

Love Under the Moon

The night was clear, the moon was nearly full, and the forest was all but silent. The hunters of the night roamed freely, searching for their quarry as they did all their lives. Hunger drove them. It drove much of their lives', and there was rarely a moment when that hunger truly abated.

For one of the forest's hunters, there was far more than simply the hunt for food. There was something else he searched for, something much harder to find. He could always find food, but his other search had yet to end. More and more, that search guided his life. He searched... for a mate.

Nearly every night he roamed through the forest. He had searched the forest in its entirety, more than once, but still he would not cease. Wolves occasionally traveled alone, most often to start a new pack. He too wanted to roam farther, but something told him not to. Something in the very depths of his mind told him not to stray far from his territory. Though he did not fully understand why, he knew that it was wise.

Time passed, the moon made its way across the sky, and still he ran. He stopped to eat, hardly even leaving the bones of the deer he had killed, to keep his hunger at bay. He quickly washed himself in a river before continuing. It seemed each night he grew more focused on a mate. He searched endlessly, eating, searching, eating, and searching. Every now and then he would stop for a moment, stand erect, spread his arms wide, throw his head back and howl to the night sky. He called for her. One night he would find her. He did not know what would happen then; he spared no thought for it. His mind was only on the fact that he needed a mate, for reasons he could not put in words, or even thoughts. There was just the feeling, the yearning, and that was enough.

As every night before, he could feel the fading of the night and the approach of day. He would soon need to rest. As quickly as his two legs could run, he made his way back to his other home. He did not fully understand why he made this shelter of wood his home, only that it was his home, and that it was where he belonged when the sun rose.

Entering through an open window, the dawn fast approaching, he made his way through the home. His mind became hazy and confused, as the dawning of the sun always did to him. He entered his windowless bedroom, instinct bringing him there. Slowly, he lay atop the sheets of the bed. His mind was quickly fading, and he closed his eyes for slumber.

Chris Ternen awoke atop his sheets, naked and crying. He cried nearly every morning; the tears slowly making their way down his face to moisten his pillow. It was the constant torture of his life, a desire that longed to be fulfilled, but one he knew he could never have. So he let his tears slowly fall, and once again tried to soothe his heart.

Stacy Lens tore down the nearly empty road on her motorcycle, the sole front headlight illuminating the coarse pavement. The road wasn't likely truly empty, but she had neither passed anybody nor heard anything but the roar of her engine in a long time. She had been driving for several days now, resting at hotels and motels when she could, camping out off the road when she couldn't. Camping had become her preference, as the last two places she had stayed at had both been far worse than anything she had found in the outdoors.

She also didn't want to be around people. Any people. Even in the places she had stayed, she had felt too close. What she wanted was a life of exile, to never be seen or heard from again, or at least as close to exile as she could get.

Her parents, and her friends, were probably still worried about her, perhaps even still trying to comfort one another. Stacey could easily imagine the grief her mother was going through. The panicked call she had made to 911, and her, surely, easily found smashed cell phone would likely have thrown her mom into near hysterics.

Viciously she threw those thoughts away and focused on the road. One mistake was all it took; just one simple, stupid mistake. And the worst part was, she had kept at it for years. Even now, trying to put it behind, she could not help but berate herself again for her stupidity. How could she have let herself get involved in the first place? She couldn't answer that, so she tried to put it out of her mind once more, and focus on riding.

That only served to remind her that the bike was stolen. Sure, he was a friend of hers, and she had taken it out for a ride a couple of times before, but now she'd run off with it. He had worked hard to get the money for it, and now she'd stolen it. She'd even gone so far as to switch the license plate with one she'd found in the junkyard. Wrenching her mind away from such uncomfortable thoughts again, which seemed to be forever inescapable, she focused on her surroundings.

The landscape was indeed beautiful, but did little for her. Her heart was simply too heavy at the moment. It was so unlike home though, and that both helped and hurt her, tearing at her like all her other thoughts. She was a long ways from her home in Maine. At the moment, she thought she was in New Mexico, but she wasn't sure. She hadn't remembered seeing a welcome sign in a while. By now, she had to be far enough away. All she needed to do was find a small town where no one would look for her.

A few hours later, she found it: Solitude, population 92. *Solitude*, she thought, unable to keep a little smile from her face. *How appropriate.*

Chris paced the house for a time after breakfast, unsure of what to do with himself. There wasn't exactly much to do in the little town he called home. Especially in his house, which he tried to leave as infrequently as possible. From the way he saw it, the town of Solitude seemed to be a place that hardly even existed. There must be records of it somewhere, at both the state and federal levels, but the town was so small that people likely hadn't seen any of those files in years. Just about everything was run locally, even the police. The town was self sufficient, and to some it was like its own little world.

Growing restless and sick of pacing, he left his isolated little cabin and walked through the woods to the town. At an easy jog, it was only a few minutes before he could see the entire town in front of him. A restaurant, a gas station, a general store, the police station, and the homes of those who lived there. The postal service was about all the contact people had with the outside world, but as far as Chris could tell from living there all his life, no one really cared.

The sun was not even mid-sky when he entered town. Despite his desire for isolation, he found that he wanted to talk to someone. No matter how he tried to deny it, it was simply a part of human nature and he could not put it aside. It was even deeply imbedded into his wolf self, making denial all the more impossible. He quickly gave up the brief fight with himself and entered Larry's Tavern. If he was going to talk to someone, he might as well get something to eat.

There were few people at the tables, as it was a little early for lunch and late for breakfast, but there were always a few people there. Chris sat at the front counter on a stool, instead of at a window side table. He still didn't want to be close to too many people.

He looked around the place. It had been a while since he had last stopped by here. The cushioned stools were still comfortable; the cushions still the same faded red he remembered. Just about everything was made of wood, giving it a very old feel. All kinds of things hung from the walls, like hunting trophies and old enlarged photographs. Though he loved the outdoors, he always felt comfortable here, almost at ease. He'd all but forgotten the feeling.

"Sleep well last night Chris?" Larry asked from behind the counter, bringing Chris to attention.

"Like a log. No pun intended" he added quickly as he casually leaned on the counter. Chris couldn't remember how many times he had used that joke about sleeping in his cabin, intentional or not.

Larry laughed as he always did. "Yeah, I know, you're a deep sleeper. Someone pounding at the door with a battering ram wouldn't wake you. Still, those wolf cries were louder than usual. You sure they didn't wake you?" he asked with an odd tone of voice.

Chris gave him a look, trying to keep his expression even. Larry seemed to believe that Chris was a werewolf. He had heard Larry mention it before to others, but it seemed no one else shared his sentiment. For whatever reason, Larry either just accepted him, or didn't quite know what to do. Chris had known Larry for quite some time, back when he was just a teen, but he wasn't sure just what Larry would do.

"I woke at daybreak, as always. So, what do you mean by louder? You think they're getting closer?"

"No, just louder" he said, fidgeting with his apron. "If you ask me, I don't like the sound of those cries. There's something in them that gets to you. Something deep, it's hard to explain."

Chris was relieved a bit. At least his wolf self hadn't been advancing on the town. He doubted that would ever happen, but still the worry stayed at the back of his mind.

"Can I get something to eat?" Chris finally asked in the following silence.

"The usual?" Larry replied, arching his eyebrow a bit.

For some reason, Chris couldn't help but grin a little. "Yeah."

A few minutes later his steak arrived, cooked rare, and he started cutting it up. It filled up most of the plate and he cut up what would likely be considered rather large pieces for each bite.

"So, Chris" Larry started, "do you know about the new arrival yet?"

Chris paused in his meal to look up at Larry. New arrivals were few and far between in this little town. "No, when did they arrive?"

"Early this morning. Called herself Lindsey and said little else as she ate her breakfast. Near as I could tell, all she had was her motorcycle, her helmet, whatever was in her wallet and the clothes on her back. Found that a bit odd."

"She's not the first." Still, her story interested him, though he couldn't put a finger on why. Maybe because no one had ever arrived with quite so few possessions.

"True. Anyway, last I saw she was headed for Sam's general store. Don't know where from there."

Chris had an idea where. “Hmm, well, thanks for sharing with me.”

“Sure thing, thought you’d be interested” he replied, then greeted the customer that Chris had heard walk in.

Chris finished his steak in silence, eating it faster than he knew he should, and left the money by the plate. He pushed open the light wood door and walked out, making his way to where this Lindsey surely was. He knew everyone in this small town to some degree, as the more he knew, the easier it was to avoid them. This new arrival was an unknown, and the unknown was always a danger.

The place Stacy now called home was the definition of a fixer-upper. Floorboards were missing, parts of the ceiling were on the floor, cobwebs were everywhere, and hardly anything looked stable. She wasn’t quite sure just how she’d get it back into working order by herself, but she’d manage, somehow. Once basic cleaning was done, as far as she could get it, she went for her new toolbox. With a hammer in one hand and nails in the other, she began taking care of the most obvious repairs.

She had spent a fair amount of her money on supplies she thought she needed, and would likely need far more. At the moment, most of them were laid across the floor. She would have set them on the table, but was afraid that the table would collapse under the weight. She’d fix that next.

As she worked, moving from project to project, she began to envision the place in her mind; at least what she hoped she could get it to be. A small wooden table with a single wooden chair; a fireplace set in the back; a wood stove; no electricity to speak of; real wood floors; perhaps a thing or two to decorate the walls. In her mind, the dilapidated cabin she’d just settled into became a cozy little home she could live the rest of her new life in.

A knocking at the door startled her, and she barely missed smashing her fingers with her hammer. She had to take a few deep breaths before she could get up. Then it struck her; who would come all the way out here in the woods to her home? Could it be..?

She violently shook her head, trying to shake off her paranoia. If it was them they wouldn’t have knocked at the door in broad daylight, not even if no one could see them. She cracked open the door, keeping her newly installed chain secured, to see a young man standing at her doorstep. His hair was somewhere between short and medium length, black and a little scraggly. The rest of him, especially his face, reminded her of something, but she wasn’t sure what. He definitely wasn’t one of them.

“Hi, welcome to town” he said casually.

“Who are you?” She asked cautiously.

“I’m Chris, Chris Ternsen. You’re Lindsey, right? Larry said you came in this morning.”

“Yeah, I did.” She stood there awhile, just looking at him, wondering why he was there. She was tempted to just shut the door, but being an obvious recluse would likely only make being so harder, as curiosity would draw people. When she looked into his eyes, she saw something that she had never seen before. It seemed somehow familiar though, but she could not comprehend why. Chris looked away, towards the heart of the forest, beginning to shift his weight slightly from foot to foot. She had the feeling that he had looked into her eyes as deeply as she had his. She shook her head lightly to clear it.

“What brings you to Solitude?” Chris asked after a moment.

That was a question she really didn't want to answer, but she couldn't help herself. "Just...getting away from the hustle and bustle," she managed. "Settle down in a quiet town and live a quiet life. What more does one really need?" She tried to be discrete about removing the chain, and he didn't seem to notice. As she tried to act casual, she opened the door just a bit wider. If they were going to have a conversation, she might as well be polite about it.

"Not much," he replied. There was a ghost of a smile tugging at his lips, and Stacey wondered at his tone. She didn't ask, but made a note of it.

It seemed clear to her that he wasn't there just to say hi. For whatever reason, he was staying, and despite herself, she just couldn't come up with a reason to send him away.

"Would you like to come in?" she asked. The look of surprise on his face told her that she had clearly misjudged his intentions. Apparently he hadn't planned on the conversation going on much farther than it had.

"Are you offering?" That was exactly what she had done, and he seemed a bit off balance. He had stopped fidgeting completely and looked as though he was a bit dazed.

"I guess I am" she said, giving a light smile and mentally shaking her head. There was no going back now without arousing curiosity, attention she'd rather not have. She opened the door all the way and stepped aside. "Come in."

He stood there a moment, uncertainty written on his face. Then he shook himself a bit (more like a heavy shiver), took a deep breath and calmly walked in. He looked around, seemingly taking in every detail. The scene reminded her of what she had been doing before the interruption, and would have been the perfect excuse. Still, it was too late to simply boot him out, especially after her invitation, so she'd have to make the most of it.

"You've done a lot with the place" he said finally.

"Did you used to live here?" she asked, wondering if that was the cause of all his emotions.

"Yeah, a long time ago. I used to visit every now and then." He clamped his mouth shut and looked away, even though he had yet to actually meet her eyes since she let him in.

It was quiet enough to hear the floorboards creak under their shifting weight. "If you don't want me to live here then--"

"No, no, it's all right. That was all a long time ago. Don't worry about it. It's not my home anymore."

"Where do you live?" If this was his old house, why was he still so close?

"In a cabin in the woods a half mile or so south of here. I moved in after--" He shut his mouth again and tried to smile, not looking away this time.

Stacy wanted to ask what he was going to say, but thought it rude. His smile seemed to tell her to forget what he said, and she could see a hint of pain in his eyes. A pain she'd seen in the mirror before. She decided to let the matter drop. He was still a stranger after all, even if she had let him into her house. And there was no reason for her to press anyhow.

He looked around again. "Do you need any help?"

She only thought for a moment. "Sure, thanks."

Chris returned the next day to help out. There was something different about her; she was certainly unlike anyone else he'd ever known. He thought that they may have more in common than he had with most people. Perhaps that helped explain why he was more comfortable around her. Helping her fix the house also gave him something to do other than pace around his own home. If she made the place hers, then maybe he could forget that it was once his. She was a bit of a mystery however, and one Chris thought would be safer solved.

When he arrived he found her outside, standing on her roof wearing only jeans and a T-shirt. Her short brown hair fell straight down, covering her ears and going no farther. She had a bit of muscle on her, and he could hear it in the pounding of her hammer. He waited until she paused in what she was doing to call up to her.

"Lindsey! Whatcha working on?"

Putting the hammer in one of the loops on her jeans, she looked back and down at him. "I'm fixing the roof. Figured it'd be a good idea to fix the outside while the weather's still nice so I can fix the inside when it gets nasty."

"Sounds like a plan. Mind if I join you up there?" He wasn't sure if he should, as there wasn't a whole lot of space on the roof.

"Sure, just be careful, there's not a lot of room to move around up here," she called down, mirroring his own thoughts. As he made his way to the ladder, she called back again, "And could you bring up that sealer stuff on the way?"

He didn't reply but picked it up and climbed the ladder. Setting it down where they weren't likely to kick it over, he walked over to her. There wasn't all that much angle to the roof, as it only really needed to keep water off and not piles of snow.

"So, what can I do?" he asked.

She turned around to face him, wiping sweat off her brow with the back of her arm. "You can start on the other side of the roof. I'll work on this side. Just look for holes and loose boards."

"Sure."

As they did their careful work, the sun made its way up further into the sky. There was hardly a breeze to speak of, and without a cloud in the sky the sun beat down on them relentlessly. Getting uncomfortable, he took off his shirt and draped it over his shoulder, deciding it would be more useful as a sweat-rag for the time being. Lindsey soon did the same, except she threw her shirt down to the base of the house, leaving her only in her bra up top. The first thing Chris noticed however was what was on her back.

It was a depiction of a hawk, seen from above with its wings spread wide as if in flight. He normally only saw them from below, but there was no doubt that it was a hawk. The wingtips touched the very edges of her shoulders, the tip of the beak just touching the base of her neck, and the tail feathers fell a little past halfway down her back. It was all in black, like a pencil drawing. The details were remarkable, and though the strap from her bra covered parts of it, he thought the whole thing looked amazing.

"Nice hawk" he commented, as much a compliment as a prompt.

She spun around, almost losing her balance on the roof. Without thinking he sprang forward and caught her, grabbing her arms. Her eyes were wide, reminding Chris uncomfortably of the deer he hunted. She pulled herself from his grip and took a few hurried steps back, breathing quickly. He was afraid she could fall again, but he stayed where he was.

Lindsey calmed down after a few breaths. “Oh, thanks. I’d kinda forgotten about it.”

Chris knew there was far more to it than that, but said nothing. Whatever it was, his seeing it clearly frightened her. “I haven’t seen something like that before” he said instead.

“It’s a tattoo. I got it a few years ago. I was younger then…” her voice trailed off at the last few words.

Chris could see pain in her eyes, pain and sadness, a look similar to one he had seen so many times. And he could swear that he could even smell fear from her, but he put that away as nonsense. There was no way he could tell that; he didn’t have his wolf’s senses as a human.

“It’s beautiful” he said eventually, then wondered why he said it. Why did he compliment something that had obviously brought her pain?

She smiled however, relieving some of his worries. “I’ve… sort of thought so to, though I don’t really see it all that often.”

“Well,” he started, wanting to change the subject, “let’s get this done so we can get out of the sun.”

“Yeah, it is pretty hot.”

When Chris left, Stacy put her shirt back on and walked back inside her home. There she fiercely berated herself. How could she have forgotten about that tattoo? How could she have let Chris see it? Why was she seeing anyone when she was supposed to be living alone? The last question actually hit her the hardest, because she could not come up with a decent answer. The fact that he was helping her felt like something of an excuse in her mind, because she knew she was perfectly capable of doing things herself.

She reached under the back of her shirt collar and felt the skin where she knew the hawk was. It was the symbol of a cult. A cult she had willingly joined about four years before. She shuddered at the memories of the whole thing: the tattoo; the robes; the bizarre beliefs.

Tears came to her eyes as she recalled once more the reason she left, the reason she faked her own death, the reason she had come here. She had been accepted deeper and deeper into the cult, her devotion earning her high praise by the priests. She was invited to witness the purging of a cult woman’s soul. She recalled how she had been eager to go.

What she witnessed then all but shattered her mind. It was no purging, it was a murder. A gruesome, sick murder. For her own sake she had forced herself to be passive and show no emotion. The woman’s raw screams of pain and terror still haunted her dreams. The blood, the screams, and finally the end of the woman’s life had made Stacy feel sick, and she could still easily recall the feeling in her stomach, how hard it had been to keep from vomiting right then and there. At that point, she had fully realized her mistake.

Shortly after that, she had told the priest that she was leaving, and would never return. Hot tears rolled down her face and she fell to her hands and knees as she recalled what happened next. Quickly, she suppressed the memories. She did not want to relive it; she was afraid she would simply snap if she did. They had let her live, barely, and

commented on how her soul appeared tainted. The threat had been left hanging. That was when she knew she had to go, to die and become someone else.

That was what she was doing now, and they would never find her. Not here. Here she was not Stacy Lens, but Lindsey Stone. Stacy Lens was dead. She'd already buried that self.

Wiping tears from her eyes, she walked over to her kitchen to make something simple to eat.

That night, she heard the howling of a wolf. To her, the cry was lonely, desperate, and somehow anguished. It touched her, resonating in some strange way. She shook her head to clear her thoughts, and rising feelings. No, she was merely putting those emotions into that call. It meant nothing. Again the cry came, and she tried to shut it out. It was just a wolf.

A week after that encounter, and helping out Lindsey each of those days, Chris woke up with more pain in his heart than he could ever remember feeling. His longing hurt him now more than ever. Was it tied to what he felt when he was with Lindsey? When he recalled it, he was startled to realize that when he was with her, he often forgot about being a werewolf.

That first day, he had completely forgotten. The next, he only remembered when he saw the look of fright on her beautiful face. *Beautiful face?* He could hardly believe what he was thinking. Was he falling in love with this stranger? Was that what he felt, love?

No, he couldn't feel love for her. He couldn't let himself do it. He hardly even knew her. It would only bring pain to them both, or worse. Chris feared that pain could drive him over the edge, making him do something he had feared all his life. No, he would forget about her, leave her alone, and go back to his solitude. He knew enough now.

He stayed in his cabin the next week and a half, going out at night as he had always done. But something was different now. His wolf self knew that something had changed. He could feel it in his bones. His mate was near.

He knew she was near, but not where. He called to her, called and knew she heard. Where was she? Why did she not come? The wolf knew that the hunt was nearly over. His mate was near. He had only to find her.

Eventually, restless once more, Chris went to town. Again, he walked into Larry's Tavern. It was really the only place he felt he could go. This time, he sat at a corner table near the back, as far away from anyone else as he could get. There was only one window nearby, and nobody was near him. Maybe he could talk to Larry again.

He ignored the sound of approaching footsteps, continuing to stare out the window at the woods. They were too light to be Larry's. He was a bit surprised that they were still getting closer and hadn't stopped at a table already.

"Chris." His name and the voice caught his attention and he whipped his head around to see Lindsey standing next to him. There was a nametag at her breast, though she wore everyday clothes. "Haven't seen you in a while."

He looked away, unable to look her in the eye. "I... just needed some time alone." The words were out of his mouth before he thought about them, and it was likely the last thing he would have said had he been thinking.

“Yeah, so did I,” she said softly. “So, can I get you anything?”

Chris looked up at her again. “You work here now?”

“Yeah. I needed money, and when Larry heard about it he offered me a job. He’s a great guy. You friends with him?”

He gave her a little smile. “Something like that.”

“Well, he certainly had a few things to say about you. Like your usual. You want me to get it for you?”

“And a glass of water” he added.

“All right, I’ll be back in a bit.” She gave him a little smile as she left.

As he sat there, he thought about her. No, he could never love her. That was impossible. But, maybe they could be friends. Yeah, they could be friends. The idea had appeal to him. They could become good friends; he would get what he wanted, and needed, and not be hurt. It could work.

It would have comforted him more if he could have brought himself to truly believe it.

When Stacy returned home, setting her nametag down on the table, she thought about Chris. For whatever reason, she’d been doing that a fair amount recently. She wondered why he’d been so helpful, and then just stopped coming, practically disappearing. Larry had said something about Chris rarely coming into town. Then there was the look in his eyes at the tavern. He seemed, so sad.

It struck her like a sucker-punch... why was she still thinking about him at all? Wasn’t she defeating the point of being here in the first place? With a sigh, she took her shirt off and sat down on the kitchen chair. She always did like wearing nothing but her bra, the sense of freedom it gave her. Nothing but air moving across her bare skin. She knew that true isolation likely wasn’t possible. Mentally, she just couldn’t take it. She had always been so social.

But those days were over. Stacy Lens was dead. She was Lindsey Stone now, and that was all that mattered. She felt that her new life was starting well. She had a home, a job, and obscurity.

Still, she liked it when Chris came over. He was so helpful, and so kind. That’s when she recognized what it was she was feeling. It was the beginning of love. She was shocked. She was falling in love?

Stacy shot up, unable to sit still, her mind suddenly racing. No, no, she couldn’t love him. She just couldn’t. She couldn’t risk losing everything again. Not again.

Then she had a thought. She was Lindsey now, so maybe she could start over. Though the thought was tempting she could not bring herself to accept it, and it whittled away like an uncared for flower. No, she didn’t want to get close to anyone. There would be too many secrets; secrets that she felt would keep her from being an honest lover. She would just have to nip this little romance in the bud.

Though, Chris could still be a friend. Yes, that would work. She could use a friend, needed a friend. That way, she could fool herself into thinking there was nothing more than friendship between them. That that was all the feeling was. And she could keep her sanity as well.

Making a little half hearted smile, she walked into her bedroom to get some sleep.

Chris came back to her home the next day, ready to help out again. Lindsey was the first real friend he had ever had, and he liked the feeling. He could smile when he was with her, and just be a human being.

Even though a lot of progress had already been made, the house had been in such a dilapidated state when it started that it would take a lot more than the two of them had already given to get it done. So, the two spent more time on it, working alone together.

A month more passed, and Chris thought they had finally finished the house. He had to admit, it was a nice looking place now. It was simple, but not plain in any way. It just seemed to have elegance about it, like everything there was all that that was necessary. Her house made him take a look around his own home. He had never really thought about the décor before. He took a quick look around from his position on the couch, thinking that maybe he should do something about it.

Knocking on the door brought him out of his reflections. Who would be knocking on his door? He was halfway there when he knew who it must be. There was only one person who would come to his home. He opened the door saying, "Lindsey."

"Was it that obvious?" she replied, standing outside the door, her fist ready to knock again.

"Pretty much. I don't get many visitors, so I figured it would be you." Chris thought it odd that she hadn't walked in yet, even though he had stepped aside. "What brings you here?"

"I, uh, needed some help back at my place. I'm having trouble with the plumbing. I would have called, but Larry had told me you didn't have a phone."

Chris smiled and gave a light chuckle. "No I don't. Pretty long walk though."

"It's not that bad."

"Do you want to come in?" he finally offered.

She thought about it for a bit. "All right. My house won't flood while I'm here."

He gave another light chuckle as she walked in and he shut the door behind her. He loved doing that, being able to laugh. Chris couldn't even recall the last time he had honestly laughed before he'd met Lindsey.

As he looked back into the house, he was momentarily afraid that there may be signs of his werewolf self around that she would notice and ask about. Questions he didn't know how to answer. He let out a small sigh of relief when he remembered he'd swept the day before. Any hair from last night would hardly be visible, and would likely be easily dismissible. Any claw marks on the floor weren't much of a concern either, since at a casual glance they really didn't look like claw marks, just parts of an old beat up floor. He was fine.

She looked around the place, and Chris thought that was likely how he looked when he first entered her home. His old home. Burying those memories once again, as he no longer needed them, he followed her into the main part of the house.

"Wow" she remarked, "It's so roomy in here. Looks like the only room that's separated is the bedroom."

"And the bathroom" he added.

Lindsey looked back and smiled at him. He loved that smile. "Yeah, that too."

Thinking back to décor as she glanced around, he really took a good hard look at the place. His old grey couch was pretty beaten up, though not too badly. His table was fine, as he hadn't abused it much throughout his life. The kitchen area was only the bare

essentials, with a wood stove, oven, and a faucet. The countertops looked all rights; being wood they somewhat hid the years. The place felt old, even though it hadn't even been ten years. It also seemed to have an almost, wild, feel to it. Maybe that's why he never changed it.

"I like it" Lindsey eventually said, completely turning around to face him. "I think it fits you."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, honestly curious as to what she meant.

"I don't know. It just, feels right that this is your home. It's like... it's just another part of the woods. I can't really explain it. It's just one of those feeling things."

Chris just smiled, not really sure what to say to that. They looked at each other a moment. Again, when he looked into her eyes, he felt they masked something. It was as though she was always holding back something. By the story of how she came to town, he assumed she was running from something. But, maybe there was more to it.

He set those thoughts aside. They didn't matter now, not with the decisions he'd already made. If she didn't want to talk about it, he wouldn't bring it up. Besides, he was hiding at least as much as she was. *To each their own*, he thought, mildly amused by how appropriate it was right then.

"You want something to eat before we go over to see the plumbing?" he asked.

"Sure, thanks. I haven't had much to eat today."

At her house, Chris went right to work. The problem wasn't much, just a bit of a leak at a bolt in the pipes under the sink, but the pipe was rusted pretty badly. Giving his wrench a good tug and pull, he easily understood why she wanted his help. Even in shape as he was, he still had a hard time with it.

With a disgusted grunt, he stopped pulling and wiped the sweat forming on his forehead. It was time to get creative.

"Hey, Lindsey, do you have any really tough string? I don't need rope, but something thin and strong. Like wire or something."

"I think I've got something like that somewhere around here. Give me a sec."

Chris took a few deep breaths and stretched his muscles, at least as far as he could inside the kitchen cabinets. He looked up at the leaky pipe, his head tilted so that it wouldn't drip on his forehead. It was a stubborn one.

"Lindsey" he called out, "how are you liking this town so far?" Having a general idea on what her background was, he hadn't wanted to ask that question for a while. Now that it had been over a month, and she seemed at ease, he was a little curious.

"I like it actually" she called back. By how loud she had to yell, he guessed she hadn't found that string yet. "Everyone's real friendly, like Larry, and it's so quiet around here. Except for the wolves at night."

He would have preferred she not mention that. He didn't like the feelings he'd been getting when he woke up recently. They were different than he was used to, and it made him more than a little uneasy.

"I've heard about that. I'm a deep sleeper, so I rarely hear them. Do they keep you up?"

"Sometimes. And sometimes, I just have a hard time not listening to it, like I don't want to stop. It's almost like...I want to answer that cry." Her voice got softer as she spoke, and Chris had a hard time hearing those last few parts. It started to sound like she was talking more to herself than him.

“You should try to stay up one of these nights” she continued, returning to her former volume. “It’s really something to listen to.”

If I could, maybe I would, he thought. He only ever had the vaguest memory of his werewolf self at any time, so he hardly knew what he sounded like. Chris found it interesting the way she described it, as that was certainly not the first thing that would have come to his mind. It made him wonder a bit why Larry described it so differently.

“Here it is!” she finally called out. Apparently she found the string. As he heard her footsteps approaching, there was a crash at the door. Lindsey’s shrill scream was more than enough to tell him that something was horribly wrong.

Chris slid out from under the sink, nearly hitting his head on the frame as he shot to his feet. He had only enough time to see the black robed man and the sword being thrust towards him. Before he knew it, the sword was imbedded in his chest.

He staggered back, bumped into the counter, and collapsed onto the floor, the protruding hilt keeping him on his side. He watched the scene unfold through unfocused, blurry eyes. Robed men grabbing Lindsey, each armed with some kind of medieval weapon. One threw her onto his shoulder. Faintly, he could hear her crying his name over and over. Desperate, heartbroken cries. Then one following behind her hit her head, and she fell limp and silent. The three men walked out.

No, not Lindsey. With all the strength left in him, he grabbed the hilt of the sword and, bracing himself as best he could, pulled. He cringed at the intense pain, and would have cried out if the blade were not still piercing his lung. It was a few more moments before he could summon the strength and will to make another attempt. Again he pulled. This time the blade came free. The blood soaked sword fell instantly from his hand as much from revulsion as from lack of strength.

On his hands and knees, Chris coughed up blood, trying to regain his strength. He watched as the wound in his chest quickly closed to nothingness. *I didn’t know I could do that*. He continued to cough up blood a little longer, then forced himself to his feet. He had to grab the counter to avoid falling again, from weakness and dizziness. It was a few minutes before he was close to his full strength.

His mind was reeling a bit, his gaze fixed on the open doorway. They had taken Lindsey. The light of day was fading as dusk settled. Anger and desperation filled him. *I have to find her*.

As he thought those words, it was as if they were spoken by two people at the same time. Chris noticed absently, but he didn’t care. As he ran out the door, he wanted to change. For the first time in his life, he truly embraced it. He willed it, and felt the change begin. Though his body changed, it was almost as though his mind had not, for man and wolf wanted the same thing. To find their love.

The wolf caught the scent of his mate and followed it out of the shelter. He knew it was her, and could smell her fear. Where her scent ended, an odd new scent trail began. He followed the trail, nothing impeding his movements to her as once they might have in his search. As he ran he ripped the soft thing around his torso; it was too cumbersome and irritating. What had been on his feet had already ripped off from the change. He would find her, tonight, and make her his own. Soon, he would find her.

Stacey just sat on the chair she was tied to. She didn’t scream anymore, she didn’t know the point. As far as she was concerned, her life was already over. Chris was dead. She

hadn't thought it would hurt this much, but it did. Death, real death, would be welcome. *Just end it all*, she thought. *The running, the hiding, the feelings, everything*. She had lost everything she ever had, twice.

She watched as they chanted, knowing every word. There were nine now, all circling around her. Stacey had heard every word before. This was the same ritual she had once witnessed, the one that led her here in the first place. Normally, the chair would be more ornate, but it seemed they were making due.

Still they chanted their low slow chant. They drew their knives now, still chanting. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see it happen. She just wanted them to get it over with.

First, they would cut deeply into each of her calves, then into her thighs, then into her forearms and biceps. Every cut could circle the selected area, the arteries carefully avoided. When that was done, they would wait, as she sat there bleeding and in pain. Then, finally, they would ram a dagger into her back, into the heart of the hawk. It was a slow, painful way to die. Still chanting, one of the nine cultists lowered his knife for the first cut.

A loud crash caused her to snap her eyes open to see the door splintering inward as a dark grey mass landed on the floor before it. When the debris settled, she could see what it was. It was a werewolf, wearing a pair of jeans. At first she thought something must be wrong with her eyes, or that her mind had finally snapped, but the rage on its face and the fire in its eyes were all too real.

Before any of the cultists could react, the beast lunged at the group, taking three to the ground behind her. She couldn't see what was going on, but what she heard told her everything she needed to know. That, and the droplets that occasionally hit the back of her neck.

The werewolf bolted all across the room, in and out of her view, slashing, biting, and ripping anything it saw. Knives protruded from its body as it all but tore the cultists to shreds. As much as the sight disgusted and terrified her, she could not close her eyes. Within seconds, everyone was dead except her and the wolf. As the wolf's steps came slowly from behind her, she closed her eyes for the inevitable and silently prayed that it would be quick.

Then, the ropes around her wrists loosened and fell off, followed by those securing her torso, and then her ankles. Stacey didn't understand just what was going on.

"It's all right. You're safe now."

She recognized the voice instantly. *It couldn't be!* Stacey whirled around in her chair to see Chris standing behind her, bare-chested and bloody. She just stared at him, not comprehending any of it. How could he be alive? How did he get here? Where was the werewolf?

"H...h...h...how?"

He gave her the broadest grin he ever had. It almost seemed as though he were laughing! "First, are you all right?"

It was a few deep breaths before she could find any voice. "I'm all right Chris, but... how are you alive?"

This time, his smile was not all merriment. "Lindsey, I'll tell you simply. I am a werewolf."

She felt as though her brain shut down for a moment before jumping into overdrive. In a flash, everything seemed to make sense. She sprang out of the chair and all but leapt on him, wrapping her arms tightly around him. He returned the embrace, but more gently, and to her a bit tentatively. "I don't care Chris, I just don't care. I love you anyway." She said, beginning to cry, her emotions from everything taking over.

To her surprise, he pried her off him, gently, and gave her a sad look. "Lindsey...I can't." She didn't understand. He must have seen it on her face, for he continued, "I want to; I swear I do, but I can only give you half my heart. As a werewolf, I become someone else. The wolf of me seeks a mate, and will continue to search for a mate, of which you could not be to him. I'm sorry."

This time, she came up to him more slowly before giving him a heartfelt hug. The tears forming in his eyes told her how much pain he was in, a pain she wanted to ease. To her relief, Chris still returned the embrace. "I love you Chris, like I've loved nothing else. I'll do whatever it takes to have your full love. I would become your mate, as well as your lover."

He looked into her eyes, eyes wide and startled. "Lindsey, do you realize what you're saying? There would be no turning back, and I can not make any promises as to what will happen-

"Chris, I don't care what it takes" she said slowly, cutting him off. "I love you, and I'd do anything for you to love me in return." Stacey fought back the fear that he would still refuse her.

She could see what argument he had remaining just drain away in his eyes. "I love you too Lindsey." And he gave her the gentlest kiss on her forehead. To her, that sealed everything, and made everything feel better.

"My name's not Lindsey, Chris, it's Stacey."

He gave a light chuckle as he shook his head. "It doesn't really matter. Come on, let's go home to talk about this. My home."

A few hours later, Stacy sat naked in the woods, waiting for Chris. Or at least who he was as a werewolf. They had talked long and hard about it, and in the end it just came down to her in the forest. She didn't know what would happen, as even Chris didn't know. All she could guess was that a bite would be involved.

She sat on a dead tree, waiting for Chris to arrive. Thankfully, it wasn't all that cold. She felt a little odd, sitting out there naked. But, they had agreed that it would likely be better if she were.

Soon, she saw him walking into the little clearing through the brush, not having even heard his approach. At his arrival, she stood up, but did not advance. She waited for him, both eager and anxious, a paradox she didn't even want to comprehend.

He approached her slowly, and soon they stood only about a foot apart, staring at each other. Stacey had to look up a bit to see into his eyes, as he was taller as a wolf. The wolf opened his jaws a bit, revealing his fangs to the moon and her eyes. She remained still, waiting.

With a snap the wolf bit into her left shoulder. Stacey gave a startled gasp as the fangs pierced her heart. She could feel the strength drain out of her. Soon, Chris' jaw was holding her up more than her own legs. Her vision began to fade as her breaths quickly grew shallower.

Then, there came a strange feeling through her heart. A feeling of strength that began to course through her body. Slowly, she transformed. Her mouth became a muzzle, her ears moved up, fangs grew, and fur covered her body. As her body changed, so did her mind. A new mind formed within her, that of her new wolf self.

As the change completed, the she-wolf looked at the wolf with his jaws in her shoulder, trying to make her his mate. He wanted her. And she wanted him. She bit into his left shoulder, her fangs piercing his heart as his did hers. She drank his blood as he did hers and they grabbed each others back, digging their claws into each other's flesh.

Something more coursed through her now, more than just her blood. She could feel a new energy, life flowing through her from her mate's heart. They were not simply mates, but soul mates.

After a long time, they released their jaws, but not their grip. After only a moment, they gripped each other so fiercely they forced the air out of each other's lungs and they howled into the night sky in the sheer joy of their ecstasy.

Epilogue

Chris Ternen, age 23, and Lindsey Stone, age 20, went missing the night of June fourth. Though they have yet to be found, authorities have announced that the two are likely dead. "All that really needs to be done is to fill out the paperwork", said police chief Wellard.

Though little information has been released, authorities have implied that there is significant evidence as to the fate of the two. It has been speculated that their disappearance is connected to a mass murder found within a derelict house on the south end of town, which authorities have announced likely did happen the same night. It is the worst act of violence this town has seen since the brutal home invasion almost eleven years ago. As to whether or not there is a connection, authorities had no comment.

Though both kept to themselves, living in homes apart from most other residents, they were still a part of the community. Larry Manner, owner of Larry's Tavern, knew both personally...

"Chris," Stacy said as she poked her head through the door of their bedroom. "Are you reading that article again?"

Chris set down the paper, only mildly reluctant after seeing the worry on her face. That article was one thing he made sure he got a hold of before he left the town for good. He wanted that reminder, that solid connection to the past.

"Sorry. It just...came to mind recently, and I wanted to look at it again."

"It's been a full year Chris; let it go."

As much as he wanted to, he still found it difficult. It hadn't been easy to start over again, and it wasn't the same. It was better for sure, but still, one can never truly give up an entire life and leave it behind. There was too much attached to that time for him to do so.

Wait, a full year? He looked out the window at the dimming sky. Sure enough, a full moon was slowly growing stronger as the orange sky faded to black. One full year, it was their first anniversary.

Chris smiled to Stacey at the memory, and by the smile she returned, he knew she was remembering that time as well. "Let's celebrate," he said "It's been a while since we've really been out."

In answer, she pulled off her shirt and tossed it at him. "I'll meet you outside," she said on her way out, with a wink and a wide grin.

Chris smiled broadly, a feral grin. How he loved her.