



Mongrel (Valleywood Season Three)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Levi is an omega, and his status is one of only three things his half-wolf mother ever bequeathed to him. Her good looks and her ability to do a bit of folk magic were the other two things. His father, who was fully human, left him nothing at all, and he'd been trying his best all his life just to get by. He has a "friend" from childhood who leads a vicious and dangerous neighborhood gang of Mongrels and misfits and they've been trying to recruit Levi as a member.

He's tempted out of sheer desperation and loneliness, but when a handsome special agent and purebred Alpha wolf unexpectedly appears in Valleywood, full of questions about the gang and Levi's role in it, Levi finds himself in trouble. He wants to cooperate, but after all, he's no snitch.

Meanwhile, his old friend and gang leader, Willie Watusi, has a new and nefarious get-rich quick scheme that is bizarre and macabre to say the least—and it comes complete with a curse that he wants Levi to remove.

The Alpha wolf is attracted to Levi almost against his will but soon has to take him under his protection to save him not only from the Mongrel gang but from a dangerous and potentially deadly curse. Buried treasure, magic, Alpha/omega, dark secrets, knotting and revenge all come together in this story of love, intrigue and mpreg—and a dog named Nugget.

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“Even big bad wolves can be good.”

-- Ronald Blackwell, Lil' Red Riding Hood lyrics

Levi

The trouble with pure-bred wolves and Alphas—and there was almost always trouble with them—was that they were so good looking, and so dominant and so persuasive that they intimidated the hell out of people.

Well...me—they intimidated me.

I fuckin’ knew better than to get mixed up with one of them in any kind of way, and yet here I was, drumming my fingernails impatiently on this bar as I waited for the Alpha wolf I had come here to meet.

Why had I even agreed to this? The word “No” had been trembling on my lips, and I was all ready to turn him down flat when he asked me to meet him somewhere after work. But then he favored me with a long look out of those gorgeous brown eyes with the sinfully thick eyelashes and leaned in close, his scent taking my breath away and scrambling my brain cells.

“Would you meet me somewhere after work tonight, sweetheart?” he asked. My good intentions to tell him there was no fucking way had folded up like a cheap card table and collapsed.

“If you want me to, I will, sir,” I replied, breathlessly.

I know. I know. It's embarrassing.

Had he mesmerized me in some way? I thought so. That had to be it, as there was no other explanation. He had smiled his slow, seductive smile at me and several of my brain cells fainted dead away on the floor.

That morning, when he'd come into the café where I worked, the first thing I'd noticed about him was how hard it was to breathe when I saw him. It was hard not to notice that about him, considering he had taken up most of the oxygen in the room. He was big, even compared to other Alphas, and he had a face like a movie star, with high cheekbones and a stubborn mouth. His hair was like dark mahogany wood, and he had chocolate brown eyes, fringed with those thick, dark lashes. He was older than me, maybe in his late twenties or maybe as old as thirty, but gods, he was a gorgeous man. I lurked in a back corner of the dining room at first, pretending to be busy clearing a table while he talked to the manager. It was just so I could study him a bit, because it really was rare to see such a fine specimen.

I mean, the arrogance just shone right out of him. Gods help me, he was everything I'd ever fantasized about. And as a shifter, a pure-bred wolf, and an Alpha, he was a walking trifecta of trouble.

My mother used to tell me that status didn't matter. Pure-breds and Alphas were no better than any of the rest of us, she said. But then, she was an omega, and she'd passed that on to me, which accounted for at least some of my intense reaction to him. My status was about the only thing my Mongrel wolf mother ever bequeathed to me. That and her remarkable good looks.

It wasn't at all unusual for a Mongrel to be really good looking. Hybrids often were, though my mother was a stand-out among our kind. She was probably the best and most beautiful person I ever knew. She was good and sweet and kind and loving. She was a walking example of her favorite saying—a person didn't need to be pure-bred

to be pure at heart.

My thick, shiny hair, my golden skin and good bone structure had come directly from her, but my green eyes were courtesy of my human father, who was no slouch in the looks department either. Their good genes had only failed me in height—I topped out at five feet seven when I was fourteen and had never grown an inch since. I wasn't complaining though. Not too much anyway.

It wasn't bragging to say I looked good, because I was no different than most Mongrels, who were known to be hard to resist. That was why there were so many of us. Both humans and pure-bred wolves found us highly desirable and just couldn't leave us alone. It seemed that human and wolf DNA mixed really well together and produced some remarkable offspring.

We weren't good enough for the wolves to actually marry us, of course, though some couples defied tradition and stayed together. It was rare, though. Mostly it was a "love 'em and leave 'em" situation, which didn't exactly inspire a great deal of love or trust in our hearts for the pure-breds.

There was another fly in the ointment, too, and maybe one of the reasons we were left so much. To be honest Mongrels simply didn't have great personalities. They could be...unpredictable. Okay, I may as well set the record straight—they weren't really unpredictable at all. They had predictably bad tempers, were mostly batshit crazy and were mean as hell. And I say this as a Mongrel myself.

Another thing about us was that most of us couldn't shift successfully, like the pure-bloods could. If we tried, we might wind up with long floppy ears or maybe black noses. That was usually the extent of it. Sometimes canine teeth got longer, or a thick pelt of hair appeared all over our bodies. The most unfortunate thing that could happen was that a tail might develop at the base of our spines, or our faces might push out in a wolfhound-like snout.

I was spared that indignity, too, thank the gods, because I couldn't shift at all—not even a little. Nor did I ever want to, as it looked to be painful. But I was definitely in the minority. Most every Mongrel I knew blamed their lack of success in life on their mixed blood and inability to fully shift. Disregarding their laziness and their lack of work ethics, (or any other kind of ethics for that matter) they instead whined around about how badly the gods had treated them by giving them good looks, but not much else to recommend them. To hear them tell it, their lives were as miserable as that of poor old Prometheus, chained to a rock by Zeus, having to endure his liver being eaten by eagles every night for all eternity. And that just had to suck.

Anyway, the Mongrels believed that if they'd only been born full blooded shifters, they could have all been Alphas with their own packs, finding great success in life with their beauty and charm—despite the fact that Alphas weren't all that common. Most wolves were only betas and spent their lives taking orders.

Maybe it was because I was only a quarter wolf that I never felt disappointed in my lack of shifter status. My father had been fully human, while my mother was only half wolf. That made me a lowly, quarter-wolf omega, but I was okay with that for the most part. I had something that most Mongrels didn't have. I had inherited some of my mother's magic along with her beauty.

She never had the big, showy kind of magic that some in Valleywood had. People called her kind of magic "Conjure" or "Folk Magic." A Conjure man or woman who could do Hoodoo was uncommon in Valleywood, whose supernatural residents mostly had higher magic.

Hoodoo was mostly reserved for those with African or Haitian heritage, and my mother had a lot of that, at least on one side of her family. The other side had been whiter skinned, so she was mixed race, as was I. She was beautiful, with her black, wavy hair hanging down almost to her waist, and her remarkable eyes and skin the color of dark honey.

Anyway, Valleywood and its vibe and atmosphere must have really enhanced her talent in magic, because she helped a lot of people in our neighborhood. She also claimed that race had little to do with it. It was her opinion that it was economic status or the lack thereof that really mattered. Even poor people needed healing, she said, and they didn't always have money for a real doctor. So, they came to Conjures, like her, who had to work hard and hone their skills to help their friends and family.

My boss cleared his throat loudly and pointedly from across the room. He hated my daydreaming, as he called it. He made me jump and brought me right back to the current situation. The Alpha was on his way over to me, and I really didn't have time to chat with him. But he came up to me anyway and told me he had questions he needed to ask me. He wanted to know what time I got off, and at the time I thought he might be flirting, so I immediately stopped what I was doing to talk to him.

Still, I hesitated a little, because I had an audition the next day that I was worried about and hadn't really prepared for yet. I still had to learn my lines for it. I was only auditioning for a bit part in *The Blazing Inferno*, a soap opera that had been running for ages from XYZ Studios. It was always on everyone's cancellation list, but its fans were loyal, so it never got cancelled. Beggars couldn't be choosers, though, and I needed the work, or my agent was going to decide I was a total waste of his time and drop me.

I also had to finish clearing off all the tables after the breakfast rush and then sweep and mop the floors, and those activities, in addition to flirting with the handsome pure-blood had been mutually exclusive. But those eyes and that body called to me in a dark siren's voice.

I was all in—right up until he told me what he wanted to talk to me about.

“Where do you want to meet me after you get off work, sweetheart?” the big Alpha had said, looking me up and down with an intense gaze, and my knees seriously went

weak.

“Well, I don’t know. I’ve kind of got some things I need to do tonight,” I hedged, touching my hair and wondering if it looked okay.

“I promise I won’t take up much of your time,” he said in a low, sultry voice. He was standing much too close, and I could smell his luscious scent. He smelled like leather and lavender, with a hint of sage and cedarwood. It could have been his cologne, but I had a hunch that at least some of it was him.

“If you want me to meet you, sir, I can do that.”

“Thank you, honey,” he breathed, his lips perilously close to my ear. That was the point at which my brain cells apparently fell out on the floor.

“By the way, why do you have that southern accent?”

“What? Oh, my mama was from the North Georgia mountains. I guess I picked it up from her. My grandma too. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I think it’s cute.” He leaned in and whispered close to my ear. “Sexy.”

I was still feeling a little swoony when he said, “By the way, I need to ask you about a friend of yours by the name of Willie Watusi.”

My brain cells sat up in shock, stopped fanning themselves and said, “What? What did he just say?”

“I have a few questions, if you can spare me a little time. Maybe after your shift is over? What do you say?”

What did I say? I should be saying, “Hell no,” but agreement to whatever he said kept dripping out of me like a leaky faucet. No matter how much I disapproved of whatever Willie was doing with his time these days, I was no snitch. Besides, if Willie thought I had given out any information on him whatsoever, I’d be in some serious shit. He would fucking kill me.

“I-I... Well, I...don’t know. What makes you think I even know Willie? I mean, I might know him a little, but not all that well, really. Surely you can find somebody else to speak to.”

He gave me a skeptical look. “Really? That’s not the information I have. From what I understand, you and Mr. Watusi have a close, personal relationship.” He reached out to brush away a stray lock of my hair with his forefinger, and it felt like he was branding me.

“N-no. That-that’s not necessarily true. I barely know him,” I said, lying through my teeth. I’d known Willie since kindergarten. Willie’s grandma was from the south, just like my mother, and they’d passed on their southern accents to both of us. As the only kids in school that sounded like us, we hung out together sometimes at recess. But that had been a long time ago, and we didn’t run in the same circles anymore. Still, I’d practically grown up around him.

The Alpha gave me a look like he was disappointed in me for lying to him. Then he shook his head and smiled, glancing over at my boss who was hovering nearby. “I’d still like to speak to you, if you have a few moments. Do you want me to talk to your boss for you and smooth things over?”

“No, I don’t. Please. He won’t like that, and I’ll get in trouble.”

He gave me another slightly hurt look that made me feel like a bad-tempered punk with something to hide. Which I was, but he didn’t actually have any proof of that.

“How about later then, honey? After work? Isn’t there some other place you and I could talk? This is really important. You could be a big help, and I’d really appreciate it.”

A shiver went down my spine, but at the same time I couldn’t stop the slight eye roll. I hated it when Alphas or betas called me pet names like “honey,” in that sexist, condescending way that most of them used with omegas, trying to sweet-talk us. The fact that it totally worked with me just made it worse.

My heart was still trying to beat its way out of my chest because this Alpha was paying me so much attention, and I had that godawful butterflies-gone-wild feeling in my stomach. It was a part of my nature that I had little—okay, make that nonexistent—control when it came to gorgeous Alphas.

“It’s just that I don’t feel comfortable talking about Willie,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip a little and trying to take a step backward from him. He moved right along with me until I hit the wall behind me.

No way in hell was I going to say anything about Willie, because he was a vicious asshole with a memory like an elephant. He’d seriously kill me if he found out. This wolf needed to find somebody else to talk to and leave me alone, because I didn’t need any trouble. Willie had recently been hanging out with a group of Mongrels who had grown increasingly violent over the last few years, or so I’d heard. They were responsible for a lot of the crimes in the area that we locals simply called “the district,” though its actual name was Khepri City, or District 5. The streets we Mongrels had claimed as our own were in a bad area of the district. The Mongrels had claimed it as their “turf,” mostly because it was poor, and a lot of us lived there. Also, nobody else wanted anything to do with those squalid, narrow streets anyway.

It was where most of us lived, though. Our district was overseen by one of the gods, like all the districts in Valleywood were. His name was Apophis Khonus, and he

pretty much left us alone. So again, I wanted nothing to do with anything that would draw attention to me. I wanted nothing to do with whatever this was. It would only cause me trouble.

“Here’s my card—write down your name and number on the back so I can call you later. Maybe you’ll decide you can spare me just a little bit of your time.”

Because I was intimidated, and because I couldn’t seem to say no to him, I took his card and scribbled my name and number on the back. I took a glance at it though as I handed it back and saw his name—Rolf Degan. That was such a wolfy name.

I happened to know that “Rolf” literally meant something like “glorious wolf” in German and “Degan” came from an Old German word, too, meaning “warrior,” so the name seemed highly appropriate for him, if a little pretentious. There were many other packs living in the area, other than German ones, of course, all of which had their own traditions and even their own slight differences in biology. They were mostly from other European countries or from Canada or some from right here in America, but the ones most associated with my neighborhood tended to come from Germany. In fact, some of the pure-bloods like this Alpha even called us mixed breeds by the old German name, Mischling. It was a little derogatory—okay, make that a lot.

It was more or less synonymous with “slut,” or at least it was to us. But it was mostly the older, wealthier families who called us that, and I had a strong feeling this Rolf Degan might be from one of them.

But back to Willie—who really wasn’t exactly my friend—he claimed that he would have been an Alpha if not for his half-human mother. But then he would have done anything to get his hands on power and money and wasn’t too particular about how he came by it either.

I think craving power like that might have depended on how much emphasis your family put on having money and status when you were growing up. My mother hadn't cared much about money at all, though my human dad had been tight with his cash—tighter than a gnat's ass. He seemed to be always short of money, but he wasn't mean about it. Well, maybe he was a little bit—like telling me that Santa Claus had died every year just before Christmas, just so I wouldn't expect any big presents to magically appear on Christmas morning. He did that until I got old enough to catch on. My dad died from a heart attack just after his forty-fifth birthday, but I still kept the thermostat on sixty-five in the winter and eighty in the summertime because of his influence. Old habits died hard.

I handed Degan back the card and he looked down at it and smiled as he read it. “Your name is Levi? It suits you. No last name though? Do you go by just the single name, like Cher or Bono?”

I flushed. “No, my last name is Jones.”

“Well, Mr. Jones, it's nice to meet you, and I hope to see you again soon. I'll call you.”

He left then, but he was as good as his word. I got off my shift at 5:00 o'clock and had barely started walking home when my cell phone rang. When I answered, Rolf Degan said, “Are you still going to be able to meet me somewhere, Levi?”

I sighed. I was dying to see him again and dreading it at the same time.

“Yeah, okay. Meet me at Balls to the Wall. It's a bar on Twenty-seventh Street.” The Alpha chuckled at the name—at least I hope that's what he was chuckling about—and said he'd be there soon. I only hoped that when Rolf Degan saw this shabby gay bar where I'd suggested we meet, he didn't question my motives in inviting him there and immediately take offense. And if he was homophobic, like

some European wolves were known to be, he just might.

It was a calculated risk. Most Alphas were at least bisexual—at least they had no qualms about hooking up with omega males—but that wasn't always the case. They were a touchy and volatile bunch—and ready to fight at a moment's notice. Pure-bred wolves, like this one were also known to be a little short tempered, and Alphas were even worse than most. I'd heard it said that they were even bigger assholes than Mongrels, but that was saying a hell of a lot. I felt like I could speak on that subject with some authority, having trouble with my temper as well.

I was worried that this was a huge mistake, and already regretted saying that I would meet him. So that begs the question—why had I caved in and agreed to do it?

Because of the aforementioned muscles and good looks, that's why. What can I say? I was a bit of a Mischling, I guess. And don't forget, an omega, whose nature it was to agree to whatever an Alpha asked of them.

Twenty minutes later, there I sat in the crappy little bar, which was aptly named, and frankly, just as cheesy as it sounded. The more well-known bars in Valleywood like Wilde or Forbidden Underground were much nicer, but I didn't think they weren't exclusively for gay men like this one was. Too expensive for my blood, too. I had chosen this one because I thought meeting in this much smaller, much less well-known and much seedier place had been my best chance to keep this meeting a secret. That had been my plan anyway. Most people in the neighborhood I lived in knew about the place, though I'd never actually met anyone who admitted to going there.

But that wasn't why I wanted to meet him here. I had no designs on the guy, despite the fact that he was fucking gorgeous. Okay, maybe I did, but none I took seriously. He was gorgeous, and way the hell out of my league. Usually, the Alphas had an arrogance about them that made them easier to resist. Not Rolf. So, I reminded myself a stuck-up pure-bred would never bother with some Mischling like me, and I

tried to make myself believe it. Besides, he was probably some kind of law enforcement, and I tried to always steer clear of them.

I'd decided on this place because I figured my friend Willie Watusi and his group of mongrel thugs wouldn't be caught dead in here, or anywhere in the vicinity, because most Mongrels like Willie and his friends, hated anything gay. They also hated Democrats, liberals, Catholics, Hispanics, African Americans, Asian Americans, and anything or anyone they deemed "woke."

They didn't really know what that term meant, but they'd heard it on Fox News a few times and decided it was something they should probably be against.

They especially hated anyone and everyone who identified as LGBTQ+, so it followed that they wouldn't be likely to see me meeting the Alpha here in this gay bar, right? That had been my thinking, anyway. I thought it might be a good cover for me.

When I'd arrived and walked inside the bar for the first time in months, I remembered why I hadn't been there in a while. The place had seriously gone down since it changed ownership, and it was now just a complete dump. I took one look around and wondered what in the hell I'd been thinking suggesting this place for a meeting. I mean, despite its grimy walls and even grimmer patrons, I had always sort of liked it the few times I'd been there in the past. Now, I'd need to make sure my typhoid shots were up to date before I drank out of one of their bar glasses.

But the longer I sat there on my stool at the bar, waiting for the Alpha hottie to arrive, the more comfortable I began to feel. After all, I sure wasn't fancy myself and had never lived or worked in a fancy place. No use "putting on airs" like my father used to say. This was a place for outcasts and misfits, so maybe it was my kind of place after all.

There was certainly a free-spirit, anything goes vibe about the place. At any other time, I might have almost enjoyed it, but tonight my nerves were frayed all to pieces. I should never have agreed to meet Degan to answer his questions about Willie. In fact, it was my personal policy to never put myself in any kind of danger or difficulty whatsoever and to always keep myself out of the line of fire. I made it a rule never to stick my neck out for anybody. Not ever. But I couldn't seem to say no to Rolf Degan.

This bar was close to the café, at least, so I could stay in my own neighborhood. It helped me avoid all the hassle of getting a bus or paying for a Loxie to pick me up, which I couldn't afford in the first place. And best of all, Willie and his little group wouldn't be caught dead in the place. It was kind of perfect, except for one thing. It suddenly occurred to me that this Alpha I was meeting might not be any more thrilled about going there than Willie and his gang would have been.

This place didn't look like much from the outside—or from the inside either for that matter. It was a little hard to find, as there were none of the usual neon beer signs in the windows that I normally associated with bars. As a matter of fact, it didn't have any windows facing the sidewalk at all. Inside, it was dingy and dark, and the lighting was so dim it was hard to see the roaches on the floor or the ones crawling down the walls. That was probably by design, though.

I glanced down at my watch again and saw that Rolf Degan was late. He should have been there twenty minutes ago. Had he been so offended by my choice when he saw it from the outside that he'd not even bothered to come in?

As far as I knew we were still on track for meeting. I sighed impatiently. I'd give him a few more minutes and then I was out of there. Besides, a lot of people knew Willie. I sure as hell didn't have any special information.

Was this Alpha a cop? I thought so. There had been talk by city officials recently of

getting the police to put a stop to the worst of the Mongrel criminal activity for years. They seemed to have the idea, from the articles I'd read about it in the newspapers, that if they used pure-bred wolf-shifter cops, then they would be able to intimidate the Mongrels. The idea being that pure-bred wolves were so much stronger and smarter than we were. It simply proved that they didn't know shit about Mongrels. Or pure-breds either, for that matter.

The Mongrels were a savage and crazy bunch—and that was always a bad combination. Then again, the pure-breds didn't really give a shit about anyone but themselves. Cops in a position of power or those who were being paid well might be different, but it seemed to me that that idea was doomed to failure from the start.

If this Degan guy was a cop, which he more than likely was, seeing as how he had approached me out of the blue about Willie and his group, then I figured maybe the mayor, or somebody else in power had finally decided to crack down on Mongrel violence in the city. If the mayor had gotten the pure-breds interested, then that meant there must be a shit ton of money being offered. Those old, rich wolf families didn't do anything without there being something in it for them.

At any rate, I was sure that if that's what this was—a crackdown on the Mongrels—then it would end badly. Most wolves didn't get along great with other clans, but all the pure-breds hated and reviled the Mongrels. Really, if they ever did form a group to hunt them down, it would be an ugly incident waiting to happen. Mongrels were mean, but certainly no match for pure-breds. But here's the thing—they were stupid enough to fight them anyway.

If the city fathers were trying to get rid of us, we wouldn't go easy, so if and when the Mongrels resisted, it would be a total bloodbath. I wanted no part of it, really, but on the other hand, if it was coming anyway, then I guess I needed to know about it if for no other reason than to avoid it.

I turned around and scanned the room, in case I'd somehow missed him coming in. Not likely but I looked anyway. As an Alpha, he would have been hard to miss. Betas were the most commonly seen around the city, followed by omegas. More and more wolf shifters were coming in all the time, though, from all over the world to vibe off the magic in this city, which was pretty damn potent.

For the past couple of minutes as I'd waited, I'd been toying with a none-too-clean glass of cheap gin and tonic on the bar in front of me. A big, ugly guy came in from a back room, spotted me and did an almost comical double take. He was mostly naked and gave me a broad wink. Though I ignored him, he sidled over to me to try and get me to leave with him or go with him to a back room.

I said, "Not just no, but hell no," and even showed him my teeth, hoping to convince him that not only was I not the least bit interested, but that it would be a serious mistake to offer up any more conversational gambits to me. One thing I maybe forgot to mention was that like all Mongrels, I was pretty strong. Not as much as most, but stronger than a human, despite my small size.

When the idiot put his hands on my ass, I overreacted a bit, and the next thing I knew he was lying on the floor, crying about me breaking his arm—I did try to warn him.

The barman came out from behind the bar, yelling at me to get out. He had a metal baseball bat and started tapping it in his hand. And that was the exact moment the front door opened, and Rolf Degan sauntered in like he owned the place.

There I was, on that filthy barstool looking sideways at the bartender who was standing over me with a baseball bat in his meaty grip. The ugly, naked dude on the floor was still yelling and while I was momentarily distracted, the bartender hit me hard upside the head with his bat. I fell to the floor like a pole-axed steer.

Rolf waded into the brawl. When the smoke cleared and the dust settled, the

bartender and his three-hundred-pound bouncer, who had also come running from the back, had managed to throw us out the front door, because Rolf was pulling his punches, and he hadn't shifted, but the two of them were much the worse for wear. The bartender was crying about having to go to the hospital and the bouncer had both his eyes blackened for him and had lost a couple of teeth. Still, they managed to get us out on the sidewalk, and we were sprawled on our backs out front, looking up at the stars.

"That was fun," Rolf said, jumping to his feet with a big grin to offer me his hand. I waved him off and scrambled up on my own, only a little dizzy from the blow I'd taken to the head.

"Not so much fun for me," I griped and heard him laughing.

"Why not?" He bent closer to me. "Oh, poor baby, does your head hurt?"

"I'm okay. That guy can't swing for shit."

He looked back at the entrance. "I thought this place was an interesting choice when you suggested it. It used to be a BDSM bar, as I recall. Are you a part of that scene?"

"What? No. Hell no, I am not." I glanced back at the bar. "I had no idea about that," I said, lying again. "It's just close to where I live."

He smiled at me, and I could feel a slight warming of my cheeks and prayed that I wasn't blushing. Rolf was uncomfortably close, his big body hemming me in between him and the building. He had to be six foot four or five, at least. I wondered how big he'd be in his shifted form and decided he must be massive. And gods help me, he was an Alpha in every sense of the word. I had been sure of it in the café, but up close like this, I could smell his Alpha scent even more strongly. He smelled wonderful, and I wanted to drop to my knees and offer myself to him. Damn it, he was putting

my heat cycle into overdrive.

Something in my demeanor must have tipped him off to how I was feeling. I tried to take a quick step back to cool my passions, but the next thing I knew, he had me right back up against the wall again, leaning in to sniff me.

“Are you coming in heat, sweetheart? You are, aren’t you? Why aren’t you on suppressants?”

“They make me break out in hives. I just try to stay home and isolate when it hits. My cycle is irregular anyway.”

It wasn’t only omegas who were affected by the omega heat cycle. Alphas were too, indirectly, and they had been known to chase omegas down the street if it got really bad. On those few days every month when I had my cycle, I had to take off work and just stay at home so I wouldn’t be molested by any Alpha customers, who might come in and be overwhelmed.

Rolf stared down into my eyes. He looked a little dazed. “Are you coming into your cycle now?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“It isn’t. Not exactly.”

“What do you mean by not exactly?”

“It means I want to make it my business.” He shook his head as if to clear it and gazed down at me again. “I think we need to go somewhere...somewhere more private...I need to talk to you.”

“Oh, I’ll bet you do,” I said, getting a feeling that I knew why, but wanting him to say it. “About what, exactly?”

“I’ll tell you when we get there.”

He took my arm in his and pulled me with him to his truck. Okay, he didn’t have to pull too hard. I was right there beside him. He was, as I believe I have mentioned a time or two, really gorgeous, and he was an Alpha, and I was a little bit in heat. I knew I should say no, but how could I turn down a chance at this gorgeous man?

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Rolf Degan

When we got to my truck, I decided I couldn't wait any longer, and pushed him up against the side of it. I took the face of the delicious little omega in my hands to thoroughly kiss his lips, which were plump and lush. I ground into them and enjoyed every moment of it, and that didn't surprise me in the least. I had wanted to do that since the moment I'd seen him. It was an aggressive and dominant kiss, surprising me a little at how intensely I felt about him, but he sighed into it and even opened his mouth and touched his tongue to mine gently, sweetly, like this was his first time to kiss someone like this. Maybe it was, and that thought thrilled me.

I was already feeling a bit possessive over him, in the way of all Alphas when they were with a new omega. I was sure that was all this feeling was, though it was pretty strong, now that I mention it. Stronger than it should have been, and that should have tipped me off that this boy was something out of the ordinary. And he was a boy—or at least way too young for me. I thought he might be around twenty, and I was eleven years older than that.

I had stared at him in disbelief for a few moments earlier that day when I'd first seen him, wondering how anybody could be so ridiculously beautiful. Of course, this was Valleywood, full of beautiful people. And he was a Mongrel, who were always enticing. Everything about him was perfect in my opinion, from his dusky skin to his sweetly chiseled jawline and those luminous green eyes.

Fuck. He was even wearing a little red jacket with a hood—everything that a big, bad wolf could want.

I'd gone right over to him in that little café, drawn there by his desirable scent and the way he looked. It was highly unusual for me to react that strongly to an omega—even to one who was a little in heat, like this one was. The omega scent wasn't strong on him yet—but then he wasn't fully in heat. More like he was just coming into it, but it still gave him away. I was drawn to him like a honeybee to a flower.

Unable to stop touching him, I brushed my hand over his jaw, and it made my palm tingle. A possessive feeling washed over me. I leaned in closer to sniff at him and licked up the side of his succulent little throat.

"Tell me...what's Willie Watusi to you?" I asked him, my voice a little rough around the edges. "Tell me."

"I-I barely know him."

"No, you're not telling me the truth, sweetheart. I need to know. Is he your Alpha?"

He blushed. "No, he can't be—he's only a Mongrel."

"Oh, so not really an Alpha. Some Mongrels style themselves that way, though. Are you sure? I'll find out if you're lying to me. Tell me if he's important to you." I got closer to him, unreasonably angry about it, crowding him and bringing me well within his probable invasion-of-personal-space zone. Jealousy, hot as liquid flame raced through me.

"No, he's not my mate," he said.

The word hit me like a cattle prod. Mate? Could that be what this was? Surely not, though I was around omegas all the time. I had never lost control before badly enough that I went after them right in the streets like this. I had practically dragged him into this dark alley beside the bar. So, what was different about this one? We

were far too exposed here to anyone who might take it in their heads to get some air and overhear our conversation. I needed to get him alone, but I couldn't seem to stop touching him long enough.

"We shouldn't keep doing this," Levi said, his voice sounding hoarse and strained. "Please..."

"Why not?" I replied, kissing his neck, even though I totally agreed with him. I knew he was right, so I tipped up his chin to kiss his sweet mouth one more time. He sighed into the kiss, and it thrilled me to know he was as moved as I was. He wound his arms around my neck and ran his hands through my hair. I felt my cock harden even more at the feel of him so close and in such an intimate embrace.

As if he were feeling a bit bolder, he flicked his tongue at my lips, tasting me too. I couldn't hold back my groan and pulled one of his legs up around my hips, slid my hands down to his ass and gripped it with both hands, pulling him up so he had to lift his other leg and wrap them both around my waist. His luminous green eyes got huge, and then round and surprised as he stared into mine. When he opened his mouth to suck in some air, I slipped my tongue inside, sending a shock wave through him that I felt in little shudders that wracked his body. I touched his sweet, hot tongue with mine and there was so much heat between us by that time that he couldn't seem to draw in a good breath, and he began gasping for air. Our tongues tangled together in the messy kiss. I eased him back to his feet while I still could and let him go, taking a step back before I took him right there in the alley.

I had no idea what was wrong with me, but it couldn't go any further until I knew what Watusi was to Levi. And I had to remember that this boy was a Mongrel. There was no way I could take him home with me. My family would never accept him.

I had come to Valleywood only three days earlier on special assignment for the FBI, though the truth was that I would have come on my own anyway if they hadn't sent

me. The Special Agent in Charge had asked me if I would be able to handle it, and knowing that Willie Watusi was involved, I'd said I definitely could. Maybe more violently than he would have liked, but as far as I was concerned that was beside the point. The point was to stop Watusi, and I would make my plans accordingly.

I had assessed Willie Watusi weeks ago and had concluded that he was an irredeemable, unrepentant animal who needed to be put away or even just put down. And nothing and no one would get in the way of me making one of those things happen.

Levi

Rolf had left me trying to recover from that kiss and still not believing what I'd allowed him to do to me. He still had me hemmed in, with his arms blocking me in, but at least he'd stopped touching me. He leaned toward me again, reaching up to toy with a piece of my hair, as if he didn't want to stop, and my heart started slamming against my rib cage.

"Tell me something, sweetheart," he said in a low, sexy voice. "Why did you choose a BDSM bar as a place to meet?"

"Why?" I hated the squeak right there at the end and cleared my throat to hide it as I looked up at him. "I don't know. I didn't know it was as bad as that. And it seemed like a good idea at the time. It was close by, or close to the place I live anyway. I chose it randomly."

Rolf smiled and lifted one perfectly shaped eyebrow, so slow and hot that I lost my breath for a moment. "Randomly, huh? Really?"

I frowned. I thought I detected a tone. I looked up at him to see if he was teasing and got lost for a few seconds in that deep brown gaze.

“What are you thinking?” I asked him. “That I like that stuff? If that’s it, then get it right out of your head. I’m not into any of that. The only thing this place has going for it as far as I’m concerned is that it’s a gay bar,” I said. “And I do like gay bars. If that’s a problem for you, I would completely understand if you just wanted to forget the whole thing and go our separate ways.”

“Now why would that be a problem for me? I’ve just spent the last few seconds kissing you.”

“Well, I-I’m not sure. But if it is...”

He smirked at me. “You’re a touchy little thing, aren’t you? Your sexual orientation doesn’t bother me in the least. But it’s nice of you to volunteer the information. Is, uh, Willie Watusi your boyfriend? Your Dom?”

“What? Gods no! I already told you no.”

“Because if he is, you’ll have to send him on his way. Or better yet, I can do it for you. Tell me where he is so I can go talk to him.”

“What? No, he’s not anything to me! And I can’t give out any information on Willie.”

“But you do know, don’t you? Isn’t it true that you’ve been out with him? You were seen together at the pizza place he frequents three nights ago in your neighborhood, and by all reports, the two of you looked pretty chummy.”

I gave him the dirtiest look I could muster. “I said he’s not my boyfriend. I barely

know him. He happened to be eating pizza at the same time I was. That's it."

The big Alpha leaned closer to me and just stared into my eyes, as a woman and her kids came down the sidewalk only about ten feet away from us. So much for this alley providing us any privacy at all.

"You're crowding me," I complained, as he leaned over to hide me from their view. I pushed ineffectually at his chest. "Do you mind?"

"Sorry," he said, and moved back about a quarter of an inch. "Let's get in my truck and drive then. Less chance of anyone overhearing us, right? You know, if you're afraid someone might see you with me. Come on."

I made one more abortive effort to pull my arm away and then gave up. I wasn't going anywhere until he said I could, apparently. Normally, that would have made me mad, because I prided myself on my strength, but with Rolf, I just decided to go along with him peacefully and see what was going to happen. And hope like hell that none of Willie's friends saw me in his truck.

He helped me get in and went around to the driver's side to start the truck and pull away from the curb.

"Tell me about Willie and his gang."

"Where to start?"

"You tell me."

"His 'gang'—your word, not mine—is made up of Mongrels, like both Willie and me. Willie likes to pretend he's an Alpha, but mostly, in the genetics game, Willie is not a winner. He's not bad-looking, like all the Mongrels tend to be, but his hair is

thinning on top already, and he's almost the same age as I am. He had a few strands that he combs over the top, so he just wears a ball cap. And he has bad skin, because he had a problem with acne as a teenager. That, coupled with his meth use, left him kind of a mess. He was more or less raised by his human great-grandma, who dealt meth out of her kitchen, where she also cooked it up. Somehow, she never blew the place up, and she's still kicking, though retired now at the unlikely age of ninety-six. She must not have sampled her own drugs, like Willie did."

He looked at me with surprise. Maybe he didn't expect me to be so honest, but that was the Willie I knew. No use in hiding it. He'd had a bad life so far. That was no excuse, but maybe it was a partial reason for why he was so bad now.

"It's sad really, because he never had much of a chance, and I would have more sympathy for him, if he didn't have a real mean streak in him a mile wide. I caught him torturing a little puppy once—or about to anyway. I stopped him as soon as I saw him with the stick, bragging about how he was going to beat the dog with it. I took the stick away from him and used it on him instead, and I wasn't sorry one bit either. That was a few years ago, back when we were close to the same size, and before he hit a big growth spurt."

My body had stubbornly refused to do any such thing, and Willie was much bigger than I was now. Willie had hated me for a long time after that dog incident anyway, because I made him look bad in front of his buddies. Plus, I kept the dog and took him home with me. That dog hated him now and would try to bite him on sight if he got the chance.

"Anyway, he never asked me to join any so-called gang of his. Not that I would have anyway."

"I think you definitely made the right choice, if that means anything."

“Yeah, I know. And fortunately for me, he didn’t kill me that day like he’d be able to do now. I liked to mix it up back then, and I was pretty good at it, while he was still as clumsy as ever. So, when he came at me, I fought him, and while I didn’t win, he’d at least known he’d been in a fight. After picking that one fight with me, he’d never tried it after that. After a while, he even started being friendly again. But I never trusted him after the puppy thing. My mom used to say, when somebody shows you who they are, you should believe them.”

Rolf nodded. “What did you and Willie talk about when you went to the pizza place with him the other night?”

“How do you know about that anyway? And I didn’t go with him. I told you. I just saw him there. I don’t remember much happening, really. I might have stopped to speak to him, but that’s it.”

“You don’t remember?” Rolf said, in a suspicious tone that made it plain he didn’t believe me.

“No. Look, I don’t know anything about what Willie is up to. Really. And even if I did, I couldn’t say. People don’t mess with Willie, and that includes me. I try to maintain a live and let live policy with Willie and his friends.”

Rolf said, sarcastically, “Oh, is that right?” A feeling like an electric charge jolted through my body as a breeze from the open window suddenly brought his scent wafting over toward me. Rolf turned to look at me. “Well, you can give him a message from me when you see him. I intend to ‘mess’ with him. A lot.”

I shook my head and turned away, wringing my hands. I didn’t need this complication in my life. “I won’t be seeing him. I told you that I don’t want to get involved. You’ll have to tell him yourself.”

“Why are you getting so stressed and nervous, Levi?” Rolf said, looking over at me. “Has he threatened you in some way? Are you frightened of him?” His eyes narrowed. “Were you lying about Willie being your Dom?”

“What? No. I told you I’m not into that shit. Look, this was a mistake. I-I have to go. Please. I just need to go home.”

“Relax. Let me take you for a nice, quiet drive so we can finish talking.”

“I said, no!” Realizing I had shouted and might be attracting undue attention on these busy streets, yelling and getting upset like I was, I clamped my lips together and took a deep breath to calm myself. “Please,” I said, hating the wheedling tone in my voice. “I’ve told you I don’t know anything. I-I would like to go home, now, if that’s okay.”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you, but Willie Watusi has been mixed up in some really bad things. He was suspected of working with a group that did sex trafficking in New York.”

“What? I-I never heard about anything like that.”

“It’s the reason I came here to Valleywood. To investigate his involvement.”

“I-I see.” I sat there for a minute, taking it in. Willie, a sex trafficker? It didn’t seem possible. Well, it did, but I didn’t like to think about it.

“You know what? I can just walk home from here. And for the record, Willie doesn’t frighten me. And neither do you.”

“Okay, good. But I still insist on driving you to your place.”

“I live literally two blocks away.”

“Then we don’t have far to go.”

I whimpered and Rolf smiled at me, putting a hand on my thigh. I balled up my fist without thinking and hit him on his arm. He’d really pissed me off with that condescending Alpha attitude of his.

His eyes flashed at me, and I got a shiver down my spine. “Don’t start something you can’t finish, sweetheart.”

“Oh yeah? What are you gonna do about it if I do?”

He swerved suddenly over to the curb, turned in the seat and pulled me toward him—none too gently either—and he put me in his lap. The steering wheel was digging into my side, his big, hard dick was digging into my thighs, my heart was beating way too fast, and I couldn’t catch my breath. It was glorious.

He bent toward my lips ever so slowly, giving me plenty of time to change my mind if I chose to, but though my mind was saying, “Abort, abort,” my body was giving me high fives. I wouldn’t have missed this kiss from him for the world. I closed my eyes and let him press his full, lush lips against mine, gently at first and then harder. And even harder. His kiss was aggressive and dominant, like before. There was so much heat between us that I couldn’t draw in a breath, and I was afraid we might just burst into flames any minute. He slipped his tongue inside my mouth and finally my brain kicked in, so I gave him a weak push.

He looked down at me and saw I was trembling, and then he nodded and lifted me up to sit me back closer to the door. But he leaned over and spoke against my ear, causing me to shudder. “You won’t get rid of me easily, you know. I’ll keep coming until you tell me what I need to know. I’m not through with you yet.”

What I wanted to say was—what part of this is not clear? I have nothing to say to

you. I don't know anything about Willie Watusi or any of his business, so leave me the hell alone.

But what I actually said was, "Okay." Because every little omega cell in my body was celebrating the idea that he "wasn't through with me yet."

He put a finger under my chin and raised my face to within an inch of his mouth.

"You see..." he brushed the tip of his tongue over my lips, and I moaned into his mouth. "I think you know more than you're saying."

I shivered hard. "I-I really don't. I promise I don't know much of anything."

"Tell me why you're so scared of this guy then. Does he beat you?"

I finally came back to my senses then and pushed him away.

"What? No! And I'm not scared of him, damn it. Maybe I should be scared of you."

Rolf looked shocked. "Me? Why? I told you I'm not going to hurt you."

"You sure could have fooled me."

Rolf frowned again. "Why do you say that?"

"You're a pure-bred and an Alpha wolf. I know what you think of me. I know what you people think about all the Mongrels."

The one thing that all the pure-bred wolves could agree on was their attraction to omegas like me, even though they felt we were far beneath them, and their antipathy toward Mongrels. We were a guilty pleasure to mate with though, and they loved to

fuck us, but hated the idea that they couldn't resist us. Since wolves didn't limit themselves in any way, that created even more little Mongrel babies. And of course, the problem with Mongrels was that after we were born, there we were—a constant reminder of how the pure-breds hadn't been strong enough to resist temptation. They reviled us for our very existence.

Rolf stared down at me for a long moment. He hadn't said a word since I told him I knew what he thought of us.

“You don't know anything,” he said, his voice low and rough. Without any warning, he leaned in closer again and those moist, lush lips came down over mine, hot and possessive. My hands moved up to his shirt front, and I curled my fingers into the material and clung to him, helpless to do anything else. He nudged my mouth open and slipped in his tongue to thoroughly taste me. Then as quickly as it all started, he released me again. He gently pried my fingers off his shirt, and I sank back in my seat, breathing hard. He could have had me right there if he'd wanted me.

He started up the truck and drove me the short distance home instead.

“Go up to your apartment now and don't contact Watusi. I'll talk to you soon.”

I scrambled out, but he reached over and caught my hand and made me turn around to look at him.

“I mean it. Do as I say. Don't talk to him any more than you have to, and don't say a word to him about me tomorrow if he comes by to see you. You got that?”

“I got it,” I said, my voice tight and irritated. “But he won't come.”

I jumped out and waited until he'd pulled away from the curb before walking slowly upstairs to my little apartment. I'd never even told him where I lived, yet he'd still

driven me straight to my place, and I'd barely even noticed until I was on the sidewalk. How did he know so much about me? I thought he probably had way too much power over me already. What would happen if he kept coming around all the time for information about Willie?

He was going to want to fuck me, that's what. And I was going to let him.

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I never believed in ghosts. At least not usually—not during the daytime, anyway. But at night, in the dark, sitting outside an old graveyard, I'd have to say I was much more open-minded about the subject.

I reached over nervously to pet my dog, Nugget. He was the little puppy I'd saved from Willie a few years before and I'd given him that name optimistically, both because he loved chicken nuggets and because I was hoping he'd stay little and cute.

Unfortunately, not so much.

Nugget hit a growth spurt early on in our acquaintance and then just kept on hitting them. At this point I wasn't even sure Nugget was fully canine. His ancestry was mysterious, but I thought it surely included some English mastiff or Irish Wolfhound, with a little Great Dane thrown in for good measure. Actually, I had long suspected he might even have some donkey blood in the mix too. Something about his loud, goofy, braying bark, I think.

He had coarse, gray hair; he came up to my waist, and he weighed at least a hundred and forty pounds, but that was as high as my veterinarian's scales went, so we weren't absolutely sure. Thank the gods he had a sweet, calm temperament, which made him really good with kids when we saw them on our walks. They always wanted to ride him around like a pony, and he never refused or got cranky with them.

Anyway, I had brought him with me tonight, not for any real protection—he'd more likely lick a would-be attacker to death rather than hurt them. But he gave me an illusion of protection that was comforting and made me feel safer.

Actually, this wasn't a graveyard we were sitting in front of—the proper term was cemetery. Most people don't know but there's a difference between a graveyard and a cemetery. I read once that a graveyard is on the grounds of a church, while a cemetery isn't. I think it maybe goes even further than that though. To me, the word cemetery isn't even scary, but the word graveyard... there's something about that word that makes my imagination go wild, conjuring up images of eerie old mausoleums, with crumbling bits of architecture, moss dripping down off trees and low-lying fog covering the ground.

Which is why I had no business being in this place so late on a work night. Or ever for that matter. I'd told my boss I needed to borrow the old truck he used to get stuff from the warehouse where he stored things, and he had reluctantly agreed, giving me plenty of stern warnings about what would happen if he found any damage or scratches on it when I brought it back. Like the truck wasn't already older than I was and in rough shape.

My dog, Nugget, had draped his body over the seat. He looked up at me as if to ask why we were there so late after dark, but I had no good answers for him. I was there because of Willie Watusi.

It had been two days since I'd last seen Rolf Degan outside my apartment. I'd bombed the audition, by the way, because I had gotten there late and forgotten the two lines I had to say. I blamed all the stress that Rolf had put me under. It was as good an excuse as any.

Rolf Degan hadn't called either, and I didn't know whether to be relieved or upset about that.

I'd heard from Willie though. Willie had come by the café and told me he needed me to help him out, along with "his friends."

“Doing what?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow night when you get there. Meet us outside Shady Pines Cemetery out on the highway just before midnight. Park outside the gates and cut your lights. Don’t be late and don’t stand me up.”

“Midnight? I don’t even have a car.”

“Borrow one. Just be there.”

“Willie, some people have to get up early to go to work.”

“Some people can get their faces rearranged too. Would you like a demonstration?”

I wondered what he’d do if I said yes and just jumped him? I’d get my ass kicked for sure, but maybe it would be worth it.

“If you ain’t with us, then you’re against us,” Willie had told me in his gravelly voice, leaning in close enough that I could smell the onions he ate for supper on his breath. “Are you against us, Levi?”

I sighed, shook my head and reluctantly told him I’d be there.

I had parked the old truck beside the closed gate when I arrived at a little before midnight and waited for Willie and his friends to show up. It was a cold night and there was a steady, stiff breeze whistling past the old truck’s windows. There was no sign of them yet. It was as silent as—well, as a tomb. The only sound was the slow tick-tick-tick of my truck’s engine as it cooled down. I sat behind the wheel, my doors locked, and my windows rolled up as tight as I could get them, and my hand on the back of Nugget’s neck. I was craning mine, hoping to see some lights coming my way soon. It was pitch black beyond the gates in the spooky, old cemetery and the

gloom only decreased the distance I could see along the wide path through the tombstones. What might be lurking there in the dark? And what possible business could Willie have in this place anyway? What kind of business had to be conducted at midnight?

Cedar trees planted at the entrance swayed in the breeze and seemed to lean over to peer inside the truck and take a long look at me, as if to try and figure out what I was doing there. A distinct chill had materialized in the air, along with the inevitable low-lying fog that blanketed the ground. It was spooky as shit and just after the witching hour by this time. I was beginning to feel colder than a witch's titty in a brass brassiere. I wondered why I hadn't thought to bring a jacket. Hell, I hadn't thought, period, or else I never would have been here in the first damn place, no matter how much Willie Watusi had threatened me.

I decided to wait another few minutes and then if there was still no sign of Willie, I was going to drive back home, and the hell with it. Just then an old, battered car pulled up behind me with its radio blaring. It cut the lights and the music all at once. The doors opened and Willie and several of his friends spilled out. I got out of my truck to go talk to him, telling Nugget to stay when he tried to get out with me. He and Willie did not, as aforementioned, get along worth a damn. Willie's friends began to clamber over the cemetery fence, brandishing various tools, including a crowbar.

"Willie, what on earth are you planning on doing with those tools?" I asked, advancing on him. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing for you to worry about, Levi. We've come to do a little prospecting, that's all."

"Prospecting? What are you talking about? I hope—surely, you aren't planning on desecrating graves? I won't be a part of that."

“No one is des-a...doing whatever it is you said. We’re just here to dig a little.”

“Dig what? A grave? Oh, hell no, Willie! I’m out of here.”

I turned to run but he grabbed me by the shirt front and pulled me closer, blasting his breath in my face again.

“I need your help, Levi. We’ll be in and out before you know it. Stop being such a pussy.”

I put both hands on his chest and shoved him hard, but still only just managed to move him backward a few steps. He folded his arms across his chest and peered down at me. “You’re here to help us. I need you. So, get over that fence and start helping.” He shoved me hard against the bars of the gate, and I fell down on my butt and glared up at him.

“I’m not grave robbing to help you. I don’t care what you do.”

His voice took on a wheedling note. “Nobody is robbing anything, damn it. Not yet anyway. We’re looking for something, that’s all. We’ll put all the dirt back on the coffin once I’ve had a chance to look inside it. I promise.”

“Looking inside it? For what? And what do you mean you’ll put it all back? You want to dig people up and break into their coffins? Are you crazy?”

“Not people. Just one here in this cemetery. And you can’t leave now. I need you in case we find what I’m looking for.”

“What are you talking about? How do you need me?”

“You’re smart, Levi, and you can figure things out. You always could, even when we

were little. You always read so many stupid books.”

That wasn’t true. The books I read were classics, and never stupid. It was true that I loved reading books and always had. Books of any kind, including history and other stuff, though novels were my favorite.

My mother had read to me as a small child, but even after she passed away when I was still pretty small, I used to carry a book around with me everywhere, looking at the pictures and trying to find someone to read them to me. A teacher noticed me in first grade and taught me how to read. Back then, they were just little kids’ books, but I had a real hunger for them, and eventually, when I got older, that same teacher took me down to the library and helped me get a card. They still wouldn’t let me check them out yet—I was too young—but they let me come in whenever I wanted to and read for as long as I wanted to stay.

Later, as I got older, I checked the books out. Like I said, the classics mostly, according to the librarian who helped me pick them out. I read some of them again and again to be able to understand them. As a result, I was well-spoken, according to my teachers, and sounded like I’d had a better education than I’d really managed to get. And I could still quote some of the ones I really liked. I had to drop out of school when I was sixteen to go to work and that teacher—a nice lady named Mrs. Adams—actually cried and begged me to at least keep up with my reading.

I was never good in Math, though, and especially algebra, as I saw no reason for the alphabet getting involved with numbers. But I knew Willie had always thought I was smart. He used to come to me for help in school. Usually, he tried to enlist my aid in helping him cheat.

I turned to face Willie. “Tell me what you think I can do for you.”

“Look, there’s stolen money—real cash and maybe even gold—inside one of these

graves—I think. If not here, then it's in another coffin in another graveyard, but it's here in Valleywood somewhere, just waiting for me to find it," Willie said. "I just have to figure out which grave it is and I don't know anybody else who could help me figure it out. These other boys are too dumb. And I'll make it worth your while. When I get all that money, I'll split it with all the ones who helped me. I swear it."

"I don't want it."

"Yeah, you do. Who doesn't want money? Don't be stupid. I'll either find all that money and or if worse comes to worse, and it's all bullshit, then I can rob the bodies of any jewelry they might be buried with."

"What? That's awful! It's grave robbing!"

The cemetery gate sprang open with a clang then as one of Willie's henchmen gave the crowbar a final wrench. It creaked ominously on its rusty hinges as if protesting such rude treatment. As it swung reluctantly open, Willie took my arm and ushered me through.

"I'll tell you the rest of what's going on while they dig. Come on. The grave we think has the money bag is up this way."

I wanted to shrink back, but he was like a force of Nature, pulling me up the hill the cemetery sat on. It was fairly steep, so I needed all my concentration to navigate the graves that Willie was tromping all over as he made his way up the hill. I tried not to step on any of them.

When we finally made it to the top, I saw several of the Mongrels digging furiously at a fresh mound of dirt near a big mausoleum at the top. They had tossed aside the flowers that had been covering the top of the grave and were shoveling dirt fast and furiously. It was flying out of the grave in big dark clouds in either direction.

“Willie, they’re making an awful mess!”

“They’re in a hurry. Don’t worry so much about every little thing.”

“Every little thing! Willie, we shouldn’t be doing this! It’s disrespectful and awful!”

Watching them was like watching a car wreck in progress. You knew what was coming and you knew it was going to be bad, but you couldn’t seem to look away.

I gasped as they hit the coffin with their shovels and soon, they were busily dragging it up and out of the grave. There was a smell of freshly turned earth, and maybe something else too, but that was probably just my imagination, and I didn’t dwell on that.

Mongrels were incredibly strong, like their wolf fathers or mothers, and some of them could move really fast too. But it seemed to me that as a whole, Mongrels were fairly unlucky in life. For example, most of us were born with an aversion to authority and never fit in at school. Many of us Mongrel kids spent way too much time in detention, or were sent home for bad behavior, which meant we were often uneducated as well as not very bright. Most of us were just lacking in one area or another. For example, though I had always been called smart, I had to be pretty fucking dumb for ever getting mixed up with Willie in the first place.

My grandmother said I was anti-social, easily irritated and could be as pouty and sullen as hell. Since all Mongrels could pretty much be described in that way, though, I personally didn’t see how that problem was confined to only me.

I went to live with her, my human grandmother, after my father passed away. She had come to Valleywood when we settled here so she could be closer to my dad, who was her only child. It was only for a few years until I was older, but she made me go to school whether I wanted to or not and punished my ass on a regular basis if I

objected. I finally got used to going to classes and discovered it wasn't so bad after all. After I left school, my gran's next-door neighbor moved out and I got the apartment right next door to her. That worked out great, because she had her privacy and so did I, but I was close enough to help her when she needed it. My gran taught me manners too, or as much as she could, and if I had any sense of decency, it probably came from her. Maybe that's why I was feeling so horrified at the prospect of digging up this poor woman's grave. Grandma had taught me right from wrong and this had WRONG written all the hell over it. If she found out about it she was going to wring my neck.

"You're doing all this because you think there's an actual bag of money inside the coffin?"

"There might be, yeah. That's the story I heard."

I stared at him, dumbfounded as he bent closer to get a better look. The Mongrels had begun to pry open the casket, and they were having some trouble. One of them was using an axe on the metal locks.

"Willie, what on earth are they doing? You have to stop! You're destroying this poor woman's casket. This is just so wrong."

"Not if it gets me what I want."

"How do you know there's even any money in there?"

"I don't. This may not be the right one. But if it is, I heard it from a guy I know who works in a funeral home in Valleywood. He said that a man came in when his dead wife was taken there. The man told them he wanted to put some items in with her—just sentimental stuff after she was like embalmed or fixed up or whatever. He told them he had to put it in her casket himself as the final thing before they closed

the lid and made them promise they wouldn't take it back out. He even watched them as they wheeled her out to make sure. They thought it was odd, but they let him do it. I guess they're used to people being weird when someone dies."

"It's strange, all right. But I've heard of people sticking photos and notes inside a casket before. So what? Maybe it was just him being sentimental."

"Nah, this guy I know from the funeral home said that what he brought in was a big satchel—like you'd haul around money in. And it was just after that big bank downtown had a robbery. Remember? It was in all the papers and the robbers got thousands of dollars. The robbers were never found either."

"That doesn't mean anything. It's just a coincidence."

"Oh yeah? Then why did he tell the funeral director that he'd put a curse on her casket, so if anybody messed with it or opened it again after he put the satchel inside, they'd be cursed. See, he was expecting one of the other bank robbers to come after him, because they knew he had all the money. So he hid the money in his wife's coffin when she died."

It was strange, all right. Every supernatural resident of Valleywood knew about the world that existed alongside of and in cooperation with our more everyday world, though it wasn't something any of us talked about as a general rule. I mean, it didn't rule our lives or anything—it was just how things were. But curses? They were a whole different story, and one I wanted nothing to do with.

"Willie, stop and think about this. This whole thing is sounding more and more bizarre."

"Look," Willie continued, "the bag he put in with her...it was heavy and full of something and not just old letters or whatever. He said he put a curse on it so that no

one could disturb her rest and take away what he put in with her. He must have planned on digging it up later.”

“If it was buried with her, how did your so-called friend know about it?”

“Oh, him? He opened the casket and found the money bag inside. He took it out.”

I must have made a shocked face because he laughed. “Oh please. She was dead—she didn’t need it anymore. And the guy that put it in was a crook anyway.”

“So was your friend if he didn’t turn him in and give back the money!”

Willie got a stubborn, belligerent look on his face. “Give it back? That would be crazy when he could take the money for himself.”

“It’s stealing! And anyway, Willie, if something sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. If there really is a curse, then it sounds incredibly dangerous, and that poor dead woman in the coffin you just dug up had a right to remain at peace and not have her body disturbed. Are you sure this is even the right person?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. There were only four or five possibilities though—four or five women who died and were buried around the same time in the Valleywood area. I looked in the obituaries and found all the recent deaths. We’re going to check them out one by one until we find the right one.”

“Oh, good gods! I thought your friend took the money!”

“Uh...funny thing about that. He died suddenly a couple of nights ago, right after he told me about the money bag. Crazy, huh?”

“Willie, come on. How did the money get back in the casket?”

“He was killed crossing the street outside the funeral home. He still had the money satchel on him, so they put it back.”

“This whole thing is crazy. It’s just not right, and you know it.”

“Says who?” he yelled, getting furious. “It’s buried now, and people on television shows are always finding buried treasure and they keep it! So, I think it’s fair game. The husband just as good as threw it away, so why can’t I have it?”

“Because it doesn’t belong to you. He didn’t throw it away; he buried it with his wife! That’s a whole different story. Where is this man anyway?”

“Well...see...he’s kinda dead too. He died right after he left the funeral home that last time, my friend told me. He got hit by a truck on the street outside.”

“This just gets worse and worse!”

“Oh, calm down. Shit happens, and it’s all coincidence. That’s how these curse things get started. Listen to me. We can find this woman’s grave, dig it up and then go on our way. Easy!”

“How on earth are we supposed to do that?”

The coffin lid suddenly cracked with a loud noise as one of Willie’s boys pried it open, and I jumped like I’d been shot. Willie ran over to lift the broken pieces, throw them aside and peer in at the corpse. I could barely look at the poor woman though, and a shudder seized me as I took a step closer to the casket. I took one glance and saw that her face was a peculiar shade of greenish gray, and it kind of looked like fuzz was growing on it, too. That was more than enough for me. Bile rose in my throat, so I turned away and I didn’t want to see anymore, but I couldn’t seem to look away.

As for Willie, he had no such qualms and was already picking up the body to look underneath it. He didn't find any sign of a satchel, though he searched the coffin thoroughly. It was shockingly disrespectful. But all that was lost on Willie and his gang.

"Damn it!" Willie said, dropping the body back in and kicking the innocent casket in his anger and disappointment. "It's not in here. Must be in with a different body."

He slumped down on the ground and put his head in his hands.

"Willie, you must have known this was a long shot. Let's put it all back now and then get the hell out of here before we get caught."

He gave me a fierce, angry glare but then lumbered to his feet. "All right...come on guys, let's get out of here."

"Wait! Aren't you putting everything back the way you found it?"

He glanced back over at it and shrugged. "No."

"Willie!"

"What? Let somebody else do it. Now come on," he said, grabbing my arm. "Levi, I'm riding with you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you got more room."

I grumbled all the way back to the truck, but the truth was I probably wouldn't be getting a lot of sleep tonight anyway after what we'd done. I hadn't actually done

anything, but I'd been there, and I hadn't stopped it. I was superstitious enough and had enough conscience to think that counted. I'd be seeing that poor woman's green, fuzzy face in my dreams when and if I ever got to sleep again.

Willie cursed as he opened the door and saw Nugget, who growled at him and showed his impressive set of teeth, but he shoved him over and got in the front seat anyway.

"Keep that mutt away from me!"

I pulled Nugget over a little to make room for Willie, more for Nugget's comfort than Willie's. Nugget looked at me with big, brown eyes, as if to ask, What the fuck? I only wished I knew what to tell him. We set off, with Nugget making a low grumbling noise all the way back to town.

Willie began dozing off with his head tilted back on the headrest. I guess his adrenaline got the better of him or else he'd gotten drunk or high to psych himself up to rummage through that lady's casket. I drove as fast as I could, glancing nervously in the rearview mirror to make sure nothing had slunk out of the cemetery and climbed in the back of my truck to go home with me.

After a while, when we started to see the lights of the city again, I turned my head to look over at Willie. He opened one eye to gaze back at me.

"Just be real, man. Do you really think that crazy story could be true? That a curse is on some kind of stolen money?"

"Of course, I do, Levi."

"Tell me the whole story that you heard then. Don't leave anything out."

“I don’t know exactly how it all happened. Just what my friend told me. The guy stole the money, and he must have wanted to get rid of it because the cops were closing in. He couldn’t very well bury it in his yard, or they’d find it. So, he got the idea of putting it in the casket with his dead wife. Genius, huh? The cops would never think to look in her casket. It was just bad luck that he had a freak accident.”

“Freak accident, huh? Don’t you think that was because it was an awful thing that he did?” I whispered.

“I ain’t afraid of no curse, Levi. My friend was an okay guy but what happened to him was just an accident too.”

“Then how did the bag get back in the coffin?”

“I guess the funeral home people put it back. How do I know?”

“But what if they didn’t? What if the whole thing was the curse at work? What if the funeral director kept the money for himself?”

“No, man, he didn’t. I already looked in his office and in his house.”

“You what?”

He shrugged. “Him and his whole family were in a car crash a few days ago. They all got killed. They didn’t need it anymore.”

I moaned and put a hand up to my head. “Oh, my gods, what have you got me into?”

“Oh, don’t be so stupid. It was a car accident.”

“But what if it was the curse?”

“I told you, Levi, I ain’t scared of no curse. Do you want to know why?”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Why?”

“Because you’re gonna take the curse off the money for me.”

“What? Me? You’re crazy!”

“Your mama was a witch, wasn’t she, Levi? That shit runs in families. I know that you know things. You’re gonna take the curse off for me. Just in case.”

“My mama wasn’t any witch,” I fired back at him, but he shrugged and rolled his eyes sarcastically, like whatever.

I didn’t like that kind of talk about my mother. In the end, though, I saved my breath. Once Willie had something like this stuck in his dumb head, I knew from bitter experience that there was no talking him out of it. He’d be lucky if he didn’t get himself and his gang arrested or worse yet, get us all thrown in jail or even killed by some evil, random curse with all this foolishness.

Part of what he’d said was true. My mother had been a Conjure woman. But she wasn’t a witch at all. Not really. She was beautiful and good. She grew up dirt poor in Appalachia where they had their own version of Hoodoo magic, though she was a healer and made little potions. That’s all. She might have lived there her whole life, except one night, while she was working at a small bar and grill on the highway near her childhood home, my father, who was a truck driver back then, had taken a detour to visit his mother, who lived in town. He had stopped in for a beer and a hamburger. He’d struck up a conversation with her and the rest was history. When he left that little town a couple of days later, my mom had been with him, leaving behind a bad home situation and looking for a better life.

I hoped she had found some happiness with my dad in what was left of her short life. I wished I remembered more about her.

She kept books about her cures and her little spells. It had been a long time since I'd seen any of them, but I was sure I could find them. There were hand-written recipes somewhere for all the potions she made along with words to use to stop a baby's colic or thrush. She could cure what my mother called the morbid sore throat or heal up cuts and burns or talk a wart right off your hand. She had potions to cure bad skin or to help with various skin rashes. I suppose I could find those books and journals somewhere and look to see if there was any mention of taking away curses. Though that wasn't the kind of magic she did. I didn't think so anyway. I don't know what kinds of words to use myself, though I'd heard her when I was little. Maybe magic words or even verses from the Bible. I'd heard that said before, and my mother had been a religious woman before she came to Valleywood, so it made sense.

"This is an awful story, Willie. I think it would be best to leave this woman in peace, wherever she's buried."

"Yeah, but that's bullshit. There's no such thing as curses, and all that beautiful money would just go to waste forever. It was simple bad luck that the wife and the guy died. Not to mention my friend and the funeral director's whole family winding up dead. I admit that. But that's just bad luck and nothing else. No need to blame an innocent bag of money."

"A stolen bag. Don't you see, Willie? The same thing could happen to us. To all of us. This sounds dangerous. We could get killed just like all the others did if we keep trying to mess with that curse."

"Maybe. But it won't happen. That's why I want you to help me take the curse off. You're smart and you can kick that curse's ass!"

“Oh gods, this is like the worst story I think I ever heard. All of this just can’t be true.”

He shrugged. “I intend to go to each and every one of those dead people’s graves I found in the obituaries until I find the right coffin that has the money bag inside. Then you can help me get rid of the curse. End of fucking story.”

I stopped trying to talk to him and just drove him back to his grandma’s house. He got out with hardly another word being said. Nugget made a go for him as he got out, but he missed. Afterward, I drove slowly back home, parked the truck outside on the street and grabbed Nugget’s leash to take him upstairs. I stopped by to check on my gran and found her watching Wheel of Fortune. We chatted a while and she wished me a goodnight.

I wondered if I’d be able to even sleep after the crazy night I’d had.

Spoiler—I didn’t very well, and every time I managed to fall into anything resembling a deep sleep, I’d be awakened by bad dreams. I never remembered exactly what they were, but it seemed to me I recalled green, fuzzy faces in the dark and black shadows dancing on the walls.

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I was at work the next morning bussing tables after the breakfast rush, when I felt a shadow falling over me. I looked up to see Rolf standing there in the flesh and looking gorgeous in a dark brown Henley with some slim cut jeans.

“Oh, hey,” I said. “You startled me.”

“Feeling jumpy, Levi? Why do you think that might be?”

“I have no idea. Look, I have work to do around here, if you’ll excuse me.”

“I just gave your boss a fifty-dollar bill to let you take your break now and talk to me. Let’s go out back—I have some questions for you.”

“I think you wasted your money, because I have nothing to say, unfortunately.”

“Really? Not even about reports that your boss’s truck was parked outside a cemetery last night around midnight?” He raised an eyebrow at me. I hated the fact that it made him look even sexier.

“Yeah, the truck was parked very close to where a grave was found this morning that someone had vandalized and desecrated during the night,” he said. “Isn’t that odd? The vandals even dug up some poor woman’s body—can you believe that? They destroyed the coffin too. Do you have any idea how expensive a coffin is? It’s thousands of dollars.” He turned to look around the store. “Okay, look, since you don’t have the time to talk to me, then maybe your boss would be interested to know his truck arrived outside the cemetery gates on the outskirts of town at ten minutes before midnight and left at around one in the morning—in the company of a known

gang leader named Willie Watusi. Think he'd like to hear about that?"

I gasped and might have fallen over in shock except he caught me and steadied me on my feet.

"Close your mouth, sweetheart. It's not a good look for you."

"How...how do you know about that?"

"Don't worry about how I know. I just do. Now are you going to talk to me, or do I talk to your boss and then take you in to explain yourself?"

"No! I-I mean, please don't. Don't mess up my job," I implored him, catching his hand and looking up at him. "Please, Rolf. I need this job, and he'd fire me if he knew. Or if I went to jail for that matter."

His lips tightened as he gazed down at me, and he shook his head. "Then you better come outside with me and start talking. I think you have a lot of explaining to do."

I let him take my arm and lead me to the back where I usually took my breaks, near a small area where we kept the trash cans. It had a little more privacy than the side alley. With every step, I felt more and more resentful and sullen, and I couldn't help it. I felt hunted, and I hated being threatened, even by the truth. I was guilty. I had done what he accused me of, after all. But if he told my boss something like that and I didn't want him to know about it, I could lose my job. The fact that I was in the wrong, and I knew it just made it all worse.

By the time we got outside, I was fuming and turned on him like a spitting cat.

"This is a crappy thing to do, you know. To threaten me like this. A job like mine might not mean much to someone rich like you, but this job keeps a roof over my

head and food on my table. And decent jobs for someone like me in this city don't come along every day."

"Well, look at it this way. You won't need a job if you go to jail."

My knees got weak then, but I steadied myself with a hand on the wall.

He leaned against the side of the building, too, with folded arms, and he stared down at me. He looked angry and tense. The muscles on his chest and arms were bulging out a little and made my mouth water. Or it would have if I hadn't reminded myself just how mad I was at him.

"Okay, I'm sorry," he said sarcastically and not sounding sorry in the least. "If it counts for anything, I wouldn't really have said anything to your boss." He shrugged. "Probably."

"Oh, you're just being mean!"

"Okay, then why don't you explain it to me? Nice and slow. What were you doing at that cemetery with Watusi?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

He just kept glaring down at me, looking unconcerned. I noticed he had stubble on his handsome face, like he hadn't yet shaved all day. He also looked bad tempered and out of sorts. Well, he was an Alpha—what else was new? But I still couldn't figure out why he was so angry.

"Go on. Tell me what you were doing last night at that cemetery. This ought to be

good.”

“How do you even know about it? Even down to the times I was there?”

“I said, never mind how I know. I just do. What you and your boyfriend and your fellow gang members did last night was a serious crime, and when it comes out, everyone involved is going to jail.”

“Oh...”

That got my attention in a hurry, and I sagged up against the wall of the alley too, because my knees had suddenly gone weak. I started twisting my hands together, and I closed my eyes and moaned.

“I think maybe I need to contact a lawyer before I say another word.”

“If you feel the need to, then go ahead.” He pulled out his cell phone and handed it to me.

“I don’t know any numbers. I have no idea who to call.”

He shrugged, as if he couldn’t possibly care less. Which of course, he couldn’t. Why did I ever think for one moment that he might? Why had I let ever him kiss me and make me think he might actually give a damn about me?

When would I ever learn?

Rolf

I stood there looking down into that beautiful little lying face and tried to harden my heart against him. He had straight-up lied to me. He'd said he wasn't involved with Watusi and his Mongrel gang, and I had believed him. I was so damn jealous I was sick to my stomach.

This little omega was a serious distraction that I didn't need. And he was in this...whatever it was...up to his pretty little neck. I knew it but hadn't been able to prove it yet. To tell the truth, I wasn't sure what I'd do about it if I did.

I wouldn't be moved by his pleas though. No matter how much he begged. He thought that every time he flashed those big green eyes at me, I wanted to take him in my arms and soothe him. And maybe that was true...but I was done. Finished!

Maybe in the past, I'd felt too much for this omega, though for no apparent reason. And really, we had no past. I barely knew him. Sure, he was beautiful and sweet, and he smelled like a succulent, ripe peach. He was pretty and his eyes were luminous green. He had a gorgeous body... I'd like to take him to bed for at least a week or two...

And I forgot what point I was trying to make.

But anyway, I'd seen plenty of good-looking omegas before and none of them had ever affected me the way this one did. I could overcome this if I tried. I knew I could.

My feelings for this one were beginning to interfere with how I did my work. I had come here for the purpose of getting Willie Watusi and making sure he paid for his crimes. I still intended to do that. What kind of person could be with a man like Watusi anyway? Nobody good, that's who. Nobody I wanted in my life, that was for sure. To think I had entertained the idea of taking this omega to bed.

No more of that! Or maybe I should do it and get him out of my system for good.

Maybe after I'd had him in my bed a few times, this feeling that he was supposed to belong to me would finally subside or go away altogether. I still hated the idea of him being with anyone else—especially that scumbag Watusi—but surely that would fade over time. He was desirable and sweet and beautiful, sure, but he was absolutely not the omega I wanted or needed to settle down with. He wasn't my mate. He wasn't even mate material. He was a damn Mischling, and I'd never be able to mate one of them. Never. My parents would have a fit.

Not that I cared what my parents thought.

But I wasn't even ready to settle down yet, though I'd known I should start a family and produce some heirs for a few years now. I was my father's heir and set to inherit everything he owned one day. Not only that, but I'd be in charge of the pack, and I needed an omega who could be a calm and steadying influence on me. Not some young punk with an attitude who may have had a pretty face and a hot little body, but what else did he have that I needed?

Not a damn thing. And if I kept telling myself that, I thought I would be able to believe it soon.

I'd been upset and furious that morning when my partner, Conroy, told me he'd followed Levi to a cemetery on the outskirts of town, where he'd met up with Willie Watusi and his little gang of lowlife misfits. Actually, I was furious...and jealous, if the truth were told. He had lied to me when he told me there was nothing between him and the Mongrel gang leader, and I was going to make sure he regretted it.

I'd been sleeping soundly when the phone rang early in the morning, and I fumbled for it.

"Do you know what time it is?" I growled.

“I do, but I thought you said you wanted to know if your boy did anything unusual.” The voice belonged to a co-worker named Alex Conroy. His job had been to watch and follow Levi Jones wherever he went.

“Yeah, so?”

“So would you call digging up graves and molesting corpses in a cemetery unusual?”

“What?” I sat up abruptly, throwing off the covers and scrubbing my hand over my face. “Say that again. Surely, I misheard you. What did he do?”

“I followed him like you told me to. I saw him get out of his truck and meet with the Watusi guy. Then they both climbed over the cemetery fence. I followed them after they all went up a hill, and I hid out in some trees nearby to watch. It was crazy.”

“What truck? What cemetery? What the fuck was he doing? Tell me about it.”

“Which part? The digging up graves or molesting corpses?”

“Damn it, Conroy, make sense! What the hell are you saying?”

“I’m trying to tell you that I followed Levi Jones like you asked me to. He borrowed his boss’s truck and drove out to the Shady Pines Cemetery a few miles from town and got there right around midnight. He had that big dog of his with him. Have you seen that thing? He’s huge. As big as a small pony.”

I made another little impatient growling sound, and he kept talking. “Okay, sorry. Anyway, Jones met up with the Mongrel gang like you thought he might, and they went inside the cemetery. They dug up the grave of a person named Marjorie Thomas, who was only buried a few days ago, and they seemed to be searching for something inside the coffin. When they apparently didn’t find what they were looking

for, they got mad, kicked the coffin and left the cemetery and all their mess. They went back to the city, and Levi drove the Watusi subject to his house. Then he drove home, took his dog and went back inside his own apartment.”

“Have you notified the local police yet about the cemetery?”

“Not yet. I wanted to tell you about it before I called them.”

“Call and tell them about the cemetery break-in and about Watusi and the Mongrel gang being involved. But don’t give them any information about Levi. Not yet. Leave him out of it for now. I want to talk to him first myself.”

“Will do.”

We hung up and I tried to get back to sleep but tossed and turned the rest of the night. Finally, I got up around seven and got dressed. I didn’t even stop to shave but went immediately to the police station to see if they’d rounded up Willie Watusi yet.

It turned out they had, but he still wasn’t talking. Belligerent as always, he claimed he didn’t know why he’d been “singled out” and why the police thought he had anything to do with the grave desecration. He didn’t give out any information on who helped him and indeed, kept insisting that he’d never been there. Our witness must be crazy. And mistaken.

His grandmother backed up his story about him being home all night. Although we still had him in a holding cell, he was already asking to contact an attorney. I needed to get Levi to talk and fast.

I went by the café as soon as I left the station and found him working at the tables in the back. He looked hot and tired, and I forced down the urge to get him out of there and let him sit down. I reminded myself how angry I was at him. I could already

smell his delectable scent, and it was stronger than before, which meant I'd been right about him just coming into heat. He was almost all the way into it and soon any Alphas around would be aware of it. He should be at home, damn him. I resisted again the urge to take him out of there and glanced around with suspicion, but I didn't see any other shifters inside the café.

After bribing his boss to let me talk to him, I'd hauled him out back to an alley for a conversation, but now he was talking about lawyering up. Why did he feel the need for that if he were innocent? It made me furious. He was still standing there in front of me, wringing his little hands and looking up at me, all stressed, making no effort to call anybody.

"Well?" I said, crossing my arms over my chest impatiently. "Are you calling a lawyer or not?"

He looked up at me with those luminous eyes of his and actually said, "I don't have any money for a lawyer. Can you tell me what you think I should do?"

Damn it. It was like a chicken asking the fox what to do after the fox broke in the henhouse. I didn't want to be affected like this by him. I shifted my feet uncomfortably and crossed my arms over my chest so they wouldn't reach for him. I started to tell him to figure it out on his own, but could I just stand by and let him go to jail, right alongside Willie Watusi? Hell, the other prisoners would eat him alive.

"Look," I said, "why don't you just talk to me? Maybe I won't have to take you in after all if you explain why you did it. Did Watusi threaten you? Did he make you go to that cemetery last night? Give me something to work with here, baby."

The word had slipped out before I could stop it, so I frowned to disabuse him of any notion that I felt sympathetic toward him.

“He did say he would rearrange my face if I didn’t take him. And I knew he would too if he got the chance. But mostly, I went to try to stop whatever he was going to do. I didn’t want to go with them, but I didn’t like to see him get in trouble again. You have to believe me. I told Willie no at first. But he said if I wasn’t with them, then I was against them, and that’s when he threatened me a little. I agreed to meet him at the cemetery, but that’s as far as it went. I told him I wouldn’t dig up any bodies.”

“Do you hear yourself? Dig up bodies!” He flinched so hard I immediately lowered my voice. “That poor woman was only buried a few days ago. She was a mother and a grandmother, who died of cancer in no-doubt terrible pain, and she deserved to rest in peace.”

Actually, that part was a total fabrication. I had no idea what the poor lady had died from, but I was hoping to guilt him into a confession.

“Oh no,” he said miserably, looking down at the pavement. “You hear a lot about the ground swallowing people up, but how come it never happens when you really need it?” he asked me, looking forlorn. It surprised a little laugh out of me.

“I mean, I didn’t know who she was or about the cancer thing. That’s terrible. That poor lady. And I knew it was wrong to dig up that body. I told him to stop.”

“You told him to stop.” I used a sarcastic tone, but it went right over his head.

“Yes, I did! But he ignored me.”

“Tell me why he did it,” I said, making my voice hard and implacable. “What did she ever do to him and don’t give me any shit about how he’ll find out and retaliate. Right now, your biggest worry is me.”

He gasped and glanced up at me and then gave the alley entrance on the side of us a long, yearning look.

“Don’t you even think about running, Levi.”

He looked up at me in surprise. “How did you always know what I’m thinking?” He turned back to me and squared his shoulders. “Look, I can’t tell you anything more. If I do, he’ll know it was me. He really will kill me—have no doubt of that.”

“He won’t do shit.” I took hold of his arm and pulled him close, but I was careful not to hurt him. “You listen to me. That guy is a punk, and he’s no one for you to worry about.”

“Easy for you to say. He probably already knows about you coming to see me. I think he has people watching the store.”

“Tell me why he broke into that cemetery, and I can protect you.”

“No, you can’t, and I can’t talk about this anymore. Look, I need to go inside. Please. This is only making things worse.”

He pulled away and I didn’t stop him, though I’m sure he felt the heat of my gaze on his back until the door closed behind him.

Great. I let him sweet talk me out of what I knew I needed to do. Now what? I was furious with myself for not throwing his pretty little ass in jail.

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Six hours later I was sitting outside the little café where Levi worked and waiting inside my truck. I had decided not to take no for an answer again from the gorgeous little omega. I was going to press him to confess everything, and I watched as the last customers left the store and saw the older man who was the owner put up the CLOSED sign and pull down the shades over the windows. About fifteen minutes later, he came out of the store.

He locked the door behind him. The lights were still on, and I could see a figure moving around inside, who was no doubt Levi, mopping the floors after the long, busy day.

I decided I could wait for him to finish for the day, so there'd be no distractions. Levi himself was distraction enough. I'd noticed earlier that he was wearing jeans that were so tight he could barely walk in them. If he were mine, that shit would change.

I'd never expected to find the most delicious little omega I'd ever seen when I came to this town. I'd never felt this way before either—both drawn to him and unable to stay away from him for long and yet regretting the day I'd ever met him.

He was entirely wrong for me in every way. My family expected me to find a beautiful pure-bred female from a good family and have lots of little pure-bred babies with her. Not waltz back home with a Mongrel male on my arm and announce that we were having little Mongrel babies and expect to govern the pack.

Not that I seriously cared what my family thought. Or the pack, for that matter. They hadn't wanted me to go into Law Enforcement either, but I had paid them no heed, figuring they'd eventually come around. It was my life, after all.

I could just picture it now, though. I'd take him to meet my family at their home in New York, and he'd be wearing something sinfully tight, no doubt, like all his clothes were, the better to show off his sweet little baby bump. He'd be all hot and bothered by meeting my family, so he'd cling to my arm and brush his pretty hair off his forehead nervously, his burnished gold skin all flushed and damp as he looked up at me with those big green eyes, his body giving off a sweet and delicious scent.

I shook myself mentally and had to reach down to adjust myself. Damn it, I had been sent to Valleywood by my boss to look into activity by the mixed-breed wolves in the area and Willie Watusi in particular. Not to add yet another Mongrel baby to the mix. But here we were. I was probably only a short time away from taking him to bed and breeding him. It was all I could do to control myself from dragging him out of that café now.

In fact, I was about to get out of the car and go in after him, when I saw several shadows disengage from the darkness of the alley beside the building and come around to the front of the store. One of the figures glanced around himself, checking the streets for any activity and then drew back his leg and kicked open the door.

There was a tremendous crash, followed by the loud sounds of yelling as a violent struggle began taking place inside the store. I was already out of the car and running fast toward the café. I leaped over the shattered pieces of the door and was greeted by a scene straight out of a nightmare. Some really strange looking creatures were grappling with Levi, who had taken one of them to the floor and was kneeling on its stomach with his hands wrapped around its neck. Another of the things was on Levi's back, attempting to get its own grip around his throat, but Levi kept hurling the thing off him. For such a little person, he was really strong. I felt a flush of pride in him. The third Mongrel stood by, keeping a close eye on the action and ready to jump in if he were needed.

I'd never seen a shifted Mongrel up close and personal like this before. I'd never seen

one at all that I could recall. All of them were big and odd looking. One's skin had patchy fur, with the skin in between a mottled tan color and another one's fur was dark brown. The three of them more or less retained their human shape, but their eyes were mere slits in their faces. The one on Levi's back had strange dark hair growing on his head like a piece of shag rug carpet that extended down his neck and back. It was his face that was most frightening, though, with a long snout like a dog's and strange teeth that were serrated like a saw. He had a long tail that whipped around behind him, knocking over chairs and into tables as he and Levi struggled.

The other two weren't quite as canine-like, though they dropped down on all fours and stopped to howl every few minutes like they were howling at the moon. One of them was serving as lookout and not too brave, because when he saw me, he looked around wildly for a weapon, but there was nothing at hand except for a little knife that he pulled out of his pocket and brandished at me. He gripped it in one big paw like a human and suddenly jumped on top of me, his bony paws grappling at my shoulders with sharp claws, as it brought its mouth down toward my face to bite me. I knocked his little knife away and jabbed a finger into one of the thing's eyes. It let out a high-pitched shriek and clapped a hand over its eye, turned away and took off out the front door like it had cans tied to its tail.

I grabbed the next one by its long tail as it tried to get at Levi and swung it around and flung it against the wall with so much force it shuddered once and then lay still. Then I grabbed the thing grappling with Levi and tumbled it backward, putting my boot to its neck to hold it down. Its claw-like hands pushed my leg away and it scrambled to its feet, but I managed to kick out at it and my foot connected with its ass.

The Mongrel flew forward and crashed into a wall. I watched the creature slide down to land in a heap. I turned back to Levi. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you before I got here?"

“No, I-I think I’m okay. Those are shifted Mongrels. Why did they attack me?”

“They’re probably some of Watusi’s gang,” I said, taking hold of his arm. “I figured they’d come by, but I was hoping you’d have more time before they got to you. I think they were sent here to try and kill you, Levi.”

“Kill me? No, you’re wrong! Willie probably just wants to scare me. He told me he needs me to help him figure out how to cancel the curse.”

“What curse? What are you talking about? No, I think he wants to shut you up more than anything else, because he thinks you’re the weakest link. Willie was picked up by the cops this morning and questioned. They didn’t have enough on him to keep him from making bail, so he got out late this afternoon. Plus, he knows you talked to me.”

“He what? How does he know that?”

“Because I told him.”

He gasped and shoved me back away from him, or at least he tried to. I grabbed him and pulled him into my arms. “Listen to me. They picked Willie up this morning, and he’s been a belligerent asshole all day. After I talked to you, I went back to confront him. I called him on his bullshit lies. That’s why I’m here—I knew he’d either send someone or come after you himself.”

“Just who the fuck are you working for anyway?”

“I’m a special agent with the FBI, on assignment here, that’s who. And watch your mouth. I’ve tried to help you, but you’ve continually refused to cooperate. I’m going to give you one last chance to tell me what you know before I take you to lockup. Now, what’s this curse you mentioned? Talk to me, damn it, or I can’t help you.”

He looked up at me, with misery written all over his face. “I-I can’t, Rolf. And you can’t help me anyway. Those guys told me just before they jumped on me. Willie’s taken my dog!”

Levi

Willie wasn’t smart, but he was cunning in the way of all cornered things. I didn’t have any relatives he could threaten so he came after the only thing other than my grandmother that I cared about—my dog. Willie was scared of my grandma, so he took Nugget.

It wasn’t hard to figure out how they’d lured Nugget outside to their vehicle. Nugget spent his days stretched out on my bed, except for my lunch hour, when my grandmother came over from next door and took him for a walk if she was feeling okay. He was fine then until I came home after work, and he never made a mess. He was a good boy in a lot of ways, but he was a total slut for a juicy bone. Or chicken, or hot dogs, or a ham sandwich or most any kind of food I would let him have. He had a bottomless pit for a stomach, and I struggled to feed him all that he wanted to eat. The vet had assured me I was giving him more than enough, but Nugget begged to differ. According to him, I was systematically and callously starving him to death. I figured they had merely offered him some food, or a bone and he went with them anywhere they wanted him to go.

After I told Rolf, he gazed down at me skeptically. “Your dog?”

“Yes! My dog, Nugget, and he and my grandma are all the family I have. Willie knows that so he took my dog to intimidate me into staying quiet.”

“Quiet about what? I already know you were with him at the cemetery. I have a

witness who saw you all there and placed you at the scene. This witness watched you break into the coffin and even took pictures with his cell phone. What is it Willie wants you to be quiet about?”

“I...well, I can’t tell you. The curse, maybe?”

“Ah, the dreaded curse again that you keep mentioning. Okay, tell me about this so-called curse.”

“But he has Nugget.”

“I’ll go get your dog, damn it. Now tell me.”

I launched into the story of the satchel of stolen money while Rolf listened and stared at me like I was as crazy as Willie surely was. When I finally trailed off to the end of it, he shook his head.

“You and Willie actually believe someone buried a bag of cash that has a curse attached to it?”

“Don’t laugh. It was a bank robber. And all those people from the funeral home are dead.”

“Not from any curse, I can guarantee you that.” He shook his head. “Go get cleaned up and I’ll take you to get your dog.”

I looked down at myself and saw that I was pretty messed up with blood and gore all over me. Then I looked around the poor café, with the bodies littered all over it, not to mention the mess. “But what about all this?”

“I’ll call for the gang members to be picked up,” he said, getting out his phone and

dialing what I supposed was the police station to come and pick up the Mongrels. “And they can clean up after themselves before they go.”

Even the ones who had been most badly hurt were already waking up and rubbing their bruises, shooting Rolf dirty looks. Like I said, Mongrels are tough—dumb as rocks, but tough. They had mostly healed once they shifted back to their normal forms, so an ambulance probably wasn’t even necessary.

“Start cleaning up this mess you made while we wait, if you know what’s good for you,” he yelled at them, and to my surprise, they actually got to work. They bitched about it and moaned a lot, but they started straightening up the café. I dreaded to think what my boss was going to say when he saw all the broken dishes though.

I had a locker in the back where I kept a change of clothing, in case I had to hurry to an audition after work—which was getting to be a rarer occasion all the time. I went back to wash up and change into a clean shirt and jeans.

“Come on. The cops are loading them up now, and one of the Mongrels told me where they’ve got your dog.”

He nodded toward one of the gang members, who glared resentfully back at him and who seemed to be sporting a brand-new black eye and a bloody nose. Rolf grabbed me by the arm and hauled me out of there and over to his truck.

He started the engine and glanced over at me. “Start talking, Levi. You need to tell me everything you know about all of this right from the start, or that curse of yours is going to look like a walk in the park when I get through.”

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Rolf

Levi looked tired, and I could imagine that he was. Not only had he worked all day, but then he had been viciously attacked at the end of it by the “shifted” Mongrels. I thought this would be a good time to get him talking, now while he was tired and worried about his dog, so I started to question him, hoping I’d get lucky. He told me the whole, sordid story again, and it sounded crazier every time I heard it.

Afterward, he had his own questions for me.

“Where did they take Nugget?” he asked. “You said one of the gang told you. Is it Willie’s house?”

“No, his grandmother wouldn’t let him bring him there, they said. Because your dog is too big and loud.” I glanced over at him. “How big is this dog anyway?”

Levi shrugged. “Oh, you know...pretty big.”

“And you named him Nugget? Was that supposed to be a joke?”

“Not really. He was just a baby when I got him and brought him home, and he loved McDonald’s chicken nuggets. I thought it was cute. I never thought he’d grow so much. And so fast.”

I nodded, and we drove toward the so-called district, the slum neighborhood the Mischling claimed as their territory.

“You know about my neighborhood?” Levi asked as he realized where we were headed.

“It was on a brief I was given to read before I came here to investigate the violent crimes in this area. It’s supposed to be the worst slum in the city, from what I understand.”

He bristled a little. “It’s not that bad. Not really. It’s where I used to live with my mom and dad when they were alive.”

“How long have they been gone?”

“My mother passed away when I was pretty young. My dad about six years ago.” He looked around distractedly. “Which street are you looking for? Maybe I can help.”

“Twelfth Street. A house belonging to some guy named Leroy.”

He leaned forward, straining against the seat belt. “Nugget will be so scared. He’s never been away from me for so long. And then to be taken to a strange place...maybe even not well treated...”

“Don’t borrow trouble. He’s probably fine.”

I pulled up outside the building the GPS said was the right one, and I began hearing a long, undulating howling coming from inside. My first thought was that some shifted wolf must be in the area, making a huge racket, but I didn’t see how that could be possible. Not everyone knew about us, because we were discreet and tried never to shift in front of human witnesses.

The sound went up and down in pitch and was getting louder the farther we went into the neighborhood. I glanced over at Levi, and he smiled excitedly. “I think that’s

Nugget! Keep going.”

“That’s Nugget?” I asked incredulously. “What in the world are they doing to him?”

“I think he just wants to go outside. That’s just the sound he makes for that.”

“Good gods.”

We were outside a dilapidated and ugly brick building, where the noise seemed to be coming from. Levi had the door open and was jumping from the truck before I even got fully parked. That’s when the howling really shifted into high gear. Maybe the dog smelled Levi or whatever. He disappeared inside the front door, and I pulled over and bailed out after him, worried that he’d get in trouble or disappear.

Damn it, he had no idea what he might be running into. What if the gang had weapons? I didn’t like this new feeling I was having about Levi. This constant worrying about him—it needlessly complicated things when I needed to concentrate on my job.

I started up the stairs after Levi and could hear someone shouting, “Shut up!” from several flights above us. I guess one of the neighbors must be getting sick of all the noise. Now that we were inside, the decibel level had seriously increased, and I hadn’t thought that to even be possible. Levi was shouting the dog’s name too, which added to the general din.

By the time I got to the last landing before the top, I heard the sound of crashing against a door, along with Levi calling out and knocking.

“Nugget? Nugget, I’m coming, baby. Just hang on.”

Suddenly the door burst open and slammed against the outside wall as a huge, hairy,

incredibly ugly creature bounded out of the apartment it had been in and leaped onto Levi, taking him backward and down to the floor. The thing looked a little like a cross between a donkey and one of those Wookiee's like in the Star Wars movies. I thought it was a shifted Mongrel like the others when I first saw it and even pulled my weapon, but I couldn't shoot for fear of hitting Levi.

"Try to move out of the way, Levi, and I'll shoot it!"

"No!" he cried. "Are you crazy? Don't shoot my dog!"

"That thing is no dog!"

"Yes, it is! This is Nugget. Put that gun away, Rolf. Please."

Against my better judgment, I slowly holstered my weapon as the huge creature continued to lick and maul Levi, who was sitting on the floor, grinning happily but not seeming to be alarmed. That's okay—I was alarmed enough for both of us.

"That can't be your dog."

"I told you he was big."

"How did they ever get him up here?"

"Probably offered him food. He'd follow anybody anywhere for food."

"Well...get him if you can, and let's get him out of here."

"Come on, Nugget," he crooned to the huge animal. "Follow me, baby."

Some baby...we went back downstairs, with me casting long looks over my shoulder

at “Nugget.” He was the largest dog—if that was really what he was—that I’d ever seen, and I was glad to see he didn’t look aggressive. And that we didn’t run into any of Willie Watusi’s gang members. No one seemed to care that we were getting Nugget out of there, but then again, who could blame them?

“Get him in the truck and I’ll take you home,” I told Levi.

Looking back on it, it was just really bad luck that on that particular afternoon, the little local grocery store located a few doors down the block was running a special on hot dogs and decided to cook some up for lunch. The grocer had them on a spit in an oven inside the store—they were the big, fat, golden brown hot dogs that people sometimes called “brats,” though they really weren’t. They were served on crusty white rolls with lots of mustard—and most people, including me, thought they were pretty good. The smell of them was wafting down the street and right toward us.

The scent must have hit Nugget around the same time as it did me, because he lifted his huge, shaggy head and gave a huge, powerful, “Woof!” Then he threw back his head and began to howl again.

When Nugget howled, it was like a sound like something out of a nightmare—like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle described in the Hounds of the Baskervilles. It was a long, air-raid-like, terrible sound that was both resonant and sonorous. It reverberated throughout the block and no doubt sent a chill running down the spine of anyone who heard it. He gave a single toss of his massive head, neatly dislodging Levi who’d been holding onto his neck, and then he was off and racing down the street. I made a fruitless dive to catch him, but it was far too late.

Down the crowded street, Nugget ran like his tail was on fire. I hesitated for just a moment, wondering how upset Levi would be if I simply turned and got back inside the truck and drove off, effectively washing my hands of the whole deal. Nugget was as fast as he was large, and he was already in full gallop toward the entrance of the

grocery store. I saw Levi sprinting after him and with a muttered oath, I took off after him, too, knowing I couldn't just abandon the shopping public, not to mention the hot-dog-eating public to their fate. I had to try and stop him.

I had longer legs, so I soon passed Levi, but ahead of me and gaining ground like a heat-seeking missile, Nugget was making his unerring way toward the food. He ran like a maniac through the aisles, sideswiping old ladies and their shopping carts with his massive tail and leaving children lying in the dust behind him. Luckily none of them seemed to be injured, but I couldn't stop to check, because ahead of me he had just knocked over a baby stroller. If not for the quick thinking of the baby's mother who snatched her child out of harm's way, the situation could have been much worse.

I saw him careening down a narrower aisle as he closed in on the lunch counter. In the front, there were people already lining up to buy a hot dog, and I shuddered to think what would happen when Nugget arrived. I yelled out a warning and saw a few people turn in our direction to see what was coming for them. Their faces blanched with terror as they tried to scatter in time.

It was at that pivotal moment, from a side aisle, that a beautiful, dainty white poodle stepped out, along with her owner. I found out later that she was named Duchess, and the name really seemed to fit. She had been groomed in an elaborate and expensive style, her topknot upswept on her head like a jeweled crown. She was fancy, majestic, and elegant—and she was also in heat.

As for Nugget, that ungainly, homely mutt, that Heinz 57 spawn of God only knew what breeds of animals—just happened to be a fully intact male. Nugget took one big sniff of the Duchess and put on the brakes. In all the old Roadrunner cartoons, this kind of thing happened all the time. Wile E. Coyote would spot a roadblock up ahead and simply jam on the brakes, skidding to a stop just in the nick of time. This was not the case, however, with Nugget.

He skidded and careened into Duchess's owner first. The man was a portly human of just past middle age, who walked with a cane. He didn't seem to know at first what hit him. He was knocked flat on his back, as Nugget leaped over him and directly into the Duchess's welcoming arms. In a manner of speaking.

The owner luckily wasn't hurt, and he scrambled to his feet shouting and swiping at Nugget with his walking stick, fortunately not coming anywhere near him. I finally arrived on the scene, too, but by that time I was totally out of breath and gasping for air. Though I tried to tackle Nugget and grapple with him, it was far too late.

I won't go into all the gory, graphic details of what happened next. How Duchess's owner grabbed her from one side, and I hung onto Nugget's neck on the other, while Nugget tossed us off like we were just annoying mosquitoes. I tried valiantly to save the Duchess's honor, but like I said, it was far too late. By that time, the two dogs couldn't be separated, though the Duchess's owner tried everything he could think of to achieve that goal, even throwing a cup of cold water directly into Nugget's face. Nugget just stared back at him with confused indignation and shook his big head, scattering water droplets everywhere. Finally, the man gave up and realized there was no recourse but to wait until the dirty deed was done.

That didn't stop him from screaming and shouting at Nugget as Levi and I stood helplessly by. Levi's face was an interesting shade of bright red as the guy called Nugget every name he could think of. In the end, they had to shut down the store to stop the mayhem. The manager, along with Duchess's owner, were both furious. There were shouted, angry threats about lawsuits and destruction of property.

That last part was included because after Nugget was finally finished and everything was done with the Duchess, he ran out on her without even so much as a thanks for the memories. He headed straight for the hot dogs and destroyed the little oven with its spit going around and around with one swipe of a massive paw. Then he proceeded to try and eat the machine along with its contents.

I managed to wrestle him to the floor and the manager brought me a piece of rope that I tied around Nugget's neck, as Levi tried to calm Duchess's owner down.

In the end, we all got clean away. Sort of—I wrote the store owner a check as Levi managed to lure Nugget to my truck by throwing hot dogs in his path. He left the Duchess's owner his name and phone number in case there were any further "developments," and we took off out of the store. I jumped in the truck with Levi and the dog, and we were finally able to drive back to Levi's apartment. Nugget fell sound asleep after his adventures. He'd had a big day for himself after all.

I had one more thought as we drove away, and though I hated to add to Levi's distress, I had to say it. "Can you imagine what those puppies would look like?"

Levi put his head in his hands and groaned.

Levi

I made no objection when Rolf Degan followed me and Nugget up to my small apartment. My grandma was at her bridge game by now—she had a group of old friends that she still hung out with every week.

I knew Rolf was still mad at me about Nugget, and he wasn't even close to being over it yet. I'd told him I'd pay him back for the damage Nugget had done at the store, but he just glared at me. Nugget went straight to his water bowl and after lapping at it for a while, he flopped down on the floor and began snoring loudly. Rolf watched him with a fascinated glare.

"Tell me again how you came by Nugget. Was there by any chance a circus passing through town? One that had some missing animals?"

“Oh stop. He’s a dog—just a strange looking one, I admit. I take him to the vet, you know, and they said he’s probably got some Irish wolfhound in him.”

“Maybe a little moose too.”

I laughed and fell down on the couch next to him. I was exhausted and all I could think of was curling up here next to Rolf’s big, warm body and falling asleep. It sounded so nice that I leaned against him and cuddled into his side, even though he probably didn’t want me to.

He glanced down at me in surprise. “Comfortable?”

“Mm, yes. Thanks.” I yawned so big I almost cracked my jaw. “I need to close my eyes for just a minute.”

I expected to be pushed away, but instead, he settled me a little closer in his arms. I sighed and turned my face into him and that was the last thing I knew for hours. I woke up as light was beginning to come through the windows. He was lying on his back on the couch, and I was sprawled out on top of him. He had pulled a blanket I kept on the back of the couch over both of us. Startled, I glanced at my phone to see that it was almost six o’clock—in the morning.

It was too early to get up, but should I stay and try not to wake him? I could hear Nugget snoring nearby and it felt as if we were all alone in our own little time and space here in my apartment, one that wasn’t even a part of this world.

Rolf groaned in his sleep and pulled me closer to him. I was hypersensitive to his touch, so when he fumbled at my jeans—not asleep after all—and then pulled my dick out and took me in his hand, I gave a slight shiver and moaned way too loud. He smiled, his eyes still closed as he began to kiss and lick and nibble at my mouth, pulling me up higher so he could reach me. My cock was leaking, and I thought that

wasn't the only thing. I was really in heat by now and this wasn't helping. He trailed his hands down under my clothes and I moaned and bucked my hips against him.

"I want these off," he whispered softly to me, tugging at the waistband and I nodded and shimmied out of my jeans and underwear in one go, still lying mostly on top of him. Suddenly, my omega scent was chokingly strong in the room, and he opened his eyes fully and gasped as it hit him.

He reached for me blindly to pull me back on top of him, and I didn't object, the idea of a condom never even occurring to me, because I was way too far gone by that time. I was throbbing with need, and I wanted him inside me. I pulled his hand over to tangle his fingers in my pubic hair so they would graze my dick. I hoped that was a strong enough signal of what I wanted to happen next. Just in case it wasn't, I told him.

"Make love to me," I begged, thrusting at him shamelessly. I wanted him so badly I had little control and all I could think about were his hands moving over me as his big fingers pushed inside my ass. I moaned encouragingly and sighed with relief.

"No, we shouldn't. Settle down until we can find a condom. You're still in heat." His voice was rough and strained and growly in my ear, and I was making way too much noise. His fingers weren't enough, and I was getting desperate.

"No, please! It'll be okay. I'm not sick—I swear it." My cock was getting harder—so hard it was painful with the promise of the attention coming toward it. He pulled away and bent over me to put his hot mouth over the tip of my cock, and I cried out a little, unable to hold it back. He took the heavy length of me into his mouth and his throat, swallowing around it. I began swearing softly above him. My hands went into his hair, not forcing him, but tugging gently, holding on against this onslaught of pleasure. But it still wasn't enough. I don't know why he thought it would be. I was fully in heat by now, and I had to have that big cock inside me. This night was

turning into something much more than I ever expected, but it was everything I wanted.

“I’m not sick either—we have check-ups at work, but you could get pregnant.”

“No, I can’t. I told you, I’m only a quarter wolf and a quarter omega. Please, Rolf.”

Finally, finally, he acted as if he might be convinced, and he began to unfasten his trousers and pushed me away so he could take them off. I tried to help, but I probably just got in his way. I was happy to see how hard he was too, so that any fear I had that he wasn’t into men dissipated as fast as it reared its ugly head. I knew the gods wouldn’t have been so cruel as to create such a delicious Alpha and dangle him in front of me, only to keep him out of my reach.

“I want you inside me,” I told him.

“No,” he protested again, but he sounded halfhearted at best. He tried to straighten up, but I bent quickly to lick his cock.

He grabbed me and pulled my chin up so he could kiss me. “Are you sure you can’t get pregnant?”

“I’m sure. I’m barely even omega. Please,” I groaned, long and loud as his fingers found and massaged my hole, slipping in and out.

I was omega enough that I was fully in heat, but I decided to ignore that fact. I was sure it was a minor detail.

“Please, hurry,” I cried, feeling desperate and he soothed me with another kiss.

“Shh,” he whispered. “Be quiet, baby, and I’ll take care of you.”

I dazedly nodded my head and bent to try and lick him again.

“Just relax. I got you. You want this to happen, right?”

I nodded frantically and kept trying to kiss him. “Let me do this then.”

He picked me up in his arms effortlessly and positioned me in the middle of the couch as he knelt over me. Despite what I said about my omega status, he had to smell the omega scent. It must have been messing with his head, because I knew it was making him crazy for me, like I was for him. He leaned over and began whispering in my ear—soft, crooning sounds meant to relax me. He pushed up one of my knees to expose me and that’s when the smell must have hit him like a brick in the face. He shouted out as the scent perfumed the air around us, so potent it made us both even more dazed and dizzy with lust.

Something else was nagging at me too. This overwhelming passion I was feeling was more than just the normal reaction of an omega to his Alpha. I’d been around plenty of Alphas and had never felt like this before. Could this be the mate scent? Was Rolf my mate?

All the reservations I’d had about mating a pure-bred seemed so trivial and unimportant now, and I pushed them all aside.

What was I thinking?

Rolf

I realized as I held him close to me that I’d been fooling myself about the way I felt for him. Mongrel or not—it didn’t matter. He’d said he was only a quarter wolf, so

maybe that was it. Whatever he was, I felt like he belonged to me. I wanted to kiss him and make love to him until I was past speaking, past moving or past feeling anything except his touch. I wanted to own him and caress him and hold him in my arms forever. And I wanted to eradicate any idea he might have of any other man. It was frightening how much I seemed to need this boy in my arms. Nothing had ever made me feel so out of control before, and with the still rational part of my mind, I wondered why. Why did I feel like he belonged to me? Was it because he was my mate, whether or not I liked the idea? Could it be true? The instant that thought went through my head again I recognized it as a fact. This boy—this beautiful boy was mine—made for me and for no one else. The idea thrilled me but appalled me a little at the same time.

The realization was making me feel hot and causing fluttery feelings in my chest. I stroked my fingers inside him again and again, and I realized his secretions weren't going to be enough to lubricate him for my knot. Maybe it was because he wasn't fully omega. Omegas opened up enough to take an Alpha's knot. The idea of getting him ready for me swept through me like a wildfire, though, and I kissed him thoroughly as he sighed into my mouth. I increased the pressure and the speed of my hand, and now on each upward sweep, I ran my thumb over the sensitive head of Levi's cock, dipping gently into his slit before continuing down. He continued to gasp for breath and tried to thrust upward, but I moved my hand to his hip, holding him down with easy strength. He opened his eyes in surprise and looked directly into mine.

"Rolf, please, I need to come," he said, a little note of panic in his voice. I smiled at him, holding his gaze. "Please let me."

"No, baby. You won't come unless I tell you to."

He widened his eyes in surprise but then he nodded, his green eyes still wide and a little desperate. He put his hands on my shoulders, holding on tightly, clenching and

unclenching his hands and staring into my eyes. So trusting. Gods, it thrilled me. Again, I dipped my thumb gently into his slit, and he growled as his hips came up off the sofa. He made a loud sound that was almost a painful moan. I slipped a wet finger up inside him, crooking it, looking for the little bundle of nerves I knew would cause him to have an orgasm and maybe open him up a little more. I found it and swept a finger over it, once and then again.

“Come on, Levi. Come for me.”

He jerked his hips upward, gave a shout and came uncontrollably, spurting out onto my chest.

I gave him a few seconds to recover his breath, before pushing his legs up and pulling his ass up to meet my fingers again.

I reached into a drawer in the side table, looking for lube. I didn't like to think about why he might have that and who had used it on him, but I thanked the gods when I found it and quickly prepared him. Then I was pushing my cock into that wet, slick hole, thrusting in so deep the hair on my groin brushed against the soft skin of his pretty ass, all the time whispering to him and wooing him with words that I hoped would arouse us both.

“Does that feel good? Do you like it when I'm so deep inside you?”

Levi nodded, beyond words by this point and tilted up his sweet ass for more, harder. He was a true omega in one sense at least. Once didn't seem to be enough. Overcome by lust and unable to make it last, I thrust harder, hips rocking up against him in a hard, fast rhythm, every stroke sending waves of sensation coursing up through my cock and radiating all through me. The pleasure was so fierce, so sweet that it took very little time for me to feel an orgasm teasing around my balls. Should I try not to come inside him? I didn't think it mattered now. I'd been making love to him without

a condom—and he was an omega in heat. I really hadn't believed his lies. He may not be able to open for my knot like a full-blooded omega, but his scent didn't lie. He could be pregnant with my child already, and I liked that idea. I'd wanted to breed him and make him mine from the first moment I saw him.

I was ravenous for him, groaning at the heat and the feel of him. But it was time to give him a mating bite and seal the deal with my knot. I knew it would hurt so I'd tried to get him aroused and stretched out enough that he wouldn't feel it too intensely. I captured his throat gently in my hand, looking deeply into his eyes as I fucked him, soothing him with one kiss after another. He shuddered in my arms and moaned with pleasure, and his eyes glowed at me.

"I'm going to bite you now and give you my knot."

His eyes widened and he moaned. "Are you sure? That would make me..."

"My mate. Yes, I'm sure. But... tell me if you don't want this. If you have any doubts."

"N-no. I don't. Except for the fact that I...I'm a Mongrel. A mixed breed. And you can't want one of those. You're a pure-bred."

"You're my mate, Levi. The gods made you just for me."

I hated the old prejudices against the Mongrels—the mixed breeds that pure-breds had helped to create. And I hated that I still reacted to them deep inside me where I didn't like to admit it. I did believe he was mine, but so many omegas had been used and abandoned by pure-breds. I wouldn't do that with Levi. I'd make sure of it.

"I want this," I said again, maybe trying to convince myself.

He nodded then, biting his sweet lip. “If you’re sure. But please be sure.”

Shuddering a little and surprised at how moved I was by his sweetness and concern, I clutched him tighter, and I bit down hard on the spot I’d chosen between his neck and his shoulder, sinking my teeth in. He cried out but he endured it. My fingers probed inside him, still carefully stretching him, even though the burn was making him jump a little. I whispered in his ear.

“Move your leg up, baby. Push out. That’s it.”

More lube and I knew he must be feeling impossibly full. I’d seen his face when he first saw my knot and how large it was. I tried to see it through his eyes—the strange bulge of hard flesh around the base of my cock. Secretly, he probably didn’t think it would fit, but his omega brain was dazed, and he wanted to please me so much he’d try. He wanted to be able to do this for me and for himself and it endeared him to me.

I knew that once we started, his body would not only accept my knot but be fully onboard with it. I whispered to him again to concentrate on relaxing and pushing out as hard as he could.

The feel of him around me, rubbing up against me made me feel like I was on fire, and I moved restlessly, wanting to thrust, but not willing to hurt him.

I leaned down closer to him and saw that his breathing was fast and unsteady. Was that because of what I was doing to him? I was having a hard time controlling my wolf, but I knew this needed to be over.

I sank my fangs deep into the side of Levi’s throat, and he screamed and gasped and would have pulled away, but I clutched him more tightly. Then as the venom spread through his veins, he began writhing, not in pain, but in ecstasy. A powerful orgasm racked his body as come shot from his cock, splashing up on his chest. I pulled my

teeth away, making growling sounds. Levi moaned and threw back his head. At the same time his orgasm hit, I thrust into him, hard and fast and deep, and my knot filled him.

He screamed again, and I realized that his scream was mingling with my own howl, creating a chilling primal sound in the small room. Before he could even register the pain of being impaled on my cock, I took his flagging cock in my hand and began to stroke him. The spot inside him that I'd touched was now being rubbed up and down by my knot, causing him to arch backward for more, but the pressure on his cock, which had already filled again under my touch, made him want to thrust forward. He didn't know which way to move—toward it or away from it, and it was causing confusion and making him disoriented.

The venom was racing through his veins by this time, and he broke out in a sweat as another orgasm came on him fast and hard. My hot semen flooded him, spilling out and running down the backs of his thighs and onto the mattress. He cried out and I bent my head over him, filled with tenderness and passion.

“Let go,” I told him. “I’ve got you. I’ll always have you.”

He sighed and turned his head blindly toward me for a kiss. I gladly obliged.

The remaining hours until the sun was high in the sky were a haze of lust and sex. Levi awakened and turned toward me, and I welcomed him each time with kisses. We made love over and over, with Levi falling into an exhausted sleep afterward.

But I loved being deep inside him and only reluctantly pulled away. I felt as if he belonged to me completely now, but it was still far from over. In the way of Alphas and omegas, it never seemed to be enough.

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A few hours passed, and I don't think I was thinking rationally anymore. Why was I thinking about making love to him again? Because I couldn't help myself, that's why. I wanted nothing more than to be inside him. I'd heard about this kind of lust before for an omega mate, but I never thought I'd experience it myself.

I turned to him in bed, and he opened his eyes and looked up at me, his eyelids fluttering a little. I'd never seen anyone so desirable before in my life.

“From this time on, you belong to me. Only to me—is that understood?”

His eyes got so big, but he nodded his head slowly in agreement.

“You're mine now.”

Another slow nod, and I suddenly wanted to hear him say it. “Talk to me, Levi. Tell me what I want to hear.”

“Yes. I'm yours, Alpha. I belong to you.”

His words electrified me, and that's how I knew I must be pretty far gone. But how had this happened so fast? I barely knew this boy. I'd always heard it happened fast with fated mates, but this was ridiculous.

His dog was becoming insistent, so I managed to get up long enough to feed and water him. I opened the door to take him outside for a quick walk as Levi slept, and the door beside his opened. To my surprise, a tiny voice said, “Oh Lordy, you're one of them Alphas, ain't you?”

I turned to look down at the little human in surprise. She was elderly, but I think the word people used was “spry.” Her hair was snow white and her eyes were a luminous green, just like...

“Oh gods, you’re some relation to Levi, aren’t you?”

“I’m his grandma.”

Now that she mentioned it, she did have the same accent.

“Oh...I...nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Humph...I’ll just bet it is. Where are you sneaking off to with Levi’s dog?”

“I’m not sneaking anywhere. I’m walking this thing. I mean, this dog. Levi says he walks him every morning before he leaves for work.”

“My grandson loves Nugget. You should watch what you say about him. Poor ole thing is ugly though, I admit. But Levi’s crazy about him.”

I shrugged. “Levi knows how I feel, and I’m not convinced Nugget is a dog.”

She looked down at him and seemed to consider it. “You do have a point,” she said, nodding. She gave me a long look. “Levi’s a sweet boy, you know. Takes after his mama.”

“Oh?”

She was the prettiest girl in the city and the sweetest too. Like I said, Levi takes after her. All except the sweetness. Too bad he didn’t get some of that, instead of his daddy’s quick temper. But Lordy, his daddy was crazy about her. He took one look at

her and that was it for him. Never looked back. She was a witch, you know. But not a bad one. And I don't mean her personality either. But that doesn't mean I didn't love her like my own and don't miss both of them every single day." Her bright eyes started to fill with tears, and I couldn't take that, so I awkwardly patted her shoulder and decided it was time for me to go.

"Well, it's been nice meeting you ma'am and talking to you. I'd better take Nugget for his walk now."

"You do that. You are coming back now, aren't you? You're not stealing Levi's dog, are you?"

"Uh...stealing him? No, ma'am. No way."

"I didn't think so, but thought I'd ask. Well, you have a nice walk. Maybe I'll see you later."

"Yes, ma'am."

I made good time getting down the stairs and out on the sidewalk. Levi had an interesting family. For just a moment, I tried to imagine his grandmother meeting my mother, in her heels and pearls, but I couldn't fix that image in my head. I dismissed the idea to worry about later and took Nugget on his walk.

But when we came back in, I shut him out of Levi's bedroom. I fell down beside my new mate, and he turned to me and rubbed his hand over my groin. I groaned and the next couple of hours were another haze of making love and sleeping. We were in a heat frenzy, and there was little to be done except to give into it until it ran its course.

My wolf had already laid claim to him, and I simply had no choice. I would eat him up if I could, and I just might do that yet. Levi slept when he could, and I held his

sweet body in my arms. He opened his eyes sometime later that afternoon and looked up at me with a dazed expression.

Good, that's exactly how he should respond to his mate. He belonged to me, damn it, and only me. As if to prove it to myself, I moved my hands between his legs and stroked him through the sheet, watching his eyes go dark and hot.

"Oh," he said, sighing into my mouth. "Yes, please."

But it was too much, and I wanted him to come out of his lust haze now, not sink deeper into it. If there were any truth to the idea that he wasn't fully omega, it might be too much for him.

Still, I handled his balls and his cock familiarly. Why shouldn't I? He belonged to me. His cock wasn't overly long, but it was still beautiful, like the rest of him, and I ran a finger over it as his cock filled out. I leaned down to kiss the head, and my breath must have swept over the over-sensitive flesh, because he flinched and moaned excessively, shoving his prick up toward me.

To distract myself, I licked over the mark where I'd bitten him again. I had held the bite for a long time when I gave it to him, putting in a good deal of venom and then finally pulling away, leaving a big mark that would be a permanent scar on his neck. I licked at it to sweep away the blood that kept welling up and to help with the pain.

I hoped my bite would lessen some of the aggression and independence that male wolves often felt no matter what their status. I'd seen hints of that in Levi already. Levi was mine now, and I wanted to eradicate any scrap of feeling for Willie Watusi, along with any vestige of regard he might still have for the man. If there were any emotions still lingering, I wanted to obliterate them. I didn't want him to have anything else to do with that criminal bastard. Especially considering how much I despised the creature.

I'd only asked for this assignment once I heard that Willie Watusi was involved. I had a score to settle with the Mongrel. Watusi didn't know me. But I knew him.

A year earlier, I had worked on a case involving interstate human trafficking. I had looked at countless photographs of young victims, some as small as five or six years old. Most were human children, but I'd been assigned because Mongrels had been known to be involved in the kidnapping of their victims, and my SAIC knew I had a special interest in them. One of them had been a human boy who had been stripped naked for these pictures. His little mouth had been twisted with fear and his blue eyes were brimming with tears as he gazed hopelessly into the camera. We had managed to recover him at an auction a few weeks later. He had been taken from Valleywood, and we had learned that a Mongrel gang led by Willie Watusi was heavily involved in his abduction and transfer to the traffickers. He'd had to undergo months of therapy, and he had a lot more ahead of him.

We had rounded up Watusi and several of his gang members, but ultimately, we hadn't been able to find enough evidence against them to prove the prosecutor's case. The victims hadn't been able to positively identify the men because most of them were so young and so traumatized. But I knew that Watusi had done it. I had made a promise to myself that I would find evidence of the crimes he'd committed, and I'd put him away so that he'd never be allowed to hurt another child ever again. That was one reason I had to find out if Levi had ever been in his gang. If I discovered that Levi had anything to do with any part of the child trafficking, I really didn't know what I would do.

Levi

Rolf left my apartment after another hour had passed, giving me a long kiss and telling me he'd see me after work that evening. He reminded me sternly that I

shouldn't take any calls from any of the Mongrel gang and most especially not Willie Watusi. He made me promise him again and again.

He left me stretched out luxuriantly in bed. I had called my boss at the café and explained to him earlier that I was having my "problems" again, and I wouldn't be coming in. My boss was a beta wolf shifter, so he understood things like that about omegas, though he wasn't too happy about them. Luckily, he had some part time help he could call in to take my place today and I was a good enough worker that he made exceptions for me when he could.

I took Nugget for a walk in the park, though I knew it would make Rolf angry. It was mostly deserted during the week, though, and as long as Nugget was with me, I felt pretty safe from any Alphas who might decide to ravish me. I just wouldn't mention it to Rolf, who would no doubt overreact. It was cold, so I wore a scarf wrapped around my neck and pulled up around my face.

When I got back home, my grandmother stopped by, full of questions about Rolf—she'd seen him in the hallway with Nugget that morning.

"He's a handsome devil," she said. "But you be careful, son. He's not from around here, is he?"

"No ma'am. From New York, I believe."

"New York City? That's a little highfalutin, for the likes of our family. You be careful."

"It's nothing serious."

"Oh? Then what's that big mark on your neck?"

I clapped my hand over it, but it was too late. She'd got a good look at it already, and I wouldn't hear the end of this.

"Well, I..."

"Mmmhmm, that's what I thought. You mind what I say. Pretty is as pretty does. I don't think I trust him."

"Gran..."

"No, you go ahead and do you. But mind what I said. I don't trust him as far as I can throw him."

That was so not what I wanted to hear. I managed to change the subject, and she finally left, but I thought about what she said all day. Gods, he was hifalutin, wasn't he? What made me think he could ever be interested in me?

To distract myself, I decided to look for my mother's old journals. Not that Rolf would allow me to get anywhere near Willie and his gang again, let alone any graveyards, but when I'd told Rolf about my mother, it had stirred up old memories and I was curious. I thought it would be nice to dig out those old books and maybe display them somewhere, or at least put them in my bookshelves. I didn't have much to remember her by.

I started looking in my storage closet in the hallway for some old boxes, which led me to find my mom's old, cheap, earthenware and some pretty but inexpensive jewelry she used to wear—but no journals. I moved on to some boxes in my storage unit in the basement, and that's where I finally found them after an hour-long search. They were in a small, dusty box labeled "Lilly's Books and Recipes" in my father's handwriting and buried under a few boxes of women's clothing. Lilly was my mother, so I knew these had to be hers. I wondered why my dad had kept my

mother's things. It had been such a long time. Maybe he couldn't bear to part with them? It did seem so very final to dispose of some loved one's clothing after they were gone. I'd had to do it for my father, and it was a sad and depressing task. Maybe it was easier to just shove it all in a box and not think about it.

I carried the box upstairs and put it aside while I fixed myself and Nugget some lunch. I made myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and had a glass of milk, and I made two more sandwiches for Nugget, because he loved them. I always gave him dog food for breakfast and dinner, but I'd gotten in the habit of making him a couple of sandwiches when I came home to give him lunch and a little treat and take him out for a walk before I had to go back.

I had jelly on my sandwich, but he got a thick layer of plain peanut butter of the organic variety. It was unsalted, unsweetened, natural peanut butter without any added ingredients. My boss at the café got it for me at his discount, so though it was a little more expensive, Nugget loved it so much that the vet said he could have it in moderation. For Nugget, two sandwiches were a drop in the bucket, I figured, and he practically inhaled them.

I began looking through my mother's journals. I was charmed by them immediately, and as I read through them, I could almost hear her sweet, soft voice talking to me, reading off the ingredients to me. There were a lot of old recipes inside for food she made us—old southern dishes like peach cobbler and blackberry pies and barbeque with Brunswick stew. Yeast cakes and fried dough and delicious cornbread in cast iron skillets, and my favorite meal, which she made for me every Sunday. It was fried chicken and white gravy, fried potatoes, green beans cooked most of the day with fatback and cooked cabbage. None of it was particularly healthy, I guess, but it tasted so good.

Besides the food, there were recipes for little potions that she used for healing too. It was never for anything bad. They were for things like stopping a baby's colic or

helping bring pain relief to old people's arthritis. There were things to rub on rheumatism or to stop the pain of an aching tooth. I found instructions to make a lotion to heal cracked skin and some to cure skin rashes and even acne. And these were all mixed in with some other spells, like love spells and spells for luck. She always included cautions and warnings with her spells, and none of them were dark or evil. Sometimes the spell was just instructions for making your garden grow better or for mending tears in your clothing.

And then I found a piece of paper stuck in the back of the book, like she'd put it in as an afterthought. I pulled it out and peered down at it. The ink had faded, and I had to hold it up to the light to be able to read it. It was a spell to stop a curse or a hex that someone put on you. At the top of the page were instructions to never do this if you didn't know exactly who laid the curse. This wasn't anything to play around with, according to what she wrote.

An easy but maybe dangerous spell to remove a curse laid on you.

Only use in self-defense and be careful to follow it exactly.

Some strong, peppery herbs — the stronger the better Something personal from the person who laid the curse on you, like hair or nail clippings.

Write their name on a piece of paper too and then cross it out with X's.

A piece of red cloth (that you can part with) A red candle, not too long

Wrap the herbs and personal items in the red cloth, adding them slowly while imagining the other person and the reversing of the curse. Tie it up with string and bury the bundle at a crossroad or toss it into a natural body of water like a river or stream. Best to do it on a new moon (for banishing), or a full moon (for power), burning a red candle all the way down and adding the nub to the bag, carving the

candle with a word or two of your intent (or their name) before burning. Say these words—I send back the curse you sent to me.

I cross you with it so that none of your deeds will prosper.

Only use this as a defense against a direct attack and never maliciously or with ill will.

The words were simple but dark compared to the rest of the little book, and I shivered a little as I read them. I read this passage again and again, and as I did, I began to picture my mother in my mind's eye—something I hadn't been able to do for years. She had passed away from complications of pregnancy when I had been really young, and I barely remembered her, or so I had thought. But as I read her notes, written in her own strong hand, her image came back to me, as bright and vivid as a star. Were these instructions written in her own handwriting? I thought they were, and I carefully compared it to the other recipes and things she'd written out. It all seemed to match. But why had she shoved this at the back like an afterthought? Had she been afraid the dark words of the spell might contaminate the rest?

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine her, sitting at our old kitchen table, writing in her little notebooks. She had a lovely, strong face with high cheekbones, a stubborn chin and remarkable eyes, and she always seemed to be smiling when she looked at me. That's how I remembered it anyway. I sat down on the floor to finish looking through her notebooks, but I didn't find anything else like the spell about the curse. I wondered why she'd written such a thing. Was she afraid someone had cursed her? But why would they?

I shoved the idea away from me. My mother had been a good person, and there had never been a reason for anyone to curse her. At least nothing I'd ever heard about. Feeling uneasy, I carefully put the piece of paper with the faded writing back in the notebook and put the book back in the box.

I didn't think the spell I'd found—the only one like it I could find—would do Willie any good, even if I ignored Rolf's orders and saw him again to tell him about it. For one thing, I had no idea who had laid the curse on the money that had been stolen and buried—supposedly, that is, and according to Willie. According to what the spell my mother had written had said, you had to know who had laid the curse to start with to be able to cross it out. I got the impression that Willie had no idea and that all his information had come to him second or third hand.

Then again, it was hard to know what to believe when it came to Willie and his stories. He could have been telling the truth—or not. Besides all that, Rolf had told me in no uncertain terms that I was to stay strictly away from Willie Watusi, and I intended to do just that. In fact, Willie was the last person on earth I wanted to see.

It was about an hour later, just before five in the afternoon, that my door suddenly burst open, propelling inward from a vicious kick and slamming back against the wall. Three of the Mongrels in Willie's gang came bursting in, and one of them came prepared to handle Nugget.

He had jumped up with a startled bark as they burst inside but one of them threw down some chicken pieces in front of him and when he bent to inspect them, the Mongrel threw a thick blanket over him, wrapping him up in it. Nugget struggled and howled, but another one of them came over to help and they pushed Nugget into the bedroom and closed the door on him.

Meanwhile, the others grabbed me and though I fought them, they dragged me out of my apartment and down the stairs. I prayed to the gods that my grandmother didn't come out and try to stop them. It was lucky that she was a little hard of hearing. When they got me to the street, one of them hit me on the back of the head with something that made everything fade to black around me.

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I woke up disoriented and unable to understand where I was at first. I had a few moments of panic and began hyperventilating, because it was dark and freezing cold, and my head was aching. I was dizzy, and I could smell exhaust fumes that were gagging me a little. I wasn't tied or anything—someone had just thrown me in the trunk of a car—but I was being jostled around enough that I was rolling from side to side with every turn of the wheel. I tried to brace myself a little against the sides and that helped a bit. I could hear the muffled sound of a radio and voices that sounded faraway.

I realized I was probably in the same car Willie's boys had been driving when I'd met them at the cemetery. Thank the gods I wasn't too claustrophobic, but if this went on long, I thought I might get that way. It must have already been a while though, because I only had to endure about fifteen more minutes of this until the car came to a stop with a squeal of bad brakes and the muffled voices getting louder. Suddenly the trunk was flung open wide, and I could see it had become "dusky dark" outside, as my mother used to say.

Wherever we were, there was still enough light outside that I didn't have a great deal of trouble seeing Willie's face looking down at me with a sneer. His boys were scattered behind him. I looked up at him and found I still had to shield my eyes, because my head hurt so much, and the light on a pole was shining down on me.

"Wakey, wakey!" Willie shouted, and I winced as his loud, coarse voice hit my ears. "Get out, asshole!"

I tried, but fell back, much dizzier than I'd expected or realized. I hoped these idiots hadn't given me a concussion.

“I said, get up, damn it!” he yelled again, and this time jerked on my arm.

I may have mentioned that Mongrels are really strong, and he pulled me right out of the trunk and threw me on the ground. It did my self-diagnosed concussion absolutely no good at all—and I was sure I had one now, though maybe I was being a bit overly dramatic.

I looked up at him and snarled. And if I could have shifted at that moment, I would have.

“Watch it, Watusi! If you want my help, you asshole, then you better stop your bullshit!”

I was pretty sure that was why he’d kidnapped me right out of my apartment—if not and he was there for revenge for talking to Rolf about him, then I was dead anyway. I figured, what the hell—may as well stand up to him.

Willie snarled back at me, because that was just classic Willie, but he put out a hand to help me back to my feet. That may have shocked me more than any other part of this whole night, and I peered at him suspiciously before reaching for it, trying to figure out what was different about him. He was a little pale and sweaty, despite how chilly it was outside, and I realized he was scared out of his damn mind, and that was why he was trying to act so tough.

I jumped to my feet, straightened my shirt and glared at him. “What the fuck, Willie? You couldn’t just ask me for my help? You had to hit me over the head and kidnap me?”

He shuffled his feet and tried to give me a sheepish smile, which came out more like a grimace. He still held my arm, but I was seriously pissed off at him and pulled it out of his reach.

He laughed. I think that's what it was, anyway. It was a rusty sound he didn't use much, as smiles came so rarely to Willie's face. It looked weird on him, like he was grimacing in pain.

"The boys got a little carried away, Levi. Sorry. Didn't I say that?"

"No, you fucking did not!"

He flushed and shrugged. "I didn't tell them to rough you up. I just said to make sure you came."

"Whatever," I mumbled under my breath and looked around me. "They made sure all right." I glared around at all of them. Not one of them looked the least bit sorry.

"You did snitch on us though. So, in a way, you had it coming."

I glanced over at him and rolled my eyes, but that was it. I wasn't in a situation where I felt like I could argue like I wanted to. I had no idea where we were, except we had probably left the city.

I looked around and saw we were outside an old country church—it was painted a faded white, and the light I'd seen shone down on the front door. It didn't look to be exactly prosperous. The name on the sign beside the steps said, Resurrection Missionary Baptist Church, with some minister's name below that in smaller letters that I couldn't read in the dim light.

Considering why we were probably there after dark like this, i.e. for nefarious graverobbing activities, I thought that church name was particularly appropriate—the "Resurrection" part anyway. But there was nothing about this scenario that didn't give me the creeps. Looking around myself, I could see we were outside an old graveyard attached to this church. And if I'd thought that the Shady Pines Cemetery

had been spooky—and I had—it had nothing on this old place. This was a straight-up graveyard in every sense of that word, and even the term made me shiver and glance around at the shadows.

There wasn't any gate to scale over, but the place was dark and big, covering maybe three acres behind the church. Gravestones stood up all over it, like eerie signposts on a dark road to hell. Some of the graves had gravel over the tops and some were overgrown with grass and weeds. It must have been one of those older churches where the families tended to the graves, and some families didn't give a shit, so the graves were overgrown.

I think it was a poet I once read in school who had been outside a graveyard once and noticed its “breathless darkness, and narrow houses.” That description had made me shudder then, like it did to recall it now. Breathless—get it? And the narrow house part referred to the grave itself, where the people were. Could anything have been more morbid?

At least we were spared the spooky fog that had been hugging the ground the last time we dug up a grave.

I felt a pang in my chest at those words, and I could almost hear Rolf's voice in my head— “Did you hear what you just said? The last time you dug up a grave?” I considered the fact that I was totally going against everything Rolf had asked me not to do. “I don't want you to see or talk to Watusi again. Stay strictly away from any cemeteries. And don't get involved with him and his gang and their craziness in any way.”

Yet here I was, and he was going to be so furious at me. Hell, I couldn't even blame him, though I had been kidnapped and this wasn't my choice. I doubted he would believe me though. And this whole grave-robbing thing was wrong on so many levels.

“Did you check on reversing the curse like I asked you to?” Willie asked. “Some things have been happening.”

“What kind of things?”

“Bad luck...things going wrong. You know—things happening. My grandma even got sick.”

“I’m sorry about your grandma, but isn’t she like ninety-six or something?”

“Yeah, so what? She was always fine before. Now she’s weak and can’t walk too good.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“She hasn’t been to any doctor.”

“Well, damn, Willie, you need to take her.”

“Whatever. Mind your own business. And anyway, I asked you a question.”

“Yeah. I found my mother’s notebooks. She had written a little about curses. But listen, Willie, I have no idea if it works or not. If this curse is real, the paper I found about it said it could be dangerous.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” he replied.

“What? Cross it when we come to it? Won’t that be a little too late?”

“You worry too much, Levi. You always have. Now everybody needs to fan out and look for a fresh grave. The name on it should be Emily Bolagi.” He peered down at it

as if trying to decipher his own handwriting. “Yeah, that’s what I wrote down. Emily Bolagi. What a funny name.”

Says Willie Watusi, I thought to myself, barely keeping from saying the words out loud. He would have failed to see the irony though. He grabbed a shovel from the trunk—so that was what had been digging into my hip—and took off to walk among the “narrow houses,” while I slunk along behind him.

He thrashed around, stumbling over weeds and mounds of earth and leaning over to peer down at the names on the tombstones, showing absolutely no regard and a lot of disrespect. After about twenty minutes of it, he stopped and leaned on his shovel.

“Damn it, I can’t find any tombstones with the name Emily Bolagi on them. What the fuck?”

“Yes, but wait. Didn’t this lady die recently?” I asked. “It hasn’t been long enough to put up a tombstone yet. That takes weeks. There’s probably just a small marker from the funeral home.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” he said, looking over at me. “See, I knew you were smart.”

Resisting the urge to say nobody had to be smart to figure that out, I just kept following him around the graves. Then, on the far side of the big lot, one of the gang members yelled out.

“Hey! I think I found it! There are two here that have that same last name.’

We made our way over to the other side of the graves—with me stepping around or over them and Willie just plowing right across them. Sure enough, there were two funeral home markers—one with the lady’s name on the grave that one of his guys was standing by, and the other one that had the name Ben Bolagi on it. That grave

looked newer than the first one, though both looked fresh.

This must be the man who robbed the bank and set this all in motion to start with. I looked over at Willie. “Is this the one who took the money?”

“Yeah, it is.”

I started to say something about crime didn’t pay, but then remembered who I was talking to and stayed quiet.

They all set to work right away with their shovels. I took a few steps back, trying to keep a respectful distance and wishing I was anywhere else. They were fast though—I guess practice made perfect—because in no time at all, they had exposed the woman’s coffin and were working to pry it open. I stood hugging myself and a distinct chill had fallen as it got later and darker. It was promising to be a really cold winter. A full moon had risen and was shining down disapprovingly on us, or so I imagined. I looked around nervously at the shadows, thinking I sensed movement in the dark.

Willie jumped in the grave and yanked hard on the cover with a pry bar, and I heard a loud crack as he broke into the casket. Like before, I didn’t want to look closely at the occupant of the grave and looked away as the others rambled around through the coffin, picking up the body and looking for the money bag.

After a few moments, Willie, with a loud, victorious cry, straightened up with a large bag in his hand. “It’s here! I told you assholes I’d find it!” he shouted. He jumped back out of the grave and threw the bag down at my feet.

“Okay, it’s showtime, Levi. Do your thing before I open it.”

I just looked at him in shock. “What? I can’t do anything here!”

“Why not? What are you waiting for? Do the damn spell.” He looked at me with suspicion in his eyes. “You did find one, right? You weren’t lying?”

“I found one, like I said, but I have no idea if it’ll work, Willie. And it needs certain ingredients. This is dangerous if a curse really exists.”

“Like you keep saying. Okay, I heard you the first ten times you said it. And the curse exists. I told you.”

“All the more reason to do it right. Or just put the money back and let’s go. These idiots of yours didn’t let me take my book of spells to bring with me, anyway. There were a lot of ingredients I’d need before I can even try.”

“What do you mean? What kind of ingred—whatever it was you said?”

“Peppery herbs and a red cloth and a red candle. Some words I’m supposed to say.”

“Then say them! Look, Leroy has a red shirt. Give it over, Leroy!”

“No! I still don’t have a candle. And I don’t remember the words. I didn’t commit the words to memory!”

He looked stumped for a second and then nodded. “Okay, there’s got to be some candles in that church. Let’s go break in and get them.”

“No. Willie, you’re not listening to me. I have to have my mother’s book. And I’m not going to break into any church. Are you crazy? Besides, we also need something personal from the one who laid the curse in the first place before we can send it back to him. And you don’t even know who that is, do you?”

“Maybe I do. Maybe I know a little more than I said at first. What if I did know who

put the curse on it? What then? And what do you mean by personal stuff?”

“I don’t know. Some hair or nail clippings. Maybe a picture or a drawing of them.”

“And if I get you those things, you can do it?”

“I can try, but I told you. I don’t know if any of it will work.”

“It’ll work. I got confidence in you, Levi. Your mom was good at this, and the apple don’t fall from the tree. Okay, let’s get them before your boyfriend shows up.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“You know what I mean. Your damn Alpha. And I should still make you pay for snitching on me to him—but if you take this curse off the money we just found, then I guess I can let it go.”

I turned to look at him incredulously. “You didn’t just ‘find’ the money, Willie. You dug up a person’s grave and took it! And what did you mean, let’s get them. Do you or do you not know where we can find the man who did the curse?”

“He’s right here,” he said, gesturing down at the other Bolagi grave. “Ben Bolagi.”

“What? Are you kidding me?”

Maybe I was shouting a little too loud. I saw his eyes get really big as he stared at me—or was he looking behind me?

Because it was at that exact moment that all hell broke loose.

Big bright lights suddenly started shining at us as loud voices shouted, “Police! Put

down those shovels and come out with your hands in the air!”

The voices seemed to be all around us, and I gasped as I stuck my hands in the air. But then behind me, I heard somebody yell, “Run!”

And right beside me, Willie pulled out a pistol and shot it toward the voices. I was horrified.

I fell to my knees and crouched down as low as I could to the ground, my arms over my head, but Willie yanked me up beside him and started literally dragging me with him as he made his way through the tombstones. I jerked my arm out of his grip, and he yelled and cursed at me and then turned and ran. The last I saw of him, he was headed toward the woods behind the graves, still clutching the bag.

People were darting everywhere as the lights danced around the tombstones. I tried to stand back up, but somebody ran right up behind me and pushed me down hard. I fell face down in the dirt covering one of the graves. That’s when I heard more shots ringing out and a big, heavy body fell on top of me, grinding me down into the dirt even more.

I lay there trembling for what seemed like the longest time, until a familiar voice in my ear urgently asked me, “Are you all right? Are you hit anywhere?”

“N-no. I’m okay.”

The man on top of me, who was Rolf, of course, got off me then and pulled me roughly to my feet to glare down at me like he hated me. “In that case...you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to talk to a lawyer before we ask you any questions. You have the right to have a lawyer with you during questioning. If you can’t afford a lawyer, one will be appointed for you before any questioning if you wish. If you

decide to answer questions now without a lawyer present, you have the right to stop answering at any time. Do you understand these rights as I've stated them to you?"

"I...uh...what?"

"Do you understand your rights?" He shouted down in my face.

"Y-yeah, I think so."

Rolf jerked me around and pulled my hands behind me—I felt cold steel clamping around my wrists.

"What are you doing? Am I being arrested?"

"Be quiet," he hissed at me. He sounded really, really angry, and my heart sank. Did he know that I'd been kidnapped out of my apartment, or did he think I'd gone out here to meet Willie willingly or because I wanted to? I wanted to tell him, but he began pulling me toward the parking lot.

"Not a word, Levi. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, but...wait! I have to tell you..."

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say. I don't want an omega, and I don't need one."

"What? Who asked you? Besides, are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

He pulled me behind him so roughly that I stumbled and bit my tongue. He grabbed me around the waist so I wouldn't fall, but I was shivering in the cold, and I couldn't believe this was actually happening and that he was saying these mean things to me.

“I don’t understand. How are you here? Why am I being arrested?”

But Rolf apparently wasn’t in the mood to be answering questions—admittedly, I probably wasn’t talking too plainly considering the tongue thing and the fact I could barely catch my breath. I was taken to his car and shoved down in the back seat, and the door was closed behind me. He wasn’t being rough now, exactly, but his touch was cold and impersonal, and I needed him to talk to me and tell me something good. Needless to say, he didn’t.

I could hear the snick of the door locks as he turned on his heel and stalked back to the graveyard, just leaving me there alone. I think I may have been in shock. I put my head back on the seat and groaned. Maybe this was all some kind of crazy dream I was having. If it was, I wished somebody would hurry and wake me the hell up. Though, come to think of it, I guess this whole thing did make me look awfully guilty. For Rolf to find me like that, in a heated argument with Willie in front of a desecrated, open grave, a corpse clearly displayed in an open casket—with a money bag at my feet... I guess it looked pretty bad. I moaned again and closed my eyes. Gods, I was so fucked.

Rolf

I had gotten the call from Conroy, the man I still had stationed outside Levi’s apartment building to watch his movements, as I got off for the day. It was around five o’clock, as I was just getting off work and anxious to get home to Levi. But instead, Conroy gave me the news that Watusi’s gang members had just physically carted Levi out of his apartment, and I panicked for a bad moment or two. What the fuck was I doing getting so involved with a lead suspect in my case that I wasn’t able to do my job effectively? I could only stand there in a complete panic over whether or not my omega was hurt.

Had they knocked him out or roughed him up or even shot him? I knew that Watusi was really angry at him and once he got his hands on him again, I wasn't sure what he'd do. I had a few bad moments until Conroy broke the silence by saying he'd been watching and ready to step in, but Levi had seemed to rouse a little as they put him in the trunk. I still wasn't happy, though, because why the hell had he not stopped them?

"Damn it, are you saying you just sat there and watched this thing happening? Is Levi all right? At what point were you planning on stepping in, Conroy?"

"I couldn't 'step in' as you say when there were about six of them and only one of me. I was actually walking back from getting coffee, and I left my weapon in the car, because this was only supposed to be surveillance. And I did call for backup, but dispatch said the closest unit was four miles away. By the time the uniforms would have gotten there, they would have been long gone. Since they didn't notice me, I figured it was better to follow them, see where they took him and then call it in."

It was still bullshit, but I decided to let it go. For now. "And? Where the fuck is he?"

"I'm trying to tell you, sir. They took him to another cemetery, to a church way out on Mason Road. I'm there now. I parked where they couldn't see me and walked in, but they're still just talking. Some of them are walking around and looking at the graves."

"What about Levi? Is he all right? Have you seen him at all?"

"Oh yeah, he's with them. He looks fine. Maybe he knew we might be watching his apartment, and they did this on purpose to make it look like he was being forced. Because he's talking to that Watusi guy now and they look pretty chummy. Do you think he's maybe involved in this thing?"

I growled in the phone, and he began backing off. "Of course, I could be wrong.

Come out here and see for yourself. Maybe they'll have broken into another grave by the time you get here. Maybe you can catch them in the act."

"I'm already on my way," I said, running back to the station to find a vehicle. "Get back out there and watch them, but don't let them see you. Make sure Levi is okay until I get there. And if your backup arrives, tell them to stay out of sight and just observe until I arrive. Stop them and make the arrest only if they try to leave before I get there. This thing is enough of a clusterfuck as it is."

"Yes, sir," he said, and quickly hung up.

I didn't know if I should be furious or concerned that they had forced Levi to come with them. Maybe Conroy was right, and he'd gone along with them willingly, and had just tried to make it look good. Damn it, he had some explaining to do for sure. If I found out that he'd been lying to me, I wasn't going to go easy on him. Not one bit. I wouldn't feel any sympathy for him at all, and I'd take him straight to jail.

Now if I could only convince my heart of that before it slammed right out of my chest. I hit the steering wheel of my car in frustration. Damn it, why was he risking himself like this? I told him to cut all ties with those criminals.

By the time I got to the graveyard, parking well up the road and walking in with no flashlight. I wanted nothing to warn them someone was there, and I could see perfectly well in the dark. I found Conroy and the others staged in front of the old church and out of sight of the graveyard. When Conroy saw me, he hurried over.

"I have a few men stationed in the trees, sir, just watching them. Do you want us to move in?"

"Give me your report first."

“They’ve dug up another grave and broke into the casket. Levi Jones is definitely with them.”

I cursed under my breath but tried not to show too much emotion. “Okay, move in on them. Make sure they don’t run into the trees behind them. Get some more backup out here to help.”

He nodded and moved off to do as I’d asked. I went to the side of the church and peered around the corner to see if I could find Levi. He was at the far side from where I was, standing by an open grave, arguing with Willie Watusi. He wasn’t being restrained and he didn’t seem at all hurt. So what the hell was he doing there? Had he been lying to me all along? It sure looked like he was in on this thing—whatever it was—right up to his pretty little neck.

Conroy came up behind me to whisper to me that the officers were ready to move in and I gave him the go-ahead. Seconds later, the men turned on their powerful flashlights and began to sweep them over the graveyard, shouting, “Freeze! Police! Put down those shovels and come out with your hands in the air!”

Of course, none of them did that—instead, the idiots began running for the woods, scattering like roaches. All, that is, except for Levi. He fell to the ground, just as the officers I’d sent there began firing warning shots over their heads. I saw Watusi bending over Levi and trying to pull him up, but Levi jerked his arm away and fell back down. Watusi took off running and I ran over to Levi and threw myself on top of him, angry as hell, but still terrified that he could be hit by a stray bullet.

When the shooting stopped, I got up and pulled him to his feet, quickly checking him over to see if he was all right and then cuffing him as soon as I knew he was. I gave him his Miranda rights. My voice was shaking, and I hoped he didn’t notice it, but I didn’t think he did. He seemed to be freaked out and confused by everything that was happening. I pulled him to my car and put him in the back seat, barely speaking to

him at all. I knew I was confusing him, but what could I possibly say to him? Besides, I needed to calm down before I talked to him. I started walking toward the other men who were searching through the graveyard, and tried to just not think about how I was going to handle this thing with Levi. There would be plenty of time for that later.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Levi

I was sunk in misery as I sat there, cold and alone and waiting for Rolf to come find me again. And then I heard a tap on my window and saw Willie standing there outside the car. He smiled at me, held up a key fob and clicked it. The car made a little chirping sound, and the door locks popped up.

He pulled open the door and grinned down at me. “Hey! Wanna get out of there?”

“Wille! What are you doing here? How did you get Rolf’s keys?”

“Don’t worry about him. I have my ways.”

“Rolf, tell me! You better not have hurt him!”

“Oh, calm down and stop making so much noise,” he said. He held up the keys again.

“Don’t you want out of those cuffs?”

“Tell me you didn’t hurt Rolf!”

“Hell no, he’s okay. He might have a little headache when he wakes up, but he’s all right.” He bent over me and pulled me forward so he could unlock my handcuffs.

“He’s got you trussed up, all right. Keep still so I can get these cuffs off you.”

“Where is he?”

“Who? Your cop? He’s right where I left him, I suppose. I was waiting over there

behind those bushes when he came around the corner and I jumped out behind him. He never even knew what hit him. But we better hurry and get out of here before he wakes up.”

He twisted the key in the lock and the cuffs opened and fell off on the seat beside me. He reached for my arm and pulled me out of the car.

“Is he hurt?” I asked, feeling frantic. “I need to go to him.”

“Hell no, you don’t. You’re coming with me.” He yanked on my arm and then pulled me along behind him to the road, breaking into a little jog that I struggled to keep up with. His legs were longer, and I was worn out by all that had happened so far. I managed, though, and soon we’d made it to the crossroads I remembered nearby. It was maybe a half mile away from the old church.

“I called Benjie to come pick us up. You remember Benjie.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Oh. Well, he can get his mom’s car. All we have to do is wait here. He should be here soon.”

“Willie, they’re going to catch us. We should just go back to Rolf’s car and throw ourselves on his mercy.”

“Fuck that. He ain’t got any mercy. So fuck him. I have the money now and I’m not letting go of it. I worked hard for that money.”

“How do you figure?”

“Don’t worry about it, smartass. It’s mine. And now all I have to do is get this damn

curse off it. That's where you come in."

Some headlights were coming down the road toward us, so we jumped back out of sight. As they got closer though, Willie smiled with relief. "It's Benjie. Let's go."

Willie pulled me behind him again to the road and we piled in the front seat next to Benjie, the guy who'd come to get us. I sat over by the window and thought about Rolf, hoping he was all right and wondering if he really would have taken me to jail, or if he'd just been trying to scare me. I figured that was a toss-up. But either way, I was dying to see him again and check on him. I guessed this was how the mating thing I'd heard so much about actually worked. It seemed like I wanted to be with him all the time, no matter what. I sent up a quick prayer to the gods that he was all right.

Sagging against the window, I half-dozed as we drove. I guess it was the adrenalin dump. I was expecting to hear sirens behind us at any time, but we soon arrived back in Valleywood without incident. I realized we were heading straight toward my apartment building. On the one hand, that was good, because I was worried about Nugget. But on the other hand, wasn't that the first place Rolf would come looking? And was that good or bad for me?

I must have made some slight noise, because Willie glanced over at me. "We're going to pick up your book and then we'll find a safe place to go so we can do this thing."

"But the book said we need to do it under a full moon. The moon isn't full."

He shrugged. "Oh, well."

"You can't just say, 'Oh, well,' and forget it. There's a reason for every part. And that includes the personal stuff from Ben Bolagi."

“What’s the reason for every part?”

“I don’t know, but if my mother went to the trouble of writing it down, then we should do it.”

“Is there a full moon soon?”

“How should I know?”

“Can you check?”

I sighed and pulled out my cell phone to Google it. I sighed as I put it back. “No full moon for four more days.”

“Then we’ll have to do without. And I’m not going back to that graveyard. The cops will be watching it.”

“But...”

“No buts. We could all be dead in four days. The curse is already after me. Imagine how bad it will be now that I have the money. We can’t afford to wait.”

I sighed heavily, though I knew he was probably right about the need for urgency. I wondered for the hundredth time why I’d ever let him talk me into this.

Willie gave me the elbow. “What else did you say we needed?”

The potion said peppery herbs...what do you think those might be?”

“Beats the hell out of me. You can ask at the supermarket.”

“Oh, okay, I guess.”

“What else?”

“My mother’s book. Some red cloth and a red candle. Oh, and once again—something personal of that person, like some of Bolagi’s hair or nail cuttings.”

“Whatever. We’ll just have to make do.”

Leroy stopped in front of my apartment to let us out and then went to park somewhere, “just in case,” as Willie told him.

Up in my apartment, Nugget was happy to see me, though incensed about Willie being there. I had to lock him in the bedroom while I found my mother’s book. I told Willie I needed to walk my dog, but he shook his head.

“No way. We have to get out of here. Hurry up and let’s go.”

“Not before I leave him some food and water,” I said, and went to fill his bowls, while Willie growled and paced behind me. I didn’t care—I didn’t want to leave Nugget here by himself again anyway. Plus, I guess I was stalling a little. I was hoping Rolf would show up and rescue me, but it didn’t happen. I wondered again just how hard Willie had hit him.

“Come on, Levi!”

“Stop shouting. I don’t want my grandma to hear and come out here.”

“Aw, hell no. She’d talk us to death before she let us go.”

“Lay off my grandma.”

“Okay, don’t get touchy. Come on, let’s get this done.”

When we finally left the apartment, we headed straight to the nearest big grocery store, which was a few blocks away. It was called the V&T, and it was the largest grocery retail store in the city. There were probably twenty or more of them inside the city limits, and their official name was the Valleywood Tea Company—hence the V&T, though no one ever called them anything to do with Tea. They had started out as a tea business, I think, before opening the first grocery store way back near the turn of the century.

It was there that I got the “peppery herbs,” which consisted of some basil, some oregano, some marjoram and chives. I even found a red candle in the household goods aisle. I already had my mom’s book and a small Bible she had among her things. All we needed was the red cloth, and the personal stuff from the one who laid the curse. Willie said he had a red shirt at home that he could use, so we headed toward his house.

“What about the personal stuff? You said you’d figure it out? How’s that?”

He shrugged. “Okay, look. It was Ben Bolagi, like I told you. He was originally from a foreign country, and really superstitious, according to my friend. He knew all about curses and stuff like that. It was in his religion.”

“But you said that the curse killed him. You said he got hit by a truck as he left the funeral home.”

“That’s right. I don’t know why the curse struck him. Maybe it was just an accident. They do happen, you know. Or maybe he did something wrong with his curse. Anyway, he stole that money from the bank.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“Think of it as a Cash Redistribution System. He stole it from that bank and now I’ve stolen it back. But really, if he’s dead, what does it matter?”

“It’s the bank’s money!”

He just laughed. “You worry too much. Let’s go do the spell.”

“But what about his personal items?”

“We have his bag and his money now. That’s pretty personal, right? And we’ll have to do without the rest. It’ll be fine.”

Groaning again, I let my head fall back against the seat. “I don’t have a good feeling about this. We need to follow exactly what the spell says.”

“You worry too much, Levi. You always have.”

As it turned out, Willie couldn’t find his red shirt, so we went by Leroy’s house to get his. Willie took me out in Leroy’s back yard to do the spell, not willing to wait any longer. It was as good a place as any, I guess, and Rolf was unlikely to come looking for us there.

Standing around Leroy’s trash burning pile in the backyard, I pulled out the faded piece of paper from my mother’s book, took a deep breath and decided to get started.

Leroy seemed the most nervous of the three of us. I heard him murmuring to Willie.

“Do you really think Levi knows anything about this?”

I looked up and addressed Leroy directly, before Willie could answer. “I’m standing right here, you know. And I’m not as good as my mother. She knew things and saw spirits. Her mother did too. And her mother before her and so on, back all the way before anybody could remember. I do too, a little, though I’m not as good as they were. I know you don’t want to believe it, but some things are just true, whether you believe in them or not. Now shut up and let me concentrate.”

I laid out the red shirt, which didn’t smell too good, but I doubted if that mattered. Then from the bag from the grocery store, I took out the basil, the oregano, and the marjoram and chives. All of it was in little tins like they sold there—we didn’t have anything fresh, but maybe it didn’t matter. We’d see. I sprinkled some of each on the cloth.

“Now I need the personal items from the one who laid the curse, Willie. You really don’t have anything except for the bag?”

“No, but that should be enough.”

I rolled my eyes at his overconfidence. “Okay, if you want to bet your life on it.”

He bristled and gave me a long glaring look. “Yours too, Levi. After all, you were there for all of it. And you’re the one doing this spell.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

Of course, I’d thought about that, but it didn’t help one bit. I gave him a dirty look, tore off a piece of the cloth and walked right up to him with my hands on my hips. “This part is all yours, Willie. Take a pen and write the man’s name down on the cloth. Then go back and cross it out with little X’s over each letter.”

“So what are we doing?”

“Sending the curse back to Bolagi.”

“But he’s dead.”

“Yeah, so that means it won’t hurt him. Now, while you do it, imagine how he looked in your mind’s eye. His hair and his eyes, and all that. Think of him and say these words, ‘I reverse the curse and send it back to you,’ as you do it.”

He did it, but only with a lot of muttering under his breath and long, menacing looks, which I mostly ignored. While he worked, I scratched the man’s name—BOLAGI—on the side of the red candle. I lit it and began letting it burn all the way down to a nub, like the paper said.

Over and over, I chanted the words, “I send back any curse you send to me. I cross you with it so that none of your deeds will prosper.”

When it finally burned down, I took the bag from Willie, along with the paper he’d written on and tied it all up with string inside the red shirt. (Or as close as I could get it. Leroy wasn’t a large man, and that shirt didn’t stretch all the way around it. But it would have to do.)

“Now what?” he asked me.

“Now we need to bury this bag at a crossroads,” I told Willie.

“What? Any crossroad?”

“Yeah, that’s what it says.”

He picked up the bundle and headed toward the front yard, as Leroy and I both struggled to keep up with his long legs.

“Wait—where are you going?”

“This house is on a corner. That’s a crossroads, right? I’ll bury it in the yard by the street. Leroy, you still got my shovel in your shed?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Leroy replied.

“Then grab it. We got to bury this thing.”

Leroy found the shovel and Willie dug a hole in the yard beside the nearest side street—which I supposed would work as a crossroads. I stood beside him as he dropped the bundle inside the hole and I said the words I needed to say to return the curse.

Willie filled in the hole and turned back to me. “Is that it?”

“I think so.”

“Okay then. You can leave now.”

“What? Just like that?”

“Yeah. You did what I asked, so you can go. Get the bus back home. Just keep your mouth shut about me if the cops come calling.”

It seemed awfully anticlimactic after the way he’d been chasing me around all over town, but he didn’t have to tell me twice. I left right away, walking quickly toward the bus stop we’d passed a couple of blocks back before he changed his mind. Willie

never even so much as waved goodbye.

I was hoping to catch a bus to take me back to my apartment, which wasn't too far. I could have walked, but I was feeling totally worn out from all my adventures. I'd been waiting for about a half an hour or a little more, beginning to think I should have just walked it, when I saw Rolf's truck come barreling down the road toward me. I saw the exact time he spotted me, because he slammed on the brakes, making the tires squeal.

He left the truck right in the middle of the road as he jumped out and charged over toward me. I backed away, holding my hands out in front of me.

"Now, Rolf, slow down. I can explain everything."

I never got a chance, because he put his head down and hit me hard in the stomach, knocking the breath out of me as he slung me over his shoulder and hauled me over to throw me in the front seat of his truck. I bounced off, hit the console and, as mad as he was by that time, I began yelling at him. I was getting sick of these Alpha type assholes throwing me around.

"What are you doing? Are you arresting me again? I haven't done a damn thing!"

He stood beside the truck, staring in at me. "Oh, really? You call breaking into two different graves doing nothing? Lying to me about Watusi and about being in his gang? Damn it, I believed you, and you made a fool out of me!"

"It wasn't hard! I didn't break a sweat."

"You little bastard."

"If that's how you feel, then take me to jail!"

“I don’t need your damn permission.”

“Good—then do it! Go on—put the cuffs on me like the stormtrooper you are.”

He glared at me like he wanted to hit me. “Go ahead—hit me.” I tapped my chin. “Hit me right here. I dare you.”

“I ought to do it and let you suffer the consequences.”

“I said to do it! Didn’t you hear me? Should I yell a little louder?”

He glared in at me and I could see that he was fuming. Well, good, because so was I.

To treat me like this, after all I’d been through? He had to know I’d been kidnapped, and I did what I could to survive the experience. Maybe it was wrong, but what choice did I have? And this was all the thanks I got?

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth. I’m taking you home and then I never want to see you again.”

“Fine by me. No problem whatsoever.”

“Stay away from me from now on, and don’t you get involved in my investigations again.”

“Don’t worry. I never wanted to in the first damn place. But you came after me, remember?”

“I mean it, Levi. I’m not running around after you to check on you constantly anymore!”

“Oh, whatever.”

“I’m serious.”

“So?”

“Don’t keep answering me back!”

“Why not?”

“I said to be quiet!”

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

“Damn it,” he cried, throwing up his hands and stomping around to get inside the truck. He had just started up the motor when there was a huge flash of light behind us and the sound of a big explosion nearby—a blast so loud that the sound waves literally rocked the truck and made my ears ring. Rolf dived for me and pushed me down in the seat, covering my body with his.

It was over in just seconds and whatever had blown up, must have been totally obliterated. The explosion was that loud. I was still shaking as I struggled to sit up once Rolf had moved off me. He was staring out the back window, looking shocked, so I looked in that direction, too, and saw big, black plume of smoke spiraling up into the sky.

It seemed to be coming from the area I just left—from the direction of Leroy’s house.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Rolf took me home quickly and dropped me off in front of my building before racing back to see about the explosion. Neither of us said anything, though I had briefly thought about asking if I could accompany him. I decided I didn't need to, really. I already knew, and it was nothing I wanted to see. I knew that it had been Leroy's house that exploded and that both Willie and Leroy were dead. The sure knowledge of it had come to me the second I saw the plume of smoke and the knowledge now lay on me like a heavy blanket.

Knowing things like that had been the bane of my mother's existence all her life. I had too, to some extent, but never with this sure knowledge. Had I awakened something inside me by doing that spell for Willie? By reading my mother's little books?

I had told Rolf the truth about Willie Watusi, though I knew he didn't believe that. Willie and I weren't close and really never had been in the true sense of the word, even as kids, though we'd known each other all our lives. I could predict how he'd react to a lot of things just out of familiarity, but we were really different people in almost every way. Willie had become just plain mean over the years and a hard life had made him callous and unfeeling. Still, it hurt now to know that he was dead. And I did know it. As surely as if I'd been there to witness it. I was sure that Willie and Leroy were both gone.

Had it been the curse? I was sure it had been, though I couldn't tell Rolf such a thing and make him believe me. He hadn't grown up like I had, in a home and a neighborhood where things like simple folk magic were so natural and expected that it was practically taken for granted. We really were worlds apart.

He was a shifter though, and he lived at least temporarily in Valleywood, so he must know on some levels that magic existed. He was a supernatural being, just like I was. A strain of witchcraft ran in my family— though it was something we didn't talk about. Not ever, but especially around outsiders like Rolf.

Maybe I would have been more open about my own abilities if my mother had lived longer.

Magic was like a fast-running stream with my mother's side of the family, and sometimes, it ran wide and deep and other times it got shallower and narrower. My mother's magic was like a steady, calm and beautiful pool. Her magic healed, and she had the power to just comfort you and make you feel better, no matter what. But she had told me stories about her grandmother too.

My great grandmother's name had been Maybell, and she was well-known in her part of the world for being a witch, and what the old people called a Conjure. She could tell the future too, though that brought to mind ladies in a county fair, wearing scarves around their heads and big, jangly jewelry. She wasn't at all like that. She just knew things that were going to happen.

In Maybell, the stream of magic ran not just deep, but a little dark too. She didn't mean any harm to anyone and never hurt anybody or ill-wished anyone that my mother knew about. But she said that my grandmother knew not only future events, but most especially when bad things were going to happen to people around her.

She predicted some good things too, but mostly she was known for her kind of ominous predictions about the bad stuff coming, like droughts and floods and nasty storms and bad accidents to the people working in the fields and difficult childbirths. She knew when a death was coming too, which didn't exactly endear her to her family, friends and neighbors. So after a while, she just stopped telling anyone her predictions. I always thought it must have been hard for her—to know something bad

was coming, but to be afraid to warn anyone or even tell it, in case people blamed you for it and called you a witch. All you could do was sit there and watch as the bad things unfolded.

I had a little of my granny's kind of magic—the darker kind where I sometimes knew bad things, even though I really didn't want to know them. It had never been so clear before, though, and I'd always been able to dismiss it as just fanciful thinking. But not anymore. I knew that Leroy's house and the Willie and Leroy were gone, for example, as surely as if I'd seen it with my own eyes. The spell I'd done hadn't worked. The curse had come for him after all.

I wasn't sure why it had been a failure—maybe because we didn't follow it to the letter. I had been afraid that the stupid bag that had held the money wasn't personal enough. I thought we probably needed different kinds of spicy herbs too. I felt guilty now for not insisting, because I should have made Willie listen to me. Maybe if I had, Willie and Leroy would still be alive. I had done something wrong or gotten the words of the spell wrong, and I felt crushing guilt about it. I sat down on my living room couch with my arms around Nugget, who licked my face and tried to comfort me by licking my face as I cried into his fur. But as I sat there, I sank into a dark depression anyway.

It was hours later that I heard a knock on my door. My grandmother had gone to her friend's house for another card game, so the apartment had gotten dark and shadowy around me as I sat there, feeling guilty and gloomy and depressed. I really didn't want to see anybody. I kept quiet when I heard the knock and hoped they'd go away. But no such luck.

The door opened and Rolf's voice called out to me from the doorway.

“Levi? Your door was open. Have you already gone to bed?”

“Hey,” I said from a few feet away and kind of enjoyed watching him jump. “I’m right here.”

“Why are you sitting there in the dark?”

I shrugged. “I just felt like it.”

He snapped on the light, and I blinked a few times at him as he came over to sit down by me. I held out my wrists toward him.

“Did you want to put the cuffs on me?”

He gave me a long look but didn’t respond. Instead, he gave a deep sigh.

“Watusi is deceased, along with an unknown male.”

“It’s Leroy, a friend of Willie’s. I don’t remember his last name. But that was his house.”

“Okay, I’ll let the investigating officers know.”

“It was Leroy’s red shirt that we used for our spell.”

He sighed. “The spell again.”

“Yes, the spell again. That’s why Willie kept coming after me. He wanted me to get rid of a curse that he said was on the money in a bag inside the casket. He wasn’t sure at first of which casket, but he had a list of names of people who had recently died, and he was working his way down the list. That’s why he was breaking into cemeteries and graveyards. He thought someone had buried money, and he wanted to find it for himself.”

“And had they buried the money?” he asked softly. “You’re saying this crazy story was actually true?”

“Apparently so. I thought it was crazy too when he first told me about it.”

“And I didn’t believe any of it.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Explain to me again what your part was in all this.”

I sighed and laid my head back on the sofa. I was so tired all of a sudden. “Willie knew my mother had been a Conjure woman—in other words, a person who did folk magic. Nothing big or flashy. Just simple little potions, mostly to help people with small ailments if they couldn’t afford to go to a doctor. Or do small spells to help them through their problems. Though she told me once that back home in Tennessee, she’d seen bigger things conjured. Like she saw her granny heal a young man who got caught in some farm machinery once. He was only a few years older than I am now. The lower half of his body was mangled so badly, the doctor in the little backwoods town said he’d done what he could for him. He was still in terrible pain, and they sent him home to die. Then somebody suggested calling in my great-grandma as a last resort.

“Go get Ms. Maybell,” they said. ‘She can heal him.’ And they carried that poor man in my great-grandma’s house and laid him down. She was an old, old woman by then. But she put cold rags all over his legs even though he cried out in pain. Water is soothing but doesn’t have any healing properties, of course, but Grandma kept the compresses on his legs while she said the words.

“What words?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Nobody knows for sure what healers say. Some say it’s verses from the Bible. Some say it’s magic spells. But whatever she said, it worked. That man’s pain eased, and they carried him home. It took six months, but his wounds healed.”

“I don’t know if I believe all of that. I suppose the cold water helped the pain, but if he had injuries as extensive as all that, it might have killed him.”

“But it didn’t. And you do believe in magic. You must—because you’re here in Valleywood, and you’re a wolf shifter.”

“Yes, but...I don’t believe in that kind of magic, I guess.”

I shrugged again. “Why? Because it’s the kind poor people use? Does it matter? Magic can be all kinds—big or little, I think. That’s what my mother said. And believe it or not, she was the real thing. I saw it practically shining out of her. I remember seeing her cure a baby’s thrush. And she talked my warts off my hand.”

“Okay...I have no idea what that thrush thing is.”

“It’s like a yeast infection inside the mouth. Babies can get it from dirty bottle nipples or pacifiers.”

“Okay. And the warts?”

“She could talk warts right off, like I said. It’s true.” I said at his skeptical look. “Willie knew about it. He knew folk magic ran in my family, and he wanted me to try and take the curse off the money for him. I looked through my mother’s old books and found a spell to remove curses and hexes. I tried it, but I guess it didn’t work. Or I did it wrong. Or we didn’t have the right ingredients. I’m not sure, but I did try to warn him I didn’t know much about it.”

“Why would you help him do something illegal?”

“I didn’t want anything bad to happen to Willie. I’ve known him a long time. I wanted to help him end this thing.”

“He’s a criminal. And if what you say is true, he was after stolen money. Helping him in any way, shape or form is aiding and abetting. You could go to jail.” He sighed and pulled me over into his arms to comfort me—I guess I did look pretty sad. I felt that way too. I was still mad at Rolf for arresting me, but his arms felt wonderful wrapped around me. I sighed and snuggled in closer, because I couldn’t seem to stay mad at him. This mate business was seriously annoying.

“Levi,” he said, “Someone planted an explosive inside that house. The investigators found evidence of it. They’re still investigating, but they already know it was a deliberate murder. The so-called curse had nothing to do with it, honey. Someone wanted Willie or Leroy dead, and they didn’t care about any collateral damage.”

“But who? Willie said the man who helped rob the banks was still alive, but I don’t know anything about who he is or where he is now. I don’t think Willie knew either. The funeral director and his family are dead. Also, the man who worked at the funeral home and told Willie about it in the first place. All of them died suspiciously once they messed with that bag. I messed with it, too, Rolf. What if the curse comes after me?”

“It won’t. I don’t believe in curses, even if I do know about magic. I’ll never let anyone or anything hurt you, baby. Do you believe me?”

“I know you’ll try. But I don’t want you in the way of this thing either. I know you don’t believe in any of this curse, but people are dead. And the body count is growing. I tried to send the curse back to its source. What if it rebounds on me instead?”

“You’re talking as if this thing has a mind of its own. But someone had to put it all into effect. I know that much even if I don’t really believe in it. And according to what you say, everyone involved is dead.” He squeezed me tighter, and I allowed it. I needed the reassurance.

“Who was the man who first came to the funeral home anyway? His name. We need to search his home. The money is still missing, you know. It was nowhere at Willie’s house.” He peered down into my eyes. “Would you happen to know where it is now?”

“No,” I said, lying through my teeth. “I have no idea. I did the spell and Willie said he was going to bury the bag and the money somewhere he could dig it up later when the cops weren’t after him.”

More lies, of course, but I didn’t want Rolf anywhere near that damn bag. Whether or not he believed in it, that curse was real. The bag had had a greasy, damp feel to it that I’d felt once before. As a small child, an old man came into our house with a little doll that he’d made. It was mostly some cloth tied around twigs, but the cloth had that greasy feeling when I touched it. He and my mother had both yelled at me and told me to stay away from it when I picked it up. My mother told me later that it was used in the worship of the devil, to ask the devil to use black magic for revenge. My mother said the dolls weren’t Hoodoo, but they were dark magic and to stay away from them.

So I lied to Rolf about the bag of money. It was better for everyone involved if it just stayed buried.

“Willie said the man who was involved in the bank robbery was named Ben Bolagi. He said he was one of the people who got away from the robbery. He had the money, but I don’t know much more about him.”

“How did Willie know that?”

“No idea. He had contacts and friends in a lot of low places.”

“Let me look into it. See if it’s true. And in the meantime, you stop worrying and go lie down. You’ve had a hard day.”

I didn’t ask why he was suddenly being so nice and solicitous to me after wanting to put me in jail earlier. I was only glad that he was. I let him pull me to my feet and steer me toward the bedroom.

“Where am I going?”

“To bed with me.”

“I thought you were mad at me.”

“I was but...not so much anymore. You seem to have that effect on me for some reason.” He picked me up in his arms when we got in the bedroom and took me over to lay me on the bed and begin stripping off my clothes.

“I thought you said I’d had a hard day.”

“I’m hoping you’d want a hard night too.” He waggled his eyebrows at me, and I groaned at his bad joke but still pulled him closer, because he smelled so good. He nuzzled my neck and kissed down my throat.

“Tell me what you want, baby. Do you want to let me make love to you?”

“Yes. I’ve wanted you since the first time you walked into the café, and it seems to just get worse every time I see you.”

“For me too. I can’t seem to stay away from you or stop thinking about you.” He smiled and I kissed him again. “I’m not sure why.”

“Thanks a bunch.”

“No...you know what I mean.” He shrugged. “You’re really nice looking, but not exactly the best-looking omega I’ve ever seen.”

“Stop—you’ll make me blush.”

“Shut up, I’m not finished. You’re cute and sexy, but there’s still an innocence that you have. A sweetness. Makes Alphas like me want to dirty you up.”

“Oh...such poetry. Let me write that down.”

He grinned. “Seriously, stop it. You know I’m crazy about you.”

“Yes. I could tell by that cute little way you had of reading me my rights, cuffing me and throwing me in the back of your police car.”

“I wouldn’t have taken you to jail. Not really. I was just so angry and jealous because you were with Watusi.”

“I tried to explain that he kidnapped me.”

“I know, but...to tell the truth, I still had doubts.”

“Do you have them now?”

“Not about that. Not about you. Not now that you’ve explained, but you must admit, it looked bad. We’re just so different. I wonder all the time why I can’t just walk

away from you.”

“Seriously, you need to consider writing romance books.”

“But I do want you to be happy,” he said, ignoring me and my remarks. “And I don’t like the idea of you with any other man. I’d hate it, in fact.”

Rolf

“Well,” Levi said, looking up at me flirtatiously. “You did give me that showy mating bite. Other Alphas might object to that a little bit, so I guess there isn’t much chance of another Alpha ever getting interested.”

And I knew that—it was why my wolf insisted on marking him. I just couldn’t seem to walk away from him, though I knew we weren’t right for each other. My family would never accept him. I couldn’t have him and my family too. I had no idea what I was going to do about that. Maybe by being here with him like this, I could get this crazy need of him out of my system and stop wasting both our time.

I caressed him, and he arched up into me. So, I leaned down to run my tongue over his nipples. I gently bit one of them, imagining it swollen with pregnancy.

He groaned and tried to thrust against me again, but I held him down and wouldn’t let him move without permission. He was noisy, making whimpers and moaning and begging me a little. At one point, he said, “I thought you didn’t want or need an omega.”

“Yeah, I think maybe I was wrong about that.”

“When will you know for sure?” he said and launched himself at me again as if to punish me. My hands closed on his hips, and I put him on his back and whispered in his ear.

“You wanted to make love to me again, I think you said.”

“Oh gods, yes.” I smiled and exchanged places with him and lay down on my back for him. He quickly slid down to position himself. He took my cock into his mouth and the wet, warm heat took my breath away. I literally saw stars. He sucked it with a lot of tongue action, paying exquisite attention to detail. Soft at first, building up gradually to tight and hot and hard, using every bit of his considerable skill. If he was trying to make it so I couldn’t forget him, he was succeeding admirably. I felt my breathing get harsher and faster and the orgasm seemed to swell from the base of my spine. I pulled away and pushed his arms down as he tried to pull me back.

“No, I want you to enjoy this too.”

I flipped him over and positioned myself behind him, leaning over him to thoroughly lick and taste his sweet, hot little pucker. He shuddered and began to make air raid noises, so loud I had to cover his mouth with my hand. When he’d calmed down a little, I reached for the lube and worked it in nicely, really taking my time, while he went crazy beneath me. I pushed my hand underneath him and gave his cock a few thrusts at the same time. He squirmed and begged and tried to push back against my fingers and began talking in tongues. The lube was slippery on my fingers as I massaged his prostate, and I bent down to plant a kiss on each cheek of his sweet, little ass. It was all I could do to calm myself enough to go slowly.

I pulled my hand away and pressed some kisses on his back and he turned his head blindly for a real kiss. I obliged him and my cock was rock hard as I eased inside him and felt that velvety tightness. It was so good, and I thrust into him mindlessly, again and again, until I could feel the orgasm come barreling toward me. I wanted an even

deeper connection, and I tried to push in even deeper and harder, until the climax hit me like a freight train, crashing into me and dragging Levi right along with me. Neither of us moved when it was over, but just lay there, trying to breathe after the waves of a mind shattering, soul searing orgasm. I had to admit I was a little shaken by the unexpectedness of it. Again, my wolf was making little self-satisfied sounds in my head.

Afterward, I lay beside him, and he threw a leg over mine, cuddling against me. I held him through all the little aftershocks, until his body relaxed.

I realized I didn't want this to end. How would I ever let him go?

Even more pressing, what would I do if he were already pregnant with my child? Maybe...maybe I could take him with me when I left Valleywood after all and keep him on the side? I could get a small apartment for him and the baby and keep my life with him separate from the rest of it. I could find a way to make it work. I would make it work—and on that thought, I was finally able to relax and stop worrying. I turned over, closed my eyes and was almost instantly asleep.

Levi

I lay there for a long time beside Rolf while he slept. And I did a lot of thinking.

Of course, I knew that I couldn't be with Rolf long-term, no matter how much I wanted to—no matter what he promised me and himself. It simply wouldn't work, no matter how nice it was to think about. He was a pure-bred wolf, from a prominent family and he was expected to one day go back home and accept his responsibilities as Alpha of his pack. The last thing in the world that he needed was a Mongrel omega and a Mongrel baby on top of that fucking up his life.

And that was assuming that he might want to take me home with him and raise babies with me. As time went by, I really didn't think he would. It was far more likely that he'd try to keep me on the side as some dirty little secret. And that would never work for me. I wouldn't allow it for one thing.

No, I was afraid we were doomed to live our lives apart. I knew that, but it didn't mean I would ever forget him. I'd probably measure every other man against him for the rest of my life, but I wouldn't mope around and mourn him. I wouldn't! I'd never be like poor, old crazy Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, for example, a book I loved the first time I read it back in high school. Heathcliff roamed the moors after his lover died, moaning out his famous lines to the cruel universe. "Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!"

Way over the top, as far as I was concerned.

While it sounded tormented and romantic and noble and all that, it just wasn't me. And it sure wasn't Rolf. He had never even said he loved me. If I, in fact, died and showed up in his life as a ghost or whatever, he'd no doubt throw holy water at me or get an exorcist—assuming those things even existed in his religion. He'd just told me, in fact, that he thought we were “so different” and that he wondered all the time why he couldn't just walk away.

I mean, if he was really so perfect for me, then why didn't he simply stay here with me in Valleywood? Because perfect doesn't mean love always works, that's why.

When I woke up that next morning after making love to him most of the night, I watched him get dressed and even made him some breakfast. Just toast and eggs, but he seemed to like it. Everything was polite and civilized between us. As he shrugged on his suit jacket, I asked, all casual like, “So what now? Now that the case is over? It is over, right?”

He nodded. “I guess it is. I came here to Valleywood to get evidence on Watusi and his gang so I could get them off the streets. But now that Willie's dead, I think his little gang will mostly fall apart. I can let the local police deal with the rest of them. I don't see any of them as any kind of leader. Not like Willie.”

“No, they broke the mold after Willie. And killed the mold-maker.”

He laughed and I smiled, but only a little. No matter how crazy and mean he was, it still felt odd to think that I'd never see Willie again. But Rolf had told me that he was involved in sex trafficking and if he had been, that was pretty monstrous and unforgivable. He'd been headed down the path toward a violent death for years, and he had finally caught up with it.

“I guess you'll be going back home to New York then. That's where you're from, right?”

“It’s where my family lives. And I have an apartment in the city. But first I need to find the money satchel Willie buried. Tell me where he buried it.”

“I told you. I really have no idea,” I said, lying through my teeth. “Ask Willie’s gang members and see if they know where he might have buried it. They probably know his hiding places.”

“All right, I will.”

“And I need to get back to work. My boss is going to fire me if I don’t show up today.”

“But aren’t you still in heat?”

“No,” I said, not looking at him. “My cycle is pretty brief, usually. I’m already mostly out of it.”

I wasn’t lying about that. I was mostly out of it. But I was pretty sure that the briefness of my cycle wasn’t the cause. I thought it was because I was probably pregnant.

How could I be so sure? I wasn’t sure—not yet. But my cycle was extremely regular. Any deviation usually meant something. It was probably too early for morning sickness or any other signs, but I just knew. Like I said, sometimes I knew things, even though I really didn’t want to know them.

The enormity of it hadn’t truly hit me yet, but I sure wouldn’t be the last Mongrel to find themselves pregnant with a wolf’s baby, nor would I be the last. It was fairly common in my neighborhood.

As for what I’d do, I’d work as long as I could, just like always, and then after the

baby, I'd go from there. I'd manage one step at a time. I could apply for public assistance, if I had to, and Valleywood had various low-cost daycare options. I wouldn't ask my gran to keep a baby at her age. I'd just have to make it work on my own. I had no other choice. Maybe at some point in the future, I could contact Rolf, and he could help pay for the daycare. It was the least he could do.

No, that wasn't fair—he couldn't do anything if he didn't know about it, and that would be all on me. I had no intention of telling him, though, or at least not yet. I didn't want him doing anything for me out of pity or a sense of obligation. I'd tell him I wasn't pregnant and make him believe it. That would buy me a little time and distance. I started to walk away, and he grabbed my hand.

“Wait... Levi, are you...could you be pregnant?”

I was stunned that he'd read me so easily, but I laughed and tried to play it off. Even to my own ears, it sounded a little false. “No. I'm not pregnant. Don't be silly.”

“But you were in heat, and we made love anyway. We weren't careful, and you weren't on any meds to suppress your heat.”

“I'm only a quarter wolf, remember? That means a quarter omega too. I don't get pregnant as easily as a pure-bred would.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I'd tell you if I was pregnant,” I said, lying in his face again.

In the next moment, I knew I'd been right to do that, because he heaved a huge sigh of relief. “Oh, thank the gods. Not that I wouldn't have taken care of you—I would have. And in the future, if you were to find out you were pregnant, then I'll meet my obligations. Don't worry about that.”

“Not worried,” I replied, smiling at him. His obligations? The future? Oh, hell no.

“But, Rolf, I don’t really think we have much future, do we? I mean...you live in New York, and I live here in Valleywood. You’re a pure-bred from a good family and I’m a Mongrel, and my parents weren’t prominent or rich in any way. We’re from two different worlds. Look, we had some fun. Let’s just leave it at that.”

He gave me an odd look. And in his totally Alpha, contrary way, he started an argument.

“Maybe I don’t want to. Maybe I’m not ready for this to be over, just like that. You’re my mate.”

I shrugged, turning away so he couldn’t see my face. Damn it, he needed to just accept this and go. It was hard to argue when my heart was lodged in my throat.

“What future do we have together, though?” I said over my shoulder. “Do you really see yourself taking me home to meet the family?”

“Well... maybe not. But if you’d agree to come with me, I could get you an apartment in New York. We could still see each other.”

“What would I do up there? Besides, I bet it wouldn’t be easy to find an apartment that would take Nugget. And we can still see each other occasionally if you can get a weekend off here or there to come back for a visit. Like you said, I’m still your mate. But this way, there’s no pressure on either of us. You can visit when you can. No pressure.”

“Stop saying that. You don’t believe I’d come back, do you?”

“I’ll plan my days around it.”

That made him angry, and he glared down at me, but I stared steadily back. I only had to stay strong until he left and then I could break down.

“We’ll talk about this later. I’m not leaving for a few days yet. We still have to find that money, anyway. Are you telling me the truth about that, Levi? You seriously have no idea where he buried it?”

“No idea, whatsoever. Cross my heart and hope to die.” I felt a strange little chill run down my back as I said those words and wished I could call them back. Words had power—especially when the person who said them had a bit of magic.

“Okay, I believe you.”

“You do? Um, I mean, good. Because I’m telling you the truth,” I said, crossing my fingers behind my back.

“All right. But from now on, stay away from that neighborhood and any of the gang members that might still be around. They’re a dangerous bunch.”

“I will. But look, Rolf, I hate to rush you, but I need to get ready and go to work now.”

“Okay, I’m leaving. Maybe I can stop by later tonight.”

“Sure, but I’m working late tonight, and then I need to go see about an audition the next day. Maybe the next night.”

“Oh. I see. Okay, then.” He gave me an odd, little look. “Guess I’ll see you when I see you.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Not for a few days. It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Oh, various things.” He started to leave and then stopped to pull me close and kiss me again, and I may have held onto him a little too hard. I made myself pull away and smile up at him, and he finally let me go and left the apartment.

I sighed and went to get Nugget’s leash to take him for a walk. I wasn’t really going into work today—another lie. I didn’t think my crossed fingers were enough to compensate for all the ones I’d told that morning.

I still didn’t feel all that well, though, especially now that I felt as if I’d mostly broken up with Rolf. And I needed to find out about any funeral services that Willie was going to have—and Leroy too. I didn’t want to attend any funerals, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

I was still planning on looking through my mother’s books again in case I missed anything. If not, then I supposed I would do the original spell again, but this time, I’d get the correct ingredients. Once I was sure Leroy’s house was cleared by the cops and the cemetery was no longer being watched, I was going to go and get the money satchel and try again to take the curse off it. Then if I was successful, I’d call Rolf to come by and pick the money bag up before he left to go back to New York. He’d be furious, but that would work in my favor, in case he got any ideas about staying or taking me back with him. I didn’t think he would, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

I was depressed though, and I felt sad. I tried to tell myself it was because of Willie and Leroy, but I knew better. It was about Rolf and me and the fact that I’d told him to leave when everything inside me wanted him to stay.

And the fact that he took me up on leaving without much argument.

It was for the best. I knew that. But it still hurt. I think a little part of me hoped—wanted—him to argue more about it and maybe insist I come with him to New York. That didn't happen.

I sighed and gave myself a mental shake. I had to start getting used to Rolf not being around. And since the full moon was almost here, I couldn't afford to wait any longer to do the spell and do it right this time.

The night that the full moon finally rolled around, it was cloudy and overcast, with a cold wind blowing. The weatherman had predicted icy rain for later that night, but I couldn't put it off any longer. I took a shovel and a crowbar and even grabbed Nugget to go out to my boss's truck that I'd borrowed again for the occasion.

Nugget was along for company, and because just his presence would make me feel safer.

The only thing I still needed was something personal from the one who sent the curse, and that was Ben Bolagi, according to Willie. The satchel hadn't worked, but I hadn't thought it would. That meant that I would have to get some hair or nail clippings from the body of Ben Bolagi. As horrible as that sounded, I'd have to do it. And I'd be all alone this time, except for Nugget.

A couple of days had passed since I'd seen Rolf. I didn't even know if he was still in town, but the full moon was here, and I couldn't stall any longer. I actually thought about waiting for the next one, to give myself more time, but some odd things had been happening to me lately. I kept dropping things like glassware and dishes, and it was bad enough that my boss had noticed and told me he'd have to start docking my pay soon if it kept up. I hurt my foot just walking through the café kitchen, tripping over thin air and spent the rest of the day hobbling around. When I got home, I

discovered that Nugget had decided he was bored and that eating one of my sofa cushions would help him feel better. Then my grandma came over and told me she'd had a terrible headache all day. It had literally been one thing after another, and I was beginning to think the curse had moved on to me. Nothing really bad had happened—or at least it hadn't yet. But I didn't want to take any chances that my "bad luck" would get even worse.

After making sure my gran was resting comfortably, I loaded Nugget up around seven that same evening, once it got dark and headed out to the Resurrection Missionary Baptist Church, where the Bolagi's were buried. As I'd hoped it would be, it was deserted. And spooky as always, even at that hour of the night. I parked the truck and got out holding tightly to Nugget's leash. He looked around himself with interest, sat down on his haunches and began to howl at the moon. The noise he made was shockingly loud in this dead and silent place and frightening to hear as always. I leaned over to shush him, and after a few minutes I finally got him quiet. A hush fell over the whole place, like its inhabitants were awake and wondering what fresh hell was here to disturb them this time. I got out the shovel and the crowbar and led Nugget through the narrow pathways between the graves.

The cold wind slipped down inside my jacket, and fog curled around my feet as I walked through the still and silent graves. It crept softly behind me as if trying to trip me as I walked along the path and closed behind me right away, leaving no sign of my passage. It was eerily quiet, and so dark that I felt like a character in one of those old fairy tales, where the wicked fairy puts everyone to sleep for a hundred years, and I was the only one left. I pulled my coat closer together over my chest. The darkness didn't help, and my brain seemed to hate the quiet. Vague shadows, that I saw out of the corner of my eye, were only little "hallucinations" created in the fearful recesses of my mind. Or so I kept telling myself.

It all added to the unease I was already feeling. Nugget walked beside me, and he stayed close by my side, acting as freaked out as I was, his tail tucked firmly between

his legs. When we got to the part of the graveyard where the graves of the Bolagi's were, I could see that Mrs. Bolagi's grave had been restored to the way it had looked when I'd first seen it and before Willie's gang had desecrated it. And now I was about to do similar damage to Mr. Bolagi's grave. It was a wonder they didn't rise up to strike me.

That horrible thought made me shudder, as I dropped Nugget's leash, picked up the shovel and grimly got to work. It took me less time than I'd thought it would to dig down and expose the top part of the casket. I was moving as quickly as I could, anxious to get this over with. It was as I'd hoped—there was a hinge on the top part of the coffin, and if I could break the seal, it would allow me to open just that part, where Bolagi's head was located. I went to work with the crowbar, and muttered a prayer to the gods, thanking them for my Mongrel strength that helped me break the hinge and open the top part of the coffin lid so easily. Almost the second the words were out of my mouth, though, I regretted bringing the gods into this. This night's work had nothing to do with them in the least.

I pulled open the lid and used my flashlight, shining it down in Bolagi's face. I saw in the quick glance I gave it that it was gray and sunken, and I shuddered again as I reached out a trembling hand to cut off a small piece of the dead man's hair.

An owl suddenly hooted from the other side of the graveyard, almost giving me a heart attack and making me jump. It startled me so badly that I rushed to put the lid back down and start piling the dirt back on top of the coffin. It didn't take too long and then I was running down through the graves and back to the safety of the truck. For once, I didn't have to pull on Nugget's leash to get him to come with me. In fact, he was straining ahead and looking back at me, like "Damn boy, what are you waiting for?"

We jumped in the truck, and I had a sudden horror of the engine not starting, but it was just my overactive brain again, taunting me. The truck started up just fine, and I

shoved it in gear and raced out of the parking lot as quickly as I dared.

I drove home the same way, hoping I wasn't going to tempt a cop to pull me over. But luck was with me, and I got home safely. Quickly unloading the truck, I hauled everything upstairs and then fell on the couch in exhaustion, worn out from the adrenalin rush of the past couple of hours. I wanted to go to bed and pull the covers over my head, but I decided to not let the hexing spell wait until morning. I'd just do it and get it over with, and the sooner, the better. It wouldn't take too long since I had everything at hand to do the spell.

I laid out the things I needed on the floor and prepared the small piece of red cloth. A day or so before, I had a thought that maybe the reason my mother hadn't written the words to the spell in her book was because it didn't work too well. I decided to use another method, or maybe a combination of things that seemed good to me. Magic was a very individual thing, after all. I decided to do what seemed right to me.

I scratched Bolagi's name on the candle and let it burn down to a nub. While it was burning, I made a small mirror box. The mirror-box was a very old type of reversing spell used in Hoodoo traditions to send evil back to its source. The source, in this case was Bolagi, who was the one who had attempted to work the curse. I found a little trinket box among my mother's things. It was made of cheap, thin wood and held nothing important, so I emptied it out and glued a little piece of a mirror on the inside. By that time the candle had burned down, so I put it in the box along with Bolagi's piece of hair that I'd wrapped up in the cloth, and the peppery herbs. I sealed the lid of the box with more wax from another candle I had and said these words over it.

"By the power of the gods, I decree and declare that no curse, no weapon, no declaration against me or anyone else shall prosper. I cancel, negate, nullify and destroy every curse fashioned against me and others, regardless of the source or cause, I decree and declare that any weapon or curse fashioned against me shall turn

back on the one who sent it. I erase it and its effects. I bind every demon attached to the curse and cast them back to the depths of Hell.

I cross you.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

I felt good about that spell. It felt as if it had some real power as I said the words, and best of all, it wouldn't hurt anyone who wasn't already gone. Mr. Bolagi was beyond all that now. All I had left to do was to take the box to the crossroads at Leroy's house where Willie had buried the other one and retrieve the satchel of money to replace it with my mirror box. Then I could contact Rolf and give him the money, and this whole ordeal would finally be over.

I decided to leave Nugget at home this time. He looked a little worn out and ready for his bedtime treat and his bed—which also meant my bed. I left him to it and locked the door of my apartment behind me. Everything seemed quiet at my gran's, and it wasn't too late yet, though it felt as if it should be. It was still only about ten o'clock, so I went down to climb back in the truck and head over toward Leroy's. I took the shovel with me, along with my mirrored box, of course. I was ready for this whole ordeal to be over.

The streets weren't busy, so I made good time getting to Leroy's house, or I should say what remained of it after the explosion. There were only some burnt out ruins that hadn't been cleared away yet. I parked the truck the driveway and walked over to the side yard to find where Willie had buried the bag.

I finally found it after a good fifteen minutes of searching, buried up under some leaves. At least something had been buried there. I figured Willie must have put the leaves on to disguise where he buried it until he could come back for it later when he thought the coast was clear.

I began to dig and was down around four feet when I hit the bag. I quickly uncovered it and pulled it out, checking inside. It was the bag of money, all right. I dropped the

mirrored box in its place and recovered the hole.

But before I had it finished and filled the hole back in, headlights went on from across the street and a large, dark sedan came out from where it was parked on a side street and careened toward me. I jumped in alarm and fell down on my backside, watching in amazement as the car swerved up onto the grass and came to a shuddering stop right in front of me. I watched as a man jumped out. A man I'd never seen before.

But the alarming thing was that he was pointing a long-barreled pistol at me. "Give me that bag!" he shouted. "Toss it over here!"

I knew two things in that moment. This guy must be someone who had been involved in that long ago robbery—and he was going to kill me as soon as I handed over the money. No discussion, no talking things over, and no begging for my life—there was nothing of pity or mercy in his eyes. I was so sure of what was about to happen—I could literally see it in my mind's eye—I froze in place and couldn't move.

"I said, hand it over!" he shouted at me, and shook the gun at me again as if to make sure I noticed what he had in his hand. Believe me, I noticed. He must have panicked then, or got tired of waiting, because he aimed the gun again and pulled the trigger.

I was shocked at the crushing pain that hit me and bloomed in my shoulder. I screamed in pain and that was when I heard the noise behind me, a sound that was half roar, half hoarse shout. The shooter jerked his gaze around to face it and yelled out something in horror at whatever he saw coming toward him. He screamed bloody murder as a huge fur-covered body leaped past me and slammed into him. The gunman was firing again wildly as he hit the ground.

I wanted to watch what happened next, but it was getting harder to see. Everything was growing darker, and I wondered vaguely if the moon had gone behind a cloud. I

was aware of a vicious struggle taking place beside me in the dark. Lights were coming on all over the neighborhood as the shots and the screaming woke everyone up.

I was fading fast, and all I wanted to do was lie down and go to sleep. The next thing I remembered was somebody pulling me up into their arms and kissing my face again and again and growling madly, right next to my ear, though it wasn't frightening at all. In fact, it comforted me. I tried to get my eyes open, but they weren't working well anymore, and the last thing I remembered was a voice—a human-sounding one this time, though deep and rough and not like it usually was—yelling at me to open my eyes. It was Rolf, of course, begging me to stay awake and stay with him.

I tried to, but I couldn't. All the noise seemed to get very far away. I had a feeling I wanted to just curl up and go to sleep so I gave into it, and that was the last thing I remembered for a long time.

I woke up in a hospital—Valleywood General, I later learned. It was a large room, though not one of their famous VIP suites. Still nicer than any room I'd ever been inside. And what a sad commentary that was. Sitting beside me, looking grouchy and gloomy and unshaven, his clothes all rumpled, as if he'd slept in them—but still the handsomest man I'd ever seen—was none other than my Alpha.

He must have been watching me like a hawk, because the moment he saw my eyes open, he leaned toward me until his face was almost touching mine.

“You scared me half to death. You have some serious explaining to do about all this.”

“W-water...” I croaked at him, and he quickly got me some and held it to my lips. His face didn't soften—well it softened a little—he at least didn't let me die of dehydration, and his hand sweetly brushed my cheek a couple of times before he pulled it away. I leaned into it like a cat.

When I'd drunk my fill and enjoyed the petting for a while, he said it again. "Explain yourself."

"About what? Oh, the money bag?"

"Yes, the money bag. Did you mean to keep the money for yourself? I need to know so I can protect you. Honey, why didn't you tell me that you needed money? Surely you know I would have helped you. You didn't have to get Watusi to take it for you."

"Wait, slow down, please. I didn't take the money and I don't care about it! It's stolen money, and I know better than that. I was going to bring the bag to you."

He frowned and looked unsure and skeptical, but I shook my head at him. "I was going to get the money and bring it to you. I swear it, Rolf. Do you believe me?"

"If you say it, I do. But you have to admit, it looked pretty bad."

"I guess so. But I didn't want you to get the curse on you. It was too late for me, so I had to do a spell to send the curse back to the one who sent it. I didn't want it to follow you too."

He started to open his mouth, and I interrupted him again. "The curse was real, whether or not you believed in it. The first spell I did obviously didn't work. That's why Willie and Leroy are dead. So I had to redo my spell to get rid of it."

"What do you mean, you redid it? How did you do that?"

"You're not going to like this..."

"I already don't like it. It couldn't get any worse."

“Okay, I’ll tell you. I went back to the graveyard and dug up Ben Bolagi’s grave and cut off some of his hair for my spell.”

He fell back in his chair, looking astounded. His mouth literally fell open. I gave him a few moments to recover.

“I stand corrected,” he finally said. “It did get worse.” He took my hand in his. “Baby, are you telling me you went to that graveyard by yourself in the middle of the night?”

“Nugget was with me.”

“Oh, well then, that’s okay, if Nugget was with you!” he said, way too loud, his face red and his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“It was okay. I was a little scared, but nothing happened. Not then, anyway. And I fixed everything back the way I found it at the gravesite. Almost. There might be a teensy bit of damage to the coffin lid, but I tried to fix it and covered it with dirt again.”

He sighed deeply and rubbed his hand over his face. “Okay. Tell me why you did something so dangerous.”

“I thought that the reason the spell I did before for Willie didn’t work was because I didn’t have anything personal from the one who originally sent the curse. And Willie told me that person was Ben Bolagi, who knew a lot about curses and all that. And he’d have no reason to lie. So, I had to go get a piece of Bolagi’s hair.”

Rolf put his head in his hands and groaned. “Of course you did. Okay, why didn’t you call me to help you?”

“Because, like I just said, I was trying to keep you safe. And would you have come to help me if I’d called? Really?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s a big old lie and you know it.”

He looked at me in surprise. “Breaking into a grave is wrong. But it’s up to me to keep you safe.”

“It’s not, really, you know. I’m not your omega.”

“Yes, you are. You’re my mate and I was going to talk to you about it once all this was settled. Before you pulled this stunt and almost got yourself killed. I have to tell you that it’s aged me ten years. When I saw that gun on you, and then he shot you...” He leaned over and kissed my hand, his eyes suspiciously wet. “I-I thought for a moment that he’d killed you.”

“But he didn’t kill me...”

“I’ve never been so scared before in my life, Levi. What if I’d lost you?”

“I know. I feel the same way about you. It was you then who attacked that man who shot me, right? Who was he anyway?”

“A guy who worked for me. And yeah, I attacked him. I wanted to kill him for what he did. His name is Alex Conroy.”

“Why did he try to shoot me?”

“He’s not talking. Even though I think I could make him talk if the police would give

me five minutes alone in a cell with him.”

“That’s not the right thing to do, and you know it.”

He shrugged, and I remembered this was an Alpha wolf I was talking to.

“I shifted into my wolf and went after him without even thinking when I saw what he’d done. I don’t have any conscious memory of it. It was pure instinct. Everything happened so fast.”

“Did you...?”

“Kill him? No, I managed not to do that. But it was a close thing. All I could think about was that he’d hurt my mate, and that I’d almost lost you. I can’t ever go through that again, Levi.”

“Y-you really think I’m your mate?”

“Yes,” he said, his tone fierce. “I keep telling you that. And you know it too. I want you to go back to New York with me.”

“I don’t think I can do that. I love you, but I don’t think New York would suit me at all.”

“We can make this work, baby. I’ll quit my job if I have to and move to Valleywood. I’ll do anything you want. Whatever you say. But I’m not leaving you.”

“But you don’t really love me.”

“Who said I don’t? And the doctor says you’re having my baby. Don’t even think about trying to get rid of me now. I’m not going anywhere.”

“The doctor said that?”

“Yes. They discovered it during their examination when you were brought in.” He kissed my hand again. “Weren’t you going to tell me?”

“Probably not.” He looked up at me and the look of hurt in his eyes almost killed me.

“Don’t look like that. Please, Rolf. I wouldn’t want to trap you. I still don’t want to. You wouldn’t be happy in a loveless marriage.”

“Then you don’t have to worry, because it wouldn’t be loveless. Like I just told you. And I hope you have the same feelings for me.”

“I do. But are you sure? You said it hurt to see me shot and you called me your omega, but...”

“I love you, Levi. Since the first time I saw you in that café. I admit I’ve been confused, but nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I can’t lose you. And I’ll do whatever it takes to convince you to spend the rest of your life with me.”

He wrapped his arms around me then, and we stopped talking for a while. And he kissed me over and over until the nurses came in to see why my blood pressure was going up so much. When they finally left us alone again, he sat beside me a little more quietly. He was restless though.

“Are you going to give me a chance, Levi?” he asked me softly.

“Well, I...”

“Tell me, because I have to go out soon and let Nugget out of my truck to use the bathroom. I guess I better get him something else to eat too, before he does

something crazy. He's already eaten his breakfast, along with a few hot dogs, and he tried to eat an entire carton of eggs from the refrigerator while I was cleaning up after breakfast."

I laughed and pulled his head down for another kiss. How could I say no to a man who made breakfast for my crazy dog? I thought maybe he really must love me if he was willing to take on Nugget. And before I let him leave the room, I made him crawl up on the bed to hold me for a while and tell me how he felt about me in greater detail. If he was going to be my Alpha, then he had some responsibilities to handle. And I was beginning to realize he was the only man for the job.

Several months later...

I let myself out of my apartment and pulled my knit hat farther down over my ears as a cold wind hit me that seemed to come right out of the North Pole. Nugget even shivered a little beside me as it hit him too. By now his winter coat had come in, and he had more hair than Chewbacca on Star Wars—he kind of looked like him too. Luckily, I had anticipated the wind before I started out on this walk, so I had worn Rolf's way-too-long, way-too-big-on-me overcoat. I thanked the gods for every inch of its wooly warmth and even wrapped my scarf around my neck to partly cover my face. And I was still cold.

The newscasters were saying that there was a blizzard coming in later today that would maybe be the “storm of the century,” and the worst one Valleywood had seen in a hundred years. Rolf had gone to the grocery store the night before and loaded up on bread, milk and all the other staples people always buy when a storm is on the way. He should have been home by now, though, because he promised to stay at work to “check a few things” and then come home.

He had started a new job with the Valleywood P.D. a month ago, and he was working with a task team of shifters, handling shifter crime in the city. His new boss was named Dilen Ross, the right-hand man of the Police Commissioner. It was a good job with great pay, and he told me he was really happy.

Of course, I knew he'd had a big argument with his parents over his decision not to go back to New York, but again—he had told me he was happy, and I decided to not borrow trouble and to just take him at his word. He sure seemed happy enough, and I was trying to make sure to keep him that way.

Nugget and I walked down toward the district, and I saw the now-empty lot where Leroy's house used to stand. It was hard to believe that he and Willie had been gone for almost eight months now.

Since the attack on me, I'd learned a lot more about what had happened that last night when I got shot. The man who shot me had once worked for the same agency as Rolf. Alex Conroy had been a special agent and had been following me around and watching my apartment at Rolf's direction. But that was when Rolf thought I might be a thief and part of Willie's gang.

Conroy had really been a criminal, though, who had taken part in the bank robbery, along with Ben Bolagi. The two of them had a falling out—as thieves often did—and Bolagi knew that Conroy was after him to take all the money for himself. It had been Bolagi that had laid the curse on the money bag to prevent Conroy from taking it. But he'd worded his curse improperly and had laid a curse of bad luck on anyone who ever touched the bag. And that had included himself.

It was probably why he'd been hit by that truck and died of his injuries. It was also probably why Willie and Leroy had both been caught up in the same curse and even why I'd been shot by Conroy. We had all touched that bag. By the time I saw Conroy that night, I had removed the curse, but it was already in play from earlier when I'd retrieved it from Leroy's yard. Hence, the curse was activated and I got shot. And Conroy got arrested.

Rolf said I was crazy when I told him about it, but then he didn't really believe in the curse like I did. I knew, though, like I tried to tell him. It was only sheer good luck that Rolf had followed me that night. He thought I knew more than I was saying, as indeed I did.

He said at that point he wasn't alarmed when he'd seen Conroy was following me too. He had tasked Conroy to watch me when he first came to Valleywood, because of what he had thought was my close relationship with Willie. And he had never

called him off. Then when he saw him running toward me with his gun pointed at me...well, it had scared him half to death, he said, and he came running to my rescue, shifted spontaneously to his wolf and attacked Conroy, saving the day along with my life. He had quickly shifted back when he found out I had lost consciousness, and he had rushed me to the hospital. An injured Conroy was arrested by officers Rolf sent back to the scene, and meanwhile, once we reached the hospital, Rolf had finally discovered that I was expecting a baby.

Now some months later, we were happily living together in my apartment, and he had talked me into leaving my job until after the baby was born. Once, when we'd been having supper one night, I'd mentioned that I wouldn't mind having even more babies, and from the way his eyes had glowed when he looked at me, I thought I might not be going back to work for a while. Which was surprisingly fine by me. I'd always thought I wanted to keep working and earning my own way, but now I loved the idea of making a cozy nest for my babies. I might change my mind later, but then again, maybe not.

A gust of wind hit us as we crossed the street to go to the park, where Nugget loved to play, and it brought with it a dash of freezing rain that hit me right in the face. I knew the roads and sidewalks would get slippery fast, so I decided we'd better go back before it got any worse. I managed to turn Nugget around with a promise of more hot dogs that we had at home. I wasn't wearing boots, so by the time we made it back, I was slipping and sliding in the ice on the sidewalks. Luckily, I had Nugget to hold onto and I made it safely home.

As I reached the front door, Rolf's truck pulled up and he hurried over to me and swept me up in his arms.

"What are you doing out here in this weather? You could have fallen."

"I was taking Nugget for a walk before the blizzard hits."

“I think you’re too late,” he said, looking up at the dark clouds hanging ominously over the city. “Let me get you inside.”

He carried me all the way up the steps and into the apartment. Rolf said he’d get us a new place that had room for gran, but we hadn’t done anything about it yet. I was happy in my old neighborhood, and Gran loved her apartment and being close to her friends. Rolf didn’t seem to mind. It was big and cheap and had an extra room for the baby too, so we decided to stay a little longer.

Once inside, Rolf got the fire going again and sat beside me on the couch. I had a little backache, but I hated to mention it because of the way he always got. He was really overprotective, but I think that went with the Alpha territory.

The man on television announced that all the roads in Valleywood were closing because of the blizzard, and the officials in town were asking everyone to stay home and stay off the streets. About an hour later, I was drowsing on the couch, still trying to find a comfortable position to lie in, when a knock came on the door. Rolf answered it, and it was my gran, who had made a big pot of chili for supper and wanted us to come over to eat.

“I think I’ll pass,” I told her. “Thanks anyway, but Rolf, you should go. I’m a little nauseated.”

“He said his back was hurting earlier,” said my Alpha, the narc.

Gran nodded. “Could be back labor. I had that with your father, Levi. It’s really painful.”

“Wonderful. Thanks for sharing. Good to know.”

“Don’t be snippy with your grandmother.”

“I didn’t mean to be.”

“I know, honey.” She looked over at Rolf. “Some of them get this way when they’re in labor.”

“Some of who? I’m right here, and I’m not in labor. I have at least two weeks to go yet.”

“Your due date is just an estimate, Levi. It ranges from 37 weeks to 41 weeks. Only a small number of babies come on their actual due dates.”

“What? Well, why don’t they tell people that!”

“I think they do. You probably weren’t paying attention.”

“But I’m not ready! I don’t have anything for the baby.”

“We have a whole closet full of stuff.”

“But that’s not enough. No, we just have to put it off until later.”

“On the day of the birth, the baby will come out of you, whether you’re ready or not.”

“Gee, Rolf, thanks for that. I had no idea.”

Rolf popped me on my butt. “Stop being a little smartass. We’re on your side, remember?”

I nodded miserably and Gran took my hand.

“It’s a natural process, dear.”

“Not for me—I’m not some girl you know.”

And that’s when I burst into tears—like a girl. Rolf started patting me, saying, “It’s just the hormones, baby.”

I grabbed his hand and appealed to him. “Look, I’ve been thinking. I’ve decided I don’t want to do this after all. Can we get somebody else to do it?”

“It doesn’t work that way, Levi.”

“Well, why not? If you loved me, you’d find someone!”

My gran looked over at Rolf and said, “They get a little crazy like this when they’re in labor.”

“I’m not in labor!” I yelled as a pain doubled me over and took my breath away.

“Honey, I think you are. I’m going to take him to the hospital.”

“No, it’s much better for you to stay here. The weather is getting worse. I’ve delivered babies before, you know. In fact, I delivered Levi, because his mom and dad didn’t have money for the hospital. We got this.”

“What have you got?” I shouted at both of them. “No, I need to go to the hospital.”

“I’m afraid you wouldn’t make it dear and be trapped in a car on the way. Just look outside.” She pulled the curtain back to show me. The snow was really coming down hard now. It was flinging itself at the window, and it was almost white-out conditions. The wind battered at the building, like it was trying to break in, it seemed. I gasped at the fury of the storm and shrank back against the couch.

“Maybe I can hold it in until the blizzard goes past us.”

I was wracked with another pain and doubled over again, moaning as a giant hand tried to grab me in its fist. I held out my arms to Rolf and threw them around his neck and held on tight when he sat down beside me.

“I’m scared, Rolf.”

He squeezed me so tightly I couldn’t breathe.

“I’ll be right here with you, baby. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I pushed him away. “You did this!”

He looked stricken, so I pulled him back to hug him. “I love you, Rolf. But I hate you right now, just a little bit.”

I heard Gran whispering to Rolf, who was looking shattered. “They always say that. Don’t worry.”

About thirty minutes later, Gran made up the bed with some clean sheets and put plastic garbage bags under them to protect the mattress. Meanwhile, she had Rolf get me to my feet and walk me around the living room to “advance my labor.” Nugget was hiding under the bed.

The walking worked for about another twenty or thirty minutes and then I couldn’t do it anymore. It was only two minutes now between those awful pains that would have brought me to my knees if Rolf hadn’t held me up.

“Bring him in and lay him down,” Gran said.

“I’ll never do this again! Not ever!” I pointed my finger in Rolf’s face. “No more babies for you!”

“I know, honey. Should I go back in the living room and leave you alone?”

“No! Don’t you dare go anywhere; I need you!”

“Okay, I’m right here.”

“Why do you want to leave me when I need you the most?”

“I don’t, baby. I’m right here.”

My grandmother shook her head at me, and then stationed herself down by my hips and encouraged me not to push until I felt the next contraction. She showed me how to breathe through them, but it didn’t help much. Rolf stood on the other side of the bed, holding my hand and looking on worriedly.

“Isn’t this moving too fast?”

“Everyone is different, and he’s doing fine. He’s opening up nicely, and I can feel the baby’s head,” she said, and pulled her hand from out between my legs.

“What are you doing down there, Gran?” I said, in an outraged voice. “You’re not supposed to be looking at me and touching me down there! You’re my grandma!”

“Levi, I’ve washed and diapered that butt of yours a million times when you were a baby. There’s nobody else to do this but me, so hush up!”

I hushed up.

“Now on the next pain, I want you to push really hard. And stop all that yelling. Use that energy to push this baby out instead.”

I did as she said, and on the next pain, I held my breath and pushed and pushed as

hard as I could—and I felt the baby slip out between my legs. Gran got busy down there as I fell back in relief. In what seemed like only a few minutes she was thrusting a baby at me that was wrapped in a baby blanket.

“Here you go, dear. It’s a little boy.”

I gazed down at him in wonder. He had dark hair and red skin with little splotches on his cheeks, and his eyes were squinched up, but along with his daddy, he was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

The next hour or so passed in a blur. The afterbirth came, and my gran cleaned everything up, but after a while, I got to just hold the baby and look at him as the storm raged outside. He had all his fingers and toes, and he looked so much like his father, it was ridiculous. I was already crazy about him, and I never wanted to let him go.

“He looks like you,” Rolf said, and I shook my head.

“Thanks, but no, he doesn’t. He’s a little Alpha, I think, because he’s already been so much trouble. What do you think?”

Rolf smiled and leaned over to kiss us both. “I think that now I have two of you to wrap me around your little fingers.”

I blushed, very pleased with his answer. “What should we name him? And don’t say Levi—I never liked my name much. What’s your father’s name?”

“Bertram.”

“Oh gods.”

Rolf laughed. “And your father?”

“Barney. So there’s no help there at all.”

“Let’s just name him something we both like.”

“What about Nicholas? I like that name.”

He smiled at me. “I like it too.”

Nugget crawled out from under the bed and gave his stamp of approval with a big woof.

“Nugget approves,” Rolf said and squeezed my hand.

“I hope your parents do. And I hope they’ll come around eventually.”

He picked the baby up and put him in his crib that we’d bought for him. It was right next to our bed. “I think once they see their grandchild and my beautiful mate, they definitely will.”

I hoped he was right. I was scared and whistling in the dark for courage. But if love was enough, then I knew we’d be all right.

“Don’t be scared,” he said, and I realized I must have said it out loud. “They’ll love you. And if they don’t, then it’s their loss. If I have to choose, it’ll always be you.”

I was touched by what he said, and the look in his eyes. We kissed for a while before I spoiled it with a yawn. Thankfully, he just laughed.

“It’s getting late. You need to try and get a little rest while the baby sleeps. Close your eyes, sweetheart. If the baby wakes up, I’ll take care of him.”

“I don’t know if I can sleep. I’m too excited. And I’m wondering—where do we go

from here?”

“That depends on where you want us to be.”

“Married, I think. Happy.”

“I’d like that too.”

“And you here with me forever.”

Rolf smiled and brushed a kiss over my lips. “Where else am I going to be? I love you, Levi.”

I sighed and laid my head on his chest. Maybe I was going to get that happy ever after people always talked about in the books I read. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep, warm and safe in his arms, as the blizzard howled outside.

The End