

Changeling Press

Kate
Steele

*Almost
Home*



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Almost Home

Kate Steele

Something is out there... waiting in the dark.

For Shannon, nighttime has always inspired fear and fascination. She longs to discover its mysteries, but some deep-seated instinct has, up to now, kept her safe inside when the sun sets. When her car breaks down a mere quarter mile from her house, rather than choose to spend the night confined within the safety it offers, she braves the moon-drenched shadows and comes face to face with her destiny.

Chapter 1

Aran vaulted from his horse with such skill Shannon felt only the barest of jolts to mark the sure impact of his feet upon the sandy ground. Waking from an exhausted doze, her apprehension returned anew, and sheer panic caused her to once again pull against the restraints at her wrists and ankles as she was carried in his hard, unyielding embrace.

From the folds of the enveloping cloak that had shielded her from the harsh rays of a sun that pitilessly presided over this vast desert into which she had been abducted, she could see unexpected splashes of color. Shaking her head, she managed to dislodge the hood from where it rested over her brow. With her vision now unimpeded, she gasped and stilled at the sight of what lay before her.

An oasis, green and lush with date-bearing palm trees, grass and other growing things, was spread out in a circle around a pool of azure-tinted water that sparkled under the receding light of the setting sun. Nestled amidst the tangled growth was a white tent, its fabric sides rippling with the breeze that played over the water and through the trees.

Without pause, Aran strode toward the tent, and Shannon's eyes widened. Being confined in an intimate space with this man was the last thing she wanted. "No! Let me go!"

"Quiet. I have not given you permission to speak." The terse, no-nonsense warning in Aran's voice caused Shannon to press her lips together against further protests.

When he was in dominance mode she knew better than to press her luck. Considering what she'd already done, she'd be lucky to escape unscathed. Running from Aran had been foolish, but what else was she supposed to do? She would not

stand idly by and let him include another woman in their relationship. Having a harem might be an accepted practice among his people, but did he really believe she would accept such a thing?

Aran swooped through the tent's entrance, and despite the closed, angry look on his face, deposited her gently on a colorful mound of rugs and pillows. "Do not move from that spot," he ordered and retreated outside. Hearing the sound of his voice a moment later, she knew he was seeing to his horse.

Wanting to run, but knowing there was nowhere to go, Shannon maintained the position in which she'd been left and tried to relax. It was impossible. Her body was tense and her muscles tight. Even her toes and fingers curled and released in an unconscious display of high-strung nerves. Unable to stay still, she angled herself into a sitting position and with shaking fingers began plucking at the knots of the silken ties at her ankles.

As she worked at her restraints, she became aware of another feeling, one that had been creeping up on her from the moment Aran had essentially taken her captive. Arousal. It insidiously wormed its way in and around any other emotion that assailed her, heightening and clarifying the knowledge that being tied up was not nearly as unpleasant as she might wish it would be -- especially in this situation. Needing Aran's touch was the last thing she wanted and yet she couldn't deny that fact that her dread of what he would do to her was mixed with more than a little anticipation.

At his return, his eyes narrowed in disapproval. With a practiced move he drew a knife from his boot and Shannon gaped at the sight of the glinting silver blade. Aran approached and knelt beside her. "Hold still," he bade her and with two swift cuts the silk split and the knife was returned to its sheath. She was freed, but it was a short-lived freedom. "Wrists," he tersely insisted, holding out his hand.

With the barest of hesitation, she held out her hands, watched him carefully examine her wrists then froze in astonishment as he pulled a pair of softly padded leather cuffs from the back of his waistband. Before she could utter a word or make a move to escape, the cuffs were on, and she was gently pushed to her back. Aran then

pulled her arms over her head, and the cuffs were clipped to a short, light-weight chain that had been attached to the center tent pole. Once more she was effectively restrained, and the time for paying the piper was at hand.

“Aran, please...”

“Silence. I don’t want to hear your excuses,” he growled and began stripping her.

As he removed her boots, Shannon thought briefly about kicking him, but decided as things stood she was in enough trouble.

“Wise decision, little one,” Aran said as though having read her thoughts. “A kick would earn you five more swats with the paddle when we return home, and you, my lovely, have already accumulated quite a few.”

Lips thinning in irritation, Shannon remained silent. Aran had the power to make her feel like a sulky child. Once her loose linen trousers and panties were stripped away, his hands on her naked skin irrevocably reminded her that she was indeed a woman. Swallowing hard, she tried to close her thighs but it was no use. He was already between them. His fingers glided from ankles to knees and further, caressing and teasing on a torturous and sensual journey to her pussy.

Anticipation brought more moisture welling forth from her core. Much as she might wish it otherwise, her body was more than ready to receive him. When he bypassed the swelling lips of her sex and instead let his fingers glide under her tunic and over the silky crease where legs met torso, she moaned in disappointment and twisted under his hands.

“You’re already hot for me, aren’t you? Beneath this fabric you’re wet and ready. Do you want my cock, little one?”

“Nooo,” Shannon breathed shaking her head in denial.

“Liar. I’ll soon have the truth from you... and not just about that. I’ll have all your truths, Shannon. All of them.”

Shannon shivered under the implacable weight of his gaze. Aran’s eyes, so dark a brown as to be nearly black, mesmerized her. At times like these it felt as though he could see into her very soul and indeed, the way he handled her, saw to her every wish

and desire, seemed to confirm it. Being helpless, unable to escape while futilely tugging at her restraints served merely to increase Shannon's reluctant desire and Aran, damn him, knew it.

Hands moving to the front of her tunic, Aran ripped it open, startling a cry from her as buttons flew and scattered. The fabric was drawn apart and her bra opened, exposing her firm breasts for Aran's intent perusal.

"You have the most beautiful breasts. So lush and full and look at these. Already they're tight and swollen." Aran brushed a fingertip over one pebbled nipple. "Shall I suckle them?" Wetting the tip of one finger, he brought it back to her nipple and painted the taut kernel with a circular stroke that caused Shannon to shiver and arch beneath his touch.

She managed to hold her tongue instead of begging him, "yes, please" and Aran, noting her refusal to speak, merely shrugged. "Perhaps later."

Instead he flattened his palms to her ribs and began a sensual examination of every inch of her exposed flesh. With a light, feathery glide, his hands caressed her. Breasts, torso, belly, hips, thighs. Every part of her that could be reached was teased and brought to tingling awareness except the one place she wanted it most. Her pussy throbbed and wept for his touch, but Aran ignored it until Shannon was gasping and begging.

"Please, please, please," she sobbed.

"Please what, little one?" he answered. His mouth had come into play and was nibbling at her ear.

"Touch me, touch me."

"I am touching you."

"Not there."

"Then where?"

Shannon loosed an inarticulate cry of frustration.

"Tell me where you want me to touch you and I'll do as you ask. I promise I'll give you exactly what you want," he whispered.

The husky, sensual tone of Aran's voice, the heat of his breath and the moist probe of his tongue in her ear forced Shannon to do as he bid. "My pussy! Touch my pussy!"

"As you command, my lovely."

Aran effortlessly lifted her hips and slid a plump pillow beneath them. Eyes closed, concentration focused on the physical center of her sexual cravings, Shannon, expecting the touch of long, clever fingers, nearly screamed from the hard slam of pleasure that rocked her when his tongue invaded her dewy slit. Her body shuddered, her back arching as she sought to press her needy flesh against his mouth.

"Ah, God, Aran," she managed on a breathy moan.

Head tossing and buttocks tightening, she undulated beneath the sensual onslaught of the man who knew intimately the blueprint of her desire. The seeking, sinuous glide of his tongue swirled and thrust within the convulsive clench of her entrance before sliding upward to caress the swollen, nerve-rich mound of her clit. Again and again, Aran repeated his erotic massage driving her closer and closer to orgasm until she balanced on the peak of a pleasure so exquisite it was near-agony.

Flushed and shaking, her skin glowing beneath a fine layer of lust-induced perspiration, Shannon's moans and whimpers finally gave way to tearful pleas. Lifting her head to gaze the length of her torturously aroused body, she met the pure carnal heat that burned in his eyes. "Aran, please, oh God, please. Let me come. Please, please, please, let me come."

Seeing the fierce rush of satisfaction that filled his eyes, Shannon had scant seconds to prepare herself when his tactics changed. Aran's lips closed gently over her clit, his tongue lashing, mouth suckling. Shannon's choked, wailing cry rang out, her back bowing, hips bouncing up and down with the fiery bliss that erupted from her center and burst forth like molten lava to fire every molecule in her body.

Pleasure rolled over her in waves, taking her breath, her sight, her thoughts until there was nothing left to do but feel. Aran continued his ministrations bringing her to peak after peak, each one devastating in its own way, yet weakening in intensity until

finally, finally he eased from between her thighs, momentarily allowing her to regain awareness of something more than the multiple orgasms that left her weak and shaking.

Taut muscles going slack, panting to regain her breath, she began to relax until the pillow was pulled from beneath her hips and her bottom instead rested against a pair of muscular, thighs. Her entire body tensed. Straining to lift her head, Shannon peered warily at her captor.

Aran had rid himself of the concealing robe that had protected him from the sun, leaving his upper body bare. Shannon's mouth went dry. He was beautiful, his upper body a sculpted example of male perfection. His skin was smooth and bronze and her eyes were drawn to the twin copper colored nipples that lay flat against his pecs. She knew how sensitive they were, knew how it felt to have them bead against her tongue and unconsciously she pulled at her restraints. Despite the seeming impasse they found themselves at, a part of her longed to touch him, pleasure him.

As she watched, he opened the fastening of his loose trousers and liberated his cock. It was fully erect, thick, the crown swollen and flushed. Precum beaded then flowed from the tiny slit at the top. Aran folded his fingers around the shaft and slid the pad of his thumb over and over the bulbous tip until it gleamed with moisture then looked up, capturing her gaze as easily as a hawk capturing a hapless mouse.

Shannon drew in an audible breath at the sight of the raw desire that flared within the dark pools of his fathomless eyes. He nuzzled the head of his cock into the wet heat of her sex, teasing her with soft glides of the plump cap over her slippery flesh.

"You didn't honestly think we were done, did you?" Aran growled.

She squirmed beneath him and opened her mouth to reply but words failed her when a gentle push and a long glide parted the drenched, swollen folds of her pussy taking Aran right where Shannon knew he'd intended to go all along... buried deep inside her tight, quivering passage.

The senses she'd regained after her last orgasm fled beneath this new assault. Shannon keened her pleasure at being stretched and filled. Her arms reached for him,

but were stopped by the cuffs that held her in place. Frustrated but not defeated, she settled for wrapping her legs around him and voluntarily opened herself for the relentless rhythmic thrusts of Aran's cock.

Whatever other complaints Shannon might have against him, she could never fault Aran's lovemaking. He was an expert, exacting and generous lover. He never made her feel as though she were just a convenient body with which to slake his lust. He watched her, gazing into her eyes letting her see the pleasure he took from their bodies moving together.

The small sounds he made, the harsh panting breaths and the occasional sharp low grunts of effort, fueled Shannon's arousal as did his kisses. He took her mouth, his tongue invading, bringing with it the flavor and scent of his earlier tasting of her. She sucked it down, whimpering as the change in angle caused the flame of her need to flare out of control. Orgasm seized her, the sound of her cries muffled against Aran's lips. Her body shuddered with cascade after cascade of wild delight and her filled channel squeezed the thick shaft that continued its constant and delicious plunge and retreat.

Shannon's climax seemed to fuel Aran's efforts and rather than stop he continued, his hips pumping, his cock sliding in and out deep and fast. A second orgasm sent Shannon spinning out of control as she whimpered and moaned, her head tossing helplessly. "Aran, oh fuck. So good. So good."

With a few more sharp, staccato strokes of his cock within her, Aran pushed himself hilt deep and found his own release. Shannon had recovered enough to watch him, loving the wild abandon of his expression. She longed to trace the taut lines of his throat and trail her fingertips over the tight buds of his nipples. Instead she worked with what she had, lightly squeezing her thighs around him.

Aran finally opened his eyes and captured her with his calm and steady regard. Gently he eased her thighs from around his hips and withdrew causing a ripple of sensation in Shannon's loins.

He watched her quietly for a few seconds then finally spoke. "Now we're done."

Chapter 2

"Hey, you gonna stay here all night?"

Shannon jumped, her heart lurching as her coworker's sudden appearance over the top of the partition that separated their work spaces shattered the sensual spell that had woven itself around her.

"Sorry," Debra apologized with a grin. "Must be a good one, huh?"

A breathy chuckle huffing forth, Shannon returned her grin with interest. "Oh yeah. This is hot. If the quality of the writing holds up, I'm definitely recommending this one for publication. And get this, the heroine's first name is the same as mine."

"Cool. I'll have to check it out," her coworker replied with a wink. "But for now, I'm out of here. Have a great weekend, Shan."

"You too," Shannon replied, closed the file she'd been reading from and hastily straightened a few cluttered piles of papers on her desk while her computer shut down.

Grabbing her purse, she caught up to Kathy, the head editor and general staff supervisor, who was preparing to set the alarm and lock up. After exchanging mutual wishes to have a good night, they exited the building that housed Sensual Phrase Publishing.

Shannon heaved a sigh and rubbed at the knotted muscles at the base of her neck. Last minute revisions handed in by one of her group of authors had made for a long and mostly hectic day at work. Not that for an editor such a circumstance was anything new. It seemed authors were a quirky bunch, and Shannon was convinced the ones she worked with were the quirkiest.

At least Friday had finally arrived. Though her sister had her locked into attending a mineral, fossil, and gem show on Sunday at the local recreation center, she

was still looking forward to some serious veg time over the next few hours before bed. Saturday too was going to be a veritable feast of self-indulgence.

Her favorite Japanese anime series was exerting its hypnotic pull and she couldn't wait to catch up on the current episodes. Evil creatures would be dispatched, decisive sword battles fought, villains defeated and emotional bonds intensified between gorgeous, virile characters that fired her imagination and made her wish she could write her own book.

A slight thrill of anticipation caused her to quicken her steps. Though it was a pathetic substitute for having a real man in her life, she was still excited by the knowledge that soon she'd be hearing the deep, intensely masculine tones of her favorite voice actor. Whenever he unleashed the full and deadly powers of his sword using but a single word, an actual chill would sweep down her spine. It was glorious!

"My dear Captain Ishida, if only you were real and your sword made of flesh... man, would I have a sheath for you," she softly quipped, giving into the grin that pulled at her lips. "Ah, the simple pleasures in life. Or should that be the pleasures found in the life of a simpleton?" Chuckling in appreciation of her own self-applied insult, she made the short trek across the parking lot to her car.

Just as she inserted the key into the door lock, a strange noise rang out, and grabbing her stomach, she rolled her eyes in response to the audible rumble it emitted. "I know, I know. I shouldn't have skipped lunch. I've got a nice frozen dinner waiting at home. Swedish meatballs and noodles, yum. Quick and tasty. I'll even throw in a glass of wine."

As though voicing its approval, her stomach rumbled again, and Shannon climbed into her car, anxious to get home. The sun had set, and daylight was already losing its foothold on this part of the world. Squelching the slight twinge of apprehension which that thought produced, she flipped on her headlights, tuned the radio to her favorite station, and headed out, knowing by the time she made it home it would be full dark.

Forty minutes later, turning onto the long, tree-lined gravel driveway leading to her house, she again mused about how spooky it was when the sun's comforting rays disappeared. Despite such an occasionally troublesome but mostly insignificant drawback, part of the attraction in buying her current residence was the fact that it was in such a rural area and so far off the road. The closest neighbor was nearly a mile away -- a point in its favor during the light of day. However, at night, when those with overly agile imaginations were at their most inventive and human contact seemed vastly distant, it was easy to see denizens of the supernatural in every shadow.

The house, invisible from this vantage point, was situated a good quarter mile from the road and was screened by its own patch of woods. The surrounding countryside consisted of varying sized plots of open, cultivated fields and wide stands of trees engulfed by thick underbrush. It was a truly rustic area, and in the six months that had passed since moving here, she'd been delighted to discover all kinds of wildlife roamed the lands around her home. There were deer and rabbits, skunks, raccoons, possums, and even the occasional fox.

She'd been thrilled to find this place when house hunting and loved the quiet, private setting... usually. On this particular night, when her car began to sputter and cough as soon as the front wheels hit the driveway, thrilled was not the emotion which came to the fore. The car shuddered a time or two then rolled to a stop before dying, leaving her in a silence punctuated only by her own vehement curses.

"Damn it! You couldn't have waited until I got to the house? I wonder if it's the goddamned carburetor again. I knew I should have taken Clay's advice and gotten a new one."

Tempted to call her brother for assistance, but knowing he'd chide her for ignoring his opinion about the carburetor, she bit her lip and stared out into a darkness illuminated only by her still shining headlights. Qualms of unease stirred in her belly. There was nothing to be seen but the gravel drive, grass, and trees. There were no furtive, secretive movements, no unexplained shadows, no glowing green orbs to indicate any wildlife was near. Still, this situation gave rise to anxious misgivings.

Things weren't always what they appeared to be. Something bad could be out there. Isn't that what usually happened in those horror movies she refused to watch?

When moths and other bugs began to gather and swoop around the headlights, she reluctantly reached for the switch to shut them off then nearly jumped out of her skin when a particularly large June bug hit the windshield. "Shit! You crazy-ass bastard, get lost. Damn, I hate those things," she hissed before killing the lights.

Heart now slightly racing, she continued to peer through the windshield. Though she knew the house was just up ahead around the bend in the driveway, the idea of making even that short trek at night was scary. She could just imagine what her brother would say if she called him to give her a ride for such a paltry distance. Not only would she have to listen to his I-told-you-so, but there'd be that other thing as well.

From the time she was nine years old and had been adopted into the Mayes family, she'd put up with his good-natured teasing about being afraid of the dark. If she gave him ammunition like this, she'd never hear the end of it. He'd already given her no end of hell about the nightlight he'd spotted in her bedroom while helping her move her stuff in. Did she really want to listen to more of the same?

It wasn't that she disliked the darkness; in fact, it was just the opposite. It seemed for as long as she could remember she'd been fascinated with it. While growing up, there were countless nights she'd fallen asleep on the window seat in her bedroom at the family home while staring out into a world turned mysterious at the retreat of sunlight. It always felt as though the darkness beckoned her and that she was searching for something in those secretive shadows, waiting for something or someone, especially when the moon was full.

She longed to go out into the night, longed to follow the ethereal thread that pulled at her soul, but she couldn't. She was too afraid. When darkness fell, some inborn inner sense generated a fear she couldn't override. It kept her safe within four walls, safe from the nameless, formless danger she instinctively knew would find her

should she venture out alone and unprotected. It was as though two fates awaited her among the secretive dark, one of infinite wonder and one that would shatter her world.

With a grimace, Shannon leashed her wandering thoughts and earnestly tried to tamp down her fears. After a couple minutes of inner pep-talk and debate, which included several aborted reaches for her cell phone to dial her brother's number, she screwed up her courage. "The hell with it." Grabbing her purse and car keys, she locked the door and took her first steps away from the safety of her vehicle.

Thirty feet from the car, jangling nerves had her softly muttering a monologue of self-encouragement, "This isn't so bad. The moon's nearly full. There's plenty of light and the house is just up ahead. Um, let's see. Five thousand two hundred and eighty feet in a mile, so that would be mmm, four goes into..." Shannon did a few mental calculations. "One thousand three hundred and twenty-feet give or take a few," she proudly concluded.

Despite the quavering inner voice that kept pleading with her to go back, she continued walking. As a reasonably intelligent, twenty-seven-year-old adult, making this little trek and conquering what seemed to be an unreasonable fear had become a matter of pride.

"It's time to grow up, you big baby," she muttered. "Almost home. Practically on the doorstep." While those words were comforting, they did little to still the growing apprehension that caused her chest to feel tight and her muscles to tense.

At first she stayed on the driveway. Its lighter color was easier to see in the moonlight, but the distinct, audible crunch of her footsteps against the gravel had the detrimental effect of increasing her feelings of vulnerability. Surely the sound would call attention to her if something was out there in the dark. She moved to the grassy verge, and uttered a soft sigh of relief when the noise was immediately muffled.

Given the more uneven footing, she walked as quickly as possible, but had to slow as the moon-thrown shadows from the trees, which lined this part of the driveway, blotted out her path. Debating the merits of enduring the reduced visibility

versus having to give up being quiet if she moved back onto the gravel, she began softly deriding herself.

"You're being ridiculously overcautious, Shannon Mayes," she muttered then gasped and froze.

An ululating howl sounded out from between the surrounding trees. It was followed by a series of high-pitched yips so close they hurt her ears while sending stunning shards of shock cutting into her middle.

She'd known almost from the time she'd first moved here that another form of wildlife inhabited this area, one she'd only heard but had never seen. Coyotes. She'd been made aware of them the first night she'd spent in her new home. At three in the morning she'd woken to their song. Their chorus of high-pitched wails had reverberated through the darkness and could be heard even through the warm shelter of the walls that surrounded her. Fascinated, she'd scrambled out of bed, opened the window, and endured endless minutes of cold, late-winter air just for the pleasure of listening to their eerily beautiful and haunting cries.

In this instance however, it was terror, not fascination that stopped the breath in her lungs. Heart pounding, she desperately tried to see through the night-shrouded woods but could make out nothing more than indistinct lumps -- until several of those lumps moved and grew steadily larger as they approached her. A barely audible whimper escaped Shannon's parted lips as the pack appeared with a fluid grace only creatures in the wild could produce. Gliding forth from between the trees and brush, there was barely a sound as they came, only the gentle rustling of leaves and the soft whisper of grass being tread upon.

The silent creatures closed in on her from their places of concealment, and Shannon unconsciously backed away from under the shroud of shadows and into the moonlight. The pack, five in total, drew near and fanned out in a loose semi-circle. Roughly the size of large dogs, their brindled colored coats were thick and the fur stood on end making them appear even larger. Several of them had their mouths open in

what appeared to be anticipation and she could clearly see their long, sharp canine teeth.

As suddenly as they appeared, they stopped their approach. Their attention, which up to then had been steadily fixed on only her, wavered as a sixth animal emerged from the shadows. This one was different. It was taller, thicker bodied, and obviously heavier than its companions. Its muzzle was not quite as sharp and its ears smaller. The thick fur that covered it was darker with the ruff being more pronounced. Though it seemed impossible that this could be, the word, wolf, whispered through Shannon's mind.

Coyote or wolf didn't matter to the voice deep inside that screamed at her to run. She wanted desperately to heed it, but another voice, surprisingly calm and reasonable, overrode it telling her that to run would only incite them to chase her. Caught in a frightening stalemate, she waited and nearly jumped out of her skin when the one her mind had labeled wolf, deliberately bared its teeth and began to growl.

"God help me," she breathed in a trembling whisper, as the chilling specter of death ran a teasing fingertip down her spine. When the wolf took its attention from her and transferred it to its own pack members she nearly fainted from the small bit of relief that coursed through her.

The others, becoming the object of what was obviously their leader's wrath, immediately toned down their aggressive stances. Fur was flattened and bushy tails tucked. There were nervous whines, fawning dips of heads, and the sidling of their bodies against his. Their superior accepted their gestures of capitulation then with more growls and nips, he chased them away. The five smaller wild canines melted back into the surrounding darkness and seconds later another chorus of high-pitched yips and wails rent the silence of the night before dying away as they retreated, leaving Shannon alone with the pack leader.

Confronted now by only one instead of six, the thought occurred that her chances for survival had improved. Not that she could outrun this one any more than she could have done so had all of them chased her, but now she was nearly convinced

she wouldn't have to try. This animal's behavior was distinctly odd. It almost seemed as though it had chased the others away to protect her... unless it was jealously guarding the easy meal she'd make. Whatever the case, her dazed and consequently sluggish intellect was telling her that this beast was somehow unique when compared to the others by more than just its appearance.

Confused by what she'd just witnessed and wondering what would happen next, an answer that first bewildered then shocked was suddenly presented. Her short-lived relief was torn asunder by the sheer improbability of what she was seeing. In the darkness, a pale cloud of hazy fog wafted up from the ground. It rose, swirled, and writhed as though alive before engulfing the wolf within its concealing folds adding further mystery to the odd alteration taking place in the atmosphere surrounding that feral beast.

In a matter of seconds the fog turned nearly translucent, shimmering and sparkling as everything contained within its ethereal embrace suddenly blurred. The wolf's body length compressed inward and changed shape. Its altering form stretched upward and grew taller. When the distorting fog cleared, what stood in that place was no longer a wild animal illuminated by the opalescent moonlight. It was a man.

For a moment all was silent but for the returning chirps of the crickets disturbed by the coyote pack's passing and Shannon's own audible breaths. The call of a disturbed night bird barely registered as she stared in dazed astonishment, struggling in vain to comprehend the images her eyes were relaying to her brain. Her circumstances had so radically changed it was as though she had stepped out of the clutches of a paranormal tale come to life and into the pages of a magazine in which she'd now become part of some artfully arranged photo shoot or scene from a classic *film noir*.

Painted by moon-created light and shadow, the man who'd taken the wolf's place was the kind who would turn heads with his sheer masculine beauty. His thick, dark and shoulder length hair shone like liquid silk. Tall, his body was sleek with finely sculpted and defined muscles which were emphasized by the pale light from above.

Though he'd yet to move, his stance spoke of grace and unselfconscious poise. His eyes appeared to be silver although Shannon reasoned that it could have been the moon's glow making them appear that way, but what really puzzled her was the emotion expressed by them. Was that warm and joyous excitement truly aimed at her?

Before her mind could even begin to grasp and make sense of what was happening or how he came to be there, he spoke. "I was beginning to think you'd never come out at night. I'd say I'm sorry your car broke down, but I'd be lying. I'm glad you're finally here. I was becoming desperate enough to come up with some conventional manner in which to ease back into your life."

His voice was velvet-soft and soothing. Something about it struck a chord... something from long ago. It resonated in the depths of her soul instilling peace in place of the turmoil that whirled within her. A forgotten memory stirred and began to wake. This man, did she know him? That perplexing thought kept her quiescent as he approached... until she noticed his burgeoning erection.

One look at that thickening organ swept the false calm away and the reality of the situation ruthlessly shattered Shannon's complacency. Her thoughts were suddenly flooded with memories of news stories about brutal rapes and murders being committed against women unwary and unable to protect themselves. In their terrifying wake, the supernatural elements of what had just taken place were torn away by the visceral bite of known reality.

She was a woman alone in the dark with a strange man. A strange man who was naked, obviously aroused and intensely focused on her. All those vague fears she'd suffered when nighttime enticed her to wander and discover its mysteries slammed straight into her gut. When the renewed scream of "Run" ripped through her consciousness, this time, she obeyed.

Dropping her purse and twisting on the balls of her feet, she sprinted back toward her car, blindly seeking the safety it would afford her if she could only reach it in time. Desperately clutching her keys she ran, instinctively knowing he was chasing her. Terror had every nerve in her body screaming and the place between her shoulder

blades throbbed as though expecting the sharp stab of a knife. There was no time to think only react and she did, racing away as though hell itself was on her heels.

Chapter 3

When his body collided with hers and his arms wrapped around her from behind, every nerve she possessed seemed to explode as though blasted by a jolt of electricity. Like a demented banshee, she shrieked. Pulled off her feet, she kicked out, her body heaving and twisting as she fought. Shannon and her attacker both went down, landing with an audible thud that drove the breath from her even as the man took the brunt of their impact with the ground. The keys she so frantically clutched, fell from her hand and harshly panting, she lay there stunned and shaking, forced to listen to him yet again.

“Shannon, stop, please. I’m not going to hurt you, I promise. It’s all right. Hush, now. It’s all right.”

At the sound of his deep, crooning voice, Shannon finally realized that she was crying. She wanted to move, to run, to fight, to scream, but her body refused to do more than shudder in his arms. When he changed their positions, gently shifting her to lie on her back in the grass before moving over her, there was nothing she could do but accept the warm blanket of his body against hers.

“Shh, it’s okay. Please don’t cry. I meant what I said. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re safe with me. You’ll always be safe with me.”

Warm fingertips softly brushed the tears from beneath her lashes and Shannon forced her eyes open. The instant her gaze locked with his, an invisible barrier within her mind melted away. Of its own volition her hand reached up and her trembling fingers touched his face. Profound relief, wonder and pure, sweet elation swept over her.

“Ethan? Is that really you? You grew up.”

A tender smile curved his lips even as the joy that had previously filled them flooded the erstwhile stranger's silver eyes. His amused chuckle reverberated between them. "Yes, love, I did." Dipping his head, he buried his face against her throat. "I'm so glad you remember me."

Only then did Shannon realize she was not the only one shaking. Instinctively her arms encircled his body and she held him while memories that had been locked away for years surged forth within her mind. Most were only partial bits and pieces of places, events, and things but there were faces she remembered as if having seen them everyday for her entire life.

A much younger Ethan was there as well as people she knew were his parents and siblings. There were others as well, men and women, teens and children whose names were automatically supplied to her, drawn from a long forgotten past.

"Mom, Dad," she whispered when the image of a man and woman laughing together presented itself. Warmth surrounded her even as the pang of loss tore at her heart. "They loved each other so much... and me... and me."

This time it was tears of grief that overwhelmed her and she clung to the man who held her as though only he could save her from the oblivion of her sorrow.

"Yes, they did. It's all right. You can cry for them now."

Shannon wept, bitter sobs that had been held in stasis for years until she was nearly limp from emotional exhaustion. "I remember now," she stuttered, gulping in an effort to swallow the hiccupping gasps that interfered with breath and speech. "The accident. Grandmother Rena made me leave. Why? Why, Ethan? Why?"

The man who held her so tenderly maneuvered them into a sitting position and pulled Shannon onto his lap. "Ascension claim. Do you know what that is?"

Shannon shook her head.

"I didn't think you would. You were too young to have learned about such things." He smoothed the hair back from her face and Shannon leaned into his touch. It felt so good and so right. "Your parents were our pack alphas, do you remember?"

"Yes."

"When they died, Brandt, the pack beta, took over. There were several who challenged him, but he defeated them and ascended to the position of pack alpha.

"One of the new alpha's responsibilities is to claim a female member of the former alpha's immediate family. Even though he was already mated, Brandt would have been allowed a second mate. In most cases it's customary for the ascending alpha to choose his dispatched rival's mate. It may seem cruel, forcing her to accept the man who killed her mate, but it's meant to be a humane gesture, making him take on the duty of supporting the former alpha's family. It's also expected that he treat her with respect, eschewing any sexual contact if she objects.

"This tradition also serves to maintain harmony in the pack by disarming the animosity of any sons the former alpha may have left behind. With the man who dispatched their father now a member of their family, it would make them less likely to seek revenge. And too, when they become old enough to understand, if they aren't already, they instinctively know that ruling comes with risks and defending his position is an essential part of an alpha's life. It's our nature as werewolves to follow the strongest and only the strongest becomes alpha. His continued rule is dependent on his strength, courage, and cunning. There's always a chance someone with something more will come along to dethrone him before he voluntarily cedes his position."

Abruptly, Shannon realized how accepting she was of Ethan's words. Things like werewolves and claims and alphas seemed normal, natural and right. It astounded her that she'd never had the slightest inkling of her true nature for the past eighteen years. At this point she was content to let Ethan continue uninterrupted, but she knew at some point there would be many questions she'd want answered.

"But all that aside, with your mother gone, the claim descended to the former alpha's children, of which there was only one female. You."

"Yes, I know but..."

"But you were already mine?"

Shannon nodded as another memory surfaced. Ethan was her promised mate. From the moment she'd been born a tenuous, invisible link had formed between them,

prelude and promise of the full mating bond that, unless disrupted in some manner, would develop when she came of age.

"That didn't matter. Since our bond wasn't fully formed, the ascension claim was given first priority. You and your brothers would have become part of Brandt's household and when you turned eighteen, to fully break our partial bond, he'd have taken you, mated with you, and bred a child with you. I couldn't let that happen. I begged my grandmother to help me and together we took you away. Grandma Rena had connections, friends; a witch who suppressed your memories and your were tendencies and a social worker who falsified documents to get you placed with the Mayes family.

"When you disappeared we were questioned, but grandmother said to deny, deny, deny any knowledge of you. The witch also gave us a charm which allowed us to hide the scent of our lies from our new alpha.

"I've watched you over the years, coming in secret to see you whenever I could, wanting to make sure you were happy." Ethan hugged her tightly, his face nestled against her shoulder. "I'm so sorry I sent you away, but there was nothing else I could do. I was only fifteen. I couldn't win against Brandt and I couldn't, I just couldn't let him have you. I loved you so much. You were only nine years old and I know you didn't feel it yet, our bond, but I did, so much that the thought of Brandt taking you into his home, mating with you when you came of age, made me sick."

Shannon could actually feel Ethan's distress and his need for her forgiveness. She pressed a hand to his head, her fingers sifting gently through the silken strands of his hair. "It's all right. I'm glad you did. You may not think it because I was just a child, but I loved you too. Maybe not in the way of one adult to another, but you were as important to me, as loved by me as my parents, as anyone in my life. You were, you are," she softly confessed, realizing the truth.

Touching this man, feeling the heat radiate from his skin, breathing in his scent had awakened the slumbering tie between them. Shannon felt it come alive, expand, and burst open within her until every iota of her physical, mental, and emotional self

blazed with awareness of a fellow being in a way no other had ever captured her attention. Ethan was no stranger. He was hers and acknowledging that irrefutable fact uncovered the banked fires of mate fever, fanning them into an out-of-control inferno.

"Ethan... Ethan," she whispered desperately holding him. "I've waited so long. I didn't know for what or for whom, but I knew something, someone was there for me, wanting me." Shannon scrambled around until she straddled his lap. "Please, please," she begged, as a tidal wave of hot desire cascaded over her, washing away every inhibition that had ever restrained her.

At the lift of his head she cupped his cheeks in her hands and captured his lips with hers. Soft, warm and oh-so-sensual, she felt them part beneath her own and welcome the tongue she slid within. A moan, rough and shaky rolled from her throat to pass between them and reverberate in the heated cavern of their joined mouths.

Every nerve in her body came achingly alive. Like flowers they blossomed, each petal sensitive to the slightest touch. Her breasts felt full and heavy, her nipples swelling, beading, pushing anxiously against the fabric of bra and shirt to feel the hard chest against which they pressed. The folds of her sex engorged, moisture pooling between her thighs, exacerbating the need that throbbed within to be filled by the hard cock she rocked against.

Never had she felt so wild, so totally out of control.

It was breathtaking.

Amazing.

Frustrating!

She had to get out of these clothes!

Shannon felt the world take a dizzying dip and opened her eyes to find herself flat on her back with Ethan frantically working open all the buttons, zippers, and clasps that kept their bodies apart. Raw determination blazed from his eyes and she felt an answering swirl of feral lust beat at her.

"If there was ever a question that you were mine, this answers it," Ethan growled. "I'd intended to romance you before our first time, but how can I with you practically rubbing the skin off my cock?"

His question, couched in somewhat harsh and breathless syllables caused Shannon to utter a shaky laugh. "I'm sorry. I just need you." She instantly sobered, writhing with the volcanic rush of carnal desire which came pouring over every inch of her sensitized flesh making her feel as though she would at any second burst into flames.

Ethan paused in the act of pulling her jeans and panties down to palm his fully erect member. A quiver rolled through Shannon's stomach as he stroked his cock from root to tip. "Does this look like I'm complaining?"

"God, no," she breathed. "Hurry."

Thighs spread, she welcomed Ethan between them and drew in a deep breath at the nudge of his cock at her entrance. Her body instinctively tensed in fear that he would simply sheath himself to the hilt with one hard thrust, but Ethan, apparently cognizant of her anxiety, soothed her.

"Relax," he crooned. "Trust me."

Slowly he eased in, dipping inside the slippery pool of her desire, teasing with short in and out strokes that took him deeper with each inward push. Panting, moaning, shuddering with each thick, solid inch that filled her, Shannon arched into each move, her body accepting the relentless yet tender invasion. When they were fully joined, Ethan lifted her up, settling her again in his lap with her legs wound around his torso.

"You feel so good," he whispered against her throat. "So wet, so tight, perfect, just perfect."

Her shirt and bra were swept from her body, allowing him full access to every inch of her skin. He trailed kisses over her throat, past her collarbone and lower, until reaching the slope of one breast, with teasing, deliberate intent, he scaled it and conquered the peak with a lave of his tongue. Throat tight, Shannon keened her

pleasure, her head swimming with the sensations evoked by the suckling of her nipple. She undulated against Ethan, her movements causing his cock to grind deeper until it touched a place that made her insides spasm with delight.

There'd never been anything like it, this joining, this sheer mind-numbing, full-bodied orgasmic delight and she opened herself to it, embracing every iota of sensuality her senses fed her. Drawn by the heady aroma of his scent, she dipped her head toward his shoulder, opened her mouth, and slid her tongue over his satiny skin. The taste was ambrosial, the faint tang of salt and male musk making her mouth water.

At the touch of her tongue, Ethan growled, a sound that made Shannon's insides quiver with excitement. Following her newly awakened instincts, she claimed her mate in an age-old manner. Setting her teeth against his flesh, she bit down, not hard enough to draw blood, but with enough pressure to leave her mark. Her primitive act provoked an immediate reaction.

Ethan's hands cupped the firm mounds of her ass and moving her at his discretion, he began to fuck her in earnest. His cock slid in and out, relentlessly, endlessly, exquisitely and Shannon bounced against him, eagerly assisting every thrust.

Her swollen sex and slippery channel embraced his cock, bathing it in the evidence of her need. Everywhere their skin touched sweat formed, wet and warm yet chilled around the edges by the night breeze. Eyes closed, Shannon listened to Ethan's panting breaths and guttural groans. They echoed her own and added to the exhilaration of the moment.

She surrendered herself to Ethan, to desire, to the overwhelming pleasure that formed a tight ball within the depths of her body and soul. She'd always felt that if passion was a color it would be purple, and she saw it now in the dark expanse of her consciousness. Ribbons of color, violet, plum and amethyst, formed, wildly fluttered and were suddenly shredded into nothingness by the orgasm that shattered the last bit of self she possessed.

Shannon wailed her pleasure to the night sky, clutching at Ethan with a desperate, frantic grip. Her body shuddered with the waves of bliss that radiated from

her center outward and she met it head on, muscles straining to catch every tiny shard of delight her climax offered.

Little by little the intensity faded. The tension that held her in thrall, eased and she sagged against Ethan, drained and sated. It was more than apparent that he too had found his release. He dropped back against the ground, his body relaxed and unmoving but for the rise and fall of his chest as he dragged in breath after breath.

Resting against him, Shannon could feel the frantic beat of his heart calm and knew it echoed her own. Never had she felt so deeply at ease and satisfied. Contentment had her rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

"Mmm. I take it milady is happy?"

Ethan's husky-voiced question made her smile. "Very happy, thank you."

"Well, you know, anytime I can be of service..."

"I won't hesitate to ask," Shannon said, finishing his sentence. Another moment's silence passed, one which this time she broke. "Ethan?"

"Mmm?"

"Brandt is no longer a problem?"

"No."

"Is he... dead?"

"No."

"No? Did he retire?"

"No. I took the leadership from him."

"But how...?"

"I've decided to institute some changes." Ethan rubbed a soothing hand up and down Shannon's spine. The sensations his caress invoked made her want to purr. "There are traditions that I and many others have taken exception to. One of which is the killing of one's opponent and the ascension claim. Just because we're werewolves doesn't mean we have to be barbarians. Killing a good man is a waste and making a woman accept the man who killed her mate is wrong, no matter how you look at it.

Having nearly lost you, I won't sanction it, and I believe by publicly taking the first step this will become a practice instituted by others."

"Lead by example?"

"Precisely."

Pride at her lover's forthright stance filled her. "I'm glad. I remember Brandt. He was my father's closest friend. He was always so kind to me and my brothers. He treated us like we were his own."

"I know. And I know had he taken you it would have been because of our customs. That's another reason I didn't kill him," Ethan confided. "When I defeated him, Brandt admitted to me that he was glad you'd disappeared."

"Glad! What if I'd been in real trouble?"

"He knew all along you weren't. I thought at the time when he questioned us that he didn't press Grandmother or me very hard. For a long time I thought it was because of the influence exerted by the charm Grandma Rena's friend the witch gave us, but the truth is, he strongly suspected it was us and was content to leave it at that. He told me he felt like a second father to you, and that he would have felt as if he was betraying your father if he'd mated with you."

Despite the warmth of being snuggled against Ethan, Shannon shivered when a slight gust of air tickled her exposed skin. Ethan stirred, rolled, got to his feet, and offered her his hand. "Let's go inside. We can continue this discussion there, hmm? Remember, you're almost home."

Taking his hand, Shannon accepted the strength that helped her to stand. "That place? No" -- she leaned against him and smiled when his arms wrapped around her -- "this is home."

"Yes. Yes it is," Ethan agreed.

Tilting her chin, she invited his kiss and welcomed his lips against hers.

Kate Steele

What is it they say? Watch out for the quiet ones? Kate Steele has found that writing is the ideal way to release all those wild inner urges and she's just getting started. "I'm aging in reverse. With the help of lots of plastic surgery and vitamins I fully expect to have my own male harem by the time I hit 90." For now she's settling for the quiet life in rural Indiana with family and pets. Guilty pleasure: Singing in the car. "With the volume loud enough I sound just like Celine Dion!" You can contact Kate and sing-a-long at katesteele27@yahoo.com or visit her website at www.katesteele.com.