

THE SILVER COLLAR
by Kate Policani

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CHAPTER 1

At first I think Mistress could have loved me as a daughter. I think she wanted to, planned to. She did love me at first. It's why my young heart bonded to her. It's why I tried so hard not to change. I tried so hard it hurt. But I couldn't hold it back for long. Horror at my hideous form killed all her love for me. But her disgust didn't kill my love for her.

I don't remember my life before I came to Mistress. I know I did not come to be when I first looked in her face, but that is all I remember of my life. She named me Lyneth on that day.

It was a sore blow to me later when she saw my ungodly form and hardened her heart against me. I suppose I was fortunate she didn't kill me or turn me out. But she kept me. Though it was anguish for me to feel her rejection, it was better than being alone. She never called me by the name she gave me after that. She only called me "Girl".

My world is the inn and the stable, and the wood behind them. Even though I dream of going away almost every day, I know that leaving would mean my death.

"We are too far from anywhere for you to travel on your own, girl, anywhere except the village. Folks there would give you a beating and send you back. Any other direction you'd get lost. You'd die. Don't wander more than a few minutes away, hear?" Mistress said on a frequent basis.

That was one of the things Mistress said a lot. She loved to say things like that to me again and again. She believed that it did me good. That was another thing she loved to say:

"Listen to me, girl. It will do you good."

I wouldn't go, either, because I belonged to her. Mistress had bought me on that first day of my memories. I was there to help her run the inn. She couldn't seem to decide whether she got me for a bargain or was cheated. Sometimes she felt one way and sometimes the other, depending on who she was talking to and how good I had been.

My life was the inn and the commands of Mistress. My function was to do everything she said—hard work to make the inn "A decent place". I scrubbed every inch of that inn from top to bottom, and then when it was all scrubbed, I started at the top again. I cleaned the stables and kept Horse (that was its name), and any other horses that visited.

I could clean and scrub, but I could not touch the beds, and I could not cook. Mistress said, "That would be disgusting! I wouldn't let my enemy sleep in a bed that such as you had touched, nor eat a morsel of food you'd cooked. Horrible!" She told me that a lot too.

I also wasn't allowed to use the bathroom inside the inn. Mistress sent me outside and into the woods to "do my business". As time passed, I surrendered to my fate and made a little latrine out there for myself. Summer or winter, warm weather or foul, I went to the woods like the animal I was.

I grew expert at my chores. By the time I was eleven years, or thereabouts, I could do it all without Mistress' instruction or correction. She only corrected me after that when she was cranky, which was frequent. But she could never find real fault with my work.

It was about that time too, my eleventh year, that Father Miller cured my terrible change.

Father Miller was the only person I had ever known who cared about me. Mistress cared *for* me but that was because she needed me. When she bought me, she was almost too old to do all the needful work. Father Miller cared about me. He spoke to me and taught me scriptures. He taught me to read the scriptures and each night before I went to the stables to sleep, Mistress made sure I read ten pages of scripture—at Father Miller's order. You see, Father Miller was filled with care for me in the form of profound pity. He had met me the day Mistress bought me and while she still loved me. He was the one Mistress called when I first changed. He was responsible for my soul, he said, because I was so cursed.

Father Miller was passionate about saving my monstrous soul, if I had one.

In the spring when I was probably eleven years, Father Miller brought a strange object. It was a ring encased in cloth and open at one end. A bright metal gleamed from the opening.

“I believe this will stop the Cursed Transformation, Mistress. I have been studying with diligence and discovered a book of curses and their cures at last. The book called her affliction ‘Werewolf’. It instructed in all manner of ways to kill a Werewolf, but I don’t think that is what you wish right now.”

Mistress considered. “No, not now. Maybe later though....”

My blood ran cold.

“This will not kill her, but it should prevent her from turning into the beast,” he declared.

The beast that overtook me came with unpredictable frequency when I was small. Any violent emotion could cause me to shift. Hair sprouted all over me. My ears became like a wolf’s. My nose and mouth stretched to form a snout. A tail sprang from behind and my body transferred to a four-legged gait. It all happened in moments, sometimes appearing to be like an explosion. When it was over, I was the same size beast as I had been a girl. My fur was the same pale blond as my hair. My eyes were the gray of my human form, but that is all that remained girl-like.

I felt the same as the beast that I did as a girl. I could understand things the same way. But I couldn’t speak.

That day, long ago, in my human form, Father Miller pulled open the circle and maneuvered it around my neck. He took care not to touch me with the gleaming metal. He then fiddled with something I would learn was a clasp, securing the silver collar to my neck.

The weight of the silver collar became enormous as soon as he let it rest upon my shoulders. The collar pulled me down and seemed to drain my energy and my joy. I felt ill. It was a physical weight and a weight on my heart. I was naturally unacceptable and needed a bizarre accessory to suppress me.

“Beneath the cloth is pure silver. I covered it with cloth, because the metal is said to burn the Werewolf’s skin. Now, this silver belongs to the Holy Church, making it stronger. I cannot give it to you because it is worth a fortune. It is, however, a responsible use of the metal to quell the transformation of the cursed beast. You may use it for as long as you live. Aren’t you glad to be free of your curse now, Lyneth?”

My breath came out in a whoosh of amazement and terror. “Yes, Father.” Father Miller used the name Mistress had given me to address me. Hearing that name brought me joy and pain each time I heard it. The feelings melded right into all the others surging through me at that moment.

“Are you sure this will cure her?” Mistress doubted.

“I believe it will. The silver represses the curse, preventing its flowering. She will be weakened for a time, but she will learn to bear it.”

Mistress huffed her skepticism.

Father Sullivan was right. The collar did stop my transformations. Instead I was racked with pain whenever a change was set in motion. It was fortunate for me that as I grew older I had learned to hold the change back so that only the strongest emotions affected me.

As time passed I did grow accustomed to the collar, though it always pained me, more when I felt strong emotions. So I began to teach myself to quell my emotions.

I worked from sunup to well after sundown keeping the inn. My duties never changed, and I never transformed in all that time.

As I grew older, boys from the village nearby began to notice me. I was always the subject of gossip and a figure of horror in the village. At first I would discover the boys peering at me from hiding. Occasionally one would throw a rock or a pinecone at me, but they seldom hit me. Later, they grew bolder and watched me from a safe distance. They inched closer as I grew more womanly.

If Mistress caught boys near me she gave them a round scolding. Until one day.

I was fetching water from the pump on the side of the inn. Four village boys came by. As I had grown older, so had they and they were becoming men now. They no longer kept their distance and they often spoke cruel words to me, though not when anyone could hear. They knew the Holy Pity that covered me like a veil, supplied by Father Miller. They knew it brought retribution on them when someone else witnessed their harassment of me.

They circled me. It was a common tactic they used to try to get a rise out of me. My bland demeanor irritated them, but it prevented the pain of transformation stopped by the silver collar. I knew I deserved their derision and disgust, so I could not be angry at them. I set down my filled bucket and waited for their abuse.

This time they were bold—perhaps a little drunk. Then one of them touched me, grabbing my wrist.

“Hey there, pretty puppy! Come ‘ere and show us that soft tail...” he mocked. They closed in, and my panic quickly turned into agony from the collar.

“Aaay!” came a welcome screech from the kitchen door. Mistress had caught them in the act. I remained frozen in the knot of boys.

“You boys...you want this girl? You want to fornicate with my servant here?” she challenged. This was not what I had expected her to say. The boys were startled too.

One of the boldest boys paused in surprise for a moment and then grew bold again and jeered, “Aye, Madam Inkeeper. We want to fornicate with your servant. What’s the charge?”

I could feel the sharpness of her gaze at the vile boys. Somehow I was included in her disgust. But she said, “Oh, there’s no charge, boys. I don’t care to take money for that kind of thing.”

They all looked at me at the same time, different expressions on their faces. Two were shocked and shamed. One was shocked, but intrigued. But the boy who’d spoken the abhorrent words, the one who still held my wrist, looked victorious and hungry.

“Oh, but if you do, boys, don’t blame me if you end up the father of a litter of bastard puppies!” crowed Mistress. Then her cackle rang out over the yard, spreading to every corner of the clearing, mocking the boys, mocking me.

The boys who were shamed ran off, then the boy who was intrigued. Alone, without his gang, the boy who had been so brazen didn’t feel so eager to brave contact with a cursed girl for a little fornication. He couldn’t run off like the others. He had risked too much. So he grinned at me, cocky but with an underlying humiliation. Then he dropped my hand and sauntered away.

I had escaped the immediate danger, but I could tell that this was the beginning of something that could be very bad for me.

I lifted the bucket and proceeded toward the kitchen door where Mistress still stood. I tried not to see her face, but her disgusted glare blazed into me. I met her eyes for just a moment, but I could see that she felt I deserved the mockery and insult. She felt as if I couldn’t be more debased than I already was.

“Aaay, Girl!” she spat as she permitted me to pass. “Don’t think that just because you’ve grown so pretty that you’re clean, not cursed...human. You’re still a monster under that soft skin. Take off the Priest’s pretty silver collar and you’re just a dog in a dress.”

I have thought long and hard about why she said those things. I was amazed that she thought I was pretty. I was horrified that she thought of me as a dog in a dress, but not surprised.

And just as life is wont to do, the next day changed my entire life forever.

CHAPTER 2

About midmorning, a ruckus came from the front of the inn. This was not uncommon when visitors arrived. But this visitor was an enormous surprise.

I was enlightened to the magnitude of the arrival by Mistress' caterwauling. "Oh, my son! My son is home! Bless the Heavens that I have lived to see this day!" She was in raptures for this son, out in the courtyard for all to see. I had no idea that she had any living relative.

I was scrubbing the floors in the dining room between breakfast and lunch as usual, so I could see everything. Into the foyer bustled Mistress, still squawking her joy. Behind her strode a corpulent man dressed in ornate clothing that looked ridiculous to me. He had no personal beauty, but his expression was that of a man admired by all and conscious of it. He was far too important for this little inn.

Mistress' raptures now encompassed a second person in the form of a daughter-in-law, who followed behind the son with an irritated expression. "Oh, my dear, sweet daughter, Nicole! I am doubly blessed to have two children now!" Nicole was unimpressed. She was also dressed very fine and her hair was ornate and covered with a fine lace cap. Her face was pinched and her nose came to a dangerous point, directed upwards. She allowed Mistress to act as a maid and remove her velvet mantle edged in fur.

"So lovely, my dear!" Mistress began but was interrupted.

"Mother, there is nothing we could desire more than rest right now," the son proclaimed in a nasal tenor voice. "We will discuss everything when we have refreshed ourselves." One would think that he was the master here.

Soon Mistress' prodigal son and his wife retired to the best two rooms at the inn. Mistress had no other outlet for her raptures but me, so she regaled me with all the excuses for her not visiting her son while I finished the dining room. Dempsey was his name. She told me why he never visited her: He was an important man in the city, crafting beautiful garments for rich men there. He was rich himself and couldn't be bothered by his old mother's little inn.

When I finished in the dining room, she followed me to the Kitchen where I was allowed to scrub the floors but not to touch anything else. There she excused Master Dempsey at length for not answering her many long letters. He had been magnanimous enough to send her an announcement of his marriage two years before. It was made of such pretty paper that she had kept it safe in her room.

Her raptures about Nicole were interrupted by the tinkling of a bell. Mistress leapt to respond. "Of course, they will want food! How stupid of me!" she exclaimed.

I was amazed at the transformation in my Mistress. I didn't know this woman who had replaced her.

And in this manner it proceeded even later into the night than was typical for our work. Madam attended her son and his wife with food and compliments, and when they dismissed her, expounded upon their glories to me. I fell exhausted in mind and body upon my bed of straw that night.

The following day, I awakened as usual at dawn and began my usual duties. Mistress was awake when I approached the inn and said, "Girl, today you'll go to the market for me."

"Mistress!" I exclaimed. She had never permitted me to leave the inn's property before. It was unheard of that I should go to the market!

"Don't sass me, girl. You'll go to the market! I can't very well have you attend my son and his wife! That would be an abomination. You'll go to the market and you'll not touch anything you buy. I'll give you two baskets and a list and you will have the vendors place the items into the baskets for you. Do you hear me? I won't have you polluting our foodstuffs with your cursed hands!"

"Yes Mistress!" was all I could reply.

"You've never been there before, have you?" she contemplated. I shook my head. "Well you walk down the road that way for a few miles. You'll come to a group of buildings and one of them will have a sign with a red cockerel on it. That's the pub next to the market. The street beside the pub is where the market will be run. I've listed the items and which vendor to buy them from, and also the price you are to pay." Then she handed me a bag of coins. "This is enough to buy the goods and no more, do you hear me! You aren't to buy anything else. I will check all that you buy and I'll know if you slight me!" I nodded again, knowing that

promising not to cheat the mistress would only gain me a contemptuous comment. Mistress liked silent obedience and nothing else.

I hadn't been given any breakfast.

And so I made my way to the marketplace. The world around me was wonderful and new. My familiar surroundings disappeared behind me and I entered into the unknown. The day was balmy and bright. Nature around me seemed to rejoice in its life.

I passed by cottages along the way, and people. The people smiled at me. They didn't know of my curse, or they would have turned away. Though it made me feel a bit dishonest, I smiled back and enjoyed their friendliness.

I passed a few men, and they looked at me the way the village boys had looked. I quickened my pace, in fear. Mistress was not there to prevent them from polluting themselves and I wasn't sure I could prevent them. I must return to Mistress quickly and avoid those types of men.

At the market, everyone was friendly. The vendors looked at me with perplexity when I asked them to put the items in the baskets, but obliged, smiling. Everywhere, the men looked at me. They smiled and said kind things, but they didn't look at my face. Young, handsome men and old men all joked with me and called my attention.

"Miss," the male vendors insisted, "The price I told that customer was for bargaining. I won't haggle with a lovely girl like you!" Then they gave me the goods for lower prices than what Mistress had written. I was confused but I didn't object. Maybe Mistress would be pleased with me, although with all the talk, I worried that I would not return to the inn soon enough for Mistress.

After I had bought from several vendors, a commotion arose down the street. I heard people exclaiming words like, "Gentleman", "Royalty", and "Wealthy". I tried to see what everyone was staring at as I made my way to the next vendor, but the crowd was too thick. The next vendor on Mistress' list was intent on the spectacle and I had to wait for her attention.

By chance, a space opened in the crowd all the way to the center of attention. There, upon a fantastic horse, sat the most glorious man I could imagine. He must have been a prince or a King. His head turned and he seemed to look right at me, handsome eyes wide.

"Oh! I can see him!" exclaimed the vendor. Then the crowd closed the gap and he disappeared. Surely it was a wondrous land we lived in where royalty visited the local market!

While at the second-to-last vendor on my list, my excitement and self-control faltered. Having eaten nothing that day, I swooned. Catching myself, I looked to see if the vendor had noticed.

"Oh miss! Are you all right?" he exclaimed, rushing around from behind his cart. His gnarled old hands grasped my arms. The wobbly world came back into focus.

"Oh, forgive me, sir. I'm fine," I murmured, struggling without strength to break the contact that would taint him. Then my stomach growled, loud and insistent.

"You must eat something, my dear! Growing girls shouldn't starve themselves just to be slender. A man likes meat on a girl's bones!" he snickered, not letting go.

"Oh, sir, I cannot spend Mistress' money on anything but what is on the list!" It wasn't something I should have said, but my hunger made me feel foggy.

"You poor dear," he crooned. "You must take one of my meat buns. I won't accept any money from such a lovely girl. And shame on your mistress for starving you so!"

I tried to refuse his misplaced kindness and defend mistress' honor as a good servant should, but the meat bun smelled so good. My mouth filled with drool and I couldn't refuse without dribbling, so I bit the meat bun with ferocity. The old man chuckled his approval and praise of his meat buns. Indeed, at that moment, it was the most delicious thing I had ever eaten.

The old man sent me away from his stand refreshed, but with a second free meat bun and more leftover money.

I stopped at the final stall, worried about the time. The woman was curt and quick, giving me no lower price than Mistress insisted.

Though I checked three times to be sure I had gotten everything, I wasn't missing anything on the list and I still had a quarter of the coins left in the bag. Not wanting to delay any longer, I decided to risk mistress' wrath rather than delay any longer.

My trip home felt much shorter than my trip to the market, but I enjoyed it more. I made sure to eat the second meat bun before I got back to the inn.

At the inn, I came to find everything changed from before I left. Master Dempsey and Mistress were in the kitchen when I brought in the shopping. Mistress seemed agitated when she took the baskets from me. When I handed her the bag of coins, she shook her head and motioned to Master Dempsey.

“Well, my! Who is this?” he warbled, his florid face breaking into an enormous grin.

“This is the house servant. She’s been here since she was a child,” mistress explained with a curt scowling.

Master Dempsey looked me over at his leisure, his eyes like the village boys’ and the men at the market, but more frightening. They glinted with possession as well as lust. “Lovely,” he cooed.

“Girl, my son will be taking over the inn from me from now on. His enterprises in the city became...tiresome. He and his elegant wife will live here and run the inn. You will obey everything Master Dempsey tells you. Do you hear?”

I nodded, my heart thumping with dread. I could see in his eyes what Master wanted from me.

“I see you have been so wise as to send her to the market for you, mother. She appears to be very successful at...negotiating.” His leer made me feel dirty. Then I felt remorse that I, the cursed one, should feel dirtied by one who is clean.

Mistress, who was a different woman in the presence of her son than the woman who had raised me, took the bag from Master with a timid attitude.

“My son, you are right! There is fully a quarter of the coins left! How can this be?” she exclaimed.

Master Dempsey just leered at me some more.

“What is your name, girl?” he asked me. I was startled for a moment at his question.

“Her name is Lyneth,” volunteered Mistress.

“Mmmmm. Excellent,” he replied, with a different kind of glint in his eye. I could tell that the glint of avarice meant that I was going to bring Master Dempsey more surprise coins somehow.

I heard the tinkle of a bell. “Ah, the new mistress is awake!” cried Mistress. “I will go and attend on her.”

“No, send Lyneth. Nicole is of a sensitive disposition and your presence unsettles her, Mother. Perhaps Lyneth will please her better,” ordered Master Dempsey. I was appalled. No one had ever spoken to Mistress in this manner.

“Oh, my son, no! You mustn’t pollute dear Nicole with this cursed girl’s presence. She is unclean! I shudder to tell you what trick that terrible trader played upon me when he burdened me with a cursed child! And I thought I was getting such a wonderful deal, too. She must not touch Nicole, or you, or any guest. She is polluted. She is a monster!”

Master Dempsey looked at his mother as if she was mad. “My dear mother, what has that crazy priest been teaching you here in this village? Cursed? Polluted? Monster? Nonsense! Look at this girl.”

“Oh her looks are very, very deceiving. It is a terrible thing that comes upon her when she doesn’t wear this silver collar, wrapped in Holy linen, around her neck. It is terrible to behold!” Mistress insisted.

“Really? Do the people of this village believe it?” queried the new master.

Mistress nodded. Then Master looked at me, so I nodded.

“Hmmm. This could be...interesting. I will think on this. In the meantime, go and attend my wife, Lyneth, for she would rather be touched by one cursed than by an old crone.”

I managed to turn away from Master and Mistress toward the stair before my jaw dropped in horrified amazement. Master Dempsey had just insulted his own mother to her face, in front of me, and she had said nothing.

Upstairs, Mistress Nicole was still in her bed, drinking a cup of chocolate.

“There you are!” she groaned when I entered after knocking and hearing her summons.

“At last, someone to attend me who is not hideous *and* a chatterbox!” I curtsied, hearing the command within the comment. Nicole wanted to speak, not to be spoken to.

I retrieved the dress and underthings she described to me from her enormous trunk. I aided her in removing her voluminous nightgown and donning the many layers of complicated underthings. I aided her in

careful donning of the fussy gown. Then she instructed me in her toilette, providing me with pictures for reference from a magazine she had upon her nightstand. All the time that I worked on her, she talked.

“You can’t imagine how awful it is for me, girl! I am a *lady born* and am unused to roughing it in the wilderness! I would have never wed that *awful* man if I had known what a lecherous cheat he was! I could bear it while he maintained... certain levels. But to be secreted away to a shack in the woods because he can’t deal in honest business! It is the living end! You can be sure that I will not share a bed with *him* ever again! He can make some hobbledehoy his heir because he won’t get one by me!”

Her tirade was interrupted by the entrance of that very man, the cause of her woes. He didn’t appear to hear any of her derision, because he interrupted with the greatest good humor.

“My angel, I am glad you have found an attendant that pleases you better than Mother,” he declared. “I have come to request an article from you. I feel it would better suit the business to cater to a higher-class level of guest. If we removed my poor aging mother from the burden of serving food to the guests we could place that responsibility upon this strong young girl, Lyneth,” with this he laid his hand upon my shoulder. I could not escape his touch, as my hands were entwined in Mistress Nicole’s elaborate hairdo. “She would both please the eye better, and serve the guests quicker,” he elaborated, now with both hands on my shoulders. “My mother objects due to her back-country religious notions that the girl carries some sort of terrible blight upon her. She feels the girl is unfit for any contact with decent people or their food.” Master began moving his hands over other areas of my body. His wife was engrossed in her magazine and didn’t give either of us so much as a glance. “Do not betray me to your mistress,” he whispered in my ear, hot, sticky, and smelling of onions. I attempted to continue upon Mistress Nicole’s hair, repulsed and afraid. “I think we will use her perceived... affliction as a subject of intrigue for our guests,” he continued, rubbing me in unmentionable places and smelling my neck like a hog rooting for a truffle. “But we must dress her in something more... appropriate for our higher-class guests.” This reference to Mistress Nicole’s wardrobe caught her attention. As quickly as she could lift her eyes from her periodical, Master’s hands were at his lapels and he was striding around from behind me. I tried not to quake with horror.

“You appear to be of a size with this young woman, my dear.” He would know now. “It would please me if you would choose one of your simpler, more modest gowns, to adorn her. Anything would be preferable to this.” He indicated my garb, which I had never doubted for propriety before. I had rushed to pin Mistress Nicole’s hair as soon as possible so I was free to flee from Masters roving paws. Mistress Nicole inclined her head toward me, her frown deep.

She sighed with great martyrdom and replied, “Very well. She can have the Camborget. But you must buy me a new gown.”

“I wouldn’t dream of anything else, my darling!” he crowed. “Lyneth, please change into the more appropriate gown and then report to me in the office. I wish to discuss your new duties.” It was obvious that I was finished with Mistress Nicole’s toilette, and that he meant terrible things when he said ‘new duties’. He had made clear that he did not share his mother’s aversions to my curse.

“Well, I am certainly relieved to relinquish *those* duties to you, girl,” Mistress Nicole declared upon her husband’s exit. Though she didn’t appear to see her husband’s actions, it was obvious she understood his intentions. “Freedom from *that* type of duty suits me very well, and the price of a dress is a small one to pay.” She plucked a pale lavender gown from a jumble in her trunks. The fabric was very soft and flowing. I had seen fine clothes like that on guests, but had never touched any. She tossed the gown toward me and moved to leave the room. Before she exited, she said, “Just don’t let it give you any ideas. I will always be mistress here. Very good, Lyneth. You will attend me each day when I ring in the morning. Do you understand?” I nodded and curtsied. This seemed to please her and she relaxed her frown for a moment before she left the room.

I changed where I stood, not wanting to risk the openness of the barn loft while Master could be near. This room, of all others, seemed to be safest from his intrusion.

The gown was delicate and soft, but revealed much more of my figure than my scratchy old one. I knew Mistress would dislike it. I felt almost naked. With a tremor of disgust I recognized that my “talk” with master, just moments away, would be worse than any lecherous grope. Some of my new “duties” that I would perform in place of Mistress Nicole would be accomplished with ease in the privacy of the office, which had

a lock on the door. It would be horrible sin, but how could I prevent it? I steeled myself the best I could and walked downstairs to my downfall.

CHAPTER 3

My salvation was already waiting for me. As I descended the stair, I heard the hushed awe of the Master and the Mistresses. The feeling of reverence was almost palpable. I stopped where I couldn't be seen. Mistress had always punished me for being seen when guests were checking in.

"Are you certain that we can only offer you our parlor for luncheon, my lord, your majesty? We have a very fine room above if you wish to have more privacy or a longer rest. We just need to send the girl to clear it out..."

"That will not be necessary," a warm, rich, baritone voice declared. I imagined the owner of that voice must be a wonderful person indeed, rank or not. It was a musical voice. "Please, just bring me to the dining room and provide a meal. That is all I require, thank you."

"Certainly, my lord, your majesty! I will call our serving girl to attend you," declared Master Dempsey. I heard both the Mistress and Mistress Nicole hiss an objection. Mistress' was general, but Mistress Nicole felt she should be the one to escort the important guest. I remained frozen. The women were cut off in strangled dismay. Master had made his orders clear and would take no argument.

"Lyneth," he called, his voice higher than I had heard it before. His call freed me and I continued down. The world slowed to a dreamlike crawl. There stood the glorious visitor who had caused so much ado at the market. He looked at me with the same surprise as before, and I knew in that instant that he *had* seen me before at the market. He was so much more glorious in person. He was exquisite and clean. Vitality and health flowed from him and his handsome face was full of wonder.

"Who is this?" he asked Master Dempsey.

I felt ashamed of the indecent gown I wore. Ah well, at least my cotton cap was modest and my pale hair tucked with care underneath.

"Why, this is Lyneth, our serving girl," he explained. "She will take you in to your meal."

"How long have you been here in this inn, my dear?" he asked me, his eyes searching my face as if seeing a long lost loved one. It quite overwhelmed me and my voice shrank in my throat.

"Since I was very small," was all I could manage

"I must take you away from here right away," he murmured, moving very close to me. My heart might have stopped with surprise and joy. I could have died right there, happy to spend my last few moments gazing at the look of adoration on that glorious man's face.

"Taken a liking to her, have you?" crowed Master Dempsey. "You can come see her here any time you like."

The visitor's face clouded and his eyes grew hard as flint. "I must take her with me today, now. I will pay you any price." Just as his adoration filled me with joy, his anger terrified me. I looked nervously to Mistress.

"Certainly, my lord, your majesty," warbled Master Dempsey, with obvious fear. "She'll not leave your side."

"No, Dempsey!" screeched Mistress. "You can't sell a cursed slave girl to a prince! She's an abomination!"

I could swear the visitor's teeth grew longer. He shot his piercing glaze at Mistress who squeaked like a mouse in a trap.

"Don't listen to my old mother, my lord, your majesty. She is senile and thinks half the people she knows are cursed. Please, come and have some dinner and Lyneth shall sit beside you."

"No, we are leaving," he declared, turning to the doorway. "Please, Lyneth, take my arm."

Worried that he was injured somehow or unwell, I grasped under his outstretched arm to support him. I only touched his coat, so I wasn't afraid of tainting him. I was more afraid of displeasing him. He looked back at me with tender amusement and pulled my hand through the crook of his arm. Leading me out as if I were a grand lady, we approached his glorious coach. Then I was the one who needed assistance to stand.

“Stephan, please pay these people anything they ask. We will not stop here today,” he instructed a very tall, broad man in livery as he strode to the coach door. Stephan rushed to the door ahead of us and opened it for the man whose name I still did not know.

The sight of the inside of the coach thrilled me, but worried me as well. “After you,” said the splendid man.

“Shouldn’t I ride on the back, sir? I mean, my shoes...” We both looked at my shoes.

“Oh dear,” he agreed. He looked at me, puzzled what to do about my scuffed, ugly old shoes.

“Certainly, Master, I have never ridden even on the back of such a beautiful vehicle,” I excused.

“Do not call me master. Call me Rafe,” he insisted. “You won’t ride on the back. You will ride inside with me.”

This was very important. My escape from Dempsey and the inn was happening right now and I needed to go away with Rafe. Taking a deep breath, I kicked off my shoes and leapt into the coach. Rafe looked at me, inside the coach, and then down at the shoes, astonished. Then he let out a magnificent laugh that echoed through the inn yard. His laugh filled my heart with exultation.

Before I knew it, I was riding in the fabulous coach, watching the inn, Mistress, Dempsey, and Nicole growing smaller and smaller in the window beside Rafe’s splendid face. I was speechless, just looking at the two most wonderful things I had ever seen.

Rafe gazed at me, looking at me as if I was a treasure. He looked as if I was his treasure. His face said even more. It said that he had searched a long and tortuous path to find me and had at last discovered exactly what he had dreamed of finding. I was humbled. I blushed and plucked at Nicole’s gown. How was I going to tell him that mistress was right? How would I say that I became a monster once the collar was removed? How could I say it to him? Would my heart break into a million pieces to see the disgust on his face that I had seen on Mistresses so long ago?

“I found you!” he said in an awed voice as if he was listening to my mind thinking about him. My heart started to break a little in preparation for telling him. I would tell him. I had to. But I would wait until I was far enough from Mistress and Dempsey that I would never have to worry about seeing either of them ever again. I wouldn’t keep the terrible truth from him, but I wouldn’t let myself fall into Dempsey’s clutches. That would also be wrong.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, his eyes tender and smiling.

“Oh, no, thank you! I had...” I stopped myself. That wasn’t an appropriate subject for a servant to utter to a prince.

“What did you have?” he coaxed, grinning.

“...meat buns,” I confessed, reddening even more. I covered my mouth with my hand. I hadn’t intended to say such a ridiculous thing to him.

He just laughed again, the sound of his voice rolling through my heart like a gentle, cleansing stream. “Were they good meat buns?” he chuckled. I just nodded, my hand still covering my silly mouth.

“Was that the stall you were standing at in the marketplace when I saw you?”

“You saw me!” My hand fell into my lap.

“Of course! I looked right at you. I tried to reach you, but you weren’t there when I managed to make my way through the crowd.”

“Oh, forgive me! I thought you just looked my way by chance. If I had known...”

“It doesn’t matter now. I’ve found you. Of course, how could I have lost your trail?”

“Did I leave a trail?”

“You were impossible to lose. That smelly old inn confused me for a moment, but, of course, I found you there.” I couldn’t help but giggle a little at “smelly old inn”.

“You said you lived there since you were a child. You worked there all this time?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“Please, call me Rafe. My heart will break if you call me ‘sir’ or ‘master’. I don’t want to be your master. I want to be your friend!”

“My friend?” This was unthinkable and magnificent.

“I want to be your best friend,” he declared. His eyes were earnest and full of love.

"I...I don't think you have the right girl," I groaned. My heart was shattering to dust. It was too late and I had to say the thing I hated to say. I would walk the road alone rather than keep him unaware or return to Dempsey.

"You are. You are just the girl I have been searching for all my life."

I couldn't let him see my face anymore. My hands felt like scant protection from the strength of his gaze.

"Mistress was right," I said through my hands. "I am cursed."

"What?" he said, almost in a growl.

My hands now served to protect me from seeing his anger and to hide my shame from his gaze.

"She was right. I turn into...a beast. Without this, given me by Father Miller, I would turn into..." I touched the cloth over the cold collar. Thinking of its power reminded me of the pain it gave me and allowed it to resurface for a moment.

"What kind of beast?" he demanded.

I swallowed the lump of terror in my throat and peeked through my fingers. His gaze was intense, but not angry. So I dropped my hands.

"Father Miller called it a Werewolf."

"And what is that collar made of?"

"Silver." My heart pounded inside of me like the beast waiting inside me was fighting for freedom. Rafe looked at me as if he felt the pain the collar gave me.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, but I knew that he could tell it did.

"I've become accustomed to it. It doesn't bother me now, for the most part. Wearing it, I can work to earn my keep. Without it, it is probable I'd be locked away or...killed."

Rafe's breathing grew louder and more agitated until he roared. I know without a doubt that his teeth grew sharp as he bellowed.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" I whimpered. "I will leave you! Please don't hurt me! I'll just step out of the carriage and you'll be rid of me."

"Rid of you! Hurt you!" His rage had turned to panic. "Why would I do something so terrible and foolish? I said I have been searching for you. You can't leave me when I've just found you!" He lunged across the seat to me, clasping my shoulders in his great, strong hands. "Please don't run away when I've found you at long last. You don't have any shoes!"

I looked down at my stocking feet. "No. No shoes." Boy was I confused.

Then he shuddered and lunged back to his seat. "Oh how can you stand it!" he cried.

"It has always been this way," I confessed. I was thrown into utter confusion by Rafe, one moment telling me he had been searching for me and then becoming so angry.

"No, the collar!"

"Oh. I guess I got used to it."

Again he lunged across the carriage. This time he clasped me to his breast. "If you can endure it, then I can!" he groaned in a husky tone, almost as if he were fighting tears. "Never leave me! Please, Lyneth, stay with me forever."

Maybe Rafe was a madman who had searched with tireless diligence for a cursed Werewolf girl, but his compassion and pure affection touched me. "Always. I will never leave you," I promised. He held me for a long time and I didn't resist him. It was splendid to be held that way, not with evil intent, but in compassion.

When he let me go, he apologized. "Please forgive me, Lyneth. I am not strong enough to endure it for too long." I was grateful for any contact he would give me, though it reviled him.

Rafe was struggling with his thoughts again, I could tell. I waited for him to decide what to do. At last he asked, "That man, at the inn, did he...harm you?"

I was so relieved to be able to give him some glad news that I blurted, "No! He did not harm me. He wanted to. He would have done so. It would have been only moments...but you came. If you had not come, he would have." Rafe was overcome. He had to turn his face from me. But it was all right because he was overcome with relief.

"That is fortunate, for me and for him," he thought aloud.

“And for me,” I included.

He laughed again, and the world was good once more.

We rode into the night, stopping just once for a meal. “Please forgive me, Lyneth. I wish to make all haste home, and I have deprived you of food to do so.”

“I am used to skipping a midday meal, and remember, I had two meat buns late this morning,” I encouraged. He laughed again. I loved to hear him laugh. Everything bad fled when he laughed.

CHAPTER 4

As the night progressed, I dozed in the comfortable carriage. No bed I remembered had been so luxurious. I think we may have stopped once, but I didn't fully awaken. When I did wake, it was dawn, as I was accustomed, and I lay upon the breast of Rafe. He cradled me tenderly as the carriage swayed over the road. I stayed as still as I could, not wanting this tender contact to be broken. Why did this splendid man want a Werewolf girl? I pondered this matter through the morning.

"Mmmm," he murmured upon waking much later. "See. I knew I could endure it longer."

"Rafe, why do you want a Werewolf girl?" I asked. I had tried to work out the answer myself, but couldn't imagine anything beyond conjecture. So I just asked.

"You don't know?" he asked, his eyes searching my face, or maybe trying to tell me somehow.

I shook my head. Nothing I could imagine made any sense.

He raised the window shutter on a bright morning, though late for me. "Well, you'll see very soon, maybe in an hour." That didn't give me any clues! "In the meantime, would you like breakfast?"

I sat up and nodded my head with enthusiasm. I was rewarded with a hearty laugh.

"Don't laugh at me. I'm a servant and I wake up at dawn. I am unused to the hours of the nobility."

He laughed harder and rapped on the carriage roof. "You were awake and laying in my arms?" I nodded and blushed. "What were you thinking about all morning?" he prodded. The carriage came to a halt and Stephan appeared at the door with a basket.

"So?" asked Rafe as Stephan unpacked the basket. I kept quiet and looked at Rafe and then at Stephan.

"Intriguing," Rafe said, glaring at Stephan. Efficient, Stephan arranged our breakfast and then disappeared. The carriage resumed its course again.

"Won't you please tell me what you thought, dear Lyneth?" he asked with command in his voice. "I'm quite overcome with curiosity."

"Forgive me, Rafe, but I am not accustomed to speaking in front of strangers. Stephan is a very good man, I'm sure, but I did not want to tell you in front of him that I was wondering why you wanted a Werewolf girl."

He smiled warm as the sun. "So you weren't thinking of Stephan all morning?" The hint that he might be jealous of my casual thoughts of Stephan produced flutters in my stomach. No. That was too much to expect. I could hope for pity, but not for feelings strong enough to bring about jealousy. I shook my head. My mouth was occupied in fitting as much of the delicious food as I could into my mouth. I was careful to be polite. I had endured too many slaps from Mistress to eat in any rude manner. But I was expert at eating fast and a lot. I never knew when I would be allowed more.

"Well, that is quite impressive," Rafe exclaimed when he noticed my rapid consumption. I smiled and continued.

"You know you don't have to rush, Lyneth. If we finish this, and you are still hungry, I will buy you more. You will never be hungry again if I can help it." I smiled, nodded and kept eating. I had been hungry since dawn and he was eating with hearty appetite himself. I was going to get as much as I needed now before he finished the last morsel and I had to wait. I think I was still unsure of his resolve to keep his Werewolf girl and not turn her out of the carriage.

Then he stopped eating. I eyed him with uncertainty.

"All the rest is yours if you want it. I won't let you be hungry, Lyneth," he said.

"Thank you, Rafe. I'm finished too."

"Are you sure?" he prompted. I nodded. He packed up the scant leftovers and set the basket aside. Then he peered out of the window again.

"This is it. We're here! Lyneth, we're home!" He turned to me, his face full of joy. Looking into his clear blue eyes, I was forced to share his joy. He ran his hand through his chestnut hair and his eyes grew soft. "Oh, Lyneth, at last I can free you!" I was pulled into his loving gaze. He leaned closer and closer to me, until my eyes closed, and I felt his lips touch mine. Nothing would ever separate me from this man now. He had stolen my heart.

But then, he called to his coachmen. “Stephan, George. Please help me! I must free Lyneth from this terrible collar.”

I struggled, but his loving embrace became a prison. “Please, don’t Rafe. I’m a monster without this collar. Don’t let it out, Rafe!” I begged.

“You’re wrong, Lyneth. I won’t let you be stifled. I will help you to be everything wonderful that you are. I promise I won’t ever leave you alone.”

And then Stephan unclasped the Silver Collar from my neck. Its painful protection was gone and my body rushed to return to my cursed form. Rafe released me as my body transformed until I stood there on four legs in the sumptuous carriage. I covered. Now would come the revulsion and the hatred. The kiss and the love I felt from him would evaporate and I would be untouchable and alone.

But then something wonderful happened! First, upon the faces of Rafe’s men, I found joy and delight. They sighed as if they were seeing a rare flower bloom instead of witnessing a young woman transform into a monster. I looked to Rafe in trembling confusion, and he smiled with immeasurable love. Then his smile widened. It became terrible. His teeth lengthened and his face stretched. After several moments, an enormous chestnut-colored wolf stood with me in the carriage. I whined like a frightened dog. Rafe barked at the men who parted from their position blocking the door. So I bolted.

Rafe pursued me across a field and into a dark forest. I ran in fear, but he herded me in the direction he wanted me to go. Forest and running soothed me, and soon I loped rather than tore through the underbrush. He came closer in gradual increments and I let him. When my wolf-legs became exhausted, which took a long time, I stopped with relief.

Rafe was there, and his eyes were his own eyes though his body was different. The same love and joy shone from them. At last my transformed brain was able to grasp all of his incomprehensible behavior and cryptic words. He was like me. He searched for me because we were the same and he would never leave me because we belonged together.

I marveled and I tried to show him that I understood and was grateful. I wagged my tail, pale hair swishing. I tilted my head and approached him. He wagged his tail too and stretched to sniff me. I licked his muzzle and rubbed my face on his. We were reconciled.

We spent days as wolves running through what I know now to be his kingdom. We caught game, drank from cool streams, and slept in leafy bowers. And we mated. As a girl, I would have been much more thoughtful and afraid of such loose behavior. Father Miller had deplored the evils of loose women. But as a wolf, it was natural. There was only him and me, no matter what, and would always be. It was meant to be. Had he felt this way about me all along?

It was many days later that I awoke a girl again, naked in a bower, my body entwined with Rafe the wolf. His keen senses woke him within moments, and he looked at me with gladness and unsurpassed love. Then he transformed. Seeing him do so was magnificent. I had lost my hatred of my other nature seeing the beauty of his.

“Hi,” he murmured, his strong limbs enfolding me now, as naked as I was.

“Hi,” I replied. I blushed. My human sensibilities returned with my human form, I guess. “Don’t be embarrassed. We are mated now. We will have a wedding too, though it is just a formality. This union that we have forged these last few days, that is the heart bond.”

I felt our skin pressed together and noticed that my skin had been renewed. My work calluses and scars had vanished. My transformation had erased all the physical evidence of my humble past.

I smiled and shivered as a chill wind encroached on our sheltered nook. Still, I felt calm.

Rafe saw my gooseflesh and sat up. He whistled to the trees. A whistle came in reply. Rafe whistled again and emerged from the bower partway. He wouldn’t leave me. Heavy boots tromped toward us and I tried to cover myself. But it was unnecessary.

“Your Majesty, we are overjoyed! We have been preparing for your return after your heart bond. The kingdom is in jubilant celebration,” a deep voice exclaimed.

“Thank you,” Rafe replied with enthusiastic sincerity. He ducked back into the bower and handed me a white velvet mantle trimmed in white fur. I wrapped it around myself against the chill. Never had I felt such softness! It distracted me from worry when Rafe, wrapped in his own cloak now, helped me out of the bower and into a circle of woodsmen.

“Welcome, Queen Lyneth!” One woodsman said, who must have been the leader. He had been the one to answer Rafe’s call. “We cannot express our jubilation have our queen returned to our kingdom at long last! We have waited many generations for your arrival.”

“Queen?” I squeaked. It was just one of my questions, but the most important. I felt more nervous and less sure of maintaining my form.

“My darling,” Rafe chuckled. “I am their king. You are my bride, so you are the queen.” His robe had a slit in the side. His hand poked out of the slit, beckoning mine. I fumbled and found the slit in mine and grasped his hand. It was warm and right, and I calmed again. I could be queen if I was *his* queen.

“Don’t worry. It’s a small kingdom,” Rafe reassured me with a devastating quirky grin as a woodsman knelt before me and fitted slippers on my bare feet.

“Come, my bride, my queen. Let us meet our people.”

Rafe led me through the forest, the woodsman tromping enthusiastic and loud behind us. It was mere minutes before we emerged upon the grounds of a great stone castle.

“Hah!” I exclaimed. I felt my form growing unstable again. Rafe laughed, anchoring me back to my form. Once I could find my voice again, I asked in a trembling voice, “Rafe, yesterday I was a servant at an inn, and today I’m a queen. What happened?”

Rafe laughed, and the men laughed, though not *at* me. They were so overjoyed that laughter just erupted. I laughed too.

“Beautiful Lyneth, the kingdom of Abidan surrounds our country of Unar. Our countries have always lived in a sort of symbiosis, trading and joining one another in defending ourselves. Generations ago, our lands were besieged by war. In this war, the kingdom of Erland argued with Abidan, but not with us. They made a show of attacking the plains of Abidan, but sent a great force in secret to overwhelm Unar. They had discovered the truth that the warriors of Unar have always been a mighty force, and joined with Abidan were unbeatable. With all the forces of Unar joined with Abidan on the plains, our homeland was defenseless and fell to the Erlanders. Our royal children were spirited away, some by their parents and some by the villains of Erland. Abidan and Unar discovered the deception and retook Unar, but many of the royal children were lost. Generations have searched for the missing families. Yours was one, taken by the Erlanders and sold as slaves, as you were and probably your parents and theirs.”

“You know the secret of the warriors of Unar, right?” he prompted.

“We are terrible beasts. Grrr!” I joked. Rafe laughed, making my heart sing. I laughed, and so did the woodsman.

“Well another secret is that without the call of their king and queen united, the Unarians cannot become their wolf selves. For generations they have been trapped in human form without the call of their rulers. The loss of the families, the deaths, and the kidnappings left us with no suitable queen to lead the people, until you.”

I was astounded. My form wavered again, and a tear slid down my cheek. It was then that we emerged from a garden, through a hedge, and into a crowd of Unarians. They exclaimed at our appearance and then they cheered! I exploded into wolf form, still wrapped in the cloak.

The crowd gave a collective gasp and then erupted into applause. Unarians shouted for joy, embraced one another, and wept. There was dancing and raucous singing. My heart raced and there was no way I could take my human form again.

Then Rafe transformed too. And he howled. The crowd became silent in an instant and all their eyes were glued upon us. Rafe’s voice warbled strong and pure above them. My heart swelled in my furry chest. Rafe let out another howl, and I joined him.

Then they began to transform. Men and women, adults, and children roared together with triumph. Hair sprouted and bodies morphed. One by one they joined our howl. The courtyard rang with it and Unar was reborn.

CHAPTER 5

Another thing to list in my roster of the most glorious things, below Rafe's laugh, Rafe's kisses, and freeing my people, is a hot bath. This new and heavenly experience could not last long enough. I hadn't felt as if I had led a terrible, deprived life until I compared washing up at the cold pump to a hot bath.

I was not alone during this bath either. It seems the entire female population of Unar was lined up outside my royal bedchamber waiting to have a turn buffing up the new queen. One woman washed my hair. The next rinsed it. The woman after that scrubbed my back. Every step of my beautification was done by a different woman, and I couldn't feel embarrassed. These were my people. I loved them and they loved me, just because of who we were. Some women came in weeping. Some laughed and some sang. Many brought gifts and all had volumes to say to me. I did not get tired of it. I would rather share the joy of one of my countrywomen than mop a floor or muck a stable, and that is all I did all day up until now. This was heaven. Well, almost.

Rafe was nowhere to be found. I felt a little sad. After days of romping through the forest together, he had disappeared just hours after I had regained my human form. My human form had lots of skin that had touched lots of his skin, and wanted to do that again. But he was doing King things, I supposed, and I got to have a bath.

After what everyone insisted was way too long, they hauled my wrinkled fingers and toes out of the bath along with the rest of me. A succession of women applied a plethora of potions and oils to me, and then a copious amount of underthings, just like Nicole. How would my skin touch Rafe's now? Then they put on petticoats, skirts, blouses, kirtles, mantles and jewelry on me. Each one was just as overjoyed to help as the last, so I couldn't complain. Truly, if I wasn't to be dressed in all this finery, I couldn't have given them all a turn.

Then they let in the children. So many beautiful little ones came giggling and bouncing into my chambers that some of the women had to step out to make room. And then they sang for me! The emotions loosened my form and I transformed inside all that finery.

A gasp erupted from the group, but not one of horror. They gasped as if seeing a miracle. Women wept and clapped. The children squealed and danced. Chaos erupted and the children began hugging me. When the push to be near me became uncomfortable, I slipped through them, brushing them with my fur and licking a few outstretched hands. I wanted Rafe to come and I wanted us to howl again, but he didn't come and I wouldn't do it without him. I regained my human form after a while. Everyone cooed their approval and then they dressed me all over again.

I knew that Rafe controlled his emotions and that controlled his transformation. But it wasn't so easy for me yet. Everything was so overwhelming and wonderful. Also, the people seemed to love it, so I didn't worry.

The crowd of ladies surrounding me traversed my castle with purpose, accustomed to that which I had only seen a small portion. Propelling me along with them, they all knew just where to go and we arrived at a set of enormous doors. That was our goal because it was filled with more people.

This was where Rafe was. I could smell him. It was a wonderful smell! Now that I had become friends with my inner beast, I knew how he had found me after that first sight at the marketplace. It's how I knew he was here.

The great doors swung wide to reveal the great hall of the castle. It was filled with people, all their eyes turned to me and my entourage. A collective sigh could be heard from them as we entered the room. Their emotions of joy and relief flooded over me and I felt my form begin to waver, until I saw Rafe.

Rafe stood at the head of the room with a small group of men. He was dressed in royal robes and he looked strong and noble. He was waiting for me. His eyes shone with love and victory, never leaving mine. I smiled and quickened my steps toward him. He was the stronghold in this sea of tumultuous emotions. With Rafe I could be a wolf or be a woman, and either form was right when I was like him.

He held out his hand to me and I took it. I ascended the dais and stood with him before the men. We gazed into each other's eyes as the Chief Steward read us the Wedding Rites of Unar.

At the Steward's prompting, Rafe said to me, "I, Rafe Kinsey, take you Lyneth to be my wife, my queen and my one true love. I will cherish our bond and love you today, tomorrow, and forever. I will trust

you and honor you. I will run with you and hunt with you. I will love you faithfully through the best and the worst, through the difficult and the easy. What may come I will always be there. As I have given you my hand to hold, so I give you my life to keep, and join my voice with yours.”

The Steward then prompted me and I said to Rafe, “I, Lyneth, take you Rafe Kinsey, to be my husband, king and my one true love. I will cherish our bond and love you today, tomorrow, and forever I will trust you and honor you. I will run with you and hunt with you. I will love you faithfully through the best and the worst, through the difficult and the easy. What may come I will always be there. As I have given you my hand to hold, so I give you my life to keep, and join my voice with yours.”

Then we said in unison to each other, “Entreat me not to leave you, or to return from following after you, For where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. And where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord do with me and more if anything but death parts you from me.”

Rafe kissed me. Though it was before a crowd, gentle and respectful, it was still a powerful kiss that I felt to my toes. I wanted to linger in that moment.

A crown, glittering with diamonds, passed from the Steward’s hands to Rafe. He placed the crown upon my head and turned me to face all of his people.

“Here, at last, is your queen!” he declared. The room erupted in cheers and applause. Rafe waited for the people to express their joy, and when the room quieted, he smiled. Then he melted into his wolf form, shook off his finery, and howled. Jubilant, I followed his example and joined my voice to his. In moments, the Great Hall rang with the jubilant howls of our enormous pack. Fine clothes littered the floor and wolves frolicked among the luxurious furniture. Unar was restored.

CHAPTER 6

After long and hearty celebration, both in wolf form and human form, I was alone with Rafe at last.

“My darling Lyneth,” he whispered, his lips brushing my neck, “how do you like your kingdom?”

At last all of our skin was touching again, and I was hazy to everything but that. I answered him once his words absorbed through the thick layer of joy, “I love everything as long as you are here.”

He rustled the luxurious sheets that were the only thing between our warm pocket and the chilly night air. “That’s not a good enough answer. You must have your own mind, or I will be terribly bored.”

I sighed, running my hand over his wide, bare shoulders. “They adore me, so how could I find fault with them?” I amended.

He laughed, making my heart flutter. It still happened every time.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“I was wondering. What happened to the silver collar? I should return it to Father Miller.”

He laughed again. How I loved his laughter! His mouth was very wide and his teeth sharp with a savage grin when he said, “That old man can come and get the thing himself... if he is able. I doubt an old crotchety priest could be nimble enough to climb to it.”

“Climb to it?” I pondered, confused.

With a twinkle in his eye he explained, “Stephan and George were esentful of the object that tormented you for so long, and exultant that their queen had arrived. While we frolicked in the forest in our wolf forms, they somehow managed to loop it around the spire right up there.” He pointed to the ceiling above us, which was cone shaped because it was right below one of the lovely spires of the palace.

“No they didn’t!” I cried in skepticism.

“Yes they did! You can see for yourself,” he chuckled. “But not now!” he exclaimed when I moved to leave the bed and go see the marvel. He wrapped his strong arms around me, and the lure of his skin evaporated any idea of leaving.

Early the next morning, I woke at dawn. It would be a long time before that habit left me. Rather than bother with maids and dresses, I shifted into my wolf form. It was easy to do with so many strong emotions to draw upon.

Outside in the chill air, I found the spire where my love slept to see if what he claimed was true. There, encircling the copper spire on the roof above our bed glinted the silver collar.

I ran back to Rafe and our warm bed, exultant in my freedom, home at last.

The Silver collar still encircles that spire, though it is now old and tarnished and shines no more.

The End.

About the Author

Kate Policani is a homemaker and compulsive writer from Seattle. She has a wild imagination and an addiction to reading and writing. Her hobby is exploring and analyzing all kinds of stories. She uses them like a literary chemistry set to examine a variety ideas and concepts and to fuel her own writing. The Science Fiction and Fantasy genres are her favorites because the exciting flights of fancy make a thrilling plot. Every day is filled with the stories of those around us, especially in this information age. It is her passion to find what stories inspire her and others, and why they inspire. There are more than 80 stories waiting on her hard drive, incubating and developing for future reading! What will she come up with next?

More Books By Kate Policani:



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Don't Judge a Book By Its Magic

My upcoming release!

Colleen is normal...well, except it turns out she's a magician. Trouble is, she's morally opposed to it; no hexes, spells, incantations, eye of newt. Despite "how it's done" she won't cave in to pressure. At Seattle Pacific Regional University she joins The Convergence. She'll learn the freaky side of Work Study, Financial Aid, and Vyxhepiocht. Seriously, she's never seen so many hot guys!

Please visit my blog to find out more about me and my other books! <http://katepolicani.com>

**Excerpt from Don't Judge a Book By Its Magic
Coming soon!**

“Well, hello!” he purred, a little half-grin breaking across his amazing face just for me. “What are you doing here?” His voice was naughty and gorgeous. It was low and enticing with a purr to it, like a tiger who wasn’t going to eat me. The tiger even liked me a bit, but might choose to eat me in the future. Also, I would enjoy it very much if he did.

I was kind of surprised that the brother alarm hadn’t gone into overdrive already. I half-expected to see my burly older brother and scrappy younger brother punching their way through the magic to get to me. This was the third hot guy who had acknowledged my existence and I was unused to avoiding the bro-bomb considering the volume of flirting.

Now, I was hyper-aware that I was sweaty, tear-stained, red-eyed, red-nosed, and horribly disheveled. It was not an attractive moment. Naughty Hottie was messy in a planned way that was even better than being tidy and put-together. Every movement and line of him seemed natural and comfortable. And he was smiling at me as if he was the Wolf and I was Little Red Riding Hood with a giant basket of goodies for Grandmother.

“I...” I faltered, unable to think of any way to explain, “I can’t get out!” Naughty Hottie looked at me and the path, puzzled in an attractive way. “Honest! Whenever I go that way, off-campus, I somehow end up turned around and going in again.” Naughty Hottie gazed at me with knowing eyes. Of course he knew all about Teimnydd restrictions and punishments because he was so bad. He studied me at his leisure, in a bold way that made me worry that some Teimnydduus might have x-ray vision. Then he turned and walked with confidence down the path until he was “off campus”. He held out his arms in a graceful gesture of completion. He could get out. So I followed, and then I didn’t and I was back where I started.

“Yep, that’s a Capiro spell just for you, Kitten. You know, you don’t look like a bad girl.” He trod back to me, languid and sleek.

“Um, I’m not. I’m just...new.”

“New?”

“Yeah.”

“Care to elaborate?” he coaxed, his interest piqued, but in a languid, feline way that could evaporate at any moment.

I shook my head. I did not want to elaborate. Though at this moment I was desperate to break a “stay here” spell by The Drop herself, I couldn’t bring myself to cross the line to reveal information about my unique status. I wanted to keep the secret, even though Joel had just ruined it and the whole campus

probably knew about the Baby Teimnydduus Freshman by now. Naughty Hottie did not appear to know and I didn't want him to know.

"OK," he replied, as if my refusing to enlighten him didn't bother him in the slightest. Then he held out his hand. I stared. He moved his hand in a way that beckoned. He wanted me to take his hand. I reached out toward him, mesmerized somehow to obey. But then I hesitated, looking into his face for confirmation, explanation, or assurance that my hand would be returned to me at some point, whole and uninjured in any physical or spiritual way. He pulled that little gut-melting half-grin again and his eyes softened into a catastrophic mixture of beckoning and scolding. I slid my hand into his. He led me toward the "off campus" spot. And then he was there and I was not, looking back into campus again. Our hands had slipped apart in the blink of an eye.

He looked at me again, communicating with his eyes. (As I was quickly learning, he was Grand Master of Eye Communication.) This time, he approved of my impressive level of badness, seeing as even *he* was unable to thwart the "Capiro" spell that was needed to contain naughty, naughty me. He was also ready to face the challenge again, because no spell designed to prevent rule-breaking was going to stop him.

A moment later he had returned to my enforced position and swept me up into his long, muscular arms. I rested in the "princess carry", heart fluttering, as he walked me toward freedom. Then we were both back on campus, turned around.

"Who *are* you?" he asked in a sexy whisper. He didn't put me down.

I was breathless and my brain had completed its evaporation. "...Colleen," I whispered. His eyes reprimanded me (sexy!) and demanded more. I didn't want to tell him, but I couldn't help myself. "Colleen Underhill."

One eyebrow lifted. In a lot of popular books I have read, people can either do this or can't and it is a point of pride or shame for them. I have never met anyone who has any deep feelings whatsoever on the raising of eyebrows. You can or you can't. So what?

Naughty Hotty could and, of course, it was dangerous and sexy. Even more dangerous and sexy, he looked me over like a tiger embracing a new kind of meat he might like to devour. "You're the *new one*, aren't you?" All I could do was nod (evaporated brain, remember?). "Mmmmm," he said, which could be interpreted as "Mmmm, I see," or as "Mmmmm, delicious." My knees evaporated too, which was OK because he still held me in his arms.

"Well, Colleen Underhill, I'm London Vadoma. *Nice* to meet you," he purred. (Insert all previous sexy descriptions here.) Tracy's high school that she went on and on about during my "orientation" was called "Vadoma High". Weird!

"Mmmmm," I replied, which could be interpreted as "Mmmmm, your wish is my command," or "Mmmmm, take me, London Vadoma, I'm yours." That little half-smile evaporated my internal organs.

Then he set me down. I was surprised I could still stand without my knees, but that must have worked because I was unburdened by the weight of my brain or internal organs.

“Yeah,” he decided, “I’m not really disappointed you’re stuck here. See ya!” And with that, he sauntered away.

When he was out of my sight, my brain was the first to return, followed by my organs. That made me tipsy because the weight of my brain upset the hollowness of missing organs and no knees. Next, my heart appeared back inside my chest cavity well-chilled by the way-too-bad-for-Colleen-ness of London Vadoma. The appearance of my knees followed a little too far behind for comfort, but at least I didn’t fall down. Yes, Naughty Hottie London Vadoma was waaaaay too dangerous for a little suburbanite Skupdyn like me. He was a guy to adore from afar. My brothers would be kicking his butt, possibly with pal backup, if not for supernatural intervention and the lie that I was in Maine. My dad would re-sharpen his knife collection if he even smelled London’s cologne near me.

I was late for class.