

**BOARDWALK**  
by Olivia Leigh Blacke

**CHAPTER ONE**

An eerie howl pierced the night sending shivers down Elle York's spine. The heart-wrenching cry of a wolf wouldn't have been uncommon in the frozen forests of Maine or the wild expanses of Yellowstone National Park, but it was spectacularly out of place just blocks from Atlantic City's famous boardwalk. It was October and tourist season was over for the year. The midway was closed, but the casinos were open all night and busy even though the last Senior Citizen discount bus tours had left hours ago.

But Elle wasn't wandering around Southern New Jersey hoping to win twenty bucks in the slot machines or take advantage of the \$9.95 all-you-can-eat buffets. She didn't care about the Wayne Newton impersonators, the twenty-four hour karaoke bar, or powdered sugar-covered elephant ears, although the white patches on her black turtleneck told a different story. Instead of enjoying Atlantic City, she was there hunting werewolves.

Elle York was no coward. In her line of business, she couldn't afford to be afraid to rush headlong into the dark chasing after slimy, fanged monsters. However, of the things that did scare her, werewolves topped the list, just after black widow spiders, and yet, here she was, looking for trouble. Part of her hoped she wouldn't find any, but the sensible voice in the back of her head and the echoing howl told her this wasn't going to be her lucky night.

"You hear that?" she whispered into the darkness.

A few inches away, Tyrone Jackson froze with his enormous hand wrapped around her sleeve. His skin gleamed in the light of the full moon, darker than the surrounding night. “Of course I heard that, Red,” he hissed, “I’m not deaf.”

He was in a foul mood, and it was getting on her nerves. When he and his identical twin Dwayne, collectively known as the Jersey brothers, had shown up at her apartment that afternoon, he’d been even more sullen than usual. He’d barely even said hello and let Dwayne do all the talking. Tyrone was never a chatterbox, but it wasn’t like him to defer to anyone, especially not to his slightly younger brother.

Dwayne and Tyrone were an enigma. She’d met them last summer but still hadn’t managed to figure them out. Whenever they needed her help, they appeared out of nowhere and left just as quickly once the action was over. So when they were waiting on her doorstep when she came home, she hadn’t hesitated even though helping them meant facing the Weres. After all, they had saved her life.

The Jersey brothers made a good living providing physical security for the wealthy and recognizable, and they were well-suited for the task. At six foot five, they loomed over Elle even though she was usually the tallest woman in the room. They were two hundred seventy pounds of big, black muscle apiece and had an astonishing bevy of firepower at their disposal. Their towering physique and outrageous arsenal was a little excessive for guarding captains of industry, but came in handy when going up against any *unnatural* creatures and other assorted hairy scaries.

Like Elle, they were part-time monster hunters. While she relied on dumb luck and dusty old books she’d long ago converted into ones and zeros and uploaded to her electronic database, the Jerseys used brute force to fight the things that bumped around the darkness. Maybe it was

from their time with the Marines, but they didn't just stalk supernatural creatures, they stormed their hideouts and took no prisoners. Even when Tyrone was in a foul mood, he was one of the good guys.

But his sullen attitude was contagious, and she wasn't going to put up with it all weekend. "I don't know who peed in your Wheaties, T, but don't take it out on me," she growled, yanking her arm away from him.

"Try talking a little louder, Red," he replied, his voice a harsh whisper, "I think there's a werewolf in Georgia that didn't hear you."

As if in response, another howl split the night. This one was closer, maybe three blocks away. Either it was moving fast, or there was more than one of them. She was betting on the latter. Weres, like their wild cousins, hunted in packs.

For once, Elle kept her mouth shut. This wasn't a good time to pick a fight with Tyrone. Before she figured out if they should head towards the first wolf or the second, he made the decision for them. He tapped her shoulder and pointed towards the closer sound.

They rose into a crouch, heads peering over the poorly maintained hedge they'd been hiding behind, and were startled by the bleep of a siren and a flood of blinding light. Both of them jumped. They'd been listening so intently to the howls that neither of them had noticed the police cruiser creeping up behind them. "What are you two up to?" asked the uniformed man in the passenger seat.

"Just out for a stroll, officer," Elle replied sweetly.

"Behind the bushes?" he asked gruffly. Her innocent voice wasn't working on him.

"You okay, ma'am?"

For a moment, she wondered if he would have sounded so concerned if she'd been a black woman slinking around a crime-addled neighborhood with a white man instead of the other way around. "Never better."

"Then step over here, both of you," he ordered, "and show me some I.D." Elle and Tyrone reached gingerly into their pockets, pulling out their wallets. The officer stepped out of the patrol car with his hand on his gun, watching Tyrone intently.

The cop hardly noticed her, which was a new experience for Elle. She was tall, five foot ten in bare feet, with long, straight hair the color of copper pennies and bright green eyes. She certainly wasn't used to guys ignoring her. If it hadn't been to her advantage, she might have felt insulted. But since she was carrying an unregistered .9mm loaded with silver bullets concealed in her pocket and a three-foot long knife blade strapped to her back under her jacket, she was glad he wasn't paying any attention to her.

"We're private investigators," she said, flashing her best 'trust me' smile and handing him her laminated credentials. "This is my partner. We're here on a case." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "We've been hired to see if someone's cheating on their significant other while they're away on business." She kept her story intentionally vague.

Beside her, Tyrone just nodded, silently stoic.

"That's funny, because Mrs. Johnson, whose house you're apparently staking out, was widowed four years ago. Ever since Mr. Johnson went to the big Bingo parlor in the sky, she's called us to check on every prowler, loiterer and shifty-looking individual on Silver Street."

"Silver Street?" Tyrone broke in. "Damn, Red. I told you this wasn't Newbury. This is the absolute last time I let a girl navigate." He shrugged his massive shoulders towards the cop. "Women. Can you believe it?"

Apparently, he didn't. "Get out of here, both of you. And if I find you lurking around Newbury or any other street in my city tonight, I'll haul you both in for trespassing. Capeshe?"

"Yeah, sure," Tyrone replied gruffly. "And so I don't have to rely on her sense of direction, could you please point us towards the Tropicana?"

That wasn't the hotel they were staying at, but it seemed to satisfy the patrolman. He pointed towards the casino and rolled into the night. As soon as they were out of sight, Tyrone flipped open his phone. "Hey bro, Johnny Law's on our back. We're heading back towards the boardwalk, then we'll double-back towards you. Okay?" He waited a second then slipped the cell back into his pocket.

"Nice job back there," Elle complimented, trying to thaw the ice between them. "Very charming."

"I can be charming when I want to be."

She snorted derisively. If Tyrone could be charming, she certainly had never seen evidence of it.

"When I want to," he repeated. "Hope you're happy now."

"Happy? It's three a.m. I'm tired, cold and the air out here isn't much better than in the casinos. What is it about that lovely Jersey smell? I'm pretty sure I'm not even supposed to have left the state," Elle grumbled.

"Relax already. You're not under investigation for murder."

"Not exactly," she agreed. She would have been, if the body of the man she'd killed hadn't mysteriously disappeared. However, until the New York City detectives sorted everything out, they were keeping her on a very short leash. "You dragged me all the way out

here and then proceeded to ignore me all day. You're acting like an eight-year-old girl who just got her Pretty Ponies taken away from her. No, I'm not happy."

"It was Dwayne's idea to bring you along," he groused as they walked, intentionally staying two paces in front of her. "Take it out on him."

"What? You didn't think I was up for the job?" Elle's temper flared. She didn't mind someone insulting her appearance or even her intelligence, but anyone questioning her abilities as a monster hunter was going too far.

"So far you haven't been much help. Where's this special trick of yours when we need it?"

"Is that the only reason you invited me? What am I, your bloodhound or something?" Only, it wasn't exactly that she could smell bad guys. It was more like monster radar. When *unnaturals* were in the vicinity, she usually knew about it even if she couldn't see them. It came in handy in her line of business, when it worked, but it was unpredictable and not always reliable, like right now. She was drawing a blank. She could hear werewolves, but she couldn't sense them.

"Not that it's doing us any good tonight." He turned and stopped so quickly, Elle almost ran right into him. "Wouldn't be so bad if I at least knew which side you're on. How do I know you didn't call the local wolf pack ahead of time and warn them that we were coming?"

"You're kidding, right?" she asked in dismay, but the look on his face told her that he wasn't. "Oh my stones, you're not. T, you know that I would never do such a thing. Never! I hate werewolves as much as the next person. More, probably."

"Funny," he replied, whipping around and starting off again so quickly that she was practically jogging to keep up with him. "I thought you had a thing for 'shifters.'"

It took all of Elle's willpower to not reach out and punch him. "You arrogant jerk! Is that what this is all about? Because I turned you down for a shapeshifter?" She was shocked, but more than that, she was hurt.

As far as she was concerned, Tyrone was a friend and a colleague that she happened to have kissed once. Once. When she'd met him, she was seeing a 'shifter, but like most of her relationships, it had ended badly. She'd be just as happy pretending that the whole episode had never happened and here he was throwing it in her face.

"Don't play coy with me, Elle. How am I supposed to trust you when your boyfriend was one of the monsters?"

"He wasn't my boyfriend!" she exploded. Inside the house they were passing, a dog barked and the porch light came on. Their arguing was going to wake the whole neighborhood if they weren't careful.

"Maybe you should keep your voice down," he growled, "before..." He never had a chance to finish his sentence. A dark blur of fur leapt out of the shadows and tackled him, taking the big man to the ground.

## CHAPTER TWO

The snarling fury of bodies tumbled end over end, making it difficult to tell where Tyrone ended and the wolf began. The sounds coming from her friend were almost as unearthly as the beast's, but they were as much from rage as pain. Fur flew in dark tufts and a splash of hot blood came out of the whirling ball of man and beast, landing with a sickening wet sound on Elle's face.

She had her gun aimed at the squirming mass, but couldn't do anything without risking hitting Tyrone, so she took a precious moment to wipe the blood out of her eyes, smearing it across her sleeve. Was it lycanthrope blood? Did it carry the contagion? It was too late to worry about that now. If it was tainted, then the damage was already done, and she was a firm believer about not crying over a little spilt blood.

"Shoot it, damnit!" Tyrone's voice penetrated the cacophony.

"This would be a whole lot easier if you'd both hold still!" she shouted back, trying to make sense of the moving shapes in front of her. In the dark, it was nearly impossible to tell the difference between the blackness of Tyrone's skin and the deep brown of the wolf. She caught a glimpse of cream fur above angry yellow eyes, sighted, and fired.

The gunshot was loud even to ears familiar with the sound. Silver bullets were expensive, a pain to smelt and wildly inaccurate compared to their lead cousins. To make up for their soft, sluggish behavior, she'd packed the cartridges with almost twice the gun powder of a normal bullet. It was a wonder the gun hadn't exploded in her hand.

She caught another glimpse of yellow and fired again. This time she was rewarded with an anguished yelp along with the muzzle flash, and knew that she'd hit it. She had a quick pang of guilt like she'd just struck a puppy with a broken beer bottle, but that thing trying to tear Tyrone to shreds was no puppy. For starters, it was twice as big as a normal wolf. It was almost five feet long and his head came to the middle of her chest. His mangy fur bristled as he crouched for another attack.

Werewolves weren't cute or cuddly. They didn't wag their tails when their masters came home after a long day at work or sleep at the foot of the bed. And they were nothing like the magnificent, misunderstood creatures that Hollywood had created, tortured souls struggling to maintain their humanity despite a primal bloodlust. Only someone who'd never seen the victim of an attack could think that werewolves were anything but pure evil.

The first time Elle had found a body torn to shreds by fangs and claws, it took her a few minutes to realize that what she was staring at had once been human. It was the little details - a class ring, an earlobe, a single Chuck Taylor sneaker stained maroon with blood - that stuck in her head. The boy, a seventeen-year-old high school senior, had never stood a chance. She still remembered the way his teeth reflected her Mustang's headlights, glittering shards of white on the dark pavement. She didn't even recognize her boyfriend, Jack, until her eyes focused on that bloodied shoe. Ever since that day, she'd been hunting werewolves and any other soulless beastie she could find.

Even if they appeared human in the cold light of day, but there was nothing resembling a soul behind those murderous golden eyes. When she did manage to kill one, it didn't revert back to a pale, naked kid. They stayed grotesquely furry, and if not properly dismembered and

burned, they would heal from even the most seemingly fatal wound. Unfortunately, her shot barely grazed him.

The wolf seemed to change his mind about attacking and started backing away, a dark smear dripping down his snarling snout. His ear hung by a few tenuous threads and exposed bone gleamed whitely above his bloodshot eye. The beast took another staggering step backwards and Tyrone, panting breathlessly, reached out a burly arm and grasped the wolf's foreleg. It twisted to snap at him, and Tyrone used the opportunity to plant his knife deep into the Were's bloody muzzle, ripping down through his curled lip.

The wolf was injured, but if he got away, within a month he would be whole again. With a squeal, he retreated backwards, turned and began limping away on three legs. Elle aimed her .9mm and pulled the trigger but nothing happened. She fired again with the same impotent result. The clumsy, homemade silver bullets had jammed, rendering her gun useless.

Elle shoved it into her holster and unsheathed the blade at her back. Lunging, she started to run after the injured wolf, but one glance at her friend froze her in her tracks. Tyrone lay on the cracked sidewalk curled into a fetal position. His skin was slick with the sheen of fresh blood, and from the gashes on his chest, a lot of it was his own.

"What are you waiting for?" his deep voice rasped. "Go after that sonofabitch before it gets away."

Elle dropped to her knees beside Tyrone, peeled back his tattered shirt, and gingerly started exploring his wounds. "Oh hush, you," she replied dismissively. A few of the gashes were deep, but nothing vital looked severed. "You're hurt."

"And you're a pain in my ass, but I don't hold that against you," he grumbled, his eyes glazing from shock and blood loss.

“Get up,” she ordered sternly, offering her hand. “We need to be gone before the cops come back.”

“I think I’m just gonna lay here for a minute and rest.” His tongue sounded thick in his throat.

“You’ll do no such thing. Where’s my big, strong lug when I need him? You’re getting up. Now.” She grabbed his slick shoulder and pulled. She’d have better luck budging a mountain, but she wasn’t giving up without a fight.

“Stubborn bitch,” he growled, sitting up reluctantly.

“I could say the same about you,” she shot back, secretly pleased. If he had enough energy to fight her, then he had enough to walk. He weighed at least twice what she did, and there was no way she could carry him three feet, much less a mile back to their hotel.

“I can’t believe you let it get away.” Leaning against Elle, he slowly made it to his feet. He swayed for a moment before he caught his balance but even so, had to drape his thick arm around her shoulders for support.

“You’re hurt,” she repeated, more compassionate now. “What’d you expect me to do? Leave you here to bleed to death?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, okay then, Big T. You walk on back and I’ll catch up with you after I take care of our little furry friend. And when you fall down dead in an alley between here and the boardwalk and your brother comes after my head with a machete, I’ll tell him not to worry about it because you said it was cool.”

He groaned and staggered forward, unable to put any weight on his right leg. “It’s bad enough when you’re right, but do you have to be such a smartass about it?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“That cinches it, Elle. If I turn furry, you’re going to be my first meal.”

She chuckled. “There you go again, assuming you’d have a chance with me if you were a ’shifter.”

There was an awkward silence as her words hung leaden on the air. In the distance, a police siren rose and fell. *Did I go too far?* she wondered, knowing this wasn’t the best time to pick up their earlier argument, but she’d meant it as a joke. She knew better than anyone that she’d made the wrong decision when she chose the shapeshifter over Tyrone, and for the last two months, not a day had gone by that she hadn’t regretted it.

Finally, Tyrone laughed hoarsely. “Fine. I guess I deserved that. Sorry about what I said earlier. I didn’t mean it.”

“Yes you did, but it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” he replied. “I guess I feel guilty about how I handled the whole thing. If I would have tried a little harder, maybe I could have saved you a lot of pain.”

She grimaced, “Not your fault. There are some lessons a girl’s gotta learn for herself. Maybe I’ll get lucky and the next guy I go out with won’t make Charlie Manson look like Ginger Rodgers.”

“If you play your cards right, I can think of one big, strong brother who wouldn’t mind helping you get over your past mistakes.”

Elle faked a coy grin, “Really? You think Dwayne would be interested in going out with me?”

With his free arm, he reached across and clubbed her in the ribs, letting out a woof of pain as he did so. The gesture had hurt him a lot more than it hurt her. “You’re a damned tease, Ellie Belly, and I’m bleeding too much to fight back.”

She rubbed the sore spot just over her diaphragm. “You call me that again, and bleeding won’t be your only problem. You hear that, big guy? I’ll make what that wolf did to you look like foreplay.”

“There you go, trying to get me all excited,” he said with a groan. “If you can’t give me a break, how about getting me a Band-Aid?”

With his arm locked around her shoulders, his blood seeped through her turtleneck. She was getting more worried with each step, wondering just how far they could make it before he collapsed. There was no way she could even drag him, and as the sirens grew louder, she wondered if maybe the best thing for him was to just wait for the cops to arrive so they could call an ambulance. She’d probably spend the night in jail, but he’d at least get medical attention. “A Band-Aid? No way. It’s the emergency room for you, big guy.”

“No can do. If I’m going to get all growly, it’s not going to be in public. Promise me, Elle,” he said, suddenly serious, “if I’m infected, you gotta kill me. Dwayne would never do it.”

“Don’t worry about Dwayne. The way you’ve bossed your brother around your entire lives, it’s a wonder he hasn’t killed you already.” She paused and kissed him on the cheek. “And enough of this infection nonsense already. You’re too stubborn for that.”

“Seriously, Elle, you gotta promise.”

“You worry too much, T. Anyway, as you pointed out, I like my men big and hairy.” She wiped a blood-drenched dreadlock away from his face, trying not to appear worried. Were his eyes yellower than they had been a minute ago or was she just imagining things?

They stepped off the curb just as an enormous truck squealed around the corner on two tires. It rocked to a halt and Dwayne jumped out of the driver's seat, "Oh my god, what happened?" he asked anxiously.

"I got jumped by a troop of girl scouts. What do you think happened, bro?"

"Shit." Dwayne shook his head and pretended to be unfazed, but Elle knew better. Dwayne only ever cussed when he was under stress, and seeing his twin torn into ribbons counted. "Just get in the damn truck." He helped Elle push him into the passenger seat and buckle him in.

They sped off towards the beach, Dwayne driving like Mario Andretti at a Monster Truck Rally. They pulled up next to the service entrance of the hotel. "I'll take him in the back way and get him up to the room. Go find a parking spot. There's a first-aid kit under the seat. Make sure you bring that upstairs." He dragged Tyrone out of the front seat and looked ready to throw him over his shoulder if need be. "And Elle? Don't scratch my truck."

### CHAPTER THREE

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Tyrone protested. “Just a couple of scratches.”

“Uh-huh,” Elle replied nonchalantly as she cut away the remains of his shirt and dropped the tattered cloth in the hotel sink. She still thought he belonged in a hospital, but if the situation were reversed, she would have refused, too.

Since Dwayne was the only member of the trio not covered in blood, he was off scrounging up bandages and supplies. His meager first-aid kit wasn’t going to cut it. While he was gone, Elle was responsible for getting Tyrone cleaned off and no matter how much he complained that he could do it himself, she almost enjoyed fussing over him.

“I’m not an invalid. I can shower myself,” he protested as she turned on the water.

“Yeah, but it’s always more fun with a friend.” She tested the water. “Get in.”

Reluctantly, he stepped out of his boxer briefs and stepped into the shower. If he was awkward in his bare skin, he didn’t let it show. Elle very carefully didn’t notice since at that moment, there were more pressing concerns than modesty. She twisted her long hair into a bun and pinned it on top of her head. It was stiff with drying blood, but her priority was getting the mess off their skin first.

Trying not to feel embarrassed, she stripped down to her underwear and pushed the curtain back. “Try not to hog all of the hot water,” she said, soaping up her loofah. “Hold still!”

“It tickles,” Tyrone said, twitching as the soap ran into the cuts. She knew from experience that it stung like hell, but he was too proud to admit it. Pink bubbles ran down his back and pooled around their feet. His back had three deep lacerations running diagonally across

his glistening skin but the worst damage was a jagged tear over his shoulder. She tried to keep a detached demeanor, but seeing a person she cared about in pain was worse than being hurt herself, and Elle was no stranger to injuries.

“Turn around,” she urged.

It was a tight squeeze, and there was no way he could maneuver gracefully in the slippery shower while his body was turning into one enormous bruise. As he twisted around, he rubbed up against her. “Oops. Sorry about that, Red,” he said with a crooked grin as he accidentally-on-purpose brushed over her breasts and somehow managed to sneak a hand around to tweak her butt cheeks though the soaked material of her panties.

“Cute,” she replied, trying to ignore his obvious enjoyment of their predicament as she squeezed just a little too much soap on his cuts. He winced but kept his mouth shut. “Okay, T. You’re as clean as you’re going to get. Go towel off. It’s my turn.”

“What, don’t I get to scrub your back?”

“I’m not the one who just lost a wrestling match with a werewolf, remember? Get out and let me finish before Dwayne gets back.” Elle slid past him, unpinned her hair, and let the water brush through it.

Tyrone watched a minute longer than necessary, and then let himself out of the shower. As soon as he was gone, she peeled off her underwear and draped it over the curtain. Ten minutes later, she’d removed as much blood as she could find and her skin was stinging and raw. She turned off the water and felt around for a fresh towel. There were none.

“Hey big guy, hand me a towel, will ya?”

“Sure thing. Got ‘em right here.”

She peeked around the edge of the shower curtain and he was leaning against the far wall, the last clean towel draped over his arm like a maître de. His own tiny hotel towel barely even fit around his massive hips, which revealed enough that he might as well have still been naked. Apparently, he hadn't lost as much blood as she'd feared.

"Oh, grow up," she said, flinging back the curtain. She stepped out onto the slippery floor carefully, ignoring the hungry gleam in his eyes. "If I'd known you were going to make such a big deal out of nothing, I would have showered in my own room." Even as the words left her, she had to admit it was flattering the way he watched the beads of water clinging to her naked body like a man dying of thirst.

"You're such a drama queen, Red," he replied wryly.

"Look who's talking." She took the towel from his arms, quickly dried off, and wrapped it around herself. Her hair dripped down her back, creating small puddles on the floor.

Dwayne knocked once and opened the bathroom door. "Everybody decent?" he asked after the fact. "I got what you asked for."

"Thanks," she replied. "It's about time a man cared about what I wanted for once. It's getting crowded in here. Let's take it out to the other room, shall we?"

There was a plastic bag on the bed. Dwayne reached into it and pulled out a clear bottle of rubbing alcohol and a plastic bottle of spring water with the safety seal removed. She wondered what the priest had thought when a big black man had burst through the cathedral doors in the middle of the night and then proceeded to fill up a Poland Spring bottle with Holy Water from the font. "What do you want first?"

"Put the alcohol away, it's no good on animal bites. Did you get the little butterfly bandages?" He handed them to her, and she sat them next to Tyrone. Rummaging through the

bag, she pulled out a bottle of pink Calamine lotion and a small shaker of sea salt. “Pour out about a third of the Calamine, and then fill it up with holy water. Add a couple big pinches of salt and shake well.”

“Won’t that sting?” Tyrone asked.

“No worse than the soap did,” she lied, tearing open the box of tiny bandages. Rubbing salt in the wounds would hurt like soaking paper cuts in lemon juice, but if sea salt kept the boogey man away, she was going to have to insist. “Sorry, bub, this might hurt a little,” she said softly in Tyrone’s ear as she starting pinning his ripped flesh back together with the butterflies. He didn’t protest or flinch, not even when she began liberally smearing the sickly sweet smelling pink goo into the wounds.

“Here, let me help with that,” Dwayne said, reaching for the mixture.

“No!” Tyrone and Elle replied simultaneously, flinching out of reach as she cradled the bottle tightly against her body, smearing pink on her white towel.

“Oh come on now, it’s not like she’s lubing you up with baby oil, bro. What’s the big deal?”

Elle couldn’t believe she had to spell it out to him. Dwayne had been in this business long enough to know better, but he hadn’t been there tonight. He hadn’t seen the completely alien look in the wolf’s eyes. “You can’t help because you’re the only one who wasn’t exposed tonight, okay? Now drop it.”

He did. If he wanted to pretend that there wasn’t a chance that both Elle and his twin brother could turn into soulless creatures in the next few hours, there was nothing she could do about that. But she couldn’t afford such illusions. No one knew for certain why one person could get mauled by a werewolf and walk away clean while another could touch a drop of lyc

blood and go all furry. She wasn't too worried about herself, having only gotten splashed, but Tyrone had been bitten and slashed. There was wolf blood inside of his cuts, mixing with his own. If she'd been a betting woman, she would have cashed in her chips and walked away.

*There's a chance, she told herself, no matter how slim, that he's not infected.* She held onto that tiny grain of hope as she continued to rub the mixture on Tyrone's wounds. If her mouth hadn't felt so dry, she would have whistled just to break the tension. *How long before we know for sure? An hour? A day? Or do we have to wait a whole month?* What she wouldn't give for a werewolf vaccine right about now.

"All done," she announced, faking a cheery grin, "but you look like you just fell into a vat of Pepto-Bismol." Under better circumstances, it would have been comical, the bright pink finger-painting on his glossy black skin. "Wish I had my camera on me."

"Great, just what I need, a picture of me looking like the Creature from the Pink Lagoon popping up on your MySpace page," he grumbled good-naturedly. All things considered, he was in the best mood she'd seen him in all night, except for maybe when she stepped out of the steamy shower completely bare except for scars, tattoos and electric blue toenail polish. "Then again, if you'll hand me my phone and your towel..."

"In your dreams, buddy." She popped open the mini bar and surveyed the contents. Six tiny bottles stared back at her. "Catch," she said, tossing the gold tequila shots to Dwayne. He was unusually somber. As he unscrewed the lid of the first bottle and drained it back, she wondered if she'd ever seen him so grim.

Elle carried the other bottles to the bar. She emptied two each into the cheap glasses on the sink, and then filled them up to the brim with Holy Water. It was the mystical equivalent of a cootie shot and probably just as effective, but it never hurt to try. "Pick your poison," she told

Tyrone, holding them out like an offering. He took the dark amber Scotch, leaving her with the watered-down vodka.

Elle wasn't much of a drinker. She was good for a couple of beers or one jumbo margarita at Dallas BBQ, but she drained her glass in two long gulps. It burned going down, and she tried to convince herself that it was the vodka that stung so badly, not the Holy Water. She flipped her room key at Dwayne. "Would you be a dear?" she asked.

As soon as Dwayne was gone, Tyrone cleared his throat. "Look, Elle, I don't want to sound fatalistic, but if this is my last night as a human, I can think of only one thing I ..."

"Hush," she interrupted, crossing the room quickly.

"Just let me finish," he pleaded.

"No, shut up. I think I heard something," she peeked between the heavy hotel curtains and looked out into the parking lot. Three stories below, a row of cars sat silently beneath yellow halogen lamps. Scrawny bushes separated the lot from the street, deserted at this time of the morning.

"What do you see?" Tyrone asked. He'd come up behind her and put his hands against the glass on either side of her shoulders, his chin resting on her shoulder.

"Nothing...wait." One of the shadows moved. If on cue, two shaggy wolves stepped into view. They peered up at her with glowing yellow eyes, their lips curled back in a snarl. One threw his enormous furry head back and howled, sending shivers down her spine. Then as suddenly as they'd appeared, they turned in unison and disappeared into the darkness.

"Well, at least we won't have to worry about going looking for them," Tyrone said, but Elle knew what he was really worried about, because she was thinking the same thing. *How did*

*they know we were here? Did they follow our scent, or is there something else, something stronger that called them?*

“What are you two up to?” Dwayne asked, having emptied Elle’s mini-bar and let himself back inside.

“Nothing,” Elle replied hastily, letting the curtains fall back in to place as she ducked out of the circle of Tyrone’s arms. “Just admiring the full moon.” She couldn’t help herself.

Dwayne shook his head, no sign of his jolly sense of humor returning anytime soon. “Real funny, York.” He snatched her glass away and refilled it, splitting the rest of the Holy Water between her and his brother’s drinks.

Elle tried to sip her drink, but the cheap vodka tasted like fermented dishwater. Finally, she gave up and downed it. “Bottom’s up!” she declared, setting the empty glass on the sink.

“If you only knew how long I’ve wanted to hear that...” Tyrone’s voice trailed off as he hid his grin behind his drink.

Elle rolled her eyes in an exaggerated gesture. “Go get some sleep, you big pink lug.” Maybe it was the alcohol, but her adrenaline had finally stopped pumping and a wave of exhaustion had started pulling her under. She couldn’t suppress her yawns any longer. “Think I’m gonna go catch a few winks myself.”

Dwayne followed her to the hall and pulled the door closed behind himself. “Doll, I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s five in the morning. The sun will be up soon. There’s not a lot we can do now, but the moon will still be full tomorrow night. We’ll have another chance then.”

“That’s not what I mean,” he started.

“I know, but we’ve done all we can. Now we just sit back and see if our karma balances out or not.”

He shook his head, “There’s got to be something I can do.”

“Sure there is,” she answered, standing up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, clutching her towel in a death grip when it started to slip. “Sleep with one eye open, and if you hear any funny sounds coming from my room, come loaded for bear.”

“I can’t shoot you.”

“Sure you could, Dwayne. If I turn into one of them, then I’m not me anymore. Don’t forget that. Now good night. I’m gonna go lay down before I fall over.” Elle let herself into her room, convinced that she wouldn’t be able to sleep.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The next thing Elle knew, sunlight was flooding into her open curtains and someone was pounding at her door.

She climbed out of bed realizing at the last minute that the towel she'd fallen asleep in was now hopelessly tangled in her sheets. "Hold on!" she growled grumpily, rummaging through her suitcase until she pulled on a pair of baggy jeans and a tight tee-shirt that was positively obscene without a bra. The pounding continued. "I'm coming already!" She opened the door barefoot.

Two uniformed officers stood in the hall. One was short enough that she could see the bald patch on the back of his head, and the other was the patrol cop from the previous night. "Ms. York? Can we come in?" the balding one asked.

"It's Dr. York, and do you have a warrant?"

"Fine. We'll talk in the hall then. Where's your friend?"

"Still asleep, if your banging on the door didn't wake him. What time is it?" she asked, pushing her hair behind her ears. She knew it was a frightful mess. She shouldn't have gone to bed while it was still wet.

"Eight a.m."

Elle yawned pointedly, wondering what the patrol man was still doing on shift. "And you're here, why?"

"Because soon after I left you last night, there were reports of a fight and gunshots in the vicinity. What do you know about that?"

“Nothing, officer. You asked us to leave, and we did. Came back here, and went to sleep. I’d love to be able to help, but I didn’t hear a thing.” She didn’t bother faking a smile. She was too tired.

“Then I guess we should talk to your friend and see what he has to say.”

“Whatever,” she shrugged. “I’ll go get him.” She went back into her room, letting the door slam behind her. She knocked on the adjoining door and waited. A few minutes later a bleary-eyed Dwayne answered.

“Do I get to shoot you now?” he asked.

“Nope. Better. You’re T.”

Although Elle had an uncanny knack for telling the brothers apart, most people couldn’t tell the difference. When they wanted to, they looked, sounded and acted like the same person well enough they could fool their own mother. He cocked his head to the side, “Why for?”

“Because there are two A.C. cops at my door that want to talk to him and considering he looks like a cotton candy bruise right now, it would probably be easier for you to put on your best scowl and be your brother for three minutes than to explain.”

“Sure. Whatever you say, boss. What am I supposed to tell them?”

“Tell them we got ambushed by a werewolf. What do you think?”

Dwayne grimaced, “Anyone ever tell you that you’re a grumpypuss when you don’t get enough sleep?”

“Sure, once. But after he ate his meals through a straw for the next six weeks, he changed his tune,” she grinned sweetly.

“It’s a good thing you’re cute, doll.” He patted her on her rear end as he squeezed past her. “Hmm, it could be fun being Tyrone.” Opening the door, he did his best to look menacing,

which wasn't difficult for a man that filled a door frame and could bench press a Civic. "What do you want?"

"We just have a couple of questions for you," the shorter cop stated.

He crossed his thick arms across his broad chest. "Then ask."

"What time did you get back to your hotel last night?" the officer asked.

"Don't know. Wasn't wearing a watch."

"Did you hear anything unusual leaving Silver Street?"

"Nope."

"So you don't know whose blood was splattered on the sidewalk just half a block from where I left you?"

To his credit, Dwayne didn't blink. "Nope."

The balding officer glanced at his partner, obviously resigned that he was getting nothing out of either of them. "Thank you both for your time, sorry we bothered you." He held his card out to Dwayne, who refused to take it. After letting it hang in the air a moment, he passed it to Elle instead. "If we have any further questions, we'll be back."

Instead of replying, Dwayne slammed the door. "Sometimes I forget how fun it is being T," he said, breaking out into a sweet grin.

"You're so good at that, it's spooky," she admitted.

"Yeah I know. Come on, let's go wake up the real T and go get some breakfast. Lying to cops makes me hungry."

Back in the Jersey brothers' room, Elle crawled up on the bed where Tyrone lay sound asleep in sheets speckled pink with dried blood and flaking Calamine lotion. Most people looked

helpless and innocent when deep in dreamland, but not Tyrone. Instead, he looked like a slumbering giant after a long night of feasting on villagers and drinking beer by the barrel.

Elle knew better than to tease a hibernating bear, but she couldn't help herself. "Wakey, wakey," she said softly, tickling his nose.

Without bothering to open his eyes, Tyrone made a warning noise in the back of his throat. "There had better be an apocalypse brewing or a beautiful chick in my bed. Otherwise, I'm going to be one unhappy camper." He cracked one eyelid. "Oh, it's just you. So where's the apocalypse?"

Instead of pretending to be miffed by the insult, Elle peeled back his lips and ran a finger over his teeth.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he mumbled awkwardly as she continued to probe his mouth.

"Checking for fangs. All clear, but someone could really use a breath mint. How do you feel?" she sat back on her heels.

"Like I just got the shit beat out of me by a werewolf. How do you think I feel?" He sat up, the rumpled sheet bunching up around his waist. His chest was covered in deep scratches and bright pink flakes where the lotion had dried to the cuts and bandages. The only way he could look more pathetic was if he had one of those cones that dogs wore home from the vet. "Hey, I like your shirt. You should wear that more often."

Elle grimaced self-consciously. She hadn't bothered to put on a bra after the cops left. "At least you're still human. Get your butt out of bed, shower that mess off, and I'll change your bandages. Then, breakfast."

Dwayne was already on the phone ordering enough room service for a regiment. Omelets. Pancakes. Sausages. Bacon. Orange juice. He covered the receiver with his hand.

“Anything else? A nice juicy raw steak for dog-boy maybe?”

“Coffee!” Elle and Tyrone chimed in unison.

“Jinx!” Elle sang, “You owe me a coke.”

Tyrone grabbed her shoulders, flipped her onto her back, and rolled over, pinning her into the bed. Elle squealed, a high girly sound that he’d never heard her make before, and struggled against him, but it was no use. The best she could manage was a hard pinch on his hand as he encircled her wrists. “It’s a good thing I’m sore, Red, or I’d have to spank you.”

She looked up at him with glittering green eyes. “Now who’s the tease? Get off me before I have to teach you a lesson. And don’t forget to brush your teeth.”

He lowered his face slowly until his nose brushed hers, noticing that she wasn’t struggling anymore. “Watch yourself, girl.”

Dwayne cleared his throat nosily. “Do I need to give you two some privacy?”

“No!” Elle said just as Tyrone replied, “Yes.” He relaxed his grip, and Elle managed to push him away. He climbed off the bed reluctantly, flashing his bare ass. “Wanna join me in the shower?” In response, she threw a pillow at him and sat back to wait for breakfast to arrive.

They had a whole day to kill, but as soon as the last slice of bacon disappeared, the Jerseys left Elle alone to round up the supplies they thought they might need. Part of Elle was disappointed that once again, they’d left her out of the planning phase, but they knew as well as she did that her idea of a plan was to rush in swinging and hope for the best. She used the time to take apart her gun, remove the jammed bullet, clean it and put it back together with meticulous care.

Even that chore wasn't enough to take her mind off the one thought that kept bouncing around her head like a pinball. What would happen once the moon rose, thick and swollen? Would Tyrone turn? Would she? She didn't feel any different. Grumpier, maybe, but that could be from lack of sleep. She didn't have an urge to chase her tail or scratch for fleas. She wasn't hungry for human flesh, or at least not as food.

When she couldn't stand to be alone with her thoughts for another second, she headed downstairs into the casino. At first, the cacophony was so loud she couldn't even hear herself think, which was strangely peaceful. But an hour later, the bells, shrieks, and the sound of nickels dropping was starting to give her a migraine. She trudged upstairs, fifteen dollars poorer, and curled up on the covers to take a nap.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Elle woke slowly, groggily aware that someone was in the room with her. She made a small noise pretending she was still asleep, murmuring to herself and rolled over, sticking her arm under her pillow. Once her hand curled around the handle of her knife, she let her eyes open just a slit. The shades were drawn, but in the darkness of the room, a shadow moved. She cursed herself for not changing rooms after the wolves tracked them back to the hotel last night. Were they here now, sniffing through her suitcase?

She didn't feel anything unusual, certainly not the spine-tingling sensation she got when *unnaturals* were near. Elle tensed her legs, ready to leap out of bed. Her gun was buried under a bundle of dirty clothes on the floor, a few feet away. She could reach it if she tried, but even if a bullet didn't puncture the paper-thin walls and bury itself in some kid watching cartoons while his parents gambled his college fund away downstairs, the noise was guaranteed to bring hotel security running.

The knife it was, then.

The shadow moved into the bathroom and began rummaging through her toiletries bag. Quietly, she slipped out from underneath the covers, not caring that she was clad in nothing but boy-shorts. Her bare feet hit the floor and she was up, plastered against the wall, without as much as a squeaky spring.

With the knife pressed against her leg, she crept forward silently, her toes flexing into the tightly woven carpet. She couldn't see the intruder anymore, but she could hear him. He'd

decided there was nothing interesting about her toothbrush and had removed the toilet tank lid. *What's he looking for?* she wondered, crouched low against the door.

She took a deep breath and flung herself into the bathroom, switching on the light with one hand as she brought her knife up in the other. The sudden wash of light and her animalistic cry caught the big man by surprise as he whipped around and stumbled backwards. The side of her knife slammed into the porcelain shield he held up in front of his face. He thrust the heavy lid at her out of habit, knocking her against the sink, the back of her thighs ramming into the countertop.

“Good, you’re awake,” he said through clenched teeth. He put the tank lid back into place gingerly.

“Dwayne Jackson, didn’t anyone ever teach you to knock?” Elle asked, rubbing the back of her legs. She could feel the bruises start to form under her skin. She laid the knife on the counter and massaged the angry knuckles of her hand.

Dwayne blushed and turned away. “You looked so peaceful, I thought it would be a shame to wake you,” he said, pretending to be fascinated by the light fixture.

“Uh-huh,” she said with little certainty. “And here I was, thinking the door was locked. What are you looking for?” She cocked her head to one side.

He shrugged, making his short dreadlocks bounce. “Your gun. T told me it jammed last night. I was going to check it out.” He still refused to make eye contact.

“So you broke into my room?” She trusted Dwayne, but he was acting strange, too strange, and his refusal to look at her made her feel more naked than if he were staring. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Look, don’t take this the wrong way, doll, but Tyrone made a comment about how it was a good thing I was with him today, in case he did get all toothy, and it got me thinking that you were here all alone. You got lyc blood all over you last night, too and you were even grumpier than usual this morning.”

“Because you’re such a bowl of Care Bears after three hours’ sleep?”

He shook his head, concentrating intensely on his fingernails. “Don’t take it personally.”

“Personally? You thought you’d come in here and make sure I didn’t have any weapons handy in case I woke up with a severe case of the growlies?”

Dwayne smiled sheepishly, but the jolly expression didn’t reach his eyes. “Something like that.”

She thought about it for a moment. “Smart.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I trust you. I just don’t trust *them*.”

“Can’t blame you. The gun’s in the bedroom. Feel free to hold onto it for a while, but I’m keeping the knife.”

“Fair enough, but I already checked the bedroom.”

“Men,” she sighed, walking out of the bathroom. She didn’t usually feel self-conscious walking around in skin, but Dwayne was making her nervous. More for his comfort than her own, she stooped down and grabbed a dirty shirt off the top of the pile and slipped it on. She kicked aside the rest of the clothes, revealing the gun, and curled up on a chair with her feet tucked behind her. “You walked right past it and never noticed.”

He scooped up the gun, checked to make sure there were no bullets in the chamber and the safety was on, and tucked it into the back of his pants, gangster-style. “Please, Elle. I’ve been in your apartment. Do you even own a laundry basket?”

“First you break into my room, then you try to smash my hand, and now you’re calling me a slob?”

Dwayne grinned, the humor finally returning to his face. “Yeah, I guess I am. I’m starting to figure out what my crazy brother sees in you. Just do me a favor, will ya?”

She felt a little insulted. What did he mean he was *starting* to see something about her? She was no supermodel, but even with a nasty set of scars bisecting one side of her face, she was a solid eight-point-five at least. And no man had ever had cause to complain about her figure, other than her shoulders were a little too broad to look good in a strappy dress. Best of all, she wasn’t some wilting Fifth Avenue Muffy. If she were a lesbian, she’d date herself. Maybe she’d taken her just-one-of-the-boys act too far if Dwayne had never noticed her as a woman before now. “Anything,” she replied, meaning it, “just name it.”

“Let him down easy, Elle.”

“Who? T? Dwayne, I have no intention of hurting your brother.”

He shrugged, his massive shoulders taxing the material of his tight shirt. “Be that as it may…” his voice trailed off. “Since you’re up, we might as well go get dinner. It’ll be dark soon and we’re going to have a busy night.”

“Good enough.” She was so happy that he’d changed the subject she would have agreed to jump off the Eifel tower into a shark tank. “Gimme five.”

“Make it ten. If Tyrone sees you dressed like that, we’re going to have to wait until next full moon to catch these bastards.”

“Oh, just get out of my room!” She bounced up and pushed the big man towards the door. Fifteen minutes later, she’d given up trying to dry her long red hair with the tiny dryer in the bathroom and finally braided it, still damp. She’d put on dark cargo pants, a black long-sleeved

tee-shirt and a dark gray hoodie since the only jacket she'd brought was stiff with blood. It was a mild night, and she doubted she'd need much warmth. She cinched up her boots, strapped the knife under her sleeve, and knocked on the Jersey brothers' door.

Dwayne opened the door a crack and eyed her outfit suspiciously. "Better," he decided before letting her in.

"So where're we going?"

Tyrone looked her up and down and suddenly, Elle didn't feel like she was wearing enough, or anything at all for that matter. "Buffet next door. I'm starving."

"Oh no you don't. You two drag me down to A.C. for the weekend, put me up in a second-rate hotel, and then try to cheap out on dinner? I don't think so. I'm in the mood for something expensive, and you're treating."

"The girl drives a hard bargain," Dwayne agreed. "Let's go, but remember, the sun sets in forty-five minutes, so there better not be a line."

Of course, there was a line, but Tyrone smiled at the maître de and twenty dollars later, they were seated. "Okay boys," Elle asked over appetizers, "What's the plan?"

"Nothing for you to worry your sweet head about," Dwayne said between mouthfuls of his crab cake. "All you gotta do is sit there and look pretty. Us big strong men will do the rest."

She almost snorted Diet Coke out her nose. "Excuse me? In that case, tell me again why I'm spending a whole stinkin' weekend in New Jersey with you two clowns?"

Tyrone covered her hand in his own. Next to him, she felt so pale and tiny, especially since the hint of the tan she'd gotten over the summer had long since faded. "Don't look so forlorn, Red. You have a very important role in tonight's festivities. You're the bait."

“Well now I feel better,” she pouted. If it had been her plan, she would have thought it was brilliant, but when someone else told her that she was the tasty cheesy nugget in the mousetrap, she just felt used. “Want me to go back to the room and change into my look-at-me-I’m-so-helpless sundress, or would you prefer the schoolgirl outfit?”

“With or without knee socks?” Tyrone asked with a gleam in his eyes.

She glared at him and made a mental note to buy some knee socks once she got back to the city. They might come in handy. “Come on you two, fess up. I know you have something cunning all worked out. Spill.”

The waiter interrupted with their main course. “You’ll see,” Dwayne said enigmatically, glancing at his watch. “But if we don’t hurry, we’re going to miss all the fun.”

After dinner, they sat in the parking lot while Dwayne showed Elle how to load a tranquilizer gun. “You really think this will be enough to stop them?”

“Maybe not,” he agreed, “but it will slow them down. Anyway, each dart has enough ketamine to put down a Range Rover. You and T will be hanging out on that bench over there,” he pointed to a spot down the boardwalk where the lights were suspiciously dark, “minding your own business.”

“And where will you be while we twist in the wind like big, juicy t-bones?” she asked.

“Close,” he replied. “When they show up...”

“What makes you think they’ll show up?”

“Elle, stop interrupting for one minute and let the man talk, will ya?” Tyrone jumped in for his brother.

“They’ll show up,” he continued. “And when they do, you two run like hell.”

“*That’s* your brilliant plan?” she asked incredulously. “Running away?”

“Well, you do have the tranqs, and I’ll even give you your own gun back. By the way, where’d you get your bullets? Sloppy work. No wonder it jammed last night. Don’t worry, I replaced them with some of my own.”

Elle shrugged, refusing to admit she’d made them herself. She wasn’t sure where the brothers got all of their fantastic toys, but she envied them. Maybe one day, she’d talk them into introducing her to their supplier. “Uh, thanks.”

“You two ready?” They nodded. “Then go be bait. And T? Keep your earpiece on.”

“Roger. Come on, Red. We’ve got some serious hanging around to do. Watch my back, bro.”

“I always do,” Dwayne nodded solemnly, giving Elle a meaningful look. She remembered their conversation in her hotel room. There was a sinking feeling in her stomach that she was treading in dangerous waters, and it had nothing to do with the sharks and jellyfish just beyond the breakers.

As Tyrone helped her out of the giant truck, he held her arm just a little longer than necessary. He led her towards the bench Dwayne had pointed out and she followed him, awkwardly traipsing through the sand in her boots. She longed to feel the beach between her toes, but walking barefoot anywhere in New Jersey was more dangerous than hunting monsters.

Tyrone cleared a crumpled fast-food bag, a broken hypodermic needle and an unidentifiable substance off the seat before sitting and patting the bench beside him. Elle sat.

“So what do we do now?”

“We wait.” He tapped the Bluetooth headset in his ear. “Loud and clear, bro. Yeah, all clear.”

He put his arm around Elle's shoulder. She snuggled into him, laid her head back, and stared at the full moon glinting off the ocean waves. It was beautiful, but sent a chill through her.

When she shivered, he asked, concerned, "Warm enough, Red?"

"It's not that," she replied. "Just grateful I guess, that I don't have an urge to run around on all fours scratch my ears. Do you feel anything?"

"Just this," he said, drawing her nearer. They locked eyes for a second as he gave her time to protest. When she didn't, he bent his head and kissed her. His lips were deceptively soft but not hesitant. He slipped his tongue into her mouth and wrapped his arms around her, squeezing tightly.

The first time they'd kissed was nothing like this. She'd been taken by surprise and it was over before she even knew what was happening. This time was different, more passionate, more eager. She had plenty of time to enjoy it, and realized it had been way too long since she'd been this close to a man. After the spectacular failure of her last three or four relationships, she'd sworn off intimacy. But once the floodgates opened, there was nothing she could do to stop it, not that she wanted to.

Instead of pulling away, she moaned and leaned in even closer while slipping her hands beneath his jacket. Tyrone winced, reminding her that he was covered in fresh injuries and crusty spots of Calamine. "Too much?" she asked.

"Never," he replied, lifting her hips up and sliding her into his lap as if she weighed no more than a puppy. She straddled him, locking her knees around him as she lost herself in the kiss. Elle grabbed a handful of his dreadlocks and pulled his head backwards until she was bending over him, pressing him into the back of the bench while she ground her hips into his.

A shudder went through her body and her skin felt like it was on fire. She'd never responded to a man like that before. *Not exactly the whole truth*, she reminded herself. *It was like this with Goliath. But that was different. He was a 'shifter.* Her body hadn't been reacting to him so much as it had been warning her. The problem was, there was only one reason why it would be happening now with Tyrone. She broke the embrace so quickly she almost toppled over backwards.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Elle shook her head, mutely, fearing the worst. Tyrone was infected. He was turning into a werewolf and he didn't even know it yet. She was out here on a lonely stretch of dark beach and her backup was about to become the enemy.

A thousand thoughts raced through her mind at once. Should she wait until the transformation was complete before executing her friend? Even then, could she do it? If she hesitated, she could find herself in his throat again, and this time it wouldn't be arousing at all. Her body made up her mind for her.

Elle arched her head until her lips brushed his, just barely touching this time. She flicked out her tongue and licked his bottom lip before sucking it into her mouth. His eyes were shut or he would have noticed a tear trickle down her cheek as she reached into his jacket and wrapped her hand around the handle of his gun.

"Elle?" His eyes flew open. "What are you doing?"

## CHAPTER SIX

Elle didn't bother taking his gun out of the holster. She just flicked the safety off and dug it into Tyrone's ribs. "I'm sorry, T. You know I didn't want this to happen, right? Please, say you understand. Say you can forgive me." She was crying in earnest now. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried in front of anyone. It had been years. Decades, maybe.

"Red, you're talking crazy. Whatever I did, I'm sorry. Okay? Just take your hand away from my piece. Just calm down and let's talk about it."

"Oh shit," she said under her breath as she jerked the gun free and rose up on her knees. She had to use both hands to steady herself, but could still feel it shaking wildly. Elle pulled the trigger on his .45 caliber hand cannon and felt the hammer click into firing position. Then, a fraction of a second later, it went off with a painfully loud bang.

A yelp split the night, barely audible in her ringing ears. The large werewolf slinking up on them from behind retreated. Blood poured out of his elongated muzzle.

"On your three!" Tyrone called out, defenseless without his gun. She swung to the right and fired twice in rapid succession, her hands steadying with each shot. The wolf was too quick for her and threw itself out of the path of the speeding silver.

Tyrone yanked Elle's sweatshirt up roughly, grabbed her .9mm and fired right through the holster at another Were slinking up on them. She scooted away from him, leaving her gun in his big hands. "How many?" she asked.

“I count four, no, five. We’re surrounded.” He fired again and grabbed her arm. “Come on!” He dragged her off the bench and seconds later they were running through the sand, heading for a dark shape about twenty yards away.

Elle risked a quick glance over her shoulder. The wolves were closing quickly. She pulled the trigger, but the shot went wild. “Is this your brilliant plan?”

“More or less,” he said, whipping the tarp off the dark shape to reveal a small dune buggy. “Hop in.”

She grabbed hold of the roll bar and jumped in the passenger seat, facing the rear of the tiny cart. Tyrone had the buggy running and in gear before she could marvel that the big man even fit behind the wheel. “Floor it!” she ordered.

“With pleasure. Use the tranq guns. They’ll draw less attention.”

There was a box of darts behind her seat. She loaded the gun Dwayne had given her and aimed it at the closest wolf. She nailed it right on the tan patch of fur on his massive chest. He stumbled, but didn’t go down. “They’re not working!” she yelled over the wind and the whine of the motor.

“Keep trying!”

She fired again, this time catching it in the foreleg. The enormous creature took three more steps, staggered, and collapsed on its side. “That leaves four,” she cried out. “No, make it three.” One of the other Weres, a big silvery male, fell over for no apparent reason. Elle whipped her head around to focus on a strange flash of light. The moon reflected off something in the lifeguard tower directly ahead of them. A dark shape raised his rifle and fired again. It had to be Dwayne.

“Keep driving,” she encouraged Tyrone.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he replied. “Stop yammering and start shooting.”

She complied without argument. Between the bouncing buggy and the weaving wolves, she wasted three more darts before finally nailing one. “Bull’s eye!” she yelled triumphantly, even though it had only slowed their pursuer.

Elle reached for another dart but as she dropped it into the chamber, the buggy hit a bump and the tranquilizer gun flew out of her hand, rattling across the metal back of the cart before bouncing out into the sand. The big black wolf that she’d seen sniffing around their hotel the night before leapt, biting at the back tires. Elle grabbed Tyrone’s gun that she’d shoved into her pocket and fired, the silver bullet splitting the growling beast’s eye.

“Hang on tight,” Tyrone yelled. She wrapped her arm around the roll bar as he wrenched the steering wheel and they went skidding sideways, throwing up a rooster tail of sand. “Now!” he screamed into his earpiece.

Over the noise of the engine, Elle heard a metallic click and suddenly, a huge contraption sprang out of the sand. A wall of sharp spikes flew up. The two remaining werewolves, still in hot pursuit, slammed headfirst into the spikes with a sickening crush. They howled in pain. One was impaled through the neck and leg. The other dangled lifelessly from his shoulder, the sharpened metal rod piercing his heart.

Tyrone slammed on his breaks, tossing Elle violently into her seat. She bounced against the headrest, flew backwards towards the dash, and somersaulted over the hood. She landed on all fours on the beach, choking on sand. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dwayne jump off the lifeguard stand and run towards them.

Elle raged up at Tyrone. “A little warning next time?”

“I told you to hold on,” he replied flippantly, jumping out of the dune buggy. He picked up his .45 where it lay next to Elle and shook the sand out of the barrel. He fired once into each of the impaled wolves for good measure before jogging into the darkness.

A minute later, Dwayne was by her side, helping her to her feet. He brushed the sand away from her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, but I’m starting to think that your brother is an even worse driver than you.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that for ages, but you never listen,” he replied, slightly winded. “Come on, there’s still work to do. Collection time.” He climbed behind the wheel of the dune buggy and drove after his brother.

Elle stood in the darkness for a moment, running her hands over her body, poking and prodding the sore spots, to make sure nothing was broken. There were plenty of new bruises and a goose egg bump forming where her chin had collided with the headrest, but nothing serious. A low growl interrupted her premature relief, freezing her blood.

They’d missed one. Elle reached for her gun, but all she felt was an empty holster with the end blown away. Tyrone still had her piece and his own. Her tranq gun was somewhere on the beach, empty and useless. She had a knife, but it wouldn’t be much good against an angry werewolf.

Even if the Jerseys heard her scream over the crashing surf and the increasing winds, there was no guarantee they would make it back to rescue her before the wolf attacked. Once again, she’d have to rescue herself. Elle felt vulnerable and exposed, alone on the empty stretch of beach, empty except for the lifeguard stand. *That’s it! Damn Elle, you’re so dumb it’s a wonder we’ve made it this far,* she chided herself as she sprinted towards the structure.

She felt more than heard something approaching, her proximity alert wailing in alarm as the creature got closer. Now she could hear big paws slapping the sand, punctuated by eager whines deep in the beast's throat as he closed in. It was gaining faster than she could run, and although the safety of the stand was right in front of her, she knew she'd never reach it in time.

Her boot sunk in the soft beach and she stumbled. *Classic bonehead girl move*, she screamed at herself. *Get up!* As soon as her hands hit sand, she was scrambling on all fours. *Just another foot and I'm safe.* She pushed herself harder than she ever had before.

Elle regained her feet and reached frantically for the ladder. *Wolves can't climb, wolves can't climb*, the words went around her head in a merry circle like a prayer. Her hand closed around the bottom rung as the werewolf slammed into her lower body, snapping viciously at her legs. She pulled herself up to the next rung and kicked her boot into the creature's massive shoulder. She recognized the big patch of tan fur under his throat.

"Hey, I know you! I shot you with a tranq dart! I saw you fall!" She kicked again, and this time the wolf's massive teeth closed on the heel of her boot and gave her a violent shake. She looped her arm through the ladder rung and held on for dear life. If she fell, the beast would tear her to pieces. "You should be passed out and chasing werebunnies right about now. Bad dog! Bad dog!"

Apparently the tranquilizer wasn't as strong as Dwayne had assured her it was, or their metabolism was higher than anyone imagined. Even after two doses, they got up just as mean and strong as ever. Exactly how quickly did they heal? There could be wolves out there rubbing the sleepy out of his eyes right now, and the Jerseys were headed straight for them. *Yeah, well at least they have guns, which is more than I can say for myself.*

Wishing for silver bullets wasn't helping, and the massive wolf was digging in his paws as he backed away slowly, her boot still firmly locked in his mouth. The Were weighed more than two hundred pounds and had the strength of three men. He was almost as long as she was tall, standing on all fours his ears came almost to her neck and his head was twice as big as her own. She wasn't going to win this game of tug-of-war.

If she let go, she was a goner, but if she held on very much longer, he would pull her leg off. Elle made a quick decision and released her grip on the ladder. The sudden change took the wolf by surprise and they tumbled over each other in the sand. He let go of her boot long enough to try to get a better grip on her leg, and that was all she needed. Elle kicked her free leg into the creature's muzzle and felt a crunch of bone beneath her foot.

The wolf yipped and snapped, revealing several broken teeth. "Serves you right," Elle yelled, planting her knife just behind his massive jaw and shoving it in until she saw the shiny red blade come out on the underside of his throat. The wolf snarled in pain, but the noises came out thick with blood.

She shoved the wolf away from her and was running once more for the lifeguard stand. She scrambled up the ladder and stood panting at the rail, looking down at the furious wolf below. Blood gushed from his snout, and her knife pinned half of his mouth shut, but he was determined. He rushed at the lifeguard stand and the tune in Elle's head changed from *Wolves can't climb* to *Wolves can jump, but how high?* She backed away, pressing herself against the wall. She had no gun, no knife and no backup.

Because the beach was closed for the season, the lifeguard shack was boarded up tightly. Inside, she might get lucky and find a flare gun, so she frantically started working her fingers at

the boards covering the entrance. She found a loose one and rocked it back and forth until her fingers bled, but slowly it came away from its nails.

Elle risked a glance over her shoulder. She couldn't see what the wolf was doing, but a second later, when the stand rocked on its wooden foundation, she knew she didn't have to worry about creature jumping. He didn't need to. He was throwing himself on the supports. Another couple of blows like that one, and the lifeguard stand would come tumbling down.

There was no time to spare. She pried another board free and started on the next one. Slam! The stand shuddered. The base was buried deep in the sand, but it couldn't hold forever. Elle lost her footing and banged her shoulder against the wall. One more board, and she could stick her head into the shack. Two more after that, and she could crawl all the way inside.

The stand jumped beneath her feet. There was the sound of splintering wood, and with a creaking groan, it began listing to the side. Elle slid towards the edge, grabbing at the railing with one hand and holding a board in the other, for as much good as it would do her. In the back of her head, she entertained the idea of beating the Were to death with the splintering wood like a club, but if it could throw itself against the supports and keep coming, she wasn't going to stop him with the toothpick in her hand.

Even if there were flares inside, it was too late now. One more good blow like the last one, and the stand would go over completely. She was out of ideas. Maybe if she jumped now, she could avoid being crushed by the falling lifeguard stand. She would run until her legs gave out, the beast caught her or the Jersey brothers came back. The odds of her surviving were worse than the roulette wheel in Caesar's, but she didn't think she had a better option.

Then something shiny caught her eye, a metallic gleam from inside the shack. She pushed herself up the steeply inclined floor and pulled herself towards the opening in the

doorway. Elle reached inside, stretching her long arms as far as they could go until her fingers brushed past something cold and heavy. At that moment, there was a great cracking sound. Her shelter dipped, swayed, and collapsed.

Half in and half out of the door, she knew if she didn't move fast, she'd break in half the second the stand hit the ground. Holding onto the metal for dear life, she let go of the door frame and fell. Her hips hit the sand first and she rolled. An instant later, the shack crashed to the ground next to where she'd just landed.

Debris flew and a board hit the back of Elle's neck. She swayed as the darkness of the night closed in around her, but she refused to pass out. Instead, she forced herself to get to all fours. The menacing growl behind her let her know that the wolf wasn't just hungry and hurt. He was pissed.

"Oh, get over it," she snapped, shakily standing tall. She wasn't going to win any awards for walking a straight line anytime soon, but she'd be damned if she let herself die on all fours. "Let's finish this so one of us can go home."

The wolf leapt at her throat, and Elle took a step backwards. She hefted the heavy metal bar to her shoulder and swung away like it was the World Series and she was Babe Ruth. The fire axe landed squarely on the werewolf's collarbone, the impact sending shock waves through Elle's sore arms. The wolf fell silently, collapsing onto the sand without protest. He moved his jaw, but no sound came out of it. His legs twitched and then lay still.

"Yeah, problem is, I'm not falling for that one again." Elle lifted the axe over her head and chopped it squarely on the dying wolf's neck, cutting to the bone. It took three more whacks before his head rolled free. Only then did she let herself relax, falling backwards into the sand with her legs extended.

Her eyes were still closed when a humming engine let her know that the dune buggy had returned. She heard someone call her name, and raised one arm weakly. “Over here.”

“Shit, Elle, what happened?” Tyrone asked as he dropped to his knees next to her. His hands groped her for traces of injury, but except for her raw fingertips, all of the blood on her was the wolf’s.

“I got stranded on a werewolf-infested beach without so much as a paperweight to defend myself, and had to fight this one off by hand. Alone. Other than that, nothing much.”

“What happened to your gun?” Dwayne asked, putting an arm around Elle’s shoulders and helping her sit up.

“Your brother took it,” she said, angrily.

“Of course I did. I was afraid you’d use it against me. You almost shot me,” he accused her.

“I said I was sorry, didn’t I?”

Dwayne looked back and forth between the two of them, “What did he mean, you almost shot him?”

Elle trusted Dwayne to the apocalypse and back, but his loyalties were no secret. Tyrone was more than his brother, he was his identical twin. That was a bond no one could get between.

“I thought he was a werewolf,” she tried to defend herself.

“Oh, that makes everything all right then,” Tyrone grumbled.

“Look, T, you made me promise to do it!”

“I asked you to kill me if I turned, not if you thought that maybe I was about to get a little furry, even though I wasn’t. Give a brother a chance! One minute you’re getting all friendly-like, and the next you’ve got my own gun shoved in my ribs. Talk about mood swings!”

“All I know is we were all alone when suddenly I get the sensation that there’s a werewolf very close by, and considering how close you were at the time, I naturally assumed it was you.”

“Naturally,” Tyrone rolled his eyes.

“How close was close?” Dwayne asked, but they both ignored him.

“At least I realized my mistake before I shot you.” She shrugged her shoulders casually. She grabbed a hold of Dwayne’s arm and pushed herself upright. She took a few tentative steps. Her legs were shaky and she felt weak and exhausted, but at least she could stand under her own power and that was better than how her adventures normally ended. “Anyways, this is just about perfect. We can end the weekend just the way it started, with Tyrone pouting.”

“I’m not pouting.”

“You are so.”

“Fine, I’m not pouting anymore. So what if you tried to shoot me? I’m over it now.” He stood and brushed the sand from his pants. “But this weekend’s not over yet. There’s still work to be done.” He glanced down at her weapon. “Nice axe. You want to behead the others, or would you rather start the fire?”

She handed the axe to Tyrone, “I’ll let you have the pleasure. I’ve already started collecting wood for the bonfire.” She gestured at the collapsed lifeguard stand. It took a while to get it started, but by the time the brothers had beheaded the remaining wolves, disassembled and packed away the wall of spikes and found Elle’s dropped tranq gun, flames were leaping into the night.

Together, they threw the corpses into the fire. Elle had to toss a charred head back into the flames after it rolled out, but other than that, she could almost imagine they were just normal

people sitting around a bonfire on the beach after a long hard day of splashing in the ocean and playing in the sun. Tyrone even had his big arm around her shoulder and she was snuggled against his chest. “Not a bad day,” she signed.

He kissed the top of her head. “Could have been worse,” he agreed, watching the sparks dance in the night sky.

“Oh cut it out, you two,” Dwayne grumbled. “We better get out of here before the cops start nosing around. I don’t know about you but I don’t want to explain why we’re roasting werewolves on a vandalized lifeguard stand.”

“The man has a point,” Tyrone said, getting up. He offered his hand to Elle and pulled her to her feet. “We should probably get out of town before daybreak.”

Elle yawned, too tired to argue. They were only a couple of hours from home, less even if Dwayne drove, and the idea of showering in her own bathroom and sleeping in her own bed was too tempting to resist. They packed up the truck, and Elle was sound asleep on Tyrone’s shoulder before they hit the Garden State Parkway.