

HUNTER'S MOON

Chapter 1

Nick's Tavern is in the worst part of town. The front door opens onto a back alley and the back door dead-ends inside another building. The Fire Code wasn't in effect when the building was built. Nick's has been there that long. My Dad remembers going there after work for a schooner of beer twenty-four full ounces—and a plate of cheese. A buck bought both in the 40's. It was big enough for lunch for two or dinner for one. They don't do cheese plates anymore. Pity.

One time I went around the back of the building just to see what was on the other side. It's an upholstery shop. Big frigging deal.

Most of the buildings that surround Nick's are vacant now. Multi-colored graffiti scars plywood-covered windows. God only knows the last time someone cleaned the trash from the sidewalks.

I'm known as Bob to my clientele. That's not my real name. I'm the kind of person you would expect to find at Nick's. Call me a businessman who works the wrong side of the street. All sorts of people have need of my services: high class, low class, quiet suburban mothers, good church-going men. At one time or another all of them give into their primal instincts and call me. I meet them here at Nick's to talk details.

I'm not a hooker or a drug dealer. Too many risks, not enough money. There are no drug deals at Nick's. You'd get bounced on your ear if you even thought about it.

I'm an assassin. A killer-for-hire. If you have the money, I'll do the job. I like puppies, kids and Christmas, but I don't give a shit about your story—or your problems. I'm the person you call when you want the job done right the first time with no sullyng of your name. Yes, I am that good. I apprenticed in the Family.

Oh, there's one other thing I should mention. I'm also a werewolf.

Yeah, I know. Big joke. Ha. Ha. I never believed in “creatures of the night” like vampires, werewolves, or mummies. They're the stuff of schlock movies and Stephen King novels. I'm not.

The door to the bar opened and the figure silhouetted in the doorway almost made me laugh out loud. I stifled the laugh with a short snort of air. Then I let my face go blank again. Talk about stereotyping. The woman wore an expensive black pantsuit, odd enough in a low-class part of town. But the part I liked was that she wore a dark wig-and-scarf get-up like something you'd see in the 60's, and huge round black sunglasses. Oh yeah, she'll blend right in with the steel workers and biker babes. Sheesh.

My client had arrived—and she was early. No big deal. We'd only set the appointment a few hours ago. I hadn't even unpacked from my last job. The quicker we finished, the better I'd like it.

The woman in the doorway was forced to take off the sunglasses to look around the darkened bar. I got a look at her face. Nothing special. Deep green eyes looked out from a relatively plain face. She stood about 5'5". I felt like I recognized her, but she was like me—a blender. She could probably

get dolled up and look pretty but she would never be stunning. She was a woman that a man would fall in love with for her mind or personality. Or maybe her body, which was on the good side of average. She was probably a size ten. Maybe a twelve. She carried it well and comfortably. The suit spoke

of money. Good. She could probably afford me. The rest of the get-up spoke of nerves.

She scanned the bar, looking for someone she had never met. You can't mistake the look. The person just stands there, hoping that someone will wave or pick them out. I let her feel uncomfortable for a moment, just long enough to size her up. She wasn't a plant or a cop. Nobody can fake that level of nervousness. She wasn't wringing her hands, but close.

I was sitting in the back booth—my usual table. I looked around the bar while I counted slowly to ten. It's a comfortable, familiar place. A Family hang-out. See, it hasn't been too long since the Mob ran this town. Nick's was one of the neutral taverns. Not upper-class. Nick didn't run “no hoitsy-toitsy gentlemen's club.” His words, not mine. Nick's son Jocko runs the place now. Yeah, really. Nick actually named him Jocko. Poor guy.

The bar looks old. Not elegant old, just old. Dark wood covers the floors and walls and surrounds a real marble-topped bar. Remnants of old sweat and stale cigarette smoke cling to every surface. You can't see through the nicotine haze on the windows. Jocko doesn't do windows.

I finished counting, raised my hand and caught her eye. She walked toward me, both hands clutching her purse like someone was going to lift it. A pleasant jingling reached my ears. Jewelry of some sort. When she reached the booth she looked at me, surprised. Apparently I wasn't what she expected.

I don't wear an eyepatch or have a swarthy mustache. I even have all of my teeth. I look absolutely ordinary. Collar-length black hair, blue-grey eyes the color of gun metal, and a build that shows I work out but not to excess. I was dressed in a blue cotton long-sleeved business shirt with the sleeves rolled up, grey slacks and black sneakers that look like dress shoes as long as I keep them polished. The jacket that matched the slacks was folded on the bench next to me. I look like I could be a lawyer, a writer, or a mechanic. I don't look like someone that would as soon shoot you as look at you. That's the idea. I gave her my best mercenary look; cold, uncaring. I wouldn't want her to think that I was just some guy hitting on her. She looked away, rattled.

Her scent blew me away. I notice smells more since the change. Nice term—“change”. Her scent was strong. Stronger than it should be, but not perfume. This was just her. The woman smelled sweet and musky, with overtones of something tangy. I learned from Babs that means she's afraid. Fear reminds me, although Babs said I'm nuts, of hot and sour soup. Every emotion has its own particular scent. And lies! When someone lies, it smells like black pepper. I don't mind; it helps me interview clients.

Most scents are soft and not particularly noticeable. They rise off a person's skin like ghostly presences, only to disappear into unseen breezes. I have to concentrate to catch a person's real scent.

My client slid into the opposite side of the booth. I didn't stand. She didn't expect me to. Good thing. She sat with her back to the room. Another good indication that she wasn't a cop. Cops, like crooks, have a thing about having a wall at their back. Nobody can hit you from behind or pull your own gun on you.

"Um," she began when I just stared at her without saying anything. "Are you Bob?"

I nodded but still made no sound. It unnerved her and amused me. She was having a hard time looking at my face, whereas I looked straight into her eyes.

"I'm hoping you might be able to help me," she tried again. It required no comment, so I didn't make one.

My nose tingled. The client smelled like blood; like prey. But that's true of most people. Especially near the full moon. I never used to think much about the moon phases. Now I plan my life by them.

People didn't used to smell like food. Some days it pisses me off. But I didn't get a choice in the matter. A hit went bad. The woman I was stalking stalked me back. I wasn't prepared for a being with superhuman speed and strength. She ripped my throat out of my body and left me for dead. I should have died. She said so later. Guess I was too damn stubborn to die.

The wash of emotions from the client overpowered my nose. I could handle the fear and the blood. I was used to them. I don't meet with clients until after I've had a large rare steak for lunch. But this lady smelled of heat and sex. Heat, not sun—heat and something that I couldn't place that reminded me of a forest. Warm, dewy, sweet, salty. It was a safe comforting smell unlike anything I've ever been in contact with. It was a smell that I wanted to soak into my pores. Breathe in, roll in. I had to blink and sneeze to clear my senses. Then I returned to staring quietly at her.

She couldn't meet my eyes but kept scanning the room. Her fingers tapped restlessly on the table, then on her lap, then on the table again while she bit at her lips as if looking for something to say or do. The hot and sour smell of fear, the burnt metal of frustration overwhelmed me as if they were my own. That was new. My muscles tensed against my will. Suddenly she stopped fidgeting, took a deep breath and looked right at me.

"Would you please say something?" she asked in frustration. "I'm drowning here."

That won her a quick smile. "Would you like something to drink? It's not much cooler in here than outside. That dark suit has to be hot."

She looked at her outfit and had the good grace to blush. "It's a little trite, isn't it? I didn't even think about the heat. I was trying to be inconspicuous." She smiled a bit as if she felt my amusement the way I was feeling her emotions, but she smelled embarrassed. A dry smell, like heat rising off desert sand, mixed with other things I didn't recognize yet. I don't know a lot of the emotions yet. Babs told me that I'd get the hang of identifying them. I'm in no hurry.

I didn't believe it at first. Didn't want to. But Babs followed me around for three days and taped me with a camcorder. I avoided her like I avoid everyone, but she filmed enough to prove that she was telling the truth. Babs was a sadistic bitch about it, too. She made sure she immortalized all of the most embarrassing moments of a dog in living color. Pissed me off. I stopped returning her calls after that.

"I don't exactly blend, do I?" The words brought me out of my musing.

Lying to save her feelings would be diplomatic, but I try to save lies for important things. "Not really."

I raised my hand to signal Jocko. He moved out from behind the bar, wiping his meaty hands on a snow white bar rag. Jocko's a big 6'8". He looks beefy but it's mostly muscle — he was a pro wrestler for a few years. Jocko wears his waist-length black hair in a ponytail because of state health regs. A scar cuts his left eyebrow in half. He's second-generation Italian but he looks Native

American because of the hair.

Jocko smells like bad habits. Whiskey and cigarettes and sweat. He walked slowly toward the table — almost lethargically. Jocko moves slow because he threw his back out in the ring years ago and since there isn't any worker's comp insurance in wrestling he came home to run the family business. But he's hardly a cripple. Jocko can still throw a man through the front window if he puts his mind to it. Everybody knows it. Like me, he doesn't talk much. He just stood at the table waiting for our order.

"Draft for me." I turned to the client with a questioning look.

"Um—rum and Coke, I guess." Jocko started to walk away. She raised her voice a little bit to add, "Captain Morgan, please." He nodded without turning or stopping. "And Diet?" a little louder still. Anyone that didn't know Jocko would presume he hadn't heard. I knew he heard her and that he was chuckling softly under his breath. The mild orange smell of amusement drifted to me. A rum and Coke is not the same thing at all as a Morgan and Diet. Not to a bartender.

She glanced at me. "Do you think he heard me?"

"He heard. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I want you to kill someone," she said calmly. "I can afford to pay whatever the cost."

Well, that was direct! I shut my mouth again, closed my eyes and reached my hand up to rub the bridge of my nose. It eased the tension behind my eyes.

"Is something wrong?"

There's a certain code in my profession. The client doesn't actually ask and I don't actually admit what I do for a living. It's just sort of understood. Money is discussed but only because both parties know what transaction is being, well, transacted.

I lowered my voice. "I would appreciate it if you could be a little more *discreet* about our business here."

That stopped her cold. She suddenly realized what she had said, and that she had said it in a normal tone, in a place of business. Her face flushed and her jaw worked noiselessly. The blend from the combination of emotions made me giddy.

"That was stupid, wasn't it?"

"Well, that sort of depends whether you *want* to spend the next twenty or so years in prison. It's called 'accessory before the fact'."

She shrugged. "Actually, for the job I'm proposing, I'd never see the inside of a prison."

"That might be a little overconfident," I replied, "There's always the chance of getting a very good investigator. I always make it clear to clients that there is risk involved. I'm good. I'm very good. But there is always a risk."

She shook her head. "You couldn't know since I haven't explained. But it's not an issue."

I believed her and I didn't know why. No black pepper smell of deceit, maybe. I shrugged my shoulders. "Fine. You've been warned." I drew a breath and began my list of conditions. "I'll need the name of the mark, a photograph, and home and work addresses. I work alone. I will choose the time and place of the job. Not you. If you want it public, I'll pick the time. You can pick the method if you want. If you don't specify, it could be by a variety of methods. I vary them to fit the situation and the mark. I don't do extras like rape or torture for the same money. There will be an additional charge for that kind of thing."

She listened intently and without comment. When I mentioned rape and torture, she grimaced

slightly. I could feel her disapproval beat at me like heat from a furnace. I shook off the feeling and proceeded on.

“If the mark meets his end without my assistance, there are no refunds. I require payment in advance. Cash only, small bills. If the money is marked or traceable you will forfeit your life at a future time of my choosing. Don't presume that I can't find you. I can.”

She nodded, as if she had heard my speech a million times. She leaned forward, eyes intent on my face—focused. Good. I like it when people listen.

Jocko arrived with the drinks so I stopped speaking. He put them on the table, then looked at me. “That'll be four-fifty.”

I motioned for him to ask the lady. He turned his attention to her and she opened her little purse quickly. She extracted a ten dollar bill and held it out to him. “Keep it.”

Jocko pursed his lips in approval and moved off silently.

“Go on,” she said.

I tried to remember where I left off. I hate to get interrupted in mid-stream. “If the police somehow get wind of me through you, I will make sure that you never live to testify. If there are family members involved and they get in the way, I will remove them. I don't charge for removal of witnesses. That's for my benefit, not yours. However, if there are potential witnesses that you do not wish removed, make sure they are kept out of the line of fire until after the job is complete. I won't be held responsible for mistaken identity, so if the photograph is not absolutely clear, or up-to-date, there could be a mistake.”

The client sipped her drink as I spoke. It's a long spiel. Now's the only time I ask questions like whether she needed proof that the job had been accomplished. She smiled. “No, I think I'll know.” That meant that it was someone close to her; possibly a husband or boyfriend. Her amusement smelled sweeter, more like tangerines than oranges.

When I finished my beer was almost gone. “Do you have any questions?” I asked.

She had a mouthful of complimentary peanuts and she didn't respond immediately. Jocko puts out peanuts to increase drink sales. It works, so I don't indulge.

“No,” she said when she'd swallowed, “That about covers it. When do I have to get the cash to you? And how much?”

“How much depends on who. Public figure or private? Who is the mark?”

She spread her hands out, showing her chest to perfection. It was a nice view but, “I don't understand.”

“I'm the target. The mark. Whatever.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“I'm hiring you to kill me. The time and place don't matter. But soon. How much will it cost?”

Alarms started ringing in my head. “There are a lot less expensive ways to do yourself in,”

She nodded her head once. “Probably. But this is the method I choose. Is there a problem?”

There was something wrong with this situation. I couldn't think of what specifically was bugging me. I really don't want to know a person's story but I was missing something. Something important. I needed to dig.

I leaned back in my chair. “Who are you and why do you need to die?”

Her eyes shifted. Yeah, there was something there all right. “Does it matter?”

“Normally, no,” I admitted, “But this is a first for me and it's making me nervous. So, give. Why do you need to die in such a way that it *doesn't* look like a suicide?”

Intense emotions washed through my nose, blending and then splitting. I couldn't identify them all. I'm still new at this shit. I suppose a little part of me is annoyed that I haven't picked them up faster. It's been almost a year. But I'm not curious enough to contact Babs.

“I don't need to die. I want to. But you'd need to hear my story and you told me on the phone that you didn't want to hear it. I'm a nobody. No one special. Just take the money and do the job.” Her eyes were bright, too bright, and her voice too intense. I didn't like it.

“What's your name?” In any event, I'd need it if she turned out to be the mark.

“Wh—” she began and then corrected herself. “Oh, that's right you need the name. Quentin. Sue Quentin.”

Sue Quentin. That name rang a bell. I leaned forward and put my arms on the table. “Take off the wig,” I ordered.

She looked around her nervously. Yeah, it probably wouldn't do to have her reveal herself in full view of everyone. That sort of thing is remembered.

“Fine,” I crooked a finger and slid out of the booth. “Follow me.” She stood and followed me down a hallway to the bathrooms. It was dark but my eyes are exceptionally good—funny thing. I knocked on both doors and waited. No response. I turned around to face her. “Take it off.”

She slid the black wig with attached scarf from her head. Underneath were medium brown permed ringlets that reached her shoulders. The hair changed the shape of her face. Even in the dim light of the hallway I instantly recognized her. The disguise was better than I'd credited. With the wig, I hadn't had more than a vague recognition. Fortunately, no one else in the bar would probably make her, either. I knew her but couldn't imagine why she would want to die.

I shook my head. “Huh-uh. No way. You're a *very* visible lady. I'd have to wait until the heat surrounding you dies down.”

She stood very still, eyes closed. The hot blanket of sorrow pressed on me and tightened my throat. A single tear traced silver down her left cheek. “How long?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

I turned and walked back into the room, not able to answer right away. I had to get away from that distress. She got under my skin way too easily. That alone made me nervous. Some instinct told me if I didn't run from her, she was going to change my whole life. I didn't want this job.

I slid back into the booth. She followed me a couple minutes later, in control again. The wig was back in place and she had wiped the tear from her face. She looked relatively calm but her hands trembled a little. She folded them in front of her and held herself stiffly, as if hanging onto her control by her fingertips.

I'm not moved by tears. I've turned down jobs before. But she'd asked a question and I could at least give her an answer. “I don't know,” I replied. “With all the publicity—a year, maybe more.”

Her gaze was steady on me but the unshed tears made her eyes shine. “So I can count on that? A year from now you'll do the job?”

I held up my hands in front of me. “Whoa, lady. I didn't say that. I said, ‘a year, *maybe more*’. I can't judge that. You could be in the papers again next week and it would start all over. I don't predict the future. No. I can't take the job.”

“If you only understood,” she began.

“Stop.” She did. “You were right the first time, Ms. Quentin. I don't want to know. I don't

care to know your story. I'm not a psychologist. I'm not a social worker." Except this time, I *did* want to know and I couldn't explain why.

Her eyes went cold for a moment, almost as though she could sense my thoughts. "Fine. How much?"

I felt my brow wrinkle. "For what?"

"To listen." She leaned forward a bit. "You're absolutely right. You're not a psychologist or a social worker. You're a mercenary. How much will it cost me for you to listen to my story?" Her anger bit at my nose. It smelled like coffee burning.

"It won't change anything," I said. "I don't want the job."

"So don't take it. There are other people out there with less *scruples*. I just want an ear. I just want you to shut up and listen to my story." Her voice tightened as she spoke—colder, harsher, more brittle. She was blinking back tears again. "You don't have to care. Just make the right noises in the right places. How much for a couple of hours?"

"It's not scruples that would stop me from taking the job, lady. It's self-preservation. Too many people know your name. Investigators would work a lot harder because you're newsworthy. And I'm not for rent on an hourly basis."

That was supposed to be it. The end. I don't know why I said the next. "But, fine. If you want to buy my ear for the night, it's for sale. A thousand up front and I'll let you know how much more when the story's over." I half-stood and half-slid out of the booth. "Let's go."

She looked startled. "Just like that?"

There I go again — being impulsive. I should walk out. My gut told me I should run. I've learned to trust my wolf instincts even when I don't understand them. And yet, I shrugged and smiled tightly at her. I had nothing better to do right now. I had no reason to fear this person. No logical reason, anyway. Money's money. It's just another job.

"Just like that. You're driving. But I have to make a call first. So finish your drink, go to the john or whatever. I'll meet you out front in a couple of minutes. What are you driving?"

Her eyes got wider. I could smell the hot tang of fear, the soured milk smell of disbelief and rising under both, the lighter smell of hope. She had been expecting me to walk out. Probably thought I was playing a cruel joke. Not a chance. For once I'd be able to indulge my curiosity. In my position, the less I know about a client or a mark the better. Except this time I wanted to know more. Maybe I'd find out how many people had walked out on her in the past. Or why she wanted to die. Maybe I'd walk out too. We'd see.

Chapter 2

I left her in the booth looking dazed. I went down the back hallway again. A payphone hangs on the wall in the corner near the door to the men's room. It's an old phone but it works.

I dialed a number and a man answered. "Plaza Hotel, how may I direct your call?"

I used my harried-but-professional businessman voice. "This is Anthony Giodone. May I speak to Max, please?"

"Good evening, Mr. Giodone. This is Max speaking. How may I assist you?"

I glanced at my watch and noticed a crack across the crystal. Damn it! I'd have to get it repaired. I like this watch. But still, not quite three o'clock on the 11th. Three more days until I checked in.

"Max, I know it's unusual but I was hoping my suite might be available."

"We always try to assist our loyal customers, sir," came the appropriate reply. "When did you want to book your suite?"

"For right now." Before he could continue I added, "I know it's unusual and short notice but I'm meeting someone on urgent business."

There was a hesitation. "No, it's not short notice, sir. When did you want to arrive?"

"Thirty minutes?"

"Oh!" his voice sounded relieved. "I understand now. Of course, we'll make the suite available immediately. We'll look forward to seeing you in a few minutes, Mr. Giodone."

I hung up the phone. The call had solved the *where*. Now to go outside and meet the *who*.

A bright yellow Mustang of this year's vintage sat purring quietly by the curb. Well, I guess if I had won the state's largest lottery jackpot ever I'd probably splurge a little bit too. Two hundred sixty eight million dollars. Wow! I took in a little over a million a year, but even after she paid taxes, I'd have to live a hundred eighty years to accumulate what she had fallen into with a one dollar ticket. I guess that proves that money doesn't buy happiness. Susan Quentin was the least happy person I had met in some time.

She still had on the wig and scarf, which I was going to suggest anyway. I opened the door and slid onto the soft white leather seats. All the perks. A CD player played a soft rock ballad that I recognized from the radio. The wind blew her scent right at me. For a second I forgot to breathe. I could feel my nostrils flare as they willingly saturated with her fragrance. She watched me get in the car. It wasn't a casual look. Whatever was happening between us, she could feel it too. Her eyes were wide. I could smell her excitement — desire and fear. Heat, for lack of a better word.

When I was seated and closed the door, I looked at her. "Yes?"

She looked forward again and flushed. "Nothing. Sorry."

She blushed easily. This could be fun.

"Drive," I commanded. She put the car in gear.

"Where are we going?" she asked after we had traveled for a block or two.

I had already worked up a cover. "Head to the Plaza. Drop me off about a block from the hotel. Park the car. Wait ten minutes. No more, no less. You'll be Jessica Thornton, a broker."

The CD was still playing. I reached over to turn it off so it wouldn't be a distraction. She reached over at the same time. Our hands touched. She jerked back suddenly, as though burned. I

felt it too. Electric, like when you scuff your feet and touch metal. But it was deeper inside, not just a surface shock. It felt good enough that parts of my body reacted forcibly.

I grabbed her hand, fast but gentle, and got the same reaction as before. Thrills of electricity up my arm that raised all the hair on my skin. It wasn't painful. The sensation was wild. It was scary but intoxicating. Almost addicting. The hand wore a small opal ring in a nice setting. Expensive and elegant but not gaudy. Probably new. The office-length nails were cared for, though not professionally.

I got glimpses of her mind as we touched. Since the change I can sometimes sense what other people are thinking. Only when I touch them, though. My hearing went berserk too. Some days if I stand real still, I can hear the neighbors talking two or three doors down. During the full moon, the humming of the refrigerator hurts my ears. I bought a stock of foam earplugs.

Why is he doing this? Is he going to hurt me? Stop. Don't stop. I'm not supposed to like this. What's happening to me?

She glanced at me. It wasn't fear—not exactly. I turned her hand over and looked at the palm. I forced my voice to remain cold and rational. "I won't specify stock or real estate. It's none of the hotel's business. I'll ask at the desk whether you've arrived. Then I'll head to my suite and ask that you be directed to the room when you get there."

She drove silently, listening intently while I traced the lines and the callousing on her palm with my thumb. Her mind couldn't come up with a complete thought. Even in the heat I saw her shiver.

I wanted to raise her hand to my mouth. Kiss the skin, roll the taste of her in my mouth. Shit. This is too weird. I released the hand and she pulled it away slow, like she had just started to enjoy it. I shook my head once to clear it and turned off the music. "When you go into the hotel, ask the desk clerk for Anthony Giodone. That's not my real name so don't bother to remember it. He'll either direct or escort you to Room 935. It's on the top floor. I'll have dinner delivered from room service. How do you like your steak?"

She didn't respond for a moment and I looked at her, waiting for an answer. "That was impressive," she finally said.

"What was?"

"You said all that in one breath. I'm impressed. And I like my steak well done."

I almost laughed but held back. "I'll let room service know."

It was about twenty miles on the freeway to the Plaza Hotel. It's very nice and comfortably furnished. It's also extremely expensive. When it was first built I met with the owner to discuss renting a suite on a permanent basis. It was about five months after the change occurred that I realized I needed somewhere to go for three days that was absolutely safe. I'd tried to lock myself in my house, but I always managed to get out. I would wake up and find a window broken and bloody feathers or fur littering my bed. Any idea what that stuff feels like coming out the other side? Once I found the refrigerator hanging open and groceries scattered through the house. It was a pain in the ass to clean up.

The client suddenly shifted into fifth gear and I once again heard the delicate jingle of metal. It must be a bracelet. I just couldn't see it under the jacket sleeve.

The hotel was in sight. I needed to go shopping soon. I always bring food with me for my visit. Then I lock the door and stay in the room for three days. They leave me alone; no maid service,

no calls, no nothing. When I come back to my senses I clean up the mess or pay for anything I've damaged. It's worked well so far because I've never told anyone I go there.

Except now I was bringing this client to my hideout. Go figure. Weirder still was that I was glad that the room could be ready.

I heard her swallow and noticed the nervous tapping of her fingers on the wheel. She was shifting back and forth in her seat restlessly.

"So, how did you get my number?"

She relaxed back into her seat. The tension drained from her like air from a balloon. She smelled of gratitude. Warm and slightly musty like air from a dryer's vent. "You would not *believe* how difficult it is to find someone in your profession."

I said nothing. It's not supposed to be easy. That's how we stay out of jail.

"I mean, it's not like you can just look in the phone book." She put her hands on top of the steering wheel, resting her wrists on it and pretended to be flipping pages. "Let's see, here we go, *assassins*. See *hired killers*." Amusement edged her voice.

I chuckled. So much for my fear she'd get maudlin.

"I remembered reading a few years ago in that magazine from Colorado . . . oh, you know the one. I can't remember the name."

"I know it," I responded, "Go on."

"Well, I remember they got into real trouble because they were running ads for mercenaries."

I nodded. "I read about that. The people who put in the advertisements weren't real bright, either."

"Well, I hoped that maybe even though they got busted they might still be doing it."

I raised my eyebrows. "And were they?"

"Sort of," she conceded. "There weren't any actual ads but when I called the magazine and talked to the classified department the clerk had a list of people who *couldn't* put ads in."

A back door approach. I like it. I grinned.

"It must have been a private list. He started to tell me but I guess his boss came in 'cause he hung up. I tried to call back later but he wouldn't take my call."

"So what did you do?"

"I went to the library and looked up some back issues. The ones that *did* have the ads in them."

"Attagirl."

She blushed and smiled. She was bright. It won her a few more points. It almost made up for the '60's spy movie get-up. Smart, with black humor. And hey, she wasn't bad-looking. I looked her up and down. Decent figure, great hair under the wig, nice smile. Not bad at all. Yeah, I could do her. Happily, if that little taste earlier was accurate. She glanced at me and must've seen something of what I was thinking. Her eyes widened and her head snapped forward again. Her knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. I smelled the sharpness of her sudden fear and the musky heat of desire.

"So, anyway," Her voice, now, just a little shaky, "I called two of the numbers I found but they were both on 'extended leave of absence'. I presumed that meant they were in jail."

"Or on the run."

"Either or," she agreed. "But one woman gave me a number of someone that she said was good. That her 'man', as she phrased it, respected."

"And that's how you called me?"

She shook her head. "No. I got the number of another person. *That* was the weirdest meeting I've ever had in my life." She shivered. "I got a message to meet him at this little video arcade that has a lunchroom. I sat down at the table that I was told to and up comes this kid wearing baggy blue jeans and a striped T-shirt. Dark blonde hair cut long on the front so it covered his eyes and shaved in the back. You know, typical teenager."

Ah. Him. I nodded, unable to suppress a smile.

"Anyway, I figured that the kid was going to try to sponge money. So I ignored him, hoping he'd go away. I mean," she looked at me somewhat pathetically, "I was supposed to *meet* someone."

"Not realizing that he was who you were coming to meet?"

She looked at me, shocked. "You mean you know him!?!"

"Go on."

"Well, apparently, he *was* who I was coming to meet." Her brows were buried under the bangs of the wig, as if she was still startled. "He sat down at the table and asked if I was Sue. He was very professional. Very business-like. It was incredibly unnerving."

"Scotty has that effect on people," I agreed.

She looked at me again, newly surprised. "You really *do* know him."

I nodded.

"He's a baby!!"

I laughed out loud. "Lady, Scotty wasn't a baby when he was born!" She smelled sour-sharp with disapproval but at the same time oozed wet, fog-bank sorrow.

"He can't be more than, what, twelve?" She gestured with her fingers while controlling the wheel with the heels of her palms. She was agitated enough about the kid that she couldn't sit still.

"I mean, he's only a few years older than my nephew who still plays video games and is shy around girls."

I nodded agreement. "He just turned thirteen. He's already had two strikes so he'll have to keep his head down. Next time, they'll charge him as an adult. And he *does* still play video games and *is* shy around girls."

"You mean he's been *caught* before? Killing people? Then why is he still out and . . ."

"Talking to people like you?" I asked with a smirk. "Because he's a minor. He got the maximum five years in juvie hall for the first one. They had to drop the case on the second one. Witnesses kept disappearing."

She glanced at me in horror. "But if he was in juvenile hall for five years, then . . ."

I completed the thought, "He did his first job, sloppily, at the tender age of six."

Her eyes went wide. "The poor baby!"

I shook my head. "Don't feel real sorry for him. He's the way he wants to be. I checked him out. There's no history of abuse. The kid's just a psychopath. He doesn't look like anything other than a normal kid. It's his trademark. Nobody expects him so he can sneak up on people." I thought I knew but asked anyway. "Why'd he turn you down?"

She shook her head with a small laugh. "He said that it wouldn't be any *fun* to 'do me', because I'd know he was coming. He said he does 'close in' work, whatever that means and he couldn't sneak up on me."

"That's with a knife or other arm's length weapon. A blade, a golf club, whatever. For Scotty,

it's a visceral pleasure for him to watch a person die. He actually gets a physical high. Maybe even a sexual high." I shrugged. "To each his own."

"That," she said with a shiver, "is just so . . . bizarre! He really scared me."

I looked at her with a questioning smirk. "And I don't?"

She paused. "Not in the same way," she said thoughtfully. "He gets his kick out of pain. You can see it in his eyes. You look like you'll do it, but it's just business."

Not at the full moon. I nodded in agreement anyway. I stared hard at the side of her face for a minute and abruptly decided she needed a dose of reality. I admire the kid's work. He's talented. I wouldn't want her to go all socially conscious on him and turn him in "for his own good."

"You know, you should be happy that he does this for a living."

"Why in God's name would you say that?" Her eyebrows climbed high on her forehead. She spared a horrified glance before returning her attention to the freeway traffic.

"Because as long as he does it for a living, it satisfies the need and he doesn't do it for *fun*." She glanced at me, stunned. "Understand? A lot less dead people. Scotty's damn smart. He won't get caught easy. He'll be a serial killer if he ever stops being an assassin."

A sign whizzed past. The next exit was ours. She flipped on her turn signal and changed lanes. Her eyes blinked in time with the sound. "I guess."

I rested my elbow on the car windowsill. "You still haven't said. How'd you find me?"

Silence for a little while, then she took a deep breath. She shook her head and straightened in her seat. "From him. He wouldn't do the job but he gave me your number. Said you were the best, if I could afford you."

Huh. Didn't know the little bastard even had my number. Maybe I'd return the favor on the next blade job.

As instructed, she stopped the car about a block from the hotel and parked at the curb. All the reasons why this was a bad idea came rushing back to me. I had never invited another soul to the suite. Too late now. I was actually enjoying talking to her—looking at her. That worried me. My voice was harsher than I had intended when I steered the conversation back to business.

"Before we go any further—a thousand up front. Remember?"

"Oh!" It seemed like she had truly forgotten and wasn't just trying to burn me. She opened the clutch purse. My eyes opened wide. Inside the little black bag was a huge wad of cash! That explained her death grip on the purse.

She pulled the roll of currency out of the bag, in full view of whoever was walking by and counted out ten one hundred dollar bills. I shook my head wearily as I accepted the money. I carry around a lot of cash, but get real! She was a robbery waiting to happen.

"I wouldn't flash that wad of money around, if I were you," I warned. "You've already got a target painted on your back from the car. No need to advertise."

She looked mortified and hurriedly stuffed the money back in the bag. "I wasn't sure how much you would charge but I figured you would want cash."

I smiled. "You wouldn't have enough there. Not unless those are thousand dollar bills. My base price is fifty grand and goes up from there."

She cleared her throat. "Fifty. I see. I've only got ten here."

"Like I said, not nearly enough. But it would have been enough to show good faith. I would have accompanied you to the bank for the rest. *If* I had agreed to the job."

She looked at me slyly. "You haven't actually refused, you know."

"Close enough." I pocketed the money and got out of the car.

As I walked to the hotel, I heard the rhythmic beat of soft-soled shoes behind me. Seconds later, a jogger passed me by, headphones drowning out the world. The muscles in my legs instantly tensed to run—to start the chase. I forced myself to keep walking. I could hear the pounding of the man's heart over the music feeding into his ears. The light dew of sweat on his forehead and trickling down his back from the heat was like some intoxicating perfume that turned my blood to fire. I fought down the desire to snarl and take off after the runner; to bring him down. To quench the hunger.

I have this problem a lot. It makes jogging in the park tricky. People seem to resent it when you chase them. Go figure. And I *have* to run. I *have* to chase. It's part of me now. It gets harder and harder to control the closer it gets to the full moon.

When I reached the hotel, the doorman quickly moved to open the door for me. "Afternoon, Mike," I said cordially. He'd worked here since the place opened.

"G'day, Mr. Giodone," he responded with a grin. Mike is Aussie, right off the boat. He always smells like eucalyptus and mint and the citrus smell of happiness, penetrating and bright as his smile. The smell cleared out the musk from the client and the prey-smell of the jogger. I slipped him his usual tip. A crisp twenty keeps his smile genuine.

Max Holcomb met me halfway across the room with a slight bow. He's the Concierge; tall, thin, and always immaculately dressed. In another time, he would probably have been a butler or a gentleman's gentleman. He has the temperament for it. Obedient and dependable, the smell of a well-tended lawn with overtones of cookie spice. It's a comforting smell. Another deep breath calmed me down the rest of the way.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Giodone."

"I've told you before, Max, you can call me by my first name."

"Now, Mr. Giodone," he said somewhat reproachfully, "That would hardly be proper."

I smiled. The same game every time I came in. "No, I suppose not." I looked around the room, as though searching for someone. "I was to meet my broker here. Has she arrived yet? Her name is Jessica Thornton."

He pursed his lips as though concentrating. Yeah right. He knew each and every person in the building and their location. "No, sir, nobody by that name has come in. Would you like to wait for her in the lounge?"

I gave it a moment's thought. "No, just have her shown to my room." He nodded and handed me the key card. I started to walk to the elevator but then stopped and turned briefly. "Oh, and have a bottle of Captain Morgan and some Diet Coke delivered to the suite for the lady. Is there draft on tap?"

Max raised his eyebrows and the scent of his surprise drifted to me. "Of course, sir. You asked that the room be ready. It is." It made me smile. "Will there be anything else?"

I remembered to order dinner before I took the elevator to the top floor. There was a bellboy already waiting for me at the door with the requested items. I slipped him a five. He accepted the proffered bill and left quickly. That's the way I like staff.

Once he was gone, I opened the door and tossed the key card on the marble-topped table inside the door. The blast of cooled air greeted me like a welcome friend. Exactly as I remembered

it. The stone fireplace with the natural gas logs stood ready if the need arose. The drapes had been opened to reveal the excellent view. Clear blue skies stretched to the horizon and the mountainside looked just ready to begin to turn colors. Next month this time, it'd be stunning.

I kicked off my shoes and padded to the wet bar opposite the fireplace. There were two taps available. Guinness Dark and whatever was on sale. Today it was Bud. That suited me.

I removed one of the mugs from the small freezer below the bar and filled it. A slight layer of frost formed on the outside of the mug and I took a grateful sip. It really was hot outside. I hate heat. I've always been a cold weather person. Give me a forty degree day anytime, no coat, no sleeves, and I'll be happy. Heat is even worse since I became a wolf. It's like I have fur even in human form.

I sat on one of the two recliners across from the couch and put up my feet. Not enough sleep for a couple of days now. It's been a rough week. I glanced at my watch again. My brow furrowed when I saw that it hadn't changed since we left Nick's. I tapped on the crystal. The second hand grudgingly moved a second forward and then stopped again. Damn! I'd not only cracked the crystal, I broke the whole watch! When had that happened?

I closed my eyes and sighed when it hit me. Oh, yeah. I knew *exactly* when I'd done it. It was during that second car theft, when I'd had to roll the hot Mustang into a ditch and high-tail it before the cops arrived. I'd forgotten to grab the portable police scanner from the front seat after I got out and the door had slammed into me when it started to roll. Yeah, this last job in Atlantic City had gone very, *very* badly.

If Carmine had given me the mark's real name instead of his current alias, I would have refused the job. I'd gambled with Jeffrey a couple of times. He knew me on sight and would see me coming. Granted, the guy had to go. He'd tried to slice a piece out of Carmine's pie. If that wasn't bad enough, he'd taken out one of our guys in the process. Under the circumstances, it didn't matter that he was the son of a cooperating family in Atlantic City. Nobody, but *nobody* invades Carmine's turf. The minute Jeffrey spotted me, he knew what was coming and ran home to daddy. I had no choice but to follow.

Carmine had called ahead. Vito, the daddy, had said he'd handle the situation. But Daddy wasn't my client. Carmine was, and he wanted the job done anyway. A strong message needed to be sent. That's when Jeffrey decided to go to the police for protection. Not his best plan and not what Daddy had in mind, either. They went to stop him and bring him home.

My one and only chance to avoid Daddy's goons and to get the job done was when the kid was walking up the police precinct steps. Granted, I would have preferred *any* set-up over that. Atlantic City's so hot for me now that I may *never* be able to go back. It's going to take some serious negotiations for Carmine to repair the damage with Vito.

The police threw a dragnet around the city in record time from sheer embarrassment. My only option was to steal cars and take forgotten back roads. It took a lot more time than I planned — how long had it taken me to get back? Shit. I'd lost track of what day it was.

Speaking of time . . .

I started to glance at my watch and swore again. I walked to the bedroom and checked the digital readout on the clock radio. Nearly eighteen minutes had passed since I got out of the car. She should be here by now. I sat back down in the recliner and reached to my left to pick up the telephone and dialed an extension I knew by heart. It and room service were the only two numbers

I ever dialed.

"Concierge," came Max's voice. "How may I be of service?"

"Max, this is Tony Giodone. Has Ms. Thornton arrived yet?"

There was a pause that I didn't like. "Could you describe her for me, Mr. Giodone?"

"She's about thirty-five, 5'5", dark hair, black Chanel pantsuit. Seen her?"

"Yes, sir. She's arrived but hasn't checked in at the desk yet. She's in a rather odd conversation with another woman."

The devil, you say. Why hadn't I listened to my instincts?

"Odd, how?" I asked, as I grabbed at my shoes. The phone wouldn't reach and I had to lean back in the chair and stretch to drag them over with my feet.

"It appears that a woman is insisting she knows your guest. Ms. Thornton is trying to ignore her but the other woman keeps stopping her to talk to her. Would you like me to intervene?"

"No," I replied, holding the phone with chin and shoulder as I hurriedly tied a bow in the second shoelace, "I'm on my way down. Don't let either of them leave."

I hung up the phone and raced to the door.