

# The Scarlet Lady

By Julie Cox

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Layla followed Frank and the werewolves up the hill from the parking lot. The wind was ferocious, and while it was still several hours until dark, the thick cloud cover brought dusk early. Frank had given her his wool pea coat, and she was glad for it.

As they topped the hill and crossed through a line of trees, Layla gasped. They were in a cemetery. Old grey tombstones dotted the landscape, topped with crosses, angels, stone banners and empty flower vases. It was overgrown at the periphery, and some stones were tilted at an odd angle, giving the uneasy impression of having been pushed up from below. Some graves had little white fences around them; some were grand mausoleums. A few were little more than a rock with a name scratched into the surface. As she passed among the tombstones she saw strange symbols carved into the sides or above the names. A few names had been chiseled out. Below one obliterated name was scratched, "Laugh all the way to hell." She took Frank's arm.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

"Pack territory. This is sacred ground for them. Their ancestors are buried here. The pack is one big happy family, more or less. With a few black sheep, as you can see by the scratched-out names. Interestingly enough, it's also the cemetery for the historic figures of St. Josephine - the founders were all werewolves. See, there's a historic marker and everything."

"Oh how nice," she said, genuinely interested.

"It's actually a fascinating place to come when it's not so dark out, or so dangerous. And quite beautiful when it's sunny. I'll bring you sometime," he said, patting her hand.

She gave his arm a squeeze. "How romantic," she teased. But underneath her words was the fear that there would be no future for her, no time in the future to walk around in an old historic cemetery with Frank. This would be the end. She was just glad there would be no more running.

"Frank," Harry said, catching up with them, "we could use some clear skies tonight. It's a full moon."

"Don't know what you're asking me for, the skies are already clearing."

Layla looked up; the clouds were rolling apart, as if swept out of the sky. Already the pastel light of the sunset was visible near the western horizon. Frank was grinning.

"Was that you or just the natural world?" Layla asked.

"Honey," he answered, "we're one and the same."

A large man with graying, messy hair sat on top of a mausoleum towards the back of the cemetery. His posture, his aura screamed "alpha werewolf." Frank, Layla, Harry and Wally joined the clump of people already gathered around the base of the mausoleum. When they were settled, the man looked down at Layla and Frank and scowled.

"Thaumaturge," he said, his voice deep and rumbling. "You are here as a friend of the pack. We owe you much ... though not our

lives."

Frank inclined his head, his features unreadable.

"Sphinx," he said, turning to Layla, "yes, I can see your wings, I know what you are without having to ask your companions. I understand you were chased out of the Harbor, and have been under the care of the Thaumaturge."

Layla nodded.

The man slipped down from the mausoleum, more graceful than he ought to have been and comfortable in his own skin. "My name is Catchbird, and I am the leader of the pack."

Layla nodded. "My name is Layla Settus, and yes, I am a sphinx. Is Catchbird your real name?"

"We have many names. Don't you?" He turned and walked among his pack, touching Wally, then Harry, then others on the shoulder as he went. "Greatstone, Thistleback, Brightchord, Halfpaw ... Even the Thaumaturge has another name." He smiled down at Frank, his teeth thoroughly canine. His eyes reflected the light like an animal's; Layla pushed fear away from her mind. These wolves, she reminded herself, were her allies. They would protect her ... right?

Catchbird leaned against the mausoleum. "So now you know us. But we don't know you. Oh, we know your name," he said, holding up a hand to silence her as she began to protest, "and we know you're a sphinx. But who ... are ... you? Why do you bring this danger in our midst? The Egyptians have extended their arm far indeed to reach for you here. What is it you hold?"

"I cannot say," she said, her mouth gone dry.

"Then leave," he said, not harshly but matter-of-factly. "I cannot ask my pack to risk themselves for nothing."

"But Wally and Harry - "

"Vowed to protect the Harbor," he finished for her. "The Harbor has been destroyed by those seeking you. The structure stands, but the wards that rendered it a safe haven are destroyed. Powerful magic indeed."

Layla felt despair coming over her. "I am a sphinx. I guard the secrets of the pharaohs and the gods. It is as much a part of me as the wolf is of you."

Catchbird bent down. "If you say nothing, you will die tonight, and perhaps so will some of my wolves. Perhaps the Thaumaturge. And your secrets will be divulged to your enemies. I assume they are written on your bones."

Layla nodded miserably.

"Then divulge the secret they seek to us and if we deem you sufficiently valuable, you will have protection from your enemies. Is that not preferable?"

Layla felt paralyzed. The idea of divulging her secrets, her sacred duty, to strangers, in order to protect them from even more dangerous strangers - it was unthinkable. She didn't know if she was even capable of doing it.

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