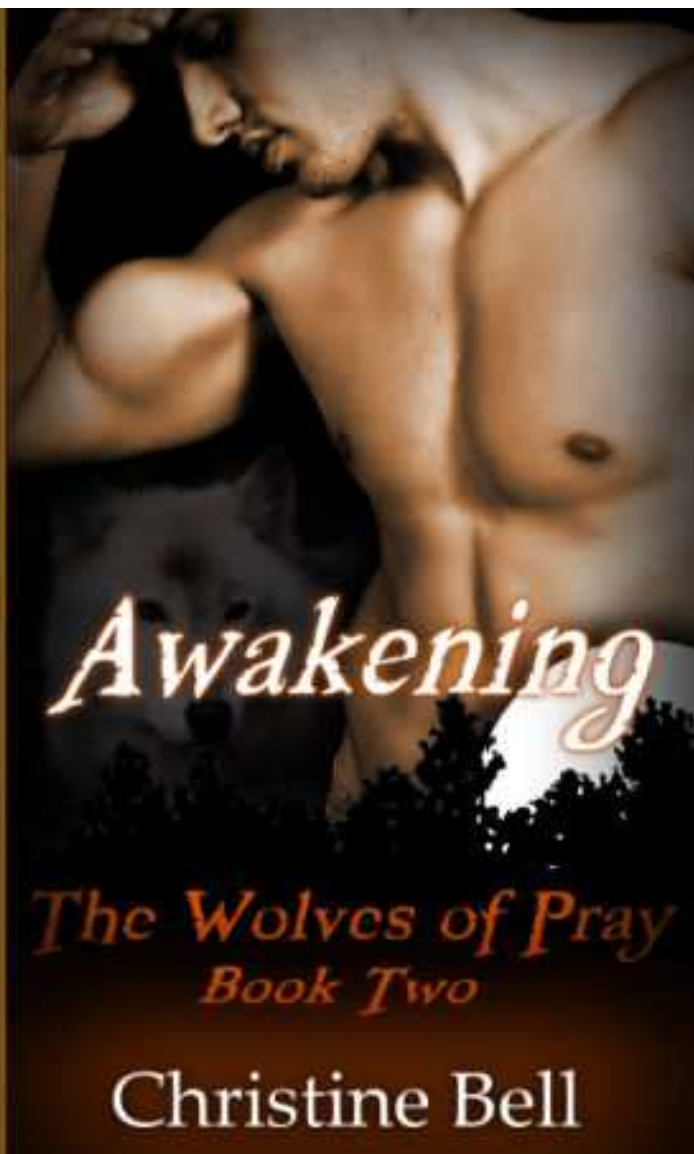


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Awakening

The Wolves of Pray
Book Two

Christine Bell

The Wolves of Pray:

Awakening

By

Christine Bell

Awakening by Christine Bell

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Awakening

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Dedication

I'm incredibly lucky because I've never lived a single day in fear of being truly alone, or hungry, or homeless or unloved. This one is for my parents. Mom, for telling me I could do anything and for thinking I'm the best at everything. Dad, who always made sure my oil was changed and still slips gas money in my purse, even though I'm almost forty. I love you both so much.

Chapter One

Pray, Montana, March 10, 2010

Chandra woke to the sound of footsteps stumbling up the stairs, then down the hallway past her bedroom door. She peered at the clock next to her bed and groaned. 3:00 a.m. It was time to ask Liam to move her quarters to the next wing over. She'd still be close enough if little Ryan needed to stop by at night to talk but far enough away that she could avoid having to hear the grand, late-night entrances his father, Sean, had gotten into the habit of making this past month. It was too painful being this close, watching him come apart at the seams a little more each day.

A feminine peal of laughter interrupted her thoughts. She closed her eyes as her heart squeezed painfully in her chest. *Oh, no way.* Sean had been lucky so far that Ryan had slept through his drunken entrances over the past weeks, but there was no way he could sleep through that. How could he do this to them? *To Ryan,* she amended quickly.

The laugh, nasal and high-pitched, sounded again, and Chandra rolled off her bed and onto her feet. The sympathy she'd felt moments before evaporated instantly under the white heat of fury.

Clearly, the two lovebirds were so entranced with one another they were entirely unconcerned about the feelings of the sweet little boy sleeping a few doors down. If they were making this much noise before they even made it to the bedroom, Chandra cringed to think of the kind of racket they would make once inside.

She was halfway out the door to give them a piece of her mind before she realized she was buck naked. Stalking quickly to her dresser, she grabbed a nightgown, jamming it over her head and adjusting it as she headed to Sean's bedroom.

She reached his door, growling as she gave it two sharp raps. Giggles erupted from the room, and the voices within modulated to the overly exaggerated whispers only drunkards can manage. Stumbling footsteps reached the door, then paused. It swung open to reveal a disheveled Sean. His honey curls were tousled, his shirt opened to the waist revealing his flat, hard stomach and bare chest. The verbal lashing she had mentally rehearsed on the way down the hall died at the sight of him. Blood roared in her ears as desire hit her hard, momentarily eclipsing her anger.

"See anything you like?" he asked in that drunken whisper as he weaved in place, leaning heavily on the door jamb.

Chandra tore her gaze away from his body and met his bleary eyes, mentally cursing herself for being distracted by his physique when she was so mad at him she could scream.

She rallied quickly, working up a fair imitation of an incredulous snort. "Uh, yeah, if I'm ever in the market for a drunken dumb-ass I will definitely look you up. But for now, I'm all set. I wanted to come by and tell you that you and your obnoxious friend are loud enough to wake the dead and, unless you want your son to come and witness what a pathetic mess you've become, you might want to shut it down for the night, Champ."

A petite but buxom blonde with improbably large breasts encased in an impossibly small shirt stumbled up behind him, wrapping her arms around his midsection possessively. The cloying scent of liberally applied Opium perfume was so overwhelming to Chandra's sensitive nose, she almost gagged.

Still, as angry as she was, relief coursed through her as it finally registered that the blonde woman was exactly that: a woman. She wasn't a werewolf like herself and Sean, so there was no way the relationship was heading anywhere serious.

Blondie pouted over Sean's shoulder and whined, "Seany, who is this lady? And why is she talking about me that way?"

"That's a great question. Who do you think you are, Chandra?" His eyes seemed to have cleared a bit, and his tone was challenging.

Not willing to back down, Chandra met his gaze with a cool glare. "Listen, *Seany*. Do the right thing here. Give Blondie some cab fare and send her on her way. And next time, have a little respect for your son and go to her place. The boy has been through enough without you confusing him by traipsing some woman he doesn't even know through here."

Sean's eyes grew icy. He shrugged the blonde off his shoulders and said softly, "Amber, why don't you go ahead and make us a drink. I'll be back in one minute." He grasped Chandra's wrists and pulled her down the hallway back into her own room, then shut the door behind them.

"Let me go," she bit out, wrenching her wrists from his grasp.

"You've overstepped your bounds, Chandra. I know you've been a sort of mother figure for Ryan these past few months. I appreciate all of your help with him, and I value our friendship. But no one knows or understands what my son is going through more than me. Apparently you forgot that he's having a sleep over at Niles' place tonight with his son, Spencer. He. Is. Not. Here. And I would never, ever bring home some one-night stand if he were. I resent that you would even think it of me."

Chandra's stomach lurched as she realized what Sean said was true. Ryan had told her about it earlier in the week. He was even excited about it, in his own subdued way. How had she forgotten? As she thought about it, she realized she hadn't seen him in the family room after dinner, but she figured he was out with Sean. It had totally slipped her mind.

Embarrassment refueled her anger. "Well, maybe I would have thought of that if you hadn't woken me up with your cavorting at three in the morning. Even if it wasn't for the woman, this has got to stop. You're acting like a jerk."

"And *you* are acting like a jealous mate."

The words hung heavy between them for a moment then Chandra's pale cheeks bloomed with furious color. He couldn't say why, but nothing in his current life gave him greater satisfaction than riling her

up. With her unruly main of auburn curls and her green eyes flashing fire, she looked like an avenging angel. If he wasn't so pissed off, he would have grinned at her, just to rile her up even more. But he *was* pissed. Who was she to judge him? She couldn't possibly understand what it had been like for him to lose Sara.

His stomach clenched painfully at the thought of his mate. He tried to picture her lovely face. It took a while these days, longer than it should have, and he hated himself for it. It was like a cruel joke.

For the first few months, he'd wanted to forget her, the way she'd smelled, her soft laugh and forgiving nature. He *tried* to forget, because thinking of her hurt too much. But she was part of everything around him. When he dressed in the morning, he would find her pink fluffy socks mixed in with his. Outside his bedroom window, her rose garden had continued to bloom. Christ, when he went to the bathroom, her fucking soap was on the side of the tub. He couldn't turn around without her presence right there, slamming him in the gut. And now? Nine months later, he wanted—*needed*—to remember her, or else it was going to be as if she'd never been there. What could Chandra know of that loss? And, almost as bad as losing her, was the knowledge that he had failed her.

With sudden clarity he realized that he was failing his son as well.

Chandra had recovered from her initial shock at his comment and let loose on him. "Jealous mate? *Jealous mate*? I wouldn't be your mate if you and Scooby Doo were the last two canines on the planet."

He didn't respond, caught up in his own painful revelation. The fire in her eyes died as she looked at him, the anger seeming to drain out of her.

"Damn it, Sean, how about caring friend? That's what I'm trying to be here."

He turned away and covered his face with his hand as he slumped down in the chair at the foot of her bed.

"You're right," he muttered. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I do the best I can with Ryan. I try to help him through this. But it hurts so much. It's almost like when my pain and his combine, I can't take it."

"The first few months after Sara died, I was in shock. I didn't even

really think about tomorrow or the fact that I would never see her face or hear her voice again, you know? But then watching Liam and Amalie together. And Thanksgiving. And Christmas. Now, a new year has begun. It's moving so fast. Lately I've been going out after he goes to sleep, and having some drinks to take the edge off. Because it's real now. The world just keeps on turning, and she's never coming back."

She walked to him, arms open, and cradled his head to her stomach, rocking slowly, murmuring words meant to comfort. He wrapped his arms around her hips and held on tight as she swayed, letting her warmth soothe his battered soul.

They stayed that way until a shrill voice from down the hall called out, "Seany, where are yoo-oo? Come out, come out wherever you are! I hafta use the ladies room, and I'm gonna get lost in this house."

Sean stiffened and pulled his head back. How to handle his would-be paramour's grating entreaties when he wanted nothing more than to stay here and let Chandra hold him for a little longer?

"Holy mother of God, is that a seal barking?" he deadpanned, hoping to lighten things a bit.

Chandra let out a guffaw and covered her mouth to stifle it. "Now, now, Seany, that's a terrible thing to say about your new girlfriend. You'd better get back in there before she wakes up the whole house with that honking."

Sean knew there was little chance of that. The house was huge and he, Ryan, and Chandra were the only ones with rooms in the east wing, but she was right. He had to figure out what to do with Amber now that he realized he didn't want her after all.

"Yeah, I guess." He stood and shifted from one foot to the other, trying to figure out what to say next. "Listen, thanks for caring. I really do appreciate everything you've done for me and Ryan these past few months. You've been a great friend." He hugged her tight against his chest.

As he squeezed her close, he realized with a start that she was wearing only a thin nightgown that barely covered her. And had she always smelled so good? Like clean sheets and sunshine. He fought the

urge to bury his face in her hair and gave her one last squeeze before he let her go.

She turned and started for the door to let him out. Sean followed a short distance behind. He tried not to stare, but damn if the cheeks of her behind weren't peeking out from the bottom of her too-short nightgown. It took all of his strength not to reach out and palm one of those cheeks to see if it felt as silky and plump as it looked. Something primal he thought had died with Sara stirred within him. Desire. Not your standard biological function variety that manifested itself in morning wood, wet dreams, or the ability to bump uglies with some stranger. No, this had nothing to do with basic biology. This was raw, uncut chemistry.

Sex had been the last thing on his mind for the better part of a year. But he was an animal, a wolf at heart, and werewolves had hungers that humans couldn't understand. Over the past few months, it had been a struggle. The instinct to mate, especially for a powerful, virile male, was strong. It was an internal, grinding need that had to be addressed. In the absence of it, he'd become irritable. The iron control he'd been exercising to this point was starting to slip, and he sometimes found himself having to focus just to stay in one form or another. When he got stressed, his body temperature rose, urging him to change. He had to get that under wraps, or it could be dangerous for both him *and* his pack. If he changed at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and humans found out monsters really do exist? Disaster. There's *nothing* more monstrous than a group of fearful humans. Just ask the "witches" of Salem.

He'd started going out to the bars a few nights a week back in January, at first hoping he could get drunk enough to dull the ache gnawing at him and get some sleep. He quickly realized that wasn't going to work, and over the past week or so had come to terms with the fact that he needed to find a fuck buddy. Good sex, no strings.

Then, in walked Amber. She wasn't really his type, but she'd been persistent. And that was good. He didn't want to burn for her anyway. He would take her out, show her a good time and, if all went well, have mutually satisfying sex. They had gone out two other times, but until tonight he hadn't been able to bring himself to seal the deal. With Ryan

out and his libido at a critical point, he was going to bite the bullet and get it done come hell or high water. Until Chandra had banged on his door.

And as she walked in front of him, hips swaying, the riotous, unfocused need that had been clawing at him for the past few months narrowed to a pinprick of pulsing energy with a clear target: Chandra.

As Chandra walked Sean to the door, she blinked back tears, calling herself all kinds of a fool for thinking that something had shifted between them when she was holding him. He had been quick to remind her she was a great friend, a buddy. That was all, and she better get used to the fact that there were going to be women for him. If not Amber, then someone else. He wasn't a eunuch, for crying out loud. He had the right to a private life and had the right to move on. She knew from her own experience how hard it was to be without a partner, especially for a were. As long as Ryan wasn't home, she should have no beef with his decision. She took a deep breath and turned to face him.

"Listen, I'm sorry I got in the way. You go ahead, have fun. We can talk more in the morning." She looked up and his warm, chocolate eyes burned into hers.

He leaned in close, his warm breath tickling her mouth. Her stomach did a flip but at the last moment he veered and kissed her cheek lightly. He pulled back a scant inch and whispered, "Good idea. See you in the morning." And with that, he turned, opened the door, and walked out, closing the door behind him.

Chandra stomped over to her bed, pulled back the sheet, and stripped off her nightgown before getting back into her bed. *What the hell was that?* It was like he was teasing her. She was used to his teasing, but this time it was different. He had looked...intense. She shivered as she thought of his hot gaze.

Her reverie was cut short as she heard a shrill voice down the hall exclaim, "There you are, Seany. I was looking everywhere for you!"

Chandra groaned and covered her head with the blanket.

Chapter Two

Chandra woke a few hours later, eyes scratchy and feeling out of sorts. As she rolled onto her back and stretched, she thought about Sean.

From 4:00 a.m. until the last time she had looked at the clock at 5:47, she had laid perfectly still, ears straining to hear his door opening and Amber on her way out. The sound never came. She'd been hoping that after their heart-to-heart Sean might send the little tart packing. Furious with herself for even caring what—or who—he did, she tried to focus on something else.

Chandra thought back to the first time she had noticed him, *really* noticed him. It had been a brisk night in October of previous year. She and her pack, the wolves of Big Sky Canyon, had come to Pray for a meeting with all the area wolves. After a rift had driven a wedge between their two packs, Chandra, never one to follow along blindly, had chosen stay with the wolf pack of Pray.

She closed her eyes as she recalled how hard it had been. Following their alpha's misguided example, her pack had been doing things that had not sat right with her for a long time. The events that night had been the catalyst she needed to break away from them. But it didn't stop it from hurting. She missed her former pack mates as they'd been forbidden from contacting her since she left.

No matter. It'd been worth it. She felt at home with her new pack in a way that she never had with the old. And, even in the short time they had been together, the friendships she'd made with all of her pack mates,

especially Amalie, Maggie, and Billy, had progressed to the point that they felt like family. Not to mention that her relationship with their alpha, Liam, was one of mutual respect and harmony. He was strong but approachable, firm but fair. Everything one could want in a leader.

Then there was Sean.

She had walked into the beautiful great room of the Pray house with her pack, tuning out the low buzz of conversation around her as she scanned the room. She stopped as her gaze was drawn to a man she didn't recognize. That had seemed strange because, despite being in different packs, everybody knew everybody to one degree or another. He looked haunted, his dark eyes staring into hers but not really seeing her.

Then she knew: Sean. Before Sara had died, his vitality had been almost palpable. She had seen them all together two summers before at a gathering by the lake. They were a beautiful family. Sara had been blessed with a cascade of corn silk hair and eyes the color of pansies in the spring time. Her temperament was as sweet as her visage, and Chandra had looked on as they played by the water with Ryan. She remembered thinking how lucky they were and made a secret promise to herself she would not settle for less than that when she finally chose a mate and had a family of her own.

Less than a year later, Sara was dead. Shot to death by a man who some of the area werewolves claimed was just a regular Montana hunter who had gotten lucky. Chandra doubted that. It took a little more than luck to kill a full-grown werewolf. And a true hunter would've assumed that a single, well-placed bullet would have killed a wolf Sara's size. Maybe two. By the time the pack reached her, she'd been shot eighteen times. To Chandra's mind, the only reason he would have kept reloading and shooting, ruining the prized, lily-white pelt in the process was if he knew one bullet wasn't going to cut it. No, Chandra, along with most of the wolves of Pray, felt like this man knew what he was doing. That he had somehow figured out, or at least had a hunch, that Sara was a werewolf.

While this terrible, life-changing tragedy played out, Sean had been out of town handling some pack financial business at Liam's request. He

had known instantly due to his bond with his mate that she was no longer alive and had rushed back. Ryan had been there with Sara and, at his mother's desperate urgings, had managed to get away when the shooting began. But in the end, his wife was dead, and she had still not been avenged.

"I failed my mate," he'd said to Chandra earlier.

She shook her head briskly to ward off the ghosts of the past focusing once again on the present. And *presently*, Sean was probably tangled beneath the sheets with that woman.

Chandra swung her legs over the side of the bed and hoisted her still weary body up. She took a few angry swipes at her hair with a brush, then pulled it up into a loose knot on top of her head. Then she brushed her teeth and threw on a pair of yoga pants, a sports bra, a tank top, and a zippered hoodie on over the top of it.

She left the room and was about to bound down the stairs to the communal kitchen for breakfast when a woman's tinny voice coming from behind her assaulted her eardrums.

"Hey, there, Red, whatcha doing?" drawled a disheveled Amber, coat and purse in hand.

Chandra sucked in a breath and pasted a smile on her face.

"Hello, Amber, aren't you looking lovely this morning? I'm going down for some breakfast." She attempted to cut their interaction short by turning back toward the stairs.

Amber didn't cooperate and instead continued. "Heading out front to wait for my cab. I think Sean's still in bed."

Lovely.

"Nice place you have here. Kinda weird all of you living together though. I mean, the house is big enough and all, and I know Sean said the bunch of you are partners and run the business out of the house and whatnot, but still...kinda weird having seven roommates, isn't it?" Amber's gaze stayed on Chandra's face longer than was comfortable.

Her Spidey senses tingling, Chandra manufactured a laugh and replied, "Yeah, more than a little weird. But our boss, Liam, is what you might call eccentric. He feels like the partners that play together will stay

together. And—" she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, glancing around as if to make sure no one was listening "—he's a slave driver to boot. He loves to call a meeting on a Saturday afternoon or some nonsense just to make sure we are all eating, sleeping and breathing the work, you know?"

A horn blared, and Chandra said a little prayer of thanks to the cab company for their impeccable timing. "Well, it was nice talking to you." With that and a breezy wave, she turned on the balls of her feet and jogged lightly down the stairs.

Once she was alone in the kitchen, watching Amber get into the taxi through the window, she let out a sigh of relief. She went to the cabinet and took out her favorite mug, one that Sean had given her for Christmas. It had a picture of Little Red Riding Hood on it and read *Anyone who confuses a wolf with their grandmother DESERVES to get eaten*. She filled it with the steaming coffee from the pot on the counter and sniffed it appreciatively before taking a deep swallow. It scalded her tongue, which healed almost instantly, but it was worth it as she felt the glorious jolt of caffeine skim through her veins, clearing out the cobwebs in her brain.

As she drained her cup and refilled, she thought about her conversation with Amber. She hoped she'd added enough detail to make their odd living arrangement plausible, but not too much that it had seemed forced.

This was why they didn't bring humans home to play with.

It wasn't forbidden to be in contact with them. Her pack did business with humans every day, and many of them had human friends or acquaintances. But they didn't let them get too close, or they began asking difficult questions like Amber had done.

Since she'd been with this pack, she couldn't recall a single time that any of them had brought a human home. Billy kept a room in town where he entertained lady friends. And despite the close bond they shared with their pack mates, Liam and Amalie had only been together for a few months and still only had eyes for each other.

Maggie and Chandra were as thick as thieves, so when they

wanted to spend some girl time or leisure time they spent it with each other. The rest of the pack followed suit, spending most of their time with one another or the other area wolves. Sean was Liam's second, and his right hand in all things. He was also the brains behind their business ventures. The others looked up to him and respected him. He needed to lead by example. In order to do that, it seemed like the unspoken rule was going to have to be spoken after all.

Cup in hand, Chandra decided to take the bull by the horns and headed back up the stairs. She knocked lightly on Sean's door but didn't wait for a response to let herself in.

The room was dark, all the shades drawn tight, and she could just make out the shape of him in his bed.

"Go away," he grumbled. "Wait, do I smell coffee?"

Chandra sighed and brought her cup over, setting it into his outstretched hand. She sat down on the bed next to him as he struggled into a half sitting position and began to drink her coffee.

"Headache?"

"Nah, not too bad. Strong constitution, you know. What time is it?"

"About nine o'clock."

He smothered a yawn. "I'm so tired. Long night, I hardly slept."

Chandra resisted the urge to jab him in the solar plexus. "Lovely. It's really none of my concern what time you and your friend finally went to sleep last night. You said we would talk more in the morning, and here I am. Let's get this out of the way so I can go for a run and get on with my day. First things first, you really shouldn't be bringing women to the house. I know it's none of my business, but she was asking me a lot of questions this morning."

Sean was still feeling a little bleary, but he couldn't help but notice the chill in Chandra's voice. She'd been the same way last night. One minute she was furious at him; the next she was comforting him in her arms.

Damn, but she'd felt really nice and had *looked* even nicer in her little nightgown. Even now, hair up and in her running clothes, she looked super hot. Her hoodie was unzipped, and a sliver of flat, hard stomach

was visible. He tried to ignore the creamy breasts, high and firm, pressed subtly against her sports tank. They were perfectly proportioned to her toned frame. She couldn't be more different from the top-heavy, flamboyantly built Amber.

Then he thought of Sara's willowy frame, her almost ethereal loveliness, and he realized why he had chosen Amber. She was the polar opposite of Sara. Maybe, deep down, he wanted to make sure he couldn't mix them up in his mind; that he didn't sully Sara's memory somehow by trying to replace her with a replica. It had been an error on his part. If he truly thought about what Sara would have wanted for him, he would have found someone who gave him some peace and some happiness. She would know that she could never be replaced.

He wasn't ready to move on completely, but if he was going to do this—and he was; he had no choice—he wanted to do it right, in a way that would add something positive to his life, not just some drunken grappling with a stranger.

Again he stared at Chandra, wondering how he was going to sell her on the idea, because he'd found the perfect candidate for his friend with benefits campaign.

Chapter Three

Chandra shifted under the weight of Sean's stare and cleared her throat as she turned away. "Well, if you don't feel like talking, I'm going to go get some exercise." As she moved to stand, he halted her with a hand on her wrist.

He put the coffee down on his bedside table in a slow, deliberate manner. "Why don't you wait a minute and I'll come with you?"

She swallowed hard, pulse pounding, wondering at her reaction to such an innocuous question. "Sure," she said, trying to keep her voice light. She stood. "But hurry up, because I'm going now."

"Not a problem," he replied with a wicked grin. He slid to the opposite side of the bed and jumped to his feet, totally nude. He walked over to a hamper, then grabbed a pair of sweatpants off the top of the pile. His back to her, he bent low and slid the pants on, sans underwear, mercifully covering his distractingly naked bottom.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Well? What are you waiting for?" Then he jogged out the door.

Chandra stood rooted to the floor for a moment, unsure of how to react. She had never seen him totally naked and was flustered by his nonchalance.

God, his back was gorgeous though. Tan, lean muscles trailing down to a firm ass that begged to be squeezed...

Whatever. If it didn't bother him, it didn't bother her, and she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of mentioning it.

She jogged to catch up to him. They met at the bottom of the stairs.

"You going to get sneakers?"

"Nah," he replied. "If we're going to run, let's run."

So they would run as wolves. *No wonder he had put on those ratty old sweats*, she thought. She looked regretfully down at her cute little Nike workout clothes and gave them a mental kiss good-bye. Wouldn't be the first, or the last, outfit she had ruined.

He took off out the door in a sprint, heading straight for the trees. She followed close behind. Surrounding the house was a square mile of thick woods. It was private property that belonged to the pack and was fenced around the perimeter. With a state-of-the-art security system complete with motion sensors and cameras at all entrances and exits of the property, it was one of the few places they were basically free to roam without fear of being seen. It was useless for hunting—werewolves typically marked fifty miles or more for hunting territory—but they were able to use the area for exercise and training.

Once they hit the woods, Sean leaped high in the air and exploded into wolf form, his sweats practically disintegrating around him. He was a glorious tawny color, large and powerful.

"Showoff!" she shouted.

Despite her teasing, her heart pounded as she looked on. She loved to watch him shift. He did it like that every time, with absolute abandon, as if he couldn't wait to get out of his skin. It was one of the rare times she saw a glimmer of the old Sean, crackling with life and power as he had before Sara died.

Chandra ran, full speed, and threw off her hoodie. She could feel her muscles lengthen and her bones shift into place as she leaped. She landed gracefully on the ground as a wolf and, without missing a step, tore after him.

They ran together, chasing one another, nipping and playing, for the better part of an hour. They stopped by the icy stream for a drink of water. As they caught their breath, Sean's mind touched hers, asking if she was ready to change back. For modesty's sake, they always stayed in wolf form until they returned to the house. There was a barn they kept just for

this purpose. It was outfitted with hot showers and clean clothes so that, in the event a hunt got bloody, they would be able to clean up before heading inside.

He was obviously yanking her chain. She sent him a mental eye roll paired with an “as if” snort and turned, loping back toward the house, his mocking laughter ringing in her head.

Sean watched Chandra go and followed behind. A red wolf with moss green eyes, she was strong and quick and as fine a wolf as she was a woman.

The first time he had seen her after Sara’s death, during Amalie’s trial, he’d wished Sara had been as physically strong as Chandra. If she had, she might have survived.

He shook his head and shoved the thought back into its box. Not the time for recriminations. He was sick to death of going round and around with “what ifs” and hypothetical scenarios that got him nowhere.

The barn came into sight, and Chandra pressed the button that opened the door with her nose. It swung wide, and she padded across the room, stepping into one of the stalls. Sean chose the stall directly next to hers. In a moment they were both back in human form. The shower wall came only to shoulder height, and they turned to face one another.

“You must be exhausted now after all the activity last night, and then running around on almost no sleep there, Loverboy.”

He smothered a laugh at her priggish tone. She refused to meet his eyes as she turned on the hot spray, and he followed suit.

“Nope. Not tired at all, I feel totally refreshed. That run was exactly what I needed to clear my head.”

She looked at him then. “Why her, Sean? And why bring her to the house?” Her green eyes searched for answers.

His focus wavered as her bare shoulders and neck wreaked havoc on his libido. He struggled to keep from moving closer to the wall so he could look down and see her whole naked body bejeweled with droplets of water. How long would it take to lick each one off with the tip of his tongue?

“Well?”

What had she asked again? Ah, Amber. "Why her? Because I thought I needed somebody I could never actually care about. And why bring her home? I don't know. Maybe so you would stop me—"

"I tried!" she cut in vehemently. "You would not be stopped."

"I didn't do it, Chan. I couldn't do it. I went back to the room and was going to send her home, but it was late, and she asked if she could stay. She was almost passed out, it was the middle of the night, and I felt like a heel for leading her on anyway, so I said okay. But I slept on the sofa. I called her a cab this morning and then got in my bed when she left. The end. I don't plan on seeing her ever again."

Chandra almost passed out with relief. He wasn't hers, but at least he wasn't anyone else's either. She could live with that. A little more time and she would get over him. She was glad she didn't have to do it while he paraded another woman in front of her face.

The steam rose around them as he moved closer to the shared wall of the shower. "Now that we have that out of the way, I wanted to talk to you about something. Something important."

"Oh?" The relief she'd felt a moment before curdled in her belly. Maybe he already had a replacement in mind. She steeled herself for the blow.

"See, Chan, I have a problem," he continued, his voice husky. "I haven't been with anyone since Sara died. I can't go on like this. I can't even function. But I'm not the type of guy to go around having sex with random women. So I've been thinking. We're both werewolves and in need of companionship. I know you haven't been with anyone since you came to Pray. For our kind, that's a long enough dry spell that it can't be comfortable. We care about each other and can be honest with each other. I don't know how you feel about me, but I think you're drop-dead sexy. If you're game, I'd like to see if we can't...help each other out a little."

She opened her mouth to reply, but he held up a hand. "Wait. Let me finish. If we aren't happy with the situation and either of us wants to back out or stop, or if you find one you want as your mate, then it ends and we remain friends."

Her pulse pounded as she stared at his beautiful, solemn face. He

was dead fucking serious.

“Before you answer, I want you to know one thing.” He looked at her hard, his eyes burning with need. “If you give me the chance, I swear I will rock your world.”

He paused for a moment and added, “What do you say?”

Chandra swallowed hard and actually began to shake. He was right about one thing: it had been a long time for her. He didn’t even know how long. His words alone had her body ready.

She didn’t mull it over or even give herself a chance to come up with the dozens of good reasons not to do it. Her instincts were telling her to take him however she could get him for however long he would have her. She reached her hand out and slowly turned the shower off.

Chapter Four

Sean's stomach bottomed out as Chandra reached out and turned the water off in total silence. *Shit*. She was so offended, she wasn't even going to answer him. He really screwed that up. She probably wouldn't even want to be his friend now, and things would be all weird between them. He felt strangely bereft at the thought.

He bent his head under the hot spray and heard the door of her stall close. He forced himself not to embarrass either of them further by watching her walk away.

Sean started in surprise as his stall door opened. As he pulled his head from under the spray and wiped at his face, Chandra stepped in, still naked, eyes wide, and shut the door behind her.

"I thought..." His voice trailed off as she leaned up on her tiptoes to nip lightly at his chin. She moved her lips down the line of his jaw, then to the pulse that was pounding in his neck. She bit down hard and touched his mind with hers. He gasped as carnal images, her fantasies, assailed him. Chandra, on her knees before him, holding him captive with her hand, sucking and licking him. Chandra on her back, legs wrapped around his waist and him sliding in and out of her pussy. Chandra straddling him, rocking on top of him, her wild hair flying.

His blood thrummed, and he groaned. "Oh, this is going to be so good, Chan. So damn good." He gently pushed her away from him, then grasped both of her wrists in his hand and held them above her head. He leaned into her, moving her hard against the shower wall, and pressed his

hips and chest to hers. She moaned and arched her back, straining to get closer to him as he rotated his hips and ground against her.

She began to pant, rocking against him, begging him, "Come on, Sean."

He continued, sliding his wet hand down her neck, over her straining breasts but skimming past her nipples. Down her flat, hard belly and between her thighs. He cupped her pussy and gave a firm squeeze, and she writhed against his hand.

She struggled harder against his wrist and whispered, "I want to touch you,"

He shook his head. Not to be denied, she looked at him and struggled in earnest now, pushing herself and him away from the wall with a mighty shove of her hips. He relished her strength as she made it difficult to hold her. He removed his hand from between her legs, reached around her back, and gave her a light slap on the ass. She stilled as he squeezed there and anchored her more fully against him once more.

"Again. Harder," she demanded. He growled low in his throat and again slapped her firmly. She gasped and arched her hips, tilting them forward and back against his surging cock.

He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head to clear it, then bent and sucked her raspberry nipple into his mouth. As he flicked it with his tongue and bit down gently, he felt her whole body tighten. Jesus, she was going to come just like this. They hadn't even kissed yet and already he couldn't figure out how he was going to stop himself from joining her. In that moment he didn't care. He wanted to watch her as she peaked for him.

Chandra's body stiffened like it was being held up by a wire that was about to snap. She closed her eyes. All of Sean's senses shimmered as he focused on the heat of the spray, the feel of her hard nipple against his tongue, and his swollen cock pulsing against her. He delivered another stinging slap to her ass and sucked hard, grinding against her, as the pleasure-pain sent her over the edge. She gasped, then chanted in a low voice, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Sean pulled away so he could watch her at the end. Her head

tossed back, eyes closed, she bit her lip hard, water sluicing down her face, neck, and breasts. He'd never seen anything so hot in his life. She was his equal in every sense. He didn't need to check himself or be afraid of hurting or scaring her with his strength. She was a warrior like him, and this was a dance, a tease, and a battle of wills as much as it was lovemaking. It was a new experience for him. He relished the freedom.

As she began to quiet in his arms, he lifted her easily by the hips. She followed his lead, wrapping her long, muscular legs around his waist, pressing her moist, hot core directly over his rock-hard erection.

She looked him straight in the eyes as she reached between them, took him firmly in her hand, and guided his swollen tip into her tight heat. His breathing grew shallow, and he strained to keep from thrusting too hard too soon. Then she reached out and grabbed his hair in her fist, pulling his mouth to hers in a hot, open mouth kiss. She pulled back slightly and traced his lips with her tongue before sucking his lower lip into her mouth.

Unable to hold back any longer, he squeezed her hips tight and slid himself into her, inch by agonizing inch until he filled her. The sultry steam that enveloped them felt almost cool compared to the heat of her body. He began to move in long, deep strokes, thinking each one would be the last as his body demanded release.

Urged on by the sounds of pleasure pouring from her mouth into his, he thrust harder, faster. Her consciousness brushed his as her body tensed, and she climaxed again. Liquid desire, hers and his, poured through him, a sensual elixir. He flexed deep, seating himself to the hilt as her inner muscles pulsed around him squeezing like an unseen fist.

"Damn it, Chan, you're killing me."

The heat and pressure coiled low in his loins and then it was over. He was coming hard, his cock jerking deep inside her as he groaned.

His breathing slowed, and he released her hips, sliding out of her. She let out a soft gasp. It took all of his concentration not to slide back into her and start all over again.

He set her feet on the floor and met her gaze. She wore a lazy, satisfied smile, and he was glad she didn't seem to have any second

thoughts.

He pressed his forehead against hers and said, "That wasn't too bad, now was it?"

She laughed. "No, I guess it was okay for a first time. Clearly we'll need some practice though. There's always room for improvement."

"If we improve on that, I'm pretty sure it'll kill me," he said solemnly. "Seriously, Chan, that was amazing. I feel so much lighter, happier, as if a dark cloud and all the tension was lifted away. Thank you."

He kissed her lightly on the mouth. "I hate to do this, but I have to go. I'm scheduled to pick Ryan up from Niles' house in a half hour."

"No problem," she replied with a quick smile. "I'll see you later on, maybe at dinner time then." She walked out of the shower stall, head held high, and grabbed a towel from the rack beside her. She dried off quickly, threw on some jeans and a sweater, gave him a jaunty wave, and headed back to the house.

Sean watched her go, feeling better than he had in a very long time. In a fuzzy haze, he dried off and dressed before heading out to his car.

He'd considered asking her to go with him, wanting to prolong their time together, but decided that he really needed some time alone to think.

He felt euphoric and fulfilled and very, very confused.

Chapter Five

As Chandra left the barn, she tried to be okay with the fact that Sean hadn't asked her to go along for the ride. He'd been up-front from the beginning. She wasn't his mate or even his girlfriend. They were friends, and she needed to make sure she didn't let the bonus stuff go to her head.

It wasn't easy to do, though, as little tremors still rocked her. Every detail played like a movie in her head. The line of his jaw, the feel of his skin, the way he filled her so perfectly. She'd felt so safe wrapped in his arms, face buried in his neck. Even now, she felt boneless, fluid, like mercury.

Big deal; good sex. Get over it, you sap.

Wrapped in her own world, she was halfway to the house before she noted the strong scent of Opium lingering in the air. Puzzled, she inhaled deeply, and again the overpowering perfume crowded her senses.

Amber had left more than an hour before. Out here in the open air, the scent should have been almost imperceptible by now. Especially since Amber had only went from the door to get into the taxi.

Chandra's hackles rose, and she picked up her pace, jogging lightly toward the house. Surely everything was fine.

Then why was her heart pounding so hard?

* * * * *

As Amber Jansen stepped into her little Victorian house, she looked around nervously. She couldn't shake the eerie feeling she was being followed. That whole weirdness at Sean's had her totally spooked.

She put her tote bag down on the table and made some nice herbal tea to soothe her nerves. Then she went upstairs, scrubbed off her day old makeup, and changed into jeans.

Back in the kitchen, she sat and sipped her tea, waiting for Wheeler to show.

When he had approached her at the bar where she worked as a burlesque dancer a couple of weeks before, she'd been skeptical. But once he'd produced half the money up-front—five thousand dollars cash—she'd put aside her reservations and went with flow.

He'd explained that he was a private investigator hired by a coalition of victims in a string of large-scale burglaries over the past year. Millions of dollars worth of paintings, antiques, and jewelry had been stolen, and he had finally found the culprits. Unfortunately, there was no concrete evidence. He needed someone on the inside to get some information, get a look at the property, perhaps snap a few pictures to start building a case to present to police.

He'd given her a picture of Sean, told her where to find him, and said that her job was to get to know him and wrangle an invitation to his house. If he didn't take the bait and wasn't interested in her, as long as she'd given her best effort, she could keep the five thousand. If she got in, managed to get a look around and some basic information, maybe a few pictures, he would follow up with another five.

At the time, it had sounded like a pretty sweet deal. And with the creditors and tax collectors breathing down her neck, threatening to take the house her beloved Nana had left her, it was a no-brainer. Besides, he'd assured her no one would get hurt. In fact, she was doing her civic duty.

But as she waited for Wheeler to meet her, Amber started to second-guess herself. First off, Sean had been really sweet to her. Even though they hadn't slept together—the original plan had been for her to feign passing out, but his chivalry had made that unnecessary—he had offered her his bed, given her cab fare, and treated her with more respect

than she deserved. Especially considering she'd played the blonde bimbo routine to the hilt.

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment as she recalled the look of disdain on the redhead's—Chandra—face. Clearly, Amber's act had been very convincing, but for some reason that didn't make her feel any better.

She gave a snort of self-disgust. What did she care if some cat burglar thought she was stupid anyway? Not only that, just because Sean had been charming and seemed genuine, it proved nothing. He could have been as insincere as she. And Chandra sure did seem jumpy when asked about their living set up and business interests. All that combined with the truly staggering amount of expensive art and furniture in that house did make Wheeler's story seem plausible.

Amber had to wonder, though, if the items had indeed been stolen, who would be brash or stupid enough to leave them out like that?

She pushed down her doubts and rifled through the stack of pictures and notes she'd compiled. Not for the first time, she found herself preoccupied with the images she had taken of the interior of the barn.

Why would anyone have a dozen outdoor showers?

Maybe to wash off any evidence, change your clothes, and burn anything related to your crimes?

Again she gave herself a mental shake. None of it mattered: her job was complete. All she had to do now was hand the information over and collect her money then she could move on. She wouldn't dwell on it. Resolutely, she shoved the pictures into the bag in front of her and zipped it closed.

If only she could keep herself from dwelling on what else she had seen, something far more strange than some outdoor showers.

Stop it, Amber. Lack of sleep and a few drinks the night before had made her disoriented. That was all.

She looked up with a start as the kitchen door swung open, heart skipping a beat as her eyes lighted on a familiar but unexpected face.

* * * * *

As Sean entered the house with Ryan following behind, he embraced the warmth that enveloped him. His time with Chandra had been magic, and he was seriously hoping they would be able to go for round two later that night.

Almost groaning aloud, he tried not to think about how sexy she was.

It was more than that, he mused. She was a really great woman, vital, strong, caring, but not coddling. She was exactly what he needed in his life. Their arrangement was going to work out perfectly.

He tried to think of the last time he had felt so good, before Sara had died, for sure. His heart clenched in his chest then, but it was quickly replaced by a bittersweet warmth as he turned and looked at their son. His angelic face was so like his mother's and, in that moment, he knew. It didn't matter if he had to look at her picture to remember exactly what she looked like because the best parts of her would be with him forever.

"Whatcha looking at?" Ryan asked quizzically.

"Just you, Buddy. You look so much like your mom sometimes."

Ryan's regarded his father warily. "I thought we weren't supposed to talk about her."

"Yeah, well, that's going to have to change. See, it was hard for me to talk about your mom after she died because it hurt so much. But I'm thinking maybe it's time we start. What do you think about that?"

Ryan looked thoughtful for a moment. "Yeah. Yeah, I think it's a real good idea, because I don't want to forget her, you know?" At the end, his voice clogged with tears, and Sean knelt before him and hugged him close.

"We won't forget her. We'll never forget her. I'm sorry that I haven't wanted to talk about her, and I am so sorry that my own sadness kept me from seeing how much you needed to. But I promise to do better, okay?"

Ryan nodded earnestly and wiped his tears away with a fist. "Okay."

"Now, come on, let's go get some hot chocolate and take it upstairs. We'll get a bunch of your baby pictures from the attic and spread them

out on the bed and talk about all those great years that we got to spend with your mom. Did you know when you were a baby, you were so small we used to give you baths in the sink?"

The boy's laughter skimmed over him like a song as they chatted and teased. And for the first time in almost a year, Sean felt truly, honestly happy.

Chapter Six

Chandra walked into Amber's house as if she had every right to be there. As she stepped in, she wondered again if she should call Sean or one of her other pack mates. More than likely Amber was upset because Sean had dumped her and had wanted to spy on him. Did that make Amber a stalker? Yes. But was she dangerous? Probably not. Not only that, but Sean had plans with Ryan for the day. If she told him about what had happened, he surely would have insisted on coming with her, and she didn't want to interrupt his time with his son.

She briefly considered calling Billy but didn't want to embarrass Sean by broadcasting his near indiscretion, so she was on her own. She could handle this. In fact, it was probably better for her to be alone. She'd feel Amber out, ask her a few questions, and make sure she hadn't seen anything incriminating that would tip her to their true natures, and then she would warn her off à la "Hands off my man, biatch." Chandra would go off on her merry way, and everything would be cool.

If Amber did see something she shouldn't have, well, Chandra would cross that bridge when she came to it.

Amber started visibly when she saw her. Grabbing the chair across from her, Chandra flipped it around and plopped down, straddling it backward. "Hey, there, Amber. Mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

"Chandra? Wh-what do you mean? And what are you doing here?"

"Look at me."

Amber met her eyes and tried to look brave, but Chandra could smell her fear. "I am going to give you one chance. One. Chance. If I don't like your answer, I swear to you, you're going to wish you were never born."

Chandra indulged in a feral smile as Amber's throat worked.

"Let me tell you what I know so far, that way you don't waste your one chance on a lie. I know you didn't really leave in the cab this morning. When I went inside after my run, I happened to look up at one of the security cameras and saw you walking out of the driveway and getting into a car parked on the street. That was two hours after the taxi left, supposedly with you in it. Curious, thinking maybe you'd left then come back for something you had forgotten, I rewound the tape and saw that the taxi was empty when it left, save for the driver. So you pretended to leave this morning and basically hung around and trespassed without informing anyone of your presence. That seems like highly suspicious behavior. Now, I'm going to ask you once again." She stopped short as a faint scent tickled her nose. She began to rise as Amber cut in.

"Listen, I didn't mean it..." Her voice trailed off as her gaze flicked to something over Chandra's shoulder.

"No!" Amber called out, but before Chandra could turn, a sharp pain registered in her neck, and her world went black.

Amber stared incredulously into the face of the man who had hired her. "What did you do to her? And how did you get in here?" she asked in a strangled whisper.

"She's fine," he said as he walked across the room, a dart gun in his hand. "It was just a sedative." He crouched in front of Chandra, who was bonelessly slumped over in her chair. He stared at her for a long moment, then turned to face Amber, his eyes burning with an almost feverish light. "She followed you. I had hoped, but I couldn't be sure... Oh, what a specimen. She's perfect!"

Amber's body began to shake as she looked into the face of a madman. "No, no, you can't do that to someone. I'm calling the police like I should have done when you first came to me with your crazy offer." She reached into her purse for her cell phone but froze when she saw the look

in Bill Wheeler's eyes as he pointed the dart gun in her direction.

"As soon as you get the chance, you go ahead and call the police and tell them about how you trespassed on their property, took pictures, and spied on them. But she and I will be long gone by the time they get here, and you'll be the one in the cell. You're knee-deep in this."

He screwed his flushed face into a twisted smile, obviously meant to reassure her. "Do yourself a favor and forget we ever met. I know it doesn't seem like it right now, but I'm the good guy. You don't know what you're dealing with. Don't you see? I'm not the monster here."

He stood, grabbed Amber's tote bag from the table, and took a quick look inside. Nodding with satisfaction, he stuffed it into his briefcase, then extracted a length of rope and a piece of cloth. He made short work of tying Amber to the chair, then gagging her.

As he finished, Chandra began to stir. He quickly walked over, extracting something from his pocket while he moved. Amber tried to scream as he jabbed the barely conscious woman in the neck with an obscenely large syringe.

Surely a needle that size would kill her.

Sick with guilt and dread, she watched Wheeler half-lift, half-drag Chandra to the door. She struggled against her restraints as the door closed behind them.

What had she done?

Chapter Seven

Sean sat in the great room with Liam and Billy discussing a lucrative real estate deal they hoped to close on later that week. He and Ryan had had a great day together, and he was looking forward to spending some time with Chandra after dinner.

All in all, things were right and tight, and he was feeling pretty pleased with himself when a vision flickered in his mind. It was so very faint he could hardly make it out. He tried to bring the vision into focus, shutting out Liam's and Billy's voices, but it was blurred, fading in and out.

Strange. It looked like Amber. Tied to a chair. Again the image dimmed.

Sean felt Chandra then, her essence trying to touch his mind. Her fear and confusion rippled through him, but it was unfocused.

One thing was for sure: something was terribly wrong. For a single moment, he sensed a male presence, heard a low, muffled voice. The image flickered once more like the tail of a firefly then she was gone.

"Hey, man, you okay? You look a little pale," Billy asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Sean jumped to his feet as he mentally struggled, trying to grab hold of the link, but it was no use. His heart was pounding so hard he thought it might explode.

"Someone took her. Someone took Chandra."

He moved like lightning, heading to the door, letting out a roar so

loud it shook the rafters. Liam and Billy followed close behind.

* * * * *

Chandra opened her eyes and groaned. The room was spinning. Even the dim light of the bulb swinging overhead intensified the throbbing in her head. *What had happened?*

She tried to focus, taking in her surroundings. Nothing looked familiar. She tried to sit up straight but couldn't. Despair momentarily paralyzed her as the realization hit: she was chained. The animal in her throbbed, the bone-deep hatred of being trapped stirring up a dangerous concoction of fury and fear.

Chandra gathered every ounce of self-control she possessed and clamped down hard to control her panic and stave off the impending change.

Taking a deep breath, she assessed what had happened. The last thing she remembered was talking to Amber. She had scented a human male nearby but before she could turn around, she was shot by something in the neck.

Judging by the way she was feeling, she must have been tranquilized with an elephant gun or something. How long had she been out? It was around dusk, so it couldn't have been more than an hour.

Chandra tested the thick chains at her wrists, then her ankles. They didn't budge. *Titanium*. She was strong but not that strong.

She briefly contemplated unleashing her beast, then dismissed it outright. While the change would increase her strength and agility to some degree, she had no idea if she would be strong enough, even as a wolf, to break the shackles. She could end up in worse shape than she was right now, with her large paws mangled by the too-tight shackles. And even if she was willing to take that risk, her assailant could be watching her right now. To change form in front of a human was a violation of Supreme Law. The penalty for such a crime could range from a serious physical punishment to exile or even death. Worse, allowing humans to know of their existence could potentially put all of her brethren in mortal

danger.

Changing was not an option.

Hating the feeling of being trapped but knowing it couldn't be helped for the moment, Chandra closed her eyes and tried to rely on her senses for some clues. She breathed in deeply, her sensitive nose capturing a medley of aromas. The scent of evergreens, ponderosa pines, and dripping sap coalesced to form an oh-so familiar bouquet. She was in the deep woods. The revelation comforted her to some small degree. If she could get out of the shackles, there would be no stopping her. She could change without fear of being seen and then she'd be home free. There wasn't a man alive who could catch her in the woods if she didn't want to be caught.

She opened her eyes and surveyed the room again more closely. Although it was dim, she could see it was very sparsely furnished. Small with unfinished oak walls, it was clearly one room of a small cabin. She'd run through probably a hundred miles of woods in the Pray area and seen as many cabins that would fit the bill.

Frustrated, she again closed her eyes and this time listened, allowing the sounds to permeate her consciousness. A myriad of forest creatures created a cacophony, but nothing stood out that would be helpful in narrowing down her possible location.

She was about to give up when she heard it: the babble of nearby moving water.

All right, so she was in the forest, in a small cabin surrounded by evergreens and pines, and within twenty-five yards or so of a brook or stream. She must have been transported by car and, even if they'd traveled quickly, her assailant would have spent a considerable amount of time getting her into and out of the vehicle. Not to mention the time it took to chain her up. Even if she'd been unconscious for an hour, she would still have to be within fifteen miles or so of Amber's house considering all of the factors that would have slowed him down. It wasn't much, but it was something. Now at least she could give her pack mates a couple of clues to work with.

She focused her mind and, casting her energy outward, once again

tried to reach for Sean.

* * * * *

Amber let out a muffled scream as her door burst open and three giant men barreled into her kitchen, Sean in the lead. He swore under his breath and quickly went around, untying the cloth that gagged her.

Before he could even ask, words tumbled from her in a rush. "Oh my God, he took her. He took Chandra. I am so sorry. I'll do anything, anything to help you. He's crazy. Burglars or not, what he did to her... I didn't know, I swear, I didn't know—" Her babbling confession stopped as the lump in her throat choked off any further words. Her chest heaved as she began to sob.

Sean bent low to face her, his voice tight voice. "Who took her?" he demanded.

Amber tried to speak, but no more words would come.

The tall, dark man with the golden eyes stepped in. "Sean, that's not going to help Chandra. You need to calm down. Come with me, let's search the house and grounds for clues and let Billy speak to Amber."

A look of understanding passed between the men, and the two moved toward the hallway, speaking in low voices as they began their search.

The one called Billy walked over to her. "I am going to untie you now, all right?"

He didn't wait for an answer but bent behind her and, with a jerk, snapped the ropes that bound her. He slipped one of his thickly muscled arms around her shoulders and the other behind her knees and lifted her easily from the chair.

The warmth of his body seeped into her, and she instinctively curled closer to him. The chills that had wracked her began to subside as she allowed the false sense of security to take the edge off her shock and terror. She needed to keep it together if she was going to help them save their friend.

Amber didn't protest as he walked her to the living room and sat

her in an oversized recliner. Why was he being so damn nice? She'd made an awful, terrible mistake that could cost Chandra her life. Fresh tears sprang to her eyes, and she bit her lip hard to keep them from spilling out.

Billy laid a blanket over her and sat on the floor next to her, rubbing her arm, giving her a chance to compose herself.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "He told me you were burglars. He told me I was helping."

"Start from the beginning, Amber," he encouraged.

She told him about her initial meeting with Wheeler, how they'd come to their agreement, and what she had done. "We need to call the police. He said I shouldn't because I'll be in trouble too, but we need to call the police. I don't know what he's going to do with her."

"We can't call the police. It's...complicated."

"What do you mean? Your friend has been *kidnapped*. Whatever you've been doing with all the stolen goods and whatever trouble it may cause you, we still need to call the authorities. What if he kills her? Or worse." Her stomach cramped as she contemplated all the horrors Chandra might face. Doubt assailed her. She didn't know who to trust or what to believe anymore.

"We are not burglars, Amber. I don't have time to get into it with you, but at the very least you need to trust that. This man...Wheeler...he's the villain here. And my friends and I need to find him. Give us twenty-four hours to save her. If we fail, you can call in the police and tell them everything. Please." His voice grew soft. "Her life might depend on it."

His deep blue eyes shined with sincerity and something else—something a little dangerous.

Then she thought of Wheeler and, in that instant, she made her decision. Billy might be a criminal, but Wheeler was insane. If she had to make a deal with the devil to get Chandra away from him, she would.

Because if Chandra died, it would be all her fault.

"Okay. What do you need to know?"

"What can you tell me about him? What does he look like? Did he ever give you any indication of where he lived or why he took Chandra?"

"I don't know. He said that I did a good job. That he figured I would get some interesting photos but deep down had hoped one of you would follow me back here. Then he said that she was a great specimen. I don't know what else he said. It was the ranting of a lunatic."

"*Shit.*" Billy's faced turned bone white as his eyes narrowed. If Amber had doubted that he was dangerous before, she doubted no more.

* * * * *

Sean and Liam had gone through the house quickly and finished walking the perimeter, having found only some footprints and tire tracks for their troubles. They'd caught Chandra's scent as well as that of the human male, so they couldn't have been gone long, an hour or so at most. Sean tried not to think about what could be happening to her, tried to focus on it as if it was a job—finding something that was lost.

They moved purposefully back toward the house, but Sean stopped short as his head hummed.

"Chan?" He breathed. She was reaching out to him. He pressed back, strengthening their link. *Are you okay?*

I'm okay, but I am chained and can't get free. Something real bad is going down.

Do you know where you are?

Deep woods, near a brook. Amber...she might be hurt. I don't know what her role was in this, but I don't think she's dangerous. I was at her house. He came there for me. I'm within twenty miles of there, I think.

A vision of a cramped, dimly lit room permeated his thoughts, and he knew that Chandra was showing him her prison. He could see her legs and ankles bound by thick chains. His gut twisted with rage. His vision blurred, and his bones began to shift, but he fought it, dragging in a deep lungful of air.

More. I need more. Come on, think! He pushed, letting his desperation get the better of him.

I don't have any more. The sharp edge of her panic-laced fear sliced through him.

He pulled back a bit and tried to calm her. *Okay, it's okay. We're going to find you. Me, Liam, and Billy are going to come get you. Hold tight, I'll stay with you as long as I can. Who is he, Chan? Have you seen him before?*

Oh my God, he's coming. Sean, he's coming. The link wavered as her concentration faltered. All he could feel was her icy terror.

Stay with me, damn it! Let me see him.

The link was fuzzy, like the grainy footage of an old movie, but he saw the door to the dingy room open and man step through holding a gun. He was tall, in his late forties, wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, and a satisfied grin.

He looked so normal. Then Sean noticed something white hooked to his belt buckle. Too large to be a rabbit's foot, it was—

Agony ripped through him as he bent at the waist, the urge to vomit overwhelming.

Sara.

Her lovely white paw on a chain around his belt loop. The vision shuddered and was gone.

"No!" he shouted. He felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him.

Liam stared, but Sean could not speak. They linked briefly and, as Liam saw what Sean had seen, his face crumpled in grief. They held onto each other and allowed themselves a moment to grieve the loss of Sara one more time.

Billy walked out of the house, his face ashen.

"It's him," he said, voice stark with pain.

"We know."

Sean lifted his head and met his alpha's eyes with his own. "I won't let him take her from me, too. I will not. And when we find them, he's mine. Let's go."

They moved, almost as one, toward the woods surrounding Amber's house.

A selfless soul, even from the beyond, Sara had unwittingly given them a clue to Chandra's whereabouts. She'd been killed about ten miles from where they stood. They had combed those woods many times since her death and knew the dozen or so cabins in that area. In all likelihood,

Chandra was in one of those cabins. If they could get there quickly, they could still catch her scent and have a chance of finding her.

Unable to contain himself another moment, Sean began to run full speed. He leaped high in the air and changed in flight, Liam and Billy a few steps behind.

Chapter Eight

Chandra fought hysteria as she stared at the paw on the man's hip. She only hoped she'd broken the link between her and Sean before he saw it. So this was the monster that had killed Sara. But why? And what was he going to do with her?

"Hey, there, missy. Awake now, finally? I gave you enough juice to kill a rhino, and it only kept you down for an hour. I'm very impressed. That's a good thing." His tone was upbeat and excited, which chilled Chandra to the bone. He was obviously insane, and that scared her more than anything else.

"The more you impress me, the more incentive I'll have to keep you around," he continued. "We're going to be doing a lot of tests over the coming weeks to see what exactly you are capable of. We can do it the hard way, or we can do it the easy way. Your choice."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, you sick bastard. What did you do with Amber?" Chandra asked, relieved that her voice didn't reveal her shock and fear.

He looked affronted. "She's fine. I tied her up and left her there. She's no threat to me. She doesn't know where I live or even my real name. Besides, I wouldn't hurt a woman. What do you take me for, some kind of animal?"

"What the hell do you call this?" she asked, gesturing at her shackles with her a nod of her head.

"You can't fool me." His voice dropped to whisper as he moved

into the room, never lowering the gun. "See, I know what you *really* are. I always knew you existed, but I could never prove it. Then, I saw it with my own eyes, a little one. I watched them hunt for a while through my binoculars, him and the white wolf. And the damndest thing happened. He changed. *Changed*. Into a human, for just a second. I was all set to take him and started to move in close for the shot, but the white one came out of nowhere. I had no choice. It was her or me. Once I got her back here I did some tests, tried to salvage some proof, but by that point she was nothing more than a dead wolf."

He paced, warming to the topic. "I knew then that I needed a live one. So I watched and waited and did my research. Saw the men from your ranch searching the woods around the spot where I killed her. Could've been a coincidence, but when I looked into your living arrangements and began to watch the strange comings and goings, I was pretty sure. Your security setup made it difficult to find proof then I got my little spy and, after that, it was child's play."

He pulled out her shredded sports bra from his pants pocket. "This and some pictures of the barn, and I knew I had the right folks. Amber made the perfect bait."

He absently rubbed the paw at his hip, sighed with regret, then shook off his reverie, giving her a broad smile. "Shame. But no matter, though. I have you, and soon enough everyone will know the truth."

Chandra tried to think of anything but Sara and pushed on. "I think you need to see a doctor." She forced the words past her numb lips, managing to affect a pitying tone despite her growing anger. "Clearly, I'm nothing more than a normal woman. Surely you can see that?" she implored. "I don't know anything about a wolf being killed. Hunting isn't a crime, but kidnapping is, and it's taken very seriously by the police. If you let me go now, we can forget this ever happened." She forced tears to well in her eyes, hoping she looked pitiful while she bit back her fury. Maybe if he could see her as a human being, like him...

His hand shook slightly, and his voice took on an edge of hysteria as he spoke. "I wish people would stop saying that to me. I don't need a doctor. I *am* a doctor. And you are a monster. A clever one, I'll give you

that, but a monster nonetheless.

"Now, you and I are going to get to know each other a little better. I'd hoped you would cooperate, hoped maybe you would even want me to try to cure you, but if you won't be nice..."

He walked toward her, pulling a wicked looking needle from his pocket.

* * * * *

Sean held his nose firmly to the ground as he moved through the forest. The pack had spread out over a three-mile area around where Sara had been killed and were in constant mental contact. No one had caught Chandra's scent yet, and they were preparing to move to another section of woods when a sound caught his attention

He pricked his ears, listening intently, opening his thoughts, and pressing outward for Chandra. Again, nothing. He had been trying to reconnect with her since they left Amber's house, and he was terrified because he had received no response. He held onto the hope that she was sedated again or somehow distracted.

He wouldn't allow himself to think of the alternative.

A sound came then, and this time it was clear. Chandra, barking and snarling. His heart leaped. He turned to the noise and broke into a run, sending out the call to his pack mates.

They had found her.

* * * * *

As Wheeler moved toward her, Chandra knew she had no choice. She had to risk changing as she could not—*would not*—allow him to drug her and perform God knows what grisly experiments on her.

Hoping buy herself a moment or two with shock value, she burst into wolf form in an instant, steeling herself for the pain in her wrists and ankles.

Three of the four shackles gave way. The fourth was still on her

right hind leg, stuck tight, above the joint. She rolled to her side desperate to get out of the submissive position she was in and stood on the bed using her three good legs. A low growl worked its way from deep in her throat.

The doctor had stopped mid-stride and stared in awe. "Amazing. I knew it. I *knew* it!" He lowered the needle, putting it back into his pocket, and instead aimed the gun at her. "I was going to give you something mild this time, but I can see that isn't going to work." He closed one eye and fixed her in his sights.

She would not allow him to render her helpless again. Chandra steeled herself and wrenched her body hard to the side just as she heard the gun go off. The bone in her hind leg snapped, and she howled in pain. Fighting through the agony, she pulled her limp, malleable leg from the chain.

Chandra looked up to see the doctor struggling to get another cartridge into the gun and set up for second shot, but she wasted no time. His wild, terrified eyes met hers, and she leaped from the bed, snarling as her jaws closed over his gun-wielding arm like a steel trap. He screamed, and the gun clattered to the floor.

A sharp sting in her side registered through the fury, and she looked down in despair to see the doctor's needle protruding from between her ribs.

She'd gambled and failed. Not only was she helpless, she'd also exposed her pack to a madman. She should have let him kill her.

As her vision grew blurry, she reached for Sean one last time before slipping into oblivion. *Run. Pack everyone up and run. So sorry.*

Chapter Nine

So sorry.

Chandra's thoughts blasted into his consciousness, then faded away an instant later.

Sean let out a haunting howl. Could fate be so cruel as to take her from him when they were so close?

He covered the last few yards to the old, rickety door and launched himself into it, smashing it to pieces as he entered the house. He followed Chandra's scent to the bedroom and stepped inside.

She lay motionless on the floor, her face covered in blood. Heart in his throat, he ran to her side, sniffing and licking her face tenderly. Not her blood. She was breathing, he realized with relief. He scanned her body quickly for injuries and noted her leg twisted at an awkward angle. Painful but not life threatening.

The rest of the pack entered the room and surrounded her, snuffling and licking her gently.

His overwhelming relief was eclipsed by ice-cold fury. Sean met Liam's eyes. *Get her home. I'll be there shortly.*

We go together, Liam responded curtly.

I need to do this alone.

Without waiting for a response, Sean followed the scent of fresh blood out the back door. He padded forward, intent on the hunt, the beat of his animal heart the only discernible sound.

As the scent of blood grew stronger, so did his rage. It pulsed

through him like a giant, seething beast, all consuming.

A subtle movement caught his attention. Narrowing keen eyes, he spotted him.

Crouched low behind a bush was the man who had killed Sara, the man who had hurt Chandra, the focus of every shred of anger and pain in Sean's battered heart.

His vision blurred into a haze of red. All conscious thought fled as he allowed the wolf to dominate, eclipsing every last bit of humanity in him.

Letting loose a feral snarl, he launched into the air, clearing the twenty feet that separated him from his prey.

A terrible scream echoed through the darkening forest.

* * * * *

Chandra awoke to a warm sponge being dragged across her skin. It was lovely. She sighed contentedly as she felt gentle hands pulling a sweet smelling T-shirt over her head. *Sean's*.

She gasped and came awake with a start, sitting up quickly. She was rewarded with a pounding in her head that took her breath away as everything came rushing back to her.

"Sean?"

"I'm here, Chan, I'm right here," he said, reaching out to grab her hand.

"You found me," she croaked. "And you saved me."

"I found you, babe, but *you* saved you. The bastard had taken off bleeding like a stuck pig by the time I got there. You were great." There was a note of pride in his voice.

"Is he...?"

"He won't ever hurt anyone ever again," he said with a grim smile.

"Good. Sean, about Sara, I'm so very sorry." Her eyes filled with tears.

"It's over. It's finally over." He leaned close and pressed a light kiss to her forehead. "Get some rest. We can talk in the morning."

She flexed her right leg and was relieved to feel it was almost healed and only caused her a twinge of discomfort.

She lay back onto the pillow, still exhausted and drained from the combination of drugs, adrenaline, and the effort it took to heal. Still, she fought sleep. "Amber? Is Amber okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. She's here at the house. I think she's still in shock. Billy is watching her. We have some decisions to make about her. She saw some things, but that's for another day. For now, everything is good. You're alive and home, and everything is real good."

"Good. Yes," she mumbled, her eyelids fluttering one last time before she drifted off to sleep.

She awoke in the middle of the night with a start, heart pounding. For a moment she didn't know where she was, and fear gripped her. Taking a slow, deep breath, she calmed herself. Everything was okay. She was home, in her bed.

Sean's strong arms tightened around her waist. She turned to face him, returning his embrace.

"Hey, there," he said, his voice husky from sleep.

"Hey, yourself."

"Feeling better?"

"Yup. Almost like new." She began to pull away, conscious of the fact that she was treating him like her mate. He hadn't signed on for that, and she wasn't going to embarrass herself by being the needy woman smothering him just because they'd had sex.

Sean held her fast. "Where are you going?" he asked, then swept his hand down to her hip, anchoring her close.

"Mmm," she sighed and fought the urge to rub against him.

"You're asking for trouble making noises like that."

Her pulse spiked at the thought of such trouble, and she gave into her urge, arching toward him. She groaned as the hard length rode her hip. She leaned forward and kissed his neck, inhaling his delicious, musky scent.

"Chan, are you sure you're okay for this?"

"Yes. Oh yes."

She let her eyes drift closed as he leaned in to kiss her. His mouth met hers, hot and hungry, as she let her hand drift down his back, kneading his taut muscles.

"You feel so good," she murmured into his mouth. She pushed him away then, pressing him back into the mattress. She slung her leg over his hips and straddled him, slowly lowering herself until she could feel his thickening erection through the thin cloth that separated them.

Reaching down, she grasped the hem of her T-shirt and pulled it over her head in one swift motion, baring herself to his hungry gaze.

"Oh, Chan," he groaned, reaching up and cupping her breasts in his hands.

Chandra arched her back, whimpering as he caressed hardening nipples. Her hips began to rock against his as he pinched and teased.

He looked down at her and said through gritted teeth, "You probably want to stop doing that."

He pulled her down toward him and flicked her nipple with his tongue, then drew it into his hot mouth. Her hips pulsed faster against his, almost of their own accord.

Sean turned his attention to her other breast as his hand snaked slowly down her side, tripping lightly over her hip. The other hand slid between her thighs and, splaying his open palm over the cloth of her panties, he squeezed. Heat rushed to her core as she trembled above him.

With the flick of his wrist, her panties were gone, replaced by his warm, hard hand. He covered her moist heat and slid a finger deep inside. Her body tensing as he flexed rhythmically.

She pulled away, determined to have him all. Reaching between them, she cupped his swollen cock in her hand, lifting him to press against her. He probed, his thick length finding its mark. Flexing his hips, he pushed into her until he was seated fully. She tried to make it last, to savor the sensation, but she was overwhelmed. Her body clenched around him over and over as he worked his hips relentlessly. First long and slow, then faster, until she began to cry out.

Shuddering over him, her body exploded, gripping his cock tight as the waves crashed over her.

“I love you, I love you,” she cried as tremors wracked her body.

He stiffened beneath her, holding her hips tight in his hands as he surged forward one last time, his cock pulsing and jerking inside her as he came.

His face was still buried in her neck, his breathing heavy, when he mumbled something.

“What?” She gasped, still trying to catch her breath as she pulled away.

He stared up into her face and pulled her close again, brushing his lips against her cheek. “I love you, too, Chan.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. He cared for her, sure, she knew that. But love? An ember of hope flickered to life within her.

He held up a hand at her look of shock. “I know what I said before,” he admitted, “but after we made love yesterday, I felt so happy, so complete. I wanted to talk to you once I got my head together, but you were gone. Then, when I thought I lost you—” He broke off, closing his eyes.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she cupped his face in her hands.

“It’s over. It’s all over now. And I’m yours, and you’re mine. Forever,” she said.

“Forever,” he vowed in return

The End

Author Bio

Christine Bell is one half of the happiest couple in the world. She and her husband currently reside in Pennsylvania with a four-pack of teenage boys and their two dogs, Gimli and Pug. When she isn't acting as maid, chef, chauffeur, or therapist, she can be found reading about poker theory and vampires. (Not in the same book, of course. Wait, do they have those?) She hates bugs (except ladybugs on account of their cute outfits) and thinks clowns are creepy as hell. She *loves* writing about love and will never stop writing sexy romance stories, although she also hopes to one day publish something her dad can read without wanting to poke his eyes out with sharp sticks. You can find Christine at www.Christine-Bell.com or www.chrisbwritin.blogspot.com.