Look what people are saying about these talented authors

About Leslie Kelly

“Once again, Leslie Kelly provides readers with a sexy, witty, romantic and all-around fun story to read.”
—Romance Reviews Today on Heated Rush

“Don’t Open Till Christmas is a present in itself where the humor and the sizzling sex never stop. Top Pick!”
—Romantic Times BOOKreviews

“Oh, this one is definitely wild, but even better, it also aims for the heart.”
—Mrs. Giggles on One Wild Wedding Night
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Leslie Kelly is an award-winning author of more than thirty Harlequin novels. A three-time nominee for the highest award in romantic fiction, the RWA RITA® Award, she is also a National Reader’s Choice Award winner and has received a Romantic Times BOOKreviews Award. Leslie lives in Maryland with her husband and three daughters. To learn more about her writing, please visit www.lesliekelly.com or her blog site, www.plotmonkeys.com.
New York Times Bestselling Author
Leslie Kelly
ONCE UPON A MATTRESS
ONCE UPON A MATTRESS

Leslie Kelly
To Julie…one of the bravest people I know.
   Working with you has always been
   one of my favorite parts of this job.
Prologue

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away as you might imagine, there lived a rather persnickety prince who refused to choose a bride. Though all the fairest princesses in the land were presented to him, the prince simply couldn’t find one to meet his most exacting standards. Nor could he ever fully explain why none of them were to his taste.

So one day his mother, the powerful queen, took matters into her own hands. Determined to see her son married to a proper princess, she hired an expert tracker to go out into the world, find a suitable young lady and bring her back to the castle to be married to the prince immediately.

But you know what they say...you should never send a wolf to watch over the flock.

And the queen did, indeed, send a wolf.
ON ANY other night when the moon waxed on its inexorable journey toward full, Lucas Wolf would be outside, roaming lush valleys, fierce and untamed like his ancestors. As he ran free beneath the midnight sky, the moon’s white-gold glow would bathe him in warmth and visceral pleasure. Every animal instinct clawed into his genetic code would fill with primal need to give himself over to his wildest impulses. And he’d do it, wholeheartedly.

That was, on any other night.

Tonight, Lucas was trapped inside a hot throne room, ready to howl with frustration. Instead of reveling in the warm glow of moonlight, he was pierced by the heated stare of a raging queen. And the only thing he might bathe in were the flecks of spit flying out of her mouth during her rant.

“Unacceptable, that’s what it is. Simply unacceptable!”

“Mother, please…”

“Shut up, Ruprecht!” Queen Verona thrust a long, sharp-nailed finger toward her adult son. “If you’d been less picky, none of us would be in this situation.”

This situation? As far as Lucas knew, the only one in a situation was Prince Ruprecht, who was known as the Charming—if not very bright.

A single man himself, Lucas didn’t blame the prince for wanting to stay that way. Then again, lawmen like Lucas Wolf had the luxury of remaining single. At least until he found his one true mate—if such a person existed.

Lucas liked women. But never had he seen one he simply couldn’t do without…and he’d been keeping his eyes open for her. Until he found her, he was reserving judgment about his clan’s one-perfect-mate-for-life concept.

Princes like Ruprecht did not have the luxury of waiting. Not as far as his mother was concerned, anyway.

“I’m not picky,” the prince said with a sigh that verged on petulant. “I just haven’t met the right person yet.” He draped himself across his mother’s throne.

“You’ve rejected every princess in all of Elatyria.”

“Not quite,” Ruprecht protested. “You were the one who sent that chit from the northlands away before I set eyes on her.”

The queen’s scowl deepened, highlighting the lines gouged into her forehead. For someone once called “the fairest of them all”, she looked as appealing as a crone. “She was no princess.”

“How do you know?”

“Her hair was lank, her skin pocked and she smelled of cabbage.”

“I like cabbage.” Amusement danced in the prince’s eyes as he egged his mother on. “You didn’t even put her to the test.”

Princess tests? How bloody archaic.
'I wish I had! Because even a false princess-bride would be better than none at all. How many times have I told you, Ruprecht?' The queen crossed the throne room and put her heavily beringed hands on either side of the prince’s face. “You must wed if we’re to keep our grip on Riverdale.”

Ahh. Lucas began to understand. Riverdale, a tiny kingdom to the west, boasted some of the richest lands in all the world. Queen Verona and her husband had taken control of it many years ago, absorbing it into their kingdom when the last surviving member of Riverdale’s own royal family had died. Why, he wondered, would the queen be worrying about losing it now?

The prince rolled his eyes. “Who cares about stupid old Riverdale?” Charming he might be, but he was also spoiled and self-indulgent, Lucas thought. Not to mention lacking in common sense if he could so easily discount such a vital part of his future kingdom.

How like a petty prince to sneer at good land. For all commoners, fertile fields provided nourishment and security. But for those like Lucas, it was even more important. His own kind would be miserable trapped within thick castles built of stone. They much preferred simple sod houses. Some managed to run tiny wood-walled shops in the towns. But at heart, what the Wolf clan most longed for was land. Streams flush with trout, fields to cultivate when the moon was hiding, woods in which to hunt when it was full.

Lucas Wolf might be a lawman. He might track down evildoers and bring them to justice here in Elatyria or even in the other world that bordered his own—the one natives there called Earth. He might even be only one-quarter Wolf. But deep down, he understood why his father and brothers wanted a homestead of their own. He knew why they craved the chance to escape the towns and villages and live in peace in the country. In the wild.

Of course, that was next to impossible nowadays. The queen kept her sticky fingers wrapped around as much property as she could grab.

“I don’t see why you’re getting so upset about this, Mummy.”

Mummy? This was the future king? Terrifying.

Queen Verona had obviously tired of her son’s attitude. She smacked him in the head, sending his crown tumbling. “Marrying and providing the country with an heir is the only way to keep the people of Riverdale from demanding that the throne go back to the Mayfair family.”

Ruprecht grabbed his crown and thrust it back on his head, realizing, at last, that his mother was truly worried. His brow scrunched in confusion. “I thought the line had died out.”

The queen cast a quick glance toward Lucas, then admitted, “Not exactly. There is one heir left. The daughter of the late Queen Lenore. The queen’s consort was a commoner from…over there.”

Ahh.

“So where is she?” asked Ruprecht.

“Shortly after her mother died, the young Princess Penelope fell from a turret and was badly injured.” She tsked. “I hear she lost so much blood they thought she was already dead when they found her.”

The queen didn’t sound particularly sympathetic.

“Her father decided he wanted to raise her over there. Better medicine or something.” She shrugged in disinterest. “In any case, Ruprecht, he asked your late father—whom he had befriended—to look after Riverdale, with the understanding that the girl would return on her twenty-first birthday to take her rightful place.”

Curious, Lucas asked, “When is her twenty-first birthday?”

The queen shifted her gaze. “It was a few years ago. The child didn’t return. I doubt she ever will.”
“Then why do we have to worry about it?” Ruprecht asked.

The queen’s face appeared harder than the statues of her that, by law, stood in every town square. “Because she might. Solidifying our hold on Riverdale is your responsibility. You must give the people a prince to claim and fawn over. Winning their hearts will ensure they aren’t swayed by the Mayfair name, should the princess ever come back.”

It made sense, Lucas supposed. He had grown up a day’s ride from Riverdale, and he’d never heard stories of a long-lost princess. So he didn’t imagine the locals were pining for her return.

Or had Queen Verona let the rumor get out that the girl had died? He wouldn’t put it past her.

“You’ve made a fine mess of things,” the queen continued. “No heir. No wife. No girl in all the lands good enough for you.” Queen Verona wrung her hands together and stalked around the room again. “What are we to do? There’s not one single princess left that you haven’t refused or insulted. Not one.”

The rumors about the prince’s pickiness? Now those Lucas had heard. Ruprecht had reportedly told the exquisite, sung-about Princess Aurelia of the Glades that he would sooner kiss one of the frogs from the castle moat than touch his lips to hers.

Huh. Sounded as though the prince had been reading some of his own family history.

Queen Verona finally stopped her pacing and stood directly in front of Lucas. “This is why I brought you here. They say you’ve never failed to complete a mission. Is that true?”

“It’s true.”

“Good. I want you to scour the kingdoms and find out if there are any princesses my brilliant son hasn’t mortally offended. Perhaps we can cajole one into reconsidering his suit.”

Royalty. They intermarried too much and it obviously did a little brain-draining with every subsequent generation. Because there was another answer. It was so obvious, Lucas couldn’t help rolling his eyes, surprised that she hadn’t seen it.

“Are you looking to leave your head behind when you depart, lawman?” the queen asked, her face growing as red as the rubies that studded her crown.

Lucas continued to lean indolently against a column made of the finest dwarf-mined marble. He wasn’t one of her subjects and didn’t give a damn for royal manners. He’d come here because he’d been told she had a well-paying job for him.

Money was all that mattered these days. He’d achieved his quest for vengeance over the death of his little sister, an innocent who’d seen something she shouldn’t have and had paid with her life. Having caught the last of the men responsible, it was now time for Lucas to get back to some kind of normalcy.

Only one force drove him these days, and it required a lot of coin. He wanted land. Wanted it for his father. His people.

“Well? Speak up or I’ll have you skinned.”

He sneered. The royal family didn’t rule any Wolf.

“There is another answer,” he said, trying to force a note of respect into his voice, though he felt none for the vain woman. But she had deep pockets and his were unfortunately shallow.

Queen Verona simply stared, waiting.

“The prince has to marry a princess, and there are none who will have him. And you must solidify your hold on
Riverdale.

“Yes, yes?”

How on Elatyria did these people manage to find their way across the castle without someone drawing them a map?

“It’s obvious,” he explained. “You simply have to send someone out to find Princess Penelope, bring her back here, and marry her to Prince Ruprecht.”

“DON’T LOOK NOW, Princess, but that sexy, dangerous-looking drink of water in the corner is eyeing you like you’re a rare burger and he’s a reluctant vegetarian dying for some meat.”

Penny Mayfair cringed as her friend and boss, Callie, used the nickname her late father had given her as a kid. Princess.

Pretending she hadn’t heard, she loaded two ham-and-egg specials and a dozen side orders onto a serving tray. Idly hoping the cook hadn’t left any eggshells in this order, she turned away from the heated, pass-through window of the diner’s kitchen.

“He didn’t want me to wait on him,” added Callie, who owned this place. Having been Penny’s late father’s girlfriend for many years, Callie was the closest thing Penny had ever had to a mother. The woman, a romantic at heart, was never happier than when she was matchmaking. “Asked for you twice!”

Penny frowned, glancing across the packed diner. Every table was full and she was doing double duty today. Gina, the other full-time waitress at Kallie’s Kuntry Kitchen, had called in sick. As usual. Gina was a wild child who always hooked up with a guy named Jack Daniel’s or his buddy Johnny Walker on Saturday nights. So she was never in the mood to serve Jimmy Dean on a subsequent Sunday morning.

Callie was an angel, but her arthritis made waitressing a real chore for her. Meanwhile, Glen, the cook, was in a rotten mood because somebody had sent back a too-runny omelet, so he was intentionally ass-dragging on every order.

Not the type of day when Penny Mayfair felt like dealing with demanding customers.

“He’s at table eighteen.”

“Can’t he see I’m busy?” she said with a weary sigh.

Not waiting for an answer, Penny snaked her way to table twelve. She slung the plates full of food at the two oilfield roughnecks who’d ordered enough breakfast for a family of five.

“Thank ya, Princess.”

“Shut up, Eddie.”

“Aww, that any way to talk to your best tipper?”

“Here’s a clue for you,” she said with an amused eye-roll. “Leaving me a note on a napkin saying, ‘Here’s a tip, bet on horse number two,’ doesn’t earn you a lot of points.”

Eddie, a good-natured good-old-boy who parked himself at the same table every time he came in, snorted and slapped a hand on his knee. He and many of the other guys who worked out at the oilfields came into LeBeaux a couple of weekends a month, looking for the closest town that boasted a bar.

LeBeaux had three. Which was two more than the number of banks and one more than the number of restaurants.
On Saturday nights, guys like these tried to hook up with girls like Gina. On Sunday mornings, bleary-eyed and obnoxious, they showed up here.

“I got a tip for ya, baby,” said Eddie’s dining companion. “Say yes and you won’t regret it.”

He grinned, but good humor didn’t light up in his eyes the way it did Eddie’s. This guy was a stranger. His reddened nose and bloodshot eyes, plus the reek of whiskey that surrounded him like Pigpen’s cloud, told her he was a hard partier. She’d been on her guard the minute he’d sat down.

“So, what time do you… get off?”

Oh, great. Like she hadn’t heard sleazy come-ons like that a million times since she’d turned sixteen and started slinging hash at this place. Considering the lack of women in the area, it was almost expected. Penny rolled her eyes and turned to attend to the next table.

Then she felt a hand on her butt.

Son of a…. She whirled around and jabbed an index finger in his face. “The next time you put a finger on me, you’re gonna have to start pulling off your shoes to count to ten.”

“Oooh, feisty! I like it.”

Eddie frowned at his friend. “Hey, no need for that, Frank.”

“Oh, miss? My coffee?”

Glaring at the perv, Penny hurried over to grab the coffeepot. Seeing the way her hand shook, she fought to stay cool.

What was it with men who thought they had the right to manhandle any woman they wanted to? And why her? Everything about her—from her aloof demeanor to her short hair, her multiple piercings, her clothes and her tattoos —screamed that she wasn’t a bimbo looking for action. So why did everyone want to give it to her?

According to Callie, it was because no matter what she did to herself, Penny could never hide the fact that she was beautiful. And beneath her gruff surface, she was sweet-natured and vulnerable.

Penny told her that was bullshit. Even if, deep down, she feared Callie was right.

Wouldn’t everyone in town have a laugh if they ever figured out that tough little Penny Mayfair, was, at heart, an orphan looking for a home.

She sighed, not willing to go there today. Not when it was only two weeks until her twenty-fourth birthday. Meaning it was almost three years since the day her father had died, leaving her by herself in this huge, lonely world.

Penny thrust the image of his kind face out of her mind and got back to work. Turning her attention back to the orders getting colder under the heat lamps and the people waiting to check out, she hurried to wait on the next table.

But then she stopped. All thought stopped. Time itself even seemed to stop. The clatter of forks on stoneware and the cacophony of raised voices faded into one soft background hum.

Penny’s rubber-soled high-tops stuck on the cracked linoleum and she stumbled a step, then came to a standstill. Her heart paused mid-beat. Maybe the rest of the world did as well.

Because there he sat. The tall drink of water at table eighteen who would have to be gulped because a sip would never be enough.

Lord have mercy.
It wasn’t the man’s size that stunned her, though the way he towered over the table said he was incredibly tall. And though the bench seat was built for two, no way could anybody else sit on it with him, not with the breadth of those shoulders.

It wasn’t the blunt attractiveness of the stark, masculine face, with the slashing cheekbones and strong brow. Or the jutting, grizzled jaw—not bearded, yet his five o’clock shadow was going on midnight despite the earliness of the hour.

It wasn’t the thick, nearly jet-black shaggy hair that brushed across the leather-jacket clad-shoulders.

It wasn’t the powerful hands curled together on the table. Or the curve of the sensual lips. Or the aura of danger that seemed to roll off the man like heat off a bonfire.

No. It was his eyes that got to her, leaving Penny speechless and confused. Dark, nearly-black eyes were focused entirely upon her, staring with utter concentration. They looked almost feral. But she didn’t feel threatened. In fact, for some strange reason, the word that popped into her mind when she noticed the way he watched her was claimed.

It was a strange feeling, considering she had no one in this world who had a legitimate claim on her. She should know, she’d looked. She was totally without family. There was absolutely nobody who could, or would, ever call her theirs.

Until him. The guy eating her alive with his stare, who looked like he expected her to accede to any demand he cared to make.

Nobody makes demands of me. Requests? Okay. But not demands.

She finally began to breathe again, to think again. But she couldn’t prevent a final, quick mental acknowledgement that she had never in her life experienced anything as jolting as this man’s possessive stare.

She slowly stepped closer until she stood by his table, staring down into the fathomless depths of those inky eyes.

He murmured, “And here you are.”


He shook his head, as if he hadn’t intended to speak. “Tell me you’re not the one they call Penny Mayfair,” he ordered.

Swallowing, she admitted, “Sorry. That is my name.”

His furrowed brow said he wasn’t pleased by the news. His muttered curse confirmed it.

“What do you want?” she asked, forcing away all those crazy, gushy sensations that had awakened and begun to do somersaults across her most girly parts at the sight of him. Hearing his voice had turned those somersaults into gigantic loop-the-loops.

No loop-the-looping with strangers. Got it?

Hooking up with a guy she picked up in the diner would simply confirm peoples’ opinion that she was pure white trash. Besides, if there was one thing her wild, cross-country quest to find any member of her family had taught her, it was that the answers to her questions weren’t going to be found in the arms of some hot stranger.

“This can’t be happening, not now, not you,” he muttered, staring at her hard, his dark eyes gleaming with something that verged on need.

Wishful thinking.
He spoke again, under his breath. “You can’t be the one.”

Her annoyance rising, she snapped, “The one what?”

He looked away, and she saw the way his pulse was pounding in his temple, as if he were undergoing some great internal struggle. Finally, he said, “You really are the princess?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Shut up.”

She had to get Callie to lay off the nickname. Her father had gotten away with it throughout her younger years, even though she had never played princess, seen a Disney movie or owned a frilly doll. She couldn’t recall ever believing in a happily-ever-after, or even reading a fairy tale in her childhood. So the princess thing had been her Dad’s little inside joke.

But now that he was gone, the nickname needed to go, too. She was about as far from a pink-tulle-and-diamond-wearing-princess as she was from a green-skinned alien chick on some old sci-fi show.

“Princess?”

“Call me that again and you’ll be wearing breakfast rather than eating it.” Her words lacked any heat. Penny was simply used to resorting to snark when anybody started to hassle her.

His eyes gleamed though his stern expression didn’t waver. “But you haven’t served me any food with which to break my fast.”

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder toward the closest table, even while noticing the odd way the man spoke. “There’s plenty of food over there.”

“Consider me warned.”

He slid out of the booth and rose to his feet, forcing her to tilt her head back to continue meeting those eyes.

God, he’s tall. Huge. Freaking gorgeous!

As if knowing he’d sent her thoughts spinning, he stepped even closer, until their bodies almost touched. His was massive, strong, rippled with muscle. Hers, soft, curvy and yielding. A perfect fit. Her mind suddenly flooded with images of all the lovely ways they could fit together.

“No,” she insisted, more to herself than him. “This is crazy.”

“I know,” he admitted. “It’s still happening.”

“What is?”

“I’ve been looking for the princess. And I’ve been looking for you. I just never expected they’d turn out to be the same person.”

Totally not following, Penny could only stare.

He didn’t explain, just watched her, his gaze hungry. “I’ll fill you in later.”

She quivered, her ears tricking her for a second into thinking he’d said he’d fill her later. Because, oh, God, did she suspect he could.

His lips widened in a knowing smile, as if he knew exactly what she’d been thinking. “Later,” he repeated. “Now, back to my mission. Your full name is Penelope Eloisa Mayfair?”

Damn, she hated that name and did everything she could to keep people from hearing it. How this dude could have learned it was beyond her, but right now, she didn’t care. She just wanted to keep him from repeating it.
“Would you lower your voice?”

A lot of people in this town already looked at her as though she was a two-headed freak and her eccentric name wouldn’t help. Sure, she might have lived among them since she’d been a child, but to most of them, she’d always been an outsider.

She hadn’t fit in. Not ever. Those who didn’t consider her arrogant and snooty because of how well she did in school looked down on her for not being interested in any of the things that fascinated the other local girls.

“I need to confirm your identity,” said the stranger.

“It’s confirmed, okay? Now what do you want?” She edged closer, trying to hide him from nearby diners. Pointless, really. It was like a mouse trying to stop anyone from seeing the grizzly bear in the corner. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re busy and I’m stressed.”

“Why not quit?”

She couldn’t help laughing. “I have bills to pay. Ever heard of not wanting to starve?” Then she glanced around at the awful food cooked by Glen-the-talentless. “Okay, I guess you have. Avoiding starvation is probably the only reason anyone would come to this place.” She kept her voice low, not wanting to offend the regular clientele, or Callie. No point making herself stand out even more.

Penny’s differentness had been made even more obvious a few months ago, when she’d come back after going on a two-year-long journey to find out who she was and where she belonged. The trip that had confirmed that whole you-have-nobody hypothesis.

She’d hit the road shortly before her twenty-second birthday, with one goal in mind: discovering her own past. Dad, as much as she loved him, had been keeping secrets all her life. Secrets about his own background and definitely about Penny’s mother’s. He’d promised to give Penny answers when she grew up.

Unfortunately, he had died before he could keep his promise.

So Penny had set off on a quest, following the few clues she had. They’d led to nothing but more questions. Eventually losing hope, she had kept wandering, trying to find someplace that resonated with her soul. She’d gone from city to city, town to town. In each, she’d tried out a new job, a new hair color, a piercing, a tattoo, or a man before moving on to the next.

And she’d discovered she didn’t really fit in anywhere. No one location was better than the last. Each left her feeling…restless. Out of step, out of touch. Adrift.

In that old movie, Dorothy had said there’s no place like home. For Penny, no place was home.

So she’d given up. Decided that having her hopes raised and then crushed was worse than just not knowing. Penny had come back to her father’s old house, her few friends, and to Callie, the one remaining constant in her life. She’d dragged all the remnants of her journey along with her. They were stamped on her body, on her mind and on her spirit, proof of her efforts to identify the real Penny Mayfair.

Oh, hadn’t that given the residents of LeBeaux something to talk about! Despite being lovingly welcomed back by a few, to the town’s old guard, she’d simply proved what they’d always suspected of her—that she was bad news.

“Are you all right?” the stranger said. He spoke softly, knowing she could hear, as if they were so in tune to each other that the symphony of gossiping voices and slinging crockery didn’t exist.

“I’m fine.”

Penny shook off her sad thoughts. Things were okay, she was okay. Not fabulous. But okay. She had a job, she had a roof over her head and she had a few true friends, which was better than having dozens of phony ones. She managed to maintain her wild-child image that kept people from looking closer and seeing anything she didn’t want
them to. And she sometimes even had fun doing it.

_This is not a bad life._

Even if deep in her heart she knew it wasn’t the one she had been destined to live.

“What is it you want?” she asked.

“I want you to come with me.”

A shiver of excitement danced through her, even as she formed an instinctive refusal. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Yes, you are.” As if realizing he couldn’t exactly force her out through the packed restaurant, though he seemed tempted, he grudgingly added, “I must speak with you.”

People had begun to notice their confrontation. They were all eyes, all ears, dying to be scandalized by the town’s bad girl.

Penny sighed. “I don’t have time for this.”

“It’s urgent.”

“Yeah, right. If you lay that ‘Come with me if you want to live’ line on me, I’m going to stab you in the eye with a fork.”

Though, that might be tough. The guy was staring down from what had to be a good foot advantage, and she was no shorty.

He merely shook his head, continuing that intense, searching perusal of her face, her hair, her black-clad form.

“You’re _truly_ Penelope Mayfair? Daughter of Lenore Mayfair?”

She gasped. “What the hell do you know about my mother?” Penny had no memory of the woman who’d given birth to her. She’d never even seen a single photograph, since her father had said they’d all been lost during a move. So for this stranger to casually throw out the name stung sharply.

He shook his head, apparently unfazed by her sudden anger. His expression suddenly appeared almost regretful as he asked, “You weren’t a foundling, I assume? No chance you were adopted?”

Penny’s hand fisted. Whatever this crazy attraction was about, it couldn’t overcome her instinctive need to protect her privacy. “Get out.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-four.” _In two weeks._ She had replied before even thinking about it. Why she was answering this stranger’s questions, she had no idea. But that was it, no more.

“Where is your father? Did he abandon you?”

This time, Penny didn’t listen to the voice of caution that said he was a big, scary-looking dude who knew too much about her. She stomped on his booted foot. Which just served to hurt her rubber-covered arch and didn’t so much as make him flinch.

“Why did you do that?” he asked, tilting his head in visible confusion and not a bit of discomfort.

Penny ignored the pain in her foot and glared at the man. “Because you’re seriously pissing me off. Now go away.”
“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head and looking anything but repentant. “You’re not going to get rid of me that easily.”

“Easily? I think I broke a bone in my foot.”

He shrugged. “Not my fault.”

Glaring, Penny considered stomping on his foot again. Or punching him. But as if he read her thoughts, he narrowed his eyes in warning. “Don’t even think about it. That shot was free. Next time, I defend myself.”

“Oh, am I supposed to be all scared now?” she snapped, probably sounding more brave than she actually felt. “You think you’re tough enough to intimidate me?”

Okay, that was dumb, because he was pretty damned intimidating. Though, honestly, she didn’t truly believe he would hurt her. Not only because they were surrounded by people in a public place, but because something about him seemed more ‘big, overbearing protector’ than ‘bad guy’.

Penny had always had good instincts about people. Those instincts told her that while this man was going to annoy her in ways she hadn’t yet begun to comprehend, he wouldn’t hurt her. The same instincts had warned her that the roughneck, Frank, was a nasty character. And he’d proved that with one disgusting grope.

This stranger was different. Not that he couldn’t be trouble, but she didn’t experience that instant shiver of awareness that said he was someone you wouldn’t want to turn your back on for fear of getting a knife between your ribs or a hand on your ass.

She could handle him. Really.

Though she felt a moment’s panic when he inched closer, keeping his voice low as he finally answered both of her questions.

“You should definitely be scared. Because if you swing at me one more time, Princess, you’re going to find out exactly how intimidating I can be.”
IT WAS FUNNY. Lucas had thought finding Princess Penelope would be the hard part when, in fact, it had been remarkably easy. Queen Verona had told him where the girl’s father had said he was taking her, and to his surprise, she’d still been here. He had picked up her trail right after he’d arrived this morning.

But he suspected locating her would be the only easy thing about this job. Getting her to come with him would be a problem.

Figuring out how to keep her was going to be an even bigger one.

But keep her he would. Because there was no way he was going to let her go. Not when, from the moment he’d laid eyes on Penny Mayfair, he’d wanted her with every ounce of his being.

It had finally happened. He’d looked on a woman and known he’d sooner cut off a limb than do without her.

And she was the princess he’d been hired to deliver to another man’s marriage bed.

“Oh, miss? My coffee?”

Lucas glanced past Penny at an impatient-sounding man sitting at a nearby table. Leveling one slow, steady stare at the stranger, he noted that the man swallowed and pushed his empty coffee cup away, reaching for a glass of water instead.

“Look, you’re making a scene.”

“You’re the one who kicked me,” he rebuked, amused by her temper. It brought out the fire in her beautiful eyes.

“I didn’t kick you,” she snapped. “I stomped on your foot.”

“So come with me to make amends.”

Finally, as if too frustrated to argue, Penny said, “Fine. Meet me outside in five minutes. Got it?” Apparently seeing his hesitation, she added, “I’ll be there. I promise.”

He watched her whirl away, wondering if she would keep her word. But he had no other choice. Short of dragging her out by force, there was nothing he could do but go outside and wait.

It was just as well. The air was better. Not good, but better than inside the cramped, reeking diner.

Lucas didn’t like to spend too much time on the Earth side of the world. It was too loud, too frenetic. Much too crowded with people jammed together in their cities, driving their screeching automobiles, moving much too fast. All his highly attuned senses went into overdrive whenever he crossed the border.

There were times, when doing his job, that he’d had to cross into areas far worse than this. The city of New Orleans was a torturous maze of noise, colors and odors. Like all his kind, he had a keenly developed sense of smell. So the scents, in particular, were so overwhelming he felt incapable of breathing.

While in New Orleans, he’d experienced its darkest side. He had gone into dingy, rundown hotels, had staked
out seedy tourist traps. He’d followed suspects into vampire-themed bars where the other patrons had no idea the creatures of their imaginations actually existed in other realms.

At first glance, the Mayfair princess seemed more suited to one of those places than to this small country dining hall. From the purplish tinge in her short, spiked black hair, to the heavily made-up skin and darkly shadowed eyes, she looked like anything but a member of a royal family. Except, perhaps, for Snow White…after she’d been in that glass coffin for a while.

But those eyes. Those dazzling, purple-violet eyes proclaimed her lineage. From what the stories said, they were a trademark of the Mayfair women.

Then there was the face. Her lips were full, her chin a bit stubborn, her cheeks soft. Finely boned, delicate and almost fragile, Princess Penelope’s face would, without a doubt, be utterly beautiful when washed clean of the layer of cosmetics and about a decade’s worth of mistrust.

But the rest. Great Rumpel’s ghost, she was nothing like he’d expected. Nothing like anyone had expected.

Spoiled, petted princesses often wore jewels. But not, as he recalled, hoops of silver dangling from the lobes of their ears, with smaller rings and studs riding all the way up each curve.

Her black clothes looked more appropriate for a crone than for a young woman on either side of the border. The only relief from the solid black came from the garish, bright-red canvas shoes that extended all the way up over her ankles.

The top and loose skirt hung baggily over her body, concealing much of her shape. But from where he’d been sitting, by the door, he’d gotten a few glimpses of her calves and thighs outlined beneath the filmy fabric. The tight, black leggings she wore beneath the skirt clung to those limbs, highlighting the slenderness, the length.

He’d seen her maneuver through the crowded room with platters of food, serving others, waiting on those far beneath her in stature. He’d heard her snap at anyone who tested her and watched her manage ten tasks at once.

He’d also seen her defend herself against an oaf who had laid hands on her without permission. That was fortunate, for Lucas had been rising from his seat, his hands clenching into fists the moment the stranger’s shifty eyes had hinted at his dark thoughts. A low, black cloud of anger had overtaken Lucas’s vision and he’d almost launched himself across the diner when the bastard had dared to touch her.

But she’d taken care of herself.

Something told him she always took care of herself.

She was also someone who could be taken at her word. Penny proved as much by showing up at the door exactly five minutes after he’d exited. She burst outside. “Okay. You’ve got my attention. Tell me what you want, and then go away.”

Lucas crossed his arms over his chest, leaned against the door to make sure she didn’t dart around him to go in, and nobody else could come out. Then he answered. “I am indeed going away. Far, far away. And so are you.”

Her mouth opened, then closed. For the first time since he’d seen her, she was entirely speechless. He sensed it didn’t happen often. This was a woman who was seldom lost for words.

She was tough. Ragged. Hard-edged. Outrageously dressed, pierced and made-up. The idea of her presiding over the genteel court of Riverdale was ludicrous. Queen Verona would never accept this woman as the bride for her spoiled Prince Ruprecht.

Which, actually, was a good thing. Because there was no way Lucas could deliver Penny Mayfair into another man’s hands.

Not when he was determined to make her his own.
“Okay, let me get this straight,” Penny said after the stranger had finished his ridiculous explanation. “You say you represent my mother’s people? And that you have to take me back to her homeland to claim some old inheritance?”

The big, sexy man, whose glorious eyes appeared to have a hint of gold in them out here in the sunlight, nodded, unaffected by her obvious disbelief. “Exactly.”

Though her heart fluttered, Penny quickly stifled her excitement. Because things like this just didn’t happen to her. Life was never this easy, not in the real world. She hadn’t gone on a fruitless, two-year journey of exploration only to have some hot dude in a black leather jacket show up out of the blue to provide answers to all her questions.

“But you won’t tell me where you want to take me or what this inheritance is? Or even who, exactly, sent you to find me.”

“Correct.”

“And you think I’m going to say, ‘Okey-dokey,’ grab my stuff and blindly follow you to the ass end of nowhere.”

He cast a long glance at her, visually assessing her admittedly unusual clothes. For some reason, one corner of the sensual mouth pulled up a bit in what was probably his impersonation of a smile. “You don’t need to pack much. You should definitely come as you really are.”

He said it as if he didn’t mind her wardrobe, which Callie called her Witch-of-the-West look, completed by the ruby-red high-tops.

“You’re missing the point. The issue isn’t my packing.”

“It isn’t? What other issue is there?”

Oh, maybe just the little one that this total stranger thought she would instantly trust him and let him whisk her away to who-knew-where to do who-knew-what.

Well, okay, some of the who-knew-what might be good. But only if she decided she wanted that ‘what’.

“The issue is, you can’t show up here and expect me to follow you like a dumb sheep.”

Though following him would entail walking behind the man. And considering the way his faded jeans hugged those incredible thighs and lean hips, she honestly wouldn’t mind getting a look from—and at—the rear.

“I’m no shepherd,” he said, something gleaming in the depths of those eyes.

“More like the big bad wolf,” she muttered.

For some reason, he suddenly coughed, lifting his fist to his mouth as he turned his head to the side. Finally, after he’d cleared his throat, he said, “We don’t have much time, Princess. We have to go now.”

There he went with that stupid nickname again. She blew out a huffy breath, then curved her hand around one ear, tilting her head to the side. “What’s that? I think I hear something. Oh, yeah, it’s the nuthouse calling. They want you to bring back their straitjacket.”

He merely lifted a brow. The man seemed incapable of being provoked, as if, despite his dangerous looks, he really knew how to hold onto his temper. “What can I say to convince you?”

She hesitated, wanting to walk away, yet tempted—so damn tempted—to listen to what he had to say.

Part of her was dying to know more about who sent him. Her mother’s people? Meaning, people who’d actually known her mother, whom Penny couldn’t even remember? People who might be able to fill in the blanks of
her history—tell her why Penny had been able to find no record of her mother’s existence, not anywhere. Maybe explain why there was no proof of her parents’ marriage. No record of where her father had lived for a good ten years of his younger life. Why her own birth certificate hadn’t been filed until Penny had been three years old.

So many questions. No answers.

Until now?

Finally, taking a chance, she said, “All right. Here’s how you convince me. Tell me everything. Every single detail. Let me hear it and then I’ll decide if you’re crazy…or I’m crazier and actually believe you.”

He frowned. Instead of making him look forbidding, it just added to the whole super-hot-bad-boy thing he had going on.

“I can’t do that.”

Stabbed with disappointment, she immediately reached around him for the door handle. “Yeah, that’s what I thought you’d say.”

He refused to get out of the way. “You wouldn’t understand, not right now.”

“Look, Mr…. what is your name, anyway?”

“It’s Lucas Wolf.”

An appropriately tough one. Then she rolled her eyes. No wonder he’d reacted when she’d called him the big bad wolf. What was it, the name for words that sounded like what they were? Onomatopoeia? Yeah. That fit. His name definitely fit his whole big, bad self.

Besides, she’d bet he was a wolf as far as females were concerned. He sure had the looks for it, if not the flirtatious charm. Not that he probably needed to rely on charm or seduction. He was all tough, overpowering, alpha man who women flocked to like…well, like sheep.

Women often chose to settle down with nice guys. That didn’t mean they didn’t have fantasies about one last, wild fling with a dangerous, edgy man who was relentless in his pursuit. Many such females would probably have said, “When do we leave?” after hearing his proposition.

But not you.

No. Not her. Parts of her anatomy might already be packing her bags to follow him anywhere. But above the shoulders, she was firmly grounded in reality. She’d sown her wild oats. Big-time.

She’d also followed far too many promising trails that led only to disappointment. She was done with all that. No more expectations meant no more disappointments.

“Well, Mr. Wolf, you’re wasting your time. If you won’t give me any more information, then our conversation is finished. I need to get back to work.”

“Tell me you don’t want to come with me, that you’re not dying of curiosity.”

She hesitated, then finally lied. “I’m not.”

In truth, this tall, sexy stranger probably couldn’t have said anything that would have enticed her more. Still, the fact that he was a stranger—a dangerous-looking one—meant she couldn’t consider going along with what he was asking. Aside from not wanting to set herself up for yet another disappointment, her instincts about people could be wrong this time. For all she knew, he could be the son of the Son of Sam.

“Hello?” a muffled voice said. Someone knocked on the glass door behind Lucas, obviously wanting to exit.
“You should let those people out. And I have to go back in.”

“No.”

He put a hand on her arm, and everything...changed.

Sizzling heat and pure electric energy erupted at the spot where hand met arm. More, though, there was a strange sense of recognition. As if confirming that she knew him far better than she should after such a brief acquaintance.

There’d been interest from the very start. This was something different. Something much bigger.

Penny sucked in a slow, uneven breath, astounded by the rush of pleasure that came with the unexpected contact. Her loose, gauzy shirt was thin enough to feel the indentation of each strong finger, though he didn’t clench them. It didn’t hurt in any way, yet she felt almost branded by the fire of his touch.

Claimed.

As crazy as it sounded, she felt as if she was finally discovering who she really was, where she belonged. Just the pressure of his grasp, that hint of restrained power, affected her like no other touch she could remember.

It was disconcerting, unnerving. Good, but also too surprising to deal with on the spot.

Somehow, she managed to keep still, merely staring at him until he silently unhanded her, the reluctant gentleman inside winning out over the overpowering male.

Well, maybe not a gentleman. But a decent guy.

Stop it, you don’t know that. You can’t be sure!

Even after he’d let her go, their eyes remained locked, and confusion flashed briefly in his. As if he, too, had been taken by surprise by an instant rush of feelings.

“My apologies.” He stepped aside to let the customers out.

Penny frowned. His speech was so strange. He was rough-looking, but could also be polite, almost old-fashioned. He used normal words, yet once in a while something sounded off.

A family eased out, casting curious stares at Penny and the stranger before heading up the block. The second they were out of earshot, he put his hand on her again, clasping her shoulder with determination.

So much for thinking he’d decided to be a gentleman. She shivered, though whether it was because she was glad or worried, she honestly couldn’t say. “Didn’t you apologize for grabbing me?”

“No. I was apologizing for accosting you in front of the door where people could see.”

“And now what, it’s accost away?” Her words lacked anger. She didn’t feel a bit accosted. Just warm and tingly again.

“I have you alone and I need you to agree to come with me.”

She cast a pointed stare toward the windows. Lucas turned, blocking her view…and blocking her from view of those within.

“Say you’ll come.”

“And if I say no, are you gonna tie me up and toss me into a big bag, tough guy?”

His response flew out of his mouth so quickly, she didn’t believe he planned it. “If I were to tie you up,
Princess, I wouldn’t be tossing you anywhere but flat onto your back.”

Whoa. Penny swallowed hard, hearing the frustration in his voice, that note of bare, thin restraint. The cords of muscle in his neck flexed and he was breathing hard through obviously clenched teeth. Everything about him screamed at some supreme effort to remain in control.

She knew what he was trying to control. Oh, did she ever.

The man wanted her, and he’d been trying to keep himself from doing anything about it. When he’d touched her, he hadn’t been surprised by his reaction, but by the fact that she felt the same way.

Before, there had been attraction. Now there was pure hunger.

The claiming she’d sensed earlier hadn’t been about making demands of her…but of demanding her.

She knew that given half a chance, he would take her wildly. Passionately. He wanted to back her into the alley between the diner and the shop next door, yank her clothes out of the way and plunge into her, right up against the side of the building.

Or that’s what she wanted. Whatever.

It was instantaneous. Primal. Completely instinctive.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

Frowning, as if he didn’t like this thing that had sprung up between them, he said, “The man you’ve been waiting for.”

The man she’d been waiting for. Forever?

Her body reacted both to his visible lust and her own mental response. Even as Lucas dropped his hand again, as if already regretting being so blunt, Penny’s nipples tightened and swelled with need. They were super sensitive anyway, and now, at the thought of those big hands touching her and that hot mouth tasting her, all her nerve endings practically sat up and begged. She wanted to rip her own shirt off, to tweak and stroke, to gain some relief.

He noticed, his hot stare zoning in on the swell of her breasts. No way could he not see how he affected her. The want in those eyes made it seem for a second as though he could peer all the way through her clothes.

“Princess,” he groaned, low, cautionary. It was as if he was begging her to stop tormenting him.

Huh.

Him? She was the one who was suddenly being betrayed by her body. The one whose feminine impulses, so long dormant, had awakened with a vengeance.

She had to clench her thighs together to keep them from trembling and to try to contain the swelling of her rapidly moistening sex. That only served to tighten the pressure around her clit, which already throbbed with need.

Funny that she hadn’t even thought about sex in months. Now she suspected she wasn’t going to be able to stop thinking about it until she’d had it—with this man—at least a dozen times.

Her heart began to thud, her skin to prickle with anticipation. Each breath she drew was filled with his scent—earth and musk and sweat and man.

Lucas closed his eyes, visibly trying to regain his calm. He seemed deeply affected by the subtle changes in her body, each hidden sign of feminine desire. His deep breaths and the faint flare of his nostrils made her wonder if he could actually catch the aroma of arousal that seemed to permeate her every pore.

He shuddered slightly, licking his lips. As if he could taste her on the air. Which simply inflamed her all the more.
Are you insane? They were standing outside the diner, in broad daylight. Even if the people inside couldn’t see her, anybody walking up the street certainly could.

This crazy interlude—which was like having sex without a single intimate touch—needed to stop. Now. And she knew how to stop it. Sheer bravado had gotten her out of many tough scrapes.

“So, uh, do you have a thing for tying girls up, hotshot? Does that make you feel strong?” she finally asked, intentionally baiting him. Her tone wasn’t suggestive and there was no purr of invitation that said she wanted him to subdue her. Even though you do. She was all gruff, bitchy attitude, albeit her voice was a tiny bit weak and breathy.

“Only those who need to be,” he growled. “And the thought of having you held in place, forced to lie back and be pleasured, doesn’t make me strong, it makes me weak in the knees.”

Oh, shit. Talk about out of the frying pan. Her own knees knocked together and she wobbled, needing to stick a hand out to steady herself. That hand landed on a big, broad chest.

“Stop it,” she whispered. “This is crazy.”

“Trust me,” he urged.

“Trust you? I don’t even know you.”


She swallowed as he stepped closer. So close his boot slipped between her feet, his jean-covered leg sliding temptingly between her thighs. Hot and hard and so overwhelmingly male it was all she could do not to sink down and straddle him, ride him, use him to gain some much-needed release.

Gazing at the hint of skin revealed by the white shirt beneath his jacket, Penny’s mouth went dry. It had been a long time since she’d run her lips along a ridge of hard muscle or tasted salt-tinged male flesh.

That flesh was darkly tanned, the neck powerful with cords of muscle that met solid-granite shoulders. A hint of curly dark hair on his chest made her wonder how low it went, if it narrowed to a thin line down a flat, rippled stomach before disappearing into the waistband of his jeans.

“Please.”

For a second, she wasn’t sure if he’d whispered that word or she had.

Shaking her head hard, she forced her thoughts back where they needed to go. On the safe and normal present. Not on any wild, crazy adventures with Mr. Shagalicious Hotness.

“I can’t listen to this any longer. It’s crazy in there.”

Crazier out here.

He hesitated, glanced over his shoulder toward the restaurant full of angry, impatient customers. Sighing heavily, he narrowed his eyes and stepped away. “All right. We’ll talk after you’re finished work.”

She let out an unamused laugh. “I’m not going to be out of here until 10:00 p.m., at the earliest.”

His jaw, which looked even swar thirstier than it had twenty minutes ago inside, clenched. “Ten o’clock? At night?”

“That’s generally what 10:00 p.m. means.” Realizing she might have sounded as though she was asking him to wait for her, she quickly clarified, “That wasn’t an invitation to come in and wait.”

“I don’t intend to.”
So much for convincing her. Penny couldn’t help wondering why the abrupt comment stung a little. “Whatever,” she said, stepping around him and tugging the door open.

He cleared his throat before she could step inside. “Nights are…” He looked up into the sky and rubbed a hand against his jaw. A big, strong hand. That stubborn, hard jaw. “…not good.”

Funny. She sensed a night with this man could be very good.


“We don’t have much time, Penny.”

It was the first time he’d called her by her real name. Oh, it sounded nice from those lips. And a bit of her resolve melted.

But when she heard the clatter of crashing dishware, that resolve reformed and hardened. Inside, Callie stared helplessly at the floor. She’d dropped a tray filled with empty plates, probably unable to bear the weight.

“Damn,” Penny whispered, stabbed with guilt. “That’s it, we’re done.” Then without offering Lucas Wolf one last moment to try to change her mind, she strode inside and got back to work, determined to forget about the dark, mysterious man.
This was definitely going to be harder than he had expected.

Princess Penelope didn’t trust him. Considering Lucas had skimped on the details to make them somewhat more believable, he imagined she would run away screaming if he admitted where he really wanted to take her. Who she really was, who her mother had been. The whole, “There’s another world that everybody over here thinks is fiction, but really does exist,” issue.

She would have laughed in his face...even though she wanted him. Badly. Oh, he’d noticed. Her obvious lust for him had nearly driven him out of his mind.

He had never been so close to letting his primal urges wash over his human common sense than in those charged moments outside the diner. She couldn’t have been more inviting if she’d torn off her clothes and begged him to take her. Over. And over.

Heaven help him, he’d wanted to. Over. And over.

But even the hint of desire he’d shown had made things worse.

“You should have stayed all business,” he told himself as he rode on his Harley early that evening, having just turned around to head back to LeBeaux. He’d been cruising for hours, staying away from towns, not wanting to be around people. But the sky would soon darken. Even if his eyes hadn’t sensed the difference in the quality of the light through his sunglasses, he’d have known the sun would soon set. He could feel it in his blood. Feel the tug of the moon wanting to take over the sky.

If he were smart, he’d stay out until morning, not risk trying to appear normal. Because, when the moon was full, his normal was a little different from that of the people on either side of the border. Nothing drastic, not like the stories of ravaging predators. But he couldn’t deny that he looked, acted and felt a bit strange at certain times of the month.

It could be worse. He wasn’t, after all, a full-blooded member of the Wolf clan, since his mother had been a human from over here. Most other Wolves had far more noticeable traits.

Feeling a hum against his hip, he remembered the cellular phone he used when visiting these lands. He kept it with the Harley, clothes, money and false identification in a small abandoned shack near the border. Only one person knew the cell phone number.

He pulled over onto the shoulder, thrust a booted heel against the kickstand and cut the engine. Pulling the phone out of his pocket, he answered, not surprised when he heard his half-brother’s voice.

“So you are here.”

“How did you know?”

Hunter, to whom Lucas’s mother had given birth after she’d left Lucas and his father to return to her own world, laughed softly. “I always call when the moon’s full on the chance you crossed over while you could.”

“Why?”
“Well, you might have a dozen half-brothers over on your side of the divide, but you are all I’ve got.”

“Don’t you have a mate now?” Lucas chuckled, knowing how to get under his brother’s skin. “A very attractive one as I recall.”

“Don’t think I’ll ever forget that you’ve seen her naked.”

“Oh, I won’t let you forget, I promise you,” Lucas replied, well remembering the day he’d climbed into bed with a sleeping woman who’d thought he was his brother.

At the time, Hunter had been tracking him, trying to capture Lucas for crimes he’d thought he had committed. Capturing the woman had seemed the simplest way to get his brother to stop trying to kill him long enough to listen to the truth.

“If and when the day comes that you settle down, I might have to pay you back. Unless you end up with a real…dog.”

Hunter snickered, and Lucas rolled his eyes. “With such wit, you should be on that box for fools that everyone over here seems to be in love with. I can see you fitting in with the people on one of those, what are they called, reality shows?”

“One TV show about a bounty hunter is all the world needs.”

“I was thinking of the one where people with no singing ability perform in front of ridiculing judges. You’re a natural.”

“F. U.”

Lucas glanced at the sky. “I need to go.”

“Are you anywhere nearby? Want to meet up for a beer?”

Startled, since his relationship with Hunter had always been more of a long-distance one, both physically and emotionally, he replied, “Sorry. Nowhere near New Orleans.”

“Too bad. Scarlett would like to get to know you. One of these days, you need to stick around between full moons. I’d like to see you, but I’d prefer not to do it at that time of the month when you’re, you know, PMSing.”

“What’s PM—” He heard his brother laugh. “Never mind.”

After finishing the call, he again checked the western sky, noting the sun had dropped further toward the horizon. He was hours from LeBeaux. Riding under the stars with the powerful engine between his legs and the wind whipping through his hair was one of his favorite things to do over here.

So ride all night. Go back to see her in the morning.

The idea had merit, and probably made sense. Given his mood, not to mention his instantaneous reaction to her, he should steer clear until sunrise. All those dark, hungry urges he’d been so unsuccessful in hiding from her this morning would be more powerful tonight.

But an inner instinct wouldn’t let him stay away. He didn’t know why, but he had the sense that something was wrong. Maybe even dangerous. And Lucas trusted his sixth sense, he always had. He felt compelled to go back to that dusty, dour little town. Back to her. Not tomorrow. Tonight.

He set off again, mentally deciding on a plan. He’d lay low, near her house, keeping an eye out for whatever danger he sensed was coming. Then he’d approach her first thing in the morning.

He had one more day to convince her. After that, the border crossing would be too thick to traverse. He’d have
to go home, wait until the next full moon approached, then come back and try again. No way would he consider spending a full month over here.

Queen Verona, however, wasn’t the patient type. And while he had no intention of allowing Penny to marry that idiot Ruprecht, he still intended to fulfill the contract by bringing her back to her homeland. But he didn’t entirely trust Verona not to renege on the deal if she had a month to think about it.

No, he couldn’t wait a month. He simply had to convince the princess to come with him.

*Or just take her.*

If he did that, however, he couldn’t guarantee they’d end up at the castle. Because taking her by force was one step from claiming her altogether. His deepest impulses already screamed for him to carry her to his cabin, lock them both inside and have her until she acknowledged what he already knew.

That she was his. Penny Mayfair, that beautiful, wild-haired, wild child, was the woman he wanted.

He still couldn’t quite believe it, even though he’d always been told it would happen. That someday, he would meet a female he couldn’t do without. Like others of his kind, he would know her and would do anything to have her.

It had nothing to do with love. It was simply the way he and those like him were made. Some believed every body contained only half a soul, that mates were simply the soul’s recognition of their other halves. Lucas had no idea whether that was true. He only knew he’d seen her, and he’d wanted her. Forever.

It was that simple.

There were a few sticky problems, however. He would be escorting her back to the homeland to be inspected for marriage. Oh, he knew Queen Verona would not allow Penny to wed her precious son. Lucas could deliver her, wait for the five minutes it took for the queen to faint in horror, then escort Penny out of the castle. Having completed the job he was hired to do, he would collect his payment—both gold and deed to some land the queen had offered to sweeten the deal—on his way out the door.

Afterward? Anything. First, he’d take her on a trip throughout the land she’d been denied since childhood. Something told him she was going to like that world. Perhaps it was the rebelliousness she exhibited here, where she thought she was supposed to be, that told him she was unhappy. Or maybe it was simply a recognition of someone who, like him, was never entirely sure where she belonged. Part of one world, part of another.

*She might not stay.*

His mother hadn’t been able to stand being away from her old life. She’d chosen it over her Wolf husband. And Lucas.

But Penny was different. She had been born over there. Elatyria was her home. Her birthright.

*What if she decides to claim the rest of her birthright?*

It was possible. She might decide to pursue her throne. The idea that a Wolf could end up with the Queen of Riverdale was almost as ridiculous as seeing Penny in the arms of that weak-kneed Ruprecht. But he’d deal with that when it happened.

The churning thoughts filled the trip back to LeBeaux, and by the time Lucas reached Penny’s hometown, darkness had fully descended. Each hour had brought the full moon—that enormous full moon—higher in the sky. The night wasn’t entirely clear and the white-gold orb was occasionally blocked by swathes of misty clouds as long and silky as great sheets of black cloth. Whenever its light was extinguished, he felt the loss on every inch of his skin, each strand of his hair, right down to his core.

Just as everything else was bigger over here, including time itself, the moon seemed double its usual size. It
consumed half the heavens, quietly powerful and mysterious, a silent answer to his own body’s cry for recognition.

Maybe this world wasn’t all bad.

Though he knew the princess’s address, instead of heading to her house, which he’d located this morning, he swung by the diner. Smart move, as it turned out. A quick glance confirmed she was closing the empty restaurant for the night.

“Long day, your majesty?” he murmured, watching from up the block as she and an older woman stood chatting outside. They were both softly silhouetted beneath a streetlight on the corner.

All the other shops around them were closed and dark. That wasn’t surprising, given the hour. This area of town boasted mostly small, dusty businesses and a few residences. The two people in front of the diner were the only ones in sight.

But they weren’t alone. Oh, no. A predator was in the vicinity.

Lucas wasn’t referring to himself.

He tensed, his heart pounding within his chest. Though his breaths remained even, they deepened, filling his lungs as if in preparation for some fierce exertion. Beneath his taut skin, his muscles tightened and flexed, instinctively readying for conflict. His fingers clenched tightly around the handlebars of his Harley, until the thick pads dug into his palms. He released them and curled his hands into two tight fists.

Why? What is it? What’s wrong?

He remained still, so still. His acute hearing picked up the soft murmur of the women’s voices. He heard nothing else.

It didn’t matter. He sensed the presence. Hell, maybe he just smelled something dark, ugly and malevolent.

He slowly stepped off the bike, moving silently into the shadow of a nearby shop. He walked lightly, not wanting even the sound of the heels of his boots hitting the sidewalk to betray his proximity. Then, tucked safely out of sight, he froze, remaining motionless. Waiting.

Their conversation carried to his hypersensitive ears.

“Goodnight, Penny. Thanks again for working a double shift. Sorry you couldn’t run off with that sexy guy this morning.”

“Run off?” Penny said with a grunt. “You have no idea.”

“Well, if you get the chance again, you go for it,” the other woman said, reaching out and touching Penny with what appeared to be a tender hand. “I know you haven’t been happy since you came back here. As much as I love having you around, please don’t feel like you need to stay because of me.”

“Here’s as good as anywhere,” Penny replied, sounding wistful, resigned. Which merely cemented what he already suspected about her feelings for her homeland.

You don’t belong.

“Besides, you’re here.” Though it didn’t seem like something that came naturally to her, Penny put her arms around the other woman’s shoulders and hugged. She just as quickly stepped back. “And you need me. Who else is going to haul your butt out of the fire when Gina calls in sick?”

“She’s going to have to grow up one of these days.”

The princess smiled. She looked younger now, softer in the darkness without the sun spotlighting the thick,
unnatural makeup. “Keep dreaming.”

The women exchanged goodnights, then separated, heading in different directions. As she walked, Penny rubbed the back of her neck with one slim hand. The slump in her shoulders and the trudge of her feet told him she was exhausted. Not paying close enough attention to her surroundings.

Obviously she didn’t notice him, though he felt sure his heated stare must be burning her from a block away.

Knowing the danger was directed at Penny, not at her coworker, who’d walked off the other way, Lucas followed the princess. He remained on the opposite side of the street, hugging the buildings and the shadows and the silence. At one with the night.

As she left the puddle of light from the streetlamp behind her, Penny was completely swallowed by darkness. The next streetlight wasn’t working.

Coincidence? Possible. But he doubted it.

The full moon played a game of hide-and-seek with the thick clouds that had followed him steadily from the west, so even it wasn’t able to provide much illumination. Yet he saw her, heard the soft scrape of her rubber-soled shoes on the sidewalk. If he stood still and concentrated all his attention on it, he thought he might even be able to hear the beating of her heart.

He also smelled the light, flowery scent—feminine, and at odds with her tough-girl appearance—wafting from her skin. Just as he’d smelled the wanton need arising from her this morning.

She lived a few streets away and apparently assumed this town was a safe one. She seemed fearless as she walked home, alone, late at night, without a care in the world beyond the pain in her tired feet and aching arms.

You’re not safe. The words screamed in his head yet didn’t emerge from his vocal cords.

A second later, he was proved right. He spotted a movement in the shadows ahead of her. Five, seven paces, no more.

The danger. The presence he’d sensed stalking her waited directly in Penny’s path.

Lucas didn’t think, didn’t shout, didn’t do anything except run, silent, furious, afraid for her. His feet nearly flew over the street even as rage clouded his vision and grabbed him in its blind, ruthless grip.

But he didn’t make it. Even at his fastest, he still wasn’t quick enough to stop Penny from being grabbed and violently hurled to the ground.

IT HAD BEEN one long, miserable day. Nonstop customers and nonstop drama had led to a nonstop headache. By the time ten o’clock had rolled around, Penny had wanted nothing more than a steamy-hot shower and an icy-cold beer, both of which awaited her at her small house a few blocks away.

The attack came out of nowhere. She had been oblivious to any threat. Entirely comfortable back here in LeBeaux, she hadn’t foreseen the dangers she would have routinely guarded against in New York or Chicago. She had simply meandered into the path of trouble. And between one step and the next, she found it.

“No,” she cried as a dark shape hurtled from between two buildings, launching itself at her. Her assailant tackled her to the ground. She cried out as her shoulder hit the cement hard and his big form hit her even harder, covering her, pinning her.

He grabbed a fistful of her short hair and twisted, slamming her head down. Pain rocketed through her, but she didn’t waste any breath trying to scream. Instead, she reacted instinctively. Operating purely on adrenaline, she fought back as if her life depended on it.
Which it might.

“Let me go!” Penny curved her fingers into talons and tried to rake her attacker’s face, which she couldn’t make out in the darkness. Drawing her knee up as quickly as she could, she aimed for his groin, knowing she’d hit home when he grunted in pain.

“Bitch,” he said in a hoarse whisper, obviously trying to disguise his voice. But it didn’t matter. The reek of booze and the rank smell of his breath told her immediately who had attacked her. It was Frank, the grabby oilfield roughneck who’d come in with Eddie this morning. He obviously hadn’t gone back out into the field, instead lurking here, lying in wait to finish what he’d started this morning.

“Let me go.” She tried to wriggle away, hoping she’d hurt him enough to gain a few seconds head start, but his fingers clenched painfully around her arms.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“No, but you are,” someone else snarled. Frank was lifted off her with abrupt, brute force. “You’re a dead man!”

Penny rolled out of the way, looking up in time to catch a glimpse of a familiar profile.

Lucas Wolf. The stranger who had so affected her this morning had come to her rescue, grabbing her attacker by the throat. He shook the man, holding onto the front of a flannel shirt and slamming his fist into the bastard’s face. Frank had been caught by surprise, but quickly regained himself. He tried to fight back, swinging wildly, something glittering in his hand.

“Watch out, I think he has a knife,” she called.

Another blow from Lucas’s fist and the glittering thing went flying to shatter against the ground. Broken glass.

A car exited a nearby alley, briefly illuminating the scene in its harsh headlights. Just a flash, then it was gone, speeding away.

But that quick glimpse was enough to stop Penny’s heart. Given what she saw in that flash of headlights, she had to remind herself to breathe, not believing what her eyes were telling her.

It had to have been a reflection of the car’s hazard lights that made Lucas’s eyes glow red. Or else she’d taken a harder blow to the head than she’d thought.

But there was one thing she wasn’t imagining. Lucas’s long, thick hair hung down around his face, which was grizzled and dark with a new-grown beard. And his lips were pulled back in a grimace, revealing sharp, white teeth as he audibly growled at the man with whom he fought. His expression defined fury.

The encounter was over within another minute. Despite landing a punch on Lucas’s face, Frank soon realized he was far outmatched, dealing with an opponent who looked driven by pure bloodlust. After a blow sent Frank spinning several feet, he took advantage of the distance and took off at a dead run.

Lucas took a step, hunched forward, his powerful body leaning as if he planned to run the other man down like a hunter after fleeing prey. Then he hesitated and looked back at her.

Penny was still on the ground. A little dazed, a lot stunned. And she’d probably have one hell of a headache tomorrow. Not from the blow to the head, but because she intended to go home and have a few shots of tequila to wipe out the crazy thoughts that had been going through her mind for the past few minutes.

Thoughts about those reddish eyes and that snarl on his face. The way Lucas Wolf had looked almost feral. The long, wild hair. But the strangest thought of all? That she wasn’t afraid. Not for herself, anyway.

Lucas’s rage seemed to ease as he let the stranger go and hunched down beside her. “Are you all right?” he
asked, his tone gruff, yet laced with concern.

Penny simply stared.

“Princess?”

“Jeez, would you lay off the Princess stuff? Call me Penny, okay?” Realizing she sounded like a flaming bitch, not exactly the appropriate reaction to someone who’d probably saved her from a serious assault, she closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m a little shaken up.”

He didn’t give her a moment’s warning before he scooped her up into his arms, rising to his feet and cradling her against his chest. He acted as though she weighed no more than a baby.

“Hey, what are you…"

“The hospital or your house?”

She stared up at that rugged face, but couldn’t see him well in the darkness. She wanted to glimpse the gold in those brown eyes, and a ghost of a smile on his sensual mouth. But the eyes shone black in the night and his mouth was compressed and hard. Despite the care he was taking of her, anger still enveloped the man.

“Penny? Do you need me to take you to the hospital?”

Finally realizing he was waiting for her to make a decision, she shook her head once.

“What about your head?”

“It’s okay,” she mumbled, lifting a hand to touch the small lump already rising behind her ear. Her fingers came away flecked with a small amount of moisture. Blood. Oh God.

Her head started to spin. She hated the sight of blood. Hated the smell of it. The feel of it. Hated anything to do with it. It was her one weakness.

And suddenly, like some vapid heroine in an old movie, her eyes drifted closed and she felt herself sag heavier in his arms. She came within a breath of fainting, but somehow, when he clutched her even tighter and she felt the strong, steady, reassuring beat of his heart, she didn’t do it.

“Hospital,” he snapped.

“No, it’s fine,” she insisted. “I’m not badly hurt. Just a little stunned.” The fact that she hadn’t eaten a thing today didn’t help.

Nor did the thought that she’d seen this man’s eyes glowing red a few minutes ago.

She swallowed. “The truth is, I get really woozy at the sight of blood.”

“Then you’d better close your eyes again,” he muttered.

But he didn’t say it soon enough. The moon peeked out from behind a cloud, and she suddenly got a better look at the man holding her so carefully in his massive arms. At the abrasions on one cheek. At the trail of blood dripping freely from the cheekbone down, likely nicked by broken glass.

This time, there was no stopping it. Darkness clouded her vision and that sense of dizziness she’d been fighting washed over her completely. It took away thought and fear and reason.

And consciousness.
ONE OF THE FIRST things he was going to do once Princess Penelope regained consciousness was lecture her about her security. Even with her in his arms, his single kick had busted the flimsy lock on her front door. Prowling around the house—after he’d lain her on her bed—he’d found the window in the bathroom unlocked. Not that her window locks were of much use, anyway.

She didn’t have a single weapon, as far as he could tell. If she had to defend herself, the best she could do was to grab one of the dusty, unused frying pans from the kitchen.

“Do you have any sense of self-preservation?” he asked her still form.

Lucas glanced toward the bed, then back into her bathroom mirror as he scraped a flimsy plastic razor over his cheek. It wouldn’t do for long, given the full moon, but he didn’t want to scare the woman to death the minute she opened her eyes and noticed that his beard had grown a couple of inches from this morning. A half inch of that since he’d rescued her.

Adrenaline, the chase, the fight…they sped things up.

“If he had been smarter, the bastard could have been here, inside, waiting for you to get home.”

The thought made that roiling surge of anger rise in him again, but he quickly shoved it away. He’d deal with the attacker later. Lucas had his scent. The man wouldn’t be able to hide from Lucas’s rage no matter which side of the border he was on.

“What?” she whispered.

“Finally.” Dropping the razor, he approached the bed. As he stared down at her, he noted the color in her cheeks. When he’d wet a cloth to clean her cut, he’d also taken a minute to wash all the makeup—not to mention dirt and gravel—off her face.

She was, as he’d expected, beyond beautiful.

He wondered if she even realized it. If the clothes, the makeup, the attitude, were all because she didn’t care how she looked, or because she did care and didn’t want anyone else to realize how striking she truly was.

He suspected the latter. She’d been hiding in plain sight.

He wondered if she even realized it. If the clothes, the makeup, the attitude, were all because she didn’t care how she looked, or because she did care and didn’t want anyone else to realize how striking she truly was.

She blinked a few times. “How long have I been out?”

“Minutes. Ten at most.”

She shifted and slowly sat up, looking at him with frank disbelief. “And in ten minutes, you carried me three blocks home, broke into my house, put me to bed, then had time for a shave?”

He answered with a shrug. Because, yes, that’s what had happened. Her slight weight hadn’t slowed him down.

Penny continued to stare up at him. The confusion slowly left her face, and color entered as her gaze grew more intimate. She parted her lips to breathe and the pulse in her throat, which he could see—and almost hear—fluttered.
God, the woman really needed to learn how to hide what she was thinking. Considering he was trying like hell to keep his own secrets, knowing how much she wanted him didn’t help.

Later. Want me later. When I don’t have to be strong enough to resist you. He had to be strong now. Not only because he still had a job to do—bringing her home—but because he couldn’t take what the woman was offering until she understood exactly who she was offering it to.

She wasn’t entirely happy about it either. Her small jaw stiffened, as if she needed to imbue herself with resolve. “I can’t believe you used my razor.”

He shrugged. “I’m not worried about using something that has come in contact with your legs.” Far, far from it.

More of that color appeared, more of that confusion. More of that feisty attitude. “Yeah, well, how do you know my legs are all I use it on? Huh? Maybe I use it somewhere a whole lot more intimate than that.”

He considered her words for a moment, then realized what she meant. This time, he was sure his face filled with color, so hot was the explosion that rocked through him. His heart was definitely beating harder, his breaths thick, each one tasting like her.

“That I’d like to see,” he admitted before he could stop himself. He’d heard of women over here sporting that smooth, shorn look, but he’d never actually seen it himself. The trend might eventually make its way over to Elatrya—with the number of travelers back and forth between the lands on the rise, some other customs were certainly making their way across.

Frankly, he could have done without ever seeing a gnome with a one-inch ear gauge.

She sputtered, rising from the bed. “I was kidding.”

Shoving away a flash of disappointment, he insisted, “You don’t have to get up to defend yourself from me. I wasn’t about to rip your clothes off to see if you were telling the truth.”

Those lavender eyes hadn’t darkened with fright; she didn’t fear him. Which was good, she didn’t need to. Although how she could know that, he couldn’t say. He wondered if she felt it too, the instant connection. The certainty that they were supposed to be together. It went beyond mere wanting. Though, right now, mere wanting was pretty powerful in and of itself.

“I’m sorry, I’m being a shrew. You bring out the beast in me for some reason.”

Mutual.

“You saved me from something pretty awful tonight.”

He frowned at the thought. “He won’t get away with it.”

“I know. I’ll contact the sheriff in the morning. But I doubt he’s anywhere near here. He probably won’t stop running until he hits the Gulf of Mexico.”

“He can run as far as he wants to,” he muttered.

“Anyway, thank you, Lucas. For saving me, for bringing me back here, taking care of me.” She moved closer, the soft smell of her perfume filling every molecule of air between them.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, his voice just as low.

He didn’t know what she intended. At least, not until she rose on tiptoe and leaned toward his face. Saying nothing, she brushed her soft lips across his in a touch as fleeting as a caress from a summer breeze.

Lucas gritted his teeth and steeled his will. Fisting his hands by his sides, he used every ounce of his power to
remain still, not grab her in his arms and kiss her with all the deep hunger he’d felt for her since the moment he’d seen her.

“Why did you do that?” he asked, his throat tight.

He expected to hear a stammering response—*It was a thank-you kiss, an expression of my gratitude.* Instead, he got pure honesty. Pure Penny.

“I wanted to.”

Some deep-rooted masochistic gene made him growl, “Do you want to again?”

She nodded once. “Yeah. A lot.”

With a groan, Lucas gave up all resistance. The invisible restraints that had seemed to bind him erupted in an explosion of pure hunger. He wrapped one arm around her waist, cupping her chin in the other hand. Dragging her up, he bent to meet her, and their lips crashed together and parted.

As Penny’s warm tongue thrust against his in deep, hungry tastes, he swallowed down the wild, untamed flavor of her. He tilted her head to one side, his to the other, needing to go deeper, wanting to devour her whole, from the inside out.

They kissed deeply, paused to gasp for air, kissed again. Penny pressed against him, her soft body molding against his. He couldn’t stop himself from lowering his hand, brushing it down her neck.

“Oh, please, keep touching me,” she whispered against his lips, arching up toward his fingers.

As if he could stop. Lucas slid his hand down, determined to be careful, not to hurt her the way he knew he could, especially at this time of the month. When he wanted to be…wild.

Brushing the soft curve of one breast, he let his thumb slide down over its taut tip, which thrust provocatively against the filmy shirt.

She hissed when he reached his prize and plucked at it.

“Oh, God, yes.”

He kissed her deeply again, sucking her tongue into his mouth, imitating what he wanted to do to her nipple. And her sensitive clit, which he was dying to see, touch, taste.

She didn’t have to beg him to give her what she wanted. He knew by her tiny whimpers, the cries in her throat. Without thought, without planning, he tugged the fabric up, lifting his mouth from hers just far enough to pull the shirt all the way off her. Then he touched her again, feeling warm, puckered flesh.

Plus something else.

“What the…” he muttered, looking at the beautiful breast in his hand. Perfectly formed, pert and lush. And *bejewelled.*

“What the hell have you done to yourself, woman?” he asked, somehow pushing the words out of a throat that felt too tight to keep bringing necessary air into his lungs. Because while part of him wanted to spank her for marring her perfect body so painfully, another part was sure he’d never seen anything as wickedly erotic in his life.

Two pretty silver rings hung from the tips of Penny Mayfair’s breasts. The Princess of Riverdale had pierced her nipples. But from her rapturous cries as she thrust harder against his hand and ground her groin against him, pain was the *last* thing she was thinking about. Which meant she had done it for her own pleasure. She liked the sensations it wrought.
Her fingers twined in his long hair, tugging him down her body. Lucas could no more refuse than a starving beggar could turn his back on a feast. He pushed her back onto the bed, dropped to kneel between her legs, and buried his face in her bare stomach. Licking, biting lightly, he worked his way up, rubbing his cheek against the under-curve of one breast. He again ordered himself to be careful, to go slowly and not hurt her, even though a primal need urged him to be rough and hard. Fast and demanding.

He managed to keep himself under control, although he didn’t know how. Nor could he say for how long he’d be able to, either.

“Please, do it!” she ordered, sounding frantic as she tugged at his hair and arched toward his mouth.

Patience was a virtue, but his was never strong when the moon was full. He groaned before moving his lips to one perfect tip, covering it, sucking hard, swirling his tongue around the pretty silver ring. He tasted warm metal and warmer, sweet skin.

“Yes,” she said with a deep sigh.

While tasting one, he plucked the ring on the other breast with his fingers. She hissed when he increased the pressure, tightening her fingers in his hair to keep him where she wanted him, urging him to suck deeper, to tweak harder. Her legs twined around his waist, the core of her landing unerringly on the long ridge of his rock-hard cock. She instinctively thrust toward him.

Lucas groaned and thrust back, taunting them both. The musky, feminine smell of her overwhelmed his senses. He had to close his eyes and breathe her in, memorizing her scent, imprinting it on his brain and in every cell of his body.

“More. Give me more, Lucas.”

He wanted to. God, did he want to. But as he opened his eyes and saw his own dark, swarthy hand against her pale skin, already reddened under his aggressive touch, something—some strong, deep instinct—made him stop. He couldn’t take her until she knew. Couldn’t claim her fully until she was aware of how much of herself she was giving.

All of herself. Forever.

With strength he didn’t know he had, Lucas pulled back, thrust a frustrated hand through his hair, then rose to his feet. “I didn’t come here to get some kind of payback.” He staggered away, watching as she gasped for breath and slowly brought herself back under control. “You were unconscious not long ago.”

It took a full minute, then, finally, her voice shaking, she said, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” Not meeting his eyes, she grabbed her top and pulled it back on, covering that beautiful body.

Good. He didn’t know if he could have kept up his resolve for another minute if she hadn’t.

“I’m not the type to go around jumping on strangers.”

“We’re not strangers.”

She didn’t respond, not trying to argue. How could she? Something inside her had to be reaching out, responding to her heart’s instinctive knowledge that he was part of her world—her real world, the one she’d been denied since childhood.

She’d recognized him, known him, at first sight, too. Now that she’d been in his arms, there could no longer be any doubt.

“You’re hurt,” he explained gruffly, seeing that she was shaken by his decision not to take what she had offered.
“I’m okay, really,” she said, a forced smile appearing on her mouth as she tried to put things back on more normal footing. She was good at it, hiding her reactions, any hurt feelings. Queenly, in fact, in how easily she moved past the moment and brought the temperature back from blazing to merely burning. “A kiss of gratitude, that’s all it was.”

“Sure.” Uh-huh. Right.

She flushed, then squared her shoulders and changed the subject. “So, is playing hero part of your job description?”

“I’m no hero. And you’re not going to be as appreciative when you see that I kicked in your front door.”

Surprisingly, she laughed. “There’s a key under the mat.”

“What are you determined to be attacked?”

“I can…”

“Take care of yourself. Yeah, I know.”

She hesitated. “Except tonight. So thanks again,” she said with a simple nod. Again, he caught a flash of her bloodline in the grace of the gesture, the way she held herself.

He admired that. But what he wanted was the wild woman who’d been writhing beneath him a few minutes ago. Not a princess, but a female in heat, at the mercy of her own hunger.

Lucas gritted his teeth, thrusting the images out of his head. Not only did he have a job to do, the woman had just been violently attacked. “Are you sure you’re all right?” he finally managed to ask. “Your head, is it paining you?”

“A little, but I’ll take a couple of ibuprofen.”

Brushing past him to the bathroom, she opened a mirrored cabinet and removed a small bottle. Her gaze passed briefly over a blood-tinged washcloth and she swayed on her feet.

Lucas crossed the room in an instant and steadied her with a hand on the small of her back.

“God you’re fast!”

“You’re still dizzy.”

“It really wasn’t the bump that conked me out. I’ve had a major thing with blood for as long as I can remember. Just can’t handle it—I tried to donate at a Red Cross blood drive once in high school and fainted in front of half the school.”

She spilled two tablets from the bottle, popping them into her mouth. Then the wicked wench bent completely over the sink, spooning water between her lips.

Wanton images flooded his brain. Was she trying to kill him? That deep, mind-numbing kiss, the wicked eroticism of her body, her passionate response, now a provocative position designed to drive him wild? If not for the leggings she wore, it would be so easy to slide the skirt up, grab her hips, and thrust into her from behind until they both howled with pleasure.

She seemed oblivious, straightening and continuing with her conversation. “I guess I used to be pretty clumsy. My Dad told me I fell out of a window and almost killed myself when I was a toddler. I’ve had a problem with blood ever since.”

Focus.
“Where is your father, Penny?” he asked, never having gotten an answer from her earlier today.

“He died almost three years ago.” She waved toward the table beside the bed, on which stood a framed image of a younger Penny with a smiling, middle-aged man. “There’s a picture.”

“He died before you turned twenty-one?”

“A few days before.”

“It all makes sense now.”

One angry brow shot up. “Makes sense that my father died of a heart attack before he was even fifty years old?”

“No, no. I mean, it makes sense now that he didn’t bring you to your mother’s people. He wasn’t alive to keep his promise.”

“Don’t go there again, please. Not right now.”

“All right. But we have to talk about it.”

Penny shoved a hand through her short hair, which had lost most of its jagged spikiness and fallen into short curls around her face. Everything about her, from her appearance to her mood, even the tone of her voice, had grown softer. More vulnerable.

“I miss him every day,” she admitted, glancing again at the photograph.

“I’m sure you do.”

He understood such grief. The loss of his sister had left a hole in him that he didn’t think would ever be refilled.

Still introspective, Penny tilted her head, glancing toward a shelf on the wall above the bed. On it sat a sizeable box wrapped in pretty paper, with a large bow on the top. The paper was faded, the bow dusty. The gift had remained unopened for quite some time.

“From him?”

She nodded. “Callie, my Dad’s girlfriend, gave it to me when I came back to town a few months ago. He’d had some stuff stored in her garage and she found it after I’d left to go...traveling. He must have stashed it there in case I went snooping around our place.”

“Why didn’t you open it?”

Her moist eyes tugged at his heart. “It hurt too much. Opening it seemed like the final step in admitting he’s gone.”

“I see.”

She managed a weak smile. “Anyway, I turn twenty-four in two weeks. I figured I’d hold out until then. It’ll be one last present from my dad on my actual birthday.”

She deliberately turned her back on the shelf, the photograph, the sad thoughts. “Look, I owe you big-time. And I have decided you’re not a serial killer, because you could have taken me out while I was unconscious a few minutes ago.”

“Thanks. I’d hate to think you go around inviting serial killers to kiss your pretty nipples.”

Color rose in her cheeks. “The point is, I will let you spill whatever it is you came here to say to me. But it’s late, and I’ve had a long day. Right now, all I can think about is taking a hot shower and eating food that doesn’t
include gravy, breading or old grease.”

Though his stomach rumbled at the reminder that he had not had a meal since he left home, her words made him grateful he hadn’t ordered anything at the diner. “You have eaten nothing all day?”

“I serve that food, I don’t actually consume it.”

Nodding, he gestured toward her shower, squelching the image of her standing inside it, naked, steamy streams of water gushing over her beautiful body—making those little silver hoops glisten and shimmer. “Take your shower and I’ll make us a meal.”

“Us?” One delicate brow arched over her eye. “You’re inviting yourself to dinner?”

“It’s the least you can do,” he pointed out.

A small frown appeared, but she made no saucy comeback. Nor did she order him to leave. Nodding once, she said, “Deal. There’s tons of produce in the fridge. I am dying for a salad.”

He grimaced. Lucas was dying for a big, so-rare-it-was-almost-mooing steak.

“I’ll be done in a few minutes, okay?”

“Fine.”

Or lamb chops. Mmm.

She probably saw a quick flash of hunger on his face. Though, he’d been trying to hide such a look since the moment he’d laid eyes on her, so it shouldn’t have showed. “Just make enough for both of us. I’m starving.”

“I don’t do salad.”

“Big bad wolf must have meat, huh?”

He let out a surprised bark of laughter, unable to help it. Damn, the woman had no idea what she was into here. Had no clue that being this close to her, especially now, with the fullness of the moon right outside, was filling his head with strange, dark, frenzied fantasies. Hunger. More intense than his need for food.

He didn’t want to hurt her, wouldn’t harm a hair on her head. He just wanted to devour her in the most sexual way possible.

He couldn’t stay here much longer. In fact, he should have left already, hidden nearby to watch over her for the rest of the night. That coward who’d accosted her probably wasn’t fool enough to stick around, but there was no telling.

But he didn’t want to leave yet. Her spirit was coming back, she was returning to her normal, feisty self. He wanted more time with her. “Actually,” he finally replied, “I could go for a steak. A very rare one.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Well, good luck with that. Because every store around here is closed.” She put her hands on his chest and pushed him out of her bedroom with a smirk. Just before closing the door in his face, she added, “And I’m a vegetarian.”
“GOOD GRIEF, he must have a beard made out of steel wool!”

Wrapped in a towel, Penny stared down at her bare legs, which were flecked with pieces of tissue. The flecks had once been snow-white, but were now turning red as blood soaked through. She steeled herself against the queasiness and looked away. *Tiny flecks, that’s all. You’ve nicked your legs before.*

But not usually a dozen times at once.

She had been out of replacement blades for the razor. Since she’d only used the blade once before today, however, and hadn’t figured Lucas Wolf’s sexy face could do too much damage to it, she’d included a quick shave with her shower.

Bad move. She looked as though she’d lost a fight with a vengeful kindergartener armed with a sharp stick.

She should have ignored the feminine vanity and skipped the process. It wasn’t like he was going to get close to her calves or thighs, anyway. He’d had his shot and hadn’t taken it.

*Maybe he will if you don’t take no for an answer this time!*

She ignored the salacious inner voice that had sounded like Angie, a tattoo artist she’d met and befriended in Detroit. The woman had talked Penny into doing some crazy things.

“Forget it, he turned you down,” she reminded herself as she went into her room to grab some clothes. And she couldn’t take another rejection. Not when she wanted him so badly.

Thinking about it, though, she realized he hadn’t looked happy about stopping. In fact, he’d acted like someone had started pulling his fingernails out. So maybe he was being the gentleman who she suspected lurked within that big, sexy body.

Penny donned a Metallica T-shirt and another loose, elastic-waist skirt that wouldn’t brush up against the nicks. Giving her head a shake, she ran her fingers through her wet hair—one definite advantage of such a short do.

As she left her bedroom, she cast a quick glance toward the wrapped box on the shelf and was stabbed with the same mix of emotions she always felt when she looked at it. Amusement, grief, happiness, regret, love. Such love. Then she left her bedroom.

True to his word, Lucas had begun preparing them a late-night dinner. She entered the kitchen and found him frowning down at the stove, where something sizzled in a frying pan she hadn’t used once in the past nine months.

Yuck. “I said I didn’t want any fried….” Her voice trailed off and she came to a sudden stop as he looked over at her.

She’d been in the shower maybe fifteen minutes. Twenty tops. And yet he looked so different. “You must have more testosterone than an entire major league football team!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I massacred my legs with the razor you used, and here you are, looking like you need to use it again.”
He glanced away. “Did you use it anyplace else?”

Wicked man. Trying to change the subject. As if he couldn’t have found out for himself a little while ago, anyway. She’d been so turned on he could have stripped her naked and done her out in the street and she wouldn’t have objected.

Damn the man for starting something and not finishing it.

You started it.

Well, there was that.

“Perhaps the blade was dull to begin with,” he added. “That must be why it wasn’t effective for either of us.”

Funny, she seemed to recall lying on the bed, looking up at him during their previous conversation about where she’d used the razor. And thinking how nice those smooth cheeks might feel on the inside of her thighs if he made good on his threat to tear off her clothes and see for himself.

Then, when she’d kissed him, touched his face, felt him scrape his cheek against her incredibly sensitive nipple, there’d been the tiniest hint of roughness, but that was all.

She shivered. Because now, those cheeks weren’t smooth. And while she couldn’t deny that the rough stubble would probably feel even better against her uber-sensitive skin, she just wanted to know why.

“Veggie burgers,” he muttered, staring at the pan in disgust. “Whoever created them ought to be put in the stockade.”

That didn’t distract her. Penny had been busy and distracted this morning. Injured and woozy, and eventually horny, tonight.

Now she was clear-headed. Fully cognizant that something about this man didn’t make sense.

It wasn’t just the beard. She also wanted to know why his speech sometimes sounded so odd. Why he insisted on taking her with him somewhere, refusing to name the place. Why he had been following her tonight. What the hell the reddish eyes and the sharp-toothed growling had been all about.

And, damn it, why had he stopped when everything from his eyes to his mouth to his hands to that big ridge against the seam of his jeans said he was dying to screw her brains out?

Penny had never read fairy tales as a kid, but that didn’t mean she had no imagination. While she might not believe in unicorns or fairies, she was open to other possibilities. Her good instincts had told her on occasion that she was meeting someone…different. Out of place.

Once, at around age eight, she’d come home early and found her father talking to a strange-looking man, small of stature, long of face. She had immediately felt that he didn’t belong here. Not just in Louisiana, but anywhere she’d ever known.

There had been other occasions. Only a few, but each time, her inner voice told her she was meeting an outsider walking a lonely path where he did not, could not, ever fit in.

She saw that now in Lucas Wolf. Maybe she’d seen it from the start, but her attraction had kept her from dwelling on it. Penny was still attracted. But now she was determined to know more.

“I asked you something earlier,” she said, piercing him with a stare. “I’m asking again, and I want to know the truth.”

He adjusted the burner on the stove, then turned to give her his full attention. She thought she heard a sigh, as if he’d resigned himself to something unpleasant. And for a second, she almost didn’t want him to answer.
Instinct told her the truth might be harder to handle than the curiosity. But curiosity won out.

“Tell me, Mr. Wolf. Who are you?” She took one small step closer. “Who are you, really?”

He didn’t move, never shifted his gaze. Instead, after the slightest hesitation, he baldly answered her question.

“My name is Lucas Wolf. I am a lawman from Elatyria, a place you’ve probably considered fictional all your life. I’m one-quarter Wolf. And I’ve been hired by a queen to find you and bring you back to Riverdale.”

She didn’t respond. Didn’t gasp. Didn’t laugh in his face.

To be honest, she didn’t react at all for a second. She merely stared at him, noting the stone-cold seriousness of his expression, replaying his voice in her head, trying to decide if he was delusional or merely pulling her chain.

Finally, though, she had to admit he wasn’t playing some crazy joke. He might be nuttier than a jar of Skippy, but he believed what he was saying.

“Okay,” she muttered, putting an end to an internal debate over whether she should call 911 or run out into the night. Doing neither, she instead walked over to open a kitchen cabinet and said, “I think we’re going to need some tequila to get through the rest of this conversation.”

He knew from experience that this tequila she craved was a weak brew. Yet it seemed to brace the princess. Before she even opened her mouth to discuss the matter, she tossed back two small shots of the stuff. She shivered once, then dove right in.

“You’re an escaped mental patient, right? Damn, I knew it.”

He merely smiled.

“Come on, you can’t expect me to believe this.”

“I don’t expect you to, which is why I wanted to take you and show you the proof rather than trying to explain it.”

“Take me where, to this imaginary place called Riverdale? Or is it Elatyria?”

“Riverdale is a territory, what you’d call a country. Like these United States. It exists in the world of Elatyria, which borders this one that you call Earth.”

“Oh, right.” Sarcasm saturated her words. She was humoring him. “You’re from another planet?”

“Hardly. Just because you Earth dwellers have explored space doesn’t mean you know all there is to know about this world.”

She merely stared.

Trying to put it simply, in the terms he’d first heard a few years ago when his completely unknown half-brother, Hunter, had come looking for him, he explained. “Think of it like this. Two lands occupying the same space, only…”

She interrupted again with a snap of her fingers and a grin. “Wait. You’re telling me you’re a time traveler? From the past?”

His eyes narrowing, he held back an instinctive growl. The woman was a pain in the ass. But damn, how he liked her.

“Do you want to hear this or not?”
She waved an expansive hand. “Oh, by all means! I’m truly fascinated, hanging on every word.”

She couldn’t have sounded more disbelieving if he’d told her he needed her to help calm a raging dragon hungry for a virgin princess. Not that Lucas necessarily believed that legend. He had always suspected the whole thing had been made up by some horny guy trying to get a princess to give it up. And though Penny was indeed a princess, he doubted she satisfied the other requirement.

That didn’t thrill him, since he considered her his. Yet not being her first didn’t enrage him either. He certainly couldn’t claim inexperience. Only a hypocrite would blame her for being what she was—a passionate young woman—up until now.

Only one thing truly mattered. That he would be the last man ever to possess her.

“Hello? Taking a break to think up the rest of your tall tale?”

He blew out a harsh, frustrated breath, wondering how this woman had already worked his brain into a knot of confusing thoughts. “What I’m trying to say is that your world and mine co-exist, that they’re simply separated by a few degrees of reality.”

She snorted. “Yeah, well, I think you’re separated from reality by about a hundred and eighty degrees, my friend.”

Turning away from her, he grabbed the tequila bottle from the counter. He lifted it to his mouth and drained half of its contents into the back of his throat.

Not much better than water. But it had given him a second to keep himself from throwing the woman over his shoulder and kidnapping her in order to prove that what he said was true.

Calmed, he turned to face her again. “Neither Elatyria or Riverdale exist on any map in your world. Those who move back and forth between the lands don’t speak of their travels for fear of being thought mad.”

She mumbled something under her breath. Seeing his clenching jaw, though, she didn’t repeat herself.

“But they do exist. Your own father lived at least ten years of his life over there.” Lucas had done research on the family before he’d come here to track her down.

For the first time, the disbelief was replaced—briefly—by a hint of wonder. “Ten years?” She glanced past him, mumbling something under her breath. “He was missing for ten years….”

Sensing an opening, he pressed on. “You don’t remember, but you’ve been there, too.”

“What?”

“Your father never told you a thing about your childhood? The two of you lived in Riverdale until you were almost three.”

She plopped onto a chair. “Lived there? Me and my father?”

“And your mother, of course. Where do you think they met?”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, thinking about it. Finally, she admitted, “He always said they met at NYU.”

He tilted his head in confusion.

“New York Univ—Look, it doesn’t matter. I went there. It wasn’t true. There was no record that either of my parents studied there.”

“Not surprising. I don’t imagine there are any official documents about your mother in this world at all.”
Her mouth dropped open in confirmation, but she just as quickly jerked it closed. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s one more piece to the puzzle you’ve always wondered about, though, isn’t it?” he asked, his tone reasonable, unthreatening.

She wasn’t in the mood to be reasoned with. She shook her head, as if shaking off a hint of doubt. “You do know I’m on the verge of calling someone to take you to one of those places with rubber-walled cells, right?”

For all her protestations, Princess Penelope’s eyes could not lie. They betrayed her. Right now, they swam not with disdain and disbelief, but with wonder. She was considering his story. Opening her mind. Perhaps because she’d already had questions about her parents, her mother. From the sound of it, she had gone looking for her history and hadn’t found it.

Because it wasn’t there to be found. At least, not in this world.

“According to legend, your father stumbled into the outer territories, a desert which bordered Riverdale. He was brought before your mother, half-dead, accused of being a spy. They say it was love at first sight.”

Penny swallowed visibly. Then the hint of wonder left her. Correction: she forced it away, he saw it in the deliberate tightening of her lips. “This is such a load of crap.”

“I know how it sounds,” he insisted. “That is why you must come with me and allow me to prove it.”

“Prove some other dimension exists? Yeah, right.” He’d already noticed the way she immediately relied on sarcastic humor when she began to doubt. Now was no exception. “Are we going to run into the Jolly Green Giant there?”

“Giants aren’t green. Nor are they ever jolly.”

She leapt from her chair. “Oh, give me a freaking break.”

He thrust a frustrated hand through his hair. It was like trying to tame a unicorn, leading her one step forward only to have her pull two steps away. “Princess…”

“What’s with the princess stuff?”

“Your mother was Queen of Riverdale. You are her only surviving child. Her only heir. You are a princess.”

Her lips twitched. Relieved laughter spilled out. “Oh, God, this is a joke! Who set this up, that witch Angie?”

He tensed. “You keep company with a witch?”

“Jeez, you don’t give up, do you?”

“Witches are not to be trusted.”

“I was kidding. I call her a witch instead of the word with a b because we’re old friends.”

“Don’t joke about witches,” he snapped, trying to slow his pulse and hide the fact that the hairs on his body were standing on end. Instant defense mechanism.

Gaping, Penny threw herself down into her chair again. “Gorgeous but insane. So sad,” she mumbled. Scooping up a fork, she began shoveling greens from the salad he’d made her into her mouth, ignoring him.

He wished he could say he found his late-night repast as appetizing. A hot veggie burger was bad enough. A cold one was more than he could stomach.

Finally, after she’d devoured half her salad, she muttered, “So who’s this queen who supposedly sent you?”
“Queen Verona,” he replied, taking a seat opposite her. She was pretending she was only casually interested, as a way to kill time while she ate. He knew better. She was curious. Whether she wanted to be or not. “She and her family have been ruling Riverdale in your absence.”

She must have heard his dislike for the queen. “Let me guess. This queen is a real witch, with the b though, right?”

He couldn’t contain a faint smile.

“And she sent you, why?”

“I’m a lawman. I track people for a living.”

She finally sighed. “You know, you are the sexiest guy I’ve ever met, and you saved my butt tonight. But I just can’t believe anything you say.”

“I know you don’t want to.”

“My father loved me.” Her voice grew soft, as if she didn’t mean to speak aloud. “He would have told me.”

He heard the emphasis. “Yes. I’m sure he would have. Maybe he just didn’t get the chance.”

Penny’s cheeks flushed. “It’s crazy…”

“But not impossible.” Lucas thought of her still-wrapped present. “You said he died before you turned twenty-one. What if that gift was something he intended to give you to help explain the truth? Maybe that’s when he was planning to reveal all.”

She snagged her bottom lip between her teeth, indecision stamped on her face.

“It might be time for you to open your present, Princess.”

Penny didn’t reply, a number of emotions undoubtedly surging through her. More of that wonder. Confusion. Doubt. Finally, though, it came down to one. The one he least wanted to see.

Stubbornness.

“You can’t come in here and start ordering me around.”

He sighed. One step forward, two steps back. “I wasn’t trying to. It was a suggestion.”

She mumbled something, sounding more annoyed than confused, then dug back into her salad. After a few more bites, she spoke again.

“Tell me about this one-quarter Wolf thing.”

He had wondered when she would get to that.

“Is being in the Wolf family some big deal? Since you’re only one-quarter related to them, did you get disinherit or something?”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying.”

She froze.

“You know.”

Penny lowered her fork to her plate, eyeing him closely. His long hair hanging over his shoulders, his face, his eyes, his beard. She dropped her attention to his arms, straining against the jacket that seemed to have shrunk since
sunset. To the dark hair on the backs of his hands.

Then she looked at his face again. He intentionally smiled, baring his teeth. His white, gleaming teeth, always a little bit sharper by full moonlight.

She looked. She gulped. And she muttered, “Oh, fuck.”

“The queen won’t like such language.”

She scooted her chair back at least a foot. “You’re trying to tell me you’re a…a werewolf?”

“There’s no such thing.”

Nodding quickly, she sighed in relief. “Right.”

Poor girl, he almost hated to explain. “You humans over here call us werewolves. In truth, we’re just part wolf. No were about it. We don’t turn into murderous animals when the moon grows full.” He glanced out the window at the night sky. “Though I can’t deny we do enjoy the moonlight, and some of our genetic qualities become more prominent beneath its glow.”

“Your family must own stock in Gillette.”

Not knowing what she meant, he ignored her.

She licked her lips, those pretty, tempting lips. “So you’re saying you’re part wolf?”

He nodded. “My father, as well as the others in my clan, are descendants of a race of half-humans, half-wolves, and they almost always intermarry. Keeping the line pure.”

“Pure wolf-man. Gotcha.”

He ignored her sarcasm, knowing it was generated by shock. “My father fell for someone outside the clan.”

“Uh-huh. Where was she from, the Land of Oz?”

Remaining patient, he answered, “No. But since my mother was fully human, I only have a quarter of that wolf ancestry.”

She hesitated, then finally snapped her fingers and grinned. “Wait! I’m unconscious. That pig knocked me out when he slammed me into the ground, and this is a coma-induced hallucination.”

He simply stared at her. She stared back, her smile slowly fading. Penny was grasping at straws, trying to find a rational explanation for something that didn’t have one. At least, not according to her view of the world.

A view of the world she wasn’t going to part with easily.

“No. No, no, no!” She thrust each word out harshly. Penny pushed back her chair, rising from it. “You need to leave now.

He stood as well. “To use your favorite word, no.”

She backed up until she reached the counter and could go no further. “I mean it. Get out of here.”

“Not until I make one thing clear,” he muttered, following her across the kitchen, step by step.

Fear flitted across her face, but he couldn’t make himself do as she asked. He couldn’t leave her, giving her time to adjust. They didn’t have time. Besides, tonight wasn’t the kind of night when he could even pretend to be patient.
When he reached her, he inhaled deeply, smelling not just that hint of fear but more of that excitement. It made her body quiver and her lips tremble. Her hands were behind her, clenching the edges of the countertop.

“What do you need to make clear?” she whispered.

Her heart started pounding as he stalked her. He felt it—almost heard it—in the silent air, thick with so many layers of tension he’d have trouble counting them all. But she didn’t try to run.

Because she wanted him still. That was causing the most tension of all. She desired him, as she had in her bedroom when he could have taken her, ridding them both of this insane need they’d aroused in one another at first sight. At least temporarily…until it swelled out of control again.

That would probably have taken less than an hour.

He couldn’t do it then, because he hadn’t told her the truth about himself. Now he had. Now, as they said over here, all bets were off. “I’ve told you who I am. What I am. Why I came here.”

She opened her mouth as if to scoff, but no words emerged.

“What I didn’t tell you is that from the moment I saw you at the diner, I knew.”

“Knew what?”

He leaned in, filling his every breath with her, studying the curls drying softly around her face, the full, pouty lips, the dark-purple eyes.

She licked those perfect lips. “Knew what, Lucas?”

He put both hands on the counter behind her, trapping her in place. Leaning down, he brushed his cheek against her hair, then nibbled his way down the pierced curve of her ear, feeling a helpless shudder roll through her. With his lips against her earlobe, he finally answered her question in a low whisper.

“I knew I had to have you.”
Penny had to wonder: was it legal to have wild, crazy, up-against-the-refrigerator sex with an insane person?

Probably not. Or at least it wasn’t appropriate.

*Screw appropriate.* She desired this man so much she would do violence on anyone who told her she couldn’t have him.

“You’re certifiable.” She tilted her head, inviting him to move that warm mouth down her neck. “But I still want you.”

More than wanted, she was dying for him. She was on fire, from her head to her toes. As he tugged the small earring on her lobe into his mouth and sucked lightly, she sighed, remembering how he’d pleased her breasts.

“I know you do,” he replied, doing what she’d hoped for, pressing those lips to her pulse point. “And I am still a wolf.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” she muttered. “I guess that’s a good thing. If you were a vampire I’d be in real trouble right now.”

He lifted his head, looking down at her, passion blazing in his dark eyes. “Maybe you are in real trouble right now.”

Penny sucked in a deep, excited breath as wanton heat roared through her. “I’m good at being in trouble.”

He didn’t hesitate, obviously hearing in her voice both an acceptance and a plea. Without warning, he picked her up by the waist, covering her lips in a deep, hungry kiss.

Penny groaned with pleasure, meeting his tongue, sucking it into her mouth. Wrapping her legs around his hips and her arms around his shoulders, she let everything go except this. This need, this wild hunger. Arousal tripped through her, setting each nerve ending afire until every inch of her burned and sparked.

Their kisses were consuming, devouring, and Penny felt lightheaded as he carried her to her bedroom. He didn’t drop her onto the bed, but fell onto it with her. Their tongues dueled, wet and rough. She tasted every corner of his mouth, reveling in the flavors of him.

When his powerful hands moved to the hem of her T-shirt, Penny lifted up to help. Loving the way he had consumed her with his eyes before, she pulled her mouth from his, wanting to see every moment. They shared a deep, panting breath, and she watched him shift his gaze to her body, saw the way his eyes flared and his mouth fell open on a low groan as he tossed the shirt away.

“I like these,” he admitted hoarsely, reaching to pluck the rings on her nipples even as he lowered his mouth to one.

Penny hissed, stunned at how good it felt. Her breasts had always been sensitive, but this was beyond anything she’d ever experienced. She’d had the piercings done months ago after a breakup. It had been a crazy spur-of-the-moment impulse. Lucas was the first lover she’d had since. The overwhelming pleasure, with the tiniest hint of pain, as he sucked, tweaked and plucked had her digging her heels into the bed, arching toward his mouth.
It was exquisite, intense, and waves of delight began swirling to the core of her. The hard ridge of his erection pressed against her groin, and she bucked toward him. Each flick of his tongue took her higher, and she twined her hands in his thick hair, long and lustrous, soft against her bare skin.

But she couldn’t hold him in place once he decided to move.

That was okay. Because he moved down.

“Oh, yes!”

Lucas was pulling her skirt off her before his mouth ever reached her waist. He dipped his tongue lower, into the hollow above her pelvic bone. Pulling back, he studied the tattoo on her hip. “A serpent?”

“Dragon,” she admitted.

He shook his head. “That’s a poor excuse for a dragon. You’ve obviously never seen one.”

She let out a half laugh, half groan. “Would you shut up? I’m trying to forget that you’re insane.”

“I’m not insane.” He licked the dragon’s tail.

“I’m reserving judgment.” She whimpered with pleasure. “Maybe you’ll like one of my other tattoos better.” She could think of one or two she’d like him to taste.

He scraped his tongue lower, against the elastic waistband of her panties. “Where are they?”

“You’ll have to find out for yourself.”

“I can hardly wait.”

Holding her breath, she quivered as he ran his fingertips from her belly to her hip. He took her silky underwear along, too, exploring her with his mouth as he uncovered her.

When he noticed the miniscule thatch of curls, he paused. She felt him laughing against her skin even before she heard the low, wicked chuckle. “You lied.”

“I don’t use a razor,” she insisted.

“My eyes, my mouth, my tongue, they all know better.”

“It’s called a Brazilian….” The explanation died in her throat. He wasn’t listening, obviously didn’t need to hear about her latest visit to a waxing salon. His satisfied expression and slow, reverent kiss on the bare lips of her sex told her everything she needed to know about how much he liked it.

“Oh, my,” she whispered.

Slowly, with agonizing restraint, he began to explore her most intimate places. Lucas dipped his tongue deep to taste her body’s essence. Her hips jerked, but he held her still.

“I like this,” he mumbled.

“Ditto,” she gasped. She wriggled toward him, craving more, needing that warm tongue to scrape across her most sensitive spot, knowing that as soon as it did, she would probably fly into a million pieces.

“I like it a lot.”

She tried not to whimper. “Ditto a lot.”

As he moved away and kissed the inside of her thighs, she heard another one of those evil, masculine chuckles
and knew he was intentionally tormenting her.

“Do it, Wolf!”

He looked up at her with that white, gleaming smile. “Is that an order, Princess?”

She gulped, but not from fear. His hands holding her hips were strong, but not punishing. His mouth was teasing, not cruel. He was bringing her to amazing heights, and she knew, instinctively, that he would never let her fall. Never.

Her lips curling into a genuine grin, she whispered, “Let’s call it a request.”

“I can hardly refuse a royal request.” His dark eyes gleamed, then he finally gave her what she needed.

Flicking his tongue over her clit, he teased and pleasured her until her body shook in a powerful climax. Penny had never been a screamer, but the absolute perfection of it brought a high-pitched cry to her throat and she had to release it.

He cut off the cry by covering her mouth with his, kissing her deeply, sharing the flavors of her own body. Penny wriggled beneath him, desperate to have him hot and naked against her. She didn’t know whose hands pulled his T-shirt off. She only knew that within a second, a hard male chest was pressed against hers.

“Oh, Lucas,” she mumbled, staring at him, the breadth of him. She also noted the ruggedness—a few scars that hinted at a rough past, the ridges of powerful muscle that no gym workout could ever provide. The dark, thick hair that proclaimed him all testosterone-laden male.

She gazed down, seeing the way it did, indeed, taper into a thin line. His jeans bulged where it disappeared, as if his erection was going to burst out the top. *God, he’s huge.*

Reaching for him, greedy, needful, she whispered, “Please.”

He didn’t reply in words, just with a low, deep growl as he thrust into her hand. Penny reached for the zipper, not wanting denim fabric but the silky skin covering a rock-hard cock. In a moment, she had it, thick and immense. Every part of her that wasn’t already wet melted into a puddle of pure sexual desire.

Lucas pulled away for a moment, long enough to kick off the rest of his clothes, then returned to settle between her thighs.

“Birth control?”

“Covered,” she said, grabbing his hips and tugging him forward. “Please, Lucas, fill me up.”

“With pleasure.”

Despite his obvious hunger, he went slowly at first, as if worried he might hurt her. Even while almost cooing with pleasure at the feel of him sliding in, making a place for himself inside her body, Penny found herself amazed by his self-control. She could see the quiver of his every muscle as he strained to ease into her rather than thrusting hard, fast and deep.

But Penny wanted it hard, fast and deep.

“More!” she insisted, curving her hips up.

He groaned, and seemed to lose his ability to take it slow. As if the last tether had broken, Lucas drove into her, burying himself to the hilt. Penny threw her head back on the pillow, crying out as yet another orgasm washed over her.

Sex had never been like this. So intense. Earthy. *Delicious.*
“Perfect,” he muttered against her hair, staying still.

_Perfect. Yes._

He wasn’t able to remain still for long. Murmuring heated whispers, he began to move, pulling away, emptying her, only to fill her, again and again, with long, devastating strokes. They found an immediate rhythm, totally in tune with each other, exchanging deep, ravenous kisses with every thrust.

Penny became lost to time, lost to place, lost to self. Nothing existed except the feel of him. His scent, his weight, his thickness, his groans of pleasure.

Finally, his climax. She felt it rise in him, felt the strain of his powerful muscles as he tried to fight it.

“Penny….”

“Yes,” she cried, feeling, unbelievably, another climax washing over her as well. And only when she was in the throes of it did he let himself go over, joining her in a soul-stirring moment of pure ecstasy that she sensed would be a turning point of her entire life.

Though she had worked an eighteen-hour day, endured an assault, been told the mother of all bedtime stories, and had the most incredible sex of her life, Penny couldn’t sleep.

Lucas didn’t seem to have the same problem. He was lying beside her in the bed, naked, gorgeous, gleaming with sex-sweat. All hard, rugged male, still half-erect—_wow—as if he were taking a break before starting all over again.

_Fine by me._

But she didn’t wake him up. She needed to catch her breath, not to mention get her thoughts in order. Her brain was going a mile a minute and she wanted to figure out what she’d done…and what she intended to do. About a number of things.

“Starting with you,” she whispered, looking up at the shelf above her head. At the package. The last gift she would ever receive from the only parent she would ever know.

Since the day Callie had given it to her, she had never been tempted to untie the ribbon, or let her fingers tear through the paper. Any curiosity she’d felt had been overpowered by the need to hold on to her dad for a little while longer.

But you couldn’t really hold onto things forever, could you? Not anything. Not jobs or homes or friends. Not loved ones.

Everything came to an end sooner or later. Journeys, relationships, lives. The echo of words left unsaid and the dreams of moments left unshared…all had to end eventually.

Knowing what she had to do, Penny sat up and grabbed the box. A kitchen light provided enough illumination, not that she needed it. She’d memorized the shape, the corners, each crease in the paper, each loop of the bow.

Her father had wrapped this final gift himself. She recognized the crooked seam, the overuse of tape. He’d written her name on the envelope and sealed it with love.

She couldn’t open the card yet. Couldn’t read his final words to her. That was one step beyond her capabilities.

Instead, she reached for the ribbon. Her hand seemed distant, far away, as if someone else was untiring the bow. A drop of moisture appeared on the paper. Penny saw it, knowing, of course, that hers was the hand doing this heartbreaking thing she had tried to avoid. Hers were the tears marking the moment.
“I’m sorry, Dad,” she whispered. “I miss you.”

She pushed the paper off to reveal a plain cardboard box. Inside was a sea of tissue paper…and something that shimmered and gleamed. She immediately knew what it was. That gleam had been too bright to be anything but a precious stone, and the object too large to be a piece of jewelry. It was a crown. She didn’t need to know anything about fairy tales to recognize that.

The thought that her father had been playing a practical joke occurred to her. But the crown was too heavy, and appeared too old. Ornate and intricate, it was made of some solid metal and decorated with dozens of jewels, including one enormous amethyst cut in the shape of a heart.

Tucked inside the box was a note. The handwriting was not her father’s.

My Dear Penny—

Happy 21st birthday. I wish I could have been there to share this day with you, and so many before it. I love you so much. Please try on your gift and you’ll see how much. It’s belonged to the women of our family for hundreds of years.

With all my love—Mother

Even as sadness stabbed into her at seeing her mother’s handwriting for the first time, she also felt a sudden, overwhelming sense of peace. Because, suddenly, she knew who she was. Where she came from, who her people were.

It was true. All true. Everything Lucas had said.

Although it was beyond belief, she could do nothing except believe. The proof was right here in her hands.

She glanced over at him, saw how still he was, how deep and even his breaths. How dark, dangerous-looking. Fierce. If the rest of the story was true….

No. Don’t even think about that. Not yet, anyway.

It was one thing to have mentally acknowledged the almost animalistic strength of the man, the power, the sexual heat of him that was more potent than any human male she’d ever known. It was another to openly admit he was truly…what he claimed to be.

“Later,” she mumbled. She’d think about it later.

There was something else she had to do first. Her mother had made a request of her. Grasping the crown, she lifted it toward her head. Emotions and fears, thoughts and wishes sped through her, and she already knew, somehow, that from this moment on, she was not going to be the same person, ever again.

She closed her eyes. And lowered the crown into place.

There was a charge of static, a jolt of energy. She almost yanked it back off, but before she could do it, a collage of images poured into her mind. “Oh, my God,” she whispered, focusing on whatever magic was laying out these scenes.

First, a landscape, the grass so green it looked artificial. Here and there, spring flowers grew in scattered clumps—huge tulips and daffodils and some she couldn’t name that were as big as dinner plates and as rich in color as the jewels on the crown.

Then someone came into focus. A small figure, dark-haired, running through the grass, carrying so many flowers she looked ready to fall over. When she did stumble over the hem of her long dress, a man swooped in to
grab her and set her on his shoulders, both of them laughing as the blooms rained down on his head.

She knew him immediately, of course. “Dad,” she whispered.

He looked familiar, but not as she remembered him from his final years. Here he was vibrant, strong. Just a young man, untouched by the currents of life that would slowly drain his youth out from under him the way the tides took the sand.

He carried the child closer. Close enough for her to see the nearly black curls, the violet eyes, the slightly up-tilted nose.

She was seeing herself. But not as an impartial observer. It wasn’t like looking at a photograph, or a home movie through the anonymous, impersonal perspective of a camera lens. Because as she looked at the father and child, she was suffused with such an overwhelming sense of love and gratitude, she knew she was seeing someone else’s memories, feeling someone else’s emotions.

Penny heard the echo of a woman’s laughter. Then, in the movie of her mind, a slender hand reached out and touched the girl’s soft cheek, smoothing the dark hair off the younger Penny’s brow. A voice crooned something sweet. A lullaby that traveled through time, awakening the melody that had long been buried inside Penny’s own mind.

Her mother’s hand. Her mother’s voice.

Her mother’s gift.

“Penny?”

The images faded, as if the reel had come to its end.

“Penny, are you all right?”

She nodded, hearing Lucas’s concern. Opening her eyes, she smiled at him. He sat beside her, watching her closely.

“I’m fine, Lucas,” she admitted, meaning it. “And I’m ready to go with you as soon as you want to leave.”
They got on the road by mid-afternoon.

After the long night of steamy sex and conversation, Lucas hadn’t needed to press Penny to get an early start. The crossing to Elatyria was in a marsh between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The journey on his bike took only a few hours.

They’d spent the morning getting ready for the trip, packing some clothes and Penny’s crown in a small backpack. He didn’t imagine she’d need the clothes for long...the crown was another story. While they packed, Penny asked a million questions about his world. He shared as much as he knew, including telling her about his family—his father and half-brothers. She’d been interested, but her questions hadn’t delved too deeply into his gene pool. Not ready to go there yet, he supposed.

She had, however, wanted to hear more about his job. “So you hunt people, huh?”

“It’s not so unusual. My human brother has a similar job over here. He calls himself a bounty hunter.”

She eyed him thoughtfully. “Another brother?”

“Half-brother. We have the same mother. As I said, she was human, not a Wolf.”

“What’s her name, Helen of Troy?”

“You really don’t know your stories, do you?” he asked with a grin. “The natural question would be to ask if her name was Snow White or Rapunzel.”

“Sorry. Never had any use for fairy tales.”

He didn’t try to convince her that in his world, those fairy tales were called history. Once she got there, she’d see the proof. Like the statue honoring Queen Sin, a vicious bitch— with a definite b— with a glass-shoe fetish. Her story hadn’t been as nice as the one the Grimms had told. There had been no pumpkin coach. And only one stepsister, who had lost her head sometime during Sin’s reign.

The fairy godmother part, though, had been true. He’d often thought being a fairy godmother—granting the wishes of selfish, undeserving princesses and the like, without ever having one granted for yourself—had to be the worst job in any world.

“So your human half-brother lives over here all the time? How come?”

He quickly told her about Hunter and their mother. Including the fact that she had chosen to leave Lucas behind when she’d left Elatyria.

“How could she do that?” she asked, sounding stunned.

He shrugged, long since having gotten over any resentment. “She was miserably unhappy. But she knew my father and I would both be even more unhappy over here. I don’t imagine it was easy for her.”

Penny shook her head, sadness visible in her eyes. The princess would deny it but he knew she had a soft heart under that brazen shell.
Lucas quickly changed the subject, telling her more about Elatyria. Having had her mind opened to the existence of another world, she’d become voracious on the subject. He’d found himself dredging up old school lessons—things people over here had learned about in Disney movies. Except for Penny, who said she had never seen one.

There had only been one thing she’d asked about that he hadn’t answered to the best of his ability.

“So what’s the deal with this Queen Verona? If she’s such a bitch and has control over some prime real estate that I might decide to claim, why’d she send you to find me?”

“Who knows why royalty does what they do?” he’d replied. “I’m just glad they occasionally do it.”

Penny’s wicked smile said she was distracted by the answer. As he’d intended.

He could have told her the truth. But admitting to a woman who’d slept in his arms last night that he was supposed to bring her home to marry another man didn’t seem wise.

It doesn’t matter.

There would be no marriage. Penny had given herself to him freely and Lucas wouldn’t let her go. Not ever.

She was his now.

No, he hadn’t had the chance to tell her that his kind usually mated once, for life. He’d intended to before taking her to bed, but the woman had so infuriated him, he hadn’t gotten beyond his explanation of who he was and where he was from.

At least he’d told her that much.

They had time to get everything else in the open. After they made it through the border tonight, the last night of the full moon, they could slow down. Their journey to the castle could take as long as they damn well needed it to once they were across. He’d explain everything then.

And he’d make sure she never wanted to leave him.

“I feel so bad about leaving Callie in the lurch, though she was great about it,” she said as she climbed up onto his Harley.

“She said last night she wanted you to go.”

“You heard that? Our conversation?”

“Of course I did.”

“You must have been close by.”

He made sure she was firmly settled on the tiny back seat. “I was a block away.”

Her eyes flared as she took that in, but she didn’t respond. Penny seemed to have decided to deal with his wolfness by ignoring it for now.

That was all right. It was a lot to digest. She’d made it clear during the night that she wasn’t bothered by his genetics. Because, even after she’d tried on her mother’s crown and accepted everything he’d told her, she’d climbed on top of him and ridden him into near oblivion.

His mouth going dry at the memory of it, he ran a hand over his lips. His skin still carried her scent, as hers did his. They had marked each other, even if he was the only one who knew it.

“Ready?” he asked, knowing they had to leave before he did something stupid like drag her back inside for
another game of let’s-find-Penny’s-tattoos. She had one on her hip, one on her ankle…and one left to find.

He hadn’t done a thorough explanation of her back side. And he wanted to. Badly.

“So ready.”

“Then let’s go, Princess,” he said as he climbed on.

She whacked him on the shoulder. “Don’t call me Princess.”

“Fine. But feel free to continue to issue royal requests. I like granting them.”

Her shapely thighs, clad in black jeans that were more suited to the motorcycle than one of her skirts would have been, tightened around his hips and she slid closer. Her sex was pressed into his back and through their clothes, he felt an instant rush of heat.

She wouldn’t object if they went back inside, either.

He ignored that thought. Smothering a groan, he kick-started the bike, suddenly wishing he had a car. Despite how much he hated being trapped inside one of the reeking machines, he had the feeling that flying down the highway with her sweet legs wrapped around him was going to be pure torture.

Over the next few hours, he was proven right. Penny curled herself around him, gripping him with her legs, her arms wrapped around his waist. Though the wind whipped across them wildly, he could still feel every inch of her and he burned.

“You probably shouldn’t have told me how good your hearing is,” she whispered against his neck as they neared the turnoff.

He didn’t respond.

“Because I know you can hear me.” Her warm lips pressed against the pulse below his ear. “I want you, Lucas.”

He swallowed.

“I wish you had put me on your lap to straddle you. Mm, what I wouldn’t give to feel your cock buried inside me as we ride and ride.”

“Wench,” he muttered.

“What?”

He didn’t repeat it.

Her soft chuckle was decidedly evil. Her hand dropped to his lap and he quivered as she felt the way his body had responded to her words. He was rock-hard and ready.

“Or maybe I wouldn’t have to straddle you,” she added, stroking him lightly, maddeningly. “I could face away from you, lean forward over the handlebars, let you slide into me from behind.”

He groaned. “God, woman, are you trying to kill us both?”

“I’m horny,” she admitted with an impish chuckle.

“Hold that thought.”

Taking the poorly marked exit almost without slowing, he skidded onto a back road that was rarely traveled. The bike didn’t have much traction, spewing gravel in its wake, but he didn’t slow down. Pure sexual energy drove
him and the powerful engine between his legs only served to rev him up harder. As did the rising moon.

“Hurry.” She sounded as desperate as he felt.

Night had fallen, the moon was full, the border open. But they had enough time. Just enough for what he wanted to do to her.

Spying the small, decrepit shack where he stored his bike and other belongings, he roared toward it. He had barely pulled up outside before Penny was shifting around, climbing onto his lap. She pressed her mouth to his, kissing him wildly, her small hands cool against his hot, windblown face. Writhing against him, she said, “Don’t make me wait.”

“I don’t intend to.”

Damn, of all times for her to give up her skirts. He hated wasting the precious seconds it took to tug her jeans open.

Kissing her again, he maneuvered the button and zipper until he could reach inside to touch her. Pushing her panties out of the way, he teased her hard little clit until she cried out. Penny was creamy with readiness, and she thrust against his hand, wanting more. He gave it to her, sliding his finger between her lips and into her tight channel.

“More, more,” she mumbled, kissing his face, already pulling her shirt up and off.

He slid another finger into her, making love to her with deep, fast strokes, and she rocked back, taking every thrust.

Still not enough.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and stepped off the bike. Letting her go only long enough to shove his jeans down, he didn’t waste time pulling them all the way off. Penny was faster, getting out of hers in an instant. Before he could even begin to ask her whether she really wanted everything she’d said she did, she turned around and bent over the seat of his bike, her gorgeous ass pale in the moonlight.

And he found her last tattoo.

She looked over her shoulder at him and licked her lips. “Please, Lucas.”

He couldn’t have said no if someone had set his legs on fire.

With the full moon raining down on him and every primal instinct screaming for release from their human constraints, he grabbed her hips and slid his erection between her curvy cheeks. She rubbed up and down in welcome, her body’s juices flowing hot on his skin, sizzling in the cool nighttime air.

“This isn’t going to last long,” he growled through gritted teeth.

“I don’t care. Give it to me!”

Rough, passionate, wild. Untamed.

He did as she asked, grabbing his thick cock in one hand, spreading her legs even wider for his penetration. Then he entered her, hard, deep. She cried out with pleasure, thrusting back, taking everything he had and obviously loving it. At the feel of her, silky smooth, steamy hot and so tight, Lucas could only throw his head back and let out a cry that would sound like a howl to anyone close enough to hear.

But there was no one. Just him and Penny, thrusting wildly under the stars, lost in lust and sensation and pleasure.
He didn’t climax as fast as he’d feared, but it didn’t take long. Feeling it build, he tried to slow, not wanting it to end, not wanting to leave her unfulfilled.

She, however, wouldn’t let him change the pace. “Don’t you dare.” Her body pulled him deep inside, milking, squeezing, egging him on, until, helpless to do anything else, he came in a hot rush, flooding her with his seed.

He howled again, but even while lost in the throes of pleasure, he had no intention of leaving Penny hanging. Still inside her, he wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her up to stand before him, his front pressed to her back. He kissed her neck, ran one hand up to cup a beautiful breast and tweak it. The other he dropped to her sex, stroking her clit until she exploded.

“Oh, Lucas!”

The strength seemed to leave her legs and she collapsed back against him, but he didn’t let her fall. Holding her close, he continued to kiss her, caress her, feeling her heart begin to slow and her panting breaths begin to ease.

“Thank you,” he whispered against her nape.

“For what?”

“For helping me find your last tattoo.”

She laughed and wriggled against him. “Believe me, I didn’t know it was called a tramp stamp when I had it done. I’m really not the type to go around advertising that I’m easy.”

“You’re not easy,” he whispered.

You’re mine.

Lucas had called it a border. So Penny had been picturing an invisible line, one that didn’t really exist anywhere but on a map drawn by some surveyor. He hadn’t said it was an actual physical barrier that would make her feel as though she was plunging through a thick layer of wet spiderwebs.

As Penny followed him through the cloying, reeking tangle of Spanish moss that somehow wasn’t really moss, she wrinkled her nose and tried not to breathe. His hand was wrapped tightly around hers, and she knew he wouldn’t let her go. Which was good, because even after getting through the moss, the air itself seemed to push back against them.

Crossing this border wasn’t about moving through some low-hanging tree branches. Though not visible, or what she’d call solid, the separation between his world and hers was tangible.

She gasped with relief when they finally pushed out into clear, fresh air. The freshest air she’d ever inhaled, sweet and flavored with some spice that seemed like it belonged in a bakery instead of out in the wide open spaces.

“Welcome home,” Lucas said, reaching up to push a few stray twigs from her hair.

Home. Just like that?

She didn’t reply at first, slowly shifting her gaze to study her surroundings. The differences between the world she knew and this one were not stark. Despite the smell—Cloves? Nutmeg?—this actually looked much like any small stand of woods. The thing was, a minute ago, she hadn’t been in woods. She’d been standing in a swamp, hearing the croak of ‘gators and the hum of mosquitoes.

“It’s lovely,” she admitted, wondering why she could so easily see the trees, the layer of pine needles on the ground. Then she realized it was because the sun was already rising. “Wait, how wide is that crossing? Is it morning?”
“Time is different over here. The days are shorter. You’ll get used to…”

“Halt! Stop and pay the queen’s toll!”

Shocked to hear another voice out here in the woods at the break of dawn, Penny could only stare as a figure emerged from between two trees. A diminutive man wearing roughhewn clothes and a long cap sauntered closer. When he reached them, he hopped onto a stump and extended his hand, palm up, as if he expected it to be filled with money.

Lucas sneered. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Collecting the queen’s toll from every traveler,” the frowning man replied. Rising on tiptoe, he glared directly into Lucas’s face, which meant he had some major balls for one so small. “Now pay up or you won’t be allowed to trespass across Riverdale.”

Realizing they were indeed being asked to pay a toll by a grumpy dwarf, Penny could only stare, her mouth hanging open.

“Get out of my way. No Wolf pays a toll to a queen, especially one who isn’t the rightful ruler of Riverdale.”

“Wait! Are you the lawman?” The dwarf lifted a pair of thick spectacles to his eyes and peered through them owlishly. He studied Penny’s face, focusing on her eyes, then stumbled, almost falling off his perch. He put his fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle, then shrieked, “They’re here!”

A sudden pounding echoed. Before Penny had time to process that she was hearing the sound of men running, she saw several of them in dark uniforms appear from the treeline.

Lucas instantly went on the defensive, grabbing her by the arm and shoving her behind him. “That double-crossing bitch,” he snarled.

Penny realized they might be in real trouble. “The queen?”

“She might have decided it was easier to get rid of you! Damn, how could I have trusted her? I’m sorry, Princess.”

She gulped, wondering if there was any chance the border was still crossable, despite the sun rising in the western sky…western? But before she could make a dash for it, dragging Lucas with her, the dwarf hopped off the stump and dropped to one knee before her.

“May I be the first to welcome your highness to Elatyria?”

Lucas hesitated, though she still felt the tension in his rock-hard form. “What?” he asked.

The dwarf ignored him, staring only at Penny. “We’ve been expecting you. Welcome.”

“Uh, thanks,” Penny said, looking to Lucas for guidance.

He visibly relaxed. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I overreacted. It appears Queen Verona is welcoming you with open arms.”

 Rather than swords and executioners. Check.

Before she could reply, the guards converged on them. Surrounding her, they pushed between her and her escort.

“Your majesty!” the one in front said, bowing deeply. “Queen Verona sends her fondest welcome and is greatly looking forward to meeting you.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll get there,” Lucas said.
“Please come with me, your majesty,” the lead guard said, taking Penny by the arm. “We have a carriage ready for you and have been instructed to bring you to the palace immediately.”

“Damn it,” Lucas muttered.

Penny blinked, shaking her head, still a little dazed from the rough border crossing. And from the unexpected welcoming party.

From the way Lucas had talked, she’d expected to have another day or two alone with him: Taking their time making their way to the palace. Stopping to explore, touch, have wild, lovely, delicious sex. Even time to deal with the feelings they seemed to be rousing in each other so suddenly, so unexpectedly.

She didn’t believe in love at first sight, despite what Lucas had told her about her parents. But something was there, something solid, sure. And growing. She wanted time to deal with it, to nurture it, before confronting the rest of her new life.

Lucas had seemed to desire the same thing. He’d told her he wanted to explain everything in more detail, prepare her for what was to come. Discuss the future.

Now, though, as she was being firmly escorted toward a gleaming carriage standing behind six white horses, she saw that fantasy slip away. Lucas was disappearing behind her, surrounded by a trio of guards, all of them looking belligerent and ready to stop him if he came after her. Indeed, when he stepped forward, he was grabbed by each arm.

Hell, if she ever needed to play the princess card, it was now. “Halt! Unhand my escort,” she shouted, wondering how she’d found the words when what she’d really wanted to say was, “Dudes, hands off the merchandise.”

The guards immediately dropped their arms, but didn’t move out of Lucas’s way so he could join her at the steps of the carriage. He stared at her from yards away, his brown eyes glowing with anger, frustration. Emotion.

“Your majesty,” said the head guard, his voice low and urgent, “I know you felt secure in the company of the… Wolf. However, you are now in our custody. You’re safe, I assure you.”

She gritted her teeth, furious on Lucas’s behalf about the inherent racism. “He’s with me.”

“He will be well-paid for his service. But, majesty, you must see that he cannot accompany you to the palace.”

“What the hell not?”

The guard seemed startled by her language. “Well, uh…because word that you’ve been traveling alone with a…man…would not make the best impression on the people, majesty. And it will almost certainly displease your future mother-in-law, the queen.”

Penny froze, staring at him, trying to figure out if he’d really said what it had sounded like he’d said.

“Penny!” Lucas called.

He was still blocked by the guards, one of whom snapped, “She’s your majesty to you, Wolf!”

“Now we must hurry,” said the guard. “Your fiancé, Prince Ruprecht, has been so anxious to meet you.”

Okay. He had said what it had sounded like he’d said.

“Wait,” she whispered. “Just wait one damn minute.”

She stayed still, her hand on the side of the beautiful gold-trimmed carriage, a few feet from the white horses who pawed the ground in anticipation.
She was a world apart from everything she’d ever known. Separated from everyone she’d ever held dear. Except one person. The person she had entrusted to bring her here.

He stood across the clearing, watching her, saying nothing. Penny stared at him, silently demanding the truth. His jaw clenched and his eyes closed briefly. That was all the truth she needed.

The son of a bitch really had brought her here to marry another man.
Not having the luxury of a horse-drawn carriage, Lucas arrived at the castle one day after Penny did. In that time she had already started the entire court talking. The whispers were thick, every person having something to say about the long-lost princess.

That hair! The clothes! Those rings on her ears! But the prince—he’s enamored, can you believe it? He can’t take his eyes off her.

Those rumors he could have done without.

If he’d had any idea he and Penny would be separated as soon as they reached Elatyria, Lucas would have told her everything she needed to know before they’d crossed over. He’d never dreamed Queen Verona would recognize Penny as the princess without even meeting her. Was she so desperate to marry Ruprecht off that she’d accept Penelope Mayfair sight unseen?

Of course she is.

He’d been stupid, careless. And now, he might pay the ultimate price for that stupidity. Because the look of betrayal on Penny’s face before the guards had tucked her into the carriage and driven her away had stabbed him right through the heart.

She might never forgive him. God, she might actually marry Ruprecht.

“No,” he mumbled as he made his way through the throne room, thick with sycophants who wanted to get in the good graces of the princess they were so gleefully gossiping about.

He spotted her immediately. Penny had been changed out of her regular clothes and put into a formal gown that looked stiff and uncomfortable. It covered her up from neck to toe, revealing not a hint of ink on her skin, much less the bump of two silver hoops on her perfect nipples.

Beside her, sitting stoic and rigid on her throne, was Queen Verona. The queen’s famed ivory skin now verged on puce and she looked ready to choke on her own tongue.

And the reason was obvious; Prince Ruprecht looked utterly besotted. He sat beside Penny, their hands entwined, their heads together as they whispered and laughed.

Lucas’s heart pounded in his chest and his fingers curled into fists. He had never considered the prince any kind of competition, but now, Ruprecht and Penny looked like a happy, engaged couple.

How could she?

The thought quickly shifted. How could you, fool? Because the whole thing was entirely his fault for not telling her everything from the start.

“Lucas Wolf! The Huntsman!” a courtier announced.

Penny stiffened; he saw the way her spine went straight and her hand stilled. But she didn’t acknowledge him at all.
Queen Verona, however, did. She jerked up from her throne, breaking all protocol by marching toward him. Ignoring everyone around them, she snapped, “You’re sure that is the girl?”

“Quite sure, majesty,” he said, knowing Queen Verona hated Penny already.

The queen closed her eyes and groaned softly. “My God, what have you led me to, Wolf?”

“Nothing but what you asked for,” he replied evenly. “And I expect to be paid the agreed-upon price for doing my job.”

Not that he really wanted the money or the land…not for himself at least. But if this whole situation was going to leave him alone for the rest of his life, having lost the woman he should have spent it with, the very least he could do was fulfill his promise to his father.

“My son can’t marry her.”

Lucas frowned as Penny and Ruprecht laughed together over some shared joke. “I think he might argue that.”

The queen’s lip trembled. “She can’t be the princess.”

“She is, any test would prove it, I’m sure. Now, my purse?”

The queen froze, staring at him searchingly. “A test…”

Hell. “Majesty, there is no doubt. One need only look at her eyes…”

The woman waved a heavily ringed hand. “Coincidence.” Then a crafty smile widened her lips and she turned in a broad circle to look at her son and his chosen princess. “My dear,” she said, her voice ringing across the court, “there is one minor formality we must complete before we can proceed.”

Penny finally looked up and Lucas would swear she intentionally avoided meeting his stare. But her smile was tight, her slim shoulders stiff as she raised an inquiring brow. “Yes?”

Queen Verona cast a knowing, conspiratorial smile at her courtiers. “We, of course, have to satisfy all the traditional requirements. Which means, my dear, that we must put you to the test.”

A FRIGGING PRINCESS test? Who ever heard of that? For the first time ever, Penny found herself wishing she’d actually read a fairy tale once in her life. Not because she wanted to pass the test. Hell, no. Because she wanted to make sure she didn’t.

She could fool a lot of people…but she could never fool herself. From the minute the carriage had pulled away from Lucas the previous morning, all she had been able to think about was getting back to him. First, to kick his butt for being so sneaky about his real motivation for coming to find her. Second, to find out how he really felt about her. And third, to make sure he didn’t get away.

She wanted him. More, she didn’t want to ever be without him. If that equaled love at first sight, or love within twenty-four hours, then so be it. She’d call it love. She didn’t need to put a name on it, she just knew she had to have the man in her life.

He felt the same way. No, he’d made no effort to approach her this afternoon, but he’d burned her with a succession of fierce, possessive glances. Claiming her.

He might have been sent to bring her back for Ruprecht. But there was no doubt in her mind that Lucas Wolf wanted her for himself.

“You’re looking pale, my dear Penelope. Are you sure you can go through with this?”
She looked at Prince Ruprecht, who was charming, if a bit dim. He was leading her to the royal ballroom, where the big princess test was to be conducted. Wondering how on earth the dude hadn’t yet figured out what he really wanted, she replied, “Yeah, I’m sure. It’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

“I am worried,” he insisted. “What if you pass the test?”

Prince Ruprecht was on board with Penny’s plan to throw the contest. He didn’t want to marry her any more than she wanted to marry him, even though they had immediately hit it off. He was funny, had a cutting sense of humor, and did a great impression of his bitchy mother. The perfect guy friend, actually.

As so many gay men were.

Not that he actually knew that about himself yet.

“Well, you still don’t have to marry me. You can refuse me.”

“But she’ll only complain I’m too picky,” he said with a sigh. “I don’t understand why I simply can’t fall in love. But I like you better than anyone I’ve ever met. So maybe we should get married.”

“I don’t think so, Princey.” Patting him on his arm, she said, “Don’t let her bully you. You should go live your life for yourself rather than doing what your mother wants you to do.”

His eyes widened and he stopped short of the closed ballroom doors. “What else is there for me to do?”

“Oh, you might be surprised. I know of a place where you could find everything your heart desires. It’s a beautiful city on a glimmering sea, with a golden bridge.”

He looked fascinated. “A bridge of gold?”

“Well, no, it’s not really gold, it’s red. But they call it the Golden Gate.” She waved her hand in the air, drawing a word picture for him. “And in this city, there is a great love of rainbows. They have a whole parade to celebrate their rainbow pride, and I guaran-damn-tee you, Ruprecht, if you go to it, you will absolutely find your heart’s true desire.”

He nodded, appearing fascinated. “I wish to hear more about this city on the morrow.”

“It’s a deal,” she said.

Though, if she had her way, she wouldn’t be here “on the morrow.” Once she got this test business over with, and gained her freedom from any engagement, she intended to go after that stubborn Wolf. Once she’d straightened his butt out and got him to admit he couldn’t live without her, they could figure out what she wanted to do about her kingdom.

Test or no test, if she decided she wanted to claim Riverdale, Queen Verona was in for one knock-down, drag-out bitch-slapping fight.

Penny had proof of her claim—her father’s letter, which she had finally opened the previous night in the quiet of her castle chambers. She’d cried for hours after reading his words, which confirmed everything she’d learned about her past, her life, her history. She didn’t want to share the note with anyone, least of all Queen Verona, but if it came down to a battle, she knew her father would want her to do whatever she had to. And he’d be cheering her on as she did it.

Penny was smiling at the thought as they neared the closed doors to the ballroom. Verona’s castle was old and drafty, with thick stone walls and damp floors. If the concept of electricity had made it over here, it hadn’t hit the royal digs yet.

From what Ruprecht had told her, the smaller palace at Riverdale was much better. Newer, more modern. Probably her father’s doing, she thought, smiling.
She almost felt him here with her, and her mother, too.

“Here we go,” the prince said as they reached the entrance and waited for the immense doors to be opened. Announced as a couple, they took a few steps inside, but then halted, both spying the monstrosity in the middle of the ballroom floor.

Mattresses. A veritable mountain of them.

“Oh, I know this one!” Ruprecht hissed, clutching her arm.

But before he could fill her in, Penny was grabbed by Queen Verona, who dragged her forward and waved for silence. “Here is our precious Penelope, ready to begin her test.” She gestured toward a tall ladder, which stood against the cloud-high bed. “Up you go, my dear!”

That was when Penny realized she was supposed to **sleep** on the damn thing. “You want me to climb up there?”

“Yes, indeed,” the queen said, pushing her forcibly toward the ladder.

Okay, what was she supposed to do…prove she could float down as light as a feather or something princessy? Be able to dress in a ball gown while her head touched the ceiling? Be all gracious and royal about getting the shittiest guest bed in the castle? What the heck were princesses good for, anyway?

She didn’t know, and there was nobody she could ask.

Absolutely nobody on her side. A quick look around the room confirmed it. Lucas wasn’t here.

He wouldn’t want to watch this. She knew him well enough to know that. But had he left for good? Gone back to his homeland, to his people?

Drat the man for making this difficult. She was the wronged party—he should be here all prostrate with grief. Or at least glaring at her and ordering her to forgive him or something.

*Maybe he doesn’t want your forgiveness.*

*Maybe he doesn’t want you.*

“Not worrying about that now,” she mumbled. She had enough to think about, figuring out this test.

The entire court watched in titillated silence as the queen nudged Penny up the ladder. The only one who looked the least bit sympathetic was Ruprecht, who was mouthing something. He appeared to be asking her if she needed to go for a pee-break before bed.

Oh, yeah, that’d be real classy.

Finally, Penny reached the very top of the ladder, and clambered onto the top mattress. It swayed only a little. And she had to admit, it was about the most comfortable surface she’d ever been on. If she actually intended to get some sleep tonight, she could think of worse places to do it.

“All right up there?” the queen shouted from below.

Penny peered over the side, gave the woman a thumbs-up, winked at Ruprecht and called, “Goodnight!”

**Now get outta here so I can figure this thing out.**

Fortunately, this test didn’t involve an audience. Because Penny got her wish. The ballroom began to empty. Everyone drifted out, heads together in whispers, giddy laughter floating up to the ceiling.

The queen had Ruprecht by the arm and was tugging him with her, not about to let him stay and influence the competition. What, did Verona think he wanted Penny to **pass**? Because she had no doubt the queen wanted her to
fail. If that hadn’t been loathing in her eyes when she’d first set eyes on Penny’s spiked hair and tattoos, it had come pretty close.

Just before sweeping out with a swish of her obnoxiously fussy gown, the queen paused to speak to a couple of those rough-looking guards. Two of them were stationed outside the doors, keeping everybody else out. And her in.

Then those doors slammed shut. She was alone.

She waited in silence, counting to a hundred. There was no rush—she had all night to go on the prowl for an answer to the test. Finally, when a few minutes had passed and she felt confident she wouldn’t be interrupted, Penny sat up and pushed back the covers to climb down.

Then she suddenly realized she couldn’t. Because a quick glance confirmed something she hadn’t even considered.

The ladder was gone. The sneaky bastards had whisked it away while she’d been waving goodnight.

“Oh, great, now what am I gonna do?”

The question had been a rhetorical one. And yet, someone answered.

“Well, Princess, I’d say you should make very good use of this comfortable pile of mattresses.”

Penny’s heart raced as it flooded with excitement. Her body reacted to his voice, his scent, his aura, even before she saw him end his climb up the mattress mountain and emerge on the side of the bed.

“Lucas,” she whispered.

Want and hunger and sweet emotion washed over her and she acknowledged that everything was going to be all right. Because he hadn’t left. He was here. Ready to fight for her.

To claim her.

But she didn’t intend to make it easy. The moment he clambered up onto the top mattress and knelt beside her, she fisted her hand and punched him in the shoulder. “You jerk!”

He grabbed her by the arms and hauled her against his chest, burying his face in her hair. His voice thick with emotion, he muttered, “I’m sorry, Princess. I was going to tell you, long before I brought you here.”

“Yeah, yeah, I figured that much out already.” She cooed a little as he ran his big, strong hands down her body, touching her all over as if he wanted to make sure she hadn’t been hurt since they’d last been together.

She hadn’t been. Not physically. Her heart? That had hurt for a little while, until she’d put it all in perspective. Still, she wasn’t about to let him off the hook that easily.

“Tell me how you feel about me,” she ordered.

He pulled back to stare down at her, the handsome, rugged face looking haggard, as if he hadn’t slept or eaten. “What?”

She lifted a hand to his cheek, scraping her fingertips across the rough stubble. “How do you feel about me, Lucas?”

He shrugged and answered as if it were the most simple question in the world. “I want you for my own, for the rest of my life, Penny. I don’t know what to call these feelings you bring forth in me, other than a certainty in my soul that we are meant to be together. And that if I were to lose you, I would never feel whole or happy again.”

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Because some words were just better than I love you. Some vows more binding, some emotions more deep.
“All right then,” she murmured, smiling at him, happier than she’d ever felt in her life. “You’d better help me get down from here so we can make our getaway before morning!”

He shook his head and pushed her back down into the pillows, nuzzling at her neck. “I don’t think so.”

“Lucas,” she groaned, “we don’t have time.”

He ran his tongue along the lobe of her ear, nibbling, blowing at the sensitive skin. “There’s always time for this.”

She sighed, pressing up and parting her arms and legs in welcome. “Maybe a quickie...”

“Huh-uh. You draping yourself over my Harley was as much of a quickie as my heart can take this week. We’re going slow.”

His words were both a threat and a promise. And he proceeded to make good on them, kissing and caressing her until she could think of nothing but him. His warmth, his touch.

When she urged him on, he forced her to wait, each stroke deeper than the last, each touch more erotic, yet infinitely tender.

He worshipped her body, showed the kind of restraint she didn’t think any man could ever have. He also showed her that even though she loved him driving into her in a frenzy, a slow, gentle penetration was pretty damn fantastic, too.

With arms and legs entwined, mouths exchanging kiss after kiss, they rocked together on the top of the crazy bed, swaying and loving until she started to cry at how lovely it was. How beautiful and perfect.

“I’m going to love you all the days of my life,” she whispered against his neck, knowing the confession ran counter to every rational thought she’d ever had.

She also knew it was true.

Finally, after he’d taken her flying far beyond the confines of this one room again and again, Penny felt him give himself over to his own climax. He shuddered as he came inside her, and she held him tight, feeling their hearts pound as one for several long moments. Then he rolled to his side, taking her with him, holding her as if he would never let her go.

Penny burrowed her face in his neck. “That was wonderful.”

“I know.”

Arrogant man.

“But we don’t have much time to figure out this test.”

“What?”

“I mean, I need to know what, exactly, I’m being tested on.”

He let out a bark of laughter. “Good grief, woman, you really don’t know your fairy tales, do you? This one is a classic. Everybody knows it.”

“Okay, so explain, Mr. H. C. Andersen.”

He did, telling her exactly what was going on in a few words, which left her gaping in shock.

“You’re telling me there’s a pea, one single pea, way down at the bottom of this bed, and I’m supposed to be so tender-skinned and delicate, it’s gonna keep me up all night?”
He nodded once, his chest rumbling with laughter.

“I think I’m gonna barf. I hate princesses.”

“I don’t,” he admitted, tugging her tighter against him. “At least, not all of them.”

She kissed his lips quickly, then said, “Okay, babe, time to hit it. We have to get out of here. Otherwise, I’m going to be stuck trying to pretend I had a blissful night’s sleep when really, I was up all night being thoroughly done by the big bad wolf.”

He swept a possessive, proud hand down her body. Then, as if realizing what she’d said, he drew back to look at her closely. “Why would you need to do that?”

“So I can fail, of course.” At his confused expression, she added, “I’m not going to marry Prince Ruprecht!”

“Of course you’re not. You’re going to marry me.”

Not exactly a standard proposal. But she’d take it. She’d definitely take it. “Right, but I have to get out from under Queen Witchy Poo first.”

“Ahh.” He drew away from her a little to sit up. “I have to tell you something. I’ve been doing some research. Asking a lot of questions. I even went to an ancient monastery to get some answers from the wise men this afternoon.”

She tilted her head, waiting.

“Penny, do you know what a matriline is?”

“No.”

“It’s a monarchy in which the title and power passes only through the female line of descendants.”

“Like in ancient Egypt?”

“Yes.” He took her hand. “And in Riverdale.”

She began to see where he was going.

“There is always a Queen of Riverdale, but never a King. Only a consort, like your father.”

“Meaning Prince Ruprecht…”

“Can never be King of Riverdale. The power is entirely yours.”

“I’m liking this concept,” she admitted. Nibbling her bottom lip, she asked, “But are you okay with it? I mean, can you stand me being your boss?”

He laughed deeply, throwing his head back. “Sweetheart, you can boss around the entire world, but behind our closed bedroom door, we’ll both know exactly how things stand.”

She shivered a little, seeing that sexy, predatory gleam in his eyes. She might claim a kingdom. But every night, her wicked wolf would claim the queen.

Suddenly growing serious, he added, “Are you certain you want to deal with the stigma of being with a Wolf?”

She rolled her eyes and grunted, tempted to punch him again. “I think prejudice is going to be one of the first things we tackle once we get things back on track.” Grinning impishly, she added, “That and indoor plumbing.”

“One of the best aspects of your world,” he agreed, kissing her temple. “To make it clear, once you are
acknowledged as the true Mayfair princess, nobody can force you to do anything, ever again.”

Including Queen Verona.

“So all I have to do is get her to acknowledge me as a true princess in front of the court? Then I can tell her to kiss my…”

“Yes.”

Penny smiled, seeing exactly how to proceed.

Leaning toward the foot of the bed, Lucas grabbed a small backpack he’d dropped there. She hadn’t even noticed it. “I thought you might need this.” He reached inside it and withdrew her mother’s crown.

Penny took it from him but didn’t put it on her head. Not yet. She’d have it on in the morning when she climbed down to claim her kingdom.

And from that moment on, she’d fill the crown with her own lovely thoughts, wishes and dreams. Images of her loving husband, her beautiful children. Her happy life.

All of which she would have with Lucas Wolf.
Epilogue

The court was agog.

Never had they seen such a pure, vulnerable, tender-skinned princess. For when Penelope Mayfair descended from her tower of mattresses the morning after her ordeal, she looked frail, pained and weak. Her brilliant purple eyes—so like all the Mayfair women’s—were luminous and moist, the dark circles beneath them telling the tale of her long, miserable night.

While she had appeared foreign and different on her arrival, now everyone looked and saw only the true, rightful daughter of the late Queen Lenore. The long-lost, but well-remembered crown on her beautiful head underscored that point.

Those closest to the damsel felt their hearts twist as they noted the redness of her skin, the faint marks on her throat and her shoulders. She walked carefully, as if her poor limbs were weak.

All those who hailed from Riverdale felt a stirring of anger at the treatment of their princess.

“Poor little thing,” they whispered, all wanting to wrap her in the softest silk and comfort her.

The girl slowly made her way across the ballroom, members of the court melting away to let her pass, offering bows and murmured blessings.

Finally, she drew within a few feet of the queen, who was unable to take her eyes off the famous Mayfair crown.

“Queen Verona,” Penelope exclaimed in a loud voice, “what have I done to offend you? How could you treat me like this?”

The queen froze.

“I never imagined that I, the last remaining member of the royal family of Riverdale, would be treated in such a way. Asked to sleep upon a bed stuffed with boulders? I don’t know that I shall ever recover.”

Every bit of color disappeared from the queen’s face. The court held its breath, knowing what this meant.

The princess had passed the test.

The two women eyed one another, and those present that day later swore they could almost feel an imperceptible shift of power. An acknowledgement by the old queen that she had been bested. The gauntlet thrown by the young one, letting everyone know she was a new force to be reckoned with.

At last, Queen Verona bowed her head briefly and murmured, “My deepest apologies.”

The dark-haired girl smiled beneficently. “Ahh, well, I’m sure with the friendship between our two countries, it was nothing but a misunderstanding. When you visit us at our castle at Riverdale, we will assuredly offer you the finest of beds.”

Queen Verona hesitated, appearing confused. Finally, though, she could deny the girl’s heritage no longer. She was caught in a princess-test trap of her own making.
“I look forward to many such visits between our realms…uh…Princess Penelope.”

And it was done. The greatest queen in Elatyria had acknowledged Penelope Mayfair as the true Princess of Riverdale. Its future queen. None could ever naysay her again.

The older woman, still appearing shaken, beckoned forth her son, the frowning Prince Ruprecht.

Princess Penelope, however, held up a hand before either of them could speak. “I must tell you now. There will be no betrothal,” she said. “Where I grew up, people decide who they want to marry and such affairs of the heart are best left to the two people involved.”

“Hear, hear,” mumbled the prince.

“Ruprecht, you have my hand in friendship for as long as you desire it,” she said, before turning her attention back to the queen. “Now, I must depart. My kingdom has awaited my attention long enough, though, of course, I thank you for overseeing it during my absence.”

A ripple of laughter slid through the crowd as Queen Verona’s skin turned a mottled red. It grew when Prince Ruprecht chuckled, seeming well-pleased by the turn of events. Only those closest heard him lean over to Princess Penelope and prattle something about longing to set off to find a bridge of gold and a parade of rainbows.

And then, as legend tells, the graceful, gracious young princess turned and nodded to the court. Every person dropped in a bow or a curtsey, watching while she strode toward the exit, looking every inch the royal being she was.

She paused only once. There, with a whisper, she took the arm of a dark, handsome man whose eyes blazed with devotion. He was a stranger, recognized by only a few at court, but obviously very well known by their princess.

The unquestionably beautiful couple smiled at one another. Exchanged an intimate glance. A brief touch.

Then the two of them walked out of the castle into the bright sun dawning over another glorious Elatyria day.
Table of Contents

To Julie...one of the bravest people I know. Working with you has always been one of my favorite parts.

Prologue

Once Upon A Time, in a

1. On any other night when the moon waxed on
2. It was funny. Lucas had thought finding Princess Pe
3. This was definitely going to be harder than
4. One of the first things he was going to do once Pri
5. “Good grief! he must have a beard made out of steel
6. Penny had to wonder: was it legal to have wild, cra
7. They got on the road by mid-afternoon. After
8. Not having the luxury of a horse-drawn carriage, Lu

Epilogue