another good reason to fire me.

It wasn't until I was about six months into my curse that I'd discovered I could put my wolf-blood to good use. Since becoming a werewolf, my human self was able to retain some of the benefits of my wolfish nature. My senses were all heightened, so I no longer needed to wear glasses, for example. My strength seemed to double, sometimes quadruple, depending on the proximity of the full moon.

My ability to heal also dramatically improved and my constitution has never been better. I haven't had a cold or caught a flu since becoming a werewolf.

So, while it's not a glamorous life, it's not all entirely bad.

My extra strength and immune system allowed me to work the more dangerous labor jobs such as roofing and construction and even garbage collection. Later I was able to move up within the companies I worked for by being able to see and hear things that normal people couldn't. My ability to interact with and influence people was heightened. I was able to pull off an incredible charisma that I often used to my advantage.

It was how I was able to get an editor to agree to read my first novel, which actually hit the New York Times bestseller list.

With the success came appearances on talk shows and the occasional red-carpet event, like when one of my novels had been turned into a feature film. That made blending into the crowd about as easy as playing "pick-

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up sticks” with my butt cheeks; a phrase I learned from Buddy.

Not that I wasn’t used to having to find new ways to sneak back home naked after a night of howling at the moon, but the celebrity aspect was starting to make the task of not being recognized that much more difficult.

After quickly determining that there was no one nearby in the sliver of park I was in, I decided to take the time to remove the bullet from my leg. If I didn’t, my body would quickly heal over it, leaving it permanently inside. The bleeding had stopped, and the wound had already started to heal, so I could tell it was at least a few hours old. By the end of the day the healing would be well advanced, and by the day after next the scab might even be ready to fall off.

I was able to push my fingers inside enough to snag the bullet between the tip of my index finger and my thumbnail. After a few seconds of painful twisting and prying, it slipped right out.

Getting up, I flicked the bullet into the murky depths of the Hudson.

Judging by the sun’s position in the sky and the sounds of traffic, it was likely around 5:30 a.m. The sun was beginning its rise, but it being an August morning, the humidity and smog hung in the air like a light fog.

The first significant set of commuters would be arriving on the 6:20 a.m. Staten Island Ferry. The Ferry landed just south of me. What I needed to find as quickly as possible was something to cover me up. Ideally clothes, but

the foliage of the park's trees or wrapping my torso in a discarded newspaper were a more likely consideration.

Provided I could get a handful of change, I'd even be able to take the subway. If not, I had a long walk ahead of me. And, despite my healing ability and the thicker padding on my feet now, walking that many miles in my bare feet on pavement and concrete still wasn't pleasant.

I surveyed the park a little more closely, picking up on the scents around me. Grass, the sap from the trees, the cigarette butts. There was the smell of semen and latex, from a condom that I could see now that I'd sensed it, about three yards to my right, just beneath a park bench. Near it I could see a newspaper, smell the newsprint, stale cheap cologne, the scent of vaginal fluids, and of the bitter dregs left behind in a coffee cup lying on its side.

But there was a second distinct vaginal scent, unobscured by latex. I started walking toward it.

On the other side of a tree near the bench, there was a pair of pink panties. I headed over and picked them up, judging whether or not I'd be able to fit into them.

It was amazing what people threw away and in what places. While the origin of these panties seemed obvious to me based on the other evidence – a pair of lovers had likely enjoyed each other in the dark on this bench – I'd always wondered, for example, why you sometimes see a single shoe on the side of the road. Who throws out such articles of clothing, and why there? I'd never met anyone in all my travels who admitted to losing or throwing away a single shoe while in a vehicle or traveling – so why, in all my time, was it such a common sight?

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A mystery for another day, I thought, shuddering in revulsion at what I was about to do.

I blew out through my nose as I bent, stepped into the panties, and pulled them up.

Fortunately, they had a good bit of play in them, so, though snug, I was able to pull them on.

It was a start at least. And I tried really hard not to think about the fact I was wearing a stranger's discarded panties.

I kept walking south, feeling I was on a roll.

Maybe I'd even find a pair of shoes my size.

As I was walking, again that spark of an idea that there was something I was supposed to remember struck me. I actually stopped walking, trying to tease it out of where it was lurking in the shadows.

That's when a solid snippet of memory from the previous night came to me.

The squeal of tires and brakes, and a bright, painful flash of headlight beams.

The memory burst stopped all other thoughts. It flashed through my mind again, this time joined by the smell of *rubber burning, overtone of a stronger, background, fishy smell*. Then the memory was gone again. I pawed at it tentatively but couldn't bring anything else back.

Instead, I started thinking about the last memory I had as a human.

Ever since one of my novels was made into a blockbuster movie two and a half years ago, the rest of my novels had been republished and the royalties started screaming in. With the advance from the movie rights

having been socked away into a secure investment, and with all the extra cash coming in, I finally abandoned my Chelsea bachelor apartment, and decided to take up residence at the Algonquin.

The Algonquin, of course, was known for its literary history.

If I could live out my childhood dream of living in New York, and of being a writer like the genius who created Spider-Man, Stan Lee, I could live out a later adult fantasy in which I was a writer-in-residence of sorts in that hotel.

The management was able to cut me enough of a deal for the long-term suite, and I made frequent appearances in the lobby, where the cultural elite liked to hang out before Broadway shows or the Opera. I didn't mind hanging out there, it was a thrill to be part of the ambience. After all, it was the ambience of the Algonquin's lobby that had attracted me in the first place.

So last night, after an unproductive writing session, I'd headed out for an early evening stroll. I thought I would have enough time to get to Central Park, where I often liked to be before a change. Being locked up in a hotel room as a wolf was a dangerous thing, and, while I sometimes did that, I liked to also ensure that I gave my other-half a good outing, the ability to run and expend what must be pent-up energy in a healthy way.

When I was planning on doing a Central Park outing, I often stashed clothes somewhere in the park for when I awoke. I had to keep finding new places to stash my clothes because they kept getting stolen. It's amazing at

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how quick certain homeless folks can be at finding things you thought were well-hidden.

By then, of course, I'd stopped having to also stash a set of keys or a wallet or I.D. or anything like that. One of the benefits of living at the Algonquin was that the Concierge knew me, and I could get in and up to my room without any hassle whenever I didn't have my key or I.D.

Last night, however, I didn't remember even making it to Central Park.

It had been evening, the sun setting. I'd left the Algonquin wearing a pair of disposable clothes with my change of clothes stashed in a plastic grocery bag. No, I didn't like to get naked before the change and thus save the clothes I was in – so, I wore either older or discount-store clothing on wolf nights.

I was walking up Fifth Avenue toward the park . . .

. . . and that's where my human memory failed. The wolf-related amnesia that I suffer from typically strikes anywhere from five to fifteen minutes before and after a transition. That told me it was possible I didn't even make it to Central Park before I changed. The walk was a good ten to twenty minutes, depending on whether or not the crosswalk lights and traffic were in my favor.

So it was likely I didn't make it to Central Park.

The other clue I had was the fact that, when I made the change in Central Park, my wolf-self usually didn't leave the boundaries of the park. With plenty of places to run, cavort, and hunt down rodents and other small animals, there was little reason for my wolf-self to wander.

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Consumed in the memories and the attempt at regurgitating the events of last night, I almost failed to notice as I crossed towards the outer edge of Battery Park, the scent of another human just downwind to my right. It was a single person, a man, and his scent was coming from around the corner of the building on State Street where the people from the Staten Island ferry came in. His scent was getting stronger as he approached.

I glanced down at myself, clad in the tight, pink panties, then to the left and right. There was no real place to hide. It was too late to duck under cover.

Interlude – Wolf Night – One

THE WORLD WAS human, pine-scented, a peaceful sort of dark, with the persistent background chirp of traffic, car horns and the occasional high-low wail of a distant siren.

These sounds meant little to the wolf. They were merely distracting elements, like static getting in the way of a radio frequency.

He surveyed his domain, calm, in control, and at peace as the subtle fingers of the wind caressed his back and haunches.

With the wind came the occasional twitch of a critter in the nearby shrubs. Those were the sounds he focused on, and he turned his head in an attempt to identify them by scent.

A shift of wind direction from the northwest brought a startling and disconcerting new smell to his nostrils.

He paused, turned to face it and let out a low, guttural growl.

There was another. And it was close.

Chapter Two: Finding the Time to Help Wally

I COULD ONLY hope that the man who was quickly approaching wasn't one of my fans.

His scent was unfamiliar, meaning I'd never met him before – that was something at least. There was also the hint of ammonia on him, so he might be one of the cleaners leaving the Wall Street office towers after his nightshift.

He stopped as I rounded the corner, and there he stood, about five and a half feet tall. He had a large round face, receding hairline and a half-grown attempt at a goatee on his face. His eyes were almond shaped and a very bright blue. He wore a red plaid shirt and bright yellow suspenders to hold up his brown pleated slacks. Over that he wore a thin windbreaker jacket. On his feet were long red sneakers, and his stance was such that his feet were angled outwards, the way you sometimes see a clown standing.

He smiled at me. A huge, unabashed, full-tooth smile, and said in a loud and deep voice. "Lovely morning, isn't it!"

Not one double-take for the way I was dressed.

Before I could say anything, he asked, "Do you happen to have the time?" He said this in the same loud announcer-type voice. It was obviously a well-rehearsed line.

I instinctively glanced at my bare wrist, then took another look at him. He was wearing a watch.

Then I understood. It explained the line, which was a little conversation starter, something it was okay for one stranger to ask of another. This poor guy was a little slow. But he certainly wasn't living on the street – he had a clean, recently bathed smell to him, and also had that hint of ammonia.

My instincts kicked in, knowing he was a person who required adult supervision, protection. So, either he was lost, having wandered out of a protected area, or his supervisory support was no longer nearby. If there had been, I certainly would have smelled another person in the vicinity. He and I were the only people within about a block.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I don't have the time, but I think I can guess."

His eyes lit up. This was going to be a game of sorts. He raised his wrist and looked at his own watch. "Okay, then you guess. And I'll tell you if you're right. I'm Wally."

"Hi, Wally. I'm Michael. So, Wally, if I guess correctly, what sort of prize is that worth?"

"Prize?" he asked. Again, he wasn't trepidatious in the slightest. His scent revealed playfulness and wonder.

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"Yeah," I said. "I'm a little short of clothes here. Maybe you could help by lending me some clothing if I guess correctly. Like, maybe your jacket."

The sudden onset of Wally's fear immediately filled my nostrils. But he didn't step back. He wasn't afraid of me, but of something else. A consequence of the thought of giving away his clothes?

"No," he said quietly. "Can't do that. Ma says that I need to keep track of my things, like my clothes. Have to keep track of things. Have to keep track. Can't do that."

Wally's recitation of his mother's orders reminded me that there was something I was supposed to remember; but I shook that nagging feeling off.

"Okay, okay, maybe you could help me find some clothes."

The fear was immediately replaced with the playfulness again, and deeper excitement.

"Speaking of your Ma, Wally, where is she?"

His scent got frightened again, but also worried and concerned and confused. "She's on the ferry. I stopped to tie my shoes and watched this ant. Then I caught up with Ma again, but I started to worry about the ant. I ran back to him. I didn't hear the ferry man announce the gate was closing. I couldn't find the ant, but I kept looking. Then Ma was calling for me, and the ferry was leaving. So I'm waiting here for Ma. I still can't find the ant, so I started walking to find him. Still can't find the ant."

"It's okay, Wally. I'm sure that the ant is okay. And your Ma saw you on the dock, didn't she?"

"Yes. She was calling to me."

"She's probably going to be on the next ferry back."

"You think so?" Wally exuded a hopeful essence.

"Of course." Based upon the scents and the locale, I suspected that Wally's mother was an office cleaning lady likely with neither the family support nor the money to afford someone to look after her son for her while she worked. So she likely did what she had to—bringing her son to hang out in the mostly vacant office buildings while she worked throughout the night.

"And I'll stay here with you until she does." Of course, it would certainly be tricky for me to not be seen by anybody dressed the way I was, but I'd figure something out.

"Okay," he said. "But do we still get to find some clothes for you?"

"Sure," I smiled. We were walking south in the direction of the Terminal when I caught the scent of someone approaching from South Street. It was a man, not quite as clean smelling as Wally, but not so unwashed as to be a street person. Also, he wasn't wearing cologne or after-shave, so it wasn't likely a businessperson.

"Wally, listen," I said. "Someone is coming. And I'm . . . a little shy about people seeing me dressed the way I am. So I'm just going to hide. I'll still be nearby, though, okay?"

"Okay," he said. And he seemed to be okay with it; my hiding becoming a playful thing based on his scent.

Just a few yards to our right there was a series of concrete barricades, due to construction at the park. I quickly bounded to them, leapt over the barricade and ducked behind it.

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As I ducked down, I was struck with another memory from the previous night. *The deafening roar of a gunshot and the unmistakable smell of gunpowder, a flash of pain in my leg, and muffled in the background, a child-like voice that said something like, "No, not the nice doggie!"*

I shook my head – now wasn't the time to have a flashback – and focused on Wally and the approaching stranger.

The footsteps got closer as the scent became stronger.

"Well, what do we have here?" a voice called. It was deeper than Wally's and spoken in a carefully pronounced way. The accent was different in pitch, not the same Brooklyn flavor common to the area, but more like my own Canadian accent.

"Good morning." Wally said. "Would you happen to have the time?"

"The time?" the stranger responded in a sneering tone. "You're the one wearing a watch, dude." There was a pause. "Oh, I get it, you're a retard."

"My Ma says that it's not nice to use that word." Again, Wally's scent wasn't fearful, it was indignant, offended.

"Well your Ma isn't here to stop me, now, is she, bub?"

"Uh, no, my Ma is on the ferry."

"I see." There was another pause. "Okay, man, give me your watch."

"Oh, oh, oh." The fear became obvious this time not only in Wally's scent, but in the way his voice broke when he continued to speak. "Can't do that. Ma says that I need

to keep track of my things, like my clothes and my watch."

I stood up at that point. The stranger was facing away from me. He was about my height, wearing faded jeans and a crew-cut t-shirt. He had long, greasy, blond hair that covered the sides of his face. Wally didn't notice that I'd moved. His eyes never left the man in front of him. I quickly stepped onto the barricade and down onto the other side then strode quietly toward the two.

"I don't give a rat's ass what your Ma says," the stranger said, his finger jabbing at Wally's chest as he leaned in closer to my new friend. "I said, 'hand over that watch.' And let me see your wallet while we're at it." I was just a few steps away.

"Can't do that." Wally said, and I could hear the sound of his heart racing. "Can't do that. Can't do that. Can't do that."

The stranger grabbed Wally's wrist and pulled him closer, his angle changing enough that he could see me from the corner of his eye.

His head turned in my direction. "What the hell do you want?" he asked, his scent revealing a little fear, and then, after a double-take at my pink underwear, he burst into a grin, his scent reeked of confidence and in the same sneering voice he said, "Oh, another retard. But it looks like someone already got your stuff. Nice panties, dude!" He started laughing.

"I'll give you one warning," I said in a calm, quiet voice. "Leave him alone, or so help me, you'll regret it."

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As I spoke, the man's confidence wavered. He quickly stepped behind Wally, taking Wally's right arm and bending it up against his back. Wally's face gave off a look of pain that I could also smell. I felt my fists clenching in response.

"Back off, buddy," he said, his free hand coming up with a knife. He pressed the blade against Wally's throat.

"Michael, help me," Wally said. "Can't get blood on my clothes. Can't. Ma will be upset and think I can't take care of my things."

"Shut up!" the stranger said

It was the split second he was distracted when I made my move. One hand going for his throat, the other for the hand holding the knife. By the time he noticed I'd moved, I already had his throat in my left hand and I'd knocked the knife to the ground.

I immediately raised my right hand and broke his nose in a quick, simple palm jab.

He stumbled backward, blood gushing from his nose.

I followed and gave him a push. He fell on his ass, hands trying to stop the blood pumping from his face, eyes wide – he looked more like a teen caught scarfing down strawberries in a garden raid, nothing but a red-coated face and these wide "oh shit" eyes.

I let out a low, deep laugh that was part growl.

The confusion I smelled off him turned to an ice-cold fear.

Wally also continued to exude the smell of fear.

"Oh no, Michael. He's got blood all over his shirt. His Ma is going to be upset now."

"That's okay," I told Wally as I reached down and grabbed the guy by the hair with one hand. "His Ma knows that he's a bad boy."

He didn't resist me, he just whined and held onto my hand as I lifted him off of the ground. I gave him a quick kick with the side of my foot, knocking the wind out of him, and whispered, "Don't move if you know what's good for you."

I started walking back into the park, dragging the bully behind then lifting him and setting him down hard, as if he were a short, fetal-like walking stick. He let out a short, forced puff of air each time he connected with the ground. "I'll be right back, Wally."

I carry-dragged the man to the first set of bushes and told him to take his clothes off.

"P-please don't rape me," he whimpered, and then for good measure, because he had to ensure I knew he was a tough guy. "Y-you f-fag."

"I'm not going to rape you, you little freak. Just take your shirt and pants off or I'll rip them off of you. I need your clothes. And you need to be taught a lesson."

A few minutes later I emerged from the bush with this guy over my shoulder. His pants fit me okay, but his shirt was too bloody to wear. I'd torn it into strips and used a few of them to tie his hands behind his back. It had been nice to discard those panties, but I let him keep his underwear, which he was still wearing. I had stuffed the panties into his mouth and secured it into place with another strip of his shirt.

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Closer to a bus stop on State Street, where he was sure to be visible to thousands of morning commuters within the next hour, I tied this fellow, standing, to the post, and, using his own fresh blood wrote "BULLY" on his chest. Before I left I told him I'd be watching him and if he ever tried to take advantage of someone like he had this morning, I'd show up out of nowhere, rip off his testicles and force feed them to him.

The distinct smell of fresh urine overpowered the strong scent of his latest wave of fear.

Wally walked over to me, studying the writing on this thug's chest but ensuring he didn't get too close. His head twisted to the side, I could tell that he couldn't make out the writing.

"Are you okay, Wally?" I asked.

"Ayuh," Wally said, still distracted by the stranger. "Michael, he's a bad man, isn't he?"

"He sure is. But we don't need to worry about him anymore, Wally. C'mon, let's go wait for your Mom to get back."

"Okay."

On our walk back, we could see the next ferry coming in, about one hundred yards offshore. Conscious of the fact that, though I had pants, I was still shirtless and barefoot, I fell into place behind Wally, and studied the scent coming off him. Mingled with his own scent and the ammonia was another person's. Similar, but also tinged with a feminine perfume. It was his mother's scent, subtle, but there – as if she'd given him a hug in the space of the last couple of hours.

I walked as close to the end of the dock as I could and waited for the wind to shift. Mingled with the scent of the sea water, the fumes from the ferry and the multiple passengers, I couldn't pick up Wally's mother's scent, but I could detect that ammonia smell.

I turned to my friend. "She's on this ferry, Wally."

"She is?"

"Yes, she'll be docking in a few minutes. I'm going to leave you now. I'm not dressed properly to be hanging around. You stay here, okay."

"Okay." His eyes turned sad and he gave off the scent of disappointment. "Do you have to go, Michael?"

"I do, Wally. I have some place I need to be."

"Okay," he stepped toward me and gave me a big hug. "G'bye, Michael."

I gently chuckled at his honest outward show of affection – how rare a thing between men. "Goodbye, my friend."

I walked away, keeping track of him easily enough due to the shift in wind. When I'd walked about half a block, I turned to see that the ferry was docking. I could hear a woman's voice calling out to Wally and Wally responding. I felt assured that he was safely out of harm's way.

Chapter Three: Cookie, Cookie, lend me your sign

CONFIDENT THAT WALLY was out of harm's way, I quickened my pace to a light jog and started walking up State Street.

I needed to get more distance covered before rush hour, when the chance of being spotted became more of a threat. Well, at least I had pants now. And it was a summer day, not all that outrageous to be walking around without a shirt on.

But still.

Walking up Broadway, near Liberty Street I was overwhelmed with a flood of sensory memory. I know that it's been more than a decade since the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, but I swear I could still smell and taste the acrid smell of electrical fire, the jet fuel, and the ash of burnt flesh, concrete, paper, wood, plastics and asbestos. It was months before I was able to approach within about ten blocks of the area without being overcome with not just the smell and taste in the air, but with the horrific memories that went with each sensation.

Even now, though I swear I can still detect subtle hints of those odors, I'm sure it's my mind that conjures it all back to full power. However, there is no mistaking the

clear smell of utter despair that still lingers in the air. Even years later, there continues to be an endless parade of tourists and visitors to the city seeking out the infamous landmark of Ground Zero; and they feed the area with this lasting olfactory image that constantly threatens to burn itself into my psyche like an image burned onto a cathode-ray tube.

Needless to say, I was glad to move past that tragic landmark.

I'd made it about three blocks north when the morning, rush-hour traffic started to really take form. Witnessing a bustling middle-aged man in a business suit with a huge scowl shoving fellow pedestrians out of the way in his attempt to cross the street ahead of the crowd huddled there, made me realize the important thing that had been teasing me since I work up.

Mack.

That's it. I remembered I had a breakfast appointment with Mack Halpin. Mack was my literary agent, a tough old codger who always had a cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth, recently more unlit than lit due to the city smoking by-laws, and an insulting quip at the ready.

Mack was basically a guy with a crusty surface and a good heart. He was a tough scrapper when it came to negotiations, and I was always glad he was fighting on my side of the battle. I'd be afraid to face him down even as a wolf.

One thing I didn't ever want to do was piss Mack off for no reason. He was a punctual man who lived by a certain sense of old fashioned honor and principles such as

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“a man always honors his commitments” and “a man is only as good as his weakest words” – they always reminded me of the moral that Spider-Man learned in his very first adventure, that with great power comes great responsibility. God bless Stan Lee for delivering such basic wisdom in a format that could be easily digested by my young mind and continue to guide me throughout my adult life.

Assuming it was now some time between 6:15 and 6:30 a.m. Mack and I had a breakfast appointment in about an hour. Mack was an early riser and we always met at the Metro Market just one street up from the Algonquin.

Considering where I was, and the time I had to get home and change I worried that I might not make it. I mean, hoofing it by foot was no longer an option unless I started running at top speed. It could be done, but it would be very obvious – I mean, a man in jogging shorts, running shoes and a headband, sure I could get away with that – but not shoeless and shirtless in a pair of dirty jeans. That would just be begging some flatfoot beat cop or patrol car to stop me. At least my bullet wound was covered now, but still, being noticed even that much would not be a good thing.

I needed to get some sort of vehicular transportation back up to Mid-Town.

The morning rush hour crowd was starting to fill out, and it would be more difficult for me to elude detection. So, at a diner that already had a line down the street, I

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walked over to the fold-over street sign and hefted it up and over my shoulders, wearing it like a sandwich board.

I started calling out “Eat at Chuck’s Diner” in a monotone voice, and kept walking down the street and around the next block. Sure enough, the faces started to pay no attention to me.

Good old New Yorkers. All you needed to do to get people to ignore you was to try to get their attention

God, but I loved this city.

Another flash of memory from the night before struck me. A low howl of a siren as the scenery flashed by quickly. I was chasing another four-legged creature that was moving as fast as I. The scent ahead of me was confusingly much like the scent of another wolf, which made no sense. I was the city’s only wolf; at least as far as I knew.

I shook my head and tried to dredge the memory back again.

All that returned was the blur of the alley walls as I rushed past them and the two-toned whine of the police siren from about a block away.

I’d made it about three blocks lost in that snip of memory when I finally encountered the scent of someone intrigued by the sign I wore. What I mean is that the curious nature was obvious, but there was a lingering scent of another emotion – desire.

Basically, somebody wanted my sign for themselves.

I started panning the faces of the people nearby. Across the street and about half a block ahead of me sitting on the curb was an older woman in a long trench coat

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and faded green slacks. Mingled with her emotive scents was the smell of stale sweat and recent flatulence. Spotting her, I smiled and carefully crossed the street.

She held onto the shopping cart beside her – strategically stacked with an assortment of odds and ends several feet higher than the metal cage sides – with a firm grip. I knew from experience with other folks like her that you couldn't pry her fingers from that cart until she had been dead for several minutes.

She stood as I got within a few feet of her, still not letting go of her cart and her lips formed a wry, gap toothed grin.

"Nice sign, Cookie," she cackled with a bit of a slur. Fortunately for her, she'd been able to score some alcohol recently. After gaining my special sensory abilities, I was better able not only to communicate with, but to properly understand others whose perceptions I couldn't quite grasp before. I found myself doing a lot less judging of people now, and simply accepted them for who they were. If alcohol helped her cope with the stress of what her life was, so be it.

"Thanks," I said. As I stood close to her, it was a bit more difficult to filter out her vodka breath, her sour-milk body odor, and get through to her emotive scents. "Care to make a trade?"

Her grin spread and she took her right hand off of her cart momentarily to run her palms together before clutching it once more.

"You don't happen to have a shirt my size in that cart of yours, do you?" I smiled.

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She paused and glanced at the cart, her head tilting to one side. I could smell her affirmation. She did have what I was looking for. "I might," she said. "What else you got?"

"C'mon, lady." I said, throwing my arms up with my palms out. "Look at what I'm wearing. I've got nothing but this sign and my pants."

"Not sure if that's a good deal for me, Cookie," she mused, but I could tell she was bluffing. It was as obvious to me as the fact that she'd just released a silent, but foul packet of flatulence into her pants. She still desperately wanted my sign.

"Fine," I said, starting to turn around. "See you later."

I made it about three steps, all the while smelling her anxiety growing exponentially.

"Wait a minute, Cookie! Wait a minute!"

Chapter Four: A scuffle in the subway

FIVE MINUTES LATER I was walking away from my transaction with the bag lady wearing a slightly torn dress shirt that was a size too large for me and missing two buttons as well as a pair of mismatched shoes, one of which was a perfectly fitting sneaker, the other was a sandal that was a size too large.

Getting there, I told myself, and thought about my meeting with Mack at the Metro Market. I briefly considered my next step. Perhaps it should be to get a quarter so I could make a phone call to his cell phone and let him know that I was running late. But I dismissed the thought given how he detested tardiness. Mack had the patience of a toddler and, despite the fact that I was now making him some pretty decent money, he wouldn't put up with a client that made him wait even a single minute for an appointment. In his point of view, if a client couldn't be bothered to be on time for a meeting, he wouldn't waste another second working on their behalf.

I realized that I was very fortunate to have found an agent like Mack, and while I'd be able to get another agent without issue, I found myself needing him – not just for business reasons, but for personal ones as well. Like Buddy, he was quirky but interesting, and he constantly challenged me. I found myself needing to be

challenged in my personal relationships – if you didn't have to work hard at something, it almost didn't seem worth it.

And I definitely had to work hard to be in Mack's good books.

And that's where I wanted to stay.

I moved to Murray Street towards the subway entrance. I figured I'd be able to sneak onto the subway, but only with the additional thought that the next time I took the subway, I'd pay double to make up for my free ride.

Sure, some people would make fun of me for trying to live my life so straight. But the person who I had to please most was myself, and, in the same way that Mack was true to himself, I set my own personal standards high for a good reason.

And having blackouts of my time as a wolf was the hardest thing to deal with, particularly after waking up the way I had this morning. I mean, if I'd hurt an innocent person, or even worse, killed someone, I'm not sure how I'd be able to live with that.

Another foggy string of memory filtered up to my conscious mind. This time, the sensation was completely non-visual, but I could tell that I was moving through an alley, moving fast, from the sound of my paws on the pavement. I was chasing the wolf ahead of me. And, mingled with his hot breath was the distinct scent of human blood – the same human blood that I woke up tasting.

A blaring horn to my left broke the wispy memory. I glared at the driver as I continued toward the subway entrance.

So there was another wolf. What was I doing chasing him? I knew it was male from the memory of his scent.

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That and the stink of human mingling with the canine scent meant that, like me, he was a werewolf. What else did I know?

He had the blood on him that I'd tasted when I woke up.

Interesting.

I moved down the stairs, meshing with the morning rush-hour hustle, and, in the midst of the crowd, I was easily able to hop the turnstile and make my way, virtually un-noticed except by the person immediately behind me, down to the lower platform level. I shuffled through the crowd over to the far left of the platform, to ensure I "lost" the person who'd spotted me hopping the turnstile, just in case.

I heard the rumbling of an approaching, northbound train down the tunnel and spotted a clock that told me it was 6:50 a.m. – I'd be able to make good time and get back to the hotel with enough time to get inside, have a quick shower, change, then be downstairs and around the block to meet Mack.

That's when I heard the faint gasp and brief cry for help amidst a scuffling.

I glanced at the approaching light of the train, then swiveled, looking down the platform toward where I'd heard the cry. There was a balding, middle-aged man in a gray suit surrounded by three twenty-something goons all dressed in blue jeans, black t-shirts and red bandanas. I suspect they were either part of some gang, all had the same fashion consultant, or spent so much of their time stealing and vandalizing that they didn't give much time or thought to their own personal style. I was betting on the latter. A glint of light from the blade of one of the men

caught my eye as he waved his weapon, saying "I said, hand it over now."

The other two men flanked the bald man, each holding him by the upper arm. The crowd nearby all took several steps back, wanting to steer clear of what was going down.

"Crap," I mumbled, moving down the platform toward them. They were going to make me miss my train for sure.

Moving through the receding flow of the crowd, I snatched a black toque off of a teenager who didn't say a word of protest, and pulled it down over my ears, and just beyond my eyebrows. Might as well try to disguise myself as much as I can.

"Hey!" I called out as I neared them. Behind me, the train began arriving at the station.

The leader turned to face me, pointing the knife in my direction as well. His lackeys also turned their attention toward me, and away from the man they'd been assaulting.

I continued rushing the leader, and, just as I got within striking distance, he thrust the blade at me. I dodged the blade, hitting him in the chest hard with my left shoulder.

He actually caught a bit of air on his way to the wall. His head connected with the wall first, making a satisfying cracking noise against the tile before he crumpled to the floor. I kicked the knife he'd dropped toward the train and it fell down into gap that commuters are supposed to "mind" just as the train finished pulling in. Blocking the noise of the train, I focused on the sound of his heartbeat. It was still strong and steady, despite the cracked skull.

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The lackey on the thug's left rushed me while I was partially turned, kicking the knife. I could have easily used his momentum to flip him over my back and send him sprawling over the train and onto the adjacent set of tracks. But my goal wasn't to kill, merely to subdue.

Yes, I behaved more like a wolf and less like a human every day.

I ducked under his rush, sending a right jab into his gut. My punch easily lifted him off the ground, breaking a few ribs and knocking the breath right out of him. As his feet came back down, I shoved him in the direction of his buddy and he stumbled, as if drunk, in a forward run, trying, vainly, to get his balance.

The third guy pushed the man in the grey suit into his incoming friend and ducked to the side.

I easily vaulted the collision and resultant tangled mass of limbs and groans on the floor, grabbed the third attacker by the scruff of his collar and slammed him headfirst into the wall. He went down like last call at a frat bar.

I turned and offered a hand to the man in the grey suit who was extracting himself from the groaning thug on the tiled floor. I helped him to his feet as the train started to leave the station.

"Th-thanks," he said, his eyes darting between the three men I'd laid out, as if nervous that they'd be getting up.

"Don't worry," I said. "They won't be going anywhere any time soon."

He looked at me, as if seeing me for the first time, and did a double take. I wondered if he might be a fan recognizing me, as he stood there staring, mouth agape.

He stepped forward, his voice low and gentle. "Listen. I'd like to thank you for helping me out."

"My pleasure," I said. I glanced around.

Most of the morning commuters that had been on the platform with us had boarded the last train. However, a few people who'd gotten off the train, and more people coming in from the street, were milling around just a few steps away, curiously looking at us and the unconscious men. I was eager for the next train to arrive and whisk me away.

"No, I mean it," he said, reaching in his back pocket and producing his wallet. He quickly thumbed it open and produced a twenty-dollar bill. "Here. Maybe you can get yourself a warm meal."

I couldn't believe it. He thought I was a homeless person.

Dumbfounded, I tried to protest. "No, you don't need to —"

"Please, it's the least I can do," he said, pulling out another twenty.

Just then, a commotion started near the stairs.

Shit. Security. I couldn't afford to be held back answering questions about the scuffle. It looked like I wouldn't be taking the next train after all. Damn.

"Thanks," I mumbled, sheepishly taking the forty dollars. I started to walk away. "The guards are coming now. You'll be safe."

Chapter Five: Little flashback in a big yellow taxi

IN MY ATTEMPT to leave the subway platform, I tried to blend into the nearest crowd. It didn't work so well because many people cleared a wide path for me. Filtering the various scents, I was relieved to note that not one of the scents contained the perfume of recognition. This was a good thing, but I was leery of how much I'd been pushing my luck with that this morning.

As I got deeper into the crowd, though, fewer people moved out of my way, so I squeezed through them, taking a wide birth of the two security guards making their way toward my friend in the grey suit.

Continuing to move against the incoming crowd, I made my way up the stairs and to the street. For good measure, I hoofed it for several blocks.

As I ran, my mind flashed back to last night. This time it was a visual memory. Racing low through the dark alley, the wolf ahead of me, its scent, and the blood of the human mingled with it enticing me to run faster. Finally, approaching the end of the alley as it met a street, I'd tensed and lunged into the air, coming down with my fangs just shy of the other wolf's neck. We'd rolled and he broke free, turned and faced me. My next nip was at

his mouth, and my taste buds were infused with the human blood that coated his tongue and maw.

The flashback ended.

I continued walking north, and was able to hail a cab by the time I reached Canal Street.

"The Algonquin Hotel," I said, climbing into the back of the taxi. "There's a twenty-dollar tip in it for you if you can get there within half an hour."

"No prob," the driver said, a wry grin on his face. "This car can find streets that aren't on anyone else's map."

I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but his comment did fill me with confidence.

As the cab raced up Broadway and turned right on Grand, I sat back in the seat and rested my head, realizing it was the first time I'd stopped since waking. Sure, it hadn't been all that long, but it had certainly been eventful.

I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up more memories from the previous night, but none came, just a low throbbing sensation behind my eyes. I should know better than to try to force the memories.

I opened my eyes and noticed a discarded newspaper on the seat beside me. *New York Press*. The large, bold-font headline read: "Vicious Wolf Attack Kills Man." The story mentioned a "pack of wolves" spotted running from the bloody scene where a homeless man was slaughtered. Police encountered the wolves near Fulton and Water, where shots were fired. An officer claims to have wounded at least one of the wolves, but the animals quickly fled the scene and have yet to turn up elsewhere.

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One witness commented, "It was as if the streets just swallowed them up."

Midway through the article the cabbie was telling me we had arrived.

Out of habit I glanced at my wrist, but there was no watch there.

"I got you here in just under twenty minutes. It's 7:24." The cabbie said, shaking his head, squinting and reeking of pride. "Man, they said it couldn't be done. But every day, every single day, I prove them wrong."

"Much to my satisfaction," I said, handing him the two twenties.

I stepped out of the cab, waved as he pulled away and realized that I didn't have time to go inside, shower and get a change of clothes. I glanced at my reflection in the window of a van parked on the street. Okay, so I looked a little worse for wear. But I'd rather show up completely naked, with a giant turd on my head than to be late for a meeting with Mack.

As it was, once I walked down the street and around the block, I'd be just a few minutes early for our meeting, and that would be cutting it close enough.

Moving down the street, there was a slight spring in my step as I thought about what I would order for breakfast. At that thought, my stomach growled.

In the back of my mind, I wondered when I might again meet that other wolf who was stalking in my territory. It was a mystery I'd likely solve some other time around, but at the thought of that other wolf, I growled.

It was a softer, quieter growl than the one my stomach had just made.

Interlude – Wolf Night – Two

THE OTHER WAS close, that was for certain.

The hairs on the back of his neck bristled. The growl lingered in the back of his throat. Forepaws pushed down, sinking slightly into the grass, legs prepared to leap.

Then a word, a human word cut through the night.

“Michael!”

He didn’t recognize the word, couldn’t understand human-speak. But there was something familiar about the high-pitched timbre of the voice. This was a human creature that it somehow knew.

Another shift in the wind brought the other’s scent to him once more.

Chapter Six: A red-letter breakfast with Mack the Knife

“YOU LOOK LIKE a bag of shit.”

I couldn't help but smile at Mack. Being greeted in such a way immediately told me that I wasn't in his bad books.

Mack had a wry smile on his face as he looked up at me, his thin lips pressed tightly beneath an even thinner, dark mustache that looked more like it was drawn on than grown. I'd always thought that with his thick, brush-cut hair, dark around the ears, but blending into a soft grey at the top, he'd look better in a fuller, thicker moustache. But I kept telling myself that would make him look more like the J. Jonah Jamieson from the Spider-Man comic books.

I felt a huge knot of tension release in my shoulders and I let the glorious smells of various breakfast foods in the open-kitchen restaurant wash over me.

“What did you do?” Mack said, still sitting at the table and grinning at me as I approached. “Sleep on the street last night?”

“Good morning Mack.” I tried to ignore his insult and move on. “So, can we order food now?”

But he wasn't finished.

"You decide to roll naked in a garbage dumpster before meeting me this morning?"

"Mack, I'm a little peckish this morning."

"What, you couldn't find something good to eat in the dumpster? Man, but you artistic types – you never cease to surprise me with the way you dress in public." He clasped his hands together while I sat, revealing that he was finished with his fun and ready to get down to business. "I already ordered for both of us. They're cooking it now."

Of course he would have. He'd never expect one of his clients to be late, or this was the last meeting he'd have with them. Smiling again, I pulled out the chair across from him and sat.

"Promise me something," Mack said.

I nodded. "Sure."

"Promise me you've got something else to wear for tonight's spot on *Letterman*."

I just looked at him. Did he just say *Letterman*?

"You heard me, didn't you?"

I nodded again. *Letterman*? *David* freaking *Letterman*?

"I got the call last night. They had another writer scheduled to appear on the show. One of those self-help guru types, Andy Robinson, I think. It was a last-minute cancellation. So, a phone call or two later and voila, Michael Andrews is on."

I was still at a loss for words. *Letterman*? I kept repeating to myself. I knew there was a reason I put up with Mack's insults and gruff nature. It was because he could pull something like this off.

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"I'd been trying to get you on the show for the past year and the producers must have had you front of mind. But you have to admit, the timing couldn't be better."

My last novel, *Print of the Predator*, had been released about four months ago, but a collection of my short fiction was due out in a few weeks. Mack and my publisher had been pushing me for the past couple of years to release something to keep my fans sated between the standard annual spring releases of my novels.

I was eager to see reader reaction to a collection of the more morbid writings reflective of my earlier years as a writer – the collection was a compilation of stories that had originally appeared in small press magazines years before my name became known alongside a few newer tales I had penned in the same macabre style.

And I'd be appearing on the Letterman show, just weeks before the book's release. Is there any wonder why I was desperate to hang onto Mack as my agent?

"Letterman?" I finally said, as our breakfast arrived, two steaming plates of eggs, hash browns, ham, bacon and sausage. A plate with a single stack of half a dozen pieces of toast sat in the middle of the tray beside two tall glasses of orange juice, two glasses of milk and a large coffee for me. Another thing about hanging around with Mack – known in literary circles as "Mack the Knife" for his ability to get what he desired – were the fringe benefits of being in his presence. This Metro Market didn't serve food to tables. Despite their ability to cook virtually anything your heart desired it was standard counter service. You ordered at the counter, paid up front, and carried the food on trays to your table. But not with Mack.

No matter where he was or what he wanted, I've yet to see him be denied a request.

Gotta love that he's my agent.

While I squeezed the ketchup onto my plate, Mack started shaking salt onto his own, as if he were trying to bleed the shaker dry. "You'll be appearing," he said, "alongside the hot new shock-rock dude. Knell. I'm rather fond of that concept, because it might open you up to a whole new audience. Given the likely attention span of his fans, it's perfect that you're promoting your book of short stories." He turned his attention to the pepper, shaking as vigorously as he had with the salt. "You should try to work in a mention of the story about the serial killer who takes out concert groupies – that oughta get their attention."

I could only nod enthusiastically at that point, because I'd already stuffed several forkfuls of food into my mouth.

Knell was definitely the latest hot commodity with young folks. A young, blond rock star with a perpetual Billy Idol sneer, he came off like a cross between Eminem and Ozzy Osbourne. His music was raunchy and hard hitting, and his lyrics rolled off his tongue like he'd just chugged a cocktail of laxatives and hard liquor.

His lyrics were controversial, his band a group of talented musicians, and he was splashed all over the media, pushing Kim Kardashian from the top spot of those celebrities the average person just loved to hate. If it wasn't a story about his songs being banned from school dances, it was a tale about his raunchy night club escapades.

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Yet, his albums were an interesting compilation, because both of them contained not only the hard-hitting songs with lyrics that pushed the envelope of taste and decency but there were also at least two tracks that were clean enough for standard radio airplay. That's how I'd heard most of his music. I'd also overheard some of the raunchier songs from personal mp3 players while on public transit – and you wouldn't need my heightened sense of sound to pick up on those, let me tell you. I started reminding myself of my father lately, thinking that the hearing-aid industry would likely be booming due to the volume with which young people blasted tunes into their heads.

Mack was right. It would be interesting to see if my appearance with Knell could capture a new type of audience.

"Woah, slow down, there, Chester," Mack said, taking a mouthful of juice. "I don't plan on taking any of that food away from you. I've got my own."

I just glared at him, shoveling another couple of mouthfuls in. Now that I'd gotten a taste of the food, I was almost not able to meet the demands of my stomach and bring the food in fast enough.

"Oh wait," he said, pointing at my plate. "I know what it is. You've got so much ketchup on your plate, you can't even see the food." He took another chug of his juice and grinned. "You're panicked – trying to ensure that there is food under all that ketchup."

I thought it was funny that he'd make so much fun of me after he'd almost depleted the salt and pepper shakers over his own plate. But Mack was like that. If we were

both sitting there with bird-shit in our hair, he'd be laughing his ass off at my predicament, completely unaware that he looked just as silly.

"Okay," the tone in his voice took on a seriousness that I could also smell. "One more business item to discuss so I can properly claim this meal as a business expense. Your publisher called yesterday and they want to see progress on the next Maxwell Bronte novel. They want to see the first five thousand words or so to ensure it's coming along. I've held them off as long as possible, but you gotta start producing."

Maxwell Bronte was the hero in my mystery novels. He worked in antiquities and usually solved mysteries in the world of books and antiques. It was a good series, and Maxwell was a fun character to explore, but after six novels, two of which had been turned into movies, one a feature length film and the other a made-for-television special that doubled as a pilot for a television series that never went anywhere, I wanted to explore other things in my writing.

I guess I was experiencing what sometimes happens to writers who create a character who is both interesting, marketable and successful. A Frankenstein monster of my own that I couldn't escape from.

That's another reason why I liked the fact that my short-story collection would be coming out – it would be good to attract some new readers, readers who might not already be familiar with Maxwell Bronte, readers who enjoyed the dark and twisted turns my stories could take, and didn't want just another antiquity mystery.

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In the meantime, my contract stipulated that I had to produce three more Maxwell Bronte novels in the next three years. Maybe after that I could explore other writing.

The problem, recently, had been that while I had been writing, I hadn't done much on the latest Maxwell Bronte novel. All my writing had either been short story diversions, or notes towards a few supernatural thrillers. I'd even started a series of humorous essays outlining what it was like to be a Canadian born in a Northern Ontario town and living in Manhattan.

Maxwell Bronte was currently an elusive character for me lately, just outside the range of my creative spark. Sure, I'd been with him on some great adventures, but neither my mind nor my pen had been able to track him down and capture what he was up to.

I hadn't let Mack know any of that, of course, because every time I mentioned working on other writing projects, he pointed out the contract – which had paid quite a lot. He'd only let the release of the short stories through because one of the tales included a mention of Bronte as a young man. Mack saw this as a wonderful teaser, and was ensuring – against my wishes – that the publisher included a qualifier on the cover indicating a Maxwell Bronte adventure appeared in the book.

So while the short story collection might attract a new audience and increase my readership, the insertion of Maxwell Bronte into one of the tales and in the promotions for the book guaranteed that the regular Bronte fans would rush to the stores to buy it, just for another simple taste of their favorite character.

In the back of my mind, I knew it was likely that many of these fans would buy the book and only read the tale with Bronte in it, overlooking the rest.

That hurt. I know, I should be thankful that my books are selling at all – hell, that they’re even being published. But I needed more as a writer than just a fan base waiting for the next in a seemingly endless mystery series.

I needed to explore the human condition in so many other ways than a single character’s exploits could take me – sure, there were supporting characters and new people who moved in and out of Bronte’s life. But I never got a chance to simply follow one of them along and see where their story took me.

The blur of graffiti from the alley walls as I rushed past them, the echo of the high-low wail of a siren, and ahead of me, maintaining its lead, another wolf.

The sudden flashback didn’t take me by surprise, they rarely did any more, but when I have them, I do pause, my eyes go glassy, and I sometimes lose track of the conversation. At times both Mack and a now ex-girlfriend used to suggest I go for a brain scan to see if perhaps I suffered from a mild form of epilepsy. Mack was in the middle of saying something when I was able to again focus on the conversation.

“. . . remind you that you’re under contract and already two months behind schedule,” he was saying. “And mostly because they and I allowed you a small grace period so you could get that little short story collection worked out of your system.”

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I stabbed the last few hash browns and glanced back up at Mack. "I'll have something to you by the end of the week," I said around a mouthful.

"No," Mack said.

His words, eyes, and his scent were like a face-full of cold water thrown in my face. He had a way of inserting his entire being into a statement, a moment. His heart even paused and beat a single strong pulse at the exact right time, as if offering an exclamation point to his word. I know that my heightened senses picked up on many of these things, but I was convinced that they also came across, quite clearly to the average person when Mack spoke.

"You'll have me five thousand words by the time you're ready to be on Letterman tonight."

"But Mack . . ."

"Don't hand me that bull, Andrews. This is a walk in the freakin' park for you. You can shit out five hundred perfectly crafted words by the time it takes me to finish my breakfast. You've got the entire day. What else is on your schedule?" He paused, then added with a bemused smirk. "Besides perhaps a much-needed shower and wardrobe change?"

I thought about that other werewolf, about trying to unravel what had happened to my alter ego the night before, about the murder, about the shooting.

"Nothing," I said.

"Don't give me that – I can see in your eyes that you've got these big plans. What are you doing, working on those non-Bronte pieces? Dammit, Michael, haven't I come through for you on all angles? For at least one year

I had to put up with you jumping around, a strained look on your face as you gestured for me to pull your damn finger so you could get this fart that had been building in your system out. Well, I pulled your damn finger – relieved you of that fart. Can't you at least do me the favor of getting your ass in front of your computer and pounding out five thousand simple words in the next Bronte adventure?"

"Fine," I said.

The conversation was over at that point. Sure, there were small words to be exchanged, the bill to be paid. But it was over. Mack's heartbeat suddenly relaxed, his mood shifted from work back to relaxation. He'd stated his case, won. Victory was his, and he wasted no time enjoying it.

"Two o'clock," his words weren't punctuated with the sudden single throb of his heart. This was merely a casual add-on for him to a lifetime of bargaining and winning. No matter what he won, what he got, he always pushed for more. It was like breathing to him, I guess.

I glanced over at a clock on the wall. It was 7:50 a.m. By the time I got to my place and showered, I'd likely have about five and a half hours.

It was only five thousand words after all. I had to stop being a big baby about it. Five thousand words was nothing – a couple of hours work perhaps.

"Fine," I said again.

Mack struck a match against the flat, plastic no-smoking placard attached to the surface of the table and smiled at me as he lit a cigar.

Chapter Seven: An alluring scent detected on the way to the Algonquin

AS I LEFT the restaurant, I caught the whiff of a familiar scent. I twisted a full three hundred and sixty degrees, but the scent was lost the moment I'd noticed it.

It was a familiar smell, though. The smell of a person whom I'd been quite familiar with, mingled with a sweet perfume.

I just couldn't place it.

That was the second time this morning something was lingering on the periphery of mind, teasing me, yet staying out of reach.

From across the street a horn quickly blurted to get my attention. It was a blue Lexus. The driver was a short, cute Chinese woman, waving at me.

I smiled at her. It was Anne Lee, Mack's assistant. She must have dropped him off for the meeting and been driving around, ready to swing by and pick him up.

It must have been her scent I'd caught. I couldn't smell her now though. She and her car were downwind from me.

"Hi, Anne," I called across the traffic.

She grinned, an amused smile, and shook her head before trying to negotiate getting the car across the street for her rendezvous with Mack.

I looked down at what I was wearing, shrugged, waved goodbye and continued on my way.

Anne was a decent woman with the patience of a saint. Her relationship to Mack always reminded me of the relationship between Mister Burns and Smithers on *The Simpsons*. Whatever Mack desired, Anne was there running the errand with that cute closed-lipped smile on her face.

I didn't have far to walk from the restaurant to the Algonquin. It was just around the block. I headed up Sixth Avenue and within a few minutes I was strolling past the people lined up outside the Red Flame on West Forty-Fourth Street and in to the Algonquin lobby.

The doorman, Paul, grinned at me, and, like Anne, shook his head. "G'morning Mister Andrews," Paul said, opening the door to let me in. "Out for another early morning stroll?"

Paul's shift started at seven in the morning. Since he hadn't seen me leaving, he'd assumed I'd left before his shift started. God knows, he was used to seeing me coming back on a regular basis like this.

He being a fledgling writer, we'd chatted a few times about writing, and different techniques I used. I'd passed along one of the things I liked to do with my characters, a tip first shared with me by Brooklyn writer Denis Hamill, a columnist and successful thriller author. The concept was taking the time to just go for a walk through

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a neighborhood with a character, listen to how he describes it, watch what he pays attention to, appreciate it in the way that only he could.

Paul appreciated that advice, because while I have used that technique, getting wonderful results from it, Paul had told me on more than one occasion how useful it had been for him too.

Paul also told me the one thing he felt really good about was his character development. His job allowed him an opportunity rich with raw material for creating all kinds of different people. He was right too; I'd read several of his short stories, he did display a solid talent for characters.

"Walkin' with a character this morning?" he asked. He considered the way I was dressed once again with a crooked smile on his face. "A homeless guy, perhaps?"

"No, not this time, Paul. I just can't get enough of these New York August mornings."

He smiled and closed the door as I entered the opulent lobby.

That's when the female scent hit me again, and I closed my eyes, breathing it in. Now I knew that it definitely wasn't Anne Lee. So who was it?

Something darted out in front of my feet at floor level, breaking me from my pondering.

I reacted quickly enough not to trip over it, but still stumbled. And I didn't have to glance down to know that it was Matilda, the Algonquin's house cat. Though she mostly moved around like she owned the place and didn't bother much with the staff or clientele of the hotel, she and I had a unique relationship. I could tell that she

understood my animal nature, and so she liked to play with me, her fun little game of predator vs. predator.

I smiled at her, let out a low playful growl, to which she purred back softly before turning and casually wandering over to her lounge couch, as if nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred.

The concierge wasn't at the desk. I could tell by the scent of her lingering perfume that it was Linda, and that she'd just moved into the office. Of course, I didn't have to be a werewolf to be able to detect her perfume – she virtually bathed in it.

As I stepped into the elevator, I began to wonder about that other werewolf who was likely still somewhere in the city. I needed to put it all aside and just focus on getting five thousand words in the next Maxwell Bronte novel out for early this afternoon.

Once I finished the writing, would I have time to go hunting for him? And where would I start? There were certainly enough parks and green space in the city for him to hang out by. And why hadn't I ever encountered him before?

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I didn't at first realize I was picking up the familiar alluring female scent I'd noted earlier until I was standing in front of the door to my suite.

Being distracted and not focusing on identifying the scent brought her identify to me immediately.

Gail.

My ex-girlfriend.

And she was inside my apartment.

Chapter Eight: Werewolf revealed and “werelove” memories

WHEN I OPENED the door to my room, I saw Gail sitting in the armchair. It felt natural yet odd.

Particularly since we had broken it off a few years ago.

As I looked at her and breathed her in, I realized why I'd had difficulty placing her scent. She had switched perfumes. That, combined with it having been so long since I'd last seen her had thrown me a curveball.

It was surprising to me that she was there at all, especially given the way our relationship had ended.

Her heartbeat started racing the moment I opened the door. I stared at her, the brunette beauty with cool-green eyes, her sunglasses tucked just above bangs that framed her soft face, rounded cheekbones and full lips face in a gently curving cascade down past her shoulders. She wore clothes that were uncharacteristic for her but showed off her athletic body nicely. A white, cut-off shirt revealed well-toned abs and a slender waist. Black with yellow striped short-shorts showed off tanned legs that went on forever.

She was a beautiful, incredible woman. I'd been lucky to even be seen in her presence in the past, never mind

sleep with her. My own heart started racing, wishing it hadn't ended, wishing I could pull her close right there.

But there was something in her scent I'd never detected from her before. There was a defiance like she often got when in confrontation or argument. But underlying it was a layer of something; fear.

She was afraid of me?

Her heart raced even faster as I took in all these things, and I wasn't even all the way inside yet.

"I know the truth about you, Andrews," she said, standing and tossing a copy of that morning's New York Press at my feet. "I know you're a werewolf."

I gazed at her, then looked down at the paper, hoping I'd find my lower jaw there somewhere.

I looked back up at Gail and felt a pang in my heart. This beautiful woman whom I'd loved, this cherished beauty whom I'd laughed with, danced with, made sweet love with, suddenly knew my most intimate secret.

"Why?" she asked, getting up from the chair and pacing toward the window. "Why didn't you tell me?"

As she moved into the shadow between the desk lamp and the light coming in the window, I reflected on this remarkable woman whose company I never thought I would be graced with again.

I had first met Gail three years ago when I was writing *Tome of Terror*, the novel in which Maxwell Bronte is framed for the murder of the owner of a highly controversial, rare edition of the Necronomicon. Gail was my field expert in the realm of the occult.

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It had been the end of a long, exhausting day of research when I met up with her for our early evening appointment. I'd gotten her number from Anne Lee, Mack's executive assistant and made the contact earlier in the day, and arranged to meet her for coffee at about 6:00 p.m.

I remember walking to the appointment, a quick jaunt from the Algonquin to the Starbucks nestled within the Barnes and Noble on Fifth Avenue, more excited about the thought that I'd be able to browse the new releases section of the store after our meeting than about the meeting itself.

That changed the moment I spotted her.

And I knew exactly who she was when I walked into the coffee shop. Even if she hadn't been wearing an outfit that screamed "occult" to me – a black cotton shirt with a lacy frill from her neck to the top of her cleavage, a black collar studded with silver rivets, not unlike a dog's, tight, black leather pants and a shiny, black leather jacket – I would have been able to guess who she was merely by the way that her heart subtly changed its beat as I walked into the room.

I didn't attribute the heart-skip as anything other than the normal anticipatory feeling one gets when meeting a stranger.

But the moment I heard the heart-skip, I made eye contact with her, and she smiled at me with a confident recognition that I was the one she was to meet. She could have recognized me from the photo on one of my book

jackets, but I had the feeling that it wasn't that. Her manner struck me as slightly predatory in the way that she scanned the room. She was a very observant person. She wasn't just sitting in the room, she was actively participating in the room's flow, in its essence. You could tell that she wasn't merely seated among the other people at the table, but she was reading each of the other people's faces, confident of the stories each person told through the way they looked around, spoke to one another, fiddled with the props on their table, drank their beverage.

I rarely encounter people with that manner. It's not something I'd really noticed before acquiring my special senses, but some people have a way of reading a room, of sucking in the very marrow of the location they were in, studying the people around them as if they were bullet-point character sketches. In my time, it's usually been either other writers or certain criminal types who give off that sense. I'd yet to have met a person who read people's fortunes for a living, but it made sense to me that she would have that sense too.

I understood that fortune tellers partially rely on whatever divination tools they are using, and partially reading the subtle, unspoken reactions of the person.

So I was struck by Gail immediately. And not merely because she was the most attractive person in the room. No, I was struck with her because by the time I got to the table, I knew that we shared a special kinship, that, like me, she had a quick fix on the others we shared the coffee shop with.

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By the time I reached the table, I'd stopped taking in the sights and sounds around me, and focused completely on a single person.

Sure, she was physically beautiful. But there was something else about her, an aura, if you will, that cast its spell on me. Even without my heightened senses, I knew that I'd have been completely in awe, in total rapture of her.

Our quick meeting had turned into an hour of intriguing conversation, and we ended up moving to a restaurant down the street, where, upon finishing dinner, we'd ordered dessert, and round after round of coffee re-fills. The waiter that had served us got a huge tip for allowing us to stay for several hours just talking.

After the restaurant closed and we walked, the air between us filled with the type of conversation you might expect to hear between two life-long friends. I was extremely thankful for the timing of the cycle of the moon. If it had been just a few days earlier, I would have had to excuse myself a few hours earlier and by that time would likely have been racing through central park on all fours.

But no, the timing couldn't be better.

Our stroll brought us through the theatre district, walking the streets between Broadway and Fifth Avenue like a couple of trick-or-treaters not wanting to miss a single house.

Neither one of us had mentioned our deep and urgent desire not to let the evening end, and while my heart and a deeper part of me burned for her – something I knew she could tell, and which I detected was mutual – I was

glad that the entire first night the only physical thing that happened between us was the occasional light touch of the hand across the table, or, while walking, the way she held onto my arm.

We didn't even kiss when we parted ways in a grey, pre-dawn light. We just stood and looked longingly at one another, each knowing how completely infatuated the other person was, yet each holding our passion in check.

I think it must have been the fact we both knew that this could be the beginning of a phenomenal, life-long relationship, and thus there was no need to jump into anything.

And those first few weeks, the relationship did work out like that – we met for coffee and dinner again the next night, but not without a quick touch-base phone call in the middle of the afternoon. And again, we walked the entire evening, sharing intimate details of our lives. It was only when it had started to rain that we ran, hand in hand, up the street to an all-night diner where we'd spent the rest of the pre-dawn hours together.

It was on the third night that we'd made love for the first time. We'd agreed to meet at the hotel lobby at the Algonquin. When she'd walked up to the table where I was drinking a rye whisky, Noilly Pratt and pineapple juice, an Algonquin house specialty, I stood, the moment suddenly right between us to share a quick peck that turned into a heated, lengthy kiss.

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We'd quickly moved from there to my room, and after the most intensely physical and wild several hours of sex I'd ever had – we lay in bed and talked more.

I'd never loved another person so much as I'd loved Gail. I'd never known so much about another person either, nor had another person known so much about me.

Except for one single fact. I was a werewolf.

It is what, ultimately, led to our downfall.

From the time we met, we'd spent as many hours together as possible, mostly in the evening, as our daily appointments and schedules permitted. And we spent virtually every single night together, either at my room in the Algonquin or at her flat in Chelsea.

But three and a half weeks into our relationship was when the cycle of the moon worked its magic and I needed to spend my evenings apart from her.

It's a shame, too, as my skill as a lover, my endurance, my stamina, were all improved during this phase. And Gail could sense it, I know. But she didn't know what was causing it.

When I first came up with the excuse that I had to fly out of the city on a book-related trip, a story I'd been concocting in my head for weeks, she was disappointed, but understanding.

During the cycle the following month – it becomes almost funny how I can measure my life now by the cycles of the moon – my excuse had been I was under deadline to get my novel in to the publisher.

By the time the third cycle arrived and I'd come down with a nasty "stomach flu," I started detecting her suspicions about my regular disappearances.

It was the fifth cycle when the suspicion turned into accusation. She knew for sure that I was lying to her about what I was doing during the specific moon cycle, but she didn't know exactly what.

With nothing more to go on, and given that it was usually the evening and the wee hours of the night in which she couldn't track me down, she'd assumed I'd taken another lover. And that had been how most of her relationships had ended. She'd always chosen some hot stud of a guy, taking physical appearance and a strong sexual nature over a decency.

She'd mentioned it multiple times. How, though she found me just as sexually attractive as the models and actors she'd been with, that I had something none of them did. I had personality, I had a depth, and I had substance.

But I could feel how my deceiving her about my werewolf nature was leading to the breakdown in the intense communication we had established so quickly. And that she was feeling like, despite me having fooled her into thinking I was more than those other mindless hunks before, I kept secrets, was lying to her, and was unfaithful.

We'd broken up by the time I went into the next cycle.

I'd lost a part of my heart then – something special within me had died. And yes, even though I saw it coming, weeks before it happened, it still caused incredible shock and pain.

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But I imagine it was foolish of me to think that I could maintain a solid and truth-filled relationship with anyone while keeping that big a secret from them. While living with the half man, half animal that I was.

Foolish, stupid, idiotic.

Why didn't I just tell her?

I thought that I'd blown it, that I'd never see Gail again, but here she was, in my hotel room.

She was standing at the window, looking out, not facing me. "Well?" she said, and her heartbeat revealed another jolt of fear – likely the fear at having her back to me.

That hurt.

I stared at her back, finding it difficult to break the hypnotic thoughts of how we met and our time together. My mind tossed between that, the pain I'd lived through when she left me, and that she was actually afraid of me now.

"I deserve an answer," she said, looking over her shoulder at me. "When I accused you of sleeping around, you didn't deny it. You just stood there like an idiot. Why didn't you just tell me the truth?"

"Gail," I started, my eyes watering with the sudden rush of emotions. "I don't know what to say. I mean, how could I begin to tell you something like that? How is it possible that you would ever believe me?"

She turned to face me, arms crossed. "I'm the first person who would have believed you. And you of all people should know it." She looked down at the floor. "For

Christ's sake, Michael, I run an occult shop. I teach divination. I'm a consultant for shows about the supernatural. I'm the only person who would have believed you."

It was true, of course. Why didn't I think of that a couple of years ago? Why hadn't I just taken the chance and told her about my true nature?

"I . . ." I began, not sure what I wanted to say. "I was never unfaithful to you, Gail."

I had to struggle against the overwhelming desire to fall to my knees and wrap my arms around her legs. My eyes welled up as I fought against the emotions that quickly bubbled back to the surface. I hadn't been physically nor emotionally close to anyone since Gail left me. While I see Buddy every six months or so when he blows through town, it's not much. And while I meet on a semi-regular basis with Mack, and though he has a way of getting to the point and digging to the heart of the matter, we never get into the types of discussions you can expect to have with a dear friend. Gail was the only person I'd truly ever opened my heart up to.

The overpowering thought coursing through my being was, now that she knew exactly what I was, now that she was here to confront me about it, maybe this meant that we could pick up the pieces. Maybe we could try again.

I stopped fighting against the tears, and just let them flow. As they blurred my vision, I again settled back on the other sensory input that I had been ignoring as the emotion began to sweep me away.

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The fear in Gail's heartbeat that I had detected moments ago went away. It was replaced with an emotion I hadn't yet felt from her, at least in my direction.

It was pity.

Pity?

She felt sorry for me.

What the hell?

I heard her moving across the room, could smell her scent getting stronger as she approached.

My heart started to warm as she reached me and I felt the gentle touch of her hands on my shoulders.

"Gail," I cried. "Please forgive me." I turned my head, let my lips caress her knuckle and place a light kiss there.

I opened my eyes, saw her hand, and my sudden hope shot all to hell.

I looked up at her and the sympathy, the pity in her eyes was virtually gushing down at me. She didn't say anything, just pursed her lips and slowly shook her head back and forth, uttering, "Oh, Michael," under her breath.

On her third finger was a solid gold band that housed a massive, soul-crushing engagement diamond. Not sure how I'd missed that giant rock.

Chapter Nine: About last night, about last love

"ANDREWS, YOU'RE SUCH an ass," Gail said, seeing that I'd noticed the ring and was shocked. "A sweet, lovable, stupid ass. As I told you last night, his name is Howard. You don't remember seeing me last night just minutes before you changed, do you?"

I shook my head. No, I didn't remember speaking with Gail at all. I stared at the engagement ring on her finger and still had no words.

"I met him about six months after you and I broke up. He's different than any of the men I've been with. Something I perhaps learned about myself that you helped me with. That I didn't need to be with the rebels and bad boys. That it was okay to be with a man who reminded me of my father. Howard treats me like a lady, and he loves me.

"Howard asked me to marry him two weeks ago." She stepped back and sat in the armchair again. "And what the hell are you wearing anyway?"

I stood and looked down at my clothes. Oh yeah. That was certainly one thing that I always appreciated about Gail – she could take an uncomfortable situation and quickly switch topics to ease my embarrassment.

"Let me change," I said.

The flash of understanding finally rang on her face. "Oh, you're just getting back from last night, aren't you? You haven't been home since last night's full moon."

I smiled sheepishly at her, then moved into the bedroom calling out, "Please wait while I get cleaned up, okay?"

I took off the dress shirt and jeans and let them fall to the carpet. As I looked at them, I marveled at how I didn't even want to pick them up to throw them in the trash, never-mind knowing I'd been wearing them for the past hour.

From the other room she asked. "You don't remember seeing me last night, either time, do you?"

Either time? I still had no idea what she was talking about. "No." I opened my dresser and picked out a cotton golf shirt.

"You have no memory of the time when you're a wolf then?"

I fished a pair of boxer shorts out of my top drawer and selected a pair of khaki shorts. "Uh, no."

"I figured as much." She mumbled something I wasn't meant to hear, but which I picked up easily. I think she was testing me. "Then let me catch you up on the fact that we already had a brief discussion about this last night."

"Okay. I'll be right out. Just hopping in the shower."

I could hear her fiddling with the doors of the stereo cabinet. By the time I'd turned the water on, I could hear

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the steady beat of John Cougar's "Hurts So Good" – Cougar or Mellancamp, or whatever he was calling himself these days, had always been one of her favorites.

As the hot blast of water hit my body I cringed. Not from the heat. From the embarrassment.

I'd just made a fool of myself in front of Gail, but, in that manner that she had, she'd allowed an out and quickly changed the course of the conversation.

And it was funny that, as soon as we'd taken care of the initial business, and getting across a few details like "I'm a werewolf" and "I'm engaged to another man" we'd easily slid into the comfortable pattern of behavior we used to have. Her making herself comfortable at my place while I was otherwise occupied.

A deep and mournful pang throbbed in my heart to know she was just in the next room, yet so far away from me. I turned to let the hot water pound against my face.

I hadn't realized the depth of how much I missed her.

But she'd mentioned that we saw each other last night. And I had no memory of that. It must have been sometime between my walk up Fifth Avenue and when I got to Central Park.

I rushed through the rest of the shower, eager to find out the details of last night.

Chapter Ten: Cougar, Bronte and a Canadian fool

WHEN I'D FINISHED dressing, I walked out of my bedroom to an empty room. Cougar's American Fool CD was still playing, now on "Thundering Hearts."

But Gail was nowhere to be seen.

Her scent still lingered fresh in the air, but the immediate smell of her was gone.

The mystery writer in me, of course, immediately suspected foul play. But I hadn't heard anything amiss while in the shower. And there was none of the sour-sweet smell of sweat or angst to indicate that something foul had occurred here.

She was just gone.

I looked around. No note, nothing.

Another tentative sniff.

Gone. Just like before.

I rushed to the door, looked out into the hallway. Her scent lingered there, both the scent of her earlier arrival and the more recent scent of her departure. And there was no other scent in the hallway – she wasn't abducted or dragged out of my place unwillingly. No, she'd left of her own volition. I considered following the easy trail

Mark Leslie

she'd left. But, if she wanted me to, she'd have at least left a note.

Why would she leave when we hadn't finished our conversation? It's not like I'd cornered her. No, she'd actually come to me, wanting to talk to me, about the fact that she knew I was a wolf, that she'd seen me last night.

I went back into the room, rushed to the window, opened it, and looked down. The street was busy, the one-way traffic moving steadily east, the city's lifeblood flowing. There was no sign of her.

I pulled back inside, and, although her scent was still strong in the air, I buried my face in the cushion of the chair where she'd sat.

After a minute, I stood and looked at the clock. It was nine thirty-three.

Mack's voice drifted into my head. *Need I remind you that you're under contract and two months behind schedule?*

That was enough for me. As good as a kick in the pants from the man himself. I thought about pissing Mack off further, then about following Gail, or, at least, going over to her place.

The image of Gail's engagement ring hung in my mind.

I took a deep breath, started walking to the door, then I let out a loud sigh, turned and walked over to my desk, cracked open my laptop and started typing.

Maxwell Bronte Novel - Untitled

A Canadian Werewolf in New York

I stared at the title line for several minutes, drumming my fingers on the desk, mind drifting. This wasn't starting out so well. I couldn't stop thinking about Gail.

So put that to use, a part of my mind suggested.

I bit my bottom lip, cracked my knuckles, and started typing again.

Bronte stepped out of the shower, reached for a towel and buried his face in it, enjoying the simple pleasure of the soft texture on his face, the clean scent of the fabric softener, a moment of simple bliss.

He tried to tell himself he wasn't stalling, that he wasn't nervous about going back out there and facing Gwendolyn. It'd been ten years since he'd last seen her, after all. Ten years since she'd broken his heart by marrying that Wall Street business executive.

But now she was back.

A phone call just hours ago, in the early pre-dawn hours, her whispered voice, begging him to help her, telling him that she was just around the corner from his apartment.

He'd rushed down to meet her, to bring her back to his place. Without exchanging many words, he'd put on some coffee and told her he was going to first grab a quick shower so she could calm herself down enough to tell him what the problem was.

And of course, his own motivation was to calm himself down, stop the frantic race through his

heart because the only woman he'd ever loved needed him again.

But when he toweled off, got dressed, and went back downstairs to the kitchen, Gwendolyn was gone. Bronte focused on the overturned mug on the kitchen table, the coffee spread out over the surface of the table, and dripping in thick black drops to the floor.

This was bad.

After a while, the phone rang, breaking me from what I thought was a good start.

Damn. I couldn't ignore it. What if it were her?

"Hello?"

"Michael." The voice was a whisper. Gail. "I need your help."

For a second, I marveled at the scene I had just written. Sure, I'd based it on Gail's return into my life, but I'd already given it an additional twist, with the ex-girlfriend needing help. Reality seemed to be following the fiction.

"Gail, where are you?"

"I'm at Grand Central. In the lobby. I'm sorry I took off on you. I can explain. But can you get down here quickly?"

Interlude – Wolf Night – Three

THE WOLF TURNED, spotted the female human walking slowly up the far side of the knoll, about one hundred feet away.

Tilting his head, he regarded the woman, confused at a strange, new feeling it had no memory of feeling before.

There was an overwhelmingly familiar scent to this woman. And an aura of trust and comfort.

Humans were normally the source of disquiet, of trepidation. The instinct to create distance between himself and a human typically kicked in at the sight or smell of one of them.

This time was different.

This time there was a familiarity to the scent with a striking earthy, wood-like base note.

There was something about this particular human that brought a pack-like familiarity with it.

Intrigued, the wolf crept toward her.

Chapter Eleven: A favor for an old friend and a grand central mess

AS I HUNG up the phone, I looked at my laptop on the desk, the first two hundred or so words of the latest Maxwell Bronte novel waited for me to go on.

It was about half past nine. I had to write another forty-eight hundred words and have them to Mack by two. It might be tight if there was nothing else for me to do, but Gail needed me.

I turned away from the laptop, feeling an almost audible hiss of discontent from it at my betrayal of Mack as it settled into standby mode. An even deeper queasy feeling settled in as I thought about how I might be screwing myself out of a contract.

Gail needed me.

Despite the fact she was betrothed to another man, I still had deep feelings for her and would do whatever I could to help her.

I left the apartment and her scent was still there, mingled with that new perfume she'd been wearing. It was easy to follow.

With the exception, of course, of the elevator ride. I'd ended up taking a different elevator than the one she'd been in. In fact, not only wasn't I graced with Gail's sweet

scent, but I had to share the elevator with this overweight tourist with a particularly nasty combination of a body odor and rye smell to him.

He stood beside two small packed suitcases in his red flowered button-down shirt, black shorts and, you guessed it, black socks and sandals. If the bags weren't enough of a clue, the despair I smelled off him, mixed with the booze and sweaty smell to him told me he was at the end of his big city vacation.

It was a relief to both my nostrils and my state of mind when we got to the lobby and I scuttled out of that elevator.

As I walked the few blocks south down to Grand Central, I followed the exact route Gail had taken, not wanting to miss a step of where she'd been.

And though I was focused on Gail, I still relished the raw sensation of walking down Fifth Avenue during the morning rush. My first time in this city, I'd gotten here on a weekend, and so, though the tourist traffic was moderate and steady, I had no idea the difference a work-day made. And since I rarely, I'm talking about sheer pedestrian traffic.

A thick flow of people coursed over every part of the sidewalk. But it wasn't a thick, unmoving line, like the kinds you see in the middle of Times Square. No, they were all moving in unison, like a colony of ants of every color and size. And while they all appeared to be moving together, they were actually all motivated by their own unique agendas. Yet they still created this marvelous flow of traffic, the way a series of sticks tossed into a set

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of rapids all move purposely forward, but all taking slightly different paths as they sway in similar currents or bounce in different directions off of the rocks.

And that's just the visual. There were so many layers of scents and sounds to surf through that it was a smorgasbord of the human experience. Here there were heartbeats and scents exuding a thirst and drive to arrive at work or make it to the next appointment. The scent of hope walked beside the scent of anger. The sound of a mid-management suit talking on his cell phone mingled alongside a homeless person's plea for spare change.

While a good part of my werewolf nature enjoys the freedom of space, there was also something raw, rudimentary and powerful about being swallowed up within such a crowd.

As I approached the station, I realized how Gail didn't even tell me where in Grand Central she was or where she would meet me. She knew I retained some of the heightened senses in human form and would thus be able to determine where she was by her scent alone.

When I walked into the station, I followed the lingering scent of Gail's perfume down the north stairs and spotted her sitting on a bench. She was looking my way, had likely had me in her sights from the moment I'd started descending the steps.

She stood as I approached, and without speaking, she stepped into my personal space, placing her hands on my chest, and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. Out of old habit I almost took her into my arms and lifted her off of her feet, but stopped myself.

She could read my impulse, because she smiled up at me and said, "I know, Michael. I know. It's a bit awkward for me too. But thank you so much for coming down here."

"So what's going on? What's wrong?" Her heart was beating fast, and there was the smell of intensity to her, and I knew it had nothing to do with my presence.

"Oh, Michael. It's Howard." She shook her head. "I don't know how to explain this, and it's the reason that I left your place so quickly. But, I think that Howard has gotten into something a little over his head. And I need your help to get him out of it."

My heart sank at the mention of her fiancé. Of course, I was kidding myself if I thought there could ever be something besides friendship between us.

"Sure, just tell me and I'll see what I can do."

"I'm not sure what it is, but Howard has been acting odd lately. He has been working overtime, taking phone calls at all hours that he hasn't explained and is far less talkative about what's going on at work.

"I know he used to have an issue with gambling and I'm wondering if that has resurfaced with all the stress related to paying for the wedding.

"I'm worried that he has slipped back into it, is possibly in trouble, perhaps owes some people some money. I'm wondering if you can follow him and find out; see what is going on so I can help him."

She looked at her watch, then cast a quick glance around the station. "There isn't much time. He'll be here soon. I can't stay. I've got to hide somewhere." She dug

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into her purse, pulled out a handkerchief. "Here, this has his scent on it." Then she produced a wallet-sized shot of him. "If this also helps, here's what he looks like."

I held the handkerchief, not needing to bring it to my nostrils to detect Howard's unique smell on it, especially since it contained the additional, overpowering scent of his aftershave. It was Old Spice. My father's aftershave of choice. Without looking at his picture, I had a sudden image of him, of Howard's old-fashioned nature.

I handed her back the handkerchief and studied his picture. It didn't quite match my mental image, but I started to build an account of him immediately.

He was middle-aged, had a thin face with a pale complexion, and, although it was a bust shot, I could see he had a slight build based on the narrow width of his shoulders. He had short, blond hair and small, round glasses that rested mid-way down his nose. I immediately imagined he had a habit of tilting his head back to look at people through those glasses rather than pushing them up his nose.

I figured he was either an accountant or a stockbroker, perhaps even a banking advisor. And, since Old Spice didn't seem to match his lifestyle, I imagine he wore it as some sort of ode or remembrance of his father.

I didn't want to like Howard, but there wasn't anything immediate about my impression of him that I didn't like. Well, except for the fact that he had Gail.

There was a part of me that wondered what Gail was doing with a guy like him. But the Old Spice, some of the "older man" attributes, suggested he perhaps appealed

to the absent father from Gail's childhood that I knew she had struggled with. Howard's essence exuded that older man, fatherly presence. Gail likely found those elements about him appealing, fulfilling a deep-rooted need from long back.

Gail skittered off, doing her best to lose herself in the crowd. I, of course, kept a bead on her and had to force myself not to continue paying attention to where she was, but, rather, to start seeking out Howard.

I took a few moments to try to absorb the unique and intriguing atmosphere of the terminal. It's a wonderfully vast echoic chamber, filled with an amazing cross-section of people. It's like a microcosm of the larger island of Manhattan.

To my left was a kiosk selling coffee and muffins, ready-made fruit, and yogurt cups, and fresh fruit. A tall man in a dark-green suit was adding sugar to his coffee, then he took a few steps over to the newspaper vendor and bought the morning edition of some paper. Behind him, a woman struggled toward the news kiosk pushing an umbrella stroller with a sleeping toddler in a bright-yellow jumpsuit with one hand and carrying a baby in her other arm. As she reached for her purse for change, Howard's scent came to me from the left.

I picked him out relatively easily, spying him walking immediately ahead of two men in dark trench coats and suits, guys that reminded me of characters out of *Goodfellas*.

I was trying to determine if the two men were walking with Howard or merely moving in the same direction as

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him, when someone brushed past me from behind. I normally don't pay much heed to such things, particularly when I'm in large crowds, apart from the annoyance of it. But this was different. There was something peculiar about the way the person who pushed past me moved – the sudden whiff of anxiety, the speed of his heartbeat – so I turned back to him.

His anxiety level increased as he headed for the woman with the stroller. She'd be virtually helpless with both hands full and two kids to mind. I gathered the anxious young man was intent on an easy purse swiping.

I took a single step toward him.

Back where I'd spotted Howard, a ruckus occurred.

There was a startled yell, the clattering of something falling to the floor, and I strained to see through the crowd as the two men I'd seen with Howard were rushing him towards the exit, a firm hand on each upper arm.

I began rushing toward them.

The woman near the news kiosk started yelling, "No, stop! Please! Someone! Help!"

Still moving toward Howard and his assailants, I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see a purse snatching, but instead spotted the mother on the floor in front of the newsstand, clinging desperately to the baby in her arms and trying to get up. The stroller was overturned beside her. A few feet away, the hood carried the toddler in the yellow jumpsuit on his shoulders, moving fast toward the south exit.

I changed direction and charged after the man. It didn't take me more than about a dozen steps to reach him.

I managed to get my hands under the child's shoulders and pull him easily from the man's shoulders.

"What the hell are you doing?" the man growled, launching himself toward me.

I'd turned my back to him, rushing back toward the woman when his hands came down solidly on my shoulders in an attempt to wheel me around. Without much effort, I brushed off his hold and continued on my way. A fist came down hard on my back. Then another one on my shoulder, and one more to the back of my head. I was impressed with the strength of his punches, but they didn't slow me.

A few more steps and I was closer to the young woman and her baby. I was surprised that this child abductor was actually sticking around to risk being caught.

I smiled down at the toddler as we approached the woman and realized he was completely terrified. Of me. And I realized that the scent on him was new. Meaning he hadn't been terrified while sitting on the man's shoulders I had plucked him from. He hadn't been terrified until I grabbed him.

I paused, looking at the woman as she righted the stroller that still contained her strapped-in toddler.

What the hell?

Upon closer observation, it was her purse that was missing.

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The purse-snatcher must have caught her off balance by pushing the stroller over to distract her.

I'd seen the underside of the overturned stroller and a man walking away with a toddler dressed in the same color.

And drawn a completely incorrect conclusion.

If I had relied more on my heightened senses, I wouldn't have made these mistakes. Was I that distracted by Gail?

I turned toward the man who'd been beating on my back, holding the toddler toward him. I recognized, now, that he and the boy I was carrying had a similar, familial smell. Father and son.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I thought he belonged to this lady."

He took the young boy from my arms and gave me a punch in the face for good measure. "Goddamn freak!"

I didn't react to the punch except to mutter an apology again. If he wanted to keep punching me, I would just stand there and take it.

I deserved it, after all.

Since I'm not a father I can only imagine the horror he must have felt to have a complete stranger pluck his son off of his shoulders in the middle of Grand Central Terminal. I'm only glad that I didn't hurt him before grabbing his child.

I looked back at the woman who'd had her purse snatched, debating trying to right my wrong by finding the man who'd taken it from her.

But I still had Howard to deal with.

I glanced back in the direction that the men had been dragging him. They must have left the building already.

Sprinting in their direction, I was relieved to divorce myself from the embarrassing situation I'd just created. As I ran to the door, I wondered if Gail had seen what had happened, seen how foolish I had been.

I went out through the exit, easily picking up Howard's Old Spice scent. I followed the scent out to the sidewalk, then south about twenty feet or so.

The scent ended at the edge of the sidewalk on the street.

Howard's abductors must have had a car waiting. If I'd been here sooner, I would very likely have been able to trail the vehicle.

I looked out over the sea of traffic heading down Fifth Avenue, unable to determine what to do next.

Behind me, I could hear Gail's footsteps, smell her worried scent. I slowly turned to face her as she approached, thinking how I'd just screwed up.

Without a word, Gail lunged at me and pounded her fists against my chest. I stood there, dumbfounded, letting her hit me, unable to look her in the eye. I didn't need to be able to smell the intense anger, the hatred, the fear for her abducted fiancé to know how I had let her down.

No heightened super senses were required to be able to read those things in the tears of rage and in the sheer horror in her face.

When she ran out of energy she crumpled against me, her head against my chest and between sobs the words

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finally came, surely but slowly between deep anguished breaths. "How . . . could . . . you?"

I opened my mouth, about to tell her that I'd find him, about to promise her that no matter what it took, I'd find him, but nothing came out. Perhaps a part of me knew that I'd done enough damage here – that I'd already failed enough times today.

After a moment, Gail lifted her head up and then turned and walked away.

I stood looking after her, helpless.

Sure, I could have followed her, could have tried to explain.

But I knew Gail well enough to know she wouldn't want to hear any of it. Not now anyway. And besides, while I hadn't promised her that I'd find Howard, I still planned on doing just that.

Gail had just disappeared from view when I caught a distinct statement I knew was directed at me.

"There he is officer. There's the pervert who tried to steal the little boy."

Those words were my invitation to get the hell out of there, and quickly.

Chapter Twelve: A Thoreau-styled walk with Bronte

IT DIDN'T TAKE much for me to elude the officer who had been heading in my direction, not once I got onto the crowded city streets. Within the first three blocks, which I zigzagged past, his scent faded, letting me know he had taken a wrong turn, was heading in the wrong direction and I had successfully evaded him.

As I walked up the street in the direction of the Algonquin Hotel, I started wondering what exactly Howard had gotten himself into. I didn't know much about this Howard guy, but based on his looks, I think I'd pegged him correctly as a financial analyst type of guy. Perhaps he worked for a bank or an investment firm.

But that didn't explain how he got mixed up with the guys in the suits who looked like they'd walked off the set of *Goodfellas*. And I wasn't clear on what or who they were. Sure, they reminded me of characters from some gangster movie, but I couldn't tell mafia guys from Italian businessmen. I mean, for all I knew, these guys could be FBI or CIA. And maybe Howard had gotten himself into hot water in some sort of illegal operation. Maybe he'd been working at embezzling for a client and was being picked up for questioning.

Mark Leslie

The fact was I didn't know anything.

So I did exactly what I did when I was writing and needed to be reinvigorated, or inspired.

I took a walk.

It was Brooklyn author Denis Hamill who taught me that. I remember him giving me the advice one evening over drinks at a little bar in SoHo called Blind Tiger. This was back when I was just starting out, my first novel sold but not yet published, and had bumped into him, offered to buy him a drink because I'd loved his novels and his newspaper column so much.

The whole thing blew my mind because he invited me to sit with him, and once we started talking about writing, the conversation took on a life of its own. Over the course of the next few hours, he shared wonderful tidbits of writing advice.

He said to me, "Michael, a writer needs to go out and walk. Dickens did some of his best thinking and plotting on long walks through London, from affluent neighborhoods to the people of the abyss."

He then went on to tell me that once he has created a character, he likes to take them out on a walk and explore the sights, sounds, smells and textures through them. "Let them feel the rain, the sunshine, the snow underfoot. Let them hear and smell and taste and touch the world." Basically, he was saying, let them live, let them breathe, let them occupy a space and time. And watch them, observe the nuances of each of them and how they react to the stimuli.

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I remember him smiling at me and then pausing before speaking again. "As you sponge up the world, so will they. And you will see them come to life as members of a neighborhood."

These were very fine words of advice, and advice that I've continued to try to heed over the years.

But here's the absolute beauty in those words.

They didn't just apply to writing.

They applied to problem solving.

And that's exactly what Dickens was doing, what Hamill does when he takes his characters out for a walk and experiences the world through their eyes.

He's problem solving.

There's something about the distinct nature of walking that triggers other processes deeply buried beneath. The whole concept might stem back to what Thoreau was harking about in his classic essay, "Walking."

Walking can put you in touch with the simple things – it can help to make things clear.

And that's exactly what I needed to do at that moment. Exactly where I needed to go. I needed to take that walk up Madison Avenue with Howard beside me. I needed to listen to what he had to say about the various shops and stores along the way, observe which ones he paused at as much as which ones he ignored. Pay attention to where he focused his attention, how he approached each intersection. Live the essence of this street through his perception.

Yes, a difficult thing to do, given that I didn't really know Howard and was mostly making things up about

him from a generic concept I'd gotten off of a quick sight and a quick smell.

But it was a start at least.

As I moved up the street, I first imagined Howard passing by the Swarovski galley store on the corner of East Fifty-ninth. I envisioned him slowing down his pace to actually take in the different items in the display window; stroking his chin as he eyed the gorgeous crystal dangles with the pinwheel-shaped diamond crests, imagining how they would look on Gail.

I immediately resented him for that, jealous of the fact that this was the guy who got to buy Gail nice things, who got to think about those things, about spoiling her. The guy who got to drape the necklace over her neck, then place a kiss there. The guy who got to slowly unzip the back of her dress and let it fall to the floor, then lean in to cup her breasts and bury his nose in her hair.

I gave up on that exercise rather quickly.

Fucking Howard.

As I kept walking, I remembered how sometimes taking a walk wasn't about thinking about the writing at all, but about doing something completely different. About just walking as a means of taking in the scenery on my own, about taking my mind off of whatever strange writing issue was facing me and causing the anxiety.

So, if I took a walk to escape from writing, to clear my head of the issue I was focusing on, then perhaps I would use this walk to clear my head of the issue with Howard by focusing on my writing.

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I started to imagine Maxwell Bronte, and see the sights I was seeing through his eyes. After all, Maxwell and I had walked so many roads together over the years that it was an easy thing to do.

Maxwell was like someone who had been a dear friend my entire life. One of those rare people who I could sit across the table from in a restaurant and not have to fill the air with idle chatter, just be comfortable in the silence, because we were comfortable with each other. He was like a life-long friend that you just know would love the steak you just ate, or the movie you just saw, or the joke you just heard, because you knew so many of the particular nuances of their personality, their likes, dislikes, the things that made them smile or maybe just get up in the morning.

Maxwell and I had that relationship.

We'd gone on many Denis-Hamill-inspired walks; more than any other character I'd created. I'd walked countless miles beside my good friend Maxwell, saw many of the wonderful sights of Manhattan Island through his eyes, experienced many events through his unique perception.

And, I realized, I loved him like a brother.

In fact, taking an imaginary walk with him was like slipping on an old, beat-up pair of comfortable shoes. Sure, they were worn and smelly and threadbare. But they fit so perfectly, and you knew exactly what to expect as you slid them onto your feet.

My relationship with Maxwell was like that.

So I took his hand and started walking down the street, decidedly happy that I would be sharing the pleasure of this walk with him.

I hadn't walked more than four or five blocks before something caught my attention. I'd been having a dialogue with Maxwell, listening to him tell me the excited story of the time he was eight years old and had dared to have the training wheels taken off of his bike, when a familiar scent suddenly captured my attention.

I paused, sifted through the myriad of scents bombarding my nose, and I was able to pick it out.

It was the scent, not of the men who had abducted Howard, but of the suits themselves. Those distinctive *Goodfellas* style suits they all wore. They had obviously come from the same source, the same tailor, or been run through the same dry cleaner, but they had a distinctive fabric scent that identified them as unique, at least to my nose.

And I wouldn't have noticed it had I been focusing on tracking; because if I had I most likely would have been trying to focus in on the odor of the men in those suits.

It's funny how I can tune in on a particular noise or sensation, blocking all of the others away; that my conscious mind doesn't always pay attention to the influx of sensory input from the periphery. It's always there, but I'm not always attuned to it while moving around on autopilot.

I suppose the act of trying to pay attention to it all might make a person mad, so yes, it was quite often that I would be minding my own business, wrapped up in

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whatever conscious thought or process kept the steady flow of sensory input from driving me bonkers, when a particular noise, smell or sight would command my attention.

And so, focusing on something else had helped me detect this unique element. The fabric of the suits.

It was something, at least.

I paused, let the scent filter in, and determined that the distinct fabric scent had been on this street where I was standing not all that long ago, that there were perhaps two or three individuals, whose body odors were uniquely infused into the suits, and the northerly direction they had been moving in.

Maintaining a “hook” on the distinct smells of the fabric of the suit combined with the infused body odors I was able to deduce three men.

I traced the scents north for another block before turning right at the next street.

These weren’t the men I had encountered before, but were very likely part of the same gang; so finding them might properly lead me to Howard.

When I moved up another block I picked up a fourth scent mingled in with theirs.

Even though it was a new scent, it was somewhat familiar. It reminded me of Howard.

Howard?

I paused, compared the fourth person’s scent as it lingered with my memory of Howard’s. No, it wasn’t him, but it contained many elements that Howard’s smell possessed.

A relative.

A close relative.

As I was reflecting upon what this might mean, I heard a faint noise burst out of the typical city background noise that I recognized immediately.

It was the distinct sound of flesh hitting flesh, mixed with a bone on bone feel to it – in other words, knuckles hitting cheekbone, followed by a groan.

A second punch followed it, this one a punch to a softer air, followed by another groan and an exultation of air. A punch to the gut. Then came a third hit, less fleshy and more boney, most likely a knee connecting with a skull.

The sounds were coming from across the street.

As I crossed the street toward the alley where the punching was coming from, I heard a scuffling of perhaps three or four distinct sets of feet.

No words were being spoken, just grunts and heavy breathing. A few more punches punctuated through the air, the final one with the gristly crunching of a nose being broken, then the sound of someone falling to the pavement, hard.

I quickened my pace.

When I turned the corner of the alley, I could see a group of three men in dark suits standing over a man laying prone on the alley floor. Two of them were kicking him. The third stood near the man's head, hands planted on his hips, watching the event.

"Hey," I called out, running toward the group. "Leave him alone!"

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As I rushed forward, I was able to smell more about what was going on, pick up the pattern of the four distinct heart beats.

The attackers weren't filled with the blood rage that one would expect witnessing such a scene, nor were they filled with any sort of heightened adrenaline.

No, these were seasoned pros. Hit men.

With the exception of the one closest to me. His adrenaline and fear was spiked much higher than the other two, suggesting to me that he was a newbie, perhaps only "on the job" for a short time. He was the first to turn tail and run in the opposite direction.

The other two paused long enough to size me up as I came charging toward them, and the one who'd been watching the other two pummel the man, leaned down and whispered to the fallen man.

"Your lesson for today is over." Then he gestured to the other man, and they dashed down the alley. As I neared, I could hear that the heartbeat of the fallen man had become sporadic. I smelled fresh blood mixing with the dust and dirt of the concrete alley floor.

"It's okay," I said quietly as I reached the prone man. "They're gone now." I crouched, noticing the stream of blood pouring from a gash on his forehead.

Then the flashback hit me.

Racing down the alley, the blur of the buildings on either side, the whine of the police siren closing in.

And the damp, sticky feel of blood on my right forearm.

The flashback ended, and I started to turn the guy over, slowly, talking to him, telling him I was trying to

help. His heartbeat remained sporadic, jumpy and I thought he might be at risk of a heart attack. His left eye was swollen shut, his nose was a mess of twisted flesh and broken bone, and his lower lip was split wide open. Blood poured from so many different places on his face that it seemed to be more of a solid crimson mask than a series of cuts and wounds.

He was white, in his mid-thirties with short, blond hair. He was dressed in a business suit, a light grey one. Not at all like the suits of the guys who had just fled the scene. But he looked a bit familiar

That's when it hit me.

The reason this guy's scent reminded me of Howard was because he was, as I'd suspected, a relative. A close relative. Smelling him up close, seeing him, even with the damage the thugs had inflicted upon him, the familial resemblance was uncanny.

This man must be Howard's brother.

Chapter Thirteen: The smell of antiseptic, blood, anxiety & fear and the memory of a kiss

I NEEDED TO get Howard's busted-up brother help, and fast. But I also couldn't afford to lose the suited hitmen who were beating a hasty retreat all the way down at the far end of the alley.

Well, two of them, at least. The first bad guy to run was gone, completely off my radar. But the last two were still easily within scent tracking range.

It was obvious that the one who'd been standing at the beaten man's head was the leader within their small pack.

And he was the one I needed to get to in order to get some information about where I could find Howard.

I reached for my cell phone, so I could call 911, and realized for the first time that I didn't have it on me.

I'd left my apartment too hastily. I'd forgotten it.

So I did the only thing that came to mind. I lifted Howard's brother onto my shoulder and started to race down the alley after the finely dressed thugs.

There were a series of hospitals on the East Side, such as Rockefeller University Hospital or New York Presbyterian Hospital, and I consoled myself with the fact that,

while I was chasing these guys down the alley, at least I was heading in the right direction to get the guy help.

He moaned on my shoulder – it was the first time he uttered anything, and I took that as a good sign. His heart also seemed to be returning to a more normal pattern. I also took that for a good sign.

The scent I was tracking told me that, upon reaching the end of the alley, the suits had headed left onto Park Avenue.

I quickened my pace, trying as best I could to tune in to the sounds coming from that direction that weren't traffic, horns or regular footfalls. All I could get was an indistinct sound of multiple racing footsteps.

I continued to follow the faint scent of the chemical used to clean their suits and followed it.

When I got to the street, I turned left and though I couldn't see them anywhere, the scent of those suits was now easy for me to follow. And here, there was also a unique smell of sweat mingled with the suit. It was a heavy, damp, musky smell, and I could tell that one of the men I was pursuing, although in pretty decent shape, must have been a heavy sweater. Not just a typical heavy sweater, but the honey-thick perspiration kind. What was it those radio ads called the condition? *Hyperhidrosis*.

That, to me, was like hitting the jackpot. I consciously absorbed as much of his unique odor as possible, in order to place a marker on it in my mind.

Particularly since I wasn't one hundred percent sure I would be able to catch these guys – I had to at least have something to follow, something to go on. And a uniquely

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overpowering scent like that was a wonderfully brilliant beacon that would be easy to trace.

"Thanks Mr. Hyperhidrosis. You'll help me find Howard." I mumbled, deciding that I had enough to go on even if I did lose their trail at this point. Given the heart condition of the man I was carrying it was likely best to get him to a hospital.

"Howie?" the man on my shoulder said in a voice so faint that a normal ear wouldn't have picked it up.

"What did you just say?"

"Howie. They said they had Howie."

"Howard?"

"Yes. Howard Clark."

Good. A first and a last name.

"How do you know Howard?" I asked.

There was a pause as he sucked in a huge mouthful of air. "He's my brother."

"You are?" I, of course, knew this, but needed to keep him talking, learn as much as I could.

"Yes." It was more an affirmative hiss than a word as I heard his heart skip a double-beat then begin to race as he started to panic. "They said . . . they were going . . ." his words faded as his heart raced even harder.

I increased my pace toward the hospital.

"C'mon," I said. "You'll make it. Hang in there."

His respiration increased to closely match his quickening heartbeat. "Going to . . . beat me . . . within . . . an inch . . . of . . . my life." He finally pushed the words out between a steady series of breaths.

"Why?"

"To show Howie they were serious."

At that point, his breathing became sporadic and his heart started doing a double Dutch kind of thing.

"Dammit," I said, running faster toward the hospital.

I checked my watch again. It had only been a couple of minutes since the last time I'd checked. And it was still only about 10:40 a.m. 10:43 a.m. to be exact.

My previously overwhelming atmospheric impressions of the emergency room slowly filtered to the back of my consciousness. For sure, it was a quiet morning in the ER, but there was still a buzz amidst the small group of people sitting in the waiting room with me and with the patients being treated whose plights I could overhear from where I sat.

I could hear the anxious, though muted, voices of the others sitting near me, hear the pulse of the machines measuring heart rhythms in the actual trauma rooms on the other side of the glass doors, the quickly spoken words of the ER doctors and nurses. And, in the midst of all the hubbub and excitement, the irritated mumblings of one of the security guards who had brought in a four-cup tray filled with large coffees. He argued with the intern behind the main service desk over the sizes and blends that were ordered.

I had to suppress a chuckle as I overheard the security guard say "double double," – and thought he must be Canadian. "Double double" was a standard order call at Canada's beloved coffee chain, Tim Horton's.

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The coffee smelled stale and burnt as if it had come out of a vending machine, or perhaps out of a carafe left sitting on the burner for too long.

In any case, the smell of the coffee was a welcome mask over the other smells I'd been sitting with. The antiseptic smell of the recently mopped floor, the blood-and-snot smell of the patient who had been next on the list to be treated until I brought Howard's brother in. A heart attack did rate over a broken nose, after all.

But worse than any of those smells was the subdued scent of fear and anxiety, which mostly came from the folks who shared the sitting room with me. That, and the distinct scent of fear I caught as one particular doctor moved through the ER. I deduced that perhaps it was his first day, or at least first week in the ER. And he seemed absolutely terrified. Perhaps terrified that he was going to make a mistake, terrified that he wouldn't be able to handle the things brought in to him, perhaps terrified of not being able to save a patient.

I glanced at my watch again. 10:44. Sigh. Okay, so it had only been about 10 minutes since I'd called Gail to let her know where I was and who I was with. And it'd been perhaps 20 minutes since I'd arrived here with Gary.

I'd learned Gary's name as the attendants had been tearing at his clothes and working at resuscitating him. When I'd been unable to give his name, one of the attending physicians had found his wallet, and announced he was Gary Clark, 34 years old, no known allergies.

If I tried, I could pick out the conversation threads from the trauma rooms, or at least snippets of them, and

had learned that Gary had suffered a minor heart attack, likely due to the beating, and within a few minutes had been stabilized.

So it was basically just a matter of waiting for Gail.

I thought back to all the times when I'd been waiting for her during our short, but whirlwind romance.

And remembered how the waiting pissed me off.

Now, I wasn't at Mack's super-heightened level of impatience when it came to waiting, but it still wasn't my favorite thing. Growing up, my mother had inflicted me with a sense of urgency over being on time. The emphasis was always on arriving early, on planning ahead, on being prepared.

I didn't quite measure up to the anal nature in which my mother lived out her entire life – sending Christmas cards out immediately after Halloween, giving herself an extra hour or two to complete any simple task, beginning to prepare meals absurdly early, such beginning to prepare the potatoes for dinner while still washing the breakfast dishes, or pre-cooking the breakfast bacon the night before so it could be heated in the microwave oven the next morning – but I still had a tendency to dislike being late or having to wait.

At least Gail had found my impatience cute and tolerable. And usually, by the time she showed up, I'd worked myself into such a whirlwind of anxiety that she often laughed.

I remembered one time we were supposed to meet at Rockefeller Center behind the famous Paul Manship

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sculpture of Prometheus that sits in the center of the plaza in the middle of the water fountains.

I'd been standing, mostly patiently, on the walkway behind the golden sculpture, just enjoying the scenery. At first it had been quite interesting, particularly when I'd realized that while I'd been to Rockefeller Center many times, that I'd never just taken it in. I'd never actually stood in that spot, looking from the base of the RCA building, the spot where the Christmas tree was raised to signal the beginning of the Christmas season, across the fountain and to the arcade that became an ice skating rink in the winter.

I remembered looking down at the sub-ground, over Prometheus's shoulder, at the small, round tables around which dozens and dozens of folks, mostly tourists, had clustered. I remembered the square, blue-and-white-striped umbrellas that hid most of them from view. But, even without my enhanced hearing, I'd been able to catch the buzz and excitement in the crowd gathered there, and reflected how I and so many others often took this marvelous city for granted.

I'd turned to face the RCA building and actually looked at the relief sculpture of Wisdom above the main entranceway. I'd never paused to look at that either, despite having gone into the building dozens of times.

The sculpture's hand sent relief rays of light down, across the phrase in capital blue letters upon an orange backdrop: "Wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times."

I didn't know where the phrase was from, or what its significance was, but I remembered just staring at it, wondering at what point that sculpture was added – if it had been a part of the original design of the building or if it had been added later.

I'd been thinking I'd have to look it up. It was likely included in the page after page of notes that I'd taken about the history of Rockefeller Center and which I'd incorporated into my first Maxwell Bronte novel, *Print of the Predator*.

The climax scene took place at Rockefeller Center, where I had my bad guy spend most of his time. He'd been obsessed with Art Deco and Art Nouveau and worked within an office within the RCA building. Most of my notes for that novel came from trivia offered up by my pal, Buddy.

On his first return trip to the big apple, he took me over and delighted in filling my mind with information about the building's conception, the architecture, etc. I proceeded to pull out my notebook and start writing and the concept for that first novel was born.

It was about that time Gail had showed up.

I'd been so absorbed in the scenery, in the Art Deco sculptures, in the crowds of people enjoying the center, that I hadn't even been aware of how late she was.

There was an anxious look on her face, but even before I saw it, I knew she was there by her familiar scent as she approached from the street.

The fact was that I while I had originally been a bit pissed over how late she was, I'd been enjoying myself so

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much that I'd pretty much forgotten about it. But I'd had a role to play, after all – there had been an expectation of what my reaction was going to be based on prior incidents.

I glanced down at my watch, not out of annoyance, just out of curiosity. She was somewhere in the realm of 45 minutes late, which was, even for Gail, who usually averaged about 5 to 10 minutes late, pretty bad.

"Michael," she said as I turned to face her and lowered my watch arm. "I'm so sorry that I'm late."

I'd shaken my head and given her a wry smile.

"I was held up at the shop when one of the part-timers called in sick and the other one showed up late." She'd been referring to one of the many university students she had working for her at her occult shop. Despite the fact that student schedules were often hard to deal with, and, being a business owner and not having to contend with any head-office policies and procedures, Gail still insisted on hiring as many part-time students as possible. Her intention had been to spread as much cash as she could to the young, hard-working students who, in her opinion, needed it most. As a result, she'd only had one full-time staff member to help run her shop, a young man named Rob.

"What about Rob?" I asked.

Rob was a decent chap, a mostly quiet guy, but brimming with energy and enthusiasm for everything occult. He was also an accountant by trade and was instrumental in helping Gail keep the books for her shop.

“Rob is on vacation this week,” she said. “Michael, I’m truly sorry. I would have called but I knew you wouldn’t be at the apartment and I didn’t have your cell phone.”

She reeked of sorrow and regret, but also of frustration, because, as I could easily tell, she was truly sorry, but ultimately didn’t have much choice. She couldn’t leave the shop unattended or close it early. Despite the fact that she was the owner and could do whatever she pleased, she wasn’t the type of person who would just close the shop down for personal reasons. Regardless of the fact that in the half-hour where the store would be closed she might only have a single customer – she held her customers in too high a regard to have an unscheduled closing, even for that short a time.

I loved that about her.

Yet, despite all that, I still played up the whole impatient angle, shaking my head and trying to look disappointed in her. I’m not sure why I was doing that, perhaps just following along with the standard back and forth that we’d grown into in those months.

But in any case, she caught on.

She was so good at reading people, at seeing through surface elements to what was actually going on with a person, that in the relatively short time I knew her, I suspected that she too had extra-sensory perception. I would have suspected that, like myself, she too was a werewolf if it wasn’t for the fact that I imagined I would be able to tell by her scent, particularly the way it would shift with the turn of the moon. But, no, while I could smell the subtle difference in her scent based on the way her female

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body reacted to a monthly cycle, there was no wolf-ness about her.

Regardless of that, she possessed an uncanny ability to see through so much surface bullshit, to be able to cut right down to the marrow.

She stopped in her apology, bit her bottom lip, something that drove me absolutely bananas with lust for her, then swung her purse at me.

"Andrews, you bastard," she said, laughing as she swung at me. Her scent was a mixture of relief that I wasn't actually mad, annoyance, and humor. "Why did you make me believe you were pissed at me?"

I looked at my watch again. "But I was, Gail."

"Bullshit," she said, as I deflected yet another blow of the purse and moved close to take her in my arms.

Her body, hard and muscle-toned in all the right places, yet soft and curvaceous in all the other right ones, melted against mine.

"You were probably standing here soaking in the atmosphere, looking at the people, at the architecture even, and building up some sort of repository for your writing."

How right she was. How ultimately right she often was about me. I was continually amazed at how accurately she knew me, knew the things going on in my head, in my heart, despite the fact that these were things that no other person on this planet had been able to figure out about me. And that she'd been able to do it within just a few weeks of knowing me.

Mark Leslie

My heart burned in love with her as I held her close and felt her heartbeat against my chest while listening to its rhythm increase in my arms. I was easily turned on whenever I could both hear and feel her heartbeat like that – like an ultimate closeness between us.

About a foot lower, something else stirred and, feeling it, she smiled demurely at me, green eyes catching a glint of the afternoon sun and sending me reeling into a state of bliss and joyful lust.

I pressed my lips to hers. And we kissed. God how we kissed. The next several minutes seemed to just freeze in time.

That certainly was one thing I enjoyed about my time with Gail. If the constant waiting was a negative, then the kissing more than made up for it on the positive side of things.

I was remembering the way we had kissed that day in Rockefeller Center as typical of the way that we kissed each other regardless of the setting, regardless of the occasion.

That was one thing about the relationship with Gail that we both fell into quite comfortably from the beginning. I know that it sounds corny, that it sounds contrived, that it sounds like something out of a romance novel. But I don't care how it sounds. Just like when we were dating, I didn't care how it looked to anyone who was watching us. Our kisses weren't mere kisses, they were the merging of our souls, a single point of our physical bodies coming together that represented our entire beings melding together.

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Kissing Gail was like falling into another person.

And I couldn't think about the kisses we'd shared without a painful and intense longing for those magical times filling my heart.

As well as stirrings in my groin. Kisses with Gail were so powerful and momentous in my memory that they rivaled memories of sexual intercourse with the women that came before her.

There had been no other women since her.

Nobody could even come close to setting those same fires Gail's presence inspired.

Just thinking about her, just remembering that kiss, I could almost taste her, could swear that I smelled her sweet scent, the sandalwood perfume that she wore, the unique rosemary-mint scent of her hair.

Even just the memory of a kiss with Gail was better than sex with another.

And that's what was going through my mind when she walked into the hospital waiting room.

Chapter Fourteen: The woman who could read you like a cheap suit

"ANDREWS!" GAIL SAID as she stormed into the waiting room. And I realized it wasn't her scent from memory I'd been recalling, but her approach from outside.

The rosemary mint scent of her hair was overpowering as she got closer. For a very brief moment I relapsed into that rendezvous in Rockefeller Center and imagined standing up and taking her in my arms again, pressing my body against her and not ever letting go.

But that, of course, was in the repressed thoughts, those things that go through a person's mind that are on a level far removed from reality. Like the way you might imagine, however briefly, reaching out and flicking the forehead of the annoyingly snobbish sales clerk to see if that might snap him back into a sense of reality.

In my conscious mind, I did want to stand, to at least walk over to her, but I realized I couldn't.

The memories of that kiss with Gail had indeed been strong, had indeed been powerful.

So much so that I'd actually developed an erection just thinking about it.

I squirmed uncomfortably on my chair, looking up at her as she approached.

She had an odd look on her face, and I smelled the scent not only of concern for her (*brother-in-law* – the word came to me like a punch in the gut and begin the process of my erection beginning to slowly retract) fiancé's brother, but also an air of confusion over why I hadn't stood.

As she got closer, and as I stood awkwardly, I saw the lightning quick flash of a rue smile cross her face, and caught the hint of amusement in her demeanor.

The flash of the smile and the amused scent were gone immediately, but were just enough to let me know that she knew what had been going on in my pants.

Again, that thing about Gail. She could read me like a cheap suit, even now, after all this time had passed.

I'd really fucked up when I lost her.

I was beginning to realize that I would likely never recover from that loss, no matter how much time had passed.

"How is Gary?" Gail asked, pacing back and forth in front of me. "When was the last update?"

"They haven't told me anything. I told them that a family member was on the way."

She stopped pacing and stepped closer to me, leaned in and in a quiet voice said. "What can you hear going on back there now?"

I was taken aback. It was different now that Gail knew my secret, that she knew I was a werewolf and possessed these special enhanced senses. Amazing how quickly she'd fallen into accepting the reality of it, accepted the simple fact that I had this gift. She asked the question the

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same way you might ask a friend who was better with math what a decent tip would be on the restaurant bill.

I marveled at this thought, kicking myself that I'd kept the secret from her, terrified that I would lose her if she knew. And yet, it was not telling her that had driven us apart – and now, so much later, here she was, no longer with me, but accepting of who I was, of the wolf nature of my being.

It just wasn't fair.

"I overheard them say that he had a heart attack. But he's been stable now for the past 10 minutes at least. There hasn't been any other discussion related to him since then."

She took my arm and pulled me back to sitting. "Will you tell me again what happened?"

I went over the details once more, and ended with the one bit of good news about this event; that I'd been able to hone in on the scent of one of the men who attacked Gary. That I felt I would be able to use it to easily track them down, to get closer to finding Howard.

Gail was silent for a moment.

"Gary said 'to show Howie they were serious,'" she said, and was silent for a moment longer.

I waited and looked at her, knowing she was processing something and didn't want to be interrupted.

"Good. This tells me that they've got Howard somewhere but they haven't killed him. This means they either need information from him or they need him to do something for them. Which means that he's important to them

alive." She paused again, this time for much longer before stating the words that I began to feel must be coming based on the rising apprehension in her scent, by the way her heart suddenly started to beat faster. "Until he gives them what they want of course, and they have no further use for him."

I reached out and held her hand, could tell immediately that while it didn't make things better, it was exactly the comfort that she needed.

"I'm here now," she said, pulling her hand away. "You can get out there and track them."

I was about to tell her that I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do once I'd found them, but I didn't know how to say it, didn't want to disappoint her. I wasn't a superhero of any kind. Just a guy who happened to have enhanced senses and perhaps a bit of superhuman strength during this particular cycle of the month. It's not like I could fly over the city and swoop down to smash through the wall of the secret hide-out of these mysterious men in dark suits.

But I didn't know how to say this to Gail.

Instead, I got up, brushed my sweaty hands on my pants and prepared to make my exit. Then it occurred to me. I froze on the spot. "Gail, you're not safe either. If they're trying to get to Howard through Gary, then they might try to get to him through you, too."

Gail gestured at the two burly security guards in the lobby and then through the window at the police cruiser parked outside with two officers inside.

"I'm relatively safe here," she said.

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Fair enough, I thought. She'd be relatively well protected, at least while the cruiser sat outside. The security guards were carrying guns, but I didn't feel as safe from their presence as I did from the presence of the police cruiser.

I still stood on the spot and just looked at her, thinking about where I might need to head off to, where I might need to start looking.

Gail pursed her lips together and stared back at me. "You don't know where to begin, do you?"

I shook my head.

She nodded. "Thought so. Listen, Michael. You know how sometimes when you're writing something and you feel that you're stuck."

"Yeah,"

"What do you do?"

I smiled. "I take a walk, head out to see a show, anything to take my mind off it."

"And what happens next?"

"It just comes to me."

She nodded. "Okay, so do that now. Go back to your apartment, crack open your laptop and start working on your latest writing project. You're not still pushing to do something different – a non-Maxwell Bronte project – are you? I remember you were chomping at the bit to put out a collection of your supernatural horror stories. Has your agent or publisher ever caved on that one?"

My smile widened. "Yeah, they finally did." I was so impressed with how much she remembered about my personal passions, about my struggles with writing,

about who I ultimately was inside, that I didn't bother to tell her that the short story book would be released in the next month – that I'd even be appearing on Letterman that night to talk about it.

I simply said. "Sure. Good idea." I thought about how I'd used the same technique earlier. Again, it broke my heart to know that I'd let this wonderful woman who had been so good for my soul get away.

"Good idea," I said again, almost whispering.

Gail reached up, took my hand for a moment, then quietly said, "Go write something, Michael. When you're not thinking hard about where to look for Howard, something, some memory, some sensory detail, will come to you, and you'll know what to do. Go write."

My heart almost burst out of my chest with love for this woman. I slipped my hand out of hers and turned away as my eyes welled up with tears.

Interlude – Wolf Night – Four

THE WOLF WAS only partway down the hill, walking slowly toward the familiar-scented, human female, perhaps seventy feet away when another shift in the wind brought back the original scent that had piqued his curiosity.

The human female, the intrigue, the almost pack-like familiarity of her scent, the inquisitive desire to get closer to her had caused it to temporarily forget about that other.

But not any longer.

The fur on the back of his neck rumped as the other's scent came in strong and sure. It was closer than before and moving.

Moving in the direction of the familiar human female.

And with the other's scent came the resolve of a hunt. The other regarded this woman as prey.

The wolf needed to get close to the woman, to protect it from the other. He immediately leapt down the hill, racing toward her.

"Michael?" she said, the fear coming through in both her voice and scent. The woman started taking a few cautious steps backward.

A flash of grey no more than three yards from the woman burst from a low set of bushes and leapt through the air toward her.

Chapter Fifteen: Broken habits and inspiration from a schoolboy crush

IT WAS A little after 11:30 by the time I got back to my room, put some coffee on and sat down at my desk.

I was careful, extremely careful, not to go anywhere else in the apartment, not to do anything else other than use the washroom. I knew my weaknesses and that if I allowed myself to stray from the task at hand, I would end up distracting myself with other tasks, other duties, other chores that suddenly would seem important to get done.

I revived the laptop from its snooze and started at the backdrop on my screen. It was a simple photograph of the rolling hills of the Ottawa Valley in the spring, taken when I'd been hiking near Mont Tremblant in Quebec just a few months before I got restless and decided to hitchhike from Ottawa to the Big Apple to seek my fame and fortune as a writer.

Being a New Yorker and a successful author still seemed surreal to me, so far removed from the person I had been growing up. It was strange the way the mind could accept some things but still have difficulty believing others. During full moons I ended up turning into a werewolf. But that seemed almost normal, easy to accept,

easy to digest, to come to terms with. The fact that I'd actually made it as a writer, that I'd actually succeeded in my far-fetched dream to live in this grand city, how successful I had become, how much money, fame, and fortune I'd acquired . . . I found that whole thing harder to believe whenever I stopped and thought about it. It seemed a much more difficult reality to accept. I mean, if my life were a novel, I was sure the reader would have no trouble accepting the fact that I was a werewolf.

But I somehow doubt, particularly knowing the writing industry the way that I do, that any readers who knew it as well, if not better than I, would balk at the thought that a young man could hitch-hike from a small Canadian city to one of the world's largest metropolitan areas with a dream to become a writer, to succeed in that path – and that within just a few years of setting out, he hit the big time, he became a bestselling success story; his novels were being turned into movies and the readers simply couldn't get enough of his tales about an antiques dealer who solved mysteries.

Yes, *that* and not the whole werewolf thing, would likely be the harder element to accept. If it hadn't happened to me, I wouldn't even accept it as a reality.

But I suppose that my success wouldn't likely have happened if I hadn't been bitten by that werewolf, if I hadn't developed this supernatural ability with heightened senses.

That, more than my half-baked dream of hitch-hiking into New York to seek my fame and fortune, was what was ultimately responsible for my success.

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So maybe, while at first seeming a bit far-fetched, it could be believed – so long as you bought the fact that I was a werewolf.

The screen saver started on my laptop screen, snapping me out of the mind-wandering episode. I realized what I'd been doing, that while I'd done my best to avoid doing physical chores and tasks in the apartment to keep me from writing, that I'd taken a daydream break.

It was amazing the things I could do to myself, the excuses and distractions I could generate out of thin air just to keep myself from writing, just to conveniently steer myself on these little tangents away from it.

But, *enough* I said in a firm voice in my mind. There's a deadline to get so many thousand words written and get them off to Mack.

Time to get down to business.

I remember the teacher, Miss Davis, was a strict and domineering woman – I'd initially hated the way in which she kept putting a hand on my shoulder and telling me to stop whenever she caught me doing my single finger hunt and peck method. I'd argued with her many times of course, demonstrating, based on my years of self-taught typing, that my word count of 20 to 30 words per minute was still far superior than the other people in the classroom.

But she'd been adamant and wouldn't let me get away with it. She kept stopping me by putting a hand on my shoulder, ripping the paper out of the Minolta typewriter, putting a fresh sheet in, then reaching down,

taking my hands, and placing them in the ASDF, HJKL position on the keyboard and telling me to start again.

We struggled this way for the first few weeks. It wasn't until I started using one of the electric typewriters – and maybe it had something to do with the slightly different angle of the keyboard itself – that I started to realize that I could type better following her advice. I actually started a bit slowly in my method. I initially began resting my fingers in the manner she'd wanted, but only used the first two fingers of my hand to type things out – I fooled her more often using this method, so the times she'd stopped to correct me started to reduce in frequency. But then after another week of doing this, and seeing my word count per minute almost double, I started adopting an additional finger into the process.

By the fifth week, I had started using all of my fingers and my thumbs in exactly the manner that Miss Davis had been adamant that I work on. And by the end of the second month, my word per minute rate hovering between 80 and 90. Not only that, but my typos were virtually non-existent.

I remember at that point wanting to hug this woman, whom, by the end of the school year, I'd grown a massive schoolboy crush on.

It was funny. She was this prim and proper teacher straight out of a stereotypical sketch of a teacher. Not all that attractive, with her hair curled into a tight bun, always wearing non-dramatic and stale looking pants suits, and barely smiling, always having a serious look on her face.

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And at first I'd hated her – hated the sight of her, hated her deep husky voice, hated the way that she constantly corrected me, constantly wouldn't let me type the way in which I'd taught myself.

She basically broke me, broke the habit of years, the bad habit that I'd taught myself and thought was the better way.

But by the end of the year, I'd fallen in love and in lust with her, admired the smart way in which she dressed, enjoyed listening to the smoky husky voice. Spent many an hour in her classroom listening to her, watching her, and fantasizing about walking up to her, reaching up and releasing the tightly wound bun of her hair, letting it spill down over the shoulders of her suit jacket, then marveling as she undid her jacket, then her blouse, and slowly, carefully, guided my hands to her breasts, gently placed my fingers to just the right positions and then slowly, methodically instructed me in the proper manner in which to touch and please her.

Oh, how I'd lie awake at night dreaming about Miss Davis, imagining her guiding my hands not only to her breasts, but to all those dark and mysterious places that occupied so much of my adolescent mind where you could touch a woman and make her squirm in pleasure beneath your touch.

Miss Davis, my first genuine love. Sure, there had been teachers before her, younger, more beautiful and sexy even, more approachable, more loving in their manner. But Miss Davis, my prim proper and strict typing teacher. She was the one I loved the most over the years.

Because before her, I thought I was good at typing. But after her, after her strict insistence about the way that I typed, I became a much better writer – because for the first time I was beginning to approach the ability for my fingers on the keyboard to almost keep time with the thoughts racing through my brain.

To this day, I think if I saw Miss Davis, I'd likely get the same boner that I often had sitting at the typewriter in her class and watching her move about the room, constantly stopping to adjust the hands of the pupils in her class.

And, to this day, no matter how old she was now, I would still imagine her having this double life – that of a strict and uptight teacher, barely cracking a smile during the day. But at night, beneath that mask, beneath that persona, being a hot, sensual and desirable woman, capable of making a man scream in pleasure, of teaching him things about his own sexuality that he didn't realize existed. I believed this in my heart, as if, like my current self, her sexuality was some supernatural ability that she possessed, that lied dormant most of her days under her skin, just itching for any opportunity to present itself.

I, of course, caught myself again. But the memories of Miss Davis, the thought that someone's outward appearance could sometimes mask the true person who lived beneath the skin (something I, as a werewolf, was continually aware of but didn't pay much attention to, the way one doesn't often stop to think about the "given's" in their life) inspired an idea for the Bronte novel. I looked at the last words I'd written . . .

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Bronte focused on the overturned mug on the kitchen table, the coffee spread out over the surface of the table, and dripping in thick black drops to the floor.

This was bad.

. . . and I knew where to go next.

But even worse was the thing that Bronte didn't want to see, didn't want to look at. It was something subtle within the rich dark pool of coffee that had dripped onto the floor – a subtle yet detectable swirl of crimson. And beside that, very small and almost lost in the pattern of the retro 70s style linoleum floor, were two tiny drops of fresh blood.

He stood there a moment, taking it in, when something out of the corner of his vision caught his attention.

About four feet away, and in the direction of the hallway that led to the living room and basement, was another tiny droplet of blood.

Crouching, he took a couple of steps in that direction. As he got closer, the next droplet of blood, this one another four feet or so further down the hallway, seemed to rise out of the colorful marble floor pattern.

A couple of more steps, and there was another dot of blood – again, almost like the result of

dipping the tip of a pencil into a can of rich red paint.

Unfortunately, though, Bronte had seen more than his fair share of blood over the years, so there was no mistaking the source of the liquid trail he was following in his house at some ungodly hour in the morning.

But worse than that was the strong likelihood that the blood came from the woman he hadn't seen in ten years but who still haunted the deeper, darker fantasies that he tried to keep buried – the woman whom he had imagined spending the rest of his life with but whom he'd lost. Gwendolyn, the high school typing teacher, the one who looked so ultimately prim and proper, in her dress, in her social manner, but who was a passionate and sensual beast of a woman, capable of a transformation unlike any other he'd ever seen in a single person before, able to bring him to heights of passion and ecstasy that he hadn't thought were even possible.

With every pindrop of blood his heart sank even further at what he might find at the end of the trail. Then came the thought that whomever had done this to her might still be in his house. He instinctively lightened his step, moved back into the kitchen and considered his options for a weapon of choice.

There was the large carving knife from the knife rack on the counter. But he wasn't used to wielding

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such weapons – hell, he wasn't used to wielding weapons of any sort, and the thought of using it to defend himself against an attacker that might be hiding in his home was unsettling.

Not a good idea.

He opened the third drawer down and pulled out the wooden rolling pin that he could only remember using once a year, when he was doing his Christmas baking. He held it by a single handle, it fitting comfortably in his right palm and weighing just the right weight. This he felt a kinship with, could easily swing it, strike whatever target he needed, without worrying about stabbing himself by accident the way he might with a knife.

The rolling pin in hand, and feeling slightly more at ease tracking the blood drops down the hallway now that he had at least a perceived way of defending himself, regardless of the silliness of the situation. A roll-pin, after all, up against a thug wielding a handgun, was pretty much useless. He might as well be holding a string of flaccid spaghetti if that were the case.

But nonetheless, he did feel a bit more confident continuing with something solid in his hand.

The blood trail continued on past the entrance to the living room – he glanced inside, gave it the once over; spied the two most likely hiding spots, the nook between the Baldwin piano and the bookshelves and the space behind the wing-back recliner chair and the wall. Both spots were clear.

He felt safe moving on, knowing the blood trail now had no choice but to lead to the basement.

The door to the basement stairs was open. He never kept it open (likely due to the subconscious childhood fear that the monsters living in the unfinished basement might come upstairs and get him) – more evidence that there was someone here, that the tracking of the blood would actually lead to something.

He paused at the top of the stairs before descending. From where he stood, despite the fact that there was no light on in the stairway, he could see the blood spot trail continue on the wooden steps. But, regardless of the distance each new spot was from him, they actually grew in size rather than shrunk the way objects in the distance seem to get smaller.

No, it was obvious that the blood droplets were turning into blood splatters – they were getting bigger and there was less space between each one.

He stepped down into the stairwell and heard a voice that he knew was Gwendolyn's let out a whimper from somewhere in the depths of the darkness.

"Gwen!" Bronte said, his fear suddenly shoved aside, replaced by concern for this woman that, regardless of how much time had passed, how many others there had been since her who held a place in his heart, that he still loved deeply and, he realized, without condition.

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He raced down the stairs and just as he neared the bottom he slipped on something – as he fell backward, his left hand put out behind him to stop his fall in a slick yet sticky substance – he realized that the bottom stairs were coated with blood.

He landed partly on his left hand, left arm and the left side of his back, most of him, he realized, now soiled with the blood that pooled on those bottom stairs, that coated them almost like a fresh coat of paint.

“M-Max...” Gwendolyn’s voice a low whispered plea.

As Bronte lay on the bottom stairs, turning his head to where her voice came from in the darkness, the headlight beams from a car passing on the street outside swept across the basement in a quick search-light effect.

Within the simple flash Bronte saw two things that he imagined would haunt his dreams until his very last day.

A body, a man, a large man, lay face down on the basement floor not three feet from where Bronte himself lay. No, Bronte, realized, he couldn’t be certain if the man was face down or not. It was hard to really see any detail other than the fact that the man’s entire body seemed to be coated in blood. He couldn’t even tell if the man wore clothes or not, or what color the hair on his head was. He was simply a dark rich crimson color.

And a few feet beyond him, cowering in the corner, sat Gwendolyn. Her hands were coated in a dark thick fluid, as if she'd dipped them into a vat of chocolate. And her lips and chin were covered in the same color, as if she were a child and had brought fistfuls of that chocolate to her mouth in a mad fury of consumption.

Only it wasn't chocolate at all. It was, obviously, that man's blood.

"M-Max." Gwendolyn repeated. "I need help. I've done it again."

Like the first time he'd made love to her and been in awe of this other person who she could be under her clothes, in the dark of a bedroom, there was obvious some other, darker thing that lay beneath.

This was worse.

Chapter Sixteen: The hidden soft side of Mack the Knife

I SAT BACK from the laptop and stared at the screen, satisfied that I'd properly moved the scene along, and it was actually going somewhere that would keep me intrigued.

This was one of the tricks I used when working on a writing project. I would try my best never to resolve a scene at the end of a writing session, but rather try to stop writing in the middle of that scene – if possible, at the very height of the tension. If I finished the scene, resolved the issues at hand, then when I sat down to work on the project again, it would be almost like working from scratch. Something I always found extremely challenging.

Also, leaving the scene hanging kept me on the edge of my seat and the back of my mind kept running through all the possibilities of what was going to happen next.

I had no idea what I was going to write next, what exactly was going on with Gwendolyn, except the fact that I was considering toying with inserting a supernatural element into the plot. I'd often done that throughout the series, insinuating some sort of supernatural occurrence, like a haunting, but only to reveal by the outcome of the

novel that it had been a series of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the actual facts. I enjoyed doing that, and my readers seemed to like being teased.

In any case, I was satisfied with what I'd written, and spending the twenty minutes on that scene helped bring my mind completely out of the situation involving Howard, properly allowing my subconscious mind to come up with a "next step."

As I pushed my chair back from the desk and stood, I knew that my next move would be to find out where Howard worked and head to his office to see if I could gather up any sort of clues about his involvement with these people and how his world intersected with theirs.

I knew that would mean a phone call to Gail to get that information from her. And I was about to pick up the phone and give her a call when the phone rang.

Hesitantly, I reached for it.

"Michael?" I recognized the sweet, timid voice on her first word, but, true to form, she introduced herself as if we hadn't known each other for years. "This is Anne Lee from Mack Halpin's office?"

"Hi, Anne. What can I do for you?"

"Mack would kill me if he knew I was calling you, but he's been pacing around the office for hours, has asked me to cancel all of his appointments, and keeps telling me to call you and check up on your status, then, moments later changing his mind and saying not to call.

He just stepped out for a moment, so I thought I would call to check in. Frankly, I'm really worried about him."

"Mack is just fine, Anne. You know how he gets."

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"Yes, I know how he gets," she sighed. "But I'm really worried about his blood pressure lately. His doctor prescribed a new medication for him late last week, and though it seemed to have a positive effect on him, today it's as if he's not using his medication at all."

I thought back to my breakfast with Mack earlier that morning, wondering why I hadn't picked up on an elevated blood pressure. I started kicking myself for not noticing it, then reminded myself that the symptoms were extremely subtle, even to my heightened senses.

"I didn't realize his blood pressure was a problem again, Anne."

Mack, of course, would have flipped his lid if he knew that Anne had confided any part of his health status to me. But it had been at least two novels ago when she warned me not to provoke him if I could help it, being quite concerned for his health. She'd gone on to tell me about her father having died on the job from a stroke – he'd been a very successful business executive, working unreasonably long hours, and had ignored his doctor's advice to slow it down, modify his lifestyle, or go on any sort of blood pressure medication. She said her father had seen that as a sign of weakness and if other executives learned he was on medication it would put him at a disadvantage.

Anne had explained how difficult it had been for her to convince Mack to go on the medication in the first place. He actually hadn't taken her request seriously until she'd started to cry. And if there was one thing Mack couldn't stand, it was a display of emotion. I'm pretty

sure that he'd agreed merely to put a stop to the water-works.

"Oh gee, Mack would crucify me if he knew I was telling you this, Michael." Anne's voice got even softer, quieter, as if Mack was in the room with her. "But he's extremely worried that you're not going to finish this novel on time. He thinks that your heart just isn't in it and that you're off your game, so to speak. He's terribly worried that you're not going to deliver the opening scenes of the novel you promised him this morning. He's gone back to the publisher for three extensions for you already, Michael. He's worried himself to the bone because he's certain you're going to let him down."

I took a deep breath. "I'm not going to let him down, Anne."

"Good. Then tell me how many words you've written so far."

"Why?"

"So I can try to alleviate his fear."

"Er, I'm done, Anne."

"Done?"

"Yeah. Done, I'm just working on some revisions."

"You're lying."

"Ouch, Anne, that hurts."

"Sorry, Michael, but I know you're lying. Shame on you. Mack has been like a father to you, nurturing you, coaching you, helping you along. How can you lie to him like that?"

For a moment I felt like a teenager being lectured by his mother about not listening to his father. It was such a

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powerful feeling that I could have sworn I felt a pimple or two sprout on my face and became worried that my voice might crack with the next words I spoke.

"I'm sorry, Michael, I don't mean to nag you, but I can't let you do this to Mack. He is too kind, too gentle a soul to be put through this."

Too kind? Too gentle?

I suppressed a laugh. "Mack? Gentle?"

She certainly couldn't be referring to my agent, the man known in literary circles as "Mack the Knife" or "Critical Mack." I kept forgetting how fond Anne was of her boss, how motherly and smothering she could be.

"Yes, he is. He doesn't let anybody but me see it, but underneath that tough demeanor, he's a kind and fragile soul. And he's put his neck out there for you more times than I would care to count. So do everyone a favor, Michael, and just get this work in to him. And for God's sake, please don't wait until the stroke of two to turn it in."

"All right Anne. There's something you're not telling me here. That's twice you've mentioned Mack putting his neck on the line. What's really going on?"

She paused before saying. "Nothing. Mack is just worried about you, Michael."

Even though I couldn't see her, I could tell that the corner of her left eye was twitching – it happened whenever she told a lie.

Interestingly, her heartbeat didn't skip a beat at all when she lied. Not that Anne was in the habit of lying to me, but being Mack's assistant meant she often had to

gloss over the truth about one thing or another over the years. After getting to know Anne, I'd picked up on the minor facial tick that came with even the smallest of white lies. It was not because of any visual clue, but because with it came a minor reverberation in her voice.

I didn't say anything, just let the silence build between the two of us, knowing it would eventually be too much for her.

Anne gave within sixty seconds.

"J.B. was here to see Mack last week."

There was no other J.B. that Mack would meet. Anne was referring to J.B. Bridgeman, the owner and publisher of Bridgeman House Publishing. J.B. never went to see anyone. They always came to see him. The fact that J.B. was in Mack's office meant something important that I couldn't fathom.

"And?"

"This is hard for me to tell you, Michael."

"Just go ahead, Anne. I'm a big boy. I can take it."

"Okay. . . With each and every release of your Bronte novels, there is a good 6-month pre-publication stirring in the publishing worlds. The online retailer presales figures start cracking within minutes after the book is first posted, and your forthcoming book hits bestseller status weeks before its release.

"Your backlist titles, which have a regular, consistent sales pattern also increase in those weeks leading up to your new release.

"In all, Bridgeman tends to hit a noticeable peak in their overall sales during this pre-publication period that

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carries nicely into the first four months of each of your new Bronte novel releases.”

She paused for several seconds before continuing.

“But it’s not happening at all, this time, Michael. Your story collection is not generating any sort of buzz, the presale numbers are among the lowest of your presales ever.”

She was silent again, which was fine, as I considered how hard I’d pushed in this particular direction. All, obviously a huge mistake.

“And the word on the street,” Anne continued, “is that this is actually having a negative impact on your backlist titles.”

“Word on the street?” I asked.

“That you’re done with Bronte – that you haven’t anything new left to do with him. That you’re finished, tired, have used it for all it’s worth.”

I laughed, but a sick feeling settled in my stomach. “I haven’t heard a peep of that sort of speculation.”

Anne didn’t have to tell me that there were various forms of “word on the street” in the industry, much of it kept out of the public eye. It was entirely possible that this word was spreading fast. Despite publishing being a relatively slow business in terms of turnaround times and publication schedules, it could be as cut-throat as any other business, and trends and loyalties could shift and change on the turn of a dime.

Did this mean that the industry bigwigs were all laughing at me, calling me yesterday’s news? Had I become the latest in a long string of “has-been” authors?

I shuddered, offered another chuckle and tried to grasp onto any floating jetsam I could to preserve my pride.

"Negative?" I said. "I could understand sales being slow . . . but negative sales?"

"The sales of your backlist titles have slowed rather dramatically, and Bridgeman is beginning to report returns figures higher than ever before of your mass market releases.

"It's as if Bridgeman offered some sort of recall on them. Bookstores are simply not moving the backlist titles and are starting to purge themselves of them. The big chain and the wholesalers have cut their regular standing draws of these titles to their smaller stores. They've even gone so far as to each cancel more than half of their "advance ship" orders on your collection."

I sank into the soft leather chair beside the phone. There was always a lot of talk about collusion in the oil industry, with competing gas station brands jacking up their prices and lowering them according to some invisible "feeling" – but the book industry moved in similar motifs. While there were still strong independent movements in various pockets of North America and the U.K., much of the industries "winners" and "losers" were determined by the large chains and the whims of the buyers at these chains.

I understood then why Mack had me scheduled on Letterman. It's a last bid attempt to bring me back into the spotlight as an author that has something to offer.

A chance to redeem myself.

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"I see, Anne," I managed to say. "Thank you."

There was a moment of silence between us, then Anne whispered. "He's coming back, Michael. I have to go." And she hung up the phone.

I held the receiver in my hand a moment, then gently placed it down. The hairs on the back of my neck had started to rise, I felt a low growl rising from the pit of my stomach, and I was viewing the room through a slight shade of red.

I didn't care how powerful Bridgeman Publishing was. Bridgeman or no Bridgeman – nobody backs me or any one of my pack into a corner.

This revelation about Bridgeman publishing and the industry trends was just the tip of the iceberg, of course. It was the last of a series of straws that had been piling on my back since I woke up naked in Battery Park. That other wolf in my territory, some sort of unsolved murder involving my alter ego, Gail's engagement, her finance's kidnapping . . . It was all pushing me into a corner that I did not like being in.

I let the growl out in a satisfying purge that vibrated through my entire upper body.

With the growl I stretched my arms up into the air, my fingers half curled into paw-like fists. Then I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, let it out slowly.

I sat down at my keyboard, opened up a completely new document and glanced at the time – it was 12:18 – and began composing.

Chapter Seventeen: Smelling the sad truth about fiancé Howard

THAT WRITING SESSION was just what I had needed to properly clear my head. And all it took was about 40 minutes of writing for me to be able to sort out what I should do next.

It was simple, actually, and something I should have thought of. But as often happens, I was too absorbed in the moment to step back and think it out.

So when I allowed myself to slide into the role of composing fiction on my Bronte novel, it clicked

I really needed to get to Howard's place of work.

At 1:20 p.m., I stood alone in Howard Clark's large corner office on the sixty-second story of the building near the corner of West 23rd and Broadway.

The building was owned by Riley-Schmidt Incorporated, one of the largest real-estate developers in New York City. Howard Clark was their Corporate Finance Officer responsible for overseeing Manhattan area projects.

A quick post-writing Google search had provided me with enough information about Gail's fiancé to lead me here. It had been enough to know his full name and his

career to be able to narrow down his search to the correct person.

Beyond that, I had relied on a series of lies and charms using biological cues to get into the building past the main reception area. Once on the proper floor for Howard's office, I knew my next step would be to trick Howard's personal assistant into vacating her desk long enough for me to gain access to his office behind her.

As I was approaching Howard's assistant, a curly haired blonde in her mid-twenties, I could detect soft jazz music coming from a speaker on her desk. It was obvious by the sound that it wasn't a radio broadcast, but rather a CD she was listening to.

"It's funny you should be playing that album at this moment," I said.

Her heartbeat raced and her bright blue eyes sparkled as she perked up in her seat as if she'd been given a small shock to the buttocks. "Michelle Amato?" She was eager to discuss this musician, and I didn't need to hear her heartbeat or detect the subtle shift in her scent due to minor race of adrenaline in her system, because she gave just as many cues verbally. "I just love her music. Isn't she the best? But why is it funny that I'm playing her album?"

My next statement was a complete guess, of course. I had no idea if this musician would likely ever be in New York nor even if she was still alive. As I stepped up to the desk, I spotted the CD case on a pile of papers to her left.

"I could have sworn that I saw her in this building just a few minutes ago."

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Her heart did the equivalent of a backflip. "Really?"

"Yeah. There's no mistaking that one of a kind smile and those streaks of blonde in her hair. It's as distinctive as her sweet voice."

She was on her feet.

"Where?"

"In the food court, actually."

"The one on the lower concourse?"

I had no idea where that was but assumed it was 63 floors down. "Yeah. She was at a table across from the Starbucks." Again, it was another guess; but really, more plausible from a coffee chain that was as common as traffic jams in this city.

She quickly hit a combination of keys on the telephone, tapped several keys on her computer keyboard.

"This I can't miss. It's time for my break anyway."

And she was off.

I didn't move or say anything as she rushed down the aisle toward the elevator. I waited until the elevator doors closed before I walked past her desk and to Howard's office.

Even if I couldn't have tracked my way to Howard's office by following the increasingly strong scent of Old Spice lingering in the air, his name was on the door in large black letters engraved onto a gold name plate.

By applying just the right pressure to break the lock, I was inside within seconds. I could tell by listening to the heartbeats of the two other people visible in their nearby cubicles that they hadn't even noticed. One of them was intently entering data with a rabid clacking of keystrokes,

while the other was staring just as intently at a YouTube video on his monitor.

Standing inside, absorbing the more powerful, lingering scent of Old Spice in this office, I picked up a few other odors – no less than twelve distinct scents.

Among them, the scent of Howard's assistant was strong here as well as the scent of the young man who'd been voraciously hammering data into his spreadsheet and a series of other human scents I had detected throughout the building.

There was another smell here too.

It was the thick, musky smell of sex. It was coming from the leather couch to the right of Howard's desk. I took a few steps closer, realizing that it contained no element of Gail. I paused, breathed it in one more time and determined that the sex smell contained the combined sweat of both Howard and his assistant.

I stood there stunned for a moment.

On one hand I was disgusted at what this meant for Gail – that Howard had been having an affair with his secretary, but another part of me felt a burst of victory. Would this dalliance of Howard's mean that Gail would soon be free again and that I would have another chance with her?

As difficult as it was, I tried not to linger on that. I did, after all, have to save Howard's life first before I could put his plans to marry Gail on the chopping block.

I circled the room a couple of times, drawing in a few different scents I hadn't first detected. The subtle scent of Gail came from a small, wooden armchair nearest a set of

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bookshelves to the left. I paused there, leaned down closer to the chair, moved my head in a line parallel to the books on the shelves. Her scent was a bit stronger on the chair and on a few of the books. As if she'd been sitting there, waiting for him to finish work, and browsing.

Directly across from the couch where Howard had fucked his secretary.

My scent survey complete, I sat at Howard's desk, jostled the mouse a bit and watched the laptop come to life. The standard Windows login screen came up, and I hit ENTER, hoping that Howard hadn't set up a password.

No such luck.

So I typed "Gail" hoping that would work.

Nada.

I tried "infidelity" next.

Nothing.

Smirking, I typed "Old Spice."

Still nothing.

Damn. As good as I was at reading people, picking up on subtle clues and being able to manipulate them, I wasn't able to do the same with computers. I was simply not hacker material.

I drummed my fingers, glancing at the objects on Howard's desk. There was a pad of papers, a pair of red and blue Paper Mate pens sitting on them, a framed picture of a brown dachshund, a box of facial tissue, three plastic Coke bottle caps with some sort of ten-digit code printed on the inside of each.

Cracking open the top drawer to the right, I plucked out a pencil and then brushed the pens off the notepad.

Mark Leslie

With a hopeful burst of energy, I started rubbing the side of the tip of the pencil across the pad of paper in thick, wide strokes.

Sure enough, by doing so I was able to reveal the faint impression of letters from writing that had been done on the previous sheet of paper from this notepad.

As the words slowly revealed themselves I felt a moment of sheer thrill at my brilliance. But once I was able to read them, I sat back.

Dentist

Thursday. 11:30

Manicure

Thursday. 1:15

I sighed.

Sheer brilliance, indeed.

If I kept at it, at this rate I'd be able to uncover all of Howard's dental hygiene and male grooming secrets by the end of the day. Maybe I'd even be lucky enough to discover his secret for getting rid of those embarrassing white flakes of dandruff.

Pulling on the bottom desk drawer, I found it locked. I steeled myself to give it an extra-hard pull when I caught the subtle scent of something I hadn't noticed in my initial survey of the room. Something lingering so faintly that it suggested a long period of time since the person who'd left it had been here.

It was the damp, musky smell of the sweaty guy I'd met in that alleyway where Gary had been beaten.

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One of those thugs must have been here in Howard's office.

As I focused on that faint barely lingering scent, I wondered how it could be that the thug had ever been in this office.

And that's when the subtle and "long ago" scent I was smelling suddenly grew stronger.

Wait a minute. I paused, focusing on the present scents in the air.

The sweaty man's scent was getting stronger. I was no longer smelling the trace of a person who'd been in this room. I was smelling someone who was currently nearby.

Mr. Hyperhidrosis himself was here. And from the sound of the footfalls outside the door, he was heading my way.

Chapter Eighteen: The first foul encounter with Mr. Hyperhidrosis

I STOOD ROOTED in my spot behind the desk for a moment, uncertain what to do.

Sure, I could easily take Mr. Hyperhidrosis, overpower him before he pulled the gun he carried which I could detect by the smell of gun oil that lingered beneath his overpowering body odor. But there was no guarantee that he would be cooperative or help lead me to where his gang was keeping Howard.

My other option, then, was to hide, hopefully see what he was doing, and follow him.

I glanced around the room looking for a spot to take cover.

There really wasn't anywhere. Not even under Howard's desk, which had an open front, likely to more easily facilitate his lunch-hour blowjobs.

I felt a wave of panic as his footsteps stopped at the door. A key slid into the lock.

With no place else to go, I figured I'd try the oldest trick in the book and hide behind the door. But an old trick was better than no trick.

The door opened just after I lunged across the room.

As Mr. Hyperhidrosis moved into the room, trailing the foul spice of his body odor, I felt like a kid who'd been caught without much time to find an optimal hiding place, and prepared for him to discover me and attack.

I watched him move directly to the desk before I quietly pulled the door open a bit more, enough to conceal me more completely.

The quick peek I'd gotten of him revealed he was wearing the same dark suit I'd seen on him in the alley--that much, at least, I could tell from the smell -- and he had short, army-style, buzz-cut blond hair. He wasn't the leader I'd seen standing over Gary's head. He was tall and wide. The phrase "built like a brick shithouse" came to mind.

Behind the door, I could no longer see him. But that was a good thing. I amused myself for a moment thinking about if the situation had been reversed and he'd been the one hiding that his odor would have given him away quite easily. I thought back to all those times I'd played hide and seek as a child, wondering just how much better I would have been at it had I possessed these wolfish traits then.

He came back into my line of sight as he moved around the left side of Howard's desk. I held my breath as he disappeared behind the desk again.

I heard him pick up something from the desktop and then headed back around the other side of the desk.

Then he stepped back out of the office, not even bothering to close the door behind him.

I peered cautiously after him.

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He was carrying Howard's laptop in his meaty right hand like some paperback novel.

As he approached the elevator, he passed Howard's assistant, who was walking toward the office. It was obvious that she would have seen him coming out of the office, but she barely glanced at him as they passed each other, despite his distinctly foul smell. Instead, she glared past him, at my gaping face peeking out the doorway.

"Hey!" she shouted at me. "What are you doing in there?"

Mr. Hyperhidrosis was just getting into the elevator as she shouted, and he turned to look at what the commotion was. A flash of recognition lit his face, his heartbeat skipped a beat, and a fresh new wave of sweat oozed from his pores. He recognized me from the alley. He glanced about the office seeming to make a decision that there would be too many people around for him to do anything about me here.

He punched a button and scowled in my direction. Despite knowing I'd be able to overpower him, it still gave me a chill to consider having to face off with such a large, meaty, angry man.

His scowl disappeared behind the closing elevator doors.

Faces started appearing over cubicle walls and people who were already walking around in the hallways stopped to look at me. They all seemed annoyed for the interruption in their routine, but their combined scents were tinged with the eau of curiosity not about what was

going down, but whether or not it would prove to be more interesting to watch than getting back to work.

I gave a sheepish wave in the direction of Howard's assistant, who kept walking toward me.

"I was just looking for the bathroom," I said in a loud voice and kept walking toward the elevator. A few of the heads that had popped up sank back down.

But three people maintained an interested aura about them, and one of them, other than Howard's assistant projected anger at my intrusion.

As I continued toward her, her heartbeat picked up dramatically. Combined with a bitter anger fused with a wave of fear, I became sure she was in on the whole deal with Mr. Hyperhidrosis and part of her fear was that she was being caught betraying her boss.

One of the tall, thin gentlemen approaching from the end of the hallway had that indignant air of anger about him. His intent was to confront me. About five cubicles back, there was another young man who gave off the same fight-reflex scent. He was rounding the side of his cubicle, also heading toward me.

Neither of them frightened me so much as the sound that came to me from down the end of the hall. The quiet tapping of a four-digit number into a phone and the whispered voice: "We have an intruder on the sixty-second floor." I knew security would be here within minutes and that I didn't have much time.

"Where do they have Howard?" I asked her quietly as I got within a few footsteps of her.

A Canadian Werewolf in New York

The intense mix of anger and fear coming off her was so strong, I wouldn't have been surprised to see her curly, blonde hair unrolling and re-curling.

"Go to hell," she hissed under her breath. And as one of her colleagues got within a few steps of us, she smirked at me as she yelled out. "No, don't touch me! Leave me alone!"

The man closest to me reached for my arm, saying, "Listen, pal, we don't want any trouble here," and the whole office area filled with the scent of the curious. The wave of scent translated to sound would be something like, "Ooooh, there's something good going down!"

I easily shrugged off the hand of the Good Samaritan, remembering that he was an innocent bystander here – that everyone in this office, with the exception of the bitter bitch before me, was innocent.

Unable to resist saying it, I leaned in close to her and said. "I outta stick you alone in a locked room with Howard's fiancé for ten minutes. She'd wipe that smirk off your face permanently for what you did with Howard."

Her demeanor, her scent, her heartbeat changed immediately to surprise.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked.

I didn't answer. Buddy behind me tried putting a hand on my arm again, this time saying. "That's about enough out of you."

The other guy who was heading my way was within a few steps of us.

Again, I easily shrugged myself out of the man's grasp, then took a few steps toward the elevators, pushing my way past the other fellow forcefully, but without hurting him.

With these jokers, all the witnesses, and security on their way, Howard's slutty secretary wasn't going to be giving up information any time soon. My best bet would be to follow Mr. Hyperhidrosis.

At least he left a distinctive trail.

There wasn't time to wait for an elevator, not with these two Good Samaritans here; and certainly not with office security on their way.

My best bet would be to hoof it down the stairs and hope I could get down quickly enough to closely follow Mr. Hyperhidrosis.

Interlude – Wolf Night – Five

IN RESPONSE, THE wolf growled and leapt toward the other wolf in an intercepting attack. The woman screamed as she attempted to dodge the first wolf's attack.

The wolf noticed how, in that split second, with both canines still lunging through the air, the woman's eyes fell on his own; and despite how she threw herself adeptly to her left, her eyes never left his own eyes.

In her gaze he sensed recognition, as if she, too detected a similar pack familiarity with him.

But that infinite split second was actually over quickly.

His counterattack managed to intercept the other wolf's lunge in mid leap. It hadn't been a perfect hit, but his front paws caught the other's hind legs enough to spin the other off track from its intended target.

That, combined with the woman's dodge, saved her.

Both wolves hit the ground and rolled.

Both came up, teeth bared, growling at one another.

Chapter Nineteen: Every stair you take, I'll be chasing you

I RACED THROUGH the fire doors and into the stairway. My footsteps echoed loudly in the more dimly lit, dusty, concrete chamber as I leapt down half of the first flight of stairs.

Turning, I took several more steps, then, hand on the railing, vaulted from the midway point of the flight I was on to the midway point of the flight below. Every second flight had an open access to the lower flight.

I was at least ten flights down when I heard the hurried footsteps of my pursuers entering somewhere above, likely back up on the sixty-second floor.

"He's heading down," a gruff voice said above.

Another voice, softer, higher pitched, spoke – likely into a radio. "Hal and I are pursuing him down staircase C. Get over to that exit on the lobby level and start heading up for the intercept."

In the time that I heard these words, I was able to descend another four floors and was just passing the forty-fourth floor.

Hearing the security guard mention the express elevator, I tried to remember if I'd seen Mr. Hyperhidrosis

getting into one of the express elevators or one of the regular ones. The two express elevators, as I remembered from my ascent, serviced the concourse, the lobby and the fortieth through seventieth floors. The other two elevators, as I recall, went to every single floor in the building.

Mr. Hyperhidrosis hadn't taken the same elevator I'd ascended on, which had been an express, and which had taken less than a minute. But had he taken one of the "all stops" elevators? If so, that meant it would take him perhaps as long as three minutes to get to the bottom.

It was a bit after 1:40, perhaps a bit too early for midafternoon breaks, but perhaps not too early for smokers needing to sneak outside for a quick smoke. I was hoping for a lot of those – because for every floor the elevator stopped on, it bought me precious seconds.

I launched myself down another half dozen floors, trying to imagine where the stinky elevator car might be; I allowed myself to become amused at the poor idiots who got onto that elevator car with my overly sweaty friend. Knowing full well that my sense of smell was one hundred times more sensitive than the average persons, I still pitied anyone who got in that close proximity with him, particularly in such a confined space. Short of someone with a bad head cold or infected sinus, it was likely unbearable to be that close to him for more than a minute.

I recalled the slight garlicky tinge to his sweat and marveled at how, despite how awful a person's garlic breath could be, how much worse smelling that garlic coming out of a person's pores was.

A Canadian Werewolf in New York

It was difficult to contain another series of shudders, even as I continued to launch myself down another half dozen flights in as many seconds.

As I ran, another flash from the night before hit me.

Screeching brakes. A car door opening and closing from somewhere behind. In front, a canine beast, filled with anger, with blood fury, running.

I pursued.

Through the damp dark alleyway, a human voice calling, shouting something indistinct somewhere behind me. A warning, a shout of anger was all I had time to interpret in it.

Ahead of me was all I cared about.

The other wolf was getting away. And quickly.

I pressed forward.

Then I felt the piercing pain in my hind leg a split second before I heard the echoing blast of the gunshot.

I tripped, rolled, bounced off the alley wall.

This was the clearest, longest flashback yet.

Too bad I was flying down the stairs at a breakneck speed and couldn't really spend much time considering it.

Nearing the twentieth floor – I could tell by the numerals painted in bright red on the wall beside the fire doors leading back into the proper office area – I figured it had been at least a minute and a half since I'd started my descent.

My pursuers were still both in the stairway, evidenced by the sound of their shoes on the concrete stairs and their

labored breathing. I thought, for a moment, about the guard who they'd radioed to start heading up this stairwell to intercept me, and wondered why another guard hadn't been sent up from below to a lower floor to intercept me sooner.

But then again, I was just a run-of-the-mill intruder. Building security was likely just going through the motions of assuring confidence in the building's clients. I mean, it's not as if I'd been walking around the 62nd floor waving a machine gun at people and firing random shots.

No, I was a somewhat harmless intruder.

On the flip side, they likely weren't going to just give up pursuing me. After all, they never knew when a harmless intruder was going to turn out to be a deranged killer, or a terrorist, or something. And I doubt that any one of these "polyester police" would want to be the one that decided to call off the chase, particularly if I turned out to be an actual threat.

After all, these were the strongest "cover your own ass" times we'd ever known.

Sure enough, after descending another half dozen floors, I heard a set of fire doors below slamming and the sound of footsteps echoing up the stairs.

I kept moving as fast as I could for the moment, trying to figure out what I was going to do.

While I could easily put the guy out of commission, I wasn't interested in hurting any of them, particularly for just doing their jobs.

The other thing, of course, was that he likely carried a gun, and might have it drawn.

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And as skilled as I have become at hand-to-hand combat, and as strong as my constitution has become, I'm not one to knowingly walk straight into a situation where I might have a gun pulled on me and risk getting shot.

I didn't think I'd ever actually had a gun pointed at me – unless, of course, I counted the blurry incident from the night before that ended with a bullet lodged in my leg. And I certainly wasn't looking forward to having a similar experience in human form.

As I approached the twelfth floor, I stopped and just listened. The two pursuers above were now quite a ways behind. Not moving nearly as fast as I, there were likely at least twenty stories up. The guard below, not as tired since his chase had just begun, was moving pretty quickly by the sounds of things. If I had to guess by the approaching intensity of his echoes, he was perhaps half a dozen flights below me.

I waited a few seconds, seeing if any of them said anything to one another on their radios about not hearing me running any longer. They said nothing, just continued to huff and puff as they ran. The sweat-and-cologne odor from the guard approaching from below finally drifted up to me.

It was time to slip out of the stairwell.

I carefully opened the fire doors to the twelfth floor, peeked into the vacant hallway, then slipped out and gently closed the door behind me, ensuring it closed with the gentlest of clicks. From this side, the latch closed softly, but I didn't know what it sounded like on the stairwell side.

My pursuers were likely huffing and wheezing so loudly that they couldn't even hear their own footfalls. But you never knew.

Walking as quickly as I could without looking like a fugitive, I headed to the stairway at the other end of the empty narrow hall and went inside.

Now in a stairwell devoid of my pursuers and my interceptor, I resumed the combination run-leap-land technique that I'd gotten quite good at. Hey, who needs to wait for an elevator anymore when you've perfected a routine like this?

I was down the last dozen floors without incident.

As I came out through the fire doors and out into the lobby at a quick walk, the fresh scent of Mr. Hyperhidrosis was still strong in the lobby – despite the mingling scents of several dozen people. His pungent odor spoke clearly to me.

He'd already been through. But, hopefully, only a few moments earlier.

I followed his scent out the lobby doors in time to see him sliding his sweaty bulk into the back seat of a Cadillac that was double parked on the street in front of the building.

"Not again," I muttered, seeing him close the car door. This would be the second time today these gangsters had gotten away from me in a car. As good as I was at following a scent, it was virtually impossible to track someone in a moving vehicle. I mean, if Mr. Hyperhidrosis had gotten onto a motorcycle I'd at least have a chance of following. But he was getting into a closed vehicle.

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I had time to lunge at the vehicle.

With the back car door open, I detected the scent of gun oil, not from the gun I knew Mr. Hyperhidrosis was carrying, but from at least one other gun inside the car. The scent of one of the other men from the alley was also in the car. And the scent of a third person, this one a smoker.

So, launch myself at a car filled with armed gangsters? I wasn't the smartest person in Manhattan, but I wasn't stupid enough to attempt that.

Perhaps ten feet from the idling Cadillac, I was determined that I was going to do my best to track this vehicle on foot. If there was a smoker inside, perhaps he would crack one of the windows open and I'd at least have a chance of tracking the car as it moved across the city.

As I was moving closer to the car and considering my options, Mr. Hyperhidrosis glanced out the window and stared right at me through the tinted glass as the car started to inch away.

He muttered a single word that I couldn't distinguish to his colleagues, and the vehicle screeched to a stop.

Mr. Hyperhidrosis opened the door back, training his gun on me and said. "Get in."

Chapter Twenty: Foul scent, foul language and foul grammar

"NO, I DON'T think so," I said, in a voice that projected out a lot more confidence than I currently felt. Like I'd said, I wasn't all that used to having firearms pointed at me.

Mr. Hyperhidrosis glared at me, his gun pointing straight at my head. A second gun appeared over the head-rest of the front seat, also pointed straight at me.

"I said: *Get in!*"

I started at him – or, more specifically, straight down the barrel of his weapon.

What could I do but oblige?

There I was with a large sweaty mobster-type man aiming a handgun at me at point blank range and one of his two colleagues was also training a gun at me.

It seemed like following their orders was my best option.

Especially, since, only seconds ago my desire was to follow these guys back to their base of operations, hopefully to the location where they were keeping the kidnapped man I was trying to save in the hopes of winning points with my ex-girlfriend.

I tried to suppress a smile as I raised my hands high in the air. "Okay, okay. I'll get in."

"This isn't a fucking stickup," Mr. Hyperhidrosis grumbled. "Put your hands down and get your ass in the car."

I lowered my hands and stepped toward the vehicle. Mr. Hyperhidrosis slowly slid himself back on the seat to allow me space to get in.

As I inched my way into the back seat of the Cadillac, my eyes begin to water. Being in this proximity with Mr. Hyperhidrosis in such a tight, enclosed space was definitely not pleasant for someone with my highly attuned sense of smell.

I glanced at the two men in the front seat, figuring that, even with normal human scent, it must also be unbearable for them. But there was no indication that the smell bothered them at all. Reading their emotive scents and heartbeats, they were definitely anxious and angry – but I couldn't find any sort of the disgust I knew the bitter odor was generating in me.

They must be used to it, I figured, and did my best to gulp in one more breath of fresh air outside the car.

"Close the fucking door!"

I obliged, then turned back to look at Mr. Hyperhidrosis.

He sat there, gun still pointed at me and shook his head as the car peeled away.

"Fuck," he muttered, shaking his head.

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Quite an articulate gentleman, I mused, almost saying it aloud. What the hell had come over me, I wondered, almost making a wise ass comment in such a perilous situation?

That whole aspect of the teenage Peter Parker fighting seriously scary bad guys as Spider-Man all made sense to me. Given the gawky teenager's nervousness about the whole situation, he cracked wise when fighting the bad guys, not because he was a confident and cocky hero, but as a way to release the nervous tension that coursed through him.

I completely understood that.

Sure, I had superhuman wolf-enhanced strength, agility and senses. But I was no superhero, and despite how I'd been acting and reacting to today's events, I was simply far from comfortable with everything that was going on.

No-sir, I was more comfortable sitting in my Algonquin hotel room with a cup of coffee in hand and writing a fictitious story about some crime caper involving a reluctant hero than I was actually being that reluctant hero.

Yet here I was, in the middle of a situation that, while I'd stepped into it willingly, I still found particularly scary.

And I was dealing with it by cracking wise – if not aloud, like Spider-Man, then at least in my head.

In any case, I wasn't finding that it was making me any more comfortable. I was still quite nervous about the gun pointing at me from about two inches away from my chest.

I listened to Mr. Hyperhidrosis' heartbeat, which was still racing from the chase, not that he'd done much running.

There was no indication that he was about to pull the trigger, and I figured that, at least while we were in this vehicle traveling through a populated area, he wasn't going to be shooting me.

The gunshot would simply be too loud. It would attract attention.

And, though I wasn't all that familiar with weapons, I had researched enough about them to know what a silencer looked like – neither my smelly friend in the back seat nor his colleague in the passenger seat in front of me had silencers on their weapons.

So I was safe from being shot, for the moment at least.

It was more likely that they would shoot me once we got back to their hideout. I was really hoping that they were taking me back to where they were holding Howard.

Once out of the vehicle, in a more open space, I would be more likely to be able to use my speed and agility and heightened senses to find some opportunity to knock the guns out of their hands and overpower them.

I mean, it sounded like a good enough plan to me.

"What the fuck you doing following us?" Mr. Hyperhidrosis asked.

"Shut up, Kern," the fellow in the seat in front of me said. He was the other guy from the alley this morning. He turned in his seat and faced me. Seatbelt not on, I noticed.

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Tisk, tisk, I thought. *Mr. Bad Guy was not paying attention to the letter of the law.*

He took a good long look at me, then his eyes widened just milliseconds after his heart skipped a beat and he gave off a flash of recognition.

Here it comes, I thought. *He recognizes me as Michael Andrews, the mystery writer.* I sometimes picked up that scent from random people I passed on the street.

I wondered if he might actually be a fan.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said, and a second emotive wave hit me, this time a kind of pride in himself, likely for being such an observant guy. "You're that guy from the alley on the upper east side this morning."

He paused, turned to look at the driver – he was the smoker – and at Mr. Hyperhidrosis, who I now knew as Kern.

Passenger seat guy looked back at me. "The fuck you doing following us?"

Hey man, I almost quipped. *You're reading the lines from Kern's script.* I gulped, and instead of the witty rejoinder in my head I said. "Er . . ."

Kern poked the nuzzle of his gun into my chest, hard. "Answer him. Jesus!" he said.

"Er . . ." I said again, this time with more feeling. "Guilty as charged."

Before the guy in the passenger seat recognized me from this morning, I had been about to pretend I was an undercover security guy who had wanted to retrieve the stolen laptop – an innocent enough story that would

likely convince these walking sides of beef that I wasn't on to any sort of larger conspiracy.

But now that they recognized me from this morning, I'd have a bit more trouble coming up with a plausible story they might buy.

Of course, I only needed to buy the time necessary to get back to their hideout where I could hopefully rescue Howard.

I opened my mouth, not exactly sure what I was going to say, when Mr. Passenger Seat spoke again. "You a fuckin' cop or something?"

He punctuated his sentence by reaching his hand over the seat and pressing his own handgun against my right temple.

Great! One gun pointing at my chest, the other at my temple. If they both fired at the same time, which bullet would kill me first? The one aimed at my brain or the one aimed at my heart? It felt like a sick and twisted reality television program.

The only thing keeping me from wetting my pants was the fact that, while their heartbeats were elevated, there hadn't been any tell-tale sign that they were about to pull their triggers. The fact is, I hadn't heard either of them click off their safeties.

I opened my mouth to deny being a cop, and my tongue felt like a wad of cotton.

Holy shit. Talk about dry mouth. Instead of speaking I smacked my mouth a couple of times.

With the sensation of my mouth going dry so immediately, there was a new smell in the air which I realized

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was my own sweat. My body was partially responding to the run down the skyscraper, and partially from fear.

"Frisk him!" the guy in the passenger seat yelled, spit from his mouth spraying onto my cheek.

Kern pulled his gun away from my chest and slipped it into a holster under his jacket in one quick, fluid motion. Then he reached over and patted my chest, back, hips and legs.

"He's clean," Kern said. "He ain't carrying. I don't think he's no cop."

Again with the grammar! Yes, despite the precarious situation, I was still attending to this guy's inability to speak in proper sentences.

Their heartbeats seemed to relax a bit all at the same time when Kern spoke.

My cotton tongue felt a bit lighter.

"No," I finally said. "No. I'm not a cop."

"He talks," the driver said, his eyes momentarily meeting mine in the rearview mirror. It was the first times I'd noticed him really taking his eyes off the road.

Speaking of the road, I hadn't been paying attention to where we'd been going.

"Then what the fuck are you?" the guy in the passenger seat said, rapping his gun against my forehead to punctuate each word.

"Ouch," I said, pretending to reflexively rub the spot he'd been hitting. It didn't hurt as much as I was letting on, I just wanted my hand to be up on my head, close to the gun in case I needed to quickly divert the pistol from my cranium. With Kern's gun still tucked in his shoulder

holster and only one gun trained on me, this option seemed less risky.

Of course, the goal wasn't to take these guys out, but to allow them to take me to Howard.

The reality of the situation hit home for a moment.

What the hell was I considering?

Sure, I'd spent the day farting around the city like some pseudo-hero. But for the most part, I hadn't been taking on anything more than a bunch of run-of-the-mill muggers and ne'er-do-wells. These guys were armed thugs – and seemed involved in something larger. Some mafia-like organization that likely went deeper than Kern was smelly.

Once they got me back to their headquarters, I imagined there would likely be another half dozen or more of them there. And if so, what did I expect to accomplish?

The guy in the passenger seat jammed the gun hard into my forehead again. "So you're not a cop. What the fuck are you, then?"

"Er," I began, and my mind drew a blank so the words that came were completely natural for the question posed. "I'm a writer."

"Shit!" Kern said. "A reporter is on to us? Monty is going to fucking freak."

They thought I was a reporter? That was fine by me. I suppose it could explain why I might be following them. Also, he mentioned somebody named Monty. I figured Monty might be their ringleader.

Of course, being a reporter, or investigative journalist, might pose as much danger as being a cop. Unless they

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thought more people knew about them. Their heartbeats confirmed it, because all three of their hearts raced in the same steadier pattern like they had when they'd thought I was a cop.

I considered my story for a moment.

Would I be safer if they thought I was working alone, or if they thought there were others who knew where I was?

I said softly. "I'm not a reporter."

"What?" Yet another question punctuated by an exclamatory poke of the gun against my head.

"I'm not a reporter," I said.

"No?" Another rap. I wondered if there might soon be a permanent, round, gun-barrel-shaped impression there.

"No," I licked my lips again. "I'm a biographer. I'm in the middle of writing a biography about Howard."

Kern laughed, and the burst of his fetid breath was a shocking relief compared to the horrible stench of his body odor. "What the fuck does that loser need a biographer for?"

The guy in the front seat burst into laughter as well. "Maybe he could write about how Howard pissed himself the first time I stuck a gun in his face."

Kern almost doubled over in laughter at that. The driver started laughing, and added, "Or the fainting, Brick. Don't forget the fainting." The driver let out a mocking sigh, which must have been an imitation of one Howard had offered in front of them and mimed passing out. The caddie swerved dangerously into the path of an

oncoming car before he lifted his head again and swung back into our lane.

In reaction, both to his mockery of Howard and the near miss, the other two thugs screamed in delight and amusement.

All three of them were giggling like schoolgirls.

I smiled and started chuckling along with them. Yeah, I know, I was being held at gunpoint and kidnapped. No, this wasn't a Patty Hearst moment – I was merely trying to go with the flow of the moment. That and the fact that, despite my goal of rescuing Howard from these men, Howard was not my friend. Howard stood between me and the woman I loved. Not that I would allow these men to harm Howard – I did hope to rescue him. But to be completely honest, taking a moment to mock him did my currently worried and hassled mind a bit of good. Besides, Howard had been screwing around on Gail. Being his rescuer didn't mean I had to like him.

The laughing continued for several minutes, each of them taking turns acting out some mock imitation of Howard's shocked face and fainting. It made me wonder just how many times he had passed out while in their custody.

But the moment was over quickly, when Kern turned to me, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes and said. "Oh, that's a hoot. Thanks for the laugh."

I nodded, still smiling like a kid that wasn't quite in on the joke, but wanted to be. "Yeah, sure."

"Too bad neither of you is going to live long enough to finish writing the biography."

Chapter Twenty-One: A reflection on memory and sanity in a Loup Garou's life

WE DROVE FOR the next several minutes in relative silence. I thought long and hard about how I was going to deal with what Kern had said.

He'd made it pretty clear that these guys had no intention of releasing either me or Howard. I imagined that once they got what they needed from Howard, perhaps once they retrieved whatever it was from his laptop, he was as good as dead.

And, with him dead, they certainly wouldn't leave his biographer around to document the story. Naturally, their plan was to kill me, too.

Interesting how matter of fact these guys were about it.

I wondered exactly what kind of outfit or organization they worked for. Were they some mafia-type group? They obviously were more than just a group of dumb thugs on a random mission. Given not only their matching suits but where Howard worked, they were likely

mixed in with some higher-level financial dealings or schemes.

I realized we were heading down into the South Street Seaport area. I was familiar with that area of town, having spent some time down there a couple of years ago doing research for a book – but even if I hadn't been familiar with the streets leading up to it, I likely would have figured out where we were heading by the not-too-subtle scent of fish in the air.

The fishy odor was powerful and was another relief, believe it or not, from the nasty stench coming off Kern. I knew these guys' noses weren't nearly as sensitive as my own, but I still had trouble imagining how they could ever get used to it.

The guy named Brický –-the gun-slapping guy sitting in the front – turned in his seat and pointed the gun at me again.

Brický?

What the hell kind of name was Brický? Maybe, and I shuddered thinking about it, it was a nickname born out of his expertise at fitting victims with brick or concrete shoes and tossing them in the Hudson.

For now, at least, I was traveling with Kern, Brický and Driver Dude. I wasn't particularly proud of the nicknames I'd quickly devised for my foes, but they would have to do in a pinch. And I was confident that if I lived for at least another fifteen minutes I'd likely be able to convert Driver Dude into a real name in my head.

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"We're almost there," Brickly said. "Any monkey business from you and you'll have six bullets in you before you have time to blink. Got it?"

I swallowed, more in reaction to the determined and serious scent coming off him than his words. My mouth was dry again. It was getting close to action time.

"Got it," I said in a small voice.

The car ducked down an alley off Front Street and we pulled alongside the back of a warehouse.

When Brickly and Kern opened their doors, a particular fishy smell hit me, which incited a quick flashback.

The air was tinged with the smell of burning rubber, combined with the fading echo of screeching tires. Even that powerful smell did little to mask the much stronger fishy smell that permeated the alley.

I shook my head. I'd been in this very alley last night as a wolf. I reached back, tried to pull more of the straggling thoughts from my memory, but all I got was the sudden brilliant and painful flash of headlights in my eyes.

I wondered about this flashback – wondered at how inspired by stimuli they might be. As I'd mused before, I didn't have much recollection of my time as a wolf, and often attributed that partially to the fact that it helped me maintain at least a modicum of sanity, particularly given the circumstances.

I still think that part of what keeps me somewhat grounded and normal is the fact that with the act of my uncontrollably morphing into a lupine beast during full moons comes a blanket amnesia. A learned forgetting of

the incident. And it's not that I think that running around as a wolf is all that traumatic. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Over the years I have had several great momentary sensory flashbacks that are among the finest of my experiences.

For example, the calm, cool evening of a full moon actually smells different than a night without a full moon. There's an incredible beauty in such moments. Or the unique sound of snowfall in Central Park. Yes, it is muted, and well below the sounds of the background traffic and other city noises. But it's there, however indistinguishable from most human perception.

So it's not necessarily the experience of being a wolf that my mind is protecting me from.

It's likely the change itself.

I can only imagine the extent of the excruciating pain that comes with the complete metamorphosis from human into wolf. Or from wolf into human. Considering the difference in the simple things like size, bone density, skull shape. With such a dramatic modification, there must also come a phenomenal pain, unlike any a normal human would ever experience.

Enough to drive virtually anyone going through the metamorphosis insane.

My head pounded, both with the memory and the attempt at reaching too hard, and my eyes started to water.

I hadn't even noticed that Kern had come around my side of the car to pull me out while Brickly had opened the door, gun still trained on me.

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Kern hauled me out. I let him pull me to my feet, as I shook the memory and blinked hard to diffuse the burst of lights from my memory.

For a moment, the overpowering smell of fish from my memory – stronger in my memory as a wolf – had actually blocked Kern's offensive body odor.

But Kern's smell came back to me. And with it was the subtle scent of Howard hanging in the air.

The four of us, me in the lead with Bricky's pistol jammed into my back, headed toward a doorway into the warehouse.

And that's when things got worse.

I smelled him before I heard him yell out to us, and I cringed at the unfortunate timing on his part. My old friend Buddy was upwind in the alley and heading this way.

What the hell was he doing here?

Oh no, I thought, even before his words passed through the air. Please, Buddy, get the hell out of here.

"Hey, Wolfman!" Buddy called out in that gravelly voice of his. "Fancy meeting you here."

Interlude – Wolf Night – Six

THE WOLF BRACED himself, steeling for an attack, when the second human scent came to it. The scent was muted and strange; it was difficult to determine exactly where it was coming from.

The female human was standing just off to the wolf's left, and the other wolf was a few steps from single leaping distance in front. And that was where the other human scent was coming from.

He paused, regarded the other with a curious tilt of his head.

That vague and unfamiliar human scent had been coming from the other wolf – but it wasn't the sort of scent that clung to the fur or came from being in close proximity with another creature.

The human scent was coming directly from the other wolf. As if it were part human.

The other wolf ceased its own warning growl, regarded the wolf with almost-human eyes. In those eyes, a pale blue that seemed unnervingly foreign for the species, and in the combined wolf-human scent coming off it, it was clear that the other was aware of what the wolf smelled.

It issued a short, almost human sounding bark and unpredictably lunged again toward the female human.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The fortuitous and Lou Costello-like timing of Buddy J. Samuels

THE GUYS I was with stopped and all heads turned down the alleyway toward Buddy. Their scents were mostly curiosity; although I did detect an element of suspicion and fear coming from Driver Dude, whose hand had shot inside his jacket, likely reaching for his gun. Bricky had tucked his gun behind the open flap of his suit jacket to keep it out of sight. I couldn't see Kern – not that I couldn't smell him. Even the essence of curiosity coming off of him carried with it that bitter, sour smell he exuded.

Buddy was still about thirty feet away, and strolling toward us, his chubby arms swinging as he moved. I was struck with the image of Lou Costello in a scene from one of those old Abbott and Costello movies, out for a Sunday stroll and whistling, either on his way to a date or perhaps had just been kissed by his girl.

I'd never realized it before, but Buddy did resemble Lou Costello in many ways. He was just a little over five feet tall and had a similar pudgy shape and a similar bulbous nose that, on Buddy, was often red from too much drink. His smile was infectious, and I loved seeing

the large creases expand on either side of his mouth, pushing out his chubby cheeks even farther, like a chipmunk stuffing its face with peanuts.

I noticed how much he seemed to have aged since I saw him – eight months earlier. His eyes were dark shadows, at least in the light of the alley, but I also noticed how the shape of his face had changed.

His chin and jowls seemed to have shrunken, giving the lower half of his face a narrow, sunken-in look.

He appeared tired, but his heartbeat hadn't changed in rhythm since I last saw him, and I had trouble getting a real bead on his mood via his scent – it was as if he was with a cold or some nasty bout of the flu that was interfering with his regular odor.

None of the gangsters moved or said anything as he strolled right up to us. I waited for Buddy to work his word magic on them and perhaps allow me a chance to attack and disarm them.

"Speak of the devil," Buddy said. "I just left a message on your machine." He reached into his jacket pocket and I caught bursts of tension from Driver Dude and Brick, but they relaxed when Buddy merely waved his cell phone in the air. "Couldn't have been more than five minutes ago I was listening to the voice on your answering machine.

"I got into town late last night, finished off both my morning meetings as well as my lunch date – oh man, Mikey, you should have seen the legs on the sweet thing I had lunch with. She had the sexiest legs I've seen in a

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long time. Legs right up to her eyeballs, if you know what I mean. The kind of legs you could suck on for a day."

Kern and Brickly laughed. I recognized it as one of the regular expressions he'd pulled from one of the slapstick *Naked Gun* movies with Leslie Nielsen.

"Ooooh, geez. I'll be lying awake tonight just dreamin' of those legs of hers, let me tell you."

There were more chuckles from the guys about this, and the sense of curiosity in them heightened. They stood there, smiling, and waiting for Buddy to say more. I remained in place, quietly trying to read their actions, waiting for the perfect moment of all three of them dropping their guard enough for me to make a move.

But most of all, I was wondering where the hell Buddy had come from, why he hadn't asked about who these strangers with me were and what we were up to. My mind raced back to the number of times Buddy had shown up out of the blue at the oddest moments. Was there more to him than the bubbly and friendly persona he so powerfully projected?

"Yessiree, I'd just left you a message. I finished with my gammy friend, sealed another fine deal, and was hoping I'd be able to get ahold of you.

"It's been ages, hasn't it, Mikey? I mean, when was the last time it took me so damn long to get back to this little island? I know I travel a lot, but this is, by far, my favorite place to be. Where else but New York, huh?" And then he started quoting from that old Huey Lewis song. "*New York, New York, there's no place that I'd rather be. Where else can you do a half a million things, all at a quarter to three?*"

I kept trying to get a read on Buddy's scent, but it was illusive, oddly muted, despite the fact his wild gestures should have pushed the scent out to me in strong waves. Sure, he was normally gregarious and friendly and verbose and animated when he spoke. But he seemed to be going a little over the top; and, though he was making eye contact and including them in the stream of verbal diarrhea he was releasing, he hadn't verbally acknowledged the guys with me. I was confused.

"Ah yes, the big apple, the large fruit. So good to be back. And I have to admit, I am completely freaked out with the fact that I bumped into you.

"I mean, the lady with the gorgeous gams and I just finished our lunch down at that place off Pearl that I keep meaning to take you to. Best clams this side of Boston. Ah hell, the best clams I've had anywhere, let me tell you. The best clams, the best gams. Oooeee.

"Yeah, we finished eating, I sealed one of the sweetest deals in a long time. Ha! I sealed one of the sweetest deals with one sweet lady. Poetry in motion, let me tell you.

"And here you are, walking through the same alley I parked my car in not two hours ago.

"This alley here is one of the least patrolled by the flat-feet and green hornets. Damn parking rates in this city could bankrupt a guy, you know what I mean? Fancy that you and your friends should be strolling down this same alley though. Funny coincidence, isn't it?

"Not so funny, of course, if you all are in the know about the lack of tickets issued when parking here.

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"Speaking of you all, I have to admire the impeccable, matching suits you have on. Most times you see a bunch of guys standing around wearing matching suits you think 'mafia' and walk the other way. But you guys look sharp in those. They're pretty exquisite, perfectly fitting each of you. They look like Logsdail's work to me. Am I right?"

The thugs shared confused glances with one another; the looks on their faces matched the incredulous wonder their scents were exuding. They simply couldn't believe this guy was real.

"Ah, but look at me! I can't believe how rude I'm being. Asking you questions about your tailor and I haven't even introduced myself." Buddy stuck the cell phone back in the pocket of his pale-blue business suit and thrust his chubby little hand out. "The name's Bernard J. Samuels. But you can call me Buddy."

Bricky was the closest to Buddy, and stuck the right hand he'd been hiding behind the flap of his jacket out as if in a gesture to shake hands with Buddy.

Buddy's hand froze mid-way to grasp Bricky's when he saw the piece in his hand. But there was an odd juxtaposition, because, despite the confused and fearful look on his face, Buddy didn't exude a single ounce of fear from his smell. I detected a very muted sense of calm and control coming from him.

"Now wait a cotton-picking minute here . . ." Buddy started to say, but Bricky interrupted him.

"Pleased to meet you, Bernard." Bricky reached out, grabbed Buddy's right arm with his left hand and hauled

him a foot closer. "Wrong place, wrong time, Buddy. You can come quietly with us, or I'll plug one in you right here. As you said, this is the least patrolled alley in lower Manhattan."

Buddy's chummy and friendly essence faded into confusion and worry. He looked at me, his eyes filled with fear, but not a single essence of fear in his scent.

"Mikey? What's going on? Who are these guys?"

Kern spoke before I could say anything. "We're a bunch of guys who just went from having to kill and dispose of one witness to three in the span of half an hour. So you can think of us as three pissed off guys with three times the amount of work to do thanks to you and your friend Mikey here. Fuck."

Driver Dude and Bricky snorted at that.

"Mikey, what have you gotten mixed up with here?"

My mouth was dry and I was disappointed at having missed a chance to use Buddy's distraction to make a move.

"These guys mean business, Buddy. Just do what they say."

"You don't talk much, but it's the first fuckin' thing you said all afternoon that makes sense," Kern said. "Now get walking."

"Thataway," Bricky said tipping his head to the right, toward a doorway about ten feet away.

We shuffled slowly toward the door and got within a couple of feet of it when Buddy suddenly stopped. "What's the point of that?" Buddy said.

"What are you? Some kinda wiseass?" Kern said.

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"You just admitted that you intend to kill us along with some other guy, whom I imagine is somewhere on the other side of this door."

"Yeah?"

"So why in hell should I make it easier for you?" Buddy said, his hands gesturing wildly as he spoke. "Why should Mikey and I make it as easy as shooting fish in a barrel for you? Why the hell shouldn't I just start running down the alley, and Mikey run in the opposite direction? You know, give you guys two different moving targets at the same time? Why should we walk into that building knowing that we're not going to be coming back out alive, and make this whole process easy? Much better to take our chances that you're bad shots at moving targets than walk into a sitting duck situation."

"You fuckin' kiddin' me?" Kern said, exuding a sense of complete bafflement. His two buddies were equally baffled. Truth be told, so was I. What the hell was Buddy up to?

"I'm a business man. A dealer. I just finished negotiating with a foxy lady who was as sexy as Manhattan nights are long and as cunning as she was beautiful. She hadn't intended on signing any contract with me. And if she did, you damn well know she'd been planning on using her sexuality to get the better part of the deal, particularly with a chubby old middle-aged man like me. But just like most men likely underestimate her intelligence because of her physical beauty, she underestimated my own resolve. She signed the contract under the terms I was offering, not the counter offer she

had prepared. And do you know why? It's because I'm good at what I do.

"So there's no way you guys are simply going to herd us into this building here for slaughter, not without a bit of negotiating."

"Negotiate this!" Bricky said, stepped up behind Buddy and bringing the butt of his gun down on the back of Buddy's head.

In that split second as I saw Bricky's hand swing down, I almost made a move. But Kern's gun had been trained on me and Driver Dude had the other gun pointed at Buddy.

I could easily avoid or even handle being shot, but I couldn't risk Buddy being shot; and Driver Dude's nervousness leading to an itchy trigger finger made me hesitate.

There hadn't been much I could do.

I watched helplessly as Buddy's eyes rolled back in his head and he crumpled to the alley floor.

But as I watched him fall, I thought that perhaps my old friend had given me exactly the kind of distraction I needed. And it made me wonder if perhaps he had planned it all along. Man, but hadn't Buddy been my good luck charm right from the moment he first walked into my life?

I thought back to that first time we met, the night I'd been attacked by that wolf and how Buddy's car just happened along at exactly the right moment to save my life. And about how he nursed me, a wide-eyed Canadian boy

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from a small city into the heart of New York, and didn't let that city eat me alive.

Watching Buddy lying unconscious on the alley floor and thinking back to all of the ways in which he had mentored me, protected me and coached me reaffirmed my commitment to wanting to see these guys hurt in new ways. Most especially Brick.

He had quite the smack down coming to him once I was able to make my move, which wouldn't be long now.

"We're not going to get any trouble from you now, are we?" Brick said, turning to glare at me.

I shook my head, trying hard to look petrified. "Uh, no. No trouble. Not from me." It was hard wiping the resolved look off my face, but I did my best.

My voice contained just the right amount of warbling fear in it I suppose, because he seemed and smelled satisfied with my response.

Brick bent over and grabbed Buddy under the arms. "C'mon, Kern, take his legs wouldya?"

"Fuck," Kern said in a low voice and bent down to hold Buddy under the backs of his knees. He kept mumbling curses under his breath.

I looked at them, still stunned. Oh man, they must really have me pegged as a coward to leave themselves so vulnerable.

Of course, I hadn't given them any reason to believe otherwise, and that's just the way I liked it.

Driver Dude pointed his weapon at me. "Okay, you first. Open that door." He looked around the alley, checking for witnesses. "C'mon. Move it."

I reached forward, tried the door. It was stiff, but opened into a dark, narrow hallway with a single dim bulb halfway down the corridor. There were two doors across from each other right under the bulb. The exterior door I was holding was a weighted one that would slam closed if it wasn't held open. I gave a weak smile at Kern who was in the lead with Buddy's body.

"Er, after you." I said in a soft voice, stepping aside to let the two men pass ahead of me.

Kern and Bricky shuffled inside.

Driver Dude poked the gun at the back of my shoulder blade and nudged me forward into the hallway. "Move," he hissed, his lips just inches from my ear.

I stepped into the hallway, listening for movement or activity, and heard nothing other than the echo of footsteps and the rhythmic whoop whoop sound of ceiling fans in what must have been an adjacent warehouse space. The only other sound I caught was the raspy cough of a man, coming from the floor above.

The hallway was thick with the stale smells of these men, and Howard's distinctive body odor mingled with *Old Spice*.

Satisfied that the darkness of the hallway would properly handicap the vision of my friends at least for another twenty seconds or so until their eyes adjusted, I decided it was time for action.

I slammed the door, quickly ducked under the gun, lifting Driver Dude's wrist up with my left shoulder and simultaneously elbowing him in the gut. I twisted and

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grabbed his wrist, keeping the gun pointed at the ceiling and drove my right fist into his face, breaking his nose.

I followed that with a quick slam of the side of my hand into his neck, striking him perfectly in the carotid. He was unconscious immediately.

The whole thing took less than a second, and it wasn't until he collapsed to the floor that Kern had time to mutter, "fuck," before I rammed my fist into the small of his back. He dropped Buddy's legs and gasped.

"Fuck!" he yelled. But before he could turn, I kicked hard into the middle of his leg behind his knee and he folded to the floor.

As he was going down, I used the same carotid chop to quickly put him out.

Bricky let go of Buddy and I rushed forward to grab my friend before his head hit the floor.

"Waaa?" Buddy started to say, the sudden movement startling him closer to consciousness.

"Hang in there, Buddy. You'll be okay," I said in a soft voice, watching Bricky take a couple of steps back and reaching for his gun.

"Don't do it, Bricky," I said, slowly laying Buddy on the ground. "You saw what I did to your friends. I'll do the same to you."

He actually paused, as if considering. Then, the telltale jump of his heart indicated to me that he intended to draw and shoot.

I leapt over Buddy's body and was in front of Bricky before his hand even touched his weapon. I punched him

in the side of the head, and he stumbled back, his eyes starting to roll back.

He teetered for a moment, rocking from foot to foot, still trying to reach for his gun.

I shook my head at him. "I told you, Brick. Why didn't you just listen to me?"

I threw an upper cut under his chin and his lights went out as he crumpled like so much dirty laundry.

Buddy was beginning to stir, I could tell by the change in his breathing and heart rate.

I quickly stepped over to Kern, fished out his gun and tucked it into my belt. Then I picked Buddy up and carried him on one shoulder out the door. I walked about fifteen feet down the alley to a six-foot tall dumpster, laid Buddy's body down on a pile of cardboard stacked on the far side of it.

Then I fished the gun from the back of my belt and tossed it into the dumpster.

Buddy stirred, close to returning to consciousness, but I couldn't stick around to explain things to him. It sounded like Kern was actually coming to and I needed to get back inside before Kern woke and warned Monty or whoever else was inside with Howard.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Kern's stink sticks to you

AS I WAS racing back to the door, I could hear Kern shuffling around in the hallway, muttering curses under his breath, then the slight squeak of a door hinge.

I sneaked inside again. As I could tell from heartbeat and breathing, both Driver Dude and Bricky were still unconscious.

Ironically, Kern's powerful scent wasn't easy to track. Most people left what I can only describe as a thin vapor trail of a scent in an area and perhaps some cloying splotches of their scent on objects they touched.

Kern's odiferous stench didn't just linger in the air – it suffused it, drenched the entire area. I supposed the best way I could describe it was the difference between being able to smell the pleasant scent of a woman's recently washed hair as she passes, and if you're walking directly behind her, staying in the path of that scent even when a dozen or so steps behind. That's the kind of scent that a normal person leaves behind as they move.

Then there's the scent that Kern left behind. Rather than that straight line of scent hung directly behind the path, it was like someone had opened a container of Chlorine or rubbing alcohol in a small room. The scent

immediately spread to the far reaches of the room, infusing the room with its scent.

I had a friend back in college who was a chemistry major attempt to explain how scent molecules work. He was highly intelligent but a somewhat cheeky sort of fellow and always liked to use lowbrow and "common man" sorts of analogies for explaining scientific concepts.

As he'd been explaining to me how the molecules of an airborne substance diffuse into a room, he began talking about molecular bonding on objects around. Of course, none of this made sense to me – I had been an arts major and hadn't taken any science related classes since the 11th grade. It was only after acquiring my unique wolf traits such as my super enhanced sniffer that I could fully appreciate what he had been saying because my nose could in a way "see" those scents he had been talking about.

Of course, I think that the only reason this particular scientific lecture stuck with me all these years was the lowbrow way in which he summed it up in a way for my non-scientific mind to grasp it.

"You fart," he had said, "and it sticks to me."

Simple enough concept. But frightening, too. Particularly given Kern's uniquely raunchy smell. The touch of the molecules of Kern's scent sticking to me in any way immediately turned my stomach. But like my pal from college said, different scents diffuse and bond in distinctly different patterns. And Kern's was that all-consuming, all powerful scent that virtually "took over" a room.

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In a nutshell, it made it hard to at first determine exactly where Kern had moved – particularly in such a small hallway. And particularly since his struggle with me seemed to have made him sweat even more profusely than normal.

So it hadn't been by scent that I knew Kern had moved through the doorway on the right hand side – but rather, because I could hear his heartbeat and his heavy breathing immediately on the other side of the door.

I listened for the sound of other movement, of someone else, and could tell it was only Kern. He was waiting on the other side of the door, perhaps to ambush me.

I then thought about the weapons the other two carried and wondered if Kern had retrieved one of them before moving on. But I couldn't detect the movement of gun oil through the air.

Of course, like I'd said, Kern's scent kind of overpowered the hallway, so it was a bit difficult to pick anything out.

He was waiting, then, on the other side of the door to ambush me. This told me that this door on the right must be the one leading to where Howard was. I strained to pick up Howard's scent trail, and thought I sensed the tell-tale Old Spice leading through the right-side door.

I considered my options. Kern was wounded. I was sure that the kick and punch I'd given him would have slowed the beast of a man down. Nonetheless, I figured I'd still be able to overpower him, move faster than him, and basically beat him in hand to hand combat.

Again, it all hinged, in my mind, on whether or not he had a gun. I still wasn't all that fond of the idea of being shot. Sure, I healed quickly, but the gunshot wound still healing in my leg continued to issue forth a dull pain.

I shuddered.

Then reached for the door.

Pausing to gauge Kern's heartbeat and breathing, and attempting to wait until the moment he would be least prepared to jump me, I grasped the door handle and slowly attempted to turn it.

It didn't move. Locked. Not that door-handle locks were much to get past, but so much for a subtle entrance.

I sighed, stepped back and threw my shoulder into the door.

While I could hear the surprise in his heartbeat and the sudden intake of breath, Kern was still prepared to attack and launched himself at me as I entered the room behind the open door.

All three hundred pounds of him crashed into me and we hit the opposite wall hard enough to make a body-sized impression in the drywall. Kern punched my head, slamming it sideways through the drywall.

I ducked, slipping out of his meaty, sweaty grasp, and, with my hands both wrapped around his side, I pushed my head into his stomach with the intent of knocking the wind out of him.

Huge mistake.

The physical proximity to this hulking mass of sweaty stink had a weakening effect on me. Similar to what I

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would imagine taking a quick whiff of chloroform might have on a person.

But driving my head into his belly was about as pleasant as dunking my head into a barrel of sour milk.

My eyes began watering and I actually began to gag.

Kern hit me hard right between the shoulder blades, and with the extreme body odor having a weakening effect on me, I collapsed to the floor in front of him.

Sprawled on the floor, I tried to lift my head, still dizzy with a combination of the overwhelming stench of the man and the blow to the back of my neck. As I was looking up, I saw his foot coming right at me and I blacked out.

I must not have been out for more than a few seconds, because the next thing I knew, Kern had hoisted me onto his shoulder. I was still dizzy and disoriented, more from the nauseating proximity of the man's body odor than from the blow to the head, but I was still able to determine we were in the same room he'd knocked me unconscious in. Although awake, I feigned unconsciousness and let him carry me.

Admittedly, I'm not sure if I would have been able to fight him anyway, not with my nose pressed into the back of his suit, which smelled of stale farts and sweat.

Kern headed up a flight of stairs.

In the room above of us, I could hear the same raspy cough I'd first heard when we entered the building.

At the top of the stairs, Kern opened a door, and a blast of cool, refreshing air from a larger space greeted us. It

was like a giant bucket of ice water poured on a man who'd just crawled three hours through the desert.

I picked up a strong scent of Howard as well as one belonging to someone new. One I imagined belonged to the cougher.

"Jesus Christ, Cheesedick! What the hell took you guys so long!" His voice was a throaty gravelly kind of sound. Kind of a cross between Clint Eastwood and Marlin Brando as, appropriately enough, *The Godfather*.

"We ran into some, uh, problems," Kern said.

I was surprised at his response, particularly since he didn't utter a single curse word. Not only that, but he spoke in a hesitant, nervous fashion, and he didn't react negatively to being called "Cheesedick" – at least on the surface. When the gravelly voiced man, who smelled subtly of menthol throat lozenges, called him that, I detected the briefest whiff of bitterness and a slight elevation in his heart-beat.

He obviously didn't like the name, but seemed to weather it when coming from this guy. That led me to believe he must be the Monty character these guys had mentioned earlier. The group's ringleader.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Uh," Kern began, but Monty cut him off.

"I said, what the fuck kind of trouble could happen? I sent half the crew over there, along with you, the brick shithouse. Lord knows you're not only built like one, but you smell like one too."

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Kern's bitter anger increased and his heartbeat started doing back flips, but he didn't change posture or let on how angry he was. He must have been used to hiding it.

There was a moment of silence.

"Well?" Monty asked.

"Well, what?"

"I asked, what the fuck kind of trouble did you run into. Let me guess. It perhaps has something to do with the body you've got slung over your shoulder?"

"Yeah," Kern said. "He, uh, was following me when I got back to the car from the pickup. Said he was Howie's biographer."

"So you what – brought him along for the end of the story?"

"No, he was followin' me. We figured he might be on to us, so we took him with."

"And?"

"And when we get here, this budinski shows up, some friend of his, starts yakking our ears off just outside. Wouldn't shut up, know what I mean? We was standin' there just wantin' to get inside before anyone saw us, but he wouldn't shut his yap. So we clocked him."

"You had two of them following you around? What are you doing, putting up billboards advertising your whereabouts?"

"No, he wasn't following us. He just stumbled upon us. But we took him out.

"When we was carryin' him inside, this joker who'd been nothin' but a scared little shit the whole time he'd

been with us, gets some balls and got a few lucky hits on Bricky and Vince."

Ah, the driver's name is Vince. Good to know. Much better than the nicknames I'd given them in my head.

I was also amused how Kern failed to mention the fact that I got the better of him and that the "budinski" he'd mentioned was nowhere to be found when he woke up. Selective memory.

Despite not knowing where Howard was or having a plan on how I was going to get out of my current situation, this certainly was an interesting dialogue. I'd written tons of conversation between bad guys before but had never realized it could be so banal and entertaining at the same time.

"So where the fuck are Bricky and Vince? And, more importantly, where the fuck is the laptop?"

"Uh," Kern began, and his heart started doing triple back flips. He'd obviously completely forgotten about the laptop, apparently the whole purpose of the afternoon's adventure. "It's ah, it must be, uh, back in the car."

Monty's voice cracked and broke as he growled, apparently not capable of making higher pitched noises than an engine starting up. "It's in the car? In the fucking car? Jesus fucking Christ, Cheesedick! I'm beginning to think the shit isn't just soaked into that suit and pants, but stuffed in that fucking melon you call your head." He punctuated that last sentence with a cuff to the side of Kern's head.

"Put this joker down and get your fat ass outside and get the laptop."

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Kern, whose anger continued to seethe, let me slip off his shoulder and to the floor. I continued to feign unconsciousness. And while I was able to take most of the brunt of the fall to the wooden floor with my left arm and shoulder, it still hurt when my head hit the wood.

The hit brought on another quick flashback.

Lunging through the air, over a brick wall, the intense heat and burning of chasing prey burning inside. That same burning hunger of attack, the dank, dark and musty smell of an alley as old faded brick moved by in the shadows.

The flashback cut, this time to *an attacking lunge, tense and filled with fury, arching down with my fangs just a few hairs shy of the other wolf's throat. Our bodies slamming together and rolling as he broke free, turned and faced me.*

The flashback ended.

"... and wake up Brickly on the way back. We can't do any of this without him. Think you can do that without fucking up, Cheesedick?"

I didn't hear Kern say anything in response.

I snapped back to the moment, focusing my attention on the room. It was certainly easier now that Kern's offensive body odor wasn't so strong. The flashback seemed to help focus me, partially overcoming the ringing from Kern's nasty kick to my head.

I smelled a new distinct gun-oil scent. And Monty's anger. And Kern's. Kern's hostility was that bitter, deep, festering anger, tinged with the essence of familiarity and comfort. It seemed to me the bitterness and anger he felt wasn't new, but perhaps something that had wormed

and festered in him for a long, long time. That made me curious most of all.

From somewhere a bit further removed, perhaps an adjacent room, behind a closed door, Howard's scent, coming with an intense fear, and if I wasn't mistaken, a low whimper.

"Okay," Kern was saying as he moved back toward the stairs.

I couldn't believe it.

Kern was leaving the room.

Leaving me alone here with Monty.

I simply could not believe my luck.

The farther Kern moved away from me, the more the sense of nausea and dizziness left me.

As the door slammed behind Kern, Monty started grumbling under his breath.

"Fuckin' Cheesedick idiot. No good stupid shit-for-brains cock sucker. Going to blow this whole operation. Jesus fuckin' Murphy." He went on mumbling under his breath as he moved away from me.

Chancing cracking open one eye, I saw he was pacing back and forth in front of a table with round steel legs and a set of chairs with blue seat pads. Beyond that was a kitchenette area with a small stove, counter and refrigerator – no, not so much a refrigerator as perhaps an icebox.

On the other side of the icebox was a closed, wooden door. Another couple of quiet whimpers came from behind the door, informing me that was the room they had Howard in.

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Okay, so I knew where Howard was. Now I had to focus on Monty, figure out the best way to get the jump on him.

He hadn't given me more than a few quick sideways glances as he continued to pace. His steady stream of mumbled curses continued. He was a big man, like Kern, perhaps six and a half feet, with a thick head of black hair, and a fat nose not dissimilar to Kern's large, flat honker. He wore a suit matching the others' and he was stocky. Not as large and ominous as Kern, but he walked in a similar fashion. The deep crease of his eyebrows was also similar to Kern's and I finally understood a bit more about the dialogue I'd just heard, as well as Kern's reaction to the insults.

I stopped the conscious repression of scent I'd been attempting and focused on Monty's scent. More masking menthol throat drops than anything, and his body odor wasn't as distinctly nasty as his Kern's, but there was a subtle similarity in the smell coming off him.

The two were brothers.

It made sense of the deep-rooted reaction Kern had. I imagined that "Cheesedick" might have been the name his older brother, Monty called him when they were kids. As I'd suspected, life as a fat, smelly kid had likely not been easy on my old buddy, Kern. And his older brother had likely been one of his worst critics. I thought about my brother Randy, and the masterful way in which he could tease me like no other – get completely under my skin as if it was a talent he'd been born to perfect.

Yeah, only a brother could have that kind of effect on someone.

So Monty and Kern, then, were brothers who had turned to a life of crime. Fortunately for me, there was clearly a lot of tension there between them that I could likely use to my advantage.

Their entire scheme seemed geared towards keeping Howard under their thumb and potentially using him to gain access to some money or funds available from the company Howard worked for.

That at least seemed to explain their kidnapping. It was good to understand these details

I had to remind myself not to be too cocky – that despite the disorganization, the infighting and confusion going on, there were still four of them, they all bore weapons and they weren't at all nice people. I had to remember their threat of killing all of us and that despite the fact I had an opportunity here, Howard and I, and possibly even Buddy, particularly if he walked right back into the situation upon waking up, were all in potentially serious trouble.

I figured I only had a few minutes before Kern returned. And he might return not just with the laptop but also with his buddies.

Along with Kern's receding footsteps down the stairs, I detected some stirring farther down in the hallway – likely one of the thugs waking up.

Which certainly meant that not only would Monty and Howard and I not be alone for long, but we'd likely be

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joined by two other guys who'd be pretty pissed about the beating I'd given them.

I was watching Monty, cautiously trying to figure out how best to close the eight feet between us without him reaching for his gun when I heard Howard call out from behind the door.

"Guys?" His voice was exhausted and filled with a tinny fear.

Of course, based on his picture and how I despised him both for being Gail's fiancé as well as for violating her trust, I imagined his voice always had an annoying tinny flavor to it – I found that somewhat satisfying.

"Guuuuuuys?"

Monty stormed over to the door and yelled at it.

"Whadda ya want?"

"I, uh, need to go to the bathroom."

"Again?"

Monty turned the lock and pulled the door open.

"Jesus, Howie, you just took a piss. How about I cut that cock of yours off and see if that cures your pansy-ass bladder problems?"

"C'mooooooooon," Howard whined again, stretching that one word into a multi-second, multi-syllabic sound.

I didn't even feel bad about how much I enjoyed hearing Howard whine like that. It felt good to hear him sound like a veritable coward, but it did make me wonder what Gail could possibly see in him.

I didn't revel in those thoughts, long, however, since with Howard distracting Monty, it was my perfect opportunity to act. I started to slowly get up.

"I've done everything you guys asked," Howard said in the same annoying, whiny tone. "I've given you the information you wanted. I set up the automated penny skimming, generating hundreds of thousands in re-routed funds. Never once did I deny any of your requests – never once have I breathed a word of this to anyone, despite the fact that you still haven't given me the original cut you promised. All I'm asking is for you to let me take a pee. Please?"

It was interesting to hear the *balls* come back into Howard's voice as he ranted. But what the hell was Howard talking about? He seemed to be in on a bunch of schemes with these bozos.

Which meant that while he might still have been kidnapped by them, there was something more going on than just a simple financial officer getting kidnapped. He'd been involved with these guys for a while. And, apparently, so had Howard's secretary.

Come to think of her, the memory of her scent closely resembled both Monty and Kern's – without the obvious match on overpowering garbage reek scent of Kern; I mean, nobody smelled like that, not even a sibling.

No, when I thought back to her smell, there was a familial scent to her that matched both her brothers. She, then, was the sister of the gang leader and one of the thugs.

Fuck—she was their sister. And she'd been screwing Howard, and Howard, in turn, had been screwing clients out of money. Apparently, small enough amounts that nobody caught on. But, do it long enough, and with

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enough accounts, and you could work yourself up a small fortune.

It started to fit into place. Enough so that I could trust the story I was piecing together in my head.

And, again, that same smugness that overcame me when I'd learned Howard was screwing his secretary hit me again. He wasn't merely unfaithful to his fiancé, but he was also scheming with crooks. The building rage I felt regarding how he was going to hurt Gail made me want to just leave him.

So Howard was involved with these guys, seemingly working with them on their little scheme. Apparently they'd been at it for a while. And, in turn for going along with them, he seemingly wasn't getting a cut, but he was getting some hot sex on the deal. I still didn't understand how someone who could have Gail would even look at another woman. Perhaps it was the thrill of the deception, the excitement of the tryst. Howard was willingly fucking their sister and a ton of clients.

So what, then, had happened to their little scheme? Why was Howard now locked up in this room instead of continuing to run their little operation? What had gone wrong?

Monty let Howard step out of the room.

I took in the sight of him and could tell that he certainly hadn't come here voluntarily. His hair was mussed, he sported a fat lip and a small trail of blood had caked around his one nostril and in a small smear below his nose. His dress shirt was torn across his left shoulder. His tie was loose and hanging down in a large wide loop

from his collar, like he'd been interrupted in the middle of removing it completely.

He smelled of urine, and I remembered the guys in the car laughing about how Howard had wet himself.

So here I was, having survived a face full of the fatty flesh of Kern, lying on the floor of some gang leader's hideout all to save the life of a man who was running around on the girl I wanted.

I'd be better off with Howard gone. So would Gail.

I could easily escape and not have to face these guys. Then, once they extracted whatever it is they wanted out of Howie-boy, they'd likely put a bullet in his head and dump his body off of a pier. And that would be the end of that particular challenge to my love-life. And the end of an unfaithful, scum criminal fiancé for Gail.

But I wasn't going to let these guys kill Howard.

Why do I always have to listen to my damn conscience?

As Howard stepped out of the room, I prepared to launch myself at Monty.

Half a second later Howard looked my way, his jaw dropped, and he said in a loud voice, "What the hell is *he* doing here?"

The word "he" stuck in the air the way a piece of wet dog shit sticks to the sidewalk on a hot summer day.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Howard's interesting way of showing his thanks for the rescue attempt

HOWARD GLARED AT me with a fierce hatred. Having never met him, I was a little confused by his reaction. Is it possible that Gail kept some mementos or pictures of me and that Howard recognized me as her ex-boyfriend?

In any case, it figured Howard would do something to immediately turn Monty's attention back my way. Idiot. I moved into a half-crouch, getting ready to spring.

"Fuck yeah," Monty said. "Your biographer, thought he would try to be a hero and rescue you. Stupid man."

As Monty said these words, I widened my eyes at Howard, raising my eyebrows, hoping he would get the hint that he should stick with the story.

But, as I should have expected, Howard did no such thing.

"What are you talking about, Monty?" Howard asked, perplexed. "My biographer?"

"Yes," I said, still trying to keep the fictitious story going and playing upon Howard's ego. "It's all part of documenting Howard's inevitable rise to success; a tale

about how conviction, talent and hard work can conquer all."

"He's no biographer," Howard said, incredulous. "He's Michael Andrews, the mystery author. You know – the guy who writes the Maxwell Bronte novels."

Monty shook his head, not understanding. Clearly, literary references were way over his head.

"He's that writer Gail dated before she met me. The guy Gail dated but hasn't quite let go of. She still has his pictures all over her apartment. Books he signed for her." He glared at me, stepping forward to address me. "What the hell kind of hold do you still have on her, Andrews? And what are you doing following me?"

Howard lashed out with a foot that connected with the side of my head.

I saw it coming, could tell he was going to strike me from the change in his heart rate. I could have easily dodged the blow or grabbed his foot and sent him sprawling.

But instead, I let him hit me.

He didn't hit me that hard. But from the angle Monty was at, and the way I played into it, reacting as if the kick was harder than it was, it looked pretty nasty. I threw myself backwards onto my back and feigned unconsciousness.

Howard stood in place, his heartbeat still elevated. He apparently wanted to strike me again and was debating on whether or not he should kick a man while he was down. It didn't take long for him to decide. He stepped forward and kicked me in the ribs. I maintained my role

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of the unconscious guy and let the kick roll me onto my front.

Monty stepped forward.

"You mean this is your old lady's ex? You think they're still tight?"

"What? No. No contact. She hasn't had contact with him at all. They're not tight."

"People screw around," Monty chortled. "Look at you and Missy. Maybe your old lady is getting some on the side from this guy."

Howard kicked me again. "No!" he yelled, kicking me once for each word. While the kicks did hurt, I was glad the man wasn't all that strong. It might have hurt a bit more than a young child's wild and flailing punches. Certainly hard enough to cause some bruising, but not hard enough to break any ribs "She's. Not. Getting. It. From. Him."

"Then what the hell is the guy doing here? And why is he claiming to be your biographer?"

"I don't know. I just . . . I don't know."

Howard's heartbeat pattered again and I braced for another kick.

"Stop kicking him," Monty said. "We need him to wake up so we can figure out what he's really doing here, why he's apparently following you. Do you think your old lady has been on to us and our dealings?"

"Naw," he said. "No way. She's too stupid to figure something like that out."

It took everything in me not to jump up and pummel him. How dare he insult Gail like that. Howie-boy was

going to get one hell of an ass kicking after I got him out of this mess, that was for sure.

But I continued to play possum.

I needed to figure out how best to get out of this.

Monty bent down and I let him roll me over onto my back. He slapped me in the face.

"Okay, dickhead," Monty said, menthol breath strong in my face. "Time to wake the fuck up." He slapped me several more times, back and forth.

I cracked an eye open, then slowly opened both, trying to look groggy and confused.

"Wha?" I mumbled.

Monty slapped me again. "Wake up, dipshit."

"Where am I?" I asked, glancing around, quickly taking in the fact that Monty's gun was no longer in his hand. One arm was still on my shoulder from when he'd rolled me over and the other still hovered in front of my face, ready to slap me again. I figured the gun was close by. Perhaps tucked into the back of his pants.

"What's your fucking game?" Monty asked, cocking his hand back to show me not answering meant another blow to the face.

Something came to mind. If I could keep Howard jumpy and aggravated, perhaps these two would work against each other.

"My game?" I asked. "Normally it's Parcheesi. A seemingly simple game, but involving various strategic approaches. I love the fact that, right up to the end, you're never really sure who's going to win. But it's difficult nowadays to find people who play it."

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I was listening to his heartbeat change while I rambled, aware of just how much I was getting under his skin and pissing him off. It was time to start pissing off Howard.

"Howie-boy's right," I said, looking up past Monty to glare at my rival, my eyes filled with hatred. That part was easy. He not only had my girl, but he was an unfaithful prick, bad-mouthed her, and was a white-collar criminal.

"I'm banging Gail. She told me his limp little dick wasn't enough for her – that she needed to be satisfied by a real man."

Monty started to laugh, and Howard let out a shriek of rage, his blood pressure going through the roof.

Howard reached down, grabbed the gun from where Monty had indeed tucked it into the back of his pants, and shouted, "Out of the way, Monty. I'm going to kill this mother fucker."

That was the distraction I needed.

Monty turned and easily knocked the weapon out of Howard's hand with a chop to his forearm. It fell to the floor just a couple of feet away as Monty stood, twisting Howard's arm around behind him.

Howard let out a yelp. "Lemme go! I wanna kill the fucker!" Howard was screaming.

"Don't touch my fucking piece again," Monty said, pushing Howard face first against the nearest wall.

As much as it pleased me to see Howard getting roughed up, this was the moment I'd been hoping for.

I did a break-dance style swipe of my legs that struck both men in the backs of their knees. They toppled to the floor, arms entangled, Monty falling mostly on top of Howard.

I jumped to my feet, kicked the handgun across the room then hauled Monty up by the shoulders. Holding him about six inches off the floor, I pressed him against the same wall he'd slammed Howard into and held him there, my hands on his shoulders and my forearms keeping his own arms pinned against the wall.

He spat in my face, the menthol-laced saliva irritating me more than the gesture itself.

I head-butted him, my forehead striking his forehead. We both let out a yelp of pain.

Damn, it hurt. It seemed to hurt me as much as it hurt him, making me wonder why the head-butt was such a popular move, but more frustrating, why I had tried using the head butt twice in the past half hour – both times I had been completely unsuccessful.

I shook my head, heard Howard getting to his feet behind us, and scrambling in the direction I had kicked the gun.

Monty was kicking at me, muttering curses, and I was still trying to clear my head, not sure what to do with the thug I was pinning down, nor about Howard.

Then the smell hit me.

Kern was back, and approaching from just outside the door. There was at least one other person with him.

When the door opened, both Howard and Monty were surprised. In fact, so were Kern, Brickly and Vince. The

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latter two were in pretty rough shape. Vince's blood splattered face from his broken nose made him look like he'd just finished a raspberry pie eating contest. And judging by the look on his face, he hadn't just lost, but likely been disqualified. Bricky's swollen face and head suggested he'd been pummeled with a pile of the ceramic/clay blocks of his namesake. And Kern, well, he just stunk up the room. But I noticed he was carrying the aforementioned laptop in his right hand.

Everybody pretty much paused to regard one another for a few seconds when the hi-low wailing of the sirens pierced the room.

"Shit!" Monty said, and the thugs across the room responded like a group of well-practiced parishioners in response to a priest's cue line.

"Shit-fuck!"

I twisted, hefting Monty by the shoulders. It didn't take much to toss him the dozen or so feet to the door. He spun sideways in the air, his head and flailing arms catching Kern mid-chest, the core of his body hitting Bricky, and his right foot connecting with the side of Vince's head.

All four went down, and, judging by the way Vince dropped, he was out again. But Monty, Kern and Bricky, as much a mass of arms and legs as they were of muttered curses, scrambled out from under one another and to their feet.

Howard reached the gun and started taking wild shots at me at the others in the room. His first lucky shot clipped Bricky in the shoulder. His next two shots went

wild and into the walls and ceiling, but his third one struck Monty in the leg.

Kern dropped the laptop and scrambled back out the doorway.

That's when Howard turned the gun toward me, a twisted grin on his face. But I'd already taken two lunging steps toward him. I knocked his gun arm down, a round firing into the wooden floor as the weapon came loose from his grip.

We both looked down at the gun, then at one another.

Howard's grin took on a helpless look, almost as if the failed attempt to shoot me was a mere accident of sorts. *A so sorry, man, can't believe the gun went off like that in your direction.*

I looked at him standing in front me, completely helpless, useless, and weak. His heart rate was doing its best Buddy Rich imitation.

I wanted to beat the snot out of him.

I wanted to strangle him to within an inch of his life.

But he just stood there, helpless, his goofy grin and upraised eyebrows now accompanied by the smell of fresh urine soaking into his pants.

Taking everything in me to restrain myself from putting too much into the punch, I threw a roundhouse to the side of Howard's head that spun him around.

"That's for Gail," I said as he crumbled to the floor.

I watched him fall and felt the most wonderful guilty pleasure in my action. I had never purposely hurt another defenseless person with such ruthless disregard before,

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and while part of me was shocked at my actions, another part was . . . well, delighted.

In my mind, it was as if he was slowly folding in on himself as he collapsed to the floor. And if there was a way I could have slowed the track down in my mind, I would have. I would have played the Rocky theme in my head, too.

But I couldn't really pause to enjoy the moment. Monty's goons were still around.

Bricky had followed Kern out the door. But it was too late for them. I could hear the sound of police officers heading into the building to intercept them.

"Cowards!" Monty yelled at them from where he tried to get to his feet. The wound in his leg was too much for him and he teetered over onto his side.

Another flash from the night before hit me.

The flash of headlights followed by a car door slamming. A panicked human yelling something that sounded like "Stop" and the sound of a gun firing. The burning hot feeling of something tearing into the flesh of my leg.

I shook my head, glanced at Monty and Howard.

Howard was safe, the stupid scumbag, so my promise to Gail was not broken.

The police would be inside within a few minutes. I glanced at Howard, at Monty, at the laptop. I had to trust that the truth would make itself evident.

But I couldn't be involved in this, at least not right away.

I needed to make myself scarce.

Interlude – Wolf Night – Seven

THE WOLF DIDN'T have time to react. Neither did the woman. She tried to duck out of the way, but moved so slowly compared to the beast that, had it intended to attack her, she would have been easy prey.

Instead of attacking, the creature leapt over her in a single bound and raced across the field.

Startled out of the reverie of the other wolf's bizarre scent that reeked of human essence, the wolf took chase after it.

"Michael," the woman called after him. "No! Wait!"

The wolf wasn't sure exactly what the woman had been saying, just knew, based on her scent and the urgency of the words she spoke that she'd been trying to get his attention.

It was no matter. The wolf was focused on the strange wolf-human creature that was getting away.

He continued his pursuit, a good twenty or so yards behind the other, which was nearing the edge of the park.

The wolf felt shivers of trepidation as he neared the southern edge of the park. He had always avoided the lights and sounds that were so prevalent beyond the darker shadows and more comforting solitude offered by the trees and bushes and rocks and water.

But the other boldly leapt over the small rock wall leading to the street and temporarily disappeared behind it.

The wolf reached the street a few seconds later, following the other wolf by the scent.

When he reached the wall, he leapt onto it and paused to regard the surroundings before venturing forth.

The other wolf was not in sight.

Instead, a naked male human was lying on the sidewalk not four yards away.

The wolf stared at the naked and sweat-glistening human. The scent coming off it was the same scent he had been pursuing, but the human scent was stronger than the wolf scent.

The naked human was, the wolf could tell, the same being as the other wolf it has been chasing - the merged scents were too distinct. However, impossibly, it was the wolf in a human form.

It stood upright in its newly acquired human form and walked to a car idling at the curb, the exhaust pumping out a putrid scent worse than the one coming from the other vehicles passing in the street. The engine made a unique clicking noise like the sound of teeth gnashing together.

The wolf watched as the other, now in naked human form, yanked open the far door and hauled another male human out with a hand on the man's throat.

It held the human off the ground and squeezed.

There was a crack and the man went limp before it dropped him to the ground, barely letting out a moan, and now giving off the stench of urine and feces.

The other stepped over the dead human and got into the car, and the vehicle screeched away.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Finally understanding why Spider-Man always made himself scarce at crime scenes

I RAN TO the kitchen area, yanked the window open and scrambled onto the fire escape. I closed the window behind me. It's not that I didn't think they'd look, but it might at least delay them. And the window was old, heavy and really hard to slide up and down. A police officer who didn't have my heightened strength might not even be able to open it, despite my having loosened it a tiny bit.

I could hear the cops enter the room just as I ducked away from the window and headed up the stairs. The noise the cops were making was loud enough to cover any of the vibrating metal noises I made as I ascended the fire escape and headed to the roof.

Inside, I heard a bunch of voices yell "Freeze!" Monty swore again for good measure, then I heard the sound of handcuffs coming out, being slapped on wrists. Their city-issued footwear shuffled and scuffed as police officers swarmed into the room and checked to make sure they'd gotten everyone.

I counted between eight and ten officers based on the voices and shuffling I heard.

Down on the street below and about fifty feet off to my left I could see three police cruisers in the alley. There was another with its back half sticking out from the alley, and perhaps a fourth around the corner.

Standing on the fire escape and looking down, I sniffed around for any signs of Buddy, but couldn't smell him in the vicinity. Couldn't hear his distinctive voice, either.

No, knowing his desire to stay out of things, I imagine he would have put in an anonymous call about what was taking place, then hightailed it out of here.

Knowing my own desire not to get mixed up in such a brew-ha-ha, I imagine he didn't mention me by name, but rather some of the things he'd witnessed and overheard.

No, Buddy must be safely far away from all this. I'd have to call him to let him know I was okay. And, of course, to thank him for, yet again, being in the right place at the right time. Perhaps there was more to his knack for doing that than simple coincidence.

But I didn't have much time to reflect on that yet.

I didn't hear any sort of "Hey look, up there on the fire escape," sort of activity happening below, but didn't want to take any chances.

And as I continued to hoof it to the roof, not really sure where I was going next, I could suddenly appreciate why Spider-Man fled the scene of a hold-up or burglary he had successfully foiled.

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Yes, it's true. I'd questioned Spidey's judgement in those moments.

Sure, I'd been a fan of the Spider-Man comic books my entire life, had always enjoyed the web-slinger's sense of responsibility, his desire to do the right thing. But I had always wondered why he would flee the scene, why he didn't stick around to explain himself.

Every single time he nabbed the bad guys, he'd take off the second the police showed up, and end up being misunderstood and getting a bad rap for it.

I'd always thought he should have invested the time into staying and explaining how he'd discovered their plot, swooped in to save the day, and everything would be taken care of.

I figured Spidey could have saved himself an endless amount of aggravation and misunderstanding for his good deeds if only he'd stayed to explain.

But, thick in the middle of a similar mess, I knew that such vigilante activities are neither appreciated nor condoned. The police don't need untrained citizens out there performing their own personal brand of justice.

That much I could understand.

And besides, at least Spider-Man had the secret identity by way of his red and blue costume to keep the police and public from knowing who he was.

I was a plain-dressed civilian, and a somewhat recognizable one at that, given my recent popularity based on the movie tie-ins of my work.

If my explanation didn't go well, they'd know exactly who I was right away.

And that wouldn't be good for my career.

Or would it?

I pondered that as I continued to hoof it up the metal stairs to the roof.

I mean, if people found out that this particular crime ring had been foiled by none other than Michael Andrews, writer and vigilante at large, perhaps the sales of my novels would explode.

I didn't let those thoughts go too far, though.

The thought of people finding out about my werewolf abilities would also lead to fear. Fear, walking hand in hand with ignorance and prejudice, would mean I'd never again find a moment's peace.

It was easy to visualize a mob bearing torches moving through the streets on their way to my apartment, chanting "Kill the wolf, kill the wolf!" and seeking to send me packing from the city and into the Canadian wilderness where I belonged.

Or perhaps they'd prefer to lock me up in a cage, or worse, some sort of lab, where secret government agents would perform endless experiments on me, try to see what made me tick, how the phases of the moon controlled the various heightened senses and abilities that ran through my veins. I'd be poked, prodded, hooked up to machines, experimented on, sliced open and then disposed of like some sort of lab rat.

No thanks.

It made me wonder if I might be better off to design some sort of costume, though, so when I did end up doing random good deeds, I didn't have to worry about

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being recognized as Michael Andrews the mystery writer.

I shook my head with a sour expression.

I'd occasionally used my heightened powers to help people, but never had I spent a full day spiraling into such a bizarre series of crime-fighting activities as I had today.

As great as it was to clobber Howard, and know I'd put a stop to an organized crime ring, I would be happy when this day was over and I could go back to writing the next Maxwell Bronte novel.

Sigh. My novel.

I looked at the time.

It was 2:30.

Damn!

I needed to get back to my place, get back to writing the damn book and sending it to Mack.

I reached the top of the ten-story building and looked around, not sure which direction to head.

The river was to my left and south, that I could tell from the fishy/salty smell coming in from the bay. I needed to head to my right and north.

But the direct route north was a gigantic building that towered another ten stories higher with no convenient fire escape stairs to ascend.

My best choice, then, was the building across the small alley to the east. It led to a rooftop at my same level, and on it, there was another fire escape stairwell that led up another six or so stories. I saw I could leap across to another building to the north that was a story or two

shorter, and from there, continue north to another building the same height. I figured if I moved at least four or five buildings north and east, I'd be far enough away that I could descend without anyone associating me with the cops-and-robbers stuff going on here.

I took a couple dozen steps back, swallowed a nice deep lungful of air, then sprinted to the edge of the roof and leapt.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Showing them exactly who the boss is

I GOT BACK to my apartment to find a threatening phone call from Mack on my answering machine.

Come to think of it, there were really only two types of phone messages from Mack Halpin. Threatening, and the ones I liked to think of as his exclamation hang-ups. As anyone who has ever dealt with him already knows, Mack isn't the world's most patient person. One thing he hates more than not reaching someone and getting an answering machine message is getting a long-winded answering machine message.

Call it a latent passive aggressive tendency of mine, but, knowing this, I purposely leave really long answering machine messages. I originally didn't start doing that to piss off Mack, that was just a side benefit. I had originally gotten into the habit of leaving lengthy "I'm not able to answer your call" messages because I didn't really like getting messages on my answering machine and figured if someone was so desperate to get a message to me they could at least first pass the challenge of listening to my "can't take your call" statement drag on for close to a full minute.

And for the most part it was effective. Those who really wanted to leave me a message stuck it out. Those without any patience hung up well before it came time for them to hear the beep and say their peace.

What surprised me most of all, though, is that despite his incurable impatience, Mack always seemed to listen to my full message and wait for the beep before violently slamming the phone down. I imagine it was because he wanted me to know how much my “not here” messages pissed him off.

And if there was a single stronger streak in Mack than impatience, it was the stubbornness which allowed him to ensure his point-of-view was clearly communicated. I mean, it was the reason he was one of the most sought-after literary agents.

At one point I thought it might be amusing to save a string of answering machine messages from Mack, the latter kind, the ones in which, by the time the little beep sounds and the machine is recording, you usually hear the tail end of Mack’s responding rant, sprinkled liberally with curses as the phone is being slammed down onto the receiver.

I knew I was wasting time amusing myself rather than doing the two things I needed to do. Call Gail and let her know that Howard was safe, though most likely arrested. Then call Mack and let him know that I came nowhere near the expected word count.

So I did the only thing I could at the time.

I pressed the button to listen to Mack’s message one more time.

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"Listen Andrews, you better get back to me as soon as you hear this. Your future, which is on pretty fucking thin ice right now, rests on you delivering the 4000 words you promised you'd have me by 2 p.m. It's 2:30 now and I haven't seen hide nor hair from you. And your hide is what I'll have hanging on my wall if I don't have the crap you call writing on my desk before 3. Do you have any idea how your incompetence makes me look? You can be a flighty bullshit-cranking creative type all you want, but I have a business to run, a reputation to uphold. Call me, and get me that manuscript or so help me God, I'll make sure you never work again in this industry, you ungrateful little pansy hack!"

Well at least he still loved and respected me.

I stood and stared at the phone.

It rang.

I picked it up.

"You're actually there?" Mack started to bellow before I had even gotten the phone to my ear – not that I couldn't hear him clearly even with the receiver still a foot and a half away from my head. "Jesus Christ on a crutch, Andrews. You nearly scared me to death. Where the hell were you and why were you not answering my calls?"

"Hi Mack," I said. "I . . ."

"I don't give a shit. Just get your ass over to the computer and email me the manuscript. And if you tell me it's not done so help me God I'll reach through the phone line and wring your fucking little pansy-ass neck!"

"I'm done," I said in a flat dry voice. I honestly think I meant that I was done, finished, washed up as a writer. I

was giving up. But Mack, of course, interpreted this as what he wanted to hear, that my manuscript was ready.

"Excellent, Michael. Wonderful. You're an absolute genius. Okay, time's a wasting, please get over to your computer and send me the document."

Then he hung up.

Shit.

Okay, so I had to take care of this here and now.

It was a wonderful sidetrack that prevented me from having to confront Gail. Yes, I wanted to relieve her with the fact that Howard was okay. But I didn't want to have to be the person to tell her he was crooked and two-timing her. And while it didn't necessarily mean I stood a chance of rekindling anything with her, it was certainly a step in the right direction.

But I wasn't good at emotional conflict, wasn't all that good at confronting personal situations head-on like that. So any little delay was welcome.

I sat down at my desk, woke my computer, and considered the manuscript I had written. The words I'd been able to get out amounted to just over 1500. Not even close to the 4000 words the publisher was expecting.

But it was all I had.

And, in all honesty, when I told Mack I was finished, I really did mean it in the sense of having had enough. For the past several years there had been such a push for me to produce commercially desired material that it had been eating away at the type of writing I really wanted to do.

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Yes, I still liked Maxwell Bronte, I still liked the universe he existed in, and I quite enjoyed delving into it and exploring the world through his eyes.

But I had other projects I wanted to work on.

And I was a best-selling author after all.

If this publisher dropped me, even if Mack dropped me, I could likely find work with some other imprint, some other publisher who would be happy to have me.

Wouldn't I?

I mean, if Mack did attempt to make sure, as he stated in his message, that I'd never work in this town again, I'm sure he meant it, at least with the large publishers.

Hell, I could start self-publishing my work. I've heard that has been a bit of a boon for a number of writers lately.

Sure, that would mean mostly digital sales, but I no longer needed the type of assurances that being published in hardcover from one of the handful of major publishers initially gave me. I'd be happy to flex a different sort of creative spirit, that let me experiment and be me.

The still-healing wound in my leg where I'd pulled out the bullet throbbed and I laughed.

Needing to be me was such an interesting term for someone like myself to use. Particularly when what I was wasn't always me, but a combination of the me that I consciously think about and the me that I have absolutely no control over and very little access to – the me that runs around on all fours, howls at the moon, and lives a completely different existence than any normal mortal could possibly understand.

Mark Leslie

Hell, I could barely understand it, and I lived with the werewolf curse every day.

But regardless of the complexity of what “me” entailed, the point was still the same.

I needed to do this.

I logged into my Gmail account and composed a message to Mack.

Mack:

I got as far as that simple line when the phone rang again.

I picked it up.

“It’s been two minutes and I haven’t seen the goddamn manuscript, Andrews. Get it the fuck to me. Now!”

Do I need to say that he slammed the phone down before saying anything else or allowing me to even speak?

I went back to my message.

Mack:

I know the publisher wants 4000 words and that was an arranged compromise on my behalf. The fact is, my writing itself has been compromised by the existing arrangement with this publisher.

Here’s what I have. 1500 words in the latest Maxwell Bronte novel.

If that isn’t enough to satisfy them, then tell them they can drop me.

You can too for all I care.

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Attached is the opening for the new novel. That's all I have written and all I will write until I'm good and ready for the next phase.

**Sincerely,
Michael Andrews**

I attached the untitled manuscript document and emailed it off to Mack.

Then I waited for his phone call.

It didn't come.

Even after ten minutes, he didn't call. Not even to fire off a string of expletives in my direction.

Well that was a first. I'd pissed him off so thoroughly that he simply didn't say anything.

And I have to admit it felt good.

Really good.

Great, even.

I decided I couldn't delay any longer and picked up the phone to call Gail. Enough time was wasted, she was likely beside herself wondering what was going on.

When I picked up the phone there was no dial tone.

I held the receiver to my ear and heard heavy nasal breathing. It was Mack.

"At first," he said, in a soft voice unlike any I've ever heard pass his lips. "I thought you were joking, pulling a fast one on me because of the way I'd spoken. Then I realized something – you were serious and actually meant it. I heard what you were saying this morning, Andrews,

don't think I didn't. I heard you clear as a bell and I've learned a few things since we first met.

"But it's great to see that you've learned few things from me, too. This bold move you're making is absolute brilliance. It's genius, even. I've never been so impressed with you as I am now.

"You're showing them exactly who is the boss, here, and I love it."

"Mack, what are you . . .?"

"I forwarded your email directly to the publisher, Andrews. Didn't even add anything from my office. Gave the manuscript a quick read and then forwarded it on to them.

"The beauty is that I didn't even need to say anything. Your message to me said it all, and it's true.

"Fuck 'em. If they're not willing to go with what you have produced, fuck 'em all. We'll find another publisher who'll offer us more. I don't care about the contract, don't care about all that other stuff. You're Michael fucking Andrews, you're a gold mine if they ever saw one, and for once they'll have to bow to your needs or lose you."

"Mack, that's not what I –"

"And they caved. Just like that. They fucking caved. You're a genius Andrews. A flipping genius. I stand in awe.

"They love what you wrote and are begging, absolutely begging to know what happens next, where the story is heading. I told them not to get their panties in a knot that they'd get the rest when you were good and ready.

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"Now get going, boy. Get your ass down to the Letterman studio – you need to report to the green room in less than an hour."

He hung up.

I sat and stared at the receiver for a few minutes.

I couldn't believe it.

And, finally admitting it to myself, I felt a huge knot of tension flow out in a massive wave from my shoulders.

I had been worried about what this move meant, considering whether or not I had sabotaged my entire career.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

The true tension, the tight-knotted ball I had been carrying in my shoulders and the back of my neck, hadn't been from the worry of what thumbing my nose at Mack and the publisher might do.

It had come from the pressure of having to produce another Maxwell Bronte novel.

Simply pausing to consider it and toss that tension out the window was a burst of relief I needed.

No, I didn't want to completely abandon Bronte – I truly do believe that there are many more stories in his universe for me to tell.

But knowing that I could let go, that I didn't need to cave into the pressure from outside forces, that I could write the next Maxwell Bronte novel on my own terms rather than someone else's, that offered me a relief like none I'd ever felt.

Who knew?

I gently placed the receiver back in the cradle.

There was a knock at the door followed by a voice.

"Michael," It was Gail. "I know you're home. Please answer the door."

Chapter Twenty-Seven: There's no good way to say this

I STARED AT the door the same way I had just stared at the phone.

Gail knocked again. "Michael. I can feel you on the other side of the door. I know you're there."

I sat a moment longer.

It must have been that I was so stunned with the situation with Mack and the publisher that I'd completely tuned most of my senses out.

Nobody whose scent I knew, particularly someone like Gail, whose scent had an intimate familiarity, had ever been able to sneak up on me.

My sense of smell was so heightened, so in tune with the world around me that, I should have been able to smell Gail the moment the elevator doors opened.

I took a breath in through my nose.

Gail's sweet scent . . . that alluring mixture of Sandalwood mingled with her sweat.

I can't remember how many times after she'd broken it off with me that I'd be sitting here and hear the elevator doors open, and desperately pray that it would be her scent I'd smell.

But alas, it never was her, and that desperate longing would send me into a tailspin. Send me packing a lunch and an overnight bag on an extended pilgrimage down memory lane.

I breathed in her warm, spicy scent again, then got up and walked to the door.

Leaning against the door, the tips of my fingers and my forehead against it, I breathed her in again.

Impossible to believe how close we had been at one time.

Incredible to know she was just on the other side of that door. But even worse, that, despite how she'd come back into my life, I didn't want to hurt her with what I had to tell her.

"Michael?"

Mingled with her warm and woody fragrance was the smell of underlying stress and concern.

Her heartbeat raced as I turned the handle. It almost skipped a beat as we came into sight of one another.

Then again, that might have been my own heart skipping a beat.

She stepped in through the doorway, looking at me with a tentative and hopeful look on her face.

I couldn't help myself as I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around her.

Her scent immediately gave off a bit of an eau de confusion to mix with the concern, but she accepted my embrace.

It seemed her body practically melted into mine, all those familiar comfort points melding so perfectly together, like we were made for each other. I was intensely

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aware of every single point of contact between us as I held her. I had to control how tightly I hugged her, ensure I didn't crack her ribs.

Her scent overwhelmed me as we held each other, the feeling of her racing heart against my chest made me feel more connected to her and more at home than I think I've ever felt in this city.

I wanted to run a hand over the back of her head, tell her I had some bad news but to just breathe, that things would be all right. I was here and would protect her and nothing bad could happen while she was in my arms.

But instead I remained silent, uncertain what to do.

And her scent grew more confused, more concerned.

She was the first to break our embrace, gently pushing back with her hands on my shoulders.

"Michael. What is it?" Her heart skipped a few more beats then began to race more quickly than before. The scent of worry and concern completely overpowered the calming affect her perfume always had on me.

I shook my head, swallowed, wasn't able to speak.

"You've got to tell me. What happened? How is . . ." she gasped and stepped back, her beautiful lips forming a perfect round O as she brought a hand up to touch her lips. "Is Howard . . . dead?"

I shook my head again. "No," I managed to breathe. "No. Howard is not dead. He's fine."

Her heart raced again as a wave of relief flooded her. "He's fine? He's fine?"

"Yes."

She cast her eyes around the apartment, looking behind me to see if I was alone. "Where is he? What happened?"

I just stared at her.

"What?" she said, her heart beginning to race again, worry, concern, stress beginning to rise again.

"I don't know how to tell you this, Gail."

"Tell me what? You just said he was fine. Now tell me, what happened? Who took him? Where is he now? Why hasn't he called me?"

"Okay," I took a deep breath. "Give me a minute. There's a lot."

"A lot of what?"

"A lot to tell you. I honestly don't know where to begin."

She then stepped forward and slammed a hand against my chest. "Dammit, Andrews. For God's Sake, just tell me already. Do you have any idea how worried I've been when I never heard back from you? Why didn't you call me when you got back?"

"I-I just got back," I stammered. "I was just about to call you."

"Where is he? Where is Howard?"

I figured I'd answer that question with as much honesty as I could muster. "Likely either in the back of a paddy wagon if he's not already at the station being booked."

Her eyes opened wider than I'd ever seen on her face before.

"What?" She slammed a hand against my chest again. "What the hell happened? What the hell did you do?"

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"Listen," I placed my hands on her shoulders, looked her square in the eye, and thought how stupid it was when people said things like that. For the past minute she had kept asking me to explain what was going on, was already fully prepared to hear what I had to say, so I didn't need to ask her to listen. She was listening. I realized it wasn't really one of those words you use to communicate to the other person that they should attend to what you're saying. It was one of those pause words that bought the speaker a bit of time when formulating what they were trying to say. It was also a word that didn't really instruct the other person that it was important to be attuned to the next words, but rather, that the next words would likely be something, of themselves, rather important and potentially something coming right out of left field.

And this one, I was pretty sure, was not only out of left field, but would completely clear the park.

"Howard isn't the person you think he is."

She stared at me waiting for me to continue. I honestly couldn't figure out what scent was coming off her. Confusion? Anticipation?

The phone began to ring. I suspected it was Mack, calling to confirm I'd be leaving for the Letterman show. I did my best to ignore it and continued to stare at Gail.

"The people who took him, the criminals who kidnapped him. They weren't, ah, after his financial expertise, Gail. They were acquaintances of his."

"I don't understand. People from his office? People he worked with?"

"Yes, people he worked with. But not from his office. They were criminals, thugs, some sort of organized crime ring."

"How did . . .?"

"Howard was working with them, Gail. Working for them."

The phone stopped ringing.

"For them?"

"Yes. They were using his financial connections to siphon funds from various accounts. As best I could understand it, he has helped them steal millions of dollars in the past couple of years."

"Past couple of years?" The air filled with the distinct scent of disbelief. "But he . . . but I . . ."

"I don't know how he got mixed up with them, but I'm pretty sure . . ."

"Maybe they tricked him. Got him to do things without realizing." Her heart raced quickly as she looked for the possibilities of it being a misinterpretation. "Then blackmailed him. Maybe there's been a misunderstanding."

"No Gail. I overheard them talking. I overheard him talking with them. There's no misunderstanding. He's mixed in with them pretty deep."

I paused, squeezed her shoulders.

"What else aren't you telling me, Michael?"

I nodded. "Yeah. There's more. And I really don't know how to say this, Gail."

"What do you mean? You just told me that my fiancé has ties with organized crime – that he's been working

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with them for years. After that, what in hell do you think you can't tell me?"

I shook my head.

"That isn't the only thing he was lying to you about."

"No?"

"No. And I wish I wasn't the one to tell you this, Gail"

The pained look in her eyes revealed she knew where I was heading before her scent did. "No." She pushed my hands off her shoulders and turned away, taking a few tentative steps back down the hallway. "No way."

"I wish it weren't true."

"I bet you do," she said. "You're probably laughing your ass off about this, aren't you?"

"Gail, no. It ate me up inside to learn this. I want to tear his head off for hurting you. I wish I could change it, make it not true. But it was there – all the evidence was there. In his office, on him. On . . . her . . ."

I pointed to my nose to indicate my wolf sense, but then I realized there was no need to indicate how I knew to her. She understood perfectly well.

She stood with her back to me as the reality of what I was trying to tell her properly sunk in.

"Who," she said, turning to face me. "Who is she?"

I took a step forward, trying to figure out how to explain.

"No, you don't need to tell me, Michael. I already know."

I looked at her, stunned.

"It's that skank of a secretary of his, isn't it? Susie fucking Kern. I should have known, the dumb slut!"

She paced back and forth in a tight and frenetic shuffle.

"Stupid damn slut. I'll tear out her damn fake blonde hair strand by strand from her big fat skanky head. I'll—"

At that point she broke down, collapsed into my arms and started to cry.

I rubbed my hands over her hair, across her back.

"Gail. I'm so sorry. I wish this wasn't true. I wish I could make it all better, make it all go away."

I kept rubbing her back, and yes, despite the fact that my main purpose was in comforting her, a part of me still clung to the concept of simply cherishing being able to be this close to her, to hold her in my arms, just like I used to be able to do.

We stood like that in the hall just outside my doorway for several minutes. Then the elevator door opened and out stepped a tall man in a crisp, dark uniform with black leather gloves and what smelled like freshly polished black shoes. He held a small, peaked cap in his hands and gave off a surprised scent at seeing us standing together in the hall.

He took a few tentative steps forward, glanced at my door number, then spoke. "Mr. Andrews?"

Gail quickly composed herself and stepped back. Our moment over.

"Yes," I said.

"I'm the driver here to pick you up to bring you to the Ed Sullivan Theatre on Broadway for your 4 p.m. appointment. I was sent by the Halpin Agency."

Interlude – Wolf Night - Eight

IT MIGHT HAVE been in human form, and it might now be driving a vehicle, but the other wolf had been prowling and intruding on the wolf's territory.

That simply couldn't be allowed.

Despite the fear of venturing into the concrete jungle ahead, the overwhelming smells of petrol, and loud noises and dangers of vehicles, the wolf took off after the car.

He darted down the street, doing his best to stay out of sight. And while it was necessary to take a complex and round-about route, often skirting around full city blocks to avoid detection, he could track the distinct scent of the emissions from the vehicle, which fortunately, seemed forced to make frequent stops along the way.

The wolf tracked the vehicle south, typically staying within a few blocks of its winding route.

Finally, the vehicle stopped in the parking lot of a wooded area near a body of water the wolf had never seen before.

The wolf-human got out of the vehicle and looked around. Fortunately, the other was upwind from him, so his tracking of the other wolf was not revealed.

Then, it was no longer a human, but again the other wolf, and started to race south on a path along the grasses that were adjacent to the water.

The wolf raced after the other.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The limo ride to Letterman

I SAT IN the back of the limo across from Gail and couldn't help but offer her a quick smile. She smiled back. And though it was a bit of a forced grin, I could tell she was bemused with the situation of riding in the back of a limo heading through downtown Manhattan.

To be honest, I'd been on less than half a dozen limo rides in the past few years. Mack, who was normally tight when it came to extravagant expenditures, had insisted on booking one for me when appearing at the movie launch for *Print of the Predator*.

Mack had also booked a limo for me to arrive at the screening party for the two-hour made-for-television movie *The Paper Capers*, which was a mashup of various plotlines in my novels *The Canary Cage Caper* and *Roost of the Ruthless Raven* complete with an underlying story that broke from my novel series in a significant way. Instead of the TV series following Maxwell Bronte, antiquarian book dealer, the network that had produced the pilot and the six episodes that never aired, squashed that concept. They said a successful television series had to be about cops, lawyers or doctors. So, in the pilot and series, the writers had adapted Bronte into a semi-retired lawyer

with a penchant for sleuthing who operated a private investigation firm. Bronte's main love interest, Gwendolyn, was no longer a high school teacher but instead the head of a cold case team of detectives.

The television movie had been a complete departure from the novels, except for the theme that most of the mysteries involved books. That was something they never even properly explained in the pilot nor the episodes that followed. Each mystery happened to be about some book or publishing related crime or cold case mystery, but the writers never explained the why behind this.

They also had Bronte and Gwen's back story that they were a divorced couple who had originally met while working a case together, but Bronte had been a defense attorney while Gwen worked for the D.A.'s office. There was also no reason given as to why they worked together, years later, on solving crimes, or how a private investigator was allowed to even be involved in the cases that Gwen's team was working on.

It was bad television drama at its finest.

No wonder the pilot bombed and the few episodes that had been written and recorded were cancelled.

Still, the experience had been a good one for me. The initial check the network had written to me for the television rights was a six figure one, and on several occasions I had been invited to go down to the set, watch the filming and meet a few of the principle characters.

So, no, I hadn't been on too many limo rides. And for most of them, I had travelled in the back alone. So it certainly felt good to be sitting across from Gail.

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It was, yet another tiny little fantasy moment for me.

After the chauffeur had arrived, it was apparent that I couldn't simply leave Gail alone. I quickly told her about my Letterman appearance and asked if she would accompany me to the studio to offer me some moral support.

She knew I'd made the offer not for me, but for her, and accepted graciously. It didn't hurt that I knew she was a huge fan of Letterman, and though she had lived in this city for most of her adult life, she'd not yet been to a taping of the show.

I proceeded to begin locking up the apartment, at which point Gail made a note of my appearance. "You're not going on Letterman looking like that!" She fingered the wrinkles, tears and scuff marks on my formerly beige golf shirt.

Looking down at myself I realized I looked quite the sight.

In my defense I had been through quite a bit in the past few hours.

"Your hair and face they'll take care of in the makeup room, but they don't provide costumes. You'll need to change, my friend."

She turned to the chauffeur. "Just give us two minutes."

Brushing past me and into my apartment, Gail headed straight for the bedroom, made a few quick comments about the pigsty state of affairs in there, then came out with a burgundy button-down t-shirt and pair of black dress pants.

"They're not ironed, and we don't have time, but they're in a lot better shape than what you have on now."

I grabbed them from her and started walking to the bedroom to change

Gail grabbed my arm. "No time for modesty," she said. "I've seen it already, remember? Take the clothes with you. You can change in the limo. C'mon, let's go."

And so we went, without many other words.

Leading to this incredible moment of smiling across at her in the limo. I wanted to reach over and take her hand, but didn't. Not immediately. I waited a few seconds, second-guessing myself, before realizing that I was being foolish. Gail wouldn't see it as an advance, or me wanting to rekindle our relationship. She needed a friend right now, and I was it.

So I reached over and placed my hand on top of hers on the black leather seat.

Her smile warmed and her scent revealed she was calmer.

She had seemed to accept it relatively quickly. As if she had suspected something. I've mentioned before how in tune with other people Gail was, how I might have heightened senses that helped me to easily read people, but that she was able to read others through some remarkable natural sense that eluded most people.

Including me.

She'd always been able to read me inside and out. Had never once been wrong. Okay, sure, when I'd lied to her about the werewolf thing and she'd assumed my lies had something to do with infidelity, she'd been wrong. But

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she had known I'd been lying to her – she'd seen that quite easily.

So I knew there were a few things about me she must already be completely aware of.

One, I'd never stopped loving her and still yearned for her.

And two, that I was scared as hell of pushing her away again.

Because, ultimately, though she was the one who broke up with me, I had to admit it had been me pushing her away. In all those long nights after having acrobatically wild sex where we'd laid in each other's arms and shared intimate details about our lives, I'd held back. I kept from her one of the most important intimate details of my life – a part of who I was that had become an incredibly critical part of my life.

I mean, I owed much of my success as a writer and my ability to get along in this city despite my humble, small-town upbringing – never-mind the fact the heightened senses had dramatically helped me in building this phenomenal relationship with Gail in the first place – to the supernaturally heightened senses that came with being a werewolf.

And yet that most critical piece of me, that ultimate secret, was something I hadn't been willing to share.

I had been lying to myself to think Gail wouldn't believe me.

She, among anyone else, would have believed.

And I should have known.

But perhaps I had been afraid.

Afraid to let her in. Afraid to get even closer.

And I think, finally, now, I know why.

It had to do with last night.

I woke up with a gunshot wound in my leg. I had obviously been involved in some sort of fight with another werewolf. I had obviously encountered Gail when in wolf form.

My fear of getting too close was that, ultimately, I had no control over my “other” self. I had no human conscious knowledge nor ability when I transformed into a wolf.

And, thus, I had no way of ensuring I wouldn’t harm Gail when I turned into a wolf.

Driving her away from me by lying to her had been the only way I knew I could protect her.

And the brief snippets of what happened last night that kept coming back to me in fleeting flashbacks seemed to only prove that.

As much as I loved this woman, as much as I wanted to protect her from the evils of this world, there was one thing I couldn’t ever properly protect her from.

Me.

The untamed and completely unpredictable wolf that flowed through my blood.

“Thanks for letting me come along,” Gail said, breaking the silence and seeming to sense the dark places my mind had been going. “But time’s a wastin’ here, Andrews. You need to get changed toot suite.”

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It was a small thing, but, knowing I was from Canada, she'd occasionally interject a purposely terrible combination of English and French terms into a single sentence, speaking in Fringlish, the interesting composite of both official languages of Canada.

Hearing it lifted my spirits.

Funny. Here was Gail, having just learned her fiancé was not only cheating on her but was involved in some sort of white-collar organized crime, making an effort to make me feel better, to make me feel good.

I was lucky to have her in my life at all.

Even as a friend.

I grinned at her.

"I'm serious," she said. "Get those damn ruined clothes off and change into these. We'll be there in just a few blocks."

She moved to sit on the seat facing me to give me more room, holding the clothes she'd selected still on their hangers.

I pulled the golf shirt over my head and dropped it to the floor between us.

Then I shimmied out of my pants, leaving them in a pile on the floor.

I checked out the bullet hole in my leg, saw how nicely it had been healing.

"What the hell is that?" Gail said. "It looks like a gunshot wound."

I looked up at her, knitting my eyebrows together, then tilted my head towards the driver. Sure, the window

between him and the passenger area was closed. But who knew what he could hear.

"It is," I whispered. "Don't know how I got it. Woke up with it this morning. Long story. Tell you later."

I noticed some dark bluish black splotches on the left side of my chest. There were more on my arms.

Running a hand over the sore and swollen spots on my left pectorals and chest, I shook my head. Wow, how had I not noticed those nasty bruises.

I could smell Gail's concern and worry about my injuries. But as my hand traced a path across my chest, I caught a distinct feeling of unadulterated lust coming from her.

Bemused, I ran my fingers down my abs, and looked across to her.

"Dammit, Andrews," she said, smiling. "You can smell that off me, can't you?"

"Yeah," I whispered.

She shook her head. "I have so much to learn about the extent of your abilities.

"And stop flattering yourself. I might still be in love with Howard, jerk that he is. But I'm not dead, you know. There might be a lot going on, but it's only natural for a healthy woman to enjoy a sight like that." She paused. "Even if it is you."

We both laughed.

"Okay, enough already." She tossed the clothes across the seat at me. "Get your damn clothes on before I leap across and jump your bones."

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By the time I had my clothes on, Bruce, our driver, used the intercom to let me know that Mack Halpin was on line one. When I first got into the limo I'd given him a quick call to ensure it was possible for me to bring a guest. If anyone could squeeze another person into an already booked theatre, it was Mack.

I lifted the receiver, pressing the button for line one.

"Hi Mack."

"She's in," Mack said. "When the limo drops you off, they'll escort you both through the admin area. Then they'll take you to the pre-studio area for makeup and whatnot and lead her to a special backstage area where she can watch the show from the side of the stage."

"Thanks, Mack. I really appreciate this."

"It's the least I can do for my best client," he said. "Now, why haven't you told me that Gail is back in your life? She's quite the hot little thing. I'm glad you finally came to your senses and figured out how to win her back."

"Oh, I haven't done that, Mack."

"Well what the hell are you waiting for, bub? You're not a spring chicken anymore. And a man can't live on bread alone if you know what I mean. Get your act together, Andrews. You need me to talk to her or something? Christ on a crutch, man. Do I have to negotiate everything for you?"

"No, you don't."

"Yeah. Right. Okay, break a leg tonight."

He hung up.

"So?" Gail asked. "What did he say? Do I get to meet Letterman?"

I smiled at her. "You just might."

Bruce piped up over the intercom again. "Mr. Andrews."

"Yes, Bruce. And please call me Michael."

"Knell's latest single is currently playing on the radio. As I understand it, he'll also be a guest on tonight's program. Would you like me to turn it on in the back?"

"Sure, Bruce. Thanks."

"Oh my God," Gail said, in a half-shriek, sounding like a teenage fan girl. It was a voice I'd never heard from her before. "I forgot that Knell was going to be on tonight's show. Ohmygod, Michael. You get to meet Knell. He's amazing."

"I've never really paid much attention to him," I said, and then settled back to listen to his latest hit. It was, as expected a raunchy sort of song, with heavy metal undertones and accompanying lightning-fast rap-style lyric delivery. I tried to like it as the song moved into what was obviously the chorus.

Motorin' through this half-baked life

Got a slut by my side, ten times hotter than my wife

Got a Porsche in my drive, got some smack, got some blow

Got a date with destiny, so on with the show

On with the show

I'm solid don't you know

On with the show - on with the show

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Gail was bopping along to the tune across from me, reminding me that it was good to recognize that, despite how much I loved her, I didn't always sync up with her tastes.

The guy's lyrics were meaningless and pejorative. The underlying music, though not my cup of tea, was pretty solid and catchy. His band was obviously talented, the guitarist right up there with Eddie Van Halen, Angus Young and Eric Clapton when it came to unique and stylized riffs. It didn't really matter what lyrics accompanied the music, because that's what carried the songs and made them popular.

I imagined you could rhyme off an alphabetical list of venereal diseases to this great background music and still make a hit. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, one of Knell's first hits did have a song that seemed to be a tribute to sexually transmitted diseases. It wasn't exactly called "To All the STD's I've Had Before," but certainly stuck in your head the way that old Willie Nelson and Julio Iglesias song does.

When the song finished, Gail grinned and cooed in that teen fan voice. "Ooooh, Michael. You get to meet him. I might even see him backstage."

"Yeah," was all I could say, because I was pulled out of the moment by the news brief that began after the song ended.

"... police are still not releasing further information about the homeless man who was slaughtered in the South Street Seaport area and the apparent pack of wolves assumed responsible. Despite an early morning comment from an officer claiming to

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have shot one of the wolves, no further statement has been made. The coroner's office is not releasing any information despite repeated requests.

"More witnesses are coming forward, confirming that there were at least two wolves. One witness, who refused to be named, stated an officer did indeed shoot one of the wolves, but that both animals still fled the scene.

"Other witnesses are claiming to have seen a wolf uptown in Central Park last night, not far from where the body of a strangled man was found, the apparent victim of a carjacking. His vehicle was found near the East River Park, and there have been at least three more sightings of wolves racing through the streets of Midtown and East Village.

"Spokespersons from Central Park, Queens Zoo and Bronx Zoo have confirmed that all of their animals are accounted for, particularly the African Wild Dogs located in the Bronx location."

The news report then moved on to world news.

But all I could do was focus on the healing gunshot wound in my leg, which seemed to have started throbbing uncontrollably upon hearing the news report.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Pleased to make-up your acquaintance

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the Ed Sullivan Theater it was a whirlwind of activity. Bruce had barely opened the back door of the limo to let us out when an intern from Worldwide Pants greeted us on the sidewalk, confirmed our names, produced two different-colored ID badges for us then escorted us inside.

The intern walked us through various rules and regulations we had to follow, made us both sign different forms in triplicate, then split us up when a second intern appeared.

It all happened so fast and matter of fact, without me having a moment to really feel overwhelmed just being in that historic building and part of such an amazing show.

I was able to detect the special flutter in Gail's heart, and the scent that revealed just how excited she was to be a part of it. I felt good knowing she was distracted from the unsettling news about her fiancé.

Gail was then led off to a special backstage screening area where she would be able to watch the show with other guests and I was ushered down the hall, through a set of security doors, and into a make-up room.

Without saying anything, the intern directed me to a chair in front of a mirror with a bank of bright, bulbous lights around it.

The intern left, perhaps to meet and guide another guest inside. I waited for a few minutes and was able to properly catch my breath.

"I'm Nora," the short, perky make-up artist said as she quickly stepped into the room, offering her hand. She had the most beautiful blue eyes that demanded attention and a warm, welcoming smile that seemed to light up the room and a head of curly, billowing Farah Fawcett hair.

"I'm Michael," I said, offering my hand.

She took my hand and her heart skipped a beat. The scent oozing from Nora was familiarity and a touch of desire.

"I know," she said, squeezing my fingers tightly and holding on for far too long than was comfortable. "I'm a huge fan."

While I was occasionally recognized, I still wasn't used to that sort of greeting from an obvious invested fan.

She kept hold of my hand for a few seconds longer, then, finally seeming to realize what she was doing, she quickly let go and took a step back, an air of embarrassment exuding from her.

"Very pleased to meet you, Nora." I said, wanting to do my best to make her feel more at ease. "So, do you think you're up to the challenging task of making me look pretty? Or if not pretty, then at least presentable?"

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She laughed. "Oh, Mr. Andrews, you look amazing as you are. I'm just going to add some pancake and highlight certain features that will look more natural under the harsh lights and cameras."

"Sounds like you know what you're doing, Nora. And please, call me Michael."

"Sure thing . . . Michael," she said, moving around the chair to gather up some white tissues that she started stuffing in my collar. "I've read all your books and am a huge fan of Maxwell Bronte."

"Thank you," I said.

"Where did you come up with the idea for him? I mean, if you don't mind me being so forward."

"Not at all. I rather enjoy talking about myself and my writing. It makes a guy feel loved."

"Oh, you're loved all right," Nora said. "You have no idea how much I love you." At that, her heart skipped another beat. She immediately seemed angry with herself for saying something silly that could be taken the wrong way, yet also excited to be telling me how much I was adored.

I felt bad for her and wanted to make her feel less embarrassed.

"Thanks, Nora. To hear such a beautiful young woman say something so nice, so flattering, really makes my day."

Another heart skipping moment. "Did you just say I was beautiful?"

"Of course. I'm sure you hear that all the time."

"No, I don't," she said. "I got into the make-up business so I could learn how to be beautiful, spend time with beautiful people. I've always thought of myself as plain, and ugly."

"Well, I hate to be rude and disagree with you, Nora."

She laughed. "W-what about me do you find attractive?"

"It's the whole package. You're very pleasing to the eye." I paused, looked into her wide eyes and her beaming smile. "But I think the thing that struck me immediately when I walked in here was your eyes."

"My eyes?" Again she said it in barely a whisper.

"They are the most incredible shade of blue I've ever seen. Sure I'm a writer, but I would struggle with trying to describe them."

I could feel her confidence level start to shoot up, and, though she was still exhilarated at a heart-skipping level, she wasn't as nervous as earlier. That made me feel good. But there was also another thing. The level of lust and desire she was exuding towards me had increased dramatically.

I had to admit, moments like this were magic to a guy like me in terms of helping to build my ego. It was one thing to have a fan gushing over you, but quite another to be lusted after.

On a level far removed from reality, the way that one might consider picking up a live wire, I contemplated how easy it would be to manipulate this young woman into a quickie.

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I knew she would eagerly “jump my bones” as Gail so eloquently put it. All I needed to do was make a bit of sweet talk, make a few subtle sexual innuendoes, then ask her to close the door to the makeup room so I could show her some personal appreciation for being such a great fan. I knew that it would just be a matter of minutes for both of us to be naked and sweaty together. She’d be talented enough, of course, to quickly get me back to looking presentable for my appearance on the show, and I’d be able to move on, satisfied with my conquest and knowing she’d have an incredible story to tell to her friends about how she’d actually had sex with someone she idolized.

It would seem, of course, a nice thing to do. A moment of sexual pleasure for two people in which there would be a nice benefit for each.

But of course, I had far too much respect for others to manipulate people in such a way. Sure, I constantly used my heightened senses to make my arguments and desires more appealing, more palatable to others. It was easy enough to know the right thing to do or say to subtly direct a conversation or dialogue in the manner that was more suitable to me. But taking advantage of a person like Nora would not only be unforgivable, but reprehensible.

As I’ve mentioned before, I’ve done my best to adhere to the old Spider-Man creed that great power must also be accompanied by a sense of great responsibility.

So I joked with Nora, I flirted with her knowing she was filing every moment away to share with friends later,

and did my best to make her feel at ease. I went on to explain that the thing I found most attractive about her was not her physical traits, but her friendly and positive attitude.

I also subtly alluded to having a girlfriend. And though it was a lie, it was a decent one to make because it allowed me to let her down without her feeling personally rejected.

In a nutshell, the man she admired so much admitted to finding her attractive, but he was attached and an honorable person who would go no further than light flirting. It was the perfect out leading to the least amount of hurt feelings, yet maintained a decent rapport.

Nora, of course, made me feel even more at ease as she continued to apply my makeup and pump me for information about what adventure might come next for Maxwell Bronte.

Of course, she never once mentioned my latest book of short fiction, and I knew, without having to ask, that, regardless of how much a fan of me she was, she had no interest in anything that wasn't from my Maxwell Bronte universe.

Though Nora and her heightened enthusiasm for my writing was a huge ego boost, the fact that her focus was on the universe and characters I sometimes felt trapped in and wanted to escape offered me a clear message. It wasn't me or my writing people were interested in, it was the particular world I'd created that they loved.

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And if I abandoned that world, and Maxwell Bronte, then perhaps I would be cutting off my nose to spite my face.

I loved to write and to create.

So perhaps there would be a way that I could do both.

In many ways, though Nora's well of desire for me assuaged my feelings of rejection that still lingered when I thought about Gail, her series of queries about my writing helped me realize something critical about myself and about the direction I was considering.

Here was one of my fans, the folks who helped me attain my position, the ones who flocked to bookstores to buy my books, who supported the movie that made me some fantastic money and also easily doubled the sales of my books, allowing me to realize I would be nothing without them, and not be in this position without having created and built up the Maxwell Bronte universe.

In a nutshell, Nora was helping me focus on Bronte as if he were a real person – and that perhaps I should treat him with the same respect with which I treated his fans.

I wondered if, instead of going into professional makeup, Nora should have considered being a therapist. Because when I dropped into her chair, I was feeling overwhelmed, exhausted and confused; but when I got out of it, I was feeling re-energized, confident and relaxed.

And looking forward to meeting David Letterman.

The rest of my pre-airtime was a blur.

There were two different interns in the green room ready to prepare me a plate of goodies or the beverage of

my choice. They also even had a bowl of Smarties for me, proud of the fact that they'd been able to acquire this Canadian candy-covered chocolate treat in a very short time. I was pleased with the effort this show had demonstrated towards making a guest feel at home, and realized that I hadn't seen a box of Smarties (similar in many ways to M&M's) since leaving Canada a decade ago.

Towards the end of my wait in the green room with the pleasant and accommodating staff, I realized that I was about to walk onto a set that was recording for a national broadcaster later this evening, and it wouldn't do my image or career any good to be a quiet, introverted stick in the mud.

When I heard Letterman mention that, after the break, he would be welcoming Michael Andrews, author of the books behind the Maxwell Bronte movie franchise, an assistant stage manager showed up to escort me to the area backstage from where I was to make my entrance.

"You've got one and a half minutes," she said, clutching her clipboard to her chest and giving me a stiff, firm smile. She paused, listening to a voice coming through on her headset, which I could clearly make-out.

The voice was the intern who had originally met Gail and I at the door. "Knell's limousine has finally arrived. Mr. Knell and his entourage are now exiting the limo and will be entering the building in approximately two minutes."

Calm and relief washed over the intern. She nodded enthusiastically and spoke into the microphone hovering beside her pouty lips. "Roger. I'll be down to greet them

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at that time.” Then, more quietly, she said. “Mr. Andrews is leaving the green room and approaching the entrance area.”

She led me with a light grip on my elbow, down a hallway and up a short flight of stairs. The door at the top was marked with a barrage of caution signs that this was the immediate back-stage area and silence was mandatory. A red light at the top of the door was on, indicating a show taping was in progress.

From behind the door I could hear Letterman chatting while Paul Shaffer led his band through a bright and cheery commercial-break tune. The scent of the several hundred people in the audience was coming through clearly.

The assistant stage manager led me through the door and we turned past three sets of staggered red curtains before we stopped on a clearly marked line on the floor where I was to wait for my cue. The whole time, the stage manager and a couple of interns were updating people on the progress that Knell and his folks were making.

A sense of continued relief flowed from her. She shook her head. “Happens way too often. There’s always got to be one celebrity who pushes their arrival time to the absolute limit.”

I smiled at her, realizing just how tight and critical the timelines were. No, this wasn’t live television, but it was recorded as if live and there wasn’t a lot of wiggle-room if a guest didn’t show up or wasn’t ready to go.

At that point, I caught a fresh whiff from the audience and was able to detect Anne Lee, Mack’s assistant, sitting

there. She was such a sweetheart. It gave me a new sense of calm to know there were two supportive folks here to cheer me on. Gail, in a nearby green room, and Anne, in the audience.

As Shaffer's band wound down and I overheard various backstage voices counting down to being back on air, the assistant stage manager prepped me. I was able to hear the prompts she was being given before she gave them to me, but I waited to do what they wanted until she told me.

When the call to send me onstage finally came, I stepped forward, coming into view of the audience and felt a huge thrill as they roared with applause.

I was halfway to the stage, when a fresh scent rolled in and I caught the whiff of something that almost stopped me in my tracks.

The other werewolf was here in the building. Potentially in the audience.

Interlude – Wolf Night - Nine

THE WOLF RACED down the alley, still pursuing the other one, which had morphed, yet again, into human form and entered the back door of a building, apparently in an attempt to throw the wolf off its path.

The wolf would not be tricked from the chase, though, and managed to keep a bead on the other.

The only issue going through his canine mind was the concern over being so far away from the open freedom of the grass, trees and rocks it normally stalked in.

The concrete, metal, and glass towers he raced through made for a great deal of discomfort. And this area smelled quite a bit different than the normal scents that wafted in to the green-scape he thought of as home. There was a salty smell, a fishy smell to this area.

Pausing to sniff the air, listen for the heartbeat of the wolf-human, he heard a scream coming from an adjacent alleyway in a downwind direction.

He raced forward to find the other wolf tearing the flesh out from the stomach of a human lying in the alley. The human was no longer alive, smelling of fresh fecal matter and urine as well as stale urine and alcohol.

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The other turned, its blood-covered snout obviously recognizing the presence of the wolf in the breeze. A cold, calculating glare in its eyes, the other bolted.

The wolf paused for a moment to nose the dead human, attempt to breath in more of the scent of the enemy, then he raced down the alley after it.

From behind the wolf came a slurred male voice. "Nice doggie." The human uttering those words then stumbled across a row of metal garbage cans, making a god-awful clattering noise as he fell, knocking the cans over.

The wolf raced down the alley after the other, the taste and scent of the human's blood thick in his nostrils along with the scent of the other.

A scent he would never forget.

As he turned the corner at the end of the alley, the other jumped out at him and they rolled over one another until they slammed against a wall. Without even attempting a kill strike, the other jumped off and raced down the alley.

The wolf then heard the piercing wail of an approaching siren. He had heard this sound many times before, but this time the sound was close and getting louder. It was accompanied by the sound of screeching tires near the mouth of the alley.

The wolf understood it was coming for the other. Or for both of them.

As the police-car screeched around the corner and into the alley, the wolf bolted toward the other, half-pursuing, half-running away from the vehicle bearing down on him.

Chapter Thirty: A writer, a rocker and a talk show host walk into a bar . . .

AS I CONTINUED across the stage towards Letterman's desk I looked over at the audience, trying to determine where the smell of the other werewolf was coming from. I gave a tight-lipped grin and waved a thank you to the audience. That encouraged them to cheer and clap louder.

If it hadn't been for scenting the other werewolf nearby, I would have enjoyed such an enthusiastic crowd making all that noise for me. As it was, I was distracted and on alert.

The bright lights prevented me from seeing anything more than the outlines of audience members, and the scent I'd detected had vanished. About half-way across the stage, I breathed deeply again, realizing I had completely lost the scent. I forced myself to keep walking towards David Letterman, who was standing behind his desk and smiling at me.

Still on edge about the other wolf, not to mention being filmed for national television broadcast, I tried to tune in to the various other noises going on below the roar of the crowd and Shaffer's band which was playing the hook from the sound-track to *Print of the Predator*. I could

hear snippets of stage management and camera and light directions being given, the sound of someone walking in a catwalk above, but nothing at all to suggest the other was actually still present.

Could it just be my nerves acting up?

I reached Letterman and he put out his hand, welcomed me to the show in a voice meant just for the two of us, then waited for me to turn, smile and wave at the audience and sit down before he dropped back into the chair behind his desk.

"Thanks for coming on the show," he said in a voice that this time was picked up by the boom mike.

"It's an honor to be here, Dave."

"So tell me something," David said. "I look at your publishing history, the number of books you've had out in just the past ten years, the fact that your novels are being turned into blockbuster Hollywood hits, and I think, okay, this guy is a writer. So why doesn't he look like one?"

The audience laughed. I smiled.

"Thanks. I think." The audience laughed even harder. This felt good.

"Seriously," he said. "You're a good-looking guy. Tall, dark, handsome. Full head of hair, a charming smile. You dress normal. You don't seem to be a loner. I mean, here's a picture of you at the premiere of your last movie release with a total babe on your arm."

Letterman turned to Shaffer. "That's what the kids are calling it these days, right, Paul?"

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Paul Shaffer laughed. "You got it, Dave. But in Canada, they're saying *Ooot with a total babe.*"

"Naturally." Letterman said, then directed attention towards a front of stage monitor we could both see where the producers had cut to a picture of me walking the red carpet with Gail. I remembered that night clearly – as if it were yesterday.

"I mean," he continued. "When the average person thinks of an author, we imagine something more like this."

On the screen, the photo of Gail and I was replaced with a black and white sketch with the superimposed text "Artist's Rendition" showing a hideous looking man with dark circles under his eyes and a look on his face akin to Edvard Munch's *The Scream* sitting at a desk with a typewriter on it and a litter of cats circling his feet.

The screen then flashed to another picture of Gail and I from that same premiere, holding hands and both of us laughing as we chatted with the director of the film. Then it cut to another one of me signing books at a local Barnes and Noble, a display of books piled high, the movie cover poster beside my desk and a line of people waiting to meet me.

Then the sketch of the anguished writer went back on the screen and David made a point of looking at it, then at me, then back and forth a couple more times, much to the delight of the studio audience.

"I just don't see any similarities, here. Are you *sure* you're a *real* writer?"

Turning to the camera that was trained on me for a close-up and staring directly into it, I said in a loud, announcer-style voice, "I'm not a writer, but I play one on TV."

Letterman and the audience laughed.

"So do you ever get tired about the stereotypes people have when it comes to writers?"

"To be honest, Dave, I'm fine with those stereotypes. My entire life all I wanted to do was be a writer. If a publisher wanted to print my books with that artist rendition sketch in it rather than my picture, I'd let them, so long as they produced my books."

"Now your Maxwell Bronte novels also feature a hero that is less than typical for a mystery-thriller series."

"Yeah."

"I mean, most successful movies and television shows have to be about one of three careers – doctors, lawyers or cops. But yours feature an antiquarian book dealer. You can't get much more boring than that, except perhaps an accountant, a librarian, or even a late-night talk show host."

More laughter.

"But yet, Maxwell Bronte, this mild-mannered hero, seems to get mixed up in some tremendous storylines, some incredible plot twists. He solves murders, saves lives, wins the love of a beautiful woman."

The screen flashed to a screen shot from *Print of the Predator*, showing Maxwell Bronte, played by Ryan Gosling, in a steamy clench with his love-interest, Gwendolyn, played by Rachel McAdams.

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"That Rachel McAdams is such a sweetheart, isn't she? But speaking of beautiful women, let's go back to that picture of you and the hot young thing who accompanied you to that premiere."

The screen showed the first picture of Gail and I walking up the red carpet.

"Who is this beautiful woman, and, more importantly, is she still in the picture?"

I grinned, not sure how to answer this. Should I say, yes, we were an item, but me being the big loser than I am, I lost her? Sure, we're friends now, but I really want it to be something more. Then I could get up, pull a Tom Cruise and do the jumping on the couch thing and declare my love for Gail on national television.

Instead, I said. "Aw c'mon, Dave. Do you really expect me to kiss and tell?"

He sat back in his chair and smiled at me, raising his eyebrows.

"Gail and I are really good friends."

His eyebrows raised further. "*Really* good friends. Really? My producer tells me that this hot young woman accompanied you to the studio today and is watching from the green room."

In typical Letterman Show fashion, they had a camera in the green room, and they turned it on to Gail who offered a slightly embarrassed smile. I was too far away from her to get a bead on how she felt about this, the sudden and unexpected exposure and the fact that our relationship, which, in my mind was quite fragile, was suddenly being put on national television.

"Hi, Gail," I said.

"This is really embarrassing, Andrews," Gail said in her mock anger voice. "I hope you realize I'm going to kick your ass after the show."

The audience laughed.

"Oh, she's a feisty one, isn't she?" Letterman said.

More laughter.

"Perhaps you'll be sleeping in the doghouse tonight," Letterman quipped. "Sorry, pal."

"You have no idea," I said. The audience laughed harder.

"Okay, we're going to cut to a commercial break now. When we come back, we'll take a look at Michael Andrews's Canadian roots and determine whether or not he and Paul Shaffer actually know each other. All that, and our musical guest, Knell!"

Letterman leaned over and asked if I was okay with the exposure of Gail. "It was a last-minute thing," he continued. "My producer suggested it, and we did get Gail's permission, so she's not as angry as she looked."

I told him I understood and how it made for a memorable humorous moment. "Gail is a huge fan of yours," I said.

"Let me make it up to you," he said. "I'll get the producer to arrange for the three of us to grab a bite to eat together after the show."

"We would really love that," I said.

Letterman then spoke quietly to the producer in a mike that fed backstage, and Shaffer led his band through

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a jazzy interlude. I sat back and took a deep breath, trying to absorb it all.

That's when I smelled him again.

And this time I knew it wasn't my imagination, or my nerves.

The other werewolf was here, and this time the scent was stronger, much closer. I could detect his abnormally strong heartbeat as well – clearly distinct through the other noises.

He was backstage, not twenty feet away from where I sat.

The intense scent caused a quick flashback to a snippet of wolf memory from the night before.

A naked human male was lying on the sidewalk four yards away. His scent was a strange mixture of wolf and human.

I shook my head as the stage manager was counting us back to being on again.

Shaffer led the band in an ad hoc and jazzy version of "Oh Canada" my home country's national anthem as Letterman welcomed the viewers at home back.

"So, Paul, Michael – guys, do tell me this – you're both from Canada. So why don't you know each other?"

"We do know one another, Dave." Shaffer said with a huge grin. "We went to the same high school, actually. Played on the same hockey team."

The audience laughed.

"Yes," I said. "And Paul's igloo was just down the snow path from my igloo."

More laughter. I used these pauses to try to stay focused on the conversation at hand and not the fact the other werewolf was here.

"Okay, all kidding aside, let's get back to your writing, Michael," Letterman said. "You've had some amazing success with the Maxwell Bronte novels, but in just a few weeks you'll be releasing a new book."

"That's right."

"But this book is not a Maxwell Bronte novel."

"No, David. This book is a collection of some very personal short tales, much like the ones I had published in small press magazines years before I had a novel deal for the Bronte books."

The screen flashed the cover of *Silent Screams*, my short story collection. In bold letters at the bottom of the cover were the words "Featuring a never-before seen short story featuring Maxwell Bronte." After much arguing with Mack and my publisher, I'd agreed to re-write one of the original never-before-published stories to include a few references to a back story from Maxwell Bronte as well as a quick walk-on scene with him that was completely disposable from the story's perspective. But, as Mack continued to remind me, that small fact would get people interested in, and to buy, the book.

"Who cares," Mack had said, "if that element adds anything to the story. It'll drive sales and prove to the publisher that you can write more than Bronte stories."

Of course, I didn't want the collection to be about Bronte, but eventually gave up the argument. I wanted the collection to be read and enjoyed completely on its

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own merit. I wanted to be able to break free from the Bronte universe. And I didn't want to be seen to be selling out in the name of increased book sales.

But I ultimately didn't have much of a choice.

"*Silent Screams* does, of course, have a Maxwell Bronte story in it," Letterman said.

"Well, sort of. The tale being referred to as a Maxwell Bronte story is actually a story about a serial killer who takes out concert groupies. The killer is a writer, kind of like the loner writer in that sketch you showed earlier. He hasn't had a new novel published in years and is jealous of the fame and fortune of rock stars, and so he sets out to slaughter concert fans, hoping to frighten people away from music and back into reading. At the same time, he is scouring through used bookstores looking for copies of his books, to remove them so that people have no choice but to buy his new books. That's where he crosses paths with Maxwell Bronte."

"A writer jealous of a rock star's success?" Letterman asked. "Is any of that based on deep buried personal issues?"

I laughed. "No. The idea came to me about ten years ago when chatting with a friend about the demise of the music industry through digital file sharing. We were comparing how the music industry survived because even if people download the music for free, musicians can still make money performing live, while writers don't have that same option. Once the sale of their books dries up, there are not many other options for income."

"So, it was just an intriguing idea from the parallel of two industries."

"Yes."

"And not any personal issue related to your own jealousy of rock stars?"

"Not at all."

"Good. Because our next guest, who is preparing to perform live for us right now, is one of the hottest acts around. Here, about to perform *On with The Show*, his latest hit, is none other than Knell!"

The backdrop rose to reveal the three-person backup band of guitarist, bassist and drummer, all dressed in matching black leather with silver studs. They launched into the opening riffs from the song, then there was an explosion of smoke and light as Knell himself, dressed in black leather and a crimson cape, swooped down from above on a guided wire, landing like some demented angel.

I could hear his steady, strong heartbeat. I took in his familiar scent.

And I knew, without a doubt that Knell was the other werewolf.

Stepping down on the stage and grabbing the microphone, he glanced knowingly in my direction, and I knew he also knew who and what I was. Our eyes locked for a moment that seemed frozen in time, then he launched into the opening lyrics of his song.

I got this fire in my bone

It won't leave me alone

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*I got this fire in ma bone
Makes me harder than a stone*

Knell, as expected, grabbed at his crotch so as to ensure there was no mistaking what “bone” he was referring to. He was as known for his crude gestures as he was for the elaborate costumes and make up. I thought back to how such a big fuss had been made about Elvis gyrating his hips on this very stage back in 1956, and how the cameras could only film his act from the waist up.

As I watched Knell drop to his knees and pretend to perform felatio on his bass player, I sincerely doubted that any particular camera angle used today could clean up the mannerisms he was performing.

I kept looking over at David Letterman every time Knell did something rude or obnoxious. The host was as cool as a cucumber. No reaction at all. I’m sure he’d seen all kinds of unexpected things on this stage so it would take a great deal to faze him.

Knell wrapped up his act by pushing his guitarist in the face, grabbing his guitar, and smashing the hell out of the drum set with it. He turned to face us, cold eyes glaring into mine, his heart-beat racing, as he gave off a powerful scent of hostility, anger and dominance.

I wondered if having two werewolves battling to the death in front of his desk might give Letterman pause.

Chapter Thirty-One: A private clash in plain sight

KNELL APPROACHED THE desk and, as Letterman and I both stood to greet him, I felt every hair on my back and neck standing straight at attention. I knew it was the wolf-blood coursing through me attempting to make me appear bigger, more menacing.

Of course, with me standing a full foot taller than the shorter blond-haired man who would make Tom Cruise look tall, my hair didn't need to do that.

His cold steel-blue eyes drilled into mine as he approached, and it took every scrap of my willpower not to leap at him and attempt to rip a huge chunk out of his throat.

And I knew he was feeling the same thing.

When he reached us, he shook Letterman's hand saying he was delighted to be here. I was surprised to hear him speak with a subtle Yorkshire accent, something not at all discernable when he was singing.

Then he turned and stuck his hand in my direction.

"Pleasure to meet you, mate" he said in a voice everyone could hear. Then, in a whisper just for me, added, "Again."

I took his hand. What I really desired was to thrust my arm right into his belly and rip out his stomach.

"Charmed," I said in a normal voice, and in a similar whisper, added, "And disgusted."

He gripped my hand with a quick bone-crushing grip.

Three of my fingers actually cracked. I knew he could both feel it as well as hear it. Letterman, Shaffer, the others onstage and back, as well as the studio audience, couldn't tell. To them it was simply a quick handshake between two celebrities.

To Knell and myself, it was the acknowledgement that this was the beginning of the standoff in which one of us would not come out alive.

Letterman, Knell and I sat, this time with me on the couch and the shock-rocker musician in the chair beside Dave. They made less than a minute of polite small talk – most of which I was paying little attention to, my heart still racing, my broken hand throbbing – before Letterman announced they would be cutting to a commercial break.

As Shaffer's band started to play, two aides rushed onto the stage and started to apply make-up to Knell's face. They fussed over and pampered him the whole break, one of them offering him sips of prune juice.

He sat back, enjoying the moment, seeming to forget I was there, and just basked in all the attention. I tried not to let that worry me, or at least not to let it show, but realized there was no preventing him from detecting that. For a brief moment his eyes turned to me and he grinned,

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seeming to acknowledge how uncomfortable and nervous I was in his presence.

"You'll get yours soon," he whispered to me as his aides rushed away, Shaffer's band wound down, and the off-stage producer counted down to us being back on.

"So, Knell," Letterman said. "I'm continually amazed at how every time you perform you've got some sort of different costume, different look to you. You're like a male Lady Gaga."

The audience laughed and Letterman continued, "Do you come up with these fantastic fashion statements all on your own?"

"Yes," he said, and I could tell immediately that he was lying even before he began to elaborate.

Based on what I just witnessed, the guy likely didn't wipe his ass without a team, never mind dream-up the costumes and stage sets he employed in his act. "The designs and fashions I sport come to me in dream-like visions. I've always had the desire to express myself through various outlets. Music is one, body language is another and, of course, fashion is yet one more."

"I find it simply astounding how you transform so incredibly between shows. And not just that, but you're known to change costumes as many as 40 times in a single show."

At that, the monitor flashed to a montage of clips from one of Knell's recent concerts with a counter at the bottom. The montage sped up after reaching 10 so that each image flashed less than a quarter of a second, before it reached 38.

"The costumes, like my music, are a reflection of how we all can, and do, transform from one moment to the next." He glanced over in my direction when he said the word transform, just to make sure I caught the double-meaning. "The average person is stuck in a particular lifestyle, in a typical life with the same thing, day in and day out. My music and stage performances show that it is possible to be more than one thing, that it's possible to explore all options, engage in and embrace the dynamic nature of life and live free from the constraints forced upon society."

"So it's a celebration of diversity."

"Yes. My music is liberating, life-changing, and revolutionary."

At that statement, the audience went ape shit. They were eating this up.

"Oh brother," I whispered, not at all audible beneath the thunderous applause, but certainly detectable by Knell. I wasn't sure what was more dominant – the wolf-blood running through his veins or the gigantic ego he carried around. Sure he had a huge following, sure he commanded sold-out shows and his name and antics were constantly spread all over radio, television, newspapers and magazines – but the incredible press and publicity storm surrounding him were no match for the tempest of ego that swirled in the man's head.

"Now speaking of musical interest," Letterman said after the crowd calmed. "You do play in a variety of genres. But if you could only ever play in a single style, what would that be?"

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Knell sat very still in his chair and simply regarded the host with his steel-blue eyes, not saying a thing. Half a dozen seconds passed where not a word was uttered. It seemed to drag out forever.

"I see this is a challenging question, one requiring a great deal of thought," Letterman said, filling in the uncomfortable silence.

"I tire of this," Knell suddenly announced in a loud, boorish voice. "And of you."

Then he stood, and without another word walked off the stage.

The crowd again went ape shit as he walked away.

Though not expecting it, Letterman wasn't surprised. Knell was known for pulling hissy fits and unprecedented little stunts whenever appearing on various programs. This, of course, wasn't as rude as the time he threw hot coffee into the face of the host of the morning program in Seattle, one of the first stunts that got him global attention.

But it was part of Knell's mystique.

Letterman and I watched him saunter offstage, then looked at each other.

"Okay, then," he said, gesturing for me to return to the spot immediately beside his desk. "Tell me, Michael, what sort of music do you enjoy listening to when you write?"

The audience laughed while I slipped back into the chair beside David's desk.

"Well, David, I'm a big fan of Canada's hottest progressive rock export, Rush."

Mark Leslie

"Ah yes. *Tom Sawyer*, *Limelight*. *Fly by Night*. Great music."

"Yes, and there has always been deep meaning and intensely thought-provoking stories told through their lyrics – in particular the albums *2112* and *Clockwork Angels*."

"There was a novel based on one that last album you mentioned, wasn't there?"

"Yeah. Science Fiction author Kevin J. Anderson, wrote the novel in collaboration with the lyricist Neil Peart. I had the good fortune to meet Anderson a few years ago at a Sci-Fi con when I was promoting my book *Tome of Terror*, the one where Maxwell Bronte's investigation took him into the occult and worlds of fantasy and horror."

The conversation continued from there for another two minutes. We made small talk about writing and music. Letterman was a consummate pro who was able to turn a tense moment into what seemed like a natural and planned dialogue.

Instead of enjoying the moment though, virtually every fiber of my being was focused on where Knell might be at the moment. Had he left the building or was waiting for me backstage?

Those two minutes waiting for the commercial break seemed excruciatingly long.

Interlude – Wolf Night – Ten

THE SCENERY FLASHED by quickly as the low howl of a siren pursued the wolf. The alley walls blurred as he raced faster, picking up more speed.

Finally, getting within a few feet of the other, the wolf tensed and lunged, coming down with snapping fangs just shy of the other's neck.

They rolled, paws entangled, snapping at each other, and broke free, standing to face one another.

The wolf snapped his jaws again at the other, grazing its mouth, its taste buds further infused with the human blood that coated the other's maw.

There was a sudden squeal of tires and smell of burning rubber, and an accompanying, painfully bright glare of light.

The other bolted to the side and there was a deafening roar of gunfire through the alley.

Escaping, the other launched itself down the alley.

The wolf went to follow it when searing pain exploded in his back leg, accompanied by another gunshot roar.

Despite the ringing in the wolf's ears and the white-hot pain in his leg, the wolf could still hear the mumbled moan from the human still sprawled among the garbage cans it had fallen into.

"No, not the nice doggie!"

Chapter Thirty-Two: The case of the disappearing late-night talk show guests

“LISTEN, DAVE,” I whispered during the break. “I hate to do this, but I really need to use the little boy’s room, if that’s okay.”

Letterman nodded. “Sure thing. You’ve got two minutes.”

“Thanks.”

I hopped out of the chair and one of the nearby stagehands started directing me to a restroom less than twenty feet away. As I was walking, I picked up Knell’s scent. The trail led down the stairs towards the green room Gail was hanging out in.

“Uh,” I said to the stagehand. “I’ve got a thing about public restrooms. Would it be okay if I went downstairs to the green room for a bit more privacy?”

Her scent and heartbeat informed me that she was nervous about that. She whispered into her headset mic. “Guest’s restroom break likely to extend past return to show.” I could hear the immediately acknowledgement and knew that someone was informing Letterman so that he could be properly prepped for it.

"Thanks," I said, and rushed past her towards the green room.

Knell's scent grew stronger as I hurried down the hallway directly toward where Gail had been staying.

I pushed the door open. His scent mingled with Gail's – and from the tone of her scent I could tell she was under duress. There was no sign of either of them.

I stood in the room and tried to get a bearing on where they might be while simultaneously trying to keep my stomach from doing flip-flops.

On the overhead monitor, which was a live feed from the stage, I could hear Shaffer's band wrapping up their jam session and Letterman beginning to address the studio and at-home audience.

"So this is interesting," Letterman said. "In all my years on the show I only ever had one guest walk out on me. And that was Richard Simmons." A clip from that show started playing.

I picked up the direction their scents led and followed out a back door into another hallway.

I could hear Letterman's voice picking back up as the Simmons walk-off clip finished. "But it looks like tonight we're going two for two, as Michael Andrews has also left the stage. Although, admittedly, he did it in a very Canadian fashion. With an apology that he had to use the restroom."

I raced down the hallway and around another corner, towards a yellow door, their scents getting stronger as I opened the door and started up the stairs on the other side. From the top of the stairs I could again hear Letterman. He was now introducing Ryan Gosling, the actor

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who played Maxwell Bronte and whose latest release was due in theatres the following week.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I pushed through another door. There seemed to have been a struggle in the essence of their scents, and I sidestepped left, then back right as I tried to determine the direction they'd gone. I moved in an expanding circle, confused over the direction they had taken. The struggle had been a relatively long one. I wasn't at all surprised that Gail would have, of course, put up a solid fight, werewolf or no werewolf.

Finally determining the direction, I concentrated on a much fresher scent, emanating from above and straight ahead.

I was so focused on the scent that I didn't pay much heed to the bathing of bright lights that were on me.

I slowly stepped sideways, squinting against the light.

"Aha," I muttered as I pinpointed a lump of shadows moving along a catwalk hidden above the tenth row of the audience.

"So," Letterman quipped from behind and to the left of me, startling me out of my concentration. "I trust that you found the restroom all right."

I turned becoming aware that I had wandered right back onto the stage.

"Uh, no, actually," I muttered.

The audience laughed.

"That's okay," Letterman said. "I can understand how easy it might be for a Canadian to get lost in a big city. I mean, it took Paul more than a decade before he was able to get from the stage back down to the dressing room without an escort."

The drummer in Paul's band let off a quick rim shot to punctuate the joke.

I stood looking at Letterman and the boyishly handsome Gosling who was sitting in the chair immediately beside the host's desk. I could hear the shuffling noise on the catwalk above the audience, and, though my eyes were on the host and the celebrity, my mind was focused elsewhere. I must have looked like a complete knob to everyone.

"So," Letterman said. "May I ask you to please join us?"

There was nervous laughter from the audience.

"Uh," I turned to look up at the catwalk again.

"Yes. Those are the lights, that's the studio audience, here's my desk, and that there," he said, gesturing to the couch beside Gosling's chair, "is your seat if you'd like to take it."

The audience laughed once more. The drummer let off another rim shot.

I nodded and moved towards the chair. Gosling stood, said it was great to see me, and shook my hand before sitting again.

As I sat, Letterman brought me into the conversation. "So, I trust that you two met some time ago. Was it during the filming of the first Maxwell Bronte movie?"

"It was," Gosling said. "And I'm glad for that, because, not sure if you're aware, Dave, but I am Canadian as well. I was born in London, Ontario, and lived in various cities and towns before I moved to the U.S. So this is evidence that not all Canadians know one another. I

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didn't have the pleasure of meeting Michael until one of the early production meetings for *Print of the Predator*."

"So we have a Canadian actor playing the lead role in a book written by a fellow Canuck," Letterman said. "Is this some sort of Canadian take-over conspiracy we should be worried about?"

"Ryan was, uh, the perfect actor to pull Bronte off," I said, making sure to contribute to the conversation while still trying to keep my focus on the figures moving about on the catwalk. "He exudes both intelligence and handsomeness for just the right balance."

"Not to mention that with Ryan playing this bookseller role," Letterman said. "He might be single-handedly responsible for more women being interested in books than ever in the history of reading." Letterman then indicated the in-studio screen on which a series of Gosling's viral "Hey Girl" memes appeared.

While everyone was occupied looking at the monitors, I looked back up to the catwalk.

"You can see me, can't you, Andrews?" Knell said in a low voice pitched just for me. "I'm right here. And as I'm sure you can tell, the little miss someone with me was more than a little terrified before I knocked her out."

I gritted my teeth. Yes, I could tell she was unconscious from the sound of Gail's breathing.

"And she, of course, has good reason to be frightened," he continued. "Because she knows if you breathe a word about this, I'm going to kill her while you watch."

Interlude – Wolf Night – Eleven

DESPITE THE WOUND in his rear leg, the wolf ran at top speed, putting as much distance between himself and the humans and their guns as he could.

One of the humans pursued the wolf on foot for a couple of blocks. But, even wounded, and with his leg burning in intense flashes of white-hot light, the wolf ran much faster than a human.

Racing past block after block, the wolf kept running until the scent of the humans and their weapons were far behind.

He began to slow as he reached an area with plenty of bushes, trees and grass.

The steel, concrete and metal buildings still nearby, this wooded area was the first comforting thing the wolf found.

And he was so tired.

Dawn was approaching. Despite the effect of the lights in the city, the wolf could still detect the subtle change in the atmosphere that came with the hour immediately preceding daylight's first gleaming.

The wolf knew what that meant.

He needed to find a safe spot to lie down.

He would sleep, a long, fitful sleep.

And he would recover and heal while he slept.

To wake once more, upon the rise of the moon, to prowl this concrete, metal, and glass island he called home.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Showdown above center stage

AS I SAT on the stage beside Ryan Gosling and David Letterman I wondered how it could have been that I'd be in such a position and yet be so uninterested in the feeling of awe and sheer star-worship that any normal person would have been under.

I was trapped on stage during a live taping of a national television program and couldn't leap from the stage up to the catwalk and rip Knell's hands off of the woman I loved before ripping his head off.

I couldn't do that.

I wouldn't be able to get there before he killed her.

No. First I had to figure out a way to get my ass off of the stage and up into the catwalk.

"... what do you think, Michael?" Letterman's voice suddenly came to me, and I realized that I had been so wrapped up in my thoughts, in focusing on Knell and Gail, that I had absolutely no idea where the conversation had gone.

My mind did a few backflips to where I recall the conversation had been.

"Oh," I said. "Yeah. I agree. Definitely. One hundred percent."

I had no idea what I had just agreed to, but whatever I had said seemed to have put a playful smirk onto Dave's face. Ryan's too. The audience was tittering.

Knell spoke again, in that voice he knew only I could hear. "I grow bored of this. So I'm throwing down a new challenge. Again, no telling, or she dies immediately. But I'm lonely now that she's unconscious, so I'd like you to join me up here. I'm going to count down from ten, Michael. And when I reach the end, if you're not up here, Gail reaches her end. Are you ready? Ten."

David smiled at me and said. "It's good when a man can whole-heartedly admit his attraction to another man. Ryan is just the sort of beautifully handsome to inspire that too. But would you really consider dropping Gail for him?"

"Nine." Knell said.

"Uh," I paused and looked at Ryan. His face was just as red as my face felt. "Yeah. He is certainly a beautiful man. But, sorry, Ryan, you're just no Gail."

"Eight." Knell said.

This brought more laughter from the studio audience.

"Listen," I said, trying to cut through the crowd's laughter. Letterman raised his eyebrows, understanding I was about to quickly change the subject in the middle of a crowd-pleasing moment.

"Seven." Knell said.

"I'm sorry to do this, but I really do have to go." I held my hand over my belly. "I'm going to have to ask you to excuse me once more."

"Six." Knell said.

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"Again?" David said, throwing the pencil he held in his right hand into the air behind him. A glass smashing sound-effect rang through the air, bringing another burst of applause and laughter from the audience.

"Five." Knell said. "I'm going to punch through her chest and rip her heart right out."

"Well, thanks for coming back, Michael," Dave said as I got to my feet. He gestured at me. "Please, a round of applause for my fleet of foot guest, Michael Andrews; author, purveyor of the world's weakest bladder."

The audience laughed as I ran offstage.

"Four." Knell said. "You'll watch her die right in front of you with her heart in my hands." Then he cackled madly.

One of the assistant stage managers greeted me as I exited stage right and whispered something about the nearest facilities.

"I'm fine," I muttered as I pushed quickly past her, my eyes darting around to see where I might be able to get to the catwalk.

"Three." Knell said. "And then, I'll rip your heart out."

There! I leapt with superhuman speed toward the metal stairs that I was certain led up to the catwalk, knowing that Knell could hear the metal clanging as I raced toward them.

"Two." Knell said. "And perhaps, later tonight, I'll feast on both of your hearts!"

I reached the top of the stairs, turned left and found Knell sneering over Gail about mid-way down the catwalk. They were a good fifty feet away from me and I

raced towards them, conscious of every precious inch. How could I grab Knell's free left hand before he ripped out Gail's heart with it? Should I go for his throat with my other hand, or for his other hand where he gripped Gail just below her left shoulder?

I was less than halfway toward them when Knell said "One." and I realized with a cold lump in the pit of my stomach that I wasn't going to make it to them in time.

I pushed myself to move more quickly, and was still a dozen feet away when heard the change in Knell's heart-beat and breathing that told me he was about to strike.

"Zero." Knell said, and raised his left hand back in an open clawed gesture, readying for the strike.

Gail's breathing changed, telling me she was now awake, and her heart leapt in a similar fashion to Knell's, which I interpreted as her preparing for the killing blow.

Only I was wrong.

Just as Knell's arm began its descent toward her, Gail twisted toward Knell and drove her fist directly between his legs. It was a solid punch, a direct hit and I could actually hear one of his testicles pop. Knell let out an anguished groan, his left hand bouncing feebly off her right shoulder, and his right hand released her left arm.

Knell's right-hand struck Gail in the side of the head, sending her sprawling onto her back.

A split second later, I drove into Knell, gripping him by the shoulders and driving onto his back on the cat-walk.

I then delivered three solid punches to his face with my left hand, relishing the fact that I didn't need to pull

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my punches on him, that the blows wouldn't kill him the way they would a normal man.

Knell grinned up at me and the blood from his smashed lip dripped between his teeth.

"She punches harder than you do," Knell said, laughing. Pushing his right elbow into my throat, his left hand grabbed my belt and his knees drove up, flipping me over him. I managed to twist in the air so that I didn't land on my back, but by then, Knell was up and racing down the catwalk in the direction I had come from.

I looked at Gail who was now sitting, the side of her head red and swollen where his knuckles had connected with her face, a trickle of blood dripping from her left nostril.

I reached for her, pleased she was alive, but worried about the damage she'd received. "You're bleeding."

"I'm fine," she said. "Go! Catch him!"

Knell was at the far end of the catwalk and heading up a series of stairs that led to a door at the top of a flight with an emergency EXIT sign on it. He pushed through it.

I was just a few seconds behind him through the exit and found myself in a short hallway that led to another door with an EXIT sign; that door was just closing. I raced to it and out onto a fire escape on the back side of the building.

Above me, I could smell Knell and hear the sound of him ascending the metal stairs toward the roof, his pained breathing giving away the fact that the blow Gail

had dealt his testicles had taken quite a bit out of him. But he was still more than three floors ahead of me

I rushed up the stairs, following him. His heartbeat changed indicated he had noticed me as he turned one of the flights. He was still a couple of floors ahead of me, slowed, but still moving steadily. My leg still throbbed where I'd been shot the night before, and my right hand, which Knell had crushed when we were shaking hands, throbbed almost to the same beat.

Slowly gaining on him during the ascent, I was only a floor behind when he reached the roof, some thirteen floors.

"Run, Knell!" I yelled as I watched him clear the edge of the roof and approached the final flight to the top. "Like the coward that you are!"

I couldn't scent him easily, the wind wrapping over the top of the building contorting the air flow in a dozen directions, but I could hear the effect of my words on his heart. He was angry and was shifting from flight back to fight.

I knew he'd attack once I cleared the edge of the roof, but his diving tackle still carried me off my feet.

We rolled along the roof up against the foot-high ledge and Knell grabbed my right hand with his left as we tumbled, squeezing it. A burst of white-hot pain flared through my head.

We stopped rolling, Knell atop me, his left hand continuing to squeeze my crushed fingers beneath his and his right knee pinning my left shoulder and arm down.

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His dark heart was filled with an intense and overwhelming sense of pleasure at the pain he was causing. He brought a knee up and pressed it against my chest, continuing to squeeze my injured hand.

"I smell fresh blood," Knell whispered, and I realized that the wound on my leg had reopened. "How's your bullet wound?" he cackled and, locating the source, thrust his index finger into the bullet hole.

A fresh blast of pain hit me.

Both of his hands occupied, Knell head-butted me. Flashes of bright white filled my head while I struggled beneath him, unable to break free from his grasp, unable to avoid the repeated bashing of his forehead against mine.

The overwhelming sense of pleasure he was feeling in my pain grew to a new intensity. Then his heart skipped a beat. A second later I detected what was causing his surprise.

"She's following us up here," Knell said through gritted teeth. "So I can easily finish you both off."

I concentrated past the flashes of white-hot pain coming from my hand and my leg and could hear Gail's heartbeat as she raced up the fire escape.

"No!" I managed to say.

"Michael!" Gail called from somewhere on the fire escape, her feet clanging.

Knell was distracted. His desire to see me tortured, to have me watch him kill the woman I loved affected his judgment. Just enough.

I managed to twist suddenly, yanking Knell's hand with the finger still inside my bullet wound, sideways. I ground down, trapping his hand between my hip and the rooftop. With my other leg I kicked out, flipping Knell off of me in the same manner he had flipped me on the catwalk. His lower back cracked against the roof ledge, and I scrambled away from him.

We both got to our feet and faced once another. I was the first to move, punching my right fist into his head.

His head snapped back, but the brilliant new flash of pain that came from punching with my severely injured hand told me the punch hurt me far worse than it hurt him. I twisted and threw my elbow against the side of his head, striking a solid blow to his temple.

This stunned him quite effectively, and he stumbled, the back of his right foot pinned against the roof ledge.

I tried to catch my breath through the waves of pain. Knell blacked out and crumpled backwards off the roof.

Diving forward, I managed to grab him by the shirt collar with my injured hand. My crushed fingers sent waves of pain up my arm and screaming into my brain as Knell's unconscious body collided against the wall of the building.

I gripped the building ledge with my good left hand and wedged both knees there as well, keeping me from tumbling over with Knell. I moaned from the pain shooting up from the right hand that held fast to his shirt.

He was an enemy, he was a killer. But I wasn't about to let him fall to his death. It was something I learned from Spider-Man after all.

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Knell was a killer.

But I wasn't.

I just needed to pull him up, figure out a way to secure him, then worry about how the hell I was going to anonymously convince the police that he was somehow a deranged lunatic and killer.

Shit, I hadn't thought any of this through. How the hell was I supposed to pin the wolf murders on Knell without revealing his lycanthropy?

I suppose I couldn't blame myself for not thinking it through given it had all gone down in just the past half hour. I had been a bit busy, after all, trying to look normal on one of the world's most popular late-night shows while a serial-killer rock star threatened to kill the woman I loved in front of me.

Time for that later, I thought, and tried pulling Knell up. The pain throbbed even deeper and I felt dangerously close to blacking out.

Knell's eyes opened and he twisted in my grip.

"You fool!" he said, looking up at me. "You never show an enemy mercy." He then reached up with both hands and squeezed my hand. "And I'd rather die than be saved by a weak fool like you."

I screamed in pain as his crushing grip forced me to let go.

Knell glared at me as he fell, eyes never leaving mine, and the twisted grin of his bloodied mouth sent new waves of cold shivers down my spine as I watched him plunge to his death.

Epilogue: Acceptance, healing, and friendship

I'M NOT SURE what disturbs me more: the memory of the sound of Knell's body connecting with the pavement thirteen stories down, generating the most unique combination of wet flesh and crunching bone; or the fact that the musician's apparent suicide skyrocketed Knell's latest album to the top of the charts.

The clip showing Knell storming off of the set of *Let-terman* had been replayed thousands of times on virtually every news broadcast; not to mention the millions of views received on the various versions that have been uploaded to *YouTube*. The media and general public have interpreted and re-interpreted Knell's last publicly spoken words as a sign that he was going to take his own life.

"I tire of this," Knell's last recorded words, have become the mantra of a society obsessed with a star's inability to deal with the angst of his musically tortured soul. Knell has been compared to Kurt Cobain in terms of the effect of his suicide, and to Elvis and Michael Jackson with respect to the life ending prematurely; particularly those who believe that Knell might not have purposely taken his own life, but rather fell due to some accident.

The authorities officially ruled Knell's death a suicide, but that hasn't stopped the speculation that it was either an accident or that he, perhaps, might have been pushed. Theories about any number of likely guilty parties continue to swirl, and at times it seems as if the controversy surrounding Knell's death will never end.

I have woken up in a cold sweat several times over the past week with the image of Knell grinning at me while he fell. He knew I wouldn't let him die, and it sickens me that he took such pleasure in my direct involvement in his death. He knew that, even though I tried to save him, I was unable to. And in several ways, he got his final revenge against me.

I have second-guessed myself multiple times; wondering if I had let him go on purpose, as if some deeper part of me needed him to be dead in order to preserve the secret of lycanthropy from the public.

Gail, who has been here the whole time; sitting by my bed while I have healed, staying on the couch and never leaving my side, and who witnessed the entire incident, reminds me that I did my best to save him; that it's simply not in me to want another person dead.

Her understanding helps. Having Gail back in my life, even just as a friend, has been a wonderfully healing element. I screwed up when I lost her, but having her back, even in this platonic way, is an incredible salve on my soul. Her presence is as healing as the transformations I have made the past several nights during this phase of the moon.

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Every time I transfer between man and wolf the injuries to my hand and to my leg undergo a significant improvement.

And Gail's presence during the transformations have been incredible.

That night, just seconds after Knell's plummet, Gail reached the roof. Knowing that the crushed body on the alley below would alert the authorities soon enough, the two of us managed to escape back down the fire escape and into the building, down an elevator and out onto the street. We managed to get a cab back to *The Algonquin* before the sun slipped down in the western sky and I began my transformation into a wolf.

I transformed right there in my apartment with Gail watching me. And, through the haze of pain and the odd way that I felt my consciousness slipping away from me during the descent into my animal form, we merely looked at one another in silence. Gail knew every intimate secret about me, but it didn't bother me in the slightest for her to see me at my absolute weakest and my absolute worst.

She was there when I again awoke from the transformation. Unlike the previous night, where snippets of memory came back to me in bold flashes, I can recall only a single thing about that night.

I can recall laying on my paws, confused about my surroundings inside a human-built setting, but comforted by the presence of this woman, by her familiar and friendly scent. I can recall pushing aside the desire to run and to stalk through the night and be content merely to

share this small and confined space with her. This human meant me no harm. I felt safe. This human was a friend. I felt safe.

Gail told me that, in my wolf form I must have recognized her, because, after the initial confusion I displayed upon changing, I sniffed at her and then maintained my distance from her, laying several feet away and just sitting there watching her.

She told me that we both sat there staring at one another long into the wee hours of the morning, and that she had fallen asleep sometime after watching me close my wolf eyes and drift away.

I woke the next day feeling significantly healed from my wounds from the day before, but with my hand still throbbing in pain. Gail managed to keep Mack away from me while I healed, explaining that I was hard at work on my next novel and she wasn't letting anybody disturb me. I did actually get a few hours of writing completed; and not for the first time I wondered if the writing block that I had experienced had something to do with not having had Gail in my life. That her being back, even in this unique new way she was a part of my life, was enough for me to regain what I had previously lost.

On the second night, Gail and I walked to the park where, again, she watched me change into wolf form and then waited while I tore around on all fours. Whereas the first night I needed to rest and to heal from my wounds, this second night I was closer to normal.

By the fourth night, my body was no longer taken over by the moon phase, and I didn't feel my body's natural

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inclination to change. Being able to talk it through with Gail was a wonderful thing. We speculated at how my body, my particular affliction, was something I had no control of. That, combined with my inability to remember the change might very well have been what preserved my sanity.

Unlike Knell. He seemed completely able to change, at will, during the same phases of the moon that I was a prisoner of. But perhaps his ability to remain conscious of the change might have been a contributing factor to his ferocious insanity.

I wasn't sure I would properly understand the relationship between Knell's psychotic demeanor and his ability to change from human to wolf at will. It was a mystery, much like Buddy's ability to seemingly appear at just the right time, that I knew would be something I would eventually have to figure out.

But it wasn't yet time for that.

It was time to heal and try to figure out what I'd learned about myself first.

On the fifth night, knowing I was now fully healed, that we had at least sorted out those basic lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, not yet being ready for the "love and belonging" layer, Gail went back to her own apartment.

I had wanted, more than once, to invite her to come in to my bedroom, to snuggle up to me, to re-live the love that we had once had.

But I knew that, in the same way I was hurting from my involvement in Knell's death, she was still trying to come to terms with Howard and the betrayed love.

So when she said she would be heading home that fifth night, I gave her a hug, feeling the strength of her heart beating so strong against my chest even without my super senses telling me.

I imagined that, perhaps, in time, we could sort through the confusion, sort through the hurt, and maybe, one day, re-discover the thread of love that had originally brought us together.

But in the meantime, we had a friendship and a bond that I knew made me a stronger person; made me a better human being.

I stood in my bedroom window with the lights off inside and looked down at the street as Gail walked out the front entrance of *The Algonquin* and got into a cab.

As the car drove off into the night, I watched it disappear around the corner but remained looking further down the city street and out over the city. My city.

Our city.

Author's Note: Michael Andrews' Ten Year Journey

THIS NOVEL BEGAN as a five-thousand-word short story that I had written with the intention of submitting it to a themed anthology by Graveside Tales entitled *The Beast Within*.

The theme the editors were looking for was a look at the human behind the beast or the monster. That's exactly what I attempted to look at in my story "This Time Around." I thought it might be interesting to explore a man trying to deal with the side-effect of being a werewolf, and a story that took place only when he was human, and not the monster. So I started it off with him waking up naked in Battery Park and trying to get back home undetected.

The story was not accepted for publication in the anthology, but I was pleased to have written it.

To me, it was a fun little romp, with my main character finding himself side-tracked from his original mission to get back to mid-town by following his inherent desire to use his extraordinary senses and super-human powers to good use. I hadn't even named the main character in the original version of the tale.

It wasn't until I showed the story to my friend and writing mentor Sean Costello that it ever occurred to me there was more to this character, more to this tale.

After finishing his first read, Sean put the manuscript down and said, "Good story. Where's the rest of it?"

"What do you mean?" I replied, "That's the whole thing. It ends there on a humorous note."

"But there's the whole mystery about the other wolf, the unsolved murder, how he ended up with a bullet in his leg."

"Yeah, you see, that part doesn't really matter. It's one of the side-effects of being the monster. Wondering what happened, never really knowing. That's the point. The story is about him as a human, how he has to put up with crap like he found himself in when he woke up."

"No," Sean said, a big grin on his face. "There's more here. This reads more like the start of a novel. I want to know what happens next."

"Nothing happens next."

"Sure it does. He walks into the diner and meets his agent for breakfast and then what happens? What do they talk about? What is the meeting about? What does he do next to find out more about the other wolf? What are some of the other side-effects of being a werewolf? Are there other, more personal side-effects he has to deal with? You have a lot to go on just by answering those questions."

And so I did.

I started to work on converting the story into a novel back in 2006. And, at the time, I was about to become the subject of a recurring "reality show" segment on a writing podcast that I was following called *The Writing Show*.

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With a subtitle of “Information and Inspiration for Writers” the podcast was hosted by Paula B. Paula, whose full last name is Berinstein, was an amazing host and among the first podcasters that I put on my “must listen to” list. She inspired and entertained me, and I was honored to actually start to become a small part of her show.

The reality segment was called “Getting Published” and the series about me was called “Getting Published, with Mark Leslie.” The idea was for Paula to interview a writer in the midst of working on a project. In my case, it was to write *A Canadian Werewolf in New York* during NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) in November of 2006 and then to follow my process of finding an agent and publisher for it.

I failed to complete either the novel or the 50,000-word goal for NaNoWriMo that year. I reached about 30,000 words by the end of November, and, as November ended, I kept chipping away at the novel while working on other projects. 2006 was the year that the anthology *North of Infinity II* which I had edited, came out. And, interestingly, I wouldn’t put another book out until 2009 when I edited *Campus Chills*.

But, even by the year 2010 and Episode 11 of the “Getting Published, with Mark Leslie” series, I still hadn’t finished the werewolf novel. I seemed to have found every excuse in the book *not* to finish it. (You can listen to the episodes via the links from www.writingshow.com – or, to hear my ongoing excuses and reasoning.)

Among my excuses were the writing and publishing of several other books in that time span (4 non-fiction titles published and 5 written, 2 novels written, both published and one of them even published twice by two

different publishers, and 2 anthologies edited and published.

But, despite my excuses and procrastination, I did manage to finish the novel in the spring 2015. And shortly after that, I found an amazing editor for it. Joshua Essoe, a freelance editor, was recommended to me by several trusted colleagues at *Superstars Writing Seminars* hosted by Kevin J. Anderson. Due to the high demand for his expertise there was a waiting list to use him – but Joshua was worth every single penny, and I encourage writers of speculative fiction to check him out at www.joshuaessoe.com.

One of the things that strikes me as amusing about this novel is that it follows the same structure as the very first short story that I had ever published. The story “The Progressive Sidetrack” was about a high school senior whose attempt to ask a girl he has a crush on to that night’s dance are continually thwarted by his duties as Student Council President. Every time he thinks he is going to get his chance, he is blocked or prevented from his goal. My writing instructor at the time said it was reminiscent of the movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, but I had more been thinking about the 1985 Martin Scorsese film *After Hours* which follows an office worker from the end of his shift, through a long series of misadventures that continually prevent him from returning home. In many ways, this novel is just that – the idea of Michael having goals and places to be and then throwing curve balls at him along the way, very much follows the same convention.

There are, within this book (as there are in many of my stories) fun little “Easter eggs” planted there for fun and discovery.

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Among them are two characters who first appeared in a short story I had written called “Distractions” which first appeared in the 2001 *World Fantasy Con* CD-ROM edited by Nancy Kilpatrick. “Distractions” was reprinted in my 2004 book *One Hand Screaming* and also appears in my chapbook *Active Reader: And Other Cautionary Tales from the Book World*. The main character of “Distractions” is Maxwell Bronte, a frustrated and down-on-his luck fantasy writer, desperately trying to overcome writer’s block by taking a serious and disturbing stand against the distractions in his life. I really liked the name Maxwell Bronte and so thought I’d make that the main character in Michael’s series. That short story also mentions motivational speaker Andy Robinson (who inspires Bronte to his extreme distraction-eliminating lifestyle); Robinson appears in this novel as the guest who cancels on Letterman, freeing up the spot for Michael.

Another fun self-reflective element for readers is the alliteration used in Michael’s Maxwell Bronte novels such as *Print of the Predator* and *Roost of the Ruthless Raven*. These are a cheeky nod to my own non-fiction titles *Haunted Hamilton* (2012), *Spooky Sudbury* (2013) and *Creepy Capital* (2016), not to mention the almost direct mock *Tome of Terror* (the Maxwell Bronte novel) referencing my own *Tomes of Terror: Haunted Bookstores and Libraries*.

See, I can have a good time making fun of myself.

It’s all part of the overall process.

Speaking of process, thank YOU for going through the process not only of reading this book, but also for taking the time to read these “behind the book” notes. Writing is fun, but so is sharing some of the more intimate behind

the scenes details. Given your dedication to detail, I'd love if you could rate and review this book on your favorite online review site. I'm not particular about what sort of review you offer, either positive or negative, just that you put one up – reviews really do make a huge difference towards helping a writer find new readers. So, in advance, thanks for that, too.

If you care to comment privately to me in any way, I also love hearing directly from readers. You can reach me via mark@markleslie.ca or look for my author page on Facebook or even follow me on Twitter (@MarkLeslie). Heck, if you sign up for my newsletter at www.markleslie.ca there's even a free read in it for you.

And so, ten years after I had originally begun this novel, I finished it. It's not the longest time I've taken to write a book, but it's right up there. Michael Andrews has been with me for a significant amount of time. He's a friend, he's partly me, and he is a whole lot of fun to write.

As I make revisions to this book, yet again, in 2020, including an entire cover and series rebranding, I know I have returned to and will continue to return to Michael's world to see what he is up to next.

For example, the novella *Stowe Away*, which you'll see a short excerpt from, appears at the very end of this volume.

That one takes place in July 2015, almost a full year after the events in this novel.

The next full-length novel in Michael's universe is called *Fear and Longing in Los Angeles* and takes place in July of 2017.

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If everything goes according to plan, that book should be released in mid-2021.

Let's just hope that with all the planning and in depth work I've done in the summer of 2020 to re-release this novel, re-brand the series, and invest in audio, all read by Scott Overton, it's not another ten years before more stories and novels featuring Michael Andrews see the light of day.

Or the light of the moon, as it were.

Mark Leslie

July 2020

Acknowledgements

I'D LIKE TO start by thanking Matt Hulls, editor of the *Graveside Tales* anthology that was the original short story that evolved into this novel was inspired from.

Thanks also to Sean Costello, a brilliant horror and thriller writer I have looked up to since first discovering his Pocket Books novel *Eden's Eyes*, back in 1989. Sean, your friendship and mentorship has meant a lot to me from the very early days, to today, as we have collaborated together. But, ultimately, for the purpose of this book, I'm grateful for the time you first read the short story "This Time Around" and asked that wonderful fateful question: "So what happens next?" This book wouldn't have happened without that.

I would also like to thank Paula B (Paula Berinstein) host of *The Writing Show Podcast*, who was there at the beginning of this novel's journey, documenting the process of my very first attempts to get the novel written during the GETTING PUBLISHED WITH MARK LESLIE "reality show" episodes of The Writing Show Podcast. Thank you, Paula, for inspiring me and so many other writers over the years.

Mark Leslie

Thanks also to Mick Halpin, who, like me, was a fan of The Writing Show Podcast with Paula B, and became an active participant in the entire process, poking and prodding and encouraging me along the way as well as providing invaluable feedback on the story itself. Thank you, Mick, for being along for the ride from the beginning.

Thank you to Jan Ehrlich, who agreed to read an early and incomplete version in order to help ensure I got the feeling and essence of Manhattan correct, but then fell in love with the story about Michael and Gail and inspired me to finish the novel because she was sitting on the edge of her seat in anticipation. Jan, you have no idea how incredibly important knowing you needed to see more of the story was to me during this process.

Thank you to Dennis Hamill who took time out not only to respond to a fan email from me, but also responding to my request for some information about Battery Park in the early morning hours. The thoughtful and insightful note I received back included some extremely helpful suggestions about how to see a particular setting not through my own eyes, but through the eyes of my character. Dennis is the one who suggested that I take a walk with my character and listen to how they describe the things around them. This is a valuable exercise that I use all the time.

A tip of the hat and grateful appreciation to Joshua Essoe, editor, who did an absolutely amazing job of scouring through the manuscript, helping me tweak not only the words, but the depths of character and the finer

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moments. If this novel is at all better in its current format from the original version, it's due to the calm and guiding hand of Joshua. If this version is worse, then that is due solely to the slip of my own hand in the post-edit work. I must also admit that, in his thorough and detailed notes back to me, Joshua made some excellent and insightful suggestions, some of which I purposely decided to abandon, not because they weren't excellent, but because they conflicted with my own perspective. I spent many months belaboring the ideas he set forth, and, only after careful consideration did I abandon a few of them in favor of keeping the novel closer to my original vision. But I can tell you that Joshua's notes did provide fruit for some potential scenarios that I will unroll in the continuing adventures of Michael Andrews.

And, last, by certainly not least, thank you to Liz Anderson, not only my first reader, but the first person who also hears the characters, the moments, the thoughts even before they are committed to paper or before I even know they will be part of a story. Being able to share my deepest thoughts with her has been and continues to be priceless, and is the favorite part of any day. The fact that, during the completion of the final version of this manuscript, Liz and I got to experience so many of the neighborhoods and areas of New York where Michael Andrews wandered through the course of this novel, is something I shall always hold dear. New York might be Michael and Gail's city in this book, but in my heart it is our city, my Love.

Sneak Peek of Next Book: Stowe Away (Novella)

On the following pages is a sneak peek of Book 1.5 in the *Canadian Werewolf Series* which takes place a year after the events in *A Canadian Werewolf in New York*

This excerpt is taken from the second chapter of the novella.

Friday July 31, 2015

11:52 AM

AS THE TRAIN left the Bronx northward on the bridge over Pelham Bay, I peered out the window on my right. I got a glimpse of the most rural landscape I had seen in several years. If I'd been looking in the opposite direction, I would have still seen the signs of the city, urban landscape and tall buildings jutting upwards.

New York has plenty of green spaces and beautiful landscapes. But there was a greater sense of an open landscape here that I reveled in as we began the journey out of the city and the rural landscape of New York State began to reveal itself. Prior to moving to Manhattan more than ten years ago, I'd lived in a small town in Ontario, Canada. My back yard had been wilderness. And, as the greener, more rural landscape rolled past, I felt an odd sense of comfort, despite the anxiety that compelled me to be on this trip.

I had to get to Gail. She needed a friend now more than ever.

A flight to Burlington, Vermont, would have been about an hour. But I couldn't do that. I became a permanent resident of the US more than six years ago and am a fully-fledged dual US and Canadian citizen. But I had let my passports expire, and, living in a city with a world-class public transit system and more taxis than you can shake a stick at, I had never bothered to get a driver's licence for the State of New York. I couldn't even imagine trying to learn how to drive in a big city like that. I hadn't been much of a driver before, either, apart from the occasional tractor, quad or snow machine in the rural north.

With a quick call to Mack, my literary agent, I'm sure there would have been a way to fly, even with an expired ID. But I was still behind on my latest deadline, and wasn't about to reach out to him and provoke his wrath.

So I purchased the train ticket.

The Vermonter train left Pennsylvania Station at 11:30 a.m. and performed nineteen stops on its way to Essex, Vermont, in just under nine hours. From there, I'd take a transfer to an Amtrak bound for Burlington, where Gail's uncle was in the hospital.

The only clincher in this plan was the fact that the train arrived in Essex Junction at 8:18 p.m. And, according to a quick Google search, sunset in that county in Vermont would take place at 8:17 p.m. during a full moon. Which meant my transformation into wolf form would be happening as we pulled into our last stop. And I had no plan for how to handle that.

So, I did what I often do. I acted first, determined that I would figure something out along the way.

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It's how I ended up in New York, after all. Hitchhiking into the city with a dream of fulfilling my dream of being a writer.

Yep, I often acted the way that I wrote. A man with a basic plan or idea; a rough outline, and the belief that I'd figure it out somewhere along the way.

It seemed to work out okay for my novels.

And, so far, it served me well on the life journey.

So I wasn't as nervous as I likely should have been.

After all, I had eight hours to figure it all out.

As I returned to gazing out the window at the landscape, I kept experiencing fleeting memories of the night before as experienced by the wolf-part of my mind.

Running through the underbrush of the forest-laden hills of Central Park, and the accompanying sense of pure unadulterated joy.

The satisfaction of quenching a deep thirst by lapping at the cool water at the edge of a lake.

Pausing to sniff the air, aware of the nearby sound of a human shuffling slowly down a trail just a few yards away, and, at the same time, the wail of a siren echoing from somewhere behind the safety of the park.

Clips and short memories of various moments are pretty typical of most of my nights as a wolf. I have often wondered if my wolf form has visions of the things I have done during the previous day, or any idea that it has another form as a human.

The retrospective clips of the night before were interspersed with flashes of the memory of Gail's cool-green eyes staring back into mine on the night of our first date,

of the intensity of her passion in those same eyes when we were in the clutches of making love.

Similar to the fleeting glimpses of my experiences as a wolf, those special memories of moments with Gail were distant, and further muted over time.

Both were similar in their almost dream-like existence.

Before leaving, I had tried to call Gail several times. It kept going straight to her voice mail, which suggested that her phone was still dead. I left a couple of messages. One to let her know I got her message and was planning on coming to be with her. A second one to let her know I had booked a train ticket and was on my way up there.

I hadn't bothered leaving any other messages before rushing to the train station. I instinctively reached down to pat my pocket for my mobile phone, thinking I should try to reach out and call Gail, then remembered I had decided to leave it at home. I don't like having things on me that I could easily lose track of when in wolf form. All I had with me was a backpack filled with a few changes of clothes, minimal toiletries, and a thin wallet with some cash and the single credit card I had used to purchase the train ticket online with.

As the countryside became more rural outside the train window, I was reminded of the encroaching deadline to figure out a proper plan on what I was going to do when the clock struck "moon-rise" and I began to turn into the proverbial pumpkin.

I needed to figure out a plan.

END OF SNEAK PEEK

About the Author



MARK LESLIE is a writer, editor and bookseller who was born and grew up in Sudbury, Ontario, spent many years in Ottawa and Hamilton, Ontario and currently lives in Waterloo, Ontario.

When he's not writing, Mark attaches "Lefebvre" back onto his name and works as a writing and publishing coach and consultant. As Director of Self-Publishing and Author Relations for Rakuten Kobo between 2011 and 2017, Mark established Kobo Writing Life which represents between 10 and 18% of Kobo's weekly unit sales, larger than any of the major publishers.

A bookselling veteran for more than twenty years, Mark has worked at virtually every type of bookstore, has sat on the Board of Directors for BookNet Canada and also been President of the Canadian Booksellers Association. He has given talks across Canada and the United States, in London, Paris and Frankfurt on the bookselling, writing and publishing industry.

Mark can be found online at www.markleslie.ca.

Selected Works

Non-fiction paranormal:

- *Haunted Hamilton: The Ghosts of Dundurn Castle and Other Steeltown Shivers* (2012)
- *Spooky Sudbury: True Tales of the Eerie & Supernatural* (2013) – Co-written with Jenny Jelen
- *Tomes of Terror: Haunted Bookstores and Libraries* (2014)
- *Creepy Capital: Ghost Stories of Ottawa and the National Capital Region* (2016)
- *Haunted Hospitals: Eerie Tales about Hospitals, Sanatoriums and Other Institutions* (2017) – Co-written with Rhonda Parrish
- *Macabre Montreal: Ghostly Tales, Ghastly Events, and Gruesome True Stories* (2018) – Co-written with Shayna Krishnasamy

Fiction:

- *One Hand Screaming* (2004)
- *Evasion* (2014)
- *I, Death* (2016)
- *A Canadian Werewolf in New York* (2016)
- *Nocturnal Screams* (Short Fiction Series) (2017/2018)
- *Stowe Away* (2020)

Editor:

- *North of Infinity II* (2006)
- *Campus Chills* (2009)
- *Tesseract Sixteen: Parnassus Unbound* (2012)
- *Fiction River 23: Editors' Choice* (2017)
- *Fiction River 25: Feel the Fear* (2017)
- *Fiction River 31: Feel the Love* (2019)
- *Fiction River 32: Superstitious* (2019)

