



FRAMED

Kelley  
Armstrong

## One

After hitting the snooze button three times, Nick knew it was time to get his ass out of bed, but it

wasn't easy when you couldn't pry your eyes open. He was on the verge of deciding it was

really more trouble than it was worth when he remembered what day it was. Thursday.

Meaning a weekday. Meaning he had to be in the office before his father called at ten.

He didn't absolutely need to be there. If he missed it, Antonio would only laugh it off and

rib Nick about his busy social calendar. If there was one thing worse than disappointing his

father, it was not disappointing him because he expected nothing better. For the past year, Nick

hadn't missed a single "morning checkin and update" call when Antonio was out of town.

Breaking that record now would just make it easier to screw up the next time.

Nick blinked hard. Threads of gummy sleep sealed his eyes shut. He rubbed them and tried

again. Laser beams of sunlight pierced his eyeballs. Goddamn it, he'd forgotten to shut the

blinds again. He always slept in the guest cottage while Antonio was away-he hated rattling

around in the big house by himself-and the window here was perfectly angled to catch the

morning sun. Sadistic designers.

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He lay there, eyes closed, feeling the tug of the dream he'd woken from. Nick shivered.

Not a good dream, that was for sure. Something about being in a hospital as nurses brought in

trays of sausage, ham and bacon. He'd kept protesting he couldn't eat it because he was Jewish,

which he wasn't, but the meat had smelled old and spoiled. As for the nurses, he couldn't

remember what they'd looked like-didn't even think he'd been paying attention. Definitely a

nightmare.

As he yawned, he caught a whiff of his breath against the pillow and almost gagged. The

blinds hadn't been the only pre-bed routine he'd forgotten last night. First stop-the bathroom

to brush his teeth.

Shading his eyes, he lifted his head. Pain stabbed through the back of his skull. He moaned

and dropped back to the pillow. Shit, how much did he have to drink last night? He opened his

eyes. Last night ... What the hell had he even done last night?

For a moment, he couldn't remember, then it floated back. After work, he'd taken visiting

clients to dinner. Purely schmoozing-Nick's specialty-but he always limited his alcohol

intake to one glass of wine, in case he was called upon to talk shop, a task that, for him, required

a clear head.

After the meal, he'd been reluctant to go home to the empty house, so he'd found a coffee shop, and worked for a couple of hours on his laptop. To drink, he'd had ... For a moment, the memory went blank. Then a picture formed. He'd had a caramel latte. That would explain the god-awful taste in his mouth, but it didn't account for the pounding head.

After the coffee house ... He closed his eyes and struggled to recall. He'd worked until eleven ... no, he'd left earlier. He hadn't been feeling well and caught a cab home. The trip was hazy, the walk into the guest house hazier still.

### Kelley Armstrong Framed 3

A seemingly unconnected memory flashed. A newspaper article he'd read. About bars letting people take drinks into the bathroom. The strange headline caught had caught his eye, but as he'd read the story, the concept made perfect sense-letting women take their drinks to the

bathroom rather than leave it where someone could slip a date rape drug in.

He had left his coffee, not to take a piss, but to grab a couple of cookies when his stomach

started growling. Still, his back had been turned, coffee left unattended behind him. And there

had been a girl there checking him out. He hadn't reciprocated because he'd been busy working.

Okay, not so much because he was working as the fact she barely looked out of high school.

That explained the pounding head and fuzzy memories, then. He'd been drugged, probably

that girl slipping god-knows-what into his coffee. Whatever she'd expected, watching him lurch

from the coffee house, green-faced and ready to puke probably hadn't been it.

He pushed up and sat on the edge of the bed, head hanging, eyes squeezed shut as he willed

the marching band in his skull to take a breather. When he opened his eyes, the room dipped and

spun. Oh, this was going to be fun.

He put his hands on the bed, braced himself, counted to three then pushed up-He made it

halfway before his pounding head screamed for mercy and he collapsed backward onto the

mattress. Only his head didn't strike the mattress. It came to rest on a cold, clammy pillow.

He reached back and touched icy skin.

“Holy shit!”

He scrambled up so fast his feet tangled in his discarded clothes and he fell onto all fours.

For a moment, he crouched there, just breathing. If his head still hurt, he didn't feel it.

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Then, slowly, he rose and turned around. There was a woman in his bed. Naked.

Normally, not a problem. Or a surprise. But then, normally, they didn't have a gash across their

throat or a halo of blood drenching their pillow.

The dream flew back. Those endless trays of pork.

“Oh, God. No way. No fucking way.”

His gorge rose, bile filling his mouth. A lifetime as werewolf, thirty years of weekly

Changes, and he'd never killed a human, much less eaten one. He'd never even been tempted,

no matter how wasted or hungry he was. The others felt the pull and took precautions, but he'd

never had to.

Now, after all these years, he'd finally fucked up. He hadn't bothered to Change this week,

with Antonio away-another thing he hated doing alone, but it'd never been a problem.

His gaze slid back to the dead woman. He forced himself to take a good look, fighting to

remember her. But the harder he looked, the more his gut swore this wasn't what it seemed.

Yes, there was a lot of blood, and her throat was ripped open, as if he'd accidentally

Changed and killed her. But he'd killed enough deer and rabbits to know what a wolf's bite

looked like, and this clean cut wasn't it. Her throat had been sliced, not torn.

Despite the blood, there was no other sign of injury, certainly not of feeding. He circled the

bed, coming up on her side. Gritting his teeth, he slid his hands under her icy flesh and tilted her

up. Her back was clean. Not a single bite mark.

With a deep whoosh of relief, he lowered her onto the bed. Then he examined her neck.

Her throat had clearly been slit with a blade. He glanced around the room. No weapons in sight.

No knives in the guest house at all. And even if he'd found one, he couldn't make a cut that

clean.

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The cut wasn't just "clean" in the sense of being straight. It was bloodless. Around the

wound, sure, blood streaked her skin. And the pillow was soaked with it. But the wound itself

was a furrow of white flesh.

As he leaned over her, the dream kept flashing back, all those endless trays of sausage, ham

and bacon. Something smelled like pig. He straightened fast, shuddering.

No, he really did smell pig.

Swallowing his distaste, he bent over her and inhaled. A pause as he struggled to analyze

the smells-never one of his strong suits. Another sniff, then he pressed his finger against the

still damp blood and lifted it to his nose.

Pig's blood.

Why would someone-?

His gaze returned to the slice across her neck. Whoever put her here had dumped blood on

the pillow because that wound wasn't going to produce any. He touched her arm again. Cold.

He'd had enough experience with death-albeit animal death-to know her body shouldn't be completely cold if she'd died in the last six hours.

As he stepped back, his foot caught clothing again. Not his this time-not unless being

drugged had revealed a hidden longing for pink blouses with bead-trimmed collars. He picked

up the shirt. The fabric was stiff-new. He checked the size. Twelve? A snort. Nothing

against a size twelve-he'd take a twelve over a two any day-but the woman on the bed wasn't

more than a six. And with her pierced navel, tattooed ankle and manicured nails, she wouldn't

be caught dead-or alive-in a blouse that showcased the softer side of Sears.

Another smell wafted back from dreamland. The hospital.

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He leaned down and sniffed again. There it was, the distinct smell of a hospital. He'd never

stayed in one, but the scent had been ingrained in his brain for thirty years, after an endless

afternoon spent in a waiting room after Clay jumped down an elevator shaft on a dare. A dare

he'd made. He'd never forget those long hours, certain he'd killed his best friend. And he'd

never forget that smell.

So he'd been drugged in the coffee shop, come home and passed out. Then, while he lay

unconscious, some mutt or other supernatural had put a stolen corpse beside him, cut her throat,

and drenched her pillow in pig's blood, to convince him he'd Changed and killed her. Did they

think a werewolf wouldn't know what a real kill looked like? Couldn't tell the smell of pig's

blood from human?

Shaking his head, he picked up the phone, punched in the 315 area code, then stopped. He

was the victim of the lamest frame-up job ever ... and he was calling the Pack for help? Please.

Even he could handle this. If he did need to called Jeremy in, at least he'd make sure he'd

cleaned up and gathered all the facts.

He hung up the phone and set to work.