



The Lone Wolf
By
Teresa D'Amario



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Tease Publishing LLC

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Prologue

The man stripped, hiding his clothes beneath a fallen pine. He had plenty of those to choose from. They lay in all directions, toppled by one of the many hurricanes to pound the North Carolina coastline. It was strange remembering such tiny details when he couldn't remember who he really was.

The dark was his first memory. He'd awakened, months ago, battered, bruised and shackled. Then the cage. If he'd been human before, if he'd been a real man, his knowledge of that time was long gone. He knew his first name, courtesy of those who'd fed him, stuck needles in him and tortured him. They called him Damon.

What he did know was he was a freak. Neither man, nor beast, but a combination of both.
A werewolf.

What he didn't know was, had the doctors created him with some strange virus, or had he been born this way? Quick visits to the public library told him very little. Books and stories of fictional werewolves, but nothing real.

He was frustrated. And frustration chafed. He needed an outlet.

Running.

Tonight was perfect. A moonless Carolina night.

Damon closed his eyes. The image of the wolf flashed across his mind the instant he called it. Confident. Powerful. Instinctual. Fangs long enough to make a grown man quake.

He'd tried to hate this part of himself, this animal buried inside. But he couldn't. Not when the beast let him race the wind, leap over any obstacle, run for the joy of the chase. He sighed, slowing the anticipatory pounding of his heart. Bright light exploded from within his body, sinew and bone first expanding, then contracting. The light flashed through the trees, chasing the shadows from the dark night. He ignored the split second of discomfort brought on by the expansion and contraction of his body.

Next came peace. In wolf form he sensed the acrid scents of the pine forest as they rushed into his lungs, clearing the dark, smoky debris left by human living. Insects chirped, talking among themselves in their own world of tranquility and comfort. A breeze fluttered through the trees. Damon caught the scent of an animal.

A rabbit.

His eyes grew wide and he grinned, his fangs glinting in the night. The desire to let loose all his fears and give chase overwhelmed all else.

With the wag of a long tail, he charged into the woods. His clawed toes dug into the sandy soil as he bounced over and under fallen branches. For this one moment in time, he was one with the beast. There was no fear or confusion. He just *was*.

The rabbit darted to the side. The sickly sweet smell of its fear rushed through Damon's nose and into his lungs. The wolf pulled up, slowing to a trot. He wasn't hungry, and therefore would not kill.

Unlike Man, he had no interest in killing for sport. Besides, he hated waking up with rabbit fur caught between his teeth in the morning, but nothing was better than the thrill of the chase.

If only he could live this life forever. It was a shame the only wolves in North Carolina were red wolves. His dark brown coat negated any chance of passing for a red wolf which may have migrated from the coast.

A mouse darted past him, then scuttled into a hole beneath a low lying shrub. Damon fought the urge to dig and chase the creature. Instead, he sat on his haunches and cocked his head to see if the little critter would come back out. It didn't. Smart mouse.

Damon tipped his head back, fighting the urge to release a howl of joy. He'd watched a movie about wolves at the library. The people in the film had all talked how the wolf's howl sounded so sad. Ha. He'd love to tell them different. Most of the time the sound echoed with pure happiness.

The light breeze ruffled his coat. He inhaled, letting the scents fill his lungs. One at a time he separated each smell from the others. The sharp edge of pine burned. The musty scent of sandy soil blended well with the mouse's own body odor.

A new smell drifted through the breeze, rushing into his lungs. The wolfish grin faded from his face, and his ears perked, listening.

The fresh scent set his nerves on edge.

Danger.

Damon moved in a flash, spinning and charging deeper into the forest. Adrenaline pumped through his veins.

The sound of something brushing against the trees above him caught his attention. He looked up. Too late.

A maze of nylon rope dropped from above, entangling him. Each move in his attempt to escape wrapped the cords tighter around him. He growled, snapping at the rope, but it was too strong. The creature moved toward him, cackling its joy at finding its prey.

Chapter 1

Krystal Maxey fingered the weapon resting in her holster. Her colleagues called her the "critter cop", a city cop who specialized in cases involving animals. After more than five years of cleaning up human messes, she was ready for something more. It seemed the more animals she saved, the more animals there *were* to save. Abusers who exhibited a never ending cycle made worse by the lack of respect for life.

Animal abuse was a part of her daily life, and what she saw had the tendency to sicken even the strongest of men. Preacher Man was the worst.

Today, she would make a difference.

Peter Burke and his strange cult were going down.

Krystal tapped the steering wheel, waiting for her teams to get into position. Keeping hidden on this deserted street just outside of town hadn't been easy. Adding to her stress levels was the decision she'd made to be the last to go in. She was in uniform and her team wasn't. No matter how hard she'd tried to tell her boss to let her wear civvies, he'd refused. She wasn't an undercover cop, no matter how much she wished different.

She'd first heard of Peter Burke three years ago. Every time the law got close to him, he picked up and moved, changing jurisdictions. Years before, she'd promised herself if he ever made it here, to Lemon Springs, NC, she would end his reign of horror. Burke didn't just abuse the animals in his care. Not him. He was so much more. Pure evil.

For years police had tried to find evidence of abuse, but that wasn't what Burke was known for. All of his pets were well fed.

Fattened up, so to speak.

The better to eat them.

The problem was, eating pets wasn't illegal in very many states. So the only way to stop the man was to find other charges. Abuse of the animals, or maybe fraud in how he obtained them.

Despite the heat of the late autumn sun, a cold shiver of disgust ran down her spine. Preacher Man acquired pet dogs and cats, pretending to be an animal lover looking to adopt. He loved them all right. Straight into his cooking pot.

She clicked the mic attached to the shoulder of her uniform, her lips close to ensure she would be heard.

"Everyone in place?"

"Bravo ready," was the first static reply.

"Charlie team ready."

"Camera's in place and rolling," came the final whispered response.

Excellent. The most important part of today's operation was to capture the rescue on tape. Evidence. Peter Burke had escaped prosecution due to a lack of evidence twice before. His good luck would end here.

"Alpha, this is Charlie team."

"Go ahead, Charlie," she said into the mic. She hated using the radios, but the only other way to communicate would have her tied up in a straight jacket or lynched and hanging from a tree before she could say Jumpin' Jack Flash. Most people didn't appreciate it when others controlled their minds.

"Alpha, he's got a wolf."

Krystal's heartbeat spiked another notch. "He doesn't have a wolf registered on his property."

"No, he doesn't. He's in violation of the law."

Krystal fought to contain her grin of victory. "Get a good shot of the wolf with the camera. Is he penned?"

"Yeah, he's in a pen on the property."

"Excellent. Get some footage that shows the wolf clearly. Has anyone picked us up yet?" One thing she didn't need was for Burke to realize they were there before they were ready to move.

"Not yet. Wait, Preacher Man's coming out of his house. Maxey, he's got an axe, and he's headed for the wolf pen."

Damn. There was no time to wait for the video. Burke didn't mess around. Once he chose his victim, he moved quickly. He didn't play with his dinner.

She flattened her body against the rough brick wall of Burke's house. The sharp stones pulled at her uniform shirt and yanked at her hair. She was too close to worry about such things now. Wiping the moisture from her hands on her pants, she un-holstered her Glock twenty three. Four brisk steps took her to the corner of the building. With a deep breath she gave the go signal, a triple key of the mic.

Krystal took a deep breath with every count. One one thousand. Two one thousand, three. She spun around the corner, facing the man she knew as Brother Peter Burke, The Preacher Man.

From the corner of her eye she could see the row of dog runs, the wire cages filled with dogs of all sizes. They barked, warning who, she wasn't sure. By the time she'd moved into position, Burke had already taken the wolf from the pen and was dragging him to a stone slab not far from the pen.

"Freeze," she shouted. "Police."

Peter Burke jerked his head upward, his eyes meeting hers in surprise.

Sounds emanated from inside the house as her team charged inside. Men's voices shouting at others to run. *Shit.* They'd planned a simple bust, not a full blown police raid. She prayed they didn't turn violent. Krystal kept her eyes trained on the man before her. He wasn't very big. Maybe five foot eight, with a head of greasy red hair. If he weighed more than a hundred and thirty pounds, she'd be surprised. He grinned at her with oily lips and pulled the axe upward. One hand pinned a dark brown wolf to the stone slab.

Krystal spared the animal a glance. Not a single muscle flexed. *Damn.* She hoped the camera caught this. It was illegal to drug a wolf in this state, and no wolf stayed that still unless they were drugged. Killing one was even worse, but she had no intention of letting things get that far.

"Put the axe on the ground, slowly," Krystal said.

Men circled the yard as they closed in on the scene. Her men.

"You think your little gun is going to stop me?"

Krystal frowned. Was he insane as well as evil? With only ten feet between them, there was no way she wouldn't drop him with one shot. Yet the bastard still taunted her.

"On the ground. Now, Burke."

He chuckled. His chest swelled as he took in a deep breath, then he raised the axe higher over his shoulder, readying for the killing blow. At this range, she couldn't be sure she wouldn't kill him, and she wasn't ready to be responsible for taking a man's life. If she wanted to save the animal now, she had to use her own special talents.

In the split second it took her to make her decision, he'd grinned, rocking into the momentum of the axe.

Krystal reached deep inside her mind, forming thoughts and images, shoving them into Burke. Her eyes fluttered as she struggled to keep them focused upon her target. *Stop. Put the axe down on the ground.*

A tremor ran through his arm and the axe froze mid strike. His mouth gaped open as though he tried to speak, but her silent words had ceased all movement except what she allowed. To the passerby, or even to her fellow officers, it looked like a standoff, his axe against her gun. That wasn't the case, and Preacher Man knew it.

She was there, in his head, controlling his every movement.

He fought her control, the axe still raised above his head. His mental strength was a surprise. In her past experience criminals had simple minds, despite their mistaken belief they were smarter than the police. Preacher Man was different. Animalistic rage rippled through her mental hold over him. Krystal swallowed, strengthening her hold.

The energy he emitted was two-fold, as though there were two personalities within him. Man and animal. She stared into his eyes, fighting to separate the energies pounding back at her. If she didn't know better she'd think she had mixed the wolf's signals with Burke's, but it wasn't that simple. The wild rage didn't come from the wolf. It emanated from Preacher Man.

The animal-like personality strengthened Burke's natural ability to fight her control. The harder she tried to control him, the stronger his determination to kill flickered through her connection with him. Sweat trickled down her neck and between her breasts, tickling as it went. She ignored it. Focus. It was the only way to save the wolf.

A flash of movement to her side caught Krystal's eye an instant before sharp teeth clamped on her wrist. She winced, struggling to keep her attention on the man with the axe above the wolf's head. Vicious snarls from whatever had her in its grip sent a chill of foreboding down her spine. Fighting the instinct to pull away, she held her arm steady. One wrong move and the sharp fangs pressing on her flesh would rip open her arm.

Whatever had held the wolf steady beneath Preacher Man's axe broke. He exploded, lunging for Burke's throat. How the wolf managed to fight off the drugs apparent in his system, she didn't know, but thank God he had! He hit Burke in the chest and the man stumbled back, the axe dropping from his hand.

The teeth on her wrist squeezed and she heard, more than felt, a bone crunch. Pain jolted from compressed nerves. Krystal's heart pounded, adrenaline surging through her veins. Her suspect was going to get himself mauled by the wolf if she didn't get herself free, and now.

Gripping the barrel of her weapon, she slammed the butt between the beast's eyes. The spotted animal ignored her attempts, growling and squeezing, as though determined to crush her wrist to powder. A quick scan of the animal sent a cold chill through Krystal's body.

Hyena!

How the hell could a hyena get here? Nobody would be stupid enough to... Then again, maybe Preacher Man was. Sane people knew not to bring wild animals into town. Nobody had said Burke was sane.

Mayhem exploded around her. Hyenas dashed to and fro, charging from the house and nipping at her team's heels. Men's voices shouted as the rest of her fellow officers struggled to contain a sudden influx of vicious animals snapping and cackling their wild laughter. It sounded like there were dozens of them, their chatter rising in celebration. Meanwhile, Krystal dropped to her knees, struggling to release her wrist from the hyena's grip.

She slammed the butt of her gun again on the animal's head, striking it in the left eye. The beast yelped, finally releasing its damaging bite. The instant she was free the animal spun, charging toward the tobacco fields beside the house. Its loping gate as swift as it was awkward, carried it across the yard.

Krystal fought the desire to follow and catch the beast. Now wasn't the time. The wolf she'd chosen to rescue was now in danger, and there was no way she was going to be able to save him if she charged off after the wild animal.

The vicious sound of snarls and snapping teeth caught her attention. The wolf wasn't fighting Preacher Man anymore. The man was gone. Instead, the wolf battled another Hyena.

Damn it.

How had he gotten away so fast? She glanced toward their camera man, only to find him batting away another of the spotted beasts as its fangs came too close to his ankles. Their footage would be

useless. Ted had been reduced to using the thousand dollar video camera as a basic club to protect himself.

Double Damn.

Her arm had begun to throb, but she didn't let it stop her. She still had the wolf to save, if she could get a shot in without hurting the wrong beast.

The animals slammed one another, fangs flashing in the afternoon sun. The wolf charged. The smaller animal dodged, snapping his own razor sharp teeth in response. Brown spotted fur now sported the coppery red of blood, matting the already greasy hair at its mouth. The wolf dripped blood from a wound on his side.

She tried to move the gun to her dominant hand, but her fingers wouldn't close over the butt. *Damn.* Squeezing off a shot at the right animal at the right time was going to be tough.

There was no doubt the wolf suffered, not only from the injury, but also from the heavy silver collar wrapped around his neck. His head hung low, and his skin was rubbed raw, the fur already gone. *How long had this animal been here?*

I have to stop this before the wolf is killed.

With her injured arm cuddled against her body, Krystal raised her weapon with her left hand. Struggling to keep the weapon steady, she aimed at the spotted creature, but the wolf swept into her line of sight, dodging the powerful jaws reaching for his leg. Krystal groaned.

Teeth flashed and the wolf jerked backward, avoiding the hyena's crushing power. Reacting on instinct, Krystal squeezed the trigger. Her gun exploded, echoing through the growls and screams of men and beasts. The hyena jerked, yelping as blood sprayed. The creature swung toward her, lips curled in a vicious snarl, its focus now on her despite its right rear leg now hanging, the bone snapped in two by her bullet.

Krystal's heart pounded in her chest as the animal limped toward her, teeth bared. She took aim again. The heavy weapon wobbled in her grip, but she struggled to focus. Her finger tightened on the trigger, but before she reached the point of no return, the beast cackled, then spun, running for the cover of the tobacco plants in the field behind the house.

The wolf stared, his silver grey eyes wide, his brown coat wet and matted with blood. But he was all right.

Relief washed through her veins, stealing her adrenaline laced strength. It was then she noticed her wrist throbbing. She glanced down. Her hand was twisted at an odd angle. *Crap.* Broken. Nausea twirled about her insides, her stomach spinning one way, her body the other. No, wait, her head was what was spinning. A cold chill, accented by the light breeze sent a shiver through her body, and she slumped to her knees.

Chapter 2

Krystal popped another aspirin, chasing it with her diet coke while she sat on the corner of her desk. One thing she didn't need was someone seeing how much damage the hyena had done to her arm. Not if she was going to have her brother heal it. Wasn't that what brothers were for? As soon as she could sneak away, she'd have him fix it up. Until then, she'd hidden the crushed bone beneath a wide ace bandage, held in place by a finagled paper clip.

"Maxey, sign this."

Ted, her partner, offered her a clip board and pen. *Crap.* She couldn't very well use her right hand. She glanced at the pages. They were the reports for the attempted bust. A bust that had gone all wrong. The only thing they'd done right was save the wolf's life. "Put it on the desk, I'll get it in a bit."

"Right." He shook his head, his eyes narrowed, flicking toward her right hand.

She'd spent the last several years partnered with the man, and he never missed a thing. Convincing him her wrist wasn't broken wouldn't be easy. Then again, he always seemed to look the other way when she used her powers.

There had been other times she'd used them during busts, times when she stopped people before they made the huge mistake of hitting an officer of the law, or hitting a defenseless animal or child. Most of the time she did it without thinking and Ted never said a word. In most ways, he was the perfect partner. In others, he was the perfect man.

Too perfect. She swallowed another swig of her soda to hide her growl of petty jealousy. Some things in life weren't fair. Despite the raid, he looked clean and neat. Fresh as a fruit right off the vine. Here she was, injured, her hair slipping from the knot at the back of her neck, and her face sweating with the effort to hide her pain.

"You aren't fooling anyone. Why don't you go to the Emergency Room?"

She shook her head, wincing at the throbbing building now in her temples. "I'm about to go have my personal physician take a look at it." Lance was a great personal physician. On call twenty four hours a day. At times, he was better than any regular doctor. While he was no full healer, his talents had improved by leaps and bounds over the last six weeks.

Like her, her brother was a wizard. All four of her brothers were. She belonged to a family of powerful wizards who fought for good with Government Control of Supernatural Abilities, or GSA for short. A long, confusing name which meant nothing more than they monitored any supernatural events or people, and protected the human race if needed. Her brother had shredded her own application to join the GSA every time she'd applied. Tired of fighting, she'd joined the police force instead. At least here they held no sway over her bosses.

Her eldest brother, Logan, was one of the most powerful wizards in the nation, measuring in at a skill level of nine on the scale of one to ten. His primary talent was enchantment, the ability to convince a person to do anything he wanted with a simple thought.

She, on the other hand, was a skill level of two. Her primary talent was communicating with animals, which was a type of telepathy. That was why she'd chosen to work as an animal cop rather than in other, more aggressive departments. She didn't choose to avoid murderers and thieves because she was weak. She worked with animals because it was where she was strongest. Often she talked aggressive dogs into backing off, or convinced fearful ones to accept her. Saving animal lives was just as rewarding as saving people.

As a mage, her only useful talent with people was the same as Logan's, but much weaker. The best she'd been able to do was stop people in their tracks. She couldn't make them wander off or even change their minds about what they wanted to do. Like what she did with Preacher Man. She was no brilliant enchantress, that's for sure.

As kids, she and her brothers practiced their talents on one another. Nothing made her feel more useless than when she'd tried to enchant any of them. Even Lance, who, until recently was the weakest of the four. On top of everything, each time she used her talent, her brothers insisted her power felt different from Logan's. They swore to her father she didn't get inside their heads like Logan did. Her Dad always waved them off. He was a level seven wizard himself, with years of experience. Dad always knew best.

The expression on her partner's face drew her attention back to him.

He'd cocked a hip, leaning against her desk, his arms folded as he watched her. His dark brown eyes had lost their typical soulful look, and were instead filled with concern. A frown replaced his bright smile. He brushed away a lock of shiny black hair from his sun bronzed brow.

Why couldn't she fall for Ted? Okay, he was her partner, but still. He was single. Handsome. Nice. Yet no matter how much she tried to force the emotions, the only place in her heart for him was friendship. Nope, not an iota of attraction burned in her blood.

"You go get that taken care of." Ted motioned toward her hand. "On your way out, see if you can get that damned wolf to relax. He's trying to eat the cage door."

Krystal's stomach lurched. She'd rescued wolves before. Red wolves, when she'd had to help with hurricane damage in the eastern part of the state. Wolves always held a special place in her heart, but this was the first who instilled powerful and visceral emotions inside her. Emotions she couldn't seem to put her finger on. They'd begun the instant he'd turned his dark eyes to hers, as though a connection zinged between them on some elemental level. Magick to magick. Only that wasn't possible. "I'll check on him. He might not like being caged. I think I'll just take him home with me."

Ted stiffened. "Don't you dare! What about Wolfie?" Wolfie was her Norwegian Buhund, a mid-sized dog with a lot of attitude. His heart was much bigger than medium sized and it beat for only one person. She had no doubt he'd give his life for her if he had to. Wolfie was smart. He knew when to fight and when to back down, but he also loved her to distraction.

"Don't worry," she chuckled. "I know how to control Wolfie. And the big boy in there will do just fine. They'll never come in contact with one another. That's what baby gates are for."

"Right," scoffed Ted, snatching the clip board from her desk. "You really think a baby gate is going to keep that animal away from your dog if he wants to eat him?" He slanted a worried glance toward the kennel door then back to Krystal. "If you insist on taking him, at least take precautions. When you're at the doc, get your rabies shot updated and take him in the truck so you can kennel him in the back."

"I don't need a rabies shot. I just updated mine last month, but thanks for worrying. I'll be fine." She patted his cheek with her good hand. "After all, I have Wolfie to take care of me." She strode away, a grin on her face, despite the throbbing ache in her wrist.

"You forgot to sign this," shouted Ted as she opened the door to the kennel, motioning with the clipboard.

"I'm sure it will be there tomorrow," she tossed over her shoulder.

The sounds and smells of the kennel assaulted her senses. She didn't mind healthy animal smells, but most of the creatures they rescued needed a lot of tender loving care and hadn't received adequate food, much less a bath. Frightened and angry barks screamed for her attention. With a sigh, she closed her mind to their pain. Not now. If she opened herself to every dog in the kennel, they'd all end up in her back yard and she'd be broke from all the vet and food bills.

Wrinkling her nose she moved down the aisle. Dog runs lined the room on either side, the hard, cement floors their only comfort. Once, she'd brought blankets in for each and every cage, but they

hadn't lasted long. Nervous and frightened, most shredded the blankets while in search of comfort they'd never experienced. A part of her wanted to replace the destroyed blankets. These animals needed comfort. But it was too easy for one to swallow bits and pieces and require surgery. No, better to leave them without. Instead, she now brought in toys. Squeaky toys, chew toys, whatever she could find at the local yard sales.

A young black lab met her at the gate, a stuffed goose in his mouth.

Krystal smiled, her hand flattening against the kennel, sufficient for the Labrador to shove his body close enough for a touch. He wagged, honking his toy with every crunch of his jaw in excitement. This guy was going to be easy to place once his court case was over. She'd seized him last week in a Puppy mill bust. Krystal shuddered, remembering the condition of the breeding stock. Most of the parents were malnourished and neglected, the female's bodies worn and aged long before their time, from churning out litter after litter of puppies. This one was a lucky one. He'd already gained ten pounds since his arrival, and was young enough he hadn't lost his happy Labrador spirit.

Krystal continued her trek toward the back run. The light above the kennel was broken, which was part of the reason they'd placed the wolf so far down the end of the run. Most wild animals had difficulties in the kennels, and hated artificial light. The wolf was no exception.

He bounced off the back wall, momentum slamming his body hard against the kennel door. The wire fencing vibrated with each collision of body and aluminum. Each slam of muscle on wire echoed through the concrete room, accompanied by the songs of twenty five dogs, each howling or barking their complaints.

"Quiet," she shouted above the commotion.

The dogs, surprised by her sudden command, quieted.

The wolf glared at her from his place at the end of the line. His sides heaved with the effort of his task.

Escape.

A tingle at the base of her spine sent a shiver through her. The same sensation she had when someone had magick. *Get real, Krystal girl. He's a wolf. What kind of magick can he have?* Though even as the thought entered her mind, she felt it again, the pull of something unexpected. She cocked her head, studying him. He looked like any other gray wolf. His brown coat wasn't unusual. Gray was a breed, not a coat color. He was a bit larger than most, but that would be genetics, not some strange magick. He was a true predator, his powerful body heavily muscled. His fangs were long and sharp, ready to sink into flesh at a moment's notice. The wolf didn't even seem to notice the injury on his side.

"What's the matter, boy? Don't like to be caged?"

He wrinkled his muzzle, his teeth glistening beneath the muted light.

"Don't feel bad, I don't like it either." He cocked his head and took a step back, as though listening to her words.

A great number of dogs understood human speak. Some said dogs had the same intelligence and ability to learn as a five year old human child. But those animals lived with humans, and usually the same group of people their entire lives. They learned more than words. They learned human body language and scent. It was that combination which taught dogs to understand human speak. It's why dogs were still the most popular pet in the country.

But this was no dog. He was a wolf. He shouldn't be able to read her so well.

Maybe he wasn't so wild after all.

She unhooked the leash clipped to the wire of his cage door, looping it into a slip sling, what many called a choke collar. She studied him for several seconds.

He stared, his silvery grey eyes following her every move, but there was no challenge. Only intelligence.

He didn't belong here. He belonged in the woods, running free, with only the sun and moon to mark his time.

Images of him doing just that flitted on the edges of her mind. She shoved them away. This was no time to let her empathy get in the way. If he became a problem she'd do more, but reading a wild animal was tricky. Their minds didn't work like dogs, and it was easy for her to misinterpret images from their minds.

Her hand trembled as she opened the gate. Stepping into a cage with a wild animal was dangerous, yet she couldn't stop herself. Something about this wolf called to her on a level she couldn't understand. His eyes drew her inside, as though he wanted her to touch him.

He stepped back, as though offering her space. She gave him a tremulous smile. "Hey, boy. You're awfully handsome." She eased down, crouching before him. When he didn't back off, she reached for him with her good hand.

The wolf moved forward, his head nudging her fingers.

What the hell? Her heart swelled in surprise and awe.

Who would expect such a wild and powerful predator would ask for her touch?

Gray wolves were much more aggressive than the red wolves she'd worked with along the coast. But still, no wild animal had ever stepped into her hands as this one had. Her fingers edged closer and closer to the wound on his side.

The wolf's body stiffened, though he made no move to stop her. He seemed to understand she was here to help him. When Lance finished with her wrist, she'd have him take a look at the wolf's side.

"Looks like you're going to come home with me, we'll need to call you something other than Wolf. My dog Wolfie will get confused if I don't." She needed a name. She frowned, peering into the silver eyes. She'd only seen eyes like that one other time. "I'm going to call you Damon. I hope you don't mind," she said. The animal's head jerked. She cooed and stroked his head, her mind filled with reminiscent sadness. Damon had been the name of her imaginary friend when she was a child. A boy who played with her and didn't care she had so little power in comparison to her brothers.

Her father hated the idea of his existence.

My children will not have imaginary friends.

Too bad, Dad. No matter how much she'd loved her father, she'd been unable to send away the youngster she knew didn't really exist. She'd clung to Damon until well into her teens. When he'd finally faded away to that small place in her mind where her favorite memories were stored, she'd felt as though she'd lost a piece of her soul.

Krystal moved to grab the leash. The motion sent a vibration straight into her crushed wrist, and she winced, hissing at the sudden pain.

The wolf stepped toward her, and she held her breath. If he sensed her weakness and attacked, she had nowhere to go. Not with the cage door closed behind her. But he didn't attack. Instead, she felt the rough texture of his tongue against her flesh. The raspy sensation eased the pain, if only a little.

For a moment, Krystal felt a connection from years past. The same connection she'd felt to that imaginary Damon. She shrugged her shoulders, shoving it aside. It had to be because she'd thought of that imaginary boy.

"If you'll behave yourself, I'll take you home with me." She brushed her hand along the thick coat, noticing the variety of shades in the rich brown.

She stood. Dark spots fluttered before her eyes and the floor tilted. She grabbed hold of the wire cage. She took in several deep breaths until the world righted itself again.

Damn. If she was going to get him home to her house, she'd better do it now. She was losing energy fast. Breaks were dangerous for any person, but to wizards and mages, any injury weakened

them. Their power rushed to heal the injury, leaving them feeble and in danger. A broken bone to a mage could be deadly.

Krystal breathed in through her mouth, fighting the nausea and pain. The loop in the leash dropped down.

The animal stood, ducking his head inside. She jerked her eyes back to his. This wolf was starting to creep her out. He was reading her mind or something, acting more like a well trained pet than a wild animal. With a deep breath, she studied him. He didn't avoid her gaze, but there was no challenge in his eyes as expected. Instead, he gave her a soft look that appeared to say *Yes. Take me home with you.*

Krystal gave a light tug on the lead, pulling it taut about his neck. He didn't flinch. Krystal backed a step, watching his face. He stepped with her, his tail swaying to and fro.

"I'll be damned," she muttered, grinning. She may have told Ted she thought she'd be fine, but she'd really expected a battle on the way home. A docile wolf trotting at her left side in heel position was not in her list of expectations for this afternoon.

"Ted," she called, stepping into the main office. "I'm gone now."

The wolf stayed beside her, trotting along with his tongue lolling to the side. If not for the tension in his eyes, she'd believe he was the calm, docile dog he pretended to be. They walked straight through the department, ignoring the shocked looks on her fellow officer's faces.

There was no need to take the department's truck.

When she opened the car door, he jumped inside, positioning himself in the passenger seat, as though he understood the concept of the car.

She frowned. "You are just one odd puzzle, aren't you?"

The thump of his tail was her only answer.

She climbed behind the wheel, reaching across her body to move the car into reverse. Lance had better be able to fix this. Driving left handed was not fun.

From the passenger seat, Damon shook his head, ears flapping against his skull. How had she known his name? This day couldn't get any stranger. He tipped his head to better see the woman beside him. Protective instincts drove him to want to throttle her. This woman had saved his life, putting herself in jeopardy at the same time. She was a menace to her own safety, oblivious to her own mortality. Who the hell puts a wild wolf in the front seat beside them while they were driving?

Later, when he was himself again, he'd teach her a little bit about being safe. After he thanked her for saving him from the axe.

He'd been surprised when the man who held him captive smelled more of animal than man. Then he'd shifted, changing into an animal. But not a wolf. And not a tiger, like he'd seen before. A hyena. Was he the result of GSA Experiments as well?

Experiment or not, the bastard was part man and part hyena. A creature without conscience. Ready to kill at a moment's notice. Hyenas liked meat, just like the wolf. The awkward looking creatures were known as scavengers, but when they couldn't find leavings, they were vicious and efficient killers. Swift of foot, they ran down their prey, crushing bones with their powerful jaws.

However, what he saw happening at the man's home wasn't natural instinct. It was something else. Something cruel. The cages beside him were filled with domestic animals. Dogs. People's loved pets, from the tiny Yorkie to the huge Great Dane.

There was no hunting. Only killing.

There was no sport in that.

No honor.

The car stopped at a red light and Damon widened his nostrils, taking in the woman's luscious scent. From the first moment he'd laid eyes on the human, while lying on the stone slab, waiting for his head to be chopped off, he knew she was something different. Her essence whispered to him of

dark nights and a full moon. She appealed to him on every level. From her beauty, to her smell, to the strength he sensed inside her.

Arousal tightened his flesh. Even in wolf form, the need to shift and caress her with his hands tingled through his cells. The urge to stroke her body screamed inside him.

Down boy. She has no reason to look twice at you. He sneezed to hide the rumble rising in his throat.

No matter how hungry she made him, he wouldn't act on his desires. She thought he was a wolf, for one thing. That put a crimp in things. For another, she was a cop. Cops had this nasty habit of locking up what they considered evidence. And right now, that's exactly what he was. His only alternative was to escape. The problem was, he needed her help to get far away from the police station. If he'd escaped from the station, he had no doubt the scent dogs would be put on his trail. This way, things would be much easier.

The instant her attention was diverted, he'd sprint away, jerking the leash from her hands. Her wrist was damaged, so it would be easy. Maybe later he'd find a way to repay her for her kindness. He glanced over to the purple bruised and swollen hand she rested in her lap.

She's hurt.

Damn it. Why did that bother him? Yet the idea of causing her even momentary pain when he jerked the leash from her grasp didn't sit well. He bit back the rolling grumble of frustration. He'd have to stay with her. For now.

"You're so lucky," she said, a faint smile curving her blanched lips. "You look the same no matter what. Me, I look like I've been run through the mill." She pulled the car to a stop at another light and with her left hand, reached across with trembling fingers toward the radio volume control. Stretched as she was, it was a far reach and before her fingers touched the knob, she fisted her hand and pulled back.

Damon studied her through narrowed eyes. The swelling in her wrist was enough to concern him, but there was more wrong. Her face was also pale, with beaded drops of sweat forming near her hairline.

Wisps of her soft blonde hair brushed her cheek and she shoved it away. The motion brought a wave of fresh scent through the car. He tried to lose himself in her natural scent, the one which calmed the wildness he'd felt in the kennel. But he couldn't. Not with the syrupy sweet smell of sickness laced within. He wrinkled his nose, then cocked his head and listened. Her pulse fluttered at the base of her throat and her heart beat fast.

Call for help. He screamed the words at her in his mind. The erratic and feeble pulse told him all he needed to know. She was on the edge of consciousness. Even as he watched her, she shook her head, fighting to clear it. If he shifted now, there was a chance she'd freak out and wreck the car. If he waited she might wreck anyway.

As though she heard his mental shout, she glanced at him, her eyes turning glassy. "Don't worry, boy. When I get home, I'm going to call for help. That beast really did a number on my wrist."

Damn her. He had no intention of letting her wait. He wouldn't examine the reasons why it bothered him to see her like this. Not now. He could think about that later. Right now, she was what mattered.

Her movements as she took the next turn were jerky, the heel of her hand slipped off the wheel half way around the bend.

Call Now. She couldn't hear him, but it didn't stop him from issuing the mental command. It was then he noticed her cell phone. It was attached to the equipment belt she wore, hooked behind her weapon. He moved closer to her and whined.

"Relax. Almost there, boy." The words were strained.

He whined again and pawed at the cell phone.

"Knock it off," she grumbled. She couldn't brush him away though, as her one hand didn't move and the other was busy driving.

He pawed again.

She stopped at a stop sign, the turn signal flashing. "You know, if I didn't know you were a wild animal, I'd think you knew what a cell phone was for.

Damon yipped his agreement. *Damn it.* How the hell was he going to get her help if she insisted on ignoring him? He pawed again.

"Okay, okay." Her exasperated tone was edged with the hint of confusion. Reaching across her body she took the phone from its holster. "Thank heaven for speed dial," she grumbled. She pressed a button, then held the phone to her ear.

With his lupine sense, he heard the ringing of the phone at the other end. On the second ring a masculine voice answered.

"Lance."

"Lance, it's me. I need help. Meet me at my house. My wrist is hurt pretty bad."

"Where are you? I'll come there."

Damon fought the inexplicable surge of jealousy rushing through his body.

What the hell?

Now wasn't the time to be thinking with his anatomy. She needed help. It shouldn't matter who it came from. Yet he couldn't help wondering if she was seeing this man on a steady basis. She must trust him if she was going to let him help her.

And she had his phone on speed dial.

"I'm only a block from the house, so just meet me there."

Great. They were almost there. If she could hold it together a little longer, just long enough to get to her house, he could shift and take care of her.

The man on the other end of the line must have sensed a problem as well. *"Are you okay to drive?"*

She winced when the car behind her blew the horn. "I'm fine. Gotta go." She snapped the phone shut and dropped it onto the console before pulling away. Seconds later she turned into the driveway of a small blue house and parked the car.

Pain dulled her eyes. He watched as her head dropped against the wheel for a moment before sitting up and opening the car door.

Damon leapt out, afraid to let her stand on her own.

"Wait," she said. Her voice was growing weak.

Damon whimpered, a sound he normally hated in wolf form, and stood by the car door. Once she put both feet out, he moved closer to offer support upon standing.

"What is this? A wolf trained as a service dog?" She gave a weak chuckle and used his back to help pull herself to her feet. Her legs wobbled, but Damon leaned in, providing her his own body for balance. She shuffled toward the door and unlocked it, resting her forehead against the wood. Her breath wheezed in and out. She closed her eyes, murmuring beneath her breath. "You can do this. Just a few more steps."

Her fingers trembled, slipping off the doorknob once before she grasped it and turned. She stumbled inside, holding on to the doorjamb. Damon followed her.

A sharp bark startled him and he spun to find a small to medium sized dog stood in the kitchen just ahead, his lips pulled back into a snarl, medium length blonde fur raised along his back.

Damon flashed his teeth and growled. He didn't have time to mess with a pipsqueak of a dog when his woman was in shock. So when the dog drew close, Damon snapped his teeth in rapid succession, warning the little twerp to keep out of his way.

A smart dog, the creature moved beside Krystal and sniffed, then gave a worried whine.

"What, are you two ganging up on me?" The smile she gave her pooch was a weak one. As was the left hand ruffling Damon's ears. She held on to the back of a kitchen chair as she took a step.

Stepping beside her, Damon nuzzled her good hand, then waited for her to understand.

She took another step, then stumbled. Damon darted forward, his body in position to help her. *Put your weight on me, damn it.*

Once again she obeyed a command he knew she couldn't hear, by leaning on his back. He stilled, waiting.

"You want to help, boy?" she asked. Her voice grew weaker with every step she took.

He ducked his head down and back up.

"I could almosst think you undersstand me," she murmured, her words slurring. Then she dropped to her knees, slumping over on the floor.

Shit. Urgency ripped through his body. In his mind's eye, he imagined the man he was, and in the blink of an eye, Damon shifted. The instant he felt his fingers, Damon reached for the woman. Her eyes fluttered open, centering somewhere around his naked chest. He pulled her toward him, her tiny body limp. He stood and her hand came to life, fingers spreading across his muscles as though trying to figure out where he'd come from. She was so fragile, cradled in his arms. It was hard to believe she was the same woman who held a gun to his would be killer, who'd looked so powerful despite staring into the eyes of pure evil.

A shudder ripped through her body and he pulled her close. "What is wrong with you?" he asked, unable to hold back the words any longer. A broken wrist couldn't cause this much damage. Not hours later. Something wasn't right.

"Lance?" she murmured.

Her eyes had already closed, her lashes brushing her soft skin.

"Rest," he murmured. *Then we'll talk about pushing yourself too hard.* And he'd have to find out who the hell Lance was. Maybe he shouldn't wait for this Lance character, and he should take her to the hospital himself. Then again, she'd been very specific to call the man. It wasn't his place to change her decisions, as much as he'd like. He carried her across the small space to the couch against the far wall, then laid her on the sofa.

Damon stared in confusion at her. In his incarceration he'd ignored females. No matter how many they'd thrust upon him he'd not touched a one. Hell, he hadn't even wanted to. Yet something about Maxey drew him closer. The moth to the proverbial flame and he already knew who'd get burned. Him.

The small blonde dog leapt onto the couch. Damon reached to move him, afraid the beast would hurt her, but the animal curled his lip and emitted a soft, low growl. Like him, the dog was protective of the woman. Maybe she just elicited protectiveness from those with the heart of the animal? No. That couldn't be right. Or else the hyena that'd bitten her wouldn't have hurt her.

She snuggled deep into the pillow on the couch as though in a sound sleep. What he wouldn't do to have her snuggle up against him like that. He growled and shook his head. It was stupid to be jealous of a piece of cloth and bit of stuffing. Besides, she needed a blanket.

Damon pulled himself erect, wishing he had at least a pair of shorts. Walking around naked in wolf form was no big deal, but as a human, it could get really scary. It's hard to claim to be a passerby when you're nude. He scanned the small house. He stood in a living room, just off the kitchen, opposite the back door. The couch was against the outside wall, a tall lamp between the worn sofa and the front door. Off to the side was a hallway. If he was lucky, he could find her a blanket, and have her at least comfortable by the time this Lance fellow arrived.

In the bedroom, sights and scents assaulted his senses. The room looked warm and inviting, with a variety of shades of blue. Not dainty, but solid. Comfortable. It was the smell that nearly caused his knees to buckle. Pure, feminine Maxey. Damon sneezed to clear his passageways, then closed his

eyes and inhaled. He let the feminine perfume permeate his body, soaking into his lungs and filtering through to his cells.

His body hardened in instant reaction. Damn. He should know better than to play with fire, and that's what Maxey was. A little spit fire who didn't know what was good for herself. The remnants of her essence filled his lungs, setting his body aflame.

Ignoring the suddenly painful erection he sported, Damon searched the closet and dresser for blankets. Nothing. No men's clothes either. Plenty of women's clothes that wouldn't come close to fitting. Just great.

The only possible help was the bed. He stripped it, wrapping the top sheet about his waist and folding the blanket to take to Maxey.

"Anybody home?" The male voice shouted as the back door slammed shut. "It's me, Lance."

Possessive jealousy twisted in Damon's gut. He held the sheet tight about his body. He bit back the growl threatening to roll from his throat. *Stop this insanity.* He had no claim on this woman or her home.

He forced his emotions back in check, tossing the sheet back on the bed. He shifted, hoping the bright light didn't alert the man to his presence. He grabbed the blanket between his teeth and moved toward the living room.

A blonde headed man knelt before Maxey. He brushed her hair from her face with a gentleness which expressed a close familiarity as well as love. This time the rumble escaped Damon's throat before he could catch himself, and the man's head swiveled around. The man looked and smelled familiar. He cocked his head, searching for some sign of recognition from this Lance character.

He gave none.

Instead, his face paled even as his blue eyes widened. But he wasn't stupid. His gaze took in the blanket trailing beneath Damon's wolven feet.

"It's okay, boy. You can bring that to me, and we'll take care of her together." His voice was soothing, almost hypnotic. He spoke as though seeing a wolf in Maxey's house wasn't unusual. Maybe she did this all the time, bringing home strays.

Damon shook his head. No, he was not a stray. Or at least, didn't want to be.

The man continued to stare at him, waiting. Damon took a cautious step forward. It was then he noticed Lance's hands on Maxey's injured wrist. Yellow light seeped from beneath his palm.

Of course. Damon shook his head and snorted. This was one of the men who'd inadvertently rescued him. The one who'd spent most of his time with the Tigress. He hadn't realized the man had the skills to heal. Yet even as he watched, the pale flesh of her cheeks colored as circulation returned to normal, the sweat on her brow dried and her lids fluttered open.

"Lance, you came." Damon's heart leapt to hear the soft, weak voice.

"Of course I did, Brat. Did you think I'd let you suffer?"

Her soft laugh filled Damon's ears and she sat up, the man helping. She grimaced. Damon groaned. He wanted to be the one whose arm wrapped around her, supporting her as she raised her body. The little dog she'd called Wolfie bounced up and ran to Lance, wagging and grinning like a little fool.

Traitor.

Krystal glanced around and frowned. "I had the strangest dream." It had to have been a dream. Yet her body still remembered the powerful, strong arms holding her, lifting her from the kitchen floor. She remembered a naked chest, and she remembered the smell of hot, masculine flesh. A scent so powerful she could feel her body melting, relaxing against him as though that's where she belonged. Maybe she was losing her mind. "You didn't find me on the floor, did you?"

Her brother sent her a sharp look. "No, why?"

She shrugged. "Just wondering."

"You okay?" Her brother watched her through veiled eyes.

She hated showing weakness in front of her brother. He may be the youngest, but just like the other three, he protected her to no end. "I'm fine. Thanks to you." She twisted her wrist, ignoring the quick flash of pain. Wolfie nudged her other hand and she stroked his fur. A soft growl drew her attention across the room. Damon. Her hand froze on the dog. The wolf had not turned into a man. She had to be imagining things. He couldn't have... Shit, she hated to be sick. Illness made her dreams too vivid.

"So what are you doing with a wolf?"

Krystal shrugged, brushing her hair behind her ear and rubbed her arm. She could still feel a man's arms holding her. Lifting her. "He was having problems in the kennels, so I thought he might be more comfortable here."

"Damnit, Brat, he could have killed you before I got here. Is he the one who bit you?"

"No, he's not." The echo of Krystal's headache still lurked behind her eyes, determined to return if she let herself get angry. Her fingers caressed her brow. Maybe she should ask him to work on her headache. She glanced at Lance's pale face. No, maybe not. Healing always took a bit more out of her younger brother than he was willing to admit, and a broken bone was no simple job.

"I'm still alive, so I guess the point is moot. I'm in no danger."

"It is not moot." Her brother drew to his full height. Five feet, ten inches. Despite knowing the exact figures, he looked taller these days. Marriage had done something to him. He was more confident, more assured and in control of his wizardry powers. Logan, their oldest brother, had even gone as far as to say Lance wasn't a wizard, but was a sorcerer, a man who didn't need to memorize the spells of wizardry, but instead could create them on the fly.

If only she could be so lucky. She had one skill and one skill only. Sure, it didn't require tons of verbal spells or hand motions, but it was the only thing she was reliable at. Commanding people or animals to stop what they were doing. She could work a few minor spells, but nothing big. She was a loser when it came to being a mage.

Lance paced her small living room. "You've got to be more careful, Brat. You're a cop. You know not to be so careless. And if he didn't bite you, what did?"

"A hyena."

Her brother stopped his forward motion, spinning to face her. "A what?" The incredulous tone of his voice only mocked her own internal confusion.

"I know. I could barely believe it myself. Here I was, my gun trained on Preacher Man, only to have a wild animal leap out of nowhere and clamp down on my wrist." She flexed the mostly healed hand, wincing at the jab of pain. "And a vicious animal with lots of teeth at that. If I hadn't known to not jerk my hand away, he'd probably have ripped the flesh right off the bone." She examined the faint trace of bruising. "As it was, he crushed the bone. I'm lucky he didn't puncture the skin."

"Is that the man you've been trying to track down for the last year?"

"The one and the same," she acknowledged with a sigh. "We got a tip he'd stolen another dog from inside town. Witnesses had seen him shove the dog into his truck and got the license plate. It wasn't easy tracking him, since it's an out of state plate, but we finally found him. When we got there, he was about to chop off the wolf's head," she motioned toward the dark animal still glaring at Lance as though daring him to make a move toward Krystal.

"And it looks like he wants to take your other hand off for your troubles," Lance grumbled.

"Wrong," said Krystal, punctuating her word with an exasperated sigh. She shoved past her brother and put herself between him and the wolf, leaving Wolfie on the couch. "I think he's reserved that for you. He probably knows you don't trust him." She motioned toward the blanket lying on the floor. "And if I'm not mistaken, that's for me. He has no intention of hurting me." Puzzled, Krystal stared at the blanket. How had the animal known where to find a blanket? For that matter, how had he known she would need it?

A quick glance at Lance told her he was probably thinking the same thing. His eyes narrowed, looking at her, then at the animal beside her. A frown lined his forehead, his lips tight and narrow.

Krystal held her breath, hoping she had convinced him everything was under control. One word from her younger brother would bring the entire Fantastic Four down on her. Just like had happened all her life.

The only girl from a family of five children, her brothers, Lance, Ross, Jared and Logan, always banded together early in life to protect their only sister. Most often, they did so in the most obsessive, aggressive and overbearing manner possible.

For years they had appeared as a solid wall of muscle against her and any man stupid enough to give her a second look. And twice was all it ever took. The minute the guy laid eyes on the four Maxey brothers, they were history.

She stared at her brother. Confidence. Her brothers were like wild animals. If you showed fear, they pounced.

At last Lance, the youngest of that protective wall, threw his hands up in concession. "Do what you want. But be careful."

Krystal let out the gust of air trapped in her lungs. "I'm always careful."

He ignored her words, his eyes narrowed. "I take it this Preacher Man got away?"

"Yes." Her teeth clenched at the memory. "Bastard."

His jaw tightened. "If you need any help, just call."

"I did that already." She hated calling any of the Fantastic Four for help but sometimes it was required. No matter what she did, her brothers acted as though she was still fourteen, always telling her to be more careful. As if she was putting herself in danger on purpose. It was her job, damn it. And she was good at her job. All she needed to do was bring down Preacher Man, and they'd acknowledge her skills.

Lance gave her a brief hug, only to step back at the low grumble they heard behind him.

"Stop it," Krystal hissed, and the animal met her eyes, then sneezed, shaking his head.

"Get rid of that wolf," Lance said, jabbing his finger toward the animal.

Krystal grinned. Her brother was all bluster. If he was really worried he wouldn't be heading out her kitchen door.

After a quick peck on her cheek he trotted down the few cement steps to her back yard. She pushed the door shut then turned to face the wolf. Krystal's stomach rumbled and she laughed. "Looks like our next step is food."

Chapter 3

Damon took a swig from the mug of beer and set it back on the dark wooden bar. Sitting in a public place made him uncomfortable. The sights and smells swirled in his head, blending with the taste of the beer. If he didn't know better he'd think he was already drunk, a dangerous condition for a man like him. Once the alcohol invaded his system, people could see the amber gleam in his eyes. A gleam normally reserved for when he was in some form of emotional turmoil. Or so it seemed, anyway. Since he couldn't remember who he was, and wasn't sure how he got to be this half-animal, half-man, he couldn't be positive what caused the colored flashes in his eyes.

The instant Maxey had left the house, he'd let himself out, dashing for his clothes hidden in the woods. Six weeks before, he'd escaped incarceration from a crazy doctor whose mission Damon had never quite figured out. What little he remembered from that time was filled with pain and torture. Experiments. Needles. Drugs. The dark images flashed through his memory like a horror flick. His hand tightened on his glass, the knuckles turning white.

One day he'd make them pay. He'd destroy their little dungeon and everything inside.

Until then he'd wanted only to be alone, avoiding man and his ulterior motives.

Still, he'd stolen a pair of jeans and a t-shirt from a basket of clothes as a woman was unloading at a local laundry mat. Clothes he used in the rare event he wanted human contact.

The jeans had fit, even if they were a tad short, but the shirt constricted the muscles in his chest. One heavy breath and he knew the seams would split. The original owner of the clothes may have been a big man, but he definitely wasn't as muscular.

Finding footwear had been more difficult. He'd watched every man he saw, judging the size of his footprints and shoes. The boots he wore now had come from a man several miles away from the forest Damon had begun to call home.

Washing the clothes hadn't been easy, but he refused to wear dirty laundry more than he had to. He'd stolen a bar of soap and washed them in the small creeks in the woods, then had hung them out to dry on low bushes and a few tree branches. Body soap wasn't designed to do laundry, but hell, he couldn't have everything.

It had worked so far.

Once he was dressed, he'd jogged back, following the scent of Maxey's trail for three miles until he found her. It hadn't been difficult. He'd know her scent anywhere, and a small part of him wondered if he'd known her. Before he was a medical experiment.

Her decision to have dinner with a friend was a blessing in disguise. It gave him a chance to examine her, in his human form. The two women were here now, seated a mere ten feet from him.

The murmur of multiple televisions, each playing a different sports show, made it hard to hear their words. If he didn't have the enhanced wolf-like senses, he wouldn't have the skills to eavesdrop on their conversation.

He knew, though he wasn't sure how, eavesdropping was rude. But this woman, Maxey, drew him in ways he couldn't understand. It wasn't just that she'd saved his life. This was deeper, maybe more instinctive. Her scent, even at this distance, was sweet as a German wine. How he knew what a sweet German wine smelled like was beyond him as well. Maybe he should actually buy a few bottles and find one like her.

Later.

For now, he listened as Maxey's blonde friend, Denise, told Maxey the long, sordid tale of her latest beau. The two women could pass for sisters. Each had blonde hair, Maxey's long, almost to her waist. Denise's, the same shade, brushed her shoulders. Even their faces were the same complexion. Smooth, pale, and clear. But their eyes were very different. Krystal's violet eyes outshone her friend's calm, blue ones.

Damon knew Maxey wasn't paying attention to the woman opposite her. Her eyes were glazed, staring off into space, nodding now and then, acknowledging her friend's words, yet he was sure she couldn't hear them.

She popped a French fry into her mouth as her friend talked, drawing his attention to the luscious curve of her lips. She swallowed, and a second fry moved toward her mouth. Tiny white teeth bit into the crispy potato. The sight of her teeth sent a surge of unexplained lust surging through his blood and he bit back a groan of desire. *What the hell?*

His desires couldn't be normal. He'd not noticed anyone else in the bar watching a woman's teeth. Yet hers were strong and healthy. He could almost picture fangs hidden beneath her sensuous lips.

He shook his head to clear it. The beer. It must be the beer causing this visceral reaction. He shoved the drink away and ordered a coke.

He wasn't here because he desired her. He was here from curiosity. She'd saved his hide today. And to do so she'd used magick. Then, the same man he'd seen six weeks before had come to her rescue. The one who'd led the rescue of all the people and animal experiments in the basement of the GSA.

He'd spent the last six weeks searching for the four men, hoping they could tell him something about himself, and today was his first break.

"You're not listening to me." The words filtered into his brain and he watched Maxey jerk from her own inner musings.

"Sorry, Denise." Maxey shook her head as though dislodging an uncomfortable thought. "I had a bad day today."

Her friend's eyes widened. "You went after *him*, didn't you?"

Maxey nodded, her soft hair fell forward into her face.

Damon fought the urge to offer to brush it aside.

"And I failed."

The words struck him with inexplicable power. She hadn't failed. Not in his opinion, anyway. He was alive. Long fingers tightened on his coke. Calloused and strong, fingers used to hard work he couldn't remember.

"Tell me what happened," demanded Denise.

Maxey nodded and Damon listened as she recounted the day's events. She didn't even leave out the odd healing with the other man. She said not a word about seeing a man becoming an animal, which meant she hadn't seen his transition in her kitchen.

He relaxed. She had no reason to suspect the wolf inside her house was also a man at a bar. Then he tensed. He may be safe, but was she? She'd targeted a dangerous man who was also a half-man, half-animal. A creature with no morals, from what he'd seen. Instincts shifted. Self-preservation was replaced with the powerful urge to protect this woman. His lip curled and his chest vibrated with the rolling growl rising to his throat.

The man seated next to him glanced at him in alarm before taking his own drink and moving to a table.

Damon bit back the sound, and instead, focused on the woman. He watched the way her hands moved, grace and power all in one. He listened to her voice as she and her friend talked. Each word was like music to his soul, both soothing and arousing at once.

"Don't look now, but I think someone has his eye on you."

"Right," said Maxey, glancing in his direction. "One look at the Fantastic Four and he'll change his mind."

Just who was this "Fantastic Four?" and why did they bother her?

"I don't know. He looks like maybe he could take them on."

He heard Maxey chuckle. The soft sound rolled through him, enhancing the arousal already present. Heat burned in his blood and he closed his eyes, fighting for control. When he opened them, he found both women looking him over. Scanning him from the top of his head down to his stolen, rugged boots.

From her side of the table, Krystal glanced at Denise, then darted a look toward the bar. At least she intended just a simple darted glance. But what she saw drew her, freezing her gaze. Her breath stilled.

Unable to stop herself, she let her inner cop tick off his stats. Dark hair, cut close on the sides, a little longer on top. A high and tight, or so it was called by the military. Even sitting she would guess him to be over six feet tall. Wide, powerful shoulders with heavy sinew roping toward equally strong arms. Definitely soldier material.

One hand gripped a drink. The right hand. The dark liquid was in the type of glass the bar used for sodas, not mixed drinks. But he wasn't completely alcohol free, since an empty beer mug sat in front of him.

Her training jangled against her nerves. This man was trouble.

Yet even as the thought struck her, everything feminine inside her went on alert. His dark silver-gray eyes radiated with strength and masculine power. Eyes that held hers.

As they stared at one another, something flashed deep in those eyes. For a microsecond it was there, before his gaze hardened.

Vulnerability.

"Breathe," whispered Denise.

Krystal heard her friend's command and forced air in and out of her lungs. What was it about this man that drew her so? From more than ten feet away he was magnetic, drawing her to him the way the opposite sides of a magnet pulled at one another.

Krystal shook her head to clear it. Magnets could just as easily repel one another with the flip of the situation. Instant attraction was always dangerous.

The man stood, and Krystal's heart fluttered in her chest. She swallowed the dry lump in her throat, as he moved in her direction.

One large, strong, hand grabbed the empty chair beside her and spun it around.

"Mind if I join you?" He straddled the seat and dropped to the wooden surface.

"It looks to me like you already have," said Denise.

He turned and gave Denise a grin, allowing Krystal the precious seconds she needed to get a grip on herself. No man's presence disturbed her. Hell, she was raised with four of the most powerful men she'd met to this date. Yet this one was different.

He turned his liquid silver eyes back to hers and her pulse skittered against her throat.

"I'm Krystal."

"I'm Damon," he said at the same time.

They both chuckled at the simultaneous blurting of names. His laughter was soft, but the smile lit his eyes, softening his hard, chiseled features and chasing away the ghosts she'd seen.

His smile melted, curving into a frown. "Krystal? But I thought..."

"You thought what?"

In an instant, his eyes drew back, shuttering his emotions within. "Nothing," he said with a shrug.

Damon. He'd said his name was Damon. Twice today the name had come up. Weird. A tingle ran down her spine. The same tingle she'd felt when she met the wolf. Yeah, that made sense. Just because his name was Damon, he was magick. Maybe Damon the imaginary friend, Damon the wolf

and Damon the man were all one. Right. He was probably the one who helped her when she passed out too, right? One man does it all! *And maybe I need to see a psychiatrist and stare at a bunch of pretty little inkblots. Wouldn't that be lots of fun?*

"Krystal."

Denise's interruption was welcome. Such morbid thoughts. What the hell was wrong with her?

"Tell me more about today's bust."

Bless her ever loving heart. Krystal fought back a smile. Her friend wanted this man, Damon, to know Krystal wasn't someone to be trifled with. Of course the need for those inkblots might make a man rethink that confidence.

"Bust?" he asked.

Krystal nodded, but when she met his eyes, she frowned. The quizzical smile he offered seemed forced. Like he already knew the answer. *Hell, now I'm jumping to conclusions.*

"It would have gone a lot better if I had caught some of them." It still irked her how easily Preacher Man had escaped. One moment he was there, the next gone.

"They deserve to rot in hell," grumbled Denise.

"Who were you trying to catch?" queried Damon.

The tremor vibrated again in her body. He knew she was a cop. She wasn't imagining things. Well, at least, not about this. He'd shown no sign of surprise when she talked about a bust. Most men at least showed surprise even if they didn't mention it.

"This bastard. He goes by the name of Preacher Man, only his religion isn't any you or I would understand."

Damon drew back, his eyes serious. "What kind of religion does he have? And how can you arrest someone for their beliefs?"

Krystal shoved her plate away and glowered at both Denise and Damon.

"Freedom of religion is one thing, but fraud and animal abuse is something else all together. This bastard peruses 'free to good home' ads in the paper, then adopts these pets from their unsuspecting owners, only to kill them and eat them."

Damon's face blanched. Good. At least he wasn't one of those hard asses that thought animals didn't deserve to be treated with respect, and that pets were nothing more than stock.

"I still can't believe he got away from you," announced Denise. "I can't remember the last time some perp escaped your grasp."

Krystal sighed. "I can't either. If that hyena hadn't grabbed hold of me, I'd have gotten the bastard, but by the time I got the thing off me, Preacher Man was gone."

Music from Denise's cell phone interrupted the conversation. She grabbed it, a grin on her face. "It's Jack."

Her boyfriend. Krystal waved her off with a disgusted sigh and Denise jumped to her feet to go chat in private.

"Who's Jack?" asked Damon.

"Her boyfriend. He's kind of a jerk, but she loves him anyway."

"Harsh," he said.

"True," she responded with a wry smile. "And she knows how I feel, so it's no biggie. I accept him because I accept her. But if he ever hurts her..."

He cocked his head to one side, his own grin quirked to show even white teeth. "I wouldn't want to stand in your way if he did."

She laughed.

Denise breezed over, grabbing her purse from her chair. "Jack's picking me up out front." Then her gaze clouded, as she glanced at Damon, then back at Krystal.

"Don't worry," said Krystal, laughing. "I'll be fine. I think I can get the few blocks back to my house alone."

"I will see to it she gets home safe," said Damon, half standing.

Denise motioned him back down, her eyes still hooked on Krystal. "If you're sure?"

"I'm sure. Now go. He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Denise grinned, then swung about, strolling through the door.

"You are very trusting."

She shook her head, and smiled, stealing a last fry from her plate as the waitress picked it up. "No, I can take care of myself, and I know this neighborhood. Anyone who comes at me is in for a surprise."

He gave what looked like an appreciative glance, a half smile on his lips. "Still, if you wouldn't mind, I'd prefer to walk you home."

Her gaze trailed down the powerful biceps, halting on the tattoo on his arm. The image of a skull, with wings hung from a parachute. Above the image the words *Death from Above* were scrolled. Airborne.

Of course. It happened every time. For years she'd gone without a relationship, because the only men who interested her were the dangerous type. The soldiers who loved putting themselves in jeopardy, the bikers who felt alpha behavior was dealt out with their handlebars. This one enjoyed jumping out of perfectly good airplanes in the middle of a warzone. She shivered at the thought.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Airborne?"

This time he looked surprised, and followed her gaze to the tattoo on his bicep. "Yeah, I guess so," but his voice was gruff, his eyes shuddered.

"You guess so?"

He shrugged. Something in his expression gave way to secrets. "Tell me."

He sighed, spinning his glass on the table between his fingers. "I don't think..."

His eyes met hers. He wanted to share with her whatever was bothering him, but wasn't comfortable. Why did she care? What was it about this man that drew her in enough to wonder why he was afraid to speak to her?

"That's okay. I just thought maybe you were still in the service. The 82nd soldiers are all over the place around here."

Damon stared into those innocent violet eyes. Okay, maybe not innocent. She was a cop, after all. And she understood magick. But she had no idea of the true evils in the world. If she did, her raid today would have been a success. She would have come in armed to the teeth instead of just a few local cops.

He started to lie, to tell her he'd done his time and now he must move on. Yet he couldn't. The idea of lying to her twisted in his gut and he couldn't spit the words out.

"The problem is," he sighed, giving in to what felt inevitable, "I don't remember anything before two months ago." When he'd woken up locked in the cage. "I was in..." Shit. He couldn't tell her everything. "A private hospital after an accident," he finished with a lame sigh. "I'm afraid I don't remember who or what I was before then."

"You lost your memory?" Horrified, she stared at him, her eyes wide. "Do you have any family to help you?"

He grimaced as he shook his head. He should have known this wouldn't work. "I don't know. See, other than my first name, I know nothing else."

"Not even your last name?" she asked, her voice skeptical.

He shook his head, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut.

"How do you know your first name, then?"

Shit. How *did* he know his first name? "My clothes told them. I had on a shirt with my name monogrammed on the pocket. Just a first name." His gut twisted, but damn it, he couldn't tell her

the doctors who were experimenting on him told him his first name, but forgot to tell him his last before he escaped. He took a drink of his cola to hide his grimace of discomfort.

"Uh huh," she said. He could see the wheels turning in her head, trying to make sense of his conglomeration of lies and the truth. "So you're not even sure that's your real name?"

"I guess not. Thanks for pointing that out," he said in a wry voice.

Her brow lifted, and then her mouth opened to say something before she closed it. She tried again. "I'm sorry, Damon. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. It's just the cop in me."

"I understand," he said, but he couldn't look at her. He played with his glass of soda pop, spinning it on the wooden table. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd not told a soul about his background, or lack thereof. But she did know Lance, one of the men who'd helped him escape. Perhaps his instincts were guiding him the best way they could to get the answers he needed.

"What did the police say?"

"Nothing," he said. "I never went to the police."

The main entrance swung open and four men entered, each lean and muscular, their voices echoing with raucous laughter. "Hey Jim, a round in the corner," one shouted as they moved past Krystal's table.

Then they stopped. One whirled about, while another grumbled and headed toward a table at the end of the bar section. Two turned and patted Damon on the back, grins spread wide across their faces. "Damon Connell. Hell, it is you. I thought so."

Damon jerked to his feet and turned to stare the man in the eyes. Every muscle tensed through Damon's body. It was obvious these strangers knew him. He glanced over to the two men at the table. One glared at him out of narrowed eyes, the other sat with his back to the rest of the room.

"Hi. My name's Krystal. What's yours?" She stood, offering her hand to the strangers.

"Campbell. Joseph," he said as though remembering his manners. He offered her a firm, solid handshake.

"Hi Joseph. Nice to meet you. Could you excuse Damon and me for a few minutes? We were kind of in the middle of something. I'll make sure he comes and visits with you before we leave."

Krystal ignored the sharp look Damon gave her, and focused on Joseph.

"Sure. And call me Joe. We'll be in the back, sitting at our old table," he motioned with a nod of his head. "Damon knows he's always welcome."

"Excellent, thanks."

The men headed across the floor to the booth in the back corner, a waitress bringing pitchers of beer and several mugs.

"Sit," she hissed at Damon.

"What do you think you're doing?" Damon growled, but he spun the chair and dropped into it. This woman was messing with what little sanity he had left, ordering him about, making plans to talk to people he didn't know but who knew him. For all he knew, they were the reason he was in this crappy situation. Yet her scent still wafted toward him, calming the beast he held inside.

She took her own seat, then leaned toward him. "Look, you said you don't know who you are, but those guys obviously do. Look at their arms."

Each man sported the same tattoo already drawn on his own arm. Death from above.

"Are you sure you want this done with silver?" The voice floated in his mind. He knew that voice. Somewhere.

"Just do it, damnit," Damon said. If I don't have this tattoo by morning I'm going to have to explain to the guys why. I don't want to sound like a wuss."

The smell of ink was overwhelmed by the scent of the silver. The only way he could keep the tattoo would be to add the silver, and each drop of silver was like torture, sizzling beneath the hum

of the electric needle. Sharp and metallic, the sharp edge jabbed into his skin, leaving the burning sizzle of poison.

Silver was deadly to his race, and one wrong move would send the toxin straight to his heart.

"You're not a wuss, Damon," said the disembodied male voice. The needle punctured his skin, sending the ink and silver beneath the flesh. The burn of the liquid intensified with each puncture of his skin. At long last the job was finished, but the torture had just begun. It would continue to burn, from now, till the day he died.

Damon tried to grasp the edges of the memory, but it floated into the recesses of his mind. He met Krystal's gaze. She watched him, her head cocked to one side. Did this mean he'd always been this wolf creature? He was born this way? If he'd gotten the tattoo to be like the "rest of the guys" and had it done in silver so it wouldn't fade when he shifted, then there was no other answer. He was wolf before he was captive. Unless the tattoo was done later. After he'd been turned.

"Damon," Krystal's voice penetrated the fog in his mind. "What is it?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"You remembered something, didn't you?"

"Nothing important."

She gave a heavy sigh.

Why did she care? She had no clue he was the wolf she'd left caged behind her home. She had no idea he was the creature who'd lunged at the hyena shifter to protect her once the man had become an animal. Then again, she was acquainted with the man she called Lance. A man who could answer his questions. Did she know he was a werewolf and was watching him the same way the doctors did? Hell, for all he knew she was an employee of the GSA and was assigned to find him.

"Tell you what, let's go visit with your friends. Let me do most of the talking and I'll find out all about you."

"I don't doubt you could," he murmured. She could pull his deepest, darkest secrets from him if he wasn't careful. Why the hell couldn't he lie to her? For that matter, why the hell couldn't he follow his head and storm out the door like he wanted?

"Let's go." She grabbed his hand.

The instant their flesh touched he knew he couldn't refuse her. He fought the urge to wrap her in his arms to fend off any who would steal her away. But the need was tempered by a fierce protectiveness. Every cell in his body ached to protect her. Even from himself.

"All right, but don't hold your breath."

She flashed him a beautiful smile and for that instant, all was right in his world. He didn't care who or what he was, just so long as he could make her smile.

"Don't worry, I won't. I don't look good in blue."

Confused, he held her still. "What?"

"You know, hold your breath, turn blue?"

Amusement flickered through his already confused emotions. "I don't know," he said, scanning her very sexy curves. "I have a feeling you will look good in anything you wear."

She shot him a wry smile with a shake of her head, but he didn't miss the flush of color on her cheeks as she dragged him toward the four men watching them.

"Damon, I still can't believe it's you," said one of them, standing.

"This is Krystal," he said gruffly. If he could get things turned over to her, maybe she could take control and they could get the hell out of here. The walls were starting to feel like they were closing in on him. The soothing caress of her thumb against the back of his hand as she held his was the only thing keeping him in the room.

"Hi," she said, a bright smile on her face for each of his so called friends. "Damon has told me about you guys and I couldn't wait to meet y'all."

“Oh really?” said one of the guys, a sparkle of humor in his blue eyes as he scanned Krystal’s body. “Somehow I doubt he’s told you all our stories.”

The desire to pummel the man rushed through Damon, and he fisted his hands and fought for control. He bit back the growl forming low in his throat. What the hell was wrong with him? The young man hadn’t said anything wrong. He hadn’t overtly flirted with her. All he’d done was smile. And look.

Krystal grabbed a chair from behind them and with a flash of her eyes indicated Damon should do the same. Unable to find a way to escape, he spun the chair to face the table and dropped into it.

They sat close, and Krystal rested her hand on his thigh.

He wished she wouldn’t do that. No, strike that. He wished they were alone so she could touch him more. His blood sizzled beneath her touch, even through the jeans.

Yet a small part of him wondered at her motives.

“So, Damon tells me you guys are all Airborne, is that right?”

Observant little thing, she was.

“Yep,” said the one who said his name was Joseph. “We’ve been through hell and back, haven’t we Connell?”

It took him a moment to realize Joseph meant him. Damon Connell. He gave a slow nod, shifting in his seat.

“More like an inferno,” growled the man in the corner. Damon turned to look at him, but the man refused to meet his eyes. At a glance he seemed younger than the rest, maybe in his early twenties while the rest were in their late twenties. Like all the others, his blonde hair was cut short in the traditional high and tight. A cut which only made him look younger.

Krystal focused in on the lad. “What do you mean?”

The young man shrugged. “Just like I said. It wasn’t fun. It was war.”

“I see,” she said, her voice soft and understanding. “I can’t imagine it’s been very pretty over there.”

“Hey, Langston,” said the one named Johnson. “Tell the lady about Connell and you when he saved your life.”

The young man in the corner blanched.

“I don’t think—” said Connell.

“Oh come on,” said Johnson. “This is the best story ever.”

Damon glanced at the young man. Connell. He needed to think of himself as Damon Connell now. Narrowing his eyes, he examined the pale features of the young soldier. The image of the boy’s face floated into Damon’s subconscious, blood spattered on the boy’s face, fear filling his eyes.

Langston met Damon’s eyes from his corner. “I think I’m going to be sick,” the boy groaned. He stood and without another glance headed toward the restrooms.

Joseph shook his head. “I don’t know about that boy. I think if someone saved my life I’d be a bit more thankful.”

“What happened?” Asked Krystal.

Joseph glanced toward Damon, and when he didn’t speak, Joseph sighed. “We were jumping into the mountains northwest of Kabul in Afghanistan. Bin Laden’s troops were hiding out in the caves. We were to take them out, then head back to flat ground for pickup. When we went in, the winds picked up, circling in the mountains, making the jump dangerous. Langston got off track and Connell there headed right after him as his buddy. I’m not sure what happened, but when Langston landed he was apparently a bit shook up. An Afghani came up behind him with a knife. Connell there charged, killing the enemy with his bare hands.”

Shit. The image of the boy’s terrified eyes wouldn’t leave his mind. Whatever had happened had panicked the soldier to the point he still couldn’t meet Damon’s eyes. He stood so quick his chair tipped back, slamming into the floor. “I’ll be right back,” he murmured.

He stormed toward the bathrooms, cornering Langston in the small alcove. The soldier's face turned even paler. "Look, man, I just wanted to see if you're okay."

Junior stepped back as if to charge around him, so Damon blocked the exit. "Let me go." Junior looked everywhere but in Damon's direction.

"What's wrong? What are you hiding?"

The kid fisted his hands and squared his shoulders. "Get out of my way, Damon. I told you before, I'm not saying a word to nobody."

"Still, I'm there for you if you need me. I wouldn't have done what I did for just anyone." Somehow he knew that was true. He was a loner. Damon wasn't quite sure how he knew that, but he was. And he wouldn't put his life on the line unless he cared for that person.

When the young soldier still wouldn't meet his gaze, Damon sighed. "Look, I just wanted to say thanks, and to let you know I'm there for you."

Langston nodded, averting his eyes again. "No problem," he mumbled.

"And Langston."

The boy froze.

"I'm glad I could save you." The youth nodded and ducked around Damon.

If only he could remember what happened. That small flash of the boy's face wasn't enough to tell him how he'd killed the enemy, or even how many of the enemy he'd killed. One thing he knew, the story the rest heard wasn't the real thing. Langston had blood on his face. That didn't happen in a bad airdrop.

Damon sighed and headed back to the table. The men were still sharing stories of their exploits in the military. He dropped into his chair and Krystal flashed him a smile.

Chapter 4

Damon held Krystal's hand as they walked out of the sports bar. Her hand was strong, but small. And yet it felt right. He shouldn't be so forward yet try as he might he couldn't let her go. He knew nothing about her. Hell, he knew even less about himself. From the instant he'd laid eyes on her dark blonde hair he'd been entranced. Even with a gun held in her hand and the man with an axe above his head ready to lop it off, Damon had been frozen, unable to look away from her for precious seconds.

Not until the hyena had grabbed her wrist had he shot into action, charging the man she called Preacher Man. Instincts he didn't understand forced him to leap to save his own life so he could save hers.

He let go of her hand and looped an arm about her waist, pulling her tight against him. She didn't fight him. Instead, she stiffened almost imperceptibly before relaxing against him. The heat of her body melted into his tight muscles, easing his tense muscles, while at the same time building the already hot desire swirling inside him.

Her body held the sweet softness of feminine curves, yet beneath them he could feel the powerful steel of muscle as she strode beside him. Her strength was as arousing as the soft curves of her hips. Unable to swallow the urge, a quiet rumble of approval rolled along his spine.

The wind shifted. Her sweet essence washed over him. Damon inhaled through his nose and mouth. He rolled her scent over his tongue. His taste buds exploded, hungry for more. The beast inside him awoke, urging him closer. Damon's mouth watered with the need to taste her skin.

Mine, a voice whispered in his head.

As they walked, her hips swayed against him. Every touch branded him, driving his desire even higher and stripping away another layer of control.

Damon fought against his need. He would not be a beast. He was a man, and he would act like one. Yet the next time she swayed against him, he drew her even closer against his body, tightening his hold.

Krystal walked beside Damon, lost in thought. No, that wasn't right. She was lost in emotions and sensation. With every step her hip brushed against the man beside her. With every touch her body burned even hotter. Damon was pure power, and no matter how hard she tried, she could not ignore his energy. In all her life, she'd never been so drawn to a man.

It wasn't like her to take the initiative, but inside the bar, she'd felt his discomfort. It didn't make any sense. She'd always been empathic. With animals, not people. Yet she'd felt every ounce of his stress as if it were her own. The need to soothe him, to calm him, had driven her to touch him at every opportunity.

And every touch only made her want more.

The masculine edges of his body pressed against her was a sensual tease, and she bit back a groan when he drew her tighter against him. Heat seared her insides and her muscles turned to jelly. It took all she had to move at a steady pace down the sidewalk.

Neither spoke for long minutes. They were almost to her house.

She couldn't let him in. She would not be a slut and throw herself at him, but if he stepped inside her door, she wasn't quite sure she could stop herself. If she didn't know better she'd think she was under some kind of wizard's spell.

Hell, if Lance did this, I'll kill him. Then again, Lance didn't know she was out tonight.

"Thanks for what you did in there," Damon said, jolting her from her musings.

"It's nothing, really. I mean, you don't have to, uhm..."

He grinned toward her. "You mean pretend we're dating?"

Heat flushed upward at light speed. She nodded.

"I don't know," he chuckled. "I think I kind of like that idea. After all, you know an awful lot about me now. All that's left is for me to learn about you."

The night breeze brushed her heated cheeks and the crickets sang their songs from the back yards of the homes surrounding them. She turned to motion to her house, drawing from his arms. When her eyes met his, her breath caught. Though he smiled, his eyes were dark and serious. His hot silver gaze trailed down her face, resting on her mouth. She resisted the urge to lick her lips, increasing his attention. Yet as he continued to devour her with his eyes, her lips ached, hungry for a touch.

A kiss.

Giving in to instinct, she licked her bottom lip, then teased it with the edges of her teeth, trying to ease the burning sensation of need. The need to press her mouth against his.

His eyes followed the motion. The sound of a soft growl rolled on the night's breeze. Her body gave an unexpected shiver.

The wolf. The wolf must be able to smell them and didn't like being left alone. Odd how the growl had echoed around them, giving the impression it had come from Damon.

She shook the thought away and motioned toward her door, breaking the connection of his gaze. "There's my house."

He turned and escorted her to the door, his arm never leaving her waist.

She searched for something to say, but the blood in her body was definitely not reaching her brain. They arrived at her door and she turned to face him. "Thanks for walking me home." Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat.

He moved a step closer, crowding her against the hard, cold wood of her door.

"My pleasure," he murmured.

The sounds of the night disappeared, with only the beat of her heart echoing in her ears. Damon's molten eyes rested on her lips and he dipped close. Heat from his body burned everywhere he touched, filling her with an aching need deep in her very core. Her muscles turned liquid, waiting. Hoping. He leaned in, one hand rested on the door beside her head.

"Definitely my pleasure," he murmured again. He nuzzled her cheek, the soft edge of the day's beard brushed against her skin.

She tipped her head back, savoring the sensual touch, ignoring the shiver travelling through her body.

His breath feathered across her face, hot and inviting. His masculine scent rolled over her, the same as the wolf's growl had. Low, soft. Hot.

He closed the last excruciating inches, and when his lips finally touched hers, she almost moaned with relief. His first touch was gentle. His mouth was hot, burning her with his soft, sensuous touch. She'd expected hot, maybe even hungry. This romantic, almost worshipful kiss destroyed her reason. A soft whimper rose in her throat filled with craving. *More.*

At long last, he opened his mouth, as though sipping a rare vintage wine. He tested, tasting. She groaned, opening to him, wanting more. His tongue delved in and his taste exploded inside her. Wild, masculine, hungry. Their tongues tangled in unison, and she tasted his power, his masculinity. It was a part of him, deep inside. A power she knew had to be magick. It swirled around her, inside her, stealing every vestige of her reason and breath. Her head spun, sensations exploding throughout her body. She arched toward him, needing, aching. One large hand burned at her waist while the other still rested on the door by her head.

More. Please more.

Her own magick pushed inside her, hungry to escape, to wrap him in its touch, to own him and mark him as hers. *Mark him?* Something about this kiss wasn't normal, but her fogged brain

couldn't make out what it was. For this single moment in time he was her one and only reason for being. He was her breath, and her heartbeat. And she liked it. No, she loved it, and needed more.

Damon slid his hand from the door, tangling it in her hair, angling her head to go even deeper. He hadn't intended to kiss her, but the instant he'd seen her teeth teasing her lip, he'd lost all control. Now, her heated body pressed against his, driving the animal inside of him wild. The more he touched her, the more the wolf inside growled, demanding more. Her taste drove him to the very brink of control, exploding along his taste buds, drugging him with an insane need to drink more of her. He felt her knees buckle and he yanked her close, her body now flush with his.

Mine. The thought whispered in his mind.

From him? Or the animal?

For the first time since he'd awakened in that dank cell, he wasn't sure there was a difference.

Her scent wrapped around him, like a gentle mist. Soft and sweet, hardened with the sharp edge of desire. Her breasts pressed against his chest, teasing him with their softness, dragging a moan from his throat. She was so beautiful. So soft and feminine, her body molding to his as though built for him. He slid his hands down her back, cupping the soft muscles of her rear. He let his fingers tease and massage her, holding her close to him. He wanted more. He wanted to crawl inside her, to be a part of her. He wedged one knee between her legs, pushing her thighs apart. She moved willingly, groaning her desire when he pulled her tight against his thigh.

His lips left hers, trailing down her cheek, burying his lips against her neck. *Yes,* hissed the wolf instincts. His gums itched and his fangs descended. Damon tried to shove the instincts back, to fight his thirst for her kiss, the thirst for her taste. He scraped the tips of the canines against her flesh and she moaned, tipping her head back. Such sweet submission.

A growl rolled from his chest. Hunger twisted inside him as his lips closed over her throat. An image of his teeth slicing into that sweet flesh flashed in his mind, blood oozing from the wound. He needed her, wanted her, was starved for the sweet wine of her blood.

Blood?

Horried at the thoughts in his mind, he yanked away, releasing her so quick she stumbled against the door. He spun away, dragging his hands through his hair.

"I'm sorry," he groaned.

"Sorry?" she squeaked.

He wanted to look at her, to lose himself in her eyes, but he couldn't. The amber glow had to be there, burning from his eyes. He could feel it, the hot change burning inside him. "I got... carried away," he ground out.

He could hear her breath coming in heavy gasps.

Shame washed over him. He'd lost control, and that couldn't happen. Not with her. She was too special. He needed her to find out who he was.

If only he could believe that was all there was.

Damon took several deep breaths and felt his fangs recede into his gums and the cooling of his eyes.

He turned to face her. She looked at him, confusion showing in her wrinkled brow. But her face was still flushed an arousing pink. *Damn.*

What the hell was wrong with him? He'd almost bitten her. Why would he want to bite her? Would his bite make her become a werewolf?

Even with all the unanswered questions, he still wanted to welcome her into his arms, to wipe the confusion from her eyes and replace it with desire.

No, strike that. If he couldn't be honest with himself, he'd never survive.

He was selfish. None of what he felt was for her benefit. It was for him. His needs, his self-serving hunger to feel her soft body against his, her feminine heat stoking his hunger until they both forgot who and what they were. Holding her was like holding an elusive slice of heaven.

One word pounded in his brain. *Mine.*

“I don’t want a man who’s sorry,” she said through clenched teeth. She whirled, rushing inside, the door slamming in her wake.

Chapter 5

Krystal slumped against the door, her eyes closed. Sorry! Geeze. What guy says he's sorry for kissing a woman?

She was such a loser. So much so he'd felt obliged to apologize to her for kissing her. Was she really that undesirable? Her legs shook and she slid down until he butt touched the floor. She propped her elbows on her knees and scrubbed her face. Her lips still burned and her tongue still dripped with his taste. She dropped her hands, banging her head against the door. Anything to overwhelm the sensual hunger burning inside her.

She dragged her eyes open. The muted rays from the streetlight outside her door filtered through the curtains. She cocked her head to the side, puzzled. The light was scattered, not in a single streak as normal from shining through the curtains. And the room looked lopsided. If she didn't know better, she'd think she'd had too much to drink. But that only worked if breathing in fumes counted, because she hadn't had a single drop of alcohol at the bar. She shook her head and looked again.

Her couch lay on its back, the springs hanging like a skeleton with no head. Her favorite chair, the one she sat in to read by the fireplace, lay on its side, twisted and broken. From her vantage point, she could see a perfect X sliced into its back. The cushions lay strewn about the floor. White stuffing decorated her floor like the artificial snow beneath a Christmas tree.

Adrenaline shot through her muscles. Her eyes widened and she jumped to her feet. Her mom's favorite lamp lay next to the couch, shattered. Krystal grimaced, a pang of loss echoing in her chest.

A quick glance showed her gun cabinet was intact. All the extra money she'd put into it for quality glass had paid off. The rifles gleamed at her from behind the heavy frame. She didn't want a rifle. She wanted her Glock. Her hands trailed along the wood, until she reached the false paneled door at the bottom. Her finger traced the well oiled wood until she found the hidden release. With a click she dropped the panel, then typed in her pass code, praying silently whoever had been here was now gone.

The small safe opened and she reached inside. Her fingers curled around the cold, hard butt of her Glock 23. She eased the door to the safe closed and checked her magazine. Fully loaded. Great. Sixteen shots.

With her back against the wall she held her gun at the ready. She forced air through her lungs in slow, easy breaths. Ignoring the pounding of her heart she moved toward the hallway. Whoever was here had done a number on both the living room and the kitchen. Not a single piece of furniture escaped the destruction. The kitchen table lay in ruins. Nothing like having firewood for the rest of the winter.

Wolfie.

The little dog hadn't met her at the door like he usually did. There was no jumping and leaping against her leg, or singing with his distinct bark in welcome.

Damn it. If he was lost because of this asshole...

She didn't even want to think what could be worse than his being lost.

The sharp edge of the Glock cut into the palm of her hand as her eyes scanned the darkness. Krystal palmed the weight of the gun in a two-handed grip, her finger resting on the trigger. Inhaling, she swung into the hallway. Still nothing. Letting the air ease out through her teeth, she moved toward the bedroom. Her house was small, and that meant whoever had been here was probably already gone. But she wasn't willing to take any chances. She kicked the half closed door open with her foot.

The drapes in the bedroom were shredded. The outside lights streamed inward, illuminating the destruction inside. Her mattress lay sideways, with massive slices from top to bottom. Whoever had done this was determined to destroy every piece of furniture she owned. The drawers in her dresser lay discarded on the floor, their contents tossed about the room, the wood surfaces cracked and broken. She glanced toward the closet. The door was closed.

Heart pounding, she moved toward it. With one hand on her glock, she used the other to ease the door open. She peered into the darkness. Still nothing. At least the culprit had left her some clothes.

The sound of soft whimpering came from the bathroom.

Wolfie!

She crept inside. The muted light from the bedroom reflected off the mirror, giving her just enough light to see. With a quick sweep of her hand, she shoved back the shower curtain. Nothing in the tub.

Krystal took deep, calming breaths and searched for the origin of the soft whimpers. Her eyes trailed along the bright white tiled floor. Reddish brown streaks marred the otherwise clean white surface. The dark stripes trailed between the toilet and the bathtub. Dropping to her knees, Krystal reached out with a trembling hand. Her fingers encountered the soft fur of her beloved pet. Her eyes stung and her heart thumped hard against her ribs.

"Wolfie," she whispered, choking back the tears. She laid her weapon on the toilet, then eased him from behind the porcelain bowl.

Red blood caked the fur around his left shoulder. The coppery scent assaulted her senses and she touched the hardened fur. Right in the center, the wound still wept with fresh blood. Krystal gasped, pain squeezing her heart.

"Shhh, I've got you, baby," she murmured. Her hands closed about his body and she pulled him out. She winced at his harsh whimper.

"Oh, Wolfie, what have they done to you?" she cried.

He whined again, softer this time as if in answer to her question.

The cop inside her warred with the pain and need to take care of the dog who'd given everything he had to take care of her home. The dog she'd given her heart to, only to have him make her a stronger person.

There had been times in her past she'd used her gift of empathy to find perps. She could do that now. *I can do this.* She closed her eyes, ignoring the pain in her heart for her small friend, and opened her mind. Through the damaged recesses of her home and through the darkness, her mind sensed any and all life. Nothing. Just her and Wolfie. Stretching even further, she pushed her power outside. In the yard she could feel the wolf's presence, but nothing more. The wild animal paced back and forth in his cage as though determined to get inside. Or escape.

Thank heaven the beast was safe. She couldn't handle two injured animals right now.

Krystal turned her attention back to the dog before her. "Shhh, baby. Let me have a look at you." She kept her voice soft and confident, but her stomach twisted in fear. Forcing herself to rely upon her training more than her emotions, she lifted his lips, exposing pale gums. *Shit.* He'd lost way too much blood. Her fingers trailed over his body, probing for any injuries beyond the obvious. Unable to find any, she blinked back the tears stinging her eyes and reached for her cell phone. The phone slipped from her blood slickened fingers, clattering to the hardened floor.

"Damn it."

The phone landed beside the toilet and Krystal fumbled for it, at last flipping the gadget open and pressing speed dial. Lance answered on the first ring. Did he know she was in trouble?

"Lance, I need you, now."

"What's wrong?"

"I'll explain later. Just get here, now."

She clicked the phone off and turned her attention to Wolfie. A lot of people thought dogs didn't feel pain the same as people, but she knew better. So many times she'd used her talent to communicate with animals when they were hurt, both physically and emotionally. While it was true some breeds had a high threshold for pain, they all felt it. Yet not all showed it the same way.

She turned a critical eye on her friend. Long seconds passed before she saw him take in oxygen. He was behaving like many humans. He was holding his breath when it hurt.

Krystal ran her fingers along the top of his forehead, between his eyes and to his nose. She closed her own eyes and sent him images of warmth and love, hoping to give him strength.

Lifting her eyes, she examined her surroundings. The little dog hadn't been hurt where he lay. The trail of blood started in her bedroom, leading through the door and behind the toilet, where he'd dragged himself to hide. A typical canine behavior, and one which had probably saved his life. Somehow she had the feeling searching for her dog wasn't on the intruder's agenda.

"You stay right where you are." Her fingers trailed along her dog's face and ears, caressing. Loving. "I'll get him, Wolfie. That bastard is going down," she said to him, her voice harsh from anger, fear and pain.

Wolfie whined, as though he understood her words.

"I know, boy. I know."

A forlorn howl broke the silence. Like a siren, it rose through the night, mimicking the pain and emptiness in her heart. Calling to her. The wolf! She'd used her senses to know he was alive, but hadn't taken the time to peek out the door to see if he was unhurt.

She bolted through the house, yanking open the back door. The wolf was in the run, his legs moving back and forth at a full run as though needing to escape. He froze when she moved toward him. Snatching a leash from the hook by the back door she ran to the kennel and unhooked the gate. The animal stood, waiting as she attached the lead.

"Look here, Damon," she said, realizing how ironic it was she'd named the animal the same as the man she'd met tonight, "Wolfie has been hurt. You so much as growl at him and you're back out here, alone. Do you understand me?"

The wolf bobbed his head as though he did. *Right.* Like every wolf understands English. Krystal shook her head at both the wolf's antics and her own musings. She looped the leash around his neck. Once inside she sidestepped the destroyed table, then continued down the hall to her own bedroom.

Bringing the wolf in was good. If she'd missed any intruders, they'd think twice before messing with him. When she entered the bedroom, Wolfie whined.

"Don't worry, baby boy. You'll be okay." God, she hoped she wasn't lying to him. Not that he'd care, but she didn't want to let him down.

Glancing about, she tied the larger animal's lead to the door knob. "Can't have you trying to eat him, now can I?" With trembling fingers she stroked Damon's head, then stepped away. "You stay here. Don't let anybody by."

I won't.

Krystal's eyes widened. She'd never heard an animal's thoughts in such a plain fashion before. Most of the time animals spoke in images, not words. Shaking her head she hurried back to the bathroom. She'd think about it later.

Dropping to her knees beside her best friend, she stroked his side. "I'm so sorry, baby." Tears streamed down her face. The dog whined and moved as though to sit up. "Shh, just take it easy. he'll be here soon, I promise." Enveloping the dog with her body, she offered him the only thing she could think of. Her body heat. Each passing minute felt more like an hour as she waited for the arrival of her brother. Wolfie's breathing grew labored, and she stroked his ribs, wishing she could ease his pain.

Time was slipping by, and with it, Wolfie's life. It was past time she did something. It would take calm to do what she needed to do. She'd never tried to take away an animal's pain before, but she had to try.

She closed her eyes and calmed the beating in her heart. Locating the center of her power, that small nut sized ball in her abdomen, she concentrated. Using her mind, she reached out for her Wolfie's spirit.

Pain ripped through her shoulder. She screamed. "Arrrgghh." She knew he was in pain, but hadn't realized it was this much. A yip threatened to draw her attention and she knew it was the wolf. The sound of the bedroom door crashing against the wall told her he was struggling to get to her. *Not now.* She sent the thought to the beast as a gentle command, and his struggles eased.

With her eyes closed she focused on Wolfie, drawing as much of his pain as she could onto herself. Sharp stabs tormented her, and with every breath she drew, her chest ached. But it was all worthwhile. In seconds, the little dog's breathing grew less labored and his whining eased.

The back door slammed and heavy boots crossed her kitchen floor. Krystal yanked her connection away from her friend, wincing when he screamed in pain.

Damn. If that asshole has come back... Her hands snatched the gun from on the toilet. She stood, ignoring the fresh wobble to her hands caused by the remnants of Wolfie's pain. She widened her stance, ready for the intruder.

A dark shadow traced across her hall floor, moving closer toward her room. Breathing through her mouth, Krystal fought to slow the pounding of her heart.

The wolf growled, ready to attack.

"Shit, Krystal, what the hell's going on here?"

Relief, as powerful as a waterfall, washed over her, and Krystal's muscles turned liquid, the gun dropping to her side. "Logan. What the hell are you doing here?"

Her oldest brother stopped, his eyes narrowing on the animal tied to the bedroom doorknob.

The wolf stood, his teeth bared, his ears flat against his head. Logan paled as the beast took a step forward.

Krystal moved behind the animal. "Back off, Damon. He's my brother."

As though she'd flipped a switch, the animal relaxed, but kept his body between hers and the newcomer's.

"Krystal," said Logan, his voice a bit hoarse. "Why the hell do you have a wolf here? And what happened to your house?"

She tossed an arm out, motioning toward the destruction in her bedroom. "You know as much as I do. What are you doing here? I called Lance, not you."

Logan's eyes scanned the interior of her bedroom, and into the bathroom, where she knew he could see Wolfie. "Lance said you sounded stressed and he was further out so asked me to come by. What happened?" He stepped past the wolf, one eye on it, the other on the dog in the bathroom.

She shook her head. "Wish I could tell you. All I know is Wolfie was hurt. On purpose. That's why I called Lance."

Logan pushed passed her and dropped to his knees in the bathroom. "He looks in bad shape."

"I know. I was trying to ease his pain when you came in."

He nodded, his hand stroking her pet's side. "Let me move him for you."

The idea of placing his body on the soft bed was great, but the pain in his shoulder was already excruciating.

"Wait. I have to ease his pain. Once I'm connected with him again, you can move him. Just be extra careful."

"What do you mean, connected?" His eyes narrowed. "I won't have you doing something stupid."

"Ha. You, the master of the Fantastic Four, calling me stupid? Get out of my way."

She pushed her way past him and dropped to the floor beside her pet. "Just give me some quiet."

Focusing herself emotionally, Krystal repeated the same steps she'd done moments before. Pain ripped through her body, centering in her left shoulder. She bit back the cry of pain.

"Krystal," warned Logan. "Stop."

"No," she gritted out. "This is my fault, and I won't let him suffer."

"But—"

"Are you going to move him or not?"

"Wait." Logan hurried into the bedroom, repositioning the shredded mattress on the bed frame.

Krystal tried not to pay him attention, instead, focusing on drawing Wolfie's pain from his body. It hurt. Bad. Once again the sharp edges sheared her internal pain sensors. She clenched her teeth, breathing through the stabbing sensation.

Logan touched her shoulder to let her know he was there, then bent and lifted the small body.

A new wave of pain rolled through the connection between the animal and herself and she groaned.

It only took a moment, but her brother repositioned the small body on the mattress.

"Stop now, Krystal."

She shook her head, tears streaming down her face. Her breath hissed through her clenched teeth. Her left arm now hung at an awkward angle at her side, and she could almost feel the nonexistent blood seeping from the wound that wasn't there.

"Krystal, you have to release his pain back to him. Pain is good."

"No. I won't let him suffer." Sweat trickled down her spine and the back of her neck.

"You've taken too much. He wants to move around and that'll kill him. Let go, Krystal. Now."

Shit, he was making sense. If she held on to Wolfie's pain too much, he'd start moving around and he'd lose more blood. Closing her eyes, she eased back on the connection. The animal whimpered but at least this time he didn't scream. But she didn't let it all go. She refused to leave him hurting when she could help.

Once her own pain had dulled, she stood, brushing her now damp hair from her face with a trembling hand. She glanced toward the mirror, surprised at what she saw. Her face was pale white, and her hair was drenched. But it was her eyes that surprised her. The pupils had dilated like an animal running in the night.

"Krystal, why do you have a wolf tied to the bedroom doorknob?"

Her brother's question caught her off guard. The laugh caught in her throat, fighting the sob already in its place. The result was an embarrassing hiccup. "Because I didn't want him too close to Wolfie in this condition."

Logan raised a brow. "I would think Wolfie would be best served with the wolf outside."

She cut a look toward the animal, which stood, muscles stiff, leaning toward them as though ready to run interference if needed. She shook her head. "No. Preacher Man...." She looked at her dog, blinking back tears. "He'll kill him if he finds him."

"Is that who did this?"

She nodded, folding her arms beneath her breasts. Her shoulder still throbbed.

Confusion furrowed in Logan's brow. "How did he miss the wolf this time?"

"I don't know." She sat up on the remnants of her bed. "And I don't care. All I know is he's safe and we're going to keep him that way."

Her kitchen door opened, followed by the sound of multiple sets of heavy men's boots thumping across the floor. Her heart skipped a beat. She knew that sound. As a kid her brothers had relished the noises they'd made with their manly boots.

Tonight, the thunder of boots meant more than four boys playing at men. Tonight it meant power, strength and support. Exactly what she needed.

"You better move that wolf," ordered Logan.

She nodded. Her fingers fumbled a few times, but she finally managed to loosen the leash from the knob, and wrapped it around her wrist.

"Come on, boy." She moved toward the bathroom. The instant the wolf realized he was moving away from the thick of things, he froze. "They're fine. It's the rest of my brothers," she mumbled. The thump of the boots moved closer, and three heads poked into the room. Lance took a quick glance about the room, then moved in, ready to take over.

He'd been that way since his marriage. At least, since the moment Krystal had met her brother's bride, she'd noticed a major difference in his behavior. He still had his sense of humor, but he was no longer a child in a man's body. He'd grown into a leader. Quick and decisive. He no longer waited for their oldest brother to make decisions, a point which sometimes left Logan looking flustered and angry.

"What the hell is going on now?" Lance asked.

Logan arched a brow and turned toward Krystal. "Now? Was something going on before?"

Krystal gave a heavy sigh. "Thanks Lance. That's just what I needed tonight."

Her bedroom was now too small. Four strapping men, ranging in ages of their mid twenties to Logan, the oldest, at thirty. The Fantastic Four. Logan, Ross, Jared and Lance.

"What the hell did you do? Call out the National Guard? I asked for you, Lance, not everyone."

"Then perhaps you should have been clearer on the type of help you needed."

She frowned. Snapping at him would do no good. Not when she looked at Wolfie's gaping wound.

As though reading her mind, Lance stepped toward the bed. "Get everyone out of the room. I'll handle this, and then we can all find out what happened."

Ross and Jared both turned and left without a word. Krystal didn't know if she should be offended or pleased. Then she heard the sounds of furniture moving in her living room and knew they were helping to set things to right.

Logan stood, vacating his place near the bed and Lance stepped up. His hands touched the dog.

Krystal stood with her hand over her mouth.

"Get her out of here," Lance said over his shoulder to their older brother. "I don't need her as a distraction."

Logan reached to take her by the arm, only to pull back when the wolf bared his teeth.

"Come on, Damon," she said, perhaps a bit too sharp. She moved into the hallway. Logan closed the door, blocking her view.

Instead of moving into the living room, she paced the confines of the hall, the wolf keeping pace at her side. This was her fault. For the first time her job had brought danger to her home. To those she loved. If anything happened to Wolfie, she'd never forgive herself. Or Preacher Man. It had to be him. But why didn't he take the wolf? She stopped and stared into the animal's face. Into liquid silver eyes.

"Krystal."

She yanked her attention from the animal and into Ross's eyes. His dark blond hair, normally perfectly coiffed, fell into his face, and he turned toward her. "Come. Sit."

She shook her head. "I can't. I have to be here. Just in case."

He frowned, then glanced at the animal at her side. "Why do you have a wolf here? What's really going on?"

She shrugged. "I saved his life, and he hated the kennels, so I brought him here."

"He's dangerous."

"No," she replied. "I don't know how, but I know he's not."

Taking care not to upset the wolf, Ross moved close to her. "Come on. There's nothing you can do here. Come sit down and tell us how you saved the wolf, and what that has to do with this mess." His eyes took in the damaged room.

She sighed. "Fine."

He nodded in approval. "First, why don't you give me your gun? You don't need it with us here."

She glanced down. She'd forgotten she held it. Even as she'd wrapped the wolf's leash around her wrist, she'd kept the gun available to use.

Preacher Man.

One way or the other, the man was going to pay for what he'd done.

Instead of handing her brother the weapon, she crossed the room and put it back in its safe. No good cop was going to give their issued weapon to a civilian. No matter what her brothers' jobs were, they did not work for the force. Instead they worked for the GSA. With their father.

"Sit," ordered Ross, motioning to a cushion he'd salvaged from her destroyed furniture.

"Fine. I'll sit."

She folded herself to the damaged padding and the wolf moved beside her. It was strange, the way the animal seemed to know exactly what was happening. She tangled her fingers in his soft brown fur. He nuzzled her arm, offering his own brand of comfort.

Ross moved away, while the other two set her furniture to rights. But he didn't join them. Instead, he headed to her small kitchen.

Krystal ignored all of them. Every time she tried to think, the image of Wolfie's blood on the floor would flash into her mind. She didn't care about the furniture. Hell, that could be replaced. But Wolfie was different. He was family.

She still couldn't figure out why Preacher Man hadn't taken the real wolf with him. She glanced to her lap, surprised to see big silver-gray eyes staring back at hers. The more she looked into them, the more she saw Damon. The man, not the childhood friend, nor the beast.

Her vision swirled and her reality tipped to one side. The shape of the animal's eyes changed, merging in her mind's eye, turning more human with every passing second.

Blinking her eyes, she looked again. All she saw was the wolf.

Damn. She was really letting today get to her.

A hand nudged her and she glanced up. Ross stood, offering a steaming mug. She took it without hesitation. Hot chocolate. Her favorite childhood drink.

"Thanks," she murmured.

"You're welcome."

She inhaled the sweet chocolaty fumes. "You'll make a great wife some day, Ross." She couldn't help herself. It was an old childhood joke.

"I'm wounded," he grinned, his hand slapping over his heart. "I try to be nice..."

She gave a soft smile. "Ross, you love it."

He tousled her hair and she slapped his hand away. "Go help the guys," she said, motioning to Logan and Jared, who were still righting the last of the furniture. She glimpsed ripped cushions, their stuffing shoved back inside through gaping holes, and winced. Complete and utter destruction.

"I'm going to make him pay for this," she whispered in Damon's ear.

Logan shoved a handful of cotton batting into the almost shredded pillow, then looked at her. "Did you report this to your job?"

"Why? So they'll take me off this case?"

Jared gave a sharp sigh.

"What?" she asked him. "You think it's going to be helpful for me to run to the boss and say *hey, guess who broke in my house?*" She stood, dislodging the wolf's head from her lap. "The next words out of his mouth will be *Maxey, you're off the case.* I'm not going to let that happen." She brushed away a small piece of stuffing clinging to her clothes. The pain in her shoulder had dulled. God, she hoped that was a good thing, and not that it meant her dog was past saving.

"So you think it's the man in the case you've been working? What did you say his name was?"

Her brother's words jerked her back to the present. She hadn't seen Jared in a few weeks, so he was a bit lost on what she was working on. He looked almost haggard. Lines formed by his eyes that hadn't been there the last time she saw him.

"Peter Burke, the Preacher Man," she answered, her gaze centered on Jared.

"What makes you think it was this Preacher Man you've been chasing?" Asked Ross.

"Give me a break," she curled her lips in disgust, shooting Ross a quick glance. "Who else would it be? What he did to Wolfie was a calling card only he would leave."

At that instant, the bedroom door opened. Krystal turned her attention in time to see Wolfie hobble out, with Lance behind him.

"Yes!" she shouted and swept her little friend into her arms. The leash on her arm tugged, but only for a second as the wolf joined her.

She turned her attention to her youngest brother. He looked so pale. "Thank you," she said, leaning to offer him a kiss on the cheek.

He gave her a weak smile. "He'll be okay, but I think he's going to want to relax a bit."

She buried her face in the dog's soft blond coat. "You are so brave," she whispered into his ear. His warm body felt strong and almost whole again. "I love you Wolfie."

Her brothers watched her with indulgent glances. "I know what you're thinking. And you're wrong."

"What are we thinking?" asked Lance, dropping into the remnants of her living room chair. He didn't seem to care the stuffing was half missing.

She shot a glare his way then buried her nose back into her pet's fur. "He's just a dog. I shouldn't care so much."

Ross chuckled. "Funny, that's not what I was thinking." He turned to his brothers. "What about you guys?"

Jared, smiled for the first time that evening. "Nope. Not me. I was thinking how Ross is an ass for making hot chocolate and not sharing with the rest of us."

Krystal couldn't help grinning. The relief of knowing Wolfie would be okay, coupled with her brothers' smiles warmed her heart. She hadn't realized how worried she had been until this very moment. "Doofus." She couldn't help slipping into childhood nicknames, even the worst of them. Her brothers seemed to draw that out in her.

Logan rolled his eyes. "And I was thinking how you should report this to your boss."

"Roll your eyes all you want, Logan Maxey. It's not happening. This is my job and I'll handle it the way I want. You didn't want me to work with you at GSA, so you lost any chance you had to tell me how to do *my* job." Their eyes met, fighting the same fight they'd had since the day she'd signed up with the force.

The longer she stared into his eyes, the more disconcerted she became. Her vision seemed to blur again. His eyes disappeared and beneath it, she could see the workings of his body. The muscles and nerves. *What the hell?* She shook her head and looked again. Gone. Just like the image of Damon before.

She sighed. "Look, it's been a long night. Thanks for coming and helping me straighten up. Lance, thanks for taking care of Wolfie. But I need to go to bed."

Logan's eyes narrowed. "I told you not to take on the dog's pain."

"I'm just tired. Lance told you he'd been here already today healing my wrist."

"Your wrist?" asked Ross and Jared together.

"What do you mean *took on the dog's pain*?" growled Lance.

Logan stared at her, his face hard, his eyes shielded.

Great. Now all four of them would be angry with her. She sighed. "Look, when I rescued the wolf, Preacher Man had a hyena there. The damned thing crushed my wrist. Logan took care of it for me." She wiggled her wrist. "See? It's fine. Nothing to worry about."

“And what Logan said?”

She could tell Lance wasn't going to let this drop. She sighed. “I don't know. It's just something I thought of while he lay in pain. I wanted to make him feel better, and so I did.”

“How?”

“I don't know,” she groaned, throwing a hand in the air. “I just did it. I connected with him like I do all animals, then I called his pain to me. That's it.”

“And you hurt yourself, didn't you?”

“So what? You can't tell me when you heal that you don't hurt yourself. I saw your face when you came out of my bedroom.”

The rest of her brothers watched their exchange with raised eyebrows. She could see the calculating communication in their eyes. Lance glanced toward Logan and nodded.

“Oh come on,” she said, refusing to hide her frustration. “Don't tell me you guys haven't had times when you've used your natural gifts a little bit different than they intended. Lance, you know better. Your gifts have mutated daily since around the time you met your wife, so don't give me that.”

Lance turned his cat-like gaze upon her. “What did you do tonight, Krystal?” When did his eyes start to look more golden? She hadn't noticed that before.

“I went out.”

“Where?”

“I went out to dinner with Denise. She left early and a friend walked me home.”

“You had a date?”

“No, I said, I went out with Denise. The guy who walked me home...” she couldn't lie. They always knew when she lied. “Was someone I recently met, that's all.”

“What's wrong?” asked Ross.

Krystal threw her arms out in confusion. “I have no idea, ask Lance. What's this got to do with anything?”

Her younger brother stood and walked toward her. She could swear he sniffed her! “What the hell?” she demanded, jerking away. “Lance, have you lost your mind?”

“This friend, what's his name?”

“Why?”

Lance's lips tightened.

She was pissing him off. Good. He was confusing the crap out her.

“Tell me.”

Krystal glanced at the rest of the family who stood, almost as though circling her, waiting. “You guys look like a pack of coyotes moving in for the kill. Who I see and who I date is none of your damned business.” The wolf moved to her side, his hair prickling on the back of his spine. That was all she needed. If the wolf went commando on her, attacking her brothers, she'd be forced to put him down. Her hand smoothed his roughened coat.

Lance's eyes narrowed for an instant. And as she stared at him, again the image changed. The skin dissolved before her eyes, leaving what looked like a doctor's model of a head, complete with muscle and blood. *Not good. No way.* She had to get them out of her house before they realized she was seeing things. Sleep. That's all she needed.

“Who is he, Krystal?”

“A friend. Come on, what the hell's the problem? You guys know any time I go out on a date. It's irritating as hell. I'm a grown woman, for pete's sake. I can make my own decisions.”

Lance did that odd look toward Logan again, then back to her. At long last he nodded. “Fine. Let's go,” he said to the brothers, then turned without another word and left.

What the hell was going on with that boy? He'd gone from being Mr. Happy Go Lucky, into this... wild, almost tiger-like look to his features and attitude. Whatever it was, it had done wonders for his confidence and bearing, but it was going to take some getting used to.

Ross tousled her hair again. "Don't mind him," he said, even as she slapped his hand away from her head. "He gets testy if he's away from his wife too long." He held up his little finger and simulated wrapping something around it. "She has him here, ya know?"

They all laughed, and Ross took her cup from her, then gave her a hug. "Call us if you need anything, Boo," he murmured in her ear. Boo. Her old childhood nickname.

Krystal nodded, ignoring the sting of tears behind her eyelids.

Jared gave her a much quicker hug and a small smile, before joining Ross as they headed out the kitchen door.

Logan remained. The first to arrive, and the last to leave.

"Krystal," he began, his voice tired. "I know you think we're interfering, but we only do so because we care."

She sighed and stepped away from the wolf toward her eldest brother. "I know." Krystal gave him a hug. "And thank you. But I'm fine."

He returned her hug before pulling back and looking her in the eye. "Be careful with this guy. You don't know if he was a part of this."

The wolf behind her growled.

"I don't think so," she said, shaking her head. "He isn't the type."

"How can you know his type? Didn't you say you just met him?"

"Sure. But I haven't been a cop for the last six years and not learned a thing or two about judging character. Don't worry so much. I'll be fine."

Logan looked around the devastation of her living room. No matter how much they put things back together, it was still chaos. "I don't know, Boo."

"I do. Go on home," she ordered, pushing him toward the door. "I'm fine".

Chapter 6

Damon stood on two legs, staring at the woman lying on the remnants of her bed. He needed to leave, but damn if he wanted to. At least it was good to know the man who'd healed her wrist had been her brother. Why that pleased him so much, he couldn't say. Maybe it was the intensity of their kiss on her doorstep. The kiss he shouldn't have given her. Hell, he'd nearly bitten her neck.

Somehow he knew he'd never wanted to bite a woman's neck before. Did that mean he hadn't always been this werewolf type creature? Or was she special somehow? She felt special, that's for sure.

Either way, he'd let her down. Her house had been tossed. Were they looking for something? Or were they just angry with her for interfering in their lives? Cops always lived with the possibility of retribution. Technically, it could have been anyone who broke into her house. But he'd caught the scent of an animal. Another Hyena if he wasn't mistaken. It's dark, oily scent turned his stomach. She needed protection.

She had her brothers. She didn't need him. And her brothers even understood shape shifters. Lance still reeked of the tigress's scent who'd been locked away beside his cell in the GSA's basement all those weeks ago.

No, she didn't need him. Damon slipped out the bedroom door and moved into the kitchen. With a last glance over his shoulder, he opened the front door then shifted, hoping the bright light didn't awaken her, and slipped out into the dawn's pale glow.

Chapter 7

Krystal tossed the file back onto her desk and sighed, rubbing her eyes. She still couldn't believe the wolf had disappeared. But this morning, when she'd awakened, he was gone. Just like that. The door was still closed and locked, a feat no wolf could manage.

She'd very nearly called her brothers to see if one of them had come back and taken him, but remembering their wary looks every time they got near him, she reconsidered. They hadn't liked the wolf. In fact, she was pretty sure Lance was afraid of him.

Wolfie whined. She smiled and reached down to pet him. "Hey, buddy. How ya doing?" The little dog was a bit jumpy, but considering what he'd been through the night before, she couldn't blame him. Bringing him to work had been not only a chance to spend more time with him to let her fears rest, but also a chance for him to be in public, and help him regain his confidence.

He reared up on her thigh and she petted him as she glanced at the files on her desk waiting for her input. Reports. Damn, she hated reports. Ted had written almost every one of them, but they still required her signature. He must have known how bad her injury was. She was healed now, but had wrapped it again in an ace bandage. It wouldn't do to have her partner questioning her quick recovery.

"You know, Wolfie? I'm glad you're here."

He cocked his head in her direction. Curiosity rippled through their combined connection. It was nice being able to communicate with animals both verbally and in pictures in their heads. She sent him a wave of warmth.

"Yeah, boy. It'd be so boring here without you to distract me." She waved her hand to her desk. "You know how I hate paperwork."

Wolfie wagged his curled tail and gave a quiet woof in agreement.

Krystal grinned and gave him a hug. "I'm so glad you feel better today. I couldn't bear it if something happened to you."

The dog squirmed in her grip just as one of the detectives passed her cubicle.

"Hey, Downing?"

"What?" he responded.

"You seen my partner?" He'd disappeared sometime in the last hour. Right after she'd had to break the news of the lost wolf to him. He'd not said a word, just shook his head and walked off. That was the problem when evidence was alive. Sometimes they had minds of their own.

"I'm right here," her partner called from across the room.

She turned to smile at him, but the expression froze. Ted strode towards her, side by side with another man. Her partner was tall, but not nearly as tall as the man who strode beside him.

Damon.

He patted Ted on the shoulder. "Thanks, man. I'm sure Maxey will be able to take care of everything I need."

The pulse in her neck fluttered against her flesh. What the hell was he doing here? And take care of what?

Ted ducked into his own cubicle. "Just yell if you need anything, Connell. I'll be happy to help out."

"I don't think I will, but thanks for the offer," said Damon.

A flash of silver eyes met hers before scanning down her body, taking in her cop's uniform and badge. Last night she'd been dressed casual in jeans and a pull over blouse. Today she dressed for authority. *Shit.*

Most men were fine with her in civvies, but the second they saw her in uniform, they were through. They couldn't get out of her way fast enough. Yet Damon was different. He didn't avoid meeting her eyes. Instead, he stared into them. And what she saw wasn't intimidation, but respect, mixed with a hint of desire which softened his silver eyes to liquid mercury.

Krystal hid a shiver of desire behind her flash of anger over his parting words from the night before. *Sorry, my ass.*

She may be dressed differently, but he wore the same clothes as the night before. Blue jeans and a t-shirt, bulging at the seams as though made for someone much smaller. His clothes only enhanced the sharp masculine edge to his body. Krystal suppressed the urge to lick her lips. He looked good enough to taste. *A shame he was sorry.*

She cleared her throat. "Damon. What brings you here?"

He stepped beside her in the small cubicle, his body devouring what little space the tiny booth offered. Wolfie welcomed him instantly, bouncing off his legs, grinning his happy doggy grin. What the hell happened to his nervousness he'd shown all morning? *Little traitor.*

"I thought maybe you could help me."

"Help you?" her voice came out almost as a squeak. Irritation mixed with desire. "After last night I didn't expect to see you again. Wolfie, come here." Her voice was sharper than she intended but Wolfie ignored her anyway. Damon absently bent and petted the dog.

He arched one solid brow, then rose to his full, imposing height. In an instant, her little cubicle went from seeming small to crowded. Krystal tried to ignore the sudden pounding of her heart.

"I think you misunderstood my meaning," he said. His voice, though even and smooth, held the soft edge of a growl. It rolled down her spine, touching each muscle in its path, melting them with its heat. She could almost feel the feather of his touch when his eyes trailed down her body, devouring her with his look.

'Hell, yes,' said her body. Shit. Her body was the traitor now. Even from a few feet away she could smell the wild masculine scent he carried. Her knees threatened to buckle. *Oh this is so not good.*

"Will you help me?" he asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she said, jerking her eyes to his face. "What can I do for you?"

He dropped into the seat beside her desk and Wolfie reared on his leg. One hand scratched the dog's ears. "Since you're a police officer, I thought maybe you could find where I live since I can't seem to remember."

She stared into his silver-gray eyes a bit longer, then shook her head. It didn't work. She still felt a haze of desire settling into her body. He looked so cool and composed. Only his eyes made her wonder if he was as affected as she.

"Where have you been staying?"

"I've been camping in the woods." He shrugged. "Mostly."

"Huh." She said. A statement, not a question. How many men lived in the woods for six weeks or more before they tried to find out who or what they were? Amnesia or no, something was strange in his story. She should tell him to head over to missing persons. No matter how hard she tried, the words wouldn't form. Instead, she said, "Uhm, sure. One second." *Yeah, that was brilliant.*

She swiveled her chair and turned to her computer. Maybe if she helped him, she could focus on the research and not on staring at his perfect body. With a quick click, her mouse opened up the National Crime Information Center database and she logged in. This shouldn't be hard. She typed his name into the fields, then narrowed her gaze back on Damon. That tattoo showed he was Airborne, and the men last night indicated he'd at least been local before he'd left their group. Chances were, he was stationed at Fort Bragg, the local military base.

She set her search parameters and stared at the screen while the program searched. Anything to keep from looking at the man beside her. Looking at him was enough to set her heart afire.

Everything about him was playing with her senses, both human and magickal. Powerful waves of energy rolled off him, teasing her body with an almost physical touch. Compounded with his scent and she wanted to melt into a puddle of jello at his feet. Or maybe, melt all over his chest.

Shit. She opened another window and pounded away on a report to distract herself. She hated reports. But she hated the sudden influx of confusing emotions just as much. The man had freakin' apologized for kissing her! Considering him as something other than a civilian needing her help was dangerous.

"You're angry," he said.

She tried not to look at him. "No. Confused."

Krystal cut a shielded look and saw him nod. His hands slid over Wolfie's head. *Damn it.* Now she was jealous of her own dog.

"Understandable. I used... the wrong word. I wasn't clear last night."

Krystal flicked back to the online search and forced herself to continue to stare at the screen. Waiting. For the information? Or his explanation?

When she didn't speak, he continued. "I was trying to share just how powerfully you affected me. I was not apologizing for kissing you, but for..."

Unable to resist she snuck a peek in his direction. Even seated, he was a commanding presence. The close cut cropped hair only added to the hard edged mystique, accenting the sharp angled jaw and chiseled cheek bones.

"For what?" she finally asked. No matter how hard she tried, Krystal was unable to pull away, captured like prey within his sharp gaze.

"For wanting to do more." His voice was even more gruff than usual.

Krystal swallowed, then turned back to the screen, just as the data refreshed. One Damon Connell in the entire state. No Red flags, but it gave his address, his driver's license number, and the fact he owned a 1977 Jeep C 7. Somehow that wasn't a surprise. He seemed like the Jeep type.

"You live at 143-A, Ashton Road. It's in an apartment complex just off Main Street." Her voice sounded a bit rough to her own ears. She wondered if he noticed.

He nodded, not commenting on her change in subject. Thank heavens. Because if he had, she might have lost it, right here in front of her coworkers and that just wasn't smart as a female cop. The guys would never trust her again.

"Ted," she called. Her partner popped his head over the top of the fake cubicle wall, his eyes twinkling with humor. So much for privacy. Even without her melting, she was going to be the brunt of an awful lot of jokes by the time she got back.

"Whatcha need?"

"I'm going to be out." She tapped the radio microphone attached to her lapel. "Call me if you need anything."

Ted glanced at Damon. His mouth tightened as though fighting off a grin.

Krystal sighed. Oh yes. She was going to be in so much trouble by this time tomorrow.

"What about the wolf?" asked Ted, surprising her. "Are you going to look for him while you're out?"

Krystal fought back her own grin. The son of a bitch was covering for her. Did that mean he wouldn't tell the entire precinct he'd overheard her flirting? Oh, she hoped so. A female cop getting ribbed about any person of interest, much less someone who didn't know his own name, was never a good time. At least, not for the female cop.

"Yeah, we're going to head out and look for the wolf and see if we can pick up his trail."

Krystal hid her grin while gathering her keys and tucking her truncheon in its slot along her belt. "Let's go, Damon. We have a wolf to search for. I'll drop Wolfie off first."

Damon sat in the passenger side as Krystal pulled into the apartment building parking lot and turned off the engine.

"You lied to me. You told me you lost your memory in an accident and spent weeks in the hospital."

Silent alarms rang in his head. "So?"

"So," she spat. "My search shows there have been no Damon Doe's or Connell's admitted to the hospitals in the area with memory loss. Before, or after an accident."

Damon sighed, shaking his head. She was smart, and that was dangerous. Yet he couldn't bring himself to chase her away. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes, focusing on the sound of her heartbeat. It thumped within her chest. Soft, delicate. Human.

"Well?" Her bright violet eyes flashed in anger.

"When did you figure it out?"

She offered a cold smile. "Last night the bells went off after your friends started talking but I didn't put the pieces together till this morning. The expression on Joseph's face and the way he watched you made me think he wasn't exactly happy to see you, but was afraid to pretend he didn't notice you. This morning I gave the hospitals a check for John Doe's. Nothing."

He nodded. "Krystal, I wasn't trying to mislead you. I did lose my memory. I didn't know my own name before last night, and like you, I thought Campbell was lying about being happy to see me." Campbell hadn't exactly lied, or Damon would have picked up on it, but the tell tale sign of nerves stung in the air. "But I didn't wake up in a hospital. I woke up in a research center. A private one, from what I can tell." He fisted his hand around the panic grip above the passenger door until his knuckles turned white. Images flashed in his mind's eye, one after the other, coalescing into a single memory.

A bright light swept from left to right in front of his left eye, destroying the comfort of the darkness. His muscles ached, and his head throbbed. He flexed his arm, ready to block the piercing brightness, only to discover his wrist clamped at his side. Heat sizzled along his arm from the metal cuffs holding him in place. Silver. He wasn't sure why that was so important, but it was.

The light swept across his other eye, reminding him of a pen light. "He's almost awake."

The voice jolted him out of his reverie. The sharp scent of antiseptic burned his nostrils, the taste rancid on his tongue. He bit back a growl, focusing only on keeping his muscles still to give him time to evaluate his situation.

The surface beneath him was cold and smooth. It was then he realized he was naked, though cloth lay over him. A sheet?

"Do you think it worked this time?" The salty smell of human perspiration drew a twitch from his nose. The mixture of sweat and medical antiseptic swirled in his stomach, and he swallowed the bile rising in his throat.

"Yes. It has to."

He ignored the voices, and slit his eyes open, disregarding the blinding pain from the overhead lamp shining down on his body like a heat lamp. The two men stood just out of his range of vision, but he could smell them. They smelled familiar, though he couldn't pull the memory out of his head. He should know them. They were dangerous. They were the reason he was here. Wherever here was.

"Welcome back, my friend," said the second voice. This was the man in charge. His memory didn't fill in that little detail. It was in his confidence and bearing, and it filled his scent. Power. He reeked of it, though it smelled.... wrong. "I'm Doctor Palmer."

"Release me," he demanded. He fisted his hands and struggled to escape the thick metal clamps around his wrists. The flesh beneath the metal burned hot, sizzling with heat and pain. He was allergic to silver. That must be the problem. Did this Doctor Palmer know of his allergy?

"I'll release you when you answer some questions." The doctor's voice was too smooth.

From his prone position on the examination table he let his gaze dart about the room, taking in his surroundings. A counter filled with medical equipment gleamed just feet away. Saws, scalpels, and other items, some which gleamed with serrated teeth. A rolling cart sat beside him, the table beside his legs held more of the vicious looking tools, including syringes. He kicked, hard, knocking the table across the room. Needles and metal objects were tossed from the cart into the air. Both men surrounding him ducked as the metal tray flew across the room, slamming into the counter.

The clatter died away, and liquid dripped off the counter. Liquid with an odd, acidic, medicinal scent to it. Yet still, neither man came to free him. One even had the gall to laugh.

"Where am I?" he growled.

"The same place you were when you woke up yesterday. Don't you remember?" Dark eyes slid over his body, examining. Taking measure. The sensation of evil slithered across his skin in their wake.

Fury coiled low in his gut. Of course he didn't remember. They knew he didn't remember. In fact, the only thing he was sure of was they wanted him to not remember. The anger roiled inside him, twisting and turning. His gums ached, throbbing with the need to... the need to do what? He shook his head, yet still the need pulled at him. He felt as if he needed to yank his teeth right from his gums.

As though humoring his strange thought, his teeth moved. Long, sharp fangs descended in the corners of his mouth, shoving the rest to the side, out of the way. The satisfying slide drew a rumble of confusion from his throat. It felt so right, yet at the same time, there was a wrongness to this entire situation. Bones ached as though some strange transformation was taking place. He arched his back, fighting the fear, fighting the changes he sensed in his body. Pain ripped through him. The sensation of being on the verge dissipated, though the wild need to escape remained. He felt like a caged animal. A wolf pacing, ready to explode.

"Who are you, Wolf?"

He'd almost forgotten the human's presence. He jerked his eyes to the doctor. Human? But he was human, wasn't he? A growl echoed around the room. He noted with surprise it came from his throat. Was this normal?

"Who are you, Wolf?" the man demanded again.

A name. It was there, on the edge of his consciousness, but he couldn't find it. He was... he was...

"I don't know," he whispered.

"Damon, talk to me." Her voice echoed in his ears as though she shouted from a distance.

He turned his gaze to the woman beside him. The dark and painful images of his past faded the longer he looked at her.

"What?" he asked.

Concern etched her features as she watched him, a wary hand near the large black nightstick at her waist. She had no idea he could rip it from her grasp even before her fingers closed over the handle.

"What kind of research?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "All I know was I had the sensation it was imperative I escape, and so I did." He wasn't really lying to her. He didn't know what the purpose of the research was. And he couldn't tell her the experiments made him a werewolf. She'd either raise her glock and try to shoot him, or she'd run screaming for her four brothers. Brothers who knew about were-beasts. Had they told her about the tigress?

Silence greeted his words. Wheels turned behind those beautiful eyes. She didn't believe him, he could tell. At last, she gave a curt nod, then switched off the ignition with a sharp twist of her wrist.

Her eyes scanned the parking lot. Before he could ask what she was looking for, she nodded toward a black Jeep and opened her door.

"There's your car."

Damon opened the passenger door of the police cruiser and followed her to the Jeep. It was old. But in mint condition. Somehow he knew, even before he reached the vehicle. The dark green paint glinted in the afternoon sun. There was no rag top, because it didn't seem right to put one on an old classic Jeep. At least, not one built to withstand all seasons. Images and reasons popped into his head. It was comforting to understand something, to remember something. Maybe one day his entire life would return. He opened the door. It wasn't locked, but why would anyone lock something without a top?

Once inside, he ran his hands over the steering wheel. He could almost remember. The feel of the wheel beneath his hands was almost like coming home. Was it muscle memory which told him exactly where the gear shift was without looking? Memory that told him his flashlight was in the glove box, but that he had never turned it on? The only thing missing was the key. He wanted to hear the rumble of the engine, to drive, feeling the wind in his face.

He adjusted the mirror, only to see Krystal resting on the tailgate, watching him from behind. Her violet eyes twinkled with feminine power. There was something different about her compared to the other women he'd met since leaving the GSA. He couldn't put his finger on what it was, either. Her brothers hadn't recognized him last night in his wolf form, but he'd recognized each of them. That fateful night when they had rescued him he'd felt the crackle of magickal power in the air. Maybe Krystal had some of her own. If so, it could be her magick which drew him. Or it could just be her.

He met her eyes in the mirror, admiring the soft smile on her face. He hadn't been lying when he said he wanted to do more last night. Kissing her was the singular most exciting moment in his short memory. And something he shouldn't repeat.

He opened the door. "Let's go inside."

She nodded, a quirk to her lips. "We don't have a key, so unless the manager is in, I'll have to pick the lock."

He chuckled. "At least I know we won't be arrested."

She gave a soft laugh in return. The sound rolled off her tongue like silk, rippling through his senses and tightening his chest. Her voice left him gasping for breath. Was it even possible to be so attracted to a woman he barely knew? His body answered with a resounding yes. From the moment he'd laid eyes on her, instinct had taken over. Hunger had him constantly at the ready, every touch sending jolts of desire straight to his groin.

"No, we won't be arrested."

He motioned toward the apartment. "Lead on, lady."

She stepped ahead, her hands resting on her gun belt. His eyes followed every movement. Hidden beneath her predatory cop swagger, her hips swayed with each step, teasing him with the desire to rip away the belt, to reveal the soft curves beneath. A maddening combination of both feminine and aggressive power swelled around her, like some shewolf in the wild.

Damon swallowed the soft growl of approval rising in his throat.

He needed to get a grip, and fast. In a few moments, this beautiful woman, with her enticing, drugging scent, would be alone with him in an apartment he'd rented when he knew who and what he was. He had no idea what they would find. It wouldn't do to be distracted by a female when he should be protecting who and what he was. *If that's what he was before.*

He frowned and followed behind her.

They didn't have to find the manager. The door, though closed, was not locked. Confidence in his own security? Somehow he doubted that. He didn't seem like the trusting kind. Then again, it's possible his trust in society dissolved the moment the GSA injected the drugs into his body.

He shoved the female aside, ripping her fingers from the knob, and peered within. Sights of a small, well kept living room met his eye. An empty living room. He glanced at Krystal and nodded. He moved to open the door.

As though she understood his sudden discomfort, she stopped him. "Let me," she mouthed, unsnapping her gun from its holster.

He glanced down at the small hand on his. How could this soft female think she could do more than he in his own apartment? She snapped the slide back on the weapon, sliding a bullet into the chamber. Then again, she did have a weapon.

Releasing the knob, Damon stepped back and motioned for her to continue. If he'd have been in wolf form, his hackles would be raised in warning. He didn't smell danger, but he wasn't sure he'd know what was, and what wasn't abnormal.

The gun in her hands, she nodded to Damon. He twisted the knob, then gave the door a shove. Krystal moved in, using the caution of her training. She held the gun low, in a wary two-handed grip.

Damon inhaled. The apartment was empty. He couldn't very well tell her that, though.

With slow, careful steps, they examined the living room. A huge entertainment center took up one wall, while a couch and a few easy chairs were scattered about the room, each facing the big screen television. He stepped forward, searching for any sense of having been here before, but all he found was an empty vessel. No past images of sitting in that furniture and watching movies floated through his mind. In fact, nothing, but the woman beside him, managed to keep his attention.

She moved forward, scanning each room, checking hiding places. Scents of others filled the air surrounding them, but they were weeks old. No one had been in his home for quite some time.

"We're clear," said Krystal, sliding her gun into its holster. She glanced around the room. "Anything look familiar?"

"Not yet," he growled. Irritation twisted inside his mind. Why would he remember the Jeep, but not his apartment?

Brushing past her, he examined the remaining rooms, leaving Krystal to her own devices in the living room.

He opened the refrigerator, sniffing as he glanced inside. Old milk. Old meat. A few condiments. He wrinkled his nose. Nothing of use. He slammed it shut and opened the freezer above it. Packages of steaks were all that was inside. Red meat. Like a wolf would eat.

Grumbling, he shut that as well, and trudged down the hall. There were two bedrooms. One must be a guest room. Exercise equipment appeared to be the most used part of the room, even though a small bed occupied one corner. The weights on the bench were loaded to 1000 pounds. So he'd always been strong. But a thousand pounds couldn't be that much, could it? He spread his palms over the bar, and lifted it to his waist, then dropped beneath the bar and lifted over his head. Easy. So either he was strong, or one thousand pounds wasn't that unusual. He'd have to see if Krystal would loan him her computer. He'd search and see what the record was, and then he'd have his answer. If this turned out to be a great deal of weight for a seasoned lifter, he'd know he was a werewolf before the GSA got hold of him.

He dropped the weight to the stand. The clang brought Krystal alert.

"What's that?" she shouted from the other room.

"Nothing. Just checking out the weight bench."

"Oh," she responded, still not leaving the living room.

Sighing, Damon moved across the hall to what he suspected must be his bedroom. Maybe something there would spark a memory. The room was dark, the drapes drawn. He flipped the switch. He knew where it was, but that didn't mean anything. Certainly most apartments had their light switches by the door.

Light filled the room, exposing a king size bed. The sheets and blankets were exactly folded. Military corners. Of course. Airborne. The tattoo on his arm itched at the thought. He widened his

nostrils, dragging air through his nose and open mouth. His scent filled the room. His taste. Nothing else. No females. No visitors. And still no memories.

He crossed the room to the closet and peered inside. Military uniforms, crisp with heavy starch, hung on one side. Jeans and shirts on the other. His shoes and boots were lined up in nice, even rows. Neat. He was neat. He grinned. Good. His mind was a big enough mess by itself. He didn't need a mess in his home, too.

Next he checked the bathroom. Shampoo, a shaving kit. Nothing that told him a damned thing about his life. The only thing he noticed was a sand colored military deployment bag. He glanced inside. Empty. Of course. His former self would never leave anything he could use to learn more about himself.

Disgusted, he returned to the hallway and moved toward the living room.

He drew to a halt. She stood in front of the entertainment center, reading the back of a movie case.

Light from the window shone on her golden blonde hair like a halo. The rays brightened the already luminescent quality of her pale skin. A lock of hair had slipped from the tight, professional bun and was hanging near her eyes. His fingers itched with the desire to brush it away. Power played around her the way butterflies danced on a warm summer's day. He didn't know how he could see it, but it was there. Sweet, gentle, yet able to entrance the wildest of predators.

Pure possessive instincts rolled through his body.

Mine.

Damon shook his head in wonder. He shouldn't look at her as a female, but as a cop. A cop who was willing to help him find his origins. But he couldn't help it. Every scent, every glance from her twinkling eyes made him want to take her in his arms. The strength she portrayed in her position as a cop only aroused him more. The aggressiveness of her job appealed to the animal inside him. An animal whose senses were on keen alert.

She'd taken off her equipment belt, revealing the soft, sensual curve of *very* feminine hips. Her pants cupped the soft curves of her ass, just like he had the night before. Damon clenched his fists, struggling to avoid grabbing that firm flesh beneath the dark blue cloth. But instinct pushed him forward.

By the muted light from the door's small window, Krystal could barely make out the words on the DVD she scanned. Of course, she didn't really need to read the back of the case. She'd seen the movie at least four times. A vampire in love with a werewolf. The dark sensuality in the movie had always called to her in ways she couldn't explain. Two different worlds, thrown together with only the goal to save the human world. It could never be, for there were no vampires and definitely there were no werewolves, but it didn't hurt to fantasize.

A soft whisper of steps along the carpet was the only warning that Damon had moved in behind her. Already she'd know his steps anywhere. The weight of them, the way he moved with stealth, even when casual. Then his large, heavy hands moved to her shoulders. Their heat sizzled into her tight muscles. *God, they felt good.* She bit the inside of her cheek and forced herself to stand straight, ignoring the urge to lean back and feel the hard edges of his body.

He leaned forward, his mouth close to her ear. "So is that what you like, Krystal?"

She jerked, stepping forward. Her heart pounded in her chest. Maybe he didn't like it when people touched his things.

He wrapped his arm about her from behind, pinning her arms in place one handed, while the other took the DVD case from her fingers.

"I don't know what you mean."

He turned it over, glancing at the title. "Yes you do. I'm asking if you like this," he waved the DVD case, then tossed it onto the entertainment center. The clatter of plastic on wood echoed in the otherwise quiet room.

“Two worlds, one dark, sensual and filled with magick.”

Krystal tensed in his arms. Had she slipped and used her magick where he could see her?

“A woman, powerful and strong, controlling the night, protecting others.”

Oh, God. He knew. He had to.

His hands slid down her arms, scattering her thoughts. The soft, yet masculine touch awoke a hot, sensual desire equal only to what she'd felt in his arms the night before. Those powerful hands shifted, moving across her stomach in a warm, intimate caress. When he reached to caress her thighs, her concern dissolved amidst a mass of hot desire. Krystal struggled to keep her breathing smooth and unaffected. She failed. Miserably.

Hot breath sizzled against her ear, seizing what was left of her balance and her knees wobbled. Her lids grew heavy in desire, fluttering to a close. With each word, with each sliding caress of his palms, tension coiled inside her, twisting and hot, hungry to fill the empty ache deep inside her.

“And a man,” he rumbled, “who’s not a man. One driven by such animalistic instincts he thrives for only two things in his dark and deadly world.”

Why did his voice have to rumble like that? Low, hot and masculine. The vibration rolled along her body, settling in her groin with the same power as his heated caress. Her soul absorbed every sound, every touch, and every smell. The same way her mind absorbed the power of magick. None of it made sense, but from the moment he'd taken her into his arms she was powerless to stop him.

But they were talking about the movie

Besides, she did like the movie. She loved the idea of two such dark worlds colliding. But only because she knew she herself held magick.

“What two things?” She should stop this. Really she should. But his hands and voice felt so good. Like a drug of choice, Everything about him hypnotized her without his ever looking into her eyes.

The idea of a man with equal strength and the urge to protect others, only she knew what that meant to her.

A fantasy.

A dream.

Never to be fulfilled.

He turned her toward him. His face was hard, cheeks like chiseled marble, eyes flashing silver, liquid mercury searching for her soul. “The drive to survive, to live another day...” he leaned forward, whispering in her ear.

Her body trembled.

“...only superseded by the need to mate.”

Oh, God. He was playing with her, he had to be. Handsome men like him didn't like women like her. She wasn't suave, or feminine. She didn't wear pretty clothes and have perfect hair.

She was a cop.

Men like Damon wanted pretty and sweet. They wanted perfect. Didn't they? They only played with women like her. A quick toss between the sheets, then off to their next conquest. Hell, when his memory came back, the chances were he'd want nothing more to do with her. Yet no matter how much she tried to stay clear headed, the heated fog of arousal stole through her mind, sapping her objectivity.

“That's what you want, isn't it?” His lips closed over her ear, his arms wrapping about her waist, pulling her toward him.

Krystal fisted her hands in his shirt. How did he know? She shook her head, refusing to admit to this man her deepest desires.

“Yes, it is. You want just what's in that movie.” His huge hands caressed the small of her back, teasing her with his heat. “A male, powerful and strong. A male who's only desire is to find the female with the power to help him procreate. A female as strong as he.”

"Stop," she whispered the word so soft she knew he couldn't hear her. His large palms spread across her butt. What was left of her muscles gave in, melting, molding to his touch.

"Stop," she whispered stronger.

"A mate who's willing to protect his female. A male willing to do anything, give anything, to keep her safe." His hand brushed her cheek, then moved to the back of her head, releasing her hair from its tight bun. "Even die if he must."

He leaned down, his nose teasing the flesh along her cheek. Who knew such a gentle touch could be so sexy? The spicy, wild scent of him rolled through her, peppering her blood with a drugging desire.

"You want a male who will give his life if need be. One who can, and will, stand between you and the rest of the world."

"I can take care of myself." With each brush of his hand, and with every word he spoke, her reserve faded. Who the hell cared if she slept with him. It didn't mean she had to marry him.

Besides, he hadn't even kissed her. She was getting well ahead of herself. She shook her head, trying to clear it, but her only success was to brush closer against his body, her breasts now hard against his chest.

The masculine chuckle rolled from his throat, vibrating through to her very soul. Every sound he made, every touch he gave her, weakened her resolve.

"Of course you can, Krystal. That's why you want this so much. You want a mate who can stand at your side. One who is equal to your power and strength." His head lowered, closer to her lips. So close she could feel the whisper of his hot, masculine breath.

"You're not making any sense," she whispered.

"Oh, but I am. Imagine it. More animal than man, running on instincts. Instincts that demand his mate survive, at all costs." His eyes searched hers. "A creature, half man, and half beast. One who rewards you by fulfilling your every need. It's what you want, isn't it, Krystal?"

She shook her head, struggling to focus on what he was saying. A small part of her knew he was trying to tell her something, but her need was building too fast. She tried to think of something else, tried to focus on anything but him, but it was as though, at that moment, he was her entire world.

"You're lying, female. I can smell your desire. Even as you deny it, your body tells the tale."

"Stop this, Damon," she rasped. "You don't want me. A cop. You want someone soft and sweet. Quit messing with me." She'd had enough of his games.

He wrapped an arm about her waist and dragged her forward, his lips against her ear. "Does this feel like I'm *messing* with you?" His voice was a raspy growl, his hot breath feathering across her cheek.

The hard edge of his hunger cut against her flesh, burning a path from the touch of his body to her groin. *Oh, God.* If she didn't get a grip soon, he'd have her strewn across the couch in seconds. Already her body ached with the need to feel the hot touch of his hand against her flesh.

Krystal couldn't take this any longer. Need pumped through her blood. It was both frightening and exciting. He may be one handsome man, and he may not want her for long, but the pull of hunger had taken its toll. With one hand on either side of his head, she dragged his lips to hers, tasting what he so eloquently offered.

Damon rumbled in satisfaction.

Her tongue swept along his lips, offering a tease of heat. Damon's gums itched with the desire to lengthen his fangs. The memory of last night's shared kiss flashed in his mind. A memory of dark and dangerous hungers. He should stop this, but the scent of her arousal drugged his mind, shaking his control.

He opened to her, hungry for more. Her tongue teased his, brushing against his lips, playing with his desire. Self preservation drove him to pull back when all he wanted was to taste all of her, no holds barred. If she felt his fangs, she'd know what he was. She pressed harder, as though hungry for

more. A soft, feminine sound whispered against his mouth. With a groan, he swept his tongue deep inside, forcing her to accept instead of respond, hiding the sharp edges in his mouth.

Her hands kneaded his shoulders, sliding down to his chest, unbuttoning his shirt. When her small fingers touched his skin, he gave in to the harsh, hungry sensations. Unquenchable thirst erupted inside him. His fingers dug into her soft flesh, dragging her up against him, off her feet. He devoured her mouth, his kiss suddenly uncontrollable and deep, tasting the sweet ambrosia of her mouth.

Fangs refused to be controlled, lengthening and growing in his mouth as his emotions teetered on the edge. *Mine*. The simple word played through his mind. It wasn't possible another woman had ever made him feel this way, so out of control he wanted to shred her clothes from her body. He forced himself to keep his hands on her ass.

She wasn't ready for someone the likes of him. What if he hurt her? What if he made her sick? What would happen if he slept with a woman? Would he infect her with werewolf virus? Could it be transmitted sexually? What he didn't know scared him more than what he did.

It was that concern, more than anything, which drove him to pull back. He would not hurt this woman. Could not. He cupped her face with his palms, then pulled back, dropping one last kiss on her lips.

"Krystal," he murmured.

The sound of the phone ringing yanked him back to the present. He jerked his head up, his eyes narrowing. *Shit*. He didn't even know where the damned phone was. A quick scan of the room told him the device was across the room. It rang again. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to release the woman before him. His thumbs caressed her cheeks.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" she asked in a breathy voice.

Growling his frustration, he let go and moved across the room, ignoring the sudden pang of loss. He snatched the phone up.

"Hello," he growled.

"Damon?"

"What?" he barked, too frustrated to figure out why the voice sounded familiar.

"It's Jesse Langston. I need your help."

Damon stiffened. The boy who the others said he'd saved once before. The one he was sure knew who and what he was. That is, if the bastards at the GSA hadn't been the ones to give him a lovely parting gift of werewolfitis.

"What's the problem?" He forced himself not to growl.

"I need to talk to you. In person. It's not safe over the phone."

Damon pulled the phone from his ear and gave it a quizzical look. The boy had been terrified of him the night before and now he wanted his help? He put the phone back to his ear. "Look, I don't know if I'm the one you need."

"You're the only one who can help, Connell. It's Jackson. He's... I think he's lost his mind."

"What makes you think I can help?"

He heard the sigh of frustration from the other end of the line while from the other side of the room, Krystal watched him with open curiosity. Great. Life was starting to get complicated, as if it wasn't bad enough already. Irritation surged inside him. He counted to ten, forcing even breaths with each count.

"Fine," he said at last. "Where do you want to meet?"

"At Kimball Point. In two hours."

Damon opened his mouth to ask where Kimball Point was, then realized he knew. Whatever it was about this amnesia, it sure as hell didn't affect his generic memories. Only the ones surrounding him. His life. His work. "All right," he growled. "Two hours."

He clicked the phone off, ignoring the urge to smash the thing to bits. Instead he used meticulous care when he placed it back in its stand. The concentrated effort gave him the precious seconds he needed to collect his thoughts.

"What was that about?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Langston wants to chat. Later."

She arched a brow. "How much later? Two hours later?"

He scrubbed one hand down his face. "Yeah. In two hours."

"What about?" She'd donned her equipment belt. A shield, reminding him who and what she was. It would work great if it didn't make her look just as sexy as she did without it. Though he did wonder why the sudden change.

"Nothing important. I'm going to shower and go.

"Not alone, you don't."

He fought the urge to growl and instead scowled in her direction. "I don't think—"

"Not your shower, doofus. I meant your trip to visit with Langston. You still haven't answered all my questions about what happened to you. I don't know why, but I have this weird feeling Langston is up to his ears in it."

If she hadn't just put words to what he was thinking, he might have laughed at her calling him a doofus. If he hadn't seen her use the same word with her brothers the night before, he might have been offended, but he knew she didn't mean it that way. Though he didn't really want to be classified in the same category in her mind as her brothers.

Chapter 8

Krystal strode back to the entertainment center, trying her best to forget Damon stood nude in his shower. Heat still swept through her veins, building the low, dull ache she'd experienced because of his touch. And now he was naked. Alone. Without her.

She stared at the DVD cover he'd taken from her hand, but the words and graphics couldn't cut through the haze of her imagination. An imagination filled with images of water cascading over powerful, bare muscles. His T-shirt had left little to the imagination, it was true. But now he stood in steamy water, and her mind tried to fill in all the blanks, both above and below his waist.

She could join him. Krystal smiled to herself. There was no doubt he was interested. His hands had stayed mostly in the safe zones both times he'd kissed her, though she'd felt his arousal each time he'd held her in his arms. *And what arms they were.*

For the first time a man had made her feel safe and secure. Wanted.

Funny. It didn't matter she didn't know much about him. Hell, it didn't even seem to matter to her body she knew more about him than he knew about himself. It was like her hormones had decided their vacation was over and it was time to get in the game. If he was as interested in her as much as she was in him, something told her they'd hit a home run if they got together.

She glanced back down at the DVD. Vampires and werewolves. She grinned and shook her head. She'd always thought the movie was sensual, but Damon had made it seem so much more. Hot. Sexy.

Listening to his words had left her burning with desire.

But she would not join him in his shower. No matter how much her body screamed at her.

Her fingers ran across the titles of his movies. You could tell a lot about a man by the DVD's he watched. There were plenty of action movies. Both new and old. There was an entire collection of a Navy cop show she'd seen on television. But that wasn't all. He had a nice variety of science fiction and fantasy as well. A man with varied and excellent taste.

A sound caught her attention, and she turned to find Damon staring at her, his eyes honey baked dark. Funny, she'd thought his eyes were silver before now. He dressed in a button up shirt, with another pair of tight jeans which stretched across him as though painted on. Only these went down all the way down to his ankles like they should. Beneath them he wore a pair of cowboy boots. Shit kickers, her brothers called them.

And he smelled so damned good. Her knees went weak as her lungs absorbed his scent. "I need to swing by my place," she said. She cleared her throat to hide the husky tenor of her voice. "I need to change."

He nodded, his face unreadable.

Damon tightened his fingers on the wheel of his Jeep. His Jeep. Satisfaction seeped into his soul. For the first time since he awoke in the lab, he felt in control. Even though it was late November, the air was warm, so he hadn't had to work hard to convince Krystal his vehicle was best. You didn't call a Jeep a car. It was a Jeep. It was an all terrain vehicle, or it was a vehicle. Never a car. He smiled to himself. Just one more idiosyncrasy of his memory problems. Somehow he just knew. A Jeep was in a class all its own. Just like he was.

He glanced to the side. Krystal hadn't said a word since they'd left her place. Instead, she sat stiff, gazing into the evening sun as though lost in thought. The wind whipped around them and wisps of soft blonde hair played with her brow, slipping into the corners of her mouth. The top was

down and the wind should have carried away her scent, but that was not happening. Instead, it swirled between them, laden with the perfume of feminine desire.

When he'd come from his shower, she'd stood in his living room, her fingers caressing his movies on his entertainment center, oblivious to his approach. There was no doubt her mind was not on the movies. He'd watched her walk through the room, lost in what appeared to be fantasy. Before that moment, he'd seen her walk with a cop swagger. He'd seen her walk as a woman, oblivious to her own femininity. This time she'd moved with sensuous grace. His imagination had run wild, imagining her in satin and lace, her legs bare, her hips teasing him with each step.

So much for his cold shower. Then the air conditioner kicked on. The light breeze had captured the pure essence of a woman in lust. He'd gasped for breath, only to drag in more of her essence. His mouth had gone dry and his only thought was of his thirst. For her.

It had taken every ounce of control to not pounce upon her the instant she turned her eyes to his. He'd taken her to her house and she'd changed clothes and fed the shrimp of a dog, then strode past him to his Jeep. Not once had she so much as mentioned the desire which hung between them.

A sign on the side of the road displayed the exit for Kimball Point road, the one road going in and out of the small island on Kerr Lake. When they reached the deepest part of the woods, he pulled off the road, hiding the Jeep in the trees. He turned off the ignition.

As the sounds of civilization faded into the night, crickets chirped in the distance. The sun was just starting to set in the distance and a small hovercraft buzzed pass on the water. *That must mean I've heard hovercraft before.*

"We're early. They probably won't be here for another thirty minutes or more. We should see their lights when they get here." Kimball point was small. Kerr Lake was a large body of water for this part of the state, but there was no true beach. Instead, the water seeped into the sandy soil, flooding the beach until it reached into the pines.

And the place was quiet.

It was probably why Langston had chosen the location. Camping season was over, so there wouldn't be much in the way of human contact, and what was there, would be seen the instant they drove through, their lights playing in the trees.

"Good," she said, turning to him with a smile. When she turned, the orange sunset reflected in her eyes, and for a moment, he could see what looked like the sharp gaze of a shewolf buried in her soul.

He frowned. *Wishful thinking.* That was it. There was no way this woman held any part of wolf in her. She was too soft. Then again, she was a cop. A dominant female able to not only put criminals in their place with a look and a weapon, but she held magick. All traits he found sexy beyond imagining. But that didn't make her a shewolf.

"You're staring at me."

Damon jerked his attention away from his musings. "I can't help it," he said, brushing a lock of hair from near her eye. "You're beautiful."

"Right. That's me. Beautiful. Mannish. The last woman on earth a guy like you would consider, so stop playing with me." The sharpness of her tone covered the hint of pain he sensed within.

It was difficult biting back the growl rising in his throat. "Who told you such nonsense?"

She gave a sharp laugh. "I'm not stupid, Damon. Guys like you don't want hard, aggressive cops in their beds. They want soft and sweet. They want something I'm not. I learned that a long time ago. You may not remember much about your life, but I remember enough about mine to know the instant your memory comes back, you'll look at me different." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye before looking off into the distance again.

So that's what was bothering her. *Hell.* He wanted to throttle the idiots who'd made her so uncomfortable around men. But he knew if he told her what he thought, she'd storm off into the night and he'd probably never see her again. He should, though. Because her not seeing him again was

good for her, if not for him. Instead, he took a different tactic. "Why do women assume they know what a man wants?"

Her brows raised. "You mean to tell me you don't want to find some super hot model chick?"

He laughed. "No. Model chicks have nothing to hold on to. Women should have hips and thighs."

Krystal blushed, and he knew she was thinking of her own hips, just wide enough to entice a man, and thighs he'd bet were powerful enough to let a man know she held him in her grip when he lay between them.

"No, soft women are not my style." He couldn't help emphasizing with his gaze as he let his eyes explore her body. What the hell was wrong with him? He should back off now. Before things got out of control. Yet somehow, he couldn't.

"How would you know what's your style?" she said at last.

He noticed her edge had softened somewhat. He smiled. "I don't know what it was in the past," he said, his finger caressing her cheek. "But I do know what it is now, and I can tell you, soft is *not* my style."

Emotion flashed in the depths of her eyes, before they changed again. Her scent changed. Sparking with a pleasant spice he'd not caught in her scent before. The narrowing of her eyes told him she was up to something.

But before he could figure out what it was, she bounced in her seat, rising to her knees and twisting to face him. She pushed him backward, her hands on his chest. With the sweep of a leg she straddled him, rising above him like an avenging angel. Her violet eyes flashed with hunger and cunning. The heat from her center burned him through the heavy material in his jeans and in an instant he was hard and ready for her.

Danger. It's all he could think of. That, and the bundle of sweet feminine softness perched in his lap. So much for not wanting soft. His fingers itched to delve into her delicate flesh, but he forced himself to hold back. For her.

Leaning forward, she moved her face to just above his. So close he could feel the flutter of her breath against his lips.

"Good," her whisper was harsh and hungry. "Because soft and gentle is not *my* style."

Before he could respond, her lips crashed down on his.

Heavens to Mergetroid. How could any man or beast be expected to put up a resistance to such wonderful sensations. He opened to her. Wild feminine spices exploded across his tongue. He groaned into her mouth, struggling to hold on to his control. He had imagined so many ways he would kiss her next. This wasn't it. Yet her aggression excited him. Teased a small place inside him he was sure no other woman would have reached. He couldn't find a place to put his hands. Except on her hips.

The instant his palms came in contact with her body, he was lost. She may think she was hard, but his fingers kneaded the soft feminine curves covering that layer of hard edged power she held inside herself. The contrasts were exciting. Erotic.

Her fingers pulled at the buttons on his shirt, and he grabbed them, dragging his mouth from hers. "What if they show up?" he gasped, using the last of his resistance. This wasn't the time. God, how he wished it was.

"Like you said," she responded, her lips curved into a smile he could feel against his own, "We'll see their lights."

Damn. Her voice was low and sexy, growling at him even as she spoke. He could swear she was shewolf. Not that he knew what a shewolf was, but his instincts pushed at him. *Mine.* The echo in his mind wouldn't go away. It was as though his entire being centered around this woman in his lap. A woman who pressed her hot body against his. He wanted to resist. Needed to resist. Yet everything she did felt perfect.

"Scooch the seat back," she murmured as she pressed hot lips against his ear.

He ignored the tremor running down his spine and reached for the seat lever. "I can't reach it," he replied.

A muffled laugh was her response, then the seat slammed backward. One of them must have found it. He wasn't even sure which of them had pulled the lever. She tugged again at the buttons on his shirt, yanking it open with one jerk. Buttons popped in all directions.

"Hey."

"Deal with it," she murmured. In an instant her palms caressed his chest.

He gasped and his muscles twitched beneath their touch. He shouldn't do this. He shouldn't let her do this. What if he made her like him?

"Now this is just what I expected to find," she growled, her eyes scanning his chest.

There it was again. That hot, sexy sound that rumbled down his spine. "Krystal," he groaned. "Not here. Not now." Despite his words, his own hands travelled up her back, pushing her body until her mouth was back on his.

There was no contest as she opened to him and this time he didn't fight the growl rolling up to greet hers. He reveled in it. Her taste was an aphrodisiac, twisting inside him, stealing every ounce of his reserve. Her hands reached behind her, grabbing his wrists and dragging them away from her waist. She moved his hands to the roll bar above his head. "Hold on," she murmured.

He grabbed hold, not even clear as to why. All he knew was her body. It overwhelmed him. The heart pounding in his chest knew something was wrong. Knew there was no reason he should want her with such desperation. Yet he couldn't stop. It felt too damned good. She felt damned good. At least if he was holding on to the bar, he wouldn't be stripping her, lying her in the back of the Jeep and making love to her the way he wanted.

Her mouth trailed down his chest, teasing and licking. She was hot. Her core burned with the same desire he felt inside. Her fingers teased his right nipple. Like an electric wire, her touch zinged straight to his groin and he bucked beneath her.

A sensual smile curved on her face, and she climbed up his body, her teeth latching onto his lower lip. She teased, increasing pressure then easing back. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes, struggling to control the fangs fighting to push through his gums. Metal clinked beside his ear and he opened his eyes wide in time to see Krystal clamp her handcuffs on his wrist with one hand and snap them closed on the bar with the other.

"What the hell are you doing, Krystal," he growled. He yanked his wrist. This wasn't exactly his idea of a sex game. And she hadn't used playful, fur lined cuffs either, but the heavy set she wore on her belt.

She backed away, jumping out of the Jeep to avoid his free hand. "I can't let you go meet Langston. This is a trap, Damon. You said so yourself." Her voice was still husky, filled with desire, despite the determined look on her face. "I'm not letting you go in there. I'm a cop and I'm going to do what cops do." Were those tears glistening in her eyes?

He rattled the metal cuff again. "Without backup? You really think if this is a trap and you go in there they'll just give up?"

She shrugged and grinned. "We'll see, won't we. If Langston is telling the truth, and he's just worried about his friend, I'll come back, release you and let the two of you talk."

She was putting herself at risk for him. He fought the chain on his wrist. Protective instincts burned inside him. "I trusted you, Krystal. Let me go. What if this is a trap, like you think. What will you do?" Fury edged his voice.

"Then I'll call for help and do what I have to do." She slid a hand through her hair. "I'm not letting you go in there. If you don't go, chances are, they won't react. They aren't going to come after me if they want you."

"Krystal," he ground out, "you don't know what you're getting yourself into. Let me go. We'll do this together."

She shook her head. "Sorry, Damon. I can't. I'll be back."

Without another word she turned and stepped into the forest.

Damon bit back the urge to howl his frustration.

He could escape, but not without revealing who and what he was. He slammed his head back against the headrest. *Damn that bitch.*

Krystal crept through the forest, careful to avoid sticks and branches when possible. While she kept her ears tuned to the road, instinct pushed her forward, toward the docks. If this was a trap, Langston would already be ahead. Guilt twisted inside her. She hated that she'd left Damon cuffed to the Jeep, but damn it, he wasn't a cop. He might have background with the military but he didn't remember that life. That black hole in his head was an impairment, and one which could get them both killed.

She'd done the right thing.

But why did it have to hurt so bad? He'd hate her for what she did. Then again, she hadn't expected her touch to shake him apart as it had. For an instant, she'd felt powerful. But the instant the hand cuff had clicked into place, the only thing she felt was guilt.

Krystal inhaled, trying to clear her head. The early winter night air was cool and clean. The woodsy scents filtered into her lungs, the fresh air calming her jittery nerves. She'd done the right thing. No matter how she, or he, for that matter, felt about it now. He would live to see another day and she would do her best to protect him.

She crouched low, hiding her movements behind the underbrush. Her ankle holster rubbed against her skin, the weight both heavy and comforting. She hadn't told Damon she'd brought a weapon. Knowing him as she did, she knew he'd step in and insist she not come with him.

Water from the lake had seeped inward, invading the once dry land. Each step was now a chore as mud sucked at her feet, slowing her pace. Each step allowing her to think about what she was doing. Each step drawing her closer to danger.

Most of the perpetrators she worked with were arrested for animal abuse. The real risk came from the animals, not the people. Today would be different. The men she stalked were not abusers. At least, not in the way she was used to dealing with.

These were trained military soldiers. Men who could be as innocent as a good friend searching for help, or, if they were guilty, as stealthy and deadly as their training suggested.

A twinge of regret tweaked her conscience. Damon was right, she needed backup.

Her hand touched the throw-a-way weapon in her ankle holster. The cold metal brushing against her palm sent a wave of reassurance through her. She could do this. She was a cop. She'd trained for this very moment.

The trees thinned. A man already stood on the dock, waiting.

Damn. There had been no car lights since their arrival. This was looking more and more like a trap. Krystal fingered her cell phone. If she opened it now to check for signal, the faint blue light might give her away. If she knew the lay of the land better, she'd have thought to check her phone earlier, before she made it this far.

It was too late now.

"Who's there?" he called.

She took a deep breath, straightened, and stepped out.

"Langston, is that you?" she called.

The man turned toward her, his eyes wide in surprise.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

Yes, it was Langston. She hadn't noticed just how young he was last night at the bar. He looked barely old enough to shave, much less serve in the military. And tonight, what she saw in his eyes was not anger or aggression. It was fear.

Ignoring the inner alarms ringing in her head, she shrugged. "Damon got held up, so I thought I'd show up for him. Just until he arrives of course."

"You can't be here." His eyes darted to and fro through the darkened trees.

"Too late." She motioned her arms wide, her hands slapping her thighs when she dropped them. "I'm already here. What's happening, Jesse? Why did you call him?"

"I... I had to. I need to talk to him."

A sound whispered in the trees behind her. *Did she have to always be right?* The trap was laid and about to spring. She clicked open her phone in her pocket, praying there was a signal and pressed the preprogrammed emergency text message for her brothers. "Aw, hell, Langston," she shook her head. "Let's quit playing games. Why don't you tell me what happened to Damon all those months ago, and we can settle this. He knows it was you who turned him over to the research hospital."

Langston's eyes narrowed. "It wasn't me. I promised him I'd keep his secret. I owe him my life."

What secret? Another rustle of underbrush sounded behind her. "You didn't do a very good job keeping quiet. You shared it with someone, didn't you?"

His pale flesh blanched even more. "Only Campbell. But he'd already suspected something was different about Damon." The man turned to pace, then stiffened and turned back to face her.

Krystal narrowed her eyes. A rifle butt peeked from behind the trees to his right. He was hiding a weapon. Her body tensed.

"And when he questioned you, you just let it slip?" Krystal bent to tie her shoe, and to get closer to her throw away weapon.

Langston shook his head. "No, really. I didn't."

"Why don't you tell her what really happened," said a masculine voice. A man stepped from the shadows to her right. Campbell. In his hand he held a rifle. It resembled a 22 caliber, but something seemed different about the barrel. It was wider than standard. A larger caliber bullet maybe? Or something other than a bullet?

Her hand closed over her 9 mm. She eased herself up, her gun at her side. "Why? So you can have more time to come at me? I don't think so." Her small 9mm hand gun didn't feel much like a powerful ward against evil bad guys. It was more like a bee sting ready to further irritate the already raging bull. She turned her focus to the biggest threat. Campbell.

Another sound rustled in the distance. *How many of them were there?* There wasn't much she could do now. They would take her down, or they wouldn't. The sound was from too far away. There was no way she could find him with a quick glance.

Campbell grinned. "Krystal, isn't it?" He cocked his head and inched forward a step.

She nodded. If she dropped and rolled, she might be able to hit Campbell then turn the weapon on Langston before he moved. The problem was the guy still behind her in the trees.

"You should have minded your own business. Curiosity might just kill the wolf." He laughed as if he'd made a joke.

"Well, one thing you didn't learn last night, Campbell. I'm a cop."

There was no surprise in his dark eyes. Instead, he shrugged. "We didn't ask you to show up, you know. Just Damon. But I see he's hiding behind your skirts, cop or not." He moved forward again.

Krystal fought the urge to growl in frustration. Adrenaline pumped from her heart to her veins as she gripped the weapon in her hand. So far either Campbell hadn't noticed it, or wasn't concerned. *Shit.* She was out of her jurisdiction, so without an obvious crime being committed, she couldn't do a thing. She needed a confession. Their intentions. Something to help guide them to a prison cell. She sent a probe into the man's mind. She could sometimes read intentions before actions. Maybe she

could force him to hold off any actions and talk. "So what did you plan? Capture him? Turn him back over to the research lab? Against his will?"

Joseph Campbell smiled, his eyes calculating as he studied her. "A smart one. That's okay, we can use you." He cocked the rifle and aimed it straight at her chest. "The easiest way to Damon is through you. Besides, those who are interested in him may be equally fascinated with a woman of your.... Talents." He stepped forward, then cocked the rifle and pointed it at her.

For the first time she felt a tremble of fear run down her spine. He'd felt her probe. He was trained to at least identify psychic or magickal power. "You aren't taking me anywhere."

Her eyes met his, and rather than raise her gun, she moved into his mind, about to push her will upon him. In her mind's eye, something unusual changed. She didn't just feel his emotions and intentions. This time she could feel his body, his muscles and his bones.

Her heart thumped hard in her chest.

Fear dissolved.

Excitement soared.

Power surged inside her, defining every cell of the man's body. She didn't know how it happened, but her magick felt stronger. More defined. The simple act of sensing intentions and putting a stop to it had grown into something else. She could feel the pulse in his neck, the arteries along the side of his head. If she could sense them, she could affect them.

"Oh, I don't intend to. I'm going to let him do it." He nodded toward the trees behind her.

A dark animal exploded from the forest to her right, charging toward Krystal. *Duck.* The word popped into her mind and without hesitation, she dropped to the ground. A blur of brown fur leapt over her, crashing into a man behind her. Krystal rolled toward the man with the gun. She scissored her legs, sweeping his feet from beneath him. He toppled backward, slamming to the ground, the gun clattering toward Langston.

The sound of snarls and growls roared through the night. She knew that sound. The wolf she'd rescued. The one who'd escaped her house. How did he find her? For that matter, *why* did he find her?

Campbell reared back on his knees, searching for the gun. Krystal raised her arm and fired. The bullet caught the man in the shoulder and jerked him backwards, away from his weapon. His recovery was miraculous and he charged toward her. She tried to focus, but the man's fist slammed toward her face. She dodged at the last moment, shoving him backward with the balls of her feet. Jumping up, she planted her legs shoulder width apart and grasped hold of the senses floating in her mind. Behind the flesh, behind the face of the man with his lip curled in aggression, she could feel his larynx. With every bit of energy she could find, she squeezed the tube, cutting off his air supply.

He choked, his hands clawing at his throat. His face turned hot red, then faded to a pale shade of gray, visible in the darkness of the now starless night. His eyes bulged in their sockets, staring at her in terror. Krystal swallowed, but held tight. If she let go, he'd come after her again. She could not hesitate.

Determined to save himself, Joseph Campbell threw himself forward, his shoulder thrusting into her belly. She jolted back, the breath whooshing from her lungs. Her gun slid across the loose sand beneath her and just out of her reach.

With her concentration broken, she lost control of his windpipe and he wheezed for air.

Krystal searched, her hands frantic as she felt in the dark for her pistol. At last her fingers closed around the grip and she raised her hand again.

At the same instant, Langston lifted the rifle.

"Shoot her," gasped Campbell. "Or you know what will happen."

Krystal swung her weapon toward Langston and pulled the trigger. The explosion of both weapons shrieked through the darkened forest. Pain ripped through her shoulder. *Damn it.* Had she missed? A wave of dizziness rolled through her body and the earth tilted beneath her feet. Her hand

reached to feel for the blood that must be dripping down her shoulder, only to find a dart. She hadn't been shot with a bullet. She'd been drugged. She dropped to her knees. Darkness settled in her eyes. The last thing before her was the sight of the brown wolf, wobbling as it tried to reach her. Drugged. Hell. At least they didn't kill him.

Chapter 9

The dark edges of Krystal's sleep faded away, filled instead with the sounds of men's voices.

"She should wake soon."

"Good. I'm tired of waiting."

"What are you going to do with her?"

"You'll see. Is the wolf ready?"

"Yep. He's set to be released inside. "

Two men. Two voices. Krystal held her eyes closed, studying her situation. She was in a sitting position, her hands above and held at either side of her head. She could feel the hard edge of steel cuffs about her wrists. Cold, hard cement was beneath her. The room smelled of dank animal scents and straw. The urge to cover her nose was overwhelming, but she didn't want to let the bastards know she was awake.

"Good. The tiger experiment failed. This one will work."

That voice sounded familiar.

"Isn't she important? What if she's misleading you with her gifts and she dies? Her brother was stronger than you thought, why not her?"

Which of her brothers was he talking about?

"Yeah, but Lance wasn't given the Kg4 inhibitor that Krystal was. At least, not early enough. We injected her mother with the drug within weeks of finding out she was pregnant with the girl. It's our most successful experiment to date. Later testing showed Krystal had almost no magickal power like her father and brothers."

Injected her mother? That would mean.... Oh, God, that was Doctor Carey's voice she heard. Her mother's OB/GYN doctor at the GSA.

"You sure that isn't just a female thing?"

"Positive. The inhibitor also stole her mother's healing powers until after the child was born."

"Then why didn't you use it on her brother after his birth?"

She heard a hand slap against something. Maybe against the other man's back. "All in the nature of science. We had to see what would happen if we gave Kg4 to an infant instead of a fetus." She could almost hear the indulgent smile of the *good* doctor. So satisfied with himself he was willing to indulge a lesser being. "And it worked as expected. Lance's powers were muted in comparison to his brothers, but not as much as Krystal's."

Sick dread twisted inside Krystal's stomach, with bile rising in her throat. She wouldn't be able to maintain this farce much longer. Tears stung her eyes. They'd stolen her talents even before she was born. They'd injected her mother, pleased not only when the infant had no talent, but that her mother lost her healing gift.

She'd remembered the whispers in her family. How she had caused her mom to lose her gift during her pregnancy. Her brothers had teased her unmercifully as a child, saying her lack of power had affected their mom. They hadn't meant anything. It was just childish teasing, but it had hurt all the same.

"Come on, I want to be comfortable and watching this on TV when she wakes up. I can't wait to see her face when she sees what he really is."

The echo of footsteps moved away, each softer than the one before. Until at last there was silence. The only sound was the soft shuffling of what might be animals.

Krystal slumped, her chains jangling around her. She let her eyes open a slit. The room was empty. She opened them wider and scanned her surroundings. She was in a small dank dungeon-like prison. The musky smell of animals seeped from the walls and the floor on which she sat. She wrinkled her nose. *Cleanliness was not their best friend, that's for sure.* Three brick walls stared at her in mournful pity, mocking her desire to escape. One wall held a small door, no higher than her waist. Bars stood between her and freedom on the last side. A prison.

She tipped her head up, checking out the ceiling. Even if she managed to escape the chains, she couldn't get out of the room. Why the overkill? She peered as far as she could see, but nobody stood nearby. At least, not close enough she could see from here.

Damon snarled, fighting the drug in his system. They'd shot him with some kind of anesthetic, but it hadn't knocked him out. It had frozen his muscles, stealing his ability to shift, leaving him fully, morbidly, aware of every conversation around him. He'd heard them talking about Krystal from the next room. They must have her in one of the cells. He didn't need his old memory to know where they were. He was back under the control of the GSA and this time they'd brought Krystal along for the ride.

A growl rolled down his spine. Good. The drug was wearing off. This doctor was dead. There would be no discussion.

"Look who's back," said Doctor Carey.

Damon growled in response. He flexed his leg muscles. They responded. He fought to hide the small motion by distracting the doctor with another growl. He'd show this asshole who was back and who wasn't.

"Don't worry, Damon. We'll have you back in shape in no time." The man walked across the room to pick up a syringe. "It's a shame, really. We intended to already have you out in the field, testing your skills, but..." He shrugged.

He moved close to Damon. "Instead, we'll interrupt your training to try something new. That pretty young thing you brought in? I want to see if we can get her pregnant with your young." A needle slipped beneath Damon's flesh and into a vein.

What the hell? Before they'd always wanted him to show aggression, to destroy anyone and anything who came near him. He'd obliged, thrilled to let off steam. Now they wanted him to mate? Anger burned as hot and acidic as the drug Doctor Carey slid into his blood while he was unable to move.

They weren't looking to make him a super soldier this time. They wanted him to breed one. Fury sizzled inside him, boiling his blood even as they drugged it. The worst part was knowing they would be successful. He'd wanted Krystal since the moment he laid eyes on her, without any drugs. The only thing holding him back was the suspicion he would change her, destroying the woman he'd come to admire. How much of his werewolfism was a virus and how much was himself, he still didn't know.

Now they drugged him, intensifying the desire which was already teetering on the edge of his control. Their medication would make it impossible for him to turn away. He'd rape her, and she'd hate him.

No! His mind roared with rage. He would not give in. He would not hurt the one woman he admired. The one woman he cared for. *Shit.* He did care for her. And he was about to destroy her.

His mind searched for ways to escape. Right now the silver collar lay heavy on his neck, once again burning the flesh beneath the brown fur. They would remove it, but not before releasing him in with Krystal. Already his body hummed with the strength of his desire. Each breath grew more and more labored with increasing desire.

"Now don't you worry. She's a pretty thing. You'll like her. She may not be quite as excited once she realizes what you are, but we can't have everything, now can we?"

The thump in his chest bordered on pain. It wouldn't happen. Inside him, the human screamed, fighting for control, torn between wanting to protect and wanting to take. At last he found his voice, and howled.

Krystal sat on the floor in her cell, wondering if Damon had escaped. Maybe he'd been able to follow them and was right now trying to find his way inside. Yeah, Right. Not a chance. She'd cuffed him to the roll bar. He couldn't even reach the ignition that way.

The howl of the wolf a moment before had seared straight through her. What the hell were they doing to the poor beast? She'd come to love that little animal. He'd tried to save her tonight, almost as though he thought her foolish to come without backup.

Her cell phone had GPS tracking hooked up and her brothers would come by tonight and not find her. Unless they got her text message, but something told her there was no reception out on Kimball Point. From what she'd heard, she was in the GSA headquarters, or one of their facilities. Would they think she was in danger when the GPS told them where she was? After all, they worked here. They wouldn't believe the GSA capable of what she'd just heard.

Angry tears stung the corners of her eyes. Her mother had suffered at the hands of these bastards. When she was free, they would pay. Doctor Carey was as good as dead.

The sound of sliding metal screeched, shattering the quiet. Krystal jerked her attention toward the small door she'd seen before. A wolf was shoved through before the door slid closed, the sound echoing off the solid brick walls around her.

The animal stood, his head lowered and teeth bared. She peered at the animal, wondering. It couldn't be, but it was. It was her wolf. His coat looked ragged and his eyes wild.

It stepped closer, then shook his head. He licked his lips as though trying to get something out of his mouth. She'd seen wolves do that when confused before. Just before they attacked. Her fingers tensed around the chains. Using their foundation, she eased up, standing.

"Easy, boy. It's me. Krystal."

The animal paced the confines of the cell, as though searching for an escape. Each pass brought him closer and closer to her. Aggression radiated off him like heat from the hot streets in summer. But there was something more. Something unusual. His energy had a sexual vibe to it. And the more she tried to reach into his mind, the more confused she became. He was blocking her.

He stopped, just feet away. He sneezed, his slate grey eyes not leaving hers. He growled, then sat.

The heat of energy poured through the room. The hairs on Krystal's arms stood on end as though called by some unseen power. She could feel it. Even more than when she'd tried to release her cuffs. And it all centered around the animal staring at her.

"What is it, boy? What's wrong?"

A bright light flashed. Her eyes blinked, closing for precious seconds.

When she opened them, the wolf was gone. In his place was a man. He crouched low, his head low, buried in his hands. The skin of his back shone in the muted light of their prison.

Fear shoved its way up her throat, fighting to force out reason. She shook her head. They had drugged her. She couldn't possibly see a wolf change into a man. Yet he was there. The man lowered his hands, raising his eyes to meet hers.

Slate grey eyes, narrowed, watching. Examining. Damon's eyes.

Her breath froze in her lungs.

"Damon," she whispered, though no sound came out. *No.* She shook her head. This wasn't possible. He couldn't be... yet he was. A werewolf. *Oh, God.* She'd seen him transform.

Or had she? She scrunched her eyes closed then reopened them. Damon was still there, his clenched, hard muscles tight through the shoulders, his grey eyes now glowing amber. This couldn't be. Yet it was. Her knees weakened. "Oh, God," she murmured, aloud this time.

Was it possible? She came from a family of wizards, so she knew magick existed. But this was different.

Damon stood.

Her heart thundered in her chest. Why did he have to be so... so... not human? For the first time in her adult life she was attracted to a man for his looks and personality and he wasn't even a man. A sob escaped her throat.

She was insane.

A werewolf was stalking toward her and all she could do was grieve for her love life.

He took a step toward her. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't help appreciate the man he was. Or, at least the man he was at the moment. As a wolf he was beautiful. Dark, powerful, strong. As a man, he left her speechless. She swallowed the lump caught in her throat. She shook her head. "This can't be. Tell me this isn't true."

He was naked. From head to toe, every inch of his body was exposed. And hungry. His erection was proud and hard as he stared at her. She felt like a sacrifice on an altar, and he was the evil beast that had come to take his offering. She tried to halt the trembling in her body as he stepped toward her.

"It's true, Krystal." His voice was soft, yet still held the power she'd come to recognize within the man. Did a werewolf maintain animal characteristics when he was human? Was that why she was so drawn to him?

"Stay away from me," she said, fighting the tremor in her voice.

He gave a slow shake of his head. "I can't. Even if I wanted to, I can't."

"What are you?" she choked out.

He pursed his lips. Such full, sensuous lips for a man. She shook her head, ignoring the throbbing from within. This creature was not human. He may look like a handsome, sexy man, but he wasn't. No matter how she tried to twist it, he wasn't human.

"I can't answer that question."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't," he sighed. "I don't know."

"You think I'm going to believe you now?" She scanned up and down his body. He was close now. So close if she leaned forward in her chains, she could press against the hard muscles of his body. The urge to do just that was almost overwhelming. *What's wrong with me?* She should be terrified. And she was. But she was also turned on. Seeing his body, powerful, masculine and naked was all she needed to tip her into desire. The pulse pounding in her ears mixed with the sensuous burn of her blood as her desire seared through her.

He rested a hand against the wall, beside her left ear. He leaned toward her. The scent of pure wildness layered his otherwise hot, masculine essence. It wasn't different. Yet now she understood.

"Everything I told you is truth. I woke up here," he said, his eyes indicating the cell. "I was this half man, half beast you see before you. I couldn't very well explain everything."

"Did..." She pulled at the chains, needing to step back, wanting to step forward. "Did they do this to you?"

He leaned closer, his nostrils widening. A soft rumble filled the small cell. Then he leaned back and shook his head as though to clear it. "I don't know. I can't remember. These doctors," he scoffed, "refuse to answer my questions."

She nodded and swallowed. If what she'd overheard about her mother was true, she didn't doubt they'd kept secrets from him. His hand brushed away a lock of hair from her face, and she jerked,

turning her face away. She closed her eyes. It wasn't fear which made her hide from him. It was desire. God, how she wanted to lean into that light touch.

He dropped his hand to his side, and his voice went flat. "I have to get you out of here, before I hurt you."

Confused, she thought about the time they'd spent together. In both human and wolf form. He'd always protected her. That night with her brothers he'd stayed in front of her until he was sure she was safe. Now she understood how he got out of her house. She'd slept with him cuddled up against her only to wake and find him gone. Her eyes opened wide. "Damn. I undressed in front of you."

He arched a brow and his eyes darkened. His lips quirked in a half smile. "Yes, you did."

She watched his face harden, saw the tightening of the muscles in his jaw. He looked angry. But more, he looked hungry.

"Why... would you hurt me?" Tears stung her eyes. *Please don't hurt me.* She could use her new found power against him, but she had no idea if it would work. He was a creature of magick, even more than she.

His hot fingers trailed along her cheek. Her teeth caught hold of her lower lip to hide her trembling arousal. Again she fought the urge to lean in. He wasn't human. *Damn it, his touch shouldn't feel so good.* But it did.

Damon stared into the violet eyes of the one woman he didn't want to hurt. The delicate nibble of her lip drove him closer to the precipice of danger. He fisted his fingers again. *Damn it all to hell.* The hunger burned inside him, building to explosive levels. He had to maintain control, or he would take her here. Now. Knowing they had an audience watching screens in their pristine offices above.

His nostrils widened. The sickly sweet scent of fear was tempered by the spicy, sensual scent of a female in heat. She wanted him. Inhaling, he drew in her zesty essence, rolling it over his tongue, tasting the savory flavor of her feminine nature. A rumble of appreciation vibrated through his chest. Like an aphrodisiac all on her own, her scent called and he lowered his head, losing himself in the dizzying headiness of her essence.

He wanted more. Pain filled his blood engorged need. Every second he was with her sent him closer to destruction. He traced the silky skin on her face, his fingers trembling. "I've been drugged," he growled beneath his breath.

"I don't understand," she murmured.

He should step back, but he needed one more touch. One more sweep of his finger against that soft, delicate skin. Her body trembled and he knew the affect he had on her. Even now, when she knew what he was, she still responded to his touch.

"They want me to take you." And he burned to oblige. Here, now. She was here, waiting for him, her hands chained so she couldn't resist. The animal inside him growled his approval. *Now. Mine. Take her.* He lowered his mouth to her throat. *Mate her. Mark her.*

"Damon," she called.

He growled his response, unable to form a word. His gums tickled and his fangs lowered.

"Damon."

"Say it again," he ordered with a harsh rumble.

She looked at him puzzled.

"My name. Say it again, Krystal."

"Stop."

Her demand caught him off guard. The human needs fought with the animal instincts. He raised his head. Her eyes widened at what he knew must be a ferocious sight. By her expression there was no doubt his eyes were glowing and his fangs visible.

"You wouldn't hurt me," she whispered.

She shouldn't trust him like that. "I will," he growled. "If you keep wanting me."

"I don't want you," she retorted.

"You do," he whispered. He let his breath feather across her flesh and she shivered. He tried hard to bite back his satisfied smile, but he failed.

"Fine," she said in a husky voice. "Maybe I do. So what of it? It's not your fault what they did to you."

Her acceptance was like throwing gasoline on an already large flame. A conflagration of heat exploded inside him. *Mine*. He growled and wrapped his arms around her, his mouth searching for hers.

Her lips opened the instant he touched them and his tongue dived in for that elusive taste only she could provide. Drunk on her flavor, his body shook with the need to take more, to sink his fangs in her flesh, to taste her blood.

He yanked himself away from her and swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Horror and revulsion filled him. He wanted to bite her. Just like that first night. That couldn't be normal. Could it? Her eyes were glazed with her own hunger and she licked her lips. Damon searched his memory but couldn't find a single reference of him with any other woman. Just Krystal. *Damn their drugs, anyway*. The GSA stole his memories, and now they had stolen his life.

Avoiding her gaze, his fingers closed over the silver chains. The metal burned, but he didn't care. All that mattered was getting Krystal out of here, before he did something he shouldn't. With a roar, he pulled with all his might. At first, nothing happened, but then the wall groaned. The screech of metal on mortar echoed through the cell as the stone gave. He jerked them free and dropped them to the floor, her arms dropping to her sides. He whirled away. He had to put space between them. Fast.

"Get out of here. Go. Run."

"And how the hell am I supposed to do that?" Krystal stared at him, her eyes wide. "We're locked in. Or did you forget."

He whirled around, his emotions a mix of anger and hunger. "Of course I know that." He stormed past her to the bars and tried to force them open. He knew he couldn't. He'd spent weeks, maybe months, in this very cell before and hadn't been able to escape without the help of her brothers.

Wizards. They were wizards. Krystal had to have some of the same powers. He'd seen what she did to Campbell.

"Krystal," he braced himself, then turned to face her. The tell tale weakness in his knees when he met her violet eyes told him how close he was to losing control. When had her face taken on that beautiful glow? He fisted his hand, fighting the drug. Hell, fighting his natural arousal as well. Maybe, just maybe if he kept his distance and didn't touch her, he would be okay. "You're a mage. I've seen what your brothers can do. Open the cell."

She shook her head, tears in her eyes. "I can't," she whispered, then looked away. "They stole everything. Everything from me." She collapsed to the floor. "Before you came in, I pretended to be asleep while they talked. They stole my powers, Damon. Stole them before I was even born." She looked up at him with the saddest eyes he'd ever seen. "I couldn't even open the chains."

"But the chains are bespelled. I remember that from when your brothers were here before."

"They were here?" she shrieked. "They know about this place and let it continue?"

"They saved me, Krystal. I knew it the instant I caught the scent of the one who healed your wrist. They came to rescue another, but rescued everyone in these cells."

Krystal took in what Damon had said. Her brothers knew the GSA was evil. Or at least that they did experiments down in these cells. Why hadn't they told her? *Damn it, will they ever quit trying to protect me?* Now if they checked her cell phone location they would at least know it was possible she was in danger.

"Krystal," said Damon, from across the cell, "you have talents. I've seen you use them."

"You could say that," she said, her eyes wary. Damon had been around her, seen her with her brothers, while he was a wolf. She slammed her chain against the wall. "I can do some things, but I can't open strong locks." How she wished she could.

"Have you tried?" His confidence in her quieted her jittery nerves. She'd tried the cuffs of course, right after the doctor and his assistant had left.

She cast a look at Damon. He stood on the other side of the cell, his arms folded, his muscles taut. His fingers held his bicep so tight the knuckles were white. Whatever they had done to him was ripping him apart inside. A flush of heat burned on his cheeks, and his need was still as hard as the moment she'd first seen him change. If only she had some clothes for him they'd probably both be more comfortable.

With trepidation, she stepped toward the iron bars. With a twist of her fingers she spoke the words aloud, hoping for more control and power. "*In a vicis of valde postulo obfirmo mos click Patefacio Says Mihi.*"

The lock sparked. Krystal reached for the door and held her breath. She pulled. Nothing. The lock remained firm. "Damn it," she muttered. "It's bespelled like the handcuffs."

Damon sighed and paced his side of the cell. She wanted to go and put her arms around him.

"I don't understand," grumbled Damon. "Why use a spell if you don't believe in magick?"

She pivoted to face him. "What do you mean, don't believe in magick?"

"The GSA. The one pattern I've seen in my time in their prison is they are trying to destroy everything magick, like wizards, and trying to make super soldiers out of others, like myself."

Krystal dropped to the floor and leaned against the cold stone wall. "You're right, it makes no sense. If they drugged my mother to steal my powers, why not take them away from my brothers too? We're missing something somewhere."

A door slammed in the distance.

"Behind me," he ordered.

"No," she retorted. "You wanted me to use my power. This I can do."

"I'll handle—"

"No, Damon. You have your skills and I have mine. I'm a cop, and I do have some power, even if not much, so give me some credit."

"It's not—"

"Shh," she hushed, a finger to her lips. Footsteps echoed through the prison hall.

Grumbling, Damon retreated to the far wall while Krystal remained by the bars.

Two men stepped past, their white coats put them in as orderlies or other research scientists.

"Hey," she called out as they passed their cell.

They stopped, the dark headed man turning to face her.

"Hey, leave her alone. Doc Carey says he has plans for her."

"I just need something to drink. Please? Even animals get water."

The two men glanced at one another. "Fine," said the blond one. "I'll get you some water. Wait here." He strode off, leaving the first man behind.

Once the door closed, she turned her attention to the man before her. She reached inside, searching for the power she knew resided within her. She grabbed it and pushed it toward the man. "Unlock the door."

The man's eyes widened and he shook his head, but didn't move.

She pictured his hand moving into his pocket and shoved the image toward him. The arm moved, slowly, his hand slipping into the front pocket of his smock, and he pulled out the keys. He fumbled, his eyes still on hers, he slipped the key into the lock and turned it. She heard the click.

"Move, Krystal."

"I'm not finished. We can't have him following us." She wanted to arrest him, but that would just backfire. Not only would she have a prisoner to deal with, she'd have to explain magick to the rest of the world.

She concentrated instead on her newest talent. Unlike when she forced him to use the key, this time she intended to put him to sleep. Instinctively she moved her attention toward his vegas nerve, the same nerve often struck during karate moves. Using the same pressure she'd used on Campbell, she closed the blood flow to the nerve. The reaction was immediate. The man collapsed to the floor. Spock would be proud.

"Did you kill him?"

Krystal frowned at the sound of hope in his voice. "No, I don't kill people."

"Right." With a growl he pushed the door open to their cell. "This way."

He moved to the back of the hallway. "We'll have to be careful. This is how I escaped last time, and if they know, it may be closed off."

She caught up him. He was staring at the ceiling. "You have got to be kidding." The ceiling was high, at least ten feet above the floor. "How are we supposed to get up there?"

He cast a quick glare in her direction, before cupping his hands. "Up you go."

She shot a skeptical look at him, then stepped a foot into his hand. He lifted her with ease, as though she was a mere toy. With her palms, she lifted the ceiling tile and slid it to the side. Damon lifted her higher. Grasping each side of the opening, she pulled herself up and flipped over. Her feet found the iron frame of the ceiling and she scuttled backward, offering Damon room.

But he didn't leap up as she expected. The flash of light filled the passageway, lighting the small tunnel before it faded. An instant later the wolf leapt through the opening, his slate grey eyes meeting hers. Her heart leapt as he moved closer.

Her pulse raced, but she shoved the fear away. Knowing this was Damon made all the difference. At last she understood the deep connection she'd had with the animal since the first day.

He nudged the piece of ceiling tile she had moved. She understood. She dropped the tile back into place, and then she followed the wolf through the crawlspace. Damon. The wolf. This had to be the weirdest thing in history. How many people like him were there? Was he the only one? She wanted to ask him, but if what he said was true, he'd have no idea. If it was the transition causing the memory loss, it was possible he put himself in danger every time he became the wolf.

All she could see in the darkness was the gray tail in front of her. She hoped there were no spiders. She hated spiders. The last time a spider bit her, her entire arm had swelled to twice its size. They crawled through the passage for a few more moments until they came up against what seemed to be an outside wall. Krystal breathed a sigh of relief. No spiders.

They dropped to the floor again, moving toward the outside door. Damon stepped out, checking for a guard.

Go. She heard the word in her head, as clearly as if he'd spoken it aloud.

Oh my God. It's his voice I've been hearing. But she didn't have time to think, and charged across the field into the trees. Damon loped behind her, nipping at her heels as though hurrying her along.

The sound of barking echoed through the trees, and she knew why he wanted her to hurry. Guard dogs. But he didn't know why she was known as the Animal Cop.

Krystal stopped, spinning to face the animals. She ignored Damon's growl of warning.

The Rottweiler rushed forward, teeth bared and snapping. Saliva dripped and foamed with each bark.

Instinct took over. Her mind reached out for his, a gentle feather touch against a mind filled with furious protectiveness. She sent soothing images and emotions toward the animal. In an instant, the barking stopped and his butt wagged, the short stub of a tail bouncing back and forth. She grinned

and dropped to one knee. "Good boy," she whispered. She gave the animal a quick pat. "Come on, let's go." She turned toward Damon. "He's coming with us."

She charged forward. Damon snarled once at the Rottie then turned about and led the way. The three ran through the forest until they reached the Jeep. It was stupid not to realize how close to the GSA Kimball point was when they setup the meet. Then again, she'd had no reason to suspect her brothers' employer of anything nefarious.

When they reached the Jeep she could see the handcuffs still hanging from the roll bar. She turned and glared at Damon. "I take it you had no problems escaping my cuffs?"

He growled again, then leapt into the back of the Jeep. A bright flash of light and he shifted back to human.

Krystal's cheeks turned red and she turned away. She really did not need to see him naked again. A naked Damon was a dangerous Damon in her mind. Making a fool of herself was something she didn't like to do a second time.

Damon grabbed his jeans and shoved a leg inside. "I can't believe they didn't find the Jeep."

She turned and started out into the night. "I agree. Do you think we'll be followed?"

"Only one way to know," he murmured shrugging. "Why'd you bring the mutt?"

"Watch your language. He's sensitive."

"Right. He has no idea what I'm saying."

Her laugh was soft, knowing. "Funny. That's what Ted said about you."

"Really, why did you bring him?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't leave him there. After we got away from him they'd shoot him, or use him for experiments. I couldn't let that happen."

"You're soft," he replied, but he couldn't deny the swelling respect for this woman. She'd taken in what he was in stride, then maintained her composure while they escaped and even brought along a dog to keep it safe.

"I am not," she denied, her cheeks flooding pink.

He pulled on his shirt. With a passing glance at the missing buttons, he jumped into the driver's seat and held his hand out for the keys. He smirked at her glare. "The keys. They're in the glove box."

She hid her face while digging for the keys. An envelope caught his eye in the dark.

"What's that?"

"What?" She shot a look his direction.

He nodded at the envelope. Her fingers closed over it and pulled it out.

"That wasn't there before. Give it here."

With a frown, she handed him both the envelope and the keys. Someone had been in the truck. He sniffed the envelope. "Langston," he said with a snarl. "That traitorous bastard has gone too far now."

"No," she retorted. "He didn't do what he did because he wanted to."

He shot her a look of disgust. "I saw him shoot you with a sedative, then turn that gun on me."

She still shook her head, her eyes wide. And if he wasn't mistaken, there were tears brimming along their edges. "No, Campbell threatened him. I heard him."

With a heavy sigh, he opened the envelope. Inside was a CD. He slid it into the CD player on his Jeep but nothing happened. "Must be a data CD."

"Makes sense." She reached for and popped the Eject button. She took the envelope from him and slid the disc inside. "We'll check it later."

"Probably a virus," he grumbled as he started the engine. Langston was going to be the death of both of them if they weren't careful.

The drug still roared in Damon's system, begging for just a taste of her soft skin. He slammed the Jeep into gear, ignoring the throbbing ache in his groin. He would not touch her. Not now. Not ever.

“Or a hint. Is there anything else in here?”

She peered into the envelope as he pulled the Jeep out of the woods onto the main road. A small slip of paper had slide to the bottom. She emptied the envelope’s contents into her lap. Using the light from the glove box she read the note. “Help me save her, L.”

“Not much of a note.”

“Maybe he was in a hurry.”

“Maybe. And maybe he was setting another trap.”

She put both items back in the envelope and stretched across to take the seatbelt with her left hand, exposing the soft curves of her breasts.

Damn, she was sexy, even doing something as mundane as putting her seat belt on. He managed to hide the rumble of approval inside him in a cough. Not ever, he reminded himself.

She pulled out her cell phone and cursed. “No signal. I guess my brothers wouldn’t have found us after all.”

He grunted his response and pulled onto the main highway.

For most of the trip she was quiet, which helped. All he could think of was pulling off into a deserted section of the woods and having his way with her. The only thing stopping him was the wolf. While he didn’t think he’d mind seeing her as a shewolf, running through the woods, he would rather see her do so in her human form. The image of her running through the trees, naked, her hair flowing behind her was enough to drag a rumble of appreciation from his chest. He would chase her. *Oh yes.* The idea of her pale flesh teasing him as she dodged behind trees, of her womanly scent filling the night air sent a tremor through him. The rumble in his chest was louder this time and she cut him a look.

He grinned but by the widening of her eyes, he must have looked more like he was leering instead of grinning. He tightened his fingers on the wheel.

“We can’t go back to your place, or mine,” he growled. He needed to get his mind off his crotch and onto something productive. “They know who we are, and they know where to find us.”

She nodded. “True. There’s a town up ahead. Let’s stop at the hotel there. I need to call my brothers.”

He jerked his attention toward her. “Why? You think I can’t protect you?”

She scoffed. “I don’t need your protection.” She smoothed her hair back. “I need to talk to my brothers about my mother. I want to know why they’ve kept secrets from me.”

His desire for her must be making him irritable. “Fine,” he snapped. “We’ll call your brothers. But I’m the one protecting you.”

“I told you—”

“And I told you, I’m protecting you. I don’t give a rat’s ass what you think you’re able to do. You can’t smell them coming. I can. The GSA can’t afford to let you live. You know who they are. I’ll be at your side until we find a way to finish them.”

An hour later Damon checked them into a small, clean hotel. The first thing his little hellion did was dig out her cell phone. But it wasn’t her brothers she called. His sensitive ears picked up every word even as he tried not to eavesdrop.

“Denise, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure. Hey, where are you?”

“I got called out of town. I need you to check on Wolfie for me. In fact, why don’t you take him to your place?”

“Are you going to be gone that long?”

“Maybe.” She took a breath. “And if so I want him safe. Someone broke in last night, so don’t be shocked when you see the place. I just don’t want anything to happen to Wolfie in case the perp comes back.”

"Why would he come back? Krystal, are you keeping secrets from me?"

Indecision played in her beautiful violet eyes. Damon hated she had to keep secrets from her closest friend. She didn't deserve this. Her entire life had been turned upside down and it was all because of him. He fought the need to kiss away the worry lines on her forehead and tell her everything would be all right.

"I'll tell you more later, Denise. Just take care of Wolfie for me."

He heard the woman on the other end sigh. *"Of course I will. Just be careful, okay? I know how much you like your job and everything, but I happen to care about you."*

Krystal chuckled into her cell phone. "I'll be careful. You too."

"I'll head right over and get Wolfie now."

"Thanks Denise."

"You're welcome. Just remember, you owe me."

"Gotcha."

She clicked the phone shut.

"She's a good friend, this Denise."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Eavesdropping?"

"The nature of the beast." He grinned when she gave a soft laugh.

"Yes, she's a great friend."

What would it be like to have such a friend? One who stood by you in times of trouble and didn't ask too many questions. Somehow he didn't think he'd ever had someone he could confide in.

He shook his head, staring at the Rottweiler who drank with sloppy zeal from the ice bucket. How far from this animal was he? He couldn't let his thoughts go into such dangerous territory. He wasn't an animal. He wouldn't *be* an animal. "You better call your brothers. And when you do, tell them to bring the tigress."

"What are you talking about?" she'd asked.

"They'll know."

She spoke to the one named Jared on the phone, and he could tell the man wasn't surprised at the demand to "bring the tigress." She snapped her cell phone shut and glared at Damon.

"So are you going to explain that comment?"

He shook his head. "No, I think I'll let them do that."

"It's bad enough my brothers keep secrets. Do you have to do the same?"

He stepped forward, cupping her chin in his palm. "It's not my place to share. But I promise, if they don't tell you tonight, I'll tell you what little I know."

She deserved answers. Her brother's secrets were more likely to get her killed than protect her, which he was sure was their purpose in hiding information. But when her eyes filled with tears, he almost gave in. She'd been through so much since he met her. The wrist injury, Burke escaping her after she'd tried so hard to capture him, her house a complete disaster, and now she'd been kidnapped. And if that wasn't bad enough, she had to let a werewolf help her escape. He shouldn't kiss her, but her tears had nearly ripped him in two. When he touched his lips to hers, his only thought was to make things better.

Her soft mouth trembled beneath his. Inside the wolf reared, instincts alert and hungry. Damon groaned, torn between wanting to take what his body thought was his and wanting to console a woman who's world had been turned upside down. He let his tongue trail along the soft crease of her mouth and when she opened, he moved within. Heat seared between them and her hands lifted to hold his mouth to hers. Tremors ran through his body as he fought the primal urges rushing through his blood. The instinct in him begged him to take her here and now, while his human mind ached for her pain.

He drew back, ending the kiss before he lost control. He dropped a last chaste touch of his lips to her forehead. He wrapped his arms about her, holding her close, ignoring the throbbing ache for more.

"I need to go clean up," he said, dropping his arms.

Her only response was a soft laugh and a nod.

After he extracted himself from her arms, he walked to the bathroom. Her scent wrapped around every part of him, from his body to his heart. He couldn't do anything about what stayed in his heart, but he could do something about what was on him. As much as he hated to, he'd have to wash it away to maintain his control. He would not be the one to cause her pain.

There was no way to explain to her what was happening inside him. Every second he was in her presence was torture. The drug still raged in his system, mixing with his already unnatural desire for this woman. He wished he could remember if any other woman had driven him to this peak of hunger.

On top of everything, if he took her, there was the chance he would destroy her life. He'd asked for the tigress to come so he could ask her. That is if he could bring himself to trust her enough. Trust was a big issue in his life. The only one who held any sway with him was Krystal. Why that was he didn't know. But he knew she'd keep his secrets. Somehow she was special.

Damon turned on the cold water and stepped into the shower. The icy water pelted his heated flesh. He was sure steam rose from his skin but didn't open his eyes to look.

He ignored the pang of disappointment as the water and soap washed away the woman's scent. *Mine*. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't quiet the voice inside his head.

Forcing his thoughts to something he could control, he thought of the tigress. It wasn't like he expected the two of them to get along. Tigers and wolves didn't make for good company, but perhaps her proximity to another human would give him some insight. He'd known Krystal a total of two days. Two days of heaven. Two days of torture.

With a tip of his head and a step forward the water sluiced over his face. Was it possible to die from want? He let his mind wander over the focus of his desire. He could picture her here, in the shower, her small hands washing his chest, caressing farther and farther down until she cupped him, her fingers wrapping around his aching need. His own hands trailed down his chest, following the path he so wanted her to take.

A knock at the door jerked him from his musings.

"Damon, I'm ordering pizza. What do you want on it?"

Pizza. Shit. He hadn't even thought about food. "Anything," he shouted out.

He finished his shower and towed himself dry. He refused to give in to the fantasies building in his mind. He could not, would not touch her. He fisted his hands in determination.

He stuffed his legs back into his jeans before stepping out into the main room. Krystal's eyes scanned his body, widening at the sight of his chest, then moving down. He'd been hard since the moment he'd laid eyes on her, but watching the appreciation and burn of hunger in her eyes sent a surge of blood so hard through him it almost brought him to his knees.

"Krystal," he murmured. Damon cursed the harshness of his voice. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop this sharp hunger building inside him.

The fight grew even more difficult when she walked toward him, her hips swaying. It was like holding out sweet bonbons to a child. And he so enjoyed his sweets. He swallowed the rumble of appreciation just as she reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"We're alone, now, Damon. We don't have to fight it."

Fangs sliced the surface of his gums, hungry for a taste. "No, Krystal. I can't." Damon wrenched himself from her arms.

The pain in her face at his refusal was almost his undoing. He forced himself to stay where he was. "I don't know what it would do to you."

"I know you wouldn't hurt me," she cried.

"No," he shook his head. "I don't. Which is why I can't do this. Krystal, I don't know if what I am is contagious."

Krystal stared at him for long seconds. Contagious? But that was in books. He was a creature of magick, not some strange mix of man and virus. He couldn't be. "No," she whispered. "You aren't going to make me a werewolf."

"How do you know?" Confusion filled his voice.

The pain in his eyes sliced through her heart. He'd been drugged, an aphrodisiac so powerful she'd watched his body tremble with need, yet he'd stayed clear of her. And now, when they were finally alone, she understood.

"Because," she whispered. "I sense the magick in you. Not a virus."

"You can't be sure."

She shook her head. "I can. I can feel it, here." She pressed her fist between her breasts. "Every time you get angry every time you want to change. I didn't know what it was before, but I felt it. If it was a virus, I wouldn't feel the power inside you. You wouldn't be this strong."

"Right," his voice filled with sarcasm. He pulled from her grasp and paced the side of the room, a hand dragging over his short, dark hair. "If I was so strong I wouldn't need you like this."

"You were drugged."

"I wasn't earlier today, was I? Yet I couldn't keep my hands off you."

Krystal smiled, remembering the sensation of his body hard against hers, his mouth taking what he wanted. Oh yes, she remembered.

"See, you make my point," he waved a hand in her direction before dropping it against his side.

A knock at the door interrupted them. "Pizza delivery."

She sighed and turned and grabbing her purse, headed for the door. Damon was there before her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing," he growled, his arm blocking her way.

"Paying for the pizza," she snapped.

"You've just been captured and held against your will. Don't you dare open that door without checking it first."

"No, really? Woe is me, the little sweetness who hasn't a clue." Sarcasm dripped from every word. "I'm a cop, damn it. I know how to deal with people at the door."

She shoved him out of the way and dug in her purse, dragging out not only her wallet, but her badge.

"You don't have a weapon," he growled.

She shot him a quelling look before grabbing the flashlight she'd brought in from his Jeep. She held the handle like her billy club and moved to the door. The knock sounded again. She stood on tip toe and looked through the peep hole. A man stood holding a red heated pizza case in front of him. With a nod to Damon, she swung the door wide to give herself room to move.

The young freckled face teen's eyes widened at the sudden movement and he stepped back. When nobody moved, he ran his eyes over her, then smiled. "Hi, you ordered pizza?"

"Sorry," she murmured. "How much do I owe you?"

"No worries," he drawled. "It'll be fourteen seventy five." He slid the pizza from the case, his eyes more on her than his job. His gaze traced upward, then his face blanched.

She glanced down at herself. Nope. Her clothes hadn't fallen off, and it wasn't like she was brandishing the flashlight at him. Then she heard the soft rumble of a growl from behind her. She shot a look back at Damon.

A dark, angry expression filled eyes, a cruel smile on his lips. The kind of smile that made a woman shiver in fear. Thank heaven it wasn't directed at her. Instead, he glared at the youth.

Krystal elbowed Damon. "Knock it off," she whispered, then handed the boy a twenty dollar bill. "Keep the change. Thanks." She took the pizza and shut the door. "What were you doing? The poor kid nearly peed his pants."

"He shouldn't have looked at you like that."

"Oh, come on," she muttered, tossing the pizza box on the desk in the corner. "Like you didn't do the same things when you were a kid." Still, his jealousy sent a wave of warm and squishy appreciation through her. Crap. Since when had she decided it was okay for a man to be all macho and jealous?

"Not that I remember."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right, I forgot. You have no memory. Its normal, Damon. He's just a kid."

"He's big enough to know what he likes."

She started to say at least she knew he'd take action if given the opportunity, but she thought better of it. No need to stoke the anger already flashing in his liquid silver eyes.

He dragged the pizza box so he could reach it from the chair and dropped to a sit, flicking the television on with the remote.

The Rottweiler ran to sit before Damon, his eyes wide.

"Go away," he grumbled. The dog didn't flex his body, but his tongue did a less than subtle sweep of his lips. Damon ignored him. The same way he ignored Krystal.

Well hell. If Damon was going to do everything he could to avoid her eyes, she'd just take the time to do the one thing she hadn't had the chance to do since they met. Every time she'd tried to take full measure of him, someone interrupted. Knowing he wasn't human was unnerving.

But he looked human. Deliciously human at that. Every time she got a good look at those wide shoulders or that killer smile, her insides threatened to turn all gooey, a concept as foreign as a man who could shift into a wolf at will.

"Damon?"

"Yeah?" he responded, switching the channel on the television again.

"Do you think..." Crap. She didn't even know how to breach the subject.

He put the remote down and turned to her, the news playing in the background. "Do I think what?"

Krystal bit her lip. "Is it possible you could be telepathic as well as this werewolf thing?"

"Werewolf thing?" he repeated.

Damn it. Now she'd offended him.

"I didn't mean it that way," she explained before he could get angry. "Just I don't know what to call it. Somehow you don't fit the picture of what I think of as a werewolf, you know?"

His face hardened, but he nodded. "Why do you ask about telepathy?"

"It's just... Sometimes when you're in wolf form, I keep hearing these words in my head. I didn't realize at first what it was."

He cocked his head, his brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Example?"

Krystal almost laughed at the command. "When you came into the clearing tonight. I specifically heard someone say *Duck*. Was that you?"

A knock sounded at the door. The dog barked.

"Krystal, open up." She recognized the muffled voice right away. Logan.

"Later," said Damon, and she nodded.

But when he moved to get the door, she waved him back with a grin. "Never fear, great protector, it's Logan. Nobody would be stupid enough to try to force their way past him into this room." She pushed the black and tan dog to the side and moved toward the door.

Apparently Damon didn't agree with her assurances, for he moved behind her. She had to push him back just to have enough room to open the door.

"Save me from the men in my life," she grumbled as the door swung open.

All four of her brothers stood on the other side of the door, each dressed all in black, each wearing their trademark trench coats. *Matrix revisited times four, and in living color too.* She shook her head and motioned for them to enter.

The men brushed past her, followed by Cassie. Her feminine and delicate body so out of sorts amid all the testosterone. But she didn't seem to care. In fact, in some ways it seemed as though her sister in law reveled in being the tiny female amid such masculine energy.

Krystal grabbed the Rottweiler by his collar and held him back as Damon stepped forward. "Guys, meet Damon. Damon, these are my brothers. But you've met, haven't you? Well, at least you've met them."

Damon offered his hand.

Logan was the first to take it, his eyes narrowed. "I do remember you. You were there that night..." he let his voice trail off before glancing Krystal's way.

Anger surged before Krystal could clamp it down. "Stop. Right now. All of you."

The men all turned to her in surprise.

"Stop what?" asked Logan, his voice low and controlled.

"Stop trying to protect me. I know exactly what you're talking about. Your secrets are going to get me killed, so knock it off."

Logan arched a brow and turned to the rest of his brothers. "Do you have any idea what she's talking about?"

Their blank looks were more than she could stand. But before she could speak, Damon spoke up.

"I do," his voice rumbled with threat. "And I have a problem with what you've done to her." Drawing himself to his full height he stepped closer to Lance, curling his lip to expose his fangs. "I want to know how you can work for the GSA and endanger your sister."

Krystal fought the shiver of desire at his sudden protective aggression. *Geeze, what the hell is wrong with me?*

"Now wait a minute," Lance argued. "I don't know who you are. I don't think you have a right to tell us what to do with our own sister."

"I'm the wolf who protects your sister." The low rolling growl vibrated through the small hotel room. The room suddenly more crowded than it was seconds before.

Krystal let go of the dog's collar and shoved herself between her younger brother and Damon. Confused, she looked at them both. She wanted to protect Lance, but more, she wanted to protect Damon. The thing was, Damon didn't need protection.

"Lance, back off. Let's get the introductions handled, and if after this conversation is over, you two want to go at it, I wish you luck."

Her brother glared at her, his eyes narrowed to sharp slits. His wife stood behind him, her own eyes wary.

"I know who he is," Cassie said from behind her husband's shoulder.

"Wait, Cassie. Let's do this right. Logan, Lance, Jared, Ross, this is Damon. Damon," Krystal said, motioning toward her brothers. "These are my brothers. And this," she said acknowledging Cassie, "Is my sister in law, Cassie, though I'm not sure why she's here."

"Because I asked for her," Damon growled.

"Oh right. Knock me silly. I guess I missed that little detail." But he hadn't asked for Cassie. He'd asked for the tigress. "I tell you what, everyone first, sit down. Then we'll start from the beginning." Each male took a seat. The dog, now free to his own devices, plopped next to Logan as her older brother commandeered the small chair by the desk. Damon, however, took the couch, grabbing her hand so she was forced to sit beside him. Cassie didn't sit. She stood, instead, by her husband, Lance.

"Isn't this pretty," Krystal finally said. "Let's all take sides."

Her brothers each glanced at one another and frowned.

"Since when are you such a pain in the ass, Krystal?" asked Ross. "I've never seen you like this."

"Like what? Standing up for myself? How about it started when your secrets started putting my life in danger." Ross was right. She'd always been close to her brothers. They'd teased and enjoyed each other's company, but hostility had never been a part of their relationship, but try as she might, she couldn't stop it. The distrust on their faces when they glanced toward Damon sent shockwaves of anger through her as though they'd directed their insults toward her. She folded her arms and waited.

"What secrets?" asked Logan.

"The GSA secrets. How about you start there?"

The brothers looked at one another and Krystal was sure she saw guilt in their eyes. *Good.* She was damned tired of them hiding things from her. When the room remained silent, she continued. "You four work there. For years I wanted to get a job there. Dad and you," she glared at Logan, "blocked me at every turn. I want to know why."

"We told you why. It's because—"

"No, Logan. I know what you told me. Now give me the real reason."

"Because it's dangerous."

"And being a cop isn't? Give me a break. You're hiding something from me. Tonight, Damon and I were taken prisoner by the GSA. I know why they wanted him, but I want to hear your reasons."

Jared bolted to his feet and paced, then turned his back to the far wall and leaned against it, his arms folded, his head lowered, he watched through unusually dark eyes. Ross gasped, though Krystal wasn't sure if it was because of Jared or her words.

Lance and Logan both remained stoic.

"Why was he taken?" Lance asked.

"You tell me, Lance. Why was it he knows all four of you, but you don't remember him?"

"Because he was busy at the time," Ross answered. "Very busy if I remember," he smirked.

Lance's eyes widened, and he glanced toward his brother, then nodded.

"All right," drawled Logan. "The reason we didn't want you working for the GSA is we found there were some illegal activities going on and we didn't want you anywhere near them. We promised Mom we'd watch out for you, and that's what we're doing."

"Bullshit. There's more to it than that."

"No," said Ross. "It's exactly that."

"What kind of illegal activity?"

The men looked at one another and Logan nodded.

"Experiments," said Lance. "They were doing medical experiments without permission."

"And what is their ultimate goal?"

Cassie stiffened, her hand on Lance's shoulder.

"We aren't sure."

"Right." She didn't believe them.

When had she started mistrusting her own brothers? *About the time I woke up to find myself chained in the GSA's basement.* One look at Damon and she knew he didn't believe them either. His mouth tightened and he snarled, not even hiding his fangs.

"Tell me about the tigress," she said, breaking the silence.

Cassie gasped and Lance stood.

"You don't know what you're asking," said Lance.

"Don't I? You weren't the one held in that building tonight, Lance. You weren't the one who overheard them talking about the experiments they did on our mother. You didn't see what they did to Damon. Damon wants to meet this tigress, and I do too."

"No," said Lance.

"What experiments?" demanded Logan at the same time, his hand on the large dog at his side. He didn't look as surprised as she'd expected.

"You answer my questions first," she said, acknowledging Logan's answer. Both Ross and Jared had stiffened at her comments about their mother, but had remained silent. It's about time they realized she knew more than they thought. "I'm tired of being kept in the dark. It's obvious the GSA is hiding things, and you work for them. I want to know what's going on. I told you to bring the tigress. Where is she?"

"Here," said Cassie in a quiet voice, stepping in front of her husband. Lance grabbed her hand to pull her back, but his wife jerked it away. "I'm the tigress."

Krystal wasn't sure what she'd expected, but that sure wasn't it. "You?"

Cassie nodded.

"So the GSA made you into a ... were.. tigress?"

Cassie laughed and shook her head. "Nobody *made* me a were-tigress, Krystal. I was born one."

She felt the fingers on her hand tighten. This was what Damon needed to know. "Born one? So there are true shapeshifters. The GSA didn't experiment with DNA and create you? And it's not a virus?"

Cassie shook her head again. "No, I'm not the result of an experiment, nor a virus. Both of my parents were tiger shifters, though like yours, my mother is dead."

Thank God. Well, not that Cassie's mother was dead. Thank God Damon's condition wasn't contagious. Krystal cut a glance toward him. His entire body was leaning forward, listening to what Cassie had to offer.

"And Damon should know all this. He and I have met, in a way. Though I know him by scent, not by his name. Or his face."

"How?"

Cassie glanced at her husband then back at Krystal. For the first time in her life, Krystal didn't want her brothers interference. Well, maybe not the first time, but the first time where it mattered. As long as they weren't sharing, she'd take the information any way she could get it.

"Like you, I was taken by the GSA. They wanted to run experiments on me—"

"But you just said—"

"Let me finish. Lance and your brothers saved me before they could do any real damage. While I was there, a wolf was in the next cage." She turned her eyes toward Damon. "I recognize your scent. It was you, wasn't it?"

He nodded.

"You saved me, you know. It was you who warned me to not eat the drugged meat. I held off as long as I could. Had I eaten it earlier, I would probably have lost my sanity. Thank you."

"You don't owe him any thanks," said Lance. "It should be the other way around. If he's who you say he is, we saved him."

"He is," said Logan. "I saw him shift and become human. It seems our little sister has found herself a shifter."

Damon moved to stand, but Krystal pushed him back. More than anything she didn't want him to reveal his weakness. Not yet. *Why the hell do I care if he reveals a weakness to my family?* But maybe in this case she didn't trust her brothers. Not until she understood their goals with the GSA.

"And do you have a problem with that, Logan?"

He sat, leaning forward, his forearms resting on his legs. One hand stroked the dog. It was almost as though the animal was his crutch. "Not a bit. I'm just surprised to see you so protective. You have a big, bad male sitting behind you, revving to charge in and save the day, but you've taken over this meeting. It's interesting." He shot a knowing look at Lance. "Reminds me of someone else I know."

Krystal could swear she heard Lance growl. Cassie, however stayed between him and Krystal, as though protecting him in the same way she protected Damon. Her sister in law's body remained stiff, her eyes flashing cat-like. Lance's temper seemed to have rubbed off on his wife.

"My husband has a point. Tell me, wolf," Cassie snarled, "why haven't you come to offer your thanks before now?" Fangs flashed in the woman's mouth and her lip curled.

Power buzzed hot in the air, sizzling from the woman she'd known only as sweet and kind.

In a flash Damon was on his feet, shoving Krystal behind him. Krystal tried to move around him, but he held her back. "You didn't hang around, tigress." The condescension in his voice took Krystal by surprise. "I couldn't give you my thanks. Just like a cat, taking off at the slightest bit of danger."

Cassie hissed and Lance stood. Tension joined the power buzzing in the air between them. Lance pushed her out of the way, and after a slight hesitation, she acquiesced to his lead.

"My wife was drugged, and nearly killed that night. You will show respect."

"And your sister was drugged and nearly killed tonight, yet all you can think about is keeping your secrets. You knew where to find us when you came for the tigress. You had to have known about the experiments."

Krystal tried to push past Damon, but he held her firm, one hand wrapped around her wrist. The contact between them sent sparks through her blood and she struggled to ignore it. None of this made sense. Not Lance's animosity, Cassie's anger, or the energy rolling off Damon in heated waves.

In all her life, no man had stood between her and her brothers. The Fantastic four. For years, her brothers had been determined to push all men out of her life. Yet Damon stood, his lip curled, fangs flashing, glaring down at Lance as though he were a spoiled child.

"Enough!" shouted Jared.

The dog barked and Krystal jumped, shocked to hear that word come from the most easy going brother of the lot.

"Look at yourselves!" he motioned toward Lance and his brothers. "This is our sister, and you're acting like she's broken some unspoken law by asking what's going on behind the scenes. You all know what we learned when we found Cassie. Krystal deserves answers."

Krystal stared, speechless. Jared, the quiet one, the funny one, was shouting at their brothers. Anger rather than laughter shone hot in his dark gaze. He had changed.

The last brother of hers to change was Lance, when he fell in love with Cassie. A tigress. He'd grown angry and temperamental. Just as she had since meeting Damon.

Realization was like a punch to the gut.

No, it couldn't be possible. She'd only known Damon a few days. Hell, not even a full two days, at least in human form. How the hell could she be in love? *Please don't let this be our curse, to become pushy brats when we fall in love.*

Jared glared at all of them, his face edged with danger. "I'm sick of it. All of it. Krystal, sit down somewhere, and even if these idiots won't share, I will."

Lance sighed and glanced at Logan, who nodded. "I'll do it," said Lance.

Krystal pulled her arm from Damon's grip and stepped in front of him, placing her palm on his bare chest. The sudden touch, so soon after her shocking realization, sent a bolt of heat sizzling from his body to hers. Her eyes fluttered closed. Biting her lip, she forced them open, then met Damon's eyes, their hard silver melting to swirling mercury. The tip of a canine showed along the edge of his lip. A shiver ran through her.

And it wasn't a shiver of fear.

She bit her lip and shoved, ignoring the building desire inside her. This He-Man routine of his was much more appealing than she'd ever expected.

As a cop, she stood up for herself.

As a sister, she constantly fought for control of her life.

Yet this instant, with her hand on the bare chest of a man who wasn't even human, she had the strangest urge to just turn everything over to him. *I've lost my mind!*

She gave him a shove, and he sat, pulling her by the arm onto the couch. The instant she touched soft cushion he leaned over to whisper in her ear, his voice ragged.

"If you don't behave, your brothers are going to be in for a sight."

Krystal swallowed at the dark sensual threat. "What are you talking about?"

He inhaled, his eyes swirling with lust. "I can smell your need."

Hot breath feathered across her neck, searing her flesh. His words and touch ignited the already sizzling fuse burning inside her. She bit her lip, then nodded, offering him a weak smile before turning back to her brothers. Cassie shot her a shocked look before her face blanked.

Shit. If Damon could smell her arousal, so could Cassie.

"Are you two through?" asked Lance.

She glared at him before turning her attention back to Jared.

"Krystal, we didn't tell you this because we knew it would hurt. You were out of town when we met Cassie. When we went in to rescue her, we found some medical records. They belonged to Mom." He swallowed, his face pale, his eyes haunted. "It seems the GSA was conducting an experiment on her. We couldn't determine what kind of experiment, but it's what gave her cancer. When we thought they were giving her chemo treatments, they were instead continuing with their research. It's what killed her."

Silence filled the small hotel suite. Krystal digested the pain in her brother's words. Digested the pain in her own heart. Tears stung her eyes. All semblance of arousal seeped from her cells replaced with searing pain. They'd killed her mother. Her hand trembled and Damon gave it a squeeze, but she didn't look at him. She couldn't. Because the instant she looked into his sympathetic eyes she'd lose all control. "Is that all?" she said at last. "About Mom, I mean."

Her brothers looked at one another in surprise.

"Yes. We suspected illegal activity, but not about the experiments until then," Ross replied.

Krystal stood, her feet itching to move. Her body hungering to take action. She folded her arms, barring the pain. Somehow her actions didn't help and the tears coursed down her cheeks. "There's more," she whispered.

"Tell us," said Ross.

She met each of their eyes. So much alike. So much like Mom's. Green, with a fleck of gold in each. She closed her own violet ones. She looked like Dad. Hell, maybe the drug they'd given her had changed her eye color. A warm hand touched her and she looked up to see Damon standing beside her, offering his support. She nodded and took a breath then turned to face her waiting siblings.

"The experiments on Mom started a lot sooner than you thought." She met Logan's gaze, needing his stoic nature to get the words out. "They started when she was pregnant. With me."

Logan's eyes darkened with anger, but he held true to course. The only outward sign of anger the tightening in his jaw. Lance sucked in a sharp breath, while Ross leapt up to pace, his hands scrubbing his handsome face. But Jared exploded, his fist slamming into the wall.

The need to go to him, to ease his pain, overwhelmed almost everything inside her, but she had to get this out now, or she never would. "For that matter, I don't even have proof it started with me. I just know what I overheard tonight. While I was chained to the wall, and they thought I was unconscious still, the doctor mentioned how he'd injected Mom with an inhibitor just weeks after she found out she was pregnant with me." Krystal bit back a sob in her throat. It wasn't the damage to her that hurt. It was the damage to her mother. "It's why my powers are so weak."

"Were weak," Damon said. He pulled her back against him.

She nodded her agreement. "They also did the same to Lance," she turned to meet her younger brother's eyes. "But they did it later, just before your birth." She closed her eyes, addressing all of

them now. "They were convinced it's why he wasn't as strong as the rest of you, but why he didn't test as weak as I did."

Jared leaned against the wall, his hands over his face. He slid down till he sat on the floor. "No," he whispered.

"How could Dad not have known this all along?" demanded Ross, his pacing steps now long and fast. He motioned with one hand in the air. "He worked for these bastards, and he said he didn't even notice a problem until a few years back. How could he be so blind?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

She watched each of her brothers take in her words. Logan alone seemed stoic. Tears ran down Ross's face. Tears mirror images of her own. She pulled from Damon's arms and grabbed Ross, wrapping her arms around him. He buried his face in her hair. His body shook with rage and pain. Pain she knew she couldn't take away. He gripped her tight, until Jared pulled her away.

"I'm sorry, Krystal. We should have told you, long ago." He looked accusingly at his two older brothers. "Hell, we should have come clean to both of you. Even Lance had no idea until he met Cassie. But none of us suspected this." Jared folded her into his arms, his grip tight.

A whisper of sound told her the family was doing what it did best, coming together as one. Fighting, loving, crying. It's what they did best. In turn, each brother hugged her, until they were one large lump of Maxey's.

From across the room, Damon watched, ignoring the pang of emptiness in his chest. The heartbreak he watched didn't dull the pain in his own chest. As much as he wanted to take away every drop of sorrow from Krystal's heart, he also wanted something else. Something she had, that he did not. A family.

"You want to join them," said the tigress, standing beside him.

He appraised her with a sidelong look. She thought he was jealous. He was, in a way, but not like she thought. He let his eyes trail over the woman he knew before tonight only by scent. She was pretty. Short, like Krystal. But her hair was blonde, mixed with honey gold, draping to her waist. Her skin was fair, and her eyes were almost the color of the sun. She may make a pretty human, but she smelled like a cat. He bit back the natural instinct to give chase.

"It's not my place," he said. "But why don't you join in?"

She shrugged. "I'm no wolf, like you. We cats are more private with our affections." She watched the family, her eyes focused on her mate. "Lance knows when he gets home, it's my arms who will take away the grief. It's what gives him the strength to hold his sister now without breaking down."

Damon nodded. A silent strength surged between the couple when their eyes met. Any fool could see it. That too was something he knew he wanted. A mate who could stand at his side. His eyes turned back to Krystal. A strong, beautiful woman. She wasn't a shapeshifter like he was, but hell, until tonight he'd thought he was nothing more than a virus.

"But where is your pack, lupine?"

He jolted at the interruption. "Don't have one." He knew what she was thinking. Wolves weren't meant to be alone. Yet there was nothing in his apartment that he saw to tell him he had anyone. There was no one who could take away his pain, and even more important, there was no one for him to comfort either. His fists clenched. Was that one more thing the GSA had stolen?

"I don't understand," she said.

Damon turned his head to look into her eyes. "What don't you understand?"

"You're a wolf. You must have a pack."

He shrugged. "I'm a lone wolf." A sob from Krystal brought him to full attention. Every muscle in his body screamed to touch her, to ease the grief and pain he saw in the way she held herself, despite her brothers' arms wrapped around her.

"Not for long," Cassie observed.

"You forecast the future too, felidae?" He used the family name for the species of cat, the only way he knew how to insult without making it too obvious. Cats. He knew some canines got along with them, but even her scent irritated him.

"My name is Maxey now, not Felidae. I took his name when I married him, just as those in your culture."

Confusion warped Damon's thoughts. What the hell was she talking about? His eyes widened when he got it. "You mean, your name was actually Felidae?"

Her laughter was soft and he knew she didn't want to alert the Maxey's that she was enjoying the visit with their discomfort so close to the surface. "Yes, lupine. My last name was Felidae. What is yours?"

"Connell," he muttered.

"Shame. I was so hoping it was something like Lupus." She chuckled. "And no, I don't forecast the future. Don't need to when I can smell her all over you, just as I smell you on her."

"But I—"

"A shower can't hide the truth from me, wolf. I may not have the skills of my friend, Lin, but I'd bet when the two of you are together, your aura's blend together as one, the way your scents already have."

Before he could ask what she meant by that, Krystal left the comfort of her brother's arms and crossed to him. In her eyes he read a need he hadn't seen before. Not sexual, though the smell of her hunger still flitted through the air, which was probably what the cat picked up. No, she had something deeper in her eyes. A need for affection. Just like a shewolf.

When she reached him he pulled her into his arms, holding her the way her brothers had. All around them, her family spoke in soft whispers. For the moment he didn't care. All that mattered was the soft, delicate female in his arms. It amused him how her brothers found her aggression unexpected. He liked it. She was an alpha female to her core. How or why she'd hidden that from them before now was beyond him.

Her hair tickled his nose and he smoothed the soft strands into place. In response, she burrowed even tighter against him. God, she felt good. Right. Even as he comforted her, the heat from her body melted into his, easing that loneliness he'd sensed before.

Resting his chin on her head he watched the men in the room.

Her family was so like a pack it was disturbing. There was a definite pack order. Ross was at the bottom. No doubt about it. While he was no slouch when it came to intelligence, the man held a certain softness the others didn't have. No, softness wasn't the word. Quiet confidence perhaps. He didn't seem to feel the need to vie for position like the others.

Then came Jared. Quiet, dark, moody. Something bothered Jared and it set Damon on edge. Even now he whispered harshly to his brothers, his eyes flashing in anger. He didn't remember the man being so edgy when he'd seen them weeks ago. Of course, Jared had been wiped out by his use of magick. Damon still remembered his own shock when the man shifted into the shape of another man, helping to save all their lives. It was a useful power to have, since Damon was limited to just his animal self. But a costly one as well. The man was useless during most of the rescue mission, weakened.

Then there was Lance and Logan. At first glance it appeared Lance was the alpha in the family. Confident, masculine and definitely self assured, he radiated power the same way the cat did. Maybe because they were mates. But he didn't miss the subtle glances between the two brothers.

No if's and's or but's. Logan was the pack leader. Quiet, assuring, and definitely the most dominant of the four. He could quell any of the brothers with a single look. A formidable opponent indeed.

Like any good Alpha, he didn't show his emotions when he'd heard Krystal's story. His face had paled, his jaw had hardened, but to the untrained eye he still looked the epitome of control. There

were no outbursts from this man. No tears or voiced words of frustration. But there also was no acceptance. Logan glanced in his direction as though he felt Damon's scrutiny.

Power rested in those eyes.

As did a need for vengeance.

The man stroked the dog, seemingly unaware of his actions.

"We need a plan," voiced Lance.

Krystal pulled from Damon's arms and wiped her eyes. Tears he ached to kiss away. He tipped her face to his and she gave him a watery smile before stepping back.

"We have a plan," she announced.

We do? He didn't voice the words, for her sake, but he knew of no plan.

Krystal moved to her bag and pulled out the disk. "Did you bring the computer I asked for?"

Oh, that plan.

Lance nodded and picked up the case he'd set by the bed when they came in. "Here, but be careful."

Krystal arched a brow in his direction. "Why?"

Lance nodded toward the disk. "We did this already, took a disk from GSA offices. It worked great for the first time you looked at the files, but the second time, a virus ate everything on the hard drive."

"Understood," she said, powering up the computer. "This came from a friend of Damon's."

"He's not my friend, at least not anymore."

"He owes you, Damon. You said so yourself. You saved his life."

"He shot you."

"Under duress."

"What the hell are you two talking about," asked Logan before they could continue.

Damon hid his frown. Krystal's brother or not, he didn't like to be interrupted.

"His name is Jesse Langston," he said, hiding the growl of frustration burgeoning in his chest. "I saved his life in Iraq. But that's not important. The man shot her with the sedative. He is not to be trusted."

"He was under duress. Campbell threatened him if he didn't."

"Campbell was as good as dead the instant you looked at him. One more second and I have no doubt you could have killed him."

She shrugged. "Jesse didn't know that. He just knew Campbell threatened whoever *she* is in this note."

"Let me see that," said Cassie, snatching the note from Damon's hand.

Damon's fangs locked into place and he flashed her a snarl.

"Back off pup."

He growled again.

She sniffed the note in question. "Lots of stress from the man who wrote this. He was terrified. I'd agree with Krystal."

Krystal fought the urge to laugh. Her big, bad, wolf looked stunned, as though he hadn't thought to do the same. Instead, she booted up the laptop computer.

"So he was afraid," grumbled Damon. "That doesn't mean anything."

"It means," said Logan, frowning, "That Krystal is right. There's more to it than him just being ordered to shoot her. I'm with you," he said, looking at Damon. "If he hurt Krystal, we can't trust him. But we can at least look at what he gave you."

Krystal hid a smile behind her curtain of hair. Logan had accepted Damon. She wasn't sure how she knew, or even why he did it, but he'd gone out of his way to acknowledge Damon's concerns. Something *she* hadn't even done.

"Agreed," mumbled Damon.

Lance read the note in his mate's hand. "He says *Help me save her*. Who is this her?"

"I don't know," said Damon.

"He's your friend," Lance pointed out.

Krystal felt, no, she smelled Damon's embarrassment. He didn't know if he knew the woman or not. Now that was just strange. In all her work as a cop, she'd never noticed a change in scents to match mood before. *I must really be in tune with him*. "Like you would tell someone about Cassie's being a tigress?" she interjected, glaring at her younger brother's challenge. "You didn't tell your own sister. Chances are, this guy hasn't shared much about this woman with anyone."

Lance scowled at her, but let it go.

"I think it's time we leave," said Cassie, taking her husband's arm.

"But—"

"I agree," said Ross.

"We aren't needed here," continued Cassie. "There's not a damned thing we can do tonight. Krystal's a big girl and can call her brothers tomorrow morning when she gets up and tells us what she finds on the disc." She turned to Krystal. "But do be careful. You may want to write down anything you find important in case the file disappears."

Krystal nodded, smiling. "Don't worry, we'll give you a call in the morning."

"I think Cassie's right," said Logan, standing. "But if I hear of anything happening to my sister while she's under your protection—"

"Logan," sputtered Krystal, "Knock it off."

Her brother glared at her, but she wasn't about to back down. "I'm a cop. He's a wolf. I think we'll be just fine."

"Like you were earlier?"

Krystal felt the flush of heat seep up her neck and into her face. "That was my fault, not Damon's. I went in without backup."

"I thought he was your back up," Jared shot back at her.

Maybe if she tried hard enough she could make the ground open up and swallow her. She glanced at Damon.

"I was indisposed at the time," said the wolf, his eyes flashing with amusement. "Krystal thought you would get her text message requesting backup. She had no idea her cell phone wouldn't work."

Her brothers glanced at one another again.

"You're right, it won't work out there," said Logan. "I'll fix that. Give it to me."

"Why?" asked Krystal.

"I'll take it back to my place and make a few adjustments so it'll work near the GSA building. There's a dampening field on the building, but with a certain chip added to your phone, you'll be able to get through."

She shook her head. "No, not tonight. Tomorrow you can do what you want with it. I might need it tonight."

Logan pursed his lips, but nodded. "Fine." He stood to leave.

"Take him with you," said Krystal, motioning toward the dog now steady at Logan's side.

Logan's brows raised in surprise. "Why?"

She shrugged. "He doesn't have a home and he wants to be with you. He likes you." The dog stood and wagged his rear as though he understood her every word. He trotted over to stand beside her.

Her eldest brother let out a disgusted sigh. "You mean you brought home another stray? Krystal, how many times —"

"He's not a stray. He's..." she glanced at Damon and grinned. "A guard dog that saved us. If they found out he'd be killed."

"No you didn't!" exclaimed Ross a half grin on his face. "Oh man. Krystal, you have to be kidding me. You stole the GSA's guard dog?"

She shrugged, stroking the dog's ears. "No. I just kept them from killing him. Come on, Logan. You haven't got anyone. And he likes you. Look."

The dog trotted to Logan, his soft brown eyes staring with worshipful abandon. Krystal laughed when Logan tried to give a stern look at the animal, failing miserably. Of all her brothers, he was one of the few who seemed to have her penchant for animals. Dogs. Cats. It didn't matter. He loved them all.

She knew she'd won when Logan let out a long sigh.

"All right. I'll take him to my place. But just for now."

"Just for now," Ross mimicked Logan. His body shaking with laughter, he hugged Krystal. "You be careful, little sister."

Krystal barely had a chance to escape Ross when Jared grabbed her in a huge bear hug. "Don't you mess with the GSA, Krystal," he whispered in her ear.

"I'll be fine," she murmured.

"Are you sure you want to be alone," asked Lance in a whisper as his arms squeezed her.

"I'm fine, Lance. Don't worry."

"You know what he is, right? You understand."

She couldn't stifle her laughter. "Oh, Lance, I know what he is, don't you worry."

He grunted his response and released her. When Logan took his turn he whispered as well. "Krystal, if he hurts you, I swear to God I'll kill him."

He pulled away from her then stared at Damon.

Damon put out his hand. "Don't worry about Krystal. I'll make sure she's kept safe."

Logan took his hand, his head cocked to one side.

Krystal held her breath. This was it. The moment where every date she'd ever been on ended in disaster. The moment Logan scared the crap out of them. Interfering would just backfire. The last time she'd tried that it ended up in a huge fight between her and her date, so this time she bit down until her teeth gouged the inside of her cheek to remind herself to keep quiet.

Damon and Logan stared at one another. Damon reached out his hand to shake and Logan responded, with a hard grip. Their muscles tightened, the knuckles whitening. Tension built between them, an aura of menacing power rippled in the room. Like two animals in the wild, they measured one another, searching for weaknesses. For long seconds, neither flinched.

Lance, Ross, and Jared watched, their eyes narrowed. Cassie rolled her eyes.

At long last, Logan gave Damon's hand a firm shake, then released it. "Just remember what I said. I meant it."

Damon flashed a calculated smile. "I know you did. As did I. She's safe with me."

Logan nodded then turned to Krystal. "Call me first thing in the morning. If you don't, I'll be knocking at the door." He turned. He gave a sharp whistle and the dog gave a quick glance at Krystal before charging after his new owner.

Krystal swallowed the giddy laugh rising in her throat, and nodded, unable to speak. *Oh my God.* He approved. For the first time! Now if only Damon didn't run out the door the moment they left.

Her brothers filed out the door behind Cassie, each meeting Damon's eyes one last time.

Burke twirled the drink through his fingers in the darkened corner of the broken down bar. This was the first time the Mistress had sent him to meet with a total stranger. He'd thought about ignoring the command, but decided, for now, it wasn't the most viable option. Playing his hand too early wouldn't do him any good. Soon he would make his move and the hyena pack wouldn't be matriarchal anymore. Hyenas in the wild might have female leaders, but there was no reason the shifters had to follow suit. He would be a better leader than she on his worst day.

Music blared from the small juke box clustered in the smoke filled corner beneath an ancient bear head. It wouldn't be so cheesy, except there were no bears in the woods surrounding the antique backwoods club.

The door complained with a loud squeal as it swung open and a man stepped through. Burke knew in an instant it was his contact. The man didn't belong. It wasn't just the short blond hair that made the man stand out. Or the quick way he used a finger to push his glasses back like a nervous habit. It was the white button up shirt and the gray cotton work pants that didn't quite fit. His face was as soft and telling as his clothes.

The man's eyes traveled over the room until settling on Burke. With a sauntering walk, as though trying to fit in, he took the stool beside Peter.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender.

The man sniffed, as though he found everything surrounding him distasteful. Light blue eyes scanned the bartender and the dirty towel thrown over his shoulder. "Nothing," he said with a squeak.

"No drink, no seat," growled the man behind the bar, pointing to a sign behind him announcing the same.

The blond man grimaced. "Fine. A cola. In a clean glass."

The bartender curled his lip before grabbing a glass from behind the counter. He snatched the filthy rag and polished the glass before pouring in a coke and setting it on the counter. "That'll be two dollars."

The blond tossed two bills on the bar and then pushed the drink away. When the bartender arched his brows, he said "You didn't say I had to drink it, just buy it."

Another couple dropped onto the bar stools at the other end of the counter, and the barkeep gave one last disgusted glare before heading in their direction.

"Smart one, you are," said Peter. "Good way to get your head taken off."

The man shrugged. "I'm only here to pass a message."

"Then pass it already," rumbled Burke. The faster he could get away from this man, the better the chance he'd survive this place. As an animal he was one of the most dangerous predators on the planet, but in his human form he was slight, even in comparison to blondie and he had no intention of battling his way out of here because the man was an idiot.

"The girl, Krystal Maxey."

"Yeah, what about her?"

Blondie glanced over his shoulder, apparently scanning to see if there were any big ears around. There weren't. Peter could have told him that. But the asshole was too busy thinking he was bigger than he was.

"My boss wants her. You're to bring her to this address," he said, tossing a small piece of paper to him. "Unhurt."

Burke slid the slip of paper off the counter and into his pocket. He didn't need to look at the address. Not yet, anyway. There was plenty of time for that. He fought the grin struggling to take hold of his lips. There was his own revenge to consider before he dumped the girl off with them. She wouldn't be hurt. Much. A few bruises here and there could be mistaken for defensive damage from when they grabbed her.

"Fine. That's all?"

"That's all."

Burke stood up and slapped his ball cap on his head. "I'm out of here, then."

"Don't you want to know how you'll be paid?"

Burke hesitated. He did, but knew the Mistress had already made the arrangements. If he tried to step on her turf, he'd pay for it, big time. One day he'd make his move against her, but today wasn't it.

Chapter 10

Krystal closed the hotel door and rested her forehead against the hard, cool, wood. Her emotions in the last twenty four hours had gone from confident to aroused, to terrified then angry and now to unsure. Her muscles ached from the rapid emotional roller coaster.

She sensed, more than felt, Damon step behind and lean close to her.

"Are you okay?" His warm breath feathered across her cheek, teasing her flesh.

She nodded. Need burned, like molten lava, sliding low and hot. It settled inside her, liquefying muscles, teasing her senses. She swallowed. Hard. Damon's presence wreaked havoc on her hormones. Something about him ripped away any vestige of the cop she was before they met, leaving her a muddled mess of feminine hunger.

She inhaled, struggling to force air into her lungs, but all she smelled was him. Wild, spicy man, filled with the heat of passion. She bit her lip to halt the moan of appreciation. This wasn't like her, to want a man so much. She turned and ran square into a powerful wall of muscle. What little breath she held in her lungs shot out and her chest tightened. She stared, caught in the swirling heat of those mercurial eyes. His gaze made her feel feminine. Almost delicate.

He's not human.

The thought sent a shiver through her spine. Not a shiver of fear, but of want. His eyes darkened, changing to the same burnt amber shade she'd seen before. Like fire, they burned hot, and she could almost see the flames seething beneath the surface.

She could still see the image of him in that cell, first as the brown wolf then transforming in the midst of bright light into a man. Naked. He'd stalked toward her. His eyes had glowed amber then too, but she'd thought it was from the magick of his transformation. They'd also been filled with something else.

Hunger.

Krystal swallowed.

It wasn't his being a shifter which frightened her. It was herself. Because everything inside her screamed to touch him. To feel his hard muscles beneath her palm. To feel the brush of the shadow of a rough beard forming since they'd departed this morning. Inside her magick sizzled, aching to add its own caress to his hard flesh.

His hand touched her arm and she jumped.

"Shhh," he murmured. He lowered his head, nuzzling behind her ear. It felt so damned good. "You know I wouldn't hurt you."

"I'm not afraid," she murmured.

"You forget, I can smell your desire." He gave a soft chuckle. "And your fear." He caressed both of her arms, with soft, gentle strokes. "I'm not what you thought. Hell, I'm not even what I thought."

Each stroke sent flashes of desire through her body. "It's not you I'm afraid of."

He pulled her closer, his breath like a feathering touch along the flesh of her neck as he nuzzled her throat. "Then what scares you?"

"Me," she gasped.

Damon pulled back, surprise etched in every muscle of his face. "You?"

Krystal nodded and pulled away, pushing past him.

"You don't understand. All my life my brothers have stepped in and made decisions for me, whether I liked it or not. I'm not quite used to their approval. What if I'm..." She couldn't say it.

"What if you're making a mistake?"

Something flashed in his eyes and Krystal was afraid she'd hurt him, but she wasn't about to lie to him. "What if what I'm feeling isn't real? Damon, I've never felt like this. I'm out of control."

"Control? You think you're supposed to be in control?" he scoffed.

"And you're not? Damon, you're the most in control man I've ever met."

"Let's get one thing straight," he growled. He gripped her by her hair and tilted her head back to meet his eyes. "I'm not a man. I'm a wolf. And a male wolf chooses his mate based on prowess and strength." For an instant he bared his fangs, but then his eyes softened and his lips curved into a smile. He nuzzled her cheek, his soft rumble of approval weakening her already fragile resolve to hold back.

"How the hell do you know?" she countered, fighting to ignore the hunger building inside her. God, what was happening to her? She was a cop, damn it. She knew all about self control. She knew about hiding her magick and holding it inside, but right this moment it burned to escape. "I know." He murmured. He released her hair, soothing it with his hand as he wrapped his arm around her. He drew her tight against his body, pressing her belly against his hardness. "You only *think* you don't like being out of control." He curled his lip and his sharpened canines flashed in the night. "I'll make you revel in it."

A shudder ran through her body. Her magick pushed, fighting to reach out and touch this man. What would happen if she did give in? Oh, God, what if she hurt him? Her breath froze. "We have to stop this, Damon. We don't know what will happen. I might hurt you."

His answering growl vibrated against her body and she fought the desire to rumble in return. She tipped her head back in response.

"You can't hurt me, just as I am unable to hurt you." He nipped her throat and gave a soft chuckle when her knees buckled. "Damn, Krystal," he said, his voice so gruff she could hardly make out the words. "No woman has made me feel like you do."

"Again," she demanded, fighting for the last remnants of control, "How the hell do you know? Damon you can't remember what happened six months ago, how can you say something like that?"

He didn't pull away like she expected. Instead he lowered his head until they shared the same air. The same heat. The same hunger. "Trust me. I could never forget someone like you," he murmured.

The first touch of his mouth was gentle, searching. And it felt so damned good. Krystal sighed in pleasure and he took the opportunity to press deeper, his tongue meeting hers. Like hot melted chocolate, the decadence of his kiss eroded her willpower, melting it beneath his heat. Like a drug it seeped into her cells, sparking the last untouched parts of her psyche. Her body tingled, awakening something she couldn't begin to understand. The power of her magick burned as hot as the hunger for his touch.

He devoured her, but she met him, stroke for stroke.

One rough hand caressed her neck, stroking her skin, while the other held her tight against his body, his fingers gripping the muscles in her butt. The magick inside her sizzled, hungry to reach out and touch. No man had drawn her power so close to the surface. Yet it was there, in her hands, itching to pour over his body, to tease and taunt him. She would not. She couldn't. It wasn't right.

Her hands gripped his shirt in an effort to control herself, her fingers trembling with the need to release the energy building inside her. She should stop this. He thought she should let go, forget about being in control, but she knew she couldn't simply do it. Yet the magick inside of him reached out to her on a cellular level, calling to hers, while his touch seared her all the way to her soul.

Her breath came in ragged gasps and the room seemed to spin about them.

His hand slid to the back of her head, fisting in her hair so he could angle her head to his liking. The resulting sound, the tiny whimper of need couldn't be stopped, no matter how she tried. The sound rasped from her throat like a match flaring to life.

Damon's lips curved into a soft smile against her mouth and he took a step forward, backing her across the floor.

Oh shit. She was going to do this. She was going to ignore every common sense thought in her head. Every part of her body screamed for him, and with every brush of his fingers and every touch of his oh so hot mouth her resolve weakened. Her legs hit the bed and even if she'd wanted to, she couldn't bring herself to let go of the male beneath her palms. Dropping to the mattress she tried to pull him down with her. He dropped toward her, but rather than collapsing, he braced his arms on either side of her, his arms stiff.

He pulled his lips away and she didn't even try to hide the whimper of disappointment.

"Mine," he whispered.

He straightened and stepped back, his heated gaze caressing her like hot flames. "Take off your clothes."

The husky demand sent a shiver down her spine, but that didn't mean she'd obey. She may be ready to give into her body's cravings, but she wasn't about to let him take over. She arched a brow and offered him what she hoped was her best sensual smile. "Just like that? Take off my clothes?" Was that really her voice? Shit, it sounded as much like a growl as his did.

"Do it," he ordered. "I want to watch."

Krystal thought about balking, but hell, the idea of his eyes hot on her was as much of a turn on as his touch. Ignoring the heated flush of embarrassment on her cheeks, she unbuttoned her blouse, one button at a time, her fingers trembling with each tiny motion.

A glance at Damon sent a wave of heat surging through her blood. Fangs rested against his lips, unashamedly curling in a hungry snarl. His hot molten silver gaze raked over her until he met her eyes, before sliding again to eye the exposed curves of her breast.

"Take it off," he said. He fisted his fingers, his muscles tight, as though fighting the urge to spring forward to rip off her clothes himself.

Her lips curved into a smile, enjoying the sudden sense of power. This was a first. Always before she was more an object than woman to the men she'd dated. This time it would be different. The look in Damon's eyes, the way he held his body, it all said the same thing. He wanted her. Not another woman. Not any woman. Her.

With a soft, sensual shrug, she let the blouse slip down her arms, and then to the floor. For an instant she was glad she'd worn her pretty lace bra when she'd changed earlier. Yet there was no need to worry. The sudden intake of his breath sent a wave of desire through her, nearly bringing her to her knees. Her magick trembled beneath her skin, itching to be released, hungry to touch that masculine body and tease it into submission.

A rumble escaped her own throat at the thought.

"More." Damon's voice was half man, half wolf, rolling in the air between them.

Krystal licked her dry lips. "You first."

"What?" he asked, as though surprised she'd spoken.

"I said, you first. Take off your pants."

Grinning, he fumbled with the waist of his pants, finally able to open the fly. He stepped out of them and kicked them to the side. He stood in front of her now, nude. The dim light played over hard, powerful muscles, accenting every plane and curve of his body. The proof of his desire stood unashamedly, as though waiting for her touch.

"Commando," she said, amusement filling her voice. "I like."

"Your turn," he ordered.

She followed suit, unsnapping her jeans and sliding the denim over her hips. Her fingers trembled from the mix of arousal and magick, overpowering the last of her fear and nerves.

Krystal couldn't believe the desire running through her blood. Kicking her jeans to the side she stood upright, facing Damon. Instincts she didn't understand sent shudders of hunger through her body, while images and ideas flitted through her mind.

Unable to fight the inevitable, Krystal lifted a leg, propping it on the mattress and removed the empty holster for her throwaway gun she'd lost earlier in the night.

When she straightened, Damon watched her every move. The hard edges of his face were shadowed in the darkness but the glittering mercury of his eyes felt like a hot caress on her bare flesh. Krystal let her eyes run over his body, admiring the sharp definition of muscles along his chest and rib cage. *Delicious*. She ran her tongue across her lips, hungry for his taste.

The scent of hungry male filtered through her senses. Hot. Sexy. Filled with testosterone. Something inside her changed, as though a switch had been flipped. A switch she didn't know existed. A low rumble traveled up her spine. Instincts she didn't understand shoved to the forefront, struggling for control. Her eyes narrowed, and she tipped her head back, gazing at him through half closed lids. She sent him a soft, sensual smile.

Damon responded, a sound so like the growl of a hungry wolf. It slid through her body, building the unexpected instincts inside her. Feminine power rose inside her, demanding she take the control she wanted and needed. Ignoring half of the mixed signals her brain sent, she concentrated only on the new. The hungry.

"Don't move," She moved catlike, strolling toward him. His eyes widened, and he gave a jerk of his head to acknowledge her command. Her hips rolled with each step, teasing him. Taunting him. The closer she drew, the stronger the wild and hungry scent.

He stood, rock solid. Only his eyes moved. And his hands. She watched him curl his fingers into tight fists. The whites of his knuckles stood out as he fought to control his own desire.

"You said you wanted to watch," she purred.

"Krystal," gasped Damon, his voice hoarse.

"Hmm?" Her voice sounded distracted even to her own ears. The sensual hunger blended with an unknown need building inside. The need controlled her every thought, her every movement. She traced a finger across his chest as she continued her prowl, stepping behind him, studying every masculine edge. Inhaling every masculine scent.

Krystal inhaled deeply, letting his essence fill her lungs, her eyes fluttered in appreciation of his luscious, hungry perfume. *God, he smelled good. So damned good*. She couldn't get enough. She leaned in, her arms circling his waist, the tip of her nose touching his back. She inhaled. Deep. The fire in her body burned almost out of control. The need to do something more seared her mind. But what? She was in uncharted territory.

Before she could stop it, energy surged from her fingertips, sending sparks along his body. Krystal wanted to jerk her hand away but the new instincts refused to allow it. She held her breath, fascinated as his muscles twitched beneath her touch.

Damon tipped his head back, his eyes closed. A soft moan escaped his lips.

Oh yes, this was what she needed. The control of bringing a man to the brink of his own control. A soft feminine laugh curled up her throat, drowned out by the rough rumble of Damon's appreciative growl.

When she slid to his side, ready to continue her sensual examination, Damon grabbed her wrist and pulled her around to face him. "No more games," he murmured. His mouth crashed onto hers, devouring, forcing his way inside, taking what he had lost patience for her to give. What before had been gentle worship was now filled with hunger as his teeth scraped her lips, demanding she open to him.

Krystal's body trembled beneath the onslaught. There was no refusing him. Hell, who would even think of refusing him at this stage? She opened and he dived inside, his tongue controlling every taste. Yes. She shouldn't be so excited, but the new instincts rushing in her blood sang in her veins in appreciation of his aggressive kiss. A sound echoed from her throat. A tiny sound of surrender, almost silent beneath their ragged breathing.

His large hand closed over her butt, dragging her against his body. So she pressed closer, her hand gripping the back of his head. Her skin was too hot, too filled with magick, making her dizzy with desire. All need to tease dissolved beneath the onslaught of sensation. All that remained was pure unadulterated lust. She growled, their tongues caressing and tasting. Dueling. Neither gave an inch. Until his hand teased her breast through the lace of her bra.

Heat ripped through her and she moaned, pressing herself against him, begging for more than just a tease. The low masculine laugh was like throwing fuel in an open flame.

"Please," she begged under his lips. For what, she wasn't sure, but she had to say the word. Her legs hit the bed and she hadn't even realized Damon had backed her into it again. She didn't care.

"Please what?" But he didn't wait for an answer. He lifted her, cradling her in his arms. After leaning down, with a quick kiss, he dropped her the last few inches to the bed. She fell to her back, her legs splaying, her body ready for him. He stopped and studied her.

Krystal felt the heat of a blush burning over her entire body. "Don't just sit there and stare." She gave him a smile and crooked a finger, urging him to join her. She hated to be embarrassed, yet the molten heat of his eyes almost made her forget how few clothes she wore. Then there was the need to feel him press his body against hers.

Yet still he waited, torturing her, with a crooked, masculine curve to his lips.

His eyes lifted to meet hers and she gasped. They glowed amber, filled with the power of his wolf. He smiled a predatory smile, the tips of his fangs edging out of swollen, sensual lips. "Afraid now?"

She swallowed. "No fear," she said. And she meant it. The sight of his magick, coupled with the sharp edges of his fangs only sent a shiver of deep hunger and appreciation through her. "I'm tired of waiting. Don't just sit there, do something."

He laughed, that low, wolfish laugh that edged into a growl. "Oh, baby. Don't you worry." He hooked his thumbs in the sides of her panties and slid them down her thighs. The entire time he stared at her, hungry, yet tender. Like a man unwrapping a precious gift. "Beautiful," he breathed. He inhaled, taking in her scent.

With heated cheeks, Krystal dropped her head back onto the pillows. When he ran his hands up her inner thighs, her entire body shuddered with desire. His soft masculine laughter only jacked her hunger up a notch. A rumble vibrated up her spine, filling the room with her own growl. Her eyes widened, and she jerked upward. *Oh shit.* She was so far out of control she didn't even know what was happening.

"Easy," Damon whispered.

Her eyes jerked to meet his hot gaze.

"Do it again," he whispered.

She cocked a brow at him. "What?"

"Growl for me baby. By God, that was sexy."

Krystal felt her eyes widen, but grinned, ready to take back the advantage. "Not until you touch me."

"Oh, baby. I'm going to do more than touch you." He hooked his arms beneath her knees and jerked her down until she was on her back, laughing when she yelped. "I'm going to drink you like wine. I'm going to savor every drop. I want this to last all night."

"If you don't get started, I won't be here for it to last all night," she murmured, trying her best to keep her brain working. She dropped back to the pillow. "I'll combust."

He flashed his teeth, giving her one last grin, he moved his face between her thighs.

When his tongue touched her, Krystal gasped. "Oh, God," she muttered. Maybe it wasn't appropriate to say such things in bed, but damn. His tongue was perfect. Rough and wet, he lapped at her, teasing, driving her crazy.

"Hmmm. Delicious." he hummed against her flesh.

Krystal fisted the sheets, searching for a way to grab hold of reality. But it didn't help. Her head spun more with each sweep of his tongue, with every caress of his fingers. Her body trembled non-stop. With each swipe of his tongue, sensation ripped through her, piercing her like a sharp edged dagger. It built, second upon second until she couldn't do more than gasp for breath. Yet he went on, a soft rumble vibrating against her flesh, holding her body so she couldn't escape even if she wanted to. But there would be no attempt to escape. Instinct had long since taken over and the only thought in Krystal's mind was the building explosion inside her. Muscles tensed and she hung on the precipice, waiting.

As though he knew she was close, Damon growled, the sound vibrating against her flesh. The sensation ripped through her. Her arms flailed as she struggled to fight the sudden violent tide of power tearing through her body. Yet no matter how much she tried, she couldn't fight what would be.

At last she screamed, thrusting toward him. Lights flashed behind her closed lids and her body trembled as the violent orgasm split her mind and body. Her mind fluttered and black haze edged her vision.

Damon held tight, lapping her sweet, feminine essence. Long after her ragged scream faded and her body slumped, but he continued to taste. Her honey rolled over his tongue. Rich and sweet. As potent as any drug, it dragged him to the precipice of self restraint, teasing him, haunting him. He devoured her, tasting every drop of her sweet honey. *Delicious*. Her skin flushed and her body rippled with aftershocks.

He should stop, but he couldn't.

The rumble of erotic hunger vibrated from his chest, drawing a long trembling whimper from the woman beneath him. He'd never been so hungry. Her taste was like an addiction he couldn't pull away from. He wasn't sure if it was him or the wolf who wanted her more. He struggled to hang onto the last tatters of his self restraint as his fangs slid and locked into place. His gaze locked on the vein beneath the tender flesh of her thigh.

"Damon," she whispered.

A part of him heard her, but he couldn't seem to break away. His fangs ached to pierce and taste. This time the growl rising in his throat was as much frustration as arousal.

With a shake of his head, he leaned in, letting his tongue gather the sweet honey again, ignoring the throbbing ache of his fangs. Ignoring the desire to taste her sweet blood.

Her body trembled beneath his ministrations and he continued to lick every inch of her. But when her fingers gripped his hair, pulling upward, he glared at her.

She gasped.

Shit. He must look a sight, his eyes changed, his fangs out. His heart pounded, suddenly worried. "Krystal," he began.

"Damon," she responded, before he could say another word. "Please, come here."

The rolling growl was nearly constant now. The instincts inside him sparking on all cylinders now. He was no longer pretending to be a man. There was only one being, and he was all wolverine. Damon abandoned the addictive taste, hungry for the promise of more, then crawled up her body. On the way, he stopped to tease the hard tips of her breasts, sucking first one, and then the other into his mouth. The shocked squeal only made him hungrier.

Her hands slid over his back. Her magick played over his flesh, like a thousand small fingers and tongues it teased his body, driving him even higher.

"Damon," she screamed, arching her back, pressing the soft mounds harder against his mouth and hands.

His fangs pricked the edge of a nipple and she gasped, but didn't pull away.

"Now. Now, damn it."

Damon captured her lips, hungry to taste and feel her every response. *Mine*. The word echoed over and over in his mind. A small part of him knew he needed to gain control before he hurt her, but

he couldn't stop. He thrust inside her, pushing to the hilt in one stroke. He caught her gasp with his own, his eyes closing at the pleasure of the tight, wet heat encircling him, burning him.

She arched her body, meeting him thrust for thrust. The bright glow of magick encircled her body, sizzling around him like a thin rope, tying them together. Every touch only drove him higher and instincts reared inside him. There were no more thoughts. Just sensation. Just hunger to be sated.

She arched beneath him, ripping her mouth from his. She sobbed, struggling for breath, a soft keening sound coming from her throat. As though in invitation, she turned her head, exposing the delicate feminine curves of her throat.

Submission. Sweet, feminine submission.

Damon growled, and without warning, he struck. Sharp fangs pierced the tender flesh of her neck. Her body stiffened in shock, and she gasped. Her hands tightened on his back, but she didn't pull away. A low groan whispered between them.

Sweet blood teased his lips as he held her in place. He sucked, licking life's sweet ambrosia.

"Mine," he growled against her neck.

As he tasted of her essence, images flashed in his mind. At first they were fuzzy, slowly changing from one to another. Then, they came faster, like a slide show, moving so quick he could barely catch them.

A young child playing with dolls, talking to a boy no one could see. Tears rushed down the young cheeks when her father told her the imaginary friend had to leave. Denial rushed through Damon. *Never.* He'd never leave her. Then the girl child changed, grown into a young woman, fighting for her place among the men in her police station. He saw the horrid conditions of the animals she'd rescued. He watched her fight amid the danger of men and women who held no respect for life. He saw the tears in her eyes when she failed and the joy in her heart when she succeeded.

And he felt her love. For him.

It roared through him with the power of a tornado, twisting and turning, blowing away any fear of rejection in its path.

Krystal fought the urge to scream as Damon's fangs pierced her neck. Even before she could react the instant of pain disappeared, replaced by a warm blanket of peace. Then the memories flashed in her mind, only they weren't her memories. As though moving backward through the life of the male who held her, she saw images of torture and pain. She saw doctors giving injections, shoving their needles into hard masculine flesh. Then there was the electrical torture. She bit back a scream as she watched the doctors use a cattle prod on the wolf that was Damon. Watched as he snarled and growled, refusing to be cowed. She saw the strength in him, the fury at being held captive.

The images changed. She felt as though she was freefalling. Then she saw Damon hit the ground running, his eyes on the young man caught in a nearby tree. Langston hung just above the ground, struggling to cut himself from his chute. Behind him stood an insurgent, his knife at the ready. Krystal was barely aware of Damon above her as she watched the Damon in her mind. In an instant he shifted, flying in mid air as his body took on the transition. Langston cried in terror as the wolf's teeth pierced the enemy's throat, spraying blood all over the younger man.

Before she could cry out, the image changed. Spinning backward she saw herself, again as Damon. A child of the woods. Hidden in plain sight. He walked upright, he walked on all fours. Either way, he was Damon. A child without parents. A child who sometimes visited a young girl by using his mind. Krystal cried as she recognized herself in his memories.

It was him. Her imaginary friend. Only he was real.

Krystal came back to herself, tears streaming from her eyes. Damon was frozen above her, his eyes wide and glittering. "Damon," she whispered.

"God, Krystal. I hurt you."

She smiled. "No, Damon. You've saved my sanity." She arched toward him, hungry for more of his touch.

He grinned, relief hidden amid other emotions in his eyes. "No, baby," he murmured, rocking inside her.

She moaned.

"You saved mine," he finished, then thrust hard inside her.

Krystal screamed, shocked at the sudden rise in tension in her body. It built, hotter, and hotter. With every stroke, her body tightened, knotting, searching.

"Come for me, baby," he whispered in her ear. "One more time, love."

Love. Krystal whimpered at the word. One more stroke and she exploded, her body trembling violently beneath his. She bit her lip, fighting back the howl building at the back of her throat. Her magick exploded with her, spinning and whirling around them both. Its energy tingled over her skin, building her sensitivity and probably Damon's too.

She barely felt it when Damon joined her in her orgasm. He thrust hard, his seed exploding inside her, sending her own orgasm even higher. His arms shook and his voice rose above hers as he tipped his head back and howled.

Chapter 11

The house was dark and quiet. The dog had been carted off, sent to Burke's house to be fattened up for the next feast. A grin creaked over the human face. He enjoyed being a shifter. It made life so much easier when you got right down to it. He could pass as human, but when he needed, he'd shift to his animal form.

The better to smell his foe.

Tonight's task was to take the woman back to Burke. There were plans for her. A soft chuckle escaped his throat. He was looking forward to this. She had caused problems and the pack leader was pissed. She'd made a few calls and from what Burke said, the Maxey woman would be taken care of by the GSA. All they had to do was grab her.

He shifted in the dark.

A growl of frustration rumbled up his throat. Hyenas were not cats. Nor were they wolves. They didn't stalk their pray. They took advantage of what was offered, when it was offered. Standing around in the shadows was torture. If he hadn't been commanded by their pack leader, he'd have snatched the bitch on the street instead of waiting in darkness.

Headlights flashed the front windows. He peeked through the blinds. A dark car parked in the drive and a woman stepped out. His fingers tightened on the pillow case. Her pillow case. He grinned at the irony. She'd be taken down by her own possession.

The key snicked the lock open on the front door.

Adrenaline surged through his veins as the door swung open. He held his breath. A quick touch to his belt assured him the syringe was in place and ready.

When she stepped in he threw the pillow case over her head. A muffled scream erupted and she clawed at the cloth, struggling to get free. She slammed backwards, cracking his head.

"Shit," he grumbled, snatching the syringe from his belt. He threw his weight forward and she stumbled to her knees. He slammed the hypodermic into her thigh and pushed the plunger.

"Arggggh," she screamed. With one last thrust, she threw herself away from him. But it was no use. Her body collapsed and she slid to the floor.

He stared down at the still body, his breath coming in silent heaves. Satisfaction sluiced through him. A job well done.

He stood and hefted the feminine body over one shoulder, then out the door.

Chapter 12

Inside the hotel room Krystal pressed and held the number seven on her phone's keypad. Denise. Her mind spun in all kinds of directions. Damon was her imaginary friend from childhood. Shit. Should she tell him? And how had she seen those images to begin with? Was it her magick as a wizard or his as a shifter that did it?

The chances were, Damon would have no idea, so she'd have to find a way to subtly ask Cassie. All she could say was it had never happened before. And as much as she enjoyed seeing into Damon's head, she hoped to hell it never happened again. It was just too freaky.

She rubbed her neck as the phone on the other end rang.

Her brothers could wait. Even though Logan had threatened to pound on the door this morning, she knew he'd wait and give them time. As much as they treated her like a child, they respected her wishes a lot more than she gave them credit.

After four rings, voice mail picked up. *Damn.*

"Denise, its Krystal. Just calling to check on Wolfie. I'll call your cell."

She pressed disconnect and then scrolled through the numbers stored in her phone. There weren't enough numbers on the phone to incorporate the speed dial she needed. Not with four brothers and a father who insisted she check in regularly. She pressed dial once she found the right number. Again, voice mail. Alarms echoed inside her mind.

Maybe she forgot to charge her cell phone. It wouldn't be the first time. Denise was about as forgetful as a guinea pig. She'd try her again after she and Damon ran by her house to collect some clothes.

Damon stepped out from the bathroom, rubbing a towel over his short hair. "Did you get her?"

Krystal shook her head, feigning indifference. "She must have forgotten to charge her cell phone again and went out for breakfast. Either that or she forgot to bring Wolfie's dog food. That dog will drive you insane if you forget to feed him. Not even Denise could handle that."

He narrowed his eyes, then nodded. "You're probably right. He is a little brat."

She opened her mouth to disagree, then stopped. "You know," she said with a grin, "you're right. But I love him, so that's what counts."

He cocked his head and frowned, as though thinking about his words. An emotion close to loneliness passed through his eyes for just an instant.

"That's what counts," he said at last, his voice gruff.

"Uhm," she said, searching for something to distract herself from what she saw in his eyes and felt radiating from him. Damn empathy was working overtime. Usually she only felt animal emotions. But then again, Damon was part animal. "Let's get that CD and see what it has to say." She powered up the laptop while Damon, throwing the towel over his shoulder, handed her the gold colored compact disk. She slid it into the drive and waited, holding her breath. She selected the drive and scanned the contents.

Document titles filled the screen. More than one hundred of them. "Where do we start?" she asked.

Damon looked over her shoulder. How was it a man who'd just showered could smell nothing like soap and everything like masculine spice? Ignoring it the best she could, she scanned the list. They were titled by people's last names. She clicked the one titled *Maxey*.

"This is probably a duplicate of the file my brothers were talking about."

"Maybe. But we know the one they had wasn't complete. We should let them review it to see what else they can find."

She nodded. Then she saw it. *Connell*. Holding her breath, she double clicked. The file opened and no explosions happened with the computer. She let out the breath and read.

Damon dropped on the bed beside her and stared at the screen.

Name: Damon Connell

Age: 30

Status: Missing, presumed alive and dangerous. Handle with caution.

Mother: Maria Dunham, wolver, deceased

Father: Roarke Connell, wolver, deceased

Siblings: None

Talents: Extreme strength. Experiments indicate high levels of aggression, yet controllable when focused, using appropriate targeting.

Notes: Subject responds well to k9g. Memory depleted, next stage of experiment is to create alternate personality and training. Once completed, shall make an excellent assassin. All attempts to breed have failed. Locate and capture unharmed.

Damon finished reading and stood, staring out the window into the parking lot. He was alone. No parents and no siblings. Nothing else in the file was unexpected, except the note on breeding attempts. Memories dripped in his mind, as though the file had turned a faucet on to a light trickle. They'd brought females and dumped them in his cage. Humans. Wolves. Shifters. He'd ignored them all. Not a one had so much as interested him. It wasn't that he didn't want to take a woman with them watching. He just hadn't thought them attractive. Not like Krystal.

He turned to look at Krystal. Her hair had slipped forward in her concentration. She'd read every word on that document and probably was rereading again. Assassin. He was to be trained as an assassin. He was glad he'd escaped before they could start the training. Or had they started and he just didn't remember?

As though she felt him looking at her, she turned her head. Her eyes met his. The shimmer of tears broke his heart.

"They were going to make you an assassin," she whispered.

He nodded.

"You remember, don't you?"

He shrugged. "Some things. Bits and pieces. I still don't remember anything before I woke up in that cell. I just remember more about being inside it."

She nodded. "I'm going to go take a shower. Then we need to get the day started. I need to stop by my place and get some clothes. Logan's apartment is on the way so we'll stop there first to keep him from worrying. He wants to add a new chip to my cell phone."

Damon gave a gruff sound of ascent.

She went to the bathroom, closing the door with a soft snick.

He could feel her distress. Was she sorry they'd slept together now? Did she think because they wanted to use him for breeding that he'd slept with all those females they'd brought to him? All of them, even the humans, had made his skin crawl. Maybe his disgust was knowing they too had been drugged. The wolves had been the worst. Red wolves, grey wolves. They hadn't cared. They'd thrown them in whenever a female they held in captivity came into heat. He still didn't know why such brilliant scientists as those who'd played with his mind thought he'd want to mate with an animal.

He slammed his fist against the wall, then flexed his fingers, surveying the damage. He wanted them dead. Every last member of the GSA.

Chapter 13

Wesley dropped the woman onto the concrete floor of the shed. Burke had insisted on bringing her to the house, but there was no sense in taking her inside. After all, the plan was to haul her off to the GSA once the dog was taken care of.

Even now the little pip squeak canine growled and cried, fighting to get out of the burlap bag. Too bad he wouldn't be much more than a morsel. Then again, just knowing the fight the woman had put up when he'd caught her was enough to make him appreciate the meal. Maybe Burke would let him kill the beast in front of her. That would be fun, watching her eyes go wide, seeing the tears as he chopped off the dog's head.

Speaking of Burke, the alpha's consort stepped inside the darkened shed, accompanied by a short blond man with glasses.

"You got her?"

He nodded. "No problem, boss. She put up a little bit of a fight, but I got her by surprise and she's slept most of the night in my trunk."

Preacher Man narrowed his eyes at his pack mate. "You're sure? Nobody saw or heard anything?"

"Nothing. She screamed once, but I got the pillow case over her head real fast and then drugged her. Tying her up was super easy. Just in case, I duct taped her mouth, so even if she woke early, nobody would hear a sound."

Burke nodded. "Good."

Burke grabbed the cord above his head and pulled, illuminating the small shed with the glare of the single bare bulb.

"You did good. Take off the pillow case."

He bent down and whipped the cloth sack from her head.

Blonde hair fell down over her shoulders, and wide green eyes shot daggers at the lot of them.

"This isn't her," shouted the human. "What's the meaning of this?"

Burke growled and snatched Wesley's shirt front. "What the hell did you do?"

Fear stole the ability to think and only the truth popped out. "You t.t.t. old me," he stuttered, hating himself for his lack of control, "to grab the woman when she came in. I did that."

"You grabbed the wrong woman." Burke shoved him away and watched as he tripped over the woman's body.

"How was I supposed to know?" he whined. It wasn't fair. He'd done exactly what they wanted.

"Get rid of her," wheezed the human. "Then get me Maxey." He spun on his heel, slamming the door on his way out.

The sound echoed through the empty warehouse.

Burke glared at Wesley. "You heard the man. Get rid of her."

"How?"

Burke shrugged. "I don't care. She's human. She can't be that hard to kill. When you're finished with her, shove her in the freezer. Who knows, maybe she'll make for better meat than the dogs we have now."

The woman's eyes grew round and she shook her head. A muffled please could be heard through the tape, but Burke turned and strode away, leaving the two of them alone.

Wesley looked at her, smiling. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. Burke hadn't said what to do with her, just when he was finished to freeze her.

He rubbed his hands together and stepped toward her bound body, laughing when she shook her head and tried to scream.

Chapter 14

Damon turned off the ignition and turned to face the woman at his side. Everything about her appealed to him. She wasn't a supermodel type of beauty, but was instead more of a natural beauty. Absolutely perfect. Her flesh wasn't sun hardened, but soft and delicate, glowing with health. Her eyes shone with intelligence and peace, something he hadn't felt in his short memory until he saw her that first moment.

But it wasn't just her looks. She radiated a gentle strength the wolf inside him recognized and groaned in satisfaction each time she smiled at him. Something she did far too infrequently, but he could work on that. When he had his memory back, he would find a way to make everything up to her. She deserved something better than a man who was a blank slate. He could be a killer for all they knew.

She flashed him a brilliant smile and reached to take off her seatbelt. His fingers were there before hers.

"Let me." The light brush of her fingers against his sent heat charging through his already overwrought system. Emotions he couldn't even begin to understand crept into his heart. It wasn't the possessive *Mine* he'd felt so many times when he looked at her. No, that was the wolf, always watching, always protecting. This was something different. It went so deep neither the wolf nor the man could comprehend.

She nodded, flushing, but she didn't move her hand away. A snap drew his attention and he realized he'd released her seatbelt. The windblown locks of her hair caught in her lip, and he brushed it away with the tip of his finger.

Her eyes fluttered closed and she leaned in to his touch.

Damon leaned toward her, their lips locking as though she'd been waiting for this since the moment he stopped the car. Her taste exploded through his mouth and her scent rushed through his veins, blossoming into his lungs. Hunger surged, as sharp and as powerful as the night before. He devoured her, wishing he could lay her back in the seat and touch her more. A rumbling in his chest built, until he could not hold it back. It rolled in the air surrounding them, vibrating with power and need.

Her breath caught, and a small sound escaped her throat. Not a sound of fear, but the sweet, distinctive sound of a hungry female.

Using the last of his resolve, he pulled back and studied her. She gazed at him through dark unfocused eyes. Her cheeks were flushed with desire. Her breasts heaved with each breath she took, calling for his touch.

"We better stop."

She nodded and pulled from his arms. He hid the desire to drag her back against him, to feel her heat again.

"Yeah," she chuckled so soft he had to strain to hear. "I don't think my brother would appreciate us necking in his parking lot." Her eyes twinkled when she turned around. "Course it could always be fun to tease him."

Damon arched a brow, watching as she ran her fingers through tangled locks of hair and grimaced. "Then let's go upstairs and tease him. Leave it," he said, snagging her hand in his. "You look fine."

"I look like I just got out of a roll in the hay."

He quirked a smile and cocked his head. "What better way to tease your brother."

She laughed and took his hand. "That's what I like about you, Damon. You are not afraid of the Fantastic Four. First man I've ever dated who didn't run the instant they met them."

He grinned. "It takes a lot more than a few wizards to scare me." Besides, he owed them his life, and what better way to repay them than taking care of their beloved sister. The fact he got the better of the deal wasn't his fault.

Krystal laughed and shook her head, then trotted up the steps to her brother's apartment, Damon right behind her. She pounded on the door and without waiting for him to answer, barreled inside.

Logan was in his kitchen pouring what looked like a cup of coffee.

She sniffed. The soft, sweet scent met her nostrils, and she smiled. Not coffee. Amaretto Hot Chocolate. Her favorite.

"When I said I'd come after you if I didn't hear from you, that didn't give you permission to storm my house," Logan said with a relaxed tone.

She grinned. "But then again, you didn't say it didn't." She glanced around at the ugly living room. For an older brother, he sure didn't set the example for the rest of them. He had a big screen TV on one wall, and a couch. That was it. A soda can sat on the floor next to the couch, probably left there from the night before. "One day, Logan, I'm going to get you a decorator." She bent and picked up the can and took it to the kitchen. "Here's my cell phone. Just in case. Pour me a cup of that, would you? Damon, would you like some hot chocolate?"

"I'm good," he said. At first she thought he was being polite, till she noticed it wasn't the hot chocolate holding his attention. His eyes traced up and down her body before grinning at her. A shiver ran down her spine and she blushed. No guy had ever looked at her that way. Not with Logan around, anyway.

"Go sit, I'll bring it," said Logan, as though wanting her out of his kitchen.

"Control freak," she muttered under her breath.

"I heard that."

She threw herself onto the couch and grinned at Damon. "He can't help it. At least he's a loveable control freak."

Damon laughed and joined her on the couch, his hand resting possessively on her leg. Oh yes. This was nice.

Logan walked in and handed her cup, and her cell phone, then took a sip from his. He leaned against the window ledge on the far wall. "Phone is ready for you, should you need it. I just put in an amplifying chip. So what did you find on the CD?"

Krystal pocketed the phone, but before she could answer the door opened and the rest of the crew traipsed in. All three remaining brothers and Cassie. The only person missing was her Dad.

"What? Doesn't anyone knock anymore?"

Lance laughed. "No need, big bro. We knew you were expecting us." Cassie stepped in, her hand in her husband's. Ross and Jared followed.

Krystal squeezed Damon's hand. He must think her family is strange, gathering in large groups without a single phone call to tell everyone when to show up. There was a strange connection they all shared. It ticked inside them like a clock, telling each when and where they were needed. Hers was sometimes broken or else the boys had found a way to protect her, because when Lance had met Cassie, she'd not received a single *tick* indicating something was wrong. And if what they'd said last night was any indication, there had been a lot wrong.

Jared nodded, then moved to the wall, leaning back, ensuring there was plenty of space between him and the rest of the family. Krystal frowned, but before she could ask him what was up, Ross interrupted.

"So, my man Damon, are we supposed to take you out back and introduce you to the family the manly way?"

Damon arched a brow. "Taking me out back would do nothing of the kind. I'd kick your ass from here to next Sunday and you'd be wondering what happened."

Krystal snorted with laughter.

Ross grinned. "Is that so? Shall we?"

"Not now." Logan glared at his younger brother. "Now we talk about what Krystal found on the CD." He dropped a few kitchen chairs in front of the couch and Lance and Cassie claimed them, while Ross dropped to the floor. Logan leaned against the same wall as Jared, yet put enough space between them to make Krystal wonder what was up.

Krystal glanced at Damon and he nodded. She let out a sigh, and then scooched forward on the sofa. Damon placed a warm hand on her back, and it calmed her.

"The disk has a lot of information on people the GSA has been watching. Some of it included experiments. There's also a list of people who are in their custody. Some are shifters," she glanced toward Cassie, who showed no emotion. "Some are not. Langston, our contact, didn't give us much in the way of detail. His note said to find *her*." She pulled a sheet of paper from her hip pocket and unfolded it. "There's only three women shown as being held captive there. I'm not sure which one it—"

Jared stalked to her, snatching the sheet from her hands.

Damon stood and snarled.

Krystal put a hand on his arm. "What's wrong, Jared."

He scanned the sheet, his eyes following each word she'd written. He shoved the sheet back at her without a word, glowering. "Nothing. Take it."

Frowning, Krystal took the sheet back. She glanced once more at the list of names, then continued. "As I was saying," she said, glancing again at Jared, "There are three women there now, according to the files Langston sent. There's a Pamela Dorsey, an Annette Fredrickson, and a Sheila Thompson. We don't know which is the one Langston was looking for, but when we go in, we should try to rescue them all."

"Who said you were going in?" Logan's voice was terse, his eyes resting on Damon.

"I said I'm going in. Don't worry; I'll take the phone you just fixed. If you guys want to join me, more power to you," responded Krystal.

Logan's gaze trailed back in her direction. He didn't speak, but gave a subtle nod.

"Can this Langston character be trusted?" asked Ross, still watching Jared. Like her, she knew Ross was worried about Jared. For the last few weeks, she'd noticed a few *ticks* telling her he was in trouble, but not enough for her to follow up on. She wondered if her brothers had felt the same plucks in their connection.

"That's a good question," replied Damon. "I'm not sure. One moment he acts the friend, the next, the enemy. He's the one who shot us with the sedatives last night."

"But he did it under duress. I heard the threat Campbell gave. Do it or else. He did it because he had to."

Her brothers watched them as she glared at Damon. His lip curled, and she arched a brow. He responded with a sharp curve of his lips, then turned his attention back to her brothers. He was testing her. The funny part about that was it didn't bother her.

"So when we go in," she continued, cutting Damon one last look, "We'll watch for these women, but I also want to see if we can release the rest of the shifters."

"I don't like it," said Lance. He'd been quiet up to now. "We may know the layout of the building, but I don't like you going in there. You aren't GSA, so your presence will be noticed. You can't get away with the same things we can."

"It's easy. If I get caught, I just say I'm on my way to visit Dad."

"And if they ask you what you're doing with one of their escaped shifters?"

Krystal shrugged, not in the least concerned. "We'll cross that bridge if and when it happens. I don't expect to go during broad daylight, and I don't plan to sashay us both past guards. You guys know how to get inside without being seen. You'll tell me how, then Damon and I will go in."

"The only way we got in last time was using my powers," growled Lance, leaping to his feet. "They have cameras everywhere. You aren't getting in there with the power of empathy with animals."

Damon growled his response, but Krystal put a staying hand on his arm before he leapt up to join her brother. Last night's hard feelings weren't exactly solved.

"Then find another way. You know the place. I want to go in later tonight. I want you four to think of the easiest way to get me inside without being spotted."

"It can't be done," said Logan.

"It's stupid," said Jared. "You've never even been inside before last night. What makes you think you can pull this off?"

"And what makes you think I can't? I'm a cop, Jared."

"She won't be alone." Damon spoke up for the first time. "I'll be right at her side. Our reasons for going in are to find Langston and his girl, then see what records we can find on my experiments. This CD," he said, motioning to the papers in her hand, "was less than informative in my file. I have a feeling Langston cleared out the most important parts."

Cassie spoke for the first time since they began. "Krystal, why didn't you tell us about Damon?"

Krystal frowned. "What do you mean? We told you last night about him. Hell, you guys knew him before I did."

"Not that." Cassie shook her head and smiled, elbowing her husband. "Why didn't you tell us how serious you were about each other."

"What are you talking about?"

Cassie stood, stepping toward her and cupping her chin in her hand, turning her head. "This. You can't hide such a prominent mark."

Krystal's hand shot to her neck, covering the offending hickey and blushed. "Oh that. It's nothing."

Cassie's brows shot up in surprise, then she turned to Damon. "You marked her," she accused.

"So what, he marked me. Everyone gets a hickey now and then."

"It's not a hickey." Cassie's voice shot up an octave.

Krystal looked at her confused. "You lost me. What are you talking about?"

"Didn't he tell you what it meant? I mean, before he did it?"

Damon shot her a look that said he was as confused as she. "This is between Krystal and me."

"No," said Lance, getting in on the sudden interrogation. "It's between all of us."

Krystal shot up. "See, this is why I hate having so many brothers. I'm not allowed to do anything. Damn it, it's just a simple hickey."

Lance stepped forward as the rest of her brothers watched on, not interfering. What the hell was going on? Her brother put himself between his wife and Damon, glaring at the shifter.

Damon rose to his feet, his muscles fluid and ready. Wolf-like he lowered his head, his lips curling in a snarl.

"Tell her, Damon. Now."

Damon copied his motion, stepping between Krystal and Lance.

Krystal heard his low growl as it rolled through the air like distant thunder.

Shoving her way past him, she pushed him backward, then glared at her family.

"Look, back off, Lance. I don't know what it means. Hell, he doesn't know what it means. Until he spoke to Cassie last night, he'd never met another shifter. So knock off the holier than thou attitude and tell us what the hell is going on."

Silence filled the air. Damon shot her a dark look, but Krystal shrugged. *They had to know sometime.*

"That doesn't make sense," said Cassie at last.

Damon shot Cassie a glare, then softened when Krystal touched his arm. "It does if the GSA scattered my brain cells."

Cassie's face paled and Lance's brow drew together, confused. Cassie grabbed her husband's arm.

"He doesn't remember anything. I didn't tell you because," she threw a hand in Damon's direction, "it's his business, not yours."

"It's our business now," said Lance quietly. He stepped away from Krystal and peeled his wife's fingers from his forearm so he could wrap it around her waist. "There's something you need to know."

"Can it wait?" *Damn.* Why did her personal life always become public knowledge to her brothers?

"Now," ordered Lance.

With a sigh, Krystal nodded, sliding her fingers down Damon's arm into his palm.

"Sit," said Logan. "I've got a feeling this is going to take a few minutes."

Krystal glanced at Damon, who gave an almost imperceptible nod.

We're not going to like this.

The voice in her head wasn't hers, and she cut a look at Damon again. His gaze speared Lance as though wanting to silence him.

Krystal sighed, then dropped back onto the couch, pulling Damon down with her. He perched on the front edge of the cushion, his knuckles white on fisted hands.

Last night had been special. A bond had formed between them that she'd never experienced before. Up to now she'd thought it was her magick releasing. It had been growing, pushing for release inside her for the last two days.

Could she be wrong? Could it have been Damon's bite that caused the visual connection of their lives? The things she'd felt as his teeth pierced her skin, the orgasm she'd felt, the images. She probably knew more about Damon than he knew about himself now. Krystal gripped Damon's thigh, searching to ground herself.

Cassie sat on the other side of Krystal and took her free hand. "The mark, as it's called, is something practiced by all shifters. Its power depends on the joining of the couples involved." She took a deep breath, then continued. "The mark is a sign of possession. It's like..." She glanced toward her husband for support. He nodded to her. "It's like a marriage."

Krystal's stomach dropped. Marriage. Her skin turned icy cold, and she jerked her hand from Cassie's. She cast a glance in Damon's direction. His face was pale. A small muscle flexed in the side of his face.

"A lot of how it works depends on your connection. With some, it goes away after the couple separate. But sometimes it is permanent."

Krystal cocked her head, confused. "I don't get it. First it's this big huge thing and then you say it might go away?" Yet even as she said the words, she knew which link they shared. For it sizzled now, filled with a mass of emotions. Anger. Confusion. Fear. What was hers and what was his was impossible to sort out. Krystal bit her lip and nodded for Cassie to continue.

"In the shifter world there are two types of mates. Regular mates, where a couple agrees to join together because they care for one another. Like a human marriage. In those cases, the mark dissipates if the couple decides to divorce, so to speak." She took a deep breath. "Then there are True Mates. In True Mates, the mating is more complete. The mark is at the cellular and spiritual level. It's permanent."

"Just what are True Mates?" she asked. The thumping in her heart distracted her and she breathed through her mouth, struggling for control. There had been so many unanswered questions in her heart and mind when it came to Damon. The images in her head after he bit her told her what kind of man he was, though it was more than those flashes of emotions and pictures which held her soul captive. It was him. His heart and his soul.

Cassie glanced at her husband again before continuing. "In our world, the shifters, we used to always mate only with the other half of our selves. Our True Mate."

"Like a soul mate?" The whispered words choked out of Krystal's throat.

"Only deeper," interjected Lance, whose hand now rested on his wife's shoulder.

Cassie nodded, relief flashing in her eyes. "Yes, similar to soul mates. After a time, we shifters seemed to lose that innate ability to find our True Mates. To save our species, our leaders told us it would be okay to mate, like humans did, until our True Mates were found. It upset a lot of our people, for that would mean we would have something akin to divorce. But it was approved, regardless, and with time, became an accepted practice. In fact the wolverines were the first to accept it."

"But?"

"No buts. For the last several generations, True Mates have become more the exception than the norm. It's only recently we've discovered the ability to find our mates among the human race."

Krystal glanced toward Damon. His expression hadn't changed, except his eyes were now closed. She wished they were alone so they could talk. "'How do you know which is which?'" Krystal finally asked.

"If it's a True Mate connection," Cassie patted her husband's hand, then flushed. "When he marks you, you share a mutual..." she pursed her lips, as though searching for the right words. "You share emotions. They pass back and forth between a psychic connection."

Krystal stood. "Shit." She muttered. She'd known it, from the instant his teeth had pierced her shoulder, she knew something unusual had happened. Something terrifying. "And if this is the connection we had?"

Cassie bit her lip, then turned to look at Damon who opened his eyes. "Either way, the punishment for marking without permission is death."

"What?" screeched Krystal. "You want to kill him?" She couldn't have heard that right. She turned to the man who was, for all practical purposes, her husband.

Husband. She was glad she was sitting down, because she was sure her knees would have given out on her. Her throat felt suddenly dry and she picked up her cup of chocolate from the coffee table and took a sip, ignoring the trembling fingers on the handle.

He'd turned pale. Shock did that to people, so it must do the same to shifters. Wolf. Shit, she'd gone and married a wolf!

"I didn't know."

The sound of his muted voice told Krystal all she needed to know. He'd stolen her future, but she couldn't steal his life. No way. "No," shouted Krystal. "I can't do this! You are not going to sentence him to death because the GSA stole his memories."

"The only way out is for you to publicly accept his mark."

"There has to be a way out of this." She strode past everyone, even Ross who tried to take her arm. She yanked away and put her cup on the counter, ignoring the sharp crack she heard as she slammed it down. "I can't believe you'd force me to accept marriage to a man I've just met due to some outdated punishment."

"There are no exceptions, Krystal." Cassie watched, her eyes moist as though she did care. Hell, it didn't matter if she cared. What mattered was keeping Damon alive.

"Then there should be. Rules are made to be broken."

Damon stood. "This is my fault," he said. His face was hard, edged with the same darkness she'd seen the first night she'd met him. "I accept my punishment."

He speaks. A shame he didn't have something better to say. "You will not. It's not your fault any more than it's mine. You can't expect to be held responsible for something you didn't even know about. It's not fair."

"You don't understand, Krystal. As long as he's alive you won't be able to accept another man in your bed."

Her brothers all looked away, a mixture of embarrassment and anger on their faces.

She grabbed Damon's hand. "We need to go. I need to go get some clothes. You guys can plan a rescue mission and we'll be back in a few hours."

"I have to report this," said Cassie, "to the shifter's council. I can't keep this a secret."

Krystal stared at her sister in law until Lance stepped forward and intervened.

"Give them a few days," said Lance. "After all, if it's a True Mate bond, it might not even matter."

Cassie's golden eyes probed Krystal's for a long time, before she nodded. "Fine. Two days. If in two days you haven't called to say you accept him as your mate, I'll have to report it and let the council handle it."

"Yeah, you do that," said Krystal, dragging Damon through the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Logan, dropping his arms to his side and stepping forward.

"To my house. I need clothes," she threw at him. He'd stood there, letting Lance threaten Damon's life. Well, Lance's wife in all truth, but it didn't matter. Not a single one of them had stepped in.

"It's dangerous there."

"I'll take care of her," said Damon, his voice low and gruff.

"You better," said Logan.

"Or what?" asked Damon, his hand tightening on the doorknob. "You'll kill me? Don't you think one threat to my life per day is enough?"

Krystal snuck a glance at him as he closed the door behind them. God, she would kill to know what he was thinking. It wouldn't do her much good to accept him as her mate if he didn't want her as his. He'd been willing to stand up and accept his punishment.

Like a wolf.

Not like a husband.

Krystal watched Damon as they walked to the car. Everything about him gave the impression of a delicate balance of power and fury. Her mate. Her husband. *Damn*. If only she knew how he felt about this whole mating thing, they could get this resolved. Now. Before they had to go into some sort of strange battle with creatures who were half hyena, half men. But the emotions running through their link were too muted for her to catch onto. She was too new at this whole marked bond thing to understand how to use it properly.

When he reached the Jeep he spun her around, pressing her back against the cold metal. Eyes wide in surprise, she looked up at him. His face was a mask of hard edges, his eyes dark with dangerous emotions.

"When this is finished, we need to talk," he said, his head lowering to her ear.

The heat of his breath whispered across her flesh. She nodded. "I won't let them kill you, Damon. I'll tell them I gave my permission."

His eyes searched hers, then he lowered his gaze. "Cassie said if you accept me, there can never be another."

Krystal gave a pained laugh. "It's not like there are any other candidates."

No sooner were the words out, she knew she'd made a mistake. He released her, his eyes shuttering the emotion she'd thought she saw a moment before. "Get in the Jeep."

"Wait a second," she said, circling to the passenger side. "I didn't mean the way that sounded."

"I will not be a charity case."

"And you think I will? Think about it, Damon. If I say no, you didn't ask me, they kill you. Any chance we had to see if it would work would be over. You heard what she said. This True Mate thing means there's a deeper connection." She slammed the door shut and jerked on the seat belt. *Damn* it. Why do these things have to get stuck when you're angry, anyway? She yanked a second time and it gave. She stretched it across her abdomen and shoved it into the slot with a snap.

"Your point?" he asked, as he turned the key in the ignition.

"My point is if you're dead, how am I ever going to know what having a True Mate is like? I mean, yeah, we just met and everything but..." Words evaporated when he turned to face her. His eyes were dark with menace.

"So now I'm a science project?"

"You're twisting everything I'm trying to say! Do you remember last night, and what it was like? Did you mean those things you said?"

"What things?" He didn't move. His hands gripped the steering wheel so hard she was afraid it was going to crack.

"When you said you would never have forgotten me, that I made you feel things you had never felt?"

He gave a curt nod.

"Good." She sighed, and relaxed into her seat. "Because I feel the same way. And if that's the case, then I say we go forward."

"Krystal, you don't know what you're saying." Damon stared at the road as he drove. Mated. How the hell could he have been so stupid. The urge to mark her had been overwhelming, but he could have pulled back. He knew it was something beyond the norm.

"Of course I do."

He growled in frustration, pulling the Jeep to the side of the road and yanking the emergency brake and shutting off the ignition. He turned toward her. "You have to stop this. You can't want me. Not forever."

"And why not?" she snarled back.

He groaned. "I'm a blank slate, Krystal. You don't know who or what I am, other than I'm a Woven, as Cassie called me. Hell, we wouldn't even know that if it weren't for your sister in law. You'd be stuck with me for life. *Life*, Krystal! Not just until you felt like leaving me."

He watched his words sink in.

She took a shaky breath. "Okay, I admit it's scary, but I'm not going to let them kill you."

"And I won't let anyone force you into being with me because of my stupid mistake."

She stared at him, then grinned.

"What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking, being mated to you should be very interesting."

"The instant this mess is over Krystal, I'm reporting to that council, and admitting what I did."

Her eyes widened and filled with tears. "You don't want me," she whispered.

Damon growled, and spun in his seat. "It's not that." He started the engine and released the brake. He pulled back into traffic.

"Then what else could it be?"

Her voice was soft. He could hear the tears she choked back down her throat. Her pain rippled through their connection. Hell, as if she wasn't already an open book with her emotions. Damn it, but he could love this woman.

But he would not. Could not, while he didn't know who and what he really was.

"I won't be the reason you don't find true love. I said I could never have forgotten someone like you. I meant it." The tires squealed as he accelerated, the Jeep jerking forward.

"Then why?"

"Why won't I accept you as my mate?"

She nodded.

He took a deep breath. He had to do this. Now. If he didn't, she would end up even more hurt. He would die for what he'd done to her, and that was okay, but he didn't want her hurting because of his choice. "Because I don't love you, Krystal." The lie tasted bitter on his tongue and he wondered if she could feel its power through that odd connection they shared.

Chapter 15

The two of them rode in silence for most of the trip to Krystal's house. Damon didn't know what she was thinking. Hell, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. The instant his teeth had sunk into her flesh, he'd sealed their fate. He should have known the bite was something special. Not just because of her taste, which was exquisite. No, it was the rush of images of family picnics, swimming lessons, playing with her brothers, all the things he'd realized he wanted in life she'd lived. It warmed him to know she had been happy up until now.

Until he'd ruined everything.

She turned her face away, staring out the window. He didn't need their joining to feel her pain. It radiated from her like a living, breathing entity. It took all his strength to not reach out for her, to try to comfort her.

But he would not saddle her with a mate she hadn't chosen. It didn't matter if she was his True Mate, as Cassie said, or just some woman he'd marked. What mattered was neither of them knew what he really was. The documents had said they wanted to train him as an assassin. He didn't even know if that training had started. For all he knew, he was a time bomb waiting to go off.

Krystal sat in silence as he drove. He didn't want her. She shook her head. Nothing made sense. When she'd first addressed that, he'd said he didn't say he didn't want her. Then he said he didn't love her. The contradictions made no sense. Neither did the pain vibrating like a snapped piano wire through the mating bond. Was he lying to her to protect her? Or did he truly not want her?

He turned the Jeep down the road to Krystal's home. Police lights flashed ahead of them.

Shit. Just Shit. It was her house. He brought the Jeep as close as he could without barreling through police blockades. No wonder her brothers were always threatening him. This woman was nothing but trouble.

Krystal leapt from the Jeep even before Damon shut off the ignition. Police cars encircled her house, their lights flashing. Yellow tape marked off the entrance to her home as a crime scene. *Shit.* Had they somehow heard about the break in? Had she forgotten to tell Denise about the destruction and she'd called the cops?

Ted exited her house just as she stepped on the walk.

"Ted, I can explain."

"Someone broke into your house and you can explain?"

She shook her head. "I didn't report it because it wasn't important. I told you yesterday morning about this."

"Krystal," he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her to the side. The sound of an animalistic growl drew him up short. Damon stood beside them, his eyes glaring with fierce protectiveness toward Ted. Ted released her arm. "Okay," he said with a touch of aggression himself. "Look, it's not what happened the night before last I'm talking about. We thought you were dead."

"Why?"

"Your neighbor reported hearing screams in your house sometime around midnight. She didn't report it till this morning, because she thought maybe it was your television. But when she got up your door was wide open."

"Screams?" Panic gripped Krystal. "Denise," she moaned. She charged into the house Ted and Damon close on her heels. A growl rumbled through the sounds of the chirping birds. When she turned, Ted stood in the doorway, blocking Damon from entering. Damon's face was a mask of pure aggression. How he kept his fangs from showing she didn't know, but they were there, hidden beneath the snarling lips.

"He's with me, Ted," she ordered.

"But—"

"Ted, it's my house," she exclaimed. "He's with me. He won't touch anything without gloves, though he's already been here so his prints are probably inside." She sent a meaningful look toward Damon. She wanted, no make that needed him by her side, but she wasn't about to let him contaminate a scene. He nodded. They both took gloves from Ted and put them on.

She didn't know if his prints really were inside, but it was best to say so, just in case. He'd gotten out of here somehow yesterday morning and she didn't think he'd done it without fingers.

Krystal scanned the room. Not much was different from the disaster of yesterday. The furniture still held signs of the destruction. "Where's Wolfie?" she asked, her eyes still studying the room.

"He wasn't here."

That meant Denise had been here and gone. Or did it?

A flash of white showed beneath the couch. Krystal's heart pounded as she stepped forward. No. Please, don't let it be. She bent down and pulled it out with two fingers. The white purse didn't belong to her. Her breath stopped, her blood pumping with painful sluggish beats from her heart. "Oh, God," she murmured tears filling her eyes. It was Denise's. The same one she'd had at the bar the night she'd met Damon.

Damon's hands touched her shoulders. Their warmth couldn't stop the trembling in her body, nor the guilt twisting inside her gut. "No," she whispered. "This is my fault. I should have been the one here. We knew it wasn't safe. We knew it," she cried. He pulled her up and wrapped his strong arms about her body.

"We'll find her. We aren't going to let anything happen to her."

She nodded, then pulled from his arms and shoved the tears from her eyes with her fisted knuckles. "Whoever did this will pay," she growled.

The eyes of her department stared at her in sympathy. She spun and moved into the bedroom. She couldn't stand them watching her. Everything inside of her ached. Why Denise? Why had she sent her friend in when she knew it wasn't safe? She snatched a tissue from the box next to the bed and blew her nose. Damon stepped to the doorway.

"Are you okay?"

"Hell no," she replied. Anger mixed with the guilt. "Whoever did this is going to pay, Damon. I can't let them get away with hurting my friend."

He didn't argue. "We should go, let them do their job."

Krystal turned to grab another tissue. That was when she noticed the missing pillow case. Her vision wavered as she stared at the bed. Why would someone steal her pillow case?

Then a thought struck her. Maybe they hadn't been trying to hurt her, maybe they'd tried to capture her. Maybe she was still alive after all.

"Who's been here, Damon? I know you have senses I don't."

"I don't know." She watched as he sniffed the air, his nostrils widening. He closed his eyes and she could see them moving beneath the lids, as though he was sorting each scent into a category. Then his eyes shot open. "Hyena," he snarled. Every muscle in his body went on alert.

"How can you tell?"

"I can smell them. It's not Burke, but it's one of his minions. The man who was about to kill me when you saved my life."

"Why the hell would Burke come after me?"

A rumble echoed around her destroyed bedroom. "Because he thinks by getting to you he can make you back off his case."

"Let's go," she ordered.

Damon didn't argue. Anger was a palpable force between them, running from both directions. And it wasn't just her own. Damon was furious. His brows were pulled together, giving a fierceness to his face she'd only seen once before. When they were locked together in that cell.

Chapter 16

Krystal didn't know which piece of information was more confusing. Denise being taken by Burke and his crew, or the knowledge she'd gained about the mark on her shoulder, and Damon's plan to let himself be killed because of it.

"Turn right on Ashton Street," she ordered.

Damon nodded, whipping the wheel so fast the Jeep swerved around the corner.

Burke's house wasn't that far away from town. She'd watched it enough times as she'd staked it out before their bust to know exactly how to get there.

"Left on Oxford," she shouted. She checked the clip in her gun. She'd had just about enough of this bastard, Preacher Man. He was going down if she had to shoot him herself.

The Jeep took the corner as sharp as the previous turn. Krystal grabbed the roll bar for support. He whipped the vehicle into the driveway, then slammed on the brakes. Krystal's feet hit the ground even before the Jeep stopped rolling.

Damon growled behind her. "Wait," but she didn't.

He was going to turn her over his knee when this was over. For better or worse, right now she was his mate, or so it seemed, and no mate of his was going to rush headlong into danger without him at her side. Hell, before he died, he'd see to it she got shoved behind a desk and kept safe.

He caught up with her as she charged around the house. He grabbed her arm, jerking her back to him and spinning her to face him.

"Together," he whispered.

She hesitated. He knew what she was thinking. He didn't have a gun, but she did. She was forgetting how swift he could move, how strong he was, and the speed of his shift, if needed. At last she met his eyes and nodded.

She held the gun at the ready, and waited for him to move.

"We should wait till your brothers get here," said Damon.

Krystal was not going to be put off. Denise was inside waiting for her to rescue her, and Damon was at her side. She wasn't about to wait. "No, let's go now. I'm not going to let Denise get hurt while we sit outside of Burke's house, waiting for her to get killed." She checked her clip, ensured she had a second for backup, and looked at Damon. "If you want to sit out here and wait, be my guest. But my best friend is in there because of me. You said Burke is a shifter. I know he has, shall we say, unusual propensities that could cost her life."

"You don't even know how to kill a shifter."

"And you do?"

He glared at her. "No. I wish I did."

She gave him a tight smile. "So we're even. Let's go in. If nothing else, the bullets will slow them down, right?"

He nodded. "We hope."

"Great. Let's go." She knew Damon was just trying to protect her, but she wasn't about to hold off. Not today.

"What about your talents. That gift of yours? Think it'll help?"

She shrugged, and ducked to hide behind a row of bushes. "Don't know. It's been a bit freaky of late. Changing. Whatever they did to my mother at that lab when I was in her womb affected me, but

now, it's like I feel my power trying to get out. Like it's growing. The thing is, I don't think I can control it like I used to."

He nodded. "I understand. Let's go."

She nodded, and moved closer to the back door. His temporary mate was a little spit fire. Nothing was going to stop her. He found her strength and determination sexy. God, this was going to be hard. But the only way to protect her in the long run was to not touch her again.

Even as he moved behind her, his body stalking with the ease of a predator, his body jerked at his internal declaration. He wanted her more than he needed to rip apart Burke and his men. And as the blood surged through his veins, hungry for retribution, that was a powerful need.

He glanced down to step over the small branch jutting from a bush. Gold glittered through the dirt and grass.

He bent over and picked up the gold chain. Dangling at the end was a medallion with letters engraved. GSA.

What the hell did the GSA have to do with the hyenas? Who was pulling whose strings? He slipped the medallion into his pocket and caught up with Krystal.

Burke had done a good job of hiding himself from his neighbors, purchasing a home not only with a very large yard he used for the kennels, but one with plenty of brush to keep prying eyes out. The good thing was, it also meant he couldn't see them approach.

Krystal sprinted to the next line of bushes and glanced back at Damon. This was going to be a piece of cake. She didn't need a warrant, because she was sure a crime was taking place. Kidnapping. She should have called Ted, but there was no way she was waiting that long. Knowing Damon was at her side in this helped. Even if he didn't want to be there.

It was quiet in the neighborhood. Not a sound emanated from the large house. She gave Damon one last nod and was off. He ran behind her, ready to protect her rear. Burke might use guns, but she doubted it. They were shifters. After meeting Damon, she knew they would shift into their animal selves before they resorted to guns.

On the back porch, she glanced in the windows. The living room was empty. She moved toward the door. It was open. Not far, just a crack. An invitation.

With a finger to her lips to remind Damon to remain quiet, she pushed the door the rest of the way. There was no creak, though if they were hyenas, as Damon suspected, then there was a chance they could know of their arrival.

"I smell them," whispered Damon in her ear. "But I can't determine where they are." He pointed to the ceiling fan spinning above them. The air circulated in a manner to hide the origin of any scent. She nodded.

Her weapon ahead of her, she stalked with quiet precision into the house. The dining room table sat straight ahead, and a hallway to the left. The doorway to the kitchen angled off the dining room. "Let's try there," she said, nodding toward the kitchen. She didn't know why, but it seemed the right place.

Damon didn't argue, but let her lead. With soft, even steps, they moved forward. The refrigerator came into view. The room was a surprise. From outside the house had looked large, but she hadn't realized how much of it was devoted to the kitchen. Oak cabinet doors stared back at her. A restaurant sized stove took up an entire wall, and a massive built in freezer door took up another. The freezer. That would be where they kept their meat. The animals they took using fraud, pretending to be loving families. Someone's pets.

Krystal shuddered.

The freezer called to her, and no matter how much she didn't want to look inside, she had to. Her fingers closed around the cool metal handle and she pulled. It opened with a hiss as cold air pushed out. She suppressed a shiver of dread.

Damon put a hand on her arm. "I'll check it."

She shook her head. "It's my job. You watch my back."

She stepped inside. The freezer was dark, so she fumbled beside her till she found the light switch she'd expected. But even once flipped, the room held a dark, macabre feel. Bodies of what were once someone's beloved animals hung from the ceiling, blocking the light from above. Blurred even more by the mist of icy fog. The stench of frozen blood swirled in her nostrils and she fought to keep from gagging.

Shelves lined the walls, from ceiling to floor. Most were filled with the average freezer type food, vegetables and such. And here she'd thought the hyenas were carnivores.

A small shape occupied one of the shelves along the wall, as though tossed there in a hurry. Instinct guided her and the nearer she drew, the harder her heart pumped, feeding the fear in her mind. Shoving her gun in the waist of her pants, she moved closer. Ignoring the cold, she grasped the dark plastic around the shape and lifted. The crackle of the plastic echoed through the frozen room.

The body was a white, medium sized dog, spattered with blood. The head was missing. Krystal's heart squeezed in recognition.

"Oh, God," she whispered. Tears stung her eyes as she stared at the dog. "Oh, God." She said again, dropping to her knees, fighting the rising scream swelling in her throat. Tentatively she stroked the cold fur, then rolled the dog over, exposing the scars from the injury sustained the night before. A sob broke through her calm façade. There was no mistaking whose body she stroked.

Wolfie.

She covered her mouth to silence the sobs. Tears flooded her eyes, blurring the image of her best four legged friend. Wolfie would no longer welcome her home with his excited barks and bouncing step. There would be no more moments of quiet contemplation as they shared an evening in front of the television.

He was gone.

Murdered by animals.

Bile rose in her throat and she stood, spinning to get away, slamming into Damon.

His hands gripped her shoulders as he looked behind her, then pulled her tight into his arms.

"Why?" Her fists pounded his chest. "Why would they do this?"

He wrapped her in his arms. "I don't know. I'm so sorry, babe. I'm so sorry."

He stroked her hair, murmuring words she couldn't understand.

The comfort only served to open the floodgates, and she sobbed against his shirt. "They killed him. They chopped off his head!" The image sent a fresh wave of fury and grief through her. The pain was as real as if someone had stabbed her heart with a knife.

"I know, baby."

Then Damon stiffened in her arms, his eyes glazing over. His body slumped, and his weight toppled into her and he dropped to his knees.

"Damon!" she shrieked, dropping to her knees, struggling to hold him upright.

"Don't worry, Krystal, he'll be just fine."

She jerked her gaze upward. Burke stood opposite her, with several men at his side.

"Don't even think about it," he said, as she reached for her gun. "If you so much as think about taking action, one of these fine gentlemen will shoot your friend there. And not with a sedative." He motioned toward the men standing behind him.

Krystal cursed inwardly. This was her fault. She should have been professional. She hadn't even thought how being inside the freezer would affected Damon's sense of smell.

She eased herself into a stand. "What do you want? Why did you kill my dog?"

Burke shrugged. "He was a by-product of something bigger."

"You took my friend. Where is she?" Her fingers closed over the butt of her Glock.

He shrugged his wiry shoulders. "Oh, my man here," he said, motioning toward the man on his right, "got her confused for you. She's, how should I say this, occupied at the moment."

“Where?”

“Not yet,” he said with an oily smirk. “You’ll see her soon enough.”

Krystal whipped the gun from her waistband, but powerful fingers grabbed her, yanking the weapon from her hand. Damn it. She’d been so shocked when Damon went down she didn’t realize someone else had come up beside them. She glanced down at her mate. “What did you do to him?”

“Him?” he looked at Damon in disgust. “I just gave him a sedative. He’ll be fine. The people who hired us want him intact.”

Fear edged itself into her grief. “Who wants him?”

“The same ones who want you.”

The thunk of a dart gun erupted in the cold air, and a dart embedded itself in her hip. “You ass,” she mumbled, as the world turned dark.

Chapter 17

The darkness retreated, chased away by the bright lights shining down on Damon from above. The light heated his chest while beneath him cold steel chilled his back. He moved his arm to block the light, only it was strapped down. *Shit.* He sniffed. Medical smells. Something he was all too familiar with.

He was back at the GSA. How the hell did he get here?

Damon searched his memory, struggling to find one iota of information that would help him figure out how he ended up strapped to a cold metal table. He'd gone with Krystal to try to rescue her friend Denise. In the process, they'd found Wolfie, dead. The sight of Krystal's tears had been his undoing. He'd sensed her grief and guilt as though it was his own. This damn mate link was inconvenient. He'd been so distracted by her pain, he hadn't sensed danger, until... until the sharp pinch of the damned dart. Damon cursed inwardly. He'd been drugged again.

Careful to not give himself away, he scanned the room through slitted eyes. A man in a white coat stood a few feet away, his back turned to Damon. But it wasn't Doctor Palmer. He was dead. How he knew that he wasn't sure. Maybe he'd heard it the night he'd been rescued by Krystal's brothers.

No, this wasn't Doctor Palmer, but that didn't mean this asshole was any better. The white coat hung to the man's knees and he wore dark trousers, with hard soled shoes. He was about the same height as Palmer, but he smelled different.

Oily.

The scent of betrayal.

The man in the white coat wasn't the only person in the room. From somewhere beyond Damon's line of sight, another male stood. Uneven breathing echoed in the cold expanse of the medical bay. The new man's scent was better, not quite as sickening as the doctor in front of him. But without seeing him, Damon knew he couldn't identify him just yet. Not without turning around and giving himself away.

Both men were too far away for Damon to strike.

Krystal. What the hell had they done with Krystal? Damn it. He steadied his breathing. He wasn't ready for them to find out he was awake. She was his mate, even if it was just temporary, and he would save her. To do so, he had to be sharp.

They wouldn't have left her behind. That meant she was here, at the GSA. Unless.... *Shit.* What if they left her with that asshole Burke? That bastard would kill her if she wasn't already dead. Anger exploded inside him. The steady mechanical beep of a heart monitor beside him accelerated.

Damn it.

The man near his feet looked up. "I see our visitor is awake."

Damon opened his eyes, baring his fangs. No need for subterfuge now. "What the hell did you do with Krystal?"

The man stood, unafraid. His white coat held a name. Doctor Carey. The doctor raised his brows, then shrugged as though the question was of no import. Maybe to him, but to Damon it was very important. He struggled against the instincts to fight with all his might and escape. He'd been locked in this hell hole and strapped to this table enough times to know he couldn't escape. The bindings were woven with silver and he couldn't break them. Even now the flesh around his wrists and ankles burned.

Then again, it wouldn't hurt to give them a show of strength. Maybe scare them a little. Arching his back, he flexed the muscles in his wrists, twisting the silver inlaid straps. A vicious growl erupted

from his throat. Ignoring the silver burn from the collar wrapped around his neck, he pushed his face into a partial shift. His canines elongated, sliding from his gums. He ignored the pain, knowing all he had to do to stop it was to stop his transformation.

"What the hell is he doing?" asked the voice behind him.

"I don't care. Give him the damned shot. I don't want him to remember a thing."

No! Not again! The wolf and man both howled with fury, desperate to ward off what could not be avoided. His muscles tensed as the cold, sharp needle pierced his flesh, sliding into his vein.

Damon jerked, fighting to dislodge the offending syringe before the vile drug was injected.

Adrenaline surged through his blood, pumped by his rapidly beating heart. He jerked from one side of the table to the other. The silver and leather restraints held him fast.

The man shoved the plunger with one thumb.

Damon's veins burned with the induction of the liquid, searing into muscles already half wolf. The cells inside his body screamed at the intrusion, the magick of the transition already exploding within them. Power mixed with chemicals, creating a cocktail so painful he couldn't hold back his howl of pain. Sinew stretched. Bones which normally receded, elongated. Dark brown hair sprouted along his arms and legs. His ankles and wrists burned from the straps which bound them. He didn't care. All that mattered was keeping his memory. His sanity. The heart monitor raced, its continuous rapid beeping piercing the air. Krystal. He would remember Krystal.

"Hold him," shouted Doctor Carey.

Damon snapped his sharpening teeth at the arm reaching across his body. Contact. The crunch of bone sent a surge of satisfaction into his already overwrought system. The warm tang of blood spilled into his mouth. "Arrrgh, stop him," shouted the tech as he struggled to wrench free.

Doctor Carey grabbed another syringe from the counter at the far wall. The screams of the man within his grasp hurt Damon's ears and he forced his jaws to lock even more. He snarled, and yanked backward, ripping flesh.

"Hurry," screamed the tech, his face now pale, his eyes wide in terror and pain.

Blood gushed over and into Damon's mouth. He swallowed the disgusting fluid, letting it give him strength.

A chill ran through him when Doctor Carey spun with the syringe in his hand. If he let Carey stick him with that needle, he'd lose his last chance at escape. Freedom. Salvation. Krystal. In a last ditch effort, Damon gave himself over to the horrendous change within his body. There was no quick flash of light and it was done. Instead there was a painful stretching of flesh as his body exploded. Powerful muscles rippled through his arms and legs, and he shredded the straps restraining his wrists and ankles as easily as though they were made of cheesecloth.

Free at last, he snatched the whimpering male from his mouth with one hand and tossed him across the room, ignoring the metallic crash of medical equipment as it toppled to the floor. He turned his attention to the man left standing.

The human's face paled, and fear shone in those slimy eyes.

"Where is she?" Damon growled. The beast growled. The sound echoed inside the small room.

Doctor Carey's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Damon stalked forward and glared down at the little man. He was nothing more than a bug who needed to be squashed. He closed his fingers around the front of the white jacket, lifting the man off his feet.

"I asked you a question." His voice was half snarl, half words.

The telltale stench of human urine filled the room. Damon snarled in disgust and with one massive hand, tossed the man aside.

Power burned in his muscles and he flexed one massive fist. He felt strong. Stronger than he could remember. Then again, his memory was short. With one mighty shove he toppled the table to which he'd been strapped. As the satisfying echo of destruction dissipated, Damon dropped to four legs. But unlike the images in his mind, he was not a wolf. He was not a man.

He was a monster.

Chapter 18

Krystal struggled with the chains attached to her wrist. Damn it. Why couldn't she release them? She wasn't an expert at lock picking magically, but she wasn't that bad. With one last mental attempt she reached for the lock, visualizing the mechanical workings. In her mind she turned until she heard a click, then pulled.

Nothing.

"Arrrgghh," she screamed, slamming her hands down, to her sides the heavy chains clanking against the cinder block wall. Damon had ripped the bastards out of the wall the last time, with ease.

But he wasn't here this time. They'd taken him someplace else. She had to get loose in order to save him. The last time they'd sent him in with her, pumped full of drugs. But the murmurs from the few who'd wandered close to her cell told her something else was up.

None of the workers would meet her eyes, yet in hushed tones she'd heard her name and Damon's bandied about.

The door at the end of the hall opened, then slammed shut. The sound of footsteps approached. Then they stopped. Muffled movement sounded just out of her sight and more whispers. Then in walked Peter Burke.

He looked calm and at ease in his spiffy clothes. A white silk shirt and grey trousers. His shoes were polished to a shine and he bent down and wiped off a spot of dirt before looking at her.

Inwardly she seethed, wishing he was closer. She could kill him where he stood. She knew that now, but she still would be locked in this stupid cell, unable to get out.

"Hello, my dear. Have you had a wonderful visit so far?"

"Go to hell, Burke. Better yet, unlock these cuffs and we'll see how wonderful my visit becomes."

"Tut tut tut," he said, wagging a finger at her. "Be nice and I'll give you a present."

"I won't play nice for you, Burke. Bring me the key and I won't use my power to force you."

He motioned with a hand behind him to the other man who stood at the bars behind him. "Oh, but you'll enjoy my present. I got it special for you. Wesley, bring it in."

His slimy grin was creepy and she fought a shudder of revulsion.

Krystal was just about to use her powers when the other man stepped into the cell. He was carrying something large, wrapped in black plastic, heaved over his shoulder. Her stomach twisted. She knew that black plastic. It was the same as was wrapped around Wolfie.

The man dumped his package on the floor and grinned at Preacher Man.

Fear climbed Krystal's spine as she stared at the 'gift.' The item was long and cylindrical. About five and a half feet long. As long as a human body. And as wide. Oh, God, it couldn't be.

"Show her," ordered Burke.

The assistant stooped down, his fangs flashing over slimy lips. He grabbed an end of the plastic and pulled.

Krystal tried to look with police trained detachment. The body was that of a female. She was about five feet three inches tall and had blonde hair. But it was the bright green eyes staring back at her that shook her to her core.

Denise.

Dead.

"No," cried Krystal. Pain and revulsion rushed through her body. Inside she screamed her head filled with pain. The throbbing center of her power shoved inside her chest, pushing. She should be worried for herself. Worried for Damon. Yet no matter how hard she tried, her focus remained glued on the body.

"I had me some fun," cackled the assistant.

"Fun?" she repeated. She heard his words but they didn't quite sink into her consciousness. Wide, glassy eyes stared at her from a bruised and battered face. Her clothes were ripped, exposing the graying dead flesh beneath.

"Yeah, the bitch was a good lay. I love it when they fight."

Grief gave way to fury, as though glad to escape the pain. The center of power within Krystal pulsed as tears ran down her face. For the first time she wished she shared Lance's power over energy. She wished she could sear every one of them with lightning.

Deep inside, she felt a snap, then turned to meet the eyes of the man who'd killed her best friend. The one who'd tortured Denise until her body gave up. The look of death in her friend's eyes would haunt her forever more. Rage pulsed, burning deep inside her, trickling through the icy wall of the small nut of her power. She could feel it, pulsing, throbbing with the need to be more than it was. A crack shot across the surface as though it were a real entity, sending bolts of pain through her.

The two hyenas laughed as they watched her grief and pain play over her face. They would die. Krystal wasn't sure where the thought came from, or how she would kill them, but the instant it materialized, she knew it was true.

"Just wait till she hears what they did to that wolf," said Burke.

"I heard they killed him. Shoulda heard his howl of pain just before the room exploded," said Sylvester.

The cackles of their laughter grated on what was left of Krystal's control, eroding the last vestiges of the wall between her and her nut sized seat of power.

Pressure surged inside that small shell. Wild and violent, it shoved and twisted, growing exponentially. Pain seared her heart, mind and soul. She didn't know what hurt most: grief, or the blinding white hot pain ripping through her mind.

Krystal screamed just as the shell's wall shattered.

Like a broken elastic band, the force of her magick exploded outward, multiplying with every wave. Like a virus it bled into her cells once starved for its touch. It radiated into her muscles, her heart, lungs and beyond. Her scream went on, though she was barely conscious of her wails.

Then, as though her body could contain it no more, the power exploded from her body, pulsing through the cell, slamming into the two men who stood gawking. Wesley slammed against the bars of the cell. Burke crashed into the far wall, his head thumping like an overripe melon.

Krystal fought to control the pain, to control the energy screaming from her body. Then, blessedly, everything went black.

Light pierced her consciousness, chasing away the darkness in sharp, painful jabs. A moan sounded in the room and it took Krystal a moment to realize it came from her. Every muscle and joint ached as though she'd run a full twenty miles rather than her regular ten. The dull throb in her head sounded like a low steady drum beat. She moved to touch her head only to find her wrists were bound in chains.

Krystal opened her eyes.

She was sitting on the hard, cement floor and though she still wore her jeans, it was cold. *Shit.* She was still in the cell.

The wheels of her mind twisted and turned until they at last caught up with reality. Across from her on the floor lay a hyena. Krystal cocked her head. Had there been a hyena in here before?

Preacher Man! She squinted and studied the animal. The body was partially clad in tattered clothes. Legs lay in awkward positions, one folded back the wrong way and a bar from the prison in which they'd kept her had impaled his chest. Cold, dead eyes stared at her from the greasy face. She felt no sympathy.

Her eyes scanned to the next body upon the floor.

Denise.

Krystal closed her eyes again, willing the sting of tears to stay where they were. She was a captive, but they were not going to make her cry. When she opened them, the tears did not fall, but only so long as she avoided Denise. She couldn't do it. Not right now. Later, when all this was over, she would see to it Denise received the respect in death she'd earned in life.

And Damon.

The tears no longer obeyed her command and trickled down her cheeks. Damon was her mate. Her future husband. Or had been. He'd fought against it, even telling her he didn't love her, but she knew better. Yes, it had hurt, knowing he would lie to her, but the reason he denied his love, *that* she was sure was noble.

To protect her.

Maybe they were wrong. Wesley and Preacher Man had said they heard Damon's howl of pain, and then a crash. That didn't mean he was dead. The GSA wanted him to be their super soldier. They weren't going to just kill him. At least, not on purpose.

Her eyes swung toward the barred doorway. Wesley had also shifted back to his animal form. In his case, the bars had given, one iron rod shoved straight through his head. His mouth was open as though about to give that grisly hyena laugh.

Krystal breathed through the shudder fighting rippling through her body. *I will not get sick.* She forced air in and out of her lungs. She needed to get out of here. Hell, it would be nice if she could figure out what just happened.

The pain she'd felt was gone and in its place was the hum of power skimming through her cells. The tiny hairs on her skin stood erect, as though electrified. Krystal frowned. Earlier, it felt as though a part of her insides exploded. As though her magick could no longer be contained within its tiny compartment in her body. For years, it had felt like the small nut, its shell uncrackable. Krystal took a deep breath and searched inside. Yes, there it was. Power. A ball of energy, right where it belonged, in her solar plexus. But it wasn't the small tiny nut any longer. Now it burned hot and strong and as large as a grapefruit. Did it feel so big just because she was used to it being so small?

The sensation of power any mage held told them of the strength of that power. The smaller it was, the weaker. If she wasn't over estimating her awareness, her power had grown by more than three hundred percent. *Hell.* That meant she was more powerful than any of her brothers. Krystal fought back the sudden giddy grin. Remembering an old exercise from her childhood, she focused, mentally touching the vibrating energy in her gut. The jolt of power shot through her and she jerked her head back, slamming it into the cement wall behind her.

"Ow, shit." Stars flashed behind her eyes as she squeezed her eyelids closed. At least the power was real. It was like sticking her hand in a wall socket, and she'd barely caressed the surface of the ball with her mind. There was no way she imagined that power.

She tried again, this time prepared for the surge. Directing the tendrils disturbed by her touch, she created an energy ball in one of her manacled hands. In an instant the ball exploded to ten times the size she intended, burning her hand. She flicked it away, surprised to see it bounce several times on the hard cement floor before dissipating.

Krystal flexed her fingers. She was in trouble. Power needed control. And control took years to learn.

She glanced at the iron surrounding her wrists.

Damon had told her the cuffs in this place were spell bound, safe from magick. *We'll just see about that.* That is, if she didn't kill herself.

With a deep breath she focused on the energy again. This time she imagined it as a ball of thread. Not thick yarn, but tiny, wispy threads. She poured the magick into the silver cuffs on her wrists. "*Aperio.*" Open. She probably didn't need the verbal command with so much magick at her disposal, but she said it anyway.

The cuffs clicked. Krystal let out a sigh of relief. With shaking fingers, she slipped them off and rubbed her wrists.

She had to find Damon. He could be hurt somewhere. She wouldn't believe he was dead until there was proof. Not until she saw the body.

Wait a second. She could look to see if he was dead. With his mark.

If he was dead, she would know, wouldn't she?

She pondered for a moment. Since the instant his fangs had pierced her flesh, she'd felt him deep inside her.

Krystal forced herself to stand. The wooziness hit and she leaned back against the wall. Not exactly dizzy but more like... she was high. Really high. The magick was messing with her mind.

She rested a hand against the wall and leaned her weight on it, then concentrated. Searching. She could feel his bond. It had to be there. All she had to do was find it. If True Matings were permanent, that had to mean there was a stronger connection.

Krystal sorted through the threads of energy in her mind. One was different from the others. In her mind's eye it glittered as though spun gold, while the rest were silver and burned white hot. She grasped hold, vibrating that small thin string.

Fury unlike anything she'd sensed from Damon to date slammed back at her. Krystal gasped, pulling back from the connection. Panting, she wiped her hand across her trembling mouth. At least he was alive. Now she had to find him.

She bit her lip and shoved her hair from her face before moving to the cell door. She stepped over Wesley's body, but instead of ducking through the bars, she moved to the side, to the lock. Her stomach was already threatening to heave out its contents. No need to make matters worse by getting close to the gore.

"*Aperio,*" she said again when she reached the bars. The lock clicked. This time the magick was easier to use. Her only hope was to continue to use the power until she had it under control, because if she tried anything when she was distracted, she might kill someone by mistake. Maybe even herself.

Once in the main prison hall, she saw several other cells. Empty. *What the hell.* Langston had insisted there were other prisoners. He'd even given them a list of them. *Crap.* That meant they were elsewhere in the building.

She strode to the main door leading out into the GSA headquarters. From the plans she'd seen on the CD, she was somewhere in the basement. There were two different rooms in opposite wings capable of holding prisoners. Holding cells, they were called. Her brothers didn't seem surprised by their presence, but she was. Why the hell would the GSA have thought to build holding cells when they planned this building? Unless they had always been some kind of covert scientific research facility.

Another shudder ran through her body and she saw no reason to stifle it. Damon. He'd been one of their science projects. He'd ended up with amnesia. And now, who knew what dastardly experiments they were working on him.

Krystal bit her trembling lip and reached for the door knob, then hesitated. She had a lot of power now, but magick couldn't stop bullets. Strike that. Bullets could be stopped if you knew how, but she hadn't a clue how it was done. Ross knew. He was excellent at creating shield magick. He'd

even made dusters for the brothers which were shields against danger. Shame he hadn't made her one.

Shit. *The Fantastic Four!* Krystal felt around in her pocket and fished out her cell phone, then pressed speed dial. The number she dialed would notify her brothers she needed help. She tucked the phone back in her pocket. She knew Logan. The instant his phone rang and all he got was the prerecorded message, he'd be on the computer trying to track down her phone. Her only fear was the little boost he'd tucked inside the small device wasn't strong enough. But she didn't have time to watch the message go out. Danger teased along the edges of her senses, like an insect buzzing around her head, waiting to dive in, hungry for its drop of iron rich blood.

Hell, she'd just have to find a way to make a shield herself. She had plenty of power, no doubt about it. Krystal closed her eyes and reached again for the power inside her. Then, visualizing the energy as tiny threads, she weaved a shield. Like fine cloth, the white hot power floated in her mind's eye, growing inch by inch. When it reached the size of a cloak, she imagined swinging it around over her shoulders. The last touch was a hood, weaving the power to rest upon her head. The energy weighed heavy, though invisible.

At last she opened her eyes and exhaled. The sound brimmed with confidence, mixed with a touch of fear. Fear was smart. Hell, these people killed mages for fun. Experimented on them, and killed them. Getting cocky was not going to get her anywhere. And if Damon was alive, it was up to her to find him, before they damaged him further, destroying more than his memories.

Her fingers tightened on the door knob and she listened. Nothing. Using caution as her guide, she turned the knob and peeked out. Still nothing. Why weren't there white coated orderlies, or heavily muscled guards? Was the GSA that confident?

Then she heard it.

The wail of a siren in the distance. That's why they weren't guarding her. They were protecting against something else. An Intrusion? Damon? Krystal ignored the flicker of hope igniting in her chest. Either way it was good for her.

She stepped into the hall, her cloak of power in place. They could see her, but few could hurt her now. There would be no way to know if it would stop bullets until it was too late. She only hoped her meager knowledge she'd gained by watching Ross would be enough.

Closing the door behind her, she felt as though she'd entered another world. From darkness came light, stabbing her eyes in their brightness. Walls held the tell tale smell of fresh paint, as though they were trying to cheer up the building.

Ha. Can't cheer up the damned.

Keeping her steps soft, she moved forward, peering into doors and windows of offices. Papers lay scattered on desks, but no people. The alarm must have frightened them off, or else they converged to help with the emergency. Either way that meant less for her to deal with.

A muffled growl echoed in the darkness behind her.

Krystal whirled about, her heart pounding in her chest, peering through the shadows. A monstrous beast stood at the end of the hall. At least seven feet tall, his muscular arms bigger around than her waist. Glowing amber eyes stared at her hungrily, and fangs flashed their deadly message.

He wore no clothes, yet had the body of a human in almost all respects, though dusted with a fine layer of shaded brown fur.

Fear shot through her, piercing her focus, scattering her thoughts.

Her shield dropped.

All that work. For nothing.

Chapter 19

Damon. That was his name. He wouldn't forget this time. The beast grappled with the thoughts flitting in and out of his mind. The drug made his brain foggy, but he wouldn't let *them* win this time.

He had to find *Her*. Now. Before... Before what? The beast shook his head, fighting to clear the building rage. He was angry. Why?

For the first time, the man and the wolf were one. Acting as one. Thinking, what little thinking he could do, as one. And his brain pushed him forward. Searching. For who or what, he couldn't remember.

Her.

That's all he knew. He had to find *Her*.

Each time he thought of *Her*, a remembered scent caressed his soul. Like sweet wine. He couldn't remember her face, but he could remember her smell.

Using all four limbs, he ran through the hallways of the building. He inhaled, searching for the scent of the female. A growl of frustration rumbled in his chest.

The hall took a sharp left and he went with it, his feet sliding out from under him on the slick surface. Why couldn't there be soil here? His claws were made to run, where his toes could sink into the soft dirt for traction.

A place he could hunt.

Dig.

Run.

The more he fought against their drug, the more he struggled against the fog in his head, the more violent his urges grew. He ran his tongue over his fangs. He could still taste the blood from the man in the exam room. The hot, coppery scent clung to his flesh where the drops splashed on his chest.

The beast fought the urge to scoop it up with a finger and taste one more time. *Wrong. It was wrong to taste blood.* But why?

He cornered again, this time remembering to slow and keep his traction. A new scent whispered in the cool, artificial air. The beast stopped, raising his body to its full height. *Female.* His nostrils widened. *Mine.* His loins burned hot and ready. Instinct rushed through his body. Protect. Take. Possess.

Dropping back to all fours, he ran forward, following the delicious feminine perfume. A growl of hunger rolled up his spine, rumbling and echoing through the halls. It was *Her*. He turned one last corner and there she stood, staring at him. He stopped, raising himself to his full height.

The woman.

Her face was pale and her eyes wide. She had backed away, plastered against the far wall. He sniffed. Her essence flowed to him, carried by the light, air conditioned atmosphere between them. Damon opened his mouth, and licked his lips. He rolled the sweet scent over his tongue and around his mouth, moaning in delight at her taste. Fear. Delicious, sweet fear. He dropped to move forward, and then stopped.

He raised again. The beast shook his head. *Wrong.* He would not meet her as an animal. Instead, he would stand, meet her on her terms. He stepped toward her.

"Stop," she whispered, terror vibrating in the sounds of her words.

Like music, it played inside him, tweaking his soul. He cocked his head. "Mine." The word came out guttural, almost a growl.

She shook her head, one hand held out, warding against his approach.

"Stay back. I don't want to hurt you."

The beast cocked his head, studying her. "No hurt," he tried to say, but that wasn't what came out. Some hidden memory told him he should be able to speak, but his tongue kept getting tangled on itself and his mouth couldn't seem to shape the words.

The female's eyes widened, and her mouth gaped. "Damon? Oh, God, Damon is that you?"

Her voice was like the tinkle of soft bells against his soul. Both soothing and arousing. He stepped closer. "Speak," he demanded. "More." She would understand. And she would obey. She had to obey. He advanced another step.

"Damon, what happened to you?"

The words didn't matter. Only the sound mattered. The music of her voice played along his body like a tender caress. His body hardened with desire. Instinct pressed him forward. *Mine*. Like a chant, the word played across his mind.

The scent of salt caught his attention and he cocked his head, hesitating. Small drops of liquid traced down her cheeks from her big, terrified eyes. The urge to lick away the drops, to taste them, made his mouth water. Hungry to discover her delicate secrets, he advanced.

She shook her head, the water now a steady stream on her face. "It's me. Krystal. Don't you know me?"

The beast growled. He didn't know anyone. He didn't know *him*. But he did know she was his *Mate*. And he would have her.

She was Krystal.

He drew to a stop. The name sounded familiar. As though it was important. He was looking for *Her*. And he'd found *Her*. But why had he been searching? The beast fought against the fog in his mind, furious at his inability to remember. He tipped his head back and roared.

She whimpered in terror.

His control snapped and he rushed her, slamming against her soft body, his fangs bared. He heard the air woosh from her lungs, but she made no other sound. Growling, he inhaled. Such sweetness. Like wine.

He drew back, staring her in the eye. She stared back. Fear still rippled off her in waves, yet she ignored it, her chin raised so her eyes could meet his. Challenging. He liked it. He hated it.

With a sharp nail, he brushed the hair from her cheek. Such a soft cheek. He touched it again, pressing the delicate flesh. Blood seeped from the tiny scratch his nail made. She gasped, surprised, her eyes wide, but she did not struggle. He wanted her to struggle. *Fight me*, the quiet voice in his head whispered to her.

He leaned in and licked the droplets of blood. Like her scent, it was sweet and tasty. It rolled over his tongue and down his throat. He resisted the urge to draw more, though why he did so he wasn't sure. "Speak," he commanded. He would taste her more after her voice sang to him.

"Don't do this, Damon. Don't hurt me."

She swallowed, drawing his attention to the white expanse of her delicate throat. His lip curled into a snarl and his hand caressed her soft flesh, resting on the vibrating thump of her pulse. "Speak more," he demanded.

"You have to remember me. You promised me you would always remember me, no matter what."

Damon leaned forward, mesmerized by the soft southern lilt of her voice. "Who are you?" he asked. This time his voice was stronger. Clearer, though his words still sounded funny.

"Krystal," she said. Confidence oozed from that delicate throat. "Your mate."

"Ate?" he asked. His teeth got in the way when he tried to talk. Yes, he'd felt she was his.

One hand slid up between them and she moved her blouse aside enough for him to see a mark. Instinct welled up inside him and he leaned in, sniffing. It smelled like him. Why couldn't he remember her if she was his mate?

"Not Ate," he growled.

"Yes, Damon. Your Mate. You are Damon Connell, my mate and if you'll have me, my future husband."

He wished he could talk. Hell, he wished he could remember why this woman was so important. He shook his head in confusion.

"Yes. And you promised. You promised you would never be able to forget me. That nothing anyone could do would strip that memory. Think, Damon." Tears flowed freely and unashamedly down her cheeks. Her body trembled. But she no longer feared him. The sickly sweet tang of terror had faded, replaced by...He inhaled. Pain? She was in pain?

Anger unlike anything he remembered ripped through him. Someone had hurt this female. *His* female.

"You hurt?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, I hurt. Because you don't remember me."

The beast glared at her. He wasn't hurting her. Then his eyes traced her cheek where he'd scratched her. Yes, he had. Why? Why would he hurt so beautiful a female? Shame swept through him. He should remember her. To ease her pain.

She met his eyes, challenging him. He growled low in his throat. Instinct pressed him to remind her of her place.

Then, as though she read his mind, she averted her eyes, tipping her head back. He moved in a flash. His fangs scraped the tender flesh of her throat. Her body stiffened, but she didn't move. Even when he closed his teeth, pinching that beautiful pink skin, she didn't move.

"*Mine*," he announced, at long last able to say the word.

"Yours," she whispered.

Damon froze. The fog in his mind thinned, thoughts began to merge, to clear. Bits of images flashed in his mind. Memories. He couldn't make sense of them, but they told him one thing. She wasn't here to hurt him. She wasn't the cause of this mess. She was here to help him. She was his mate.

He pulled back, his eyes narrowing as he examined her. "ootiful" he managed.

She sniffed, as though fighting the urge to cry again. That's what the salty water had been. Tears. Damon rumbled pleasure at putting the pieces together.

She raised a trembling hand and touched his naked flesh. So warm. So delicate. Small flickers of memories flashed in his mind. Memories of him taking her from behind, and with her on her back. Memories of her taste. Memories of a family.

"What did they do to you, Damon?"

More images flashed in his mind in answer, only these were not pleasant. A doctor. His assistant. A needle stabbed into him as he struggled to shift. "Exeeriment," he replied.

"Oh, God," she murmured. Her eyes teared and he bent to lick the salty moisture from her cheeks. He closed his eyes, enjoying the subtle taste of her over his tongue.

Her hand continued to caress his chest, then over his arm. The soft touch did things to his body he didn't understand. The hunger to kill eased, and in its place grew the already present sharp edge of desire. He wanted her. Here, in this hall. And she wanted him. He could see the flush to her cheeks, smell her hunger in the air. He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her soft, feminine body against the hard planes of his own. She gasped, her body shuddering against him. The beast bespoke his pleasure, the sound rumbling down the hall, echoing against the walls. Her eyes fluttered closed at the sound and he felt his lips curve in a semblance of a smile.

He leaned in, intending to claim those rosy lips, but when he pressed against her, she yelped. He pulled back, puzzled.

"Watch those teeth," she said, holding her hand over her lips.

Embarrassed, he nodded and released her. He turned away, searching to find his lost memories. He wasn't a man any longer. Somehow he knew he had been before. But he wasn't animal either. He was somewhere in between. Rage and pain mixed inside him.

"You can understand me, right?"

He nodded.

"Good. Because we have things to do. Can you remember how we got here?"

I wish. He shook his head.

"I guess that's not important. We have to find Langston's girlfriend. Do you think you can help me?"

Somehow her words made sense. She needed his help. "Yeshhh," the word came out slurred and heavy, but she seemed to understand him. "Kryshall?"

"What?"

"You are Kryshall?" He sounded like an idiot. But the more he concentrated on his speech, the better it got. As did his memory. He straightened, ignoring the surprised look on her face at his towering above her.

"Yes. I'm Krystal." She offered him a tremulous smile and he tried to return it, but if the sudden look of trepidation on her face was anything to go by, it hadn't worked.

"I ate," he said. When she frowned, he tried again, forcing his lips around his teeth. "Mmy mmate."

"Yes, Damon. I'm your mate. Do you remember?"

He wanted to lie to her, to say yes, if just to see the pain on her face ease. But he couldn't. One never lied to your mate. He didn't know how he knew that, but it was true. But he could remember her scent. It played now on his heart and lungs, pumping into his blood. "Somme," he said at last.

She nodded. "Good. That will have to do. Look, we have to go find Langston's girl, and get out of here. I heard an alarm before, so they must know you escaped."

"Killed doctor," he said.

Her brows raised in surprise. "You killed Doctor Carey?"

He nodded. "Hurt mme, was going to hurt you."

"Yeah, well, I don't think he could. Let's go and I'll explain on the way."

Krystal took Damon's hand and pulled him along with her. It was bigger than it had been, and the sharp nails on each finger were half canine, half human. But when she looked into those beautiful golden eyes, Damon was still in there. He was changed, there was no avoiding that. The long canine nose was more animal than man, and his ears were pointed on the ends. Worse, they'd stolen his memory again. It was almost as though they had managed to merge both parts of him into one. Only he'd gotten bigger. As though the mass doubled when they did whatever they did.

He was so tall he ducked as they moved through an arched hallway, and he was so wide in the shoulders no one else could walk beside them in the hallway if they'd wanted to. "Look, I don't know how much you remember Damon, but you know about my magick?"

He frowned, then after a moment, nodded.

Thank heaven. She didn't want to start by explaining she was a mage. She'd managed to avoid that little problem because he'd met her brothers, but now, she didn't really know what he knew, and what he didn't.

"Good. Well, when I was in the prison cell they'd chained me in---"

He growled, his fangs flashing in anger.

"Don't worry, I'm fine. Really." Krystal tried to hide the sudden surge of pleasure at his reaction. He still cared for her. Yet when he'd first pressed against her body, arousal had been as powerful as the fear. She wanted him. The same way she'd always wanted him. Somehow, in his transition, the GSA had enhanced the testosterone and pheromones that were Damon. Her body had reacted, shooting bolts of pleasure and arousal through her with the speed of lightning. His scent had rolled through her nose and into her mouth, teasing her with promise of more to come. Even now her body ached, heavy with desire she tried to push aside. *This isn't the time.*

They moved forward, easing around each corner as they headed to the far wing where the other holding cells stood. "So while I was locked up, Burke and his wimp Wesley showed up. It turns out they were paid by the GSA to bring us in. They figured they'd kill two birds with one stone by doing so, since I've been after Burke for years. Burke of course had to gloat." Anger burned in her gut at the memory. "They also brought Denise to me."

Damon stopped and turned toward her, cocking his head, as though fighting to remember.

"shshsheee okay?"

Krystal blinked back the tears filling her eyes. "No, she's not. They'd killed her."

"I'm sssorry," he said. His rough fingers brushed away her tears.

Krystal closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. For this instant, it didn't matter what he looked like. It didn't matter where they were. He was Damon, her mate, easing her pain. She tried to focus on that instead of Denise's blank, staring eyes.

"Yeah, well they told me you were dead, too." She closed her eyes at the remembered pain. "When they said that, something happened inside me. My power, it... I guess for lack of a better description, it exploded."

"You hurt?" he said, stopping and examining her arms and legs.

"I'm fine. But Burke and Wesley are dead. I killed them."

She tried to feel bad about their deaths, but she couldn't. They deserved it after what they'd done to Denise. She might feel guilty later, but for right now she didn't care.

"It seems my power is now released. It's stronger than all of my brothers. Probably because it's been contained--"

"Shh," Damon shushed her. One powerful arm flattened her against a door, the knob jabbing her in the back.

God, he was strong. Stronger than before. He hadn't hurt her, but the power in his move was unmistakable. She shouldn't find this strength attractive, yet deep inside, somehow she did. For the first time, since meeting Damon, she felt as much like a wolf as he looked. A shewolf looking for the strongest, most powerful male to mate. Hell, there was no doubt Damon was that male. She tipped her head back, planning to nip his chin, but he wasn't looking at her.

His attention was focused in the corner near the ceiling.

Damn. A camera.

The slow sweep of the machinery from left to right showed the lens moving in their direction. Krystal shoved aside the strange need to bite her mate and grappled with the door knob gouging her back. Her fingers at last closed over the smooth metal and she turned it. The door opened. With one hand she grabbed at Damon's shoulder and dragged him back into the darkened room. They both reached to close the door. With Damon's fingers over hers, they eased the door shut. Krystal turned, her back now against the inside of the door.

He was so close, she could feel the energy from his body. Each wave washed over her, merging with her own energy field, warm, comforting. Protective. For an instant she felt only the need to feel his arms around her, protecting her from what she knew must be coming. If only he didn't look so... scary.

"Damon, is it possible for you to shift back?"

His brow furrowed as though struggling to understand her meaning. "Shift back?"

Oh, God, he didn't know. "Uhm, yeah. Have you looked into a mirror?"

He shook his head. "Why?"

Krystal took one of his arms in her hands, then, directing his gaze with her own, she traced the outline of the massive forearm, the long clawed fingers fighting to merge as paws. "Have you done this before?"

Damon looked down, confused. He knew something was wrong. His words wouldn't form the way they should, and he'd felt more animal than man even though he was on two feet. His eyes trailed down her body, following the soft sweetness of her fingers to the hand she held.

His hand.

His paw.

He jerked his eyes back to hers, then down again. With her pale, delicate flesh, her fingers caressed fur.

Damon yanked from her grasp and turned his back, sending a quick glance down his body. He was naked, which didn't surprise him. But things didn't look right. He was bigger. He was hairier. The drugs no longer fogged his mind and he could think, but the memories were sketchy. If the look on Krystal's face told the story, he hadn't looked like this before. Flexing his palm, he stared at the horror of what he'd become. Huge muscles flexed along his forearm, rippling beneath the brown fur that shouldn't be there. What the hell had they done to him? He reached for his face, nearly scratching his own eye with the long claws at the tips of his fingers. His face felt the same, yet different. Larger maybe?

"What have they done to me?" he murmured.

"It's like you're half way between wolf and man," she answered, though he wasn't looking for her answer.

He shook his head. "Not good." He wanted to roar, to howl his pain and fury. They'd taken her away from him, making him a monster. He swung toward her, searching her eyes for fear, yet there was none. He tried to remember what they'd done when they had him strapped to that examination table. The remembered fury at the straps holding him down shook through his body even now. The fear for Krystal's life. Then the needle. He'd tried to shift, to do anything to avoid the drug inside. The same drug which had stolen his memories.

Then nothing. He didn't remember anything until he held Krystal again in his arms, her soft, feminine scent curling into his lungs, calming his beast.

God, Krystal. She was his mate, and he'd probably terrified her by the way he looked. Yet she stood, calm and serene, watching him. She was so damned strong. Just like he had always wanted. How he knew he wasn't sure, but the thought was the clearest he'd had since the needle had sliced his skin.

Shit, his beast. He couldn't feel him. At least, not in the way he once did. It was as though he was the beast, and yet human. It felt as though they were one entity. Not man. Not animal. But one.

He glanced at himself again. A man, who stands upright, with brown canine fur covering his body, with claws for hands. Shame burned inside him. How could he stand here beside this woman and take her as his mate? He was worthless. Less than man. Less than wolf.

He growled. He would not show weakness. Not now, when danger surrounded the woman he called his mate.

"It's not so bad." Her delicate hand reached to touch him, caressing his bicep.

He stared down at the soft hands. He ached to have them caress him this way, but not when fur separated his flesh from hers. He jerked away.

"Don't," he growled.

She didn't even hesitate, but moved to face him, although she didn't try to touch him again. "Try it, Damon. See if you can shift to either form. Maybe..." She let her voice trail off, and he knew what she was thinking. He might be able to be a wolf again, but probably not a man.

He rumbled his frustration. "I'll try."

Damon closed his eyes, picturing the man he was this morning, when he held Krystal in his arms, then reached for the magick within. Nothing. Not a damned thing.

Avoiding her gaze, he tried again, this time reaching for the wolf. The image came easier, but still there was no magick. It was as though the center which held his magick was hidden inside a shell, buried deep in his psyche.

"I can't," he gasped at last.

"It'll happen," said Krystal.

He shook his head. "No, it's gone. They've drained the magick from me. The only remnant is a tiny empty ball."

Her brow raised. "Are you sure? That's what mine used to feel like."

Damon nodded. "It's gone. Wrapped up tight and I can't get to it."

"Shit," she said. "Don't worry. We can get that back. It's just a matter of figuring out how. And unlike me, it's not going to take twenty five years to find it."

Damon narrowed his gaze on his mate, studying her. Something had changed. Power circled her, cocooning her in a protective energy. Her eyes glittered with it. Her body nearly glowed like a goddess, her aura an ethereal glimmer in the small room. Her smile was more confident, more arousing than ever before.

While the doctors of the GSA had been busy destroying what he once was, she'd found her true strength. Found the mage she was meant to be.

She would not want him now. She was powerful and strong, while he was this... this thing.

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed, pushing past him.

Damon whirled, expecting danger. Instead, he saw Krystal running toward the only light source in the room. When he'd examined himself, he'd noticed the additional lighting from the wall, but not the cause. Now, he followed her gaze and peered in the same direction. Clear tanks lined the wall, filled with a liquid of some kind. The thick, somewhat milky substance hid the shadows within. Searching the depths, he realized why she gasped. For tucked safely within the liquid of each tank was a creature.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I've not seen anything like them."

Inside the tanks were bodies. Only they weren't quite human. Each of them had different heads, or instead of hands they had hooves, or paws. One even had pinchers. One had flippers where his feet should be, with large fish like eyes, and a bulging face. Movement within the water provided proof of life, such as it was.

"Oh shit," she said. "They're blending DNA of animals with humans."

"Are you sure they aren't just shifters, gone awry, like me?"

She shook her head. She put out a hand, blindly reaching for him as though to comfort them both. "No. I can feel the magick in you, even though you can't reach it. There's no magick in these creatures." She put her hand to the glass tubing, as though she wanted to touch one of the abominations.

"We should destroy them," he growled. Nobody deserved to live their lives like this. Misshapen creatures whose bodies couldn't become man nor beast. Like himself.

"We don't have time," she said, yet still her hand stayed in place, as though she was trying to communicate with the one in front of her. The half dolphin, half woman. Where fingers should be, they were webbed, attaching the small appendages into one for faster swimming, but her hands were tied together. A tail trailed downward where her legs should be. A mask over her face gave her the oxygen she needed to survive. Something told him the hands were tied because she'd tried to rip off the mask to kill herself.

"If we aren't going to destroy them, we need to go. It won't be long before they figure out we ducked inside their newest lab. They'll kill us just for knowing about them."

She nodded. "She's aware. Her body hurts with each change they make to it. She wants us to stop this from happening to others."

Damon cocked his head. "How do you know?"

She shrugged. "My gift has always been empathy and a little telepathy. I just usually work with animals."

He took Krystal's arm. "We'll help her. Just as soon as we release those in the cages." Damon marveled how far he'd come in a few minutes. Just being next to Krystal had at last cleared his mind of the drug stealing his thoughts. "We can't chance being caught here. We can't save everyone." He pulled her away, struggling to ignore the hand she held out to the dolphin woman. He could feel Krystal's pain, but if he didn't get her out of here, she would die. "I'll come back, Krystal. I'll make sure they are destroyed, and all the equipment in this room."

She dropped her hand and turned into his body. Just as she ducked her head he scented the salt of her tears. Tears for which he knew there would be no comfort. The horror of what they'd seen would live with her the rest of their lives. Not a problem for him, since his life would be short. When he killed the creatures, he would kill himself as well.

He dragged her from the room and down the hall, ducking past the camera while it faced down the opposite hall. He remembered reviewing plans from a CD. In fact, he remembered almost everything from the time he first met Krystal. Those memories would make what he had to do even harder.

Following the plans in his mind, he headed toward the secondary prison wing, dragging Krystal alongside him.

"Wait," she whispered.

He slowed and turned. She gasped for breath and yanked her hand back. "You're going to have to slow down, Damon. You may be all hot and sexy, but damn it, I can't keep up with that faster pace."

Hot and sexy? *Did they give her drugs too?*

He waited till she caught her breath, then hurried down the hall.

When he reached the door, he didn't even check to see if it was locked. With one hand, he ripped it from its hinges and tossed it aside.

He stepped inside first, keeping his mate behind him. The dank smell of bodies, both animal and human, assaulted his nose, and he sneezed in an effort to clear his senses. The room was dark. He could already see the line of cells, small tiny prisons, encircled by iron bars, each painted with silver. Everything was so familiar, yet he'd never been in this room.

"I can't see anything," said Krystal. Damon turned and flicked the power on. Krystal gave a sharp gasp.

Animals paced in cages, each with a silver collar upon its neck. Other cells held people, also with the collars about their neck, but in smaller versions, keeping them from shifting to their animal forms. Just as they had done to him for so long. These people they could save. Not those poor souls in the tanks. Anger burned inside him as never before. He moved to the first cell and yanked the door straight from its hinges, the sound echoing against the brick walls.

"Damon, wait, what if..."

"What if what? They find us? Right now, Krystal," he motioned toward the cages, "I want the bastard responsible for this menagerie to step foot in here. I dare him." For the moment he was glad for the extra power in his arms as he ripped another cell door from its hinges. The young woman inside huddled in the corner as though terrified to move forward. He didn't know if it was him causing her fear, or what they had done to her. Either way, it couldn't be helped.

"Get them out of here, Krystal. Use your magick to remove their collars and get them out."

"What about you?"

"Do it," he ordered as he ripped off another cell door. The wolf inside the prison howled with pent up frustration and anger, though he didn't step toward him to interfere. Damon had been in his paws and he knew exactly how the beast felt. Confused. Untrusting, yet wanting with every fiber in his being for this to spell freedom. A quick glance to the side showed Krystal throwing aside the collar she'd removed from the young woman. Good.

The hinges from the hall door squawked in complaint as the door swung open. But what stepped through the door wasn't a man. And he wasn't a beast.

Chills ran over Damon's skin. The creature walked upright on legs more animal than human, with dark cloven hooves for feet. The wide expanse of his chest was shaped like that of a man, but was twice as wide, twice as strong. As were the powerfully muscled arms. With a neck the size of a power lifter. But it was his head which was the most frightening. A long black snout with small, human eyes. It was as though Greek fantasy had come to life, and the minotaur stepped out of the pages of history, complete with two sharp horns atop his animal head.

Steam shot from the beast's nostrils as it snorted. The eyes glowered at Krystal as she fought to calm the young girl she'd just freed, unaware of his presence.

Damon lunged just as the beast moved toward the women, his eyes filled with malice. Curling his lip, Damon snarled, the low rumble vibrating in the air between them. Thanks to the doctors here, the wolf and human were now one, in mind and purpose, and this thing was going down.

The man-animal stopped and turned, his eyes widening in surprise at Damon's challenge. The beast's mouth curved, as though amused.

"Stay away from her," Damon demanded. Anger rolled through his voice, echoing against the prison walls. Krystal whirled about, her face paling as she gazed up at the huge beast.

"Damon," said the beast.

Damon cocked his head. He'd know that gravel voice anywhere. Damon's heart dropped in his chest. "Campbell."

The beast nodded but didn't back away from Krystal. "So we meet again."

"What did they do to you?" asked Krystal, now staring in horror.

The beast tipped its large bovine head back. The sound rumbling from its massive throat must be a laugh, though the noise grated on Damon's nerves.

Stepping closer, Damon put himself between Campbell and his mate.

"What did they do?" the beast-man stretched out his massive arms, the sharp edged muscles on his bare chest prominent beneath the artificial light. "They improved me. Don't you like the new me?"

"We'll get you help," said Krystal, pushing her way from behind Damon. "We'll find someone who can undo this."

Campbell dropped his arms and glared at her. "You mistake me, small one. I don't wish to be *undone*. I am exactly as I wish to be." He turned his attention back to Damon. "After I kill you, I think I shall have a little fun with the female. I wonder if magick makes for a better orgasm."

Red fury flashed before Damon's eyes. "Mine," he roared, his muscles exploding with power. The tiny ball of magick inside him expanded, pulsing with the need to escape.

He charged the half bovine, barreling into his ribs. The door behind the male shook from the blow. The satisfying crunch of bone sounded from the creature's ribs. Yet powerful muscle protected the animal from severe damage and the beast laughed. He spun his body about the small room, dragging Damon with him. Then he released, tossing Damon across the floor into one of the cells.

Pain sliced through his muscles, but Damon stood, shaking himself. "You will die, Campbell." He fisted his hands, willing his strength to build. The magick answered, and muscle and sinew grew. Fangs sharpened in his mouth, his nose growing long and more canine. For this one moment in time, he nothing more than Campbell. An animal. Breath heaved from his lungs and he howled with fury.

The door screeched open. Before Damon could look to see who approached, the monster charged. Grasping the bars of the cell, Damon tensed his muscles, jerking about in time to slam his feet into the creature's abdomen.

The beast roared as it rolled backward onto the sawdust floor.

Krystal's heart pounded with fear as she watched the two fight. Damon, with his animalistic anger at its peak, like never before. He'd grown even larger, his body now massive, filling the once spacious prison with his wide shoulders. He roared, glaring at Campbell. A man who just the day before was human and was now part man, part beast. How could they do this so fast?

Krystal squealed when Campbell tried to use his horns to gouge Damon, but her mate dodged, then charged back into the fray.

The screech of the door caught her attention and she turned. In walked a man. He stood no more than five feet tall, yet his presence echoed off the prison walls. Magick. Whoever this man was, he had the same level of power as her brothers. At least, she hoped it was no more than theirs. She gulped. She needed more time to learn her magick before she fought with it.

The wizard glanced toward the fight on the other side of the room, then turned back to her with a grin. "Hello, Krystal." His voice was smooth and practiced. "I see Campbell couldn't wait to tear into Damon."

"Who are you?"

He bowed, as though courtesy was important while Damon battled the bull-like Campbell. "I am Jacob Vantry, and I am here to keep an eye on Campbell. And of course, to destroy you."

Krystal arched a brow, hiding the sudden ramping of her heart beat. She couldn't figure out what kind of magick the man held. Every Wizard had their own specific kit of talents, but she couldn't identify his. "Destroy me, how?"

He smirked. "Through magick of course, child. Surely you aren't as dense as your wolfish friend there."

Krystal stepped forward. It wouldn't do to get locked into a cell without a fight. "I don't expect you have a reason for what you're doing?" While she talked, she re-built her shield, just like her brother, Ross, had always tried to teach her, yet it took until today before it came with ease. One imaginary rope at a time, it weaved around her at the speed of light, circling her like a mother's loving arms.

"Of course. I intend to kill you because you are in the way. The GSA isn't happy with you, and they know you'll run back to your big brother and tattle about everything you've seen here," he said with child-like sarcasm. "We can't have that, now can we?"

Ignoring the thumping of her heart, she mentally grasped the new center of power inside her. Using her mind, she balled it up like a roll of yarn, then, she let it seep into her arms, legs and even her mind. "I have no intention of tattling," she said, stepping forward.

The door pushed open and one more creature moved inside. A hyena. Damn it. Couldn't those filthy bastards leave them alone? "Get lost while you still can," she called out to it.

The creature circled her, his head low, his nasty cackle echoing through the chamber. Krystal split her attention between him and the wizard before her. Not a good idea and she knew it. If she didn't get rid of the shifter, she could end up dead before she felt the killing blow.

In a flash, her mind reached out, shoving energy like fingers, closing them over the beast's esophagus. She knew choking him wouldn't kill him, but at least it would give her time. One fight at a time was plenty. The cackling ceased and the shifter's eyes bulged. Then, the greasy head lolled to one side. As she felt the creature lose consciousness, Vantry struck. His first magickal charge was electrical energy, screaming between them, searing the air with its heat. Thunder exploded, the energy slamming into her shield. She hobbled backward, maintaining her balance. Okay. She knew his talent now. It was the same as her brother's newest one. Energy.

"You're going to have to try harder than that," she smiled.

“Interesting,” he murmured, his eyes narrowing. “They told me you had almost no magick.”

Krystal laughed, stepping toward her nemesis, searching for a weakness in his magick.

Her own energy pulsed inside her, hungry to explode. *Now isn't the time to get cocky.*

Her thoughts focused on the wizard. She could feel cracks in his shielding, as though erected in piecemeal, rather than with true protection in mind. “Your people lied, Vantry. You are up against a level ten mage. A woman who controls more magick than any other in the state. What say you now?” She really wasn't a level ten mage, but she wasn't about to tell him that. Prior to today she'd been a level one, with her brothers ranging from five to seven. She knew she was at least as powerful as they were, now. But level ten?

With the precision of a seamstress, she slid a sliver of magick past his shields, jolting his body. His eyes widened in shock. Flames licked upward, traveling from the seam to his thigh. He patted it out, skittering about, crying out as the fire caressed his flesh.

His recovery was swift, and reaction was even more swift. Before the fire was extinguished, he shoved magick at her, slamming her backward against the bars of the cell behind her. The blow knocked the breath from her lungs with a woosh. From the corner of her eye she saw Damon still battling the huge minotaur-like beast. The creature had him pinned.

With no more than a thought, she sent a bolt of energy to the minotaur's body. The beast yelped and jerked about. Damon hit him from behind, knocking the beast to the floor.

Krystal then righted herself, charging back at her wizard with a wave of telekinesis. The man spun and slammed into the cell, then threw himself into the air, spinning and landing on his feet beside her. He snatched her hair and yanked her head back.

“You'll pay for that, bitch. Nobody throws me against the wall and lives to tell about it.”

Krystal winced, fighting to ignore the pain. She wished she had her gun so she could just shoot the bastard, but she was left with magick she had no clue how to use. “Prepare to die.”

“Not yet, asshole.” Krystal slammed her elbow back, then grabbed him around the neck, flipping him over her head. “You want gymnastics, I can give them to you.”

His body slammed into the ground, and she heard the breath leave his lungs. But the look on his face was not one of pain, but fury. The powerful retaliation of magick slammed into her brain, burning like fire. She swallowed her scream, her hands holding her throbbing head.

A quick glance told her the wizard was grinning. Overconfident bastard. She continued to play incapacitated.

The bad thing about new power wasn't that she couldn't use it, but figuring out how to do so without killing herself. She quickly scanned her memories, searching for clues. She'd handled this before, when the power had exploded inside her. She concentrated on that memory, compressing her magick tighter and tighter, reigning it in. At last she had it. It wasn't as small as what she'd held this morning, but it would do.

She glanced at the wizard. He was fighting to pull himself back up after her last attack. *Good.* She spun the energy inside her, testing it for control. Then in her mind, she created a funnel, with Vantry as the focus. Krystal took a deep breath, and released. Energy exploded, shooting across the cell toward Vantry. Controlled, unlike before, it pummeled him, slamming him again and again into the iron bars. His body collapsed like a rag doll, tossed about in the center of a tornado.

Power continued to surge. She couldn't control it. Dropping to her knees, she tried to grasp hold of the energy, to wrap it in its little ball, but was unsuccessful. Her body's energy was failing. Dark spots floated before her eyes and she closed them, fighting unconsciousness. What if she couldn't grab control? Would she hurt the prisoners still locked in their cells, or even Damon?

No. She shook her head, fighting the blackness. She was a Maxey, and Maxey's didn't let things get out of their control. Not when others could be hurt.

Even now the sounds of Damon's battle waged, echoing through the chamber. Krystal took a deep breath, focusing again on her magick, soothing it as she would her very own wolf cub. Her mind

stroked it, softening the rough edges, relaxing. At first, she didn't see a change, but after a time, the power receded. It no longer stretched outward, searching for a target. Fingers of energy pulled back, petting the ball almost as if she herself was doing the work.

The softball sized energy rolled and twisted inside her, settling once again into her place of power. She let out a sigh, falling forward to her hands. Her body still tingled with residual energy, but she no longer felt as though she was nothing but an open funnel.

Krystal opened her eyes. Her half of the room was quiet. The prisoners who were freed had all gathered in a single cell, huddled in a corner, protecting one another. Some were naked, some were not. The wolf Damon had freed paced back and forth as though to protect the ones radiating the most fear. Others cringed in the corners of their cells, alone and afraid. Hell, she'd be afraid too if she had witnessed the battle she'd just fought.

Her foe lay in a heap across from her. She wiped moisture from her face and glanced at her hand. Blood. *Aw crap.* She'd pushed too hard and her body had rebelled. She sighed and wiped the blood on her jeans and dragged herself up, using the bars beside her. Her legs trembled and her knees were like water, but they held.

She took a step toward Damon to help him when the high pitched cackle of a hyena caught her attention.

From the other side of the room, Damon wheezed as the minotaur slammed him hard against the bars again. Another rib cracked beneath the pressure and he snarled to hide his pain. He'd lost count how many times the two of them had thrown the other about. They were too evenly matched to make any progress.

He heard the cackle of the hyena. Damn it. Somehow he'd forgotten about the beast. Sharp fangs pierced his ankle, and he kicked outward. He didn't have time to battle two foes.

"You and your bitch will die," growled the beast.

"Not by your hand," replied Damon. He held on to his sanity and his temper. Campbell was nothing more than a bully. Faded memories told him everything he needed to know. Anger was the man's Achilles heel. He couldn't control his temper when provoked. "You're nothing more than a second rate animal. Look at you. So ugly the cows would even hide from you."

Campbell tipped his head back and roared in fury. Damon crashed into him, slamming him backward, knocking him off balance. He heard the crunch of bone, but still the beast spun, escaping Damon's grip.

The hyena nipped his heels again and Damon thrust his foot out, but this time he heard the thunder of Krystal's power and the small beast yelped. Damon smiled when he smelled the searing scent of burnt hyena flesh. His mate was one hell of a fighter.

"The cows bow to their master," said Campbell.

"Right," agreed Damon. "Which is exactly where you belong. Out in the fields, a bull set out to pasture."

Campbell lowered his head and charged, the horns aiming right for Damon's gut. At last. Damon shifted to one side just as the beast reached him, grabbing the horns in each hand. Then, he twisted with all his might. His muscles screamed, but he would not give. With one last jerk, he heard the bones shatter in the massive neck. Campbell stilled beneath him. Damon kept his grip on the pronged horns, waiting until he was sure there were no breathing sounds, then dropped the body to the floor with a heavy thud.

Damon slumped against the bars. Behind him the caged lion roared, but he ignored him. Hell, if the beast didn't understand they were trying to save him, he'd have to take him on too. But after he rested.

He lifted his eyes into the warm gaze of his mate. Her wan face was made worse by the dark tinge of blood near her ears. Shit, the magick had hurt her. He held open his arms. She rushed forward, collapsing her weight into his. Together they dropped to their knees.

Thank God she was alive. He'd caught glimpses of her battle with the wizard and he'd tried several times to reach her, but each time, Campbell had attacked, sensing his distraction.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm fine."

But she didn't look fine. She looked like hell. A hell he should have protected her from. A strange lump formed in his throat and he couldn't speak. He wrapped his arms about her frail body, careful to not squeeze too tight. "You don't look fine," he finally managed.

She pulled back from his hold. "I am. Really. We need to get these people out of here."

He nodded. It was almost over. Soon, she would be on her way back to her brothers, and he would stay here, ensuring the creatures in the tanks died with him. He only hoped they were not as far into the transformation as Campbell had been. Fighting two or three creatures like him would be impossible.

They stood and Krystal wobbled.

"You're hurt?" he asked, his heart pounding with fear.

She shook her head. "No, but using magick like that steals energy from me. I'm weak."

"You go with these shifters. Get them out of here. I'll take care of the lab."

She stared into his eyes, her own gaze filled with concern. "We'll do it together. I'm not leaving you down here. We'll send them up, then handle the lab."

Damon didn't argue, but finished opening the last of the prison cells. Twenty in all. With at least 30 people and shifters combined.

Krystal turned to the lion. "Do you know how to get out of here?"

The beast nodded.

"Take them. All of them, and lead them out. By now my brothers may be there. Four wizards and maybe a tigress. Stay with them. Tell them I sent you. I'm Krystal. We'll be right after you."

She then herded the last of the shifters and people out the door. Her hands trembled as she wiped away a wisp of her hair from her face.

"You should go with them," he said, wrapping an arm around her waist for support. She leaned into his body, scaring him all the more.

"I'll be fine." She halted, looking into the prison, her brow furrowed.

"What's wrong?"

"I saw something earlier." Then her eyes lit on something in the far back cell. She pushed away from him, but he gripped her more firmly about the waist.

"What is it?"

"There," she pointed. He followed her finger. The last cell didn't hold any prisoners. Instead it was being used as storage, the door hanging sideways. Inside were bags stacked four feet high. Fertilizer.

"So?"

"Grab one of those. I have an idea."

Damon shook his head, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Why?"

"Just do it," she ordered.

He sighed and looked at her. If he let go, there was a chance she'd fall over. Her eyes looked too big for her face, glazed with exhaustion as they were. Her skin was pale and clammy. Damon stepped closer to the cell beside them. He grasped her hand, wrapping her fingers around one of the bars. "Don't move from this spot."

She nodded.

He trotted to the last cell on the row and lifted a bag of fertilizer. It wasn't heavy, only about fifty pounds, but heavy enough he knew she couldn't carry it as tired as she was. He had a suspicion of why she wanted it, but unless she'd seen something in that lab he hadn't, he couldn't think how her idea would work.

With the bag thrown over his shoulder, he hooked an arm about her waist and drew her against his side. "I should take you outside then come back. You're too tired."

"No," she argued. "If my idea works, nobody will have to come back here. All you have to do is give me a hand."

Damon growled in frustration. They moved carefully down the hall toward the lab. It was late, now, and most of the employees were gone. Maybe scared off by the alarm still echoing in the distance. He hoped the shifters hadn't met any trouble getting out of here, and he hoped Krystal's brothers had met them outside. Otherwise this would all be for naught.

He let her open the door into the experimental lab. It was just as they left it, with the four tanks against the wall, their creatures inside, as though large fetus's, awaiting their birth. The two silver exam tables still sat in the middle of the room. Damon dropped the bag of fertilizer on one.

"What is it you have in mind?"

She nodded toward a cabinet marked as hazardous material. "Something has to be in there that we can use to create an explosion. Something that will destroy this room and everything," she said, glancing at the creatures, "in it."

This couldn't be easy for her. She'd dedicated her life to saving defenseless animals, and now she was going to have to destroy four people who, through no fault of their own, had become the victim of evil science, merged with animal DNA. Even now she stared across at the four of them. He wondered what she was thinking.

He brushed the hair from her face and touched her soft cheek. She turned her eyes to his, and he lost himself in their depths. "You don't have to do this, you know. Go. I'll handle this."

Krystal looked into her mate's eyes, ignoring the blur of tears trying to get in the way. "No," she whispered. "This is my job. I promised her." She looked again toward the half dolphin, half woman. "She wants to die, and I said I would do it for her." Krystal pulled away from him, placing her hand on the clear surface of the compartment. The woman reached out her finned hands, matching Krystal's, and nodded. She was ready.

The others were all too far gone, or asleep for Krystal to reach, but she could feel this woman's pain. Her mind screamed with the agony of what was happening to the cells in her body, her organs twisting into other shapes and forms. The pain radiated even through the closed compartment. Her experiment had failed. If they left her, she would only die a painful death. Krystal couldn't let that happen.

Her mate wrapped his arm around her waist and she leaned against him. Tears were now coursing down her cheeks, and she nodded toward the woman, though she knew the fluid kept her from seeing. But she must have felt it, as she dropped her arms, the webs between her fingers drawing inward as she closed her hand into fists.

Krystal walked to the hazardous storage cabinet.

"I was never all that great at chemistry, but surely..." There. On the bottom shelf. Potassium Chlorate. Mixed with the fertilizer, she could create Armstrong's mixture, a combustible home-made bomb. Her eyes trailed over each bottle in the cabinet. Sulfur. Perfect. And she could use the chalk lying on the chalk board where their formulas were written. She hoped that was the only place the chemicals were stored.

"Pour the bag of fertilizer out near the creatures."

Damon grabbed the bag, but by the hard set of his jaw, she knew he wasn't happy. He wanted her out of here. That was just too damned bad. If she left, something told her she'd never see him again, and that wasn't going to happen. Sure, right now, he looked scary, but there had to be a way to fix him. She could still feel his magick. It was just stuck.

He poured out the contents of the bag of fertilizer in front of each of the monsters within, stretching it along the wall.

Krystal carried over the Potassium Chlorate. She'd have used the bottle of bleach instead, but wasn't sure it was as flammable in its liquid form. She poured the crystals in a fine line over the fertilizer.

"Now what?"

Krystal narrowed her gaze and searched the room. "We need to break up the chalk from the chalk board."

Damon grabbed what almost looked like a rubber mallet and laying the chalk sticks on the metal table, he pounded them into dust. While he worked to spread his results over their homemade bomb, Krystal opened the sulfur. A bed sheet lay over the last of the exam tables. Using a pair of scissors, she cut off a long piece, then poured sulfur inside. A fuse. This would at least give them a chance to escape. She then poured the remainder over their mixture on the floor.

She ran the homemade fuse out the door, then returned. With one last touch of her hand to the glass, she gave the woman another goodbye.

The creature beside her came to life. He looked to be a mixture of man and some form of bird. It struggled, pounding at the container separating him from the rest of the world. "Let's get out of here before he breaks free."

"Go. Let me light this."

"With what? Damon, knock it off. You're going with me, even if you don't want to."

He grabbed her arm and she whirled to face him. "And what am I going to do, Krystal? Hide? I can't go out into the world, looking like this."

"And I'm not going to let you kill yourself. Damn it, Damon. I told you, your magick is there. You even used it when you fought Campbell."

"With no way to fix it."

"Wrong. I know it's there, and now that I understand what happened with mine, we can work to fix it." Her heart pounded hard in her chest and the taste of fear was acrid in the back of her throat. She'd just found him, and had no intention of losing him.

"There's nothing to fix," his voice was quiet. "It's not like I'm broken."

"Yes, you are," she said angrily. "How dare you let them win! You'll get your ass over here and help me set this afire, and help me get myself out of here before it explodes. You are not staying behind."

"The instant I go out those doors, your brothers will shoot me, thinking I'm some kind of monster."

The more angry he became, the more the magick inside him pulsed. She could feel it, as it interacted with her own. "So you're just going to stay down here and cower? I thought better of you, Damon."

Damon felt the anger surge through him like never before. "I am no coward," he roared.

"No? Then prove it. Show me what you're made of. I'm not leaving this room without you."

He stepped toward her, hoping his powerful presence would frighten her but all she did was raise her chin in response. She was acting just like a shewolf.

"Or would you rather I go find myself another man? One like, oh, I don't know, Langston? At least he's willing to try to help me."

Jealousy twisted inside him, spurring his anger. With each pulse of fury he felt the wolf inside him splintering, separating from his mind.

"Shift, Damon. Prove to me you're the strongest mate for me. Because if you don't, I'll find another."

Damon spun away from her, his hands fisted. "Don't you think I would if I could?"

"How the hell do I know?" she shouted. "All I see is a man willing to give up."

"I'm not a man anymore."

"Says who? You? Or Doctor Carey? Do you really think he has any say in who and what you are?"

Pain roared through him at her words. He wanted to shift. He wanted to be at her side for years to come. "I can't," he whispered.

"Or won't. It's there, I feel it. You used it before."

He stared at her, watched as pain ravaged her beautiful face. Tears ran down her cheeks, dripping on the tile floor. God, how he wanted to make her pain end. If he killed himself she would hurt, but it would fade. Wouldn't it?

"No, it won't," she said, as though she heard his thoughts. "If you die, Damon, I will hurt forever. No amount of time is going to ease my pain. The only way to make me stop hurting is for you to be with me."

Her words struck hard in his chest. His heart pumped hard, fighting the sensations of pain and fear building inside him. It was then he felt it. The simple pulse of magick. It burned in his chest, like a small candle flame. In the prison cells, he'd felt the pulse of magick, the growth of his body, when he'd felt the need to protect his mate. And he felt that same emotion again. The need to keep Krystal safe. And happy.

He thought of how she'd been chained to the wall, waiting for the doctor to start his experiments. The possessive urges struck hard and with it, the magick pulsed again.

"I need you, Damon. I don't care what you are, or what you look like, I need you."

Damon stared into those beautiful violet eyes a moment longer, then closed his own. He touched the core of pulsing magick and imagined himself as the man he had been this morning when he'd held his mate in his arms. Krystal. The sweetest, softest female. Her strength and character made him want to be more powerful. Made him want to not let her down.

And then it happened. The surge of power washed over him with a bright flash of light. He closed his eyes, hungry for the release, starved for the shot of adrenaline which always accompanied his shifts.

When he opened his eyes, Krystal stood before him, her eyes filled with tears. God, it hadn't worked. Did he look even worse?

He looked down at his hands. Not claws, but real hands! His pulse sped up and he jerked his gaze to hers. She offered him a tremulous smile, then threw herself in his arms.

"I knew you could do it. We just had to find the key." She sobbed into his chest and he wrapped his strong arms around her. His arms, not those of a beast. He held out one hand as he held her, staring in wonder at the fingers with normal human looking nails.

"It worked," he said in awe. His knees felt like rubber, but he was human looking again. "I'm back. I'm really back!" He lifted her off her feet in a huge hug, fighting the urge to swing her around.

He dropped her back to her feet. "Let's hurry up and get out of here."

She nodded, swallowing her grin. "You go start the fire alarm, we want as many out of the building as we can, and then I'll set this on fire." She nodded toward the fuse she'd made.

"How are you going to light it?"

She held up her hand and he watched as a ball of flame formed. "I still have a few little tricks up my sleeve. Now go."

Damon whipped around the corner and found the fire alarm. He broke the glass and pulled the lever. The resulting klaxon hurt his ears, but he ran back to where Krystal waited. She was still so tired. He, on the other hand, felt refreshed as he hadn't in days. Whatever had happened in his shift had cleared all kinds of things from his body.

She gave one last look toward the four trapped bodies. Two were sleeping. One still struggled to escape. The other held her palms to the glass, embracing her fate. A small fire ball lay in Krystal's hand. With one last nod toward the figures, she tossed it onto the fuse. The treated cloth sparked and sizzled, then began to burn. Once she was sure it was going to stay burning she nodded.

Damon lifted her in his arms and took off at a full run.

He didn't know how long he had to get her out of here, but he wasn't taking any chances. They didn't meet anyone else as he charged toward the exit. Footsteps sounded above them as people ran out the doors in response to the clamoring alarm. He found the stairwell and took the steps two at a time. Holding her in his arms gave him the strength of ten men. She felt as light as a pillow, needing only his comfort to keep her safe.

An explosion rocked the building from below them. He barreled out the door as another explosion slammed them outward. He used the momentum of the blast to speed up his steps and they darted out into the night.

Together, as one body, they arrived on the edge of the GSA universe, at the parking lot. People screamed and milled about. They'd hoped most employees would have already gone home. And it appeared that was the case, because thousands worked in this building, and most of those watching were the shifters they'd rescued.

"Nooooooo," the masculine voice reached Krystal's ears with shocking clarity.

"Put me down, now," she ordered.

Damon obliged her, and she was already running. Jared. He thought she was in the building. She found them, her brothers all linked together. Jared was fighting to escape them as Ross and Logan held him back. She rushed forward and grasped his face in her hands.

"I'm okay, Jared. I'm here."

It took a moment, but his eyes finally focused in on her. "No," he dropped to his knees. "Not you. Rena. She's in there. She has to be." His eyes trailed back to the building as a third explosion erupted and the roof caved into the building. The force of the explosion rocketed across the parking lot and Jared dropped to the pavement.

"Look at me, Jared."

His eyes slowly traced from the building to her. Grief like she'd never felt from any of her brothers rippled in the heat of the fire born night. "What is she? If you think she was there, she had to have magick."

Krystal had to strain to hear his voice.

"A cougar."

Relief washed through her. "Jared, there were no cougar shifters inside. We got all the shifters out. I looked at those plans and we emptied out the prison cells. There were a few women in human form, and some big cats, but none were cougars."

A spark of hope flickered in the depths of his eyes, yet still he watched the flames as they devoured what once was home to one of the most hidden agencies in the history of the US Government.

The pain flowing from his body throbbed inside her and she fought the urge to take her brother in her arms and offer comfort, false though it may be. For if Rena was inside as he thought, there would be no solace. It took only one look inside his emotions to know this woman was beyond important to him. Krystal uttered a silent prayer in hopes this Rena was unhurt.

A light touch on her shoulder drew her attention. Krystal turned to meet her sister in law's troubled eyes.

"There's more than thirty people here that you saved. I don't want to do like we did the last time, and let them just run and find their own way in life. I'm going to take them to our place for now, and we'll find people to care for them, and help them get their feet on the ground."

"Agreed," said Krystal. "If Damon is any indication, these people need assistance, even if they don't want to take it. At the least we can help them find their own packs and prides and ensure their safe return. Nobody should have to stumble along after such a horrendous ordeal." She watched Damon slide one of her brother's long trench coats over his naked body. Each flex of muscle reminded her of the animal inside him. Sinuous grace mixed with pure male beauty.

A low, dull ache of longing rolled through her body. She gasped, surprised at the suddenness of the burn.

As though he felt her eyes on him, he turned, meeting her gaze. His eyes were filled with equal parts hunger and concern.

Her mate. In all her life she'd never wanted a man the way she wanted him.

He turned away, laying his hand upon a man's shoulder. Langston. The young man turned and grinned, his fingers linked with a young woman's. Pamela Dorsey. Krystal remembered seeing her name on the list of captives he'd provided them. She was just happy he hadn't been inside the building when it exploded.

Her brothers had dragged Jared off to the van. Lance and Logan each had a hand on his shoulder. She turned to face the flames devouring the last of the once proud building, offering her brother his privacy.

"What's wrong?" asked Ross.

"Just wondering what kind of minds come up with the creatures I saw in there." Her eyes watered and she brushed the tears away with an angry hand. "Ross, they'd made their own versions of shifters, merging DNA. Only it didn't quite work out the way they'd hoped. Instead, they created monsters. One nearly killed Damon. And one begged us to kill her."

Ross nodded, his eyes filled with a knowledge that sent a shiver down her spine. Just how much did he know about those experiments?

"You did the right thing, Krystal. No matter what happens, destroying them was the best thing you could have done for them."

She nodded he was right, but putting those people out of their misery did not destroy the pain inside her heart. She kept seeing the woman, so beautiful and ethereal. She was almost a present day mermaid. But a mermaid wouldn't hurt so much. The woman's pain still radiated inside Krystal's soul.

Chapter 20

On the other side of town, a man with silver hair slammed his fist against the desk.

"I never told you to take Krystal Maxey prisoner. Scare her, I said. Get her off the case. Which one of you imbeciles disobeyed me?"

The three men standing before him shuffled their feet, refusing to meet their commander's eyes. "It was the doctor. He insisted she was perfect for the experiment he had in mind."

Anger burned inside his gut. "And you thought it was worth my wrath to disobey? What about her brothers? Do I need to draw you a picture to keep you away from them?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"And you," he glared, pointing at the lone woman. "Your pack nearly screwed everything up. How could you let them operate so close to this facility? If Burke had kept his strange proclivities out of this county, then Krystal wouldn't have been on his tail to begin with."

She narrowed her gaze at him and he knew she wasn't used to a man ordering her around. "What my pack does is my business. Not yours. We are not here to do your bidding, except as we are paid. Our lives are not part of the negotiations."

"Well they are now," he growled.

He nodded at the two men on either side of her. One extracted a silver collar from his pocket and while the other held her still, he snapped it closed.

Chapter 21

Krystal stood on Logan's balcony, staring out into the street. Cars passed as though life hadn't changed. People walked to and fro, living their lives just like they had the day before, ignorant of the horrors in the world. A part of Krystal wished she could do that. She wished she hadn't seen the horrendous experiments perpetrated by the GSA.

Her father worked for them. Her brothers worked for them. Hell, she had wanted to work for them herself.

She scratched the Labrador Retriever's head who stood at her side. She'd found him at Burke's place when they'd raided the animals left behind. The dogs were confiscated as evidence for a trial that would never happen, but she couldn't very well tell her boss the man was dead and she'd killed him. In time, the judge would allow all of the dogs to be adopted by new, loving, homes. She would even work with the rescue shelter, visiting adoption fairs and helping them to find the homes they needed.

Wolfie would always be a part of her. His strength and love would forever be stamped on her heart. The black dog licked the hand at her side while her other one brushed away the tears on her cheeks.

No more crying. She was done with it. One of her brothers was acting as though he'd lost his mind, while the others hovered around her like she might break. Her father had held her in his arms as though he was sure she'd disappear in an instant. The shield he held around his heart blocked his emotions from her gifts, but the love in his eyes told her all she needed to know.

The masculine scent of her mate reached her nostrils, and she knew Damon stood behind her. Powerful. Masculine. Wild and free.

"What are you thinking?" he asked. His warm hands caressed her arms.

She gripped the railing to regain her balance. Every time he touched her, her knees went weak and today was no different.

"How much life has changed. How we've changed."

His breath whispered against her neck an instant before his firm lips brushed her neck. "Is it for the better?"

Krystal spun in his arms.

The beautiful amber gaze stared back at her, hungry for life. Hungry for her.

"Oh yes. For years, it's been me, separated from my brothers by my job. You, separated from your pack by your lost memory. Now we're together. Two against the world." She wrapped her arms around him again. "Our own family. Never to be alone again."

"Good," he growled, punctuating his word with a quick kiss. "Let's go." He grabbed her hand and tugged her inside.

"Where are we going?"

"It's time we settled a few things between you and I. And I need a run."

"What about the dog?" she asked, fighting his pull.

"Don't worry. Logan and the Rottie will take care of him until we get your house ready to go."

"But..."

"No buts. My apartment is just a few miles away. If anyone needs us they can call."

Frustrated, Krystal gave in and let Damon drag her to his jeep. He drove. A part of her wondered if he had any idea where he was going. He'd turned the wrong direction.

"I thought you said we were going to your apartment?"

From behind the steering wheel, Damon flashed her a smile, glad she couldn't tell he was nervous. Today they would resolve several things. Not the least of which was what would happen between them. In the GSA building she'd seemed like she still cared for him, but at the same time he'd felt the sympathy, the shock at what he'd become. While he was back to human form, he hadn't yet tried to shift, to see if he could become the wolf ever again. It was possible he'd always shift to that horrid form, the true Hollywood version of a werewolf. He hid a shudder of disgust as he turned the wheel.

"I have something we need to resolve before we go to my apartment."

She frowned, and he could smell her confusion.

He pulled off the pavement and turned down a small dirt road. "This is where I spent a lot of my time after your brother's got me out of the GSA." He didn't add it was also where Burke had caught him.

When the road ran out, he parked the jeep and stepped onto the sandy soil. "Let's go," he said, grabbing a large blanket from the back of the vehicle.

She raised a puzzled eyebrow as she climbed out of the jeep. "And why are you bringing that?"

"Because I need to take a run and I thought you might want to relax while I do. No sense in sitting on the sand and getting dirty."

"Uh huh," she responded.

He grabbed her hand and they walked into the trees.

"It's beautiful here," she murmured, her eyes scanning the trees and underbrush.

Damon inhaled. "More than that, it smells beautiful." The fragrance of pine filtered through his lungs and into his bloodstream. They'd walked a while before he stopped in a clearing and spread out the blanket, then stood, closing his eyes.

It was time. She would either accept him as he was, or he'd go to the council and admit he'd marked her without her permission. He'd tell them what a monster he'd become at the hands of the GSA. They could then put him out of his misery.

Krystal watched Damon lay out the blanket, then stand, his eyes closed, his head tipped back. She didn't need her gifts to know he was worried about something. And based on where they were she had an idea of what it could be.

"Damon?" she asked softly.

He started, as though surprised to hear her speak. Then he motioned to the blanket. "Sit, Krystal."

He reached out his hand to her and she slid her fingers into his palm. The calluses on his hands showed he'd always worked hard, even if he didn't remember it. He escorted her to the blanket and held her hand until she sat.

"I'm going for a run," he murmured. "I'm going to shift. If you don't want to see me, you can close your eyes."

He turned away, but not before she caught a glimpse of pain in his eyes. Did he really think, after everything they'd been through, she wouldn't want to be with him, here, where he was most at home?

He yanked his shirt off and bronzed muscles flexing along his arms and back. It was warm out for a late fall day, even for North Carolina, but she had a suspicion the gleam of perspiration wasn't due to the heat.

"I want to watch," she said.

He spun toward her, surprise on his face. "What?"

She swallowed. "I want to watch you shift. The only time I've seen it was when I was upset. I want to see you shift with me not afraid."

He stormed to her, grabbed her by her arms. "What if the only thing I can turn into is that beast again?"

Krystal studied his expression, his eyes glittering with emotion. "It doesn't matter to me, Damon. That's what I was trying to tell you before. I don't care what you look like, when beast or man. It's you I love."

The muscles in his jaw tightened. "But you don't know me, Krystal. I don't know me."

Cupping his face in her palms, she pulled his face down to hers. "But I do. In here," she said, caressing his forehead, and in here," she said, moving to his chest, laying her palm over his beating heart. It thumped hard against her hand and she smiled. "You may think, because we don't know your full background that we don't know you. But I know the kind of man you are. Even if I had just met you, based off Langston's story, I know you are a good man." She slid her hand up his chest, gripping his shoulder. "We know more what you are than what I am. I'm still learning my gift. Does that make me someone you can't care about?"

He shook his head. "No," he said, his voice like gravel.

Krystal offered him a weak smile, then dropped her hands and stepped back. He hadn't said he loved her. She'd laid her emotions bare, and he'd not said he did more than care. She blinked back the sting of tears. "So shift. Show me."

He stared at her for long seconds and she wondered what he was thinking. He'd somehow closed down the bond between them and she couldn't even feel his emotions. Hiding her own, she tucked her hair behind her ear and sat on the blanket, waiting.

Damon finished undressing and stood before her, naked. He was aroused, but then he always was when around her as far as she could tell. It meant nothing. His eyes showed nothing of his emotions. Krystal sighed then bit her lip. He was her mate, and she would teach him to love her if she had to. She would not let him die because he'd marked her. Not when she loved him to the bottom of her soul.

"Did you know," she began, "when you marked me, I saw images of your past?"

He nodded, then dropped to the blanket before her. "As I saw some of yours."

"Good. Do you remember that day I brought you home? I said I was going to call you Damon? You never asked how I knew your name."

He shrugged, his eyes staring into hers yet still there was no emotion. "I assumed it was your wizard skills."

She let out a small laugh. "No. It wasn't my wizarding skills. Well, not exactly." Krystal picked up a smooth rock laying next to the blanket and caressed the edges with her fingers, like a worry stone. "I called you that because something reminded me of someone I'd known as a child. An imaginary friend, according to my Dad. I'm not even sure when he started showing up, but I remember by the time I was five or six he was very prominent in my life." She let the stone slide through her fingers, weaving in and out over each knuckle, refusing to look at him. "He was always there when I needed him. He even played childish games with me, even though I could tell he was a few years older than I. Nobody else ever saw him but me. When I reached high school, he disappeared. I never knew what happened to him."

She lifted her gaze to meet his. "Until I met you. When you marked me that night, I saw him again. In your memories. You were that friend, Damon."

The sounds in the forest were drowned out by Damon's sharp intake of breath. "I saw you, in your mind, that night. You were with a young boy."

She let her lips curve into a smile and nodded. "Yes, that's him. You, I mean. In your mind, I saw you in the forest, you were alone. I don't think the GSA killed your parents. Damon, I think you've always been alone. But it doesn't have to be that way."

Damon thought his lungs were going to explode in his chest from trying to control his emotions, and breathing both. He closed his eyes, thinking about what she'd said. If she was right, they had always been together. Just the two of them. "I've never had a pack," he murmured. He didn't mean to say it aloud, but the words came out just the same.

“But you can now. With me. You don’t have to go to the council. In fact, if you do, I’ll go to them and say you’re lying. I won’t let you die because the GSA stole your memories. I can’t do that.”

Damon felt his skin itch with the need to shift, to run and avoid this conversation. He couldn’t accept what she offered until he was sure what he was. What if the GSA had implanted something in his mind to make him kill her later? What if... He could do a million what if’s. What he needed was to feel the fresh forest air in his lungs, to feel North Carolina’s sandy soil between his toes. Not as the monster he’d become in that underground prison, but as a wolf.

“Wait here,” he finally muttered. “I’m going for my run.”

Krystal stared through tearful eyes as he shifted. He did it slow enough she could see parts of him changing, but not so slow as to cause her to lean back away from him. In no more time than it took for a squirrel to drop his nut from the tree to the ground, Damon went from man to wolf. Her lip quavering, Krystal reached out to touch the brown fur. An instant before her fingers came in contact, the animal turned and shot into the forest.

Her hand dropped to her side and she let the tears fall.

Chapter 22

Damon ran, his feet eating the ground with alarming speed. The sand spit behind his paws, and the cool, autumn air filled his lungs. Small animals charged in all directions, hoping to avoid the wolf. He didn't care. He ran on.

He fought the urge to howl his frustration. Wolves weren't natural to this part of North Carolina. He'd be courting disaster if he let loose the way he wanted to. Frustration and pain ripped through him. Her imaginary friend. Hell, he'd never thought of himself as imaginary. How had he done this before? Was it her magick which had brought his mind to hers?

She was a mage. A female wizard.

He was a creature they called wolveren. A creature he knew next to nothing about.

Damon wracked his brain, searching for any clue as to his past. All he knew was what they'd found together. With Krystal at his side, he knew he was a wolveren. A soldier. A protector. But what else was he?

He was alone.

He'd always been alone.

He didn't even know how long he'd been running, but he stopped, at last. His chest heaved as his lungs struggled to bring in fresh air. He was a monster. He'd marked her without her permission. Even now he could feel the slide of his fangs into the soft, supple flesh. He remembered how much he'd enjoyed it. What if he hurt her?

The wolf shook his head, struggling to fight off the swamping emotions.

She loved him.

She'd said it and he hadn't even responded. How could he? He was a monster.

He could still remember his shock when he'd looked at the claws he'd had for hands after the GSA had experimented on him. Again. Always playing with people's lives. Krystal's life. He turned back toward the woman who waited for him.

His woman. A woman who said she loved him.

Every moment he could remember before her, he'd been alone.

Yet with her, he felt a part of something. Even with her brothers, they were careful to include him in their laughter, as well as their anger. They accepted him. She accepted him.

Why couldn't he accept himself?

The monster creation of the GSA was still there, tearing at his soul, wanting out. He refused it release. Maybe some other time, when he knew it was safe, he could experiment with the creature pulling at his heart. Until then, it would remain steadily under control.

He trotted back toward the clearing. He could smell her now. As sweet as wine. An Auslese maybe. Semi-Sweet, with just a touch of bite. Yes, that's exactly what she smelled like.

A touch of bite. Inside the wolf he smirked. That described his Krystal.

She said she loved him. He knew he loved her. Almost since the very beginning. He just didn't understand why it happened so fast. Yet the first time he'd laid eyes on her, he'd felt something inside him click. Warmth as the memory flooded through him.

He stopped at the edge of the clearing. She was lying on her back, a piece of grass between her teeth. Chewing it. At a glance, one would think she was relaxed, but he knew better. He could smell the stress on her. Stress he'd caused. He could smell the salt of tears as well. He'd hurt her.

All this time he'd worried about hurting her with his strength. With his teeth. Yet all it had taken was his words. *I'm an ass.*

He strode forward, one small step at a time.

As though she could sense him, she rolled to face him. Her eyes were huge, brimming with tears. She didn't move when he reached her, just lay there, watching him. She'd said what she wanted to say. Now it was his turn.

But first, he licked the tears from her face. She didn't reach to touch him, and that hurt. He took one step back, then shifted again, more quickly this time. For once, he didn't care what she saw or didn't see.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, pulling her up to a sit. "I just needed to think."

She averted her gaze.

"I'm a total idiot," he said. He touched her face and while she didn't flinch, she didn't turn toward him. So he did it for her, tipping her chin up just enough to meet her eyes. "I've been alone so much. I knew it, Krystal. The night we met with your brothers, I knew I'd always been alone. I just wasn't willing to admit it. I don't want to be alone anymore."

She met his gaze. The tears still streaked her cheeks, but she didn't sob. "What are you saying, Damon?"

He cupped her face in his hands, drawing closer to her. His lips hovered just above hers, his eyes never left hers. "I'm saying, I love you. I'm saying, I want you as my mate, if you will have me."

Her eyes widened, and then she blinked as tears once again slid down her face. Precious seconds ticked by while he waited. Seconds he was sure were like hours. What if his leaving her behind and running into the woods had changed her mind.

"Of course I'll have you," she said at last, her words breathless. "I'll always have you."

"And I will always love you," he murmured, his lips then touched hers.

Krystal tried to staunch the flow of tears, but they just kept going. Even as Damon's mouth closed over hers. His kiss was so gentle, so worshipful, it undid the last of her control. She moaned and tried to press herself against him. This man. This wolverine. Her Mate.

His mouth moved to cover her entire face with gentle kisses. "Mine," she whispered, arching toward him. It didn't matter that someone could wander over and see them. All that mattered was this male, his hard as rock body and his touch. His fingers opened the buttons to her blouse, and she could swear she saw them tremble.

"Yours," he murmured, then took her mouth again. He came up for breath.

"Never alone," she murmured.

"Never again," he agreed.

The Moon: Tigress By the Tail

Excerpt

He stared at her, his eyes caressing every inch of her body. Heat burned inside her, arousing hungers she'd only dreamed of. How was it possible this human was able to arouse inside her what no shifter had awakened?

"Your tigress is beautiful Cassie. As beautiful as you are right now."

He took her hand and tugged her toward him. She shouldn't be doing this. Cassie stared at his fingers, how they wrapped around her wrist. They were warm, and powerful. Strength emanated from them, and she could feel them not just on her arm, but tightening around her heart. Almost as though he reached right inside her and tugged her heart along with her body.

She struggled with the warring thoughts inside her. This sudden, all encompassing heat fought with the knowledge that when her father got here, he would take over, and the chances were, Lance wouldn't live to see the sunrise.

Her heart rebelled, cursing her for believing in the impossible. He would live. He had to live. But it was hard to think with this strong, warm male was pulling her into his arms. They wrapped around her with practiced ease. Alarms went off in her head.

She pushed back. "You just want me because you think I'm a virgin."

"Do I?" he murmured. His lips were almost on hers now. She could feel his breath, his scent wrapping around her, cocooning her in his masculinity.

"Do you what?"

He smiled. "Do I think you're a virgin?"

"But..."

"Cassie, maybe I just want you because you're you." His words whispered against her lips. So hot and inviting.

"I don't think—"

"Perfect," he said. "Don't."

He closed the last excruciating inch to her lips. He was slow at first. His mouth was hot, burning her lips with his touch. Instincts in her body reared to the surface, and she moaned, arching into him, molding her body to his. She needed to stop this, but she couldn't.

He tasted like pure male, wild and hungry. His mouth crushed hers, feeding from her, like a beast in the jungle. His arms tightened around her, dragging her hard against his body.

Sensations whirled through Cassie's mind and heart. Her head swam and darkness threatened the edges of her consciousness. She'd never been kissed like this. Not with such overwhelming passion. And never had her body exploded with such liquid heat.

The tigress shifted inside her, moaning along with Cassie with hunger. Heat burned lower, deeper inside her body. A dull, empty ache throbbed inside. Her skin tightened and she moved against him.

The hard ridge of his desire rubbed against her soft belly, heightening her need. She wanted. For the first time in her life, she hungered for a man. This man. This human.

The scent of their mingled desire wrapped around them like unseen ties, binding them together. He groaned, hungrily into her mouth. This was no weak human who held her. His arms were strong and powerful, and he devoured her with masterful strokes of his tongue, taking all of her, feeding her in return.

Her hands slid to his shoulders, and into his hair. He had such gorgeous, thick blond hair. Her fingers trailed through it, relishing the soft locks. So like a shifter's hair, silky and smooth. A finger teased her breast, and her body trembled. With each masterful touch of his hand, each sweep of his tongue she tumbled faster and faster into the abyss of desire.

Lance couldn't believe he could hold such a beautiful creature in his arms. She was so delicate in her human form. So feminine and soft. Her body was so hot and sweet, melting against his every curve, her breasts pressed hard against his chest. Hunger exploded within him. He groaned and thrust his tongue deeper into her mouth. She tasted so perfect, like cinnamon with just a hint of sweet. The sharp taste of her essence drove him mad, pushing him to the limits of his control. The exotic scent of her teased his senses, and his body ached with the need of her.

A door slammed, but Lance barely noticed it. Cassie nipped Lance's lip and he groaned, his body shaking in response. She smiled against his mouth. By God, she felt right. Tasted right.

"What the hell is going on here?"

About the Author

Born in Atlanta, the daughter of an Army Soldier during the early stages of the Viet Nam war, Teresa spent her childhood traveling from state to state, and country to country. Enamored by the life style of the military, Teresa joined the US Air Force after high school, where she completed twenty years of military service as a meteorologist.

Teresa began writing in 2006. Her first published book was ***SHEWOLF***, published with Freya's Bower, which finaled in the ***2008 PRISM*** for Best First Book. She followed this with ***THE MOON: TIGRESS BY THE TAIL*** with Tease Publishing, LLC which took 3rd place at the Predator's and Editor's Poll of 2008 for best Romance.

Teresa lives in North Carolina with her husband and two dogs.

You can learn more about Teresa and keep updated on her writing by visiting her website.

<http://teresadamario.com>