



BEAUTY

A MODERN WICKED FAIRY TALE BY

Selena Kitt

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A Modern Wicked Fairy Tale: Beauty © April 2011 by Selena Kitt

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A Modern Wicked Fairy Tale: Beauty
By Selena Kitt

Jolee could never stay out of trouble for long and being locked in the trunk of Carlos's black BMW was no exception to that particular rule of her life. She'd given up trying to kick the side of the car to make noise—luxury car makers practically sound-proofed their trunks. Who knew? She wondered if engineers considered scenarios like this one—after all, any rich husband might have to enlist his hit men tie up and toss his troublesome wife into the trunk for easy disposal, right?

Besides, her feet were secured with zip ties, as were her hands, which stretched painfully behind her back. They didn't use duct tape—too easy to wiggle out of—except for the pieces over her mouth. And even those weren't just slapped on—they'd used the roll to wrap the silver stuff around and around her mouth and jaw in layers. Carlos's guys knew exactly what they were doing. Of course they did. It was their job.

There was just no way out of this bit of trouble. That realization finally hit her in the darkness, the car's wheels crunching gravel a long time now, off the highway, she surmised, the suspension bouncing her violently up and down. This was going to be the last batch of trouble she ever got herself into in the whole expanse of a life that seemed suddenly very short.

She'd been so focused on escaping or finding a way out since Carlos's goons had grabbed her out back—zip-tied and duct taped before she could even raise the snow shovel she'd been using—that this final realization hit with such terrifying force Jolee actually wet herself, urine staining the crotch of her jeans with spreading navy blue darkness.

She was going to die.

"No," she whispered, feeling herself giving in at the same time as she denied the notion. "Please, no."

She had no one left to mourn her. Her mother had been gone since she was a baby, her father dead for years, killed in a logging accident. And her husband—Carlos was the reason she was facing this end, a betrayal she still couldn't wrap her head around. But for the first time in her life she was glad for the miscarriages, that she had no baby or child to leave behind. Her only real regret was that she had never really loved a man who truly loved her back.

Jolee wailed, a muffled cry that wouldn't have been heard over the pounding bass of Ted Nugent through the car's speakers even if they'd been stopped in traffic somewhere, but they were far from civilization. She knew where they were. Not exactly, but they'd driven a long way on this back, bumpy, winding road and there was no doubt in her mind they were in the middle of nowhere, deep into the wild, far from the logging camps, but still on the thousands of acres of land Carlos's father had left him.

That was where Carlos buried the bodies.

Jolee thought of her husband, the way he sucked on a Wintergreen Lifesaver and tied his tie in their dresser mirror every morning as if he was going off like any other man to a regular job living a regular life, the way he ruffled her hair and called her "chickie" and kissed her cheek before he left. How could that man be the same man who had ordered her kidnapped and killed?

As much as she wanted to deny it, she knew it was the truth. Her husband killed people. No, he had people killed. If they got in his way, if they threatened him or his little empire, Carlos had the money, the power and the influence to simply make them disappear. She hadn't wanted to believe it, for years she had suppressed her intuition. But when proof had arrived in her mailbox, when she had confronted Carlos with the information and he had petted and placated and pacified her, she had still denied it, hadn't she? She'd believed his lies. Because she wanted

to? Because she had to? What woman wanted to believe her husband would have her father killed?

It had been over a week since the blow-up, since the unstamped white envelope with proof of Carlos's crime had shown up in their mailbox with just her name—Jolee Mercier—scrawled onto the front. She'd thought things had gone back to normal, that Carlos had forgotten, that they could live out their lives as they always had, separately together. How could she have let herself sink so low? How could she have believed for one moment that the man she married wasn't the monster he'd been revealed to be?

But she had found that living with something, day in and day out, numbed you to its power. Now she was going to pay for that denial, with her life.

"No!" She didn't know where she found the strength. Maybe it was the thought of Carlos telling his next conquest that, sadly, his last wife had run off on him. Maybe it was the injustice of being interred beside her father somewhere in the middle of nowhere, a mass grave for Carlos's enemies—men who had defended the union, women who had turned him down, people who had made Carlos's life uncomfortable. How many bodies were buried out there, she wondered? If he would order his own wife killed—who *hadn't* he gotten rid of?

Jolee wiggled around in the trunk. There was nothing back there—made more room for bodies, she assumed dismally—just a tire iron and a jack and a set of jumper cables. All great weapons if she could have gotten her hands free, but the zip ties were drawn so tight behind her back the circulation had long ago disappeared from her fingers. She could still feel her feet though, and that was what she used, slamming both of them against the latch of the trunk.

There was no way to disguise what she was doing. She knew the guys would hear her. The music stopped blaring almost immediately. She was probably denting the hell out of

Carlos's car. The thought, *he's going to kill me*, crossed her mind and she gave a strangled, crazed half-laugh, kicking again, again, again.

"What the fuck? Bitch! Knock it the hell off!" She recognized the voice. One of the guys who'd grabbed her, an older man, her father's age, someone she remembered seeing around the logging camps and later, at her husband's office.

She heard him yelling but didn't stop. If they pulled over now and shot her in the head it wouldn't matter. This was her one chance, her last chance, a last gasp for a final breath.

When the trunk popped open, Jolee screamed in triumph behind her duct tape mask. She had time to see a gun metal expanse of winter sky and fat flakes of snow still falling outside, her nostrils flaring as she filled them with a sharp, cold intake of air, before the car stopped.

But it didn't just stop. The impact was so sudden Jolee was tossed toward the front of the BMW, hitting her head against the car jack. She felt something floppy on her forehead, wetness flooding her eye, stinging, but then she was flying and couldn't think about that anymore, thrown out of the open trunk into a foot of heavy snow.

The landing was hard, so hard she couldn't breathe, but her head hurt the most and the last thing she remembered was hearing a scream, a wild animal cry of pain and death and horror, and she wondered briefly if she was making that awful noise before the world went black.

* * * *

Silas had been following the animal for over a mile. His father taught him long ago that hunting should be something a man did honorably, so tracking in the snow seemed a bit unfair, but he was carrying a bow, not a gun, and the elk had a good quarter mile head-start. Besides, the animal was a thousand pounds and bulls were known to charge any hunter forced to get too close. Silas was careful to stay downwind. He had two arrows ready—elk often ran, even after a

kill shot, and he was ready to track it for the second if he needed to—but it turned out he only needed one.

The first shot was good, clean, a chest hit, surely puncturing the animal's lung, possibly piercing the heart. And still, the big bull ran, bellowing as it bounded through the trees, heading for the old logging road. It wasn't much of a road at all, just a two-track, and very few people knew about it—most of them dead. His brother, Carlos, only had it plowed or graded for “special occasions.”

It all happened far too quickly for Silas to do anything but bear witness. He heard the animal cry, a horrifying, sorrowful squall, but by the time he'd reached a clearing near the road, following both the elk's tracks and the blood trail, events had already been set in motion. The first thing he noted, setting aside a rising anger at the sight, was that the two-track had been freshly plowed. The foot of snow they'd received overnight—nothing compared to the two more they were supposed to get over the next few days—had already been cleared from the narrow road.

The elk had bolted across the gravel path, not afraid or cautious of anything that looked like a road this far from civilization, and probably too weak from the arrow to jump far out of the way of the oncoming vehicle. Instead, it had tumbled sideways onto the hood of the BMW, its huge rack—calcified this time of year and sharpened to dangerous points on tree bark—shattering the glass, puncturing the air bag, and skewering the driver of the vehicle to his seat.

The other airbag had either malfunctioned or was nonexistent, because the passenger had gone airborne through the windshield, his body sprawled over that of the elk on the hood, limp and unmoving. There was so much blood Silas couldn't tell from an immediate assessment which was human and which was elk. But the elk was still alive, the arrow rising out of its side

as it struggled to free itself, the pulling and tugging of its head making the driver do a bloody dance in his seat.

Silas moved to the front of the car and raised his bow, making it quick and fast, easing the animal's suffering and silencing its cries. He surveyed the scene, understanding immediately. He monitored the old two-track regularly, even though it was miles from his own cabin, knowing Carlos's penchant for using it, but he hadn't been down this way in a few weeks. He recognized the two men as Carlos's, in spite of their disfiguring wounds.

Probably the same men who had taken Isabelle, he thought, a slow heat burning in his chest as he assessed the damage. The memory of his wife was always close to the surface, and although his life out here was full and far from idle, it was also quiet and lonely and left him a great deal of time to think about her. He couldn't help imagining them carrying her out of his house while they left him, drugged and duct taped to a chair, in their burning cabin. What had they done with her? Where was she now?

There was no movement from either body, and they were probably dead—or would be soon if they weren't already—and he was glad. He might have killed them himself if he'd found them barreling down this road, off to carry through with Carlos's orders. God only knows what he had them doing.

He ran a hand over his own marred cheek, self-conscious—an emotion he didn't feel much out here—reminding himself that at least he'd lived through his ordeal, although there had been plenty of times he'd wished he hadn't. Slowly, he had discovered purpose in his life again—to protect his father's land and to find his wife's body. He was sure they'd killed her. He prayed they hadn't raped her. The thought of these two men anywhere near his wife made his chest burn with rage.

Silas slung his bow over his shoulder, circling the vehicle. He would have to extract the buck and get it back to his cabin. But what to do with the car and the two bodies? His train of thought was completely derailed as he came around the trunk, seeing it popped open. The woman had been thrown clear of the vehicle, but she was lifeless on her side, a pool of blood melting the snow around her head.

He went down to one knee beside her body, checking her throat for a pulse and finding one, strong and steady. Then he checked her for wounds, finding only one, a gash on her head that was bleeding profusely, but it wasn't deep or fatal. He couldn't tell if she had any broken bones, but the head wound needed to be addressed first.

Unzipping his parka, he peeled up his layers of clothing until he got to the long underwear closest to his skin. Using his hunting knife, he cut a solid piece away out of the front, folding it up and pressing it against the woman's head. She didn't stir or cry out at all. He opened one of her eyes with thumb and finger. Her pupil retracted in the fading light of the sun and he sighed in relief as the other did the same when he checked it.

She looked young, a good ten years younger than he was—maybe early twenties. It was hard to tell with all the duct tape wrapped around her mouth, but there were very few lines in the skin around her eyes and none across her forehead, and her hair was dark and long and lustrous, no hint of gray. She was exotic-looking—maybe Native American, he guessed, cradling her head in his hand and using his other to press against her forehead, applying enough pressure to get the bleeding to stop, and waiting.

It was quiet. The wildlife had scattered, frightened away by the accident. He could sense them quivering, watching—rabbits, foxes, coyotes, joined for the moment in silence as they waited for the outcome of this strange event. The trees above him creaked under the weight of

the snow on their bare limbs. It had been hovering near the freezing point for days, making the precipitation heavy and wet.

Silas looked over at the car, noticing the vanity plate. It was his brother's BMW all right. Only someone as arrogant as Carlos would send men in a car with his own vanity plate on it to commit a murder. The car had stalled on impact but the engine was still ticking as it cooled. His brother would certainly wonder what had become of his BMW and his trusty sidekicks. Carlos would send someone to look for them. Perhaps he would even come himself. The thought of seeing and confronting his brother was tempting, but as he looked back down at the woman on the snow, he reminded himself of the reason he'd stayed hidden all this time. Isabelle first. Then he would deal with Carlos.

Long enough, he judged, peeling the cloth away from the woman's head to check, blood blooming on the material like a red flower. It was still seeping, but it had slowed. He worked quickly, using his hunting knife to cut the zip ties on her wrists and ankles, carefully, gently peeling the duct tape from her skin. When he had her free, he stopped to gaze down at her, struck by how like Isabelle she looked, all that dark hair, those red lips. She even had the same body type, tall and full-bodied. The poor thing didn't even have a coat— just jeans and a turtleneck—and his jaw tightened when he noted the dark stain between her thighs. Must have been terrified, he thought, trying not to compare this woman to his wife, trying not to think about her fate, wondering if Isabelle, too, had wet herself before they had killed her.

He checked the woman's wound again. It would need stitches, but he couldn't do that here. At least it had stopped bleeding. He used the remains of the duct tape to fashion a makeshift bandage, securing the material over the cut. The woman was cold, already far too cold. He looked around again, listening. Still quiet. Glancing up, he watched the snow falling around them

growing heavier. There was no car coming after this one any time soon, he judged, and if they got as much snow as the radio had been predicting, there wouldn't be one for days.

The whole thing was a big mess. He could bring the snowmobile back for the elk, but he couldn't leave the woman here to freeze in the meantime. He unzipped his parka and wrapped her in it, zipping her arms in, making her an easy-to-handle bundle. She was dead weight but he lifted her easily, getting his head under her torso, using a fireman's carry as he squatted with her over his shoulders.

For the first time, she made a noise, and he wondered when she was going to come to. What was he going to tell her? At least she couldn't see his face from this angle, he thought, using the big muscles in his thighs to help him rise to standing. The girl over his shoulders sighed again and he stiffened, waiting, but she stilled. He wondered what the poor girl had done to arouse Carlos's wrath. Refused him perhaps? That's all Isabelle had ever done—she'd chosen one brother over the other. Of course, Carlos hadn't killed her over that, although Silas was sure it had been, at least in part, some of his brother's motivation. Carlos had killed her because Isabelle was Silas's only heir. She would have inherited all the land their father had left to Silas that Carlos had been determined to get his hands on.

He shifted the girl's weight, balancing her on his shoulders. There was nothing to do but take her back to the cabin and he couldn't get there by car. It was a mile on foot and the sun would be setting by the time he arrived home. He grabbed his bow and took another look around at the accident site, marking the location in his memory. It would be dark when he came back, and the falling snow would cover his tracks.

It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

She drifted in.

Her head throbbed. It felt too big on her neck, wobbling around up there, hard to hold up. The man in the camouflage hunting mask held her head, made her drink water. His face floated in front of her like a demon, and the first time she saw him, she screamed and tried to scramble away. It came out only as a whimper and a shuffling of her feet under the covers, but in her head she was running for the door. She choked on the water and it dribbled down her chin. The man wiped at her with a cloth and they tried again. He didn't speak and it scared her, but she didn't say anything either. Did she have a voice? She tried to vocalize and just croaked, an unintelligible noise. He shook his head and wiped her mouth once more, offering her water. She shook her own head, and the movement sent shards of glass rolling around through her skull.

She drifted out again.

* * * *

It took Silas almost a full day to clean and dress the elk. He started in the early morning as the snow came down heavily outside the shed, making it hard to even see the house through the little window on the side. He stopped every hour to wipe his hands on his apron and trudge back to the house to check on the woman, just opening the bedroom door a crack, too afraid to show himself, masked and blood-stained. She'd think he was a serial killer for sure.

She slept on. The room with its twin bed served mostly as extra storage. He boxes full of books and magazines stacked against the walls and tools littered the floor. He had thought about putting her closer, in his own room, but there was only the one bed, and she was already afraid of him. Not that he blamed her. The poor girl clearly had plenty to be afraid of, and he couldn't expect her to trust him.

There had been nothing to tell him who she was, no purse or wallet, no identification at all, and the woman was silent, like a beautiful ornament tucked away in his spare room. He had been forced to get her out of her wet clothes, undressing her quickly, doing his best to just take care of business, but he couldn't help his reaction. He'd almost forgotten he wasn't an animal, a monster living in the middle of the woods, but a flesh and blood man.

She was a stunning beauty, her tawny against the dark waves of her hair, her limbs long and lean. He checked them carefully for breaks, her skin almost painfully soft in his hands, like velvet. Her flesh was too much of a temptation and he was embarrassed by his raw, immediate response, glad when he was done and she was dressed and tucked back under the covers.

He took a break to try to feed her some turkey noodle soup about mid-day, but she just stared at him, her speech fuzzy, eyes glazed. He drank the soup himself instead, watching her drift off again and wondering if he should take her to the hospital. There was no way to get there that day anyway, he decided, even though he'd just winterized the Duramax. The snow was thick and heavy with ice and already another foot had fallen overnight. The main roads would be difficult and the back ones impassable, even with his plow.

Once the elk was taken care of, Silas took a shower, standing outside in the cold under the nozzle attached to the side of the shed. He could run the well on the diesel generator or use the hand-pump inside and there was a composting toilet and a sink in the bathroom in the cabin, but no shower. He'd never installed one, never saw the point. He got dirty outside, might as well wash off the dirt outside, he figured. Besides, the needling, freezing spray felt like good punishment, the warmth of the woodstove in the house a relief when he came back in, dripping wet, to dry by the fire.

Then there was another mess to clean up.

He tried feeding the woman again, but she just groaned and rolled over and slept. It was a gamble, but he decided to leave her. She probably wouldn't wake at all, he told himself, and if she did, who would be crazy enough to go out in this storm? Only him. He didn't take the diesel Arctic Cat—he made his own biodiesel fuel—but instead had gone on foot in snowshoes, not wanting to draw attention to himself if someone had discovered the accident.

The car and the bodies were where he had left them, undisturbed. The extra foot of snow now covering the two-track made it tough going. The BMW got stuck twice, and riding in the blood-and-gore-covered driver's seat left him in desperate need of another shower. He'd stowed the bodies in the back, both of them cold but the remains of rigor mortis beginning to fade, making them easier to move.

He drove twenty minutes before he found the spot he was looking for, a place where the road dropped off on the right into a ravine. It was thick with trees down there and a creek bed ran through in the summer. It was mostly frozen now. Silas put the car in neutral and pushed it over the edge. The front end crumpled, accordion-style, before momentum flipped the BMW onto its roof, wheels spinning.

It wasn't the best solution, but at least it looked like an accident, and there was no missing elk begging explanation. He covered his tracks to the woods and went back to the accident site. There was a great deal of blood in the snow and he did his best to cover that. They were going to get at least another foot of snow overnight again, and that would help. He covered his tracks again to the woods and started the walk on snowshoes back to the cabin.

He was nearly home when he saw a deer and thought of his bow, sitting in the shed. He had a gun in his belt—a good piece to take care of business, a .357 magnum, but nothing to hunt

with. He faced the buck and its head came up when it heard him. The deer turned tail and bounded off further into the woods.

No sense being greedy, he thought. The meat from the elk would be more than plenty to feed him through the winter, along with the various turkey and pheasant and deer and rabbit in the freezer. *Feed us*, he corrected himself, walking a little more quickly as he neared the clearing where his cabin stood. He was careful to remove the camouflage hunting mask from his pocket and pull it back on.

The woman had been sleeping when he left to take care of the car and the bodies and he was sure she would be still, but he was worried. She still hadn't spoken, and although her pupils continued to be normal size and responded to light, he didn't like to consider things like concussions and brain swelling and hemorrhage, but he had to keep an eye out.

He went around the cabin, heading for the shed—and another shower—when he saw the woman standing just outside the shed door, still wearing his t-shirt. It came to mid-thigh and she was barefoot in the snow, staring at the mess inside. The shed was still full of blood and gore and tissue from butchering the elk. His heart sank when she turned and saw him, masked and bloody, and she let out a choked cry at the sight.

Her gaze darted quickly from him to the cabin to the woods, and he waited for her to run, but she didn't. He saw it beginning to happen and barely made it to her side before she collapsed, muttering something under her breath. Now they were both a bloody mess again. He sighed, looking down at the woman's bandaged head. *She's still sleeping*, he realized, seeing how her eyes moved beneath her eyelids when they closed. He hoped whatever dream she was having didn't involve bloody masked men. He lifted her easily and carried her into the house.

* * * *

She drifted in.

And this time she did scream. She was restrained, a makeshift zip-tie handcuff attached to her wrist, another looped around the bedpost. She pulled and pulled, thrashing on the bed, kicking off the covers. It was the first time she realized she was wearing a man's button-down shirt and nothing else. Where were her clothes?

The man in the mask appeared in the doorway, the light behind him making him loom like a god. He came swiftly to her side, his big hands pulling the covers back up, smoothing her hair. He could cradle her whole head in his palm. The man was a giant.

"Where am I?" she croaked, confused and horrified at his gentle touch. "Who are you?"

"My name is..." He hesitated, sighed. "Silas. And you're in my cabin in the woods."

She let that information sink in, trying to get the world to make some sense.

"Why am I tied up?" She pulled at the zip tie again, whimpering.

"You were walking in your sleep," he explained. "You went outside in your bare feet. It's snowing."

She didn't remember that at all.

"Who am I?" she whispered, reaching up to touch her throbbing head. There was a thick bandage there.

The man was quiet. Then he said, "I was hoping you could tell me."

She didn't remember that either.

* * * *

Silas couldn't deny his relief—she was getting better, eating now, getting up to use the bathroom—but she still couldn't remember her name or what had happened. He prompted her as

much as he could, knowing head injuries could cause amnesia, that memory could recur any time, triggered by anything.

“You found me in the snow?” she mused, sipping the tea he’d made. It was good to see her sitting up, although she didn’t do it for long and she still slept a great deal. Her head hurt her and although the wound was healing nicely, the bruises on her forehead were growing a deeper, angry purple by the day. He had taken the zip-tie handcuffs off since she seemed more lucid, but he didn’t go far, never out of sight of the house.

“There was an accident,” he reminded her.

“And you didn’t take me to the hospital because...”

He nodded toward the window. The snow had drifted against the pane, a good four feet high. He had to use snowshoes everywhere now. He’d plowed out the driveway, but the cabin wasn’t built near any real pavement or labeled roads, and the way out couldn’t be called anything more than a path—room enough for one vehicle in and out. It was ten miles by car to anything resembling civilization.

“But how did I get all the way out here?” she mused, rubbing her bandaged head. She repeated that action often, as if her wound was a lamp and a genie might appear to tell her the answers she sought.

“There were two men in the car.” He treaded this road carefully. He didn’t know her relationship to his brother. “Do you remember them?”

She shook her head, frowning into her tea. “I remember snow. Shoveling snow. I remember a squirrel at our bird feeder. I chased him away. We feed the cardinals and blue jays that stay in the winter...”

“Who is ‘we’?” he prompted gently. This was promising—more than she’d ever shared.

Again, she sighed, looking over at him with a helpless shrug. "I don't know."

He stood and took her tray. She'd graduated from soup to sandwiches and he was pleased to see she'd eaten almost all of it.

"The men...they were dead?" she asked again.

He nodded, waiting. She seemed to be considering this information as if for the first time, although they'd gone over it a dozen times at least.

"Will you call the police?" She put her tea on the night table, pulling the covers up high. "Take me to a hospital?"

"When the snow stops," he agreed. He turned to take the tray out and her voice halted him.

"Why won't you take off the mask?"

Her words made him cringe. She'd asked him this question before and he'd given his answer, trying to assuage her fears, but he found it hard to address the issue repeatedly. It was like piercing an old wound with an ice pick every few hours.

"It's for your own good." He hesitated, hand on the doorknob, balancing the tray. When he glanced back at her, he saw the hurt in her eyes and wished things could be different. "Trust me, you don't want me to take it off."

She usually argued with him, gave some sort of protest, but this time she didn't. Instead, she turned to look out the window. Snow was falling again and the world was white.

He shut the door behind him and when he went in later to check on her, she was sleeping, her tea cup empty, covers twisted around her waist. He pulled them up to her chin and, not for the first time, wondered what in the hell he was going to do about her.

* * * *

She woke screaming again.

She couldn't remember the dream, she just knew it terrified her. Silas stumbled in, feeling his way to the bed.

"Bad dream," she whispered.

He sat on the edge. "Do you remember?"

"No." It was hard to explain to someone how you could be so afraid of something you couldn't recall, but that overwhelming sense of terror wouldn't leave her limbs—they trembled under the blankets.

"Are you cold? Do you want me to put more wood in the stove?" He adjusted her covers in the darkness.

"No." She shivered. He started to stand and she grabbed his arm. "Please. Stay for a while?"

His weight made the little bed creak as he sat. She didn't let go, gripping the thick expanse of his forearm. They stayed that way for a few moments, quiet, their breath the only sound in the room.

"Would you talk to me?" she whispered, swallowing past her fear.

He shifted on the bed. "What about?"

"Anything." Her hand slid down, finding its way into his.

Silas cleared his throat, squeezing her hand gently, and she waited, her heart still trying to find a normal beat. Just his presence helped, but the calming sound of his voice was better.

"I saw a wolf today," he said finally. "She was really something."

"You did?" She half-sat, already interested. "How do you know it was a 'she'?"

“Females are smaller than males,” he explained. “I wish you could have seen her. I was out back getting wood and I looked up and there she was, right at the top of the hill.”

“Were you scared?”

“No.”

She smiled in the darkness. “Are you ever scared, Silas?”

“Yeah,” he admitted softly. His other hand moved over hers, petting her skin.

“Was she a gray wolf?”

“Black,” he corrected. “Beautiful. She reminded me of you.”

She felt warm at his words. “What did you do?”

“I just watched her.”

She tried to imagine it, face to face with such a wild animal. She’d seen her fair share of deer and coyotes, even a bobcat once, but never a wolf. “Aren’t you worried about her coming back and attacking us?”

“No. My father always said, anyone who’s afraid of the wolf shouldn’t live in the forest.”

She frowned, something flashing into consciousness. It was brief, fleeting, a cross between déjà vu and the sense that something was right at the tip of her tongue, if she could just remember...

“You’re safe here,” Silas assured her.

“I’ve never been safe anywhere.” The feeling was true even if there was no real memory to accompany it. She struggled with trying to remember anything about her life, even her own name. Again, it was that feeling, like it was all on the tip of her tongue, if only she could speak. Silas had been patient, prompting her often, but she could tell he was worried. She was worried too, but the snow falling outside kept them from making a much-needed hospital visit.

She turned toward the big man sitting on the edge of her bed, wondering about him. He seemed to have as much of a missing history as she did. He was quiet to the point of being laconic, giving her lots of space and privacy, although she had caught him checking in on her a lot in the past day or two. And the mask thing was strange, but everything felt weird, off-kilter, and he hadn't given her any real reason not to trust him, after all.

She gasped as a low, silvery flood lit the room from the window pane, a cloud moving from across the face of a full moon. The light was dim but she could see his profile.

"You're not wearing a mask." She reached out without thinking, but he grabbed her hand, shaking his head, turning away.

"Don't." Silas stood, his back to the window, his face in shadow. "I should go to bed."

The light dimmed, the moon playing hide and seek, as he moved away.

"Do you think the wolf will come back?" she asked as he opened the door.

"She was a lone wolf."

She nodded. "My father always said they were the most dangerous kind."

They were both silent, the air pregnant with the pause.

"My father..." She said the words again and they both let them dangle at the edge of comprehension. Her breath had turned to ice in her throat, her body moving from hot to cold and back to hot again. The world tilted up and down and back and she opened her mouth to speak, the first memory coming, the rest falling like dominoes behind it. It was a horrifying relief, that flood of memories, and all she could manage was a distressed cry.

Silas was by her side in an instant, pulling her trembling body into his arms.

"He killed my father," she choked, hiding her face against his chest. He wore a pair of white long-underwear and moved like a ghost in the darkness.

“Who?” he asked sharply.

“Oh my god.” The tears came in a flood like the memories and she clung to him, feeling his arms tighten at her back. “Carlos killed my father! He tried to kill me too!”

He prompted her like he had been for days. “What do you remember?”

“Everything. *Everything.*” It was true. Her name, her life, her near-death, Jolee remembered it all in one terrifying, mind-blowing instant. “I’m so afraid.” She quivered. “I want to go home.”

He stroked her hair. “You’re safe here.”

“I don’t have a home.” She sobbed against his chest. This realization was the worst. For days she’d wondered about her family, the people who might be missing her, worried and waiting for her to return. Did she have a husband? Children? A mother and a father?

“Your father’s dead?” he asked.

“Years ago.”

“So where is home?”

“With my husband,” she whispered, closing her eyes at the memory of Carlos, who he was, what he had done. Her emotions hadn’t caught up with her brain, but they were coming—she could feel them lurking in the shadows, ready to spring her limbs and squeeze her heart.

Silas stiffened at her response. “But you said you don’t have a home...”

“I can’t ever go back there,” she confessed, realizing the truth of her statement. Home wasn’t safe. There was nowhere in the world that would be safe from Carlos.

“Why?”

She realized how cryptic and strange her words must be and tried to explain. “Because Carlos is my husband. He’s the man who tried to kill me. Those men you found, they were his.

He hired them, told them, to kill me.” They both sat in silence, letting that knowledge sink in.

“What am I going to do?”

He sighed, rocking her in the darkness. “You don’t need to think about it now.”

“You found me,” she whispered, incredulous. He had been her rescuer from the beginning, but she hadn’t understood just what he had saved her from, and clearly he hadn’t either. It wasn’t just the accident—in fact, the accident had been part of her salvation. “You saved me from those men. They were going to kill me.”

“They’re dead.” His voice was like steel.

“If that elk hadn’t come along…”

“But it did.”

She tried to hide the sob rising in her throat and it came out anyway. He tried to hold her but she struggled, pushing at him. “I thought if I could remember, everything would be okay again. But it’s worse. Everything’s worse.”

She twisted and buried her head in the pillow, still hiding her tears, although they were coming, whether she wanted them or not.

“I’m sorry,” Silas murmured. She felt his big hand pressed against her shoulder. “You’re welcome to stay here for as long as you need to.”

She turned toward the window. The moon was a high, yellow, silver-lidded eye. “I guess I don’t have anywhere else to go…”

Silas stood. “I’m sorry,” he said again.

“I want to go to sleep.” She closed her eyes. “I wish I hadn’t remembered anything.”

“Try to sleep.” He moved to the door and then turned to ask, “Do you remember your name?”

“Jolee Mercier.”

He stood for a long time. So long she turned to see if he was still there, framed in the doorway.

“Silas?”

“You should know.” He cleared his throat. “Carlos Mercier is my brother.”

Jolee gave a short, sharp laugh, but the man didn’t return her mirth. He was serious. It wasn’t possible, couldn’t be true. Carlos’s brother was gone, dead, that’s what he’d told her, told everyone. But that was all she’d ever known about her husband’s only sibling. She tried to remember more and couldn’t.

“Goodnight, Jolee.”

She tried to see him in the moonlight but could only discern his outline. “Goodnight, Silas.”

Overwhelmed with the crushing impact of chance, she turned her face to the wall and closed her eyes, wishing again for oblivion.

* * * *

The woman was impossible.

He’d wanted to take her into a hospital when the snow finally stopped, but Jolee refused, too afraid Carlos could find the records, trace her somehow.

“There are privacy laws,” he’d reminded her, but she just gave him a long, steady look and shook her head.

She did seem to be getting better, her cut healing, memory returning, but he would have felt better if he’d had confirmation from an emergency room doctor, or at least a few x-rays or an MRI.

Then he'd tried to take her into town for clothes. "You can't live in my t-shirts forever," he'd teased. But she didn't want to go. Even when he'd offered to drive three hours away, to a different town, she refused.

"He'll find me."

Silas didn't point out the holes in her logic. If Carlos found the car, if he discovered her body missing from the wreck, that would prompt a sweep of the area—and being anywhere near the accident site would then be the worst place to be. No, he didn't emphasize that fact at all.

But he did bolster his security around the cabin—not lights or alarms, but traps and snares. And he watched, and waited and tried not to leave her alone. But he couldn't always be there. He'd had to run to town for supplies, going three hours away, as he promised, getting them staples like sugar and salt, things he only had enough stocked of for one. He'd bought her clothes too, some jeans and shirts, both a little too snug—she seemed smaller to him than she was, apparently—along with underwear and socks.

"No bras?" Jolee had asked in wonder as she pawed through the bags.

Silas had flushed and shrugged and turned away to finish putting away groceries. What did he know about women's clothes? The truth was, he had looked at bras, lacy, strappy things, small and soft in his hands. They made him dizzy, and the woman who had come out to help him had just made him feel more uncomfortable, so he'd left. He bought underwear for her somewhere else, plain white cotton, the kind that came in a plastic package, the kind he didn't have to handle or touch. That seemed safer.

Of course, now the woman was walking around braless in t-shirts and driving him further to distraction. Lesson learned. But she'd really liked the oranges he brought home and had

delighted in the bar of chocolate he'd splurged on. That alone made the trip worth it, in spite of her protest and worry and constant questions.

Silas wasn't used to living with someone—he knew that was part of it. And the mask was a bone of contention between them that wouldn't go away. He hated wearing it, she hated him wearing it, and yet he couldn't take it off. Revealing himself to her would be a mistake, he was sure of it, and so he tried to deflect, change the subject, make a joke instead. It didn't always work.

Just that day, she'd been eating her lunch in bed. He still made her take a mid-afternoon nap, even if she protested, like a child, "I'm not tired!" She always slept though, and he would bring her lunch on a tray. He liked seeing that sleepy smile on her face when she woke.

"What is this?" she'd asked, sipping from her spoon. "It's so good!"

"Elk stew." He'd had his before bringing hers, but now sat in the chair beside her bed while she ate to keep her company. The chair was a convenience for her nightmares, which came and went, but she liked to fall asleep after a bad dream holding his hand.

"*My* elk?" Her head lifted, eyes wide.

He raised an eyebrow. "I seem to remember having something to do with bringing him down."

"Oh sure, take all the credit." Jolee laughed, spooning another bite. "Just because you tracked him, shot him, dressed him..."

Silas smiled at her teasing. "I admit, it's the only thing I've ever eaten killed by BMW."

"Does food taste better when you've hunted it yourself?" she inquired, drinking her milk. Big Anna, his Irish Dexter cow, provided them with fresh, whole milk, and the three chickens,

which the wolf had been eyeing, he was sure, when she showed up on the hill, gave them eggs for breakfast every day.

“I think it does.” He nodded. “Wait ’til I make the chops.”

“Mmm.” Her eyes lit up. He loved the way they did that whenever she got excited about something. “I haven’t had elk chops in years. My father used to make them.”

“He was a hunter?” Silas had asked her as much as he dared about her family and the circumstances surrounding her father’s death, although he’d been careful about what he, in turn, shared with her about his own life.

Carlos hated the unions, and it didn’t surprise him at all to hear he’d been getting rid of loggers like Jolee’s father who were organizing, although it made him furious. But most things about Carlos made him angry, although very little surprised him anymore.

Jolee smiled. “Know any loggers out here who aren’t?”

“Good point,” he conceded. He watched her eating and felt a deep ache in his chest. She looked a great deal like Isabelle, and he supposed that was one of the reasons Carlos had married her. That, and the fact that he’d killed her father and left her practically an orphan right out of high school. Carlos had created the perfect damsel in distress to rescue. Besides, his brother lived by the credo—keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Silas noticed her looking at him and he let his gaze shift to the window, the pine trees sagging like a cluster of fat brides under the weight of the snow. He tried to keep himself from her as much as he could, to reveal as little as possible while still maintaining her trust, but it wasn’t easy when she looked at him like that. He sensed the question coming before she even asked it.

“Why don’t you want me to see you?”

“Jolee, please...” He held up his hand, shaking his head, and stood. This was the easiest way to end a conversation he didn’t want to have.

“Just tell me why.” Her voice was soft, pleading, and goddamnit, it made him want to relent. “Is it so much to ask?”

He tried not to carry the guilt of it, because part of him wanted to tell her, wanted to share his life—or lack thereof, anymore—with this woman. Then he reminded himself of their situation, that this was his brother’s wife, a woman who was in serious danger, someone he now had to protect. Taking off his hunting mask and scaring her away wasn’t going to do anyone any good.

“I’ll be out back,” he replied gruffly, heading toward the door.

“Silas, you don’t need to run away.”

Her words made him turn on her, in spite of his best intentions. He snapped. “I’m not running away. There are things to do around here. Food doesn’t appear out of thin air you know. I’ve got wood to chop.”

He heard her gasp when he slammed the door behind him.

It felt good to be outside and he stalked past the shed, around to the wood pile, grabbing the maul and swinging it at a piece of white oak already set on the block. He set about his task, easing into a steady, lulling pace, working hard, working up a sweat. He unbuttoned his flannel shirt, peeling it off, the cold air feeling painfully good against his skin. Picking up the maul, he got back to work, setting wood, swinging in a full, round arc, hearing that satisfying ‘pop’ as the oak split apart, flying to either side of the block. Lather, rinse, repeat. Splitting wood was like meditation, repetitive that way, giving his mind some freedom.

And he needed some freedom, because ever since he'd followed that elk onto the two-track and found Jolee in the snow, he'd been far too distracted. Life had taught him not to care, not to get too emotionally invested, but this situation had sunk him deep into something he wasn't ready for and didn't want. But what choice did he have?

Until this had happened, he'd had a purpose. Spring would be here before long, and his plans would come to full fruition. And he was sure to find Isabelle by then, he reasoned—although after so many years of looking, even he had to admit to losing some hope. There was a damned lot of land to cover, and he'd explored more of it than probably anyone in the history of the state.

But then this giant wrench in the works had come along...

He had his brother's wife locked up in his cabin—a brother who thought he was dead. Hell, Carlos might even believe his wife was now dead, if they didn't do too much investigation around the wreckage—at least until spring, when the way down the ravine was less treacherous.

We've got until spring, he told himself, swinging the maul again, aiming far past the point of impact, as if the top half-foot of wood didn't even exist. The result was a fine, resounding split, the wood flying apart, the wedge of the maul separating it cleanly. His father had taught him never to split wood with an ax. A maul did the job best, and a dull one at that. A sharp maul was no good to anyone—it just got stuck in the wood.

Silas swung again, thinking about his father, gone too many years now. The old man had taught them both all of the same things. He and Carlos had grown up side by side, their mother a distant, warm, sad memory from the time Silas was about six and Carlos fifteen. Maybe the old man had spent more time with his younger son, teaching him to set traps and track and hunt. Carlos had been doing older-boy things by then, dating girls and asking for the keys to the truck

all the time. Perhaps the experience of their childhoods had been more different than he realized, Silas thought.

But the old man had done the right thing, the smart thing, when he finally succumbed to the cancer eating away at his esophagus—too many years of chewing tobacco, something Silas would never do—putting provisions in his will that one son receive all the land, the other son all the money. It was supposed to get them to work together, Silas was sure, although perhaps his father had known that was an improbability. Silas had been outspoken about the rape of the natural world taking place in the logging camps and strip mines, and had made it pretty clear what he would do if he got his hands on the land.

Still, had they parted ways amicably, it would have all been all right. According to the will, Carlos had the right to continue working on the land where he was already established—he just couldn't go any further or put up any new logging camps or mines without his brother's permission. There was plenty of money to be made still, and if there was one thing Carlos knew how to do it was making his money make money.

And Silas, who had never valued money and possessions in the same way his brother had, would have been happy protecting his land and the wildlife living on it. So maybe the old man had anticipated their split, had known the brothers would never see eye-to-eye, and had done the only thing he could think of to avoid trouble between them.

And it might have worked. If it hadn't been for Isabelle, maybe it would have turned out the way his father had imagined. Instead, his world had ended in fire and pain and death, while his brother...

“Silas?”

He stood upright, hearing the screen door creak on the side of the house. It was Jolee. His brother had gone on with his life, continuing with the business—even if it involved using Silas’s land and making illegal deals and if someone got in the way, well, everyone in Carlos’s world was expendable, after all...

And Silas had known all of those things, but the ultimate betrayal, the thing that made Silas’s gut twist into knots, was the fact that his brother had gone on to marry a woman so like Isabelle it made him both wistfully nostalgic and furious every time he looked at her.

“I came out here to help.” Jolee stepped around the shed and Silas quickly grabbed his shirt, buttoning it up, his back to her. “What can I do?”

When he glanced over at her, wearing jeans and her boots and one of his t-shirts—she still had a penchant for wearing them in spite of the fact he’d gotten her some that actually fit—and a hoodie pulled over that, he shook his head, more to clear it than anything else.

“Go back in the house.” He kicked the maul aside, moving past her, heading around the shed. She’d broken his reverie and he was in a sour mood now. He needed to do something to steady himself.

“No.” She followed him, watching as he withdrew his bow and quiver. “You said there was a lot of work to do around here. I can help.”

Silas went back out behind the shed, ignoring her as she trudged alongside him. There was a target set up against a tree in the distance and he pulled an arrow, aiming, trying to focus.

“Wouldn’t a gun be more efficient for hunting?” Jolee chimed in just as he let the arrow fly. It threw him off and he swore under his breath, drawing another arrow.

“Too noisy,” he countered, pulling his bow again and breathing deep, centering himself. He could hear her stamping her feet in the snow next to him, bouncing a little to keep warm, her

breath coming wispy white streams, and he found himself unable to concentrate. Putting his bow down, he turned to look at her, frowning.

“I’m sorry about what I said.”

She pursed her lips for a minute, blinking those big dark eyes at him. Then she shrugged. “That’s okay. You’re right, if I’m going to stay here, I should help you.”

“Maybe when you’re all healed up.” He nodded at the bandage on her forehead. It was smaller, but the wound underneath was still considerable and she was going to have a scar, no matter how many careful stitches he’d applied—he’d lost count after the fifteenth.

“Well there has to be something I can do.” She threw up her hands, exasperated. “Besides, I’m going stir crazy staying in the house all day reading *Guns and Ammo* and watching you check in on me when you think I’m sleeping.”

Silas flushed and was glad for the cold, an excuse for the roses blooming on his cheeks. “Well, there is one thing.”

She followed him again as he headed to the truck parked in the driveway. His gun case was in the back and he unlocked it, pulled out the 10/22 Ruger, checking the safety and shouldering it. It was always loaded.

“I hate guns.” She trailed him back again behind the shed.

He gave her a quelling look. “I can’t be here all the time, you know.”

He went out to the fence line, lining several targets up for them to shoot at that he’d picked up in the shed—three tin soda cans and a beer bottle. Then he went back to where she was standing, watching, arms crossed over her chest. Silas lifted the gun, let the safety off, and aimed.

“You’re going to have to learn how to protect yourself,” he said, pulling the trigger. One of the soda cans jumped and fell off the fence post. His shot was a good one, although he’d just clipped it—he was actually far better with a bow.

“The first rule of guns is to always assume they’re loaded.” He showed her the clip. “The second rule—”

“Never point the gun at anything you’re not willing to kill.” She held her hand out for it. Silas hesitated, frowning. “I said I hated guns, not that I didn’t know how to use one.”

He handed the Ruger over, watching doubtfully as she turned the safety on, checked the clip herself, and then unlocked it, shouldering the gun and aiming. The second and third soda cans fell, followed by the bottle, which shattered with her last shot. He gave a low whistle as she put the safety back on and handed the gun over.

“So you can handle a gun.” He nodded, squinting his eyes at the carnage of bottles and cans left in the snow. It was pretty impressive. “But can you cook?”

Jolee grinned. “Far better than I can shoot. Where’s that elk?”

* * * *

Jolee woke up Christmas morning feeling as she imagined most people felt on that day—excited, anticipatory and utterly happy. She almost didn’t recognize the feeling. She heard Silas feeding the woodstove and smiled, wondering if he felt it too, rolling over in her little bed and glancing out the window. The sun was just coming up over the horizon, bleeding orange light into her room.

“Are you awake?” Silas whispered from the doorway and she turned to face him, grinning and kicking off the covers.

“I don’t think I slept at all.” It wasn’t true, of course—she’d slept deeply, lulled by the sound of a hoot owl outside her window all night. “Did Santa come?”

She saw the flash of his teeth through the mouth hole of his mask. “I think there are some things under the tree.”

She knew there were—she’d put a few of them there herself. Silas had bought her yarn and knitting needles and she’d found something else to do besides help him make their meals. She’d been knitting like crazy when she was supposed to be “napping.”

Jolee bounded out into the kitchen, the smell of cinnamon drawing her toward the stove.

“Cinnamon rolls?” She dragged a finger along the top of one and groaned as she sucked the icing off. “Oh Santa has been very good us.”

He put a roll on a plate and handed it to her. She curled up in a chair near the fire in the living room with her cinnamon roll and a big glass of fresh milk, drawing her t-shirt over her knees and admiring their Christmas tree.

Silas had dragged it home through the snow and set it up in a stand he’d made himself. They’d popped popcorn and strung dried berries and fruit—it was a truly an old-fashioned tree, no lights or sparkles, but in the glow of the fire it shined anyway, a magical thing.

She clapped her hands when Silas began handing out the brown packages wrapped in twine under the tree. Hers for him were more elaborately decorated in white butcher paper, stamped using nutshells and leaves and pinecones with a dark brown ink she’d made from boiling walnuts and vinegar.

There was an orange for her and a big bar of chocolate and she overdosed on sweetness as she unwrapped more yarn, thrilled at the bright colors he’d chosen. There was also a new pair

of boots for her and a winter jacket, waterproof and warm. She blushed when she opened a package of delicate, lacy bras in a myriad of colors.

Silas shrugged one shoulder, reminding her, “You asked for them...”

“I did.” She smiled, rubbing the silky material of one of the cups against her cheek. He watched her do this, his eyes dark in the holes of his mask.

“Open yours.” She handed him the first, watching him unwrap the paper.

“It’s beautiful,” he murmured, spreading the wrapping out as he got it open, looking at the designs she’d made on the butcher paper.

“That’s not your present, silly!” She unfolded the scarf, deep blues and greens. She wrapped it around his neck.

He fingered the edge of it, smiling. “Thank you.”

“There’s more.” She handed him another.

“Someone hasn’t been napping,” he remarked as he unwrapped three pairs of socks and a pair of gloves, smiling over all of them. He stopped when he opened the last one, holding up the knitted thing in his hands, frowning.

“I thought, if you’re going to insist on wearing a mask, maybe you’d like something a little more stylish.” She showed him the way the eye holes were bigger, the mouth hole too.

“Besides I’m sick of looking at that camouflage thing.”

He turned his back to her, pulling off his hunting mask and putting the knit one on.

She nodded in satisfaction. “Now I feel like I’m being held captive by a crazed skier instead of a crazed hunter. That’s an improvement, right?”

He grinned and she loved how she could really see him smile. “They say variety is the spice of life.”

“It’s made from very breathable yarn. How does it feel?”

“Pretty good.” He rubbed his cheek through the black material, thoughtful. Then his eyes lit up and he stood. “I have something else for you. A big surprise.”

She watched him heading toward the back of the cabin, still in his long underwear, always covered that way. She wished he would tell her, show her, whatever it was he kept hidden, but they had tacitly agreed not to talk about any of it, especially Carlos. They both had a history with the man that neither wanted to share.

“Are you coming?” He looked over his shoulder at her, waiting, and she hopped up, following him. He led her down the hall, past her room, past his, to a locked door at the end of the hall. There’d been a lot of hammering and pounding in there the past month or so, and whenever she asked him about it, Silas said he was making a “workroom.”

“Did you make me something?” she asked, her eyes bright as he used a key hanging around a string on his neck to unlock the door.

“You could say that,” he agreed.

Jolee peeked into the room expecting maybe something decorative made of wood, perhaps a rocking chair to sit in by the fire—he was quite an accomplished carpenter, she’d discovered—but the sight that greeted her left her stunned still and speechless.

“It’s indoor plumbing,” Silas explained, stepping into their new bathroom and turning on the water for the tub. “No more boiling water for sponge baths.”

“How in the world did you do all this?” She stepped into the room, staring around in wonder. The tub alone was huge. How had he gotten it in by himself without her noticing? He knew how much she hated not having a warm shower, a real bathtub, and so he’d installed both, just for her.

“I managed.” He shrugged one shoulder, half-smiling as he adjusted the water temperature. “Do you want to take a bath?”

“Do I?” Jolee laughed and clapped her hands. “I can’t believe this! Silas, it’s incredible.”

“Merry Christmas,” he said, standing up and nodding toward the towel rack where a big pink fluffy towel and a brand new pink robe were hung.

She moved toward him, putting her arms around his waist and resting her head against his chest. He was warm and solid and he hesitated just a moment before putting his arms around her too.

“Merry Christmas,” she whispered, squeezing him tight. She went up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek through the mask, the yarn soft against her lips.

“I’ll give you some privacy,” he said, taking a step toward the door.

“Silas.” She called for him and he turned, his eyes bright through the holes in his mask. “This is almost the best gift ever.”

He laughed. “Almost?”

“The best gift would be if you would take off your mask.” She said it hopefully, breath held.

“You know I can’t do that.” Silas smiled sadly, taking a step toward her and kissing her forehead. Her bandage was gone, the wound healing. He’d removed each stitch carefully, tenderly. “Have a good bath. I’ll make us a great big breakfast. Eggs and bacon?”

She nodded, smiling up at him. “Scrambled.”

“Of course.” He knew her well enough by now. He even made and canned his own version of ketchup and it was better than Heinz or Hunts ever thought about being.

Jolee waited for him to go and then stripped down and stepped into the tub, letting the warmth and steam envelop her, trying not to think about anything. It wasn't always easy, but she found it less difficult here, squirreled away with Silas in his cabin, than she had anywhere or any other time in her life. At first, she'd been afraid, always looking over her shoulder, worried that Carlos or one of his guys would show up, but after a while that anxiety had faded.

Now they both practiced a very zen life together, living in the moment, not talking about the past or the future. At first she was full of questions, but she found him less than forthcoming about his life, especially about his brother—not that she blamed him. Carlos wasn't a happy subject for her either. Silas had clearly chosen a different life and didn't want his family to know he existed. Whatever his reasons, they were his own, and who was she to question or argue with him about it?

She poured bubble bath into the water, watching the suds rise, delighted. Sponge baths were tolerable and got the job done, but this was pure luxury. She could feel layers of grime washing off her skin and she sank down into the tub, her hair spreading around her like a dark fan.

The thought of Silas doing all of this, the work it must have been, actually brought tears to her eyes. She'd never meet a sweeter, gentler soul, and she couldn't help comparing him to his brother, the two of them so opposite they could have been from different planets. Where Carlos was cruel, Silas was kind. Where Carlos was selfish, Silas was noble. She saw the similarities, too—their eyes, dark and deep, the curve of their mouths, that bright smile, their humor and charm. That was the thing Carlos had used to seduce her in the beginning, when she was just a young girl.

I'm not so old now, she reminded herself. Just twenty-six, hardly an old maid. But she'd been practically a baby when her father died, just turned nineteen, when Carlos had taken her under his wing and guided her life down a pathway to merge with his own. She'd been ready to take a scholarship to an out-of-state college, something her father had been so proud of, even if she had used her looks to obtain it—Jolee had entered and won Miss Teen USA, the prize a full ride to Boston University, that year's sponsor. Her father had insisted she go, had even packed her bags for her, even though she'd never been out of Michigan's Upper Peninsula in her whole entire life—and then the accident had happened.

It wasn't an accident. Of course, she hadn't known that then. She'd been a lost, grief-stricken child and Carlos had been waiting to swoop in and comfort her, convincing her to marry him and give up that scholarship so far away from anything familiar she'd ever known. She still couldn't believe her naiveté, how she had believed Carlos's lies through the years, listened to his excuses. And then, even when faced with the proof of her father's murder, she had allowed him to explain it away. She held the paper in her hand—findings suppressed at the hearing that the brakes on the logging truck had been fine after all—and had still denied it as truth.

She remembered it clearly enough. Her father had kissed her goodbye that morning, grabbing a thermos of coffee, stopping only to take a bite of the eggs she'd made for him. He'd been on his way to talk to one of the union reps and Daryl had pulled the chain outside on the big logging rig, informing the whole neighborhood that he was there to pick her father up.

Later Daryl tearfully told the cameras that the brakes had failed.

"I told the old man to bail!" he swore in his testimony. "He couldn't get his belt off. I tried to help him but I had to get out of the truck. What could I do?"

Watch her father sail off a ledge into a ravine, apparently. Daryl broke his arm in the fall, but he was alive. Her father had been trapped in the truck by his own seatbelt, and all those years she thought it had been a mechanical failure.

They said the brakes failed, but the brakes were fine. According to the report, they were just fine, and the handwritten note—*Your father was murdered- there was nothing I could do about it - he was a friend and a good man – your husband wanted him dead*—pointed the finger clearly enough. But Carlos had explained it away and she believed him. She had let him charm her once again, and had nearly paid for that mistake with her life.

Jolee thought of Silas on the other side of that wall, out there cooking breakfast for them. What did he know about his brother? He had certainly accepted the fact that Carlos had killed her father and had been trying to kill her as well, willingly enough. He had never questioned her assertions, not once. Maybe it was just because he trusted her—or maybe it was because he knew the kind of man his brother really was.

She looked at all the pretty shaped soaps and lotions and bottles of bubble bath Silas had left on the ledge, trying to remind herself not to think about it. Her father was gone, her husband believed she was dead. She didn't belong anywhere—but she had Silas, and he had her. It was enough for now.

* * * *

Silas gunned the Arctic Cat, the runners gliding along the hard-packed snow as he ducked his head to miss a low-hanging branch, realizing he was just five minutes from home now. He hadn't had that glad-to-be-heading-home feeling in his chest for years, and he knew it was because Jolee was waiting for him. Part of him hated leaving her, but there were things he had to do, in spite of her protest and questions—and Lord knew, the woman was full of both!

“Just tell me where you’re going,” she’d insisted as they both sat on side-by-side stools next to Big Anna while he attempted to teach her how to milk the old girl.

He’d considered lying to her, making up some excuse or reason he had to go, but instead had decided that being cryptic had worked so far, why stop now? Of course, Jolee had caught on to his deflection, and if that failed, his silence and refusal to answer.

“You are impossible!” She’d given up on both him and the cow, storming out of the old horse stall where kept Big Anna for the winter.

I’m not the only one, Silas thought, scanning the woods for wildlife, constantly using his peripheral vision, always practicing a high degree of situational awareness. He had instructed her how to do everything—when to turn on the generator, where he kept the extra fuel, how to milk the cow. He’d been as thorough as he could, but he knew better than anyone that you couldn’t plan for surprises. Anything could have happened while he was gone.

He gave the Cat another jolt, urging the machine faster. Dusk was settling though the snow-heavy limbs of the trees, casting long shadows. He’d promised he would only be three days and if he made it home tonight, he would keep that promise, although he hadn’t been sure, yesterday morning when he’d been repelling deep into one of his brother’s mines with four pounds of dynamite strapped to his back, that he would make it at all.

All’s well that ends well, he told himself, seeing the house come into view over the rise of the hill. His heart raced at the sight of it, faster than it had been pounding when he’d flipped the switch and blown his brother’s new sulfide mine, collapsing it into rubble. He was always careful to pull his jobs at night, when no one was working in the mines or at the camps. Carlos had them guarded now, of course—there were rumors around the mining and logging camps that they were being haunted and/or hunted by some sort of mythical “beast” who mangled trucks,

equipment and even the sites themselves—but Silas could track so silently the guards were taken care of, passed out before they knew what hit them.

He didn't know who really believed the "beast" rumors, but he didn't do anything to discourage them. They were useful and kept Carlos and his cronies from turning their attention to the real culprit. They probably figured it was some overzealous activist from the EPA, Silas thought, and that was good. As long as he was careful and they didn't connect him to the millions of dollars of destruction and the months of set-back, he figured he and Jolee were safe in the woods until spring. And after spring, it wouldn't matter anymore.

He parked the Arctic Cat next to the shed and peeled off his helmet. The mask she had made him was breathable but it kept the wind off his face and he was grateful for it. She'd knit him several more, a small concession to his wearing them at all, in a myriad of colors. "At least give me something new to look at," she'd teased, handing him an orange one. "Besides, I don't want a hunter taking your head off out there."

He flipped open the storage container on the back of the Cat, removing two of the three rabbits he'd snared while he was waiting for activity to shut down for the weekend. The third one had met a different fate in the mines. He held the rabbits up in front of him as he stomped into the kitchen, calling for her.

"Slim pickins' out there, huh?" Jolee leaned against the door frame, frowning at his small game offering.

"We got plenty in the freezer." He took off his boots as she snatched the rabbits, tossing them next to the sink.

"I know." She turned to face him, arms crossed. "Which begs the question—where were you exactly? Because you clearly weren't out there hunting."

Silas shrugged off his parka and removed his gloves, the warmth of the room making his limbs tingle. He'd been on the Cat so long he'd grown numb to the cold.

"Did you miss me?" he teased. He glanced over at her drawn brow and pursed lips, looking for a hint of the truth. Had she missed him? He didn't like to admit it, but he'd missed her. He turned and headed toward his bedroom to change.

"There was someone here, Silas," she called.

He stopped, turning, his heart dropping to his knees, and looked into her eyes. They were bright with tears.

"Who?" he managed, his gaze sweeping over her as if he could assess, just by looking, if she was unharmed. "When?"

"I don't know." Her voice was choked and she wiped angrily at her falling tears, storming past him down the hall toward her room.

"Jolee!" He followed her, bursting through the door she'd just slammed behind her. "Talk to me!"

"You left me alone!" She sat on the bed with her accusation, looking up at him with such a dejected look he was instantly sorry. He wanted to scoop her up and make her feel safe again. Silas looked around the room, noting the difference instantly. Curtains—she had hand-sewn them, patch-worked from his old t-shirt material.

"Tell me what happened," he said flatly, going over to the window and pulling the curtain aside, somehow already knowing what he was going to see.

"I think someone was looking in the windows." Her voice trembled and Silas saw the footprints in the snow, coming in from the woods and retreating again.

"Did anyone see you?"

“I don’t think so.” She sniffed. “I only went out to milk Anna in the morning and it was still dark.”

He considered this information. Whoever it was had been wearing boots, big ones. Definitely a man. He’d have to go out and investigate, see if there were any shell casings, arrows, signs he hoped he’d find.

“It was probably just a curious hunter.” Silas let the curtains drop, turning back to Jolee. “My land backs up to state land about five miles to the north.”

“What if it wasn’t?” Her hands twisted in her lap and she looked up at him helplessly. “What if he found us?”

“He didn’t.” Silas sat on the bed, feeling it sag under his weight, and put a comforting arm around her thin shoulders—she was actually quivering with fear. He told her the truth, in spite of her anxiety. “Carlos is no peeping Tom. If he’d found you, you would know it.”

“Maybe.” Jolee turned toward him, letting him comfort her, tucking her head under his chin. He could smell the sweetness of her shampoo and he let the heady scent envelop him.

“So did you see anything? Hear anything?” he asked, stroking her hair. She’d stopped having so many bad dreams and while he was glad, he missed holding and comforting her like this in the darkness.

“I heard something.” She pressed herself closer at the memory. “Last night, late. I thought it might be you coming home.”

The longing in her voice made him want to smile. “What did you hear?”

“I was sleeping.” She shrugged. “I heard something outside my window, but by the time I got up to go look, there was nothing. Then this morning, I saw the tracks.”

He nodded, hoping it was just a lost hunter, out too late, looking for somewhere to crash for the night. He'd been careful, backing his truck up into the make-shift garage out back so the license plate wasn't visible even if Jolee had gone in for something and forgot to shut the barn door. If one of Carlos's guys had stumbled on this place—and it was purposefully well-hidden dimly lighted—there was no reason for them to believe it was connected to him or to Jolee.

Unless one of them had seen her.

"You're safe." He said the words and hoped she believed them. Even if there was danger lurking, he had every intention of protecting her.

Of course, he'd intended to protect Isabelle too.

"I'm glad you're home." She sounded both relieved and truly happy. "I *did* miss you, you big lug." She went to pound her fist against his chest to emphasize the point and he caught it, stifling a laugh.

"So did you fix me dinner, woman?" he teased. She looked up and stuck her tongue out at him. That did make him laugh. "I smelled something good a mile away."

"Venison chili." She stood, picking up a skein of yarn and her knitting needles. "I used some of your canned tomatoes. I hope you don't mind."

"They're for eating." He followed her out, shutting the door behind him before heading toward the good smells in the kitchen. "What are you working on now?"

Jolee put her mass of flesh-colored yarn and needles on the counter, peering under a pot lid and stirring. The already delicious scent of food increased tenfold and Silas's stomach rumbled. He'd been living on jerky for two days.

"Another mask." She held it up. "I made my own pattern. Since you won't show me yours, I'm going to give you a face."

“Talented girl.” He studied it—she only had a third of it completed, but he could see the image beginning to take shape in the stitches. “Keep it up and I’m going to need to buy you some sheep just to keep you in yarn.”

“You should learn.” She pushed the yarn toward him and let him finger it while she spooned bowls of piping hot chili. “It’s a good skill to know out here. That way you can even make clothes for yourself when I’m...”

She didn’t finish the sentence and Silas looked at her, his heart beating too fast, as she handed him a spoon. Of course she didn’t have to finish the sentence. He finished it easily enough in his head. *When I’m gone.*

Gone.

He didn’t want to think about that. He’d lost too much in his life and didn’t want consider losing her too. They didn’t talk about what might happen in the future, or what had happened to either of them in the past, and it was better that way. Thoughts of the past brought pain and looking into the future was too uncertain. Staying right here in the moment was the only thing that mattered.

Jolee was a surprise to him every day and he couldn’t have expressed what a joy it was to wake up to the sound of her singing in the new shower every morning, how much he looked forward to stoking the fire in the woodstove at night so she could warm her feet while he whittled and she knitted and they played the “would you rather?” game.

Would you rather live in the country or the city? His answer was obvious.

Would you rather eat a bug or step on a nail? She made faces at him and refused to choose.

Jolee had introduced him to the game and he played with relish, seriously considering even the most ridiculous options, always giving her an honest answer. Of course, there were questions neither of them asked—they had a tacit understanding. But now a question came to mind that he didn't want to ponder.

Would you rather lose Jolee or Isabelle?

He couldn't choose. Isabelle was gone, and although he still searched for her, nothing was going to bring her back. But Jolee was here—safe and smiling at him from across the table, chattering on about how Anna had missed his big, warm hands and objected to her small, cold ones—and he wouldn't let anything happen to her. He would make sure of that.

He wasn't even going to let himself consider the alternatives.

* * * *

She tried to scream, but nothing came out. Opening her eyes, she saw only blackness. The darkness was suffocating, air like lead weight in her lungs—she could barely pull a breath. She listened hard for something that would center her, give her a sense of location, and it took moments that felt like hours to discern the soft, hitching sound of Silas snoring down the hall.

The bed beneath her tensed limbs grew slowly familiar, as did the whistling of the wind through the pines outside her window and the sudden, startled call of an owl. It had just been a dream. She was safe. She was home. Rolling over and pulling the covers with her, Jolee willed her heart to slow, her breathing to return to some semblance of normal. It had been months since she called out for Silas in the middle of the night because of a bad dream, but she still wished for him upon waking, even if she didn't say anything.

There was something so comforting about the man, just his presence in a room made her feel more calm. Of course, that wasn't all it made her feel. Closing her eyes, she tried to drift off

again, but the weight of the silence, the darkness, and her own loneliness were too great. The bed was too small, the sheets too rough. Nothing felt right.

Down the hall, Silas snored and Jolee couldn't help it. She pushed her covers off and crept toward the sound. She didn't know why she bothered—his door was always closed and locked, an unspoken barrier. She'd tested it a few times on her way by at night, listening at the door, hearing him breathing. His locking her out didn't surprise her.

What surprised her was finding the door open tonight. Maybe he'd gotten up to use the bathroom and forgotten to shut it? She felt her way in the darkness. The cabin had no ambient light and Silas left no outside lights on, so moving around at night was like being blind. She found the edge of the bed with her knees and stopped, hearing Silas snort, his breathing stop.

“Jolee?” He sat up, sounding wide awake. “Are you okay?”

“Bad dream.” She crawled into bed with him, under the covers, and found him surprisingly, warmly nude, only the t-shirt she was wearing separating the two of them. He was always dressed, even on his way to the bathroom in the morning, usually head to toe in long underwear.

“Jolee...” Silas drew in a sharp breath when she snuggled in closer, tucking her head under his chin like she always did, her bare thigh snaking between his. They'd never been skin to skin like this. It was a shock to both of them.

“Someone was trying to kill me.” Okay, so she lied—she couldn't really remember her dream—but it was a small lie. And to be fair, her dream could have been about someone trying to kill her because, after all, someone had been. Might still be, out there, somewhere.

Silas cradled her instantly and she let him, hands moving through her hair, over her back, soothing. Smiling, she rubbed her cheek against the solid expanse of his chest, feeling hairs

tickling her and the rough edge of something. A scar? Her fingers moved up to explore it in the dark, finding her way, like a roadmap, to his throat. His skin was a surprise, smooth in places, rough and raised in others.

It wasn't until she reached his chin and he grabbed her hand that she realized. "You're not wearing a mask!"

"I don't sleep in it," he confessed, swallowing and shifting on the bed, placing her hand firmly on his chest—neutral territory.

"I can't see you anyway." She continued to follow the harsh terrain of his skin southward, finding the dip of his navel. "It's too dark."

"What are you doing?" His voice was choked, hoarse.

"Exploring," she whispered, reaching a thatch of thick, wiry hair with her fingertips. She found what she'd been searching for, half-risen out of its nest, the wrap of her hand around its pulsing length bringing it fully to life. His cock was alive in her hand, throbbing against her fingertips, the skin moving under her thumb when she began rubbing the meaty shaft up and down. She listened, but he wasn't breathing at all now.

"Silas?" She lifted her head as if she could see him in the darkness and heard him let out a pent-up breath.

"Shhhh." His hand slid over her hip, finding bare skin under her t-shirt. "I'm dreaming. I don't want to wake up."

"Me either." She felt his breath, warm against her cheek, and turned her face to his, their mouths pressed together for the first time. His lips were soft and they opened under pressure from her tongue, giving into her insistent probing. She sensed him holding back, restraining

himself, one hand gripping her hip, the other fisting her hair as they kissed, and even the gentle tug of her hand between his thighs didn't move him.

"Jolee," he whispered as she slid a thigh across his belly, moving to straddle him. "What are you doing?"

"I have a job for you." She walked her way up his chest with her fingertips, stopping briefly at one of his nipples, feeling him shudder. Then she leaned in to kiss him, her breasts pressed against his chest, his cock trapped between them, steel heat, and felt his hands move to her hips, holding on.

"What job?" he gasped when she slid further up, pressing her breasts against his face. He groaned as if he was in agony but Jolee ignored his plea for mercy, peeling off her t-shirt, hips already moving in circles against his belly.

"It's a little repetitious," she warned as she put one knee on his pillow and then the other, straddling his face.

"Oh god."

She heard him swallow, felt the heat of his breath, and gave a little whimper of her own.

"Please," she whispered, reaching a hand down to spread her swollen lips. She waited—listening to him breathe, his chest rising and falling far too fast, just like hers, his whole body tense—waiting for him to refuse her, to tell her to go back to bed.

Instead, he gave a low, animal growl, wrapping his arms around her hips and pulling her in, his mouth and tongue pure heat, delving into her own. Jolee gave a squeal of surprise, her hands coming up to catch herself against the headboard, and then lost herself in the sensation. He attacked her flesh violently with his tongue, licking and sucking at her pussy, lapping at her slit, burying his whole face against her, making her burn with pleasure.

When he found her clit, almost by accident he was so lost in her flesh, drowning in her, he stayed there, sucking it first between his lips and then lashing it back and forth with his tongue. Jolee felt her thighs tense, trembling, her hips wanting to buck but stilled by the thick wrap of his arms around her, holding her in place against his face. His biceps were flexed, hard against her thighs and she arched her back, reaching behind to find the thick thrust of his cock, wanting to feel it pulsing in her hand.

It distracted Silas only for a moment. He gave a low moan, the sensation vibrating through her clit, and then redoubled his efforts. She heard him swallowing her juices, his breath coming almost as fast as hers. Silas made rough animal noises against her pussy, deep from his throat and chest, and still she tried to hold back. She wanted to do this forever, to feel his abandon, his wild lust between her legs.

But she was going to come. There was no stopping it.

“Silas,” she warned, barely a gasp, but he heard, he knew, focusing right on her clit, that tiny bit of flesh making her whole body shudder with anticipation. She screamed when he let go of her hips, letting her buck and writhe, so he could slide two fingers deep into her pussy. Her muscles clamped down immediately and she rode his hand, his mouth, mashing her flesh against his face as she came, her orgasm a bright flash of pulsing light through her body in the darkness.

She didn’t have time to breathe or think or even move. He had her rolled onto the bed in an instant, kissing her pussy like a mouth and then moving up to kiss her mouth, letting her taste herself. She licked at his lips and sucked his tongue and felt him parting her slim thighs with the hard flex of his, forcing them open wider. Reaching, she grabbed hold of his length, aiming and guiding him in the dark.

“Wait.” He took a deep, steadying breath, holding himself above her, poised and ready. She wanted him so much she was dizzy with it. Sliding her hands up his biceps, over his shoulders, feeling the uneven terrain of his scars, she felt his hesitation, understood it, and didn’t want to give him a chance to think, to second guess this.

“Fuck me, Silas, please,” she begged, sliding a hand behind his neck and pulling his mouth to hers, drowning in his kiss. She felt his body giving in as she drew his tongue in deeper, wiggling her hips up, attempting to bridge the gap. The tip of his cock teased her clit, sliding up and down her wet slit, but not in.

“Jolee.” He groaned as she used her hand to grab hold of him, pulling, tugging, rubbing him furiously against the sensitive nub of her clit. “We can’t.”

She moaned in frustration as he rolled off her onto his back on the bed, throwing an arm over his eyes. The sound of their breath, both of them panting, filled the room. It was so hot it felt like a sauna in spite of the near-zero temperatures outside and the wind blowing tree branches against side of the cabin.

“I want you.” Silas gulped, reaching over and finding her hand. He squeezed hard. “Don’t think for a minute I don’t.”

“But…” She rolled onto her side toward him, feeling his body tense.

“But you’re my brother’s wife.”

Jolee let out a tight little laugh. “Are you kidding me? Is that all?”

“I think it’s enough,” he said finally.

They hadn’t talked about it, but it had been there between them from the beginning. She thought about her husband—this man’s brother—and the idea that Carlos could keep her from one more thing in the world that she wanted filled her with a fierce, heated rage.

“Carlos hasn’t been my husband for years. Not really, not in any way that counted.” She sat up, hugging her knees. “I was something he could take around and show off. Something he could use, if he felt like it. I wasn’t a person to him. I was a...a...thing. I was something he wanted for a while, but when he didn’t want me anymore, when it got too inconvenient to keep me, I was disposable, like everyone else.”

He made a small sympathetic noise. “That sounds like my brother.”

“I never loved Carlos. I never really wanted him.” She felt Silas’s hand trailing down her spine and shivered. She turned to him, letting him pull her in and kiss her, their breath mingling, already feeling him relenting. Part of her had come here tonight knowing she wanted this, had always known from the first time he held her in his arms.

She reached up to stroke his cheek, feeling the scars there too, and he let her. “Silas, I want *you*.”

His silence stretched between them. Then he cupped her face in his hands. “Don’t say that if you don’t mean it.”

“I mean it,” she whispered, and he brought her mouth to his, the kiss fierce and full of everything they’d been feeling and keeping in for months. If she could have devoured him, turned herself inside out to feel him more deeply, she would have, but she didn’t have to.

Silas gave her everything. There were no more boundaries between them and he took her without restraint. They rolled together on the bed, kissing, Jolee struggling under his weight, but protesting when he eased up, wrapping her legs around his waist, squeezing him between her thighs, rocking the hard length of his cock between them like an iron bar.

She protested, but not for long, when he rolled her onto her back and slid down between her thighs, his tongue working magic again. But it still wasn’t enough and she whimpered and

begged and reached for him until he finally gave in to her pleading, flipping onto his back and letting her crawl over him on the way to his cock, stopping her when her pussy reached the hungry gulp of his mouth and tongue.

Taking him into her mouth was a joy, feeling the slick silk of his skin moving over the thick length of his cock as she sucked him. His hips moved with her motion but his tongue never wavered, flicking steadily over her clit as his fingers explored her, sliding in deep and then retreating, rubbing the fat, swollen lips of her labia with his fingertips, tugging at the dark, wiry hair there. Jolee gasped and sucked him harder when he slid two fingers in, then three, really stretching her, making her moan and rock against his hand.

“Oh!” She rolled her hips, feeling him fingering her, deeper, harder. His cock slid out of her mouth as she felt her impending climax begin, rubbing the mushroom tip of him over her outstretched tongue, feeling his delicious pulse against her lips as she closed her eyes and gave into her orgasm. It started between her thighs, where Silas was working so hard to take her there, her pussy clasp his fingers in a fast, fluttering dance, and then spiraled outward from her center, making her grip his cock hard in her fist.

“Easy!” Silas croaked, gasping for breath beneath her. “Go easy, baby, please.”

She let her hand relax a little, feeling a thick wave of precum flooding over her fist. He shuddered and moaned as she began to lick it off.

“Now will you fuck me?” she whispered, kissing the head of his cock, slapping it lightly against her cheek.

“You couldn’t stop me if you tried.”

She yelped as he grabbed her, not even bothering to turn her around toward the headboard before shoving her legs open with his big thighs. His cock found its way into her

swollen wetness without her help and she cried out when he entered her, nails digging into his shoulders as she took him as deeply as she could, almost to the point of pain. She relished the sensation, burying her face against his neck and urging him on.

“Oh Jolee...” He settled himself between her legs, up on his elbows above her, face lost in the river of her hair. “Oh god you feel too good...”

“I can’t believe you’re inside of me.” She actually felt tears stinging her eyes, realizing for the first time how much she had wanted this.

“You’ve been inside me since the beginning.” He nuzzled her and she felt his scars. She cupped his face and he stilled, her fingers moving over his cheeks.

“I want you.” She kissed his cheeks, his closed eyelids, his chin, the corner of his trembling mouth. “Please.”

He began to move, his cock a swollen, driving heat between her thighs and a heady friction began to build again almost immediately. His breath was hot against her cheek and she slid her arms around his neck, pulling him closer, deeper. He curled himself around her as they rocked on the bed, the springs squeaking fast and hard, the headboard banging against the wall behind them, their breath coming in hot, short bursts. There was no one around to hear them and Jolee let herself go, moaning in pleasure.

“Fuck me,” she panted, heels digging into his thighs. “Oh god, yes! Fuck me!”

Silas grunted and gave her more, making her scream with every deep thrust, her teeth raking his skin. His cock felt even more swollen somehow, filling her completely, and she felt him tense, the hard, flat expanse of his belly slapping against hers as he gave into his own lust.

“I’m going to come,” she whispered into his ear, feeling the quiver of her pussy around the pounding heat of his cock. “Oh you make me come so hard. It’s so close. I can feel it. Right...oh...right there...Silas...”

He groaned and thrust deep, her imminent pleasure forcing him to give into his own, his thighs spreading her so wide she thought she might break apart like a wishbone and still she wouldn’t have cared. She’d gotten her wish. He cried out and called her name and buried his face against her neck. She felt every glorious pulse of his cock as he filled her with the white hot spurts of his release.

“Almost there,” she whimpered, rolling her hips, arching up, and he moaned loudly and clasped her to him as her climax came in just behind his own, her pussy milking his still-spasming cock. Jolee threw her head back and let herself go, quivering beneath him, barely able to breathe, taking all of his weight and still wanting more.

“How did you get in?” Silas asked, still on top of her as they rested. He petted her, stroking her hair.

She wrapped her arms around him, as if she could get closer. “The door was unlocked.”

He rolled them up in the covers like a cocoon, pulling her with him, impossibly hard still inside of her, and they stayed that way, joined together, Jolee sleeping on top of him. But it was still dark when she felt him carrying her naked to her own bed before she even knew what was happening. He tucked her in, kissing her forehead.

“Silas?” she asked sleepily, reaching for him. She kissed his mouth in the darkness, her body instantly remembering, wanting.

“Go to sleep,” he whispered. “I’ll see you in the morning,”

And then he was gone and Jolee found herself alone, wishing for his warmth as the door down the hall closed and locked her out again.

* * * *

Silas had never really been afraid of anything. When he was young, his father had labeled him “fearless,” and he was. It wasn’t always a good thing. He took risks others wouldn’t, especially when an injustice was involved. Bullies ran the other way when Silas came along. Tyranny or inequity in any form raised his hackles, and often his fists. He’d discovered that fighting fire with fire, and fighting dirty if he had to, was a good strategy, even if it wasn’t the most popular, honest or lawful one.

He’d faced down everything, from bullies to criminals to black bears. Once, in a bar, he’d taken a bullet that missed his spine by inches. It had been meant for a woman he didn’t even know, but the man who fired the gun had punched her before pulling out his weapon—and that was all the information Silas had needed. He couldn’t count how many times he’d faced death or the possibility of death, and even that didn’t frighten him.

But he was afraid now. He was afraid of the hundred-and-twenty pound woman in his house, who had taken over his life and the way he lived it, in so many ways. She terrified him, that tiny slip of a girl. He hadn’t thought about another woman since Isabelle, hadn’t even considered the possibility. There was no reason to—Isabelle had been the perfect woman, perfect for him in every way, and you couldn’t improve on perfection.

But Jolee had been thrown into his life, had found her way into his heart, and he couldn’t deny it anymore. In the midst of protecting her, caring for her, guarding her against the possibility of his brother’s harm—and he had to admit, part of him had been thinking about Isabelle when he was doing those things—he had fallen for her. The ghost of his dead wife had

faded in the light of Jolee's smile, her quick temper, her soft hands and, last night, her lush, full body.

It wasn't Isabelle he thought about anymore when he neared home, a little extra speed in his step, carrying his bow over his shoulder. It was Jolee—the woman who had made curtains for the cabin windows and stuffed pillows to sit on for the wooden chairs, the woman who appreciated his subtle sense of humor, who teased him about his slow, fastidious ways, who spent a night with him in the stable when Anna was sick, petting the cow's head and singing to her in a native language he didn't speak but spoke straight to his heart.

He'd left early this morning, trembling at the thought of meeting her in the hallway, going off instead to find things to do outside—milking the cow, gathering eggs, straightening the shed, repairing his trap lines—too afraid to face her, too afraid to face what he might be forced to acknowledge.

Since Isabelle, he'd wanted to die, and when his survival instincts had gotten him out of the fire and he'd found her gone, he'd been determined to finish the job Carlos had started and join her—or, barring that, at least end his own suffering, although part of him still felt he deserved the pain he lived in for not saving her.

He'd tried to end it all several times after the fire. If it hadn't been for Abe, he probably would have. After the fire, the old Indian had found him crawling on his hands and knees in the dirt, calling Isabelle's name, and had made a litter to drag him back on. The time he'd spent at the Bad River reservation had been healing—and informational. They all knew about Carlos and the mines and the logging camps.

And, of course, Abe had passed on the information Carlos was telling everyone—that his brother and his wife had died in a fire. That was the darkest time of his life, when he'd realized that Isabelle was gone and he understood he could do more good dead than alive.

And it was his hatred that kept him going, in spite of Abe's efforts to sway him. The only reason he'd stayed alive was to thwart his brother's efforts to rape and pillage the land their father had left behind. And in the spring, he was finally going to get the chance to end it all—his brother's shady business and his own pain. Jolee had been a complication at first, but he only had to keep her here, safe until spring, he reasoned. Then she would be safe wherever she went.

Now she was far more than a complication and the plans he had so carefully and meticulously outlined seemed ridiculously simple—and horribly final—in a way they never had before. For the first time, he was questioning his decision, and Jolee was the reason. For the first time since Isabelle had died, life seemed worth living.

Well, he decided, hanging his mended lines in the shed and heading out, he didn't have to decide anything today, and he couldn't hide out here forever. Besides, he was getting hungry. The house was warm from the woodstove and the smell of bacon made his stomach rumble. He could hear her in the kitchen, singing to herself, and he smiled, stopping to listen. The words weren't in English—her father had been part Chippewa, she'd told him, and had taught her some of the language, many of the traditional songs—but they were lovely.

“Is that you, Silas?”

He heard the edge in her voice. Mostly she felt safe, he figured, but there was still a part of her on guard, waiting for Carlos to find her here—and there was always a part of him waiting for that as well.

“It’s me,” he confirmed, taking off his boots and coat, but leaving on his mask. The damnable thing was too warm inside, but in spite of his lapse the night before—how had he forgotten to lock the door?—he had no intention of taking it off in the light of day. Of course, if he hadn’t forgotten, she wouldn’t have come to his room, and he wouldn’t have had the glorious opportunity to have her. Christ, just the memory of being inside her made his cock jump.

He stopped when he came around the corner, seeing her standing at the counter, plating up eggs and bacon—mountains for him and little rolling hills for her—wearing nothing but a pair of panties. She turned to look at him over her shoulder, her hair a dark waterfall down her back, and smiled, a new, shy smile he’d never seen before that made his heart lurch in his chest.

“Morning.”

He’d seen her naked in the beginning, forced to undress her when she was unconscious, but he had tried to block it out, to not pay attention to her in that way. Not that it had worked completely. But in all honesty, he had never imagined she could be so beautiful. His imagination couldn’t have stretched to those limits, even if he had, yes, okay he had fantasized and thought about her. In the darkness she had been all softness and heat. In the light she was long, tawny limbs and supple flesh and he found himself far hungrier for her than he was for bacon and eggs.

“Morning.” He cleared his throat, trying to keep his eyes focused on hers. “Don’t you think that’s a little dangerous?”

“Cooking breakfast?” she teased, moving past him to the table. He followed both the scent of the food and the sight of the goddess in her plain white cotton panties bending over to put the plate down in front of him as he sat.

“Cooking breakfast...” he agreed, swallowing a dry lump in his throat as he now found himself on eye level with the fullness of her breasts, her nipples dark, the areolas lighter, a

stunning contrast against her skin. “Naked,” he finished faintly. “Grease has a tendency to splatter...”

“It does,” she agreed, sliding a sleek thigh across his and settling herself into his lap. Silas kept his hands at his sides, knowing if he touched her, just for a moment, he was lost. “But I thought you could kiss my boo boos and make them all better.”

His cock throbbed against his zipper, feeling the heat of her through her panties and he looked up into her eyes, seeing the lust there. God, he wanted her, more now than he had last night. Not touching her was killing him. She searched his eyes with hers, the only part of his face, aside from his mouth, that she could see, and he wondered what she was thinking.

“Do you regret it?” she asked, touching a finger to his lips.

“No,” he admitted hoarsely. She made him tremble.

“Good.” She leaned in and kissed him and he felt the rush of her breath through the knit mask, her tongue licking at his lips. When she reached down and grabbed his hands, putting them on her breasts, he groaned at the incredible weight of them, the shape and shift in his hands as she wiggled, making his cock swell. He couldn’t believe they were doing this, that she wanted him, but everything told him that she did. He would never have initiated this, would never have crossed that line—even if he’d wanted to. And yes, he’d wanted to, but that was hardly the point.

“I want you,” Jolee whispered, squeezing him between her thighs in the chair, her breath hot through his mask, her mouth next to his ear. “I touched myself this morning in the shower, remembering last night.”

He made a small noise that, he had to admit, would probably be classified as a whimper by any objective observer.

“Do you want me?” she asked, leaning back in the chair, pressing her hands over his, mashing her breasts flat and then rubbing his palms over her nipples. They were hard little pebbles and Jolee moaned and rolled her hips at the sensation.

“Yeah,” he croaked, watching her pull her lower lip between her teeth, her eyes half-closing with pleasure. “I’m just...afraid.”

She stopped, eyes widening at his admission. He was glad the mask hid his flushed face.

“Afraid of what?”

“You.” His hands were moving on their own, kneading her flesh, watching her reaction. He couldn’t help it. “This.”

“Why?”

He sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Don’t let this come between us.” She reached for the edge of his mask, starting to lift it.

He grabbed her wrist, shaking his head. “Don’t.”

“What can I do to convince you that I want this?” Jolee frowned and then her eyes brightened as she slithered down between his legs, starting to work on his jeans. Silas groaned in protest, but his hips lifted when she yanked them down, freeing his cock for her mouth. He was scarred everywhere from the fire, even there, but she didn’t seem to notice, her eyes never leaving his. Just watching the hot pink trail of her tongue around the head of his cock was a delight, but the sensation went beyond pleasure and bordered on pain, making his thighs tense and quiver.

She lifted her head, kneeling up and rubbing his wet cock-head against her nipples. “How do I convince you that I want *you*?” she whispered, leaning in and kissing his mouth, her belly deliciously soft, pressing his cock up against his own, trapping him.

“That’s a good start.” He smiled.

“Wanna feel how wet I am for you?” she offered, guiding his hand down between her legs. Oh Christ, Silas thought as she nudged her panties aside and let him feel. The soft, wiry hair, the swollen lips, the way they parted for his finger as he delved inside, was enough to make him crazy, but after last night, he wanted more. He wanted to see her.

Jolee squealed when he shoved the plate of eggs and bacon aside, reaching down and grabbing her hips, pulling her up and sitting her squarely on the table. It was solid and could hold her weight—he was sure of it, he’d made it himself—and it was going to have to hold a lot more than that in a minute. He yanked her panties down and Jolee lifted willingly enough at his insistence, spreading her thighs for him in the early morning light spilling across the kitchen table.

“You’re beautiful.” He couldn’t help telling her as he took a seat in the chair again. The truth was, his knees didn’t want to hold him upright. And besides, this way he could lean in and feather kisses up the slender, silky expanse of her thighs, moving slowly toward the thing he wanted most. He made himself go slow and Jolee squirmed on the table, her pussy visibly swollen already in anticipation.

By the time her pubic hair was tickling his lips, she was begging him, pleading, the sound of her cries only making him go slower, savoring it more. He snaked his tongue up the groove of thigh, skipping across to the top of her cleft, hearing her moan, her head thrown back and thrashing on the table. Her hands kneaded her own breasts, her palms rubbing her nipples, her thighs thrown wide. Silas let himself taste her, sticky and wet, moving his tongue back and forth against the raised flesh of her clit. Jolee moaned and lifted her hips in encouragement.

“Please,” she whispered, reaching down to spread herself with her fingers, showing him, and he drank in the sight of her open for him like that. His cock throbbed at the thought of being inside of her and he grabbed it and squeezed as if he could send it a message—*easy, slow down, would you wolf down a gourmet meal in two minutes?*—but his cock didn’t want to hear it. It had been starving for too long.

His tongue slipped lower between her lips, trailing down to really taste her, musky and hot. He remembered how she’d rocked on him the night before, mashing her whole pussy against his face. Glancing up, he saw her eyes were closed, head back, and he decided to chance it, pulling his mask up—not off, just up enough so he could open his whole mouth over her pussy.

“Oh god!” Jolee rewarded him with a trembling arch, writhing on the table as Silas sucked at her little clit, swallowing the hot, tangy taste of her juices, letting them coat his throat and then going back for more. He couldn’t get enough of her, exploring her wet, swollen mound with his tongue and mouth and fingers, caught in a slick, pink labyrinth of flesh.

“Silas!” she gasped, rocking her hips, her toes beginning to curl. Just her saying his name that way, with the low, growly catch in it, filled his whole body with a blinding lust, but the words she followed it with sent him into overdrive. “Oh baby! Oh please, please, make me come all over your face!”

He fastened his mouth to her clit, working his tongue furiously, as eager for her orgasm as she was, holding desperately to his cock and trying to mentally reason with it. *Not yet, not yet. Soon, I promise.* Jolee was coming, her breasts heaving, belly quivering, her pussy spasming against the wet lap of his tongue.

“Oh god, oh god, oh my god,” she moaned, rolling her hips from side to side. He couldn’t tell if she wanted more of his tongue or was trying to get away from it. “Silas, please, I want you. I have to have you.”

Struggling to sit, she reached for him but he was already half-out of his chair, cock in hand. He’d forgotten his mask was pulled up and she looked at him in wonder, seeing his jaw, his mouth still wet. He reached to pull it down but she protested, grabbing his hand, shaking her head, sliding her little hand behind his neck and pulling him into a kiss.

Silas moaned into her mouth. She sucked at his tongue as if drawing the taste of herself from him, her hand moving to take hold of his cock and guide him inside. She was over-wet, slick and hot as melting butter, and he slid in easily, his balls resting against the hard edge of the table, burying himself deep. Jolee held onto him, wrapping her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck, her mouth never leaving his.

He fucked her. He fucked her without thought or reason, thrusting deep and hard and fast, his cock feeling every delicious ridge and twist and turn of her body as they rocked together, the table shaking under their weight. Jolee wouldn’t let him pull his mask down, keeping her mouth locked on his, their kiss hard and fierce and deeply probing, not unlike their fuck. Silas was past the point of caring, would probably have let her pull the whole damned thing off altogether in that moment, but thankfully she didn’t.

Instead she climaxed, her heels digging into the small of his back, her nails raking his shoulders—he was grateful then he’d never taken off his shirt—and he felt every sweet flutter of her pussy around his length as he ground his hips and sent her flying. Jolee gasped out his name, begging him for more, begging him to stop, but he couldn’t hear her, not really. He grabbed her

hips, her ass, driving in as deep as he could, bottoming out with every thrust, making her squeak delightfully in his ear.

His cock swelled to bursting and then it did, boiling up from base to tip, erupting into the slick, hot sheath of her pussy. Jolee made a low noise in her throat as he exploded, almost a purr, sending shivers down his spine as her muscles consciously milked him. He continued to thrust, lost in the frenzied furor of his climax, as if he could empty himself completely into her and be utterly spent.

“Silas,” she whispered, kissing his throat, the air blessedly cool on his neck and chin and jaw. Her lips caressed him, little feathered kisses, moving back from his jaw to his ear, murmuring words he was sure were in English, but he couldn’t understand them at all. His mind was blank, his body verging on the edge of collapse, weak and helpless in her arms. She tugged gently at his mask and he would have let her then without a second thought. He was hers completely.

They both startled when someone knocked on the front door.

“Carlos,” Jolee hissed, looking around for something to cover up with, and of course there were only her panties.

As senseless as he had been a minute before, Silas snapped into action, zipping his pants with one hand and reaching behind him with the other, grabbing the shotgun off the wall. He didn’t think it was his brother, but you could never be too careful. Very few people knew about this cabin or its hidden location. The three knocks he’d had on his door in as many years had all been lost strangers looking for a way home.

“Bedroom,” Silas whispered, nodding, but Jolee was already scrambling down the hallway. He didn’t like her out of his sight, but he couldn’t keep her behind him unclothed either.

His heart sank when he opened the door.

“There’s trouble.”

Silas looked at the old man, eyes dark and sunk into his leathered face, mouth downturned, and nodded. At least it wasn’t his brother.

“Let me get my boots on. I’ll meet you out back.”

The old native gave him a nod and Silas shut the door, wondering just how he was going to explain this to Jolee.

* * * *

Everything melted, and Jolee melted with it. She tried to stay mad at Silas, for refusing to tell her anything, for leaving her alone in the cabin for stretches of time, but she couldn’t stay mad at him long once he was home. She would melt and creep down the hall to his room, her breath held like a secret, and he would open up to her, the two of them free in the darkness to wallow in the blissful heat of one another.

And it went on like that, Silas masked in the daytime, quiet, often gone, but both of them unmasked and unclothed at night. It went on until the snow ran in rivers down the hillside and the leaves began to bud on the trees and then open and the forest around them teemed with life again. She knew it was fully spring when she saw a female deer and her fawn at the edge of the clearing while she was on her way to milk Anna in the hazy, early light of morning.

That, and the roses began to bloom.

She watched them open outside her bedroom window, growing up the trellis against the side of the house, a red carpet of flowers. Silas smiled when she exclaimed over them and started leaving one for her on occasion—on her pillow, or in a vase, or put across her latest knitting project, a budding reminder. She pressed them between thick books—heavy tomes about

tracking and wildlife and growing mushrooms in the wild—and saved them in a dresser drawer, wanting to keep every part of Silas that he gave to her.

Yes, the world had melted and she with it, but it was the conversation she overheard outside her window that froze her again, breaking the spell, raising her hackles and making her curious once more. She had left the window wide open, letting the breeze blow in, and she was supposed to be napping—Silas still insisted and lately she'd actually been tired enough to sleep—when she heard their voices, low but clear enough.

"It's not your decision, Abe." Silas was angry—she knew what he sounded like when he was angry.

"There are other ways."

The old Indian had come around several more times and Silas had gone off with him. He wouldn't tell her, of course, what any of it was about. Jolee crept to the window to listen, ducking low so they wouldn't see her.

"You don't need to sacrifice yourself for this cause." Abe sounded sad, not angry or pleading.

"I'll decide what I need and what I don't need."

The old man sighed. "You can't wake someone pretending to be asleep."

"What does that mean?" Now Silas sounded really mad.

The old man countered with something even more cryptic. "Love beyond your fear."

Silas snorted. "Did you consult some Native American sayings handbook before you showed up today?"

Abe laughed. "Don't sacrifice yourself, friend," he said again. "The world needs more men like you, not less."

“I got work to do.”

“We’re going to the community board meeting next week,” Abe called.

Silas's voice sounded further away. “I’m sure you’ll get a lot done with the bureaucrats. In the meantime, I’ll do it my way.”

Jolee chanced a peek over the windowsill, seeing Silas heading off into the woods down a trail. The old Indian watched him go for a moment and then headed the other way.

She made a quick decision, running to the back door and pulling on her boots. She followed him as quietly as she could. Silas wasn't the only one who could track. Her father had taught her to shoot and hunt, how to track a deer for miles. Even when she lost sight of Silas in the distance, she knew the signs to look for on the soft ground, through the brush.

He walked a long time, going through parts of the forest that hadn't been cleared at all. She hopped logs, ducked under hanging branches. She was so focused on marking her way back and looking for signs of Silas's direction, she was startled when the forest opened up into a clearing.

She stopped, seeing Silas standing too, still, head down, in the middle of what was left of a house that had been ravaged by fire. He stood a long time amidst the charred remains, so long that she almost called out, went to him.

Then he went to his knees and made a noise that scared her so much she couldn't even think about moving. It started low, a keening wail, that grew into an intense, primal scream of rage so deafening she could have sworn the trees shook. Startled birds flew out of their nests, rabbits bolted, and Jolee stared, watching, terrified, as Silas began to sob.

I shouldn't be here. That was her first thought—to walk away and leave him here alone with his sorrow. Then she thought she should go to him, offer comfort, but how? The man didn't

share much under normal circumstances. Why did she think he would in such a vulnerable state? She imagined him pushing her away, telling her to go home, and couldn't bring herself to risk the rejection. After following him for over two hours, she was just going to turn around and go home and leave him to his secret pain.

She stood, undecided, until Silas got slowly, heavily to his feet, rubbing his masked face on his shirtsleeves. He drew a few, deep, shuddering breaths and she thought she'd never seen anything so sad, the way his shoulders slumped and his arms hung at his side.

"Jolee." The sound of her name drew a startled gasp from her throat and she actually took a step back into the forest. "Come here."

He'd known. He had known she was following, had probably known the instant she was out of the house. She crept forward, wary, picking her way through the rubble, and came to stand beside him. They stood quietly like that until he reached over and took her hand, squeezing gently.

She found the courage to speak. "What is this place?"

"It was my home." He kicked at the ashy residue. "Our home."

She wanted to ask, but she was afraid to break the spell they seemed under. Silas was talking about his past? Was she dreaming?

"Who's we?" she prompted gently.

"Isabelle." He gave another great sigh. "I haven't said her name out loud in five years."

"She was your wife?" Jolee guessed. "What happened?"

"She was killed."

Jolee surveyed what was left of their home together, her heart breaking for him. "In the fire?"

“No.” Silas’s voice hardened, his grip growing tighter on her hand. “My brother took her and he killed her.”

“Carlos?” Jolee whispered, incredulous. Although she knew what the man was capable of—she really shouldn’t have been surprised. “But why?”

“Because I wouldn’t give him this.” Silas gestured toward the forest, to the hundreds of thousands of acres of land that lay beyond. “Our father left it to me, and I wouldn’t let him destroy it.”

Jolee leaned her head against his shoulder, her heart swelling with pride, knowing how much he loved the land, how he protected it, just as he protected her. But oh, god, how it had cost him. She couldn’t even imagine his pain.

Silas glanced down at her, offering a small, sad smile behind his mask. “But really, he did it because he wanted her, and she wanted me instead.”

Jolee’s spine straightened. “I don’t blame her.”

He began to walk, slowly pulling her with him. “They left me here to die.”

“But you survived,” she countered, finally understanding his scars, the mask.

“My body did.” Silas drew her around the rubble to a white fence, an old trellis there filled with roses. They had grown up wild from the ashes, thick and red, weaving their way up the trellis and blooming open toward the sun.

“So beautiful,” she murmured, reaching to touch one of the velvety red petals.

“I don’t know how they survived.” Silas reached into his pocket and withdrew his hunting knife, a monstrous thing, and cut one of the stems. “These were Isabelle’s roses.”

She watched him, thoughtful, as he trimmed the thorns, talking the whole while. “Isabelle tried to play peacemaker between us. She invited Carlos to dinner. I should have known better,

but I thought...I hoped..." Silas studied the flower in his hand. "He drugged us both. I woke up duct taped to a chair with the house on fire."

"Dear God."

He lifted the flower to his masked face, breathing in. "And Isabelle was gone."

"How do you know she's...I mean..." Jolee swallowed, almost not wanting to say the words. "How do you know she's not still alive?"

"I've looked for her body." He gestured toward the forest again. "It wouldn't have been the first time Carlos had someone killed. You know that as well as I do."

Jolee nodded, feeling sick.

"You were my last clue." Silas reached over and tucked the rose behind her ear. "If Isabelle had been alive, Carlos would have taken her, made her his. Instead, he had you."

"She would never have betrayed you like that."

"I don't know." He tucked her hair behind her ear along with the flower, shaking his head. "My brother can be charming. He seduced you, didn't he?"

She didn't have a response for that, didn't want to think about it. Instead, she turned to look at Isabelle's roses, wondering at their beauty in the midst of the devastation. There were no other plants growing, even after all this time, amidst the wreckage. The soil must have been completely drained after the fire. And then it occurred to her.

"Silas, she's here." Jolee knelt in the soil, her hands turning over the dirt, knowing somehow that she was right. "She's right here."

"I feel her here too."

"No." She looked up and met his eyes. "He buried her right here. With her roses."

Silas's eyes widened in realization. She saw the emotions passing, just in his eyes—the horror, the anger, the sorrow. And then he sank to the earth beside her with a howl of rage and pain so great it hurt her heart, tearing at the dirt with his bare hands. He'd dug down two feet, bleeding at his knuckles and fingernails, before Jolee located a shovel at the other end of the rubble. It was rusted through entirely at the handle, but the business-end still worked.

He accepted it with a grunt when she handed it over, making quicker work of the soil under his feet. She sat with her arms curled around her knees and watched him until he found her, still eerily preserved and recognizable.

Jolee knew Silas had forgotten about her sitting there. He was lost in his memory of Isabelle, the woman whose body he held and rocked, dead in his arms. *I'm not a part of this*, she thought.

So she turned and headed for home. She knew he would come to her, when he was ready.

* * * *

He couldn't have thought of a better resting place for her. He hated his brother for thinking of it, for burying her here. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it himself. All these years, she had been right here. How many times had he come back to walk this perimeter, reliving their life together? He could still see her pruning her roses, singing to herself. Now she was giving new life to the same roses she had so lovingly grown. Thanks to his brother.

Carlos had always taken whatever he wanted. Had she refused him? Silas knew she would, although what had he done to her while she was drugged? Or worse, while she was awake, by force? That thought burned and he tore two roses off the bush, breaking off the stems, ignoring the rip of thorns against his bleeding palms.

He had said his goodbyes, his final goodbyes, and buried her again under the roses. Now he stamped the dirt down under his feet and began tearing the roses apart, scattering the petals over her grave.

He stood a long time, thinking about his past, about his future. He hadn't realized, until he saw Isabelle's body, how much he'd hoped she was still alive somewhere. Now he had closure, and knowing she was really gone changed everything. His brother had taken her, had probably raped her, and then, when she refused to bend to his will, had killed and buried her. He'd imagined the scenario so often it had become truth in his head, but now he knew it was true, or at least, a close approximation.

He'd planned his revenge all along, sabotaging Carlos at every turn, but never going so far as to completely put him out of business. What had he been waiting for? Silas wondered. He could have gone to the police at any time, shown them where Carlos had buried other bodies—men like Jolee's father, people who had gotten in his brother's way.

I've been waiting to find her, Silas realized, squatting down and sifting his fingers through the freshly packed dirt, spreading the rose petals. And now that he had?

His plan to expose his brother, to sacrifice himself in the process, would hurt Jolee. She cared about him too, he was sure of it. Even if she could never really love him—who could love the monster he'd become?—his death would be a hard blow for her. She'd grown used to him, comfortable. He would be leaving her alone, unprotected, to fend for herself.

He thought about Isabelle, but he also thought about Jolee, who had followed him, who had witnessed his unabashed pain and who had been the one to realize where his wife was buried. She had come to mean far more to him than he'd realized.

There are other ways. Abe's voice came back to him. He'd worked closely with the old man, once they'd realized what Carlos was planning to do at the old White Pine Mine—re-opening it to get what was left of the copper with sulfuric acid, most likely poisoning the aquifers in the process, which included not only Silas's land, but the local Indian Reserve land next to it as well. Sabotaging the sulfide mine had set Carlos back, Silas was sure, but it wouldn't stop him. Nothing would stop him, unless his brother was either dead or in prison.

Carlos had paid off all the mining safety inspectors to get the White Pine Mine opened again and had received all the necessary permits. While Abe and others on the Bad River reservation had been trying to draw attention to the issue, Carlos had been seducing the media on his own, telling them, "At this strength, sulfuric acid is a very diluted solution. This stuff is safe as lemon juice!" And, as Silas as pointed out to Jolee, his brother could be very persuasive.

But Abe had proof that the stuff was already leaching into the water. And Silas had dropped one of the dead rabbits he'd snared into a vat of the solution, watching the stuff eat away at its flesh, leaving it just a floating skeleton, in the space of a three minutes. The media wasn't listening, the local mining safety commission wasn't listening. The only way to get it all to stop was to use the media himself and get the EPA involved.

This spring would mark five years since Isabelle had died. That meant, this year, Carlos could have Silas declared legally dead and inherit all the land. Silas's plan of self-sacrifice, to martyr himself for the cause, to die like the rabbit in a vat of sulfuric acid on the day of the spring mine opening with cameras rolling, had seemed like a good one back before Jolee had been thrown into the mix.

Before Jolee, life hadn't been worth living. Silas had sacrificed far greater things than his own life, he realized, standing on his wife's grave. And it was a good plan. It would work. With

Carlos exposed, the media would run with the story, the EPA would get involved. Silas had already provided Abe with enough evidence to give them after Silas' death to put his brother away for life—including plots of land where the bodies were buried and a long laundry list of detailed, illegal activity.

But for the first time since his wife's death, Silas had found something—someone—worth living for.

“Goodbye, Isabelle.” He pulled his mask off and threw it aside, turning and walking into the forest, heading for home.

* * * *

Jolee should have known. Silas would have been on guard the moment he walked into the yard, she realized later as she bounced up and down, once again locked in her husband's trunk, zip-tied and duct-taped. *Right back where I started. Déjà-fucking-vu .*

But hindsight was 20/20, and she'd been distracted, worried about Silas. Should she have stayed with him? What was he going to do? Would he be okay alone? So she didn't notice the muddy tracks, men's shoes, not boots, on the wooden back steps. She hadn't noticed the tire tracks either—definitely made by a car, not a truck—running up the rain-softened driveway. She hadn't even noticed that the back door was open. Because she'd probably left it open, in a hurry to run after Silas, hadn't she?

But she noticed all of those things on the way out, Carlos dragging her by the hair in a blind rage. She didn't know how he'd found her and it didn't matter. Silas was gone and couldn't protect her, and while she'd fought as hard as she could, even managing to stab her husband in the upper arm with a meat fork—she'd been aiming for his jugular—hard enough to impale it

three inches, it had all been in vain. She was still locked in his truck heading toward her death for the second time in a year.

And she still regretted that she'd never really loved a man who truly loved her back. Carlos had never wanted or cared for her—to him, she'd been a trophy, something to win and display. And Silas? Did he love her? The last time she'd done this, she'd been full of thoughts of escape. This time, the ride was shorter, and she didn't have as much time to plan, but she thought about Silas almost exclusively.

Would he believe she got lost? Or worse, would he think she left?

Or would he realize what had happened and come for her?

Even as the car bumped down the old familiar two-track and she flashbaked to that day last winter, her pants wet with fear, her heart hammering in her chest just as it was now, she couldn't help hoping for the latter.

* * * *

Silas should have paid attention to his instincts. Miles from home, he thought he heard someone traveling on the old two-track. *Too wet out there*, he thought. *Gonna get stuck*. The rain had been heavy this spring, making everything soft and muddy. But he'd second-guessed himself as the sound faded.

Besides, he was changed, everything was different, his eyes just adjusting to a new light. He felt off-balance and was trying to get his bearings. Or perhaps he needed new bearings.

He'd buried Isabelle and now he was going to see Jolee. And he was anxious to be home. Even if she walked away after she saw his scars, he thought, stepping over a log and running a hand over the rough skin of his cheek—and some part of him was sure she would—he wanted to see her again, to tell her that he loved her, to give her that much, at least.

He saw the tracks in the driveway in the dappled afternoon sunlight as soon he stepped out of the woods, his senses immediately awake, telling himself it was a trick of the light and already knowing it wasn't. The man's footprints through the driveway, up the steps and down again—a second set of smaller tracks beside it on the way out—had his hunting knife unsheathed and ready as Silas slipped silently into the house. She wasn't in there, he was sure of it, but he had to be ready just in case.

Silas's assessment had been correct. The note on the kitchen table, written in his brother's handwriting, confirmed that much. It was simple and wouldn't implicate his brother in anything, of course, but it was clear enough.

Meet me at the White Pine. Bring the deeds.

And Jolee was gone. Her knitting was still on the table, another mask, this one black with a white skeleton face—for Halloween, she'd said with a grin, although he'd watched her making it and realized it would probably be his death shroud instead, because he didn't plan on being around in October.

Excerpt now he very much wanted to be here, and he wanted Jolee here beside him.

Silas worked quickly, not knowing how much of a head start his brother had. He would take the four-wheeler most of the way and then do the rest on foot, he decided. And he took several things with him—but the one thing he didn't take was a deed to any of his land.

* * * *

Kicking her way out hadn't worked this time. Jolee couldn't get the latch to pop and it did nothing except making Carlos even more pissed when he opened his now very dented trunk to drag her out. By the hair. She swore, if she got out of this, she was going to get it cut off so no one could pull her around by the stuff ever again.

“Fucking bitch! Look what you did to my car!” Carlos threw her to the ground and she sprang up almost instantly—the idiot had forgotten to zip tie her feet together—heading into a full-out run. He swore again and took off after her—he’d always been good about going to the gym and he was fast—catching hold of her hair and yanking her backward. She fell onto her back, hitting her head hard enough on the ground to make her see blackness and bright stars instead of blue sky and sun.

She was cursing the length of her hair again as he grabbed another handful and stalked off, forcing her to follow, bent over and panting, still struggling in spite of the pain and searching the ground for a weapon. There had been no jack or even a tire iron in the trunk, but her hands were zip-tied in front, not the back, and she could grab something if she could find it. She wondered, considering how sloppy he’d been, if her husband had ever really done this by himself, or if he’d always gotten one of his guys to do it for him.

“Carlos, please,” she begged, trying to appeal to the part of him she knew must be in there. “Don’t do this.”

“Shut the fuck up.” He shoved her through a door and threw her to the floor, kicking her in the ribs to leave her breathless and deter her from running. It worked—her side exploded, a bloom of pain, and she clutched it, groaning. “You don’t tell me what to do. Nobody tells me what to do.”

She looked up at him, seeing a gun in his hand, and she had a moment of panic, thinking of Silas, wishing he was here, at the very least so he could be the last thing she saw before her husband pulled the trigger. But when Carlos just stood there, her eyes skipped away from his hand, around the room, taking in her surroundings. A factory? There was a heavy, metallic smell in the air and it hung around them. It smelled like blood. A slaughterhouse?

She looked for an exit but the only one she found was between her and Carlos. He'd even left the door propped open and the light called to her like a beacon. The place was huge, full of strange looking machines with thick ductwork, heavy steel. She could get lost amongst them. That would be a start. She struggled to rise and he kicked her again, the other side this time, making her scream in pain.

"You were always way more trouble than you were worth," he snarled, unslinging a bag from his shoulder and dropping it down by her head. She saw the blood seeping out of it and screamed again, backpedaling from the sight.

He snorted, squatting down beside her and opening it up. "You think my brother's the only one who knows how to hunt?"

He pulled out a muskrat by the tail, its head half-gone from the shot that had killed it, and Jolee rolled away, shuddering. It wasn't the animal that made her sick, it was Carlos, the sneering smile on his face, the glint in his eyes.

"Wanna see something cool, chickie?" He grabbed her upper arm, still holding the muskrat with the other, and dragged her to her feet. She was doubled over in pain, looking around with blurry eyes for another exit, but she was forced to follow around the huge machine in front of them, down an aisle way.

It was dark back here, although the light coming from the doorway reflected against the ceiling, giving her some ability to see. Could she crawl under? Get into a small space and hide? But Carlos had a gun. He'd slipped it into his belt, but it was still there. Could she reach it? It was worth a shot. She took a step toward him, knocking him off balance, reaching for the butt of the gun, but he turned, shoving her backward onto the floor. She sprawled, hands thrown over

her head behind her, hitting her head again, the other side this time, leaving a lump she could practically feel.

“Whoa!” He slammed his foot down on the zip tie across her wrists, making her howl in pain. He’d just broken her finger, at least one of them, maybe more. It hurt so bad she thought she might pass out, the world fading to gray. “Careful. Wouldn’t want to fall in there. That would be nasty.”

He squatted, turning her chin toward him and looking down at her. His face filled her vision, upside down, like a storm cloud. She tried to move her fingers under his foot and it brought more bursts of pain so she held still, letting the tears roll down her temples. Carlos was still holding the half-headless muskrat by the tail and she could smell its decomposing body. It made her gag, but not as much as what he did next.

Using his other hand, he yanked her t-shirt up, exposing her bra, his gaze burning over her flesh. Then he yanked her bra down too, his teeth showing in a sneering smile as he squeezed and kneaded her flesh. She turned her head away again, more in reaction to his mauling than to the smell of the dead animal, wanting to scream, knowing it would do her no good.

“I forgot how beautiful you are.” Carlos tweaked her nipple and then twisted it, making her wince, but she didn’t cry out. “And we’ve got time for lots of fun before we get down to the dirty work.”

He had to stretch to reach her crotch, cupping and grinding his hand there. “I’m gonna fuck you so good.”

“That would be new,” she gasped, trying to twist away, the pain in her hands increasing enough to make her still. “Besides, your brother’s been doing the job much better than you ever could.”

He growled, bringing his fist down on her pubic bone, making her scream and curl up, turning fetal in spite of the pain in her hands. The hurt between her legs far outweighed that of her fingers. They were going numb, but her pelvis was on fire all the way to her bones.

“Cunt!” He stood, yanking her up again, dragging her by her mangled hands, keeping his grip on the zip tie between them. “Want to see what I’m gonna do to you?”

He let the muskrat drop, and Jolee heard a splash. In spite of the pain radiating through every part of her body, she turned her head to look. There was a vat sunk deep into the floor beside them, the liquid a good ten feet down. She saw something—a lid?—on the floor next to the hole, like huge manhole cover, that had been taken off.

Carlos sighed, looking down at the hole. “Would have been more effective if it had still been alive I guess.”

“What?” Jolee glanced down again, still dazed and in pain, seeing something white floating in the liquid. She could hear a hissing noise, like steam escaping.

“Sulfuric acid.” He grinned, meeting her eyes. “Gonna eat you right down to your bones.”

She looked down again at the muskrat skeleton floating in acid and the realization rolled through her like thunder. She struggled, trying to get away from him, she didn’t care how much pain she was in. She finally understood that he was going to put a world of hurt on her that she could never have even imagined—and that was all going to be before her sulfuric acid bath.

“Stupid bitch.” He grabbed her, crushing her mangled hands between them as he tried to kiss her. She turned away and his lips mashed against her cheek, the corner of her mouth, and she tasted Wintergreen Lifesavers. “Why did you have to find out? I would have given you everything.”

“You don’t have anything I want.” She spat the words out with his attempt at a kiss.

He had both arms around her and he squeezed her so hard she couldn’t breathe. “Another few months and I’m going to be the richest man you’ll ever meet. You know what’s in this mine?”

She shook her head, letting out a little squeak of response, but she did know. She’d identified the smell, that thick bloody smell—it was copper.

“Silver!” he hissed, eyes bright with glee. “Do you know what silver is worth in today’s market? Do you know how much it’s going to be worth?”

She shook her head again, the world fading from gray to black and back again. She literally couldn’t breathe.

“Millions!” He laughed, squeezing and twirling her around like they were celebrating something. “Billions!”

She caught a breath, her lungs burning, her side, both sides, aching with the expansion. “I hate you.”

His eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. “Good. That will make dying easier.”

She went on, in spite of herself. If she was going to die, she wanted him to know the truth. “I never loved you. I love Silas. He’s more man, in every way, than you will ever be.”

“We’ll see about that.” He shoved her backwards, grabbing hold and tearing at her bra. It wouldn’t give, the hooks on the back holding fast. He frowned in frustration, redoubling his efforts, and Jolee saw the sudden widening of his eyes before she realized what was happening, the way his mouth dropped in surprise, jaw working with unspoken words.

Carlos tried to say something, but he just gurgled, his grip on her loosening. That’s when she saw the arrow sticking out of the side of his throat.

“Silas,” she whispered, pushing her husband away from her without thinking, already searching for her rescuer with her eyes. Carlos stumbled back, one hand reaching for the arrow sticking out of his neck, the other blindly grasping in front of him, and she saw that he was going to fall. There was no stopping his momentum—he was going to fall into the hole in the floor.

“Uuuuhh!” Carlos choked, blood running down to stain the collar of his white button down shirt, blooming on the front like a rose. He had one hand on the arrow and was trying to pull but the pain was clearly too much. He pawed the air with his other hand and managed to hook his fingers through the front of Jolee’s exposed bra again.

And she was falling.

His momentum became her own, and they were both going down together, falling into the darkness toward a roiling death. She heard thunder behind her, felt something hit the floor, but there was no time to turn. She could only see her husband’s wide, frightened eyes and the white skeleton of the muskrat bobbing below.

Then a big, thick arm had her around the waist and she was watching Carlos fall, not falling with him. Silas, who had seemed to fly down to catch her, had been on top of one of the machines behind them, making for an easy shot—and the thunder behind her had been him jumping to the floor.

She turned away from the splash, ten feet below, and Silas pulled her in close, squeezing her so hard she couldn’t breathe and didn’t care. He whirled her away from the vat of acid and they both heard Carlos screaming, finally finding his voice in spite of the arrow in his windpipe.

Silas glared down to see his brother dying and snarled, “Don’t worry, bro, it’s as safe as lemon juice.”

She was in too much pain to walk and he carried her to the end of the aisle toward the exit, his bow still strung over his shoulder.

“What took you so long?” she gasped, arms around his neck, drinking him in. He was scarred, his face ravaged by the fire, but she could still see the man he’d been, the man he still was, the strong jaw and clefted chin, the full lips, and the same beautiful dark eyes.

“I came as fast as I could.” He looked at her in the light of day as he carried her outside, fully exposed to her now. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

“Yes,” she replied, swallowing. “And yes.”

“I’m so sorry.” He pressed his forehead to hers and then kissed her cheek, looking down at her still zip-tied hands, her fingers bent.

“It’s okay.” She rested her cheek against his chest as he walked, carrying her easily in his arms, as if she weighed nothing at all. “You can take me home and fix me up and make it all better. You’ve done it before.”

“True enough.”

She felt his lips against the top of her head.

“How long were you there waiting to take the shot?” she asked as they walked past Carlos’s car, the trunk she’d ridden in still open. She wondered what he’d heard, how much he’d seen.

“Not long.” He slowed. “A few minutes.”

She lifted her face to look at him, tracing a scar from the corner of his mouth to his jaw. “Did you hear me say it?”

He cleared his throat. “Say what?”

“I love you.” She watched his eyes fill with tears.

“I heard.” He blinked fast, his gaze drifting away and then back to her. “I just didn’t know if you meant it.”

“Oh I meant it.” She kissed him softly, marveling at the familiarity of his mouth, his arms around her. This was Silas, *her* Silas, unmasked. “I promise you, I meant every word.”

“I was coming home to tell you.” He smiled, hefting her in his arms. She knew what he meant.

“But I wasn’t there.”

He shook his head, his eyes grave. “No, you weren’t.”

“But you found me.”

“Yes, I did.” He nodded, a smile playing on his lips.

She wrapped her arms more tightly around his neck. “You can tell me now.”

“I love you,” he said, and she didn’t think she’d ever seen a brighter, more beautiful smile in her life.

“Good.” She snuggled up in his arms. “Now take me home so you can kiss it and make it all better.”

Silas started walking again, carrying her with him. “Yes ma’am.”

* * * *

Epilogue

“Abe came by this morning.” Jolee greeted her husband with the news as he came in the door, shaking off the snow. It was a winter reminiscent of their very first in the cabin—three feet of snow outside and still falling. The world was blanketed in white silence.

“How in the hell did he get out here?” Silas yanked off his boots and set them aside. “It’s so deep I can barely make it in snowshoes.”

She shrugged, watching him dust the snow out of his dark hair. “He said the county finalized the paperwork. The judge’s decision is final, no more appeals.”

Silas stopped, eyes wide. “Really?”

She nodded, smiling at the joyful look on his face, knowing now why Abe had stayed so long, wanting to tell Silas himself, but the snow and the lateness of the day finally chased him back home. They’d had a good, long talk, as always. Abe, she’d discovered, had been a good friend of her father’s. She was only one-quarter Chippewa herself, but her father had been half, and it was Abe, she discovered, who had left the note in her mailbox, her father’s friend, who had come out to the cabin to check on her at night when Silas was gone, leaving his footprints in the snow.

After the discovery and identification of Carlos’s body, the Chippewa Indians had come forward with the information Silas had given them. Abe, working as a spokesman, had revealed her dead husband’s crimes to the world. Then they’d discovered the most shocking news of all. Carlos had never changed his will—Jolee was the sole heir to his money and businesses.

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all day!” Silas exclaimed, coming forward to kneel in front of her chair by the fire. He put his wet head in her lap and she stroked his hair, smiling. They had both agreed, almost simultaneously, when they’d heard the news about the will, and Jolee stepped forward to claim it. Of course Carlos’ partners had contested the will, but in the end, the will was upheld. After three years of appeals, the mining and logging businesses had been ordered to be liquidated, the land donated to the Indian Reservation for restoration.

“Well, you might want to hear my other news before you make that call.” Jolee smiled.

“Oh?” Silas lifted his head, raising an eyebrow.

“My water broke.” She opened her legs to reveal the towel she was sitting on under her t-shirt.

His eyes widened, his jaw dropped and she almost laughed out loud. “What?”

“You ready to have a baby?”

“In a snowstorm?” He gulped. “We can’t get to a hospital.”

“Who needs a hospital?” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Would you rather have a baby in the truck stuck in the snow or here in our own nice, warm bed?”

“Home.” He smiled, recognizing their “would you rather?” game. “But Jolee, are you sure—?”

She rolled her eyes, feeling the baby stir, knowing another contraction would come soon. They were coming more steadily now. She wasn’t worried. It was all going to be okay.

“Would you rather kiss me or keep talking?”

Silas hesitated and then pressed his lips to hers, giving her the only answer that had ever really mattered.

ABOUT SELENA KITT

Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr-and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

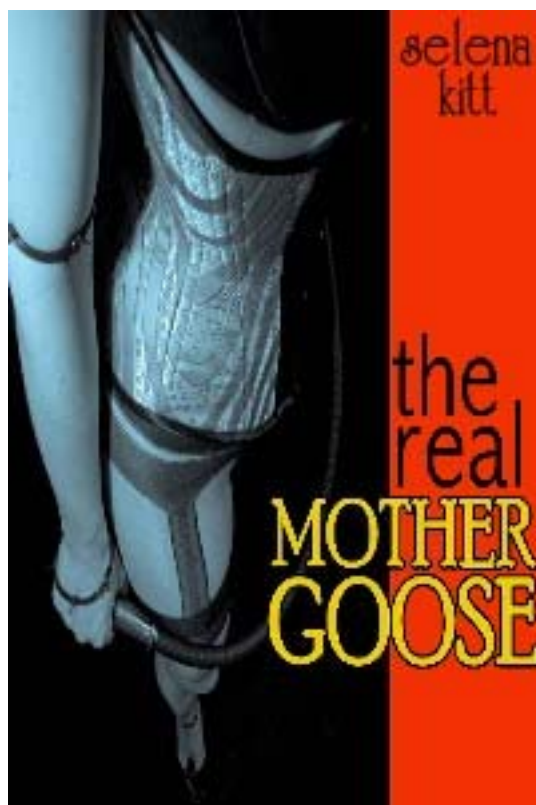
Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out-this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she devotes herself to her family—a husband and four children—and her growing organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her books *EcoErotica* (2009), *The Real Mother Goose* (2010) and *Heidi and the Kaiser* (2011) were all Epic Award Finalists. Her only gay male romance, *Second Chance*, won the Epic Award in Erotica in 2011. Her story, *Connections*, was one of the runners-up for the 2006 Rauxa Prize, given annually to an erotic short story of "exceptional literary quality," out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read "blind" (without author's name available.)

She can be reached on her website at www.selenakitt.com

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EXCERPT from THE REAL MOTHER GOOSE:

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep
And can't tell where to find them.
Leave them alone,
And they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.

"Peep!" The voice shook the room and the startled girl looked up as Mother came in. "Do you know where your sheep are now?"

"No, Mother." The girl looked up from her position, kneeling on the floor, her blue eyes wide. "I penned them before I left, I swear it."

Mother Goose came toward her, the high heels of her soft boots clicking on the floor. She squatted down before Peep, whose hands were bound behind her to her feet with pink satin sashes.

"You are a pretty little one." Mother lifted the girl's chin and studied her face, her gaze moving over the girl's body, the pink and white corset drawn tight, her blonde curls spilling over her shoulders, partially hiding Peep's rosy little nipples. "Sometimes I think you're just playing dumb."

"No, Mother," Peep implored, shaking her head. "I penned them. I promise you."

"Is that so?" Mother stood. Peep looked up Mother's long legs, encased in black fishnet stockings and garters, the dark triangle between her legs exposed, as it always was, for easy access.

Mother had taken to wearing black since Father had crossed over, and her mood was ever changeable, but lately she seemed often cross and hard to please. Mother tapped her toe in front of Peep's knee, folding her arms over her ample breasts, pushed up high in her black corset, but covered with the sheer, lace peignoir she always wore, unbuttoned to the floor.

"Mother, please," Peep pleaded. "I will go tend them, if you let me."

Mother walked over to the cabinet and the girl moaned, the sound caught halfway between regret and anticipation. "I think we need a little correction, don't you?" Mother's voice drifted over her shoulder as she chose a small cat o'nine tails from her collection.

"Please," Peep pleaded again, her eyes downcast. "I'll be a good girl."

"Yes," Mother murmured, coming to caress the her cheek with her soft hand. "You will."

Mother reached behind the girl and began untying the pink satin ribbon binding her. Peep sighed in relief, rolling her tired shoulders once her arms were free. She leaned forward onto her hands and knees as Mother began to untie her feet, but then the older woman stopped.

"No ... this is good." Mother tightened the sashes at the girl's ankles, chuckling. "Turn around, Little Bo Peep who's lost her sheep, and doesn't know where to find them."

Peep did as she was told, turning her face toward the wall on her hands and knees, using her hands to slowly work herself around. She felt Mother's hand caressing her ass, and she shivered, looking back over her shoulder at the older woman. Mother squatted down behind her, beginning to drip the many straps of the cat o'nine tails over Peep's behind like a little leather waterfall.

"Peep's little puss," Mother whispered, parting the dark blonde fuzz with her fingers to peer in at the pink treasure. "I love peeping at Peep's little puss." Mother giggled, wiggling her fingers through and finding the girl's clit.

"Oh, Mother!" Peep moaned, lifting her bottom in the air as much as she could with her feet tied together at the ankles.

"That's right, Peep," Mother encouraged, with her finger and her voice. The girl's clit was swollen and pulsing. "You like it so much, don't you?"

Peep nodded, glad her long blonde hair covered her red, flushed face. Mother's fingers rubbed there, making her moan with pleasure. Peep's little puss was incredibly responsive, her lips swelling, the pink color deepening to a rosier shade.

"You've been a naughty shepherdess, haven't you, Peep?" Mother asked, standing behind her. The girl nodded, her blonde hair falling in waves falling over the stone floor. She felt the first blow from the cat o'nine tails, almost a gentle thing, with just a little sting. She twisted and squirmed.

"Oh, Mother, please," Peep whispered. Her pussy throbbed from the older woman's attention.

"Yes, tell me." Another blow, and then another. Mother waited.

"I lost my sheep," the girl sobbed, feeling another slap, another. Her bottom felt hot. She cried out as she felt three more stings from the cat o'nine tails in quick succession. "Oh, Mother! Please!"

But the older woman was catching a rhythm now, and Peep heard her working hard. She lashed the girl again and again, until Peep's bottom felt red and raw and huge, and her pussy--it

was on fire, throbbing with longing. She hid her shamed face behind her curtain of hair, her tears falling onto the stone floor.

"Now, are you going to find those sheep, Miss Peep?" Mother grabbed the girl by the hair and pulled her head back, looking down at her tear-stained face. Peep nodded, moaning softly, looking dazed, her eyes glassy. "But first, you're going to do penance, aren't you? On your knees."

Peep nodded, tears still streaming down her rosy cheeks. "Yes, Mother."

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