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Christine Warren

HOWL AT THE MOON

Is her desire worth the risk?

A NOVEL OF THE OTHERS

Howl at the Moon

By

Christine Warren

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

HOWL AT THE MOON

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CHAPTER ONE

"Seriously, there's this thing called 'the sun,' and it gives off this stuff called 'sunlight' that it's important to have occasional contact with."

"Uh-huh."

Samantha Carstairs narrowed her eyes and glared over her left shoulder at her best friend. Annie clearly wasn't paying any attention, which, though annoying, wasn't exactly unusual.

"Without this 'sunlight' stuff, your body can't make any vitamin D."

"Yeah."

"And if your body doesn't make enough vitamin D..." Sam barely blinked as the phlebotomy needle bit into her skin. She was too busy trying to figure out if her friend remembered more than just her forearm and veins was still in the room. "... your tail is going to shrivel up and drop off."

"It would not. At most, if the tailbones softened that badly, I might develop a slight curve." Annie Cryer untied the rubber tourniquet around Sam's bicep and dropped it onto the stainless-steel laboratory counter.

"Open and close your fist a few times. Your veins are being stingy today for some reason."

"Maybe because you've already sucked more blood from me than a vampire with an iron deficiency," Sam grumbled, but she made the fist obediently. She had this routine down after the last eight months of regular withdrawals. The only thing she didn't have a handle on at the moment was what had added the barely perceptible sharpness of nerves to the other woman's scent.

Annie looked up from the slowly filling vial of blood and frowned. "Have you been feeling light-headed? Damn it, Sam, I told you to let me know if you started to not feel well after the donations. I'll stop collecting from you. I've got a couple of vials left from last time. Those would last me a few more weeks, if I just cut down on the number of tests I'm running in each batch."

"It's fine, Annie. I feel fine," Sam sighed. Not because she was lying, but because it was so like Annie for the subtle approach to go flying over her head without even slowing down. Not that subtlety happened to be one of Sam's specialties. "You're the one I'm worried about. You need to get out of this building before your muscles atrophy. Have you even been back to your apartment in the past week?"

Annie shrugged and efficiently switched out vials. "There's a sofa in my office. And I can shower in the doctors' lounge."

"Not my point. You're a werewolf, An, remember? You need to get outside."

Sam knew the truth of that better than most. After all, she was a werewolf, too, a member of the same pack. In fact, her mother and Annie's mother had given birth within a few weeks of each other, and the girls had been raised as littermates from the age of four. They had, literally, grown up together.

"I'm fine."

"Sure, the way Viktor Frankenstein was fine," Samantha retorted. "I'm starting to

worry about leaving you alone during electrical storms."

That was only a slight exaggeration. Before today, Sam had just been exasperated. She had assumed Annie was going through one of the phases she hit every time one of her experiments reached a critical stage. She always disappeared at those times, but she usually came back a few days later, riding a high of scientific accomplishment the way a manic-depressive rode a high of dopamine. Only this time it had been weeks, Annie still hadn't crawled out from her lab, and she looked a long way from giddy with intellectual triumph. She looked almost haunted.

Annie's interest in science had always bordered on the obsessive, so it wasn't the disappearance or the single-mindedness that worried Sam. Her friend had been that way ever since grade school, which was about how long Sam had been nagging Annie to take a break now and then. Usually even when she was in the midst of one of her experimental breakthroughs and Sam came to drag her back to the world of the living, Annie would kick and scream but then spend hours describing her work to Sam in loving detail. This time, Annie hadn't said a word. If it weren't for the fact that she hadn't left the lab in two weeks, Sam would have shrugged off her worry and gotten on with her life. But Annie remained silent and didn't even mention the words "data" or "P value." It was creepy.

Not that it did Annie any good to try to explain her work. The length of time Sam had been trying to drag her friend out of her lab coat was also how long it had been since the two of them had shared a classroom. While Sam had struggled to master the intricacies of long division, Annie had been skipping grades like boxes on a hopscotch board. At fifteen, she had landed herself in the biochemistry department at Columbia University. She'd gotten her PhD at twenty-one. Her first PhD. She had two now: one in biochemistry and the other in molecular biology. Sam was lucky her bachelor's from CUNY hadn't been snatched out of her hand, rolled into a tube, and used by her professors to whack her a few times over her nose. An intellectual she wasn't.

Which, Sam figured ruefully, she should have thought of before she tried to lecture Annie on vitamin deficiencies. And Sam still didn't have an answer to the question she had come here to ask. Time for a change of tactics.

Where humor hadn't worked, maybe pity would. Or guilt.

"Annie, come on. Your mother is worried about you. And if that weren't bad enough, she's given up trying to reach you and turned on me instead. If I don't bring her proof of your continued health and well-being, I think she's going to challenge me." Sam watched her friend's face for any sign of weakening. "And you know what? I think she could take me."

"Don't be ridiculous. My mother is almost thirty years older than you, and she hasn't issued a dominance challenge in decades." Annie popped the fourth and last tube free and withdrew the needle, pressing a gauze pad against the puncture mark. Her movements remained as brisk and competent as always, but the shadows in the back of

her eyes didn't escape the notice of someone who knew her better than a sibling.

"She hasn't had to. There isn't a Lupine in Manhattan who would be willing to accept one. We know when to show our bellies, sweetheart."

Annie's pen didn't even pause as she labeled the tubes. "I've never seen you show your belly to anyone, Samantha. Not even Graham."

Samantha felt her eyebrows shoot up. "You think I'd defy the Alpha of the Silverback Clan? Do I look suicidal to you? I can assure you the only reason our pack leader hasn't seen my belly is because he's never asked to. But I still do my crunches every day, just in case."

"Right."

Annie turned away so abruptly, she banged her hip into the counter and sent the vials of blood skittering toward the floor.

Sam's hand shot out and caught them before they had time to fall more than two or three inches.

"All right, that does it," she growled, slapping the vials back onto the counter with restrained ferocity. Guilt could go screw itself. She switched to threats. "You seriously need to tell me what's going on with you, Annie, before I tell your mother to come down here and find out for herself."

With both her palms, noticeably shaking, pressed to the cool countertop, Annie bent forward and shook her head. "I can't."

"Why the hell not?" Sam figured she probably looked as confused as she sounded. She could feel herself scowling. "I'm your best friend. You told me when you had your first change, your first period, and your first orgasm. What could you possibly have to say that would freak me out?"

Annie shook her head, her dark hair falling forward to conceal her face. "I'm not worried about you freaking. I'm worried about you telling the Alpha."

Sam's stomach took a sudden trip on an amusement park ride, climbing into her throat before dropping so fast, gravity seemed to keep it airborne for a long, queasy moment. Damn it, this was going to be worse than she'd feared. Her instincts barked at her not to ask any more questions, but the words were out before she could stop them. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what you think I mean, Sam."

Oh, shit. Her instincts shifted from trying to shut Annie up to trying to get her out the nearest door, window, or unreinforced concrete wall. Something very not good was going on here. So not good it bordered on bad.

For a second, she couldn't seem to remember how to speak, as if the primitive side of her brain had taken over and left her inarticulate and powerless. She watched while Annie calmly gathered up the blood vials and stowed them carefully in the small refrigerator on top of the counter. Her motions looked jerky and uncoordinated for the first time Sam could remember. Annie wasn't clumsy. She was smart, not always careful, and often oblivious, but she'd never been clumsy.

"Holy hell, An, what have you gotten yourself into?" she whispered.

Annie shook her head emphatically and slammed the refrigerator door. "Forget about it. I'm not dragging you any further into this than you already are. Right now, if the Alpha asks you, you've got no idea what's going on. You won't have to lie. Let's keep it that way."

"Are you serious?" Sam tossed the gauze into the trash and yanked, down her sleeve. "Okay, (a) if Graham Winters asks me questions, you're right that I won't have to lie because I won't even need to open my mouth for him to realize something is wrong. And (b) how am I already involved in whatever it is I know nothing about?"

"I said forget it," Annie repeated, and headed for the door that Sam knew led down a short, cramped hall to her small, cramped office.

Sam stalked after her. "No, I'm not going to forget it. If I'm caught up in this, I deserve to know. And if it affects the pack as a whole, so does the Alpha."

Annie sank down into her battered leather desk chair and buried her head in her arms. "It's nothing, Sam."

Her voice was muffled, but Sam could hear the hiss of the water in the wall pipes if she concentrated, so it wasn't like she'd missed anything important.

"Bullshit. Nothing doesn't leave you smelling like a turkey on the third Wednesday in November."

"I shouldn't have said that before. You're not involved. You have nothing to worry about. Now will you shut up and please go away?"

"Sure, that sounds exactly like what I'm going to do." Sam pushed the office door shut and leaned against the panel, crossing her arms over her chest. "You have to tell me what's going on, An."

The other woman looked up, her light brown eyes glinting behind her wire-framed glasses. Her spine lengthened, and her shoulders rounded as if to puff herself up and make her size as daunting as possible. Her lips pulled back from her teeth in what would have been a snarl if she'd been in her other skin. "Oh, I do, do I?"

Sam rolled her eyes. "Don't even go there, An. I love you like a sister, but I outweigh

you by twenty pounds, and I can and will kick your ass if you make me."

Annie visibly deflated. "I know," she said, rubbing her forehead as if she could rub away whatever was bothering her. "I know, Sam, but trust me, it's better if I leave you out of this."

"*Kick your ass, Annie.*"

It was interesting, actually. Sam could almost see the scales in Annie's head bobbing up and down as she weighed her stories and tried to decide what to share.

"It's just... work," she finally managed, adjusting her glasses in the nervous habit Sam knew meant she was lying like a cheap toupee. "Some research I've been doing on... us."

"Us?"

Annie's chin jerked up and down. "Yes. On Lupines."

Sam's stomach took another nosedive. "You mean on me."

"You've been an important source of research material."

"Shit." Sam blew out a breath and crossed the two steps to the chair in front of Annie's desk. She sank down and braced her forearms on her knees. "What exactly are you researching, Annie?"

"I'm decoding the genome."

"And how far have you gotten?"

"I've decoded the genome."

Sam blinked. Somehow the answer didn't surprise her. "But that should be a good thing, right? I mean, decoding a genome is the first step in finding new medicines and treatments for diseases and stuff, right?"

"Sure. It's huge. With this kind of information, we could find a cure for AIDS or smallpox or anthrax."

Her head was already bobbing up and down before the words actually hit. Sam froze. Those were three diseases to which Lupines were not particularly susceptible. By "not particularly," of course, she meant "not at all." A werewolf would eat a small village full of AIDS victims and not end up with so much as a case of the sniffles. Something in were wolves' genes just kept the human virus from getting a toehold in their immune systems.

"You don't look particularly excited about that," she said.

"Oh, it's a huge step. It could mean we'd finally understand what it is that makes us Lupine. We could find out what triggers our changes, what's responsible for our speed, even what it is about shifting that helps us heal what would otherwise be life-threatening wounds."

"But?"

Annie laughed, not sounding amused. "Secrets don't keep in science, and now that our biggest secret is out, it won't be long before the rest of them leak as well. We'll be the most popular kids in school."

The light dawned, and Sam swore. "And everyone will want to be just like us."

"Exactly."

"You'll have to stop, An. You have to put this stuff away. If human scientists got their hands on what you're telling me you're working on, we'd be the next great species of lab rat."

"You don't think I know that? I'm a certified genius, Sam. The thought had occurred to me."

"Come on. I'll help." Sam stood. "We'll grab everything together and get rid of it. I can take it back to the club with me and have them throw it in the furnace if I have to. Show me what to start with."

Annie shook her head, looking as if she wanted to cry. "I can't."

"Why the hell not? You know how dangerous this is, Annie. What's the matter with you?"

"Many, many things." She gave that laugh again, humorless and more sarcastic than anything else Sam had ever heard come out of Annie's mouth. "But at the moment, the problem isn't me. I think..." She paused. "I think someone started spying on me."

Sam blinked. "What?"

"It's mostly little things," Annie said, "but lately I've been feeling like I'm being followed. The person doesn't always smell the same, but I swear it's happening. I can feel my hackles rising whenever they get close, and a couple of times I've set things down, like on a table at a coffee shop or next to me on the subway, and half the time they go missing. Gordon thinks I'm being ridiculous, of course."

Sam said something her aunt would have shaken her by the scruff for if she'd heard. Gordon Entwhistle was a human who worked with Annie, when he wasn't busy trying to get himself some publicity or take the credit for someone else's hard work, and Sam had hated him on sight. Unfortunately, Annie hadn't been as discerning.

It probably hadn't helped that since she rarely left the lab, Annie didn't have a whole lot of experience with men, or a whole lot of opportunities to meet them. When a reasonably attractive, if you discounted the coating of slime, and reasonably intelligent, if you equated ruthless self-preservation and a wily, cutthroat sense of ego with intelligence, man waltzed into her territory and played the smitten flatterer, Annie had reacted like any woman in her situation would have: she'd developed a crush.

Sam set her teeth. "What does Gordon have to do with it?"

"He's been very interested in my work," Annie said, her shoulders hitching defensively. "Very supportive, He's helped out a lot, Sam. Two hands make the tests go a lot faster, after all."

"I'm sure."

She was. And she was also sure that two names on a paper published in *Science* would make Entwhistle's career plans go a lot faster, too.

"Don't look at me like that." Annie frowned. "He *has* helped. It's just... lately..."

"Well, maybe I'm being paranoid, but it feels like he's paying more attention than he used to. Not to me, but to the work."

"And?"

"It started around the same time I started to get the feeling of being followed. That just strikes me as a really big coincidence. I'm not sure I can trust him anymore."

Sam refrained from telling Annie she never should have. "You can't think he's the one following you? You spend most of your time in the same lab with him anyway, and it's not like you wouldn't notice if he kept showing up where you were outside of here."

"I know," Annie said. "But maybe he's involved in it somehow. Sam, I know this all sounds crazy, but I'm starting to get really scared. This work is significant. There could be a lot of people interested in it, if they knew about it, for all the wrong reasons."

Sam shook her head. "That's it, An. I don't care what your plans were; you *have* to tell the Alpha. And if you don't, I will."

"I can't. Not yet." She held up her hand when Sam opened her mouth to protest. "I've got time, at least a few more days, before things get to the point where we need to be worried. I'm keeping the key to my notes separate from the main data, and the results from my latest panels won't be in until the middle of next week. Until those are here, the data is too incomplete to be useful to anyone. I promise."

"Annie—"

"No, Sam, I mean it. I promise that if the danger was imminent, I'd go to Graham

myself, but it isn't. And until I run tests on the samples I just took, I can't confirm half of what I've already done. It'll be okay."

For a long minute, Sam stared across the desk at her friend, reading her face, her eyes, and her body for the truth. It was her scent that finally tipped Sam's decision. She could smell nerves, yes, but not fear, and no traces of panic. Not yet.

Sam stood and nodded once. "I'll give you a week, Annie, but that's it. After that, I need to fill Graham in on what's going on. It's going to be bad enough going back to work with him this afternoon, let alone getting through the week."

Sam meant it, too, because Graham Winters wasn't just Sam's Alpha; he was her boss also. Sam worked with him at his office in Vircolac, the city's premier private club for the Other community. She served as personal assistant, assistant general manager, bookkeeper, and go-to girl. She didn't make a habit of keeping secrets from the Alpha.

Annie nodded and stood herself, jaw firming. "Thank you, Sam. I owe you one."

Sam snorted. "You owe me about seven thousand, three hundred, and forty-two, but who's counting?" Shaking her head, she turned and opened the office door. "One week, Annie. The clock is ticking."

As Sam made her way back out of the lab and into the Manhattan afternoon, she sent up a silent prayer that the alarm wouldn't go off before they were ready for it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Vircolac Club had been founded when Others first began to congregate in the New World in large enough numbers to require a private and safe place to gather. For most of the time since then, it had been run quite skillfully by the Winters family, and in addition to being the Silverback Clan's Alpha, Graham Winters also happened to be the club's current owner. As his personal assistant, Sam helped him with both club and pack business and had enough to do to merit a stack of message slips on her desk when she returned from lunch.

"Hey, Sam." Daisy Cliff, one of the club hostesses, had been monitoring the phones while Samantha was out, and she gave a cheerful wave when Samantha stepped back into her office in the town house's old front parlor. "It was pretty quiet today, but that could be because the Man is next door shoving a lunch fit for the Hundred and First Airborne down his wife's throat."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "He'll tell Missy that while she's nursing she's still eating for two, but Missy will tell him that he can shove his multivitamins where the sun don't shine, so it all evens out."

Daisy laughed, a light, trilling sound that proclaimed her part-Siren heritage more clearly than her penchant for really brief bikinis. "True, but things must be going relatively peacefully, because I haven't felt any tremors in the foundation."

"Thanks for holding down the fort for me, Dais, but you should get back before Richards decides I need another lecture about taking his staff away from their appointed positions."

Richards, the club's butler, liked to think of himself as a stern taskmaster, but Samantha and Daisy both knew he would have spared the hostess for the rest of the day if Samantha had needed the help.

"No problem. It's been quiet everywhere, including the dining room. Holler if you need anything else!"

Samantha nodded and waved Daisy out the door, but her attention was already focused on her message slips. She sorted them into two piles, the ones she could handle and the ones that needed to be passed on to Graham. Hers always turned out to be a lot bigger. Tons of people thought they needed to talk to her boss, but Samantha made a vigilant gatekeeper.

Focusing on work helped her push her visit with Annie out of her mind, and within a few minutes she had managed to relax. She'd given Annie a week, and she'd do her best not to worry about it before then. She had the majority of her callers dealt with by the time she scented the Alpha's return. She looked up just before he opened the office door.

"Hey, boss." She grinned as the polished wooden panels swung toward her. "How's it hangin'?"

Graham didn't even blink at her informal greeting. Their relationship operated on a level few others in the pack could have boasted of. Samantha was closer to the Alpha than anyone other than his mate, his cubs, and his Beta, so they tended to dispense with the formalities of rank.

"I swear that female is going to turn my hair gray before I'm forty-five," he growled, but the tone held no real menace. It never did when he spoke of his mate, no matter how much she might currently be driving him crazy.

"It'll look good on you," Samantha offered, still grinning. "Very distinguished."

Graham just sighed like a man much put upon and hitched his hip on the edge of her desk. "It's all right. I'm getting used to it. Besides"—his expression took on a distinctly mischievous cast—"I can always get her back and round out the family in a few months. Four is a nice, even number of pups, don't you think?"

"Oh, sure. And I'm sure if you gave it one more try, you could manage to have a

daughter just like Missy. That would be so sweet!" She fluttered her eyelashes innocently.

Graham turned a little pale. "And deal with boys sniffing around a daughter of mine? Just whose side are you on, anyway?"

"I refuses to answer that question on the grounds that it may incriminate me."

"That's fine, because I know a way you can make it up to me."

Sam let her eyes narrow. "And what would that be?"

"I'm going to need you to do me a favor."

She shrugged and dropped her teasing glare. "Sure, no problem. I'll put it on your tab. What's going on?"

"The pack is going to start setting an example of interspecies cooperation."

Sam quirked an eyebrow. "You mean we don't already?"

The question was only half-humorous. The Silverback Clan had a long history of interspecies cooperation, dating back to the time before their Alpha had actually mated with another species. The fact that Graham's family had operated Vircolac for centuries and always opened its doors as neutral ground for all Others played a part in that, as did the pack's long association with the Council of Others. In fact, compared to a lot of the Others out there, the Silverback Clan looked a lot like a supernatural version of the United Nations. Only functional and quite a bit more effective.

"This time we're doing it specifically with the humans, and with the government in particular," Graham said. "I discussed it with Rafe and the rest of the Council last night. I think the consensus labeled it as a 'gesture of good faith.'"

"Which really means that Rafe wanted it and the rest of the Council decided they'd rather watch the pack do the real work of it than dirty their own hands taking it on."

"Exactly."

Rafael De Santos, Felix werejaguar and head of the Council of Others, tended to get what he wanted from the Council, which was why he made one of the best leaders the Others had ever had. Managing that group was no mean feat when you considered that the rest of the membership consisted of the most powerful vampires, shape-shifters, changelings, and magic users in Manhattan. Still, one of the reasons that things tended to happen according to Rafe's plans was Graham. Having the Alpha of the Silverback Clan as a close friends and a staunch ally had often proved useful to Rafe. It looked like it was about to do so again.

Sam just shook her head. "Okay, so what are we on the hook for this time? More

surveillance duty? Security for a contingent of humans from Trinidad and Tobago who want to consult with the Council on treaty negotiations with their local population of were-Gila monsters? I can round up volunteers. I'll ask for the ones who likes palm trees and sunbathing. You know, to put the visitors at ease." Her words were joking, but she had already reached for the phone. Her job around here was to make things happen, and Sam was good at her job.

"Actually," Graham pursed his lips and developed a sudden fascination for his fingernails, "it's that word 'volunteer' that I wanted to talk to you about. You in particular."

Sam's head started shaking before he even finished speaking. "Oh no. You know what happened the last time you sent me on some other kind of assignment. It took me months before I could find where you'd filed the bar receipts."

"I handled the office just fine."

"You put them under 'M,' Graham, and when I asked why, you called them medical expenses."

The Alpha shrugged. "Don't worry. This time, you won't be going anywhere. This is a desk job."

Sam eyed him with growing suspicion. He wore his most charming smile, the one that said he was about to convince you to invest your last dollar in a housing development in the middle of the Okefenokee Swamp. Missy called it his Conner smile. Conner was the name of their second son.

Sam could already feel her feet getting wet. "Why doesn't that reassure me?"

Graham clucked his tongue. "Because you have a disturbingly suspicious nature, Samantha. I'm sure your family raised you to be more openhearted than this."

Considering the fact that the family who'd raised her had also raised him—in the pack, everybody helped raise everyone else's pups—that wasn't much of a stretch.

"And do you know why I'm suspicious?" she asked. "Because whenever you get that look—the one you're wearing right now—it bodes ill for me. So stop stalling and lay it on me. I'm a big girl. I can take it."

"We need to clear off some desk space in here," Graham said. "We're going to be having a visitor for a little while."

"Oh, my goddess! We're being *audited*?"

Graham shuddered. "Bite your tongue. No, nothing like that. I've agreed to let a select branch of the U.S. military have the opportunity to recruit pack members. Strictly as volunteers, of course. An army officer is going to be setting up a minioffice space with

us for a few weeks."

Sam's glimmer of suspicion exploded in a siren-blaring and red flag-waving supernova of alarm. "Who?"

"Noah Baker."

Yeah, that's what she'd been afraid he would say.

On the surface, there was nothing wrong with Noah Baker. For a human, in fact, he'd made quite a few friends in the Other community since his sister had gotten mixed up with, and subsequently married to, a sun demon. Everybody seemed to like the man, from his demonic new brother-in-law, Rule, to Graham, to Rafe De Santos himself. Even Rafe's wife, Tess, liked Noah, and she wasn't one to suffer fools lightly, or even at all. But then, Noah Baker had proved to be no one's fool. A major in the army's highly selective and newly developed supernatural squadron, he had grit, training, and a cool head under pressure. Not to mention a talent for making large objects make even larger booms.

The only person Sam knew who *didn't* see the human as an all-around swell guy was Sam herself.

Something about Noah just made Sam's hackles rise every time he got within twenty feet of her, and it didn't seem to matter what form she was in at the time. Human, wolf, or were, Sam's teeth went on-edge when Noah walked into a room and her hormones went haywire. She'd gotten to be friends with his sister, Abby, but with Noah, the best Sam could manage felt more like a tense cease-fire. And now Graham expected her to share office space with Noah?

Too much a Lupine to directly challenge her Alpha's word, Sam took a more subtle approach. "So he's going to be recruiting for his own unit? This 'spook squad' he's on?"

Graham nodded. "His own unit and a couple of new ones. Apparently, the Pentagon has been pretty happy with the way the squad has handled a couple of recent incidents leading up to and resulting from the Unveiling." The revelation of the Others' existence had set a few backs up around the world. Riots, demonstrations, and protests had been the least of the trouble. "I think their successes have inspired the army to expand, put together a few new teams."

"Do you really think many members of the pack will be interested? Playing well with humans is a new skill for a lot of us."

"To tell you the truth, I think it's a great opportunity. As loyal as our members are to the pack, it's got to chafe a lot of them to know they're not going to get ahead without challenging someone in a dominant position for a better place in line. That's why we get into trouble from time to time with things like the Curtis incident." Graham made euphemistic reference to the time his cousin Curtis had tried to rip his throat out and

steal his mate, but Sam got his point. "This should give some of our gammas a good chance to get out from under my paw, so to speak."

"I'm sure no one has a problem with your paw, boss." But even as Sam said it, she uttered a mental curse. Graham made sense. Spending a lifetime in the middle of the pack didn't suit everyone. Graham's former Beta made a good example. Logan Hunter had chafed under the traditional pack system of hierarchy, and the only solution for him had been to leave Manhattan and take over as Alpha of the White Paw Clan in Connecticut.

Graham making sense, though, failed to make Sam feel any better. All she could think of was the impossibility of getting any work done while a pair of very human and disturbingly intense hazel eyes looked on.

The Alpha flashed her a grin. "You may be nearly as biased as Missy."

Sam forced a smile of her own. "Not quite." She drew in a deep breath. "Well, you're the boss. When can we expect the troops to land?"

"How about now?"

Noah caught the flash of surprise and annoyance on Samantha's face and stifled a grin. He knew he made the Lupine tense just by walking into the room, but then, she did the same to him. Unlike him, though, he suspected Sam had no idea why they disturbed each other so badly. She probably wrote it off as lousy chemistry.

Oh, it was chemistry, all right, but Noah couldn't describe it as lousy. Not by a long shot.

Samantha Carstairs made Noah Baker feel about as predatory as her closest friends and relatives actually were. He might not get furry on full moons, but looking at the luscious female Lupine made him want to howl at one. It had been that way from the first time he'd set eyes on her, while he still thought she was a kidnapper holding his little sister captive. He'd taken one look at Samantha and felt his entire body go on alert. A few parts had even gone on *high* alert.

She had the body of an athlete, not as sinewy as a runner or as fine as a gymnast but covered in sleek, firm muscle and decorated with curves just generous enough to make a sane man look twice. Noah had looked more than that, taking stock from the top of her mane of wavy, richly brown hair to the tips of her feminine feet. Of course, by the end of their first meeting those feet had turned into paws and tried to pin him to the ground in the middle of the small park down the block, but even that hadn't put him off. He'd dated women with bigger vices than occasionally shifting into timber wolves.

After a second of silence, Samantha started to squirm and Noah deliberately shifted his gaze to the other werewolf in the room. Stepping inside, Noah set a cardboard file box down on the chair beside the office door. "Thanks for agreeing to put me up, Graham.

I appreciate it."

The Silverback Alpha shook his hand, relieving the last of Noah's worries that the Lupine might still hold a grudge over the way his sister had briefly set the pack's Luna in harm's way a few months back when she'd been pursued by demons. Apparently, Graham didn't like having demons surrounding his wife.

"It's no problem," Graham said. "In fact, I was just telling Sam I think it might be good for some of our young males. Give them a place to channel their aggression other than in a dominance challenge."

Noah smiled. "I'll do my best."

He looked around the spacious room, taking note of the territory Sam had already marked. The huge cherry desk stationed in front of the door to Graham's private inner office had the look of a sentry's gatehouse, and Noah had no trouble picturing her fending off intruders and interlopers. Her area only took up one end of the grand old sitting room, though. There would be plenty of space for him. And he'd be near enough to give the electricity between them time to spar.

This grin he didn't bother to suppress. "Where would you like me to set up?"

Graham shrugged. "That's up to Sam. She's the one who keeps everything in its place around here."

It didn't take a mind reader to see that Sam wanted to put Noah outside with the trash. Or maybe to banish him to another continent. But that wasn't her decision.

Sam forced a pleasant expression onto her face. "I'll have one of the staff bring in a desk and some chairs. If we set them up near the fireplace on the far side of the room, it should give you some privacy for your sales pitch."

And get Noah as far from her as possible without banishing him from the room. Still. He'd save his fighting for other battles. "That works for me. Why don't you just tell me who on the staff I need to talk to, and I'll take care of my own supplies. I'm sure you have plenty of work to do without worrying about me."

"Great." Graham clapped Noah on the back. "I'll leave you to it, then. If you think of anything you need, just let Sam know. I'm putting her entirely at your disposal."

Noah saw Sam's eyes widen and her lips part to protest, but Graham had already retreated to his inner sanctum and closed the door behind him. Patiently Noah waited for Sam to turn her wary gaze back to him before he let the satisfaction bloom across his features.

"That," he said, his voice low and purring, "suits me perfectly. I can hardly wait to get started."

By four o'clock, Sam found herself wishing for a gun, a Valium, or a spot in the witness protection program. Noah Baker had obviously made it his life's work to drive her demented. She had to admit, he seemed to have a talent for it.

After fifteen minutes of discussion that had felt more like fifteen years—during which Sam asked questions about what furniture and supplies he would need for his area and he watched her with those penetrating hazel eyes that tracked every flicker of her breath—Sam had sent him off to see Richards about plundering from the other rooms of the club. The butler would be able to handle Noah while Sam took measurements to determine exactly how many bottles of Scotch would fit in the bottom drawer of her desk.

Laying her head down on a stack of paperwork, she gave a heartfelt groan. "This is never going to work."

"Don't be a pessimist," announced a familiar voice. "If I survived years of living in the same house with him, you can make it a couple of months in a shared office."

Sam groaned again, but she didn't need to lift her head to know that Noah's sister had let herself into the office. "I really don't need any more surprise visitors today, Abby, especially not ones with smart mouths."

"Better a smart mouth than a dumb one." Sam heard light footsteps and a slight rustling as Abby Baker settled herself in one of the chairs on the far side of the desk. "Come on, Sam. Aren't you being just a little bit melodramatic? I admit that my brother can be a pain in the *tuchis*, but he's not *that* bad. You managed to get along with him at my engagement party."

"I was dressed up," Sam grumbled, "and those little meatballs looked like they'd stain."

"With all the Lupines in the room, I doubt any of them would have landed."

Reluctantly Sam raised her head and propped her chin on her hand. "I'm sure that would have amused your family, to see all the werewolves leaping for flying meatballs. I can see your brother's face now."

Abby's friendly odd-colored eyes watched her sympathetically. "Yeah, I know he drives you crazy. That's why I came to lend you moral support. Rule just told me what was going on."

"Are you sure you didn't want to make sure I wasn't snacking on his femur?"

"Of course not. I'm over that old fear. You werewolves are just great big lap puppies." Abby's tone was airy, but her eyes twinkled.

Sam snorted. "Right. You should so work in our press office." Resisting the urge to

whine like a two-year-old, she settled for making a disgruntled face. "I want you to know that it's because I consider you a good friend that I'm going to try to get along with him."

"And I appreciate that, even though I still don't get what it is with you two that constantly has you snarling at each other."

That was a question Sam chose not to consider too closely. "Just lucky, I guess."

Abby laughed. "I guess. But, hey, the other reason I came over was to ask if you had plans after work? Missy said the boys are playing poker tonight and they invited Noah to sit in. So Tess suggested drinks and DVDs at her place. Are you interested?"

A moment of introspection revealed Sam's choices: she could call Annie and fail miserably to coax her out of her lab, she could hang out with the lively group of friends no doubt included in Abby's invitation, or she could go back to her own apartment and spend the rest of the night brooding about a certain annoying new office mate. Gee, which of those sounded most appealing?

"Very interested," she answered, and glanced at her watch. "It's twenty till five. I've got a few things to finish up, but I should be able to get out of here on time tonight. I'll meet you guys at Tess and Rafe's?"

"Sounds good. I'm going to run out and pick up a couple of bottles of wine and some whole milk."

"Milk?" Sam blinked.

Abby grinned. "Missy still can't drink because she's breast-feeding, but she needs both the hydration and the calories, so you can tell your boss we're taking care of her. I'll see you later."

Sam waved Abby out the door and then looked down at her desk. If she was lucky—or if she shoved a chair under the doorknob—she just might be able to clear most of the pressing paperwork out of her in-box and slip out of the club without seeing Noah again. Then she'd have the whole weekend to brace herself for their next encounter.

Grimacing, she shook her computer mouse and brought her accounting software back up. She hoped Abby bought a *lot* of wine.

An attack of doubt wasn't enough to keep a good soldier from doing his duty.

Noah was a very good soldier.

After spending a good amount of time instructing Vircolac's butler as to what he needed in his office area, Noah beat back the impulse to return there for the pleasure of tormenting Samantha for a few more minutes. Instead, he slipped out through the club's kitchens and walked the eight blocks to the second-closest pay phone. There he

punched in the number trained into his memory.

"Yes."

The voice on the other end of the line didn't introduce itself, but then neither did Noah. "They're setting me up today. By Monday, I should be able to get down to business."

"Good. Is everything going smoothly?"

"Yes, sir. The pack and the Alpha are being very cooperative." And he was learning to ignore the feeling he got from lying to all the people around him all the time.

"Make sure it stays that way. I shouldn't have to remind you, Major, that not only do we need results on this; we need them quickly."

Noah's mouth tightened, but the man on the other end of the line couldn't see that. "I'm aware of that, sir."

"Fine. I'll expect updates whenever it's feasible. I definitely want to hear something next week."

"Understood."

The click of the line disconnecting was the only reply Noah got.

Feeling grim, he replaced the receiver and turned toward the liquor store at the end of the block. Returning to the club with a couple of six-packs for tonight's poker game would explain his absence if anyone had missed him or, even less likely, had seen him slipping out. But Noah knew no one had.

He was very good at his job.

CHAPTER THREE

It hadn't taken Noah very long after he'd learned of the existence of the Others to realize that, aside from the obvious, the differences between the species were actually remarkably few. Some things just never changed. Poker nights were among them.

The room on the second floor of Vircolac might be a little more elegant than the ones Noah was used to playing in—hell, half the time he ended up playing in a tent or a shack or inside a Bradley fighting vehicle—and the service was a hell of a lot better than he was used to. He could get accustomed to having a waitstaff bringing him a fresh, cold beer every time his bottle even threatened emptiness. But once he got past the surface polish, everything else looked and sounded pretty familiar, from the haze of cigar smoke to the flutter of shuffling cards. Poker was poker, and men were men.

Even, apparently, when they were also wolves. Or jaguars. Or demons.

"Five." Noah tossed his chips into the center of the table and listened to them click. He recognized that sound as well.

"See you."

"I'm in."

"Same."

Rafael De Santos clasped the stub of a very expensive, and mildly illegal, Cuban cigar between his first two fingers and leaned back in his chair. "See and raise. Another five."

Noah grinned. The werejaguar and head of the Council of Others said that so intently, as if the amounts they were betting wouldn't have gotten them laughed away from any serious table in Vegas. Noah liked Rafe. He had from the beginning. There was something steady and purposeful about the other man, for all his air of lazy elegance and weary sophistication. At first glance, a person could make the mistake of writing him off as too much of a pretty boy to worry about.

Noah wasn't that stupid.

He was, however, playing a very edgy hand. In more ways than one.

He threw in his chips and met the raise. "Let's see what you've got, Mr. Kitty."

"Three of a kind." Rafe arched an elegant brow. "You?"

Grunting good-naturedly, Noah tossed his cards onto the table. "Boot marks on my ass, apparently."

"That should teach you." Rafe grinned and leaned forward to rake in his chips.

Graham sighed and squeezed his hand into a fist, cracking open a handful of peanuts. "I don't know why we even bother playing with this bastard," he grumbled, and crunched. "His luck is better than Quinn's."

Noah had never met Sullivan Quinn but had heard of him. The Irish werewolf had come to New York at the beginning of the movement toward the Unveiling and ended up marrying Cassidy Poe, the granddaughter of one of the most influential members of the Council of Others. He and his wife split their time between Manhattan and Dublin these days. So far, their time in New York hadn't overlapped Noah's.

"Don't let the Irishman hear you say that," Tobias Walker snickered over his beer bottle. "He's a touchy son of a bitch."