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BORN
TO BE
WILD

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OF THE OTHERS

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MORE.

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BORN TO BE WILD

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For information address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

ISBN: 978-0-312-35719-1

Printed in the United States of America

St. Martin's Paperbacks edition / March 2010

St. Martin's Paperbacks are published by St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Josephine Barrett had just flipped off the lights in her triage area when a low, heavy pounding thundered at the clinic's back door. So much for the novel experience of eating her pizza while it was still hot.

For a split second, she debated hiding behind the ultrasound cart and pretending the office was already closed, locked, and deserted; but that was just cowardly, not to mention irresponsible. No one would be trying to knock down the door on a Saturday night unless they had a genuine emergency. And it wasn't like this was Portland, where the next clinic down the road could take the case. In this tiny, rural town of Stone Creek, Oregon, Josie was the only veterinarian in twenty miles, and there was no way she could turn her back on a patient in need.

No matter how strong the urge.

Sighing, she flipped the light switch back up. *Fine, but if this is Mrs. Cowlitz's Persian with Dental Creme matted in its coat again, I swear to God I will not be responsible for the size of my bill.*

Grabbing her stethoscope, Josie strode to the rear of the clinic and pushed open the heavy security door. "The office is closed right now. Is this an emergency?"

The second sentence bounced off the back of a large and fast-moving male form that hadn't bothered waiting for her to step aside and let it in. The intruder shouldered straight past her and over to one of two surgical-steel exam tables at the far side of the room. Her subconscious barely had time to register recognition of the local sheriff in time to choke off an irritated threat about calling the police.

"Sheriff Pace, I'm not sure if you realize this, but it's after nine o'clock, and I've been—"

Whatever she'd been about to say died in her throat as the uniformed figure stepped to the side to reveal the ragged bundle he'd just deposited on the table.

"Jesus Christ!"

Josie bolted forward, shoved the sheriff out of the way, and peeled aside a corner of the reflective silver survival blanket. She pressed her palm hard against the bloody, matted fur beneath a limp forelimb. The beat she felt there was weak, but discernible.

"What the hell happened?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," the deep voice answered, sounding taut and . . . displeased, "as long as it involves at least one round from a .50-caliber hunting rifle."

"Where?" Now intently focused, she ran her hands over the rest of a shockingly still gray body, searching for wounds.

"Left flank."

Josie grunted, shoved the blanket entirely aside, and began probing the heavy muscle he'd indicated. Or rather, where that muscle should have been. Right now there was more blood than meat. A long, ragged trough of flesh had been carved out of the animal's leg just below the hip.

She swore again and grabbed a packet of sterile packing from the counter just behind the table.

While she tore it open, she ran an educated eye over the rest of the still form. “Any others?”

“~~Bullet wounds? Not that I saw, but she’s a mess. I didn’t waste a lot of time checking her over.~~ thought I’d leave that to you.”

Pressing the wad of cloth against the top of the wound where it bled sluggishly, Josie applied pressure and jerked her chin in the sheriff’s direction. “I need to hold this in place for a minute, so I need your hands. You’re going to take her rear paws in one hand and the front in the other and *gentle* roll her over so I can check her other side. But first, you’re going to grab that blue muzzle on the counter and slip it over her nose. When it’s in place, you can tie it off at the back of her head.”

“She’s unconscious. I don’t think she’s in any condition to take a chunk out of me—”

“I don’t care,” Josie cut in. “You just brought me a critically injured adult female timber wolf. She might be too weak to fight, but I’m not taking the chance. And more importantly, you’re not taking the chance in my hospital. Pain makes us all do strange things, and it’s not like she’s wearing a rabies tag.” She scowled and nodded toward the counter. “Muzzle.”

The sheriff obeyed, and since she didn’t have time to wonder how he felt about it, Josie couldn’t have cared less whether or not his macho sensibilities had tinged his movements with reluctance. She just concentrated on applying pressure to the bullet graze and waited for him to turn the injured wolf onto her other side. A quick assessment when he did revealed a few scratches, but nothing that looked nearly as serious as the wound she’d already seen.

She nodded. “Okay. Back over.” When he had the animal resettled, she grabbed his right hand and pressed it down on the gauze packing. “Hold this. Firmly.”

He didn’t bother to protest, and Josie didn’t bother to mention that she didn’t care for being stared at, especially not when the injured animal opened her eyes and fixed Josie with a steady, amber gaze. That was an observer she’d deal with happily.

Josie’s hands were already moving to the hole at the front of the muzzle and lifting the animal’s lips to peer into her mouth. The fact that the wolf didn’t even blink was making her nervous. As was the pale, pale sticky surface of the animal’s gums.

“I’m sorry, girl,” she murmured, her voice pitched soft and soothing even while her movements remained briskly efficient. “I know it hurts, but you’re being so good. Just be good for a few more minutes, and I promise I’m going to do everything I can to help you.”

The wolf didn’t move, but she whined and the tip of her tongue flicked out the end of the muzzle almost as if she understood. Josie repeated the promise to herself and shrugged her stethoscope in place, positioning the chest piece behind the animal’s elbow and listening intently. Then she frowned.

Her hand went automatically to her pocket and pulled out her ophthalmoscope. When she peered into the wolf’s dark golden eyes, she nearly dropped the instrument on the poor thing’s nose.

“This is not a wolf,” she blurted out.

The wolf whined.

The sheriff frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that this”—Josie pointed, pointedly—“this is not a timber wolf. It’s a human being.”

The sheriff lifted an eyebrow.

“Okay, she looks like a wolf,” Josie conceded, “but she’s not. Or at least, that’s not all she is. She’s a Lupine.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because I went to school for four years and did another six months of internship and three years of residency to learn how to identify and treat members of canine species. This”—she pointed again, for emphasis—“is not canine. She only has a partial tapetum lucidum.”

“Tapa-who?”

“A reflective layer of tissue behind the retina that helps to reflect light and enhance night vision.”

canines, the tapetum lucidum lines the entire back of the eye's lens. Hers is concentrated just around the fovea. If she were a wolf, that would be really, really not natural."

The sheriff shrugged. "Okay, I'll take your word for it. But I don't think it matters all that much. She's still hurt, and you're still a doctor, so how about you give a comparative anatomy lesson later and just patch her up right now?"

"Didn't you hear me? She's *human*. I'm an *animal* doctor. I can't treat a human being."

"No, she's not. She's Lupine, but at the moment she's got more physically in common with Mr. Potter's springer spaniel than with Mr. Potter." He spoke slowly, as if she needed extra time for comprehension. As if she hadn't graduated at the top of her class from both Reed College and the University of Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. "Not to mention that Dr. Shad's office is closed until Monday and I don't think it would be in her best interest to wait for an appointment. So what do you say? Why don't you take a shot at it? You know, as long as we're here."

Although the impulse to inject the man with a horse laxative tugged at her seductively, Josie's sense of responsibility and medical ethics won out. Turning her back on the sheriff, she placed her stethoscope against the wolf's belly and tried to hear any important sounds over the angry throbbing of blood in her ears. A soft *whoosh* immediately caught her attention.

Frowning, she shifted the scope a few inches caudally and listened again. Then she straightened up and pressed the tips of her fingers gently against the wolf's abdomen.

"Grab that phone and press the button next to the name andrea," she ordered, looking back up at the sheriff. "There's internal bleeding. She's going to need surgery."

"Andrea?"

"And tell her to hurry. Otherwise I'm going to have to teach you how to tube and anesthetize an injured Lupine."

Without a word, the sheriff turned and strode for the phone. Apparently he approved of Josie's decision to go into private practice rather than teaching.

Eli waited in the clinic for almost three hours, despite Dr. Barrett's warning that the surgery would be a long one and she'd be happy to call him with an update when it was finished. His shift was over, had been over before he'd stumbled on the still, bleeding form of the injured Lupine a little before nine o'clock. So he had nowhere else he had to be. At least, not for another seven or eight hours.

He supposed he could have gone home and tried to sleep—Gods knew his gritty eyeballs and the headache pounding at the back of his skull indicated a need for the unfamiliar stuff—but sleep wasn't going to cure the restlessness that had been crawling along his hide for the past couple of weeks. What he needed was the good solid prowl he'd had planned for the end of his shift, the one he'd had to abandon in order to get the wolf to the vet.

After nearly three weeks of double and triple shifts for himself and the two deputies he employed who hadn't succumbed to the latest flu that was going around, Eli thought he deserved a few hours cut loose, shed his human skin, and let the beast inside him out to run. Instead, he'd barely gotten his uniform collar unbuttoned before he'd scented the blood.

He hadn't heard the shot, which was strange, but between the growl of his SUV's engine, the crackle of his police scanner, and the voice on the cell phone he'd held to his ear, he supposed there was a chance he'd just missed it. It had been another long shift, after all, at the end of another long week of them, and he'd been on the phone with Ramsey when he pulled into the gravel parking area at the edge of the forest, so he supposed he should forgive himself for his distraction. He hadn't realized anything was wrong until he'd stepped out of the truck and taken his first deep breath of the crisp spring air.

The sweet tang of fresh blood had filled his head and sent hunger momentarily stretching through him. Then he'd sniffed again and realized he wasn't smelling a fresh deer carcass or the remains

some coyote's rabbit dinner. The blood smelled heavier than that, with the curious bitterness of a predatory animal and the peculiar thickness of a large spill.

Something had been near death. Some *Lupine* had been near death.

It hadn't taken him long to find her. All he'd needed to do was follow his nose, and since he hadn't known precisely what he would find, he'd tracked the odor on two feet instead of four, with his radio in one hand and the other on the holster of his service revolver. His flashlight had stayed in his belt. After all, in the darkness he had the eyes of a cat.

She had fallen near the base of a huge pine tree, the kind of old growth that had always made the logging companies just a little bit nervous. A sniff and a quick touch had confirmed that she was still alive, so Eli had wasted no time in scooping her up and carrying her back to his truck, but he'd made no note of where he'd found her so he could return in the daylight and go over the scene. Cat's eyes or not, some things could still be overlooked in the dark.

Now that he'd deposited the *Lupine* safely in the doctor's care, Eli couldn't stop thinking about the incongruity of the situation. Hunters rarely roamed the area around Stone Creek. The town's reputation reached too far for most people to feel real comfortable about shooting something that might or might not have passed them in the Home Depot a few hours earlier. Even the fundamentalists who liked to talk big about how Others were abominations who should be hunted down and killed tended not to like the odds of getting away with taking that kind of action in a place where two-thirds of the local population was something other than human.

Which meant that only locals tended to hunt in the local forests, and most of them did so the old-fashioned way—on all fours with their fur flying. The few who went out with rifles from time to time tended to respect the state-outlined game seasons, and right now the only things a body could legally shoot at were coyotes, cougars, and waterfowl. No one in Stone Creek hunted cougars or coyotes, and the middle of a dry pine forest wasn't exactly prime grounds for goose or duck.

So who had taken the shot that injured the *Lupine* currently stretched out on the vet's operating table, and what exactly had he been aiming at? Eli didn't imagine sleep would get any more appealing to him until he figured that out.

He rose from the doctor's stool he'd perched on when the door to the operating room opened at the other end of the short hall. When Dr. Barrett emerged in her stained green scrubs, Eli was watching.

"How did it go?"

She braced one hand against the small of her back and stretched wearily. "About as well as it could be, all things considered. The bullet wound was the easy part. We got that cleaned out and stitched, but the internal bleeding was what had us worried. Thankfully, we caught it before she lost enough to require a transfusion, because I'm not sure how to go about finding a donor match for a *Lupine*. The bleeding was in her spleen, which we had to take out, but theoretically, she should do fine without it."

"Theoretically?"

"Canines and humans can both live fairly normal lives after splenectomy, and I've never heard differently about *Lupines*, but I'm far from an expert on their anatomy and physiology."

Eli heard both the doctor's words and the hesitation behind them. He could also see a certain shadow in her serious brown eyes that told him there was more to the story than she'd already revealed.

"But?" he prompted.

"But, I can't be sure," she admitted. "I'll do some research tonight, but even so, it's a little too late to worry about it. I can't go and sew it back in, even if it hadn't been irreparably damaged by something other than the bullet."

"What do you mean?"

"You nailed the cause of the wound on her flank. A .50-caliber bullet grazed the left upper thigh, n

question. But that was a comparatively minor wound. It certainly didn't cause her internal injuries."

Eli frowned. "Then what did?"

"Some kind of blunt-force trauma, but I can't tell you what from. I'd have to shave her from her neck to her tail to check out the bruising before I could make a reasonable guess, and I'm not willing to do that. At this point, I don't want to cause her any unnecessary stress. Not to mention it will be a lot easier to keep her temperature up and out of shock territory if she keeps her fur coat."

"You really don't know a lot about Lupines if you think it wouldn't have grown back in a day or two," he murmured, his mouth quirking at one corner. Then his gaze fixed on the doctor's face, and a few traces of humor fled. "What?"

Dr. Barrett hesitated. "I'm not so sure about that."

Why did that one short sentence give Eli such a bad, bad feeling?

"I might be human," she continued, frowning, "and this might be the first Lupine I've ever admitted to my clinic, Sheriff Pace, but I grew up in Stone Creek. The Unveiling was no big surprise to me. I've been around shifters all my life. But this Lupine you brought me isn't healing like any shifter I've ever heard of."

"Meaning?"

"Were you not listening? She needed *stitches*."

That did sound odd. Most shifters had truly amazing healing powers. Wounds tended to knit almost while you watched, even faster during a shift. The fact that the Lupine had stayed in her wolf form had been one of the reasons Eli had known she needed medical attention.

"Serious wounds slow down the healing process," he said. "And I'm assuming whatever sedative you used is going to slow her down for a while, too."

"Probably, but I'll feel a lot better if that wound looks to be on a faster healing track tomorrow." Her frown lingered on her face, creasing the smooth skin between her brows. "It worries me that the internal injuries didn't appear to have even begun the healing process when I opened her up."

"Like I said, the worse she was hurt, the longer it will take her to heal. She'll make a big step forward once she wakes up long enough to shift."

The doctor shot him a sardonic glance. "While I'm sure you meant that to reassure me, let me say that I hope it doesn't happen before morning, because that will be the earliest I can set up a recovery space suitable for a human. Before that, she's taking the risk of waking up in a cage. I don't imagine that would go over well."

Eli shrugged. "If she's anything like me, she's woken up in stranger places."

Dr. Barrett looked up while she tugged at the ties on the back of her surgical gown. "Stranger than a vet's office?"

"Try in the middle of a kennel full of sled dogs."

A grin flashed across the doctor's face and nearly knocked Eli back on his ass. If anyone had asked him to describe the local veterinarian before tonight, he'd have summed her up like any other subject—approximately five-foot-three, maybe 120, brown and brown, with an average build and an average face. But that smile was anything but average. The expression transformed her face from an ordinary, intelligent visage to the enticing, impish countenance of a sexy pixie.

Wasn't that a hell of a thing?

"Hey, if you didn't wake up harnessed to the sled, I'd say you were doing pretty well," she observed, stripping off her gown and tossing the bundle of cloth into an open hamper against the wall. The scrubs she still wore beneath looked limp and wrinkled but noticeably less bloody.

They also covered a body that was noticeably less average than he had always assumed.

Eli coughed to cover his astonishment and shifted away from the counter with the built-in desk he had waited at during the surgery. "Tell that to the frostbite I nearly got on my butt. It was February, and

the dogs slept in the snow caves they dug for themselves. Well, they slept until they caught my scent. Then they mostly lunged around on the ends of their tie-outs and barked at me.”

He saw the flash of curiosity on the vet’s face and saw how she just as quickly pushed it aside. He heard that she’d grown up in Stone Creek, so it shouldn’t surprise him that she had her Othe etiquette down pat.

“Feline,” he explained, since she was being too polite to ask. “Lion. The dogs weren’t wild about my natural cologne.”

Her next expression, he couldn’t read so clearly. Nor could he figure out why that should bother him.

“What’s a lion doing out here? We don’t have much savanna in western Oregon.”

“I noticed that. No pride, either.” He shrugged. His family hadn’t understood his choices, either, but he’d made them for himself, not for anyone else. “There are only four prides in the United States right now, and last I heard none of them was looking for a Felix. If shifters stayed exclusively in the habit of their animal forms, we’d have overpopulated those areas and died out a long time ago. I’ve lived a few interesting places over the years.”

“Well, our Lupine friend might not have lived as adventurous a life as you have,” she said, and she looked away from him to a desk full of office supplies. Pulling out an empty manila folder and a printed form, she began to make notes in a new medical chart. “No doubt both of us would feel better if we at least knew who she is and if anyone out there is missing her.”

Eli stared at a pair of hands that looked too small and delicate to dig around inside a living body, then caught himself and forced his gaze back to her face.

Her ordinary face, he reminded himself.

“Right. I’ll contact Richard Cobb and see if he knows anything. Even if he doesn’t, he’ll make sure the word gets out.”

The doctor nodded, acknowledging that the Alpha of the local Lupine pack was the proper person to consult on this. “I’d appreciate it if you could have someone from her family contact me as soon as possible. I really don’t think it’s appropriate for her to stay here for very long. Especially not once she loses the tail.”

“Once Cobb hears about this, he won’t let any grass grow under his feet. Trust me.”

Eli had to fight against the urge to look for an excuse to linger, which didn’t sit well with him, so he compensated by being perhaps a bit too brusque in making his farewells.

“Let me know how she does,” he grumbled, already striding for the back door. Clearly something about this room had begun to affect his sanity. Or maybe all those extra shifts were catching up with him. Either way, he figured the best thing for him to do was go. Quickly. “I’ll make sure Cobb finds out who she is by tomorrow, latest.”

“Thanks,” the doctor began, but she never finished.

Or if she did, Eli didn’t hear it. He was too busy executing one of the first strategic retreats of his life and wondering why it felt so much like running away.

Exp. 10-1017.03

Log 03-00119

Dosage administered to test subject (TS-0024) via intramuscular injection. Resistance made use of force necessary. Technician reported a struggle and injuries, both blunt force and penetrative.

Subject released post-administration and will remain under covert observation beginning after the twenty-four-hour estimated incubation period.

Remain hopeful that recent modifications will reduce incubation by 6–12 hours in secondary host.
Must wait and see what contact test subject achieves with control population.

CHAPTER TWO

Josie slept poorly that night. Whether it was because she spent the time on a hastily inflated mattress next to the Lupine's cage, or because she couldn't get her mind off her first real encounter with the local sheriff, she couldn't quite decide.

Well, okay, she could decide, but that didn't mean she was ready to admit to anything. Far from it, though what there was to admit to was another question. A slightly awkward encounter with a relative stranger? It wasn't like that had never happened to her before.

A quick glance into the cage near her head assured her that the Lupine remained calm and furred quite possibly because she was doped up on more pain meds than Josie had ever prescribed before—shifters metabolized drugs so fast that they required much larger doses than humans or animals in order to achieve the same levels of relief. Once Josie began to taper the dosages, hopefully her patient would regain the ability to answer some questions. Along with regaining her opposable thumbs.

With a groan, Josie rolled to her knees and then pushed herself reluctantly into a standing position. Somehow sleeping on an air mattress positioned on a linoleum-tile-covered concrete floor was a lot less comfortable at thirty-two than it had been at twenty-two. It hardly seemed fair. Nor did the amount of money she would have been willing to pay at this point for half an hour to herself with a cup of coffee and a very hot shower. Unfortunately, given that it was Sunday, the clinic was closed and her staff had the day off, she'd be lucky to get her wish within the next four hours.

It was days like this when she began to seriously consider taking on an associate. Providing she could find an associate willing to work for beans and relocate to the most remote northwestern corner of Oregon.

Josie grimaced and forced herself to begin making the rounds of all of her currently hospitalized patients. In addition to the Lupine, she had George Carpenter's Irish setter, Jenny, who had taken her pursuit of a grouse a little too seriously and broken her leg in a rabbit hole she hadn't seen coming. The bone had been set on Saturday afternoon, but given Jenny's age—eight on her last birthday—Josie had felt more comfortable keeping her overnight before sending her home.

Then there was Clovis, Mrs. Patterson's cantankerous Siamese cat, who just couldn't seem to keep his nose out of anything, including a spilled bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream liqueur. Clovis had been, to put it politely, three sheets to the wind when his owner had rushed him in yesterday convinced this his unsteady gate meant that he'd suffered a stroke and consequently would be permanently brain damaged.

Josie had valiantly resisted the urge to observe that the brain damage might very well have preceded the alcohol poisoning.

Judging by the yowls currently emitting from Clovis's cage, it sounded as if the activated charcoal and IV treatments had done their job overnight. Chalk up another victory for the good guys.

Still wishing violently for coffee, Josie grabbed a pen and began making notations in everyone's charts until her brain woke up enough to begin her actual examinations. Without caffeine, that could

take a few more minutes.

She was just reaching for the latch on Jenny's cage when the door from the front office opened and a familiar figure bowled inside.

"Morning, Doc," the young man said, looking much too cheerful for six thirty on a Sunday. "Andre gave me the heads-up that we had a new patient as of last night, so I thought you might be able to use an extra hand this morning."

"A blessing on your house, Benjamin Broder," Josie said with feeling. "Remind me to pay you overtime for this."

"You got it!" The youngest of her vet techs peered around her into the Lupine's cage. "Is that her? Is she really a werewolf?"

"Yes, and don't call her a werewolf. It's considered insulting. She's Lupine. Or a shifter."

"Right. So right now, she looks like a wolf, but she's actually human some of the time?"

"Yes."

"So why's she here and not over at Dr. Shad's office? His practice sees humans and Others, doesn't it?"

Josie didn't mention how much she'd prefer to trade her patient with the local physician, but she thought about it. She'd actually been thinking about it for a good many hours now.

"Because it was an emergency, and the sheriff didn't want to take the time to drive her all the way into Astoria to the hospital while she was bleeding pretty badly," she explained, proud to hear that her work at sounding calm and reasonable seemed to be paying off. "Plus, it's one of Dr. Shad's 'Gone Fishing' weekends, so it wasn't like he could have been called in on an emergency basis."

"But are you even qualified to treat a huma—er, a humanish patient?"

Josie glared at her employee. "Does she look very human to you at the moment?"

"Okay, fair point."

"Gee, thanks."

Ben shrugged. "I didn't mean to say you *couldn't* treat a person, just that I wasn't sure if you *should*, if you know what I mean. I mean, with liability and all that."

"Please, do not mention that word in this clinic." Josie shuddered. "Imagining the look in my insurance agent's eye is enough to make me reconsider joining a convent."

"Old Dr. Barrett would probably be all for that idea," he teased.

Josie thought of her father, the one who had sold her his own veterinary practice when he'd decided it was time to retire, and of the way he still called her his baby girl and glared at her every time she mentioned a date. "Yeah, well, he's already had to adjust to the idea that he doesn't set my curfew anymore, so I'm sure he'll be able to adjust to me shelving that idea again."

Before Ben could start asking more questions, Josie piled the day's patient charts into his arms and switched back to doctor mode. "Today we just have Jenny, Clovis, and the Lupine, knock wood," she said briskly. "Jenny can go home if Mr. Carpenter comes by to pick her up. Just make sure he has the broken-bone aftercare sheet, and remind him to call if he has any concerns, or if she seems to be in pain. It was a simple closed fracture, and we got it aligned really well before we put the cast on, but I'll give him a day or two worth of pain meds, even though she may not need them. Make sure you see him up with an appointment for four weeks from now, though, for follow-up."

She went over Clovis's situation briefly, then turned and frowned into the Lupine's cage. "I'm going to call and leave a message for Dr. Shad in a minute, but until either she shifts or we hear from him, we're just going to manage her condition instead of her species." She outlined last night's procedures for Ben and reviewed her chart notes. "You'll need to check her incision and wound site and change the dressings, but other than that, at the moment we're just monitoring her. The biggest worry, of course, is infection, but it's also a little weird that she hadn't fully regained consciousness

tried to shift yet.”

Ben hummed in agreement, his pen busy making notes of her instructions.

Josie pursed her lips. “Do me a favor and do a draw on her. I can run a CBC to check for any kind of underlying infection that might be compromising her system, and I’d like to double-check the concentration of her meds. I looked a dosage up online last night, but I’m a little paranoid about getting it right for her.”

“Got it.” Ben crossed a *t*, dotted an *i*, and looked up. “Anything else?”

“Nope, just the usual for the rest.”

“No problem. I’ve got it under control. And since that’s the case, why don’t you go upstairs and get a shower or some coffee or something? You look like you could use it.”

“Thanks, I will.” She turned toward the door, then paused. “I have to feed Bruce first, though. He slept in the file room last night. I think he was mad that he didn’t get the pizza I promised him.”

Ben waved her away. “I’ll take care of him. He’s still asleep at the moment. I heard him snoring when I came in.”

“Thanks, Ben. I really appreciate this. It’s been a crazy weekend so far, and I really—”

“Need a shower. You still smell like Betadine,” Ben finished for her, grinning.

Josie rolled her eyes, but she obediently made her way out the rear exit of the clinic and up the outdoor back stair to her apartment on the house’s top floor.

Stripping off her worn scrubs made an instantaneous difference in her attitude, but it wasn’t until she stepped under the steaming spray of her shower that she really began to feel something resembling normal again. She raised her face to the stream of water and slicked back her hair while her mind turned toward the next item on her agenda. Oddly enough, that item turned out to be not coffee, but the rather unexpected figure of Stone Creek’s newest sheriff.

Newest, of course, was a relative term. From what Josie knew, Eli Pace had moved to town a little more than three years ago in order to take up his current position in law enforcement. If the small town gossip mill was correct, he’d previously lived and worked in Seattle, having served as a detective on that city’s police force. More than one resident of Stone Creek had wondered what would make a man in his thirties with a successful career in the big city move to their remote little corner of the Northwest, away from all the culture, nightlife, and eligible women a more metropolitan setting had to offer. A small betting pool had quickly been established, and word down at the tavern said the current odds favored a woman at the root of it, either divorce, death, or nasty breakup.

Personally, after last night, Josie felt she needed to lay her money on death, because she couldn’t possibly imagine what kind of lunatic would deliberately end a relationship with the man who carried an injured wolf into her clinic in the dead of night. Had she been blind not to realize how handsome that man was?

Josie blinked hard, sending drops of water flying back toward their source.

Wow, that thought had certainly snuck up on her. Had she honestly developed a case of the hots for a man she’d never spoken to before last night?

Rinsing the last of the conditioner from her hair, Josie reached for the faucet and shut off the water. A few twists of cloth and she had both hair and body wrapped in terry toweling and a frown still on her face as she padded back into her bedroom to dress.

Admittedly, there was nothing odd about her finding the sheriff attractive. She, after all, was *blind*, and she would have to be not to notice the very fine physical attributes of a well-built, six-foot-tall man when one stood right in front of her. Josie had definitely noticed, everything from a pair of ridiculously broad shoulders and a correspondingly wide chest to callused, long-fingered hands to long legs and slim hips that somehow looked even sexier when slung with a heavy utility belt and holster.

And then there had been those eyes, green and glittering and fringed with surprisingly black, thin

lashes for a man with sun-streaked, toffee-colored hair. The memory of those eyes stayed with her. She could picture them now, intent and unreadable, seeming to follow her every move without revealing a single thought of his own. How in the world had she missed noticing those eyes before last night?

Josie snorted and yanked up the zipper on her jeans. It had probably been quite easy, she acknowledged, scuffing her feet into a pair of battered loafers and heading back to the bath to dry her hair. She had never seen him in his animal form, and Josie had never been the kind of girl to notice much that wasn't covered in fur.

Whether it came from growing up in a rural community known for a population made up two-thirds of Others, or from growing up as the daughter of the only veterinarian for twenty miles, Josie couldn't be sure. Either way, according to her mother her first word had been *kitty* and the first birthday Christmas present she'd ever asked for had been her own puppy. And a stethoscope. No one had ever doubted what the youngest Barrett girl was going to be when she grew up, least of all Josie. Unfortunately, at the age of five, she hadn't considered what a single-minded focus on her future career path would mean for her social life.

Or the lack thereof.

Bundling her mostly dry brown hair into its usual ponytail, Josie grabbed her keys and her wallet and left her apartment, thumping down the stairs to the small parking area at the back of the clinic. On the small patch of grass between the blacktop and the building, a familiar figure waited for her with inexhaustible patience.

"Morning, Bruce," Josie greeted cautiously. "Does this mean that you've forgiven me for the pizza thing?"

Chocolatey brown eyes blinked at her from beneath grizzled gray eyebrows, but Bruce's expression remained impassive.

"Oh, I get it. You've decided the only way I can atone for last night is to spring for breakfast this morning, is that it?"

Bruce's plummy tail wagged in response.

"All right, then. Come on. I'm headed to the bakery anyway. We'll see what Mark has on offer."

With a satisfied grunt, Bruce pushed up from his sitting position and fell into step at his mistress's side.

Josie rounded the corner of the clinic building and set off down the quiet, tree-lined side street toward the center of town. The walk would take less than five minutes, given the fact that Stone Creek didn't consist of much town, but with her thoughts still jumbled, likely the exercise would do her good. And at the end of it, there would be coffee.

The center of Stone Creek remained quiet at not-quite-eight on a Sunday morning, and Josie and Bruce made their way down Main Street without running into more than two or three acquaintances. None of them, thankfully, stopped Josie to ask a question about their pets.

She couldn't help casting a glance toward the historic brick building that housed both the town hall offices and the police station as she passed, but the nineteenth-century facade offered no clues as to what might be happening inside. Still, it took a concentrated effort to pull her gaze away and focus back on the clapboard front of the Sweet Spot Bakery & Café. As soon as she opened the door, though, the small shop received all of her attention. The seductive scent of coffee, yeast, and cinnamon lured her inside like a magic spell.

A quick command had Bruce settling with disgruntled grace in front of the plate-glass window while Josie made her way inside.

"Mark Hennessey, I swear to God, if I didn't love you with all my stomach, I'd report you to the Inquisition for practicing witchcraft."

A shaggy, sandy-haired figure stepped through an open doorway behind the tall glass counter wiping his hands on an already smeared white apron.

“If you’re referring to the Spanish Inquisition, it was formally disbanded in 1834. And the Roman one changed its name in 1908. But since I’m not Catholic, I don’t think either one really has jurisdiction over my baked goods.”

Her eyes fixed on the trays full of gooey, doughy, sugar-laden treats already on display, Josie didn’t even bother to look up to catch the local baker’s smirk. She didn’t need to. Their morning routine had been established years ago. “So you don’t deny that you use unnatural means to create your confections.”

“Josephine, baby, if you knew how I created my confections, you’d never look at another man again.”

“What makes you think I look at any of them now?”

“You know, I had always assumed that you just *performed* de-sexing operations, not underwent them yourself. Then again, I could be wrong.”

“You can be the queen of England if you want, as long as you give me three of everything and a extra-large coffee with cream before you leave to take up your royal duties.”

Mark was already reaching for a stack of tall paper cups. “Nah. I mean, don’t get me wrong; it’s not like I haven’t considered it as a career change, but I’d look funny in those little veiled hats.”

“Not to mention the pantyhose.” Josie handed her old high school buddy a packet of raw sugar on the counter, then leaned her elbows on the polished wooden surface while he diluted her beverage with enough dairy product for any five people. “So what’s good this morning?”

He threw her a dirty look as he dumped in the sugar. “Have I ever made anything that wasn’t good?”

Josie thought for a moment. “There was that first loaf of rye bread you attempted. The thing could have served as a boat anchor.”

“I was thirteen. It was more than fifteen years ago. I think you need to move on. My breads have.”

“Yes, but your breads are more evolved than I am.”

The first sip Josie took had her eyes closing and her throat humming. No one made coffee like Mark. If she hadn’t remembered the way he’d looked in his Peter Pan costume during their sixth-grade play, she’d have proposed to him the minute she turned eighteen. And that would have really pissed off his wife.

When she managed to pry her lids back up, she tried again. “Okay, let me put it this way. What do you have today that will meet Sir Bruce’s exacting culinary standards?”

“And not get your license revoked by the state veterinary board? I’ve got naturally sweetened organic carrot muffins. He liked those last time.”

“Hm, give me two. He’s pretty pissed at me.”

Mark snapped open a folded sheet of parchment and reached for the tray of muffins. “What did you do this time?”

Josie made a face. “I reneged on pizza night. But it wasn’t my fault. I had an emergency.”

“As if that’s any kind of excuse. A woman’s word should be her bond.”

“So he’s made clear. I’m hoping this will at least get him to speak to me again.” Accepting the tray he handed her, Josie headed toward the door and her grudge-holding pet. “How about you warm me up a cinnamon roll while I go beg for forgiveness?”

A moment later she left Bruce on the sidewalk under the bakery window, happily feasting on the warm muffins and bowl of bottled springwater that Mark had provided. When she stepped back into the shop, her friend was busy transferring huge chocolate chip cookies from a sheet pan to a bright red plate in the glass display case.

A huge, frosted cinnamon roll sat on a smaller blue saucer on the counter beside her coffee.

“You are a saint,” she breathed, reaching for the roll with one hand and a stack of napkins with the other.

“Sarah tells me that all the time,” he agreed. “‘A saint among husbands’ is how she likes to put it.”

“I won’t go there, but I’ll totally vouch for a saint among bakers.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. Especially not when you’re eating the very thing you swore last week that you were going to give up for Lent.”

Josie swallowed a gulp of coffee and grinned. “I’m not Catholic, either. Besides, I deserve a cinnamon roll, darn it. I had to sleep in the clinic last night, and I swear you can feel how cold and hard that floor is even through the air mattress.”

“Busy night?”

She shrugged. “Just one emergency, but it was pretty serious. Had to go into surgery.”

“Anyone I know?”

Josie started to shake her head, then hesitated. In a town with fewer than three thousand residents, most everyone in Stone Creek knew most everyone else, including their pets, but a wolf wasn’t a pet, so her initial reaction was to deny that Mark might know her patient. Then again, her patient wasn’t actually a wolf, was she? And since Josie still had no idea of the Lupine’s human identity, how did she really know if Mark knew her or not?

“We’re still waiting to contact the . . . owners,” she finally said, looking away and busying herself carrying her breakfast over to one of the three small tables in the corner of the shop. “I probably shouldn’t say anything until I’ve talked to them.”

Mark shrugged his agreement, but his brow quirked up as he repeated, “We? I thought you played the saint and gave your entire staff Sundays off so you could martyr yourself on the altar of overwork.”

“Funny. As it happens, Ben came in to help me out today, but I wasn’t talking about my staff. I meant me and the sheriff. He’s the one who found my patient and brought her in.”

“Eli brought you an injured animal?”

“Why not? Sheriffs are supposed to be like grown-up Boy Scouts, right?” Josie pulled off another chunk of soft, sticky dough and eyed her friend. “But when did you get to be on a first-name basis with the local fuzz?”

“This is the closest thing to a doughnut shop in thirty miles,” a new voice answered, and Mark and Josie both looked toward the door to where the man in question stood, wearing a crisp blue uniform and an amused expression. “Mark was the first local resident I introduced myself to.”

Gasping with a mouthful of cinnamon roll nearly caused Josie to choke. She grabbed quickly for her coffee and took a healthy swig to wash down the bite and used a napkin to wipe her eyes when they started to water.

“Dr. Barrett, are you all right?” the sheriff asked, focusing his bright green gaze on her. “Do you need some help?”

Josie waved a hand at him and shook her head. “No. Sorry.” She gasped for air. “You just startled me. I’m fine.”

“Oh, good,” Mark said mildly. “Deaths on the premises are really bad for business. For some reason, they seem to upset the customers.”

“Speaking of customers,” Eli broke in, “I was wondering if one of yours might belong to the fellow loitering out front.”

Josie wiped her fingers on a stack of napkins as she struggled to regain her composure. Why did she always seem to be at her least cool and collected in front of a good-looking man?

“Bruce is my dog, Sheriff,” she said, striving for a mild tone. “Is there a problem with him?”

Eli shook his head. “Not at all, Doctor. I was actually just going to compliment whoever had trained

him to sit and wait like that without even tying him to anything. I've never seen a more well-behaved dog. You should be proud."

Mark snorted. "It's Bruce who should be proud. Josie had very little to do with it."

Josie shot her friend a glare, but she shrugged when she turned back to the sheriff. "Mark is unfortunately right. I really haven't done much training with Bruce at all. I think the reason he doesn't wander has more to do with the fact that he's one of the laziest animals on the face of the earth than that it's what I told him to do."

"Last year I watched him sleep through the entire July Fourth fireworks display," Mark agreed. "And we were only sitting like fifty feet from where they were setting them off. Most people had locked their dogs inside their houses. Bruce lay down on our blanket in Kirkland Field and snored through the whole thing."

"And, trust me, his snores were almost louder than the explosions."

Eli grinned. "That's some dog. Where did you get him?"

"He got me," Josie corrected, her fingers pulling idly on the rim of her coffee cup. "I was working late one night, running labs, and I heard a noise coming from the parking lot behind the clinic. When I opened the door to look out and see what it was, Bruce strolled in and made himself at home. He was only about four months old at that point, but he already had paws the size of dinner plates."

"Yeah, I noticed that. What is he, do you think? Part Great Dane?"

Josie shrugged. "I usually go with mostly Irish wolfhound and mastiff, with maybe some Saint Bernard thrown in, but that's purely a guess."

"He does like brandy," Mark agreed, "so it's a good guess." He dropped the sheet pan onto the counter behind him and smiled at the sheriff. "So what can I do for you, Eli? I don't do doughnuts on Sundays, but I've got the cinnamon rolls, and I think the scones came out pretty well today."

"I'll take a bribery box to go," Eli said. "And coffee for three. If I go back to the station empty-handed, I'll end up locked in one of my own cells. But believe it or not, I didn't actually come in here for pastries. I was just walking by when I looked through the window and saw Dr. Barrett. She's the one I've been looking for."

Exp. 10-1017.03

Log 03-00122

Unable to locate TS-0024. May be required to adjust staffing if performance does not improve.

New dosages to be administered immediately to new subjects. Goal includes TS-0025 through TS-0029. At least three new subjects required for sufficient data.

The early methodology will be adjusted. Clearly more than one subject will be required in order for sufficient levels of transmission to be achieved.

Looking into radio tracking equipment for Stage 4. Remain optimistic as to ultimate project success.

CHAPTER THREE

The one I've been looking for.

Something inside Josie sprang to life at the sound of those words, but that something wasn't entirely comfortable. Exciting, but not comfortable. The sheriff made it sound more like a sacred prophecy or a statement of personal intent than the matter of business she assured herself it had to be. It *had* to be.

Josie ignored the surge of fluttery butterfly wings in her stomach and took a casual sip of her coffee. "You were looking for me? I hope I'm not wanted for questioning in anything."

"Not at all. I just wanted to ask you about your latest patient. How is she doing this morning?"

"About the same as she was when you left, unfortunately. I had hoped she'd be a bit more alert this morning."

Mark passed a fat white pastry box tied with white butcher's twine into the sheriff's hand, along with a tray containing three enormous take-away cups of coffee. While he made change, Eli kept his attention on Josie. She fought momentarily against the urge to fidget, then gave up and stood to drop the remains of her cinnamon roll into the trash.

"She hasn't changed then?"

Josie shook her head. "Not as of about ninety minutes ago, but I should be getting back to check on her again." She turned toward the counter, even while her body began inching toward the door. "Mark's delicious as always. I left a ridiculous yet appropriate fee on my table. Tell Sarah hello for me and I'll see her tomorrow morning."

"Hold on and I'll walk with you," Eli said, pocketing his change and picking the coffee tray up again. He gestured toward the door.

Josie wasn't sure if the surge of adrenaline in her veins signified excitement or panic. Either way, she figured it meant danger.

She forced a smile. "Don't be silly. I'm going in the opposite direction from you. I don't want to take you out of your way."

His expression hinted that he found her dithering amusing, but he was polite enough not to mention it. He just followed her out the door with a last nod for Mark and fell into step beside her as she made her way back down Main. Bruce abandoned his final inspection of his crumb-free tray to follow their heels.

"It's not like there's much way to go out of in Stone Creek," he observed evenly. "It won't be much more than five extra minutes. Besides, I'd like to look in on your patient for myself."

Josie clung to her coffee cup like a life rope and tried for a casual tone. Since the sheriff hadn't given any indication that he suffered from the same heightened awareness around her that she felt around him, letting him see her discomposure would inevitably lead to humiliation, she was sure.

"I take it that you haven't heard anything about her identity yet," she said, watching the steam curl up from the hole in the rim of her cup. It kept her from staring at his shoulders. "Since you haven't

mentioned anything.”

Eli shook his head. “I left Rick a message last night, but he hasn’t called me yet. It’s still early though. Trust me, as soon as I know, you will.”

“I’d appreciate that. I did the same with Dr. Shad. I’ll feel a lot more comfortable when I can turn her over to his care. It doesn’t seem right somehow, having her in a cage in a veterinary office, no matter what she looks like at the moment.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Josie saw his mouth quirk up in a smile. “Speaking as someone who can imagine what that would be like, I feel compelled to thank you for being so conscientious. But no matter who she turns out to be, I’m sure our Lupine will be too grateful to you for saving her life to hold a grudge over her accommodations.”

Josie shrugged uncomfortably. “Still.”

Just as the sheriff had implied, the distance between Main Street, where his office and the bakery were both located, and her clinic on Pine Street took all of two more minutes to cover. Stepping through the back door into the open space of the triage area, Josie took a deep breath of the disinfected air and felt her nerves settle just a bit. Being back in her element made her feel more like a competent professional woman and less like a junior high school girl with her first crush.

“Oh, good, you’re back,” Ben greeted, leaning down to scratch Bruce’s ears as the huge mutt ambled past on the way to his fluffy, padded bed behind the reception desk. “Sheriff Pace. Did you come to check on the Lupine? Dr. J said you were the one who brought her in last night.”

Eli nodded, setting his parcels down on the nearest section of free counter space. “I did, even though I’m told there isn’t much change.”

“Not so far.” Ben looked back at Josie. “While you were gone, though, I did start running those tests you asked for.”

That effectively managed to pull the last straggling bits of her attention off the sheriff and back onto her work where it belonged. “How do things look?”

“Interesting.”

“And that means?”

“You’re the doctor. You get to tell me, as soon as you take a look at them.”

“Right.” Her fingers itched to get ahold of those test results, and she actually took a couple of steps toward the CBC machine before she remembered the sheriff standing near the door behind her. Cursing to herself, she threw him a smile and gestured toward the kennel room. “Why don’t I take you to see the Lupine first, Sheriff? I’m sure you must be anxious to get back to work yourself.”

His mouth curved again in that smile Josie was convinced meant he wanted to laugh at her but was too polite to actually do. As if that made some sort of difference.

“No, I can see that you’ve got another busy day ahead of you, Dr. Barrett. And your assistant says there hasn’t been any real change since last night. I can wait until she’s more alert. I always find it easier to take statements from witnesses when they’re actually awake.”

“In this case, you might also want to wait until she rearranges her hyoid bone.”

Josie blushed at the sharp tone of her comment. Clearly she needed to avoid the sheriff in future if he was going to send her emotional reactions into such turmoil. There could be health risks.

She formed a smile to soften her explanation. “The bone people have in their throats between the jaw and the spine. Its form and placement are requirements for human speech. Wolves have it up high under their tongues and use it more for breathing and swallowing than vocalization.”

“Good to know.”

He picked up his coffee and baked goods, and this time he sent Josie a full-fledged smile, which should have been a relief after all those secretly amused half smiles of his, but it really wasn’t. Instead it sent her blood pressure through the roof and had the butterflies in her stomach forming a veil.

enthusiastic conga line.

"I'd appreciate a call as soon as the Lupine wakes up, and I'll definitely shoot one to you when I hear back from Rick." Eli nodded at Ben, smiled once more at Josie, and shouldered open the door. "You two have a good day, now."

With that, he was gone, and Josie had to lock her knees to keep from dissolving into a heap on the linoleum tile.

"Um, wow. Wasn't expecting that," Ben ventured after a moment of buzzing silence.

"Expecting what?"

He looked at her with patent incredulity. "Was I not supposed to notice that the sparks you two were shooting off each other nearly triggered the fire sprinklers? Because I like my job, and I can pretend if I have to, but I'd like it noted in my next performance evaluation that I'm not actually that stupid."

Josie glared. "I don't know what you're talking about. The sheriff and I barely know each other."

"Okay, then. One oblivious idiot coming up." He pulled out a chart and flipped it open. "Do you want to take a look at the Lupine's CBC then?"

Her lips pursed. "Yes. Why don't we do that?"

He shuffled a printout to the top of the file and held it out for her, his mouth silent and his expression carefully blank. Josie rolled her eyes and then focused them on the test results.

She had wanted to run a complete blood count for a couple of different reasons. One was simple curiosity. She had never treated an Other before, but she had grown up around them, so she had heard all about their remarkable healing powers. The scientist in her couldn't resist seeing if evidence of that ability would show up in their blood work. But for the same reason, the very fact that the Lupine in her clinic wasn't showing much evidence of accelerated healing had her a bit worried, and she wondered if there might be some sort of infection or unknown medical condition underlying her traumatic injuries. If so, that could help explain things. If the Other's body was preoccupied with trying to heal an acute or chronic condition that had preceded the shooting, maybe it didn't have the energy to spare to speed up the mending of her wounds. A look at her CBC results, and specifically her white blood cell count, might shed some light on that mystery.

Josie scanned the numbers on the lab report and blinked. Then she scanned them again. Then she frowned at Ben. "Did you look at these?"

The vet tech nodded. "Three times. Then I recalibrated the machine and reran the test. Then I looked at them another three times. The results are valid. Wacky as all get-out, but valid."

"And you rechecked her vitals?"

"Twice."

"No sign of fever or anything else?"

"Nada."

"This is totally weird."

"Tell me about it."

Josie read the numbers again and shook her head. "I need to find a reference where I can check these against Lupine normals. Maybe we're just using the wrong comparatives."

"I've already pulled something up." Ben waved toward the laptop computer that sat open and running on the desk built into the counters lining the inside wall of the triage room/lab space. "That was the first thing I did after running the second test. The numbers I circled are the ones that *still* look funky."

Mumbling to herself, Josie hooked an ankle around the wheeled physician's stool and pulled it over from the desk, perching on it as she peered at the computer screen. Her finger followed the numbers on the printout as she compared them over and over against the values on the screen.

"This is just crazy."

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