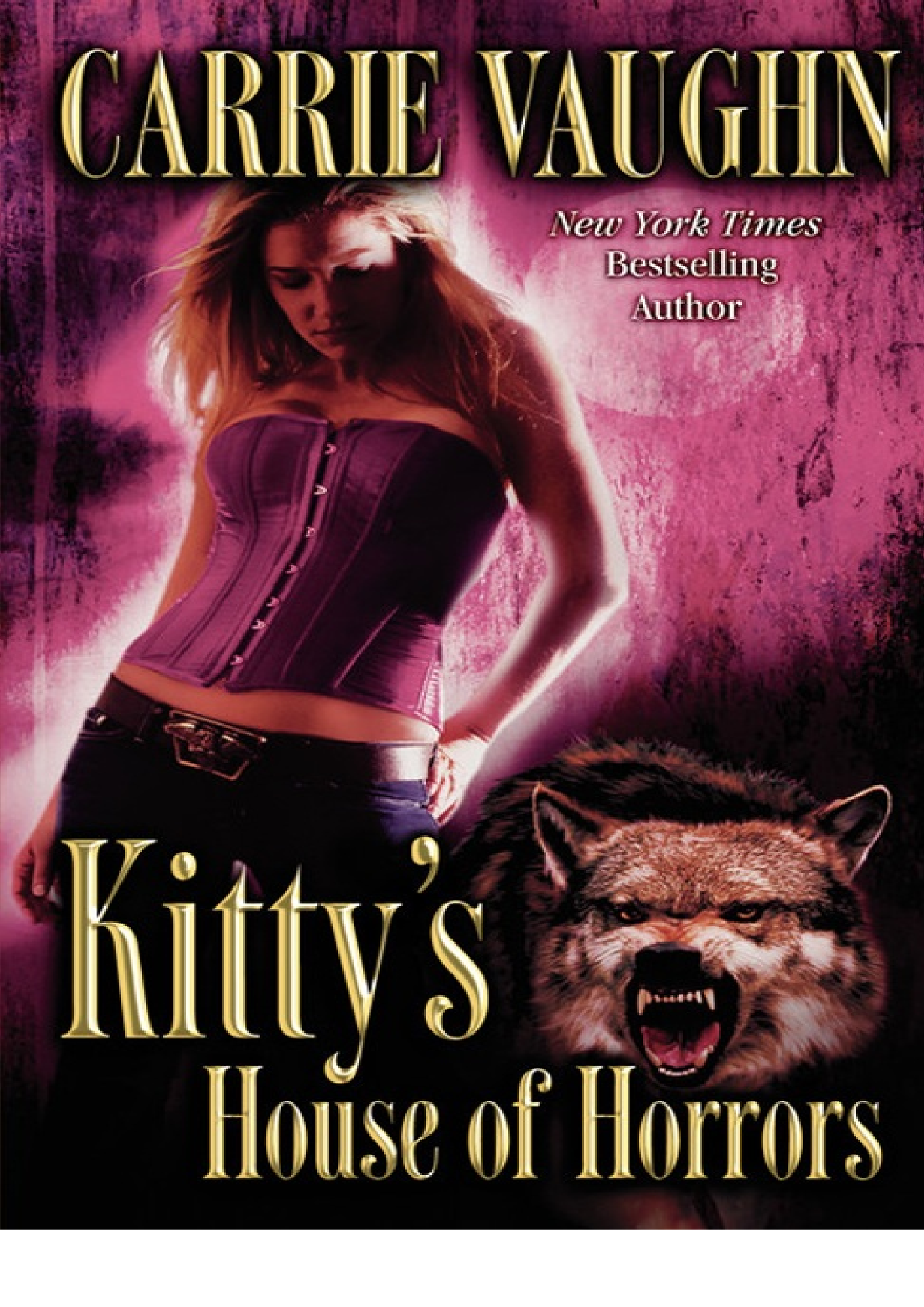


CARRIE VAUGHN

New York Times
Bestselling
Author



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Kitty and The Midnight Hour
Kitty Goes to Washington
Kitty Takes a Holiday
Kitty and the Silver Bullet
Kitty and the Dead Man's Hand
Kitty Raises Hell
Kitty's House of Horrors

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To Daniel and Mike
Comrades in Arms

The Playlist

Tom Petty, "You Don't Know How It Feels"
Vampire Weekend, "M79"
Billie Holiday, "What a Little Moonlight Will Do"
The Bangles, "Angels Don't Fall in Love"
Too Much Joy, "Sort of Haunted House"
The Cure, "A Forest"
Gaelic Storm, "Black Is the Colour"
The Tim O'Brien Band, "Another Day"
The Dresden Dolls, "Good Day"
Sarah McLachlan, "Black"
Public Image Ltd., "The Order of Death"
Pink Floyd, "On the Turning Away"
Jeff Oster, "Tibet"

I knew if I stayed in this business long enough, I'd get an offer like this sooner or later. It just didn't quite take the form I'd been expecting.

The group of us sat in a conference room at KNOB, the radio station where I based my syndicated talk show. Someone had tried to spruce up the place, mostly by cleaning old coffee cups and takeout wrappers off the table. Not much could be done with the worn gray carpeting, off-white walls filled with bulletin boards, thumbtack holes where people hadn't bothered with the bulletin boards, and bottles of those covered with photocopied concert notices and posters for CD releases. The tables were fake wood-grain-colored plastic, refugees from the 1970s. We'd replaced the chalkboard with a dry erase board only a couple of years ago. That was KNOB, on the cutting edge.

I loved the room, but it didn't exactly scream high-powered style. Which made it all the funnier to see a couple of Hollywood guys sitting at the table in their Armani suits and metrosexual savoir faire. They seemed to be young hotshots on the way up—interchangeable. I had to remember that Joey Provost was the one with slicked-back light brown hair and the weak chin, and Ron Valenti was the one with dark brown hair who hadn't smiled yet. They worked for a production company called SuperByte Entertainment, which specialized in reality television. I'd looked up some of their shows, such sparkling gems as *Jailbird Moms* and *Stripper Idol*.

They were here to invite me onto their next show, the concept of which they were eager to explain. "The public is *fascinated* with the supernatural. The popularity of your show is clearly evidence of that. Over the last couple of years, as more information has come out, as more people who are part of this world come forward, that fascination is only going to increase. But we're not just trying to tap into a market here—we hope to provide a platform to *educate* people. To erase some of the myths. Just like you do with your show," Provost said. Provost was the talker. Valenti held the briefcase and looked serious.

"We've already secured the participation of Jerome Macy, the pro wrestler, and we're in talks with a dozen other celebrities. *Name* celebrities. This is our biggest production yet, and we'd love for you to be a part of it."

I'd met Jerome Macy, interviewed him on my show, even. He was a boxer who'd been kicked out of boxing when his lycanthropy was exposed and then turned to a career in pro wrestling, where being a werewolf was an asset. He was the country's second celebrity werewolf.

I was the first.

While working as a late-night DJ here at KNOB, I started my call-in talk-radio show dispensing advice about all things supernatural, and came out as a werewolf live on the air about three years ago. Sometimes it seemed like yesterday. Sometimes it seemed like a million years had passed. A lot had happened in that time.

Arms crossed, I leaned against a wall, away from the table where the two producers sat. I studied them with a narrowed gaze and a smirk on my lips. In wolf body language, I was an alpha sizing them up. Deciding whether to beat them up because they were rivals—or eat them because they were prey. They probably had been talking to Jerome Macy, because they seemed to recognize the signals, even though they didn't quite know what they meant. They both looked nervous and couldn't meet my gaze, even though they tried.

This was all posturing.

“That’s great. Really,” I said. “But what is this show going to be *about*?”

“Well,” Provost said, leaning forward, then leaning back again when he caught sight of my stare.

“We have access to a vacation lodge in Montana. Out in the middle of nowhere, a really beautiful spot with a nice view of the mountains. We’ll have about a dozen, give or take, well-known spokespeople for the supernatural, and this will be a chance for them—you—to talk, interact. We’ll have interviews, roundtable discussions. It’ll be like a retreat.”

My interpretation: we’re going to put you all in a house and watch you go at it like cats and dogs. Or werewolves and vampires. Whatever.

“So... you’re not using the same model that you’ve used on some of your other shows. Like, oh, say, *Cheerleader Sorority House*.”

He had the grace to look a tiny bit chagrined. “Oh, no. This is nothing like that.”

I went on. “No voting people off? No teams and stupid games? And definitely no shape-shifting on camera. Right?”

“Oh, no, the idea behind this is education. Illumination.”

Ozzie, the station manager and my boss, was also at the meeting, sitting across from the two producers and acting way too obsequious. He leaned forward, eager, smiling back and forth between them and me. So, he thought this was a good idea. Matt, my sound guy, sat in the back corner and pantomimed eating popcorn, wearing a wicked grin.

I had a feeling I was being fed a line, that they were telling me what would most likely get me to agree to their show. And that they’d had a totally different story for everyone else they’d talked to.

I hadn’t built my reputation on being coy and polite, so I laid it out for Mr. Provost. “Your shows aren’t exactly known for... how should I put this... having any redeeming qualities whatsoever.”

He must have dealt with this criticism all the time, because he had the response all lined up. “Our shows reveal a side of life that most people have no access to.”

“Trainwrecks, you mean.”

Valenti, who had watched quietly until now, opened his briefcase and consulted a page he drew out. “We have Tina McCannon of *Paradox PI* on board. Also... Jeffrey Miles, the TV psychic. I think you’re familiar with them?” He met my gaze and matched my stare. One predator sizing up another. Suddenly, I was the one who wanted to look away.

“You got Tina to agree to this? And Jeffrey?”

Both of them were psychics; Tina worked with a team of paranormal investigators on prime-time TV, and Jeffrey did the channeling-dead-relatives thing on daytime talk shows. I’d had adventures with them both, and the prospect of spending two weeks in a cabin in the middle of nowhere taping a TV show was a lot more attractive if I’d be doing it with them.

“What do you think, Kitty? Do we have a deal?”

I needed to make some phone calls. “Can I get back to you on that? I need to check my schedule. Talk it over with my people.” Most of my people were already in the room, but the Hollywood talk show amused me.

“Of course. But don’t take too long. We want to move on this quickly. Before someone else steals the idea.” Provost actually winked at that, and his smile never faltered. Valenti had settled back and was regarding me coolly.

“You’re not scheduling this over a full moon, are you?” I said.

“Oh, no, certainly not,” Provost said, way too seriously.

“Just one more question,” I said. “Have you signed on Mercedes Cook?”

Provost hesitated, as if unsure which answer would be the right one. I knew which answer was the right one: if the ~~Broadway star/vampire/double-crossing fink~~ was on the show, I was staying as far away as possible.

“No,” he said finally. “She turned us down flat.”

Wonders never ceased. But they’d asked her. And she’d said no, so that was a point in the show’s favor. “Ah. Good,” I said, and Provost relaxed.

We managed polite farewells and handshakes. Ozzie and I walked the two producers outside to their rented BMW. Provost continued to be gracious and flattering. Valenti stayed in the background. Sizing me up, I couldn’t help but think.

After they’d driven away, we returned to the building. The summer sun beat down. It had been a beautiful day, a recent heat spell had broken, and the air felt clean. Smelled like rain.

I turned to Ozzie. “Well?”

He shrugged. “I think it’s a great opportunity. But it’s up to you. You’re the one who’s going to have to go through with it.”

“I just wish I knew what kooky tricks they have up their sleeves. What are going to be the consequences if I do this?”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” he said.

I hated that question. Reality always came up with so much worse than I could imagine. “I could make an idiot of myself, ruin my reputation, lose my audience, my ratings, my show, and never make a living in this business again.”

“No, the worst that could happen is you’d die on film in a freak accident, and how likely is that?” Trust Ozzie to be the realist. I glared at him.

“Who knows? At best it’ll draw in a whole new audience. To tell you the truth, with people like Tina and Jeffrey involved, it kind of sounds like fun.”

“You know what I’m going to say,” Ozzie said. “Any publicity is good publicity.”

So far in my career, that had been true. I was waiting for the day when it wasn’t. “Let me call Tina and Jeffrey and find out why they signed on.”

* * *

I had Tina’s cell phone number stored on speed dial—she was one of my go-to people on all things weird—and called her as soon as I got back to my office and shut the door. I expected it to roll over to voice mail but was pleasantly surprised when she answered on the second ring.

“Kitty!” she said, before hello even. Caller ID made everyone psychic, at least with phone calls.

“Hi, Tina. How are you?”

“It’s so good to hear from you! Is everything okay?”

People always sounded worried when I called them. Maybe because I only ever called a lot of them when I was in trouble and needed help. I needed to set up more lunch dates or have more parties, to cure people of the idea that a call from me automatically equaled danger. Then again, that was probably a lost cause.

“Everything’s fine for once, I think.”

“I love how you never sound sure when you say that,” Tina said cheerfully.

I sighed. “I’m afraid if I relax at all the universe will decide I need a challenge.” Which brought

me to the business at hand. "I've just had a visit from a couple of guys with SuperByte Entertainment."

"Oh yeah," she said. "Those guys. What a couple of freaks, huh?"

I agreed; I'd found them eerily plastic, like they'd been pressed from a mold: Hollywood sleazebag. "This show they're putting together? They said you were on board, and I wanted to ask you why you agreed to it. Do you think it's a good publicity opportunity? Did you... I don't know... get a good vibe from those guys or what?"

She paused for long enough I thought we'd lost the connection. "Tina?"

When she finally spoke, she sounded confused. "Um... I mostly signed on because they said that you'd already signed on."

"What?"

"They told me you'd already agreed to do the show. I figured if you'd decided it was okay, it was a good idea, and I thought it'd be fun hanging out with you again."

"Tina—I heard about this for the first time this afternoon. I hadn't agreed to anything."

"God, they lied to me. I shouldn't be surprised." I imagined her planting her hand on her forehead. I tried not to sound angry. "You're psychic! Can't you tell when somebody's lying?"

"I'm psychic—that doesn't mean I can read minds," she shot back. "Kitty, you met those guys. They were really convincing!"

"You didn't think to call me to talk about it first?"

"No. I mean, face it—this show totally sounds like something you'd do."

Any more arguing stalled in my throat. Because she was right. I had a few crazy publicity stunts on my own under my belt. And why did I get the feeling Jeffrey Miles would give me a similar story? Those bastards had *used* me. Flung my name around like so much currency. I ought to be flattered.

"That's it," I said, grumbling. "I'm not doing a show run by lying Hollywood scumbags."

"Kitty, please, you *have* to sign on. You can't leave me all alone with this thing. You owe me."

Crap. That was a pretty compelling argument. If I left Tina high and dry with this, I'd feel guilty about it for the rest of my life.

"Did you sign anything? Surely if you did you can get out of it."

"Well," she started, and I waited for the other shoe to drop. "Here's the thing: this really could be great publicity." That was going to be everybody's excuse for anything, wasn't it? She continued, "And the other thing is I figure this is the only way we can counter some of the real wackos they're bound to recruit for this. Right?"

"The fake psychics and emo vampires?" I said. I knew exactly what she was talking about: the kind of crap that gave people like us a bad name, that we had to spend half of our time apologizing for.

"Right," she said.

"You've got a point."

"I'm not going to tell you what to do, Kitty. But please think about backing me up on this thing."

"All right. I'll think about it."

"Thanks, Kitty. Come on, it'll be fun!"

Maybe we could *make* it fun. We'd be like two girls at summer camp.

We clicked off, and I dialed another number. Joey Provost had left KNOB only an hour before; he might not even have arrived at the airport yet.

He answered his phone with, "Hey, Kitty, tell me you've decided to say yes. Don't let me get on the plane without hearing yes."

I suddenly wanted to punch him. Sometimes I really hated caller ID. "Why did you lie to Tina and

Jeffrey and tell them I'd already agreed to do the show?"

He hesitated only a beat. "Who told you that? Who said I told them that?"

"I called Tina! *She* told me!"

"Well, yes. Okay," he said, barely stumbling on the words.

"Explain," I said.

"All right. I'll level with you. We need names for a production like this, and I had to start somewhere. You were at the top of our list—you were always at the top of the list. With you on board half our other names didn't hesitate."

"Why didn't you talk to me first? Why did you have to lie about it?" I said.

"I had to have some way of convincing you, didn't I? Once I got the others signed up, I could do that."

The trouble was, he made sense, in a weird corporate-logic way. I understood why he did it; but he wouldn't admit there was anything wrong with it.

I tamped down on my anger. "Well, now you have to convince me why I should agree to work with a scheming liar."

He took a deep breath, and the edge of desperation in his voice made him sound honest and heartfelt. "Look, Kitty, I know I shouldn't have lied, I should have been upfront. I know that, and I'm sorry. But this is my big chance. This is SuperByte's big chance. We probably look like a bunch of bottom-feeders—and I freely admit that's what we've been until now. But we're trying to rise above all that and get out of the late-night cable gutter. We have our sights set on A-list cable, maybe even network prime time. We want to go upscale, and this is our vehicle. Having you on board will help us do that."

The guy gave a good pitch, I had to give him credit for that. I had to admit, I was a tiny bit flattered—me, A-list? Really? This wasn't to say the whole thing still didn't sound as exploitative as hell.

But I was always saying I wanted the supernatural out in the open. Didn't I want to have a hand—or claw—in this? If it turned out well, yes, I did. If it didn't turn out well... maybe I just had to take that gamble.

"All right," I said.

"All right, you're in?" Provost said hopefully.

"All right I'll think about it. Seriously."

"That's all I can ask for," he said, back in Hollywood deal-making mode. "Call me if you have any more questions."

Hanging up, I felt like the decision had already been made. But there was still one person I had to talk to about it.

Home was a condo near the Cherry Creek area. I'd spent the whole drive there arranging the coming conversation in my head. Maybe it would even go a little like how I planned it.

The other person I had to talk to was Ben. My husband. We'd been married for a year. And we hadn't killed each other yet, which I was pretty proud about. Not that we would literally do that, but we were both werewolves, and we *could*—if we didn't depend on each other so much.

Ben was a lawyer with his own practice. He worked from home, which meant he was already in the living room watching evening news on TV when I came in, wincing and looking guilty, sure he'd suspect something was going on.

But he hardly noticed. "Good, you're home," he said. "I have some news."

He seemed positively bubbling. I blinked at him. Wow—my conversation was already derailed and it hadn't even started yet.

“So do I,” I jumped in. “I need some advice, actually. I just need to talk this over with someone a little more objective than I am.”

“You first,” he said. “Let's get yours out of the way so we can get to the exciting part. 'Cause mine's better.”

Now I was intrigued. I almost argued, but I wanted to have this talk before I chickened out. I slid next to him on the sofa.

“I've got an invitation to appear on a reality TV show—” I held up my hand to stop him because he'd already opened his mouth to argue. “They're inviting a bunch of supernatural celebrities. Remember Tina McCannon from *Paradox PI*? She's signed up, and so has Jeffrey Miles, and I don't know who else they've got. But it looks like they're trying to do this with a little credibility. It'll tape over two weeks in Montana. They've got this hunting lodge or something, and they say they want it to be educational. Consciousness-raising. You know?” I realized I was trying to make it sound good. I wanted him to think it was a good idea.

He sat back, brows raised, looking at me like I was a little bit crazy. I'd thought he was long past being surprised by anything I got mixed up in.

“It sounds like the setup for a horror movie to me,” he said.

“God, please don't say that. I'm already anticipating nightmares over this.”

“Then why are you even thinking about it?”

“Publicity,” I said, and I could feel the wild gleam in my eye.

“You show-business people are weird,” Ben said.

I liked to pretend I wasn't exactly part of show business. Sure, I was in the business of entertaining people, but I was on radio. On the fringe. And I was even on the fringe as far as radio was concerned. It wasn't like I was in the thick of the Hollywood madness of *real* show business, right? At least, not yet.

But you know? He was right. Show business was weird.

“It pays pretty well. And. Well. What I'm really worried about is being away from you for two weeks.”

Ben and I were a pack. Even if we hadn't been the alpha werewolves leading the Denver pack, the two of us were a pair. A matched set. The idea that wolves mate for life isn't accurate—in the wild, wolves will find a new mate if one of their pair dies, and an alpha male will mate with several females if the pack is prosperous. But Ben and I were pretty solid, and since we'd hooked up we hadn't been apart for more than a couple of days. That was the worst part of this whole deal. I'd gotten used to having him in my life, and I didn't like the prospect of being without. Of not having my guy watching my back.

I saw some of my own thoughts reflected back at me: hesitation, uncertainty. The conflict between human and wolf.

“I don't know,” he said, shrugging. “If we were a normal couple and you really needed to do this for your career, it wouldn't even be a question, would it?”

We tried to be normal. We tried not to let our wolf sides overrule us. It was a dominance thing, just like being part of a wolf pack. Every time the wolf side won an argument, we felt a little less human.

“I think I'd still miss you.” I leaned my head on his shoulder.

“Thanks.” He kissed the top of my head, and I could have stopped talking about anything and just cuddled for the next hour or so. “But you still want to know if I think it's a good idea or a bad idea.”

“Yeah.”

“It sounds... *interesting*.”

“That is *such* a loaded word,” I said.

“And you said Tina’s agreed to it? She’s cool.”

“Yeah, and Jeffrey Miles—you remember him, from the hearings in D.C.? He’s cool, too.”

He pulled back just enough to look at me. “Do you know what I think? I think it’ll be good for you to get away for a little while. Since I came along and you took over the pack, you haven’t had a chance to do your own thing. You should go. Think of it as a vacation.”

I hadn’t looked at it that way. “Most men would get suspicious if their wives wanted to go on vacation alone for a couple of weeks. Come to think of it, most women would get suspicious if their husbands suggested they go on vacation alone.”

“Honey, I can’t hide anything from you. You’d smell it on me.”

“Hmm, true.” I turned my face to his neck and took in his scent, distinctively his, soap and sweat, spice and wolf.

He kissed me—a quick peck on my forehead. “I still have my news.”

“Is it really better than mine?”

He picked up a letter from the coffee table, marked with some kind of state government seal at the top. Ben was a lawyer; he had dozens of official-looking papers fanned out on the table.

Then he said, “Cormac has a parole hearing.”

Moving on to the next call, now. Hello, Audra,” I said into the mike.

“Hi, Kitty, yeah, so I’m like a really big fan. I love your show, really.”

“Great, thanks very much.”

“So, like, I totally need your help. I have this friend who thinks she’s a werewolf. But she’s totally not. I even went out with her on the last full moon. And I’m like pointing at the sky, pointing at the moon, going, ‘Look, you haven’t turned into a wolf—you’re not a werewolf!’ And she’s all like, ‘But I am on the *inside*. I have the *soul* of a wolf.’”

These potpourri shows were great for when I didn’t have anything else planned. Just let people call in with all the problems that have been brewing over the last few weeks. Great—in theory. But it meant I couldn’t complain about what calls I *did* get.

I had so much going on in my personal life right now I had a hard time focusing on the call. Cormac’s parole hearing was scheduled at the same time I was supposed to be in Montana taping what SuperByte Entertainment was now calling *Supernatural Insider*. I wouldn’t be here to give him or Ben moral support. That pissed me off. But I was also so darned excited over the prospect of Cormac getting out of prison. Apparently, he’d been a good boy, and that shaved enough time off that now, with almost half of his four-year sentence completed, he was eligible for parole, and Ben said it was all but a done deal. Cormac had friends and family in the area, a place to live, and a plan to look for a job. By all appearances he was completely reformed and repentant. At least, he’d convinced the prison psychologist of it. And what I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall during those sessions...

So in as little as a month from now, he could be out. A free man. I was excited—and more than a little anxious.

I didn’t know what to think about Cormac anymore. The first time I met him, he’d tried to kill me but I talked him out of it. The next time I met him, we traded information, because we were both after the same bad guy. The third time, we’d almost fallen into bed together. We didn’t, because he had a thing against werewolves. After that—we were friends. We acted like it, mostly. We’d come to each other’s rescue often enough.

I met Cormac before I met Ben. Cormac referred me to Ben—his cousin—when I needed a lawyer. Then Cormac brought Ben to me right after Ben had been bitten and infected with lycanthropy. I took care of Ben, and Ben and I—well, we bonded, and Cormac was left out in the cold. Then he came to our rescue, shot and killed a very bad person on our behalf—and was convicted of manslaughter for it. And each of us thought it was our own fault. We had a bumper crop of guilt between us. Not to mention the sparks still lingering between me and Cormac, though I’d gone and gotten married to his cousin and best friend in the meantime. And in the middle of all that I had this sensationalist TV show to deal with.

I needed a radio advice show *I* could call in to.

Audra was still talking. “... and I know she listens to your show, too, and I just want you to tell her that she’s so full of it.”

I leaned in and turned on my snotty voice. “And why should I tell her that?”

“Because she’s totally deluding herself. She’s not fooling anyone.”

“Maybe she isn’t trying to fool anyone. Maybe she really honestly feels this way, and if it helps her

feel better about herself, and she isn't hurting anything, who are we to argue? As her friend you ought to be a little more supportive, don't you think? She's not actually hurting anyone, is she?"

"Well, no. But it's just so stupid!"

"I think you're being a little judgmental."

"But you're a real werewolf—why are you standing up for her?"

"Because I think, based on what you've told me, that she's right and you're wrong."

Audra made an offended grunt. "That's so not fair!"

Lots of people called in to the show. Lots of people claimed to be fans. Yet they always seemed surprised when I gave them the same smackdown I gave ninety percent of my callers.

"Let me ask you a question, Audra. Why are you so threatened by this? Why does it bother you so much that she calls herself a werewolf when she physically isn't one?"

"Because she's *wrong*. And she's just such a snob about it. Like she's all better than me because she's a werewolf when what she really is is *crazy*."

I straightened. "Why does this girl even hang out with you when you're so mean to her?"

"I'm not mean to her! I'm trying to get her to wake up to reality!"

"To which you've applied a narrow definition."

"And she can't face up to the fact that I'm a vampire."

"Huh?"

"The only reason she keeps going on about being a werewolf is because I'm a vampire, and she's jealous."

I blinked, my brow furrowed in confusion. My lack of a poker face was another reason I was better off on radio than TV. Which was something else that was going to make *Supernatural Insider* interesting.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You're a vampire? Really?" 'Cause right then I would have laid money that she wasn't.

"Well..." she said. "I have the *soul* of a vampire."

I didn't know what it was that made people bare their souls and tell me the truth when I had no way of knowing whether they were vampires, lycanthropes, or the Queen of Sheba. Maybe it was that radio was simultaneously so personal and anonymous. They could speak, I could hear them, hear the tears in their voices. But they could stay alone, no one had to see them crying, and as soon as they hung up the phone the confession might never have happened. But I was happy for the confessions, because they were made for great entertainment.

"Audra, Audra, Audra," I said. "You know some people believe that vampires don't even have souls?"

"But I *do*, I *understand*, I have the innate sense of style and superiority! I feel the music of the night!"

Oh no. One of *those*. "Audra, do you collect dried red roses in your bedroom? In fact, your whole bedroom is done up in black and red, isn't it? You dress in black and wear a lot of eye makeup? And you listen to a lot of Sarah Brightman?"

"Yes," she said, tentative.

"Okay. Here's what I think. I think you're a bit of a whiner."

"But you're not being *fair*! You're not even *listening* to me!"

Well... "I'd like you to try something. I want you to count to ten and exhale slowly. It's a calming exercise. It works for me every time. Can you try it now? Deep breath, and one, two, three—"

"But I *am* calm!"

“Just keep up that counting, Audra, and I bet if you tell your friend that you’ll stop making fun of her if she stops making fun of you, you guys’ll get along just great.” Gratefully, I hit the cutoff. “Next call, what have you got?”

“Hi, Kitty. Thanks for taking my call. I want to talk about bounty hunters. Those guys who go out hunting supernatural monsters.”

This night was definitely not going my way. I didn’t want to talk about bounty hunters, but who was I to deny my audience? I knew I wasn’t going to like where this went. I sighed. “What about them?”

“You’ve met a lot of these bounty hunters, right? Why don’t we hear more about them in the news and stuff? I’d have thought they’d want publicity, that they’d want to get some credit for the work they do.”

Looking back on it, I was kind of shocked at how many supernatural bounty hunters I had met. Not by intention, of course. Self-preservation dictated I stay as far away from professional assassins as possible.

“If they started working in public,” I said, “then they’d have to be held accountable for what they do. Right now, when they’re underground, they don’t have to put on a good face for anyone. And when the people they’re hunting are also underground, so that no one misses them when they disappear, there’s no accountability, no due process, and sometimes no justice.”

Except in rare cases, like Cormac’s, when he’d been justified in making the kill—and had been convicted for it anyway. The no-win situation. I wasn’t going to bring that up if I could help it, which was part of why this topic was making me nervous. It was hitting too close to home. Never mind having to talk to listeners who clearly wanted people like me dead. Weren’t they supposed to be fans?

This guy wasn’t buying it. “Let’s face it, people like that have been around for centuries, right? And the freaks haven’t taken over yet, so it must be working. What’s wrong with letting them do their jobs?”

Sometimes I thought my listeners were the smartest people around. Sometimes I despaired for the human race.

I said, “I think the question at hand isn’t whether or not these hunters should go public, but whether they should be regulated by the government. Licensed, trained, paid regular salaries. Made an extension of existing law enforcement. Hell, train existing law enforcement and let them do the same job for supernatural citizens that they do for everyone else. It’s already happening—the police department right here in Denver has a paranatural unit now.”

The guy’s mocking tone was clear. “Oh yeah, that’ll bring a whole lot of protection and justice to the system.”

“Come on, people, have a little faith. You have to start somewhere or you end up with anarchy. You end up with guys claiming to be vampire hunters running around staking whoever they please in self-proclaimed war against evil. Next call, please. Kansas City, you’re on the air.”

“I’m one of those bounty hunters you’re talking about. And let me tell you, you have no *idea* what’s out there.” The voice was female, with an edge. She sounded like someone who was under a lot of stress. Someone who was used to fighting—all the time. She went on. “Vampires and werewolves aren’t even the half of it. Demons, incubi, zombies, warlocks—there’s a battle for good and evil out there, and the only thing standing between nice people like your listeners and total chaos are people like me who are willing to sacrifice everything to keep the rest of you safe. And what thanks do we get? Scars and trauma, and not a whole lot else. Naive do-gooders trying to shut us down when you ought to be on your knees thanking us.”

I stared at the mike, because I could think of only one thing to say, and I knew it was the wrong thing. But I couldn't help it; I said it anyway.

"I'm sensing a lot of anger here."

A beat. Then, "Excuse me?"

"Anger. You know: ire, hostility, rage, fury. You have some."

"Oh, you have no idea. I'm angry about *a lot* of things."

I leaned in, getting ready for a nice long chat. I had a wedge with this one, and she seemed willing to talk. We were going to do some digging. Hell, if she didn't like it, she could always hang up. But I didn't think she would, because she was the one who'd called me, and if she hung up now, then I'd just keep talking about her without her input. I loved this gig.

"Why is that?"

"This is a war," she said. "I'm one of the few people out there who are doing something about it. Of *course* I'm angry!"

"A war? Isn't that a little melodramatic? Most people will go through their whole lives and never encounter anything remotely supernatural. Or at least not recognize it. In my experience, most of this stuff prefers to stay out of sight."

"It stays underground because it's afraid of people like me. Not that anybody knows it."

My own problems were temporarily forgotten, because this was interesting. Brain wheels were turning, giving me an idea. My caller wouldn't like it. "Let me try something out on you. You're not really angry about this so-called war you're talking about. You're angry because you don't get any appreciation. Because you're not getting enough love. Am I right?"

"What?" she spat. "That doesn't have anything to do with it. I don't expect anyone to hand me a medal."

Oh, but I was just getting started. "See, I don't think you're as tough as you think you are. Or as tough as you work so hard to make other people think you are. I think you use violence to cover up a lot of insecurities. You have to be the biggest, baddest beast on the block. But that gets kind of lonely, doesn't it? You don't have a lot of friends, do you?"

"You think in this line of work I can trust anyone? You're more naive than I thought."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"As a matter of fact, I have several." She sounded smug, bragging.

"Really? How is that working out for you?"

She actually sighed, the barest sign she'd let her guard down. "Not very well."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

She hadn't called to argue with me. She'd called because she needed to vent. She needed to *gush*. And gush she did. "It's so hard when you can't count on the people close to you. They're great guys, they really are, but I feel like they're always judging me. Of course they are—they're way too good for me. They deserve someone better, someone who isn't always getting into trouble, who doesn't have my temper. Someone *prettier*."

"Whoa, hold on there, what has that got to do with anything?" I said.

"I just want people to *like* me. But how can I afford to be nice, doing what I do?"

I turned off the snark. "You're a really strong woman, I can tell. You fight a lot of battles, you stand up to a lot of really bad stuff. I get that. So tell me something: why don't you feel better about yourself? Don't you think there's a certain strength to be had in standing tall, in thinking you're beautiful and acting that way? You don't have anything to prove, right?"

"Easy for you to say—everybody loves you." She sniffed. Now I wanted to feed her chocolate and

give her a big hug.

~~“Honey, some days I’m not too sure about that. But ever onward, I say. I gotta tell you, I think we’re a little out of my league here and I’m really not qualified to offer you guidance. Have you thought about getting counseling?”~~

She huffed, and whatever moment of honesty and openness had passed. The defenses slammed back into place. “Counseling? I don’t need help. I’m not *weak*.” She clicked off.

I sighed. “Alrighty, then. Public service announcement here: there’s no shame in getting help. Really. Honest. We’re all in this together, and life is a little easier when we act like it. Well, it looks like we’re out of time. Alas. Now, for next week I’m trying to dig up information on a vampire-only beauty pageant held in New York City last month. Apparently it was all very hush-hush and no one’s talking about it. But I’m bound and determined to bring the winner of that pageant on the show for an interview. Join me for the next exciting *Midnight Hour*. This is Kitty Norville, voice of the night.”

Two weeks later, I was set to go.

Ben and I stayed awake for a long time the night before I had to fly to Montana. I was still contemplating backing out of the whole thing. If he’d told me right then that he didn’t want me to go I’d have called it off and stayed, just for him.

But we were both trying to pretend that neither of us was that needy.

We’d made love, then made love again, and now lay sweaty and tired, arms around each other. I absently ran my fingers through his hair—scruffy and tangled no matter how much I combed it and smoothed it. It was amazing how long I could focus on his hair. I was comfortable, with his arms around my middle holding me to him like I was a giant pillow. His face nuzzled at my neck, moving along the skin, around my ear, into my hair, as he breathed deeply all the while. Like he was trying to memorize my scent.

“I can’t smell that good,” I whispered.

“Yes, you can,” he whispered back. “I’m not going to wash the sheets ’til you get back.”

I pulled away so I could look at him, and so he could see my goofy smile. “That’s so romantic.”

“It is? I was thinking it was another one of those creepy things that only a lycanthrope would say.”

“That, too,” I said. “Maybe I can get myself voted off the island early.”

“Hmm, cool.”

We kissed again, and again, and again.

When Joey Provost said the mountain lodge where the show was being filmed was in the middle of nowhere, he wasn't kidding. I arrived at the Great Falls airport, then had to wait for another, smaller airplane that would take us to the site. The lodge was accessible only via aircraft or a long, hard hike. Was it bad that I kept thinking, limited escape routes?

"Kitty! You're here!" a female voice squealed when I entered the tiny waiting area at the far end of the concourse, and a minute later Tina McCannon had her arms around me.

I resisted an urge to snarl or flee. "Tina, you know better than to sneak up on me like that." But the moment of panic faded—I managed to convince Wolf that just because someone ran at us didn't mean they were attacking—and I hugged Tina back.

Tall, thin, buxom, she was the eye candy for the paranormal-investigator TV show *Paradox PI* and the secret of its success. She had an uncanny sixth sense, and spiritualist tricks like Ouija boards and automatic writing actually worked for her. She always knew which places were really haunted. She was kinda scary—the same way I was kinda scary. We were scary only if someone knew what we were. Otherwise, we must have looked like a couple of really girly girls, hugging and carrying on.

Tina stepped aside, and I glanced past her to see Jeffrey and Ariel, also waiting for the same flight out. TV psychic Jeffrey Miles gave me a big hug. In his thirties, clean-cut, with sandy hair and a photogenic smile, he was handsome and charismatic. Friendly as all get-out. You couldn't help but like him.

"You look great!" he said. And he totally wasn't kidding about that, because he could read auras. At least, he said he could. The first time we met, he'd pegged me as a werewolf before I'd introduced myself. Like Tina, he was too nice and friendly to be *too* scary.

I beamed at him. "Thanks. It's good to see you."

I'd never met twenty-something Ariel in person, but I recognized her because her photo was on her website, and we'd talked on the phone—a lot. Ariel, Priestess of the Night, hosted a talk-radio show like mine, if a bit fluffier. She was way nicer to her callers. Her black hair was pinned up in a bun, and she wore a black dress with a lacy black cardigan, and cool boots. Goth-y, and she wore it well.

"Kitty!" She squealed, just like Tina had. God, this was going to start sounding like a fourth-grade sleepover. She wanted to hug me, too. "I'm so happy you're here and I finally get to meet you."

"God, Kitty. Do you know everyone or what?" Tina said.

"Kinda. Just because I end up interviewing everyone on my show. Come on, sit down, tell me everything."

We traded gossip and recent life stories for about half an hour before the pilot for the local commuter airport came to tell us the plane was ready. We filed out behind him to the tarmac.

My confidence was not boosted. The pilot was brusque, not talkative. He wore what he probably considered to be a uniform, the logo of the tiny commuter airline embroidered on the sleeve of his khaki shirt, tucked into slacks. He wore aviator sunglasses and didn't smile. And the plane—I wasn't convinced it would even get the five of us and our luggage off the ground. We barely fit inside, and the walls seemed paper thin.

I hesitated, staring at the tiny airplane.

"Come on," Jeffrey said, urging me on with a smile. "It'll be an adventure."

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I replied, scowling.

But the pilot knew what he was doing, and the little plane did get off the ground. The engine rumbled so loud we couldn’t talk—or even think much—which left me staring out the windows at the scenery. We quickly left civilized territory, the city falling away, development growing more sparse, until all I saw were open meadows, forests cut through by hills, then mountains. Forty-five minutes later, we landed on a narrow airstrip nestled in a mountain valley. I closed my eyes during the landing and tried not to think about being trapped in a little metal box, hurtling toward the ground.

The plane pulled to a stop, the pilot opened the doors, and we all piled out. The clean mountain air hit me, and all was forgiven.

Another plane, a bit larger than ours, was parked at the end of the narrow airstrip. The pilot explained that it belonged to the production company and had been used to fly in equipment and supplies. The production crew had a pilot with it—there was our escape route. We wouldn’t be completely cut off.

The descriptions I’d been given, variations of “a beautiful mountain retreat,” didn’t do the place justice. I’d seen mountain lodges that didn’t have much thought put into them, squat buildings that looked like they’d been dropped into the landscape by a crane with no consideration of surroundings. This place nestled at the edge of the valley like it had grown there. I had to search for it, where it sat against a hillside—part of the hill, almost. A meadow swept down from it, a clean expanse of rippling green grass dotted with patches of wildflowers. I bet elk and deer grazed here in the mornings. A wide stream ran through the meadow to a lake, and on the other side of the lake—ringing the whole meadow, in fact, up to either side of the lodge—was a forest of tall pines. And beyond the forest, on the horizon, were the mountains. A spur of the Rockies jutted out here, bluish-gray peaks capped with snow even at the end of summer. They were sharp, grouped together like teeth. Clouds were gathering above them. The sun was setting, casting the whole valley in a rich blue twilight. I hoped I got a room with that view.

A few aspens butted up against the lodge itself, which was tasteful log architecture rather than the obnoxious version of it. The whole thing had a warm, rustic atmosphere. My muscles started relaxing.

We spent a few moments just looking around, admiring. I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath of air: trees, stone, a hint of snow, cold water, sun-touched grass, animals in a collage of trails and scents. Untouched wild. So much prey here, my Wolf thought. So many creatures, vegetation, smells all jumbled together, I couldn’t make them all out right away. Also, predators: bears, maybe even mountain lions. Their smells were dangerous.

The pilot unloaded our luggage. I turned to thank him, but he had already climbed back into the cockpit and revved the engines. Taxi ride over. We collected our bags and found a path that led to the lodge.

I took out my cell phone just to check, and sure enough: no signal. I couldn’t say I was surprised. Middle of nowhere and all that.

We climbed the steps to the lodge’s front porch and went inside.

Stopping inside the front door, with the other three crowding around me, I had my first look at the place: the entire first floor was open, with a large, modern kitchen on one side and a living room area on the other. Here, a big stone fireplace dominated the far wall, and a collection of sofas and cushy armchairs gathered in front of it. A couple of cameras and cameramen were set up in opposite corners, staring at us. So, they’d already started collecting footage. One of the cameramen was Ron Valenti, from the meeting with Joey Provost. He’d shed the Armani in favor of jeans and a flannel shirt—very rustic, in a bought-it-out-of-a-high-end-catalog way. He looked at us but didn’t acknowledge us.

Focused on getting that perfect shot.

~~People were sitting on the sofas, looking up at us with interest. One of them was Joey Provost.~~

He stood and came toward me, hand outstretched for shaking. *Another attack*, Wolf growled. We were never going to appreciate aggressive human friendliness, were we? I gritted my teeth, smiled, and shook his hand.

“Hi! Welcome, all of you!” He shook each of our hands in turn. His smile was ferociously pleasant.

“Thanks,” I said, glancing around, taking it in. I smelled old soot and the smoke of many fires from the immense fireplace; dinnertime cooking smells from the kitchen, red wine in glasses, and people. Different kinds of people—not entirely human people. My nose was working overtime, trying to take it all in.

“Why don’t we come in and make some introductions?” That smile never dimmed, and I sensed an edge of anxiety to it. I didn’t envy Provost his job here; he wasn’t just going to be producing a TV show, he was going to be playing mediator and camp counselor.

Provost gestured to a large, aggressively muscled black man with a hooded glare sitting on a chair a little ways from the others.

“Jerome Macy,” Provost said.

“Yeah, we’ve met,” I said while the others nodded greetings.

The pro wrestler nodded at me. I nodded back, and we didn’t meet gazes—wolf body language that said, *Hey, we’re cool, nothing wrong here*. He was another werewolf and understood how weird this was. I might spend the next couple of weeks being more comfortable around him than anyone else.

“Finally, we get some eye candy,” said a guy I didn’t know, scoping out Tina, Ariel, and me with a definite leer. I had to admit, we did sort of look like Charlie’s Angels standing together.

He smelled weird. Definitely not human, but a flavor of not-human I hadn’t encountered before—and I was racking up quite the scent catalog. Not a vampire, not a werewolf, were-tiger, or were-jaguar. I’d even met a were-African wild dog, but this wasn’t any of those. He had a human and something-else smell, like all lycanthropes had. But the something else was kind of... fishy. Salty. Wild without the fur. Weird.

“Lee Ponatac,” he said in response to my inquiring glare. He had dark hair, and his features were square, young, his eyes brown and shining. He had the scruffy appearance of someone who spent a lot of time outside and didn’t care much about polish. It was a nice look, and he pulled it off well. My inquiring glare didn’t go away, and he just kept his charismatic smile. “Were-seal. Children of Sedna we call them back home,” he said finally.

My eyes widened. “Really?”

Provost said, “Lee is a state legislator in Alaska. He may be the first publicly acknowledged lycanthrope elected to office in the country. I’m a little surprised we discovered him before you did.”

“Yeah. But hey, happy to meet you now. Were-seal? Really? And you don’t think this gig will come back to haunt you if you ever decide to run for president?”

He smirked. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

I didn’t think there’d ever come a time when I couldn’t be surprised, and he seemed pleased at my astonishment. Oh, this was going to be a fun couple of weeks.

The other man, a guy in his thirties, a little overweight and a little balding but not more than average, sat back in an armchair, arms crossed, frowning slightly as he regarded us all. He smelled human. But so did more than half the people in the room.

“And you are?” I asked.

“Conrad Garrett,” he said.

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