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SHAPESHIFTER

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DOG WALK.

# *Dog Walk*

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Ivan drove north on US 301, away from Tampa. He had an itch to scratch, and this was the only way. He didn't care what the hell Jeremy thought. *He* needed it. Running on a fucking treadmill and listening to canned nature sounds on an iPod did *not* give him what he craved. Maybe Jeremy had calmed his inner beast, but Ivan's still wanted playtime.

*Fucking pussy. "Go run on the treadmill," he says. I'll shove that goddamned treadmill up his ass, he doesn't leave me alone.*

Only a little after eight on a Tuesday morning, Hillsborough River State Park wasn't busy. He paid the entry fee and drove until he reached his favored parking area and pulled his silver Ridgeline truck into a spot that would remain shaded for a couple hours yet.

If he had more time he'd drive up to Withlacoochee or Silver Lake or even Ocala, but Jeremy had ordered him to have his ass back to the office by noon. He locked his truck and looked around. Still relatively desolate. A few early joggers and bikers, but where he was going, there weren't exactly any trails.

He took off down a path, making sure he wasn't observed. Once under the safe cover of a thick cypress stand near the river, he stepped off the trail far enough into the underbrush so he couldn't be spotted.

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey Martinez couldn't wait to get to the park. She'd looked forward to this treat for days. Normally she settled for jogging around her neighborhood, but she was dying to get away from everything.

Tampa was brighter and hotter than she was used to, even though she had been raised there. Five years in Vancouver, Washington, had thickened her blood and dulled her senses. Screw the romance of rainy days and Pacific Northwest rain forests.

It was good to finally be home.

To finally be free.

She'd only been back three weeks and was itching to visit one of her favorite places. How many hours had she spent jogging or canoeing or hiking here? Did numbers go that high?

She parked next to a silver Ridgeline, stepped out, and misted herself with bug spray. She planned a full morning of walking and jogging and didn't want to be a mosquito smorgasbord in the process. She'd do the Florida trail first, then the River Rapids trail. After that . . .

Lunch.

She picked up her MP3 player, locked the car and tucked her key into her pocket. Then she popped the ear buds in and hooked the MP3 player to her waistband. Now ready, she grabbed her bottle of water and set off on her adventure.

\* \* \* \*

Ivan streaked through the underbrush, his senses in overdrive, his heart pounding. He didn't have time to hunt today, especially here, but he loved tracking. About the only thing worth taking down in this area was the occasional wild pig, but sometimes they fought hard, and he didn't feel like calling Jeremy to come take him to the vet.

*I'd never hear the end of that. He'd bust my balls forever.*

He caught a scent, a deer. Unusual, they normally stayed on the other side of the park, hey, but gift horse and all that crap, right? He veered course, hyperextending his long legs to fly over the ground. The brush blurred beside him.

*Now this is a run in the woods. Jeremy can have his goddamned treadmill. Real wolves run woods.*

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey stopped and took a long drink of water. The day grew hotter, but she didn't care. It felt great. No more sweaters and jackets all the freaking time.

She passed a group of three teenage boys, skipping school probably, on one of the paths. Understandable, she'd spent many days skipping school here, too. She ignored them.

\* \* \* \*

Ivan made quick work of the deer's trail, an older doe grazing at the edge of the pine woods near the northern park boundary. He crouched downwind, watching. It would be so easy to . . .

He shook his head. Not here. He didn't like taking deer in this area. For one thing, they usually tasted like crap. The last one he'd caught had the flavor of a freaking tire from grazing on the highway shoulder all the time. The ones up in Ocala, however, melted in your mouth like prime rib. For another, if someone stumbled across the carcass here, it could cause questions. No one cared about wild pigs. They were considered a nuisance species. But something starts taking down deer, and people start asking questions.

Jeremy would *so* be on his ass over it.

He chuffed, growled, scaring the deer. Its head popped up before it bounded away. Ivan's amused snort started his tail wagging, and he took a minute to stretch before returning the way he'd come. Lots of kinks worked out of his muscles, that's for sure.

*Jeremy can have his fucking Starbucks.* Nothing jumpstarted *his* day like a morning run in the woods.

He glanced at the sky—probably been out here an hour. He'd need to head to the office, grab a shower before he went back to work. He paused by the river's edge and drank,

enjoying the natural tang. The river wasn't too bad this far from the bay, but he damn sure wouldn't be drinking out of it on two legs.

The whiff of a scent drifted to him. His head popped up. Nose wrinkling, he tested the air. A woman, not too far away. He had to be careful not to be seen because off-leash dogs weren't allowed.

But maybe a little tracking for fun was in order.

Following her scent, he silently made his way through the undergrowth. Then he found her, blessedly oblivious to her surroundings because of her music.

Ivan's tongue lolled from his mouth, and not from heat exhaustion. She wore running shorts that showed off her great legs. A little on the pale side, like she spent a lot of time indoors, but *damn*, did she smell great. Except for . . . eww . . . bug spray.

He sneezed and froze, but she never heard him.

Ivan, staying twenty yards behind her, padded down the trail after her and enjoyed the view of her hips rolling under the blue fabric of her shorts. With a tight ass he'd love to run his hands over, she didn't smell like she had slept with a guy, at least not last night she hadn't. No trace of a man's scent on her. Her red hair, pulled into a ponytail that hung just below her shoulders, bounced in lively time with her steps. He bet she had green eyes, but staring at her ass, he couldn't tell.

And what a nice ass she had.

Trim with just the right curves, a pleasure runner, not a marathoner or serious competitor. Enough meat on her bones to make her fun, not so freaking skinny that she looked like a compilation of toothpicks with tits.

*Hmm. Maybe a different kind of hunting trip was in order.*

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey felt watched. She paused, looking around, removing the ear buds so she could hear. Nothing but birds, bugs, and distant traffic. She shivered despite the heat. Creepy, she'd never felt like that before.

Hunted.

*Okay, I've been watching too many freaky TV shows lately. Or read one too many vampire romances. This park was safe. She'd never had a problem here, even as a teenager.*

*Christ, thirty and acting like a baby scared of my own shadow.*

She replaced the ear buds and picked up her pace, jogging as she followed the path closer to the river.

\* \* \* \*

Ivan quickly found his bearings and started toward his stashed clothes when he crossed the trail and froze. The woman's scent, and another.

He glanced around, making sure he was alone, and put his nose to the ground. Three men, together.

Closing his eyes, he carefully sniffed, and then his eyes popped open. They had smoked crack. Recently.

Dangerous.

Swiveling his ears, he couldn't hear them, but they had gone in the same direction as the woman. With his heart pounding in his chest, Ivan forgot about getting his clothes and, wheeling around, tried to home in on the lone female jogger.

*God fucking damn it, please don't let me be too late!*

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey tried to shake the creepy feeling, not wanting her morning ruined like this. It wasn't fair. She wanted to spend most of her day here.

She picked up the pace. With her free hand, she turned down the volume on her music. Then she heard them.

Low voices.

Now her heart thudded in her chest. She sped up, trying to close the distance, less than a hundred yards from the end of the trail and the parking area. She didn't want to turn and let them know she'd heard them.

\* \* \* \*

Ivan, desperate to reach her, poured on the speed. Maybe he was wrong, but he doubted it. His intuition rarely failed him. He cut through the woods again, trying to make up distance when he heard her scream.

\* \* \* \*

A hand grabbed the back of Lindsey's shirt, another yanked her arm. She screamed as the men turned her around, the three guys—had she thought they were teenagers?—she'd passed earlier on the trail.

"Where you goin', lady? We want to party," the tallest one said.

“Pretty woman like you shouldn’t be out here alone,” the shortest one offered.

She screamed, backing away, trying to fight them off. The third grinned, jumped behind her, and kicked her legs out from under her.

Lindsey fell to the dirt trail under them. One of the men clamped a sweaty, grimy hand over her mouth. She bit down, hard, praying the asshole didn’t have AIDS or something.

He yelled and punched the side of her head, rocking her senses, darkness blooming behind her eyes.

“Fucking bitch bit me!”

“Yeah, well, she bites something else, I’ll cut her tits off.” The sound of a zipper and then he said, “What the fuck?”

That’s when she heard the growl.

\* \* \* \*

*Holy Christ, almost too late!* He growled, his hackles up, lips curled, teeth bared. He advanced, snarling.

One of them immediately jumped to his feet and ran. Ivan fought the urge to take off after him because the woman was still on the ground under the other two assholes.

The tallest of the three stood and pulled out a switchblade.

*What kind of moron carries a switchblade anymore? Be original, for Christ’s sake.*

Ivan flexed his shoulders, dropped his head not in submission but warning, and tensed to spring. The asshole was still close enough to the woman that he could hurt her.

The third druggie sat there, frozen in fear. Ivan fought the urge to laugh when he smelled urine.

The stupid mofo had wet his pants.

*Serves him right.*

The woman rolled over—Ivan was happy to see all her clothes still on her body, although her shirt looked ripped—and when she spotted him her eyes widened.

Ivan winked at her, then took a step forward, his eyes on the man still on the ground.

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey rolled over. *Holy fucking shit!* That *couldn't* be a dog, could it? It looked like a . . . like a huge black wolf. With a generous dusting of silver throughout his coat and huge, grey eyes, he stood over three feet tall at the shoulders.

*Did he just wink at me?*

She blinked, sure she imagined it. Stress, maybe even shock, who knew?

One of the attackers immediately ran. A second stood up and backed off, and the third rolled away from her.

“Lady, look, call off your fucking dog.”

She was too numb to talk. She loved dogs, but this wasn't just a dog.

It took another step forward, its eyes on the man on the ground, the one closest to her. She prayed the dog wouldn't attack her as she slowly crawled toward it. It was her bad luck that these assholes jumped her, and freaky good luck that this canine pony happened by.

As she drew closer to the black beast it sidled around her, putting itself—himself, she suspected—between the remaining men and her.

Only then did she draw herself to her knees and saw that one of the men had a knife.

“Be careful,” she whispered to the dog. It didn't seem to have a collar and tags, but his thick fur could easily be hiding them.

Did it nod?

The guy still sitting stood up and backed away. That's when the dog viciously barked and lunged.

\* \* \* \*

Mr. Knife wasn't as brave as he looked. He ran, then tripped and fell onto the knife. He screamed in pain.

*Stupid fuck never learned not to run with scissors. Great.*

“Aw, fuck!” his cowardly friend, Mr. Pantswetter, yelled.

Lindsey screamed. “Help! Rape! Help!”

Ivan winced at her piercing cry, wishing he could tell her to put a sock in it. The one would need an ambulance, no doubt, but Ivan worried more about getting her to safety.

He backed into her, swung his head around to bump her, felt her hands tangle in the dense fur at the scruff of his neck.



*Ooh, long fingers. Strong fingers. Bet they'd feel good . . .*

Crap, now he was sporting wood.

He sat in front of her, pressed against her, wishing she'd shut up. The second attacker, Sir Pissalot, looked at his writhing, bleeding friend and ran.

*Coward.*

Five minutes later, two rangers raced down the trail. One leaned over the injured man. The other ranger dropped to one knee next to the woman, who'd blessedly stopped screaming now that the cavalry had shown up too fucking late.

"What happened?"

She sobbed, circling Ivan's neck with her arm. Despite her patina of fear, she smelled . . .

*Yum.*

Fuck, and he'd almost softened again.

"I was jogging . . . and three of them . . . the other two . . . he had a knife, and when the dog growled, he ran and tripped and fell on it . . ." She broke down in tears again.

Unable to help himself, Ivan licked her face to try to comfort her.

Yeah, right, okay, so he wasn't *just* trying to comfort her.

Jeremy would be totally pissed, but too fucking bad. This was more important.

"Is this your dog, ma'am?"

Ivan froze. *Oh, shit.*

She stroked his fur. "Yes. Yes he is."

Ivan heard her pulse quicken at the lie.

"You do know they're supposed to be on a leash and have a collar and tags?"

The woman tensed. Ivan whined. Holy fucking shit, now he had to depend on her, at least until Matlock and Barney Fife got their act together and stumbled out of eyeshot so he could run for his clothes.

"He slipped his collar, and I must have dropped his leash somewhere before they attacked me." She cradled Ivan's head in her palms, met his gaze, and winked. "Thank God he stayed with me."

He couldn't help it. He winked back.

\* \* \* \*

The rangers, considering that she had almost been raped, overlooked the uncollared dog. She stood just short enough she could tightly knot her fingers in Ivan's fur at the scruff of his neck as the rangers escorted them to the parking lot.

She'd parked next to his truck. Could his day go to shit any more than it already had? He had just wanted a fucking run. He knew he should have gotten a vehicle with a keypad entry. At least then he could get in his truck and go when no one noticed.

After an hour of questioning by the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, she was free to go, and Ivan learned her name was Lindsey. He had no choice but to jump into the back seat of her car when she opened the door and said, "Come on, boy."

Thank God at least she hadn't dubbed him something lame like Fido or Spot.

She lived in a one-story condo complex in Temple Terrace. Far from the worst neighborhood, but not the best. All the way home, she glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

And daammnn, she smelled good. He had to fight not to drool.

He paid careful attention to the address. Jeremy would never let him live this down.

She opened the car door. He had no choice but to follow. To get to a phone, he had to follow her because he damn sure couldn't shift into a naked guy in public.

Not that he minded following her. Especially when his nose sat right at ass level . . .

He accidentally bumped into her when she stopped at her front door.

She jumped. "Listen, buddy, we'll get along fine if you don't go sticking your nose up my hind end." Then she smiled.

He looked up at her. *We'd get along a helluva lot better if you'd let me do just that.*

His heart beat at an unsteady pace. Call Jeremy, yeah, that's what he had to do.

*Umm, why?*

Oh yeah, work.

He followed her inside. Tidy, not fancy, some moving boxes stacked in her living room.

She rummaged in a kitchen cabinet, then filled a bowl with water. She knelt down beside him on the linoleum and watched him drink.

She ran her hands over him. He closed his eyes and gulped, wishing she wouldn't do that and praying she wouldn't stop. As her hands approached his rump . . .

He jumped when she brushed his balls. It took every ounce of will he had not to shift and fuck her silly right there on her kitchen floor. Why'd she have to smell so damn good, even with the last traces of bug spray she smelled right, smelled like—

*Mate.*

He stared at her.

"You are a boy. I thought so. Hard to tell with all that fur." She cradled his head again, staring into his eyes. Hers were green, as he'd suspected, a beautiful shade of jade green he could lose himself in.

"Thank you," she whispered, then broke down crying. She threw her arms around him and, hugging him, buried her face in his fur.

He rested his chin on her shoulder. How could he leave her? He wanted to curl up in her lap, stay with her, and lick every tear off her sweet flesh.

*Mate.*

Now that the word had pierced his conscious, he couldn't get it out of his brain. Every beat of his heart hammered it home.

*Mate. My mate. My mate.*

He'd never felt like this before. This wasn't wanting a piece of ass. This was deeper, in his blood. In his soul.

When she sat back, he licked her face and whined. *Jesus, I love you, Lindsey.*

She laughed. "I need to get a shower. Please don't pee on anything, okay?" She petted his head and smiled. "We need to get you a collar and a name tag, but what am I going to call you?"

*"Fuck me harder" works fine for me, babe.*

"You're not some stupid wussy dog. You need a good name, a strong name." She braced her arms against him as she stood, wincing. "I'll think about it. I think good in the shower."

*I bet you look good in the shower, too.*

He curled up on the floor at the end of her bed and watched her strip. She threw the clothes she'd been wearing during the attack in the trash and went to start the water.

Mouthwatering didn't begin to express what he felt when he saw her. Her nipples tightened into hard peaks as the cool air hit them. Perfect, natural breasts that would comfortably fit in his palms as his fingers brushed over her . . .

He whined, his erection nearly painful.

She smiled. "Sorry, puppy. That's illegal. Hope it's enough for you to know you're the only man in my life. You don't have to share me." Lindsey walked into the bathroom and stepped into the shower.

*Believe me, honey, I'm not sharing you. Not on your fucking life.*

*Mate. My mate.*

He stared through the bathroom door, and then reality called. He stood and streaked into the living room. Checking to make sure he was out of view of the bathroom, he shifted, grabbed the phone and called Jeremy. A glance at the clock told him it was almost noon.

He anxiously watched the bathroom door while Jeremy took his sweet fucking time answering his cell.

"Why the hell aren't you back yet—"

"Jer, shut the fuck up and listen. There's been trouble." Jeremy listened while Ivan detailed what happened.

"Where are you?"

He read off the address. "Temple Terrace."

"I'll be there in twenty and sneak you out of there."

"No!"

"What?"

Ivan hesitated. "I want to stay."

*What?* Are you out of your freaking mind?"

Ivan closed his eyes and whispered the words. "I've found her."

"What do you . . . Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*. I need some time. I'm going to be out of touch for a few days."

"Are you sure?"

He listened to her in the shower. Lindsey hummed a light, tuneless melody that tattooed her voice across his soul. "Yeah, dude. I'm sure."

Jeremy sighed. "What do you need from me?"

"My truck's still over at the park. And my clothes. She's in the shower. She'll be done in a minute. I think she's going to go to the store. Can you wait outside and run me over there after she leaves? I can be back before she returns. Just wait for me in the parking lot here, a few buildings away."

"Don't leave me sitting all day."

"Gotta go. Bye."

Ivan hung up, shifted back, and padded into the bathroom.

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey closed her eyes and let the hot water soothe her sore muscles. This wasn't a normal dog. She wasn't into crazy psychic shit, but she'd seen strange things in her life, and there was something different about that dog. He wasn't a stray. He was well cared for. Maybe a police K9 dog or something that escaped from its handler.

She should put an ad in the paper. Shouldn't she?

The thought ripped her heart out. She didn't want to give him up. It was stupid, silly, and childish, but the dog had saved her. He wasn't just a dog. He was more.

And thinking about keeping him felt right.

He needed a good name. Not some normal dog name, a name that fit him.

Sensing a presence, she looked down. He'd shoved his head into the shower, spray dotting his black fur with small drops of moisture.

Was he . . . smiling? If he were a guy, she'd say so.

"Hey, personal space, buddy."

He snorted, but withdrew his massive head.

"And don't go dragging your wet fur on my bed, either!"

Another snort, and she watched through the frosted shower curtain as he rubbed his head on her bathmat.

She stuck her head out of the shower and looked at him, an absurd idea hitting her between the eyes. "Hey, you."

He looked up.

“Go get me a soda out of the fridge.”

\* \* \* \*

*Is she fucking serious?*

He debated. Then when the full force of her jade eyes nailed him, he bolted from the bathroom and carefully opened the fridge with his mouth. He gently gripped one of the Cokes, tried not to puncture the can, and bumped the door shut with his ass. Then he trotted back to the bathroom. She stood with her head sticking out of the shower and watched him in awe and disbelief.

He waited for her to reach for the can before he gently placed it in her palm.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He sat, wagging his tail. *No problem, babe. Anything else you want? Sandwich? Chips? Wedding ring?*

Leaning against the wall, she slid to the shower floor. He worried that she’d fainted, but she stared at him, deep in thought. She popped the tab on the can and took several long swigs. Then she loudly belched.

He laughed, which he knew to her sounded like a snort.

“You think that’s funny?”

He couldn’t help it. He nodded.

“You’re not a normal dog, are you?”

He shook his head. *Babe, you have no idea.*

She set the can on the floor and stood, finishing her shower. She dried and dressed and he watched her every move. He’d do whatever she wanted. *Anything* she wanted.

Now he had to figure out how to tell her the truth.

She walked to the front door and grabbed her purse, then turned. “Don’t chew. Don’t have an accident. Do you have to go to the bathroom?”

He shook his head.

“Okay. I’ll be back in about two hours.” She stopped, laughing. “Jesus, I need a life. I’m talking to a dog like he understands me.”

He watched from the front window as she drove off. Five minutes later, Jeremy drove into the complex. Ivan shifted back, raced to the bathroom, and grabbed a towel from the floor. He returned to the front door, opened it, and waved.

Jeremy walked up with a pair of shorts and a T-shirt in his hand and tossed them at Ivan before he even reached the stoop.

“Here you go, brainiac. Jesus, I can’t believe you.”

Ivan caught the clothes and put them on, returning the towel to the bathroom. “No time for that now, you can kill me later. We need to go.”

They made it to the park in less than twenty minutes with Jeremy’s driving. “Where’s your clothes?”

“Off the trail.” They got out of the truck and Jeremy followed him at an easy, loping pace. Ivan found them and breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks, man. I owe you.”

Jeremy smirked. “Yeah, well, I’ll hold you to it.” His expression grew serious. “Really?” he asked. “You’re sure?”

Ivan looked down. “I can’t explain how she’s different. You know how normally a woman hits you between the balls when you want her? This one hit me straight between the lungs and eyes. I can’t think about anyone but her, man. It’s killing me not to be at her place, smelling her.”

“Well, good luck. Should I drop by to check on you?”

“I’ll call.”

“Any idea how to tell her?”

“I think so.”

\* \* \* \*

Ivan made it back well before she did. He parked in a guest spot and prayed no one had broken into her condo. Fortunately, they hadn’t. He put his cell on silent mode before taking it inside. He locked the front door behind him and, stripping, looked for a place to hide his things.

The condo wasn’t large. Where wouldn’t she find them? He looked at her bed and inspiration struck. He lifted the mattress and jammed everything into the middle of the bed on top of the box spring, smoothing the sheet and cover after.

He shifted back and waited, pacing the condo, sniffing every square inch of it looking for anything with even a trace of her sweet scent.

*My mate.*

He greeted her at the door when she returned not quite two hours after her departure. He fought the urge to shift and help her unload her groceries.

“Hey, boy. Did you miss me?”

He softly woofed. She carried a huge bag of—*groan*—dog food. A top-shelf brand, very expensive, human-grade homeopathic food.

She’d spent some bucks. That both relieved him and made him feel guilty that she spent that much on him when he wouldn’t be using it for long if he got his way.

Lindsey sat the bag on the floor. She knelt beside him, hugged him, and buried her face against his neck. She deeply inhaled. “The girl at the pet store said it’s the best food, none of that Chinese chemical crap to make you sick.”

She looked into his eyes again. “I should put a found ad in the paper, but I don’t want to. I kept worrying about you while I was gone.”

*Join the club, babe.*

She nuzzled his nose and went back to her car for more bags. She’d bought two collars, not sure how large she needed. A leash.

*A little BDSM? Hmm . . .*

He tried to quiet his anxious cock at the thought. She could lead him anywhere she wanted. Of course, it wasn’t kinky to her in this context. *He* was the perv.

Only one of the collars fit, a large choker. She slipped it over his head. “I should get you to the vet.”

He whined. *Baby, these balls are staying put.*

“A big boy like you afraid of the vet?”

He whined again.

“I promise I won’t have you neutered as long as you promise not to go running off and screwing around.”

Trying not to laugh, he softly woofed. No worries on either count.

She’d also gone to Publix and spent a few bucks. She’d bought him a huge T-bone steak. She put it on a plate and set it on the floor for him. “That’s a thank you. There’s three more.”

*Hot damn, that’s more like it.*



\* \* \* \*

That night, Lindsey curled on the couch to watch TV and patted the cushion. He eagerly jumped up next to her and rested his head in her lap with a content sigh.

She stroked his head as he closed his eyes and inhaled her scent.

*My mate.*

When she started yawning around ten, he remained hopeful as she stood and walked to the bedroom. He waited for a cue. His heart leaped when she stopped at the door.

“Well? Come on, big boy. I don’t want to sleep alone.”

He knew she couldn’t possibly mean it the way he wanted, but he scrambled off the couch and raced past her into the bedroom, landing squarely in the middle of the mattress.

She laughed and turned off the lights before stripping and then sliding into bed. “Slide over, bed hog.”

He did, waiting until she settled to snuggle against her. She rolled over and threw her arm around his broad chest. “I still need to name you.”

*Husband’s always a good one.*

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey wasn’t sure if she’d sleep, but she did, almost immediately. He didn’t smell like any dog she’d ever had. He reminded her of . . .

Of a man.

No, she wasn’t so desperate for loving, despite a three-year dry streak in her love life, to contemplate bestiality. Between his freaky intelligence and imposing physical presence, she couldn’t help it.

She loved him.

She dreamed of a large man with the dog’s grey eyes and black hair peppered with silver. But he was young, maybe a little older than her, broad-shouldered and handsome.

Her dream lover rolled over and looked at her. He laced his fingers through hers, gently, tenderly kissed each digit. He nuzzled her hand. “Ivan,” he softly said.

She stared into his large, grey eyes and nodded. “That’s a good name.”

He smiled and she wanted to lean over and kiss him. Wanted to lock her lips onto his and . . .

Lindsey opened her eyes and looked at the dog, his grey eyes delving into hers.

“Ivan?”

He nodded.

“That’s a good name.”

\* \* \* \*

He lived with her three more days before making his move. Every night he made sure she dreamed about him, each dream going further than the rest. He pretended to like the kibble so he didn’t hurt her feelings. As soon as she left every day, he shifted back and scavenged through the kitchen for real food. Then he’d take a shower and shave because he couldn’t stand feeling grungy.

On Saturday morning, he curled in bed and waited for her to wake up. Normally she would start the pot of coffee, and then they went jogging. He enjoyed running with her even if she wasn’t as fast as he was. He always perfectly synced his steps to hers, never pulled on the leash, never fell behind. He enjoyed the looks they received, the men who watched her and warily eyed him.

*Mate. My Mate.*

This morning would be different, because she had the day off from work. He followed her to the kitchen and grabbed his leash in his teeth from where it hung over the doorknob.

“You have to go out now?”

He shook his head and nudged her hand. She slipped the collar over his head—it always stayed snapped on the leash—and sat.

“What is it?”

He looked at her and nuzzled her hand so it rested on top of his head.

*Please let this work.*

He shifted.

He didn’t dare move. Her sudden gasp did not break into the anticipated scream. When she fell, he caught her and pulled her into his lap, her stunned eyes wide with shock.

He didn’t speak, waiting.

She touched his face, ran her fingers through his hair, and finally gasped for breath.

“Do it again,” she whispered.

Ivan couldn’t contain the slight smile that curled his lips. He shifted back.

Lindsey sobbed, wrapping her arms around his furry neck. “Again.”

He did, holding her.

She sat there for an hour, not speaking, barely remembering to breathe. When she sat back, he stood, the collar and leash still around his neck. Ivan scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom.

Lindsey’s eyes never left his, her hand stroking his cheek. He captured her fingers and kissed her hand before gently sucking each digit into his mouth and laving his tongue over them. She was taking this better than he ever dreamed. He’d expected at least a few minutes of screaming, followed by some orders to get the hell out—which he’d ignore, of course—followed by more screaming and hysterical crying.

She looked . . . relieved.

\* \* \* \*

The man of her dreams. No, literally, the man she dreamed about every night since Ivan saved her in the park. If she’d lost her mind, it could stay gone permanently for all she cared. He wasn’t a figment of her imagination. The collar didn’t magically appear around his neck.

Her fingers trailed down his jaw to his throat and she unsnapped the leash and tossed it to the floor.

He rolled on top of her, his huge erection poking her in the thigh. “You okay, Lindsey?”

His voice sounded the same as the man from her dreams, deep and strong, soothing, sending tendrils of need from her heart to her heated sex.

She nodded. More than okay.

When he kissed her, she closed her eyes and buried her fingers in his thick, black hair. He tasted good, safe, strong. Moaning when he broke their kiss, she tried to pull him back but he chuckled.

“It’s okay.”

His lips blistered a scorching path down her throat as his hands lifted her T-shirt to expose her breasts. Ivan’s sharp intake of breath at the site of her peaked nipples only served to increase her need. His lips captured one and when his tongue flicked it, she moaned.

As he gently cupped her other breast, his fingers tweaking her nipple into a similar state, she ground her hips against him.

She wanted him. Now.

Screw patience, screw caution—she wanted him to screw *her*! Thank God she was still on the Pill.

“Fuck me,” she begged him. “Please!”

A deep and hungry growl in answer. He lifted his mouth from her breast. “I will, babe, trust me. And I won’t stop.”

Lindsey closed her eyes and squirmed against him. She’d deal with reality later, no way in hell she would let him stop the delicious things he did to her.

Ivan peeled her T-shirt off, and his hot flesh felt perfectly right against hers. She ran her hands over his firm body. He wanted *her*.

When she pushed her shorts and panties down her hips he pulled them off her legs. He bent his head to her belly, kissing, licking, tasting.

That’s not exactly where she wanted him, but it was a damn good start.

Trying to nudge him lower, she tangled her fingers in his hair and pushed. It was like shoving a large boulder. He wasn’t budging.

“I’m going to make love to you all day,” he whispered. “There’s no need to rush.”

Lindsey threw her head back, squeezing her eyes shut as he took an agonizingly long time exploring every centimeter of her flesh before lightly teasing her clit with his tongue.

“Do it. Please.”

“I want you, Lindsey.”

“I’m telling you to fuck me, Ivan.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

His choked voice more than his actual words broke through her passion. She looked at him as his grey eyes focused on her.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I love you.”

Every last shred of sanity screamed at her to stop, to back up, to at the very least ask for a background check or ID or a current rabies vaccination certificate. His eyes. Those big, grey eyes melted her.

He saved her. At any time he could have done . . . whatever he did . . . certainly big enough to force her. He didn't.

He protected her. And for the first time in a long time, she felt she was exactly where she should be.

"I love you, too, Ivan." She knew the words were true as soon as she whispered them.

"Forever?"

"That's a long time."

He nodded. "You have no idea."

"We've got a lot to talk about."

He nodded again.

Lindsey swallowed, hard. "Do I start doing . . . this?"

He smiled. If she'd had any reservations, that would have melted them away like a spring thaw on Mt. Rainier. "Long story, but no. I was born like this." He sat up and held her hand. "Okay. No fleas or ticks, I promise I'm faithful, and I'll rip the throat out of any guy who dares look at you wrong."

His desperate, pleading expression pulled at her. A guy like this should look confident that he'd get the girl, but he looked scared.

"Downside?"

"It's a fucking big secret to keep. I'll introduce you to Jeremy."

"Who's he?"

"He's my friend, boss, and Alpha."

"Alpha?"

"Pack leader."

She sat up. "Pack? There's more of you?"

"More than you'd think."

Reality hung on by a rapidly fraying thread. “Upside?”

His smile returned and he leaned in, nuzzling her just behind her ear, making her lower belly contract in a hot and pleasant way. “I get to do this to you every day for the rest of our lives.”

“Promise?”

“Absolutely.”

Lindsey closed her eyes. “I’m yours.”

His growl might have been scary except for the fact that his lips did incredibly addictive things to her neck. Ivan gently lowered her to the bed, quickly returned to his earlier position between her legs, and dropped his head.

She hoped the neighbors weren’t home. His tongue firmly stroked her clit and sent a shockwave through her nervous system the likes of which she’d never experienced. When he slipped one, then two thick fingers inside her, she loudly moaned.

“Fuck, yes!” she cried.

Ivan chuckled but didn’t respond, too busy massaging her swollen nub with his lips as his fingers skillfully stroked her to the most explosive climax she’d ever had. She screamed his name as he kept her coming for what felt like forever.

Well, she could ditch the vibrator.

He eventually relented and moved up the bed to gather her against his firm chest, holding her with his face buried in her hair.

“Every day?” she gasped.

“As many times as you want.”

She flattened against him, and his cock rubbed along her belly. “You’ve still got to propose.”

“Marry me. If you want groveling, I can do that.”

“Yes.”

“To the groveling?”

She nipped his throat. His cock jumped in response. “No, silly. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

Then his cock slipped inside her, buried deeper than any man had ever gone. He rolled on top of her while she threw her legs around his waist and hung on for the ride.

His eyes locked onto hers. "I'll never leave your side."

"That's unrealistic."

He smiled. "You're a ballbuster, aren't you?"

"That a problem?"

"No. I'm always up for a little kink." He playfully grinned.

Lindsey laughed. "I think you'll need a daily session on the leash to remind you who takes you home every day." She reached up and flicked the choker collar, which still hung, albeit much more loosely, around his neck.

He plunged a little deeper, drawing a content gasp from her. "Leading me around by my cock isn't good enough, huh?"

She grabbed the collar, pulled his face to hers, and thrust her tongue between his lips.

His hungry groan flipped her heart. Who was she kidding? If this hunk wanted her, she'd take him even if he turned out to be a crazy psycho—or an ultraconservative Republican.

He pulled away just long enough to flip her onto her knees and slide his thick cock inside her from behind, filling her, taking her breath away.

Ivan wrapped his arms around her waist, one hand between her legs, skilled fingers rolling her clit and teasing her toward another climax.

"I want you, Lindsey," he growled, kissing her back, tasting the flesh over her spine. "I want you forever, for mine, for my mate."

She barely formed coherent words. "Take me, Ivan. Fuck me."

Then his lips, hot on her shoulder, his teeth grazing her as the explosion built in her sex. Between his fingers and his cock and his mouth and the solid wall of flesh pressed against her body, she knew she wanted this forever.

"My mate," he whispered before sinking his teeth into the top of her shoulder. At the same time he pistoned his hips hard, burying his cock balls-deep. He gently pinched her clit, setting off a thermonuclear reaction of her own.

Agony and ecstasy vied for the win, with pleasure leading the pack by a mile. She was vaguely aware of his climax, of his growling moan, and of the feel of his hot seed inside her marking her.

Mate.

*His* mate.

Gasping for breath, shuddering, she collapsed under him.

He rolled to his side, his arms around her, holding her tightly, still joined.

With sanity returning, she suspected she'd hurt like hell where he bit her, but his lips and tongue carefully caressed her flesh, and it felt like the best feeling in the world.

It took her a while to regain her senses. When she did, she rolled over to face him.

"Do it again," she whispered, her fingers now around his collar.

He laughed. "I'm good, babe, but even I need a few minutes—"

She shook her head.

That half smile would be deadly to her reserve. She'd have to learn to build immunity to it somehow. Her fingers weren't touching his hot flesh, but dense, black fur.

"Okay. Come back."

The two-legged hunk laughed. "I swear, Jeremy is not going to believe you didn't run away screaming."

"I'm still in shock. But if you can fuck me like that and keep the bad guys away, I can deal with anything else. I think." She hesitated. "It's probably too late to ask this, but you don't kill people, do you?"

"Only if they tried to hurt you or kill me, babe. It's not like in the movies."

"Okay." She traced the firm lines of his abs. "What do you do for a living?"

Ivan cocked an eyebrow. "A guy shape-shifts from a large dog into a man who fucks you silly, tells you he loves you, asks you to marry him and be his mate, and the second thing you want to know is what he does for a living?"

"You have a problem with that?"

Ivan threw his head back and laughed, long and hard, the bed shaking from his rumbling amusement. "Lindsey, damn girl, you are too fucking much." He reached up and rested his palm along her cheek. "I work for Bruin and Associates. We're a consulting firm."

"That tells me shit."

He rolled onto his side, propped on his elbow. "Legal, I promise. We deal with a lot of industrial secrets, things like that. Studies, coordinating product trials, compiling research information."



“Good money?”

He grinned and, rolling out of bed, pulled her to him. “Let’s take a shower.”

\* \* \* \*

She was surprised to find that he’d stashed his things under the mattress, another paradox that amused the crap out of him. Maybe she was still in shock over the revelation, but he didn’t think so.

He opened the truck door for her. “After you.” He stole a kiss as she passed, which earned him a gentle goose in his crotch.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

He slipped his sunglasses on before backing out of the parking space. “Home.”

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey’s composure faltered when they drove into the private, gated community in New Tampa. “You live here?”

“We,” he corrected her while smiling. “Don’t tell me you’re freaking out now?”

“Wow.” In the grand scheme of things, Ivan was slumming it with his new Honda Ridgeline when the neighbors on either side drove Jags. He pulled into the garage and led her inside.

She stopped in the foyer. He let her take it in while he continued on to the kitchen. Jeremy had brought in his mail and newspapers and had stacked them neatly on the counter. He dropped his keys next to the pile and sorted through mail while she regained her voice.

“This . . . this is amazing.”

He shrugged. “It’s home.”

The house had cost him over eight-hundred grand, five bedrooms, six-and-a-half baths with high-end Italian tile all the way through. All the room was necessary when pack mates came to visit from out of town.

Lindsey drifted over to the back sliders and looked through them. The private screened lanai, with large pool and heated Jacuzzi, was tastefully accented by professionally designed container gardens. “Wow.”

She drove a ten-year-old Camry. He knew from snooping through her mail and personal papers that she wasn’t broke, but she was far from rich.

He’d enjoy the hell out of spoiling her.

Eventually, she turned, not speaking, studying him.

Unable to take the silence, he asked, “Well? What do you want to see next?”

“Our bedroom.”

\* \* \* \*

Lindsey knew he had to walk over to her, pick her up in his arms, and carry her to the bedroom, but it seemed to take place within one breath and maybe two blinks. She found herself flat on her back in the large bed, his lips on hers, and then . . .

Aw, who cared? She wanted his cock inside her again.

He took his time, slowly thrusting. “Please, Ivan,” she begged him. “Make me come.”

He drew delicious warm circles around each nipple, back and forth, with his tongue. “Not yet, babe. I want to play with you for a while. I can’t show you all my secrets the first day, you’ll get bored.”

“I have a feeling boredom isn’t a word I’ll ever use to describe you.”

“I hope not.” He alternated deep, powerful strokes with short, shallow ones that managed to bring her to the brink time and again. She’d never climaxed just from intercourse before, but she suspected she was about to experience that for the first time in her life.

He slowed his thrusts and lifted her legs to his shoulders. He drove his cock deep into her, stretching her, possessing her.

*Lie here flat on my back and get fucked by this guy for the rest of my life? Sure, no problemo! Happy to do it!*

“Look at me, Lindsey,” he whispered.

She did, unable to resist.

He kissed her leg and drove a little deeper, which made her moan. “You think you can come for me like this?”

“I want to.”

He smiled, slowing his strokes and tilting his hips. His thick cockhead glided perfectly along her G-spot, and his pubic bone hit her clit just right. “Like that?”

She nodded, not speaking, not daring to breathe or move for fear of losing that magic combination.

At first she didn’t think it would happen, sure he’d change position or speed or . . .

It built, slow and steady. Unlike the volcanic eruption of the prior releases he'd brought her to, this was practically gentle.

"That's it. Give it to me," he said, coaxing her.

She gripped his arms and moaned as the wave hit her, softly, tenderly.

He didn't change a thing about his movements until certain she'd finished. Then, with two more thrusts, he climaxed deep inside her.

He lowered her legs, leaned forward, and kissed her throat while murmuring to her.

What he said she didn't know. She tangled her fingers in his hair, pulled his face to her chest, and drifted to sleep content and sated.

\* \* \* \*

She awoke alone in bed, the sheets tangled around her, the afternoon light golden through the bedroom blinds.

She rolled over and spotted the bedside clock. It was almost four. Touching her shoulder didn't hurt where he'd bit her—it was totally healed.

"Awake?"

Lindsey jumped, startled by his voice. In full, naked glory, a smiling Ivan leaned against the bedroom doorjamb.

"Sorry I scared you." He crossed the room with smooth, fluid strides and slipped into bed.

"How did you know I was awake?"

"I heard you."

"I didn't make any noise."

"You rolled over in bed." He kissed the hollow of her throat. Maybe she should be afraid, but she only wanted to pull him closer.

"You heard that?" She tangled her fingers in his hair and, hoping to keep him there with her, hooked a leg around his.

"I promise I don't howl at fire engines."

She rolled on top of him, pleasantly surprised to see he was already aroused. Saved her the trouble.

He moaned when she impaled herself on his stiff shaft, gripped her hips.

“Ready for round two?” he asked.

“I think you lost count. This is more like three or four, isn’t it?” Rolling her hips in a slow sensual motion coaxed a low growl from him.

“I guess counting will get pointless real fast, won’t it?”

Lindsey leaned forward and gently bit his nipple. He gasped, fueling her passion. “Do you always answer a question with a question?” she asked.

“Does that bother you, babe?”

She looked at him, his half smile firmly anchoring her heart to his. “Is it supposed to bother me?”

“Do you like playing games with me?”

“Are you trying to get the last word, or are you going to fuck my brains out, wolfman?”

He laughed, flipped her over onto her back, and thrust hard and deep. “Does that answer your question?”

She giggled. “You’re going to keep me busy for a long time, aren’t you?”

Ivan shook his head and kissed her. “All right, you win. Uncle.” He paused, slipped a hand between them, and found her sensitive clit with his thumb. “Besides, I think I know a way to distract you.”

“Mm hmm.” Loving the way he filled and stretched her, she worked her hips against him. He rubbed tight circles around her nub, timing his strokes perfectly. Within minutes, she had climaxed again.

He stilled his hips and kissed her.

“Hey, don’t stop now.” She wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m not stopping. I’m memorizing your beautiful face. I never thought you’d accept this so well. I figured we’d still be at the you-cowering-in-the-corner-and-threatening-me-with-a-kitchen-implement stage.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you don’t have the market on secrets. I’ve got one too, you know.”

“Like what?”

“When I get PMS, I’m a real bitch to live with.”

He roared with laughter. “Then you’re my kind of girl, aren’t you?”

\* \* \* \*

He’d have to wait until she told him the rest in her own time. Something deeply hidden. She used humor as an emotional defense. He’d learned that much in a few days. They made love again and skinny-dipped in his pool. After, he called Jeremy and arranged to meet him for dinner.

They stopped by her place so she could change clothes. When they arrived at Outback Steakhouse, she nervously gripped Ivan’s hand as he led her inside to where Jeremy had their table waiting.

Jeremy, warmly smiling, stood at their approach and extended his hand to her as Ivan made the introductions. She hesitated a moment before shaking his hand, then climbed into the booth and huddled close to Ivan’s side.

After the waitress took their order, Jeremy leaned forward, folding his arms on the table. “How are you handling this, Lindsey?”

She nervously glanced at Ivan. He protectively slipped his arm around her shoulders as she answered.

“It’s an adjustment.”

Jeremy nodded. “That’s not the word I usually hear, but good. Do you have any questions for me?”

She met his eyes square on. “Can you kill those fuckers that nearly raped me?”

Ivan choked on the swallow of tea he’d taken. He’d give Jeremy credit for not reacting to that one. Maybe this was a key to Lindsey’s deep dark bogeyman.

“Babe,” Ivan said, “we’ll let the law take care of them.”

She glared at him. “What if they don’t find the others?”

“With their partner in the hospital, and then going straight to jail, they’ll get them.”

She tensed against him and he nuzzled the top of her head, kissing her. “It’s okay. I promise, never again. Ever.”

She nodded.

After dinner, Ivan drove her back to her place and they spent the night making love. In the morning, he rolled over and grinned as she woke up. “What?”

He held up his collar and leash. “Want to go to the park for a run?”

\* \* \* \*

He knew if he didn't get her back to the park now, he might never be able to. She was scared, understandably so, but he didn't want what happened to ruin her enjoyment of a place she obviously loved.

They parked in a shaded area and Lindsey laughed as he slipped the choker over his head. "Why now?"

He shrugged. "Who says I don't like it?"

She carried a small backpack with a couple of bottles of water and the leash. Leading her by the hand, he quickly took her off the path into a more desolate section of scrub pine woods away from the river.

He noted her sly smile while he stripped. "What?"

Kissing him, she wrapped her fingers around his cock, which immediately responded. "I like you like this."

He clipped the leash to his collar and jammed his clothes into the backpack. "Keep that up, babe, you'll end up flat on your back and butt naked."

"Maybe that's what I want."

He carefully and reluctantly peeled her fingers off his cock. "Later, I promise, you can have as much of that as you want." He kissed her hand and gave her the backpack. "Let's go play. Running in the woods makes me really horny."

"Then by all means, mister."

He would kill for her smile, to keep her this happy. He shifted, loving the pleased look on her face.

They spent two hours in the park. He could have run all day, but as he sensed the tension fully drain from her, he playfully chuffed and refused her request to shift back before they left. He happily padded at her side down the path toward the parking area while enjoying the wide berth people, especially men, gave them. Only one single man dared approach her. She tensed, but as Ivan raised his hackles, the guy suddenly veered off in a different direction.

Lindsey laughed, tangling her fingers in his fur at the scruff of his neck. "Good boy," she murmured.

His tail eagerly wagged.

\* \* \* \*

Two weeks later, she received the call to come ID the other two attackers. Ivan held her hand as they stood behind one-way glass and waited for the line-up of suspects to walk in. “I don’t know if I’ll recognize them,” she whispered.

“Don’t worry, babe. I will.” He kissed her hand. “I’ll let you know.”

They let him stay with her because he wasn’t a witness—that they were aware of—and as the first group of potential suspects marched in, Ivan struggled not to growl. Number two. The pants wetter.

Ivan’s large hand engulfed hers, which made it easy for him to tap her fingers twice with his.

“Two,” she breathed.

*Smart girl.*

He gently squeezed her hand.

Lindsey turned to the officer in charge. “Number two.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

They marched the second batch in a moment later. Again Ivan fought the urge to growl. Four gentle taps.

They repeated the procedure. Thirty minutes later, she was in Ivan’s truck, curled in his arms, sobbing as he tried to console her.

“When do you let me in and tell me what happened to you?”

She shuddered. “My ex-boyfriend. I left him, and he stalked me.”

“Can’t get much farther than Washington State without needing a work visa.”

“No.”

He stroked her arms. “Why’d you come back?” He’d met her family, and while they’d welcomed him, they’d all stayed conspicuously clear of any discussion of Lindsey’s recent past or why she’d moved out west.

“He was killed in a drug deal or something a few months ago.”

Ivan gently clamped his large hands around her shoulders. “You’re coming to work with us. Jeremy gave me carte blanche. I told you, I’m not leaving your side.” In the time since his revelation, she’d quit her job and moved in with him. He’d taken the time off from work to be with her.

“I told you, that’s unrealistic.”

“Let me have my fun.” He stroked her cheek, fighting the urge to make love to her right there in the Sheriff’s office parking lot. “I enjoy taking care of you. And I can’t stand being away from you.”

“I’ll think about it.”

\* \* \* \*

Saying that he couldn’t keep his hands off her was no exaggeration. Back at their home and knowing the creeps were finally behind bars, she seemed free, somehow. She pushed him to the bed and straddled him.

“Feeling better, babe?”

She nodded, working on his jeans. “Almost.”

“Almost?”

His cock sprang free as she slid his jeans down. “Yeah,” she said as she lowered her mouth to his throbbing member. “Almost.”

He groaned, tangling his fingers in her hair. Fuck she was sooo good with her mouth. She did things with her tongue that melted him inside.

He gasped. “What can I do to make you feel better?”

To answer, she had to release his cock. “I want to make you come.”

“No problem.”

She swirled her tongue around his large plum-shaped head, caressing his sac with her fingers. It never took her long to get him off like this. As the tightness built in his balls he gently bucked his hips against her.

“Don’t stop,” he whispered.

She deep-throated him, finishing him, setting off an explosion behind his eyes. No woman had ever made him feel the way she did.

When he regained his senses, he looked up to her teasing smile.

“What?”

She curled next to him, nestled perfectly against his side. “You’re just a big puppy.” She took great pleasure in teasing him about that.



“You tamed my beast.”

“When do I get to meet your family?”

He kissed her, his tongue tracing a gentle path from her lips down her jaw to her ear, where a tender kiss just below her lobe always melted her. “Is that when you run screaming into the night? When faced with a houseful of shape-shifters?”

“As long as none of them chew my shoes, we’re copacetic.”

He rolled over and lifted her shirt, nuzzling her breasts. “You have to promise not to make fun of my cousin, Frank.”

“Why? Does he turn into a Chihuahua?” she said with a snicker.

He laughed. “No, I wish.”

“Then what?”

He looked up, serious. “He’s from a different branch of the family.”

“Well?”

“He turns into a panther.”

“And that’s a problem . . . why?”

“Cat in the middle of a pack of canines? You don’t see an issue there?”

“Should I stock up on catnip? Kitty litter? Set up a scratching post? Tuna?”

He rolled over, laughing. “I cannot believe you’re accepting all of this.”

“Hey, wolfman, you promised me great sex every day forever. I’m holding you to that.”

“Walk in the park.” He smiled.

The End

## *About the Author*

Lesli Richardson is a snarky, stubborn Taurus freelance writer. A native, life-long Floridian (endangered species), she's (as of now) never seen real snow. She lives in southwest Florida with her husband, son, and a houseful of neurotic, misfit animals of various species.