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Soul Mate



CATHERINE BYBEE

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Chapter One

Kari Pierce stared up into the deep shades of the horizon. The giant sequoias of California loomed overhead in colors of black and dark grey. Above her the full moon, visible only by its bright aura, crested the mountains. The sight was tremendous, one she would have loved to enjoy. However, her time in the park wasn't for enlightenment or pleasure.

Her time here was for work.

Massive amounts of people camped in various forms, from motor homes to tents, to hammocks under the open sky. Happy families lounged around open campfires without a care in the world. Some roasted marshmallows while others popped popcorn in Jiffy Pop containers. Several children played with the bear boxes used to place food in so the native black and brown bears wouldn't announce themselves in the middle of the night searching for food.

The scent of harmony, relaxation, and the occasional disgruntled man hung heavy in the air. None of these were what Kari focused on.

She centered on fear.

Closing her eyes, she tuned out all the sounds of families, of laughter and focused only on fright.

Kari's ears perked and headed north. The scent of the cloth she purposely pulled deep in her nose earlier in the day narrowed her course.

Eyes open, she bolted with all four of her legs in the direction the child appeared to be. With four legs, Kari could reach the child in half the time of a human. In wolf form, she could sense not only the child, but also the desire of the man standing over her.

The taste of his scent sickened her.

She had to hurry. The child wouldn't be safe for long.

Rain drizzled over the fur covering her body. Still she held onto the child's scent, her concentration so fierce her head started to pound. She couldn't let a little thing like rain stop her from getting to the child in time.

At eight years old, Kari knew the child would understand the danger she was in. The little girl would wonder if she'd ever see her loving parents again.

Kari ran faster, the damp ferns and low-lying branches slapped against her flanks. Shifting course at the last minute, she pressed her nose to the air and stilled her legs mid-stride.

The small whimper of the child sounded like a scream in Kari's heightened awareness.

She would save this child. Or die trying.

Crouching down, Kari eased closer. A twig snapped.

The man shot up in alarm. "Shut up!" he hollered to the child.

A frail blonde-haired girl huddled beneath the little protection her sweatshirt provided. Her eyes were red and swollen with tears as she watched the man pace.

Kari studied the surrounding forest, assessing if the man worked alone or with others. No scent or sound filled the ground other than the child, the man, and Kari.

The girl let out a shriek when the man turned.

He lifted a hand to slap the noise from the child's lips, but Kari's growl stopped him before his hand struck.

Pivoting, he swiveled his head back and forth in the dark night, searching for the cause of the noise. Kari felt his fear prick. Unfortunately, the young girl's elevated, too.

Unable to alleviate the child's worries, Kari concentrated on the bastard standing over the girl.

He stepped closer to the child, with alert eyes. In complete silence, Kari crept away from where she made the first noise.

A small chipmunk scurrying in the dark caught his attention. The man darted his gaze south of where she actually stood.

One silent paw followed the other as Kari approached the man from behind.

As luck would have it, the chipmunk held his attention and kept him from hearing her advance.

The frightened child, on the other hand, wasn't quite so oblivious. Her scream struck the air with a clarity that would sit with Kari for years.

The man turned and Kari pounced.

His arms moved to protect his face and neck, but she didn't relent. Sharp teeth reached for his jugular, but quick movements kept her from sinking her sharp incisors in. Biting him would mean killing him. There was no way Kari would turn him into a beast like her.

Dripping with fear, his hands moved to protect his vital organs.

Kari attacked again; the hair on her back rose. She grazed his chin and drew first blood, not enough for a turn, she thought. Her saliva hadn't permeated his blood stream. He recoiled and gave her another shot at his neck.

Before she could attack, intense pain penetrated her right shoulder. The bastard had a knife and sunk the blade into her flesh. She yelped but attacked again. This time her paws hit his chest with massive force. His head snapped back as he lost his balance and fell.

His body grew still when his skull hit a large boulder. The blow would render him unconscious for hours.

Kari sat back and considered giving him the death he deserved. Killing

anyone, even scum like him, was always a last resort. Taking human life in the heat of battle was one thing, slaughtering him while he lay motionless on the ground proved nothing.

Fear still permeated the air. Turning, Kari noticed the child staring wide-eyed as the scene unfolded in front of her.

Kari wished for the power to remove the memories from the girl's mind, but she didn't have that skill.

Looking over at the stilled body of the man who kidnapped the child, Kari realized the need to befriend the little girl and get her to safety. Quickly. With any luck, the authorities would apprehend the man before he awoke.

Kari lowered her head in the most submissive form she could give, and slowly moved toward the child.

"Go away!" the girl yelled.

Kari stopped and gave her a timid look.

The girl's eyes shifted from the unconscious man to her.

Kari cringed, hating the fear she sensed.

She took another step. The child drew back.

Kari kept her head low, ignoring the pain and blood seeping from her shoulder, and approached the frightened child with a whine.

"Shoo..."

Kari moved yet closer. Within inches of the girl's feet, she stopped. With her head hung low, she sat back on her flanks and panted like any animal happy to see a friend.

The child visibly relaxed, her eyes never leaving Kari's.

It took only minutes and Kari rested her head in the girl's lap. A small hand sent a timid pat to her head, in which Kari reacted with a sigh.

"Nice, doggie," the girl trembled when she spoke, a trace of fear in her voice.

The pain in Kari's shoulder started to burn. She couldn't let this meeting go long, or they both could be in trouble.

Kari stood and barked. Her head motioned away from the man. The child looked around in confusion and refused to move.

She barked again, this time moving between the girl and a small trail the man had made while dragging the child into the remote reaches of the forest.

The girl stood. Her thin arms circled her body trying to bring her warmth. The rain had stopped but the cold and wet penetrated the air. She took one shaky step and then another in the direction Kari wanted her to go.

Relief flowed through Kari as they slowly moved down the path. As the forest grew darker, the child's hand found her fur. Instinctively, the girl stayed close. Every noise brought her closer.

Twice the exhausted child stumbled; both times Kari nudged her to get her

up and moving.

By two A.M., the soft glow of lights, which made up the command post for the search party, came into view. This was as far as Kari could go. With reluctance, she stopped.

“Come on,” the girl urged, pointing at the group of cars.

Kari looked behind her. Someone was coming.

“Let’s go.”

She backed away, intent to see the child to safety. She yipped twice and motioned as well as she could to the people mulling about the campground.

When the girl knelt down and smiled, Kari’s heart almost broke. “You’re hurt. They can help you, too.” Small hands scratched her ears. She moved forward and lapped the child’s cheek. Then, Kari scrambled free of the girl’s arms, sat back and howled.

Instantly, flashlights illuminated the forest around them.

“Hey!” A loud booming voice yelled in their direction. Kari leapt away from the child.

“Come back, wolfie. Come back.”

At the sound of her voice, Kari heard the frantic call of the child’s mother.

“Julie... Julie is that you?”

A safe distance away, far from prying eyes, Kari watched as Julie’s mother

ran, weeping in the direction of her daughter. Three police officers followed, all shouting for her to stop. But nothing was going to keep Julie's mother from running to her daughter. Nothing.



The diner was filled to capacity. Kari saw an open stool at the counter between two groups of men, three of them in uniform, two in plain clothes, all of them cops.

She snuck her five foot five frame into the seat, doing her best not to draw any attention to herself.

The gum-chewing waitress, with her hair in a bun, poured a cup of coffee without even asking. She slapped down a menu and mumbled a quick, "I'll be right back," before walking away. Behind the counter, the cook yelled "Order up", and the waitress piled plates of steaming pancakes and eggs on top of each other.

Kari sprinkled sugar in the coffee and glanced at the menu, all the while listening to the conversation of the men at her side.

"So where is she now?"

"The mother insisted they fly her to Children's in LA, not that she needed it. The girl is physically fine."

Kari pegged the man asking questions as a rookie. He looked to be in his early twenties, his eyes big as saucers.

“And the perp?”

“Knot on his head and talking nonsense,” the plain-clothes cop added. He lowered his voice, but Kari could hear the second hand on the man’s watch. His whispered voice sounded like a yell in an empty room.

“He’s rambling on about a rabid wolf. Personally, I think he’s setting up for an insanity plea.”

“Didn’t the kid say something about a wolf?”

The waitress walked up and poised her pen over her order tickets. “What’ll it be?”

“Short stack,” Kari replied, hoping the woman would leave quickly.

She did.

Kari grasped a forgotten newspaper from the counter and pretended to read.

“The kid had to be seeing things. A wolf wouldn’t have befriended her in the forest.”

She smiled despite herself.

“We did find a trail of blood.”

That wiped the smile off her face and made her heart pound against her chest.

“Any wounded animal at the end of it?”

“No, only tire tracks, which doesn’t make sense unless the wild life has

learned how to drive.”

The rookie scratched his head. “Or the wolf was really a dog that had an owner.”

The bell on the door of the restaurant fell against the glass, alerting the staff to another customer. Kari didn’t look, but whoever it was commanded the attention of the men talking about the case. All stood a little taller and the conversation ceased.

“Murdock,” the street clothed cop greeted the newest member of the fold.

Kari absently sipped the coffee, her eyes skirted toward the door. There she saw the broad chest of a man covered in a half open dress shirt and a government issued FBI jacket. His tailored black pants told her that whoever this man was, he hadn’t expected to work when he put the pants on the night before. He appeared as if he came off a dance floor or a wedding line up.

He approached the plain-clothes detective and extended a hand in greeting. “Bill. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Don’t know why not. It’s my jurisdiction.”

“I thought you’d retired.”

The waitress set Kari’s pancakes down and refilled her coffee. “Anything else?”

“No, thank you. This is fine.” After dribbling a small amount of syrup over

her pancakes, Kari reached across the counter to put the sticky plastic bottle down. Pain shot through her right arm. She bit her tongue to keep from grimacing. Maybe she should have the wound looked at? But knife injuries always raised suspicion, and questions would be asked. No, she would suck it up, keep it bandaged, and wait for time to heal. Lucky for her, she would do so quickly.

While her mind drifted and she struggled to cut her pancakes, the men at the counter started to clear out.

“Mind if I sit here?” The man in the FBI jacket asked her.

“Excuse me?”

“Is this seat taken?” he asked.

“No. Be my guest.”

His scent hit her. Pure masculinity mixed with a touch of pine. The faint smell of a woman’s perfume hovered just above the surface.

Kari felt the weight of his eyes and dared a look for herself. Grey eyes narrowed slightly and the cleft of his strong jaw twitched. One corner of his mouth turned up.

He was gorgeous. His hair was as dark as hers was blonde, and it was in dire need of a cut. A wisp fell into his eyes and Kari felt the sudden urge to push it away. Her hand actually moved to do just that.



Nick's mouth went dry staring into the ice blue eyes of the woman at the counter. The realization he'd seen her somewhere before hit him hard enough to consider asking, 'Have we met?,' but that sounded too much like a line. Even though it was exactly what he thought.

Uncomfortable under his probing eyes, the woman turned her head and went about eating her breakfast dismissing him with the simple act of picking up her fork. A slight stall in her arm and tremor over her face had him wondering if she was in pain. He was about to ask when Bill interrupted his thoughts.

"Have we ID'd the perp?"

Nick dragged his eyes back to the local sheriff then around the room. No one seemed to be listening, yet he didn't feel comfortable telling all he knew in a room full of civilians. "We're working on it." Nick glanced at the woman, then back to Bill. "Have you eaten?"

"Yeah, I was just headed back."

"I'll stop by and give you details later then."

Getting the hint, Bill tipped his head murmuring his goodbyes.

Nick swiveled in his chair and stared at the menu.

"So, what's good here?" he asked aloud, hoping the blonde next to him would answer. When she didn't he added, "How are the pancakes?"

“I’m sorry?”

“The pancakes? How are they?” He put the menu down and smiled at her. Where had he seen her before?

“I’ve had worse.”

She avoided his eyes by glancing down. This served to tighten his suspicion that she knew him or at the very least, wanted to go un-noticed. He rubbed his jaw in thought. This was his first time in the Sequoias, so if they’d met before it wasn’t here, *but where?*

The waitress behind the counter filled a cup of coffee, placed it in front of him, then walked away before taking his order.

“I don’t remember asking for that.”

The blonde next to him laughed. “She did the same thing for you?”

“Yeah. Sitting at a counter in a diner gives her permission to pour coffee, I guess.”

Nick didn’t place her voice. He expected it to be high pitched and well... blonde. But it wasn’t. It was slow, deep, and very sexy. The kind of voice men called 900 numbers to hear.

“So, should I have the pancakes?”

“Do you like pancakes?”

“Yes.”

“Then order them.”

“All right, I will.” He tossed the menu aside and turned to face her. “I know how this sounds,” he paused, took a breath, “but do I know you?”

She shifted and swallowed her mouthful of food while her eyes raked his form. Tilting her head back, she replied, “No, I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure? I never forget a face.”

“Now *that* sounds like a line.”

He put out his hand. “Nick Murdock.”

After wiping a hand on her napkin, she reached over. “Kari.”

Small, soft, and confident, again, not the combination he expected. By his estimates, she couldn’t be more than one hundred and twenty pounds yet she shook hands like a politician. She let go all too quickly, but not before he felt her pulse quicken. “Just Kari?”

“A girl can never be too careful, even to seemingly innocent men who wear FBI jackets in a Podunk diner.” Raising her fork she pointed to the paper with the dark headline. “You must be here because of that missing girl.”

Small, soft, confident, and he needed to add, smart. Nick was impressed. “Found girl,” he corrected.

“Oh, I didn’t hear she’d been found. She’s all right, I hope.”

“Safe with her parents as we speak.”

Kari nodded and finished the last of her pancakes, which meant she'd be leaving soon. He hadn't placed her yet and didn't want her to leave. "So, you must be here on vacation."

She put down her fork and stared across the counter at the wall. "Maybe I live here."

Nick shook his head. "You called this a Podunk diner. Your shoes are meant for walking on Rodeo Drive and not the trails of the forest." He leaned forward and sniffed. "And you smell like expensive perfume, not bug spray. No, Kari, I don't think you live here." Odd though, she wasn't wearing a ring and didn't have any trailing boyfriend or children at her side. Vacationing alone in the Sequoias struck him as odd.

"This is a nice place to visit," she clipped out as she reached inside her purse. Removing a ten-dollar bill and placing it by her plate, she stood up. "It was nice talking to you, Mr. Murdock. I'm glad the girl came back to you safe and sound."

"Leaving already?"

Her smile was lethal, her laugh seductive. "I need to get back to Rodeo; Gucci is calling out to me."

His chest rumbled in laughter.

As she walked away, his eyes followed the gentle sway of her hips. Damn, she was something to watch.

Once out of sight, he turned in his seat and brought the coffee cup to his lips. As he swallowed, his eyes landed on the car keys sitting next to Kari's empty plate.

With a wicked smile, he covered them with his hand and headed toward the door.

Outside he watched her fumbling through her purse while standing in front of a four-wheel drive rental. A strand of blonde hair slid over her face; she tossed it back in frustration and mumbled a curse.

"Looking for these?" He held up the keys and shook them with a jingle.

Her head shot up, eyes narrowed.

"You left them on the counter," he found himself explaining.

Taking a step in his direction, she reached out to capture them from his fingers. Nick playfully pulled them out of reach. She cocked her head to the side and dropped her hand.

"Have dinner with me," he spoke before she could say anything.

"What?" She looked at him as if he was crazy.

"You know, dinner. Kind of like breakfast, only later and with wine."

"Are you always so forward, Mr. Murdock?"

"Nick."

"Are you always so forward, *Nick*?" she emphasized his name to express her

annoyance.

“I believe in being direct.”

She took another step in his direction and smoothed her hair back. Her tongue shot out and moistened her lips. The action shot heat to his groin. “I’m glad to hear that, Nick. I believe in being direct, too.” Stepping closer, she brought one hand up between them, tilted her head back to gaze into his eyes. Low lashes fluttered in a way that proved she knew her affect on him.

A small shock registered when she trailed a finger down his arm. “I think you are very attractive.”

“That’s a start.” His voice grew husky. “But...”

“But,” she sighed and walked her fingers down his arm. “I don’t like being held hostage for a date.” With that, she grabbed her keys from his hand and turned to walk away.

A quick response had him grasping her arm. Kari twisted out of his hold with the skill of a trained officer. But when she stepped back, her left arm reached for her right shoulder. “Son of a...” she left the profanity out, turned white as a sheet, and leaned against the car.

Nick felt like an ass, their playful banter had somehow caused her pain. “Damn, are you okay?”

“Fine!”

Moving her hand away from her shoulder, she fumbled with the key as blood seeped through her clothing.

“I don’t think so.” Ignoring her protest, Nick moved next to her and slid back the light jacket she wore. A large saturated bandage covered her shoulder. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Kari pushed him away and managed to open the car door.

Blood dripped down her arm as she practically jumped into the driver seat.

“You should have that looked at.”

“Thank you for your concern, Nick. But I can take care of myself. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

She slammed the door, turned over the engine, and gunned the car in reverse.

Nick stepped out of the way to avoid the gravel kicked up by the tires.

“Well done, Murdock. You couldn’t have messed that up better if you tried.”

Chapter Two

Kari shoved clothes into her suitcase with her cell phone nestled between her shoulder and ear.

“There’s nothing today?” Frustration filled her voice.

“I’m sorry, Miss Pierce, but the airport you’re requesting is small, and departing flights are only scheduled twice a week. The soonest I can get you anything is Thursday at one-thirty in the afternoon.”

The packing stopped, Kari flopped on the edge of the bed and groaned. “Fine, I’ll take it.”

She finished with her reservation and hit end.

On speed dial, Kari called her office.

“Hey, sis,” Dee’s voice echoed over the airwaves. Kari could almost smell the nail polish that most certainly sat on the desk in the small one room office she kept.

“How is everything there?”

“Carter called. He says his wife was out again last night. He’s starting to think you can’t find any dirt on her.”

Kari rubbed the back of her neck and opened her e-mail on her laptop.

“Did you tell him I’m out of town on another assignment?”

“Yeah, but he didn’t seem to care. What is it with these guys?” Dee asked.
“They think the world revolves around them?”

“I’m afraid it’s a trait all men have.” Pausing, Kari thought of the men she’d worked for in the last seven years as a private investigator. All of them thought their case was in need of her dropping everything to solve. From unfaithful wives, girlfriends and even boyfriends to backstabbing employees and stealing maids, it was the end of their world if she couldn’t solve the case in three days.

“Tell Mr. Carter I’ll be in on Thursday.”

“Ahh, why so long?” Dee whined and Kari cringed.

“Airline delay.”

“Can’t you find another flight?”

“There aren’t any. Hold down the fort. And none of those three hour lunches.”

Dee laughed, yet Kari sensed her kid sister had already taken advantage of her absence.

“You’re a slave driver.”

“Well, go back to school and you won’t have to work for me.” It was a constant argument. One Kari knew her sister would blow off.

“I’ll take care of everything.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Safe flight, sis. See ya Thursday.”

Kari felt her heart soften, “Love you, nut.”

“Bye.”

On a deep sigh, she tossed the phone on the bed and resolved herself to a few hours of work on-line before taking a much-needed nap.

Running a Private Investigative Agency was a lot more monotonous than it sounded. Kari considered bringing in another agent at one time, but changed her mind after interviewing all of four candidates. Their inquisitive nature was needed when spying on cheating spouses, but dangerous for her.

Dee didn’t even know she turned furry three nights a month around the full moon. And Kari didn’t want anyone else snooping around in her life figuring it out.

Her thoughts drifted to Nick Murdock. He pegged her as more than a tourist the minute he hit the diner door. It would only be a matter of time before he found more to be concerned with than her place of residence. Still, he was tempting. It had been quite a long time since her libido had been scratched. And she couldn’t remember a smile derailing her as Nick’s did.

Kari pulled up her sleeve and looked down at the damage the scumbag from last night had inflicted. Already the edges of her skin were mending together. Healing fast was one of the perks of being a werewolf. It was the first thing she

noticed after being bitten eight years before.

Shaking her head at the memories, Kari pushed away from her computer and opted for a shower and a nap before work.

It wasn't as if she had anything better to do.



Having a badge with the three little letters F.B.I. stamped on it had its advantages. Nick fumbled through the yellow pages where he crossed lines through several names. The phone to his ear was ringing.

"Day's Inn, how can I direct your call?"

"I'm checking to see if one of your guests has checked out yet?"

"What is the guest's name?" the clerk asked while the tapping of computer keys vibrated through the line.

"Miss Kari Pierce?" Nick found her last name by pulling strings with the local sheriff and the rental car company.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't see any guest by that name."

"Hmm, I thought for sure she was staying at the Day's Inn," Nick lied, scratching off the name in the book.

"Have you tried Dave's Inn on Twelfth Street?"

"Oh, maybe that was it. Do you have their phone number?"

Scribbled down the number she rambled off, Nick then disconnected the

line.

After four more calls, he finally hit gold.

“No, Miss Pierce hasn’t checked out yet, would you like me to connect you to her room?”

“Please.”

The operator made the connection, but Nick hung up on the first ring. Almost immediately, the phone rang again.

“Murdock,” he answered.

“It’s Thompson.”

“Did you find anything on Kari Pierce?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think it’s what you’re expecting?”

Oh, that didn’t sound good. “Any sheet?”

“No, Miss Pierce doesn’t have a record, but her name did come up involving a double homicide.”

Nick felt his neck tighten. “Whose?”

“Her parents, Ron and Susan Pierce. They were attacked by a pack of dogs. Kari Pierce was with them at the time it happened, got pretty messed up herself from the pictures I have here.”

“Attacked by dogs and it was labeled a homicide?” Nick’s pencil tapped on the pad before him.

“According to an eyewitness, the dogs were directed to kill by their owner.”

Nick did his best to hold back the images filling his head. He started remembering bits and pieces about the case. Only it wasn't a case he actually worked. His brow wrinkled. No, it was one used in case studies for the bureau.

“Send me copies of the file,” Nick instructed.

“They're already in cyberspace.”

He smiled. Thompson always anticipated his requests.

“Great. Was there anything else on her?”

“No, not really. Looks like Miss Pierce works as a PI in LA.”

Now we're talking. No wonder she was so quick to get out of his hold.

“Thanks again, Thompson.”

Nick opened the files from his in-box and watched the crime scene photos unfold in front of him. Recognition flooded.

The pictures he had seen before. Ron and Susan Pierce sprawled in the open and dead in the parking lot of a rural department store. Kari Pierce, only eighteen years old at the time, had made it to the backseat of her parent's car with a younger sibling and escaped the brunt of the attack. But when she realized her parents were being killed, Kari left the car and attempted to save them.

Nick swallowed hard when Kari's picture came up on his computer. He had seen this picture before. Blood soaked hair with a gash running down the side of

her neck, and another above her left eye. Her eyes were most striking. The same piercing blue, only in these photos they appeared haunted by her ordeal.

The first time he had seen these pictures, he remembered thinking, ‘What a shame, her beautiful face forever scarred by the attack.’

His brows pinched together. Yet, she didn’t seem to bear any scars at all. He knew plastic surgery did wonders, but having no scars after such a vicious assault was unheard of.

Nick continued to read the report. At least three dogs were involved, and at one point the dogs turned on each other. In the end, the animals left the scene in two separate cars driven by men who were later apprehended. Before the case went to trial, the men ‘accidentally fell’ in prison and broke their necks.

Snatching his keys from the dresser, Nick headed out the door. Some relief came at knowing where he had seen Kari Pierce before, but now he had other questions.

Questions he planned on asking in person.



It wasn’t often Kari had the opportunity to extend her stay when on assignment. A flight delay was as good as any excuse to see the Sequoias. With the nights of the full moon behind her, she didn’t need to stash clothing in the woods to retrieve after the change. Out of habit, Kari always hiked with a complete

backpack full of life's essentials: water, food, clothes, a blanket, lighter, flashlight, and a smutty romance novel was all Kari needed to get by. She didn't plan on sleeping in the elements, but if night fell she could.

The trail she chose to hike indicated a moderate intensity level of only five miles, with a promised waterfall and spectacular cliff views at the end. The stream she followed for the first two miles was the same one she traversed the night before when rescuing the girl.

The air, no longer thick with fear, felt fresh and clean. It helped that summer storms were in the forecast. Even now, thick white clouds bubbled overhead. She would get wet on the way back, that was a given.

Animals scurried away from the path and her human scent. Some poked through bushes in confusion over the mix of both human and wolf scents her body put off. Animals could sense the subtle differences, where humans could not.

Most days Kari thought of herself as human, but after nights of violence, she knew she wasn't. Her thinly veiled humanity was an illusion to everyone in her life.

Only a mile into her hike, Kari sensed a presence behind her.

She stopped for a moment and leveled her camera to her eye. The noise behind her stopped. Turning slightly, she noticed that the person following wasn't in sight. Her keen sense of smell picked up his scent.

“Murdock,” she mumbled. *Why is he following me?*

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. *He thinks he’s so good, but he doesn’t know what I’m capable of. Okay, Mr. F.B.I. let’s see what you can do.*

Kari wandered off the trail, and acted as if she had all the time in the world. Within a half an hour, she was certain he wouldn’t be able to find his way back to the well-defined trail.

When he turned his back, she slipped from the path and doubled back. Her footsteps found solid forest floor, keeping her movements as quiet as a fox.

“Son of a bitch,” Nick cursed when she disappeared from sight.

Kari laughed and considered leaving him. Watching him spin in circles for fifteen minutes gave her heart a little lift.

Climbing on a nearby rock, she folded her hands across her chest, and shouted. “Why are you following me?”



Nick wasn’t sure if he was relieved or pissed to see Kari standing in triumph over him. He’d just been played. *Damn! She is good.*

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Humph.” Her shoulders shrugged. “Why not walk up to me and talk? Why follow me into the woods?”

“I...” He considered lying, but opted for the truth. “I didn’t think you’d stick around to talk if I did that. I thought my best shot was to get you alone so you couldn’t run away.”

“You’re smarter than you look, Murdock. Your mistake however, is thinking I’ll stick around even in the middle of the forest.” Kari jumped down from the rock with the grace of an athlete and started walking away.

“Wait.” Nick started after her.

Realizing she had a head start on him, Nick jogged to catch up. When she disappeared from sight for the second time, he cursed aloud.

“Damn it, Pierce. Where the hell are you?”

“How do you know my name?”

She sounded angry, and close.

“I looked you up.”

“Why?”

Her voice shifted directions.

Nick swirled in a circle. “I told you I knew you from somewhere.”

“We’ve never met, Murdock.”

“I know, but the department has photos of you.”

Behind him a twig snapped. He spun around in alarm.

Ice blue eyes spit cold fire from beneath long pale lashes. Kari was literally a

foot away, and he hadn't heard her.

"Why?"

"Your parents."

A flash of pain sparked and went away almost as quickly.

"The FBI was interested in their murders?" She took a step backwards.

"The case is studied due to the weapon of choice used by their killers."

Kari's eyes cast to the ground. "Wolves," the word came out on a sigh.

"The file said dogs."

"I was there; they were wolves. The police have a hard time listening to details."

Nick watched as she straightened her shoulders and stared him in the eye.

"Any more questions, Agent Murdock?"

"Yeah, one."

Kari cocked her head to the side and said, "Shoot."

"How did you know the missing girl came to us?" Nick didn't blink, didn't breathe while he waited for her response. He watched for subtle changes in her stance and eye contact that would give away her feelings. A slightly twitching left eye gave him what he needed.

"I don't know what you mean."

Bullshit. "In the diner you said You were glad the girl came back to us safe

and sound. How did you know she ‘came to us?’”

“What are you talking about?” Her eye twitched again.

“Give, Pierce. I know you’re a PI. Where did you get your information? I can’t have the men on my team blowing classified information about a case until we’re ready for it to go public.”

“The key to PI is the word private.” She brushed past him and took two steps before he moved in front of her.

“Privacy isn’t something the FBI acknowledges.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Nick scrambled in front of her and crossed his arms.

Meeting his stare, the corners of her mouth turned into what he would call an ‘almost smile’.

“I overheard someone in the diner.”

“Overheard?” He wasn’t sure he believed her, yet it wasn’t impossible.

“Eavesdropped really.”

Honed eyes searched hers for dishonesty. “Why lie?”

“It’s in the blood.”

Sitting back on his heels, Nick wondered if she told the truth. Her blonde hair, pulled back in a ponytail, gave her the appearance of innocence.

“Are we done here?”

Nick sighed knowing she wouldn't tell him more and looked around with the feeling of being lost. "Only if you know your way back."

Now she smiled. White teeth and a slight sparkle in her eye had Nick wondering just how often she cracked into such a grin.

"Follow me, city boy." Kari took the lead.

Her small frame forged a path through fallen trees and large ferns. There wasn't a trail, yet Kari walked as if she knew the way.

He didn't mind taking up the rear. It gave him the perfect view. Cotton olive green shorts halted at just the right length, giving way to slender tan legs. Her cute little butt swayed below the backpack she wore as if she had no idea the effect it had on the opposite sex.

Licking his lips, Nick tried his best to think of something else other than the sexy woman in front of him. But it was hard, and so was he.

Less than ten minutes later, they found the trail.

"Well, this is where I get off," Kari told him.

Nick turned his head from side to side. They were alone on the trail. "Where does this trail lead?"

"There's a waterfall two miles ahead. That's what the map said anyway."

"That's where you're headed?"

"Yeah, before I was so *rudely* interrupted."

Now it was his turn to smile. “It’s getting late, aren’t you worried about being out after dark?”

“I can take care of myself, Murdock.”

I’ll bet you can. “Since I’m the reason you’re delayed, I feel it’s only right I make sure you arrive home safely.”

Kari closed her eyes and shook her head.



Son of a Bitch! Why is he following me? Kari grumbled inside the silence of her mind while marching up the trail and completely ignoring the world around her.

Sequoia trees, three thousand years in the making, didn’t catch her eye. Late summer flowers blooming in small meadows were beyond lovely, but Kari thought nothing of them. Only the man kept her attention.

He bought her story; she knew it. So why the hell was he following her?

They passed groups of sight seeing tourists on the trail heading back to their camps. The sun no longer pelted down on them but lowered to its setting state. Not that they could see the sun because clouds filled the sky. Secretly, Kari hoped the impending bad weather would deter her unwanted companion, and have him heading back. But no, luck wasn’t on her side.

Kicking up dirt and brooding, Kari didn’t realize she met her destination until the pounding water deafened her ears. Stopping mid step, she looked up in

wonder.

In front of her was a sheet of water some four hundred feet high. Signs indicated the danger of approaching further, but she headed toward them without hesitation. The sight and power of the waterfall was awesome. For Kari, the beauty of the falls lay in the massive sound it made as she shortened the distance from her to it. With each step, all other noise outside the water simply disappeared.

Being a werewolf, Kari had difficulty tuning out everyday noise. Breathing, swallowing, and walking were only a few. Multiply that by every person and animal in a five-mile radius and you understood the life she led.

The noise of the fall drowned it all out. The closer she was, the quieter it became.

Closing her eyes, she tried to hear something, anything. She smiled. Silence.

A hand on her arm caught her in complete surprise. That alone had her near tears.

Concern etched into the hard features of Nick's handsome face. He opened his mouth to speak, but she couldn't hear his voice.

She laughed, pulled away from his grip, and moved closer to the pounding water. The spray mixed with small droplets of rain falling from the sky.

Glancing behind her, she saw Nick following every move she made. He

slipped on a rock and quickly righted his feet. She kept going.

She pressed forward toward the base of the falls with soaked boots and hair now plastered against her head, mesmerized.

Silent tears streamed down her face. Not since before her parents' death had she felt alone with her thoughts. Now, at the base of a waterfall, Kari wanted her old life back. Silence was truly golden.

She took another step.

Nick's hand grabbed a hold and kept her from walking further. Knee deep in water, he turned toward him.

"What...are..."

She couldn't hear him. Her face broke out in a grin, almost giddy with the fact he had snuck up on her and she hadn't heard him over the loud falls.

He pointed to the water and back to the path. Kari shook her head.

Tugging her arm out of his grip, Kari slipped on a rock. Nick shot his arm out to steady her.

Upright, his body pressed tight against hers.

Cool, wet clothing clung to both of them. Between the spray and the river, they were soaked.

Kari gazed into the chocolate brown depths of his eyes. Slowly, his hands moved from her arm to her waist and pulled her close.

His scent, musk and pine, filled her head. Her lips parted in anticipation.

She wasn't sure if she invited his move, but she certainly didn't stop him when his lips crushed to hers.

With eyes shut, and the sound of the falls drowning out the world, all Kari could do was feel.

At first, his lips were almost hard and demanding, but soon they softened. His fingers spread, spanned her ribs, and circled her back.

Passion, his and hers filled the air. For one brief moment, she wondered if he could smell it like she did. Then his hands moved to round her ass and bring her even closer.

His growing desire pulsed between his legs, despite the frigid water they stood in. The animal in her wanted. And it wanted him.

Kari wasn't sure which one of them broke the kiss, but when they parted, she stared up to startled eyes.

Looking around, Kari noticed a small cave behind the falls. Not only was it convenient, but close.

Nodding in the direction of privacy, Kari didn't give him much choice but to follow when she started toward the cave.

Her body raged. Why, she didn't know. She knew from experience not to let her passions go unfulfilled. To do so would bring frustration and pain.

Her past relations were a series of one-night stands. Nick would be no different. A part of her felt lost at the thought. But that was what her life would be.

Who would accept a werewolf as a mate or a wife?

Chapter Three

Nick saw the cave she motioned toward. Darkened skies indicated a storm approaching, and he wasn't sure the cave was the smartest place to be in when the rain came. Still, he followed.

They picked their way through the maze of rocks until they found their way to dry land.

Inside the cave, she turned to him. The noise of the falls made it impossible to talk. Even yelling proved fruitless. From the smoky expression in her ice blue eyes, Kari didn't want to talk.

As if on cue, she slid a smile, seductive and confident over her lips. Tossing her backpack from her shoulders, she crossed her arms over her chest and tugged the wet shirt free from her body.

He swallowed hard. Black lace held two beautifully shaped breasts. His nose flared, eyes widened.

Mesmerized, he lowered his mouth and captured the side of Kari's neck that she displayed with shameless abandon. He felt her pulse quicken under the assault of his tongue at her neck. Wet hands clenched his side and traveled up the long expanse of his chest.

Tugging his shirt off, it slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground. Small delicate hands played with the curls on his chest. One tiny fingernail drew lazy circles over his nipple and heat pulsed to his groin. Good god, this woman was seduction embodied. Capturing her moist lips again, Nick thought about how lucky he was to be holding her in his arms, and wondered what other gifts she would offer before their tryst was over. Just then, her questing tongue stroked his and sent his heartbeat through the roof.

Images of Kari in the diner, by the rental car, walking up the path, and crying at the base of the falls all floated in his mind while his hips ground against hers and their kiss deepened. Hunger, like that he'd felt only after weeks if not months of wanting, turned to fire in the pit of his belly. Little eager cries managed to escape her mouth and reach his ears despite the noise of the waterfall. Caught up in the moment, they touched, caressed, and kissed each other as if they were teenage kids steaming up the back windows of a car.

Just when he started to regain the power to slow down this frantic mating, Kari's delicate hands stoked his length through the denim of his jeans. All illusions of slowing down ended.

Pushed against the wall of the cave, Nick worked the clasp of her bra. Tossing the garment aside, he reveled in the soft, pink, hardened tips. After drawing one into his mouth, she buckled. Pure male pride had him smiling over

her perfect body.

He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, but the sound drowned all conversation. Instead, he let their bodies do the talking. And talk they did.

Kari worked the buttons of her shorts until they fell to the floor of the cave. Black lace panties enticed his eyes. They, too, fell to her ankles. Soft pale curls covered her core. Not to be outdone, Nick made quick work of ridding his form of unwanted clothing.

The corners of her mouth turned up while watching his brief striptease. Never shy, Nick stood to his six feet height, his sex ready to please. Kari pushed away from the wall and slid her hand over his desire.

“Lord, woman. What you do to me.” But she didn’t hear him.

He closed his eyes. Let his head roll back onto his shoulders and enjoyed her touch.

The slow caress of her hands moved, until a small drop moistened the tip of his very happy penis.

If she didn’t stop, he wouldn’t be able to control his actions. He pushed her hands away and stared deep into her eyes, looking for any sign of turning back.

Short gasps of breath escaped slightly parted lips. Not wanting to wait any longer, Nick feathered a touch down the length of her body and rounded her mound. There, he slipped one finger into her soft, moist heat. Fluid raced down his

hand. *Damn, she is wet. And oh, so ready.*

Her knees gave way, dancing fingers stoked around her swollen sex until she arched against him.

Unable to stop, he once again pushed her against the wall of the cave. Holding her gaze, strong hands guided her hips until he rested on her entrance. She was the one who pulled him close, but he was the one who plunged.

Tight folds of her skin surrounded him, begging. She clenched her muscles tight, damn near finishing him before they began. Fighting off the desire to come instantly, Nick set the pace. Slow deep thrusts rocked them both.

Kari's pleasure mounted almost immediately. He felt her body spasm but she continued to move, wanting more. Each thrust drove them harder. One of her legs circled his waist. Her teeth dug into his shoulder with savage hunger. Hands grasped his ass until he thought there would be marks. Still, he kept moving.

Maybe it was the cave, the waterfall, or maybe the woman herself, but when she arched against him, her cry rent the air despite the thunder of the water, Nick's body shot higher than ever before.



Kari slumped against the hard planes of his body, and tried to catch her breath. Even now, with their passion spent, his scent filled her completely.

Standing naked and pressed against a cave wall was a first for her. The man

holding her was, as well. She couldn't describe why, but Nick Murdock did more than fill her body with his seed. He touched something much deeper. For the first time since the change, Kari was scared.

Nick regained his breath and took her face in his hands. Without words, he searched her eyes for her thoughts. With more confidence than she felt, Kari tossed her hair that had come loose, and licked her bottom lip. Nick grinned.

He motioned toward the back of the cave and took her hand. Gathering their clothes along the way, they found a much quieter part of their shelter, away from the pounding sound of the water.

Kari put her nose to the air, to see if she could sense any unwanted visitors. They were alone. Evidence of previous occupants was apparent by the small fire ring and half-burned logs. Obviously, teenage kids had found this spot and used it recently.

"Hey," Nick interrupted her thoughts.

She glanced his way then reached into her pack for her blanket. "Hey back."

His hand stopped her. "Why the sudden shut off?"

I'm petrified, she wanted to tell him. "I'm cold," she said instead.

He helped remove her blanket and draped it over her shoulders. His fingers touched the edges of her skin where the knife had punctured her the night before. "I thought this would look much worse for all the bleeding it did earlier today."

“I heal quickly.”

“Ahh.”

Sitting on a rock, Kari watched him put on his boxers and shirt. His pants, like hers, were soaked.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen,” Nick told her.

“Neither did I.”

He knelt before her and captured her hands in his. “I’m not sorry it did.” His hands pushed her hair back. “You’re amazing.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, Murdock. Even standing in freezing cold water, you grew harder than a rock.” The best way for her to get her mind off the emotional connection she suddenly felt for the man in front of her was to make light of their encounter.

“It’s your fault. Watching that sexy ass hike up the trail for two miles drove me crazy.”

She chuckled, but couldn’t come up with a come back. She shivered, and Nick stood and looked around.

“Do you have any matches in there?” He pointed toward her bag.

“I have a lighter.”

“Even better.”

He lifted the bag and opened it up, pulled out her novel with two half-naked

people on the cover, turned it over in his hands and narrowed his eyes at her.

Her face grew hot.

“I would never have guessed.” He laughed.

He tossed the book to the ground and removed the lighter from the bottom of the bag. Kari quickly replaced her book when he went to the edge of the cave and gathered dry leaves. Within minutes, he had a fire flickering to life.

“Once we dry off, we should head on back.”

Nick moved around the fire and took a seat next to her. “What’s the matter, Pierce? Are you afraid of roughing it for the night?”

“Oh, please...I’m the one with all the supplies. It’s you who isn’t prepared.”

“You were planning on this?”

“Not this, exactly, but...”

She stopped talking when he placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. He motioned toward the mouth of the cave where the sun started to set. “It’ll be dark soon. We’d be better off staying here for the night.”

Shivering and not because she was cold, she wondered what a full night with this seductive man might do to her growing trepidation. “I, ah...” she stammered.

“I can keep you warm.”

“You’ve proven that already.”

He laughed.

“Listen, Nick, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea,” she began, then looked away.

He put a finger on her chin and forced her eyes to his. “I’m suggesting spending the night, nothing else.” It was Kari thinking about the next day, and the one after that.

“The night?”

He lowered his lips to hers; her body trembled with the tenderness of his kiss.

“The whole night.”

He trailed his lips down the column of her throat.

Oh, yeah. This is bad. Not smart at all. “Okay.”

Nick lowered her to the ground, and made good on his promise to keep her warm.



Curled up under his arm, Kari’s even breathing told him she was still in a world of dreams.

Her soft pink lips parted slightly, reminding him of the night they shared, and all the places those lips had traveled. The memory of her bent over his erection had him growing hard. He closed his eyes and forced his body to comply with his

brain. Making love to her three times was bound to make her sore, a fourth would prove he was no better than an animal.

The fire dwindled to coals as the brisk morning air saturated the cave. He considered leaving her side when she shivered and moved closer to his warmth. A broad smile spread over his face.

He'd never met a woman like her. Between making love and eating granola bars, they spoke about their lives. Although she was extremely vague, he learned her sister lived with her, and had after the death of their parents. Kari felt a certain amount of responsibility for her younger sibling. She kept to her story about being in the Sequoias on a vacation, but when asked about when she was going home, she told him, "I couldn't get a flight out until tomorrow." That left Nick to question why she would lie. What on earth was she hiding?

Staring down on her porcelain features, he remembered the photos of her after the attack. He moved closer inspecting her smooth skin. There was nothing, not one scar.

He moved away slightly and examined her arm that had bled so profusely the day before. Her bandage had fallen off in the night and under it was a red closed line. No scabs at all.

She'd told him she healed fast, but this was uncanny.

Kari rolled over, her eyes fluttered open. Seeing him, she smiled and licked

her lips. “Morning.”

Her husky morning voice was every man’s fantasy. “Good morning.” He placed a gentle kiss to her forehead and hoped there wouldn’t be any ‘morning after awkwardness.’ He wasn’t sure if they had a chance outside of the one night they shared, but he didn’t want to say the wrong thing and blow his chances of seeing her again.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you want to say something, but are afraid to.”

Nick let his gaze and fingers travel down her neck. She caught her breath. Only when his fingers moved over her half exposed breast did she let the air out. “You look lovely in my shirt.”

He cupped his palm over her breast.

“You mean out of your shirt,” she giggled, a girly giggle which surprised him. From the look on her face, it shocked her as well. He got the impression she didn’t let herself relax very often.

“Out of it, in it, whatever you want.”

She caught his hand and stopped his pursuit. “Sorry to disappoint you, Murdock. But my flight leaves in...,” she turned her wrist and glanced at her watch, “six hours. If we left now, I’d be pushing my luck getting to the airport in time.”

She was right, but he wasn't about to let her go without a fight.

Lowering his mouth to her exposed nipple, he circled the tiny orb with his tongue. It hardened instantly.

"You don't play fair," she told him, squeezing his hand.

Moving lower, he found a sensitive spot below her ribcage with his teeth. She arched toward him. Her fingers spread and traveled to his hair. Smiling, he stayed poised over her navel, enjoying the salty taste of her skin.

He sent a puff of heated breath across the curls between her legs. She moaned, arched, and caused his blood to boil.

"What were you saying?" he asked after one pass of his tongue on her exposed and swollen nub.

"You..." She buckled when his lips clasped on and sucked. "Oh, Nick."

Slick heat moistened his lips while her hips met his eager mouth.

He could get used to this. Very used to this.

With his tongue and lips, he moved faster, bringing her to the very edge of passion. Her hands grasped his head and kept him as close as two people could be, until her eager cries escalated in the earth-shattering moans of pleasure.

Before her passions crashed to the floor, he rose above her to ease his desire.

With his first thrust, her body shuddered again.

"You're insatiable," he told her.

A Cheshire cat grin found her lips. In one swift movement, she turned him on his back and took control. Straddling his pulsating erection, she rode him hard.

Her breasts thrust out in abandon, which he made love to one at a time.

“You started this, Nick.”

He felt her sheath clench. He nearly lost it. “Damn,” he grit between his teeth. “I’ve never known anyone like you.”

“I’ll bet you say that to every girl you screw in a cave.” Her voice edged on harsh.

Nick stopped all movements. Eyes locked with hers.

“No, Kari. That’s not what I mean.”

Worry passed over her face. It vanished quickly. Something changed in that moment. Nick couldn’t put his finger on what, but it did.

She rocked over him, taking him. His body, with a mind of its own, quivered in mounting desire. Controlling hands guided her hips until she found her pleasure with a strangled cry.

Only then did he take his release.

But he wasn’t fulfilled. Not by a long shot.



They dressed in relative silence, then picked their way along the path of the cave and onto the trail that brought them to the falls.

What is he thinking? Kari wondered. She cursed her off handed comments in the last moments of passion. It was her MO to turn off her lovers before they left. In this case it was her doing the leaving, but she needed to break the connection anyway. Didn't she?

For the second time in twenty-four hours, she damned her infliction. If it wasn't for her secret, maybe she and Nick would have a chance at a real relationship. But, in twenty-seven days she'd turn again. No man would put up with that.

Half a mile from the cars, Kari heard a rustling in the brush. She stopped and turned her head to the side. *Bears*. Nick walked in front of her, deep in his own thoughts. Oblivious of what was coming.

"Murdock," she hissed.

"What?" He turned back.

"Hold up." Kari peered at the hillside to their right. At least three figures were having breakfast and headed their way.

Nick followed her eyes but the bears weren't in sight yet.

"What, did you see something?"

"Come on." She grabbed his hand, and pulled him onto a large rock. From their perch, the bears would think they were large animals, and with any luck leave them alone. "What are you doing?"

Reaching the top of the rock, Kari pointed to their foe.

Momma meandered out with her two cubs enjoying the morning sun.

“Holy shit, how did you see them?”

“I didn’t. I heard them.”

Nick gave her a disbelieving look then watched the bears picking their way through the forest.

Momma took notice of them for a brief moment, contemplated the threat, then moved her babies along.

Once they passed, Nick turned to her and asked, “What was that all about?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know damn well what I mean. How did you hear those bears? I hardly noticed them when they were on top of us.”

“Sixth sense,” she replied.

“You know, Pierce, you don’t lie very well. Your eye does this little twitchy thing that gives you away every time.”

With hands on her hips, Kari stared him down. “I just saved your ass from what could have been one pissed off Momma. You’d think you’d be a little more grateful. But no, one night in the sack and you think you can call me a liar.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” she spit.

“Make light of what’s happening between us.”

“Us? There is no *us*, Nick. You are going your way; I’m going mine. We had a fling. Now it’s time to go home.” If it was only a fling, why did it hurt already?

“That’s what you want?” His voiced lowered with his question.

Kari sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and chewed it. “It’s what it is.” Even then she felt her eye twitch. In an effort to hide it, she turned to the side and away from him.

The slight pains of fear emanating through Nick’s skin changed slightly. Kari tried to ignore his scent.

“We need to get back. I’m going to miss my flight.” She pushed past him and onto the path. They walked the rest of the way in complete silence.

Chapter Four

Nick's rental car was first on their path. He pushed the button of the remote control and unlocked the doors, before opening one for her.

"Get in."

"I can walk; my car isn't far."

"Damn it, Kari. Do you always have to be so stubborn?" If it wasn't for the twitch in her eye during their argument, he might actually think she wanted him gone.

But she didn't. For some crazy reason, he didn't want her gone either. In the thirty-two years of his life, he wanted to see tomorrow with the same woman, this crazy, beautiful, stubborn, and amazing woman.

"What kind of man would I be if I let you walk to your car?"

She rolled her eyes, shrugged her backpack off her shoulder, and climbed in.

He closed the door, lifted his brow, and walked over to the driver side door.

Once buckled in, he opened the glove compartment to retrieve his gun and cell phone.

Scanning his missed calls, Nick noted ten from the local sheriff. *What's this about?* Hitting redial, he called the station and waited for the clerk to answer.

Kari watched but didn't say a thing.

"I need to check on something."

She shrugged and stared out the window.

"Police Department, how can I direct your call?"

"This is Agent Murdock. Bill's been trying to get a hold of me."

"Yes, Agent Murdock, let me dispatch you to him right away."

Less than five seconds past before Bill's hurried voice yelled over the line.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Nice talking to you, too."

"You always were a smart ass, Murdock. Listen, we have a situation on our hands." The teasing stopped, and Bill's voice grew grave.

"Oh, what situation is that?"

"Our suspect is missing."

Anger coursed through Nick's veins at the news, fists hit the steering wheel in frustration. "What?" he screamed into the receiver. Kari turned to him, alarmed.

"We were transporting him when the van collided with another vehicle on the road going down the hill. The driver and second officer were stunned. By the time they checked on our man, he'd escaped."

Nick ran a frustrated hand through his hair and swore under his breath.

Kari touched his shoulder, gaining his attention. "Where was he last seen?"

He wanted to ask her how she heard Bill on the line, but remembered the bears. “Where did you lose him?” he barked.

After Bill gave a mile mark on the road, Nick hung up the phone and stared out the window.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

“Let’s? Oh, no, this doesn’t involve you. I’m taking you to your car.” Nick turned over the engine and put the car in drive.

“Whatever.” But her tone was anything but cooperative. “How did they lose the scrawny little weasel anyway?” she asked under her breath. “Morons.”

Nick slammed on the breaks, and Kari put her arms out to keep from lunging into the dash.

“What the...”

“How do you know he’s scrawny?”

“Damn, Nick, where did you learn how to drive, K-Mart?” She conveniently changed the subject. Her eye started to twitch.

“I asked you a question.”

“It was a guess.”

Her eye twitched again, this time she brought her hand to her forehead as if she sensed him watching her own personal lie detector.

“You’re lying.”

Surprisingly, Kari turned in her seat and looked him straight in the eye. “Maybe I am, but I have my reasons. Time is wasting, Nick. He could be out there snatching up another little girl while we sit here debating my honesty.”

She is right, damn it.

Nick placed the blue flashing light in his dash and took off.

He drove a half a mile before skidding to a halt in front of her car.

She didn’t move. In fact, she folded her arms in front of her chest and made a display out of scrutinizing her un-manicured nails.

His jaw went rigid. “You’re not going to get out, are you?”

“Tick, tock, Murdock.” She glanced at her watch.

Growling, he punched the gas again and turned onto the road where the locals had misplaced his charge.



Satisfaction at getting her way was quickly replaced with worry. Nick snuck a few glances at her through the slits of his eyes. Somewhere, in his thick skull, he was trying to figure her out. Not that she thought he would, but his effort was bothersome. No one in her past had ever tried to place her motives or ways. Not even Dee.

The two-lane country road was blocked with a dozen squad cars and forestry department vehicles. K-9’s were sniffing the area and both uniformed and

un-uniformed officers were everywhere.

Kari jumped from the car as quickly as Nick.

“Stay here,” he ordered.

Not willing to argue and waste more time, Kari gave him a mock salute and leaned against the car.

He marched away, looked back once, then turned and spoke with the sheriff.

Once Nick moved a little farther away, Kari got to work.

Fear, mixed with anxiety, was everywhere. Unfortunately, it was the result of the police shitting their pants after losing their suspect and not the weasel on the loose. Kari noted the directions the dogs headed and moved quietly away from the crowd.

The man’s stench hit her several yards from the smashed up van. She approached a small patch of trampled forest floor, where one dog assessed the ground.

His snout picked up her scent and the animal gave a warning growl. His handler darted his eyes to her and asked. “Who are you?”

“I’m with Murdock. Do you have any leads?” Acting as if she belonged was something Kari had mastered years ago. Seldom was she ever questioned.

The officer shrugged and tugged his dog back when he barked in her

direction. Perhaps he didn't like the competition, she mused.

"No, we just arrived on scene."

Kari bent down, picked up a broken twig, and brought it to her nose. He must have stumbled where she stood.

Again, the dog barked at her.

"Can you quiet him down?" She was trying to hear past the white noise of the chaos.

The air changed and she caught his scent.

Just then, Nick grabbed her arm from behind and whirled her around in his direction. "I told you to stay by the car. What the hell are you doing?"

"Saving all your collective asses." She pulled out of his grasp and started running into the forest.

Nick stayed close behind. "You know, Pierce, you're really starting to piss me off."

She ignored him and changed directions after a few more yards. When she stopped, he collided into her.

Gasping for breath, he asked, "Do you see something?"

She leaned over and picked up a branch. Wiping her fingers along the wood, she collected a small drop of blood. "He's injured."

Standing back on his heels, Nick's expression started to soften. He had a

thousand questions. Kari could practically see the wheels in his head turning.

“Which way?”

“North.”

They ran together, but didn’t say a word. When Kari stopped and sniffed the air, Nick stayed quiet about her strange behavior. He simply followed.

For two miles they forged new paths until she knew the weasel was close.

His fear gagged her. The sticky, bloody trail he left behind was equally offensive.

“We need to split up,” she whispered.

“No way. I’ve gone along on this wild goose chase but there is no way I’m leaving your side.”

“Be reasonable, Nick. I’ll cause a distraction and you grab him from behind.”

Nick spread his arms wide. “Where is he?”

Sending him a smirk one would grant a child, she grabbed his hands, knelt down low, and pointed to a tree some twenty yards away. “Behind there.”

“How can you tell?”

“Now’s not the time for questions. He’s catching his breath, which means he’ll be moving soon. I’ll circle in front of him, you take him from behind.”

When he started to argue, she insisted, “I won’t have to get near him.”

“What if he hears you?”

She rolled her eyes. "Right, like you did yesterday."

Nick shook his head and removed his gun.

By the time he looked up, Kari was gone.

Her hair stood on end when she passed the man sitting at the base of a tree. Dressed in a jailhouse jumpsuit, he appeared thinner than he had when she incapacitated him the first time. Handcuffed with his hands in his lap, he didn't pose any threat at all.

She saw Nick take position a little closer than where she left him. The time had come to let the pervert know they were there. It was then it dawned on her, she didn't know his name. Not that she'd give him the dignity to use it.

Kari picked up a small stone and tossed it into the brush to the East.

His eyes darted toward the noise, his fear mounted.

"What's the matter, dick head? Afraid of what might be hiding in the woods?"

She could almost hear Nick's scowl with her choice of words. Besides, she couldn't help herself. It was a comfort to play with her prey before she pounced, with or without fur all over her body.

The man shimmied up the trunk of the tree until he stood straight. Kari shifted positions and called out from a different direction.

"You were better off in the paddy wagon. Out here in the woods, it's easy to

get lost.”

His head whipped around. She moved again.

Nick moved closer every time she spoke.

“Who are you?” his shaky voice called out.

“Ah... well, you know who I am.”

“No, I don’t.”

She ducked out of sight and up onto a rock. There she let her body be seen.

“I’m your nightmare, you pervert.”

His beady little eyes looked her way and raked over her body. He swiped his lips with the tip of his tongue and smiled a toothless grin. “Even handcuffed I can take you out.”

Nick was less than four yards from him. His stealth- like manner filled her heart with pride. They made a great team. Too bad it couldn’t last.

She jumped down from the rock and walked forward, keeping the man’s attention. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Come on, Bitch,” he spat with cocky confidence.

“I don’t think so.” Nick brought the butt of his gun down on top of the man’s already swollen head. He crumbled to the ground before he knew what hit him.

“Well done, Murdock. But how are we going to get him out of here?” Kari

flashed her eyebrows high and gave into a chuckle when Nick's expression of accomplishment fell.

Chapter Five

“I want to see you again,” Nick said in the busy airport while they waited for her flight to be called.

“We’ve been over this. I’m not cut out for long term.”

“How will you know if you don’t give it a chance?”

He had said it all before. In the past twenty-four hours, he’d tried to convince her to give them a chance. He prodded her to divulge her secrets he knew she kept. In the end, they made love for the last time in the wee hours of the morning and fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Part of her wanted to try. But she knew it wouldn’t work. It was better to break it off now, without hard feelings.

“We had a good time.”

“Is that all it was to you?”

Her eyes started to gloss over. She shook her emotions down and took a deep breath. “No. But it’s better this way.”

“Flight 613 is now boarding at gate 2 to Los Angeles.”

“That’s me.”

He stepped closer and brought his lips down to hers, branding her with his

scent. She choked back the lump in her throat and met his kiss with as much urgency as he.

The announcer called her flight again.

He ended their kiss and rested his forehead against hers. “Be careful, Kari.”

“I will.”

Kari turned, handed her ticket to the waiting flight attendant, and wondered if she was making the biggest mistake of her life.



Nick scowled throughout the office for the better part of a week. His report on the kidnapper was typed and on his superior's desk, with only a few minor details omitted. Explaining how a pint size woman could sniff out the suspect would look as if he was indulging in the confiscated stash in the evidence vault.

Some things were better off unsaid. Besides, he still wasn't sure how she did it. Over and over she pleaded a sixth sense. But it was more than that; he knew it. And Kari knew he suspected something. Is that why she ran? Whatever her secret was, it kept Nick out of her life, and he wasn't happy about it.

Kari Pierce was never far from his thoughts. Although he kept busy during the day with case files, at night his body and mind remembered her warmth, her scent, and her smile.

Nick forced the image of her naked and in his arms from his head and stared

at the phone on his desk. He tapped the numbers with his index finger, wondering if he should try calling her again. Every time he did, however, her sister Dee lied and insisted she wasn't in. One time he heard Kari's voice asking who called. Dee quickly covered up the receiver, mumbled something, then proceeded to tell him Kari wasn't there.

Dragging a frustrated hand through his hair, Nick snatched his hand away from the phone and forcefully opened the file in front of him.

"Murdock," his boss called from the door of his office. "You have a minute?"

Nick stood while Ron Patterson came in and shut the door behind him. Before he sat down, he tossed a folder on top of his desk. "You mind explaining this?"

It was the Sequoia file. Kari's file.

"What didn't you understand?"

"It appears to jump ahead of itself. I'm wondering if there is something you're not telling me." Ron sat back and calmly folded his hands in his lap. Nick remembered how unsettled he felt by Patterson when first joining the FBI. He gave lectures at the time and wasn't in a position of being in charge. Like any good agent, Ron elevated in the ranks and soon took the corner office. At sixty-five and with silver streaks feathered into his raven black hair, Ron may be on his way to retirement, but could still be intimidating.

On occasion, Nick would join Ron and his wife Nancy for dinner and special occasions. Nick considered him a friend more than a colleague.

“I believe all the pertinent information is there, Ron. If something doesn’t meet with your approval...”

Ron brought his hands in the air and shook his head. “I never said I didn’t approve.”

“Then what is this about?” Now Nick was confused. Ron’s body language didn’t give the impression he was angry. In fact, if Nick didn’t know better, he would swear there was a grin hiding behind his stiff exterior.

“This Pierce woman, she’s the same person you pulled files on the other day, right?”

“Yeah.”

Ron rubbed his chin, as if in debate with himself. “She’s a beautiful woman.” It wasn’t a question.

Nick narrowed his eyes at his boss. “You know her?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Exactly what would you say?” *And why the hell are you being evasive?*

Instead of answering his question Ron asked, “Are you involved with her?”

“I don’t see how that is any of your business.”

Now Ron did smile. “Beautiful, not like my Nancy mind you, but stunning in

her own way. You can't even tell she'd been attacked by wolves when she was eighteen."

"Wolves? The report said dogs."

"Humm." Ron nodded his head, unaffected by the inconsistency of his statement. "Wasn't there a report of a wolf helping the child escape her kidnapper?"

Ron was leading him somewhere, without saying where.

"I put the child's statement in the file."

"Yes, you did." Ron stood to leave. When he reached the door, he turned around and glanced to the ceiling. "I wonder how far a wolf can smell or hear their prey?"

"I'm not sure, why do you ask?" *Damn it, what are you getting at?* Nick knew better than to come right out and ask. Like he told Kari, the FBI didn't acknowledge privacy, even within their very own walls.

"I wonder if there's anything in our files. Let me know if you find the answer."

"I will."

Smiling, Ron walked out of the room.

Nick watched him leave, his cryptic words echoed in his mind.

Not wasting time, he clicked into the department classified files and opened

a second monitor to the internet. Nick had a sneaking suspicion that the facts of the Pierce murders lay in the details.

After typing in wolves, dogs and murders along with Kari's name and that of her parents, he cross-referenced to unsolved cases. Ron wouldn't have led him to something wrapped up tight.

A warning screen popped up saying it would take over an hour for the files to pull out of archives. They dated back to the borough's inception.

While waiting, Nick used the information superhighway to learn more about the woman who kept him up at night.

Once the department files finished downloading, Nick clicked into the one that flashed classified. It wasn't password protected, which surprised him. After Ron's hints, he guessed his boss was the reason for the ease in obtaining access.

The screen flickered, and in slow motion an image emerged that had Nick's jaw hitting the floor. "Son of a bitch."

At one in the morning, Nick picked up the phone and woke Ron Patterson from his comfortable sleep.

The bastard deserved it.

"Yeah?" Ron's sleep-filled voice answered the phone.

"It's Murdock. I've been called away on a family emergency."

"Really?" A small clicking noise came over the wire. Almost like it was

bugged. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Damn the man, he knew exactly what he faced, but didn't give a clue.

"When can we expect you back?"

"I'm not sure. I'll keep you posted."

Ron cleared his throat. "California's nice this time of year. Take some of your vacation time if you need to."

Sneaky bastard. Ron knew he didn't have family in California.

"I'll call when I'm back in town."

"You do that."

Nick ended the call and picked up the phone again.



Kari slammed the file cabinet closed and cursed when she noticed a broken nail.

"Damn," she mumbled bringing her finger up to her mouth and sucking on the sensitive exposed skin.

She'd put the Carter file in archives, having given the man what he needed. He in turn gave her a hefty check for her efforts.

It beat the alimony he would have shelled out if Kari hadn't found his wife in bed with another man, a boy toy Mr. Carter's money supported without his knowledge.

Usually, Kari would be satisfied with a case coming to a close, but lately she found little joy in her work.

Dee found her more times than not deep in thought and distracted. Nick's constant phone calls only added questions from her little sister, questions Kari didn't want to answer.

She suspected that Dee realized her big sister's heart pined for the man behind the voice. But sisterly love kept her from forcing the issue, for which Kari was eternally grateful. Kari would have caved and blubbered like a lovesick girl if Dee had pressed. That behavior wasn't something she did very often.

Maybe she should take some time off, she mused. Even now, she could smell him as if he were in the other room.

Kari sighed and walked out of the small stockroom and straight into an armload of roses.

In painful slow motion, Kari's eyes traveled from the beautiful variegated roses up and onto his thrust out chest until finally her eyes met and locked with his.

"I didn't think I'd be able to pull that off." Nick's sexy voice was playful and light. "With that sixth sense thing you have going, I figured you'd know when I hit the state."

Her heartbeat thudded in her chest like a hammer. Butterflies flapped their

wings in her stomach, but she tried to push the pleasure aside. He shouldn't be here. "What are you doing here, Nick?"

"I had to see you again. I missed you so much."

"You shouldn't..."

Placing a finger on the tip of her lips kept her from talking. "You're like a drug and I'm in need of a hit," he whispered close to her ear.

"Okay, big sister," Dee laughed from her desk as she stood and grabbed her purse. "This is where I leave. Nice meeting you, Nick."

"A pleasure meeting you, too."

Kari sent Dee a killer look of abandonment, which was met with another laugh and a sashaying butt as she marched out the door. "Traitor."

Once the door closed, Nick picked up her hand and made her take the roses. "Do you like the flowers?"

"They're beautiful."

"With a sniffer as good as yours, I needed all the help I could get. Besides, my mom always says flowers make women smile even when they don't want to."

Kari embarrassed herself when her lips slid into a grin. "Oh, Nick. What are you doing? It was better the other way." *Painful, but better.*

"You mean the sleepless nights and snapping at my colleagues way? I beg to differ." He shifted to the door and locked it after turning the sign to 'closed'.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want to be interrupted.”

“Please, Nick.”

“You know I almost called my boss a bastard last night when I woke him up after midnight.”

Needing to sit, Kari leaned against her desk for support. The sight of him again had her questioning her resolve. Looking like he’s slept on a plane, with wrinkled clothing and a jaw that hadn’t seen a razor in at least twenty-four hours, Kari wondered if he even bothered to pack a change of clothing before rushing to California. “Aren’t you curious as to why I wanted to call my boss a bastard?”

Snapping out of her deep thoughts she asked, “Is he?”

“No, not really.”

“Okay, why did you want to call him nasty names?”

Nick walked up and traced a hand down her face. She leaned in, unable to stop herself. He smelled so damn good.

“Because he knew all about you before I did. It sucks when the boyfriend is the last to know.”

“Boyfriend? Nick, I already told you...”

“I have to be your boyfriend before we get married.”

She jumped away as if burned. “What? Nick I can’t get married.”

His cocky grin sparkled all the way to his eyes.

“Wait a minute. What do you mean when you say your boss knows all about me? The FBI is spying on me?” *Oh, god. What does he know?*

Her mouth went bone dry while blood rushed to every nerve ending in her body. When the hair on the back of her neck stood on end, it reminded her of when she was on the hunt in wolf form. *This is bad. Really, really bad.*

“See, you’re too smart.”

“What is it, Murdock? What do the Fed’s know about me?”

He rocked back and folded his arms across his chest. “You know-the whole furry full moon thing.”

The blood in her head dropped to her feet, she stumbled off the side of the desk and found her chair before she fell. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” *How, how did he find out?*

“Once I put aside the fact that werewolves were real, everything fell into place.” He rattled on like he talked about his favorite kind of pizza. He’d uncovered her deepest, darkest secret and acted like it was nothing.

“Werewolves?” Her voice was hardly a whisper.

“It’s the reason you pulled away, isn’t it?” He came around to her chair and rested his hands on her knees. “I wonder if anyone in your life knows the truth. Does Dee?”

Everything cracked her deception and lies all stacked up against her came crumbling down like a house of cards.

“No, she doesn’t.” Tears welled, threatened to spill.

“Why not?”

“She wouldn’t understand. No one would understand.”

“Really? Because I do.” Nick’s thumb brushed away the moisture from her cheeks, his touch caring and tender, and not at all what she expected. “You must have been terrified the first time.”

Like flood gates opening the tears fell in sheets. She hated the female weakness, but years of loneliness and solitude with her secret weighed heavy on her heart. Nick’s eyes caught hers in concern.

“I thought I was dying the first night I changed. I thought I’d survived the attack only to die of a seizure.”

“But you weren’t dying. In fact, you were growing.”

“Yes, into an animal. Just like the ones who killed my parents.” When he didn’t say anything, she went on. “The first night, once I realized what happened, I wandered the streets, hid in alleys. When I screamed, the sound came out in a howl. I didn’t know if I would change back, Nick.” She pulled in a shaky breath.

“But you did?”

“Yes, I did. Over the years I learned to use what those assholes did to me. I

could hear things, even on nights the moon wasn't full. I could smell things like fear. Do you know what fear smells like, Nick?"

"No."

"Putrid. Rancid garbage smells better than fear. I learned to use my affliction for good. But sometimes, it feels purely evil."

Nick gazed at her with understanding eyes. "I've had to use my gun with lethal force six times in my career. Every time I feel that evil you're describing. Your weapon is different, that's all."

She let out a sob of relief. He gathered her in his arms and held her while she cried out her years of loneliness and frustration.

When she finally grabbed hold of her emotions, his cotton shirt was soaked and streaked with mascara.

She brushed her hand over the damage she inflicted. "I'm sorry."

"It won't be the last time you cry on my shoulder."

"Nick, about us..."

He kissed her before she continued. First to keep her quiet she knew, but then her body started to warm. She felt his heart beating in time with hers.

He moved his lips to her neck. "Did you know that werewolves mate for life?"

"What?"

“The files over at the borough are very informative. Classified, but informative.” He continued his trail of fire.

“Mate for life,” she murmured with pleasure.

“Some files say it’s more of a soul mate kind of thing.”

“How do you know that means us?”

He slowly undid the first button of her blouse. “I smell you everywhere. My nights are interrupted with images of you, us, naked and laughing. You are my air, Kari. If that doesn’t sound like soul mate then I don’t know what would. Once you turn me like you, I’ll make love to you every night of the month to prove it.”

“Nick, you don’t mean that.” She drew back.

“Yes, I do.” He leaned in and kissed the worry from her face. “I love you, Kari. If you give me half a shot, I’ll prove it every day.”

Her heart swelled with joy. And for the first time in her life she looked forward to the next full moon. “I love you too, Nick. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t stop myself.”

“Does that mean you’ll marry me?”

“You won’t mind having a wife who needs to shave her whole body?” she laughed.

“We can move to Sweden where the women don’t shave.”

“I think that’s Switzerland.”

He moved in to kiss her again. “Does that mean yes?”

Placing both hands on the sides of his face, she stared deep into his beautiful laughing eyes. “Make me your wife, and I’ll make you my mate.”

His lips crushed to hers and sealed her answer with a kiss. “We make a great team.”

“Forever.”

The End

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Author Bio:

Catherine Bybee has been an avid reader of romance novels for over 25 years. She's found her calling writing paranormal romance, with kick ass heroines and hero's that give their lives purpose. Catherine is a wife and mother of two boys who keep her very busy.