

OF WOLF
AND MAN

A *Triumvirate* Novel by
CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

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Of Wolf and Man

ISBN Number: Hardcover 978-0-9774535-9-7

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This book was printed in the United States of America.

Rising Star Visionary Press hardcover edition: November, 2008

**A Rising Star Visionary Press book
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Rising Star Visionary Press
Copies Department
P O Box 9226
Fountain Valley, CA 92728-9226**

The following story takes place approximately eighteen months after the events depicted in the short-story, “Connexion,” and approximately two years after the events depicted in the novel, *Pandora’s Game*.

The hunter fled through the forest, and the wolves followed.

Scott Gerrard wasn't sure which was louder: The heavy clumping of his booted feet through the underbrush, the thudding of his heart (which felt like it would explode at any moment), or the gleeful yet malevolent *barking* which trailed him.

Stealth was not an issue. Scott did not bother to “creep” his way through the foliage. He had no delusions. The wolves knew *exactly* where he was. They were toying with him, playing games with him like they were *more* than animals ...

Watch it, Scott, don't go down that road — if you go down that road you'll crack and then you're a dead man, you hear me?

... and his only hope was to reach the campsite ahead of them. *Let* them play their games, if that's what it took to get him there first.

His favorite hunting rifle lay in the dirt, hundreds of yards behind him. It would have done him no good even if it were in his hands right now, as *they* had torn it to pieces — ripped the wooden stock to shreds and even bent the metal barrel, if he had seen correctly — just as they had the other members of his hunting party.

Brandon. Monty. Patrick. Rick.

Dead, all dead. Not even faithful ol' Tanner — that poor, wretched Retriever of Monty's, who was way too old to be out here with them, anyway — had been spared.

Only Scott was left. And it was *his* fault they were out here to begin with ...

The five men, and Tanner, had been hunting together for years, usually in Colorado or Montana. But it wasn't as *fun* as it used to be. It seemed like every season, the fucking Liberals got new laws

put on the books — you can't do this, you can't do that; you can't shoot this, you can't shoot that; oh, you can shoot *this*, but only while you're standing on one foot under a cloudy sky with a corncob up your ... whatever.

Then Scott got a big idea: They take a trip up to Alaska, where everything is nice and spread out. Sure, they've got National Preserves out the whazoo, all protected under Federal and local law, but any bleeding-heart Liberal would whine to you about how bad the budget-cuts had gotten, how understaffed these areas were, especially as you pushed north into the Arctic regions.

Understaffed meant fewer park rangers.

Fewer rangers meant bigger holes in security.

Bigger holes ... *bigger game*, licensed or not, protected or not.

It would make for an expensive trip, of course, but even that cheapskate Monty had caught on to the possibilities by then. Hell, Brandon and Rick started talking about bagging a Kodiak, but Scott wasn't thinking quite *that* big. After all, if they bagged a bear, and if that animal *happened* to be on the protected list this year — who could keep track anymore? — how the hell would they get the damn thing home without getting caught? And what was the point of shooting something if you weren't going to bring home a trophy to show for it?

Nah, what Scott wanted was a *wolf*. An Arctic Wolf, the biggest wolves there were. Now *that* would make one helluva trophy ... and the skin would tuck nicely into a suitcase for the return trip.

So, they spent the next four months planning the trip. They arranged to arrive in the summer, because none of them wanted to freeze their asses off. Brandon and Patrick okayed it with their wives, and Rick got someone to watch his kids for the two weeks he would be gone. And Monty, whose first words on the subject had been to complain about the expense, insisted on bringing Tanner with him, which cost a pretty penny.

And Scott? Well, Scott had no one to ask, no one to worry about. He had never been married (though he'd come close once) and he had no children (that he knew about). All he had were his friends ...

... and those friends were all *dead* now ...

The barking grew more intense, and some of it even gave way to *howling*, straight out of a fucking horror movie. But the camp was close now, very close. Scott had another rifle there — thank God for procrastination, because he had never unloaded the bullets after Tuesday afternoon’s target practice. There were at least four shots left in it — not enough to take out the whole pack, but once the shooting started and *their* blood was shed, he was pretty damn sure that these fucking coyotes-on-steroids would change their motherfucking tunes ...

When they had gotten as far north as Unalakleet off the Norton Sound, Scott and Brandon — the undisputed “nicer” looking pair of the five friends — began making subtle inquiries into the best known locations of the Arctic Wolves. They had to be cautious, to tread carefully, because while some of the locals were very practical about wolf-hunting and even hunted on the side themselves, others could be just as rabid Nature Lovers as those down in the lower forty-eight.

On Brandon’s suggestion, they kept their guns tucked away while he and Scott carried around nice-looking cameras ... *implying* that they were here for the photography, without having to actually *lie* about it — Scott had kept the receipt and would be returning his overpriced Nikon as soon as they got home. Slowly but surely, talking to a white man here and an Eskimo there, they got the information they needed.

They made their way further north. It would have gone a lot faster without ol’ Tanner along for the ride, but they knew the old boy wouldn’t be around too much longer, and Monty would take it very hard when that day came. So they kept their peace and played with the white-muzzled Retriever instead of complaining about him.

They were making their way from Coldfoot to Deadhorse when they managed to get “lost,” which would be the story if they got caught. With Brooks Range to the west and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the east, they had a lot of ground to cover, but so did the park rangers.

Bigger holes, bigger game ...

Scott's boot snagged on something, and he almost went down, but at the last moment he managed to catch his balance and keep going. He could hear some of the barking and howling coming from in front of him now (*I knew they were playing games with me, I knew it!*), but that didn't matter. Those noises were coming from further ahead of him than the distance remaining to the camp, to his tent, to his other gun. The sons-of-bitches had outsmarted themselves this time. They should have killed him when they had the chance, when they killed his friends and Tanner ...

The hunting grounds up here had thrown them all for a loop. For one thing, they weren't used to the tundras, and had to look harder than expected for the woods to which they were accustomed — they needed cover from the Feds as much as from the game. Their rented SUV had four-wheel drive, but that was still nearly insufficient once they left the main roads.

Another thing that messed them up was the weird daylight up here. As the season crept closer to the height of summer, the white nights were on the way. They were used to the usual pattern — you get up early, you hunt all day, you return to camp in the evening, you get drunk with nightfall, and then you sleep until the next morning. But up here, at this time of year ... well, it never really got *dark* dark. Oh, it wasn't like twenty-four/seven daytime or anything like that, but instead of the sun going all the way down like it should, it just sort of tucked itself right below the horizon, leaving the world stuck in a kinda-sorta “dusk” for a few hours, then started back up into the sky again.

This shouldn't have been that big of a deal, but it messed with their internal clocks. They had trouble sleeping the first few nights, but eventually they adjusted.

Over halfway through the entirety of their trip, they set out for hunting for the first time. Monty and Rick were a little grumpy over the wasted days, but the land was beautiful, and when they did find themselves at the sudden edge of the woods and looking out over the tundras, Brandon started making use of his camera “prop” after all.

They didn't see any game all day — not the kind of game they were *hoping* for, anyway — but that turned out all right. Patrick

shot a rabbit, Tanner chased a squirrel up a tree and then spent ten minutes giving it a what-for while the men laughed, and Brandon took a lot of pictures. As the day began to wind down, more according to their watches than from judging this weak-ass “nightfall,” they made their way back toward camp, and Scott felt satisfied even without having so much as seen an Arctic Wolf.

That was when Monty stepped into the trap ...

Scott smashed through some underbrush, and *there* — there was the camp! But behind him, some of the wolves were now close enough that he thought he could hear their padded feet kicking up dirt, their furry bodies knocking aside underbrush.

Almost there, almost there, almost there ...

Scott had been leading out front, debating with Brandon about the merits of keeping his expensive digital camera after all, when they heard Monty scream. It wasn't a yell, it was a *scream*, and that sound coming out of a manly-man's mouth was never a good thing.

Hustling back a few dozen yards, they found Patrick panicking and Rick staring, Monty holding his right shin and crying, and Tanner whimpering.

Oh my God, Scott thought, *his foot is gone!*

But that impression only lasted for one tense moment. His foot wasn't gone, it was just down a shallow hole, out of sight. So what the fuck was the chaos all about?

“Monty, what the hell?!” Scott yelled over the bedlam as he stomped forward. “Did you twist your ... ank ... le ...?” He just stared for a moment, trying to *unsee* what his eyes were telling him.

Monty had stepped into a hole, that much was correct. But this wasn't like a gopher hole or any some such. It looked like the hole a dog would make when burying a bone. But then, to Monty's great misfortune, some branches had fallen over the top of the hole, hiding what would otherwise have been difficult to miss, even in the fading twilight that would last for the next several hours.

But all of that was neither here nor there. That wasn't the real problem.

The hole itself *could* have been dug by an animal, and those loose, thin branches *could* have ended up covering it by chance ... but how did any of that explain the two little *spears* that were

poking up through the top of Monty's foot?

"Someone *help me!*" Monty cried as he squeezed his shin tighter.

"What the fuck ...?" Brandon whispered as he knelt for a closer look.

The spears were made of wood. Under most circumstances, Monty's hiking boot would have just crushed them, splitting them into pieces. But these two little bastards had been positioned with their points — their deliberately-crafted, unnaturally sharp points — straight up. As Monty's foot had come down and broken the loose branches, his full two-hundred-thirty pounds had come down right on top of the spears. They must have been well anchored not to have turned to the side when they met the resistance of his boot sole. Judging from their placement, one of them might — *might* — have only cut the sides of his toes as it stabbed between them. But the other one had emerged closer to the tops of his laces, and dead center; pretty much the thickest part of the foot.

Scott looked up, around, side-to-side. There were no trees close enough to this very spot for those loose branches to have just fallen so *perfectly* to cover the hole.

Someone had done this deliberately. But why? What kind of animal trap was this? Most game was too light for this to be effective, their paws or hooves too small for such a perfect fit.

This was a *man* trap. What kind of sick fuck would do this?!

Brandon touched the bloody tip of one of the spears. Monty screamed.

"What do we do?" Patrick huffed. "What do we do, Brandon? Scott?"

"We, uh," Brandon began, then spat on the ground to one side, as though he had a bad taste in his mouth, "we need to get his foot out of there. If we break off the two points, we'll have less—"

"No, no, no!" Monty cried. "Not two! *Three*, damn it, *three!*" He fell back, crying again but trying not to.

Three? Oh, Jesus, Scott realized, *that means there's another one we can't see, one that's gone into his fucking heel.*

"What do we do?!" Patrick started again.

"Patrick, calm down!" Scott snapped. "Monty's the only one

here with an excuse to lose it right now, so *calm down!*”

Patrick nodded. Rick, who had been silent when the cavalry arrived, remained so. Tanner continued to whimper and pace, distressed by his master’s pain but no more certain of what to do about it than his human companions.

“Okay, here’s what we do,” Brandon said with authority, but Scott had known him too long — he was making this up as he went along. “Patrick, I want you to haul your ass back to camp before it gets too dark to see—”

“Yeah, right,” Rick muttered, staring up at the eerie glow in the sky. The full moon was visible, but only a few stars were bright enough to penetrate the overall radiance of the barely-hidden sun.

Brandon ignored the interruption, “Bring the first-aid kit *and* the tool kit. Can you carry both of those, or do you need—?”

Tanner suddenly barked, loud, and since Brandon was kneeling, it was painfully close to his ear.

“Jesus, Tanner!” Brandon grouched, placing a hand against the side of his head as the old dog barked twice more.

Even through his haze of pain, Monty reached for his dog. “What is it, Tanner? What’s wrong, boy?”

Tanner looked left and right, growling, his nostrils pulsing. He barked again.

“Shut up, Tanner,” Rick muttered without feeling.

“Patrick,” Brandon tried once again, “I need you—”

“No,” Monty interrupted this time. He was pushing himself up onto his elbows, despite the pain it was obviously causing him. “Somethin’s wrong.” He reached for Tanner again.

“Monty,” Scott admonished, “you should just—”

“*No*, you idiots!” Monty barked in his own way, looking around and reaching for his dropped gun. “Don’t you dumbshits know anything? Pay attention to the dog! You *always* pay attention to the dog—!”

Scott was looking right at Monty, looking right at him, when the wolf appeared out of nowhere and sank its teeth deep into Monty’s throat.

“*Oh, shit!*” Patrick cried, staggering away from the carnage. Brandon jumped to his feet with an inarticulate yelp. Rick just kept

staring, his eyes wide and showing too much white.

Scott found himself strangely detached from what he was seeing. He felt no horror, or even dismay — hell, he'd been more upset upon seeing Monty's ruined and bloody foot. One of his oldest friends was dying before his eyes ... and somehow he felt *nothing*. All he could do was stare at the wolf.

It was huge. Of course, that's why he had wanted to come hunting up here in the first place — to bag a large wolf — but somehow he hadn't been prepared for just how damn *big* it really would be. He had always pictured a wolf in his mind as just being a burly dog, figured it would look like an Alaskan Husky.

But that was not the case, not at all. It had similar markings to a Husky, and it certainly wasn't as big as the black bear he and Brandon had taken a shot at a few years ago. It was the way it had emerged from the shadows like a grey-and-white bolt of lightning, the ruthlessness of its strike, the cold, inhuman gleam in its eyes.

Its eyes ...

Dear God, is it looking at me ...?

Monty spasmed and twitched as the wolf jerked its head from side to side, tearing his flesh like fingers through wet sand. Patrick was screaming and Brandon was fucking with his rifle and Rick appeared to have pissed himself.

In the end, only one member of their party took decisive action.

Tanner jumped on the wolf. He could not reach its throat, so his poor, old jaws with their two or three missing teeth tore into the wolf's left ear.

The wolf, which had remained uncannily silent during its attack, released a deep-throated *yip!* that was half pain, half surprise. It pawed and scratched at Tanner, but it did not release Monty's throat.

Scott heard Brandon mutter, "Son of a bitch," before he shifted his grip on his rifle — clearly, he was experiencing some kind of jam — and moved forward to smash the stock into the wolf's head. "Hold him, Tanner!" he yelled as he raised the rifle high. "Hold that fucker still!"

The wolf finally let go of Monty as Tanner came close to tearing its ear off. One look told Scott that Monty was beyond help

at this point — steam rose from his gushing, mangled esophagus, but it was just the heat of the blood hitting the cool air ... Monty had breathed his last.

Brandon brought the rifle down, intent upon cracking the wolf's skull.

And, just as swift and silent as its predecessor, a second, darker wolf leaped into view and bit Brandon right on the ass.

That's when Scott laughed. For however long he might or might not live, Scott knew that he would always remain baffled and feel guilty about his reaction to what had happened — *he laughed*. He laughed as though he were watching some screwball comedy instead of death and dismemberment. Some part of him knew that it wasn't *really* funny, that laughing was a disturbing and potentially dangerous reaction to have to such an event ... but he laughed anyway.

Brandon screamed and dropped his gun. The second wolf, every bit as big and menacing as the first, pulled and shook its head. Brandon's pants slid down his legs, and a significant chunk of his ass muscle came with them. And the glob didn't just break loose — no, it peeled downward, tearing a trench of blood and flesh down onto the back of Brandon's thigh.

A shot was fired. Scott thought it had come from Patrick, because Rick was *still* just standing there ...

What, and you're doing any better than he is?

... and now he appeared to have shit his pants, too. Either way, it didn't matter, because the bullet didn't hit either of the wolves.

The first wolf had turned on Tanner. Its ear was a dangling mess on the side of its head, but that was the extent of Tanner's victory. The wolf had the smaller, older animal by the hind quarters now. Tanner was crying out in pain, but unlike Brandon, he was still *trying* to fight. He might have gotten another bite or two in there if a third wolf hadn't joined the fray at that moment. Tanner was dead in seconds.

Patrick fired again, and now Scott realized that he had not been shooting at either of the first two wolves to begin with — he was aiming for the myriad of wolves that now emerged from the gloom.

It's not that dark, Scott marveled, so how did so many of them

get this close without any of us seeing them? And why are they so damn quiet?!

Indeed, except for the first wolf's reaction to Tanner's assault on its ear, the pack had not made a single sound. There were eight — no, *nine* — of them now, and not a peep. Patrick fired once more before they dragged him down, and another wolf was approaching Rick with caution, almost as though his *lack* of action were making the animal suspicious.

Finally, *finally*, Scott began to move. He raised his rifle, taking measured aim at the wolf creeping its way toward Rick. Monty was a goner. So were Tanner and Brandon, and probably Patrick. But the least his pathetic, laughing ass could do was save himself and Rick, so that they could come back up here with every—

A tenth wolf (or was it the eleventh?), its fur white as snow, leaped in from the side and clamped its teeth down on the barrel of Scott's rifle. He was thrown off balance, and his finger twisted out of the trigger guard before he could fire the weapon. There was a brief tug-of-war, and then the wolf had his gun. It jerked its head, much like the first had done while biting into Monty's throat, and smashed the rifle onto the ground with each downstroke. The weapon broke apart, the metal barrel ...

no no that's not right no it can't be that strong

... crushed between the animal's jaws. The wolf gave one final toss of its head, and the rifle clattered to the ground, wrecked and worthless.

Scott stepped back and waited for the inevitable. His finger was hurting from where the wolf had yanked it from the trigger guard, but he knew that soon this would be the least of his worries. He, too, would be dragged to the ground, torn ... limb ... from ...

The white wolf did not attack, did not pounce, did not strike. It just stood there, licking its chops as though to rid itself of the taste of the gunmetal. Its amber, merciless eyes shined in the perpetual twilight, and its ears were pressed forward, its nose twitching as it studied Scott with multiple senses.

But it did not attack.

Other wolves made their way towards him. Only Patrick still struggled against his two attackers, but his efforts were ineffectual

— little more than death throes. Soon, more than a dozen wolves stood facing Scott.

And *still* they were silent. One or two of them were snarling at him, but they made not a sound. Not a fucking sound.

“What—?” Scott began, before his dry throat croaked out on him. He swallowed hard, and this time managed to ask, “What are you waiting for?”

He expected no answer, of course. And yet ... he did. Sort of. After all, *none* of this was normal. The trap, the silent attack, this large pack of wolves managing to slink within striking distance with only Tanner being the wiser for it.

“So answer me,” Scott said aloud at the conclusion of his thoughts. “What are you waiting for? Huh? Monty didn’t have to give you an invitation, so what do you expect from *me*?”

The white wolf in the lead raised its head slightly ... and *smiled* at him.

No. No, no, no. That couldn’t be it. Monty always insisted that Tanner could smile, but Tanner was a *dog*, damn it — dogs were domesticated and had spent enough time around Man to have *maybe* learned the meaning behind a smile. But a wolf? No fucking way.

And yet ...

One wolf off to the left, with blood around its mouth like terrible war paint, pawed at the ground and took a tentative step forward.

Scott raised his hands. At this point, he almost *wanted* them to attack — that, at least, was something to be expected from wild animals.

The white wolf glanced at the advancer, then back at Scott. Then he barked. Barked *loud*. The pitch was lower and the volume was much higher than Tanner’s, but otherwise, it was just a bark.

Nevertheless, Scott flinched.

This seemed to please the wolf ...

Damn it, that doesn’t make any sense!

... who panted for a second, then barked again, even louder still.

Then the wolf who had advanced a step barked. It wasn’t as

deep, but was every bit as loud.

Scott took a single step backward.

This excited the wolves as his vocal challenges had not. They still did not attack, but now more of them began to bark, and more, until finally the entire pack was yipping and yapping and barking in an enormous cacophony of savage joy.

Scott covered his ears, taking another step back, away from them.

The white wolf slapped at the ground with its forepaw, like a bull preparing to make a charge. But that wasn't it. It was telling Scott something else — he knew it, could feel it.

It was telling him to *run*.

Scott took another step back. The wolf pounded the ground again, barking even louder.

Two more retreating steps from Scott. The rest of the wolves jumped up and down in place, so damned excited, many of them now licking their bloody chops.

If I turn my back on them, if I run, they'll take me down in a matter of seconds.

And what other options do you have, Scotty my boy?

The white wolf threw its head back, high into the air ... and howled.

And Scott ran ...

Now, he was seconds away from camp. Seconds away from his still-loaded backup rifle. His breath was burning in his throat and his heart was threatening to burst, but he didn't care — all he could think about was getting to that rifle before the wolves reached him.

He was even forming a plan, of sorts: He would dive into his tent, but he would not zip the entrance shut behind him — he had no delusions about how long it would take them to tear through the polyester walls to get to him. He would seize his rifle, aim it at the opening ... and wait. They had been having fun at his expense, but he wasn't going to play their game anymore. No matter how they barked, howled, or clawed at the walls, he was going to just sit tight and wait. Sooner or later, they would come in after him. Without taking the time to bite their way through other places, only one, *maybe* two, could get through the entrance at a time. They would

bottleneck, and there would be no way he could miss.

Once one or two were dead, the others would most likely back off, giving him a few seconds to add additional ammunition. *Then* he would zipper the front flap, and they could tear at the tent all they wanted. For once, this never-night would work to his advantage — between the full moon and the lasting twilight, he would be able to aim at their silhouettes. And if he misses once or twice? So what — he would be sitting on all the bullets he and Brandon had brought with them.

Past the beer cooler, past Monty's bedroll, past the crushed and crumpled remains of last night's beer cans.

Behind him, a wolf bumped the beer cooler aside — they were *that* close!

Almost there, almost there, almost there ...

Scott threw himself toward his tent, brushing the front flaps aside with his outstretched arms—

The flashpoint of the rifle blinded him, and the noise didn't do his ears any good, either. Neither of those things really bothered him, though. What did bother him, what *demand*ed his undivided attention, was the bullet that pierced his right kneecap, ricocheted up through his thigh muscle, and exited up near his hip.

He tried to scream, but for some reason, it wouldn't come out. All he managed to do was wheeze heavily, spit leaking from one side of his gaping mouth, as he clutched at his devastated leg, hopped on his good left leg for about two seconds, then collapsed in a heap before the tent that was to have been his saving shelter.

The two wolves that had been right on his heels skidded to a halt. They did not tear into him, but tumbled to one side, rolled over the ground and each other, and then came to rest that way — huddling over one another, panting from their run, watching Scott but nothing more.

Scott tried to scream again, but all he got was another wheeze, this one even messier with drool than the first. He expected the horrible burning in his knee to get worse, but instead it actually got better as his entire right leg went numb. Some small part of him recognized that the bullet must have caused severe nerve damage, probably permanent ... but since he wasn't going to be around much

longer, that didn't really matter, did it?

But ... *what just happened?*

The flaps of his tent parted, successfully this time. From the darkness within emerged a woman. A naked woman, who was holding the very rifle that had been his goal.

"What ... the fuck ...?" Scott mouthed, though as with his screams, very little sound actually came out.

Once outside the tent, the naked woman stood, holding the rifle loosely in one hand. Two of the wolves, including the white wolf that had destroyed Scott's other rifle and set him upon his final run, padded their way over to the woman. The white wolf stood on her right, a red-furred wolf stood on her left, and all three joined in staring down at Scott's bleeding form.

Fucking tree-hugger hippie, Scott thought, *fucking Liberal. That has to be it. No wonder the wolves were acting so strange — she trained 'em. They're her fucking pets.*

That was the only explanation that occurred to Scott, the only one that he would *allow* himself to consider. Nothing else made sense. Suppose, just suppose, that there were something *else* going on here. Something not so easily explained. Then, according to every horror movie Scott had ever seen, this woman before him should be *gorgeous*, right? She should be a gorgeous witch, or devil-woman, or whatever she was.

But this woman was not gorgeous, and she was exposed enough for Scott to tell. She was ... *earthy* may be the best word, if you went for that sort of thing. Scott, personally, preferred his fantasy woman more of the Kim Basinger-Michelle Pfeiffer mold. *This* woman was dark, very thick, muscular rather than lean, athletic. She also looked pretty damn tall, although it was difficult for him to tell for certain from his vantage point on the ground.

"What ...?" he finally managed to say with any volume. He was beginning to feel very strange, and with the blood gushing from his leg, he knew that could not be a good sign.

The woman smiled, or was it a sneer? It was hard to tell on her almost-masculine face. She stepped forward, and the wolves followed by half the distance. She squatted next to him, her legs splaying wide — under other circumstances, Scott might have

forgiven her average looks in appreciation for such a sexually-exposed pose. It did not seem to bother her in the least that he could see her private parts, that her full breasts were close enough for him to touch. The look in her eyes was part anger, part disgust ... but mostly, it was dismissive and apathetic.

“Hunter,” she stated in a deep-ish voice that matched her body and face perfectly. She did not seem to be asking a question, or even making a statement. It was as though she had simply classified him.

Scott said nothing, but his eyes flickered toward the rifle in her hand.

The woman saw the look, and the anger and disgust swelled to take a larger role on the stage of her face. She stood, stepped one muscular leg over his chest, squatted once more ...

... and pissed on him.

Scott started to react as one would expect, but she whipped the rifle around so that the barrel stopped bare inches from his nose. Gritting his teeth, he remained still and silent as she urinated on him. What else could he do?

The wolves drew closer, their snouts sampling the aroma of her handiwork.

Scott turned away, thinking that surely *now* it would end.

The woman finished, but remained squatting over him.

Slowly, he looked back, and gasped.

She stared at him with the amber eyes of a wolf.

“Hunter,” she said again, more dismissive than ever, “no more.”

And she shot him in the face.

ONE

Lupe sighed, then bowed her back in an attempt to relieve her aching and stiffened muscles. Her effort was hardly successful.

It had been a long day, and a glance at her watch revealed that it was going to be longer still. She reminded herself that she had volunteered for this duty, to supplement her regular paycheck, and she tried not to think about how small a supplement it was.

But she had not become a nurse for the money — if that had been her goal, she would have taken the necessary courses to become a full M.D. She wanted to work *with people*, something that her disappointed doctor of a father had never failed to ridicule. Her mother gave her support, but it was very passive ...

Lupe shook her head. What was the point of mulling *that* over again? She must be more tired than she thought.

“Next,” she called out, preparing her checklist for the next person in line, a person who was a *true* volunteer, and whom she therefore admired sight unseen.

“Afternoon, lass. I hope ye’ve been havin’ a good day so far?”

Lupe looked up ... and her day got a whole lot better.

The man was *gorgeous*. Dark brown eyes, dark full hair, killer smile ... he looked like a guy-next-door version of the actor Hugh Jackman. And that Irish accent was to *die* for! His thick sideburns were a bit dated, but Lupe could forgive that in a second if it allowed her to get her hands on the thick muscles of his arms and chest.

Very nice, Lupe. Reeereal professional.

Oh, shut it! When was the last time I had a date?

Good point.

Lupe closed her dropped jaw and reached for his paperwork. “I guess it’s been fine so far,” she fudged.

He handed the completed form to her and sat down. “Glad to hear it.”

“So, Mister ...?” Her eyes seemed to take a long time to find the appropriate box — after all, it was only *right at the top!*

“ ‘Mabrey’ is the last name. But please, call me *Sean*.”

“All right ... Sean. I’m Lupe. Thank you so much for volunteering today.”

“It’s my pleasure, Lupe,” he said around that wonderful smile.

She looked over his form, and again found herself momentarily too stupid to read it properly. “Have you donated blood to the Red Cross before?” she asked, even though she knew the answer was on there *somewhere*.

Damn, girl, keep it together, would you? He’s not that good looking!

Yes, he is.

“I’ve donated before, but not to the Red Cross. I usually donate plasma to the Bachman Foundation.”

Lupe thought for a moment, and was relieved that at least *that* part of her brain was still functioning. “ ‘Bachman Foundation.’ I’ve heard of them. They’re new, aren’t they?”

Sean smiled. “New, and old. It’s a long story.”

“You do understand that the Red Cross does *not* pay its blood donors—?”

“Oh, yes. But when I heard ye were goin’ to be here at the Convention Center,” he gestured around at the large meeting room in an off-handed manner, “I thought I might drop by, anyway. It’s been a while since I gave blood, and I don’t do it *just* for the money, ye see?”

“Oh, of course,” she gushed.

“Besides, gettin’ to spend time with an attractive young lady like *yerself* has already been payment enough.” He smiled again, and she melted that much more.

“I, uh, I’ll need to test a sample of your blood. We need to check your blood-iron levels, and so on. I’m sure they do the same

thing at the Bachman Foundation?”

“Aye.” He laid his arm on the small table between them, his hand palm-up.

She pulled on some latex gloves and took his hand in her own ... his large, masculine hand ...

What *was* the Red Cross’ policy on using a donor’s phone number for personal reasons?

She was just about to pose that very question to him — as a sort of half-joking ice-breaker, so to speak — when something changed. His smile faded, to be replaced by a very forlorn expression. It was surreal. Just seconds ago, he had been ... well, she had hoped that he had been flirting with her. Had she done something wrong?

“Sean ...?”

“Ye seem very nice, Lupe,” he said through a heavy sigh. He hesitated, then added, “I’m sorry.”

“You’re ‘sorry?’ I don’t understa—”

Whooooop! “Your attention, please!”

Lupe jumped, the alarm and loud speakers catching her completely off guard. Sean just sat there, looking sad.

“There is an emergency in the building. Please evacuate immediately.” Whooooop! “Your attention, please ...”

The prerecorded voice continued its loop. All around the convention room, donors stirred as nurses moved to free them from their needles and tubing. The donors who had yet to reach that stage of the process meandered toward the doors; the woozy ones who had passed through it already helped one another. It wasn’t until the actual smell of smoke wafted into the room that people started moving at a more-than-leisurely pace.

Shaking herself, Lupe pulled off the gloves. “Well, Sean, looks like we’ll have to continue this at another time.”

Sean smiled, but while it was still charming, it lacked its previous glow. He said nothing.

She looked around again and saw that several of the donors appeared shaky enough that they might faint. They needed help, but the smoke in the air — which she could now *see* — was causing more people to jump ship and clear out.

“Sean,” she asked, now all business, “can you please help me get some of these people out of here? I hate to ask, but you look like a pretty strong guy and—”

“No problem, lass,” he said, “I’ll be right behind you.”

Taking him at his word, Lupe moved. In seconds, she was helping two people, one on each side, as they steadied themselves. Thank God no one had passed out yet ...

Sure enough, just the thought jinxed it. A pale, skinny man stumbled against one of the reclined chairs and fell. Lupe recalled that his blood-iron had been borderline, almost to the point of turning him away.

But damn it, she couldn’t just abandon the people she was already helping!

“Sean?” she called, turning one way, then another. “Sean?!”

She did not see the Irishman at first. She was about to give up looking when she finally spotted him, halfway to the convention room door. He appeared to be carrying something, but it was too small to be an adult, and children were prohibited from donating blood. He hadn’t been carrying anything when he approached her table, so what ...?

Just before he reached the door, he angled his body to slip past a couple of evacuees, and Lupe saw that he was carrying a large red and white cooler.

*The blood supply! He’s stealing today’s blood donations!
What in the world—?!*

“Sean, stop!” she yelled at the top of her lungs, which startled the hell out of the people leaning against her.

He paused in the large doorway, turning back toward her for just a second — he still had that dejected expression on his face. He mouthed the words *I’m sorry* once more, and then he was gone.

Lupe wanted to run after him, to tackle him to the ground and kick him until he explained just what the *hell* this was all about ...!

Except that she couldn’t. People were depending on her.

But you could bet your ass she’d be stopping by the Bachman Foundation to ask a few questions. Oh, yes — count on it!

Sean Mallory loaded the stolen Red Cross cooler into the trunk of his car. The plan had been executed with perfection, the smoke bomb igniting right on time. It could not have gone smoother.

And Sean hated every moment of it.

He didn't fear getting caught at this point. He had given a false last name, a false address, and the staff at the local Bachman Foundation had already been advised about this "Sean Mabrey" fellow who had been causing some trouble in the area — when the Red Cross inevitably made inquiries there, they would find sympathetic concern, but no helpful information.

What Sean hated was the very *idea* of it — stealing donated blood from a charitable organization turned his stomach. But what else were they supposed to do? The Bachman Foundation was still getting on its feet in this world ... and Alistaire could only go so long without blood.

Such were the complications of working with a vampire who never took victims.

Sean drove out of the parking garage and headed for his next errand of "grocery" shopping, this time a far more conventional destination: The local supermarket, one complete with an old-fashioned butcher.

Two years had passed since he and Alistaire — and later, Trey — had emerged into this world, a world very similar to but far more *mundane* than their home. They had good reason to believe that they were far from the only supernatural beings to "cross over," and so they had to tread boldly into this undiscovered country, determined to continue their mission against their own kind as they worked their way west.

Things, however, had not been that simple.

Alistaire had to start from scratch. His business relations in the old world had been cultivated for centuries, and had *evolved* into their modern-day equivalents. Kathy Schaumburg, the sweet young girl who was one of only a handful of people who knew what they really were and where they came from, had given them a very small amount of money when they parted ways, and Alistaire had helped himself to a little "nest egg" that Neil Carpenter's family had kept well hidden at their trailer home by a nearby lake.

Still, it was barely enough to keep them sheltered at first. They were constantly moving, not only for lack of funds, but also to make sure that their host bodies were not identified — both Neil Carpenter and Mark Hudson were wanted for questioning in relation to the havoc that Bishop, another vampire who crossed over, had wreaked.

Things got a little easier once they located Trey. Sean had come across a newspaper article about a Doctor Melissa Kramer, a hypno-therapist who had been using her craft to help heal the sick, or at least bring relief to the terminally ill. Alistaire had one of those “feelings” of his, and so they shadowed Doctor Kramer for a month or so. Sure enough, as always, Alistaire’s instincts were spot-on, and the two of them “rescued” Trey when he emerged into the body of Travis Bekele.

Having Trey around to share guard duty while Alistaire slept during the day allowed Sean to get even more odd-jobs, and reduced their need for unfortunate-but-necessary petty theft.

It was also a tremendous help that every time Sean transformed into his wolf or Alistaire into mist, after they reverted to their humanoid form ... they found themselves looking just the slightest bit *different*, less like their hosts, more like their old selves. It was a very small, subtle change, one that neither of them noticed until Trey pointed it out a few months after rejoining them.

They did not know if they would ever change completely into their old selves. But after all, as Alistaire believed was no mere coincidence, he and Sean had already borne some physical resemblance to Neil and Mark. The important thing was, they now both looked different enough that they could relax a bit from the fear of Carpenter or Hudson being recognized by happenstance.

So ... they had help from Trey, additional funds through Sean’s occasional work and Alistaire’s increasing grasp of this world’s economics, and a growing cloak of anonymity.

After many months of floundering, they began to find their way.

But Sean always got sullen when, even after two years, he was *still* forced to resort to the occasional crime. He was grateful that these instances were getting fewer and further between, but it made

him feel *dirty*.

Pulling into the supermarket parking lot, Sean forced his mind back to completing his errands. At least, until he got home.

He had decided that he and Alistaire needed to talk.

* * *

Sean drove the car into the driveway of their modest Southern California house and popped the trunk. Moments later, he balanced the grocery bags in one arm and the stolen cooler in the other — a heavy load, but one that any werewolf could handle. He could *not*, however, get to his house keys with such an encumbrance, so he was forced to knock on the front door with his knee.

Although the door did not open right away, he heard movement from within. That would be Trey, tearing himself away from cartoons or, even more likely, his newest love these days: The Internet.

While he waited, Sean glanced toward the setting sun; by his educated guess, Alistaire would be up and about within the next thirty minutes or so. During the summer, his partner was forced to “sleep late,” to match the greater length of daylight hours. Sean was grateful that *that* sort of limitation was not a part of his own curse.

A shuffling at the door pulled his attention forward again. The locks were unbolted, slowly — one of *Trey’s* curses was impaired manual dexterity. Finally, the door opened ... but only a crack. One milky eye appeared. Far from the first time, Sean wondered just how it was that Trey’s vision was unaffected by what *looked* like the world’s worst cataracts.

Trey’s eye disappeared, only to be replaced by his lips. “You raaaaang ...?” he drawled.

Sean groaned. “Trey Matthews, as long as I live, I shall *always* regret introducing ye to *The Addams Family*.”

The zombie giggled in delight, just as Sean had known he would, and opened the door.

It had become a ritual for them. In spite of his semi-regular flashes of adult-level intelligence, Trey was, as a whole, very

childlike, and that included a childlike fondness of *repetition*.

Sean didn't mind. In some ways, Trey was turning into the younger brother that Sean never had ...

But that made Sean think of his sister, Theresa — he cut his thoughts off there.

With Trey taking his share, the two carried their bizarre “groceries” to the kitchen: Human blood for Alistaire, beer for Sean, extra-strength deodorant for Trey, and pounds and pounds of raw meat for both Trey and Sean. Sean would be cooking his own portion a bit — unless he was in wolf-form, he preferred his meat served at least *rare* — whereas Trey could only tolerate it if it were as raw as it could come.

Of the members of their Triumvirate, Trey handled his curse (in his case, the craving of living, human flesh) with the greatest mastery. While Sean was in almost complete control most of the month, during the nights of the full moon he lost that control entirely. Likewise, while Alistaire's steel will had prevented him from ever “taking a victim” in the traditional sense, he was still very much dependent upon human blood — he could sustain himself on animal blood for short periods of time, but the longer he pushed it, the more out-of-control his inherent thirst became.

But Trey — the lucky bastard — had never displayed any real danger of attacking a human for cannibalism. Maybe it was the same inner strength that had allowed him to break free from his voodoo master. Maybe it was the advantage of having experienced guides in Alistaire and Sean to “leapfrog” him into greater self-control.

Whatever it was, Trey had thus far proven content to gorge himself on raw beef. It *had* to be beef — early experiments had eliminated pork, poultry, or fish as a substitute — and it had to be bloody raw, but otherwise ... well, Trey left Sean feeling *envious* from time to time.

“Did the Bachman Foundation send any blood today?” Sean asked.

“No,” Trey answered, putting their meat in the refrigerator (not the freezer; they couldn't let the blood dry up). “Sent a ... e-mail. Should come ... Mon-day.”

“I hope it gets here on time for a change.” He gestured toward the Red Cross cooler. “I hope it’s a while before I have to do *that* shite again.”

Trey jerked as though Sean had fired off a shotgun. “Ali-staire ... doesn’t like it ... when you *swear*, Sean.”

Sean sighed. “I know. I’m sorry, Trey. I shouldn’t have said— said a bad word.”

Trey nodded his agreement and returned to putting away the groceries.

Sean shook his head. He didn’t exactly consider himself a ruffian, but living with Alistaire’s religion and Trey’s childlike temperament sometimes made him feel like the world’s worst “potty mouth,” as Trey would put it.

“But ye know,” he began again, “I can’t help but wonder just how many sick or injured people are suffering every time we steal blood like this.”

“Ali-staire ... has to eat, Sean.” Trey then stood still for a moment, a confused and concentrated look on his face. He turned to Sean and asked, “Or is it ... ‘drink’ ... for him?”

Sean chuckled. “That’s okay, Trey. I knew what ye meant. I think either ‘eat’ *or* ‘drink’ works for vampires.”

“Oh. Okay.” He closed the refrigerator.

“But it’s not just the moral dilemma, either,” Sean continued once more. “Sooner or later, I’m going to get *caught*. And what if that happens on a day of the full moon? What if I’m sitting in some jail cell when night falls?”

“That’s why ... Ali-staire ... makes you stay home ... on those days.”

“Aye. Ye’re right.” He glanced at his watch. Alistaire would be up soon, and then he could take this argument up with him.

Not that he expected to get much further with Alistaire, because Trey *was* right, and he knew it. He just hated doing things like he did today. Hated it so much.

Trey left the kitchen, so Sean followed him back to the living room.

It wasn’t a long journey. The house was small — the most they could afford for now, nothing like their townhouse in Pittsburgh.

There was a living room, dining room (which was more of glorified “breakfast nook”), small kitchen, full bathroom, and one bedroom. Since Sean was the only one in their group who slept in the traditional sense, the bedroom was his. Trey, who *never* slept, spent most nights browsing the Internet. And Alistaire, of course, retreated during the day to his coffin, which had been one of their biggest expenses in the beginning. The coffin rested in the crawlspace under the house, an entrance to which Sean had cut into the floor in the bedroom hallway shortly after their arrival here. That *same* coffin also served as Sean’s impromptu prison on the nights of the full moon, until they could again afford a house with a storage cellar. It was more physically uncomfortable, and claustrophobic, than Sean would prefer, but it beat the alternative of breaking loose and mauling some innocent victim.

Before they could settle, Sean’s enhanced hearing picked up the interior latches on the coffin being opened. He glanced at the clock, then at the windows — even with the blinds closed, he could still see the faintest hint of evening glow. Alistaire must have awakened and grown weary of being stuck in his coffin for the long summer hours. But with the dusk still in evidence, he would be groggy and sluggish for a while yet.

With a gesture, Sean led Trey into the hallway. He popped the surreptitious latches along the baseboard, and Trey opened the trap door.

“*Thank you,*” Alistaire said when the door opened. He tried to pull himself out of the coffin and into the house, but he couldn’t seem to get himself coordinated. “*Could one of you please assist me?*”

“Uh-huh,” Sean mused aloud, “just as I thought. You’re up too early.”

Alistaire glanced at him as Trey helped him up and to his feet, then offered a self-deprecating grin. “*It is not just that, though I admit the lingering presence of the sun is not helping matters.*”

“What is it, then?”

“*I consumed the final ration of our current blood supply this morning before retiring. It has proven ... insufficient.*” He looked to Sean, a subtle pleading in his eyes. “*I sincerely hope today’s*

operation was a success ...?”

Sean nodded. “It was. The cooler is in the kitchen.”

Some of the tension seeped from Alistaire’s shoulders. “*Thank G-God. And thank you, my friend.*” He smiled and hurried down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Trey looked at Sean, who in turn rested his hands on his hips in annoyance. “I know, I know. Don’t say a word ...”

Here he had been moaning and groaning, both to himself and to Trey, about how difficult it was to steal from the Red Cross and wrestle with his conscience ... forgetting just how much *Alistaire* willingly endured in order to keep these instances as far apart as possible, specifically *because* he knew how much it bothered Sean to commit these crimes.

Yes, Sean now felt like a real ass — he didn’t need Trey to point it out for him.

Honoring Sean’s wishes, Trey returned to the living room without comment. Alistaire was in the kitchen now; Sean could hear him sifting through the donor bags and, a moment later, caught the scent of human blood in the air — so different from the cattle blood in the butcher’s wares. He knew that Alistaire preferred a bit of privacy when he fed, so he stayed put.

Sean found himself feeling a bit lost now; he had been gearing up for a serious “No more” conversation with Alistaire, but he couldn’t bring that up now. But as much as he had been dreading having a row with his friend, he now felt almost *disappointed*. How daft!

“Sean ...?” called Trey. “Can you ... come here?”

Eager for a distraction from his own absurdity, Sean stepped into the living room. “Aye?”

Trey sat in front of their computer, hunched over his keyboard and staring at the monitor. He two-finger typed a few words before answering. Whatever he was looking at, it really had his interest. “Someone ... sent a link ... to my blog.”

“*What is a ‘blog’?*”

Sean glanced over his shoulder, too familiar with how impossibly quiet Alistaire could move to be startled. “An Internet diary. Don’t worry; Trey doesn’t give away anything about us.”

“*Ah*,” was Alistaire’s only remark. Although Alistaire had proven quite adaptive to the technological changes he had witnessed over the centuries, Sean knew that the Internet still boggled his mind a little. All Alistaire needed to know was that Trey’s amateur, online sleuthing had turned up the trail of a legitimate vampire more than once (amidst *hundreds* of dead-ends, of course) — beyond that, he trusted the details to his two, more modern-minded friends.

“What did ye want to show us, lad?”

“ ‘nother blog ... from Alas-ka ...”

“What about it?”

“Looks like ... there might be ... were-wolves up there.”

Sean stiffened. While vampires were a sadly common problem, they rarely encountered werewolves. Lycanthropes were able to blend in most of the month, and often went to painstaking lengths to avoid leaving living victims, even if it meant hunting them down *after* the full moon to finish the job. Vampires took similar precautions, but since the masters loved to have servants to lord over, their kind still “procreated” far too often. Trey once compared them to cockroaches, and Alistaire did not disagree.

“What does it say?”

Trey was clicking the mouse now. “There’s a ... doctor up there ... who thinks he has ... were-wolves.” Another Internet window popped up. Trey leaned forward and read some more.

Sean’s instinct was to push Trey aside and read for himself, but Alistaire’s calming hand on his shoulder held him back. “*Trey, would you mind terribly if Sean were to take your seat? This is, after all, his area of expertise.*”

Trey swivelled his chair around to look at them, confused — Sean and Alistaire usually let him handle everything online. But then that hidden spark of intelligence flared, and he understood. “Sure ...” The big man lumbered up out of the chair and let Sean take his place.

Sean’s attention came into sharp focus as he read, his entire body tense. Forgotten were the stolen blood and the lovely Lupe, the theft and feelings of guilt. This was business.

The doctor in question kept his name to himself, which was

common enough — after all, who in their right minds would go blathering about the supernatural in the twenty-first century? If anything, this lent credibility to the man’s account.

The doctor worked somewhere up in northern Alaska — some towns were mentioned, but Sean was not familiar with any of them. Over the past few months, there had been a stunning increase in the number of wolf attacks. Contrary to popular belief, wolves tended to be quite timid of humans — why would they bother tangling with such large prey when there were plenty of smaller mammals upon which they could feed? Wolves would normally have to be starving (or ill in some manner) to behave otherwise.

Therein lay the doctor’s bafflement. Wolf attacks had increased over one-thousand percent since the beginning of the year; even more shocking was that they were all *fatal*. The fact that the majority of the victims were poachers kept many of the locals from shedding too many tears, but the Alaskan officials were tearing their hair out. The very questionable decision had been made to *cover up* the situation for now, as summer was by far Alaska’s largest tourist season. Every family or group of families were being led to believe that their loved ones were the *only* ones recently killed, as though this were a freak situation, a thousand-to-one tragedy.

According to the doctor, it was a lot like the movie *Jaws* — the authorities refused to “close the beaches,” so to speak — only the dark secret involved wolves rather than a shark. And a lot more deaths.

Even with his anonymity, the man never actually said the word “werewolf” — that summation had come from Trey’s faceless online friend who sent him the link. In fact, the first four paragraphs were just a straightforward, off-the-record warning to any or all tourists who happened to read it. Nothing suspicious or questionable, just a Good Samaritan trying to do what he felt was best.

About midway through his blog entry, he started making hints between the lines. He observed how fascinating it was that the majority of the killings took place during the full moon. He commented on the wolves’ “uncanny intelligence” in evading traps

as the local authorities *tried* to hunt them down as surreptitiously as possible.

Finally, he marveled on the biggest mystery of all: How forensic evidence insisted that a number of the wolves had been fired upon, and most likely struck, by hunting rifles during many of these attacks ... and yet not a single dead or even *injured* wolf had been found. Canine blood with some “unusual qualities” had been identified over and over, and yet the trails always ran out without leading to any carcasses.

For the sign-off, which was probably what prompted Trey’s friend to send it his way, the man suggested that “if his old Russian grandmother were still alive,” she would tell him and everyone to start taking silver jewelry and melting it down into knives and bullets. There was no “LOL” or winking-face graphic included with this final statement.

“*Well?*” Alistaire finally prompted him after he had read the blog a second time. “*What do you think, Sean?*”

Instead of answering his German friend, Sean swivelled his chair around to face Trey.

“How do we contact this man?”