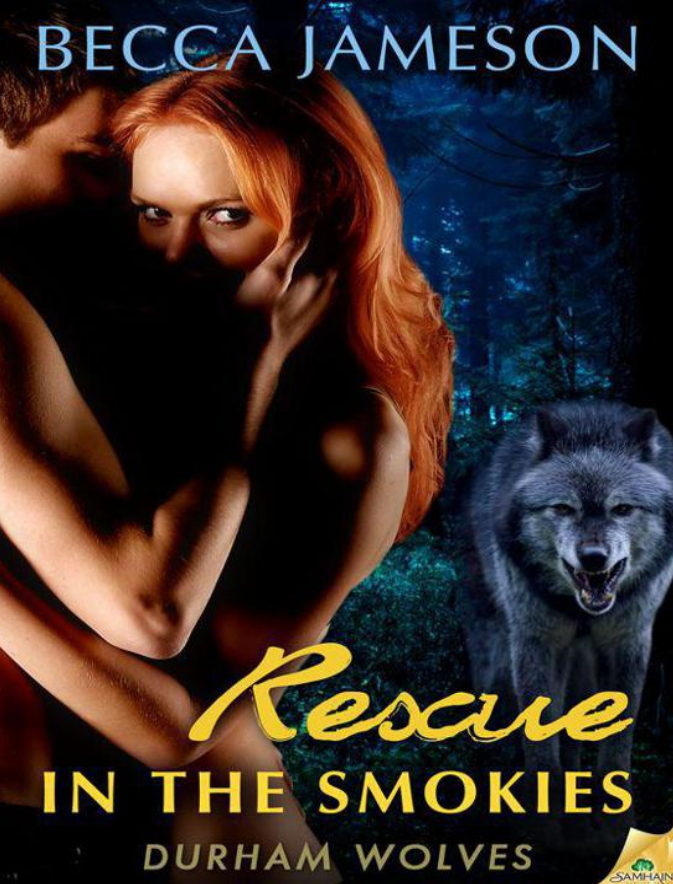


BECCA JAMESON



Rescue
IN THE SMOKIES
DURHAM WOLVES

Dedication

To Christa, my fantastic editor.
Without her taking a chance on me,
I wouldn't be here!

Chapter One

Sergius Durham froze at the distinct crunch of gravel beneath tires. His hackles rose. He finished drying the breakfast plate, set it on the counter with a soft clang, and then turned to the front door, his brow furrowed, a headache already forming over his right eye.

No one visited Sergius and his brothers except the sheriff. And the news was never good.

Sergius grabbed the handle of the solid wood front door and took a deep breath, allowing his eyes to

close for a moment before he pulled.

“Morning, Serg.” Sheriff James Hardin tipped his brown suede cowboy hat and nodded as Sergius stepped outside.

Without saying another word, James climbed the three steps up to the long, wraparound porch. His gait matched Sergius’s pace until he leaned against the dark wooden railing. The sheriff avoided eye contact; instead he stared out toward the expanse of lawn and forest.

A less discerning eye would think he was admiring the view of

the Smoky Mountains. But Serg knew he wasn't seeing anything at all. He was inside his head, carefully selecting his next words.

They waited in silence for Micah and Jaxon, Sergius's brothers, who would have heard the police cruiser and headed back to the house from the barn. They were all familiar with this scenario. Words weren't necessary.

"James." Micah muttered the name as he rounded the house, Jaxon on his tail.

The two brothers stopped at the foot of the steps and looked toward the sheriff.

“Need your help.” James jerked his hat off and rubbed his brow.

“Whatever you need, James. You know that.” Jaxon climbed the first step and rested a hip against the railing.

“Hiker missing. Headed toward Chimney Tops yesterday afternoon, we think. Never returned to her hotel last night.”

Her?

Shit.

“Name’s Juliana Polanski.” He handed Sergius a small, grainy photo. “She’s a seasoned hiker.”

Goose bumps climbed Sergius’s spine. Sweat gathered around his

forehead and trickled down his face even though the late May morning hadn't yet reached a temperature worthy of a sweat.

"Got pretty cold last night. Did she have anything with her to protect against the elements?" Sergius bit his thumbnail between his front teeth. A person could freeze to death this time of year if they were caught out in the elements. Luckily, last night had only dipped to about forty, but you never could tell what would happen.

"Blue windbreaker. Thank God."

"She was hiking alone?" *Why the*

hell do people always seem to take off hiking on their own in unknown territory? Hasn't anyone ever heard of the buddy system?

“She started out with girlfriends, but they didn't want to make the last jaunt up Chimney Tops. They waited halfway up, but when she didn't return after a few hours, they figured they must have missed her somehow and headed back to the hotel. She never showed up.”

“Isn't Chimney Tops closed for reconstruction?”

“Just on weekdays. Open Friday through Sunday. That's half the problem. Today is Monday. There

won't even be anyone in the area to stumble upon her if she's up there."

"Path's pretty worn out up there too. She could have slipped and fallen into a ravine or something and twisted an ankle." *If luck is on our side, and hers, that's the only thing that happened.*

James cleared his throat and looked Sergius right in the eye. "McKinney's back."

"Fuck." The last thing they needed was Keeton McKinney in the area with a lost hiker. That damn vamp showed up every few months to poach whatever he could out of the national forest. He

wasn't known for being particularly selective either. Rabbits, squirrels, deer, bears... humans.

Jaxon and Micah groaned.

The sheriff continued, "Yeah, that's the word I would use. It's been years since he killed a human around here, but still. I don't like taking chances. If she's out there and alive, I'd rather find her as soon as possible. My men are scouring the area of course, but none of them can track like you can."

One side of the sheriff's mouth rose into a knowing half smile. He

gestured over the railing toward the patrol car. "I've got some of her clothes in the car. Hope her scent hasn't been too contaminated with that of her roommates. They were all staying in one room."

Sergius looked down at his brothers. "I'll ride with James to the last known location. Why don't you two take the truck and start searching a few miles west of Chimney Tops. She couldn't have gone east with the road and the river. At least not alone." He closed his eyes for a few seconds. *If she isn't alone, we're fucked.* With McKinney in the area, anything

was possible.

“Sounds good.” Jaxon turned toward the cruiser, Micah right behind him. “We’ll get her scent and get going.”

“I’ll be right out.” Sergius turned to the sheriff while he reached for the doorknob behind him. “Gonna grab my pack.”

Less than a minute later, Sergius emerged from the house and jogged toward the police car. James stood several yards away, leaning into the cab of Jaxon’s truck, no doubt providing every detail he could about the missing woman.

Sergius climbed into the

passenger side of the police car, reached for the seat belt and then froze.

His eyes closed halfway as he took a long, steady breath in and then moaned. This was no ordinary missing hiker. Juliana Polanski was his mate.

Sergius let go of the belt, twisted around backward and grabbed the beige sweater that had been tossed on the back seat with some other clothing. Pressing the soft material to his face, he inhaled as though it were the last breath he would ever take.

Her scent was like an

aphrodisiac. His cock hardened inside the tight confines of his jeans.

So this is what all the hype about finding a mate is about. Fuck me. He'd never believed this could truly happen to someone. Sure, years ago he'd watched with an amused chuckle as other family members had fallen for a woman. But this? Nothing could have prepared him for this.

Thank God James took an extra moment to say goodbye to Jaxon and Micah over the hood of the cruiser, because it gave Sergius a moment to compose himself before

the sheriff climbed inside and saw his face.

He didn't want anyone to know of his discovery, not even his brothers. He wasn't ready to face them yet. Hell, even James wouldn't understand the way of wolves, at least not in this respect.

Serg reluctantly tossed the cashmere sweater onto the back seat and turned forward. He itched to find his woman and get her back safely. As fast as possible.

James slid into the driver's seat and started the car.

"Some of her things are in the back seat." James angled his head

and nodded toward the back.

Sergius reached back with trembling fingers and snagged the stack of clothes as though he weren't already familiar with Juliana's essence. He thanked God it wouldn't be weird for him to sit there inhaling deeply of her scent, her unwashed shirt and pants from the day before pressed to his nose. Pure ecstasy. James would never think it odd. This was how he and his brothers always tracked a human.

He now knew more about her than most human husbands probably knew about their wives

after five years of marriage.

She used a floral shampoo and body soap he'd never smelled before, but made him envision a grassy field of wildflowers. Probably one of those gazillion scents from one of any number of crazy bath and lotion stores women were always so gaga over.

She hadn't worn perfume, but that didn't surprise him, seeing as she was an avid hiker. He smiled to himself at the thought that she enjoyed the outdoors. Heaven forbid he find himself mated to a woman who hated to get a little dirty.

Above the smell of laundry detergent and soap, the prevailing scent had been all Juliana. Her personal musk drove him to squirm in his seat. He could practically taste the spice of her sex on his tongue. *Holy Mother of God.*

James enumerated the details of Juliana's disappearance for several minutes, and then they finished the drive in relative silence.

Serg prayed to himself that his mate had not headed out yesterday without the requisite list of gear every well-versed hiker should carry.

"This is about as close as I can get

you.” James stopped the car and turned toward Sergius.

“This is fine. I can cover a lot of ground in a short time, or have you forgotten?” Serg pasted a cynical grin on his face. The circumstances sucked, but he wasn’t kidding. If Juliana Polanski were anywhere in the area, he’d find her in no time. *And, Lord, she had better be alive.*

“Good luck. And, once again, thanks. I know you boys don’t get any recognition for all you do for the department. But know that I appreciate you.” James’s face was serious, his brow furrowed, his lips pressed together. Few people knew

the three brothers were werewolves; the sheriff was one of them. They'd been helping the local law enforcement for many years on cases that weren't likely to be cracked by human action alone, but they stayed under the radar as much as possible. Most people simply believed the brothers knew the area so well it made them better trackers. And that was true. It just wasn't the whole truth.

Very few humans were even aware of their kind, and even fewer were aware of the existence of vampires. Hell, even the Durham brothers hadn't known of the night

creatures until a few short years ago.

“I’ll find her. Don’t worry. I’m sure she just wandered off the path and twisted an ankle.” Sergius climbed from the cruiser.

Leaning back through the door, he added, “I have my radio. I’ll get in touch with you as soon as possible.”

James nodded as Serg pushed the door closed and turned toward the path in front of him. He took a deep breath and stepped in amongst the trees while the sheriff’s car disappeared behind him.

He had no doubt he'd find what he was looking for. Her scent was all over him from the small pile of clothes James had in the back seat.

Assuming the clothes had only been worn by Juliana, this mission was the most important one he'd ever undertaken.

Serg climbed his way into the woods a short distance, the urgency of this particular assignment gnawing at his spine. Even his hands twitched at his sides.

Besides the fact his mate was lost in these mountains, Keeton McKinney had been spotted in the area. That damn vampire had been

the bane of his existence for several years, feeding off the local wildlife even before the Durham brothers dared to settle in the Appalachian Mountains.

No matter how many times Sergius and his brothers ran the guy off, he kept returning. But this time it was personal. All he could do now was pray there was no correlation between McKinney's appearance and Juliana's disappearance.

Chapter Two

Juliana shivered.

The temperature had dipped quite low overnight, and she'd been unable to shake the chill that reached her bones, even though the sun had finally risen.

She was tired too. She hadn't slept all night. How had she gotten so far off course?

Closing her eyes for a minute, she rested against a tree, put her hands on her knees and took a deep breath.

Think, Jules. Her brain was

muddled. Had seemed that way all night. She couldn't hang on to a thought.

Sure, she shouldn't have ventured off on her own. But there'd been plenty of people around when she'd started the trek up Chimney Tops Trail. Vanessa and Charlene had been worn out. They weren't as accustomed to the steep inclines as Juliana. They said they'd wait for her at the juncture to Road Prong Trail. Shouldn't have taken more than a few hours.

That had been seventeen hours ago. She'd been almost at the end of the path when that man had

pointed out a shortcut. What had she been thinking going off the path like that? She knew better. She hiked all the time for heaven's sake.

He was so nice, and cute even.

Seemed sort of old world. Is that even something? Nevertheless, he'd also been wrong.

Ugh. She was exasperated and pissed off at her own stupidity.

Thank God she'd carried a small backpack with plenty of supplies. Otherwise, her situation would have been much worse. Even though she'd only embarked on a simple day hike, she never headed out on mountain paths without her

pack. The jacket she never would have needed during the day had been key to her nighttime survival. She hadn't stopped long enough during the night to start a fire, but she certainly might need the matches tonight if she didn't get herself out of this mess. Even the small, but powerful, flashlight she carried had become a lifesaver.

If she hadn't left the damn camera open on her phone, it wouldn't have died, and she could have at least been located with the signal. But, no. That would have been way too simple.

Juliana slid down the tree until

she hit the ground with a thud. A pile of dry leaves crinkled beneath her.

Her friends would have reported her absence by now. Geez, yesterday afternoon. People would be looking for her.

Where are they?

She knew she couldn't be too far from civilization because she'd spent the entire night heading toward the only light she'd seen. How she hadn't ever reached it was beyond her comprehension. It was as though the light had been only an illusion or a mirage. She felt sluggish, hypnotized.

Now that it was day, she was stuck. She had a compass and a map. Well, the map wouldn't do her a bit of good at this point, because she had no idea where she was. Somewhere in the woods. In the middle of nowhere as far as she was concerned. She could make good use of the compass, and the sun, but she was so exhausted.

She needed to lie down and rest for a while. *So tired*. Thank God for the Mylar blanket in her pack. She set the bag down next to the tree and pulled out the shiny material.

All she could do was hope whatever light she'd been heading

toward would be as bright tonight as it had been last night.

The Smoky Mountains were covered with trails running in every direction. *How is it none of them seem to be anywhere near where I am?*

Rest, she told herself as she lay in the pile of leaves, using her backpack as a pillow. She still had four protein bars and plenty of water, but she needed to get out of this mess by tomorrow or she'd be in a heap of shit.

Keeton McKinney leaned back

against the damp cave wall and smiled. *Aren't I the lucky bastard?*

It had been almost a hundred years since he'd smelled anything as sweet as that fiery hot piece of ass lost in his woods.

And yes, he did think of them as "his". After all, he'd been traipsing around in this forest off and on for nearly three hundred years. He'd first settled in the area long before there were as many inhabitants as there were now. Back then, the only humans he ever saw were Native Americans, mostly from his own tribe. All his people were dark complected with long black hair.

His pickings had changed drastically since then.

The pale-skinned petite redhead made his mouth water anew.

Redheads were so delicious. Their veins, easily visible under nearly translucent skin, made it easy to drain them of their essence. He would know; he'd feasted on plenty of them in his day.

But something intrigued him about this woman. Her smell was so enticing, he thought he might keep her.

His hands shook as he slithered down to sit on the cave floor. Darkness enveloped him.

He'd never left a single person alive before. Didn't even know if he could. Nor had he ever considered taking a mate. It seemed easier to travel alone. He'd enjoyed many a good fuck before the kill, but never contemplated forcing himself to take just a taste. Save some for later, so to speak.

Other vampires had human mates. He'd run into them over the ages. But he'd never understood how they did it. How did they sleep with the same woman day after day without draining her? Somehow they managed to sip of the essence of one woman just

enough to lengthen her life expectancy and keep her enthralled.

He'd thought it a feat not worth his effort. Until now. Until the stunning redhead had entered the picture.

Keeton had gotten his first whiff of her the night before. He'd been wandering around the base of the mountain after dusk and gotten a trail on her scent. He'd frozen in his spot. Something was different about her. Her pheromones called to him unlike any other human's ever had. He'd followed her sweet, intoxicating smell to her hotel and

watched from the shadows all night. Late in the afternoon, Keeton had ventured out under the cover of the trees to track her, praying all the while she'd headed out for another day of hiking. And rejoicing to find he was right.

Thank God, because he didn't do this often. Traipsing around in daylight was not his style. After hundreds of years as a vampire, he was strong enough to endure sunlight, but he still preferred to sleep by day out of habit.

When he'd first spotted her alone on the trail, he'd intended to lure her into the forest, fuck her and

suck her dry. But as he got closer, he'd realized he wanted more. Her scent was like a magnet to him, drawing him toward her. When he breathed the air around her, he could taste her on the tip of his tongue like a sweet red wine as it glided down his throat. Her voice, when she'd asked him about his "shortcut," had been smooth, sexy, mesmerizing. He hadn't remembered having goose bumps in decades...until she spoke.

Could he hold her under his spell, control her mind, for a hundred years? With the right balance of mind control, he could

convince her she belonged with him, hold her in a trance in which all she wanted was to fuck him. His dick stiffened at the thought. He licked his dry lips.

Normally, he survived on the blood of animals in the world's forests. In the last century it had grown more difficult to kill a human without raising the suspicion of local law enforcement. The last thing he needed was for humans to discover his existence. Several already suspected. It had grown harder and harder to cover his tracks. Sucking a human dry of their blood and leaving them on the

side of the road raised eyebrows. He'd had to get more creative and dispose of the bodies—permanently—after a kill. So taxing.

In the Smoky Mountains he almost never killed. Especially since the wolves had descended.

But the redhead made his mouth water for more than a taste. He wanted to have her over and over. Could he do it?

The only thing he could think to do at the moment was lure her farther away from civilization until he could come up with a plan.

His mind was practically fuddled as though she held him under a

spell instead of the other way around. He'd needed time to think. Get control of his urges so he didn't drain her in the heat of passion. He'd intended to take her during the night, but hadn't quite felt he could do so without killing her. Perhaps if he sucked the blood of several animals before he went to retrieve her again, he could gain some control. Maybe a larger animal than usual was called for this time.

He surely had one more night before humans, and wolves, would start looking for her. A hiker on her own out traipsing around in the

mountains wouldn't be missed by anyone yet. It usually took at least two days before someone missed them. Stupid on their part. Played out fantastically for Keeton though.

The light had been a brilliant idea. He'd led her quite a distance last night with a lantern. Always staying just far enough away to make her believe she could find other people if she could reach the light. He'd experimented with his ability to control her, confuse her. And it had worked. Several times she'd turned all the way around, stared up at the sky with a frown on her face. She even mumbled out

loud about those damn stars reorienting themselves in the darkness.

He laughed, remembering his game of cat and mouse that had lasted the entire night. His voice echoed off the cavern walls, scaring a few bats and sending them scattering through the darkness.

His brow furrowed. The bats should be migrating away from the area by now. He'd hoped to use the caves to keep his lovely mate safe for a while. He didn't want to run the risk of her getting rabies. Plus, there was a ban on humans entering the caves and abandoned

mines in the Appalachians because the bats were infected with white-nose syndrome. The disease was killing hundreds of thousands of bats. It wasn't dangerous to humans, but the sexy redhead would probably be reluctant to enter their habitat.

He intended to find some caves that were bat-free to sequester his woman in for a while.

For now, he needed to sleep. He'd left her under a tree, exhausted after the long trek. With a slight push in her mind, he'd convinced her to lie down for a while. It bought him some time to

rest as the sun began to rise.

Hopefully, he'd enthralled her enough to keep her asleep all day. If not, he could track her scent anywhere.

As long as those damn wolves didn't get to her first. Those fuckers had been a thorn in his side since they decided to move into the area ten years ago.

Bastards think they own the place.

Ha.

He smirked and let his eyes close. He really needed some rest.

Chapter Three

Sergius stripped off his clothes and stuffed them in the pouch he always had on him. It wasn't the most ideal situation, since he had to carry the bag in his mouth through the woods, but he'd yet to figure out a method that worked better.

If he could just find a way to harness something onto his back, that would be perfect. But how was he supposed to attach the pouch alone in wolf form? And what would people think if they happened to spot a wolf running

through the woods wearing a backpack?

The air was cool against his bare skin. The day would warm up significantly later, but this morning it was overcast and still chilly.

With a deep inhale, Serg closed his eyes, tipped his head back and listened to the sounds of the forest around him. Birds, leaves rustling in the breeze, insects buzzing. In moments he would be one of them, a part of nature.

He let the change take over his body. Limbs popped, stretching and shrinking into place. He dropped down onto all fours while his face

elongated and his fur grew from his pores to cover bare skin. In seconds he was an oversized red wolf.

The reintroduction of the red wolf into the Smoky Mountain National Park in the last decade had made the area a perfect spot for Sergius and his brothers to settle when they reached adulthood and set out on their own. Their parents had been killed by poachers in Virginia when the brothers were cubs. Nearby relatives took them in and raised them. At twenty, twenty-two and twenty-three respectively, Micah, Jaxon and Sergius had headed south to the

Appalachians.

Now, ten years later, they were enjoying a quiet, peaceful life, raising thoroughbred horses to make a living and staying out of the public eye. Sergius was Alpha and the oldest, but none of the three had much interest in mating and raising families. They'd seen firsthand the destruction humans could wreak on shapeshifters and hoped to enjoy each other's company and finish out their days at one with nature, a three-man pack.

That was until today. Today, the world had tilted a fraction on its

axis when Sergius climbed into that police cruiser and got the first deep whiff of his...mate. *Damn.*

His brothers were not going to understand. Hell, Juliana wasn't going to understand. If he even found her before that fucking vampire sank his teeth into her.

Serg's stomach rolled at the combination of the vamp's presence and a lost hiker — and not some random lost hiker. The need to find her and get her to safety made his fur stand on end.

McKinney's tracking skills were at least as good as a wolf's, if not better. If he was anywhere near this

area last night...

With a brief howl of frustration, Sergius took off toward Chimney Tops Trail.

James had dropped him as close as possible. It would take only minutes to run the half mile through the trees to the junction where she'd left her friends.

Without pausing to breathe, he loped between the trees and overgrowth off the beaten path until he reached his initial destination, the junction of Road Prong Trail and Chimney Tops.

He skidded to a stop, panting. He could smell her, thank God. His

wagging tongue could taste her essence. Juliana had definitely been here, and he trotted intently up the path, sniffing his way along where she should have hiked. The closed path gave him the edge needed to explore without running into any hikers. People tended to scream and run from him in wolf form. He didn't like to test the theory any more often than necessary.

Pausing from his concentration on his mate's scent, Serg lifted an ear. In the vicinity was a search team. They had started earlier. Arrived before him. He could hear someone calling out orders. The

smells of about a dozen different humans wafted his way from maybe a quarter mile to the north.

Where was she?

A chill went down his spine as he contemplated the possibilities.

Nose to the ground, he resumed tracking her. Halfway up the path her scent ended, as far as the main trail was concerned. This was where she'd ventured into uncharted territory. The other searchers were farther up the path. They had no idea she hadn't reached the end. Her scent stopped here.

Why? From what James had said,

she was an avid hiker. No hiker left the path without a damn good reason. Besides getting lost, any sort of fate could befall them, ranging from snakes to poisonous plants to...vampires. *Damn it.*

In any case, it was easier to track her once she'd stepped into the forest. Her smell was not mixed with that of others. Trees and bushes all around him were covered with her scent.

About ten yards beyond the tree line, Sergius stopped and raised his muzzle to sniff the air.

Fuck. It was as he feared. McKinney was hot on her heels as

well. Had that bastard actually singled her out from the crowd and led her astray? Or worse, dragged her body into the woods? How had he gotten away with either of those things with people all around and in broad daylight?

Nose back to the earth, Serg trotted forward with renewed haste. His hackles were up. He had to find her alive — no other alternative was acceptable. She hadn't died here. That much he knew. How was it that Juliana and the vampire had met up in this spot for some reason and the vamp hadn't killed her? What was

McKinney up to?

And why would fate put the woman in Sergius's path if he wasn't meant to have her?

Decidedly angry now, Serg lit a fire under his own ass and loped off in the direction of his mate's scent.

Within minutes he realized he was on the craziest wild goose chase of his life. *What the hell?* The woman had traipsed everywhere, north, south, east, west. All over the place.

Of course, if McKinney was somehow leading her, anything was possible. How on earth had he managed to string her along like

this?

One thing he knew for sure – the vamp hadn't simply dragged his mate into the woods and drained her on the spot as Serg had feared. There was no sign of a struggle. No blood anywhere.

Nothing made sense. It was as if he'd toyed with her. Played a game. Why?

Frustrated, Serg paused and lifted his muzzle into the air. Her scent was everywhere and her person was not. The smell wasn't strong enough for her to be close by, and he had no idea which way to turn first. He would need to start

circling the area in a spiral pattern to figure out which way she'd eventually headed.

Had McKinney purposefully staged this chaos?

Devious.

Think. It was time for the wolf to think like a human. Time was of the essence. He needed to stop wandering in circles, chasing her smell. It was hard. In wolf form, it was what he did best. Track.

Context clues. Broken branches. Trampled leaves. Footprints.

Head back to the ground, he changed his approach. In minutes he found footprints, dainty ones

that belonged to a woman's hiking boots. And they were facing southwest.

Naturally. If McKinney was going to lure his prey, he would want to lure her away from the most populated area. Southwest would do it. If he managed to get her to cross the Sugarland Mt. Trail without realizing it, he could lead her for several miles in a southwesterly direction until she was in the middle of nowhere.

Genius, really.

Sure enough, as soon as Serg separated from the hodgepodge of smells congregating in and around

the place she'd left the path, he managed to find a new lead and was back on track.

McKinney had led her quite a ways. Her scent grew stronger with each passing minute.

The vamp might have gone to ground for the day, but what would he have done with Juliana in the meantime? Why hadn't he killed her yesterday or during the night?

According to legend, vampires needed to sleep during the day, but Serg was suspicious of this idea. He'd seen evidence of McKinney's presence in direct sunlight over the years.

A strong whiff of his mate made Sergius lift his head.

She was close. She was also alive. If he could have sighed audibly in wolf form, he would have. Even more important, McKinney was not nearby. His smell was still distant. As though he'd left her somewhere. God, could she be restrained somewhere in the woods while that bastard slept?

Serg ran. Fear of what he would find made his blood boil.

He pushed through a grove of trees and suddenly she was there, right in front of him, sleeping on a bed of leaves, curled up in a tight

ball under a shiny Mylar cover.

He stood for several seconds, staring at her. His chest heaved from the mad dash to find her. He took a deep breath in and held it.

She was slight compared to him. Long, gorgeous, red curls feathered out in every direction, some covering her face.

The urge to lurch forward and nuzzle her made his front paws twitch.

He needed to shift and get her to safety, but he also wanted to burn this moment into his memory, the second he first saw his mate. His jaw clamped down on the pack he

carried, his dry mouth reminding him of its presence.

Finally, he backed away from her several yards, hiding himself amongst the bushes he'd come through to let the change take him back to human form.

In two minutes, it was over and he was dressed. And this was why he always carried the cumbersome pouch.

She was so still.

He crouched beside her. Her breaths were shallow, her face totally relaxed in deep sleep. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Juliana?"

His fingers shook where they'd made contact with her warmth, shockwaves traveling up his arm even through the jacket and whatever she wore underneath. The urge to haul her into his embrace made him tense. He needed to know she was all right. Every bit of her.

She startled awake and bolted upright. "Ohmygod," she gasped. A strangled sound left her throat.

Her gaze met his from only a few inches away, green eyes like deep pools of water reflecting her shock, her fear and her relief all at once.

"Are you okay?"

She smiled up at him, cute dimples forming on both cheeks. "I am now." She inhaled, releasing it slowly.

Her heart rate slowed under his palm after the initial surprise. He could feel her pulse in her neck, the swish of blood as it coursed through her.

"Are you injured?"

"Only my pride." Her pale face tipped back again, her cheeks now flushed. "How did you find me? Where am I?"

"You're a long way from where you left the path, that's for sure. Scores of people are combing the

woods searching for you.” *In a completely different direction.* But she didn’t need to know that right now. “How did you get so far from where you started?”

“A man recommended I take a shortcut. When it got late I backtracked. I must have taken a wrong turn, because before I knew it, it was dark. I walked for a little longer and finally saw a light in the distance.” She dipped her head down, her face no longer visible to his perusal. “How embarrassing. I hike hundreds of miles every year. I’ve never gotten lost before. I-I’m not sure how this happened.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re okay now. Everything is going to be fine. Did you walk all night? You must be exhausted. Hungry.” He was rambling. He never rambled. She had him tongue-tied. No, he’d never acted like this even as a youngster. Wolves didn’t fall all over themselves quite like humans did. Not until they met their mates, apparently.

She giggled. The sweetest sound he’d ever heard. “I think I’m okay. Relieved you found me. Wasn’t sure what I was going to do if I had to keep walking all night again.”

Why had she chosen to travel by

night and sleep by day? Sure, it was a better idea as far as warmth was concerned, but not many people would think of such a thing under stress.

Sergius stood and extended his hand to her. She rose alongside him, steadying her slight frame. But her grip sent his mind whirling. Every hair on his body felt electrified. His heart raced. And damn if his cock didn't jump to attention.

Lord, she was half a foot shorter than his six feet. And might weigh one fifteen, one twenty, soaking wet.

He could feel the firm muscles on her arms where his hand had landed as they stood. She was strong, apparently both physically as well as emotionally. She hadn't started crying as he would have expected and didn't appear to have spent the night crying either. Her eyes weren't puffy, but weary. Stress lines marked her face.

“Why did you walk all night?”

“Well, the light for one. I thought it was a campfire, but it always remained elusive. I was sure if I followed that damn light, there had to be people around wherever it led when I got there. The strange thing

was it was like a mirage. It seemed to keep moving farther away the closer I got to it. Exasperating, really." She chuckled. "Now it seems absurd. Maybe I imagined the damn thing."

Her brow furrowed and she bent to examine herself and brush off the twigs and leaves sticking to her body.

Serg reached to pull a leaf from her hair and tucked the unruly strand back behind her ear. When his thumb brushed her cheek, a shock jolted him. She jerked her gaze up to his and sucked in a breath.

She was so beautiful, even with tangled hair and a streak of dirt across her chin. Her round face was pale against his darker hand, a light sprinkling of freckles above her button nose. Sergius let his thumb travel across her cheek again, cupping the side of her head with his palm. His gaze traveled around her face, landing finally on her heart-shaped pink lips, which quivered as she licked the dryness away and tucked the bottom one inside, biting it between her teeth.

Her breath rate increased, in and out through her nose, while she dented that bottom lip with the

tight grip of her front teeth.

Did he turn her on? He hadn't been around mated couples for so long he'd forgotten what it was like when wolves met their mates.

His own heart was racing, threatening to pound out of his chest. He tried not to breathe too often or too deeply, because every inhale dragged more of her sweet essence into him, driving him crazy with the need to take her.

His cock was so stiff, rubbing against the zipper of his jeans. He'd picked a fine day to go commando. If he didn't adjust soon, the tip was going to escape the top edge of his

hip-riding pants and embarrass him to death.

Think, man.

If she were a wolf herself, he would strip her sexy little body down right now, force her onto all fours in a show of dominance, and take her from behind. Claim her instantly.

Heat raced through his body, seeming to rush from every limb and his head, to gather in his groin. His blood all flowed south, leaving his palm shaking against the side of Juliana's face.

He jerked his hand away, needing to break the moment. Had

it been just a moment? It seemed like he'd been staring deep into her eyes for an hour.

"Um, how far off the path did I wander? My friends must be worried sick." She took a step back.

"Quite a ways. It'll be quicker if we head this way instead of back the way you came." Serg pointed southwest, the direction she'd been heading most of the night.

Now that contact with her was broken, at least physically, he turned and faced the south, trying to adjust himself discreetly. It wasn't as though he'd hauled a jacket around in his teeth all

morning in the event he'd need to use it to hide a hard-on.

And the scent of Juliana was driving him insane. Her essence stuck out like a drug. Her pheromones called to him on a primal level, demanding he take action.

She grabbed his arm. "Are you okay?"

When he turned in her direction, he saw a hint of worry furrowing her brow. Her fingers gripped his forearm this time. Which one of them needed more support?

"I'm fine. Just—" *Just what, Sherlock?* "Thinking about the best

course of action here. If we head this way..." he nodded south, "... we should be able to reach Clingman's Dome Road in a few miles. It won't be easy hiking without a path, but it's the shortest route."

"Okay. Wait. You aren't carrying anything. Not even water."

He gave a half chuckle while searching around inside his head for an appropriate retort. *She's gotcha there, wiseass.*

"Didn't expect you to be so far off the path when I started out. Still surprised you managed to wander this far in the dark." He wasn't

surprised at all, but it sounded like the right thing to say. He could picture McKinney laughing to himself while he led this sexy vixen farther and farther from civilization.

Serg reached into his pocket and pulled out his radio. "I have one important thing." He smiled at her.

God, he was so mesmerized by her presence, he hadn't even had the decency to introduce himself. The woman who was going to spend the rest of her life with him, no matter she didn't know it yet, should at least know his name.

"I'm Sergius, by the way. Sergius

Durham. My friends call me Serg.”
Or they would if I had any. The
sheriff called him Serg. And his
brothers.

“Juliana. But you knew that.” She
bit that damn lip again.

Suddenly he didn’t feel the
urgency of earlier. He had her now,
by his side, at least for a few hours,
because it would take that long for
them to reach the road.

Where was McKinney? Sergius
cringed, wondering what the vamp
had planned. Not for the first time,
he wished he understood the
rhyme or reason of Keeton
McKinney.

"I'll radio headquarters and let them know you're okay." He held the receiver to his mouth and pressed the button connecting him to the sheriff. "Hardin? You there?"

"Serg? Give me good news."

"Found her. Not a scratch. We're heading southwest now toward the main road."

"Thank God. I'll meet you there."

"Perfect." Sergius stuffed the radio back in his pocket and glanced at the sky. It was midmorning. The sky was still overcast. It could rain. The last thing they needed was to get caught in a shower.

He needed to let his brothers know he'd found the hiker so they could stop looking. He reached out through their connection. "*Jaxon? Micah? I found her. Safe and sound. You can go on back to the house. I'll be a while leading her off the mountain.*"

"*Got it. Good work,*" Jaxon responded.

"*Ten four,*" Micah stated. "*Meet you back at the truck in a few, Jax.*"

Sergius turned back to Juliana. She had both hands reaching up and behind her head, gathering her curls together. With her face tipped down she couldn't see him staring, mesmerized by her. Her torso

stretched, her breasts pulled high on her chest. Her jacket wasn't zipped all the way up and he squeezed his fingers into tight fists as he watched her chest rise and fall, her pert nipples poking through the thin material of her shirt as she wrestled with a band to pull her hair back.

He glanced away before she caught him gawking and swallowed. "You okay to start walking? When was the last time you ate?" He wished he'd at least brought her some food. Water.

"I'm fine. I still have protein bars and plenty of water. But I'm very

tired. This way, you say?" She pointed south, scrunched her forehead, grabbed her backpack and started walking.

Chapter Four

Juliana trod along behind the stranger. Her mind battled with conflicting thoughts.

If her gut wasn't insisting her rescuer meant her no harm, she'd be scared out of her wits. The reality was he wasn't hard on the eyes. In fact, he was exactly the type of man she was attracted to. Outdoorsy. Strong. Confident.

Walking behind him was no chore either. His ass was tight and firm beneath his perfectly form-fitting jeans. His physique

distracted her from considering many unanswered questions.

Where had he come from? Where were all the other search and rescue team members? How was he way out here alone and she couldn't even hear another human being in the distance calling her name?

These questions should have caused her great concern, but for whatever reason, he seemed sincere and she found herself trusting him.

Or maybe it had something to do with the fact she had no other choice. Who else was she going to follow out of the forest?

And he *had* known her name.

That was something. Sergius had done nothing to raise a red flag.

On the other hand, the last time she listened to a stranger, she'd ended up in this mess in the first place.

There was something about him. He moved without making a sound. He scanned the horizon as if he expected something or someone to jump out at every turn.

"How far did you say?" She wanted to get him talking.

He turned toward her and stopped so suddenly she walked smack dab into his huge, muscular chest.

With both hands, he reached to steady her before she fell flat on her ass. *Geez.*

Honestly, she wasn't usually this clumsy. Lack of food? Sleep? Something had her completely out of sorts. She tried desperately to ignore the fact she found herself acutely attracted to this stranger. Why?

If she hadn't been staring intently at his ass when he stopped, she might not have embarrassed herself by running into him. She grabbed onto his forearms with both hands to keep from swaying. As soon as she touched him, a jolt

like a small bolt of electricity raced up her arms to make them tingle. It didn't stop there, however. Heat raced through her in the wake of the initial shock, and all her senses came alive.

Juliana tipped her head back and stared into his eyes. He stood a full six feet, without a doubt.

For a moment, all she knew was Sergius. His outdoorsy scent mixed with his own personal musk. His rock hard biceps rippled under her fingertips. His deep brown eyes gazed intently into her own. The sounds of the forest blocked completely out, and all she heard

was his breathing, short pants in and out as if she affected him as much as he did her. Even her sense of taste was not left out. Inches from his chest, she licked her lips, the combination of everything making her believe she knew what flavors she would find if she leaned the last few inches toward his mouth.

His rugged good looks shook her to the core. Soft brown waves of hair fell across his forehead. She had the urge to weave her fingers into it and hold it back to get a better look at his dark brown eyes surrounded by sun-darkened skin.

His chest expanded beyond her vision when she stood so close to him.

“Sorry, I...” It was hard to form a coherent thought with this proximity. After spending the entire night wandering in the woods uncharacteristically confused, now she was magnetically locked in a gaze with this gorgeous hunk who seemed to hypnotize her with just a look. It was daunting. *Perhaps I have low blood sugar or something.*

She’d always had a soft spot for tall men, but this was ridiculous. She didn’t even know this one. Up,

up, up she looked to maintain eye contact. Her head tipped back to accommodate his height.

He smiled down at her. "My mind wandered. I-I wasn't thinking. Are you okay? Was I going too fast?"

"I'm fine." She cleared her throat. The words were stuck. "Just trying to make conversation. Where are the others?" She glanced around behind her and took a step back to break the spell woven by being so close to him.

"What others?"

Oh, God. This wasn't good. "The rest of the rescue team?"

“Oh, them. They started in a different spot. I arrived late. The team met at the top of Chimney Tops Trail and branched from there. I actually live in the area with my two brothers, a few miles outside the park. Whenever someone goes missing, I set out with one or both of my brothers, looking for the lost hiker. We have an excellent success rate, I might add.” He puffed up his chest in an exaggerated fashion and smiled his huge grin at her once again. His gaze was mesmerizing.

“I guess you do,” she mumbled. He was sex on a stick. He wore

nothing more than a tight black T-shirt, low-riding jeans and hiking boots. If they hadn't been standing in the middle of the national forest, she'd have assumed he just walked off a photo shoot.

His rugged good looks would probably not appeal to her yuppie friends who preferred a business suit and tie, but to Juliana he was the perfect male specimen.

She loved the outdoors and everything associated with it. Sure, she'd dragged Vanessa and Charlene out here for a weekend of hiking, but they'd been humoring her, and hadn't even had the

stamina to keep up. Which was how she got into this mess.

No, that wasn't their fault. She couldn't blame her friends for her stupidity. She'd been tired and anxious to get back to the juncture where she'd left them. Felt guilty for leaving them in the first place. So when a handsome man had approached her and suggested a shortcut to the top, she'd jumped at the idea and taken off without thinking clearly.

She could kick herself. Who does that? And now, dozens of people were out looking for her, just because a tall stranger with a nice

smile had given her false directions.

“You don’t look so good. Let’s sit for a minute.” Sergius — *what a strange name* — pulled her onto the log of a fallen tree and sat alongside her.

Of course she didn’t look good. She’d been out here twenty-four hours, hadn’t eaten enough for the number of miles she’d covered, had spent the night wandering in the forest, and now she was alone with a strange hunk of a man. Who would look good under those circumstances?

“Where are your brothers?”

“We branched in different

directions to cover more ground. We know the area like the backs of our hands, and we're great trackers. The sheriff calls us police dogs." He laughed. "Sheriff Hardin came to me this morning, told me you were missing and asked for my help. The reality is most of those rescue people are volunteers. No offense, but they aren't as good at following the clues you leave behind."

"You? As in 'you stupid hikers'?" She grinned though, to take the edge off the words he'd left unspoken.

This time his smile was more of a smirk. "More or less." But he

hurried to add, “Not that I find *you* to be stupid. You seem perfectly intelligent to me. Hardin said you were an avid hiker. So, tell me again about this guy who pointed out the shortcut.”

“The man came around the corner and spoke to me. He seemed friendly enough. Told me if I headed north through the opening in the trees, I’d be there in no time. Either I seriously messed up his directions, which I’ll have you know is quite unusual for me, or he lied.” A chill went down her entire body, shaking her to the core.

Handsome, sexy Sergius brushed

a few stray hairs from her face and gazed at her as though he would kiss her at any moment. His look was so serious and concerned and... nonjudgmental. He hung on her every word. She found herself wishing he *would* kiss her.

God, I must be more tired than I suspected.

She shook the thought away and continued, "Of course, the idea that he lied makes no sense either, seeing as I'm still alive and I haven't seen him again." *Thank God for that.* "Perhaps he thought it would be funny to steer me in the wrong direction. What sort of sick

bastard would do that, though?"

"What did he look like?"

"Well, he was rather tall, about your height, I'd say, but slender, not built...like you." Shit, she literally felt the blush that covered her cheeks. She cleared her throat, trying to compose herself. Sergius's stare penetrated into her, his intense interest in her story evident in his direct gaze and the furrow in between his eyes.

"Long dark hair. Light skin..."

The hand Sergius had used to brush her hair back now tightened on her shoulder. "How light?"

"Hmmm... Almost pale, not

what you would expect on a hiker.” Her own skin was a golden brown even though she wore a hat and protective clothing. Why hadn’t she thought it odd at the time? Her brows tugged together. “Which seems strange now that I think about, because I would swear he was Native American. He had on black jeans, black boots and a black tank.” *How stupid am I? What the heck was I thinking letting that man guide me into the trees?*

“Did he tell you his name?”

“Not that I recall.”

“He probably just accidentally pointed you the wrong way. Not

everyone is as good at directions as others. He could have been confused himself.” He tipped his head to one side.

“Hmm, I like that idea. It makes me sound a bit less stupid.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m quite sure you aren’t stupid. Ready?”

Feeling much better, Juliana took Serg’s offered hand and let him help her stand once again. And once again, she felt a surge of... something...run up her arm at the touch of his warm hand in hers. She wanted to melt into him, lean forward and press herself against

his hard chest.

Geez. Get a grip.

She looked into his chocolate eyes. "Let's. My roommates must be going insane with worry. Besides, I'm anxious for a hot shower and maybe a steak."

"They know you're a great hiker. Everyone thinks you fell and twisted an ankle or something. It happens out here a lot. The majority of the cases of missing people involve some sort of minor accident that prevents the victim from getting back down the mountain. Besides, your friends are at the rescue base. Sheriff Hardin

has alleviated their fears by now.”

“That’s good.”

This time Serg kept her hand in his as they started out again. She welcomed the warmth. His palm was outdoors rough. He seemed like a cowboy. And man did she like a good cowboy. All he needed was a hat and a horse and he’d be her dream man...

The sky was overcast, and she’d been so chilled during the night she still hadn’t thawed out enough to forget the cold. That must be why she was reacting to him so. There was no other good explanation. With her free hand she pulled her

jacket tighter around her neck.

Chapter Five

Sergius had grabbed Juliana's hand on instinct. He could hardly let it go now that he held it. First of all, it would be awkward, and second of all, he liked holding her slender, delicate fingers in between his huge, callused ones. It was an unusual gesture for him, but somehow felt natural with Juliana.

The contrast of her soft, feminine skin against his hard, masculine palm did nothing to alleviate the need growing within him.

With stiff movements caused by

a stiffening cock, he resumed stepping over fallen branches and piles of leaves to get his woman to safety.

What was he thinking? She was completely safe now. She just didn't know it yet.

He would have liked to draw out the morning. He cringed to think he'd have no choice but to hand her over to her friends and the authorities when they got to the road. How was he going to arrange to see her again?

Hell, he couldn't possibly let her go, not even for a moment, now that he thought about it. What if

Serg left her with her friends and the vampire hunted her down? Nope, couldn't let that happen.

So, he needed a plan, and fast.

He'd never been much of a talker. Just because his brothers felt the need to fill every imaginable void with banter didn't mean he had to.

Now he needed to buck up and dispel that myth in an effort to win the trust of this woman next to him before the end of a two-mile hike.

"Where are you from?"

"North Carolina, originally, but I live about an hour from here. Knoxville. I just finished my

Masters in Anthropology.”

“Anthropology? That’s great.” It intrigued him how so many people could study the evolution of man without ever stumbling upon the existence of shapeshifters. “Where did you live in North Carolina?”

“Charlotte. Left six years ago to go to college and haven’t regretted it. I love it out here so close to the Appalachians. Hiking is my ultimate passion. If I could make a living hiking I would.” She chuckled, a sweet sound that vibrated through her and into Sergius where their hands still connected.

“Careful, that’s poison ivy.” He pulled her against him and steered her around the patch of familiar pointed leaves of three, grateful for its presence for the first time in his life. After all, its placement assured him proximity to his sexy woman, at least for a minute.

“Ah, you’re right. I should’ve seen it. I’m usually very careful.”

“I was distracting you.” He looked down into her eyes and smiled.

“True. You were. Your turn. Where are you from?”

Shit. He had wanted to learn everything about her. Not talk

about himself.

It doesn't work that way, dude. If you want her in your bed, you're going to have to provide a little give and take here.

“Virginia, outside of Roanoke.”

“Your parents still there?”

“No. They were killed...in an accident, when I was young. Got a lot of relatives in the area still, but my brothers and I came down here and started breeding horses about ten years ago.”

Juliana sucked in a sharp breath he couldn't miss. She squeezed his fingers and then let go of his hand to balance against a tree as they

stepped over a small stream.

When Serg turned to look at her, he found her staring at him. "Sorry about your mom and dad. My parents died when I was young also."

Sergius swallowed. They had something very personal in common. "Sorry to hear that," he whispered.

A moment of silence ensued. He hadn't wanted the subject to turn sad. It just happened.

Juliana stepped forward and changed the subject. "What kind of horses do you breed?" And just like that the melancholy moment

passed.

“Thoroughbreds. Race horses.”

“Awesome. They’re so majestic. How many do you have?”

“In the spring, the foals are born. We usually have about six most years and sell them the following spring.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“We love it. We live outside Pigeon Forge. Caring for the mares and their foals is a full-time job.”

“And you hike?” Her voice hung with anticipation.

“Not as much as I’d like. But it’s a beautiful countryside out here. I love it when I have the

opportunity.” Never mind he usually wasn’t in human form.

Time to change the subject back to her. “What are your plans now that you’ve graduated?”

He held his breath and prayed the battle to convince her to stay with him wouldn’t be completely uphill.

Without looking up, she shrugged. “Not sure yet.”

She stumbled over something and grabbed onto Sergius from behind. “Shit. Sorry. I’m all left feet today.”

As far as Serg was concerned she could be the clumsiest person alive

if it meant she touched him every so often. A zing raced through his body each time she made contact.

“Want to rest again?”

“Sure. I could use a drink.” She sat on the nearest log and grabbed for the pack on her back. “Aren’t you thirsty? Here.” She held out the water bottle after taking a swig.

Serg wrapped his palm around the clear plastic, eagerly accepting the opportunity to graze fingers and then set his mouth on the spot where she’d had hers. Maybe he’d glean a hint at how she tasted.

“How much farther do you think?”

“About a mile, I’m guessing.”
Not enough time as far as he was concerned.

By noon, he’d have his little mate safely back in town. And then what?

He gazed at her profile while she stared off into the distance. Smudged with dirt, no makeup, tendrils of her red hair blowing haphazardly in the breeze, she’d never look better than this.

Sure, she might clean up and knock him off his socks later, but he’d always remember her as she was right now, at one with nature.

He’d give anything to pull that

band from around her hair and let the long locks cascade over her shoulders. By his estimation, her hair would reach past the pert nipples of her breasts.

As if on cue, Juliana unzipped her jacket and peeled it from her arms to tie it around her waist. In a simple, pale pink, tight-fitting shirt, nothing was left to his imagination. As she reached behind her to adjust the jacket, her shoulder blades pulled back and her chest rose.

Serg held his breath. Her breasts were small and firm, as expected on someone as fit as she was. And God help him, her nipples pebbled

beneath the minute layer of material, poking out toward him, begging to be suckled deep into his mouth.

He had to turn his head before he did something incredibly stupid, like drool...

Adjusted to her satisfaction, she stood. "Think I'm ready to get going again. Day's getting warmer."

"That it is." *That's an understatement.*

"Want me to carry your backpack?" What sort of ass had he been, hiking along empty handed while she carried her own stuff?

His momma wouldn't be proud of him right now.

"I'm fine, but thanks. It's not heavy."

"Yeah, well, I like to think I'm a better gentleman than that." He clambered behind her, grabbed the straps with both hands and eased it over her slender shoulders and down her bare arms.

He had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from leaning forward and nibbling all that exposed flesh. Pale skin, covered with a light coating of freckles, taunted him from inches away while he adjusted her pack on

himself, tugging on the side straps to accommodate his much larger torso.

“Do you have sunscreen in here somewhere? Your skin is going to burn even with the clouds.” He could see she always took precautions – otherwise her skin wouldn’t appear so pure and creamy.

“Oh, right. I do.” She reached into the pocket of her hiking pants and pulled out a small tube of ointment. “Would you mind applying some to my back?” She peered at him over her shoulder, dangling the little bottle of

sunscreen in her fingers.

That alone nearly made him groan out loud, but the evil little vixen was blinking her eyes at him all coy-like with her bottom lip tucked in between her teeth again.

Oh, baby, you don't know who you're messin' with. He would not forget to punish her sweet little ass later for being such a tease.

She didn't know it, but from his viewpoint she was begging him to take her, make her scream his name while he made her come over and over again. Or maybe he'd hold her on the edge. Fondle her clit to distraction. Master her deep inside,

dragging his fingers slowly over her G-spot. Strap her arms to the head of his bed and hold her down, legs spread wide, while he sucked her clit into his mouth and made her beg for forgiveness.

A smile spread across his mouth. Nope, she had no idea what she was getting into.

Serg took the tube from her grasp, allowing his fingers to linger over hers for a second longer than necessary. She shivered slightly as she turned to face front again. Had she seen the slow burn in his eyes? *God, I hope so.*

With one finger, Sergius flipped

the top on the lotion and squeezed a fair amount into his other hand. He tucked the tube into his own jeans pocket and then rubbed his hands together before placing them on both her shoulders at once.

Heaven. Pure heaven. Her skin was warm and smooth as a baby's. Like silk. He could smear lotion onto her back all day and all night and never tire of it.

The back of her shirt crisscrossed, exposing most of her skin, and he spread the sunscreen liberally over her shoulder blades, even reaching under the elastic of the straps to be sure no crease would get burnt.

Or perhaps it had nothing to do with an altruistic need to keep her safe from the sun's rays and everything to do with needing to touch as much of her skin as he possibly could. Who knew when he would get another chance?

When lingering any longer would seem plain weird, he let his palms creep up to her shoulders again, spread the lotion over the tops, his fingers reaching under the straps in front, grazing the tops of her breasts and causing his balls to pull up inside his jeans.

There was every chance he was going to come right now without

even touching himself. Ecstasy.

With a small amount of lubrication remaining on Serg's hands, he spread the last bit down her arms and over her hands, his fingers tangling with hers to finish off the excess.

When he reluctantly released her, she turned to him. Her eyes were glazed and half-mast. She was at least as turned on by the erotic scene as he was. He caught a whiff of her arousal as she spread her legs slightly. Her breaths were shallow and brief.

Thank God she needed him as much as he did her. Obviously it

was true what they said about mates. Once they met, they couldn't resist the pull to one another, even if one of them was human.

She swayed slightly. When she tipped her head back and grabbed the front of his shirt for balance, he didn't even think. He angled his head to one side and dipped down to brush his lips against hers.

A soft moan escaped her parted lips, and he couldn't resist. He grabbed her biceps and tugged her closer, locking his mouth on hers and plundering her. His tongue didn't have to work hard to gain

entry. Her mouth was already open and begging. She gave as well as she received, meeting him thrust for thrust as they tasted and explored each other's mouths.

When her hands released their grip and wrapped around his middle, his wandered from her arms to her waist, his fingers spanning her right above her hips.

Serg let his thumbs graze back and forth on the under swell of her breasts until she writhed beneath him.

He could have taken her right then and there if his damn conscience hadn't reared its ugly

head and demanded he stop. With one last, lingering taste, he finally pulled back and lowered his palms to a safer section of her stomach. He set his forehead against hers and gazed into the deep green pools of her eyes.

This was not how he was going to start out his life with her. Against a tree in the woods, her hungry and tired and thirsty and impressionable.

And uninformed.

No, he needed her to be fully aware of who and what he was before he claimed her. It was only fair. Taking a human as a mate was

delicate. If he did so without her knowledge and consent, she'd never forgive him, and he'd live with that regret for the rest of his life.

Chapter Six

Holy shit. What the heck was she thinking?

And she wasn't stupid enough to blame this indiscretion solely on Sergius. She'd been as much an instigator as him. In fact, she'd nearly yanked his head down toward hers for that mind-numbing kiss.

And now her brain cells swam inside her head, unable to regroup and get back to the proper lobes they came from. Until that happened, she didn't think she

could move or speak.

She could feel though. God could she feel. His cock pressed against her stomach. His firm abs against her palms. His breath, minty and fresh as it blew across her face. He heaved for air. And she smiled, knowing she caused that.

“What’s so funny?” His voice was hoarse, a near whisper.

“Nothing. Just this.” She stepped back and let him go. “We met like two minutes ago and here we are mauling each other like bears in the woods.” The chuckle she heard didn’t sound like her at all. Strained. Embarrassed. Very low

pitched.

“I thought it was wonderful.” He gripped her chin between his fingers and thumb and tilted her head back up to his. “I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you like this under these circumstances, but I won’t apologize for the attraction I’ve felt since the moment I saw you asleep on that bed of leaves.”

His words flowed over her like honey. Sweet and calm and slow. The urge to pull him back into her embrace and to hell with propriety overwhelmed her.

She sucked in a breath and held it. He smelled so good. Like nature,

the woods, spring, a combination with his own personal musk that enticed her like a drug. She could still taste him on her lips. She was hungry for more...and food was the least of her concerns.

“I’m not sorry,” she uttered on an exhale.

“Good. ’Cause I intend to explore that further...after we get you out of the woods.”

“Promises, promises.” *What? Who in the world says that?* She’d never...*ever*...come on to a man like this.

She wasn’t a prude, but she’d spent the last six years studying,

sometimes squeezing in her love of the outdoors and hiking, but rarely letting men get in the way of her goals. The sum total of three relationships she'd had in six years had amounted to nothing super special. She usually ended up breaking up with a man because she wasn't that interested. If the earth didn't shake beneath her, why keep up the ruse? She wanted more than that. If such a thing existed.

Why in the world was she all sweaty palms, damp panties and thumping chest over this guy she'd just met? And what possessed her

to slink toward second base with a man she barely knew? She'd never had sex with a man on the first date. Of course, it hadn't ever turned out to be that steamy in the past either.

What was she thinking? This wasn't even a date.

If Sergius hadn't pulled back from her, would she have let him go all the way? Right here in the forest?

If she were perfectly honest with herself, she'd still have sex with him now. It was as though her body was pulled to him of its own accord and she wasn't controlling

anything.

While she gazed into his eyes, nibbling on her lip to keep from jumping him and embarrassing herself, a dark shadow descended over them.

“Oh, great. Just what we need.” Sergius glanced upward and Juliana followed his gaze. “It’s gonna rain.”

Sure enough, the thin overcast had been replaced by a thick layer of clouds. “How did that happen so fast? Were we kissing longer than I thought?”

“I’m not sure.” He chuckled and took her hand.

“What are you doing? We can’t very well outrun it. We have another mile to go.”

“Trust me.”

With a shake of her head, she allowed him to pull her along, climbing over rocks and logs, angling around thorny bushes and plants. What the heck did he have planned?

The first drips fell from the sky, large drops that promised a downpour to follow. Great, now they were going to be soaked and cold on top of lost. Well, not lost exactly. Sergius seemed to know exactly where he was going. But

still...

Before she could even finish the thought, her knight in shining armor tugged her around a bend and into complete darkness.

"Where are we?" She grabbed his arm with her free hand, trying to ebb the fear seeping into her. A chill shook her body even though she hadn't gotten wet yet.

"Cave. Stay right here a minute, okay?"

She shook her head but knew he couldn't see it. No way was he leaving her alone in a cave. She squeezed his arm.

"It'll be fine." He turned her

around to face the entrance and only then did she realize she could see out just fine.

The sky had grown quite dark, but enough light peeked through the branches to ease her nerves. She could stare out into the rain and see the branches blowing in the wind, the leaves turning upside down, an indication the storm would be quite fierce in a minute. Water dripped off the greenery and created a small stream on the ground in front of her.

“Where are you going?”

“Just want to make sure we’re alone. The bats in this area are off

limits. I'm sure you've heard."

"Right. White-nose syndrome. Humans are banned from the caves and mines until they migrate. Do you think this is a good idea?"

"The danger is really to the bats, not the humans. We can't catch what they have, unless they also have rabies. Hang on and stay close to the entrance." He let go of her and moved deeper into the cave.

How can he see where he's going?

Juliana wrapped her arms around her middle and hugged herself. She was chilled now, when a few minutes ago she'd been hot. Had it only been a few minutes

since the heat of the day and then the kiss had singed her skin?

Moments passed and she forced herself to watch the rain as it picked up speed and pelted the forest with increasing intensity. *Where is he?*

She gasped and let out a small, high-pitched shriek when two arms circled around her and drew her close. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you." His lips landed on her still-bare shoulder and nibbled a path to her ear, reminding her she had her perfectly warm jacket wrapped around her waist. "Coast is clear. No unwanted guests here."

Why did it sound as though he had been looking around for more than just bats? She didn't even want to know what else he might have stumbled upon. Hiking was her passion; spelunking was not. Even without the bat warning, she'd never had any desire to enter the dark caverns and explore.

She'd stay right here by the entrance where she could see the waning light of day. "How could you see anything in that darkness?"

"Didn't need to see. I could hear fine." He released his hold and ran his warm hands up and down her folded arms. "You're shivering," he

mumbled into her ear.

“Of course I am.” Her voice was hoarse, barely a whisper, almost unrecognizable to her own ears.

“Even if it were a hundred degrees I’d be trembling with your tongue in my ear like that.” Her smile spread from ear to ear, and she felt him do the same against her neck as he moved down to her shoulder.

“Come here.” Sergius turned her so her chest rested against his front. His huge frame surrounded her and warmed her instantly. She grew still and stayed in his embrace, absorbing his incredible body heat.

“Are you always this hot?” His

core temperature seemed higher than anyone's.

"No, I'm not nearly as sexy when I wake up in the morning." He chuckled at his pun, a deep sound she was growing quite fond of. It rumbled between them and drew her closer to him, if that was possible.

God, she wanted this man. She squeezed her legs together, attempting to quell the need burning in her core. "Ha ha. And I doubt that's true. You probably look like you stepped off the cover of GQ first thing in the morning, with your hair all ruffled and

hanging across your eyes.” She sucked in a breath. Her mouth was running like nobody’s business.

He laughed, shaking his entire frame and hers too by default.

“Only one way to find out.”

Oh my. This banter between them was loaded with innuendo. And so sexy.

“Come on.” Sergius tilted his head away from her, a nod that indicated he was pulling her farther into the cave.

“I’m good here.” She really didn’t want to move from the entrance, even with this hunk of man who would protect her from

anything.

“Honey, you’re good anywhere. I’m sure of that. But let’s sit down. It might be a while.” His voice was teasing. “There’s a perfect bench in the rock right over here. We can sit. You’ll still be able to see out.”

Reluctantly she permitted him to tug her arm deeper into the darkness, keeping her eyes plastered to the opening. No way was she going to get herself far enough inside she couldn’t see out.

He finally stopped, much to her relief. His hand trailed down her arm as he sat. “Okay, maybe not big enough for two.”

The next thing she knew she was on his lap, sideways. He wrapped his hands around her body, encompassing her entirely, and pulled her head onto his shoulder.

It felt so...right. Like she belonged with him.

“Warm enough?”

“Yes.” Her breath was shallow.
Too warm.

She desperately wanted to pick up where they'd left off. To hell with the rain and the dark cave. To hell with her conscience.

She tipped her head back, and in a bold act that surprised even her, she kissed her way up his neck and

found his mouth.

It started out innocent enough, for about thirty seconds, each of them exploring the other. But the passion of earlier caught back up with itself and she twisted in his lap to more fully face him.

Almost total darkness. Even with the dim light of the cave entrance, her eyes hadn't adjusted to the black surroundings inside the cave. Her other senses heightened.

Her hands explored his body, his hard chest, his shoulders, his strong back. She scrambled to investigate every inch of his upper torso, learning his frame and memorizing

it for later. Surely she'd never see him again after this brief encounter in the forest. Didn't her entire crazy sexual frenzy stem from the situation? Damsel lost and found in the wilderness by a god of a man who popped out of nowhere to rescue her from the wild?

Perhaps she was dreaming the entire thing from her nap on the pile of leaves.

I sure hope not.

On second thought, if she was, she wanted to be sure to make the most of it. No sense wasting a perfectly good sex dream.

Huge firm palms trailed down

her bare arms and grasped her around the waist. He squeezed and inched his fingers up to brush against the undersides of her breasts. Just as he'd been doing in the woods before he'd pulled back.

He'd pulled back.

Maybe he didn't want this. Wasn't interested in her like she was him.

The thought dissolved into thin air as he devoured her mouth and moaned against her lips. The hard shaft against her thigh indicated he did indeed *want* her.

Maybe he'd just been feeling chivalrous. Hopefully he wouldn't

encounter that emotion again. She wanted, no needed, this. Right now. Right here. A quick fuck with a gorgeous man would do wonders for her ego...and her pussy.

She ached for him to touch her, drive her mad with the need building inside her. In a bold move she never could have accomplished in the light of day, Juliana wiggled around until she straddled him.

Ah, perfect. So fucking hot.

Her crotch pressed against his hard cock, only the denim of his jeans and the nylon of her pants between them. God damn he was hot. Not just sexy, but to the touch.

She skimmed her fingers all over him frantically until she finally reached the bottom of his T-shirt and yanked awkwardly on it to pull it over his head.

Their mouths separated for that split second before colliding back together, the craze of passion picking right back up where it had left off. He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and then grappled for her tongue to do the same.

Sergius's hands were everywhere, firmly clutching her against him, up and down her back and around her waist, finally landing on her breasts.

A gasp, followed by a deep moan, filled the cavern and echoed off the walls. She leaned her head back and forced her chest out, silently begging him to continue his exploration.

Fingers squeezed and explored her breasts, stopping to pinch her nipples and driving her crazy.

“Serg...”

“What, baby? Tell me what you need.”

“Oh, God. That feels so good. Just...touch me.”

In a flash, her jacket fell to the ground from its loose tie around her waist and he grabbed the

bottom of her sports shirt and stripped it over her head. It disappeared into the darkness as rough, callused fingers resumed their exploration of her breasts. She knew she was small chested. But his hands completely covered her and then some.

“Perfect.” His muttered words against her mouth squelched her worries. “You’re perfect.” Could he read her mind?

A chill shook her frame — from the breeze blowing into the cave or from the fingers now pinching her nipples into a state of pleasure-pain?

Never had she been this aroused. Totally wanton.

The breasts that had always seemed far too small to be even remotely attractive suddenly made her feel incredibly sexy and appealing. When she leaned back again to catch her breath, Sergius dipped his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth, swirling around the tip until she ached. The heat of his lips sent a line of warmth bee lining to her sex.

“Too many clothes...” She wiggled against his cock, wishing he could use his magic to make them disappear without the

awkward need to stand and break the spell currently clutching her.

Serg grasped one breast in a palm that knew her body like a finely tuned instrument. The other breast received a spiral of tongue around and around her areola. That left Serg with one free hand. And thank God for that.

Fingers crawled down her body until they cupped her sex between them.

“So hot, baby. So hot.” The words were nearly lost against her nipple, his breathy whisper blowing against the tip and making her crazy. “I can feel how wet you are

through your pants.”

If he didn't shut up, she was going to come before he even touched her.

In slow motion, Sergius unbuttoned and unzipped her hiking pants, his knuckles brushing against her panties. She wiggled against him, silently begging him to reach inside, push the pants down her legs and enter her.

Serg let go of her breast with his skilled hand and wrapped his arm around her, holding her still. “Stop squirming.” He smiled against her breast, his lips parting in a telling move.

“I-I can’t.”

“You can.” His grip tightened.

“You will.”

Her head lulled back. Was this what she’d needed all her life? An unyielding, dominant touch to get her juices going?

Serg lifted her ass off his lap enough to edge the nylon down her legs a few inches. Her thighs were trapped, pulled slightly together, her straddled legs tightening around his waist. She groaned when he set her back down.

“Oh, God. Get them off. Please, Serg...”

“No.”

No?

Experienced fingers reached between her and dipped into her panties. Her mind went blank. What had she wanted?

With one hand circling her waist, holding her in a stiff grip, the other reached expertly under the lace, passing her clit without touching it. How did he do that? Wetness flooded her pussy as he held the material of her panties away from her body.

One finger dipped into her soaking heat and grazed through the space between her lower lips. She gasped at the touch. Leaned

her head against his shoulder. Grasped his forearm with her hand, pressing him into her. Pleading with her strength for him to apply more pressure.

Her need amped up two notches. "Serg..."

"Yeah?"

Her nails dug into his arm, her torso rigid. Anything to increase the amount of skin on skin at her crotch.

"Let go of my arm, baby. I'm stronger than you." He chuckled. "Put your hand on my shoulder or I'll stop."

Stop? Fuck.

With tremendous restraint, she did as she was told.

Again that finger slithered through her wet folds, collecting moisture and swirling it around and around the edges of her sex. He didn't enter her, nor did he touch her clit, which throbbed with a need of its own.

When had she ever been more aware of that little nub?

She gripped his shoulders with both hands and held her breath for long moments, concentrating on the pressure building inside her. God, she wanted his cock in there. Anything, really. Why was he

torturing her so? Didn't he know she couldn't take much more of this?

Of course she could. She could take anything he dished out...and he knew it.

She was his.

Totally and irrevocably his to do with as he pleased.

With no warning, he plunged two fingers into her core, sucking the breath out of her. He held his fingers inside her, suspended for seconds that seemed like hours while she acclimated to the stretch of severely unused muscles.

With acute awareness, she

realized his palm still pressed against her panties, not making contact with her deprived clit.

“Ugh. Serg...” She strained to wiggle against him, but he held fast.

“Uh, uh, uh. Don’t move or I’ll stop.”

New moisture pooled around his fingers as he gradually curved them to stroke inside her, not pulling out, stoking the fire within.

She found his mouth with her own and sucked in his lower lip. Hard. She wanted more from him. Maybe if she distracted him or drove him to crave her as urgently

as she did him, he'd move...faster.

"That's not going to work, my sweet," he muttered around her attempts. "But nice try."

"Please, you're driving me crazy."

"I know. And I love how hot you are. So fucking hot and wet. And goddamn you're tight."

"Yeah, well..." She moved on to his ear, nibbling around it and praying to the god of sex that he drive this man to — fucking *move*.

Sergius froze.

"What?" *Please don't stop.*

"You aren't a virgin, are you?"

"No. No. Not that. Just...been a

while.”

He let out a slow breath and pulled his fingers out of her.

“Don’t —”

Her words were cut off when he slammed back inside and fucked her in earnest with his adept fingers. Finally, when she was teetering on the edge, he pressed his thumb against her clit and rubbed in a tight, small circle.

“Come for me, Juliana. I want to hear you scream. Feel you around me while you fall apart in my arms.”

She shattered. Screamed his name, which echoed over and over

in the cave. The walls of her sex grasped his fingers and pulsed, sucking him deeper inside her until she thought it would never end.

Exhausted, when the tremors finally subsided, she collapsed her forehead against his shoulder. His hand still remained buried in her depths, his thumb resting against her sensitive nub.

“So fucking hot,” he whispered. “God, baby. That was...amazing. So beautiful.” He kissed the top of her head. Her hair fell in a tangled mess around him and over her face, her rubber band having worked its way loose long ago.

“Amazing doesn’t even touch the surface. I’ve never...” Could she tell him? Tell a virtual stranger she’d just had her first orgasm at his hand, with her pants still on?

He sucked in a quick breath. “Come under a man’s touch?” His fingers dragged from her core, and he spread her juices around her hypersensitive clit in a circle. New awareness stirred to life. So soon?

“Come...period.”

“Oh, baby.” He held her tighter, if that was possible. “That makes me so hard.” Expert fingertips danced around her nub before pressing the hood back and flicking

over the top in a repeated motion that made her grasp her legs around him in renewed need. "Do it again."

What? Again? Was that even possible?

Juliana shook her head back and forth and leaned her forehead on his shoulder. "Too much. My clit can't take any more." She grabbed his arm again, this time pulling instead of pushing him into her.

"Oh, yes it can, baby." He was undaunted. Much stronger than her feeble attempt to stop him.

"It's so much better the second time. I promise. Let it go." He

pressed his palm against her overstimulated nub and started a rhythm of flicking and pressing against her.

“Oh, God. Stop. I can’t...” Her words were weak, even to her own ears. She fought to release his hand, but he was having nothing to do with her efforts.

Frustrated, she changed her tactic. “At least let me come around you this time. Please... I need you inside me. Ache to have you fill me.” He couldn’t turn that down.

“Not this time, love.”

What? Is he made of steel?

“Relax. Let go. Just feel.” His

fingers skipped around her sex, learning her by touch. Inside, then out, rubbing against her G-spot, a spot she'd never really believed existed, which most certainly did.

When he returned to flick her sweet spot again, she felt the spiral of need crescendo. Juliana was coming apart at the seams for the second time in as many minutes.

Now she switched abruptly from fighting against it, to wanting it with all her soul. If ever she'd desired anything in her life, the need for a second orgasm right this minute, in this cave, in the dark, with a man she barely knew,

topped the list.

“Right...there,” she mumbled when he tapped her in just the right spot.

“Here?” His question was teasing. She didn’t care. The pressure increased.

Suddenly, without warning, he stopped, pinched her clit between a few fingers and jammed the others into her sopping core.

Intense pleasure spread through her body as she spasmed around him. Pulse after pulse of her orgasm shook her body, the squirt of her come pushing out around his fingers. She’d not realized women

actually ejaculated like that.

When she came down — again — her limbs shook as though cold. Really, she had no blood flowing anywhere in her body except for the area between her legs. She trembled, unable to stop the chills from taking over.

Sergius removed his hand from between her legs and held her tight.

Tears formed in her eyes. She didn't even know why. She squeezed her lids closed to stop them from trickling out, but in vain. A line of moisture escaped down her cheek from both eyes.

She sniffled.

“Honey?” Sergius pressed her away from him, as if he could see her face in the darkness anyway. He brushed her hair from her face and tucked it behind her ears. Okay, so maybe he could see in the dark. What was he, a ninja?

“Sorry.” She choked out the one syllable and swallowed, trying to regain her composure.

“God, did I hurt you?” His voice was filled with angst.

“No, no. Of course not.” She took a deep breath in, and then let it out. “I’m being silly. Emotional. Not enough sleep, I suppose.” She tried

a giggle. It came out lame.

His shoulders relaxed and he tugged her back against his rock-hard chest. She wasn't unaware of his cock still pressed into her stomach.

"It was just...so overwhelming is all."

His chuckle vibrated through her. "That's for sure. You are the sexiest creature I've ever met. Sexy. And vibrant. And so...alive. Your emotions spilled out all over the place, and it was beautiful."

"Um, Serg?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you forget something?"

“Not that I’m aware of. Did you want to come a third time?” He chuckled into her hair.

“Ha ha. Not me. You. One of us came twice. The other didn’t come at all.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that. Can we please take these jeans off? I still need you inside me and you surely could use a little relief.” She shoved her groin against his to prove her point.

“Nope.”

“What?” *Did he say no?*

A puff of air landed in her hair on a sharp exhale. “I’m not going to have sex with you for the first time

in this cave on a stone bench. I'll wait until we find a bed."

"Are you kidding? That's it? Just *no*?"

Didn't men only care about how many times *they* came? What man on the planet ever considered going through what Sergius had just gone through without getting off?

And more importantly...could she keep him?

Chapter Seven

“I think it stopped raining.”

Sergius trailed a hand through the thick curls tangled around his lovely mate's face.

Oh, yeah. He wanted her like he'd never wanted anything in his life. But he'd known as soon as he sat down on this bench with her in his lap, there was no way in the world he was going to fuck her silly this morning.

Sure, he had every intention of binding her to him, making her come so violently she'd never even

consider leaving him. But no way could he have turned what would be the most wonderful experience in their lives into a dark, damp frolic on a rock surface.

Not to mention he hadn't even begun to explain to her what he was and how he lived. And he fully intended to do that before he took her. It wouldn't be fair to her otherwise.

The beauty in his arms twisted toward the entrance to the cave. "Hmm, seems so." She didn't seem particularly interested, however, considering she laid her head back against his shoulder and let her

body relax into his, molding to his every curve, her softness against his hard chest and abs.

Not that she was any less muscular and athletic than he was, a fact he adored about her, just that she could let herself go completely limp, her sated body supple to the touch.

“We should go. Your friends are worried.” His words didn’t match his actions though. He could sit here with her in his lap for hours if she’d let him. His hands trailing around her body, learning every curve, every spot that made her squirm, and some that made her

giggle.

“You’re ticklish.” His fingers found a spot under her ribcage that made her flinch to one side.

“Not.”

Oh, the little nymph.
Challenging him like that.

Both hands reached under her armpits and pressed into the soft bare skin beneath.

That got her moving. She practically jumped off his lap to get away. “That wasn’t fair. I was vulnerable.”

She stood before him, fingers on both his shoulders, holding him at arm’s length. As though her arms

were longer than his.

And God almighty she was a sight. She had no idea he could see her so well in the darkness of the cave. That he'd seen every little nuance of her facial features as he drove her to distraction and then forced her to fall apart in his arms.

Now that she stood, he could admire her body better from the distance of a few feet. She was glorious. Petite for sure, but perfectly formed. Her pert breasts were just right for her frame, her nipples pebbled still and pointed up, begging him to take them into his mouth again. He had to

swallow to keep from doing just that.

Her waist dipped into a small span he could easily reach around and then flared out at her hips.

He'd give anything to strip her down and see her entirely naked.

But not now. Later. Now he had to get her back to her friends.

"We should go." He stood and then reached to grab their shirts off the ground.

"God, how did you do that? I can't see a thing." She didn't sound overly concerned as she tugged the tight elastic material of her shirt over her head. "My jacket is around

here somewhere.” She twisted and glanced around, but came up with nothing.

It always amazed him that humans could see so poorly. “It’s right here.” He grabbed the windbreaker from the bench and handed it to her.

As she tied it around her waist once again, he said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever god had aided in keeping her shoulders bare so he could admire her torso on the walk to freedom.

“Coming?” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Be right there.” Deep breaths in

and out. His dick ached. He tried to get the fellow to calm down in vain. Adjusting himself with a grimace, he tugged his T-shirt as low as he could to hide the evidence of his discomfort.

As if that would work.

When he finally came up behind Juliana and put his hands on her shoulders, she was standing outside the cave, her breath held, her gaze wandering around their surroundings.

“It’s so beautiful. How often do you get to see the center of the forest right after a rainfall? The sun is even peeking out as if it never

happened.” The awe in her voice made him glance around, seeing nature in a new light. How had he never noticed it before? She was right. Flecks of shimmering light glinted off the drops of water on the leaves, casting tiny, sparkly rainbows everywhere.

He’d lived and run in the forest all his life, and it took his mate to make him see the world through new eyes.

He could fall in love with this woman.

Where did that thought come from?

A sharp inhale only made things worse, her scent flooded his nostrils

and seeped into his body unbidden to mingle with the fresh smell of rain and earth and the sprouting buds of spring.

“You okay?” She turned her face to glance at him over her shoulder.

“Right as rain, love. Better than ever.”

She smirked. “Are you always so poetic?” She turned to him, breaking all contact, hands on her hips. “You sure look smugly content for a man who didn’t have sex.” An eyebrow rose in mock question.

“What can I say? Making my woman scream in pleasure is more

than enough to bring me peace.” Hardly fucking true, but it sure sounded good.

“*Your* woman?” She smiled, belying the intention behind the question. “I feel like a commodity. And this from a man who seems to think he owns me after a hike in the woods and the queen of all make-out sessions in a cave. Hmph.” The grin still hung in place. She knew her world had shifted. It was written in the crease on her forehead. The blush spreading across her cheeks. She just didn’t know quite what that entailed yet.

But he had her.

Wrapped around his middle finger, the one he'd used to bring her to orgasm. Twice.

With a smirk of his own, he took her hand and started trekking south, toward the road and civilization. As much as he loathed returning.

Down, boy, he repeated to his dick. *You'll get a turn...eventually.*

Chapter Eight

The last mile to the main road wasn't as easy as the first, as far as the traveling was concerned. The tension had disappeared, an easy camaraderie having developed between them that lightened the load on Serg's shoulders and made his spirits lift until they nearly floated.

But the hiking was brutal. Water streamed down the mountain, creating little rivers and pools they had to occasionally wade through when there was no other way to

cross.

He worried about Juliana's wet boots and soaked feet. She'd rub a blister if they weren't careful. And he slowed the pace considerably with that in mind, watching her face for any signs of distress.

She showed none, of course, and insisted she was fine. She'd hiked wet before. She claimed she'd climbed several miles a day on occasion and sometimes the skies let loose.

She teased his overprotective side.

"Serg, I'm fine. Just get me out of here."

Eyes to the ground, she kept moving, stepping over anything she could and traipsing right through the middle of whatever was unavoidable.

Sure, she hiked a lot. He got that. But this was different. Nobody gallivanted around off the beaten path like this for great lengths. It wasn't safe. Even Sergius didn't do it. You never knew what you might step in or on.

"Look." He took her hand in his and pointed in front of them.

"Thank God." Her smile stretched clear across her face.

"Didn't think we'd ever see

concrete again.”

The road was ten yards away. In a moment, Serg heard the sound of a motor and dashed the last distance to stop whatever vehicle might be headed down that stretch of pavement.

His luck got even better when the sheriff's slow-moving cruiser pulled to a stop as he burst from the trees.

Juliana bounded right into the back of him, catching her breath.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” she shouted over the motor as James climbed from the cruiser. “What luck.”

“Hardly luck at all, ma’am. I’ve been driving back and forth along this stretch for the last several hours hoping you two would pop out along here somewhere.”

She stepped out onto the pavement and followed James back to the patrol car. He popped the trunk, opened a cooler and handed them both a cold water. “Thirsty?”

“Parched.” Serg took the dripping bottle, unscrewed the top and chugged three quarters of the cool liquid down before pausing.

“Serg here is the best at finding lost hikers in these woods, even when all my volunteers fail.”

The radio at the sheriff's waist beeped. "Hardin?"

He grabbed the device and pressed a button on the side. "I have her. We'll be on our way to town in two shakes."

"Fantastic. Got someone here who'd like to say something."

"Go ahead."

"Jules?" The female voice was wracked with worry.

James held the mic up to Juliana and nodded. "I'm here, Vanessa. I'm fine. Tired and hungry."

"Thank God. We were worried sick."

James pulled the mic to his own

mouth. "We'll have her back to you in a few minutes." He replaced the receiver on his belt. "Damn thing's kinda antiquated, but it works like a charm out here where there's no signal. Were you carrying a cell phone, ma'am?"

"Yes, but I seemed to have left the camera on and it died."

"Is there anyone else you need to call? We can't reach very far on this radio, but you can call your family back at the station."

Juliana shook her head. "No. I don't have any close living relatives."

James opened the passenger door

and motioned with a hand for Juliana to get in. Serg climbed into the back seat behind her.

On the way to the station, James asked Juliana numerous questions about what had happened to her yesterday.

Serg hadn't said much about McKinney during the walk, not wanting to frighten her any more than necessary while they hiked. But now he sat back and listened as she recounted everything that had happened from the moment the vamp had lured her off the path until now. She even shuddered and crossed her arms as she told the

saga.

She'd been shaken. Still was.

"It seems so strange," she muttered. "I've never gotten lost before. I felt like I was in a trance. All night. As though I were drugged. Even the stars seemed to move around in the sky and keep me scattered."

That was McKinney all right. The man definitely had enthralled her somehow. Controlled her thoughts. The idea made Serg cringe. He gripped the leather seat on both sides of his thighs with his fingers.

The vampire had lured her into the woods for a reason. Whatever

that reason was, it still existed. He'd no doubt the bloodsucker would come after Juliana first chance he got.

When they reached the base, Juliana leaped from the car before the engine was off and ran into the arms of the two women standing on the curb. A giant group hug was followed by three sets of tears and smiles.

How women could be happy and sad at the same time, he'd never understand.

Serg ambled over to them and stopped a few feet away. They all spoke at once while Juliana retold

the story for the third time today. Although the version was pointedly shorter and less frightening when she told her friends.

“I’m so sorry I scared you,” she stated when she’d calmed down. She looked from one to the other and then turned around. “Sergius, this is Vanessa and Charlene.”

The women gasped. Charlene even put a hand over her heart. “This is the man who led you out of the forest?”

“Yes.” The look of pride on Juliana’s face made him smile.

“God, I’d happily get lost any

day of the week if that's the kind of man they send in to retrieve lost hikers." Vanessa didn't move as she spoke, her words serious and flirty.

Juliana hit her playfully on the arm. "Vanessa!"

"Just sayin'."

"Can I take you ladies to lunch?"

He'd rather be shot than have to share his mate with anyone at this point, but it couldn't be avoided. Until the three women got it out of their systems, he was stuck waiting on them to grope each other and make sure all limbs were still intact and no one was in eminent danger of dying.

“I’ve never been so hungry in my life.” Juliana’s shoulders sagged with relief. “Please.” She looked around and smiled.

Sergius followed her gaze to the hole-in-the-wall diner across the street and nodded. “Jasper’s. Great burgers. Especially if you’re famished. Just a sec.” He headed over toward the sheriff who still fiddled with something in the cruiser. “Taking Juliana and her friends to lunch across the street. We’ll be back. I’m sure you need a statement.”

“Sure. I’ll be here.”

Serg turned, smiled at the

women and spread an arm out in the direction they were headed. "After you, ladies."

Giggles erupted and Juliana slapped both her friends on the arm. "Stop it. You're embarrassing me."

He didn't know why. The friends of the woman he intended to spend the rest of his life with thought he hung the moon. What could be wrong with that?

In moments, the four were seated in a booth at Jasper's, Serg on one side with Juliana pinned against the wall, Vanessa and Charlene on the other, all gaga-eyed, tossing

repeated looks in his direction. Was he that fantastic to look at?

It'd been a while since he'd spent any amount of time in town, hanging with the locals, but he couldn't remember anyone ever acting quite so...drooly...in his presence.

Perhaps it was the hero factor. He'd saved their friend from certain death — in their eyes anyway.

When the waitress came over, chomping a huge wad of gum on one side of her mouth, Sergius glanced up at her. "We're starving."
"Okay. What can I get you?"

He turned to his mate and raised an eyebrow. "Burger? I promise you'll never have a better one."

"Perfect."

He glanced at her friends. They both nodded assent.

"Four burgers, fries and fountain drinks." His stomach rumbled and he wasn't even the one who hadn't eaten for a day.

"Cokes?" The waitress snapped her gum and jotted down their order with a flare. As if the woman couldn't remember the simple fare between the booth and the kitchen.

Everyone nodded and she went back to the kitchen.

The women jabbered all at once again. He had no idea how they knew who was talking to whom or when to respond. His brain was tired, and he just watched them and the dance of their limbs and lips as they spoke over each other, hand signals sending arms flailing in every direction.

He set the arm closest to Juliana on her thigh and squeezed. He couldn't stand not touching her, and he wanted her to know she was still his. Even though they were no longer lost in the woods, he wanted her. Intended to have her.

She tensed for a moment and

then relaxed into his touch, even reaching below the table for a moment to squeeze his hand with hers.

It was all he needed. Acknowledgement that they were okay. This wasn't over. She wouldn't tell him to "take a hike" when they walked back outside.

His fingers grazed her thigh while she talked to her friends, and he watched her face flush, knowing he did that to her. She angled him a look with narrowed eyes that said "watch it, buddy", but her legs parted slightly at the same time, giving him even more access to her

center. Over the scent of fried food and grilled meat, he could smell her arousal and chuckled softly to himself.

She wanted him.

She needed him.

She was his and he would have her. Soon.

Huge plates of food landed in front of them. The silence was a welcome relief when everyone dove into the juicy burgers and hot, crispy fries. It was after the lunch crowd. Not many people in the diner at this hour of the day.

Juliana moaned around a bite and closed her eyes as he gazed at

her. Grease ran down her chin and he reached instinctively to wipe it off with his finger, and then sucked the juices into his mouth.

Luckily no one seemed to notice. Her friends would have had a field day with that one. But they were both concentrating on getting catsup out of the bottle at that moment, and the intimacy belonged only to the almost-lovers.

Juliana swallowed and gazed into his eyes. She bent to take a drink of Coke, never losing eye contact. No emotion showed on her face, but the subtle desire in her eyes did not escape him.

“Can we go home after this, Jules? Have you had enough hiking for one weekend?” A glance at Charlene proved she was smiling jokingly at her friend.

“I know you guys have to get back, but I think I’ll stay a few more days.” Juliana took another bite before glancing at the faces frozen mid-chew in front of her. “I mean, I have to speak to the police, answer questions, sort things out. There’s still the issue of the man who led me astray, you know. If this is all his fault, he might do the same thing to someone else.”

“True...” Vanessa gulped her

food and continued, "But we can't leave you here."

"Sure you can. I'll be fine."

Juliana waved a hand in front of her. "I bet Sergius would be willing to entertain me if I get bored... waiting on the cops and all...to wrap up their investigation, you know." She squirmed next to him, and he had to hide his grin behind his uplifted glass of cola.

"Uh, huh." He wasn't sure who muttered that line of understanding, but both ladies resumed their meals, smirking repeatedly at Juliana. They weren't stupid.

Secretly, Serg was so excited his insides were doing a dance. The woman he was going to spend his life with had just made a pile of lame excuses to her friends so she could spend more time with him. *I'm one lucky bastard.*

Sure, what she'd said was true. It would help if she stayed around a few days to talk to the sheriff and answer questions, but he knew she was just blabbing at the mouth. *She likes me.* Convenient. He couldn't keep his emotions under control. He was known for being rather stoic. Smiling was not his style. But damn if this woman hadn't thrown

him off his game.

“Wait, where will you stay?”
Vanessa’s brow furrowed. She had a French fry in one hand, dangling in front of her lips. “The hotel is booked. They’re waiting for us to get out this afternoon and —”

“She can stay with me.” *She will stay with me. I’m just glad everyone is making it so easy... Don’t smirk...*

Charlene’s mouth fell open and she turned to Juliana. “Jules, are you okay with that? I mean...I, um, can see you two have...” she waved her burger through the air, glancing back and forth between Juliana and Sergius, almost comical considering

the serious slant of her eyes, “... some sort of chemistry, but you don’t really know each other.”

Juliana glared at Sergius and then reached across the table and laid her hand on her friend’s. “I’ll be fine. We just spent several hours together. He’s harmless...sort of...” She glanced at him, her cheeks pink, one eyebrow raised. “Besides, it’s not like he could chop me up and bury me in the yard with the cops knowing where I am.”

The look she’d given him spoke volumes. Her eyes were slightly glazed over and she took a deep breath. When she gripped his knee

beneath the table, he stiffened. The little minx was as aroused as he was and eager to finish what they'd started. This mating thing was great. Even though she was human, her attraction to him was no less than his for her.

“Kay, Jules, just so you know,” Vanessa began, “that’s not comforting.” She shivered as though a cold wind had blown through the restaurant.

Juliana startled from staring at Serg and twisted back to her friends. “I’ll be fine.”

“We expect updates.” Vanessa leaned back and pushed her plate

away. “And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do —”

“On that note, who’s ready to go?” Time to halt the chick banter before he lost his lunch. He stifled the smile forming on his mouth and got up to pay the bill.

All three women argued about his paying as he walked away, but he didn’t turn around. What sort of gentleman would pass the bill around the table?

The sun had emerged when they stepped outside, and they had to squint to see each other on the curb.

Charlene spoke first. “Well, I really have to get back tonight...if

you're sure you'll be okay here alone." She glanced at Serg in trepidation.

Juliana put an arm around Charlene. "Of course. You guys go on ahead. I'll rent a car and drive back as soon as I can. You both have jobs and responsibilities. I'm footloose and fancy free still, at least until I find a job, or a life."

Sergius fully intended to provide her with a life.

Hugs went around and then Charlene and Vanessa left after Juliana promised to call them every day with updates.

First things first. They had to go

back to the sheriff's office.

Reluctantly, Sergius guided his tired mate into the police station where it took only a few minutes for James to get everything he needed from her.

She sat in a chair across from the sheriff while Serg hovered behind her, shifting his weight back and forth.

Neither man wanted to make a big deal out of what had happened to her, but they both knew from her description she'd been hunted by McKinney. She was not safe by any stretch of the imagination.

"Can you stay close by for a few

days, until we're sure we don't have any questions?" James spoke to Juliana, but he glanced up at Serg with a questioning look.

"She's going home with me. Just holler if you need anything else." Serg didn't look down at his mate as he spoke.

Was he being too high-handed? He hoped not. He certainly wasn't in the mood to argue with her right now about propriety and what people would think. He just wanted her safe...and naked. And fuck yes, he would insist. Though he doubted it would be necessary.

"Okay, then," James said as he

stood, Juliana along with him. "I'll drive you back to your place. And I'll call if there's any news." He directed that last part at Sergius. "Want me to send a cruiser by the house every once in a while?"

"That won't be necessary." If McKinney came within a hundred yards of his place, he or his brothers would smell the bloodsucker before he even had a chance.

"Figured." James grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

"I'll need to stop by the hotel. Grab my things." Juliana spoke in James's direction.

"No problem."

Chapter Nine

As soon as they were on their way out of town, Juliana pondered what had happened in the last twenty-four hours. No one had specifically said anything, but she sensed they were more worried about the stranger than they were letting on.

When the police cruiser pulled off the pavement and onto a gravel road outside of town, she wondered about her decision to stay with this man she'd met only hours ago. She'd climbed into the

front seat again, leaving Serg alone in the back.

On the one hand, she felt like she knew Sergius better than she'd ever known anyone.

On the other hand, what did she really know about him? And God, where were they? The middle of nowhere. She rubbed the sudden goose bumps rising across her arms.

And then there was the sex. The man was hotter than hot. Her pussy still wept with needing him. Sure, she'd orgasmed — hard — in that cave, but since then, instead of feeling sated, she'd wanted more. She'd squirmed in her seat during

lunch, wishing for all the world everyone would disappear so Serg could stuff what was sure to be an impressive cock inside her. That would end the mental torture of her wondering how good it could be with him. What kind of slut did that make her?

The car pulled to a stop. This was it. Juliana stared out the window at the sprawling ranch-style home in front of her while both men climbed from the cruiser.

It was huge. Not the cabin she'd expected. Of course he did live here with two brothers, but still. It *looked* like a cabin, the frame purposefully

constructed of horizontal logs that nestled together perfectly, but the opulence was evident. The selling of thoroughbreds must be lucrative.

Sergius opened the passenger door and leaned down, a worried look furrowed his brow. He had her bags in one hand. "You gonna just sit there?" Then his warm smile took over. "Come on. You'll have to meet my brothers sooner or later."

As she stepped from the car, carefully avoiding any skin-to-skin contact with the man who made her toes curl, two others nearly identical to him sauntered toward them from one side of the house.

She jolted as the door shut behind her.

Sheriff Hardin cleared his throat. "Hate to run, but I've gotta get back and help comb the area where you were found. I'll be in touch."

Juliana nodded in his direction as he stuck one foot back into the car, lifting his hat briefly and smiling at her. "You're in good hands with these fellows, Ms. Polanski. Call if you think of anything else I should know."

"Thank you." She watched as the car backed up and turned around on the gravel drive, the sound of the tires screaming out to her that

the last bit of civilization she'd see in a while was slipping down the road.

When she turned back around, she was surrounded by testosterone. The smirk she'd seen frequently on Sergius's face was reflected in his brothers' as well.

What's with these Durham men?

They all three looked like they held a deep secret.

The brothers glanced at each other, their faces turning rapidly in every direction, occasionally toward her even, without speaking. Their expressions changed frequently, as though they were

engaged in a heated discussion.
What the fuck?

Finally, Serg spoke. “Juliana, these are my brothers, Jaxon and Micah.” He nodded at each in turn.

After a pause, the two scrambled to remove their cowboy hats and both reached at once to shake her hand, bumping into each other in their efforts.

“Welcome. Make yourself at home. We, um, don’t get many guests out here, but I’m sure we’ll be able to tidy up enough to make your stay as comfortable as possible.” Jaxon smiled at her.

Micah took her hand next and

continued, “It’s kind of a bachelor pad, but I hope you like it. We’ll catch up later this evening.”

As the brothers hustled back toward the barn, Sergius reached for her hand and tugged her toward the long porch stretched across the entire front of the house.

He pulled her into his embrace — dragged her really — until his forehead met hers. His arms wrapped around her middle, his large hands warm where they seemed to burn her through her shirt. She licked her suddenly dry lips.

“I have so much to tell you,

Juliana. But first I want to say that whatever happens here, I-I'm just... I had a great morning...getting to know you. I'm really attracted to you and I'd like to see where this thing could lead us."

Warm breath wafted over her face as he spoke, the scent of the mint he'd picked up on the way out of the diner mixed with the taste of him she could sense on the tip of her tongue from earlier.

What was it about this man that drove her to forget the entire world around her?

"I don't think your brothers are very pleased you brought me here."

“Ah, don’t worry about them. They’re surprised is all. We don’t —”

“What? Don’t tell me you three never bring women out here.” She gave a sharp laugh at her joke. “I’d never believe a line like that.”

Sergius closed his eyes briefly and smiled. “I’ll let you figure it out for yourself.”

What was that supposed to mean?

“Come on. I’ll show you around.” Serg let go of the cocoon he had wrapped around her. He laced his hand with hers, grabbed her bags from the ground next to

him and headed for the house.

The inside had the same modern yet rustic-looking feel as the outside. And it was astonishingly tidy for three bachelors not expecting company.

Everything was in line with the cabin-in-the-woods look, but clearly expensive and up-to-date underneath the façade. The great room was decidedly masculine, nevertheless Juliana liked the tones of browns and coordinated dark colors that made the house a home.

“You like it?” His words jerked her from her examination. His expression was apprehensive as

though her impression mattered to him a great deal.

“Love it.”

“Thirsty?” He let her hand go and headed for the kitchen area. The entire space she stood in was one giant great room – kitchen, dining area, family room all in one.

“I’m fine, thanks.” She wandered toward a lush, beige, suede couch, thinking if she could just lie down she could sleep for ten hours without moving. She needed a shower and a change of clothes first, but God she was tired. Whatever adrenaline rush she’d been running on was crashing fast.

“You’re exhausted. Come on.”

Serg nodded his head and she followed his lead. “The house is divided into three wings, this living space in the center connecting each personal space.”

Huh, interesting. So planned out. *What if one of them gets married?*

Down a short hall to the left of the kitchen, Sergius opened a set of French doors and backed up a step to let Juliana through.

She sucked in a breath. *This is his bedroom?*

The space was enormous and so inviting. Deep navy blue and forest green were the dominant colors. A

king-sized bed graced the back wall. The only sign the place was even lived in was the mussed sheets and blankets, the clothes scattered next to the bed.

“Sorry,” he began when he saw where her gaze landed. “I left in a hurry this morning. Didn’t make it back into the room to tidy up.” He scrambled around grabbing jeans, socks and T-shirts from the floor and disappeared through a side door before returning empty handed.

He’s sorry? The man saved my lost ass in the forest today and didn’t make his bed first...and he’s sorry? She

laughed out loud, covering her mouth with her hand. She was feeling a bit hysterical and this was all so surreal. She really needed sleep.

With one side of his mouth crooked up in a confused expression, he motioned for her to follow him through the door where he'd just hastily taken his dirty clothes. His retreating butt made her mouth water. His jeans were the same ones from earlier, obviously, but for some reason they were getting better and better, hugging him to perfection, the well-worn denim molding itself

expertly around the firm globes of the fine ass she'd managed to grab this morning.

She felt like she'd taken some sort of sex drug, unable to control her ridiculous reaction to him, and part of her wished he'd just strip her down and take her right here and now. They had unfinished business. On the other hand, she was practically sleepwalking. She needed rest more than sex right now.

As she rounded the corner she found herself in a luxurious bathroom, the likes of which she'd only read about. The kind of bath in

which a person wishes they might be able to spend one night of their honeymoon if they splurge and spend a month's wages for the opportunity.

Not the sort of place she'd ever expected to find herself relaxing.

Words wouldn't come. Sergius, the man every woman conjures up to masturbate to, busied himself dashing around the tile floor, his feet bare. When had he taken off his hiking boots?

One wall was covered with a large walk-in closet she could partially see into through the open door. A *family* could keep their

clothes in there. Heck, a family of four could *live* in there. The opposite wall contained a glass-enclosed shower and a side room with a toilet. Dual sinks dipped into the long counter on the wall across from her.

But the best part of all was the huge whirlpool tub in the center of the room, sunk halfway into the floor and currently filling with steamy water.

Serg glanced up from where he leaned over to adjust the temperature. "I'm sure you won't turn down a warm bath after the day and night you've had."

“Never.” She inched forward.
How was this going to work?

When Serg turned to stick a hand in the water, broad shoulders and an impressive muscular back presented themselves a few feet away. The black T-shirt he wore stretched tight across the expanse of firm male body, and her hands itched to explore him again.

“Here. Sit.” Serg reached back with a gentle hand and pulled her onto the wide edge of the tub.

A shyness she hadn't encountered earlier grasped her around the middle. Was he expecting her to take her clothes off

and climb in with him? Sure, they'd already been almost as intimate as two people possibly could, but that was different. Extenuating circumstances and all. Not to mention it had been pitch dark. There was no guarantee he was going to like what he saw in the light of day.

Juliana had no illusions when it came to her body. She was small, fairly muscular for a woman, and had small breasts. Her mother always told her they'd be the first to grow if she'd put on a little weight and stopped her incessant exercising.

She'd never had an occasion to care very much, until this moment. It was as though their relationship was ass-backwards. First the sex—well, almost sex—and then the introductions, meal and nudity. No wonder her hands were shaking.

“Relax. I'm not going to jump you.” He laid a hand on hers to still them. “In your state of sleeplessness, it'd be like pouncing on a drunk woman.” A wry grin met her gaze. “I think you've got everything you need here. I'll leave you be. Yell if you need me.”

She hadn't even realized she'd been holding her breath until she

watched him retreat, closing the door behind him. On a long, deep exhale she stripped off the attire of the last two days and piled it all up on the floor before gingerly sticking first one toe and then a leg into the perfect water.

“Ahhh.” Nothing had ever felt so good in her entire life. *Hope I don't fall asleep and drown.*

Easing the rest of the way in, she took stock of her surroundings again. Shampoo and conditioner sat on the opposite edge of the oval tub, next to it a bar of soap. Utilitarian, not girly, but what would she expect in a bachelor

pad? If they made her smell like him and she could spend the night breathing in his scent, she'd have the best dreams of her life.

Thirty minutes later, she reluctantly climbed from the tub, dried her body, wrung out her hair and wrapped the giant, fluffy, white towel around her. She had nothing to put on, but at least one of the benefits of her size was she was covered from under her armpits to practically her knees.

When she wandered into the adjoining bedroom, she found her bags from the hotel sitting beside the bed. Thank God she didn't have

to tiptoe out into the living room to hunt for her stuff. Geez, the man was thoughtful. When was the other shoe going to fall?

Juliana grabbed her case and made quick work of brushing her teeth before slipping into an oversized T-shirt and panties. She stared at the door, but when drowsiness won out over curiosity, she climbed between the disheveled sheets of Serg's bed and sunk into the scent that was all him. Moments later she was sucked into oblivion.

“Goddamnit.” Keeton paced between the trees where he’d left his dainty redhead and cussed loud enough to scare the leaves into shaking. He kicked at the dirt until he stubbed his big toe on a tree root. Hobbling on one leg, he cursed another blue streak and gritted his teeth against the throbbing pain in his foot.

She was gone. No trace of her anywhere. She’d have been too exhausted, confused and under his spell to have wandered out of the forest on her own.

The only way she could have roused enough to be missing from

this spot would be with outside intervention.

He raised his nose, took a deep breath of the air. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what had happened. Those fucking wolves had happened. The scent of one of them was everywhere, along with his woman. And by the way her waning fragrance had started to dissipate, the redhead was long gone.

He should have known, been prepared. Those bastards rescued every fucking damsel in distress on the entire mountain. Couldn't they have been a bit tardy for the save

just this one time?

That redhead was soft and sweet and smelled like nectar. And she was his.

His mouth watered remembering her skin, all white, pale and unblemished. And her hair, a deep red that would match her passion.

One damn day. That's all he'd needed to get himself refreshed and get her into hiding. Once he lured her into a cave he'd have been able to smother her scent and take off without a trace.

"If you assholes think I'm going to give her up without a fight, you're sadly mistaken." He spoke

only to the rustling leaves in the trees.

Keeton tugged his black shirt down over his hips, smoothed his hand through his hair and followed the mixed smell of his lovely redhead now intermingled with that fucking wolf.

She'd surely be in town by now. Probably at the sheriff's office.

He'd find her. It was only a matter of time.

Under the waning light of evening, he followed her scent.

Three hundred years he'd wandered this earth alone. It was time he took a mate.

There weren't many of his kind. He'd had frequent contact with several over the decades, but tended to go it alone. What he did know was that any vampires he'd encountered were near his same age. All seemed to have been created during some violent historical act, awakening alone to find the rest of their people slaughtered around them.

In his case, his village had been wiped out during a smallpox epidemic in 1738, leaving him as the sole "survivor".

He'd awoken lonely, thirsty and confused, his last vivid memory

that of his brother easing him into bed with a high fever.

Surrounded by dead carcasses, it didn't take long to realize something very unnatural had occurred. The ghost town had clearly been without a living soul for several days, judging by the degree of decomposition. And Keeton McKinney thirsted for living, flowing blood, not water.

Now, Keeton stalked through the forest as the sun dipped behind the mountains. He didn't have any more answers as to the cause of his plight today than he'd had nearly three hundred years ago. However,

he didn't intend to spend another
three hundred years alone.

Chapter Ten

“Shit, Serg. I can’t believe it.”

Jaxon paced a path in the floor of the barn.

Sergius leaned against a stall, chewing on a piece of straw, trying not to grin like a schoolboy. Micah was just as stunned, hands on his hips, head shaking back and forth.

“How did this happen?” Jaxon continued. “Don’t answer that.” He looked at the ceiling. “This wasn’t in the plan.”

Serg would give his brothers a minute to wrap their heads around

this new development. It wasn't as though these thoughts hadn't occurred to him. It was just that he'd had more time to adjust to the idea. And furthermore, he had no choice. The decision was made for him first thing this morning when he climbed into the passenger side of James's cruiser and smelled his sexy mate all over the back seat. There was no way he could deny the pull, the attraction, the intense need to mate with her.

"The idea was to live out our lives not involving others. We agreed to help *find* missing people, not *mate* with them." Micah leaned

against a post, put his hands on his knees and lowered his head to catch his breath.

Serg still said nothing. It wasn't like he needed to explain to either of them how unplanned this was for him. Shit, they both knew as well as he did this was out of his control. When the right woman walked into a wolf's life, human or otherwise, there wasn't a goddamn thing anyone could do about it.

"Now what?" Jaxon looked to Sergius for answers.

Oh, it was his turn to speak?

"We adjust." What else? "It could happen to either of you two holier-

than-thou asses too, ya know. You jerks aren't immune."

"I know. I know. It's just so... sudden." Jaxon smiled now and then shook his head. "Sorry, bro. I know this isn't what you need right now. I'm happy for you, really I am. Just takes some getting used to. She's a gem. I can tell by looking."

"That she is. Keep your hands to yourselves." He gave them both a stern look.

Both men raised their hands in an innocent stance and backed off a step.

"Have you told her anything yet? What does she know?" Micah

kicked at the dirt beneath his boot.

“Nothing. Listen, we have a bigger problem than my finding a mate and her being uninformed about it. Juliana’s a seasoned hiker. Avid. She doesn’t get lost.”

Jaxon came closer. “What happened then?”

“Keeton McKinney happened. Bastard’s up to something. Lured her off the path with some mind game. Convinced her to take a ‘shortcut’ and then led her on a wild chase around the woods in the dark of night.”

“And left her alive?” Micah stepped into the close circle.

“Exactly. That’s why I’m saying we have a problem. I don’t know what that asshole is up to, but I’ve no doubt we’ll be seeing him. And my main concern is going to be keeping Juliana safe.”

“Of course. You know we’re on it. No fucking vamp is going to mess with any woman of ours.” Serg almost chuckled at the sudden change of tune in Micah’s puffed-out stance. The man had done a one-eighty in about two minutes flat.

“Whatever it takes,” added Jaxon. “So, when are you going to claim her? She’ll be safer after. Take

her off the market so to speak.”

“It wasn’t fair to claim her without her knowledge of who and what we are. She needed sleep more than anything.”

“With McKinney on the loose I wouldn’t wait much longer. You need the added connection to her.” Micah placed a palm on Serg’s shoulder.

“I know, I know.”

Micah stepped back. “So, we should be expecting company and prepare to react accordingly. What the hell do you suppose McKinney has in his fucked-up mind?”

“Not even going to venture a

guess. But I'm quite sure he has his sights on my mate. I've never known him to play with his food before. Not his style. Guess I should be eternally grateful though, whatever it was that made him hesitate."

The distinct sound of gravel crunching under tires interrupted the men. Serg headed for the front of the house, his brothers right behind him.

No matter how many times someone drove out this way, it never failed to raise the hairs on the back of all three of their necks.

The patrol car wasn't altogether

unexpected this time and actually felt like a relief. Maybe James had new info that would help him and his brothers figure out what to do next.

The sheriff climbed out of the car. "Evening, boys." He was forever calling them boys. Serg figured he sort of saw them as youngsters since he himself was almost fifty.

"Anything new?" Serg stopped a few feet away and stared into the sheriff's face for any clue as to his mood.

"Not much. The rest of the search team found nothing while looking

for Juliana. Not a trace of her or McKinney.”

“Come inside.” Serg nodded toward the house. It was growing dark. “I’ll make coffee.”

Juliana hadn’t been asleep for long, but he figured she was out for the night. Exhausted. When she hadn’t come out of the room after her bath, he’d eased back into the bedroom and found her snuggled under his covers, dead to the world. His cock had stirred—well, to be fair, it hadn’t ever been un-stirred since this morning—but it had jumped to attention at the sight of his mate right where she belonged,

completely at home in his personal space. Her sweet, pale cheek lay against his pillow, her gorgeous red curls spread like a fan around her.

His bed. His sheets. His pillow.
All tucked in and around *his* woman.

He'd nearly groaned and had to take his cock in hand and squeeze the fellow into submission...

Now, he was acutely aware of Juliana's presence in the bedroom, but marginally more under control.

Serg startled from his thoughts when the screen door shut behind him.

"I'll make coffee." Micah headed

for the kitchen area, everyone following on his heels.

As they gathered around the island, Serg started the questioning. "What'd you find?" There was no way James had come all the way out here to tell them nothing. And by the look on the sheriff's face, they weren't going to like it.

"The SAR team didn't find anything, like I said. But you know I couldn't leave it at that. There's something fishy about this situation and I don't like it. How does a well-trained hiker get so turned around?" He shook his head and looked down, seemingly fascinated

by the pattern in the black and brown swirls of the marble countertop.

Micah, holding two mugs in each hand, set the coffee on the island and pushed one in front of each man.

“So?”

James lifted his head and stared Sergius right in the eye. “This isn’t some lost hiker to you, is it?” When Serg didn’t move a muscle he continued, “I’ve known you for several years now. Never once have I seen a woman out here. Hell, I’ve never seen you, any of you three, in town with a woman. Honestly, I

thought..." He shook his head. "Doesn't matter what I thought. The point is... What is the point?"

James ran a hand over this close-cropped hair and looked at the ceiling. "She means something to you." He pointedly looked at Sergius and then at the other two brothers. "You aren't like humans, are you? I mean your — your... whatever...dating...stuff."

Now Sergius laughed. "No. We aren't."

"You don't date. Not like humans anyway, do you?"

"No."

"But when the right one comes

along..."

"Yep. Pretty much. Nail on the head, sheriff."

James cleared his throat.

"Thought as much. At least something like that."

"James? What is it?" Serg wasn't sure he wanted to hear whatever the sheriff had to say anymore. Unease crept up his neck.

"That bastard McKinney, he did quite a bit of damage last night, or maybe early this morning. Had himself a bear. A fucking *bear*."

The uneasy sensation on Serg's spine went through the roof at the sound of James's words combined

with —

“Who’s McKinney?” The soft almost hesitant syllables uttered from the mouth of his mate.

Juliana shook, her body trembling uncontrollably at the entrance to the kitchen area. What was going on?

What were they talking about? Sure, she was tired, groggy, but what did the sheriff say about bears and humans?

Considering the strange, nonsensical conversation she’d heard, she had to wonder what she might have missed *before* padding

down the hallway toward the sound of voices in the kitchen.

She had no idea what had woken her in the first place; she'd simply bolted upright several minutes ago from a deep sleep with goose bumps crawling up her spine as though she was being watched. No one had been in the room, but her gaze had darted toward the window when she'd heard a soft noise. Nothing. The curtains drifted in the slight breeze from the open pane, but that was it. Rubbing her hands up her suddenly chilled arms, she shuffled over to the window to peer out. Could

someone have been staring in at her? Or was she being paranoid?

Assuming Serg and his brothers were the only ones in the house, she'd pulled on shorts and a tank top and ventured out to the main living area.

Before she could open her mouth and interrupt, she'd found herself around the corner listening to the harsh tones of the sheriff rambling on about the strange dating habits – nonexistent dating habits, it seemed – of Sergius and his brothers.

Curiosity getting its firm grip on her shoulders, she froze in the

hallway, eavesdropping on the four men as they discussed...she had no idea what.

When the conversation turned to a madman in the woods, her mouth had taken over her brain and she'd blurted out the question before she had the chance to rein herself in.

"Who's McKinney?" she repeated, standing firm in her spot, arms crossed.

"We think he's the man who lured you into the woods yesterday." The sheriff was the only man in the room with the balls to speak. Why was that?

"Lured? You mean you believe

he intentionally misdirected me? Why would someone do that? And what does he have to do with a bear?" A thousand questions swam through her mind, but she'd start with those two. The nine hundred ninety-eight other questions swirled around issues of how the man she'd almost fucked earlier in the day wasn't exactly human. She'd get to those later.

Sheriff Hardin, having lost his ability to speak, and apparently his balls, opened and closed his mouth several times before turning to Sergius.

"Baby..." Sergius began.

Baby? He had the audacity to call her baby right now?

“Yes, *buttercup?*” Two could play the game of who could out sweet-talk the other.

Micah and Jaxon covered their faces to hide the chuckles.

Serg gazed at her firmly for about three seconds before he cracked a half smile. “You aren’t the kind of woman to be coddled, are you...*shnuckems?*”

“Hardly.” She pulled her arms from under her breasts and placed her palms on her hips.

With the exception of Sergius, everyone had looked away. The

floor and the ceiling suddenly became the most fascinating features of the room.

“Not the way you probably planned on coming out, but hey, it’ll work.”

“Shut up, Jaxon.”

“You’re gay?” Well that would explain the sheriff’s rambling about the three of them not going out with women. It did not, however, explain the hot, sexy romp she remembered from the cave.

Laughter filled the room.

“*Hardly.*” Serg repeated her word with his own special mocking tone. “Let’s all go in the living room and

sit down. I've a lot to explain."

At that point she thought she should hightail it out of town and leave the answers behind.

Whatever these four men were going to tell her, she was quite sure she wasn't going to like.

Chapter Eleven

Serg's brothers and the sheriff sat in uncanny silence in the living room, watching as Sergius took a spot on the sofa with his reluctant mate.

Her pheromones, which were now mixing with his own scent all over her body from using his soaps and sleeping in his bed, permeated the room. He needed to have a brisk chat with his little head to rein the fellow in until he could have his turn claiming her.

"Who's McKinney?" she

repeated for the third time.

James cleared his throat and wiggled uncomfortably in his chair. He turned to Sergius and then held his gaze, his face asking a million questions at once. Serg nodded at him. Now was as good a time as ever. Might as well get it over with.

“He’s our local vamp. Well, when he’s in town, that is.”

“Your what?”

“Vampire.” Serg waited for her to glance his way. “He’s a blood-sucking asshole.”

“Oh, I see.” She nodded, but he didn’t think she “saw” anything. That would be too simple. “So, he’s

like a money shark or something? Stealing from people? What does that have to do with a bear?" Her quizzical expression made the sheriff suck in a breath.

James interjected again. "No... He's a vampire, not the metaphorical kind, the real deal you hear about in novels. And he drained a full-grown bear yesterday and left the carcass in the woods after he met you."

Juliana stared at the sheriff through narrow eyes and said nothing. No emotion showed on her face. In fact, the entire room engaged in a collective breath

holding.

“Are you people crazy? Do you guys believe this shit too?” She glanced from one brother to another, her eyes widening as she took in their expressions. “You all want me to believe vampires are real beings that haunt the forest and suck the blood of...lost hikers?”

“Among other things, yes.” Serg didn’t reach for her hand, although he did scoot closer to her on the couch.

“Other things? What? Ghosts? Goblins? Werewolves? I can’t believe this.” She jumped up and began to pace, pressing her fingers

to her temples.

“Well, I’ve no knowledge of ghosts and goblins, but I can certainly attest to the existence of werewolves,” James muttered.

“Oh, good. Let’s throw a few more mythical creatures in the mix. And I suppose now you’re going to tell me you are in fact a vampire and these boys are werewolves.” Her chuckle was uneasy.

“I’m definitely not a vamp, no,” James stated.

“Oh, thank God for that. You had me worried for a minute.” She scrambled around as if looking for something. “I need to go. You have

everything you need from me, right?" She looked at James and then moved toward the hall. "I'll just grab my stuff. Can you take me back to town? I'll find someplace to stay tonight and get a car in the morning."

"Juliana—" Sergius stood.

"No. No. It's okay. You don't owe me any explanations. You've messed with my mind enough for one day. Let's call it all good and I'll get out of your way. Whatever it is you three do out here in the middle of nowhere, you can get back to it and—"

He reached her side in two

seconds and took her hands. "Come back. Sit. Listen... Please?"

Her green eyes gazed into his, asking questions she didn't want answers to.

"I want you to understand what we're talking about and give me a chance. Please."

"No, really. I'll just go. I'm tired. Delirious, apparently."

"Juliana, I—"

"Serg." Jaxon leaped up, Micah following.

Sergius tipped his head back and took a long, deep inhale. *Keeton McKinney. Didn't take him long.*

"He's here, isn't he?" James

moved toward the door, drawing his gun and grasping it with both hands.

“Who? What’s going on?”

There wasn’t time to explain. She was about to get a first-hand view of who he was up close and personal.

“I’m sorry, Juliana. This isn’t how I wanted you to find out.” He reached down to pull off his boots, letting go of all contact with her skin. “I’d hoped to have more time. But here’s the abbreviated version. The man following you yesterday is Keeton McKinney. He’s a vampire. Don’t know why he didn’t kill you.

It's not like him. My brothers and I are shifters, wolves. That's why we can track missing people so easily. That's how I found you."

She stared at him in a daze, frightened by all the hustling around her. Fear etched on her face, draining her of all color.

"We're going to shift now. Track this bloodsucker. And try to put a stop to whatever he wants of you. Damn vamp has some balls coming around here." Sergius pulled his shirt over his head and looked back at his mate.

She was paler than she'd been a moment ago. "He's after me?"

Why?"

"I don't know. Never seen him act like this before." He leaned down and kissed her gently on the forehead and then hovered inches from her. "Stay with James. We'll be back as soon as possible."

She couldn't process it all. The whirl of chaos around her made her head spin.

Holy shit. I've fallen into the fucking Twilight Zone.

One minute she was listening to a strange tale of vampires and werewolves; the next minute she found herself scrambling to become

a part of the plush sofa while the sheriff stood next to the front door, holding a revolver.

And if she'd thought it couldn't get any freakier, the three brothers started to undress. Right there before her, they stripped off their shirts. Her eyes widened. Damn. They were ripped. As they moved to unfasten their pants, her breath froze in her lungs.

Too bad they were certifiably nuts.

She zoned her gaze in on Sergius. Lord, rippling muscles were everywhere — *everywhere*. Even his ass was as tight as a board. Smooth,

tanned skin covered the expanse of his chest, a light sprinkling of hair tapering down to his—*oh my God*. The man was hung like a beast. Thank goodness he had insisted on not fucking her in the cave this morning. She'd felt his cock, but without seeing it she hadn't realized that girth would stretch her beyond comparison.

She licked her lips at the thought of just that. *What's the matter with you, Jules? How can you even think of sex at a time like this?*

She glanced away to clear her head, but that proved futile considering the room was filled

with men all in the same state of nudity, all sporting similar physiques a woman would swoon over. *This is just...wrong.*

And then, holy shit. The stuff of legends jumped off the pages of any werewolf novel she'd ever read and became reality right in front of her eyes.

Sergius and his brothers paused inside the front door where the sheriff stood guard, peeking occasionally out the window. In seemingly slow motion they transformed into three of the largest wolves Juliana had ever seen.

Bones popped and snapped as they fell onto all fours. Hair instantly grew to cover their bodies with a deep rich coffee-colored fur. It was over in moments.

Juliana blinked and then wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. They were still there. *Oh...my...God.* Her hands shook even though she gripped the sofa as tight as possible.

The wolf standing in the place where Sergius had been turned his head toward her and bowed gracefully toward the ground. He was majestic. Regal. His eyes seemed to plead with her to trust him, a pitiful puppy-dog look.

Hardin opened the front door and the animals bounded out of the house into the darkness. With a soft click, the sheriff pushed the door closed and then locked it.

He didn't look back at her as he spoke, but kept his eyes trained through a slit between the curtain and the window. "Don't worry, Juliana. They never lose. Everything will be fine."

Don't worry? The man she'd made out with this morning—no, made out was too mild a term for what they'd done... The man who'd rocked her world, turned her into a sexual being she didn't

even know she was capable of becoming, made her want things she'd never dreamed about, drove her insane with the need to fuck like an animal – that man was in fact an animal. A wolf. She snickered to herself. Don't worry... *Right.*

“So, there *is* a vampire out there?”

“Uh huh. And he isn't a nice one either.”

“There are nice ones?”

“Well, I guess I don't really know the answer to that. Haven't met another.”

“How do you know he exists

then?"

"I've seen him twice, once from a distance and another time when he had the audacity to walk into my office. And... I've seen the destruction he leaves in his wake."

Juliana wrapped her arms around her body below her breasts to stop the shaking.

"What sort of destruction?" She couldn't keep herself from asking questions better left unasked.

"He pops up every few months or so. Spreads his 'wealth' around the country and even Canada. But when he shows, there's no doubt. He drains small animals and leaves

their empty carcasses on the forest ground. Sometimes they aren't so small. And occasionally they aren't animals."

Humans...

Is it cold in here? Juliana glanced around until her gaze landed on a plush blanket over the back of a chair. She finally stood, grabbed the throw and wrapped it around her. But the chill remained. She couldn't keep the cold out with the blanket any more than she could use it to shelter herself from the bombardment of unwanted information. How could she possibly believe what she was

hearing?

“What are they gonna do, exactly?” Her voice was so low she could barely hear herself. As if it were safer that way — keeping her sounds to a minimum. She tiptoed over to Hardin to barrage him with more questions.

“Run him off most likely.”

“Can’t they catch him? Kill him or something?” *Or get killed?*

“Doubt it. Even with three of them, they’ve never caught him yet. He’s very fast. They threaten him every now and then, enough to get him to leave...for a while. But it’s different this time. No tellin’.”

“Different how?”

“You.” He turned his head to her for a second.

“Me?”

“Serg won’t let anybody threaten anything that’s his. None of them would.”

“His?”

He cleared his throat and looked back outside, staring into the darkness. She figured he couldn’t see a damn thing, because she couldn’t. But it must have given him something to do to feel useful and kept him from having to confront her directly.

“What does that mean?” She

reworded the question.

“Look, I don’t understand it too well myself. These are the only wolves I’ve ever met. And they’ve never had...women here before. But, from what I can tell —”

“They don’t have girlfriends? Lovers? No one?”

“Nope. Stick to themselves. Like they’d rather not.”

She thought back to this afternoon when she’d first arrived. No wonder Jaxon and Micah were so stunned. Seemed like they had a “no chick” pact or something. And Sergius had broken the agreement. Maybe that wasn’t so crazy after all.

“I heard what you were saying before I walked in. What? Did Sergius like imprint on me or something?” *Is that what they call it?*

“Something like that.”

“Do I have a say in the matter?”

“No idea. You’ll have to ask Serg. I know about as much as you do now. Probably less, actually.”

“So, why don’t the police catch the vampire or why doesn’t the government track him down or whatever, if he’s such a threat?”

“Hardly anyone human knows of his existence. No one in my office does. It’s not like I can put out a manhunt for McKinney. No one

would know why. He's tricky. He doesn't leave obvious evidence." Hardin turned to look her in the eye. "And, he's fast. Faster than the wolves. Very difficult to track. Even harder to catch and kill. The best the wolves ever do is run him off for a while."

"How did you find out about them?"

"I sort of stumbled on this problem with the vampire by accident years ago, and then the truth about the Durhams being shifters soon after that. The brothers had been helping us find missing people for several years. I

thought one or more of them were psychic.” Hardin chuckled. “There was no other explanation for their incredible tracking skill. They’d just show up and had an uncanny ability to find people.”

Juliana stepped closer until she stood inches from Hardin. “Then what?” Her eyes burned. She couldn’t bring herself to blink, as though she’d miss part of the story if she did.

“Then a hiker was found dead, drained.” He stared unmoving out the window, still holding his gun against the pane as though prepared for anything.

“Drained?” Juliana swallowed.
“Of blood?”

“Yep. I made some offhanded comment to Sergius about thinking there must be a vampire in the mountains. Only problem was, Serg didn’t react to that quite appropriately.” Finally Hardin lowered his gun and let go of the curtain to give his full attention to Juliana. “He wasn’t really surprised. Didn’t laugh at my statement like a normal human would have.”

“Did he know about this McKinney guy then?”

“Coincidentally, no. But being

supernatural himself, he didn't find the idea that outrageous. He said, and I quote, 'I suppose it's possible'."

"Shit. You must have freaked out."

"Oh yeah. I said something like, 'You think it's possible there's a vampire living in my national forest? What the fuck are you, dude?' And that was the moment I realized the Durhams weren't ordinary humans. The look on his face was priceless. In a very serious, no-nonsense tone, he informed me that he didn't want a vampire roaming around in this forest any

more than I did and that he would look into it. *Look into it!* I nearly pissed my pants."

"How did you find out the brothers were werewolves? Did he just tell you?"

"No. Not at all." Hardin shook his head. "It was actually McKinney that tipped me off. The bastard wanted to rid himself of the shifters, so he waltzed right into my precinct and told me there was a trio of large wolves wreaking havoc in the mountains. He described them dangerously approaching humans and told me they should be hunted down and killed for safety

reasons.

“He was a little too zealous and my hackles were raised in his presence. Undoubtedly he used his mind-altering mojo on me in order to convince me to grab my rifle and head out for the kill.”

“Geez. What kept you from being convinced?”

“His biggest mistake was sending me here. As soon as he told me I’d find three large wolves hanging around this area, I knew. A hundred-watt light bulb went off in my head. I drove straight here and waited on the front porch for the Durhams to return. Sure enough, it

didn't take long for three naked men to lope out of the woods toward me. And the rest is history, as they say."

Hardin jerked as though he'd forgotten where he was and resumed his frantic peering out the crack between the curtain and the window frame.

He continued, "As far as we know, none of the other wolf packs have had any success catching this vampire either."

"There are other werewolves?" Juliana held her breath. Her fingers ached where she gripped the blanket around her shoulders. She

stared at the sheriff.

“Well, Sergius and his brothers at least have family. They came here from South Carolina where they left cousins, aunts and uncles to establish their own home in a new territory.”

Juliana wandered back over to the couch and lay down when the story seemed to be over. Way too much to think about. She snuggled under the soft comfort of the blanket and closed her eyes. Her brain swam with all the information she couldn't even begin to process all at once. She fought sleep, but it didn't help. The

curtain of darkness tiptoed over her
like a thief in night.

Chapter Twelve

“Juliana?” Strong arms wrapped around Juliana’s frame, and she startled when they lifted her into the air, still wrapped like a burrito in the cover she’d burrowed into.

Her eyes mere slits, she saw Sergius’s face inches from her and breathed a sigh of relief. He’d come back. At least there was that. “What happened?” she murmured.

“Nothing much. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow. Sleep. Gonna carry you to bed.”

Bed. Nice. And his bed. Even

nicer. She remembered the soft sheets, the smell of him all around her as she'd slept earlier, before the craziness had turned her world upside-down.

"So tired."

"I know. Just sleep."

She landed gently on the firm mattress and stretched out. Without opening her eyes again, she was only vaguely aware of the tender touch that tugged her cocoon of warmth away and then covered her with the cooler sheets of the huge bed. Before she could manage to fully drift off again, she found herself surrounded in a firm

embrace that chased away the chill of the sheets and lured her under.

Serg stared down at the sleeping form of the beautiful woman beside him and held her even closer. She was so small, but not fragile. Not physically or emotionally, which brought a smile to his face. She'd never be bowled over by him or his brothers. No, she'd set them in their place fast and furiously. He'd no doubt.

Her skin was smooth and perfect. Her glorious curls lay across his pillow and he leaned over to put his cheek on them and smell her

scent. Not quite hers, actually. She'd used his shampoo earlier. He'd make a trip to town tomorrow to get whatever supplies she required. He wanted her to smell all feminine and Juliana-like, as she had when he'd first found her. Even before that. Hell, her scent had permeated the cruiser this morning before he'd met her. *Was that just this morning?*

Well, yesterday he supposed. It was almost one in the morning now.

She was passionate. He'd known that just by seeing her hair the first time, all tousled and falling out of

the band she'd started out wearing on the hike.

Were all redheads so fiery? Or was that a stereotype and he'd gotten lucky?

The stress of the last few hours melted away as he gazed at his mate.

They hadn't come face to face with McKinney, but they had run to the edge of the national forest, chasing him out of their territory. Too bad the bastard was quicker than them. They'd have ripped him limb for limb given the opportunity.

Never in ten years had he had

the balls to come so close to their cabin. Sergius swallowed hard. The vamp wanted something and wasn't about to give up easily. Sergius nuzzled Juliana's neck. The fucking vampire couldn't have her. *Ever*. Serg would do everything in his power to ensure that fact.

Exhausted himself from the long day and the long run, Sergius closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

Goddamn animals. Who in the hell do they think they are?

Keeton paced a hole in the

ground, literally.

With his strength, he could punch a tree trunk and damage it beyond repair. And he had. Several.

He needed to feed too. That bear he'd had earlier would have been enough under normal circumstances to last him for days. In fact, he'd done that purposefully to keep himself from killing the redhead. He wanted her like he'd never wanted anything in his life. He could taste her essence on the tip of his tongue. She was *his*. He had plans that didn't include those bastard werewolves.

His mouth watered thinking of

tasting her sweet alabaster skin. He was sure he could keep himself from killing her. Just a taste now and then to lure her, keep her in enough of a stupor to not realize she was under his influence.

Humans didn't live forever, but as long as you gave them just a nip occasionally, you'd kill several birds with one stone. They'd take in enough vampire serum to keep them slightly delirious and pliable, always willing, ready and able. Second, the serum's qualities would prolong their lives considerably, slowing down the aging process. And third, and perhaps most

important, the host got the pleasure of tasting the sweetest nectar in the world day in and day out.

His woman was currently hiding out in the home of those damn animals. And no stinking shapeshifter was going to ruin her for him.

He just had to figure out how to lure her into his arms and the rest would be history. All he needed was patience. They couldn't watch her every second of every day forever. No, soon they'd fuck up... and then the prize would be his.

Chapter Thirteen

Something heavy and hot pressed Juliana into the bed. She wiggled to free herself from the obstruction while her mind struggled to remember where she was and why she was so encumbered.

It was so dark. She could barely breathe under the firm arm pinning her across the chest. Soft hairs tickled her nose. *Arm?*

Her eyes flew open as realization dawned. She was with a man. She never slept with a man. A moment

of terror made her almost scream before she managed to push the covers away from her face and caught a glimpse of her surroundings.

Sergius. Jesus. She must have been dead to the world to forget *that* man. And no doubt, considering how tired she'd been. She had a vague recollection of him carrying her to bed from the couch. After that, nothing.

Obviously he'd tucked himself in right alongside her and now was attempting to suffocate her with his body heat. Geez, the man's core temperature was not ninety-eight

point six, that was for sure.

Right...he wasn't exactly human. Who knew how many degrees the wolf body maintained?

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light coming in the window. The moon was low in the sky. What time was it?

Ugh. "Serg...Get...off...me." His arm weighed a ton. It was a wonder she'd managed to stay alive under it without a crushing chest injury.

Ya think you might be exaggerating a smidge?

"Mmm." He pulled her closer instead of releasing her.

"Serg."

“Yeah?”

“Your arm.” Shit, his leg was over both of hers too. She was well and totally pinned. She squirmed fruitlessly against him for a minute, trying to rouse him. Well, apparently not “fruitlessly” because her hip grazed over the “fruit” of her efforts and he was definitely “roused”. At least one part of him was. Even if his brain hadn’t fully caught up.

With a final shove, she wiggled free and scrambled toward the other side of the bed for cooler sheets. Damn, that man was hot.

Serg, however, flung himself into

a sitting position the moment she broke contact, sending her into giggles at the image of him bolting forward as though he were hinged like a zombie.

“What? What happened? You okay?”

“Fine. You were suffocating me.”

“Your skin is so cool and smooth, it felt wonderful against mine.”

“Yeah, well, yours is way too hot. Felt like I was in a sauna.”

He took a few shallow breaths, seemed to stare her in the eyes even through the darkness. “Come here.” One hand reached out for her. His voice was husky, deep.

Sexy.

When she leaned back a few inches instead of forward, a stream of moonlight hit his face, enlightening her to his serious expression. His chest heaved for breath as though he'd been exercising instead of sleeping.

His full lips were sensual, especially when he drew one side of his mouth up in a half smile, but as she watched, the tip of his tongue licked across his bottom lip and then traveled around to lick the top one.

The sudden need to taste those lips made her belly tighten. She

clenched the sheets on both sides of her to keep from flinging herself into his arms.

Sure, earlier today she'd practically begged him to make love to her. Embarrassing to think back on. But that was before.

Before they'd reentered civilization. Before she'd had a good meal and something to drink. Before she'd found out a madman was after her. Before...she'd seen Serg shift into a werewolf.

So why did her heart beat rapidly in her chest? Her hands itched to wander around that wide expanse of chest. Her pussy ached to have

that enormous cock she'd seen earlier stuffing her to the hilt.

Lord, you've lost your marbles, girl.

Serg smiled as though he knew what she was thinking. He leaned forward the few inches necessary for contact, wrapped his huge hand around her upper arm, and dragged her body toward his.

She lay on the bed, shaking beneath his gaze as though she were cold, when moments ago she'd been burning up. The quiver in her body wasn't from a chill this time. It was the product of her lust.

Her tongue reached out of its own accord to lick her lips as she

stared at his and thought about how talented she knew he could be with that tongue. He'd used it yesterday to swirl around and around her nipples, driving her to the edge of sanity.

Sergius leaned the last few inches and placed a sweet kiss on her lips. "I want you so bad, baby." God, his words alone ratcheted up her arousal. Blood surged through her veins. He leaned closer, angling his head and pressing against her mouth with more determination. His tongue was everywhere, inside and outside. He devoured her, and she was lost in the sensation.

Her body melted against the mattress, all doubts skittering away.

He hovered over her. When she felt the heat pooling in her belly, she flung her arms out and grabbed Serg by the biceps. He didn't come any closer though, no matter how much she silently pleaded with him to let his weight rest on her. She craved the feeling of his skin next to hers.

Instead, he pulled back, nipped around her lips a few times and then gazed into her eyes, into her soul. "We have to talk."

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?"

“Not this time.” His gaze roamed her face. He reached with one finger and brushed hair out of her eyes, tucked it behind her ears, barely grazing over her skin.

“Wolves mate for life, Juliana.” He said her name like a caress. “I need you to understand the implications of us making love.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip, felt her brow scrunch up. How big a deal could it be? It was just sex. She really wanted him to shut up, get naked and take her over that precipice she remembered from yesterday. No one had ever affected her like he did. She wanted to do it

again. *Now.*

“We call it a claiming. When we meet the right woman, we know, instantly. Our bodies react chemically. Everything about you calls to me. Your scent, your body, your mind...” He glanced away and took a deep breath before turning back.

She let him continue. He needed to get this out, whatever it was. She felt like she understood on a visceral level. After all, wasn't she reacting rather violently to him also?

“What I'm trying to say is...this isn't just sex for me, Juliana. When I

take you, it's for good. I won't let you go. You won't want me to. Your body will need mine as much as I need you after we mate. Perhaps more so."

If he wanted her half as bad as she wanted him right now, it'd be enough to sustain them for a lifetime. But she needed to clear her head. Think. Was he saying this was a commitment for him? Just having intercourse with her was enough to make a lifetime promise?

Could she do that?

Could she not?

Of course, that was ridiculous. Then again, everything that had

happened for the past day and a half was impossible. Still, there was no way she could commit to a man she barely knew, especially one that turned into a wolf.

“I swear to you, Juliana, to love and adore you for the rest of our lives. It’s a process that grows over time until a mated pair can’t even imagine life without the other. However, I won’t take you without you understanding the implications, the intensity of the pledge I’m making to you. There’s no going back. No regrets.”

Juliana eased out from under him. His arms held him rigid above

her, and she scooted back until she was sitting, leaning against the headboard.

“So, you’re saying we can’t just have sex right now and move on? You don’t do one-night stands? Are you a virgin?” The thought almost made her gasp. This did not seem like a man who had no experience.

“No, I’m not a virgin. Yes, I’ve had one-night stands, but not with the woman I knew was my mate for life. You are that woman. All bets are off. This is different.”

She froze. Different? This was most assuredly different. Even in the limited relationships she’d had,

she'd never felt anything near what she felt right now, and he wasn't even touching her. The man made her squirm. Her sex wept. Her heart pounded. Her palms sweated.

His intensity, the look in his eyes — grave, serious, kind, loving... All those qualities combined to melt her resolve. She wanted him. So bad. More than she'd ever wanted anything before in her life. But she was human. Did humans have that sort of reaction?

“Why do I feel so drawn to you? I'm not even a...”

“Shapeshifter. It just happens that way. Even though you're

human, your body knows deep inside that you belong to me. Our pheromones call to each other. Just like animals have for centuries in the wild. Humans don't heed that call. Their ability to reason supersedes anything so carnal. Nevertheless it's there in your soul, an innate draw to mate with the right being."

His words sucked her in, drew her to want to touch him. Run her hands over him. It seemed so reasonable. She knew if she so much as stroked a knuckle over his cheek it was all over.

Do it. With shaking fingers, she

ran the tips along his jaw, his brow, his chin. And then she wrapped her palm around his head and whispered, "Okay."

Sergius released a long breath and tugged her back down until she was flat beneath him. Her shirt rode up, became trapped under her. It felt suddenly too tight, confining.

"Way too many clothes here. I want to feel you against me," she mumbled. She crossed her arms over her chest and jerked her tank top over her head.

She lay under him in just her shorts and panties.

Nerves skittered across her skin,

pebbling it with goose bumps. Following his gaze, she glanced down at her breasts. Her nipples stood at attention, but they were small. It registered that he hadn't seen her before, as much as he'd explored her in the cave. It had been too dark.

"Don't look at yourself like that." He took her chin in his hand.

"You're so perfect." With a finger, he wiped her brow, brushed the frown off her face with a touch.

"I'm so small." She bit her lip, gazed at him in wonder. *What does he see in me?*

"I saw you naked yesterday. Did

I seem unimpressed then? Why are you so embarrassed today?"

"It was pitch dark. You *felt* me. That's not the same. I feel more exposed now."

A quick grin flashed to her gaze. "I see perfectly in the dark. I'm a wolf."

She moaned and turned her head to the side. *God.*

"Just right. So gorgeous." Holding himself aloft with one hand, he trailed the huge, work-roughened fingers of his other hand down her neck and circled her breasts. So light a grazing, she could barely feel him. A spiral

pattern ensued around first one breast and then the other, never reaching the center – the nipples that ached to be flicked, pinched, nibbled, sucked. God, anything. If he would just touch her...more.

“I’ve never seen a more spectacular sight. Your skin is so smooth, flawless. Look at yourself. Look at the contrast between your pale, perfect chest against my darker, rough hand. Look, baby. Look what you do to me.”

Juliana tipped her gaze down from his face to his hands, worshipping her body. He was shaking, his fingers dancing over

her skin, barely touching her because of the shiver in them. Sure enough, even the contrast of their skin tones was arousing. Or maybe it was his poetic version.

“I could stare at you all day.”

“Please don’t. I need you inside me.” She arched into his touch, grasped the sheet beneath her with both fists.

He smiled, but kept his gaze locked on her chest as though it were the most wonderful piece of art he’d ever seen.

A fresh wave of heat sent dampness to the space between her legs. Could she come from this light

tickling to her chest?

“Please...” She tried so hard not to squirm. And didn’t want to beg as though she couldn’t control her body’s reaction to him.

“Please what, baby? This?” He flicked a finger over first one nipple and then the other. She writhed and arched higher off the bed, a deep moan escaping her lips. *God help me.*

Feelings she’d never known existed surfaced. A deep need to be *one* with the man languidly enjoying this as though he had all the time in the world.

“We aren’t in any hurry. Just

enjoy yourself. I want to make you burn, baby. I want you to come under my touch again and again. I want to mark you. Make you mine with my mouth, my lips, and then my cock."

In a blink, Serg straddled her waist and pinched both nipples between his fingers.

Juliana bucked her torso up toward him, but he held himself out of reach. The only thing he wore was a pair of cotton shorts, but they did nothing to hide the erection bulging in the front.

Licking her lips, she reached around him and grabbed his ass to

squeeze his firm glutes with her fingers. She let her hands trail from there to the front so she could wrap one palm around his erection through his loose cotton shorts while the other weighed his sac.

Serg moaned and gave her no more than a few seconds of exploration before he snatched both wrists and tugged them over her head. "You can't do that, baby. I'll shoot off before I'm ready."

"I'm ready."

A smile spread across his face.
"No, you're not."

She didn't know how she could be any more ready than she was

right now. Her pulse sped. The temperature of her skin rivaled his. And small spasms had already started to spark in her core. She wanted him so bad, her heels dug into the mattress in an effort to arch into him again.

“I’m a bit dominant in bed, baby. I like things my way. Not known for being very flexible about it.” He seemed to search her face while he rearranged his grip so that one hand held both of hers over her head, firm against the pillow. The other hand pressed against her stomach, dislodging her feet so she lost purchase.

He was going to kill her with his fucking *words*.

How much more aroused could she get?

“Prove it. Show me, goddamnit. Just...do something. I’m so horny.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” The word came out on a breath. She didn’t know why she should or would, but she did. With her life. And her body.

“Let me take your choice away. That’s a lot to ask of someone who had their first orgasm yesterday. But I guarantee it’ll heighten your experience to a level that will blow your mind. And it would be so

fucking sexy to have my woman, my mate, the person I will spend the rest of my life worshipping, give me that control our first time together.”

“Choice?” *What does he mean?* She held her breath again.

Sergius leaned down and nibbled a path to her ear, gently licked the lobe and dipped his tongue inside to send a chill straight down her body.

He whispered, barely audibly, “Let me restrain you, baby. Force you to come at my hand, over and over again until you can’t take it anymore...and then I’ll give you

my rock-hard cock, hard and fast. Let me make you want it so bad you can't stand another moment without having me inside you, pumping my seed into you. I'll make you beg. I'll make you know with all your heart and soul that you belong to me, always and forever. You'll never want another man to touch you again."

The moan she emitted was long and deep. Her eyes fluttered shut. She couldn't speak. Her throat felt closed, almost raw as though she'd been screaming for hours. Her mouth was dry. Her tongue couldn't even gather enough saliva

to lick her lips. All she could do was nod. Even opening her eyes wasn't a possibility. The stimuli created by sight would make her cry with need.

"Say it, baby. I need more than a nod. Tell me what you want."

Oh God, he was good at this. Was this the foreplay women always complained about needing? 'Cause obviously none of them had met the right man.

All doubt fled. He didn't have to restrain her to have his way with her. She was his already. Irrevocably. Did he not know that?

"Tie me up. Make me yours." The

words were murmured so low even she could barely hear them echoing in her head. They burned in her throat. Saying them out loud sent a new pool of moisture to dampen her panties. She wiggled her ass against the sheets. It was the closest she could come to relieving the tension growing between her thighs.

When he pressed her belly into the mattress again, she squeezed her legs together.

“Hold still.” He let go of her hands abruptly and leaned over to the bedside table. When he righted himself over her, she never even

had a chance to see what he had retrieved because the first thing he did was cover her eyes with a soft material. The dim room went black.

He lifted her head a few inches and tied the swath of fabric behind her. When he laid her back on the pillow, his hands tangled themselves in her hair and spread the long, messy locks around her. "Love your hair, baby. It's fiery, like you. I want to see it spread out all over my pillowcase while I take you."

Her arms still lay limp above her head. She hadn't even remembered their existence until another strip of

fabric delicately tiptoed up her inner arm and reached her fingertips. Serg wrapped the material in a figure eight around her wrists, and then he tied it off beyond them to the headboard. The languid speed of his movements did not match the haste she felt or the rate of her heartbeat thumping wildly against her chest.

“Beautiful.” He kissed her lips briefly and pulled back, leaving her reaching her tongue out into thin air in desperation. She needed to taste him again. “Relax. I promise you the best sex of your life. Well, to date. It’ll get better and better

later today, and tomorrow, and the next day."

"Too much talking." She bit her lip again.

"Oh? Hmmm. I can make this last all night if I want."

His threat did nothing to slow her libido.

"In fact, every time you complain, I'll back off. Slow down. Make you wait longer. So I suggest you keep those soft, provocative lips sealed until I either ask you a question or tell you when you can start begging."

A low groan escaped her parted lips, unbidden.

“Oh, those sexy little sounds you make are permitted.” He chuckled, the vibrations coming closer and closer until he nipped her neck and trailed a line of kisses down her throat and across her chest.

When his lips closed over a nipple she bucked her hips. He'd lowered enough that her clit rubbed slightly against his stomach through the material of her shorts.

Instead of rising away from her reach, this time Serg flattened himself onto her and rested his torso against her sex. Her legs were pinned together still and she couldn't get the friction she so

desired against her clit.

It was hard to concentrate on her lower region, though, when a pattern of torment began on her chest. One nipple was sucked deep into his mouth, seeming to encompass almost her entire globe. He plucked at the other, making the bud stand at attention, and then grasped it between several fingers and rolled it back and forth.

“Ugh, Serg—”

“Uh, uh, uh.” His fingers and mouth disappeared, adding fuel to her desperation.

She ground her teeth together to keep from pleading with him

prematurely. The roller coaster of emotions was sheer torture.

Two heartbeats later, he resumed, having switched nipples. Suck, lick, blow, release. An indefinite pattern kept her toes curled in anticipation.

“These are the sweetest nipples in the world. You taste like honey. An appetizer to the main course, which will surely be a culinary delight.”

Was he talking about her sex? God, the man needed to shut up. He was a master with the English language. And rapidly becoming the master of her body.

Serg released the pinch on one nipple and two seconds later she screamed his name as he lifted off her a few inches and pressed his thumb into her trapped clit. Without warning a small orgasm pulsed through her, the rasp of lace between his pressure and her needy nub enough to push her over the precipice.

“Oh, baby. That’s so hot. I haven’t even touched your sweet, bare pussy yet, and you’re already giving me a little piece of yourself.” His words tumbled onto her chest, the breath creating a cool line of goose bumps on her sensitive

mound. "If this is your reaction, I will have to restrain you more often."

She couldn't comment, which was a good thing, because the last thing she wanted was for him to stop. *Please get inside me now.* Seconds went by without him removing his thumb.

"What if I do this?" He moved so fast. One second he was straddling her and the next he was gone. His hands grasped her shorts and panties together and pulled them down her legs and off. "Spread your legs for me, baby. Let me look at you. I didn't get to see the pink

folds of your sex yesterday.”

Tentatively, she let her legs fall open. A flush rose against her cheeks and spread down her neck and over her rising chest. So exposed. So vulnerable.

Her imagination of him staring at her naked pussy was more than she could stand.

“Wider, baby. Let your legs fall open farther.”

When she didn't move far enough, Sergius laid his palms against her thighs and spread them as wide as she could stretch, pressing her knees open into the mattress.

She heaved for breath. *He's gazing at my most intimate parts. Fuck, he's breathing only inches from my clit.*

“So fucking beautiful. Don't ever doubt that.” His words puffed air onto her wetness. The effect was a chill that made her shiver. Wetness escaped her center to trickle down between her ass cheeks.

She twisted her head to one side as if that would keep her from calling out to him. She even managed to bite into the pillowcase.

“You're glistening. So pink. So hot. Your clit is peaking out of its

hood, pulsing with need. Are you as tight as I remember?"

He waited a beat. Did he want her to answer that?

"Good girl. You want me to stuff your mouth with something easier to bite down on? I'm sure I have another scarf around here someplace."

She froze, her teeth clamping onto the sheet. Would he?

Instead, he pushed one finger into her sheath, the shock so intense she shuddered and had to squeeze her eyes tight behind the blindfold to keep from coming again on the spot. How

embarrassing.

“Oh, baby. Don’t hold back on me. Come for me again. Come around my finger. Come once more and then I’ll suck your clit into my mouth and drag a mind-numbing release from your pussy.”

Fuck.

Another finger joined the first; they twisted, and then raked along the top lining of her sex across her G-spot.

The pillowcase fell from her lips. “Oh, God. You’re killing me.” Her hips lifted off the bed and she held herself rigid. *Right...there.*

She couldn’t stop it.

He made no mention of her indiscretion. "Let it go." He reached back inside, as deep as he could, and did it again.

Her body had no choice, as he'd wanted. The pulsing release milked his fingers, waves of surrender given to this man who controlled her mind and her body.

She gasped for air. Fell limp against the bed.

And yet she wanted more. How could she? She needed to feel him filling her, driving into her body until they were one being.

He wasn't done yet. True to his promise, his lips wrapped around

her clit and sucked the little nub into his mouth. Her second orgasm wasn't quite over. He didn't let up. His tongue flicked over and over the single most sensitive spot on her body, his mouth consuming her, his fingers pumping in and out of her.

So close. So close to the biggest release of her life. She could feel it coming. Every nerve ending in her came alive. Her legs trembled. She wanted this feeling to last forever, to be repeated as often as possible until she died.

More pressure. If she could just mash herself into his open mouth.

Her head rolled back and forth. She only knew this because strands of hair tangled around her lips.

Serg's one free hand released her thigh and landed across her torso, pinning her to the bed, forcing her to take what he gave, to let him control her orgasm, the depth, the duration, the intensity.

Over the edge she fell again. Her clit pulsed in rhythm with the walls of her channel. She hadn't known... It was so good. So right. So intense.

A deep inhale held in her chest as she rode the waves of this ecstasy. Serg's fingers remained buried deep, curling and twisting

around to reach every spot inside her. His mouth sucked and sucked, dragging out the orgasm until the over-stimulation made her flinch, forced the breath from her lungs.

Only then did he gradually release her from his clutches, his fingers, tongue, mouth and arm relaxing against her body.

“So hot, so tight, so wet. My own personal aphrodisiac. I’m so hard, my dick hurts.” His lips brushed her sensitive areas as he spoke.

She needed him inside her — now. Needed to feel the stretch he would consume her with. Even after three life-altering orgasms.

She wanted to feel him go rigid and hard, pressed deep inside her, until he stiffened over her and called her name.

Serg climbed up her body and whipped the mask from her eyes. She blinked up into his face, startled. It was unexpected. He would let her look into his eyes while he made her his.

“I need a second.” He caught his breath, rose off her body and flung one arm between them. His teeth gritted together, and she watched the strain on his face as he scrunched his eyes. *What?*

Her gaze wandered down his

chest to his cock. He'd gripped the length with his palm and pressed his thumb into the slit at the top. It looked painful. When had he taken his shorts off?

"I—"

"Hang on, baby," he mumbled through his teeth. "I don't want to come too fast. I want to last at least a few strokes inside you."

"And that's helping?" she whispered. *Geez.*

He smiled and let his forehead press against hers.

Blessed Jesus.

Hands shaking, Serg reached

above her head and released her arms. The wolf in him beamed with pride. He tried to keep his face expressionless. *Why? So she doesn't know how bad you need her? You think you can hide your desire?*

He let his eyes drift closed, hid from her. Hid the fact that she made him so aroused. He'd never cared before...with any woman.

Tiny hands slid to his face.
“Serg?”

He couldn't speak.

“What is it? Tell me.” Her voice, so soothing, made him swallow his pride.

He gazed into deep pools of

understanding that made his chest squeeze. This woman who'd just come undone beneath him really cared about him. Worry furrowed her brow. Her fingers grazed his cheeks, easing his nerves.

His arms quivered when she smoothed her palms down his biceps.

"I want it to be perfect. I'm not going to last this first time. Round two will be better. I promise."

Her grin spread across her entire face. "And here I thought you'd changed your mind or something."

"Ha." Was she delusional? "Not a chance in hell, baby. I just can't

seem to rein the little head in after watching your lithe, sexy body come undone under me.”

“Then let’s skip round one, if it means so much to you, and aim for round two.” The nymph sucked her bottom lip inside her mouth, teasing him.

“Right. You want me to step out of the room a moment while I blow the first load? I’ll be right back.” He didn’t move, of course. He was kidding.

“No, I want to swallow the first round.”

What? Fuck me. His eyes shot open wide. Not what he’d

expected.

His cock was now jumping to attention, having heard her words as if spoken directly to it. *Down, boy.*

He shook his big head while his little head bobbed up and down as if nodding. "No, baby. Not this time. This time is about you."

"If we're sealing some sort of deal here for eternity, I'd say this time is about *us*. And I want to taste you as you did me. I want to feel the weight of your cock in my hand, in my mouth. I want to hear you moan with pleasure as you just demanded of me." She pushed him off his knees and onto his ass, kept

bearing down on his chest until he lay on his back sprawled across the bed. His cock bobbed in the air. Juliana kneeled over him, straddled his legs as he had hers.

Oh...my...God... Never had anyone taken over his body like this. He'd always been in control. Always been dominant, in charge. Loved to make his woman shatter beneath his command.

This? This was hot. He gripped the sheets with his fists, straining to let her have her way.

"I want to feel your skin on my tongue. Taste every inch of your flesh." She grasped his erection

with one hand, stroked up and down twice.

He had to hold his breath to avoid coming in her hand. *The woman wants to taste you. Don't blow it. Literally... Think of something awful. Something gross. Cleaning out the barn...*

Nope, his mind wouldn't veer from the delicate fingers strumming him like a violin. Her other hand reached to fondle his balls. He watched her, mesmerized by the look on her face.

He might have been a self-proclaimed dominant in the past, but that was then. This mate of his

was going to spin his world on its axis and turn the tables on him. And he...he was going to let her. Whenever she wanted.

Her finger grazed over the slit at the top of his cock, spread the leakage around his sensitive head.

He stiffened his legs. Never took his gaze off her face.

She lifted her eyes finally and smiled up at him while lowering her head toward the object of his greatest need.

At the last second she looked back down and...*holy mother of God*. Those sweet, soft, plump lips sucked his rigid length all the way

into her tight little mouth and held him there. One hand remained wrapped around the base and the other held the weight of his sac in her palm. On withdrawal she swirled her tongue around the head and moaned.

Sergius bucked up into her mouth to stop that tongue from pushing him over the edge. Without breaking contact, his amazing mate lifted one leg, shoved his apart with her knee and forced her thigh between his.

Jesus Christ, what is she doing now? He felt more vulnerable and exposed with his legs spread out.

Not a position he ever expected to be in.

Juliana released Serg's cock with a small pop and lifted her torso. She stared straight into his eyes while she lowered her open sex onto his thigh, ground her clit against the coarse hair of his leg. Her wetness burned into him.

Her eyelids lowered as she scooted down his leg until she could suck him back into the warm depths of her throat for a second time.

Sergius was so fucked.

His hands flew to her head, not raising or lowering her with any

force, enjoying the feel of her as she sucked him into her mouth.

Three passes — that was all she got before he tightened his grip in her hair. “Juliana, I’m going to come. Stop, baby.”

She didn’t obey. Fleetinglly, he thought she was a horrible sub, but the suction she had on him chased that idea into the stratosphere. She was welcome to top him any time she wanted.

White-hot lights danced before his eyes as he squeezed them shut and shot pulse after pulse of his come deep into her throat.

“Oh, baby. Juliana.” He loosened

the hold he had on her hair. His hands jerked, mimicking the pulse of his cock.

She swallowed him. Every drop. And then licked a line down his dick and around his balls, swirling her tongue over every inch of his skin and humming softly.

With a low moan, she finally propped her chin on his thigh and gazed up at him over his package. She smiled, all traces of her early shyness evaporated.

“It’s still hard.” She glanced at his only partially tamed erection and then back at his eyes.

He chuckled. “It’s already

thinking about being inside you.”

He wrapped his hands around her head and tugged, urging her to climb up his body. Apropos since she'd just bested him at his own game of dominance. She complied, crawled her lithe body up his until they were face to face.

She held herself above him with her hands on both sides of his head. Her breasts hung over his pecs, her nipples tight and poking out, grazing his chest. He wanted to squeeze them between his fingers, tease her into submission once again. But not now. Now he needed to finish the claiming before he lost

his mind.

He took her mouth with his, roughly exploring her. She tasted of him, salty. He didn't care. He liked it. Knowing she'd sucked him dry was so heady his shaft pulsed back into its fully engorged state. Demanding another release.

"Now, baby," he mumbled against her mouth.

With no warning, Sergius flipped them over until she lay on her back while he rose above her and settled between her knees.

She was as prepared as she could be, and he was relieved when she wrapped her arms around his neck

and relaxed into the bed. He could smell her arousal.

He wouldn't take her without making her come with him, that was a given.

With her soft, supple body splayed out under him, he gazed admiringly at her pale complexion, smooth and unblemished. Later he'd enjoy running his tongue all over her skin, tasting every inch of her.

Sergius slipped one hand between their torsos and dragged his fingers through her still-wet slit. She arched into him as much as she could. A moan escaped her parted

lips.

She gazed directly into his eyes.

Serg ran his hand up her body, her stomach dipping as he skittered his fingers over it. When he reached her nipple, goose bumps rose across her chest. Her breath increased once again. He never broke eye contact.

“Juliana Polanski, will you give yourself to me? Spend your life as my mate?”

“Yes.” The word came out on a strangled breath. “Yes, Sergius. I will.”

Serg pressed his rigid length between her thighs and lined

himself up with her opening.

Teeth gritted, he eased himself into her an inch before backing up and repeating the same movement.

A brief slide out and then another few inches in. Again.

God, she's tight. He knew that. But feeling it around his dick was an entirely different story.

She moaned around his girth when he was halfway in. "Sergius, for the love of God, please." He froze. "I want to feel you inside me. All...the...way."

That was it. Deep, sharp breath in, and he plunged to the hilt. *Fuck.* The stars realigned in the sky.

He held still for only a brief moment and then pulled out, setting a rhythm that Juliana imitated. She might have been on the bottom, offering herself up to him as his mate, but she was not entirely submissive. She was controlling him at least as much as he was her. Lifting her torso to him, matching him stroke for stroke.

Soft whimpers wafted up to his ears. He wasn't going to last long. Even following so close on the heels of her blowjob.

He skimmed his fingers down her body, spread his wide palm across her stomach and pressed his

thumb firmly against her clit.

"Serg." Her orgasm took him by surprise. He hadn't expected her to come so fast. But when her walls squeezed around his already tight cock, he couldn't keep from coming at the peak of her own climax, which milked him until he thought he'd burst.

He held himself inside her, letting his semen pulse deep into her womb. Over and over she continued to contract around him, her head thrashing back and forth, her voice echoing her moans around the room.

When at last he was completely

spent and Juliana stopped quivering around him, he eased out of her and fell onto the bed beside her. He wrapped his arms around her middle and pulled her back into his chest.

Her breasts heaved, her breathing labored. With his upper hand, he smoothed her curls away from her face. Her brow was damp from sweat.

She smelled spectacular with her pheromones filling the room.

A sliver of light peeked through the window, indicating it was almost morning. He didn't care. They were not getting up any time

soon. His brothers would understand and take care of the horses without him.

He kissed her brow. Her mouth curled into a small smile.

“You’re mine.”

“Who else’s would I be?” she muttered into the pillow as she drifted off.

Chapter Fourteen

Juliana woke to the wonderful smells of bacon and syrup wafting into the room.

She smiled without opening her eyes. Still burrowed deep beneath the comforter, she didn't think she could move. Every muscle in her body ached. A good ache.

She stretched one hand out to the space next to her. It was still warm, but Serg wasn't there.

When she finally opened one eye, she could see it was late morning. Bright sun streamed

through the window, casting a long ray of light across the room.

"Juliana, baby."

She smiled, stretching, before she eased into a sitting position. The blanket fell to her waist, exposing her breasts, nipples beading against the cool air that caressed them.

"Sergius?" She scanned the room for him and realized she was alone. Had she just imagined his voice?

"You're awake. Don't get out of bed. I'm bringing coffee."

She jerked her gaze to the door as it opened and he backed into the room, ass first — an ass clad only in low, well-worn jeans. She saw why

when he turned around, holding two mugs, steam rising. The rich scent of coffee filled the room. The fine expanse of naked, muscled, male chest filled the doorframe.

“Morning—” The broad smile he wore faded. “What? You okay?”

“Yes.” Confusion warred in her head. She’d heard him speak to her, but he hadn’t been in the room.

He set the cups down on the bedside table and climbed up beside her. “You don’t look like you’re okay.”

“It’s just—” Unease slipped into her chuckle. “I mean—I thought I heard you—” She shook her head.

His worry left his face, wiped away from top to bottom until his lips fell open as hers were.

Rough hands formed around her face in contradiction to their gentle touch, and he lowered his head to place a kiss on her lips, a slight brush against her that sent tingles down her body.

“That’s awesome,” he murmured. “I’d hoped...”

“What is? Why do I seem to be inside your head?”

“Thought transference. It’s a wolf thing. My siblings and I can communicate through our thoughts. We sort of talk to each

other.” He settled more comfortably in front of her and took her hands. “But it’s nothing like this. I can feel your emotions. Sense what you’re thinking even when you aren’t trying to tell me something. I knew mates could communicate, but I didn’t know it would be like this. You’re like an open book. And I hadn’t expected it to happen so quickly.”

“What? Like telepathy?”

“Sort of.”

“So I didn’t imagine you telling me you were bringing coffee?”

“No. I sensed the instant you woke up and grabbed you a mug.

Didn't even occur to me you'd heard my thoughts directed your way. I was just sort of talking to myself."

"That's just...weird."

"Yeah, you scared the hell out of me when I saw your face. But then I suddenly felt you in my head, knew what you were doing."

"And then you got into mine." She narrowed her gaze at him, but grinned. "Can I turn it off? I don't think I need you knowing my every thought." The idea made her cringe. She'd have no privacy.

"You'll learn to control it. Block some things. But your emotions,

especially when they're strong, will resonate to me. I'll probably always sense when you are in pain, angry, sad, happy and especially aroused, even from a distance."

Her pussy grew damp. Her abdominal muscles clenched as though she were about to start her period. Almost an ache. No...not a pain, a need.

She moaned and flopped back on the bed. Flung her arm over her eyes.

To make matters worse, she knew without looking he was staring at her breasts. Through his eyes her chest was a beautiful

expanse of unblemished, perfect, white skin. The small disks of her areolas and even smaller nipples were just the right size for him to suckle. His cock grew hard. Juliana flinched at the unbidden images. She could literally *feel* what Sergius experienced.

He wanted her, needed her, naked and beneath him. Tenderness she'd never known existed oozed from him and flowed into her. He craved a repeat performance. No, he wanted a new experience. Wanted to lay her down and worship her body tenderly, slowly, lick, taste, feel her

all over. Spread her out and let his gaze wander all over her naked body so he could truly see her for the first time in the light of day.

She shook her head under her arm. Her mouth was too dry. She opened it, but syllables wouldn't form into words.

And still his thoughts bombarded her.

He stared at her and visualized a baby of theirs suckling that same little bud. His gaze moved to her flat, slender stomach as she panicked and he pondered what it would look like round with their child.

Fuck. Condoms. They hadn't used protection.

She should have been seriously worried about his sudden paternal thoughts where they concerned her. Instead she whipped her arm from her eyes and glared at him. "We forgot condoms."

"Huh?"

For as much as she could read his mind and follow his line of thinking, he'd been doing nothing of the same in the last minute. Just like a man.

"You know, a rubber? A raincoat? Latex? We didn't use anything to prevent pregnancy,

Serg.” She punched his arm to get his attention.

When he didn’t catch on fast enough, she pulled the sheet in her lap up under her armpits to cover herself from his wandering gaze and thoughts.

“Oh. Right. Baby, I’m a wolf. It’s not the same. I don’t carry human diseases, and I know you haven’t been with anyone recently enough to have anything, either. I couldn’t catch anything, even if you had.”

“I’m not talking about STDs, you oaf, I’m talking about babies.” Her voice rose as she squared off with him, eye to eye. Was he that dense?

He shook his head. "You're not pregnant, if that's what you're worried about. But I wouldn't mind."

"You wouldn't mind? Serg, that's insane. *I* would. I'm too young, haven't even figured out what I want to be when I grow up. I'm not ready to have a baby. And how would you know if I was pregnant? It's been like five hours since we had sex." She glared at him.

"I would smell it, baby. Instantly. I know everything about your body now. Well, most of it I knew before we mated, but now it's increased in intensity. I'll know when you

ovulate and when you conceive. My senses are much more heightened than yours."

She shook her head at him. "That's crazy. It's impossible."

"How do you think animals in the wild seem to mate at just the right moment to have a litter each spring? They smell it. Women of all species emit pheromones that give them away. It's just that human men can't scent them like wolves can."

Fuck, that was twisted and insane and sexy and hot all at the same time.

"It *is* kinda hot, isn't it?"

“Get out of my head.” She glared daggers at him around the humor she couldn’t keep at bay.

“Never. I love your head almost as much as I’m growing to love the rest of you.”

Silence stretched for several seconds. It was one thing to read and feel the love inside each other’s brains. It was another to verbalize it.

“You’re tense.”

“No shit. Who wouldn’t be?” Juliana still gripped the sheet as though it were a lifeline.

“How about a massage? I could rub your back?” He pulled her

gently by the legs farther down the bed. "Turn over. You can let your mind process all that info while I work my magic."

Yeah, like you don't have an ulterior motive.

"Well... Let's see how it goes. Start with the massage."

Juliana blew out a breath and flopped onto her stomach. Would she have no private thoughts for the rest of her life?

She gripped a soft, fluffy, down pillow with both arms and relaxed her cheek on the cool cotton material.

As though he were a magician

performing an act, Serg yanked the sheet from her body with a flourish she witnessed from her peripheral vision and tossed it aside to leave her naked.

Her lips curved up slightly, and she let her eyelids flutter shut as he began his magic. Firm hands kneaded her shoulders and neck.

Two seconds later he pulled back, muttering, "Just a sec. Don't move."

Juliana was too comfortable to even raise her face. The bed dipped alongside her. With her eyes closed, she listened to the sounds of a drawer opening and closing and then a small pop. Lotion? That

made sense.

The swoosh of palms rubbing together and then, “Ahh.” She was in heaven.

“Warming oil. You like it?” He chuckled, but his voice was low, gravelly.

“Mmmm.” *Don't stop.*

“*Wouldn't dream of it.*” Firm hands spread out across her shoulders with just the right pressure, easing the tight muscles as they worked their way down her back, along her spine.

Luxurious. Heavenly.

“The best part about giving your mate a massage is knowing exactly

how she wants it. I can read every emotion and tell when you need more or less pressure. That's incredible." The soothing words barely reached her ear.

The man was thorough. He worked his way down her back and then began once more from her feet up. By the time he reached her center again, she was purring. *Purring?* Geez.

Serg's huge hands pushed up her thighs until they gripped her butt cheeks, his thumbs grazing precariously close to her sex on the way.

Juliana spread her legs slightly,

unable to stop herself. The entire scene was so sensual that she was burning hot with need. Her stomach clenched and moisture pooled between her legs.

“God, Juliana. Your skin is so smooth. So beautiful. Do you know what you’re doing to me?” The husky words filled the silence.

“You? What about me?” *After all, I’m the one about to come from the massage.*

Sergius groaned aloud. In a swift change of tactics, he spread her legs and settled between them.

The instant exposure made Juliana bite her lip and twist her

face into the pillow for a moment.

Palms pressed into her ass cheeks, spreading them over and over again until she suddenly found herself yanked from the death grip she had on the pillow when Serg grabbed both thighs and pulled her backward so her ass was raised in the air.

“Ugh.” Her breath whooshed out of her as she propped herself up on her forearms to keep her face from holding up her body.

“So sexy. I need you, Juliana. Just like this.”

Was that a question? Because she couldn't begin to hold a

conversation right now, nor could she deny this man anything.

The sound of a zipper filled the air, and then she lost contact with him for a few seconds while he discarded his jeans.

Serg moaned and leaned forward to envelop her body with his, his smooth chest against her back, his cock bobbing between her folds.

He reached around her with both hands and molded her breasts, squeezing and fondling them until her nipples ached with the need to be pinched. "Oh, God." Juliana rocked forward on her knees at the sudden, firm sting that raced from

her chest down to the apex of her thighs.

The sex between us is going to be fantastic if everything I think becomes a reality.

Moments later, her nipples were released as Serg trailed his hands down the path of her stomach, pulled her thighs wider, and feathered over the sensitive area between her legs that desperately screamed for attention.

“Serg.” She nearly shouted his name, her legs trembling, fighting to hold her up.

“Hmmm?”

She leaned her forehead on the

mattress between her hands to steady herself.

A dance of fingers skipped around her clit, excruciating in their unwillingness to hit the right spot.

Juliana wiggled her ass back and forth, trying to coax Serg's hands to touch her where she needed it the most.

Finally, he chuckled in his low, sexy voice and gripped her clit between two fingers while pushing a few digits from his other hand inside her burning center.

She clenched his fingers with her pussy as they scissored, stretching

her and forcing her to buck into his cock as it rubbed a path between her butt cheeks.

“Please, Serg.” Her voice was a mere whisper. It didn’t matter. He knew what she wanted. And moments later, she was rewarded as he removed his fingers from inside her, dragged his length through her wetness, and then slammed into her until he was fully seated against her ass.

With both hands, he gripped her hips and held her still against his groin.

Ragged breathing, from both of them, filled the room.

Finally, he released her hips, trailed one hand up her spine and held on to her shoulder as he began to move. Tingles traveled the length of her back where he'd made the slight contact. Her pussy clutched at him, begging for movement.

And it was granted. A brisk pounding, in and out, that Juliana knew was the result of Sergius's inability to control his need to have her, hard and fast and now.

Her stomach clenched as she climbed around in his clouded mind and saw the desire he felt for her, making her chest pound in

rhythm with his cock. He was so overwhelmingly attracted to her that the emotion stopped her breath in her throat.

He was so close. Had been since he entered her. And she was relishing this new ability to feel his thoughts. It warmed her soul.

And then he reached around and rubbed her throbbing clit. All thoughts vanished with a poof. "Come for me, Juliana. Come around my cock. I can't hold back any longer." He uttered the words through his gritted teeth.

Juliana screamed, pressed her ass back as hard as she could and

squeezed her eyes shut as the huge waves of her orgasm milked the cock inside her.

Not releasing her clit from the continued assault of his fingers, Serg dragged the orgasm out for as long as he could until his own need forced him to grip her hips again and hold himself rigid inside her tightness while he came, pulsing inside her, plastered to her ass and thighs.

As Juliana came down from heaven, she finally collapsed onto her stomach, sprawled across the cool sheets, gasping for breath. Her face burned, sweat trickling across

her exposed cheek, and she was too weak to reach up and wipe it away.

Sergius landed alongside her, his arm across her body, his breath blowing against her neck to tickle her skin.

“Holy cow.”

Juliana giggled, a deep, guttural sound. “I’ll say.” She attempted to breathe slower so she could speak. “Do you suppose it’ll always be like that?”

“God, I hope so.”

“Why would we ever leave the bedroom?” She twisted to her side and snuggled against him, her back to his chest.

When his palm landed on her breast and grazed her nipple, she squirmed. How could that simple touch make her want him again so soon?

Sergius jerked his hand away and laughed. "Nymph."

"Whose fault is that?" She turned again until she lay on her back and faced him, her chest still heaving. She smiled into his gaze and batted her eyelashes until he swatted her thigh.

"As much as I'd love to do nothing all day but smash you into this mattress and fuck you silly, I need to help out around the house

and barn some before Jaxon and Micah get miffed.”

Juliana broadened her grin.
“Hmm.” The image of him
“fucking her silly” all day
outweighed the wrath he might
incur.

“Stop thinking or I’ll never get out of here.” He sat up and glared at her with his brow furrowed in contradiction to the smile on his lips. “Go. Take a long hot bath. It’ll sooth your muscles. I’m going to head out to tend the horses and get as far away from your naked, sexy ass as possible so you can relax without me mauling you. ’Cause,

baby, later I'm going to want to do just that, again. Eat you alive. Make you scream my name until you're hoarse and the neighboring farm can hear you."

She gasped and silently berated her traitorous body for finding his words so arousing. Moisture pooled anew between her legs.

Serg moaned and eased off the bed. He handed her the mug of coffee, now probably cool enough to drink. "Stop thinking. Bath." He pointed toward the adjoining room and backed toward the door, grabbing his jeans along the way. "I'll make you some breakfast and

bring it in. Juliana..." His voice held a touch of warning. "You're killing me. Go."

Like a castigated schoolgirl, she stood from the bed and padded toward the promise of warm soothing water. She didn't hesitate to wiggle her naked rear at him on the way by, just to taunt him. He could be all high-handed if he wanted, but two could play at that game.

"I put your things in the bathroom for you and washed all your clothes this morning. You don't have much. We'll go shopping later and get you some

stuff. But at least you have clean shirts and shorts and underwear for now." He still spoke to her as she disappeared from sight, his voice rising slightly. "Bra and panties are optional, of course."

Ha. Whatever.

How was she going to get used to this?

Chapter Fifteen

Serg hastily prepared his mate a heaping plate of pancakes and bacon. With everything arranged on a tray, including juice, syrup, butter and utensils, he shuffled back to his wing and repeated the process of backing into first the room and then the bath.

His lovely mate was leaning back in the tub, submerged up to her neck beneath bubbles, her eyes closed. She was so alluring. So peaceful for the nanosecond that lasted before she peered at him

through one eye.

“Just gonna set this here on the side. I’ll be out at the barn for a while. I’ll...know if you need me.”

Juliana lifted her head. “I’ll call my girlfriends this morning. They’re probably pacing the floor right about now.”

“Do you think they’re that worried about leaving you with me?”

“No.” She grinned and lifted her eyebrows. “I think they’re going to pump me for details about your sexy body.”

“Seriously?” Serg opened his mouth to continue but couldn’t

think what else to say.

“Don’t worry.” Juliana slunk back into the water. “I wouldn’t kiss and tell. At least not too much... Nobody would believe the last day of my life anyway.”

As Juliana closed her eyes and sighed, Serg backed out of the room and shut the door. Even leaving the room didn’t keep him from craving her.

As soon as he walked outside, he breathed deeper. The fresh air dampened the scent of Juliana now permeating his entire house and driving him to distraction.

“Gonna help out today?” Jaxon

came around the corner of the house, chuckling. He tipped his hat low over his eyes as he went by, but Sergius still saw the smirk.

“You just wait, asshole. One of these days this is gonna be you, and I’m gonna laugh my ass off.”

“No fucking way, bro. I’m staying as far away from women as I possibly can.”

“Yeah, so was I, dipshit. Are you gonna stop helping James out when he needs us? Are you gonna stay out here and not go into town for groceries and supplies? You think I went looking for a woman?”

“Maybe...” Jaxon’s answer was

noncommittal. A single muttered word as he went by.

Whatever.

The dim light of the barn made Serg pause to allow his eyes to adjust from the blinding sun as he entered.

“Morning, Serg. Oh, wait...”
Micah made a big production of flipping his wrist in front of his eyes, “...afternoon. My bad.”

“You too? Are you both about done getting your jollies off at my expense?”

“Nah, give us a few more days.”
He stopped sweeping hay from the entrance and looked up. “But

seriously, Serg, if she makes you happy then I'm happy for you."

"Yeah, she's pretty damn awesome. I'll give you that. I'm one lucky bastard." He turned to walk toward the stalls, adjusting his cock for the umpteenth time.

"So, what do you think about McKinney?"

"I don't know, but it makes me nervous. Sure, we chased him out of this area, but he'll be back. He wants something."

"Or someone."

"Yeah, that too. He can't have her." Serg grabbed a brush and rubbed down the sleek

thoroughbred mare in the first stall. She turned her head, nudging his arm, and then neighed softly. He reached in his pocket for a sugar cube and gave it to her.

“We’re going to have to be pretty damn diligent.”

“I know.” He swallowed the frog in his throat. Even with all the teasing, his brothers would protect Juliana with their life. They were a family. No one messed with them.

“You know we’d never let anything happen to Juliana, right?”

Serg nodded but didn’t look back at his brother.

“She’s family now. No matter

what, we'll protect her from the likes of Keeton McKinney. We just have to be smarter than him. Never leave her alone."

"What if he doesn't give up?" Sergius pulled his gaze from the horse to Micah. How long would his brothers fight for his woman?

"Then we don't either, bro." A short silence filled the lull before Micah continued, "We may have to figure a way to rid the world of a certain bothersome vampire."

Serg shuddered. He didn't need to voice his thoughts. None of them had any idea how to go about that task. This was real life. They had no

idea which legendary measures might work, if any of them would.

Keeton stomped through the door of his Knoxville apartment and flung the grocery sack he was carrying across the room. Why did he have to choose eggs this time? Goddamn yolks ran down the wall and dripped onto the carpet. *Fuck.*

He always stopped at the store to get a few items. Made him look like a normal bachelor to the neighbors even though he never ate the stuff. But eggs? This morning something nice and packaged would have

been a better choice given his mood.

Keeton dropped onto the couch and cursed those damn wolves. Motherfuckers had been meddling in his life for ten years now, ever since they'd decided to make their home in his territory. Saving damsels in distress like fucking heroes.

Jesus.

Usually he couldn't give a shit. They weren't worth his time. As far as he was concerned, they weren't a threat to him so he didn't intermingle with their kind unless they pissed him off.

He laid his head back and closed his eyes.

Those bastards had gone too far now. The redhead was his. He'd found her first. And that damn Sergius could rot in hell for all he cared. He'd get her back.

He'd been developing a plan while he watched her sleep earlier, before he'd gotten too greedy, too close, and the wolves had come out of the house to chase his scent.

He planned a distraction, something that would ensure the wolves would be too busy to watch her. Then he could move in and snatch her right from under their

noses.

First he needed to sleep. He wandered toward the bedroom and fell face first on the mattress to snooze the day away.

That evening the tight little family with their new addition all sat down to dinner.

Tension crawled across Juliana's shoulders, radiating up her neck. She hadn't spent much time with his brothers yet. She felt like an outcast with them. Not that they'd been rude, but this new arrival to the house hadn't been in their

plans.

They smiled at her, but it appeared slightly forced.

“So, you all read each other’s minds?” It couldn’t hurt to start a conversation.

“How did you know that?” Jaxon asked.

“When I first arrived yesterday all three of you stood in the driveway glaring daggers at each other. I realized later you two weren’t all that excited about my arrival.” She smiled and stabbed her fork into the steak on her plate. The tender red meat tasted as good as it smelled, and she wasn’t about

to let it get cold. “You hadn’t planned to have a woman in the mix.”

“Ah, but you misread us, Juliana.” Micah reached for a roll, which he proceeded to toss back and forth between his hands as steam rose into the air. “We love having you here. It’ll keep our older brother off our back. In fact, in the twenty-four hours since you’ve arrived I can’t remember a single time he’s growled at me. How about you, Jaxon?” Micah chuckled.

“I don’t growl.”

“Sure you do. Or would you

prefer to call it brooding?" Micah continued to tease.

Juliana glanced his way. "What were you so moody about...before my arrival?"

The three brothers grinned at each other.

Her cheeks burned, but she didn't back down. "Ah. Well, thank God. Now I can spend my days making sure each of you meets a woman to keep you from brooding also."

"Touché, my love," Serg spoke to her silently.

"Thought you'd like that one."

"Hell no. I don't need or want a

woman in my life. Don't get me wrong. I'm all chocolate and roses over Serg's good fortune, but count me out. I prefer the bachelor life. Less complicated." Jaxon stuffed another bite in his mouth, his brow furrowed.

"He's gonna eat those words someday. Sunny side up."

"You can bet on it." Juliana smiled at Serg as he laid a hand on her thigh to send a wave of heat racing toward her sex.

She cleared her throat and batted his fingers away before they inched any farther up her leg. "So, what's the plan? You guys can't hover

around here watching me day in and day out while we wait on some vampire to stalk me.”

She glanced from one to the other and cringed at their collective pause, each with a fork hovering somewhere midair. *That’s exactly what they intend to do.*

“What if I went home or —”

“No.” Serg didn’t even let her finish her thought. “Juliana, this is serious. You can’t so much as walk outside alone until we figure out how to stop McKinney from threatening you.” He laid a hand gently on her arm. “I’m so sorry. I know this is hard.”

“Hard?” She huffed and turned toward Serg. “Hard doesn’t even begin to describe this situation. Two days ago I was living a normal regular life, hiking with my friends, celebrating my college graduation and talking about plans for my future. Today, my world is upside down and filled with werewolves and vampires.” She sucked in a deep breath. “Piece of cake. No problem.”

The hunger she’d experienced before sitting down to dinner disappeared and she dropped her fork. Wiggling free of Serg’s gentle grasp on her forearm, she rubbed

her temples with both palms, pressing into the ache beginning to form behind her eyes.

“Sorry,” she muttered as she let her hands fall to her lap. With her head still bowed, she continued, “I know this isn’t any of your faults, I’m just —”

“Don’t apologize. We understand.” Serg laid a hand on her back now. “This is more than the average person should ever have to deal with in a lifetime, let alone a few days. We’ll sort this out. In the meantime, we’ll also keep you safe. That’s a promise.”

Juliana pulled her mouth into the

best semblance of a smile she could and looked at each of the brothers in turn. "Thanks."

Micah and Jaxon nodded toward her, mumbling about the unnecessary need for gratitude.

"Let's get some sleep. It'll all seem better in the morning." Serg set down his silverware and wiped his mouth.

"What if he shows up again?"

"The same thing will happen, for now. Until we can come up with a way to change the results."

"By that you mean kill the bastard."

"Yes. In the meantime, he can't

get very close without us smelling his stench, and we outnumber him, so we can play chase all he wants.”

Juliana opened her mouth and then let it hang, the words trapped in her throat. No need to state the obvious. This was going to get really old really fast.

Chapter Sixteen

“So what’s in the bags?” Juliana padded out of the bathroom, wiping her face with a towel. She looked like a model, even wearing an old, worn T-shirt of Serg’s. But that wasn’t how he wanted her to dress forever. He wanted her to have nice things. Sure, she was outdoorsy and fit, but Serg knew women loved to dress elegantly now and then.

They would need to go to her place and get her stuff soon. He hadn’t mentioned it yet. It was like

an elephant in the room. As long as no one said anything, she could just stay here like she was on a vacation or something.

As soon as he suggested they move her belongings in, he'd have to face her response. She might balk at altering her reality. He wasn't ready for that confrontation. What if she didn't want to live out here with him in the woods with no one around? No female companions? What would he do then?

Follow her to the ends of the earth, of course, but this was his home. He loved the cabin, the sights and sounds of nature all

around, the ability to shift and run free in the wild virtually whenever he wanted.

Time was on his side right now. As long as they waited for McKinney to make his next move, she needed to be here protected and safe. He'd made that abundantly clear. For now, he had to hope the claiming had bound her to him in such a way she couldn't possibly consider leaving. Every day they were together the bond would strengthen. Their connection would grow. Their need for sex would be more intense by the hour.

That damn vampire was actually

helping his cause.

“Sergius?”

He stared at her, his face flushing. What was the question?

She raised a brow and nodded toward his hands. “The bags?”

“Oh.” He glanced down at the packages he’d gripped with his fingers. “Clothes. Thought you might like a few things since you have a limited selection.” The woman had been on a weekend hiking trip. She had three shirts, two pairs of pants and some shorts with her.

“How did you get them?” She angled her head to the side and

looked at him quizzically.

"I picked them up when I went into town earlier." He grinned.

"Oh? And what did you buy?"

"Open them. I did my best to guess your tastes." He gripped the side of the bed, praying he'd judged right.

She hesitated. *And if I don't like what he has in mind for me?*

"I can read your thoughts, baby."

"I know."

"Let me select something for now. You can look at the rest tomorrow when I'm not around. If you don't like something, we'll take it back. How's that? No hard

feelings. Aside from hiking gear, I have no idea what you usually wear."

"Fair."

Sergius peered into the bag with the lingerie label on it and pulled out the item he had in mind for this moment. He held it up for her to see. "Thought you'd like something more feminine than my old T-shirt to sleep in."

"Oh, my. That's...gorgeous. But you didn't really buy that with me in mind at all, did you?" Her eyes sparked with mischief.

"Perhaps it wasn't altogether altruistic, no. But do you like it

anyway?"

"To be honest, I've never owned a stitch of anything so sexy." She reached out to take the swath of material in her hand. "It's so soft."

"Silk." He whispered the word in her ear. "It will make you feel as though you're wearing nothing at all. Hmm, maybe that's a better idea. Perhaps you shouldn't wear anything."

Sergius watched the flush rush across her cheeks as she reached to snatch at the bag he still held.

"What else is in there?"

Serg jerked the bag out of her reach, stuck his hand in and came

up with a matching cover. It couldn't really be called a robe, because it would be wrong to imply it actually *covered* much. If anything, the matching sheer peignoir would only make the piece underneath even more enticing. He held it out.

“Try it on.” He watched as she turned for the bathroom as though he'd never seen her naked before. He could tell already the black silk was going to show off her alabaster skin to perfection. He grew hard waiting on her and closed his eyes to concentrate on her emotions. It felt like he was cheating, but he

wanted her to love the garment.

Minutes went by, several. Her thoughts jumped around as she changed. Serg sat on the bed, jiggling his knee. He was dying to see her sexy curves encased in the black silk. Shit. She took too long. And then he smelled her arousal. Rather than wait another second for her to emerge, he leaped off the bed and bounded toward the bathroom.

With his hands clasped on both sides of the doorframe, he stopped and sucked in a breath. In the middle of the room stood his flawless mate, her back to him,

facing the large, full-length mirror. He gazed at the image in the glass.

The negligee fit her perfectly. Tiny black straps barely held the silk against her body. The top was a pattern of lace that accentuated her breasts and made them appear larger than they were in contrast to the delicate dip that hugged her waist and then flared slightly to barely cover the sexy round globes of her ass.

Her legs appeared to be incredibly long beneath the hem, pure white skin reaching out from beneath the elegance.

When his gaze roamed back up,

he saw that her nipples jutted forward, hard points against the transparent lace of the bodice.

Her neck above the flare of her breasts was flushed a dark shade of pink, as were her cheeks. Her expression was one of awe.

“You’re the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s so lovely. Thank you.” Her words choked out. Her eyes watered.

“Nothing is lovelier than you.” He ambled up behind her.

When he reached her backside, he set the tips of his fingers against her shoulders, not touching her

anywhere else. Their gazes met in the mirror. "Look how incredible you are. Like porcelain." Her hair lay in soft ringlets all around her shoulders and down her back. He couldn't resist the temptation and leaned forward to bury his nose in her curls and inhale her scent.

"You used your own shampoo this morning. I love that smell. Floral. Raspberry?"

"God, your nose is good."

"I like that better than my masculine soap on you."

"I had it in my travel bag," she muttered as though an explanation was needed.

He leaned back and met her gaze again, flipped his fingers over and dragged the tips of his nails down her arms until he reached her trembling hands. Goose bumps rose in the wake of his touch.

Serg entwined his fingers with hers. A subtle pressure had her leaning against his front, the silk and lace tickling his bare chest. He wore soft flannel pants and his cock lengthened even more as her shoulder blades brushed his pecs.

With her hands locked in the tangle of his, she was helpless to stop him from raising them over her head. He wrapped them

around his neck and repeated the action of grazing his fingers down the insides of her arms, through the dip of her armpits and across her nipples.

“Sergius...” She moaned his name, making it sound as though she were dreaming. Her eyes flittered closed.

“Watch me, baby. Watch what I do to you.”

She lifted her chin slightly and stared back into the mirror.

Her chest rose with a deep breath, and he cupped her breasts with his hands, his palms rasping over the tight buds straining

against the lace.

“Oh, God...”

“Don’t close your eyes,” he murmured into her ear, nipping at the lobe and letting his warm breath send shivers down her body.

His hands wandered down to her waist, circling the expanse until his fingers nearly met each other. Then over her hips until he reached her slender thighs.

At the edge of the black silk he flicked his fingertips under the hem. It fluttered around her, teasing their view with what lay beneath. Serg flattened his palms on her legs and eased the material

up her hips until he uncovered her sex.

He froze, his gaze not leaving the apex of her thighs. His breath caught in his throat, threatening to choke him. "Lord, baby. You...?"

"You like it?" Her hands rubbed up and down his neck, still resting at an angle behind her, her elbows in the air.

She gripped him with her palms and he flicked his gaze to her face. She bit her lip and batted her eyes.

His smile spread fast and huge. The grin created an unaccustomed ache in his cheeks. "That is so sexy." She had shaved — *everything*.

“I wanted to see what it would feel like, my bare skin against you. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Hell no. Just shocked, and about to come in my pants at the sight of your sex glistening naked in the mirror. That’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. You will never cease to amaze me, will you?”

“Hope not.” She relaxed against him.

“Don’t move.” Reluctantly he let go of her soft skin for the two seconds it took him to pull the long, padded bench chair over in front of the mirror. He flipped the seat

sideways so the end made a T with the mirror. A thought raced through his mind and he whipped around to grab the sheer matching cover she'd set on the counter. As he straddled the bench, he tossed the flimsy material under it and then grabbed her hand to position her in front of him, her back to his chest, her legs spread wide to accommodate the width of the seat.

She settled where he set her ass and made a little squeak when he lifted the hem of her lingerie at the last second.

“Feel good against your hot, smooth ass?”

“Hmm.” She wasn’t committing.

“Oh, baby,” he moaned as he lifted the hem again and pulled it up around her waist. “So fucking hot.”

She gripped the edges of the bench with her thighs, tightening her muscles as she shuddered. Her hands grasped his legs so hard her nails dug into the skin, the soft pinch keeping him on edge.

“Don’t get shy on me, Juliana. You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen.” He braced her thighs with his hands, held them farther open. She was adorable when she got timid. It wouldn’t last long. When

she grew more comfortable with him, the shyness would disappear. But, for now, he enjoyed showing her new things. Introducing her to her wildest imagination.

“I need you,” she whispered as her gaze dropped between her open legs, her chest rising on a shaky breath.

“Not even close. You don’t know what it means to crave release yet, baby.” Ah, but she would. Serg reached beneath the bench with one hand and returned with the translucent black material. He shook the thin, black, silk belt loose and let the rest flutter to the

ground beside them.

“Give me your hands.” Watching her eyes darken with desire, he stroked his fingers down her arms, grasped her wrists, and raised them back over both their heads again to wrap around his neck. With a dexterity even he was proud of under the circumstances, Serg wrapped the black silk around her wrists and tied them securely behind his head. “Leave them there. Don’t move.”

Juliana’s head rolled back against his chest, her lips slightly parted, her deep breaths making her nipples rise and fall invitingly.

“Watch me in the mirror, Juliana. Let me pleasure you.”

He bore down on her thighs again to force them farther apart. She was so wet, the glistening folds of her sex begging him to spread her wider.

Serg dragged one finger through her opening and then used both hands to spread her lips, exposing her channel to his gaze. So pink and swollen. A little stream of her arousal ran down toward her ass. He would take her there. Not today, but soon.

Juliana heard his thought and moaned. Her head rolled back and

forth, her eyes fluttered closed. The idea heightened her arousal and made him smile. Perhaps he'd breach her tight hole sooner than he'd thought.

"Serg..."

"You know you want me to drive you to new heights, baby. And I will. Rest assured, there is nothing you can imagine I won't do to you, in time. The thought thrills you. Makes you wetter."

Serg sat there for several seconds, holding her petals open, admiring the view while she wiggled and squirmed, her back brushing against his cock, teasing him

mercilessly.

“Serg...”

“Open your eyes.”

Heavy lashes rose as she looked at him through shuttered eyelids.

“Every time you close your eyes, I’ll stop.”

Her gaze landed on the space between her thighs in the mirror. Her rapid breaths and pulse told him she was even hornier with his command.

“That’s it. Keep your gaze pinned here while I touch you. You let them close, I stop. You want to come? You’ll watch.”

She moaned long and low, but

she obeyed, barely blinking.

He gave her what she wanted. With his last two fingers on each hand, he stretched her folds farther apart and dipped the first fingers deep into her core. Her ass bucked up off the bench, but he firmed his grip, dragging the digits out and swirling her wetness around her outer lips.

On the next pass inside her, he angled the tips of his fingers up in the direction that had driven her crazy last time. He let them flick out, pressed the hood of her clit up with his thumbs and then teased the tight little nub with the moist

tips of his fingers, grazing over it again and again while she wiggled her ass against his crotch.

“So smooth. I love this shaved look. And it’ll feel so good against your panties or just bare, your naked pussy rubbing against the denim of your jeans every day while you wait for me to fuck you.”

He let his fingers dance around her shaved mons, flicking over her nub with each pass. “I hope you’ll let me shave you sometimes. Let me spread your legs across the tub and drag the razor over your pale skin until it’s perfectly smooth. So hot...”

Fuck. His dick throbbed with need. The tip weaseled its way out of the top of his low sleep pants and now grazed the silky back of her negligee.

Serg was so intent on pleasuring her, he forgot to watch her face. Her eyes had closed. He stopped, let go entirely. When she realized her faux pas, she jerked back to attention in time to watch him lick her arousal from his fingers. He sucked each digit into his mouth and pulled it out with a pop, one hand at a time.

“Oh God. That’s sexy.”

“Promise to watch?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

This time he drove several fingers into her while pinching her clit tight with his thumbs. “Come for me,” he begged.

“I... So close.” Her feet got purchase on the floor and she lifted her ass a few inches off the bench. He didn’t stop her.

“Watch my fingers while I fuck you. Let it go. Juliana, suck my fingers with your tight pussy, baby.”

She stiffened and leaned forward slightly when her climax took her over the edge. Her clit pulsed between his thumbs, her sheath

grasping his fingers, dragging them farther inside her. Her entire body shook and she cried out. Serg held her tight.

When she was spent, she went limp, her body drooping forward, her arms still clasped behind his head. Her chest rose and fell with deep inhales and exhalations.

He kissed her neck, nibbled around her shoulder, cupping her wetness with his palms while she came completely down.

“I think we should make use of this mirror more often. Been wondering why I even had it there. Not like I often stand here in front

of a full-length mirror admiring my jeans and boots and making sure my butt doesn't look too big in these pants."

She giggled. "Honey, your butt is perfect, in and out of your jeans. In fact, if you wouldn't mind releasing my hands, I'd be glad to squeeze them around those ass cheeks of yours while you make sure to get your full money's worth out of that mirror."

With lightning speed, Sergius whipped her hands to the front, yanked off the tie, and in two seconds had her back against the mirror and his tongue inside her

mouth.

“Ugh...” The air in her lungs left in a whoosh as the cold glass hit her back. A shriek escaped her mouth before it was consumed by Serg’s.

His lips and tongue were everywhere at once. Sucking the life out of her as if this was slated to be their last kiss on earth. And his hands followed suit, traveling up and down her body, grazing over her breasts, her neck, her hips...

“I want you so bad. So hot. So tight.” He nibbled a path to her ear.

“Please. Now.” Her legs quivered. She didn’t think she’d be

able to stand.

She didn't have to. Sergius grabbed the hem of her lingerie and whipped it over her head. He flung it aside and reached under her arms to lift her, slide her up the mirror.

She wrapped her ankles around him as he lined up her demanding center with his cock. "Serg... I need you."

He pushed inside her, a leisurely slide until he was all the way seated. "Lord. I'll never get enough of you." His lips smashed back into hers. He licked around the edges of her mouth before sucking on her tongue. Milking it...rhythmically.

She almost came again at the fullness inside her and the attack on her mouth.

Serg leaned away from her mouth and gazed into her eyes. "Not gonna last...again." His strained grin made her flush. She did this to him.

He lifted her off him and held her in the air for a moment and then slammed back inside to press against her bare clit over and over.

"Oh, Lord. That feels so good against my shaved skin." She moaned.

"You aren't kidding. Grind your clit against me, baby."

“Can’t... Gonna come...”

“Come with me. Hold on... Let me...” He plowed into her several more times, each pass ratcheting up her need to shatter around him. She had to grit her teeth and squeeze her thighs tight to keep the orgasm at bay.

“*Serg.*” She screamed his name, a warning.

“Now, baby, now. Come with me.”

The orgasm exploded around her. She could feel the pulsing deep inside her, deeper than before. And Serg held his erection all the way in to the hilt, his rough hair brushing

against her newly shaved mound luxuriously.

"Juliana," he moaned around her mouth. *"You're mine."*

When she could finally catch her breath, she uttered one syllable, *"Still?"*

"Always."

Chapter Seventeen

“That can’t be good.” Sergius put down his fork and rubbed his temples with both hands. Breakfast around here was getting better by the day now that Juliana was in the house. The woman could cook, and she didn’t even seem to mind preparing meals for three big wolves.

“What?” She turned to look at him from the counter where she was already stacking dishes in the sink even though he and his brothers were still stuffing their

faces with breakfast. A moment later her chin lifted and she angled her face toward the door. "Oh, that. God, your hearing is amazing."

"Yeah, *that*." Sure, occasionally a few other people came out to the cabin, but Serg knew the sound of the police cruiser well. What was up with James now?

Sergius pushed his plate back from the edge of the table and headed for the door with his brothers.

The sheriff already stood on the porch by the time they gathered around to greet him. "Morning, boys." He tipped his hat back, a

grave look furrowing his eyebrows.

When he arrived with that expression it often meant whoever they were looking for was presumed dead. Either they'd been missing too long before it was reported, the weather conditions weren't conducive to surviving the night, or the last-sighted location was a dangerous area.

The brothers would never hesitate to help out the local law enforcement, but man, did it suck when they were tracking a dead person. Serg much preferred search and rescue to recovery.

"That bad?" Jaxon inquired after

several seconds of silence.

“Much worse.”

Serg froze. A niggling suspicion he wasn't going to like this climbed up his spine.

“Three women are missing. All with similar descriptions, all in the last twelve hours, and all from a location where they shouldn't have had a problem.”

“That's not unusual. They probably wandered off the path and hunkered down for the night.” Micah spoke, but Sergius grabbed the porch railing in preparation for the rest. Something was very, very wrong.

“They weren’t together.”

“What?” Jaxon sat on the porch swing with a thump.

“Exactly. They don’t know each other, weren’t on the same hikes, aren’t with people who’ve ever met, and they aren’t even in the same general vicinity in the park.”

“Shit.” Serg gripped the wood under his hand and stared at the ground. “McKinney.”

“That’d be my guess. What I don’t understand is why? You boys ran him off two nights ago. I didn’t expect to see him again for a while.”

“It’s Juliana.” Rage boiled in

Serg's veins, a slow burn that grew stronger.

"Why? What do you think he wants?"

"I don't quite get it myself. But he wants her. Of that there's little doubt. He's never lured a woman away and left her alive."

"A search party is organizing now. They'll have to divide into thirds."

"They won't find those women. He set this up. He wants the three of us to separate and leave Juliana alone." Serg leaned against the side of the house.

"He isn't being very subtle about

it.” Hardin slapped his hat against his leg and began pacing.

“He doesn’t have to. He knows we won’t turn you down.” Serg ran his hands through his hair, pulling the strands so tight his head hurt.

The Durham brothers were soft when it came to people’s lives. And McKinney knew that. This was a setup. But what could they do—let some woman die on the off chance another was in jeopardy?

“Fuck.” Serg paced in the opposite direction from James, clenching his fists at his sides.

The door swung open with a long squeak. Juliana stood there, a

knowing look on her face. She hadn't missed a beat. How could she? Serg's emotions were running so high she couldn't have overlooked the mental images if she'd wanted.

"I'll stay with the sheriff. It'll be fine. We can go into town. I've been wanting —"

Serg stopped his pacing and turned toward her with a snarl. "No fucking way. Not going to happen. I won't risk it. We'd be playing into his hand, just as he wants us to."

"And your plan is?" She stuck her hands on her hips and cocked

her ass to one side in challenge. “Look, I’m sure you’re right. This vampire guy seems to have set us up, but he would also assume the sheriff would be working with search and rescue, not be left babysitting the damsel. We’ll go straight to the police station. How dangerous can that be?”

“She’s got a point, bro. What do you have in mind? Clock’s ticking.” Jaxon headed for the stairs. “Gotta make a decision and get going.”

Serg had no doubt McKinney had set this up. None whatsoever. He just needed to outsmart the asshole at his own game. “Okay,

let's head to town, leave Juliana in the police station with Hardin and then split up to find the women. God, let them be alive. We'll rendezvous back at the station."

What the fuck are you up to, vamp?

Hardin headed down the stairs too. "I've an even better idea. I'll give you three the coordinates. You can head out in your truck and get this show started. I'll take Juliana with me to the station." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a notebook and ripped out pages. "I'll give you all the info you need."

"Perfect. See, it'll be fine. Let me grab a few things. Be right back."

Juliana turned to the house and disappeared, leaving Serg staring at the door.

He waited for her on the porch while the others headed for the driveway. His skin crawled. Fur rose. How was he going to keep Juliana safe?

In less than a minute she returned.

“Ready.” She set her dainty hand on his shoulder and reached up on tiptoe to kiss him. Instead of letting her plant a chaste peck on his lips, he hauled her in for a hard, demanding act of possession.

“I can’t live without you.”

“It’ll be fine. It’s not like a vampire can just waltz into the police station in the middle of the day and drag me away.”

“I don’t like it. This reeks.”

“You also can’t leave a woman stranded in the forest, lost and cold. I know you. That’s *why* I know you.”

“Why do you always have to be so fucking right?” He smiled at her and smashed another hard, rough kiss to her mouth. “Don’t you dare take any chances, got it?”

“Yes, master.”

“Ha, ha. You’re about as good at being submissive as I am at being a

ballerina.”

“Can’t wait to see your tutu, cowboy.” She flicked his hat over his eyes and grabbed his hand.

“Daylight’s not going to pause for us, big guy.”

The cars were already running. Serg opened the sheriff’s passenger door for Juliana, helped her in and leaned in for one last kiss. He turned his gaze to James. “Don’t let anything happen to her, ya hear?”

“Never.” Hardin nodded.

Sergius watched as the cruiser pulled down the gravel road. His brother’s truck slowed down next to him, barely long enough for him

to jump onto the footboard and swing inside.

Goddamn vampire.

Serg grabbed one of the three bags the sheriff had given them, each with a photo, a page of info and a few items of clothing belonging to the missing women. He withdrew the piece of paper and stared at the info. The woman he would be tracking had gone missing yesterday afternoon, but it hadn't been reported until the middle of the night. She'd wandered away from her friends to snap a picture and disappeared.

Was McKinney controlling every

woman's mind?

He peered down at the picture of a blonde woman with deep blue eyes. Anna was her name. She looked so happy. He prayed he'd find her alive and in the same spirits.

"Juliana?"

"I'm here."

"Just checking."

"I'm fine. Just concentrate on finding the missing hikers and getting your butt into town."

Serg stared out the window, gripping the items in his lap so hard his knuckles hurt. This was too orchestrated. He didn't like it.

Fifteen minutes later, he'd stowed his clothes in the usual pack, shifted and made his way toward the coordinates he'd read in the truck.

Sergius had picked the woman missing closest to town, where Juliana would be.

When he reached the coordinates, he caught the woman's smell and tracked her instantly. She'd headed north, off the path, just like Juliana. Why? How did a man — well, at least someone who seemed to be a man to his victims — manage to get a vulnerable woman to leave the safety of a known trail

surrounded by friends and fellow hikers and head out unprotected and alone into the trees?

He'd never known McKinney to use such powerful mind control. But apparently he had used it to lure Juliana the other day, and now three other women. Did the damn vamp have some new power? Or perhaps Serg and his brothers just hadn't ever had the opportunity to witness this ability firsthand.

The thought made him shudder, even in wolf form.

Where are you, Anna?

Her scent grew stronger. She wasn't as far into the trees as

Juliana had been.

"Have you found her yet?"

Sergius's heart beat faster at the sound of his mate's voice in his head.

"Not yet. You okay?"

"Fine. Still driving."

He was getting closer. And thank God. Anna was still alive. *Death* had a completely different scent, one that couldn't be mistaken.

Minutes later he came to the entrance to a cave. *Of course.*

"I'm not far now. She's in a cave."

He communicated this info to Jaxon and Micah before going inside. It was time to shift and get dressed.

Women didn't usually find him to be of much comfort in wolf form.

"Got it. Seems like the case here too. Be careful, bro. This has to be a trap."

Jaxon was also still in wolf form.

Serg could sense his pounding heartbeat, indicating he was running.

"I'll keep you posted." Micah had stopped, but he too hadn't shifted yet.

Once dressed in his usual jeans, T-shirt and hiking shoes, Serg ducked into the cave and paused the few seconds it took to adjust his eyes to the light. He raised his head and took a deep breath.

A muffled moan reached his ears. Prickly pin spikes stabbed along his shoulders. McKinney wasn't here... Hadn't been for a while. But that didn't change the fact that Serg had to save this woman.

"Anna?" He spotted her in a corner, huddled on the damp ground. As he dashed toward her, he continued speaking. "It's okay. I'm with search and rescue. You're going to be okay."

As he reached her side, she turned her face to him, eyes huge and frightened. He could smell her fear. A wide strip of duct tape covered her mouth, and he gingerly

tugged it from the sensitive skin of her cheeks, wincing as he did so.

She started to sob uncontrollably, gasping for air, her jumbled words spilling on top of each other, unintelligible.

“You’re okay now. No one is going to hurt you.” He assessed the rest of her and made quick work of untying the ropes around her arms and then her legs.

When she was free, she scrambled crab-style back into the wall behind her. Poor woman was petrified.

“I’m going to take you back to your family. You’re going to be

fine.” He attempted to soothe her, hoped his words were gentle.

“That’s what the last guy said, and look where that got me.” Her voice was barely audible. She shook her head back and forth.

Ah, so that was his ploy. Pretend to be helping. “Tall guy? Pale? Dark hair to his shoulders?”

“Yeah. How’d you know that? Are you with him?”

“No, but lots of people are out searching for him. He’s...wanted.” It wasn’t really quite true, but it would make her see reason, hopefully.

“He bit me.” She leaned her neck

to one side. Sure enough, his telltale marks were right at her jugular. *What is that fucker's plan?*

"Geez, I see. Are you okay now? We need to get going." He wasn't even considering letting her know the bite had been the work of a vampire.

"I passed out. When I woke up I was here...in the dark...alone." Her breaths were slowing down.

They needed to hurry. "Can you stand?" Sergius grabbed an arm and helped her to her feet. She shook beneath his grasp.

She was wobbly, but she managed to right herself and took

several cautious steps forward, shaking free of his grip. “I can manage. Just get me out of here.”

Gladly.

Sergius moved with a purpose, one foot in front of the other, desperately trying to keep a pace she could handle while his blood pumped hard through his veins, demanding that he shift and get to his mate. They were only about a half mile off the path – not far at all, unless you were weak, tired, hungry, thirsty...and human.

Serg radioed the deputy in the area while they walked. “I have Anna. She’s okay. We’re heading

toward the road."

Silently he reached out to Juliana. *"I found her."*

"Is she okay?"

"Yes. We're heading back. I'll meet up with you soon."

"K."

"Are you at the station yet?"

"No. There's a tree in the road. The sheriff is about to move it."

"A tree?" Sweat ran down his forehead even though it wasn't very warm yet.

"Well, more of a branch. No biggy. See you soon."

"I'll hurry. Please be careful."

She didn't respond, but he

figured she was dealing with the obstacle. A tree? He tried to shake his arms to release the unease. *Calm down. This is a national forest.*

Branches fall across the road every day.

It took only fifteen minutes to reach the main road and meet up with a cruiser.

Anna had remained relatively quiet during the short hike. She didn't let down her guard the entire way, and he couldn't blame her.

Serg spent the majority of that time communicating silently with his brothers, who were experiencing similar ordeals — two

other women, each bound in the same manner, each bitten, each in a cave.

As soon as Anna was safely delivered into the arms of the cop, Serg briskly waved off the man he only knew in passing and darted as fast as possible out of sight. He could get back to Juliana faster in wolf form, and he intended to do just that.

The bastards had played right into his hands. Brilliant, really. He'd simply ambled through the forest, grabbed the first woman

who looked delicious and tucked her away in a cave. The quick little taste he'd taken from her jugular had eased his thirst and hardened his dick to new heights. Hmm, maybe he *could* sip from a woman without killing her. Good practice.

In just hours he'd repeated the process in two more corners of the mountains.

All he had to do then was hunker down for the night, a short distance from the wolf cabin, and wait for the show to begin with first light.

It was a gamble, but he had a hunch the do-gooder wolves would take the bait and be forced to

abandon the redhead while they saved the day once again from the big...bad...vampire.

It wasn't long after the sun came up that he watched the local sheriff pull up to the house.

The long-distance binoculars he used were incredibly accurate and kept him from getting too close and blowing his location as he watched the redhead climb into the cruiser. A smile spread across his face. Perfect.

He figured with no other alternative, the Durhams would be forced to leave the redhead in the hands of the fine, upstanding

sheriff. Keeton wandered down to a spot in the road in the direct path to town and casually dragged a long branch across the gravel.

Sure enough, five minutes later, Hardin pulled to a stop and got out of the car, mumbling something about how the forest rangers should have already been by to clean up something like this.

The moment he ducked out of sight off the road, shoving and tugging on the heavy limb, Keeton popped out of the trees, dove into the cruiser, flung it into reverse and backed away, tires squealing as they attempted to get purchase on

the gravel.

The redhead screamed, struggling to reach the door handle. As the door flew open she lunged, but was caught short by her seatbelt. He laughed at her. Her fear was palpable. She reeked of anxiety, which made her blood pump faster through her veins and heightened his need to drink from her.

A deep inhale of her scent made him grip the steering wheel firmly with both hands to keep from slamming on the brakes and taking a sip of her. He kept her trained in his periphery vision while he

angled his neck to see out the rear window and guided the vehicle to a spot where the road was wider.

At the first opportunity, he hit the brakes and twisted the wheel to the right, sending the car careening to a T with the road and forcing the passenger door to slam shut. The redhead stopped screaming and held on tight to the door, gasping for breath. Keeton popped the gearshift into drive and had them headed in the opposite direction in a flash.

The woman pleaded with him, "Please, let me out... Please... Just don't hurt me."

“Why would I hurt you?” He glanced at her, confusion warring with his need to feed from her. Even with the three snacks he’d had last night, he wanted her. He’d hoped the little meals would tide him over and keep him from taking too much from her the first time. Now, he wasn’t so sure. Saliva pooled in his mouth. His fangs poked at his gums, threatening to come down. He glanced her way again.

The quizzical expression on her face made him raise an eyebrow.

“You’re a...a...”

“Vampire?” he provided for her.

His chortle filled the car again.

She swallowed, her throat bobbing up and down.

“Not everything you hear about us is true, ya know.” He drawled the words in his finely perfected southern accent. “Vampires have families too – wives, kids... We can control ourselves. We don’t have to kill everything in our paths.” *At least I hope so. She smells so damn good.* The floral scent of her shampoo filled the confined space of the cruiser.

It was true. Sure, he hadn’t specifically tried this out himself before, but he had no intention of

killing her. At least not for about a hundred years or so.

“You won’t get away with this. They’ll kill you, you know.” The woman looked around the inside of the car. She was calming down, which both pleased him and concerned him at the same time. He’d never once picked up a woman who wasn’t terrified out of her mind once she realized what he had planned for her.

Her heart rate slowed. He could actually hear the swishing of her blood flowing at a more reasonable pace through her veins.

“Those wolves of yours? Ha.

They'll have to catch me first. And they haven't succeeded in that area yet."

"The whole state is going to be looking for this car in about ten seconds." She glanced around, her brow creased.

"I'm sure they are, but we'll be long gone." Within moments of speaking, Keeton whipped the car right off the road into the trees. The spot was perfect. Branches scraped both sides of the car, scratching the doors with a sound not unlike fingernails raking across a chalkboard. The foliage would hide the vehicle and buy him some time

while he escaped with his woman. Her white fingers grasped the dashboard with one hand as the car jostled over the uneven dirt.

Finally, when the vehicle would go no farther into the dense foliage, he shut off the engine and turned to face his lady.

The redhead stared at him with her lips pursed. He clutched her biceps with one hand and yanked her toward him, the seatbelt strangling her as she struggled.

“Listen, my little redheaded goddess. As you’ve duly noted, I *am* a vampire and therefore possess the ability to end your life in the blink

of an eye. I suggest you squeeze those plump, pink lips of yours together and not make a single noise. As much as I'll admit you are a fine piece of ass I'd love to keep for my personal entertainment for years to come, I'll not have my own existence jeopardized by you. You understand?"

Tears streamed down her face and she nodded her assent.

"That's better. Now, if you want to stay alive, keep your trap shut and do as you're told."

She nodded again.

Keeton slammed her back against the seat, unbuckled her and then

grabbed her by the hair to jerk her out of his side of the cruiser.

He flung her over his shoulder in less than a second. Her breath whooshed from her lungs and she pounded on his back with her fists. "Put me down."

Keeton sprinted between the trees.

He'd chosen the perfect hiding place.

He figured he had about an hour before Sergius or one of his brothers would be on his tail. They'd need to save the day, rescue the damsels in distress and then head back to town where they

assumed the redhead would be at the station.

By the time they figured out the error of their ways, it would be way too late.

Juliana squeezed her eyes shut and tried to concentrate. *Think, Jules, think.*

Her body was flung over the shoulder of the bloodsucking asshole like a sack of potatoes. She ached all over, even in places she didn't know possible. Her stomach threatened to chuck her breakfast with all the jiggling and bouncing.

"Serg?" Why can't I reach out to

him? She'd been yelling at him through her mind ever since McKinney had jumped into the car.

He moved fast. She gripped the back of his pants to hold herself up and keep the jostling to a minimum. Branches raked across her face, leaving behind the sting of their scratches. Everything was a blur. She couldn't begin to identify where she was at the speed he moved and with her head hanging upside down.

It didn't take long, only five minutes or so, before he jammed them through an opening to a cave and flung her onto the floor. It

wasn't like the last cave. The entrance had been boarded up at one point and seemed to have an actual door.

McKinney leaned in very close to her face, his lips millimeters away. The scent of his wretched breath gagged her. She held her breath while he whispered, "This shaft is loaded with bats, and the bats have rabies."

She didn't so much as breathe as he tied her wrists behind her back and then her ankles together. "I suggest you don't scream." His eerie voice hummed close to her ear, and a tremor assailed her.

“Sharp sounds and movement upset the bats.” He stood up, looming over her. “You’ll find yourself in a hell of a pickle if they attack. Bound and helpless, you won’t be able to protect yourself. Do I make myself clear?”

She nodded, staring blindly into the pitch-black abyss. Fear crawled across her skin like insects.

Bats were the least of her problems. Leave them alone, and they’ll leave you alone. But vampires? She had no idea how to fight them.

“How do you think you’re going to be able to hide me? They’ll find

you.” Even though she had no idea why Serg couldn’t seem to hear her telepathically, she knew he could track her. He’d done it already.

“Ah, my sweet,” he muttered into her ear, sending a disgusted chill down her spine, “I have a plan. You see, this is an old, abandoned mineshaft we’re in. I’ve had years and years to explore them. I know every inch of my way around the tunnels. We’re just going to slip inside, dynamite the entrance and voila, your precious wolves won’t be able to get through to follow you. Even if they follow your scent to this location, it’ll be

the end of the road. We'll be long gone by the time they figure out a way through. Believe me. I know."

Fuck.

Juliana bit the inside of her lip until she could taste her own blood. Her fingers shook violently as she struggled to work at the knot behind her back. Sweat ran down her arms, the dampness making it difficult for her to get any sort of purchase on the rope.

"Serg. Where are you?"

The vamp glared at her. "Trying to communicate with your precious Sergius? Might as well give that up. He won't hear you. Not while

you're with me. I'm much older and far more powerful than he is. I can block almost anything. We'll be out of here before those Durham wolves track us. I'll be right back. Don't move." His cackle trailed him into the shaft of the mine, making her cringe at the amount of noise he was making.

As soon as Sergius shifted, he took off at a full sprint through the trees. He was hell bent on getting to the police station as fast as possible, but he paused, skidded to a stop and lifted his nose into the

air.

"Juliana?" Nothing. Fucking goddamn McKinney. How the hell could the vamp have her already? She should be in town, in the police station. Visions of a fallen tree flitted through his mind. It had been a setup.

Deep breaths. No way she'd made it to the station.

Sergius turned around, ran in the opposite direction, toward where she'd probably been when he'd last connected with her.

"Something feels wrong about this," he told his brothers. *"You guys head to town – I'm going another direction."*

I don't think the sheriff ever made it to the station." He wasn't about to take the time to change back to human form and call Hardin. His gut told him it would do no good anyway.

"Jesus. What happened?"

"I can't connect with Juliana anymore."

When Serg reached the road that led from his ranch to the town, he came to an abrupt halt. A long, deep inhale told him his mate had been here. Recently, and outside the car. He spun a few degrees in both directions to determine which path to take. Southeast.

Within moments of stepping into

the trees across the road, he saw the cruiser parked between the trees. He'd scented Hardin even before he saw him or heard him. Hardin leaned into the vehicle, shouting into the radio. Where was Juliana?

Serg growled, and the sheriff spun toward him. "Serg? Thank God."

Serg lowered his head to glare at the sheriff.

Hardin shouted information. "McKinney took her. It was a setup. Jumped in the car when I got out to move a branch across the road." He pointed toward the northeast. "About a half a mile that way. He

spun the cruiser around and I chased. Only managed to find where he'd left the road because of the tire tracks and the smashed bushes. Don't know which way he headed from here. Obviously on foot." James spun around as if he could figure it out that way. Didn't matter. Sergius had her in his scent. He turned and loped off.

Where have you gone, vamp?

It didn't take long to arrive at the entrance to an old mineshaft. His breath almost froze in his chest as he dragged Juliana's scent into his lungs. She was alive.

Staying in wolf form, Serg darted

into the darkness. It took little time for his eyes to adjust. The stench of vampire stung his nostrils, but Juliana's scent was stronger.

"Serg?" Her voice was barely audible.

He spun and saw her scrunched in a corner in the same fashion Anna had been, except without the duct tape. Where was McKinney?

He inched toward her, keeping his eyes peeled in every direction.

"Stay quiet. Bats," she whispered. "He went deeper into the shaft. He'll be back any second."

Sergius turned in the direction she indicated with her chin and

headed away from the entrance toward the tunnel. A low growl rumbled in his throat.

“Dynamite,” she breathed. “He plans to blow the mouth of that tunnel.”

His steps were precise, paws hitting the hard-packed earth soundlessly. Didn't matter; he could smell the vamp already, which meant McKinney could sense him too.

“Stay right there, wolf. Not another inch or she dies.” The vampire's deep, gravelly voice grated on Serg's nerves.

Sergius paused. McKinney stood

ten yards down the dark corridor, a lighter in one hand and a fuse in the other. *Good Lord, what does he think he's doing? Doesn't he have anything more modern than a fuse and a flame? He's going to blow the entire mountain off the map if he isn't careful.*

Clearly McKinney hadn't done much research on modern explosives. He really lived a sequestered life.

When the vampire flicked the lighter open, Serg emitted a howl to bring the rafters down. The noise startled McKinney. He jumped, and the glowing red flame made

contact with the fuse. The igniter hissed, lighting up like a Fourth of July sparkler.

A moment of realization sparked on both their parts in the sudden flash of light, and then McKinney dropped the dynamite, turned and fled into the tunnel.

Sergius bolted backward toward Juliana, flinging himself over her body. There wasn't time to shift or try to get her out. All he could do was pray his large form would be enough to save her. The ear-piercing explosion vibrated the rock floor beneath them, ricocheting off the walls and shaking years of dirt

and debris loose. A large rock smashed into his back. If the sharp pain hadn't stolen his breath, the suffocating scent of dust would have. The gritty substance filled his nose and mouth.

Juliana's scream was half-muffled beneath him. Neither of them moved as the cave creaked and more rubble crashed to the ground around them.

Long seconds passed. The air thickened, his sight diminishing.

"Juliana?"

"I'm okay." Her voice trembled.

When he realized they weren't injured, he leaped into the air and

spun around. The passage was completely caved in, blocked. With McKinney on the other side, there was no way to track him. *Shit.*

That damn vamp had been in this area for hundreds of years. He could easily follow the mine's old tunnels for miles. There was no chance of catching him today.

Fuck.

Sergius shook the fragments of earth and stone from his fur and made fast work of shifting back into human form.

Naked, he reached for her. She flinched. "It's me, baby. I'm right here."

Her pulse rate went down, and she relaxed into his touch as he reached for the ropes binding her, just as he'd done not an hour ago for another woman.

But this woman was his. His hands trembled and made it difficult to get a good grip on the knots. He squinted in the soot falling around them, his eyes so gritty they watered. As soon as she was free, she launched herself at him and wrapped her shaking arms around his neck, squeezing him as though her life depended on it.

“God. What happened? I couldn’t communicate with you.”

Her words stumbled out of her mouth between gasps for air she used to keep from crying. Her fear was palpable.

“I’m here now. You’re safe.”

“McKinney?”

“He’s alive, I’m sure. But trapped on the other side of the mound of rubble. He can’t get to you now.”

“Won’t he just come back?”

“Yes. But we’ll be ready. Always. I’ll never leave you like that again. I promise. One day he’ll be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I’ll put an end to his charade.”

Epilogue

Two weeks later...

“Man, she’s beautiful.” Juliana leaned back against the fence and watched Sergius as he worked with the filly. It was a spectacular sight. The spring weather was gorgeous, and the wind fluttered Juliana’s hair around her face.

“Yes, she is. You want to pet her?”

“Can I?”

“Of course. Just always remember to come at a horse from the front so you don’t startle them.

You don't want to get kicked." He reached for her hand when she jumped down and meandered toward him, slightly leery and apprehensive.

She'd never been around horses. But this was her life now. Three men, a ranch and a dozen thoroughbreds. No time like the present to get acquainted.

"How long will you keep her?"

"Just until she's one. Next spring she'll be sold."

"That must be hard. Don't you get attached? And what about the mother? They're so close. She never lets her foal out of her sight. What

happens when she leaves?" Juliana lifted a hand, spread her fingers and smoothed her palm down the hair along the horse's head.

Sergius wrapped an arm around her waist and kept the other twisted in the reins. "Feeling maternal, are you?" He smiled down at her.

She startled. "No, of course not. Just thinking about the foal is all. Kinda sad if you think about it."

"Are you sure that's it? 'Cause —"

"Stop it." She slapped his forearm. "I told you I'm not ready. And I expect you to honor that, Mr.

We-Don't-Need-Condoms-Because-I-Have-It-All-Under-Control." She glared sideways at him.

"I was just going to say that, if you wanted to...you know...now's the time."

"For what? Sex? When is it not the time for sex with you?"

"Hey, you can't deny you want me at least as bad as I crave you. Don't even go there. I've seen the way you watch me when you think I'm not looking." He leaned in close to her ear, his breath sending chills down her neck. "You can't stand it when we don't make love for more than a few hours. Your blood

pressure increases..." he nibbled her pulse point, "...and you always reach for your clit."

She gasped. *He knows that?*

"I know lots of things, baby. You touch yourself under the table, in the bath, the shower and even in your sleep. Hell, you can't even talk to your girlfriends on the phone without touching yourself. Your sweet little nub needs attention."

Sweat broke out on her brow, and heat flushed her cheeks and neck. Did she have no privacy at all?

Only a tiny chuckle answered her unspoken question.

“I love you, Juliana. I love everything about you. I love the way you bite your lip when you’re uncertain about something. I love that your pussy gets all wet when you think about me. I love the taste of your skin and the smell of your sex. And I love the fact that you are all hot and bothered, more so than usual, when you ovulate.”

Jesus. He drove her crazy. She sucked in a breath and held it.

Ovulate?

“Uh huh.” He placed kisses along her neck, and she tilted her head to the side for better access. “You want me so bad right now, you

can't even hold still."

True enough, her legs were quivering. She hated he could read her so well. And loved it all at the same time.

"If you don't want to get pregnant, we're going to have to get creative for a few days, baby."

"There's always condoms..."
What did the man have against latex?

"Nah, I prefer creative..."
Without looking, he tied the lead rope off on the post next to him, let go of the foal and twisted Juliana around until they were smashed front to front and he was devouring

her mouth. Making her hum deep in her chest.

When he came up for air, she was practically dizzy. She clenched her thighs together, her clit throbbing. "I..." Still a bit bashful about asking for what she wanted, she couldn't finish the words.

"You never have let me shave you."

She froze. Hadn't he been kidding about that? "I've done an okay job myself, haven't I?"

"Better than. But I still want a turn. How about you head for the house while I finish up here. When I come in, I want you stripped

naked, sitting in the tub filled with warm water. It's easier to shave after soaking anyway."

He turned from her and left her standing there bereft of his touch, her breath coming out in short pants.

"How...?" She didn't even finish the question. What had it been, anyway?

"Maybe we should make good use of that mirror again. It's been a while. I think I'll prop you up on that bench and tie you to it spread eagle so you can watch while I shave you until you're so smooth I can rub my cheek against your

pussy.”

She couldn't walk. Her legs turned to Jell-O. Her clit throbbed harder against her jeans without any underwear. Most days Serg insisted she not wear any. He liked the thought of her bare beneath her jeans, her pussy rubbing up against the denim without any barrier.

It made her squirm. And today was worse. Ovulating did that?

“Better grab that post, baby. You look like you're going to faint. You feeling okay?” His smirk told her he was teasing. Toying with her. “Hey, if you don't want my cock in you, I'll find something else to stuff

in your tight pussy while you beg. It won't be the same, but you won't get pregnant either."

Bastard.

"I'm sure we can find a vibrator or two to do the job."

Now her jeans were soaking with her arousal, her chest was pounding, and damn, she wanted to taste his cock, suck him into her mouth and swallow him until he was as aroused as she was. She stared at his crotch and smiled. He was hard.

He kept moving around as if this were a normal everyday conversation. Putting stuff away,

stacking blankets—heck, she didn't really know what he was doing. She wasn't paying that much attention.

Suddenly, he was right in front of her. One hand reached to cup her sex while the other traced her breast. "You're so hot, baby. So fucking sexy. Go inside and do what I said before I strip you naked right here in the barn and fuck you silly. I don't think you want my brothers to walk in on that. And I know you don't want my cock in your tight little pussy right now."

She regained a tiny piece of her brain when he let go of her crotch,

not before dragging his fingers across her clit. "Promise me you won't get me pregnant before I'm ready. Please, Serg."

The laughter on his face vanished. Serious as could be, he looked her in the eye. "Juliana, I'd never, ever do anything you don't want. I swear, you will not conceive until you tell me you want to. Trust me?"

He cherished her. It was written all over his face. She knew it in her soul. "I love you, Sergius Durham."

"And I love you, Juliana Durham."

Stunned, her mouth fell open.

He grinned. "Sounds nice, huh? Want to make it official?"

"Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. I know it's fast, but it's right." He stared at her wide-open mouth. "What do you say?"

Her lips came together and she swallowed while he held his breath. "I say 'yes'."

Sergius lifted her in the air and swung her around. He kissed her senseless before he set her back on her feet.

"Bath," he muttered. "Naked."

"How long will you be?"

"Not long enough for you to get

yourself off. Keep your hands above the water and wait for me. I want to watch you come. See your expression when you explode around my fingers while you're at the horniest time of the month. Go." He patted her ass and turned around.

"Promises, promises," she said to his back before she sprinted toward the house.

About the Author

Becca Jameson lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and two kids. When she isn't writing, she can be found reading, editing, scrapbooking, running, swimming, biking, or taxiing kids all over creation. She doesn't sleep much... or sit down often...but she loves to be busy! Unlike many other authors, Becca had never written a single word until a few years ago. After enjoying several years on the editing side of the business, Becca decided to give writing a try. Now

she can't stop! And the voices in her head are clamoring to get out faster than she can get them onto "paper"! Still experimenting with both contemporary and paranormal genres, there is no telling what she may come up with next. To learn more about Becca Jameson, visit her blog at www.beccajameson.com, email her at beccajameson4@aol.com, or tweet her [@beccajameson](https://twitter.com/beccajameson).

Cat got your tongue?

Wolf Nip

© 2013 Vivian Arend

Granite Lake Wolves, Book 6

Tessa Williams is looking to make her mark outside the family business, and the unusual landlocked paddle wheeler she spots in Haines, Alaska, strikes her as the perfect location. Only the owner is being difficult, refusing to sell. Still, she's sure that replacing her written queries with a little in-person charm is all she'll need to shortly have her Eco-tour B&B on

the road to success.

Local wolf-slash-owner of said vessel, Mark Weaver, isn't hanging on to the landmark building out of spite. There are more reasons for holding back the sale than are easily explained on paper. A face-to-face meeting to resolve the matter only confounds it — when Mark recognizes Tessa as his mate.

But she's a cat...and cats don't do insta-mates.

The sexual attraction between them isn't in question, just everything else. He wants her. She wants *twue wuv*. His wolf can't figure out what the holdup is. Her

cat thinks the entire situation, and the pack, are rather amusing.

Somewhere in here is the beginning of a beautiful relationship — if they don't drive each other mad.

Warning: One hyper cat, one laid-back wolf. Inappropriate use of permanent markers, and a heaping side dish of cat/dog jokes. Shenanigans (read: nookie) in front of a roaring fire. Spiced liberally with sarcasm. Enjoy!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Nip:

It took a moment to spot his mystery woman. She wasn't where

Mark had expected. For some reason she'd crawled on top of her car hood and was up on her tiptoes examining his house.

He'd never had a peeping tom like this one. He stepped across the lawn space. "Hello. Can I help you?"

She landed on her heels, her brilliant smile dazzling him. Bright green eyes snapped to meet his and somewhere deep inside his wolf rumbled awake.

"Are you Mark Weaver?"

"I am."

She clasped her hands together and bounced, literally, setting the

entire car into motion. "Awesome. I'm Tessa, and I'm so glad to meet you."

Tessa. The name didn't register, but he automatically accepted her outstretched hand intent on helping her down off the hood.

Only instinct kept him vertical as she jumped lightly and landed beside him. The rest of him was a bundle of unplanned reactions, his wolf lurching to the surface and damn near howling in delight. The wind caught her hair again, ruffling it around her face. The breeze also brought her scent to him, and his mouth watered.

His body grew tight with need.
His legs quivered.

“Ahem.”

Mark jerked to attention. Tessa stood in front of him, her fingers caught in his, their bodies nearly touching. Sometime in the past ten seconds, he'd lowered his head toward her neck and taken a good long sniff.

It was like shooting a bottle of moonshine except the hangover kick arrived simultaneously with the pleasure buzz.

“Mark, if you don't mind, I need my hand back.” She grasped him around the wrist and tugged herself

free from his clasp.

Embarrassed and yet excited at the same time, Mark let her go and forced himself to stand in place rather than crowd forward. There had to be a protocol he wasn't aware of that explained how you were supposed to react upon meeting your mate for the first time.

Mate. Yeah, his once-and-forever, fated-and-soon-to-be-mated woman. Once he found out a few minor details, like who she was, they could get down to the important stuff. Like him carrying her inside, finding a bed.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and batted her lashes, and his heart raced. *Patience, Mark.*

Patience...

“Tessa. What brings you to Haines?”

“I’m here —”

He meant to give her time to answer. Meant to ask her in. Meant to do all sorts of things, actually, but what he did was lose control. He closed the distance between them, cupped his hand around the back of her neck and dragged them together so he could kiss her.

Whatever she planned on telling him was lost as his lips covered

hers.

The taste of her? Ambrosia. The feel of her against his body? He'd died and gone to heaven. She nestled in tighter and her breasts rubbed his chest. His wolf nudged him harder, and he was powerless to resist the command, tangling their tongues until air became a dire need.

But the idea of stopping was unthinkable.

His wolf wanted more. Forget making it into the house and a bedroom, the beast wanted him to pick her up and wrap her legs around his waist. Lean her back

over the car hood and take her right there. Strip her down and wallow in her scent and sex it up until they were both too sated to move.

Mark's human side figured most of that was dandy as well. He was far enough gone in lust that even the sex-in-public bit didn't sound like *too* bad of an idea.

Two cool hands cupped his burning-hot cheeks as Tessa managed to disengage their lips and wiggle away until her face returned to view. She was smiling, but confusion clouded her pretty eyes. "Hi. I think we should start this again. I'm Tessa Williams. I

sent you a proposal to buy your house.”

Shock was a good mood killer. Icy-cold restraint returned. “You’re T. Williams?”

She wiggled out of his clutches and straightened her sweater. “I am. It’s a beautiful place. We’ll need to make a few changes though, but if you don’t mind me looking around, I’m sure we’ll be able to come to an agreement.”

Mark pulled his mouth shut. *This* was the person who wanted to purchase his home? “You’re not supposed to be here until tomorrow.”

“I was too eager to see the place to hang out in Whitehorse overnight. We can wait until the scheduled time for the meeting if that’s better for you.” Tessa pulled out a small mirror and lipstick, and touched up her lips with a fiery red colour he was tempted to lean over and lick off. He battled his wolf into submission. Stubborn beast didn’t want to talk. Wanted to take.

Mark got the sentiment, but...
“We can discuss the house in a minute. First...”

His wolf poked him again, and this time he wasn’t too distracted by lust to get the message. He took

another breath, running his gaze over her entire body. Analyzing the way she stood, the way she'd moved.

Tessa crossed her arms in front of her, which only framed those flawless breasts a little more. "Yes?"

"I'm a wolf."

She nodded slowly. "I figured that out about two seconds after we met. And this is important...why?"

"You're a cat."

A cute pout appeared on her succulent lips. "You have issues with that?"

Mark shook his head even as he wondered how in the world this

was going to work out. “You’re perfect.”

Light laughter escaped her. “Thank you, but I’m not sure what brought that on.”

Good grief. If she’d been a wolf, he wouldn’t need to have this conversation. They would have met and known they were the one for each other. As it was, his wolf continued to do the lupine equivalent of pacing, and it was a pretty damn uncomfortable sensation.

There must be more logical ways to approach this, but his logic meter had gone out of whack at the first

sniff. The words blurted from him like homing missiles.

“My wolf says you’re my mate.”

Tessa’s eyes widened. “Oh, really?”

He nodded. “That’s why I kind of attacked you back there. The kiss and all.”

“Okay, I wondered about that.”

Tessa glanced him over then shrugged. “Well, that’s interesting. So, do you want to meet regarding my proposal now, or tomorrow?”

Confusion swirled with need, making his brain foggy. “That’s interesting? That’s all you’ve got to say about me telling you we’re

mates?"

Rescue in the Smokies

Becca Jameson

Only one will win the right to call her “mate”.

Durham Wolves, Book 1

Sergius Durham and his brothers are legendary trackers in these parts, and only the local sheriff knows why. They're wolf shifters, attempting to live quietly on their horse farm. A difficult task when they're summoned every time a hiker goes missing.

Serg knows there's something different about his latest case the moment he touches her left-behind clothing. She is his mate, and nothing will stop him from finding and claiming her — except maybe the repeat-offending nuisance of a vampire who lured her off the trail.

Juliana Polanski isn't sure how

she got so lost, but there's no mistaking her instant attraction to her rescuer. No denying the passion that explodes between them when rain drives them into a cave for shelter — or at his home, in his bed, even after the crazy, improbable truth of his heritage comes out.

Yet Serg knows the danger isn't over. At any moment Julianna could be kidnapped right out of his arms — by the only creature the Durham brothers have never been able to track.

Warning: This book contains hunky shape-shifters living in the

mountains, hot steamy sex in caves,
mind-blowing oral, mild bondage,
and wild abandonment in front of
mirrors.

eBooks are *not* transferable.

**They cannot be sold, shared or given away as
it is an infringement on the copyright of this
work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real.

Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

11821 Mason Montgomery Road Suite 4B
Cincinnati OH 45249

Rescue in the Smokies

Copyright © 2013 by Becca Jameson

ISBN: 978-1-61921-463-7

Edited by Christa Desir

Cover by Lou Harper

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: March 2013
www.samhainpublishing.com



SAMHAIN[™]
P U B L I S H I N G

Table of Contents

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Epilogue

About the Author

Also Available from Samhain

Publishing, Ltd.

Copyright Page