



Black Rose

Josie

by

Lora Darling



There was no more time...

The sound of distant voices and snapping twigs jerked Josie's gaze toward the horizon. The noises were coming closer and she recognized them as the same ones that had interrupted her tryst with Michael earlier in the evening. What should have been a private, blissful encounter had turned into a frightful fight for their lives. Dropping to her knees, she buried her face in Michael's fur, memorized his scent, and said a silent goodbye. "I love you," she whispered before pulling back. A hot tear rolled down her cheek, but she swiped it away. There was no more time for grief.

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Josie

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Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706
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Publishing History
First Black Rose Edition July 2006

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Mom

It was the unbearable itching that roused Josie from her deep slumber. It burned across her back and clawed at her flesh, as if making the attempt to touch her bones. She moaned and rolled over. The damp earth seeped into the thin cotton of her t-shirt and the discomfort finally gave her the strength to open her eyes. Where was she? Blinking against the sparkle of stars above her, she shifted her head to the side and saw a familiar length of gold fur over muscle. Reaching out, she stroked her fingers through the soft bristles expecting to feel the steady rise and fall of breath, or at the very least, a low growling rumble of pleasure.

She felt and heard nothing.

“Michael?” Her voice rang out across the still, silent night, bouncing off some unseen obstacle before crashing back into her ears. She continued to caress the furred back of the magnificent beast lying at her side, but none of her strokes garnered any type of response. Real fear pushed her onto her elbows and she leaned close enough to bury her nose in the scent of wolf.

“Michael, can you hear me?” She whispered this time, knowing in her heart of hearts that her words, no matter how loud, would not be heard.

Josie snatched her hand away just in time to catch the sob that tore from her lips. The sight of Michael’s lifeless body brought back all the horrific memories of the last few hours: the fear, the flight, the horrible sound of gunshots, the pain. Her survival instincts screamed at her to get off her ass and find a place to hide, now. What if the hunters came back? What if they weren’t satisfied with only one kill? She was halfway to her feet when she realized she

had never changed out of her human form. If the hunters came back they'd see a woman alone, not a wolf. The prospect didn't add to her sense of safety one bit.

Josie's damp jeans clung to the back of her thighs, and her t-shirt provided no protection against the chilly night breeze as she stood and looked down at her best friend, lover, and mate while trying to decide what to do.

How would she survive without Michael? He was everything to her. He had brought her into this world and she feared her ability to survive a single day without him. What if the pack expected her to take a new mate? How long would they give her to mourn? That last question didn't matter, because no matter how long, it wouldn't be enough.

The sound of distant voices and snapping twigs jerked Josie's gaze toward the horizon. The noises were coming closer and she recognized them as the same ones that had interrupted her tryst with Michael earlier in the evening. What should have been a private, blissful encounter had turned into a frightful fight for their lives. Dropping to her knees, she buried her face in Michael's fur, memorized his scent, and said a silent goodbye. "I love you," she whispered before pulling back. A hot tear rolled down her cheek, but she swiped it away. There was no more time for grief.

With more tears burning in her eyes, she straightened up, sniffed the air, and decided to head north. It was away from the approaching voices and also away from the pack. She couldn't fathom facing any of them now. Not yet.

An endless amount of time passed and it soon became too difficult to continue walking on two feet. The discomfort across her back had increased and Josie realized the itching that had awoken her was the result of a gunshot wound. Earlier she had attributed the dampness of her shirt to the grass, but now she knew it was a combination of that and blood. The scent teased her nose and

warned her that without her health she'd never escape the hunters, but to heal she had to change.

Josie studied the sky and determined by the position of the stars dawn was only a few hours away. If she hoped to change and escape under the cover of darkness she had to do so now. Quickly stripping off her clothes, she let them lay where they fell, not caring if she made it back here to collect them later. Dropping to all fours and closing her eyes, she summoned the change. She'd gotten better at this over the years, but it still hurt like hell.

With her eyes squeezed shut against the pain, she listened to the racing of her heart and the popping of her bones. Her skin stretched and settled, then tingled as fur sprouted from new pores. In a matter of moments it was over and she opened her eyes to focus on the spread of her pads against the soft grass as it tickled between her toes. She could feel the earth beneath her and hear every noise in the sky above her. With ears twitching, she picked up the one sound that mattered more than all the others. The hunters.

They hadn't given up their pursuit, which meant every moment standing still increased her risk.

Arching her back, Josie felt the sting of her wound beneath her fur. She longed to drop onto the ground and roll around so the damp grass could soothe the burn, but that sort of relief would have to wait. In time the wound would heal on its own and she'd be like new. Unlike Michael — she pushed the thought away and sprang into an easy gallop.

The wind stung her eyes and whistled through her ears, helping to ease the ache of her loss. Michael would want her to be strong. He'd want her to carry on without him, and not waste precious energy mourning something that could not be undone. Doing so seemed impossible, but for him, she'd try.

The sound of a gunshot brought Josie to a halt and she skidded around with her muzzle twitching in the air. The stinging aroma of

gunpowder was too close for comfort, as was the underlying smell of unwashed human flesh. They were still tracking her, and they weren't as far away as she would like them to be.

Crouching down to allow her black fur to blend into the dark surroundings, she picked her way cautiously over the twig littered grass, careful not to make any unnecessary noises. Her ears flicked with every little sound, then pinned flat to her head as a man suddenly stepped onto the path before her. She didn't recognize his scent, which meant he hadn't been with the hunters earlier, but that didn't mean he wasn't intending to kill her now.

With her nose to the ground and her eyes rolled back into her head, Josie bared her fangs and emitted a single growl of warning. Instead of moving away, as he should have done, the guy tossed up his hands and said something she couldn't understand while in wolf form, but the words didn't matter. What mattered was that he was still stupid enough to be in her way.

Gathering her muscles, Josie lunged.

Shawn barely had time to register the attack before the large, black wolf had him pinned to the ground. The air was knocked from his lungs and his vision blurred as his head bounced off a sharp rock. Fighting to maintain consciousness, he somehow managed to get his hands around the wolf's throat. Little good it did him. The beast snarled in his face, dripping foul drool over his cheek, before the bright yellow eyes rolled back and the muzzle aimed for his throat.

Holy shit, if he didn't do something fast, he was going to be reduced to a hunk of meat.

The first sting of teeth propelled Shawn into action and he used every ounce of strength he had to curl his legs up and knee the beast in the gut. The wolf whimpered and the pressure of the teeth disappeared, but not for long. Before Shawn could gather the strength for another defensive move, the wolf was at his throat

again and this time the bite was deep enough and powerful enough to numb him from the neck down.

His legs went limp, his hands fell away from the animal's throat and his eyes drifted shut. This was the end then, and not exactly the way he would have liked to go.

The moment her victim went limp, the thrill of the kill was gone.

Josie pulled her teeth from the man's throat, taking some flesh in the process, and stared down at the inert face beneath her. Her wolf eyes couldn't register clear features, but the warm breath puffing across her muzzle told her the man wasn't dead, so why wasn't he fighting her? Who the hell just gave up with a wolf on top of them?

Growling low in the back of her throat, she lowered her face and bumped her nose against the underside of the man's chin. She was hungry for a fight and when the man's eyes fluttered open her body pumped new adrenaline through her veins. She growled again and lashed her tongue against the wound on his throat. His whole body jerked in response, but he did nothing to save himself.

Confused, angry, and more than a little irritated that this bastard would just give up and die, Josie jumped off of him and turned to dart away. She didn't have time to play, and this guy was clearly not a threat. Bounding two strides forward, she was suddenly hauled to her haunches by a cruel yank on her tail.

Whipping around with her fangs bared, she snapped at the man's wrist, but missed when he released her. He rolled toward her and landed a solid kick to her side. Josie yelped at the pain and danced out of reach as the man staggered to his feet. The smell of his blood filled the air and she fixed her gaze on the wound at his throat. The need to flee took a backseat to her lust for fresh meat. Her jowls filled with saliva as she curled her lips back to issue one final growl of warning.

Shawn stared back at the menacing yellow eyes and tensed for the wolf's next move. Hindsight, always too late to do a body any damn good, told him he should have played dead a little longer, but he hadn't and now he faced the prospect of being dead for real.

The sound of distant voices whipped the wolf's attention around and Shawn watched the black hackles rise. Tossing another look in his direction, the wolf pinned its ears back, then spun around to dart away. Twigs snapped, leaves rustled, and the wolf vanished in a blink of an eye. Shawn's muscles were just beginning to relax with relief when a gunshot sounded, followed by an unmistakable canine squeal of pain.

"I hit it!" a voice called out, followed the sound of heavy footsteps barreling across the ground.

Shawn could still hear the plaintive cries of the wolf and knew the gunshot had struck but failed to kill. The zoologist in him couldn't walk away, and against his better judgment, he followed the path the wolf had taken to find its large, black body splayed out on the ground with an angry, bleeding wound behind the right foreleg. The yellow eyes narrowed as he approached and a low growl vibrated in the air.

Shawn spoke softly as he hunkered down and stretched a hand out. "I won't hurt you." The growl intensified, but he wouldn't give up. Keeping an eye on the dripping fangs, he brushed his fingertips over the fur and felt the warm ooze of blood. The speed in which it covered his skin told him if he didn't get this wolf patched up soon, it would bleed to death. The feel of warm blood on his neck reminded him he had a wound of his own to see to, but that would have to wait.

"I have to carry you out of here," he told the snarling beast.

The wolf's body rumbled with another growl, but it did nothing more as Shawn slid his hands under the body to scoop it off the ground.

“It has to be around here somewhere,” the voice of the shooter spoke again.

Not wanting to waste another precious moment, Shawn gathered the heavy animal close to his chest. The bleeding wound at his throat made him weak and he fought off a wave of dizziness as his lungs struggled to gather enough breath. As quietly as possible he headed back toward his cabin, praying he could hide the wolf before the hunters knocked at his door. Behind him he could hear the clear sounds of fast pursuit, and a glance down at his unexpected patient told him the wolf could hear the same.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Shawn promised.

The wolf’s eyes drifted shut and some of the tension left the heavy body. By the time Shawn stepped through the front door of his cabin he was ready to collapse. His arms shook as he laid the wolf on the living room floor. He could see and hear the steady cadence of the animal’s breathing and it decreased his earlier sense of emergency. Returning to the door, he threw the bolt, then pulled down all the blinds on the windows. Grabbing an old fashioned oil lantern from a nearby table, he lit it quickly and returned to the wolf’s side.

A quick inspection of the wound showed the flow of blood had slowed and the bullet had passed clean through. Shawn sat back on his heels and skimmed a shaky hand over his face. The animal would definitely survive, but for how long with the hunters in the area? Clearly they were out for blood.

Earlier echoes of gunshots had led him out into the dark forest to investigate and he had been heading back here when this wolf suddenly burst out of nowhere to block his path. Survival training had flown out the window as he stared at the wild, yellow eyes and the attack hadn’t really surprised him. The wolf was guided by its instinct to survive, as well as its learned fear of humans and Shawn had been in the way and had suffered for it.

The memory reminded him that he had his own wound to see to and he left the wolf sleeping on the floor and headed for the bathroom. Once he cleansed and bandaged his throat, he'd do the same for the animal, and if both of them survived the night without infection, he'd consider it a success.

Josie heard the human leave the room and she opened her eyes to peer around at her surroundings. She was inside and her nose told her the place was constructed of wood, which meant he had carried her to a cabin of sorts. His? It didn't matter. What mattered was getting the hell out of here, and wound or no wound her chances were better as a human.

Listening closely for any sounds of the human's return, Josie numbed herself to the pain in her front leg and concentrated on shifting forms. Going back was always harder and she nearly screamed out loud as the process dragged on longer than normal. Her bones and muscles protested what she asked of them, and for the first time since becoming a werewolf, she feared she'd get stuck between shapes. The thought of being trapped in such a nightmare brought fresh tears to her eyes and new determination to her actions. Concentrating harder than she ever had before, she dug her claws into the wood floor and commanded her human self to emerge.

The world went black, her senses deserted her, and time slipped away until the unmistakable sensation of rough wood pressed to naked flesh jolted her back to awareness. Glancing down at her hands, she spread her fingers, then pushed herself to her knees. The gunshot wound protested every move she made, but she couldn't let it stop her. She staggered to her feet, knowing she had to get out of here before—

“What the hell!?”

Josie spun around too quickly and nearly toppled over as dizziness washed over her. The man stood in a doorway across the

room staring as if he had never seen a naked woman before. She stared back, her human eyes having no difficulty cataloging the man's features. Shaggy, dirty-blond hair, wide, greenish-blue eyes, high cheekbones, square jaw, wide lips, straight nose, bandaged throat...her attention halted as she remembered the feel of flesh clamped between her teeth.

"Do you mind telling me who the hell you are, and where the black wolf went?"

Josie dragged her gaze to the man's face and silently admitted, for a non-werewolf, he was pretty pleasing to look at. She decided to ignore the question he asked and toss out one of her own. "Do you happen to have some clothes I can borrow?"

His gaze raked her from top to bottom, then settled on her face once more. He shook his head and leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest. While cradled to his chest, she had felt the soft brush of clothing against her fur, but obviously he'd pulled his shirt off to tend to his wound because now he was dressed in nothing but faded gray jeans. His build was not as powerful as a werewolf's, but she couldn't find fault with the toned chest, flat belly, and slender hips.

"Tell me who you are?" he demanded.

Josie arched a brow. "And if I don't, you'll make me walk out of here naked as the day I was born?"

The man shrugged and leisurely scanned her person again. "Doesn't matter to me, I actually find the view rather stimulating."

Josie bristled at the comment and emitted a low growl. The sound brought the man's gaze flying back to her face and realization contorted his features.

"Jesus," he whispered. Shoving away from the door, he slowly moved toward her, as if anticipating an attack at any moment. Josie held still and allowed him to advance within three feet. She curled her lip back to let him know that was close enough and he halted with a look of pure astonishment on his face.

You can't be what I think you are," he whispered.

Josie spun in place as the man circled her. "That depends on what you think I am."

He halted and shook his head. "Unbelievable."

Josie wasn't in the mood to waste time while this guy came to terms with the fact that she was a werewolf. Spreading her arms out, she spun in a full circle then stopped. "Look your fill, then give me something to wear so I can get the heck out of here."

"Do those men know what they are hunting?"

Obviously she wasn't going to leave anytime soon. With a sigh, Josie strolled to the guy's couch and plopped down. She reached for the throw tossed over the back and wrapped it around her shoulders. She shouldn't be expected to chat while nude, after all. "They know exactly what they are hunting. A wolf."

The man scowled and moved toward her to take a seat on the other end of the couch. "You know what I mean. Do they have any idea you are a werewolf?" He flinched a little as he said the word out loud, but she gave him credit for not being visibly disgusted by the fact he was sitting awfully close to a freak of nature.

"I don't exactly go around advertising what I am," Josie retorted then asked a question of her own before the guy could comment. "What's your name, and why did you help me?"

To her surprise he extended his hand for a handshake. Hesitantly she accepted the gesture as he answered her. "Shawn Reardon, and I helped you because as a zoologist I couldn't leave an animal to die."

Josie withdrew her hand and tucked it back under the blanket. "Thanks, but don't even think about putting me on display."

He shook his head and his lips twitched as if fighting back a grin. "I'm too greedy to share this little discovery with the world, so you don't have to worry about being turned into an attraction at the local zoo."

Josie wasn't sure the flippant answer made her feel any better, but she gave a little nod regardless. "So how 'bout some clothes?" she reminded him.

"How 'bout a name?" he fired back.

Josie bit her cheek and tamped down her impatience. "Josie De Luca."

Shawn studied the stunning woman sitting on his couch, wrapped in his favorite throw, and rolled her name around in his head. Josie De Luca didn't ring any bells, not that he had expected it to. After all, if he had had the privilege of meeting her before, it wasn't likely he would have forgotten. Her long, springy black hair with random streaks of caramel running through it, combined with her hazel eyes, shapely, petite body, and striking features made her rather memorable.

Knowing she was a werewolf just about blew his mind. He'd heard rumors that such creatures existed, but he'd shrugged them off along with all the sightings of Bigfoot and reports of people being attacked by the Jersey Devil. Now he wished he'd paid a little bit better attention to what had been said.

Shawn drew his focus away from the lovely slant of Josie's eyes.

"Why are you being hunted? Did you steal a sheep or something?" He regretted the joke the moment he voiced it.

Her eyes narrowed and she tossed off the blanket to leave the couch. He lunged for her as she got to her feet and pulled her back down. She landed almost on his lap and he captured her hand as it moved toward his face, clearly ready to slap him for his stupidity.

"Hey," Shawn said. "It was a joke, all right?" He eased his grip on her hand, but didn't release her. The look burning in her eyes told him she was hankering for a fight, and he wasn't willing to play the victim twice in one night.

“It’s amazing to me that humans survive given how stupid all of you are.”

Shawn felt the sting of the insult, but he had to admit it was well deserved. Trying to ignore the weight of her bare breasts resting against his bicep, he looked her in the eye and apologized for being an idiot. Some of the heat went out of her gaze, but not enough to encourage him to let her go. “Tell me why they are hunting you?” he tried again.

“Do they need a reason other than the fact that we are wolves?”

“We?” Was there another werewolf out in the woods being tracked at this very moment? Excitement raced through Shawn, followed closely by unease as he watched something dark shift behind Josie’s eyes.

“Let me go,” she said softly.

Shawn released her as if his will were no longer his own and watched her leave the couch. She crossed her arms over her chest and paced toward the front door, allowing him an excellent view of her long, lean back, tempting rear end, and toned legs. He forced his attention upward just as she reached the door and turned to face him.

“Thank you for helping me, but I really need to get out of here.”

Every ounce of Shawn’s being protested the idea of letting this splendid creature walk out the door. “You weren’t alone were you?”

Even from across the room he saw the tears form in her eyes a moment before she turned her back. “They killed my mate.”

The words were almost too quiet to hear, but hear them he did, and the emotion wrapped around each one propelled him off the couch and across the room. Without considering the consequences, he wrapped his arms around her from behind and pulled her back against his chest. She stiffened, but didn’t fight the contact.

“I’ll keep you safe for as long as necessary,” he promised. How? He didn’t really know, but the thought of her going back out there where men with guns tracked her like an animal, couldn’t be borne.

"I'm not your responsibility."

"No, you aren't, but I won't let them hurt you. If what you say is true, and they did kill your mate," the word sounded strange to him, and he shook his head before continuing, "then you've been through enough for one night. Where's the harm in letting me watch over you for awhile?"

She turned in his arms, sliding her bare skin over his and making his body jump to attention. The look in her eyes told him she wasn't unaware of his reaction, and she wasn't real thrilled by it. "It isn't safe for me to stay here."

Shawn reeled back at that. "It's a hell of a lot safer than going back out there." He nodded toward the window and watched her shake her head.

"No." She pushed away from him and backed up against the door. "I can smell your lust, and I won't stay here to be used by you."

Shawn couldn't hide his offense. "What the hell have I done to make you assume I'd rape you, for God's sake? I could have left you to bleed to death, you know? You are the creature who nearly ripped out my throat, after all, so leaving you to die certainly crossed my mind."

Her eyes drifted toward his throat and he felt the weight of her gaze through the tight bandages. "You will wish my bite had killed you."

Shawn's blood ran cold in response to the unemotional statement. "What the hell does that mean?"

Her gaze lifted to his face and he saw the answer in her eyes. Oh God...pounding dread filled his ears, making it difficult to hear her words when she finally spoke.

"If you survive the next twenty-four hours, you'll become one of us."

Shawn stumbled backwards until he literally fell onto the couch. No... Unfortunately nothing in Josie's expression indicated she was lying.

"Being the one responsible for changing you means you belong to my pack. If they don't kill you on sight, you'll be put through an initiation—"

"Just hold on a damn minute," Shawn interrupted. He was getting close to information overload and he doubted he could take anymore. Josie fell silent and blinked at him from her position at the door. "Are you saying I'm going to wake up a werewolf?"

Before she could answer, a loud voice boomed on the other side of the door. She jumped and her expression told him she recognized it as easily as he had.

It seemed the hunters had come to call.

Still reeling from what Josie had told him, Shawn left the couch and headed for the door. One significant glance toward the bathroom had Josie scurrying across the room. As soon as she was out of sight, he took a deep breath and opened the door.

Josie's entire body shook as she pressed her ear to the bathroom door. Such a stance wasn't necessary to hear what was going on, but human instinct was sometimes hard to suppress. She heard Shawn offer a light greeting, followed by a response from a voice sure to give her nightmares.

"Sorry to bother you, Dr. Reardon, but we're tracking a wolf and wondered if you'd seen one."

The use of Shawn's name told Josie the hunters knew him, and a new wave of fear washed over her. If he was friends with these men did it equate to some long standing loyalty? Would he hand her over and turn his back to punish her for altering his life? Until he became a werewolf, she knew she could not rely on the loyalty due a pack member.

“A wolf?” Shawn sounded legitimately surprised. “Around here? No, I haven’t seen any, thank God. I was under the impression the wolves were released a lot farther north, so why would they venture into these woods?”

“What did you do to your throat, doc?” another voice asked.

“Would you believe I nearly killed myself while shaving? Damn phone rang and I jumped like a woman.” The explanation led to gruff male laughter. “Sorry I can’t help you fellas,” Shawn went on, “but I promise to let you know if I see any sign of wolves in the area. Fair enough?”

“You got it, doc. Sorry to bother you, and maybe you should see about buying one of them fancy electric razors?”

“I’ll do that.”

Josie listened to the sound of the front door closing and let out the breath she’d been holding. Stepping back from the door, she grabbed a nearby bath towel and wrapped it around herself just as the door swung inward. She looked up from tucking the end under her arm to meet Shawn’s expectant gaze.

“Well? Do you think they bought it?”

Before she could assure him that he had done just fine, the front door flew open and the two hunters crowded inside with their guns held out before them. Josie choked back a scream as Shawn jumped in front of her.

“What the hell do you two think you are doing?” he demanded. “I told you there weren’t any damn wolves around here, and even if there were, they wouldn’t be inside my house.”

The larger of the two men, the one whose smell she had detected on Michael’s fur, flashed a glance toward the bathroom and his eyes widened as he spotted her. “Well, well, well, what have we here, doc?”

“She’s my girlfriend, Trace,” Shawn told the man, “and I’d appreciate it if you put your damn eyes back in your head. I’d also

appreciate it if you'd put your guns down before you accidentally blow off someone's head."

Trace chuckled and looked away to scan the room. Josie watched his gaze settle on the floor and she looked as well to see a dark stain. Blood. Her blood. Trace glanced up and over toward them once more. "Were you shaving in the living room, doc?" His sarcasm dared Shawn to lie.

"The blood isn't mine," Shawn admitted and Josie caught her breath. This was it then.

"Care to tell me who or what it might belong to?" Trace's gaze slid over Shawn's shoulder to focus on Josie. She resisted the urge to slink out of sight.

"It's mine," she said before Shawn could offer an answer.

"Is that so, pretty lady?" Trace propped his rifle against his shoulder and sauntered toward the bathroom. There was no way he could see through her towel, but that didn't stop him from making a real obvious attempt to do so. He halted in front of Shawn and met her gaze. "How'd you get your blood on the floor?"

"Is that any of your damn business?" Shawn demanded.

Josie squeezed Shawn's arm and he glanced back with a frown. "You don't owe this jackass any explanations, hon," he told her. The endearment made her snatch her hand away from his arm and he frowned before refocusing his attention on Trace. "I don't know why you guys barreled in here like a scene out of a bad movie, but I assure you I don't have a wolf hiding under the bed."

Trace never took his eyes from Josie's face. "I wanna know how your girl got hurt."

"And I want you to get the hell out of my house."

That got Trace's attention and he shifted his gaze to Shawn. "It wouldn't do real good for your reputation if word got out that you were beating your woman, doc."

Josie heard Shawn draw in a deep breath. "The only person that has to worry about tasting my fist is you," he warned.

Trace laughed and pivoted on his heels to join his buddy at the door. "Let's go, Buck, there aren't any wolves in here."

Josie watched the door close and listened to the sounds of the men's footsteps retreating into the distance. She didn't think they'd be back tonight, but her earlier decision to leave no longer seemed like a wise idea. "I think I'll stay after all," she said quietly.

Shawn turned to face her, his shock evident in every inch of his face. "I'll refrain from making some stupid human comment, and simply offer you a choice between the couch and the bed."

Josie had already assessed the comfort level of the couch and didn't relish the prospect of sleeping on it. "The bed."

Shawn nodded and turned to lead the way out of the bathroom. They walked down a narrow hallway and into a small, but nice bedroom. There was a full size bed made of fat pine logs, a matching nightstand, and a good size armoire. The wood floor was bare, but at least the window had curtains and a blind. Shawn crossed the room to close both, then turned to gesture toward the bed. "It's all yours."

Josie managed a tight grin of gratitude, then pressed against the doorframe as Shawn left the room. Just outside he halted and turned back to her. "I don't suppose you'd let me take a look at your wound before you turn in? You were losing a lot of blood earlier and it would put me at ease to know you'll survive the night."

"I'll survive, trust me."

Shawn sighed and with a curt nod he turned and walked away.

Josie closed the door, stripped off the towel, and crawled into the comfy bed without hesitation. The moment her head hit the pillow, her thoughts filled with Michael and the tears she'd been fighting for hours spilled over her lashes and down her cheeks. She made every attempt to stifle the sounds of her sobs in the pillow,

but they echoed around the room and she heard the soft shuffling of Shawn's footsteps as he approached the door.

"Josie?"

She buried her face in the pillow and pulled the blankets over her head. Go away, she silently begged.

"Josie, you okay?" The door opened and he stepped into the room. "Hey?" He came closer to the bed and his smell filled her senses. She detected beer and wondered if she was the reason he had felt the need to drink. "Are you crying?"

Josie flinched as she felt Shawn's hand on her back through the blanket. "I'm fine," she said into the pillow.

"Does your wound hurt?"

No, she wanted to tell him, my heart does. Instead, she shook her head and prayed he would leave her alone. He didn't.

The bed creaked as Shawn sat next to her. She could feel the heat of his hip against her arm and she lifted her head off the pillow to find him staring down at her with enough concern to make her want to cry all over again. Why did he care so much? Was he just a nice guy? Or was it the zoologist in him afraid that a special creature might die while in his care?

"You want to talk about it?" he asked her.

Josie rolled onto her back, away from Shawn's hand. She dragged the blanket with her to preserve what might remain of her modesty. It was something werewolves didn't have a lot of, but there was no need to make things more uncomfortable for Shawn.

"Did you know we mate for life?" she said into the quiet room.

Shawn's jaw clenched and compassion filled his eyes. "Yes, I did know that," he said as his hand settled on her arm. He petted her bare skin with long comforting strokes and instinct produced a rumble of pleasure deep in her throat. The look on his face shifted to one she had no problem recognizing and the smell of male lust once more filled her nose.

Shawn seemed unable to control his reaction to Josie. Considering the pain he saw reflected in her eyes, he should have the decency to halt the direction of his thoughts, but he couldn't. Her skin was smooth and warm beneath his fingers and tears threatened to spill over her long dark lashes at any second. If ever a woman needed to be held, it was Josie, and his body was on fire to do so.

"What will you do?" he managed to ask.

She shook her head against the pillow, causing her hair to fan out in a wild bi-colored wave. "I don't know if the pack will even take me back. Without Michael..." she let the rest of her words fade away as she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Was he alpha?" Shawn tried to ignore the strangeness of this moment. He had a gorgeous naked woman in his bed and he was asking her if her "mate" was the alpha male of her "pack." Surreal did not begin to describe it, but at least it redirected his thoughts on something other than making love to a complete stranger.

Josie's eyes slid open, shiny with unshed tears. "No, but his brother is, which makes Michael's position in the pack very high. They were forced to accept me as his mate, but they've never been happy about it."

A thousand questions competed in Shawn's mind. "Are all werewolves created?" Given what she had revealed about the bite to his neck, it seemed the best question to start with.

"Most are not," she told him. "I was, however, against Michael's better judgment."

"Meaning?"

Josie shifted under the blankets and her arm slid away from his touch as she propped herself on her elbows. "Meaning, he should have let me die."

More questions joined the battle in his head. "His bite saved you by turning you into a werewolf?" It was a guess, but a good one

given the expression on Josie's face. There would be time enough later to demand details. "Did you love him before he bit you?"

Josie's gaze darted away to focus on a spot across the room and she gave a little nod. "I've loved him my whole life."

"Did you know?"

She looked him in the eye and arched a brow. "Did I know what he was, you mean?"

Shawn nodded, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Yes," Josie admitted. "I knew exactly what he was."

"You weren't afraid of him?" He was having a hell of a time processing the fact that a woman would voluntarily fall in love with a guy that wasn't quite human, though such knowledge hadn't forced him out of this room.

"Michael would have never hurt me, and I knew that. The choice to bite me was the hardest he had ever made, and the guilt nearly destroyed us."

The depth of her love was painfully obvious and Michael's presence was nearly tangible. Shawn resisted the urge to scan the room just to make sure the man wasn't lingering in a corner. "What will you do if the pack doesn't take you back?"

Josie shrugged and clutched the blanket over her breasts. "I'll be a rogue wolf and an unprotected female."

She didn't need to say more for Shawn to recognize the danger. "We'll form a pack of our own," he said without thinking clearly. "If what you say is true, and I'm a few hours away from no longer being human, I'll need your help to survive this change. Instinct tells me your pack won't be too eager to take me as a replacement for Michael—"

"You cannot hope to replace him," she interrupted in a sharp tone.

Shawn put his hands up. "Easy," he said. "Figure of speech." She nodded stiffly and he lowered his hands. "I already told Trace

you were my girlfriend, so seeing you around won't draw undue attention. With me, you'll be safe."

She didn't look convinced. "You seem to believe that hiding what we are is easy. I assure you, it isn't. The need to change cannot be ignored for very long, nor can the need to feed like a wolf. Humans witness things they shouldn't and rumors spread until a pack is all but forced to relocate."

"There are only two of us. I'd think that would make our chances a lot better." Shawn pressed his fingers to Josie's lips as she began to speak. "Think it over," he said. "We'll talk more in the morning." His throat had been protesting his use of it for several moments now, and nausea rolled in his stomach. He probably shouldn't have downed that beer once putting Josie to bed, but alcohol seemed like a good idea at the time. Didn't it always?

Josie nodded, her lips brushing the tips of his fingers.

Shawn removed his hand, braced his weight on the pillow, and leaned down to kiss her on the forehead. She arched up and he felt her lips at his throat. "Josie..."

Josie ignored the sound of her name rolling off Shawn's lips. The raw emotion brought on by the loss of Michael, the fear of death, and this man's easy offer to protect her, craved release as it built within her. Her wolf, denied the ability to run and hunt, knew only one other way to free it.

Releasing the blanket, she wrapped her arms around Shawn's back and pulled his body down on top of hers. Crushed by his weight she slid her mouth back and forth across the bandages at his throat, able to smell the blood underneath, but right now she didn't want to tear into his flesh. She wanted him to make her forget the events leading to this moment, knowing it was a lot to ask of him.

"I don't want to be alone," Josie admitted against the pulse in Shawn's throat. She felt his muscles stiffen and loosened her hold

so he could pull back from her. His lovely sea-colored eyes locked on her face and filled with doubt.

“You don’t know what you’re saying. Grief manifests itself differently in everybody, but I assure you, you’ll be full of regrets in the morning if I stay one more second.”

Josie dropped her arms to the bed and melted into the pillow. “Fine,” she said as the blanket slid off her breasts to pool at her waist. “Leave.” The tension in Shawn’s body was obvious as he braced himself half on, half off of her.

“Before I leave, tell me what to expect.”

Josie hid a smile. “Aren’t you concerned about my state of mind if you continue to linger?”

Shawn’s jaw visibly tightened. “Answer the question. You told me if I survive the night, I’ll be like you come morning. How concerned should I be that I won’t survive the night?”

Josie scanned her eyes downward, taking in all she could see given Shawn’s pose. “You seem pretty healthy to me.” She shifted slightly, allowing the swell of her hip to nudge the front of his jeans.

Shawn nearly flew off the bed. “I doubt Michael would appreciate knowing how you plan to deal with his death.”

Josie took the verbal hit and allowed a coy grin to tug at her lips. “I’m an animal, Shawn. You should probably keep that in mind.”

“You’re part animal,” he countered, then turned to stalk out of the room. Josie sighed and listened to the angry sounds of Shawn settling down to sleep on the living room couch. His barely disguised disgust shouldn’t really surprise her, but it hurt nonetheless. Maybe come this time tomorrow night, he’d understand her need to lose herself in the frenzy of sex, but whether he did or not, didn’t do a thing to help her now.

Hurting, frustrated, and lonely for the first time in three years, Josie rolled to her side and pulled the covers over her head. She

tried to ignore the empty space at her back where Michael should be pressed and the heavy silence settling around her. The walls of the room made her feel trapped and without considering her actions, she tossed off the covers, left the bed, and crossed the room to throw open the window.

The caress of predawn air slithered over her skin, bringing with it the urge to run. If not for the faint murmur of voices in the distance, she would have leapt out the window. Jerking back, she wrapped her arms around her chilled skin. It seemed the hunters were going to search all night long. Would they give up long enough to collect Michael's body? Would they display him like some sort of sick trophy?

The thought formed a dry lump in her throat, and despite Shawn's belief that she should sleep alone, Josie left the room and made her way to the living room. Stepping over Shawn's discarded jeans, she halted beside the couch and looked down, surprised to see he was already deeply asleep. Maybe he wasn't as healthy as he looked, after all? If so, he might appreciate her unexpected presence come morning.

With that in mind, Josie lifted the corner of the old throw and stretched out alongside Shawn. He mumbled in his sleep and rolled toward her, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to welcome his embrace.

Shawn woke up in hell.

Flames licked at his flesh and singed his bones, the pain causing his screams of agony to lodge in his throat. Instinct yelled at him to fight, but an oppressive weight held him down, restricting his movements and worsening the torment.

"Don't fight it, Shawn."

The voice was almost familiar enough to penetrate through his anguish, but a fresh wave of fire snaked up his spine and any attempt to identify the speaker was preempted. Gritting his teeth

hard enough to split the enamel, he bucked against the weight on his chest and growled his way through the pain.

“Shawn, stop fighting it!” the voice yelled at him over the roaring in his ears. “Can you hear me?” it asked.

Shawn struggled to lift his eyelids and realized the weight pushing on his chest was Josie. She was straddling his waist with her hands pinning his shoulders to the couch. Looking in her eyes, he sucked in a sharp breath as another wave of agony crashed over him. “What...hell...happening...” His throat seemed to be the source of the flames and it hurt to form the words. He wanted to reach up and claw at the bandages covering his wound, but Josie’s position trapped his arms to his sides under her knees.

“You’re changing.”

The two words echoed in his brain as his body exploded under the pressure of the flames. His skin tore open, his muscles shredded, and his bones fractured into a thousand pieces. A loud, piercing howl filled the room and Shawn’s ears as he came up off the couch with enough force to knock Josie off his chest. He heard her soft expulsion of breath as her body hit the floor, but he couldn’t command his head to move in order to glance in her direction.

Whatever the hell was happening, it held him prisoner, and he could do nothing but surrender to it and pray it ended before torturing him to death.

“Shawn, can you hear me?”

Somehow he rolled his head to the side to see Josie’s face hovering over him. Her long hair fell over her shoulder to pool on top of his chest and his skin reacted to the sensation with a level of sensitivity that had him clenching his teeth again.

“Can you hear me?” she asked again. Damn, why the hell was she yelling?

Shawn nodded between bursts of fire.

Josie gave a little nod of her own then pressed her hands against his chest. “You need to let it happen. If you keep fighting it, it will kill you.”

“Noooo...”

She crawled on top of him again to straddle his waist. “I won’t leave you, Shawn. You aren’t alone, but you have to stop fighting.”

Somehow, through the heat of the flames and the crashing waves of pain, Shawn registered the feel of Josie’s thighs pressed to his ribcage. Focusing on that, and nothing else, he closed his eyes and silently gave up the fight. The moment he did so, the pain lessened only to be replaced by a host of other sensations no human being should ever experience.

He felt the cartilage in his nose and ears stretch and remold itself into a shape he couldn’t comprehend. He was aware of his gum line lengthening and his teeth sliding down to nearly hook over his bottom lip. His spine cracked loudly as it shifted into a new position and the muscles in his arms and legs pulled taut for several moments, before shortening.

At some point, Josie had moved off his chest and he was able to roll onto his side as the first sprouts of fur poked through his tight skin. Opening his eyes to mere slits, Shawn saw Josie hunkered down next to the couch and her scent reached out to him. He inhaled, coating the inside of his nose and throat with the fragrance of woman and wolf. He felt his ears twitch and tasted drool inside his lips. He watched her open her mouth, heard a jumble of words spew out, then continued to stare as she changed before his eyes.

Feeling awkward on the soft cushions of the couch, Shawn cautiously bounded to the floor to run his muzzle through the sleek, black fur across Josie’s back. She stood perfectly still and allowed him to explore nearly every inch of her. She watched as he circled her, and there was the tiniest hint of fear mixed with her scent. Nudging her with his shoulder, he attempted to tell her she had

nothing to fear. She shook her head, twitched her ears, and sprawled out on her belly alongside the couch.

With the lingering remnants of pain lessening with every second that ticked by, Shawn stretched his new body out next to Josie and entwined his front paws with hers. The contrast of tawny fur against black made him blink, but the feel of a tongue swiping up the side of his face pulled his attention away. Resting his head on his paws, he allowed Josie to continue her ministrations, until finally his body gave into exhaustion and he slept once more.

Josie glanced over at the clock as she sat huddled against the couch wrapped in the old throw. Shawn had been a wolf now for nearly four hours, and she knew she should wake him up and help him change back into a man. Reaching out from under the blanket, she slid her fingers along his spine, marveling at the feel of the coarse tawny fur. He felt so different from what she was used to. Michael had been so smooth, and so golden. Shawn had the deep rich coloring of a lion.

He stirred beneath her touch as she moved her hand up to fondle his soft ears. They twitched under her fingers, then the rest of his magnificent body awakened. He lifted his head and fixed his eyes on her face. As a human, his eyes were the color of the sea, now they were remarkably bright blue. "You need to change forms," she told him, although she knew the words couldn't be understood.

He turned his muzzle against her palm and licked.

Josie smiled, gathered the blanket closer, and got to her feet. Shawn rose up on all fours, steadily watching her every move. He shook as if emerging from a long dunk in the water, then stilled with his head cocked at a slight angle. Josie dropped the blanket and tried to tell him with her eyes that he needed to become a man. Something shifted in the bright blue gaze and she knew he understood.

The next several moments made Josie long to run for cover. She had never felt as helpless as she did while watching Shawn battle the transformation of his body. Panting, covered in sweat, and shaking violently enough to knock his teeth together, Shawn collapsed at her feet the instant he was human again. Not sure what else to do, Josie covered him with the blanket and sat at his side. She ran her fingers through his damp hair and cooed nonsense in his ear.

“God, I feel like shit,” Shawn suddenly mumbled against her outer thigh. To her surprise he lifted his head and shook his hair out of his eyes. “Is it always this bad?”

“Sometimes.”

He lowered his head back to the floor and she felt a light kiss against her thigh. “You know I’ve been a vegetarian my whole life?”

Josie smiled at the confession. “Not anymore.”

Shawn lifted his head again and she knew by the brilliance of his smile that he was going to be alright. “No,” he said, “not anymore. So do we actually hunt?”

Josie nodded and slithered under the blanket to press her bare skin to Shawn’s. He wrapped his arms around her and spooned against her back. His transformation had done nothing to cool his ardor, it seemed. She wiggled her rear end against the ridge of his erection and his embrace tightened.

“It’s still too soon, in my opinion,” he said against her ear, “but even if it weren’t, I lack the energy.”

“You’ll get stronger each time you change, until it comes naturally.”

“I’ll take your word for it, but right now, I have my doubts.”

Josie recalled her own disbelief at the whole werewolf thing, so she said nothing to counter Shawn’s comment. He’d learn soon enough. Snuggling against him, she stifled a yawn and brought up their conversation from last night. “I think your idea to form a new

pack might be best for everyone, but it means we'll have to leave the area."

Shawn shifted behind her and she glanced over her shoulder to find him staring down at her. "Where will we go?"

Josie shrugged. "It doesn't matter, as long as we don't settle in another pack's territory. Considering the small amount of wolves there actually are, it shouldn't be too hard to find a new location."

"And the hunters?"

The reminder made her think of Michael, and her sense of loss returned with only a slight decrease in intensity. She wondered how long it would take for her grief to heal. "Wherever we go, there will be the risk of hunters. We just have to be careful and alert."

"You make it sound so easy."

Josie rolled onto her back and reached up to press her palm to Shawn's cheek. "It is not easy, and it's not a life anyone should be forced into. I'm sorry I did this to you."

"You had intended to kill me, right?"

As much as she wished not to answer, he deserved the truth. "Yes. You were one more human and in my mind no better than those who killed Michael."

"Why didn't you kill me?"

"You gave up." She shrugged as if that explained it all.

"I'm not sure I understand, but if given the choice, I'd be exactly where I am, so don't ever apologize again."

Before she could respond, Shawn lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was gentle, searching, and unlike any she had ever shared with Michael.

After a few moments it ended, and Shawn lifted his head enough to look in her eyes. "I think you and I will be just fine, Josie De Luca."

Josie entwined her arms around Shawn's neck, letting the damp tips of his hair tickle her fingers, and pulled him back down for another kiss. She was in control this time and her true nature

wouldn't allow the kiss to stay gentle for very long. With her tongue in Shawn's mouth, she arched against him and slid her knees up his sides. She felt his hands dive into her hair and he pulled her gently away to break the kiss.

"Easy, Josie."

"Why do you keep saying no to me?" It was hard to hide the frustration in her tone.

Shawn kissed her nose then rolled away from her to lie on his back. "I want you, don't get me wrong, but I won't have you with the ghost of another hovering over us."

There was nothing she could say to that, and they both knew it.

The silence stretched until Josie felt compelled to shatter it. She scooted close to Shawn and draped her arm over his chest. "How does your throat feel?" She had torn the bandages off the moment his transformation had begun.

He reached up to touch the newly healed skin of his throat and his body vibrated with a low chuckle. "I'll be damned."

Josie laughed softly at Shawn's astonishment and buried her face in the crook of his shoulder. "You'll get used to such phenomena."

"If you say so."

The silence settled around them again and Josie scowled against the awkwardness. "So how long are you going to keep denying what both of our bodies want?" she finally asked him.

"As long as it takes."

Josie rose up onto her elbow and glared down at the man next to her. "What does that mean?"

He met her gaze and reached over to trace the line of her lips with the tip of his index finger. "It means we'll wait until you can think of Michael without pain filling your eyes."

She slid her gaze away but he cupped her chin and forced her to look at him once more.

"It won't hurt forever, Josie. Trust me, I know."

Something in his tone and his expression told her more than any words could. He had loved and lost just like her, and had survived intact. This new knowledge gave her the hope she needed. “Thank you,” she whispered as she settled back down against his side. With Shawn’s arms around her and his heartbeat steady in her ear, Josie closed her eyes and allowed sleep to overtake her. She wasn’t lonely and she wasn’t afraid to dream of Michael, not when she knew Shawn would still be holding her when she awoke.