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Chapter One

By Angela Knight

Jesu, look at all the werewolves.

Jarred out of his preoccupation, Tristan stopped dead in the center of the sidewalk, staring at the crowd gathered around the house at the end of the cul-de-sac. The brick colonial had a bigger yard than most of those on the block, with a long colonnaded porch, neatly trimmed holly hedges, and a yard shaded by a huge magnolia tree whose ghostly white blooms perfumed the night air.

The werewolves gathered under the magnolia's spreading limbs and clustered around the pickup trucks parked along the street. The smell of Dire Wolf magic rode the summer breeze, thick with the scent of fur and rage.

And beer. Coolers sat on the open truck gates, filled with cans nestled on piles of melting ice. Just great. The werewolves are getting plowed.

They were all still in human form, thank Merlin. The men were dressed for the weather in short-sleeved shirts and jeans or khakis, while most of the women wore sundresses or shorts. The females all clustered together on the porch, gathered around a woman who sobbed fitfully in utter despair.

The boy's mother, no doubt.

Every instinct Tristan had told him this was going to get nasty. For a split second, he considered asking Belle to conjure his armor and sword.

Then again, better not. The sight of an armored knight would only light the tinder under the werewolves' rage. He simply couldn't afford to do that, even though it meant being seriously under-equipped if things went south.

So instead Tristan fell back a pace behind Belle, guarding her back as Justice led them up the walk toward the house. The big cop carried the shotgun at the ready, his black eyes moving in wary flicks. Evidently he didn't like the smell of the situation any more than Tristan did..

Sure enough, one of the werewolves stepped directly into the Wolf sheriff's path. "What the hell are you doing bringing them here, Justice?"

Tristan was instantly aware of being the focus of enough fury to light a bonfire. *Looks like we're about to be the guests of honor at a werewolf lynch mob.* Belle's voice rang out, cool and clear. "If one of the Magekind did kill that boy, I can work a spell to identify the source of the magic."

"Question is, will you tell us who it is—or will you cover it up?" another man shouted.

She turned and scanned every face in the yard. The Direkind was immune to magic, but Belle had another kind of power in her eyes, the kind that made even furious werewolves remember she was a woman.

And decent men protected women.

“I swore to serve mankind when I became a witch,” Belle said, her voice ringing calm and steady. “Anyone who would kill a child—especially from behind with a coward’s stroke—deserves nothing but death. If it’s one of the Magekind, I’ll kill him myself.”

“What if it’s Arthur?” a hoarse voice shouted.

Tristan had heard more than enough of that. “Arthur Pendragon is no child-killing coward. And any man who says he is in my presence again had better be prepared to bleed!” The last word was a little too close to a battlefield roar, but damned if he’d back down.

Arthur might no longer be High King of Britain—he hated anyone calling him by that title—but he’d never be anything but king to Tristan. Even if Tristan would rather die than admit as much out loud. He’d certainly never say so to Arthur himself.

Silence fell, broken only by the crickets.

“Any more questions?” Tristan snapped.

Apparently the point had been made, because nobody said a damned word as the Wolf sheriff led the Magekind toward the house.