



THE SENTINELS

DARK
STRANGER

DESIREE HOLT

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Dark Stranger

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

The Sentinels

DARK STRANGER

Desiree Holt

Dedication

To all my author friends who support me, inspire me, and without whom I'd never be here

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Chapter One

The cabin was a wonderful blend of rustic and comfort, nestled comfortably deep in the Maine woods. The view was spectacular—trees all around, the wonderfully fragrant Maine pines, a clearing where deer came to nibble at the grasses, and a natural rock terrace into the ravine on the other side. And the sunrises. Now she understood the phrase ‘the edge of morning’. The moment when night shed its gown of darkness and the life forces of daylight paraded forward. Time for dark secrets to be hidden away and for the sunlight to open up all the corners of the earth to visibility. The blending of the two sides of nature had a magical mystical quality to it,

But after three days, Kelsey Bryant was beginning to go stir crazy.

Not that she didn’t appreciate the loan of the cabin from her partner, Luke Spencer, and his wife, Sierra, who actually owned the place. And when Sierra had made the offer, it had seemed like just the right place to take a look at her life the way Sierra had done two years ago. And look what Sierra had gotten out of it! Luke!

Not that Kelsey expected a hot, sexy man to come out of the forest, shape shifter or otherwise. But she was getting antsy with only herself for company, a situation she wouldn’t have expected. Usually, she was known as the loner of The Sentinels, the shadowy security and protection agency she owned with seven other shifters. Since they’d been forced to flee Northern Michigan after the rest of their pack was decimated, she’d kept pretty much to herself, focusing only on her work.

Now, however, the two she was closest to, Luke and Brian Spencer, the ones she thought of as brothers, had found their mates and settled into their own lives. Despite all their efforts to include her as much as possible, Kelsey was feeling like the odd man out.

It wasn’t as if she could just go out and meet someone. Over and above everything else, which included her innate suspicion of other people, was the fact that she was a shape shifter. A human who could assume the form of a wolf. Or, if you preferred, a wolf who could become human. Most people didn’t even think shifters were real and thought they were creatures made up to scare children or to blame unexplained things on.

But they were real enough. All the members of The Sentinels could attest to that. Hunted almost to extinction by uneducated townspeople, they had fled to Texas and found safe haven in the Hill Country just outside San Antonio. Now they spent their lives in two pursuits: protecting and helping others and seeking other disconnected shifters to recreate a solid, functioning pack.

That was another dilemma Kelsey battled with. Lately, she'd begun to question her protection and tracking skills, her ability to contribute to the missions of the agency. A case had gone sour, and while the other partners had pointed out to her that they'd been called in too late, in Kelsey's mind, it was her own dwindling skills that had contributed to the failure.

So here she was, trying to take a good look at her life and decide if she had suddenly become the odd man out. Of everything.

Twice since arriving at the cabin, she'd shifted and run through the surrounding trees, careful to avoid any humans who might be tramping through the woods. She ran mostly at night, loving the feel of the wind in her fur and the clean smell of the forest. It also gave her a chance to test her abilities, to see if it was only her human abilities that were failing. It was a question she was still wrestling with.

Right now, though, at this very moment, all Kelsey wanted was some non-demanding companionship of any kind. Something to break up the monotony. And she wasn't going to find it here, isolated from everyone else. She'd stopped at the little town of Rock Creek, about five miles down the road, to stock up on supplies. Driving down Main Street, she'd spotted what she thought was a bar. No, a tavern. Towns like this didn't have regular bars. She hoped the place wasn't a total dive, and that they'd have either something decent to drink or someone halfway acceptable to talk to.

Shrugging into her jacket, she grabbed her purse and keys, locked the door and cranked the engine on her new, fire-engine-red Jeep. Everyone had teased her about the colour, reminding her it was hardly inconspicuous. But the polished red surface always cheered her up, and when she needed to not be seen, she borrowed one of the agency's vehicles.

Rock Creek appeared to have only one main road running through it. Big shock. Almost everything was dark on the short street, not surprising since Sierra had told her the streets rolled up right after dinner. The only light came from the tavern at the end. An amber glow showed through the window and a neon sign proclaimed the name of the bar—quaintly enough, 'The Bar'.

Kelsey snorted a laugh. How original. She could imagine what the inside was like.

Like I have a lot of choices about places to go.

She had never been one for going into bars alone, especially out here in the middle of no place, but she was heartily sick of her own company and the idea of drinking alone didn't appeal to her. Sighing and hoping she wouldn't live to regret it, Kelsey she parked in the gravel parking lot in front of the building and shut off the engine.

I should go home and curl up with a good book. If I had a good book, that is.

Hesitating briefly, she finally climbed out of her vehicle and forged ahead. Pushing open the heavy wooden door, she stepped into the dimness. It took her almost a full minute to adjust her eyes to the low light. The Bar was larger than it appeared on the outside, with a handful of booths on one wall, a long bar opposite and a few tables and chairs scattered in the space between. Two of the booths were occupied but none of the tables. Four people sat at the bar, drinking quietly. At the end of the room, under a rectangular overhead light, two men played pool.

When the door closed behind her with a *thump!*, everyone turned to look at her, staring at her as if she were an alien come to earth from another planet.

To them, I probably am.

The same eyes followed her as she walked over to the long counter and hitched herself up on a stool. A napkin slid onto the bar in front of her, and she looked up to see six foot plus of muscular male, a face all sharp lines and angles with a thick shock of dark hair framing it. The punch of lust that shot through her stunned her. No man had ever drawn that kind of instant reaction from her. Then she looked up and saw his eyes, a glowing amber that reflected what little light there was in the place.

The only people she knew with eyes that colour were shifters like herself and her partners. But surely it wasn't possible that one existed in the flyspeck of a town. Wouldn't Sierra and Luke have discovered him by now?

They were forever on the hunt for other lost shifters, looking to rebuild a pack and develop new relationships. So if a shifter lived in the town where Sierra's inherited cabin was located, wouldn't she or Luke have ferreted him out by now?

She sniffed delicately, trying not to be obvious, but it didn't matter. If he was a shifter, he'd managed to mask his scent well.

"We rent out the stool, but you can have it for free if you buy a drink."

The deep voice, shaking her out of her reverie, had a timbre to it that sent shivers down her spine and did nothing to diminish the desire heating her blood.

Jesus, don't let me make a fool of myself here.

"Oh. Well." She couldn't seem to untangle her tongue. "In that case, a beer, please. Whatever you've got on tap."

In seconds, he placed a heavy glass mug on the napkin, the glass already frosting from the cold liquid in it. As he leaned towards her, the rich scent of pine trees drifted past her nostrils, reminding her of earth and outdoors and everything clean. Her stomach flopped.

That must be some aftershave he uses.

Kelsey picked up the mug and sipped from it, watching the bartender watch her.

"Just passing through?" he asked. "We don't usually get strangers here."

"I can imagine." She couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She raised her eyes again to his and was shocked by the wave of lust that swept over her. Her nipples felt as if pins were pricking them, and moisture flooded the crotch of her panties.

What the hell?

She took another sip of beer to steady herself. "I'm actually spending a few days at Sierra and Luke Spencer's cabin. You know them, right?"

It had to be impossible for him not to, she thought, as small as the town was.

He nodded. "A little. They come in here once in a while." A grin tugged at his lips. "Although they mostly keep to themselves. They up here, too?"

Kelsey shook her head. "No. They were nice enough to let me borrow it so I could hide away from the world for a few days."

He lifted one eyebrow. "Hiding from anything in particular?"

She shrugged. "Just life." She looked around the bar. "Isn't that what everyone else up here is doing?"

The muscles in his face tightened. "People earn their livelihood here," he told her in a flat voice. "This is big lumber country. Didn't the Spencers tell you?"

"What about you?" She cocked her head. "You don't look the lumberjack type to me."

He was silent for a long moment before he answered her. "I have other things that keep me here."

Kelsey watched the muscles flex in his arms as he wiped the surface of the bar next to her then tossed the cloth under the counter. Hair as dark as that on his head dusted his arms

and curled over the vee of his dark sweater. She had an insane desire to leap across the bar and rip off the bartender's clothes. She picked up her drink to steady herself and sipped at the cold brew. What on earth was happening to her?

"Hey, can a guy get a drink around here?" The man four stools over called. "Socialise on your own time."

"You need to drink more slowly, Bert." The bartender filled another mug from the tap and walked it down to the man. "Don't want you to fall off the stool like last time."

"I told you I just lost my balance, damn it," Bert protested. "Gimme that drink."

"Okay, but I'm cutting you off when I see you start to wobble."

"Hey!" One of the pool players hollered out. "Who's the dame?"

"None of your business," the bartender answered. "Pay attention to your game."

"You must not have much business if you talk to all your customers that way," she told the bartender when he stood before her again.

He shrugged. "No place else for them to go. So...do you have a name or are you hiding that, too?"

For a minute, she was tempted to make one up, but realised that was just foolishness. It wasn't as if he was a criminal. "Kelsey. Kelsey Bryant."

He extended a hand across the counter. "Mack Renfield."

The moment their hands touch she felt every muscle in her body contract. The walls of her pussy contracted, and if possible, her nipples hardened even more. The lust that had swept over her in the beginning coiled like a snake low in her belly.

What is going on here? If he's not a shifter, where is the instant electricity coming from that's snapping between us?

His hand continued to hold hers, the palm rough and calloused, the skin incredibly warm. Finally, he released her, and she picked up her mug again, hoping he'd ignore the shaking in her own hand. When she looked up, he was staring not at her hand but straight into her eyes.

"I close in an hour," he told her, his gaze holding hers.

Well, that's getting right to the point. I guess they don't beat around the bush up here in Maine.

She realised instantly that the same feelings were gripping him. And he wasn't telling her his business hours just to give her information. She drained her beer.

"Well, then. That gives me plenty of time for another drink."

"Sip it slowly. You don't want to get drunk. Someone might take advantage of you."

Again that all consuming feeling of lust grabbed her. Was he trying to tell her something? If she was smart, she'd get up, run to her car and get the hell out of there. But smart didn't enter into what she was feeling. Her body was sending her a message her brain ignored.

"Exactly who would that be?" She met his piercing gaze, seeing the amber darken to a rich gold.

He never looked away. "You never know. Could be me. Would that disturb you?"

Everything about you disturbs me. I'm crazy for sitting here, having this conversation with you – a total stranger – and knowing with a certainty where it's going to end up.

Kelsey ran her finger around the rim of her mug. "I think it would be...interesting."

His eyes burned into her, as if they could see right down to her trembling soul. "Take your time on the drink. In a little while, I'll check for last call then start closing up. I only live five minutes from here."

Kelsey heard the words come out of her mouth before her brain connected. "Why don't we go back to the cabin?"

Mack hesitated for the space of one heartbeat. "Are you sure?"

No, but I'm going to do this anyway.

"Yes."

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "That sounds like a hesitant yes, but I'll take it anyway. Sip on that beer until I get squared away.

Well, Kelsey, you've done it now.

Chapter Two

Kelsey parked in the small area next to the cabin and waited while Mack parked next to her. She trembled slightly as she led him up the two steps to the porch, and her fingers shook so badly she nearly dropped the keys. Inside the door, she flipped the switch that turned on a small lamp then started towards the fireplace to get a blaze started, but Mack's strong hands grasped her arms and turned her to face him.

His face was bare inches from hers. "Last chance to change your mind."

Not likely.

Mutely, she shook her head.

When his mouth came down on hers, it was like kissing a live wire. The electricity of it stunned her, sending shock waves through her body. It definitely wasn't a gentle kiss. Rather it was ravenous, as if he wanted to devour her mouth. His tongue pressed the seam of her lips until she opened for him then swept inside like a marauding predator.

It brushed across her teeth, the inside of her lips and cheeks, then twisted with her own tongue so she couldn't tell one from the other. Mack's hands pressed her to him. Her breasts ached unbearably, the nipples tingly as if a thousand tiny pins poked them. And the muscles in her cunt clenched and quivered while her juices flooded her already soaked panties.

One hand gripped a cheek of her ass, pulling her against him, while the other played a magic tune on her spine. Kelsey lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck as he continued to feed on her mouth. She was dizzy with desire, her knees wobbling, her body melting into his. Through their clothes, she could feel the hard ridge of his erection and knew he would be enormous and thick.

They broke the kiss only to drag air into their deprived lungs. Kelsey looked at Mack with glazed eyes, wrapped in a fog of lust.

"I-I should light the fireplace," she stammered, wondering if she could even walk to it.

"I'll do it." He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the couch facing the fireplace. "Don't move," he ordered.

As if she could.

When the fire was a bright roaring combination of orange and red, he came back to her and slowly began to remove her clothing. He dragged her sweater over head and tossed to the side. She watched his eyes rake over her, eating her up before he lay down beside her on the wide couch. His gaze fastened on the silk and lace bra that covered her full breasts then bent his head and captured a nipple in his mouth, fabric and all. His teeth closed with a light touch over the stiff point, tugging on it as a new kind of heat radiated straight to her womb. He palmed her other breast, squeezing and rubbing it, the friction caused by the fabric enhancing the feel of his touch.

Kelsey twisted against the sensations, but he threw one leg over both of hers, effectively trapping her in place. Moving his mouth to the other nipple, he gave it the same treatment until she wanted to beg to feel his lips on her bare skin. When he finally flicked open the front clasp of the bra with a deft twist of his fingers and tugged it from her body, she arched to raise her breasts to his touch.

The feel of his tongue on her bare skin was an unbelievable pleasure. The wetness of his mouth was cooling on her heated skin. He flicked the tip from one hardened bud to the other, teasing each one until Kelsey didn't think they could get any harder. The throbbing in her pussy ratcheted up like an insistent drumbeat. She moaned, a light sound that escaped from her throat and floated in the air as his teeth nipped first one nipple, then the other.

"Take off your clothes," she whispered. "I want to feel your skin against me."

Mack lifted his body just enough to yank his sweater over his head and toss it to the side. Then the fine hair of his chest was rasping the sensitive skin of her breasts while his tongue traced circles at the hollow of her throat. He shifted his chest back and forth in a slight movement, but it was enough to swamp her with a flood of new sensations.

Beneath the mat of hair was a hard, unyielding wall of muscle. Kelsey felt the same hardness as her fingers dug into his back. She wondered if the rest of his body would be as well-toned and knew somehow it would.

Mack let his tongue travel down between the valley of her breasts, then shifted position to get access to her ribcage and navel. He licked a path from side to side on her naked flesh, drawing a line of liquid heat. She shivered at the sensual onslaught, her body arching against Mack's burning mouth.

When he reached the waistband of her jeans, he tugged the snap open with his teeth, then dragged the zipper down, exposing the sheer silk of her panties. He went to work with

his tongue again, licking the material until its wetness stuck to her like a second skin. Kelsey tried to wriggle her hips, wanting more, needing more, but Mack's big hands held her firmly in place. He nipped and teased at her flesh through the delicate fabric, teeth gently dragging at the soft curls beneath.

When it seemed she could stand it no more, he shifted enough to drag her jeans and panties down her legs and shove them away. Then he rose to rid himself of his own jeans. When the firelight caught the full impact of his naked body, Kelsey drew in her breath in a sharp gasp. Broad shoulders and a powerful chest sloped into a washboard hard abdomen and down to powerful, muscular thighs.

But what really captured her attention was the enormous erection that jutted out from curls as tight and dark as those on his chest. She was sure she'd never be able to get her fingers around its thickness, and as for taking it in her mouth, that would require a lot of manoeuvring on her part. A thick vein twisted around it, pulsing as it fed life into the wide shaft, and a drop of pearlescent fluid sat at the slit in the dark purple head. Below the heavy sac of his balls rested against his thighs. Kelsey's throat was suddenly dry, her heart racing as she thought of that enormous cock penetrating her, stretching her beyond belief.

Mack's eyes raked over her nakedness as if memorising every inch of her, before spreading her legs and kneeling between them. Again his mouth feasted at her nipples, scraping them with his teeth then soothing them with his tongue. She wound her fingers into the inky pelt of his hair and tried to pull him closer.

He followed the same trail along her flesh past her navel to the now fully exposed pubic curls covering her cunt. When his tongue dipped into the opening and rasped against her clit, the walls of her pussy fluttered and the liquid of her heat moistened her channel even more.

Fuck me, she wanted to shout, but she couldn't make her mouth form any words. The things his lips were doing to her drove any semblance of thought from her brain. Her blood raced, like molten heat, every pulse in her body throbbed as he teased her clit over and over, now nibbling, now flicking the tip of his tongue. She spread her legs as wide as she could in open invitation, but he was determined to take his time, to move slowly in a tormenting dance of sensual pleasure.

"God, you taste like the sweetest dessert. When you walked into my place tonight, I just knew I had to have a taste of you."

"More," she begged.

"Oh, believe me, sugar. We've just started."

She jerked at the electric shock that shot through her when his tongue finally found its way into her well-lubricated slit, tracing a line from end to end. He shifted slightly, his shoulders pressing the inside of her thighs outward as his fingers peeled back her labia. At last—at last!—his tongue rimmed the opening to her cunt then finally slipped inside.

The sensation was like that of a cold flame, burning her and soothing her at the same time. His tongue thrust in and out of her slick pussy, his warm breath like a soft breeze on her heated skin. She wanted to scream at him to hurry, to move faster, the coil of need winding tighter and tighter low in her abdomen. But Mack was apparently determined to set things at his own pace. His strong hands held her in place as he fed on her in steady, lapping strokes, holding her open, swiping with a broad stroke at her clit so irregularly she couldn't anticipate it and ready herself for it.

She heard herself moaning again, a low wail that rose up from deep inside her.

Please, please, please.

His hands shifted, pressing against the backs of her thighs and pushing her knees against her breasts. Shards of lightning stabbed through her body as his tongue licked the tender tissue between her cunt and her anus, then rimmed the tight ring of muscle.

"Oh, god," she wailed.

"Like that, do you?" His deep voice rumbled through her. "Maybe you'll like this even more."

Scooping her fluids from her pussy, he painted the ring of her anus then pressed a finger against her opening. As he eased the finger inside her hot, dark tunnel, her muscles automatically clamped down on him and she pushed against it. A thought flashed through her sex-fogged brain that, if Mack were a shifter, he would already be fucking her ass, driving into her like an unstoppable force.

Please, she whispered in her head again.

Then his mouth was back at her cunt, drinking from her, ravishing her.

"No, no, no," she wailed when he suddenly stopped. "Don't stop, don't stop."

Even his chuckle was hot and sensuous. "Don't worry. We're far from done here." He lapped another slow stroke. "The minute I saw you tonight it was like the gods had sent me a

present. Did you feel it, too, Kelsey? The electricity? The heat? We were made for each other. Something brought us together. Tell me you feel it, too."

"I do," she whispered, fighting to catch her breath. "Oh, god, I felt it, too."

"I'm going to make tonight very special for you."

He moved up her body, lowering her legs, shifting himself until his enormous cock was inches from her lips.

"Open your mouth, Kelsey. Take me inside."

Fighting the need to feel him inside her, she opened her mouth and stretched her lips to accommodate his size as he rubbed his shaft back and forth across them.

"That's it," he urged. "Open wider. Lick me with your tongue."

He was a tight fit, but slowly, she worked her mouth around him and drew him inside. As her muscles relaxed around him, she managed the lap at him with her tongue, tracing the pulsing vein that ran the length of the heated rod. The head was like velvet, pressing against the roof of her mouth, the cum seeping from it rolling down to the back of her throat.

Mack held her breasts in his hands, his thumbs rasping the nipples as he rocked back and forth, fucking her mouth with the same long, slow strokes his tongue has used on her cunt.

Kelsey managed to work one hand under him and cup his balls, squeezing them and rolling them with her fingers. One finger traced a path back towards his anus, and he pulled away from her so quickly she nearly bit down on his cock.

"That's it." He was panting heavily. "No more play time. Now we get serious."

He flipped her over to her stomach, then drew her up on her knees. She heard the snap of latex as he sheathed himself. In a moment, the head of his shaft prodded at her vaginal opening then, with a roll of his hips, he was seated inside her. At once, her pussy muscles began to spasm, milking him, the orgasm building inside her even before he began to move.

She pushed back against him, trying to take him deeper, even as her body stretched to accommodate him. She felt it coming, the tension about to snap.

And then he pulled out, leaving her poised on the edge of a precipice, unable to make that final leap. His fingers probed her vagina for the liquid flooding from her and used it to lubricate her ass.

Yesss!

That was how she wanted it. Hard and deep. In her tightest channel. Filling that tight space.

"Deep breath, Kelsey. Now."

She drew in a long breath as his hands drew apart the cheeks of her ass and the tip of his penis pressed against her. He pushed steadily, the thick length of him filling her slowly, slowly, slowly. And then he was in, his heavy balls slapping against the backs of her thighs.

"Play with yourself, Kelsey," he ordered. "Rub that little clit of yours until you can't stand it. Do it."

She had no strength to defy him, her need was so great. Obediently, she reached between her legs and squeezed her clit between thumb and forefinger. And then it began. Mack grabbed her hips, pulling her back against him as his shaft plundered her, harder, deeper, his thick length scraping ever sensitive nerve in her rectum.

The only sound in the room was the slapping of flesh against flesh, the sounds of laboured breathing and little moans that mingled in the air so one could not be distinguished from the other.

Faster, faster, faster, he pumped, with a more rapid rhythm. Every muscle in Kelsey's body quivered as she edged towards the elusive precipice, wanting it, needing it. She rubbed her clit vigorously, teeth clamped onto her lower lip. She moved her hips in rhythm with his, her thumb in cadence with her hips.

Mack's hands tightened their grip on her hips as he pulled her more tightly against him and drove into her harder and harder.

"Jesus, Kelsey," he gritted. "Now. Pinch you clit now. Hard."

She did as he asked. He thrust one more time and the world exploded around them. Her entire body shuddered and shook as spasm after spasm rocked her. Mack's hard, thick cock throbbed inside her, spurting wave after wave of cum into the thin latex barrier.

Mack leaned forward as the last of the convulsions shook him, his teeth nipping the flesh of her neck, and she flew into space, losing every bit of herself.

Kelsey was sure she had passed out. She had absolutely no idea how much time had passed before she became aware of Mack lifting himself from her. At some point, he arranged the thick cushions on the floor in front of the fireplace then picked her up from the couch and arranged her on them. She lay wrapped in a wave of lassitude as he bathed her

front and back with a warm cloth then lay down beside her, pulling the throw from the couch over them both and drawing her body against his.

“Sweet,” he murmured. “So sweet. This was meant to be, Kelsey. Sleep now, and have pleasant dreams.”

She fell asleep with his arms wrapped around her and the firelight dancing at their feet.

Chapter Three

The first thing Kelsey noted when she awoke in the morning was how stiff she was. The second was that Mack was gone, no sign of his presence except the lingering glow in her body. She was lying in her bed, not on thick pillows on the floor as they'd been the previous night. Sometime before he'd left, he must have carried her to her bed.

Images from the previous night drifted through her mind, warming her. She wasn't usually given to hot, sweaty sex with strangers five minutes after she'd met them. Promiscuity wasn't one of her personality traits. But something about Mack Renfield was different.

Like he'd told her, there was something that linked them. Something very special. Something she'd never felt with anyone else. Could they take this further? What did they even know about each other? Had her first instinct about him been correct? Was he a shifter like her and the others?

The last thing she'd expected up here in the Maine woods was to find a man who connected with her on every level. The whole thing had blindsided her, coming at her out of nowhere. All she'd wanted was a drink and she'd gotten...something a lot more. She needed to find answers to all her questions. Now. But first she'd call Luke. See if he and Sierra could tell her anything.

Forcing her aching body to her feet, she grabbed a robe from the chair where she'd thrown it yesterday and shuffled into the other room. The pillows were stacked neatly next to the fireplace, where last night's embers had died out. Kelsey looked around. If it weren't for soreness of erotic sex that still clung to her, she might have thought she'd imagined the whole thing. That Mack Renfield had never been there at all.

In the tiny kitchen area, she set the coffee to brewing, pulled a mug from the cupboard, and picked up her cell phone from the counter where she'd left it. Speed-dialling the agency, she managed a polite hello to the receptionist who answered, then asked for Luke.

"How's the solitude and clean air?" he asked when he came on the phone.

"Exhilarating and boring," she told him. "A great place to think but my own company is driving me nuts."

Luke chuckled. "Maybe a stray wolf will show up to entertain you."

"Speaking of that." She paced back and forth in the small area. "Have you sensed that there might be others like us up here? In this little town?"

Luke was silent for a long moment. "Are you telling me you've met someone you think is a shifter?"

"I don't know. I just got a...sense. A feeling. Nothing I can put my finger on except the colour of his eyes."

"Amber? Kelsey, some humans have amber-coloured eyes. Who are you referring to?"

She paused, sorting out her words, trying not to give out too much information yet get some in return. "I stopped in at The Bar last night. Do you and Sierra ever hang out there?"

Another long silence. "Okay, we've been there a few times. Are you talking about Mack Renfield, the guy who owns the place?"

"Yeah, I am. Did you ever get, I don't know, a feeling about him?"

"As a matter of fact, both Sierra and I did. But we threw out hints which he never picked up. And we couldn't catch a scent of any kind."

"Same here. If he is a shifter, he's masking it very well."

Luke's sigh carried over the connection. "Do you want us to come up there? I don't want you poking around in something that might be dangerous."

Kelsey forced a laugh. "How dangerous could it be? He's just a bar owner, right?"

"Kelsey, listen to me. If he's a shifter who's hiding, he won't want his secret revealed. If he's not, he could be an enemy. Either way, exposing him could get you in a lot of trouble."

"Don't worry. I promise to be careful. And no, I don't need babysitters." The coffee was ready, and she filled the mug with the hot liquid.

"Just be very, very careful, okay? Meanwhile, I'll see what we can find out on this end about our mysterious bar owner."

"Thanks. Call me when you know anything, and I'll be very careful."

Careful. There was an interesting word. How did you be careful around a man who made your blood sing and your pulse throb?

Dropping the phone into the pocket of her robe, she carried her mug out onto the deck, sipping at it while she stared into the surrounding forest and thought about the night before. The smart thing to do would be to forget anything had happened and just go about her business. Avoiding The Bar, of course. But she had to know why he'd left without even a

note or a message of any kind. If he was the kind of man—or shifter—who simply used women for sexual satisfaction, then walked away, she wanted to know now so she could get past it. If not...well, one way or another he owed her an explanation.

* * * *

Kelsey hadn't expected to find many people in The Bar when she pushed the heavy door open. But it was noon and apparently those who didn't take their lunch at Pine Tree diner ate at The Bar. Every booth and table was full, and the soft hum of conversation filled the air. There were still two empty stools, and she hoisted herself onto one of them.

Mack was busy carrying orders to customers, so she forced herself not to fidget until he was back behind the bar. When he spotted her, the blink of his eyes was the only signal she'd startled him. He slid a paper napkin in front of her, and she waited for a smile. Anything. But his face was implacable. She might have been anyone sitting there.

"Beer?" he asked.

At least, he'd remembered that.

"Please."

He filled a mug and placed it precisely on the napkin, then started to turn away, but Kelsey reached out a hand and clamped her fingers around his wrist.

"Mack?" If only he'd look at her directly.

"I'm busy. I have a bar full of people to wait on."

"One minute." She hated the pleading note in her voice. This wasn't the way she'd planned things at all. "Just one minute, okay?"

He finally turned to look at her and the chilly look on his face made her heat twist.

"One minute. What is it?"

She wet her lips with her tongue. "Maybe I'm mistaken here, but I thought we clicked last night. That we had something going. Something really good. Was I mistaken?"

His amber eyes stared at her so hard she thought he could see clear through her. "We had one hot night, Kelsey. Don't make it into something it's not."

She tried to keep the hurt from showing on her face. He was right. One night. Why should she think it was anything else? What she hadn't expected was for him to treat her like a complete stranger the next day.

She swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "I-I'm sorry. You're right. I'm reading something into it I shouldn't."

He lifted her fingers from his wrist and slid his hands beneath her elbows. "Listen to me, Kelsey. There are things about me you don't know. You're right that last night something connected between us. But there are reasons why it can't go any further. Believe me."

"What reasons? What is there that's keeping us from exploring this further? Last night, you told me we connected. That something special was happening between us. What's changed since then?"

"It was a mistake. I got carried away." He backed away from her. "Drink your beer and go home, Kelsey. Don't come in here again. You might find out things that will give you nightmares. Now excuse me. I have business to take care of."

He walked away, leaving her staring after him, her heart stuttering inside her chest and her stomach clenching. How had she been so wrong about him?

She took a sip of her beer, but it tasted flat and bitter. She set the mug down and pushed it away from her, ready to slide off the stool when the door slammed open and two men burst into The Bar. Everyone turned to look at them.

"He's back," one of them said in a hoarse voice. He was tall, well over six feet, dressed in a plaid lumberman's jacket, jeans and heavy work boots. His thick brown hair was sticking up in all directions as if he'd been running his hands through it.

"We thought he was done, but he's not," the other man said, a wild-eyed blond just as big and looking just as dishevelled.

A man at one of the tables stood up and indicated the vacant chairs. "Sit down, come on. Are you sure it's him?"

The brown-haired man dropped into a chair then stood up again. "It has to be. Jody Logan's missing right from his yard. It's just like it was before."

Kelsey was conscious of the buzz of low conversation filling the room. Mack had moved out from behind the bar so she turned to the man next to her. "I'm sorry. I'm new here. Can you tell me what this is all about?"

The man stared at her as if she'd arrived from a foreign planet. "It's about the children. You don't know about it? My god, woman, it was all over the papers two years ago."

Something clicked in Kelsey's brain, memories of newspaper articles Sierra had shown her when she'd first inherited the cabin. A child abduction ring had apparently invaded the area from Canada, one involved in selling young children in a black market adoption ring. Taking advantage of the fact the houses were so scattered, they'd managed to abduct nearly a dozen children, all of them under three, most of them never seen again. The distraught parents were still trying every avenue to trace them, working with the FBI as well as private agencies. Three children had been found—one of them dead, one of them rescued hours after the capture, and one of them still undergoing treatment for the trauma.

According to the newspapers, the three men involved had been captured and were now in prison. Did this mean there was a fourth man who'd gone free and was now back in business?

"I'm just glad this is over," Sierra had said at the time. "I can't imagine something this evil up there in such a peaceful environment."

But did this mean it wasn't over after all?

"I'm sorry," she said now. "I do remember reading about it. So now another child is missing?"

The man nodded. "Apparently, there was one that got away. Or someone else has decided to go in business."

"Isn't it possible the little boy just wandered away? Kids at that age have a tendency to roam. They're naturally inquisitive."

The man gave her a scornful look. "Not around here. Kids are taught from the moment they can crawl to stay close to home. Predators, you know, although we usually only have to worry about the four-legged kind. Anyway, most of them were taken from their rooms at night or out of a crowd." He heaved himself up. "Excuse me. I have to help."

Kelsey wasn't sure what to do next. She tried to overhear as much of the conversation as possible without looking too nosy.

"Where was Jody?" someone asked. "Did they take him from his home?"

The blond man shook his head. "Fran was watching him play outside. The gate in the fence was locked like always. The phone rang, she ran to answer it and two minutes later when she came back he was gone."

Mack stood at the table where the men were sitting. "What's been done so far?"

"Sheriff Laporte had a deputy take Fran home then pick up her husband from work. Sheriff's wife is with them now along with a couple of neighbours. Laporte called in the state police and they set up roadblocks."

"Was Fran able to give them a description of the other car at the station?" Mack asked.

"A vague one. She's trying, but she says she really didn't pay much attention. And right now she's fighting hysterics which doesn't help."

"Have they asked for search parties to help?"

The man with brown hair nodded. "Sheriff asked for everyone who could to come to the station right now. He's coordinating with the states. With the roads blocked off, they think there's a possibility whoever took Jody might try to hide in the woods until the coast is clear."

Everyone in the bar was slapping money on their tables for their tab and getting ready to leave. Kelsey battled with her own internal conflict then went to stand next to the table. Maybe there was something she could do here, even if her talents weren't as sharp as she'd like. Surely there had to be *something* she could do.

"I'd like to help," she said to the group of men.

Mack looked at her, the same cold look on his face. "Exactly what do you think you can do? You don't even know this area."

"I'm a certified tracker," she told him, stretching the truth a little. "And I can get Luke and Sierra up here right away. They know the territory." She looked at the other. "My name is Kelsey Bryant. I'm also a private investigator, staying at the cabin of my friends Luke and Sierra Bryant. It seems to me you can use every person you can get."

Everyone's eyes shifted to Mack as if waiting for his blessing on the situation. His eyes were cold but assessing as they raked over her. Finally, he nodded his head.

"All right. Do you know where the sheriff's station is?"

"I'll just follow everyone else. See you there."

Chapter Four

On the ride to the sheriff's office, Kelsey called Luke and explained the situation to him.

"Damn. We thought they'd caught everyone last time. Let's just hope it's a leftover gang member back in business and not a whole new gang setting up shop again."

"I just have a hard time with people who treat children like merchandise," Kelsey told him.

"At least, wolves care for their young as well as everyone else's." His voice was tinged with bitterness as he remembered all that the pack had been through. "Okay. Do you need us?"

"You and Sierra," Kelsey told him. "You know the area. How fast can you get here?"

"I'll have someone chopper us up right away. If I remember, there's a field behind the sheriff's station where we can land. But we'll need a vehicle."

"I'll leave mine," she told him. "I can catch a ride with someone. I'll leave the keys with the dispatcher."

"On our way."

Kelsey stuffed her phone back in her pocket and pulled into the sheriff's parking lot behind the car in front of her. A large crowd had already gathered, and the man she assumed to be Sheriff Laporte was organising them into teams. She pushed her way forward, introduced herself and told him about Luke and Sierra.

"Good, good," he told her. "They know this place, all fifty square miles of it. The staties have got the roads blocked, but there's a million places to hide with a child until whoever this is thinks it's safe."

"I told Luke I'd leave my keys inside, so I'll need a ride with someone on whatever team you assign me to."

"She can ride with me."

Kelsey hadn't heard Mack come up behind her, and his voice still lacked any warmth, but his hand closed firmly over her upper arm. When she tried to pull away, he tightened his grip.

"Okay." The sheriff nodded. He pointed to the map. "Take quadrant four." He reeled off the names of the others he'd assigned to the area. "Same procedure as usual, Mack. You know the drill."

Mack nodded before moving away to his truck, pulling Kelsey along with him.

"Hey," she protested, trying to keep up with him. "What's with the caveman tactics? And besides, I thought you told me to peddle my papers someplace else."

"Things change." Three other men were standing next to his truck, all big and muscular like Mack, all with faces wiped clean of expression except for the anger smouldering in their eyes. Mack gestured at them. "John Ravitz, Cal Bellows, Larry Pelletier. Gentlemen, meet Kelsey Bryant."

The men nodded at her, and Kelsey felt shock race through her system. They all had the same amber eyes as Mack. What the hell was going on here?

"Something wrong?" Mack asked, feeling the tension radiating through her body.

"N-no." She shook her head. She couldn't wait for Luke to get here. "Just tell me what you need me to do."

"We're heading to the area by the old logging camp," he told the others. "He may be hiding in there with the child so we need to approach with caution." He looked at Kelsey. "Just follow whatever I do."

Kelsey could tell from the moment they reached a concealed parking area and began to hike through the woods that these were seasoned trackers. They moved with total stealth, hardly disturbing a leaf. Every so often she would notice one of them turning towards her, a questioning look on his face as if noting she moved just as quietly as they did.

Splitting up, they covered every possible hiding area as they converged on the long-abandoned cabins. As she moved along with Mack, Kelsey felt herself tuning into the environment, her brain focusing on what she needed to look for, any clues that might be in their path. Slowly, she felt her senses come alive, her skills beginning to awaken. Maybe, she wasn't losing it after all.

Quietly, they searched the cabins one by one, but all of them were empty.

Mack pulled out his phone after searching the last one and called the sheriff to report in.

"Nothing from anyone else," Mack told them.

"But what about the little boy?" Kelsey protested. Now that she was in her groove again she didn't want to stop, as if finding this child would erase the failure of her last case. "We can't just pack it in. We have to keep going. Surely, he's afraid, wherever he is. And what if the man who has him finds a way out in the dark?"

Mack shook his head. "We've been at this for hours, and it's getting dark. We need to be fresh to start again in the morning. Don't worry, though. New teams are taking over. And the state police will have their helicopters covering the area with searchlights all night. We'll all meet again in the morning. Whoever this asshole is, he won't get away. And we'll find Jody. I promise you."

That had to be good enough for her. And she realised Mack was right. They were all exhausted, both from the search and effort at stealth. Much longer and they'd be no good to anyone, least of all Jody.

"What kind of person does this?" she asked.

"A devil," Mack answered. "I just wish they could find out if it's someone new, god forbid, or someone from before who slipped through the net. Or who we didn't know about."

They were halfway back towards town when Kelsey's phone rang. Luke. He and Sierra had been on one of the other teams.

"Anything in your area?" she asked.

"Nada. We're heading back to the cabin."

"I brought my sleeping bag," she told him. "You and Sierra take the bed. I'll bunk out in the living room."

Mack reached out and took the phone from her. "Luke? Mack Renfield. I've got a better idea. Kelsey will be at my place. What? Uh huh. I read you loud and clear. See you at first light."

"I don't understand you at all," Kelsey protested when he handed her phone back to her. "Last night, I thought we'd never get enough of each other. Today, you froze me out. Now, you're taking me home with you. I'm confused. What gives here?"

"I'm not sure I understand it myself," he told her in a hard voice. "I should listen to my brain and take you to Luke and Sierra's." He made a sharp turn in the road and began climbing a narrow road to the top of a hill. "I told you. There are things about me you don't know. Things that would... Well, never mind. But you're in my blood, Kelsey. The only thing I can hope is to get you out of it so I can get on with my life."

"Oh, really. And exactly where does that leave me?"

"Same place as me, I guess. You were just as hot as I was last night. Tell me you want me to take you back to Luke and Sierra's place, and I'll turn the truck around right now."

She tried to force the words out, but they were stuck in her throat.

"All right, then." He pulled up in front of an old two-story house with a wraparound porch. "Here we are. Bought this place ten years ago when I moved up here. What do you think?"

She climbed out of the truck and looked around. The moonlight touched everything with a silvery cast, reflecting in the big windows in front and kissing the tips of the big pine trees. Even in the near dark, Kelsey could tell the house had character.

"Big place for one person," she said.

"I like space," he told her, leading her up onto the porch. "Come on. I'll get a fire going before the temperature really drops."

* * * *

As exhausted as they both were from the hours of searching, Kelsey was sure neither of them would have the strength for any kind of sexual activity. And despite her determination to hold back, to make Mack give her some answers, they were barely inside before they were tearing each other's clothes off. Leaving them scattered on the hall floor, Mack lifted her in his arms and carried her up the stairs. He left her on his big bed only long enough to light the fire then stretched out his magnificent body beside her.

When his mouth came down to cover hers, she met him eagerly, opening for him and eagerly accepting the flame of his tongue. His kiss was hungry, ravenous, and she was just as greedy. His hands cupped her head, slanting it to give him a better angle to plunder her mouth. She clasped her fingers around his wrists and held on for dear life. He drank from her like a man dying of thirst. By the time he broke the kiss, Kelsey was lightheaded and dizzy.

"Your skin is like satin," he told her as he ran his hands over every inch of her. "So smooth. Every time I looked at you today, my hands itched to strip off your clothes and touch every inch of you."

"We would have collected quite a crowd in the bar, don't you think?" she teased.

"But there's no one here now." His voice was thick with lust. "Now I can hold your breasts and squeeze the ripe rosy nipples. Like this." He pinched one nipple, hard, making her jump. "Like that? Pain—the right pain—is the sweet edge of pleasure. Did you know that?"

If the moisture flooding from her pussy was any indication, she more than knew that.

"Y-yes," she stammered, arching into his touch.

"Oh, but we need to pay attention to the other one, too." He clamped his lips over the one nipple while his fingers reached for the other. His teeth bit down while his fingers pinched, and twin stabs of excitement raced through her. The walls of her cunt were already quivering with tiny spasms.

"Mmm..." she moaned twisting her body, arching into the pleasure.

"Oh, yes," he growled, lifting his mouth from its grasp of the swollen bud. "I know you like that. What we need are some nipple clamps to squeeze these little nubs. Make them stand out even more. Then I can lick them at will."

He reached for one hand and pushed it down between them. "Grab my cock, Kelsey. Wrap those slender fingers around it and stroke it. You know how. Rub your thumb over the head."

Kelsey could barely get her fingers around the thick shaft, but she moved them up and down from root to tip and back again in a slow, steady rhythm. With her thumb, she spread the thick fluid seeping from the slit over the velvety head, rubbing it against the soft surface, her breath hitching as Mack groaned in response.

"Oh, yeah, sugar. That's it. Keep doing that."

His hand travelled over her belly down to the soft nest of curls, his fingers sifting through them. Kelsey widened her legs to give him better access, her flesh aching for the touch of his fingers. She didn't have long to wait. He opened her labia like the petals of a flower and slid his fingers through the liquid making her inner lips hot and slick.

"Yes," she urged, widening her legs even more.

Mack pulled one of her legs over and clamped it between his, then began a tantalising dance with his fingers over her sensitive flesh. He swirled his fingertips over the throbbing point of her clit, rubbing back and forth. Shards of sensation streaked through her pussy and her fingers clenched more tightly around his rigid shaft.

"That's it," he said again. "Up and down, Kelsey. Oh, god, that feels good."

His hand drifted lower, and he probed the opening to her pussy, one finger then two slipping inside, even as he continued to nip at one throbbing nipple. His thumb set up a rhythm on her clit that matched the in and out thrust of his fingers in her cunt, and her own hand matched his strokes as she caressed his rigid penis, the hot shaft swelling in her grip.

"Do you like it when I fuck you with my fingers?" he asked, his mouth leaving her nipple to move to her cheek.

His warm breath tickled her ear as his tongue traced the outline of the shell then licked the spot beneath her earlobe. He trailed a wet line down the column of her neck, his teeth biting at the sensitive spot where neck and shoulder joined. And all the while his fingers teased her cunt, probing her wet sheath, curling to rasp his fingertips over her sweet spot and send jolts of fire through her.

Beneath her fingers, she felt the pulsing of the thick, ropy vein twisting around his penis, feeding the hot blood to it that made it harden and swell. More liquid seeped from the slit, and she smoothed it again over the head, fingers stroking, thumb curving, trying to match the tempo of his fingers in her pussy.

"You're like a drug, Kelsey," he growled. "I should chase you as far away from me as fast as you can run, but I can't do it. I want you. I need you. I want to suck your nipples and lick your pussy and fuck you in every opening in your body. Jesus, I must be losing my mind."

I have my own secrets, Mack. Even now, I know if I don't shift in the next twenty-four hours I'll be in trouble. But I want you with the same fierceness. Oh, god, what am I doing?

He pulled his hand from between her legs, changed position and settled himself between her thighs. His big, strong hands slid beneath her ass and lifted her, giving him access to her weeping cunt. Without preamble, he stroked her slit with his tongue, tracing a line from top to bottom and back again then taking her clit between his teeth.

A low wail rose from her throat as he ate at her, driving her to a high sensual plane. When he draped her legs over his shoulders and began to suck her cunt in earnest, she cried out, the tension rising from her body almost unbearable. A pulse throbbed deep in her womb, the beginning of a climax building inside her.

Clenching her hands into fists and closing her eyes, Kelsey rode the wave of pleasure, praying Mack wouldn't stop. This time he didn't. This time his tongue thrust inside her again and again, his thumb taking up the tormenting of her clit where his teeth had left off.

And then it was there. Like a tidal wave, the orgasm rolled over her, grabbing her, shaking her, every muscle clenching and spasming again and again, the walls of her cunt clamping down on Mack's tongue like a vice. She thrust her hips again and again, every nerve sparking, her pussy convulsing as she poured her liquid into his mouth.

He held her tightly in his grip, his mouth never leaving her as the aftershocks rolled through her, lapping and nipping and driving her from one plane of pleasure to another.

She had barely caught her breath from the intensity of the climax when he rose to his knees, grabbed a condom from the nightstand and, in seconds, was plunging inside her, the head of his huge cock pressing against the mouth of her womb. He gripped her hips, holding her in position as he rode her with driving intensity. At once, the climax built inside her again, reaching out from low in her belly, spreading throughout her body. It hit before she even realised it, but Mack didn't stop. He kept up the hard thrusts, riding her through it and taking her up again.

She gasped for breath, her heart beating against her ribs like a jackhammer as once more her body convulsed. This time, he was there with her, his hard shaft pulsing inside her as he spilled into the latex. A low growl rose from his throat, floating on the air to mingle with her own mewling sounds.

Mack lowered her legs and collapsed on her, catching his weight on his forearms as both of them dragged air into their oxygen-deprived lungs. Kelsey felt as if she'd been hit by a truck, every bone and muscle in her body drained by the most powerful orgasm she'd ever experienced. She reached up and threaded her fingers through his hair, drawing his head down beside her.

She closed her eyes, thinking, *What the hell am I doing?*

Sometime in the darkness of the night she stirred, feeling Mack's mouth on her neck then trailing kisses down her spine. One hand massaged a breast, a thumb rasping back and forth over the already distended nipple.

She lay there halfway between wakefulness and sleep, letting the sensations of pleasure wash over her. Mack's hard cock pressed against the cheeks of her ass, the heavy sac of his balls resting against the backs of her thighs. A pulse throbbed in her cunt, her inner thighs already wet with the juices of her arousal.

"Awake?" Mack's deep voice crooned in her ear.

"Mmm," she murmured, unwilling to disrupt lassitude gripping her.

"Just lie there. I'll do all the work."

His hand drifted downward from her breast to her cunt, stroking the soft curls before slipping a finger into the wet slit. The moment he touched the tip of her clit she jerked, heat slashing through her.

"Easy," he murmured. "Easy, sugar."

She forced herself to settle down and enjoy the feel of his fingers probing her, teasing her, arousing her. Without thinking, she began to rock her hips back and forth, her thighs squeezing his hand tightly.

Mack's mouth returned to her neck, nipping and kissing then licking with his tongue.

"Don't move," he whispered against her skin.

He shifted position, Kelsey heard a drawer open and close then one long finger probed the cleft of her buttocks. It was coated with something cool.

Gel!

She forced herself to relax as Mack probed her anus, his lean finger entering her and spreading the gel against her hot tissues. She heard the snap of latex then hands rolled her slightly and the head of his thick cock pushed against the tight ring of her sphincter muscle.

"Breathe," he told her. "Deep breath."

She drew in air then let it out slowly as his penis pushed inside her, slowly and steadily. His thickness filled every inch of her, and the lassitude was quickly swept away by a feeling of urgency. She pressed back against him, trying to take him deeper although he was as deep as he could go. His hand reached around and his fingers pinched her clit, rubbing it in cadence with the rhythm of his hips.

Slow and steady, unhurried, he moved back and forth, as if fucking her ass was the only thing he had time for in the world. She tried with her body to urge him to move faster, but he was bigger, stronger, more determined.

"Easy," he whispered. "Let it build. Feel my cock inside you. Feel me fucking you. God, your ass is so tight, Kelsey. You're burning me alive." He pinched her swollen bud harder. "And this clit. God, sugar. It's so wet. Your whole cunt is wet. All that delicious juice flooding just for me."

In and out. Back and forth. Kelsey felt the orgasm climbing, demanding to break free, and little mewling sounds rolled from her throat.

"Please, Mack," she begged. "Please, please, please."

"Ready?" He let his hand drift lower to probe the wetness of her pussy. "Oh, yeah, you're ready. Hold on, sugar."

He pressed his hand against her lower abdomen, holding her tightly to him as he increased the tempo of his strokes.

In and out. Harder, Faster.

Now, now, now, she screamed silently in her head.

"Now," he growled in her ear and rolled his hips one last time, shoving hard into her rear tunnel.

They exploded together, Mack pumping his seed into the condom in thick, heavy spurts, his fingers fucking her cunt in the same rhythm. Her pussy spasmed—her whole body spasmed—then she was launched onto some dark plane where all she could feel was Mack's big cock and her body clenching on it. On his fingers. Nothing else existed except the erotic convulsions racing through her body.

At last, she lay completely spent, a fine sheen of perspiration covering her body, shivering in the aftermath of such an intense explosion. She felt the heavy thudding of Mack's heart against her back, a slow and steady beat. Gradually, her own heart resumed a normal rhythm, and she drifted off again, vaguely aware that Mack was still seated deep inside her.

Chapter Five

Kelsey thought she might be losing her mind. The smell of coffee drifting from the kitchen woke her, and she stumbled there, wrapped in Mack's shirt, expecting at least a smile or a good morning hug. But once again, while Mack was still physically present, he might as well have disappeared as he'd done from the cabin.

His curt nod had all the warmth of icicles. After handing her a mug, he pointed at the coffeepot and turned away.

Kelsey poured the hot liquid and sipped at it, barely avoiding burning her tongue. What the hell was going on here?

"Mack?" she said tentatively.

"Last night was a mistake," he told her without turning around. "I can't think when I'm around you. My dick does all my thinking for me. I'm taking you to the cabin so you can ride with Luke and Sierra today. Get dressed."

"Get dressed? Just like that? Not even a thank you for a hot night?" She hoped he didn't hear the pain in her voice.

"Just like that." Finally, he turned around. "Listen. This whole thing was a mistake. There are reasons why we can't be together. Reasons I can't begin to explain to you. Just leave it at that."

"No!" She slammed the mug down on the counter so hard the hot liquid splashed over onto her hand. "No, I will *not* leave it like that. I want an explanation. I *deserve* an explanation."

"Well, I can't give you one. So just get dressed. I already called Luke and told him to wait for you."

Kelsey didn't know whether to cry, scream or throw something. She settled for gathering the remnants of her dignity around herself. Pulling on her clothes, she stomped out to the truck and waited for Mack to lock up the house and climb in beside her.

The ride to the cabin was completed in chilly silence, broken only by one brief exchange.

"Any word on Jody?" she asked.

"Not yet. But they've had every egress from the county locked up tighter than a prison camp. People are so irate about this they've even patrolled the little dirt roads that hardly anyone knows about."

"So he's still here. Somewhere. With a scared little boy."

"We're relieving the night searchers in one hour."

And that was it until he pulled into the cabin driveway. Kelsey opened the door and slid out. She opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it then slammed the door and stomped off.

What an ass! He'll never get me within a mile of a bed again.

Sierra must have heard them pull up because she opened the door the minute Kelsey set foot on the porch.

"Don't say a word," Kelsey told her. "Not one word. I need a shower and fresh clothes then I'm good to go."

"Kelsey –"

"No. Not a word." Kelsey stomped off to the bedroom, brushing past Luke who was just pulling a sweater over his head. "You, either, hot shot."

She stepped over Luke and Sierra's things, found fresh jeans and a sweater for herself and slammed the door to the bathroom. In the shower, she allowed herself one minute to let the tears flow then swallowed them back. This was the last time she was wasting emotion on some damned man.

He had secrets? He had things he couldn't tell her? What about the secrets she had? What would he say if he knew her true nature? And if he was a shifter, why hadn't they been able to sense it in each other.

With a supreme effort, she pushed all thought from her mind except Jody Logan and the task ahead. She felt good about that, at least. Yesterday, she'd found herself into the search, senses alert. More like her old self. She'd make that work for her today. And if she couldn't find Jody as a human, she'd find a place to shift and let her wolf self find him.

She poured the rest of the coffee in the carafe into a go-cup then hurried out to meet Luke and Sierra, sitting in the SUV they kept at the cabin.

"Let's go," she said, buckling herself into the backseat.

They were a mile down the road before Sierra said, "Care to give us even the tiniest explanation of what's going on with you and Mack Renfield?"

"Nothing's going on. Forget it. Case closed."

Another mile passed in silence, broken this time by Luke.

"You asked me if I thought it possible that Mack was a shifter. I've never spent enough time with him to know, but it would seem to me one of us would sense him. Somehow, he must be masking himself, as well as his ability to sense you."

"So what are you saying? He is? He isn't?"

Luke shrugged. "You tell me. You've spent more time with him than either of us."

"Don't know. Don't care anymore." She took a long swallow of her coffee. "What's the latest on the little boy?"

"One of the teams last night thinks they've found traces of where the man has taken him. Also, Sheriff Laporte called the FBI for help. They dug through their databases and discovered one of the men arrested two years ago, Nathan Haverill, had a half-brother, Clete Wilson, who apparently no one knew about. There'd never been a reason to connect them until now."

"Seems after things died down, Clete decided to go into business for himself," Sierra added. "The FBI is also flying more people in this morning."

"So where do they think he is?" Kelsey asked.

"There's an old farmhouse at the far corner of the county, near where two highways intersect. I'm guessing he thought he could take one of the roads out, but the sheriff closed them down too fast."

Kelsey frowned. "Didn't anyone search there yesterday?"

Sierra nodded. "Yes, but the sheriff thinks the man's been one step ahead of them. The problem is that area is so thick with trees it's hard to do a good search without giving yourself away. There are also a lot of hills and hidden caves."

"And no one wants to do anything that will put Jody in jeopardy," Luke added.

"We could get in there and do it," Kelsey pointed out.

Luke nodded. "I'm going to ask Laporte to assign us to that area."

Which was exactly what happened. The teams were just being assigned when the Spencers and Kelsey arrived, and Laporte was only too glad to send them to the most difficult area to search.

Luke drove as close to the area as he could until he found a place to conceal the SUV. The three of them had just climbed out of the vehicle when Mack's truck pulled up behind them. The four of them simply stood and stared at each other.

Finally, Luke said, "Maybe you want to try a different area, Mack."

Mack's face was a stone mask. "Maybe *you* should be the ones to leave. I know this area, and I have...skills that can help."

"Yeah?" Kelsey cocked an eyebrow at him. "What kind of skills would that be?"

It was obvious Mack was waging an fierce internal struggle. Kelsey expected any minute he'd climb in his truck and leave. Instead, he just shook his head.

"Okay. But remember, you asked for it. You may not believe what you're about to see, but at this point, I don't much care. I just want to find the child. So whatever happens, happens."

Very carefully, he took off his clothes, folded them and put them on the seat of the truck. Three pairs of eyes stared at him. Then a cloud of fog swirled around him, and when it dispersed, in his place stood a huge white wolf.

For a moment, Kelsey thought her heart would stop. So he was a shifter after all. This was the secret he was so carefully guarding?

She burst out laughing, and the wolf growled at her.

"Calm down," she told him. "You're in better company than you thought. Give us a minute, then you can lead the way, since you know this place better than any of us."

She and Luke stripped, handing their clothes to Sierra. They nodded at each other, and exhaling long, slow breaths shifted into wolf form. When the dark red, almost auburn fur covered her body and her limbs had stretched and elongated, she padded over to Mack and pushed her muzzle against his shoulder. He turned his head to look at her, and she could have sworn he actually smiled.

"Come on, guys," Sierra said. "We don't have much time. I'll keep watch here and stay in contact with sheriff Laporte while you do your thing."

Mack took a moment to swipe at Kelsey's muzzle with his long tongue. Then he trotted to the front of the group, gave a short, soft growl and started off through the woods, Kelsey and Luke following him. Overhead, helicopters still searched, swooping low and forcing the wolves to seek shelter until they pulled away.

It took them the better part of an hour to find their prey, huddled in one of the caves Sierra had mentioned. He was the first to catch their scent, padding softly into the enclosure, the others following closely behind him.

The man was seated against a far wall of the cave, a small lantern next to him. Beside him, Jody Logan sat shivering, his eyes filled with fear. When the wolves drew close, both the child and the man tried to scabble away. Luke simply gripped Jody's overalls in his teeth and trotted out of the cave, leaving the others to deal with Clete Wilson.

"Get away from me," he shouted, his eyes shifting wildly from one wolf to the other. He yanked a gun from his pocket. "Scram. Go away, or I'll shoot you."

Kelsey was the first to launch herself at him, aiming unerringly for his throat. The more the man tried to struggle, the deeper her teeth sank, until he finally gave up the struggle. Mack helped her drag his body out of the cave and leave it in a bloody heap where bloodhounds could find it. They stood, then, waiting patiently for Luke to return, knowing he had taken Jody someplace where he could be seen. Then the three of them trotted back to their vehicles.

"Well?" Sierra asked. "I'm guessing you found Jody, right?"

They shifted back to human form and Luke nodded. "Done and done." He gave her the details as he pulled his clothes back on. "I left Jody where he could easily be spotted. One of the helicopters was circling overhead so I had to hide in the trees. I waited until they picked him up then headed back here."

Mack grabbed Kelsey's arm, as soon as she was dressed. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"Why the hell didn't *you* tell *me*?" she retorted. "Is this what your big secret is? Why we couldn't be together? Is this why you've been treating me like shit?"

"Damn it, you should have said something."

"Same goes."

They stood and glared at each other.

"Children, children," Luke chided them. "We need to get moving. Can we take this someplace else?"

Mack blew out a long breath. "I'm sorry. But you of all people should know what I was afraid of."

Kelsey stared at him. "Of course, I know. But you didn't have to —"

"I said I'm sorry. And I am." He reached out and cupped her chin. "Okay? Please? Will you come home with me?"

"Yes," Luke answered for her. "Let's get moving."

Kelsey was about to add her own comment when Mack's cell phone rang. He answered it, spoke briefly to the person on the other end then snapped it shut. "The sheriff. Just like Luke said. One of the helicopters spotted Jody at the side of the highway and set down to pick him up." One side of his mouth kicked up in a grin. "They said he told the wildest story about being saved by wolves."

"At the risk of repeating myself too many times, we need to get out of here," Luke reminded everyone. "We don't want someone to find us and start asking questions."

"Good idea." Mack reached out for Kelsey again. "Come with me. Please. We have a lot of talking to do."

"Damn right," she shot back. Then her tone softened. "All right."

"How about the two of you coming back to the cabin tonight for dinner," Sierra said. "I think we *all* have some things to talk about."

* * * *

Mack and Kelsey were seated in front of the fireplace drinking wine and watching the news on the television set on the wide fireplace hearth.

"With the death of Clete Wilson, the area is safe again from the gang that preyed on children two years ago. Police assure us they've checked, and this was the last of the group to be caught. People are still shaking their heads over the story little Jody Logan is telling," the reporter said. "No one can budge his tale of being saved by three wolves, who then killed his captor. His parents, who asked not to be interviewed, said they are just glad to have their son back safely and want to thank everyone who spent their time searching for him."

"Are there wolves in the area?" a voice off camera asked.

The reporter shook his head. "Hard to say. Most residents say there haven't been any in this area for years, although some people have reported a rare sighting now and then. Fish and Wildlife is taking the case under advisement and said they will be studying the possibility."

Mack pressed the button on the remote to shut off the television. "Fish and Wildlife won't touch it," he told Kelsey.

"How do you know?"

"Because the other times someone's reported a sighting they've written it off as a drunken mirage. They have enough trouble without chasing phantoms."

Kelsey sipped at her wine. "So how long have you lived up here?"

"About ten years, give or take." He picked up one of her hands and laced his fingers through hers. "I have three friends who live here, too, a couple of them in the next town over. We had a thriving pack in Minnesota until a wild dog attacked a family's pet. The wolves were blamed and people got out their shotguns."

"We had the same thing happen to us," she told him. "In Michigan. We ended up in Texas."

She told him briefly about their relocation and about The Sentinels.

"So you operate a security and protection agency?" he asked.

Kelsey nodded. "It's worked out pretty well for us."

"I gather that." He was quiet for a moment. "I really am sorry for the way I acted, Kelsey. But the minute I saw you, I wanted you, and I just didn't see how anything between us could work."

"It works for Luke and Sierra," she pointed out. "And for his brother, Brian, and his wife, Regan. And others in our pack had married humans."

"What happened to them when the pack was decimated?" he asked.

Kelsey shrugged. "We've kind of lost touch with them. The whole thing was so devastating. We're actually putting a plan together to try to track them down. Make sure they're okay. See if we can help them."

"Tough job."

"Mmm." She ran her finger around the rim of her glass. "You know, usually when shifters meet they recognise each other by their scent. But I didn't smell anything from you except pine trees."

He chuckled. "My own special blend of aftershave. It masks the wolf musk. But what about you? You didn't give off the right traces, either."

Now it was her turn to laugh. "Same deal. A special perfume I have made up for me."

"We're some pair, aren't we?"

They sat in silence for a while, drinking their wine and watching the fire. Kelsey spoke first. "So tell me. Now that we've got the shifter thing out of the way, what happens next?"

Mack looked at her for a long time. Then he rose, tugging her up with him. He took her glass from her and set it on the hearth.

"I have a wild idea," he told her, pulling her sweater over her head and unclasping her bra. He paused to plant a kiss on each of her nipples then turned his attention to her jeans. By the time he had her stripped naked, she was trembling with desire, and he'd barely touched her. He reached between her thighs and probed the dampness of her cunt, sliding his fingers into the slick, wet tunnel.

Kelsey rocked her hips forward, her blood already racing through her veins like molten lava.

"Cup your breasts for me," Mack said, while he took off his own clothes. "Pinch your nipples. Make them stand out."

Kelsey slid her palms underneath her breasts then lifted her fingers to her nipples, swaying as she rolled them and tugged at them. When Mack was naked, her eyes dropped automatically to his magnificent cock. He saw where her gaze was fixed and wrapped his fingers around his erect shaft, stroking it lightly from root to tip.

"Do you know what it's like when I bury myself inside of you?" His voice was rough with desire. "It's like nothing I've ever felt before."

Kelsey moaned, pinching herself harder.

"We're meant to be together, Kelsey. I knew it the minute you walked into The Bar. But at that time, I thought you were human, and I didn't see any future for us. I almost hated you for making me want you so much."

"And now?" she asked, breathless.

"We belong together. And you know the rule."

She nodded, feeling her liquid wet the inside of her thighs. "Wolves mate for life."

"I think that's what we should do. Now."

"You mean —"

He nodded. "I want us to shift, to run into the woods together and to mate as wolves." His amber eyes reflected the heat of the fire as he watched her. "Okay?" He took two steps to close the distance between them, threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her with such need her knees buckled.

"Yes," she gasped when he finally let her breathe. "Yes, yes, yes."

Mack stepped back, his chest heaving, and opened the door to the side porch.

"Let's do it."

They exchanged a heated look then simultaneously signalled their bodies to change from human to wolf. Mack licked her muzzle as he'd done that afternoon then led her out the door. Kelsey raced past him, tail high and waving in the air as she raced into the gathering dusk. But in a moment, Mack sped past her, setting the pace as they entered the thickness of the forest. She followed him until they reached a small clearing and stopped when he did.

Knowing what to expect now, she waved her tail at him and braced herself to take him into her body. This was it, the moment of joining. The moment when they would connect forever. No going back. This was not just very hot sex. This was more. This was from the heart. Everything within her had known the second she stepped into The Bar that she had met her mate. It just had seemed so illogical. So...so...unbelievable. Yet here they were, making a silent eternal pledge to each other. She had never felt so elated.

In a minute, he was on her, his front paws latching onto her shoulders as his cock rammed home into her cunt. Fire shot through her as she felt the head of his shaft bump the mouth of her womb. She clenched her inner muscles around him, locking him in place as he began to hunch against her body. Her nerves were so highly sensitised when she was in wolf form that every thrust and retreat made her shudder with need. She loved it this way, without the need for a condom, feeling every ridge and bump of his penis. Skin to skin. Nothing between them. It was erotically exhilarating.

Mack rammed harder into her, and she pushed her hips back against him, rocking with him on every thrust. His cock swelled even more inside her, igniting the orgasm smouldering in her belly. Mack growled, bit down on her shoulder and exploded with the force of dynamite. Kelsey's own orgasm erupted, her body shivering and shaking against the onslaught. The spasms went on and on, Mack gripping her with his paws, his teeth still lightly planted in her pelt.

This is it! Together. Forever. Mine, mine, mine!

When the last aftershocks rippled through them, Mack pulled free and rolled to the side, releasing her. Kelsey lay with her muzzle on her paws, panting. When Mack nudged her with his nose, she pulled herself to an upright position and waited for him to do the same.

Their run back to the house was far more leisurely than the trip out, both of them spent by their powerful orgasm. Inside the house, they shifted back to human form and collapsed on the couch, twined in each other's arms. Mack's sensual mouth pressed against the damp skin of her forehead, a kiss of possession, and she pressed herself more tightly against him. His cock, still damp from their joining, rested heavily against her thigh.

"We need a shower," he told her when they regained some semblance strength.

"I can't move," she protested.

"I'll carry you."

And he did, standing her in the huge shower stall he'd put in, turning the faucet so a dozen tiny jets of mist sprayed them. He turned her this way and that, making sure every inch of her body was covered by the sprays. Taking a large bar of soap that carried the same pine scent he wore, he rubbed it vigorously between his palms until he'd worked up a rich lather.

His hands moved very slowly over her body, stroking the column of her neck, the slope of her shoulders. The roundness of her breasts. He massaged soap into each nipple until they were painfully aroused and liquid began to seep from her pussy where the tiny nerve still sparked from the feel of Mack's naked cock. He moved over the roundness of her belly, pausing to twirl a fingertip in her navel then continued down through the curls covering her mound and into the wetness of her slit.

His hand urged her thighs apart before returning to soap every inch of her labia, her inner lips, her clit which shrieked in response, as aroused as she was. Inside her pussy, fingers rubbing and teasing.

And all the while, his eyes held hers, eyes so filled with emotion her heart turned over.

Then his fingers went to her back and danced down the ridges of her spine. Massaged her hip. Her buttocks. The cleft of her ass. Pressed the tightness of her anus and pushed inside. Two fingers coated with the rich soap moved in and out, his other hand pressing against her cunt, her clit trapped between two fingers.

She wanted him again. How could she want him so badly so soon?

He pulled his fingers from her body and handed her the soap. "Your turn."

Her hands shook with need as she massaged the rich lather into his shoulders, down the length of his arms, across his chest, taking care to rasp his flat nipples until they swelled in response. Across his hard abdomen, down to his thick cock which responded at once to

her touch, swelling and pulsing. Then to the heavy sac that contained his balls. She rubbed the very sensitive area beneath them.

Then to his back, ridges of muscle as hard as his spine. Taut buttocks that had no give to them. Boldly, she rubbed the cleft of his ass, then, gathering in a deep breath of courage, plunged two fingers into his hot, tight rectum.

He jerked, and a low moan rolled from his throat, but he pushed back against her, silently urging her on.

Then they couldn't stand it anymore, either of them. In a rush of need, Mack rinsed them both off, lifted her up in his strong arms and plunged inside her with one hard thrust.

"Mine," he said, his burning gaze holding hers.

"Yes. Yours. As you are mine."

Kelsey wrapped her legs around him and held herself tightly against him as she rode his powerful strokes, head thrown back, pleasure gripping her in its sensual vice.

This time, he didn't tease. This time, he didn't draw it out. They had coupled as wolves, but now the need to join as humans was too great to take their time. They exploded in a climax so violent it shook them both. Mack's mouth took hers in a predatory kiss, drinking from her, his tongue searching every inch of her hot cavern.

The shower beat down on them as they collapsed on the floor, leaning against the cool tile. Neither could speak. It took too much energy just to breathe.

Mack broke the silence. "I love you, Kelsey. You're mine."

"I love you, too," she told him.

"You can't go back to the city. I want you here with me."

"I know." She blew out a long breath. "I think I've had enough of the city for a while, anyway. Even though my own house is in the Hill Country, I've discovered I love it up here." She turned to him. "At least, I love it wherever you are. I plan to talk to Luke about it at dinner." She let out another shuddering breath. "I want to meet your friends, too. Maybe as we continue our search for others of our pack who might have survived, we can do the same for you."

"Or form a new pack together," he told her.

She smiled at the thought. "Yes. A new pack. I like that."

"Will your partners give you any grief about leaving Texas?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Luke and Sierra take cases up here. If I'm here permanently, we can open a branch of The Sentinels and give everyone another place to work from."

He bent his lips and pressed his mouth to hers, a gentle kiss, not an erotic one, filled with so much emotion it brought tears to her eyes.

"Just as long as you remember what your first priority is," he chided her.

She smiled. "To take care of what's mine."

He nodded. "Same goes. You're mine, Kelsey, and I'll love you forever."

She reached up and pulled his head back down to hers, smiling into his amber eyes. "Forever."

About the Author

I always wanted adventure and change in my life, and I certainly got it. I grew up in Maine, a beautiful place to live, then lived in the Midwest and Florida. Now I make my home in the Hill Country of Texas, truly God's chosen place on earth. My husband, David, is a sixth generation Texan, tracing his roots here back to the time when Texas was a Republic, so retiring here was a dream we finally fulfilled.

I've had a lot of firsts in my life – first female sports report on The Michigan Daily at the University of Michigan; first woman to own a rock and roll agency in Detroit, the home of Motown; first woman president of the Pasco (Florida) Economic Development Council.

I graduated from the University of Michigan with a double major in English and History, and a minor in Economics, and went on to have at least four careers. When my children were small, I satisfied my need for writing by working for weekly newspapers. I had a wild and wacky time managing rock and roll bands. I joined the insanity of retail with a string of shoe stores. I worked in fundraising, public affairs and community relations. But writing fiction was always my dream. I had a lot of stops and starts, but it wasn't until we retired that I could devote myself to it full time.

My wonderful husband, David, encourages me and supports me in my dream. Our children are all grown and on their own, and are my biggest fans.

When I'm not writing I'm an avid reader – anything and everything – and watching football, especially my beloved Michigan Wolverines. David and I golf and target shoot, and of course enjoy life in the gorgeous Texas Hill Country, where most of my stories are based.

I am a member of Romance Writers of America, and San Antonio Romance Authors, Diamond State Romance Authors, and Passionate Ink chapter of RWA.

Email: desireeholt@desireeholt.com

Desiree loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

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