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JUNE HAD COME in like its usual hot, sweaty self, but a freak cold front had moved in during the night and the car radio had been full of the record low temperatures. It was only in the low sixties, not that cold, but after weeks of eighty- and ninety-plus, it felt downright frigid. My best friend, Ronnie Sims, and I were sitting in my Jeep with the windows down, letting the unseasonably cool air drift in on us. Ronnie had turned thirty tonight. We were talking about how she felt about the big 3-0 and other girl talk. Considering that she's a private detective and I raise the dead for a living it was pretty ordinary talk. Sex, guys, turning thirty, vampires, werewolves. You know, the usual.

We could have gone inside the house, but there is something about the intimacy of a car after dark that makes you want to linger. Or maybe it was the sweet smell of springlike air coming through the windows like the caress of some half-remembered lover.

"Okay, so he's a werewolf. No one's perfect," Ronnie said. "Date him, sleep with him, marry him. My vote's for Richard."

"I know you don't like Jean-Claude."

"Don't like him!" Her hands gripped the passenger-side door handle, squeezing it until I could see the tension in her shoulders. I think she was counting to ten.

"If I killed as easily as you do, I'd have killed that son of a bitch two years ago and your life would be a lot less complicated now."

That last was an understatement. But . . . "I don't want him dead, Ronnie."

"He's a vampire, Anita. He *is* dead." She turned and looked at me in the dark. Her soft gray eyes and yellow hair

had turned to silver and near white in the cold light of the stars. The shadows and bright reflected light left her face in bold relief, like some modern painting. But the look on her face was almost frightening. There was a fearful determination there.

If it had been me with that look on my face, I'd have warned me not to do anything stupid, like kill Jean-Claude. But Ronnie wasn't a shooter. She'd killed twice, both times to save my life. I owed her. But she wasn't a person who could hunt someone down in cold blood and kill him. Not even a vampire. I knew this about her, so I didn't have to caution her. "I used to think I knew what dead was or wasn't, Ronnie." I shook my head. "The line isn't so clear-cut."

"He seduced you," she said.

I looked away from her angry face and stared at the foil-wrapped swan in my lap. Deirdorfs and Hart, where we'd had dinner, got creative with their doggy bags: foil-wrapped animals. I couldn't argue with Ronnie, and I was getting tired of trying.

Finally, I said, "Every lover seduces you, Ronnie, that's the way it works."

She slammed her hands so hard onto the dashboard it startled me and must have hurt her. "Damn it, Anita, it's not the same."

I was starting to get angry, and I didn't want to be angry, not with Ronnie. I had taken her out to dinner to make her feel better, not to fight. Louis Fane, her steady boyfriend, was out of town at a conference, and she was bummed about that, and about turning thirty. So I'd tried to make her feel better, and she seemed determined to make me feel worse.

"Look, I haven't seen either Jean-Claude or Richard for six months. I'm not dating either of them, so we can skip the lecture on vampire ethics."

"Now that's an oxymoron," she said.

"What is?" I asked.

"Vampire ethics," she said.

I frowned at her. "That's not fair, Ronnie."

"You are a vampire executioner, Anita. You are the one

who taught me that they aren't just people with fangs. They are monsters.”

I'd had enough. I opened the car door and slid to the edge of the seat. Ronnie grabbed my shoulder. “Anita, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't be mad.”

I didn't turn around. I sat there with my feet hanging out the door, the cool air creeping into the closer warmth of the car.

“Then drop it, Ronnie. I mean drop it.”

She leaned over and gave me a quick hug from behind. “I'm sorry. It's none of my business who you sleep with.”

I leaned into the hug for a moment. “That's right, it's not.” Then I pulled away and got out of the car. My high heels crunched on the gravel of my driveway. Ronnie had wanted us to dress up, so we had. It was her birthday. It wasn't until after dinner that I'd realized her diabolical scheme. She'd had me wear heels and a nice little black skirt outfit. The top was actually, gasp, a well-fitted halter top. Or would that be backless evening wear? However pricey it was, it was still a very short skirt and a halter top. Ronnie had helped me pick the outfit out about a week ago. I should have known her innocent “oh, let's just both dress up” was a ruse. There had been other dresses that covered more skin and had longer hemlines, but none that camouflaged the belly-band holster that cut across my lower waist. I'd actually taken the holster along with us on the shopping trip, just to be sure. Ronnie thought I was being paranoid, but I don't go anywhere after dark unarmed. Period.

The skirt was just roomy enough and black enough to hide the fact that I wore the belly band and a Firestar 9 mm. The top was heavy enough material, what there was of it, that you really couldn't see the handle of the gun under the cloth. All I had to do was lift the bottom of the top and the gun was right there, ready to be drawn. It was the most user-friendly dressy outfit I'd ever owned. Made me wish they made it in a different color so I could have two of them.

Ronnie's plan had been to go to a club on her birthday. A dance club. Eek. I never went to clubs. I did not dance. But I went in with her. Yes, she got me out on the floor,

mainly because her dancing alone was attracting too much unwanted male attention. At least with both of us dancing together the would-be Casanovas stayed at a distance. Though saying I danced was inaccurate. I stood there and sort of swayed. Ronnie danced. She danced like it was her last night on Earth and she had to put every muscle to good use. It was spectacular, and a little frightening. There was something almost desperate to it, as if Ronnie felt the cold hand of time creeping up faster and faster. Or maybe that was just me projecting my own insecurities. I'd turned twenty-six early in the year, and, frankly, at the rate I was going, I probably wouldn't have to worry about hitting thirty. Death cures all ills. Well, most of them.

There had been one man who had attached himself to me instead of Ronnie. I didn't understand why. She was a tall leggy blond, dancing like she was having sex with the music. But he offered me drinks. I don't drink. He tried to slow dance. I refused. I finally had to be rude. Ronnie told me to dance with him, at least he was human. I told her that birthday guilt only went so far, and she'd used hers up.

The last thing on God's green earth that I needed was another man in my life. I didn't have a clue what to do with the two I had already. The fact that they were, respectively, a Master Vampire and an Ulfric, werewolf king, was only part of the problem. That fact alone should let you know just how deep a hole I was digging. Or would that be, already have dug? Yeah, already dug. I was about halfway to China and still throwing dirt up in the air.

I'd been celibate for six months. So, as far as I knew, had they. Everyone was waiting for me to make up my mind. Waiting for me to choose, or decide, something, anything.

I'd been a rock for half a year, because I'd stayed away from them. I hadn't seen them, in the flesh anyway. I had returned no phone calls. I had run for the hills at the first hint of cologne. Why such drastic measures? Frankly, because almost every time I saw them, I fell off the chastity wagon. They both had my libido, but I was trying to decide who had my heart. I still didn't know. The only thing I had decided was that it was time to stop hiding. I had to see them

and figure out what we were all going to do. I'd decided two weeks ago that I needed to see them. It was the day that I refilled my birth-control pill prescription, and started taking it again. The very last thing I needed was a surprise pregnancy. That the first thing I thought of when I thought of Richard and Jean-Claude was to go back on birth control tells you something about the effect they had on me.

You needed to be on the pill for at least a month to be safe, or as safe as you ever got. Four more weeks, five to be sure, then I'd call. Maybe.

I heard Ronnie's heels running on the gravel. "Anita, Anita, wait, don't be angry."

The thing was, I wasn't angry with her. I was angry with me. Angry that after all these months I still couldn't decide between the two men. I stopped walking and waited for her, huddled in my little black skirt outfit, the little foil swan in my hands. The night had turned cool enough to make me wish I'd worn a jacket. When Ronnie caught up with me I started walking again.

"I'm not mad, Ronnie, just tired. Tired of you, my family, Dolph, Zerbrowski, everyone being so damned judgmental." My heels hit the sidewalk with sharp *clacks*. Jean-Claude had once said he could tell if I was angry just by the sound of my heels on the floor. "Watch your step. You're wearing higher heels than I am." Ronnie was five feet eight, which meant with heels she was nearly six feet.

I was wearing two-inch heels, which put me at five five. I get a much better workout when Ronnie and I jog together than she does.

The phone was ringing as I juggled the key and the foil-wrapped leftovers. Ronnie took the leftovers, and I shoved the door open with my shoulder. I was running across the floor in my high heels before I remembered that I was on vacation. Which meant whatever emergency was calling at 2:05 in the morning was not my problem, not for another two weeks at least. But old habits die hard, and I was at the phone before I remembered. I actually let the machine pick up while I stood there, heart pounding. I was planning on

ignoring it, but . . . but I still stood ready to grab the receiver just in case.

Loud, booming music, and a man's voice. I didn't recognize the music, but I recognized the voice. "Anita, it's Gregory. Nathaniel's in trouble."

Gregory was one of the wereleopards I'd inherited when I killed their alpha, their leader. As a human, I wasn't really up to the job, but until I found a replacement, even I was better than nothing. Wereanimals without a dominant to protect them were anyone's meat, and if someone moved in and slaughtered them, it would sort of be my fault. So I acted as their protector, but the job was more complicated than I'd ever dreamed. Nathaniel was the problem. All the others were rebuilding their lives since their old leader had been killed, but not Nathaniel. He'd had a hard life: abused, raped, pimped out, and topped. Topped meant he'd been someone's slave—as in sex and pain. He was one of the few true submissives I'd ever met, though, admittedly, my pool of acquaintance was limited.

I cursed softly and picked up the phone. "I'm here, Gregory, what's happened now?" Even to me, my voice sounded tired and half-angry.

"If I had anyone else to call, Anita, I'd call them, but you're it." He sounded tired and angry, too. Great.

"Where's Elizabeth? She was supposed to be riding herd on Nathaniel tonight." I'd finally agreed that Nathaniel could start going out to the dominance and submission clubs if he was accompanied by Elizabeth and at least one other wereleopard. Tonight it had been Gregory riding shotgun, but without Elizabeth, Gregory wasn't dominant enough to keep Nathaniel safe. A normal submissive would have been safe in one of the clubs with someone there to simply say, "no thanks, we'll pass." But Nathaniel was one of those rare subs who are almost incapable of saying no, and there had been hints made that his idea of pain and sex could be very extreme. Which meant that he might say yes to things that were very, very bad for him. Wereanimals can take a lot of injury and not be permanently damaged, but there is a limit. A healthy bottom will say *stop* when he's had too much or he

feels something bad happening, but Nathaniel wasn't that healthy. So he had keepers with him to make sure no one really bad got ahold of him. But it was more than that. A good dominant trusts his sub to say *when* before the damage is too great. The dom trusts the sub to know his own body and have enough self-preservation to call out before he is in past what his body can take. Nathaniel did not come with that safety feature, which meant a dominant with the best of intentions could end up hurting him badly before realizing Nathaniel wouldn't help himself.

I actually had accompanied Nathaniel a few times. As his Nimir-ra it was sort of my job to interview prospective . . . keepers. I'd gone prepared for the clubs to be one of the lower circles of hell and had been pleasantly shocked. I'd had more trouble with sexual propositions in a normal bar on a Saturday night. In the clubs everyone was very careful not to impose on you or to be seen as pushy. It was a small community, and if you got a reputation for being obnoxious, you could find yourself blacklisted, with no one to play with. I'd found the people in the scene were polite, and once you made it clear you were not there to play, no one bothered you, except tourists. Tourists were posers, people not really into the scene, who liked to dress up and frequent the clubs. They didn't know the rules, and hadn't bothered to ask. They probably thought a woman who would come to a place like this would do anything. I'd persuaded them differently. But I'd had to stop going with Nathaniel. The other wereleopards said I gave off so much dominant vibe that no dominant would ever approach Nathaniel while I was with him. Though we'd had offers for ménage à trois of every description. I felt like I needed a button that said, "No, I don't want to have a bondage three-way with you, thanks for asking, though."

Elizabeth had supposedly been dominant, but not too much to take Nathaniel out and try to pick him up a . . . date.

"Elizabeth left," Gregory said.

"Without Nathaniel?" I made it a question.

"Yes."

"Well, that just fries my bacon," I said.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m angry with Elizabeth.”

“It gets better,” he said.

“How much better can it be, Gregory? You all assured me that these clubs were safe. A little bondage, a little light slap and tickle. You all convinced me that I couldn’t keep Nathaniel away from it indefinitely. You said that they had ways to monitor the area so no one could possibly get hurt. That’s what you and Zane and Cherry told me. Hell, I’ve seen it myself. There are safety monitors everywhere, it’s safer than some dates I’ve had, so what could have possibly gone wrong?”

“We couldn’t have anticipated this,” he said.

“Just get to the end of the story, Gregory, the foreplay is getting tedious.”

There was silence for longer than there should have been, just the overly loud music. “Gregory, are you still there?”

“Gregory is indisposed,” a man’s voice said.

“Who is this?”

“I am Marco, if that helps you, though I doubt that it does.” His voice was cultured—American, but upper crusty.

“New in town are you?” I asked.

“Something like that,” he said.

“Welcome to town. Make sure you go up in the Arch while you’re here, it’s a nice view. But what has your recent arrival in St. Louis got to do with me and mine?”

“We didn’t realize it was your pet we had at first. He wasn’t the one we were hunting for, but now that we have him, we’re keeping him.”

“You can’t ‘keep’ him,” I said.

“Come down and take him away from us, if you can.” That strangely smooth voice made the threat all the more effective. There was no anger, nothing personal. It sounded like business, and I had no clue what it was about.

“Put Gregory back on,” I said.

“I don’t think so. He’s enjoying some personal time with my friends right now.”

“How do I know he’s still alive?” My voice was as unemotional as his. I wasn’t feeling anything yet; it was too

sudden, too unexpected, like coming in on the middle of a movie.

“No one’s dead, yet,” the man said.

“How do I know that?”

He was quiet for a second, then, “What sort of people are you used to dealing with, that you would ask if we’ve killed him first thing?”

“It’s been a rough year. Now put Gregory on the phone, because until I know he’s alive, and he tells me the others are, this negotiation is stalled.”

“How do you know we are negotiating?” Marco asked.

“Call it a hunch.”

“My, you are direct.”

“You have no idea how direct I can be, Marco. Put Gregory on the phone.”

There was the music-filled silence, and more music, but no voices. “Gregory, Gregory, are you there? Is anyone there?” Shit, I thought.

“I’m afraid that your kitty-cat won’t squawl for us. A point of pride, I think.”

“Put the receiver to his ear and let me talk to him.”

“As you wish.”

More of the loud music. I spoke as if I was sure that Gregory was listening. “Gregory, I need to know you’re alive. I need to know that Nathaniel and everyone else is alive. Talk to me, Gregory.”

His voice came squeezed tight, as if he were gritting his teeth. “Yesss.”

“Yes, what, they’re all alive?”

“Yesss.”

“What are they doing to you?”

He screamed into the phone, and the sound raised the hairs on my neck and danced down my arms in goosebumps. The sound stopped abruptly. “Gregory, Gregory!” I was yelling against the techno-beat of the music, but no one was answering.

Marco came back on the line. “They are all alive, if not quite well. The one they call Nathaniel is a lovely young man, all that long auburn hair and the most extraordinary

violet eyes. So pretty, it would be a shame to spoil all that beauty. Of course, this one is lovely too, blond, blue-eyed. Someone told me that they both work as strippers? Is that true?"

I wasn't numb anymore, I was scared, and angry, and I still had not a clue to why this was happening. My voice came out almost even, almost calm. "Yeah, it's true. You're new in town, Marco, so you don't know me. But trust me, you don't want to do this."

"Perhaps not, but my alpha does."

Ah, shapeshifter politics. I hated shapeshifter politics. "Why? The wereleopards are no threat to anyone."

"Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do and die."

A literate kidnapper, refreshing. "What do you want, Marco?"

"My alpha wants you to come down and rescue your cats, if you can."

"What club are you at?"

"Narcissus in Chains." And he hung up.

2

“DAMN IT!”

“What’s happened?” Ronnie asked. I’d almost forgotten her. She didn’t belong in this part of my life, but there she was, leaning against the kitchen cabinets, searching my face, looking worried.

“I’ll take care of it.”

She gripped my arm. “You gave me this speech about wanting your friends back, about not wanting to push us all away. Did you mean it, or was it just talk?”

I took a deep breath and let it out. I told her what the other side of the conversation had been.

“And you don’t have any clue what this is about?” she asked.

“No, I don’t.”

“That’s odd. Usually stuff like this builds up, it doesn’t just drop out of the blue.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“Star 69 will ring back whatever number just called you.”

“What good will that do?”

“It will let you know if they’re really at this club, or whether it’s just a trap for you.”

“Not just another pretty face, are you?” I said.

She smiled. “I’m a trained detective. We know about these things.” The humor didn’t quite reach her eyes, but she was trying.

I dialed, and the phone rang for what seemed forever, then another male voice answered, “Yeah.”

“Is this Narcissus in Chains?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“I need to speak with Gregory?”

“Don’t know any Gregory,” he said.

“Who is this?” I asked.

“This is a freaking pay phone, lady. I just picked up.” Then he hung up, too. It seemed to be my night for it.

“They called from a pay phone at the club,” I said.

“Well, at least you know where they are,” Ronnie said.

“Do you know where the club is?” I asked.

Ronnie shook her head. “Not my kind of scene.”

“Mine either.” In fact the only card-carrying dominance and submission players that I knew personally were all at the club waiting to be saved.

Who did I know that might know where the club was, and something about its reputation? I couldn’t trust what the wereleopards had told me about it being a safe place. Obviously, they’d been wrong.

One name sprang to mind. The only one I knew to call that might know where Narcissus in Chains was, and what kind of trouble I’d be in if I went inside. Jean-Claude. Since I was dealing with shapeshifter politics it might have made sense to call Richard, with him being a werewolf and all. But the shapeshifters were a very clannish lot. One type of animal rarely crossed boundaries to help another. Frustrating, but true. The exception was the treaty between the werewolves and the wererats, but everyone else was left to fend, and squabble, and bleed, among themselves. Oh, if some small group got out of hand and attracted too much unwanted police attention, the wolves and rats would discipline them, but short of that, no one seemed to want to interfere with each other. That was one of the reasons I was still stuck baby-sitting the wereleopards.

Also, Richard didn’t know any more about the D and S subculture than I did, maybe less. If you’re wanting to ask questions about the sexual fringe, Jean-Claude is definitely your guy. He may not participate, but he seems to know who’s doing what, and to whom, and where. Or I hoped he did. If it had just been my life at stake, I probably wouldn’t have called either of the boys, but if I got killed doing this, that left no one to rescue Nathaniel and the rest. Unacceptable.

Ronnie had kicked off her high heels. "I didn't bring my gun, but I'm sure you have a spare."

I shook my head. "You're not going."

Anger makes her gray eyes the color of storm clouds. "The hell I'm not."

"Ronnie, these are shapeshifters, and you're human."

"So are you," she said.

"Because of Jean-Claude's vampire marks, I'm a little more than that. I can take damage that would kill you."

"You can't go in there alone," she said. Her arms were crossed under her breasts, her face set in angry, stubborn lines.

"I don't plan on going in alone."

"It's because I'm not a shooter, isn't it?"

"You don't kill easily, Ronnie, no shame in that, but I can't take you into a gang of shapeshifters unless I know that you'll shoot to kill if you have to." I gripped her upper arms. She stayed stiff and angry under my touch. "It would kill a piece of me to lose you, Ronnie. It would kill a bigger piece to know that you died because of some shit of mine. You can't hesitate with these people. You can't treat them like they're human. If you do, you die."

She was shaking her head. "Call the police."

I stepped away from her. "No."

"Damn it, Anita, damn it!"

"Ronnie, there are rules, and one of those rules is you don't take pack or pard business to the police." The main reason for that rule was that the police tended to frown on fights for dominance that ended with dead bodies on the ground, but no need to tell Ronnie that.

"It's a stupid rule," she said.

"Maybe, but it's still the way business is done with the shifters, no matter what flavor they are."

She sat down at the small two-seater breakfast table, on its little raised platform. "Who's going to be your backup then? Richard doesn't kill any easier than I do."

That was half true, but I let it slide. "No, I want someone at my back tonight who will do what needs doing, no flinching."

Her eyes were dark, dark with anger. "Jean-Claude." She made his name a curse.

I nodded.

“Are you sure he didn’t plan this to get you back into his life, excuse me, death?”

“He knows me too well to screw with my people. He knows what I’d do if he hurt them.”

Puzzlement flowed through the anger, softening her eyes, her face. “I hate him, but I know you love him. Could you really kill him? Could you really stare down the barrel of a gun and pull the trigger on him?”

I just looked at her, and I knew without a mirror that my eyes had grown distant, cold. It’s hard for brown eyes to be cold, but I’d been managing it lately.

Something very like fear slid behind her eyes. I don’t know if she was afraid for me, or of me. I preferred the first to the last. “You could do it. Jesus, Anita. You’ve known Jean-Claude longer than I’ve known Louie. I could never hurt Louie, no matter what he did.”

I shrugged. “It would destroy me to do it, I think. It’s not like I’d live happily ever after, if I survived at all. There’s a very real chance that the vampire marks would drag me down to the grave with him.”

“Another good reason not to kill him,” she said.

“If he’s behind the scream that Gregory gave over the phone, then he’ll need better reasons to keep breathing than love, or lust, or my possible death.”

“I don’t understand that, Anita. I don’t understand that at all.”

“I know,” I said. And I thought to myself it was one of the reasons Ronnie and I hadn’t been seeing as much of each other as we once had. I got tired of explaining myself to her. No, of justifying myself to her.

You’re my friend, my best friend, I thought. But I don’t understand you anymore.

“Ronnie, I can’t arm wrestle shapeshifters and vampires. I will lose a fair fight. The only way I survive, the only way my leopards survive, is because the other shifters fear me. They fear my threat. I’m only as good as my threat, Ronnie.”

“So you’ll go down there and kill them.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you will.”

“I’ll try to avoid it,” I said.

She tucked her knees up, wrapping her arms around those long legs. She’d managed to get a tiny prick in one of the hose; the hole was shiny with clear nail polish. She’d carried the polish in her purse for just such emergencies. I’d carried a gun and hadn’t even taken a purse.

“If you get arrested, call, and I’ll bail you out.”

I shook my head. “If I get caught wasting three or more people in a public area, there won’t be any bail tonight. The police probably won’t even finish questioning me until long past dawn.”

“How can you be so calm about this?” she asked.

I was beginning to remember why Ronnie and I had started drifting apart. I’d had almost the exact conversation with Richard once when an assassin had come to town to kill me. I gave the same answer. “Having hysterics won’t help anything, Ronnie.”

“But you’re not angry about it.”

“Oh, I am angry,” I said.

She shook her head. “No, I mean you’re not outraged that this is happening. You don’t seem surprised, not like . . .” She shrugged. “Not like you should be.”

“You mean not like you would be.” I held up a hand before she could answer. “I don’t have time to debate moral philosophy, Ronnie.” I picked up the phone. “I’m going to call Jean-Claude.”

“I keep urging you to dump the vampire and marry Richard, but maybe there’s more than one reason why you can’t let him go.”

I dialed the number for Circus of the Damned from memory, and Ronnie just kept talking to my back. “Maybe you’re not willing to give up a lover who’s colder than you are.”

The phone was ringing. “There are clean sheets on the guest bed, Ronnie. Sorry I won’t be able to share girl talk tonight.” I kept my back to her.

I heard her stand in a crinkle of skirts and knew when she walked out. I kept my back facing the room until I knew she was gone. It wouldn’t do either of us any good to let her see me cry.