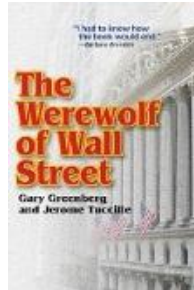


(Editorial Note: The following chapter excerpts are from a pre-publication version of the text and may contain typos and other minor changes that don't appear in the published version.)



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Chapter One

Alex Mallum had a problem: he needed to reach the LA airport before the German's bonecrushers figured out he stiffed their boss for one hundred and sixty grand, and now he regretted his decision to take the scenic route along the northern California coast. His blood-red Alfa Romeo snaked along the narrow twisting highway carved high into the jagged cliffs. No barrier stood guard along the narrow shoulder at the cliff's edge. Way below, angry waves pounded against the rocky shore. The sleek convertible tenaciously hugged the asphalt as Mallum raced around sudden sharp turns and into long rolling banks.

Overhead, storm clouds sailed rapidly across the night sky. The crystal light of the full moon disappeared behind the dark clouds, leaving only the car's headlights to penetrate the black void that hid the road. Flashes of lightning briefly illuminated the coastline, and then quickly vanished into the void. Blasts of thunder boomed against the mountain walls.

Rain started to fall, a few drops at first, slowly building into a light drizzle. Mallum pulled to the side of the road, lifted the soft roof out of its compartment, locked it into place, and then sped back onto the highway. Twenty minutes later the drizzle thickened into a solid downpour. Cursing his luck, Mallum let up on the accelerator, cutting his speed by half. If this rain didn't taper off soon there was no way he could reach the airport in time. Mallum was scared. The German would hurt him—hurt him so badly that he would beg for death. And the German would grant his wish, in his own sweet time.

Beads of sweat gathered on Mallum's forehead. His palm tapped nervously against the steering wheel and little drops of moisture trickled down his cheeks. He could not sit still, could not help fidgeting in his seat as he winced his way through the sheets of water deluging the windshield. The wipers swept them away, but managed only to leave a blurry smear. The rubber blades whined across the glass, fueling his frustration. His foot pressed harder on the accelerator, picking up speed against his better judgment. The road was slippery and the tires skidded sideways, closer to the precipice. Again he slowed down, slammed his fist onto the dashboard and cursed his luck.

The skyburst lasted a full hour longer before it stopped. Mallum uttered a long slow sigh,

and alternately increased and decreased his speed to accommodate the snaking road, which was still slick from the rain. He had not seen a single other vehicle during the hours he had been racing down the coast. Isolation heightened his panic. The darkness, the emptiness were eerie enough without this fear. Then, suddenly, there were headlights up ahead. Just the beams were visible, meaning the approaching vehicle had to be rounding a bend. Mallum moved to the edge to give the driver sufficient space to make the turn.

As he veered left following the bank of the road, the headlights were in his eyes. The high bright lights temporarily blinded him. An instant later he saw the truck, a pickup, tearing around the bend three-quarters of the way into his lane. There was no room on the right, just the precipice and the drop off into darkness. Mallum swung to the left, cutting in front of the truck as he aimed for the wider shoulder along the mountain wall. The pickup never slowed. Its right front fender slammed into the rear of the Alfa Romeo, spinning it out of control. Mallum hit his brakes, skidding toward the mountain wall as the truck continued past. He swerved to avoid a frontal crash into the rocky embankment, and heard the shrill horrific scream of metal scraping along the rock. A stream of sparks illuminated the blackness as the Alfa scraped along the rugged craggy stone.

It all took place in seconds, but in Mallum's fevered state it seemed like eternity. Directly ahead, a large outcropping of rock blocked his path. Mallum slammed down on the brake, and then skidded abruptly across the highway toward the far edge. He deliberately picked up speed to generate friction on the road, and twisted the steering wheel left, back toward the mountain wall. Now he swerved back and forth from left to right, struggling to hold the middle ground between the deadly precipice and the towering rocky embankment. The crash had knocked out his left headlight, and his view of the road was even more obscure than before. Too late, he noticed a downhill leftward curve, and before he knew it he was on the far shoulder along the edge traveling much too fast.

He was going over the edge; he knew it in his soul, when he heard the pop. A tire blew. The Alfa swerved toward the left, then cut back in the opposite direction toward the cliff. He hit the brake as hard as he could but the Alfa kept on sliding. Mallum screamed. He threw his arms across his face and braced against the steering wheel.

The right front tire went over first, but the left side of the car smacked into a tree on the edge of the cliff. The entire windshield shattered in on him as the Alfa slammed to a halt. Mallum's body surged forward, his head banged into something hard and unyielding, but the seatbelt kept him from flying out through open space. He touched a painful spot on his head, removed his hand and saw blood on his fingertips. He reached into his pocket for a handkerchief to dab the wound, and his shifting weight caused the car to rock in place.

Mallum stopped squirming. His mind began to clear and he looked around. The Alfa was perched halfway out over the edge of the cliff. He had to get out—slowly, calmly, without disturbing the vehicle. He gripped the door handle on the driver's side and tried to turn it, but the door was stuck. He rolled down the window, reached overhead and unlocked the convertible roof. With extreme care, he pushed it back and eased himself up, ever so slowly, out of his seat, over the top of the left side of the car.

Mallum stood on solid ground. He was shaky, dizzy, so he leaned against the tree until the sensation passed. Then he looked closely at the tree trunk that now formed an integral part of the car's grille. He also noticed his left front tire was bent at an unnatural angle to the ground. Without thinking, he poked it with the toe of his shoe. He turned and saw one of his star-shaped hubcaps lying twisted in the middle of the road. He walked over and picked it up, then rubbed it

clean with the sleeve of his sports jacket. He took out his handkerchief and buffed the metal. He placed it under his arm and returned to survey the wreckage of his car.

It was beyond recognition—his blood-red Alfa Romeo Spider Veloce, with glove-soft leather seats, digital electronic ignition for easy starting in any kind of weather, electronic multi-point fuel injection system automatically adjusted by a microcomputer several times a second to ensure a perfectly running engine—now a useless pile of twisted scrap metal sitting on the edge of a cliff.

He loved that car, the one possession he treasured. Mallum traced his finger along the hand-stitched leather seat, fighting back the tears. Tears for what? His treasure? Himself? The Alfa was shattered, and so was what remained of his life. He lowered himself to the ground and rested his back against the tree. A great pall of depression, loneliness, unhappiness descended upon him. Mallum studied his reflection in the hubcap and saw the rivulet of blood rolling down his cheek. He buried his head in his arms and gave in to the weariness and the feeling of complete despair.

“Damn!” His voice was a croak, choked with grief. “I just can’t catch a break.”

Composure regained, Mallum stood up and walked over to the edge of the cliff. He stared down at the churning waters crashing against the rocky shore below. I wonder, he thought, if jumping off could be anywhere as painful as anything the German could do to me. What was that old line about a coward dying a thousand deaths, a hero dying but once? One simple jump, then eternal peace and no pain.

He almost persuaded himself to do it, but then had second thoughts. With my luck I’d bounce off the rocks, break every bone in my body, and land on some bushes. If the German found me like that, crying in agony, he’d probably just laugh and leave me there to die a slow agonizing death. Screw it! I’m not jumping.

Mallum turned to leave but as he stepped away his foot landed on a loose rock. His ankle twisted and he stumbled backwards, rolling over the cliff’s edge but luckily managing to grab hold of some shrubbery as he fell over the side. He held on to the deeply-rooted bushes with all his strength, his body dangling over the foaming sea.

“Give me a break!” he screamed. “Just this once.” His voice faded to a whimper. “I’m not greedy. Just one break is all I ask.”

He tried to haul himself up but was unable to lift his weight. Perspiration flowed from every pore; his hands grew damp and started to slip along the shrub. Straining every muscle in his body, he swung his legs back and forth, widening the arc with every swing until he had built enough momentum. He put everything he had into one final lunge. His left leg cleared the top, giving him the leverage he needed to belly himself onto the shoulder’s edge.

Mallum crawled forward on hands and knees to the middle of the road, then rolled over and stared into the tar-black sky. “Thank you, God,” he said softly, forgetting his atheistic predilection, if only for the moment. “I owe you one.”

He stood up and walked over to fetch the flashlight from the glove compartment. Gingerly, he reached across from the driver’s side without putting weight on the vehicle until he found it with his fingers. He flicked it on but nothing happened. Of course not. Nothing else had gone right for him lately; why should this? Mallum hurled it to the ground with all his strength, and then watched the light pop on with the impact. Shaking his head from side to side, half smiling and half crying, he aimed the beam down the road. Instantly, the light cut out once more. This time he banged the flashlight against everything in sight—the tree, the car, the mountain—to no avail. He flung it away for good over the side of the cliff.

He had to move on, but not before he got rid of the car. The German would recognize the distinctive vehicle immediately, even in its battered state. He would know he was alive somewhere in the vicinity, perhaps hobbling off down the road after his accident. Mallum planted his feet against the ground and braced his shoulder into the back of the car. It required a bit more strength than he imagined, but the Alfa rolled slowly toward the edge and toppled over into the abyss. He watched it bang along the rocky palisade and crash into the churning waters below. The trunk of the vehicle remained visible above the boiling surf. Good, he thought. If the German finds it first, maybe he'll think I'm dead.

A chilly wind suddenly blew in off the ocean. Mallum turned up the collar of his sports jacket and wrapped the coat around himself, hugging it tightly across his chest. He looked down and saw the hubcap lying on the road. This, too, he kicked over the side. How far was he from LA now? Still over two hundred miles, he guessed. He continued south along the curving road even though there was no chance whatsoever of getting to the airport in time. His best bet now would be to find a place to stay for the night.

After about a half mile, Mallum's ankle began to throb. Apparently he had strained it slightly when he tripped on the rock. Walking became increasingly difficult, so he sat down on the side of the road. He knew he couldn't remain there long, knew that every moment he hesitated he ran the risk of being seen by the German who was most probably in pursuit. The pickup truck was the only vehicle he had seen in hours. With his luck, the next one that came along would be the German's—him and his goons racing him down the coastline to keep him from reaching the airport. Mallum got up and tried to walk again.

The wind grew colder and brisker. By midnight the pain in his ankle was excruciating; walking any further was out of the question. The cold wind became damper, bringing moisture in off the ocean. The dampness turned to rain, the rain into a downpour. Within seconds he was drenched to the skin and freezing. The water poured down his face in a ceaseless cascade. His nose was running, his throat felt raspy. He began to sneeze without letup. Hopeless. Utterly, utterly hopeless. His life was over, he had hit bottom. No way out. If only I had the guts, he thought, I would end it all right now.

Sick, feverish, drained of energy, terrible pain jolting his entire body, Mallum was ready to pack it in. If he didn't have the courage to hurl himself off the cliff, he could simply refuse to go on. He could collapse onto the side of the road, slip into unconsciousness, and refuse to get up again. Just lie down and die. Like an old dog. He was thinking of doing exactly that when he looked ahead, through the rain and the darkness, and thought he saw a light. Was it merely his fevered imagination? Or was it real? Hobbling closer, he believed he could make out the shape of a large old building, perhaps an inn. Mallum screamed and ran ahead on his throbbing ankle. The pain slowed him down but he kept on moving, hobbling with all the strength he could muster.

He reached the front of the building. The sign over the doorway read:
PENTAGRAM PUB AND INN.

Mallum howled. "Can you believe it?" he shouted. "Right out of a damned Wolf Man movie." He shook his head and laughed. Only in California, he thought.

Mallum turned the handle, pushed the door open, and fell forward, face down onto the hardwood floor.

Chapter Two

Dolph Hauptmann, a.k.a. "the German," sat in his usual booth at Jammie's, a San Francisco restaurant popular with people on the make—former military officers who had recently moved into the corporate world; networking young professionals looking for a big score; former government officials between administrations. The German looked every inch the stereotypical Aryan sadist. His hair was blond and closely cropped. His eyes shone with blue fire. A thick wound that might have been taken for a dueling scar in an earlier age ran down his left cheek.

Keeping him company were his two chief lieutenants, Vinnie Raposo and Cowboy, brutal enforcers who had risen to the top of their highly competitive profession. Raposo, unusually short and slim with jet-black greasy hair, took his profession seriously. Rumor had it that he once dressed up as a nun in order to get close enough to a troublesome bishop to stick a shiv in his ribs. Cowboy, blond like his boss but with longer and more stylish hair, simply enjoyed the work. Tall and muscular, with tattoos etched heavily on both arms, he looked like an ex-biker who had found his true calling breaking kneecaps for the German.

"He ain't gonna show," Raposo said as he mindlessly swirled a swizzle stick in his untouched scotch and soda.

"He'll show," the German said. He seemed unconcerned. "He don't, his father-in-law will. Not to worry."

"Yeah, not to worry," the Cowboy echoed his boss. How he idolized the man. The German had brains, a real head on his shoulders. Cowboy wanted to be just like him, and would be, just as soon as he got his act together.

"I ain't worried," Raposo said. "It's your money. I just don't understand how come you gave him all that credit in the first place." He was referring to the one hundred and sixty thousand dollars Alex Mallum had lost that afternoon when all eight of his long shots failed to finish in the money.

The German stared at Raposo with what passed for a smile on his scarred face. "You still don't get it," he said. "That's because you got a fuckin' cobblestone for a head. All rock and no brains. Even Cowboy over here can figure that one out, right, Cowboy?"

"Right as rain, boss," Cowboy said.

"Ask yourself who Mallum's father-in-law is," the German said. "Peter Dante. Who is Peter Dante? Only the chief executive officer of Palliser Dynamics, one of the largest fuckin' defense contractors in the country. You think he can afford to have the word get out that his son-in-law owes money to the boys? You think he'll let that one go by? Either way we get paid, either by that schmuck Mallum or by Dante. It's all the same to me, ain't that right, Cowboy?"

"Right on, boss. You hit the nail right on the head," Cowboy said.

"So me and John Wayne over here might as well go home," Raposo said, half sneering. "That means we don't get to do no work tonight."

"What's the matter?" The German laughed. "That blade burning a hole in your pocket?"

Now Raposo laughed. "I got it right here just in case," he said, patting the right hip pocket of his Jacket.

Cowboy extended his right hand and pretended to pull the trigger of an invisible gun. "Not so fast," he said. "You ain't havin' all the fun by yourself, little man."

"I'll show you who's little, you dumb fuck," Raposo said. He braced his hands against the table and started to slide back.

“Cool it!” the German said.

“He ain’t talkin’ to me like that,” Raposo said. Cowboy laughed and Raposo started to rise again.

“Cool it I said! Wipe that stupid grin off your face, Cowboy. You two don’t stop giving me grief, I go to the zoo and hire a couple orangutans instead. They’re just as smart as you two and they don’t talk back.”

Raposo and Cowboy glowered at each other a moment longer, then lost interest in the game. They didn’t have much fear for anyone or anything in the world except the German. He gave them both the chills whenever he stared at them with those crazy blue eyes.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the door. The three of them looked over and saw the maitre d’ and a passel of waiters ushering in a portly gray-haired gentleman in a double-breasted blue suit. It was Peter Dante, and with him were three men—one black man with a shaved head, another black with Jherri curls, and a short, blocky white man. The four of them were escorted through the lounge, past the German and his boys, back into the dining room.

“That’s Jimmy Bones with him,” Cowboy said, referring to the big black man with the shaved head. “Last I heard he was in Mozambique startin’ a revolution all by himself.”

“He works for Dante now,” the German said. “The pay’s a lot better.”

“Yeah, well, Mallum ain’t gonna show, that’s for sure. So whatta we gonna do now?” Raposo said.

The German’s eyes were blue currents flashing brighter with every second. “We sit tight for a few minutes,” he said, “then we go pay a visit.” He revealed nothing of himself to the others, but inside he was seething over being stood up by that miserable punk Mallum, and snubbed by Dante and his guard dogs who had strode by him without so much as a nod of recognition. Stiffed by a scumbag and snubbed by his big-shot father-in-law. Somebody was going to pay.

The German sipped his gin and tonic, and then he put his glass down and nodded at the others. They all rose together, the two goons following their boss as he headed back through the lounge into the dining room.

“Mister Dante,” Hauptmann said, extending his right hand toward the industrialist. “You know me. Dolph Hauptmann. So how come you don’t say hello?”

Dante stared at the hand for a full five seconds before looking up at the German. “Hello,” he said without accepting the handshake. Bristling, the German balled his hand into a fist and lowered it to his side.

“So what can I do for you?” Dante said.

“Your scumbag son-in-law owes me a hundred and sixty grand,” the German said. “I come over to collect the debt.”

“I don’t know anything about it.” Dante lowered his eyes and studied the menu.

“Alex put twenty grand each on eight long shots today. Poor fuck couldn’t tell a pony from a porcupine. Lost every single race. Said if he didn’t come around to pay off, I should see you about it. I was you, I’d keep a closer watch on that boy before he gets himself in deeper.”

Dante pried his eyes away from the menu, stared up at the German, and then burst out laughing. His three companions joined in with him as though he had just told the funniest joke they ever heard.

“Alex is a dumb gambler,” Dante said. “But you know what’s dumber? Some bookie that’d trust him for one hundred and sixty thousand dollars. And what’s even dumber than that is you thinking I’m going to pay it off for him. That’s the funniest, dumbest thing I ever heard.” Dante roared with laughter again, his companions joining in with even more gusto than before.

The German's face smoldered, burning slowly into a deep scarlet fire. "Laugh now, Dante," he said. "You won't think it's so funny when the press gets word that Peter Dante's son-in-law is in hock to the boys. That's not gonna sit too well with your connections in Washington."

"Now that's not funny." Dante stared at the German without expression, his face a frozen mask. "That sounds like a threat and threats I don't find funny. You're a fool, Hauptmann. Your information's out of date. My daughter divorced that loser Mallum six months ago. Finally came to her senses. If you think you've got leverage on me with him, you're a bigger fool than I thought you were."

Dante had him and the German knew it. He had called his bluff and won. His choices were limited. The German could back down and lose face completely, or he could strike at Dante with the only weapon he had left. He lunged forward but, before he could reach Dante, Jimmy Bones reached out and caught his arm. The German was locked in a vise. He glared at Jimmy Bones, his face burning red and his neck bulging with purple veins. Hauptmann was big and tall, but Jimmy Bones had three inches and thirty pounds on him.

"Get your hands off me, boy, or I'll pound you flatter than your Aunt Jemima's favorite pancake." The two men stood eyeball-to-eyeball for a long, tense moment.

"Jimmy, Jimmy." Dante broke the tension. "Mind your manners. You don't want to put your hands on Mister Hauptmann, do you?"

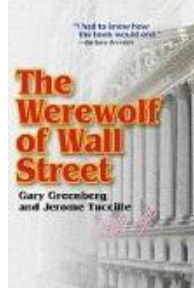
"No, Mister Dante."

"Release him then." Jimmy Bones let go of Hauptmann. He turned away, walked three steps, then whirled on one foot with blazing speed and smashed his adversary's jaw with the heel of the other foot. The German dropped to the floor as though he had been struck by lightning. Cowboy reached for his gun first, Vinnie a split second later. Neither was fast enough. Dante's other two bodyguards already had theirs drawn, pointed in their faces. A pall of silence fell over the room as the diners looked on, too shocked to utter a sound.

"That's better, Jimmy," Dante said. "Why should you get your hands all dirty touching filth like that before you eat?" He turned to Cowboy and Raposo. "Your boss is very rude, disturbing peaceful people having supper and minding their own business. Why don't you monkeys drag him out of here before Mister Bones loses his temper?"

The fear was a palpable thing in their eyes. They were afraid for themselves, but it was more than that. The sight of their fallen leader, the invincible German who only had to look at men to make them tremble, crumpled like a rag doll on the restaurant floor, had shattered their own sense of invulnerability. Cowboy bent over, placed one arm behind the German's back and a hand around his wrist, and helped him to his feet. He and Raposo half carried and half dragged him back to their booth in the lounge. They eased him onto the padded bench and hovered above him like two unlikely nurses who didn't quite know what to do.

"You okay, boss?" Raposo said, his voice an anxious rasp. The German didn't answer. Raposo walked over to the bar and got half a tumbler full of bourbon. He brought it back and tilted it under the German's mouth. The German clutched it in his hand and sipped it slowly. He did this for several minutes, catching his breath and sipping the bourbon. Finally, he sat up and rubbed his aching jaw, feeling it more than rubbing it to see if anything was broken. He thought he had been kicked by a horse. Nobody had ever hit him that hard before. Through clenched teeth, his jawbone grinding like broken glass, he spoke through the pain. "Alex Mallum dies. Find him. Hurt him. Kill him. Now."



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Chapter Thirteen

Peter Dante paced the ground floor living room of his Manhattan townhouse twenty blocks north on Fifth Avenue. Fenris had returned to New York the previous evening, he knew, and still he hadn't heard from him. The anxiety refused to leave. It gnawed away inside until he had reached a point where he couldn't sleep properly, couldn't concentrate on anything except where he stood with Fenris and Navi. Unable to stand the tension any longer, he picked up the telephone and dialed Fenris's number.

"Daddy!" Danielle answered on the second ring. "We were just talking about you."

"Hiya, sugar." Dante was pleasantly surprised. As long as his daughter and Fenris were an item, he felt he was secure. "Just thought I'd check in and see how everybody was doin'."

"We have the greatest news and we wanted you to hear it first. Luke and I are all set for Christmas. I finally pinned the rascal down."

"That's wonderful, darling. I'll throw the biggest bash this town's seen in years. Dante and Fenris. What a combo, a team that can't be beat."

"Luke's right here. Let me put him on. He wants to say hello."

Dante could hear Fenris's muffled voice on the other end, asking Danielle to wait in the living room so he could speak to her father privately about some business. A second later his voice was loud and clear on the line.

"Good to hear from you, Peter. How've you been?"

"Great, Luke. This is wonderful news. I can't tell you how thrilled I am."

"I'm thrilled, too, Peter. So thrilled, in fact, that I'm going to tell you right now what I want as a wedding present from you."

"Name it, Luke. I'd cut off my right arm for you, you know that."

"That won't be necessary. You're going to give me your company instead, Palliser Dynamics on a silver platter."

Dante could feel his stomach tighten and his testicles shrivel. Surely the man must be joking. "You got a strange sense of humor, Luke."

"I already own four and a half percent of your company on my own through open-market purchases, plus another sixteen percent through proxies. Once you sign your twenty-percent block over to me, I'll have far and away the single largest controlling interest."

"So it was you who was doing all that buying . . . you and your flunkies nibbling away at my

company. You won't get away with this, Luke. I got the board on my side. I'll fight you right down the line."

"It's all over, Peter. You're dead meat floating in the water. I'm not just going to cast you adrift, though. After all, we're almost family now. You're my boy. You get to stay on as chairman, titular head of the company. Nobody will know I've got your balls in my pocket . . . unless you choose to make a public spectacle of yourself, that is."

"Fuck you, Fenris!" Dante was ready to explode. He could barely contain himself as he barked into the phone, spittle flying in all directions. "You can't get away with this! You can't just walk in and steal my company away from me!"

"You're overwrought. Your emotions are getting the best of you. Calm down and listen to me carefully. I've got enough on you and your cost overruns with the military, your deliberately shoddy quality controls on weapons programs to send you to jail for the rest of your life. I'm offended that you would accuse *me* of being a thief. Didn't Christ say, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone?'"

"I got leverage, too, Luke. I . . . I'll expose the plan to take over the media. I . . . I ain't gonna let you push me around."

"You can't do that, Peter . . . do you mind if I call you dad? You're already a co-conspirator yourself. I'm being generous with you, but my patience has a limit. If you turn down my offer, I'll seize control of your company anyway and throw you to the wolves. Either way I'll win. The decision is yours."

Dante slammed the receiver down in the cradle. He was so livid he could scarcely speak. He thought of calling Navi to hear his side, then decided against it. The two of them were asshole buddies, inseparable—at least until Fenris decided that Navi was expendable. The man had no shame, no spark of decency, no loyalty to anyone but himself. Dante needed to weigh his options carefully.

He poured himself a tumbler full of scotch and returned to his chair by the telephone. He sipped the scotch slowly at first, then swigged it down in large gulps. He could fight Fenris and risk exposure, possibly jail for both of them. Or, he could play hardball, take care of Fenris the same way he took care of Danielle's second husband. Nobody would ever find his body again. But that, too, was fraught with danger. Dante shuddered when he thought of what had happened to Fortunato and his boys. No one had ever succeeded in implicating Luke, but who else had the motive or the resources? The man was untouchable, almost inhuman.

Dante poured himself another drink, downed it, and then filled his tumbler again. On one hand I could fight him, and we all lose, he reasoned. If I go along I get to stay on as a figurehead, but maybe nobody will find out. I'll be taken care of and I save face at the same time. Any way he looked at it, Fenris had him by the balls—the eight hundred pound gorilla with its hand wrapped around them, waiting for an excuse to squeeze.

Dante staggered into his bathroom, succeeded finally in extracting a handful of aspirin tablets from a childproof bottle, then washed them down with the rest of his scotch. He stumbled back toward the telephone and dialed Fenris's number.

"You win, you prick." His words were noticeably slurred. "I'm gettin' too old for this shit. Welcome to the family. I hope you treat my daughter better than you're treatin' me."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate your cooperation. Don't think of it as losing a company, but rather as gaining a warm-hearted son-in-law. Navi will draw up the papers. You'll have them in a week."

"Does Danielle know anything about this?"

“No, Dad. I’m not one of those men who brings his problems home from the office.”

Dante put the receiver back down softly this time. He felt worn out, beaten, too tired to bounce back up and fight any longer. And sick inside. The combination of too much booze and aspirin on top of a heavy meal was not conducive to digestion. He stumbled into the bathroom, bent down low over the bowl, and felt the contents of his stomach bubble upward in an outpouring of food and bile.

Fenris and Danielle showered together, toweled each other dry, dressed, then left for a late dinner at Lutece. After dinner Danielle was exhausted, but Fenris insisted that they extend the festivities into the small hours of the morning. They danced, then stopped at a few popular midtown watering holes, and returned to Fenris’s apartment at four-thirty in the morning, before dawn.

“I don’t know where you get your energy from, darling,” Danielle said. “You put in such grueling hours, then party all night long with hardly any sleep. You’re incredible, Luke.”

“You invigorate me, my love. I want to stay awake forever and just look at you.”

Danielle wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “You’re sweet,” she said. “Right now though, this party girl needs some sleep. I’m exhausted.”

They spent the next day together, and then it was time to part.

“I can’t believe where the time went, Luke. I have to get to the airport by eleven. I’m giving a speech in Austin in the morning.”

“Martin’s waiting downstairs with the car now. I’ll ride with you to the airport, then I’m going to Asia myself for a few weeks.”

“Can I meet you there when I’m through?” Danielle asked.

“I don’t think so, love,” he said. “Jungles, bugs, lots of nasty people. You wouldn’t enjoy it at all.”

“I’d enjoy being with you.”

“Next time perhaps. This trip’s not going to be much fun for me either, I assure you. We’d better get going now.”

Martin was waiting for them with the car when they left the building. Fenris watched her board the plane, waved her off, and then returned to his apartment where he studied the Thorn reports until just before dawn. A little before sunrise, he took the elevator down to the lobby, and stepped outside onto the sidewalk.

Fenris walked down Fifth Avenue, thinking about how he always lied to Danielle about his lengthy disappearances—pretending that he was going off to distant places on business trips. He did not like lying to her; surely, it was not the best way to cement their relationship. But, for the moment, he felt that he had no other choice. Could she accept the truth yet? Was she ready for it? He thought about it a moment longer, then decided she was not. It was too early for the truth.

Chapter Fourteen

The cacophony of screaming voices and honking horns and clanging garbage pail lids lifted upward from the streets into Alex Mallum’s apartment. Alex groaned, lifted the pillow from his face and listened for a long moment to the sounds of the city and the pigeons cooing on his window ledge. As he awakened gradually at first, then with a start, he noticed that the pigeons were not only on the ledge outside; half a dozen or so were sitting on the foot of his bed. He

turned his face toward the window, and saw that the glass was shattered. Jagged shards stuck out from the frame like the translucent teeth of a giant shark.

"What the . . ." Alex jumped out of bed, scattering pigeons and bedclothes, and walked to the window. Splintered glass was strewn over the outside ledge and the fire escape beyond. How could that be? If anyone had broken in, the glass would be on the floor inside.

His handiwork was still intact. The duct tape was in place around the door and the window frame. The powder he had sprinkled on the floor and sill was undisturbed. Alex shook his head, clearing the remaining cobwebs. What the hell was going on? Where had he been? It was impossible that he could have gotten up in his sleep and just broken through the window like that.

As he thought, his dream of the night before bubbled upward from his unconscious. The details were vivid, alarming, more real than mere dreamlike fantasy. There was the wolf again—the wolf in his apartment leaping through the closed window. There was the sound of shattering glass. And then, there was Danielle—.

God, how he ached for her. Danielle and her thug of a father were both in his dream. Concentrate now; he needed to recall the details. A hunter was stalking the wolf. No, wait. The hunter followed the wolf, not threatening, not stalking. The setting was vague, a vast blur. He couldn't say where they had been. The wolf had charged and pounced, landing on top of Peter Dante, driving him to the ground. How good it felt. Dante screamed as the wolf's paws held him down, its face inches from Dante's throat. The wolf bared its teeth, drooling on Dante's face.

Then there was laughter, pleasant and musical laughter from somewhere in the blurry background. The wolf looked up and saw Danielle. She was kneeling beside him, hugging him around the neck, nuzzling him behind the ears. She stroked the wolf's cheeks. Then everything went blank. Alex could remember nothing else.

Alex pressed both palms against his temples. This was the first time he had dreamed of Danielle in ages. He thought of her often enough when awake. But she had never appeared in his wolf dreams before. Perhaps it was an omen that, somehow, they would get back together again. How incredible it all was. There were no footsteps in the powder. If he had walked in his sleep and punched out the window, he would have left prints in the powder and his fist would be bruised or gashed. But there was nothing, no blood, no bruise, no footprints. He had to find out what was going on before he went nuts—if he wasn't crazy already.

The alarm clock jangled on the nightstand, and Alex went over and shut it off. He had to get ready to go to work; he had missed too many days already, and his boss's patience was wearing thin. The job was menial, mostly clerical in nature, filing, sorting and delivering documents and folders, at the *New York Times*, but it was perfect for him in his new life, obscure, nonchallenging, a place to hide and make enough money to pay for rent and food. Alex was certain of only one thing as he stepped into the shower: there was a definite correlation between the full moon cycle and his wolf dreams and blackouts. That knowledge was not reassuring; it was downright alarming actually. But it was all he had to go on.

At work later that week, Alex sorted through the wedding announcements for the Sunday edition, when one in particular caught his attention. DANTE-FENRIS. Alex read it through in shock. Danielle and Luke Fenris? It couldn't be. Say it isn't so, Danielle! Anybody but Luke Fenris.

The mere mention of Fenris's name was enough to make Alex's blood boil. A week earlier a cover story in Barron's entitled, "The Mysterious Pirate of Wall Street," attempted to dissect the man and shed some light on his puzzling past and sprawling empire. That article had been no

more successful than the ones that preceded it. Most of it consisted of rumor and innuendo and little if any fact. Luke Fenris exemplified—more than Peter Dante even—everything that Alex Mallum detested about contemporary America. The profile of Fenris and his business dealings had been bad enough, but buried in a paragraph toward the end was a comment that Fenris and Danielle Dante had recently been seen together at a party at Carl Navi's house in the Hamptons. The line had practically jumped off the page when Alex read it, but he dismissed it as idle gossip. Danielle, with all her faults, would never sink that low.

Now, here it was in black and white in front of him—irrefutable proof. She was actually going to marry the bastard! Alex found it almost impossible to comprehend how she could violate every principle she once stood for, and marry an amoral buccaneer like Luke Fenris. It defied credibility. He could accept the fact that she had been swayed by her father, that she had been blinded by his money, betrayed him and their marriage, and maybe even have fallen a little out of love with him. But, in the back of his mind, Alex had always attributed her defection to exasperation, not lack of love—exasperation with him and his uncompromising devotion to a losing cause. Deep inside, Alex had felt that there could possibly be a slim chance that someday they might even get back together again. He took secret pleasure over the knowledge that her second marriage had ended so mysteriously. Perhaps one day Danielle would wake up and see that her father was really as evil as Alex said he was. But, with this notice, all hope was shattered. She was marrying a man who was the exact opposite of everything Alex stood for. He had never felt so alienated from her as he did at that moment.

Tears rolled down Alex's cheeks and dripped onto the wedding announcement. The paper grew soggy, and Alex tore it into tiny shreds. "There will be no marriage!" He thought he had spoken to himself, but as he looked around at the alarmed faces of his colleagues he realized he had screamed.

"There will be no marriage," Alex whispered this time. "Because you can't marry a dead man, Danielle. And Luke Fenris is as good as dead."

Alex knew for the first time what his revolutionary plan for CRUSH was going to be.

Ludwig von Dracula sat at his desk, sorting through the hundreds, no, thousands of letters he had received since his interview. He knew he should not have gone public with his confession. The world was not ready for the truth; perhaps it would never be. Every misfit, every psychotic, schizophrenic, manic-depressive, lamebrain, kook, maniac, and moron in the country had written to tell him they thought they might be vampires. Was it always like this? Did everybody want to be Jewish, or black, or homosexual, or a woman, or whatever the new victim-of-the-month was? It was all so depressing. He had known before that the human race was really screwed up, but this was ridiculous. Space cadets! People who swore that vampires had landed in UFO's in their back yards! There was no end to the lunacy.

All he wanted to do was share some knowledge, shed some light on a forbidden topic, and let other vampires know that they weren't alone, that there was someone out there, just like them, who *cared*. It was time they came out of the coffin now and stopped pretending to be something they were not. For too long now they had lived in fear of stake-wielding religious fanatics. It was time to end their lives of silent, fearful suffering.

He didn't expect everyone to believe his story about being a vampire or of his noble heritage. But other vampires would know he was speaking from his heart and telling the truth, and possibly be emboldened to do the same. And maybe, just maybe, a few caring humans would sympathize with their plight and join them in their fight for justice. But just the opposite had

happened. Thousands of maniacs wanted to be vampires themselves while the diehard bigots—judging by the hate mail mixed in with the rest—were even more hardened in their opposition to his species. One correspondent from New Jersey thought the government should ship all vampires back to Transylvania—even though many of them had lived in the United States for centuries. And an old lady in Florida had written to say that he and his people should be rounded up into rehabilitation centers—sounded like concentration camps to Luddie—for their own good.

Luddie was close to despair, almost ready to take the remaining letters and toss them unread into the fireplace. He felt his energy flagging as the night wore on, and knew he must soon get ready for a good day's sleep. He got up from his chair and went over to check the contents of his refrigerator; he was down to his last three vials of blood. He needed a pick-me-up, so he poured a few ounces into a rocks glass with some ice, knocked it back, and returned to his desk. He made a list of things that needed to be replenished—tissues, saltines, detergent, Oreos, blood, tangerines, paper towels; if it wasn't one thing it was another, always something, as cousin Emily used to say.

He was about to abandon his search for intelligent life on earth, when he came across one letter that jolted him out of his lethargy. Who was this from? He didn't give his name, but from the address and phone number Luddie could see he lived a few blocks away. A message for him from Lothar and Tanya? That could only mean that this writer had something significant to say to him, but preferred anonymity for the time being. Good Lord! He'd better check in with Lothar at once to see what it was all about.

"Yes?" Lothar answered on the fourth ring.

"Lothar? It's me, Luddie."

"Luddie! How've you been? I saw you on television a few weeks ago."

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry I ever agreed to do the interview. You wouldn't believe the crazies coming out of the woodwork."

"Tell me about it," Lothar said. "What did you expect anyway? Love? Kindness? Understanding? Nothing's changed, my boy. It's the same now as it was way back in the dark ages. But, then you always were the idealist, weren't you?"

"Yes, well, listen. I received one very disturbing letter. It doesn't say much, except that the correspondent has a message for me from Lothar and Tanya. How can this be, Lothar? Do you remember someone stopping off at your inn a while back who might have had an encounter with Tanya?"

There was a long silence on the other end, and then Lothar heaved a sigh and said, "Yes." Lothar paused for a moment, nervously nibbling at his lip. "It happened quite a while ago, five or six years now I should think. I . . . I had hoped nothing would come of it."

"Did he spend any time with Tanya?" Luddie could not keep the alarm out of his voice.

"Well . . . yes, I suppose so."

"What do you mean you suppose so?"

"They did spend the night together."

"My God, Lothar! Did Tanya bite him?"

"A little bite, Luddie. Don't get all excited."

"There's no such thing as a little bite, Lothar. You know that."

"Okay, she bit him. She bit him, all right? I prayed that nothing would come of it. Night after night for months I prayed."

"You promised me you would sedate her during the full moon periods." Luddie was almost in shock. "You know the risk."

“It was such a rainy, stormy night. Horrible, horrible weather. Who thought anyone would be out in it? It tears me apart when Tanya goes through these changes. He arrived at the inn, hurt and exhausted. Half dead. Only Tanya knew the proper medicine to use. It all happened so fast, Luddie. I didn’t have the heart to stop her.”

“You should have called me right away.” Luddie made no effort to hide his irritation.

“I was going to at first. I swear. But when there was no news of anything unusual happening after a few months, I . . . I just let it slip.”

“I’m very angry with you, Lothar.”

“I never realized—”

“Do you understand what this means? This October there’s going to be an eclipse of the Harvest Moon, the first full moon after the autumnal equinox.”

“My word.”

“The gravitational confluences could result in permanent transformation of infected males. If this particular human male is infected, we have to find out what kind of creature he becomes. If it’s dangerous . . . I may have to kill it.”

“Luddie, I’m so sorry. I can’t tell you how upset I am by this. Please don’t blame Tanya. It’s not her—”

“You must keep her sedated in the future during these critical periods! She’s a menace, Lothar! But we agreed to let her live because she’s the last of her line . . . unless this male she bit is infected and he infects others.”

Lothar was silent, properly chastised. What more could he say?

“I should be able to track him down,” Luddie said. “He’s obviously concerned that something’s wrong with him, and he’s looking for help. I only pray to God that it’s not too late. I’ll keep you posted.”

After he hung up, Luddie checked the eastern skyline and saw that it was already too late to take any action now. Soon it would be dawn and, just as an Eskimo could discern twenty different shades of white, he and others of his species were sensitive to the delicate gradations as night yielded to sunrise. Urgent as the situation was, he could take no action until the evening.

Luddie walked over to his coffin, which rested atop a loft platform at the end of the living room. The soothing mineral-rich mud spread over the bottom was from his home village in Transylvania. Luddie mounded some of it at the top end to form a pillow for his head. Then he undressed and settled himself down inside. The early morning air was warm already, so he tossed his blanket onto a chair nearby. He pulled the lid shut above him, blocking out the grayness of the rising sun. Within moments, he dropped off into the nether reaches of pitch-black sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

“Ask yourselves,” Alex said to the assembled CRUSH members, sprawled on the floor of their pigsty office like human litter in the bottom of a Dempsey Dumpster, “who personifies the corrupt establishment more than any single individual you can think of?”

God, how he hated this scene. How did he talk himself into it in the first place? If only he had kept his mouth shut last time. If only he hadn’t run into Sally and been recognized in the first place. Now he was here with this useless pack of crazies, talking to them of revolution as though they possessed the power of reason.

“What is this, man?” Pinto said, scratching his filthy beard. “Twenty fuckin’ questions or somethin’?”

“Yo, man. Hear the dude out,” said Kirk, apparently ready for another punch-out with Pinto.

“Shut yo’ face!” Kenyatta glared at everyone else. “The man say he got a plan to raise a couple o’ million. I don’t know ‘bout you, but that gets *my* attention.”

“As I said the last time, money’s the name of the game,” Alex continued. “At the risk of sounding like a capitalist pig, you can’t even start a revolution without it.”

“Tha’s a fact,” Kenyatta agreed.

“So what’s the symbol of everything we’re against? Name the one person who stands out in your mind the most.”

Everyone remained silent for a moment then shouted as one voice, “Kathy Me!”

Alex rolled his eyes upward and held his hands out at the side, palms up. He shook his head back and forth a couple of times and then spoke. “Get serious. Forget about frivolous media celebrities. I’m talking about people who matter, powerful people who make bad things happen to lots of good people.”

Jennifer raised her hand, the only one in the group who did before she spoke. “Peter Dante,” she said quietly, as if she were waiting to be graded on her answer.

“Fuck no!” Doug yelled. “You’re off the fuckin’ wall as usual.”

Jennifer trembled and bit her lip, close to tears.

“Any asshole knows it’s Carl Navi, that slimy greaser son-of-a-bitch,” said Doug.

“Greaser!” Pinto yelled, struggling unsuccessfully to hoist his bulk off the floor. “He ain’t no greaser, man. He’s Lebanese or Ay-rab or some capitalist prick like that.”

“Chill!” Kenyatta’s voice cut through the din and silence filled the room. “Let’s hear what the man got in mind.”

“Who’s he anyway?” Pinto said, pointing to Alex. “He talks like some Social Democrat weenie. I mean, what do we really know about him anyway?”

“Sally vouched for him an’ tha’s good enough for me,” Kenyatta said.

“Sally’s got her head up her ass,” said Kirk.

“Kirk!” Sally said. “I mean, like, really!”

“We need some action, man,” said Nicky, the demolitions expert. “The time for bullshit’s over.”

“You’re all being very rude,” Maria said. “We invited Alex back to tell us his plan, and now you won’t even listen to him.”

“Right on!” Nicky said, turning toward Alex. “Go for it, man. Everybody else shut the fuck up for five minutes.”

Now that he had their undivided attention, Alex tried once again to make his statement. “The one man who comes to mind more than anybody else is Luke Fenris, the so-called Mystery Man of Wall Street. Not Peter Dante, not Carl Navi. Fenris is head and shoulders above them all when it comes to the single individual who most personifies white male oppression in this country.”

“Word to ya mama,” Kenyatta said.

“So what’re we gonna do about it?” Pinto said.

“Waste him!” Nicky said. “Blow the motherfucker’s ass into a million pieces!”

“No! No!” Alex yelled, quieting them down. “We don’t want to kill him. He’s useless to us dead. We need to take him hostage and put a price on his head. He’s worth a lot of money to us alive, not as a dead man.”

“Who goin’ to pay to get him back?” Kenyatta said. “The man got no wife, no family,

nobody we know of who gives a fuck.”

Kenyatta had a valid point, and Alex decided that he was the only one in the group with a functioning brain. There was one person Alex could think of who *did* care about what happened to Fenris, however, and he tried not to look at Sally when he mentioned her name. “Danielle Dante cares,” he said. “They’re engaged to be married. She’ll do anything to get him back, and a million or two to her father is like nickels and dimes to you and me.”

“I like it.” Kenyatta beamed at him and the others. Through the corner of Alex’s eye, he saw Sally regarding him with a quizzical look. “The only question is,” Kenyatta continued, “is how? Man like that got to be well protected. You don’t just snatch him off the street like he was Joe Blow goin’ for a stroll.”

“That’s where Nicky comes in,” Alex said. “I understand you had some demolitions training in the military.”

“Just call me Boomer.”

“Do you think you can rig up a little bomb? Not one big enough to blow a car and its occupants to smithereens. Just big enough to disable a vehicle that’s set to go off at a certain time?”

Nicky stared at him for a long moment, hollow-eyed as though something essential had vacated the premises, then he said, “No sweat.”

“This is critical. Something rigged to go off at a precise time. Low impact, enough to blow out the engine let’s say, that’s reliable enough to go off when we want it to.”

“I said ‘no sweat.’ Just tell me when you need it, man.”

“Three days from now.”

“Three days!”

“If you can handle that.”

“It’s complicated, man. It’s, like, a work of art, a craft. I got to rig it up, then I got to set the timer.”

“Don’t worry about the timer for now. Just rig it up and I’ll tell you when to time it later. This will give me some time to do a little surveillance of Mr. Fenris, find out what his habits are and so on.”

They made plans to convene again a few days later, and then the meeting broke up. Alex could see that Sally was troubled as he walked her back to her apartment. He took her hand, looked down at her, but she avoided his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he said.

“You’re still in love with her, aren’t you, Alex?”

“Who’re you talking about?”

“You know who I’m talking about. Danielle. Who else?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! After what she did to me?”

“I can tell, Alex. Women can tell these things. I . . . I know you’re not interested in me like, you know, like you were in her.”

“I find you very attractive, Sally. I really do. I’m just—just not ready to get involved again.”

“It’s been ages now . . . how many years? You’re just not over her, Alex, that’s all there is to it. Otherwise, if you found me attractive like you say you do, you’d be able to—”

“I can’t even think about that right now.” Alex ran a hand over his face, pressed his palms against his temples to stop the throbbing. “There are strange things going on in my life that I don’t even understand right now. It’s not you, believe me. If things were different I’d jump at the chance to . . . to get to know you better on a, on a more intimate level.”

"I know it's a bad time for you, Alex, and I don't mean to put any more pressure on you. I just want to be sure, you know, that this plan of yours is—"

"Yes?"

"Is not just some kind of a way for you to get revenge?"

"Revenge?"

"Revenge against her . . . and him, too. I read the papers about them getting married, and I know how you feel."

"Goddamnit, Sally! My personal feelings don't enter into this at all. It's perfectly logical, what I've suggested. Don't you see—?"

"It makes sense, I can see that. It's all perfectly logical. I was just curious about your motivation, that's all."

"My motivation is clear. You asked me to follow through on the plan I mentioned, not to embarrass you in front of your friends, so—"

"Okay, okay." She stroked his arm, rested her head against his shoulder. "I understand. Do you think it'll work?"

"My plan? Yeah, it'll work if your friend Nicky can do what I asked him to. Do you think he's playing with a full deck? Kenyatta's the only one there with anything resembling a human brain that seems to be working right."

"Well . . ." Sally heaved a long sigh of resignation. "We'll see I guess. Sometimes it all seems so hopeless for people like us. But we're doing the best we can. That's all any of us can do. Right?"

Alex patted her hand. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer, as though to insulate them both against the terrors of the night.

They knew before they met again a few days later that Nicky would not be able to deliver on time. The wreckage of the top floor of his apartment building was shown two nights in a row on television, and the story was on the front page of the *New York Times* (along with an inset photo of Nicky over a caption that read: If You've Seen This Man Call The Telephone Number Below).

"It blew up, man," was the way he explained it at the meeting.

"We know it blew up, Nicky." Alex tried somewhat unsuccessfully to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "The question is, how did it happen?"

"It just went off, man. Like, I think maybe I connected it wrong."

"He could have been killed," Jennifer offered in his defense.

"Yeah, right. It was lucky I was out at the time, cleaning off windshields on Houston for spare change."

"And lucky no one else was there at the time," Alex said. "Meanwhile, your picture's all over the newspaper, which puts you and all the rest of us in danger. Where are you hiding out?"

"He's stayin' with me," Pinto said. "I got him covered."

"You better change your appearance," Alex said to Nicky. "Shave, cut off your hair, put on a suit and tie, look like you got a job down in Wall Street maybe."

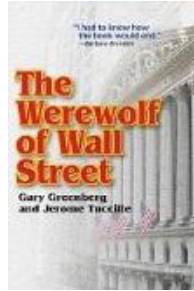
Nicky just stared at him blankly. There was definitely nobody home inside, Alex decided. "Do you think you can make a bomb that'll go off when it's supposed to?"

"Of course, man. What do you take me for?"

Alex let that one slide.

"So where we at now?" Kenyatta said.

“Back to the drawing board,” Alex said. “Let me see if I can come up with something that doesn’t require as much . . . ” He groped carefully for the right word. “That doesn’t require as much—precision, shall we say?”



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Chapter Twenty

Ludwig von Dracula woke up at the crack of night on September sixth. He tossed his coffin lid to the side, hopped out, and donned the clothing he had laid out the night before. He climbed onto the ledge outside his window, lifted his arms parallel to the ground, stared down toward the street below, and leaped off. As soon as his feet left the side of the building, his flesh and clothing melded into the hide of a bat and his body reshaped itself into the winged mammal. Luddie soared across the night sky and, in seconds, flew through the open window of Alex’s apartment. The instant he hit the floor he transformed himself back to human form.

The thud of the landing caught Alex’s ear in the next room. He quickly hung up the phone and came charging in to see what was going on.

“You?” he said. “How’d you get in?”

“Flew. You were expecting me, were you not?”

This is getting too weird, Alex thought. What have I let myself in for?

“It’s not weird at all,” Luddie said. “We discussed why we’re doing this, remember?”

“How did you know what I was think . . . ? Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“How are you feeling tonight, Alex?”

“Fine, so far.” Alex shrugged.

“Do you have your camera set up?”

“You bet I do.” Alex nodded toward the bed table. “I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

Luddie went over to familiarize himself with its operation. He noticed that the flash attachment was of a kind that automatically recharged after each use. The short delay after each shot might reduce the number of pictures that could be taken, but it would do.

“All right?” Alex asked.

“A bit crude, but it’ll do.”

“So what do we do now?” The irritation was apparent in Alex’s voice.

“Do you have a deck of cards?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Let’s play gin while we’re waiting. Nothing big. Penny a point, nickel a box.”

“I should gamble with a man who can read my mind? Fuck you, Luddie!”

“No need to get hostile. We’ll just play for fun then.”

Alex got the deck and tossed it onto the table. Luddie picked it up and shuffled. "Cut for deal," he said. He split the deck in half and showed a seven, then reshuffled and slid it over to Alex who sliced out a four.

"My deal." Luddie took the cards and observed Alex as he lifted his hand and rubbed his throat.

"I'm getting thirsty," Alex said. "Can I get you something?"

"Nothing for me, thanks." Luddie dealt out two hands face down and turned one card up. "Six is the knock card." he said, watching Alex rise from his seat and go into the kitchen. He could hear him running the faucet and filling a glass, then gulping it down thirstily. He filled it again and carried it back to the card table. Luddie kept his eyes fixed on Alex as he reached for his cards, but raised his hand to his throat and massaged it instead.

"Are you feeling ill?" Luddie asked.

"I don't know. My throat's getting dry and I feel a bit feverish." Alex downed his water in a single gulp.

"Lie down in the bedroom," Luddie said. "I'll get you another drink."

Alex started to rise, lifting himself with his hands braced on the sides of the table when his legs began to buckle and his face turned red.

"Help me," Alex said.

Luddie darted around the table and caught Alex's arm as his body sagged closer to the floor. He draped Alex's arm across his shoulder and held him around the waist. With faltering steps, Luddie trundled Alex into the bedroom and lowered him onto the bed.

"I need more water." Alex's voice was weak and raspy.

"Lie down and take it easy. I'll be right back with some." When Luddie returned a moment later with the refilled glass Alex's brow was red and feverish and perspiration poured from his face onto the pillow. Luddie spilled some of the water onto his handkerchief and placed it on Alex's forehead.

"Take it easy, I'm right here," he said.

"D-don't leave me. I've never been so scared in my life." Alex's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"I'm not going anywhere, Alex." He unbuttoned Alex's shirt and removed his tight jeans.

"The pain's unbearable. I can't stand it."

"It'll pass soon, very soon. I promise."

Alex held his throat with both hands. His breathing quickened until he was gulping air repeatedly. After several moments, the pace subsided until Alex was breathing normally once again.

Luddie placed his hand on Alex's forehead and felt the fever recede. He watched as Alex closed his eyelids and fell almost instantly into a deep sleep. Luddie rose from his kneeling position beside the bed and went over to get the camera, studying Alex all the while for any signs of change.

Everything appeared to be normal for a full twenty minutes, when Luddie noticed the first stirrings in Alex's body. It occurred piecemeal at first, pulsing and bubbling like volcanic action beneath the skin in isolated areas of his body. Then convulsions spread throughout and Alex's entire being quaked violently. Portions of his frame began to expand; Luddie pointed the camera and snapped the first shot. Alex's dark hair faded, becoming lighter and lighter until it had turned completely blond. Luddie snapped away, taking pictures as fast as he could. Still Alex's body continued its metamorphosis, expanding, bubbling, throbbing.

Soon Alex's face assumed new proportions. His features twisted, changed, reformed themselves. His body stretched and grew to over six feet tall. Luddie pressed the shutter release again and then, finally, the changes taking place in Alex came to an end. The individual lying in bed where Alex had lain moments before looked nothing at all like him. He was taller, startlingly handsome, with high cheekbones, straight blond hair, and a lean, well-muscled body devoid of fat. Luddie stepped back away from the bed as the creature came alive. He watched it from the corner as it flexed its fingers, opened its eyes, then sat up abruptly and threw its feet over the side of the bed. The creature stretched its arms and yawned, stood up and yawned again, facing away from Luddie.

Luddie watched as this new Alex furrowed his brow, apparently aware that he was somehow connected to this apartment, but not exactly why or how.

When the new Alex finished dressing, Luddie stepped into the center of the room, called to get his attention, aimed the camera and shot. The flash startled the being, which raised an arm across its eyes.

"Well I'll be!" Luddie exclaimed, a shock of recognition in his voice. "Nice to meet you. Aren't you—?"

Instantly, the new Alex underwent another transformation as Luddie stopped in mid-sentence. The handsome face became a snarling, menacing visage with a long, pointed snout and a large, gaping jaw out of which two sharp fangs descended to below the bottom lip. Its nails grew into miniature, razor-sharp swords. Most terrifying of all, the creature's azure eyes now glowed with the intensity of fiery red coals.

Luddie stepped backward as a low growl rumbled from the creature's throat and it advanced slowly toward him. He put the camera down on the bureau and looked around; there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Now the growl became a horrific roar, deafening and chilling in its intensity. The creature advanced a step and crouched. Luddie dropped into a crouch himself, prepared for the worst. He willed himself into combat form, transfiguring his nails into sharpened points and his teeth into elongated fangs as menacing as the creature's. The creature halted and roared, carefully measuring its transformed opponent. Luddie roared back, snarled, and circled to the side. The creature crouched lower and circled with him, then with lightning speed sliced its right claw through the air. Luddie saw it coming and caught the wrist before the claws struck home. The creature lunged with its left and Luddie whipped his head to the side, blinking as the dagger-like nails whizzed past his face.

With the creature slightly off balance after the second thrust, Luddie spun on his heels, his hand still locked on the monster's wrist, pulled it over his head and flung it to the floor. He jumped on top of the stunned form, his claws ready to strike a mortal blow to its throat, but the demon rolled out easily from underneath and catapulted to its feet. Now Luddie was at a temporary disadvantage as the creature moved in again.

Luddie thrust twice with his left, but the monster easily blocked his jabs. They each retreated a foot, searching for an opening. Suddenly, the creature rushed him. Instead of sidestepping this time, Luddie advanced as though to meet the charge, then ducked low as the monster's momentum carried him over Luddie and sent him hurtling to the floor. Luddie grabbed it around the neck and waist, lifted it above his head and spun around in dizzying circles. Then he hurled the demon against a framed Warhol poster on the wall, splintering the room with flying glass.

The monster caromed off the wall and landed on its side, lying there stunned for several moments. Luddie moved in quickly, but the creature recovered and rolled onto its hind legs to face him, growling as it did so. It crouched as though it was preparing to lunge again, its evil,

fiery eyes locked on Luddie's. With blinding speed it leaped forward just as Luddie launched a charge of his own. They crashed head-on and fell to the floor a foot or so apart.

Luddie started to swipe at the monster's face with his left, but the demon charged first, catching Luddie across his legs and knocking him off-balance. The creature was over him before Luddie could recover. It grabbed him by his collar and belt, hoisted him into the air, and heaved him across the room onto a table that collapsed beneath his falling body. Luddie sat up and turned, only to see the well-aimed kick for a split second before it caught him on the temple. The second kick struck his ribs, knocking him back against the wall.

Hurt, dazed, but not unconscious, Luddie saw the third kick whipping straight at his face. He caught the ankle just before impact, twisted, and spun the monster to the floor. Seeing his momentary advantage, Luddie ignored the pain in his side and jumped to his feet. He grabbed a heavy wooden chair, lifted it overhead, and brought it crashing down on the monster's head. The chair shattered instantly. Luddie tossed what was left of it aside and rushed the beast. Again, the beast recovered quickly. It jumped up and met Luddie's advance, locking its claws on his. They struggled for several seconds, each trying to gain an advantage over the other. Luddie hurled himself backward to the floor, raised his feet to catch the beast in the pit of the stomach as it fell forward, and heaved it backward in a somersault.

Luddie twisted around and jumped onto the monster's back. He grabbed it around the throat and was about to break its neck, when the demon slashed back blindly with its right claw and ripped Luddie's face with its razor-sharp nails. Luddie howled with pain as the wound seared its way deep inside. The skin on Luddie's cheeks and forehead was flayed open to the bone; the pain was excruciating. He roared with hurt and rage. With a maddening, blind fury now, Luddie threw himself headlong at the monster's face, but the beast was ready for him. It smashed its head into Luddie's chest and knocked him to the floor. It lifted Luddie by the neck and tightened its claws against his throat. Luddie felt his strength draining out of him with each passing second. He tried to recover, tried to summon his reserve strength for one final attack, but the reservoir was close to empty.

The beast held him by the throat and brought its face close to his. Luddie could see the gloat of victory in its sizzling red eyes. Defenseless now, unable to continue the fight any longer, Luddie raised his arms slowly with the last ounce of strength he had left. He closed his eyes and concentrated all his energy into his mind. His will took over and, instantly, Luddie disappeared from the demon's iron grip. The claws closed on empty air. Luddie lifted himself to the ceiling, in bat form now, as the monster roared in frustration, searching the room for its errant foe.

Luddie circled around the ceiling, just beyond the beast's reach. He headed toward the open window but the creature, sensing the movement above its head, sprung there first and slammed it shut. The pain inflicted on Luddie's human form earlier still assailed him. His face was on fire from the slashing wounds. He needed to escape, to find sanctuary from this monster and regain his strength so that he could continue the battle another day—before the next full moon when the horrific change in Alex would become permanent. Luddie circled the room, flew throughout the apartment, looking for an exit while the beast howled beneath him, leaping and slashing its claws through the air.

Dracula grew weary, and the pain in his face intensified, rippling throughout his body. The strength in his wings diminished, and as he slowed in his flight the swiping claws of the beast missed him by mere inches. Luddie had difficulty maintaining speed and altitude, and soon fell within range of the deadly claws.

He dove, circling around the monster's waist, then ascended with great difficulty toward the

ceiling. The demon swiped again, this time ripping him across a wing with the tips of its nails.

Luddie faltered, fluttering aimlessly around the living room, then landed on the coffee table in front of the sofa. It was just a matter of time now—seconds at most—before the monster closed in for the kill. Luddie needed to focus his mind for one final transformation. Concentrate and focus. Time was running out rapidly.

He opened his eyes only to see the demon glaring at him with victory in its eyes once again. The monster approached, ready to lunge. Luddie shivered with fear, and summoned his remaining strength into his mind. His final metamorphosis was accomplished with only a microsecond to spare. The beast landed claws first on the coffee table—into a puff of smoke. The claws slashed through the smoky mist that wafted upward toward the ceiling. The beast howled in frustration, battering the table until it shattered into a thousand splinters.

The mist kept rising, and stretched out along the ceiling well beyond the monster's reach. The monster leaped again and again, flailing at the drifting vapor. The vapor floated into the kitchen and the demon saw the vacuum cleaner resting against the wall. It plugged the cord into the socket and flicked the switch on. It raised the vacuum overhead and chased the mist as it sailed across the ceiling. Luddie heard the roaring machine and felt its pull, trying to restrain his movement. He soared faster across the ceiling toward the place where he remembered the door was located.

Luddie found the door on the first try, then swooped down along its surface and sailed out through the crack above the sill. The monster was just behind him and the suction tugged him back before he was completely free. There he was, so close to freedom, and now he was trapped again. He tried to regain his motion out into the hallway, but the power was too strong. He willed himself ahead with all his strength, but his strength was ebbing quickly and he felt his form being pulled back inside the apartment.

Then, abruptly, the power quit as the plug pulled loose from the socket. The suction faded and Luddie soared forward again, faster and faster, his momentum undeterred now by the vacuum cleaner. Free! Free! Free at last! Thank God I'm free at last, Luddie thought, as he flew rapidly down the stairwell and out into the night air.

As mist, Luddie was free of the pains of the flesh, and he moved comfortably through the air although more slowly than he could as a bat. His progress was slowed further by air currents to which he was also vulnerable. Allowing for an even stronger head wind than he faced at the moment, Luddie estimated that he should be back in his apartment in no more than fifteen minutes—time enough to tend to his injuries before he was required to resume his human form in approximately three-quarters of an hour.

He could easily mend his simple cuts by concentrating his mind and melding the broken skin into a seamless, unmarked surface. Minor bruises, likewise, required only brief mental exercises. But the deeper slashes and bruises to his rib cage would be more difficult to heal. He would have to enter a deep sleep for three days and allow his unconscious mind to release its restorative powers.

Luddie floated over the rooftops and contemplated the problems that lay ahead. Alex's alter ego was strong and intelligent, more powerful than he imagined it would be. He had been surprised that he was able to engage it in combat for as long as he did, and he had no illusions about being able to survive a one-on-one struggle with the monster in the future.

His choices were limited. What it came down to was that, if the demon was going to be stopped, Alex had to die before the eclipse of the moon next month. Luddie could see no other alternative. Yet, the thought of murder—the destruction of another being however demonic it

was—was anathema to Luddie. Quite simply, I am not a murderer, he thought as he wended his way through the buffeting air currents. It's not for me to decide who, or what, should live or die. But what was the alternative? Alex was like the carrier of a deadly plague. It was necessary to quarantine a plague-carrier so that he did not infect others.

Quarantine, not kill. Do we kill patients, or are we supposed to treat and comfort them as best we can?

But Luddie knew in the deepest recesses of his being that a quarantine would not work in Alex's case. His change during the next full moon would be permanent. He will not merely turn into the monster for a brief interval, he will *become* the monster. Even so, do we kill the creature on the suspicion that it's evil? Isn't that what humans had done to vampires for centuries? Do I betray my own beliefs by attacking a creature I don't understand? The creature, after all, is only living according to its own nature and its own needs. It attacked me because it felt threatened itself. What about its non-beast aspect? Perhaps that part of its nature was capable of living a productive, constructive, creative existence.

Do I, Ludwig von Dracula, have the right to take the law into my own hands? Isn't that what the legal establishment was for? Could you have a civilized society if everyone struck out at someone or something they considered threatening? The answer was obvious: of course not. As justified as murder might seem to be in the case of the Alex demon, it was still unacceptable. Even if it were evil to its core, no one had a right to strike it down before it committed a crime. It was necessary to take precautions against that eventuality—but morally proper ones. Murdering Alex did not fall into that category; it was just plain wrong. Luddie would have to find another way.

Light winds buffeted the mist that was Ludwig von Dracula. He saw his building up ahead, and concentrated on negotiating the air currents as best he could to complete his journey on time. Soon he was there, and he descended to his window and entered his apartment through a crack in the sill. Inside now, he hovered two feet above the floor, and then expanded from floor to ceiling. The smoky vapor began to swirl, thickening and hardening like an increasingly opaque volcano until a human shape appeared. Luddie had returned to flesh form once again.

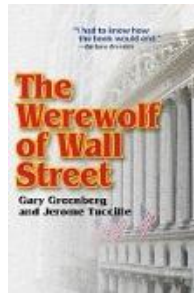
Instantly, the pain returned. It swamped him with a vengeance and he clutched his side to still the agonizing throbbing. His cheeks, his forehead, his entire face was on fire. He limped into the kitchen, took a vial of blood out of the refrigerator, and drained it in one swallow. Then he returned to the living room and sat down on the floor. His left leg hurt, and there was a burning sensation under his right arm where the demon had slashed his wing. The bloody gash snaked downward from his armpit to his elbow. His entire body felt as though it had been hacked and torn by sharp knives.

Luddie pressed the palms of his hands together and raised his fingertips to the point of his chin. Next he closed his eyes and mentally scanned his entire being, beginning with his head and working toward his toes. He focused on each area of his body where he felt pain. When this exercise was completed, he concentrated on the lesser injuries and could actually feel the healing taking place. He touched his face and the skin was smooth to his touch. A remnant of pain remained, but the worst of it was gone.

The bruised ribs and slashed arm would take a bit longer. His mental scanning process had revealed that there were no broken bones, and no damage to the muscles in his arm. He was close to exhaustion now, and dawn was rapidly approaching. It was time to turn in, time to will himself into a deep, deep hypnotic sleep and allow his unconscious mental forces to exercise their power. Total healing, and the complete restoration of his strength and vibrancy, required undisturbed

rest for three full days.

With great exertion, Luddie lifted himself off the floor and walked over to his coffin. Rarely in the past had he felt so weary of mind, body, and spirit. His injuries, his exhaustion, his epic struggle with the demon all weighed heavily upon him. But even worse than these, there was also the question of Alex—the young human male whom he had genuinely come to like, as a human being. But what was he to do about Alex in his soon-to-be permanently transformed state? That was a dilemma with no easy solutions. That was his most terrifying nightmare come to life.



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Chapter Twenty-Two

Dracula opened his eyes for the first time in three nights. He pressed his hand against the coffin lid and pushed it off to the side. He lay still in the coffin for several moments, and then flexed his muscles one at a time, testing them for soreness. His pain of several days before had completely disappeared. In his cursory examination, he could detect no sign of injury.

Gradually, the details of his war with the demon flooded into his mind. He recalled everything all at once: the lethal swipes with claws and fangs, the pulverizing smashes, the brutal, exhausting, and nearly fatal brush with death. The monster was terrifying, all but invincible. Somehow, he would have to find a way to stop it.

Then, almost as an afterthought, Luddie remembered why he had been there that night; the whole purpose of the visit was to observe Alex as he underwent his transformation. The task had been more perilous than he imagined, nearly costing him his life. Now that he knew the nature of Alex's infection in all its horrifying implications, he had to act at once. Luddie jumped out of his coffin and went over to the telephone. He dialed Alex's number and fidgeted anxiously as the ringing went unanswered. After three more fruitless attempts to reach him during the next ten minutes, Luddie decided to get over to Alex's apartment immediately and wait for him to turn up. He shuddered to think of what might happen if that creature survived the next full moon.

Luddie walked over to the window and willed himself into bat form. Minutes later, he landed on the window ledge of Alex's apartment. The window was broken, so he just flew through the shattered frame. Once inside, he metamorphosed back to human form and looked around at the wreckage.

The physical pain had left Luddie, but the mental anguish he experienced upon revisiting the scene of his mortal struggle with the monster immediately overwhelmed him. Poor Alex, he thought, an innocent victim in this epic saga, and yet a lethal and nearly indestructible adversary. Luddie picked his way among the ruins, shocked by the extent of the destruction. Any observer

who had not been a party to the carnage would assume that a marauding army had laid waste to Alex's apartment. How was it possible that only he and one other creature had done all this? The battle had seemed endless at the time, yet it could not have lasted longer than a few minutes from start to finish. So much damage, so much devastation, so many near rendezvous with death in the blinking of an eye.

Incongruously, Luddie felt a sharp pang of hunger accompanied by a spasm of dizziness. How long had it been since he'd eaten last? He stepped over the splintered remains of the furniture and the broken glass, and went into the kitchen. Alex's refrigerator contained a broiled chicken breast neatly enclosed in plastic wrap, and a single bottle of beer—a typical bachelor's spread, not unlike his own. It was not exactly to his taste; he preferred spicier fare like Tex-Mex and Cajun food. But there was no other choice.

Luddie opened the beer first and took a long, refreshing swallow. Then he sunk his teeth into Alex's chicken breast and polished it off in several voracious mouthfuls. When he was done, he wandered through the apartment, looking for . . . for . . . there it was, just where he remembered, over by the window. The door of the camera was open and the exposed film lay beside it. Damn! Damn! His photographs—his only proof of what he had witnessed and experienced—were worthless. Then again, Luddie had not expected anything else. His situation was hopeless. How could he expect Alex to believe him in the absence of any shred of convincing evidence?

There was nothing to do now but wait. Luddie walked over to the sofa, found the remote, and clicked on the television. Thank God that, at least, still worked. He sat down and glowered at the screen, oblivious to what was on, and waited for Alex to return home.

Alex was not in the best of moods when he dropped off Sally at her apartment. She had talked him into eating Mexican food even though he despised the stuff, particularly those pasty beans and that gloppy guacamole that he believed he was allergic to. It was the only food that caused him to break out in rashes for days afterward. He was irritable and still hungry for something civilized—like a grilled chicken breast—as he mounted the stairs to his apartment. Just as he paused to catch his breath before going in, Alex thought he heard the muted sounds of voices inside. Was that Jay Leno in there, making corny jokes as usual? He could have sworn his television set was off when he left; he hadn't watched the idiot box in days.

Flinging caution to the winds, Alex decided to go in and investigate. What else could happen to him after the events of the past few days? A mugging? A knock on the head? That would be a welcome diversion. Alex inserted the key in the lock, hesitated a moment, then gripped the door handle and got ready to turn it when it flew out of his hand.

"Luddie!"

"Alex! Good Lord! You scared the life out of me. Come in already."

"What are you doing here?"

"We had an appointment, remember? I said I'd give you a rundown on everything that took place when the full moon was over. I've been waiting for hours."

"How can you . . . how can you stand there and talk to me so calmly after trashing my apartment?" The tone of Alex's voice suggested he was on the verge of hysteria.

"Don't be absurd, Alex. I didn't trash your apartment."

"You had your vampire friends in! My place looks worse than the day after a toga party!"

"Nonsense. Why would I do something like that? What kind of a savage do you think I am?"

"Well, what happened then? If you didn't party in here when I was unconscious, then what?"

“Alex, Alex. Calm down please. Let me give this to you slowly.”

Alex could hardly believe that Ludwig von Dracula was standing before him, admitting him into his own apartment if you please, looking as unruffled as a British peer presiding over High Tea.

“Forget slowly!” Alex yelled. “I want to know what happened all at once. I’m a big boy. I can take it. Trust me.”

“What happened, in a nutshell, was, well, you.”

“Me? So it was my fault, right?”

“Yes and no. In a way, that is.”

“I can’t take it.” Alex’s patience was depleted. “I’ve been to dinner, I’ve got hives, and I’m still famished. I need a quick bite and a beer. Just make yourself at home for a minute . . . if you’ll forgive the absurdity of that suggestion.”

“Oh dear. I’m so sorry. I should have brown-bagged it, but then I would have had to walk over as a human, I’m afraid, and I was in such a hurry.” Luddie pointed with embarrassment to the pile of chicken bones and crushed beer can on the counter.

“He eats my food, too.” Alex collapsed onto the sofa in exasperation. “He destroys my home, then comes back uninvited, tells me it’s my fault, and eats my food. So what’s next? Maybe you want to fuck my girlfriend, too?”

“I’m so sorry, Alex. I was in a mad rush to get over here and I didn’t have a chance to eat. I didn’t realize it would upset you so much.”

“You don’t like me, do you?” Alex said. “I mean, don’t deny it. Let’s just get it out in the open right now.”

“I do deny it. I’m quite fond of you actually, as hard as it is for you to accept that.”

“Then why me? Why not find somebody else to destroy?”

“Will you listen to me for just a minute?”

“Sure. Just try to make it good. My credulity’s already stretched to the max.”

“You may find this difficult to believe, but I had a terrible, terrible fight with a werewolf here the other night.”

“Everybody has a bad date once in a while. That’s no reason to get ballistic over it.”

“I’m talking serious struggle. I’m talking werewolf, Alex. Bloodcurdling, frothing, killer monster. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I’m not responsible for your friends, Luddie. Who told you to invite someone . . . er, something like that to my apartment?”

“It was you, Alex. You’re the werewolf. When the moon is full you become another being . . . actually, two beings, one of which is a powerful but violent monster. That’s what accounts for your blackouts.”

“You told me the odds against that happening were—”

“The odds were overwhelmingly against it, against your being infected by Tanya’s bite in any way. You cashed in on a long shot, I’m afraid.”

“Sort of like hitting the werewolf lottery, is that it?”

“No need to get snotty about it. I’m just as upset as you are.”

“Where’s your proof, Luddie? You must have taken some pretty awesome photographs of all this, something fit for Ripley’s Believe It Or Not.”

Luddie shook his head in embarrassment, seemingly beyond belief himself. “That’s the sad part, Alex. I had to flee for my life. I was almost killed. The creature is as intelligent as it is vicious. He, it, whatever, exposed the film after I left.”

“So you got nothing?”

Luddie walked over to the sofa and retrieved the useless film, handing it to Alex. “Ruined. A total waste.”

“How convenient for you. You come back here with the most incredible story I’ve ever heard and expect me to swallow it hook, line, and sinker, without a single shred of evidence.”

“It’s true, my friend, every word. Why would I lie to you about it?”

“I don’t know. You tell me. For whatever twisted reasons you have, I suppose.”

“Listen to me.” Luddie’s voice was firmer and suddenly less defensive. “You metamorphosed into another being. At first you appeared to be a normal, quite attractive human male. I snapped some shots of you like that, and then introduced myself. At that point you turned into a snarling, absolutely horrifying monster, complete with claws and fangs, a consummate killer. We fought, Alex, you and me, right here in your apartment, which accounts for the ungodly mess you see. You—the monster aspect of you—nearly finished me off. I was quite lucky to escape with only a few cuts and bruises and no broken bones. If we fail to do something about this by the next full moon . . . ,” Luddie paused and stared at Alex for emphasis, “. . . this transformation will become permanent. Alex Maltese will cease to exist and will become, instead, this other creature.”

“You say you put up a noble struggle with this . . . this indomitable monster, Luddie?” Alex sneered sarcastically. “I don’t mean to offend you, but you look more like a lover than a fighter to me.”

Ludwig von Dracula stepped closer to Alex. As Alex looked on in horror, Luddie’s light blue eyes turned into glowing red coals. Luddie raised his hands and Alex saw his nails grow three inches longer and take on the aspects of lethal claws. Saber-like fangs dropped down out of Luddie’s upper jaw, extending to his chin.

Alex backed away, too shocked to utter a word.

Without warning, Luddie plunged his claws into the wall and ripped downward, leaving four large trenches and showering plaster onto the floor. Then he went into the kitchen and smashed his fist through the wood cabinets above the sink, shattering Alex’s dinnerware. Luddie was not yet finished. He came back into the living room, hoisted the sofa over his head and heaved it through the wall separating the living room from the bedroom, where it landed on the bed. Then he turned his attention to Alex who was cowering in the corner, trying to make himself invisible. He lifted Alex into the air with one hand and stared into his eyes.

“Convinced?” His voice was a rumbling growl.

“Yes, yes. Of course I’m convinced. Please put me down.”

“You humans!” Luddie said. “Violence is the only language you understand.”

He released Alex and dropped him to the floor. Within seconds, Alex observed the fiery eyes fade back to the friendlier blue, the fangs retract into the upper jaw, and the sharp claws shrink to normal length.

“Why is everyone always so suspicious?” Luddie said. “Is paranoia the normal condition of the human race? It’s so depressing having to *prove* things all the time.”

“I believe you, I believe you,” Alex said, his voice still half an octave higher than usual as he struggled to regain his composure. “Tell me. You said I looked like a normal human being before you identified yourself to me. Did I look anything at all like the real me?”

“Nothing whatsoever. You were totally different in every way.”

“I wonder . . . maybe there’s a chance that the human me . . . before it turns into a monster I mean . . . has some redeeming qualities. If only we knew who it is.”

"I know who it is, Alex. I recognized you at once."

"Anybody I know?"

"I should think everyone has heard about you in your human incarnation, if I may use the word *human* loosely. You, my dear friend Alex, are none other than Luke Fenris."

Alex felt as though he had been cold-conked between the eyes with a sledgehammer. He stared at Luddie with a look of stupefaction on his face. "Luke Fenris!"

"Yes, that's who you are after your transformation."

"But that's impossible. He . . . he's a loathsome fascist, an evil bigot with a warped mind. He represents the worst aspects of American capitalism."

"Oh, I don't know." Luddie smiled indulgently. "The extremes of right and left are equally noxious. Actually, I rather think that he and Uncle Victor would have had a grand old time together. Victor would have admired his . . . panache, shall we say? It's not Fenris, but rather his werewolf aspect that concerns me."

"Yes, well I can work on toning down his extremist tendencies now that I know who he is . . . or I am, I guess I should say. But how do I go about purging the werewolf from my nature? It'd be nice not having to worry about blackouts anymore, living a normal life, opening up more with Sally."

"Sally is your—"

"Lady friend, yes. She thinks I'm such a bear as it is during these full moon cycles."

"I don't think you've grasped the big picture yet, Alex."

"What do you mean?"

"As I've told you, there is no cure."

"So?"

"You will be permanently transformed into Luke Fenris after the next full moon unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you die, my friend."

"You can't be serious."

"I'm completely serious."

"Who's going to kill me? You?"

"Do I look like a murderer to you?"

"The thought crossed my mind a few minutes ago."

"That was only for purposes of demonstration," Luddie said. "You were the one who wanted proof, remember?"

"Well if not you, who then? Who's going to kill me?"

"Do you have to ask? I should think suicide is the only decent alternative, considering the circumstances. Don't you?"

"You expect me to kill myself?" Alex was visibly annoyed, but he tried not to antagonize Luddie and risk having him turn back into that other thing again. "Try not to be so cavalier about my life, if you don't mind. I don't want to ruin your day or anything, but I don't think I'm ready to cash in my chips yet."

"Let's weigh the alternatives, Alex. It's possible that some part of your consciousness might survive in the altered state, but it would be submerged under the more powerful mind of Luke Fenris. Think of what that means. You described him as loathsome, evil, fascistic. Do you want to be responsible for unleashing him in full force against society?"

"Let me ask you this." Alex moved around the room, putting some distance between him and Luddie, who had suddenly become a bit too moralistic for his taste. "Suppose I decide to

live. What action do you plan to take against Fenris on your own?"

"None, I should think. Unless, of course, he tried to make my life unpleasant in some way. If he breaks the law, it's up to the police to intervene. Otherwise, it's not my place to interfere."

"So, except for the werewolf factor, he's just another influence for good or evil in society. It really doesn't concern you what he does, is that right?"

"I'm concerned about losing you as a friend. But . . . either way, that's going to happen."

"So, looking at the big picture as you put it, on one hand I can kill myself now and end the lives of Alex Maltese and Luke Fenris."

"Don't forget the werewolf."

"And the werewolf as well. On the other hand, I get to become rich, famous, and powerful if I live. Not to mention that I also enjoy, once again, the pleasure of marriage to Danielle Dante, the only woman I've ever really loved in my life."

"That sums it up neatly." Luddie's face was grim, and slightly sad.

"It's a bitch of a decision," Alex said, "but, what the hell, I think maybe I can live with option two." He walked over to Luddie, clasped his right hand with both of his and pumped it vigorously. "I want to thank you for everything, Luddie. You've been a prince, a real brick throughout this entire ordeal. I can't tell you how much I appreciate everything you've done for me."

"What are you saying, Alex?"

"I've made my decision. I'm going to allow myself to become Luke Fenris permanently, marry Danielle, and let the chips fall where they may."

"You're overlooking the werewolf aspect. That's part of your nature, too, and it's an extremely violent, powerful, explosive, and uncontrollable force. It's evil and destructive."

"Nobody's perfect, Luddie. We all have our little character flaws."

"It . . . *you* may kill innocent people, Alex!"

"People die every day, from traffic accidents, disease, a random mugging. It's the human condition."

Luddie shook his head from side to side.

"I know you're upset with me," Alex said.

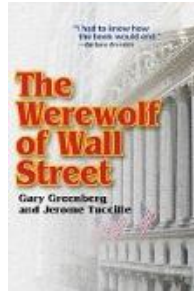
"I'm disappointed in you. There's a difference. You struck me as a man of principle, someone who was concerned about suffering and injustice. Now, here you are, permitting yourself to become an amoral wheeler-dealer who is the antithesis of everything you profess to believe in, as well as a monster that rips people apart with its own claws and fangs. I thought you were better than that, Alex."

"Well, welcome to the real world!" Alex stormed back and forth across the apartment, debating more with himself than with Dracula. "I never said I was some kind of a martyr. Besides, what good would my death do anyway? If Luke Fenris disappeared, some other corrupt, self-serving robber baron would come along and take his place. I'm not responsible for this state of affairs. I've been devoted to a cause, sacrificing my life, living like a scrounge long enough. What good has it done? To hell with that, Luddie. I've got a chance to enjoy life, make an impact, and be with the woman I love. If you can come up with a solution that doesn't require my death, I'll be happy to consider it. But, until then, my mind is made up. I'm going to—"

Alex looked up for the first time since beginning his tirade, but Luddie was gone. He felt a breeze and looked over at the shattered window. In the distance he thought he could make out a black bat winging its way through the night.

"I'm doing the right thing, Luddie!" Alex called after it. "I have no choice, damn it! Can't

you see? I'm doing the right thing. I know I am!"



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