



An Arrangement of Three

Anastasia Rabiya

Published by Purple Sword Publications, LLC

www.PurpleSword.com

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ISBN 978-1-936165-59-9

Cover Art Designed By Anastasia Rabiya

Edited By Diana Castilleja

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*For Toni who once said:
"One isn't enough."
Maybe she was right.*

Chapter One

Sherri sighed and slid her key in the lock, wanting nothing more than to calm her racing nerves after what had happened at work. Turning the thin piece of metal, she silently reprimanded herself for losing her temper, for snapping and doing something rash. Ever since she agreed to come to the blistering hot city of Safford, Arizona, her life felt *wrong*. Her boyfriend of three years had wanted to move here, lured by a higher paying job with the accounting firm he worked for, and since they arrived, his hours working kept getting longer. She shook her head and opened the door to their home, not looking forward to explaining to him that she'd up and quit her job at the paper. She hated the job, hated the two people she had to work so closely with as much as they obviously disliked her. For once, she thought her happiness ought to count for something. Roger would have to understand.

Crossing the living room, she tossed her purse on the couch and jumped when she heard a woman's voice. Not just any voice—the voice of Roger's boss. When the woman screamed out Roger's name, everything clicked into place in Sherri's mind. *Late nights. Cell phone switching to voice mail. His cold reactions to me in the bedroom. The whole move to this hellishly hot place.* Still, she had to see for herself. *Stupid curiosity.*

In the hall she found a trail of discarded clothes. A woman's slip, Roger's paisley tie, a crumpled red blouse, a bra; the evidence pulled her toward the infidelity. She heard his usual groan, signaling his release. The scent of sex mingled with perfume in the air. At the doorway to their bedroom, she stood frozen, staring at the two of them naked and tangled across the bed.

The part of her that had taken up with Roger wanted her to be quiet and walk away. Her mother liked him and wanted Sherri to settle down with someone stable instead of all the playboys she'd followed around in her past. Roger the accountant. Roger with his gold rimmed glasses and perfectly creased slacks. Roger

who did everything with precision and demanded perfection in all things, even her.

"So that's why we moved here," Sherri blurted. "I get it now."

Amanda, Roger's boss, turned around with widened eyes. Roger covered his face with his hands. She heard him whisper, "Oh my God."

Shock fused her there. She stared at Amanda's round butt, and her fiancé's hairy legs visible in the tangling of cream colored sheets she'd bought the day before. "Well shit," Sherri whispered. "Shit, shit, shit. You son-of-a-bitch!"

Amanda rolled off of him and dragged the sheets up to cover her breasts. She looked like she wanted to say something, but whatever it was, Sherri didn't want to hear it.

"Don't speak!" She held up her palm. "Nothing you say can do any good now."

She had no one here in Safford. No one, not even friends from work. She hadn't been here long enough to form any bonds, and she'd quit her job, royally screwing herself. Turning her back on them, she forced her feet to move. *One step in front of the other. Keep on moving. Don't look back. Don't stop.* She needed to escape. She needed to put this behind her and rethink everything. She'd definitely lost her happy place. In fact, it had been on vacation for some time now. She needed to go find it again.

After snatching her purse from the couch, she simply walked out the front door. Not that there is anything simple about walking out on what she had thought was supposed to end up being a great life—a stable future. A plan. The road she should have been on. "Thank God we didn't get married, or worse...have kids." She looked back at the brick home with its perfect white trim and aesthetically placed river rocks, agave, and Mexican bird of paradise plants, and shook her head. Maybe perfection was overrated or always an illusion, a mirage. "What the hell am I going to do now?"

She pushed the key into the ignition and started her car. It didn't matter that she didn't have any clothes, or that she hadn't taken her belongings. She didn't want anything in that house. Right now, it all would remind her of Amanda's rounded ass, dotted with sweat. Or memories of the times with Roger. She didn't want to remember any of it. She wanted to forget.

After she drove out of the neighborhood and into the inner city, such as it was, she began to form a plan. She had a gay friend she'd been exchanging e-mails with in a writer's group for years. They traded critiques, advice, and shared a lot with each other when life got crazy. She had never met David in person, but she knew he lived about thirty miles away outside the small town of Clifton. He had mentioned the idea of them getting together for coffee sometime after she told him she'd moved to Safford. She'd put it off, like so many things, but now was as good a time as any to see if his offer still stood.

Sherri headed for Clifton, her mind a blank. The drive helped her breathe, at least. On the outskirts of the town she pulled into a coffee shop lot and fumbled through her purse for her cell phone. She'd never called him, but she had David's home number. *He'll likely be at work or out somewhere. This is a long shot.* After scrolling through the list, her eyes blurred by tears, she finally found it.

The phone rang five times. She was about to hang up when someone answered. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this David?"

The deep male voice yawned. "Yeah, yeah, who's this?"

"It's Sherri."

Silence ticked away. She wondered if he would hang up on her. Sometimes people she knew from the net freaked when they met in person. Sometimes, they turned out to be real weird.

"From the writing group?"

"Yes. Um, you said you might want to do coffee."

His tone changed, becoming lighter. She could tell he was smiling. "That'd be great! When do you want to meet up?"

Glancing around, she frowned. "How about today?"

He chuckled, sounding nervous. "Well, I'm off work today, so sure. What time?"

"Now?"

"Now. Um, okay Sher." His tone darkened. "What's up? You've been in Safford for months, this is the first I hear from you by phone, and you want to meet *right now*."

"It's Roger. He's cheating on me. I left him."

Silence ticked away. Sherri watched a thin blonde woman traipse into the coffee shop. She winced and shut her eyes. Trust would never be easy to give again. Love—she didn't think she could bear to try it a second time. Not after this.

"I'm so sorry," David finally said, sounding sincere. "Where are you?"

She opened her eyes, tears welling there, and struggled to read the shop's sign. "Café Ten. It's on the corner of Third—"

"And Penning. I know the place. Stay put, Sher. I'll be right over. It's not that far."

After ten minutes, she went inside and ordered a latte. Time moved slowly. She ordered a second and contemplated the slice of strawberry cheesecake under glass by the counter. Food to ease the mind. Resisting temptation, Sherri shuttled back to the seat near the window and stared at the road.

Another ten minutes passed before a red Mustang pulled up next to her car. She squinted at the man who got out. He brushed strands of dark blond hair from his eyes. She had seen pictures of him on the net before—always dressed in a business suit. David wore a rumpled white t-shirt and blue jeans today. He strode across the lot, his face riddled with concern lines.

The bell jingled on the glass door. David scanned the patrons. His brown eyes pierced right through her. He smiled and hurried over. "Sherri," he said when she stood, holding out her hand in a safe, professional gesture. "I'm so sorry this happened." His embrace crushed his body against hers so that she felt every

curve of taut muscle across his chest and the lump in his pants as well.

She swallowed and hugged him back, her tears starting fresh. "Thanks. Thanks for coming, for being here. I don't know what to do."

"Stay with me. It's not much, but a cabin in the woods might do you good. Nature has a way of putting life, and what's important, into perspective. You can stay as long as you like." His mouth touched her temple in a gentle kiss. "You're welcome there."

"No, I couldn't impose. I can't..."

"You can. It's an invitation from friend to friend. We've known each other for years, just never in person. I feel like you're family. A sister."

Her skin went cold. Trapped in his comforting arms, she didn't want to feel like his *sister* at all. She wanted him to press that tender mouth of his against her lips and make her forget. The animal attraction she felt for him sent a burning shiver through her womb. Sherri let her arms fall to her sides, afraid of what she felt, completely surprised by it. *I can't take any risks. I can't try again. Never again. Besides, he's gay.*

His warm hand rubbed up and down the small of her back in soothing motions. "Let's get out of here, okay? You don't need to be in a public place. You need to be somewhere quiet where you can work everything out."

He pulled away and stared down at her. She hadn't thought he would be so tall. He stood a head over her, imposing and kind all mixed in one.

"Yes, all right," she blurted, surprised again that she agreed so easily. He was persuasive in a subtle way, and really, it had been her plan all along. "I won't stay more than a couple of days. I promise. Just until I get my bearings. I might have to move back to my mother's house."

"No, no. Stay as long as you need to. You've got that new job and all."

She sobbed. "Well, that's the other thing. I quit."

"Oh." He sucked in a breath and grasped his chin. "Hey, I can talk to my partner. He does research on the Mexican Gray Wolves they've released into the wild. He could use an assistant. It's grant money, so it doesn't pay much, but it's better than nothing, and it'll keep you at the cabin."

"Really?" His kindness gave her hope. David was safe, a safe place to hide, and maybe a new beginning for a decent job.

"I'll have to ask him first. He'll be home late tonight."

"Thanks, David. Thank you for this. I didn't know what to do, or where to go."

He took her hand, his fingers knitting with hers, and led her away. They passed out of the coffee shop into the parking lot. After he gave her directions to his house, she started her car and followed his Mustang, thinking she had done the right thing.

The drive through and out of Clifton was boring. Organized landscaping gave way to desert scrub and vast sections of cactus and wilds. In the distance, Sherri stared at the looming blue-gray mountains. She didn't know anything about David's partner and hadn't realized they lived so far out of the way.

They passed onto a rough asphalt road leading into the Apache National Forest. She reached over to turn on the radio, but could only pick up a static laced country station. After a few minutes, she gave up and switched it off.

A feeling of angst settled in the pit of her stomach. Her nerves were shot. She blinked away another flood of tears. Following her friend on a winding road that led into the mountains, she began to question what she was doing. *He might be some nutcase, an axe murderer taking me into the trees to chop me to bits and bury me.* She decided no one but her mother would really care if she didn't show up again. Surely Roger would be relieved.

A reckless sense of rage washed over Sherri. She decided she didn't care what happened next. Worrying over her future had gotten her in the state she found herself in at that moment. Trying to be too careful, to make all the right choices hadn't worked out.

She focused on the shape of the man driving in front of her and wished he wasn't gay, that they could have a wild, vengeful fling and immediately reprimanded herself for it. *Be careful what you wish for*, she thought.

This was David. Her friend. Her lighthouse in the midst of a dark, stormy nightmare. She wouldn't use him like that even if she could.

The Mustang turned onto a dirt road and slowed to fifteen miles an hour. She saw the cabin long before they reached it. An old-fashioned timber built model, it boasted a side deck with balcony and a stone chimney. She wondered if they had heating or if it would be cold nights huddled by a fire for her.

Her cell phone rang. She reached for it on instinct, saw Roger's number, and shoved it back where she'd found it. "Bastard."

David parked on the gravel drive. He got out as she pulled in next to him. Snatching up her purse, she climbed out of her car and smiled awkwardly. "Thanks for this."

"No problem." He shrugged. "Do you have a suitcase or anything?"

"No."

His forehead crinkled.

"I walked in on him, all right? He was having sex with his boss in our bed. Right in our house."

He sighed and put an arm over her shoulder, his warm scent pleasing. "Come inside, Sher. We'll have a drink or two. You can tell me everything or nothing at all."

Trying to catch her breath, she kept pace with him. He left his arm around her when he unlocked the door. Inside it was dark, the large sitting room inviting and restful. He guided her to a leather couch that faced the fireplace and sank in beside her. She cried into his t-shirt while he stroked her hair.

"You'll be all right," he soothed. "You'll see. Everything happens for a reason."

Her eyes hurt. The beginning of a headache pounded her temples. Feeling safe in his arms, she closed her eyes and tried to stop thinking about what had happened. His heart thrummed by her ear, steady and low. Each intake of his breath pushed his chest against her cheek. She smelled soap on his skin.

His fingers kept combing through her locks, running over her scalp and down past her neck. "I'll take care of you," he promised. "No one's going to hurt you here."

She dozed off and woke when he tried to get up.

"I'll get you a blanket and a pillow." Concern lined his face. "You can crash on the couch. I've got to get dinner started before James gets home."

Sherri nodded. The room had gotten darker still. She figured the sun had set. Feeling useless, she let him set a pillow under her head and closed her eyes when he tucked a velour blanket over her body. Soon after, the scent of burning pine permeated the room. A fire crackled and popped in the hearth while David moved pots and pans in the adjacent kitchen. He had left a glass of white wine for her on the coffee table.

The smell of good things to eat drifted to her.

She heard the front door open and then slam. "Whose car is in my spot!"

Chapter Two

James stormed in from the chilly night air, his body tense. He smelled someone here, someone new, and he didn't like it that David had brought company without warning him. There was too much at stake. Too much risk. Besides, a man wanted to be able to go about dressed as he pleased without having to worry over offending someone—or undressed in James's case. Clothes were annoying.

He glared at the dark-skinned woman spread across the couch, blaming her for his discomfort. She had big brown eyes that watched him with a hint of fear. Her full lower lip trembled.

"I'm sorry. That's my car," she said. Her voice sounded like music.

He scowled at her.

"David!" He waved a hand at the woman, dismissing her. It wasn't like his pack mate to bring women home, or anyone for that matter.

"Hi, James. How was your day?" David was being facetious. His face was all smirk.

He ground his teeth. "Same as always. Who is *that* on our couch?"

David fully turned from his place over the stove. Something was frying in the skillet. Vegetables were boiling. He liked to show off his cooking abilities given the chance. Obviously, he wanted to make an impression on the woman, clueing James in that she was important somehow.

"That's Sherri. You remember. I told you about her a thousand times. She's an editor. I met her years back in my writing crit group. Online."

James glowered. "Oh." He hissed out an annoyed sigh and lowered his voice when he spoke again. "Tell me when you're having people over. I could have walked in buck naked."

"That would have startled her for sure. Besides, you don't carry a cell...not that you could out there. I figured you'd have sense enough to be presentable when you saw her car."

"Lucky I keep clothes in the Jeep, just in case." He growled and marched to the fridge to grab a cold beer. Twisting off the cap, he wondered what David was up to. "How long?"

His friend flipped whatever it was he was cooking. "She can stay as long as she needs to. Sherri ran into a problem with her boyfriend—ex I should say. She has nowhere else to go."

He swigged his beer. "Great. Just great. Last thing I need is a woman hanging around here poking into my business."

David eyed him, looking bemused. "Really? I thought you'd enjoy the company. Skulking off in the woods all the time with those wolves of yours. Pretending to be so rough and anti-social. Besides, you'll like Sherri. She's nice. She tells it like it is. No holds barred."

James snarled and left the kitchen. In the hall by the living room he spied on the woman. She was on her side, but clearly awake and unaware that she was being watched. He wondered if she would jump if he snuck up beside her and sat on the cushions. Her creamy mocha skin made his mouth water. She was nice to look at, that was certain. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been with a woman. Years maybe. For him, women had always been wild flings in the back seats of cars or the darkened places men took them when they didn't want to be found. And usually, he was drunk in those moments. Very drunk. Tempting fate, pushing his luck.

She lifted her chin, her eyes on him now. "I won't stay long," she said, sounding apologetic. "I'm sure it must be awkward for you to have me here."

"Awkward?" She didn't know the half of it. He rolled his eyes and stalked toward her, bent on making her as uncomfortable as she was making him. James plopped onto the end of the couch by her bare feet.

"Yes, well, with you and David being partners and all."

James shrugged. "He's more of a financial backer, really." He guzzled the rest of his beer and set the empty on the coffee table. "Foot rub?"

She flinched as if his fingers burned her when he slipped them under the blanket. She looked extremely confused now, her eyes wider yet and her mouth turned down in a strange frown.

"Financial backer?" she questioned.

"Yeah. For the newsletter, and he helps me get research funding. He's better with people than I am. Comes more naturally to him."

He dug his thumbs into the arches of her feet, circling and easing her flesh. He knew well how to turn a woman on, and this was the tip of the iceberg.

She moaned and settled back into the cushions. With a soft sigh she said, "But I thought you and David..."

"Me and David what?"

"Well, I thought you two were *partner* partners."

"Huh?"

She looked very embarrassed, caught between what her prejudice had been and what she was now coming to realize.

"Is that what he *told* you?" James tried his best not to burst out laughing.

"Um." She frowned even worse. "He said you two were partners. I just assumed..."

"You know what they say about assuming." He quirked an eyebrow and moved his thumbs lower until he found her heels. They needed attention as badly as he wanted to lie across her and lick her graceful neck. She was a beauty this one. He didn't mind her presence so much anymore. Her embarrassment amused him.

"Down boy!" David shouted from the hall. He had two plates in his hands and a mischievous smirk on his face. "I'm setting the table. You eat already?"

He growled. "I did, but I have room for more. Always."

"Good."

"Why does she think we're gay?"

David stumbled and righted himself quickly. "Gay?" He stared at Sherri. "Is that what you thought?"

She pulled the blanket up over her mouth. Eyes wide. Skin flushed. "Yeah. I'm sorry. It's just that...well, you never mentioned a woman."

James burst out laughing then, and David shook his head in disbelief as he went to put the plates down.

"I'll *prove* I'm not gay," James whispered to the woman.

She gaped at him.

"I like her!" he called across the room. "Let's keep her, David. She's so easy to embarrass."

"Be good," he snipped. "She's had a crappy day."

"I'm massaging her feet," he offered, smiling sideways. "I'm being good."

"Make sure that's as far as it goes." David gave Sherri a warning look. "If he gets on your nerves, smack him. That's what I do. He needs a good slap every now and again."

"Um. Okay." She looked bewildered.

David went to fetch the other plate and drinks while James kept working the woman's feet. She was moaning softly, putty in his hands. He could keep it going until she totally relaxed and fell asleep, vulnerable to his whims.

"Stop staring at her like she's dessert."

James snarled and let her go. "Fine. You're no fun." He stood up and stomped to the kitchen for another beer.

"And for God's sake clean up after yourself while we have company. Be a gentleman."

"I'll try." He returned for his empty bottle, snatched it up, and took it to the recycle bin.

Sherri was already seated at the table by David when he came back into the room. Her long, black hair fell around her heart shaped face just the right way, the ends curling, drawing him in. He flashed her his best charming smile and sat across from her. He had a plan.

As his pack mate poured out three glasses of juice, James slipped off his loafers. He reached his foot across the distance between him and the woman until his toes touched hers. She turned to face him, her lips pursing with angst at first, then relaxing as he rubbed the edges of her feet before dipping his toes underneath to continue the massage he'd started on the couch.

"So, Sherri, tell me what happened today. Fill me in." He had an effect on people when he put his mind to it, a way to ease their minds without words, but it wasn't like what David could do, tricking people to his side. James exercised his ability to the fullest at that moment—hoping to make Sherri feel relaxed and welcome. David was too busy cutting up his steak to take notice.

"There's not much to tell. I was engaged to be married. I came home and found him in bed with his boss."

James groaned in disgust. "Nasty. Best cure for that is to have a man friend show up and kick his ass. I volunteer my services whenever you feel ready for vengeance."

David hissed. "Manners, James."

She giggled at him, her eyelashes lowering halfway. She looked so seductive at that moment. He wanted to crawl under the table and place his head in her lap. Comfort her. Ease her pain. Give her anything she wanted to make her forget. It wouldn't be so bad wearing clothes as long as she looked at him like that every so often.

"Thanks, James." Sherri said. "I never thought you'd be—"

"So much of a jerk," David cut in.

"I learned it from you," he shot back.

Sherri laughed a little louder. It changed her face, made her more approachable. He wanted her at that moment, really wanted to claim her. He knew he'd try it tonight and likely regret it. But if she gave in...

He began to cut up his steak and chewed each bite with care, on his best behavior. While he ate and David chatted with the object of his desire, he imagined different ways to please her. He could taste every inch of her taut body, suckle her skin, lick her into

a heated frenzy until she begged for him to take her. He blinked, and an image of her against the wall in his bedroom crossed his mind. Her back pressed to the wall, her face painted with ecstasy as he fingered her.

Someone slapped his forearm. "Manners," David warned. "You're staring." He nodded at Sherri who looked flushed with embarrassment. "He doesn't get out much. Ignore him."

"All right. I'll do my best." She flashed James a sweet smile that said entirely the opposite. Maybe she needed the kind of attention he was willing to give. What woman didn't want to take out her revenge on another man after being cheated on? He'd be her innocent bystander tonight, and tomorrow night, and the night after that...whatever it took for her to get her anger out of her system.

"I can't let you stay on the couch," he said, throwing out his best chivalric smile. "Take my room. First one down the hall." He gestured in that direction.

"Oh, I couldn't impose on either of you. The couch is fine."

"Nonsense," he pressed. "I'll take up residence with my *partner*. I'm sure he won't mind, will you, lover?"

"Be careful what you suggest," David said, doing his best to keep a straight face.

James's grin turned devilish. "My bed, Sherri. All for you." He waved away her second attempt to protest. "And if you need anything to wear, the dresser and the closet are at your disposal." Like he needed the clothes there. Most had been worn only a couple of times. "We have some extra toothbrushes and such in the bathroom. David travels a lot on business and always saves that free junk they give out at hotels."

She lowered her eyes to her plate, pushing a slice of tomato this way and that. "Thanks guys. I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you for this. But I will." She sniffled and wiped her eye with the back of hand before taking a small bite of food.

"We'll bill you at the end of your stay," James joked. "We take installments plus interest, you understand."

She giggled and flashed him another sweet smile.

The rest of the meal went well enough. She talked about her job and why she'd quit. She told them about her idea to start her own editing company, and David was very supportive. He was like that though. Thanks to David, James had finished not only high school but college, all through correspondence and online courses. James liked that best of all about his friend. The man always saw the good in the bad. He was always willing to help those he cared about, and as he watched his friend's face, he realized David cared very much about Sherri. In all the time he'd lived with him, he'd never brought home a woman, never gone on a date that he shared any information about, if he'd ever even gone on one. He was practically a celibate monk, thrown into his work.

Until now.

James watched the way David leaned in, reached out to touch Sherri's arm every so often. The guy had it bad. And he'd known her for years, even if they'd never met before in person. He'd never given much thought to how often David had talked about her. It was always Sherri gave me this advice on my article or suggested I do this with the memoir I'm working on. Sherri this. Sherri that.

Obviously, David had fallen in love with this woman a long time ago. It put a damper on James's mood. How could he seduce her now? He drank down his second beer, excused himself, and went to the kitchen to drink two more, alone.

Chapter Three

David couldn't believe she was actually there, in his house, at his table. She was even more beautiful in person; her hands so warm when she touched him, her eyes intent and alluring when she listened to him speak. He wanted badly to lean closer and kiss her cheek, her lips. The tension in the air was palpable, but he knew she didn't feel it coming from him.

His roommate was too blatant for that, practically throwing himself at her. He hadn't expected that sort of reaction from James, but in a way, it felt right. James had always followed David's lead. They were inseparable.

After dinner, Sherri stood beside him in the kitchen to rinse the dishes after he washed them. She was quiet then, contemplative.

"It'll be better in time," he said to her in a low voice.

James was on the couch finishing off the last beer they had. His drinking was unusual. A way to handle his nerves, he supposed. He hadn't thought this through, about how difficult it would be for James to have someone else here who didn't understand the way things were between them. He'd seen the opportunity with Sherri, an opportunity he never thought possible, and he'd jumped in, offering her sanctuary, hoping to offer her so much more.

She made a strange groaning sound in the back of her throat that sounded unconvinced. "Yes. One door closes and another opens."

He handed her a plate. "That's right. And our door is always open for you."

He unplugged the sink and rinsed it of the bubbly water, wiping down the shiny metal. After she set the last dish in the rack, he handed her the towel he'd used so she could dry off. "I'm here for you, Sherri. For anything you need. To talk, to vent. Anything."

Her eyes welled with tears. He pulled her into his arms and held her while she cried. He tried not to be obvious when he breathed in the clean smell of her hair. He wanted to kiss her sadness away, to lick the tears from her cheeks and carry her to his bed to hold through the night. His cock came to life in his pants, and he told it to settle down, aggravated. *Bad as James.*

She stepped back slowly, as if she didn't really want to. He wiped her cheeks and offered her a sympathetic smile.

"If it's all right, I'm going to take a shower."

"That's fine, Sher. It's all yours."

She nodded, her chin lowering as she walked past him. His nostrils flared to breathe her in one last time for the night.

When she walked through the living room, he heard her giggle, and he peered around the corner to see what had made her laugh.

James was sprawled out on the couch, his feet dangling over the armrest. He snored through his open mouth.

"Looks like I'm safe for the evening," she said with another snicker.

"Looks that way." He went to retrieve the empty beer bottle and put it away before he followed Sherri down the hall. She closed the bathroom door, but he didn't hear the lock click.

Ignoring temptation, he went to the end of the hall and stepped into the sanctuary of his bedroom slash office. The large sliding glass door looked out on the forest in the back of the cabin. The moonlight played upon the shadows. Normally he found the dance of light and dark fascinating, but not this night. He took off his clothes and pulled on a pair of pajama pants, then sat at his desk to write for an hour before bed. He still needed to brush his teeth, and he wanted to wait for Sherri to finish and get safely to sleep. He would feel better when he knew she was resting.

Far away he heard the ghostly cry of a lone wolf. He resisted the urge to go out onto the small balcony. Sometimes he cried with them in answer. Six months ago they would come right up to the back of the yard, flashes of gray or brown darting back and forth.

Curious. Ears pricked. Eyes seeking. He had stopped seeking so very long ago, afraid no one would accept him if they knew his secret, just as it had been with his father.

But tonight he wasn't restless in *that* way. He felt he was safe in his den, his warm, cozy room. The woman he wanted most was here with him. Sure, she'd be sleeping a couple doors down, but maybe, with time and patience, that would soon change.

He set to work, typing away the time until he heard the shower shut off and the familiar sound of James's door closing. He stopped tapping at the keyboard to listen more acutely. After closing his eyes he heard her breathing. Far away, yet so close, close enough that he could crawl up into that bed with her and snuggle his face into the warm crook of her neck.

What would she think if he did such a thing? Would she push him away? Or would she pull him in close and hold him like she'd done in the coffee shop, in the kitchen. He liked to imagine there was more to it than *his* wants and needs. That maybe she was attracted to him too.

Her breathing eased and became steady. Soon her low, feminine snores made a peaceful cadence.

He crept out of his room—his cave as James called it—and brushed his teeth in the bathroom, staring at the slight mist on the upper portion of the mirror. Heat still lingered in the small space, heat that had swirled and caressed *her* naked body. He groaned, frustrated. Patience would be difficult to maintain, but that was why it was patience. He could do that. He had waited all this time already. What was a little while more?

Bearing in mind her fragile state, he cracked open the door to look in on her peaceful face as she slumbered. Her pupils were dancing behind her closed eyelids. She held to her pillow as if it were a lover. He envied the pillow.

Chapter Four

Sherri felt sedately warm. She snuggled backward into the comforting heat, glad of it. Wet hot kisses trailed across her shoulder, sliding with tender licks to her neck. She moaned in pleasure.

A knee wedged between her legs from behind, sliding across her skin. A man's muscular leg with soft hairs all across it. The leg drew up and then excruciatingly back, up, rubbing her just right. She shuddered. His lips kissed the edge of her ear. Whispers made her skin prickle with heat. Teeth grated with extreme gentleness across her earlobe. His tongue darted across her sensitive skin. His hand slid beneath her t-shirt and up her belly to the center of her breasts, pausing as if unsure which to touch first. She sighed, impatient.

The palm cupped her right breast. Thumb and forefinger took hold of her nipple to twist it in slow, feather-soft motions. Wetness filled her slit, readying, welcoming.

"I want you," a whispered voice said.

She breathed in and smelled the clean scent of his skin, soap, the hint of the same shampoo she'd used that night. Sherri opened her eyes to see a blank wall ahead of her. It was so dark there wasn't much else she could make out. Her mind wasn't completely coherent, but her body was very turned on. She inhaled sharply and reached up to touch the hand on her breast.

"Mmm," the voice moaned. He thrust at her backside, his cock thick, hard against the thin cotton boxers she had borrowed from the dresser. She wondered which man had crawled into bed with her. Panicking, she froze, afraid to ask, afraid, as his hand slipped out from under hers and made its way down her body, that he would stop.

His fingers edged past the elastic waistband, curled and circled momentarily in her pubic hair until it tickled. With a swift

and accurate movement, his fingers delved into her slit and found her clit. His index finger circled the tight nub of pleasure.

She closed her eyes and let him.

Another thrust against her ass. His cock pushed at her crack. She wiggled backward telling him without words that this was okay; this was wanted.

His other hand pushed beneath her body and cupped her left breast through her t-shirt, kneading, massaging. The pattern on her clit changed to a tapping. Deliberate. Rhythmic. Her hips started to move.

His hips followed.

His fingers pinched her nipple, drawing a low whimper from her lips.

He grunted and pushed against her. Tapped harder.

She was so wet. If he kept at it much longer she'd come. Sherri wanted that, needed to lose control. She shivered.

He ground into her.

She moaned and started to pant, approaching the edge of release.

He stopped.

She gasped, disappointed.

His hands withdrew.

She started to face him but those same hands returned, gripping her forcefully and turning her on her stomach. They ran down her body as he positioned himself on the bed over her, and then sat back, pulling her hips up while her upper body remained on the mattress. His hot palms roved over the contours of her ass cheeks, warming them, readying her. She had never felt like this before. Dominated. She liked it.

Fingertips clawed at the waistband and tore the boxers to her knees, then off. His hands rubbed along her bare ass, down the back of her legs, dipped between them and pulled, spreading her.

Her heart thumped hard in her chest.

His knees settled between her calves. His hands left her skin only to guide the head of his dick to her wet pussy. She held still,

afraid he would stop, afraid he would continue, but mostly afraid of who it was behind her, ready to plunge himself into her body. She dared not say a name for fear she'd guess wrong. Offend him. Make him stop.

He stroked her slit with his cock, the head moist, firm as it dipped down to brush her clit and make her shudder with need. Up it went, guided by his steady hand to circle at her entrance, warning her of what he intended to do.

His other hand came to rest on her left ass cheek. He squeezed her, then abruptly slapped.

She half cried out, half sighed with sudden pleasure. That same hand sent a pointed finger down the crack of her ass to stop at her anus. The fingertip circled.

The cock teased.

The finger pushed at her tight hole, easing inside.

She held her breath.

He pushed in a little further. Teasing. Circling. The cock bumped her clit. Her thighs felt so weak. Then he plunged his full length deep inside her pussy, making her groan and clench her teeth to keep from screaming. Everything felt so tight.

He waited.

She breathed, fast, trying to relax, shocked at that finger which now began to slip up further inside her. His hips slowly pulled back until she thought the thick length of him would leave her empty.

She groaned impatiently, sounding disappointed.

He obliged and pushed in.

Skin slapped together.

She sighed.

Out. Deep inside. Out, faster in. Her toes curled. He picked up his pace, his erotic dance hurried. She could feel subtle differences in the way he moved, swirling to the left a few times, then the right, shifting from side to side after he'd thrust himself all the way in.

His other hand came to rest on the small of her back, holding her steady. Her lover lost control then, plunging at her violently, her aroused, wet pussy taking all he could give. The bed began to shake and squeak every so often. She clenched the sheets in her fisted hands and tightened her jaw to keep from screaming.

Her orgasm hit with a pounding intensity that made her whole body quake. A release of voice and air left her lips. He continued to ram her, seeking his own plateau. The finger slipped free of her ass. Both hands gripped her hips and pulled while his body pushed. Rocking, filling, slapping.

He grunted, and she felt him filling her with his moist release. His pace started to slow. Eased. When he stopped, still so deep inside her, she took a slow breath and closed her eyes. She was exhausted.

He ran his hands under her body to her breasts and tweaked her nipples before easing her down to the mattress, his length sliding out. He pulled her back to him, and they were where they'd started, his hot, lean body spooned to her, his lips kissing across her right shoulder.

Teeth nipped and bit down. It hurt a little, but she was so tired all she did was sigh. Settling into his heat was delicious. Her mind drifted. Her body throbbed with the bout of lingering pleasure. Sherri fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter Five

Sherri woke alone in the bed, staring at the planked ceiling, wondering what the hell had happened last night. The boxer shorts she'd put on the night before weren't there. Her pussy was pleasantly sore, and when she rolled over and stood, her thighs hurt like she'd run a marathon. She heard someone humming in the kitchen, pans tapping each other, and she smelled bacon sizzling. She licked her lips and rifled through the sheets for the boxers. After pulling them on, she found a pair of sweats in the dresser to slip into. It was chilly in the cabin. She put on a pair of long, white socks, too. She tugged at the hem of the t-shirt she already had on, feeling self-conscious. At the door, she hesitated, hoping this wasn't going to be as embarrassing as she imagined it would be.

She turned the handle and went into the hall, padding along. James was still sprawled on the couch, one arm over his chest, the other hanging off the side, fingers grazing the floor. His mouth was open slightly, and his jet black hair jutted up in all kinds of crazy directions. She stopped by him and stared. It didn't look like he'd left the spot he'd fallen asleep in last night.

So, it was David.

"Morning Sherri." David poked his head around the corner and grinned widely. He looked cheerful, but he had always been an upbeat person in their many e-mails. Maybe this was normal morning chipper, not after a wild night of sex giddiness.

She smiled back. "Morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

Her face flushed with heat. "Yeah. Great, just great."

"I'm making breakfast. Hope you're hungry."

She nodded. "I'll help you." She gave the couch a wide berth and followed David into the kitchen. She started getting the plates out and then moved on to the silverware, collecting what they needed from the drawer.

"I was thinking, I know you said maybe I could work with James, but I should try to find a job on the outside...you know." She shot a sidelong glance in his direction. He was turning the bacon.

"I understand." He nodded at her, his brown eyes warm, sincere. "You can use my computer if you want to do a little job hunting today. I have an appointment at eleven, then errands to run. Have to go into town for some groceries too. Can I pick up anything for you?"

"Um, yeah, actually. If you don't mind. I'll make a list and give you some cash."

He nodded and moved on to the pancakes.

Sherri stood there staring at his back. He was dressed in casual pajamas, his tight ass firm, inviting her to touch beneath the cotton fabric. Again she was struck by how tall he was. Had it been him last night? With all James's flirting, she had guessed he'd have been the one, but now she wasn't so sure.

"There's orange juice in the fridge if you want to set the table and pour some out for us." He didn't turn. She wanted to reach over and trace her hand down his back to see his reaction. It would hardly be appropriate to flat out ask if he had snuck into the room last night, especially if he hadn't.

"Sure." She spun and got the juice from the fridge, then gathered three cups and pinched their rims together with three fingers as she carried them to the dining table. She poured out the juice, her eyes flickering over to James. He had shifted in his sleep, lying now on his side.

"Wake him up," David called from the kitchen. "Otherwise he'll sleep until noon and be cranky for the rest of the day."

"Okay!" she called back.

She approached him cautiously, unsure. When she reached his side, Sherri knelt and shook James's shoulder. "Time to get up," she said, trying not to be too startling.

He grumbled and muttered.

She knelt further, her knees pressing into the rug. "Hey. James. Wake up. Breakfast is ready."

His eyes flickered and opened, lovely hazel eyes trying to focus. Smacking his lips, he stretched his arms up high and blinked at her. "Hey. Morning." He smiled crookedly. "Sleep good?"

A trill of panic shot through her stomach. Had it been him? "I, um, slept all right, considering..."

His eyebrow arched. "Considering what, Sherri?" he asked in a conspiratorial whisper. But he continued on, giving her no time to answer. "Considering you were all curled up in my hot bed without me?"

"Uh." Her jaw dropped for a moment.

"Joking!" He fisted her gently on the shoulder and chuckled as he pulled himself up and hurried off to the bathroom.

He's like a teenager, she thought, and laughed softly to herself. If anything, when he was in a good mood, he was fun. He sure did like to flirt, though. And was he joking that she'd been alone...or not alone? She shook her head and went to the kitchen for the plates and silverware.

By then, David was done and followed her out to the table with a serving tray loaded with food. They sat together and filled their plates while James showered. Twice David's arm brushed up against hers while they ate. She shivered, heat prickling her skin. He didn't seem to notice, didn't seem to feel awkward at all about last night. This was disconcerting.

James emerged dressed in a pair of jeans and that was all. His chest had a few drops of moisture dotted across it that he'd missed when toweling off. His hair was tamed now, slicked back and neat. He narrowed his eyes at Sherri. "Bad girl. Stop staring."

She dropped her fork. It clattered atop her dish.

David laughed. "God man, go put your clothes on. What's the matter with you?"

James ignored him and sat down beside Sherri, snatching up his plate with a devilish smile. "Nothing wrong with me. She enjoys the view. Don't you, Sher?"

Both men were beside her, one on each side, both attractive in their own ways, James a heated mass of muscle and lust, David more subdued and gentle in his allure. She wasn't sure what to say or do, so she only shook her head and put a chunk of pancake in her mouth to chew on.

"I meant to ask you last night," David began, addressing James. "You said you needed an assistant. Sherri needs a job."

James nodded. "Yeah, yeah I need someone to transfer my notes to Word. I have observations, whole articles. Mostly, they need to be typeset, maybe fleshed out a bit."

"I can do that," she said. "I can edit, write, whatever you need."

"Even submit to the publishers?"

"Man, you're so lazy when it comes to people." David pointed his fork at his partner. "Don't take advantage of her skills."

James groaned and gnashed his teeth.

"I can submit them too," she said, settling it.

"You can list yourself as the co-author." James set his hand on her arm and winked. "We can split the pay sixty-forty."

"That's better." David went back to his food, seemingly satisfied.

"Settled then." She felt David's toe tickling the side of her socked foot. He ran it up across her foot and then down to the side, back to where he'd started. Looking at his face revealed nothing.

"I have to go out today," James told them. "I'll be home at my usual time, *lover*." Sarcasm tainted his tone on that last word, directed pointedly at David, not Sherri.

"Right. Be on better behavior when you come home this time. You'll put Sherri off men the way you act."

James harrumphed and ate in sullen silence then.

Sherri finished her plate and took it to the sink. She started the dishwasher and set to work. David joined her to rinse. They worked as a team, his movements relaxed, his infectious smile putting her at ease. By the time they'd finished, James was darting out the door as if he were late.

“My turn for the shower,” David said, and leaned over to plant a warm kiss on her cheek.

She exhaled and looked up at him from under her lashes, curious.

“I’ll leave the bathroom door unlocked in case you need the sink or...anything.”

“All right.” She didn’t know what else to say. With James it was obvious what he wanted. With David, she wasn’t so sure if that had been an invitation or polite hospitality. She decided she was going to find out, one way or another.

Chapter Six

David soaped his body in the heated shower and dipped beneath the spray. His cock was hard with need, demanding attention. He worked soap over the curls of hair above it, and gave in, stroking down the firm length, cleaning as much as tantalizing himself. His mind wandered, and David imagined Sherri was with him, her hand touching his dick. He smiled and dipped beneath the spray again, rinsing.

A shadow moved behind the shower curtain.

She's in here with me. He let go of himself hoping she hadn't been watching his silhouette, and that she couldn't see what he had just done. He listened to the sound of her moving about, felt the water temperature change slightly when she turned on the faucet to brush her teeth, and shivered even though he was anything but cold.

He looked out from behind the vinyl shower curtain with one eye at her, dressed in a man's t-shirt, and that was all. She was naked from the waist down. He couldn't breathe for a moment. She rinsed and set her toothbrush in the marble holder, a pink toothbrush—one he'd never have used from the stash of spares. It had been free, and now he was glad he'd kept it. It suited her.

Just then, she turned and looked directly at him. His courage swelled in his chest and he did the unthinkable. "Care to join me?"

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, eyes filled with concern.

What was he thinking? He opened his mouth to apologize, but she nodded, stopping his voice.

Sherri released her full lower lip, now glistening and moist. She took hold of the hem of the t-shirt and pulled it up, revealing a smooth belly, a set of shapely breasts with dark nipples and then last, her face, eyes hooded, lips slightly parted. She came forth and he moved back to allow her room. One slender, dark leg entered

the shower. He didn't know if he should cover his dick now. There was no hiding his arousal. It pointed straight at her.

She was all the way in and looking up at his eyes, smiling shyly. Her body was beautiful, curvy, and luscious. Her eyes scanned him, down his chest. He felt them searching until she caught sight of his erection. "Oh," was all she said.

David pulled her into his arms, bringing her eyes back to his face. His dick fit smoothly between her thighs and the water ran along their bodies, heating her up, slicking her skin. He didn't want to talk, and it seemed she didn't either.

Sherri stood on her tiptoes and softly kissed his lips. Her eyes stayed open, watching him as she tasted. He kissed back, his lips parting. She allowed him in to touch her tongue, to roll and linger in her warmth. He closed his eyes and pushed her to the side, pinning her between his body and the tiled wall. Her nipples hardened to points that poked at his muscular chest in earnest.

He groaned into her mouth when her hands began to explore him. Fingernails grazed down his bare back and found his ass. She caressed him, kissing harder until their mouths plunged and suckled with desperation. She whimpered and moaned, letting him know that he turned her on.

He reached behind her and cupped her ass, pulling her tight to his erection. But he couldn't take her yet, not so fast. He wanted this to last, to be a moment she always thought of when she looked at him.

David moved to her chin, kissed along her jaw-line and took her earlobe into his mouth, sucking it. Nibbling. Licking. "I want you so badly," he whispered in her ear. She quivered. "I want to hear you scream my name. I want that. Will you, Sherri?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh yes..."

He sucked hard kisses down her neck, knowing there'd be marks there later. At her shoulder, he licked and bent his knees, lowering to stop at her soft, round breasts. He drew in one nipple, swirling his tongue over the aroused flesh until she made a small cry of pleasure. Then he moved to the other, his fingers replacing

his mouth on the first to pinch and tease. After he had afforded the second breast as much attention as the first, he ventured lower. He kissed the smooth skin above her bellybutton. He dipped his tongue into the small indent. She squealed.

Down further. He ran his cheek along her pubic hair. Nestled his nose there. Let his tongue graze the wetness of her sex, up and up until he found her hardening clit. He drew that between his lips, lapping the sensitive hardness.

His dick filled more, thickened to the point he thought he might lose control. He licked her clit from side to side. He hummed. Her thighs trembled.

Sherri's fingers combed into his hair to clutch his head as she moaned and made sounds he'd never heard a woman make. He brought one finger along the back of her leg, circled the skin behind her knee, and then moved to her inner thigh.

He paused at her slick pussy and circled the opening, learning its shape, teasing her before he dipped a finger inside. She was tight and slippery. He pushed in more.

Her body arched.

He ran his tongue in circles, hoping to make her come all over his face. David eased a second finger in with the first. She started to buck. Sherri rode his hand, and he lifted his face, slipping his thumb up to cover her throbbing clit, to circle it. He watched her expression as she turned her head from one side to the other.

She cried out his name when her climax overtook her. He bit his lip, awed at how sexy she was at that moment, melting under his touch. Her body contracted against his fingers. She fisted his hair. "Oh, David," she whispered. "David!"

He stood, his fingers still inside her swollen pussy. She wiggled her hips, and he pulled out with a gentle pinch to her clit. Her eyes narrowed in pain and pleasure.

She leaned into his body and kissed his chest with those plump lips, her tongue licking at the water across his skin. She sucked at his hardened nipple and reached between his legs to

touch his dick. He held back when she stroked him, hoping he'd last long enough.

She knelt before him as he had done to her. With both hands she took hold of his length. Her face was slightly upturned, watching him with those chocolate eyes as she brought his dick to her mouth. She drew the tip inside and ran her tongue around the head.

It was his turn to curl his fingers into her wet hair. He held to the back of her head, keeping her in place as she sucked and licked. His balls tightened, his release imminent. She pulled him in more, deeper. The hot pad of her tongue made him close his eyes and hold his breath. Her hands circled and pumped his length. His hips shot forth, propelling his sex into the melting heat of her mouth. She met him each time he plunged into her until the tingle became unbearable. He shot and she sucked it away, licking every last drop from him.

David lowered himself to kneel in front of her. He set his arms around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest. They sat there clinging to each other in the steam.

When they'd both caught their breath, he lathered shampoo into her hair. He soaped her slick body and cleaned her with loving care. He rinsed her, and after he shut off the shower, he towed her body dry.

"I never imagined..." He shook his head, not wanting to ruin what they'd shared by saying something stupid. "Come to bed with me for a while," he said instead. "I want to hold onto you." *Forever.*

"All right."

He lifted her up and carried her to his bedroom. There he placed her across the king mattress and curled up at her side. She snuggled against him, like he'd imagined she would the night before. He didn't envy that pillow now.

Wrapped in his heat and comfortable, she fell asleep. He examined every inch of the lean body next to him and traced a bite mark on her shoulder. Had he done that? It was possible. There

were love bites all along her neck. He knew for certain those were his doing. But the mark on her shoulder had been harsher. It wasn't a purple bruise from sucking, but an actual bite, with teeth marks.

At 10:30 he snuck away from the bed and pulled the comforter over Sherri, letting her sleep. She hadn't made him a list of groceries, but there was always tomorrow. Hell, he'd go out again tonight if she wanted. He'd do anything for her.

Pulling on his clothes, he contemplated cancelling the meeting. It would be much more satisfying to crawl back into that bed and wake her with his tongue.

Chapter Seven

James came home early that night, still in his wolf form. David's Mustang wasn't in the drive, so he guessed his friend wasn't there yet. *Good*, he thought. *I can have Sherri all to myself.* He made a detour to the wood shed where he had taken off his clothes that morning before his trek to the pack. He willed his body to shift, used to the aches and pains of muscles reforming and bones transfiguring to their other positions. He had never really looked forward to taking his human shape as much as he did at that moment. Dressing hastily, he thought of the woman. She was driving him wild.

He strode to the front door and as soon as he opened it, he could smell her delicious scent. "Sherri, I'm home!" he shouted. It sounded so cliché, like a husband announcing his arrival to his wife. A pang of a memory stabbed at him. His father used to announce himself like that to his mother. That was so long ago. Their faces were blurs to his memory now.

"Oh hey, James! I'm in David's room on the computer."

He swept through the hall to find her. The bedroom was the only room with a light on. He guessed she'd been in there long enough that she hadn't realized it was getting dark out. Leaning against the door frame, he stared at her. Sherri wore a pair of reading glasses, and she was dressed in his clothes. Her fingers tapped away at the keyboard, nonstop.

"You look hot in glasses," he whispered.

She jumped, startled by his comment. "Um, thanks." She smiled up at him. "I've applied at six places in Clifton so far and have been accepted as a freelance editor for a small online magazine back east. All the work is via e-mail. Easy enough."

"Busy bee," he said and stalked into the room to stand behind her. Without thinking of much else other than touching her, he set his hands on her shoulders and began to massage away the tension he felt there. "Shoulder sore?" he asked when she flinched.

"A little."

He tugged down the neckline of her t-shirt and frowned.

"Nice bite mark."

She stopped typing.

"Did it feel good?"

Her face raised, her eyes searching him.

"Do you want me to do it again?" he asked.

Her hand flew to cover her mouth, hiding those ripe lips that he was dying to taste.

He chuckled. "I didn't make these, though." He ran the back of his finger along three hickeys. "At least, I don't think I did." James shrugged, nonplussed. "Of course, it *was* dark. I had a lot to drink last night. Good thing I left the bed before David got up. He'd have kicked my ass if he knew I snuck in there with you last night."

Her eyes widened even more, which confused him.

"What's wrong, Sherri?"

"It was...it was you."

He nodded and set back to work on her shoulders. They'd gotten real tight. He worked his thumbs deep into the muscles. "Breathe. You're all knotted up."

But her breathing stayed wild, out of control.

"I need to go. I have to get out of here." She pushed back from the desk and stood so quickly that she knocked over a paper clip holder, spilling its contents across the desk. He gripped her shoulders and pulled her backward into his chest. She stumbled, and he caught her before she could fall.

"Where're you running to? I've been thinking about you all day. I need some of that sugar, hon." He spun her around and crushed his mouth to hers, plying her lips with his tongue until, with a weak gasp, she opened and let him in to taste. He used his gift to calm her, to settle whatever worry she'd developed all of a sudden.

Gradually, she began to kiss him in return.

But he could smell her fear.

James pulled back, letting her catch her breath. "You look upset."

She nodded. "I didn't know it was you."

"So?"

"I um...thought it was David."

He nodded and stroked his finger along her marked neck a second time, thinking over her words. "These are from David." He frowned, realizing what had happened, half amused. "You attacked him after I left then?"

She swallowed, looking miserable.

"Ha. I'll bet he's a happy camper." He swept her small body up in his arms. "You're not leaving over this."

"I c-can't stay. It's just so weird, so awkward. I'm worse than Roger. This is...what I've done is wrong."

"Wrong? Mmm." He carried her down the hall to his bedroom and kicked the door shut. "It doesn't bother me."

"What?"

He shrugged. "I want you. He wants you. We both want you. I don't have a problem with it. Obviously you didn't mind me last night."

He tossed her on the bed, grinning crookedly. "Let's ask him what he thinks when he gets home."

"What? How can you even say that?"

He unbuttoned his shirt thinking it ironic that he'd put it on only minutes ago to make his appearance. He wished he could come home naked like always. Straight from his wolf skin to his man skin. Would she be able to handle that? She wasn't handling his idea of sharing well at all.

"There's a lot you don't know about us," he said, unsure of how to start, but figuring he could make her get over her hang-up.

"That's an understatement."

He tossed his balled up shirt at the hamper. "I've known David for almost ten years. He and I have things in common, things that bind us together. I don't expect you to understand that, but you gotta realize that he's got it bad for you, Sherri. You can't

leave. Not because I slept with you last night. Look, I was drunk; you're hot and vulnerable. Couldn't help myself."

She shook her head. "I don't think I like you very much at all."

He crinkled his nose and snorted. "Most people don't. That's why I stay here, only go out and have contact with people when there isn't another option."

She grabbed a pillow and clutched it to her chest as if that would stop him. "So you're antisocial and what little people skills you have are..."

"Underdeveloped."

"I see."

"I'm used to taking what I want, when I want. And unless I'm remembering last night wrong, you needed what I had to offer. You wanted it, and for a little while, it made you feel good, made you feel better. Made you forget. Right?"

Her mouth opened. Snapped shut. Opened again. "Sex isn't like that... It shouldn't be that way." She frowned and shook her head in denial.

"I'm not gonna lie to you. I can't say I know you well enough to love you, but I'd sure as hell like to. In fact," he said as he pinned his hands on his hips. "The thought of you leaving scares me a little already."

"Scares you?"

"Yeah," he grumbled. James started to pace in front of the bed. He couldn't let her go. He raked a hand through his hair, frustrated. He'd gone and messed everything up. *Stupid!*

"I like the way you smell, the way you laugh at my off-color jokes. I like the way your face gets all relaxed when I rub your feet." He ran his hand through his hair again, combing it out of his eyes. "If you want me to stay away from you at night, I will. But if you don't want that...I'll give you what you need."

The front door to the cabin opened. "Hey! Could use a hand with groceries." David was home.

"No leaving." He shook a finger at the woman.

She looked horrified.

James pulled the bedroom door open and trudged out, waving one hand in the air, telling her without words to stay put. He marched out to the Mustang and hefted up as many bags as he could. When he bypassed David on the way to the kitchen, he snarled, his temper rising. "I'm not staying for dinner."

"No? Bad day at work?" David smiled sarcastically.

"Sherri wants to leave. You work it out." He ground his teeth, feeling like a failure. "You know I'm no good at fixing things like that. I'm only good at screwing them up!"

David's face crumpled with sadness. "Leave? She's only been here a night and today. What the hell did you do?"

He carried the bags to the counter and set them down. "Ask her. Ask her what I did." He threw his fisted hand up and raised his voice. "You know why we can't be bringing people here—especially not a woman! What the hell were you thinking!"

"I was thinking she'd take us as we are, that maybe this was my only...*our* only chance."

"What woman in her right mind would?" He stomped past David and halted by the front door.

Sherri was standing by the fireplace, her body rigid, her mouth set in a tight, tense line. "So, this was planned from the moment I arrived? The two of you seduce me? Try to trick me into having sex with both of you—to stay here and be your...your...I don't even know what this is!"

David came out of the kitchen looking dejected. "I'm pretty sure you seduced me, Sher, not the other way around." He glanced at James and narrowed his eyes. "If *he* seduced you, it's news to me. But it's...not surprising."

"It's *not* surprising. Great. This is the last place I need to be. Two lonely men who aren't gay but don't mind that each has had their way with me. Exactly what I need after walking in on Roger. Maybe I'm the delusional one. Maybe he wanted me to have a three-way with his boss and him. Stupid me for running out and missing all the fun."

David closed the front door and grasped his chin. "Maybe that's true, Sherri. But maybe not. A relationship like that, like what I hope ours could be...it's not all about sex. You've been a good friend to me over the years, albeit from a distance. James has been..." He stumbled over his words, searching.

"She won't accept it." James started to pace again. "She won't! She's not one of *us*. There's no way it can work."

Silence spanned out. The little clock on the mantle ticked.

"What do you mean 'not one of us'? *What* are you?"

"She needs to know," David whispered.

"No, she doesn't. She wants to leave. She doesn't want to be part of our pack— Our odd little family."

"Pack?" She questioned, her eyes filling with concern. "What are you talking about?"

Chapter Eight

James reopened the front door and stormed out. Sherri stepped over to watch his rushed escape, strange as it was. He shed his shoes as he sprinted toward the trees. A pause and he tore down his pants and boxers before disappearing nude into the wilds. Sherri felt frozen in place. "He just took off naked and barefoot into the woods."

"Sorry." David shut the door again. "I can try to explain him, if you want to hear it. If you want to leave, I'll understand. I'm not angry that you slept with him. In fact, I guess I'm happy for you, and for him. He's never cared enough to bring someone home. If he's this upset, he really likes you. Any flings he had were far in his past, in his wild days. "

"Wild days? Did you not see what I just saw? That man just ran off *naked* into the forest and you're telling me his *wild* days are in the past!" She backed away when David started toward her. He nodded in understanding and sat on the couch, watching her, waiting, giving her space.

"Okay fine. Tell me his cockamamie story. It doesn't mean I'm staying."

"Promise you'll listen to the end."

She rolled her eyes. This was too much. *No jealousy? No anger that both slept with me? Too crazy...or too good to be true?*

"I promise, David. But that's as much as I'll promise right now."

"Okay first, there's something you don't know about me. I have this *illness* for lack of a better word." He raised his hand as panic riddled through her. "It's *not* contagious. It's hereditary and it's very, very rare. So rare that it sometimes skips multiple generations, and there aren't many people I know that have it. My father had it and when my mother found out, she left him. He raised me on his own, the best way he knew how. He taught me to

deal with it, how to repress it. And I'm very good at keeping it from showing."

"What is it?" she asked, curious but still scared.

"I'll tell you after you hear about James. Because if I tell you right now, you won't believe me."

She nodded, wary. "All right."

"Okay, to understand you have to realize that this *illness* makes me do things that a normal man wouldn't...or can't. It gives me instincts closer to a predator, a heightened sense of smell, stronger eyesight, the undeniable urge to run, and I can run very fast if I need to."

"What, you're a superhero?" She laughed uncomfortably. This was getting weirder the more he talked.

"No. Not exactly." He held his hand up and smiled. "Sit down, Sherri. I'm not going to bite you. I've never done anything to make you not trust me."

She went to the couch and sat at the far end. Even from there she could smell his skin and the clean soapy perfume leftover from their shower that morning. Three of his buttons were undone at his collar, giving her a view of his chest.

"I found James in the Rockies, when my father and I were on a camping trip together. It was ten years ago. My dad went off to be alone, to run, and I was sitting by the fire, taking a moment to myself. James came out of the forest and I was glad to see him, because even as he was, I knew we shared the same illness. We became friends right off, mainly because instinct tells us when we've found one of our own. Our kind is drawn together."

"In a pack. Like wolves." She fidgeted with the hem of the t-shirt she had on. This was beyond strange.

"Exactly like that." He nodded, and smiled but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "You see, it was different for him. Neither of his parents had the affliction. When it hit him at fifteen, he had no one to turn to, so he ran away, took off into the woods and stayed there, living off what he could hunt. He was truly wild, truly connected to the animal side of him. Befriending him was the only

thing that brought him this close to society. And it took him a long time to get him this far."

She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. "So, what aren't you telling me?"

"That James and I...our illness isn't really an illness at all. It's an ability. A dual life. We're shifters."

She narrowed her eyes, glaring. "I don't know what that means."

"Shape shifters. We can take on another form if we choose to. I don't tend to. As I said, I keep that side of me hidden. But to James, being human is what he tends to hide."

The clock ticked and ticked until she thought it was tapping at her brain. There was no doubt about it. She'd slipped into some whacky version of *The X-Files*. Sherri pushed up from the couch and went to the kitchen to grab her purse and car keys.

"You're leaving then?" he asked.

She gave him a pointed glare. "You're nuts. You and your crazy partner-friend-whatever the hell he is, are completely off this plane. I can't believe what you just told me. It's crazy. You're crazy!"

He stood, grimacing, and took hold of his shirt, pulling it over his head. He kicked off his shoes and took down his pants and underwear. "Let me show you."

"No." She held up a hand to stop him. "No!"

He got down on his hands and knees and raised his head to watch her reaction as she backed to the front door, escaping. Her hand clasped the doorknob, and clenched. His face changed before her eyes, elongating. His limbs were shortening. His shape shifted, and then came clear. Not a man. The white wolf standing there on the carpet watched her with amber-brown eyes. It lowered its head and whined, ears back.

She turned the handle and spilled out onto the cement patio. Her heart slammed inside her chest. It was difficult to breathe right then. Everything in her purse scattered across the ground. The wolf sauntered toward her and nuzzled her cheek with a cold, wet nose.

She sucked in a breath. Sherri pushed the animal away and scrambled to grab up her belongings, tears stinging her eyes. "I've lost my mind," she said to herself. It was the only plausible explanation. "I've gone and lost it." She shoved everything back into her purse and hurried to stand. Her sanctuary had become a nightmare.

The wolf sat on its haunches, head cocked to one side. It whined again, this time louder, more urgent.

She turned her back on it and sprinted to her car. Safe inside, she shoved the key in the ignition, her eyes fixed on the animal. It hadn't moved, hadn't chased. The wolf stood there by the open door, looking forlorn and lost.

Sherri turned the key.

The wolf lowered its head, ears pricked now. Waiting.

She shook her head no and backed out across the gravel drive. She turned her car slowly, afraid whatever delusions she was suffering from might cause her to have an accident. "Careful," she whispered. "You're imagining this. It's shock. Shock over Roger. Stupid, stupid Roger." And all of a sudden Roger didn't seem that bad. Going back wasn't impossible now. In fact, it seemed like the most logical thing to do.

She drove along the road keeping her eyes straight ahead. Avoiding the rear view mirror took effort. If she looked there she might see something she didn't want to see. A wolf running along the road chasing her. Maybe two wolves if what David had said was actually true. But it couldn't be real.

"It's not. Not real. It's ridiculous."

She applied more pressure to the gas pedal, leaving those two men behind.

Chapter Nine

She parked in the drive and stared at the house, her hands fastened tight to the steering wheel. Sherri knew Roger wasn't home. She knew this was her chance to do one of two things. Take revenge by trashing the house and taking back all her things or stay there and wait for his sorry ass to get off work. Maybe they could work things out. She guessed with time, she might be able to forgive him. Of course, she wasn't sure she wanted to do either.

Leaving had felt so final.

So she waited and stared at the bird of paradise bushes as their yellow and orange flowers swayed in the late afternoon breeze. The sun would set in a couple of hours. If he didn't come home, she figured he'd be boffing his boss at work. Anger sizzled in her mind. *Okay, forgiveness is out.*

Her cell rang. She was amazed it had survived the fall at David's house. She fished it out of her purse and looked at the screen.

"Mom." She pressed the button to answer.

"Hello, Mom."

"Hi baby. You okay?"

"Yeah. No. Um. Not really. I left Roger. I came home and caught him in bed with his boss. In *our* bed."

There was a cool silence for a long time followed by a disappointed sigh. "Baby, I know. He called me yesterday and told me what happened."

Incredulous, Sherri had to ask. "What's his excuse?"

"He said it was a mistake. A stupid mistake that he regrets. He wants you back, if you'll have him. He knows it'll take time for you to forgive him."

"Ha." She couldn't believe this. He'd actually called her mother and told her? The guy was either a complete idiot or he really did feel bad about it.

"What are you going to do?"

"I um, I don't know. I stayed with friends last night, but I can't go back there. Not now. I think I need to get on my feet by myself this time."

"Mm hmm. I understand."

"What do you think, Mom?"

"What do I think...?" She was quiet again while she thought over her answer. "I think I don't want you to end up like me. I had it bad for your father, and he was a jerk. He was like all those guys you used to date. Using me for one thing. I had hoped Roger would be different. I really did. He seemed so nice, so stable."

"Maybe it's my fault. Did I do something wrong? Something to drive him away?"

"No sugar. Some men cheat. And when they go and do something like that, it's a hundred percent certain they'll do it again."

"Once a cheater..."

"Yes, baby. That's right. Don't you go back to him. Don't you put yourself in that position. Where are you now?"

"Outside the house, parked in the drive. He's not home."

"Now why are you there?"

"To get my stuff."

"Do that. And get yourself gone. You can come back here if you like, but I'll understand if you don't want to. Thank the Lord you two didn't get married. Who knows how long he's been up to this..."

"Okay Mom. Thanks. I'll let you know where I end up."

"I love you, sweetheart. You be careful."

"Love you too, Mom. Thanks."

She hung up and turned off the car. Sherri walked to the door and went inside to collect her possessions. She packed up her laptop, her CDs, and tossed her clothes, still on hangers, into the big flowery suitcase Roger hated so much. Sherri grabbed everything of hers from the bathroom and the few books she had on the bedside table that she'd planned to read but hadn't gotten to. She set it all in the trunk of her car. There wasn't much else she

wanted—and coming back for what she did take wasn't easy. She locked the house and went to her car to leave, for the last time. It was close to 7:30 by then. She was running out of time.

Another car pulled in behind hers and stopped, blocking the drive. She scowled at Roger as he rushed to get out and talk to her. His tie was askew, his sandy blond hair looking like he'd been combing his fingers through it over and over, a nervous habit of his.

"Sherri." He pushed his thin gold glasses up on the bridge of his nose.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"No. But I have so much to say to you. Can you listen?"

"No." She slammed her trunk shut. "Goodbye Roger. I only took what was mine. Do whatever you want with the rest...with the house. I don't care."

"I'm sorry," he blurted. "Please, Sherri, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Amanda was a mistake. She came on to me that first day and I just didn't... I couldn't..."

"Couldn't think about me?" she finished for him. "I have a life to live and it doesn't include you. Goodbye. Have fun fucking your boss. Maybe you two can get married and have some spawn of your own someday."

"Amanda...she's already married."

Sherri sputtered out a harsh laugh. "Oh great. Maybe you can move in with her husband and the two of you can take turns." She hurried to the driver door and opened it. She'd cut across the yard if he didn't move his sorry-ass car out of her way.

"Please Sherri. It won't happen again. I swear." He was running at her, his arms open, his eyes welling up. He caught her as she moved to sit inside, and he pulled her back out. "Please, Sherri. I love you. I was stupid. I need you. You're everything to me."

"I never cheated on you. Never. I would never have hurt you like that." She refused to look at him, instead focusing on the ground. "It was over the second you put your dick in her. You son-

of-a-bitch." Her open hand flew and cracked upside his face. His glasses fell off and landed on the ground with a tinkling sound, busted. He let go of her, and she was glad he did. If he hadn't, she would have punched him in the face instead of slapping him a second time.

"Don't go, Sherri. The house is as much yours as it is mine. Stay. I'll sleep in the guest room. Stay until you have a place to go."

"How the hell do you know if I have a place to go or not? And who in their right mind would sleep in the same bed their ex fucked his boss in?" She shook her head, her temper flaring. "I swear Roger. I swear. I thought I was cracking up today. But I can see you're the one who has completely lost his mind."

She went to sit, and his hand closed over her shoulder.

That time she let loose, curled her fingers into a tight fist, and punched him in the face. He staggered backward, covering his nose with both hands. Blood dribbled onto his upper lip.

"Good riddance." She started the car and peeled out across the drive, cutting through the perfectly placed river rocks, mowing down two of the bird of paradise plants. *They'll grow back*, she thought. *They're resilient, and so am I.*

She sped out of the neighborhood and on past the reaches of the little suburban community. In town, she pulled over when her cell rang. She looked at the name on the screen. It rang again while she tried to remember why Auros Med sounded familiar. Then it hit her as she answered.

"This is Sherri Roberts."

"Hello Sherri. This is Michelle Aguirre from Auros Medical. I have your online application here and we're very interested in interviewing with you. Are you available tomorrow after three?"

She smiled. Things were looking up already. Auros was in Clifton, closer to David and James, but she figured it was a start. After she made the appointment and jotted down the driving directions, she pulled back into traffic and decided to head to Clifton again. She'd rent a motel room at first, at least until she could find an apartment and was sure she had steady income.

Chapter Ten

It had been three weeks since Sherri left them. David had checked the online crit group messages daily for any sign of her. Nothing. She hadn't called, hadn't e-mailed. He was worried about her and sorry for ever bringing her to his home. Sorry for showing her what he was, for telling her everything. And most of all, he missed her. Having her as a friend was better than not having her at all.

The front door opened and slammed shut.

He wheeled his chair out to look down the hall from his bedroom.

James stormed into the hall. Bits of forest debris were tangled in his wild hair. Mud streaked his bare chest and right leg. He scowled at David and went into the bathroom.

David smiled, relieved. At least one had come home. James had blamed himself for Sherri leaving. He'd gone off into the woods for the last week and a half, likely hunting with the real wolves. David had listened for his pack brother's lonely calls each night and heard them, though they were distant.

He scooted his chair in and clicked on the window to open his e-mail. Three weeks was long enough. He didn't dare call her yet, but an e-mail was safe, not as intrusive.

Dear Sherri,

I'm sorry about what happened here. We both are.

Talk to me.

David.

He hit send and shut the PC down for the night. With James home, he had an excuse to make dinner, and cooking took his mind off things.

In the kitchen he set to work, defrosting pork chops, peeling potatoes, prepping green beans. He even mixed up a bowl of

homemade buttermilk biscuits, his roommate's favorite next to steak. He had the meat sizzling in olive oil atop the skillet when James leaned against the kitchen doorframe in solemn silence, his hair damp from the shower.

"Did she call?" he asked.

David shook his head. "No."

"I'm not sorry," he grumbled, stubborn as ever.

"I am." David reached up for the pepper grinder and shot his pack mate a glance. He looked absolutely miserable, worse off than he'd been when he first met him. "You look like crap."

"I showered."

"Still look like crap."

James narrowed his eyes. "Go get her back."

"I don't know where she is."

"Go find her!" His voice was full of anger, the voice of a man used to getting his way.

"No. She doesn't want to be with us. If she did, she'd have stayed."

"She *does* want us," he growled. "She just doesn't want to admit it."

"How do you know what another person wants, James? You can't."

He seethed out a ragged sigh. "She does."

"Set the table."

James glowered a little while longer before he complied. As he completed the simple chore, David heard him complaining under his breath and couldn't help but smile. They were so different from each other.

When they sat at the table together, the only family ritual they tended to uphold, he turned to James and said, "You've always been more of the alpha. Maybe you should go get her."

"Alpha." James broke out in guffaws. "Right! I think you're deluding yourself. You're the *responsible* one. If not for you, I'd still be running feral in the woods, and I'd probably never shift back to the form I was born into."

"True. But if not for you, I'd never shift to wolf."

"It's been a while since you did." James nodded, challenging him. "Tonight's as good a night as any. Hunting's been plentiful down by the stream. Rabbit. Deer."

"I'm not that much in to hunting."

He drank, his eyes watchful over the rim of his glass. He set it down and said, "I know. But you like to run. Run with me tonight."

David ate, not ready to answer for a long time.

James kept watch, tapping his foot beneath the table so noisily that it was the only sound they heard.

"I know you want to."

"Go find her and I will."

"Find her now?"

"In a few days. If she answers the e-mail I sent."

"Hmph."

They finished their meals and cleaned up. James started a roaring fire. He curled up nude on the couch and basked in the warmth. David sat in the reading chair by the window, watching the flames flicker and dance, his mind elsewhere.

"Well?" he said, bringing up James's suggestion in one word. They had sat there for nearly an hour.

James raised his face and smiled. "You're ready?" His hands gripped the back of the couch. He lunged, shifting mid-air and landing on four paws. His silky gray and brown fur caught the firelight. He had mesmerizing golden eyes that blinked, looking mischievous, reflecting the nature of the beast. Always the show-off with that side of him, he pranced to the door and scratched.

David went to let him out, but not before he ran his palm over his best friend's furry head. "All right. I'm coming." He undressed slowly, remembering the look on Sherri's face when he'd last shifted. He folded his clothes and set them on the small bench by the door. She wasn't the only one who had a hard time accepting what he was.

Slowly, he willed the change into happening. With a grunt, he became the wolf, sauntering at the side of his pack-brother, the only family he had left. Together they darted away into the night, nipping and barking their camaraderie.

Chapter Eleven

Sherri set the file in the OUT basket, satisfied. The work was easy enough, but interesting so that it kept her challenged. Ever since punching Roger in the face, things were looking up. She'd toured two apartments so far and neither were exactly what she wanted, but she had an appointment to see a third that evening. Across the hall, her co-worker smiled, convivially. They had a lunch date, and she enjoyed Melanie's company. In fact, the people she worked with were all nice, easy to get along with, even her boss, Sam. She signed out for lunch and quickly switched over to check her personal e-mail.

Three more messages from David. She hadn't opened any of them, but she hadn't marked them as SPAM or deleted them either. Trying to put the men out of her mind was becoming more difficult as each day wore on. She filled her empty time off work by reading books or watching the History channel, anything to not think about the curve of David's lips when he had leaned in to kiss her or the heat of James's body that first night—how much she really had needed what he'd done. There was no denying her attraction to both men.

She'd made it through a little more than four weeks.

The image of a wolf's face flickered in her mind. She clicked the window closed from her e-mail account and picked up her purse. *That wasn't real*, she reminded herself.

"Ready?" she called to Melanie.

"All set." Melanie slung her little, purple purse across her shoulder and the two set off to grab a bite to eat at Alejandro's.

Outside it was sunny and unbearably hot, as usual. They took Sherri's car because Melanie's had been on the fritz and was in the shop. The drive was fast, uneventful, except of course for Melanie jabbering on about her husband. She was a newlywed and still smitten.

Sherri was polite and let her go on, unwilling to rain on her new friend's joy. The woman was totally in love, hopeless. Sherri didn't think she'd let that happen to her again. There was simply too much at stake. It wasn't worth the risk...especially with the last prospects still so fresh in her mind.

"Are *you* dating anyone?" Melanie asked as they walked to the door of the restaurant.

"Nope. I'm off men," Sherri answered and then shook her head. Melanie looked taken aback. That didn't come out the way she meant it. "I mean, my last boyfriend cheated on me. I think it'll be too difficult to trust another guy. Not for a long time."

"Oh," Melanie sighed out. "I'm so sorry. I was going to ask if you wanted to meet my brother-in-law, but I guess that's out."

"Thanks, Melanie. But no thanks. I think I'll play it safe, put my life back together first."

"Sounds bad."

They sat by the window overlooking the parking lot and placed their orders. "Yeah, it was. He was sleeping with his boss. I walked in on him. Took off and stayed with a friend for a couple days then came back and got all my stuff."

"Wow, that's horrid. What a jerk." Melanie looked truly concerned. She reached across the table and patted Sherri's hand. "He wasn't the one. That's all it means. Don't give up."

Sherri smirked. "Okay. But I'm not actively looking."

As their food arrived, her cell rang. She glanced at the screen and scowled. It was David's number. He was going to start calling now? *Stalker*.

"You gonna get that?" Melanie asked, twisting a lock of her auburn hair around her finger.

"I'll call him back later," she said, knowing she had no intention of doing that at all.

"Oh. Okay." Their food arrived, heaping plates of beans, rice, and burritos topped with enchilada sauce and cheese. "Looks like I have lunch *and* dinner."

Sherri laughed. "Same here. Their portions are ridiculous."

Her cell chimed, letting her know she had a message.

Before they left, it chimed again, reminding her. Sherri grimaced. She hadn't realized how much she wanted to hear his voice. When she got back to work, she shut the door to her office and dialed in to retrieve her voicemail.

"Hi Sherri. Can you please just e-mail me back and let me know you're okay?" That was all he said, his voice full of concern.

She shook her head and clicked over to her personal e-mail again.

She read the first, a simple message to contact him. The second was longer, going on about how James had left and David was sorry for what had happened. The third was short, succinct:

We miss you. Hope you'll come back and give us a chance.

Love,

David

Us. He meant him and me, not James too. Didn't he? She wasn't sure. Maybe he did. She picked up her cell and called.

"Hello?"

It was David's voice.

"Hey."

An uncomfortable silence ensued while both waited for the other to speak. Finally, Sherri did. "David I'm...okay."

He breathed a deep sigh of relief into the line. "Good. I'm sorry, Sher. So sorry. I don't want to lose you."

"Um, yeah. I wasn't yours to lose. I just don't think, after what happened and all, that anything can work out with us."

"We want you to come home," he said.

She tapped her desk with her pen, weighing her answer. "You both want that." It wasn't a question, but it clarified his intent. "And somehow that's supposed to be okay?"

"Look, I know it's complicated. James and I have known each other a long time. We're sort of...inseparable. So, is it me? Or is it him you don't want?"

She frowned. "I don't know how to answer that question."

"Do you want either of us?"

She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, flustered. "Um, okay. You both want me there. You both *want* me want me. And you're both...okay with that?"

A small silence followed before he said succinctly, "Absolutely."

"It's weird, David."

He sighed, and she heard the sadness in it, the futility. "I know, Sher. But I think we can make it work if you're willing to try."

"What about jealousy? It's not normal..."

"James and I share everything as it is."

She giggled, an image of them both in bed with her causing her to flush with an unexpected heat. But that cooled when the image of the white wolf flashed in her mind.

"What?"

"I, um, about what I saw before I left, what I *think* I saw... Maybe I was hysterical or something, from stress. Guilt. I don't know..."

"You won't have to see that again."

She shook her head. "Impossible. I didn't see what I think I saw, right?"

Another silence on his end, longer this time. "I, um, shouldn't have done that to you. I'm sorry for that, too."

She nibbled at her bottom lip. "Look, I have to get to work. I've got a job now. Lunch break is about over. I'll call you later tonight, okay?"

"Promise?"

She groaned.

"What time?"

"Um, how about eight? That way we both have time to eat dinner."

"You can come here for dinner."

"No. No, I'm not ready for that."

“Right. Eight then.” He had to be smiling. His voice sounded happy now, hopeful.

After his call, the day flew by. Work wasn’t helping to keep her mind off of him. Sherri thought of James too, his raw animal magnetism, the heated, secretive night they’d shared. At least five times she had to fan herself with a manila folder to cool down. She could really use a shoulder rub from him right now. After work, she felt edgy as she walked with Melanie out to the parking lot. The sun was setting, lighting the clouds on the horizon in shades of orange and pink. She bit her bottom lip, thinking, worrying herself.

“There’s my Alex,” her co-worker said. She grinned like a giddy teenager and threw Sherri a quick wave. Alex, the god of all men according to his wife, pulled up in their now fixed blue Honda and stopped. He nodded at Sherri.

She waved at him politely, thinking, *What makes him the one? How did Melanie know? How does anyone know? Maybe that’s all a big pile of crap.* She stood there as the couple kissed from behind the windshield and embraced each other with enthusiasm. They looked in love, but she was skeptical that love was such a real thing at all. She had been in love, or so she thought. Sherri sighed and hurried to her car.

She silently chastised herself for agreeing to call David that evening. Where would things end up if she did go back there? A wild threesome fling? Was that what she wanted? She slipped her key into the ignition and got the AC going. It was so damn hot in Arizona. Closing her eyes, she imagined what it would be like to find herself in bed with both men. David would be slow, gentle, all foreplay and teasing. James would be the burning flame of lust, all about rushing in for quick satisfaction and a heated aftereffect that lingered. But the two of them? At once?

She clenched her teeth and groaned. “It’s too much. I can’t handle that. What would people think?”

But her conscience was all too ready to supply answers. James didn’t like going out in public. No one had to know about him. And David was fine to show off, a great catch on all

accounts...except for... The crazy thing she'd seen, the thing that made her leave still seemed like an illusion. It had to be.

She turned on the stereo to the dance station and tried to let her mind go clear. It was time to get home—well, to the motel room she'd paid for anyways. Time to sort all this out could come later on or not at all if she didn't call him, or told him to leave her alone. She couldn't *not* call him, not after she promised she would. Sherri ran a hand over the top of the steering wheel and hoped the morning would come real soon.

Chapter Twelve

James loved the hunt. The challenge made his blood boil, his hackles rise. He figured he'd have an advantage hunting in the city. He could shift from animal to human and back as needed, gaining entry into places that either side alone might not be able to attain. *Much to be said for opposable thumbs.* He ran alongside the road, toward the cabin, home. Safford wasn't that big. If David gave him the okay, he'd be able to find her. If that was where she'd run to. He had his ways. *If.*

He leaped when he reached the front yard and shifted midair, faster than David could ever do it. Naked, he turned the handle and opened the door to their house.

He watched as David went through the motions that evening, cooking and serving dinner, washing the dishes, wiping down the table and counter afterward like nothing had gone wrong, like he had never brought that beautiful woman home. He even settled on the couch with the fireplace flickering and pretended to read a book while James paced.

"What's the matter with you tonight?" David peered over the top of his book, eyes measuring.

"Anxious."

"For what?"

"For Sherri to come back."

"About that..." He set a marker between the pages and closed his book. David placed it on the coffee table and took a deep breath.

He didn't like the look his pack mate gave him, as if he were trying to prepare him for something bad. It was the same look he'd had when he told James that David's father—the man who had briefly become his father too—had died of a heart attack.

"Well?" James stopped pacing and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I spoke to her today."

He grinned. "When's she coming home?"

David's mouth twisted on one side. "I told her she's welcome here, apologized again. She's gotten a job of some sort in Clifton."

"That's great! Closer to us."

David's lips twisted worse, and his brow crinkled.

"What?"

"I think you shouldn't get your hopes up is all."

James growled. "You're the idiot that showed her what we are. That was stupid. I wouldn't have."

"Ah hell, she was freaked out enough when you ran off naked. Had she stayed longer, I figured you'd come home all hairy and crawl into her lap like the dog you are."

He growled again, frustrated. "It wasn't my fault she left."

"It was. As much as it was mine. We were stupid. Should have given her time and space. It was selfish what we did to her."

James sighed and plopped down on the rug in front of the fire, stretching out his long, muscular legs. The flickering flames put out a comfortable heat. Under other circumstances he'd have curled up and taken a nap to keep from thinking so much. "She needed what we gave her. I think she knows that deep down."

"We're a lot to accept."

James groaned, and it sounded like a whine. "Read your book. I don't want to talk about her right now."

"Fine."

He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of pages turning every so often, to the slow, steady breathing of his friend. He was nodding off when the phone rang. James held still. He had no desire to move from his spot.

The book snapped shut and hit the table with pop. David was rushing, his steps heavy as he half-ran down the hall. James rolled over and listened intently.

A bedroom door shut. Locked.

James stood and went to the kitchen to pick up the other receiver and listen in.

“...processing claims for Auros Medical.” It was Sherri’s soft, subdued voice. James grinned. She had called. This was a good sign.

“Really? I have a contract with them. I’m giving a seminar at their main office next month.”

“Ha. What a coincidence.”

“Maybe we’ll bump into each other then.”

Silence. He listened to her breathe, sensed her hesitation. James wondered why David didn’t ask for her address and go get her. That’s what he ought to do instead of dodging around the issue with politeness. She belonged with them. She needed to come home. Now. He’d make her see that.

“Yeah, well, it was nice to hear your voice again,” Sherri said.

James hung up the receiver and padded to the front door. Enough was enough.

Chapter Thirteen

The click startled Sherri. She waited for the inevitable tone that meant the line was dead. It didn't come. "Are you still there?"

"Yeah, Sher." He breathed a relieved sigh into the phone. "I thought you hung up on me."

"No. That wasn't me." She glanced at the old phone on the bedside table. "Maybe there's something wrong with the line." She had to admit she was relieved too.

"Do you think I *will* see you again, Sherri?"

She rolled on her side, bunching the pillow under her shoulder. Changing the subject and avoiding his question, she said, "I went back home after I left your place. Ran into Roger. Punched him in the face."

James laughed. "Good for you. If he ever gives you any trouble, let us know."

"I don't think he will. Not after that."

"Did you get everything you wanted from the house?"

"Yeah. It was good that I went back. I shouldn't have left so much there. You know, I was just so pissed."

"I understand. I think it was best you got out right then. You could have ended up doing something you'd regr..." His voice trailed away as if he had only realized what he was saying.

"How's James?" she asked, unwilling to talk about regrets.

"He misses you, and he's not shy about what he wants. He's pretty grumpy about not getting his way."

She couldn't help letting out a small laugh. "Yeah. Not shy." Sherri shook her head. "What *does* he want?"

"You. Of course. He thinks I should hound you until you give in and come back here. But I won't. That's not me. You'll come home if you feel right with it. No matter what happens, I hope we can still be friends."

"Home," she whispered. She didn't have a home now. It felt wrong. Unsettling. The apartment she'd looked at after work

wasn't what she wanted either. Sherri looked over at her suitcase propped on the folding stand by the bathroom door. Her eyes strayed to the chipped desk and her laptop and makeshift office there. She'd already finished several articles for that online magazine she'd agreed to edit for. But no matter where she went now, she didn't think it would ever really feel like being home. Not like it did before she'd walked in on Roger.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah—no, not really. Just thinking."

"Well, I'll let you go. If you feel like talking, give me a call here or on my cell during the day." He gave her his cell number and she wrote it down to program into her phone later on. "I have sales meetings this week, so I'll be out. But if it's you, I'll answer no matter what."

"You don't have to do that."

"You're worth it, Sher. I'd do anything to take back what happened here, to start over."

Before she thought out what she was saying, she blurted, "It really wasn't such a bad start." Heat rushed up her neck and face. She was always talking too fast when she should keep quiet.

He laughed. Her skin prickled from the warm sound of his voice. She closed her eyes and remembered how it felt to be carried by him, to fall asleep in his strong arms, feeling protected, safe, wanted—doubly wanted.

"Wow. Can't believe I said that. Oops. I better get some rest. Must be sleepier than I thought. Take care, David, and take care of James."

"Bye Sher."

"Bye."

She hung up and turned off the lamp. The room had the kind of curtains that kept all light out, so she was shrouded in darkness. Outside she heard the sound of a car passing, then nothing. Sherri meant what she'd said. It had been a hot start, and she *was* tired. Pulling the covers up, she closed her eyes to get some sleep.

Her dream was troubled. In it, she ran through the woods naked, and something gave chase. It was the kind of dream where she wished she had shoes. Why had she forgotten to put her shoes on? There was no way she could get away barefoot. The pine needles jabbed at the soles of her feet. The low hanging branches slapped at her bare skin. She pushed on and heard the thing not far behind, its voice a low growl, its hot breath at her back.

But she couldn't turn around. Fear kept her running.

She stumbled on a fallen branch and tumbled to the moist ground. When she opened her mouth to scream, no sound came out.

Her alarm went off. She sat up, struggling to catch her breath. Sherri blinked and rubbed her eyes to clear them. "A nightmare," she told herself. "That's all. Time to get ready for work." She slipped out of the bed and stripped, hurrying to take her shower and steep her mind in mediocrity to keep from facing what she felt herself really wanting—both of those men, all to herself.

It was too much to want, too good to be true.

She remembered to grab the slip of note paper with David's cell and hurriedly keyed it into her phone...just in case.

* * * *

At work, she found a new stack of files to complete. At lunch, she was on her own. Melanie had a *date* with her husband. Sherri decided to head to the outdoor patio behind work with some drive through food and relax under the shade of a tree. She had seen the little park-like patio every morning and evening and wanted to stop there. It had a peaceful look, the kind of place where she could be alone with the crazy thoughts in her head.

She pulled in to the parking lot and turned off the engine. After grabbing her bag of McD's, she took her time finding a good place to settle in. It was hot, but not as hot as it had been yesterday. A huge Palo Verde tree hung over one side of the patio, shading it. The summer had nearly ended. Autumn needed to hurry up and

cool off the town. She spread her food across the small ceramic tiled patio table and sat on the bench.

"Hey, Sher."

The familiar voice made her skin crawl. She turned and looked up at him, angry that he was here, confused about how he could have found her, and very pleased that his nose was still bruised from where she'd hit him.

"Roger."

He didn't smile or look the least bit convivial. In fact, his eyes were darker than usual, his expression grim.

"What do *you* want?" she asked.

"You to come home."

"I don't have a home anymore." She unwrapped her burger and turned her back on him to eat. Between chews she said, "You made sure of that."

She heard his footsteps as he rounded the table. He had the audacity to sit across from her. "I was scared, Sherri. Marriage was like this big, looming thing. This tether. A prison."

She sipped at her iced tea, watching him try to explain why he'd hurt her, why he'd screwed someone else. She didn't say anything, just kept eating.

"Remember how good we were together? How much fun we used to have in the beginning?" He leaned forward, his lips still tense, his eyes boring into her.

She ate a fry. Another. Sherri finished off the little paper sack of them before she took in a deep breath, preparing to lay into him.

"Everyone makes mistakes, Roger. Some work out for the best. Some we learn from. I hope you learned from yours, but since you're sitting here, like some crazy-ass stalker—I don't how the hell you found me anyways—you obviously haven't learned anything. Go home to your empty house. Your prison of aloneness. Marriage isn't looming over your head now."

His fingers curled around the edge of the table until his nails started to turn white from the pressure. "Who's David, huh?"

She sipped her sweet tea, finishing it off, refusing to answer. Then she balled up her trash and stood, meaning to throw it in the dumpster and go back to work early. He'd ruined her lunch hour, that was for sure. Ruined her life. She walked away, a little surprised she didn't have the urge to hit him. The words she'd told David that first night played in her mind. *One door closes, another one opens.*

His hand closed over her shoulder, forcefully turning her to face him. That hurt.

"Who is he?"

"A friend."

His face twisted up with malice. "You're coming back," he said, his tone deep and dangerous. "You're mine. You belong to me. You're coming. Right now!"

She jerked back, afraid now. This was very unlike him. Although he'd never laid a hand on her before, she'd seen him lose his temper over trivial things. But he'd always regained control. Never done anything rash. She was the one to throw things and shout, shooting off her mouth. Roger was better at holding things in. Maybe he'd held things in too long.

"I know I messed up," he said between gritted teeth. "I said I was sorry. But we've been together too long for this not to work out."

She took a backward step.

He reached.

She made a fist, preparing for a repeat performance of their last meeting. When her hand flew at him, he caught her wrist and twisted it until she let out a pained screech.

Roger tugged her hand around, turning her, forcing her wrist behind her back and pushing her toward the parking lot. She searched the area for someone, anyone, but at this hour the place was dead. People were either in the cool office working or out having lunch. Auros Medical didn't see customers, so it wasn't likely anyone would be dropping by to help. She should have stayed inside and eaten in the cramped lunchroom.

“My car’s over there.”

She saw it, parked at the curb across the street by an empty field. “If you’re good, I’ll let you come get yours another day. This is what’s going to happen. You’re going to call in and say you’re quitting. Then you’re going to take a job in Safford. Or...if you can’t *handle* that, you can stay home and be the housewife. What woman doesn’t want that?”

Silent, she marched along, unwillingly, her wrist hurting from his tight hold. There had to be a way out of this. Sherri scanned the lot again, glancing over her shoulder for something, anything.

“Keep walking,” he commanded.

At his car, she heard a growling sound. “What’s that?” she asked.

He clicked his keychain to unlock the door and shoved her into the passenger seat, ignoring her question. “Buckle,” he told her.

She righted herself and sat back, pulling her feet up when she saw how much trash was piled across the floor. Wads of takeout paper. A half eaten sandwich. Torn pieces of mail. He’d always been so immaculate before. Scolded her if she borrowed his car and left a water bottle inside.

She raised her head and stared at his face. “Have you lost your mind?”

He slammed the door. His car smelled real bad. She kicked the sandwich further away thinking the hundred degree heat wasn’t helping it smell any better.

The lock activated.

She reached for the handle.

He shook his head no at her, and she saw how fierce his eyes had become. “Stay put.”

Her hand dropped back to her lap. He walked around the front of the car to get to the driver’s side. When he unlocked his door with the key, she heard a horrible grating scrape that sounded like it was on top of the car, the skitter of feet, and then right before

her eyes, Roger was crushed by a huge animal. She couldn't make out what it was. A flash of gray-brown fur, the glitter of white teeth. Roger's hands flying out as he flailed and fell.

She heard him hit the ground, his screams.

Sherri grabbed hold of the lock and pulled. She had the door open in seconds.

The animal sounded rabid, growling and snarling. She ran across the street to the parking lot before she dared look back. What she saw made her shake. It was a wolf, a rather large, gray and brown wolf pinning her ex to the asphalt and tearing at him like a piece of meat.

The animal lifted its head, Roger's arm in its jaw, and looked at her. Everything stopped in that moment, her breathing, her heart, her fear. She felt a soothing emotion overtake her as she stared into the animal's eyes. She had felt that soothing calm before—in the cabin when James's hot, comforting hands had taken hold of her feet and massaged them.

A wolf.

Like David.

Like James.

The wolf released the arm to bark once, and returned to its gory business.

She took in a breath, felt her heart skip faster. Sherri sprinted into the office and called 911 from her cell. The woman at the front desk stood. Darcy was her name. As Sherri gave the details to the dispatcher, Darcy reached into the drawer of her desk, took out a key, and then hurriedly went to lock the front door.

Sherri stayed on the line until a police officer showed up and Darcy unlocked the door to let him in.

Sherri told him what Roger had tried to do. The officer nodded, taking notes, an odd smirk on his face. She glossed over the description of the wolf, making it sound more like a German Shepherd.

"Is Roger still out there?" she asked.

Smiling, he tapped his pen on his paperwork. "Oh yeah. That guy's not going anywhere unless it's on a stretcher. That dog you mentioned... Let's hope for that guy's sake that it didn't have rabies." He jotted down a few more words. "My partner's out there with him now, waiting for the ambulance."

"And the dog?" She tried to stay calm.

"No sign of it. We already have a call in to the pound. They'll find him."

Sherri closed her eyes and nodded. Everything would be okay now. She was safe. Roger was gone and likely not in any condition to bother her for a very long time. "C-can I make a phone call?"

"Sure. Let me know when you're done. I'll need your signature on the report." He nodded at the papers he was working on.

She felt like a zombie walking to her office, caught in a surreal moment between reality and some freaky paranormal horror nightmare. After the door closed, she wiped her face and discovered her cheeks were wet. She hadn't even realized she'd been crying. Sherri fished her cell from her purse and dialed David's cell. It rang five times. About to give up, she lifted the phone from her ear.

"Sherri?" His voice sounded so good right then.

"David, I think James was here...just now."

"Shit. He didn't come home last night. I was afraid of this. It's my fault. I told him—"

"No, it's...a good thing really. Roger came to my work. He tried to kidnap me. He was so...mad...scary." Her voice broke with a sob.

"What happened?"

"James attacked him. If he hadn't..."

"He *what*?"

"As...a...wolf." Her voice came out softly, almost in a whisper. "I know it was him. When he looked at me, I had this feeling like...like God, I mean I don't know. He made me calm."

"Yeah. That was James. Where is he now?"

She sniffled. "Ran away, I guess. The police said there wasn't a sign of him. I told them it was a big dog."

"Hmm." She heard David say something to someone near him, excusing himself most likely. "Listen Sher, keep an eye out for him. I'm sure he didn't go too far. He won't leave you if he came all that way to find you."

"I will."

"And do me a huge favor."

"What?"

"If you find him, bring him home. He shouldn't be anywhere away from the cabin, much less in town around a bunch of people. That's not something he does at all anymore. I don't think it's safe for him. He'll do something stupid."

"I can do that."

"Call me if you find him, okay?"

Someone tapped on the door to her office. She looked up and snorted out a sob-laugh.

"You okay?" David asked, concerned.

"He's here," she said, staring at the man on the other side of the glass window escorted by the police officer. James had on a pair of jeans that were two sizes too big and a t-shirt that said: *BEER. It's not just for breakfast anymore!* "Oh God, I don't know what the hell he's wearing, but he's here."

David sighed. "Good. Don't let him leave. Before he gets himself in more trouble."

They hung up.

Chapter Fourteen

James clutched her when she pulled him into a tight embrace. He buried his face in her hair and breathed in and out, trying to calm down, glad that the officer had let him see her. Even more happy when the cop left them alone for some private time.

"I should have killed him," he mumbled against her ear. "I wanted to. So bad. He was gonna hurt you."

"Thank you," she told him and kissed his neck.

He puffed out his chest, proud, but he refused to let go of her. "So, come home after work."

Sherri laughed into his chest. She lifted her face, and he growled at the sadness in her eyes, the fresh tears welling. That asshole had hurt his woman. He should have killed him. Should have put an end to him when he had the chance.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. David asked me to drive you home."

"Hmph." James ran his hand up and down her back to soothe her. She felt *right* against him, her body trembling from the ordeal. He could keep her safe, make her happy. He would never cheat on her. Never do anything to hurt her.

When the police officer cleared his throat to get Sherri's attention, he reluctantly released her and sat down on the chair in front of her desk. He eavesdropped as she completed the paperwork and answered more questions. Being in the office made him anxious, nervous. He started to tap his forefinger on the top of his leg, counting the seconds until they could be alone.

"Take the rest of the day off," a man said, poking his head in the doorway. "Go home and give yourself a break." The man had a kind smile and his eyes were bright and clear as he regarded Sherri.

Jealousy crept up in James's chest, threatening to make him say something he knew he shouldn't.

"Thanks, Sam." Sherri smiled at the man.

James didn't like him at all. He didn't much like the police officer, either. In fact, with the exception of the blonde woman at the front desk who had smiled at him, he didn't think he much liked anyone else in the building other than Sherri.

"Oh Sam, this is my friend James."

Sam quirked an eyebrow and leaned in the office more to get a better look. "Nice to meet you. Funny shirt."

James nodded and forced a smile. "Thanks."

"James, this is my boss, Sam Mason."

Boss was safe, he guessed, for now. He tapped his leg at a faster pace. *The office is clean*, he thought. James scanned her desk for any signs of secret stuff, fetishes for figurines or photographs. There wasn't much to go on. He vaguely remembered his mother's office at the bank, that she'd liked ceramic frogs.

"I think I'll take you up on that," she was saying to Sam, when James caught sight of the small picture frame near Sherri's mouse. It was half hidden behind the monitor and a water bottle. He narrowed his eyes, but guessed, from the shape of the other woman's face in the picture, that it was just Sherri and her mother. They looked happy in it, and it was taken a long time ago, when she must have been fifteen or sixteen. He wondered where the pictures of her dad were.

He raised his face when she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Time to get you home. Thanks for showing up when you did. I um, don't know what would have happened if you hadn't."

He smiled crookedly. "Anything for you, Sher."

Their audience had left them. He stood and watched as she gathered up her things to go. Dutifully, he followed on her heels as she left the building and meandered to the parking lot. "Stop skulking behind me," she said, waving a hand for him to catch up. "It makes me nervous."

He kept pace at her side then and took hold of her hand, knotting his fingers with hers. It pleased him that she didn't pull away.

Her car smelled like her. He sat back in the passenger seat and snapped the seat belt in place, breathing deep. She slid in beside him to start the engine and turn on the air. "Did you miss us?" he asked.

Her jaw tensed. "I'm not sure how to answer that."

He narrowed his eyes. "I missed you." His fingers strayed across the console to grab for her hand. She stopped and pinned him with a stare that he figured meant *back off*. But he held her hand anyways and grinned. "I think David misses you more."

Sherri pinched her eyes shut for a moment, her mouth open. It was tempting for him to lean over and capture her lips, taste her. She spoke when he started to lunge, so he stopped.

"What am I going to do about you two?"

He shrugged. "Come home and think about it?"

"I'm not staying the night."

"You have to stay until David gets home. Otherwise his feelings will be hurt. You should see how he mopes around now. All quiet. He's got it so bad for you."

She shifted into reverse, her eyes forward, and the car pulled out of the lot. He noticed she didn't try to take her hand away now, either. He was winning. On the long trip to the cabin, he plotted different ways to keep her there once she arrived. Gentler ways. It wasn't easy to plot like that. Not his style to be subtle.

He had to give her directions once they started into the forest. She looked on edge, so he rolled down his window to let in the cooler, fresh air. That always calmed him. Maybe it would help her, too. He smelled the pine and lush plants, the scents of rabbit and deer. Beneath that, a little older, he smelled the scent of the release wolves. They hadn't been this close to the cabin in weeks. The pack was on the move, spreading its range wider, hunting game and shying away from people...like *he* usually did.

She interrupted his surveillance. "David was surprised you came into town."

He squeezed her hand. "I was listening on the phone when you two were talking. You told him where you worked."

"Stalker. Just what I need. Another one."

"I'm your protector, not a stalker," he reminded her, snarling at the insult. "How did your ex find you anyways?"

"Sounded like he hacked my e-mail. He asked who David was. If he'd paid attention the whole time we were together, he'd have already known how I knew David."

The car eased up into the drive next to his Jeep. She extricated her hand from his to turn off the engine. "Well, you're here."

He didn't like the look in her eyes. She stared pointedly at the front door as if he ought to go and leave her to escape.

"Come in," he encouraged. "I won't bite."

Her expression softened. She giggled. "You *do* bite if I remember correctly."

"Please? I promise not to bite you this time."

She grabbed her purse, dropping the keys inside. "For a little while."

"You have to stay until David gets in."

Sherri opened her door and stepped out. James followed, keeping back all the instincts that told him to have a repeat performance of their first night together. He'd resist if she'd stay. Her company was worth it.

He found the rock by the door with the hidden compartment in it and took out the house key. After unlocking, he stepped aside so she could go in first, then replaced the key in its spot for future use. She strolled past him, exuding nervousness, fear, and something else he could smell clearly. Lust. It was a sweet scent, soft and tempting. He pressed his lips together to keep from smiling. He willed the thick, hard length in his pants to chill out.

She set her purse on the coffee table and plopped onto the couch to stare at the empty fireplace. He paused, debating. Then he went to the kitchen and called, "Want a drink?"

"Sure. Water. No beer for you."

He bit his lower lip, smiling awkwardly. *Good point.* He got two glasses of water and went back to her. Her legs were crossed,

her calf exposed below her skirt. He licked his lips imagining running his hand up her leg. "Here you go."

She nodded her thanks and drank. "I can't believe he came to my job."

"Bet he won't do it again."

"No. Bet he won't too."

She drank and kept her eyes averted from his. Silence spread out. Her scent was strong, tickling his nose, tempting him. He wanted to scoot closer to her and at least touch her, place his arm over her shoulder. Something. Anything.

"Will you still work for me?" he asked.

She sipped and faced him. "I guess I can. I could use the money. I need to get out of the motel and get an apartment."

He nodded, fighting back the urge to argue that it was silly to rent when she could stay here for free. "Before you leave, I'll get you my notes."

"All right." Her eyes swept up and down him and she startled to giggle again. There was something about that laugh, something that told him she could be a much happier person under other circumstances.

"What?"

"That shirt. It's so tacky."

He looked down. "Yeah. Kinda suits me though!" Without thinking, he reached down and grabbed the bottom, pulling it off. "Better?"

"Um." She looked away, her mouth twisting in an expression that could only be embarrassment. "Yeah, much."

He frowned. Taking off his shirt wasn't subtle, not that he'd meant anything by it. "I know! Let's make dinner for David. It'll surprise him."

She brightened at that. "Sounds like a plan." Sherri jumped up and headed for the kitchen. He followed after, pleased with himself. How dangerous could cooking be? Of course, he'd rarely tried on his own.

Chapter Fifteen

"No! Don't hold the knife like that. My goodness. You'll chop off your fingers," she scolded. And it wasn't the first reprimand. James doubted it would be the last. She pushed him aside and relieved him of knife duty.

"Sort the lentils."

"Huh?"

Sherri laughed, her smile brighter than he'd ever seen it. "You know. Pick through them and make sure there aren't any rocks. Then put them in the colander and rinse them off in the sink."

"Oh. Okay." He felt so...useless here. David always did the cooking, and when he was away on trips, James ate out...in the woods like he'd been doing since he was fifteen.

She chopped the onions, humming lightly under her breath. His eyes began to burn.

She wiped her left eye with the back of her arm. "Whoa. Those are strong."

"You're making me cry," he joked.

"Hey, it was your idea to do this. No pain, no gain." She lifted the cutting board and scraped the onions into the pot of hot olive oil. The smell was delicious. His stomach grumbled. He hadn't eaten since dinner the night before. He watched her turning sausages in a pan and hurriedly dropped all the lentils in the colander by the sink, sure she wouldn't catch him.

"What's it like...?" she asked.

He turned on the faucet and swished the lentils around guiltily. "No rocks!"

"Um, no. That's not what I meant. What's it like to be able to...to change what you are."

"Oh." He turned off the water and stepped back, running a hand through his hair. He supposed he ought to shower, get cleaned up. Make himself a little more presentable. "To be honest at

first, it really sucked. It sort of happened one night when I'd snuck out of my room. I could hear my dad shouting for me to get my ass back in, and I wanted to go back, but I knew I couldn't. Never again."

He snuck a peek at her. She was still turning the sausages this way and that.

"The first time I changed, I didn't mean to do it. It hurt real bad, like someone was breaking every bone in my body. But with time, and with understanding the change and not fighting it, the pain isn't as bad."

"But you don't like to be the way you are." She looked over her shoulder at him, eyes searching, trying to understand.

"I like the way I am right now, with *you* here." He shoved his hands in the pockets of the stolen jeans he had on. They nearly fell off.

"But most times, you'd rather be a wolf."

He shrugged. "Yeah. Running wild. Totally free. No responsibilities. Can you blame me?"

Her brow crinkled a little as she thought that over. He could see her reasoning with herself, trying to get past the shifter thing, trying to accept it. "I guess that makes sense."

"Need me to do something else?" He gestured at the stove.

She quickly shook her head. "No, no. I got it here."

"I'm gonna jump in the shower."

"I won't be joining you," she said mockingly.

"Good. You're not invited. Keep away from me, you *vile seductress*."

She giggled at his sarcasm. "I'll try."

Chapter Sixteen

David came home to the appetizing scents of food. His mouth watered. Cooked onions, meat, savory spices. That had never happened before. The fire was already crackling in the hearth, and James and Sherri were at opposite ends of the couch chatting with each other like old friends. He stood there, feeling the realization sweep over him that she was back, in his house, in his den, and she looked happy.

James was the first to notice him, shooting off his sarcastic mouth with his greeting. "Hi, lover, how was your day?"

David snorted. "Fine. Lots of sales with Codelco."

"The pharmaceutical super-marketer strikes again." James pretended to shoot a ball at an invisible hoop. "He shoots. He scores! And his *partner* doesn't have to face a mortgage payment for another three months."

"Ha, ha." David trailed around the couch and peered at the table, investigating. If his roommate had cooked, he'd promptly feign illness and scrape his plate of its contents, hiding them in the trash. "What's the occasion?"

"We thought you'd appreciate someone else cooking for once." James had a smug look on his face.

He raised an eyebrow, wary. "*You* cooked, right Sher?"

"Mostly, yeah."

"Whew. Had me scared there for a minute. I thought maybe he was plotting my death."

"I am, but I need you 'til the house is paid off. After that, your days are numbered, buddy."

Sherri stood and came around the couch, wordless. Afraid to move, he watched as she set her arms around him and hugged. James made a funny face and mouthed the word: *lucky*.

"I promised him I'd stay until you got in." She stepped back and eyed the front door as if she might bolt.

So he guessed the hug was preceding her goodbye. "Stay for dinner at least."

"All right, but then I need to head back. I have work tomorrow, and I'm behind now after missing half of today."

They all settled in at the table, one on either side of her. James was behaving himself, which he knew was just a ploy to keep her there as long as he could. David didn't care. He was glad for it. He ate and listened to the extended version of what had happened to her with Roger.

"Thanks man," he said across her to James, his tone sarcastic. "I'm glad you left without telling me where you were going. At least it turned out well."

Scowling, his roommate said, "I'll tell you next time. Promise."

"You guys are funny. Like brothers."

"More like father and son from my perspective," David added."

"Yep. I'm the younger, sexier son that's old enough to do whatever he wants. Pisses my father figure off."

Sherri downed her drink, her eyes wide for an instant. Her plate was empty, and David was starting to get a tugging feeling in his gut. She'd leave soon. She might not come back this time. She stood to collect the dishes. He followed her into the kitchen and ran the hot water nonchalantly, hoping she'd stay to clean up with him.

She did. Rinsing after he washed each plate. He scrubbed longer than was necessary, dragging out their time together.

"Will you come over for dinner tomorrow night?" he invited.

She set a plate in the dish rack. Picking up another, her eyes half closed in thought, she said, "Maybe. I'll let you know tomorrow."

"That's fair."

James joined them and started drying the clean dishes and putting them away. "Was nice to have you back for a little bit," he said, speaking so low it was difficult to hear him.

"It was nice to be here too."

"I left the folder of work by your purse."

"Thanks. I'll start on it tonight."

They finished up, and she retrieved her purse and the folder from the coffee table, but she didn't look anxious to go, her eyes scanning the room, the fireplace, stopping on James's face, then glancing back to David's. Sherri went to the door and opened it. She breathed in the chilly air and sighed as if its coolness pleased her somehow.

James pushed past David and took her waist, pulling her backwards into a hug. At first she resisted, her body tensing, her eyes pinched closed when she shook her head no.

David closed in and came in front of her, slipping his arms over her shoulders to hold her there. Sandwiched between them both, she relaxed. Her body molded to his, nipples tight from the cold. *Has to be the cold*, he told himself.

She held him with one arm, gently, not tight. He glanced down to see that her other arm was curled backwards, embracing James. *This is how it should be*, he thought. This was the only way she could stay, if she felt right about this, about them.

At the same time, he bent and kissed her right cheek while James kissed her left from behind. They both withdrew, all too conscious that this moment might have served to frighten her away again.

"Thanks guys." She started toward her car. Another long look before she got inside. He felt her staring at them again through the windshield, all hesitance now. Not until they'd watched her drive into the distance did they go back inside.

James tore off his clothes and dropped them in a pile. He promptly spread himself across the rug and basked in the heat from the fire. "That went well."

"Did it?"

Gloating, he closed his eyes, his smile devilish as usual. "I think it did. She'll be back tomorrow."

“Maybe.” David sat in the reading chair and pulled up his book, trying to do anything to keep his mind off of her. He couldn’t bear to get his hopes up.

Chapter Seventeen

Sherri sat at her makeshift desk in the motel and opened the folder James had given her. She read over his observations on the wolves. They were concise, written in a neat but left slanting print that could have belonged to an architect. He had catalogued each animal by its tag number and also by names he had given them. As she read over everything, she realized something more about James. In his words there was a desperate longing, a drive to fit with these animals, to make sense of them. But time and again his paragraphs would end the same way.

They are curious of me, but they don't approach. They watch from a safe distance as if they can still smell the scent of man on me. I am not a danger to them; that much I think they know. But I am not one of them. Not wholly. I can understand their rudimentary language. Barks, yips, howls of loneliness. But my own vocabulary is more advanced and they often cock their heads to one side, offering me a snort of disdain for not being able to understand. Whatever I am, it's not like them. Maybe that's what it appears to be on the outside, but we are not the same. There is no place I belong.

The last sentence was echoed so many times. In ways she cringed to read. She felt trapped...like James. Trapped in a place where she didn't belong. Sherri looked over the small motel room. It wasn't what she wanted, wasn't where she belonged, but she was comforted knowing that it was only a temporary place. James had no temporary place. He was stuck between two worlds, neither of which fit him, and he struggled to stay afloat in either.

She typed out an article about habitat and hunting methods, using the facts he'd gathered and omitting his personal struggle. In her mind she clearly imagined each wolf, not difficult to do thanks to his concise descriptions of their fur markings, even their expressions. When she finished the article and clicked send to e-mail it to David using her new account, she finally understood why these two men were so close to one another.

It was love, but it was also survival. Neither had a true place he belonged. Even though David appeared well adjusted to life in the human world, she knew the other side had to be calling to him. They found friendship and understanding in each other. And that was the epitome of love. That and acceptance.

She supposed their connection was something she could learn to live with. Accepting the other side of them though, she wasn't so sure of herself when it came to that issue.

Sherri shut down her laptop and went to bed. Curling up beneath the covers, she closed her eyes and relived that moment before she'd left them. The hug, the warm, all encompassing embrace. One man behind. One man in front. Both men wanting her and holding back. She had felt their arousals pressing into her body. Her body had responded in kind, slicking to receive them, calming to hold them. Then each had offered her a chaste kiss on the cheek, pushing her over the edge. She'd wanted to stay that night. But she was afraid. Afraid of being hurt. Not by one, but by both. How could a relationship like that work?

Three in the bed. Three in the house. Three in love and holding each other together like a family...like a pack. When one man was gone, she'd have the other. She would never have to be alone.

She hugged the pillow to her body and sighed. It was overwhelming. Sherri reached back and placed another pillow behind her, mimicking the embrace. "This feels good," she whispered, guilty to admit it, to face her desires. They seemed so decadent. So wrong.

And so right.

* * * *

In the morning she rushed to get to work, anxious still over what had happened the day before. She parked in the lot and scanned everywhere for Roger, Roger's car, anything that might be amiss. Satisfied he wasn't making a reappearance, she snatched up her purse and hurried inside.

Darcy looked relieved to see her. "You made it! How're you holding up?"

"Good, I think. Still shaken from it."

Darcy came around the desk and hugged Sherri. "Be strong. Don't let him stop you. I've had my share of crazy exes." She pulled back and swept her hair behind her ear. "File a restraining order. That way if he tries anything else, he's in big trouble."

"I will." She looked around and noticed the concerned faces in the offices. They all had been worried about her. This was a nice change after the paper she worked for in Safford. "Thanks, Darcy."

"There's something waiting for you on your desk." She smiled.

Sherri went to see what it was, Darcy following like a child on Christmas morning. A slim glass vase sat in the middle of it, three red roses inside. It was simple. Pretty.

"The delivery guy brought it early." Darcy was right behind her. "Is James that guy with the beer shirt that came by yesterday?"

Sherri flushed with embarrassment. That's how they'd remember him forever. "Yeah."

"Sorry. I read the note in case it was from Roger. I didn't want anything to freak you out."

"That was actually very nice of you. Thoughtful."

Darcy smiled brightly. "Okay, gotta go to work. See ya."

Sherri settled in at her desk, eyeing the three roses. They were all so beautiful, fat and lush, a deep red and arranged in succession: highest, one in the middle, and one lower. She took the small note off and flipped it open.

Every arrangement must have the principal of three: heaven, man, and earth. You are the heaven. I am the man. He is the earth that holds us up and binds us together. Three becomes one and one is three.

-James.~D.

She closed the note and wondered what Darcy had thought of it. Certainly its meaning would be lost on anyone else. Sherri had five more minutes before her shift started, so she e-mailed David to let him know she'd be over for dinner that night.

* * * *

As she drove up the winding road to the cabin, the sun set behind her, allowing the night to slowly come in and cool off the horrible heat that had collected all day. Every tree she passed brought in shade and a feeling of calm. When the forest took over the roadsides, Sherri felt a new emotion, something she hadn't thought to experience so soon after having it stolen from her. She hated to name it, holding onto the happiness it brought.

James's Jeep was parked in what she now knew was its usual spot. David's Mustang was still warm and ticking when she walked past it to the front door. She knocked.

It was David who answered, his blond hair damp from a recent shower, his face all smile. "Welcome home."

Home, she thought. The feeling fluttered in her belly, sweeping through her. "Hey, David. How was your day?"

"Lots of paperwork, not enough fun. James has a surprise for you."

She shook her head. "I'm scared."

"You should be. It's very frightening."

She giggled and stepped inside, breathing in the smell that was unique to the home. Pine, scents of good food, the mingled taste of the men's unique flavor in the air. The soap they used. Making herself comfortable, she sat on the couch and dropped her purse and the folder of James's notes on the coffee table. David sat next to her, keeping a safe distance away, letting her take any lead if she chose to do so.

"Thanks for the roses."

"Welcome. It was my idea, but I figured it'd look better if James's name was the only one spelled out."

"Good thinking."

She scooted closer, breaking past the invisible wall. He looked uncomfortable for a moment, his mouth tightening. She leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to his lips until they loosened, and he kissed back.

"I'll send you roses every day if that's the reward." He swept his hand over her cheek. "Dozens."

"I like the arrangement of three just fine. It's more than enough for me." She leaned in again, closing her eyes when he brushed his lips across her forehead. Her body felt like a livewire, sizzling with energy. "Where is James anyways? It's getting too sweet in here. I keep waiting for a rude comment or a snarky joke."

"He's still working on his surprise. It's out back, a little ways into the woods."

She stiffened, her imagination running wild.

"You'll like it. I think. It's your fault really. He's trying to cook. Be all domesticated."

"Outside?"

"Yep. Barbeque tonight. He said he remembered his dad doing that every weekend when he was a kid. Wanted to try his hand at it. A long time ago this cabin was a ranger station and there were campsites. He's down by one of the clearings that has a permanent grill. I figured it was best to get him as far away from our flammable home as I could."

"Smart."

"I think so." He reached around and slipped his fingers up into her hair, drawing her in to kiss her more soundly.

Sherri gave in. She relaxed and let him taste her. He pulled away too soon.

"So." His eyes flashed to the fireplace. "Is this the do-over?"

"Yeah."

"Then let's do it right this time. I don't want to mess it up like before."

She nodded. "Neither do I."

"Think it'll work?" He sounded skeptical.

She reached for him and meshed her fingers in his. He had big hands. Her little one was lost in his, carefully protected. "We won't know until we try."

"True." He pulled her up, and they walked through the hall to the back patio, an offshoot door by David's bedroom. The balcony was small, cozy, set with a little wrought iron table and three chairs. It was obvious one of them hadn't been part of the set. They'd added it for her. It felt oddly right. Out of place, but set in with the other matching two as if it had every right to be there.

Sherri scanned the woods and found James, standing over a small black grill. Gray smoke billowed up and she could smell the charry scent of meat grilling. "Steak?"

"Yeah. His favorite." He squeezed her hand and led her down the steps to the sloping hill they'd need to traverse to get to the cook. "I made some baked potatoes and some broccoli and cheese. Pineapple upside down cake for dessert."

"I feel the pounds piling on already."

"Nothing long walks in the woods won't cure." He stole a sideways glance to gauge her reaction.

"Knowing there're so many wolves here, I hope those walks of mine won't be unaccompanied."

"We'll try one tonight...if you don't mind staying late."

"Nope. Don't have to work on the weekends. I'm yours until eleven."

"I think midnight is more appropriate."

"Am I Cinderella?"

He chuckled. "Maybe you are tonight."

She resisted asking which one was Prince Charming. She knew the answer to that. David. James was the Big Bad Wolf, in more ways than one.

"What?" James shouted when they reached the edge of the clearing. "You have a lovely smirk on your face."

Sherri laughed. "Oh nothing. Just waiting to see if dinner's burned to a crisp."

Miffed, he went back to his duties, but not before his eyes strayed over her and David's clasped hands. She hoped he wasn't jealous. This was what they said they wanted, after all.

They sat on the concrete park bench, side by side. The men had set out plates and two dishes of food were covered with lids to keep their contents warm. A small cooler was perched at the edge of the table. She hoped there wasn't any beer inside. That wouldn't lead anywhere safe.

"How much longer?" David asked.

James shrugged. "Maybe a minute." He poked at a steak with his tongs. "I guess. I mean mine's fine raw."

Sherri gagged.

"Kidding!" he shouted. "Yours is cooked. Really done. Hope you like it crunchy." He flashed her a wide, rascally grin.

"Better than raw." She eased back against the edge of the table to watch him slap each steak onto a platter.

As usual, they settled in together to eat, David to her right and James to her left, his right hand resting on her thigh. David was less touchy, using both hands to cut his food into precise pieces. James stabbed his steak with his fork and brought it to his mouth to tear off a piece.

"You guys are total opposites."

"Yeah." James laughed at her comment and bumped her playfully. "Keeps it exciting around here. Besides, you might be on to something about lover here being gay. He cooks pretty damn good cake to be straight."

"That's rude," David muttered, glaring around Sherri.

Sherri didn't get how rude James was until they opened the cake's lid and found a large, uneven chunk missing. Like someone had scooped it out with his hand.

"Now *that* was rude," she said.

James whispered in her ear, "I was testing it to be sure it was safe for you to eat."

"Right!" She rolled her eyes. "I waited for the both of you to try the steak before I bit into mine."

He harrumphed, insulted.

David snickered and popped the top on a soda. "Still up for a walk after this?"

She pushed her plate away, full. "Definitely."

Chapter Eighteen

"I was afraid he'd run off and never come back," David said of James as they walked along a footpath in the forest. "Dad and I would go back to that same spot every weekend, coaxing him out with food, books, anything he asked for. We'd found someone like us, and it was too rare to let go of." The trees swayed, and wind whispered high above. Sherri felt safe, one man's arm hooked through each of hers. She was learning more about how the two men had met.

"He was always angry. Dangerous angry in the beginning. Sometimes he did run off. Totally distrustful of us. And I'd have to go find him. Took days. Weeks once."

"Pissed you off, didn't it?" James jibed, lowering his head to get his friend's attention. "Me making you have to shift like that."

David sighed. "Yeah. You always tested the line with me. I think you lived for the chase."

"I don't run off anymore though. We're family." James's free hand rubbed up and down Sherri's upper arm that he held. "Aren't we, Sher?"

"Um. Sort of. Well, I mean, you two are family, yes."

James groaned.

"Takes time," David whispered in a low hiss. "You're always so pushy, wanting everything right away. You have no patience."

"Why should we wait? She's right here. She's the one...for both of us. You know it." James scowled and pressed his lips shut.

For a long while they walked in uncomfortable silence, the night creeping in to cover everything in its dark embrace. Sherri didn't realize what the shushing sound was until they reached the little stream cutting through the woods.

"Here we are," David said, leading her to a bench. It was a tight fit with the three of them all seated there. Their closeness kept her warm.

"This is nice." Sherri looked out across the rushing water. She could see the silvery moonlight streaked in ripples. For a moment, she was afraid. They'd taken her far away from the cabin. She didn't know if she could find her way out alone if she had to, if something went wrong.

James rubbed the small of her back as if he could sense her fear and needed to ease it. The soothing sensation enveloped her.

David lifted her hand and ran the back of it across his cheek, ending with a kiss to her knuckles. "This place is special," he explained. "Because we're here, all together. And we want to tell you how much we need you. Of course he spoiled it already. You know how much we want you. But it's more than that. You make us both want to be something more than we are. Huge strides for James. Dream come true for me—an old, comfortable dream I never thought I could reach for."

James set his head on her shoulder, nuzzling close. He must have figured it was better to be quiet than say something else that would scare her.

Her traitorous body gave in right away, all those moments of daydreaming about what it would be like to have them both, to know they belonged to her and only her. This was real, not a fantasy, not a wandering of her deluded mind. She shivered. David moved closer.

"Why me?" she asked.

"I've loved you since the second e-mail, Sherri."

"The second?" she squeaked.

"Yeah. The first was a rather harsh critique of my writing."

"Oh yeah. That's right." She'd been in a foul mood that day, and brutally honest. "The second was much better." She ran one hand along James's leg. The other she hooked around David's waist. There was too much to hold on to. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

James hissed through his teeth. "Because he's a wolf?"

David only laughed at him. "Yeah. That was part of it. And you were always taken, Sher. Always someone else's woman. I

thought you were happy where you were, and I would never want to take that from you."

She nodded. "That's true enough. Still. I wish I'd known how you felt. Maybe it would have...changed things."

"Well, there was another reason. James. Anyone who loves me would have to be able to accept him...in some way. I never thought it would be like this."

"I haven't agreed to anything yet," she reminded him.

"You're here." James chided her with a playful shove. "That's agreement enough. Aiding and abetting."

"Now it's a crime?" She nudged him back.

"It's a crime *not* to accept us. Come on, Sher, look at you." He waggled his eyebrows. "You know you want us. I can tell." He breathed in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Yeah, you were made for us." He bowed his face to hers and kissed her, not the soft, timid kiss like David and she had shared at first in the cabin that evening. James's lips left no room for denial. He licked at her until she opened and let him inside. His tongue rolled and tantalized. It became too difficult to focus on anything other than his demanding mouth.

David's excited breaths warmed her neck from the other side, and then he too, gave in and started to kiss his way up her neck and cheek. She felt smothered by their passion, by their shared desire to have her—but smothered in a delicious, decadent way.

James pulled away, his smile gone, his eyes lowering as he went to plunder her neck from his side. David moved in to take up where James had left off. Before long, Sherri was moaning with each brush of mouth against her body, each circled touch from hands that explored and aroused her. She wished they were back in the cabin in a bed, not here in this impossibly cramped position.

As they lowered to lift her blouse and kiss her exposed skin, she curled her fingers into their hair and stared up at the sky. Tree branches hung as black shadows, but stars twinkled through. Her body felt light, hyper sensitive to James's lips, David's tongue,

fingers, palms, their low, manly groans of desire. She didn't know how she could resist this double seduction. She tried to remember all the reasons why she should, but they faded away like so many worries that had plagued her since she'd walked in on her ex.

Nothing else mattered but the two men with her. They wanted her. And she had known all along that she wanted them too. But to give in to this? Would she ever be ready?

David was the first to release her. He sat beside her and took her hand as if the moment of indiscretion hadn't happened at all. With a swift but playful nudge from David's shoe, James stopped too. He did growl, but Sherri only laughed at him.

"Eh, guess we better get back to the cabin," James grumbled. "Need to put the dishes away and all that."

"Yeah. It's getting late. She's only staying until midnight."

"Eleven." She thought her voice sounded strained.

"Midnight," James said with a laugh. "Come on. One more hour won't hurt you."

"I, um, I don't know about that. This was only a few minutes and I can hardly breathe."

James laughed, satisfied. He clasped her hand, and they all stood to make their way back to the cabin.

She questioned everything she thought she knew about love, about herself and what a relationship meant. Sherri grasped loving one man, devoting her life to him, compromising, sharing, working together. But two? Could it really work out? Did she have that much love to give? Could she compromise that much?

"You worry too much," James said. "Sometimes you have to look ahead and never look back. Just jump into what you see and let fate take over." His hand left her fingers as he ran ahead of them. The places where the moonlight danced through the trees lit up the footpath. She watched in fascination as he jumped high, his body reforming, blurring, changing, until he landed on all fours and darted away, a flash of fur in the night.

David's hand tightened on hers. "Sorry about that. Did he scare you?"

She stopped when they reached his discarded clothes, his shoes. Sherri bent to pick it all up, balling it to carry back to the cabin. "No. Not scared. Should I be?"

The wolf ran through the underbrush circling them once before he bounded away, yipping. He sounded happy. Happy go lucky, that was James all the way. A free spirit. Wild. And she saw that indeed he was much more himself in his wolf form.

"I had hoped you wouldn't be," David said with a relieved sigh. "Look, I know we're a lot to take in. James..."

"He's all impulse."

"Yeah. Good and bad."

"You could learn from him," she suggested, looking up at him through her lashes. "Maybe he's not so bad after all."

David hesitated. He ran a hand through his hair and half smiled. "You mean that?"

She nodded. "Do what it is you're wanting. Right now. Don't stop to think about it. Don't let the consequences, the reasons why you shouldn't...stop you."

"I would but, I'm not sure that's what would make you happy, Sher. Would it?"

"Hmm. I can't think of the last time I've been this happy. Confused, a little scared. Unsure. But happy, yes. I'm happy right now. With you. Both of you."

He broke out in a full smile then. "Okay. You asked for it!" David swept her up in his arms. She screamed, taken off guard. Out in the woods, the wolf howled, long and mournful. David carried her the rest of the way to the cabin, up the steps, through the door, and directly to his bed.

Chapter Nineteen

Sherri watched wide eyed as David stripped off his shirt, button by button. He set it across the back of the desk chair. He unzipped his pants, dropped them. Then his boxers. Kicking off his shoes, he said, "I want to lie naked with you in my arms. That's all I want tonight, Sher."

She nodded, words too difficult to form as she took in his well shaped body. Every muscle, every graceful line and curve...it was hers, belonged to her. *He's mine*, she thought with finality. *All mine*.

His cock was thick and jutting out from his body, aimed at her. She shook her head and giggled.

He laughed too before climbing on the mattress to ease in beside her. His fingers plucked open her blouse and undid the front clasp of her lacy black bra. He smoothed his hands over her shoulders, pushing her garments off. Then her skirt slipped away at the urging of his fingers. He took down her panties with his teeth, slowly dragging the satin fabric between her legs, down her calves, past her ankles.

David lay beside her, closing her in his strong arms so that she faced him. He kissed her forehead and pulled her against his chest. She held to him, lost in his heat and tenderness. It wasn't long before she started to drift to sleep.

That is, until James came home.

She heard the water running in the kitchen, heard the clink of dishes being washed and set to dry. The garbage disposal grinding. Footsteps in the hall.

Sherri waited, anticipating his shout of disapproval. When she raised her head to see what he was doing, she let out a startled gasp. Naked, he had already lunged for the bed and landed behind her, shaking the mattress.

David lifted his head up and snorted out a laugh. "You did the chores."

"Yeah. I got your back, man." With that, he scooted in behind Sherri, his cock as hard as David's, jutting at her ass. His right hand scooped up under her. His left rested atop her thigh. He nudged her with his whole body, a suggestive thrust that pushed her tighter to David.

She moaned.

This was better than two pillows in a motel bed.

For a time she drifted in and out of sleep and the heated passion that encompassed her. Both men waited, clearly wanting more, but allowing her to lead them. She felt James's lips on her shoulder in the place he'd bitten her. He dragged his teeth over the skin and kissed.

The clock in the living room chimed softly. David nudged her with his nose to the tip of hers. "Hey," he said. "It's midnight."

She sucked in a breath. "I'm already home."

"Are you sure?"

"Stop giving her second chances to go. She's sure!" James nipped her skin then, making her flinch. Her nipples tightened in anticipation. David's hand slipped between her thighs, testing the wet, hot heat pooled there.

"Are you?" he asked again.

"Yes."

"Told you she wants us." James nipped again, harder. She arched into him. He pushed back.

The fingers at her slit found her sweet spot and teased her, sweeping up and down, turning, testing every vantage. She squirmed until James's hand held her hips in place. He laved her neck with his tongue. Up he travelled until his mouth reached her ear. Every exhale made her shake with delight. He sucked her earlobe into his mouth, tracing the edge with his tongue.

David lowered to lick her breast, affording attention to the areola until she couldn't stand the teasing any longer. He pulled her nipple into his mouth, grazing it with his teeth before moving to the other. All the while his finger pleased her, and the hot

mouth at her ear continued to overload her senses with frenzied whispers.

She felt the drip of slickness from the cock at her ass. James was close to the edge, his whispers frantic, broken words of how much he wanted to be inside her, buried, connected, part of her. His hand left her thigh to grip his erection, sliding up and down. She reached back, placing her fingers over his.

Moisture slipped over his length. He let her hand take the place of his, positioning his fingers at her anus to slick the tight hole. "Relax," he whispered.

She breathed out when his wet finger edged inside her. He waited for her to loosen. In patient strokes, he stretched her opening to prepare her body to take him.

The finger at her clit kept an even pace, pulling her toward the edge of an orgasm. He was good at touching her, at pleasing her with his hands and mouth.

"Ready for me?" James asked.

She groaned a weak yes.

David lifted her left leg up over his and James moved in behind her, his cock guided to her ass. He pushed in slowly, thick and hard. She let out a held breath and waited to see what more they would do to her. David lowered, sliding down her body until her lifted leg was hooked over his shoulder now. He buried his face in her curls to lick her. She whimpered when the first orgasm pummeled at her body. He drove a finger into her pussy, holding it still as her channel contracted. Everything felt so tight and constricted. He pushed in another finger.

James thrust unexpectedly from behind. His body shook. She felt him tense up, shivered when the gasp that left his mouth blew over her shoulder. Heat emptied in spasms inside her body. The tightness eased.

David pulled himself up until the tip of his cock rested at her entry. He stared into her eyes while he pushed in as if ready to stop should she protest. The tightness was back, stronger now, like it would overpower her.

She winced.

He stopped.

Gritting her teeth, Sherri ground out two words.
“Don’t...stop.”

He pushed in, burying the length of his sex deep inside her moist depths. His rhythm was slow, careful.

She closed her eyes. Euphoria held her captivated, her body light and tingling all over as David built up speed. His mouth closed over hers in a clumsy kiss when he came. Both sets of arms tightened on her body. She cried out into his mouth, lost in the moment, too lost to care anymore that there were two of them, that she’d taken them both at once. It felt damn good.

All her worries fled...and stayed away.

She slept that night in the arms of the two men who had fallen in love with her. She didn’t want to question why or how it had happened. There was only the overwhelming feeling that she had found a place where she fit, had found a kind of love that was precious, unique. She didn’t have any nightmares at all that night, and when she woke in the morning with both sets of arms wrapped tightly around her, James snoring open mouthed, and David breathing softly at her ear, she stared at the ceiling of the bedroom and embraced the feeling she’d felt the night before.

She hadn’t wanted to name it, to accept it.

This was the feeling of being *home*.

Chapter Twenty

Summer slipped away with August. September passed. October brought the chill winds of autumn to breeze through the pine trees. Sherri walked hand in hand with James through the woods, his voice echoing as he laughed. They looked ahead at the path winding through the pines for a sign of the pack. The release wolves were back, easier for James to observe now that they'd taken up their haunt closer to the cabin. David was enjoying their presence.

A flash of white raced across the path ahead. Sherri pointed. "There he is!"

"Look at him go." James grasped his chin, rubbing thoughtfully. "He always did like to do that."

Another flash of gray-brown. Two more. Then the whole pack sprinted across. Sherri froze, a little taken aback by their sudden appearance.

"Don't worry," James told her. "It's all a game."

Further along they came to the bench and the meandering stream which was fuller now thanks to a recent rain. Sherri sat, James plopping down beside her. It wasn't long before the white wolf returned, eyes regarding them, tail high.

He sauntered to Sherri and rested his head on her leg. "Having fun?" she asked.

His ears pricked.

She ran her fingers over his thick furred head and gave him a scratch behind his ears. David had managed to find the balance he needed, shifting once every weekend to run wild. James had been spending more time in the house—occasionally fully dressed, but there was never a guarantee. Sherri always looked by the fireplace when she got home from work to see what sort of surprise awaited.

The men accepted her the way she was, sometimes full of spitfire and too frank for her own good. David encouraged her

creativity. James kept her from becoming too serious. He kept David from doing that, too.

The white wolf nudged James's leg.

"Do you mind?" he snapped, suppressing a ridiculous smile. "I'm sitting with my woman."

"Oh, go on," she told him. "I know you want to run with him." She waved her hand at the woods, dismissing them both.

James pulled off his favorite t-shirt, the beer one he'd stolen so long ago. He kicked off his shoes and took down his pants. Sherri shook her head when she saw he had nothing on underneath.

"What?" he asked, sounding petulant.

"I'm just not surprised."

"Ha. Yes, you are. I can tell when you're embarrassed." With that he ran off into the trees. She looked on as his body crumpled and shot away, covered with fur now. The white wolf tore after him.

She had found peace with their secret, peace with herself, and a home that was like no other. Loving two men was more than she'd thought she could handle, and everything she hoped it could be.

The End

About the Author

Redemption through love is a common thread in author **Anastasia Rabiya**'s stories. First published in 2007, she primarily writes erotic romance and dark fantasy but has also crossed into contemporary works. In addition to writing, she designs cover art for several small publishing houses: Amira Press, Sugar and Spice Press, loveyoudivine, Mundania Press (and its imprints), Purple Sword Publications, Whimsical Publications, and Whispers Publishing. She edits, line edits, and formats books for e-book release and for print for two small publishing houses. She is a lover of fantasy and enjoys exploring the dark worlds of vampires, werewolves, and mythical beasts usually unloved and unwanted until they meet that special someone. Anastasia lives in Tucson with her husband and three small children, all who keep her busy when she isn't sneaking away to the keyboard to write, edit, or work on another author's book cover. She is a member of Romance Writers of America and the Saguaro Romance Writers. To find out more about her, please visit her website at:

www.RabiyaBooks.com

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