

The Shifter's Choice

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Are werewolves sexy? Harlequin Mills & Boon believe they are; and they are a publishing house with a reputation for knowing what its predominantly female readership wants. The Harlequin Mills & Boon Nocturne series is just one of the ways the publishing house has diversified from their traditional offerings of modern, historical or medical romances in order to remain current and attract new readers. Dating from around the time of the phenomenal success of Stephenie Meyer's paranormal romance the *Twilight* saga (first published 2005), the series features '[f]ast-paced, action-oriented romances in which characters struggle with life-and-death issues in a paranormal world' (Tuttle: online 4th January 2016). Featuring vampires, shape-shifters and figures from Greek mythology and fairy kingdoms, werewolves are a firm favourite amongst both authors and readers for the role of powerful and mysterious alpha male hero within the series. With titles such as *One Night with the Wolf*, *Mate of the Wolf*, and *Undercover Wolf*, how does one even choose which werewolf romance to indulge in?

The Shifter's Choice by Jenna Kernan contains all the key elements of a gripping and suspenseful paranormal romance. The alpha male hero, Johnny is the ultra-tough US Marine who was transformed into a werewolf during a firefight in Afghanistan. His captain, Mac, fell victim to the same attack, but he is able to control his transformations, whereas Johnny is not. Johnny, it seems, is stuck permanently in werewolf mode. Enter, the heroine, Private Sonia Touma, who like most Mills & Boon heroines is really very likeable, in spite of her criminal record and violent past. When she is first introduced to the reader, we see her through the medium of her army record file which Mac confronts her with: "I've read your file." [...] "Thick file." He showed her the width with his thumb and index finger. "Mostly just reports of you quitting" (Kernan, Ch.1); and it soon becomes clear that Sonia is only serving in the marines as part of a deal brokered by her lawyers to enable her to escape prison for breaking and entering.

Sonia's role is to teach Johnny sign language (being a wolf makes it difficult for him to communicate). Growing up with a deaf sister, Sonia is fluent in sign language but Johnny's is emotionally shattered by his new form as she is damaged by the deprivation and poverty of her past, and the first few chapters of the book focus upon their mutual difficulties in overcoming these barriers and trusting each other. However, blackmailed into taking the job ('Do the job or do time,' Mac threatens her, [Kernan, Ch. 1]), Sonia, like countless other Mills & Boon heroines before her, is outmanoeuvred into spending enough time with the hero to fall in love with him. Once this realisation has hit her, the main barrier to their love is clear enough: they're not even the same species.

However, help is at hand in the slightly unnerving form of mad scientist Dr. Zharov, who is working away in the basement of the top secret military base Johnny is confined to, experimenting on anything he can get his hands on to help Johnny transform back into his human form (something tells me Dr. Zharov didn't complete the Research Ethics module when undertaking his doctoral training). After a couple of false starts, Johnny is back in his human form and free to woo the heroine. Saving her from some errant vampires who want to kidnap Mac's (also-vampire) wife helps, although at the end the main barrier to their love seems to be that US marines are not permitted to 'fraternize' together. However, this is a Mills & Boon romance, and no barriers exist that can't be overcome by the power of love, including army regulations. The end is a foregone conclusion and before you can say 'there's a full moon tonight,' Johnny has permission to kiss his bride and take her to what is her first real home.

As is clear from the plot summary, this is a romance where the author is asking her readers to suspend disbelief quite a lot. However, like most Mills & Boon romances, it's not as empty-headed as literary critics would have you believe. The story raises several issues of interest to contemporary society, including such matters as the selfishness of our Western consumption-driven culture in which the gulf between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' is ever widening. Sonia, firmly established in the 'have-not' category, is almost demonized by Captain Mac until she proves her worth by saving Johnny. This happens in spite of the fact that it is made clear to the reader that Sonia has been forced into crime by her struggle to survive the streets, after the foster care system she was abandoned into failed her. Similarly, how right is it that Dr. Zharov, working insanely away in his basement, experiments so freely and with such reckless disregard for suffering, on any animal he can get his hands on, including, when the opportunity presents itself, Johnny himself? The concept lends new resonance to Sonia's reply when Johnny asks her: "You don't mind that I'm still half

monster?”” Sonia smiles and reassures him, perhaps thinking of Dr. Zharov as she does so, ““No more monster than most men, less than some”” (Kernan, Ch. 4). The narrowness of the divide between humans and animals is emphasized at nearly every turn in the novel. At one stage, one of the other Marines stationed at the base, describes his post as being in a ““half-assed zoo”” (Kernan, Ch. 4); and it is clear from the very beginning that Sonia finds the wolf in Johnny a huge turn-on.

I have studied Harlequin Mills & Boon novels for a number of years and have found that there’s always more between the covers than just moonlight kisses and melting embraces. Jenna Kernan’s *The Shifter’s Choice* is no exception to this, and is an intriguing introduction into the world of werewolf/human paranormal romance.

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