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# *Unleashed*

A novella of erotic romance by

ERICKA SCOTT

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# *Prologue*

The man beside her shifted and twitched in his sleep. Serena O'Toole rolled over and snuggled against his side. She studied his profile and a warm rush of desire washed over her. Asleep, Jackson looked so normal, yet she'd never met a more complicated man. Once a member of a notorious Los Angeles gang, he had turned his life around and became part of the solution. A cop. To look at him, with three-day stubble covering his strong chin and his overlong dark hair, he didn't resemble a typical officer of the law. Especially not a small town sheriff. But then Eclipse was a most unconventional town.

Several years ago, a government experiment went awry when one of the test subjects, Ben Rawlings, escaped and began infecting civilians. Once Ben had been recaptured, the government segregated him and his victims in a tiny town built in the middle of the Mojave Desert. Unfortunately, Ben had again escaped from quarantine. The danger of his escape pushed the CDC to accelerate their research on the reversal, and they were now closer to finding a cure.

So far, Serena had managed to escape infection, but lately she'd been dancing close to the fire. As a professional dog trainer, it was proving impossible for her to resist trying out her skills on the biggest dog of them all—the werewolf.

She had been able to get some of the members of the pack to obey her commands, but she'd made little-to-no progress with Jackson. Of course, she conducted the training from behind the safety of a wire fence. The true test of her ability would have to be done out in the open, with the werewolves running wild. If something were to go wrong...

Shaking off the negative thoughts, Serena went back to studying her lover. His eyes dashed rapidly back and forth under his eyelids as he dreamed. His legs twitched and he tossed his

head a little. What did he dream about? Did he dream as a man, or as a wolf? Could dreams be guided, influenced by an external stimulus? Well, it sure would be interesting to find out.

With a slight smile, Serena ran her hand across his chest. He sighed but didn't wake up. She finger-walked further down his torso until she encountered the crisp curls of his pubic hair. His cock hardened when she touched it, but a quick glance at his face assured her that he still slept. With soft touches, she stroked him to full arousal, then inched her way down the bed until her face hovered over his erection. She opened her mouth and as she was about to engulf him, a hand on the back of her head gave her a push of encouragement.

"Hey," she protested.

Jackson just laughed and kept her pinned. His chuckle faded to a groan as she set to work teasing him with her tongue, lips, and teeth. To add torment to the teasing, she caressed his balls. She heard his breath hitch as she took him deep into her mouth.

A tug on her shoulders interrupted her. Allowing him to guide her up his body, she straddled his hips and stared down into his amber eyes. Bedroom eyes, heavy-lidded with desire.

Her breasts ached to be touched and her pussy throbbed. Leaning forward, she brushed a nipple across his lips. He sucked it deep into his mouth and sent a jolt of desire straight to her core, setting off waves of need.

While he suckled, he pinched and rolled her other nipple. Ecstasy danced around the edges of her pleasure; it would only take one thrust to push her over the edge. So, she drew out the moment, resisting the urge to mount him.

Jackson took the decision out of her hands by grasping her hips and surging up off the bed and into her. With a cry, she sank down onto him, reveling in the way he filled her. Matching him thrust for thrust, she gave herself over to the pleasure as lights flashed behind her eyelids. She heard a howl join her cry and felt him throb deep within her as he came.

She lay in his arms, enjoying the aftershocks of their orgasm. When the spasms finally subsided, she nuzzled his neck.

"I love you."

"Love you more." Jackson's grip tightened on her. "You know that, right?"

Serena pulled back so she could look into his face. His expression was serious and gave her pause.

“Of course I know you love me.” She knew he did; he’d just proposed to her. Or had something changed? Was he having second thoughts?

“More than anything. If...” He took a deep breath. “I’ve been dreaming lately. When I wake up, they almost seem real. You’re standing in the moonlight and I’m torn. I’m filled with this all encompassing love for you. I know I should want to protect you. But...”

“But?”

“But under all that love is a more primal desire. It takes every bit of my willpower not to attack you.” Jackson shot her an anxious look. “I’d never hurt you, not knowingly.”

Serena bit her lip. She hated keeping secrets from him. So, should she tell him about their moonlit training sessions? If she did, what would he say? Would he be angry or upset? Forbid her to continue? Or would it be better not to tell him? He thought they were dreams, so perhaps it was better to keep it that way. But, it was best to not keep secrets. Especially one where she knowingly put herself in harm’s way. If Jackson ever bit her, he would blame himself. Would he forgive her for the deception? Probably not.

Taking a deep breath, she started to confess it all when she noticed his eyes were closed and his breathing rhythmic and heavy. A quick glance confirmed that he’d already fallen asleep. She carefully extricated herself from his embrace and slipped off him. He didn’t stir when she rolled to her side of the bed.

It was a relief to have made the decision to tell him, and an even greater relief to know she didn’t have to tell him now.

## *Chapter One*

A strange, unpleasant odor drew Jazmin Carmichael from the haze of sleep. She took a deeper breath and then came awake with a start. She knew that smell. Decomposition and death. What the hell? Looking around the room, her gaze came to rest on the body lying next to her.

Even the thick coat of fur couldn't disguise the cold emanating from the carcass. The chest no longer rose and fell, and the limbs were fully extended and stiff. She stifled a shriek as she leaped away from the bed. Freezing floor tiles sent a shock of sensation through her. She stared, feeling colder by the moment. This couldn't be happening, yet here was the gruesome truth in her bed.

Last night, she'd brought Patrick Talbot home and taken him to her bed. Not so much a lovemaking session as a job interview. In just a few days, with the rising of the full moon, she would go into her first mating heat. Anecdotal evidence suggested if she didn't take a mate, her mental status might be affected. A few of the common werewolf myths even theorized her body would shift back to human form and leave her mind forever feral. Was it just an ancient explanation for insanity, as Serena thought, or something more concrete? As leader of the pack, she couldn't take the risk. So, she had been picking through the available males, looking for a suitable one to choose as her mate. So far, she'd only had two candidates. Michael O'Toole, the horror writer, was one. However, he was near the bottom of the pack order and, despite one lustful encounter, she couldn't picture herself with him for life. Besides, he was smart—too smart—and would probably question her decisions. She wanted a partner, not a competitor.



Which is why Patrick had been much more to her taste. Tall, buff, tan, pretty to look at, but not overly blessed in the brains department. Exactly what she wanted.

And now...

She circled the bed, hoping against hope she'd only imagined this. Perhaps it was a nightmare. The cold seeping into her joints convinced her that this nightmarish situation was real. She closed her eyes and then opened them again. The face on the pillow wasn't attractive. The eyes were open and blank, the corneas already cloudy with death. The creature's nose was dry and the lips were pulled back in a feral smile revealing overlarge canines.

Damn.

After running her shaking hands through her hair, she reached for the bedside phone, then thought better of it. A cup of coffee would go a long way toward calming her nerves.

She pulled on a pair of sweatpants and the white wife-beater hanging over the end of the bed. It engulfed her and hung nearly to her knees. Oh God, it was his shirt!

Shuddering, she cut her eyes toward the stiff corpse and ripped the garment off her body. Bile rose in her throat as she threw the shirt to the floor. She grabbed her bathrobe off the back of the door and fled to the kitchen.

By the time she'd measured out beans and ground them, her insides had stopped churning. While the coffeemaker gurgled, hissed and spewed forth the black sludge she called coffee, she realized she felt calm, too calm. What was happening to her? Shock? Was that causing her to feel so disconnected? She had liked Patrick, really liked him. Why wasn't she crying and hysterical? Instead, she was making coffee. What the hell was wrong with her?

Just because she was the leader of the pack, everyone assumed she had self-confidence galore. Pah! She had good looks and lots of sex appeal. Unfortunately, those qualities only got you so far. She did have chutzpah, though, in spades. Fake it 'til you make it, was her motto. She had gotten really good at faking it. Had she gone too far, to a place where her real emotions were locked up too tight to be shown?

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She poured a cup of coffee and took the first bitter sip, savoring the taste. As she drank, the kick of caffeine seemed to clear her mind, allowing her to focus. She needed to call for help. Thankfully, Jackson answered on the first ring.

“Eclipse sheriff’s department.”

It must be a slow day at the office for him to sound so eager for excitement. Well, she certainly had the news to jump-start his day. Why did she feel so numb and disconnected? A man had died, for God’s sake!

“Hello?” Jackson’s voice had an edge of impatience. “Is there someone there?”

Suddenly, the impact of what had happened hit her. She tried to speak around the huge lump of emotion in her throat, but her voice caught in a sob. Then the damn broke and a wail burst out.

“Hold on. I’ve got Caller ID pulling up here.”

Shuffling sounds ensued, and she could almost see him frantically pushing buttons on his government-issue phone.

“Jazmin. Is that you? I’m on my way.” The line disconnected and Jazmin sank to the kitchen floor. It wasn’t until she heard the car pull up in front that she realized she had to get up and unlock the door. Too bad her legs refused to work.

\* \* \* \*

There were only three blocks from the station to Jazmin’s residence, but it seemed to take an eternity. While he drove, a myriad of scenarios danced through Jackson’s head, each one more outlandish than the previous one. As he approached, he noticed a strange car sitting in Jazmin’s driveway. He slammed on the brakes in front of her house. He knew that car. It was Talbot’s little sports car. Opening the car door, he surged out and then he paused when he slid his hand to his thigh. Although his holster was strapped to his leg, it was empty.

His steps faltered. Should he go back to the station and pick up his gun or head into an unknown situation? He knew he was out of practice dealing with real crime. Heck, the last emergency occurred when Tom Owens got drunk and ended up freezing to death in the desert this past winter. Being rusty was no excuse

for negligence. He also seemed to be having trouble focusing. Here he was, standing stock still in the middle of the yard like a damn statue. He made one hell of a target, if a gunman lurked inside the house.

He glanced up and down the street. Everything seemed quiet, preternaturally silent. There had been no calls reporting gunfire or anything unusual.

Taking a deep breath, Jackson forced himself to keep moving forward. Once on the porch, he knocked. When no one answered, he pounded on the door. As he backed up to give the metal panel a kick, it swung open.

He stared.

Jazmin's tousled hair and pale complexion spoke volumes. A quick glance revealed no bloodstains on her or her clothing, so perhaps it wasn't as severe as he thought.

Her eyes filled with tears. A wash of sympathy passed over him but he shook it off impatiently. He was the sheriff first and her friend second.

"He's in the bedroom," was all she said.

So, it was Talbot. Again, his hand dropped to his holster. He would have loved to have used his scent to scout out the way, but the entire house smelled like French roast. Talbot stood over six feet tall and weighed over two hundred pounds. If the situation turned ugly, he sure would be more confident if he had a weapon. With a sense of trepidation, Jackson stalked through the living room of the small ranch house. He'd been here enough to know that the large master bedroom was at the end of the back hallway.

He slowed as he approached the door. It was wide open and his sensitive hearing detected no movement from inside, but there was an odd scent in the air. Perfume mixed with something more organic. A quick look revealed no one inside, unless Talbot was in the bathroom. Jackson slid into the room and skirted the wall, heading for the bathroom. It, too, was empty. The smell, however, had gotten stronger and sent an uncomfortable shiver down his back. He turned, his sense of frustration rising, and he wished he'd asked Jazmin for more details. The only place someone could be hiding was either in or under the bed.

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At first, he couldn't take in what he was seeing. The bed was mussed, clothing strewn around as if by a whirling dervish, or, by a couple in the throes of passion. He stepped closer.

"What the hell?" He turned and found Jazmin leaning against the doorjamb looking ill. He sought out her eyes.

"He was like that when I woke up."

"Dead?" The question sounded stupid as soon as it left his lips.

"Of course he's dead." Jazmin's snapped reply only accentuated his feeling of detachment.

"Did you kill him?"

"No," she replied, hugging herself tightly. "I just woke up this morning and he was..." She made an ineffectual motion with her hand toward the body.

"Natural causes?" Jackson murmured to himself. Talbot was a big guy and seemed relatively healthy. Perhaps he had a heart condition? Or was it more than an urban legend about men being killed by sex? Who knew? He shook his head as if to shake out the fog clogging up his mental processes. "I need to call in Doctor Brown. He's the coroner. But there's something wrong..."

"Wouldn't he be human if he were dead?" A soft voice wondered.

Jackson turned around. Serena stood in the doorway gazing sadly at the bed.

"What? And how did you get here?"

"I called her," Jazmin's voice shook.

"Did you call anyone else?" Jackson tried to keep the impatience out of his voice. All he needed was for the entire town to show up and contaminating the crime scene. If it was, indeed, a crime.

"No."

"So what happened?"

"We came in late last night, and after, well, you know." Jazmin's face contorted from her effort to keep from breaking down again. "He was fine when we fell asleep. When I woke up this morning, he was dead." Jazmin ended in a swallowed sob.

Serena put her arm around Jazmin. "That doesn't explain why he's turned wolf. When Tom died, he stayed in his human

form.” Serena took a step forward but Jackson waved her back. “Patrick’s reverted to wolf and there’s still three days before the moon is full.”

“What does the literature say should happen?” The low voice made Jazmin squeak, and everyone whirled toward the doorway.

“Shit, Michael! What are you doing here?” Serena asked.

“Sorry, sis. I live next door, remember? So, did old man Hyett document any similar deaths?”

Jackson looked up at his lover. She stared off into the distance, deep in thought. He could almost hear the gears grinding and the file cabinet drawers opening in her mind. Not only was Serena the only full human in town, but also because of her family’s connection to the previous watcher, William Hyett, she was the new government guardian. When Michael had been turned into a werewolf, he’d given her the Victorian fortress with its werewolf safeguards, silver reinforced doors and walls, and moved into the town’s tract housing.

Along with the mansion came the old man’s enormous library. It’d be fair to bet that every book written about werewolves sat on a shelf or existed in digitized format on the hard drive of the computer. If there was documentation concerning what happened to werewolves after they died, Serena would be able to find it.

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to dig around in the literature more, but from everything I’ve read, it sounds as if the body is always in human form after death. So how can this be?” Serena stepped closer and knelt down.

“Don’t touch anything,” Jackson cautioned.

Serena gave him an impatient look. “There’s a really odd smell coming from the body.”

“I smelled it earlier, too. Could it be cyanide?” Jackson suggested.

“No, this smells nothing like bitter almonds,” Mike interposed.

“Maybe some other poison?” Jackson asked.

“I didn’t poison him,” Jazmin objected.

“No one said you did, sweetie.” Serena shook her head. A puzzled frown creased her forehead and she sniffed again before

standing up. “Perhaps our resident mad scientist and the Center for Disease Control will find something. Meanwhile, I’ll go back and do some more research. Maybe there’s a simple explanation for this.”

Jackson noted she didn’t sound very confident. After one last look, Serena left. She wouldn’t stick around to be in the same room as the doctor, especially after he and the pack’s previous alpha, Ben Rawlings, tried to capture and turn her last fall. Although Jazmin, previously Ben’s mate and now the alpha leader of the pack, and Serena were fast friends, Serena couldn’t find any forgiveness for the men who had mercilessly hunted her.

“Well, I’m going to go get something to eat before the circus arrives,” Jazmin said.

Circus was right. Jackson had to first clear out the small crowd of neighbors gathered by the front door. They left after he gave his assurances that everything would be handled. Doc Brown arrived first in his yellow Hummer. Jackson thought it odd that the doctor didn’t come in, and when Jackson went out to talk to him, he wouldn’t even roll down the window.

Men from the CDC arrived in full HAZMAT suits. No one spoke to Jazmin or to him. They simply walked through the house, taking readings, and then they removed the corpse. One lone man, speaking like Darth Vader through his breathing tube and plastic facemask, told them not to divulge any of this to anyone. Then he, too, left.

Obviously, they knew more about the situation. For the first time in a long time, Jackson was afraid.

## *Chapter Two*

“It’s been three weeks! Why isn’t anyone telling me anything?” Frustration and fear had taken its toll on her. She was a wreck and couldn’t eat or sleep. To boot, she kept losing things—her keys, phone numbers, grocery lists, and names. Jazmin’s first instinct was to attribute it all to stress, but the paranoid conspiracy theorist in her thought otherwise. It had something to do with Patrick’s death.

And no one was giving her any answers. She was the pack leader, damn it. However, no one took or returned her calls. It didn’t help that she’d walked into the sheriff’s station, hoping for news, only to find Jackson playing Mahjong on the computer.

“I haven’t been able get any information, either,” he said grimly.

“So, you’re going to sit back and do nothing but play games?”

Jackson turned off the monitor. His amber eyes reflected his troubled state of mind. “You know, two weeks ago, I used to be able to win at this game every time. Now...” He shrugged. “I’m lucky to win fifty-percent of the time. The morning Patrick died, when I got to your house I found out I hadn’t even put my gun in the holster.”

“So, it’s not just me?” The wash of relief she’d felt immediately soured. “So, what is it? A virus, the natural progression of lycanthropy?”

“I don’t know. And no one seems anxious to tell us anything.”

“Which means—” The shrill peal of the phone on Jackson’s desk interrupted her. She had a momentary flare of hope that this was the call they’d been waiting for. Her optimism died when she saw the expression on the sheriff’s face.

“I’ll be right there,” was all he said.

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“What?” Jazmin asked, almost afraid to know.

“Brenda Kyle just dropped dead at the beauty shop.”

“Let’s go.” Luckily the sheriff’s station was on the same block, so it only took a minute to hurry into the hair salon.

The women inside stood in a terrified huddle by the cash register, the state of their hair an expression of their discomfort. Trudy, the owner, a sophisticated and full-figured black woman, separated from the others and came over to greet Jackson at the door.

“She’s over there.” The woman made a motion toward the body sitting along the wall and gagged.

Jazmin followed them in and then stared. The body, dressed in a bright pink miniskirt and tube top, sat slumped under a dryer. As they watched, the face elongated and sprouted hair.

“When did this happen?” he asked.

“Right before I called you—three minutes ago. Tops. I put her to dry and walked away to get her a magazine. When I got back, I noticed her legs and arms were, well, turning. I touched her and when she didn’t respond, I realized she was dead.”

“And she’s continued to change even after she died,” Jazmin added with a shudder.

Trudy nodded, her lips trembling.

Jackson reached for his cell phone, but Jazmin grabbed his arm. “What are you doing?”

“Calling Doc Brown.”

“No.” Jazmin spoke louder than she’d expected, and all the women turned to look at her. “We were told not to talk about Patrick, but everyone has a right to know.”

“Oh, God,” one of the women moaned. “I told you I thought something odd had occurred. We were told that if anything happened, we’d be sent home to our families. But I know for a fact that Patrick’s body is still here in Doc Brown’s morgue. His nurse, Nancy, told me the CDC didn’t run a single test on the body. I didn’t want to believe her. But now...” She turned an accusing eye on Jackson. “So, did this happen to him, too?”

When neither Jazmin nor Jackson answered her, she sat down heavily. “We’re all going to die, aren’t we? Just like...” Her gaze shot over to the corpse.



“You’re right about Patrick,” Jazmin admitted. “When he died, he exhibited these same symptoms, and I assumed the CDC was running tests. No wonder no one is returning my calls.”

“So, what are we going to do?”

A plan, a wild, crazy, could-get-her-in-deep-shit plan, formed in Jazmin’s mind. “I’m going to find some answers, but I need your help.”

“Anything,” Trudy responded without a thought, and the women surrounding her nodded.

Jazmin turned toward Jackson. As sheriff, he was going to be a harder sell, especially since what she planned to do was something he’d taken an oath to prevent.

“I’m going to take Brenda’s body to UCLA. They have experts in everything there. Surely one of them can tell us what she died of.”

Jackson shook his head as she talked. “You know I can’t let you leave.”

“It’s still a few days until the full moon.”

“But by tomorrow night, you can change at will and you’ll be infectious.”

“I’ll be back long before then. I promise I’m not going rogue. I’m going to get help. Help no one is offering to us here.”

“Please,” Trudy begged. “I don’t want to die. None of us do. Especially not like that.”

Jackson’s expression seemed to soften as he looked at the nodding women. Then, he heaved a sigh. “Okay, but I’m disclaiming any knowledge of this.”

“Fine. Now, help me get her out to my car.”

Trudy handed Jackson some colorful smocks which he carefully draped over Brenda’s body. The women surrounded him while he carried the body out to the car and slid it into the back seat.

“Good enough,” Jazmin nodded.

“How will you get out of town?” Trudy asked. No fences or guards kept the citizens of Eclipse in town. However, the town policed itself. If anyone spotted cars driving in or out, the phones at the sheriff’s station would begin to ring.

Jackson paused and looked around. It didn’t appear that they had caught anyone’s attention, but that could change in a

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heartbeat. “I’ll create a diversion. If everyone’s focused on a brush fire on the east side of town, you’ll be able to drive out undetected. We’ll cover for your absence until you return.”

Jazmin looked around at the faces staring back at her. The trust and hope in their eyes made her warm with pleasure as well as leaving a cold lump of doubt in the pit of her stomach. God, she sure did hope this wasn’t a wild wolf chase.

\* \* \* \*

“Walk.”

The petite and buxom blonde only said one word as she put her arm around his back and pushed him forward.

Even under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t have protested to taking a walk with a pretty lady. However, the command in her voice stymied any thoughts of dissension. So, walk he did.

Blaze Petrofsky, doctor of veterinary medicine and, up until last year, acclaimed wolf health and behavior expert, wasn’t so much afraid as he was frustrated. The entire symposium had been a bust and now some crazed woman was going to rob him. However, he couldn’t have asked for a prettier assailant. Plus, she smelled wonderful. A mixture of some high-end perfume and something else more elusive and damned sexy. He took a deeper breath and his cock hardened slightly. He tamped down any arousing thoughts and focused instead on his predicament.

Had she mistaken him for someone rich and famous? If so, she would be sorely disappointed. Hopefully, when she found out he had a sum total of seven dollars in his wallet, she wouldn’t shoot him. Why did these things always happen to him? Did he have a big sign hung on his back proclaiming his vulnerability to beautiful women? Just last year, his fiancée—now ex-fiancée—had stolen his research, claimed it as her own, and then accused him of stealing her thesis. And now this.

“What do you want? I don’t have much money, but you’re more than welcome to what I’ve got.”

“I need your brain.”

His steps slowed but she prodded him in the side. A black Lexus sat illegally parked in front of a fire hydrant. He heard a bleep and the brake lights flashed.

“You do know who I am, right?”

“According to Wikipedia, you are Dr. Petrofsky, wolf expert.” She opened the door and motioned to him. “Get in.” Her voice was more a growl than a request.

With a shrug, he slid into the passenger seat. She shut the door behind him and began to walk around the front of the car to the driver’s side. Here was his chance, all he had to do was open the door and walk away.

But he didn’t. First, he spent a few seconds admiring her profile. The slim straight nose, high cheekbones, and flashing green eyes. He sniffed the air. The car smelled nothing like the woman; in fact, an unpleasant odor wafted from something in the back seat. He shifted and turned. A large lump, covered by colorful plastic, took up most of the backseat. Then, he noticed something had escaped being covered. A foot. Or, to be more exact, a wolf’s paw.

The thud of the door pulled his attention back to his captor. He gave her a questioning look, but she only started the car and pulled smoothly into traffic.

“What’s this about?”

“You are Dr. Petrofsky, right?” Her voice sounded less sure than it had.

“Yes, I am.”

“I need you to do an autopsy.”

“On the wolf?” The woman nodded. “You must not have done enough research. If you had, you’d have found out I’m only a visiting speaker. I don’t have a laboratory here on campus.”

“Damn!” She swerved to the side of the road, cut off a huge city bus, and slammed on the brakes.

“I can borrow one.” Did he really say that out loud? What the hell was he thinking? He should be jumping out of the car and running for his life. Instead, he thought about the stiff body in the back of the car and his curiosity was piqued. People seldom asked for a determination of cause of death for wild animals. Researchers, maybe. However, if she were a scientist, she’d have access to her own equipment.

She looked over at him, and her eyes glistened. "I need this done soon. Today if possible."

"Fine. Let me make a few calls."

"Don't try anything funny," she warned.

"Listen, I could have jumped out of the car a long time ago, or clandestinely called the police. Believe me, I'm cooperating in whatever crazy scheme you have planned, lady."

"Jazmin. My name is Jazmin, and thank you."

He pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket and flipped it open. Scrolling through the address book, he tried not to pause as he scrolled past his ex-fiancée's name. Monika Jeffries. Seeing her name always caused a dull ache in his heart. So, why hadn't he deleted her from his list of contacts? Well, there was only one time to start. He deleted it, and it seemed as if a large weight had been lifted from his chest. Or was it because he was in the presence of a pretty woman? Okay, not just a pretty woman. A wet dream in a pink cashmere sweater and tight jeans.

Finally spotting the number of one of his past collaborators, he pressed talk and waited to be connected. What would he do if Russell didn't answer? Luckily, he didn't have to consider that for long as a brash voice with a southern twang answered. He hit the speakerphone button in order to assure the woman, Jazmin, the call was on the up and up.

"Blaze, you bastard."

He cringed a little at the greeting. Last year, he could have called any number of colleagues for help. Now, he was down to relying on the only one who had believed in him. Too bad the man was a Neanderthal. "Russell. I have a huge favor to ask."

"No, you may not borrow my wife or my daughter for that damn cocktail party tonight. Honestly, you need to forget that black-haired bitch and pick up a blonde with big ta-tas."

It seemed as if the collar of his shirt suddenly tightened and he was afraid to even glance at Jazmin for fear she'd laugh out loud at the blush he was sure had painted his features bright red. Oh, he had tried to forget that Monika would be in attendance. Still, he had to admit that he'd fantasized about them meeting at the party, resolving their differences, and then having wild makeup sex.

He'd been such a fool. Somewhere along the way, he'd forgotten humans weren't wolves. Those wild and gorgeous animals mated for life; humans were serial monogamists, at best. Still he'd convinced himself that Monika was his mate, and deluded himself into believing she felt the same. Partly because they'd shared a common interest in wolves, and partly because he'd found her irresistible with her long dark hair and deep blue eyes. The incredible sex had blinded him to everything else. But thinking about her now, she seemed to pale in comparison to the woman sitting beside him.

"I don't need a woman," he began. "I need your laboratory."

A low whistle emanated from the speakers. "That's a first. Blaze Petrofsky, single, white, *desperate* bachelor doesn't need a woman? Please don't tell me you've decided to swing the other way these days."

"The laboratory?" Blaze struggled to bring the conversation back on track.

"I'll ring my lab assistant and have him unlock the doors. Just clean up after yourself, unlike the last time."

"Sorry about that." Damn it. Why did everything remind him of *her*? The last time he'd used Russell's lab, he'd been with Monika. While they waited for their samples, they'd had wild sex on one of the lab benches.

"He'll be there in about fifteen minutes. I know he planned on attending your talk."

"We'll meet him there, and thanks."

"No *problemo*. See you tonight?"

"Yeah, see you then." Blaze snapped the cell phone shut and stared off into space, thinking about the nightmare he faced. Not the kidnapping or whatever this was. No, the cocktail party. His lecture earlier had been a bust. There had only been twenty or so students in the huge auditorium. Tonight, the rich and famous of Hollywood had paid hundreds of dollars a plate to sit down to dinner with him and several of his colleagues and discuss the future of wild animal sanctuaries. He couldn't use any of his past research, and his current project wasn't far enough along to have any real results. So, despite the rousing

videos of wild wolves at play, he didn't have a prayer of getting even a portion of the donations flowing in tonight.

Where would that leave him? A wolf expert with no wolves to study. His sanctuary would be closed, his wolves—no, his friends—released into an unforgiving wilderness where they would be not only predator but prey.

"Where to?" Jazmin's soft voice pulled him out of his reverie.

"It's behind us about three blocks."

Despite the close proximity, it still took them almost ten minutes of navigating through the fraternity housing and winding streets to get to the building and find a parking spot.

A gangly youth, his hair an elaborate blue mohawk, sat on a small bench. White wires dangled from his ears and his head moved up and down to the music being piped into his brain. Blaze recognized him as the one attendant of his speech who had asked intelligent questions.

He jumped and pulled out his earphones when Blaze tapped him on the shoulder.

"Dr. Petrofsky, it's such an honor," the young man exclaimed.

"Thanks for meeting us here with the keys."

"Can I be of any assistance?"

It amused Blaze to see the offer was made not to him but to Jazmin. "No, we'll be fine. I'll lock up when we're done," he answered.

A flash of disappointment crossed the young man's features, but he shrugged and handed them the keys. He gave Jazmin one last look of longing before plugging himself back into his music and walking away.

"We'll need a gurney to get Brenda inside."

"You name your wolves?" Although why he was surprised at that, he didn't know. In his experience, females were more prone to anthropomorphize animals than men.

Jazmin stopped and gave him a look. When he realized she was embarrassed, he tried to reassure her.

"Don't worry, I name mine, too. There are seventeen wolves at my sanctuary. They're my friends and my family. Is that how you feel about yours?"

“You could say that,” Jazmin admitted.

Luckily, they found a cart located in a small cubbyhole by the elevators. Together they wheeled it out to the car and started the unwieldy task of retrieving the stiffened body. While transporting it, Jazmin seemed particularly ill at ease. She startled when a car drove by and several young students leaned out the window to favor her with a long wolf whistle.

Blaze wracked his brains for a topic of casual conversation. He’d talked for and about wolves for so long, it seemed he’d forgotten how to talk to a pretty woman. “So, where are you from?”

“Chicago,” she answered.

“You’re a long way from home,” he remarked.

“Oh, kind of. I’m living, temporarily, out in the Mojave desert.”

As they entered the building, the colorful plastic covering the animal caught on the door handle. Instead of putting it back on, he rolled it up into a bundle and shoved it on the bottom shelf of the cart.

He paused and ran his hand down the coat of the dead animal. “Grey wolves aren’t indigenous to California,” he said automatically. He looked closer and realized that although at first glance it looked like a grey wolf, there were some startling dissimilarities. It was too large, for one.

“We, I mean they, aren’t from here,” Jazmin stammered.

“Oh, I see.” Although, he didn’t. If she ran some sort of wolf sanctuary, why didn’t he recognize her? The wolf community wasn’t that big.

An uncomfortable silence fell on them as they approached the lab. Blaze unlocked the doors and turned on the lights while Jazmin maneuvered the cart inside.

Together, they hefted the big animal onto a stainless steel bench. The same one he’d made love to Monika on...

Wrenching his thoughts away from that topic, he looked over at the pert and pretty blonde across from him.

“Well, here we are. So, what do you need to know?”

“I hope you’ll be able to tell me what killed her.”

He made a cursory examination of the body while he peppered Jazmin with questions. “How long has she been dead?”

“Six hours.”

“Exactly?”

“Give or take a little,” Jazmin replied. “I stopped for bathroom breaks and took the time to google wolf experts. I couldn’t believe my luck when your symposium was the first hit. I got lost driving through campus and then had another stroke of luck seeing my wolf expert standing at the corner.”

Luck or fate? Blaze wondered. Lucky for him, anyway. He hadn’t spent this much time in the presence of a beautiful woman in a long time. Too long, if his screaming hormones were to be believed. Everytime she leaned near him, he got a whiff of her scent and had to fight down his hard-on. And he was supposed to be solving the mystery of how her wolf died, not wondering if her breasts were real or the result of Hollywood magic.

With a concerted effort, he concentrated on the wolf in front of him. Rigor mortis was evident in the stiffening of the animal’s joints. Before he started cutting into the animal, he took several vials of blood and one of the vitreous fluid in the eye. He carefully labeled and racked the tubes. After a careful examination of the mouth, fur, and feet to rule out any obvious cuts or bites, he prepared to make the initial cut.

With a smooth incision, he laid open the gut.

A gagging sound caught his attention. He watched as Jazmin dashed over to the nearest stainless steel sink and vomited. Sympathy surged through him, and he had the sudden urge to shield her from the unpleasantness.

“You don’t have to stay,” he said quietly once she’d finished.

“No, I need to stay.”

“No, you don’t. You’ve piqued my interest enough. I won’t run away.”

Jazmin, still pale, marched back over to the stool she’d recently vacated and gingerly perched on top of it. “I owe it to her.”

He knew what she meant. When one of his charges died, it was usually of old age or a known condition. However, when death came under mysterious circumstances, he’d stick to the problem like a hungry wolf to a carcass until he found the answer.



"If it gets to be too much, let me know." He then turned his attention back to the contents of the stomach. What he was seeing didn't make sense. The substance, still relatively undigested, resembled scrambled eggs and sausage. And Jesus, was that really a chocolate doughnut?

He made a face and searched again.

"What?" Jazmin asked. Although still appearing queasy, she leaned in to see what he'd discovered and he was momentarily distracted by her nearness. It was as if she'd cast some spell on him. Was it the scent of her perfume? Or simply the fact that it had been a year since he'd been with a woman?

He dragged his reluctant attention back to the corpse in front of him. "Your wolf must have been digging in the trash. All I find is human food."

"That isn't what killed her though, right?"

"Of course not. Wolves are mostly carnivores, but in a pinch, they'll eat anything. What's unusual is I seldom see well-fed wolves scavenging in the trash. It brings them too close to humans."

"So, what did kill her?"

"I suspect poison. Perhaps our gray lady made it a habit of rummaging through someone's garbage can, and the owner put a little something extra in the food. I'll run this sample through a spectrophotometer and see if there's anything in here that shouldn't be."

He began pulling out various vials and a Bunsen burner.

"What are you doing? I thought you just injected the fluid into that spec-thingy-mo-bobber and got the answer."

Blaze shook his head and sighed. "Lady, this isn't CSI."

\* \* \* \*

However, just like a prime time drama, in almost one hour to the minute, Blaze held a syringe of clear white fluid in his large, capable hand and injected it into a rubber stopper gizmo on the side of the machine.

Jazmin resisted the urge to hold her breath. "How long will this take?"

"Five minutes."

Feeling anxious, she walked over and watched the paper spit out of the small printer by the side. She wasn't sure what she expected, but a bunch of colored squiggly lines, some printed so thickly together it was impossible to tell one from the other, was not it.

"The spectral analysis," Blaze explained.

His breath brushed her cheek. If she turned slightly, she could capture his mouth in a kiss. To her discomfiture, her heart began to pound. For a moment, she wondered if he could hear it the way it was thundering in her ears. What was it about the man that attracted her? His looks? Maybe.

She cut her eyes to take in his features. Messy brown hair, a strong chin, a rather large nose she associated with his Polish-sounding last name, and dark brown eyes. He stood about five foot ten and she'd guess his weight at one-sixty or so. In other words, average height and weight. He looked exactly like his picture on the website and she hadn't found him all that attractive then. All in all, he was rather nondescript—until he smiled. When he did, his eyes lit up and sparkled. The smile changed his entire look and sent a zing of desire through her.

She gave herself a mental shake. This situation was serious. She needed to be focused, not be thinking about jumping the man, especially in this cold, sterile lab with Brenda's poor body cut open. Despite that, a picture formed in her mind of her wearing nothing but a lab coat, sitting on the edge of a stainless steel table while Blaze... Stifling the erotic image of his face buried between her thighs, she sighed. Less than three days remained until the full moon, and she needed an answer to this mystery before someone else died. Perhaps before they all died.

She pointed at the paper in Blaze's hand.

"What does all that mean?"

He studied it, his eyes darting back and forth. Just when she thought she'd need to repeat the question, he pointed at a group of peaks and valleys. "That's noise. It's generated by the liquid we immersed the sample in." His finger slid along the graph. "Here's where it gets interesting. We've got trace elements of heavy metals, arsenic and fluoride mostly, probably from the groundwater."

“Arsenic? Isn’t that a poison?” Jazmin shivered. Her fingers and toes felt frozen.

“It is, but not at these levels. You’d find these amounts in everyone. No, where it gets interesting is this.” He pointed to a large peak. “Aconite.”

“A poison?”

Blaze nodded, but his expression remained troubled. “I’m having trouble understanding how a carnivore in the wild ended up ingesting this. Especially at this level.” He shook his head. “I’ve seen this before, but...” he trailed off.

“So, if this aconite is what killed her, how did it get in her system?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Blaze stared at her, and Jazmin got the uncomfortable feeling that he knew she knew more about this than she was saying.

“I don’t know what you mean. I assume she ate it. Isn’t that the normal way animals are poisoned?”

“Normally, yes. But aconite is produced by a plant. Granted, it could have been from a secondary source.”

Jazmin shook her head. “You lost me. Please explain.”

“Wolves eat meat, not plants. Aconite is from a plant called monkshood.” Blaze looked up at her and there was a strange light in his eyes. “Ever heard of it?”

“No, should I? Would it have been in the, um, trash that she’d eaten? Like rat poison or something?”

“No, the chances of that are slim. It isn’t a pesticide. In fact, there’s really only a couple of uses for it.”

“Which are?”

“Homeopathic medicines. Aconite is sometimes used to treat the high fever, restlessness, and fearful anguish that occurs with acute liver disease. However, this wolf’s liver is normal. Not that a wolf would be taking homeopathic medications, anyway. Right?”

Jazmin stayed silent. She didn’t know Betty well enough to know if she was or wasn’t taking any pills. However, the chances of Betty and Patrick taking the same medication were slim to none. Patrick didn’t take any medication, not even aspirin, for fear that it would interact in some way with the

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lycanthropy. However, she would have to be sure and search Betty's medicine cabinet when she got back to Eclipse.

"You weren't giving the wolves anything, were you? Some sort of supplement, maybe?" Blaze asked.

"Of course not. I..."

Suspicion flared in Blaze's eyes. She wanted to tell him the truth. But that would get them no closer to the answer and might result in her receiving a one-way ticket to the psyche ward at the hospital for observation.

"The oddness doesn't end there. You see, I've worked with this compound with wolves. A special kind of wolf, anyway."

Jazmin shot him a quizzical look.

"I don't know if it's a coincidence or not, but monkshood is more commonly known as wolfsbane."

## *Chapter Three*

She went white, and for a second he thought she was going to fall. It convinced him that she knew more than what she had told him. But it also conveyed to him that she hadn't known the consequences of using the drug. Maybe she had been supplementing the wolf's feed, thinking to make the animal healthier. In that case, the poisoning would be accidental. He took her in his arms, only meaning to comfort and console her.

Instead, he kissed her.

He hadn't meant to; he'd intended to keep his distance, not get involved. Kissing her had been the furthest thing from his mind. Or had it? Not only had he kissed her, it hadn't been a comforting peck on the lips, either. He steeled himself for her to step back. Her lips seemed to mold perfectly to his and the kiss intensified into a deep, arousing one that sent tendrils of desire through his lips straight to his groin. As his cock hardened, a voice in his head told him to release her, perhaps apologize. Instead, he pulled her flush against him.

It was crazy—this was crazy! But as the kiss deepened, so did his desire.

He felt her hands on him, on his shoulders, running down his back to come to rest on his butt. Finally, before it was too late to pull back, he released her lips and looked into her eyes. What he saw wasn't indignation, protest, or anger, but something tender and a bit confused.

"I—" he began.

She cut him off by pressing her mouth to his. This time, it was passionate and needy. Her tongue entered his mouth, her body pressed against his in all the right places, and the heat from the sweet spot of her sex seemed to sear through clothing to heat his erection.

Their mouths connected with hot urgency, and he found his hand moving down to cup her breast, and she pressed even tighter against him.

Musical chimes sounded, and they jumped apart. It took him a second to realize it was the bells of a nearby church signifying the hour.

"I didn't mean for this to happen, not here, not now."

"Do you want me to go?" Jazmin asked.

"No." He shook his head, and she came easily into his arms.

"You're sure?" she whispered.

This time, he didn't answer her with words, but let the passion of his kiss speak for him. As they kissed, she jerked on his tie, loosening it so she could attack the buttons of his shirt. Once it was undone, she tossed it to the floor and then stepped back.

A seductive smile danced across her lips, and then she ran her hands over her own breasts to the bottom of her sweater. In one lazy movement, she lifted it up and over her head. Her pink lace bra barely held her breasts. He struggled to catch his breath as she reached between the cups and unsnapped the scrap of fabric.

As he started to approach her, she stepped back. Obediently, he stopped. Her hands, caressed her torso. Her perfect skin glowed, seemingly heated by her own touch. His gaze paused at her navel, pierced by an odd shaped symbol made of stone, or perhaps polished bone. The flutter of her hands drew his attention lower to where they played with the snap of her jeans. The rasp of the zipper sounded loud in the room. With a jiggle and a shimmy, she shed the tight denim fabric to reveal a pink lace thong.

He took one step toward her and his knees gave way. Sinking into a crouch in front of her, he ran his hands over her hips and thighs before hooking his thumbs in the elastic band of her panties and pulling them down her legs.

Small but strong fingers threaded through his hair and gripped his scalp as she widened her stance. Blaze rewarded her with a leisurely lick along her gleaming slit. She was so wet. His cock pressed against his zipper as he thought about burying

himself into her heat. Thick cream coated his tongue as he used it to toy with the edges of her nether lips.

“I could eat you all day,” he murmured. He blew a gentle puff of air along her heated flesh and she writhed, more warm wetness trickling onto his tongue. Ravenous for the taste of her, he licked along her opening, probing deeper with every stroke.

Jazmin cried out and her thighs tightened down around his head. He smoothed them with his hands to ease them back apart. His tongue kept up the onslaught, thrusting into her snug pussy. Every third or fourth stroke, he paused to circle her clit. The tender nub poked free of its protective hood and hardened further with each moist swipe.

Instinctively, Blaze knew she was close to coming as tremors coursed through her taut muscles. Jazmin’s breathing was rapid and fractured, and her cries had dissolved into whimpers. Gasping, she sagged against a nearby stool. Her entire body vibrated, and when he caught her gaze, it was full of raw need. He breathed in the heady fragrance of her musk and groaned.

“Let go, Jazmin. I want to watch you come apart for me.” His lips closed around her clit, and he sucked.

Her scream filled the laboratory and seemed to echo off the stainless steel equipment. Her hips bucked beneath his face. He maintained the suction on her until the ripples of her orgasm faded, then he soothed her with a series of slow, thorough licks.

He wanted to touch her more, bring her to even greater heights. Blaze had never been a selfish lover, but he’d never felt like this before—that his partner’s pleasure was far more important than his own.

He stood and put his arms around her, supporting her as she leaned into him. “What more can I do for you?” he asked.

She put her finger over his lips and then dragged it down his chin to his chest. There, she stroked through his chest hair and then further down to the waistband of his slacks.

When she wrenched open the button, his desire surged so strongly he nearly came in his pants. Her soft, cool hands pushed down his pants and his boxer briefs, then settled on the heated flesh of his cock. Every touch set off waves of need that began at the base of his back and spiraled through his balls.

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Then, she stopped the soft caresses and her hands ran back up his torso to his shoulders. He paused, puzzled, until she stood on the bottom rung of the stool and slid one leg up to encircle his waist.

Her wet pussy pressed against him. One thrust and he would be inside. He craved her, but he also wanted this to last. Instead of taking her, he dipped his head to suckle on a taut nipple. She moaned as he took it deep into his mouth.

“Please,” she asked.

He didn’t have to be told twice. Encircling her, he lifted her slightly and, with one long thrust, entered her. It was as if he were encased in hot, wet velvet. He paused, shoving his orgasm back. She writhed in his arms, settling herself further onto him. He drove into her.

He heard her cry out and felt the muscles deep inside her pull on him while the wave of his own climax washed over him. Arching his back as he held her tight against him, he almost howled as he emptied into her.

A nearby table supported most of their weight as, still holding her close, he buried his head in her neck, breathing deeply of her scent. Peace and contentment filled him. He’d just met her, he only knew her name, but he recognized her on a primal level.

He’d found his mate.

\* \* \* \*

They dressed in silence. Jazmin studied Blaze as he finished buttoning his shirt. When he finally looked up at her, his eyes looked...haunted. Did he regret what had just happened?

More important, did she?

No. But while the sex was incredible, her sense of urgency mounted. When they’d connected, it had seemed like not only their bodies, but their souls had touched.

So, what was the problem?

The problem was that she was a werewolf who lived in a town created by the government to keep her and the others segregated from *normal* men and women. People like Blaze. Plus, she’d just found out one of her pack had been poisoned



using wolfsbane. That meant the killer had to be someone who lived in Eclipse. Or was it, as Blaze suggested, accidental poisoning? No matter, she needed to get back to town to find out, preferably before the full moon made a monster out of her.

Thankfully, Blaze assured her he would take care of disposing of the body. He'd told her the university had freezers for storing the corpses, and a company came in once a week to pick up the dead animals for incineration.

For a long moment, she had stalled and emotion had gotten the better of her. It had taken every ounce of restraint to act as if Brenda were only a wolf. Yes, Brenda deserved a decent burial, but taking her back to Eclipse wouldn't accomplish that. If she took the body back, it would only disappear into a black hole like Patrick's had. She'd bet his family hadn't been notified, and perhaps they never would be. There might be hell to pay when the CDC found out that one of the residents was unaccountably missing, but only because the CDC was trying to cover something up. Besides, what would happen if they all died? The CDC would sweep it all neatly under the rug. No, the only thing she could do for Brenda, for them all, was to find out who had killed her and to keep it from happening again.

Blaze held her while she cried, assuring her that the wolf's death was an accidental poisoning. But despite his assertions, Jazmin was equally sure it was murder.

So, she got into her car, clutching the paper lab results. Truth be told, she didn't want to drive back to the desert with that stiff, cold, smelly body. The analysis sheet fluttered a bit on the seat next to her as she adjusted the fan and temperature for the ride home. She looked over at Blaze, standing at the curb.

She pushed a button and the passenger side window slid down.

"Are you sure I can't give you a lift somewhere?"

He looked up and down the street and seemed to hesitate. Finally he shook his head. "My hotel is only a couple of blocks away. What I need is a ride to get to the mixer tonight. I didn't realize it wasn't on campus. Luckily, there's a taxi stand right across the street."

"You sure?"

"Positive." He stepped back and gave her a small wave.

“Blaze.” Where just a second ago she’d been chomping at the bit to get away from here and back to Eclipse, now she didn’t want to leave.

“Yeah.” He stepped up to the car and leaned in the window.

“You’ve helped more than I can say. If there’s anything you need...”

Blaze laughed. “This from a woman who won’t tell me where she lives and hasn’t given me her phone number. No, there’s only one favor I could even think of asking, but I know you’re in a rush to get back to...wherever.”

“What’s the favor?” Jazmin asked.

“To accompany me to this stupid party tonight.”

He smiled that devastating smile and started her hormones humming in an unmistakable song of seduction. She had less than three days now until the full moon. And only twenty-four hours before the lunar effects would start playing with her mind and body. No, she had to get back as soon as possible.

“I’m sorry.”

“I understand.” His smile lost a bit of brightness, and he gave her another small wave. “Drive safely.”

Jazmin pulled into the road with a sense of regret. She felt a connection with Blaze she hadn’t experienced, well, ever.

Nonsense. There was no way he could be her mate. It simply wasn’t possible. He was human, fully human, for pity’s sake. No, she had to be mistaken. He was only a man, albeit a very attractive man, and she was approaching her heat cycle. That was it. *Fini*. Period.

Despite knowing that he wouldn’t work for her, she couldn’t keep her mind off him. She kept remembering his smile, the way he laughed, and his compassion when she’d cried over having to leave Brenda’s body behind. So lost in thought, she somehow got turned around on the 405 Freeway and ended up heading toward the airport instead of away from it.

Coincidence? Or was her subconscious mind messing with her? Holding back the impulse to bang on the steering wheel, she took the airport exit, intending to simply turn around. However, Century Boulevard resembled a parking lot, not a thoroughfare. Penned in, she could do nothing except inch forward when the cars moved at all. Then, just as her nerves frayed to the breaking

point, she saw the sign for the hotel hosting the party. Pressing her hand on the horn, she jerked the wheel and shot across two lanes of traffic. Amazingly, she made it without hitting anything or anyone, granted it was probably more to the credit of the defensive driving abilities of the other drivers than to her own skill.

As she pulled up to the valet parking stand, the nebulous plan fell into place. Especially when she looked over and saw a woman coming out of the hotel. The hair on the back of Jazmin's neck stood on end.

Flicking back impossibly long black hair, the woman walked as if she were God's gift to men. The three men dancing in attendance seemed to agree with her assessment. "Black-haired bitch" was what Blaze's friend had called her. She might have wondered about the connection had the embroidered wolves on her jacket not sealed her suspicions.

Jazmin got a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*. As if she'd seen the woman somewhere. But where? Eclipse? There was only one new resident; however, she too had long black hair. Jazmin had only seen her from a distance the first day she'd moved in.

Although the woman had been in residence a few weeks, no one was home when Jazmin paid her cursory welcome-to-the-neighborhood visit. Or, as Jazmin really suspected, she was there but not ready to face the reality of the situation. That happened to a lot of people, and Jazmin considerately gave them space. After a few weeks, solitude got old and they eventually left their residence. Soon, they found their niche within the community, and Jazmin assumed the new woman would, too.

So, was it coincidence that this woman resembled the new resident?

*Enough already with the conspiracy theories*, Jazmin chided herself. *Lots of women had long dark hair.*

Still, she couldn't shake the sense of unease she felt as she handed over the keys to her car. Before she walked into the hotel, she cast another look at the black-haired prima donna as the group waited for their car to be brought around. Jazmin met her eyes and saw a flash of something intense in their depths. To her relief, the woman laughed at something one of the men said and turned away.

When the car pulled up and the black-haired diva got in without a backward glance, Jazmin convinced herself that the emotion had been the jealous look of one beautiful woman acknowledging another.

Entering the lobby, Jazmin took her place in the line to check in. Three dour looking women and one fresh faced young man worked the counter. As she moved up in the queue, she mentally calculated her odds of getting the young man. It didn't look good. She was next in line and the sourest of the three women was just finishing up a client. Damn. Pretending that her cell phone rang, she flipped it open. As the woman waved her forward, Jazmin let the man behind her take her place while she pretended to chat with her mother.

Then it was her turn.

She flashed a bright smile at the man and, to her amusement, he blushed.

"Are you checking in for the conference?"

Fearful there might be a list they'd check her name against, she shook her head. "No, just catching a flight out in the morning."

"Lucky you. The convention booked the entire eighth floor and there aren't any vacancies left there." He tapped on his keyboard, his brow furrowed as he studied the screen. After a second or two, his face cleared, he pounded a few more keys, and then went to retrieve the paperwork from the printer.

While he ripped off the hotel copy, Jazmin practiced her lines. She only wished she could remember the full name of the woman who had moved into Eclipse. It was Monika something-or-other. Jesus, could you get Alzheimer's Disease before thirty? Why was she having so much trouble remembering names? As well as getting lost. What was up with that? She had an infallible sense of direction.

The man handed her a folder. "Your room is on the twelfth floor. Have a good stay, Miss Carmichael."

"Thank you." Jazmin made her way to the elevators. Once the doors closed, she punched the button for the eighth floor. The hallway was empty except for a bellman unloading suitcases at the far end. Luckily she'd gotten close enough to the black-haired woman to get a good whiff of her scent. Following her

nose, Jazmin walked down the corridor and paused in front of a door. This was the room. Now she'd have to figure out a way in.

"May I help you ma'am."

Jazmin turned. "Yes. I just unpacked and started downstairs when I realized I'd forgotten my flash drive. And now my key won't work." Palming the folder, she slid her own key into the door and pulled it out. A tiny light flashed red. "Could you run it down to the front desk and get it rekeyed? I'd do it, but I'm in a bit of a rush and don't want to make two trips."

The man looked at her, doubt written clearly across his face. She could almost see him mentally reviewing the rules about letting unidentified guests into rooms. Oh well, if he wouldn't let her in, she'd think of some other way.

"You know, that's okay." Jazmin gave him a wry smile and kept her voice sincere. "I'll just head on down to the front desk and..."

"No, here. Let me." With a flourish, he pulled out a card and whipped it into the lock. A green light flashed, and he opened the door for her.

"Thanks," she said.

"If you give me your card, I'll happily get it rekeyed for you and bring it right back."

"No, I'm in now and all set. Thank you."

Once the door shut behind her, she went to work. Flipping through the suitcase, she encountered piles of top-of-the-line panties, a few cleavage enhancing bras, sweaters, pants, and plastic packages of hosiery. Nothing that would identify the woman.

In the closet, several cocktail dresses hung like sexuality on display. A laptop sat in its case in the back. Jazmin pulled it out and sat it on the bed. She booted up the computer while she did a cursory check of the drawers. They were all empty.

Hopefully the computer wasn't password protected. It wasn't, and within minutes she had the entire contents of the hard drive at her fingertips. There was too much here to read. She pulled her flash drive out of her purse, shoved it into the USB port, and with a couple of keystrokes, copied the hard drive.

## UNLEASHED

She repackaged the laptop and set it in the back of the closet. There. A last glance around the room revealed something she had missed. A square shadow behind the curtains. It could be innocuous, or it could be...

Another computer. Hauling it out of its hiding place, her fingers caught on the airline tag attached to the handle. Turning it over, she saw a familiar name. Blaze.

What was his computer doing here?

Her senses, already heightened by the werewolf in her and now on high alert, detected the ding of the elevator followed by a familiar lilting laugh. Shit! The woman was on her way back, and Jazmin couldn't be caught in the room. Grabbing Blaze's laptop, she strode across the room.

Without hesitating, she opened the door and glided out into the hallway. She firmly resisted the urge to look toward the elevators. Instead, she fast-walked in the opposite direction.

"Hey, did she come out of my room?" the shocked voice asked.

"No, I think she came from next door," a man's voice murmured in reply.

The woman's steps begin to race and, in response, Jazmin picked up her own pace. To her relief, the woman stopped at her own doorway and fumbled with the keycard.

As soon as Jazmin heard the door open, she broke into a run. She hit the exit door running and dashed down two flights of stairs, burst through the door and ran to the opposite end of the hallway, and then climbed three floors. Only then did she feel safe enough to take the elevator up to the twelfth floor and her own room.

No one seemed to have followed her, so either the woman hadn't noticed anything wrong or...well, Jazmin didn't want to think about the alternative.

Now what?

She should go back to Eclipse. That would be the smart thing. However, she wasn't going to. No, what she was going to do was buy a dress, go to the party, and find out what that woman was up to.

\* \* \* \*

Blaze watched Jazmin's car pull out of sight with a heavy heart. He couldn't believe he'd finally found *the* woman, the *one* woman for him, and then let her drive away. He didn't even know how to find her again, and it was clear she didn't want him to. Shit-for-brains, that's what he was. Always getting involved with the wrong woman. But if she was so wrong, why did she feel so right?

Sighing with aggravation, he turned and walked toward his hotel. Unlike the major chains, this was a small, cozy, intimate place close to campus. Most of its clientele were family members of patients hospitalized at the medical center, but he'd been staying there for years.

As he walked, he tried to think about anything except Jazmin. So, he concentrated on the wolf. Something niggled the back of his brain.. The proportions of the body were *off*. He couldn't quite put his finger on what, though. He mentally walked through the autopsy again. In his mind's eye, he watched his hand approach the hazel orb to fill a pipette with vitreous fluid. His steps faltered as he thought about that eye. The proportions and color of the iris were wrong. In death, it hadn't even looked like a wolf's eye, it had looked...

He mentally shook himself. It had to be his overactive imagination, but, just in case, he decided to take another look at the animal.

Once back in the lab, he pulled the body out of the freezer. Damn it. The eyes were frozen shut, so he couldn't confirm what he was now beginning to suspect was just paranoid imagination. Now what? His gaze lighted on the vials of fluids he'd drawn. The vitreous wouldn't tell him what he needed to know, but the blood would. Good thing he'd left them all out for the lab tech to discard. He grabbed one of the tubes. It would only take a quick analysis to determine whether his imagination was running wild or whether he'd crossed over the edge of insanity.

Quickly scouting through the cabinets, he started to pull out equipment to perform a precipitin assay. However, in one drawer he found something even better. A rapid stain identification test kit.

His hands shook as he opened the box and began preparing the assay. Part of him knew he was mad, simply insane. A larger fraction of him was convinced he was right.

He sat on the lab stool watching the seconds tick by on the timer. The instructions said it would take ten minutes for the results but it seemed like an eternity.

A timer chimed.

Suddenly he was reluctant to leave his seat. What he should do was walk away. The wolf was dead, and the beautiful and mysterious Jazmin was gone. But he was a scientist, not only by training but in his heart. Even after he'd left government employment, he'd continued to do research. Not along the same lines. No, he wasn't that stupid. Especially when the experiment had so easily gotten out of hand.

What a nightmare.

The project had started out as a simple what-if proposition, a break room discussion that turned into an obsession. Vampirism was thought to be a result of Porphyria, a rare blood disorder. What if lycanthropy was caused by a virus? If so, what type of virus would cause the disease? He and two other researchers set about creating one using various combinations of existing organisms and a bit of genetic manipulation.

As they went along, they clandestinely tested themselves with the various stages, reckless young scientists that they were. Luckily for two of them, most of the viruses had no lasting ill-effects.

Then, Blaze had stumbled upon a treasure trove in an online auction. A trunk of seventeenth century medical books and laboratory paraphernalia. Fifty dollars and a week later, he'd received the package. Disappointed, the whole lot seemed worthless until he found a round silver case in the bottom of the box. He'd opened it and discovered it contained a salve. A search through the physician's notes documented that the salve was supposedly given to the physician's father by Jean Grenier, the Bordeaux werewolf. This was the ointment the boy claimed to anoint himself with in order to effect the change to wolf form.

After he and the others had finished laughing about it, they'd tested it, just for kicks. Nothing could have prepared them for what they found. The salve was human fat and blood. They



tested the DNA and discovered it was rife with wolf genome properties. And the kicker: a small virus lurked in the cells.

One of his colleagues, Ben Rawlings, rubbed the cream on his face and arms. The full moon had brought a big surprise—Ben's conversion to a wolf-like creature. An even bigger surprise came the day after, as Blaze was summarily removed from all his projects and promoted to a management position. Management. He hated supervising anyone, and he hadn't even been in line for the promotion anyway.

The more he puzzled over the promotion, the more he was sure that it was only to remove him from the laboratory. He finally confronted his boss who had responded for him to do his job and not to worry about it. In the end, he'd been so miserable that he'd quit.

A byproduct of the project was his interest in wolves. He'd taken his severance pay and created a sanctuary for the beautiful creatures, his sole intent to save them from extinction. At least that's what he told himself. However, he now suspected it filled his need to absolve himself from the harm he'd reintroduced into the world.

A sudden and unwelcome thought invaded his mind. Did Jazmin and her wolf, Brenda, have anything to do with *that* project? He wanted to say no, but he simply couldn't be sure. Wouldn't be certain until he saw the results.

Straightening his shoulders, he slid off the stool. A quick glance at the test strip confirmed his suspicion.

The blood was human.

## *Chapter Four*

The day had gone from bad to worse.

He'd been kidnapped to perform an autopsy, discovered the animal patient was not at all what it seemed, and then gotten back to his hotel room to find the door hanging off the hinges and his notes and computer missing.

If he had been a woman, he would have cried. As it was, he showered, put on his tuxedo and a brave face, and caught a taxi to the airport hotel. It was tempting to tell the driver to zip on by the hotel and drop him at a terminal. He could be home in few hours. It would give him a head start to finding new homes for his wolves and time to work on his resume. Blaze Petrofsky, insane, discredited wolf expert. Yeah, he'd have plenty of job offers.

Steeped in despair, he paid the taxi and wandered into the lobby.

"Hey there, Blaze!" A voice hailed.

Pasting on a smile, he looked up. It was Russell and his stout, matronly wife, Kathy. Blaze strode over to join them.

"You ready to wow everyone tonight?" His friend asked.

To lie or not to lie? Blaze opened his mouth to tell them about the robbery in his hotel room when a soft voice interrupted him.

"He's going to be terrific," the familiar voice said.

Blaze started. "Jazmin?"

He glanced at his friend and found Russell staring at her with his mouth slightly open. Hopefully, he didn't wear the same expression. Pulling himself together, he made introductions.

"Jazmin, this is one of my colleagues, Russell Zaremba, and his wife, Kathy."

"Nice to meet you." Jazmin smiled and then turned to him.

"Oh, honey, you left your laptop in my car this afternoon. I left it

at the concierge's desk for you." She nodded toward a stiff man in a maroon suit standing behind a secluded podium.

"My laptop?" But how? He hadn't been carrying his laptop with him. Was it simply a ruse? He glanced at her again. She'd dressed for the occasion in a stunning clingy black evening gown. No, she didn't have to lie to get his attention. His glance traveled down to her cleavage, and he tamped down the sudden punch of lust that shot to his groin. No, she definitely had his attention, and more.

It was as if the entire crowd melted away. As if from a far distance, he heard Russell say, "See you upstairs, old man."

Jazmin tucked her hand in his arm and snuggled close to him. Her presence was intoxicating, but he pulled himself back to reality.

"Why did you come back?"

"I told you, your computer."

"I didn't leave it in your car. Did you know my hotel room had been robbed?" He felt his eyes narrow with suspicion. "Did you break into my room?"

Jazmin took a step back. "Certainly not."

The feeling that something was *off* persisted.

"I returned to the lab after you left."

"And?" Jazmin's voice sounded casual. Too casual.

"There was something odd about the wolf. Her proportions and weight were off. Her eyes revealed the truth."

Jazmin stared at him.

"They weren't the right size or shape for a wolf. Part of me noticed it, but I didn't realize the significance of what I was seeing until I ran a blood test."

Again, she greeted his statement with silence.

"Don't you want to know what I found out?"

"I know what you found out."

"Because somehow you're part of *it*," Blaze accused.

"It?" Jazmin asked.

"Don't pretend you have no idea what I'm talking about. Brenda wasn't any ordinary wolf."

She stepped forward and although shorter than him, felt intimidating. "You're right, she wasn't. She was my friend, and I want to know what killed her. That's all."

Her scent surrounded him, causing a cascade of thoughts and feelings all focused around one thing. Sex. She seemed to sense it too, for her eyes darkened with lust.

He grabbed her arm and dragged her behind a potted palm. Once his lips touched her mouth, everything was forgotten: the break-in, the stolen laptop, and the speech he was due to give in less than an hour. All he could think about was her lush curves and the passion sizzling deep within him every time he touched her.

Her lips cruised over his and then her tongue speared into his mouth to join his in a carnal dance of desire. If they hadn't been in a public lobby of a hotel, he would have taken her right then and there.

After several deliciously decadent moments in her arms, she pulled away. Her eyes were troubled and she reached up and stroked his cheek. "I wish..." she began.

"Wish what?"

"I wish things were different." Then, she smiled, but Blaze noticed her lips were trembling. "I know this sounds odd. I don't even know you, but I love you, Dr. Blaze Petrofsky, and I wish you all the best in everything you do."

"What?"

Instead of answering, Jazmin turned on her heel and walked away. Heart in his mouth, he started to follow her, but she walked so fast it was obvious she didn't want him following. The lobby was strangely silent and his footsteps sounded loud on the marble floor. He glanced at his watch. Shit. He was due upstairs. Now.

Casting one last glance in Jazmin's direction, he headed for the concierge desk.

The man greeted him with a professional smile. "May I help you?"

"I'm Dr. Petrofsky. My, um, secretary left my laptop here for me."

"Yes, I have it here." He handed the case to Blaze, which was when Blaze realized the attendant wasn't even looking at him. Instead, his gaze was focused off to the side. Blaze turned to see what had caught the man's attention. Jazmin stood in the

middle of the doorway and right in his line of sight. Granted, she was worth the view. Breathtaking, no less.

She turned and her eyes met Blaze's. He could have sworn their green depths were drowning in tears. Quick motions drew his notice—were those three men converging on her? She must have seen something in his expression for she took one look over her shoulder and then raced back into the hotel.

Blaze overheard the nearest man say as he ran past, "Lone wolf on the run."

\* \* \* \*

Jazmin looked around. Agents closed in on her, moving fast. She sprinted forward. More men in black suits approached from the other side of the lobby. Without a prayer of escaping, she did the only thing she could.

Surrender.

Holding her hands up above her head, she turned. Rough hands grabbed her. She didn't put up any resistance. There really wasn't any point. One agent on each side took a firm grip on her arms as they led her back through the hotel lobby. The goons hadn't handcuffed her but still people gawked. She'd scream for help but was sure no one would provide any assistance. The men in black seemed to ooze a government-agent aura. As she walked, she saw no trace of Blaze.

"Wait, Jazmin." Blaze seemed to appear out of nowhere and elbowed aside one the goons.

The group halted.

"Sir, you need to step back." The man on her left endeavored to step in front of Blaze but Jazmin gave him a push, causing him to collide with another agent. He stumbled. Everyone's attention was on the fumbling agent for only a second, but it was long enough for her to maneuver close to Blaze's side.

Blaze's hand was warm on her elbow and he pulled her in close. "Are you okay? Should I call a lawyer?"

She wasn't going to lie. "No, a lawyer won't help."

"What's going on here?" Blaze asked the agent.

Instead of answering, the man simply strong-armed him to the floor. Blaze grunted, but when the man put his hand on the holster at his side, Blaze held up his hands. His gaze, though, never left hers.

One of the agents then dragged her unceremoniously toward the black sedan parked in the valet lane.

“Don’t you have to read me my rights?” she asked as the burly agent on her right jerked open the back door of the car.

“You have no rights under the Patriot Act. This is a matter of national security.”

Jazmin stifled a snort. She should have expected this. The government who made the disease was now desperate to keep it out of the public eye. For one short moment, she envied the only escapee so far, Ben Rawlings. However, if she escaped, she wouldn’t go around biting people.

Or would she?

The man gave her a push and she found herself sandwiched between two hard bodies. It might have been pleasant except her heightened sense of smell told her what the men would never admit. They were sick with fear. *Over little ol’ me!* She wondered what they would do if she suddenly let out a low growl. They’d probably claw at the bulletproof glass barrier trying to get into the front seat.

The thought made her giggle, and then, to her chagrin, burst out laughing.

“You think this is funny? You’re in deep shit,” the agent on her left snarled. “You’re lucky you aren’t on your way to Guantanamo Bay.”

The man on her right chuckled, a cruel sound without an ounce of humor in it. “She’s going somewhere far worse.”

Worse? Jazmin’s confidence flagged.

The miles fell away with the hours. How had she been discovered? Had someone snitched about her absence? There was no mystery as to how the agents had found her. All of the residents of Eclipse had been implanted with GPS tracking chips, just like someone’s prize poodle. So, the where had been easy. But who and why?

It couldn’t have been Jackson. He’d gone AWOL to protect Serena after Ben Rawlings’ escape from Eclipse, so, he owed her

a favor. Had it been one of the women at the shop? Doubtful. They'd been petrified as they watched Brenda's metamorphosis. She'd promised to find the answer. So, they had no motive to turn her in. But wait...

Jazmin stole a glance at the mirthless bruiser next to her. No one had asked about Brenda or her body. Did they not know about that or were other agents, even now, scouring through the UCLA campus in search of the corpse?

Thank goodness they'd left Blaze alone. The last she'd seen, he was picking himself off the floor. She'd been too far away to tell what he was thinking. However, she'd seen the look in his eyes when he told her what he'd found out about Brenda. Suspicion. As if she might be the scientist who had created this madness.

She should have told him the truth, no matter what the consequences were. But would believing she was a nutcase who thought she was a werewolf be any better than thinking she was a terrorist. Probably not. But it would have made her feel better. Especially as she was more convinced than ever that Blaze was her mate. They'd worked like a well-oiled team to get close despite the training of the government agents. But had it been enough?

A headache began to burn behind her right eye as darkness fell. Shit. The pounding heralded the lunar affect that drove her werewolf cycle. She knew why the agents were in a hurry to get her back to Eclipse. She had only twenty-four hours left before the wolf trapped within her asserted itself. From nightfall the evening before the full moon until nightfall the day after, she'd be able to change into her wolf form at will. Unfortunately, as an animal, she and the other werewolves of Eclipse would be unpredictable, potentially vicious, and infectious. And on the night of the full-moon, they would not be able to control their metamorphosis, turning into a wolf as the moon rose and staying that way until dawn.

Jazmin's blood ran cold. She ran her hands up her arms as if to smooth down the goose pimples, but, in truth, was to assure herself that the skin still felt smooth and human.

After what seemed like hours, the sedan pulled off the freeway and began weaving its way down bumpy back roads.

Too soon, the lights of Eclipse came into view. As expected, the car pulled into a slot in front of the jail.

The agent on the left slid out first. The other pushed her from behind. Her legs stiff from the long drive, she stumbled and would have fallen if he hadn't had a death grip on her arm as he manhandled her across the sidewalk to the jail.

"Hey," she protested. "Is that any way to treat a lady?"

Instead of answering, the man snorted. Eclipse never bustled with activity, but today nothing moved. The dark windows of the courthouse across the street seemed to stare at her ominously and a curious sensation of being watched tickled the back of her neck. She took a deep breath, but couldn't catch the scent of anyone she knew.

No lights shone inside the sheriff's station. *Where is Jackson?*

With his absence, she lost hope of getting news of the poisoning out into the population.

The agents shuffled inside and led her straight back to the holding cells. The three iron cages looked innocuous, but the wolf in her howled at the fury at the thought of being locked up. One of the agents gave her a push, and she stumbled and nearly fell. The door shut with a clang. The mood in the room changed perceptibly and she no longer smelled fear, but instead, a sweeter scent tinged the air as relief washed over the men.

*En masse*, they scurried out. Cowards, one and all. Well, she wasn't going to give in to her fear. With a cockiness she didn't feel, she turned with a smile and a wave. "Y'all come back now, you hear," she called after their retreating backs.

Then, she sat down on the thin mattress.

It crackled.

Looking around, she confirmed that no one observed her. She glanced at the security cameras that hung overhead. The light indicator was dark on each, confirming her suspicion that they hadn't been turned on. Shifting positions again, she isolated the source of the sound. Hidden under the mattress was a folded note.

"We didn't rat you out. Something sinister is afoot. Not sure when someone will be able to spring you, but have faith." *Who*



*the hell wrote this?* It sounded like something out of a poorly written horror novel.

There was only one person who fit that description.

"Thanks, Michael," she whispered.

The lights went out in the building, and there was nothing left to do but wait.

She lay down on the cot. The rough wool blanket scratched her cheek and reminded her of the feeling of Blaze's five-o'clock shadow as he trailed kisses down her face and throat.

Heat gathered between her thighs and her pussy throbbed as she remembered the feel of his hands cradling her breasts. His touch had been gentle and firm as he'd stroked her nipples. And his mouth. She moaned a bit as she thought about his tongue flicking over the sensitive peaks of her breasts and then trailing down her torso. No one had ever set off such strong feelings of need within her.

He was her mate; she had no doubt about that now. What had he been thinking when he'd seen the government agents drag her off into custody? Probably damn glad to see the last of her. He'd all but accused her of being involved with Brenda's death.

Despite that, his kisses had been full of passion. She thought about the way their bodies had melded together. A perfect fit.

Just like his cock had been.

It only took a few seconds to hike her dress up and off. Her need for release drove her on. Hell, she didn't care if the entire military watched her masturbate on a hidden camera. Running her hands over her breasts, she caressed her nipples with one hand while the other found its way under the small triangle of material covering her pussy. Feather light touches became more insistent as she crept ever closer to climaxing.

Jazmin thrust first one finger, then another into the wetness, softly at first, and then with more vigor as her orgasm built. Memories of Blaze's erection pulsing inside pushed her over the edge. She came with a howl.

\* \* \* \*

Serena grabbed the keys off the pegboard and stuffed them into the pocket of her jeans. Unfortunately, at two o'clock in the morning, the nearly full moon lit up the night sky. A few high clouds danced across the stars but didn't stop long enough to provide cover.

She pulled on a jean jacket to ward off the cold and started out to the barn. She'd planned to drive into town from her Victorian mansion to release Jazmin from the confines of the jail; however, a curfew had been put in place and she knew that men with guns patrolled the roads, stopping all vehicles from entering Eclipse.

Thank goodness Jackson had listened to sense and let her reopen the tunnel that ran from the property to town. It was part of an old silver mine. If they had known about it earlier, it would have come in handy a year ago when he'd been incarcerated in his own jail. William Hyett had fortified the mansion with metal inside the walls and silver engravings on some of the doors and furniture, just for good measure. However, Serena had wanted the fail safe of being able to get to town, and the jail, secretly. For not only would the jail cells keep the werewolves in, they could also be used to keep them out. Something else she'd learned the hard way.

Using a large moonstone and silver amulet as a key, she unlocked a specially constructed door. It was similar to one in the house that hid the panic room which was outfitted with a library and state of the art computer system. The doorway in the barn, however, led to a simple wooden ramp.

A cold breeze whipped through Serena's hair and she paused to look over her shoulder. No windows revealed her actions, and she hoped the feeling of being watched was simply a product of her imagination. Closing the door, she strode down the ramp toward a pale glow. Enough light fell from a low-wattage bare bulb to illuminate the tunnel entryway. A tiny electric golf cart sat at the ready.

Serena slid behind the wheel and reached for the key when she heard tapping.

"She came this way," a deep voice said.

Damn, she had been followed.

Although the cart was quiet, it would have given away her position. As it was, she had built in another fail safe.

*Sorry, Jazmin.* For a moment, she thought about the woman who had once been a bitter enemy and was now her best friend. Hopefully, this would be only a slight delay. But why were the men here, now?

Serena crept toward a ladder hanging against the wall and scaled up it. This path led to the loft in the barn. Once at the top, she would open another panel, and move into the sound stage where she filmed dog training videos. *Woof*, the show she'd originally starred in, had gone national with a new host, her former assistant, James. Her new endeavor consisted of a series of training tips broadcast on public television and the internet. If everything went as planned, she could disarm the men's suspicions and send them on their merry way, none the wiser. Hell, she'd even show give them a tour of her little studio and perhaps even make them watch an episode or two.

Heart pounding, she made her way out the secret door and into the studio. Heavy footsteps indicated she wasn't a moment too soon. Clicking on the camera, she took up her position in front of it.

The door burst open and she stifled a scream.

Two men in black business suits stared at her. Both almost identical in height and weight, they looked like tall, blond bookends.

"Who the hell are you? And what are you doing in my house?" she asked.

"This is a barn, lady," the one on the left corrected her. "We have it on good authority that you are aiding in the escape of a terrorist."

So, her instincts were correct. She was being watched, and someone in town had been talking. Not intentionally perhaps, but she had no doubt the government had listened into every conversation every resident had had in the last twenty-four hours.

"It's also private property." The ratchet of a shotgun being cocked accentuated the statement. Serena looked up and met Jackson's gaze. Damn, he looked sexy standing half-dressed in the doorway, wielding William Hyett's twelve-gauge.

“We have a right to be here. This is a matter of national security.” The other agent stated.

“My dog training videos?” Serena quipped. “I hardly think paper-training a puppy affects the security of the nation.”

“Get out,” Jackson commanded.

“We don’t have to,” the second agent asserted. “The Patriot Act give us the right to—”

“Die for your country?” Jackson growled. “Glad to hear it.”

“You’ll go to—” the left bookend began.

“Jail? I doubt that. Or didn’t they tell you what I am?”

Jackson pulled himself up to his full height. In the dim light, he eyes glowed with a feral heat. Thinking about what had happened to Patrick and Brenda, a frisson of fear danced down Serena’s spine. What would she do if he died? Wrenching her mind away from the macabre thought, she focused on the agents. Alarm clearly written across their features made them look even more identical.

“Please leave,” Serena requested in a firm voice.

She didn’t have to ask them twice. They turned and pushed past Jackson.

Jackson clumped down the stairs after them. It wasn’t until the barn door slid shut that she realized she’d been holding her breath. The encounter had been too close for comfort. She couldn’t take the chance of going into town now. The only hope she had was to get some word to Jazmin when she went into town tomorrow afternoon on her monthly rounds.

Jackson reappeared, and Serena stepped back. She could sense his rage earlier, and hoped that the lunar effects hadn’t taken hold. If so, her skills might be tested a lot sooner than she anticipated. However, when he smiled, revealing his chipped front tooth, there was nothing alarming about his expression.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to...” he began.

Serena put her finger on her lips. In her mind’s eye, she saw the image of agents wearing earphones and hunched over a tape recorder as some sort of parabolic dish picked up her every word. The studio was soundproofed, but she wasn’t sure how secure it was against a government-issue listening device.

“I agree. I’ll film this episode some other time.”

## *Chapter Five*

Blaze nearly took his laptop and went upstairs. He was due to present his inane research in less than an hour. Halfway up to the party, he changed his mind. He had turned his back once before and regretted it. He wasn't going to do it again.

Hoping no one noticed his aborted arrival, he punched the lobby button and rode the elevator back down. He headed out to the circle drive in front. The black sedan was long gone and so was his chance of following it. Where had they taken Jazmin?

He shoved his hands into his pants pocket as he blew out an exasperated breath. One hand closed over a weight of metal. *What the hell?* He hadn't driven here. He pulled the keys out and looked at them.

Where had they come from?

He remembered Jazmin maneuvering to get close to him even as she was being arrested. She must have slipped them into his pocket. A surge of pride shot through him. His woman was one smart cookie.

His woman? Where had that thought come from?

He headed back into the hotel. The parking garage was on the lower level. Hopefully, her car would be easy to find. So, he'd have transportation. Then what? What was she trying to tell him?

He no longer wondered what her role was. The only explanation that made sense was that she was a victim. A werewolf. Did that change the way he felt about her? No. It didn't matter what she was; he was finally going to do what he should have done years ago.

Shut down the project for good.

The elevator doors opened and he stepped in. He punched the button labeled parking. Hopefully, Hell wasn't always down.

Jazmin's car was parked illegally right in front of the elevator. There was a note on the windshield notifying her that a tow truck had been called. Good thing it hadn't arrived yet. He peeled the note off the glass and crumpled it into a ball before tossing it toward the trash bin next to the elevator.

He pressed the remote button and unlocked the door, opened it, and then slid behind the wheel. The engine turned over with a roar. Now what?

He rifled through the glove compartment. Three vials of fingernail polish, a hairbrush, and a bag of makeup. No registration or insurance paperwork to be found. Cursing under his breath, he opened the center console and found it stuff with tubes of lipstick and stained, crumpled tissues. Pulling one out, he winced at the red color, thinking it was blood. Unfolding it, relief washed over him, for it contained a perfect kiss.

*Damn it, Jazmin. You're smart and beautiful, but you need to help me here.*

Had she left information on his laptop? He glanced at it sitting beside him on the passenger seat. He spotted a map case in the door by his foot. He reached in and pulled out a fluffy white beret.

Hell, there wasn't even a map in the car. So, how had she gotten here? He let his gaze rove over the dash. There was a radio and a small screen. He pushed the button below it and it glowed green.

Ah, this was more like it.

He noted with surprise that it wasn't tuned to Los Angeles. Instead, it showed a location in the middle of the desert. Pressing the zoom button, he was able to blow the map up to where he could read the name printed above the glowing dot.

Eclipse.

Ice seemed to run through his veins. So, the project had continued without him. Well, not for long, not if he could help it.

He put the car in gear and drove up to the street exit, passing a tow truck on the way out.

Traffic was light and he made good time to a town called Palmdale. But despite driving up and down the freeway a couple of times, he'd been unable to find the turnoff leading to State Highway E. He'd found Avenue E, but when he checked the

GPS map, it was clear that they were different routes. So, he stopped for gas and meandered around the convenience store looking for caffeine and chocolate. He was tempted to ask the pimply faced kid behind the counter where State Highway E was. The guy hadn't even looked up from his Manga comic when he walked in, so Blaze didn't hold out any hope that he'd be much help.

At that moment, a big green truck pulled up and a handful of California Army National Guard reservists crawled out. Following his instincts, Blaze made his way to the back, where a rack of chips half hid his location.

The door opened and one of the men strode in. He had a cocky walk and Blaze had no doubt this was the squad commander. The others followed and stood clustered around the counter.

"Excuse me," the first man said.

The attendant didn't even look up.

"I said excuse me," the reservist bellowed.

When he still got no response, he slapped his palm down and the kid jumped. When the cashier realized he was looking at a man in uniform, he took a step back. He lifted his hands and his comic fell to the floor.

"I need directions to State Highway E."

"State Highway E?" The kid echoed.

"Jesus, are you as dumb as you look?" the reservist grouched. The other men of the unit snickered.

"Really, I've never heard of it." The young man sounded close to tears.

The leader let out a huge exasperated sigh. "I don't suppose you know anything about a roving pack of rogue wolves, either. Shit, you're worthless." He turned to one of the other uniformed men. "Get General Murphy on the phone and tell him we need directions. Now!"

"Yes, sir."

On his command, the men trooped back to the truck.

Blaze let out the breath he'd been holding. Rogue wolves. That confirmed there were humans out there infected with a virus—his virus—that turned them into beasts every full moon.

A horrible thought formed at the back of his mind. The government wouldn't condone the slaughter of its own citizens, would it? Not in human form. But if the men doing the killing were tricked into thinking they were hunting wild animals...

Not wanting to believe his own thoughts, he tried to put them out of his mind but couldn't. If that were the situation, he had to stop it. He watched the big green truck idling at the curb, waiting to pull into traffic. Throwing money at the attendant, he grabbed an iced coffee out of the case and snatched candy bar off the rack.

The truck pulled out just as he climbed into Jazmin's car and started the engine. Several miles went by before the truck made a right turn onto a dirt road. Blaze pulled over and watched until the taillights were almost out of sight. He turned off his headlights and drove by the light of the full moon. He must have hit every rock and pothole in the road. A couple of times, he feared the car would shake apart as it traveled over the washboard surface.

"Sorry, Jazmin," he apologized when he hit a particularly large pothole. Her Lexus was never going to be the same.

He should have been paying attention to the drive, instead, his mind whirled around the implications of the situation. He could follow the soldiers out to the desert, but when the time came, he didn't have a prayer of saving any lives.

However, he did know who could. What if he were wrong? Perhaps he'd misinterpreted the lab results, and there really was a pack of wild wolves roaming the desert. Which was ridiculous. In the first place, this wasn't their normal habitat. It could be a sanctuary or an animal rescue facility; however, it wasn't one Blaze had heard of. Besides, he argued, the government didn't condone killing endangered species unless they posed a threat to a community and all other options had been exhausted.

The steering wheel jerked in his hand and he nearly lost control of the vehicle. Shit! He gazed around. He could no longer see the taillights of the truck. Damn. Where had it gone? Had the truck stopped? If so, they'd certainly be able to hear his car approaching. He put his foot on the brake pedal but then hesitated. What if they were just ahead, in that case, he should speed up. Or had he missed a turn somewhere?



Before he had a chance to make a decision to stop, a large boulder seemed to appear in the middle of the road. He slammed on the brakes, but the tires spun in the loose dirt. Bracing himself for impact, he resisted the urge to close his eyes. He didn't.

But, he did pray.

\* \* \* \*

Jazmin had spent the whole night and most of the next day waiting before she finally conceded no one was coming. They'd planned to, of that she was sure. However something had prevented them from rescuing her. Had they all died?

She shivered but quickly abandoned the macabre thought. Even if all the werewolves were gone, Serena would still be alive. No matter how grief-stricken she might have been over Jackson's death, Serena would have come. Jazmin had to hang on to that belief.

One of the burly agents from the day before had slid a tray of food through the slot this morning. Eggs, bacon, and a steaming stack of pancakes. Lord knows where they got it; there weren't any restaurants in town...yet. The scent of the food even overcame the smell of disinfectant always hanging in the air of the jail. No matter how good it smelled, she couldn't bring herself to eat it.

Thank goodness the cap on the bottle of water was still sealed. She sniffed the liquid before drinking. It smelled like normal tap water, but was it? Or did it contain some chemical that would incapacitate her? Perhaps wolfsbane. She now wished she'd asked Blaze more about the properties of wolfsbane. Did it have a scent? Could it be tasted? Why hadn't she asked? Was it because she was already afflicted with the poison and it had affected her memory, or was it because the man had been too damn sexy and she hadn't been able to think about anything else?

Sadly, her forgetfulness was probably more a result of checking out Blaze's ass.

Lunch had consisted of a can of soup and another bottle of water. By that time, Jazmin had convinced herself even the water wasn't safe and hadn't touched anything.

Now, dusk approached. She resisted the urge to pace back and forth in her cell. There would be time enough for that after she got furry. Her wolf, never happy about being confined, and the incessant fear of the last few hours made her doubly anxious.

The door creaked open, and Jazmin startled but didn't look up. It was probably the guard with dinner. She hoped to convince him to take away the uneaten remains of breakfast and lunch, for once she turned, her wolf would eat anything in sight.

An unexpected scent wafted toward her. Not food, but perfume worn on a very human female form. Her! As the figure approached in the dim light, Jazmin found herself staring into deep blue eyes framed by a curtain of jet black hair.

"You! What have you done?"

The woman smiled without a hint of amusement. "I guess I don't have to keep secrets any longer, you seem to have made the connection clear enough."

"Duh." Rude, she knew, but she couldn't think of anything clever. "So, what are you doing here?"

"Cleaning up a tiny mess."

"A mess? Is that what you call it?"

The woman smiled rather self-deprecatingly. "It doesn't matter what I call it. I just need to get it cleaned up."

"By killing us all," Jazmin stated.

Monika shrugged, and Jazmin resisted the urge to lunge at the bars. A tiny mess? People were dying and this woman acted as if she'd knocked over a flowerpot or broken a glass.

"If that's what it takes."

"How are you going to get rid of us?" Jazmin asked.

"I've been dosing you all with a chemical that will keep you in your wolf form after death. You were all supposed to die off, a few at a time. I had already laid the groundwork to convince everyone that this was the normal progression of the disease. Then you showed up in Los Angeles and I realized I was going to have to, um, accelerate your demise."

"Sorry."

Monika shook her head. "You just couldn't leave things alone, could you?" She suddenly gave a small laugh. "Well, lucky for you, my research assistant thought of a plan to cover up all your deaths. The National Guard has been called to

exterminate a pack of wild wolves. By morning, you'll all be dead. Problem solved."

"Except for one thing," Jazmin pointed out.

"What's that?"

"Ben Rawlings. Didn't they tell you? He's still out there creating more werewolves every full moon. How do you plan on getting rid of them?"

All the color drained out of Monika's face. "You're lying," she said.

It was clear from the sound of her voice that she knew Jazmin wasn't. However, within a few seconds, she'd regained her composure. "Oh well, even if you aren't lying, I'll deal with that problem as it arises. I was looking forward to getting out of this hellhole, but if I have to stay a few months longer to get the promotion, I can. But for now..."

She raised her arm, and Jazmin could see she held a pistol.

"Silver bullets?" Jazmin couldn't resist asking.

"No, tranquilizer darts," Monika answered and then pulled the trigger.

## *Chapter Six*

The sun was high in the sky when Blaze awoke. His entire body hurt, especially his arms. His forearms felt as if they were on fire; however, a careful examination revealed a surface burn caused by the airbag deployment.

He crawled out of the wrecked vehicle. Amazingly, although he had some lacerations and contusions, he didn't seem to have broken anything. In fact, it seemed as if the worst thing he'd suffered was a concussion. At least that's what he assumed was making his head pound and his stomach roil.

In pain, he limped around the car. He'd totaled the vehicle, no doubt about it. So, now what did he do? Walk back to the highway or continue on this insane mission? His mobile phone chirped. Low battery. Well, whatever he was going to do, he'd better do it fast. Call for a tow or call his old fraternity brother, DJ?

Before he could talk himself out of it, he punched in DJ's telephone number. After being told to hold twice, he almost gave up in despair when a familiar voice boomed in his ear.

"Blaze! Your middle name must be Trouble. This is the second time this weekend you have been mentioned."

"Really?" That surprised him.

"Really," DJ echoed.

When the ensuing silence convinced Blaze that DJ wasn't going to divulge any further details, he gave up waiting and launched into the explanation of where he was and how he got there.

"Eclipse, California," DJ repeated. It wasn't a question and his tone of voice seemed to imply that this was exactly what he'd expected to hear.

Again, there was a pregnant pause, filled only by the urgent bleeping of his dying cell phone. Did those cryptic little

statements come with the rank and office DJ occupied? It gave a whole new meaning to “need to know.” Well, damn it, he might not need to know, but he wanted information.

“You heard of it?”

“I have. However, what you’re telling me doesn’t coincide with the file sitting on my desk. Let me do some research and get back to you.”

“Do it quick. My cell battery is dying,” Blaze said.

When he received no answer, he looked at the display. The phone had died.

He started walking, not sure he was even headed in the right direction. Suddenly, a path appeared in front of him like a mirage, and he could see tire tracks in the dust. This must be the road he should have been on last night. He took a guess as to which direction the truck had been traveling and then set off.

He’d been walking for two hours. However, walking was an optimistic way of referring to the painful shuffling of his legs. His feet hurt, his chest and back hurt, even his eyelids hurt. Turning in a full circle, he scanned the horizon for any sign of civilization and saw...nothing.

Until the ground met his face.

It was hot, and he had no food, no water. He’d been a fool. He couldn’t save anyone or anything, not even himself. Of their own accord, his eyes closed. Hopefully the truck full of soldiers wouldn’t run right over him as they drove out of this hellhole.

Jazmin knelt beside him. She wore a bright red teddy with some sort of fur on the hemline. It tickled his cheek as she bent over, and he stifled a giggle. Then, she was wearing nothing at all. His mouth went dry and his mind went blank as all his blood rushed to his penis. Had he died and gone to heaven? No, that couldn’t be; people didn’t have sex in heaven, at least that’s what he’d been told in church. So, was he in hell? If so, he didn’t ever want to leave.

“Here, drink this,” she said softly.

She leaned forward and brushed a lush pink nipple across his lips. He opened his mouth to suckle and choked on the flood of water that rushed in.

Coughing, he struggled to sit up.

Hands gripped his arms and helped him sit while something wet swept across his cheeks.

“Tucker, leave him be.”

He opened his eyes. A woman knelt in front of him. She had short dark hair, hazel eyes, and, to his disappointment, was fully dressed. A large yellow dog crouched next to him. He turned to get a better look at the animal and the dog licked him.

“Ugh. I think I was dreaming.”

The sun hung low in the horizon, a bright orange ball of fire and pain. He groaned and closed his eyes.

“More like dying. Next time you get in a wreck, stay put until help arrives. Especially when you’re hurt. Luckily, Tucker here picked up your scent, and we found you before it was too late.”

“Too late? Too late for what?”

Instead of answering, the woman hauled him to his feet and propelled him toward a black Volkswagen Beetle. She opened the passenger door. He staggered forward, but she blocked his entrance. Instead, she flipped the seat forward. “Tucker, in.”

The dog hung back.

“Damn it, dog. I don’t have time for your stubbornness and shenanigans. Get in.”

The dog whined.

She sighed heavily. “Most dogs like to ride in the car. But mine...” She turned to the dog. “Go home then, but better make it quick. The sun’s almost down.”

The dog stood up as if it understood what she said and barked once before running off into the desert.

“Who are you?” Blaze asked, as she flipped the seat into position and turned to help him into the car. She looked familiar, but he couldn’t place her.

“Serena O’Toole.” She studied his face, then smiled. “Woof?”

The lady from the dog training show! Now he knew who she was. She’d been off the air for a year now, but he’d recognize her anywhere. Which begged the question: what was she doing out here in the middle of nowhere? “Training wolves?”

The last bit came out audibly and she flashed him a curious look. "What an odd thing to say. Who are you?"

"Dr. Blaze Petrofsky. I..." He didn't have a clue where to start.

"You must be the man Jazmin went to talk to at UCLA."

He simply nodded.

"Well, that explains some of it." Serena started the car and cast a worried look at the sky.

"I'm glad you seem to know something about me. I'm following the trail Jazmin left for me. At least, I hope I am. She was arrested in Los Angeles."

"That much I do know. So, I suppose you had a hare-brained idea to rescue her." Serena put the car into gear. "She tends to have that effect on people. It'd probably surprise you to know that she can take care of herself."

If his head hadn't been aching before, it certainly did now with all the shaking and bumping they did. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, but it didn't help.

"Can you drive a little slower?"

"No," Serena answered in an annoyed tone of voice. "Listen, right now, we're in deep shit. In less than an hour, there's going to be forty-seven huge, hungry werewolves roaming this desert looking for food. They aren't going to care if they catch a fuzzy bunny or a slightly less hairy man. So, I'm not going to drive slower. I'll get you to safety, and then I'm going to see what I can do to fix this situation."

"Oh, God." Every nightmare he'd had for the last five years had just become reality.

"Some fucking idiot who worked for the government came up with a bright idea to use a virus to create some sort of super soldier. Well, a few willing volunteers were infected with lycanthropy. I don't know if they thought they could control the disease or if they were just plain stupid."

"A little bit of both," Blaze said.

Serena shot him a look but then turned back to watching the road. "Whatever. The result is that approximately fifty residents in this little town get a little furry once a month. I'm their watcher. I'm supposed to lock them in their homes at dusk tonight and let them out in the morning."

“But?”

“Fortunately for you, no one seems to care about me driving around in the desert. But when I tried to drive into town, some very large men in black suits told me my services were not needed this evening. I also noticed the truck full of gun-toting men in green uniforms sitting at the edge of town, and I put two and two together. There is something linking the mysterious deaths of two of the pack with what’s happening tonight. Somehow, somehow, I have to stop it.”

The car screeched to a halt and Blaze looked up in surprise at the large Victorian mansion. “What the...”

She slid out of the car and motioned for him to follow her. Walking so fast it was almost a run, she mounted the stairs.

“I don’t have time to explain. You need to start talking and now if I’m going to figure out a way to stop those soldiers from killing my friends.” Serena’s voice caught in a sob.

When she pulled him inside, he noticed her eyes flooded with tears. She closed and locked the door before leading the way through the house.

Blaze followed and began to explain. “Five years ago, I worked for the CDC. In the beginning, we just wanted to see if it could be done. Changing men to werewolves, that is. I probably wouldn’t have ever found the virus if I hadn’t stumbled upon some old samples in a trunk I bought in an auction.”

“Go on.”

“We all thought it was a hoax. One of my colleagues infected himself and the rest is history. After he turned, I was removed from the project and reassigned. So, I quit.”

“Before you found the cure?”

Blaze nodded but hastened to add, “I continued researching on my own time and I was close—real close—to finding a cure, but my research was stolen.”

“Stolen?”

“My ex-fiancee still works at the CDC. She—”

“Damn. I had hopes there for a moment.” Serena cut him off with a wave. She reached down the front of her shirt and pulled out a large silver amulet. With a flourish, she set it into an engraved pattern on the wall and turned it. Blaze felt his eyes widen as the wall slid back to reveal a room filled with books. A



well-worn easy chair sat off to the side and a computer sat on a nearby desk.

She strode over to the computer and moved the mouse. The screensaver flashed briefly, revealing a famous actor in full werewolf garb.

"Wolfsbane was the base," Blaze offered.

"Wolfsbane?"

"It's a poison, but in small doses can be used medicinally to good effect. But that's what the wolf, um, I mean Brenda, had been poisoned with. They have to be connected somehow."

"Okay, so someone thought they were curing the disease, but instead, killed someone. Why didn't they simply admit their mistake and keep going. Why kill everyone?"

"Because..." A suspicion began to take hold. Monika had stolen his research last year and presented it as her own. And he suspected that she'd covered up the theft by burning his house down. Had his research finally won her the coveted position of senior researcher she'd had designs on for years? Could she have been given his old project? If so, and things began to go wrong, would she try to cover it up as well?

"I'm taking a leap here, but if the research wasn't hers and people were dying, she'd be desperate to cover up the mistake so she wouldn't be blamed." Blaze drew in a deep breath.. "My ex-fiancée, Monika Jeffries. She and I met at the CDC. Now, I run a wolf sanctuary but I've been researching canine parvovirus. Last year, she stole my data and presented it as her own. I think my research opened a few doors for her, namely giving her access to a project that I'd once worked on. I didn't have a chance to confirm it as I missed her presentation at the conference in Los Angeles."

"She was there? Do you think she might have seen Jazmin?"

"Jazmin? I don't know. I wouldn't think so, but then again, maybe." Blaze shrugged. "Why?"

"On the day Jazmin drove out of Eclipse, Jackson created a diversion on the other side of town. Despite that, he still got reports of a resident of Eclipse escaping. He didn't think much of it until one of the informants gave him the license number of the vehicle. It wasn't Jazmin's car. He ran the plates." Serena tapped

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a few keys and a DMV picture displayed on the monitor. "Do you know this woman?"

Blaze's worst fears were confirmed. It was Monika.

\* \* \* \*

Serena took a deep breath.

Damn it. She'd had hopes that the mysterious man in the desert would miraculously have a solution. All day long she'd been fighting a rising panic that her friends were all going to die and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Jackson.

She couldn't even think about him now or she'd burst into tears.

Blaze sifted through the books on the desk and then picked up the picture of her and Jackson, taken last month when he'd asked her to marry him. She looked so happy and carefree, never dreaming the paradise she'd found here could be so easily destroyed.

"Is he a werewolf, too?"

Serena nodded. "That's Jackson Hardy. He's the sheriff. We're to be married at Christmas." Just thinking about it made her chest hurt. She dragged in a ragged breath and willed herself not to cry.

Blaze put the picture down and touched her gently on the shoulder. "So, is he the pack leader?"

Serena blinked back tears. "No." She looked more closely at him. "Haven't you guessed?"

"Guessed what?"

"Jazmin's the pack leader."

"Oh." The word spoke volumes. "So, what's the plan?" he finally asked. "The National Guard thinks they are out here to hunt rogue wolves. I'd gladly tell the men that the wolves are human, but I don't think they'd believe me."

"We have to get the wolves out of the equation somehow."

"Can we pen them up or something?"

Serena glanced up at the clock. "Too late for that. The moon has risen and they're changing as we speak. It would be suicide

to confront them unarmed. Human or not underneath, they are all wild animal now. We could tranquilize them.”

“Do you have a tranq gun? I’m a decent shot.”

Serena bit her lip. “No, but the sheriff does. We’d have to break into jail to get them. In the meantime, I do have some canisters of anesthesia.” Left over from the attack on her, but she didn’t elaborate.

“That isn’t going to work in the open air.”

“It’s an experimental aerosol anesthetic, so it’s absorbed through the skin as well as via inhalation. There’s not much wind, so if we can get close enough to the wolves, they might get a strong enough dose to knock them out. It might work,” Serena said in an effort to boost her confidence. “The canisters are out in the barn. Follow me. Stay close. If you hear a growl, run for the doors.” Blaze laughed a little until she gave him a look. “I’m serious here.”

Once in the barn, Serena grabbed one of the tanks and Blaze grabbed the other. “Now what?”

Jeez, did he think she had this written down? Heck, she was making it up as she went along. “We’ll go through my tunnel to town. If we’re quick, I’m hopeful the werewolves are still busy nosing through trash cans and raiding the meat case at the market.”

“And the soldiers?”

She didn’t answer him, not because she didn’t want to, but because she couldn’t speak over the lump of emotion in her throat. If they had already started shooting and killing the werewolves... Unable to think about that, Serena led the way down into the tunnel.

Blaze followed, quieter now, as if the seriousness of the situation had finally begun to sink in. He climbed into the golf cart, awkwardly clutching the canister.

She had the accelerator pushed to the floor and even though they seemed to be flying, they were only going ten miles an hour. The half an hour it took to cover the five miles to town would be too long. Worse yet, what would they find when they got there?

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“Will they change back?” Serena finally asked. The question had been nagging her for over a week now, ever since Patrick had died.

“What?”

“The werewolves. Will they change back to human in the morning?” She looked at him, hoping to see assurance but only seeing doubt in his eyes.

“I don’t know.”

There wasn’t anything left to say. They’d do what they had to do and hope for the best. It was all they could do.

The jail was dark. She listened but couldn’t hear any sound except the hum of the hot water heater. Serena slipped out of the doorway first and left it open for Blaze. She headed for the gun rack when a voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Help me, here,” a woman said irritably.

Blaze met Serena’s panicked gaze. He nodded toward a desk and as one, they crept over and sank behind it.

“I don’t want to get bit,” a man’s voice answered.

“She can’t get you through the bars. Now move it.”

Serena peered around the desk. A really young man, one she’d never seen before, and the woman she now knew as Monika Jeffries came out of the holding room carrying a large metal crate. The animal inside growled with sinister intent. Serena recognized the wolf’s markings.

Jazmin!

Where were they taking her?

“Was that open when we came in?” Monika asked.

“Huh? Whatever, let’s get this mutt out to the truck, okay?”

Although Monika seemed to hesitate, the young man dragged her along in his wake. It seemed to take an eternity for them to get outside.

After much cursing, the couple finally managed to load the kennel into the back of the waiting pickup truck. “Let’s go.”

Even after the door shut, Serena found it hard to take a deep breath.

“I wonder where they’re taking her.”

“Out into the desert.” Blaze answered.

“You sound sure.”

"I've only studied one pack with a female leader. She'd been injured and the predator dragged her away. The rest of the pack gathered forces and came to the rescue. I suspect Monika thinks that's what will happen now. When, she gets the pack out there surrounding the truck, they'll be sitting ducks for the soldiers to shoot. Damn her."

"So, the other wolves will follow her?"

Blaze shrugged. "I've only got one case to base it on, but I'd say yes."

"Let's hope so." She moved out from behind the desk and pulled out her keys. Two guns and a couple of dozen tranquilizer darts later, they were ready to go.

"Where are we going?"

"After them," Serena answered. A plan had begun to form in her mind; she could only hope luck and determination were enough to pull off the half-baked scheme.

Once outside, she shouldered the tranquilizer gun. Not even crickets chirped, and the full moon illuminated the street as if it were daylight. Off to the south, she heard a howl, then another.

"Come on." She led the way to Jackson's truck.

"I'll drive."

When Blaze headed for the passenger side of the truck cab, she paused. "You're going to have to ride in back."

"And do what?"

"Shoot any werewolves we encounter. The anesthetic should drop any that jump into the truck with you."

Blaze's eyes were wide in his face. "You're kidding, right?"

"Damn it, you drive, then." A snuffling sound made her freeze, too afraid to turn around. The animal huffed again and she recognized the sound. Tucker!

"No, I'll do it." Blaze leaped into the back of the truck. "How will you know where to go?"

Serena motioned toward the yellow Labrador standing with his ears pricked and his nose pointed south. "I'll follow the dog."

Which is exactly what they did.

Serena drove as if possessed. Blaze sat in the back, probably hanging on for dear life. Amazingly, she felt calmer than she had been in days. This might not work and might get them all killed, but she'd done her best. She couldn't do any more.

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Howls filled the night. It was difficult to tell if they were howls of fear or delight. The wolves were probably thrilled to be running loose through the desert, off their leashes, so to speak, for the first time in years. Unfortunately, this run could also be their last.

Blaze knocked on the window and Serena slowed down. The first wolves were coming into sight. As if to confirm her suspicion, the truck barreled past Tucker standing still on the side of the road. He wouldn't come any closer to the wolves than he had to. She was amazed that he'd known what to do and how to do it.

Not for the first time did Serena wonder if Tucker was just a really intelligent dog, or whether there was something more to him than met the eye.

As she drove up, a werewolf looked up at her, drool dripping from his fangs. Blaze blasted the animal with the anesthesia. He dropped like a stone. It worked! They passed two other wolves, then a group of five. All of them staggered and fell in their tracks when they were sprayed. She didn't know how long the drug would last. She'd been out for hours when it had been administered to her, but that had been in an enclosed space. This was out in the fresh air.

She could only pray it would be long enough.

Looking up, she spotted taillights in front of them. Monika's truck. It wasn't moving. As they approached, she realized the truck had hit a pothole. With the front tire flattened, the vehicle was going nowhere fast. The driver and his passenger sat motionless in the seat while wolves surrounded the vehicle.

Time for a little target practice. She stopped the truck. While Blaze shot at the wolves, she watched headlights approaching, fast.

"Here comes the cavalry," Blaze shouted.

"No." The sob caught in her throat.

The truck pulled up and a man began shouting through a bull horn. Her blood roared in her ears, and all she heard was something about firing on three.

"No!" Without thinking, Serena jumped out of the truck and ran toward the wolves. "Don't shoot!"

"Don't shoot!" Blaze took up the cry behind her.

A growl to her left caught her attention and she skidded to a stop. Around her, wolves lay unconscious. All except one. Large and black, he had glowing amber eyes.

Jackson.

She turned, willing her heart and breathing to slow down. To show any fear would mean instantaneous death.

*The most important thing to remember when training your dog is that you are their pack leader. You have to be the pack leader in your tone, posture, and attitude.* She could almost hear her own voice on the training video.

Drawing herself up to her full height, she cleared her throat.

"Jackson." His name came out too soft. As a result he stepped forward.

"Out of the way, lady!" a voice called from the direction of the truck. "You're going to get yourself killed."

Focusing on the wolf's eyes, she took a step forward and said firmly and sternly, "Jackson."

The wolf paused, and his ears flicked in her direction.

"Sit," she commanded.

The big animal's mouth opened and for a long moment, it looked as if he were laughing at her. Then, to her amazement, he sat.

"Down." A much harder command. Accompanying the word, she made a downward slap with her hand. "Down, Jackson."

Again, his ears twitched. She didn't know if he was listening to her or to the sound of the guns being cocked in the truck behind her. "I said *down*!"

With a grumble and a snort, the wolf lowered his body to the ground.

Oh my God, she'd done it! She'd actually made him obey her.

"Lady, move out of the way. Don't make us shoot you."

Even if they did, she'd die happy at this moment. A fitting culmination to years of hopes and dreams. She'd finally trained the biggest dog of them all.

There was an odd sound in the background. A thump, thump, thump that wasn't her heart. A spotlight shone down on her, highlighting the odd scene.

In front of her, Jackson remained on the ground, his gaze fixed on her face as if awaiting her next command. To her surprise, Jazmin, too, crouched down in her cage. To her left, several of the werewolf stragglers hunched down and focused on her.

“Stand down. This is your commander-in-chief, and I’m ordering you to stand down and escort Miss Jeffries back to town and into custody.”

Commander-in-chief? Serena looked up. The Governor of California’s insignia on the bottom of the helicopter left no doubt.

Wow.

Before she pushed her luck any further, she issued one last command. “Stay.”

She turned, walked back to the truck. Blaze held open the door for her while she climbed in and slid over to the passenger side. Only then did she allow herself to relax, and as a result, shook so hard her teeth chattered.

Blaze climbed in behind the wheel, grinning from ear to ear. “That was simply incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it. You were fantastic.”

The loudspeaker squelched. Serena struggled to hear the voice over the helicopter’s rotors, but she could have sworn the governor’s next words were, “Now we’re even, Blazey-boy.”

“What did he say?” Serena asked.

“I’ll explain on the way back to town.” Blaze started the truck. While he drove, he explained how he had and his colleagues at the CDC had started playing around with many viruses, how they’d tried and failed until the serendipitous discovery of the salve. He culminated the tale by telling how he’d been removed from the project, quit his job, and began running a wolf sanctuary in Alaska.

He then recounted an amusing anecdote about his old college fraternity brother, the man who later became Governor of California, a bottle of moonshine, a cold shower, and a girls’ dormitory.

Serena laughed in all the right places, but was too worried to really enjoy the tale. Would the werewolves change back to humans at dawn? And if they did, how much trouble she was



going to be in with Jackson and the others for training them without their knowledge?

\* \* \* \*

As the sun arose, Jazmin yawned and stretched. Then, she froze. Something was wrong. She looked down. Instead of pale skin, her forearms were covered with silvery gray hair. She let out a shriek, and a howl echoed off the walls. Where was she?

The smell of disinfectant hung in the cool air. Stainless steel cabinets hung along one wall, along with a large poster of the circulatory system. With a sense of relief, she recognized Doc Brown's clinic. At least she was still in Eclipse.

The door opened.

"She's awake." Blaze and Serena came into the room.

A spurt of jealousy burned deep in Jazmin's gut when she saw them together, but the feeling evaporated when she saw the expression in Serena's eyes.

"Do you think they all stayed in wolf form?" Serena asked, then added, her voice breaking, "Oh, God, Jackson."

"We'll know soon. I sent the soldier boys out with the truck to pick up any humans they found."

Serena approached the cage. How could she let Serena know she was human inside? Jazmin tried to speak, but all that came out was a series of yips.

Serena walked away and moved over to where Blaze, with his back toward her, hunched over a microscope.

"Have you found the source of the wolfsbane yet?"

Blaze shook his head. "No, and Monika isn't talking."

"It could be in anything, right? Food, water."

"Not to my knowledge. The chemical has a bitter taste and the compound we were working with only dissolved in alcohol and chloroform."

"What are the symptoms of the poisoning?"

"Confusion, numbness, paranoia, forgetfulness. There's a whole spectrum of other symptoms too."

"Why did only a couple of them die?"

"I think the first death was an accident. Monika then realized she was going to have to account for the results and

panicked. She gained entrance to the town and, I suspect, continued to ply poison in everything she could get her hands on.”

“How is it usually given? Injected, eaten...?”

“We put the wolfsbane in a salve to rub on the skin. That way the absorption rate was far more consistent and less lethal. The experiment didn’t work, the subjects still changed to wolf form during the full moon. When I left the project, I was in the process of isolating an aconite molecule with the opposite chirality in hopes that it would have a different effect.”

“Chirality? What the hell is that?”

Blaze held up his hands and fit them together. “Like your right and left hand, most molecules aren’t mirror images, so they can’t be superimposed on each other. Often right and left forming molecules have different properties. I suspect Monika managed to create the compound, but it didn’t work the way she’d planned.”

It obviously hadn’t kept them from turning wolf, but Monika must have discovered it kept the bodies in wolf form after death. Had someone else died for that? Or had the proof been Patrick? And why in the world had Monika thought that killing all the werewolves would solve the problem? But that was the way her mind seemed to work when she panicked.

“So, the chemical could be entirely different,” Serena murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it could taste sweet, not bitter, and could dissolve in anything.”

“I suppose so,” Blaze murmured.

Wait a minute. The sweet smell that day on Patrick’s breath. Toothpaste. Now that Jazmin thought about it, she recalled that he’d gotten up early that morning. Had he brushed his teeth before coming back to bed in hopes of combating morning breath? That had to be it. But how to tell them? Nearly dancing with impatience, she rattled her cage.

The two gave her a momentary look before turning back to the microscope.

*Damn it!* She knew the answer. Two months ago, toothpaste had disappeared from the grocery shelves. A new brand replaced

the once familiar tubes. The paste had a sickening floral scent. It was like brushing her teeth with perfume, so she'd avoided it by using an old tube. She'd bet every hair on her chinny-chin-chin that the toothpaste contained wolfsbane.

Jazmin whined. When no one paid any attention to her, she whined louder. Serena looked over at her.

Now what? Jazmin had never been good at games. Charades especially. How in the hell did you play charades when you had paws instead of hands? Just as Serena started to turn her attention away, Jazmin yipped and pawed at her face.

"What's up with Jazmin?" Serena's head cocked to one side, puzzlement clear on her features. "She acts like there's something in her mouth."

Serena walked over to the cage.

"Don't get too close," Blaze warned.

Jazmin pawed at her face and then looked up at Serena and smiled. Or produced the best approximation she could.

When Serena still stared at her, she continued to smile and raised her paw to her face. She swiped up and down, up and down. *Jesus, Serena. You're smart. Think!*

She stared at her friend, hoping against hope that something, anything she was doing would sink in.

"Your mouth." Serena's face suddenly cleared. She gave Jazmin an odd look. "You're trying to tell me something about your mouth." She stepped closer and looked deep into the wolf's eyes.

Jazmin shook her head slightly and smiled wider.

"Not your mouth." Serena's hazel eyes held a dawning awareness. "Oh, God. You're in there. Aware."

Jazmin nodded. She snapped her teeth together and then raised her paw once more.

"Teeth." Serena whirled. "Toothpaste! The poison is in the toothpaste."

"What?" Blaze exclaimed. "How do you know?"

"Jazmin told me so."

Jazmin nodded.

"Oh my God, she's got human cognizance." Blaze walked over. "So, that's why you were able to control the werewolves last night. Here I thought it was due to your training skills."

Jazmin sneezed in disdain.

"It was due to my training. I've been practicing with them for months," Serena argued. "The werewolves have never been aware before."

"Aware of what?" A deep voice rumbled.

Jazmin looked up and met Jackson's eyes. Wait a minute. If he had changed back, why hadn't she?

"Nothing," Serena said quickly.

"Nothing?" Blaze protested. "You should be proud you can control them like that. How did you go about training them? I hope you took precautions."

"Training?" Jackson walked over to them, his eyes narrow with suspicion. "Is there something I should know about last night? Because I really hate waking up naked in the desert."

If Jazmin were in her human form, she would have laughed.

"Um." Serena took a sudden interest in some papers laid out on the table. "Is everyone back to normal?"

"Everyone except Jazmin. I'm organizing a search party—"

"Jazmin's here." Serena motioned over to the cage.

Jackson followed her gesture and then looked back at Serena. "What happened?"

Blaze launched into the story. Jazmin listened with interest. She remembered being shot with the tranquilizer gun, but nothing after that. However, that wasn't unusual; she never remembered anything while in wolf form. That is, up until now.

Blaze paused just as he got to the part where the soldiers arrived and then looked pointedly at Serena.

"What happened then?" Jackson asked.

"I, um, well, just intervened before the soldiers could shoot you. What's really cool is that the governor, who is Blaze's fraternity brother, arrived right at that moment. He called off the soldiers and had them arrest Monika."

Serena spoke quickly, the words tripping over each other in her haste to brush over the fact that she's intervened. Whatever that meant.

"Now that the state government is involved, I'm sure a cure is right around the bend. In fact, Blaze is working on that. Right?"

"I thought I heard something about training," Jackson persisted, taking Serena's arm and drawing her off to the side. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

"Well, you see..."

While the two love birds argued, Jazmin studied Blaze. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been knocked on his ass by a federal agent. She'd only hoped that he would follow the trail here, and he had. The question was why?

"He what?" Jackson shouted.

"Blaze didn't mean to," Serena replied.

*He didn't mean to what?* Jazmin asked, only it came out as a long, low woof.

"I didn't intend for anyone to be infected with the werewolf virus. I just wanted to find out if it was real," Blaze said to no one in particular.

Jazmin felt her jaw drop and her eyes narrow. Rage surged through her veins. He'd created this mess. Why hadn't she known? Why hadn't he told her back at the hotel when he'd accused her of being involved in *it*? She had been so worried about him suspecting her of complicity that she'd never questioned *his* involvement. Instead, she'd been too busy trying to figure out how she could get him naked in the lobby of the hotel. Damn him.

This was all *his* fault. He'd destroyed her life. Family and friends, jobs, hobbies, they'd had to give up everything for his stupid mistake.

A low growl erupted from her throat.

Jackson glanced over at her. "That's exactly the way I feel about all of this." He glared at Blaze and then turned to Serena. "We'll talk later."

Without a backward glance, he left the room, slamming the door behind him. Serena jumped.

"Shit."

"So, he really didn't know?"

Serena whirled on Blaze and Jazmin could almost see the anger emanating from her. "You're lucky he walked away and didn't come in here and tear you to shreds. Do you realize how many lives you've destroyed?"

He scowled but didn't answer.

“Do you?”

“Yes, I do.” He put the test tube he’d been holding down and met her gaze, steadily. “Right now, it’s important to confirm the poison’s location. Then, I need to figure out why Jazmin didn’t change back at dawn with the others. Assuming they all did. Believe me, I want this fixed as much or more than you do.”

“Right.” Serena stared at Blaze, but her gaze dropped first. “I’ll go grab a tube of toothpaste and be back. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I hadn’t planned on it.”

Serena sailed out the door, giving it a good slam behind her as well. Jazmin wished she could throw and slam a few things too, instead of being trapped in this box.

Blaze closed his eyes and for a moment he looked sad and vulnerable. She wanted to go to him, pull him into her arms, and then...

She whined. The sound brought her crashing back to reality. This wasn’t the time to be thinking about jumping a man. There was no place for lust here. She had to keep focused on the problem at hand. No more thoughts of sex.

That had gotten her into enough trouble already. First, three years ago with the handsome and virile guy she’d met during happy hour and decided to take home for the night. Ben had repaid their passion with a bite that changed her entire life, literally. To boot, she’d gone and gotten involved with the man who had created the whole damn mess in the first place.

Well, he’d better fix this, and fast.

Blaze walked over to the cage and stooped down so he could look into her eyes.

“If you can really understand me, I’m sorry. I’d take it all back if I could.”

For a moment, Jazmin’s heart softened. It was hard to be mad at him, he was just so doggone cute. His shirt clung to his biceps and highlighted his tight pecs. Jazmin sighed and her gaze dropped lower. The jeans he wore were tight. She envied the soft cotton cradling his gorgeous cock.

Impatiently, she reigned in her thoughts and closed her eyes. That settled it. No more thoughts of sex. If she ever

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changed back to her human form, she was giving up sex, for good.

## *Chapter Seven*

“Here’s everything.” Serena dumped four more boxes into large green dumpster behind the clinic. “We went through the houses and the shops. Jackson’s positive we got everything.”

Good thing, for not only had the wolfsbane been in the toothpaste, but had been present in hand lotion, lubricants, and even hemorrhoid cream.

The werewolves had all been so eager to help, so grateful someone showed interest in helping them and keeping them safe.

Safe. What a concept. Suddenly, Blaze saw the residents of Eclipse not as monsters, but as people. People whose lives he’d turned upside down and inside out. He owed them, big time. It was time he paid his debt to them by finding the cure to the disease he’d unleashed.

But first, he had to save Jazmin. Knowing she was aware and human inside the wolf’s body haunted him. He’d finally come to believe her situation wasn’t typical. So unusual, in fact, that fear had set up camp in his gut. What if she didn’t change back? What if tomorrow, another person turned and stayed in a wolf’s body?

He hated Monika for what she’d done with the wolfsbane, and hated himself even more for experimenting with the virus in the first place.

A glance at the horizon confirmed his suspicion. Night approached. Too fast.

“I’m off to make sure everything is locked down tight. Are you coming back to the house?” Serena asked.

“No,” Blaze shook his head. “I’m heading back inside. I think I’m really close to figuring out why Jazmin didn’t change back. I’ve detected some odd hormones in her blood that aren’t present in anyone else’s.”

“So, you think you can fix it?”



He didn't know and was afraid that with the limited equipment, the situation was hopeless. But he had to try. So, he lied. "Yes, I think I can."

"Well, I'll do some searching too. Good luck and good night." Serena waved and then strode toward her Volkswagen Beetle. "No one should be out and about, but to be on the safe side; remember to keep the doors locked."

Back inside, Blaze heeded her warning. His eyes felt as if they were full of grit; however, he couldn't give up now. He had to return Jazmin to normal.

Then what?

He really wanted to get the hell out of here. To go where? Back to his wolves? No, his heart wasn't in it anymore. Hadn't been since Monika had stolen his research. The blow of her betrayal had started an avalanche inside him. Or had it begun even earlier? Perhaps when he'd discovered that the government intended to put his project to use. What would happen to his wolves?

One of his volunteers had always assured him that she'd buy the place if he ever wanted to sell it. He'd had such big dreams, but maybe he'd take her up on the offer. At least the wolves would have a home. He could sell the sanctuary and start over fresh somewhere. Somewhere far away from wolves, deserts, and beautiful women with haunting green eyes.

He glanced over at the large kennel in the corner. Thankfully, Jazmin had slept most of the day, and he'd been able to avoid her accusing stare.

The key was the hormone. It had to be. But which one of the myriad of hormones could it be? If he had the proper equipment, he'd have had the answer by now. Maybe he should just send the samples back to the CDC and let someone else figure it out.

No, he couldn't do that. Not this time. Fifty people lived in this town. People who had given up families, friends, their lives because he and a couple of other researchers had played "what if."

It was too late now. Time couldn't be turned back. So, he'd press forward. He booted up his laptop computer and began

searching through hundreds of pages of online drivel. Somewhere in here was the answer.

An odd sound woke him. The room was dark except for the flickering glow from the computer display. He'd fallen asleep and hadn't even realized it. Damn.

Looking at the clock, he realized it was midnight. The witching hour. The moon would be truly full for only a few more seconds before beginning to wane. Time was running out.

He heard the whisper of bare feet. This time, he slid off the stool and walked over to the light switch. Closing his eyes to avoid being blinded by the glare, he wasn't prepared for an impact. Knocked to the floor, he cried out and cringed, thinking he'd been attacked by a werewolf. To his relief, his hands encountered smooth skin and full breasts.

"Jazmin?"

The woman in his arms didn't answer, not with words anyway. Her mouth was too busy claiming his in a kiss while her hands tore at his clothing. The buttons of his shirt gave way and he heard them pinging off the wall and floor as they fell to her assault. Not that he wanted to resist, but Jazmin's advances mystified him. All afternoon, she'd growled at him if he approached her cage. Now she pursued him with single-minded intent. Before he could react, she ripped the remaining material of his shirt off.

He scrambled backward across the floor and she trailed after him, her hands gripping the hem of his jeans. They slid off his body, dragging his boxer briefs with them. Now naked, he resisted the urge to cover his erection, not sure why he was suddenly modest. She giggled, but it was an odd sound.

"Jazmin," Blaze said again. "There'll be time enough later for this. I need to figure out..."

Figure out what? She was human again, mystery solved. Sort of. But, it was late, on the night of a full moon. She should be a wolf.

He continued to crab-walk backward and, on all fours, she crawled after him, a seductive smile on her face. A wall stopped his progress, and once again, Jazmin was on top of him.

Her body felt so warm and right, and the smell of her desire filled the small room. He couldn't have said no to her even if

he'd wanted to, as her mouth trailed wet kisses down his torso, stopping to suck his nipples erect. She held his hands with a grip stronger than he expected, holding them confined as she continued her exploration past his stomach to the length of his penis. Her warm wet mouth enveloped him and her tongue explored his shaft.

He knew he was oh-so-close to release with his balls pulled up tight against him. A few more wet pulls from her mouth and he would be there.

Jazmin abruptly stopped. She was trembling. To his surprise, instead of mounting him where he sat, she turned and kneeled in front of him. She threw a come-hither look over her shoulder and Blaze scrambled to crouch behind her. He stroked her soft rounded bottom and then parted the globes to get a better view of her pink nether lips. They glistened wetly and he trailed his hand lower to spread her folds. He delved his fingers into her hot wetness, spreading her fluids and savoring the anticipation of what was to come.

"Now," she growled.

With one long, slow thrust he entered her, trying to hold back his climax. Wet and ready, her pussy gripped him. She moved against him as he drove into her with increasing urgency. He watched himself, slick and rigid, sliding in and out of her. With a cry, he held her against him while she fought his restraint. Waves of pleasure washed over him and he could hear Jazmin panting.

They remained joined and he stroked the skin of her back, intoxicated with her presence and her scent. To his amazement, his erection didn't flag. If anything, he was even more aroused now than he had been before his orgasm. Moving in and out of her with mindless pleasure, he felt a familiar tingle at the base of his cock. He came again.

After the ripples of his climax faded, he started to dismount. She cried out and her inner muscles clenched, holding him tight. As her pussy milked him, he felt his penis harden yet again.

This couldn't be real, yet the hard cold floor pressed against his knees left him with little doubt. He wasn't dreaming.

With each of his thrusts, Jazmin drove back against him. Her breathing was ragged. God, he'd been so focused on how he

felt, he'd forgotten about her needs. He stroked her clit and she bucked in his arms.

"Oh, oh, oh," she gasped with each touch.

Her cries drove him to new heights of arousal. His own climax danced within reach but he hesitated to grab it just yet. The last time he'd come three times in a row, he was thirteen years old. Just him, rosy palm, and a pilfered *Playboy* magazine. This would be his last chance to give her satisfaction.

Her entire body shook in his arms as he stroked and thrust; then, she came with a howl.

As his own orgasm ebbed, he backed out of her. His knees ached and he longed to hold her, enjoy languid kisses and silky caresses, and ease them both back down from the best sex he'd ever had.

She turned easily in his arms and her body molded up against his. Her head rested on his shoulder, her soft hair tickling his cheek. Relaxed at last, he contemplated enjoying a few hours of sleep with her in his arms.

"I'm so glad you've turned back to being human. You really had me—I mean us—worried today. I..." Emotion closed his throat and it took him a few seconds to swallow so that he could continue speaking. "When I followed your trail here, I expected to find animals. Yeah, I know, werewolves start out as people, but they're depicted as monsters. What I didn't expect was to discover the depth of my feelings for you. I was desperate to find a cure to make you human again." Eyes closed, he tilted his head, inviting her to nuzzle his neck.

Instead, she bit him.

"Hey!" He grabbed his neck and sat up, shoving her away. "What'd you do that for?"

"As if you didn't know," Jazmin said, her voice chiding.

"What?"

"I'm claiming you as my mate. That's the only way I'm going to keep you from walking out of my life, isn't it?"

"No." Blaze gazed at the buxom blonde. With her green eyes flashing and her face flushed, she was enchanting. If he hadn't just had her three times already, he'd have been tempted to grab her and kiss all her temper away.

“Don’t lie and say you weren’t planning on leaving,” she argued.

Blaze hung his head. “I won’t lie. I’ve spent most of the night trying to figure out where to go from here. When instead, here is right where I need to be. With you.”

“You want to be with a wolf?” Jazmin paused and then understanding flooded her face. She looked down at her hands and turned them first palm up and then down. She looked up at him, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. “I’m human again!”

Blaze looked at the clock. Six o’clock! How the hell could it be six already? While he was puzzling about the passage of time, his lover embraced him. She sobbed against his shoulder while he held her. When her sobs subsided, she sat up with a hiccup.

Blaze wiped a stray tear away with his thumb. His heart hurt from the pain he’d caused her and the others. There were so many things he shouldn’t have done. But then, if he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have met Jazmin, the woman of his dreams, his soul mate. Had he really only known her for so short a time? It seemed as if they had been together forever.

“So, what are you going to do now?” Jazmin asked through a sob

“What do you think? I’m going to stay and fix this, of course.”

“Oh, Blaze, I love you.”

It was the second time she’d said those words to him. The first time, he’d not given them a second thought. Monika had always been saying she loved him. Well, her actions had spoken louder than her words. He’d thought he loved her. Looking back, he realized what he’d felt wasn’t love; it was a weak and self-serving emotion. Lust? Probably.

So, was this love? Feeling as if Jazmin completed him? As if they touched on a level even deeper than flesh and thought? Yes, he had no doubt that this was the true emotion.

“I love you, too,” Blaze said, and he meant it.

The door unlocked and swung open, and Serena burst in.

“GNRH,” she said cryptically. Then, her eyes widened as she took in their naked forms. She put her hand over her mouth in mock horror. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she snuffled, although her giggle contradicted her words. “I’ll come back.”

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“No, wait. What did you say?” Blaze asked.

“GNRH. I’ve been up most of the night working on this, and it’s the only explanation I can come up with.”

“Of course!” Blaze exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

After one last stifled snort, Serena closed the door behind her, leaving them together.

“What?” Jazmin asked. Irritation painted her features. “What does G-whatever mean?”

“Gonadotropin-releasing hormone.” Blaze chuckled. “The reason you didn’t change was because you were in heat.”

“Oh,” she said.

Their eyes met.

“So, does this mean what I think it means?”

Blaze shrugged. “How the hell should I know? You’re the werewolf. But, I *can* tell you one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll be around to find out. That is, if you want me to be.”

Jazmin didn’t answer, not with words anyway. Instead, she pulled him down for a kiss. A kiss that held all the answers he needed.

## *About the Author*

Ericka Scott is a multi-published best-selling author of seductive suspense. She's written stories for as long as she can remember and reads anything under the sun (including the back of cereal boxes in a pinch). She got hooked on romantic suspense in her college days when reading anything but a textbook was a guilty pleasure. Now, when she's not chauffeuring children around, wishing she had a maid, or lurking at the library, she's spinning her own web of fantasy and penning tales of seduction and suspense. She currently lives in Southern California with her husband and three children.