

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and a man are shown in profile, facing each other in a close embrace. They appear to be about to kiss. The background is a dark, starry night sky. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right. The overall mood is romantic and mysterious.

P *A love story of passion, danger
and primal rules.*
REY FOR

THE WOLF

KARI THOMAS

Prey for the Wolf

He was stretched out in a lounging chair against the wall, his long legs out in front of him and his arms folded at his chest. He appeared relaxed but she acutely felt the odd tension radiating off him from across the room. He reminded her of a predator just waiting to spring. The thought struck her hard: *He's every bit the wolf he shifts into.*

She couldn't explain to herself why that thought thrilled her, excited her to hot, sensual awareness of him. She was distinctively aware of every breath he took as he stared at her. For just a moment it felt as though they breathed in unison. It was an erotic feeling she'd never experienced before. She caught her breath in a small gasp and broke the pattern.

His thorough gaze traveled from the top of her head to her toes, lingering in certain spots on her body. Invisible heat flowed over her. She felt scorched -and caressed at the same time.

Bethany took another deep breath and released it slowly. "Hello, Kane."

He smiled, his lips curving in a tight slash before he answered. "Bethany."

Was that all he was going to say? It was obvious he wasn't going to make this situation any easier for her because she could see it in his eyes. It was as though he was waiting for her to make the move that would set this scene in motion. She just wished she knew what he expected. She knew he wasn't happy with the engagement; he'd already made that perfectly clear. And she'd heard him arguing with Ethan after she had moved in earlier this afternoon. He didn't want her here. Not for anything would she let him know how his resistance bothered her. Not yet, anyway.

The strained silence lingered as she stood there in the dining room doorway and they continued to stare at each other. She tried to think of something to say to break the tension between them. *Nice weather we're having, huh? Yeah, Bethany,* she mentally chastised, *that should make him look at you with less disdain.*

Kane suddenly stood and advanced on her. He walked slowly toward her, holding her gaze captive. His glide was smooth and calculated. She got the distinct impression he would look like that when he was stalking prey. She shivered. She realized she was holding her breath and gasped in a quick intake of air. *Maybe I'm that prey.*

Kari Thomas

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Also by Kari Thomas

Seducing the Hero

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Dedication:

To my dear friend Foery MacDonell for all her encouragement, and all the great vibes she's sent my way to keep me writing. Friends are the best, and Foery --- you're definitely at the top! And a big wonderful THANKS to my dad for being so patient while I wrote and let everything else remain "un done"!

Chapter One

Hunters. Murderers. The ominous words echoed in his thoughts, tormenting him, taunting him. He growled under his breath low and rough. Sitting back on his haunches, he surveyed the scene before him. His prey showed bravery, exposing their selves this early in the game. They knew his Pack was more than one hundred strong. And they knew their presence would be discovered and the alert sounded. Yet, here they were, twenty of them, unpacking and preparing for a Hunt.

Ten Shifters accompanied him. It would be a quick, easy slaughter if they attacked the Hunters now before they were fully prepared.

Kane Steele, Wolf Shifter and Alpha of the Montana Pack, turned to his cousin beside him. Using the mental link between Pack members, he said, "We'll spread out and circle them. Attack on my signal."

He stood on all four legs and lifted his head to cautiously sniff the air. Even from this distance he could smell the foul stench of the Hunters. Some of them—if not all twenty—had murdered recently. The scent of Shifter blood wafted on the wind, screaming in silent rage. Kane shook his furry head in a vain attempt to clear the sickening odor from his nostrils, but it didn't work. He stretched tense muscles, ready to spring forward and attack. Waiting wasn't something he did well, but it was a necessity when it came to striking at just the right moment.

The Pack ominously circled the small area where the cabins sat and spread out, some blending into the shadows of the surrounding forest, others moving forward into open ground. The Wolf Shifters were of various sizes, shapes and colors, but as a team they worked in perfect unison and became one strong force. Kane's wolf form was unusually large, even for a Shifter, and he noticeably towered above the other wolves. His thick coarse fur was dark brown, his eyes smoky blue; like

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most Shifters his wolf form retained the same coloring of hair and eyes he had while in human form.

Kane nodded his head, motioning his Shifter warriors to move into a tighter position. The Hunters were still unpacking, completely unaware of the danger of the approaching Pack. They thought they were safe; probably assumed their hideout was unknown as of yet. They had chosen a remote set of cabins in the mountains outside city limits for their camp, but would most likely move into homes in town later. It was their pattern, no matter where they hunted.

No one knew they were there. Good, Kane thought. No one would miss them.

Once they were disposed of, life for the Shifters would continue the same as before. It was his duty as Alpha to take care of the Pack and Kane made sure their lives were as normal as could be. Kane and the others of his Pack were prominent citizens in Kalispell, yet no one knew about their secret heritage. They lived and worked among the humans, blending in. Because of the Pack's anonymity and normal human forms, the Hunters were unable to single them out. It took a very skilled Hunter to ferret out a Shifter from among humans. But it didn't take much for a Shifter pack to destroy the Hunters once they were exposed.

Suddenly the wind changed direction and Kane immediately caught the scent of new arrivals before he heard them. "Hold." He ordered the mental command for his men to stop their advance and wait for this new development to show. When he saw the newcomers, Kane mentally cursed a bluestreak.

Women and children! Damn! Two large vans pulled up to the cabins and sixteen women and children climbed out. *What the hell is going on?* Hunters usually didn't bring their families along for a Hunt; it was too dangerous, always a matter of life and death. *We'll have to wait. Hell.* He had to think this through before he ordered the attack; there were no other options.

Despite the women and children being family of the enemy they were still innocents. Or at least, most of them were. Kane knew there were instances when a woman would join the Hunt and turn out to be just as deadly as her male kin. And he knew each child was trained in Hunter skills when they were old enough to carry and use a weapon.

Still, he couldn't justify harming a woman or a child. It wasn't in his nature. His kind didn't kill unnecessarily.

Kane bit back the angry expletives he wanted to spit out. He shook

his furry head, disgusted. He didn't have a choice. They would have to abandon the kill for now and plan a new strategy. They would wait and catch the Hunter males alone.

Reluctantly, Kane ordered his team to back off. "We'll regroup and plan for another time." As one, the wolves silently blended into the surrounding woods, and then returned to the Steele headquarters in town. The Hunters never realized just how close they had been to certain death.

Steele Construction sat in downtown Kalispell, a three story building with over fifty Wolf-Shifter employees. Kane owned the company in partnership with his younger brother, Ethan. Their family was well known in the state, although their Wolf-Shifter heritage was not. It was the main reason Kane employed only Shifters; it kept them all safe and anonymous.

That is, until Hunters found them. It was a rare occurrence and when it happened, Kane and his Pack dealt with them, keeping the event as quiet as possible from human awareness. They'd been lucky so far. Very few Shifters from Kane's Pack were lost to a Hunter. They prided themselves on surviving against such a relentless enemy and it gave them the reputation of being the strongest Pack in the States.

An hour later, Kane surveyed the group of now-in-man-form Shifters in front of him. He couldn't shake the bad feeling that something was about to change, and not for the better. His gut instinct told him their prey was going to prove more dangerous an adversary than any Hunters before them. *A storm is coming. This prey is stronger.*

"Why do you think they brought their families with them?" Seth, Kane's younger cousin, broke into his straying thoughts.

Kane frowned. On the return trek back into town, he'd tried to reason out the explanation, but couldn't come up with a logical answer. Hunters moving into a Wolf-Shifter area were never a coincidence, yet bringing their families with them was completely out of character.

"They chose Kalispell for a reason," he answered. And whatever that reason was, they must have planned for it to take awhile. "We have to find out more before we strike." We can't let them have the advantage. Too many lives were at stake.

"What if they strike first?" another asked.

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Kane shook his head. "My guess is that it won't be soon. I have the feeling the twenty we saw are only a few of the full group. There are three cabins there and not enough to house all the women and children we saw. So that means they will be settling in town and most likely using the place for meetings and storing weapons. We need to find out who they are and where they live."

Unfortunately, that task wouldn't be easy. Hunters were all human and blended inconspicuously well with the populace in any town they moved into. Unless they wore their specific hunting clothes, Shifters were unsure they were Hunters. And they never wore those clothes until they were on the hunt, ready to attack.

"The advantage is they can't recognize us either," Seth stated encouragingly. The other men nodded.

Kane's gaze roamed over every man's face and he made eye contact in the Alpha-way. His Pack were warriors—they didn't allow defeat. They protected what was theirs, no matter the cost. He knew every one of them would face death if necessary, without backing down.

"We're about to begin a very dangerous game of cat and mouse," he told them, his tone hard. A few snickered at the *cat* reference and he smiled for a moment before continuing soberly, "Make sure your families are on constant guard. Keep an eye out for the newcomers in town, find out where they settle, what they do. And most importantly, keep your pups under closer protection at all times."

He straightened his shoulders, standing taller. "We've lived this long here and survived. I'm not about to let a group of damn Hunters come in and destroy our lives. They may think they've got the advantage. I intend to prove otherwise."

I'll do whatever it takes to protect the Pack. Even if it meant he had to kill innocents to do it.

Chapter Two

If I can't pull this off, Drew is dead. Bethany Garrett wrapped her arms around her waist and shivered despite the warm sun beating down on her as she sat in her parked rental car. The implications of her failure were all too real and she felt as though she was in some kind of waking nightmare. For months now she'd tried to convince herself there was some way out of this. But, Drew's life was at stake and there was no other way to save him.

She drew in a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. "Be calm." It was time to do this. Ethan would be waiting and the sooner this was over, the better. She got out of the car and straightened her clothes. Her tight dark green mini dress clung to her curves in all the right places. She'd chosen this dress because not only did Ethan really love to see her wear it, she knew how well it sensually emphasized her petite curvy figure. Determined to use every weapon at her disposal to successfully carry out her mission, this dress was the first step. The thin shoulder straps crisscrossed over her upper chest, allowing the top of the dress to pull off a perfect vee-cleavage and leave a hint of bare breasts below. The dark green color was a perfect background for her milky white skin and red hair.

She'd always hated her coloring. She burned too easily instead of tanning. And her cameo skin tone always made her deep red hair even more noticeable. She wore the long length in a tight bun atop her head, allowing a few stray curls to curve near her cheeks and ears. Since she was a petite five-three, she reasoned the look gave her a more mature air. At twenty-four, she needed all the help she could get if she wanted to succeed.

Especially now. I'll do whatever it takes.

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Her high-heels clicked loudly on the concrete pavement as she crossed the parking lot. She couldn't shake the disturbing feeling that someone was staring at her. She carefully perused the area, her head barely turning in each direction, enabling her to covertly see if someone was watching her. But she couldn't see anyone, despite the persistent feeling. The tall building had many windows, all of them security shaded, so she couldn't be certain someone wasn't staring out at her even now, watching her every step as she slowly moved to a destination she had no wish to go to. *It's just my overactive imagination. I've got to stop this.* The last thing she needed was a case of out-of-control nerves. It wouldn't save Drew.

She opened the large door to the Steele Construction office and, head held high, stepped inside. She stopped just inside the door to let her eyes adjust from the outside glare and took a fortifying breath of courage. She resolutely ignored the little voice in her head screaming the warning to forget all this and *just run.*

The receptionist sitting behind the large desk in the foyer immediately greeted her with a question. "Are you Miss Garrett? Ethan is waiting for you in his office."

Bethany blocked out the insistent mental warning still shouting in her head and followed the directions the woman gave to Ethan's fourth floor office. Her steps slowed as she approached the door with Ethan's name on it. It was ajar and she could hear voices inside. Angry voices. She stopped. Should she just walk in, or should she wait for whomever it was Ethan was arguing with to leave? She inhaled a deep calming breath into her lungs and then slowly exhaled. It didn't help. Her nerve endings tingled with fearful apprehension.

She hated being afraid. And she'd been in a constant state of fear since that day when she'd first discovered Drew's predicament. It was only sheer willpower that had her here now. *How could you do this, Drew?* She frowned. The *why* didn't matter as much now, she thought, and shook her head. Only the *how* to make it right and manage to save his life mattered. *All our lives.* She had to do this. She and Tess shouldn't have to pay for Drew's mistake. She squared her shoulders, checked to make sure her dress was at a perfect thigh-length and stepped forward pushing the door open. The first thing she noticed was that both men inside suddenly stopped arguing. A stark, anger-tinged silence filled the room.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her gaze was instantly snared as she

stared into the icy blue eyes of the tall man standing next to the window. A shiver—oddly rough—shook her from head to toes. She couldn't think straight, almost forgot to breathe.

She'd been told that Kane Steele was a force to be reckoned with. But no one had warned her this enigmatic man would have such a startling impact on her. Instantly. *Mind. Body. And Soul.* She felt the stark, engulfing power of him waft over her like an invisible wave, oddly sensual, oddly...primal. Her body reacted instantly, her nipples hardening, her breath becoming catchy. Sudden panic welled from deep inside her and she clenched her hands together. *What have I gotten myself into? I can't do this. I have to get out of here. Now. Before it's too late.*

Some inner voice inside her whispered tauntingly, *It's already too late.*

Kane Steele was the very embodiment of everything male. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his overpowering form and she was acutely aware of her own erratic breathing as she stared. She hoped he didn't notice her sudden unease. That wouldn't bode well. She'd never encountered a man like this before and she wasn't sure she liked this unwanted reaction from simply looking at him. How in the world was she going to control this situation if she couldn't keep her body from reacting this way?

He towered over his brother's six-foot frame by several inches. His body was lethal-lean, toned, tanned. His long legs were encased in tight blue jeans that emphasized the muscles in his calves and the slenderness of his hips and waist. His thick, dark brown hair was highlighted with strands of amber-gold and his eyes were a dark smoky blue. His features were handsome in a rough, rugged way. She'd heard that his features matched his personality—steel-edged and hard. *The information wasn't wrong,* she thought. She could *feel* his hardness.

Her gaze remained trapped in his hard stare and her heartbeat increased. His glowering expression made it perfectly clear she was an intrusion he resented. She could almost sense his determination to deal with her now without giving her a chance. She'd expected that reaction. After all, she was a threat to him in more ways than one. But she wasn't sure she'd fully realized just how strong his resentment would be. *This is going to be harder than I first thought.*

Bethany lifted her chin, meeting his non-blinking glare with the calm, innocent expression she had honed to perfection in preparation for this possibly volatile meeting. His hot stare made her insides feel like jelly, but she wasn't going to be intimidated. Too much was at stake.

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Yet despite her resolve, she finally, reluctantly broke from Kane's stare as Ethan crossed into her line of vision. He came to her and pulled her into his arms. She let him kiss her. Even though it was a brief kiss, Bethany was suddenly all too conscious of Kane watching them intently. She forced herself to stay in Ethan's arms as he introduced her to his brother. For some reason, she felt safer there. She'd learned early on that Ethan was a Beta male, his personality a calm buff against any opposition. Kane, on the other hand, was everything volatile and Alpha that Ethan wasn't.

"Bethany is from an old Southern family in Atlanta," Ethan told his brother. He turned his gentle smile on her. "Say something, sweetheart, so Kane can hear that adorable accent."

Trapped again in the heated glare of his mesmerizing stare, Bethany could only manage a low, "Hello, Kane." *And if I had any choice in this, it would be goodbye, too.*

His dark brown brows arched and he leaned back against the desk, folding his arms across his wide chest. Bethany's breath hitched again. He was an incredibly sensual man, his every move smooth and graceful. That strong sensuous aura of sexuality oozed off him in invisible waves of heat as it subtly caressed her from across the room. Her nipples hardened in sudden desire and warmth pooled in her lower belly. She immediately schooled her expression into a blank look, hoping against hope that he didn't see her obviously feminine reaction to his every move.

"Welcome to Kalispell," Kane finally said. His voice was deep-toned, darkly-smooth. Bethany wondered if he knew the effect he surely had on a woman when he used that incredibly sexy, husky tone. Studying him closely, seeing *something* in his eyes, she was betting he definitely knew. *And he most likely uses it to his full advantage.* She could well imagine Kane Steele had no problem getting any woman he wanted. Any time he wanted. That thought sent invisible butterflies swirling chaotically around in the pit of her stomach. *Not good.*

Okay. Kane was definitely going to be a force to deal with. But she reminded herself that she had her own weapons too. And she was determined beyond logical thought to succeed in this mission. Even if she wasn't prepared for a man like Kane Steele, aka Alpha Wolf-Shifter, aka Too-handsome-for-her-comfort-male. She frowned. *Why didn't they warn me? They made it sound so easy.* A little better preparation for facing Kane would have been greatly appreciated right about now.

"Bethany's family attorney is prepared to buy a large section of land here in the area and she will be building a house. I told her we could take care of that part," Ethan told Kane. "Of course, it will be a 'family project' for Steele Construction now that Bethany is to be a part of our family, too."

"We haven't fully discussed all this, Ethan," Kane growled out low and Bethany gasped at the not-so-subtle implications. She'd expected him to protest the engagement, had actually counted on it. But his obvious displeasure was a bit daunting, facing it for the first time. She hardened her resolve and forced herself to think about her brother Drew.

"I know this seems sudden to you," she told Kane. *Darn, does my voice have to sound so weak-willed?* Kane had to see her as a strong woman or this wouldn't work. "But, Ethan and I are in love." Every time she repeated that lie, her conscience berated her. "It happened fast, yes, but we knew it was real. We've spent the last two months together, learning about each other and we know our feelings are true. I hope you can accept that, Kane. I really want to be a part of your family." She could only hope her voice sounded sincere enough to convince him. If not, then she'd have to try something else. She almost groaned aloud at that thought. Why couldn't this be just cut-and-dry and be over with as soon as possible?

Kane's handsome features darkened, appearing stern and stormy at the same time. He frowned at Ethan. "My brother knows how I feel about this." He turned his glowering attention back to her and Bethany almost wished he hadn't. Even an obviously angry Kane was a sexy Kane. "I'm sorry, Miss Garrett. But you have to realize I would naturally be suspicious of any woman claiming sudden love for my brother after discovering he is an heir to a family fortune the size of Montana."

Bethany gasped, indignant at the obvious accusation. Granted, she'd actually expected it. But she hated his snide tone. "Are you calling me a gold digger?"

Kane nonchalantly shrugged and the obviously male reaction fueled her slowly simmering anger. She resolutely forced herself to stay calm. The last thing she needed to deal with was his anger as well as controlling her own. "I happen to have my own family fortune, Mr. Steele. I don't need Ethan's, or your, money."

It wasn't exactly true; her family had lost its fortune and social status decades ago when she and Drew and Tess were children. Their father had forfeited the family estate and all their possessions after a bad deal

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with stocks. But she had managed to use her family name to snare Ethan's attention and had discreetly covered up the destitute state of her financial situation from prying eyes. Of course, *they* had helped. It was all part of their Plan and they weren't willing to take the chance that either Kane or Ethan would do a background check. They had put their own money at her disposal for the time it took to carry out this mission.

I only pray I can do this. She didn't want to think about failure. It wasn't an option. She stared at Kane and her heart missed several beats. Again. *He's an obstacle I didn't expect to be so ...* She wasn't even sure of the right word to describe him. He was tough. Strong. Unyielding. And she had this bad, sinking feeling he wasn't going to go down easy. She almost grinned with the thought; she was sure 'easy' wasn't even in Kane Steele's vocabulary. At that thought, a tired sigh escaped her. She was definitely in for the fight of her life.

Chapter Three

Damn, she's a complication I didn't expect, Kane thought as he stared at the petite beauty standing so defiantly, glaring so bravely at him. He had the feeling her temper matched her dark red hair. He could actually see sparks of fire glowing in the depths of her green eyes and anger etched in her smooth features.

He purposely ran his thorough gaze slowly over every delectable inch of her. His blood heated even more. His senses spiked to high alert and he felt his muscles tightening in stomach-punch hard desire. The stark reaction startled him. He couldn't recall a time he'd ever been this instantly affected by a woman and never this hard. Lusty, erotic images swamped his mind, clouding his vision for a moment and pushing back all his common sense. He had the sudden urge to turn primal and pick her up and carry her out of here to a place more private. Where no one else could disturb them ...

His basic primal instincts had instantly reacted to her as he'd watched her cross the parking lot. Her short tight dress emphasized every sexy curve, tiny waist, slim hips and her long smooth legs. His mouth had watered just perusing all that soft silky-sheen skin exposed by that damn slip of a dress. She walked with a sensual grace that belied the feisty temperament her red hair indicated and it took little imagination to guess a fiery passion lurked just beneath the surface of that perfect package.

Man, she's incredible. Her face was captivating. He could easily stare at her for hours. That thought disturbed him. His gaze caressed over her cameo complexion and exquisite features again, wondering why he was so instantly captivated with her. He noticed every inch of her high cheekbones, cat-eyes with long silky lashes, cupid-bow mouth. His

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hungry gaze settled on her mouth. An overwhelming need hit him hard: he wanted to taste those lips. Hell, he wanted more than just a taste. The images in his mind were so explicit; he had to swallow back a telltale moan.

An aching hunger steadily built, sizzling hot and deep inside him; one he knew he had to fight with every ounce of strength and willpower he possessed. *Or all hell will break loose.* He almost groaned aloud at his thoughts. *And I won't give a damn.* Nothing else would matter if he gave in to the demands of his primal side and claimed this woman like he suddenly wanted to. There would be no turning back.

He forced himself to remember why she was here. She wasn't free prey. She belonged to his brother. His thoughts turned darker. He couldn't believe Ethan's foolishness. What had his brother been thinking? It wasn't forbidden for a Shifter to date or marry a human, but it wasn't something encouraged either. Shifter mating Shifter, kept their bloodlines strong, their heritages intact. The Steele family's bloodlines were pure and Kane had never once considered that Ethan would want to contaminate them by marrying a human. *Granted, she's one potently sexy human, but that's no excuse.*

He studied Bethany more closely as she and Ethan talked in low tones. What was it about her that made his brother completely forget his heritage and fall under her spell? Was Ethan reacting to her, physically? *Just like I am. Damn.* Or was she just a good actress and had seduced his brother into thinking he was in love with her? Both brothers had been under scrutiny from gold digging women for years, but they always managed to escape the clutches of any woman out solely for their money. Sexual liaisons were one thing. Matrimony was another, altogether different situation. Kane considered himself lucky that no woman had ever been able to tie him down. He enjoyed them, used them, but didn't want to be committed to one.

Yet ... there was something different about Bethany Garrett. The instinctive, primal side of his nature was definitely already lusting after her. He frowned darkly. Was it only lust? He immediately pushed *that* unwanted thought right out of his head. Lusting for his brother's woman went against everything wolf in him. Like their wolf counterparts, Wolf Shifters mated only once in life. Ethan had chosen Bethany. Kane knew he had to get control of his reactions to her now, because he would never willingly betray his brother. The logical side of him demanded he get her out of their lives as soon as possible. He resolutely drugged up the

willpower to force his body back under control and opted for the practical side's choice. He made his decision right then. Ethan would get over it.

"You won't be offended if I have my attorney check into your background, would you, Miss Garrett?"

Her face paled slightly, but she raised her chin in that adorably stubborn tilt she had done earlier and met his gaze with green fire simmering in her cat-like eyes. Her bravery added another notch of admiration to his estimate of her. He didn't like it one bit.

"I don't mind," she answered, silky smooth. "In fact, I would expect it, Mr. Steele."

Touché, darling. Her spunk fueled the fire, the undeniable lust still stubbornly simmering deep inside him. *Just great.* He was going to have to be really careful around her. He couldn't afford to let his defenses be affected by his physical reaction to her.

"Okay, you two," Ethan admonished with a grin. "Time-out. You are allowed to be on a first name basis, you know."

Kane smiled disarmingly, purposely showing his teeth for a moment. "Fine," he murmured silkily, "Bethany." *Damn.* He ran a hand over his face. He'd uttered her name like a soft caress. Her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of pink and he realized she'd heard the same tone in his voice. Not good.

Bethany held out her hand. He ignored it. Touching her was the last thing he should do. *Ever.* She finally lowered her hand and frowned at him. He almost grinned. He had a feeling he would enjoy seeing the red headed beauty lose her temper. It couldn't be healthy to keep all that obvious hot-blooded passion bottled up inside. And man, when she finally did explode! He wanted to be there. Hell, if he was truly honest with himself, he had to admit he wanted to be the one to cause the emergence of that sensual display of fireworks. Following those unruly thoughts, he suddenly realized he didn't feel like grinning anymore.

"I'm taking Bethany to look at a few properties on the west side of town. Can you meet us at Fonzella's for lunch around one? We can discuss plans then." Ethan didn't wait for Kane's reply and ushered Bethany from the room. As soon as she was out of his sight, Kane sucked in a deep cleansing breath. *Damn.* He could still smell her scent—uniquely different, tantalizing, ultra feminine. The sweet alluring essence of her settled deep into his body, into every pore, touching every nerve ending.

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It was definite now.

There was prey in his sights.

Prey he had no business going after. He'd do well to remember that and concentrate on the more important problems.

Still, despite his resolution, his wolf soul reared to readiness. He admitted the truth, accepting it with the determination that was so much a part of him. He just wasn't sure which of his prey would be the most satisfying to hunt – The Hunters. Or...Bethany.

Twenty minutes later she still shivered deep inside. Bethany frowned. Kane Steele affected her like no other man ever had in her life. *And I don't like it one bit.* It only added to the complications this situation presented. In order for her mission to succeed, she had to have Kane – as well as Ethan – completely smitten with her. But after meeting the man, she had her doubts as to whether or not she was strong enough to handle him. He was definitely out of her league. At thirty-four, he was far more sexually experienced than she was. Ethan had even mentioned that his brother was considered a playboy in most circles.

And that was the exact reason *they* had chosen her for this mission. Kane's reputation for dating only the most beautiful women had put her in that group. They were sure her looks would get Kane's attention immediately.

It worked. Too easily. But now she was having second thoughts. Kane Steele's direct attention made her uncomfortable in ways she'd never experienced. His stare was skin-scorching hot, his smoky gaze intent and thorough. He exuded an aura of rough sex appeal, practically oozed it from every pore.

And he knows it, too.

She had to keep her wits. She had to be strong. *I can't fail Drew.* She was not going to allow one incredibly sexy man to get in the way of saving her brother's life.

Time to start. She turned to Ethan, sitting beside her in the car. "Are you sure Kane won't mind if I stay at your house while I'm here?" *As if I didn't already know the answer to that.*

Ethan smiled. "I'm sure, sweetheart. He would expect you to stay with us, considering we're engaged now. Don't look so apprehensive. Kane's bark is worse than his bite."

“Right. That’s why I feel so chewed up and spit out after meeting him.” Unfortunately, it wasn’t the only thing she was feeling after one round with Kane.

“I think he’s jealous,” Ethan said in a teasing tone. “You’re so beautiful and he’s not happy that I found you first.”

Heaven help her, those words made her heart race and her blood heat. Kane’s intense perusal had been startlingly lustful and aggressively sexual. She’d felt the chemistry between them instantly. If she could only find the right way to do this, her mission would be over quicker than *they* expected. Drew would be free and she could go away—as far as possible from one disturbing Kane Steele, Wolf Shifter.

“I’m the lucky one,” she said. “If you had met my sister first, you wouldn’t have looked twice at me.”

“Ha. She can’t be more beautiful than you, Bethany.”

“She is. Men fall in love with her instantly.”

Ethan chuckled softly. “By the way, where was she while I was visiting you in Atlanta? You said your brother was in Paris for the summer, but you never mentioned where your sister was. I was hoping to meet them both before I brought you home to Montana.”

They had Drew, but Tess was safe. For now. She had sent her younger sister to stay with a friend who lived in the remote hills of Scotland. As long as she was there, *they* had no idea where to look for her and she couldn’t be used as a pawn in the morbid game of death They had planned for the Shifters.

It was Drew’s fault she and Tess were in this mess. He’d first become involved with the group known as Hunters years ago when he’d helped them track a pack of Shifters in the mountains of Canada. Drew’s reputation for being one of the best wildlife trackers in the States kept him busy leading groups into uncharted territories. Until one particular expedition—that memorable hunt—neither he nor Bethany nor Tess had ever known that Shifters existed.

Bethany and Tess had been horrified to discover the truth. And even more upset to learn their brother was involved with a group known as Hunters who made it their life’s work to hunt down Shifters and kill them. The sisters had pleaded with Drew to expose the Hunters to the authorities. But he refused. He was being paid a fortune to track for them and to keep their organization a secret. Bethany and Tess gradually distanced themselves from their brother—they hated what he was doing. After that, they lost track of his whereabouts for over a year. Then, out of

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the blue the Hunters Organization approached Bethany with an offer she couldn't refuse. No matter how much she wanted to.

They told her that Drew's conscience had begun to bother him and he finally refused to help track the Shifters anymore. Without his expertise, the Hunters were basically at a loss and had a more difficult time finding Shifters, because the species blended so well with the human populace. Drew's uncanny, proficient knack to track them was an asset they weren't willing to lose.

Drew was whisked away to some untold destination where he would be kept prisoner until Bethany helped them. If she refused, they would kill him. They didn't hesitate to tell her that she and Tess were next on their elimination list.

Drew had located the Montana Pack of Wolf Shifters before his conscience started bothering him. The Hunters had searched for this particular pack for decades because of their reputation for being an undefeated group of fighters led by two brothers. Although the Hunters Organization knew the reputation of the brothers who led the Pack, it was hard to find their home base. Kane, Ethan and their Shifter warriors had made forays into other states to help ferret out and destroy Hunters on the track of other Shifters. More Hunters had lost their lives to this Pack than to any other. It became an obsession to find the brothers' Pack and wreak revenge by destroying every one of them.

And *they* had a Plan. *A plan I have no choice but to help execute.* Not that, she certainly hadn't tried to think of some way to thwart the Hunters and their Plan. But she didn't know where Drew was and she couldn't risk his or Tess' lives.

Getting engaged to Ethan Steele was step number one.

Seducing Kane Steele was step number two.

Until this morning, she had thought the Plan an easy task.

That is, until she met Kane and was unwillingly, undeniably caught in the invisible, sensual trap he wielded so easily.

Drew's imprisonment wouldn't be near as rough as hers.

Chapter Four

She dressed carefully for dinner, choosing a pale blue, silk sheath that sensually flowed over her curves to her feet and complimented her skin tone. Kane's favorite color was blue. Standing in front of the floor length mirror, the thought made her shiver as she surveyed herself and wondered for the thousandth time if she was strong enough to follow through.

She reached up and brushed away a few wayward curls from her face. She'd put her long hair in a loose knot atop her head in a less severe style than what she normally wore; it made her delicate features more noticeable. Not one for wearing a lot of makeup, she smoothed on a shimmery gloss over her lips and a slight buff of blush to her cheeks. Satisfied she looked as good as she could, she sighed in resignation and left the guest bedroom.

Ethan had placed her in the guest room down the hall from his bedroom. She hadn't discovered where Kane's room was yet. Just the thought of finding out made her nervous. It was something she would have to do. Later. When she could get better control of her reaction to Kane.

The big house was quiet, and she saw no one else around as she walked into the dining room. Immediately, the atmosphere changed around her. It was noticeably tense. Charged. She stopped in the doorway and instantly locked with Kane's hard stare. She almost forgot to breathe.

He was stretched out in a lounging chair against the wall, his long legs out in front of him and his arms folded at his chest. He appeared relaxed, but she acutely felt the odd tension radiating off him from across the room. He reminded her of a predator just waiting to spring.

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The thought struck her hard — *He's every bit the wolf he shifts into.*

She couldn't explain to herself why that thought thrilled her, excited her to hot, sensual awareness of him. She was distinctively aware of every breath he took as he stared at her. For just a moment it felt as though they breathed in unison. It was an erotic feeling she'd never experienced before. She caught her breath in a small gasp and broke the pattern.

His thorough gaze traveled from the top of her head to her toes, lingering in certain spots on her body. Invisible heat flowed over her. She felt scorched and caressed at the same time.

Bethany took another deep breath and released it slowly. "Hello, Kane."

He smiled, his lips curving in a tight slash before he answered. "Bethany."

Was that all he was going to say? It was obvious he wasn't going to make this situation any easier for her, because she could see it in his eyes. It was as though he was waiting for her to make the move that would set this scene in motion. She just wished she knew what he expected. She knew he wasn't happy with the engagement—he'd already made that perfectly clear. And she'd heard him arguing with Ethan after she had moved in earlier this afternoon. He didn't want her here. Not for anything would she let him know how his resistance bothered her. Not yet, anyway.

The strained silence lingered as she stood there in the dining room doorway and they continued to stare at each other. She tried to think of something to say to break the tension between them. *Nice weather we're having, huh? Yeah, Bethany, that should make him look at you with less disdain.*

Kane suddenly stood and advanced on her. He walked slowly toward her, holding her gaze captive. His glide was smooth and calculated. She got the distinct impression he would look like that when he was stalking prey. She realized she was holding her breath and gasped in a quick intake of air. *Maybe I'm that prey.*

Kane stopped mere inches from her and she could feel his male warmth radiating off his body toward her. She had the urge to step back, but the dark sensual look in his eyes mesmerized her, keeping her frozen to the spot.

He slowly raised his hand to her face and she thought her heart would stop right then and there.

Kane touched a curl that lay against her cheek. His rough padded fingers lightly skimmed the skin there with a caress she felt all the way to the pit of her stomach. His smoky blue gaze darkened seductively. "Do you ever wear your hair down?"

"What?" She blinked rapidly several times, surprised at the odd question.

"How long is it?" His husky whisper caressed over her cheek as he leaned closer and curved his hand around her nape, tangling his fingers in the wispy-soft curls.

Bethany couldn't think straight. This was exactly what she wanted, but now that it was happening, she wasn't sure she could handle it. Kane was too *-too!* She shook her head to dislodge his hand, but he tightened his hold.

"Take it down," he murmured, his tone dark and wicked.

"I'd rather not," she managed to get out. *Stay calm. Let him take the lead. Just follow.* Even as she repeated the silent mantra, she had the fleeting thought she would never again know the meaning of calm as long as she was around Kane.

Kane's smile was decidedly wolfish and a tingle of excitement she couldn't suppress careened through her entire body. He moved his hand up to the knot at the top of her head and gave a sudden hard pull of the clasp. It snapped open and her hair tumbled down from its perch, falling around her shoulders and down to her waist in thick disarray. She gasped and stepped back. "Why did you do that?"

She tried to gather the thick mass back up, but Kane suddenly reached out and captured her hands. "Let it stay down. I like it better that way."

Maybe this was going too fast. "I don't care what you like," she muttered and pulled her hands free. "Ethan likes it up, so that's the way I'll wear it." She felt too vulnerable like this, almost naked, and she didn't understand why. He made her feel things she wasn't sure she was strong enough to deal with...just yet. *Ha. Will I ever be ready for that?*

"Conveniently accommodating, aren't you."

She bent and picked up the clasp from the floor and then glared at him as she twisted her hair back into a loose knot. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged. She was already beginning to dislike that nonchalant habit of his. "You think you have Ethan wrapped around your little finger. Truth is he's smarter than that and sooner or later, he's going to

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realize this relationship is wrong.”

“Why are you so opposed to our engagement?” she demanded, surprised she could play this charade so well when her entire insides were quivering with awareness at how close he stood. “Haven’t you ever been in love? Don’t you want your brother to be happy?”

“Not with you.”

He turned away then and she almost didn’t hear that low muttered answer. The words shocked her, despite expecting them to be the very answer she needed. She cleared her throat. “Why?”

Kane walked over to the large oval dining table and pulled out a chair. He sat before he answered. “Because I don’t believe he knows what he’s getting into with you.”

His cold voice made her tremble and it angered her at the same time. She wasn’t happy with the way her body was responding to his every tone or action, but there wasn’t anything she could do to control that. So she was going to have to play out this game as outwardly calm as she could manage.

“He’s captivated by your beauty, no doubt about that,” he continued. “But, Ethan has dated beautiful women before and never wanted to make the relationship permanent.”

“That’s called *love*,” she stated, trying hard to keep the sarcasm out of her tone. “It makes a world of difference.”

“Yeah?” He raised his brows in obvious derision. “Are you so sure it’s love and not simple lust that has my brother so spellbound by you?”

“You are a jerk,” she muttered. She wanted to walk out of the room and out of this house right now. Kane’s disdain and smug attitude grated on her nerves and it took every ounce of willpower she had to keep from loosing her temper and telling him what she thought about it.

But doing that would defeat the Plan. It would mean...death.

She straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin defiantly and forced herself to walk over to where he sat. She hoped her hand wasn’t noticeably shaking as bad as her insides were. She couldn’t believe she was doing this. She reached out and gently touched his cheek with an obvious caress. An arc of electricity—intense and sensual—instantly flared between them. With a surge of mental willpower, she purposely kept her features from showing she’d felt it.

“I’ve heard that Kane Steele knows a lot about lust,” she murmured softly. “But that doesn’t mean his brother is the same. You’re just going to have to accept that, Kane.” She smiled, hoping it looked as flirtatious

as possible. "I'm here to stay."

His eyes suddenly flashed an eerie red, then darkened to blue-black and narrowed. He frowned, his brows slanting downward. She fought back the urge to smooth his brows. She didn't want his anger. She wanted something far more intimate. The thought shocked her.

He surprised her and reached up, clasping her wrist in a painful grip. "Don't count on staying, Bethany."

He flung her hand away and pushed back his chair. He stood and towered over her. Bethany caught her breath at the lethal look he singed her with, but she didn't back away. She couldn't.

"I've warned my brother about making mistakes," he muttered, his tone full of danger. "I'm giving you a warning now. Don't ever touch me again. It will be the biggest mistake of your life."

"Are you afraid of me, Kane?" She nearly groaned. She couldn't believe she'd just said those words! *Not so smart.*

"No, Bethany," he softly murmured with a decidedly wicked smile that sent her heart into overdrive. "I'm afraid of what I'll do if you touch me again." His heated gaze seared her, over her, in one swift hot caress. "I hope you have enough sense in that pretty head of yours to be afraid, too."

Before she could reply, he stomped from the room. Bethany gasped in several catchy breaths and tried to calm her racing heart as she watched him leave. She'd never heard a man's voice sound so sexy and yet so lethal all in one sentence.

Ethan walked into the room and then glanced back over his shoulder. "What put Kane in such a foul mood?"

Bethany shrugged, hoping she didn't look as flustered as she felt. It was time to change the subject. Thinking too much about Kane wasn't a smart thing to do, despite being exactly what she had to do. *I've got to get better control around him.* She wouldn't let her thoughts stray to what might happen if she lost that precious, calculated control.

"What are the plans for tonight after dinner?" she asked as Ethan seated her next to him at the dining table. Getting away from Kane sounded like a good thing to do for now. She could regroup, rethink and get a better grip on her wayward reaction to him. "I'm really eager to see more of the town, especially since I will soon be living here permanently." She wouldn't be, but that information had to be kept secret for now. Her mission was to destroy the brothers, allow the Hunters access to them and in the end, save her brother's life. After that,

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her future was way too uncertain. And she definitely didn't want to think about it. Not until she had to.

"I thought we might go to Shareem's," Ethan answered. "It's a popular nightclub downtown. Kane and I go there often and you'll be able to meet a lot of our friends and associates."

Would any of the Hunters be there? Since she had only met a few of them, she wasn't sure she would recognize others of the group. She knew they had arrived a few days before she did and were organizing their battle plans even now. Everything depended on her accomplishing her goals and setting it all in motion.

The truth was already there, but it nonetheless hit her hard, deep in the pit of her soul. She was going to be responsible for the deaths of many just to save the life of one.

I'm not sure I can do this.

But I have no choice.

Chapter Five

Kane sat at a table in a dark corner of the lounge at Shareem's and watched his brother and Bethany across the room. They sat at a large center table with four other couples, all Shifters, and didn't even know he was there.

He told himself he was watching her so closely because he hoped to catch her in some kind of deceit. But it wasn't the full truth and he knew it. He couldn't tear his gaze away from Bethany.

He growled low. Even the four male Shifters with their mates sitting beside them seemed to be captivated by her. Hell, every man in the bar was watching her at some time or another.

It didn't hinder her that her delicate beauty was emphasized by the sexy outfit she was wearing. The low cut blouse with spaghetti straps hugged her full, pert breasts and narrowed to her slender curved waist. Her black jeans were so tight; they looked like she'd been poured into them. He grinned, mouth watering. She had one sexy ass. He'd already had a hard time trying not to think about running his hands over it as caressingly as his gaze was freely doing. And he didn't dare let his thoughts stray to the mental vision of her long sexy legs wrapped around him at the same time he would be cupping that soft ass.

Don't go there. She's trouble. His mind knew that, but his body sure as hell wasn't paying any attention. He'd been semi-hard ever since he'd first laid eyes on her and it didn't look like he was going to get relief any time soon. As long as she was in his sight, he was going to be achingly hard with the undeniable, stark, eating-lust slowly burning its way through him.

And as long as she was a part of Ethan's life, he was going to make sure he kept her in sight at all times. He could cope with the lust. And

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the need. Just as long as he kept reminding himself there were other priorities. It bothered his conscience that he was lusting after his brother's woman, but he wasn't going to deny he wasn't making much of an effort to keep her out of his thoughts. His primal instincts had been on alert ever since she'd walked into the office that morning. The warning that all Hell would break loose with the impending arrival of a storm they had no idea how to fight against, kept him overly tense and alert to anything. Especially alert and aware of Bethany. He decided that was the only reason he was so intent on keeping her close. With a sudden surge of pulsing heat, his body mocked his logic and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Her soft laughter reached his sensitive ears and his groin tightened all the more. *Dammit.* He had to get control. He couldn't afford to let her affect him this way.

He resolutely pulled his gaze away from her and looked around the crowded room. The place was full tonight. It wasn't unusual because most of Kalispell's elite came here nightly. But there was something different about the atmosphere tonight, something he couldn't put his finger on. He knew most of the people here and some of them looked unfamiliar.

Kane growled low in his throat. Hunters were here tonight; he could sense them. He wished for the millionth time there was some way to tell a Hunter from a normal human. But they never gave themselves away, never looked or acted any different from anyone else while in public. Sometimes their foul stench from recent murdering gave them away, but a Shifter had to be close in order to recognize whose body the death odor came from. It was nature's way of keeping the balance even; Hunters blended as well as any Shifter did and that made them just as dangerous.

He noted how many Shifters were present. There were the usual couples, and the usual loners. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, but Kane knew something wasn't quite right. His preternatural senses were on high alert and he noticed that many of the Shifters were casting thorough gazes around the room every now and then, too.

His pack was the strongest in the western half of the United States; his warrior wolves had a reputation for being relentless and dangerous beyond the norm. He knew every one of them here tonight was being overly cautious now that the Hunters were in the vicinity.

Kane forced himself to relax. The Hunters weren't foolish enough to start something out in the open, especially when other humans could

witness their attack. He settled his gaze on Bethany again, his blood heating instantly. The Hunters he could deal with. Easily. But Bethany Garrett was a complication he wasn't sure how to fix.

She leaned against Ethan and smiled up into his face. Kane's gut clenched and he balled his hands into fists. He had the sudden overwhelming urge to march over there and drag her away from his brother. Throw her over his shoulder and carry her off somewhere...private. Then, he'd take his time showing her just what he'd meant this evening when he'd told her she should have the sense to be afraid of him.

Suddenly Bethany's gaze met his. He wasn't sure how she'd known he was there in the corner. But she zeroed in on him and their gazes locked. His muscles tensed and his semi-hard erection became full blown, pushing against his jean zipper with relentless, painful, pulsing heat. He shifted in his seat, and purposely raised his brows to acknowledge her. She blushed and turned quickly away. He grinned.

Blush away, baby. I intend to make sure you do it more often. With a start, he realized he'd already made up his mind. There was no turning away from this. From her. Seducing her away from Ethan was the only thing to do. If she truly loved Ethan—and Kane had his doubts about that—then she wouldn't be easy prey for him. But if she came to him—willingly—then he knew his conscience would be clear afterwards. He'd be doing Ethan a favor. He knew his brother. Ethan would get over it. Especially if Bethany was so easily seduced. Once he exposed her for the gold digging schemer he suspected—he hoped—she might be, then he'd get her out of their lives. Ethan would thank him.

His entire body hummed with hot sexual tension. He was going to enjoy this.

Bethany was acutely aware of Kane sitting in the corner staring at her. She could feel his intense hot gaze roam over her, invisibly touching her, setting her nerves on fire. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair and leaned closer to Ethan. She was going to ignore him no matter what she had to do.

Ethan was in deep conversation with the males at the table and the females were quietly talking to each other. Bethany had liked them all immediately; they welcomed her into their little circle without hesitation

and she felt at ease being around them.

A deep aching sadness settled in her. She was here to put a plan into motion that just might kill them all if it came to fruition. Not for the first time, she doubted her sanity for doing this. *How can I do it? I can't be responsible for their deaths.* Despite the fact they were preternatural beings, people who could shift into wolves at will, they were still a part of humanity. They had families and they had lives, just like everyone else. Why did the Hunters want to destroy them? After meeting so many of them, she couldn't bring herself to believe they were as dangerous as the Hunters made them out to be.

Drew, I swear I'll never forgive you for putting me in this position.

"Bethany, how about a dance?" Ethan broke into her dismal thoughts. She was glad for the intrusion; thinking too long on what she had to do gave her more heartache than she was able to bear and still remain sane.

She loved to dance. She had always been able to allow the music to sink into her and tune out the rest of the world. But this time, the knowledge of Kane's intense perusal from across the room made her hesitate. Ethan didn't give her the chance to say no. He stood and then gently pulled her to her feet. Bethany let him lead her to the dance floor and she went into his arms. She immediately closed her eyes as she leaned against his shoulder.

The moment his arms went around her, Ethan suddenly stiffened. Bethany lifted her head and searched his face, confused at his odd stance.

"What's wrong, Ethan?"

Ethan shrugged and then relaxed. "Nothing, sweetheart. Just thought I heard a growl."

"A growl?" She looked around the room. "An animal growl?" Would a Shifter risk exposure so carelessly with humans in the place, too?

Ethan chuckled. "No. More like a very male reaction to something someone wasn't happy about."

Oh. Instantly her gaze locked again with Kane's smoky stare. She saw the truth in his eyes, the clench of his jaw, the baring of his teeth as he smiled wolfishly at her. Her heart raced and she cuddled closer to Ethan, closing her eyes. If she didn't look at him, then maybe she wouldn't react to him. *If only!*

She was deeply aware of his hot steady stare during the entire dance. When the song ended, she was more than glad to go back to their table.

She felt his gaze follow her. This constant awareness of each other was unnerving. But it was working out the way she needed it to, so she just had to accept it and use it to her advantage. No matter what happened.

At the table, she instantly noticed a difference in the atmosphere. The males were huddled together and their mates looked uneasy. Bethany searched their faces. Their expressions were tense, their body language shouting distinctive, held-in-check aggression. She wanted to ask what was wrong, but she bit her tongue instead and sat. One of the main rules the Hunters had demanded was that she do absolutely nothing to expose the fact she knew they were Shifters. Asking questions would only stir up curiosity and expose her.

Something was definitely wrong here. Now that she was no longer in Kane's direct gaze, she also noticed the room's atmosphere felt charged with unusual pulsing energy. It was as though something important was about to happen and every Shifter in the place was ready to spring into action.

Hunters wouldn't dare attack here in public, would they? Surely, they wouldn't chance exposure so soon. Not with other humans around. They were supposed to be waiting for her to do her part in this battle before they did anything. Still, the uneasy feeling of impending doom was beginning to sink into her. She started to glance at Kane, instinctively seeking him out. She didn't want to rationalize why; she just needed to know he was there.

A disturbance suddenly broke out at the bar across the room. It was so loud; the arguing voices could be heard above the natural noise of the crowd. Bethany looked in that direction and then gasped out "Oh no!" when she saw who was yelling the loudest. Reed Leavy. One of the Hunters. She'd met him a few days ago and was told that he would be near at all times if she needed someone to contact for any reason.

It was bad enough Reed was exposing himself this way with a room full of Shifters. But even worse was the realization she recognized the Shifter he was arguing with.

Seth. Ethan and Kane's cousin. She knew by his personnel file that Seth was a hothead. He was a seasoned fighter, tough and dangerous. He never backed down from a confrontation. *Great. This was a stupid move, Reed. What were you thinking?*

She had to get Reed out of there before a physical fight started. But how was she going to accomplish that and stay out of the way? *Think fast! Or we're both in trouble if he's exposed.* Sick trepidation hit her in the

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stomach as Ethan and other male Shifters around the room suddenly stood and then headed straight for the bar. Heaven help them all. There would be death here tonight if the Shifters decided to fight.

She surged to her feet. She started to follow Ethan. A hand clamped painfully tight on her arm, effectively stopping her. Startled, she turned and stared at Kane's thunderous glare. She saw something in his smoky blue eyes she wasn't sure of. He looked every bit the primal male ready to defend his mate. The thought shocked her. She couldn't allow her thoughts to go in *that* direction.

Kane's grip tightened for a moment. "Stay here," he ordered.

"Let go of me." She struggled to pry his hand from her arm, but he gave her a hard shake and growled low. She tried another approach. "I need to stop this before it gets out of hand."

Uh oh. She had to be more careful! Those could prove to be too-revealing words and she certainly didn't want to be exposed so soon. *Try, never.*

Kane's dark brows arched in reaction to her words and he tightened his grip to the point of pain. "Oh? And why is it you think *you* are the one who has to stop it, Bethany?"

What could she say? The truth was out of the question. She didn't have time to think up a plausible answer, so she blurted out the first thought that came to her. "I know that man." She indicated Reed standing in front of Seth and bellowing at the top of his lungs. "He's my-ex boyfriend. He's also a professional boxer. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

Kane's eyes darkened and narrowed to mere slits and he growled low. The sound was nothing short of pure primal. She felt a cold shiver go down her spine. She gasped and tried to pull free again. He gave a rough jerk and she lost her balance. She fell against his hard chest.

"Ex-boyfriend?" Kane spat the word out like a curse. "Well, well. Aren't you just full of surprises, baby?"

She could hardly catch her breath as she stared up into his hard angry face. He looked like he wanted to shake her. *Or...!* She trembled, suddenly feeling too warm, too lightheaded. Trying to sound nonchalant, she asked, "You don't like surprises, Kane?"

"No," he growled again, this time rougher. The sound rumbled from his chest straight into hers. "Especially when the surprise is tied in with a lie. I happen to recognize that man, sweetheart. Reed Leavy is not a professional boxer. He's a well-known taxidermist." His eyes glared red

for a terrifying moment.

“He likes to stuff animals.” He shook her, his grip on her arms painful. “Your ex-boyfriend is an animal in his own way. Is that the kind of man you go for, Bethany? Someone more beast than the animals he stuffs?”

He pressed against her. His hard body aggressive. And aroused. She gasped in shock. “If that’s the case, baby,” he drawled silkily, “then you chose the wrong Steele brother. I’m better suited to you than Ethan ever could be.” He grinned wolfishly and her heart stuttered. “I can be all ... beast.”

Chapter Six

She couldn't have replied even if she'd had the chance. Another loud commotion came from the bar and Kane jerked his head in that direction. With a muffled expletive, he shoved her from his arms. "If you know what's good for you, you will stay here."

Bethany watched him stomp towards the fight already starting. *Stay here? Ha! Think again, Kane. Too much is at stake for me to allow Reed to blow this now.*

She pushed her way through the crowd gathered around the two fighting men. Seth and Reed were throwing punches so fast, their movements were a blur. Bethany knew that Seth, as a Shifter, was a well-seasoned fighter with preternatural strength Reed would find hard to win against. But she also knew Reed Leavy was one of the toughest Hunters in their group. He would be hard to whip.

The crowd around the two fighters got rougher. Bethany noted the ones she knew as Shifters were becoming more aggressive as other men—some most likely Hunters—pushed and shoved and shouted out mixed threats and encouragement.

Bethany panicked. Her heart raced and her skin became clammy. Her stomach had tiny invisible rocks rolling around inside. If she didn't do something now, there was no telling what would happen.

She didn't get the chance. In the blink of an eye, the crowd of angry men surged into one another and started throwing punches. The entire bar area became a thick mass of fighting men.

Bethany was jostled back as several of the female Shifters moved forward. She couldn't believe her eyes. The women were ready to join in the fight!

One of the female Shifters, a woman named Annette, caught Bethany

by the waist as she stumbled. "Bethany, hold onto me," she shouted above the noise. "Kane told me to get you out of here."

I can't leave! It wasn't an option, hadn't been from the first moment. It was anyone's guess which man would be the victor tonight. And anyone's guess *what* would be exposed after it was all over.

Annette was stronger than she was and Bethany had no choice but to allow Annette to pull her out of the bar and then into the parking lot. Annette warned her to stay in the car and then hurried back inside.

"Now what do I do?" Waiting just wasn't going to work. She had to do something. Bethany grabbed her cell phone from her purse and dialed 911. She told the dispatch operator about the fight and was assured the police were already on their way.

She waited and worried. She knew she should be thinking about Reed's possible exposure and be worried about Ethan's safety. But all she could think about was Kane. She'd seen that dangerous look of deadly retribution in his eyes when he waded into the fight. It had frightened as well as excited her. The man was all primal, alpha, instinctively wolf when it came to protecting what was his. He'd already showed a quick glance of that side of his nature to her when he'd made no secret about not liking her engagement to Ethan. She had to admit his wildness excited her. She should be shocked at that revelation, but wasn't. She sighed out her confusion. Being attracted to Kane was dangerous. She had the bad feeling that more than just her life was at stake with this mission now...

The blaring sirens of the police cars arriving stopped her from dwelling on the thoughts of being so aroused by Kane's show of lethal power. *I can't think about this. Not just yet.* She sighed. Being a southerner shouldn't make you a definite Scarlett O'Hara; avoiding unpleasant things was dangerous. Especially now.

Half an hour later, the fight had been stopped. Reed and Seth were taken into police custody. Bethany stood impatiently by the car and waited for Ethan and Kane to come out.

When they did, it took every ounce of willpower she possessed to keep from running straight to Kane. She had the sudden urge to feel his strong arms around her again. She wanted to make sure he was okay. Instead, she forced her feet to move to Ethan.

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Her gaze took in both men. They were a little scuffed up, but it was obvious they had done more to their opponents than had been done to them. Ethan was sporting a black eye. Kane had a cut on his bottom lip. She avoided looking too long at him, and her stomach clenched every time she glanced his way. But for now, she had a part to play.

"Are you okay?" she asked Ethan. She touched his bruised cheek with a soft caress. "I was so worried."

Ethan chuckled and then grimaced with the slight pain. "No need to worry, honey. We haven't lost a fight yet."

"Can't say the same for your boyfriend," Kane murmured in a rough tone. "He's pretty bad off."

Bethany frowned at him. The last she'd seen of Kane wading into the fight had been him reaching for Reed. She couldn't help but wonder how much of Reed's injuries were Kane's fault instead of Seth's. She lifted her chin and gave him a stern glare. "He's an ex. I told you that. And why should I care how he fared? Ethan is the only one I'm concerned about."

Kane smiled, the wicked slash of his sensuous lips making her heart clench in reaction. "That hurts, Beth-love. You weren't even worried the least little about me, too?"

"No." *There, let him think on that!*

Ethan put his arm around her shoulders. "Boyfriend? You knew the jerk who started the fight?"

Bethany nodded, the lie coming easy to her lips, "We broke up a few months before I met you. He's been following me, trying to get back together for the longest time. I didn't think he would come this far. I'm sorry, Ethan. I feel a little responsible for his actions tonight. He must have seen us dancing."

Ethan shrugged. "No problem, sweetheart. I can deal with him later." He grinned. "Come on, let's go home. You can nurse me and make me feel all better."

"Yeah," Kane said softly. "I like the idea of Bethany kissing our boo-boo and making them feel better." He locked his stare with hers, a lustful heat simmering in the smoky blue depths. "Ethan only has a black eye. My injury is a bit more serious." He touched his bottom lip with a finger.

Later, she couldn't have said what possessed her to do it. But before she could stop herself, Bethany locked gazes with Kane and then stretched up to place a soft kiss against Ethan's closed, bruised eye.

Then...she took the step to Kane. She leaned close, breathing in his

male scent, the heat of the fight still lingering in his sweat. Closing her eyes she touched her mouth to the outer edge of his bottom lip. The kiss was brief and butterfly soft.

She felt it all the way to the bottom of her feet.

And Kane's shocked, half-gasp, half-growl reverberated through her like a knife straight to her soul.

One, too-brief moment and yet she could still feel the firm warmth of his lip against her mouth.

Bethany stood in her walk-in closet and tried to concentrate on what to wear. Last night's events played through her mind like a movie and she couldn't get Kane's reaction out of her mind. It was those last affecting moments with Kane that she kept dwelling on.

She'd been too much of a coward to look into his eyes after she'd kissed his injured lip. She'd turned away and hurried to the car. Ethan had teased her all the way home about shocking Kane speechless and she couldn't help but wonder why he wasn't jealous or upset with her impetuous action. Ethan was so casual about the whole thing. Something nagged at her conscience, but she couldn't put a finger on it. Despite Ethan's Beta personality, he should have been at least a little jealous. Kane's reactions towards her were more than a little obvious, as well as hers to him. Yet Ethan remained unruffled.

Something told her that Kane would have reacted a lot differently if he'd been her fiancé instead of Ethan and she'd kissed Ethan like that.

Kane's rough gasp-growl echoed in her mind. She trembled, remembering the exciting sound. Bethany ran a shaky hand through her hair, absently untangling curls. "How in the world am I going to face him this morning?"

Ethan had arranged for Kane to meet them at the adjoining piece of land next to the Steele estate. The property had once belonged to the State Forestry, but later was sold at auction. One of the prominent Hunters had purchased it via a representative and was now making it available for sale so that Bethany could buy it. Part of the Plan, was to bring in as many Hunters as possible without causing a stir among the Shifters or allowing them to realize so many were moving into the territory. They would need more housing and the house Steele Construction would build for her would be their headquarters. Not for

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the first time she wondered why the Hunters needed a permanent residence. Wasn't this mission only a destroy-then-leave plan? It would take months for the main house to be built, yet they expected her to put her part in this plan into immediate effect. She cringed. She hated deceiving Ethan this way.

Last night's move—kissing Kane—had been the first on a list Bethany had mentally contrived. Her part in this plan was to seduce both brothers and then cause friction between them to the point there would be separation. The Hunters wanted them divided and thus weak when the real battle happened. That was all she knew about their plans, but she knew it wasn't *all* they were up to. There was much more and she could only hope she wouldn't be around when the proverbial all-hell-breaks-loose happened. Her guilt in the part she had to play would haunt her for the rest of her life. Forever...after she left Kane and Ethan far behind.

She shrugged off the despairing thoughts. She had to stay in control at all times. She chose a pair of blue jeans that fit like a tight glove over her hips and legs. Her melon-colored blouse was made to look like an old-fashioned corset with crisscrossed strings of lace and snug in the waist and bosom. The thin material purposely showed she wasn't wearing a bra. She pulled her hair up into a loose ponytail and secured it with a melon-colored ribbon. Surveying her reflection in the floor length mirror didn't boost her confidence one bit. She looked the part of a sexy seductress. But just the thought of being around Kane again had invisible butterflies flying crazily in her stomach.

"Step number two," she murmured and left the bedroom.

Chapter Seven

Kane, in wolf form, watched Bethany from the protective shadows of the surrounding trees. She had arrived earlier than he'd expected. He'd just finished his run and had come up to the perimeters of the clearing to see her standing there. She'd left the car at the edge of the road and walked to the center of the property she was planning to buy. Kane knew Ethan was still at the office, but would be there soon. His brother had made the point of insisting that Kane be there to meet Bethany, worried about her being alone in a deserted area.

Since Ethan was delayed, Kane knew he had just enough time to put his plan into action. A twinge of guilt hit him in the gut. He never thought he'd be hatching a plan to seduce his brother's fiancé away from him. Not in a million years would he have ever considered something that vile. Wolves mated for life. So did Wolf Shifters. Ethan had chosen Bethany and Kane had no right going after her like this—even if was only to get rid of her.

But there was something off about Ethan and Bethany being together. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. At first he'd reasoned it was because he was acutely aware of his own feelings of lust for Bethany. Too, there was the odd way Ethan acted around her. His brother was naturally protective, but he threw out that perfect gentleman act in abundance. Hell, Kane reasoned, that wasn't the way a Shifter in love with his intended mate acted. Ethan should have already challenged Kane for simply looking at Bethany the wrong way. But he hadn't. In fact, he'd seemed amused by the way Kane and Bethany warily circled each other whenever they were together.

If she were his mate, Kane would have killed any man that dared look at her the way he had. And that fact bothered him most of all.

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Damn. He had to constantly fight his possessive instinct—force himself to accept he had no right feeling that way about her.

He was about to initiate a game that would, hopefully, expose Bethany and send her running out of their lives. He felt guilty about hurting Ethan, but something told him that his brother would get over it way too easily.

Kane frowned. He needed to have a long serious discussion with Ethan. As soon as possible.

He sat back on his haunches and studied Bethany, his gaze thorough. And hungry.

He growled low and rough, disgusted with his feelings. *Dammit.* Even in wolf form he lusted for her. What made her so different from all the other women he'd known? She was beautiful, but that wasn't the full reason. Something about her called to the primal side of his nature. Something about her screamed with the invitation to claim her.

Mate her.

Kane abruptly stood and started pacing, heated agitation setting his nerves on end. Where the hell did the thought of *mate* come from? He must be going crazy. That was the only explanation for feeling like this about a human woman he had no right desiring.

Anger and frustration ate him up inside. Ever since she'd come into his life, he couldn't stop the wanting, the needing, to claim her. He tried ignoring it, tried to convince himself that it was only lust for a sexy woman. But deep down, he knew it was something more. He sure as hell didn't like it, but he couldn't deny it.

He forced his thoughts back to some order of sense. The sooner she was gone, the better. Yeah. That sounded convincing enough. He groaned and stood on all four legs. He shook his body as if he could shake away the disturbing feelings.

He forced his mind to concentrate on changing back into a man. His wolf features dissolved quickly, the transition smooth as always. When he stood again, naked, his body emphasized the fact that he was all male.

And painfully erect.

"Damn you, Bethany," he muttered. He carefully pulled his jeans on and zipped them. His erection pressed against the metal clasp and he stared down at it in frustrated amusement. He put his shirt on and then his boots. His whole body thrummed with sexual excitement, his erection pulsing hard. He groaned aloud. He had the bad feeling if he didn't accomplish what he planned for Bethany, then he would be

looking for some kind of relief very soon. Lucky for him, several of the single female Shifters were always more than willing to accommodate his needs without strings attached. Kane ran his oddly shaking hand through his hair. For some reason, the thought of having sex with another woman...who wasn't Bethany...didn't feel right.

"Damn. What the hell does feeling right have to do with anything?"

He strode with determined purpose from the concealment of the forest and walked directly to where Bethany was standing in the middle of the small clearing. She didn't even know he was there until he reached out and touched her on the arm.

She squealed and spun around to face him. "Kane!"

"Hey, Beth-love," he murmured, drinking in the beauty of her eyes as they darkened at the same time her soft satiny cheeks turned pink. "Why are you here so early? I thought Ethan said noon."

"I wanted time alone," she answered. Then, as if to cover up the implications of that statement, she hurriedly added, "To see what the property looked like without the influence of Ethan's enthusiasm."

Kane kept her gaze locked with his, the wolf in him holding his prey mesmerized. He loved the inner fire that sparkled in the emerald depths of her eyes. It didn't take much imagination on his part to know what kind of fiery passion had to lie beneath her delicate beauty. "Yeah," he answered. "My brother does tend to get a little too excited over things."

He could tell she caught his implication. Her eyes widened slightly and her cheeks flushed a darker shade. He smiled. She was falling right into his little trap. He wanted her angry. "I'm sure you've noticed that about him."

But she wasn't taking the bait that easily, just yet. She nodded absently and then broke from his gaze to look out over the land. "It's lovely here. I never realized how different Kalispell would be from Atlanta."

She was deliberately trying to change the subject. He wasn't going to let her. "Just about the same difference as you and Ethan are." He watched her expression closely. *Come on, baby. Show me that temper. It'll make this so much easier.*

She shrugged her slim shoulders. Even that little movement was sexy when she did it. Damn. He had it bad. "Opposites attract," she said quietly. "Haven't you heard that expression? Ethan and I are very compatible, despite growing up in different worlds."

Kane wanted to growl. He suddenly wanted to hit something. He

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didn't like the way she'd emphasized the words *very compatible*. It hinted at an intimacy between his brother and her; something he didn't like thinking about. But he had to know. "Just how compatible, Beth-love? Are you and my brother already lovers?"

She uttered a little exclamation of anger and swung to face him. Her eyes narrowed. "That's none of your business, Kane."

"Yeah," he muttered softly, "it is." The thought of another man touching her broke loose a damning, rough, possessive instinct he wasn't happy acknowledging.

"This conversation is over," Bethany stated. "You have no right asking questions so personal. I'm sure Ethan wouldn't be too happy to hear that you have."

He already admired her spunk, but her steely defiance was an added attraction he couldn't help but like. Too much. For one brief moment, he almost wished she was everything she pretended to be. She'd make any Shifter a worthy mate.

Whoa. Stop right there. That was the last direction he should allow his thoughts to go.

"Are you saying you tell my brother everything?" He moved closer to her, close enough to feel her catchy breath waft over his face. She didn't retreat and it raised his admiration another notch. Obviously, Bethany Garrett wasn't one for backing down easily. *Good for you, sweetheart.*

"We have no secrets," she answered. She lifted her chin and met his gaze without blinking. "Lovers never do."

Hellfire. The beast inside him roared into possessive life at her declaration. He wanted to turn all primal on her; snatch her up and carry her off to the privacy of the woods and then...

He immediately halted his wayward, destructive thoughts with steely determination and strained force of willpower. With a deep surge of fortitude, he tried to clamp down on the rapidly rising beast within his soul. For just one moment he almost thought it was too late and he was already out of control.

The thought, the mental pictures, of Ethan making love to Bethany was more than he could stomach right then. Every well-thought out plan of action went right out of his head. His reactions were all male. Dangerous. Uncontrolled.

He grabbed her by the arms and hauled her up against his chest. He ignored her surprised gasp. "You've slept with him?" The words came out in a growly demand, but he didn't care. Something wild and far too

possessive had a hard painful grip on him. "When, Bethany? Right after you met? Was it your idea or his?"

He wrapped his arms tight around her to still her struggles. Her squirming was making him unmercifully hard, the pleasure-pain intensifying with her every move. "Was that your way of ensuring Ethan became so enamored of you, he would propose? You obviously knew a lot about my brother. You must have known his standards are high when it comes to women."

"How dare you," she bit the words out, her green eyes sparkling with a rage that only fueled his lust to a dangerous high. "You have no right talking to me like this. My relationship with Ethan is none of your business, and your personal questions are way out of line. Let me go."

Not a choice, baby. She felt so good in his arms, her slender body moving against his hardness. He knew she had to be aware of his erection straining against his jeans. The lower halves of their bodies were pressed tightly together, his one arm clamped like a band around her lower waist holding her tight.

Her hands were trapped between their chests and she tried to push against him. He moved his other arm up to tighten around her shoulders and lessen her struggles. She was surprisingly strong for such a slender woman.

Before his thoughts strayed to a point of no return, he had to put his plan in motion. He was dangerously close to forgetting even why he had to do this.

"How much research did you do on Ethan before you snared him?"

"What?" she demanded. She struggled harder. It fueled the pleasure-pain of fire in his gut that much more.

"I did a background check on you, Bethany, just like I said I would. Your family may be from old wealth, but it's nothing compared to Ethan's share of our family monies and holdings. Your family estate is old, run-down and you haven't lived there in years. You have two siblings who are practically in hiding, making them untraceable. Your bank account has a lot of money but it's not that substantial compared to Ethan's."

"And that information is supposed to matter when it comes to being in love?"

Good come back, baby. "It matters when Ethan is considered a good catch for gold diggers. I meant it when I said you two are complete opposites. Besides your beauty, there shouldn't be any reason for my

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brother to be interested in you. He knows women want one thing from him and that's his money. He's used to being pursued for that reason alone."

"I think you just said your brother is ugly," she countered smoothly. She stopped struggling and warning bells immediately went off in his head. "You just said Ethan wouldn't appeal to a woman unless she knew he was wealthy."

"You're deliberately twisting my words, you little spitfire." He purposely moved his arm from her shoulders to tangle a hand in the thickness of her ponytail. He tugged slightly. "You're good."

"Good enough for your brother," she said and smiled beguilingly. His heart raced. He didn't like the way she affected him so easily. One smile like that and he was ready to kiss her senseless.

"Yeah?" He dropped his hand to her nape and applied pressure to bring her face closer to his as he lowered his head. Kissing her senseless sounded better every moment. "Or maybe you're too good for him. Maybe Ethan isn't what a woman like you really needs."

"A woman like me? What's that supposed to mean?"

He grinned. "My brother has always chosen the quiet, lady-like women. There's a fire in you, Beth-love, a simmering passion just below the surface of your outward sweetness. I think in the long run you'll turn out to be too much for Ethan."

He watched her eyes widen as he lowered his mouth to hers.

"I think you need a man like me to tame that fire."

Chapter Eight

Bethany couldn't think straight. It was absolute heaven being held so close to his hard aroused body. And it was hell, too. Her conscience warned her to break away from the spell he was sensually casting over her. Her body argued the point. Wasn't this exactly where she was supposed to be?

Never in her wildest dreams did she think she'd be this attracted to a man like Kane Steele. He was the very embodiment of the alpha male: hard, tough, sexy, sensual, powerful.

He was everything Ethan wasn't. Deep down, she cared for Ethan. He was very good to her. But she had to admit that if they had met under different circumstances, she wouldn't have even dated him. His beta-male personality was sweet and endearing, but it didn't stir feelings in her like she'd always believed would happen when she met the right man.

Kane Steele stirred those feelings. And more. *Heaven help me.*

She felt mesmerized staring into his hooded gaze as he lowered his head to hers. She knew he was going to kiss her. She wanted him to; it was part of the seduction plan. But she wasn't prepared for the raging emotions swirling in her, the anticipation for the feel of his lips against hers. It was too much, too soon.

For one brief moment she wanted to tell him to stop. She even opened her mouth to say the word. But she never got the chance. His hard lips closed over hers and captured her breath.

And her soul.

She'd never been kissed like this before. His mouth was possessive, his taste drugging. She lost her breath and every single thought of a plan. All she could do was feel.

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One kiss. And she was lost. That fast. That...permanently.

Stark, vibrant emotions swamped her senses. She moaned into his mouth and heard his answering groan. The rough sound made her shiver. He slanted his mouth over hers, drinking her like a water-starved man. Bethany felt the consuming passion of his kiss all the way to the bottom of her feet. And deeper still, than she'd ever thought possible.

This was part of the plan. She was supposed to seduce Kane. Then why did she feel like every ounce of control and motivation she possessed was now gone? That plans didn't matter, or even that this wasn't what she wished it could be?

Kane's kiss deepened and became sensually persuasive. A sudden flare of panic hit her like a punch to the stomach when she realized she was kissing him back, putting far more into it than she should. Bethany struggled in earnest now, afraid of letting things get out of control.

She managed to twist her head and break free from Kane's drugging mouth. "Kane." She meant her tone to sound demanding, but it came out sounding like a soft caress instead. She moaned.

Kane's hot lips seared across her cheek to her ear. His breathing was harsh, his voice deep and rough. "You taste so sweet, Beth-love. Like potent honey."

"Please let me go," she pleaded. If he kissed her again, she was lost. And she wouldn't even care. "I'm engaged to your brother. You can't kiss me like this, Kane. It isn't right."

He chuckled and the sound rumbled from his chest to hers. He nipped the bottom of her earlobe then licked it soothingly. "You sound so proper, baby. You enjoyed that kiss as much as I did. Admit it."

"No." *I can't!*

"Yes." He lifted his head and stared down into her eyes. The smoky blue depths of his eyes were dark and gleaming with a wild look of possessiveness. It took her breath away. "I felt your response, Bethany."

"You're wrong. I only felt disgust that you would try something like this with your brother's fiancé. Don't you care what Ethan might think?"

His eyes narrowed. "Are you going to tell him?"

Was she? Wasn't that part of the plan? No. It was too soon. She needed to be more fully involved with Ethan before she did what she had to do. She shook her head. "No. I don't want him hurt. It was just a kiss, it didn't matter."

"Liar."

Bethany gasped at Kane's sexy drawl. She strengthened her resolve.

"It didn't mean anything."

He opened his mouth to say something at the same time they both heard the engine of Ethan's jeep as it approached. Bethany shoved out of Kane's arms and stepped back several steps. He gave her that wolfish grin he did so well and the butterflies in her stomach did silly somersaults. She suddenly realized seducing Kane wasn't going to be as hard as she had first thought. The real problem was going to be not falling for him in the process. Deep down, she had to wonder if it was already too late to stop that from happening.

Ethan drove the jeep to within yards of them and stopped. Bethany noticed his angry expression immediately and for one brief moment she panicked thinking he had seen her in Kane's arms.

"Kane, we have trouble," he said as he alighted from the jeep. He smiled at Bethany, but then frowned as he turned to face his brother. "Excuse us, Bethany, we need to talk privately for a minute."

She nodded and walked away. She tried to appear nonchalant and hoped they didn't notice that she didn't move away too far. But try as hard as she could, she couldn't hear their conversation. Their heads were bent together and they talked in low tones. *What's going on?* Her concern grew when she watched Kane's features darken to a dangerous look of rage. Something was definitely wrong.

She panicked. Had they discovered her real reason for being here? It was too soon! She hadn't accomplished what she needed to do in order to save Drew. The Hunters had a back up plan should the first one be revealed, but she had no part in it. If she failed them, then she failed her brother. There was no other chance.

Finally, Ethan raised his head and looked in her direction. He motioned for her to join them. She walked with heavy steps, her heart racing. What was he going to say?

"Bethany, I'm sorry but we'll have to put off the property search for today. Kane and I have an important issue to deal with at the office. Can we get together at dinner tonight?"

She didn't like the angry vibes she could feel emanating off Kane. Ethan appeared upset, too, even though his tone was very casual. But she didn't want to let on she was sensing anything wrong, so she nodded. "Sure. I've got other plans for today anyway. I'd like to do some shopping, and sightseeing in Kalispell."

"Thanks, honey." Ethan kissed her cheek. His lips barely grazed her skin and she wondered why he hadn't kissed her mouth instead. Her

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gaze met Kane's stormy one and her heart lurched. She could see the same question in his eyes. Suddenly, he smiled a slow sexy grin and deliberately let his hooded gaze settle on her lips. She bit back the gasp of excitement that careened through her at his hot stare. She could almost feel his kiss again.

They left and Bethany walked back to her car. She waited until they were out of sight before she started her car and then drove in the opposite direction of Kalispell. The Hunters had set up a temporary headquarters in a group of cabins outside town. She needed to talk to them about Reed's blunder last night and also warn them something was up with the Steele brothers.

She hated this. Her brother's foolishness and greed had turned their world upside down and she had no choice but to try and right it again. She hated having to deceive and hurt Ethan. She cared for him, albeit only as a friend. It made her sick knowing that she was going to hurt him. Possibly even destroy him.

And Kane. If they had met under different circumstances...

She was completely, undeniably attracted to him. Sudden realization hit her. Hard. Deep. Frightening her beyond any other thoughts. Her feelings for Kane went deeper than mere physical attraction. It was as though his kiss had sent an invisible arrow of possession straight down into her heart. *Oh God*. When had it happened? Something about him touched her very soul. It scared her. Yet...it excited her beyond her wildest thoughts and dreams.

She decisively faced the truth. She wouldn't come out of this unscathed. She couldn't shake the desolate feeling that before this was over, her heart would be irrevocably broken. And her soul would be scarred forever with the loss of something she never had the right to have in the first place.

Half an hour later, she stopped the car in front of the cabins the Hunters had rented. The place looked deserted, the cabins' windows' drapes closed, the quiet around the buildings ominous. But she knew they were aware of her arrival. Nothing got past these men.

As she got out of the car, a shiver of dread wracked her body and she had to stand still for a moment to get control. She hated being around the Hunters. They were evil personified. Murderers. Not for the first time,

she wondered how her brother had ever managed to get involved with such a dangerous group.

She knocked on the main cabin door and waited. A gruff "Enter," was coughed out from within. She slowly opened the door and took a tentative step inside. The door slammed shut behind her. She jumped with a startled squeal.

At first she thought the room was empty, because all she could see was a dim darkness around her. A light came on and she found herself standing in the middle of five Hunters, guns drawn and pointed directly at her heart. She choked back a scream, her hand flying to cover her mouth. Her heart nearly stopped. She wanted to turn and run from this place as fast as possible. And never look back again...

"Come in, Bethany," one man said. The others lowered their weapons and Bethany released a shaky sigh of relief. But her shaking didn't stop. It wouldn't until she was once again far away from these vile men.

"Why are you here? Do you have a report?"

Bethany forced herself to calmly tell them about Reed's fight with the Shifter Seth. The leader, an older man with grey hair and dark skin, nodded his head.

"We left Reed in jail," he stated. "Punishment for his foolishness."

"What if he talks?" It had been her biggest fear last night.

"He knows his life is forfeit if he does," Phil Nicks stated. "What else have you found out? Have you started your seduction of the older brother?"

"Yes," she sighed the word out. If they only knew it was Kane who had actually made the first move. "We were together earlier."

"Don't dally, Ms. Garrett. Your brother's life is at stake and we will only let him live for as long as we know you are doing your part in this. The sooner you bring this plan to fruition, the better for you and Drew."

If only that were true. But she had a feeling of acute, prophetic dread this would never be over. Even if she managed to free Drew, she would still be a captive. Her feelings for Kane were already so deep and real, she would forever suffer the heartache.

When had this become so complicated?

Later that evening, Bethany dressed for dinner, purposely choosing her sexiest dress. The short dress clung to her curves and the left side

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exposed a generous expanse of bare thigh with a slit that lay open almost to her waist. The dress was too tight to wear panties, so she chose a thong and its thin waist string was barely covered where the slit ended. The vee-neckline dipped low enough to teasingly hint at bare breasts. The dark cornflower blue emphasized her cameo skin tone to perfection. She chose matching blue high heels, but left her legs bare of hose. She felt decidedly wicked as she walked into the dining room knowing that underneath that scrap of dress she was almost completely naked.

Ethan let out a low whistle when she entered the room. "Whoa, Bethany. You look sexy!"

Bethany felt her cheeks flush, despite being glad her efforts were being rewarded. She tried to avoid the other man in the room, but Kane's intense stare made her finally lock gazes with his.

"You look good enough to eat," Kane murmured, his voice deep and husky. Her heart and body reacted instantly to the blatant sexual tone. She tried to keep her expression calm and not expose her feelings. But it was a battle she almost didn't win.

Ethan made a coughing sound and Bethany jerked in response, pulling her gaze away from Kane's mesmerizing one.

"Good thing we have food," Ethan said. "Kane looks like he's hungry." He pulled out a chair for Bethany and she sat. The slit in her dress opened wider to expose more of her bare thigh and this time, it was Kane who whistled low. Only it was a different tone than Ethan's had been. Kane made it sound rough, like something x-rated. Shocked, Bethany glanced up to note Ethan's reaction.

To her surprise, he only grinned at his brother and murmured, "*Really* hungry, huh?"

She hid her shocked reaction. His comment was completely out of character for a man supposedly in love. Why wasn't he acting jealous of Kane's obvious ogling of her?

During dinner, Ethan kept up a regular conversation about Kalispell and its many charms and advantages to living there. Bethany got the distinct impression he was trying to convince her of something and it confused her all the more. They were engaged. Didn't he expect her to live here, too? Why try to sell the idea to her now?

Kane was silent during the meal, but she was constantly aware of his hooded gaze on her the entire time, like a hot physical caress she could feel sliding over every exposed inch of her body. Several times she had to stop herself from squirming under his gaze. His stare made her

wonder if he knew she was nearly naked under the tight dress. Shivers of unwanted desire caressed over her skin at the thought he might have guessed. At least, she told herself the response was *unwanted*. Her body disagreed.

Ethan broke into her stray thoughts with a question he obviously repeated twice before she realized he was asking her something. *I've got to stop thinking about Kane!*

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "What did you say?"

"Lost deep in...thought, Beth-love?" Kane asked, his voice deeply sexy and hinting at something she wasn't quite sure of.

"I said," Ethan answered with a grin, "would you mind if we take separate cars tonight to Shareem's? I have a late appointment at the office and I don't want to drag you there after we leave the club."

"No problem." She wished they weren't going to the nightclub tonight anyway. She needed more time with Ethan. If they kept busy, when was she going to have the special time she needed to start her seduction plan? Her time with Ethan had been limited, and she had the feeling she was going to have to speed up the plan to convince him that she was also interested in his brother—without Kane knowing what she was up to first. The Hunters had warned her that time was running out. She felt that persistent urgency all the way to her gut.

Kane pushed back his chair from the dining table and folded his arms across his chest. "I heard Reed was still in jail," he drawled. "We don't have to be on the lookout for any other ex-boyfriends, do we, Beth-love?"

Did he deliberately call her "Beth-love" just to taunt her? She glanced at Ethan under her lashes. He never once reacted to Kane's obvious endearment and she couldn't help but wonder why.

She looked back at Kane and willed herself not to show any reaction to his words. Words her fiancé should have been asking, instead of him. "Ha ha. You make it sound like I have hundreds of ex-boyfriends, Kane. If Ethan isn't jealous, then why should you be?"

Kane's eyes narrowed, his lashes lowering to conceal his intent stare. His sensuous lips thinned to a hard slash. His voice was rough. "Just how many do you have?"

She smiled impishly just to goad him. "I lied. I have hundreds."

She lost her smile with his next words. Her heart nearly stopped, too.

"Damn. I didn't expect to have to fight that many."

"Fight them? What are you talking about?" She was instantly wary of

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the lethal look in his eyes.

He shrugged then stood up. "You're going to be family, Bethany. I won't allow any man to try and stake a claim to you now." He walked to the door of the dining room, then turned around to finish stating, "You'd better get used to the fact that once you're claimed by a Steele, you belong to him only. We fight to keep and protect what is ours. So be careful who you associate with—if you don't want him to face me later."

Face you, Kane? She wanted to ask, but the words wouldn't come. They choked in her throat the moment he shot her that hot possessive look. Heaven help her, but that look seared her to her very soul.

And for just one breathless moment she wanted to believe he meant that *he* would claim her and keep her from any other man. Including Ethan.

That wish was dangerous. She knew it. But she wanted it to be true. With every fiber of her being, she knew at that very moment she wanted to belong to Kane Steele.

No matter the consequences.

Chapter Nine

Shareem's was packed with patrons and Bethany recognized a lot of the same Hunters who had been there the night before. The atmosphere of the club was thick with hot-blooded aggression and tense anticipation. Looking around, she saw a lot of the same Shifters from the night before, too. She couldn't help but wonder how long it would take before another fight broke out between the two groups. She wondered who would start it this time. Her first guess would be Kane. His body language was tense and aggressive as he glanced over the room.

Ethan kept his arm around her waist as they waded through the crowd to their table. Kane stayed close enough for her to breathe in his potent male scent with every breath she took. When they reached the table, Kane sat on one side of her and Ethan on the other. She greeted the three other couples at the table, remembering them from before.

"Is it always this crowded?" she asked the woman across from her.

"Always," Mia answered, raising her voice to be heard above the noise. "It's the most popular spot in town. Don't worry, Bethany. You'll get used to the noise in a bit."

She didn't want to be here long enough to get used to it. As time passed, she was more and more anxious to be done with all this and get away. Away from the Hunters. Away from Kane.

Kane was sitting so close, she was constantly, acutely aware of his every breath. The heat radiating off him felt decidedly sexual, making his body appear noticeably tight and tense. He looked ready for action. Any kind of action. She purposely kept her face turned from him, but she was aware that he watched her—she even realized that the three other women at their table noticed it, too. The look on their faces was telling. They were curious to know why Kane was focused so intently on

his brother's fiancé.

He was making her nervous. Invisible butterflies kept a constant chaotic flight pattern in her stomach. She was so intent on trying to ignore him, she jumped with a slight squeal of surprise when Ethan laid a hand on her arm and whispered into her ear, "Let's dance, Bethany."

Kane growled under his breath. The sound was rough. A thrill of surprise and instant desire shot straight through her. She gasped and their gazes met. Ethan turned and looked at his brother.

"I just remembered something I have to talk to Brian about. Would you mind if I gave you over to Kane, Bethany?"

No! The last place she wanted to be was in Kane's arms. The thought left her breathless and shaking inside. She nearly groaned. *I'm such a liar!*

Kane didn't give her the chance to answer. He surged smoothly to his feet. Taking her by the arm, he moved her onto the dance floor. She went into his arms with a shaky inhale of air, trying hard to control the hard shiver that wracked her from head to toes, but failing miserably.

Kane's strong arms came around her and pulled her snugly against him.

Bethany had never wanted so much to run away as she did at that moment.

She wanted even more to stay in his arms forever.

"Relax, Beth-love," Kane whispered teasingly against her bent head. "It's just a dance. I'm not going to kiss you here where everyone can see."

"I didn't expect you to," she muttered. He was deliberately trying to goad her again. She was grateful for it. This way, she could focus on anger instead of...desire.

"You're such a sweet liar, baby."

"And you are what we Southerners call a 'Cad,'" she told him. "Lucky for you, Ethan hasn't noticed you flirting. I can't imagine how he would react." Good. That was the way she was supposed to be acting, putting her "divide and conquer" plan into action. Now, if she could only convince herself it was all an act.

"Ethan has noticed."

Bethany suddenly stopped and lifted her head to stare up into his guarded features. "What?"

"My brother isn't stupid, Bethany." Kane's smile was grim. "I told him I was attracted to you the moment you first walked into the office."

This couldn't be good. "Attracted to me?" Okay, she was beginning

to sound like a repeating parrot, but she was too confused to get much else out.

That wolfish smile of his, that could so easily start her heart to stuttering, creased over his sexy mouth. "Actually, I think I used the word 'lust' instead of attraction at the time."

"You told him *that*?" Why hadn't Ethan said anything? Wasn't he the least bit jealous? She searched his eyes for the truth. "How did he react?"

Kane shrugged, the movement casual. "How do you think he reacted? Steele men mate for life. It's not the best thing to happen when two brothers discover they want the same mate."

He was talking like the wolf shifter he was! Didn't he realize his words were too telling? She had to pretend she didn't know what he was talking about. "Why do you use the word *mate*? That's an odd choice. And I'm not sure I like being talked about as though I'm some kind of property that will belong to one of you."

His eyes darkened to steely blue-grey. For one brief moment she could have sworn she saw his wolf side glowing in the depths of his heated stare. It took her breath away. It excited her beyond her own comprehension.

"What were you thinking when you agreed to marry Ethan?"

She blinked rapidly and tried to make sense of the odd question. "I'm not sure what you're asking. What else would I be thinking, except that I love him and wanted to marry him?"

"Did he ever explain anything about our family?"

He wasn't going to tell her, was he? Shifters kept safe by keeping their race secret. That's why it was so hard for the Hunters to find them among the human populace. Would Kane risk exposing them because he wanted to test her true feelings for Ethan?

She tried to make her voice sound nonchalant, but failed when she heard herself squeak out, "There's something I should know?" *Don't tell me. Please, Kane. I can't do what I have to do if you confess.*

"Damn it, Bethany. Do you have to be such an innocent?" He tightened one arm around her waist and used his other hand to cup the back of her neck. He pushed her face into his chest and muttered roughly, "Why *you*?"

"You're not making any sense, Kane," she mumbled against his shirt. But, he was. And it scared her to death.

She was pressed so tight against him that she could feel the hard ridge of his erection pressing into the lower part of her stomach. He

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knew she was aware of it; he kept his arm tight around her hip and pressed her even closer. It took a lot of willpower to keep from moving against his hardness. She wanted to feel him closer...and that wasn't possible considering where they were.

So, instead, she tried to pull away. "Kane, let me go."

"I should," he muttered darkly. "I should make sure you get out of our lives and never come back."

The words hurt, but she couldn't let him see that. "That's not your call." She pushed back to look up at him again. "I'm engaged to Ethan, not you."

His answer was a rough growl vibrating from his chest straight to hers. For just one brief moment, she wondered which of them trembled so hard to cause their bodies to vibrate together.

The music stopped, ending the dance. For one long minute they stood still, his arms still tight around her. Bethany knew she should make the move away from him, but couldn't force herself to do it. Kane decided for them. He slowly released her. Taking her by the arm, he led her back to the table.

Ethan smiled at her as she sat. "It's a good thing I'm not the jealous type, Bethany. Every man in this place was watching you out there on the dance floor."

She felt her cheeks heat. She definitely didn't need that kind of attention. She glanced around the room and noticed more than a few of the Hunters intently watching her. A sense of dread crept over her and settled in the pit of her stomach. Were they there to make sure she carried through her part of the plan? Had they noticed the sexually charged exchange between her and Kane?

Bethany glanced at Kane and her heart lurched. He was surveying the room too and by the look on his face, he was noticing the same thing. His eyes narrowed as he turned back to look at her.

"Anyone you know?"

She shook her head. She could tell by his expression that he doubted her denial. This was getting too risky. If Kane or Ethan ever realized she was associated with the newcomers, then everything was forfeit. Drew's life, included.

She had to get them away from the Hunters. The tension in the air around them was getting thicker by the minute.

Bethany turned to Ethan and touched his arm. "I'd like to go home now, Ethan. I'm not feeling well."

Ethan glanced at Kane before answering. "I'm sorry, honey, you're not well. Sure, we can leave now. I have that appointment anyway."

They said their goodbyes to the others at the table and Ethan escorted Bethany out to her rental car. Kane stayed behind, and she couldn't help but wonder what was going to happen if he allowed his obvious aggression for the Hunters to get out of control. She was glad she wasn't going to be around to find out.

Back in her room at the Steele estate, Bethany undressed and went to the bathroom. She filled the large tub with warm water and rose-scented bubble bath and got in. She sank into the perfumed water with a long heartfelt sigh. It was long minutes before any of the tension from the night slowly began to melt away and she was finally able to relax. Closing her eyes, she tried hard to think of anything but Kane. It didn't work.

Despite wanting to deny it, she couldn't. Kane Steele was already imbedded deep in her, already entrenched in her soul and she knew she would never be free of him. Somehow she had known that truth from the first moment their eyes had met, but she had pushed it to the back of her mind to keep from accepting it. She was supposed to seduce him.

Not fall in love with him.

It didn't even bother her now that he wasn't full human. That he was a man who could shift into a wolf at will. When she'd first discovered such a race existed, she'd been shocked and a little horrified. But the more she was around the Shifters the more she realized they were a lot like every other human. They led human lives, had spouses, children. They lived and died. Just like humans.

Kane's primal other-half excited her constantly and that fact no longer shocked her to admit. He was so alpha, so sexual in every thing he said and did. It called to every womanly cell in her body, heart and soul.

Her thoughts drifted to wonder what would have happened if they had met under different circumstances.

"Stop it," she muttered and sat up in the tub. Thinking like that would only make this situation harder to get through. She couldn't allow herself to have feelings for a man she was planning on seducing and betraying.

Too late...

Her mind, her body, her soul, told her it was already too late to stop it from happening.

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What am I going to do? How am I going to walk away from him when this is all over?

The truth hit her, hard. She wouldn't have to worry about walking away. If Kane was still alive when all this was over...then he'd make sure she was out of their —*his*— life.

He'd probably kill her.

Chapter Ten

The warm scented bathwater eventually soothed her chaotic thoughts and she drifted off with her head back against the tub. Her thoughts slowly, inevitably morphed into erotic dreams of Kane.

His hand stroked over her face, thoroughly skimming every feature with a soft caress. He lowered his touch to drift down her throat, and then across her collarbones from side to side. She wanted his fleeting touch to be firmer and she squirmed, lifting towards the retreating hand. She heard his soft chuckle near her ear and it made her nerve endings tingle and tighten in anticipation.

Then she felt his hands—both now—waft over her breasts. Before she could protest the too-soft caress, his hands came back to fully cup her breasts and lift them slightly. She moaned.

His rough-padded thumbs rubbed over her peaking nipples once. She squirmed again with the silent plea for a firmer touch. He obliged. His forefingers and thumbs pinched her nipples, a rough tweak that shot a streak of hot desire pooling to her stomach and below.

She kept her eyes closed and she let the dream carry her on towards something she wasn't sure of reaching for until that very soul-searching moment. The feelings the dream was creating were too erotic, felt too good to let go of. If she woke, Kane wouldn't be there.

His warm hands released her breasts and started a slow foray down to her stomach. Her heart raced with the rough glide that felt as though he was trying to press his possessive touch into the very part of her that housed her heart and soul.

When his hands moved to firmly press against the skin below her navel, she gasped. But she kept her eyes closed. *Don't stop*, she silently begged.

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Rough fingers suddenly tangled in the soft curls of her mound and tugged with a sensual pull that made her arch upwards. She moaned, wanting more.

When one long finger parted her slick fold and suddenly penetrated deep, she gasped out a moan of fervor and her eyes flew open.

Oh my God, this isn't a dream! "Kane."

Kane leaned over the tub, his arm under the water, his hand pressed firmly, hot and heavy, against her pulsing mound; his finger deep but unmoving. His eyes burned with a passionate fire that threatened to consume her right then and there. His expression was starkly erotic, wild and ever-so-primal.

"Beth-love, you had better not have been dreaming of Ethan just now," he rasped in a dark sexy tone. "You don't belong with him. You never did." He moved his finger, pushing deeper into her and twisting it slightly. "So, keep you eyes open, baby. I want you to know it's me here with you now. I'm the one who is going to take you. Not Ethan. Not any other man. *Me.*"

"You can't," she whispered, her heart breaking at having to say the words she really didn't mean. She wanted him to take her. Wanted it more than she'd ever wanted anything in her entire life. But it couldn't happen. Making love with Kane wasn't part of the plan. She was only supposed to seduce him into falling for her and thus cause friction with Ethan.

When had it all changed? Her heart knew the answer to that, but it didn't make it any easier to accept and justify.

Kane growled, so rough it made her shiver. He abruptly inserted another finger and pressed deeper. "Ethan told me you and he hadn't been intimate. You lied to me, sweetheart."

Surprised she could even talk with the sensual way he was slowly moving his fingers in and out of her, she countered, "It doesn't matter. Our private life has nothing to do with you, Kane."

"You don't love him."

Bethany closed her eyes tight. If he would only stop moving his fingers, she could think more clearly! She should shove him away. *Ooooh...not just yet.* It felt too good. She managed to gasp out, "Why would I be engaged to him if I didn't love him?"

"That's something I intend to find out," Kane muttered, his voice sounding dangerous and husky at the same time. "But not now. Right now I have other things on my mind." He increased the rhythm of his

fingers and she groaned from the sweet friction. "Feel good, baby?" His sexy growl rumbled from his chest and she shivered again, loving the sound of it. "Want more?"

Yes, please! If he stopped right then, she just might kill him. She could feel the beginnings of an orgasm starting to build low and hot. She couldn't stop from wiggling, moving hard against his hand. She ignored his rough chuckle; instead she closed her eyes and just...*felt*.

Kane's breathing became as rough as hers as he increased his movements. He shoved his fingers hard and fast, mimicking the act of sex with a breath-stealing expertise that should have shocked her but instead increased the fervor of emotions swirling deep inside her to the boiling point.

Her impending orgasm suddenly struck. With a soft scream of intense pleasure, Bethany arched upward and let the crashing waves wash over her as her body trembled with the erotic spasms.

When her body finally stilled, she opened her eyes. Her gaze immediately locked with Kane's. So close. She could see the fire burning brightly in the depths of his shadowed lust. She lost her breath all over again. She saw the intent in his eyes. Saw it, and wanted it.

"As sexy as that was, baby," he groaned out through clenched teeth, "it wasn't enough. I need more."

Before she could manage to get her voice back, Kane surged to his feet. Towering over her, he looked down with eyes of blue steel. He jerked his boots off, then his socks. He threw them over his shoulders and they landed with a thud on the tile floor. The sound barely penetrated her pleasure-flushed mind. Yanking his shirt free from his waistband, he pulled it off so hard and fast the buttons flew in all directions, some landing in the tub of water.

Still holding her gaze captive, he unzipped his jeans. In one swift, fluid movement, he pulled his jeans and underwear off. He dropped them to the floor.

Bethany couldn't breathe. The sight of a naked Kane was more than she could take at that moment. He was beautiful. A barely-hysterical giggle threatened to break free with the thought, *Are men supposed to be beautiful?*

He was tanned from head to toes. His toned body rippled with subtle muscles over his wide chest, down over slim hips and lower to strong legs.

His large erection stood straight out. Proudly. Pointing right at her.

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Ready and noticeably pulsing with hidden heat and aggressive zeal.

She heard herself whisper his name. In the back of her mind, she realized the sound of her voice was worshipful and excited at the same time. She didn't allow herself to think about how wrong this was. She didn't even dare think about the consequences...

Kane leaned down and scooped his arm beneath her bent knees. She thought he was going to lift her from the tub and carry her back to the bedroom. But instead, he lifted her legs. He stepped into the tub and sat down, fitting his large body right into the opening of her spread legs, his own spreading out to settle behind her. He settled her legs over his hips. He grasped her bottom with both hands and gave a hard tug pulling her closer. Their bodies were mere breaths apart now, and she lay open and vulnerable to his hot gaze with her knees spread wide. The eroticism of it left her breathless.

And his thick heavy erection lay pulsing against her waiting center. Barely touching.

The moment to stop this was long gone. She didn't even want to. No matter what this cost her later, she wasn't going to let anything take this from her. She reached up and put her hands on his shoulders. His skin was hot against the caress of her palms.

And she could have sworn she felt a slight shudder waft over him the moment she touched him. Her own body shook with something close to fear, yet even closer to a consuming desire she'd never felt before. She felt as wild as the look of possessiveness she saw in his eyes.

"It's too late to stop me, Beth-love," he murmured huskily, echoing her own thoughts. "It was too late the moment we met."

He lowered his hand and once again slipped a finger deep inside her. "Before this night is over, I intend to make sure that you will never belong to Ethan." He groaned. "Or to anyone else. *Only me.*"

Her heart felt suddenly heavy. She realized the truth, whether Kane was willing to accept it or not. She spoke the words aloud, "But, I won't really belong to you, will I, Kane? You only desire me. Nothing more."

"Nothing more, Beth-love," he muttered as he leaned in to settle his lips over hers. "There's too much at stake."

She wanted to ask him what he meant by that cryptic remark. But at that exact moment his lips claimed hers, Kane clasped her hips and yanked her to him. With one hard shove, he penetrated her. Deeply and completely.

Bethany cried out against his mouth. His rough possession was a

little painful.

But it was also the most beautiful pain she'd ever had.

She wanted to cry. Kane took all she had to give with a possessive eroticism that felt wildly out of control. Irrevocably, he claimed her body, heart and soul. He took her, over and over, through long passionate hours filled with every pleasure-induced moment a soul-felt dream could ever bring to reality. It left her with the truth that would forever remain with her, no matter what else happened. And still, she gave back all there was in her to give. Even knowing that truth.

The truth was...it was the most beautiful experience she would ever have. Ever.

And never have again.

Ever.

Chapter Eleven

Exhausted, Kane laid spread out over Bethany, her soft body noticeably still as she pretended to sleep. He studied her beautiful features and silently willed her to keep her eyes closed. He didn't want to see what she was thinking. Didn't want to see again the incredible, stark emotions in her lovely eyes when he'd taken her over and over. His possession had been rough. Complete. Neither one of them would ever be able to forget that final moment when their souls had touched and sent them spiraling into a place he was sure they would never be again.

Not after tonight and what would be revealed.

He and Ethan had talked for hours, after leaving Bethany at the clearing. Ethan had learned something that he needed to relay to Kane. His brother finally admitted the secret he'd been keeping. Kane was furious at the chance Ethan had taken with all their lives. He was more than furious that Ethan had involved Bethany. The game his brother had been playing could very well cost Bethany her life.

When the truth was out between them, Kane finally allowed himself to admit he had feelings for Bethany. It was Ethan who finally forced him to admit those feelings went deeper than just a physical lust for a beautiful woman.

Kane closed his eyes for a moment. He could, for just a moment, allow his conscience to admit he'd known the truth all along. Bethany was his mate.

But after tonight, he'd have to give her up. They couldn't be together. They were playing on opposite sides of a war that wouldn't end tonight, despite a certain resolution.

Bethany had made her choice. Just as he had. He'd have to let her go. That's if she lived through what was to come.

He held back a soul-felt groan of pain and heartache. *I won't let you die, Beth-love. I may have to give you up, but I won't let you die. I swear it.*

Hours later, Bethany lay in her bed. Alone. Her body ached from Kane's unrelenting, passionate lovemaking. But it was the deep ache in her heart and soul that hurt the most. He had carried her from the bathroom and to the bed after making love to her twice in the tub. She was weak and sated, but Kane wasn't finished with her. His hunger burned her, pushed her to give more even when she wasn't sure she could. He was insatiable. His growls were so rough and erotic, she almost expected him to shift into his wolf form several times. He made love to her wildly. And then he would suddenly be incredibly gentle and ever-so-tender as he claimed her again. Her heart was left in a chaotic turmoil she couldn't deal with. When he finally left the bed and went back to the bathroom to retrieve his clothes, she cried. Silent tears that fell hard and fast as she kept her face hidden against her pillow. She'd heard his catchy breathing as he stopped by the bed and leaned down to her.

"I wish things could be different, Beth-love." The words were whispered so low she had to strain to hear them. The clicking of her door as he closed it behind him was loud and clear. She cried hard then, not caring who heard.

Bethany sat up in bed and looked at the clock on her nightstand. It was almost three in the morning. Her head and heart ached as well as her body. She knew she had to decide what to do now, but she didn't want to. Everything had gone wrong from the beginning. She'd let herself fall in love with Kane, instead of keeping her head and heart clear of the potential danger.

She knew she could just tell Ethan what had happened between her and Kane and that would speed up the plan's part of causing separation between the two brothers. But she wasn't sure she could stomach telling him. She didn't want to hurt Ethan, or any more than she had to.

The sudden, shrill ringing of her cell phone startled her. Who would be calling at this hour? She reached over and grabbed it off the

nightstand and flipped it open.

"Hello?"

At first, all she heard was loud static. And then she realized it wasn't static. A sickening bile rose in her throat and she swallowed the dark fear back. There were horrific screams, chaotic shouting. The sound of gunfire, ferocious animalistic roars and growls blasted from the other end of the cell line.

Bethany gasped in horror, holding the cell phone away from her ear for a moment. It sounded like a war! Shaking hard now, she grasped the cell phone to her ear again and shouted above the noise on the other end, "Hello! Who's there? What's going on?"

"Traitor!" A man shouted on the other end and the accusation hit her like a ferocious punch to her stomach. "You betrayed us, you little..." His words were cut off as another round of gunfire erupted. Bethany was shaking so hard, she could barely hold the cell phone to her ear. Then she recognized the man's voice. It was Phil Nicks. *Oh God, no. What is happening?*

"You will pay for this," he rasped out. "Drew is as good as dead."

The connection abruptly ended.

Fingers numb, body shaking uncontrollably, she closed the phone and dropped it into her lap. This wasn't a nightmare—she knew she was awake. It was real. Deadly so.

The only explanation she could fathom was that somehow the Shifters had discovered that the Hunters were here and had attacked.

And the Hunters believed she had betrayed them.

"Oh, God. Drew!" She had to do something! She jumped out of bed and ran to her closet. She didn't know what she could do, couldn't even think clearly to form a plan, but she knew she had to get out to the cabins. Drew wasn't there, but she had to convince the Hunters that she hadn't betrayed them. She had to do whatever it took to try and save her brother.

Even if it meant helping them fight the Shifters.

She'd never driven so fast in all her life. She heard the horrendous noise of the battle before her car lights ever highlighted the clearing where the cabins sat. She stomped on the brakes and the car came to a skidding halt on the gravel road that led to the driveway.

Bethany stared in shock. The entire scene was a horrifying chaotic nightmare. She wanted to close her eyes and pray it would all be gone when she reopened them. It didn't work.

Hunters and Shifters (in wolf forms), fought out in the open clearing in a battle that looked straight out of a horror movie. Most of the Hunters had guns, but were having a hard time using them as the wolves attacked nonstop. There were bodies lying around, some Hunters, some wolf Shifters, and the ground was bloodied and ravaged. Behind them, the cabins were in flames and already falling to the ground in burning shambles.

Bethany stared at the scene, shocked beyond her wildest comprehension. At the back of her mind she had known the Hunters planned some kind of attack—and no doubt planned it to be deadly—but she never fully realized the extent of it all. There was death everywhere.

Had she been allowed to follow through with her part of the plan, she would have been responsible for most of these deaths now.

She was going to be violently sick. She pushed the car door open and barely had time to lean out before she vomited. She emptied the contents of her stomach and still continued to heave. The horror of it all was just too much.

Suddenly, an arm came around her shoulders and lifted her back onto the car seat. Through tear-filled eyes Bethany recognized the Shifter Mia.

"Bethany, you shouldn't be here," she said gently. "There's nothing you can do now. I'll take you back to the house."

No! She had to help somehow. Kane! Where was he? Her frantic gaze flew around the chaos and she pulled free from Mia. "I have to help! This is my fault."

Mia shook her head, then glanced back at the battle. "No, Bethany. This is something that was going to happen no matter who else was involved. We can't let the Hunters destroy us. We had to attack first. Now, come on, let me take you home. Kane saw you drive up and sent me to you. He doesn't want you to be in danger."

"Where is he?" Bethany searched frantically.

Mia pointed to the center of the battle. Bethany gasped in horror. Kane was in the middle of four Hunters and fighting them to the death. Her scream was choked. "Oh God, Kane! What have I done?"

Mia started to reply when a gunshot sounded too close for comfort.

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The female Shifter gasped in pain and slumped against the car. Bethany swung around and immediately saw the dark stain of blood already soaking the sleeve of Mia's bullet-torn shirt.

"Mia!" She clasped her arm and pulled her into the interior of the car. Mia shook her head when Bethany tried to take a closer look at the wound.

"Bethany, you have to leave. Don't worry about me."

"I'm taking you back with me," Bethany stated. "I can't leave without you."

"Bethany, look out!" Mia screamed.

A large shadow loomed over them and Bethany swung around to confront a Hunter holding a gun aimed at her head.

She didn't take the time to think. She reacted. Using the car door as a brace she leaned back and kicked out with both legs. Her surprise attack hit the man in the stomach and knocked him backwards. The gun flew into the air and then landed on the ground between them. Bethany and the Hunter grappled for it at the same time. Bethany was faster. She snatched it up and aimed it directly at his heart.

"Don't make me use this," she panted. She was shaking so hard she was afraid she'd drop the gun, so she grasped it tighter. Realization hit then. She knew where her loyalties lay now. And it wasn't with the murderous Hunters.

The Hunter laughed. "You don't have the guts to shoot me. You're as weak-willed as your brother." He pointed a finger at Mia behind her in the car. "Why would you care about these beasts?"

"That's my point, exactly," Bethany said firmly, her heart and soul sounding righteous in the conviction of her words. "I care. That means I'll kill if I have to. To protect them."

She could tell by his surprised expression that she'd shocked him. She'd told him the truth. She cared. The Shifters were friends. And...God help her, she loved Kane. Nothing else mattered as much.

The Hunter made a sudden lunge at her. Bethany didn't allow her conscience time to debate. She pulled the trigger.

He fell dead at her feet. She stared at him for a long moment, the battle sounds dimming in her ears as the horror of what she'd done penetrated her numb mind. Then she fell to her knees and vomited up what was left in her stomach.

Strong arms wrapped around her and pulled her gently to her feet. Dazed, Bethany looked into the sympathetic eyes of another female

Shifter. "I killed him." She heard herself murmur the words, but they sounded like a booming condemnation to her ears. She started shivering harder, the violent shakes covering her entire body.

"I'm taking you home," the woman said firmly.

She didn't have the strength to argue. She couldn't bear to be here. The destruction was too much. Somehow, she knew it had to be all her fault. Drew's life was forfeit and countless Shifters were dead now. She had killed a man.

She wanted to die, too.

Sicker than she'd ever felt in her entire life, Bethany managed to scoot over to the passenger side of the car with Mia and the other female Shifter slid into the driver's seat. Closing her eyes, Bethany whispered brokenly, "I'm so sorry." The tears fell hot against her cheeks, and the bile threatened once again to surge up her throat. "So sorry."

Back at the house, she was helped up to her room and into bed. She was too numb, too drained of emotion and energy to protest. Her mind - as well as her soul felt empty. Dead. The woman Shifter left for a few minutes and then came back with a glass of water and a small white pill in her hand.

"Take this," she ordered softly. Bethany didn't have the strength to refuse, didn't even care what it might be. She didn't want to think anymore. Didn't want to even feel. *Never again.* She obediently swallowed the pill with some water and fell back against her pillows.

"This is just a nightmare, isn't it?" She focused her quickly blurring gaze on the other woman's concerned face. "I'll wake up and find myself at home in Atlanta, and none of this would have ever happened."

"I'm sorry, honey," the woman comforted gently. "Just sleep now."

The pill was working quickly. Bethany felt the drugging effects steal over her body, relaxing her muscles and numbing her mental pain and horror. She gratefully closed her eyes.

Barely able to whisper, she called out the name of the one she so desperately needed then. "Kane."

"He'll be here soon," she heard the woman whisper.

Her last coherent thought was she knew she couldn't face him when the time came. He was going to hate her for her part in all this.

She had failed Drew. She had betrayed Ethan's love. She had killed a

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man.

And she had fallen in love with a man who would now hate her forever.

The touch against her cheek was whisper soft. She fought through the fading fog of sleep and opened her eyes. Her gaze met Kane's mere inches from her face. She choked back a cry of surprise, coming fully awake.

Kane slowly straightened from leaning over her. "I was beginning to think you would never wake up," he drawled.

Bethany carefully sat up. *He's alive! He's safe!* Her gaze was thorough as she perused his beloved body from head to toes. He had a few cuts here and there, some bruises, but otherwise looked fine. More than fine! Immense relief flooded her.

Trepidation suddenly swamped her just as quickly and she stared deep into his eyes. She couldn't tell by his guarded expression what he was thinking and it made her more than just a little nervous. Was he here to accuse her of helping the Hunters?

"How long have I been asleep?"

He folded his arms over his chest. "Almost two days. Jan says to tell you she's sorry. She gave you the same medicinal strength of sedative that Shifters use. She wasn't thinking about your human status at the time."

Bethany gasped in shock. He knew! *And he knows why I was here in the first place.* There was no pretending now, no need to fake ignorance. Her heart raced. What would he do now?

"When did you find out about the Hunters plans?" She grimaced at the shaky tone of her voice. *He knows I'm a traitor, a fake. What will happen?*

Kane's face darkened. "Later than I would have liked to have known. It seems my little brother thought he could handle this situation by himself."

"Ethan knew first?" How? She'd been so careful. "When?"

Kane sighed, the sound coming from deep within him. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Bethany automatically scooted a few inches away. This close and she could feel the tension radiating off him in hot waves. She just didn't know what kind of tension...

"Ethan has a lot to atone for," Kane muttered. "But the gist of it is that we've been searching for this particular group of Hunters for just about as long as they've been looking for us. Ethan was in Atlanta on business when he discovered the Cell there. He and an accomplice -devised a plan to ferret them out. He thought he could handle things until it was necessary to let me in on everything." He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "Damn pup. He deserves a thrashing."

She was afraid to voice the words aloud, but had to know. The truth was out and she couldn't hide from anything or him anymore. "When did he find out I was associated with them?"

"Your sister told him."

Bethany was grateful she was already sitting. She couldn't have taken the shock and remained on her feet. "Tess?" How could that be possible? They didn't even know each other, and Tess was safely hidden in Scotland.

"Yeah," Kane nodded his head. "Little Miss Innocent Tess. The sneaky little sister who let you think she was tucked away safely in Scotland while you tried singlehandedly to save your brother." He chuckled softly. "They deserve each other."

Too many more shocks and she wasn't sure she'd recover. She frowned at his statement. "*They?* Kane what or who are you talking about?"

Kane smiled slowly, the curving of his sensual lips so sexy it made her shiver with sudden desire. Even after everything being exposed, and her life possibly forfeit now, she could still acknowledge her desire for this man. *How crazy is that?*

"Tess and Ethan are the perfect match." He grinned again, looking like he was enjoying her confusion way too much. He finally relented with the statement, "They're mates, Bethany. They have been for over six months now. Ethan met Tess before you tried to send her away. They recognized each other as soul mates. When the Hunters contacted you, they didn't know about Ethan and Tess. Ethan decided to keep it that way, and he and your sister came up with their own plan. Tess went to Scotland, just as you thought. But she came back incognito. Ethan assigned a few of our best Shifter trackers and together with Tess they ferreted out where the Hunters were keeping your brother."

He stopped grinning. "Ethan proposed to you knowing the Hunters would expose themselves by following you here. When his plan started falling in place, Tess contacted him with the news they had rescued

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Drew and had him safely tucked away."

"Drew is safe? Tess found him? She is Ethan's mate?" Bethany rubbed her suddenly aching temples. This really was too much to take in. What had started out as a nightmare was turning into something even more disturbing. "What about the Hunters? Are they...?" She couldn't bring herself to say the words aloud, not sure she was ready to hear the stark truth she saw glittering dangerously in Kane's eyes.

Kane's expression turned deadly. "We disposed of the bodies after the battle. The remaining families will be leaving soon. I don't imagine they will want to stay here now." He looked long into her eyes. She felt the sudden urge to close her eyes tight and never face him again. His next words couldn't be good...

"Hunters are a danger, a reality that my people face every day of their lives, Bethany. There are those out there who live for the sole purpose of killing us all. We strike back when we have to. I won't apologize for doing what we had to do to protect our own families from murderers."

She closed her eyes for a moment. Deep down, she knew what he was saying was right. She didn't have to like it, but it was a part of the Shifters' lives. She couldn't condemn them for fighting back. After all, she had killed a man to protect Mia.

"I understand, Kane," she said, a sigh softly slipping out. "I know you wouldn't have attacked without a reason." She wondered if he knew what she'd done. Would he be horrified to know she had killed, too? "I understand all too much."

But...now that it was over, where did this leave her? She might as well have been the enemy for her part in their plan to destroy the Shifters. How could Ethan or Kane ever forgive her? Even though Ethan knew her reasons for betraying them, would it make a difference? She moaned and covered her face with her hands. *Oh God, will this nightmare ever be truly over? Will I survive it?*

Kane gently pulled her hands away from her face. To keep from looking at him, she immediately closed her eyes tight. She couldn't bear to see the condemnation she was sure had to be there in his eyes.

"Look at me, Bethany."

"I can't."

He growled, rough, and her eyes flew open at the all-too-sexy sound. "These past few days have seemed like an eternity, playing this game of charade." Kane reached out and grasped her chin. "I should hate you for

the part you were willing to play in this nightmare. But I understand your reasons. I would have done the same – or more – if Ethan’s life had been at stake like Drew’s.”

“I didn’t know what else to do,” she murmured. Hot tears clouded her vision. “I felt guilty about hurting Ethan, but I had no choice. I wish I could undo my part in this, but it isn’t possible.”

“So,” Kane drawled, “what exactly was to be your part in all this? Bringing the Hunters into our backyard wasn’t the only thing you were expected to do, was it?”

How could she tell him the truth? Would he hate her even more than he already did? Could she bear that? She took a deep breath, then released it on a shaky exhale. She had to tell him. No matter the consequences.

“They wanted me to seduce...you. Then, cause friction between you and Ethan. Their plan was to divide you and hope that it weakened the other Shifters’ morals. When you were fighting among yourselves, they planned to attack.”

Kane’s dark stare settled on her mouth for a long moment. “And when did you plan to start this little seduction? You acted like you were afraid of me whenever we were in the same room.”

“I wasn’t afraid of you,” she exclaimed. “You were just so-so – overbearing that I didn’t know how to react around you.” That was certainly an understatement! *And he grins!*

“Overbearing?” Kane tightened his grip on her chin. “I call it being territorial, baby. I knew you were mine the first moment I saw you cross that parking lot.”

Bethany blinked rapidly a few times and shut her mouth on a surprised gulp. Did she just hear him right? Was he saying what she thought he was? Dared she hope? She shook her head, loosening his grip on her chin. He moved his hand to behind her neck and grasped a handful of hair. She almost forgot to breathe when he looked at her like that.

“Kane, I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying.” *Please, tell me you don’t hate me.*

“Beth-love, you know exactly what I’m saying. I felt it in your answering kiss that day. I knew it in the way you gave yourself to me *that* night. I see it in your eyes now. Why don’t you just admit you felt the same inevitable bond I felt the first moment we met?”

She chewed on her bottom lip to keep from blurting out the words

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she wanted to say. She had to be sure of his true feelings before this went any further.

"So, what does that mean? You're attracted to me? You never made it clear...that night." She glared at him, suddenly remembering past words. "Or is it just 'lust' like you told Ethan?"

"I'm a wolf, baby." He growled sexily to prove his point. "Wolves lust. It's in our nature." He yanked on her hair, bringing her face to within an inch of his. He stared down into her eyes with a look of primal possessiveness that took her breath away. "But once they find their mate, the lust turns to something more. Permanent. *Undeniable*. I recognized you as my mate, and I've been patiently waiting to claim you ever since." He grinned wolfishly. "Okay, I haven't been exactly patiently waiting. Must be the wolf in me." His breath wafted teasingly across her lips. "That night, I lost control. I wanted to wait until this situation with the Hunters was dealt with, but I couldn't. You were driving me crazy."

He pressed his lips against hers in a hard, quick kiss. "The question is, are you going to deny this bond between us? Or are you going to give in and let me show you what suppressed lust for one's mate does to a Shifter?"

Bethany shivered from the raging desire spreading over her body like a wildfire at his words. But it was definitely a delicious shiver. An exhilarating, all-compassing shiver of truth.

But she couldn't resist the tease, one last time. "I don't know if I can handle it. I thought you already showed me that night. Your *showing* nearly killed me," she whispered seductively against his lips. "And I've had enough shock to last me a long time. Maybe I need to rest more before we continue this...uh...conversation."

"The hell you will," Kane growled, half teasing, half threateningly, his breath hot against her waiting mouth. "I've waited long enough. You're *mine*, Beth-love. You can rest...later."

He started taking off her blouse as his lips murmured against her mouth, "Yeah, definitely rest later. *Maybe*."

Kari Thomas



About the Author

Kari Thomas is a multi-published Author, writing mostly in the Paranormal Romance genre. Her last book, with Eternal Press, titled *Seducing the Hero* won a 3rd Place award in an RWA National Contest. Her other books have also won numerous awards.

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Available now from Eternal Press

Seducing the Hero

by Kari Thomas

Kitchen Witch Baylie Campbell needs a hero—a protector—when a crazed stalker threatens her life. Ex-detective-turned cowboy, Colt McKnight, agrees to protect Baylie, and he takes her to his secluded ranch. Colt knows Baylie is big trouble when he meets her, and those misfit, magically-blessed animals of hers are added stress. But he soon realizes it's more than his male-sanity at stake when it comes to the seductive witch. Colt tries his best to resist Baylie's charms. but, Baylie knows he never stands a chance. Both learn to trust love again; along with help from her four animals, and fate in the form of a stalker.

Colt shook his head. If he managed to stay sane, he was definitely going to make Jason pay this favor back!

"Can you stand?"

Colt looked at her, his mouth gaping open as she suddenly stood. That damn silky gown flew up her thighs with her movement, and he caught a tantalizing glimpse of bikini panties underneath. He couldn't have stopped the lustful groan had his life depended on it. His groin tightened. He wasn't sure standing was an option at the moment.

"We need to get your wounds cleaned and bandaged." She held out her hand. "Come on, cowboy, I'll help you."

Colt stared at her bare legs, so close to his face, and cleared a throat gone dry. "How did you know I'm a cowboy?" He grimaced. Was that

all he could think to say?

She smiled and his heart raced alarmingly.

"You're wearing worn jeans, worn cowboy boots, and your cowboy hat is being flattened underneath Sweet Pea's butt."

"Damn pig!" Colt surged to his feet. He bent down to retrieve his hat and the pig growled at him as she squished it further into the wet ground. Colt jumped back a step and glared down at the offending beast. "Fine," her muttered finally, "Keep it. But you're going to look damn silly trying to wear it."

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Bite Me

by Donaya Haymond

People say bad things about Dianne's parents that just aren't true; they're a vampire and werewolf...so?

It's hard enough for Dianne to be fifteen and obviously to love her parents, even worse when there's something weird about them no one quite understands. Her father being a vampire and her mother being a werewolf is a simple fact of life. More worrisome are Mom and Dad getting sick for unknown reasons, the effect an accidental display of power is having on her social life, and the possibility that the boy next door thinks she's a freak. Matthew seems to like her, yet there's something off about him. Dr. Nat Silver, a vampire with several medical degrees, may provide some answers. For the most part Dianne feels it's her wit and devotion versus a world more cruel than any supernatural being could ever be.

"Dianne Anghel, is there something wrong at home that's bothering you? Your grades are still good, but your behavior has slipped so abruptly. I'm worried."

Hah. I could just see myself sitting down and solemnly saying this to the principal, "Yeah, in fact, there is. You see, my mom's a werewolf and my dad's a vampire. Which wouldn't be so much of an issue, except everyone thinks they're weird for other reasons and won't stop ragging

me about it. Worst of all, my social status has managed to plunge to a negative rating, and I might have some no-longer-latent shape-shifting abilities. Other than that, no, there's nothing wrong at all, ma'am, and I'm sorry I slapped Tammy. I wish I'd bitten her."

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10:15

by Trent Kinsey

One second always makes the difference.

The suspenseful tale of three students and one teacher trapped in one second of time, only to find out that something is there with them. Something no one has ever seen before, with an appetite none of them want to bear witness to.

As he walked around the back of the gym and passed the front entrance, Mark could see the little fat kid he loved to mess with running for his life. He wanted to laugh because George was nude as the day he was born and his fat body was gyrating and jiggling all over the place. Before he could muster the air for a laugh, his eyes pulled in the image of what was chasing him. The only thing Mark could think was, "This is the fear those people in the movies must feel when they piss themselves." He was glad he had relieved himself earlier.

His attention caught movement to his right. On instinct he turned and raised his fists, ready to fight, only to see one of the hottest girls in school run the other way. He didn't blame her. He wanted to run away at the sight of the thing chasing George, too.

Two options crossed his mind: run and help the gyrating blob, or protect the hottie. Being the man of strong morals he was, he chased after the girl.