

*Red Cloud Wolves 3*

# **FACETS<sup>OF</sup> NIGHT**



***Kate Steele***

**Changeling Press**

# **Red Cloud Wolves 3: Facets of Night**

## **Kate Steele**

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Sixty years ago a loose end was inadvertently left unchecked. Now it's begun to unravel. People are dying, their bodies found torn apart by some savage beast and in each case a bloody souvenir is left behind.

For Landon and Dark, these disembodied fingers are silent admonishments for they share something in common with the killer. All three of them have been given the gift of the moon wolf but something has gone terribly, terribly wrong.

In the face of growing suspicion from local law enforcement, Lan and Dark are forced to go on the hunt. It's up to them to stop a killer. One who's been holding a grudge for a very... long... time.

## Prologue

*Why did I ever agree to this? Oh yeah, this guy's loaded... aaaand he's not bad looking in a rugged, rough kind of way.* Ronnie Little Fawn squatted down behind a concealing SUV in the parking lot. So Jack wanted to play hide-and-seek. It wasn't the strangest thing she'd ever done for a guy. She paused and twisted her head a bit. Was that the sound of a footfall? A thrill of excitement zinged up her spine.

The lot was huge and packed with vehicles. Drove of people came to gamble at the reservation on Friday nights. Even though it was nearly one a.m. the casino was doing a brisk trade behind its glittering façade. Ronnie was glad her shift was over for the night. It was tough being on her feet for eight hours. Her friends thought being a blackjack dealer was a piece of cake. *Yeah right*, she silently scoffed. They should try dealing with the public under these conditions.

People who were losing money weren't exactly happy campers. Ronnie had taken her fair share of verbal abuse since she'd worked here. Thank God the customers weren't all bastards. Win or lose, everyone reacted differently. Now Jack was one of those who took the good with the bad. He smiled through the wins and the losses, and kept his equilibrium not to mention his charm. He'd spent the evening quietly getting acquainted with her and when her shift ended, she was more than happy to take him up on his offer of a late night dinner.

Yeah, sure, employees weren't supposed to fraternize with customers but everyone did it. At least she wasn't providing services for money like some of the girls and guys did. She'd made that point perfectly clear to Jack and he'd accepted it with the same grace he'd accepted losing five grand at her table this evening. She had to admire the kind of devil-may-care chutzpah he'd displayed. It was classy.

In the distance she heard voices. Slowly straightening from her crouched position, she peeked over the hood of the SUV and spied a party of four emerging from the glass enclosed entryway of the casino. The group headed away from her and she sighed in relief. She felt a little stupid playing this game but what the hey, Jack was playful and that was okay too. Although it was kind of nerve wracking. She'd not had a glimpse of him since the game began and wandering around alone in the parking lot after dark wasn't one of her favorite things. *I wonder where he is?*

Thinking it might be fun to turn the tables on him, Ronnie went on the hunt. Silently she crept from shadow to shadow, alert for any hint of movement or sound. The urge to giggle rose in her throat. This reminded her of when she was a kid and her brother, sister and cousins would play hide-and-seek when the sun set. The twilight made everything spooky and they'd sneak up on whoever they could and scare the living daylight out of them.

From the corner of her eye she caught a furtive movement. It had to be Jack she reasoned and changed direction toward the furthest reaches of the lot. She could definitely hear something now. There! Was that a muffled cough? Sure she was on the right track, Ronnie made her way toward the sound as stealthily as possible. Thank goodness for rubber-soled athletic shoes!

Another raspy sound clinched it. She was sure Jack was just on the other side of the black pickup truck just ahead. *I didn't realize he smoked*, she thought, hearing the harsh rumble that seemed to echo in the still night air. *He really should quit. Funny, I didn't notice any coughing while we were in the casino.* A hint of fear brushed its way down her spine but she ignored it. Nerves wound tight, she tiptoed closer and closer until she was able to flatten herself against the truck's grill.

Heart pounding with anticipation, she lowered herself into a crouch then leapt out. "Gotcha!"

The wide grin that curved her full lips died an instant death, as did she. The scream in her throat was physically torn away along with flesh, bone and muscle. Ronnie collapsed beneath the weight of the furred, red-eyed nightmare bearing her to

the ground, her eyes unseeing as it growled and ripped and shredded cloth and skin with equal enthusiasm.

## Chapter One

"Can anyone tell me what this is?" Dark held up the picture he'd brought to class that day.

"It looks like a posy to me."

Chuckles, titters and giggles rippled in waves across the crowded classroom. Dark grinned. "Thank you, John. That's very observant of you," he told the lanky, dark-haired student who'd taken the role of class clown, "but this posy has a name. Anyone know what it is?" His students remained quiet, some of them shaking their heads. "This is called the Cherokee Rose. Does anyone know the legend behind this flower?" A tentative hand went up. "Yes, Lynne."

"Wasn't it said that it came into existence along the Trail of Tears?"

"Yes. Exactly. It's ironic that considering how the legends say it came into being after the Cherokee were forced out of the state, it's now the official state flower of Georgia. This flower represents all the heartache of that terrible journey along a route which was called *Nunna dual Tsuny*, The Trail Where They Cried.

"The white of the petals represents the tears of the mothers who lost children and kin along the way. The gold in the center stands for the gold taken from the stolen Cherokee lands that were once in Georgia, and the seven petals represent the seven Cherokee clans that were forced to leave their homes. The Trail of Tears. That's what we are going to study today." Another hand was raised and Dark nodded in his student's direction. "Yes, Tom."

"Why are we studying the Cherokee? We're Apache."

"That's a fair question," Dark allowed, giving his student an approving look. "As you know, this class is called Native American Studies. I believe it's important for us to study Native American history as a whole which includes all the tribes. It's important



we understand not just our own Apache history but that of all the peoples. I feel in that way we'll come to a better understanding of the past and how it affects us today. Does that make sense?" The boy nodded and Dark smiled with anticipation. Lan had been right all those years ago when he told Dark he'd make a good teacher. He loved teaching. "Let's get started," he told the class. "Turn to page seventy-three in your text books."

\* \* \*

Foot on the brake, Dark halted the jeep in the driveway for a moment, pushed the button on the small control he fished out of the center console and watched as the garage door slowly rattled upward. When it had lifted high enough, he let the jeep roll forward and parked. With a slight grimace of disappointment, he noted the empty space in the two-car garage. Landon was already gone, his shift at the casino having started just an hour earlier. Not that this was unexpected but still there were days he hated coming home to an empty house.

Unfortunately, it couldn't be helped. With him working days at the reservation school as a teacher and Lan working nights as assistant security chief at the reservation's casino, there were a lot of times these days when they found themselves alone. *You'd think, Dark mused, we'd enjoy the break from each other's company.* He sat still in the quiet of the garage and let his mind drift over a few of the highlights that marked his life with Lan.

The two of them had been together for over a hundred years now and still their bond was as strong and vital as when it had first come into being. Yeah, sure, there were times when they drove each other crazy. That was a given. But there'd never been any hint of either of them wanting to leave the other.

He knew in part it was because of the gift they'd been given when they'd become moon wolves. Wolves mate for life and apparently that held true no matter how long they were together. Still, he liked to believe that it was also the deep and abiding love and respect each had found in the other's human side. It never escaped his notice just

how empty the bed felt when he was alone in it on the nights Lan worked. Especially now when some as yet unforeseen danger was stirring.

In light of the troubling visions he'd been having lately, a part of him wanted to keep Landon close. Dark felt the involuntary quirk of his lips. Lan would certainly scoff at the very idea he needed anyone's protection. All the same, with these vague, unformed images disturbing his sleep, Dark was feeling uneasy. It was as though something was coming. Something filled with vicious, ill intent toward both himself and Lan. Frowning, he clicked open his seatbelt and opened the vehicle's door.

Grabbing his backpack from the passenger seat, Dark slid out of the jeep, made his way to the kitchen door, and paused to hit the button on the panel above the light switch. The garage door reversed, cutting off the light from outside. Opening the kitchen door, Dark stepped into the sunny room. Everything was neat and tidy.

The tiled floor looked newly mopped. Honey colored granite counters reflected the light coming in the windows. The appliances glowed with a subtle sheen. The antique hardwood table and four chairs looked freshly polished and everything smelled faintly of lemons. It appeared Landon had done some cleaning before he left. A couple of dishes, silverware, two cups and a pot sat in the drainer, further silent testament to Lan's clean up efforts.

*Looks like he cooked,* Dark noted hopefully before spotting the pad of paper left on the counter by the sink. Dropping his backpack on one end of the kitchen table, he crossed to the note. A smile curved his lips at what was written there in Lan's strong hand.

*I made Ramen just the way you like it with stew beef, veggies and cheese, so eat. You're going to need your strength. I expect a reward for all this cleaning when I get home. Lan.*

Smile turning into a grin, Dark washed up, warmed his dinner in the microwave and ate while grading the papers he pulled from his backpack. In the silence of the kitchen, the ticks of the wall clock could be faintly heard, heralding the steady, inevitable passing of time. Papers rustled and the scratch of his pen was joined by the

occasional clatter of eating utensils against blue and gray pottery dishes. Outside, the sun set and dusk gathered, its concealing shadows growing deep while imbuing mystery to the normally mundane.

Finished with both food and paperwork, Dark gathered his dishes together and washed them up, adding them to those already in the drainer. Lan would complain that he didn't put those that were already dry away but it was a minor infringement, one he would easily forgive. After carefully returning all his school related work to his backpack, Dark wandered into the living room and turned on the television.

He settled into the cushioned comfort of a recliner upholstered in deep green and old gold colored fabric, flipping through the channels, giving the flickering images on the screen a portion of his attention. The rest was centered elsewhere. Inside an unconscious division of self had occurred. One part concentrated on the ordinary and familiar that surrounded him while the other waited, listening, ears perked and nose to a phantom wind, searching for a hint of what approached. His wolf was restless. A fine tension vibrated inside like a taut, silken thread caressed by a gossamer touch. At any moment, too much pressure would cause it to break.

The parchment colored walls that surrounded him seemed to disappear as did the thick green carpet beneath his feet. Slowly the rest of the furniture vanished until he floated in a bubble dimly illuminated by the light shining from the television until that too winked out. The familiar smell and feel of home was replaced by a starkly lit blacktop and the faint smell of warm asphalt. The silence was broken by a rough, muffled growl and a picture began to form before his eyes.

Splashes of red and a large, hulking object took shape. It moved. Dark's indrawn breath rang sharply in his ears. Horror sprouted as a small seed, growing by deliberate increments as the picture wavered. The image changed, slowly becoming clearer until he could almost see what appeared before him. He strained to focus, fought to see the details. Sweat broke out on his brow at the struggle. It was just out of reach, just -- right -- there.

The shrill jangle of the phone brought Dark's separate pieces together with a snap. His vision shattered and he cursed as he felt the shock of it ripple under his skin. Blinking eyes gone dry from staring blindly at the television, he softly murmured, "Shit," and reached for the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey darlin'."

"Lan." The sound of that familiar voice eased muscles that had grown tight while he'd lost himself for a time. Relief must have shown in his voice considering Lan's response.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing that I know of for sure. I'm just edgy tonight," Dark replied, downplaying his unease.

"I'll bet I could help you with that."

"I'm sure you could."

"When I really think about it, it sometimes amazes me just how easily you become putty in my hands."

"Is that so? If I recall correctly, you were the one doing a fair imitation of putty last night."

"That's true," Lan admitted cheerfully. "There's a lot to be said for being putty."

Dark snorted. His lover was being his usual facetious self, at least it seemed so, until he voiced a question revealing his concern. No one could accuse Landon of being oblivious or uncaring.

"Seriously though, are you all right? I know you haven't slept well the past few nights. You've been restless and sometimes you talk in your sleep, though what you've been mumbling makes little sense."

"Umm. Sorry if I've kept you awake. I don't know what it is. I feel something bad is coming but I don't know what form it will take. Lan..." Dark paused for a moment, careful to choose words that wouldn't offend his mate's pride or make him sound like a mother hen. "Be on your guard. Whatever this is, it hates us. I can feel it."

"Sounds serious."

"I'm not saying these things just to hear the sound of my own voice," Dark snapped.

"Hey, calm down. Did I say I didn't believe you? Christ, Dark, you should know better than that. If there's anyone in this world who takes your visions seriously, it's me."

"Shit. Sorry. Like I said, I'm edgy."

"I know, just take it easy. If trouble's coming we'll deal with it. Make sure you lock up tight before you go to bed and I'll watch myself. I promise. Now go take a hot shower or, better yet, fill the tub and kick back for a while and try to unwind. I'll even give you the go ahead to jack off if it'll help you relax."

Surprised by the jolt of amusement Lan's declaration birthed, Dark laughed and felt the tension plaguing him, ease. "Gee, thanks."

"I'm a generous man, darlin', you know that. Hell, I've got some time on my hands right at the moment, why don't I talk you through it?"

"What?!"

"You know, phone sex. I know you've heard of it."

"Well, of course I have. I'm not an uneducated savage anymore."

"You were never an uneducated savage. You've always been one of the most intelligent men I've ever met."

"You think so?" Dark asked, touched by Lan's statement. His lover wasn't one for dispensing idle flattery.

"I know so. Intelligence isn't just something you acquire by reading books or going to school. Some people naturally have an innate sense of understanding, of curiosity and the willingness to see beyond the limits of their world. You're one of those people. Like most people, you can react on a primitive level if driven to it but you're more willing to embrace and learn about something or someone new. Rather than dismiss it or strike out in ignorance or bigotry or the simple brute need to have everything under your thumb, you weigh and measure and learn the possibilities. That's something I've always admired about you. Now if you're done fishing for

compliments, can we do this?" Lan asked plaintively. "I've been thinking about the other night when I watched while you touched yourself. Remember? I can't get it out of my head."

"I remember." Dark leaned back and made himself comfortable. "That really gets to you, doesn't it?"

"Hell yeah. Fuck. You looked so damned good. It was almost surreal, watching you stroke your own cock while the moonlight streamed in the window. It looked like something out of a film noir, the way the light leached the color from your skin and left it gleaming like a pearl with its own inner luminescence."

Dark closed his eyes. Lan's voice had taken on a timbre so soft and velvety it shook him deep within. "I'm not the only man of intelligence here. When did you become so poetic?"

"I've had to work to keep up with you."

"Lan..."

"It's true. When we met, I was a simple and rather shallow man. All I cared about was having a good time. You made me see there was more to life than that. I never want you to be... bored with me."

"*Denzhone*," Dark breathed. "As if that were even possible. Where is this coming from?"

"I'm not sure, but maybe it's just the result of our life together. We've faced our share of unpleasant things and each time it's made me realize how important you are to me. I couldn't survive losing you. Every time something's happened, I found my strength in you."

"No. You have your own strength. You always did."

"Yeah, well, whatever I have it's been tempered and refined by loving you."

Throat tight from the emotion evoked by his lover's words, Dark managed to ask, "Where are you calling from?"

"My office."

"Is the door locked?"

"Yeah."

"I want you to touch yourself for me. I want to hear the sound of your pleasure in each breath. I want to know that you're with me, that you'll always be with me."

"Only if you'll do the same."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Lan's soft laugh rippled over the line. His lips curving in a smile, Dark opened his jeans. The unfastened button and zipper released the pressure his expanding cock was under. With a few squirming movements, he was able to push the fabric down enough to comfortably expose not only the aching column of flesh that came so naturally to hand but the firm balls below it.

Holding the phone in the crook formed by shoulder and neck, he used his other hand to unbutton his shirt. The material parted exposing the hard, well formed muscles of his chest and abs. Smooth cinnamon-colored skin molded to that sculpted expanse like a warm satin sheet. The same hand slowly swept over that silky plain, fingers following the shape of finely toned muscle until they encountered a small nub. His nipple rose to the touch, nerve endings roused by that gossamer contact. Dark moaned.

"That's what I want to hear," Lan responded. "Tell me what you're doing."

"I just touched my nipple. It's pinched up so tight and hard, it hurt."

"And yet you liked it."

"Yes."

"Are you touching your cock?"

"Yes."

"Oh yeah. You know what I remember most about the other night? It was when the first drops of moisture welled from the head of your cock. I could almost taste it, light and sweet. All I wanted to do was put my mouth on you and let my tongue take the flow straight from its source. But I didn't. Not right away. I watched you and let the hunger build. I watched your eyes glitter with need. I listened to every harsh breath. I let the scent of your desire fill my nose until it made my mouth water. I watched the way your fingers curved around the solid flesh in your hand and the way they

tightened and released. Only when those clear beads spilled over and slid like liquid diamonds down the hard length of you, did I give in and take what I wanted so desperately.”

“Jesus, Lan, have you been taking literature classes?”

“I’m just saying what comes to mind. You want me to be dirty, raunchy? How about you pretend I’m biting your nipples and you pinch them until they sting. I want you to grab your balls and squeeze and roll that aching sac while you stroke your big, hard cock until it feels like you’re gonna spew. But don’t you dare fucking come. Spread your legs wide and shove a finger up your ass. I want you to ride it like you’d ride my cock. I want to hear you groaning like a cock slut in heat. Is that what you want, baby?”

Dark grimaced at the spear of sensation that stabbed his gut. “That works too, but no, I like the other better. It’s sexy as hell. Let me try?”

“I’m all yours, darlin’.”

“I want to tell you what I remember about that night.” Dark closed his eyes and envisioned the scene. The words formed and in a languorous, dreamy tone, he voiced them. “I played just for you. I wanted your eyes on me. Their intensity was nearly savage and so wild my wolf wanted to burst free and join with it. Something feral and primitive inside me craved your touch and when you finally gave it, it was all I could do not to come it felt so good.”

Dark’s hand, wrapped around his cock, moved with a steady cadence up and down his full, firm erection. His belly grew taut and his heart beat faster.

“Even now I think of how it felt to have you warm and heavy between my legs. Your arms were sure and strong draped over my thighs and your hands so hot when they gripped the cheeks of my ass while you sucked me. Those kneading movements of your fingers pushed ripples of arousal through my flesh. I can still feel the heat of your mouth and the swirl of your tongue over my skin. The way it pressed into the slit at the tip of my cock and caused that slight burn right before the suction pulled at me, demanding that I give you what you wanted.



“Every glide of your lips up and down the length of my cock was like the purest pleasure and deepest agony all rolled into one. You know the feeling. It grips your insides and winds tighter and tighter and you strive for all you’re worth to hold onto it until you just can’t take it anymore. The dam bursts inside and you’re flooded with sensations so overwhelming you lose all sight and sense of anything but the wrenching flow of come that bursts from your body. I remember you groaned when it filled your mouth and the vibrations from that sound burrowed deep inside my gut, taking the pleasure even higher.”

With his own pants for breath loud in the receiver, Dark listened. His breaths were echoed, rapid and harsh. “Fuck, Dark, darlin’, I can’t...” Dark nodded silently. He truly understood Lan’s near incoherent ramble. They were teetering on the edge of temporary insanity. That place where absolute, blinding pleasure overwhelms every thought, every breath and every hint of civilized man and his restraint is swept away in an avalanche of pure animal revelry.

Dark’s hips were moving, undulating in rhythm with the steady pulls at his cock. He was almost there. The pleasure was insistently pushing, piercing deeper and deeper. “*Denzhone*, I’m coming,” he managed to gasp just as it exploded, sending forth a flurry of creamy ropes that decorated his chest and belly in warm wet curls of milky seed.

With every hard inhalation he caught the musky fragrance of male release. Though he’d just come, the scent aroused him. Dark felt fire re-ignite in his veins. His belly grew tight with a return of need so intense, he ached. “When you get home,” he growled, “I’m fucking you or you’re fucking me. I don’t care which. I want you. I want your heat. I want your scent and your taste. I want to drown in you. Do you understand me? Lan? I don’t want to see or feel or know anything but you.”

Lan’s snarl slid over the phone line, lodged in Dark’s ear and vibrated over every nerve ending. “You got it. Be ready for me when I get home. It’s not gonna be tender and sweet. It’s gonna be fast and hard and hot. I mean it, Dark. Your ass better be lubed when I get there.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Dark cut the connection. A sly and definitely feral smile curved his lips. Lan was going to be a wild man when he got home. With anticipation warming him, Dark rose from his chair and headed upstairs for the bathroom. Lan's suggestion of a long soak in a tub of hot water suddenly sounded very appealing.

\* \* \*

Dark woke with a soft but sharp intake of breath. Eyes springing open, he lay motionless, tense and silent, his senses straining in the dark. Moonlight lay across the bed, a pale wash of opalescence to dispel the night shadows. Nothing moved, not even a wisp of night air stirred the leaves of the tree outside the window. As quietly as possible he sat up and swung his legs over until his feet touched lightly and settled on the carpet.

Something had disturbed his sleep. He could feel the reverberations of it jangling along his nerve endings as it disrupted the normal flow of the night. He rose and glided with inaudible steps to the window. Standing to the side, out of sight of anyone outside, he gazed down on the backyard. Again, he sensed no presence but understanding came. The quiet, that's what woke him. The ever-present song of the crickets had stopped. Even as the thought came to him, they re-started their night chorus. Whatever had been outside was now gone. Or inside the house.

On quick, silent feet, Dark crossed the room. He stopped and grabbed one of the two ash hiking poles kept in the corner by the door. Easing the door open, he took a deep pull of air into his nostrils. Though not as keen as when he was in wolf form, his sense of smell was still acute. The aromas that filtered in were all familiar. If someone had broken in, he would have caught their scent.

Still keeping his guard up, he proceeded with caution down the stairs. On the ground floor he stood still, listening while letting the feel of the house seep into him. Once again there seemed to be nothing wrong until a faint scent caught his attention. He was well familiar with that coppery tang. It slowly wafted to him and drew his attention to the back of the house.

Dark moved like a wraith from room to room until he arrived at the kitchen. With only a slight hesitation, he crossed the cool tiles of the kitchen floor. The closer he got to the back door, the stronger the smell grew. Prickles of alarm danced across his skin. Mixed with the smell of blood was a scent that made invisible hackles rise. Taking a firm grip of the pole in his hand, he turned the knob of the deadbolt then the door knob itself and pulled open the door. No one waited on the other side, but laid out on the mat before the door was something small and pale.

Dark frowned. It looked like a large, dirty and hairless caterpillar. Hating to do it but having no choice, he flipped on the switch for the porch light. He blinked in the sudden bright light and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust. Looking down, the object was now clearly illuminated. A finger. Shredded skin marked the base where it had been torn from someone's hand. Dark, crusty blood stained the skin and outlined the perfect oval shape of the nail and the mauve polish that adorned it.

Shock burst over every nerve ending in his body. Utterly appalled, he whispered, "No. It can't be. What have you done?" He jumped in reaction at the shrill ring of the wall phone by the back door. Cursing in reaction to the strident ringing, he picked it up and bit out a savage, "What!?" Silence greeted his outburst.

"It's me."

"Damn it, Lan! It's two freaking thirty in the morning!" Dark lashed out as he glanced at the illuminated readout on the stove.

"I'm sorry I woke you but something's happened."

"Well something's happened here too. And I wasn't asleep."

"What is it?"

"Someone left a gift on the back porch."

"What kind of gift?"

"A bloody finger that looks like it was ripped from someone's hand."

"*Jesus*. Dark. We just found Ronnie Little Fawn's body in the parking lot. She's been torn up by what looks like a large animal of some kind."

Dark closed his eyes, a grimace of pain on his face to match the slicing grief that stabbed his heart. He knew Ronnie and her family well. Ronnie's little sister was one of his students. Hating to do so, he voiced the question that came to mind. "Was she missing any fingers?"

"Her left index finger was gone."

"*Great Spirit*," Dark murmured, a string of his native Apache following that invocation.

"Dark."

"*I know*. This must be hers."

"What the *hell* is going on?"

"Did you catch the scent of this... animal?"

"Wolf. And more."

"Same here. It's one of us, Lan."

"I refuse to believe that. One of our people wouldn't do this. You know they wouldn't."

"What other explanation is there?" Dark could hear the pain and denial in Lan's voice. His own heart cried out against the evidence before them.

"I don't *know* but I refuse to believe it. Could you catch any hint of the human part of the scent?"

"No, it's too diluted by the wolf." Dark frowned. "Although now that I think of it, how can that be? If this person changed forms while he was here, there should be two distinct scents and yet it's as though the two are intertwined. There's something very wrong here."

"You noticed it too, about the scent, I mean. I'm glad. I thought my nose was playing tricks on me. Dark, what should we do about Ronnie's... finger?"

"Tell the police. Are they still there?"

"Yes."

"You have to tell them. If this small part is withheld when she's buried, her spirit will never know rest."

"I understand what you're saying, but what's this going to mean for us? Isn't this just what the killer wants? To involve us in this?"

"Yes, obviously, but it can't be helped. I can't be a party to this sacrilege."

"All right, Dark, take it easy. I'll tell them. I'll be home as soon as I can, baby."

A tiny, yet sad smile tilted the corner of Dark's lips. "Don't worry about me, *denzhone*. Send the police. Handling them will be the easiest part of this horror."

## Chapter Two

Dark rubbed his eyes. They felt gritty and he was tired, just plain dead-tired. The police had arrived and taken charge of the *evidence*, their polite word for the finger that had been left on the mat by the back door. The porch and yard had been carefully searched for evidence of the intruder. The only thing they found was a light smear of dirt on the bottom step, an indistinct footprint on the edge of Dark's herb garden and a barely visible trail through the dew on the sparse grass that had evaporated with the rising of the sun.

The trail had ended at the side of the road and it was concluded that the intruder must have had a vehicle waiting. As there were no neighbors nearer than a quarter mile, it wasn't expected that anyone would have seen anything but a couple of officers had gone to make inquiries of the closest ones. Dark had his own ideas about a waiting vehicle. More than likely, the beast had merely continued on his way under his own locomotion using the road for a time to put off any possibility of leaving a trail. But then he couldn't tell the police that a man turned wolf was their suspect.

A detective, Detective Ross Akino to be precise, had taken his statement. He not only asked Dark about what transpired but probed into his life, job, history, etc. etc. etc. His questions had ended only long enough for him to make one short and one lengthy phone call. From what he could overhear, Detective Akino was putting the wheels in motion that would start an investigation of Lan and himself.

Fortunately, Dark knew that the carefully constructed backgrounds he and Lan possessed would pass even the probing inspection of law enforcement. They were so long lived, it necessitated the ability to construct a series of identities. To remain in one place while seeming to go unchanged or untouched by the passing years was impossible. They made a habit of moving when it was deemed necessary and with each

move, their backgrounds changed. They usually became younger relatives of themselves. With help from a man they'd met years ago who was an expert in such things, they'd become more than competent in providing the necessary documents and cover they needed for each new incarnation.

It was nearly six a.m. when Lan finally arrived home. He looked every bit as tired as Dark felt and was trailed by, from the looks of him, another detective. From his vantage point, seated at the kitchen table, Dark silently watched his lover take two cups from the cupboard and fill them with coffee. He brought them to the table, placing one each in front of the two remaining empty chairs.

Dark felt the warmth of Lan's body behind him a moment before large hands settled lightly on his shoulders. Landon leaned down. "You all right?" he murmured softly. Dark nodded and a soft, fleeting kiss brushed his temple. Lan moved and took the chair to his left.

"Have a seat, Detective Danvers," Lan invited.

Impassively, Dark noted the glance the two detectives exchanged. He was glad Lan made no bones about hiding their relationship. He mildly wondered what would be made of it but in the end it mattered very little. The opinions of others concerning his relationship with Lan was of no import. Disapproval was dismissed. While acceptance was nice, they needed no one's approval or permission to love each other.

The detective took a seat and Dark studied the man. Short dark hair, brown eyes, sharp cheekbones, a thin blade of a nose and skin with a cinnamon tint revealed his Native American heritage. The suit he wore was rumpled and his tie was askew as though he'd pulled at it in an effort to free himself from its suffocating restraints.

In addition to the physical characteristics he noted, Dark was drawn by something else. There was an aura surrounding the detective. Some unknown quality drawing Dark's attention. His powers as a shaman came to the fore and a vision appeared before his eyes. Briefly he saw the face of an older man. He sat with a boy and was speaking to him. Though Dark couldn't hear the words that were said, he realized the boy was a younger version of the detective now before him. The vision faded and

Dark wondered why he'd been shown this bit of the detective's past. As with all his visions, he knew the answer would be revealed in time. Curiosity rose in him.

"What did it used to be?" he inquired, his eyes fixed on Detective Danvers as he seated himself.

"Beg your pardon?" the man answered.

"Your name. Danvers. What did it used to be?"

The detective answered with a short spate of Apache. "Meaning Dances on the Wind. I figured Danvers would give me a little more credibility at the police academy."

"You never told me that," Detective Akino interrupted.

"You never asked."

Dark noted the ever so slight flush that touched Detective Akino's cheeks. His fair skin readily revealed the color that intensified the blue of his eyes. A hand rose and carelessly brushed through his reddish blond hair leaving it tousled. "I guess not."

A glance in Lan's direction caused their eyes to meet. Lan shrugged and Dark knew he wasn't the only one wondering what the relationship was between the two detectives. "I take it you two know each other?"

"We ought to. He's my partner," Danvers informed them. "Even if he is a wet behind the ears, newly minted, detective rookie."

"Jeez, Dans, give it a rest, will ya?"

"Yeah, yeah, Aki, don't get your panties in a twist."

Surprised by their exchange, Dark felt his lips twitch at the amusement that bubbled up inside. At his side, he heard Lan snort. "Yeah, they're partners," he affirmed then sighed. "So, what now?"

The amusement he felt dissipated fast and Dark looked expectantly from one detective to the other.

Detective Danvers took a sip of his coffee then moved his gaze from Lan to Dark. "Unless my partner here tells me otherwise, I'm inclined to believe that someone has a grudge against you two. The facts, as much as we know them, are this. Ronnie Little Fawn was murdered in the parking lot of the casino by a person or persons unknown. It



was meant to look as though done by some kind of animal but there are certain circumstances that totally contradict that idea. The most telling of which is that her finger was left at your home. I know cats sometimes leave a trophy from their kills for their owners but I don't believe an animal would randomly pick you out for the pleasure of receiving such a gift. It's more than likely a large dog controlled by a human killed Miss Little Fawn. At any rate, forensics will give us more on that.

"You, Mr. Jeffers, have an airtight alibi for the time of death. Not only are there witnesses that place you in the casino but you're on the security cameras. Miss Little Fawn's death wasn't a clean one. The killer would have been liberally spattered with blood. There's no way you could do the job and go back inside to clean up without anyone spotting you. Nor were you away or unseen for any significant amount of time that would have allowed you to clean up elsewhere.

"As for Mr..."

"Dark."

Detective Danvers gave him a sharp-eyed look, his eyes narrowing slightly as though he'd been struck by something. A hint of misgiving silently echoed inside him, but Dark kept his eyes steadily locked with the detective's. He could actually see the man relax slightly before he continued. "As for Dark, he has no alibi so he could have been in the parking lot waiting to kill Miss Little Fawn, but then what? He brings home her finger and places it on the back porch to implicate himself? Even after so short an acquaintance you don't strike me as an idiot," Danvers informed him.

"Thank you, I think," Dark answered with a thin smile.

"Allowing my men to search the premises without a warrant is a mark in your favor. You're obviously not trying to hide anything and they didn't find anything the least suspicious, including any homicidal pets. Then there's the whole reason for the killing. If Dark killed her in an effort to have a finger pointed at you, Mr. Jeffers..."

"Lan," Landon interrupted.

"Lan. Then I have to ask why. I don't get the feeling there's any discord hanging between the two of you and such a thing would be totally incomprehensible unless Dark here is some kind of a nut."

"There isn't and he isn't," Landon assured him.

"So we're left with several possibilities. A, someone has a thing for one or both of you and is trying to impress you. Why he or she would choose this method is a mystery for the time being. Unless you have any ideas?" Lan and Dark both shook their heads and Detective Danvers continued. "Possibility B. Someone has a grudge against one or both of you and is trying to embroil you in a situation that will bring you under suspicion for having committed murder. Do one or the other of you have any enemies? Someone who might be holding a grudge? A big loser at the casino or a parent not happy with little Johnny's grades?"

Dark frowned. "How did you know I'm a teacher?"

"Aki called and shared what info he got from you. By the way, my kid brother, John, talks about Dark, his Native American Studies teacher. He's a fan."

"Hmm, I'm surprised. He's not the type to be easily impressed. I like John too. He's a smart kid with a smart mouth but it's fun watching him keep the others interested and lively."

"Should I have a talk with him? I know he can be a pain."

"No, not at all. He's not cruel or mean about his teasing. He's actually quite clever in that way. I don't want to suppress that natural leadership ability of his."

"Huh, now I'm surprised. Anyway, back to the question. Have either of you had a run-in with anyone who might be wanting to get some payback?"

Lan shook his head and Dark found himself echoing that movement. "I can't think of anyone. There are plenty of people who lose at the casino, but I've never faced off with anyone vowing revenge," Lan answered.

Detective Danvers swallowed more of his coffee, then nodded. "Well you know we'll be doing some checking on you guys. That's part of the job. I guess I don't have to tell you that leaving town now would be a bad thing."

"I think we get that." Dark heard the edge to Lan's voice and reached out to lightly touch his hand. "Sorry. I'm tired."

"Understandable. We're done here for now. I suggest you two watch yourselves. This doesn't feel like a random act. There may be a method to this guy's madness. I wouldn't want to see either of you end up like Miss Little Fawn."

"We'll be on our guard," Lan assured him.

Taking a last swallow, Detective Danvers set his cup down and rose. "Thanks for the coffee. Aki, let's hit it." He started to walk away then paused and reached into his jacket pocket, producing a business card. He handed it to Landon. "Just in case you think of anything else or need to contact me."

Lan accepted the card and saw the two detectives to the door. Dark waited for him at the foot of the stairs and when he returned, said one word. "Bed."

Nodding, Lan agreed. "Is there anything I need to know right now?"

"Nothing that can't wait, *denzhone*. We're both tired. We'll compare notes when we get up."

The two of them wearily climbed the stairs and entered their bedroom. Lan began to strip. "I'm gonna take a quick shower."

Dark was peeling out of his own clothes. "I'll probably be asleep before you get back."

"Go for it, darlin'."

With a tired smile, Dark crawled into bed.

\* \* \*

Heat blanketed his body. The warmth encompassed him and lay along his back, buttocks and thighs. His head was pillowed on a firm, muscular bicep and a hard cock was pushing at him, seeking entrance. Barely rousing, Dark instinctively wiggled to accommodate that prodding penis and bore down, opening himself for Lan's penetration. A rough humming groan slid from his throat, its length matching the inward glide of hot, solid flesh that stretched his anus and filled him.

Awareness sharpened, but remained drowsy and acquiescent. This wasn't the time for hard and fast. This was the time for a long awakening in which an ember was fanned and slowly fed until it rose upward in a glorious, fiery blaze.

Landon moved like a languid tide, an unhurried advance followed by a leisurely retreat. The dragging friction of his silky-skinned and lubed cock over the tender, sensitized nerve endings of Dark's passage ignited sparks of sensation between them.

Warm breath caressed his shoulder, leaving it moist for the lips that settled against his skin. They kissed and teased then opened to let teeth lightly rake and nibble while an agile tongue sensuously played over his flesh. First shoulder, then neck and nape. Every move was easy and deliberate, meant to stimulate his desire but slowly, ever so slowly. Dark let himself sink into the rhythm, relaxing, letting his lover do as he would.

Lan's arm rested over Dark's waist, his hand lying flat, fingers splayed over his firm belly while lightly rubbing. His fingertips strayed south, stirring the fine bush of hair at his pubis. He traced the swollen base of Dark's cock with a gentle circular motion, then let his hand slide lower. His balls were cupped and massaged, the pressure just enough to be felt, just enough to make him want more. Dark groaned.

"Open for me. Put your leg back over mine," Lan whispered.

Dark readily complied by lifting his upper leg and sliding it back to hook over Lan's. Taking advantage of Dark's increased exposure, Lan lightened his hold on Dark's testicles and let one finger play over the short, sleek path of his perineum. That intimate touch caused Dark's anus to tighten on Lan's cock, drawing groans from both of them.

Lan's mouth hovered at Dark's ear. "Ease up, darlin'. I'm not ready to come yet," he said before tonguing the sensitive whorls.

Dark arched his neck and shivered then gasped when Lan's finger began to explore the point of their joining. The stretched and tender skin of his anus was simultaneously caressed both inside and out, bringing the penetration into sharp, delicious focus. Lan shifted position, changing the angle of penetration just enough to

send his cock skating over Dark's prostate. Dark's entire body went rigid as he cried out.

"Ahh, *denzhone*, fuck!"

"Mmm, right there," Lan's voice was a gravelly purr. "You ready, darlin'? Wanna come?"

"Yes," Dark hissed.

Instead of immediately complying, Lan kept to his slow, torturous pace for a while longer. Once more he cupped Dark's balls and played with them, rolling them with his long fingers.

Any remaining drowsiness was long gone. Fully awake and wanting, Dark was at the point of demanding. He desperately wanted Lan's hand on his cock and was about to tell him so when Lan finally brought his hand out from between his thighs. He reached for Dark's hand and brought it to his cock urging him to wrap his own fingers around the hard column. Together, Lan moved their hands in a strong, rhythmic stroking movement.

"You keep doing this. It's time," he declared.

His hand clamped down on Dark's hip. Holding him firmly, Lan began thrusting harder but it apparently wasn't enough for him. Growling with frustration, he pushed, forcing Dark to release his hold on his cock and roll to his stomach. Instinctively, Dark pulled his knees up and raised his hips from the bed. An incoherent sound of approval met his action as Lan rose up behind him.

Hands found his hips and held on while Lan again started thrusting harder and faster. The slap of flesh against flesh accompanied the harsh pants and grunts of effort that came from both men. Lan bent further over Dark. His left hand slid upward along his body to end curled over his shoulder while his right hand reached under to firmly grasp Dark's cock. Bracing himself, Dark pushed back into the sharp, staccato jabs of Lan's hips.

He reveled in the hard taking. His body welcomed not only the thick cock that drove in and out of the tight clasp of his sheath, but the hand that was jacking him in

rhythm with that frenetic penetration. He held on, gritting his teeth against the need to come, wanting the pleasure to last. Heat engulfed him. Moisture formed on his skin everywhere his lover touched. Lan's scent and his own lay heavy in the air around them, the tart musk of rutting males making his head spin.

Dark's belly knotted, his insides quivering with the intensity of sensation that gathered there. It grew and grew until it could no longer be contained and burst free in a flood of hot seed and animalistic growls. Lan's cry of completion echoed his own. He shuddered with the spasms of pure, mind-numbing bliss that wracked his body. His heart pounded and his lungs labored, his rough gasps for breath entwined with those of the man who now rested heavily against him.

Carefully, Dark stretched his legs and lowered himself to the bed. Lan eased free of his body and dropped to his side. They gazed at each other, silently communing. Lan's hand rested in the small of his back and he smiled when his mate began gently petting him. Taken by a yawn, Dark closed his eyes, content to lay there and drowse. He was brought to full wakefulness sometime later by a not-so-gentle smack on his ass. Lan was sitting up, an expectant smile on his face.

"Bastard," Dark growled.

"Time to wake up, sleeping beauty. We've got things to discuss."

The early morning events came flooding back and Dark nodded. He rolled and stretched, noting the admiring gaze that traveled the length of his body. True to form, his cock began to thicken.

Lan's brow lifted, his smile growing wider. "Gonna do something with that?"

Levering himself off the bed, Dark walked toward the bathroom. "Come shower with me and you'll find out."

"Right behind you."

Half an hour later they were clean, dry, dressed and in the kitchen preparing a meal together. Dark started the coffee and set the table while Lan presided over the pancakes and bacon. Even though it was late afternoon, they'd still opted to have

breakfast food. Passing Lan on his way to the refrigerator, Dark cupped one jean clad cheek and stopped to nuzzle the back of his neck.

Lan leaned back into him. "Hmm. What?"

"Nothing. Just want to touch."

"All you want, darlin'." Lan set aside the utensils he was holding and swiveled to loop his arms around Dark's waist. Dark's arms encircled Lan's neck. "Now this is more like it. I get to touch too."

He initiated a long and languid kiss. It was a sublime joining of lips and tongues and breath. It was the kind of mutual, heaven-bestowed intimacy that brought two separate beings so close, their souls touched.

Lost in the warmth, scent, taste and pure essence of his mate, Dark gave little attention to anything else, including their position near the stove. Lan slid his hands down, curving them over the firm swells of Dark's ass. Wanting more of that pleasurable kneading, Dark leaned into Lan, who moved them back a step.

Lan suddenly tore his lips from Dark's and jerked hard, sending them both stumbling forward. "Yeow!" He released his hold on Dark and sent one hand around to his own backside, vigorously rubbing it. "Whoa. 'Bout burnt my own bacon."

Chuckling, Dark smoothed a hand over the "bacon" in question. "Do we need to put some butter on these?"

"Tempting as that sounds, I think we'd better save it for the toast," Lan answered with a grin. "It doesn't take much imagination to know what would happen if I let you near my ass with butter."

Dark smiled and moved away to gather eggs, orange juice and butter from the refrigerator. He prepared the eggs, cracking them open into a bowl and scrambling them along with salt and pepper. He joined Lan at the stove with another pan and soon had the eggs cooking nicely. Keeping an eye on them, he popped some bread slices into the toaster. When the food was ready it was divided on separate plates and the two of them devoured their meal. Their conversation concerned everyday normal things as if by tacit agreement they put off the subject of most importance while they ate.

With the meal finished and clean up accomplished, final cups of coffee were poured and they resettled at the table. Their eyes met and Dark nodded. "Tell me what you sensed at the scene of Ronnie's death."

"It was the scent overlying the blood and well, other things." Lan carefully avoided mentioning offal and excrement, things they both knew accompanied a kill. "It wasn't wholly wolf but it wasn't completely that of a man either. It was as though the two scents were blended. I don't quite understand that. If it was one of us in wolf form, there would be only the scent of that particular wolf."

"Could she have had contact with this man while he was in human form as well?"

"That's entirely possible, but it just doesn't seem to explain the scent. It was more than just two separate scents mingling after having been touched to the same surface. It was as though this was a single blended scent. Neither scent was stronger or overlaid the other. It was as though both touched her at the exact same moment."

"It was the same here."

"But what does that mean? Are we dealing with some kind of upright on two feet, Lon Chaney type wolfman? Is that even possible?"

Dark shook his head. "I've never heard of such a thing. All I was taught by the old shaman and in all the legends he passed to me, such a thing was never mentioned."

"Have you ever tried... well, turning just part of your body?" Lan asked. "I have to admit I've done so a couple of times but without success."

"Landon! You could have caused yourself harm!"

"Nothing happened."

"That's not the point."

"Calm down."

"I'm perfectly calm."

"Yeah right. You always look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like a stern-faced parent about ready to mete out punishment."



"As though you'd hold still for that."

"You're right about that. My ma never got the opportunity to spank me, though she certainly wanted to plenty of times."

"So that's what's wrong with you."

"What?"

"You weren't spanked enough as a child. It's why you're a brat."

"I'm no brat!"

Dark laughed but quickly sobered. "Back to what we were discussing. So you actually tried to change just a part of yourself?"

"Yeah, but it didn't work."

"I'm not surprised. While the moon wolf is a part of us, it's also a separate entity. Our consciousness is transferred to the wolf when we change but the wolf's instincts take the lead."

"Not that I want to start an argument but I agree and disagree with that at the same time. Yeah, I'll go along with the idea that our consciousness is separate from the wolf's but the cells that make up our bodies all come from the same place. They're just rearranged and enhanced to take one form or the other. I would think that a partial transformation should be possible."

A frown formed between Dark's brows. "I never really considered that idea. But if it was possible, which mind would lead the body? It seems to me there would be so much conflict between the two natures, man and wolf that it could drive one to... madness."

"Madness." Lan formed the word at the exact same time. "Do you think it's possible that's what's happened here? One of us found a way to make a midway transformation and was driven insane by it?"

"We need to contact Spirit. Everyone keeps in touch with him. Those of us who had retreated to Canada, then returned, took up residence in Wyoming with him and the others."

"Seeker's here in Arizona with some of the others too. I say we put in a call to him as well."

"Yes, but before we do, I wanted to ask what you thought of Detective Danvers."

"I wondered if you'd bring that up."

"He was quite open with his opinions on this case, don't you think? I didn't think a detective would be so forthcoming with explanations, especially to those who could be considered suspects."

"Umm hmm, you think he was trying to keep us relaxed so our guard would be down."

"Don't you?"

"Yeah, I do. I also noticed that look he gave you. It was almost as though there was some kind of recognition taking place when he heard your name."

"I know. It's possible he'd heard of the shaman called Dark. His heritage could make that more than possible." Dark briefly considered mentioning his vision but decided at this point it held no importance.

Lan stood and retrieved the handset from the phone by the back door. Returning to his seat, he said, "We're going to have to be careful of him. He's obviously no fool. If it is one of us that's done this thing, we're going to have to take care of the problem without being caught." Deliberately setting the phone down on the table, Lan captured Dark's gaze. "Is there any other explanation? Could someone else have learned the secret of the stones or could this creature have been created some other way? Werewolf legends say a bite can turn a person."

Dark shook his head. "That does not work for us. As for it being created some other way, I don't know. How could I? But the stones? No. No one else could have learned that secret. It was passed orally from shaman to shaman. There was no written record and it was each man's sacred duty to keep the secret just that, a secret. I've told no one, not even you, *denzhone*, and if there was someone I'd be tempted to share it with, it would be you."

"I wouldn't want you to. You were entrusted with the secret and I'm proud to know you take that trust so seriously," Lan told him. "You activated the last of the stones that were used to change those of us who chose to become moon wolves. Could they have stayed active? Could someone else have used them?"

"Once an active stone is used it can never be used again. Even had I activated more than would have been used, they were never capable of keeping their power intact for long."

"Did we ever lose track of any of the stones? Didn't you used to carry a pouch that contained some of them when we lived at the canyon site? What happened to those?"

"I did carry such a pouch. It was lost when the hunters came but even if one of them had taken it, they didn't leave with it. None left that place alive, you know that. Even if they had, the stones would be nothing but that -- pretty red/orange stones. They would be powerless. And besides, wulfenite, as the stones came to be called, has been unearthed from the Red Cloud Mine and from other places as well. They are in the world. I noticed them for sale on Ebay. They're powerless."

"Well, then the stones can't be a factor unless someone found a way to activate them. If that was the case, wouldn't they change?"

Dark sighed. "They would change, but they would become a moon wolf just as you and I are. Not this nightmarish creature we are supposing exists. Unless whatever ritual they used was flawed. Then there's no telling what might have happened. I would be inclined to think that a flawed ritual wouldn't work, period. We can speculate all day long without finding a concrete answer. Make the calls. I know you're afraid it's one of us. Putting it off won't change anything. Let's absolve as many of our people as we can, then we'll worry about who is responsible. Besides, didn't you notice one thing more about that scent?"

"Unless something happened to change one of our packs cellular makeup, that scent didn't belong to anyone we know."

"Exactly."

Lan picked up the phone and dialed. Dark watched his lover's face, the pleasure that appeared when he greeted Spirit, and the solemn mien that overtook him when he finally informed Spirit of what had happened. Lan was their pack alpha, and even though they no longer lived as a pack, he was still their leader. The possibility that one of their number had become a murderer hurt him. Dark fully understood his need to find another explanation because Dark too wanted to believe something, anything other than to accept they might have to hunt down a friend.

## Chapter Three

Several hours and many phone calls later, everyone had been accounted for and to their great relief, been eliminated as suspects. Lan had personally spoken to anyone who by the remotest chance could have been in the area. In his position as alpha, Lan's senses were acute. He was deeply attuned to each and every member of the pack. It would have taken an impossibly clever person to pass off a lie he could not detect. Pure instinct would make each pack member *need* to speak the truth. It was all part of their inborn biological imperative to please the alpha and be in his good graces.

As he disconnected from the last call, his gaze found Dark's. "All present and accounted for. Whoever this is, he's not one of ours. So what do we do now?"

"I say we go hunting."

"I like that plan. Good thing today's Saturday. You don't have to worry about being at school. Of course it's one of our busiest nights, but I think I can wangle the night off. The boss owes me a favor. As soon as it's dark enough, we'll go. We should be able to follow the scent trail left by this guy unless he changed back to human and had a vehicle waiting nearby."

"I don't believe that's the case. It's just a guess on my part but I believe he arrived on foot. If he really is some blend of wolf and man as the scent indicates, would it even be possible for him to drive in that condition? And I suppose it would be too much to expect that we'll be able to follow him right to his door or wherever it is he's living."

"That'd be damned convenient but unless he's an idiot, I don't see that happening. Still, we may be able to gather some information that could be useful in finding him." Lan looked at the green LED readout of the clock on the stove. "We've got a couple of hours until nightfall. Is there anything we need to be doing?"

"Grocery shopping."

"Considering the circumstances that's rather mundane, isn't it?" Lan asked, grinning at Dark's unexpected reply.

"But necessary."

"All right. Grab your purse, darlin'," he teased, loving the one eyebrow raised and daggered look Dark sent him. "Let's take the jeep. I'm driving."

"Purse, my ass and why do you get to drive?"

"Cause you get the fun car all week long while I'm stuck driving that dull-as-ditch-water sedan. It's my turn."

"If you don't like the sedan, we should think about trading it, although the Great Spirit only knows what mischief you'd get into if you drove a 'fun car' all the time."

"Hey, I'm a good driver."

"Just keep in mind you're not in a race. You don't need another speeding ticket."

Lan turned a sour expression on his mate. "That was an accident. I didn't see the sign that said the speed limit dropped."

"I told you when we were coming into town."

"I didn't hear you over the radio."

"And that's another thing. You play the radio too loud."

"Oh come on..."

Their banter continued as the two of them left the house, piled into the jeep and headed for town. In the brightly lit supermarket, they restocked the usual items. Lan looked up to see his lover being admired by a couple of young women. Unaware he was being watched, Dark had stopped to examine some spices. Lan found himself looking at his mate with heightened awareness.

Dark was dressed in faded jeans and a white button down shirt with the tails hanging out. His clothes were nothing special and yet he wore them with a sensual grace that drew the eye to him. Against the white of the shirt, his warm, cinnamon-colored skin glowed.

His long, sleek black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The simple severity of the style brought his finely chiseled facial features into stark yet beautiful relief. In profile, Lan could easily see the high cheekbones, the strong blade of his nose and the full firm line of his lips. Just looking at him made Lan's heart stutter for a split second. Dark was every bit as breathtaking now as he'd been when they'd met that fateful day so long ago.

Fumbling to put a jar back on the shelf, Lan let himself be drawn to his own personal North Star. Since Dark had entered his life, he never felt lost or alone as he'd sometimes felt when he'd been a gambler/gunslinger wandering from town to town. Even on those rare occasions when they'd found themselves parted for a time, Lan could feel their connection. It was always there. Strong, sure and steady.

The two women had halted their cart near Dark and engaged him in conversation. They were obviously flirting and Lan was amused to see the deep flush that appeared on his lover's cheeks. Dark had never learned to enjoy such things.

Coming to liberate his bedeviled lover, Lan approached and smiled openly when Dark turned a searching gaze in his direction. The relief in his lover's eyes was palpable. Turning his attention to the two women, Lan smiled and duly noted the admiring looks he, himself was now garnering. "Good evening, ladies. Could you excuse us for a moment?" Lan slid a possessive arm around Dark's waist. "Darlin', I sure could use your opinion on which of these brands of picante sauce we should get. Do we want the mild, hot or the you'll-never-feel-your-tongue-again kind?"

Giggles met his humorous sally and looks of understanding were exchanged at the obvious claim Lan had just made. "Don't burn off anything important!"

"Have a good evening, you two." The two young women moved on.

"Thank you," Dark murmured before planting a quick peck on Lan's cheek. "I really hate that."

"I know you do. That's why I came to the rescue."

"My hero," Dark deadpanned and actually batted his eye lashes.

Lan hooted with laughter. "Don't you make fun of me now or next time I'll leave you in the lurch."

His expression turning serious, Dark soberly shook his head. "You'd never do that."

His mate's words were filled with such surety, Lan felt a frisson of warmth inside. "You're right. I'd never do that." He gave Dark a squeeze and released him. "Come on, let's finish this and go home."

By the time they finished their shopping, daylight was fading into dusk. Even though they'd eaten not long ago, the metabolism of the moon wolf ran high and both of them admitted to being hungry again. They stopped at one of their favorite steak houses and indulged in sixteen ounce ribeye steak meals with all the trimmings.

Country music played over the sound system and empty peanut shells crunched under foot as people walked by. Through the window, they could see the sun disappear below the horizon. Its fading rays painted streaks of gold, magenta, pink and deep indigo using the sky as its canvas.

"That's a pretty nice one as sunsets go," Lan commented. "We've seen our share of them, haven't we?"

"We have. With many more to come, *denzhone*."

Before Lan could comment, the waitress arrived with their check. "Is there anything else I can get you? More dessert?" After refusing her offer she went on. "I like to see a man with a hearty appetite and you two sure can put it away," she observed. "How the heck do you stay in such good shape?"

"We work out a lot," Lan answered with a smile before giving his mate a pointed look.

Dark returned his look then shifted to look out the window, studiously ignoring him. The waitress, having given her attention once more to the check, missed their exchange. Lan, on the other hand, had given his lover his full attention. At the flare of desire he'd seen in his Dark's eyes, he felt a tightening inside that ran gut deep. At that



moment he wanted nothing more than to take his mate home to bed but he knew they had business to take care of and it would keep no longer.

Once back home, the jeep was unloaded and everything put away. It was full night outside. Inside, the two of them eagerly stripped out of their clothes and exited the house out the back door. Even though the chore they undertook was of a serious nature, they always enjoyed every opportunity presented to shift into their wolf forms.

"Maybe we'll get the chance to run when we're done playing bloodhound," Lan told Dark. Dark merely nodded and Lan could see his mate's impatience to go. In the blink of an eye they both took their wolf shapes. Lan took the lead, easily finding the slowly fading scent trail left by Ronnie Little Fawn's killer.

Around them, the night was gloomy and filled with shadows. A breeze had risen, stirring the leaves on the trees and bushes while causing even the short grass in the yard to ripple in tremulous waves. A three quarters full moon rode high above them but was continually obscured by banks of dark clouds that sailed majestically across the sky.

Lan unerringly followed the trail, though it was already growing faint. Grass gave way to dry dirt and sand as they moved out into the wilderness that took the place of the cultivated lands in the area. They were being led into country that took on the near semblance of a desert. It was stark with rocky, rolling hills and mounds of scattered, wind-scoured boulders. The wind was even now wearing at the earthen path they followed, obscuring the scent.

Lan persevered, though several times he had to stop and cast around until he was again able to find the correct direction. It was difficult, especially with dirt trying to insinuate itself into his nasal passages. He had to sneeze occasionally to clear his nose.

Slightly behind him, he felt Dark's presence and that knowledge brought with it a primitive satisfaction. The wolf was in his element, hunting with a pack mate by his side. Running in a large group was something they both missed. The thought ran through his head that they needed to visit with the others. Lan's wolf was eager to reestablish his dominance and lead his full pack on a hunt.

With the correct route becoming harder and harder to find, Lan had nearly decided to call a halt when the capricious wind brought a new aroma to assail his nostrils. Blood. Fresh blood. The moonlight was once again hidden by clouds but following the weight of that coppery perfume, he rounded a large hill and soon came upon a body. It lay broken and discarded at the foot of a pile of jumbled boulders. With the night vision of the wolf, he could see the dark stains of blood that marred the tattered clothing and skin.

As suddenly as they covered it, the clouds parted and the moon was unveiled. Opalescent light washed over the pale flesh of a face. A woman's face. Sightless eyes stared straight ahead, all light and life extinguished. Her long, blonde hair was dull, the ends matted and stained where they come in contact with her throat. That pale column was a ruin of torn and shattered meat and cartilage.

Lan had halted. With his eyes steadily on the corpse before him, he listened and scented the wind hoping something would stir. A moment later he heard a moan and a soft retching sound. He craned his head around to find his mate transformed back to his human self. Naked, Dark looked strangely vulnerable to the wolf. It was momentarily disorienting to see his mate in this form. Dark was crouched low to the ground, one hand planted in the dirt to steady himself.

Throwing off the wolf's split second perplexity, Lan took his own human form and quickly moved to his lover. He slid an arm over Dark's shoulder and brought their bodies close together. "I'm here. Take it easy."

"Landon. I know her." Dark's voice was laden with shock.

"Who is she?"

"Sarah Tallant. She's a teacher at the school."

"Jesus. Here, come on." Lan urged Dark to stand and moved them further away. He found a smaller bunch of boulders and pressed his lover to sit on one that presented them a fairly flat and smooth surface. "Are you going to be all right? I want to change back and see where this new trail leads. It can't be more than an hour old. The scent is

strong and did you notice? It's changed. Whoever brought her here was a man. His scent overlays the other one."

"I'm fine. I just didn't expect to see something like this. Is this how Ronnie looked?"

"Yes."

Head lifting to let the moonlight wash over his face, Dark invoked a prayer to the Great Spirit. The sound of those ancient words, spoken in his native Apache, seemed to strengthen him. "We have to find this bastard."

"We will. Come with me. I'm not leaving you here alone. I don't know exactly what we're up against and the son of a bitch may still be lurking around."

"But what about...?"

"She can't be hurt any more. The best thing we can do for her now is find whoever did this."

"You're right but we've got to tell the police. We've got to call Detective Danvers."

"We will. Just as soon as we've learned all we can. Now come on." Lan went into alpha mode knowing it would brace his mate.

Nodding, Dark followed Lan's lead and transformed. The two wolves easily found the trail and followed it until it disappeared several miles later. Depressions in the dirt indicated the presence of a vehicle. In the distance, barely visible, was a road.

Changing once again, Lan picked up a handful of dirt, threw it and cursed. "Bastard had a vehicle this time. That's Arroyo Canyon Road over there, isn't it?"

"I think so."

"Shit. Well, this proves one thing. He has to have a vehicle capable of cross country travel. Not that that's going to help. Even if the dirt had held a print, the wind is erasing everything."

The two of them stood silently for a moment, eyes gazing over the barren landscape. Lan let the implications of what they'd just found wash over him. The

conclusion he came to was not a comforting one. "He knows us, and not just as humans."

"Yes, I agree with you. He killed Ronnie because we knew her, and he killed her in a place where you'd be certain to have a part in finding her. Then he brought us proof of his kill."

"Then he killed Sarah because you knew her. I figure he was hoping we'd try to follow the trail he left from the house. He brought her body out here for us to find. He's sending a message. He's watching us. He knows where we work, where we live, people we associate with."

"But why target others? Why not just attack us?"

"Either he enjoys toying with us, or he's trying to make us suffer, or both. Dark, what you said about bringing proof of his kill. We need to go back and look at Sarah's body. Callous as this sounds, I didn't notice if any part of her was missing."

"And if something is missing?"

"We'll be getting a visitor at the house," Lan said, finishing Dark's quietly voiced thought. "He might be there right now."

Without another word, Lan and Dark transformed and ran. The return trip was quicker now that they knew exactly where they were going. When they reached Sarah's body they stopped only long enough to discover one of her fingers was missing. After that it was a flat out run for home.

The scenery streaked by but Lan had eyes and thoughts only for what awaited their arrival. Tongues lolling and sides heaving, they slowed their approach when the house came in sight. Keeping to the shadows and using the trees and bushes in the yard for cover, they silently crept closer to the back porch. Ears laid back, Lan bared his teeth as his hackles rose when he picked up the scent of the man who had killed for the second time. It was all he could do to keep from growling.

From his position in the yard, he could see the porch and the mat in front of the back door but nothing seemed to have been left there. Closely examining every bit of the area, he noticed a slight shadow around the door. It was open. Just barely, but

nevertheless open. He knew he'd closed it when they left but he hadn't bothered to lock it. Signaling Dark, the two of them resumed their human forms.

"He's inside," Lan whispered.

"Maybe. He could have come and gone by now."

"We go in carefully just the same. You go left, I'll go right. Climb over the porch rail. Once we get to the door well, we'll see."

"All right." Dark agreed.

Lan shivered when the evening air brushed over his naked skin. Sweat from his exertions had formed now that he was back in human form. The grass was cool under his bare feet and he took each step at a deliberate pace while keeping his eyes and ears straining for any hint of movement or sound.

He and Dark reached their appointed places at the same time, climbed quietly over the porch rail and approached the back door. Lan signaled Dark to crouch down then he leaned forward and pushed the door open. It glided silently back. The kitchen was in darkness even though they'd left a light on over the sink.

Lan took deep breaths. The air was not only laden with the scent of the man who had abandoned Sarah's body by the rocks but was permeated with the tang of blood. Lan could almost taste it on his tongue and was surprised when his gorge started to rise. Gritting his teeth, he got his stomach under control, then reached for the light switch just inside the doorway.

Brightness flooded the kitchen and brought into stark relief the small, bloody object that was placed dead center on their kitchen table. Sarah Tallant's finger was positioned and curled as though beckoning them inside. Behind him, Dark began cursing. He used every filthy word Lan knew in English and Apache. Hearing his normally calm, controlled mate go off the deep end shook Lan's command of himself. The rage and pure sick horror he felt at what this person, this creature, had done made him want to strike out.

Keeping a tight rein on himself he ordered through gritted teeth, "Stop it, Dark. Falling apart isn't going to help anything."

"I'm not falling apart. I'm venting my anger in the only way possible without damaging anything."

Meeting his mate's gaze, Lan could see it was true. Before him was the Apache warrior he'd met over a hundred years ago. He looked furious enough to spill blood. As time went by he sometimes forgot that Dark and he himself had lived lives in which civilization had sometimes thinned to the breaking point. Men of their era had lived with violence and met it defiantly with guns, knives or bare fists. While Lan could honestly say he didn't miss such a life, it had well prepared him to face this current situation.

"Let's go over the rest of the house. He's long gone but I don't want any surprises later. Besides, you know Detective Danvers is going to want to do a thorough search and I don't want him or his people finding anything before we do. Danvers seemed surprisingly willing to share with us but that doesn't mean he'll continue to do so, especially if that psycho's left something behind in an effort to try and implicate us."

With a nod, Dark left the kitchen and disappeared into the living room. Lan followed him and took the upstairs. As far as he could tell, the killer hadn't set foot on the second floor. When he returned, Dark was just emerging from the basement.

"Nothing upstairs," Lan told him.

"The same down here. He seems to have confined himself to the kitchen."

"He accomplished his objective. I guess he felt that's all he needed to do at this stage. Let's get dressed. It's time to make that call to Detective Danvers but before we do we need to get our story straight. He's not going to believe that we went out for a simple stroll in the middle of the night."

"I'll bring down the hiking poles and get my camera, the one with the infrared capability. You and I went out to do some wildlife photography."

"That'll do." Lan started to reach for the phone then paused. He held out one arm. "Come here a sec."

Dark obeyed without hesitation and the two of them wrapped their arms around each other. At the touch of flesh against flesh, much of the tension that entrapped them,

eased. Lan rubbed his hands over Dark's naked back in a soothing rhythm and was petted in return.

"Damn, I needed this," Lan whispered against Dark's neck before placing a soft kiss there.

Dark kissed his shoulder. "Me too." With a sigh he pulled back and cupped Lan's cheek.

Lan accepted the soft kiss his lover bestowed. "I love you. Don't ever forget that," he softly admonished staring in the smoky depths of his mate's deep brown eyes.

"I couldn't, *denzhone*. Never." With one more kiss, Dark let him go. "Make the call. I'll bring everything down."

Nodding, Lan took up the phone, retrieved the business card Detective Danvers had given him and punched in the numbers.

## Chapter Four

Detective Danvers answered Lan's call and arrived at their home with his partner, Detective Akino. They'd also brought backup in the form of several police officers and a crime scene investigation team. Lan and Dark were questioned separately with Detective Danvers taking Lan's statement and Detective Akino taking Dark's.

Lan related the story he and Dark had agreed upon. They'd gone out to do some late night wildlife photography and had found Sarah Tallant. Upon returning home to place the call to Detective Danvers, they discovered her finger had been left on their kitchen table. He related the sequence of events in a calm, straightforward manner including the time they'd spent following the fresh tracks for signs of the killer and of searching their house.

"You should have called as soon as you discovered the guy had been here. If he was still here you might have run into trouble. We would have had a better shot at apprehending him than you," Detective Danvers scolded. Lan merely gave him a patient look while Dark, who had since rejoined them, raised a sarcastic brow. Upon seeing the looks they gave him, Detective Danvers grudgingly relented. "All right. I admit you two probably could have handled it, but you still should have called us first."

By the time the coroner's van had arrived, the sun was coming up. A small caravan headed out toward the place where they'd discovered Sarah's body. Lan directed Detective Danvers who drove the first vehicle in line.

During the trip, Lan explained in more detail what they'd found as far as signs the perpetrator had left behind. "We could see depressions on the ground where he'd parked his vehicle and a faint trail but it's sandy dirt out here. It's loose and dry, and



there wasn't a hint of tread marks. Plus there was a pretty stiff breeze blowing. Any signs he left behind were being erased fast."

"You say you could see Arroyo Canyon Road from there?"

"Yeah."

"I'll have someone take a look along there. Maybe there's some sign of him left on the shoulder of the road. I'll need you to point out approximately where you think his vehicle may have exited and returned to the road."

"We can do that."

"So this photography you're into. Get any good shots last night?"

Dark took the question as the camera equipment belonged to him. "No, I didn't. Perhaps the killer being in the area drove any animals away. We never got the chance to set up and stay stationary for awhile either. Normally we head for high ground, set up the camera and wait."

"And that's how you just happened to end up at that one particular place?"

"Yes. It's one of the highest hills in the area and I've had good luck there. When we return to the house you might take a look at the framed photos in the living room. I've gotten some good shots of coyotes and some really nice ones of owls in flight."

"Hmm." Detective Danver's reply was noncommittal and Lan knew he wasn't really interested. He'd just been testing Dark's knowledge of the subject.

"I don't suppose you thought to take any pictures of any tracks you found before the wind erased them all."

A genuine look of surprise and distress crossed Dark's face. "It never occurred to me. It was just such a shock to come across Sarah that way. It drove everything else from my mind."

"That's natural. I'd have been amazed if you *had* taken pictures. The information you've given us so far is more than a lot of people can manage after coming across a dead body."

Dark glanced at Lan. Regret shone in his eyes. Lan knew exactly how he felt. He hated lying but there was no help for it. There was no way they could tell the truth and

come away unscathed. At best they'd be labeled freaks, at worse they'd probably be locked up somewhere. Whatever happened, their lives would be in ruins. Lan gave his head a slight shake and reached for Dark's hand. Giving it a squeeze he acknowledged and shared his mate's remorse.

Coming within sight of the hill that hid the crime scene, Detective Danvers commented quietly, "Well, I guess we could have found it without you."

Puzzled, Lan looked out the window. Understanding came when he saw several large birds circling overhead. Buzzards had discovered the body. He found himself hoping that the coyotes hadn't had a chance at it as well. Having left their wolf scent behind, he was fairly certain the coyotes would not have dared brave the area so soon.

Circling the hill, Detective Danvers brought their vehicle to a stop with the body in sight. The other vehicles gathered around it. Lan and Dark waited patiently while the crime scene investigators went over the area. Making the body the center of their activities, they worked their way outward, carefully examining the ground and taking pictures of anything of interest.

"You don't suppose we left any tracks, do you?" Dark asked.

"Hard to tell. I wouldn't think so considering how the dirt was being stirred by the wind but I suppose it's possible."

"How do we explain wolf tracks?"

"As far as I'm concerned, even if they find wolf tracks and someone is actually able to identify them as such, it's not up to us to explain how they got there."

"You're right. Then we won't worry about it."

Lan glanced at his lover. Dark's face was expressionless, his eyes impassive. While he was used to his mate being calm and low key. This seemed a little more so than usual. He felt a tingle of alarm. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Dark."

"Don't fuss. It's fine."

"Yeah right," Lan scoffed but let it go.

Pressing Dark only made him more stubborn. Lan resolved to keep an eye on him. It didn't happen often but Dark had a tendency to become remote when under stress. It was the nearest thing to a barrier that ever came between them and it made Lan distinctly uncomfortable.

Forty-five minutes later, Detective Danvers returned. "I'm going to drive you two back home by way of Arroyo Canyon Road so you can point out about where you saw the vehicle tracks. There's no reason you should have to hang around here any longer."

"Thanks. We'd appreciate that. We've been up all night and I for one am damned tired," Lan answered.

"I too, *denzhone*," Dark added quietly.

"No problem," Danvers answered, giving Dark a startled glance at his use of the endearment.

Lan frowned thoughtfully. Apparently Danvers had a knowledge of the Apache language. Lan could see he recognized the word Dark spoke. He'd pondered the question of what tribe the man was associated with and wondered if he just received an answer.

Danvers started their vehicle and began the return trip. "Listen, we're trying to keep the details of this out of the press, but just in case you're contacted by any reporters I'd appreciate it if you didn't speak to them."

"That won't be a problem," Dark muttered.

"Not a publicity seeker, huh?"

"No."

"There's one more thing. Would the two of you mind if I come back later this evening to speak with you? I have to take care of things at the scene first. After that, Aki and I will be trying to find out who saw Ms. Tallant last and when, and if she was with anyone, that kind of thing. But I really need to speak to the two of you privately."

In the backseat, Lan and Dark exchanged a quick glance. Dark shrugged and nodded. "Sure, no problem," Lan answered for both of them.

"Great. It might be late before I can get there."

"That's all right. Since we're getting to sleep so late, we'll be up late tonight."

"Thanks. I appreciate this."

After they showed him approximately where the vehicle had been parked, the detective dropped them at their door and wasted no time heading back. Lan and Dark entered the house, noting the things that were out of place from the police having gone through the rooms. There was fingerprint powder here and there as well.

"I suppose we should clean this up, but hell I think we should let it wait. We both need sleep. What do you say?" Lan asked.

"I say, yes. I'll go make sure the back door is locked."

Dark headed off for the kitchen and Lan duly checked the front door and the downstairs windows. Leaving the living room, he stopped at the foot of the stairs. From that vantage point he could see Dark standing in place, silently looking down at their kitchen table. Almost certain he knew what his lover was thinking. He squared his shoulders and approached him.

"It makes me sick to think he killed Sarah simply because she was someone I knew. How could he do such a thing?" Dark asked.

"Cause he's a sick son of a bitch with no conscience."

"We'll have to buy a new table. I could never eat off this one again."

"I know. We will. Let's not think about it right now." Even though he was trying to keep his emotions under wraps, Lan could tell how deeply his lover was affected. "Come on, darlin'. It's time to let it go for awhile."

Dark let Lan urge him out of the kitchen and upstairs. "Did that sound cold?"

"What?"

"Talking about buying a new table. Two women are dead and all I think about is how our table has been ruined."

"Dark."

"I feel bad for them, Lan. I really do. And even though I knew them, we weren't close. Still, I should feel more. Why am I not feeling enough?"

Lan steered Dark through the bedroom and into the bathroom. He brought them to a halt, turned and clapped his hands on his mate's shoulders, looking him straight in the eyes. "You're feeling plenty. That's why you're trying to shut it down now. If this guy was just trying to hurt us, we'd know what to do. It would be easy. But he's striking at us through innocent people who don't have a clue what's going on. We're helpless in the face of this because we don't know who he is, where he is, or who he might hurt next. It's debilitating feeling this way, but until he shows his hand there's nothing we can do about it. We're going to have to live with the guilt, even though it's really not our fault. This is exactly how he wants us to feel. Now strip."

Dark nodded and did as Lan bid him while Lan quickly followed suit and started the water. Their shower stall was large enough that even with two big men in it, there was still plenty of room. Steam immediately began filling the room. Grabbing a wash cloth and the bar of soap from the built-in ledge in the wall, Lan vigorously worked up a lather.

A touch on his arm brought his gaze up. Dark was watching him, his eyes solemn. "Don't be angry."

"I'm not angry."

"You are."

"All right, I am! You're withdrawing into a shell, I'm totally pissed, and neither of these is helping either one of us."

"I know. Give me that." Dark took the washcloth and soap from Lan. "Turn around, please."

Lan did as requested and let his lover scrub his back. It felt good to be touched, to be cared for. He closed his eyes and willed himself to relax. After a short time, Dark set the washcloth aside and Lan let slip the moan that filled his throat. Dark's hands replaced the rough cloth. They were slippery and wet and slid over his skin like living silk. The feeling was sublime. As Dark kneaded the tight muscles in his shoulders, arms and back, the tension he'd been holding onto leached away.

Dark let his hands glide over Lan's ribs, around his waist and settled them against Lan's abdomen. He brought their bodies together until there wasn't the least iota of space between them. They stood there, plastered against each other, breathing together, hearts beating together until the calm enfolded them and peace filled their souls.

"Face me," Dark whispered. Turning in his arms, Lan let his gaze meet Dark's. Blue eyes and brown locked. Nothing was hidden, nothing was locked away. Their feelings, each for the other, were clearly on display. "I wasn't withdrawing from you," Dark assured him.

"I know that. I wasn't angry with you."

"I know you weren't upset with me; you were just worried. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault. Just don't... go too far away."

"Never, *denzhone*." Dark brought one hand from around Lan's back and laid it over his chest. "Don't you know? I could never abandon my heart."

A rush of emotion greeted Dark's word and Lan fought the sting of moisture that tried to fill his eyes. He grinned at his lover. "You say the mushiest things sometimes."

Dark chuckled. "It's because we've been together so long. I'm no longer embarrassed to admit out loud how much you mean to me." He let his hand glide down over Lan's abs and stomach, allowing it to come to rest on his cock, already rising to meet his searching fingers. "Nor am I ever reluctant to tell you how much I want you."

"Want what? This?" Lan reached between them and closed his fingers around Dark's semi-tumescent cock.

"Yes," Dark breathed. "Your hands on me. Your body with mine." His hand glided up and down the length of Lan's cock. "Your pleasure rising with mine."

With only indirect morning light filtering in through the shuttered window, they were embraced by the shadowy confines of the shower. Moist heat engulfed them. Water, hot and soothing, pattered over their skin. Face to face they stood, bodies as

close as possible. Every inhalation contained the scent of mate, of sex, of the solidarity that was their union.

Desire filled Dark's eyes and Lan knew the same was reflected in his own. He watched it grow, felt it inside himself as it became unbearably sweet, a knife-edged agony of impending bliss. He felt the touch of his lover, the sure hand, the clever fingers that caressed and manipulated his flesh, demanding, coaxing his response. He followed Dark's lead.

The hard column of flesh in his hand was as familiar as his own. He knew the reaction each touch would elicit, what each subtle variation of pressure would do to his lover. He knew how each stroke drew the sensations closer and closer to the surface and he plied that knowledge to invoke the maximum arousal possible. Dark's lips were parted; the soft moans that issued forth sent waves of desire burning down Lan's spine. His eyes were locked with Lan's, the irises nearly black. His breaths were fast and harsh and matched Lan's exactly.

The tension pushed higher, harder, the need to come rising hot and insistent. Lan felt his insides fisting tight. His stomach quivered, his legs were rigid, holding him upright by sheer instinct. He fought to hold on, wanting this moment to last but to no avail. With the twist of something deep inside, a breaking, a surrender occurred. His body and will succumbed.

A raging torrent of pure physical ecstasy flooded him. It burst forth in the streams of creamy seed anointing his skin and that of his lover's. It mixed with the semen he felt spew from the cock in his hand and he rejoiced in their coming together. Vision dimmed by the internal fireworks, he blindly found his lover's lips and slammed their mouths together. Bodies shuddering with orgasm, they devoured each other. Groans and pants were swallowed, tongues were entwined and writhed senselessly until the climax waned.

The desperate hold each had on the other, eased. The frantic kiss gentled and Lan moaned softly at the soothing, tongued caresses he was given. Reluctantly he let Dark retreat. Bringing his hand forth from between them, he briefly considered the pearly

liquid there before swiping a coated finger over his mate's kiss swollen lips. Dark turned a sleepy, sultry eyed look in his direction. His tongue appeared and made a slow, wet sweep over his lips, gathering the fluid Lan had left behind.

His own lips parting, Lan brought his hand to his mouth and tasted their combined essence. The taste was unique. Sweet, salty and bitter all at once. Dark moved close and swept his tongue over Lan's fingers. A hand curled around the back of his head holding him in place for the open mouthed kiss he was given. He readily accepted the flavored lips and tongue that joined his own and shared the evidence of their fulfilled desire.

Humming with pleasure, he relaxed in Dark's arms. When the kiss ended, he let his head rest on his lover's shoulder. "Tired?" Dark murmured, fingers brushing the wet hair back from Lan's ear.

A sleepy *mmm*, was all he could manage. Dark's soft laugh brushed his skin bringing with it a faint stirring of renewed arousal. He smiled at his body's predictable response. It seemed no matter how many times they enjoyed each other, there was always a certain amount of desire simmering just beneath the surface. Dark was in his blood, a part of him, a need that would never be fully sated, and Lan wouldn't have it any other way.

He yawned, stretched and muttered, "Let's go to bed."

"A good plan. If you can manage it, we need to finish this shower first."

"Crap."

Dark's chuckle warmed him more than the water running over his skin. "Just stand still. I'll do it."

Enjoying every bit of it, Lan put himself in Dark's hands, sighing with pleasure as his mate washed him.

\* \* \*

Dark stirred and shifted slightly, his eyes opening then closing several times as he drifted in that space between wakefulness and sleep. Awareness crept in and he noted the stronger light coming in the west window. It was late afternoon. He and Lan



had slept peacefully at least five maybe six hours and he was grateful for that. Rested, he felt better able to cope with the nightmarish situation that had engulfed the two of them.

Easing his arm from where it lay over Lan, he carefully sat up and looked down at his sleeping mate. Lan's brown hair was tousled, his lips slightly parted and his expression relaxed. His face was boyishly handsome when he slept. A smile curved Dark's lips. No matter how many times he was treated to this sight, it never failed to move him. This man, strong and true with all his faults and foibles, all his wisdom, bravery and his pure lust for life, was his.

Rising carefully so as not to disturb his sleeping lover, Dark dressed in jeans and a tee shirt. First on his list of things to do was make coffee. He leaned against the kitchen counter, soberly contemplating the misused table. He hated the thought of getting rid of it. It was handmade, and quite old. He and Lan had purchased it together after a day of browsing a town full of antique shops. He considered the idea of a cleansing ritual and perked up at the thought.

His gaze was drawn from the table when Lan entered the room. Barefoot, dressed in jeans so washed out they were almost white, he looked scrumptious. His denim shirt was open, his lightly furred chest showing between the parted sides of the fabric. Padding toward Dark, he moved with the grace of a lean and muscled beast sure of its surroundings.

Stepping up without the least hesitation, he offered a kiss that Dark was happy to accept. The taste of toothpaste mingled with Lan's natural flavor. "Morning. Or guess I should say afternoon." Lan licked Dark's bottom lip. "Coffee tastes good." He snagged the cup Dark held and brought it to his mouth for a sip.

"Afternoon to you too, and that's mine. Get your own," Dark growled, appropriating his cup.

"That's harsh, darlin'," Lan complained but nevertheless got his own cup. He joined Dark with his back to the counter. As though reading Dark's earlier thoughts, he offered a suggestion. "What if we strip and refinish it?"

Following Lan's thought, Dark divulged his own. "I was thinking a cleansing ritual would help."

"It's settled then. We having lasagna?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Wanna set things to rights while we're waiting?"

"That was next on my list."

"So be it."

The two of them stayed side by side, silently sipping their coffee. Lan turned around and rummaged in the cupboard behind them. He came out with a package of toaster pastries. Opening the packet, he offered one to Dark. With a light snort, Dark took it and bit into the rectangle of strawberry filled crust.

"Why do you buy these things? They're for kids."

"I like them. Besides, I didn't see you turn it down."

"I'm hungry."

"Uh huh, admit it, you like them as much as I do."

"Never."

"Elitist."

"Grub."

Lan laughed. "Grub, huh? Guess that about covers it. I can live with being common."

"There's nothing common about you," Dark amended, giving him a slight nudge.

The two of them finished their pastries and coffee in companionable silence then set to work. The fingerprint powder was cleaned up and everything out of place set to rights. Lan ran the vacuum while Dark dusted, household chores neither were fond of but performed with semi-regularity. When they finished, the coffee table in the living room was pushed forward and pillows thrown on the floor between it and the sofa.

Dark, who'd been watching the time, shoved a loaf of Italian bread into the upper oven and both timers went off at the same time. Lan sliced the hot, garlic

seasoned bread while Dark spooned healthy servings of lasagna on two plates. The food was taken into the living room along with butter for the bread and glasses of water. They settled in and Lan turned on the television, flipping through the stations until they settled on watching a football game.

"I suppose I should have made a salad."

"We can let the greens slide now and then. We are carnivores, you know."

"We're also human, you know."

"I know. We'll feed that part with ice cream."

Dark chuckled and let Lan win. Digging into his lasagna, he settled back and enjoyed what, under the current circumstances, felt as close to a typical Sunday as was possible.

Dark let his mind drift. Part of his attention was on the football game and part was on Detective Danvers impending visit and the situation they found themselves dealing with. He found himself pondering the identity of the person responsible for Ronnie and Sarah's deaths.

At his side, he felt Lan stir. Lan took the fork that he'd been holding. "You're thinking too hard. I can feel it. Besides that, you've had this fork dangling in front of your face for the last five minutes."

"You're exaggerating," Dark began then stopped when he found himself with his arms full of an insistent mate. Lan set the fork aside and straddled Dark's thighs, settling himself comfortably.

He draped his arms over Dark's shoulders and encircled his neck. "Am I?"

"I wasn't holding the fork for five minutes."

"Maybe not, but it was long enough to tell me your mind was elsewhere. So what were you thinking about?"

"I was wondering what I might have done in the past to cause what's happening now. Who is this man and what did I do to him?"

"First of all, it's not just you. It's us. So whatever was done, we did it and damned if I can think of anything." Dark felt a frisson of surprise that Landon had been

doing his own soul searching. It must have shown on his face. "You think I haven't thought about it? Well I have, and frankly, my conscience is clear. I'm no angel but I'm not a total bastard either. I don't go out of my way to be cruel or uncaring, and neither do you. Whatever issue this guy has with us, I'm willing to lay money on it that it began with something he brought on himself. Somehow we were there at the time and he's decided to pin it on us."

"You really think so?"

"Darlin', I've seen too many people in this world who refuse to take responsibility for their own actions. Something goes wrong and they automatically look for someone else to take the blame. It's just so much easier than admitting they've done something to cause themselves trouble."

"I suppose that's true."

"Sure it is. For example, take this situation." Lan did a twisty little wiggle with his hips that sent a jolt of sensation careening headlong into Dark's groin. He leaned in and spoke softly into Dark's ear. "I'm completely ready to take responsibility for the fact that your cock is getting hard."

Bringing his arms up from his sides, Dark let his hands first settle on Lan's thighs before sliding them around to cup the taut cheeks of his ass. "You're always so conscientious. So what do you intend to do about it?"

"I thought I'd let you fuck me."

Dark couldn't stop the soft chuckle that bubbled up from within. "Conscientious and generous. You amaze me."

He tilted his head and silently invited a kiss. Lan accepted and their mouths came together, lips parting, their tongues slipping in to tease and explore. Dark closed his eyes to savor the feel of his lover's touch. The heady and familiar flavor of his mate caressed his palate and fed his growing arousal. He let himself sink into that place populated by only two people -- himself and Lan.

Bringing his hands up, Dark let them roam under Lan's shirt and over the firm muscled plains of his back. His skin was smooth and warm beneath Dark's palms. He

broke their kiss and let his lips wander down the tanned column of Lan's throat. Lan lifted his head, accommodating the path Dark chose to take while his gentle pants revealed the pleasure his lover's actions brought.

Lowering his head, Dark nuzzled his cheek against the soft, short hair on Lan's chest before blowing a breath of warm air over one nipple. That small brown nub drew up tight under his fascinated gaze. Following his own imperative inclination, he brought his mouth to it and with several flicks of his tongue left it damp and harder than before. Lan's soft groan sent Dark's desire climbing higher. He covered that tiny bit of flesh with his mouth and pinched it lightly between his teeth while sucking and lashing it with his tongue.

Lan's body rocked against Dark's, his hips moving convulsively. The pressure and friction between them increased. Even with several layers of fabric separating skin from skin, the stimulation his cock was receiving was intoxicating. Wanting it to continue, Dark released Lan's nipple only to attack the other in similar fashion.

He could feel the tense and release of the muscles in Lan's buttocks where they rested against his thighs. At the thought of those firm round cheeks, Dark was taken with an urgent need to see and touch them. He reluctantly released the nipple in his mouth. It glistened, red and swollen from his tender abuse.

Leaving it with a kiss, he brought one hand down from Lan's back and lightly smacked his ass. "Take these off," he ordered.

"Damn it," Lan growled. "Why can't clothes just magically disappear? I swear we should just go naked when we're home." He levered himself off Dark, stood up and quickly stripped his jeans and briefs away. Kicking them a short distance away, he faced his lover with a full erection. "Where do you want me?"

At the sight of it, Dark's mouth began to water. "Sit on the sofa," he replied before rising to his knees and pulling his tee shirt off.

Lan took his own shirt off and spread it over the sofa cushion before sitting down. "Just in case. Don't want to leave extraneous body fluids on the fabric."

Struck by a thought, a mischievous smile curved Dark's lips. He turned back toward the coffee table and reached out, snagging a small bowl. "Or butter," he declared, showing his lover the container.

Wide-eyed, Lan gave him a doubtful look. "I never knew you had a butter fetish. You really gonna use that for lube?"

"Why not? It's nice and slippery." Placing a hand on either of Lan's knees, Dark spread his thighs and moved between them. "Relax, you'll be delicious."

Lan snorted. "As long as you don't take a bite out of me."

"Maybe just a nibble," Dark teased and bent his head to his lover's swollen cock.

At the first sweep of Dark's tongue against the full, plump cap, Lan groaned and leaned back. This was something Dark loved to do. Not only was sucking his lover's cock sinfully sensual, it was empowering as well. He held the key to his mate's pleasure. Every touch would evoke a response that revealed Lan's need of him and the physical passion they shared.

"Sit on the edge and put your legs over my shoulders," Dark instructed him. His eyes shining with the heat that filled them, Lan did as he was told.

Dark turned his attention back to Lan's cock. Taking it in his mouth, he glided down the hard, silky length, taking it as deep as possible. His tongue swirled over the velvety flesh, tracing the slight bulge and pulse of blood engorged veins. The scent of his lover mingled with the taste, touching that place deep inside where his unconscious mind registered the essence of his mate. A basic, primitive side of him rose up and growled, insisting he reclaim that which was his.

With his mouth engaged in driving his lover wild, Dark strove to keep himself in check. It was too soon to lose control. His mate needed to be prepared. He dipped his fingers in the bowl of butter and brought them to the full sac that hung below Lan's cock. With infinite care, he ran his fingers over it while gently squeezing.

"Come on. In me," Lan groaned and spread his thighs wider. Tracing the short path of his perineum to the puckered flesh that rimmed his opening, Dark teased the tender opening then slid one finger in to the knuckle. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. More."

Lan commenced a sultry undulation of his hips that had him riding the finger that penetrated him. Entranced by his lover's wanton actions, Dark gave him exactly what he asked for. A second finger was soon followed by a third. With those three tightly fluted digits, he loosened the tight entrance, readying Lan for penetration. When this was done to his satisfaction, he pulled his mouth from Lan's rigidly swollen cock, and withdrew his fingers. Still on his knees, he sat back and lubed his erection with more butter from the nearby bowl.

*"Denzhone, come to me. Legs around my waist. Lower yourself,"* Dark ordered.

With his arms braced on the sofa, Lan followed the guidance of the hand Dark rested on his hip. With the other hand, Dark held the thick column of his cock in position and groaned when the head nestled in and penetrated the tight ring of Lan's entrance. With a guttural groan, Lan hesitated only for a moment before continuing to slide down until the full length of Dark's cock was planted deep within him.

Panting and fighting to maintain his sanity, Dark closed his eyes for a moment. With a modicum of success, he stilled the wildly careening physical sensations and brought them under a tenuous control. When he opened his eyes, the full glory of his mate was presented to his lust-filled gaze. Lan was a bounty of golden skin, fluid muscle and pure male sensuality. His lips, slightly swollen from their kisses were parted and soft moans issued from between them. His eyes were closed, his brow furrowed in a look that, Dark knew, signified Lan's efforts to withstand the need to come. His engorged cock lay against his belly, quivering with every indrawn breath.

Pushed to the limit by the sounds, sight, scent and feel of his mate, Dark pushed forward, grinding himself against his lover. That one shift of his body set off a chain reaction of movement. Following age-old instincts, Dark began thrusting, in and out, deep and hard inside his lover's tight, encompassing sheath. Lan moved with him and together they built a mountain of aching need that exploded into an avalanche of pulse-pounding ecstasy.

Dark felt his climax rapidly approaching and wrapped his long fingers around Lan's cock, determined to make him come as well. A few firm strokes had Lan crying

out with the forceful ejaculation of seed that spattered over his belly and Dark's hand. Dark gave in and let the pounding orgasm roar over him. It clutched at his insides with fingers of unadulterated delight and left him shuddering with every spasm that sent his seed spurting within the convulsively, clutching sheath that milked him. He rocked mindlessly, his once fluid movements now choppy and uneven.

By slowly bestowed increments, his body relaxed and he leaned forward over his mate, heedless of the warm semen that smeared and spread between them. He felt himself lifted and set down with each breath Lan took and it was a feeling that nearly sent him drifting into sleep. Until a twinge in one thigh muscle reminded him of his cramped position.

"Can you move?" Dark managed to ask, though his throat was dry and his voice husky.

"Not sure," Lan replied, his voice equally hoarse.

Sitting up, Dark pulled Lan toward him. "If you can get your feet under you and stand, I'd appreciate it. I'm fast losing the feeling in my legs." Lan snorted and began to chuckle. Unable to help himself, Dark felt the smile. "It's not funny, *denzhone*. If you don't get up soon, I'll have to spend the next hour learning how to walk."

Something about the way he'd complained must have hit Lan just right. His body shook with the laughter he could no longer contain. Despite the numbness and cramps sneaking into his legs, Dark started to laugh as well. Caught between amusement and pain he did the one thing he could think to do. With a heave, he tilted them until they landed in a heap on their sides. With a groan of relief, Dark straightened his legs.

"That maneuver could have cost you your cock. You were still inside me, you know," Lan gasped. His grin was still in place and he was wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"It was a chance I had to take," Dark replied and melted boneless against the carpet. Lying there with his eyes closed he said, "You know, I love you but you can certainly be a lot of work."



“It’s worth it.”

He smiled at Lan’s reply. “Yes. It is.”

## Chapter Five

As was usual lately, any day they got to spend together seemed to pass swiftly. At one point they'd discussed the possible reason Detective Danvers could have for wanting to speak privately with them but decided it was useless to speculate. The reason would come out when he arrived.

Toward dusk they took a walk, this time in the opposite direction of where Sarah Tallant's body had been found. It was pleasant out, not too warm and the air was dry. The sunset out in the wilderness, with nothing to hide it, was spectacular and they sat enjoying it until all the colors waned. It was full night by the time they returned home.

Dark started some laundry and contemplated a few future lesson plans, leaving Lan to his own devices. These turned out to be the wood carving hobby he'd taken up years ago. Lan carved wildlife figurines that ranged in size from a mere few inches to life size. He'd gotten quite good at it and even took orders for his work. Of course it was just a hobby and not something that he did full time but he'd still cultivated a reputation amongst the local artisans.

A seven foot tall bear that stood upright on his hind legs graced the end of their driveway. It was carved from the solid trunk of an oak tree, and stained to make it look lifelike. It had garnered quite a bit of attention when it first appeared. There had even been a write up about it in the local paper. It still drew the occasional passerby to their door making inquiries.

He had just returned from his woodshop in the small building next to the house and was washing his hands when the front doorbell rang. "That must be Danvers," he said, grabbing up the towel that lay on the counter by the sink.

"I'll get it," Dark told him and went to the front door. Turning on the porch light, he could see through the small panel of security glass in the door that it was indeed the detective. Dark opened the door. "Detective Danvers. Please, come in."

"Thanks. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all. We've been expecting you."

Lan entered the living room. "Detective, can I get you something to drink? Coffee, tea, juice, water?"

"No, but thank you anyway. I'd really just like to get right to it, if I may."

Dark and Lan exchanged glances. Dark could see that getting to the point was something they all wanted. "Please, sit down," he offered, directing the detective to a cushiony wing chair. He and Lan took seats on the sofa and waited.

Detective Danvers sighed. "I rehearsed what I wanted to say but now that I'm about to voice it out loud it seems crazy. But here goes." He directed his gaze to Dark. "You're Apache, am I right?"

"Yes."

"So am I. Years ago, my great-grandfather used to tell me all the great legends and stories of our tribe but there was one he said was for my ears only. He spoke of a shaman called Dark and how he bore the secret of the moon wolves. He said it was an ancient ritual that could allow a man to become a wolf."

Dark could feel Lan tense at his side. His own muscles had tightened but he kept his face expressionless while processing this unexpected revelation. Remaining silent, he gave the detective his unwavering attention. To speak now would reveal more than he was willing to have exposed.

"According to my great-grandfather, when the white men encroached on their lands and made it impossible to go on living their lives as they had, a branch of our tribe disappeared. It's said that the shaman Dark performed a ritual that bestowed the gift of the moon wolf on every member of his tribe and that they disappeared into the wilderness never to be seen or heard from again. He insisted, right up until the day he

died, that one tribe of Apache remained free and was never tamed by the white man. He took great pride in that fact." Detective Danvers fell silent, his eyes upon Dark.

"That's an interesting tale and one I've heard myself. Is there a reason you bring it to me now?"

"Forensics evidence from both Ronnie Little Fawn and Sarah Tallant include the hair of some kind of animal. Its basic makeup is canine but there are some anomalies that the lab techs just can't explain. It's almost as though canine and human DNA have somehow combined. Something they believe is utterly impossible. They're blaming the results on some kind of equipment malfunction.

"When I read that part of the report and put it in context with how both women were killed, it brought to mind the tales my great-grandfather used to tell me. Moon wolves, werewolves. One and the same? Do they really exist? And if so, is this the killer I'm searching for?"

"That still doesn't answer the question of why you're giving us this information."

"Doesn't it? I've personally done some in-depth investigation into your background. It checks out but at the same time there are a few quirks, some interesting peculiarities that don't register unless someone is really looking for them. Things like how your name gets passed from generation to generation and how close the family resemblance is on official documents. You're the spitting image of your father and your grandfather. But then I guess you know that. If I didn't know better, I'd swear they were all the same man."

"Resemblances do have a tendency to run strongly in some families, and passing names from generation to generation is a time honored tradition."

"That's true. But it seems the same holds true with the Jeffers family. It's quite a coincidence that two of you, with such similar circumstances in their backgrounds should be together. Great-grandfather also said it was rumored that the tribe I speak of adopted a white man and that this man became Dark's mate."

"Your great-grandfather seems to have garnered quite a few facts. If they are indeed facts," Lan commented.

"I believe they are true. My great-grandfather was a shaman himself. He was an honorable man. He spoke of Dark with great respect and awe. He made me swear that the tales he told me of Dark and his tribe would remain a secret, which they have until now. He told me that someday I would need to know these things. He said that the day would come when I was to pass on a message to two who would face a great evil. What branch of the Apache are you descended from, Dark? Do you mind if I ask?"

"I don't mind. I'm descended from the branch your great-grandfather told you about. I'm the man he spoke of. I'm Dark."

Not only did Detective Danvers stare at him in disbelief at his confession, but the man at his side, his mate turned to look at him. Dark met the storm in Lan's eyes with an icy calm. "I've seen this man in a vision. I knew he would play a part in this. He speaks the truth. There's no reason to hide from him."

"You could have told me before now," Lan growled.

Dark shrugged. "I didn't know what it meant."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean you're the man my great-grandfather spoke of? That's not possible. You couldn't be."

Dark turned to look at the man who spoke. Detective Danvers' expression was filled with suspicion. "Will you now doubt the knowledge your great-grandfather gave you?"

"I don't doubt him but how can you be the original Dark? That would make you well over a hundred years old. Unless you found the fountain of youth, I'd say that was impossible."

"Longevity is one of the perks that comes with being a moon wolf."

"You're saying it's true? That you can become a wolf?"

"Yes."

"This is crazy."

"This is truth. What was the message your great-grandfather told you to give me?"

"Wait a minute. I can't just hand that over to you without proof."

Lan snorted. "A few minutes ago you were sure of your facts. You can't have it both ways. We either are or are not, who you accuse us of being. What's it going to be?"

"Yes, but..."

At that moment the phone rang. With a look of disgust on his face, Lan reached for the handset that rested on the side table near his end of the sofa. He engaged the call, said hello and listened for a moment. The expression on his face grew hard and remote. Dark felt a frisson of alarm twist his stomach.

"Yes, I understand. We're on our way, just don't hurt the girl. There's no need for you to do that. Hello? Shit!" Lan stood and threw the phone across the room. It hit the wall with such power that it exploded in a shower of plastic, metal and plaster dust. A hole marked the wall where it impacted. He turned hard eyes on Dark who met them squarely. "He's got one of your students. He wants us to go to the place where we found Sarah. Now. We're to come as wolves." Lan turned his gaze on Detective Danvers. "You want proof? You're about to get it."

"Hold on a minute. I can't just let you do this. Let me call for backup."

"No! He'll kill the girl if we don't do as he says. You think he won't if a half dozen police cars show up instead of us?"

Dark fished in his pocket and came up with the keys to their jeep. He tossed them to Danvers. "You can follow us. Take our jeep. It'll save you from having to walk the entire way. The moon's full tonight. Keep the lights off and walk the last mile or so."

Lan was stripping and the detective was looking at both of them as though they were insane.

"What was the message, Detective?" Dark pulled his tee shirt off over his head and threw it to the floor. "What did your great-grandfather wish you to pass on to me?"

Danvers' eyes widened in shock. "Jesus Christ," he whispered.

Dark followed his gaze and found that Lan had transformed. Standing in their living room, the wolf looked enormous. Gray, tan, rust, black and cream fur blended, over his entire body only to separate and highlight various parts. Cream highlighted his legs and undercarriage, black tipped his tail and ears and accented his golden-amber eyes. Rust, and tan darkened the thick ruff around his neck and blended with the gray that made up the bulk of his coloring.

Dark let his hand rest on Lan's back. He turned back to Danvers. "The message!"

Startled, the detective jumped. "Heart's desire. Fulfill the heart's desire."

"Fulfill the heart's desire? Is that it?"

"That's it."

"All right. Follow as you can but don't interfere. This is our fight. Your great-grandfather knew that."

Dark quickly removed the rest of his clothes and followed Lan into the kitchen. He opened the back door and transformed. With a last look back at Detective Danvers who was looking distinctly shell shocked, he followed his mate into the night. Before they were out of ear shot of the house, he heard the sound of their jeep's engine. Hoping that Danvers would follow his instructions, Dark kept pace with his mate. At full speed, they raced to meet a madman.

With a young life in the balance, the trip seemed to take forever but in reality very little time passed. He and Lan sailed across the landscape like bodiless wraiths, leaving only the stirrings of disturbed dust hanging in the air behind them. They arrived and stopped short of rushing headlong to their destination. Going in carefully, the two wolves scented the area and knew that their enemy waited above on the crest of the high, rocky hill.

Dark let his gaze wander upward over that rough terrain and wondered if his student was still alive. His emotions were in turmoil but buried beneath a blanket of calm. He wouldn't lose control. If there was a chance to save her, they would take it and destroy the enemy who had indiscriminately caused such pain.

There was movement above. A man stood silhouetted by the moonlight and a voice called down to them. "Don't be shy boys, come on up. But carefully. We wouldn't want this young lady to get hurt, now would we?" A muffled screech followed that warning.

With a growl rumbling in his throat, Dark followed Lan as they picked their way over stone and loose dirt to the top of the hill. There they found their target and his captive. Dark immediately recognized her. She was Lily Reed, a bright, outgoing girl who laughed often. She was bound, gagged and blindfolded. Fresh blood flowed from the wound on her throat, a wound made by the silver knife held against her skin.

Dark stared intently at the man holding the knife but no hint of recognition came to him. He was taller than average with a muscular build and medium brown hair. He supposed some would find the man attractive, especially if he was able to hide the insanity that shone from his eyes. As far as Dark could tell, he'd never encountered this man before, though such a thing seemed unlikely. He seemed to know all about them.

"Don't be shy now. This little lady won't see or hear a thing. I made her put earplugs in as well. I wanted this time with you all to myself, but of course I needed a lever to get you here. Transform. I want to see it," he ordered. His eyes glittered with a fanatic light. The two of them did as they were told and stood unashamedly naked under the moon's silvery light. Dark felt sweat break out over his body.

"So that's how it's supposed to be. That's beautiful. I remember how it looked the day I first saw you." The wonder and envy in his voice was patently apparent. "I wish I could do that."

Dark was struck by his wistfully voiced craving. Was this the heart's desire Detective Danvers' great-grandfather said should be fulfilled? If so, how could he possibly accomplish such a thing? He certainly carried none of the stones that could make such a wish come true. He gave his full attention back to the here and now.

"First saw us?" Lan was asking.



The man looked disappointed. "You don't remember me? How ignominious to have made such a forgettable impression. Tell me. Do you have a scar where I shot you?"

Startled, Dark brought the man's face sharply into focus. Recognition assailed him with startling clarity. "You. I know you now. You've changed."

"Ah, so you picked up on my clue. And yes, I've changed. I cleaned myself up and acquired some polish. A person can do many things when they have endless time on their hands. So. Who am I?"

"You're one of the hunters who tried to kill us at the canyon."

"Very good. You may call me Jack, and that's absolutely right. I did try to kill you and you should have had the courtesy to die like a good animal. But you didn't behave correctly at all. Instead you killed all my friends and me in the bargain. Well, strictly speaking, it was one of those bastards who shot me but it was your fault. Do you know what happened to me? Do you have the least idea what I've been through the past fifty plus years?"

"How could we know? We thought you were dead," Dark told him truthfully.

"Well, thanks to you, I survived. Want to know how? Because of this." The man ripped his shirt open to reveal a vicious and terrible scar that marred the center of his chest. It was pale and rough with long lines that looked like slash marks running through it. "Do you remember the pouch of stones you carried? I took them. The stones were so pretty. They glowed like reddish orange suns. The others wanted them but I found them first and made them mine."

Jack's voice had taken on a soft sing-song quality and Dark felt a shiver slide down his spine at the tone. He was right to have labeled the man mad. "I was wearing that pouch when my erstwhile friend shot me. The strangest thing happened. That bullet went through the pouch, hit one of those stones and drove it right into my heart."

Astonished understanding swept over Dark.

"You people thought I was dead and dumped me into the river, but my body came to rest on a sandbar. That night when the moon rose, my physical form tried to

change. Poor, uneducated bastard that I was, I didn't have a clue as to what was happening to me. After hours of screaming agony I finally realized that my body was trying to turn into a wolf just like I'd seen yours do. But something was wrong. I couldn't make the change. Instead I became something quite different. Something neither wholly man nor beast. Quite an interesting thing, wouldn't you say? Why do you suppose I didn't change properly?"

"The stone fought you," Dark answered. "The gift it can bestow requires one condition. A good heart. You showed us the evil that lurks inside you that day you tried to kill us. The wolf would repudiate you. Wolves are not indiscriminate killers. They take joy in life and kill only what they need to survive."

"How quaint. It has a conscience. It certainly has made me suffer over the years. As you can see I've actually tried to dig this thing out of myself a time or two. I'm afraid the pain causes me to get a little crazy now and then. I did try to find a doctor to remove it but the surgeon I consulted said it was impossible. It was so intricately imbedded that trying to take it out would kill me." The man sighed. "So I've lived with it. I've even enjoyed it at times. Spilling blood and tearing through pale, vulnerable flesh can be such a pleasure."

The girl at his side suddenly moved and tried to run. He grabbed her and with a backhanded slap, knocked her completely off her feet. She landed with a dull thud and didn't stir. Lan and Dark both made a move in his direction but he stopped them by squatting down and placing the knife to her chest. "I will kill her if you don't stay right where you are."

"What do you want?" Dark asked. "What is this all about?"

"Really," he replied sarcastically. "Isn't it obvious? I want you to suffer as I have. You killed some of my friends so I killed some of yours. I thought that was only fair and then, of course, I want to kill you. I can do it, you know. I'm very powerful when I take my other form."

"I've no doubt you are," Lan told him. "So let's get to it. Why waste time with her? We're the ones you want, and I sure as hell want a shot at you. I owe you for the scar on my back."

"Or are you a coward?" Dark asked, following Lan's lead. "Hiding behind a woman is not the action of a man whose balls are intact. Were you neutered somewhere along the way?"

The man laughed. "You think I don't know what you're doing? You're trying to provoke me, trying to make me angry. It's really not necessary. Do you think I'll just forget about the tender little missy here? Not likely, but I'll tell you what. I'll give you a chance to save her. I brought you here tonight to finish this. If I kill you, she's dessert. Of course, if you kill me you won't have to worry about her. I think that's a fair offer, don't you?"

"We'll take it," Lan answered.

"Music to my ears." Jack rose and dropped the knife.

Dark debated the merits of attacking now, as he peeled his clothing off, but decided he was too close to Lily. Moving closer to Lan, he got his attention. "Keep him busy." Lan nodded.

Before the last article of Jack's clothing fell to the stony earth, a change began rippling over his body. Dark watched in horrified fascination as mottled fur sprouted from his pores. His arms and legs elongated and became more like those of a canine. Pointed claws with razor-like tips took the place of his finger and toenails. His face sharpened, a muzzle forming and filling with gleaming white fangs. Cold eyes glowing with a reddish cast turned themselves in his direction and harsh growls rumbled from the nightmarish creature before them.

He threw back his head and howled but the sound wasn't the pure clear notes of the wolf. It was guttural and perverted, and Dark literally felt the hair on his head try to rise. With a speed and strength that nearly saw him gutted, the creature was on him. Dark threw himself out of the way and felt the sting of torn flesh across his belly. He

landed on the rocky ground, rolled and came to his feet to meet the continued assault. It didn't come.

Lan had transformed and attacked. The wolf harried the creature, drawing its attention by diving in and dancing away. The two of them moved so fast it was hard to follow. Dark could see Lan was inflicting damage on the other, but it was superficial at best. Blood flowed from scratches and bites on its body. Having to fight an opponent that walked upright on two legs was disrupting the wolf's natural plan of attack. He had to avoid the arms that swung and reached for him.

Jack had spoken the truth. In this form he was strong. And agile. He aimed a blow at Lan that connected and sent him tumbling across several feet of dry earth. Lan immediately regained his feet but didn't come away unscathed. Blood dripped from his shoulder. He barely avoided the pounce that would have seen him pinned beneath several hundred pounds of crazed wolf/man hybrid.

A movement beyond the two who fought caught his attention. Detective Danvers had made his appearance and had found Lily. He picked her up and retreated back the way he came. Relieved that Lily would be taken care of, Dark turned his attention back to where it needed to be.

He began the chant that invoked the power of the stones. He kept his eyes on the two combatants and recited the words, feeling the power gather around him. A pathway opened between himself and the creature. He could feel the pulse of the stone lodged inside its chest. His vision shifted and in his mind's eye he could see the wulfenite begin to glow, to heat, to burn.

The creature screamed and grabbed at his chest. It dropped to its knees. Dark kept the chant going. He could feel the silent protest of the stone and the whine of that ethereal wolf as it fought against the evil that sought to engulf it. Entreating the wolf's forgiveness and promising to heal it and drive the evil out, he forced the transformation.

Jack received his heart's desire. His body writhed and rolled on the ground. Limbs rearranged themselves. His fur grew longer, his torso more compact. His muzzle

elongated, his ears growing pointed and changing position as everything shifted. His cries lost any semblance of humanity and became purely those of an animal in extreme distress.

When the change was finished, a fully formed wolf lay on its side against the hard, stony ground. Eyes closed and chest heaving, it panted while its body slowly recovered. Dark watched it carefully as did Lan, who retained his wolf shape. Neither was sure what would happen next.

Dark could still feel the connection between them, though it was slowly fading. He could feel the animal's confusion but felt nothing left of the man he'd once been. The wolf opened its eyes and lifted his head. With a heave, he rose unsteadily to his feet. Lan growled and moved closer, but Dark signaled him to wait.

Taking a few hesitant steps, the wolf approached Lan. With his tail tucked and his ears laid flat he dropped to the ground at Lan's feet and rolled, exposing his vulnerable throat and belly to the alpha. Stiff legged, Lan instinctively reacted. He grabbed the subordinate wolf by the muzzle and growled. Whining, the newly minted wolf held still until Lan released him then he began frantically licking Lan's face. When he stepped away, the lesser wolf rose and danced around him like a puppy.

Dark laughed. It was a sound that broke the spell. Lan transformed. "What the hell's going on?"

"He's gone. Jack is gone. All that remains is the wolf."

Lan looked down at the wolf who'd settled obediently by his side. "So now what do we do with him?"

"We keep him with us. He obviously can't be set free. No wild pack would accept him."

"I saw Danvers take the girl. Do you suppose she's all right?"

"I don't know, but we should go home. I'm sure he'll contact us. If nothing else, he has to return our jeep."

"Damn straight he'll return it. God forbid we lose the fun car." Lan grinned and Dark shook his head.

"Come on. Let's see if this guy can keep up with us."

Easily changing forms, it was three wolves now instead of two that made the return journey back home. On their arrival, there was a message waiting for them on the answering machine. Dark pushed the button and let it play. At the sound of the voice coming from the box on the wall, the wolf whined and twisted his head to the side, his ears perked in puzzlement. Lan absently rested a hand on his back and Dark smiled at the alpha automatically offering comfort.

The message was from Detective Danvers. "I took the girl to the hospital. In case you didn't know, her name is Lily Reed. She's going to be fine. Her injuries were confined to mostly bumps and bruises. There was a cut on her throat but it wasn't deep enough to need stitches. She doesn't know who grabbed her. Said she never got a good look at his face. I've got some explaining to do about how I found her but an anonymous call is my answer and I'm sticking to it. I'll be by as soon as I can to return your jeep. Notice I'm assuming you won the fight. Don't disappoint me."

The message ended. Dark and Lan exchanged glances. "What do you want to bet he'll be here soon?" Lan asked.

"Wouldn't you? The curiosity alone must be killing him. Besides, he'll want his own car back. It's out in the drive, you know."

"True enough. I'm starving, but I want to get cleaned up first."

"That sounds like a good idea."

The two of them headed upstairs with the wolf following on their heels. "He seems awfully placid and calm for a wolf," Lan commented as he started the water in the shower. He glanced back over his shoulder at the wolf in question who had settled in the doorway and was keeping an eye on them.

Dark stepped in behind him. "He's spent the last fifty some years fighting a losing battle for his honor. I'd imagine he's just plain worn out. It has to be a relief for him to no longer be a part of Jack. He deserves the rest. I think he looks content."

"Hmm. Well I know I'm content to have this over with."

Dark took up the soap and worked up a lather with the washcloth he'd brought with him. "Yes. I'm taking a sick day tomorrow and I think you should too. We deserve a day to relax without anything hanging over our heads."

"Good idea."

Lan plucked the cloth from his fingers and applied it to his lover's body. Dark sighed his appreciation. Their shower was accomplished in short order, both of them too tired and hungry to think about much of anything else. And as Dark pointed out, Detective Danvers would probably show up any minute.

Two clean humans and one wolf returned to the kitchen. Lan prepared an omelet with sausage, cheese and peppers while Dark defrosted some stew beef in the microwave. He offered the raw meat to the wolf who gulped it down with relish. "Looks like we're going to be visiting the butcher more often," Dark observed. "I wonder if we can find some venison somewhere."

"I'm sure we can. You know, I was thinking. He'd probably be better off with Spirit in Wyoming. There's acres of woods to run in and I'm sure our people would be happy to adopt him. He could run with a pack and live a semi-normal life there."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea. As soon as we can, I think we should arrange to take a couple of weeks off. We can transport him there ourselves and spend some time while he gets acquainted with everyone. Besides, I miss being with the others."

Lan brought two full plates to the table and set one in front of Dark. "I was thinking the same thing the other day. We definitely need to reconnect with our brothers and sisters for a time."

With his mouth full of omelet, Dark merely nodded his agreement. They had finished their meal and were standing at the sink doing the dishes when the doorbell rang. Lan chuckled. "Didn't take him long."

"Told you," Dark said, wiping his hands on the towel laid on the countertop for that purpose. He took a step forward but was stopped by a hand on his arm.

"Let's get rid of him as quickly as possible." Lan's blue eyes were shining brightly, filled with mischief and growing desire. "I'm getting very sleepy all of a sudden. Bed's looking awfully good about now."

Dark cocked a speculative brow. "Sleepy?" He decided to turn the tables. "That's too bad. I was hoping to have my wicked way with you but if you're too tired, I understand."

Lan growled and wrapped Dark in his arms. "Wicked, huh? I'm never too tired for wicked. Promise you'll do that one thing."

"What one thing?"

Lan whispered in his ear and Dark felt his cheeks growing warm. Hooting with laughter, Lan let him go and headed for the front door. "I can't believe you still blush over that."

Following him, Dark sputtered, "*Denzhone!* I swear, I can't believe you..."

Lan spun around. "Can't believe I'd what?"

Dark walked right into his arms and kissed him. Their mouths met and opened, their tongues greeting each other with sensual caresses. Dark moaned and sank into the kiss. It was always this way when he was in his lover's arms. There was the familiar yet intoxicating scent, the growing heat, the physical arousal and the emotional satisfaction. It was love, pure, deep and forever. They fit together perfectly and he knew it would always be so.

The doorbell rang again and Dark reluctantly stepped back. "Can't believe you'd forget that other thing that goes with the one you mentioned. I'll be expecting you to do your part as well." Smiling complacently, he left an open-mouthed Lan behind him and opened the door to Detective Danvers. Before he could greet the man, an arm slid around his waist and a soft laugh sounded in his ear.

"I'll dig out my chaps and cowboy hat."

With his eyes going wide, Detective Danvers asked, "Do I want to know what he's talking about?"



“No!” Dark vehemently replied then with a mock, long-suffering sigh, he returned his mate’s rascally grin.

## **Kate Steele**

What is it they say? Watch out for the quiet ones? Kate Steele has found that writing is the ideal way to release all those wild inner urges and she's just getting started. "I'm aging in reverse. With the help of lots of plastic surgery and vitamins I fully expect to have my own male harem by the time I hit 90." For now she's settling for the quiet life in rural Indiana with family and pets. Guilty pleasure: Singing in the car. "With the volume loud enough I sound just like Celine Dion!" You can contact Kate and sing-a-long at [katesteele27@yahoo.com](mailto:katesteele27@yahoo.com) or visit her website at [www.katesteele.com](http://www.katesteele.com).