

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

RED

Belinda McBride

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

RED

By Belinda McBride

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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RED

By Belinda McBride

Photo Description

A muscular young man in a bright red hoodie makes a tempting target. He may be far more dangerous than he seems!

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name's "BIG Red Riding Hood", or at least that's what everyone calls me. Woke up one morning after a night out with a big WOLF of a man in bed with me. HELP me figure out how I got there, as I drank too much and don't remember. Please?! Thanks.

Sincerely,

Christopher

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, sci-fi, post-apocalyptic, dystopian

Tags: law enforcement, alpha males, shifters, switch/versatile, psychic ability, enemies-to-lovers

Content warnings: Hopefully Ever After

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RED

By **Belinda McBride**

PROLOGUE

Burning pain ran through Colin Redington's shoulders and back, creeping around to his chest. His breath caught, his muscles shuddered and he gritted his teeth in determination.

"Six more, Red. That's all."

The voice of his torturer was low and brash with a trace of city around the edges. He opened his eyes and looked into the face of a merciless sadist.

"Breathe through the pain."

Obediently, Red inhaled, letting it out as he pushed the barbell straight up from his chest in an explosion of waning strength. He got through two more reps before his muscles surrendered. Frozen, he was caught in the middle, the bar wobbling precariously over his body. A strong hand steadied it.

"Two more, kid. Do it or I kick that skinny ass of yours."

Red blinked, not sure if it was tears or sweat rolling down his cheeks. Hell, it could be blood. His ears rushed with white noise, and over that hissing beat he caught the sound of jeering. Laughter. He set his jaw and pushed through one more. Exhausted and demoralized, he lowered the bar slightly, unable to continue.

The old trainer got into his face. His skin was brown from many suns past. Long lines creased his cheeks and wrinkles webbed out from the corners of his eyes. He nodded at the cluster of teenage boys who congregated around a heavy punching bag.

"Now listen, kid. You came to me because of them." His thick hair was a bolt of white against the grubby gray walls of the gym, and his dark eyes were sharp with urgency. "These here are hard times we live in. You walk out without finishing and they're on your ass before you can breathe."

“They’re on my ass anyway,” Red gasped. Fuck. He was trying to keep them *out* of his ass. He hadn’t expected a bunch of rich kids to show up at this hole-in-the-wall gym when their daddies’ bank accounts offered much better.

The pressure of the weight lifted slightly and, to his humiliation, Red realized that the old guy had slipped his palm under the center of the bar, relieving him enough to give him a rest. “Here’s the thing, Red. This world is a hella lot uglier than it was five years ago. A different world since I was a kid. Nowadays, there’s predators and there’s prey, and you gotta decide which you’re gonna be.”

There wasn’t much doubt which column Red had fallen into, with his skinny shoulders and fragile white skin. The trainer must have seen Red’s thoughts play over his face.

“Nope. It’s not determined by your size, kid. It’s all up there in your brain and in your soul and heart. You can work around weaknesses and make them strengths. You can take your strengths and make them power. Them young ones, all their strength is in each other. They’re a pack. Alone, they’re nothing. Together, they’re frightening and dangerous. They’re turning into a rape gang now, I’d guess. Someday they’ll be deadly if someone don’t break their ties.”

Red breathed deeply, not liking the feeling of being trapped on the bench, but he had faith in the old trainer to hold the bar.

“They’re kids and won’t be much different as adults. Break one, you break them all. Through their egos. Their wallets. Their dicks. Take away their girlfriends...” He looked up at them, then back down at Red. “Don’t suppose they have girlfriends stashed away unless their folks made arrangements. Take away their back-alley boyfriends. Find what props them up and jerk it away. That’s how you’ll bust ’em wide apart.”

He lifted the barbell and rested it back in the rack above Red’s face. His sharp gaze flicked to the side. “But that one over there... the dark one... don’t look, now... he’s a stone-cold killer. A hunter.” He jerked his chin toward the window where Red caught the reflection of a man. Even in the glass, he was

scary as hell. All dark and lean and hungry, he looked out at the world from under the dark hood over his head.

Look away! Look away!

Predator. Red's primal brain screamed, but he calmly looked up at the trainer.

"How do you survive someone like that?" His voice cracked only a little and he didn't try to hide the fear he felt.

"Gimme five more reps, and I'll tell you."

His breath caught in his chest and Red nearly laughed with the wild need to run. He reached up for the bar and the old guy spotted him through his next press. And then another. It seemed easier this time, probably because of the shot of fear zinging through his system. He reached five and nearly lost his grip.

"One more and I'll tell you how to survive that one, and others like him. Because he's not the only hunter out there, boy. And once he fixates, you won't shake him."

Automatically, Red glanced at the plate glass. To his horror, the man was watching. He was seated on a weight bench, doing curls with a massive dumbbell. His teeth were sharp and white as he strained, but he never looked away. His bare arms bulged with muscle and veins stood out in stark relief on his forearms.

Without looking away from the reflection, Red battled through one final press and then parked the barbell, remaining there on his back. The trainer leaned down, whispering in his ear so he wasn't overheard.

"Hunt *him*. Keep getting stronger, and stay smart like you are. You start thinking like a hunter, and someday you'll make him *your* prey. Not yet, kid. You aren't ready and I doubt he's really noticed you. But don't forget his face."

The trainer sat up and extended a calloused hand, drawing Red to his feet. He nodded to the floor. "Sit-ups. Give me a hundred. Now."

Red dropped to the floor and noticed that the old guy had positioned him so he had a perfect view of the dark man. He counted off and focused on a spot just over the stranger's shoulder, and Red learned every line of the predator's face. In that hundred count, he learned other things about the man, and about himself as well. He'd think about that later. Much later. Looking at the hunter started a burn in his gut that had nothing to do with sit-ups and weight benches, and everything to do with a hunger he never knew existed.

The hunter was... beautiful.

“You finish there and we'll start on the punching bag. Then you walk me home. Old guys like me need protection.”

CHAPTER ONE

“Hey Red!”

Colin Redington pushed through the door of the pub and shouldered his way toward a table in the back of the room. He wasn't here for social time. Tonight, Red had an errand. He lifted the hoodie back from his head and gazed around the room, sizing it up with every one of his senses, letting the feel of the atmosphere wash over him. Outside, the fog was thick and chill. He slipped out of his jacket but left his brilliant red sweatshirt on, knowing it marked him like a target in the dark room. The color scheme clashed violently with his copper-red hair, but he didn't much care.

He liked red.

The bartender spotted him and lifted a hand over his head, showing five fingers. Red nodded and headed toward a table in the back. He tossed his jacket over an empty chair, then turned it around, straddling the seat and crossing his arms over the back.

“Hey, Avery. Duke. How you boys doing tonight?” He grinned as their nervous glances slid to the single empty chair at the table. It had taken a little time, but Red had found a weak link in the group of former bullies and exploited the hell out of it. That had been long ago but they hadn't forgotten.

Nor had Red.

“Just watchin' the game. 'Niners are up by seven.” Duke nervously peeled the label of his bottle. It wasn't so different from high school—only now, Red was a detective on the raggedy restoration police force. He'd sent Duke's daddy to prison for a money-laundering operation. Duke wasn't a rich kid anymore. And before that, Red had nailed Avery's big brother for pimping his pretty little wife. Women were a rare commodity these days and he'd made a bundle on the poor female. Thanks to Red's investigation, she was in a safe haven with the means to support herself for a long time. Avery's big brother wouldn't be coming back any time soon.

Red looked at the empty chair and smiled, forcing the men to remember their friend Sam, who'd just finished a prison term for assault. He should have chosen his victim more carefully; Red had learned plenty about defending himself over the years. Sam was more than familiar with rape gangs, only now he'd been at the other end of it. He was back in the family home, being cosseted, no doubt. But Sam would never assault an officer again. Hopefully, he'd never assault anyone ever again.

Maybe it was time to go drop in on old Sammie. Just for old times' sake.

Red had never considered himself a bully and frequently questioned his behavior toward his former tormenters. Maybe he had crossed that line—but one by one, he'd taken them out of action. He'd also done some good along the way. He'd kept others from falling victim to the pack of young marauders.

“Order up!”

He pushed his chair back from the table, pausing to look down at the men. “See ya.”

“Yeah, see you, Red.” Gazes were averted as he left. He wondered if they even realized how transparent they were in their submission.

Red started toward the bar, sensing rather than seeing the front door open. He caught a whiff of fog, the sound of traffic, and then it was just the familiar bar again. He handed the bartender a twenty and grabbed the big bag of takeout. When he turned he came face to chest with a wall. A big, wide wall encased in leather and smelling of the night and other dark things. He looked up into a face he'd memorized long ago. For the briefest moment, he was again a skinny kid doing his best to bulk up, learning to fight.

The world snapped back into place. A dark flame ignited in his gut.

“Scuze me.” He stepped to the side at the same time the other man did. Looking up, he saw the wicked gleam of a smile lurking in dark brown eyes. The man's face was still as lean and chiseled as it had been a decade before. Rich auburn hair trailed out from under a dark red watch cap.

“Hey, Little Red, going somewhere?”

Red stepped to the right, then to the left, dodging around the man. His heart hammered in his chest, old memory overtaking him. He breathed in, catching wild scents on the stranger, as though he'd recently been in the forest rather than the city. Red almost wished he were armed, but he never carried when he was off-duty.

He stopped and turned, facing the man who was watching him leave. Red saw a glimmer of surprise in his eyes and was immediately grounded again. For a long moment they merely stared. Red let his eyes wander the length of the man's body, noting the wide shoulders, narrow hips and the bulge he was packing at the vee of his legs. When his cock responded in kind, he didn't bother to hide it. He just grinned.

And then he turned, stepping through the door and out into the fog. A half block down the street he dodged into an alley and leaped nimbly up onto a fire escape, knowing his pursuer would be unlikely to look up in his search. Not many people did. After a few heartbeats of time, the door to the pub opened and the stranger stood, peering out onto the empty street. He lifted his head, scenting the air, and Red grimaced down at the plastic bag in his hand. The food had left a trail.

To his surprise, the hunter went back into the bar, eventually emerging with a bag of his own.

Interesting.

When the hunter headed off down the street, Red followed at a safe distance, grinning when the man ducked into the stairway of a cheap hotel. He slipped into the shadows of an alley and waited. A few moments later a light went on up on the third floor. At the window, the curtains flicked as though someone was peeking outside.

Much as he'd like to stay and watch, Red had to get down to Frisco's place and drop off his dinner. The old trainer wasn't doing too well these days and was waiting on his bangers and mash.

"Another night, then." He stared up at the window and smiled.

He'd been waiting for this. He was ready.

Little Red was out there in the darkness.

Stephan laughed and turned from the window, digging into his bag of takeout. He popped open the lid of the container and inhaled deeply. Funny that he'd had a craving for shepherd's pie tonight. Funny he'd lost track of that prime morsel years ago, and just happened to stumble across him in some run-down pub known for its Irish food. He chuckled softly. Sometimes life was just funny.

With a deep sigh of satisfaction, he relaxed into the worn easy chair and stretched out his long legs, digging his plastic fork into the mashed potatoes that topped the pie. Why was it that the first time he'd had a craving for this particular meal, it had led him straight to the same little ginger-haired boy he'd wanted to lap up in old Frisco's place all those years ago? He wasn't one for boys, but the kid had had such an air of determined potential about him. He'd been a skinny kid back then, and hadn't put on much size over the years though he'd filled out nicely.

Especially those jeans. Goddamn.

And he was out there, maybe even looking up at Stephan's window.

That thought propelled him back to his feet, and he dimmed the light to peer outside again. There was nothing but a forlorn streetlight and a stray cat. He'd been there, though, watching Stephan from hidden places, hunting him as efficiently as Stephan hunted *his* prey.

He needed to go back to that bar.

After he ate.

He sat, his cock hard as iron behind the soft fabric of his jeans. He grabbed the cold can of beer he'd popped open and rested it on top of his hard-on, enjoying the chilled condensation that seeped through the fabric to his heated flesh.

He'd have that kid on his knees.

Stephan took another bite of the pie and chewed slowly, imagining those pouty lips opening for him, that sweet ass bared to him.

But then he'd have to kill him afterward, for Red bore the distinct tang of a beast. He'd endanger Stephan and his hunt.

That thought ruined the mood. Stephan sighed and set his food aside, then tossed back his beer. He went to the little fridge and grabbed another, downing it more slowly.

He wouldn't really have to kill him. He could keep him... play with him for awhile. Maybe it was time to settle down, stop wandering the country on his never-ending hunt. It was getting old, anyway. Hunters like him didn't have much of a life-span. A decade ago it hadn't much mattered. Life had been a blinding series of fights, fucks and wild escapes. Maybe it was age creeping up, or just that he was growing weary of seeing hopeless terror in the eyes of others.

That's why Red was such a turn-on. He might be afraid, but he stared a predator straight in the eye, then turned his back. That took balls.

Stephan nibbled at his lip, wondering about the red-haired man. When he'd first seen him, his head had been clipped right down to the skull, leaving just a haze to tell him the kid had hair the color of a new copper penny. Now though, it was longer. Straight and soft looking. His own... he dragged off the knit cap and strode into the bathroom, looking at himself in the dull mirror. Thick, unruly waves fell past his chin. He didn't look often but knew that in the sun, it was the color of garnet... or old blood. His chin bristled with whiskers the same color. Lines were starting at the corners of his eyes, and maybe a thread of silver wound through the darkness of his hair.

He snorted in disgust and ran his hands through the wild mop. He couldn't afford to be vain. He dragged the cap back on. The room was cold, since he'd opted not to pay for the weak heating. Pretty much all he did here was sleep, and occasionally eat.

Stephan paced like a caged tiger.

He needed to connect with the kid... the young man again. He was a hunter drawn to his prey, and somehow Stephan knew this one might very well be his fate. This one could break him. Or maybe rescue him.

He shoved a hand into his pocket and fingered the few bills left there. He had money stashed in other places, but this was his budget for now, unless he picked up a bounty or two. There were boards outside the police station littered with wanted posters and skip traces. There weren't enough cops to keep up with all that was going down on the mean streets of 'Merica these days. He'd pick up a job and keep his nose to the ground for his real quarry, and watch for Little Red as he worked.

He could afford a drink or two from the bar.

Stephan picked up the box with his leftover food and carried it outside, setting it on the grubby sidewalk. As he walked away, he heard the scuffle of bare feet on the pavement and knew the container would be gone when he returned.

CHAPTER TWO

Frisco lived in an old Victorian that still clung to its glory days. It had long ago been painted in whimsical pastels and the colors glowed through as a relic of the old man's long-dead wife. Red sat on a comfortable old chair in the small living room, listening to the creak of floorboards above his head.

The only social safety nets in place these days were those a man could wrap around himself. Frisco rented out all the upstairs bedrooms to tenants, men and boys, though the boys were mostly grown up now. There were few children being born lately. Red's generation had been the last. Women who'd survived the catastrophic biological terrorism of the past were cloistered behind the walls of the wealthy or living in sanctuaries where they determined the course of their own lives. Babies were still coming, but their conception was carefully negotiated. Frisco had a granddaughter he'd hustled out of the city using a guide who led groups of women and girls through old tunnels where the trains once ran. He'd not seen her in a decade but they exchanged letters often, so he knew she still lived. He now had a great-grandson.

The old man ate slowly; his hand trembled as he carried the fork to his mouth. Red gazed into the fire and reminded himself to gather more wood on his next trip out of the city. Like most government agencies, the Department of Forestry now existed in name only, and the forests were littered with deadfall. It just took some hiking and a strong back to stock up for the winter.

When Frisco was finished, Red picked up the containers and carried them to the kitchen, tossing them into the trash. He returned and sat again. The old man was quiet these days, undoubtedly depressed. Going to work had been the anchor in his life. Now his legs were frail, his body fragile. He wasn't dead, though, and he needed an outlet. Red decided that maybe he'd bring the gym's paperwork for Frisco to work on till he figured something else out. The business was still running; Frisco had enough friends who volunteered their time to oversee it. Red spent a couple hours there in the mornings, opening and cleaning the place, keeping a watchful eye on the younger men as he worked out.

After five silent minutes passed, Frisco leaned forward. “Something’s on your mind.”

Red smiled. The old man’s senses were as acute as ever.

“The hunter’s back.”

“Shit.” Frisco sat up straight, his eyes brilliant... with excitement? Anger? It was hard to say. “I figured he must have followed his target out of town. Didn’t think we’d see him again. He recognize you?”

“Yeah. I figure he did.” Red looked away, hoping he didn’t betray his own excitement.

“What you plan to do, then?”

“Don’t see I have much of a choice. I’m going to hunt him before he hunts me. If he minds his business and doesn’t break any laws, he can do whatever he’s here for, then go his way.”

“You know why he’s here.” Frisco rubbed his arthritic hands together. “He’s after some poor lad.”

“Or a rogue. There’s been a few grisly killings down by the docks. Not my normal territory to patrol, but if he happens to take out the freak, the department won’t complain any.”

Frisco gave him a sly look. “So you haven’t gone down there to poke around? Not at all? Guys like you are hardwired to go after the sick ones.”

Red got up and looked out the window. Frisco’s house was on a hill, and there weren’t many places for someone to hide out there in the darkness. He didn’t see anything, but that didn’t mean much. He pulled the curtains closed and turned back to the room.

“How’d it all happen? Not the bioterrorism, I know about that. But what did it do to us? Physically.”

Frisco stood up and held his hands out to the fire. “You know most of this, son. The toxins killed a lot of us, men and women alike. After, there was the occasional fellow who dropped into rage, murdering anyone around him.

Those guys were eventually caught and if they didn't die, they were killed. For awhile there was no justice system. No cops or courts or jails, just vigilantes like the Red Caps. Then that stuff dropped off, and for a few years things looked like they were gonna get normal again."

He turned and faced Red.

"It was when babies started coming that we knew there were problems. Not many girls born, then the boys..." He sighed. "Some were born different. Some were normal as ever. But those different ones... they were all predators. Some grew up and turned. Like movie monsters. Their bodies changed with the moon sometimes. They craved violence and blood. They had a lot of animal in them. Others came up who were just as predatory, but they seemed to prey only on those shifters. That's where vigilantes like the Red Caps came from. Scary times. And they're still out there."

"Yeah, I know." That explained the fixation he and the hunter had for each other. "You figure the offspring... if I have a kid someday, you think it'll be like me?"

Frisco shrugged. "Not enough data. I suppose some of the women in those compounds know, but they ain't talking about it." He looked speculatively at Red. "You never seemed to miss the females. The more they vanished, the harder men were on them. You'd think we'd cherish them. Instead, we hurt them and drove them away."

No, Red had never particularly missed the presence of females... not sexually. Long ago he'd had a mother, a few teachers in school. His father had cherished Red's mother. The old man had been broken when she died. The teachers, he'd liked them. They filled that aching hole in his heart. But his sex had never stirred at the glimpse of a woman on television. He'd never gotten a hard-on when his friends smuggled an old tittie magazine to school.

Fortunately for Red, he wanted men... and many men wanted him back.

"I miss the women. But I'm gay, so I'm not hurting the way some of the other guys are."

Frisco smiled and shook his head. “Figured you were. Way back then you looked like you wanted to eat that fellow as bad as he wanted to gobble you up. You just be careful where your impulses lead you, kid. Don’t want to hear you woke up dead.”

Red chuckled. “Frisco, you know I’m all grown up now. I can take care of myself. I’ve taken out my share of rogues and crazies.”

“Yeah, but they weren’t guys you wanted to fuck,” Frisco said baldly.

“No, they weren’t.” Red smiled and pulled his coat off a rack. “Gotta get going. I think I’ll catch a beer before I go on home. Morning comes early.”

Frisco snorted in humor. “I remember you dragging your skinny ass into the gym all those years ago. You still fall asleep on the weight bench.”

“Just between sets, Frisco.” He threw an arm around the old man’s shoulders. They were the same height now, but Frisco was frail, so very small. Red squeezed him. “I left bagels in the cupboard, stuff for lunch in the fridge. I’ll be back by tomorrow night.”

“Not necessary, kid. I’m not helpless.”

“No, you aren’t. But you’re good company. Neither of us needs to spend time alone.”

Stephan prowled the waterfront for a couple hours, but didn’t catch scent of his prey. He had a couple simple-looking skip-trace flyers in his pocket, but there was time for that later. The rogue’s rapidly fading trail burned behind his eyes like a brand, tinting his vision in a wash of pale red. His prey hadn’t struck tonight, but he’d be back. His kill pattern radiated out like a sunburst.

The epicenter of that pattern was the noisy pub he’d visited the night before. And a certain wild scent clung to the trail, pulling him taut with arousal. Pretty disturbing, considering the owner of that scent just might be a murderer. No less disturbing was the idea that his excitement might be linked to the lingering violence he sensed at the site.

The fog hung heavily over the wet streets, muffling the sound of his footsteps. Even without the assistance of the weather, he moved silent as a specter, ghosting through the watery shadows. He gave himself over to the hunter within, following his instincts. He shadowed pedestrians as they hurried home or to bars that were open late. His belly rumbled, reminding him that he'd not eaten his entire meal.

Stephan sighed and headed back toward the pub, figuring it might be the best place to watch and listen, and maybe pick up some whispered gossip. He changed directions, head ducked, hands buried in his pockets and gaze furtively dancing about as he studied the shadows.

“Hey, want a date?”

The voice was soft, husky and alluring. Stephan came to a stop, peering into the shadows where the speaker was half-hidden. Slowly, a pale figure moved forward, seeming to float in the mist. Though he could catch the man's scent and knew he was merely a human, the skin on Stephan's arms pebbled and the hair on the back of his neck rose.

Shadows suited him. The prostitute's long hair was silvery. Perhaps it held some yellow in the daylight, but under a muted streetlight it looked like quicksilver. His skin was pallid, pale eyes were rimmed with black liner. His pouty lips were tinted; they looked black against his ivory skin. His T-shirt was knotted up high, his black shorts hung low on his hips. Black leather belts looped and twined from his torso to his groin.

“I've got a place nearby. I'll be your boy.” He smiled wickedly. “Or your girl, if you'd like.”

The whore's pretense of worldly sexuality was slightly marred when he shivered. Automatically, Stephan looked for his pimp. No doubt the bastard was somewhere warm and dry.

“How much?”

“Twenty for head. Fifty for ass. Top or bottom.” He licked his lips, looking around furtively.

“You know it’s not safe out here.” Stephan reached into his pocket. “If I pay you, will you go in for the night?” When the kid glanced around again, Stephan moved closer. “If you want, I’ll walk you home. Pay you for the whole night. If there’s a problem with your pimp, I’ll stick around for a few hours. Hate to see someone as pretty as you get cut up into little pieces.”

The kid’s eyes went wide and he started to speak, but jumped back into the shadows when a figure emerged from the fog. Stephan caught the stench of the kid’s fear.

“He’s right, Ash. Bad night to be in a bad place. There’s evil creatures out and about. Why don’t you run on home?”

The redhead looked ominous in the fog. A leather jacket covered his sweatshirt, making his shoulders look bulky and broad. His eyes were barely visible under the hoodie. But his smile was friendly and open. Ash relaxed slightly. He trusted Little Red.

“Hey, Detective Redington.”

Stephan looked sharply at the other man. Detective? Well, this was an interesting twist to the hunt. Might be a problem to explain the disappearance of a cop. He smiled at Redington, showing a hint of teeth.

“Take the cash, kid. Get home and go to bed. Alone.” He handed a small roll of bills to Ash, who snatched it. He looked from one man to the other, and then hurried away. Once his footsteps echoed off into the distance, Stephan looked back at Red. Redington. He still didn’t know the other part of his name.

“You might want to get inside, too. I’d hate to see something happen to a visitor.” The detective stared at him, unflinching. A lot had changed since Red had been a skinny kid in a run-down gym. He wasn’t a tall man, but he gave off the impression of power. Stephan’s inner hunter responded fiercely. With a surge, his arousal rose again and was met by answering heat from the other man.

But that wouldn’t do. And judging by the wary expression in Red’s gaze, he was well under control. Now that he was close, Stephan could separate his scent from that of the rogue. Red had been hunting, too.

“Don’t know who’s luckier that I came along, you or Ash.”

Stephan grinned at him sardonically. “Pretty little crook, eh?”

Red lifted a shoulder in a one-sided shrug. “He’ll give you the best fuck of your life, then snag anything of value. He’s a junkie.”

“Most of ’em are. Guess that means he’ll be shootin’ up the last of my rent money in a few.” Stephan sighed, feeling a touch of melancholy. He’d never had the freedom to fuck up his life. From the moment he was born, Stephan had been driven by the wild urges. Those urges didn’t include the need to shoot up or drink away his pain. He fucked, he fed and he killed. Then he moved on.

“Not likely he’ll score tonight. Most anyone with sense knows there’s a killer out here. Street business is slow.” Red looked at him steadily, his gaze unwavering.

“Then maybe your killer will move to another location in the city.”

“I’m thinking he needs to move along to somewhere else completely. Like LA or Vegas. Even better... across the country. Let him be someone else’s problem.”

Stephan found himself closer to the other man. He wasn’t sure if he’d moved or if Red was starting to crowd him. “If he leaves, then you’ll miss out on a merry hunt. And I’ll bet that’d rub you the wrong way.”

Anger flared in the other man’s eyes. That was his cue. With a move so swift it could barely be tracked, Stephan gripped Red’s arms, swinging him into the entrance of the alley, pinning him up against the damp brick wall. Their faces were just inches apart and his thigh was wedged between the other man’s legs. He felt heat. He felt solid, rigid flesh. “How very lucky I found you again, Little Red.” He leaned in, pressing his teeth to the throbbing vein in Red’s throat. The smaller man groaned, struggling slightly against Stephan’s powerful grip.

He nuzzled Red’s tender throat again, dragging his whiskers along the fine skin. “Who’s the other man I smell?” He inhaled deeply. “The scent reminds

me of... boxing gloves and punching bags... it's the old man. So he's still alive and around? Still your daddy, maybe?"

"Fuck you!"

"Oh please... I'd like that so very much." He dragged a tongue along Red's bristly jaw. "But I'll do the fucking, cub."

He pressed his mouth over Red's, stifling the other man's curses. For a moment they wrestled, teeth smashed against lips, and he tasted a hint of blood. He pulled back and eagerly lapped at the cut on the perfectly shaped upper lip, then returned to the kiss, his tongue piercing deep and savage. Suddenly, Red was meeting him, hips echoing the fierce rhythm of their tongues. While his hands were still pinned, Red twisted and thrust, his hard cock grinding against Stephan's aching dick.

With a groan, he released Red's wrists and fumbled first at his own pants, then at the other man's, gripping their cocks in one rough hand, pushing back the sweatshirt hood with the other. He fisted Red's hair and held him in place while he pumped their flesh together. He grinned when Red grabbed his ass and wrapped his fist over Stephan's clenched fingers.

"I remember you back then, Little Red. So small and frail. Just a pup... a snack waiting for a big bad wolf to gobble you up."

"Not anymore," Red snarled, his bared teeth close to Stephan's ear.

"No, you grew up. Nice and tasty." He jerked his head away as sharp teeth snapped just fractions of an inch from his jaw. When a rough tongue laved down his throat, Stephan shivered in the sort of anticipation that accompanied danger. Covering his hand, Red's fist gripped tightly, his nails digging into skin, coming dangerously close to the tender flesh of their erections.

Stephan was rising to climax, his balls drawing up, his breath growing ragged. He watched Red's face, drinking in the rough beauty along with the extreme idiocy of what they were doing. Two animals fucking in an alley, just feet from where a killer had left his earlier victim. Sex was the only time he was defenseless. The only time that Stephan lost all control and immersed himself in the sheer bliss of sensation.

His palm was wet with their combined fluids, and he caught the musky scent of Red's pre-come. The ache built in his balls, his back... pulling him taut from neck to toe. He pressed an almost-kiss on Red's vulnerable throat, feeling the ache in his teeth, the need to bear down and break skin, to taste blood.

Red wasn't so restrained. The leather of Stephan's coat squeaked as Red bit hard into his shoulder, stifling his panting breath.

When it broke, the orgasm washed over Stephan, seed bursting past his fingers, wetting both their hands. He came with a loud groan, and the sound echoed through the alley. Stephan melted against Red, who pumped frantically until he also came, his seed hot and silky, his shout echoing Stephan's.

Except the shout didn't come from Red. It took Stephan long moments to realize that the detective's sharp teeth were still bearing down on his coat. Panting, he rested his chin on the cop's head.

In the distance, men's voices rang out in panic. Red blinked, obviously as undone by the sex as Stephan had been. It took only seconds for him to gather his wits and make sense of what they were hearing.

Red's eyes went wide. "Oh, fuck. Ash."

They jerked their clothing into place, but they were too late.

CHAPTER THREE

He smelled the crime scene well before they arrived.

Red ran at top speed, aware that the hunter kept pace with him easily. Two blocks away, he could smell the pungent scent of blood and urine and the stench of abject terror. One block away he could hear frightened voices and prayed the crime scene was undisturbed. This was the closest he'd been to one of the killings and the murderer had to be near by, perhaps watching from a doorway or window. He needed a clear scent to track the beast.

When they rounded the final corner, they saw two men hovering in the vicinity of Ash's fallen body. Their faces were white with horror and fear; their scents mingled with the miasma that hung on the air. Immediately, the hunter began casting about, walking in a slow, wide circle. His gaze worked from the body outward, showing his experience not only in preserving evidence, but in finding a trail. It wasn't the standard operating procedure for police work, but then, the man wasn't a cop. Red was, though, and despite what the predator inside his gut urged him to do, he was compelled by law to remain at the scene.

"He's alive."

Red looked over at the hunter in shock. He'd avoided looking at the poor, broken mess that had been Ash, but now appraised him with a critical eye. Blood splashed the pavement, his clothing shredded, and his flesh was torn and flayed. But his chest moved slightly, and when the stranger moved closer to Ash, he didn't protest. Now Red could make out a weak, raspy breath and saw the slight beat of a pulse at his throat. The leather belts that advertised his profession had saved Ash, protecting his tender belly and groin. If he and the hunter hadn't been interrupted, though...

Red dug into his pocket for his cell, calling for support and medics. There were two towers in the city and only the precinct and the hospital had working numbers. Red then dropped to his knees and quickly scanned the damage, afraid to touch... to hurt the young man even worse. The hunter was

distracted. He was sorting scents, separating the pungent smell of body fluids from the faint trail left behind by the killer.

Closing his eyes, Red also dissected the trail. He caught the tang of cabbage and tobacco, lube and semen.

The latter scent rose from his own body... his hands and belly. The other man scented it too and looked at Red with a heated expression. It was a promise that things weren't finished between them.

The hunter stood, backed away from the fallen man and lifted his head to the night air, letting his eyes drop closed.

A soft sound drew Red's attention, and he looked down at Ash. The pain of loss arrowed into his heart. Ash was gazing up at him, calm and unafraid.

"Is she safe?" His voice was barely a whisper.

"Who? Is who safe?" Red stared down at Ash in confusion. In the distance, he heard the wail of a siren.

"The girl. Little girl. We were—" He coughed. "We were moving her to the dock."

"And you were keeping the path clear."

"Yeah. Hell of a job I did. He's been after her for weeks. No matter where we hid her—"

He put a hand over Ash's pale lips. "You'd move her and the killer followed."

Ash gave a slight nod. His eyes began to grow unfocused.

"Don't leave us, Ash. Help's on its way."

The prostitute's pretty lips curved. "My guts are hanging out."

"Flesh wound. Just a scratch." He stroked Ash's cheek. "One of those crazy-ass hunters is out there now, tracking the bastard."

"You go, too. Help him. This one wants to breed. Eventually he'll find a sanctuary—" Ash coughed and gasped in pain.

Red and blue lights flashed off the streets and wall, casting eerie shadows over the fallen whore's face. Cops were finally on the scene. The ambulance should be coming, too. Red stood, trotted to the car and showed his badge. Briefly, he updated the other cops on the situation, leaving out the lone hunter's involvement and the girl who'd been the killer's target. They were gone and the cops didn't need to know. More than one criminal had operated out of the department in the past. Red wouldn't risk the safety of a little girl.

Red jogged off into the darkness, catching the scents of life and death: blood and semen. It drew him like a magnet. Breaking into a run, he dodged down alleys and leapt over rusted-out cars, his passing almost silent in the darkness. He was barely panting when he arrived at the waterfront, spotting a decrepit boat laboring slowly out into the bay. Two figures struggled on the dock in near silence, just feet from the water. One figure was human. The other was not.

Pale figures, slender but strong, moved efficiently about the boat's deck, watching the fight even as they protected a young girl whose eyes were huge with terror. The boat's engine caught, then died again. One woman wrapped her arms around the child. Their hair looked white in the darkness; both bore more than a passing resemblance to Ash. This was his family, perhaps the girl was his sister.

Or perhaps she was Ash's daughter.

Red's head pounded, and shock ran through him. A young girl, and she'd been living here, hidden away in the city. She'd been born after the war, after the toxic poisonings. She'd been born in some grubby apartment somewhere, long after baby girls were no more. She'd probably never seen the sun or breathed fresh air. He'd known an underground network still existed for women, but never expected to see a little girl. And Ash had risked it all for her.

Pulling himself together, Red turned back to the fight. The killer struggled with the hunter. He'd morphed into his bestial form, towering over his opponent. His naked body was covered with blood, his erect phallus gleamed, and Red felt a brief moment of sickness when he recalled that most of the

victims had been brutally raped. He prayed that Ash had been spared that torture.

He watched in horror, realizing the child had been the beast's target the entire time.

Moving closer, Red caught the hunter's attention and slipped in smoothly, striking the killer in the back of the knee, dodging, then darting back in as he went down, armed only with bare hands and speed. In his shifted form the creature gained many inches over the average human male. When he was human, he probably passed unnoticed on the street.

He could even be someone Red knew.

He danced about, using kicks and strikes, drawing the creature away to give the hunter a break—but the idiot didn't take the hint, diving in and grappling again. The brute toppled, scrabbling along the wood of the dock, desperate to reach the boat. The engine finally caught with an oily cough. Smoke clouded the air as the boat motored away slowly... too slowly.

As one, Red and the hunter dove for the killer—one on his belly, the other pinning his legs, grimacing against his frenzied screams.

"Mine! Mine!" His clawed fingers shredded the wooden dock and he drew his legs up, scrabbling for purchase.

"Hold him," the hunter grunted. Oddly, he still wore that knit cap. Blood spattered his face and smeared his hands. He strained against the beast's unnatural strength, groaning with the effort. "Another minute... two..."

Because if they let go, the brute would kill them both. Kill them and go to the water, and God only knew he might catch the women on their puny little boat. Hopefully, one of the great sharks in the bay would get him first. Red took a fist to his thigh, grunting with the pain. *Fuck!* It felt like a sledge hammer! Another blow landed right in his gut, and he couldn't breathe. Gasping, he struggled to hold on, but the creature's skin was slick with sweat and blood. He writhed away, dragging the hunter with him. They rolled again and he wrenched his body from the hunter's grip, his massive body crashing

into the dark, oily water with an explosive splash. Desperately, Red looked toward the boat, but it had vanished into the darkness.

With a snarl, the hunter scrambled out of his own clothing. Before Red could think or react, he vanished into the water, leaving behind his coat and worn boots, and the frayed knit hat he habitually wore.

“Shit!” On his hands and knees, still choking and panting from the final punch, Red finally found the strength to lurch to his feet, seeing nothing but ripples in the water. He growled, cursing his own feral drive to follow his quarry into the frigid bay, where only death waited. Five minutes passed, ten... and he remained in place, the stranger’s clothing bundled in his arms. He pressed his face to the fabric and inhaled, and part of him grieved.

CHAPTER FOUR

He had a beer. Maybe he had more than one. The empty bottles vanished as soon as he set them down, and Robbie at the bar watched him carefully.

There was a reason cops didn't carry when they were off duty. Red rose carefully, and finally found his balance under the intoxication. He tossed a bill on the scarred wood of the bar and bundled up the clothing, carrying it outside. Without thought he walked toward the hunter's rented room and stood outside, looking up at the dark window on the third floor. After a moment's consideration, he decided it probably wasn't a terrible violation of privacy to break into a dead man's space.

Red quickly picked the locks, smiling at the thread that fell to the floor, a low-tech but effective security device. He stepped inside, pausing, letting the feel and scent of the place waft over him. He smelled old cigarettes, long-ago sex, and hundreds of meals and bodies all jumbled with the newer scent of the dark-haired hunter.

With a sigh, he hung the black leather coat on a peg by the door and dropped the boots by the ice-cold heater vent. He walked further into the room and stared out of the single window. It looked onto the alley where he'd hidden just hours ago. So much had happened since then... a decade of want had culminated in a single, hurried encounter in an alley.

And then he was gone.

The room held a combined kitchen and living space; the bedroom was tucked away with a tiny bath and shower. He flicked on the bedroom light, surveying the neatly made bed and the tiny open closet that held spare clothing and carefully folded sheets.

Nothing here told Red who the hunter was or where he had come from. He'd vanished into the water, and now he'd simply vanish from the broader world. Would anyone care?

With a sigh, Red flicked off the light and paused at the door, rubbing his cheek against the worn leather of the long coat. It smelled like the lost hunter.

Red couldn't stifle his groan, remembering that brief, fierce coupling in the alley. He wrapped his arms around the garment, inhaling deeply.

Deep inside, he knew damned well he'd chosen the man all those years ago. He'd known the hunter would come back, he'd known they'd couple like a pair of beasts, mating and melding in a raw, primal fuck. Now the hunter was gone and Red had never even learned his name.

Amazing that he'd never actually been part of Red's daily life, only his thoughts and dreams. When the man had blocked his path in the bar, Red felt as though he'd known him forever.

He settled the coat into neat folds, running his fingers over a spot that was slightly thicker... heavier than the rest of the garment. Carefully, Red searched the lining, feeling a small tear in the old silk. He reached in, finding a hidden pocket with a thick folder inside. He extricated it, carrying the folder to the tiny table in the kitchen, turning on the cheap table lamp to examine the bundle. It wasn't a wallet—it was too long. A leather cord kept it secure and he unwound it, opening the packet.

There wasn't much there. Cash from several different regions, including the West. Letters and contracts. Red squinted, surveying their scrawled signatures.

Stephan Le Pierre. There was an old, yellowed birth certificate from a city that no longer existed. An ID card. A photo of a young man, laughing, his arms wrapped around the shoulders of a lovely woman. Stephan, but much younger, perhaps in his early teens. A pretty girl with hair the color of wine leaned against his shoulder.

She looked just like him.

Carefully, he tucked the papers back into the folder and returned it to the coat. Having seen the hunter's name... glimpsed into his life, Red felt a sense of peace. At least he knew that much.

It explained Stephan's heartless avocation.

Stephan dragged his weary body from the frigid water, draping himself over a horribly uncomfortable rock. He lay there panting, feeling even colder now that he was out of the water and into the foggy air. He'd lost the beast but that hadn't been his undoing. He hadn't expected the wickedly powerful currents under the still surface of the water.

The killer had outpaced him before he'd even hit the water, and it hadn't taken long before his precarious situation registered. On top of that, Red was back there on the dock, still smelling of musk and sex and Stephan's come. For the first time in his life, instincts warred within him and he'd found himself torn away from the hunt. His infatuation with Red had probably saved his life.

Still, every time he remembered the look on that girl's face, his heart went tight.

God. She was a child. Just a child and most likely a miracle at that. He hadn't seen a female in years. His mother was long dead, his sister cloistered away in a safe haven far from here. She'd been born during a time of turmoil; after the wars, but before the diseases that had taken so many mothers, sisters and wives. Getting her to safety had been a sacred task and he understood why the prostitute, Ash, had risked everything to help move the girl to the boat.

Stephan rolled off the rock, landing hard on wet sand. He grimaced at the feel of drenched denim on his legs and shivered, wishing for his hat and coat. His feet were bare, his skin white and puckered. Somewhere out in the water he'd lost his stockings. The walk home was gonna be a bitch. It was as cold as a witch's tit out here.

He sat up and squinted northward, searching for a landmark to guide him. He was still in the city, just north of the pier he'd leapt from. The roads were rough but passable, so he might make it back in under an hour. Not likely, but he could hope. He figured he'd drifted a mile or so. Not a bad walk if he was dry and had shoes. Nasty as hell with wet clothes and cold fog.

Well, hell. He got up, wincing at the rough ground under his feet. One foot after the other, he began his journey. He slogged from the beach, to the docks,

to the roadway. He didn't want to think about being cold and footsore so he thought about Red instead. He thought about the other man trapped in his arms, biting down into the leather of his coat to stifle his shout as he came. He recalled the warmth of Red's muscled body, the scent of his lust. His cock stirred, then gave up, discouraged by wet denim and convulsive shivers.

Stephan eventually recognized the street he'd turned onto and within moments was approaching the Irish pub. He dug into his pocket, praying for some cash, and dragged out a wad of damp bills. Enough for a couple shots of whiskey. He started in through the door, glanced down at himself and laughed ruefully. He didn't exactly cut an intimidating figure. He carefully backed out, heading those last few blocks to his rental. In a world of predators, it was never safe to show weakness.

A hot shower would go a long way toward bringing him back. He could huddle under the thin blankets and catch some sleep. He'd even spring a couple coins to turn on the heater.

Barefoot, he moved more silently than usual. He paused before his door, looking down at the thread he'd stuck in the doorway. It was roughly a half inch away from where he'd placed it. He dug the key from his pocket and opened the door, closing his eyes to listen... to sense who'd been in his space.

It didn't take long to figure it out. To his eternal gratitude, his coat hung neatly on the peg, his boots lying below it. The scent of Red still hung in the air, alluring and heady.

Suddenly, he was no longer cold. Stephan scrambled from his wet clothing, jerking on dry pants and a T-shirt. He finger-combed his hair, letting it curl wildly around his head. For once, he left off the watch cap, shoving it into the pocket of his coat. Once he was fully dressed, Stephan rushed down the stairs, retracing his route and pulling open the door to the pub.

Inside, the crowd was thin. Red sat at the bar, his head bowed and a beer in front of him. Stephan saw the moment Red became aware of his presence. His body straightened and he slowly turned, gazing at Stephan, the expression on his face shut down. Stephan took a step, and then another, sliding onto the

stool next to Red's. He gestured for a whiskey and downed it quickly, nodding for another.

"That doesn't really make you warm." Red tipped his bottle, taking a shallow sip. Judging by the way he smelled, he'd had more than one already.

"Yeah, well, I like the illusion." Nevertheless, he savored the drink, letting it burn slowly down his throat.

"That wasn't the brightest move, jumping off the dock like that." He glanced over. "Stephan."

"Going through my stuff, eh? I should be pissed as hell."

Red shrugged. "Wanted to see where I should send your possessions."

Stephan grinned, knocking back the rest of his whiskey. "Did the whore survive?"

"Ash is still hanging on. He's not talking, though. Figure I'll go visit him later tomorrow. Today. Hell, it's dawn in just a few hours." He stood and stretched, and Stephan felt himself grow hard with arousal. Red's belly was flat and lean, and he had a pretty good idea of the muscle that he'd find under that shirt. The cop tossed a bill on the bar and turned away. "I got it."

"That's good, 'cause I left my cash in my other pants."

They left the bar and walked together in the darkness. Though the streets were dark and quiet, Stephan could hear the skittering of rats and the rustling of street people as they sought comfort against the cold.

"What happened back there... between us—"

"I liked it." Stephan grinned wickedly. "I want more."

Red caught his breath, and then continued, "I can't trust you."

"You shouldn't. I'm the bad man. I hunt cubs like you."

They continued on without speaking, and the atmosphere became charged. Stephan was now fully erect, even though he'd come in a magnificent climax just hours earlier, followed by that brisk swim in the ocean. He should be

home in bed, dead to the world. Instead he was trying his level best to seduce a man far too young and far too good.

Far too wrong for a cynical, hard-hearted hunter with a distinct lack of ethics.

“I think you underestimate me.”

Red’s voice was slightly breathy. He was excited. Aroused. But tempted as he was, Stephan wasn’t going to shove him into the wall and fuck him out here in the cold. He wanted a bed big enough for them both. Running water. He kept walking, and Red stayed right at his side.

“What’s your name?”

“Redington. Colin Redington. Red for short.”

Stephan grinned. “So I had it right all this time. Little Red.”

“Hard to get it wrong.” Red glanced at him, giving Stephan a glimpse of his face under the red hood of his sweatshirt. Here in the night he looked hauntingly beautiful, a ghost with his pale skin, the red hair overwhelmed by darkness. Stephan kept walking. When they came to his rental he hurried up the stairs, nearly groaning with each step. He unlocked the door, noting that the thread was still in place. He stood back, letting Red into the room so he could follow.

He planned to take the kid down, press him to his knees and get the party started, but that’s not what happened. Red was so fast. So strong. Stephan wasn’t sure how he ended up face to the wall, pinned there by a powerful body. He heard the sound of clothing rustling, boots dropping to the floor. Stephan was unable to move, to turn his head and watch.

He heard the sound of labored breath, caught the smell of wild things and feral creatures. The skin on his arms pebbled; the hair rose on his neck. For a moment he thought the beast had returned from the water and taken Red’s place, and he panicked, fighting for a glimpse of the smaller man. Instead, a massive, powerful hand held him in place.

Behind him, Red growled softly in his ear.

“Mine.”

“Oh, fuck.”

He'd always known the kid was one of the beasts... but he hadn't realized he was a shifter. Hot breath blasted into his ear, and the body behind him now topped him by several inches. The hand that came around to tug at his clothing was massive. He shut his eyes tightly, waiting for the fatal strike, waiting for sharp teeth to rend his flesh.

Instead, the beast that was Colin Redington leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to his temple.

CHAPTER FIVE

Red smelled Stephan's fear, though it was liberally overlaid with lust. He smiled, focusing on containing the fangs that wanted to drop, pulling back the beginnings of fur and claw. He rarely let the wolf out to play, and Red needed a moment to cage that aspect of his other self. He was now massive, tall as a tree and bulked up like a mountain. The years in the gym had honed him into a weapon, one to be kept sheathed and hidden from all but those he trusted most.

Or those he planned to kill.

Why this man was one of the few he could be open with was a mystery, but Stephan had known what he was from the beginning. He simply hadn't been prepared for the reality.

"W-wolf?" Stephan asked. In answer, Red licked the length of his throat, pressing his teeth gently to the hunter's neck.

"I'm wolf. You knew that." He nipped the human's ear.

"Actually, no. I knew. I knew I'd have to kill you. I didn't expect..." he trailed off, so Red finished for him.

"You didn't expect I could contain it. To use it for the benefit of others. That in spite of the beast, I'm not an animal."

"Yeah. That." His breathing was rapid and shallow, and Red knew if he cupped Stephan's groin, he'd be hard as stone. Hell, he'd been putting off pheromones since they'd met in the bar.

"Evolution, Red Cap." Beneath him, Stephan went still, and for a moment, his breathing ceased completely.

"You figured that out, eh?"

"Turn that coat inside out and there's a great red cape. That knit cap you wear... it marks you as one of the senior members. And your hair... it's genetic. You were born to hunt the beasts. Your sister probably has the same skills. Granted, I figured you were just one of those rogue hunters... bad as that fellow that's been killing down on the docks."

Red wrapped a hand around Stephan's waist, shoving it up under his T-shirt. He reveled in hard muscles, the sprinkling of hair across his chest. Red gripped Stephan's hip and pulled him back, grinding his groin into the human's ass.

"Ah hell... you're gonna fuck me with that monster of yours." He sounded resigned and just a tiny bit excited. Scared.

Red chuckled in his ear. "Got lube?"

"In the bedroom. Let me go, and I'll get it."

"Bullshit. I let you go and you'll try to top me again." He stepped back, giving Stephan room to move.

Slowly, the human turned, his eyes level with Red's chest. He looked up slowly, taking in the breadth of chest, the brawny shoulders. Finally, he looked up at Red's face. His breath gave an audible hitch. "You're beautiful."

Red felt a flush spread over his skin. In truth, this form didn't look much different than his human shape. Just... more.

"You have another form?"

Red nodded. "Yeah, pretty much what you'd expect. Teeth, fur—"

"A tail?"

"Hell yeah."

Stephan laughed. "Can I see?"

"Later." Red leaned down, trapping the human against the wall, one hand cradling the back of his head. His hair was still damp. Red ran his fingers through it and it felt like damp silk. He trailed a curl over his lips, savoring the scent of Stephan.

"I usually top." Stephan's voice was hoarse and Red smiled, dipping down to kiss him lightly.

"So do I. But for now you have to know me... all sides of me." He dragged his tongue over Stephan's lips, moving in for a deeper kiss when his mouth opened slightly. Their tongues stroked, and he shivered at the sensation.

“Is the wolf gonna... you know...?”

“Fuck you?” He grinned down at Stephan, who was recovering his cocky attitude. “No.”

“Good.”

“Not yet, anyway.” He stifled a smile.

“You’re really gonna top me? I mean... seriously... you’ve gotta be huge...”

Red took Stephan’s hand and settled it over his cock, grinning fiercely as the hunter’s eyes went large. “Ok, I’ve always been a bit of a size queen... but you’re scaring me now...” He gave a laugh. “Lube. We’ll need a lot.” When Red let his hand go, Stephan continued to fondle and cup Red’s cock and balls. His fingers slipped back, gently tickling the tender skin back there, skimming over his hole. Once again, Red pressed in, pinning Stephan to the wall, enjoying the feel of the other man. He bent his knees, letting their cocks tangle and duel, slick with pre-come and scented with lust.

Carefully, Red dropped to the floor, his head level with Stephan’s taut belly. It took but a moment to loosen Stephan’s jeans, tug off the boots and strip his lower half. He trailed his tongue on a wicked journey down to the dark hair of Stephan’s groin, while one hand played at his nipple.

“Oh Lord...” Stephan’s head dropped back against the door.

As Red went down on Stephan, he tasted salt and musk and caught the slightest hint of the ocean. He played at the hunter’s cockhead, slipping the tip of his tongue into the eye, dragging the edge of his teeth over the flared ridge. Stephan’s knees buckled and Red caught him, holding him steadily in place.

“I dreamed about this... ten fucking years I dreamed about having you on your knees...” His mouth dropped open as he panted. “Just didn’t expect you to be a giant—motherfucker.”

Red grinned around a mouthful of Stephan, then swallowed him down whole, relaxing his throat till the other man’s cock kicked off his gag reflex. That made Stephan grip his head, digging fingers into his hair and tugging.

“If you’re really gonna fuck me... don’t like it after I come... better stop.”

Reluctantly, Red drew away, giving Stephan’s cock a single long lick before rising back to his feet. He leaned in, bracing his arms at either side of the human’s head, caging him, asserting his domination. “It won’t always be like this, Red Cap, but tonight, I’m on top. Just so you remember later... I’m not your bitch.”

“I don’t want a bitch.” Stephan reached out, tracing circles over Red’s erect nipples. “I want someone who can give as good as I can.” He looked up at Red, his eyes as sincere as they were ever likely to be. He scraped his nails over Red’s chest, not quite drawing blood, but causing enough of a bite that he threw his head back on a gasp.

“You like that, eh?”

“Sometimes.”

“And sometimes I bite.” Stephan bit the muscle of Red’s chest, bearing down hard enough to leave a mark.

Red’s cock flexed and he felt fluid rising to trickle along his shaft. He looped an arm around Stephan, drawing him away from the wall, tugging him toward the tiny bedroom. In this full-grown form, he dwarfed the room. He stood and stared at the bed, wishing he was home where he knew he wouldn’t break the furniture.

“I can downsize...”

“Hell no!” Stephan pushed past him and dug into the duffle next to his bed, searching for supplies. He pulled out condoms and held one up, looking from the packet to Red’s shaft.

“Nope.” He tossed it back into the bag and sorted through the handful he still held.

“Nope... uh-uh.” Finally he found one that satisfied him. He rolled it onto Red’s shaft, then pushed, so Red landed on the bed with a grunt. Somehow, the human had recovered his dominant role in their interaction.

“Not so fast.” Red rolled, flipping Stephan to the bottom. “I’m on top this time.”

He groped for the bottle of slick, making liberal use of the lube on his hand, cock and at the entrance to the other man’s body. He worked him, not so much concerned with being gentle as being thorough. “You bottomed before?”

“I’m no virgin.” Stephan sat up slightly, propped on his elbows, watching Red as he worked the lube. “Dear God. I might need to rethink this.”

“Too late.” Red penetrated his ass with a finger, grinning in satisfaction as Stephan groaned, squirmed and quickly adapted to the invasion. After a few thrusts, he pulled out and turned the other man over. Stephan protested but didn’t fight, particularly once Red started finger-fucking him again, opening him... relaxing him and adding more lube. When he notched his cockhead and started his invasion, the hunter groaned gustily.

Red paused. “Is that a bad sound you’re making?”

Stephan lifted his head slightly. “It’s a ‘there’s a tree up my ass’ sound.” He laughed breathily. “Carry on.”

Red pulled back and added more lube. He started in again, making a little more progress. He slipped past muscles, then paused, feeling as though he was entering heaven. Stephan’s body was tight, hot and greedy. Evolution had made them; perhaps nature had made them for each other. He wrapped his arms around Stephan’s body, pulling them tightly together. He was now large enough that the human’s head tucked neatly under his chin. Once they were fully joined, Red sat up straight, pulling Stephan onto his lap. They paused like that, panting and still.

“Are you all right?” Red couldn’t help moving, thrusting in and out by fractional increments, afraid to pump and fuck as his animal demanded. He ran his hand over Stephan’s chest, circling his nipples, then sliding down to fist his cock. In answer, the human groaned and shuddered as a stream of fluid seeped from his cockhead. Stephan turned his head, his gaze fierce and hungry.

“Go,” he whispered to Red.

So Red moved. Slowly at first, the fear of damaging the man holding him back. Stephan found his balance and rose, coming down hard to meet Red's cautious thrusts. They grunted, flesh slapping, sweat rising to sting their eyes and slick the skin between them. How dangerous... how delicious it was to take another man this way! Red held Stephan in place by brute force. When the old, decrepit bed groaned ominously, he simply moved faster.

He pushed the human forward till he landed facedown on the pillows and continued to plow into him, faster and deeper, and now in complete silence save for the squeaking bed frame and the rough sound of their breathing. Stephan groaned, a sound that rose from the very depth of his being. His back arched and he shook. His seed filled Red's hand, making him slick, and Red continued to draw on the human's cock, milking out every drop of fluid.

When Stephan reached back and clasped Red's massive thigh, the drag of his nails bit, the salt of his sweat burned, and the tiny bite of pain brought Red over in clenching waves, almost painful in their intensity. He panted, held his breath and shuddered, finally dropping forward, catching his weight on one hand.

They hung there like that, limp, blissed out and sweaty, until the bed gave one more warning groan and finally collapsed. It dropped them to the floor in a tumble of broken wood and rumpled bedding.

Stephan laughed. The sound was tight and muffled, his face still pressed to the flattened pillows. Red rolled away, landing heavily on the floor. With a growl, he crawled back onto the mattress and gathered the human into his arms, spooning around him protectively. They lay there in the darkness, uncaring of the sweat and semen and streaks of blood. Red sighed, tucked his chin over the top of Stephan's head and closed his eyes, letting satiation and exhaustion take him away.

CHAPTER SIX

When Stephan woke, dawn had lightened the sky to grey. His front was cold, but his back was warm where Red lay asleep, still in his massive form. He moved slightly and the beast pulled him tighter, not letting him go.

“Really could use a piss about now,” he grumbled, but Red slept on. Minutes ticked by and he finally managed to twist around, facing the slumbering giant. It was still Red, with his copper hair and fighter’s build. Just bigger. With an edge of wild he’d lacked before.

A beast, but shockingly gentle. There’s no doubt Red could have gravely injured Stephan during sex. He studied Red’s face until the man’s eyelids flickered, and he woke. For a heartbeat, Red looked confused. Then he sighed, stretched, and to Stephan’s fascination, suddenly shifted shape, shimmering and rippling till the more familiar version of Red lay beside him in the broken bed.

“Did I freak you out?” He looked worried.

“You really turn into a wolf?”

“Yeah, but not the kind you see in the forest. I’m bigger.”

“I’d say that’s a given. Like a dire wolf?”

Red nodded his head. “Yeah, that. My folks weren’t this way. I guess I mutated.”

Stephan propped his head on his hand and studied Red’s exquisite body. “Which is your normal form? The one you’re most comfortable in?”

The shifter sat up and shrugged. “This one gets me by in public most easily. If I’m tracking another beast, the wolf is best. He can fight on equal terms. I use my other shape mostly for the scare.”

“Why didn’t you go after the killer last night? I mean, you could have followed him, fought him better than I did.”

Red gave a laugh. “You were there before me, dude. The two of you moved so fast I didn’t have a chance to strip and jump in. Then you were

gone.” His smile faded. “I thought you were dead. Between the water and the beast...”

“Yeah. Pretty rash.”

For a moment, they were silent, avoiding each other’s gaze.

“So,” Red asked, “you know about me. What the hell are *you*?”

As he watched, Stephan’s expression shuttered. He ran a hand through his wine-dark hair. “Human.”

“Not a normal human, though. You’re a hunter. That’s a mutation in itself.”

Stephan nodded, not looking at him, but he didn’t speak.

“And you’re a Red Cap.”

Stephan looked at him, slightly annoyed. “How’d you figure that out?”

Red nudged him. “Come on, like I said: red watchman’s cap, the lining of your coat, even your hair color.” He looked away, embarrassed. “I saw those papers, the assignment to come out here. Red Caps may be a secret society, but I figure they’re on the right side of the law. And these days, there’s not much law anywhere. Our force is pretty loosely organized, and no one’s gonna question me if I take help from an outside source.”

“We’re vigilantes.”

“Until the cities recover and the government is functioning again, we need people like you.” He touched Stephan’s face, turning him to meet Red’s gaze. “Tell me more about what you are. How you became a Red Cap?”

The human glanced away, not willing to look at Red as he spoke. “I guess hunters are mutants, too. My senses are more acute, and my brain... it’s hardwired for the chase. I’m obsessive. When I was a kid I couldn’t rest if something was on my mind. I needed answers. If I tried a game, there was no rest till I mastered it. Never wanted to lead or follow, didn’t have many friends. Just family. And then...”

“And then they were gone,” Red finished softly.

Stephan let out a huge, gusty breath. “Momma was the first. The bio attacks took her. We managed for awhile, till the rape gangs started marauding. Me and Dad tried to keep my sister hidden. But she was taken. Dad was beside himself. And then something inside me clicked.” He paused and gnawed at his lip. “It was more than obsession. I *had* to find her. Eventually I did. She lived. Hurt, damaged, but alive. While I was hunting for her, Dad connected with a network. We eventually got her to safety.”

“What happened to her captors?”

The look on Stephan’s face chilled Red to the bone.

“You killed them. All of them.”

“I was fourteen years old.”

For a moment, he was frozen. The first time he’d seen Stephan, Red had been sixteen. A child. How had the young hunter survived that?

“Dad died that year. And the Red Caps came to me in the night. They recruited me, trained me and set me loose on the world. I’ve been with them...” He paused, frowning down at his hands. “...it’s been nearly twenty years now. Most don’t survive their first two years.”

“Maybe it’s time to stop.”

“Can’t. That serial killer? He’s alive. I can feel it, like an itch under my skin. I’ve gotta go after him.” He gave Red a despairing look. “I feel him; he’s gone south. When he hits another city, he’ll keep on till he finds another target.”

“Women.”

“Yeah.”

“Fucking beast.” Red shook his head.

“For the record, it’s probably not the beast that makes this one a killer. If he’d never mutated, he’d still have been a murderer.” Stephan rolled out of the bed, stepping carefully around the wreckage. He pulled an empty duffel from a shelf in the tiny closet and started stuffing clothing into it.

“You’re leaving.”

“Gotta. Otherwise it’ll make me crazy.” He stepped into the shower, not waiting for the water to heat. The cold cleared his head and tamed his erection. Having Red there so close... so naked... God. He stepped out and quickly toweled off. The young detective had occupied his mind for a decade. Want for him had never risen to feral obsession, but he knew damned well it would now. Every step he took away from Colin Redington would pull him further into hell. Every step the beast took away from him tore him in half.

He was so fucked.

“Hey, Red,” he ducked his head out the door and saw that Red was still on the bed, stark naked and frowning at the sheets.

“You could come with me.”

The shifter shook his head. “Can’t.”

“How can you stand letting him get away? He killed how many people here? Four?”

“Five.”

Stephan continued. “He maimed your friend Ash. Poor kid. Now you’re letting the bastard get away.”

Red stood and came to within just a few feet of where Stephan stood. His face was pale, and the red hair on his head and at his groin appeared vivid in contrast. “I’m human to look at, Stephan, but at my core, I’m a wolf.”

Stephan cocked his head in confusion. “I know that.”

“I have a territory. The people inside it... I’m bound to them.”

“That beast invaded your territory.”

Red reached out, placing both hands on Stephan’s bare shoulders. The room was frigid, but neither of them seemed to notice the cold. “Now he’s gone.” He ducked his head. “I’m not a lone wolf, Stephan. I don’t roam. My territory is huge and my wolf is bound to it. I protect my territory.”

“And your pack. Humans and all.” Stephan moved into the circle of Red’s embrace. Together, they were warm. Before Red, he’d always been cold. It had never bothered him. Now it made him ache. He rubbed his chest, then moved away to pick up the clothing he’d discarded the night before. It took but moments to dress. Then he was ready, his coat on, hat over his damp hair.

Red was dressed, too, the hood of the sweatshirt shadowing his face. The grief Stephan felt was echoed in the other man’s demeanor. Together, they left the cold, empty little rental. Their feet echoed on the stairs, the sound of their steps vanishing completely once they stepped out onto the sidewalk and into the fog. Stephan closed his eyes, tasting the air and the messages it sent.

South.

Red would turn and walk north. He blinked rapidly, turning to look at the beast. His beast.

Red stared at him, unmoving. “You’ll come back?”

“Won’t be able to keep me away.” He summoned up a smile. “The sex is too hot to ignore.”

And you hold my heart.

Dear God, but something deep inside him belonged right where he was, standing beside a young man not so different from the one he hunted. He started to walk away, and then turned. This wasn’t right. He saw hope flare in Red’s eyes, then fade just as quickly. Instead of speaking, Stephan pulled the other man close, holding him tightly, whispering in his ear.

“I *will* come back.”

“You’d better. And don’t take too long about it.” Red nipped Stephan’s chin, bearing down slightly, just enough to sting. He gently licked the wound and then came up for a kiss, soft and sweet. “Mate.”

He said it so softly that Stephan almost didn’t hear. When he understood, his heart went still.

One final kiss and they stepped apart, but this time Stephan remained rooted in place. He watched as Red turned away, walking rapidly, hands

buried in the pockets of his jacket. The hood of his sweatshirt was brilliant around his head.

“Mate.”

What nonsense. He tried to laugh, but it came out wrong. Stephan whirled, the skirt of his jacket flaring out in a red and black blur. Then he was gone, traveling as fast as he could move, easily homing in on the trail of a killer.

He'd be back. Soon.

THE END

Author Bio

Belinda is an award-winning author of erotic romance, speculative fiction and LGBTQ romance. She lives in far Northern California with her family and a pack of perpetually shedding Siberian Huskies. Her m/m romances have won the RWA Passionate Plume, the EPIC and taken placements in the Rainbow Book Awards.

A graduate of CSU Chico, she managed to attend the notorious party school without once getting drunk, arrested or appearing in a “Girls Gone Wild” video. Her main focus of study was classical and archival history, cultural anthropology and theatre arts, all of which influence her science fiction and paranormal writing.

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