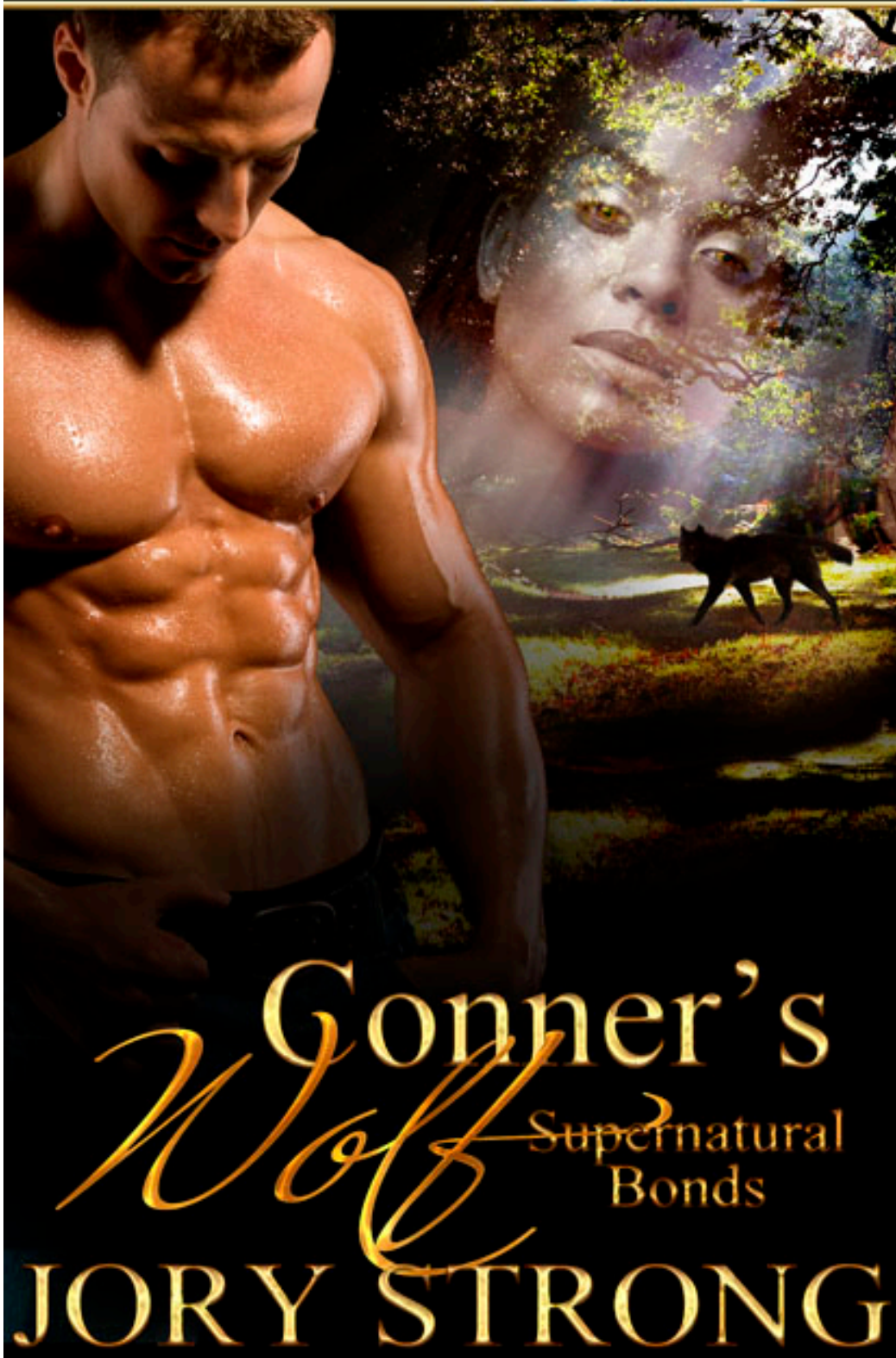


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Gonner's
Wolf Supernatural
Bonds
JORY STRONG

Conner's Wolf

Jory Strong

Book 6 in the Supernatural Bonds series.

Homicide detective Conner Stern doesn't know what Khemirra Reis is running from, only that he's damn determined to find out. Right after he lays her bare beneath him and works the beautiful obsession out of his system.

Sexual satisfaction first, revealing her secrets second—that's the plan—except Khemirra is battling a fascination of her own. Her rational mind says stay far, far away from the gorgeous cop who doesn't want anything to do with the supernatural. But after Conner catches up to her and shows her with heated kisses and carnal demands just how perfect they can be together, the wolf part of her nature is convinced he's the right mate.

Conner wants her trust. She needs his help. But Khemirra doesn't know which of her secrets Conner will hate more—that she killed a man, or that she's a werewolf. Unless love overrides all else, they'll lose any chance of a future together.

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Conner's Wolf

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CONNER'S WOLF

Jory Strong

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Jockey: Jockey International, Inc.

Chapter One

He was pissed off. Royally. He considered himself a pretty reasonable guy and one hell of a detective. But at every turn, the delectable Khemirra Reis had skated on him, staying ahead of him by mere hours in some cases.

Did she know he was on her trail? Or was he closing in just as whoever she was running from was doing the same?

Conner didn't know the answer, but son of bitch, this was getting old.

He'd chewed up most of his vacation time. He'd called in favors, asking cops in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina to keep an eye out for her black Wrangler. And if he didn't catch her soon, he'd be hunting up contacts in Virginia. Not to mention losing most of his ass in a serious chewing out if the captain found out he was working a CSI friend who was, in turn, working a friend to monitor calls going to voice mail on her cell phone – the one he'd figured out early on she'd ditched.

Except for the friend in CSI, all the cops he worked with in Homicide thought he was kicking back at his parents' cabin, holed up writing music and playing his instruments. Or maybe holed up with some badge bunny and making a different kind of music with an instrument big enough and hard enough to be confused with a flesh-colored police baton.

The imagery made Conner laugh, unclenching his jaw in the process. Truth was he'd never invited a woman to the cabin. But the moment he'd seen Khemirra, the decision to do it had taken hold. Viscerally. As in with a cock that went rock hard every time he pictured her, as in with a hard-on that needed to be taken care of every morning because his nights were spent dreaming about her.

Goddamn, he had it bad.

He tightened his hands on the steering wheel as if squeezing it could stop the blood from rushing straight to his dick. Too late. He might be seeing the highway stretched out in front of him but mentally he was looking into the past, remembering what he'd felt the day he met her in the park while he and four other cops were working a case that had ended up with a connection between missing children and the murder of a couple of psychics.

He'd assumed Khemirra would be like most reporters, quick to cite the First Amendment. Instead she'd been open with him, a contradiction that had heightened the attraction.

She was a looker, some mix of races that had produced stunning results. She could have been a runway model with her exotic features and caramel skin, the midnight-black hair begging a man to spear his fingers through it and pull her to him, while the lithe, sleek body fueled fantasies of peeling off her clothing.

His immediate instinct had been to push her to her hands and knees and mount her. Almost every instinct following that one was a variation on a theme involving sweat-slick bodies and carnal ecstasy, although somewhere along the way, the need to find and protect had gotten as strong as the lust.

He took a hand off the steering wheel to adjust the front of his jeans. He was tempted to free himself but he ruthlessly suppressed the urge. His luck, some deer would decide to cross the highway in front of him and the EMTs would be pulling him out of his wrecked car with his hand wrapped around his dick like some perv.

Not exactly the way he wanted to be remembered if he died. And if he survived, the jokes would make him almost wish he hadn't. Cop humor was merciless.

Despite his aggravation at Khemirra's continued elusiveness, he laughed thinking about how he'd left things in Florida. Trace Dileccio, who felt the same way he did about all things supernatural, falling fast and hard for Aislinn, the owner of Inner Magick.

He wondered how Trace's partner Dylan was holding up. And his own, Miguel.

Conner shook his head. Miguel was like a guy walking around carrying a ball and chain in his arms, desperate to engrave some woman's name on it before attaching it to his ankle—or more accurately, his cock.

Well, times were changing. He could see the writing on the wall. First guy to fall hard started a trend that would end the days of them hanging out together at bars in the company of badge bunnies and lead to barbecuing poolside while the wives chatted it up and the kids swam.

Hell, this chase after Khemirra was proof of it. It's not like he didn't have other stuff he should be doing. The guys he played with in a cop band were counting on him to come up with some new material. His parents were always up for a visit, so were a grandparent from each side of his family. Though without fail, right after *hello* came *are you dating anyone seriously?*

He didn't know about dating, but he was going to do some serious fucking when he caught up with Khemirra. He was going to do enough of it to either get her out of his system or move her into his place. And in the process he was going to find out who the hell she was running from and why.

He rolled his shoulders, trying to get some of the stiffness out of them. It'd been another long day. Besides calling in favors from other cops, he'd been working the magazine and newspaper angle because she'd been calling in favors from folks she knew too, picking up income by freelancing along the way, selling off articles.

Getting information out of editors and reporters was a study in frustration. His success rate was closing in on one percent, but his gut said he was getting close to her.

A little farther and he was quitting for the night. There was a country western bar off the next freeway exit. Khemirra had written a piece about the place a couple of years back, and he'd stumbled onto it.

Damn, he loved the web for making it easy to find that kind of stuff. Now if he could only catch up to the woman.

She was in this neck of the woods, as the locals would say. She'd made a call from a pay phone at a gas station to check for messages a couple of hours back and, based on the trail of red Xs he'd marked on the map dedicated to his tracking efforts, he thought she'd keep going forward rather than double back.

There was one major upside to her direction of travel. She was heading toward the Blue Ridge Mountains, where his parents' cabin was located.

He couldn't find any record of her owning property there or having grown up in the mountains, but she'd done stories about people and places all through the Appalachians. And one thing he'd seen repeatedly in his years as a cop, when people ran, they almost always ran to the familiar.

As far as he could tell, the Blue Ridge Mountains were where she'd first started making a name for herself with her writing. It's where she'd come onto the radar screen as legally existing by getting a driver's license and buying a car, a troubling discovery given she wasn't in witness protection. If she had been, then his digging would have brought some Fed to his doorstep.

His lips firmed and he forcefully silenced the internal voice questioning her origins. He'd get his answers when he caught up to her, though talking might have to take a backseat to fucking.

He reached down, readjusting his cock while fighting the urge to free it. Who knew, maybe tonight he'd get lucky. Maybe instead of questioning the bartender and waitresses about her, he'd catch Khemirra herself. If he did, he wouldn't let her out of his sight again until whatever trouble she was in had been dealt with and the attraction between them addressed.

Khemirra felt edgy as hell. Part of it came from nearly a month of being on the run. But the greater part of it came from being a day away from the full moon. It felt like her skin was going to peel away any minute and let the wolf out to play.

Not a good thing. Not out in public, and sure as hell not here, where any number of rednecks had already riled her temper by trying to feel her up whenever she left the barstool to line dance.

She lifted the mug of beer to her lips and took a drink, trying to let the cool slide of it down her throat wash some of the tension out of her body. What she needed was a run in the woods wearing fur, a satisfying chase ending in a hot kill.

A shudder went through her on the heels of that thought, coming with the remembered taste of human blood, human flesh. She took another swallow of beer in an attempt to wash it away, reminding herself as she'd done a thousand times since killing the mage that she hadn't had any choice.

She cupped both hands around the cold mug to keep herself from scrubbing them over her face like a kid rubbing away a nightmare. It came anyway, accompanied by remembered emotion.

The absolute, incredible thrill of having gotten a personal call from Armand Scholes, a multiple-time bestselling author and a guy so reclusive he made Howard Hughes seem like a socialite. She hadn't thought she had a chance in hell of being granted an interview request, and up until the moment she'd arrived at his compound and actually seen the gate slide open to admit her, she'd considered she might be the victim of a practical joke by person or persons unknown.

Uncertainty, elation, disbelief—

Lucky. She'd felt that way as she entered Scholes' compound, already envisioning how many other doors might be opened for her once the piece on him was written and published.

But in the end, her luck had taken a completely different form. And she *had* been lucky, so damn lucky.

First, in that her car had been in the shop so she was driving a rental when she went to do the interview.

Second, in that she and Armand Scholes were still just inside the slow-moving gate to his compound when the mage arrived.

She'd smelled the dark magic on the mage and felt the first stirrings of fear, but he'd hardly glanced at her. All of his attention had been on Scholes, and laced in with the scent of magic was excitement, anticipation, greed.

A step away from them, Scholes said, "Show me," eagerness in his voice, but a wealth of doubt too; both, in the end, contributing to a lack of judgment making all the difference *for her*.

The mage pulled a small, velvet-covered box from his pocket, something a ring would have left a jewelry shop in. He looked away from Scholes then, his focus on her as he opened it.

Compulsion slammed into her in the presence of the wolf-shaped charm. It was as if pure moonlight had been trapped inside the pale crystal and there was no denying its call.

She *shifted* without thought. Attacked without hesitation, canine teeth tearing through skin and muscle, ripping, her mouth filling with blood before intelligence intruded on instinct, urging her to take possession of the charm and run.

Seconds later and the gate would have been fully closed, leaving her at the mercy of Scholes, who'd pulled a tranquilizer gun from beneath his clothing. Lucky again that in the frenzy of the attack and escape, he'd only managed to get off a single shot. It pinged against the metal of the gate an instant after she was beyond his reach.

Closing her eyes, she lifted the mug and pressed it to her forehead in an effort to get some relief from the memories and never-ending tension. Running was taking its toll on her. But what choice did she have except to keep running, at least until she could come up with a better solution?

Because of Scholes' continued pursuit, she had the distinct feeling the charm she'd taken, and subsequently destroyed, couldn't be easily duplicated. A logical conclusion since the mage wasn't around to do it and those who practiced magic were generally

fanatical and secretive when it came to the knowledge they possessed. She also guessed, *hoped* for the sake of other werewolves, that she was the only one Scholes knew existed, or suspected of being a Were, though she still didn't understand exactly what she'd done to make him target her.

If she could be absolutely certain Scholes wasn't using supernatural means to hunt her, she could return to the pack. But that was a big *if*, and besides not wanting to put them at risk, it had taken a lot to *escape* the pack. Not in the physical sense; members were free to come and go, *if*—another big *if*—they could overcome their instinct not to leave.

Males found it a lot easier than females. Even then, most only went to another small town in the middle of nowhere where the alpha who claimed the place allowed the newcomers in order to refresh the gene pool.

She sighed and opened her eyes to look around the crowded bar. Beneath the smell of sweat, beer and peanuts, every breath she took contained the scent of sex, arousal and a heady dose of pheromones, all of which stirred the wolf's urge to take a mate—and that was a huge reason for not returning to the pack.

She might be able to blow off some steam by getting laid in her human form, but come the full moon in pack territory and she'd find herself covered by a male Were of her wolf's choosing, his engorged cock working in and out of her until they tied in a mating that would follow her into her everyday life. Allow it to happen and she'd never be able to leave again, a major bummer, especially since she didn't think the man for her was back home.

The image of Conner Stern filled her mind, causing heat to roll through her. Under different circumstances she would have acted on the intense attraction between them. All she'd wanted to do when they first met was drag him behind the nearest wall of trees and get naked. He might be totally *human*, but he'd managed to make her nipples go tight and her pussy weep with need in a way no man ever had.

Blond, big—everywhere, as evidenced by the bulge at the front of his pants—he had alpha stamped all over him, even if he wasn't Were. And the way he smelled... Hot, aroused male mixed with the scent of guns and coffee, determination and strength.

Breathing him in had nearly made her lightheaded. Seeing the desire in his eyes had nearly made her start panting like a bitch in heat, *literally*. The wolf would be satisfied with him, even without his having a furred shape.

She choked back a laugh that might just as easily have been a cry. Conner worked Homicide, making any hope for something with him a joke.

He was all cop, a straight-up guy who was well respected by his peers. She'd researched him before agreeing to meet and talk to him after the psychic, Patrick Dean, was murdered.

There were times when being a reporter and a werewolf was *not* a good combination. Specifically, when the supernatural intersected with the world the majority of the human population thought was the *real* world. In those times of intersection, the true supernaturals—the Were among them—all tried to keep a lower profile than usual, and that was saying a lot since *no one* wanted a coming-out.

The urge to explore the world around her, to discover interesting stories and share them with others, seemed to run as thickly in her blood as the call to turn into a wolf during the full moon. Having that desire had given her the motivation and sense of purpose necessary to override instinct and leave the pack, but it had also led to the situation she found herself in.

A man claimed the stool next to her. His smell had her lips pulling back in a get-lost snarl. Considering how on edge she felt, she was afraid she'd bite him if he dared lay his hand on her or uttered the pick-up line his scent told her was coming.

Hell, she might just bite him for being close enough that his body heat and smell invaded her personal space. Both rubbed against her like a scouring pad.

"Hey there, sweet thing, looks like you could use some company."

Not his fault he was the last in a long line of guys who'd hit on her. Not his fault she was all out of polite. "Not interested. Get lost."

He laughed, a good-old-boy, I-don't-believe-you're-serious-about-passing-me-up sound that had her biting off a growl the tiny lizard part of his brain would recognize as the real deal.

"Don't be like that, brown sugar."

Her nostrils flared, the wolf and human aspects of her personality wholly in agreement with Darwin's theories and the need to cull the genetic pool, starting with this guy. She wasn't sensitive when it came to her heritage, or the obvious mix of Caucasian, Mexican and black in her features. The right man could call her brown sugar while he had his mouth on her and she'd say, "Eat me right up, baby."

What she *was* sensitive about was being in the presence of idiots who couldn't take the hint. Strike that; *get lost* were two short, simple words and an easily grasped concept. *Not interested* was the same. Ergo, this old boy was beyond classification as an idiot.

Khemirra drank the last swallow of beer and set the mug on the bar, thinking he was lucky she didn't club him with it. Time to go. And if this guy thought he was going to follow her down the road to her motel room, then she just might blow off a little steam by going furry.

She stifled a laugh. Yeah, big talk on her part. Turning wolf was the ultimate self-defense move in her arsenal. Pepper spray, making plenty of noise and avoiding dangerous situations were at the top of her list, though in between those and shifting she had some fight moves she wouldn't mind dusting off.

She slid off the barstool, ignoring her unwanted suitor. A step. Two. Her survival instincts told her he'd swiveled to watch her walk away, but other than that, he apparently had some good sense after all.

At the door she felt his attention shift to someone or something else. Some of the tension washed out of her. Not all. That wasn't likely to happen anytime soon.

She pushed through the door and stepped into moonlight. It was a struggle not to lift her face to the sky and howl, to fill the night air with a wolf song holding the longing to be somewhere safe, to be surrounded by the pack – or more accurately, given the primal nature of the wolf's desire, to be covered by a strong alpha male. By Conner.

Khemirra managed a small laugh at herself. Talk about Pavlov and his dogs. *Bow wow. Soon as the words alpha male pop up, there's Conner front and center in my thoughts. Pretty soon I'm going to start salivating, not just wetting my panties with arousal.*

She shook the hot need off and scanned the parking lot. There were plenty of cars mixed in with the trucks. Engines were still running in some of them, the glass steamed from activities she wouldn't mind being engaged in herself with –

Save it 'til you get to the motel room, then you can fantasize.

A few of the trucks had people hanging around, shooting the shit, or in more than one case, lifting Mason jars wrapped in paper sacks to their lips for long drinks of home brew. None of the people seemed to notice or care about her though she had the prickly sense of being watched, much, much dulled and now pretty much ever-present from being on the run.

She hated this part. The second-guessing herself, the wondering if it was really safe to stop long enough for a good night's sleep and a morning of doing interviews or research or writing the articles that paid for gas and food.

Her Jeep was tucked in behind the motel, a relatively short, very dark walk and a curve away from the bar. She'd parked in the back, facing out, the plates conveniently muddied for a quick escape if necessary.

The room was paid for. Cash, no questions asked. Proximity to the bar and the freeway generated plenty of activity the owners apparently didn't want to go on record as knowing about. It suited her just fine.

She turned to the right, toward the motel, alert to any movement, any threat either in front or behind her. A burst of laughter had her nearly jumping out of her skin. "Like a damn cat," she muttered, only barely stopping herself from whirling around.

Doors slammed behind her, mixed in with plenty of talk and laughter from both male and female voices. She didn't glance over her shoulder but kept going, moving out of the light illuminating the parking lot and into a darkness lifted only by the moon's glow.

She picked up the sound of a car leaving the highway in front of her. Its choice of destination was limited. Motel. Bar. Possibly the stretch of land dotted with homes sporting plastic deer and rusted-out lawn mowers in their front yards, or the trailer park farther down the road.

A diesel engine started in the bar parking lot, its hard throb almost loud enough to drown out the sound of night insects. She kept moving, breathing in the scent of pine and honeysuckle as she walked, filling her lungs with it and holding it there, wishing she could use it as a buffer against the stink of cleaner and cigarette smoke and old carpet that would soon assail her despite the open window of the motel room.

She was tempted to shift and sleep in the woods. The wolf would like that.

A shiver of longing went through her at imagining the feel of dirt and leaves beneath her feet, the embrace of so many exquisite smells and textures and tastes.

She resisted temptation. It was too close to the full moon to risk it.

She was the wolf, and the wolf was her. But there were degrees of separation and sometimes those degrees created a nearly impenetrable barrier. Shifting back to human wasn't often easy, especially when prey was abundant and survival easy, though transitioning between forms *became* easy with the taking of a mate.

As if on cue, the word *mate* summoned the image of Conner and thoughts of him brought the hard clenching of her channel and the tightening of her nipples. She shook the reaction off, her attention splitting between the sound of the diesel truck accelerating behind her and the gas-powered car closing in ahead of her.

Her heart rabbited in her chest, a physical reaction to the potential threat of being trapped. Her logical mind said the odds were against it and wrestled against the urge to run.

Wolves fought when cornered, but preferred to bolt. She was very afraid if she gave in to the urge to race for the nearby woods, she wouldn't be able to prevent the shift.

The truck screeched to a halt behind her and she whirled to face it. Fear-based adrenaline morphed into a blowing-off-steam kind of rush at seeing the two guys who jumped out of it. Run-of-the-mill scumbags; she was fairly confident she could handle them.

"We're going to have us some fun now," the hefty one said, licking his lips as a prelude to charging.

She was ready for him, though he made it easy to deflect his attack.

A grab of his arm and she sent him sailing past to burn his exposed skin on asphalt when he couldn't regain his balance and went down.

His scrawny companion was already in motion and unable to change his assault tactics. A duck and flip, and he went airborne, landing hard enough on his back to make him gasp and flail like a fish pulled out of the water.

She laughed, probably not the smartest thing to do when she'd just emasculated a couple of guys, but after the last few weeks, she couldn't help it.

The slab of low-grade beef got to his feet, smiling though there was meanness in it now. "I'm glad you like it rough, 'cause I do too."

His companion was still down but rolling as if he intended to stand. Beefy charged again, this time low, anticipating she might duck or try to sidestep him.

She used a foot to the gut instead. Risky if he grabbed her ankle, but she didn't think he'd be fast enough.

He hunched over at the contact. A strike of her clasped hands dropped him to the ground.

It nearly cost her.

Scrawny swung as she turned but her reflexes saved her from suffering more than a brush of knuckles against her face.

He danced backward, anticipating her foot. She was content to let him go rather than move forward and end up with one on either side of her.

If they'd been smarter, that's what they would have done in the first place. But they'd seen only a woman alone in the dark. *Easy prey.*

The thought made her smile.

Movement betrayed Beef Slab's intention well before he could scramble to his feet and take her out. She put him down with a chop hard enough to break a board.

His companion launched himself in a tackle, managing to take her to the ground. But with her knees drawn and her feet planted against his chest, he couldn't take advantage of the position. A shove upward and he was airborne again.

The screech of tires announced company. The shock of seeing Conner held her flat on her back for several seconds as he aimed a pistol at the two men, yelling, "Police! Stay on the ground!"

Working on the assumption she was exempt from the command, she got slowly to her feet and edged away so her assailants wouldn't attempt to use her as a shield.

Damn, Conner was a fine sight standing there in a shooter's stance, his attitude total *bad ass* and practically begging the two numbnuts who'd attacked her to make a move and make his day.

Her memory hadn't done him justice. He was even more devastating to her senses than she'd remembered.

Chapter Two

"Are these the guys you've been running from?" Conner asked.

The fierce protectiveness in his voice was like the lap of a hot, hot tongue between Khemirra's thighs and she savored the sensation, squeezing her legs together in awareness of just how swollen she'd become at his mere presence.

"I don't know who they are."

She ate him up with her eyes because making a carnal meal of him at this particular moment wouldn't be a good move. She would have laughed at how much she was channeling the wolf, except she'd been thinking about Conner off and on all night, and now here he was, his scent obliterating the stink of beer and unwashed bodies wafting off the men lying on the asphalt between them.

"They're opportunistic rapists, I'd say." She glanced at the truck, its engine throbbing and the doors open for what was probably supposed to be a quick grab followed by a hasty exit onto the freeway. "Texas plates."

"If you don't have a cell phone, come over here and get mine. Call 9-1-1."

Her amusement died. Calling the police would generate a report with her name on it, maybe even get trapped in an information filter and passed on, confirming time and whereabouts. Not something she was anxious to do. But freeing these guys and having another woman take her place for their idea of fun and games wasn't an option either, which left her with only one obvious alternative.

She skirted around Beefy and Scrawny, going to Conner's side. Keeping her voice low she said, "What about if you call it in? Say you were an eyewitness to an attack but while you were maintaining control of these assholes the woman fled the scene. It'd be my word against theirs anyway, with your testimony being the one to lock them up."

She didn't need the change in his scent to tell her how much he didn't like the suggestion. He fairly bristled at hearing it. But he was also cop enough to understand her reasons without her having to argue them.

"Fuck! I'll keep you out of this if I can, on one condition. You stick around and we talk."

Talk wasn't the four-letter word she was primarily interested in, but his showing up wasn't an accident, and agreeing to stay didn't necessarily mean revealing the worst of her secrets. Though, from his point of view, she wasn't sure which he'd hate hearing more — that she'd killed a man, or that she was a werewolf.

"I'll stick."

"Good. There are some plasticuffs in the console between the seats. Grab a couple of them."

He ordered the men onto their stomachs as she retrieved the cuffs. "You know how to use a gun?"

"Range practice every week as part of my schooling. Hunting deer, rabbits and ducks for the family dinner table as quality bonding time."

"Then keeping these two covered while I cuff them shouldn't be a problem for you."

She nearly purred at the approval coming off him, and that was a testament to his effect on her. A wolf *was not* a cat. "Nope, not a problem. This close, placing my shots isn't much of a challenge."

"Don't get trigger-happy."

Conner exchanged the gun in his hand for the plasticuffs in hers before making quick work of securing the men and pulling ID off them. Christ, he knew he was thinking with his dick, but right now its voice outshouted the one of reason.

He took the 9mm back, a flash of sexual heat shooting through him with the casual touch of her skin to his in the transfer. He couldn't believe he'd given her his gun, could

barely accept how much effort he was about to expend to keep her name out of this, but until he knew who she was running from and what kind of influence they had, he didn't see a choice he liked better.

Instead of dialing 9-1-1, he called his CSI buddy. "You at work?"

"Yeah, so is my supervisor."

"This is official business."

"You abandon the search? Or catch up with her?"

"Caught up with her just as she was putting a couple would-be rapists down."

"I'm beginning to see why you're hot for her."

"You don't know the half of it. I need you to run the names for me. They're driving a Ford-250 with Texas plates and I'm thinking chances are good there are some outstanding warrants on these two."

He read off the information, hearing it being typed in. The wait for a hit took even less time.

"Good call. Jumped bail on charges of aggravated assault in the commission of a felony. The good State of Texas definitely wants them back."

"That's music to my ears. Thanks."

He called 9-1-1, identifying himself and the situation before directing the local police to their location.

"If you want to stay uninvolved, you should get in the car."

"I appreciate this, Conner."

She walked away. And goddamn, he couldn't take his eyes off her. It felt like there was a leash attached to his dick and she was holding the other end of it, pulling it tighter and tighter with each swing of her hips.

Talk. He'd be lucky if he managed more than two words with her. *Let's fuck.*

He remained hyperaware of Khemirra sitting in the dark interior of his car as the locals showed up. He half expected her to bolt as he did a song and dance with them,

but luck was with him and they were content to pass the problem of the men onto Texas rather than tie up effort and generate paperwork for a case that didn't need to go to trial to keep the bad guys off the street.

He joined her in the car, a jolt of pure need going through his cock. Only stubborn determination kept him from pulling her against him and slamming his mouth down on hers.

"Were you heading to the motel?"

"Yes."

"What room?"

"Seventeen. Around back."

He did a U-turn and drove the remaining distance, his temper heating up at the dark stretch of road caught in the rearview mirror, cut only by his headlights and the moon in front of him. Why the hell had she walked to the bar rather than driving the Jeep he'd spent most of his vacation chasing after? Did she *want* to get jumped?

He pulled around back and spotted her Wrangler facing out for a quick getaway. Parking next to it, he cut the engine. *Wait 'til we get inside*, the rational part of his brain told him. It was outvoted by the one operating on hormones and raw emotion. "Who are you running from?"

Instead of answering, she countered, "You're a long way from Florida, Conner. Why?"

"You know why; because of you. It was pretty damn obvious that day in the park that you were in trouble and needed help."

"So you made yourself my knight in shining armor?"

Amusement sidetracked him. Jesus she had a smart mouth on her.

He glanced downward. A smart, kissable mouth.

"If you're going to label me, then make me an old west sheriff riding to the rescue."

Her laugh just about had him wrapping a fist around his dick.

"You make a habit of doing that? Riding to the rescue so far away from your jurisdiction?"

"Sometimes. When it's personal." He leaned forward, drawn by the slightly parted lips and the smell of honeysuckle-scented skin. "You promised answers, now tell me who you're running from and why."

She gave a little shake of her head. "Wrong. I promised to talk and that's what we're doing, talking."

Humor deserted him. "That's bullshit and you know it."

"Do I?"

"You're playing word games like a defense lawyer."

She laughed again, sending a spike of heat straight through his cock.

"Now you're being downright nasty, Conner, calling me names. What gives? Why have you been following me?"

To hell with talking. He tangled one hand in her hair and pulled her to him, too far gone to bother with lying. "Because I can't fucking get you out of my mind."

"More like, you can't get fucking me out of your mind."

She'd twisted his words again, but the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes were sultry seduction, come-hither promises of carnal sin he had no intention of resisting. He took her mouth, nearly reaching down to free his cock when her tongue rubbed against his in heated welcome.

He didn't have to ask if she'd been thinking about him too. She met him thrust for thrust, tongues twining, tasting, rubbing against each other in a sensual prelude to the joining of bodies.

Her nipple stabbed his palm when he covered her breast with his hand. She pressed into him, moaned when he took the hardened point between thumb and forefinger, squeezing, tugging, their lips parting only long enough for quick inhalations.

He thought he was in control of the situation until she demonstrated just how thoroughly his own nipples had become tiny points of sensation. Her fingers zeroed in on them, sending a lightning strike of ecstasy through his chest and stomach and cock.

His hips bucked and he surrendered a sound of pleasure, then a second. The roar of lust drowning out all possible conversation except the one being conducted by their bodies, and that one was simple.

His abdomen went taut when her hands left his nipples. His balls pulled tight as she grabbed his shirt and jerked it upward, ripping it from his jeans as if nothing less than the feel of bare skin would satisfy her.

White heat filled his head when her fingers found his belt buckle. He nearly helped her free his cock. Might have if he hadn't been afraid he'd come the instant her fist closed around him. She'd turned his dick into a battering ram against the front of his jeans.

Panting, he ended the kiss, satisfaction coming at seeing desire mirrored in her expression. "Let's take this inside."

The night air and hurried walk to her room cleared his head enough to remember the answers he'd been after. But the minute they were inside and he'd pinned her against the door, he knew he didn't have the self-discipline to get all of them before fucking her.

He settled on getting the one answer that had a chance of dousing the lust like a drop into frigid waters. "Tell me you're not involved in anything illegal," he said. But even then he denied her the opportunity to do it by covering her mouth with his, the thrust and retreat of his tongue a prelude to ramming his cock into her slit.

"I'm not," she told him when the need for breath forced him to relinquish her lips.

"Good."

Her nipples were hard-tipped, touched to his chest in aggressive demand. He took her mouth again in a series of searing kisses, tugged her dark tank top from the waistband of jeans that looked poured on, emphasizing long legs and a great ass.

She ground her cunt against his erection as his hands slid underneath the tank and up her sides, then over to cover her breasts. "Is this the way you usually interrogate your female prisoners, Conner?"

Her voice was husky, breathless with desire. He laughed and it earned him a nip to his bottom lip, followed by the soothing lick of her tongue.

"Is that how you see yourself? Prisoners usually wear restraints."

Lust shot downward at the image of her bound to the bed, a willing participant in a bondage game where he was the dominant and she was the submissive.

His cock jerked, wetting the tip with arousal, the foreskin retracting just enough to make him feel like an alpha dog about to mount a willing female. He panted, silently cursing the possibility he might actually start humping against her.

It didn't stop him from turning her, forcing her hands up and against the wood of the door. "Prisoners get put in this stance," he said, pushing his hands under her tank again, smoothing upward over a taut abdomen to cup her breasts, to brush his thumbs over rigid nipples.

He kissed her neck, bit, his cock spasming as she moaned and ground against him, sending a fresh wave of fantasy searing through him. Her scent making him think of a dappled forest and a vigorous, uninhibited mating, of her on her hands and knees, while he covered and thrust inside her.

She'd started this with her mention of interrogation. He decided to use it. "Give me something."

Answers, he meant.

She said, "Let's get naked and we can give each other something."

"Fuck!"

"In a word. Yeah."

Maybe it'd take a good fucking to clear his head and get her to cooperate. He jerked the tank up and off, tossing it to the floor.

The bra followed and her back arched when he cupped her breasts. He licked her earlobe, sucked it as he rubbed his palms over her nipples and imagined latching on to them with his mouth.

Khemirra closed her eyes in ecstasy. His touch and dominance were intoxicating. Every lick, every bite and suck ratcheted up the desire to have him inside her. The wolf wanted him as badly as the woman did.

She kept her hands against the door, using it as a brace as she pressed her buttocks against a penis swollen with need. She could smell his arousal, the scent of it adding to the bouquet that was uniquely, intriguingly him.

Her panties were wet with need, her folds swollen and flushed, her channel clenching and unclenching in anticipation of being filled. She wanted to see him, taste him. Hoped that when she knelt in front of him she'd find him uncircumcised, raw and natural as a man was meant to be, as a Were male would be.

The muscles of her abdomen quivered as a hand left her breast, traveling downward in a petting caress that had her unsnapping her jeans, unzipping them before he reached the waistband.

"That's right, baby, make yourself ready for me."

Her womb fluttered at the tone of his voice. It was little more than a deep rumble, the sound of an alpha male sure of his prowess when it came to delivering pleasure.

She widened her stance, opening herself to him, offering him greater access. His moan was her reward, heated breath followed by the feel of his teeth on her shoulder.

"Touch me, Conner," she said, covering his hand with hers, urging him those last few inches.

Strong, masculine fingers slid beneath the waistband of her panties, gliding over the soft down of pubic hair to find her engorged clit and capture it. Her hips bucked, her body answering the command inherent with each stroke, each squeeze and tug, each foray over swollen, parted labia to thrust into her slit.

Primitive satisfaction surged through her at the sound of his ragged breathing, his hoarse, "I want inside you. Deep and hard, with nothing between us. Tell me it's safe."

The wolf shivered with joy at the prospect of feeling the heated throb of an unsheathed penis and the hot splash of seed. The woman wanted the same, at least with this particular man.

"It's safe," she told him, having the advantage of knowing when she ovulated because of the wolf.

Conner wanted to jerk her jeans down and get inside her. Instead he forced himself to step backward, some part of him wanting her to *see* him before he took her.

She turned and his gaze went to her breasts, the screaming of his cock suddenly secondary to the hunger to capture a large, dark nipple between his lips and suck.

"Change your mind?" she asked. Provocative. Daring him. Her hands going to her breasts, cupping and lifting, nearly making him come when her tongue darted out, caressing the puckered areola and turning it into a wet invitation he had no power to resist.

He crowded her against the door, holding her wrists to the wood to prevent her from wresting any more of his control away from him.

"I intend to put my mouth on every inch of you before morning," he said, taking her lips first. Thrusting, savoring, tormenting them both by delaying.

She was whimpering by the time he kissed downward, her skin darker than his, erotic in texture and taste and scent. He left his mark where her neck and shoulder met, then another on the slope of her breast before capturing a nipple.

He laved, sucked at first one breast and then the other. Her cries of pleasure pouring molten fire into his bloodstream, telling him he could make her come then and there if he chose to.

The knowledge had his testicles pulling tight in a burning warning he didn't ignore. He broke all contact with her, hand going to the front of his jeans, gripping his cock in a desperate bid to gain control of himself.

"Strip," he ordered.

Her smile was an invitation to use force though she didn't delay long enough to make it necessary. He memorized the sight of her peeling skintight jeans off, taking panties with them, her shoes already kicked off. Christ she was beautiful, the reality even better than his fantasies.

"Your turn," she said, stepping into his space, daring him with her expression to let her undress him.

Finger by finger he released his dick before removing the shoulder rig with the 9mm in it and setting it on the floor. Willing himself to remain steady as she unbuttoned his shirt, pushing it off his shoulders and down.

When she would have explored his chest with her hands, he grabbed her wrists and denied her. "No."

"No?" Her mouth touched his nipple before he could stop her, her tongue sending a jolt of heat down the length of his cock.

In desperation he carried her hands to the waistband of his jeans and her attention went with them. She undid snap and zipper, pushed jeans and Jockeys downward until they fell to his ankles and he toed his shoes off, freeing himself from the constraint of clothing.

The expression on her face told him she liked what she saw. He moaned when she cupped his testicles with one hand while the other captured his cock, sliding up and down his shaft, her grip tight enough to turn fist and foreskin into a satin channel for his penis.

Desire intensified with each stroke. A bombardment of sensation making thought impossible.

His buttocks clenched as he speared the fingers of one hand through her hair, drawing her to him for a kiss as the other covered hers, forcing her grip to tighten on his shaft, slowing, finally stopping the movement.

“Much more and I’m going to coat your belly with come,” he warned.

“You can do that another time if you want.”

A shudder went through him, raw desire and shock at how much the idea of it turned him on. “Assume the position, Khemirra.”

Her smile was a wicked flash of white. “Next time I get to be the cop and you get to be the bad, bad prisoner.”

His cock jerked, more arousal leaking from its tip. He wasn’t sure he’d survive to play another round of cop and prisoner with her.

She braced her hands against the door and spread her legs, standing far enough away from it he could see her slit and the wet, swollen folds of her cunt. Possessiveness settled on him with a silent snarl and gained a firmer grip as he touched his cock head to her opening.

It was a struggle not to thrust all the way in, a fight to keep from closing his eyes at the rush of pleasure. He sank into her one slow inch at a time, savoring the sensation and memorizing the sight of his cock entering her. She was so hot and tight, making him work for it with the clenching of her channel, making it impossible to remain still, even if she’d allow it.

She didn’t. Her movements demanded he keep his promise to take her hard and deep.

He obeyed, hips pistoning, her slick inner muscles clamping down on him, an exquisite fist opening and closing, delivering pleasure so extreme it consumed him in merciless white heat. Allowed him only enough free will to find her clit and ensure her release before the ruthless grip of her channel forced the seed from his body in a hot rush to mind-blowing ecstasy.

If she hadn't been braced against the door, he might have collapsed to the floor and taken her with him. He leaned against her, chest pressed to her back and eyes closed.

"Am I going to need to call the paramedics here?" she asked.

He managed a smile against her neck. "Give me a minute then you can use mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to revive me."

"Mouth-to-mouth? Or mouth-to-dick?"

The thought of the second energized him enough to stand upright, to snag his shoulder rig before guiding her to the bed for a horizontal collapse. He positioned her back against his chest, locking her to him with a draped arm and a leg over hers.

A warm breeze drifted over his skin and the cop in him took charge, noting the open window and the single change of clothing tossed onto the scarred desk. He could hear the hum of air-conditioning going full blast in the rooms on either side of them, but like her, he preferred fresh air, even if it came with sultry, Southern heat.

He nuzzled her ear, the smooth curve of her buttocks against his cock starting to revive it. "You going to make this easy on both of us and tell me who you're running from? Or am I going to have to get tough?"

Khemirra laughed. Damn if he wasn't irresistible despite the subject he seemed determined to pursue.

She shifted position so she was on her back, smiling with feminine pleasure when his eyes went instantly to her breasts and darkened with desire. She couldn't help herself, playing with him was too much fun. She touched her forefinger to a nipple, circling it lazily as she asked, "Like what you see, Conner?"

He rose onto an elbow and leaned over, taking the nipple between his lips, lashing it with his tongue and sending molten need straight to her cunt before he began sucking.

His hand followed the wave of heated desire, smoothing over her belly before capturing her swollen clit, squeezing and stroking until she was lifting her hips off the

mattress, pleading for more of the pleasure she already knew he was capable of delivering.

He cupped her mound but withheld the penetration of his fingers. Scorched her with the heat of his palm, enthralled her with the rub of it against the tiny head of her clit.

She moaned as he increased the pressure, the hard pull of his mouth on her nipple translating into a hungry throb in her clit, to the building need to come. She widened her legs and canted her hips in a silent demand for him to make her climax. He lifted his hand and she tried to follow it, her breath catching in protest, and then in shocked pleasure when his hand returned, giving a sharp spank to her cunt and clit.

His mouth left her breast, his face returning to hover inches above hers so he could watch her expression. He delivered a second carnal punishment before once again cupping her mound with his hand, trapping the flushed heat of need and the memory of his dominance there.

“Who are you running from and why?”

He was as bad as a wolf with a bone though unfortunately for her, the smile that thought brought gained her the minute rub of his palm over her clit and the intense desire to submit if it meant he'd cover her and fill her with his cock again.

“You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

She was tempted, more than she would have thought possible, but she remained silent.

“Tell me,” Conner said against her mouth as though sensing weakness.

His voice was pure honey, and the sweet glide of his fingers over arousal-slick folds was nearly enough to make her comply. She might have, except for the protectiveness gathered in the wolf's heart and spinning outward into the woman's.

She licked his bottom lip, nibbled before sucking it gently. "I need until morning to think about it. I don't want anything to happen to you."

The answer both pleased and irritated him. She read it in his face and scent.

"Nothing's going to happen to me, I'm a cop."

A *homicide* cop. Not exactly what she wanted to be reminded of at the moment.

She slipped her tongue into his mouth and coaxed his out to play. Found a tiny nipple and stroked it with her fingertip, feeling a throb go through his cock where it pressed to her thigh, nearly hardened again but not completely.

The prospect of finding her scent, her taste on him appealed to the wolf. "Let me think about it, Conner," she said, giving a subtle push to his chest, a silent request for him to go backward. Giving a slow suck to his tongue before adding, "Right now I have some resuscitating to do."

He didn't want to let it go but years of interviewing people told him to back off for now. Or so he told himself, unsure which head was really doing the talking with Khemirra's mouth heading in the direction of his cock.

He'd be rock hard before she reached it, though he'd die a slow, agonizing death before he'd tell her that her efforts to revive him were unnecessary. Not when the feel of her lips on his nipple only hinted at the pleasure to come.

His hips lifted off the mattress when she sucked, pulling a stark confession from him. "I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since that day in the park."

He felt her smile against his skin, followed by the caress of her tongue and heat of her breath when she released his nipple to say, "Wondering if I had the same problem?"

A howl of protest came from his dick when she reversed directions, kissing upward instead of continuing downward. She rose to straddle him and he found intense pleasure in the sight of her above him, her face and breasts, the flat belly and small triangle of pubic hair, the rich natural caramel of her thighs against his sun-darkened skin.

A rush of heated blood surged into his cock. The press of her parted cunt lips to it silenced its scream for her mouth, replacing it with the desperate need to feel her tight channel.

He moaned when she reached down, capturing his cock and guiding it to her opening. His hips jerked up, his body hers to command. He had no problem with her taking the dominant position, not when he'd dreamed of her riding him like this, taking all of him in a slow slide to pleasure unlike anything he'd ever experienced with another woman.

He covered her breasts with his hands, loving the way she gave him some of her weight, matched her strength to his, her eyes partially closed and her back arching, making him think of a cat purring with satisfaction, stirring him, challenging him to add to her pleasure.

He captured her nipples, loving their size and darkness, the way they hardened so readily, leaving no doubt about his effect on her. He squeezed and tugged, twisted, his actions timed to her up-and-down slide on his shaft.

She rewarded him by moving faster, with the clamp and release of her channel. By changing the angle so her clit struck him. And he countered, thrusting hard and deep as his fingers tightened, blending pleasure with pain.

"Come for me, baby."

She obeyed, crying out in release, the grip of her sheath demanding the same of him. He came, the force and length of it leaving his head humming in a buzz of blissful exhaustion and masculine satisfaction.

He smiled at the feel of her draped along his length like a hot blanket. Wrapping his arms around her to keep her in place, he said, *"We talk tomorrow."*

Maybe, Khemirra thought.

Chapter Three

Khemirra woke late and knew it was early afternoon by the quality of light and air coming in through the open window. She was still partially draped over Conner, his skin warm against hers, his scent more intoxicating today than it had been yesterday.

She wanted to rub every inch of her body against him, to mark herself with him, and in turn, coat every inch of him with her scent. The wolf in her wanted a mate, a pack in this human world the woman insisted on living in. Khemirra wasn't averse to the idea of a husband and children, but the stakes were made higher because regardless of form, Weres mated for life.

Conner's relaxed features and deep, easy breathing told her he was asleep despite the erection pressed to her belly. Edging away from him, so she could think without the distraction of feeling his skin against hers, she wrestled with conscience, instinct battling rational thought.

She felt safe with him, couldn't even remember the last time she'd slept so soundly. She believed he might be able to help her deal with Armand Scholes, if not directly then indirectly, by using contacts and resources she had no access to. But involving Conner would put him at risk in ways neither of them could predict. She couldn't rule out the possibility a witch or psychic was being used to track her, or worse, a mage with ties to the one she'd killed.

A homicide cop with a bias against anything defying rational explanation was a bad choice. The day they'd met in the park to talk about Patrick Dean's murder, Conner's scent had changed, aggravation edging its way into his voice when he said *psychic*. She doubted he was even aware of it, though she suspected if asked he wouldn't blunt his opinion of things supernatural. In her experience, people rarely liked to be jerked out of their comfort zone when it came to their beliefs and the things they *knew* were true.

I'm a werewolf, Conner. Oh, and by the way, I shifted because a charm forced me to and then I killed the mage who'd created it. That's why I'm running.

Oh yeah, that would go over well.

She glanced toward the window. The night was still hours away but she could already feel the pull of the moon. She'd planned to wake at dawn, write, polish an article and send it off, then hit the road so she'd be in the mountains in time to hide the car and shift.

She needed to leave soon. Looking at Conner, she thought it'd be better for him—so much safer—if she slipped out and away.

And if he followed her? She frowned, wishing she'd asked him exactly how he'd managed to catch up to her, because if *he* could then maybe Scholes was using the same approach. Too late now. And at some point Conner would have to give up his pursuit and go back to work.

She eased off the bed, careful not to wake him. An ache spread through her, widening and deepening with each step she took, turning into the wolf's howl by the time she reached the clothes she'd discarded next to the door.

Uncertainty crept in at the sight of the engaged security chain. The only possible reason for sleeping through Conner's getting out of bed and moving around the motel room was because the wolf trusted him completely. It gave her pause, making her wonder if she was wrong to leave him.

Bonded pairs weren't completely governed by the full moon. The forced change of its call in childhood was a way of integrating wolf and human personality, while in adulthood it came because of the need to find a mate.

She shook the misgiving off and picked up her jeans. Out of habit she touched the pocket containing her keys.

Panic hit at finding them gone, a knee-jerk response rather than true fear. She kept a spare taped under the car.

The sound of jingling sent a whole different type of panic scrambling along her nerve endings.

Her focus shifted to a pissed-off-looking Conner. Damn if he wasn't gorgeous wearing nothing but a scowl. She was torn between the wolf's desire to sidle up to him and lick his lips in a show of submission and appeasement, and the woman's to run and let him catch her for some make-up sex.

"Missing these?" he asked, the growl in his voice one hundred percent alpha male.

He rose from the bed and stalked toward her, each step tightening her nipples and the coil of heat that had taken up residence in her belly. She shivered when he reached her, her fear entirely erotic in nature.

He trapped her against the door as he had the night before, leaned in so their faces were inches apart. "Don't count on the spare key being in its hiding place."

Surprise ripped through her. He couldn't have outmaneuvered her so thoroughly without the wolf being complicit in keeping her human consciousness submerged in sleep. The knowledge weakened her resolve to leave him, but despite the heat between them, he wasn't her mate.

Yet, the wolf whined, but because he wasn't, and that deep bond between them didn't exist, the urge to shift form would grow stronger the closer they got to moonrise. There would be no denying it at nightfall.

"I have to get to the mountains, Conner," she said, hearing the desperation in her voice where she'd intended firmness. "That's my best shot at staying safe."

Conner's pissed quotient edged upward another couple of degrees. His lips pulled back in a tiny snarl. "Are you saying I can't protect you?"

"I'm saying I need to be in the mountains before dark and I can't stand the thought of something happening to you because of me."

He'd been spoiling for a fight from the instant she slipped out of bed and it became obvious she intended to bolt. Her answer mollified him, batting temper aside and

clearing his mind until she dropped the jeans and placed her palms against his chest in an almost submissive pose, then the little head tried to do all the thinking.

His cock pulled away from his body far enough for the tip to touch her belly in a wet caress to her smooth skin. Goddamn. In a minute he was going to lift her and take her against the back of the door.

Stamina had never been a problem for him. But a couple rounds with Khemirra and he probably wouldn't be able to summon enough strength to get to his feet, much less prevent her from leaving.

"You need to get to the mountains, fine. My parents have a cabin and I've got a friend between here and there. He's ex-military with plenty of law enforcement ties. We leave your car with him, stashed in his garage so it can't be used to track you. If someone shows up looking for you, he can take care of himself and gather information, enough to start applying pressure to whoever is causing you problems. I'll even wait until we get to the cabin before hearing the answers you promised me."

He pulled her against him, figuring to use every means possible to persuade her to say yes, though the touch of her breasts to his chest and her belly along the length of his cock just about chased every thought out of his head.

"Fuck, you drive me crazy," he said, tightening his hold on her, pleasure pouring into him when she leaned forward as he leaned down, her mouth eagerly meeting his, her tongue quick to rub and twine with his.

Heated need pooled in his testicles and pulsed through his cock as the kiss deepened. Her hands moved downward on his back, fingernails scraping and sending fire ahead of them, his buttocks clenching in an effort to keep from fucking against her.

When she attempted to take his cock in hand, he denied her by capturing first one wrist and then the other, knowing he couldn't allow her to touch him like that. A couple of strokes and he'd be coming on her abdomen like a porn star, a comparison that should have made him laugh. Instead it made him hunger to claim her in every way a

man could claim his woman, to put up huge no trespassing signs with bites and kisses and the smell of his come. Son of a bitch, when had he gotten so primitive?

He needed her agreement before he gave in to the lust. "Say yes to my plan, Khemirra. Give me a chance to help you. You can't keep running forever, not if you want to keep writing. Anyone looking for you will recognize your style."

For good measure he nuzzled her neck. Took the skin between his teeth in a little love bite she responded to with a moan and the rub of her clit to his cock, naked hot skin against naked hot skin.

"I'll keep you safe," he murmured. "Say yes."

Khemirra wanted to but couldn't without warning Conner his plan might not reduce the risk. She didn't know what Scholes would do if he caught up to her while they were together.

"Hiding the car might not be enough. There's a chance a psychic or witch is being used to find me. Maybe even a mage."

She felt the instant tension in Conner, accompanied by a change in scent. Disbelief. Denial. Rejection. But not the cooling of desire. His cock remained hard and thick against her belly, proof against that.

"You're not going to scare me away by parading out the weird, Khemirra."

Her lips pulled back, the woman baring her teeth at his attitude. The wolf giving a show of submission in a pleading bid for acceptance.

He covered her mouth with his before she could come up with a rebuttal, the thrust of his tongue making her channel clamp with painful need. She let the argument go, accepting the fact that neither she nor the wolf were ready to be without him.

As if sensing her capitulation, he said, "You'll stay at the cabin with me?"

"Yes. I want a shower first."

"That works for me," he said, releasing one of her wrists, but not the other until after he'd led her into the bathroom and then beneath the heated spray of water.

It works for me too, she thought as his lathered hands glided over her flesh.

The wolf loved the petting strokes, the admiration telegraphed by scent and sight and touch. The woman reveled in features made taut by desire, by an expression leaving no doubt as to how much he liked what he saw.

He crouched in front of her, smoothing his hands down one leg and then up the other, eyes following the movement before giving all of his attention to her cunt. She spread her legs, widening her stance, anticipation building with the proximity of his mouth to her clit and opening.

“You want my mouth on you, baby?”

She shivered, loving the way he could make her feel wicked and precious at the same time. “You know I do.”

Wet, his hair was a dark, dark blond. She tangled her fingers in it, urging him to give her what his look and his voice promised.

Pure bliss hit her when he did. She moaned with the hot press of his lips to her lower ones, his tongue delivering ecstasy with each lick and swirl and thrust as his hands gripped her buttocks and held her in place.

She wouldn't have escaped even if she could, even if the tight confines of the tiny shower stall would have allowed it. She craved the feel of his mouth on her cunt and clit too much, loved the sounds he made as he ate her, hungry and satisfied at the same time.

Her hips jerked when he captured her clit. Her eyes closed and her head tilted back as she gave herself over to him.

He rubbed his tongue against the tiny head and along the underside. Sucked, shrinking her world to the pull of his lips, to the need building inside her.

His name became a litany. Her fingers tight in his hair, holding him to her, and then holding her upright until desire burst, an orgasm exploding in white-hot sensation and a shattering weakness that had her sinking into a crouch.

“Looks like you need resuscitating,” Conner said, making her smile with his play on their exchange the night before. “Good thing I’m here for some mouth-to-mouth.”

“Even if you’re the cause of my collapse?”

“Even if,” he said, touching his lips to hers.

Tasting herself on him was decadent, darkly carnal. It tightened her nipples so they ached for the punishment his fingers could deliver, for the sweet pleasure of his mouth.

She touched them, pleased herself, swallowing the sound of his desire. Her hands dropping to his open thighs when the kiss ended, her focus shifting with them, to a cock darkened with need, the foreskin retracted to leave the head exposed, the small slit weeping arousal as if crying for her.

She slid her palms along his inner thighs, her sense of feminine power deepening at the way his muscles firmed beneath them and his cock pulled farther away from his body, as if it would hurry to her had it not been attached. Like the rest of him, his erection resonated strength and the heavy globes of his testicles prowess, the wolf seeing both as indicators of a worthy mate.

Don’t go there, the rational part of her mind warned. But it was impossible to stop channeling the wolf this close to a full moon.

She opted for distracting herself by changing position. There was just enough room to move backward and then onto hands and knees, on all fours as she would have been in her other form.

Conner’s hand went immediately to his cock, his quick inhalation and the deepening of his aroused scent all the enticement she needed. Another time she’d make him beg. Make him demonstrate his dominance by exerting his will and his physical strength, but not now.

She took everything above his hand into her mouth, savoring the taste of him on her tongue, the feel of him against her lips. *Hers*. It reverberated through her with a savage intensity, translating into sucks that had him panting, thrusting. Yielding more

and more of himself to her and unable to hold back anything as she swallowed him down, making him come.

Conner managed to lean back against the shower wall and go from a crouch to a sitting position without keeling over. It felt as if she'd just fried every brain cell and burned out all his nerve endings. He was surprised he could still breathe.

"I think that'll hold me until we get to the cabin. What about you?"

Not the right thing to say given the flash of amusement in her eyes and the smile that warned his ego was going to take a hit.

"It'll have to. You look done in."

"Give me a few minutes and I'll prove otherwise."

She laughed and shook her head. "My bad, for teasing you when we should already be on the road."

She stood, affording him a view of a pussy he could spend hours enjoying. And when she turned and reached for the shower door, of sleek buttocks he'd yet to spread and thrust between. He forced himself to his feet, not willing to risk letting her out of his sight in case she changed her mind and bolted.

Woman and wolf were both edgy as Conner parked the car in front of his family's cabin. The woman at knowing she'd soon be faced with deciding how much to tell him, the wolf because dusk was rapidly approaching and with it, the undeniable call of the moon.

Already the urge to run was nearly overwhelming, not the fear-induced emotion that had kept her moving for most of the last month, but the joy of senses wide open and hot-blooded prey to be killed and consumed.

Khemirra's human mind shied from the thought though her stomach growled, making Conner laugh and say, "I'll get the grill going as soon as we haul everything inside."

The cabin was one story, quaint with its porch swing and rustic appeal. It wasn't as remote as she would have liked, but with her Jeep hours behind them, there was nothing to do but accept the choice she'd made.

Grabbing her suitcase and several bags of groceries, she followed Conner inside. Someone had been there recently. The lingering trace of cologne remained and the air didn't have the smell of a place closed up for a long period of time.

A family room dominated, taking up much of the space. A kitchen opened up into it, as did a couple of bedrooms and a bathroom.

It took several trips to unload the car. On the last one she found herself smiling at the sight of Conner with grocery bags in one hand and a flute case in the other.

He was such a big, masculine guy. Most wouldn't be caught playing an instrument like the flute, and yet it became another reason he appealed to her. He had the confidence of an alpha and with it, the fearlessness to pursue what interested him.

Including her.

Pleasure rippled through her, contentment eroding even the wolf's edginess. A traitorous curl of longing took up residence in her belly and wound its way around her heart as she and Conner shared the task of putting away groceries. She could get used to being with him like this. If only he could accept *all* of her.

Light streamed in through the kitchen window. She didn't need to read its texture to know how long she had before darkness, not on a full-moon night.

There was maybe an hour before answering its call wouldn't be optional. At the moment, she was still in control, and given how calm the wolf felt in Conner's company, she decided she'd yield to magic and moon early, in the hopes of being able to shift back.

Conner wouldn't put off his questions much longer. If she disappeared for any length of time after telling him who she was running from, he might think she'd been abducted.

"You mind if I explore a bit?" she asked.

"What you see is basically what there is. Two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen and family room. Out back there's a grill, some deck furniture and a tire swing, but no hot tub unfortunately."

"I meant heading out on one of the trails. I'd like to stretch my legs, maybe do some jogging before it gets too much later."

"I'll go with you."

She shook her head. "Alone, Conner."

Determination etched every line of his face. The wolf urged her forward in a press of lips against lips and the swipe of her tongue against the seam of his mouth. "I'll be back. Promise."

"It'll be dark soon."

"Full moon tonight. Don't worry about me getting lost. I've done search and rescue work. I'm good at memorizing trails."

He moved into her, trapping her against the kitchen counter. His arms went around her, holding her tight as he deepened the kiss the wolf had begun in appeasement, turning it into a carnal expression of human desire.

She loved his taste, his scent. Loved the hard feel of his muscles and the rigid line of his cock, as well as the fierce protectiveness and growing possessiveness.

One kiss merged into another, swelling her labia and dampening her panties with need. She would definitely return to him, only necessity demanded she separate.

They were both breathing hard by the time their lips parted. He rested his forehead against hers. "You sure you want to hit the trails? I can think of other ways to stretch your legs."

She laughed. "I think you mean, *spread your legs*."

His smile made her toes curl. "Yeah, that too."

"When I get back, we can experiment with your exercise regimen."

“Fair warning, it’ll be vigorous. Extremely vigorous.”

“We’ll put 9-1-1 on speed dial in case you go down then.”

He touched his mouth to hers before nibbling over to her ear. “Oh, I intend to go down all right, but you’re the one who’s going to pass out.”

She snorted. “I’ve never passed out in my life, Conner, during sex or otherwise.”

That just widened his smile. “You will.”

“We’ll see. After my run in the woods.” She hugged him before using palms to his chest in a gentle request for space.

He stepped back. And what she felt for him deepened at his willingness to let her go.

She’d donned shorts and tank top at the motel. She swapped out the sandals for tennis shoes so she could maintain the pretense she planned to jog.

Contrary to depictions of *the change* in horror films, werewolves were imbued with genetically tied magic and shifted in a shimmer of it. Whatever she wore became part of the fabric of her being.

“If you get hungry, eat without me,” she said, giving him one final kiss before she headed for a trail that led farther into the mountains.

Anxiety whined through her with the feel of Conner’s gaze on her back. At separating from him, as well as from knowing she’d have to be careful not to leave tracks, in case he changed his mind and came after her. An abrupt end to footprints and the beginning of paw prints wasn’t the way to tell him what she was.

She stumbled. Did she intend to tell him?

Her mouth went dry. Telling him wasn’t a good idea unless his scent and his stiffened muscles had lied about his reaction to the supernatural. And showing him... The penalty for breaking covenant law and revealing the existence of werewolves—except to a mate or in a life-threatening event where any witnesses could be handled—was harsh.

She shoved worries about a future with Conner to the back of her mind. First she needed *this*.

Sight and scent and taste burst over her with the change. Mother Earth sang through the pads of her feet as she ran, was there in the voices of whispering trees, in bird song and the sound of insects, in the scurrying and crashing of prey animals as they became aware of a predator in their midst.

A deer bolted across the trail and she took off in pursuit, eager to catch it, accepting that its death was part of the cycle of life. Joy filling her with each stride though enough of the woman remained to silently laugh at imagining Conner's reaction if she returned with a doe slung over her shoulder.

The wolf tired without bringing the deer down but still found immense pleasure in drinking from a stream before lying down and rolling in dirt and leaves and a thousand scents. She'd heard tales of Weres who rejected their animal nature and chose to live among humans, to breed during those times when their cycle coincided with one of the moon phases where the gene drawing upon magic went recessive, so their children were born free of the moon's call and unable to shift.

She would never deny her children this. *Never*.

Time held no meaning for the wolf though she noted when dusk gave way to a night lit by the full moon. She rose and shook, leaping and snapping at fireflies, giving chase to first one rabbit and then a second, and a third, uncaring of anything but the moment.

Chapter Four

Conner put the guitar down gently though he felt far from calm. Where the fuck was she?

It wasn't the first time he'd asked the question and he had a bad feeling it wasn't going to be the last. Christ. Anyone else and he would have called it in by now and started a search. Anyone else and he wouldn't feel raw at the prospect of having been lied to.

He scrubbed his hands over his face as if doing it would erase the conflicting thoughts and emotions. He never should have let her out of his sight, but fuck, trust had to start somewhere.

He left the lounge chair and added another round of charcoal to those already dying out in the brick grill. He'd give her a little bit longer then decide what action to take.

Returning to the chair, he accepted the impossibility of getting any songwriting done. Composing didn't come naturally to him on a *good* day, something his partner razzed him about when early versions of a piece could be likened to torture by a listener.

He put the guitar in its case and hauled it into the cabin, bringing the flute out and sitting on the back stairs of the wraparound porch. A semblance of peace came with the first note, a calming grace made more beautiful by nighttime woods and lack of city sounds.

The wolf abandoned her pursuit of a rabbit when the music reached her ears, a sweet serenade whose lure was every bit as potent as the Pied Piper's. She raced toward the sound as if it were a summoning, a different type of joy filling her. Her will

becoming more closely melded with the woman's, though she wasn't yet ready to relinquish her form.

When she reached the edge of the woods, she left them rather than hide in comfortable darkness. She crept forward, her belly only inches above the ground, her body held low in deference to the alpha.

She whined, wanting his acknowledgement, wanting him to shift forms and join her though on some level she understood the impossibility of it. He didn't smell like the males of her birth pack. But of all the males she'd encountered in the place the woman had chosen to live, he was the only one who felt right, *worthy* of being a mate in the world outside of the insular one of pack.

Conner's breath caught when he saw the wolf, a pause bisecting a note before he continued on. He thought female, given her size, and she was achingly beautiful, the embodiment of a fierce wildness even if her actions were unnatural.

He wondered if she'd escaped a pen somewhere in the mountains, or been dumped by one of the thousands of people who thought it would be cool to own a wolf and then found out otherwise.

Did the music bring her? Or was she hungry? Or worse, rabid, the disease and her familiarity with humans translating into a lack of fear and presenting a danger he couldn't ignore, especially with Khemirra in the woods.

His shoulder rig was in place, the off-duty piece within easy reach. From this distance, he was reasonably sure of making a kill shot. Anything less would be unacceptable.

The wolf edged closer in a slinking crouch. He couldn't be certain it wasn't a prelude to attack, but something about the body language suggested otherwise.

She grew more breathtaking the closer she got. Her coat was luxurious, black rather than shades of gray. Her irises were the gold-brown of Khemirra's and he felt their impact, saw the intelligence in them when their eyes met for a brief instant before her

increasing boldness finally forced him to slowly lower the flute. She stopped the instant the music did, watched with unnerving intensity as he pulled the gun from its holster.

“What’s your story, beautiful?” he murmured, thumbing off the safety.

Her ears swiveled but her gaze didn’t veer from his gun hand. He had the sense she understood the danger she was in, that she’d crept far enough away from cover that a charge forward or a retreat to the woods could be equally deadly.

His appreciation of nature warred with a moral code embracing a duty to protect. He didn’t want to kill her without justification, yet her behavior wasn’t normal and letting her go might lead to an attack on someone else, on Khemirra.

He strained to hear the sound of footsteps approaching, either at a walk or a run. He heard nothing and the moment stretched between them, fraught as he considered what should be done, what might *need* to be done.

Conscience won. He couldn’t be certain she would attack someone else and he couldn’t be sure his music hadn’t been responsible for bringing her this close to the cabin.

“I’m not going to shoot you without cause,” he said, standing, the movement freeing her, making her wheel and rush into the woods.

Her disappearance didn’t relax him. It made him tenser.

He thumbed the safety on, holstering the gun before taking the flute inside. It was time to go hunting, and when he found Khemirra...

Khemirra shifted a mile from the cabin, the wolf’s lope becoming a human’s run. *Shit!* Her heart felt like it might take a flying leap up her throat and out of her mouth.

It hadn’t occurred to her that Conner might actually shoot her! Hadn’t occurred to the wolf either, another little telltale marker that had her shying away before the word *mate* became too deeply ingrained in her human psyche.

She stopped, turning and jogging toward the cabin rather than running away from it. A smile worked its way out from the wolf within. He'd called her beautiful.

She heard Conner before he came into view and attempted to head off an argument by yelling, "Conner, that you?"

"Yes."

She grimaced. His voice held aggravation where it had been soft for her other self. She'd laugh at the irony of it except she didn't want to make the situation worse, not when his being pissed stemmed from worry, maybe even fear something had happened to her.

"Sorry," she said when they got within sight of each other. "I went farther than I intended."

She could see him visibly wrestling down his emotions and putting a muzzle on what were probably some choice words about her disappearance. "Sorry," she repeated, and found she really was, though short of telling him the truth, this couldn't have been avoided and would have been far, far worse if he wasn't the wolf's choice.

The wolf didn't readily yield her shape. Usually there'd be zero chance of shifting forms until closer to sunrise unless she found herself in a life-or-death situation requiring the use of hands or words.

Khemirra went willingly into Conner's embrace, pleasure moving through woman and wolf at being surrounded by his heat and scent.

"Fair warning," he growled, his arms like bands of steel. "If you were my girlfriend or my wife and you put me through this kind of hell, you'd feel my hand on your bare ass the minute we had some privacy."

The threat caused a ripple of need through her belly. The dark timbre of his voice reminding her of the spanks he'd delivered to her cunt the night before.

"And then?" she asked, her sudden breathlessness having nothing to do with physical exertion.

“Then I’d fuck you long and hard.”

Her channel clenched violently and there was no way to suppress a smile. “You might want to rethink that approach, Conner. It sounds to me like you’re trying to *incite* disobedience.”

He laughed and she felt the tension flow out of him. The muscles in his arms relaxed though he didn’t loosen his grip on her.

“You saying you’d like me to punish you, baby?”

“Put your hand in my panties and see what I think about the concept.”

“Jesus,” Conner said against her neck before letting her feel his teeth. He shouldn’t allow her to distract him, but the wildness running through her surged into him, fed by moonlight and the scent of a hot summer night.

Feeling her arousal on his fingertips wasn’t going to satisfy him. He wanted to see it, taste it. He knelt, unsnapping, unzipping, a tug taking her shorts and panties to her ankles.

“Your punishment can wait until after dinner,” he said, pushing her tank top up far enough to torment her first with open-mouth kisses and teasing licks to her navel, followed by a string of sucking bites to her belly.

He’d never been a man to mark a woman before Khemirra, but then he’d also never felt the raging possessiveness he did when it came to her. The scorching lust she incited with words alone, the white-hot fury of need to be inside her that came with the mere thought of her.

She widened her stance, revealing inner thighs damp with arousal and cunt lips already swollen and parted. He touched her first with his fingers then with tongue and mouth. Loving the way she ground against him in both demand for pleasure and surrender to it. Loving her taste and scent, loving everything about her.

His cock grew wetter, the foreskin retracting fully as the sounds she made excited him further. He’d never make it to the cabin without joining his body to hers first.

He stood, his hands going to the front of his shorts and freeing his cock. All thought disappearing as she positioned herself on elbows and knees in a presentation of her slit, an invitation to be mounted that left him driven by raw instinct.

Khemirra shivered in anticipation. Primal desire surged through her as she felt Conner's eyes on her wet cunt. She needed this. Her wolf needed this. Here, now, in the woods and beneath the moon.

It was as close as the wolf would ever get to being covered by him, but the wolf was content. The wolf *accepted*, trusted more deeply than the woman did, negated what Khemirra knew.

This was dangerous, so very dangerous, not to her physical self but to her heart. She wasn't in full heat but for the wolf, this was a precursor to breeding, an invitation that had never been extended to another male. This was the beginning of the bonding process—not irreversible. Yet.

Her rational mind issued the warning but it was too late to heed it even before Conner joined her on the ground, his hands caressing her buttocks, petting her an instant before she felt his teeth on one ass cheek, followed by the lap of his tongue, first over the bite and then a slick, hot glide over parted, swollen folds.

She begged with a husky, "Please, Conner." And he took what she offered, what her wolf offered. Thrusting hard and deep and fast, the rhythm marked by the sounds of a rough, fast mating. The slap of flesh against flesh and harsh breathing. By whimpers of pleasure ending in a cry of ecstasy and a feminine demand enforced with the fist-tight squeeze of her sheath.

Conner came, the force and length of it making him feel powerful, exultant even as it drained him, requiring him to gather strength before he could pull from her body and get to his feet.

She followed his lead, rising and dressing before wrapping her arms around his waist, her smile as dangerous to his self-control as her body was. "You look pleased with yourself. Like the big bad wolf after he's swallowed Little Red Riding Hood."

Conner laughed against her neck, kissing along the length of it. "I won't argue with that assessment, but I'm not the only wolf in these woods tonight. One showed up at the cabin just before I decided to come looking for you."

"You sure it was a wolf?"

"Positive. Probably escaped or was dumped by someone who thought owning one would be cool."

Khemirra snorted. "As if you can own a wolf."

"As if, though I can understand the temptation. She was gorgeous, eyes the color of yours. I think she liked my music."

"I heard it. It helped bring me back."

"And now it's time for dinner and some answers."

Conner took her hand as they walked back to the cabin, holding off his questions until the steaks were done and they were sitting at the picnic table eating. "Talk, Khemirra." Not the smoothest of interview techniques but he wanted to get to the point and get this behind them.

"Armand Scholes."

"The science fiction writer?"

"You a fan?"

The full moon provided enough light for him to see her tense though her voice didn't reveal her thoughts.

"No, I'm more of a mystery/thriller kind of guy."

"You like Robert Crais?"

"Nice try. I read his stuff the day it comes out, but we're not going to talk about that now. Why is Scholes after you?"

"What do you know about him?"

"Fair enough. Not much more than what I've read in the papers. He's reclusive and eccentric. A larger than average number of his fans seem to be nut jobs who believe

there are aliens among us with wisdom to share, and Scholes is in contact with these extraterrestrials, giving him kind of a cult-like following. But to give the man his due, he gives back, and one of his charities is wolf preservation. He spends a lot of money trying to get bills passed supporting the reintroduction of them into areas they once inhabited. He's got a compound in Florida where he houses wolves rescued from various situations. Now what do *you* know about him?"

"He believes in werewolves."

Conner laughed. He couldn't help himself. "So he's as whacked as his fans. Why am I not surprised?"

"You might want to keep an open mind here, Conner."

The sharp tone of her voice warned him against smiling but he couldn't prevent it any more than he'd been able to stifle the laugh. "I'm all for keeping an open mind, *within reason*. But you want to know what happens when you open your mind too wide?"

"No. But I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Your intelligence falls out and you start believing in demon possessions, little green men from outer space, werewolves and a wide array of other crazy shit."

"And if I've seen some of it for myself?"

He put his knife and fork down and opened his arms wide. "Show me the proof, baby."

Her glare was ruined by the tiniest hint of a smile. "I can't."

"There you go."

"It's not as simple as that." Exasperation threaded through her voice, attracting him rather than repelling him. "There are things out there, but there are also rules in place as to who gets to know about them."

"Isn't that convenient. If I never hear the world supernatural again, I'd be a happy man. Same goes with seeing it."

He picked up the knife and fork, spearing his steak hard enough to hear them slam into the plate. He didn't know how Trace handled it, except he wanted Aislinn badly enough to deal with the weird shit, not just Inner Magick, her shop, but the psychic stuff.

Remembering Aislinn's ability to pick out the glove belonging to the Morrison boy when faced with dozens of choices, and then, on another occasion, being able to locate the missing Kirby kid, had his mind shying away, not wanting to look too closely at unexplainable things. Even as the memories forced him to silently admit it'd be a mistake to discount the possibility someone like Aislinn might lead Scholes to Khemirra.

His fingers tightened on the knife and fork. They could revisit the whole psychic thing later. There couldn't be too many out there who weren't crackpots or con artists.

The feel of the shoulder rig and the weight of the gun formed a solid anchor to the world he understood. For now, that's all he needed.

"So Scholes believes in werewolves, which probably wouldn't shock his fans if you reported it. Why is it relevant?"

Khemirra pushed her empty plate away. Truth time. Sort of.

"He granted me an interview. Rare, but then I've reported on all kinds of offbeat topics, including stuff about wolves. I went to his compound, the idea being to work in a tour along with the talk. He got it into his head I was a werewolf and I managed to escape. If I hadn't, I'd still be there. And if I don't keep running until I find a way to stop him, I'll end up in a cage somewhere and no one will ever see me again."

Conner's expression hardened and his scent changed, anger bleeding into fierce protectiveness. "You should have gone to the police. False imprisonment is a felony charge."

"My word against his, with no proof? No way, Conner."

"Anyone witness your being there?"

Her stomach threatened to reject dinner at remembering the clamp of the wolf's teeth and the taste of human flesh and blood. "There's nobody to back up my statement in any way, shape or form."

Conner finished the last of his steak and pushed his empty plate to the side. "Shit. Give me some time to think about this. Let me run it by a few of the guys I work with. We can kick around some ideas and figure out a way to keep Scholes away from you."

Khemirra had no hope of human law making that happen. This was going to require supernatural intervention, she just wasn't sure yet about how to pull that off.

She stood, thinking to gather their plates and end the conversation. He stopped her with a hand on her wrist, a warm, firm shackle.

"No more running, Khemirra. Promise."

"I can't promise that."

"Then say you'll give me a chance to help you. Come back to Florida with me. Stay at my place and I'll call in some favors so you've got around-the-clock protection."

The extent of her desire to say yes was warning enough about her growing feelings for him—*hers*, not just the wolf's attraction to a dominant, protective male. But the longer she remained with him, the harder it was going to be to leave if his attitude toward the supernatural didn't soften and change so she dared reveal the full truth of herself.

Deep inside the wolf whined at the prospect of losing him. She urged the woman to take the chance, to risk her human heart. And though Khemirra *knew* said heart stood a very good chance of getting broken, she yielded. "I'll go back to Florida with you."

"Good."

He stood and moved around the picnic table, scooping her up in his arms and startling a laugh out of her, though amusement quickly fled as his expression darkened with possessive intensity.

He didn't need to tell her to strip when they got inside. The moment he set her down on a thick throw rug in the bedroom, she shed her clothing and he did the same.

Moonlight streamed in through the windows, caressing her skin and touching the wolf beneath it. But rather than a call to shift forms, it was a call to give herself to her mate.

"God, you're beautiful," Conner said, wanting to worship every inch of her with his hands and mouth. She made him feel things he'd never felt with any other woman, made him hunger in a way he'd never experienced before.

She placed her palms against his chest, silently urging him to sit on the bed. He went willingly and she rewarded him with the press of her nipple to his lips.

He latched on to it, letting her feel teeth and tongue and the pull of his mouth. Laving, biting, sucking. Alternating between breasts as he played with her clit and slipped his fingers into her channel, working her until she was shivering, trying to bring herself to an orgasm with his hand, something his cock promised would lead to his abdomen being coated with come.

He freed her nipple but it wasn't a clean break. He returned, nuzzling, licking, giving each dark, dark areola another kiss before looking up at her face. "Scholes had it all wrong, you're pure cat."

Her smile promised sensual retribution. "Now you're just trying to rile me."

"I can't help myself." He rubbed arousal-slick fingers over her clit. "Not any more than I can stop wanting to be inside you. Time for the main act, baby."

"I don't think so, Conner."

Her eyes glittered with wildness as she pulled away, only to drape herself across his lap facedown. "Is this how you like to punish your women?"

There was a growl in her voice and the sound of it brought intense pleasure, a feral smile at recognizing her possessiveness. Good. She'd pretty much ruined him for anyone else.

He lifted his hand and delivered a spank, the blow sending a surge of white-hot need through his cock.

Somehow he managed a second one.

A third.

A fourth would cost him the last of his control.

He leaned down, kissing her buttocks. Biting the spot he'd already marked on one ass cheek as if reestablishing his claim before repositioning them so he was above her, his mouth covering hers, his cock sliding into her like it was coming home.

Chapter Five

Conner woke hard, his cock pressed to smooth buttocks. Kissing a soft shoulder, he got a mumbled response though Khemirra's legs parted and her nipple pebbled when he brushed his palm over it.

"Not a morning person?" he teased, shifting position just enough to allow for the slow slide of his cock into the scorching heat of her sheath.

"Damn, I'd like to start every day like this." It wasn't a line. And he meant with her, not just any attractive female.

She pushed against him, taking him deeper and threatening to cut off the blood supply to his brain. His fingers clamped on her nipple, delivering pain and pleasure as he smiled against her shoulder, gave her a little bite. "I'm not going to let you rush me."

She laughed and finally spoke. "We'll see about that, Conner."

"A challenge? This early in the day? Why am I not surprised?"

He kept his thrusts slow, measured. A sensory ecstasy he lost himself in.

Her channel fisted on him as if she'd never let him leave and he savored the tightness, the overwhelming feel of their being perfect together, right together. Drew out the pleasure, only relenting when his testicles burned in warning.

His fingers left her nipple then, capturing her clit, giving her what she wanted, what they both wanted—a surrender to the mind-numbing rapture of release.

Khemirra twined her fingers with Conner's where his hand rested against her mound. It felt good to be with him like this, skin touching skin, lying together with the morning sun streaming through the windows, the air not yet heavy with the particular heat of the South.

"That was nice," she said.

"Very." He kissed along the length of her neck. "Maybe there'll be an encore."

"Only maybe? You slowing down, Conner?"

He laughed. Damn if she didn't love that sound.

Her thoughts wandered back to the first time she'd seen him, the memories bringing pleasure and then the familiar stirrings of guilt. She tensed, or must have, because Conner pulled her more tightly against him and asked, "Thinking about Scholes?"

"Yes."

"Far as we know, he hasn't found your Jeep."

"I thought I was probably a day ahead of whoever he's got following me when I stopped at the motel. It seems like finding me quickly depends on figuring out which direction I'm traveling in." She hesitated, not wanting to spoil the mood, but the need to reinforce an earlier warning of danger made her continue. "If he's using a psychic or witch, or something a mage made, I think they have to be within a certain range to get a read on where I am."

The muscles in Conner's arm tightened and she felt him stiffen where his chest touched her back. He exhaled slowly, the length of it a shout though his voice was low and smooth. "Let's not talk about supernatural sh— This stuff first thing in the morning."

His words created a fist around her heart, a squeezed warning accompanied by the wolf's snarl at his continued refusal to recognize the possibility of her existence. Khemirra took a deep breath, reminding herself that despite the great sex and growing feelings between them, she couldn't expect him to accept overnight something so foreign to his reality.

She let the subject drop. "I researched you before I agreed to meet with you that day in the park."

He laughed, totally relaxing against her. He thrust his hips suggestively and moved their joined hands to cover her nipple. "Still researching me, baby?"

She smiled despite where she wanted to take the conversation. "Maybe."

"Go for it. I'm all yours."

A flutter went through her womb, a longing that blossomed upward, expanding into her chest so the fist around her heart squeezed again. *I'm all yours*. She wanted it to be true in more ways than just the sexual. But the doubts it ever could be were like talons digging deeper with each discussion of the supernatural.

Just as she'd never deny her children their wolf form, she'd never hide the full truth of herself from the man she shared her life with.

It was all or nothing. Anything less dishonored both of them.

She let silence provide a buffer, a warning before transitioning away from playfulness though she was very careful not to let either her voice or her body give her away when she said, "You killed a man in the line of duty. How tough was it for you to cope afterward?"

He tensed but answered without hesitation. "It was tougher, a hell of a lot tougher than I thought it would be even though the guy didn't leave me any choice. For weeks afterward I kept replaying it in my mind, looking for ways it could have turned out differently."

She'd done the same. She still did it, and no matter how many times she replayed the events, not just at the compound but those leading up to her being there to interview Scholes, she couldn't imagine a different outcome. She'd had no warning, no reason to think Scholes had guessed she was a werewolf. And they, in turn, must have thought the change would be slow and she'd be helpless long enough to be incapacitated and caged. Otherwise they wouldn't have exposed her to the charm so casually and eagerly.

She shouldn't care about the mage's death. Shouldn't feel anything except justified in the wolf's actions, *her* actions, but she did.

“Did you feel guilty afterward, about taking a life?”

“No. I didn’t feel good about it, but I didn’t feel guilty either.” Conner shrugged against her back. “I’m not sure I can explain everything I felt, Khemirra, then or now. I’ve made my peace with it. He was a criminal out for himself. He didn’t care who got hurt as long as he got what he wanted. Bottom line, he may not have landed any of the blows that left an old man dead, but he was part of a robbery that ended in homicide.”

She found a measure of comfort in Conner’s words, permission of sorts, to shrug off human guilt. Whether the mage knew about the covenant with its laws applying to the supernatural, or not, he hadn’t cared about the fate of any werewolf who might be forced to change because of the charm he’d created.

She turned in Conner’s arms, smiling when he made a sound of protest as his cock left her channel. “You’re a good man.”

His eyebrows lifted. “What brought that on?”

“I like being with you.”

His hand traveled the length of her spine. “I can say the same about you.”

He followed the words with a slow, thorough kiss, and then another, causing heat to coil downward with each of them and fill her with the need to join her body to his.

She grasped his cock, swallowing his moan as she slid her hand up and down on his shaft, coaxing him into hardening again before pushing him onto his back.

He went willingly. Hands tangled in her hair, extending the time their lips touched, clung, before releasing her so she straddled him, guiding him to her entrance and taking him inside her.

Her hands went to his chest, fingers brushing over tiny nipples. She loved the tone of his skin, the contrast, his lighter than hers by several shades.

His blond, blue-eyed looks appealed to her, as did his cop’s body. He was a warrior in his own right.

She rose on his cock until only the tip of him penetrated her, the threat of loss making him lift off the mattress, his hands going to her hips in a silent demand that she reverse direction so he'd once again be fully seated. She yielded, burying him deep inside her only to rise again, and again. And when she came, he rolled them, claiming the dominant position and thrusting until he spilled his seed inside her.

Contentment flooded into her, her channel rippling along his shaft as if the wolf milked him of semen, an act that would one day lead to growing heavy with young. She tried to stifle the image of a child with Conner but couldn't quite pull it off, not when he was content to linger in bed, his cock still in her.

She stroked his back, distracting herself with touch and lazy kisses until the desire for a shower and breakfast intruded. They shared both before deciding to go outside.

When he picked up the shoulder rig and put it on, wearing it against his bare skin, she couldn't resist making a show of giving him a thorough study before saying, "I like the whole Rambo look on you."

He retaliated, eyes traveling downward to where her nipples were tight, hard points against the thin material of her tank top. "I take it you're a fan of his."

"I'm a fan of yours."

Jesus. In a minute she was going to have him beating his chest like Tarzan. "I thought you wanted to go outside. Keep this up and we'll be back in bed."

She laughed and headed for the back door. He followed her out, admiring the way she moved, the air already heavy, still and thick with building heat.

Claiming a lounge chair, he pulled the gun from the shoulder rig and set it on the table within easy reach. Khemirra joined him on the chair, sitting facing him with her legs crossed.

Christ, he liked looking at her. Liked talking to her and reading the things she wrote. Hell, he even enjoyed arguing with her. All of which he could see himself doing for a long time to come.

Nagging doubts returned, questions lost in sex and the need for more important answers. He couldn't keep ignoring them, not if this thing with her was heading in the direction his gut told him it was.

"Is Khemirra Reis your real name?"

She stiffened but just as quickly relaxed. He wasn't ready to read anything into the reaction—yet.

"Are we getting ready to play another round of cop and prisoner?"

She sighed when he refused to rise to the bait. Bringing a knee up, she rested her chin on it and wrapped her arms around her leg. "Yes, Conner, Khemirra Reis is my real name."

"You were twenty-one before there was any record of your existence."

"That's right." Her smile teased rather than taunted. "I thought cops couldn't pull DMV records unless they had cause."

"I had cause, *you*. Why don't you exist before you got your driver's license?"

She contemplated him for a long moment before finally saying, "Because I was twenty-one before I decided to leave the small town I grew up in and see what the rest of the world had to offer. And don't bother asking the town's name. I won't tell you and knowing it wouldn't help you. For generations the majority of residents have lived anonymously, completely off Uncle Sam's radar screen."

A band formed around his chest, tightened, compressing his lungs so it was difficult to breathe. "You grew up in a cult?"

"Hardly. I grew up in a place where self-reliance is valued, and at the same time, the concept of family extends to everyone in town."

"Why the secrecy then?"

"Will it set your mind at ease if I say something like, fear of Big Brother?"

Jesus. He wasn't sure how much of this he wanted to know. It didn't stop him from saying, "It depends on whether or not the citizens are armed to the teeth and ready for a gun battle if law enforcement or government officials show up."

"Then relax, Conner. There'd be a mass exodus well before there was any chance of a confrontation taking place."

"So why didn't you run back home?"

"Because I don't know how Scholes keeps finding me. And though you don't want to hear this, since I can't be sure he's not using a psychic or a witch or a mage charm, I can't risk leading him to my family and the town I grew up in. He's absolutely convinced I'm a werewolf. Imagine what he'd do if he thought he'd found a whole town full of them."

Conner grimaced. This was a prime example of how belief in the supernatural and turning into a certifiable whacko went hand in hand. But open that conversational door with Khemirra and a whole avalanche of shit was likely to push through and smother what they had going together, not fertilize it and lead to beautiful things—a thought that had his lips kicking up at the corners though the smile was fleeting. He wasn't ready to talk about psychics, much less witches or *magas* tracking her, but he couldn't quite blow the possibility of it off either, thanks to Aislinn's having been able to locate the Morrison and Kirby boys.

They needed to consider the wisdom of leaving. If they were a day ahead of Scholes or whoever he'd sent after her, then he'd just as soon use that day to get somewhere defensible. The cabin wasn't it.

He didn't regret bringing her here. His gut, reinforced by her long run in the woods, told him she'd needed this and wouldn't have agreed to stay with him anywhere else. But play time needed to end. "We should leave today."

"When?"

"The sooner the better."

"Then I need something to tide me over until we stop for the night."

He laughed at the reminder of his own words after the mind-frying blowjob in the motel shower. The band around his chest fell away and he wondered how in the hell he'd gotten so lucky when she rose onto her knees in a demand he could no more ignore than he could the raw need rushing through him.

He shoved tank top and bra upward, exposing her breasts with their dark, dark nipples. Cupping the smooth mounds, he pushed them together, lessening the distance between large areolas so he could give equal attention to both.

He took a nipple between his lips, his tongue offering a wet greeting, his cock already aching to be inside her again. Arousal beading on the head when she said, "I love having your mouth on me."

He answered with his teeth because there was no way he could force himself from her breast. He bit, her sharp cry and the arch of her back making him curse the clothing between them.

Lust was a molten fire in his bloodstream. He bit again, felt her gasp and the jerk of her body an instant before she went completely limp.

Alarm flashed through him and he reached for the 9mm automatically. His hand making contact but stilling when a man's voice said, "Stop or I'll order you killed."

A gun fired from a different location, the kick of dirt next to the chair punctuating the threat issued from the woods in front of him.

"Take your hand away from the weapon."

He complied, fury gripping him, fear transformed by adrenaline, accompanied by condemnation at having allowed this to happen. He ruthlessly suppressed anything that wouldn't aid him in staying alive and stopping Scholes.

Against his bare chest he could feel Khemirra's heart beating. He shifted her in his arms and saw the dart stabbed into her left buttock. Protectiveness had him tugging her bra and tank top downward over exposed skin.

Footsteps approached from the rear, two sets of them, coming from either side of the cabin. The first to reach him belonged to a thug with prison ink on his neck.

The ex-con picked up the off-duty piece and the owner of the voice stepped from the woods, a geek carrying a scoped rifle. Conner gambled and said, "I take it you're Armand Scholes."

A flinch acknowledged the hit. "And you are?"

He decided to take a second gamble, though this one came with the unwelcome question of how they'd found the cabin if he hadn't been recognized. "Detective Conner Stern."

Scholes glanced at the man still out of sight behind Conner. "Check the cabin, Diego. Verify who he is."

Footsteps retreated. Conner didn't volunteer that his wallet and shield were on the kitchen counter. No point in making things quick and easy, though with three armed men, having one leave didn't change the odds in his favor, especially when he was hampered by Khemirra's unconscious body.

Scholes' free hand went to a silver medallion around his neck. He lifted it to his mouth and spoke with it pressed to his lips as if it contained a tiny transmitter. "Bring the van."

Several minutes passed before Conner heard an engine in the distance. It grew steadily louder, arriving with the sound of tires crunching on the gravel driveway leading to the cabin.

More adrenaline poured into his system. But there was no move he could make that didn't risk the instant death of a head shot or the complete powerlessness of a tranquilizer dart.

"Get out of the chair slowly, Mr. Stern. You may retain possession of Khemirra for the moment."

Conner shifted Khemirra in his arms and got to his feet, the position allowing him a good look at Diego as he emerged from the cabin with a gun in his hand. Another ex-con, more likely to be hired muscle than cult-like followers of Scholes.

"He's a cop," Diego said.

"That's unfortunate. Keep your eyes and your weapons trained on him." Scholes gave a slight wave of the rifle barrel toward the side of the cabin. "Let's go around front, Detective."

Conner went, Diego and his companion flanking him while Scholes stayed well back.

"Prepare for loading the cage," Scholes said, his voice low enough to indicate he was speaking into the transmitter again.

Conner's gut told him he was still alive because of the passion Scholes had witnessed, and his potential usefulness as leverage against Khemirra. He tried to improve the odds of being worth keeping alive by dredging up what he knew about werewolves—something he could use as an angle with Scholes.

Fuck, he hadn't watched horror flicks even as a teen. Did werewolves have sex? Did they do anything but turn at the full moon and eat people?

They rounded the corner of the cabin without his coming up with anything useful. A van was parked a few feet away from his car, the side door open, a metal cage visible.

A woman stood next to the van, motionless, as if awaiting further orders. She was a looker, tiny and blonde like Trace's Aislinn, though her face held a remoteness Aislinn's never would.

Several feet from the van, Scholes said, "Stop," though he kept going until he stood next to the woman, his hand gripping the medallion as if it had turned into a lucky charm. He gave her the rifle and pointed at Conner. "Keep it aimed on him. Any movement from that spot and you tranquilize him."

The coldness of the woman's eyes said she'd do as ordered without hesitation, but the command solidified Conner's read that he'd be kept alive and with Khemirra.

Despite the amount of firepower aimed at him, Scholes approached cautiously. "Give me his gun, Tony. Then take Khemirra and put her in the cage."

Tony handed the 9mm over, shoving his own in the waistband of his jeans before reaching for Khemirra. Conner's arms tightened instinctively but he forced himself to relinquish her, to remain still even as he seethed at witnessing her being caged.

"Excellent," Scholes said, moving backward so he stood next to the woman again. "Diego and Tony, before we leave I want you to go inside and make it look as though revenge is what motivated this visit and Detective Stern's disappearance."

Diego turned toward the cabin. Tony jumped from the van.

Scholes fired without warning, hitting Tony in the chest before changing targets.

He caught Diego turning, the first bullet striking an arm, the second and third driving into his torso. The distance making both men easy kills.

Training and self-control kept Conner in place. The woman's attention on him never wavered.

Scholes lowered the gun, gaze flicking between Conner and the blood spreading in a slow stain from where Tony lay only a few feet away from him. "Either you have tremendous control for a werewolf, or you're human, Detective." He turned toward the woman. "Which is it?"

"Human."

"Then only time will tell if keeping him alive serves a purpose. Shoot him."

The dart hit Conner in mid-lunge, dropping him into oblivion.

Chapter Six

Khemirra returned to consciousness in snarling confusion and the wolf's frantic desire to escape. She battled the change instinctively, keeping her eyes closed though her nose and ears frantically gathered information.

Conner was near. She could hear breathing and smell his scent.

The wolf's struggle for dominance lessened and Khemirra cautiously opened her eyes, not willing to reveal her awareness. She was in a cage, one large enough for a wolf or a crouched human.

Conner lay on the ground several feet away. He was on his side, the same as she was, but unlike her, his hands were bound behind his back with plasticuffs and the rope securing his ankles was tethered to a metal ring set in the floor.

Guilt nearly crushed her, pain at seeing him made helpless, his life in danger because she'd involved him in this. Anger followed. At herself, at Scholes.

She should have ripped Scholes apart after killing the mage. She would if she ever got the chance again.

She forced her attention away from Conner and to the bars. They'd been set far enough apart to allow for capture loops and sedation, a gap too small for most men to get an arm through, but not her.

She fought a smile. From a young age she'd been taught how to pick locks. All the wolves in her pack underwent the same training. It was considered as essential to survival as learning how to hunt in wolf form or navigate the human world while wearing skin.

An inventory of her clothing, done by sight and the subtlest of movements, had elation singing through her. The small collection of wires hidden in the waistband of her shorts hadn't been discovered and removed.

The urge to escape the cage and get to Conner was a fierce dictate she fought against giving in to. Her rational mind cautioned and she listened, studying what she could see of the room, looking for cameras monitoring her actions, knowing that until Conner was conscious, it would be foolish to act.

It seemed an eternity before his low moan signaled a change in condition. Renewed anguish spread through her as she watched him come slowly to alertness and struggle against the restraints.

There was fury in his expression, and more. The bitter taste of failure became part of his scent.

She couldn't bear it. Sitting up, she pressed forward against the bars and called his name.

The sound of Khemirra's voice centered Conner. It brought him out of a desperate struggle with dark emotion and gave him focus. He managed to get to his knees and go to her, the rope growing taut so there was no possibility of his bound wrists or ankles being within reach of her hands.

"I'm sorry," she said, and the sight of her eyes glistening with tears stripped away everything but the truth. He loved her.

"I'm not."

He touched his mouth to hers, swallowing her small sob before his tongue coaxed her into opening for him, into celebrating the fact they were still alive and together. He didn't know if there were cameras or listening devices, he suspected there were, but in the long moments of their kiss, all that mattered was the press of lips and rub of tongues in soul-deep communication.

"What happened?" she finally asked. "The last thing I remember was you biting my nipple. And don't tell me I passed out from the pleasure of it."

He gave a short bark of laughter despite the dire situation. "Tranquilizer dart."

"And then what?"

"Scholes killed his hired muscle."

"God, Conner, I'm—"

"Don't say it, Khemirra. I'm tied up at the moment but that doesn't mean we won't revisit the issue of due punishment."

She laughed as he'd meant for her to do, though there were tears buried in the sound. "Where are we?"

He shook his head. "I got hit with a dart after you'd been loaded into a van and Scholes gunned down his helpers."

They both looked around. Windows high up on the wall marked it as being evening, but closed, there was no fresh air to give them a hint either by smell or sound as to where they were.

The construction implied an industrial-type building rather than a home. Over half the room was made up of a large cage Conner labeled an artificial habitat.

It reminded him of something he might see in a low-end zoo. Piles of rock and cut trees decorated it, along with tall plants in ceramic pots, allowing for hiding places and the pretense of privacy. The only visible cameras in the entire room were attached to the ceilings in the habitat.

Wire fencing divided it into two equal parts, but that fencing could be retracted, creating a single space. Along the front of both compartments were sections at the same height, and matching the door size of the wheeled cage holding Khemirra, allowing for the safe transfer of non-tranquilized wolves into the enclosure.

The rest of the room was furnished more like a vet clinic than a mad scientist's experimental laboratory. Locked drawers suggested drugs, possibly surgical instruments.

A desk had neatly stacked folders to one side and a legal pad on the other. None of the drawers had locks. That offered possibilities. With a sharp pair of scissors and

enough time, he could be free of restraints, provided one of them could get to the desk and they were lucky enough to find something useful there.

He refused to think escape wasn't possible. Turning his face toward Khemirra, he saw the same resolve in her and nearly blurted out that he loved her. He leaned in, kissing her again instead, saying afterward, "We'll get out of here alive."

The sound of a deadbolt sliding stopped him from saying more. The door opened and Scholes entered the room, the blonde with the nonexistent conscience accompanying him.

"Good, you're both awake," Scholes said.

He crossed to the cage with confidence though he had a gun holstered at his side and a cattle prod in his hand. "Our stay here is temporary, the unfortunate result of your involvement in this, Detective, and your being aware of mine. I'm making different arrangements, but we won't be able to safely relocate for another day or so. Whether you'll accompany us or not will depend on my being convinced you're a help and not a hindrance to my plans for Khemirra."

"By plans, you mean prove the existence of werewolves?"

"Ah, so you know what she is."

What I know is that you're bat-shit crazy. What he said was, "Yes."

Scholes nodded, as if congratulating himself. "I'm glad I decided to keep you alive. I've been led to believe it's against supernatural law for werewolves to reveal themselves to a human who isn't going to be made part of their family unit, pack as it were. Apparently you do indeed have value.

"But to return to your question, revealing the existence of werewolves has never been part of my motivation for spending large sums of money in order to locate and capture one. In fact, public knowledge would be detrimental.

"My goal has always been, and remains, the breeding of a species of wolf with enough human intelligence and cunning to not only survive in what remains of its

natural habitat, but to expand that territory so wolves once again roam freely in all of the Americas.”

He waved a hand in the direction of the habitat. “It’s a theory, of course, but I suspect she won’t mate fully with a male wolf, otherwise those magnificent creatures wouldn’t be slowly edging toward extinction. If you both cooperate, there will be an opportunity for conjugal visits. But by natural means or artificial, she will soon be carrying a litter of pups.”

Jesus. Scholes’ vision for greatness had the hair standing at the back of Conner’s neck. He *hated* dealing with crazies.

“Have you seen her in her wolf form?” Scholes asked.

Conner flashed back to the wolf lured to the cabin by the sound of the flute. Pretend that was her? Or deny? There was no way to be sure what the smart move was when it came to someone as certifiable as Scholes.

He opted to play along. “I saw the wolf last night. It was a full moon.”

“Excellent.” Scholes’ attention shifted to Khemirra. He gestured with the cattle prod. “If you’ll please shift forms now, we can avoid unnecessary violence and your Detective Sterns can be made more comfortable. Surely you don’t like seeing him restrained in such a manner.”

“I can’t change forms, not during the day.”

“You and I both know that’s not true.”

Conner saw her hands tighten on the bars of the cage. “Then I’ll rephrase. I can’t unless forced by magical means.”

“I wish I could rely on you to tell the truth. Instead it seems I’ll be forced to test a hypothesis predicting that the wolf will emerge if it perceives a life-threatening situation.”

His free hand went to the medallion as he turned slightly toward the woman. Offering her the cattle prod, he said, "Use this on Khemirra until she changes into her wolf form or I tell you to stop."

The woman took it from him and crossed to the cage. Though there was no way Conner could get free of the restraints, he fought against them, fury rising and caution evaporating into a stream of curses as, with icy, deliberate calm, the woman touched the tip to Khemirra.

Pain screamed through Khemirra, an electric agony that had the wolf thrashing. She curled into a ball rather than scramble around in a cage too small to allow her to escape the prod's reach.

It took all her control to keep the wolf contained. It required the surrender of pride and dignity. She screamed, gasping out a lie when she could. "I need moonlight."

The jolts lessened as the charge wore down, but actual pain and remembered pain and the threat of pain, along with the battle to keep from shifting, left her trembling and whimpering even after Scholes finally said, "Stop."

The barest hint of the woman's scent drifted into the cage then, causing goose bumps to spread across her skin as the wolf translated smell into a realization that nothing about the woman was human, despite the appearance of it.

Khemirra uncurled from the fetal ball and sat, hugging her knees to her chest, her nerve endings still jittery.

The woman was completely motionless, lacking breath and heartbeat. She was like a beautiful statue, inanimate perfection except for the emotion burning in sapphire blue eyes, the merciless fury of a trapped creature who would tear its captor apart should the opportunity present itself.

"I believe my experiment is nearly concluded," Scholes said, drawing Khemirra's attention to the medal on a chain around his neck and the way he touched it when he ordered the woman to relinquish the cattle prod.

It made Khemirra think of the mage charm that had forced her to change shape in its presence. If she or Conner could take possession of it, they could command—

A hard shudder went through her, wolf denial and self-preservation both. No, not command, not without knowing what the entity appearing human was.

Khemirra looked at Conner and experienced a different type of agony at reading fury and failure in his face, at scenting blood from his struggles against the restraints.

“You were able to track Khemirra using her soul as a beacon,” Scholes said to the woman, the medal still in his hand. “Can you see a connection between the two of them?”

“There is a linkage.”

“They’re a mated pair?”

“I cannot say with certainty.”

“Then I’ll see if I can arrive at an answer another way.” He touched the tip of the cattle prod to Conner and the wolf surged forward in a savage lunge to get to the male it had chosen.

Conner went down in rigid silence. Khemirra screamed, “I need moonlight!”

She thrust her arms through the opening in the bars, yielding to the wolf’s need to attack despite the futility of it. Using the gesture in a desperate bid to remind the wolf that if Scholes and the woman would leave the room, there might be enough time to pick the cage’s lock with human hands and free Conner.

Scholes touched the prod to Conner for a second time.

Khemirra cried out though only a soft grunt came from Conner. The wolf retreated rather than surge forward, biding her time, a howl rising from her and revealing itself in the free flow of tears over Khemirra’s cheeks.

Scholes pulled the prod back and let it hang at his side. He checked his watch. “Nightfall will arrive shortly and I don’t want to waste the opportunity the full moon

presents. Since we're forced to remain here until alternative arrangements have been finalized, I believe I'll look over the male wolves and make a selection for you."

He left, the woman trailing him like a malevolent spirit, their exit punctuated by the sound of a deadbolt sliding home. A sob escaped Khemirra as Conner struggled to his knees and returned to his earlier position, his upper torso pressed to the bars of the cage. "If you say you're sorry for involving me in this, *I'm* going to turn into a wolf and bite you."

There was a rough growl in his voice, either intended or the aftereffect of pain. She tangled her fingers in his hair, unable to suppress a second, softer sob as their lips met and clung in a desperate joining of soul and purpose, in an offering of comfort and a recognition of the feelings between them.

She wanted him in the same way the wolf did, for a lifetime. But when the kiss ended, he murmured against her lips, "If you say the word werewolf after we get out of here, or bring up the supernatural in any way, shape or form, I can promise you right now you'll find yourself bare-assed and getting spanked."

She froze, emotions plummeting though she clung to hope. If they got out of here, then there'd be time to change his mind, she had to believe that. She could build on what they had. She could provoke him into spanking her, turning sexual play into a slow acceptance of the supernatural.

She pulled her arms back into the cage, her hands going to her waistband and freeing the top button of her shorts. His eyebrows lifted in silent question but he didn't speak, aware as she was there could be microphones and cameras.

Using his body as a shield, she extracted the hidden wires. A smile kicked up at the corners of his mouth. "Damn, I love you," he whispered.

The declaration exploded in her chest, delivering sharp-edged bliss. She moved away from him, going to the cage door. A simple lock was threaded through holes bored into both door and cage frames.

She chose the right combination of wires and slid them into the lock mechanism. A soft click, barely heard over the pounding beat of her heart, signaled victory, and brought with it fierce gratitude for the teacher who'd demanded nothing short of speedy perfection.

She removed the lock, her breath coming fast, her pulse an internal clock frantically ticking off the seconds. The latches gave and she grasped the bars, sliding the door to the left, creating just enough of an opening to escape through.

Conner jerked his head in the direction of the desk and she crossed to it, quietly opening a top drawer. Smiling at finding a pair of scissors next to a box cutter.

She grabbed both and rushed back to Conner, exposing the blade of the box knife as she crouched behind him. The cuffs were tight and slick with blood. She sawed carefully, straining to hear approaching footsteps.

If Scholes came alone, they could overpower him without the wolf's help. If the woman was with him...

The ties severed and Conner gave a soft grunt as he brought his arms forward. She cut the ropes binding his ankles, his scent holding adrenaline and determination, fear forced into the smell of courage.

They rose to their feet, the sound of someone approaching in a slow, stealthy manner warning them time had run out. Khemirra's mouth went dry. She offered Conner his choice of the two weapons, desperately wishing she could give him both since she wouldn't need either if it came down to a fight for survival.

Conner selected the box knife, motioning for Khemirra to take up a position behind him. He readied himself mentally and physically as the footsteps came to a stop on the opposite side of the door.

The pause following was tense. The sliding of the deadbolt hesitant, cautious.

He waited until the door opened a crack then rammed into it, hearing a terrified squeal an instant before he saw the teenage boy.

Aborting his attack, Conner grabbed the boy's arm, demanded, "Who are you?"

"Matt. Matthew Herrington. I live here with my parents. They manage Wolf Haven."

"This is Wolf Haven?" Khemirra asked. But didn't wait for him to answer before saying, "We're about thirty minutes from where we left my Jeep, Conner."

Fierce hope surged through him. They would get out of this alive. "Where's Scholes?"

The teen's eyes widened. "Armand Scholes? He's here? His trust supports Wolf Haven. My parents got a call this morning, saying we had to leave for a couple of days. They weren't given a reason, only told that the wolves would be taken care of and it was very important to go. They thought they'd get fired if they said no. I snuck back because I wanted to see what was going on."

"Did you see anyone outside?"

"No, but I saw the door to the kennel building close. That's where I was heading when I looked in here and saw a deadbolt on the door to the room the vet uses." The boy cast a wild-eyed look over his shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Give me your phone."

Matt gulped. "I can't. My dad's got it. I'm on suspension. The only one in here is on the desk."

Fuck! It wasn't there now.

Conner took a second to look around. They were in a narrow foyer, indefensible against two people with guns and who could keep the front door covered until reinforcements arrived. The boy would be a casualty, he had no doubt about that after witnessing Scholes' coldblooded killing of his hired muscle.

"Where's the nearest phone?" Going back into the habitat room and risking getting trapped in there was a non-option now that Matt was involved.

"In the kennel building. There are more in the house."

"Is the house locked?"

"I don't know. I've got my key."

Matt pulled a key ring out of his pocket and offered it to Conner, his hand trembling. Conner accepted it before moving to the front door and looking out through the window set within it.

The house was to the left, maybe fifty yards away. The van they'd been transported in was also to the left, roughly twenty feet from the building door and affording some cover, though maybe they'd get lucky and find keys inside it.

"Kennel building is to the right?" he guessed. It wasn't visible.

"Yes."

Khemirra joined him at the door. "We're making a run for the house?"

"It's our best option. There's a chance Scholes will bolt if he thinks the police are descending on Wolf Haven."

"Let me go first."

It went against his training, his moral code, his need to protect her. Denial surged up his throat but he didn't say no. Of the three of them, she was the only one Scholes cared about keeping alive.

"Van first. We check for keys in the ignition and get a fix on the kennel building."

"What about me?" the boy asked, his voice high.

"With us." Conner met Khemirra's eyes. "Ready?"

She nodded and he opened the door, all of them straining to hear the sound of voices or footsteps. Khemirra peeked outside. "Clear," she said, and ran.

Conner touched Matt's back. "Go!"

Matt ran with Conner right behind him. They reached the van but a glance through the passenger-side window killed the hope of finding keys in the ignition.

Conner looked in the direction of the kennel building. Still clear.

“Go!” he said again, but fifteen feet beyond the shelter of the van, Scholes emerged and started firing.

Matt screamed and went down, blood saturating his t-shirt.

Conner’s training took over. He scooped the boy up and retreated to the van.

Chapter Seven

Khemirra shifted. There was no thinking, no deciding. The danger and the desperation of the situation drove her actions.

She raced toward Scholes. Very nearly veered when she saw the woman rushing toward the van, except the wolf's urge to go to the aid of its mate was overpowered by the knowledge that getting to Scholes would do more good.

"Protect me! Protect me!" he screamed when the frantic pulling of the trigger yielded only silence.

The wolf leapt the remaining distance, taking him to the ground. *Coward!* She could smell the stink of his fear, along with that of black magic and gunpowder on his hands as he gripped the fur of her neck, fighting to keep sharp canine teeth from reaching his throat.

He was no match for her fury or strength. Low growls sounded his death knell as powerful jaws snapped, drawing closer to fragile skin and wild pulse.

Wolf and woman both wanted Scholes dead. But the woman faltered as his arms lost strength and the kill neared.

The battle shifted internally then, guilt over the dead mage fighting with the memory of Scholes touching the cattle prod to Conner. Memories of being caged set against how Conner would react at seeing the wolf's savagery when he hadn't yet accepted her existence.

She snarled in fury and frustration, acquiescing to the woman's decision, clamping down on the medal rather than flesh and muscle and roaring blood. It burned her lips, tasted of brimstone and hot ash. She wanted to spit it out but the woman knew it was far too dangerous to leave where it might be touched by human hands.

She ripped it from Scholes' neck and swallowed it, turning her head just in time to see the being bound to it vanish.

Conner closed the sliding door, silently praying he wasn't turning the van into a coffin for the boy. Matt's blood coated his arm and soaked into his shirt, an unnecessary reminder that survival depended on incapacitating Scholes and the woman.

In the profound silence coming after the rapid burst of gunfire, Conner steeled himself against finding Khemirra down. He clung desperately to the hope she'd made it to the house, the sight of the scissors on the ground close to where Matt had been hit suggesting she had kept going rather than attempt an attack on Scholes.

He moved to the back of the van and cautiously looked around it, the ice of a primal fear pouring into his bloodstream along with denial at the sight of the wolf holding Scholes to the ground with the threat of glistening canines.

As if sensing his attention on her, she lifted her head and looked over her shoulder. A steel band tightened around his chest. There was no mistaking the intelligence in her eyes, no pretending he hadn't met them the night before.

He *wanted* to deny again and couldn't, not when Khemirra had returned moments after the wolf left. Not when Khemirra had been determined to get to the mountains and go for a long moonlit run.

He *knew*, but the sound of Matt's low moan allowed him to ignore that knowledge, to shut its existence and everything that came with it behind a barrier of purpose.

He sprinted to the house, using a phone in the kitchen to summon police and paramedics before searching for weapons. He found his off-duty piece in the master bedroom and checked the load before looking for the woman.

She wasn't in the house, making him fairly certain she'd retreated to the kennel building or fled into the woods. He left, chest going tight once again at seeing the side door to the van open with Khemirra standing next to it, Scholes on the ground at her feet, on his stomach, his wrists bound behind him.

She looked up as he approached, eyes meeting, searching for something in his. And he looked away, not ready to deal head-on with—

Fuck. He didn't want to trust the evidence he'd been presented with.

Matt's presence gave him an excuse to avoid a discussion about the wolf. The sound of approaching sirens promised an extension of that delay. And the role of cop was like a second skin, an easy place to retreat into.

"Did you see where the woman went?" he asked while concentrating on checking the field bandaging he'd made of Matt's t-shirt.

"She's not here. She never was. My guess is Scholes killed her after she tranquilized you. He probably dumped the body and I'm betting the police will never find it."

Conner's head snapped around but Khemirra had her back to him. Fury scorched through him, complex in its texture. Not just that she was denying the presence of the very woman who'd tortured her with a cattle prod, but at the implicit message the denial contained, that the woman would *never* be found and brought to justice because she was something other than completely human, something supernatural.

He didn't say anything more though he took Khemirra at her word. Swallowing down anger and frustration, and a whole shitload of other emotions he didn't want to identify, he mentally rearranged the statements he would give to the police when they arrived. Manpower was too precious to waste. There was no point in initiating a search or taking up an artist's time to produce a sketch of the woman's face.

Scholes wouldn't talk. If he did, he'd only come across crazier than he was already going to sound.

Conner focused on Matt as though the injured teen was a lifeline anchoring him to sanity. His hand settled on the boy's shoulder. "Hang in there. You're doing great."

Khemirra kept her back to Conner. She told herself he just needed time.

Once Matt was in the care of the EMTs and Scholes was in police custody, then Conner would realize the wolf had *saved* them, and he'd accept who she was, *what* she was. He *had* called her other self beautiful.

She told herself that, but the longer the silence stretched between them, the more it felt like a lie.

A slow pain began spreading through her chest, an ache that had her jaws clenching and her eyes burning. *You knew there was a possibility this would just be a fling. There were never any guarantees you'd be able to soften his attitude or change his point of view about things supernatural.*

A police car came into view, then a second, followed by an ambulance. It was almost over now.

She forced herself to concentrate on the positive. She had her life back.

The kidnapping and murder charges would keep Armand Scholes locked up. And now that she knew how he'd been able to track her, and that he no longer could, it would be safe to contact the pack. The council of alphas could decide if anything further needed to be done about Scholes.

And the medallion... A shudder went through her at the remembered taste of it.

She'd ask the alpha, but she had a bad feeling her options were limited to either retaining possession of it and preventing an accidental summoning, or finding a witch who could free the entity bound to it. Goose bumps pebbled her skin contemplating either choice.

The police cars and ambulance drew closer, lights flashing and sirens screaming. Behind her, Conner said, "They'll separate us to take statements. I'm going to tell them the truth, everything that can be backed up by *facts*."

She nodded to let him know she'd heard him then lifted her hands to show she was unarmed when the patrol cars screeched to a stop, the officers emerging with their hands on their guns.

The tension dissipated with Conner's identifying himself and telling the officers that Scholes had been the only threat. Emergency personnel rushed to the van then, and as Conner had predicted, within minutes of Scholes being put in the back of a police car, she was led to a patrol car by a female officer and her male partner while Conner accompanied another pair of policemen into the building where they'd been held prisoner.

Lights came on in the compound, triggered by growing dusk. In deference to her desire not to be caged in the car, the officers allowed her to remain outside their vehicle as she told them what she could, not defining or expanding on her relationship with Conner other than to say she'd helped him on a case in Florida and he'd gone out of his way to try to help her.

They asked for clarification a couple of times, grimaced and shook their heads each time she said the word werewolf, but their scents told her they didn't doubt the truth of what she said. And whether by intention or accident, they revealed they'd gotten a radio call confirming two bodies had been found outside Conner's cabin.

Relief grabbed hold of her as it hadn't earlier, bringing fine tremors noticeable enough that the male officer told her they were finished, while the female said she'd go see if Conner was done giving his statement.

As the officer headed toward the building, Conner emerged from it. He didn't glance in her direction.

Khemirra's throat went tight with acceptance of a truth she didn't want. Earlier she'd been willing to lie to herself about what his refusal to look at her meant, but now she read it for the rejection it was, the rejection it would *always* be.

She'd ripped aside a veil and showed him a world he didn't want to believe in, hell, one he'd said in a hundred different ways he wanted no part of. She should probably consider herself lucky he didn't hate her for it. At least his scent had been free of that emotion earlier.

"You think I can get a lift from you guys?" she asked the male officer, thinking maybe they'd be able to take her to her Jeep, or be willing to help her convince a cab driver that she was good for the fare.

"Let me clear it." He pushed away from the car and headed after his partner.

"What a freaking nutcase," Tyson, the cop to Conner's left, said. "I hope he gets jail time instead of time on the psych ward."

"You and me both."

Tyson laughed. "Not that I'd mind being in a breeding program with the reporter. She's a real looker."

"Yeah, she is."

Christ. He just wanted to get this wrapped up so he could deal with what else she was.

His head felt like it was never going to be screwed on right again. But his cock was rock hard and the only screwing it cared about was finding its way back into her.

Fuck! How could he want that so desperately? Knowing she came with a whole shitload of baggage labeled supernatural.

The cop who'd been interviewing her got within speaking distance. "You need us to hang, Tyson?"

"No. Saunders and I are going to stick. A unit is coming out to process the scene since this kidnapping is linked to the homicides at Stern's cabin. You and Lake can head out."

"Okay."

Lake caught up to his partner then. He gave Conner a quick glance before speaking to Tyson. "The reporter asked for a lift. We'll take her with us unless you've got an objection."

Conner looked at her then, daring the distraction he hadn't allowed himself when he stepped out of the building. Across the distance their eyes met and he saw she intended to make this easy for him. There were no tears in them, no accusation. No regret or pleading. There was nothing but the same courageous resolve he'd seen before, the fierce determination to survive.

Realization trapped his breath in his chest and tensed his muscles. A fight-or-flight response his heart understood.

If he let her go now, all the times he'd told her he wanted nothing to do with the supernatural, all his negativity toward it would create a wall that could never fully be torn down. He'd lose her. And he'd spend the rest of his life regretting it.

His feet were moving while his mind scrambled to get ahead of them, to have the right words by the time he reached her. He understood then how Trace could handle Aislinn being psychic, because loving the woman meant accepting the existence of things that couldn't be sealed in an evidence bag or paraded out in front of a jury, or even put down in a police report without risking a forced leave of absence or a visit with the department shrink. It meant coping, the same way anyone who loved a cop had to cope with the baggage that came with the job.

Determination and possessiveness grew with each step. She was his and he wasn't going to let her go.

He gripped Khemirra's upper arms and jerked her against him when he reached her. "You're not running away from me, baby."

Fire returned to her eyes. "Don't accuse me of that, Conner. I've got sharp teeth and might just bite your ass off."

A laugh erupted, coming from deep within and surprising him as much as it did her. Jesus he loved her mouth. He loved everything about her, inside and out.

"Yeah, well, I only just discovered the teeth thing. No more secrets, Khemirra. Promise me that I can accept all the rest."

Everything inside Khemirra stilled. The hope shattered earlier reforming though still fragile from the cracks in it.

“Do you mean that?”

“Try me.”

“It’s a lifetime deal once the bond kicks in.”

“Good, then what we have won’t become a casualty of the job. Marriage to a cop isn’t easy.”

“The woman isn’t completely gone, Conner. Whatever she is, she’s bound to the medallion Scholes was wearing.”

Conner’s jaw clenched so tight it surprised her he could get it open to say, “Was?”

“I’ve got it. It has to be dealt with.”

His nostrils flared. “I know someone who might be able to help. She owns a place called Inner Magick. Anything else?”

Her heart pounded so fast it ached. Lowering her voice so there was no way it would carry beyond the two of them, she said, “That day I met Scholes at his estate, a mage showed up with a charm capable of forcing the change. It happened so fast there was no control involved. I shifted and the wolf killed him.”

The entirety of Conner’s expression became stone, but that stone lasted a breath, no more. “What happened to the body?”

“Scholes disposed of it, I think. I watched the papers and used my contacts. There was never any report of it.”

Conner glanced in the direction of the building where they’d been held as prisoners. His hands tightened on her arms as principle battled with the reality of what would have happened if she hadn’t escaped the first time.

Reality won. “No body, no crime.” His hands left her arms in favor of tangling in her hair. “But let’s not make a habit of this kind of trouble. If you need to see action, we can take up alligator wrestling.”

She became aware, then, of the hard length of his cock against her cunt and belly. Pressing into it, she said, "Alligator wrestling? That's the best idea you can come up with for excitement?"

"Hell no."

He halted additional conversation with the possessive claiming of her mouth, with the thrust and rub of a tongue that promised a lifetime of ecstasy. He sealed off any objection and silenced all doubt, his scent holding arousal and determination, his arms becoming the place both woman and wolf called home.

Catcalls finally penetrated the haze of desire, ending the kiss. A male voice yelled, "Get a room."

Conner laughed against her lips. "I've got a better idea. Let's go back to the cabin. By the time they're finished with me here, and we collect your Jeep and get there, the homicide guys will have cleared the crime scene and everyone will be gone."

"Let's," she said, and they did, stripping the moment they got inside. But when he would have pinned her to the door and taken her there, she avoided the embrace, yielding to a greater need, to the wolf's craving to be acknowledged and accepted.

She shifted without warning, a demand for a truth that couldn't be hidden. There was a flash of fear in Conner, human instinct that would be overridden with time and exposure, but it didn't linger to permeate his scent or control his actions.

He crouched in front of her, face inches away from hers, making it easy to read the admiration in his eyes, the awe. "Beautiful," he murmured with no tremble in his voice, no hesitation as he reached out, touching her, stroking, *accepting*, truly accepting *all* of her.

The wolf's heart sang with joy and contentment. The woman's burned with the desire to call him husband as well as mate.

He rubbed her ears, combed through fur at the ruff of her neck, his sudden smile making her mouth open in a furry version of one. "Fair warning," he said, amusement lacing his voice. "This is definitely giving rise to some collar and leash fantasies."

Her jaws clacked as she snapped, lips pulled back, sharp canines inches away from his face before changing in a glimmer of magic and saying, "Bite me, Conner."

His laugh preceded his tumbling her backward onto a throw rug and coming down on top of her, hot skin against hot skin, his mouth going unerringly to her neck. "I believe I will."

Epilogue

Pausing in the act of washing more carrots and broccoli for the veggie platters, Khemirra smiled as she looked through the kitchen window. The backyard was full of cops.

They weren't a sea of uniform blue, but a wild mix of colors and a wide variety of shapes and sizes, from a deeply tanned guy with a surfer's vocabulary to the proverbial donut-fond overeater in an eye-straining Hawaiian shirt with garish parrots on it.

Conner's pack, not the one he was born into, but the one he'd chosen. The men and women who had his back on the job, whose backs he would have if they ever needed him. Her pack now, in a way, and the wolf made its approval felt at having a place in this human world, even if most would never know she existed.

Their guests drank beer or soda, gathered in companionship around the grill and congregated at the food table, some of them accompanied by spouses or dates, others coming solo. Khemirra's smile widened when her eyes settled on an older homicide detective, Brady Sinclair. He'd shown up with a date he introduced as Ilsa, a woman she knew was a psychic named Madam Fontaine.

Laughter broke out and her gaze shifted to a cluster of guys that included Dylan Archer, who worked Homicide, and next to him, his partner Trace Dileccio. She didn't see Trace's wife, Aislinn, and hoped that meant she was on her way inside for a quick consult about the medallion.

A short distance away was another homicide cop, Storm O'Malley, in the company of a man who smelled like magic and wasn't human though the wolf wasn't positive what he was. Fey maybe, given the elemental scent of water and air surrounding him.

Khemirra laughed. For a man who hadn't wanted to talk about things supernatural, or think about them, Conner had ended up surrounded by it, even without her in his life.

"What are you laughing at?" the subject of her thoughts asked, entering the room and wrapping his arms around her, the kiss he pressed to the spot where her neck and shoulder met narrowing her world to just the two of them.

She turned to face him, pleasure filling her like helium pumped into a balloon, his happiness making her lighthearted. "I'll tell you later." She nibbled his bottom lip. "Your partner here yet?"

"Any minute now. He was swinging by the store to pick up some beer."

"What? He thinks the rest of you are going to empty the keg before the first round of burgers and dogs is off the grill?"

Conner laughed. "I wish it was something like that. I've been saddled with a beer snob. He won't drink anything but Dos Equis."

Aislinn's presence in the doorway ended the hug. Conner stepped away. "I'd better go keep Trace occupied. He tends to be overprotective."

Khemirra snorted. "As if you wouldn't be the same if I dropped my guard."

"True enough."

Aislinn laughed and the sound was laced with musical notes Khemirra heard only because the wolf did. She wanted to ask, *Are you human*, but bit her bottom lip to stifle the impulse, though the question must have remained in her expression.

"Half," Aislinn said after Conner left the kitchen. "My father was human. My mother is Elven." She stopped next to the small kitchen table. "Does Conner know what you are?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad. I'm glad he found you."

"I'm glad too." Khemirra joined her at the table, snagging the medallion's chain and pulling it from the pocket of her shorts, placing the medal on the table, sigil-side up, without actually touching it.

At the sight of it, Aislinn shook her head in instant denial and took an instinctive step back, no doubt aware of the black magic as the wolf had been. "I can't tell you anything about it, but there's a witch who might be able to help you. She's Dylan's heartmate though he isn't aware of it yet. I think you can probably trust her. I'll —"

A gorgeous Latino with a six-pack of Dos Equis in each hand entered the kitchen, halting the conversation. Setting the beer on the table, he gave Aislinn a hug then surprised Khemirra by pulling her into his arms.

"I'm Miguel Torres, Conner's partner, and I'm guessing you're Khemirra, the reason we're all here."

"You're right on the first count at least."

He laughed, releasing her and picking up the medallion before she could stop him.

"Fuck!" He flung it back onto the table hard enough for it to bounce a couple of times.

Color crept in his face. "Sorry, guess I'm still a little jumpy from my trip. It felt like my hand was on fire."

A burst of laughter drew his attention to the window. There was a fleeting expression of unhappiness before he shrugged it away and smiled. Taking possession of the beer, he said, "I'll leave you two to your girl talk."

Fear for Miguel roared through Khemirra, anger at her own carelessness. Her heart was still pounding in her throat after he'd gone.

She grasped the chain and lifted the medallion so she could see both sides, already knowing on some level that they would be smooth—the sigil gone, along with the taint of black magic that had clung to the medal.

"What do you think it means?" she made herself ask.

Aislinn surprised her by touching the very thing she'd been frightened of moments earlier. She examined it as if she could read something left behind, a truth captured in the silver.

Her smile gave Khemirra a measure of relief. Her words brought cautious hope. "I think it means Miguel is about to meet his match."

About the Author

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses or hiking with her dogs.

Jory welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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