

Changeling Press

SECOND

HANCE

HARITY



Kate Hill

Second Chance Charity

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Second Chance Charity

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Charity, Queen of the fierce Hot River Werewolf pack, has reason to hate men. Enslaved by one as a child, turned by another as a woman, she's got issues. But being a werewolf isn't one of them. She's been making the most of her cursed existence, until a run in with the man who turned her makes her question the path she's chosen.

Deep in the Wicked Wild, she meets Shane. Half Elf, half Wildman, Shane makes her question everything she thinks she knows about men -- and sex. The attraction between them is electric. In spite of his origins Shane had a tender side that's hard to resist, even for the Werewolf Queen. Can he convince Charity to take a second chance at love?

Chapter One

Charity had never dreamed she could be so weak and dishonest.

She stood by a brook that ran near the clearing her pack called home. Glancing around, she saw her women -- some in wolf form, others in their human skin, mingling in the village. They sparred on the dirt floor of the forest, cleaned and prepared meat from the hunt and went about their daily lives, seeming not to care that just yesterday their queen had cheated them out of their much-deserved revenge.

Every werewolf in the pack had been cursed by the same man. Hugo had enticed them, fucked them and, with his love, forced them to change from women to beasts with every full moon. Together they had formed this pack and learned to master their curse so they could call upon the wolf inside them any time they chose. Though in many ways their curse had become a gift, they had sworn vengeance against Hugo.

After so long they had captured him and had been on the verge of making him pay for his animal lust only to be thwarted by a woman Charity had foolishly loved like a member of her pack.

Charity growled deep in her chest. Her fists clenched and pain shot through her injured arm. During the battle, her opponent had broken her arm. Though because of her shapeshifting ability Charity was well on her way to healing, she couldn't shake the feeling of self-disgust. Not because she'd been wounded, but because of the reasons why.

"Charity," Magda, her second-in-command, interrupted.

Charity glanced up at the naked brown-haired woman who approached. Like the others in the pack, she wore no clothes. They weren't necessary in the Wicked Wild, at least not in their territory. The female wolf pack ruled this part of the forest and, until yesterday, had defended themselves well.

"No one holds what happened against you. Sadie challenged you for Hugo's life and she won the battle. You set them both free and now it's over. You don't have to leave."

Closing her eyes for a moment, Charity tried to keep her temper in check. These women didn't fully comprehend what had happened. "Yes, I do have to leave."

"Anyone can lose a battle. Sadie is a strong warrior."

"I know what she is. I made her," Charity said bitterly.

Sadie, a gifted magical practitioner, had come to her years ago with an avid interest in shapeshifters. The women had taken an instant liking to each other and Sadie had been invited to live with the pack. After much convincing, Charity had agreed to give Sadie the power of the werewolf. They had been close, then Sadie had become her wolf daughter.

Sadie knew how the female pack had been cursed. She knew all about the pain Hugo had caused them, yet she had still chosen to harbor the bastard in her house, attempting to rehabilitate him and show him how to control his power.

"If the women felt you were wrong or that justice wasn't served, we would have gone against pack law and killed Hugo and Sadie anyway. During the short time we held him captive, we took our revenge on his hide. Not that he didn't deserve it, but..."

"What?" Charity demanded.

"I'm not the only member of this pack to believe he seemed to regret what he did to us."

"Don't be weak, Magda. That's how he got to you in the first place. Feigning sweetness. You know he showed each of us what we wanted to see and told us what we wanted to hear. We entered his bed women and left wolves. Do you think because he pretends to be sorry for what he did that he deserves to be forgiven?"

The women held each other's gaze for several seconds, then Charity looked away. That was a first. Usually she could stare down anyone.

Perhaps because she knew she was lying again. She was accusing Magda of doing what she had done, except for Charity it was worse. She was their queen. It had

been her duty to avenge them, and she had failed. There was no forgiveness for her, just as there should have been none for Hugo.

Magda sighed. "Maybe it is a good idea for you to go away and sort things out."

Charity turned to her and nodded. "You're a great warrior, Magda, and a wise woman. You'll probably be a far better queen than I have been."

"You are still our queen," Magda said with conviction. "I've talked to the other women and they agree. When you return, you will take your rightful place as leader of our pack. I will simply watch over our territory until then."

Drawing a deep breath and releasing it slowly, Charity tilted her face upward, squinting at the sunlight shining through spaces between the leaves at the tops of the tall trees.

"When will you leave?" Magda asked.

"Now."

"Good luck."

"Keep the pack safe and strong."

"You have my word."

Without further hesitation, Charity shifted into her wolf form. Pain briefly enveloped her as her muscles rippled and thickened, and her human face became wolfish. Though she remained upright, a shaggy red coat sprang out over her entire body. A rush of power shot through her and she growled then leapt across the brook with supernatural swiftness and raced through the trees.

She was no longer fully human, but not totally animal, either. Instinct mingled with intelligence, making her one of the most dangerous creatures in the Wicked Wild. She needed this time alone, to understand the strange emotions that had led her to set her captive free and lose to a warrior she most likely could have beaten.

The truth was, she had no desire to kill Sadie in spite of what pack law dictated regarding a challenge over a prisoner. Oddly, when faced with the chance to execute Hugo, vengeance had lost some of its luster. Maybe if he had been the same self-centered bastard who had fucked over sixty women and turned them into werewolves,

all for the sole purpose of trying to “cure” himself, she could have killed him easily. Strangely, Hugo seemed to have changed. He had accepted his punishment and admitted the pack had reason for wanting revenge. Had he been acting? Was his apparent regret a ploy to charm them into freeing him?

Since acquiring the characteristics of a wolf, Charity had the ability to smell lies. She believed Hugo had been truthful. But that shouldn’t matter. Just like so many people she had known in her life, he deserved punishment for his crimes. Charity had the chance to give it to him and she had failed -- failed herself and her pack.

Howling with rage, she ran faster, her swift feet practically flying over the rocky forest floor. She tried to outrun her shame and confusion, but it was impossible. As always there was no outrunning her problems. They stuck like ticks, sucking blood and draining life.

How do you get rid of a tick? Charity thought as she slowed to a jog, her heart pounding and lungs burning. Sweat drenched her red coat and heat enfolded her entire body. It felt good and calmed her somewhat so she was able to think. *You burn it out, but make sure you don’t leave the head.*

That meant if Charity was to return to her pack as a worthy leader, she needed to confront her fears and weaknesses. She was a powerful warrior, but was she strong enough to overcome herself?

Glancing around, she noticed she had already traveled far outside her pack’s territory, into the darkest mountains of the Wicked Wild. Her eyes widened, ears twitched and muscles tensed. All her senses strained and her fur stood on end. Racing mindlessly through any part of the Wicked Wild could prove deadly, but here even more so. This was the domain of the fiercest beasts in the magical world -- Dragons, Wildmen, snake-shifters, and other creatures too revolting to think about.

Long ago in her youth, the wizard she’d served abandoned disobedient servants here. Rarely did one return. She shuddered at the memory of living in that cold dark house, forced to serve the bastard who had enslaved dozens of magical folk.

A distant grunt reached her sensitive wolf ears and she sniffed the air, catching the foul odor of Wildmen -- carnivorous, human-like creatures covered in shaggy hair. They possessed incredible strength and were immune to the effects of many magical powers, including the bite of a werewolf. Though a werewolf's bite could do great damage to a Wildman, the curse would not be passed on.

Even with its fierce strength and powerful bite, a single werewolf would have trouble defeating one Wildman. Worst of all, Wildmen usually traveled in groups.

Right now Charity discerned the reek of four different Wildmen, and they were closing in fast. She decided fleeing would be wiser than fighting a battle she couldn't possibly win, so once again she took off at a run. She didn't get far, however.

The Wildmen must have caught her scent as well because they trapped her. A black-furred Wildman blocked the path in front of her, a red-furred one behind and two brown ones advanced on either side.

Her heart racing, she growled, bared her fangs and raised her clawed hands to an attack position. The Wildmen, thick wooden clubs in hand, raced at her. Using her speed and agility, she avoided their blows and managed to claw the eyes of one of the brown ones. A blow from behind landed heavily on her back and she staggered, but lashed out behind her, her claws striking hairy flesh.

Another blow struck the back of her head and she fell, her vision blackening.

Before she lost consciousness, she heard the savage cry of a fifth Wildman and she knew that tonight this group would be dining on werewolf flesh -- hers.

* * *

"Hey," said a rough male voice. A warm, callused hand rested lightly on her shoulder.

Charity moaned softly and opened her eyes halfway. It took a moment for her vision to clear, but once it did she jumped in surprise and growled, on the verge of shifting to her wolf form, since she'd reverted to her human shape when she'd been knocked out.

Beside her squatted a rangy man with unkempt reddish-brown hair hanging almost to his waist. A curly beard, so long that it brushed his chest, sprouted from his sturdy jaw line and his moss-green eyes stared at her from beneath severely arched eyebrows.

He wore nothing but an animal-tooth necklace and a leather loincloth. Across his smooth chest were black tattoos of wild animals, similar to cave drawings. In his current position, the loincloth didn't conceal much. She noticed a good portion of a large, well-shaped cock peeking out the side. The sight would have amused her if she hadn't noticed the thick wooden club resting beside him. Though he didn't appear to be a full-blooded Wildman -- his body was smooth rather than covered in fur and he had a fresh, sexy scent rather than a putrid stench -- there was no mistaking his relation to those cannibals. He had rather primitive facial features and his sharp teeth were visible through his slightly parted lips.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Clear English. Wildmen didn't speak in any known language. They had their own method of communication that included various grunts and growls.

"Can you talk?" he pressed, reaching out to brush hair from her face.

Charity grasped his wrist and shoved his hand away. "Yes, I can talk. I'm surprised you can, though. What are you? A Wildman wannabe?"

He curled his lip. "Apparently your mouth is working just fine. Wolfy, that group was getting ready to cook you over an open fire. You could try saying something like *thank you*."

Still feeling a bit groggy, she pushed herself to her feet and leaned against a nearby tree.

He also rose, club in hand, and she noted exactly how tall he was. Not quite as tall as most Wildmen, but nearly. And he had a damn fine body. Long limbed and muscular without being overly-bulky as many Wildmen tended to be. Unfortunately the loincloth now entirely covered his privates. Her head had almost completely cleared and she wouldn't mind another glance.

Shoving his thick hair over his shoulders, he cast her a lingering look from head to toe, then shook his head slightly and turned away. It was then she noticed the tattoos on the backs of his calves.

Chapter Two

Charity should have let him continue on his way, but something about him interested her. Who was she kidding? Quite a lot about him interested her. "Why did you stop them from killing me?" she asked.

He paused, keeping his back to her for a moment, and then he turned, a rather seductive smile on his lips. Once again she took note of those sharp white teeth and a quiver of desire ran down her spine. Her nipples tightened and she flipped her long red hair forward so it covered her breasts. No point in giving him any ideas.

Men were always quick to take advantage of women. The last thing she needed to do was flirt with a cannibal.

Then why did she stop him from leaving?

"Because you're too pretty a werewolf to eat -- at least in the way my cousins planned on eating you."

"Cousins. So you *are* a Wildman."

He walked toward her. "You didn't notice the resemblance? Should I be flattered?"

"No, I noticed."

"Oh." He grinned the slightest bit and shrugged. "I guess that magical hair removal kit I bought wasn't worth the money."

"I..." She shook her head. "I didn't mean that as an insult."

"It's all right. I was joking about the hair removal kit. I never did have much body hair. Growing up it made fitting in a little difficult, but now I don't care."

Charity could only nod. What an odd conversation to be having with a perfect stranger. "What else are you?" she asked.

"My mother was a Wildman -- or Wildwoman? They're not big on political correctness, so I guess female Wildman?"

"I get the drift," she said. "What was your father?"

"An Elf with a fur fetish."

She gave a snort of laughter.

"That actually wasn't a joke, but don't worry about it. I guess it is kind of funny."

Charity raised an eyebrow. "I'm surprised someone with Elf blood rescued a werewolf. You're not immune to the curse -- or did you take after your Wildman relatives?"

"I'm immune."

"Then you've been attacked before?"

"Wolfy, we're in the Wicked Wild. I think I've tangled with just about every known kind of magical beast and a few I'm not sure have been recorded yet. How long have you been here?"

"Years," she said softly. "Though I usually don't travel outside of my pack's territory."

"What happened? You get lost?"

"Not exactly."

"Would you like me to escort you back to your pack?"

Her brow furrowed. "I don't need an escort. And why are you being so nice?"

"If I answer, will you tell me why you're being so rude?"

"I'm not rude," she snapped. "I'm careful. There's a difference."

He smiled again. "You're so careful that you ended up in the darkest mountains of the Wicked Wild, attacked and nearly eaten by Wildmen."

"And you're one of them, so why should I trust you?"

"I saved your life and --" He stopped and shook his head. "Fine. Nice to meet you, Wolfy. I don't have time to waste arguing with you."

Again he turned away and her stomach tightened. Why didn't she want him to go? She'd left her pack to be alone. Now that she was, she longed for company. *His* company in particular.

"Where are you going?" she asked, a slightly taunting note in her voice. "A tea party? Maybe a ball at a wizard's palace? You're sure dressed for the occasion."

Once more he stopped and glanced over his shoulder at her, his sharp teeth glittering and eyes narrowed, observing her. "Are you trying to goad me or is this your way of showing you enjoy my company? I know werewolves are cranky, but if we're going to get to know each other you could at least try to be a bit more congenial."

This time she approached him, and stood, a hand on her hip and her chin tilted up so she could meet his gaze. At her height, she rarely had to look up to anyone and she rather liked the sensation. He made her feel...

No. The last thing she wanted was to become all girly and let her emotions run away with her. All her life she'd had terrible luck with men -- from being a wizard's sex slave to mating with a guy who turned her into a werewolf. Now here she was, flirting with a Wildman. She was treading on dangerous ground, and though her good sense told her to stop, the masochistic side of her refused to let her walk away.

"Are you looking for some kind of payment for saving my life?" she asked.

"Of course not."

She curled her lip. "Oh please. Maybe you inherited your father's fur fetish and that's why you rescued me. You thought you'd have a little fun, then eat me."

His brow furrowed and he shook his head. "Wolfy, there is something wrong with your head. And for your information, if I ate you, you'd probably have more fun than I would."

"Oh really?"

He shook his head and snorted with contemptuous laughter. "I can't believe I'm playing along with this, but, Wolfy, I find you... irresistible."

His words made her heart skip a beat, but she tried to remain nonchalant. "Coming from a Wildman, that could be dangerous."

"I'm only half Wildman. The other half..." He let his voice trail off as he wrapped an arm around her waist, dipped his head toward hers and brushed her mouth with a kiss.

Briefly, Charity wondered if a minion of Cupid was hanging around nearby, blowing love dust in their direction. Then her desire overcame her. His beard tickled her face and his lips, firm and moist, moved against hers in a way that sent her desire off the scale.

Impulsively she slipped her arms around him and pressed her lips closer to his.

He groaned softly and tightened his grip on her. The tip of his tongue ran along her lips then gently thrust between them. He explored every corner and crevice of her mouth, and when her tongue caressed his, he enthusiastically returned the strokes.

His hand slid up her back, tightening on the place where the Wildman's club had struck her. She flinched and gasped in pain. Impulsively, her tongue sought his with fiercer strokes and bitter-sweet arousal made her stomach clench.

Breaking the kiss, he loosened his grip on her and met her gaze. "What's wrong, Wolfy?"

"Nothing."

"That wasn't nothing. Let me see." He moved behind her and swept aside her long hair. Ever so gently, his fingertips brushed across her back. "You've got quite a few bruises and scrapes here."

"Who cares? Come back around here and kiss me." She turned and looped her arms around his neck. When she stood on tiptoes to kiss him, he stepped away and once again tried to examine her back.

"I thought you wanted the same thing I did," she said.

"I do," he murmured. "But I don't want to hurt you."

"I like pain." She turned, took his face roughly in her hands and kissed him hard. Taking his lower lip between her teeth, she bit it gently.

"Then we're going to have to strike a compromise," he said, resting his hands on her hips, his fingers stroking gently. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"There's a cave nearby with a spring that will make your wounds feel better. And I have a salve I made using Elf magic that helps heal injuries."

If Charity shifted shape a time or two, her injuries would be repaired. Yet standing here looking into his big green eyes, she knew swimming with him in a spring and having him apply salve to her back would be a much more pleasant way to heal.

No doubt she was crazy to go anywhere with him, yet he *had* saved her life.

Still, she had left her pack to sort things out, not have a tryst with a half-Wildman. On the other hand maybe this was exactly what she needed. Here, in the heart of the Wicked Wild, without the responsibility of her pack upon her, she was free to do whatever she wanted.

If she was to confront the darkest part of her soul, to finally understand the strange emotions that forced her to throw a fight and spare her enemy, then she needed to follow her instincts, and her instincts told her to see where this meeting with him would go.

Him. She didn't even know his name.

"The spring is this way." He pointed his club toward a path through the trees. "If you'd rather have me bring the salve to you, I will, but I can't guarantee other Wildmen won't attack while I'm gone."

"I'll go with you," she said and followed him through the trees. "What's your name?"

"Shane."

She smiled. An Elf name. "I'm guessing Wildmen don't have names?"

"You guess wrong. It's just that my Elf name is easier to pronounce to most non-Wildmen. No one ever seems to get the inflection right."

She smiled. "Let's hear it anyway."

He uttered a series of grunts and when she raised an eyebrow in his direction, he said, "You asked for it."

"Yes, I did. I didn't know Wildmen mated outside of their own kind."

"It's a rarity. By the way, what's your name? Unless you want me to keep calling you Wolfy."

"I kinda like that," she admitted.

"It does suit you, even in your human form. There's a sexy wildness in your eyes."

Men were all alike, always thinking of fucking. Obviously he was the sort who liked to soften up his lovers with compliments. For the first time she could remember, it didn't bother her. Usually she detested all the pre-mating bullshit. She wasn't accustomed to it. Sex was an emotionless act, something to provide brief physical pleasure, *if* you were lucky enough to have a partner who gave a damn. "My name is Charity."

"I like that. Does it fit?" She tossed him a slightly irritated look and he shook his head. "You're ornery even for a werewolf."

"I was made by the worst."

"Bitten?"

"Fucked."

His gaze riveted to her. "Oh, I see. A lover cursed you."

"Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. Most lovers wouldn't hesitate to curse each other."

"That's cynical."

"No, it's truthful. If your love life has been so great, why are you here with me and not in a cave fucking a Wildwoman of your own?"

"I guess you're going to be the sort who doesn't like pleasant conversation."

"Are you getting bored already?"

"Are you deliberately trying to turn me off?" After a moment he shook his head and laughed.

"What?" she demanded, unable to see what was so funny.

"This is the strangest first meeting I've ever had. But I've never made love to a werewolf before. Is this considered foreplay for your kind?"

Foreplay. Until she had fled the wizard's house, foreplay had been a foreign concept to her. Even after she'd gained her freedom she'd found few men unselfish enough to take the time to fully arouse her before seeking their own pleasure. At least Hugo had aimed to please, so she'd enjoyed the moments leading up to her curse. He'd been more than willing to feed her craving for pain.

She'd been treated roughly for so long that she couldn't imagine pleasure without pain. Hopefully this big hunk of Wildman would be just as accommodating.

"No," she said. "I'm just... having a bad day."

"Let's see what we can do about making tonight better."

Her brow furrowed. What kind of man was he? He certainly hadn't inherited the Wildman disposition.

A short time later, they reached the cave he'd spoken of. Inside, two tunnels extended in opposite directions.

"This way," Shane said, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder and guiding her toward the tunnel on the left. "You don't want to go down the other one."

"Why?"

"It leads to a Dragon's den."

A tinge of fear darted through her. The dangerous yet beautiful beasts carried the scent of moss, making them virtually undetectable, even with a werewolf's keen sense of smell.

Not that her sense of smell would be much help right now. She was so aroused by Shane that with each breath his sexy scent filled her, blocking out just about everything else.

They continued down the tunnel. It became so narrow that as they walked side-by-side their bodies touched. She loved the feel of his warm flesh against hers.

Soon the tunnel expanded, not enough for a Dragon to travel down, but far more accommodating for two people, even one as tall as Shane.

The tunnel led to a spacious cave with a hot spring toward one end that kept the temperature pleasantly warm. At the other end of the cave was a crude living area with

a bed of rough-looking blankets, a wooden trunk and a basket filled with fresh fruit and vegetables. A short distance away was a fire pit and several torches mounted on the craggy walls provided some light. Werewolves and Wildmen could see in the dark, so she wondered if he had inherited Elf vision, thereby requiring the light.

"Is this your cave?" she asked, following him toward the living space where he knelt and began rummaging through the trunk.

"Wildmen don't believe nature can be owned, so no, the cave isn't mine, but I stay here every now and then," he replied and pulled a jar out of the trunk. "Here's the salve."

He uncapped the jar and held it out to her. Charity approached and knelt beside him, taking the jar. Inside was a glittery, pale blue cream. It smelled of berries and wildflowers.

"You made this?" she asked.

"An odd talent for a Wildman, but not for an Elf. I didn't inherit much Elf magic, but I can empower healing lotions and create a mean compulsion dust if I have to."

"It doesn't work on Wildmen, though."

"Certain Elf magic does affect them, but the recipes are obscure. My father's family is very old, even among Elves, and they have knowledge of ancient magic not often practiced anymore."

As he spoke, he took the salve back from her and offered her his hand. She slipped hers into it and they stood and approached the spring.

Chapter Three

Charity stepped into the water and found it pleasantly warm. Without further hesitation, she waded in and closed her eyes, allowing the water to soothe her and cleanse the wounds from her attack.

After a moment she glanced at Shane who stood by the edge of the water. He removed his loincloth and tossed it aside. Even flaccid his cock was rather long and thick, the balls beneath heavy. Both were nestled close to his thatch of dark reddish-brown pubic hair. He strode into the spring, water lapping his long, lean body. Charity was no stranger to men, but she'd never been this attracted to one. Everything about Shane aroused her.

He approached and her gaze roamed from his wild hair and primitively handsome face to the expanse of his gorgeous chest. She lifted her hand and touched her fingertips to the water-slicked flesh, tracing the lines of his tattoos.

"Do these mean anything?" she asked.

He glanced down at his chest. "These? Not really. I just liked the design. The ones on my calves, though, were given to me at the end of my studies with my great uncle who taught me most of what I know about salves."

"I didn't know Elves were into tattoos."

"They're not. He learned some of his techniques from a Shaman. The tattoos were an ancient rite in his tribe. Turn around."

She did as he asked, and he swept her hair over her shoulder and let his fingertips stray across her back. Then he took handfuls of water and washed her injuries. In between pouring the water over her back, he pressed soft kisses along the side of her neck.

Charity found it difficult to keep her eyes open. His touches and kisses were so relaxing. He was unlike any man she'd ever known.

Or was he? She should know better than anyone that all men were cut from the same proverbial cloth. All selfish, cunning, untrustworthy --

She stepped away from him and flipped her hair down her back. "Let's get on with this."

"All right. Come with me."

She followed him out of the water and they walked to the trunk where he took two towels and handed one to her. As she dried off, her gaze kept straying to him. It was as if she couldn't keep from ogling him as he ran the towel over his gorgeous chest, tight ass and long, sleekly-muscled legs.

When she glanced at his face, she found him watching her with equal interest. Their gazes met and he smiled. Charity dropped her towel and walked toward him.

Enough foreplay. They'd kissed and admired each other, now it was time to do what they really wanted. No more pretense.

"Let me put this on you," he said, dropping his towel and reaching for the salve.

"My back feels better already."

"This will help even more."

Raising her eyes to the heavens, she turned and he smoothed the salve over her injuries. A little thrill of anticipation darted through her when his hands strayed to her hips. He cupped her bottom and caressed.

Charity turned and placed her hands on his chest, her nails scraping his flesh. Gazing up at him, she said, "Come on, Wildman. Fuck me."

"What's your hurry?" One of his hands trailed up her spine while his other gently squeezed her ass. He kissed her forehead then her lips.

Taking the lead, Charity grasped his face and thrust her tongue between his lips. Shane met every sweep of her tongue and groaned deep in his chest. His arms wrapped around her, holding her so close that her breasts flattened against his chest and his stiffening cock pushed against her soft flesh.

She kissed him harder, hoping he'd take the hint and handle her roughly.

Grasping her shoulders, he held her at arm's length, staring into her eyes. "Hey. Slow down."

"Why?" she demanded. "I thought we wanted the same thing."

"If you want to make love I'm all for it."

"Then do it." She lay on the blankets and cast him her most erotic look. It wasn't wasted.

He joined her on the blankets but to her surprise rather than cover her body with his and take her quickly, he stretched out beside her. Gazing at her, he stroked her belly and dipped his hand between her legs.

What was his problem?

"If you're worried about getting me pregnant, no werewolf can conceive. The curse makes us sterile."

"I know."

"And we can't catch or pass on diseases."

"Neither can Wildmen, except among their own kind."

"Then why the hesitation?"

His brow furrowed and he met her gaze. "Hesitation? It's called foreplay."

"It's not necessary."

"No, but it's fun." He nuzzled her neck, his beard tickling her.

Edging lower, he kissed her breasts and caressed her thighs. He took one of her nipples between his lips and sucked it. His hot, wet tongue teased it to a hard peak, then he sucked it again.

Moisture drenched her pussy and she drew a sharp breath, her body tense as she waited for him to use his sharp teeth on her breast. Pleasure then pain. That's how it was with men. First with Egan and more recently with Hugo. One had abused her flesh and the other had made her a werewolf.

Shane left her breast and covered her belly with feathery kisses. He stroked her inner thighs and cupped her soft mound, kneading gently.

"Harder," she whispered.

He applied slightly more pressure with his hand, but not nearly what she expected. All her life pain and pleasure had mingled. She couldn't imagine one without the other and she desperately wanted to fuck this big, sexy Wildman.

Shane kissed her hip then hoisted her legs over his shoulders.

"No!" Charity snapped, pushing him away. She rolled onto her side and seconds later felt his hands on her shoulders.

He pulled her into his arms and she tensed.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly.

"You're the one with the problem. I thought you wanted --"

"I do. But I want to make sure you enjoy it. I thought most women liked this."

She met his gaze. "I'm not like most women."

"No?" A slight smile touched his lips and he slid his hand between her legs. First one finger then the other eased into her hot, damp pussy. "You're very wet. I think I must have been doing something right."

"Just fuck me," she said, her voice almost a plea.

"Let me please you."

Again he stretched out between her legs. This time before she could protest, he covered her clit with his mouth. His tongue rolled over her ultra-sensitive flesh and she quivered with desire. Slowly, languidly he stroked her, as if he wanted nothing more than to spend the whole day lapping her where she was so warm and aching. Then he slid his tongue into her pussy, stealing her breath and making her heart pound with need.

Only when he had thoroughly explored her did he return to her clit, which was now so sensitive that the first few strokes of his tongue sent her into a panting, writhing orgasm.

He pressed his face closer to her, continuing to lick her through the marvelous pulsations. Charity clutched handfuls of his hair and closed her eyes, riding the waves of intense pleasure.

When her climax subsided, he covered her body with his and she tensed, her eyes flying open.

Now he would demand payment.

As always.

Bracing his hands on either side of her head, he filled her very slowly. All the while his intense green eyes stared into hers.

Charity shuddered again, but this time with pleasure.

Buried almost to the hilt, he paused and asked, "All right?"

She nodded and clutched his shoulders as he began pumping in a slow, steady rhythm.

"I don't think that ever happened to me before," she breathed.

"What?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. This wasn't right.

"Fuck me harder," she demanded.

He quickened his pace and she jabbed her hips against him.

"Harder," she said, her voice almost a growl.

"You like it rough."

"I *need* it rough."

He grinned and shook his head, but did as she asked. He pumped harder and faster, yet he still refused to hurt her. The friction between their heated bodies and the expression of lust on his handsome face soon had her hovering on the brink of another orgasm.

By the harshness of his breathing and the way his muscles rippled beneath her stroking hands, he was close, too.

"Bite me," she practically growled.

"No."

"What's the matter, Wildman?" she panted. "Afraid of a little pain?"

He paused, leaving them both trembling on the brink. "Getting it, no. Giving it? I don't work that way," he said, his breathing harsh.

"All men give it."

He lowered his head toward hers and whispered against her lips, "Not this man."

Again he began thrusting, slowly and tenderly. His body trembled with desire, but he continued the almost delicate motions. Strangely, this stimulated her even more. Maybe because she was so close to the edge or maybe because no one had ever made love to her like this, but being possessed by this big, gentle man aroused her more than she thought possible.

"Oh, Shane," she cried, her body straining and her legs locking around him in an attempt to make him move faster and push her over the edge.

"Come on, Wolfy," he said, his voice rough with passion. "Come for me." He pulled out almost to the tip, then entered her slowly.

Charity's entire body shuddered and pulsed in one of the most intense orgasms of her life.

He began pumping into her, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to keep her coming for so long she thought she might faint from the pleasure. He exploded while she was still throbbing in ecstasy and she clung to him, her eyes closed tightly.

In her entire life she had never experienced an orgasm that touched her emotionally like this. Her head spun and she swallowed hard, on the verge of tears.

This was ridiculous! She hated herself for this weakness and, worst of all, she wouldn't have traded this moment for anything.

He held her close as they recovered. Her cheek resting on his chest, she heard the slowing of his heartbeat until it was a calm, steady rhythm against her ear.

Shane caressed Charity's hair and she flinched away from his touch. She wasn't accustomed to cuddling after lovemaking, though she'd heard most women enjoyed it.

In her years of captivity, her wizard master, Egan, had used her often and thrust her from his bed directly after achieving his pleasure. That had been fine with her, since she hated the thought of lying beside him. The very few times she had gained pleasure

with him had disgusted her, and while those times hadn't included affectionate touches, her memories of the wizard tainted her.

Why, so many years later, did she still think of her tormentor while lying here with a man who pleased her? Even after making love one time she knew Shane was as different from her old master as two people could be.

She had left her pack to find understanding and at the moment she felt more confused then ever.

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing. I just don't like being touched."

"You could have fooled me."

Anger squeezed her heart and she turned, glaring at him only to find him gazing at her with a teasing smile. "What's that supposed to mean?" she growled. "You like the idea of manipulating your partners?"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "I didn't force you into anything."

"Men are all alike. Always using sex for power. You like having control."

"Did we just have the same experience or was I hallucinating? Because what we did had *nothing* to do with control, at least not to me. I just wanted both of us to have a good time."

She studied him carefully. He seemed so honest, even *smelled* honest, but in her experience people just weren't like that.

"What's wrong, Charity?" he asked, taking her hand.

Chapter Four

Charity flinched again but didn't pull away from Shane's grasp.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked. "Why did you leave your pack?"

She sighed and lay on her back, staring toward the cave ceiling, taking note of each crag and crevice. "It's a long story," she said.

"I'm not going anywhere."

Turning to him, she asked, "Why do you care?" She'd meant to sound haughty, but instead her words had a desperate edge.

The truth was, she wanted someone to talk to. When he'd touched and held her, she'd felt protected, cared for. He'd done far more than give her physical pleasure. He'd made her feel feminine, loved, and she'd wanted to surrender to him. No one had ever treated her like this, mostly because she'd never allowed it. After so many years as a slave, vulnerable and controlled, she had no desire to reveal weakness of any kind, even if it meant never taking a permanent mate.

The members of her pack were her family and even they didn't truly know her. All her life she had managed to keep a part of herself secret. Now, looking into Shane's eyes, she wanted to tell him everything -- all her fears and desires. It was completely unlike her.

"Because I like you," he replied simply.

"You don't even know me."

"I want to, if you'll let me."

She shook her head. "It's complicated."

"It always is, but some things are worth taking the time to sort out."

She smiled and caressed his face, letting her fingertips linger over his sharp cheekbone. "You're stubborn, aren't you?"

"Very."

"So am I."

"I don't doubt it. Come here." He drew her closer and covered her mouth in a lingering kiss.

* * *

For the first time in her life, Charity awoke in a lover's arms. Shane was still asleep, so she lay still for several moments, enjoying his warmth and scent. She was surprised how much she enjoyed being here with him.

Realizing how comfortable she felt, how safe and content, she growled softly and slipped from his arms, careful not to wake him.

Indulging these newfound emotions was a bad idea. As Werewolf Queen, there was no place for softness in her life, not that there ever had been. Her very survival had always depended on her ability to steel herself against life and the hardships it tossed her way. How ironic that a half-Wildman was drawing out a gentle side of her she never dreamed existed.

She had just waded into the spring when Shane woke and joined her. He ducked under the water and surfaced in front of her, shoving wet tendrils of hair from his face. "Good morning," he said with a smile.

"Hello." She accepted his kiss then continued swimming, trying to ignore the way her heart pounded and her entire body tingled just from his kiss.

"What do you want to do today?" he asked.

"I'm moving on," she said.

"Where to?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Would you like a traveling partner?"

She paused a moment, her back to him, and closed her eyes. In truth she would love to spend more time with him, but she knew it wasn't a good idea. She needed to get on with what she'd come to do, not procrastinate her journey because she enjoyed

spending time with him. "No." She turned and faced him, trying to ignore the disappointment in his eyes.

"All right," he said. "I would like to see you again, though."

"Why?"

"Didn't you have a good time? You seemed to."

"Yes. I had a very good time, but that doesn't mean I'm looking for a relationship," she lied. In her heart she wanted to get to know him better, but something stopped her from admitting it.

"I see. Well, I must confess I hate the idea of a one night stand."

"Sorry."

"Can you give me a reason? Don't you like me?"

Sighing, she raised her eyes to the heavens. He certainly was sensitive. "Yes, I like you a lot," she said. "It's just that I came out here to think something through. I need some privacy. That's all."

"All right," he said. "I understand. However, I suggest you leave this part of the Wicked Wild as soon as possible. Do your thinking someplace safe, out of range of Wildmen and Dragons. Next time you're attacked, it's doubtful someone like me will be around to help you."

"Thanks for the warning," she said, and walked out of the spring. The sight of his naked body, slick with water, was already turning her on, weakening her. And the gentleness in his eyes was about to finish her off.

What was wrong with her? She'd never respected weakness in herself or anyone else. Yet she couldn't call him weak. He'd fought off his own kind to rescue her. He'd survived trapped between two worlds -- the world of Wildmen and the world of Elves. No, one thing she'd bet her life on was that Shane was *not* weak.

She'd never imagined a man could be both strong and tender. The combination was more intriguing than she wanted to admit, but she didn't have time to ponder something as frivolous as romance.

Since entering this part of the Wicked Wild, something had been nagging her. She hadn't chosen this destination randomly, but had a reason, even if she hadn't realized it when she started.

Somewhere out here was the path leading toward the house of her old master, the place that had scarred her for life and turned her down a path of violence, anger and loneliness. In spite of the fact that she loved the members of her pack like sisters, she had scars even they didn't know about. She had kept some secrets for so long they were eating away at her insides.

For some reason, she was driven toward the house where she'd been born, enslaved, tormented. She would love Shane's company on this journey, but she needed to do this alone. "Thanks for the warning," she said, gazing into his eyes. "Good bye, Shane."

He nodded, his green eyes devouring her. "Goodbye, Charity. I hope our paths cross again."

If she waited any longer, she'd run right back into his arms, so she turned away, shifted swiftly to her wolf form, and trotted out of the cave.

No sooner had she left the tunnel and entered the main cave than she heard a savage roar and turned, faced by an enormous silvery Dragon.

It growled again and spat fire in her direction. Spurred by terror, she dove behind a boulder. After a moment, she peeked out, but the Dragon still crouched in the distance, its gray gaze fixed on the rock. As soon as he saw her, he spat more fire.

Closing her eyes, Charity tried not to think about her past experience with Dragons. Trembling, she thought about the destruction they caused and how brutally they killed.

Finally getting hold of herself, she cursed under her breath and once again glanced around the rock toward the Dragon. The savage creature blocked the cave exit. Even if she tried to run back to Shane's cave, it would burn her up before she reached the safety of the small tunnel.

She wasn't sure how long she waited there, trapped by the Dragon. Then she heard tapping from the small tunnel. The sound distracted the Dragon as well and it inched closer, sniffing deeply. A dark red haze appeared around the Dragon's head and it blinked its enormous pearl-like eyes, then they closed and it flopped onto its side in a deep sleep.

Shane stepped around the Dragon. This time he wasn't dressed in his Wildman attire, but in worn work boots, dirt-stained jeans, and a dark green, long-sleeved T-shirt that hugged his sleek torso. He carried a backpack and his long hair, though still unkempt, was bound at his nape. He looked so sexy -- wild yet civilized, and he made Charity tingle all over.

She drew a deep breath and moved from behind the rock.

He grinned in her direction and held up a pouch of black silk. "Compulsion dust. There's no telling how long he'll be asleep, though, so I suggest you go now."

"Not before we kill it," Charity strode toward the Dragon, but Shane grasped her arm.

She spun, meeting his gaze. Once again her heart leapt at the sexy look in his eyes. "There's no need for that," he said. "It was only defending its lair."

"They're brutal creatures. If you can make compulsion dust powerful enough to control a Dragon, then I'm surprised you didn't kill it long ago and take these caves as your own."

"I told you before. You can't own nature. Even the Dragon serves a purpose. Now we need to go before he wakes."

"How can you be like that when they've driven your own kind out of the north?" she asked.

"I know most other races consider the Wildmen savages, but they understand and accept the laws of nature. To kill for food or in self defense is one thing. To kill without purpose is unworthy of the lowest creature."

She sighed and shook her head. When he talked like that and looked at her with those beautiful green eyes, she was lost. Charity knew she should run as far from this

gorgeous, sensual man as she could. He was more dangerous to her than the Dragon, because he had the potential to steal her heart.

Yet she stood rooted in the spot, her gaze locked with his. "All right," she said. "I suppose I should thank you for saving my life. Again."

"It's my pleasure. Again." He strode toward her and placed a hand on the back of her head and drew her closer for a kiss. His tongue slid between her lips and hers met it with long, tender strokes. When the kiss finally broke, he whispered against her lips, "Are you sure you couldn't use a little company? This deep in the Wicked Wild, there's safety in numbers."

Her gaze swept him and she asked, "Were you going to follow me?"

Grinning, he said, "No. You said you wanted to be alone. I'm not a stalker."

"Then what's with the traveling gear?"

"I don't live in the Wicked Wild. I have an apartment and a business in Grimton City. I was out here visiting my Wildman relations and also gathering herbs and other natural ingredients for my salves. That's what I do for a living. Make magical salves. I have a shop."

This interested her. The more she learned about this man the more he fascinated her. "Isn't it unusual for either an Elf or a Wildman to live in the city?" she asked.

"Yes, but have you noticed I'm not typical?" He playfully wiggled his eyebrows and she gave a little laugh.

"Yes, I noticed."

"My cousin, Dylan, lives in the city, too. If you want to meet a really unusual Elf, he's it. He runs a shelter not far from my shop where he helps out magical folk who turned down the wrong path."

"You have an interesting family," she observed.

"Yeah. What about you? You're of magical origins, aren't you? I mean you're not a human who became a werewolf."

"My mother was a Valkyrie. She's dead now. I never knew my father."

"I'm sorry."

"What about your family?" she asked.

"My parents are still living. I'd just come from visiting them when my path crossed yours."

She studied him, torn between giving in to her desire and following the strict rules she had long ago created for herself.

He smiled and sighed. "I should get going."

"If --"

"Yes?"

"If you didn't need to harvest ingredients, I'd take you up on that offer to travel together."

"If you mean that, I'll harvest them along the way, but if that's an excuse not to hurt my feelings --"

"It's not that. Really. If you still want to come, I'd like the company. If you don't, I understand. I haven't been all that personable -- other than the sex thing."

"You don't need to explain anything. I mean, we just met. Not that I wouldn't like to get to know you better."

She gave a little laugh and shook her head. "Are you sure about that? We werewolves don't have the best reputation."

"And Wildmen do?"

"You've got me there, Shane."

He gestured with his hand toward the forest. "Shall we go?"

They left the snoring Dragon and traveled swiftly over the rock and root-strewn ground until they were a safe distance from the cave.

"What are you looking for anyway?" he asked as they walked through a particularly heavy growth of vegetation.

She took a moment to consider how she should answer. Maybe telling him the truth was the best way to handle the situation. After all, he seemed much more familiar with this area than she did. Maybe he knew the path that she had forgotten over the years.

"I'm looking for a house that belonged to a wizard called Egan."

Shane's brow furrowed. "He lived by a swampy offshoot of Hot River, if I recall. I didn't know him personally, but by his reputation, since he was one of the few wizards familiar with magic that worked on Wildmen. They avoided his domain. He died a few years back, I believe."

"Seven years back," she said softly.

"Why do you want to go there?"

"I'd rather not talk about it now, if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind," he said, but already he was looking at her with curiosity tinged with sympathy. This man, with his gentle yet stubborn nature, was overtaking her defenses and for the first time in her life she wanted to surrender.

* * *

Around midday they stopped in a clearing where Shane gathered some of the roots and herbs he needed for his salves. Then he and Charity sat by a stream to eat a meal of cheese and fruit he'd packed in his bag.

He selected a ripe berry and held it to her lips. She took it and he kissed her.

"Mmmm," she said, licking her lips. "Delicious."

"The berry or the kiss?"

She smiled. "Both."

He kissed her again, this time sliding closer and taking her in his arms. For several blissful moments they indulged in deep, tender kisses. Charity's arms slid around him. She stroked his back and clutched handfuls of his long, thick hair.

Shane's hands roamed over her, caressing every part of her he could reach. His fingertips traced the sides of her breasts, then trailed over them. He cupped the soft mounds and squeezed gently.

"Harder," she whispered.

He tightened his grip slightly, but not nearly hard enough.

"Shane, please. Be rough this time."

"Rough, or do you want pain? You know how I feel about that."

He bent to kiss her again, but she braced her hands against his chest and met his gaze. "If you don't do what I ask, then I won't make love with you."

"What you want isn't making love. I don't know what it is, but it has nothing to do with love."

Frustrated, she closed her eyes and shook her head, then opened them and said, "You don't understand. I can't have gentleness right now. If you make love to me like we did last night, I'm not sure I'll be able to walk into that house."

His brow furrowed and she almost wished she hadn't said that. Shane was the curious type. He wanted to understand her and that was impossible because she no longer understood herself. "What is it about that house?" he said, more to himself than to her.

"Shane." She grasped his face and kissed him. Hard.

It had no effect. When the kiss broke he continued gazing at her with those calm yet searching eyes. "I won't let you use lovemaking as a way to prepare yourself to face your fears," he said. "It's meant to be joyful. A time to feel safe and cared for. If you need support in that house, I will be right beside you, but I won't let whatever evil is attached to that place taint our intimacy."

No one had ever spoken to her like this. She'd known abuse from her captor, sex without emotion from men like Hugo, and respect from her pack members, but no one had ever looked so deeply inside her as Shane did. Perhaps no one believed that Charity the Werewolf Queen had a vulnerable side -- a part of her that wanted to be held, comforted and loved like any other woman. "You're a strange man, Shane. I've never met anyone like you. Most men don't ask questions. They just give me what I want."

"No," he said, with a pointed look. "They give you what you ask for. They have no idea what you want."

"Sometimes I'm not sure I know what I want, either," she whispered.

Taking her face in his hands, he gently stroked her cheeks and said, "I think I know. Let me show you."

She nodded slightly and her eyes fluttered shut as he pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. Then he kissed her temples and the tip of her nose. Finally his lips touched hers gently, chastely. For several moments he merely moved his lips against hers in comforting rather than passionate kisses. As she relaxed against him, the kisses deepened.

First he sucked her upper lip, lightly running his tongue along it and biting so gently she scarcely felt the pressure of his teeth. Then he did the same to her lower lip. When his tongue slipped into her mouth, she was more than ready for it. She longed for every warm, wet stroke, each tender thrust.

Shane's hands swept her shoulders and back, then moved down to cup her bottom. He kneaded the spheres and tugged her closer.

She moved onto his lap and wrapped her legs around his lean waist, relishing the feel of his stiff cock pushing against her clit. If only he wasn't wearing pants. Yet in spite of his obvious arousal, he seemed in no hurry to tear them off and fill her with his erection.

They took their time, savoring each kiss and running their fingers through each other's hair. Charity loved his scent -- so fresh and masculine. In spite of his Wildman characteristics, he carried the aroma of an Elf. Very pleasing and so sexy.

He broke their kiss, took one of her full breasts and lifted it high as he bent his head. He captured her stiff nipple and ever so gently scraped it with his teeth, then he swept his tongue over it and sucked it into his mouth. Little thrills of passion coursed through her and she moaned, clutching his head.

His wet mouth teased her nipple for several moments and she squirmed against his stiff cock. Her clit ached with need, and her pussy grew hot and damp. She could almost feel him inside her, filling her with his magnificent satin-and-steel cock.

Finally he left her breast and nuzzled her neck. He moved slightly, rolling her onto her stomach. Sweeping her hair aside, he began covering her shoulders and back with those wonderful, delicate kisses. She relished the feel of his soft yet firm lips and the tickle of his coarse beard against her flesh. He kissed down her spine, then gently bit

each ass cheek, yet it wasn't a painful bite as she had received from past lovers. This was a slight pressure from his pointed teeth. It teased and aroused, making her sigh with pleasure. Next he licked the places he bit.

His warm, wet tongue slid lightly along the indentation of her ass before he kissed the backs of her legs from her thighs to her knees.

"Gods, Wolfy, I want you so much," he murmured between kisses.

"I want you, too, Shane," she said. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Please fu... I mean make love to me."

She rolled onto her back and he leaned over her, bracing his hands on either side of her head. She glanced at the chiseled muscles in his arms and trailed her fingertips over his gorgeous biceps, tracing the veins that ran along them.

Then she took his face in her hands and looked into his eyes, wondering if he could see how much he meant to her. "Make love to me."

Smiling slightly, he closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. When he opened them, she saw such desire burning in them that another thrill shot through her. She thrust against him, needing the pressure of his cock against her clit.

She bent her knees and parted her legs, welcoming him.

It took scarcely a moment for him to shed his clothes, then he covered her with his big, hard body. She gave a little laugh of pleasure. Her hands roamed all over him, up and down his sleek spine and over his rock hard ass.

"Look at me, Charity," he said and she did.

Looming above her, he stared at her with those big green eyes that never failed to turn her legs to liquid. Their gazes locked, he filled her with a long, slow thrust. Buried inside her, he bent and kissed her. He thrust his tongue into her mouth to the same rhythm as his hips. His thick cock rubbed her in all the right places and she could scarcely control herself.

Panting, she clung to him, her hips lifting in time with his thrusts.

"Oh, Shane," she moaned, almost overwhelmed by emotions. It wasn't just physical pleasure, but something deeper, something she'd never imagined feeling. In all her life she had never dreamed of sex being like this, nor had she thought a man like Shane existed. He was gentle without being weak, tender yet masculine.

The first orgasm struck fast, making her heart pound and her entire body tremble. Shane didn't come after her, though. He waited, his big, hard body still as she throbbed around his cock and writhed beneath him. She had scarcely caught her breath from the first climax when he began thrusting again, driving her toward another.

She reached three orgasms before he rewarded himself with one of his own. As she neared her fourth, she felt him trembling, his breath harsh as he pumped into her so hard and fast that all she could do was wrap her legs around him and surrender completely.

No sooner had the first orgasmic pulsations struck her than he gave a guttural cry of passion and joined her in ecstasy. Somehow he managed to avoid collapsing on top of her, but lowered himself to the ground and lay, his body half draping hers. Her eyes closed, she listened to their panting breath and enjoyed the feel of his warm flesh against hers.

After a moment, he lifted his head and brushed wisps of hair from her face. He kissed her cheek and she smiled at him.

"We should go," he said. "We still have a long walk ahead of us."

Her smile faded, as did her contentment. A sinking feeling overtook her when she thought about the house.

Shane must have noticed the change in her, because he said, "We don't have to go on, you know. We can return to my cave or I can escort you back to your pack."

His gentle ways had started to affect her already. If anyone else had suggested that she needed an escort anywhere, she'd have taken a bite out of him -- and not a love bite. Now she merely shook her head and lovingly stroked his face. "No. This is something I need to do."

"And you still don't want to tell me why?"

“No. Maybe later.”

He sighed and nodded, then stood and offered her his hand. Charity accepted it and he tugged her to her feet and into his arms. They kissed once more, then she stepped away. It was time to go.

Chapter Five

Shane and Charity continued on their way, even deeper into the forest. The air grew cooler and she shifted to her wolf form. From the corner of her eye, she saw Shane watching her change shape. She approached and sniffed him with her wolfish nose.

Shane remained still under her inspection, moaning softly with desire when her wet tongue lapped the side of his neck. She gently raked her sharp teeth over the flesh, not to hurt but to tease. A technique she'd learned from him, she thought with a smile.

His hands roamed over her, cupping her breasts, his thumbs brushing the elongated nipples poking through her shaggy red wolf coat.

"Do you have any idea how sexy you are?" he whispered.

She gave a husky laugh and said in a deep, primitive voice, "I'm glad you think so."

Cupping her ass, he squeezed then patted it. "We better get going. It will be dusk in a couple of hours and though I can see in the dark, I doubt my night vision is as good as yours."

They continued through the forest, pushing their way through the vegetation until another rocky path opened up. She paused and a shudder tore through her. There was something familiar about this place.

"Charity." Shane placed a hand on her lower back. "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

"The house is about a mile down this path. Do you want to continue?"

"Yes," she whispered. Her stomach knotted and her throat constricted. Why was she doing this?

Because she had to. For years she had avoided this place, fearful of once again being trapped in Egan's hellish house.

They continued down the path and too soon for her taste, the moss-covered stone house loomed in the distance. It had been abandoned for years and part of the roof had caved in. Several windows were broken and the wind carried a stale scent from the ruins. There was no sign of the cruel wizard who had once owned it or the prisoners who had served him.

For a moment she was the fearful young woman who had escaped this place, then rage overtook her.

"Charity, what's wrong?" Shane asked.

She turned toward him, growling. Then she met his gentle green gaze and some of her anger faded -- or at least it was no longer directed at him. "I'm going inside," she said, her voice rough, even for a werewolf.

Shane followed her and she was grateful for his presence. In truth, if he hadn't been with her she wasn't sure if she would have had the strength to enter the house. Inside, they wandered around the abandoned rooms. Outside the master bedroom, she paused, her heart pounding. Drawing a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped into the place where she had suffered the most.

The dark wood furniture was covered in dust, but in her mind she could still see him sitting behind the desk, his icy blue eyes tearing through her, his long, tapered fingers ready to strike her with a painful spell.

She could still see him lying naked on the bed, summoning her to him through magic, and forcing her to --

With a howl of pure rage, she leapt onto the bed and shredded the quilts and mattress with her claws. She kicked and clawed the furniture and it splintered like twigs beneath her wolfish strength.

After a moment, she stood, panting amidst the rubble.

Shane, who had been watching her from the doorway, approached and touched her shoulder. She flinched, but when he took her in his arms she went willingly and buried her face against his chest. Locked in his arms, she changed to her human form.

After a moment, he asked, "Do you feel better?"

"Sort of."

"Is he the one who made you a werewolf?"

"No," she said, gazing up at him. "That was another man. Hugo. Unlike you, he was more than willing to give me the pleasure-pain I... I craved until meeting you. You've done something to me, Shane. Changed me."

"Have I? Or did someone else change you long ago?"

"I thought I knew the answer to that, and so many other questions, but I don't understand anything anymore. For years I've feared this place. I learned to hate here. I hated Egan. I even hated my mother for allowing me to be born in this house, but it wasn't her fault. She was a prisoner, too. I hated Hugo for making me a werewolf, but the truth is I asked for what he gave me and I love having the power of the wolf."

Shane caressed her face and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I was Egan's sexual slave. He was a cruel bastard. I remember he punished many of his slaves by abandoning them in the area of the Wicked Wild where you and I first met. Slaves who were abandoned out there never returned. He didn't punish me like that because he liked to keep me at his disposal. He'd use compulsion dust on me often and when he used me in his bed he enjoyed causing pain. Sometimes he would give pleasure with pain." She stepped away, feeling heat rise in her face. She had never talked about her experiences with Egan. Why was she telling Shane?

"That explains a lot," he said softly. "How did you finally escape him?"

"He grew tired of using my mother and abandoned her in the heart of the Wicked Wild. I bided my time, waiting until the magical shield that kept us imprisoned was at its weakest. I managed to break through and went searching for my mother."

"Did you find her?"

"What was left of her." She swallowed hard, once again closing her eyes against the memory. "A young Dragon had... killed and partially eaten her. It was terrible. I just kept running. Egan must have assumed I died out there like the other slaves. For several years I lived on the edge of the Wicked Wild, close to Hot River Campground. A

few years ago I took up with Hugo. After one night in his bed, I became a werewolf and I have loved every moment of the power. I guess that makes me as bad as Egan."

"No." Shane held her at arms' length. His green eyes, fierce with emotion, stared into hers. "You are not evil, but you are confused."

"I was a werewolf queen."

"But you left your pack."

"To find answers. Mainly the answer to why I let Hugo live when I could have killed him to avenge myself and my sisters. He created every female wolf in my pack."

An expression of even deeper anger passed across Shane's face. "Then why did you let him live? Fear?"

"No! I never feared Hugo," she spat. "He... he seemed to regret what he did. He was prepared to pay for his crime. And a woman I love very much, one who asked me to give her the power of the wolf, had fallen in love with him. He was different because of her, or maybe he had always had some good inside him and she just helped him find it. In a way, you've done that with me."

A slight smile touched his lips.

"It's true," she said. "Maybe our paths were meant to cross. I don't think I could have come here without you, Shane, and I have never been able to talk about my past with anyone else."

"I'm glad I could help." He glanced around the room. "Do you want to stay here for a while?"

"No," she said with a look of contempt. "I've done all I have to do here. I'm ready to go."

"Back to your pack?"

"Not yet. I still need some time."

"Then if you intend to stay this far in the Wicked Wild, let me do something for you."

"What?"

"Come with me to my mother's village. I'll ask the Wildmen to hold a gathering and your scent will be joined."

Charity's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"A close friend or lover of another race who belongs to a Wildman can be joined by scent. That is, through a magical rite, your scent will be passed to every Wildman in the Wicked Wild and harming you will be prohibited. You'll be safe from attacks by my kind."

"You'd do that for me?"

"I'd feel much better knowing you're safe. My kind can be... difficult."

She smiled. "That's an understatement."

"Will you come with me?"

"Yes. Besides, I'm curious to see what a Wildman village is like."

* * *

Long before the Wildman village came into view, Charity caught the foul odor and tried not to gag.

Shane glanced at her and grinned. "Their scent isn't so nice to non-Wildmen. I'm of their blood and I'm still not crazy about it. Sometimes it amazes me that an Elf like my father got used to it."

"You're lucky to have inherited his scent because you sure don't smell like a Wildman."

"That's part of the reason the females avoid me."

At that Charity gave a little snort of laughter. It hadn't occurred to her that Wildmen would enjoy their odor, yet it made sense.

They climbed up a rather steep mountainside, through a tangle of tall trees with twisted trunks. Then in a clearing in front of the mouth of an enormous cave, stood the Wildman village.

Dozens of the tall, thickly-muscled creatures mingled, attending to various tasks such as cleaning freshly killed meat from the day's hunt, hauling water from a central well, and sitting around open fires, talking in their strange, primitive language. A group

of lanky children roughhoused in a penned-off area under the watch of a female covered in shaggy salt-and-pepper fur. Other villagers walked in and out of the cave.

A black-furred Wildman approached, club in hand, and grunted to Shane, who replied in similar grunts and groans.

Turning to Charity, Shane said, "My mother is inside. Let's go."

He took her hand and they walked to the cave. Many of the villagers cast curious glances in their direction, but they didn't approach. The cave mouth opened to an enormous room where other Wildmen families sat around, eating half-cooked meat and freshly-picked roots. Though the roots didn't appeal to Charity, the wolf in her salivated at the sight and smell of the meat.

"My parents' cave is on an upper level," Shane told her and offered her his hand. "Come on, Wolfy."

Why did she like that nickname so much? Taking his hand, she followed him to a tunnel that rose at a gentle slope higher up the mountain. On their side were openings to smaller caves -- private dwellings.

Shane finally paused outside one and grunted. An answering grunt -- distinctly female -- came from inside.

With a smile, Shane entered, Charity following warily behind him.

A female, as tall as Shane and covered in reddish brown fur, stood and gave a little wail. She rose from the ground where she'd been seated, carving club handles, and accepted a firm embrace from Shane.

For several moments they communicated in the Wildman language, then the female turned to Charity, enfolded her in a bone-crushing embrace and lifted her off the ground. The smell nearly choked her, but Charity ignored her disgust, not wanting to insult Shane's mother.

Finally the Wildwoman put her down and Charity smiled. The female's eyes -- large and green like Shane's -- glimmered and for one of these creatures she seemed surprisingly good-natured.

She made some grunts and moans which Shane replied to. Charity looked at him in question.

"She said welcome to the family," he replied. "But I told her it's too soon for that. We're just friends right now. She said welcome anyway."

"Oh... tell her thank you," Charity said.

Moments later, Charity found herself seated on the floor, eating a thick slice of savory, uncooked meat. Shane munched some roots while his mother continued working on her clubs.

"My father isn't here right now," Shane said. "He left earlier this afternoon to visit the Elves. If you don't mind staying here with my mother for a while, I'm going to the village leader to ask if your scent can be joined at tonight's gathering."

"That's fine," Charity said.

Shane left the cave and she and his mother stared at each other. Charity offered a smile and the Wildwoman screwed up her face in what Charity was starting to recognize as a Wildman grin.

Chapter Six

The gathering took place after the evening meal. Charity was taken to a rather small hut built over a hot spring. Shane explained that in order for them to properly join her scent, it needed to be strong. Spending some time in the hot hut would ensure it was.

Soon after entering the hut, she was drenched in sweat from the heat of the spring. Just before the gathering, Shane returned for her and guided her to the clearing outside the main cave. The cool night air felt good against her heated flesh and she drew long, invigorating breaths. In the middle of the clearing, she stood, surrounded by the Wildmen, Shane at her side. Briefly, her wolfish instincts took over and she wondered if they intended to join her scent or devour her. She tensed as they moved closer, almost suffocating her. They sniffed loudly, then wailed and danced around her, grunting and growling.

Shane approached with a rough-looking cloth and ran it over her shoulders and back, absorbing sweat. "The healer will use this to work the magic that will allow all Wildmen in the Wicked Wild to learn your scent. They don't have much magic, but the little they do have is powerful."

"Anything you say. Right now all I want is a swim in a cool river."

He grinned. "I know just the place."

Not long after, Charity and Shane traveled a short distance down the mountain to a pleasant little brook. Moonlight shone through a space in the trees, brightening the water. A large, flat rock jutted into the water and they walked out onto it. Both were naked, so they simply stepped off the rock and into the brook.

Charity sighed with pleasure and poured handfuls of water over her skin. Then she ducked her head under, drenching her hair.

When she looked up, she caught sight of Shane a short distance away, his sleek muscles rippling beneath water-slicked flesh. He turned to her and smiled, then strode closer and took her in his arms. Their lips met in a hungry kiss.

When the kiss broke, Charity gazed at Shane and ran her fingertip across his firm, slender lips. She wanted him to make love to her, but even more she wanted to show him some of the affection he had given her. She wanted to please him, let him know how much she cared for him. It was funny how, after a lifetime of secrecy, she had gotten this close to a man she had known only a short time.

Maybe soulmates weren't just a fantasy. Perhaps she and Shane belonged together.

Since escaping from Egan, she'd had no desire to please a man with her lips and tongue. There were too many distressing memories attached. Now, here with Shane, she started to see that under the right conditions, with the right man, such an act could be pleasurable for her as well.

"Shane, come here." She took his hand and tugged him down to the rock. "Lie down and relax."

He did as she asked, an expression of keen anticipation in his eyes. Moistening his lips, he lay on the rock and leaned back on his elbows.

She grinned. "All the way down."

"Whatever you say, Wolfy."

He stretched out on his back, and she knelt between his legs. Slipping her arms beneath his thighs, she caressed his hips and lowered her head toward his groin. She gently nuzzled his cock and balls, relishing his scent and the texture of his skin and hair.

She reached out tentatively with her tongue and began licking his shaft, then she lapped with enthusiasm. Her tongue swirled around it, teasing him from base to crown. Shane groaned with delight and shifted slightly to a more comfortable position. Charity slipped her hands from his hips and clasped his cock. She took the head between her lips and sucked it. Every few seconds she swept her tongue around the head. He

seemed to like that and groaned louder. She continued licking and sucking for several moments, then flicked her tongue along the underside of his cock.

He growled, sounding more like a Wildman than she'd ever heard him. He reached down and wove his fingers through her hair. There was no missing the tension in his body, the ripple of muscles as he strained for release, yet he never grasped her hair too hard, nor did he thrust roughly into her mouth. Even in the midst of his own pleasure, he still thought of her comfort. This touched her profoundly, but she wanted him to lose control and enjoy himself thoroughly.

She began kneading his balls and stroking his cock while at the same time sucking faster, then deeper.

"Oh, Charity," he panted. "Gods, you're going to kill me. I can't take much more of this."

As if to reassure him, she released his balls, reached up, and tenderly stroked the tight muscles in his sleek belly. Then she wrapped both hands around his cock and sucked him to completion.

He gave a guttural cry and his hips lifted off the rock. Overcome by pleasure, he bucked and writhed. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on making this experience as perfect as possible for him, just as he had done for her from the first.

When he lay completely relaxed and satisfied, she moved beside him and cuddled close to his chest.

After a moment, he said, "Charity, I have an idea. Do you want to come to the city with me? You've spent your life in the Wicked Wild. Now that you've confronted your fears and your past, maybe it's time you moved on for a while."

She sighed and closed her eyes. Perhaps he was right. "I've never been to the city," she admitted. "I don't know if I'll like it."

"You could try it. Stay at my place. I can show you around when I'm not working in the shop."

She shrugged and glanced at him. "Maybe I could work for you. Earn my keep."

A smile tugged at his lips. "You're hired. Though I'm not sure the job of a shop clerk will appeal to a werewolf queen."

"I'm not the queen anymore. Right now I'm just Charity and I like it that way."

He caressed her face, kissed her, and whispered against her lips, "I like it, too."

* * *

The following morning, after stopping at a small dress shop along Hot River, Charity and Shane arrived at his Grimton apartment. She glanced at herself in the bathroom mirror. It had been a long time since she'd worn clothes. Shane had bought her a flowing skirt and a gauzy green shirt in an elfish style that looked rather nice with her tall, sleek body and long red hair.

Shane approached and stood in the open door, a smile on his lips. "You look beautiful."

He'd already told her that several times, but she still loved hearing it.

"I'll pay you back for the clothes," she said, slipping her arms around his neck.

"They're a gift," he said and kissed her. "Why don't you hang around and relax for a while? I need to go to the shop and make a special order. Dylan just called and he needs a medicinal salve."

"Can I help?"

"If you want." He took her hand and they left the apartment and walked down the stairs to the workroom of the shop below. It was spacious, with a modern kitchen setup as well as an old-fashioned hearth since Shane usually liked preparing his salves the traditional way.

Charity walked to a table on which rested several containers of various herbs and a stack of jewel-colored jars labeled *Shane's Salves*.

"What can I do to help?" she asked, watching him arrange ingredients on the table.

"Once I have a batch mixed, you can fill the jars. Later when I open the shop I'll show you how to take sales. I --"

A chime rang. Shane walked to the back door and opened it.

"Dylan. Hey," he said.

Charity's gaze darted toward the lean, black-haired Elf who stepped inside. Though lanky, he wasn't nearly as tall as Shane with his Wildman proportions. He had a longish nose, slanted amber eyes and wore a neatly-trimmed goatee. Strange, considering most Elves preferred the smooth-shaven look.

"I was wondering if I could get a calming incense," Dylan said, his voice low and soft. "I'm having some issues with a -- Oh, I'm sorry." He paused and offered Charity a slight smile. "This must be the lady you were telling me about."

"I'm Charity," she said, extending her hand to him.

Dylan shook it. "I'm Dylan. Pleased to meet you. Actually, you might be able to help me."

Her brow furrowed in question and he continued, "Shane mentioned you're a werewolf and over at my shelter I'm having some problems with a recently cursed wolf. We have him locked up because for some inexplicable reason he keeps changing at random. It doesn't even need to be the full moon."

"I've seen that happen before," Charity admitted. "If you want I can take a look and offer some suggestions."

Dylan smiled with relief. "Help from a Werewolf Queen? I'd be most grateful."

She turned to Shane and asked, "Is it all right with you?"

"By all means." He gestured with his hand. "Dylan, I'll have the salve ready in a couple of hours and I'll deliver it, since it sounds like you're busy with that wolf. Here." Shane handed him a wooden box. "Calming incense. If you need compulsion dust..."

"No," Charity answered before Dylan could. "Compulsion dust leaves annoying aftereffects on an out-of-control wolf. We'll manage without it."

Both Shane and Dylan raised their eyebrows.

"A woman of authority. I like that," Dylan said. He took the incense from Shane then walked to the door and held it open for Charity.

For the first time since she left her pack, Charity felt her old confidence return. After so long as a werewolf queen and having successfully led her pack for years, she was an expert in werewolf behavior.

The shelter was located a couple of blocks from Shane's shop. During the walk, she glanced around at the tall buildings and dozens of people walking down the sidewalk or driving along the street. Her senses were almost overloaded by the many sights and scents, but she needed to focus on the task at hand.

When they reached the shelter called *All Haven*, they stepped inside. Several people of various magical races greeted Dylan who returned the gesture while at the same time walking purposefully toward a door that led downstairs.

In the basement, Charity found a small, brown wolf growling ferociously, his clawed hands gripping the magically reinforced bars.

"Hmm," she observed. "The werewolf curse is always harder for males to control and this one is very young. Lots of energy, which probably explains why he's changing at random."

"Can you help him?" Dylan asked, concern in his amber eyes. "He hasn't killed anyone yet and we're hoping to keep it that way."

"Yes," she said with confidence. "I can help. It will take time and effort on his part, but it can be done."

For the first time she truly understood Sadie's desire to rehabilitate Hugo. There was a certain irresistible challenge in teaching an out-of-control wolf to master his power.

An indefinable twinge darted through Charity when she once again remembered that Hugo hadn't simply been a challenge to Sadie. She was also deeply in love with him. And she was Charity's wolf daughter. Though she could never condone what Hugo had done, Charity realized that maybe, just maybe, she should give him and Sadie a second chance.

"Can I help?" Dylan asked, nudging her from her thoughts.

She glanced at him. "Yes."

"Thank you for doing this. Some magical folk avoid this shelter. They don't like the work I do here."

She curled her lip. "They don't like the idea of helping people?" Then she shook her head, remembering her reaction to Sadie when she said she was trying to help Hugo. "Maybe they have their own issues and just can't deal with helping someone else. I'm sure there are other people who fully support what you do."

He smiled faintly. "You know, for a Wildman, Shane has great taste in girlfriends."

Charity shook her head, amused. "All right. Let's get to work."

* * *

Later that night, Charity sat in the basement, watching the young werewolf who had finally fallen asleep, curled in a corner of his cage.

The aroma of Shane's calming incense filled the room, soothing her as well. It had been a long, tiring day, but they had made some progress. She didn't doubt that eventually this wolf would control his powers and maybe with examples like Dylan and Shane, he might become a decent man as well.

She heard the steps creak and glanced toward the staircase. Shane descended and came to sit beside her on the battered old loveseat. He slipped an arm around her and she cuddled close to his side, closing her eyes.

"How's it going, Wolfy?" he whispered in her ear.

She smiled. "Not bad."

"Want to go home?"

"In a few minutes. Dylan will be relieving me at midnight."

"He's really impressed with your knowledge and patience."

"I'm glad I can help. You know, Shane, I've been thinking."

"Yes?"

"Dylan helps a lot of people here, many shapeshifters. He said he could use someone with my skills."

He tilted her face toward his and their gazes met. "Are you thinking about staying in the city?"

"I think I could really like it here. It's different from the Wicked Wild. Don't get me wrong, I love my pack and the woods, but right now I can do more good here. At first the pack needed guidance. They have Magda now, and in many ways she'll be a better queen than I ever was. She already knows what I'm just starting to learn. That you need to accept yourself and sometimes be lenient with others."

He smiled and brushed the tip of his nose against hers. "You're a fantastic woman, Charity. And I think your name fits perfectly."

She snorted. "I don't know about that."

"If you're staying here, do you want to live with me?"

"I wouldn't want to be any trouble."

"You're the best kind of trouble." He tightened his grip on her and nuzzled her neck, his beard tickling her until she giggled and squirmed.

"There is one thing I need to do, though," she said, pushing against him.

He loosened his hold and their gazes locked. "What is it?"

"I need to return to my pack and let them know what's happening. And I must permanently pass on leadership to Magda. Will you come with me?"

"Yes. Always."

Affection flooded her and she held him tightly. He returned the embrace and they sat, wrapped in each other's arms and content in each other's love.

Epilogue

The ceremony for the new pack leader took place one week later at midnight.

Surrounded by members of the female pack, Charity and Magda stood by a blazing fire pit. Smoke rose through the trees and flames leapt, casting shadows on their faces.

Shane stood apart from the group, in the shadows. Nearby lurked a chestnut-haired woman and a black-haired man. Earlier, Charity had pointed them out as Sadie, her wolf daughter, and Hugo, the werewolf who had passed his curse to so many women.

Though Shane still felt anger toward the man who had caused his beloved pain, he knew the best thing for Charity was to let go of the past. If she believed Hugo felt remorse for what he did and she was willing to release the hatred she felt, then Shane would follow her lead. Knowing she liked her wolfish side made it easier to accept.

Charity raised her hands to draw the attention of the pack and said, "Magda, I pass on leadership of this pack to you. They are yours to guide and protect." She gazed out at the pack and said, "My wolves, I give you your new leader, Magda. Obey and defend her as you have me."

The wolves howled and Magda answered their cries. Charity bowed her head to the new queen and then turned away.

"Charity, wait," Magda said.

The two women faced each other, a poignant look passing between them. Magda called, "Sadie and Hugo step forward."

The tall, chestnut-haired woman and the black-haired man approached. They bowed their heads to the new queen and Magda said, "From this moment forward, the

battle between us is over. We are no longer enemies. Sadie, your place among us is restored and Hugo, you are forgiven for your past crimes against us.”

The pack remained quiet, their silence meaning approval of their new queen’s decision.

Even from a distance, Shane saw Charity stiffen a bit, yet as promised she made no protest.

“This alliance is contingent upon your behavior,” Magda added. “As long as you remain friendly to us, we shall remain friendly to you.”

“You have my word that I will not return to my old ways,” Hugo replied, his voice deep and steady.

“Charity, I hope the anger between us will fade in time. I still love you as my wolf mother,” Sadie said, bowing her head in respect.

Charity extended her hand to Sadie who grasped it, then the two embraced.

Shane felt a sense of relief for his lover. He knew how much this reconciliation with Sadie meant to her and he was happy for her sake.

Once she and Sadie stepped apart, Charity turned to Hugo. She had accepted Magda’s decision regarding the male wolf, but Shane knew she wasn’t yet ready to offer him her hand in friendship. Hugo seemed to understand this and respectfully inclined his head toward her. She returned the gesture.

Magda called for the festivities to begin. Food was served and everyone ate and celebrated.

Grasping Shane’s wrist, Charity smiled and tugged him behind a particularly large tree. Standing on tiptoes, she looped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Shane held her snugly, relishing the feel of her curves against him. They still had so much to explore and so much to learn about each other, and he looked forward to every moment. Werewolf and Wildman, a strange but perfect joining of hearts.

Kate Hill

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>, www.myspace.com/katehillromance, or join her newsgroup at groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill. Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at www.amazon.com.