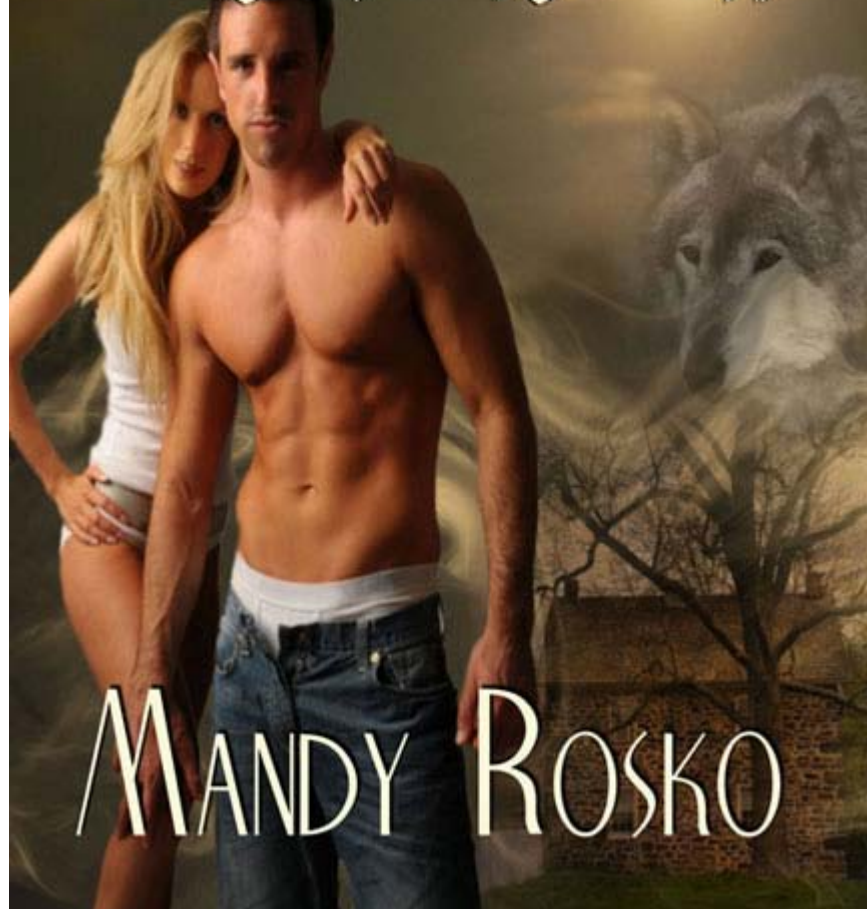


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

# mate of the wolf



MANDY ROSKO

## Mate of the Wolf

Shelley just wanted to get out of the city and relax by a campfire. She's pretty sure that has nothing to do with getting kidnapped by a werewolf, who happens to be getting stalked by a vampire princess who's out to skin him for his rare silver pelt. And they say show business is tough.

Michael Hunter has found his Mate after years of solitude and months of self-induced exile. He's the alpha of his pack, and his duty is their protection. With a vampire hunting him, things have gotten tricky, and it's not so safe for those he's charged with caring for. But now another person needs him, whether she knows it or not. Shelley is his mate, and he wants to keep her hidden with him. But when the vampire in question finds his hiding place, Michael is forced to make some hard choices.

**Genre:** Paranormal, Romantic Suspense, Vampires/Werewolves

**Length:** 21,265 words

# **MATE OF THE WOLF**

**Mandy Rosko**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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# **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to the ladies, and gentleman, of ORWA, who took me in and taught me all about e-publishing. Thank you ☺

# **MATE OF THE WOLF**

**MANDY ROSKO**

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## **Chapter One**

Shelley Star shifted awake before her eyes opened. She stretched, then froze. Something was wrong. Her air mattress was scratchy, grimy, and damp. Dirt, leaves, and grass.

A twig snapped. Pinecones crunched beside her head as she moved.

Shelley's eyes flew open.

She was face-to-dick with the biggest penis she'd ever seen. She screamed. The shriek flew into the sky and shook the birds from their nests and probably woke up all the critters in their little holes, too. She tried to scramble away, but her stiff limbs weren't as fast as her attacker, who came awake when she stupidly opened her mouth.

Large hands whipped out, cobra fast, and wrapped around her face, holding her mouth shut by squeezing her jaw. Hurting her. Oh God, any more pressure and the bones there were going to crack. Shelley's scream turned into a wail of pain and blood-pumping terror. She scratched at his wrists and arms, but there was no loosening of his grip.

With the sun directly behind him, the figure was as black as a shadow in an alley at night. Even if she managed to get away, she could never give a description to the police.



He was going to kill her. Rape her first, then kill her. No, beat her, rape her, and then kill her. She was dead, dead, *dead!*

“How did you get here? Who are you?” the figure demanded in a deep rumble. He shook her a little when she didn’t answer.

Must have forgotten he was holding her mouth shut. Tears leaked from Shelley’s eyes. She moaned—a pitiful noise under his big hands—and shook her head as much as she could.

His giant fingers slipped away from her mouth slowly, as though realizing his mistake. A flood of warmth hit her over the spot where his hands had been, blood returning to her jaw and lips. An unpleasant tingling followed. Though, she couldn’t pay much attention to that as Crazy-Guy’s hands moved to either side of her head. His naked body remained mostly on top of hers. She got the message—he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Don’t be scared. I’m sorry. I’m not going to hurt you.”

His soothing voice and gentle words didn’t bring her any peace. That was what all serial killers said. She was sure of it. They said it to lure their victims into a false sense of security right before they killed them, chopped them into little bitty pieces, and used those pieces for fertilizer.

Shelley coughed out a petrified sob and squeezed her legs shut. Like that would work, with those muscles of his. If he really wanted, he could force them back open again.

*Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.*

How did she even get here? Where was she? And what was she doing alone in the woods with this man?

“Are you injured? Do you have any cuts? Or animal scratches? Here, I’ll check.”

*No time to think!*

His large hands went to feel and touch her body, and Shelley’s knee flew up in response. Like a rocket blasting off skyward, it crashed into his groin.

His breath whooshed from his throat. His body spilled weakly overtop of hers. Shelley flattened her hands against his bare chest and pushed.

The man rolled off her and crumpled in on himself, coughing and holding his hurting flesh with both hands like he was afraid it would fall off. Shelley jumped to her feet before he could rise up and kicked one leg in front of the other in a clumsy race for her life.

Find the road. Find the road.

Twigs, leaves, and heavy branches from low trees slapped and scratched her face, but she didn't stop. She took a few pine needles in the mouth and stepped over rocks so sharp she felt them through her shoes, but that didn't hinder her either.

She would find the road. Where the road was there would also be a car. She was going to stop it and get the driver to take her somewhere, anywhere, just so long as she could call the cops. Then she would go home, sink into her soaker tub, stay there for forty-eight hours, and never think about this ever again.

A heavy force knocked her forward, and she fell down, down, down into the leaves, pine needles, and sticks. She tried to rise, but a huge weight on her back kept her immobile.

That man was behind her, on top of her again, pinning her. Shelley's shriek made her own lungs vibrate.

The large hand returned to her mouth, yanking her back and pressing her into his chest.

"Listen!" he hissed, snarling into her ear. "Don't ever do that again. Don't make a move unless I say, and don't make a sound unless I say. Do you understand?"

Her pounding heart and the pine needles stabbing her hands disrupted her thought process, but she did indeed understand. She nodded.

"Good. I want you to stay still and stay very quiet because I'm going to move my hand." He did as he said he would do.

Shelley gasped through her mouth and fought to breathe properly through choked words. “Please let me go. I won’t say anything to anyone. Just let me go.” Even to her own ears, she sounded like she’d witnessed a mob hit. Not good if she wanted him to release her.

Thoughts of a time, back home, when it had been discovered that a man had been prowling around outside her house, taking pictures through her windows, flashed through her brain. But he had been caught before she even knew of the threat.

Last she’d heard, however, his prison had been minimum security that consisted mostly of therapy and locked doors rather than iron bars and barbed wire fences.

Still, if he had been released, or escaped, she would have been informed. So who was this man?

“What are you doing out here?”

“Please let me go.” She could barely see through her tears. He wouldn’t let her go, she knew it. Her fists clenched into the needles on the ground, but even though they pierced her fingers, she couldn’t unclench her hands. She was dead.

Shelley let out a tiny shriek when he gripped her upper arms and his blunt fingertips dug into her flesh.

“What are you doing out here?” He repeated the words as though through a clenched jaw.

“I—I...I was hiking.” That’s right. She remembered now. Her agent had suggested it. Had said the country air away from the city and everyone who knew her name would be good for her, and ultimately, her career as well.

So much for that advice.

Shelley recalled the drive, nothing but her, the highway, and her loud stereo spilling Shania Twain for hours until she passed out of California State and into Washington, then just a little farther until she found the right spot. She’d set up a tent rather than rent a cabin. She’d been excited for that part, especially since she’d never done real camping before.

She had found and placed large stones to make a fire pit before inhaling the pine-scented air in a deep sucking motion and feeling more relaxed than she ever remembered. She had thought coming out here was the best thing she'd ever done for herself.

Then a deep, animal rumble had sounded behind her. She'd spun and dropped the tin kettle she'd been holding and gasped.

A gray wolf. A bundle of murdering muscles with shaggy fur and pointed teeth stood just inside her clearing, golden eyes staring at her.

Shelley hadn't known what to do. It shouldn't have even been there at all. She didn't know a lot about camping, but she'd researched and made sure all her food was kept in airtight containers to keep the animals away. But one was here now and looking right at her. Should she be still? Play dead? Or try and scare it away with loud noises?

The wolf had decided for her by lunging.

Shelley had grabbed a stick from her fire pit and swung the heavy log like a bat. She'd hit her target in the muzzle and the wolf had cried out as it went down.

Shelley made a similar pained sound as the fire that had been eating away at her weapon licked her hand. She'd dropped the stick without meaning to just as the wolf turned its glowing eyes back to her.

Shelley had turned tail and run like the Flash.

She didn't remember anything else up to waking up with this dangerous, naked stranger on top of her. Guess she wasn't Flash material.

Comparatively, Shelley would rather be eaten alive than raped and murdered in the woods.

"Hiking." He repeated her answer. "Did you come across any animals? A wolf?"

She turned her head as much as possible, trying to stare up into his face. She still couldn't make out any features because of the damn

morning sun, and craning her neck like that hurt. “How,” she swallowed and sniffed, “how did you know?”

“God.” He groaned as if in pain, like she’d kneed him in the balls all over again. His large hands went under her shirt and moved to lift it off.

Shelley shrieked and tried to punch his hands away, but it was awkward because he was still behind her. She kicked and twisted and screamed, but he was too heavy to be thrown off.

He pressed his palm into her back, pushing her into the dirt and making it all the harder for her to hit him. “Stop it! I said I’m not going to hurt you.” His harsh voice became softer toward the end of his sentence.

She didn’t believe him. “Don’t rape me. Please, I have money, lots of it. I’ll give you as much as you want.”

He turned her over but didn’t move to get off her. Though she still couldn’t make out his features that well, hills high into his hairline suggested raised brows.

“Rape you? I swear I’d never—what made you think that?”

She couldn’t contain herself. “*You are naked, on top of me, and trying to take my clothes off, you bastard!*”

“Jesus, lady!” he hissed, rubbing one of his ears with his palm.

She inwardly relished it. Good. She hoped she gave him permanent hearing damage.

His hands went palm down on the ground on both sides of her head, not seemingly bothered by the pine needles pricking him. It was a reminder of who was large and in charge as he leaned in close. “I’m only trying to see if you have any bites or scratches on you. This isn’t sexual.”

“Why are you naked then?” she demanded, though it didn’t sound as strong as she wanted with her shaky breath.

He sighed. “I can’t answer that, but I promise it has nothing to do with assaulting women in the woods.”

She didn’t believe him.

He must have seen that. “I’ll only lift your shirtsleeves. How ’bout that? You can check everywhere else on your own, and I won’t take off your clothes. But if you fight me on this, I’ll tie you to one of these trees and strip you naked so I can see for myself.”

She totally believed that. His hard voice gave no indication he was joking. Shelley let her body go slack.

He breathed a sigh. “Okay, I won’t hurt you.” His hands were gentle on her wrist, not gripping too hard or digging his fingernails into her skin. He used his other hand to lift the sleeve of her thin pink shirt.

She’d worn something with sleeves because she didn’t want too much skin exposed to the blood-sucking insects, and it was thin enough and made of that breathing material so she didn’t sweat all over the place in the heat. Now, she wished she were wearing a tank top instead so he could perform his little search with his eyes.

Ugh, never mind. Just the thought of a strange, naked man’s eyes roaming over her gave her the chills.

Wait a minute. That was right, her arms were covered. There was no way she could have cut or scratched herself against the trees while she ran. And if that wolf had bitten her, the wound would have bled right through her clothes.

What was he really doing?

“Relax. You’re tense. You’re working yourself up,” he said, lifting the sleeve of her other arm.

She could see his eyes now, which was strange because she was still blind to the rest of his face because of that damn sun. They were flashing, bright enough that she could make out their gray—no, silver—color. Was it even possible for eyes to do that?

Didn’t matter. Those silver eyes were extremely focused, as if he didn’t dare miss an inch of her flesh.

“What do you think I’m hiding?” she asked.

His eyes met hers, glistening brighter than ever. “You have scratches on your neck.”

Her hand went to the spot. A sting of pain flared. It wasn't wet but a little sticky. Blood, but not much. "It must've been from the tree branches when I was running." From both the wolf and later *him*, no doubt.

If he thought she didn't notice how he didn't answer her question, he was so wrong. She tried to move, to put distance between their bodies. His hand took her wrist and gripped it like an iron shackle.

"Let me go," she said.

He didn't blink. She could tell his face remained steady because the deep shadows blocking him from her didn't move. Then he shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Shelley tensed, panic rising inside her. "You're sorry?"

What the hell was *that* supposed to mean?

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I can't let you go."

One of his muscled arms reached under her knees, and the other wrapped around her back before she fully understood his words.

And his actions.

He hoisted her into the air and onto his shoulder. The ground blurred, and the wind rushed in her ears like someone was blowing in them nonstop.

No. That couldn't be right. The ground wasn't blurred, it was just moving really fast. So were his feet. He was running so fast with her that the wind flapped her hair around, made a haze of the earth, and made her deaf to everything but that noise.

Then the more important fact came crushing in on her. He was kidnapping her. Taking her deeper into the woods. Away from any help.

Shelley's scream rocked the trees.

## Chapter Two

Shelley's eyes snapped open. Light blinded her, and sleep left her like a blanket being ripped away, leaving her wide awake. How long had she been out?

Instead of a blue sky, a pointed cabin roof made of logs sat above her, staring at her as she lay on a fur rug of some kind. A fur rug, not the leaves and twigs from outside.

Her hands flew to the worn blanket that covered her body and lifted it away. Aside from her hiking boots and socks, everything she'd worn while out in the woods was still on her. Roberto Cavalli jeans, long-sleeved shirt, everything, all the way down to the gold rings on her fingers and the locket at her throat.

Her fingers felt nice and clean. There were still prick marks from the pine needles, but someone—him no doubt—had cleaned her hands until they were a healthy peach instead of covered in dirt and green slime from decaying leaves. She touched her blond hair. It felt smooth and dry, and no leaves or twigs seemed to be stuck in it.

She didn't understand. Why do this for her? Why clean her up and bother with blankets? To prevent infection? Get her to lower her guard? Who knew? She felt around the left side of her neck. Still tender, but a fresh bandage had been taped there.

She wasn't relieved, nor did her nerves ease up. Just because she'd been bandaged up and nothing had been stolen—and nothing perverted had happened while she slept—didn't mean she was safe while awake.

She hadn't rented a cabin and knew no one in the area who had one. So it could only belong to one other person.



The door opened, and Shelley whipped her head around. *He* stood in the doorway, dressed this time—thank God—in faded jeans, old brown work boots with the heavy heels and steel toes, and a maroon T-shirt. The sun was behind him again, but now it wasn't so bright or at the proper angle to shadow his face to her.

The beauty of his features actually threw her for a loop. A shadow of a beard darkened his square jaw. It was as dark as his thick head of shaggy hair, which didn't quite reach his shoulders. He hadn't shaved in a day or so, but she'd always found that look to be hot.

He stopped at the sight of her, his arms filled with firewood that went up to his chin. "I was hoping you'd still be out when I came back."

She turned. There was a stone fireplace in the wall barely three feet away. The embers burned low, which explained the firewood he carried. Long metal prongs leaned against the stone. Could she get to the fire pokers before he got to her?

He stepped inside, his heavy boots clomping against the floorboards.

She didn't want him near her. Shelley jumped up. "Where am I?" The sound of clinking chains reached her ears too late.

Her head snapped down. An iron shackle sat securely around her ankle, connected to a rusted black chain—a friggin' chain!—as thick as her wrist.

Animal fear sucked any intelligent thought out of her head.

He put the wood down on the floor without taking his eyes off her. He held his hands out cautiously. "I can explain that."

Shelley opened her mouth and shrieked. She ran at her captor and tackled him like a football player. She must have shocked his wits out of him because he flew off his feet and went down on his back. The bang from his body hitting the floor crashed with the impact of a crane dropping a truck.

Shelley pushed herself against his body, launching herself into a flying leap toward the door.

“Wait—”

Sunshine hit her face as she exited the cabin. Her legs were spaghetti weak. She stumbled down the three steps of his porch but managed to keep her footing.

She stopped abruptly. A thick tree line surrounded the cabin. No lake. No other cabins that she could see. Just a dark, dense forest.

“Wait! Come back!”

Shelley looked behind her.

Mistake! Her kidnapper had gotten to his feet and was running after her. She ran again. She tried to. The chain had run out of length, and it pulled her leg one way when she was trying to go the other. She lost her balance and was pulled down.

Shelley fell with a thud on her chest. The wind was knocked from her lungs, and she coughed, puffs of dirt clouding around her face.

Then *he* was on her. He turned her on her back and held her down, gray eyes flashing with annoyance. “Listen!”

Shelley struggled against him and screamed. She tried to at least. Her body was so weak she didn’t think he felt her pathetic blows, and the sound that came from her throat was more of an expulsion of air than a scream. He clamped his hand over her mouth to silence her anyway.

She bit him. Her teeth broke skin and blood splashed into her mouth. He yanked his hand away.

“Ah! Fuck!” He shook his hand out. Droplets of his blood spattered in the dirt as he got up off her, paced, and cursed.

He put his hand to his mouth to suck on the wound. Righteous glee surged through Shelley’s body.

Good. She was glad she hurt him. Glad for the taste of blood in her mouth even as she spat it out. If he tried anything on her, she’d bite off a whole finger.

With his back to her, he suddenly stiffened. His head came up and away from his hand, and his shoulders started to shake like an earthquake was rumbling under his skin.

Concern spiked inside her. Oh God. Was he having a seizure? She didn't know anything about him, so it was possible. What if he died out here? She would still be chained up and alone in a place that didn't look like it had a radio much less a phone to call for help.

Shelley got up and ran to him, but what she could do to help, she didn't know. She'd never had any medical training or even seen someone having a seizure before. Her hand clasped his shoulder. "Are you—"

He spun, and eyes that were suddenly golden glared at her from under a caveman-thick brow that hadn't been there before. His nose was longer, wider, and darker. Hair, long, gray, and black, sprouted on his face from his pores, and his teeth were as long and as pointed as a saber-tooth tiger's.

A tiny scream erupted from her throat, and she jumped back. He followed, his boots heavy against the ground.

Shelley tried to take another step back, but the chain jerked and halted her. She looked down and saw that, yes, she was at her limit.

"Ge' in the housh!" His voice was rough, deep, and slurred from the long teeth. "Lock the door an' shtay away from me!"

Good advice, but her feet were frozen.

Then his bones broke and snapped at odd angles. They sounded like tree branches breaking, and she winced and covered her ears. More thick hairs sprouted on his face and arms as he doubled over.

That did it. Shelley unstuck her feet and ran back to the cabin. A hideous howl followed her.

She rushed inside and tried to slam the door, but it wouldn't shut all the way.

The chain! The door stopped on the chain! Shelley dropped to her haunches and started yanking the chain inside in desperate tugs. She looked up as her kidnapper fell onto four paws.

Her heart stopped for some seconds before it began beating again in a frantic, drug-induced rush. God. She did not just see that. She did not just watch a man turn into a wolf!

The animal shook itself and seemed to settle before it turned its head and found her, golden eyes staring. Shelley froze as they locked her into place. The wolf seemed to be under the same spell.

It was the silver wolf that chased her last night. The one that had tried to kill her.

The animal came out of its daze, lifted its muzzle to the sky, and howled before charging toward her.

Heart in her mouth, Shelley pulled the chain the rest of the way with renewed vigor. The beast's nails dug holes into the earth as it charged, jumped clean across the porch, and smashed face first into the wooden door just as Shelley slammed it shut.

Shelley pressed her back to the door. Her breasts pumped and breath wheezed as she panted. What was that? What the hell was going on?

*Uh, plain and simple, you idiot.* There was a monster outside. And it wanted to kill her. Was *going* to kill her unless she thought of something fast. But she was still wearing the chain. Unless her kidnapper kept the key to it inside and not in the pair of jeans he'd just ruined, there was no way she was getting out of here.

Long nails scratched at the door outside. The wolf barked.

Tears streaked down Shelley's cheeks. "Go away!"

She couldn't give up. She just needed to calm down. That man, wolf, whatever he was, had kidnapped her. But wait, she knew exactly what he was. A werewolf. The word shouldn't exist outside of horror movies and the paranormal romance novels she read, but there was no other explanation for it.

He was a freaking real, live werewolf.

More scratching and barking followed by a pitiful whining sounded outside.

It was the whine that snapped her out of it. Why would it be crying? No way was she opening the door to find out.

The fireplace. The pokers. Not something that could be used to saw through her chain, but any one of them would make a suitable

weapon. She'd beaten the wolf before with the right swing of a log, so a metal poker would definitely make a better weapon.

Shelley got up and stepped one toe away from the door, trying to be quiet. The floor creaked and moaned like a dying man under her foot, and she cringed. Could this floor be any louder?

The door banged as the wolf threw himself against it. Barking, scratching, and whining renewed.

Shelley ran for the pokers, snatched one in her hands, and held it like she was about to go up to bat, same as she had the first time.

The animal outside continued to scratch the door, but no longer with the fierce determination of before. More as though the creature was losing hope she would make an appearance. More than anything, its painful whine, like that of a dog who only wanted the attention of its master, disturbed her.

She moved to the window to the right of the door and lifted away the lace curtain.

The wolf spotted her and, with a happy yip, jumped up from where it lay in front of the door.

Shelley leapt back as the wolf planted its paws on the windowsill to stand. Its wet nose pressed against the glass while its breath created a heavy fog.

It looked straight at her. Then the biggest tongue she'd ever seen rolled out of its mouth in the equivalent of a dog-smile.

It didn't jump through the glass and rip her a new throat hole. It just smiled and stared.

When she didn't come forward, however, the wolf stopped smiling, rested its muzzle between its paws, and started to whine again.

Almost as if it wanted her attention.

*I must be out of my mind to even consider it.*

Shelley stepped toward the door. The restless wolf pawed the window and resumed barking.

“I must be nuts,” she said to herself. “Yeah, I’m coming,” she said to the wolf.

She reached the door, leaned the poker against the wall, and gripped the handle.

The silver wolf jumped down, its paws thudding heavily against the porch. Its nails clicked as it moved to sit on the other side of the door, waiting for her to come out.

Heart pounding, Shelley took a deep breath.

You can still change your mind, she thought. She could stay right where she was and wait for the werewolf to go away or for help to arrive.

But the wolf let out another long whine, accented by a small, pain-filled howl.

Shelley sighed. She loved animals, and for whatever reason, this one was in pain. It didn’t seem like it wanted to harm her at any rate.

She opened the door.

This time the howl was a joyful one, as if saying, “At last!” And it launched itself at her.

Heavy paws landed on her shoulders. Fear prevented her from moving or screaming as hot dog breath panted in her face. At least the happy dog-smile was back, and its tail wagged side to side. She’d never owned a dog, but tail-wagging was always a good sign.

The wolf barked, and Shelley flinched, but was frozen to immobility as a wet tongue kissed her nose, cheeks, lips, and eyes. Everywhere that could be reached.

She turned her face, but the tongue followed, lapping her neck this time. She didn’t dare open her mouth to yell at it to stop in case that tongue got inside. Gross.

Shelley stepped back, but the beast followed. She gripped its coarse hair in her fingers and attempted to shove it off, but the wolf was stronger than she was.

Shelley tripped over her chain, screamed, and fell back on her ass. The weight of the wolf put her on her back.

The wolf continued to nuzzle and lick her as though nothing had happened. Shelley rolled on her stomach and shielded her head with her arms, and only then did she allow herself to laugh.

The wolf followed and stuck its wet nose in the cracks of her defenses, sniffing, trying to kiss her more, and whining when she resisted.

Shelley's laughter continued, became crazed. She couldn't stop. There was a werewolf on top of her, wagging its tail like an excited puppy and demanding her attention. "Stop! Stop it!"

The wolf groaned and dropped to the hardwood floor with her, rubbing his furred back and face against her since he could get attention no other way.

Shelley raised her head for a look. The wolf stayed where he was, still smiling at her.

"Huh." Shelley rested her face in her palm, tapping manicured nails against her cheeks as she observed her happy, panting kidnapper.

"This is pretty intense."

She reached out and threaded her fingers through the silver fur, and his heavy tail repeatedly pounded the floor in response.

Funny. It shone like real silver.

## Chapter Three

Shelley woke when the bed shifted. She must have dozed off after climbing in. The room was still bright, so not much time had passed. Maybe ten minutes.

Well, Mindy—her agent—had said she needed to catch up on her sleep.

She lifted her head from the pillows she'd been snuggling.

He was there. Normal again, sitting at the edge of the mattress, naked but for the sheet around his privates.

Confused emotions warred within her. On the one hand, she already missed her new friend. On the other, she kind of needed him as a man so he could release her.

His back was to her, giving her a view of strong muscles and a slim waist. He had the body actors and models spent hours in the gym, or hundreds of thousands of dollars in surgery, to get and maintain. She wanted to reach out and touch those shoulders.

Shelley shook the thought from her head. Not a good idea. Must have come to her because she was so mellowed out from her nap. Instead of touching him, she sank further into the mattress and allowed an appreciative sigh to escape her.

He turned, eyes widening as he caught her staring.

She wasn't scared of him anymore. Playing fetch and giving his wolfy self a belly scratch did that to her.

"Hey," she said.

He swallowed. Though she wasn't naked like he was, his eyes roved over her body. "Are you all right? I didn't scratch you, did I?" he asked, his voice serious.



Shelley yawned, stretched, and sat up. She giggled at his desperate expression. “You were a perfect puppy.”

He jerked his head. “Puppy?”

She swung her legs off the old mattress so she could sit. The chain rattled, reminding her it was there. Shelley frowned at it, then shrugged.

When she climbed into bed the wolf had hopped in with her, circled, and lain down. She’d lain there, staring up at her kidnapper’s log ceiling while scratching his ears, contemplating why a werewolf would bring her to his cabin, put her in chains, yet be so concerned for her well-being.

The only possible answer was the most logical one—to make certain he hadn’t infected her. Wasn’t that how it always went in those books she read? As for why his wolf-self would be so playful, well, there was another reason for that, but this was real life and not a romance novel, so she wasn’t about to consider that thought.

The important thing was he hadn’t infected her. So it was just a matter of time before he removed the chain and let her go.

“You got anything to eat?” she asked.

“Wait, wait. What do you mean *puppy*?” he demanded. “And why are we in my bed?”

“Your bearskin rug is comfy and all, but I didn’t want to relax on it. Since you don’t have a couch...” she trailed off with another shrug. She hadn’t meant to doze off like she had.

“I put you on the rug so you wouldn’t wake up afraid and chained in a man’s bed. And that doesn’t explain how I got inside.” He looked toward the door. “The door isn’t broken, and none of the windows are shattered.”

“I let you in.”

He spun on her, muscles flexed and eyes blazing. “You *what*?”

Shelley had trouble looking away from his naked chest. He had the most wonderful six-pack she’d ever seen, so deep and defined she

bet she could climb it. “You were sitting outside all crying to get in like a lost puppy afraid of the dark or something. I felt bad.”

“Felt bad?” he repeated, mouth hanging.

Shelley nodded.

“I could’ve killed you.”

“Hmm.” An image of the silver-haired wolf came to mind, panting smile and tail wagging. “I kind of doubt that.”

“Unbelievable.” He got up, holding the sheet around his hips as he stepped in front of an aged wooden dresser.

Shelley snapped her head away when he dropped the sheet and pulled out a pair of jeans. Of course, she did still catch a little glimpse of his ass. Wow. Talk about full and amazing.

He was cute. Oh, who was she kidding? He was the hottest thing on two legs she’d seen in a while. And if this cabin was any indication, he was also the kind of guy who wouldn’t pass out a card with his agent’s phone number on it when asked on a date. Either way, watching him get dressed was pushing her luck.

“I’m going to have to check you for bites and scratches again.”

“To make sure you didn’t infect me?”

There was no answer to that. Shelley turned her head to look at him. He was staring back at her, a single light brow raised.

“I watch TV, y’know. Wasn’t hard to figure it out.”

He snorted and pulled a white T-shirt over his head. It was tight over his chest, hugging the ripples of his muscles. Small consolation for watching his flesh disappear under the cotton.

“You don’t look too scared,” he said. “Like this morning.”

Shelley stretched onto her belly on his mattress, bending her knees to stick her feet in the air, catty smile on her lips. “If I wanted, I could’ve had you playing fetch while you were...transformed.” No point in embarrassing him by telling him that was exactly what she had him doing. Then a thought occurred to her.

“I don’t think you tried to kill me yesterday!”

“What?”

“When you were a wolf. I thought you were running at me to eat me or something. You just wanted attention like you did this morning!”

Maybe it was just the shock of seeing a wolf for the first time that had made it look more vicious than it was. And when it ran for her, she naturally panicked. The only time it had ever looked angry was when she bashed it with a piece of her firewood, and who wouldn’t be a little ticked about something like that?

The idea thrilled her. Maybe it was the thought that she had a wolf friend, or just the exhilaration that she was in no real danger after spending so long praying for her life.

Her kidnapper stared at her as though *she* were weirding *him* out.

“You gonna feed me or what?” she asked.

He stayed still, head cocked as he observed her. “Yeah, I’ll go into town and pick up some breakfast.”

“There’s nothing here?” she asked.

“No.” He looked at her and must have seen the shock in her eyes because his face softened. “I’ve gotten used to hunting for my food lately, and since I doubt you’ll like anything I...bring home. I’ll drive on down and be back as soon as I can.”

“You’re going to leave me chained here?”

“Yes.”

The single, sharp word struck her hard. Shelley flinched and sat up. It shouldn’t have bothered her. She should have expected this. Just because she’d scratched his belly when he was a wolf didn’t make them friends.

He ran his hand through his bed-haggled hair. “What did I do last night? Exactly.”

They were getting down to business again.

Damn. She was letting too much slip with her emotions. “Uh, nothing much really. You were more like a tame dog than a wolf. I scratched behind your ears a bit, and your foot even thumped against the floor. Can you please take the chain off? It’s starting to irritate my

skin. I promise I won't run anywhere. I'll even go into town with you."

She wanted to know which town he was going to. That would tell her where she was.

"You didn't change me, and I promise I won't tell anyone what you are. No one would believe me anyway." That much was true.

His hand left his hair, and his posture became hard and serious. "What else did I do?"

Shelley ran her tongue over her teeth. "I wanted to lie down and relax, so I climbed into your bed. You came in and settled down with me. I scratched your belly. You licked my palm a bit for that."

He paced. His eyes were far away, as though thinking, yet they contained some of the panic that Shelley had felt earlier. "I didn't snarl, snap at you, anything that might've scared you?"

His silver-gray eyes went back to her. They moved up and down her body, studying her as though she were a priceless gem. Like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"You're kind of scaring me right now," she said. "Can you please unlock my chain and let me go?"

He covered his eyes with his hand and muttered something. He took one look at her and shook his head. "No."

Shelley felt like she'd been slapped. "Why not? I told you I wouldn't tell anyone, and you didn't turn me."

He moved to the other end of the cabin and grabbed a brown leather jacket hanging off the back of a wooden chair. He threw it over his shoulders without looking at her; then he went for the door.

Shelley gave chase as he left the cabin. "Hey, wait a minute! You're supposed to let me go now!"

He went to an old red Ford truck, opened the door, and lifted himself inside. "I'm sorry, I can't."

"*You're sorry?*" The chain didn't have any more slack for her to reach the truck. Lucky him. If it had she might have yanked him out

and strangled him. “This is kidnapping, you psycho! You can’t do this!”

He leaned out the window, backing the truck out of its parking spot and swerving to turn. The door to the truck was right in front of her now. She might be able to reach him...

“I’ll return with your breakfast. I’m very sorry.” He reached his hand out, clasped the back of her blond bed-head, and pulled her face forward, meshing her lips to his.

Shelley was shocked into stupidity. She didn’t move even when he released her and drove away.

## Chapter Four

Shelley ran back into the cabin. Her eyes scanned for anything breakable, but she found nothing that looked expensive. No porcelain bowls, shiny knickknacks, iPad, nothing. The guy had nothing that looked remotely expensive for her to destroy. Just plain wooden furniture, some of it badly painted and peeling. There were also some rosaries of a similar, bulky wooden design hanging, one on each of the four walls—must be a devoted Catholic or something—but for the sake of her soul, she left them alone.

Still, holy relics aside, she had to vent her anger on something. She had to knock something over, so she settled for the table and chairs. Watching them crash down brought her a temporary satisfaction, but not freedom.

There was a big wooden beam in the middle of the cabin. Her chain was locked around it. She tugged, pulled, and scratched, but it did not weaken. She broke one of her pretty manicured nails instead, but she kept right on trying.

A sob broke out of her throat as she snapped her third nail trying to break free.

That lousy bastard. Well, he'd had his chance. The second she got out of here she was pressing charges. She wouldn't have before, but now he was dead meat.

Shelley got to her feet. If he wouldn't let her go, then she'd have to leave on her own. She was in a cabin in the woods. Her kidnapper had to have a hatchet lying around somewhere.

She opened the cupboards and drawers in her search, not caring about his privacy in the least. Screw him.

He had almost nothing. There were only a few more pairs of jeans, some extra T-shirts. No underwear.

Wow. That last part shouldn't have made her blush.

She shook her head, deciding not to dwell on it and move on.

There was a microwave with a clock on it—it was well past noon despite his offer to get her breakfast—and a tiny fridge. The kind she usually had in her dressing room or trailer, the one that held only drinks and sandwiches.

She opened it and found Pepsi cans, but nothing else. Helping herself to one, even though it wasn't diet, she continued her search.

There was no stove either, but there was a pot and a frying pan. He must do his cooking outside in a fire pit or something. None of the cutlery he had was steel. Only plastic.

There was no way she could use any of it to break the chain.

She found letters under his mattress. They were all addressed to a post office box—at least now she knew where she was; she couldn't be far from her original camp—and inside there were no male names mentioned, so she still couldn't identify the man who had her.

As she skimmed them she found that the writers seemed to be friendly enough, but some of the letters contained warnings for him to stay away, while others asked for him—no, *begged* him—to come home. Again, without using his name. Totally frustrating.

There were a few mentions of a woman named Pearl amongst those letters. Apparently it didn't matter if her name was mentioned, and that brought a spike to Shelley's blood.

Just what was he hiding from? Or who?

Heavy tires crunching on rocks and twigs sounded in her ears.

The truck? Back already? Shit! She didn't think she'd been searching for so long. Shelley returned the papers to their envelopes and threw them back under the bed. She turned to do the same to the things she'd moved or knocked over, but then cringed at the mess around her. Everything was in disarray. Everything.

What had seemed like the best way to blow off her anger and get a little revenge now looked like the biggest mistake she'd ever made apart from being in that soap opera.

Should she right the table and chairs? She didn't have time to do that *and* put the things she'd taken from the cupboards and drawers back the way she'd found them. Few personal possessions as there were, she still didn't remember exactly how she'd found them.

Whatever. She'd stare him in the eyes and not be afraid for what she'd done. It was his fault for leaving her by herself anyway. She had a good mind to pull the letters back out and place them neatly, face up on his bed, letting him know she'd read them.

Already he was at the door—she could see him through the window beside it, struggling to open it with the brown bags in his arms. She didn't move to help him.

He got the door open, stepped inside, and stopped. Wide gray eyes scanned the mess. With one brow raised he looked at her. She stood dead center in Ground Zero.

"Find what you were looking for?" His eyes were hard and accusing.

"Since I'm still here, no." She took a sip from her stolen Pepsi can just to piss him off.

He nodded, not pissed like she'd wanted. Damn. Maybe she really should have taken the letters back out.

"All right."

He set the bags on the floor and turned the table and chairs to their proper positions. He put the bags on the table before folding his clothes back into his dresser. Shelley blushed and looked away as he did so.

She thought he'd yell at her. Be all indignant and intimidating. This silence while he cleaned up and she didn't help was infinitely worse.



"I'm not going to apologize," she said as he finished and moved back toward the table. He opened the bags and the scent of sausage, bacon, and eggs floated in the air like beautiful music for the nose.

Shelley's stomach rumbled in response. God. How long had it been since she'd eaten? He pulled Styrofoam boxes and more plastic cutlery from one bag, and the delectable smell thickened.

"Wouldn't expect you to," he muttered, reminding her of what they'd been talking about.

From the other bag, he pulled out bananas, a carton of orange juice, and a bag of Granny Smith apples. "Figured you would enjoy some fruit with your breakfast."

"You mean lunch?"

"Eggs can be eaten at any time of day. Here's for your ankle."

He tossed something at her. She caught it and looked down at the label. A squeeze bottle of lotion. According to the label it promised to both hydrate and soothe sensitive skin.

How very...sweet.

Shelley shook her head. No, no, no, that thought did not just pass through her brain.

Safer topic, safer topic. Like, how was he able to buy her breakfast when it appeared as though he barely had enough money to live on?

Then he opened one of the boxes, revealing two eggs, sunny-up, sausage, bacon, brown toast with those little jam packets, topped with twin golden pancakes, and more packets with syrup and butter.

God. She was starving. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had pancakes, let alone buttered toast and eggs with the yellows. They were too fattening.

He held out a plastic fork for her, and she took it, sat down, and dug in. Her ankle could wait.

Hunched over her food as she was, she didn't see what her kidnapper was doing until he set a plastic cup down beside her and

poured the orange juice inside. A tiny Styrofoam plate with the apple slices and another container of caramel sauce came next.

He must have had a real knife hidden somewhere to slice the apple. She'd have to remember that.

But who cared about that right now? He'd just gotten her a feast for breakfast. Pancakes, eggs, bacon, fruits. She'd never be able to eat it all, but she was going to do her damndest to try.

He was trying to take care of her, was being nice to her, and it annoyed her to no end. She didn't want to soften toward him like she was doing when he was a playful wolf. He was keeping her here against her will, and he had to know that just because he brought her this wonderful, totally amazing, breakfast didn't mean she'd forgive him.

She pushed away the little plate of green apple slices. "I only eat Royal Gala."

He paused as he sat down to his own eggs. "What?"

Shelley grabbed a syrup packet for her pancakes and peeled it open. She didn't look at him. "I hate Granny Smith. They're sour. Disgusting."

She felt rather than saw his confused blink. "Oh, well, there's caramel to go with them if you like."

She slammed her hand on the table, and her juice cup jumped but didn't spill, miraculously. She wanted him fuming. Yelling. At least that way she could yell back at him without feeling guilty. "Stop being nice! It's irritating."

"Irritating?"

"You're kidnapping me. You're not supposed to be nice." Because when he was nice she was at ease around him, felt bad for going through his things and didn't mind so much that he'd kissed her, which was another thing she should be pissed about but wasn't.

He opened his own breakfast box and salted his eggs with another paper packet. "Would you rather I tied you outside and left you to starve?"

Shelley clutched her breakfast box protectively. He seemed to see it, and his lips lifted in a smirk.

“That’s what I thought.”

Asshole. That same helplessness from before rose inside her. “There are going to be people looking for me. I can’t stay here.”

He paused with the tiny plastic fork in his mouth. He pulled it out, swallowed, and eyed her without making her feel threatened. “I know. I know who you are.”

She blinked, not having expected that. “You do?” All the way out here, without a TV in sight, she didn’t think he’d recognize her.

He nodded. “Shelley Star. I have to admit I didn’t recognize you at first, but I go into town sometimes and see your face in the gossip magazines.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “You never really look happy in those pictures they sneak of you. Even when you’re smiling you look like you’re,” he waved his hand, “faking it, I guess.”

She blushed, but had to agree with him, reluctantly. “I guess.”

The good old entertainment papers. She used to read them herself, but now she hated them. Not long after getting the starring role as both Catherine Linton and Earnshaw in the new *Wuthering Heights* movie did her pictures start appearing. More parts came, more money, too.

And a lot less privacy.

It had been a year since she’d *made it* with that movie. She’d once prayed to become rich and famous. Seriously prayed. Thought it would ease the stress brought on by her parents, who thought their daughter, the only blonde in a family of brunettes, so beautiful, they started putting her in pageants and working to get her parts in commercials at a very young age.

But ever since, it had been nothing but pictures of her not wearing makeup, eating, and even that bikini shot with the close-up of the

cellulite on her ass. She'd had double gym time and was on an even stricter diet than usual for *that* little photo.

While her father did smile in approval more after the parts and money started coming in, there was still the hinting tone in his voice that suggested he'd wanted her to go even further.

He wanted her to star next to Brad Pitt, Robert Downey Jr., and Will Smith in their next romantic movies, never mind that Shelley thought they were a little old for her. Her father saw Oscars in her future and red carpets and film festivals.

And Mindy, well, she was a good friend, sometimes, and could listen for a long time while Shelley poured out her woes, but in the end, Mindy was still her agent. Someone who got paid a percentage of what Shelley made. Which was why, when, *if*, this vacation ended she was going to do four back-to-back movies within the next twelve months.

That was a lot more than what it sounded like.

She'd nearly had a nervous breakdown when she found out that was the plan, and so the camping trip had been suggested. The advice had seemed good, at the time. And what was better, because Mindy had suggested it, her parents couldn't rebuff it.

Oh, Shelley knew Mindy had only been fearful of losing one of her bread-earners should Shelley actually have a meltdown, and she still had to actually sign the papers that would commit her to the projects, but she'd still felt the walls closing in on her.

Movies, stars, festivals, and travel. It all sounded nice, but none of it excited her. Truthfully, Shelley would rather be behind the scenes in making the movies. She wanted to be the person who wrote the screenplays, the big finales and yearning kisses, and then watched as her creation lit up on the silver screen. Or even just novels. A writer of romantic novels.

Shelley nearly laughed at herself for the cruel irony of it. Millions of twenty-three-year-olds were busting their humps every day to try and get where she was, and yet she complained.

Her identity. The blessing and the curse.

“If you know who I am, then you know I can pay you anything you want. You look like you could use the money,” she said, trying not to look around the one-room cabin with its sparse furniture.

His jaw tightened. “I have my own money. I’m not after yours.”

Yeah, right. Then what was he after? The image of him leaning out his truck to kiss her came to mind. She felt the press of his lips against hers, the rough beard stubble, dark despite his sandy hair, scratching her mouth and cheek, as though it were happening all over again. Despite the fact that it hadn’t been unpleasant, all the color drained from her cheeks.

Oh God. What if he was one of those crazy woodsmen she read about in true crime novels? The kind that kidnapped female hikers and forced them to be their wives.

“Get that thought out of your head.”

Shelley’s head jerked up at the deep growl. His eyes flashed gold as he glared at her from across the table.

She blinked. “What? How did you—”

“Wasn’t hard to figure out what you were thinking,” he said, turning his eyes back to his breakfast. “I don’t like being thought of as a rapist. I’m a monster. Not a rapist.”

Shelley snorted and went back to her breakfast. “Prove it. What’s your name?”

His head snapped up. “What?”

She glared at him. “If you really have no plans to hurt me, then it won’t matter if I know your name.”

That and she wanted to know the name of the man who’d kissed her so desperately outside.

He sighed. “I guess you’ll have to know it eventually.”

Eventually? How long did he intend to keep her chained up?

“My name is Michael.”

She folded her arms. “Michael what?”

He gritted his teeth, eyes flashing again. “Hunter.”

She grinned. Knowing his name washed away a lot of the tension inside her. Shelley held out her hand. "There, see? That wasn't so bad."

Michael hesitated, looked at her hand for a second before he reached for it. His large hand took her offered one, all but dwarfed it, before shaking and releasing. A small smile of his own touched his lips.

It made him look so cute and relaxed. "It's nice to meet you, Mike."

His jaw tightened. "Michael."

He was sensitive about his name. Huh, maybe Mike sounded too juvenile for him or something. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-three," he replied.

She nodded. Not bad, that was a good age. "Is this where you," she tried to not look around the cabin, "normally live?"

He chuckled darkly. "Lot of questions out of you."

She stiffened. "Knowing things about you would make me a little less scared, that's all. Especially with your friends warning you away."

Michael's eyes shifted to the bed, where his letters were kept. He frowned, and for a split second Shelley thought she might have gone too far.

"They have their reasons."

"Pearl?" she asked, that same unpleasant heating of her blood starting up again.

He rolled his eyes. "She's no one you should be worrying about. And she's not my ex either."

She was shocked. The idea that he had been seeing that woman *had* crossed her mind. How was he doing that?

"Have I answered enough questions?"

Shelley shifted. "I just...figured if I knew more about you, this all wouldn't seem so scary."

Michael stared at her intently, gray eyes seemingly searching her insides, as though checking for sincerity. Finally he shifted and reached behind to his back pocket. His hand came back with a black leather wallet.

Shelley watched with interest as he took out his driver's license and handed it to her. She swallowed and took the card. There was no way he could be serious. Was he really giving this to her? If she ever got out of here and decided to turn him in, just looking at this little card could be enough to lead the police straight to him.

She hesitated, then looked. There it was in writing and a photo that did not nearly do the justice of the real thing: Michael Robert Hunter. His DOB indeed put him at thirty-three, and the address was some town she'd never heard of in California.

So he was telling the truth about his name and age. And he was letting her look at a pretty important piece of ID. She didn't know how to tell if one of these was fake or not, but it certainly *looked* real, and he was totally trusting her with it.

All her fear of him vanished. She wasn't scared anymore. She just didn't get that vibe out of him.

She handed him back the license. He took it as casually as if she were passing him the salt.

Shelley grinned. "So," she started conversationally, unable to suppress her giddiness. "Mike..."

"*Michael*," he corrected.

She shrugged, but agreed. "Michael, if you're not going to hurt, rape, ransom, or eat me, why am I here?"

"I have my reasons for keeping you around."

"Uh-huh, my amazing conversation, right?"

He smiled a lazy smile. "Something like that. I will eventually take the chain off. Just not now."

Hmm. He'd handed her his license and said he wasn't going to keep her. Maybe he still didn't trust her enough to not turn him in to the police. Or maybe he thought she was going to tip off whoever this

Pearl woman was. A lot of his friends seemed to think she was a concern.

A sudden thought had her eyes going wide. “Is she, like, a werewolf hunter?”

Michael choked on the juice he’d been in the middle of swallowing. “What?”

“Pearl? Is she out to get you? Because that’s not right. Wolves are beautiful animals, and if hunting them isn’t already illegal, then it should be.”

Michael laughed at her, slinging a muscled arm over the back of his chair. “Yes, but I’m not exactly an animal.”

Shelley blushed. “Oh, but I didn’t mean it like that.”

Michael dipped his sausage in his syrup packet. “I know you didn’t.”

It got quiet then as they ate. Shelley feasted on toast dipped in egg yolks, took generous bites of buttery and syrup covered pancakes, and then decided to take a chance. She took a bite of one of her sour apple slices with the sweet caramel sauce. Her eyes widened as both flavors hit her tongue. Delicious. Utterly fantastic.

Shelley double-dipped, making sure there was an extra amount of caramel oozing off the apple.

Michael grinned. “Thought you didn’t like Granny Smith.”

Shelley shrugged. “Guess I was wrong.” She took another bite, eyes gliding shut as she savored the simultaneous sweet and sour taste. “Besides, it’s nice being able to eat all this without my dad hounding me about calories and carbs.”

He raised a brow, then snarled, gold eyes flashing in that way she was coming familiar with whenever something stirred his anger. “You’re perfect as you are.”

Shelley stopped eating, apple slice hanging halfway to her mouth, startled. His snarl showed off white teeth, which were getting longer and sharper.



The same went for his hands. Before her eyes, his fingers became darker, stretched thinner, and his nails grew out to razor-sharp points.

All this anger for her?

She recalled his last transformation, and how painful it sounded. She reached across the table and laid her palm on his changing hand. “It’s okay.”

He blinked at her, face relaxing back to normal. His eyes changed back to silver and his hands stopped their transformation as well. She felt the shift in his skin as they returned to their usual shape and color, the wiry hairs diminishing to nothing beneath her fingertips.

He took a calming breath, eyes closing. “I’m sorry. It’s just that hearing that people have been doing that to you... Your own father...” he trailed off.

Though her father had been an ambitious man, and her childhood hadn’t been a normal one as a result, he’d loved her, and she felt the need to defend him a little. “I needed to stay slim while growing up, especially when I started developing a figure. It was the only way to get parts.”

After she said it, she realized that her words were almost an exact match of what her father had to constantly tell her every time she’d asked questions, as far back as ten years old. It was the reason why she could never have ice cream or cake, even on her birthdays. Why she ate salad while the rest of the family enjoyed pizza night.

She didn’t like those memories. Hadn’t thought of them in a long time.

His eyes became sad, the gold finally dulling back to gray. “You’ll eat whatever you want under my roof.”

Shelley blushed. If she didn’t know better, she’d say he was reading her mind. How could he be doing that? *Could* he be doing that?

Not that it mattered. Her eyes started to tear up, and the inside of her chest expanded and contracted with gratitude.

Not the emotion she'd wanted to feel toward him a few minutes ago, but that didn't matter either.

There was one thing she wanted that she hadn't had in years, could barely remember the taste of, and somehow she knew he'd give it to her if she asked. "I want chocolate."

He smiled and gripped her hand. She'd forgotten he'd even been holding it. "You'll have it."

Abruptly her throat swelled up, and when she swallowed, it created the worst pain she'd felt since losing her voice.

She'd never felt happier.

Shelley got up from her chair and walked around the table. The chain rattled behind her, but she hardly noticed as she took Michael's stubble face in her hands and leaned down for a kiss.

She'd meant to pull away immediately. It was only supposed to be a thank-you peck.

He put his fingers in her hair, and it became so much more. Shelley didn't protest.

Her tongue touched Michael's mouth. He moaned, snaked his arms around her waist, and lifted her onto his lap. His long arousal pressed against her through her jeans. It didn't scare her, despite how she'd been picking a fight with him ten minutes ago. It sent a shivering thrill through her.

She wanted more.

Michael's lips opened, and his tongue shot out, touching hers, then dived into her mouth.

Shelley moaned. She pressed herself closer to him, breasts hardening and rubbing against his chest.

Michael's mouth gently left hers. He licked his lips, closed his eyes, and sighed as though in pain. He stood up and put her on her feet.

"Wait here," he commanded, eyes so bright and big Shelley could hardly make out any pupils. He burst through the door and ran outside like a man possessed. Did he even remember he'd chained her to the

inside of his cabin? She couldn't go anywhere even if she'd wanted to.

*The chain.*

Shelley stared down at it, still latched to her ankle.

What was she thinking? What the hell was she doing? From being hostile to voluntarily kissing him was a complete turnaround, and she couldn't explain it even to herself. Stockholm syndrome? So soon? Was that possible?

The truck door slammed outside, and through the window Shelley saw Michael jog back toward the cabin. When inside, she recognized the bag of M&Ms in his hand.

"This is all I've got until I go back into town. I'll bring you more for dinner."

She eyed the brown bag with a fixed gaze. For her. He was going to give it to her, and she was going to eat it without a word or silent glare from her father.

"Easy," he said, handing her the bag with a grin.

She took it, half afraid it would be snatched away. It was already open and only about half full, but that was fine with her. Shelley poured the entire contents into her hand and tossed the empty bag on the table. She wouldn't need it. She was going to eat all of it.

With shaking fingers, she took three of the little chocolates and popped them in her mouth. She wiggled her tongue around, willing the candy coating to dissolve faster so she could savor the—

Shelley moaned. Oh! There it was, melting and making love to her taste buds. She rolled her tongue around, delighting in the taste.

Shelley swallowed when the chocolate was completely liquid. She opened her eyes, not remembering having closed them. Michael stared at her, cheeks pink, mouth open slightly, and shoulders relaxed.

The trembling in Shelley's fingers didn't go away. It spread like an expanding ripple in a pond. Her body buzzed under her skin, warmth pooled in her belly and moved downward.

Not just the chocolate. This reaction wasn't coming from the chocolate.

Warm spice, as thick as a winter quilt, wrapped around her and floated into her nose. It was wonderful. Amazing. It was *him*. She could smell him. She wanted more of him.

Shelley unclenched her fist around her chocolate treats. She hadn't realized she'd been doing that either. Carefully, she set them down on the table for later eating. So much for gobbling them up in one go.

Her palm resembled a dotted rainbow. Shelley brought a finger to her mouth to suck off the color.

Michael moaned. She looked up at him as he leaned in, as if to kiss her.

*Panic.*

"I have to pee."

He stopped.

## **Chapter Five**

As though her big chain were made of tinfoil, Michael took hold of the links and pried them open, not bothering with the lock on it at all. Did he destroy the key?

Shelley would dwell on that later. She really did have to go. So when Michael lifted the chain up and walked her outside, she turned her head about, searching for his bathroom, or outhouse, or whatever. He led her a little ways into the tree line. It was instantly darker in there without any direct sunlight.

“Here you are.”

She looked around, confused. All she saw were giant trees and little bushes. Then it dawned on her.

“No way.”

“There’s no other place around here for you to do it.”

She made a face at the shrub just in front of her. Michael had his arms crossed, waiting.

“Ew, get out of here! You’re not going to watch me.”

His face turned bright red, losing some of that menacing bad-boy aura he’d tried to intimidate her with. “I wasn’t—” he growled then and shoved the chain at her. She caught it before it could spill heavily at her feet. “Don’t try anything.”

As he walked off she yelled at his back. “I don’t want you so close you can hear me either!”

He stiffened a bit but then kept right on going.

Shelley sighed, nudged the little shrub with her foot in distaste, even though it was pretty innocent in all this, and did her business. She had to use leaves, and she hoped Michael would have a bottle of

sanitizer or something for her to wash her hands with when she went back.

But then, who said she had to go back?

Standing straight, Shelley looked around herself. Aside from the odd twitter of birds she couldn't name, for the first time since being kidnapped, she was unchained and alone.

She ran for it. Ran as fast as she could with bare feet and carrying a heavy chain that was still connected to her ankle. She leapt over a fallen tree and avoided a slime puddle in her path.

She was getting good distance. The wind was in her face and she felt as fast as a deer. Then she stepped on a twig the wrong way and pain shot up her leg. She let out a mild cry as she went down.

She didn't hit the damp ground. Michael caught her. A deep frown creased his face even though his hands around her shoulders and waist were gentle. "I told you not to try anything."

She glared at him. "Did you really think I wouldn't?"

His frown melted away as he grinned. "Not really. And don't pout. It doesn't become you."

"I'm not pouting!" she said.

"Sure." With a smooth yank she was lifted into his arms. He leaned a booted foot against one of the thick tree trunks and sat her down on his leg. He used his other, now free, hand to take her foot and examine it. He made a small grimace.

Shelley didn't want to look at it. She looked at everything but her own foot. "Is it bad?"

He prodded around the area. It didn't feel too—

She screamed.

This time Michael made a sound of pain. "Please, please, stop doing that."

There was a bloody twig in his hand. Sharp on the end where he'd pulled it from her foot.

"It hurt!" Her first instinct was to reach down and grab her injured foot to ease the pain, but Michael held her firm and arranged her so

that her whole weight was back in his arms instead of sitting on his knee.

“I know. I’ll get you cleaned up.”

“Back at your cabin?”

“Yes.”

Disappointment flooded her. She hadn’t even been close to escape. She couldn’t blame her lack of success on her injured foot or her fall. He caught her so fast there was no doubt in Shelley’s mind that he knew the second she decided to make a break for it. Probably knew before she did.

“I told you I would let you go eventually,” he said softly.

She wished she knew how he was doing that. “Right.”

He kept his pace back to his little cabin a gentle walk this time. He wasn’t going so fast that the woods around her blurred or anything, which she was kind of grateful for. And at least she was at a better angle to enjoy the ride now, too.

Still, she sighed. Being so near him made her feel things that should not be remotely possible, or even healthy, after such a short period of time. If she continued to stay, continued to accept his olive branches and gifts and kindnesses, she was bound to do something she regretted.

When they got back to his cabin and he set her down on the porch step, this time she didn’t move when he told her to stay. She kept her foot lifted as he went inside. He came back out with his first aid kit.

He took her ankle, gently lifting her foot, and he poured a cool liquid that stung like a bitch over her cut. He soothed her when she hissed, and then he put his head down to better inspect it. “Don’t think you’ll need stitches.”

She shivered. If there was one thing that creeped her out more than needles, it was stitches.

Next Michael took out a bandage roll and a tiny bottle of green-colored sanitizer. He handed her the bottle, which she used to wash

her hands, and he began to wrap the wound at her foot. It felt like the twig had got her in the arch.

He went under the foot and around her heel over and over again until it looked like she was wearing a weird-looking sandal. He used a pair of small scissors to cut the bandage and a pin to keep it together. All the while he kept her foot steady with the gentle grip of his other hand.

So, so strange how she suddenly felt like Cinderella, kneeling in front of her prince while he put the shoe on her foot. A very tight shoe.

“How does it feel?”

Shelley wiggled her toes. The bandage was so tight they felt cool from a lack of blood, but not hurting or anything. “Pretty good.”

“Good.”

He collected the first aid stuff and put it all back in the white tin before going back inside.

Shelley was left alone again, wondering how many times he would trust her to do this. When he came back out, he had the lotion bottle he’d bought earlier.

“Don’t forget your ankle,” he said, handing it to her.

She took the bottle with a small thank you, but otherwise couldn’t take her eyes off him long enough to open it. What was he doing?

She watched as he went to the back of his truck. Michael pulled the hatch down for its bed, reached across, and dragged out a foldable chair.

He came back and set it down near a patch of grass in the sunlight. After unfolding it Shelley could see it wasn’t a chair but a lounge chair that someone could lie on.

“Is that for me?” she asked.

“Yup.” He came back for her, took the chair in one hand, and lifted her back into his arms.

He did it so freakin’ easily. And the swirl of butterflies in her stomach whenever he did was so not helping her to keep her distance.



He set her in the chair as though she'd break. Really, she wasn't in *that* much pain.

She shifted to make herself more comfortable and winced when she dug the bandaged foot a little too hard into the soft material.

"Ow."

"Take it easy," Michael commanded. "You seem to injure yourself a lot while running."

"It was why I never made the track team."

He laughed and went back to his truck.

"So, what am I doing here?"

He pulled out a giant nail and a hammer from the back. "Relaxing."

She tensed up at the sight of the huge, thick tools. "Are those supposed to help me relax?" Her foot was still feeling good enough to make a break for it if he tried anything. Hopefully.

"No, they're to help *me* relax," he said, grabbing the last link of her chain, pinning it down to the ground, holding the nail over it, and hammering it into the ground in a single hard pound.

She was officially staked to the ground. She glared at him. "Thanks."

He grinned back. "You're welcome."

After disappearing a third time into the cabin, he came back out with a magazine and the M&M bag for her. He must have put the little candies back in it. "Here, keep yourself entertained."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. The magazine was *People*. Not a magazine known for constantly printing horrible things about celebrities, even though it did have its moments. Still, the cover depicted a picture of the First Family and how they continued to make history. Didn't look like something she needed to worry about.

She'd just opened the front cover when Michael lifted his shirt above his head.

Holy muscles.

He grabbed an axe and went to a log pile near the tree line. "I'm going to do some chores. Figured you wouldn't want to be by yourself all day while I did them."

He figured right. He just wasn't aware of what he'd just given her. A lounge chair, chocolate, and a magazine to hide behind while she admired the view.

Wow. Just...wow.

He grabbed one of the heavy logs, put it upright on a round stump that had a lot of swing marks cut in it, swung the axe up and brought it down, and the log split as easily as a cheese string.

She kept on eating the chocolate, but the magazine was all but forgotten.

The weird thing was, after the third log or so, even though he didn't smile, didn't look at her, she got the impression he could tell she watched him. And that he totally liked it.

Awkward.

"So," she said, fishing around the M&M bag with two fingers for the last little red one. "Why do you have so many rosaries in your house? Are they a decoration?"

She'd learned a little about him before, but figuring out more couldn't hurt anything.

This time he did look at her between swings. "You could say that."

*Chop!* Two more pieces of split wood. He put them aside and grabbed another log.

"Oh, so it's your faith then." He didn't seem like a fanatic. So having a bunch of pretty rosaries hanging from his walls was actually a comfort.

"No."

*Swing! Chop!*

That kind of shocked her. "No? Then why have them?" If she believed him about them being just for show, they didn't exactly provide his place with a lot of color.

“Because some people do believe,” he answered.

“Uh huh, your family, then?”

He did smile a little this time. “They’re not particularly religious either.”

“So you keep them to ward off vampires or something?” She said it as a joke, but when he didn’t answer, just sent her a look, shock gripped her.

“Bull. Shit.”

“It’s easier for you to accept that a werewolf exists because you’ve already seen me transform. You’ve never seen a vampire before.” He swung the axe again, adding to his split logs. “Or maybe you have and just never knew it.”

Just the way he said it...

“So, you’re talking about Pearl?”

He sighed and put the axe down, blade on the ground and handle up, he leaned his arm on it. “I told you, she’s not a concern. She doesn’t know where I am. If there was even a remote chance she knew, I wouldn’t keep you here.”

That smell from earlier came back. The same smell that made her want to jump into his arms. But something else was with it, too, the need to protect and comfort him. To hunt down and kill the woman who put him into hiding. “Why *are* you keeping me here?”

He wouldn’t look at her, still leaning on the wooden end of his axe. “I’m...still deciding.”

Again, the smell came, warm and intoxicating. She suddenly felt like she usually did after a margarita. Mindy always said she was a lightweight. “That’s not good enough. Why am I here?”

He let the axe fall over. “I think I have enough.”

“Michael.”

“I’ll take you inside now.”

She wanted to protest. They were outside for barely ten minutes, but she couldn’t persuade him to stay.

He totally shut down after that. Without a problem, he pulled the thick links of her chain apart, releasing her from the spike in the ground, brought her back inside, and locked her up before going back out to collect his firewood.

Just to try it herself, Shelley grabbed at the links of her chain and gave them a tug. They held the way steel was expected to. Strong and unmovable. In *her* hands at least. So she was still stuck chained to the beam in the middle of his cabin.

Michael came back inside, all the stuff put away. Then the scent. Again with that spicy-sweet, make-her-drool smell. What was with that? It was coming from him, so could he smell it too?

“It’s different when it comes from you.”

Listening to her thoughts again. She blinked at him and grabbed a chair back at his messy table to sit down. “But it’s not coming from me, it comes from you.”

“It comes from you, too. I can smell it. Spicy-sweet, thick, and leaves you feeling just drunk enough to do something you wouldn’t normally do, right?”

Holy God. She could barely contain herself when she smelled him. Was it similar for him when he smelled her? Did he have as much trouble? He didn’t look it sometimes. But then, he did kiss her before he drove off in his truck. Then there was that close call at this very table.

And now he was standing over her again.

“Michael?”

“Yes.”

He had that same look as before when he wanted to kiss her. Only this time she didn’t have an excuse to get away from him. She could always lie and say she needed to use the bushes again, but right now she couldn’t bring herself to. She really didn’t want to, anyway.

“Why are you keeping me here?” She needed to know. She just couldn’t jump into bed with him without knowing, no matter how much she ached for it. She had the feeling it came down to her earlier

suspicious about romance novels. The reason why a supposedly deadly werewolf would not harm her for any particular reason, but she couldn't even make herself think the word until he confirmed it.

"I-I told you—"

"You didn't tell me shit," she snapped. The throbbing between her legs and in her belly that continued to go unsatisfied made her irritable. She glared at him. He was going to answer her.

"You have a filthy mouth," he said.

Not exactly what she wanted him to say. "Tell me why I am in a chain, tied to your cabin in the middle of nowhere."

His eyes widened just a little, but even without that she could tell she was shocking him. The same way she could also sense how turned on he was.

"Because...you're mine."

"Yours."

Not a question. He wasn't making a joke, or even overdoing what he might possibly feel for her. He meant it seriously.

"Yours," she said again, working the word around in her mouth. She kind of liked how that sounded. And just like that, everything clicked into place. Michael's strange behavior when he found out the wolf didn't rip her up, his patience when she tried picking a fight with him and escaping, not to mention her monumental attraction to him in such a short period of time.

He leaned in closer, his one hand resting on the back of her chair the other on the table, his face so close to hers now that if she shifted just a little, their lips would meet.

"I'm yours. You're mine?"

He nodded.

The confirmation didn't frighten her. It delighted her. That they were mated, meant to be, brought a wonderful feeling inside her heart. Shelley let the attraction she'd been fighting take over, and it was like being filled. Like finding a piece of herself that she hadn't known was missing.

She wasn't something to be used to further his career. She was really his.

His hand slid across her jaw, thumb caressing her bottom lip. "You really are mine," he agreed.

Screw it all. She jumped into his arms. He latched his mouth onto hers, and she knew he tasted the chocolate she'd eaten.

His big hands gripped her ass, lifting her up so Shelley could wrap her legs around his waist.

*Mine.* Mine, a voice roared inside her head, resonating like a battle cry.

It was Michael's voice. His voice was actually inside her head.

The world tilted, and Shelley's back hit a cloud of pillows and sheets. Michael raised himself so his weight was supported on his arms instead of crushing her.

"We really shouldn't do this," he said, voice pained.

"Yes, we should," she replied, scraping her nails along his arms and under his T-shirt.

His chest expanded and contracted for air; glazed eyes moved up and down her body again, like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. A blind man gifted with vision and seeing art for the first time.

Shelley's body burned like a rising fire. No one had ever stared at her like that before. Though people told her she was beautiful, special, lucky, no one ever looked at her like that.

Abruptly, she knew that if she said she was scared and asked him to stop, he would. He would stop, but she didn't want to. He was being gentle for her sake, but she wanted this to be as much for him as for her.

"If we do this, there's no turning back. Ever. It will be done," he said, the last warning, the last thread of his resistance.

She didn't care. She wanted him.

She said as much out loud, and Michael swooped in.

## Chapter Six

Michael's mouth against her lips felt like coming home in a thunderstorm. His hands slid under her pink shirt, producing a tingle and burn along her skin, as natural as if she were touching herself.

*Mine. Mine.* This time the voice in her head was her own.

She pushed against his chest to sit up. Her fingers gripped the bottom of his cotton T-shirt, and he grinned when she pulled it up and off. He raised his arms to ease the way. Shelley balled it up and tossed it away.

Michael's big hands touched her shoulders and did the same with her thin pink shirt.

Shelley grabbed a fistful of his long hair and pulled his face down, meshing her lips against his once more.

Michael pushed her back down with enough force that would have made her bounce back up had his weight not been pressing on her. She felt the excitement of his cock even though two pairs of jeans still separated them. Their mouths broke apart long enough for him to kiss the valley between her breasts. She shivered.

She was nearly as naked as he was now, wearing only a red bra and her girl jeans. His eyes widened at the heart locket at her throat.

Shelley looked down at it, surprised that he'd stopped. She'd entirely forgotten it was there.

The reason for his shock clicked, and she clutched her hand over the silver charm, protecting him. "I'm sorry, I forgot it was there. I'll take it off," she said, her voice breathless.

"I'm not allergic to silver." He reached a finger out to touch the locket.

“You’re not? Really?” Wasn’t silver supposed to be the Antichrist to werewolves? But then again, he also didn’t change during a full moon either.

She opened her mouth to ask questions, but he beat her to it. “Is there,” he swallowed, “anyone special inside?”

He looked torn between jealous possessiveness and deep worry that she could be carrying another man’s picture around her neck.

“No.” She took his face in her hands so he would look at her and not the trinket hanging at her throat.

“Then who’s inside it?”

She blushed and bit her lips.

“I’m sorry,” Michael said, though he didn’t entirely sound it. “I know it’s invasive.”

She smiled. “Yeah, kinda.” She got the feeling that he couldn’t help it, though, so she showed him some mercy. “No one’s inside it. It’s empty.”

“Empty?”

“Yeah, look.” She opened the locket and held it out to him.

He took the tiny heart into his big fingers, looked, then brought his eyes back to hers. “Why would you wear an empty locket?”

She shifted under him, inadvertently rubbing her breasts against his chest. She stopped instantly at the thrill of electricity that ran through her, but that could wait two more minutes. Maybe. “I’ve been waiting to put someone special in it.”

It was true. She’d always wanted to put a lover’s picture inside. But the few lovers she’d had never stuck around long enough for her to even think of doing so. Putting her family inside had seemed pointless. They loved her, she had no doubt about that, but shopping her around as a child, hoping she’d get parts in children’s movies and commercials, hadn’t endeared them to her enough to make her want to wear any of them.

She’d wanted to put someone inside who didn’t care about whether she got a great part or what she wore on the red carpet.



Now that she had a mate, maybe she'd put Michael in it.

He leaned down and took her mouth again, taking her mind away.

Shelley moaned as Michael's hand slid under her jeans. It was a tight fit, but he got there. He found what he wanted, and his palm started slowly rubbing through the curls, his fingers hooking and teasing in the folds of her sex.

Shelley's body throbbed. She needed one thing to make it better.

Her fingers struggled with his belt, eager to get at the part of him that would make her ache so much harder, yet ease it at the same time. Finally the buckle sprang free. His button and zipper were cake after that.

Michael, the jerk, laughed at her while their mouths were still connected, offering no help at all. That changed when her hand found what it was searching for.

He choked back a groan when she gripped his cock. He was more than a fistful, and she shivered at the anticipation.

With their hands between each other's legs, bodies tense with the sizzling pleasure that came from skin-on-skin contact, Shelley decided it wasn't enough.

Her hand slipped from his cock, and she forcefully shoved him off. Startled, he rolled beside her, but she paid no attention to him as she yanked her jeans off.

Or tried to, anyway. Damned things were so tight it was like trying to rip off an extra layer of skin.

"Eager?"

She looked at him. His chest was heaving, and he was grinning at her, his cock up and arched onto his belly. From her vertical position, it kind of looked like a smile.

She mock glared at him. "This would be fast if you would help."

He instantly slid off the bed and knelt before her, taking and moving her legs so he was hunched between them. His hands on her thighs, stroking and kneading through the tight denim, turned up the heat and got her juices flowing. She spasmed and moaned.

“Little horn-bug, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she gasped, “and this horn-bug will sting if you don’t get her off.”

Her hips jerked, and a tear sounded. Shelley looked down and cool air hit her sweating legs. He was ripping her jeans down the seams like they were made of paper.

Excitement bubbled inside her. She was finding his strength to be a total turn-on now that he was putting it to better use. “Wow.”

He traced the groove of her knee with his tongue, all the while keeping those wicked golden eyes of his on her.

That was so hot.

He pulled his tongue away. “You like?”

She nodded, then pointed toward the shredded jeans on the floor. “Those are designer jeans, cost me nearly two grand, and I don’t care that you turned them to rags. So yeah, I like.”

He shifted around on his knees, then tossed his own pants away.

Shelley lifted herself up to look at him, her eyes naturally moving down to his cock. Full mast, long and thick. His hands were back on her legs as he kneeled in front of her like she was royalty.

She crooked her finger at him. “Come here.”

He obeyed. Such a rush.

Shelley lay back down as he climbed on top of her. Her legs opened and curled around his hips as naturally as if she’d welcomed him there a thousand times before.

His voice growled in her head again. *Mine. No one else’s. Mine!*

“Yours,” she agreed.

*Kill anyone who tries to hurt you.*

He was chivalrous, too. She felt like swooning. “Fuck me.”

His gold eyes went so bright they burned. He growled low in his throat as his hand shot to grab her little lace panties. He didn’t rip them away like with the jeans, but yanked them out of the way as he plunged his cock inside her with an animalistic howl.

Shelley grunted as his weight pushed her deeper and deeper into the mattress, then moaned as the desperate surging and retracting of his cock stroked her pulsing inner walls.

They tightened, were on fire with need as Shelley's head thrashed back and forth. But it wasn't enough. She wanted, no, *needed* more. "Harder," she demanded through a moan.

His arm snaked under her waist, pulling her toward him in what could have been a hug as he groaned and complied with her wish.

The heat of his body was too much. She couldn't stand it, but it was too good. Her fingernails clawed along his back and shoulders, pulling at skin, muscles, and sweat. He moaned low, so she did it again.

And then she felt it—like a warm blanket wrapping around her and locking securely in place, locking her to him. His love, his thoughts, they all went inside her, and she was part of him now. And suddenly Shelley knew what he was talking about from before. When he said if they made love, there would be no going back. Ever. There could never be anyone else after this.

"Never letting you go," he rasped, drawing her close, hips still pumping in fast and jerky movements.

"Don't want to leave" was her reply.

His teeth clamped down on her shoulder, and she went over the edge with a scream, her belly and clit and everything else within her expanding and pulsing. Her body tightened around him. Not just her sex around his cock. Her arms, legs, everything tightened and clenched as she yelled out the best orgasm she'd ever had.

Her body calmed enough for her brain to catch up, and she smiled, pleased as she felt the warm spurts inside her, the tense and twitching muscles beneath her fingers, signaling Michael's own climax.

He'd come as quickly as she had. Thank God. Otherwise she'd have been embarrassed to have lasted so short a time. Maybe this meant she did to him what he did to her. How long would she have to

wait before they were both ready to try that again? Only this time have it last just a bit longer.

He stopped moving above her, tight shoulders relaxing. Then his teeth released her, and he leapt from the bed like it was on fire.

The sudden lack of body heat and shock of cold left her confused. What the—?

The long howl outside bolted her straight up. Panic flung her from the bed and had her running nearly naked, but for her stretched panties, toward him.

There he stood, naked in the sunlight. Back straight and tight. Sweat glistening in the light, highlighting the muscles of his body as he angled his face up and howled at a moon that wasn't in the sky yet.

His body shimmered, and long, coarse hairs began poking through the pores of his skin.

For the second time, Shelley watched his body change shape, cringing at the sounds of breaking bones, but he didn't seem to be in any pain. When he fell forward his hands were already paws, his long, bushy tail returned, and his face lengthened into the furry muzzle of the wolf.

Change complete, the wolf shook himself off as though it had just hopped out of a pool, sniffed the air, and spotted her.

Shelley smiled when Michael yipped and trotted over, big smile back on his yap. She bent down to scratch his ears when he rubbed against her like a cat.

"Yeah, I missed you, too," she said when he licked her face. "Let's go inside."

Michael yipped again and followed her, nails clicking on the floorboards. Shelley didn't know how long it would take for him to change back, but if it was as long as before, she'd definitely be able to go another round before the sun went down, and maybe even get the chain removed.

Michael hopped into the bed where they'd made love, sniffed, circled, and settled down while she picked up his T-shirt from the

floor and put it on. It went down to her midthigh. She thought it looked good on her.

She raised the cotton to her nose, smelled, and grinned. The scent was completely his.

Michael yipped at her impatiently, tail thumping the mattress.

“All right, I’m coming.” She put her knees on the bed and settled in, scratching Michael’s ears when he placed his front paws over her belly. Protectively? Possessively?

Because she’d gotten more than enough sleep already, having another nap was not an option. But her body was a little achy and in need of rest, so Shelley leaned back against the headboard and passed the time stroking Michael’s neck and ears, happier than she ever felt.

## Chapter Seven

Shelley jerked back into reality at the sound of Michael's low growl.

It seemed to be taking Michael a bit longer than last time to change back, so she'd gone snooping again. She'd found a book to read in his nightstand, and although spy thrillers weren't her thing, between putting on dabs of the skin cream on her chained ankle, she'd gotten lost in the story until Michael jolted her out.

He still lay half on top of her, and she felt the vibrations of the sound all over her before she even looked at him.

His eyes were glowing, lips pulled up to reveal his teeth on his long face, which was bent low. His hackles were raised so high it was like a mohawk was running down his back.

He glared and snarled at the open door.

She'd left it open to let in a stronger breeze than what his windows would allow. It hadn't bothered him before.

Shelley threaded her fingers through Michael's raised hair, attempting to lower it as she shifted him off and climbed out of bed. "Shh, hey, there's nothing there."

Michael didn't calm down. He barked and leapt from the bed, standing in front of her and still snarling in the direction of the door, mohawk raised high again.

Fear chilled Shelley's blood. Was there something out there she couldn't see? An animal?

She sighed as the thought came to her. Yes, of course. There was an animal outside. It was dark now, so it made sense that all the critters would come out. Maybe another wolf, or even—she

shivered—a bear. Maybe it sniffed the crumbs of food still on the table.

Shelley stepped around Michael. “Don’t worry, I’ll shut the—hey!”

Michael charged for the door before she could take a step. His nails skidding against the floor didn’t hinder his strength as he crashed his shoulder into the doorframe, taking it with him as he charged into the night.

“Michael!” Shelley ran outside after him, the night air cool against her skin and bare feet. She stopped when the chain pulled her back.

Then her stomach dropped, and for once, she was glad for the shackle around her ankle. Without it, she would have run into the dark trees with him, right where whatever creature it was that he’d run after in the first place lurked.

Michael’s barking in the distance sounded farther and farther away. Shelley had to force herself back in the cabin, reminding herself that, as a werewolf, he could take care of himself.

Unlike her, as a chained-up woman, she couldn’t defend herself at all should something come for her.

She stopped at the splintered wood of the doorframe, reached out, and touched it.

Such strength. It was nuts. Some of his fur had been pulled out by the splinters.

Shelley squinted at the silver tuft of hair and pulled it free. Up close, turning it this way and that in the artificial light, it was so...shiny. Like real silver. But that could be a normal color for werewolves for all she knew.

Smiling secretively, she rolled her fingers and balled the bit of hair, opened her heart locket, and placed it inside.

She doubted the door would close on its own now. She’d have to put a chair under the knob. She grabbed one and did so. She tested it, and it held.

Shelley sighed. She turned back to the bed, deciding to read until he came back, hoping the paperback would take her mind off the worry she felt, until a banging knock sounded against the door.

Shelley jumped three feet in the air and turned.

Back? Already?

The knocking pounded like a hammer on the door. No bear could make that sound. She rushed to take the chair away as the knob started to jiggle.

“I’m coming! Just a sec!”

She shoved the chair aside, grin on her face as she readied to tell Michael why she needed to put it there to begin with.

She threw open the door, and her grin melted away.

Not Michael. A woman stood there. She was as tall as Shelley, but thinner. *Way* thinner. So much so that her chest was flat, she had no hips to speak of, and her cheeks were hollow. She was almost sickly looking.

Probably was. Shelley knew all about eating disorders, and this chick definitely had one.

Despite the lack of a shapely body, and the out-of-the-way location, she wore a dark blue miniskirt and matching tank with a skull sewn into the fabric, black platform shoes, and she had...purple hair?

Wondering if she was lost, Shelley opened the door wider but kept her body half hidden behind it, wishing she’d taken the time to at least put her bra back on under Michael’s T-shirt. “Um, can I help you?”

Eerily mismatched eyes stared at her, then around her, then toward the bed. The woman said nothing. She just...studied the inside of the cabin. One of her eyes was a pale blue. The other was gray, and it shone just as bright as the moon would have if it had been out.

Shelley shivered. What was this woman doing out here in the dark? Was she running from whatever Michael was chasing? Her clothes didn’t give any hint of that, though. She looked like she just finished prepping for a party. Her hair was perfectly straight, not a



strand out of place, and her clothes were neat. Not at all like what they should look like had she been running through the trees. Shelley knew all about *that*.

The strange woman still hadn't answered her. Shelley closed the door just a little. "Hey, hello? Are you lost?"

The woman's blue and gray eyes finally met hers. "I am. Would you invite me inside?"

Shelley didn't know what to say to that, but all the hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she was getting goose bumps up and down her arms. That wasn't how a frightened woman, lost and alone in the woods, should act. "Uh, maybe you should wait outside, at least until my...boyfriend comes back...from getting firewood. He can help you get home," Shelley said.

If this was a vampire, then she couldn't come in until invited.

The woman pressed her hand to the wooden door and pushed it open against Shelley's weight and took a step inside.

"Hey!" Shelley said, trying to push her back out, but she must have been as strong as Michael for all the good it did.

The woman's gray eye shined brightly. "I shan't be long."

Shelley didn't think she'd ever heard anyone use the word *shan't*. It wasn't like she had a foreign accent or anything, suggesting English wasn't her mother tongue. She sounded pretty much the same as Shelley did. This girl definitely wasn't normal, and neither was the way she was looking around at the rosaries on the walls, crinkling her little nose at them, and then at Shelley. Then her eyes traveled down to the chain at her ankle.

Shit, shit, shit. She'd totally forgotten about it.

Goth-girl actually smiled at it.

Shelley straightened her back, trying to make herself look as tall as possible next to the open door. This woman may or may not be a vampire, but she could still be a dangerous psycho. "I'd like you to leave, now."

The purple-haired woman glanced up at her, creepy smile still in place. Shelley caught the hint of long, pointed teeth through her grin.

"I believe I'll stay." She lunged.

Shelley barely had time to tense in fear. The woman moved like the wind and had those teeth in Shelley's neck before she had the chance to gasp for breath. Shelley was treated to the odd sensation of being paralyzed and feeling the blood rush out of her like a river.

No. That wasn't right. She wasn't cut and bleeding all over the place. This woman was sucking the blood out of her.

*"Pearl!"*

The sucking motion abruptly stopped, and for a minute Shelley thought Pearl became paralyzed as well at the sound of Michael's enraged voice.

So this was Pearl, the woman Michael was hiding from. But he said she wasn't a problem. How did she find this place?

Pearl's teeth pulled from Shelley's skin and stared at the man who filled the doorway. Shelley couldn't turn her head, but he was in her peripheral vision, and her heart leapt at the sight of him.

He took a menacing step into the cabin, human again, feet and chest bare. He was wearing a pair of jeans. Likely he kept pairs of them in his truck, or even hidden around the forest, should he need them. But being half naked as he was only served to show off his big muscles, clenching with rage.

"You let her go," he growled, and although he'd just changed back from wolf to man, Shelley could see his fingernails elongating to claws, the dark hairs on his arms thickening, preparing for another transformation.

Pearl cupped Shelley's neck, caressing her skin as her teeth scraped along the already abused flesh. "You should've warned your woman. It's her own fault really."

Like there was anything Shelley could have done. She tried to pull away but whimpered when she couldn't. Oh, God, if only she could move.

Pearl's nose inhaled long and deep along Shelley's shoulder and up her neck. "I scented her blood in the forest and followed the trail."

Shelley's eyes went huge. Her foot. Her stupid bleeding foot from when she'd made a run for it and stepped on that twig led this woman right to the cabin. This was totally her fault.

Pearl laughed a little. "I only wished to have a snack before continuing my search. I never would have thought to find you holed up with another being like this."

Michael took another step into the cabin, this one slower, less threatening. "This is between you and me. Let her go and we can talk. Come to an agreement."

Enough feeling returned to Shelley's body for her to feel Pearl pull her tighter against her flat chest, like a shield. "Unless that agreement involves you peeling the skin from your body and handing it over to me, there shall be no such talk."

Shelley's eyes widened. Peel the skin...? Was this woman crazy?

"Your woman is curious, monster," Pearl said. "Will you explain why she is to be my feast, or shall I?"

Michael pursed his lips. "You're not going to be anyone's feast, Shelley. I'll get you out of here, and nothing like this will ever happen to you again."

Warm breath touched Shelley's cheek. She brought her hand up to slap the woman's face away, but her arm was still so weak that her palm didn't get halfway to its target.

"Your mate should have sent you away, but since he was so eager to keep you," Pearl kicked the chain still attached to Shelley's ankle, "you shall feed me and make me strong for the skinning."

Shelley's eyes widened. She screamed inside her head.

Pearl chuckled. "Not you, pet, him. He is a very rare specimen. A werewolf with true silver hair. My father is the king of all vampires, and he demands only the best. He wishes to wear the coat of your mate."

Pearl talked about it like she was discussing buying a fur coat or something. She fingered the heart locket at Shelley's neck. There must have been a few hairs poking out because she laughed. "Even you acknowledge its beauty. Even you wish to have it, to wear it."

Shelley wasn't shocked. She hadn't known, but the news that Michael's fur was real silver didn't stun her either, not after everything she'd seen and heard. Michael had told her he wasn't allergic to silver, and she did see how shiny his coat was. So his hair being real silver wasn't such a stretch.

Pearl brought her back to the present by planting a kiss on the bare side of Shelley's neck, then a tender lick to scoop up the collecting blood from where she'd bitten. Shelley shivered.

"The king sent his half-breed daughter to hunt me down and collect what's in your locket," Michael snarled, eyes furious at the sight of Pearl's lips on his mate's neck. "Only he wants all of it."

Pearl hissed back at him, literally hissed at him, her hand tightening over Shelley's bandage. She winced at the sting but could do nothing else.

"When I deliver your skin to him, he shall acknowledge me as his. I'll be a true princess, and you will be dead."

"You can only skin me if I'm a wolf, otherwise there's no fur." Michael fisted his long sandy hair, completely void of any silver. "Worthless. No praise from *Daddy*."

Pearl growled again, and while her body became tight with rage, she seemed to forget she was holding onto Shelley.

He was goading her, Shelley realized. Teasing Pearl into letting her guard down.

"That's why he sends you out, right? To earn your keep?"

Pearl threw Shelley to the floor. She had barely enough strength in her arms to catch herself, and she couldn't crawl away.

"Silence!"

“Not the youngest or the oldest, but you’re the only one of your siblings that was sent out to find me. Do you have to bow to your little sister even though she doesn’t bow to you?”

Pearl flew at him. Had the door been shut they would have crashed through it. Instead they landed on dirt ground outside, kicking up a comet trail as they rolled and fought.

Shelley tried to get her body to move. She lifted her head, trying to keep Michael in her vision, as though if she could see him that would somehow keep him safe.

She blinked away the dizziness, summoned as much strength as she could from her sleepy limbs, and crawled forward. That crazy woman wanted to kill them. What Shelley could do to help, she wasn’t sure, but there was no way she was going to hide.

Shelley crawled out the door and onto the little porch. She pushed herself to her knees, grabbing onto the wooden rail to keep her balance. Whatever that psycho bitch’s teeth had put into her system was wearing off. Probably because it hadn’t been in her neck for long. Either way, she could see the fight clearly.

It was gruesome. Like watching a pair of snarling, fighting bulldogs. And that’s what it nearly was. Even though their bodies moved quickly, each one trying to best the other, Shelley could see the hair growing out of Michael’s face, his eyes turning gold and wild.

No. That wasn’t a good thing. When he was the wolf, he was something different altogether. He had no memories of being the wolf, so was it safe to assume that the wolf had no memories of being a man? If he changed, he’d be at a disadvantage, for only a few seconds, but it would be enough.

“Don’t change!” Shelley screamed, her voice strong in her panic.

Michael landed a strong punch in the vampire’s face, sending her back into the trees. He looked at Shelley, his face partially wolf, like the Wolf-Man from the old black-and-white movie. Then he ran to her.

Her hands went to his hair-covered cheeks. His went to her chain. Wrapping both hands around the metal, he pulled, yanking the links apart with an easy snap, like the metal was made of tinfoil, freeing her.

“Run.” His voice was barely human. He pointed to the truck, as though telling her to get inside and drive away.

She couldn’t leave him like this, couldn’t even if she wanted to because her legs were still working off whatever was inside her. “No, you need me here, to keep you human. Don’t let her get to you. Stay in control. Beat her and we’ll leave.”

She smoothed a hand over his brow, the skin returning to normal as she caressed him.

Pearl flew like a jet from off to the side, body-slamming him into his truck with a metallic crunch. The thing toppled to its passenger side as though it were a toy. A toy that made a loud crash of breaking glass and bending metal that kicked up a lot of dirt. Shelley screamed.

Pearl stood above her, purple bat-like wings stretched out behind her, her nails as long as rulers, pointed like spikes and dripping with some kind of pink venom.

She stepped toward Shelley with one of those nails stretched out. “His transformation is required if I am to have the silver pelt.”

Shelley tried to scramble back, but her legs were still shaky.

“Please don’t,” Shelley begged, hating herself for it but unable to get up and run. She was never very courageous. She could barely even act out the emotion in the movies she played in.

“If putting down his human brings out the monster, then that is my mission.”

Pearl reached her hand out to grab her, and then her body jerked and she went stiff. Her mouth opened and blood dripped from between her lips, a dark circle spread in the middle of her chest, staining the white skull on her tank top red.

The vampire looked over her shoulder. Michael was there, fully human, and he'd stabbed her through her shoulder blades with a long dagger.

Her mouth gaped open at him as he tossed her to the ground. The dagger in his hand glistened with her blood. He raised it again as though he meant to stab her in the throat, but he held his hand steady. "Now you listen to me. The only reason I don't kill you now is because I don't want to defeat you by stabbing you in the back. But if you ever come near my pack, my mate, or myself ever again, I'll get you any way I can take you. Then I'll hunt down your father and brothers and sisters personally. My pelt is my own and not for that fat bloodsucker to wear. Understand?"

Shelley didn't know how the vampire managed to survive the wound she had already received, probably an undead thing, but the woman nodded. Fear glistened in her wide, mismatched eyes.

"Good. Now get the fuck off my property before I put this in your heart." Michael pointed with the blade toward the trees.

Pearl got up, still clutching her bleeding chest. Through her trembling she sent a nasty glare over her shoulder as she spread her wings and leapt into the dark sky.

Shelley breathed a shaky sigh as the woman became a dot in the distance and disappeared into the black clouds. Then it all came on her, and she couldn't hold it back, so she put her hand over her eyes to try and hide her tears. She didn't even want to touch her neck where that woman had bitten and kissed her. She was going to have to wear another bandage to match the one on the other side of her neck.

Michael was on his knees with his arms around her in an instant, gathering her close, crushing her to his chest. "Don't cry, baby, please. I'm so sorry. You'll never see her again."

She wanted to stop, but she couldn't. Her tears just kept right on coming, and her throat kept making that lousy sound that was something between a sob and a hiccup.

After a few minutes of petting and kissing her hair, Michael left her, for just a second it seemed, before coming back. He scooped her up and held her as though she would crumble like dust.

Shelley wiped and opened her eyes when he settled her down on a cushioned seat, wrapping something around her with a click.

She looked down and knew where he'd gone. To set the truck in its proper position. He'd placed her inside and put her seat belt on. The window on her side was completely smashed out. Now he was climbing into the driver's side.

"Where are we going?" Shelley asked as he started the engine, wishing her voice wasn't so shaky.

He didn't spare her a glance, just clutched the steering wheel with white knuckles as he pulled away from the cabin. Shelley was impressed the thing was still in working condition. "I thought she couldn't find me out here, otherwise I would have let you go the second I knew you were mine. I never would have put you in harm's way like that." He shook his head at himself and clutched the wheel so tight it looked in danger of popping right out.

"It was my blood that led her here," she said, toeing the bandage on her foot.

"She already knew I was in the area." His lips thinned. "Careless. I was careless. She must have tracked my letters, or maybe I was seen by one of her servants in town."

He kept right on talking, apologizing and listing all the ways he could have been found in the middle of the woods, but Shelley barely heard him as he drove down the narrow dirt road, headlights leading the way through the trees.

A bolt of dread struck her. He still hadn't answered her question.

"Where are we going?" she asked again.

He still wouldn't look at her. Shelley's dread intensified.

"I'm taking you back to your original campsite. I assume your car will still be there. It hasn't been long."

"To...get my things, right?"



He pressed his lips together. She watched his Adam's apple bob deeply as he swallowed.

"You're sending me away," she said, tears rising again. "But I thought—"

"You are my mate. You'll always be mine, but there's a good chance Pearl will return regardless of my warning. When she does, I don't want her using you to get to me like that," he said. "I'll go back to my pack and tell them what happened. I'll command them to watch over you, keep you safe, but you won't ever see them."

"Will I ever see you?" Billion-dollar question.

"No."

Shelley let her tears fall. She turned away from him and curled into her seat. Mate or no mate, he was sending her off after she had just discovered what they really were to each other, after they'd had sex in his bed. She felt like a one-night stand.

The truck jerked to a stop, and Michael was beside her. He tried putting his arms around her, but she shrugged him off and pushed him away.

"You're not a one-night stand to me. Don't think that." His voice was firm.

Oh, right. She'd forgotten about the whole mind reading thing too.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Read my mind. You're not allowed to do that if you're dumping me."

"I'm not dumping you." She heard the sad sigh in his voice.

She spun on him. "Then what do you call *this*?"

"I call it keeping you safe."

"But it won't keep me safe!" she yelled. "You just said you're going to have some people watching me. If I ever see someone following me, how will I know if they work for you or that woman? I'll never feel safe if I'm on my own. I never felt safe to begin with anyway."

He opened his mouth, but she cut him off. "I've lived in the public's eye for a year now, but even with everyone watching me, taking pictures, I still had a stalker."

Michael's jaw tightened. Already she could see the wheels in his head turning, planning to hunt the guy down and make him ever regret looking at her. "Were you hurt?"

She shook her head. "No, but I could've been. I never knew he was watching me until after he was caught. A neighbor walking her dogs saw him lurking on my property one night. He'd been watching me for over a month. He had pictures of me at his house. Some of them were Photoshopped to look like he was in them with me."

She allowed a few seconds for Michael to absorb her words. She felt his anger sliding away and knew she was getting through.

"Let me stay with you. I can go with you to your pack. If anyone has to watch me, I want it to be you."

He rubbed his palms over his face. "What about your life? Your family? If you come with me, you have to know you'll be leaving them behind."

He was right about that. Her parents were too eager to see her in the spotlight, and there couldn't be reporters with cameras sneaking around a group of werewolves. It would ruin the whole secrecy thing. And even if she left it all behind, there was still a chance that people would recognize her. She would have to change her name and dye her hair.

Shelley Hunter. Brunette. No. Redheaded fiery writer. That sounded kind of nice. She'd call Mindy and tell her she wasn't going to sign onto those movies, that she was done. And her parents, well, they'd be upset, but eventually they'd get over it. And after enough time had passed, after she was no longer in the magazines and in movies for a while, people would forget her. Her name, what she looked like. She could start writing novels. She could be normal.

As normal as could be for a woman living with a werewolf.

"I don't want to live in the spotlight anymore. I never wanted that." She touched his face, pulled him closer until they were so close she could be kissing him. "I'll leave it all behind and never look back. I either disappear with you, or I disappear if that vampire finds me. I'd prefer to be with you."

His resolve was entirely broken but for a single remaining thread. The one that was left behind to make one hundred percent certain that she knew what she was asking for.

Shelley nearly smiled. She could get used to this whole mind-reading thing.

He licked his lips, trying to avoid eye contact, but she wouldn't let him. "There'll be others like me, most of who are as unpredictable in their transformations as me. You're my mate, and they'll smell that even in their wolf forms. You'll be safe, and they will protect you if I tell them to. But it will be different from what you're used to."

She did smile this time. "Your transformations are a lot more predictable than you think. I'll bet anything that when we met, you changed into a wolf because you smelled me or something. And the second time, I bit you, made you bleed. The third time..." She trailed off with a smile.

He returned it.

"They won't scare me," she promised, even though she was certain it actually would be scary. But she would get used to it if they were anything like what Michael said they were. "As for being different, well, I've got enough money for the both of us, and we can share it with your pack, too."

He put his hands up, backing off her very fast. "Whoa, whoa, what's this about money? I never said anything about money."

He hadn't? Wasn't that what the whole *different* comment was about? Then there was the little cabin...

He shook his head. "Being with you would be so confusing if I couldn't read your mind. I have my own money. I told you that before. I'm master of my pack. That back there," Michael jerked his

thumb behind him, indicating the cabin that was no longer in sight, “was just where I was hiding. I have my own house, a nice one, and so do my pack mates. We don’t live in the cities or anything, but we’re definitely not forest dwellers either. The vampire king heard about my silver coat, wanted it, and sent Pearl to collect it. No one was hurt the first time she’d tried, so I left the pack in the care of a trusted friend and disappeared before someone was.”

She swallowed. “And now?”

He sighed. “Now, everything has changed. It changed the second I realized what you were.”

“Really?” Shelley asked.

He nodded. “You wanted to leave, but I didn’t want to let you go. You wouldn’t have come back. But if I send you away now that Pearl’s seen you, I’ll have to go back and get some people to watch you. If I do what I want and keep you, take you from your family, everything you’ve ever known, I’ll have to go back anyway so you can be with my family. Where it will be safer.”

He knew the answer, but guilt radiated from him.

She pressed her lips to his mouth, trying to take that guilt away with a kiss, caressing his scratchy cheeks and hair to soothe away his hard decision.

She knew what he should do. He never should have left his pack to begin with. If the word *pack* was anything like how she’d pictured it, it was a group of people who were loyal and loved Michael very much. Especially if he was their leader.

He never should have left them. With or without her, she wanted him to go back to them and stay with them. Where there were lots of people. Where he could be safe from that vampire princess cunt.

Michael chuckled. “Even your mind is filthy.”

She pulled his mouth back onto hers. She didn’t care. No one was going to be skinning the fur from Michael on her watch. Shelley happened to like his fur right where it was, thank you very much.

She stopped their kiss to look at him, grinning as she felt the distant haze inside his head. "I'd like to meet your family."

He put his hands over hers and sighed. "I said I'd never let you go, didn't I?"

She smiled brightly. She'd won. She didn't know if the joy she felt was hers or his, but it didn't matter. Maybe it was both of theirs. "I think I remember you saying something like that." When she was busy having the greatest sex of her life.

"Then let's go."

The truck started up again, and wearing nothing but the T-shirt of her werewolf mate, Shelley Star vanished into the night with him.

# THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mandy Rosko lives and works in Ottawa, Ontario, is a romance junkie, a lousy web designer, and is working hard to improve the craft of creating an actual plot. She one day hopes to stop mooching off her big brother for cheap rent.

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