

# **Mark of the Moon**

## **B.J. McCall**

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The Mark of the Moon prophecy ordains that Ivy Ward must mate with the werewolf bearing a birthmark similar to the one she bears, a crescent-shaped moon. No *were* in Ivy's pack will touch her and she's lived her life saddled with the nickname, Poison Ivy.

Frustrated and looking for love, Ivy takes an extended vacation with a California pack. Since her mark isn't readily visible, Ivy embarks on a personal mission of passion. All she needs is a sexy, unsuspecting *were* to help her.

Lodan Hunt bears the Mark of the Moon, but there is far more to the prophecy than a preordained mate.

One *were* and one she-wolf, destined to mate.

## Chapter One

Heart pumping, lungs laboring and paws burning, Lodan Hunt hugged the final turn of the grueling forty-mile race. Sponsored by the West Coast elders, the trail of the annual cross-country race was over rugged terrain designed to challenge any werewolf. The first twenty miles were completed in human form, and then the participants shifted and finished the race on four legs.

Lodan had won the last two races. With this victory he'd hold a record, the only *were* to win for three consecutive years. Lodan wanted that record. His lead was slender, but solid. Several wolves were keeping pace, but Lodan was confident he had more than enough stamina to beat them in the final uphill stretch. Paws digging into the rough meadow grass, Lodan began his closing push. Nothing could stop him now.

Lights lined the final stretch and the enthusiastic pack members hovered along the makeshift rails. A blur of faces in human form, the crowd cheered, clapping and yelling out the name of their favorite. Arms waved before him and Lodan ducked his head. Fingertips slid along his spine, from neck to tail, leaving a shockwave in their wake. A whiff of she-wolf stung his nostrils. Heat spiked through him, piercing his brain and exploding in his chest.

The shock forced air from his lungs and threw him off-stride. His attention momentarily diverted, Lodan lost his concentration. His paw slipped, the lost momentum costing him dearly. A streak of gray fur came up on his right and shot past him. Lodan lunged forward trying to regain the lead, but to no avail. He'd lost.

After months of training, he'd lost in the last few yards. Lodan had no idea what had just happened, but the crescent birthmark on his right hip was on fire.

\* \* \*

A hot current zinging through her, Ivy Ward staggered backwards. Heart pounding and chest heaving, Ivy stumbled through the crowd of cheering werewolves and toward the abandoned picnic tables. Wondering what shocked her, Ivy sank onto the closest bench.

Everything had happened so fast. Ivy recalled being pushed by the excited crowd and falling forward toward the racing wolves. Beneath the silvery light of the full moon, the wolves were nothing more than passing blurs. She'd felt the silky fur of one wolf slide between her fingers, recalled the sparks of blue right before a hot charge had shot up her arm, knocking her back on her heels as if she'd touched a live wire. Heat had swept through her like a wildfire.

Ivy sniffed her fingers, caught the virile scent of wolf. Heat stroked through her like a lush wave. The amazing feeling slowly dissipated, leaving Ivy weak-kneed, but blissful.

Which wolf had she touched?

Nothing in her experience, even a climax, had come close to this euphoria. She took a deep breath; only then did she realize that the crescent-shaped birthmark on her left butt cheek was burning.

## Chapter Two

Backside swaying, Ivy strolled into the party wearing a little black dress, a pair of lacy black panties and red high heels. She inhaled. The sexy scent of werewolf filled the room, putting her senses on alert. Had she been in wolf form, her tail would be waving in furious anticipation.

Ivy had come west to visit her friend Beth, who she'd met at a ski lodge in Utah last winter. Ivy, a lodge manager in her home state, was attending a hotel management seminar and Beth was on a singles skiing vacation. They'd met on the slopes after Beth had taken a nasty fall and had become fast friends. At the conclusion of her vacation, Beth had invited Ivy to visit her in California.

After a week with Beth, Ivy had asked permission to remain at the lair. Accepted by the pack, Ivy now had a furnished apartment and a part-time position as a clerk in the building maintenance department answering the phones and scheduling repairs. Not as demanding as her usual position as a resort manager, but at least she was employed.

The midnight buffet and dance promised a pick of healthy, single *weres*, but after the *incident* at the race Ivy was hunting for the wolf responsible for knocking her off her feet.

Ivy scanned the room and spotted her friend at a table near the door leading to a flagstone patio. Beth's platinum blonde hair was easy to pick out in a sea of brunettes. Heads turned as Ivy threaded her way to Beth's table. Unfortunately, it wasn't her little black dress causing the stir. Several pack members had shown genuine concern when Beth had discovered Ivy draped over the picnic table, nearly unconscious.

"You're looking better," Beth said, giving her a concerned once over. "Sure you shouldn't have stayed in tonight?"

Once Ivy had recovered from the *incident*, she'd returned to her apartment and changed from her jeans into evening clothes. She felt great, energized, with her blood running high. "And miss the midnight dance and buffet? Not a chance. I feel fine. I should have eaten more at the picnic."

"The buffet is excellent." Beth wagged a long finger tipped with bright red nail polish. "I don't want to hear the word diet and I don't want you passing out on me again."

"I didn't pass out. I was just a little woozy."

"So woozy you couldn't stand. The elders are serving prime rib, very rare. Make sure you have a generous portion."

Ivy smiled at Beth's concern. "I'll be sure and have the prime rib."

Having no idea exactly what had transpired, Ivy hadn't told Beth about the hot jolt she'd received. Despite her confusion, the virile scent of a male wolf was seared into her olfactory memory. If the wolf were here tonight, she'd find him.

Glancing around the room, Ivy checked out several good-looking *weres*. Extending her stay was proving to be a smart move. The moon was high, full and bright, and the night held promise. At least here no one would whisper the nickname that had haunted her since she'd reached the mating age, Poison Ivy.

In the foothills of the Sierras she was just Ivy, a relation from a distant pack, a she-wolf ready to explore her passionate side. Now all she had to do was find that sinfully scented werewolf. Her gaze slid over a group of young, fit males standing at the bar. "A fine choice of available *weres*. Any racers in that group?"

Beth followed Ivy's gaze. "The one with the long brown hair is my cousin, Anton. He won the race. Would you like to meet him?"

Ivy recalled the amazing scent and her explosive reaction to one of the racing *weres*. She had to find him. "Love to."

Anton was handsome with a generous smile and deep-set brown eyes. When Anton asked Ivy to dance, she stepped into his arms and braced herself for a hot charge. Nothing. The song was slow, so Ivy moved closer and inhaled. Although pleasant, Anton's scent didn't make her nostrils twitch and the mark on her buttock wasn't even warm. He wasn't the wolf who had stunned her senses.

"Congratulations on your win," she said. "It's amazing you beat all those competitors. There must have been ten or was it twelve?"

"Ten."

*Only nine to go.*

"I understand the course is difficult. How long have you been in training?"

"I've been training for two years. Last year I almost won, but this year I took Lodan in the final stretch."

"Lodan?"

"Lodan Hunt, the winner for the last two years. He was the one to beat and he didn't like losing."

"A spoilsport?"

Anton shook his head. "Lodan's a good guy, but he's very competitive and he trains as hard as I do."

Someone tapped Ivy on the shoulder. She turned and smiled at the pretty blonde who asked if she might cut in. Ivy willingly relinquished her partner and made her way back to her table. As she slid into her chair, she asked Beth if she knew Lodan Hunt.

Beth's eyes narrowed. "Stay away from Lodan."

Ivy's curiosity was piqued. "Why should I?"

"You're looking for love, the perfect mate, right?"

Ivy hadn't told Beth about the mark on her butt cheek or about the prophecy that linked her to only one compatible werewolf for a mate. "I'm not necessarily looking for forever tonight."



"Lodan's a loner. He lives in the mountains and oversees the pack's nature reserve where the wild wolves run. He rarely visits and when he does he's here for only one or two nights."

Ivy lifted an eyebrow and waited for Beth to tell her more.

"Lodan prefers the wilderness to living with the pack. He's not a relationship kind of guy."

"Untamed?"

"He's civilized, but he likes his freedom. No commitments. At least he's right up front about his desire not to get involved."

"Sexy?"

"Yes. A few she-wolves have tried to tame him. No one has succeeded. The more he pushes away, the bigger challenge he presents."

Given her mark, a commitment wasn't an option. Sexy and free sounded perfect. "Maybe I'd like a challenge."

Beth reached out and laid her hand on Ivy's shoulder. "You told me you haven't dated much. Don't jump into the fast lane with Lodan. You'll get burned."

If Lodan was the source of her hot jolt, she'd already been burned. "Have you been in the fast lane?"

Beth started to shake her head. Instead, she looked Ivy right in the eye. "It was a long time ago. I'm over it. Lodan never had it."

"Is he here?"

"I haven't seen him, but he wouldn't insult the elders by leaving before the awards ceremony."

"Describe him."

"Dark hair. Green eyes."

Ivy raised an eyebrow. "That's it?"

"A rugged outdoors type, muscled, but lean. His hair might be clipped short or hanging down to his shoulders. Lodan gets a haircut when the mood strikes him. You can eliminate any male wearing a tie or shoes other than sandals or hiking boots."

Ivy stood. "Green eyes, no wingtips. Got it."

Beth grasped Ivy's arm. "Just remember, I warned you."

"Fair enough."

Ivy danced with several partners, but not one of them was the elusive Lodan Hunt or the source of the sizzling charge.

\* \* \*

Preferring the cool night air to the crowd inside, Lodan hung out on the patio drinking a few beers while waiting for the awards ceremony to begin. The elders would introduce the competitors, present the winner with his trophy and prize money, then everyone was invited to enjoy the prime rib. Lodan had planned to head home right after the obligatory meal, but he knew he couldn't leave without finding the wolf responsible for his loss.

Losing the race was a major disappointment, but Lodan was pleased that Anton was the one to best him. If he'd lost because he wasn't fast enough or hadn't trained hard enough, Lodan would put the race behind him, rethink his training schedule and concentrate on next year, but someone had thrown him off-stride, snatching away his victory with the touch of their hand.

The memory of those fingers sliding along his spine, the shockwaves rocketing through his system, mystified Lodan. His instincts told him those slender fingers belonged to a she-wolf, the source of the delicious, heady scent that had slammed into his olfactory system. *Her* scent alone had been enough to take his mind out of the race.

He'd made it to the finish line and dropped to the ground in a euphoric stupor. His friends and supporters had thought he'd pushed himself too hard, but Lodan knew the shaky feeling that had washed over him had nothing to do with physical exertion and everything to do with being zapped with a charge so hot he had no idea how to deal with it. He'd lain in the soft, cool grass trying to figure out what had happened.

Finding the source of the charge and the scent was the answer. Another scent, familiar and decidedly she-wolf, reached his nostrils.

"I should have known I'd find you outside."

Lodan turned and smiled at Sanda. She was wearing a slinky green dress that showed off her figure to perfection. He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

She grinned. "So you haven't changed your mind about being just friends."

"But you remain a beautiful temptation."

Sanda was beautiful and ready to mate. Even if Lodan was in love with her and wanted to take her as his mate, the elders would never approve the match. He bore the mark that took away his freedom of choice. According to prophecy, his mate was pre-ordained.

At eighteen years of age he'd made the mistake of falling in love, only to be denied the she-wolf he'd wanted for his mate. After learning another wolf had claimed her during the Lycaon Moon, Lodan had decided he'd never put himself or anyone through that kind of pain again. And even if he did meet a she-wolf with a similar mark, he'd be damned if he'd let an old prophecy dictate his life.

Since Lodan was not born of this pack, Sanda did not know he bore the mark of the moon. He'd disguised the crescent birthmark by having a wolf's head tattooed beneath it. Remaining single set well with Lodan, but that didn't mean he had to give up sex. He just had to keep his encounters brief and mutually satisfying.

Sanda's blue eyes sparkled. "You could ask me to dance."

Lodan sat down his beer and took her hand. "I'm a lousy dancer."

"It's good to know you aren't great at everything."

The look in Sanda's eyes caused a natural stirring Lodan quickly suppressed. He and Sanda had shared one passion-filled night. He lived in the mountains away from the pack and deliberately kept his visits infrequent and his temptations limited. During the pre-race activities, Lodan had noticed how Anton watched Sanda when he thought no one was looking. The two would make a perfect couple.

The song was slow and sultry and the dance floor crowded with couples. Lodan's nostrils began to quiver, the familiar scent sliding beneath his senses, stealing his breath. *She* was here.

"Lodan. Sanda."

Turning, Lodan caught sight of Anton dancing with a brunette. Maneuvering between couples, Lodan guided Sanda toward Anton and his partner.

*Her* scent became stronger. *She* was close. Lodan released Sanda's hand.

Anton's gaze swept over Sanda before he addressed Lodan. "Have you met Ivy? She's just moved here from West Virginia."

Heat spiked through Lodan as Anton made the introductions. Ivy's eyes were brown, warmed with golden shards and framed by long, dark lashes. Voices slid away, all except for one with a slight southern accent. She spoke his name and Lodan ached to press his mouth to her lush red lips and taste her.

Her hair was long, the dark glossy strands spilling over her nearly bare shoulders. Black knit clung to her firm breasts, slender waist and flared over her sweetly rounded hips. Her legs were long and the sight of her red high heels sent his imagination into overdrive.

Her compelling scent engulfed him and the promise in her gaze sent hot shivers straight to his loins. A vision of the two of them naked and making love on a carpet of thick soft grass beneath the full moon came in a flash. He knew the spot, understood the stirring inside him was too powerful to be dismissed. "Would you like to dance?" Lodan asked, reaching for Ivy, aching for her powerful touch.

Sanda sighed. "I guess you've caught a new scent."

Realizing his social blunder, Lodan turned to Sanda, ready to apologize. Saving him from the awkward situation, Anton slid his arm around Sanda. "Mind if I catch yours?"

Smiling, Sanda waved at Lodan and glided off in Anton's arms.

Ivy stepped into Lodan's arms and placed her hands on his shoulders. The jolt rocked him back on his heels.

She stumbled. "It was you. You're the racer."

Regaining his balance, Lodan caught Ivy and pulled her close. She'd made him lose, but Lodan didn't care. His blood had gone hot. So hot all he could think about was being deep inside her. Lodan saw his searing desire reflected in her eyes.

She moistened her lips. "What's happening?"

He had no idea, but whatever it was the feeling was powerful. "Let's get out of here."

When she nodded, Lodan took her by the hand. Within seconds they were through the open French doors and across the patio. Hand-in-hand they hustled down the steps leading to the expansive lawn. Lodan slid his arm around Ivy's slender shoulders, bringing her so close their bodies brushed against one another as they walked.

The heat intensified.

The lights of the clubhouse gave way to bright moonlight. Lodan guided Ivy through the trees to an open meadow where the grass was soft and wildflowers bloomed. He drew her into his arms, slid his fingertips along her back. Where skin touched skin, heat followed.

"I feel like I'm on fire." She gasped, pressed her soft body to his, crushing her breasts to his chest. "I'm burning up."

He inhaled, her scent pure seduction. Rock hard, Lodan held her tight against him. Every muscle in his body contracted, sizzled and burned. Even the air in his lungs was hot. He managed to say her name. "Ivy? I know we just met and you don't know a thing about me." He didn't know what was happening, but Lodan knew the outcome. The sizzle between them was too hot to be denied.

"I'll learn as I go." She cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. Hunger raged as lips met and tongues tangled. Fierce heat flowed between them, melding body and spirit.

Desire stabbed his balls, and his knees buckled. Lodan fell to the grass, bringing Ivy with him. He pushed up the hem of her dress and slipped a hand beneath. Heat spiraled through him as his palm touched her thigh and his fingertips slid beneath the scrap of lace covering her ass. Her skin was scorching to the touch, but Lodan wanted to feel the fire.

The need to have her overpowered all thought, reason and caution. Lodan grasped her lace panties and ripped them from her body. The damp thatch of soft curls between her legs took him to the edge. Her hot juices scorched his palm, liquid fire.

Aching and swollen, Lodan growled with need. Her hands tore at his shirt, popping buttons and pushing the cotton fabric off his shoulders. As Lodan shrugged off his shirt, Ivy unbuckled his belt and yanked open his fly. When her hand found him, Lodan gasped, nearly climaxing in her palm.

She shoved down his pants and curled her legs around his bare hips, opening for him and giving him access. Lodan probed, striking true when the crown of his cock touched her moist entrance. He thrust, pushing deep, sliding home. Hot and wet, her pussy accepted him, grasped him. Pure splendor.

Teeth clenched, Lodan shuddered. Ivy yelped, the sound akin to a she-wolf in heat. Gasping, Lodan opened his eyes. Ivy's face blurred. Her features transformed, a blend of wolf and woman, her eyes changing to the color of dark gold. Then the climax overtook him, hot and intense, grabbing his balls, spilling deep into her waiting pussy.

\* \* \*

Given the sensual nature of werewolves, Ivy had anticipated her first sexual encounter as an exciting, feral experience, expecting the appropriate amount of growling. She'd had human lovers, men she'd liked immensely. Yet, something was lacking in those encounters and her she-wolf fantasies had gone unfulfilled, until tonight.

Sparks had flown and the short, intense ride with Lodan was definitely the most exhilarating experience of her life. Her heart still pounded and every part of her tingled. Ivy's decision to leave her pack had paid off. In order to change her lonely life, all she had needed was a sexy *were* who had no idea she had the mark of the moon on her butt. And Lodan was definitely a virile wolf.

She opened her eyes. The full moon was directly overhead. Ivy could swear it was shining down on them, like a huge spotlight. "Is it always like this? Wild? Raw?"

Lodan shifted his weight on his arms, but he remained on top and inside of her. He lifted his head, his rugged face shadowed. "Sex?"

"I've never made love with -- I've never made love outside."

"You're feeling the power of the moon. I can see its reflection in your eyes."

Ivy reached up and raked her fingers through Lodan's silky hair. Amazing how well they fit together, how wonderfully her body cradled his, as if they were designed for one another. Ivy ran a hand over his back, tracing her fingertips over thick muscles, then along the valley of his spine to his hip.

She cupped his ass, squeezing his firm cheek. Heat seared her palm, spreading like wildfire through muscle, bone and blood. The need for him spiked through her, fierce and feverish. Ivy dug her fingers into his flesh. This time she wanted to initiate the action, to seduce and arouse.

She lifted her mouth to his, welcomed the press of his lips, the lush warmth of his tongue. Heat raced through her as he deepened the kiss. He stroked her breast, the heat of his hand seeping through the material of her dress. An ache, deep and needy, thrummed between her legs. Ivy needed him inside her, hard and hot, filling her, bringing her passion to the boiling point once again.

His virile scent reawakened her senses. Her blood ran hot, her body coiling and heating for the caress of his hand, the touch of his lips and the stroke of his cock. Lodan pushed the strap of her dress off her shoulder, tugging down the knit fabric until her breast was exposed. She arched, seeking the heat of his touch.

He rolled her taut nipple between his thumb and forefinger and Ivy shuddered as a river of pure need shot down her middle and between her legs. She clenched and his cock jerked against her.

He kissed a path along the column of her neck, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. Lodan flicked his tongue, wet heat sliding over her nipple. Ivy gasped as Lodan's mouth settled over the aching peak, suckling in deep, lusty draws. Thick and hot, his cock stretched, filling her.

He released her breast. As he raised his head, their gazes met. His green eyes were burning, blazing with desire. He thrust and flung back his head, lifting his face to the moonlight. His facial features blurred, wolf and human blending in the stark glow, the image fleeting.

Lodan growled, the sound rich and deep, more wolven than human. Ivy responded with a low she-wolf cry. Their bodies strained, moving together in an ancient dance. Each thrust was faster and hotter than the last, each brush of skin and touch of bodies taking them closer to bliss.

Lodan grasped her hands, gripping tightly as they raced to the pinnacle. Quivering and riding the edge of ecstasy, Ivy held on, her fingers entwined with his. He tensed and shuddered. The air shimmered and his eyes opened, the color changing to a deep green. Then she saw his wolven face, the image clear for a brief instant before she went over the sensual edge.

Like hers, his breathing was ragged. Still quivering from her climax, Ivy nipped Lodan on the shoulder. "You've exhausted me," he said, rolling off of her. "I feel like I've run another race."

"I'm sorry you lost. Is there a prize for coming in second?"

"The awards ceremony!" Lodan sat up and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. "Elder Launt will have my ass if I miss his show. He's my sponsor." He jumped to his feet and yanked up his pants.

Ivy scrambled up and adjusted the straps of her dress.

He tried to button his shirt and swore. "Looks like I've lost a few buttons. I've got less than ten minutes to change and get back to the clubhouse." He planted a quick but fierce kiss on her lips. "Sorry, I've got to go."

"Go. I'll see you at the ceremony."



## Chapter Three

Ivy watched as Lodan raced off and disappeared through the trees. She finger-combed her hair and brushed off her dress. Without a mirror, Ivy had no idea if she was presentable. Most likely she looked like she'd been rolling around in a meadow.

Realizing she was missing her panties, Ivy got down on her hands and knees and searched until she found them. She wadded the torn lace in her fist and headed for home. Fortunately, her apartment was within walking distance of the clubhouse.

By the time she'd washed the grass stains off her knees, put on a fresh pair of panties, brushed her hair, fixed her mascara and walked back to the clubhouse, the ceremony was over and the buffet had begun. She slipped into the empty seat next to Beth and quickly glanced around the room.

Her friend smiled. "I hear you met Lodan and your exit was rather hasty."

"I --"

Beth leaned toward her. "Don't bother to deny it. You aren't the first she-wolf to feel the power of the moon."

Ivy's heart twisted. "What?"

Beth lowered her voice to a bare whisper. "Lodan likes to fuck outside. Especially in the moonlight."

With a few words, Beth had burst Ivy's naïve bubble of passion and joy. She hadn't been special at all. "I guess I've made a real fool of myself."

Beth poured a glass of white wine for each of them. She picked up the glasses and handed one to Ivy. "You aren't the first and you won't be the last to succumb to Lodan's charms."

Ivy gripped the stem of the glass. "Lucky me."

"Hey. Don't regret the best fuck of your life. I haven't."

Ivy's cheeks burned.

Beth grinned and touched her glass to Ivy's. "It's okay. Just make me one promise. If you find a better fuck than Lodan, introduce me."

Ivy sipped the wine and looked around the room for Lodan. Everything had happen so quickly she hadn't had time to think. She hadn't wanted to think. She'd wanted exactly what she'd gotten, an amazing first time with a remarkable lover. Better to be initiated by a master than a novice. Ivy worked up a smile.

"That's the spirit," Beth said. "Don't bother looking for him. He left right after the ceremony."

Ivy resisted the temptation of asking if Lodan had left alone.

"Ready for prime rib?" Beth asked.

"Famished."

\* \* \*

Lodan had left alone. After the ceremony he'd made two sweeps of the clubhouse looking for Ivy and he'd revisited the spot where they'd made love. Since she was unmated and without local family, Lodan figured Ivy lived in one of the apartment buildings near the clubhouse and she'd rushed home to clean up.

With her name on the mailbox, the apartment was easy to locate. He knocked on her door, but she didn't answer. Maybe Ivy didn't require the I-had-a-great-time-but-I'm-not-ready-to-mate-speech. Truth be told, Lodan wasn't sure he'd get the words out before he was dragging her to the floor.

The she-wolf had something, and what had happened between them was damn intense. He'd slaked his lust beneath the moon with other she-wolves, but nothing compared with the heat Ivy had generated or the amazing climax that followed. Ivy's scent clung to his skin and every breath was sheer torture.

Frustrated by the night's events, the loss of the race and his amazing reaction to Ivy, Lodan jumped in his SUV and headed for his beloved mountains. Just thinking

about Ivy had him on edge. After two incredible climaxes he hadn't believed it was possible to get an erection. Yet his cock was hard, straining against the material of his pants. Straining for Ivy.

He tried to will away his erection with no success. The farther he drove, the more he ached. Finally, he turned around and headed back to the lair. Back to Ivy. The second time he knocked on her door, she answered it.

Instead of inviting him inside, she crossed her arms in front of her. She was wearing a pair of loose knit pink shorts and a white tank top that stretched over her breasts, revealing the dark shadows of her nipples. Her hair was damp. Was a nightly shower a habit, or had she tried to wash off his scent? "You didn't show up for the ceremony."

Her chin shot up. "You didn't show up for the buffet."

Her accent was stronger when she was angry.

"I had planned to head for the mountains right after the ceremony," he said.

"So what stopped you?"

"I can't stop thinking about you. Your scent is on my skin, driving me crazy. I want you, Ivy. I want you now."

Her eyes flashed. "You want to fuck. Beth said you like to fuck in the moonlight."

The way she used the word set Lodan's teeth on edge. What had happened tonight was more than a casual fuck. It was blistering hot. "If you are referring to Beth Majors, she and I are friends. We haven't been together in months."

"Your one-night-only rule? She told me."

Lodan wondered if Beth had told Ivy that she'd seduced him. Okay, he was easily seduced, but he hadn't chased Beth. He liked her, enjoyed the few hours they'd spent together, and he had been completely upfront about his intentions. He had none and he wasn't looking for a mate. "I enjoy sex. I don't make promises I can't keep."

"Your reputation is intact. You didn't make any promises and I didn't ask for any. We aren't friends, we're strangers."

Lodan heard voices in the nearby stairwell, pack members coming home from the party. Soon they'd have company. "May I come in?"

"What more is there to say? We fucked. It's done."

She had a right to be upset. He'd raced off, left her alone after the most amazing sex of his life. But her scent belied her anger. She was wet, ready, like a feral wolf in heat.

She was driving him crazy.

Lodan's nostrils flared. He wasn't done with Ivy. "What happened between us was mutual and satisfying. Tell me different and I'll leave." No way was he leaving, not when breathing the air surrounding her had him on edge, ready to explode.

Ivy stepped back. "I was having a glass of wine. Would you care to join me?"

"I'd like that."

She walked into the kitchen, her delicious scent trailing behind. Lodan had lived in this building for a short time three years ago when he'd moved from Colorado and the furnished apartment layout was familiar. The living area was to his left, kitchen, dining area and private balcony to the right, beyond the bath and bedroom.

Ivy had added personal touches, colorful pillows on the sofa, photographs and paperbacks on the bookshelves and fresh flowers on the coffee table. The lights were low, muted in the kitchen and a single lamp lit in the living room. A bluesy instrumental was playing. Lodan sniffed the air, finding no scent other than hers. No werewolf scent lingered. That knowledge pleased him.

Ivy poured a glass of red wine and set it on the counter, keeping a barrier between them. Lodan had to admire her ability to control her urges. His own were walking a fine line.

"What brought you to California?" he asked, his gaze sweeping over her breasts. The hard points of her nipples were visible through the thin material of her top. The urge to suckle her breasts made his mouth water. Dragging his gaze back to her beautiful face, Lodan picked up his glass and sipped the wine.

"Do you care, or are we making polite small talk before you ask me to watch the moon set?"

He did care, but seeing her naked in the moonlight was an image Lodan couldn't dismiss. "Do you want to see the moon set?"

"What do you have against a bed and fresh sheets?"

Maybe it was the muted light, but the golden shards in her eyes shimmered. Her aroused heat penetrated his senses. He needed to taste her, bury his face between her legs and lick her hot nectar. "If you're between them, not a thing."

A grin curved her lush lips, and her nose twitched. She'd scented his need. "Just one more roll in the hay?"

He set down the wineglass and walked around the counter. Her heat scent spiking, Lodan's nostrils quivered. "As many rolls as we can manage between now and dawn."

Ivy set her wineglass aside and turned, pressing her backside against the counter. "What happens at dawn?"

Lodan moved closer, deliberately invading her space. He watched her glance down at his obvious erection. He was rock hard and way beyond willing his cock down. Ivy was the one in control. "I've work to do. The race has kept me away for several days. I need to check on my wolves."

"Your wolves?"

"There are two wild packs living on the reserve. I watch over them, protect them. I can be possessive with those I care about." He placed his hands on the counter, enclosing her within the span of his arms. Ivy didn't push him away, nor did she touch him, but the heat flowing between them was volcanic, hot and volatile.

The heat triggered his lycan urges. He'd been in the mountains too damn long with only the wild wolves for company. Lodan was accepted by the wild packs, except during the mating seasons when he was considered a rival.

"So your plan is to fuck me until dawn and then return to the mountains?"

He liked the way she said fuck, all soft, southern and sultry. "I have to go back." Lodan leaned in so close only their clothing and a thin layer of heated air separated them. She rewarded him with a breathy gasp that shot fire straight to his balls. "But right now I'm ready to explode."

Ivy didn't hesitate. She twined her arms around his neck and kissed him. Her breath caught as she slid her tongue inside Lodan's mouth. He tasted delicious. He smelled better, hot wolf with the lingering scent of their passion still clinging to his skin. Damn, he was sexy, raw and untamed.

Growling low in his throat, he pressed his groin to hers, rocking his thick erection against her belly, promising and wild. Sex with a werewolf was nothing like the intercourse she'd had with humans. Lodan was pure lycan, feral and on the scent.

He rolled his hips, digging the ridge of his cock into her belly. Moaning, Ivy fisted Lodan's hair. She undulated her hips, riding that exquisite ridge. Her insides went molten.

He'd asked her why she'd come to California. This was the reason she'd left her home, her family and friends. To Lodan she wasn't Poison Ivy. She was Hot Ivy, pure sensual she-wolf. And she was on fire, a slave to the pleasure.

He cupped her breast, squeezing and kneading her aching flesh.

Ivy pulled at his shirt, eager to feel the smoothly muscled contours of his chest. He slid his hand beneath her waistband, his fingers dragging down her shorts. Ivy grasped his hand, halting his progress.

If she allowed it, they'd fuck here and now. That wasn't going to happen. No way would she let him see the mark on her ass. He might know nothing about the mark of the moon prophecy, but she wasn't willing to take the chance. "Let's give those sheets a try."

"I don't think I can last that long," he said, his voice low and husky and his hand pulling on her shorts.

"Bedroom. Now." Ivy pushed his hand away. "You can undress on the way." As she ran down the hall, Ivy heard him groan. If he had the stamina to run for forty miles, he'd manage the twenty feet to the bed.

Two thuds, his shoes hitting the tiled kitchen floor in rapid succession. A following clink must be his belt buckle.

In her bedroom, the lamps were turned off, but her blinds were open. Moonlight fell in a slanted pattern upon the bed, providing just enough light to see form and shape, but leave the details, like her mark, indistinct.

Ivy yanked off her top and barely had time to remove her shorts before a naked Lodan entered her room and swept her into his arms. Entwined, they fell to the bed. The instant her back hit the mattress, his hips were between her thighs.

There was no prelude, no groping or words of endearment, just fierce heat and his cock plunging inside her. Rock hard, he thrust deep, spearing her. Ivy opened in a liquid rush, her slick walls clamped around him, grasping and tugging. His hips bucked and the powerful muscles in his legs were hard and taut. She wrapped her legs around his hips, holding him in a vise grip.

His muscles bunched and his skin slicked with perspiration. With each pounding thrust his breath grew more ragged. She dug her fingers into his back and lifted her hips, her pussy squeezing and answering each hot stroke. He drove hard, filling her, taking her over the edge. The climax slammed into her, a hot jolt of pure ecstasy.

Lodan jerked and thrust, driving into her so deep and fast the exquisite fullness triggered another orgasm. She clenched, and cried out. An intense shudder racked his body, his cock pulsing in rapid contractions. Then he fisted her hair and kissed her.

A lush mating of lips, tongues and teeth, the kiss endured until Lodan's powerful body relaxed. Ivy wondered if she was imagining the possessiveness of his kiss. He collapsed on top of her and for several minutes neither of them moved, they just breathed.

Ivy loved the feel and weight of Lodan's body, the hard muscles of his chest, belly and legs pressing against hers. The strong beat of his heart against her breast

made her feel wild and fulfilled, yet safe and secure. This was what she'd been missing, an alpha male.

Lodan rolled onto his side. He slid his hand across her belly and grasped her by the hip. Shifting her weight, she faced him and sighed. She'd never felt so utterly wonderful, so at ease with a male.

"Are you tired?" he asked, stroking her hip. His fingertips slid over her ass. Her mark heated beneath his touch, reminding her that Lodan wasn't her alpha male, could never be her mate.

Ivy reached up and threaded her fingers through his hair. "I feel fine."

"Good. I have a few things I have to do."

"Do?"

"With you it's been so hot, so out-of-control, I need more. I need to taste you, savor you." He flicked the tip of his tongue over her nipple. Then he circled the taut peak before sucking it into his mouth. He drew deeply, taking his time as if savoring her flesh. He licked and nipped and sucked until her nipple was distended and swollen and her body ached and her pussy was hot and slick.

Eager and ready, Ivy rubbed her belly and thighs against his.

Lodan rolled her onto her back and spread her thighs, and Ivy raised her hips in urgent demand. Ignoring her silent plea, Lodan planted kisses down her belly, inhaling deeply before burying his face between her legs.

A hot lick along her slit, then his tongue plunged inside her. Her pussy quivered, each lick and flick of his tongue more intense than the last. She fisted his hair, gripping the silky strands as if her life depended on it. Right now, Ivy felt sure she would die of pleasure.

His fingers dug into her thighs, holding her, possessing her. With a low growl, Lodan traced the tip of his tongue around her swollen clit. Once, twice, then he suckled, drawing on her needy flesh. Ivy pushed her clit against his lips, triggering a climax so intense her hips came off the mattress.



The delicious pulses eased as Lodan laved her clit. His tongue was wet and warm, his strokes sweet and easy. Just as her pussy ceased quivering, his long fingers slid inside her, pumping slowly, then faster, creating a new heat. He wasn't allowing her to wallow in contentment. He demanded a sensual response, made her pussy ache for more. His fingers pounded her pussy and his lips drew lustily on her sensitive clit.

"Lodan, please. Now. Fuck me, now."

He suckled deeply and added another finger. The combination of Lodan's lips and tongue, his glorious fingers brought a new intensity, the sensation so overwhelming, such sweet torture, surely she'd shatter.

He sucked hard on her clit, wrenching another climax, so sharp and intense a scream tore from her throat. Every muscle in Ivy's body tensed in pleasure as another, stronger climax tore through her. Ivy moaned when Lodan released her clit and withdrew his fingers. He quickly rolled her over and guided her onto her knees.

"Now, I'll fuck you."

Grasping her by the hips, Lodan entered her pulsing pussy. Still hot and wet from her climax, Ivy rocked her hips back and forth, pushing him deeper with each rhythmic stroke. Ivy arched her back and growled, the low throaty call of a she-wolf demanding her mate. Beneath his hands, Lodan felt her skin change, soft downy hairs springing forth.

The wolf inside Lodan responded to her mating growl. A transforming shudder slid through Lodan, bone, muscle and sinew starting to flow from human to wolf. A knot began to form at the base of his cock. Gritting his teeth, Lodan fought the urge to shift, to be a slave to his natural lycan urges, to enter the forbidden.

A fierce battle raged between his mind and body. Powerful needs overwhelmed him, the need to complete the act surging, controlling him. Lodan pounded his cock into Ivy's hot receptive flesh, taking her wolf style, like an alpha male claiming his mate. The knot swelled, locking them together. His skin tingled as hair sprouted on his back, chest, belly and legs. Bone and muscle began to change, the shift to wolf nearly complete.

On the verge of climax and transformation, Lodan grasped at the tenuous thread he had over his physical urges. He gripped that thread and pulled back. A marked wolf, he was forbidden to change during intercourse, to claim a mate. The prophecy compelled him to deny his natural lycan urges.

Lodan struggled, fighting the shift, forcing away the wolf to return to his human form. He had to break the physical contact. As a marked wolf, Lodan had nothing to offer Ivy. She deserved better. He tried to withdraw, but Ivy clamped down on his cock and the knot held him fast. Again, Ivy growled, pawing the bed like a she-wolf in heat.

Her form blurred, human skin and soft pelt.

He had to stop his transformation or he might pull her with him. Focusing his energy, he halted the shift. The hair on his body began to recede, bone and muscle reformed.

Ivy rocked back, slamming her pussy on his cock, again and again, slamming her wet flesh against the knot. She reached back and dug her nails into his thighs, holding on to him. A deep whine tore from her throat and her pussy clenched, drenching his cock in hot cum. His climax knifed through him as his balls emptied. Howling, Lodan came in furious hot spurts. Painfully, the knot shrank.

Lodan struggled to breathe, to drag air in his lungs. His heart pounded so hard his chest hurt. Never had he felt so exhausted, so physically overwhelmed. He released Ivy's hips and she sank onto the mattress.

After he recovered and was able to breathe normally, Lodan placed a hand on Ivy's back. Her skin was smooth, the downy pelt gone. She hadn't completed the shift. He wondered if she was even aware it had almost happened. "Are you all right?"

Stretched out on her belly, Ivy answered with a soft snore.

That he'd nearly transformed during intercourse shook Lodan to the core. He wasn't allowed to take a mate and he'd come damn close to claiming Ivy. If the elders ever discovered what he'd done, he'd be ostracized, forced to leave the pack.

Lodan had been forced from his birth pack for a similar offense and until three years ago he'd wandered without a home. Elder Launt had given him a home and a purpose. Out of respect, Lodan had controlled his natural urges.

Ivy had taken him to the limit of his control.

Lodan had no idea why she had moved to California, but he had no right to negatively impact her life. Eventually, she would mate and whatever lucky wolf claimed her, he'd be getting a beautiful, passionate partner.

Lodan squeezed Ivy's nicely rounded ass. Not only had she kept pace with his raging desires, she'd given him a night to remember. He wanted to curl his body around hers, spoon fashion, and sleep for hours, wake up and make love to her again and again, but his wishes weren't important. The quicker he left the temptation of Ivy, the better.

Ivy moaned when he rose from the bed, but she didn't awaken. Lodan drew a blanket over her and brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. He'd do the right thing and keep away from her. Kissing her cheek, he whispered a reluctant, but necessary goodbye.

The intoxicating scent of sex and Ivy clung to his skin and hair. He inhaled deeply. It was a long drive home and each breath he took would remind him of her. The intensity of the night would eventually fade, but he doubted he'd ever stop thinking about her.

## Chapter Four

Lodan climbed out of his SUV. He'd come to a favorite spot on the reserve where a rock overhang provided a view of a slow-moving stream, a favorite spot where the she-wolves brought their young.

The deep growl of a she-wolf answered by a louder snarl of a mountain lion set Lodan's heart rate soaring. He rushed forward and lifted the binoculars. Ears erect and lips pulled back, the she-wolf circled the large cat. She snarled, her fur bristling.

His gaze on the wolf, the lion turned, exposing the wounded pup at his feet. Guarding his prey, the cat growled in warning. He wasn't willing to relinquish his meal. The she-wolf continued to circle the mountain lion, waiting for the opportune moment to attack. She'd fight to the death for her whimpering pup.

Lodan ran for his SUV and grabbed his rifle. He chambered a bullet and shot into the air. The startled cat turned. Lodan chambered another round and took another shot. Abandoning his potential meal, the cat ran, disappearing into the dense brush.

Grabbing his first-aid kit and keeping a firm hold on his rifle, Lodan scrambled down the hillside. The she-wolf stood over her pup. Snarling, she warned Lodan away.

*You have nothing to fear from me. Let me help him.* Lodan moved forward. Instead of snarling, the wolf sniffed her motionless pup. He set the rifle aside, but within reach should the lion return, and opened his first-aid kit.

The pup had a two-inch gash on its flank and a puncture wound on his neck. Lodan dressed both wounds and slowed the bleeding, but the pup needed stitches, antibiotics and X-rays. *I need to take him to people who can help him.*

Eyes narrowed, the wolf pulled back her ears.

*If he remains here, he'll die.*

Her stiff tail dropped.

Lodan closed the first-aid kit and slipped the carrying strap over his shoulder. He picked up the rifle. *I'm taking him to the werewolves' lair.*

With a low, breathy "wulf," the wolf stepped back, allowing Lodan to pick up the pup. Using the rifle butt as a stretcher, he carried the pup to his vehicle. The wolf watched and paced as he loaded the pup into the back of the SUV.

He jumped in the cab and started the engine. Lodan pressed the accelerator. The wolf howled. As he drove down the mountain, Lodan worried about the pup. Proper medical care was essential. Every so often he heard the pup whimper. At least the little guy was still alive.

Gripping the wheel, Lodan concentrated on every curve and bend in the road. How many times in the last few weeks had he been tempted to come off the mountain and visit the lair, to see Ivy one more time?

The pup whimpered, reminding him of the task at hand.

Finally, the buildings of the lair were visible in the distance. As Lodan approached the back gate, he reached up and punched the button on the remote attached to the visor. Pack lairs were built on private land, and the security was such that families found it unnecessary to lock their doors.

As soon as the gate slid open, Lodan hit the gas and headed straight to the clinic. He carried the wounded pup inside. Ignoring the few clients in the waiting area, Lodan swept past the reception area to the first empty examination room.

A female in dark blue scrubs came rushing into the room, took one look at the pup and snatched a pair of latex gloves out of a box on the counter. "What happened to him?" she asked, snapping on the gloves.

"A mountain lion got him."

"Lucky he's alive. Get Dr. Woods. She's in her office, last door on the right."

The doctor's office door was open. She looked up and smiled. "Lodan. Good to see you."

Before he'd finished explaining the situation, Dayna Woods was on her feet and heading to the examination room.

Dayna had examined Lodan right before the foot race, certifying his fitness to participate. Trained as both a physician and a veterinarian, Dayna was the pup's best chance for survival. A regular vet might refuse to treat a wild wolf, but Dayna and her staff wouldn't hesitate to help. "You can save him?"

The doctor looked at Lodan. "I'll do my best. You've done your part. Find something to do and leave a number where I can reach you at the front desk. I'll call you the moment I have news."

Reluctantly, Lodan did as the doctor instructed. As he walked to his SUV, Lodan's thoughts turned to Ivy. The desire to see her, to hold her, filled his chest. The surge had nothing to do with sexual desire. Lodan needed Ivy at his side while he waited to learn the pup's fate.

The painful possibility that she wouldn't want to see him slid through him. He'd vowed to do the right thing and resist temptation, but now that he was here and so close, it wasn't going to be easy to stay away from Ivy.

Lodan climbed into his vehicle, glancing back into the cargo bay. Thankfully, the seats had been down, leaving an open bed for the pup. Blood stained the gray carpet as well as his pants and shirt.

He drove to the coin-operated car wash and cleaned the SUV. Under the management of pack leader Jance Ryland, the lair had the amenities one would find at an upscale development. The clubhouse, pool, tennis courts, gym and recreation center were topnotch facilities. A myriad of businesses, owned and operated by pack members, made the lair nearly self-sufficient.

Next, Lodan visited the gym where he maintained a locker. He showered and changed into his workout clothes, an old T-shirt and sweatpants. Back in his vehicle, Lodan flipped open his cell phone and called Elder Launt to advise him of the situation. The old wolf was more than his racing sponsor. Launt had served as Lodan's advisor since he'd been granted permission to join the pack. The reserve and its wild wolves

were the elder's pet project. During his prime years, Launt had lived on the reserve and among the wolves. He'd passed on a sacred trust when he'd assigned Lodan to the reserve.

"You've done your best," Launt said. "When you hear from Dr. Woods, I'd like you to call me."

"Of course, sir." Lodan gripped the wheel. The urge to see Ivy hadn't eased. He knew she was close and demons of desire were coming alive. If there was any way around this cursed prophecy, he had to know. "If you have time while I'm here, I'd like to speak with you. It's important, sir."

"I have a meeting later in the afternoon, but right now I'm free."

"Thank you, sir. Your home or the lodge?"

"My home. You may join me for coffee."

"Thank you, sir."

When the elder invited Lodan inside his home, Lodan quickly apologized for his attire, explaining the state of his clothing.

Lodan and the elder sat on a wide deck, sipping coffee and enjoying the view of the mountains. Spring had arrived, but the highest peak was still capped with snow. Lodan commented on the weather and beauty of the mountains, then stared into his empty cup. He had no idea how Launt would react, but the time for deception had passed.

"What's troubling you?" Launt asked. "If it's losing the race, you must keep training and focus on next year."

Lodan set his cup on the small table next to his chair. "It's not the race. Have you heard of the mark of the moon prophecy?"

Launt set down his cup. "Why do you ask?"

"You have heard of it?"

The old wolf nodded.

"I bear the crescent, the mark of the moon."

Launt's eyes widened and his jaw tightened. "You should have told me. You should have revealed this information when you sought sanctuary."

"You're right. You and the other elders had a right to know."

The old wolf's gaze bored into Lodan's. The elder expected an explanation.

"When I came to the lair, you asked me why I had lived among the humans for so many years. I told you that I worked with them on several projects reintroducing wolves into the wild. That is the truth, but only part of it. I lived with my mother's pack until I was eighteen. I was forced to leave because of the mark. I wanted to mate, but my parents and the elders denied the match. I refused to accept their decision. The she-wolf I cared for was forced to mate with another. The elders ordered me to leave. I could return when I accepted my fate. I never went back."

"And you believed by living with the humans, you'd escape your fate?"

"I never understood why I was given the burden of the prophecy."

The old wolf slammed his hand down on the table, rattling the cups and saucers. "Burden? You've been honored."

"Honored? I can't have a normal relationship with a female. I can't take a mate of my choosing. I wouldn't wish this mark upon anyone."

"You have been chosen."

"For what? Why me? What is so important about the mark of the moon prophecy? If this she-wolf exists, why haven't we found one another?"

"If the prophecy is not fulfilled, werewolves will die."

"No one has ever told me anyone would die."

Launt leaned forward. "What have you been told?"

Lodan exhaled. "Not much. The night I was born, my grandfather lay on his deathbed. My mother swore that my impending birth was all that had kept him alive. Unfortunately, I never knew him. She said he was a good father, a strong wolf, an elder and the leader of his pack."

"The presiding elder?"



"Yes. On his deathbed, he asked my mother to bring me to him so that the last thing he saw was his grandson. When he saw the mark on my backside, he told her the prophecy."

Launt nodded but didn't speak.

"He told her I was marked by the moon and that it was my destiny to take an alpha mate with a similar mark."

"That's all he said?"

"He could barely speak, but his final words were 'The prophecy must be fulfilled.' As a boy I was aware of the mark, but I never thought much about it until I was eighteen and eager to take a mate."

"Do you believe the prophecy?"

"It doesn't matter what I believe, I'm a victim of it. I've spent my adult life alone because of it."

"You are not destined to live alone."

Lodan clenched his fists. "If I'm supposed to mate with a marked female, why hasn't fate or the moon brought us together? I haven't heard of any female bearing the mark and I sure haven't met one. What if I don't want her?"

"The moon will bring the two of you together. Have patience."

The moon had brought him together with several she-wolves, but not one of them carried the mark. "Patience?"

"You are marked. You cannot deny your destiny."

Dejected, Lodan stood. "I think I should go home. I'll check on the pup before I leave. When he's recovered, I'll come back and pick him up."

"I think you should stay. Leader Ryland's office will set you up with housing."

Would he be strong enough to resist going to Ivy? Lodan doubted it. "Is that an order, sir?"

Launt rose. Although he was the oldest of the elders, his back was ramrod straight and his mind was sharp. "That's a direct order. I must go and speak with Elder Rander."

Lodan understood he would be the topic of discussion between Launt and the lair's presiding elder. He wondered what action Rander would take. Would he force him out? No matter their decision, Lodan wouldn't leave until he knew the pup's fate. "May I offer you a ride, sir? I'll arrange for housing while I'm there."

"Thank you, Lodan. I would like you to wait for me. I could use a lift home afterward."

Fate was already nipping at his heels. "Of course, sir."

\* \* \*

Ivy kept pace with Beth for three miles. Despite the exercise, the tense, pent-up feeling that had prompted her to call Beth and suggest an after work jog was still with her. The morning had started out fine, but by noon Ivy was edgy and the birthmark on her left butt cheek was tingling.

"Good run," Beth said as they walked up the stairs to her apartment.

Ivy invited Beth in and grabbed two cold bottles of water out of the fridge.

"Everyone is getting together at the Den tonight," Beth said, twisting the cap. She took a long drink. "You want to come?"

Ivy enjoyed going to the Den, and Beth's friends were a fun group. Ivy had accompanied Beth once since the night she'd spent with Lodan. But the sparks didn't fly when she was with other *weres*. "I think I'll pass."

"That's what you said last weekend. There's a salsa band playing tonight." Dressed in spandex shorts and a racer-back top, Beth undulated her hips, dancing to a silent Latin beat. "Anton is bringing a couple of his friends. He says they're great guys."

A few weeks ago, Ivy would have been excited to dance the night away with Anton and his friends. Now, she wasn't interested. "Maybe some other time."

Beth stopped dancing. "What's with you, Ivy? Suddenly you're not interested in meeting anyone. You don't want to go dancing. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Tell me you're not hung up on Lodan?"

Hung up didn't begin to describe Ivy's feelings. She felt connected to him. Ivy kept telling herself this emotional connection and giddy feeling in her chest was nothing more than him being her first wolven lover. Wolven encounters were powerful stuff. So why wasn't she eager to move on and have her second? "I don't recall mentioning Lodan Hunt."

Beth gave her a sly grin. "Ivy?"

"What?"

"I had to drop off some documents at the elders' lodge this afternoon."

Beth was an assistant in the pack's legal office. She made regular visits to the lodge. "So?"

"I saw Lodan's SUV parked in front of the lodge."

Ivy's heart leaped into her throat.

"His SUV was still there when I left."

Ivy's heart twisted. "So, he's here. So what?"

"So nothing. I warned you he was a one-night wonder."

"Yes, you did." *And, yes he was.*

"Sure you won't reconsider going to the Den?"

Ivy shook her head. "Maybe next week."

Beth finished her water. "I gotta go. If you change your mind, give me a call on my cell." At the door, Beth turned. "Don't put your hopes on Lodan. I bet he's already halfway up the mountain by now. Sorry I mentioned him."

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm going to curl up with a good book and make it an early night." Ivy leaned against the door, wondering if Lodan Hunt ever gave her a thought.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, Lodan was still at the elders' lodge, waiting for Elder Launt. He took a seat in the antechamber and stretched his legs out before him. His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten for nine hours.

The door to the inner sanctum opened, and Launt appeared. Lodan stood. After dropping the elder at his home, Lodan intended to visit the Den for a cold beer and a burger. "We'd like for you to come inside."

Lodan's breath caught, his hunger all but forgotten. The only time he'd been invited into the sanctum was when the rules for his acceptance to the lair were laid out. Like his first visit, the elders sat at a semi-circular table. Launt directed him to the same single chair facing the table.

Rander, the leader, sat at the center. "Thank you for coming, Lodan."

"My pleasure," Lodan responded. He nodded, acknowledging the other six elders.

"Given the gravity of Elder Launt's information, I think we should get to the point. Do you bear the mark of the moon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Forgive the indelicacy of this request, but the elders would like to confirm this."

A collective rumble of affirming grunts and growls told Lodan he had no choice. He stood and turned his back to them, pulling down his sweatpants to reveal his buttocks. He recalled the embarrassment he'd felt at eighteen when the pack elders had inspected the mark and the resulting fury when they'd denied him the right to mate. Now Lodan was more anxious than mortified. If the elders forced him out, he'd have to leave his wild wolves. And he'd never see Ivy again.

Chairs scraped as the elders stood. One by one they stepped down from the dais and formed a line to inspect the birthmark on his right butt cheek.

"What is this tattoo?" Rander asked.

"I had the wolf's head tattoo added at sixteen. I never liked being an oddity."

"He bears the mark," Rander said. "Please, be seated."

Lodan pulled up his sweatpants and dropped into the chair. The elders returned to the dais. Rander cleared his throat. "I believe the time has come to tell you the mark of the moon prophecy."

Finally, someone was going to spell it out.

"The prophecy has been handed down for five hundred years," Rander said. "Many know about the prophecy, but the details, the significance, was known only to the presiding elders, passed down throughout the generations.

"A male child would be born, bearing the mark, followed by a female. An event would occur, what kind we did not know, but the ramifications would pit humans against the wild wolves and our kind.

"The child born of the marked mates would provide a solution that would end the war on wolves. For generations no male child was born with the mark, so the prophecy had become more of a myth. When you were born, your grandfather, the presiding elder of his pack, understood the role you would play in the future of packs throughout this continent, perhaps throughout the world. He instructed your mother to fulfill the prophecy."

Lodan started to speak, but Elder Launt shook his head.

"After I finish, we will address your questions," Rander said.

"Since no child in my pack was born with the mark, I did not give much thought to the mark of the moon, but recent events brought the prophecy to the forefront. Even then, I felt helpless to act. But now that you are here, I can and must act.

"A few weeks ago, a virus common to wolves and harmless to werewolves was passed to a human. Just days ago, this human died. I fear he infected others, but this information hasn't been confirmed. I believe this is the prophetic event."

Rander's words swirled in Lodan's brain. He raked his fingers through his hair. A virus? An ancient prophecy predicted a modern virus?

"If this virus spreads unchecked, panic will follow and humans will turn against wolves."

The thought of humans killing his wolves shot fear through Lodan.

"Eventually, they will turn against us," Rander said.

A couple of the elders grumbled beneath their breath.

"Your first-born will carry the blood solution."

*Blood solution?* His mind racing, Lodan gripped the arms of his chair. "A serum?"

"That is our hope."

"I must find my alpha mate."

"We've started the search for you by contacting the presiding elders of several packs. Stay put, but be prepared to leave at a moment's notice. Are you fully aware of your duty?"

"Yes, sir."

Rander nodded. "You're dismissed."

Filled with purpose, Lodan walked out of the lodge. He looked up. The moon was rising, a slender crescent hanging just above the horizon. Lodan needed no moon to remind him of his duty to his kind. He'd finally accepted his fate, but his heart was heavy. His relationship with Ivy would never be more than an amazing memory.

Still, he needed to see her one last time.

## Chapter Five

Opening her dining room slider, Ivy stepped onto the small, private balcony. Often, she enjoyed sitting here to watch the moon rise or stare at the stars. Tonight, a crescent moon like the mark on her butt hung just above the horizon, a bright silver sliver in an inky sky.

She'd planned to make it an early night, but Ivy was restless.

Why had she been marked? If she was meant for one wolf, why hadn't he found her? Even Lodan didn't want her beyond a night's pleasure.

Ivy turned away from the silvery sliver and squared her shoulders. It was time to go home. She poured a glass of wine, sat down at the kitchen table and booted her laptop. She'd just typed in the address for an airline website and had hit the send key when a knock sounded at the door.

She glanced at the wall clock. It was nearly midnight. Ivy doubted Beth would stop by this late. Ivy flipped on the outside light. Already in her pajamas, she opened the door a fraction and peeked out. Her breath caught. "Lodan?"

"Any chance I could talk to you?"

He looked tired, but his five o'clock shadow and his virile scent gave him a rugged appeal that Ivy found very compelling.

"I could use a friend."

Curious, she opened the door and invited him inside. He was casually dressed in a faded black T-shirt, sweats and flip-flops. "Would you like a glass of wine? Perhaps a beer?"

"I could use a cold beer. Thanks."

Ivy walked into the kitchen and removed a bottle from the fridge. She handed him the beer and picked up her glass of red wine.

Lodan stared at her laptop. "Going somewhere?"

"It's time to go home."

"To West Virginia?"

She nodded and sipped her wine.

"When are you leaving?"

Ivy was ready to hop the first flight out, but she owed her employer the courtesy of a couple days' notice. "In a couple of days."

"I'm sorry to see you go."

But he wouldn't ask her to stay. "Are you?"

He set his beer on the table and stepped toward her. "You and I, we connected."

"We had sex, Lodan. Is that why you're here? You're making an exception to your one-night rule?" Ivy brushed past him, the touch of her arm to his electric. She felt the spark race along her skin. Her step faltered.

"Did you feel it?"

She felt it, but Ivy didn't understand it. He grabbed her around the waist, pulling her back against his chest. Fire slid along Ivy's spine.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled. "Your scent drives me crazy." He slid his hands beneath the loose knit top and cupped her breasts. She gasped as his thumbs raked across her nipples. "Touching you is like holding fire in my hands."

Desire surged, burning through her like wildfire.

He pressed the hard ridge of his erection against her butt. "I want you, Ivy."

Her blood heated, so hot she hovered on the edge of climax. She wanted him. He offered nothing, promised nothing, except pure ecstasy. Ivy reached up and grasped him by the hair. Their lips met, and Ivy was lost in a maelstrom of need. Heat pooled between her legs, and the mark on her butt burned.

She needed him, now. Ivy rolled her hips, pressing her ass against his cock.



He grasped the elastic waistband of her pajama shorts and pulled them down. The sudden, compelling need to make love in the moonlight raced through her, heating her blood. Ivy broke the kiss. "Outside! On the balcony."

Driven by a sensual force so powerful she didn't want to resist, Ivy pulled out of his arms and flipped off the interior lights. Grabbing him by the shirt, she drew him outside. Darkness surrounded them. The air was sultry and soft, perfect for lovemaking.

Ivy removed Lodan's shirt. Tonight, she wanted to set the pace. Placing the tip of her tongue against his hot skin, Ivy traced a path down the center of his chest. She grasped the soft material of his sweats and dropped slowly to her knees.

He fisted her hair. "I shouldn't."

She pulled his sweats down. "Don't think, feel." Ivy slid her tongue over his flat belly, then lower to his cock. He was stone hard, thick and hot. She covered the broad, silky head with her mouth.

A deep groan tore from his throat as she suckled, taking him deep, using her tongue to tease his turgid flesh. Hips rocking, he cupped her head. Senses sizzling, Ivy took him all the way to the root. She suckled and licked, drawing deeply on his length. His cock jerked.

"I'm on fire." Lodan stepped back and drew her to her feet. He pulled off her pajama top then reached for the bottoms, dragging them off her hips. In the faint moonlight his eyes glittered. He drew her into his arms, pressing his chest to her breasts, his belly to hers. Everywhere they touched, Ivy burned.

Lodan kissed her neck, working his way to her breasts. Her nipples were hard and aching. He suckled, moving between the taut peaks, drawing lushly on her flesh. Needing him inside her, Ivy turned and gripped the balcony railing. "Now."

He reached between her legs and probed her slit with his fingers.

Wet and ready, Ivy swayed her hips. "Fuck me."

At the touch of the hot tip of his cock, Ivy leaned forward, arching her back and lifting her ass. She wanted his cock deep inside her, fucking her, making her howl. Hard and thick, his cock slid inside her, stretching her to accept his width and length.

She rocked back, taking him deeper. "Fuck me!"

He growled and pummeled her pussy. The faster, the harder he fucked her, the more Ivy wanted. Mindless, needy, she growled back. Heat rippled through her. Muscle, bone and sinew tingled and shuddered. With each hot stroke, he brought her closer to climax and transformation. Sliding between human and wolf, Ivy rode the edge of ecstasy. Caught up in the sensuality, she lifted her face to the moon and shifted.

Her paws dropped from the rail to the rug. She dug her nails into the ropey fibers and flipped up her tail. Growling low in her throat, she clenched.

She held him in the grip of pleasure, swaying her hips beneath him. The climactic knot locked them together, making her movement pure ecstasy, sweet torment. Ears flattened, Lodan nipped at her shoulder, growling his pleasure, demanding her submission. He pawed at her back, dragging his nails through her thick coat.

On the verge of howling, he threw back his head. His climax slammed into him, an explosion of hot spurts. With the release of wolven semen, the swollen knot shrank.

Aware of soft fur and mating scent, Lodan opened his eyes. He stood on his back legs with his front paws on Ivy's back. He'd transformed, taken her in wolven form. The realization of what he'd done shot fear through his brain and pierced his heart. He had allowed his own desires to take priority over duty. How had he lost control?

Confused, Lodan withdrew and transformed.

Then he saw the mark glowing on her left cheek, a crescent moon amid the dark fur. A waxing moon where his own was a waning moon, the two halves coming together.

He understood the stunning shock of Ivy's touch, his desperate desire and why her scent remained in his nostrils even when they were apart.

Ivy was his mate, his destiny.

His breath caught. "The mark of the moon." Still in wolven form, Ivy backed away from him. Joy ripped through him. "You bear the mark of the moon."

She dipped her head. Then she turned and jumped onto the patio chair, planted her front paws on the railing and leaped off the balcony.

"Ivy!" Lodan watched her land, hard, and then race off, disappearing into the darkness. He climbed over the balcony, hung from the railing for a second before letting go. After dropping to his feet, Lodan shifted. Following her scent, he raced after his mate.

Lodan caught up with her easily. He ran along beside Ivy until she reached an open stretch of manicured lawn behind the gym. He bumped Ivy's flank and sent her sprawling. He stood over her, ready to tackle her again should she run.

She laid her head on her front paws. *I'm sorry. I should have told you about the mark. Ivy. Look at me.*

Ears laid back, she lifted her head.

*I bear the mark.*

Lodan shifted his weight, angling his right hip. *I have the waning crescent. You're my mate.*

She rose, nuzzled the mark. Then she wagged her tail and licked his face.

*What were you told about the mark of the moon prophecy?*

*Because I was marked, I could only mate with the wolf bearing a similar mark.*

*That's what I was told, but there's more to the prophecy. So much more you need to know.*

\* \* \*

As the SUV rounded a turn, Lodan slowed to a stop on the empty road. "You can open your eyes."

Ivy gasped at the majestic view of the mountains. Tall peaks soared from slopes thick with trees. A waterfall tumbled a hundred feet to a river below. "It's beautiful."

He pressed the accelerator and drove along a narrow, gravel driveway. The wolf pup poked his nose between the bucket seats and whined.

"He knows he's home," Lodan said, braking before an A-frame cabin.

Ivy looked at the cabin with its stone fireplace and wide porch. She loved it already. "So are we."

A gray wolf trotted out of the brush to stand before the vehicle. The pup whined and gave a sharp bark. The she-wolf lifted her head and howled.

Lodan climbed out of the SUV and lifted the pup out of the vehicle. The moment his paws touched the ground, the pup ran to the wolf. She licked his face and nuzzled his healed wounds with her nose.

Heart swelling, Ivy watched the tender reunion of mother and son. Thinking of the child she carried, Ivy reached out and took Lodan's hand. Together, they watched mother and son trot off into the brush.

After a satisfying afternoon and a delicious dinner, Ivy and Lodan stood on the porch to watch the moon rise. It began as a silver light appearing above the peaks, becoming a long, curved sliver of silver against a black velvet sky. Although the waning moon was just a thin slice, its light was brighter, more dramatic in the mountains.

Ivy raised her arm. "It seems close enough to touch."

"I've often sat here and watched the moon rise," Lodan said, drawing her close. "I always felt something was missing. I never understood why, until you. I love you, Ivy."

Ivy looked into his eyes and saw the reflection of the moonlight. Lodan, her alpha wolf, her mate. A destiny had been thrust upon them, an uncertain future, but together they had the strength to face it. "I love you, Lodan. Forever."

## **B.J. McCall**

A multi-published author of contemporary and futuristic sensual romance, B.J. McCall is a West Virginia native now residing in Northern California. Thanks to an older sister who was a librarian, reading became B.J.'s favorite pastime. B.J.'s idea of the perfect way to spend a rainy afternoon or a day at the beach is reading a romance novel. The phrase "Do what you love" applies to B.J. -- she loves to write and each story is special. She hopes her readers will enjoy each and every one of them. Visit her website at [www.BJMcCall.com](http://www.BJMcCall.com).