



# *The Shape of Love*

Vicky Burkholder  
Misty Simon  
Victoria Smith



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Maryland**

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# ***Who's Your Alpha?***

**Vicky Burkholder**

## **Dedication**

Dedicated to The Bootsquad without whom this wouldn't be possible, and Bob for his unwavering support.

# Chapter One



**“Y**ou’ve got to come, Sunny. That’s all there is to it.”  
There were times when Sunny Clark hated her best friend, Rommy St. James. Times when all she wanted to do was slam down the phone, turn off the e-mail, lock up her mailbox, and otherwise become unreachable. “Give me one good reason.”

“I’ll pull the mom card.”

“Rommy! That’s not fair.” Just because her mother was off somewhere in the wilds of the South American rain forest didn’t mean she didn’t exert her extensive influence on Sunny, and Rommy knew it. If Rommy brought Sunny’s mother into this, Sunny would never have any peace. Sometimes she thought Rommy stayed in touch with Dr. Emily Clark more than Sunny did. There was no justice in the world. None. Pushing thoughts of her mother to the background, she came back to what Rommy was saying.

“You’ve put this off forever. I’ve heard every excuse ever invented, and more than a few new ones. You’re done with college so no more working to pay for books. You’re done with your Master’s so no more Teaching Assistant duties. You’re done with

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your doctoral so no more thesis research, and I know for a fact the psycho clinic is closed that week so you'll be on vacation."

"That's 'psych' not 'psycho.' Gee, you've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Oh, and if you check your e-mail, you'll see your mom and I already made reservations for you at Carson Place, the new hotel. It's a block off the square."

"You already told mom? Thanks a lot, traitor." Sunny sighed. "Where are you and Sam staying?"

"We're with Sam's folks this time. I'd have offered to bring you with us, but I didn't think you'd enjoy their sofa."

"Not the orange monster?" Sam's folks had had the same ratty sofa since the 70's. It was a huge relic that should have been trashed a couple of decades ago.

"Yep. His mom claims she can't see the point of getting a new one when it'll only get ruined."

"Ew. No thanks." She hugged the phone to her shoulder as she checked the dates on her PDA, hoping against hope she had something going on during those dates. No luck.

"And David will be there."

At the mention of his name, Sunny's heart rate sped up and she was pretty sure if anyone took her blood pressure right now, it would be sky high. "David?"

"Yes, David. As in David Maxwell. You remember him. Tall, dark, handsome, gorgeous eyes? Into science and music and sports? Oh, and I think I remember he lived next door to you for oh, what, your whole life?"

How could she forget? Sunny had had a crush on him for as long as she could remember. But he'd been one of the "in" crowd and she, well, hadn't. Being overweight, nerdy, and a late bloomer didn't exactly put you high on the popularity scale. It didn't matter they'd shared a backyard fence, or cookies and milk when her family was in town. Fortunately, most of her parents' research trips had been over summer vacations. But it still meant she hadn't had many chances to bond with the more stationary kids. And traveling over the world didn't help her popularity. Sunny tamped down her memories. *I'm not a bump on the scale of humanity. I am somebody.* Keeping that litany in her mind, she turned her

attention back to Rommy.

“When’s the last time you shifted? I mean really shifted, and went out for a run?” Rommy asked.

Sunny refused to answer. She caught a glimpse of herself in her mirror and stuck her tongue out.

“Uh huh. That’s what I thought,” Rommy said. “You ever heard the phrase ‘use it or lose it’?”

“Of course. Just because I don’t shift anymore doesn’t mean I can’t. I have other priorities.” She studied her hand, turning it back and forth in a ray of sunshine. Hand-paw-hand-paw-hand.

“Yeah, I know. Tell me something, Dr. Clark, if you had a client who refused to recognize an important part of their past, a part defining who and what they are, what would you tell them?”

“That’s not fair.”

“I never promised to be fair. So you’ll come?”

Sunny sighed. “All right. All right. I’ll come. But don’t expect me to shift and go running through the woods with you. I’m not a kid any more.”

“You were never a kid. A bitch, yes, but never a kid.”

“Goodbye, Rommy.” She hung up the phone before Rom could say anything else. It looked like she was going back to Carsonville. When she left ten years ago, she was certain it had been forever.

Sunny slammed the trunk lid to her car and stared at the hotel that hadn’t been there the last time she’d been in town. Of course, ten years had passed, but still, a four-story hotel? And out on the edge of town, one of those new mega-stores had been built across from a huge gas station/convenience shop, right off the new highway. Where once there’d been cornfields, now apartment complexes stood, catering to the ever-expanding city folks looking for an escape from their cramped, expensive lives. So much had changed in the small town, and yet there were parts left unchanged for over a century.

She wondered if the people had changed.

Or the mountain.

She wheeled her suitcase into the lobby. A small fountain bubbling in the center was flanked by two sofas and tall palms.

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Everything was done in shades of cream, maroon, and navy. All very pretty—and so very boring. She approached the desk.

“Hey, Sunny. I didn’t expect to see you here. Surprised a lot of us when we saw the registration.” The woman behind the check-in desk smiled a false smile. Her long bleached blonde hair and too-heavy makeup couldn’t quite hide the ravages of too many cigarettes, tanning booths, and late nights at the local bar. Her crisp navy blue uniform covered a pencil thin shape.

“Ruby Baker. How nice to see you.”

The woman smiled with her mouth; it didn’t reach her eyes. Eyes colder than the Antarctic in mid-winter. “It’s Montgomery now. I assume you’re here for the reunion?”

“Yes.” Sunny resisted the urge to straighten her rumpled tunic and creased slacks, or run her hand through her short, dark curls. Though she wasn’t nearly as heavy as she’d once been, Sunny knew she’d never be one of the “thin” girls—the style-conscious clique who had decided who counted in their school. And Sunny hadn’t. Though she’d been a leader of sorts in her own right, but not of the alphas. “I have a reservation for four days.”

Ruby turned to her computer. “Ah, yes. Here you are. Non-smoking. Single room. Sunny Clark. Still the same name?”

Sunny attempted to ignore the smug smile on Ruby’s face. “Yeah. And what about you? I understand Tom’s your second? No, third husband. Oh, wait. He’s already moved on, too.”

Ruby slammed a keycard on the countertop, her smile tighter than a Hollywood starlet’s pushup bra. “Room 401. Enjoy your stay—and the view.”

Sunny picked up the card. “Why thank you. I think I will.” Whistling an old country song about a cheating farm wife who left her husband, Sunny wheeled her suitcase to the elevator.

The room looked like a thousand other generic hotel rooms, though maybe a tad smaller. Sunny dumped her suitcase on the bed closest to the door, then opened the curtains and snorted. Her “luxury” room looked out over the rear parking lot and was next to the elevator. At least she could see the mountain from here. Ruby might not think the view was much, but it was exactly what Sunny wanted to see. The late afternoon sun turned the autumn colors to a dazzling kaleidoscope display.

Sunny checked the clock on the nightstand. Five o'clock. She could grab some supper, then go for a run. Rommy wasn't due in until late and she'd have to do the family thing first. They'd hook up tomorrow, if possible. She stretched out her hand and stared at it. Her fingernails changed to claws and dark fur grew without her even thinking about it. Odd. Usually she had to really concentrate for the shift to happen. She shook her head and her hand resumed its normal long-fingered, manicured shape.

Except for the occasional run, she'd kept the urge to shift closed away for years. What was so special about this town that increased the desire, like hunger needing feeding? Or, in this case, changing? She couldn't even blame the urge on the full moon because she could change whenever and wherever she wanted. But why here? Why now?

Shaking off the questions, she strolled the three blocks to the nearby family diner rather than eat in the over-priced hotel restaurant. Besides, she figured from the fancy names on the menu, they probably gave you "cuisine" sized meals. And she wanted food. Food she could sink her teeth into. Food that filled her up. Food not served with crystal goblets, fine linen, and a wine list. She grinned as she passed by stores already closed for the night. Unlike larger towns and cities, Carsonville stores closed around five. Except on Fridays, then they stayed open as late as nine.

She pushed open the door of the diner. The noise of loud locals, country music, clanging heavy china, and "order up" assaulted her ears with a forgotten—and welcome—din. The place was pretty well packed. She inhaled. And inhaled again.

"Can I help you?" A waitress who looked to be barely past jail-bait age smiled at her, the bright fluorescents glinting off her braces.

"Table for one, please."

"I've got one booth left, or the counter."

Sunny spied the open booth—a two-seater next to the door. Noisy, cold—few people liked it. But she didn't relish sitting at the counter on a stool barely big enough for one hip let alone two. "I'll take the booth. Thanks."

"Sure." The girl—Darla according to her nametag—led her the two steps over and handed her a menu. "The specials tonight

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are the ham steak, meat loaf, or macaroni and cheese. I'll give you a few minutes."

Sunny looked over the menu and grinned. Another thing that hadn't changed. Oh, the prices were a little higher and they'd made a passing nod to "healthy" food by adding broiled or baked choices, but it was basically the same menu from ten years ago. And she knew exactly what she wanted. As she waited, the rest of the seats filled up with more coming. Though older, she recognized many of the patrons, some of them her old classmates, now with families of their own. A touch of envy colored her vision. If only... *Might as well wish for David to walk in.*

"Sunny?"

She looked up and all thoughts of food scurried away like a mouse from a cat. "David?"

The man standing next to her table looked even better than the lean muscled, dark-haired boy she'd had a crush on. Of course, every other female—and a few males—had felt the same way. David Maxwell was and had been every girl's dream. But he'd been her neighbor, and her friend. Unfortunately, that hadn't extended to boyfriend.

"Hi." His smile shone brighter than Las Vegas at full power. And she'd just spun the Mega-prize.

"Hi. You here with anyone?" Heat poured into her face. Man, was that lame. Of course he was. How could he not be?

"No. Just waiting for a seat."

Willing her hand not to shake, she pointed at the empty bench opposite her. "You're welcome to join me." She came close to melting into a puddle when he slid onto the seat.

"Don't tell me you're here alone," he said.

"Completely. It's been a long time since I was in town. How 'bout you? Are you here for the festivities?"

"Actually, I still live here. I was away for a few years, but came back." His shoulder lifted in an easy shrug, drawing her eyes. "Guess I missed the place. What about you? We never heard much after your folks left. Where are they now?"

"Would you believe somewhere in South America—Brazil last I heard. Dad is doing a study on the mythology of some unpronounceable indigenous tribe and Mom's studying their

forms of arts and crafts.”

“South America? That sounds like your folks. We never knew where they were going to drag you off to next.”

“Yeah, I did get to see a lot of places—mostly jungles and deep forests. Probably why I did so well in World Cultures class. So what do you do here?”

“I’m a vet. I have a small clinic across the river.”

“A vet? Just like you always wanted.” Good for him. At least one of them was living their dream. She loved her job; loved helping people with their problems, but it didn’t fill the empty place in her heart reserved for someone special. A spot so far left untouched.

A beautiful blush covered his face. She studied his eyes. She’d always loved them—palest blue ringed with a darker hue. So different from her own. She’d worn contacts as long as she could remember to cover the odd bi-coloring. Who had one green eye and one brown eye?

“Are you ready to order?” Darla was back.

“Cheese steak sandwich with onions and mushrooms, fries, and a Coke,” Sunny said.

“I’ll have the same,” David said.

Darla left them and Sunny grinned. “The same? How do you keep in shape?”

“I run a lot. Besides, people don’t come here for the salads.”

Sunny laughed, drawing stares from the surrounding tables. She hadn’t felt this good in a long time. It had been forever since she and David had exchanged confidences over Oreos and milk in the kitchen. She’d missed talking with him. Looking at him. Drooling over him. Tamping down her runaway hormones she returned to their discussion.

“I still don’t know what you do. Or where you live.” David said.

“Pittsburgh. I’m a psychologist at a small clinic there.”

“A psychologist! I’d never have guessed that. I thought you were going to go into business.”

Sunny stared out the window at the mountain. The town had been built at its base, between the slope and the river. “Things change.”

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Darla returned and sat four plates down—two with foot long toasted rolls cut in half and overflowing with chopped meat, cheese, mushrooms, onions, and sauce. The other plates were mounded with fries still sizzling from their oil bath. Next to the plates, she set two glasses filled with ice and soda.

“Will there be anything else?”

*Yeah, David in my bed.* “Um, no, I think we’re good,” Sunny said. She studied her sandwich and the mound of fries and sighed, her mouth watering from the aroma alone. She tucked the filling into the roll, picked half up and bit into it. Her eyes closed as the blend of flavors exploded in her mouth. “Oh, God, that is so good.”

“You don’t have steak sandwiches in Pittsburgh?”

She opened her eyes to find him grinning at her. “Not like this.”

“I’m beginning to think you didn’t come back so much for the reunion as you did for this sandwich.”

She noted he was making short work of his food, too. “You got that right.”

He put down his sandwich and stared at her until heat suffused her face. “So why did you come back, Sun? When you left, you swore that was it.”

Her sigh this time wasn’t one of ecstasy. “As I said, things change. I’ve changed. I’m not the same cowed little dork I used to be. I guess I needed to come back to prove something to myself.” She dug into her fries, avoiding his knowing look.

“That Ruby and her gang don’t rule you.”

“That, and more. And I missed the mountain. Pittsburgh is close, but it’s just not the same.”

“This place is in your blood. Those of us who are part of the mountain may try to leave—and do for a while—but we always come back.”

“Why? What is it about this place? There’s nothing special about this mountain. It’s just a mountain. A pile of dirt and rocks covered with trees. Why does this one draw me so? And why does it play in all my nightmares?”

He stared at her, a thoughtful frown on his face. “Nightmares? You have them a lot?”

“Ever since I left here. It’s weird. I’ve worked on trying to understand them and think it has something to do with this place.” It was odd talking so easily to him again, sliding back into their old, comfortable pattern. Like the years hadn’t passed.

“You really don’t know?”

“Know what?”

He shook his head. “Not here. Not now.” His voice dropped so she had to strain to hear him, and even then she wasn’t sure she did. “I can’t believe your folks never told you.”

“What?”

“Finish your dinner. Then we’ll go for a walk.”

The rest of their dinner talk ran to inconsequential things, like who was coming back, who married whom, who had kids, divorces. All the mundane subjects you touch on when you meet an old acquaintance from your teen years.

“Would you like dessert?” David asked as Darla arrived with their check.

“Not me. I’m stuffed.” She reached for the bill but he was faster.

“My treat.”

“I can pay.”

“I’m sure you can, but I owe you.”

“Huh? For what?” She almost melted into a puddle at his feet when he grinned at her.

“Remember graduation night?”

“Ye-ah.” Sunny did remember—barely. She had a fuzzy recollection of too much beer—if you could call one beer too much—and a long drive through the mountains.

“You don’t remember.” He laughed as he handed Darla a twenty. “We were so wound up but nothing around here was open...”

The memory returned, along with her snort of laughter. “So a whole bunch of us jumped in the back of your truck and you drove to State College to the truck stop. You didn’t have enough money to cover your food and the gas.”

“So you treated me. I’m finally getting the chance to return the favor.”

Sunny led the way outside. The sun had set, but soft globes

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lit the main street. David was close enough for her to feel the heat coming off him as they strolled the familiar streets. “What happened to the Five and Dime?” she asked as they crossed the square.

“It closed when Wal-Mart opened out by the highway.”

“But not the hardware store.”

“That’s because they supply things you can’t get anywhere else. The stores that were unique continue to thrive, the others...” He shrugged.

She noted they were strolling away from the center of town toward the mountain. “So what do you want to talk to me about?” She jumped as his cell phone howled. She quickly hid her hands in her pockets, willing the claws to turn back into fingers and fingernails while David answered his phone. All she heard was “I’ll be right there.”

“You have to go?”

“An emergency. I’m sorry. Where are you staying?”

“The hotel, room 401. Call me later?”

“If it’s not too late. Come, I’ll walk you back.”

“Go. I’m a big girl now, David. I’ll be fine.”

He sighed and shook his head. “You really have changed. The Sunny I knew didn’t like being out at night.”

“The Sunny you knew grew up. Go on. Call me tomorrow.” She watched as he took off at a quick jog. By the time he’d disappeared around a corner, she turned away and faced the mountain. Very few streetlights lit this part of town. Ten years ago, she’d never have ventured here alone. But like she’d told David, she’d changed.

She strolled on, reaching the end of paved streets and houses about thirty minutes later. A narrow path led from the end of the road into the forest. This was the night of the new moon so no light broke up the deep darkness under the trees. She picked a large hemlock with a double trunk next to a rounded boulder as a memorable spot and stripped out of her clothes. Finally, she removed her contacts. She tucked everything into her over-sized handbag and buried it in branches at the base of the tree. Then she shifted.

Hands and feet turned to paws, hair turned to silver-tipped

fur. As her body changed, she sniffed the air, searching for other animals in the area—especially humans. There was a smell—familiar and yet not—in front of her. Not close enough to be a danger, though. When the transformation was complete, she shook all over, settling her fur into place. Where a woman had previously been, a beautiful, but slightly overweight Siberian Husky now stood. Sunny took off on the path, stretching out her muscles, enjoying the night air and the freedom of running.

