

Changeling Press

Holiday Howlz

Cry for the Moon

MARIE TREANOR

Holiday Howlz: Cry for the Moon

Marie Treanor

All rights reserved.

Copyright ©2009 Marie Treanor

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this or any copyrighted work is illegal. File sharing is an International crime, prosecuted by the United States Department of Justice and the United States Border Patrol, Division of Cyber Crimes, in partnership with Interpol. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is punishable by seizure of computers, up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000 per reported instance.

ISBN: 978-1-60521-357-6

Formats Available:

HTML, Adobe PDF,

MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:

Changeling Press LLC

PO Box 1046

Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046

www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Crystal Esau

Cover Artist: Reneé George

This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Holiday Howlz: Cry for the Moon

Marie Treanor

A lonely woman spends Christmas by herself in the country cottage she once shared with her beloved husband, a soldier who disappeared without a trace over two years ago. She has finally accepted that he's dead and is even contemplating suicide.

On Christmas Eve, a knock on the door heralds the arrival of a homeless man in ragged clothes who bears a staggering resemblance to her husband. However, he doesn't know who he is, or what has led him to the cottage. Recklessly, she lets him stay the night, but begins to suspect she may have made a terrible mistake when, in the midst of unexpected passion, a wolf flees howling from her bed.

Chapter One

In spite of everything she knew, Ruth's heart beat faster as she turned the final corner of the lane, the one that would bring the cottage into view. She even walked faster, her boots crunching over the frosty ground like those of a much younger, much happier woman rushing to meet her lover. Her breath steamed and sparkled in the cold darkness, drawing her onward.

And still in spite of everything she knew, she couldn't help the corroding disappointment when the black building loomed at last in front of her. No warm, welcoming glow from the windows. No Christmas tree gleaming behind the curtains. No impatient lover watching for her approach.

Of course there wasn't. There hadn't been for the last two Christmases and there wouldn't be ever again. Jared was dead.

Her brief, silly hope done with, she let the dull lethargy close around her again, like a familiar, if boring, friend. Stepping up to the front door, she slid her key into the lock and kicked frost off her boots before entering the dark cottage.

Although she hadn't been here for several months, it was exactly as she'd left it. Switching on the lights, she saw that a thin layer of dust covered the surface of the hall table. It would be everywhere, which would give her plenty to do tonight before she went to bed.

Walking into the kitchen, she laid her meager shopping on the table and began to unpack. Coffee, milk, bread and whisky. When she opened the fridge, she found that Jane and Charlie, her nearest neighbors who kept the spare key for her, had left a turkey as usual.

Ruth's throat constricted. It was a kindness begun when she and Jared had first bought the cottage and continued even after Jared's death. They barely saw the couple

but had always exchanged Christmas gifts -- always a fresh, home-bred turkey from Jane and Charlie -- and met on Boxing Day for a drink, if Jared didn't have to rush back on duty.

A pang of guilt struck at Ruth. She hadn't bought them a gift this year. Lost in isolation and grief, she'd never even thought of it. Now she wondered how they'd feel to find their turkey ignored and uneaten. Nor would it be kind to let them discover her body.

It was a silly idea to do it here, anyway. She should wait until she got back to the city and do it there where no one would care. She wasn't thinking straight, hadn't been since the two year anniversary of Jared's disappearance. Since he was legally dead, it shouldn't have made any difference. The army had long made it clear that she should regard him as dead, even though there was no body to mourn. They couldn't give her details for classified reasons, but they'd left her with no doubt that he was gone for good.

What the two year anniversary had done was make her a widow, make her realize finally that he wasn't ever coming home, and that without him, she really didn't want to carry on. She knew it was a weakness, a terrible fault, that she couldn't pull herself together, find some other cause to live for if she wasn't interested in finding another man as her colleagues kept trying to persuade her to do. But the truth was, she had always been a one man woman, and no other man interested her. And now she was bored with life, bored with grief.

"Stuff it," she said aloud, putting the kettle on. "What does it matter where or when? Just get through Christmas one last time."

* * *

The cottage cleaned to her satisfaction and the living room fire lit, she curled up in the armchair with a glass of whisky. Beside her, the radio played non-stop Christmas carols in its inexorable build up to midnight and the eternal hope of Christmas Day.

Ruth smiled into the flames. "Bah, humbug," she murmured and toasted the fire with her glass. "Good luck, world." She took a drink, relishing the fiery streak down her throat.

Then she closed her eyes and remembered a different Christmas, when Jared was here with her, holding her on his lap in this very chair while they'd talked and laughed and teased each other over a shared glass of whisky, just relishing this chance to be completely alone together for two or even three whole days. Christmas had seemed magical then.

Her colleagues thought she exaggerated their happiness together, but she didn't. She hadn't forgotten the bad times, the quarrels and lively disagreements. She remembered very well that Jared hadn't been perfect; he could be arrogant and thoughtlessly selfish and there was a tough, almost hard streak in him that could be frightening. But then, he was a soldier, and a basically good man with a strong sense of responsibility, serious about his job and about her. He'd been her best friend as well as her lover. They'd laughed together as much as they'd talked, and much, much more than they'd fought.

"Here's to you, Jared, wherever you are," she whispered and blindly took another drink. And since it was all so nearly over, she relaxed her self-imposed rule and let herself dream he was here, that it was his arm not her own that folded across her breasts. That there was a present for her under the Christmas tree, which she hadn't troubled to put up, and one for him. One last fantasy to the sounds of the crackling flames and the interminable carols.

The laughter at something she'd said would just be dying in his eyes as he gazed down at her. Slowly, he'd nudge up her chin and bend his head to kiss her. Jared's kisses were priceless, long, slow and thorough. And unashamedly sensual, even a kiss of greeting or farewell given in front of others. But this one would be special, deeper, more urgent.

Ruth lost herself in her dream, the remembered feel of his lips and tongue, the caress of his hand on her breast while the other sneaked up her skirt to stroke her thigh

and hip and slide round between her legs. She was wet for him, always eager, and the discovery made his breath hitch as he slid his fingers inside her panties to find the slick nub of her clitoris. Jared's fingers... she loved his fingers, adored the pleasure they gave her. But soon, she wanted more. She turned in his arms, burrowing under his sweater to pull it over his head before unzipping his jeans and dragging out his fully erect cock. Raising herself in his arms, shivering as his hands closed around her naked hips, she gazed into his hot, devouring eyes as she lowered herself onto his cock. God, it felt so good, filling her, answering her every desperate need...

A loud knock shattered her dream. Whisky sloshed over her hand as she jumped. Who the hell could that be? Whoever it was, she hated them for interrupting her dream. It had almost felt real.

Standing, she dashed her hand across her wet face. Shit, when had she started to cry? As the knock came again, loud and impatient, she walked unsteadily to the door, wiping her eyes on her sleeve as she went.

She was a woman, alone, in an isolated cottage at night. But she ignored the danger. She'd been beyond caring for some time. In any case, it must be Jane or Charlie in the midst of some emergency.

She flung open the door. "What is it?"

She found a tall man leaning one arm across the door frame, staring at her. In the contrast of the lit cottage with the darkness outside, she couldn't make him out properly, but he seemed to be large and ragged and unshaven. And by some unkind trick, he managed to look like her husband.

Her throat dried up. Shock and grief kept her frozen. Had she fallen asleep in front of the fire and was dreaming? After all, she'd had dreams like this before, where he came back... Only he hadn't looked so... rough.

He moved, pushing his head forward into the light and she saw that of course it wasn't Jared. This man had blank, wild eyes, not the thoughtful, intelligent, often cynically amused ones of her husband. And he was too thin, too unshaven. Jared had never had stubble growing all over his neck like that...

The man took a step nearer her, and instinctively, although she wasn't frightened, she took one back. She blinked. In the glow of light from the cottage, his neck no longer looked so hairy, though he clearly hadn't shaved for some time. Unsure, she lifted her gaze back to his.

He stared at her, a frown etched between his thick brows. Or were they really so thick? Perhaps they were just untidy. But his eyes... her mind was playing tricks, for his eyes seemed to be exactly the same shade of bright, piercing blue as Jared's.

He said, "Who are you?"

She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the dream to end, because it didn't seem right to let the stranger have Jared's voice, even if distorted with some hoarse, gravelly element it had never possessed in real life, only to deny any knowledge of her.

"I'm Ruth. Who are you?"

Not Jared. Even in a dream, not Jared. Life sucked. "I don't know."

She opened her eyes. "You don't know your name? Or you're having some philosophical identity crisis?"

A faint, a very faint smile tugged at his lips. That *was* like Jared, and it twisted her heart. "Both."

Dream or not, she decided to go with it. "All right, let's try something easier. What do you want?"

The frown deepened. "I don't know that either. I thought..." He trailed off, gave a quick, half-apologetic shrug. His gaze darted behind her, then upward and around the cottage before coming back to her face. "I thought you might be able to tell me. I'm sorry."

He turned away, and released from his eyes, Ruth took in the full state of his dress as he began to walk with hunched shoulders and an uneven gait. Down-at-the-heel boots with the toes almost worn out, torn trousers that were much too thin for the weather, and an old, moth-eaten coat that had been ripped down one side. A deranged down-and-out, his mind no doubt destroyed by drink or drugs or both.

With the face of her husband.

"Wait." She'd said it before she meant to, but she didn't regret it. She could give him money and send him away, only where would he spend it around here on Christmas Eve? He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "You don't have anywhere to stay, do you?"

"It's warm in the woods."

"No, it isn't."

Even in the darkness and over the distance between them, she sensed the confusion that briefly crossed his face. "Actually, it's not as bad as you think. The cold."

"You can stay here, if you like. For tonight."

There was a pause, then he said, "Thank you. But I'm better in the woods."

"Then why did you knock?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Christmas Eve."

"Then let me do you this one kindness before I die."

He straightened and began to walk slowly back toward her. "Before you die?" His eyes, his whole face looked anxious now, the frown quite ferocious, reminding her unbearably of Jared when something angered him. "You're too young to die. Are you ill?"

She smiled. "Yes," she admitted. "I'm ill. But it's not catching. Come in."

He stared into her eyes and for a moment, she thought he would refuse. Then he merely nodded and waited for her to lead the way.

Chapter Two

He stood in her little living room, shrinking it as Jared had used to, by his size and presence.

"Please, sit down." A little nervously, Ruth waved her hand at the second chair. "Coffee? Whisky?"

The stranger with Jared's eyes dragged one dirty hand through his matted hair. "It doesn't seem right," he muttered. "I've been living rough. I'm not... house-friendly."

"Would you like a bath? The water should be hot by now."

He didn't answer at once. Then he said, "You're here alone?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't do that." He frowned at her.

"What?"

"Invite strangers into your home, admit you're alone. Offer them whisky and baths."

Amused in spite of herself, she said, "Too late. I already have."

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

"No. But then I don't seem to be afraid of anyone or anything anymore."

"You should be."

She shrugged. "I'm not."

Again, his eyes scanned hers. "Then I'll accept the bath and the whisky and an hour of your time. And then I'll be going."

"As you wish. Let me show you the bathroom."

Not crowding her, he waited outside the bathroom while she turned on the taps of the old-fashioned bath and laid out a couple of towels for him. In case he wanted it,

she left out Jared's shaving kit and murmured that she'd find him some clean clothes and leave them outside the bathroom door.

Brushing past him, she felt the warmth of his body through his tattered, dirty clothes and was shocked by the tingle of her sexual response dampening her panties. Half frightened now by her unexpected reaction, she glanced up at him, almost with foreboding. His body was tense, his face carefully expressionless. But for some reason she sensed his discomfort and was soothed by it, at least enough to recognize that her desire came from the fact that he looked so much like Jared -- and by her body's unfinished business so soon after her own fantasy of being with Jared.

With a quick smile, she squeezed past and let him enter the bathroom, which he did wordlessly, closing the door with a definite snap that comforted her some more.

She thought it might hurt, digging out Jared's clothes from their untouched place in the cupboard. But it didn't. It reminded her that she should finally give all his stuff away to good causes. In the meantime, some socks and shorts, a pair of decent jeans, a T-shirt and warm sweater could all go to her visitor. And there was a warm, waterproof jacket he could have too. Leaving the indoor clothes in a neat pile outside the bathroom door, she hung the jacket beside hers at the front door. She'd give it to him when he left, whether that was in an hour or in the morning.

Then she made up the bed in the tiny spare room and went to the living room to wait. Curling up in her chair, she retrieved her whisky and wondered how long he would be. She half expected him to take ages, luxuriating in the treat of warm water, maybe even stumbling over things like shaving, which must have become unfamiliar to him over the period of his homelessness.

She surprised herself by how much she wanted to hear his story. She'd cut herself off from people too much, especially in the last few months since she'd finally accepted Jared's death as final.

More quickly than she expected, the bathroom door clicked open. He'd be picking up the clothes, going back inside to dress and shave...

Ruth took a sip of whisky, a little nervous now as to how to talk to him without sounding patronizing. Hell, she'd managed before. After all, she was planning to kill herself. She had absolutely nothing to be patronizing about.

A shadow caught the corner of her eye and she glanced up at the doorway.

Her heart jolted, sweeping downward into her stomach with a rush that left her breathless and dizzy. It could be Jared standing there. It *was* Jared standing there.

Tall and lean, he fitted Jared's clothes almost perfectly. Perhaps the muscles in his thighs pushed slightly against the denim of his jeans, and perhaps he was a little thinner around the hips, but he still looked good in them. He even suited the baggy black sweater which had been part of Jared's favorite slobbing garb. He'd always looked sexy in it, and so did the stranger.

Under her stunned gaze, he began to move into the room. The corded muscle in his neck drew her attention before she focused on his face. Clean shaven, he was Jared's double. Perhaps his cheekbones were a little leaner, his eyes a little more deep set and hollowed, but otherwise, it was Jared's face. And Jared's eyes. Without the slightly scary mixture of wildness and blankness she'd noticed before, these were surely Jared's eyes. Perceptive, sensitive, thoughtful, intelligent. And blue enough to drown in.

"Oh God," she whispered, rising to her feet. The glass slipped from her fingers, balancing precariously on the arm of her chair as she moved across the room to meet him. "Jared... Jared..."

Her arms went around him of their own volition, her head pressed into his chest. Warm, real... Jared.

She gasped. She couldn't control the ache in her throat, the words that spilled from her mouth. "You *are* Jared! How did I not know you? I'm your wife and you needed to bathe before I even knew you..."

"My *wife*?"

The unmistakable stunned note in his voice broke into her confusion. She realized he held himself stiffly in her arms, that his hands were on her shoulders, not

embracing her but holding her back so that he could stare into her face, scanning, searching. But not finding what he sought -- that much was clear.

"You don't know me," she whispered. "Am I wrong, then? Do I really not know you? Am I mad enough now to imagine your face, your voice on a stranger?"

His Adam's apple wobbled as he swallowed. "I don't know. I have amnesia. You could be my wife, or a complete stranger. You should hope for the latter."

"Why?" she demanded. "I have dreamed, I have *wanted*..."

"You can't have wanted this..."

"More than my life."

His eyes widened. He drew in a deep breath. "And that's your illness?"

She closed her eyes, shutting out his face, hiding her tears and her shame. "Yes," she whispered. "That's my illness."

He moved. She felt his arms around her shoulder, drawing her with him, seating her in the chair, wrapping her fingers around the glass she'd abandoned. His touch was vaguely shocking, warm and gentle despite the roughness of his hands. Like Jared's and yet not quite.

"I'll have that whisky now, if I may," he murmured.

She gestured to the dresser where the bottle and the spare glasses lay. His hands were steady, not those of a drunk, and the measure he poured was generous without being excessive. Jared's normal dram.

I can't bear this. Why don't I know for sure? Shouldn't I know my own husband?

She watched mutely as he came back to her and instead of taking the chair on the other side of the fireplace, sat down on the rug, by her feet, facing her.

He said quietly, "Tell me about your husband."

She swallowed. "His name was Jared. He was a soldier, an army captain. He died two years ago."

"Then I can't be your husband."

She couldn't work out if it disappointed him or not. Hell, why should it? She was clearly a half-mad woman damaged beyond repair by grief.

Perversely, she chose to fight the logic. "There was no body. I never saw the body, was never told how he died. They told me it was classified, but still there was no funeral, no memorial until he'd disappeared officially for two years."

The man with Jared's face frowned and took a sip of his whisky, reminding her to do the same. "That doesn't sound right," he observed. "Didn't you pursue it further?"

"No. I knew if he was alive, he'd come home. With or without the army's permission. But he never came."

"And now you think I might be him? Why? Do I look so much like him?"

Ruth nodded, but catching the glimmer of doubt in his eye, she reached down for her bag and dragged out the slightly dog-eared photograph she'd always carried with her, ever since he'd first given her it before they were married. "Look. He was younger then, only twenty-four, but you must be able to see the resemblance. I've got a mirror too if you need it."

He took the photograph, slowly shaking his head as he stared at it. "I don't need a mirror. I haven't recognized my own face in three months. Which is all I remember of my life."

"Nothing at all before?" Even without the Jared possibilities, that interested her, arousing compassion and curiosity.

"Not a jot. I woke up on the intercontinental express and got off at the first stop -- from instinct I suppose. Or panic. I didn't even know my own name, never mind where I was from or where I was going. And I had no documents to tell me. Only those clothes I've just taken off and which didn't last too long living rough..."

"What did the doctors say? Shouldn't you be in a hospital or something?"

"No way. I'm not going near any doctors. They'll just take away anything that's left. Besides..."

"Besides what?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

She said, "I'm a doctor."

His head jerked, his eyes widening as he searched her eyes. "Really?"

"Really. That's how I met Jared. He'd broken his arm in some military exercise when I was a student. I got to practice on him."

"So... what's your specialty?"

"Gynecology."

A smile crossed his face, unbearably like Jared. "I don't think I mind gynecologists."

"You know what that is. And you talk like an educated man."

"I don't always behave like one."

She wasn't quite sure what he meant by that. But the sudden gleam in his eye, however quickly subdued, was easy enough to recognize. Knowing she stepped on dangerous ground, she still couldn't resist reaching out to touch his cheek.

"Am I familiar at all? Is there nothing about me you remember? Nothing you know you liked?"

His eyes dropped, then immediately rose again to meet hers. His hand reached up to cover her fingers, holding them lightly to his clean-shaven cheek.

"There's a lot about you I like," he said frankly. "I like your kindness and your loyalty and the way your eyes laugh even when you don't want them to. I like the softness of your touch and I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I *know* you're the most beautiful woman I've seen in three months. I hate to see you suffering as you are. But I'd be lying if I said you were familiar, because you're not."

Her face flushed with his compliments, even while her heart twisted with disappointment like a physical pain. "Then what are you doing here?" she whispered. "Why did you come here, to his house, where we spent every Christmas since we met?"

He lowered her hand from his cheek but still held onto it. "I don't know," he admitted. "I was passing, and something drew me here... I *feel* things sometimes. I'm drawn to particular people for reasons I don't understand and often with bad intentions. With you... I sense nothing bad and God knows I mean you no harm."

His fingers moved on the soft skin between her thumb and forefinger, making her shiver. He seemed to hesitate, then added, "I can only think I was drawn by your sadness, by your need. And you invited me in because you sensed mine. I never believed in Christmas miracles -- at least I don't think I did -- but maybe we're meant to help each other."

Her body leapt, not with memory of Jared but in response to the man looking into her eyes so seriously right now. Whoever he was. She said breathlessly, "How do you suggest we do that?"

He rose up on his knees in front of her and leaned forward. Her heart began to hammer in her breast. Panicked, she almost backed away, but her body spoke for her, urging her to close what little distance was left between them.

Their lips touched and parted. Electricity jolted through her. It might have been recognition or it might have been simple lust. Or a mixture of both. For an instant, they stared into each other's eyes and then his mouth took hers fully, sinking on it, parting her lips and slowly entering with his tongue.

She wanted to weep because he felt like Jared, he tasted like Jared, and then he took her in his arms and deepened his kiss and suddenly she no longer cared if he was Jared or not. Desire soared, opening her gasping mouth for him, pressing her closer into his body. She hadn't had sex in two and a half years, hadn't been even remotely tempted, and yet one kiss from a stranger who looked like Jared and she was an instantly straining, melting heap of lust.

"You *are* Jared, you are," she whispered against his lips, not knowing which of them she was trying to convince.

"For tonight, I'm whoever you want me to be. I'm all you have, and I'll be good because you're all I want..."

She didn't even try to make sense of that, for his hand had found her breast under her sweater, and she let out a low, animal moan she barely recognized as hers. It was as if she threw out all her native caution, all her inhibitions with that one sound.

She had to have this man now, feel his naked skin on hers, his exciting hands all over her body, and his cock, most of all his cock, plunging deep inside her.

Gasping, she pushed him back. He let go at once, but she gave him no time to ask or imagine what was wrong. Instead, she followed, throwing her body against him with such force that he fell backward onto the rug, with her on top of him, and at last she felt the unmistakable, hard ridge of his cock digging into her stomach.

With a little growl of triumph, she wriggled herself downward, fitting his straining bulge between her thighs. He thrust upward from the hips and bolts of delight whipped through her, egging her on.

She rose up, straddling him, loving the feel of his erect shaft from her clitoris to her anus as she rocked on him. Dragging her sweater up over her head, she moaned again as his hands closed over her breasts, impatiently shoving aside the bra before she'd even unclipped it. His hips gyrated under her, driving her nearer to orgasm, which she'd never expected to share with anyone again.

Spurred on, she pushed up his sweater and T-shirt until he pulled them off and she fell forward onto him, pressing her breasts into his hard chest, rubbing her pebbled nipples across his hot, responsive skin. Rough chest hair ground against her skin, her nipples, exciting her further. His hands roved across her back and shoulders, sliding up her throat to hold her head steady before he took her mouth and thrust his cock against her clothed clitoris.

"I'm coming too fast," she gasped into his mouth as the almost forgotten tide of ecstasy began to rise. "Wait..."

"No." He deepened the kiss and she gave up and writhed with him until the waves broke over her like surf.

She lost control of mind and body, could do nothing but give herself over to the shattering pleasure. Yet through it all, she was aware of his mouth kissing her, his hot avid eyes on hers, drinking in her climax as if it was his own. But it was all hers, and surely one of the most intense she'd ever known. So why wasn't it enough? Because he hadn't come with her.

Forcing her shaking limbs to move, she tried to sit up on him, to reach for the fastening of his jeans, but he was ahead of her. He flipped her onto her back so quickly that her already dizzy vision almost disintegrated. Before she knew it, her jeans and her panties were tugged down her legs, hanging off one ankle, and he was yanking down his own trousers with one hand while his other thrust between her thighs.

"Still wet for me?" he demanded hoarsely. His eyes scalded her, excited her beyond endurance, especially when the smile of triumph lit them as his fingers found her soaking, desperate pussy. "Oh yes..."

She wanted to feel his fingers inside her, as something more immediately possible than his cock, but it seemed he couldn't wait. Without troubling to take off his jeans and underpants properly, he freed his rampant cock. While she moaned at the sight of it in his fist, he pushed it against her pussy. She cried out as it slid against her over sensitized clitoris and pushed straight inside her.

Nothing had filled her for over two years. She felt unbearably stretched, and yet his hot hardness within her was stunning, wonderful, amazing. And he gave her no time to get used to it. Although he shook with his need, it didn't detract from his strength or his purpose as he thrust fully inside her.

The glowing embers of her orgasm sparked back into life, and without meaning to, without even knowing she could, she strained upward to take as much of his cock as she possibly could. He ground down on her and thrust again, and she began to moan and cry with every movement.

As if encouraged by her obvious pleasure, he pushed harder, driving her across the rug. She clung around his neck, her hands all over the rippling muscles of his back and hips as he pounded into her. He reached under her to hold her buttocks and protect her from carpet burn, but never let up. Leaving her mouth, he sucked one hard, elongated nipple into his mouth, shooting sharp, new pleasure straight to her womb, while he fucked her with wild, almost savage strokes that only lifted her lust higher.

She fought to meet him, to pleasure him with the tight, straining muscles of her vagina while she reached for her own climax with a desperation she'd never known

before. His teeth grazed her nipple, dragging across it before he released it and fell on the other, bucking and groaning as he slammed his cock into her.

His breathing became a breathless pant. She knew he was coming, felt his trembling fingers splay as far as her anus and knead her buttocks with a desperate, involuntary motion that pushed her over the edge with him.

Even more shattering than the last one, the orgasm claimed her in a storm of joy. Somewhere in among it, she found his mouth and kissed him, glorying in his weight as he collapsed on her, in the sheer power of the pleasure he'd taken from her as well as given.

As his mouth loosened on hers, she opened her eyes and saw his almost rolled up in his head. His whole face was contorted with passion, hot and clouded, and yet surely his eyes shouldn't do that? Surely that was pain, not pleasure twisting his mouth?

"Are you all right?" she whispered. "What is it?"

His groan of passion changed in pitch, becoming an agonized howl. Without warning, an animal's snout pushed out of his mouth.

Chapter Three

He catapulted off her body, fur springing out on his altered face, all over him as he twisted and reformed in front of her eyes.

She couldn't move, couldn't believe, let alone comprehend, the nightmare unfolding so suddenly from her joy. Her mouth opened as if it wanted to cry out, but it made no sound. Which didn't really matter since there was no one but this impossible being to hear her.

It was a huge wolf. The man who'd just made love to her with such exquisite savagery was a wolf. She was crying inside, with primal fear, but she knew it was all in her head. The wolf's eyes silenced her, paralyzed her. Because they were still blue. Still like Jared's.

Then the wolf moved, leaping toward her face, and she let out a long, panicked sound like keening.

I'm dead. I wanted to be dead, but not like this, not from a creature with Jared's eyes...

But the wolf didn't tear out her throat. It stood over her, one thick, powerful foreleg planted on either side of her head, holding her eyes with his. It made a sound, not a growl but a whine, like a dog crying. Its mouth opened; its tongue unfurled and licked her cheek once.

Then with another cut-off whine, it leapt off her and dived straight at the window. Glass shattered as its huge body hurtled through the opening and was gone.

* * *

The wolf ran for the woods, consumed with unendurable pain. For he knew now who he was and what had been done to him. The government he'd trusted, had been prepared to die for, had made him like this, without permission and for a purpose he

couldn't quite remember yet, though he was sure it was something to do with the three people he'd deliberately targeted and killed over the last few months.

But the woman at the cottage, she hadn't been his victim or even his target. She had been his wife. Something had made it through his reconditioning, bringing him here, drawing him to her and now she'd seen what he was.

The wolf rushed on through the darkness, trying to escape the awful fear and revulsion he'd read in her eyes. How could he have done this to her? Just when she'd accepted his death, he'd shown up again, raked it all up again, and destroyed whatever good memories she'd had left of him. They'd be lost now in the terror, in the loathsome thing he'd become.

He should never have gone inside. Should certainly never have kissed her, or made love to her. But the sexual urge had been so strong, and she was so beautiful, so hurt. It hadn't been all selfish either. Although he'd wanted to fuck her, very badly, he'd meant to give her something to live for too, a reminder that there could still be sex, even love in her life. And instead he'd turned that very act into horror.

What would she do now?

The wolf stopped running, came to a halt so abruptly that his paws actually skidded on the frosty ground.

She'd been suicidal when he found her. She'd admitted that. And having scared the shit out of her, destroying all her pleasant memories of what had been good in her life, he'd just run and left her to deal with it alone.

Jared lifted up his head to the moon and howled with shame and fear.

* * *

In the cottage, shivering in the icy air, Ruth heard him howl. Standing at the broken window, staring up at the same moon, she knew it was him. Her lover was a wolf, and the wolf was her husband.

As her brain struggled to deal with the impossibilities, she glanced blindly at her watch, seeking reality and comfort in the mundane.

My husband's not dead after all. He's some kind of werewolf.

Really? Shall I put the kettle on? What's the time?

Midnight. It was two minutes past midnight. Which meant it was Christmas Day. The day she'd been celebrating all her life without truly believing in the reason.

"He came home," she whispered. "I knew he'd come home..."

She gasped as the tears welled up her throat and spilled over.

* * *

Although it was still dark, Jared managed to force the wolf back inside him, and reached out to bang his fists on the cottage door. But at the last minute he drew back. He needed to know she was all right, needed to explain things. What he didn't need was to scare the shit out of her all over again by thundering on the door. Or to appear naked, but there wasn't a lot he could do about that.

He took a deep breath and knocked politely.

The door gave way under his knuckle, opening silently. His throat constricted. Why had she left the door open? Surely she couldn't have...

No. Sniffing the air, he got no scent of blood or death. She was inside. Jared stepped into the cottage. He knew at once that she was in the kitchen at the end of the little hall, although the door was partially closed, hiding her from his view.

He went nearer, his heart beating fast with dread as well as all the love he remembered and still felt. At the living room door, he caught sight of his clothes, the ones he'd taken off to make love to her. She'd piled them neatly on the arm of her chair.

He went quickly inside, noticing with peculiar pride that she'd boarded up the broken window, using the wood he'd once planned to build shelves with for the spare room. He climbed hastily into the jeans and dragged the sweater over his head before striding out of the room and across to the kitchen.

He pushed open the door slowly, almost afraid of what he would find, preparing to meet her cries of rage and fear with calm, soothing reason. If he could find any.

She stood by the kitchen table with her back to him. She was dressed in fresh clothes, the familiar, simple, red wool dress that hugged her hips. In spite of everything, he felt his libido stir and growl.

Heat from the oven hit him in waves, and he realized she was wrapping a turkey in foil.

His throat closed up. God, did Jane and Charlie still give her one of their turkeys at Christmas? Shit, were they coming over for dinner? He frowned. It was still the middle of the night.

Then all speculation vanished because she turned her head and saw him. He stiffened, ready to take the pain. But a smile broke out on her face, warm and real, and his heart turned over. She was all that had kept him sane for months, before the memories had vanished altogether. She'd been the last to leave him and the first he came back to. There were no words for that.

Instead he said, "What are you doing?"

"I thought you might be hungry."

Fascinated, he took a step nearer. "You knew I'd come back?"

"I've always known. And that's the thing about Christmas. You have to have faith."

She stood face-to-face with him now, no fear in her beautiful dark eyes, only the love that miraculously had never faded.

"I don't know what I am," he got out. "I may never know. I will never, ever hurt you, but I am violent and I have killed."

She put her arms around his neck and he whispered, "I love you," as he brushed his lips against her soft, warm cheek. He felt her smile, even as the wetness trickled past his lips.

"I love you," she murmured into his neck. "And I'll never leave you. I'll never even think of it."

In spite of the heat of the little kitchen, her nipples were hard, pressing against his chest. Raw, sexual hunger broke through his tenderness. Gently tugging back her hair he kissed her mouth, lost himself in her taste and smell and the feel of her hot, sensual body wriggling in his arms.

She whispered, "I know how you remembered."

"So do I. I want to remember more, everything. Put the turkey in the oven."

"Why?" she asked, clearly baffled by his apparent change of subject.

"Because I want to fuck you on the kitchen table. If you'll have me."

"Oh, I'll have you," she gasped. With apparent effort she tore herself out of his arms, opened the oven door and thrust the turkey tin inside. But before she'd even closed the door, the sight of her curvaceous rear bent over drove him to catch her hips, pulling her back against his hard-on as he yanked up her skirt.

"Now?" he asked urgently, swinging her round toward the table.

"Now," she pleaded.

Laughter caught in his throat. For the second time that night, he wrenched open his old jeans and pushed his cock into her hot, welcoming pussy. He'd come home.

His eyes closed as her warm, velvety walls closed around him and squeezed.

"My God... Happy fucking Christmas," he whispered, and set about making it just that.

Marie Treanor

Marie Treanor was born and brought up in Scotland, but for some years moved around the UK working and studying. Now she is back home and happily married with three young children. Having grown bored with city life, she lives these days in a picturesque village by the sea where she is lucky enough to enjoy herself avoiding housework and writing stories of romance and fantasy.

You can find out more about Marie and her books on her website: www.marietreanor.com, or by subscribing to her newsletter at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/marietreanornewsletter>. She also shares the Sexy Delights loop with fellow authors Kyla Logan and Kara Griffin. Find out more at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sexydelights>.

Befriend Marie on MySpace: www.myspace.com/marietreanor.

Marie loves to hear from readers, who can contact her at marie@marietreanor.com.