

Bestselling author of the Hunter Moon Academy Series
SIMONE LEIGH MARTIN



**HIDE
&
SEEK**

A REPOSSESSED NOVEL

HIDE & SEEK

A Repossessed Novel - EXTRACT

By Simone Leigh Martin

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EXTRACT ONLY Edition

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Thanks for taking an early sneak peek at this extract of Hide & Seek, the soon-to-be-released first book in the Repossessed Series.

It should not be shared or published in any format or via any other medium.

As always, the author welcomes your comments and feedback.

Chapter One

I woke to a lunar flare, chips of ice spitting from my AC unit as it inhaled the passing magic. The unit was so new, the sale sticker still glowed in the dim light, but I held my breath as it started to rattle. I'd been so tired last night, I'd just clicked it on and collapsed, too blissed out by the climate control to think of setting any wards. But of course, it was just my luck a flare would strike, painting the overheated sky in icy licks, and sending its feral magic out into the world. As I groped in the covers for the remote, I could hear the chaos the flare left in its wake – babies crying, dogs barking, and the sad splutter of appliances in unwarded houses.

I shivered and brushed ice crystals from my eyebrows. Oh, the irony. Only yesterday I'd raided the rainy-day fund and trudged into the nearest electronics store. It was eye-wateringly expensive, but we were ten days into a heat wave, and I was down to my last scorched nerve. I was also worried the tires on my twelve-year-old Jeep Wrangler would melt if I drove all the way to the Anderton mall. They were old. And mostly bald. And only hanging in there because I valued cool air over car safety.

Somewhere, the gods were laughing at me. Because now my comforter was covered in ice, and the fancy remote was slick in my hand. Naturally, I'd found the time to peel the protective plastic off the device, because not even a house fire would distract me from that pleasure. But even as I pointed it at the unit, I knew it was a lost cause. No matter how many buttons I pushed, the AC unit kept coughing, interjected with a few alarming rattles, until it burped out a frosty cloud and went still.

For a moment, I contemplated collapsing back onto my damp pillow. But magic flares weren't just destructive, they were my call to arms. I sighed and studied the inside of my eyelids for a moment. Even though my alarm clock informed me it was only 1.45 a.m., it was time to put on my big girl boots and to go to work.

Out of habit, I brushed a hand over the light switch and hissed at the burn. Lunar flares did strange things to electricity. Some things it iced out, while others it left white hot. After a decade of suffering through the events, the working theory was Mother Nature on steroids – if your appliance was designed to cool you down, it went icy. If it heated things up, it gave you third-degree burns.

Plucking the warranty out of the box in the corner, I tucked it under my arm. Companies had wised up to claims against magical damage years ago, but it was still worth a try.

My uniform from yesterday was in a pile on the bedroom floor. It was really too hot for denim, but I required two things from my work wardrobe – it had to be comfortable, and it had to be durable enough to survive the night. Jeans were the universal staple even amongst magical folk, and my Levi's had yet to let me down when it came to the tracking and repossession of assets. The shirt was matte black and marketed as combat wear, with mesh panels and bicep pockets. It was anti-static, anti-

microbial, and anti-moisture, and could practically drive the Jeep on its own. It also gave me a serious law enforcement vibe that I wasn't above milking in a tight spot.

When I was dressed and had laced up my police-issue tactical boots, I headed into the mud room down the hall. Sitting in the trough was an isolation pack I used to transport infected boots, equipment, and assets. It was still a little damp from last night, but the things weren't cheap, and I was saving for a backup. When I had it slung over my shoulder, I caught sight of myself in the mirror glued to the back of the door. The bag was basically a big fanny pack, not that anyone had ever called me on it. But that wasn't what I was looking at.

Aw, dang. My tires weren't the only ones suffering from a bald patch.

It was going on three months since I'd discovered I was losing my hair. Just one spot, but it was right above my left ear. I preferred to wear my hair in a no-fuss ponytail or braid, but it was getting harder to hide the shiny circle of skin. I'd never been overly obsessed with my looks, but I *liked* my dark hair. It was long and shiny and smelled as if my shampoo didn't come from the bottom shelf at the supermarket. Maybe it was time to ask my aunts for a remedy, but right now I just pulled it into a low bun, and covered it with a Navy Street cap. The real kicker? I was pretty sure the bald spot was growing, but that was a problem for another day.

After my complicated beauty routine, it took another three minutes to get through my front door. Like everything else electrical, the flares affected security systems, so most of us were back to good old-fashioned reinforced steel. I had iron deadbolts on all my doors and blackout blinds and salt-laced double-glazing on every window. Maybe it was overkill, but I'd yet to be visited in the night by one of my targets, pissed at having their high-value asset seized. Not to mention the beasties who trolled the neighborhood during a flare, looking to scratch a magical itch.

My partner was waiting for me at the curb. He was behind the wheel of his beloved gunmetal gray Pontiac. A pre-seventies model, he'd kept all the original components to reduce the effect of the lunar flares. As far as I could tell, he spent most of his paycheck fine-tuning the fifty-year-old beauty. And the only time I'd been with him when it stopped running, he'd shamefacedly admitted to a lazy gauge. We'd run out of gas.

"Partner," I drawled as I rounded the car. He humphed something I took as a greeting. Robert Willis was a fifty-something former detective of the Anderton police department, and despite all those hand signals you see cops using on TV, he still believed grunting was the most effective form of communication. I might have labelled him a barbarian, if he wasn't always slamming out the Thursday puzzle in the Times.

Yes, Willis – he didn't respond to Robert, and Bob made him grit his teeth - was a man of contradictions. He still insisted on wearing a suit to work, but rarely shaved. Carried a sidearm at all times, but bitched about lax firearm laws. Hated coffee, but downed cans of Monster throughout our shifts. And while being a grumpy asshole who didn't keep so much as a fern at home, he liked kids, checked every missing pet flyer we passed, and volunteered at the Sun City Nursing Home three times a week.

His stubble was looking particularly wild tonight, but I didn't comment, given my own hair situation. Instead, I tugged down the peak of my cap and buckled up. But within five minutes, I knew something was off. "Why are you heading north? Aren't we going back to Barrenridge?"

"Nope." An actual word. He must have been in a chatty mood. "New case."

I raised my brows at him, but he was already dropping the file into my lap. Faulty electrics played havoc with computer systems, so most workplaces also kept paper records. After years of going green, we were back to driving gas guzzlers and killing our planet, one filing cabinet at a time.

"Nope," I mimicked him as I scanned the highlights. There weren't many, so after a cursory read, I tossed the file on the dash. "A name and credit history does not a new case make."

"It's on the light side," Willis agreed, but didn't change direction. "But Gerald said it's a must-do, and we'll get more details when we meet with the client."

I squinted at my partner. Client meetings were for our investigators, not Repo Agents. And we both knew 'must-do' was absent from my vocabulary, while 'right to refuse' was hard-wired into my contract. Gerald might have been our boss, but I liked to think of myself as an independent contractor, with an emphasis on independent. Since I also liked my paycheck, I grabbed the file and gave it another quick look. It was enough to make me toss it back onto the dash. "The 'Other' box is ticked next to practitioner," I sneered. "What other? It's witch, mage or necromancer, unless someone rewrote the Amp Act without telling me."

Willis ignored my rant. "The client is someone with pull. And they asked for you personally."

I screwed my nose up at that. Anyone who knew me *personally* knew I didn't do favors, freebies or exceptions. And if someone was pulling, that was usually a precursor to me digging in my heels. Besides, tonight I was one hundred percent invested in closing out our active coven case. "Maggie said the witches are meeting tonight, and it's highly likely our asset is in their possession. How about we put a ribbon round the coven, and then look at the new case tomorrow?" I tapped my knuckles against his windshield, where the celestial event looked like three smears of silver paint. "The witches will be getting twitchy with the flares up. They might burn out the asset, or even go to ground after using it. This could be our last chance."

I was piling it on a bit thick, but Willis knew as well as I did that clearing the case was time sensitive. The asset in question was old, powerful, and had no business being in the coven's hands. There was also a rumor the client had another repo agency working the case. Losing out to the competition was not an option, and Willis finally gave a tight nod. "We check their place, but if they're not around or you can't pick up its signature, we start on the new file."

I shrugged. Maggie, our investigator, rarely gave us bad intel, but predicting how a magical perp was going to act wasn't always easy. Not that it would change our game plan. Unlike the real cops, Repo Agents weren't detectives. Most of the investigating happened behind the scenes, while Willis and I were the muscle.

Our job was as simple as SSS - subdue the target, seize the asset, and shift it back to base.

Subduing could take many forms, but like with cops, a key tactic was giving the criminals enough rope to hang themselves. And there was never a better time for it than during a lunar flare. I assumed Willis was thinking the same thing until he said, "You need to take the edge off. There's a packhouse ten minutes away in Thomastown."

I knew that better than he did, but I looked at him in surprise. Willis rarely initiated uncomfortable conversations, and my personal issues were at the top of his cringe list. "I'm good."

"You need a fight," he said. "Base says the shifters are having one of their full moon retreats."

I looked up at the bright white orb. It was the last day of April – Walpurgis Night to the witches – and it hung in the sky like a candy melt. Unlike the werewolf myths, the full moon was traditionally the most peaceful time for the shifter community, when they communed with their beasts and rested easy in their skins. But not since the lunar flares had started showing up. Not only did they play havoc with appliances, they made shifters lose their minds. And with the icy smears hanging in the sky like claw marks, all the meditation in the world wasn't going to stop their beasts from going berserk.

And dang if that didn't make me want to grab the wheel and drive us straight there.

"I'm fine," I told him again, careful to keep my hands loose in my lap. Last thing he needed to see was me white-knuckling the dash. "Besides, there's no time. This window is going to be a tight one."

Willis grunted, but finally altered our course, heading towards Barrenridge. He didn't argue with me about how much time we had to SSS the witches. He knew I could read the moon and her flares the way he could read his cryptic crosswords. And as stated before, my partner didn't like to waste words.

I settled back and turned my gaze to the street. There was always something to be on the lookout for in Sun City. We had the second-largest magical community in the state, and the lunar flares forced everything supernatural out of the shadows. Like a great big spotlight, flare nights made shifters hyper, witches twitch, and vampires sparkle. Well, not really. It made the bloodsuckers a hundred times more attractive and twice as thirsty, which was bad news for anyone with a pair of eyes and a pulse.

Barrenridge was a subdivision like plenty of others in the city, with the exception it backed onto a reserve. Twelve acres of natural forest, it had once been an urban escape for the families who wanted a greener life. But the storybooks didn't get it wrong when they said witches liked to live near woods. Over the last decade, most of the original homeowners had sold up and left, and now it was almost exclusively a coven community.

In terms of paranormal territories, Sun City was broadly divided between the vampires downtown, the werewolves in the national park, and the witches in the burbs. The flares had been pretty ruthless in piercing the veil of secrecy, but unlike the

shifters and vamps, the witches made little effort to hide their magic. Even though they were technically human and had the best chance of staying hidden, it seemed to go against their witchy code. Which was why driving through their streets was like crashing a Halloween party the night before the world ended.

“Scrying Street. Moonblood Crescent. Foxglove Lane,” I snorted, as we navigated through roads lined with oleander, poke berry and nightshade. “I guess they’re not above spelling the city planners.”

I wasn’t kidding. Magical folk were ruthless about achieving their goals, and some saw the human population as little more than stepping stones – or annoying hurdles – along their journey. The government had wised up to this eventually and now employed magic practitioners to level out the playing field. Humans still outnumbered the magically blessed by a thousand to one, but when you’re a fire mage who can level a city block, the balance of power was a tricky thing.

“66 Creeper Street,” Willis murmured, and pulled up outside our target’s house. “Think anyone’s home?”

I restrained the urge to side-eye him, since this was the closest thing to a Willis joke I’d heard in a while and didn’t want to discourage him. As I cracked the door, the hot night air hit me in the face, but it had nothing on the sound effects. The two-story Victorian was shaking with the force of pagan drums, percussion bells and ululating voices. It was also lit up so bright, it would’ve been visible from space, assuming it wasn’t being strangled by Virginia creeper.

When we were both out of the car and Willis had secured it to his satisfaction, we studied the house. Underneath the layers of vine, it was your usual suburban home, if a little on the Gothic side. It was definitely built pre-flare, given the generous windows and lack of iron bars. Although, the thick vines that covered most of the building probably provided the security now. Especially since there seemed to be a lot of slithering going on under the greenery.

As Willis rubbed his bristly chin, I was tempted to make a pruning joke, but he was busy pointing his camera at the creeper house. It made its distinctive whirring sound, then spat out a shiny Polaroid print. Willis flapped it a few times to get the image to settle, then pulled a Sharpie from his suit pocket. He scrawled the address on the bottom and checked the time code on the back against his old Seiko. When he had it all stowed away in his own version of a fanny pack, we approached the door.

“Jeepers creepers,” I muttered, watching a patch of vine undulate as something slithered by. Snakes I could handle, but this was definitely the black magic variety, and that stuff tended to cling. Pulling a pair of long gloves from my pack, I rolled them on. To anyone on the street, it probably looked like I was getting my Goth on, but they were my version of gauntlets; thin, but resilient, and made of a material close to chain mail. Bracing my arm, I stuck my hand through a tangle of chalice vine. I couldn’t feel a doorbell, but there was a knocker shaped like a coiled snake. “They’ve definitely gone over to the dark side,” I told Willis.

He just grunted, so I grabbed the brass snake and gave it a firm tap. I doubted they could hear me through the pagan party going on inside, but it was procedure. The vine shuddered, something foul and slippery rolling over the back of my hand, but the

wards were no match for my gauntlets. Or for my kick-ass boots. I gave the bottom of the door a friendly nudge and the hinges popped. “Going in.”

Willis was one step behind me as I shoved against the glass-paneled wood. It opened without a hitch, the vine rearing back as we stepped into an entryway. Pale walls, slate floors, and exposed beams greeted us. Country chic in the ‘burbs, with some interesting bits of art on the walls. The pagan revelries were too loud for conversation, so Willis just nodded towards a nearby archway. I went first, a gloved finger pressed to the badge stitched onto my combat shirt. We didn’t have flashy tactical vests like the FBI, and wearing your ID around your neck was just inviting someone to grab it and use it as a strangling device, so my aunts had the contract to stitch the Repo Agency emblem on all our shirts. The fact they wove stay safe spells and back off hexes into the fabric was one of those locker room myths I didn’t confirm or deny.

Because the truth was, most of the time our targets knew we were coming. And the odds were never in our favor.

Still, protocol was there for a reason, so I kept my finger over the embroidered badge as I reached the archway. I caught a glimpse of puffy white couches pushed back against the walls, and flashing black robes swirling in a circle. This was definitely the epicenter of the party, and I cleared my throat as I stepped inside. “Evening, ladies. Repo Agents on the premises.”

Witches were predominately female, over the age of thirty, and well-educated. They never married, always lived in their coven group, and had zero interest in outsiders. Power was their jam, and they got it through intense study, spellwork, and rituals. Their homes were usually dominated by their kitchens and libraries, which were often located side-by-side. There was always a community cauldron, which was kept in the house of the head witch and was usually filled with components of their spells. Not so much boil and bubble as animal parts, poisonous herbs, and hex stones.

While a coven was occasionally caught dabbling in dark magic, witches were skilled at operating in the gray of M.A.D. guidelines. Many of them held respectable jobs in the human world, and some of the older covens were Sun City’s most-revered philanthropists. If I was to pigeonhole the traits of your average witch, I’d say they’re intelligent, arrogant, and able to spell their way out of most situations. In short, they’re the MacGyvers of the magical community, able to brew a hexing spell out of a rat’s tail, a corn chip, and a toothpick.

But none of that seemed to be playing out when I stepped into the living room of 66 Creeper Street.

For starters, the witches were all wearing rubber owl masks, complete with realistic beaks, wild yellow eyes, and silky gray feathers. But it was the massive werewolf at the center of their parliament that stopped me dead. Buck naked, he was pierced in each extremity by a silver stake, and bleeding all over their expensive carpet.

Chapter Two

The familiar whirr of Willis' Polaroid shutter sounded behind me, but I was still gaping at the werewolf. He was in a half-shift, so nearly seven feet tall, although it was hard to tell given they'd pinned him to the floor with silver stakes. His limbs were canted at a strange angle, the overlong fore-bones sticking up like tent poles. Muscles twisted and clenched all over his body, the veins thick as rope from the exertion. His face was hairy – and not particularly pretty to look at - but his eyes looked human. And they were in excruciating pain.

I glanced around the room. Expensively furnished, it was all leather and hardwoods, with thick shag carpet and lots of throw pillows. There was the usual armchair tourist stuff on the walls – an eclectic mix of tribal masks and woven tapestries the owner had probably picked up at a flea market. Everything you'd expect to find in an upscale suburban home, except for the red-hot cauldron on the coffee table and the two dozen black candles crowded on every other surface.

I turned my attention to our hosts. Not a full coven, which usually numbered around twenty, although the robes and masks made it difficult to take an accurate headcount. I guessed closer to a dozen, and forming a tight circle around the bound werewolf. Even though they knew we were here, they hadn't stopped their ritual dance, and I sensed we'd interrupted them at a delicate time. Shutting off a spell midway through was often like trying to put your finger back in the dyke wall.

Since they were all masked, there was no way to easily identify the coven leader, so I strode over and knocked the needle off the turntable. It instantly killed the music, although the witches kept up their wailing. I looked at Willis, who picked up a stubby candle and tossed it at the nearest silky drape. The thing went up like gasoline on a bonfire, and the witches all showed us their best startled owl impression.

"Now we have your attention," Willis ground out, his camera whirring in the shocked silence. "We're from the Sun City Repo Agency. My colleague and I are here to issue you with a Repossession Writ for the return of stolen property."

"Hold up a second," I told him and pointed at the werewolf. "How about we start with what the bejeebers is going on here?"

"That's a matter for the Supers," he replied, although his lips thinned under his scruff. "Not our jurisdiction."

It wasn't the first time Willis had drawn a line between our role and the Supers, who were the division of law enforcement focused exclusively on the magical community. Given they had a Dead or Alive authority, they acted more like bounty hunters than detectives, and their ranks were thick with trigger-happy cowboys. Our paths usually crossed when we were reposing a rogue supernatural, and it was never an enjoyable experience.

I dropped to a knee next to the werewolf. It was hard to hold eye contact since the witches had closed ranks, but I pinched the nearest robe hard enough to make her squeal and step aside. “Sir, would you like to request assistance of the Sun City Repossession Agency?”

“He can’t.” A cold voice said from behind one of the owl masks. It was the voice of authority, and I figured this was the coven leader, who was probably also an expert in magical law. “You only deal in humans, so he’s not covered by your writ.”

I gave her a filthy look and returned to the werewolf. “Sir, the owl lady is correct. But since you are in a half shift, you qualify as part-animal right now. And as a member of the city’s animal control unit, I can take you into custody if you’d like.” The werewolf’s eyes – bright with both pain and the yellow awareness of his beast – blinked once, then gave a tight nod. “Right,” I said, surging back to my feet. “Party’s over. I’m confiscating the werewolf under Penal Code 567. Failure to comply with this legal order will lead to an obstruction of justice charge, which is a Class 1 misdemeanor, and can result in twelve months’ jail.” I looked around the circle. “You birdies want a little cage time?”

The head witch pulled off her owl mask – which despite being rubber, was a fairly lifelike version of a Western Screech Owl – and I saw she was a pretty blonde in her late twenties, with crystal blue eyes and a cleft chin. She wasn’t wearing any makeup, so the porcelain skin and pink lips were all hers, which nudged her into knockout territory. But the coldness in her eyes was also genuine, and I was a firm believer all the beauty in the world couldn’t compensate for a black heart. Fury sparked in her eyes as she said, “You try to take him, and you won’t leave this house alive.”

Threats were a dime a dozen in this business, since magic folk tended to be arrogant, and rarely gave up their property without a fight. I didn’t keep tabs on our repo-rate, but there was a reason Willis and I were sent out on the trickier cases. I stuck a finger in her pretty face. “You make a move against us, and we’ll burn down more than just this Gothic monstrosity.”

Which was starting to groan, since the flames had disintegrated the drapes and jumped to the exposed beams. Witches warded their homes like the rest of us, but they didn’t always top up their interior spells. Sometimes, arrogance can bite you in the butt.

And so can rabid owl-ladies, I reminded myself as she leaped at me, her four-inch nails curled into talons. I thought it was just a gnarly manicure until I saw the cuff of feathers at her wrist. Another set of nails raked across my back, and I swallowed hard. Not because they hurt – my combat shirt was doing its job – but because I’d just worked out why the werewolf was invited to the party.

“Looks like an amalgamation spell,” I told Willis, who was fending off his own witchy owls with an iron baton he kept under his suit jacket. “We’re going to have collateral damage.”

I said it as much to warn the witches as to prepare him, since they clearly weren’t in their right minds. Amalgamation spells were usually used on inanimate objects for personal gain - a water barrel and a bottle of fifty-year-old scotch, or a lump of rock

and a bit of gold dust – and the rules were very clear about excluding anything with a pulse. Combining witch and werewolf genes definitely fell into the unnatural realm.

“Freaks,” Willis muttered under his breath, but I was too busy fending off the coven leader to remind him of our PC guidelines. The witch was still clawing at me, but now she was also clutching an amulet that hung around her neck on a leather rope. A sure sign she was reaching for a power boost.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I told her and wrapped my hand around hers. Touching a witch was never fun, but holding her when she had one of her charmed objects in her grasp was like grabbing a live wire. Her power couldn’t get through my gauntlet, but it danced over the surface until it reached the skin of my elbow. And then it sank in its magical fangs, down to what felt like the bone. My instinct was to break free – and backhand her into her cauldron - but I had to contain the spell until we got the werewolf out of harm’s way. “Wallis, please knock those witches out and get the wolf unpinned.”

My partner cast an incredulous look my way. “Forget it. The spell’s toast. And as soon as he’s free, he’s going to tear this place apart.”

“And I’m not leaving him here to be burned alive,” I replied, and yanked hard on the head witch’s hand, making her hiss as the leather rope burned her neck. But the thing must have had a resin binder, because no matter how much muscle I put behind it, the cord refused to break. “You can lose it, or you can lose your head,” I told her, yanking harder.

“And I’m going to suck your soul out of your mealy little mouth,” she spat back.

Well, now.

I inhaled a deep breath through my nose. I wasn’t just goading her; this was the fastest way for me to taste her power, which was unfortunately quite substantial. But there were sour notes there, too. Not just the unnatural werewolf spell, but a deeper imbalance I took to be trouble in her coven. Someone this strong should have at least twenty other witches behind her, but my guess was they hadn’t supported her amalgamation spell. Good for them, and lucky for me, since it left cracks in her power base I could exploit. “Willis, can you please get the wolf out of here?”

He grunted, but finally got to it, approaching the werewolf from his left shoulder. His other hand was on his gun belt, but as soon as he touched the metal stake driven through the guy’s palm, Willis jerked back. “The thing’s rigged,” he told me, shaking out his singed fingers. “She must be feeding it some serious power.”

The ‘she’ in question gave me a smirky smile, and I tried not to snap at Willis. One universal truth about all magical creatures was they were arrogance on legs, and talking about their power only amped it up. I could sense her sucking it out of the wolf at our feet. Great big gulps that made him grind his three-inch fangs. He looked close to breaking point, which made the urge to smack the smug grin off the witch’s face almost unbearable.

But Willis distracted me by snapping his fingers under my nose. “Alexa, your boots are burning.”

I looked down to find the soles of my top-of-the-range field boots melting into the carpet. Instead of lamenting the fact, the head witch cackled. Which would have made me roll my eyes if I wasn't watching my favorite footwear go up in smoke.

Right. Well, this party was officially a bust.

Pulling a switchblade from the side pocket of my pack, I flicked it open and cut through the leather cord just above our clenched hands. Something went boom in the cauldron, and the remaining witches dropped like stones.

The coven leader hissed in my face, but I just squeezed her hand tighter. Panic flared in her eyes as she realized I had the grip of a bulldog, and her fake talons were about to snap like twiglets. "Stop! Stop!"

I waited until her pinkie popped, then upped my grip, but she was already wailing. The second she let go of the amulet, Willis hit her with his baton and she slumped to the floor. Right next to my ruined boots. And an enraged werewolf.

He'd already pulled the spikes out of his hands with a roar, and was working on the ones in his feet, the muscles in his thighs rippling with the effort. I glanced at my partner. Willis was gray-faced and reaching for his gun. I stuffed the throbbing amulet in the bicep pocket of my shirt and said, "Willis, can you check the other rooms? We need to make sure all the coven members are accounted for."

He gave me a dark look, but didn't hesitate to leave. It wasn't the first time I'd maneuvered him out of the way, but he was an out of sight, out of mind kind of guy. "Hey," I said to the werewolf as soon as we were alone. "I need your beast under control before you pull that last spike."

He flashed me a yellow glare, his lip curling over his fangs. "Hurts."

Which was a fair call. But also a bad sign. Werewolves never admitted a weakness if they could help it. "I know. But if you try to attack me, it's a felony." Assuming I didn't put his furry face in the ground, which was the most likely outcome. "Think of one of those little silver cages the jails are using now. Your beast is going to hate that a lot more than giving me an extra couple of minutes."

"Escape." His yellow gaze slid to the witch at my feet. "Feed."

It was hard for a wolf to speak mid-shift, but when they could, it was a good way to gauge their intentions. Single words commentary was hard to misinterpret.

"Even if you get those spikes out, you're still bound." I tried not to look at the binding object in question, but I kind of had to make a point, too. "The witch is inactive, but the spell is still working. Have you tried a full shift?" The lip curling became a ferocious snarl, but the man inside the werewolf paused, then gave a reluctant nod. Admitting he was trapped in his half-form stripped away a bit more of his pride, but it had to be done. "If you run out of here, you'll take the spell with you. So, you need to let me help you, okay?"

Which translated to him not trying to rip my head off and eat every witch in the room.

A nod. Grudgingly given, but a wolf didn't lie. One of the things I like best about their kind.

“Great. Now, you’re going to leave the stakes where they are, and I’m going to come up beside you and remove the object. You need to hold on for just a minute longer. If you want to shift after that, I’ll wait, and we can talk. But I can promise you one thing either way; this coven is dust.” I glanced at the roof, which was now fully alight. I figured we had less than ten minutes before the thing collapsed, taking everything with it. Which meant it was probably more accurate to say the coven was ash, if I didn’t hurry up and move things along.

Which was fine in theory, but as the werewolf eased back, I realized I was going to have to get very up close and personal. He definitely wasn’t the first shifter I’d touched, but I always restricted my interactions with their kind to friendly violence. They were a challenge, and a way to release pent up energy. They weren’t my buddies. And they definitely weren’t what Aunt Madge called my suitors. I was still waiting to discover a species I could use for that kind of outlet.

Chatting seemed inappropriate, so I just loosened my laces and stepped out of my ruined boots. Lowering myself to my knees, I came up beside him on his left. I’d been scenting him since I entered the room, but now the distractions were limited to the inferno over my head, I breathed him in. Powerful. Angry. Aroused. But mostly *hurting*. He was an alpha, which didn’t surprise me, and he was wearing the signatures of dozens of wolves, so a trusted, hands-on leader. Important to his pack. But there was a darkness under there, too. Not something he’d done... I leaned over him, breathing that dark stain in. It smelled of rotten things, best left buried, with a hint of fresh blood. Definitely something he’d bitten.

I avoided looking at his fangs. He was making a low, growling sound now. Not threatening, so much as a warning. Werewolves had very clear boundaries, which was why they avoided human magic users like the plague. They had too many ancestral memories of being the pawns in magic games. So this was his way of telling me to watch my step. Or, to be more accurate, watch my hands.

The object formed a tight ring around what was a fairly spectacular erection. Everything about him was bigger in this form, but I tried not to focus on that too closely as I studied the bracelet. Definitely the asset we were here to repo, and exactly what its owners had promised – old gold and chock full of magic. But there was no time to celebrate the fact with the wolf’s yellow eyes fixed on my every move.

As awkward as it was, I leaned in slowly and took another whiff. That dark stain was more than just a hint now; it coated the metal and had dribbled into the fur on his belly. In the flickering light, it had a purplish tint and I bit back a groan. Definitely from a Creature of the Night, which was a complication I’d have to deal with later.

The only good news was the witches had used magic to anchor the bloody bracelet in place. Given their fondness for silver spikes, I’d expected something more brutal. But other than the location, it wasn’t particularly intrusive. It only took the brush of my fingers against the object to realize why. The power slammed into me, so bright and pure it made me snap my teeth closed, my eyes rolling in my head.

Darnation. This was so out of the league of a suburban coven, it might as well have been a comet that fell in their backyard.

Moon magic.

A bright white orb eclipsed my vision, and as its magic slipped free, it brushed my gauntlet aside like a gentle hand. Even more disturbingly, it passed over my protective shield as if it didn't exist, even though my aunts had just topped it up with moon magic of their own. And I didn't even feel that bad about it, because it hummed as it worked, the tantalizing music of vibrant stars and endless skies. Tingling fingers climbed my arm, winding through my blood like a song. It was the caress of a wild, ancient power, and it was feeling me. *Knowing* me. It tasted my flesh and drank my blood, its music building until I could feel it echoing in my pulse points.

Who are you?

Who do you serve?

"Nice. Touch. Still. Hurts."

The werewolf's pained commentary snapped me back into myself, and I tasted blood, thick and sharp. I'd bitten through my bottom lip, and when I looked down, my gauntlet was a shredded mess. Crudola. Whoever that power belonged to, their magic was beyond anything I'd ever felt. One song, and they'd almost owned me. I supposed I was lucky they'd left my protective shield mostly intact.

Especially when the enraged werewolf sat up – a punishing kind of crunch, since his feet were still pinned to the floor – and glared at the side of my face. He was way too close for my liking, but he'd pulled me back from the grip of the object's magic, and the effort had clearly cost him. His whole body was trembling, and for a moment I turned my head and stared into his eyes. His yellow gaze dipped to the blood on my lip. I knew I was looking right into the heart of his beast, but instead of taking a bite out of me, he just nodded. I could sense his emotions, and there was a lot bubbling beneath the surface, but mostly he was trusting me to finish the job.

Which made my aunts' cautionary voices rattle through my head, but I didn't hesitate. Pulling the shredded gauntlet off, I lay my hand over his heart. He grunted, but kept still, and I turned back to the binding object. It had tasted me, but I had learned a lot about it, too. I just needed the smallest sliver, the tiniest crescent, a fragile beam battling the dawn.

"Luna." It was a broken sigh, defeated, but full of awe.

I ignored the wolf – that was a problem for another day.

My magic swept over the object, and as soon as it popped free, the werewolf surged to his feet. I was already rolling, flattening myself over the coven leader. The shifter went full wolf as I'd expected him to, and his howl shook the first beam loose from the crumbling roof. One of the couches ignited, and hot breath chuffed across the back of my neck. His saliva dripped into my hair, but he paused, and the air trembled around him. We were caught on the edge of violence, until I felt the press of five sharp claws on my nape. I knew the moment before a wild animal struck better than the lines of my face in a mirror, and I didn't hesitate. It was a *speak now, or forever rest in peace* moment.

"*Síthcháin.*" It was an old Wyrđ. Magic in its own way, since language was infused with intent. It did in fact mean peace, or the compact of peace. But also goodwill, if your hind brain went back that far. The wolf probably didn't realize the power it had

over him until it tore a howl from his chest and he bounded away in a fury of slashing claws.

I waited a whole thirty seconds before I lifted myself off the witch and turned to face the werewolf-sized hole in the wall. He'd taken out one half of a giant tribal mask, and the fire was melting the other side into a leer. But my attention was on the view out to the front yard, and the glowing lights of the cavalry.

"Crudola." We had less than three minutes before the house would be crawling with something other than creeper.

After a quick cleanup that involved cutting my boots out of the carpet and putting them in my isolation bag with the bracelet, I went in search of Willis. I found him in the next room, which was lucky, since the whole upper level had collapsed into what I assumed was the guest suite. This room was a library crammed to the ceiling with witchy books, which meant the fire was already eating through the paper walls. "We need to move," I told him. "The roof is coming down, and the goon squad is on the doorstep..."

My voice trailed off as I really looked at my partner.

Willis was standing on the edge of an empty pentagram, a small leather book cupped in his hands. His face was slack, his mouth open just enough to remind me I had wolf saliva in my hair. Not an inch of his body was moving, and to an EMT, it probably looked like he'd gone into shock. But it was clear to me Willis had either tripped a ward, or absorbed some of the power of the grimoire he was holding. Either way, he was done for the night, so I carefully took the book from him and, shoving it under my shirt, led him to the door.

To be continued...

If you enjoyed this extract, please provide your feedback to the author at simoneleighmartin@gmail.com

The complete book will be available in early May, 2022. Pre-order at your Amazon store.