

# The Wild Harmonic

by Beth W. Patterson

## Chapter 1: Prelude to a Howl

“It’s time to flip the switch from ‘standby’ to ‘on’ and unleash the beast!” Raúl the drummer shouts, and I bare my teeth in assent. He starts us off with a mighty cadence across the tom toms and we all jump in on a tight downbeat. We hit the crowd hard with a clenched fist of bass, drums, keyboard, horns, electric guitars, and the commanding presence of our menacing-looking Rasta front man. The mural of Bob Marley behind us stares out at some unseen vision. Gods, I’ve missed playing reggae.

Frenchmen Street, just over the border of the French Quarter and into the Marigny district, is a hot bed of music, less touristy than Bourbon and full of authentic bands, unique restaurants, and art markets. And while the Jamaican-themed Café Negril hosts bands of every sort, on the weekends reggae is king. It’s been years since Hurricane Katrina, but the aftereffects have still filled the denizens of New Orleans with an even fiercer need for ceremony, and the long, narrow club is crammed with people hungry for life.

And I am hungry, too.

As Nigel, our lead singer calls out a tribute to Haile Selassie, Raúl and I drop out for eight bars and I grab the moment to dislodge a strand of my long Creole mustard-colored hair from the strap of my tank top. Onstage in a packed club, it doesn’t matter that I am not a pretty woman. For even in a musical city like here in New Orleans, no one plays bass quite like I do. Oh, sure there are better players, with better tone and timing, who can hold down grooves that would keep a train from derailing. They can play soaring solos, or raise a band to new heights from the ground up. But I’m the one who stayed in the spotlight all these years. I have instinct and a ferocity that allows me to dive so deeply into the sound, I don’t see anyone’s judgment. When I become one with the music, I am a pair of eyes, a pair of ears, a pair of hands, and frequencies. At the same time I’m holding in the core of my being a darkness that I can’t let the rest of the world see.

My bass is a comfort in my hands, the thick strings gliding under my fingers, the familiar weight balanced across my shoulder, and the smoothness of the body leaning into my right side like a favorite dance partner. I forget to be uneasy, and let myself ease into the pocket. Raúl and I sit out when only the guitar and keys play together in what they call *riddim*, then dive back in when it’s just bass and drums together in *dub*. We all close in together and raise our voices. The vocal harmonies are especially tight tonight. We are all just a bunch of misfits come together, and tonight we are creating a sound. It’s who we are.

Many people, including voodoo drummers, Jesuits, and music therapists, have told me that repetition of rhythm can induce a trancelike state. You can also see this in mantras for meditation. These structural *riddims* certainly have gotten me into another universe altogether. In reggae, there is no showmanship allowed for a bass player. Just create solid bass lines without variation, and pay attention to the spaces between the notes as well.

A current of sound energy connects Rowan and me. Just thinking of him makes my breath quicken. Even if he weren’t working as the soundman tonight, I would still be able to pinpoint his location. His

laughing dark eyes are shining in the back, even though the spotlights prevent me from seeing past the edge of the stage. Much as I'd like to, I'm not going to try to seduce him tonight. Maybe I'll just lunge for his throat. That would be safer. Something is going on, it scares me. We have more in common than he knows.

The PA system here at Café Negril isn't great, but at least I don't have to worry about how I sound when Rowan is behind the board. He can do a world-class job of slaying feedback and balancing a mix. Most folks who have worked with him have remarked that they don't know how he does it. Live or in the studio, it's as though he can hear notes before they even start. I would bet my bass that his keen auditory senses are because of what he really is.

Trust in Rowan has been creeping up on me. That never happens, not in years. Not for those like me. It's like something magical, or something much darker. I wish I knew why, or even how he is doing this. Sometimes I feel as though he would understand me better than anyone on this planet . . .and I am terrified of how crushed I'd be if I were wrong.

A hoarse, high-pitched screeching from around the corner of the bar tears the fabric of the night air, jangling my nerves. A cat seems to have just met an untimely end in the street. Helpless to the animalistic desperation that stabs at my senses, the scent of death assaults my nose: bodily functions shutting down, blood flowing, energy shifting. I don't lose the groove, but I give the room a desultory glance. The crowd continues its oblivious dance, but Raúl and I exchange a fleeting glance of concern. One side of my upper lip peels back from my teeth.

Nigel calls for riddim, which I accidentally interpret as dub. Among the crisp guitars skanking on the upbeats and the keys filling in the smaller gaps, I suddenly stick out like a low thumb. I try to make my blunder sound as deliberate as possible, sliding my note slowly down the neck and into oblivion. Why couldn't my friend at the voodoo shop find a potion that wards against stupidity?

I have to free myself, if this is not real. This unhexing charm had better work. I'd have been better off tucking the gris-gris bag in my bra, held against my skin, but that would have been too distracting. The comforting lump of it in my pocket will have to do. The scent of pungent smoke and the sweet herbs tucked into it promise a miracle. My lungs creak as I try to inhale some sort of immunity to this obsession with Rowan, because if I continue to feel like a bloodhound on a scent trail, I'll never get through the gig.

What is really frightening is that I don't want to fight it. It's like a delicious drug, which scares the hell out of me. If Rowan is doing this, he does not know the danger he is putting us both in. But I can't seem to resist it. Is it wrong to crave dangerous toys? There is a big, swollen full moon in the sky, and I think it's making us all a little mad. The glowering disk always has affected me more than others.

*No!* I have to focus on the gig, and I watch Raúl's bass drum pedal to ground myself. Raúl and I have been working together for a number of years now on various blues, funk, and reggae gigs. I can always count on him to keep everyone in line, signaling the changes with his clockwork playing. Nyahbinghi chants are next. Even though I myself am not a Rastafarian, this piece needs to be given the respect it deserves: Babylon and Zion and freedom and fire.

The intensity of the show increases. Assorted scents fall into complex olfactory harmonies of their own: sweat from the dancing audience, the acrid tang of spilled cheap booze, and cilantro from the tiny grill past the bar where many a starving musician can get an insanely good taco on a thrifty nickel. A fainter odor, I can tell that someone *almost* made it to the grimy restroom way in the back. The girl dancing by herself up

front is putting on an impressive veneer of joy, but the scent of her loneliness is so far in the olfactory foreground, I have to shield myself from her secret melancholy. Time to dig into my strings, ground, and bring myself back to task.

We launch into a raggae dancehall song next, the sharp accents of the intro shooting across the stage and up my leg bones. Raúl shoots me a comical grin, and I chuckle. It's going to be okay. We always have fun when we work together. Raúl never tells me what made him decide to settle in New Orleans, but he seems to love it here. Even though he expresses no desire to leave this crazy town, he always teases me that he's going to steal me away and take me to his native Mozambique with him. . . exaggerating his accent, occasionally switching to Tsonga or Portuguese, describing his native African culture in outlandish caricature. Perhaps I would like to meet his brother? He would just eat me up. Once you go Mozambique, no other will you seek. (Or it will hurt to take a leak, or it will make your whole week — there's a different rhyme every time he goes into this act.) Most of us musicians are a crude bunch, and Raúl's antics never fail to get a laugh out of me. There's a genuine harmlessness to it all, and I'm quite certain that he can sense my affections secretly lie elsewhere.

I squint through the lights at Rowan. Either this little gris-gris bag doesn't work, or I really am in love with him. No way to know for sure until the bag does its magic, literally. So there's nothing to do except lose myself in the music for now, swaying to my own spell.

With the trance-induced groove, an awful realization creeps over me.

Rowan hasn't bespelled me at all. Why would he? He could have any woman he wants, and I am not exactly a prize. My heart does a nosedive into my gut. I am so screwed. It's far easier to lift a curse than it is not to feel an emotion.

Finally we are on the last song in the set. Most people have begun to trickle out as Nigel brings us down with a song about feeling *irie*, mellow and agreeable. But the ones who are sticking around are still craving more. As much as I am feeding on this power surge, I can't wait to get home. This is Frenchmen Street, not touristy Bourbon, but it's still getting too crowded. It will be too risky to even tell Rowan goodnight. I simply don't trust myself.

But he is gone before I've even packed up my bass. I am torn between the relief of keeping my secret and the empty longing for something I have never known.

\*\*\*

Back uptown in my tiny one-bedroom apartment, I heave a groan of relief and frustration. Surrounded by my comforts—my books, my Rush posters, hazardous toys, and knickknacks, I am in my territory now. I can keep my secret, even during the full moon, but it's physically draining. It's time to fully be myself.

My blinds permanently drawn, it is now safe to throw self-consciousness to the wind. Stripping off my stage clothes and throwing my little gris-gris bag onto the floor, my body finds much needed relief as I drop to all fours and allow the change. It feels good: stretching my spine, extending my tail, and feeling my fangs protrude, as if the beast of me has been cramped in a kennel all month. As long as my playing doesn't sound pure white, I don't mind if my fur is. Another growl that can't be helped resounds, this time from my stomach. Between the long gig and now my body's change into a large wolf, it voices its displeasure at me not having grabbed a burrito at the venue.

Only one more day of the full moon, and tomorrow's gig is a showcase. It means that I'll have only forty-five minutes onstage, and I'll get to see some friends. It should be far easier than what I had to deal with tonight. A lot of my musical peers will be there. Comradship in the music scene is invaluable.

There's my fellow bass player Teddy Lee. Teddy is going to go places, but right now he doesn't seem to be in a rush. Like Raúl, he's one of the few people on the scene that I feel I can trust. He's also one of the best musicians I know, but most people can't seem to get past his high falsetto singing voice and abnormally large chin. When Teddy's not onstage, he's outright hilarious...cheerful and cuddly-looking, like his name.

My childhood best friend Sylvia has promised that she'll be there too. I am so relieved to have her back in my life, a pillar of comfort in these dangerous and uncertain times. She and her family had disappeared suddenly when we were in our teens, and one blessed night when we were reunited a few years ago on a gig, she explained that it was a witness protection program. And just like that, we picked up where we left off. I still find her new job hard to wrap my head around, but I know it's the same old Sylvia I knew from our days of sleeping over at each other's houses and playing games to scare ourselves silly. Fed up with the madness of the music scene, she quit gigging as a progressive rock keyboard player to become a nun and a church organist in St. John Parish. She was always wise beyond her years, and a beacon of reason. But she'll still be eager to hear my gossip and recent discoveries of gloriously bad movies.

And Rowan, will be running sound again, dammit. This stupid gris-gris bag was a rip-off. Some miracles can't be bought or sold. There are charms to heal broken hearts, charms to attract love, but nothing is going to kill my feelings for him.

A high-pitched whine escapes my sinuses like a whistling teakettle, and then I remember that the neighbors can hear me. Growling to let off steam is not an option, so I pin the offending cloth pouch beneath my paws as I would a mouse and snatch it in my teeth. With a violent shake of my head, I imagine its neck snapping. Shredding the gaudy fabric, I roll in the pieces, twisting and turning like a decapitated snake.

The oils and crushed herbs permeate my coat to my skin, and the scent soothes me. A moment to let my heightened sense of smell pick up on every subtlety, and the bag's contents begin to work their magic. They make me drowsy and relaxed, and my physical shell flows back to human form. The magic can't break my love, but it can keep me from fretting about it for a while. Naked, I drag myself to the fridge for a post-change snack of high proteins, sliced turkey breast and yogurt. Then I crawl into bed and ready myself for mystical dreams.

Only one more night of the full moon to go while I have to see Rowan. Then for a few weeks I can go back to being a normal musician—whatever that is.

\*\*\*

I could bite my own leg for choosing this line of work sometimes.

As it is, I'm already irritable; I've had a hell of a day. Now my bass is strapped to my back in a padded gig bag tough enough to withstand a grizzly attack. Ahead of me on a hand truck, I'm pushing my rig that, when cranked at full volume, could blow the toupee off of a crooked politician. Remaining positive was possible until just a second ago, when I reached for the door of the club, and some patron of the arts decided to call out, "You *play* that thing?" Would he ever dare ask a female police officer, "You *shoot* that thing"? Grrrrrr

...

I've often wondered if my male bandmates get asked any of these dumb questions, but now I need to

focus on more important things. Namely how I'm going to pull off this show for the second night in a row without throwing myself at Rowan.

Before my eyes have a chance to adjust to the dim light of the club, I can sense him. Without looking I can locate him behind the mixing console. But of course, he would be. His punctuality defies the musicians' lackadaisical stereotype. But then again, Rowan is not your average anything.

Rowan steps out from behind the board to help me carry my gear. I try not to think about his Hispanic-Cajun good looks, and as he greets me with a kiss on the cheek, I pray that my rising temperature doesn't accidentally singe him. "How was your day?" he gently murmurs as we hoist my gear onto the stage.

Oh, dear *gods!* I was planning on being Miss Cool, but I can't help myself. I have all of the social graces and aplomb of a warthog in a tutu, and before I even realize it, I find myself spewing about my adventure.

"You're not gonna *believe* this. This afternoon, I was trying to drive across Camp Street, and this dude yapping on his cellphone driving at this idiotic speed ran a stop sign. Somehow I knew he was coming, and I swerved as hard as I could, but he totally plowed into me. Luckily there was no one riding shotgun. If there had, it would have been *ugly*...we're talking major injury or death, and three generations to pay off medical expenses..." He nods sympathetically.

"And when we got out of our cars to exchange info, he recognized me! Remember when I told you about that gig I played in the Quarter where this drunk dude loudly cursed me out for *three solid hours* from the bar, and the rest of the patrons were getting pissed, but the bartender refused to throw him out because he was tipping her so extravagantly?" I don't wait for a response. "It was *him*, and I wanted to kill him right then and there, but I had to act rational because by that time a cop had arrived on the scene. As they were towing away my poor crumpled car, he apologized nonchalantly for ruining my vehicle and my gig, as if he'd done little more than knock over my drink. I was so mad, I was practically foaming at the mouth! So I asked him if that was all he could say, and he said that in fact, he had more he wanted to tell me. He asked me if I was aware of massive changes about to take place and a new heaven on earth. And he pulled a *pamphlet* out of his pocket . . . like I really want to be preached at by a *religious freak!* What kind of man tells you 'join the angels' right after he's demolished your vehicle?"

His expression never changes. "Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?"

And in a split second, I'm laughing. And then I realize that while I've been running my mouth and emotionally barfing, he's set up my mic, run my amp through a DI box, and materialized a guitar stand for me seemingly out of thin air. He knows just by the sound of the room's acoustics what settings I should use, and he's surreptitiously adjusted my tone on my rig—I've been known to forget to do this myself when I'm really flustered before a gig. There's even a bottle of water for me. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear he was a freaking ninja.

But I do know better. I wonder if he knows that I know. I'm terrified to ask him about it.

It's an extremely risky boundary to cross. It seems that many people choose to turn tail and shun the things that make them who they are: their quirks, their flaws and foibles, their hopes and fears, their heritage, and their private demons. It didn't take me long to figure Rowan out, and the fact that I seem to be the only one who has caught on is extremely unnerving to me.

A beverage-enhanced voice bellows from the crowd, "Hey, miss! You gonna play us a song tonight?"

*No, actually, I'm going to land a helicopter.* Deep sigh. I have to be grateful that we live on a planet with only one moon. Especially on nights like tonight, when it looks so ripe, and when it plays with the tides of our bloodstreams.

I glance at our band's backdrop. Even the scowling Lion of Judah looks exceptionally ferocious in this light.

\*\*\*

I hate checking sound while audience members are trickling in. We try to get the right levels—play a little, adjust a little, play some more, the sound person tries to dial up the right tone and volume, tries to get us decent monitor mixes so that everyone in the band can hear each other—and in the midst of this, someone always screams, “*Play a song!!!!*” We go to check our microphones (“One, two...one, two...”) and some genius shows off his intellect with “*Three, four!!!!*” (This is why I always check my mic in Scots Gaelic.) The band that goes on last usually checks sound first, so at least I can get this over with, swap a few jokes with Raúl, and sneak away before I’m tempted to stare at Rowan.

Now that there's nothing left for me to do — except catch the other acts and wait my turn to go play—I have to step outside for a spell. Hanging out in the employees' parking lot helps me clear my head, even in the humid evening air. Flanked by the back ends of adjacent businesses, it's a good, private little spot to prepare mentally before a show, and with three other bands sharing the billing with us tonight, the green room is a little too crowded for my taste right now. The sun begins to set over the defiant buildings: intricate wrought iron balconies interspersed with the occasional potted fern contrasting with the rugged walls. We haven't had much rain yet this season, so the mosquito population isn't too awful tonight. I lean against the sun-warmed bricks and begin to relax.

Someone in the distance is having a crawfish boil...I can smell the highly concentrated spices and the salt used for purging the live crustaceans, and I can imagine how some nice, fat mudbugs would taste... small cobs of corn, potatoes, heads of garlic, and mushrooms boiled with them, absorbing all of those complex flavors and washed down with a cold Abita Amber beer. Farther off in the distance, a lone trumpet player is warming up outside another club. Long tones in some easy intervals, then an ambush of chromatic runs. Some jazz licks are flushed out of hiding...they run amok in whatever chord changes are playing within the unseen musician's head.

There's a reason that New Orleans seems to attract the absurd. All sorts of misfits are more likely to be accepted here. Some people come here to be noticed, and some to hide. And it is indeed a supernatural town. The bright is just a little bit brighter, and the dark a whole lot darker. All of the frenetic tales, all of people's secrets, hopes, and broken dreams get carried down the Mississippi river—all the way from the source. They end up here at the mouth, in highly concentrated energy that pools near the Gulf of Mexico and runs this area like an unpredictable power grid. People flock from near and far because of the hype about voodoo, the cemeteries, the ghost stories, and endless books about vampires that take place here in the Crescent City.

I suddenly snap out of my musings. Something doesn't smell right. It's not even the ubiquitous skunk-and-gasoline smell of pot that seems to loom over the music scene. That I don't mind; it's as ever-present as a backdrop these days—especially on reggae gigs like this one tonight—and although I don't partake of it much myself, I'd rather deal with stoners than drunks. But it's the three kids in the farthest corner who are trying to get their jollies who have caught my attention. And now it seems as though I have caught theirs. On my own

turf, I am suddenly regarded as an intruder to their little party. I suddenly remember why drab colors are important for survival in the females of many species.

They begin to approach me. I don't even know what they want, but I do know that they're not employees, nor are they here to contribute to the conservation of any endangered species.

“There she is, the one that got away! You better be careful, or someone gonna bite you back!”

I have had a crappy day, I'm trying to focus on the gig tonight, and I absolutely do not need these punks messing with me now. I stand as still as a stone until they step a little too close for comfort. They make the mistake of making eye contact with me. It's an act of aggression that tips me right over the edge.

A subtle feedback loop gnaws at my eardrums, and I'm dimly aware that an angry little song is rumbling in my throat. I think it's an old Scottish call to battle that I learned as a kid, but I'm not really paying attention to anything other than how to make these kids to back off — *now*. One foot takes an involuntary step forward.

And as if summoned somehow, there are now two of us. Raúl is suddenly at my side, snarling what appears to be some choice words in Tsonga. He could be reciting the nutritional content off of a bag of Chee-Wees for all I know, but it sounds menacing enough to make these punks step back very quickly, palms up in the universal “We don't want no trouble” gesture. They wisely decide to move along.

Trying to maintain some semblance of bravado, one spits on the pavement as a final gesture of defiance in the middle of his hasty retreat, marking his territory. They duck into an alleyway.

Raúl resumes his relaxed smile, as though he's just enjoyed this showdown like a funny film. “They don't know much about who the real 'brothers' and 'sisters' are, do they? Mess with one musician, you mess with the whole lot. Now let's go back inside, before you attract any more attention. Who would it possibly be coming after you next time, hmm? Some mobster? Maybe some James Bond villain . . . no, I've got it! Disgruntled rodeo clowns. Come on, *baixinho* . . . if you weren't like a little sister to me, I would marry you this instant. Since I have these scruples, I guess I can't be a true Louisianian then, can I?”

I look back to track our adversaries' retreat, but there's no sign of the kids. Only a cluster of rats skitters down the streets and into the gutters. One creature turns back to fix me with a menacing glare in its beady eyes before joining its scaly-tailed brethren. This clearly isn't over.

\*\*\*

Teddy checking sound when we walk back into the club is such a welcome sight, I forget about the near attack. Raúl gives him a wave, and the comfort of friendship grounds me. I've borne witness to so much backstabbing and outright swindling over the years amongst club owners, equipment dealers, producers, and fellow musicians, so it seldom goes unnoticed by me how refreshingly real Teddy is. When you're a bass player, you don't often hang with your fellow low-end jockeys (the annual Mardi Gras “Bass Parade” notwithstanding), and I'm grateful that Teddy and I have each other's backs.

Tonight he's playing with self-proclaimed guitar god Maestro Dude Holstein, a man known for his grandiose ego, pretty golden hair, and faster-than-the-speed-of-musically-pleasing guitar licks. I don't know why Teddy wasting his talent in a backing band for Maestro Dude Holstein. He seems content to just make his musical statement and then disappear into the shadows again. Not all of us are career-driven, I suppose.

The Maestro, however, is a notorious asshole, and right now he happens to be mouthing off to my beloved Rowan. I try to mind my own business and appear casual, but the hair on the back of my neck and arms is beginning to rise. Maestro swears at Rowan over the mic, insulting his aptitude, his musicianship, and his manhood. Rowan calmly diffuses the situation by suggesting a different setting on Maestro's rig. Maestro tweaks a few knobs, fails to see any more problems, then storms off the stage into the green room.

Teddy makes a beeline for me as the next band sets up. "Can you *believe* that dipshit? I can't take dealing with these asshats anymore." He grins as Raúl, who has also worked with Teddy, comes trotting over to commiserate. "I've been dying to take that guy down a notch or two, and tonight's the night." I must appear concerned, because he chuckles reassuringly, "Don't worry. It's not going to make the night go askew. But this douchebag might think twice before fucking with his fellow musicians. You guys in?"

No need to ask us twice. With soundcheck officially over, and the canned music flooding the PA once more, we have a few minutes to spare before the showcase begins. Maestro has stormed off somewhere—he doesn't seem to be close, as the smell of his rancid cologne (which I think is probably Chanel Number Two) is very faint. In a millisecond, Teddy has swiped the set list and procured a Sharpie.

"Um, isn't he going to notice . . .?" I venture cautiously.

Teddy grins like a mischievous wild animal. "Who do you think had to write up his set list at the last minute while he was fixing his hair?" He flips the paper over, and we set ourselves to the task.

Now there are three of us, huddled into a tight knot, howling with laughter. We substitute quite a few nouns in the song titles with "penis." We compete for the most heinous plays on words, trying to keep our voices down.

"Okay . . . now we have 'Rising Farts' . . . and 'Gland in Hand,' and I think we're good to go! Holstein is gonna have a *cow!*" Teddy triumphantly snatches the newly altered set list and is back at the edge of the stage so fast, he defies physics, while Raúl and I try to alleviate the pain in our faces from laughing by mashing our cheeks in our hands.

I'm still wiping the tears from my eyes when I spot Rowan across the room, casually leaning against the railing intended to protect the sound board and crew from drunken idiots. He seems unfazed by the exchange with Maestro, but his mouth holds the barest hint of a smile, as if he's actually heard our wicked plans. It's hard to imagine him as potentially dangerous, as all I can see in him are sweetness and beauty. I am a little ashamed at how quickly my pulse begins to race again.

\*\*\*

I've actually enjoyed Bad Pillow, which was a trio of cello, African percussion, and theremin, an early electronic instrument that sounded eerily reminiscent of early horror films. I endured Sofa King Bad, who probably did not intend to be New Orleans' answer to The Shaggs. But with Maestro Dude Holstein up now, Raúl has managed to tear himself away from the two lovely German ladies to sit with me. Women are crazy about him, with his high African cheekbones, exotic accent, and charming manners: pure animal magnetism.

But apparently to Raúl, not even female attention can measure up to the impending hilarity. It is quite entertaining to see the megalomaniac Maestro Dude Holstein verbally shoot himself in the foot a few times, then scowl at his band and carry on the rest of the set with the proper titles, face darkening with each song. I'd



swear that Teddy can see us, even though the blindingly bright stage lights that always make a dark club seem pitch black from the stage. He grins, and he throws some utterly sublime bass riffs my way. Between his amazing playing and what it meant to him that I was there, it was worth it.

“I *told* you I’d make it!” hisses a familiar voice next to me. As I whirl around to face my best friend, Sylvia flashes me a toothy grin and raises one copper-colored eyebrow at me. “I’ll have to say at least a dozen Hail Marys for lying to Father O’Flaherty to get out of my chores. But he believed me when I told him that polishing the silver would soften my callouses, affecting my ability to play.”

I nearly lose my water out of my nose as I hug the nun. “*Callouses?* You don’t need callouses to play keyboard instruments, you crazy Penguin!”

She snorts. “I know that, but the priest doesn’t. I hate polishing silver. That stuff they give me to work with stinks. Why hello there, Casanova,” she says by way of greeting to Raúl.

The Maestro hops off the stage to stand by his little table full of merch, and Teddy comes over to join us. It’s too late to holler out a request for a reprise of “Rising Farts.” My turn to do my thing.

\*\*\*

I’m been psychologically revving myself up for this moment. Now it’s as if my frustrating day never even happened, and a warm glow begins to kindle in my belly. Rowan’s obsidian eyes are shining behind the board. Sylvia is sitting at the bar, wearing her full habit of a black tunic, veil, and wimple and beaming at me. A million punchlines to this scenario of the nun at the bar come to mind, and it’s obvious by the glint in her eye that she’s found the humor in it too. A few curious young men begin to cluster around her, but she shoos them away with a comically stern glower. Friendly Teddy has already struck up a conversation with her, and the two are chatting like old friends. He is trying to keep a straight face at her theatrics before turning to me and giving me a thumbs-up, that huge chin of his turning on the full force of his generous grin.

We’re the headlining act for this showcase and the final band, and we have to give the crowd its money’s worth. Finally we’re up, and it’s time to go. Now is not the time to think about future gigs, paying bills, or even Rowan.

I may be a woman in love, I may be not entirely human, but all that matters right now is that I am a musician. And we’re off.

The pull of the moon higher in the sky draws the crowd in a tide of swaying, weaving bodies. The songs seem to fly, one right after another...I can’t believe how quickly the set is going. We switch to a reggae adaptation of an old Hebrew chant, Nigel the singer lunging with conviction. The mix is intoxicating. A frequency thrums down my spine from the base of my skull to my tailbone, playing my body like a vibrating string. It feels so sweet and delicious. I shiver with pleasure and surrender completely to the groove. It carries me like a steady river, and I navigate through it easily in the boat of my musical mind.

The lapse between my heartbeat and the pulse roaring in my ears creates a complex polyrhythm. Not only that, but the faint sound of the other players’ hearts adds to this vibe...just bass and drums now, and it’s a huge heartbeat.

*Lub, dub . . . lub, dub . . .*

Too soon we’re coming to our final crescendo, and now it’s my turn to shine. Solos for bass aren’t often called for in this kind of music, but I’ve just been given a cue. I’ve never taken a bass solo quite like this. The

notes just choose themselves. My beats ever so slightly behind the solid bass drum, it seems that some sort of door has been opened. It's as if I just haven't been paying attention all my life...until now. I'm beginning to hear partials, overtones, harmonics, and all sorts of dimensions that I somehow should have known were there all along. I don't know how Rowan is coaxing a sound like this out of me.

Rowan. He's not behind the board.

It's hard to make out the audience with the spotlights in my face, but the movements of my friends swim into view. Teddy is looking worriedly at me. Sylvia is pacing like a caged animal. In spite of their sudden concern, they look so hilarious somehow that I let out an involuntary bark of laughter. I must have forgotten to shave my legs this morning...*why is this occurring to me now?* My knees begin to bend into a slight crouch, and my stomach does a sudden lurch. I've lost the groove. Or has the groove lost me? Something's wrong. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Someone in here is afraid, and it stinks...pungent and sickly. But why? And of what? The audience seems oblivious, but the keyboard player and guitarist start inching away from me. Even tough-talking Nigel looks uncomfortable.

The kick drum pounds through the floor and resonates up my spine in an unmistakable cue. It appears that Raúl is just going to close us out with a drum solo. Not at all the way had we rehearsed the set, but it seems like a great spontaneous idea, and the crowd is digging it. So I let my solo fade, and Rowan is suddenly appearing from the backstage shadows—unseen by the throng that is now transfixed by Raúl—and silently leading me by the arm back into the wings. The mere notion that his hands are on me at last makes me giddy beyond description. He wordlessly slips a pair of shades on me. *Oh, my, I'm a celebrity now . . .* I lean my bass against one of the equipment cases and follow like an obedient little lamb.

The urge to reach out and stroke his short-cropped black hair suddenly overtakes me, to trace my fingertip along that fetching widow's peak of his. I can barely bring myself to look him in the eye for fear that I would drown in the dark intensity of his gaze. What would it be like to bury my nose in the hollow of his throat and breathe in his scent? Would he taste spicy, like his blended heritage—of cayenne and gumbo and chiles and cinnamon? Would he mind how lunar-white my skin might appear against the “café au lait” hue of his own?

He leads me down the corridor toward the back exit. The music is still singing in my blood, and I'm savoring the feel of Rowan's fingers on my arm. The sensation of the tiniest bit of his skin against my own is electrifying, and his body feels turbocharged with energy, which seems to flow into me through his firm grip. My tongue lolls out of the side of my mouth in pleasure. In spite of my dizziness, I haven't had a drop of alcohol tonight (although I had been planning on a few glasses of celebratory post-gig wine). Another power surge from Rowan's touch, and I start laughing deliriously again.

We're in the employee parking lot. The whole area seems oddly deserted, as if invisible to everyone but us.

“What the hell was *that* just now?”

I've never heard him raise his voice before. “Rowan...” I mumble weakly.

“I don't have much time. Tell me what's going on with you. You need to be honest with me if we're going to keep working together like this!”

“Rowan... I need... to shpeak wif you...” I can't even get the words out. The moon is so bright that even through the shades, the parking lot nearly looks like the weirdly shadowed afternoon of a solar eclipse.

“I’m not asking you again. Come clean this instant, or I’m leaving right now.”

Now that the moment I’ve been equally fearing and wanting is staring me in the face, a surreal wave of calm washes over me. Instinct steers me into something that is neither surrender nor risky move. This is the proverbial straw, the tipping point, and it’s now or never.

“*Rowan!*” I can feel his body heat, breathe in his richly alluring scent, and all resistance flees into the night. Mustering up all of my courage, I take a huge, deep breath until my lungs creak. The feeling of my chest expanding and my spine stretching means that there is no turning back now. In one frantic moment, I’ve stripped off my clothes and dropped to all fours. My hands are padded before they even hit the ground, with a click of claws on the pavement. My pale coat shines white in the moonlight.

And there he is beside me . . . our noses touching, tails wagging. I rear up onto my hind legs in utter joy. He licks my muzzle.

And then the others appear. Big, gray Teddy with his powerful furry jaw. Raúl with his mottled coat and huge rounded ears, closer in appearance to an African wild dog, his shining white teeth parted in a lupine grin. Soft, slender Sylvia, still wearing that damned wimple held in place by her pointed ears, most likely intended to ease any shock I might feel over this huge revelation. “We thought you’d *never* come out of the den!” she snorts thickly through her long canine mouth. The words are garbled, but the message is clear. I must be giving her a *look*, because she continues, “I’m sorry! I was sworn to secrecy, and you know how I can keep a secret! You had to figure it out for yourself.”

My mind reels with incredulity. How long have they known that I was lycan? Why did it never occur to me that there might be a reason for my connection to Sylvia, Teddy, and Raúl beyond music and friendship? Have I really been *that* self-absorbed all this time? Or so myopic in my feelings for Rowan that I had a nose for only him? Did I really believe that by burying myself in my music career I could stall my fear and denial about my true nature forever? How did the others find the courage to reveal themselves to each other? Which of them were born into it, and which ones were bitten? I want to *understand*, almost as badly as I want to *be* understood at long last. I have so much to learn from this newfound pack of mine.

The outside humidity makes my nose sweat, and the stench of human agenda surrounding the club is no picnic, but in my joy and relief I couldn’t care less at the moment. Common sense keeps me from howling to the world, *I belong somewhere at last!* I fix my gaze on Rowan, his dark widow’s peak markings framing his intelligent eyes—now golden, but every bit as smoldering. He smells spicy and clean—of musk, passion, and superhuman self-control. Someday, hopefully, when we’re laughing over a glass of wine in his den, or even—fingers crossed!—lying in bed together, I’ll tell him, “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted you to sniff my butt!” But now is not the time for joking. And I’m not going to try to seduce him tonight. It’s that time of a big, swollen full moon in the sky, and it’s time to gather together in a different kind of intimacy. I look around, but there’s still no one else in sight.

We all close in together and raise our voices. Packed tightly and banded together, a single unit celebrates its uniqueness. Humans would call it noise, or cacophony, or “the crap young people are listening to these days.” But they can’t hear what we can: the subtle beating between notes, the intricate countermelodies, the descant, the way that multiple melodies weave around each other so expressively. It’s a frequency that no one else can hear, save others of our kind.

There’s no way we could be tracking this in a studio. It would never sound this good on a recording, not

even done with state of the art equipment. We are among a very small few who can hear it anyway. All we can do is live in the moment and be grateful that there will be more nights like this. This is our secret, and we will leave no tracks. We are all just a bunch of half human misfits come together, creating a sound.

It's who we are . . .

## Chapter 2: Cadenza

*Journal entry, March 15<sup>th</sup>: What does it mean to be a werewolf musician? Most days I really strive to be ahead of my game, playing to the best of my ability, always learning, always growing, and feeling the music. Other days I have to suppress the urge to tear people's throats out. In short, this makes me no different from any other kind of musician.*

I'm not all here. My body is on autopilot, instinctually perusing the upscale boutiques on Magazine Street, but my mind has been elsewhere since that life-changing gig. And Sylvia's briefing over the phone this morning has given me even more to wrap my head around.

There is a definite ebb to the erstwhile frenetic energy all over the city now that Lent is finally in full swing. I don't follow the custom like my clerical pack-sister Sylvia does, but the relief of Mardi Gras stressors being over is enough to make me want to embrace it. Multicolored strands of rogue plastic beads are still caught in trees lining the streets, generous offerings that never quite made it from the floats to the hands of parade goers. I feel a smile creep over my face as the warming weather caresses my bare arms. As always on days I don't have to be on stage, a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers are my seasonal coat. My tarnished yellow hair is pulled back in an unceremonious ponytail, although my personal code forbids me to go out in public without my ritual mask of heavy black lines around my eyes. I like to think of it as a tiny trademark disguise that gives me power, like a Superman cape or a Lone Ranger mask.

"Birch!" a boisterous male voice calls out. "Heyyyyyy, Birch! Where y'at, dawlin'? You were great the other night! How ya been?" In my line of work it's not at all sordid to hear a total stranger tell me how great I was last night, as a man in a Hubig's Pies t-shirt greets me warmly. Judging by the matching shirt donned by the woman with him—*his mate*, I can smell—I can only guess that they are tourists. They are obviously trying to get the hang of some of our local vernacular, and I wonder if they know how to pronounce the name of the city. Nobody around here really says "Noo Or-LEENZ," but there are endless songs about our town, and nothing good rhymes with the way it's really pronounced, "Noo OR-lins."

The façade of over-familiarity makes me stiffen. I am always introduced onstage by my real name, "Birch MacKinlay," but my close friends call me by my childhood nickname "Buzz". An instinctual reflex turns on my automatic smile. These well-meaning people obviously don't know me, of course, but I always want to be gracious, albeit guarded. I nod and exchange pleasantries with the couple, get a whiff of their enthusiasm, and move on. Finding my cognitive bookmark, my train of thoughts resumes rocking on its tracks in time to my footsteps. As the memories of last night flood back, butterflies dance in my stomach and a ridiculous grin smears itself across my face. *I'm not a freak! There are others like me! Not only that, but they are people I care for . . .*

Too often I have taken this city for granted, but now my reawakened senses allow me to see it through

a different lens. In this town, strangers chat like old friends. Brass bands, jazz funerals, and second line parades are part of everyday life. I spend much of my time playing for carnival balls and eccentric pub crawls.

Icons range from Satchmo and Fats Domino to salt of the earth heroes like Mister Okra – the last of a dying breed of people who drives through the Marigny neighborhoods selling produce from his truck, announcing his wares with a bullhorn in the old tradition of street criers. And of course there's the late Ruthie the Duck Lady, a famous schizophrenic woman who traversed the French Quarter on roller skates and always had live ducks trailing after her.

And the Mardi Gras Indians are another element that is difficult to describe to the outside world. They have their longstanding traditions that span many generations of Big Chiefs and Big Queens, elaborate handmade costumes, jagged edge tambourine rhythms, Wild Men, spy-boys, flag boys, signals, and Creole patois. African tribes meet First Nation tribes, blended beings all.

So why wouldn't this be a place for lycanthropy as well? Like the Mardi Gras Indians, lycanthropy isn't a mantle that any person can just take up. It just happens to you, and you can either walk away from it or celebrate it.

So many labels have been slapped on me over the years: diva, monster, angel, prize, and white trash whore. I have drifted between shores of identity, an uprooted tree trying to blindly navigate its way through the floodwaters. And now I have been swept onto the shore of the Promised Land in a way that no street preacher could have ever foreseen.

This transformation. I am still incredulous that it happened in front of others, let alone four people I love. I had never let a soul know until now, and shame had burned up most of my energy trying to stifle my dual nature. Even before I had any clue that I would someday become a werewolf, I was simply *different*. And anyone who has ever been different knows that that is a near death sentence in school.

I don't know what I would have done without Sylvia back then. She was a misfit redhead with her nose constantly in a book, and I was a restless tomboy with complete disdain for authority and the inability to blend in. Luckily Sylvia lived two blocks away from me and was quick to soothe me, helping me to transform my frustration into humor as we explored the most ridiculous 'what if' scenarios in our heads – usually pitting our nemeses against each other in imaginary cage wars. She was always immersed in her piano lessons, yet always had time for me whenever I showed up at her house, bass in hand– the oboe that my folks thought I should learn just wasn't satisfying to me. She was ready for us to jam out on "Light My Fire" or any number of songs over which we could bond.

I wish I'd known that we were both born lycans. We were, after all, the ones who spent our teenage years secretly swapping horror novels, playing "Light as a Feather," and sitting up all night with Mountain Dew and the Ouija board in her family's game room. My parents were always so preachy about hellfire and damnation, and I didn't trust many of the other girls enough to let my animalistic curiosity slip to them.

I had been devastated when Sylvia had suddenly disappeared with her family, not knowing that her entire household were lycans and was about to get its cover blown. And then, with no other friends, the bullying started. It was that time when cruelty at school was an epidemic for which there was no cure. There wasn't even an official name for this merciless persecution that would call attention to the issue, and the teachers neither cared nor intervened. The other kids could not smell it on me, but they knew that I was somehow different, which is a pre-teen death sentence. The bullies and their disciples might have spared a girl

with a physical disability, but an able-bodied kid was fair game for getting punched, tripped, taunted, and – worst of all – labeled. I always felt a fire of rage in my belly, but would always freeze for fear of what I might actually do if I unleashed it.

I had received some sort of warning before my first complete metamorphosis, although I hadn't figured it out until many years later. The last time I had seen my grandmother was during a trip back to Scotland. Before she died, she was trying to tell me something: "*You're likened to . . . likened to . . .*" *Alikened to what?* I'd wondered for years. It wasn't until my first transformation that I realize she'd been saying, "*You're a lycan, too.*"

I had no outlet. So nearly every day I would run through the woods in which we used to play, screaming out my despair. If I could not preserve my innocence, I was going to slaughter it as brutally as possible – before someone or something else could beat me to it. I wanted to watch it die, wanted it to beg for mercy so that I could show it none, the way none was shown to me. But of course this was impossible, because my innocence was already gone. So I took out my beastly anger on my surroundings. The trees and ferns, the paths and creatures, the things I had loved so were now my targets. Anything in my way was slashed, torn, and mangled on my rampages. And then one day, there no turning back, and I realized exactly *how* different I was.

As my body made its transition to adolescence, I seemed to have inherited a curse – or was it a blessing? In recurring dreams I received visitations from shadowy entities, enticing and frightening. Their silky voices were more tangible than audible: "*Your time has come. Arise and hunt your destiny.*" Wolf-shaped with diamond bright eyes, these were the most perfect creatures I had ever seen, and I wanted more than anything to be accepted by them. After fighting this growing instinct for years, it was a relief to finally accept this lycan life, the only thing that made me feel protected and powerful.

The option to fight it never entered my mind.

The only thing that prevented my savagery from ruling me was my first bass guitar. My rants in the woods subsided as I immersed myself in its healing low tones. And so began my dedication to this safe haven of music, and my instrument became my first real shield. Learning some bass lines and their foundational structure became the path to tame the destructive flame within, to soothe the beast of me, and to hide it during full moon phases. No matter what anyone said or did at school, it no longer mattered. The monster that was trying to surface within me went back to its lair, and I found some kids my age to play with in a little garage band. At last I was able to connect with other people, and the nightmare was over for a spell.

My trials had taught me to blend in with my surroundings. They showed me that it was possible for a she-wolf to get through college, play gigs, cultivate friendships, and keep her wildness stifled during the full moon. I had managed to land a lucrative gig, playing bass with the world-famous bluesman Slackjaw Harrison, which suddenly put me in the best of clubs and festivals all over the world. I had even dated.

I shouldn't have worried about my wolfiness being exposed to my suitors, for in dating who wants to see the true person anyway? They only saw a gal with a good gig. Some of the young bucks just wanted to be bought lavish gifts, some betrayed me, and some wanted to be seen with me but lacked interest in getting to know me. So when Calvin O'Quinn came along, with his keen attention to my playing and his acceptance of my wild nature, I ignored the warnings my instinct was screaming.

I wonder if my lycan life was the only thing that allowed me to survive my former relationship with Cal, or if my preternatural senses caused me to be more deeply entangled with him. He tasted of money and

power, both of which had intrigued me, for I had never known these things. He had a penetrating stare that could draw me in or hypnotize prey. At close range he could choke me singlehandedly, and from afar he could suffocate my spirit.

I had paid dearly for the boost he gave my career. His input included coercion into tanning beds and controlled food portions. I began to get weaker, and his power grew. I recall my promo photo from several years ago. I looked as close to beautiful as I would ever be, but in truth I was starving.

Perhaps werewolves aren't inherently vicious. Perhaps most of us simply go mad from being given this gift that is taboo to use, like a beautiful and deadly weapon that is illegal to own.

I finally reached the point that my raw instinct took over and I fought back one day. He was grabbing me by the face so hard that my back teeth were cutting into the insides of my cheeks. I lashed out and bit him on the hand. A scrap of his skin, dry and oddly patterned, came off in my mouth. We both stared at the scrap before he turned on his heel and disappeared from my apartment so instantaneously, I could have sworn he had vanished into thin air. And just like that, I saw him no more. Should I have fought harder? Should I have tried to run away sooner?

Shame boils in my belly.

I finally reconciled that I was better off alone. But then I began recording with Rowan and found that we laughed easily together, sharing a love of "outsider music" and egregious B-movies. I had stopped daring to dream of true love by then, and tried to bury the notion of more than friendship with this compelling music man. But at my first whiff of his lycanthropic scent, I could no longer repress my hope for a deeper connection.

Now, everything is different. I have my pack: Sylvia duBois, Raúl Makamu, Teddy Lee, and Rowan López. My whole world has just expanded. I will give the gigs my all and try to be an asset to the pack.

What do I truly want in life, true love or a successful career? I am supposed to be hard-wired to strive for a successful music career. It's the eternal hunt, always pushing for more. According to the masses, performers aren't supposed to feel pain. They aren't supposed to have hobbies, confidantes, or even boundaries. This is the age of instant gratification, and we are expected to be available to the public at any given moment. But the tiny bits of glory, the places I've gone, the things I've seen, I've tasted enough to stay in the game.

At some point, happiness and true love would be a nice option.

Perhaps the simple, basic necessity of belonging is enough. It's going to be a fine line to tread: a balance between pack, career, and hope for love. I hope to every higher power that I don't screw this up.

I shake myself out of my musings like a dog come in from the rain. I've just walked almost three miles, and haven't even thought about it. I'm almost to the New Orleans Music Exchange, I need new bass strings, and it will be good for me to drop in and say hi to everyone. A dose of the normal would be good medicine, if hanging with musical equipment dealers could be considered normal.

Almost to the cross street of Louisiana Avenue, a shriek nearly makes my heart stop. It isn't a human cry of terror, but it sets my every nerve on edge. Ignoring the traffic and indignant horns, I go pelting across the road, off to the side of my destination, and find the source of the sound. It's a dead mockingbird draped over the roots of the old oak tree down the block. I shrug off any advice I've ever heard about handling dead wildlife and lightly put a finger to its breast. The bird is still limp and warm, eyes and mouth wide open as if to

scream, and I stare until my neck prickles.

Mingling with the outside world no longer appeals to me, and the safety of my own house screams my name. I buy my strings as quickly as possible, catch the bus home, and lock myself inside. Lighting some candles and incense, I choose my favorite bass—my Rickenbacker, plug into my small practice amp, and dial up some comfort and grounding. I play into the late hours in a vain attempt of drowning out the shriek that still resonates in my mind.