

Woman's Sigh, Wolf's Song

Kathryn Madison

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Quote from *Shades of Gray* by Renee Askins; *Intimate Nature, the Bond Between Women and Animals*; Random House.

Quote from *The Greatest Salesman in the World* by Og Mandino. Random House.

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Dedication

To my husband, Michael, who removed every obstacle, provided every tool, encouraged with his words, and sustained with his love.

To my mother, who refused to let my dream fade.

And to Celeste, the future.
May she one day hear the howl of the wolf in Yellowstone,
and recognize a kindred spirit.

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Kathryn Madison

*Woman's Sigh,
Wolf's Song*

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*“...A deep, profound truth still resonates in us;
by some grace our souls still whisper to us,
our wildness still calls us...
Instinctively we know that what we do to the wolf,
we do to ourselves.
And what we do for the wolf, we do for ourselves.”*

*—Renee Askins, “Shades of Gray”
Intimate Nature, the Bond Between Women and Animals*

Chapter One

Rain in Seattle, what a cliché. A bone-chilling, flesh-numbing cliché that pelted through Sean Denny's uniform as wet and cold as on bare skin. The police Sergeant was soaked from collar to socks before he'd run half a block. His flashlight spotted a bushy tail as it vanished around a brick building and he grinned. His partner was much better equipped for the weather.

Rain rolled off the brandy and black German Shepherd without notice, a downy undercoat kept Rommel warm and dry, and only muzzle and feet sensed the wet. Huge paws splashed water as he dashed into the dark alley.

After a murderer.

Twice as many feet propelled Rommel twice as fast, and Sean was panting after three blocks, sweat blending with rain on soggy navy wool. Rommel's long-striding pace demanded a human sprint just to keep him in sight, and Sean was awed by his partner's abilities to disregard the elements.

Sergeant Denny loved that dog as much as he would have a human partner, maybe more.

Stray human hairs and dislodged skin cells were all Rommel needed to track, and rain only dampened the game. He had paced the murder scene, sniffed the victims and identified death by pools of coagulating blood and cooling human skin temperature. But he made no value judgement. Rommel lived to find people... missing people... injured people... people who didn't want to be found. And he was very good at it.

Rommel burst from the alley into Pioneer Square, dimly lit by old style gaslights. The usual contingent of winos and panhandlers had vacated their regular habitat for drier ground and only the pigeons squabbled over real estate under the opaque glass canopy.

Rommel paused momentarily, sniffed the ground, scanned the air, and bolted through the park and across the next street to a metal fire door on a derelict building. The padlock on

the door was still locked, but the hasp had been recently pried from the crumbling brick. The scent on the metal was sharp and fresh and tingled sensitive olfactory cells. Rommel lunged against the door, barking with excitement, but smart as he was, opening it required an opposing thumb, so he waited for his partner who had one.

“Oh shit, Rommel, not down there!” Sean muttered, “I hate the underground!” The agitated dog barked and bounced. “Rommel, down!” But prey was too close, he couldn’t sit still. Sean hauled him back by the collar, but when he opened the door Rommel dashed down the shaky stairs and vanished into the darkness.

Sean keyed his radio, “2210, requesting backup at Seattle underground fire door #8. Repeat. Perp’s gone into the underground.”

“2210, this is control, ten-four.”

Sean took a deep breath—the last clean air he’d taste for a while—and followed Rommel down the rickety steps. Twenty-two feet down and a century and a half back in time. To the tunnels of old Seattle. The first Seattle. And to the restless ghosts of its first citizens.

Two miles north a cab pulled to a stop and an attractive blonde rushed into the lobby of the Westin Hotel. She paused at a large mirror, touched up her lipstick, tugged a crooked earring back into position, and smoothed the front of her scarlet Valentino original. Transformation complete. Alex Davidson Verazzano, DVM, was now Alexandra Verazzano, lawyer’s wife.

“Late again,” she muttered to the reflection, “for another gathering of the beads and sequins.”

Shoulders back, smile glued on, she grasped the enormous brass door handle. Her posture and the set of her jaw screamed battle ready, and camouflaged shaky nerves and a queasy stomach. Swinging the giant door open, she drifted gracefully into the ballroom. Hating every high-heeled step.

Two hundred pairs of eyes followed her to the vacant

seat next to her husband and a brief glance confirmed the frown she had expected. She responded with a tiny 'sorry, I-couldn't-help-it' shrug and faced the front of the room.

Alex, she thought to herself, you are still a goldfish in this tank full of sharks.

The evening's host picked up where he'd left off. "As I was saying, tonight's speaker brings with him twenty years of experience working with inner city children. I believe his cause is worthy of our consideration."

Light applause seated the host, and ushered the speaker to the podium. Alex glanced around the room, noticed the same faces draped in couture's latest greatest, and sighed. Middle-class Alex had realized early in her marriage that charity banquets weren't really about charities. Yes, money was donated, frequently large, tax-deductible sums. But here the city's ambitious and powerful mingled and postured while their trophy wives, coifed and primped, displayed the family jewels. Quiet, but binding deals—and people—were made or broken. This was the arena for sophisticated political games, subtle games you really couldn't learn unless you were born into them. Alex wasn't, and she still didn't know the rules.

Alex, veterinarian, disguised as Alexandra, wealthy wife, parked her handbag in her lap, settled a lawyer wife's smile on her face, and prepared to endure the evening.

Watching her rain-stained shoes dry.

The same storm buffeting Seattle stretched north and east a thousand miles, where temperatures plummeted and snow fell instead of rain. It blanketed a large wolf, coating the soft fur of her muzzle, lodging in her eyelashes. But she was oblivious to it.

Winter-hardened claws scraped away snow, then scratched the earth's skin in earnest, forelegs assaulting the shoulder of the hillside with single-minded focus. Huge paws threw mud, then dry dirt behind her in a staccato rhythm that kept time with her relentless drive to prepare for her unborn

young. Four feet into the east-facing hill she angled her tunnel upward, creating a rise that guaranteed a dry den.

Cub-bearer, alpha female, attacked the hillside with no tangible blueprint, save the absolute design dictated by centuries of instinct.

The three yearlings of last winter's joining romped in the slushy leavings of her work. Canine teenagers, they were an awkward age, large in body, small in wisdom and experience. Slate gray Cunning batted her tan brother in the face and Jester rolled backwards down the hill, too clumsy to break his fall. Gentle, a carbon copy of her mother's rich red hues, cowered instantly before her sister, shrinking beyond reach. Her gentle spirit had no stomach for Cunning's brash aggression. Bored with her siblings, Cunning stuck her head in the tunnel in time to get a face full of dirt. She growled, but not loud enough for her mother to hear. Dominating her siblings was one thing, challenging the adults was something else.

Gentle and Jester spied their uncle, Guardian, asleep under a fir tree and pounced on the large gray male. Guardian wrestled the two cubs, at one point pinning Jester down, the yearling's entire head in his mouth. Jester had never been safer.

The adult wolves had fought and killed to feed the yearlings and keep them safe, but soon parental care would be abruptly terminated. For twelve months they had been nurtured, now they would become the nurturing.

Ominous silence greeted Sergeant Denny when he reached the bottom step. Rommel was out of sight and sound. A wooden walkway led left and right into the darkness and in the filth on the plywood Sean found a large pawprint. Rommel had turned left—south—at the bottom of the stairs.

Sean's limited human senses restricted him to a pace much slower than the dog's, and the musty air and thick silence of the underground raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He had no idea how far Rommel was ahead of him and the pitiful spot cast by his service flashlight brought little comfort. Glowing

pairs of eyes hovered in the darkness and small feet scurried through the dirt on either side of the walkway, then skittered across the plywood behind him.

“Rats”, he muttered. “Perfect!”

Sean unbuckled the safety strap on his revolver.

“Rommel, where are you, boy? This place gives me the creeps.” Sean Denny had proven his bravery many times since joining the force, but this place reeked of a little boy’s nightmares, and the ghosts that haunted him here would not die with a bullet.

Tensed by every rustle and rat scratch, Sean’s imagination resurrected Seattle’s colorful past, attended by the ramshackled junk around him. Spider webs draped old wooden crates, rusty ancient tools, and leather strapping. Hollowed-out logs mounted end to end hung along the wall, Seattle’s first sewer system.

Charred timbers loomed out of the darkness to Sean’s left, glaring reminders of the fire of 1899. Raging fast and hot through lumber mills, feeding on piles of sawdust, it had leveled most of the existing city. After the smoke cleared many merchants decided to build higher, solving tidal flooding problems. Using the old first floor as a foundation, they relocated their business entrance on the new second floor.

Over the years the spaces in and around the old lower floors were filled in and fell into disuse as businesses vacated. Stairways and doorways to those subterranean ruins were boarded up, built over, and forgotten by everyone except the rats.

It was along those recently excavated streets that Sean followed Rommel.

He prowled down the eerie old sidewalk, past a print shop, then the remains of a blacksmith shop, next to some sort of accounting enterprise. Grateful for the dirt-covered plywood trail that made tracking the dog easier, he audibly sighed every time he saw the German Shepherd’s paw print. Sean had no idea where he was in relation to the city above him. He keyed his

radio, "2210, to control, over." Only static responded.

"Control, this is 2210, over." More static.

"I sure hope someone's tracking me like I'm following you, Rommel-dog."

Beyond sunset and into the evening Cub-bearer labored, pushing dirt to the opening, then outside, packing the floor with her paws and smoothing the walls with each pass of her body. Human eyes would notice and forget the two-foot hole, but when she exited the tunnel late that night Cub-bearer had completed her cozy natal nest, three feet in diameter, nine feet into the hillside.

Panting, she gazed at her family, four sleeping mounds of fur in the snow. Except one. Patriarch watched as she climbed to him, her fatigue visible in each step.

Nothing interrupted the black of Patriarch's coat, so dark he virtually disappeared on moonless nights. Even after the trials of winter he carried over 120 lbs. on his large frame and the footprint he left in the snow measured five inches in length. He evinced the wisdom of six winters survived, and leadership's mantle rested easily on his strong shoulders.

Patriarch cared for his offspring, but his affection was tempered by the weight of responsibility, and merely a look from his golden eyes could freeze an underling in fear. Little effort was required to believe the cunning and clever brain behind those eyes was capable of some semblance of logic. The pack fed or starved by his wits.

He was Patriarch. Alpha. And he demanded absolute respect.

Cub-bearer collapsed in the snow, exhausted, and he dropped next to her. Their valley stretched below them, blanketed in new snow, moonlit from end to end. A surging river roared a lone reminder of the glacial ice that had chiseled lowland from mountain a millennium ago. This valley of the wolves breathed a virginal wildness, pure and untouched. In its isolation it was timeless.



Sean turned a corner and froze. Every hair on his body leaped to attention.

“What the hell...?”

A soft purple light quivered and danced on the plywood trail ahead of him like some century-old spirit, trapped and trying to escape the underground. Rommel’s pawprint seemed to shift in the eerie glow with a life of its own. Sean pulled his revolver and stalked up to the apparition. Then looked up. He shook his head and grinned. A halogen streetlight from the current century above cast powerful beams through an ancient skylight of thick glass, tinted purple with age.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” he mumbled, “but if I were going to consider the concept, this would sure be the place to start.” Several deep breaths and the sound of his own voice calmed him, but he still had no idea how far Rommel was ahead of him.

Minutes later Rommel’s tracks turned sharply and entered what looked like an old theater through a gaping crack in the wall. Sean crawled through the hole and heard bipedal footsteps across plywood and, in pursuit, the reassuring sound of claws tapping a canine gait. Rommel was closing in on his prey.

Shining his flashlight around, Sean could see the room was not large by today’s theater standards, but it was at least two hundred feet to the other end. Barking and growling erupted from what would be the backstage area and he sprinted down the ancient center aisle.

Seconds later he found the dog leaping up and snarling at a hole in the ceiling, an opening to the floor above.

“Rommel, down!” The dog glanced at him and obeyed reluctantly. Sean pointed his light up into the darkness, and a gunshot whizzed by his head.

Rommel leaped up, putting his seventy-five pound frame between the two humans and the next bullet hit him squarely. He collapsed and Sean aimed at the dark hole, letting

off four rounds. A human dropped through the ceiling and hit the ground next to the dog, bleeding and unconscious.

Sean kicked the gun from the sniper's hand and immediately turned to Rommel. He heard footsteps and yelled for his backup.

Rommel was so still Sean's stomach knotted, and when he knelt next to him canine blood seeped into his pants from under the dog.

"Oh, God, no," he groaned. Sergeant Denny tasted real fear for the first time that night.

But when Sean stroked his head, Rommel opened his eyes and whined softly. Sean exhaled, his partner was still alive.

In his flashlight's glow he concluded the shell was still in the dog's thigh so he pressed his hand over the entrance wound, applying pressure to slow the bleeding.

"We gotta get you out of this rat-trap, partner, you could catch the plague down here." A lump in his throat swelled to keep company with the knot in his stomach while he stroked the dog's head with his free hand. "Hang in there, Rommel, you stay with me, pal."

Not one thought passed through Sean's head for the condition of the killer next to Rommel.

The silent pager vibrated inside her evening bag, rudely summoning Alex to consciousness. She checked the number and made eye contact with Stephen, who nodded, lips pursed. Arrived late and leaving early. But now she didn't care. In the hotel lobby she pulled out her cell phone and dialed her message service.

"This is Dr. Verazzano, you have a 911 for me?" The lethargy and boredom of the evening vanished.

"Yes, have them take him to the clinic, then call Tony. I'll be there in ten minutes." She hung up without waiting for a response and caught the eye of the concierge who had been watching her.

"Cab, please?"

"Yes ma'am, right this way."

Dr. Alex Verazzano wrapped her satin coat around her shoulders, marched briskly across the marble lobby and stepped into the waiting cab.

A very special patient had been shot.

Chapter Two

Seven minutes later Alex opened the car door and red satin heels struck pavement before the taxi rolled to a complete stop. Her technician's orange Volkswagen bug was flanked by two Seattle police cars, parked at odd angles, blue and red lights hypnotically probing the darkness.

"Rommel, how are you, boy?"

The veterinarian had cared for Rommel since his qualification with the department four years earlier and her first words conveyed a familiar affection. Rommel was conscious and his eyes followed her approach, unblinking. When she was close enough to touch him, he raised a bushy tail and flopped it once against the vinyl seat. He easily recognized his caregiver beneath the rustling satin.

"Looks like you made somebody pretty angry tonight."

She stroked him between the ears with one hand and inched the other along the length of his body to the wound in his thigh. He flinched.

"Easy Rommel, I'm not going to hurt you."

Alex performed her initial triage, her soothing voice ministering to Rommel's spirit as her hands worked over his body. There was a lot of blood dried in his fur, and fresh blood oozed slowly from the wound itself.

"The second the perp fired at me he leaped between us and took the next round!" Sean's pride and affection for the dog was obvious. "He's gonna be okay, right?"

Alex looked up and noticed the large bloodstain on his shirt.

"How far did you have to carry him?"

"Hard to guess, there aren't any street signs in the underground. At least half a mile, maybe more." She nodded.

"Tony, take Rommel to the surgery."

Her technician, nervously pacing beyond the perimeter of uniforms, started toward the dog, but before he could pick

him up Sergeant Denny stepped in front of him.

"I'll carry him." Sean's voice communicated authority equal to his uniform.

"Yes, of course." Tony stammered and backed away. "This way, please." Sean, with Rommel cradled like a large hairy baby, followed Tony to the stainless steel table in the surgery. Two other officers completed the parade.

Alex tossed her evening bag on her desk and kicked her ruined shoes into a corner of her office.

"Start two IV's of Ringer's, Tony," she called, "front legs." But he already had one needle inserted and lactated Ringers solution flowing before she verbalized the task.

"What's that for?" Sean's demanding voice made Tony jump. Alex answered from her office while she slipped into a pair of worn Reeboks.

"Sean, we can't let Rommel get dehydrated, he'll lose electrolytes. The Ringer's will keep his fluids up during surgery and while he is unconscious." Tony handed the two IV bags to Sean to hold while he retrieved stands, and the other two officers took their moral support to the waiting room. The antiseptic smell of surgery made them as nervous as they made Tony. Sean, however, remained firmly planted next to Rommel's table. Tony reached around him to insert a rectal thermometer, while he counted Rommel's respiration.

"Vital's, Tony?"

"Temp is 99.7, respiration is low." Alex made entries on Rommel's chart.

"Sounds shocky. We can't operate until he's stable, so let's give him dexamethasone."

"What's that?" Sean's interrogating tone was starting to annoy Alex.

"It's a steroid to stabilize him." She reached around Sean to tape contacts to Rommel's chest and then plugged the contacts into the EKG. Sean watched the two professionals and felt as useless as a piece of broken furniture. Alex and Tony shuffled around him as if he were. Finally, Alex tired of the ballet.

“Sean, you’ll have to wait outside. As you can see, there isn’t a lot of room in here, and Tony and I have our own dance routine for getting around.”

“I’d like to stay. If you think the blood will bother me, it won’t.”

“That’s not the point.” Alex spoke with as much authority in her jurisdiction as he had in his.

“I’m in the way?”

“You read my mind, Sergeant.” He stroked Rommel’s head and reluctantly joined his fellow officers, amidst the pet magazines and pamphlets on heartworm and parvo-virus.

“X-ray his left rear, Tony, and I’ll prep the anesthesia.” She calculated the dosage for the large canine—1 cc. of 4% thiamylal sodium per five pounds of body weight—and they worked in silence for fifteen minutes.

“How’s he doing now?”

“Pulse and temp normal and stable for the last three minutes.”

“Good, let’s go ahead.” Within minutes of the injection Rommel was breathing deeply in his drug-induced slumber.

“Trach tube now.”

Working together, they inserted an endo-tracheal tube down the canine’s throat to insure a clear airway and administer the general anesthesia during surgery, and Alex tied Rommel’s muzzle closed with gauze, to keep him from chewing on it. Then Tony passed Alex a hypodermic of atropine, and she administered the subcutaneous injection to check his salivation.

While Tony shaved Rommel’s left rear, Alex studied the x-rays, noting the position of the slug.

“This is good, didn’t nick the femur. Tony, what conclusion could you draw from the amount of blood loss he exhibited?”

The tech thought briefly and then said, “The bullet didn’t hit the femoral artery either. Not enough blood.” Alex smiled.

“Right. It looked like a lot of blood to Sean, but it was already coagulating when they got here.” She pointed to the X-

ray, "This is one lucky dog, it's sitting in the fleshiest part of his thigh."

Tony shaved and washed the surgical area generously with betadine and Alex started the flow of 2% halothane through the endo-tracheal tube. For two minutes she watched the system of tubing to and from the canine, through the rebreathing bag and into the flutter valves that visibly counted the dog's respiration.

Rommel was one of the brightest dogs she had ever encountered, and a hard-working member of the Seattle Police Department. She recalled watching him climb a ladder with the agility of a cat, and walk across a two-by-four, half as wide as his body. He had been tested repeatedly for the number of times he would return to an assailant that had caused him pain and he never cowered.

But it was the other side of Rommel that touched Alex. He was six years old, yet he retained a puppy-like curiosity. More than once he had received a nasty swat from Sheba, the clinic's cat, when his nose drifted within striking distance.

His stillness on the stainless steel table was out of character.

When all was functioning smoothly she and Tony scrubbed for surgery with the same care as if their patient was human. They masked, covered their hair, and gloved. Tony stepped behind her to cover the Valentino gown with a well-washed green cotton smock and Alex stepped into it without a second thought. The incongruity of the image was striking, a beautifully coifed woman in worn Reeboks and red satin, gloved and masked for surgery.

"Okay, Tony, let's do it."

The sun's first rays were bathing the hillside in gold when Cub-bearer entered the den to stay. She did not eat and silently kept her own counsel, awake and waiting. Outside, the pack stationed itself around the entrance to the subterranean nursery.

No sound escaped the den as Cub-bearer panted through her labor, each contraction more intense than the previous one, but she suffered her whelping in silence and darkness.

She gave birth to her first cub as sunlight touched the valley floor. With the same teeth that could crush a moose's leg, she bit into his embryonic sac and drew him out, licking away all traces of birthing matter. Then Cub-bearer nuzzled Red-cub, a male, to her side to nurse while she delivered his sibling.

The next cubs were born together, a pair of gray females, First-twin and Second-twin. Their coincidental birth kept the shewolf busy cleaning and licking, and she worked quickly, massive teeth gently tearing away the slimy film. They risked suffocation inside the fetal sac if she didn't release them within seconds.

The fourth cub to make his appearance was another male, Black-cub. Cub-bearer cleaned and nudged him next to his siblings and closed her eyes to rest until the next contractions started. When they came, they were the strongest yet, but the exhausted bitch bore them in silence.

Tony retrieved the sealed pack of surgical instruments and opened it over the sterile environment of the table. Alex slowly probed the wound, following the path of the bullet. It had entered Rommel's thigh front to back, stopping just short of the femur.

When she felt the probe strike metal she nodded at Tony and in one smooth exchange, he took the probe and handed her the electro-cautery. As Alex sliced the skin, it simultaneously cauterized the incision to reduce the bleeding, and keep the surgical field clear. The odor of burning flesh assaulted her, familiar, expected, and repulsive. Alex never got used to it.

Then she took the scalpel with a deftness born of experience and cut into the muscle only as far as necessary to extract the bullet.

"Hemostats, Tony."

She paused to glance at the x-rays on the wall, verifying the bullet's orientation, then she extracted the long forceps, and the deadly slug clanked into the tray near Rommel's head.

Alex irrigated the opening generously with aqueous penicillin while Tony prepared the sutures. With smooth movements she closed the muscles internally with Dexon, changing to Braunamid to suture the thick external skin.

She examined the surgical site and, satisfied, began the methodical shutdown of the systems that had sustained the dog. The halothane was turned off before the two caregivers transferred Rommel to a recovery table. As soon as Rommel showed a swallowing reflex they removed the trach tube, but the IV's would be left in place until he regained consciousness. Alex left Tony cleaning the surgery to give Rommel's friends his prognosis.

"Sean? Officers?"

"How'd it go?" Sean stood up and Alex smiled.

"He's going to be fine. That dog leads a charmed life, gentlemen, the bullet lodged in the largest muscle of his thigh and there was no bone damage."

The men exhaled in unison and the release of tension was palpable.

"That's great, Doc, can I see him now?"

"Yes, for a few minutes, but he's unconscious and I'll keep him sedated for the rest of the night."

Sean's two friends left the clinic and he followed Alex into the surgery. She understood his need to see Rommel himself. Surgery holds a primal fear that can only be dispelled by personal touch. When Tony saw the police officer coming, he moved away so Sean could get closer to the dog. Sean's eyes drifted from the needles and tubing in Rommel's front legs to the stitches in his shaved thigh.

"How you doin', pal?"

His voice was quiet and the gentleness with which he stroked the sleeping dog dissolved the toughness of his station.

"He's really going to be okay, Sean. He should be fully

conscious tomorrow, why don't you come back in the morning?"

"Okay, Doc. And thanks for everything." He glanced at Tony but the vet tech was loading surgical instruments into the autoclave on the opposite counter. Obviously he didn't think Sean's gratitude included him.

"Thanks to both of you."

At that Tony turned around and nodded his head at Sean without meeting his eyes. Alex wondered if it was Sean's uniform or the strength of his personality that unhinged her technician.

She walked Sean to the door of the clinic, and when she returned, Tony was checking Rommel's vital signs. He was unaware of her observation and she was struck by the contrast of his confidence and skill with the animals and his gawky nervousness around people. Alex smiled. She recognized much of herself in the sensitive, but unfinished young man.

"Tony, I'll finish up here, go on home."

"That's alright, I'll stay with Rommel tonight."

"No, we have a full schedule in the morning and I'll need you rested and alert. Go home and get some sleep."

"Okay." Tony patted Rommel one last time and left the clinic.

Unattended paperwork beckoned so Alex made a pot of coffee, switched on her portable office radio and returned to the room where Rommel lie still and quiet. There were no other patients overnighting so the silence was only broken by deep sighs from the tranquilized dog and faint music from her office.

The largest of Patriarch and Cub-bearer's litter was born last. White-cub was absolutely white except for a black nose and black slits that defined his unopened eyes. Cub-bearer cleaned him as she had his four littermates and nuzzled him to her side, unaware of any world beyond their underground nursery.

Cub-bearer sensed her time of delivery was complete. Satisfied her cubs were clean and safe, she curled her body around them and rested her nose across the litter, hiding them

with her tail. The exhausted mother slept.

Outside, the northern lights shimmered across a moonless sky to the howls of a wolfen chorus. From her underground nest Cub-bearer listened as the voices of her family harmonized with the rhythmic suckling of her cubs.

A large black wolf sat motionless on the hill above the den. Lifting his nose skyward, Patriarch sent his haunting song spinning through the night.

Rommel woofed softly in his sleep and Alex rested her hand on the dog's head until he quieted. For the first time since arriving at the clinic she became conscious of the designer gown under her surgical smock. It was spotted with blood and the satin showed wet circles where some liquid had spilled and dried. She smiled weakly, her drycleaner was used to odd spots on her clothes. But not on Valentino. She picked up the mail.

"Hey, a letter from Greg," she mumbled to the walls.

Her eyes recognized her college friend's handwriting and reached for the large manila envelope. A flashy pamphlet fell out with a Post-it note attached.

"Alex,

The enclosed information is about an international conference on biodiversity we are organizing for this fall in Calgary. Please read and consider chairing the session on the restoration of endangered species. I know this is something you feel strongly about from our conversations in the past. It's a hot topic, Alex, and we could sure use your cool head, emotions are running high on this issue. I know how busy you are, but please consider it. And, as usual, I need your answer yesterday.

As always, Greg"

Alex devoured all the information and then read it again. Every fiber of her being said she had already decided to participate, but she knew Stephen was not going to be excited about this opportunity. Lately he had become critical of how she

managed her time.

It had been so long since she had been involved in any wildlife activity—since she opened her clinic—and with each reading the conference appealed to her more.

This will require serious negotiation with Stephen, she thought, but it'll be worth it if I can go. After all, I haven't been away by myself since our wedding, and this was what I studied in college. I've got to convince him...

Rommel returned to his dreams, and Alex to her coffee, and they passed the night together.