

Wolf Tales 4: Keisha

Kate Douglas

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Chapter One

Running. Always running. Grass whipping face and chest, paws torn and bleeding. Searching for someone? Evading someone? Not sure. Never certain if running after or away from, only certain of speed. Constant, lung-bursting, heart-throbbing speed. Must run, faster... faster.

Someone follows, someone... no. Something new, someone shadowing, someone strong and true, dark as night, heart pure as gold, running alongside, a safe, strong shadow, running close in the night.

"Ouch. Meanie! That hurts."

"Stop complaining. I've never done this to a white girl before. Your hair's so straight, it's hard to braid! Maybe I should just quit."

"Please! Don't stop now."

Anton paused outside the open door and smiled at Stefan when he heard the women's laughter in the kitchen. Stefan merely grinned and shook his head.

It was such an amazing sound, the soft lilt of Keisha's laughter.

He heard her giggle again.

"Xandi, you say that all the time. 'Please, Stefan. Don't stop now. Please, Anton? Don't stop, Anton. Oh... Anton...' "

The last was said in a low, breathy wail.

"I heard that." Grinning so wide he felt like an absolute fool, Anton shoved the door open and walked into the kitchen. Alexandria sat on a kitchen stool, her tightly braided hair gleaming like polished copper, caught in a brilliant beam of morning sunlight. Keisha stood behind her, eyes twinkling as she braided one last row in Alexandria's hair.

"Heard what? This little girl whimpering 'cause I'm braiding her do a bit too tight? She is such a wuss." Still laughing, Keisha tugged the strands tighter, finished up the last row and fixed a small, blue bead to the end of the braid.

Alexandria shook her head and the beads adorning the ends of dozens of braids clattered together. Then she tilted her chin so the myriad colored beads draped to one side and smiled seductively at Stefan. From the harsh intake of the other man's breath, Anton had a feeling she'd gotten the desired effect.

"Damn." Stefan walked around her, staring at the totally new look. "You did this, Keisha? It's gorgeous."

"Thank you... of course, it's all gonna fall out the minute she shifts." Hands on her hips, Keisha stood back to survey her work.

"I just wanted to see how it would look." Alexandria forced a sulky looking pout.

She couldn't hold it. "Where's the mirror? I wanna see!"

Keisha handed her a small hand mirror. "It really does look good on you. Wish there was a way to make it hold through a shift, but it all pops right out. All that work and *poof!* You end up tripping over a scattered bunch of beads!"

Alexandria turned to Anton. "You haven't said anything... what's your opinion, oh exalted leader?"

Anton cast her a sideways glance. "Exalted leader? Moi? I understood you were the Alpha bitch in this pack."

Alexandria snorted. "Yeah, right. C'mon. What do you think?"

"I think Keisha's an artist. You look absolutely beautiful." He trailed his hand over the tight row of perfect braids sweeping back from her forehead. "You look just like a red-headed Bo Derek. Remember her in that old movie... *10?*"

"Oh, yeah..." Stefan nodded. "Now if she were wearing that same skimpy little bikini..."

"You see me naked all the time. What good's the bikini?"

"I enjoy unwrapping the package." Stefan moved closer and tilted his head just

enough to catch Alexandria's lips with his. She practically melted against him, all teasing suddenly lost in the lush sharing of lips and tongue.

Anton looked over the two of them at Keisha. The laughter had disappeared from her face and her body trembled. Sending a subtle block to Stefan and Alexandria, Anton reached around them to lightly grasp Keisha's hand and lead her from the kitchen.

He closed the door softly behind them and grabbed her when she burst into tears.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, sobbing against his chest. "I don't mean to be that way. I don't."

Lightly stroking her back, Anton smiled against her hair and silently reveled in the tight clasp of her arms around his waist. She had no idea how far she'd come. No idea at all.

"Sweetheart, don't cry." He kissed her tousled hair. When she raised her head, he used his thumbs to wipe the tears from beneath her eyes. "Look at me and think of what just happened. You've spent almost three hours braiding Alexandria's hair. Touching her, being close to her. Right now your arms are around my waist. You're holding on to me for comfort."

She nodded, but she didn't pull away. Another positive step.

"Are you afraid of me, embracing you like this?"

Almost shyly, she shook her head.

"That's because you trust me. I think what just happened in there, when you saw them kiss? I think your body reacted to the inherent sensuality and it frightened you. Does that make sense?"

"Of course it does." Pushing away from his embrace, Keisha stomped across the room, whirled around and stalked back to him. "Everything you say makes sense, dammit. It still doesn't keep me from freaking out every time I see you guys kiss. Every time you crawl into bed with them and you guys make love, I want to be there so bad it hurts, but I lose it. I've stood in the doorway and felt my heart pound and my pussy

practically weep with wanting to be with all of you, and I still fall apart!"

"It's going to take time."

"I'm tired of waiting." She flipped her hand beside her face, opened her mouth, then shut it. "I want to do more than just hug, more than sleep in your arms as if you were my big brother. I want to fuck. I want to enjoy sex again, not run away when things start to get hot. I can't keep playing the voyeur, getting my rocks off in your heads when the three of you screw. I can't go to a therapist. Counseling won't work when I can't say what's going on."

She glared at him, as if her condition were all his fault. "I can just hear myself now. 'Oh, it's a bit confusing, doctor. I'm not really human, I'm actually a shape-shifting *Chanku* and I really, really want to screw my pack mates, but the silly little rape thing keeps getting in my way.' Anton..." She practically wailed when she asked, "What can I do to get past this?"

Once again, Anton wished he had been the one to kill the bastards who did this to her. Choking back a low, angry growl, he spread his arms wide. Keisha threw her body against his, taking his comfort, taking his love. Avoiding the attraction that was tearing him apart.

He held her while she cried. Murmured words of love, kissed her dark hair and fought his own tears of utter and profound frustration. Times like this, it was all he could do to keep from going uninvited into her head and tweaking her memories, changing her past in order to help her accept her present.

Unacceptable. Even so, there had to be something he could do to help her. She'd been here three weeks now. Her body had healed. Her sense of humor blossomed, her ability to touch and be touched was returning.

Yet the only way she'd been able to accept the sexual nature of their relationship was through a mind link with Alexandria. Joining mentally with the other woman, experiencing the sensual touch, the deeply intimate acts the three of them shared, not as an actual participant but as a mental voyeur.

Maybe... maybe Alexandria was the key.

My love... do you ever feel sexually drawn to Alexandria?

Xandi? Keisha lifted her tear-streaked face away from his chest and frowned. I guess I never thought about her that way. She's beautiful. I love being in her head when you guys are all together in bed, love the feel of sharing your bodies... I just wish I didn't lose it when I'm in the same room with you!

"What if you were in control? What if it was just you and Alexandria, alone together? What if the two of you made love? Would you find that at all appealing? She's not male... not a threat. She loves you as much as Stefan and I do. She is a gentle, caring lover, filled with compassion as well as passion. As *Chanku*, you should find her as sexually appealing as you would any male..."

He allowed the sentence to linger. Holding Keisha in a loose embrace, he watched the thoughts unfolding in her brilliant amber eyes.

Xandi? Blinking owlshly, Keisha opened her mind to the idea of sex with another woman. Obviously, she'd never thought of herself as lesbian, though she'd often noticed women who she felt were sexually attractive. It wasn't as farfetched as it sounded, not really. Xandi was beautiful, sensual...

With their minds linked, Keisha had been more intimate with Xandi than with any other human alive. She'd participated in group sex, enjoyed the other woman's responses and made them her own. There'd never been a feeling of wrongness, never a sense of shame.

How could she feel shame with someone as loving, as giving, as Alexandria Olanet? And, if what Anton said were true, that the *Chanku* were polyamorous by genetics, that the love of the pack put sexuality aside, became, instead, a sharing of the sensual body as a whole, then her feelings for another woman within the pack were right and normal.

How come she hadn't thought of this before?

Ah, but you have. I know you've pleased yourself during the links with Alexandria.

You do? Struggling out of his light grasp, Keisha glared at Anton. "You

snooped!"

He laughed softly and brushed his hand over her hair. Damned if she didn't lean into his touch! Jerking herself upright, away from the magnetic pull of his fingers, Keisha took a deep breath, prepared to tell him exactly what she thought of him coming uninvited into her head.

"Yes, I was snooping. I've been worried about you, afraid you were withdrawing from us. When I realized you were finding sexual satisfaction in the privacy of your room, I was not so worried anymore."

He cupped her chin in his big hands, his fingers warm and firm. "I want you healed, my love. I want you able to come to me, to share your body with me... some day to share with all of us, with Stefan and Alexandria as well, so that there are four of us together... four of us as intimate as any two people can be. I want you to love me, to love them... most of all, I want you as my mate, as the one who will bear my children... I want you with me, for all my life. Before that can happen, you must be whole, a complete woman, without fear."

The breath whooshed out of her lungs. Anton's hands trembled against her face and his jaw was tightly clenched. She'd had no idea... none at all, how much of a future he envisioned... how deep his feelings ran.

What of hers for him? Blinking back tears, she reached up and touched the side of his face with her palm. "Give me time, Anton. Just a little more time. I want to say I love you, but not until I can come to you with a body and mind free of fear."

The disappointment in his eyes made her wish she could draw her cowardly words back. He merely nodded, leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead, then turned and left the room.

Keisha felt as if he took the sunshine with him, took the air she needed to breathe, the love she needed to exist. Stumbling in her haste to leave this suddenly cold and dreary place, she raced down the long hallway to her bedroom.

Chapter Two

Oliver brought her meals, a silent visitor, warning of his presence with a soft tap on the door. She felt so foolish, hiding away like this, but Keisha realized she'd put the day to good use.

Xandi had been always in her thoughts. A silent, sensual image. Keisha found herself thinking of things with the other woman she'd never imagined, thinking of things sexual, and wanting to touch herself.

More important, she realized she wanted to touch Xandi.

The sun had begun to set. It was time to shift, time to join Xandi and the men for their run through the forest. Time to lose herself in the mentality of the pack, to hunt as one, to merge her consciousness, for awhile, anyway, with something primitive and wild.

She wasn't ready. Didn't want to bare herself to the others. Not now. Not when she felt fragile, unsure.

A soft tap at her door brought Keisha out of her musings. She wasn't at all hungry, but it must be Oliver with an evening snack.

"Come in." She scooted up in her bed, resting against the pillows.

Xandi opened the door. "It's me," she said. "The guys have gone. I... I didn't want to mess up my braids. I decided not to shift tonight."

Keisha laughed. Suddenly everything seemed to come together. "Braids, hell. Anton told you to seduce me, didn't he?"

At least Xandi had the good grace to blush. "Well... okay. Yeah. But I brought wine!" She held the bottle aloft as she closed the door behind her.

"Been there, done that, bought the farm." Keisha sat straighter against the pillows. "The first time I got laid, he got me good and drunk. Knew I'd do anything. Of

course I wanted to do anything... everything. I was sixteen. What did I know?"

"A hell of a lot less than you know now." Xandi walked into the room, sat on the chair by the bed and set out two crystal goblets. She carefully uncorked the bottle and poured the chilled Chardonnay into each glass.

"I'd like to make a toast to you, but instead I'll toast to us. Will you drink?"

Keisha stared at her a moment before taking the offered glass. "I'll do more than drink. I've thought of you all day. First, though, tell me what Anton said to you. Believe me, that's a conversation I wish I'd heard."

"He only said what I hoped he'd say. I've wanted you ever since we shared a link, Keisha. I won't lie to you. I've never been with a woman, but I've dreamed of making love with you almost since the beginning."

Taken aback, Keisha stared at Xandi, looking for any sense of deception. "I find that..."

"Honest Injun," Xandi interrupted. She held her hand over her heart. "I felt weird about it at first, believe me." She dipped her chin and blushed. "Especially when I actually fantasized it was you one time when Stefan was going down on me."

"*Chanku*?" Keisha barely breathed the word.

"Yes... and no. I'm sure it's the reason why I'm equally attracted to a woman as I would be to a man. I liked you immediately, the first time I saw you. As I've gotten to know you, I've grown to love you. Love your strength, your resilience, your ability to accept the unacceptable. I've wanted to be more like you, wanted to touch you. At the same time, I knew you weren't ready. I think you're ready now. I think you want to explore as much as I do."

She did... as much to satisfy her curiosity as anything else. At least that's what she told herself. Holding the filled goblet in both her hands, Keisha tipped the glass and drank deeply. When she'd emptied her glass, she held it out to Xandi for a refill.

"I know there's an inhibition left in there, somewhere. One more glass should put that baby to sleep."

Xandi snorted. Then she carefully poured the golden liquid, filling the goblet one

more time. She refilled her own, set the bottle down and held her glass out to Keisha.

Keisha lightly tapped her glass to Xandi's in a toast. "Here's to us, sister."

"To us. To exploring new territory." Xandi took a sip of the wine. Her gray eyes sparkled over the rim of the glass. When she set the half-empty goblet down, her tongue swept across her upper lip.

Evening shadows filled the room. The women stared silently at one another. Keisha realized she was fantasizing, imagining what each of them could do to please the other. The images -- graphic images of their bodies together -- filled her thoughts. Lush and sensual, the sweet eroticism of her fantasies gave Keisha the feeling they truly were about to explore new territory.

As the room darkened, she became more aware of the sound of their hearts beating, aware of Xandi's familiar scent, the soft sound of her breathing, the gentle clatter of the beads she'd braided into Xandi's long hair. They clicked together with every move Xandi made, no matter how slight.

Suddenly Keisha realized the sound had moved closer.

Xandi now sat beside her on the large bed. Close, not touching, yet Keisha felt the warmth of her body, imagined their bodies together, soft and sensitive in the same places.

Keisha set her goblet down on the bedside table, only marginally aware it was once again empty. Xandi drank her last swallow of wine, setting hers down again as well. Slowly she turned to Keisha. She slipped her hand under the soft cotton tank top, following each of Keisha's ribs, stroking softly until her fingers rested beneath her breast.

Keisha inhaled sharply as one of Xandi's fingers found her suddenly erect nipple. Moisture pooled between her legs when Xandi simply rubbed her fingertip gently, back and forth, bringing her nipple to a tight, taut, sensitive peak.

The room darkened, yet Keisha's enhanced *Chanku* vision threw everything into sharp relief as she slowly wrapped her fingers around the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head.

Xandi never altered the soft caress of her nipple, but now that both breasts were free of the cotton shirt, she leaned closer to Keisha and licked the very tip of the other one.

The tiny beads at the ends of her hair tickled the round swell of Keisha's breast. The soft clicking sound they made as Xandi's head moved across her chest echoed in the room. Her tongue was hot and moist, licking just the very tip of Keisha's tightly puckered nipple.

Once more Keisha forgot to breathe. She sat rigidly, leaning back with her legs crossed Indian fashion, supporting herself with her hands tightly fisted in the blankets as Xandi licked her nipple once more, then slowly sucked it between her lips and pulled it into her mouth.

"Ahhhh..." Keisha tilted her head back and thrust her breasts forward. Xandi sucked harder, using her tongue and teeth, nibbling and suckling while her hand continued its soft caress of Keisha's other nipple.

The beads tickled, clicked, tickled more.

Neither woman shared her thoughts. Keisha wasn't ready for such intimacy, didn't want to know what Xandi was thinking, only wanted to experience her own pleasure, selfish as that might be.

Trembling, she lay back against the pillows and spread her legs wide, making room for Xandi between her thighs. Xandi went with her, slowly pleasuring Keisha's breasts with lips and tongue and teeth, with soft fingers and the warm palm of her hand. The beads felt like more tiny fingers, touching, teasing, slowly warming to the heat of Keisha's body.

After long moments, Xandi slowly released Keisha's nipple, breaking the strong suction with a soft *pop*. She licked the moist tip, blowing cool air across it, then kissed her way down, along Keisha's ribs, slipping her loose sweatpants off over her hips when she reached the waistband with her mouth.

The tiny beads rolled and clattered, crawling behind Xandi's mouth, following like an army of little mouths as she kissed and licked slowly across Keisha's flesh.

Keisha arched her hips and felt the cool night air against her wet pussy and puckered nipples. Felt Xandi's lips and tongue trailing the soft skin beneath her navel, a sharp nip on her inner thigh, the sweep of a warm tongue along the crease where thigh met groin.

Heard the beads, felt one brush against her clit, another rest for a moment in the indentation of her navel, others skittering across her thighs, between her legs.

Suddenly the direction Xandi's mouth was taking coalesced in a white-hot flash of understanding and desire.

You don't want to... can't possibly want to... oh Lord, woman!

Oh, but I do.

Keisha raised her head and looked down. Xandi knelt between her legs. Her eyes glittered, the shiny beads swinging slightly with each breath she took, mesmerizing, hypnotic. Keisha had never realized before how those beads would feel against a body, how they'd stimulate and entice.

Somehow Xandi had removed her sarong and her naked body gleamed in the darkness, her full breasts with their dark nipples swaying as she leaned forward and once more licked the sensitive bit of flesh on Keisha's inner thigh.

The beads tickled... clattered and clicked. The sound somehow caught the rhythm of Xandi's lips, emphasized each nip and lick.

She slipped her hands beneath Keisha's rear and lifted her, then tucked a fat pillow under her hips to hold them up. Then she lightly patted Keisha's flat belly, ending the pat with a long, slow stroke down between her legs, completely bypassing her clit.

Groaning, Keisha raised her hips in blatant invitation. Damn, she'd never felt so turned on, wondering what might come next, wondering just how far Xandi planned to take this. With a guy you knew. You'd get the perfunctory lick between the legs then a good, hard poke with a thick cock. Not that she'd complained, but this was so weird, knowing the person kneeling between your thighs knew exactly what parts to touch, what buttons to push.

If she'd only get on with it! Xandi leaned forward, but instead of going for her pussy, she pressed her breasts against Keisha's, dragging her nipples over her darker set, pressing her pubic bone against Keisha's clit, lightly rubbing her practically smooth pussy across her sensitive flesh and tightly curled thatch of dark hair.

The beads clicked and clattered, louder, faster with each movement Xandi made.

Practically hyperventilating, Keisha fought the need to wrap her arms around Xandi and hold their bodies together. This was Xandi's show, Xandi's chance to experiment, and it felt good... felt so damned good and somehow forbidden and wrong and so right and beautiful, all at the same time.

The contrast of pale flesh against dark, of tightly curled pubic hair against Xandi's almost bare pussy, of tightly puckered nipples sweeping against nipples and the accompanying music of the beads went beyond anything Keisha had ever imagined. Caught up in their differences as much as their sameness, she was stroking Xandi's breast, bringing it to her lips, suckling the other woman's flesh deep into her mouth before she even realized what she'd done.

She'd never imagined what this would be like, never thought of what a man felt when he sucked her breast. She thought she could spend all day suckling the sweet nipple, tugging it with her teeth, wrapping her tongue around the pebbled tip, using her lips to compress and hold tight.

Xandi moaned and her mons came down hard against Keisha's, then she pulled slowly away, slipping once more down, down lower, between Keisha's widespread thighs, dragging those damned beads, those tiny little fingers of sensation, slower, lower.

Hardly daring to breathe, Keisha waited. She felt the soft puff of air, the first tentative lick of Xandi's tongue against her needy flesh. Her hips jerked in response. She bit back a nervous giggle. Closed her eyes.

Xandi licked her once again, slowly this time, using the flat of her tongue to sweep between the engorged folds of Keisha's labia, the very tip of her tongue to tease her protruding clit. She suckled Keisha's nether lips deep into her mouth, tugging at

them, then releasing. She kissed her inner thighs, staying away from her clit until Keisha begged for release.

Finally, her breath rasping from her heaving chest, unable to form a coherent word, Keisha linked.

What are you waiting for, bitch?

Xandi laughed out loud. *C'mon. Admit it. You're more turned on now than you've ever been with a man.*

Oh shit yes. She writhed against the blankets, bucking her hips toward Xandi's mouth, begging with her body, her mind, her moaning appeals for release.

Xandi spread Keisha's legs wider, grabbed her butt in one hand then slipped the fingers of her other hand deep into Keisha's pussy. Keisha felt her muscles clamp tightly around Xandi's fingers just as the other woman leaned close, teased her a moment with the dangling beads then drew her clit into her mouth, suckling it as she had Keisha's breast.

Xandi moaned against Keisha's clit, a deep sound of pure desire and need. Her tongue pressed harder, her fingers probed deeper.

Sensation, pure, unadulterated sensation.

Keisha's legs trembled, her hips bucking against Xandi's mouth. Overwhelming stimulation -- so much at once! One hand kneading her buttock, tongue and teeth taking her clit, slick fingers thrusting in and out of her pussy, all in perfect rhythm with the swaying beads, the hypnotic clicking and clattering, moving faster... faster. All framed in a mental sense of love and acceptance, flowing over her like an aphrodisiac.

Higher, farther than she'd ever flown, Keisha felt her body arc, stiffen, heard the cry from deep in her chest, felt herself come apart like shattered glass in a mind-blowing, breath-stealing climax.

Lights behind her eyes flashed and her body went numb. Her arms and legs were solid cement, but her toes and fingers tingled as if from an electric shock. The only part of her that moved was her pussy, its slow spasms tightening rhythmically around Xandi's fingers.

Ohmygawd. Keisha dragged in one deep breath after another.

That was fun.

Xandi's deadpan comment made her chuckle.

Oh, I'd say so. For me, anyway. Give me a minute, then it's your turn.

You don't have to. The guys will be home soon.

I want to.

Are you sure?

Yeah... I'm sure. Maybe not the same way, but I want to make you come. I want to watch your face.

Yours was beautiful. I've never seen a woman's face before when she climaxed.

Your fingers are still inside me.

I know. I'm wondering if I can make you do it again.

Keisha laughed and tightened her pussy around Xandi's fingers. "Bitch."

"Alpha bitch to you, sweetie."

Keisha twisted free and rolled Xandi to her belly before the other woman had a clue what was coming. Laughing, she sat on her butt and pinned her down with knees clamped tightly to her hips, holding her arms over her head.

"We'll talk about the Alpha bitch role later."

Xandi did a half-hearted bounce to throw Keisha off.

"It'll take more than that." Before Xandi could react, Keisha had her hands tied to the headboard with a nylon stocking. They were both giggling hysterically by the time she got Xandi's feet spread apart and tied to each bedpost.

Then she flipped on the bedside lamp, throwing a soft glow across the room, and shoved a big pillow beneath Xandi's belly, raising her buttocks high and showing her sex to its best advantage.

"I never noticed before what a nice ass you've got." Keisha slapped one round cheek with the flat of her hand.

Xandi jumped.

"Slap a black girl's ass, it doesn't turn that nice shade of pink. Yours is really

rather attractive.” She slapped the other cheek, harder this time, and bit back a giggle. She’d left a perfect handprint on each cheek. They practically glowed.

She couldn’t believe she was actually spanking another woman!

“You’ve been bad, little girl. Very bad.” Keisha leaned over and dragged her nipples along Xandi’s back, then licked the indentation along her spine, just above her waist. Xandi’s skin tasted slightly salty.

Keisha licked her again.

Xandi moaned and pressed her belly against the bed.

Keisha scooted back and ran her fingers between Xandi’s legs. Her pussy was soft and engorged, slick with fluids. Keisha ran her fingers back and forth a couple of times, dipping them into her vagina once before withdrawing her hand and showing it to Xandi. “Oh my. You’re wet. Isn’t that a punishable offense?”

Xandi giggled. “Oh my, I sure hope so. I’ve been very bad.” She wiggled her hips as much as the restraints allowed.

It looked to Keisha as if Xandi definitely wanted a spanking.

Chapter Three

Xandi still tasted Keisha's fluids on her tongue, a salty, earthy taste that made her want to taste her again, made her wish she'd spent longer with her mouth between the other woman's legs, buried in her slick pussy -- but this wasn't so bad either.

She'd fantasized before about being tied up, though certainly not by another woman! There was something so decadent about this, stretched out buck-naked on her belly. Well, naked except for the beads in her hair, with her legs spread wide, her butt in the air and her arms stretched out straight, hands tied to the bedpost.

Keisha knelt out of sight between her thighs.

Slap!

Oh shit! It hurt, but there was an immediate reaction she'd not expected, a rush of hot moisture between her legs.

The second slap on the opposing cheek felt even better. Xandi's skin tingled and her entire butt warmed.

"Bad girls who think they're Alpha bitches need to be punished, don't you think?"

"Uhm..."

Slap! Slap!

"Don't you agree?"

"Yes, ma'am, but you'd sound more alpha if you'd quit giggling... ma'am."

Keisha snorted. Xandi bit her lips to keep from laughing out loud. She felt really stupid tied up like this, hoping like hell the guys wouldn't find them. Really stupid, like two kids playing sex games... stupid and horny as hell.

She was warm all over, waiting for the next spank.

Keisha didn't make her wait long.

She slapped her hard, first one cheek, then the other. Quick, stinging slaps with the flat of her palm, low on Xandi's buttocks one time, higher the next, alternating cheeks and intensity, finding a rhythm that kept Xandi just enough off base she wasn't sure where the next one would land.

Every once in a while, Keisha would stop altogether, just long enough to drag her fingers through Xandi's engorged labia, dipping into the liquid pooling there, finding more *proof* she'd been a 'bad girl.'

Harder, faster, until her bottom stung and tingled and her pussy begged to be filled. Writhing to meet each slap as much as she wanted to avoid them, Xandi bucked and twisted, fighting the nylon bonds, begging for the climax that hovered, just out of reach.

Close, so close to the edge she... Keisha suddenly stopped.

Damn!

"I think that's enough, don't you? Your bottom's such a pretty shade of red. Clashes with your hair, though. Such a shame."

Her body trembling with the need to climax, Xandi turned her head and saw Keisha reaching into the drawer of the bedside table. She pulled out the biggest, most realistic-looking dildo Xandi had ever seen.

"Let's see how this feels. I've been saving it for one of the guys. That is, if I ever get my nerve back..." Keisha laughed, stroking the lifelike rubber cock. It was the color of dark coffee with prominent veins and a bulging crown. "I'm suddenly feeling really nervy."

She twisted the base and a low hum filled the air. Xandi watched until Keisha disappeared from her line of vision. Her pussy clenched, waiting to take the lifelike vibrator.

Instead of inserting it, Keisha dragged it slowly across her sensitized buttocks, caressing her hot skin with the cool, ribbed toy. Xandi felt each vibration, each soft sweep as if her entire body were being touched.

Moaning, lifting her hips, she begged for release. "C'mon, Keisha. I didn't make

you wait this long!"

"Yes, you did! I was begging... my pussy was weeping and I was desperate. Your turn to see what it feels like."

She slowly ran the vibrating cock between Xandi's widespread legs, barely touching her clit.

Giggling nervously, Xandi jumped and bit back a scream. "You bitch!"

"Alpha bitch to you, sweetie. C'mon... say it or I leave you here."

"I never knew you were this mean!"

"Say it... c'mon. Keisha's the Alpha bitch. You can do it." Once more she slowly dragged the vibrator across Xandi's sensitive cheeks.

Xandi's pussy clenched and she felt moisture trickle over her clit.

Keisha lightly touched the vibrator to Xandi's ass, rubbing back and forth across the puckered opening then sliding it down lower between her legs, brushing her clit.

Xandi almost came when it touched her ass... and if Keisha had lingered just a moment longer on that sensitive little spot, she...

Keisha turned the vibrator off and stepped away. "Have it your way."

Oh shit oh shit oh shit... Sobbing, laughing so hard she could hardly talk, Xandi twisted and bucked her hips. "Alpha bitch, Alpha bitch, Keisha's the Alpha bitch. C'mon... don't leave me like this!"

Keisha slapped her once more on the butt, hard. "Don't leave me like this, Alpha bitch ma'am." She snorted, then burst into laughter. "Wow, I didn't know I had it in me. I am *so* good!"

The hum returned when Keisha twisted the vibrator back on and Xandi felt the long, slow slide of the massive, shuddering cock head easing between her legs, deeper, deeper, stretching, probing, then coming to rest against the mouth of her womb where it vibrated and hummed.

"Ahhh... bless you, Ms. Alpha Bitch." Xandi closed her eyes, savoring the fullness, the heat and vibration. Keisha knew exactly what to do with the big toy, slipping the vibrating dildo slowly in and out as she rubbed Xandi's clit with her

fingertip, harder, faster, building up speed and pressure.

Xandi felt the first coil of her climax, a hollow, needy feeling deep in her womb, felt the hard thrust of the vibrating cock and the warm sweep of Keisha's fingers over her clit.

Her body stiffened, the sensations all coalesced into one, hot pulsing sense of fulfillment, and the climax boiled up and out of her body. Screaming, she jerked against her restraints and bucked against the thick dildo vibrating her sensitive tissues. Her pussy tightened around it in quick, convulsive spasms. Keisha held the cock hard and deep inside her.

Sobbing with her release, Xandi trembled as she slowly came down from her orgasm. She gasped for air when Keisha replaced the rubber vibrator with her own soft tongue, lapping gently at Xandi's sensitive tissues, bringing her once more to a smaller, lighter orgasm.

She came once more when Keisha's practiced fingers found the perfect spot between her legs to stroke. Closing her eyes, Xandi let her entire body go liquid as the rhythmic tremors finally slowed and stilled. Sagging against her restraints, she closed her eyes and reveled in Keisha's loving touch.

She must have slept, at least a little while. Xandi suddenly realized she was awake, her hands and feet no longer tied, and Keisha sat on the bed beside her, legs crossed, her chin resting in her palms.

"Wondered if you were ever going to wake up."

"Wow... I feel totally... totally fucked." Xandi laughed. "Damn, woman. You're good. Who needs the guys?"

Keisha smiled shyly. "Feels weird, doesn't it? Waking up next to a woman... I've been sitting here staring at you, thinking of how you made me feel, how good the sex was... how different. As good as it was, I still need the guys, though, don't you? I mean, some of the time when you were touching me, I thought of Anton. I wondered what his tongue would feel like, licking me, how his fingers would be inside me." She looked away and sighed. "I guess I wanted not to be afraid of his cock. I want it to feel as good

as what you and I just did.”

Xandi sat up, brushed the beaded strands back behind her ears and took Keisha’s hand. “I understand. As good as you are with that rubber cock, it’s not the same as Stefan’s.” She stared at Keisha for a long moment. “How are you? Are you okay with what we did?”

Keisha’s broad grin told her everything.

“Oh yeah. More than okay. I had sex, I had a mind-blowing orgasm... I gave my partner at least two...”

“Three... and counting.”

“Three orgasms, I licked a woman’s pussy -- and liked it -- and not once did I feel threatened or scared or think of what happened before. I don’t know if I’m ready to make it with all you guys at once, but I finally feel as if I’m getting *me* back.”

“How about we break into it gently? When the guys get back, they’re really going to be ready to fuck. You know the feeling, after a good run, especially if they’ve hunted. Come with me. Link with me. Stay in the room, touch if you want, but don’t feel as if you have to participate. Think you can do that?”

“I can try.” Keisha took both of Xandi’s hands in hers. “Thank you. It’s hard to believe it’s only been three weeks since we met. All of you are so important to me. So patient. Thank you for helping me through this.”

She leaned close to Xandi for a quick kiss. Xandi captured her mouth, moving her soft lips over Keisha’s fuller ones, teasing the seam between them with the tip of her tongue, then finding entrance into the warm, wet cavern of her mouth.

Suddenly Keisha moved closer and wrapped her legs around Xandi’s waist until she was practically sitting in her lap. Their breasts rubbed together, nipple to nipple. Their mouths discovered new tastes and textures and Xandi realized she wasn’t nearly as sated as she’d thought.

She wrapped an arm around Keisha’s waist to steady her, then reached between them to find Keisha’s clit. Keisha did the same, rubbing her fingers through Xandi’s moist tissues, moaning against her mouth.

Tongues twisting, bodies writhing against searching fingers, they found a rhythm and held it, held it until Xandi broke for air, gasping out her scream of release, with Keisha following close behind her. Gasping for breath, they leaned against each other, giggling and panting, their fingers still buried deep in one another's bodies.

"Holy shit!"

"Stefan?" Xandi slowly turned and stared at the door. Stefan stood in the doorway with Anton just behind him. Both men wore gym shorts and nothing else, as if they'd just come from the shower. Their bodies gleamed in the soft glow from the bedside lamp.

The front of each man's shorts tented straight out.

The looks on their faces were priceless.

"Hello, boys." Keisha slowly removed her glistening fingers from between Xandi's legs and waved. "You're late... the party's over. I was just heading for the shower."

Still panting from her climax, Xandi grabbed Keisha's hand. "No you don't. Remember what we talked about?"

"Oh. Yeah..." Keisha looked around, as if searching for a way out. She dipped her head and nodded, then took a deep breath. "Okay. I can do this."

"Do what?" Carefully adjusting himself, Anton sat down on the bed next to them. He played with the colorful beads dangling from Xandi's braids, but made no attempt to touch Keisha.

"When we, you, me and Stefan, go to bed tonight, Keisha's going to join us. Not to participate, just to be in the room, in my head, linked like we usually are, but physically in the same space with us."

Anton smiled at Keisha. "Are you ready for this?"

"I think so... I hope so. If not, I'll get the hell out of Dodge."

Still leaning against the doorway, Stefan laughed. "I've never quite compared our lovemaking to *High Noon* before... I'll have to think on that."

"You do that, sheriff." Anton stood up. "C'mon. Let's get something to eat."

Xandi slipped off the bed and bent over to reach for her sarong. She was barely aware of Stefan's bark of laughter before she felt a stinging slap to her behind.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

Stefan leaned close and kissed her soundly. "As rosy red as your butt looks, I thought maybe you enjoyed it. What have you girls been up to?"

Grinning, Keisha slid off the bed and grabbed her clothes. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Xandi leaned close and whispered in her ear. "I think he'd rather we showed him, don't you? Bring the nylons..."

Keisha slipped them into her pocket as they headed for the kitchen.

Chapter Four

"So you're telling me we've got two Alpha bitches now?" Stefan grinned at Anton. "One was enough to drive me nuts."

"Two is two too many." Anton gently pulled Keisha onto his lap, pleased when she didn't attempt to get away. "Don't you agree?"

She swiveled around, rubbing her bottom against his cock as she twisted to look him in the eye. Anton bit back a moan of pure frustration.

"Xandi and I will work it out between us. You two Beta males just stay out of our power play."

Stefan stood up from the dinner table. "Personally, I intend to work it out between Xandi's legs. Do you two intend to join us?" He held his hand out. Grinning broadly, Alexandria took it, then reached over and palmed his erection through his soft, cotton pants.

"Down, boy. Behave." She tugged Stefan's hand and led him from the room.

Keisha stiffened in Anton's lap, silently nodded and stood up. He stared at her a moment until she turned away and refused to meet his eyes. He tried to read her thoughts, but she'd completely blocked her mind.

He almost wished he had the guts to mesmerize her. Just use the powers of his mind to entrance her out of her fear, but that was a coward's way of coping -- Keisha was not a coward. If she ever found out, and she would find out the first time they linked, she would forever resent him. Even worse, he would always wonder if she really loved him, or loved him because he made it so.

Controlling her thoughts with a set of false memories was not an option. Instead, he held out his hand until she slowly placed hers within his grasp.

Stefan and Xandi took the lead. By the time Anton and Keisha entered the

bedroom, the other two were already undressed and wrestling playfully on the bed.

Keisha hung back at the doorway, her fingers still tightly grasped in Anton's hand. He heard the quick rush of her breathing, felt her rising panic.

Suddenly, before he could react, Keisha shifted, became the wolf, and, claws scrabbling for purchase on the hardwood floor, bolted from the room.

"You two stay here. I'll go after her." Anton shifted and took off at a full run. He saw Keisha race through the open door, leap over the deck railing and make a mad dash for the thick forest. Anton followed at an easy lope, knowing he would never lose her scent.

She needed this time alone. Once more he would give it to her, but not at so great a distance he couldn't protect her if the need arose.

It was well past dawn when he tracked her to a small woodland pond. She lay in the thick grass, her fur matted and covered with mud, her paws raw and bleeding.

Anton flopped down beside her with a canine grunt, stretched out his long legs and laid his head across her shoulders. He felt her sigh, waited for her to open her mind to his.

I'm going back to San Francisco, as soon as I can get a flight. My month is almost up. I need to go back to work on my project.

Let me come with you?

No. I need time alone, time away from all of you, the intensity of your feelings for one another... your feelings for me.

I love you, Keisha. I will wait.

It's so unfair! She scrambled out from beneath him, standing squarely in front of the water. *You're so patient and I'm such a fucked-up head case! It's not fair to you.*

I didn't ask it to be. I only want what's best for you. I want you to heal.

One week. Give me a week alone. I'll call you then and let you know if you can come. If it's worth it for you to even make the trip.

Her head hung low, her body trembled. Anton sat up on his haunches, then

stood. He licked her muzzle and nudged her shoulder in the direction of the house.
Okay. One week. I don't think you can forget me in a week.

She took off at a tired, wobbling run, but he caught her thoughts as she passed by him.

I couldn't forget you in a lifetime. Not if I lived forever.

* * *

Keisha tipped the cabby an extra ten dollars when he carried her bags to the front door and waited until she got inside and turned on the lights. She'd been terrified of coming home to her townhouse alone at night, terrified of leaving the safety of her friends' love.

Terrified of staying.

She leaned against the door, staring down the well-lighted hallway at the beautifully decorated entry, the attractive front room. She'd loved this place from the moment she bought it. Now it just felt empty... lonely and empty.

Would it ever feel like home again?

Home now was high in the mountains of Montana, where the air was cool and the forest dark and deep and welcoming. Where she could run freely with her pack, feel the night air against her furred body, stretch her legs out and race the wind.

Race the wind with Anton beside her.

Already she missed him. He'd taken her to the airport, held her tightly before she boarded the plane, kissed her forehead when she turned her lips away from his.

She loved him. Of course she loved him, but how could he know that?

She hadn't told him, certainly couldn't show him.

That, of course, was the problem. Until she could come to him freely, make love to him as a whole woman, she was useless to him. Anton deserved better.

She carried her bags up to her bedroom, checked on her studio, made sure the greenhouse watering system had kept her plants alive, then went back inside.

The night called to her. She opened the door to the fenced back yard and took a deep breath. Anton, Stefan and Xandi would be running right now. Running as a pack

beneath the nighttime sky, following the trails of deer and rabbits, leaping creeks and fallen logs, baying and yipping with the pure joy of the hunt.

She smiled, imagining Xandi's beads scattered all over the planks on the deck, and hoped Oliver wouldn't slip on them when he came to work in the morning.

Slow tears coursed down her cheeks as she sat in the dark on the back porch step. The sounds of the city were all around her, the stars lost in the bright reflection of a million lights. Before Keisha was even aware of what she'd done, she became the wolf.

A single leap took her over the tall fence, into the narrow alleyway that was a direct link to the only wilderness within miles. She ran low to the ground and fast, weaving in and out of shadows until she leapt the last barrier between herself and the freedom of the forest that was Golden Gate Park.

She circled Stow Lake, found the spot where her memorial garden would eventually grow if the commission accepted her entry, then raced the length of the park, staying clear of roads and lights. Watching, always watching, hiding in shadows, avoiding sleeping transients and their skinny, underfed dogs, curling her lip in disgust at the smells of unwashed humanity, overfilled trash cans, the detritus of too many people in too small a space.

She dreamed longingly of the thick forest and fresh air of the Montana mountains, missed the sense of brotherhood she'd known with her pack running beside her, searched fruitlessly for the sense of freedom she'd discovered under the big Montana sky. She ran until her muscles ached, until each breath screamed in her lungs, until her footpads were raw from asphalt and gravel paths.

Well before dawn she retraced her path, slipped quietly through the sleeping neighborhood, leaped her backyard fence and paused in the silence near the greenhouse. Something seemed out of place. Something was not quite as it should be.

Her *Chanku* senses went on high alert as she checked the yard, sniffed the back door still slightly ajar, just as she'd foolishly left it. Hackles rising, she squatted and peed by the back step, marking her territory.

Nothing. She sniffed the air once more, growled quietly and made one last pass

around her yard. Still feeling oddly unsettled, she slipped inside to become Keisha once again in the privacy of her home.

Sleep was a long time coming. Her burglar alarms were set, the house secure.

Her dreams, when they finally came, were lonely and unsettled.

* * *

It took three days before she was willing to face the huge pile of mail that filled a box she'd left beneath the mail slot. She thought of calling Anton first, but it was even later in Montana, and she knew he'd be running with the pack. Other than a call to let him know she'd arrived safely, they'd not spoken.

Damn, but she missed the nightly runs, the thrill of the chase when they hunted, the tight mental link of the pack when their prey came into sight.

She'd run just one other time since her return -- run without intention or direction. It wasn't at all satisfying without the pack. Instead it was lonely, unsettling. She missed the connection, the sense of family.

She missed Anton most of all. So serious and patient, a direct counterpoint to Stefan's more playful yet sweetly caring nature and Xandi's nurturing soul.

Anton needed her, if only to lighten him up. Smiling, the sense of Anton strong in her heart, Keisha poured herself a glass of wine and went back into her front room with the box of mail under her arm.

It took almost an hour to sort through everything. She filled a bag for recycling with junk mail, separated out the stuff she needed to run through the shredder, checked the statements for the bills paid automatically out of her account, dismissed the political ads and added them to the recycling bag.

One slim envelope dropped out of the small pile remaining in her lap. She leaned over and picked it up off the carpet. There was no postmark, no stamp... no return address. Her name and address were neatly typed on the front, but someone must have slipped it through the mail slot on their own.

Curious, she slit the top of the envelope open with a kitchen knife and dumped out the single folded sheet of paper, then forgot to breathe when she read the message.

**I know about the wolf.
Call me.**

* * *

Keisha stared at the telephone. The letter she'd received the night before lay on the table next to another piece of paper with Anton's phone number written across it in his big scrawling hand. She touched the numbers and bit back the tears.

Then she dialed the local number. There was no need to involve Anton. She'd put a stop to this, now.

"Hello? Carl Burns, here."

"Mr. Burns, my name is Keisha Rialto."

She heard soft laughter on the other end. It made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"What, Mr. Burns? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The wolf, Ms. Rialto. You are the wolf. You killed three men. Somehow you can shift, become a ferocious beast. A killer. You're a werewolf, right?"

"That's absolutely preposterous. Who are you? Wait... I know. You're that tabloid reporter, aren't you? The one with the vivid imagination?"

The image of that faked newspaper photo was forever seared into her brain. How could he do this to her? All she wanted was to heal, to get past all this. "Please leave me alone. If you persist in bothering me, I will take out a restraining order against you, and I'll make sure it's enforced."

"You'll shift again, Ms. Rialto. The moon will be full. Maybe something will happen and you'll shift. When you do, I'll be there."

"Are you threatening me, Mr. Burns?" She realized her hands were shaking and prayed it wouldn't show up in her voice. She couldn't let him know how much he frightened her.

"Not at all, Ms. Rialto. Have a nice evening. Enjoy your run in the park."

Chapter Five

Keisha sat on the floor in her studio in the dark, knees drawn up under her chin, the scattered drawings of her memorial project spread out about her on the hardwood floor.

The commission had accepted her entry, which meant she had to stay here in San Francisco, at least until it was completed. She should be thrilled, celebrating, jumping for joy with this amazing news. She should be on the phone to Anton, knowing he would celebrate with her.

She should be happy.

All she really wanted to do was go home. Home to Montana, to Stefan and Alexandria and, most of all, Anton.

Home to the people who loved her.

She wanted to run free in the forest, feel the wind on her muzzle, the damp earth beneath her paws. She wanted the sense of power she experienced when she ran as a wolf, the physical strength, the aggressive nature that became, in essence, a focus for her energy.

Instead she was a virtual prisoner here in her townhouse, afraid to venture out as a human, much less as a wolf.

Now that she knew how to shift, she craved the feeling. Now that she knew she was being watched, she couldn't risk giving in to her true animal self.

Images of the torn and mutilated bodies of the three men she'd killed flashed through her mind. She shuddered, well aware she recalled more of that fateful night each time she drew the memories forth, more detail, more blood.

The *Chanku* were an ancient race, their rules of survival primitive and violent. Like the wolves of the forest, the *Chanku* hunted. When they were threatened, they

killed.

Keisha did not want to kill again.

She couldn't call Anton. He'd have no sense of remorse over killing Carl Burns. She didn't want murder on his soul and she knew he would want to protect her. Neither did she want to expose him to her misery, to a woman who wouldn't take the risk to become whole.

She glanced at the scattered drawings, at the project that had consumed her, given her so much satisfaction before the attack. Work on the memorial garden was scheduled to begin in two weeks. All she could think of now was the fact that she had time to go back to Montana, time to spend with others of her kind.

She knew if she went, she'd never return to San Francisco.

She wanted Anton here. Wanted to feel his warm, undemanding body next to hers. Wanted finally to find the strength to tell him how much she loved him, how very much he meant to her. Wanted to make love to him without fear, without the horrible memories slipping in and stealing her soul. Wanted to ask him to stay, at least until she completed this project, sold her townhouse and moved home with him to stay.

She wanted...

Something moved just outside the front porch. Keisha sensed life, someone or something male... Rolling over to her knees, Keisha slowly crept across the floor of her studio and looked down from the open window.

The shadow on her porch was obviously not a potted plant. It slipped out of the darkness, still partially hidden from view. Could it be Burns? She'd never seen the man, couldn't identify him at all, but dammit, if he had the temerity to come to her home...

Furious, barely controlling the *Chanku's* violent nature, the almost overwhelming desire to shift and become the predator, Keisha stomped down the stairs, prepared to do battle. She flung open the front door...

"Hello, sweetheart."

Anton!

Sobbing, she threw herself into his arms. He half carried her across the threshold

and closed the door behind them. "Keisha? What's wrong? Has something happened? Are you okay?"

I missed you. I didn't think I would, not like this, but, Anton, I've missed you so much!

I couldn't stay away, my love. I was certain I sensed your need, then realized the distance was too great and I was merely projecting my own need, my own desire.

He knows about the wolf. He's threatened me.

"Who?" Anton's anger was suddenly a palpable third party in the entryway. "Who's threatened you?"

Gasping for air, Keisha struggled to get her breathing under control, to cut the flow of tears. "His name is Carl Burns. He's the tabloid reporter who wrote the story about me being a werewolf. He contacted me... told me to enjoy my runs in the park."

"You've shifted?" Anton stepped back but kept his big hands solidly clasped about her shoulders.

Keisha nodded. "Twice. I had to. I missed all of you so much more than I thought I would. I figured if I shifted, I might feel closer to you, feel like part of the pack, but it was so lonely. I went to Golden Gate Park and pretended it was your mountains, but it's not the same without you."

"Oh, sweetheart." He wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

She sighed against his broad chest, inhaled his familiar scent and realized there was no fear in her. Not now, not with Anton here to protect her.

"I got the project. The memorial for the park. I start in two weeks."

"That's wonderful." Anton stepped back but kept his hands on her. "I knew you'd win. You're talented as well as beautiful."

She dipped her head. "You're biased, but thank you. I wish I could enjoy the feeling more, but I've been so worried. What about the reporter? He could ruin everything."

"Leave him to me." The low snarl behind Anton's voice left no doubt how he would handle things.

She couldn't let him kill.

I know. However, it's very tempting.

He tilted her chin up and forced her to look at him. The naked desire in his amber eyes practically stole her breath.

"Come away with me. You've got a couple weeks before you have to start work. I have a cabin up in Humboldt County, just a few hours north of here. The redwoods and ferns grow thick, there's no one around, and we can run as much as we want without fear of observation. We'll figure something out. Please, say you'll come?"

She couldn't speak. How could he know exactly what she needed? "Tell me what to pack. I can be ready in five minutes."

He wasn't going to give her a chance to know fear, not this time. Anger, hot and heavy, boiled just beneath the surface, anger he struggled to hold under control. Anton had Keisha's single bag loaded in the back of the rental car just minutes after his arrival. If the reporter were watching, he'd have a hard time following the nondescript sedan up busy Highway 101.

If he followed them, actually found them, Anton figured Burns would regret it... but only for the time it took him to kill the bastard. He'd rather deal with an angry *Chanku* bitch any day than let the reporter expose her.

Within half an hour, Anton was skillfully negotiating rush hour traffic across the Golden Gate. Once they got through the heavy commuter traffic in Santa Rosa, they sped through the wine country, took a jog to the west at Cloverdale and caught the scenic route over the twisting, narrow coast highway heading north. Just north of Rockport they cut east through miles of stately redwoods to Benbow. At Garberville, Anton took another road back to the west. It was growing dark and Keisha had long since fallen asleep.

He studied her throughout the long trip, wishing he could find the secret to help her overcome her fears. It was such a temptation to use his mind, his powers to mesmerize, to compel her to want him, to help her forget the attack.

If he did that, he would be every bit as guilty as the men who assaulted her,

would always wonder if she were drawn to him of her own accord or because he had planted the compulsion within her heart.

That was unacceptable. Keisha would love him on her own...

Or not at all.

And that's just as unacceptable.

Many narrow, unnamed roads, locked gates, private thoughts and private roads later, he pulled up in front of a small, well-kept cabin. He'd called ahead to have it stocked and prepared for his arrival. It helped that he'd owned the property for years and the caretakers were trusted friends.

Keisha stirred in the seat beside him, stretched, opened her eyes and looked about her curiously. "Where are we? How long have I been asleep?"

"We're at the cabin. It's not all that far from the King Range National Conservation Area, and about as private as can be. There's no way your reporter or anyone else can find you here. You're safe and I want you to relax. Think you can do that?"

She stared at him a long moment, her amber eyes like golden disks against her dark skin, glinting in the pale starlight. "I always feel safe with you. Always."

He nodded, deeply moved by her trust. "C'mon, we'll get something to eat. Then the *Chanku* are going to run for as long as they want. No one will disturb us."

Everything was as he had expected. The generator was fueled, the refrigerator stocked and the stove working fine. The cupboards had plenty of provisions. Anton fixed a quick meal while Keisha unpacked their few belongings, wrapped herself in a comfortable sarong and explored the cabin. There was a single room for the kitchen and living area, one bedroom with an enormous bed and a serviceable bathroom with a tub and shower combination.

Her eyes were constantly drawn back to the bed. Was she ready? Could she make love to Anton without flashing back to her attack? She wanted him. She knew she could experience sexual pleasure. Xandi had certainly proved that.

Somehow, some way, she had to get over her reactionary fear of men and sex.

Anton called her to come and eat. He'd prepared fresh salmon, a salad and pasta, skillfully using the gas range that dominated the small kitchen.

"Ah, and he can cook too! I didn't know you were so talented."

"I'm a man of many talents, my love." He tapped her nose with his fingertip and she rewarded him with a smile.

"Actually, I love to cook. It's easier to let Oliver take over when I'm at home, but cooking is a pleasure I enjoy." He leaned close and kissed her, a light touch of lips to cheek. "I enjoy it almost as much as running through the forest with an Alpha bitch at my side."

Keisha giggled. "I guess Xandi talked, eh?"

"Alexandria did more than talk... she showed Stefan exactly what you did with those nylons of yours. And the flat of your hand. He couldn't sit down the next day, though I didn't hear him complaining. In fact, he smiled an awful lot. It was truly disgusting. I chose not to join them that night."

Keisha's laughter shifted to a contemplative smile. "I had no idea I could find sexual pleasure with a woman. It was absolutely amazing. Xandi said the *Chanku*..." Her voice trailed off.

"The *Chanku* are a polyamorous people. We find sexual satisfaction with both sexes. It's part of who we are... an important part."

"It's a part of me that's still not whole. Anton, can you still love me the way I am?"

She looked desolate, as if her soul were shredded. Somehow, some way, he would bring her through this. The *Chanku* were a strong and powerful race.

A vengeful race... yet adaptable. He would find a way.

They finished their meal in silence. His thoughts were anything but quiet.

Chanku? He set down his fork and neatly folded his napkin, then touched the side of her face, gently forced her to look at him. *My love, when you shift... when you are the wolf, do you fear your sensual nature then? Do you fear me?*

Slowly, eyes unblinking, she shook her head. *I have no fear when I am the wolf. No*

fear at all.

Run with me tonight. The forest calls us. I also think it heals that which is broken. Are you willing?

Keisha stood and shifted in the same motion, then waited uncertainly in front of the closed door. Anton laughed, stood up and walked to the door. "It's always a good idea to open the door first. Paws are no good for that sort of thing."

He opened the door and stepped out onto the narrow front porch, carefully removed his clothing and shifted. His muscles bunched and he leapt over the railing, landing lightly in the thick ferns beyond the cabin.

Keisha followed, her leap almost as far, her body primed and ready to run.

The night called them. The forest and its myriad scents beckoned. With a sharp yelp and a nip at her shoulder, Anton took the lead.

Chapter Six

She lost track of the miles they ran, the trails they followed through the towering redwoods on soft, spongy earth that was damp and pungent beneath her paws. It was new and fresh, a rebirth to feel so free. How she'd missed this!

Keisha scared up a buck at one point, a huge creature with spreading antlers. It raced away and they followed, no threat this night as they'd both fed so well at dinner. Still, the run was exhilarating and left both of them panting, tongues lolling, eyes bright with wolven laughter.

After the chase, Anton kept the pace at a comfortable speed so the miles disappeared beneath their feet, but Keisha never felt pushed or stressed.

Finally he paused in a small, secluded glade. He circled the meadow, sniffing for any sign of danger, lifted his leg and pissed to mark territory along the perimeter. Nothing would intrude where wolves rested.

They might have been on another planet, so far from human habitation, so deep within the primeval forest.

Trees older than recorded time towered above them, their roots cushioned in beds of thick, springy moss. Ferns grew six feet high and more, and thick vines made bridges over creeks and fallen logs. It was a place of magic, truly a place of healing.

The forest heals that which is broken.

Anton's words had become her own private mantra. *I am broken*, she cried. *Heal me!*

They flopped down in the thick bracken, tongues lolling, eyes glowing in the pale starlight. Keisha had never felt so aware of her wolven body before, nor as aware of the big male beside her. The strength of their muscles, the thick pads on their paws, the dark nails they used to dig and climb and run.

She rolled over on her back and nipped at Anton's muzzle. He licked her face. She nipped again.

He rolled over as well, so that his furry body pressed against hers, nose to tail, tail to nose.

She felt his tongue between her legs and jerked at the contact. He'd never approached her sexually in wolven form before. He licked her again, slower this time. She might have been frightened, had she been human.

She was wolf. An Alpha bitch.

She lay back and spread her legs.

Anton rolled over and stood up, his shaggy head hanging low, his eyes intense, watching. His mind was closed to her, but his intentions obvious.

He meant to have her.

She was *Chanku*, the wolf. Not a victim of rape, not human. Her fears couldn't touch her now. Powerful, in control, the Alpha bitch.

Growling, the snarl a low rumble in her chest, Keisha rolled over and rose to all four feet. She presented her bushy tail to Anton, swinging it slowly, enticingly, back and forth.

A deep growl emanated from Anton's wolven throat. He raised his foreleg and pawed her hip.

His claws were sharp. They left ruffled furrows in her pelt.

Keisha refused to give ground. Instead she turned and looked at him over her shoulder, linked with him.

Take me, now, as a wolf, not a woman. The woman is broken. The wolf is whole.

He shook his head, denying her words.

You are not broken. Never, in my eyes. I love you. You must know, my love, that among the Chanku, if I take you as a wolf you are mine forever. Have you noticed that Stefan and Alexandria mate as wolves? I do not join them. Only in human form are we so promiscuous.

I love you, Anton. Do you truly want me?

For all time, my love. Forever.

Then take me now. Make love to me. Show me your goodness and your strength. Wipe out the memories and give me new ones, fresh, loving memories of you and me together.

He needed no further urging. Nipping at her shoulder, he established his dominance with a single slash of his teeth, the rake of his paw across her back as he mounted her.

The frustration he'd felt as a human male was intensified in wolven form. He found her soft opening on his first thrust, driving deep, hard, entering Keisha as she braced her legs to take his much heavier weight.

He heard her soft grunt as he filled her, a sharp *yip* when he finally buried himself deep inside. He tried to link and found a barrier thick as a stone wall. Then the sensations took over, the clenching heat of her channel, the coarse fur along her spine rubbing against his chest. He pumped quickly, taking her as a wolf takes a mate, filling her with his rapidly swelling cock, readying her for his seed.

Once embedded in her warmth, Anton thrust hard and deep, over and over until his swollen cock tied the two of them together. He felt her body stiffen, knew the sexual knot in his wolf's penis could frighten her with her loss of control, the sense of entrapment.

He took his chance then. Prayed it was the right move, and shifted. Still tied to Keisha, he resumed his human form.

And realized she'd done the same thing. He held a woman in his arms, her buttocks pressed against his belly, his cock buried deep inside her hot sheath. They lay together in the soft bed of moss and bracken fern, tied together in love and passion.

He shuddered with the last tremors of his climax and felt the lingering spasms in Keisha's body. Gently he brushed the tangled hair away from her face and held her close, her back fitting perfectly against his chest, her hips seated in the cradle of his. She turned her head and gazed back at him with so much longing in her eyes, so much love, he buried his face in the hollow of her throat, broke down and wept.

She twisted her upper body so that she could see him, looked into his face, into

the amber eyes of the man she loved, and marveled at his tears. With her hands still shaking from the tremors of her climax, Keisha brushed the moisture away from his eyes, leaned closer and kissed Anton on the mouth.

Whatever fears, whatever worries she'd had melted away in the beauty of his tears, in the depth of love she felt for this most amazing man. His cock was still embedded within her heat and the connection felt right. It was perfect. When she kissed him, she felt him swell once more within her, knew he wanted her again.

"I love you. Forever. Make love to me again... love me as a man loves a woman."

His body trembled and he closed his eyes as if in prayer. Very gently, he withdrew from her clasp sheath and rolled her to her back in the crushed bed of ferns. Kneeling between her legs, he brushed the hair back from her face.

He started to speak, cleared his throat and tried again. His eyes glittered in the starlight, filled with unshed tears. His voice broke, cracked, strengthened. "When I first saw you, your hair was so tightly braided, I had no idea how thick it was... how beautiful."

She frowned. All she could think of was putting that beautiful cock of his back between her legs. The fear that had held her for the past month felt like a bad dream, she wanted him inside her, now... and he wanted to talk about hair?

"It's changed. I've changed." She knew she sounded impatient. She couldn't help it. "My hair was so kinky I had to wear it braided or keep it short... becoming *Chanku* changed it. It's softer now, more like Xandi's."

"You've always been *Chanku*... but shifting to the wolf must have altered your hair... much as it's altered the rest of you." He ran his hand over her tousled mass of black curls and waves, leaned over and held a handful of her hair to his face and inhaled, then smoothed it back from her face once more.

"You are stronger, more powerful. You will never be a victim again." He laughed as he leaned down and kissed her, his lips moving skillfully over her mouth, his tongue barely teasing with hers. She felt his hard cock brush against her belly and her pussy wept.

He ended the kiss and sat back on his heels. "You truly are the Alpha bitch in the pack. Even Xandi defers to you in many ways."

She tightened her knees against his hips. "What are you driving at, Anton? Why aren't we making love? You've been wanting this for weeks." She bit back a nervous giggle. "I'm ready, okay? So are you... just look. Your poor cock's standing there, looking very impatient with both of us."

She tilted her hips once more in blatant invitation. His erect cock grew even larger, pressed upward against his lean belly. What was he up to? His introspective comments made her uneasy, unsure of herself. Her pussy was wet and waiting, her nipples puckered into tight, sensitive little buds, and all of a sudden he wanted to talk?

Why did he still look so sad?

"I've dreamed of this since the moment I saw you. I've slept with you in my arms, knowing you were afraid of anything more than my support and companionship. Let me savor this a minute, okay? Let me look at your body, taste your flavors, inhale your scent. I want it all, my love. All of you. I want your love, your passion, the very thoughts in your mind. I don't intend to rush until you're ready to drop all your barriers."

"Oh." She gazed up at him, understanding, for the first time, the true depth of his need. She'd blocked his thoughts so thoroughly, seeking the one protection left to her, the sanctity of her fears still locked in her mind.

The fear was gone because of Anton. The trauma, the assault, the brutality no longer controlled her heart, her mind and soul. Finally there was truly room for love in her heart. She dropped her barriers, linked with Anton and gasped with the intensity of emotion roiling within his thoughts.

Gasped, then smiled, finally accepting his need, his desire, his unconditional love.

Accepted, and returned every bit as much.

Love washed over her, spilled out of Anton and bathed her. He leaned close and took her nipple into his mouth, suckling it deep, and she felt reborn. His tongue licked

the very tip, his teeth nibbled and nipped, and she cried out at each fresh sensation.

He kissed his way quickly down her belly, nuzzling in the tightly curled thatch of hair between her legs, licking her swollen lips like a starving man at a feast.

Almost frantic now, he lifted her with broad palms beneath her buttocks, raised her hips to his mouth and curled his tongue inside her, lapping like the big wolf he was.

Moaning, body trembling, Keisha reached for his arms and held on tight, practically curling herself into a ball as he licked and sucked her tender folds.

He took her to the edge, took her one step closer, then stopped, raised his head and leaned over to kiss her. She tasted herself on his lips, suckled his tongue into her mouth, groaning with each new taste, each new sensation.

Her pussy clenched, wanting. His cock bumped against her, just as desperate.

What are you waiting for? She glared at him.

An invitation?

Oh shit. Fuck me! Now, Anton. I can't wait any longer. Gasping for breath, she lay back in the soft ferns and grabbed onto the stems, anchoring herself. He drove deep and hard, his cock finding its way home in one sleek thrust. He bumped hard against the mouth of her womb and sighed.

I feel as if I've come home.

You are home. We both are. She reached up and touched his beloved face, felt the emotion in his heart and mind, and accepted, finally, what Anton had told her all along. He was the one, her mate, the single most important person in the world for her. Lifting her hips to hold him even closer, she wrapped her arms across his lean, muscular back and hung on tight.

In the deep woods in the dark of night, in the strong, steady arms of the man she loved, Keisha healed.

Chapter Seven

Four days later, just at sunset, they crossed back over the Golden Gate. The lights of San Francisco glittered against a pink and mauve sky and the buildings faded from peach to gray in the dying light of the sun.

Keisha stared at the familiar skyline and missed the mountains of Montana, the tall trees of Humboldt. She definitely missed the little cabin.

She and Anton had truly discovered one another over the past few days. There wasn't an erogenous zone on either body that had gone untouched, an orifice that hadn't been filled, a taste that hadn't been sampled. She felt well and thoroughly fucked, as wonderfully satiated as she'd ever been in her life.

So in love with the man beside her she almost hurt.

She looked down at her left hand, grasped tightly in Anton's right, and felt the first sense of tension since they'd left the cabin.

"He'll be waiting, you know. We won't be able to shift. He'll see us."

Anton turned and smiled at her, looking more feral than when in wolverine form.

"I know. I look forward to meeting Mr. Burns." He looked ahead, skillfully maneuvered around a stalled truck, then turned back to Keisha. "I doubt he'll enjoy it as much as I intend to though."

He squeezed her hand for reassurance, then returned his attention to the heavy commute traffic. Keisha sat back against the seat and watched the road ahead.

There was a car parked in front of her townhouse. Anton's senses went on alert. He had to consciously tamp down the need to shift, to become the predator he was at heart.

I believe Mr. Burns is waiting for us now. Do you recognize the car?

Keisha shook her head. Perspiration beaded her brow. *It's been in the neighborhood, off and on, since I returned. I don't recall if it was here before my trip to Montana.*

If it is him, follow my lead. Stay in my mind if you must, but don't question anything I say.

You're not going to kill him, are you?

No... though I've thought about it. It would be most satisfying to gut the bastard, but it would make a horrible mess. He turned his attention from the car at the curb to the woman beside him. *It's important, Keisha. Will you do as I say?*

She turned and there was no fear in her. She laughed out loud. Saluted. "Yes, sir!"

This was the woman he loved.

Finally relaxed, now the battle had come to him, Anton pulled into the driveway.

A portly, middle-aged man immediately got out of the car at the curb. From the rumpled appearance of his clothing he looked as if he'd practically lived in his vehicle over the past few days.

"Ah, Ms. Rialto. I was sure you'd return eventually." He held his hand out, totally ignoring Anton.

Big mistake. Anton barely controlled the low growl starting deep in his chest. His skin shivered and twitched with his desire to become the wolf, the predator in his nature almost overwhelming his civilized self.

"I'm Carl Burns, reporter for the..."

"We know who you are, Mr. Burns. Thank you for coming." Anton bit back the snarl and stuck his hand out, intercepting the other man's in a tight handshake. Burns' bluster turned to confusion.

"Thank..."

"It's wonderful of your newspaper to acknowledge Ms. Rialto's memorial garden. It was truly an honor when her design was selected."

"But that's not why..." Burns shook his head. "I'm not here to..."

"Come this way." Still speaking, Anton put his hand to the other man's back and

guided him up the stairs. Claws appeared, then receded. His spine rippled with his need to transform, to kill. "I'm sure you'd like to get some shots of Ms. Rialto's drawings, maybe information about the exotic plants she's selected? It's really quite exciting." He turned to Keisha. "Sweetheart, hand me the key, would you?"

Shaking her head, biting back a grin, Keisha turned the keys over to Anton, grabbed their luggage and followed the two men up the steps. She felt Anton's struggle, knew the wolf was close. The fact his anger was so near the surface, yet so tightly controlled, made her feel more loved and protected than she could imagine.

She closed the door behind her. The moment it clicked shut, Anton grabbed Burns by the throat and shoved him up against the wall. There was a feral gleam in his eyes and he bared his teeth, but somehow, to Keisha's surprise, he controlled his rage.

Instead of the wolf she feared, it was a very angry human watching the reporter gasp and squirm, his feet dangling six inches off the floor, his face turning purple from the choke hold Anton continued to tighten.

"You will not write about the wolf. The wolf does not exist. If you persist, you will die. It's a simple choice to make, Mr. Burns."

Burns' eyes bugged out, his hands scrabbled at Anton's muscular wrist, and his feet scraped at the wall. Keisha held her breath, wondering how far Anton would take this, knowing full well she couldn't let him kill the reporter, no matter what she had promised Anton, no matter how great a threat he posed to all *Chanku*.

Suddenly Anton took a deep breath and released his hold on Burns. Gasping for breath, the man slid to the floor. When Anton leaned over and grabbed his hand to pull him to his feet, Burns appeared transfixed for a brief moment.

Then he was shaking his head, absentmindedly rubbing his throat before straightening his coat, apologizing for his clumsiness in tripping over the carpet.

Keisha wasn't certain how Anton managed it, but he had Carl nodding and smiling as if nothing at all had happened in the entryway of her home. The reporter pulled out his notepad and jotted down information, even grabbed his camera for a quick photo of her drawings in the upstairs studio. He took a picture of Keisha as well,

standing beside her greenhouse.

She almost laughed when he had her hold some of the very grasses that helped her become the wolf. Anton stood behind the idiot, his canines practically clicking in frustration. Keisha sensed the fury simmering just beneath the surface of Anton's civilized behavior.

Burns left a few minutes later, obviously unaware how close to death he'd come. The minute he was gone, Keisha grabbed Anton by the back of the shirt and spun him around. "Would you mind explaining to me what just happened? You practically strangle the man, then he acts like it's all his fault and we're his new best friends. What the hell is going on?"

"Why, Mr. Burns merely stumbled in the entryway before he interviewed you about your memorial garden."

His smile was innocence personified, but the effect was ruined by the snarl in his voice.

"That's not exactly why he was here. How come he totally ignored the fact you tried to kill him?"

"If I'd tried to kill him, he would be dead."

"That's not the point and you know it. Why didn't he ask about the wolf?"

"Merely an implanted suggestion, m'dear. A form of hypnotism, if you will."

"What?" she practically shrieked, took a deep breath and tried again. "You're saying you used mind control? How?"

His look was pure *Anton*, all testosterone-driven male, proud of himself and his ability to protect his mate.

Keisha growled.

Anton took a deep breath and answered. "You forget. Before I was a wolf, or before I knew I was a wolf, I was a very powerful wizard. Those skills are inbred in me, partly learned from many years of study. I merely convinced Mr. Burns that a story about your lovely memorial garden in Golden Gate Park was the entire reason he'd been trying to reach you. And you, my lovely lady, have been terribly elusive because

you're very shy by nature."

"Yeah. Right. Shy." She snorted.

"Not very ladylike, however."

"Will he ever remember? Will he come back?"

Anton nodded, kissed the end of her nose. "He's going to find his notes, references to you as a wolf. He doesn't have photos, or he would have used them to blackmail you. I imagine, however, that he has a lot of information in his files. It may confuse him at first, but eventually he'll remember. Hopefully by then we'll be long gone."

"What about the bruises on his throat?"

"I'll let him wonder about them." Anton looked away for a moment, the fury radiating from his elegant frame almost palpable. He took a deep breath and Keisha heard him grinding his teeth together. "I wanted very much to kill him, but it would create too many problems for you." He swept his hand over her hair. "I think you're safe now."

"What if he finds us?"

"If he comes after us, I just may eat him."

From the feral gleam in his eyes, Keisha wasn't sure if he were serious or teasing. "You don't..."

"Nah. Too much fat. Bad for my cholesterol."

Laughing, she threw her arms around him and kissed him on the mouth, hard. "Anton, I love you. As soon as the project is over, take me home, please?"

"You've got it." He kissed her back.

Lord, but she loved the taste of his mouth, couldn't wait to taste the rest of him. *Mind control*. He could make someone think whatever he wanted...

"Anton?" She pulled away, moved out of his embrace. "Why didn't you ever try that on me? The mind thing... why didn't you just convince me I wasn't raped, I didn't kill those men. It would have been so much easier for you."

His pensive smile told her how much he'd thought of just such a thing. How

difficult it had been for him not to help her.

"Not easier for you, though. It would have taken away a very powerful part of who and what you are. You needed to come through this by your own choice. You're a survivor. I would not cheat you of that victory. It's an amazing symbol of your strength, that you've done this on your own. I love you the way you are, who you are. I don't want someone I've helped create. I love you, Keisha Rialto, fears, flaws and all."

"Flaws? You're saying I have *flaws*?"

"Well, you do have an odd habit of thinking you're in charge of things."

She threw herself into his embrace. Once again, as always, he caught her. Just as he would always catch her. She whispered against his lips, kissing him between the words. "As soon as the project is over, you're taking me home to Montana. There's so much more for me there than here."

Anton nuzzled her hair, then raised his head and grinned at her. "You're right. You can't forget Xandi... and there's still Stefan."

Stefan? Stefan, with a body and face so much like Anton's, with a quirky sense of humor and limitless compassion... and an obvious interest in sex.

"You wouldn't mind, wouldn't feel jealous, seeing me with another man?"

"Do you feel jealous when I'm making love with Xandi... or, for that matter, with Stefan? When I have Xandi's breast in my mouth and Stefan's cock deep inside me, do you want to stop what we're doing?"

She shook her head, picturing exactly the scene he described, realizing it no longer held fear for her, only desire. "No. I want to be there with you. When I linked with Xandi I wanted so badly to be a part of your lovemaking, but I couldn't. I was too afraid. The fear's gone now, though I imagine I'd like to sleep alone with Stefan first, before we were in a group. I need to start slowly. Would that make *you* jealous?"

"It would make me very proud, to see how far you've come. To know you truly embrace the part of you that is *Chanku*. I love you." He kissed her again, much more thoroughly this time.

"C'mon. I know a few things Stefan enjoys. How about I show you what you

need to do?"

She laughed. "So I'm getting instructions now? You would presume to..."

Anton swept her up in his arms, kissed her mouth and headed for the bedroom. "I *presume* you love me. I presume you're mine forever and beyond. I presume you can't wait to make love... and I presume the bedroom is down this hall?"

"You presume correctly." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "On all counts. I sure hope Stefan appreciates how much we're willing to sacrifice for his pleasure."

"Oh, he does. I'm sure he does." Anton tossed her on the bed and kicked the door shut behind them.

Kate Douglas

Kate Douglas writes contemporary romance, romantic suspense, romantic comedy and erotic romance.

For over thirty years Kate Douglas has been lucky enough to call writing her profession. She's produced ad copy for radio, flown over forest fires in a spotting helicopter as a photojournalist, drawn a weekly comic strip for a worldwide health agency, co-authored a cookbook and written numerous freelance articles. She's won three EPPIES, from the international authors' organization, EPIC -- two for Best Contemporary Romance in 2001 and 2002, and a third for Best Romantic Suspense in 2001. Kate's also won EPIC's Quasar Award for Cover Artists.

She and her husband of over thirty years live in the northern California wine country where they find more than enough subject material for their shared passion for photography, though their grandchildren are most often in front of the lens.

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