



Adrianna
Dane

Vampyre Falls:
Heartbreak

Vampyre Falls: Heartbreak
by Adrianna Dane

Amber Quill Press

www.amberquill.com

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By

ADRIANNA DANE

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CHAPTER 1

It happened so quickly she didn't have time to scream for help. They grabbed her. One held her against his huge frame, a large paw of a hand over her mouth, stifling any scream, another wrapping duct tape around her wrists, binding them together. A third man sat behind the wheel of a dark purple Chevy pick-up truck that had a black slash of lightning slicing across the sides. Funny the things you remembered. A fourth man stood sentry, apparently watching for anyone who might offer her help. After gagging her, the man holding her heaved her up and tossed her into the back of the truck as though he were hefting nothing more than a sack of feed.

With no way to cushion the impact, her shoulder connected with the unforgiving bed of the truck, and Petra groaned at the pain that vibrated through her whole body.

If she hadn't been gagged she would have screamed bloody murder. For all she knew that's exactly what they had in store for her. Murder. Hers.

Images darted through her mind when she landed in the truck. Flashes of wolves, swords, and severed heads. She cringed from the images. Who where these men? And what did they want from her?

Instinct had warned her not to come to this town. But her curiosity had gotten the better of her. And now it might just get her killed.

The vehicle spun out and she rolled across the truck to collide with the tailgate, banging her head in the process. For

a moment, she saw stars. Dust filled the air and she heard the sound of loose gravel beneath the tires and the truck barreled along at a speed that could kill them all before they reached whatever destination they had in mind.

She wiggled around, trying to gain some leverage, ready to throw herself out, bound or not. Petra tried to look around, to gain her bearings. She saw two of the men seated on a toolbox near the front of the truck, huge, feral grins on their faces.

"Hell, yeah," one of them screamed triumphantly as he high-fived the other one. "Now they'll pay."

Petra knew she had to find a way to get loose. She couldn't bet on the fact that they weren't going to kill her. She had to do it now, when they least expected it, because she doubted she'd get another chance.

The truck veered sharply to the right, down another road and then she was thrown to the other side as it swerved left. Hadn't anyone seen what happened? She was right on the main street of Silver Creek. Why hadn't someone done something?

Her heart pounded, rapid beats thundering loudly. At least to her hearing. She felt the adrenaline rush through her system. She was not going to give up. Not now, not ever, until her last breath.

Petra should have realized she was being followed. Since the operation that had saved her life her instincts and her abilities had become more pronounced. There were other things like increased strength as well. Things she had tried to

hide from her mother. And from Rolland. Skills that most normal people would look at with suspicion.

But she knew there was something different about these men who had kidnapped her. They weren't normal either. A strong animal scent clung to them.

She needed to think, to calm down. She concentrated on her breathing, on the beats of her heart, forcing them to slow. She stopped struggling and attempted to center, and then maybe she could get herself out of this crazy situation. The dust and dirt choked her, making it hard to breath. If she didn't get the gag off, she knew she was probably going to suffocate as her nasal passages felt like they were clogged with soot and grime.

If she hadn't come to this damn town, she probably wouldn't be in this mess. Served her right for snooping into her mother and Rolland's so-called business affairs.

Petra fought against the duct tape that held her fast. And she searched inward, to the source of the strange power she now had. A power that she normally kept well hidden from the people who knew her. She'd had certain abilities before the operation. But this was different, and she knew, very dangerous if anyone found out. But this was a desperate situation and called for desperate measures.

She was determined that she wasn't going to die, at least not today. Not at the hands of these men—whom she was certain were paraspecies. The kind her mother and fiancé hated. That was what she smelled. She lay quiet as she allowed the power to build. She heard the mumblings of the men in the truck as they planned what to do with her. She

was jostled back and forth as the truck hit potholes and lurched along what was probably a deserted dirt road of some sort.

She heard one of the men cough and then make a nasty growling sound.

Petra felt the strength seep through her, slowly building. She concentrated, and drew on the energy swirling inside her, forcing the surging juice into her arms and her legs. Her heart pumped powerfully, different than before. This time with purpose, not with fear. She could almost hear it thundering in her chest, like a huge locomotive gathering speed. Like the heart in Poe's tale. Rhythmic and loud, blocking out any other thought, any other sound. She allowed the energy to build, to let the anger at being handled by these savages magnify.

Yet, she controlled its affect on her, afraid of what would happen if she allowed it free rein. And then she used the might of her angry passion as it pooled at the core of her body and using the newly energized muscles in her arms and legs. The tape binding ripped like it was made of thin paper and suddenly she was free of her fetters. Wasting no time, she jumped to her feet and tore off the tape muzzling her mouth. *Damn, that did hurt.*

"Hey!" One of the men surged to his feet. Just then the truck hit another pothole and he stumbled. She leaped across the space between them and latched onto his shoulders, then she jerked her knee up and caught him square in the balls. She dipped her head and then brought it up, smashing it into his jaw. For a moment she saw stars. Blood spilled from between his lips and his eyelids fluttered. For good measure

she propelled him against the front of the truck, knocking his head into the cab. He slumped to the bed. One down.

She spun around to face the other savage man who was almost on her. Curling her fingers, she launched herself at him, jabbed her fingers into his eyes, forcing him backward just as she shoved her knee into his groin. He screamed with pain, stumbled backward, and fell. She kept up the pressure. As they collided with the side of the truck, she grabbed his head in her hands and banged it against the unforgiving metal. Once. Twice. She felt his warm blood pouring over her hands, his jaw went slack, eyes rolled back, then closed, and she allowed him to slide to the bed. No time to catch a breath.

A low snarl emanated from her throat. The look she gave him held no speck of compassion. Quickly she glanced around. The truck was slowing as the men in the front realized what was happening. She jumped to the ground, rolled and rose to her feet before the truck could stop. She ran.

One quick glance over her shoulder informed her the truck had come to a skidding halt—curls of dust almost obliterated it from view. Pulling on another burst of speed, she sprinted toward the line of trees that looked to be two hundred yards away. If she could make it to the forest, she might have a chance of eluding them.

She had the element of surprise on her side, but she didn't dare look back. Her legs shot out, heart pumped, and adrenaline sped through her body. She raced like the wind. She didn't think she'd ever covered so much ground so

quickly in her life. She screamed and stumbled as she felt something sharp pierce her shoulder.

Quickly she recovered, but the pain was blistering. Warm blood trickled down her arm. She stumbled once more, but this time out of nowhere a pair of steely arms wrapped around her, clamping her to a masculine body.

"Give me the web," she heard a deep voice say. She fought against him with all her strength. She wasn't going to let them take her again. She reached up to claw at his face, but steel grips that masked as hands clamped around her wrists. "Hurry up, dammit. She's a hellcat."

He forced her arms down to her sides with a strength far exceeding her own. She tried to yank her leg upward to incapacitate him, but before she could gain leverage, he'd whirled her around. Something white, like a mohair cape was wrapped around her. But this was no fragile wisp of material. Once the second man had her cocooned in it, she couldn't move. Not one bit of her strength worked in her favor.

She screamed and a hard hand clamped over her mouth and arms wrapped around her, plastering her to a hard, male body. She inhaled his scent, wanted to lick and taste his flesh, suck the fingers into her mouth. An odd heat swirled and flared to life in her abdomen. No. She could not be responding to him this way. It didn't make sense. He dragged her back into the woods. She dug her heels into the ground, going limp, hoping to slow him down. But her efforts had no effect on him whatsoever. He jerked her behind a dense covering of trees, thick bushes shielding them from being seen by anyone on the road.

"Shut up and watch," he growled in her ear. "See the party you almost missed." He forced her head around toward where the truck was sitting crossways in the road. Four black SUVs were now circled around it. She recognized the emblems on the doors. What looked like an army of men dressed in black, with hoods and guns jumped out of the vehicles and ran toward the truck.

She knew she didn't want to see what came next. She'd heard the stories but had not wanted to believe them. Something inside her told her she was about to witness a scene out of a horror movie. She heard the shots. One after another. The blood-curdling screams ripped through her, echoing over and over again.

She tried to turn her head, to look away, but the hands holding her in place refused to allow her to hide from the bloody confrontation that played out on the desolate road.

It was over in a matter of minutes. She felt a passing sense of guilt. After all, if she hadn't rendered two of them unconscious, they might have been able to help themselves. On the other hand, they had tried to kidnap her and who knows what they would have done with her. The assassins dragged the four bodies from the bullet-ridden truck and lay them out on the side of the road. The agency assassins turned their attention to one of the SUVs and Petra followed their gaze. Another man, taller and broader than the others stepped from the vehicle. He didn't wear a mask like the others, and she was shocked when she recognized him. He held a lethal-looking sword in his hands. As Petra watched in horror, he sliced off the heads of the four men. The most

frightening thing of all was the smile on his face as he completed the deed. Petra thought she was going to be sick.

"Petra Thornton, you'll pay. You led the bastards to them. You're responsible for their deaths. And you will pay."

She felt the wetness of tears drip down her face. The man restraining her had no idea how responsible she felt just now. No matter what they had planned to do to her, they hadn't deserved to die such horrible deaths. It also matched the vision she'd had when she was first thrown into the back of the truck. Common sense told her she couldn't have stopped this, but that knowledge didn't arrest the guilt in which she now drowned.

And the worst part was when she'd recognized the man who wielded the sword. It was the man she had come to Silver Creek to find. Her fiancé, Rolland Braun.

She couldn't bring herself to continue to fight the cruel hands that now shackled her, spun her away from the bloody massacre, and marched her forward. She was in shock, there was no resistance left. There was no way to know what this man had in store for her. From the frying pan into the fire was a very apt description of her predicament right now.

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CHAPTER 2

Carson Black forced the woman to walk ahead of him. He had a feeling he was going to want to get this over quickly because there was something about the woman that pulled at him. He'd felt something building over the last few days of watching her as she moved about Silver Creek. He remembered the photo he'd snuck from the file. And now her scent pulled at him in a strangely arousing way. Knowing from the files he'd studied that she was human, her recent show of strength and dexterity was unusual. But this sexual draw she seemed to have was even more perplexing. It shouldn't be affecting him like this. He tried to ignore his responses to her and focus on the task. Her strength and ability to run were thwarted by the spinner's web used to bind her. She would not have a chance to turn on them the way she had the Dalwins.

They had trailed her again today, waiting for the right opportunity, when the Dalwins had snatched her off the street. They'd had a feeling they knew where the Dalwins would take her, but before they could catch the pickup, the PIA agents were already hot on their trail. Donovan had veered off the road and parked the vehicle. He and Carson had made for the woods to try to determine if there was anything they could do, when the woman ran straight into their arms. It was just too bad they couldn't have done something for the Dalwin brothers. Damn them for being so hot-headed and jumping the gun.

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At this point all they could do was move forward with the original plan now that they had her. Which was for he and his brother, Donovan, to ride shotgun over her until the terms the council presented to the Thorntons had been met.

It wouldn't do to have her finding out about the sanctuary, especially considering who her parents were. She was a bargaining chip the council planned to use to gain the freedom of several of their kind. The plan was to negotiate for the release of paraspecies being held at a PIA detention facility in Spokane, Washington, slated for transfer to The Harden Institute. The Vampyre Falls Town Council would negotiate with the PIA. It was supposed to be neat, clean, and hopefully quick. But suddenly everything had turned deadly.

When Petra Thornton had shown up in Silver Creek the paras hadn't been able to believe their luck. Files were maintained on the top-level people involved with the PIA. Research scientists, Deborah and George Thornton, although not directly employed by the PIA, were known to have links with the government organization that was charged with control of the paraspecies population.

When word came through the underground network that the Thorntons' daughter was in the vicinity of Vampyre Falls, the council formulated a plan to use her in negotiations with The Harden Institute. They couldn't afford to pass up this opportunity. If only the Dalwin brothers hadn't interfered too soon, it could have been a slick abduction without bloodshed instead of this mess that resulted in the deaths of the headstrong, young wolf pack.

For security reasons, full humans without special ability were not allowed in Vampyre Falls. Therefore, they'd secured another place, away from the paranormal community, in which to hold the Thornton woman until negotiations were completed for the release of the paras.

There was a cave they planned to use to detain her until arrangements could be made. It was outfitted and ready. The Black brothers were supposed to have been the ones who handled the operation. The Dalwins getting wind of it meant there had to have been a leak within the town council itself. Probably a vie for control of the council. Someone had made a serious error in judgment.

An hour later they reached the opening of the cavern at the base of the mountain. A good holding place until he could get more information out of the Thornton bitch before the council sent the demands for exchange. He looked at her and saw the fear and anger in her startling, turquoise eyes, the tension threaded throughout her lush body. And he felt the strange pull once again—a protective instinct that he shouldn't have. This attraction to her had to stop. It was unfortunate that she was even more beautiful in person than she was in the photo he carried. A photo he'd stolen from the file because...

Well, he couldn't be certain exactly why he'd taken it—or at least a reason he would admit.

"I'm not going in there," she said as they drew closer to the entrance. She tried to dig her heels in to impede their progress. His hand against her back propelled her forward and she fell to her knees. She shook her head back and forth.

Much to his annoyance his attention was drawn to the highlights of red in her gold hair as the sun's rays reflected on the shiny locks. He leaned forward to lift her up and caught the whiff of roses that wafted enticingly from the thick, unruly locks. Dammit, this had to stop. His cock engorged painfully inside his pants and he tried to ignore it. It was readying for something it wasn't going to get. One thing he didn't want to think about was Petra Thornton as more than a hostage to be used in negotiations.

He yanked her to her feet. "You're going in."

"No, no, please. Anywhere else, but not in there. I can't do it. I can't go in there."

He heard real fear in her voice, some level of desperation beneath the words. He stepped in front of her, tilted her chin up, and studied her face. He was startled by the genuine panic he saw in the blue depths of her eyes. It wasn't anger that confronted him. Her eyes were dilated, her slender face drawn and pale. Her whole body quaked. She wasn't just scared; she was terrified to go into the cave. He could smell her terror.

"You've got a thing about caves?" He didn't want to care. After what they had just witnessed, he shouldn't be the least bit concerned. But there was something about her, something ... dare he say ... familiar, that made him balk at forcing her into the cave.

He'd never met her before so he couldn't quite understand the sensations, the vibes that were coming off her. This aggravating need to protect her.

"Just knock her out, Carson. We don't need to put up with her tantrums right now. We've got things to do."

Carson held up a hand. "No, Donovan. Give me a minute." He focused on Petra. He noted her lips were trembling. He saw himself taking her into his arms and soothing her fears, telling her it would be okay. That nobody was going to hurt her. But he couldn't promise that. She was nothing to him. Was she going to be able to come out of this alive? Very possibly not if their demands weren't met.

He placed a hand beneath her chin, forcing her to look up at him. "Give me a reason not to just sling you over my shoulder and force you inside."

He watched her reactions, looking for some kind of subterfuge, something that told him she was the sly daughter of the two powerful scientists who supported the PIA. People who had enough power to meet the demands of the paras and make the exchange.

Surprisingly, he saw none of that. He saw pure outright terror. And sorrow.

"Tell me."

What he saw was a bedraggled young woman, a bruise forming over her left temple, blood seeping from a wound in her shoulder where a bullet had probably grazed her arm. Damn those hot-headed Dalwins. She looked fragile, with flawless alabaster skin. But right now her eyes were very dark—bruises within the ivory whiteness of her lovely complexion.

He sensed the storm going on inside her. She met his look without flinching. Carson respected the courage in this slight

woman. He'd felt her unusual power when he'd tried to subdue her. Saw it when she'd fought the Dalwin brothers, vaulted off the truck, and run for the woods. He'd admired the woman who fought for her freedom. His whole body had responded to the picture of a goddess triumphing over her enemies. It had shocked him to discover that he'd wanted her with a searing desire he hadn't known for quite some time, not since...

There was definitely more to Petra Thornton than met the eye. And if he wasn't careful she could end up being the cause of his death, because he knew she wasn't to be trusted. And he wanted her so badly he could taste it.

She lifted her chin and tried to pull away from him, but he wasn't having any of that. The alpha wolf rose inside him and he yanked her close to his chest, staring down at her. She had to give him a reason for not making her go into that cave. One he would believe. He needed a reason not to force her inside. She had to stop fighting him, it was only intensifying his desire to make love to her. Damn her for being so desirable.

"Right now, I own you woman, and you better tell me what I want to know. Or you won't like the consequences." The only problem was that he didn't know whether he'd spank her or kiss her. Or maybe both.

"I was caught in a cave-in." She spoke the words as though each one was yanked from her against her will.

He knew there was something more. He saw it in her eyes. "And?"

She bit her lip. It bloomed red and engorged, a full mouth, a perfect bow of temptation. Now wet and glistening. He shook her. But he wasn't certain if it was to get the answers he wanted, or to pull himself out of the fugue he found himself in.

Her female scent wafted over him again. It aroused him and that made him angry. His aching cock demanded to be buried in her pussy, to possess her so thoroughly that she would understand completely what it meant to be claimed as his mate. Something flickered in the back of his mind. He couldn't go there, it was dangerous, too dangerous.

"I'm waiting," he said. Then he began to drag her toward the entrance to the cave.

"No, please," she begged. "My brother died in that cave-in. Please, I can't go in there. I'll do anything. Go anywhere else, but not in there. Please."

The sound of her sobs, the pain he heard in her words, cut him to the quick. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. She was supposed to be hard and unfeeling, just like her parents. Hatred for his kind should reek from every pore. But it didn't and that confused him. He couldn't look at her tear stained face. He was liable to cut the web and set her free, like a defenseless rabbit caught in a trap. Not only the Town Council but also the Vampyre Council would have his head if he did that.

He made a decision and turned to his brother. He couldn't make her go inside that cave. "Donovan, go talk to Ben Herbert. See if we can use his cabin for a few days."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. Just do it."

"Carson, bro, don't tell me you actually believe her?"

Carson turned to look at her. How still she stood, except for her bottom lip, which quivered, displaying a vulnerability he simply couldn't allow himself to yield to. His grip tightened on her arms.

He turned back to look at his brother. "Yeah. I believe her. At least regarding this. Now do it." Donovan looked at him and then at Petra. Carson thought he saw something flicker in his expression. Donovan nodded and whirled away, loping off into the forest. Damn, but she was going to be trouble. Big trouble.

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CHAPTER 3

"Strip."

Petra blinked. She couldn't have heard him right.

"I said strip."

He had cut off the white shroud-like blanket, or whatever, that they had used to bind her, but only after she'd promised not to try to run. When they hadn't forced her into the cave she'd felt bound to offer the promise, at least for now. Surprisingly, the one called Carson accepted her word. At least the cabin wasn't underground. She could deal with that. But stripping in front of these men? That was a whole other thing entirely.

"Who are you? And why are you doing this to me? I most certainly will not take my clothes off in front of the two of you."

"Well, you're not going anywhere either inside this cabin or outside by yourself," the one called Donovan said. "If you don't want to have those clothes removed forcibly, I suggest you start moving."

Her gaze flew to Carson. He'd listened to her before. Could she get him to help her again?

He shook his head. "Not this time. You're covered in blood and you need to get cleaned up."

Carson turned around and picked up a pile of clothing. "You can wear this in the meantime."

In his hands it looked like he held a grain sack of some sort. She took a step back.

"You've got to be kidding. I told you, I'm not going to remove my clothes in front of you."

"Look, you have a choice. We can either send a piece of your clothing to prove we've got you, or a piece of your anatomy. You're choice."

She turned a shocked gaze on him. "You'd really do that? Cut me?" The bloody images of earlier would never leave her. God, it was so horrible. She studied Carson for a long moment. His features were not typically what one would call handsome in the usual way. But, surprisingly, there was something oddly familiar and very attractive to her in the way he held himself. Tall and wiry, with a hungry, intense look to his dark brown eyes. To some the line of his lips might appear cruel, but to her they simply looked firm and tempting, and she had the strongest urge to taste him.

My God, what had gotten into her? He was her captor, he talked about maiming her for God's sake. She shouldn't be attracted to him. Her whole body grew warm as she remembered him holding her against his hard body. No, he wasn't the type of man to underestimate. He wasn't a man to cross. And looking into his eyes right now, she knew he wasn't going to give her a choice. He might have relented about the cave, but she had a feeling that was as far as she dared push him, at least for now.

She lifted her chin and directed a look at Carson. "Can I at least do this in the bathroom instead of standing here? That way I can use the sink to clean some of this blood off."

"Fine." Carson turned to Donovan. "Wait here, I'll go with her."

"Thank you," she said softly. She wanted to hate him for keeping her prisoner, but he was making it hard.

She looked Donovan in the eye. "You may be able to force me to do this, but I'm not a stripper and I don't have to give you a show."

He grinned and it looked more like an expression that belonged on a wolf rather than a man. And then she realized that's probably exactly what they were.

"You're shifters."

Donovan and Carson looked at each other and then back at her. She saw something pass between them but she couldn't be quite certain what it was.

"Guess you're quick, huh," the smart-ass Donovan answered. "Like you've never seen one of us before. It's not likely you haven't run into a few of us with what your mother does for a living."

"Screw you," she responded.

It was then his expression altered and she knew she'd said the wrong thing. She felt herself color. "I didn't mean ... I mean—"

"Any time, blue eyes. You name the place and I'll be there." He cupped his bulging erection and thrust his hips. "I've been known to make more than one girl happy."

"Bastard." Now he was a man she could learn to hate very easily.

Her attention shifted when she heard a low, rumbling growl coming from Carson. His eyes blazed brightly. And now she saw the glint of pointed, sharp incisors as he snarled at his brother. "You aren't going to touch her."

Donovan's eyes widened as he started at his brother. And then again something passed between them. It was Donovan who backed down. "Well, shit, if you want her, you can have her. We could share, you know."

Carson let out a roar and she almost saw a ripple of movement over his whole body. And then the moment passed. It occurred so quickly, she wasn't even certain of what she had seen. But it left her no doubt the two were wolf shifters.

Carson whirled around to face her, his eyes dark and intense. "Come on. Let's get to the bathroom so you can change and let's get this over with." After giving his brother the evil eye, he stomped toward the bathroom and Petra quickly followed. She did not want to be left alone with the licentious Donovan.

He stepped back and allowed her to precede him into the small square room. He nodded toward the shower which had a white curtain. "You can use that for privacy. Pull the curtain and then take your clothes off and hand them out."

"What am I supposed to wear?" He couldn't possibly think she was just going to stand there naked.

He grabbed a towel off the rack and handed it to her. "Wrap this around you. I want to look at your arm before you get dressed."

"It's nothing," she said, clutching the towel close. "A bullet must have grazed my arm, but I think it's only a flesh wound, nothing serious."

"It needs to be cleaned," he growled. "I'm not taking a chance on you getting an infection and dying on us."

Of course, that would be his reason for seeing that the wound was bandaged. And she should have known it. It still irked her.

"Fine, if that's the way you want it." Petra stepped into the shower and yanked the curtain closed. Damn the man anyway. Just because she could, once she'd stripped, she turned on the shower. She squealed as the cold water hit her, but it slowly warmed.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Cleaning the wound," she yelled back. The water really did feel good after what she'd been through and she allowed it to sluice over her body. She saw some soap and used that on her hair. *Let him wait, damn him.* If she was going to be stuck here at least she'd be clean. She winced when the soap caught the furrow of the wound in her shoulder.

It wasn't until she turned around to rinse the soap from her hair that she realized he could probably see the outline of her body right through the flimsy curtain. She stopped for a second, staring at his shadow. Wondering what he was thinking.

Her body began to heat in a strange way. The coil of heat started at her abdomen and worked its way upward into her breasts, and downward, pooling in her pussy. She inhaled deeply and was surprised to realize she could smell him. A male scent that wound through her. One of her hands dropped to a breast as she stared at the curtain as though in a trance.

Suddenly the curtain was yanked back and he grabbed her arms and jerked her toward him, plastering her wet, naked

body against his. With the other hand he turned the faucets off.

"Keep this up," he said between gritted teeth, "and it won't be Donovan screwing you.

She could feel his thick erection pressed against her. She licked her lips as she looked up at him, unable to move.

He shoved the towel at her, stepped back, and dragged the curtain back into place. "Make it quick. Then come out into the living room so I can look at that arm."

Petra tried to catch her breath. She couldn't stop trembling—and it wasn't from the cold water. Quickly she wrapped the towel around her. Pulling back the curtain, she stepped from the shower and was surprised to find she was alone in the room.

Thank God the bath towel covered her pretty well. She stepped into the living room. Carson was standing next to a table which had what looked like ointment and bandages laid out.

"Sit here." He pointed to a chair standing next to the table.

She walked across the room, totally ignoring Donovan and sat down, pulling the towel snug.

"I'll try not to make this worse than it needs to be."

"I'd appreciate that," she said.

As close as he was, she could smell the primal heat of the man and those strange feelings started to erupt inside her. She looked up at him, studied the intensity of his expression as he worked on her arm. She was surprised to find his touch gentle as he probed the wound. She hissed as he touched a particularly tender spot. And then his eyes met hers.

It was as though the world stopped and every sense intensified. She could hear him breathing, she could smell him, feel the heat of his fingers on her arm, and she shuddered as curls of arousal spun through her.

He leaned toward her and she held her breath, unable to turn away, his sharp stare holding her captive. A willing captive who wanted to feel the touch of his firm lips on her skin.

She thought he was going to kiss her and her lips parted. Her tongue slipped out to wet her lips, readying herself. She was shocked when she smelled her own arousal in answer to the earthy scent of him. A soft sigh escaped her as he bent closer. One of his hands brushed across her towel-covered breast and she felt the nipple screw to a hard, sensitive peak.

Yes, kiss me, she screamed inside her head. She didn't dare voice the need that was rising like a tidal wave inside her.

"Should I leave now, or do you plan on using the bed in the bedroom?"

The spell was broken as Donovan crashed her back to earth with his rude remark.

Petra leaned back in the chair and gulped for air. She felt the molten heat of embarrassment rise into her cheeks. Her body still hummed, still wanted. She glared at Donovan. He gave her a feral smile in return, eyebrows arched.

"Shut up, bro," Carson said. "Okay, that should do," he murmured to her.

The moment passed. She didn't dare look at him. She felt him dry the wound, apply the antiseptic and finally he bandaged the arm.

"Too tight?" he asked.

She shook her head, unable to find her voice. She'd almost made a complete fool of herself.

Carson then handed her the clean clothing, no hint on his face of what he might be thinking.

"You can change in the bathroom."

Petra accepted the clothing with shaking hands and quickly walked back to the bathroom to change. She felt a definite tension in the air surrounding her as she slipped on the handmade shapeless shift that fell past her knees. Even wearing the shift, for some reason she'd never felt quite so exposed and vulnerable in her life.

"I'm going to make us something to eat," Donovan said when he returned to the living room. He left the room and stepped through a narrow doorway at the back of the cabin.

Turning around, Petra looked up at Carson, who stood there holding her discarded clothing. "Are you happy now?" she asked.

He was looking at her with the oddest expression. Her heart thumped in her chest and she felt an awareness of the man that she shouldn't. First of all he was her captor and second he was a shifter. Neither one should have been conducive to her being attracted to him.

But she was, her whole body seemed to have an awareness of the man. She could smell him and she felt her breasts swell and her pussy leaked cream onto her thighs.

She wanted to move closer to him, but instead she took a hasty step back.

"Now will you tell me why I'm here?" she finally asked. "What are you going to do with me?"

He sauntered across the room and set her clothing on the table. And then he sat down in a caned wooden chair. "You are a winning bargaining chip in a dangerous game. We figure your people will want you back in good health. In exchange we want the people they're holding for transportation at the Paraspecies Detainment Center out near Spokane."

She dropped into the chair that was behind her. "You can't be serious. You think they'd be willing to trade detainees for me?" She couldn't help laughing. How little these people knew about her worth to the Thorntons and the people they worked with. "I'm afraid you're going to be in for a huge disappointment."

He nodded. "We've checked on you. I admit it was quite a surprise when you turned up in Silver Creek. Sort of like jumping right into our hands. But we considered it a lucky break we couldn't pass up."

Petra laughed again. "They aren't going to pay anything to get me back. I'm not that important."

"Are you saying your parents wouldn't do everything they could to get their daughter back?"

"Hardly. I'm adopted. I've never been able to figure out why they adopted my brother and me, because they certainly didn't love us. But I seriously doubt they'll pay anything to get me back."

Carson stared at her for long moment. His dark expression drifted over her body, making her burn with desire, drenching her with a need she did not want to identify. This man did things to her that made her want to beg for him to take her. And again she had to remind herself of her precarious position right now. His attention shifted as Donovan came through the door carrying a plate laden with sandwiches.

"Dinner's served."

The heat surging through Petra's body turned to a slow simmer, but wouldn't seem to fade away completely. Petra had no appetite and she was exhausted. Her arm was throbbing and she just wanted to lie down. She did wonder what these men would do when they discovered she wasn't lying and her parents wouldn't pay a dime for her return. Barring that, she had a feeling she wouldn't have long to live when they found out she was the fiancé of the man who had just murdered four of their own kind. She didn't even want to think about what her chances were for getting out of this predicament alive.

An eye for an eye was the thought that ran through her head.

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CHAPTER 4

Carson walked into the outer room of the cabin. He had just checked on their captive for what felt like the thirtieth time in the last three hours.

"What is it with you, anyway?" Donovan asked as Carson shut the door. "I haven't seen you show this much interest in a female since—"

Carson held up a hand. "Don't say it. Don't say her name."

Sybilla. Carson's mate. The woman who had been murdered because he hadn't been there to protect her. It had been years now since her death, and the nightmares had lessened somewhat, but he could never forget. He saw the look of devastation on Donovan's face and realized that his brother would never forget her either.

"It wasn't your fault." Donovan had been there and had almost been killed himself. If Carson and Treynor hadn't returned when they did, he'd probably have ended up dead as well. The assassins hadn't been able to carry all three bodies out of the woods at the same time. Their younger pack brother, Kyle, and Carson's mate, Sybilla, were gone, only a trail of blood left in their wake. Their bodies were never found.

Carson and Treynor had arrived home after a supply trip into the city to find him lying unconscious in a pool of blood. There'd been no time to ask questions. They'd gotten him out as quickly as possible to a safe place and then gone back to

try to track Kyle and Sybilla. The trail eventually led to a dead end.

Like the Dalwin brothers, they'd eventually made their way to Vampyre Falls to seek sanctuary for what remained of their pack. Unlike the Dalwins, Treynor's pack never discovered what happened to Kyle and Sybilla. For them it had been worse to have no closure at all.

"I should have been able to do something. We shouldn't have been taken by surprise. I still don't know how they did it."

"You can't claim all the guilt, Donovan. You're lucky they didn't kill you as well."

His pack brother looked at him with dark, tortured eyes. "If it could have saved Kyle and Sybilla, I'd gladly have died in their place."

Carson walked across the room and put his hands on his brother's shoulders. "I don't seem to be able to say the right things. I'm better off staying away from all of you. I only cause you to hurt more."

Donovan glanced up at him, shock evidenced in his expression. "That's why you spend so much time down in Silver Creek? Because you think you're not welcome at the house in Vampyre Falls? Dammit, Carson, that's just crazy. We're family. We belong together."

"I loved Sybilla. She was my mate. You and Treynor deserve a chance to move on, and sometimes I think I'm just a reminder of what happened."

"We all loved Sybilla in our own way, you know that. She was a part of all of us, just as Treynor's wife is. We're family."

"We're not a human family though, are we, brother? We're shifters and we do things and feel things differently. Sybilla shared the same blood of our ancestors and the bond was permanent. I will never mate with another, there could never be a bond as close as I had with her." Why was it he kept seeing Petra Thornton's image pop into his head? Why did he carry her photo in his wallet? Why did he act so possessively to a woman that should mean nothing to him? It felt like such a betrayal to Sybilla.

Donovan nodded. "I know. We all miss her. It's the blood; it's from the cursed blood of our families. We're all tied. Too closely maybe." Donovan looked at him. "What is it with this woman? There's something going on with you. Tell me what it is."

Carson shook his head. He wished to hell he knew. Somehow he was drawn to the woman, but he didn't know why. Drawn in a way he hadn't been—since the death of his mate. And his kind supposedly mated for life.

This woman was human. His reaction to her didn't make sense, and it shouldn't be this strong. She was the enemy.

"I don't know what's wrong with me. Her parents are responsible for the deaths of my mate and our brother. I should feel nothing but hate for her."

"Deborah and George Thornton are two of the most dangerous people associated with the PIA. They could only have spawned a child with a black heart. You know that. You're leaving yourself vulnerable and setting yourself up to be killed."

Carson sighed. "I know that. There's just something about her. Something that's not right."

"Well, of course something's not right. If she knows you've got a weakness for her, she'll use it against you. She's going to cut out your heart if you don't watch out."

Carson lifted his head to look at Donovan. "I don't have a heart left for her to cut out."

"Then fuck the bitch and get it out of your system. Scratch the itch and be done with it. But don't let her get to you. Don't let her play you, Carson. And she will if she gets the chance."

"Screw you," Carson retorted. Damn, his brother had a coarse way with words sometimes. "That isn't the problem."

"When was the last time you were laid properly? You haven't had a woman since the bonding ritual with Rainna, have you? Binding with Trey's mate. That was over a year ago."

"It's none of your damn business," Carson growled back. So what if he didn't hump everything in sight the way Donovan had a habit of doing. All the women loved Donovan's charm. He doubted there was an unmarried woman in Silver Creek that Donovan hadn't taken to bed at one time or another.

Donovan's intent focus was like a blowtorch shooting right through him. His brother saw more than he should and it unnerved Carson to think that anyone could see into his soul so clearly. "Or maybe I should screw her and prove she's nothing special," Donovan challenged him. "Just a viper we have to keep under lock and key until a deal is made."

Carson reeled back at his brother's words. "You don't touch her, brother. Keep your hands off her."

She's mine, his mind shouted at him. His blood surged until it reached a boiling point as the anger blasted through him. He felt the change coming, the shift of bone and sinew about to erupt. A growl erupted deep in his throat. What the hell was happening to him? Why was he reacting with the territorial possessiveness of an alpha mate for a human woman he didn't even really know? She was the enemy, dammit.

Through a narrowed gaze he saw Donovan's eyes widen in surprise at his forceful reaction to his suggestion.

"Jesus, Carson, what's gotten into you? What kind of spell has she put on you?"

Carson tried to calm down, to think rationally. He knew Donovan didn't mean what he said. He wouldn't have fucked the woman just to prove a point. He was just as confused as Carson was by the man's powerful response to their captive. Now was not the time to lose control. Shifting to his wolf form would not solve this problem. He needed to be here in human form. He wished Trey were here. Trey was the alpha of their pack; he was the peacemaker, the level-headed one. He was the one to ground them all.

But their older pack brother couldn't leave the mountain right now. It was a crucial time with Rainna in the last months of her pregnancy.

Carson couldn't blame him for refusing to leave her alone. Especially after what had happened to Sybilla. Even though they all knew Rainna was as safe as being locked in Fort

Knox, her mate wasn't taking any chances. Trey had been torn, knowing the assignment could be dangerous. Tangling with the Thorntons was not a simple assignment.

Carson managed to calm himself. "Sorry. But you're right, there's something about her. It goes beyond my common sense. Whatever it is, it's rooted in my primal side—the wolf side. I don't understand it. I don't want to be protective of her, but I can't help it. So don't bait me. Right now this is something I can't control."

Carson sat in a chair on the other side of the room. They were both silent for a long time, staring into the fire that Donovan had built in the fireplace. "We need to know more about her," Carson finally broke the silence as he turned to look at his brother.

"What more is there to know? We've seen the file provided by the council."

Carson got up to throw another log on the fire. Sparks shot out as the hungry blaze consumed the new fuel. "It didn't go deep enough. She told me she was adopted. She said she had a brother. Neither of those facts is in the file we have. There has to be more. I don't know how deep it goes, but my instinct tells me there are things about Petra Thornton that we don't know, and it would benefit us to have that information. We've got friends inside the PIA. See what they can dig up."

"Dammit, Carson, you know we don't contact them except in an emergency. It's too dangerous. Both for them and for us. We use that route only when the information we need is vital to the success of an operation."

"Do it, Donovan. There's more here than meets the eyes. I want to know everything about her. We miss something vital and it could endanger all of us."

Donovan stared at him for a long time and then he stood. "If it's that important to you, I'll do it tonight. Ben doesn't have a phone and the cell reception stinks up here. I'll go into town and make the call and I should be back by morning. Unless, of course, you want me to be the one to stay and guard her."

Carson found himself against narrowing his gaze and set to pounce. "Stop baiting me. I don't know what's wrong with my instincts when it comes to her." He fought to rein himself in once more. "Just go and get it done. I need to know. I need to understand why I have this reaction to her. There could be something in that file that can help me figure this out."

"Damn, the things I do for my brothers," Donovan grumbled. "You should be safe enough up here until I get back. Just keep an eye out. I placed the motion sensors around the perimeter earlier tonight, so if there's any action out there at all, you should know about it. Just make sure she stays put."

"She's not going anywhere. She's handcuffed to the bed, remember? And the cuffs aren't human police issue—they were made by the blacksmith in Vampyre Falls. I don't care how powerful she is, these are cuffs she's not going to be able to break."

Donovan stripped his clothes off. "Might as well leave these here. I'll need them when I get back. They'll have a change of clothes for me in town." One of the nice things

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about the relationship between the residents of Vampyre Falls and Silver Creek. They took care of each other and had come to terms over the years that benefited both communities.

Carson walked outside with Donovan and stood on the step. He watched his brother shift to his wolf form and then lope off into the moonlit darkness toward Silver Creek, which was about five miles from where the cabin was located.

Before going back inside, he looked up at the night sky and noticed how close the full moon seemed to be tonight. He felt a portent of danger bleed through him. His wolf instinct was fighting for control.

Turning to head back inside, he heard the most blood-curdling scream he could imagine. And then he heard the deep, unmistakable snarl of a wolf. He slammed the front door shut and shot across the room to the bedroom. The place where Petra Thornton was bound to the bed with no way of escape. He should have known better than to leave her alone.

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CHAPTER 5

The weight of the rocks crushed Petra's chest, making it hard for her to breathe. Each draw of breath was painful and sharp. In the darkness she heard Jamie moaning, yet she couldn't move, couldn't reach out to help him, beyond the grasp of a single hand. She felt so helpless.

"Jamie." The word was no more than a whisper. She knew they would die in the black darkness of this bleak, terrible place.

"Watch out for her, Petra. She'll hurt you. Badly."

"Stay with me, Jamie. Stay with me."

The scene shifted and she could breathe again. Rocks no longer weighted her down. She was racing as swift as an antelope across a wide open field. Except she was chasing the fleet-footed animal. On four legs she felt the power of her animal form. The instincts of a predator bearing down on its prey. A dog? No, a wolf. The beat of her heart was strong and vital. She stretched out, intent on catching her prey. She could smell its fear. She could sense it was tiring.

And then she felt the presence of another running beside her. Bigger, faster, potently male. She recognized him as her mate. The antelope faltered. The moment they'd waited for. The two wolves launched themselves forward, taking the animal down together, smelling its fear. It would keep their bellies full for some time.

Snow and ice blanketed the landscape, the chill of the air settled like a hovering cloud above the ground, a spectacular

glittering panorama of pristine white. The cold didn't touch her. The steam of the newly killed prey drifted upward to meld with the cloud of frigid, still air. She ripped at the flesh with strong, sharp teeth, eating her fill, alert and listening for any signs of danger. Three more wolves joined them. Nothing to fear. More of their pack. Males. She was the lone female.

She stared at each of them, recognized and knew them by name. She turned her gaze upward to the moon. Its light glistened on the virginal white of the newly fallen snow, making it appear as though flawless jewels littered the fine surface. Paw prints tracked a path to where the antelope had fallen. Crimson blood splattered and seeped into the ground around them. A vivid display of survival of the fittest in this wild land.

She heard the low growl of her mate and watched him back away from his feast as the alpha of their pack tore at the choice antelope flesh. His dark gaze met hers across the exposed ribs of the downed prey. Blood dripping from his mouth.

His gaze shifted to another of the wolves. He snarled and snapped his powerful, hungry jaws and the pack brother skittered away, deferring to their alpha. The scent of fresh blood permeated the air as he turned back to devour the flesh.

Petra understood she was rooted in a dream world, but it was one she didn't understand. Yet, she couldn't seem to wake herself up.

Glutted by the kill, she watched the alpha turn and trot away from the carcass. The others moved in quickly to gorge

themselves. By right of the alpha, the female should have been mated to him, not to the other one. Even though she knew this was a dream, Petra was confused by the dynamics of the pack. Why was she here? What did it mean?

And then understanding of their nature flooded her as she watched the males shift to human form. Furry bodies began to undulate and lengthen. Muscular male legs filled out and formed, arms and hands no longer covered with fur. Muzzles narrowed and flattened to define human noses and mouths. Fur receded to expose male, bronzed flesh. None of them were simply wolf, there was human as well. She felt herself shift and when it was completed, they surrounded her. It was a different heat she now felt, burning from within, coiling in her belly. The heat spread throughout her body, like a flare lit and brought to life. The glare of animal passion rose fiery hot, demanding to be quenched. Her hungry gaze stroked over the naked male bodies orbiting her. Dark slashes of crimson blood painted their bodies as they tightened the circle, eyes glowing and dilated. Dark, primal worlds all focused on her, drawn to her by the pull of the full moon shining above and the animal heat of pure sexual desire.

She raised her face up to the moon, so big, so close, and felt herself falling into the huge, shining orb as the heat of her pack males closed in and claimed her. She felt the surge of lust consume her, and her female juices dripped from her cunt onto her pale thighs, the scent of arousal permeating the air around them.

Yes, she knew their names. Carson, her mate. The one she loved more than her own life. Treynor, the pack alpha. Pack

brothers, Donovan and Kyle. Her gaze fastened onto her mate who now stood directly in front of her. She had chosen him above the others, yet she was linked to them all. She heard the possessive growl as he swooped forward and lifted her against his hard chest. She felt the brush of his pelt against her throbbing nipples. She allowed her fingers to travel through the lush silk forest covering his chest. Not as thick as the fur of his wolf form, but reminding her of the nature of the soul inside his body. The wolf she ran with, who protected her, possessed her, was undeniably linked to her for all time. The others closed ranks around the pair. It was a moon ritual unlike any other.

Triumphant and affirming. Her plump breasts were pressed against Carson's chest. One of his hands cupped her ass and she drew her legs up to wind them around his narrow waist. His rigid cock pressed to the valley between her labia. So hot and hard and demanding. She saw his breath cloud between them, opened her mouth and inhaled his essence, claiming it for herself, making it a part of her.

She felt the press of bodies closing in, the others of her pack, as strong, male hands stroked over her arms, her shoulders, her legs. Carson pressed his heavy prick to her weeping cunt and then he was buried inside her, sealing with her, and she cried out with the pleasure of the claiming.

The others supported her, mouths and sharp teeth flaying across her flesh as Carson's thick member pumped into her. Demanding and stroking as Carson wedged himself deeply inside her vagina. Her mate. Oh, God, how she loved him. Loved being with him, touching him, running with him.

She dropped her head back and looked at the moon. It was Trey who claimed her mouth, wedged his tongue deep inside, circling and demanding. She sighed with pleasure as they possessed her. She embraced the huge, shining sphere that drove the animal lust this night. Petra knew it for what it was, although she had no idea why this was happening to her. She embraced it with passion as the unyielding hands claimed and wooed her body. She felt the cold touch of frozen ice pressed against her hot flesh as Donovan trickled ice water onto her overheated body. She shivered with the delicious hot and cold sensations that ran rampant through her. A reaffirmation of life, of earth, of the connection of animal, earth, and human. Cold, wet fingers pressed into her tight anus. Trey released her mouth and as his taste still clung to her, it was melded with that of her beloved mate as Carson plunged inside, his tongue thrusting forcefully between her lips.

Trey knelt down and his mouth fastened on her hip, his tongue blazing a fiery trail downward along her thigh, circling, nipping and then traveling upward, to follow the curve of her leg to her narrow waist. Upward still until he reached the mound of a breast and sucked at the silhouette of flesh. To her shoulder, her neck, and the pulse of flesh at her throat. She moaned and cried out at the ecstasy that filled her as these men claimed every inch of her body.

Carson's cock was like a fiery beacon of sizzling fire driving into her forcefully again and again. Her cunt clutched at him, claiming him, refusing to release him. Thick, long fingers opened her anus, preparing her to take another into her

smaller orifice. Donovan still trailed melted ice over her steaming flesh, dribbling it over her breasts, down her back, wetting her, preparing her, drenching her with the heat of her males, saturating her with their wild scent and primal desire.

Some rational part of Petra's brain wondered how she could know these men so intimately. But she did and she wanted them, she needed them, just as they needed her. She was the focus of this ritual. And although Petra didn't understand it, she claimed the moment for herself.

The broad head of a searing cock pressed into the entrance of her smaller hole, slowly widening her, slipping past the tight ring of muscle, burying tightly inside her rectum. She felt so full, so completely possessed, like riding a wild avalanche that tossed and claimed her, submitting herself to the surging dominance of her pack.

Trey and Donovan pressed to either side. She was cocooned in a blanket of male bodies, the sizzling heat of sex surrounding her, enveloping her.

Carson lifted his head to look at her, capturing her in the swirling passion of his eyes. Donovan moved in to ravish her lips, and Trey pushed her hair aside to suckle her neck. The tip of Carson's cock pressed against her cervix and Kyle's prick rooted deeply into her anus. She gasped for breath, consumed and completely possessed by all of them, just as it should be. She closed her eyes, yielding herself to them and to the moonlight. Other demanding lips captured hers; a mouth snagged a nipple, tugging sharply to send a flood of intense pleasure rushing through her body. She felt the heat of his claim, the grip of his teeth.

She screamed as the passion—the pleasure and pain mingled and collided, grabbing her and drowning her in sensations that owned her completely. The thrill of the hunt, consumed by her pack, the reaffirmation of the moon shining down upon them all served to drive her to the heights of frenzy. The thrusts burned her, pleased her, filled her. Her hands curled around the heavy erections of the two men kissing and suckling her body. Oh, God, yes, they melded into one, cemented together as one, never to be parted. She couldn't bear the ecstasy, the epicenter about to explode.

The scene shifted suddenly as she was ripped from the embrace of her lovers. She was again a wolf, this time circled by dangerous humans. She was crouched in a corner, backed there by men who meant her harm, strangers she did not know. Glancing frantically to the side, she could just make out the fallen outline of two of her pack brothers. She howled with pain as she saw her pack, their blood oozing from mortal wounds.

There was no hope of escape. She felt the shift pull upon her. And then the pain as a bullet struck her chest, another in her leg. The blackness and pain surged through her. The sorrow filled her.

"Carson, my love," she wailed in agony as she lay dying.

Petra shot up in the bed, anchored there by the handcuffs, she screamed, a blood-curdling sound that erupted from her soul. And then she realized something else. She was shifting. But that was impossible. She wasn't a shifter. This couldn't be happening. She screamed again. But this time it formed into a name.

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"Carson!"

The next sound that erupted from her throat was the whine of a frightened animal. And then a growl of fear.

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CHAPTER 6

The bedroom door rocked back on its hinges as Carson slammed his flattened palm against it. And then he skidded to a halt just inside the doorway. A female silver wolf crouched in the center of the bed. Carson could see it was trembling, a low growl emanating from its throat, eyes glittering as though filled with fear and confusion.

The metal handcuffs swung from the bed frame. No woman in sight. It couldn't be. There was nothing in the file to indicate Petra Thornton was a shifter. Not of any variety. There was absolutely no information to indicate she had any kind of unique powers. But Petra's scent was on the animal. There was no doubt who the she-wolf was. And something told him by the look and stance of the wolf crouched in front of him, he wasn't the only one confused by the situation.

Suddenly, Petra whirled away from him and launched herself off the bed. Before Carson knew it, she had crashed through the paned window sending slivers of glass and broken wood flying in all directions.

Dammit. Crazy as she was and not knowing what she was doing or where she was headed, he couldn't just let her take off like that. Quickly, he shifted to his wolf form and shot off after her out the window, picking her scent up quickly. He tracked Petra hoping he'd be able to catch up with her before something terrible happened. She didn't have the self-preservation instincts ingrained in Carson and his brothers from long years of battling the PIA. He suspected she was

literally a babe in the woods with no hope of survival if he didn't find her in time.

She moved swiftly, faster than he'd anticipated. Her confusion should have slowed her down, but apparently it didn't. Her scent took them farther into the dense woods and, truthfully, that was probably not a bad thing. At least they were headed away from civilization where the worst danger threatened for their kind. At this time of night there was little likelihood they would encounter humans in this part of the woods.

Long, heart-stopping hours later, he spotted the she-wolf. When he caught up with her, she stood in the center of a clearing, every bit of her quivering as she heaved for breath.

His instincts kicked in and he sensed danger far too close for his comfort. Looking past Petra, he stiffened when he saw another wolf, black and deadly, watching her intently from the other side of the clearing. From his smell he wasn't a shifter. He was pure, lone alpha wolf ... and he had his eye on Petra.

Carson's animal instinct kicked in with a vengeance. Male protective instincts notched to the max, Carson made his way to Petra, who seemed too terrified to move and completely unable to shift back to human form. Although now could be the worst time for her to revert to her human form, he hoped she would stay in her wolf form until he'd diverted the predator's attention.

Carson watched the black step forward, fur standing straight up, a rumble of challenge deep in his throat. The

gauntlet was thrown down to Carson. Give up the she-wolf or fight for her.

The oddest sense of primal possessiveness overtook Carson. The ingrained intuition that the she-wolf belonged to him, was part of his pack, and that the black would get to her only over his dead body was first and foremost in his mind. There was nothing human about the savage confrontation that was about to take place. He accepted the black's challenge and bared his fangs. His snarl and the answering challenge of the black echoed through the silent clearing.

Carson would do whatever it took to protect what belonged to him. The law of the wild was about to be enforced. Survival of the fittest would play itself out here.

His eyes connected with the eerie bottomless stare of the black as the two males circled each other, fangs bared, snarls and growls emanating. Carson felt the fur on his back stand up straight, preparing for battle. The black was not going to back down. And neither was he.

He heard the change in pitch, he knew it was coming, and he readied himself as he sprang at the wolf. At the same time the black launched himself at Carson, jaws open, fangs bared. Carson twisted. The black missed Carson's throat and landed on the ground, scrambling for purchase. Carson wasted no time, whirled around and dove for the black's throat while the animal was still off balance. Carson was bigger than the black and using his weight to advantage, he drove the other wolf to the ground with little effort. They grappled, rolling over and over, a mass of growls and snapping teeth. Carson managed

to get a mouth full of fur, and a few bits of flesh as he lunged at the black again and again.

The black was big and powerful and caught a lucky snap when Carson lost his footing. The wolf wasted no time and sank his teeth past the thick fur barrier and into Carson's flesh, coming away with scrapings of fur and skin, but little else. It stung like hell, but didn't deter Carson. Gaining his foothold, Carson was faster and there was an element to Carson's strategy that the wolf didn't possess...

Carson had one focus in his anger-crazed mind and one thing only. The she-wolf was his mate and he would not give her up. It wasn't a human understanding, it was primal recognition. And the wolf in him was determined to protect what belonged to him.

He felt the black tiring after what seemed like hours of battle, but probably was no more than a few minutes at most. He managed to get his sharp teeth into a particularly tender spot and the black yelped and jumped back.

Carson hung on and pressed his advantage. He'd tasted blood, he'd scented the black's defeat and he wouldn't back down now. He growled a warning, *run now and live, or stay and die*. The black finally freed himself and backed away, teeth bared, blood oozing from the ravages of Carson's repeated successful attacks.

Bravado. Carson knew he already had the black beaten. The wolf's sides heaved as he tried to draw breath. But life preservation did not seem to be paramount in the black's mindset at the moment. He wanted Petra. Carson saw him look at Petra, who stood to the side of the clearing, trembling

with fear. Carson was concerned she'd turn and run and end up getting caught in another dangerous situation and he might not be there to avert it.

He growled at the black, forcing his attention back to Carson. Carson stalked the wolf, forcing *him* to make a decision. Carson wanted this finished. He couldn't take the time to check on Petra again, to make sure she didn't run. That was something that could prove mortal—for both of them.

He kept his attention on the glittering anger in the black's eyes. Carson was ready. He knew it wouldn't take much to kill the black, not now. He was beaten. He just needed to recognize the fact. The black growled and snarled and then halted his backward retreat.

Shit. Carson had hoped it wouldn't come to this. He launched himself at the black, driving him to the ground. The black struggled beneath him, but his strength was diminished. He wouldn't be able to fight Carson off. Carson fastened his iron jaws onto the black's vulnerable throat. The black whimpered and fought for breath. Carson clamped down harder, and with one last powerful grip, ripped the wolf's throat open. He tasted the black's blood, hot and thick. He tasted victory. He went for him one last time, knowing the black would not survive, left so mortally wounded. Carson ended it as quickly and cleanly as he could. One more instant and the black was dead.

Carson saw the life bleed from the black's eyes. He lay there with his mouth gaping, tongue hanging to the side, eyes flat black, his throat shredded. There was no humanity inside

Carson to regret the death. He was triumphant. He turned away from the scene of battle and death to find his mate. Only she was no longer in she-wolf form. Somehow she had transformed to her human form and knelt next to a tree, arms crossed, shivering and watching him with a glazed expression on her face.

He trotted closer, watching her intently. She rose unsteadily to her feet, retreating until her back was pressed against the rough bark and she could retreat no further. God, she was beautiful. Every curve gleamed like pale lilies in the light of the full moon. Her gaze was imprisoned by his. She belonged to him. All of her, and he would claim her. Nothing else mattered.

She must have seen something in his eyes because she whirled around and ran for the woods. He bolted after her. Her scent was easy to follow. He brought her down quickly, her human speed no match for the alpha wolf who tracked her. She rolled onto her back, fear glazing her eyes. They stared at each other for long moments. Dilated, frightened eyes, flared nostrils, lush, soft body. He shifted back to his human form. Hands imprisoned hers to the ground. The low rumble vibrated through his chest.

For long moments they just stared at each other. Fast, hot breaths escaped through her lips, and her nostrils flared. Her breasts rose and fell as she tried to drag in oxygen. His gaze tracked down the rising swell of her sensual body.

He wedged a knee between her thighs, separating them. He pressed his rigid cock to her entrance. He scented her arousal. It wasn't what he expected. He heard an answering

soft growl purring from within her chest. It surprised him. And pleased him.

She tried to lift up, but he forced her back to the earth. She bared her teeth and snapped at him. He knew in that moment that she was as much caught between human and animal as he was. And right now animal heat is what drove them both toward the precipice. Humanity had nothing to do with it. In the animal mind, he was the victor, the alpha male, and he would claim his prize.

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CHAPTER 7

Petra's mind was a mass of emotion and confusion. Filled with animal lust. She couldn't get her bearings. But none of it mattered because her body was burning. The man ... no, the shifter ... holding her down was streaked in blood—the black wolf's blood. Somehow she had recognized Carson's unique scent. And through the whole confrontation, something inside her screamed for this man to win because she was his mate. And she knew inside her that he would fight to the death to protect her and claim her for himself.

It didn't make sense, but making sense wasn't important. She had to be with him. She needed to feel him inside her. Her body reacted to the scent of the man, steamy arousal that she could not find the strength to deny. She spread her legs wider and lifted her hips, pressing his shaft deeper into her vagina, eager to be possessed by him. There was no reasoning to what she did or her response to the man who was a perfect stranger. And her captor. But the heat flared and consumed her entire body, the ache to be claimed by him was too strong to resist. She had to mate with him; there was simply no other choice. If she didn't, she would die.

"Now," she said in a low voice that she didn't even recognize as her own. "Mate me now." And she thrust her pelvis against him again.

He pressed her back to the ground, the streaks of crimson making him look more pagan primitive than civilized human. He dropped closer and her aching nipples rubbed against his

muscular chest. He licked around her areola, and she couldn't halt the whimper that escaped from between her lips and the pleasure his mouth aroused. He tugged the sensitive nipple with his teeth. She gasped at the sensation as he drove his cock into her and yanked on her nipple in a seamless, primal act that urged her into a frenzy of pleasure. She screamed as her body rocked with ecstasy. His prick plunged into her hot core like a searing stake being driven through the heart of her soul. She arched her body against him, trying to mold herself closer and closer, merging them as one.

"More," she cried.

He pulled back and slammed into her again. His mouth turned to her other breast. She felt his teeth, marking her, twisting her nipple, his cock pistoning hard and fast, forcing her higher and higher, raking a trail of fire across her flesh.

His hips ground powerfully against her, locking her to him. She felt him pulse deep inside her cunt, like lightning pouring into her womb. She plummeted over the edge into her own climax. Shattering, she thought she would die from the rapture. She dropped back onto the earth, her eyelids fluttered closed, her lips trembling.

He lifted her, flipped her over, and dropped her to her hands and knees. Her eyelids snapped open. Pressing a firm hand between her shoulder blades, he forced her upper torso to the ground, back bowed, hips raised. He spread her legs wider, and the cold night air feathered across her overheated pussy. Once again, she felt the broad head of his cock at her entrance, separating her engorged lips. His hands clamped onto her hips and he sank his cock into her slick pussy,

burying himself to the root, making her howl as he pressed against her cervix, wedging himself deeper inside her.

Petra couldn't catch her breath. Emotion swept her away on the tides of primal possession. She yielded to her mate's dominance, accepting his fierce possession, reveling in her submission. He must have sensed her acceptance. He began to move inside her, faster and faster, powerful thrusts that stroked her sheath like fire scorching her, cleansing her, and reshaping her. He yanked her upward, wrapped his strong arms around her, welding her to his chest. Then she felt him plunge to her soul, an ache that pierced right through her. She screamed as she came. It was animalistic, it was primal, and he claimed her so completely, linking them together in ways that could never be severed.

His hands cupped her throbbing breasts, fingers kneading her nipples. Hands that smeared droplets of blood over her engorged breasts. Baptizing her with the blood of his victory.

"My mate," he growled in her ear. "Mine."

She shuddered as his steel-hard cock pierced between her lips and again plunged deep inside her molten center. A hot friction that branded her for all time.

"Say it," he said. "My mate."

He thrust inside her again and she cried out at the intense pleasure that permeated her whole being. In a way that went soul-deep, she was now connected to this man in a way she had never been touched by another human being. There was nothing civilized about this claiming. Little that could be called human. Petra fused with him, beneath the glare of the full

moon above. They were wedded by the night, united in combustible, animalistic passion, and still she wanted more.

She inhaled sharply when he brought the flat of his hand down across her ass cheek. Petra felt the spread of the stinging heat imprint on her ass as he lifted his hand away.

"Answer me. Tell me you understand what's happened. That there can be no going back. That you know what you are."

Her wet pussy grasped at his swollen cock, almost as though recognizing his claim, demanding her answer. She dropped forward, a sob caught in her throat. Tears coursed down her face. What was she? He was wrong; she didn't know. She didn't understand. Not the shifting part. But there was one thing she did know.

The heat wafted through her, imprisoning her still. That was something she was growing very familiar with. The unquenchable drive that had grown inside her so quickly for this man. The recognition she didn't understand. The dream confused her. But she did accept one thing.

"Your mate," she affirmed, unable to deny him.

He pulled out until the tip teased at her entrance and then drove into her again and again. She pushed back and met him measure for measure, groaning and screaming, clawing at the earth. Arching her back as he rode her, wanting more of him. And wanting to give him everything. She didn't understand it, but she accepted him and his claim. She wanted to be bound to him. It didn't matter that he'd kidnapped her, it didn't matter that he'd handcuffed her to the bed and then brought her to ground to mate her.

She wanted it more than anything in her life. This was who she was. It was as though she had searched all her life for a place to belong and someone with whom she belonged.

Her climax ripped through her, and then another, mingling and blending together. She shuddered beneath him, this man who was shifter. An alpha who claimed her as his own. Her heart thundered in her chest, powerful, surging beats.

"Oh, God," she screamed as another climax quaked through her. Too much and not enough. He fucked her and fucked her, and she answered with her own wolf call for more and more and more.

Finally, he exploded inside her, bathing her womb with his semen. She welcomed the heat of him filling her, sealing her to him. There was no thought for past, present, or future. For human or shifter. There was only him and the night and his cock pulsing inside her.

It seemed a long time later that he finally pulled out, and she collapsed to the ground gasping for breath, overcome with the enormity of what had just occurred. He gathered her up into his arms and lifted her chin so she was looking up at him. His eyes were dark, his face shadowed.

"There's no going back—you realize that."

She didn't understand everything, but she knew enough. She nodded. "I know."

He leaned against the tree and chained her to him, spread across his lap, her arms curled around his neck. She closed her eyes, exhausted by everything that had happened. She doubted she could have moved if she wanted to. The haze of the animal heat was slowly dissipating.

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There were so many questions, but right now she was just too tired to ask them, her brain too fogged. She was sated and sore, her breasts throbbing, her pussy empty. One of Carson's fingers brushed over her swollen nipple and she shuddered at the exquisite sensations produced by his touch. She swore in that instant that no man's touch had ever affected her, or most likely would ever affect her, so deeply as this one man.

Certainly not her fiancé's.

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CHAPTER 8

It was a good thing the ground was soft, Carson thought the next morning as he dug the black wolf's grave with his bare hands. The animal deserved proper respect for the fearless battle he had fought. Carson picked up the lifeless body and placed it into the grave. He stood looking down at the animal who had such a fierce heart. It could have been him. Carson knew he would have fought to the death for Petra.

It was in their nature to fight to possess. Only the fittest survived. And that included the world of shifters as well. After a moment, Carson dropped to his knees and began pushing the moist earth into the makeshift grave. He'd dug it deep and, although much less than six feet down, it should remain protected from most marauders, or humans looking for an easy pelt to add to their collection.

He stopped as he saw a pair of delicate arms, long fingers buried in the earth next to his, pushing the dirt, helping him to fill the grave.

"You don't have to do that. I can finish it," he said.

He sat back on his heels to look at her. Her curves seemed to go on endlessly, lush and beautiful. He noticed the vivid marks of his fierce passion littering her body. Her nipples were still engorged, teeth marks visible around the deep crimson of the areola surrounding the dusky buds. It was the way of the animal heat at full throttle. During the full moon there was no stopping it. There was no denying it. The fact

that she had embraced the heat so completely told him that shifter was in her blood. But it still didn't make sense.

His eyes swept over her breasts as they swayed with her movements. His cock swelled quickly, and his arousal was something he wasn't going to be able to hide.

She fit him, her body bending to his will, her pussy wrapping so tightly around him the night before. Again and again she accepted his possession, yielded so sweetly to his demands. So passionately. He wanted to take her right here in the moist, dark earth. To spread her and sink into her succulent, wet channel.

She didn't turn to look at him, or stop working when he told her he could finish. He still found it hard to believe she was the daughter of two vicious and powerful assassins. He also didn't understand how she could be a shifter. He knew he was right when he said there was more to Petra Thornton than what they had discovered in the initial file.

Finally, he turned away and bent to the task of covering the grave, ignoring the cravings of his body. At last it was finished and they both settled back, covered in grime and mud. Carson rose to his feet and began to gather up fallen leaves and pine branches to cover the mound. Immediately, Petra mirrored his efforts. As she laid the last of the greenery upon the grave, he grabbed her arm and whirled her around to face him.

"Who are you?"

She looked up at him and he saw so much pain and confusion in her expression. "After last night, your mate, I guess. Beyond that, I have no idea."

Again, he looked at the marks painted across her body. He hadn't wanted another mate after Sybilla died. Hadn't expected something like this to happen and certainly not with the daughter of his enemy. He yanked her against him, saw her wince at the abrupt action, a result of the bruises.

"Is that what you want?" he couldn't help asking. "I won't force you to stay." He stroked her face, brushed at the bits of dirt, smudging it across her cheek, feeling the silky softness of her skin. He dropped his hand and she stepped back, looking up at him with curiosity and surprise in her expression.

"You mean I'm free to go? You don't plan to use me as your bargaining chip?" Her expression darkened. "Oh, I see. Maybe you've had what you want from me after all. So I guess I'm not worth keeping around."

A moment of anger flared through him at her words. But he looked at her and realized she was angry at what she thought was his rejection after the night they had just spent together. He needed some distance if he were going to offer her freedom. Her feminine scent was too overpowering and it would have been just as easy for him to rescind the offer of release.

"I'm not rejecting you," he assured her. Right now his body should tell her exactly how much he wanted her. It wasn't like it was something he could hide. "But I can't force you to stay. What I mean to say is that you are free to leave or to stay. No one will stop you. I don't know what you are, but, no, I can't force you to remain with me, no matter how much I want it."

"Do you want me to go? After last night..." her voice trailed away.

"Last night changes nothing." It changed everything, at least for him. He had to force his emotions down. He needed to say this. "You were taken against your will to use as leverage with your parents. But things are different now." He couldn't force her to stay; she had to know she was free, that she had a choice.

"You called me your mate."

He nodded. "So you are. I fought for you and you belong to me. But you don't know our ways. You don't know our code. You're a shifter and that's something none of us expected. We can't use one of our own. We couldn't give you up to them." He looked at her more closely. "Do they know what you are?"

"No. At least I don't think so. I don't know what's happened to me. A lot of strange things occurred after the operation."

"What operation?"

She pointed to the vivid white scar running down the length of her chest. "Heart surgery. After the cave-in. My brother died, but someone got me out. It took a long time for me to recuperate. But ever since then I've had these odd feelings. Well, I had some ability before, but certainly not shifter ability. At least that I was aware of. But after the operation something changed, I don't know why this has happened; I don't know what I am anymore. And I don't know what to do about it."

He reached for her and enclosed her in his arms. He couldn't help it, she looked so lost.

"That's how you got away from the Dalwin brothers. Your increased strength. But if your parents aren't shifters—"

Her arms had come up to wrap around his back. He found he liked holding this woman in his arms. Liked the feel of her flesh rubbing against his.

"I told you, they're not my real parents."

He leaned away and looked down at her. "Yes, I remember. Do you know who your real parents were?"

"No. But apparently the Thorntons either couldn't have children, or Deborah didn't want to be bothered getting pregnant. They adopted Jamie and me. Though I still don't know why, because they never seemed to want us around."

Well, that could explain some of it. But not everything. If they'd known she had any kind of powers, wouldn't they have destroyed her immediately? Or at the very least, incarcerated her at the detainment facilities?

"None of this adds up. Did the Thorntons realize you had any powers? You say you had some before."

"Yes, both Jamie and I ... were different. But we never discussed it with anyone. We only had each other. Jamie and I didn't have the same parents. Like I said, the Thorntons never wanted us and never loved us. The only one who loved me was Jamie. When I found out I could—" She stopped speaking and chewed at her full lower lip.

"When you found out what?" He put a finger beneath her chin and lifted her head. He leaned down to possess her lips ... so soft and responsive. Then he cupped her face and gazed

into her eyes. "I've claimed you as my mate. Do you really think I would hurt you? Tell me the rest."

She heaved a shuddering breath. "I'm not used to talking about this with anyone. It's dangerous in my part of the world. Jamie was three years older than me. He realized sooner than I did that he had powers. He could do things with his mind."

"Like what?"

"Light a fire, bend things, stuff like that. I was the only one who knew what he could do."

"And what about you?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes when I touch an object, I can see things. Sometimes it's the past, sometimes the future. Jamie liked to go spelunking and sometimes he took me along. That day, just after we entered the cave, I picked up a rock and I knew. Oh, God, I knew. But it was too late."

Again, Carson gathered her into his arms. He stroked her hair and tried to soothe her, but he knew losing someone so violently never went away. The horror of it might ease to some degree, but it never totally left you.

"It's all right," he murmured against her hair, inhaling her fragrant scent. "You're safe now. You're with people who can help you, people you can trust."

"I wasn't like this before the operation. Yes, I had the sight, but not the strength. And I certainly wasn't a shifter. I would have known, wouldn't I? I'm frightened, Carson." She looked up at him. "Except when I'm with you. I trust you—I don't know how or why, but I do. There's just something about you. I have to be with you for some reason. It doesn't

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make sense, but I feel like I would die if we were parted now."

He didn't have answers, only more questions, but he knew that now that he had mated her he couldn't let her go. He understood what she meant. He had to help her and keep her safe. Whatever the cost.

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CHAPTER 9

It was strange how easily she accepted the role as Carson's mate. Common sense had nothing to do with this. She wasn't certain being human even had anything to do with it. What she did know was even now she needed him as much as she required oxygen to breathe.

Her whole life had been turned upside down when she came to Silver Creek. It seemed to her the whole previous night was a dream, or a nightmare. She still found it difficult to believe she had shifted into an animal. Having been brought up to hate paraspecies of any type, it mystified her that she responded so quickly to Carson. But then, technically, she was paraspecies, even before the operation. So hating others with abilities would mean hating herself as well. And Jamie. How would her parents have reacted if they'd known about hers and Jamie's abilities?

Here she stood in the middle of the forest, bare as the day she was born, and in some way it seemed second nature to her. It was as though it had always been a part of her life. And even though she didn't understand it, it seemed natural for her to be here with Carson. To help him in whatever way she could. To love him when it came right down to it.

"We need to get cleaned up," Carson said. "And find something to eat. I know where there's a stream where we can wash up and there are some blackberry bushes nearby. Unless you want to wait here while I shift and hunt for meat."

"No, oh God, no," she hastily answered. "Really, the berries will be fine." She shuddered as she remembered the hunt scene in her dream. To humans it might have seemed cruel, but when she was in wolf form her thoughts seemed to revert to primal survival mode. Right now, in human form, she was certain she didn't want to deal with the whole hunting thing. Especially right after burying that poor dead wolf. Yes, berries and anything green and edible would be just fine with her right now.

Carson watched her for the space of a minute and then shrugged. "Okay then, let's get cleaned up."

He grabbed her hand and headed toward a narrow path, which she would have missed if she'd been on her own. But then, it was unlikely she would have been on her own in the middle of the forest under any other circumstances.

Carson pointed out various types of ferns and plants to her along the way, which she found interesting. Much of what he told her was based on scent, and he had her smell the aromas of the various flora in the area. She knew he was attempting to teach her the ways of the wolf, but he didn't say so directly. They walked for about twenty minutes when she heard the sound of rushing water. Carson pushed back a particularly tall fern and then she saw the stream.

She had to admit she did feel quite grubby, and even if the water was cold, she welcomed the opportunity to scrub clean.

"Go ahead," Carson said. "I'll gather some of the blackberries in the vicinity. I expect you might want a little bit of privacy."

"You won't go far?" Suddenly, she wasn't quite certain she wanted to be alone, but he was right, she did need at least a few moments of privacy. It was very considerate of him to realize it without her needing to ask.

He leaned down to kiss her. "I won't be far." His eyes blazed as he looked at her. "I won't leave my mate unprotected."

Heat flared to life inside her at his words. How is it she could become so responsive to this man so quickly? It was like touching match to flint, within a breath the heat consumed her. She shook her head as she made her way to a section of overgrown ferns and utilized the few moments of privacy he provided. Then she walked down to the water's edge. It was serene and quiet here. Quite beautiful. She sat on a rock that was partially submerged in the water and began to scrub at her skin. She was actually thankful there wasn't a mirror nearby. She'd probably scare herself if she looked into it.

Then she slipped off the rock to more fully submerge herself into the water. It was cold, but not quite as frigid as she'd expected. And it was deeper than she thought it would be.

Carson walked around the corner and looked down at her. "Need any help?"

She smiled. "I think I've got it. What about you? Need help?"

He set down the bark he'd used as a bowl to collect the berries and then stepped into the water beside her. "Wash my back?"

She cupped water and trickled it down his spine. She smoothed her hands over the muscles, feeling the heat that emanated from him. She marveled at the solid sculpted muscles and traced her fingers down the length of his spine. His skin was burning hot ... male heat that had her wrapping her arms around him and pressing her breasts to his back, needing to feel him close against her body.

He gripped her hands. "We aren't going to get very far if we keep this up."

"Mmm," was all she was able to say as she started rubbing against him. The animal heat rose to the surface once again and she couldn't fight its control. She reached down to enclose his erection, which was slippery and wet, in her hand. Her fingers swirled over the head, then slid down to cup his testicles. His hand gripped hers again, and he raised it to his lips. He licked each finger, then sucked a finger into his mouth and released it.

Carson turned around to look at her. "I'm hungry," he growled. "And those berries aren't going to quench my appetite."

Petra threaded her fingers through his long, black hair. "What would?"

Without warning he lifted her out of the water and carried her to a sunny spot in the grass near a tree. He laid her down and then came over her to lick at the droplets of water clinging to her skin.

"I'm going to eat you," said the wolf to Little Red Riding Hood." He growled and showed his sharp teeth. She couldn't help laughing. He leaned up to kiss the laughter from her lips

and then began to slowly lick his way down her body, swirling his tongue inside her navel before moving lower.

"What if Little Red Riding Hood doesn't want to be eaten? What can she do to save herself, Mr. Wolf?"

She heard him chuckle as he spread her thighs and she felt the heat of his breath against her opening. "Oh, I think Little Red Riding Hood will enjoy being spread across this particular table. In fact, with any luck at all, she'll beg to be devoured." Petra caught her breath as she felt the swipe of his long tongue from anus to clit, and she shuddered at the pleasurable sensations that assaulted her.

She couldn't help arching up, wanting to feel more of him inside her. "Carson," she cried out when his tongue entered her vagina, retreated and lapped at her inner labia lips, sucking his way toward her engorged clitoris.

"Mmm, a tasty treat," he said. "Such sweet, sweet cream. 'More,' said the wolf to his delectable breakfast." And he plunged his tongue as deep as it would go into her cunt, lapping at her juices as they dripped from inside her, excitement and desire surging through her, driving her to the summit.

He consumed her like the ravenous wolf of his nature. Petra cried out again and again as he sucked and stroked, driving the heat higher and higher, frenzied with the need to mate with him.

"Carson," she cried out as another climax surged over her. "Please, I need you. I need you, now."

Only then did he rise over her, and she felt the tip of his penis press to her opening and then sink inside. Her channel

clutched at him, welcomed his invasion, reveled in his possession.

"More. More," she cried as she arched against him, gripping his ass and pressing him closer.

He rode her, thrusting in and out, again and again, until finally he climaxed, and she thought she would die from the pleasure. She heard his raspy breaths as though he had run a long distance as he collapsed next to her. He pulled her into his arms. He started to pull from inside her, but she stopped him.

"No, not yet. Please. It feels so right to have you there. I don't want you to leave me just yet. Please."

He tightened his embrace, pulled one of her legs over his and buried himself deeper into her channel. Without him she felt so alone. But connected, like this, she felt so much a part of something special. She wanted it to go on forever. She closed her eyes and snuggled against him.

It was a long time later that Carson finally allowed his cock to slip from inside her vagina.

"We have to get back to the cabin," Carson said. "Donovan will have returned by now and wonder what happened to us. He's probably already gone looking for us. That broken window in the bedroom won't help matters any."

She looked up at him. "How far away are we? How long will it take us to get back? What if someone sees us?" Her questions fell over each other, her mind a muddle of thoughts and feelings she couldn't seem to unknot. She really did not want to return to civilization. Not just yet.

Carson's dark, hungry eyes surveyed her. "We'll have to shift. It's the fastest way."

"But I don't know how. I don't know how I did it last night. I don't seem to have any control over it."

He nodded. "I figured that's what happened. You're going to have to center and call upon your primal nature. You've done it once already; it should come easier this time. Close your eyes and call the image back into your mind. Don't panic. This time it may be a slower change, but yield to it."

She tried to do as he instructed, but each time she felt a disturbance inside her, she panicked and pulled back. She backed away from Carson. "I don't think I can do this."

"I know you're scared." He moved toward her and leaned forward to kiss her.

She felt the press of his lips, his closeness centered her, gave her strength. He lifted away. "What if I can't shift back to human form? What then?"

"You'll do it. Don't worry. You're strong. I'll be with you the whole way. I won't leave you, Petra. You're part of me now."

She inhaled a deep breath. Okay. She could do this. She regulated her breathing and focused inward. It had to work the same way she called on the power when she was back in the truck. She centered herself, willing and harnessing the power inside her. She felt the shift begin, her bone structure altering, like fluid mass, reshaping her. The fear rose, but she pushed it aside. She dropped to her hands and knees; her frightened gaze clung to Carson.

"It's all right," he assured her. "I'll shift as soon as your transformation is complete. You won't be alone."

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Her back arched, her body was covered with fur, her ears lengthened, her face narrowed and altered. She tried to say something, but it came out as a whine instead of words. And then suddenly she was wolf and no longer human.

She watched with wonder as Carson transformed into his wolf shape. He was beautiful with a thick, silky coat. So male. So alpha. Animal instinct pulled at her and she trotted over to him. He turned his head and licked the side of her face and nuzzled her. Then he looked at her and it was almost as though they communicated on a different wavelength in this form. She knew he wanted her to follow him. He turned and trotted off into the woods and she followed him.

The sounds and scents of the forest were different. They seemed magnified, her ears pricked to pick up sounds, both friendly and dangerous. The scents were stronger and she tried to pick them apart, to identify each one. Her paws struck the soft earth, she sensed vibrations. She was enthralled by the sensuousness of such intimate surroundings as she absorbed their texture inside.

Carson started to move faster, his gait changing into a lope, and then they ran. The wind whipped across Petra's fur as she raced after him, her heart pumping fast, her legs and lungs powerful beyond anything she had ever known before.

Carson slowed and looked back, then increased his pace once again. They trotted to the top of a hill and Carson came to a halt. Below, she saw the cabin. She sensed unease in Carson as he slowly crept forward. She saw him sniff the air and then stiffen. She couldn't seem to sense what he did and she looked around, searching for something out of place.

It was then the first dart hit her in the haunches and she yipped. Carson whirled around at the sound. She saw a dart hit him in the shoulder and he went down. Another caught him in the haunches.

The world began to blur. Moments later she had shifted to human form. She dragged herself across the ground toward Carson, who had also shifted back to human form.

"Carson," she whispered, desperate to reach him. Darts protruded from his arms and legs. He rolled over and tried to get to her. Reaching across the ground, her fingertips brushed against his and then their fingers entwined.

Oh, God, not like Jamie. Please, don't let this happen.

"So animals will find each other no matter what. I always knew this is how you'd turn out, Petra." Petra had all she could do to turn her head to look up and see her adoptive mother standing over her, surrounded by a group of men dressed in PIA uniforms.

"No. Mother, if you've never done anything else in your life for me, please d-don't hurt him," she begged.

Two of the men wrenched Carson up by the arms, ripping his hand from hers.

"No!" She watched them drag him away. A booted foot shoved Petra onto her back.

Deborah's cold eyes raked over her body. "Well, I can see he mated you," she said as her gaze surveyed the marks on Petra's body.

"H-how did you find us?"

"Remember that operation? A microchip was surgically implanted beneath your skin as well. How else does one track their pets these days?"

Petra fell onto her back, unable to hold her eyes open any longer. "Why?"

"Research. But I've found out what I wanted to know and now is probably the perfect time to end the experiment once I've recorded my findings. Unless, of course, I decide to wait to see if he's bred you."

Petra had no strength left. There was no way she could help Carson. What had she done by coming here? How many lives would be destroyed because of her?

Oblivion overcame her.

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CHAPTER 10

When Carson started to regain consciousness, he realized he was seated in the back of an SUV. Someone had shoved a pair of black jogging pants on him and his hands were bound together behind his back. And there was something heavy encircling his neck. A man dressed in black was seated on either side of him; both bore the insignia of the PIA.

He and the man driving locked gazes in the rearview mirror. Carson recognized him. It was the man with the sword, the one who'd beheaded the Dalwin brothers with such relish.

"So you're finally awake. We were starting to wonder if you planned to stay in dreamland all the way to Spokane. Certainly would make it easier on my men. I wouldn't advise trying anything. We've learned how to control your kind."

He lifted one of his arms and Carson noticed he held some kind of remote in his hand. He pressed a button and Carson felt excruciating jolts of electricity pass through his body from the neck down. He realized the voltage emanated from the metal collar surrounding his neck.

He stiffened, gasping for air until finally the pain eased.

"Just a sample," the man said as he tossed the remote onto the dashboard. "That's not nearly as bad as it could be. I put it on max and you'll be dead. We decided handcuffs alone didn't work on you shifters. But we made adjustments and now your kind don't give us any trouble at all."

Carson heard his dirty little snicker but refused to respond to the bastard. His neck throbbed from aftershocks and his mind was still slightly muddled from the drug. What had they done with Petra? Her safety was his immediate concern right now. He had to find a way to get to her.

He reached out for a sense of her and was surprised when he found it. He felt the steady beating of her heart. Carson didn't understand why he knew it was her, he just did. At least she was alive, even if he couldn't pinpoint where she was located.

He tried to clear his head, attempting to jump-start his brain. He didn't know what they'd used in the darts, but it was taking too long to wear off. He didn't dare attempt to shift. The restraints on his arms wouldn't be a problem, but the collar could strangle him. He doubted it would simply break open. And that would be if he was lucky enough to complete a shift before the man in the front seat managed to hit that damned button again.

He stared at the man in the mirror. His eyes were ice cold and dead. Carson saw no humanity in evidence.

"Was she a good fuck, wolfboy?"

Carson stiffened but refused to rise to the bait.

"I mean my fiancé, Petra," he went on. "Not that I was ever going to marry the bitch, but the Thorntons wanted someone to watch her closely when they weren't around. Not bad in bed, but certainly nothing I'd take home to mom, if you know what I mean."

Carson felt the rage surge. He had touched Carson's mate and the only thing he wanted right now was to see the man's

throat ripped open and to watch him slowly bleed out. Why hadn't Petra told him she was engaged to vermin like this? She had to have recognized the murderer when they were in the woods.

Carson heard the man sitting next to him chuckle.
"Interesting use of wolf bait, Rolland."

Rolland. So that was his name. Carson planned to remember that name.

Rolland laughed again. "Yeah, think of me as her teacher, wolfboy. Training a virgin isn't for the faint of heart, you know. And it takes a strong stomach to bed a para."

Carson felt the savage inside himself fight for control. The growl of rage seemed unstoppable and he felt the impotence grate at him. They would all die. His head dropped forward, lips were drawn back in a snarl, yet he met the eyes of the man in the mirror.

"You know what they'll do with her now, don't you, boy? Now that they know the operation was a success? They'll do what they do with all the paras at the facility. But you won't be seeing her again. They won't be taking her to Spokane. No, she's a special case—they'll probably ship her back to D.C. for observation. You won't ever be seeing that one again, wolfboy. Not in this lifetime."

"Fuck you," Carson's angry response was more of a snarl than actual words.

"Though maybe there will be concessions." Rolland continued as though Carson hadn't spoken. "If you tell them what they want to know. They might make you into a nice house pet, do what they want, and just maybe you can save

the bitch. There are a few around from what I understand that have been house trained with some success."

Carson shot up, his intent to reach the man in the driver's seat, but then he dropped back as the electrical pain drove through him, sending him reeling backward, gasping for air. *God damn the bastards. If they hurt my mate, I'll kill every last one of them.*

Suddenly he was thrown to the side of the vehicle as the car swerved.

"What the fuck?" Rolland yelled as he tried to straighten out the vehicle. "Shit. Somebody shot out the tire. We'll see how far they think they're going to get. If they pull anything out of this car it will be your dead carcass, wolfboy." He slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

Carson was thrown to the other side as the car swerved again. This time he heard the loud pop as a bullet sliced into another tire and the car careened to the other side. Rolland lost control and the car skidded into a ditch, toppling it on its side. Carson fell on top of the guard sitting on the other side of him.

Moving as quickly as his restraints would allow, he launched himself over the front seat straight at Rolland. His hands might be tied, but by God, his teeth weren't. Carson bared his fangs and clamped onto the man's shoulder with as much force as he could manage. Hot blood spilled into his mouth. Rolland screamed and tried to claw Carson off of him, but Carson wasn't going anywhere. He had a firm grip on the man's flesh and used his own body weight to keep him off

balance. The only way he was letting go was if he could manage to get a clear shot at his throat.

The remote, which had been on the dashboard, had apparently rolled off onto the floor. Rolland grappled with one hand, attempting to pry himself free of Carson's grip. With his other hand he searched frantically for the remote.

"Where is it? Sonofabitch, where'd it go?" he screamed as his desperate search failed to locate the object in the front seat. Just then the car door was ripped off its hinges and a hand reached in to grab Rolland by the back of the shirt and dragged him from the car. Carson released the bastard and lost sight of him, but he heard Rolland scream again. Carson spit out blood and smiled. He recognized the scent of his pack brothers.

"Don't kill him," Carson yelled. "Not yet."

The men in the backseat were yanked out the back window and then someone reached in to lift Carson out. When he was sprawled on the ground, he looked up into Trey's face.

"Get these things off me," he said. In no time Donovan had freed his hands as well as the metal collar around his neck. Quickly, Carson jumped to his feet. Trey handed him a cloth and Carson wiped the blood from his face. Rolland had sure left a nasty taste in his mouth. His brother then handed him a bottle of water. Carson took a swig, swished it around in his mouth and then spit it out. It helped somewhat with the metallic taste from Rolland's blood. He'd never understand how the vamps drank that stuff on a regular basis. It turned his stomach.

Looking around he noticed other shifters from the Falls were there as well. Two cham shifters stood guard over the men who had been in the SUV.

He turned back to Trey. "What are you doing here? You should be with Rainna."

"She's safe where she is. No one can get to her. You needed our help. You didn't think we were going to let them take you, did you? Enough of our family is lost to us. We weren't going to lose another."

"How did you know what happened?"

"I saw it all. When you weren't at the cabin, I went looking for you," Donovan said as he walked up to them. "I was just leaving the cabin to head out to track you when I saw the PIA bastards coming in. They've done something so their stink isn't as easy to detect. If I hadn't actually seen them, I might not have made it out in time. We're going to have to put some feelers out to see if we can find out what they've developed now. They almost got me. But I shifted and jumped out the broken window in the bedroom before they found me." He shook his head as he looked at his brother. "I couldn't get to you before they did. So I went straight back up the mountain. I knew there was no time to waste."

"Did you see where they took Petra?"

"No. After about ten minutes they split up. The woman left with a team of four and they took the girl with them. They got in one of those SUVs and took off. The other group dragged you back down to the cabin. I knew I wasn't going to get you out by myself, so I sent for backup. I got a message to the

sentry at the base of the mountain and then hightailed it back to the cabin."

"Thanks for getting me out." He picked up the discarded collar lying on the ground and strode over to where the three men were kneeling, hands bound behind their backs, and rather a bit the worse for wear. He immediately made his way to Rolland. Blood still oozed from the wound on his shoulder. Grabbing a shank of his hair, he yanked Rolland's head back.

"It wouldn't take me much to make a meal out of your throat, Rolland. Where is she?"

The guard sneered up at him. "You're too late, wolfboy, you'll never find her."

Carson held the collar up in front of Rolland. "You know, I think this would look pretty darn good around your neck. Maybe we'll see exactly how high that setting goes." Carson snarled and bared his teeth. "Maybe we'll strip you, let you see what it feels like to be owned first. See how you like having a sadistic master making you dance? Would you like that, Rolland?"

Rolland was shaking his head now, and tears shimmered in his eyes. Carson could smell the stink of his fear. He knew it wouldn't take much to break him. All talk. He was the type who liked to prey on the weak, but when it came to someone stronger, he'd be the first to fold.

"No," he gasped. "No. I don't know where they are. Another team went with Deborah, and I think they were headed for Vancouver. That's where Deborah has set up headquarters."

"What's the name of the hotel? Make it fast, my patience is just about at an end."

"The Night Wind. I think that's the name of it. It's just outside of town."

"You better be right. Because if you're not, I'll be coming back for you. And whatever the council plans to do with you once they get their hands on you, I'll find you, and when I do"—he hunched down closer, until he was practically nose to nose with the sweating bastard—"my bite is a hell of a lot worse than my bark. Take my word for it. And your death won't be either easy or fast." Carson whirled away, sick of looking at the bastards. Sick of their smell.

"Wait!"

He wheeled back to look at Rolland. "You have more to tell me?"

Rolland licked his lips. "You bit me. On my shoulder. Will it ... will it turn me?" There was so much dread in the quivering man's voice that Carson wanted to laugh. Just went to show how stupid these PIA guys really were. They had no clue what they were dealing with.

"Hell, no. Wrong pack. We don't make werewolves out of vermin like you. But if you live long enough, it could make you so sick you might wish you were dead." Carson chuckled as he pivoted away and walked back to where his brothers stood waiting. "I need to get to Vancouver. I don't suppose any of you brought any extra clothes?"

"You can't go after them, Carson," Donovan said. "There's too many of them. She's back with her people. She—"

"Don't say it, don't say another word." Carson burned his brother with a savage look. "She's my mate. I've made her mine. She's a shifter."

His brother's eyes widened. "You're kidding. She's one of us? But that's not possible."

"There's too much to explain. I don't have time." He looked back at the men kneeling at the side of the rode and an idea struck him. He whirled around to face his brothers. "Will you help me or not?"

"Carson, you can't be serious," Trey began. "You'll never get her out."

Carson stepped closer to him until they were nose to nose. "She's my mate, just as Rainna is yours. I will not lose another mate. Not this time. I either get her out or I die in the attempt. Whatever happens is my choice. But I cannot live with the loss of my woman. Not this time."

He didn't wait for Trey's answer as he strode back to the guards. Either way, he was going after Petra. His desire for this woman made no sense at all. Carson didn't understand how he could be so drawn to her, how he had chosen her as his mate when he had turned down so many others since Sybilla's death. But the fact was, everything he said was true. If he lost her, he could not go on. She was already buried that deeply into his heart and soul.

"All right," Trey finally said. "We'll help you. What do you want us to do?"

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CHAPTER 11

Petra awoke slowly from the effects of the drug. Turning over, she realized she was lying on a bed and was dressed in a pair of beige linen drawstring pants and a midriff cut T-shirt.

But she felt something else as well. Lifting a hand to her neck, she felt the metal collar that encircled it. What she didn't understand was why it had been placed there.

"Good, you're finally awake." She stiffened when she heard the hard voice of her adoptive mother. "Now we can get out of this filthy little rat hole."

Petra was dragged up roughly from the bed and a chain attached to the collar. She fought against the rough hands and turned toward the woman she had once thought of as her mother.

"Why?" Just one word. But it was a word drenched with Petra's pain and confusion.

Deborah uncrossed her long legs and rose from the chair she'd been sitting in. She took her time as she stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette, then looked across the room at Petra with expressionless eyes. "Why did I come for you? Or why did I let you live in my house? What exactly is it you want to know, Petra?"

"All of it. Why did you pretend to be my mother all these years? Was there ever any speck of love in you for me? Or for Jamie?"

If it was possible her expression grew even harder. "After your parents' ... deaths, I picked you from the litter, so to speak."

"You what? What does that mean exactly?"

"Your parents were paras. They were captured in Albany and taken to the facility in New York. You couldn't have been more than a few months old at the time as I remember. We got what we could from them and then they were ... euthanized. I was heavily into research at the time and I asked for you. As an experiment."

Horror bled through Petra. Euthanized? Her parents were murdered? And this woman had known about it. She probably had been the one to give the order. Oh, God, what else was she going to discover. How blind could she have been? All these years she had truly thought the PIA and her adoptive parents in particular only incarcerated those paranormals who were evil. Jamie had tried to tell her differently. It was because of Jamie she'd never revealed her special abilities to anyone. It was amazing what a person could blind themselves to in order to be loved. But not anymore.

"You killed my parents?"

"You know the laws as well as anyone. They wouldn't work with us. Therefore, they couldn't be trusted. So they were eliminated. But you hadn't been tainted, at least not then. I wanted to observe you as you grew and matured. To see what developed. But you became as corrupt as any of them—hiding your abilities from me. Did you think I wouldn't find out? No better than the rest of the mutants. Animals, all of them. Biting the hand that fed them."

"You never loved me." It was a statement of fact. All these years she had tried so hard to do the right things, to be deserving of Deborah's love. All for nothing. Even the engagement to Rolland had been to please her parents.

"I owned you." The smile she gave was an evil thing to see. "I even named you. Petra. Pet for short. My pet. Tamed to my hand. Taught the tricks I wanted you to know. Performed when I told you to perform. You housetrained quite well. Jamie was another matter. You would have made quite a nice docile addition to my household if it hadn't been for him. He encouraged you to rebel."

Petra watched her as she paced back and forth across the room, arms crossed over her chest. "Don't think for a minute I didn't know what he was up to. I had to get rid of him. But you—I had other plans for you. I would have repaid your loyalty. I would have eventually turned your papers over to Rolland. Of course, I couldn't let you out on your own, but Rolland knew what you were. He would have known how to handle you. He knew what I could give him if he did as I asked. I actually had several people in the agency willing to pay good money for you." She whirled around on Petra. "I tried to do right by you, and look what you did? There was no reason for you to be in Silver Creek. None at all. You had your assigned duties and they would have kept you out of trouble."

Petra thought she was going to throw up. Her stomach roiled at the thought of all the years she had lived under false assumptions. She had known her mother was a hard woman, but she had never seen this monstrous side of her. She had kept it well hidden from Petra and Jamie.

"Oh, my God." She tried to twist away, to run from the horrible truth, but the chain attached to the collar kept her from going too far. Like an animal on a leash.

"Of course your worth increased after the accident. I didn't know you were going to accompany Jamie that day. He was meant to die, but you weren't. But your value did increase after that, I must say. You were worth keeping around."

Petra's head shot up. "You killed my brother." She had to say the words out loud in order to make herself believe them. It felt like she was sitting in the middle of a nightmare. None of this could be real.

"Yes. He was becoming unmanageable. And he was beginning to ask too many questions. After he finished college, he wanted to move out on his own. Leave the institute. I couldn't allow that. I wouldn't have been able to observe him if he did that."

"You killed him." Petra couldn't seem to come to terms with the knowledge that was just coming to light. That her mother had murdered her brother. And almost killed her as well.

"It was quite fortuitous that your accident came at the same time we were transporting the she-wolf Sybilla to the compound. I had been after that pack for quite some time. I'm just sorry I didn't get them all. She tried to escape and was shot. But then you were brought in very near death and I knew a crucial experiment was about to take place. I wanted to find out if it was possible to transfer the shifter abilities through the transplant and transfusion process and how the

curse worked—if that was possible. That way we could control the beasts and use our own people when necessary."

Oh, God, she didn't want to hear this. Petra understood exactly what she meant. "All along you were going to try to use me to infiltrate the paranormal community. That's what you're trying to do, isn't it? You want to pinpoint their sanctuaries."

Deborah shrugged. "Of course. There would be no need to fake the paranormal effects if we could induce and control them ourselves. But now we can move on to the second part of the experiment. To see if we can reverse the effects as easily as we instilled them in you."

Every word out of Deborah's mouth just made the horror of these revelations worse. Petra was so shocked she couldn't even think of what to say.

"She was his mate, you know," Deborah said as she walked over to the other bed. "Your wolf lover. He probably recognized her scent on you."

"What did you do? Oh, God, what did you do to me? To us?"

"Her heart, her blood. Your body, your mind. You are, in essence the mate he lost all those years ago. I wonder what he would say if he knew it was his first lover's heart that saved his new lover?"

The world was spinning and Petra couldn't find her way to solid ground. *Oh, my God, these people were monsters.* And she was a part of it. She had to get out of here. She was suffocating. She clawed at the collar imprisoning her neck.

She tried to launch herself at Deborah, but the guard yanked her back onto the bed.

"You're crazy!"

The cold smile on Deborah's face sent chills coursing along Petra's spine. "Oh, I wouldn't try using your newly-acquired strength. That collar contains an electrical charge you won't enjoy. In fact, it could kill you if it's set to max. So I'd be very careful if I were you." She held up a remote and then tossed it to the guard standing next to the bed holding the leash. He caught it deftly with his other hand. "Use it if she gets too rebellious. I hate it when they forget their manners."

"Yes, doctor." Petra saw him smile as he stroked a finger over the surface of the small black box.

Deborah reached down to the second bed and Petra only then noticed a wolf pelt lying across the bed. Her gaze widened. She had been so focused on Deborah and the terrible things she'd been relating that she hadn't actually looked around the room. Now she stared at the pelt in horror.

"Isn't it illegal to have those?" she asked.

Deborah smiled coldly as she picked it up and stroked it with her hand. "Only the purebred kind is still protected. But this isn't purebred." Insanity lit up her eyes. "Do you know what it is?"

Petra didn't want to know. How had she allowed herself to be so blinded? Had she needed the love and approval of a parent so desperately that she had not wanted to see the true nature of the woman who had raised her?

"I asked you a question," Deborah yelled. "Do you know what this is?"

"No, I don't."

Deborah smiled as she stroked the fur. "But I think you do. Did he tell you about Kyle?"

Oh, my God! The man in Petra's dream. It felt as though the world was going black. Her stomach churned. She blinked and forced herself to focus.

"Well, Kyle was out of the same pack," Deborah went on in a conversational tone. "He resisted too hard and I'm afraid we had to kill him. Did you know it takes a little while for a werewolf to shift back to human form after it's killed? Especially if death comes to him slowly."

Petra could only stare at her mutely, horrified by what this monster was revealing to her.

"Well, he was still alive when my men dragged him out. But just barely. I gave the orders that the minute his heart stopped ... Well you get the idea. I had him skinned immediately and the fine pelt treated." She rubbed the pelt against her cheek. "Mmm, nice and soft. It's a wonderful reminder of my mission in life. And just the way I like my shifters."

"Nooooooooo," Petra screamed. This time she couldn't stop herself. She leaned over the side of the bed and vomited. When it was over, she pulled herself up and glared at Deborah. "You're a monster."

The guard yanked the chain viciously and dragged her back on the bed. She struggled to get free. He held up the small box as a warning, his finger hovering over a black button. She sagged back down onto the bed.

Deborah settled the pelt back onto the bedspread "Now that we've seen the experiment has worked even beyond my expectations, we're going back to the facility in New York for more tests and to eventually attempt a reversion."

"Where is he?" Petra looked up at Deborah with dull eyes.

"The wolf who mated you? Oh, he'll be taken to Spokane for a different sort of tests. You won't be seeing him again," she said matter-of-factly.

Petra crouched on the bed, staring up at the woman who Petra now wanted to destroy.

She had taken everything from her ... everything. Her parents, her brother, and now she meant to take her mate. She felt the animal rise toward the surface, felt the rumblings of primal savage passion spread through her.

"Why have you done this? Why?"

"Why? A long time ago when I just a child, I saw my parents murdered by werewolves. I watched them die a slow, painful death. The wolves thought I was dead as well, but I lived. At that moment I swore to put an end to their kind once and for all. When the PIA was formed I knew what I had been born to do." Deborah glared at Petra with that unholy light in her eyes. "And I shall triumph, Pet. Just you see. And you shall help me."

"I won't let you win," Petra growled at her.

"I already have, my Pet. I already have." She looked at the guard. "Take her out to the van and see that she's secured. If you try to escape, or try to fight your way out, even think about shifting, all he'll have to do is press that button and I'm sure you'll think twice before trying it again. Well, maybe a

small test, just to assure you I mean what I say." She looked at the guard. "Show her."

The guard pressed the button and Petra was thrown back onto the bed by the force of the electrical current that shot through her whole body, centering at her neck, choking her, trying to suffocate her. She screamed in agony.

The guard released the button and the pain immediately began to dissipate. Petra panted and tried to draw in deep breaths.

"That was just a sample, Pet. Go along nicely with the guard and it won't be needed again. Prepare her for departure. You have my permission to use the collar if you need to, but I don't want her dead. Not just yet. We still have much to learn."

The guard nodded. "Yes, Dr. Thornton."

Petra had no choice but to follow the guard out to the small yellow van waiting in the parking lot. She saw the outline of two men dressed in black seated in the front, but the guard yanked the leash and forced her around to the back before she could make out their faces. When they arrived at the back, he stopped her from climbing in and wheeled her around to face him.

He pulled a knife from his belt. "I need to prepare you for transport. You heard what the doctor said."

She tried to step away from him, but he yanked on the chain. "Don't try it or I'll use the collar. I can strip you just as well unconscious as conscious."

She lifted her chin and glared at him. Using the knife, he split open the front of her shirt and removed it. He did the

same with her pants until she was standing naked in front of him.

His hot gaze traveled over her body, then he smiled. "It will be an interesting trip." He spun her toward the steps that would take her into the back of the truck. The inside was empty, except for a steel cage. The guard forced her up the steps and then into the cage. It wasn't large enough for her to stand; she was required to kneel. He then unhooked the leash. She heard the squeaking echo of the door as he slammed it shut and padlocked it. She refused to look up at him.

"You're the doc's special project. She'll be flying home, but for us—it will probably take a good week to get you back to the New York facility. She expects you amenable when you reach the facility. It's our job to make sure the doc gets what she wants. You can make it as hard or as easy on yourself as you wish. I'm a friendly kind of guy and more than willing to negotiate—on my terms. Awful hard riding in that cage all the way across country. But you think about it."

Petra refused to look at him. She knew he meant to humiliate her, to break her. In the last twenty-four hours she had learned things about herself. Revelations that had made her stronger and more determined to fight people such as Deborah and the agencies she worked with. Petra had wanted to fit in, to please her parents, to gain their love. And in doing so she had shut her eyes to the atrocities that were being perpetuated on the paraspecies. Not just the werewolves, but any human with the least bit of unusual ability. No more. She *would* get free and when she did she would tear this bastard's

heart out. The cruelty of these people astounded her and with her last breath she would fight them. No matter what they did to her, she would not let them win.

When she didn't cry or beg or scream, she heard him walk away from the cage. He lowered the door and the light dimmed. He walked back to the front and banged on the wall. Petra heard the rumble of the motor as the truck started. Her gaze narrowed as she watched the guard move to a bench bolted to the side of the van and he sat down, his focus on her.

She felt a ripple of electrical shock curl around her neck and travel down her body. She shot a poisoned look at him.

He grinned as he held up the control. "Just checking to make sure you know who's in control."

At least for now, she wanted to qualify his statement. There would come a time when even the thought of excruciating death would not deter her. She didn't plan to make it all the way to New York.

But for now she was going to have to bide her time. It would come, that was something she was certain of.

The back of the truck swayed and she felt the rumbling vibrations as the vehicle began to move forward. She settled back, drew her legs up, and wrapped her arms around them. She kept her eye on the guard as the truck turned onto what was probably the main highway that would take them out of the state. Who would guess what was contained in the small panel truck? With nothing to draw particular attention to it, no one would question what was inside. It would be up to her to find a way out. One way or the other.

Vampyre Falls: Heartbreak
by Adrianna Dane

She leaned back against the bars of the cage, planning her eventual escape. The swaying of the truck lulled her into a state of semi-sleep. Suddenly she was jostled awake as the truck veered to the side, pulled off the road, and came to an abrupt stop. She didn't know how much time had passed, but thought it couldn't have been more than a couple of hours.

The guard rose to his feet and looked at his watch. He went to the back and lifted the heavy door and sunlight poured inside. "Now you stay right there," he joked. "I'm going to see why we've stopped. It's too soon for a break." He jumped down and she lost sight of him.

Seconds stretched into minutes. She heard voices outside, but couldn't tell what they were saying. And then she saw the shadow of someone climbing into the truck.

"Son of a bitch," she heard him growl. And then he was kneeling before the cage and she saw his face. It wasn't until then that the tears finally fell.

He broke the lock and suddenly she was in his arms. Her arms wrapped around his neck, holding on tightly. "Oh, Carson, oh, my God. It's you."

His mouth slammed down over hers, so very real. The sobs caught in her chest as she clung to him, returning his kisses with desperation.

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CHAPTER 12

Carson wanted to kill someone all over again when he opened the back of the truck and saw what they had done to his mate. He wasted no time in jumping into the back to retrieve her from the cage.

The uniforms from the guards they'd captured had made it almost too easy to gain access to the truck. The men who were originally set to drive now lay dead in the bushes near the hotel. It had taken all his self-control to watch the guard walk Petra to the back of the truck. If Carson had realized he'd stripped her, they probably wouldn't all be alive now. Carson would have killed the man right then and there.

Carson ripped off his shirt and put it on her and then lifted her into his arms once again.

Deborah Thornton had too much confidence in her own superiority to even consider that anyone would try to thwart her authority. Carson only wished he could have gotten to her before she left, but his priority was in seeing to Petra's safety.

He carried her out into the daylight. His only concern at this point was in getting her to safety. Once that was accomplished they could straighten out the rest. Deborah would have to be dealt with at another time. The council would see to the clean-up of today's activities. They were very good at handling that sort of thing.

Everything had happened so quickly from the moment Petra had arrived in Silver Creek and the council had decided to acquire her to use as a bargaining chip against the agency.

How could he have known what would transpire? He wanted to give her time to become accustomed to him. He wanted to teach her about her abilities as a shifter. But the first thing he needed to do was get her back to the Falls where she would be safe.

"I think you can put me down now. I can walk." It was the first she had spoken since he'd gotten her out of the truck.

"I know you can." But he didn't set her down. Instead he drew her closer to his chest. In some ways he was terrified he would lose her if he set her on her feet. Too much had occurred, they'd both come too close to being separated forever.

"Grab that fancy lock pick of yours, Donovan, and get this damned thing off her neck." He looked at her as he finally lowered her feet to the ground in front of the opened door of the SUV Trey had pulled in behind the van.

He stroked the side of Petra's face. "Did they hurt you? I know what that thing feels like."

He saw the concern in her eyes. She touched his neck and he shuddered at the sensation it caused. "It's my fault they found you. It's my fault they caught you and hurt you."

"No, that's not true."

"But it is. My mo—Deborah told me." He saw her shudder as she tried to control her emotions. "They implanted a microchip under my skin when they performed the operation. That's how they found out where you took me. I led them right to you. It's most likely how they got to the men so quickly who kidnapped me on the street. I've been a beacon all along." She stepped away from him. "You have to

leave me before I cause your deaths. It's dangerous to be around me."

"I'm not leaving you," he said, pulling her into his arms and binding her to him. You're not going anywhere without me." He turned to Trey. "We need to get her back to Silver Creek before the PIA realize what's happened. But first we'll take her to the Silver Creek hospital to see if they can remove that damn chip."

Trey shook his head. "We don't dare take her into Silver Creek right now. The town is crawling with PIA. The townsfolk aren't too happy about them being there. There's been too much paranormal activity there recently. We need to lay low for a while or it's going to cause them problems. We don't want to see them stuck in the middle of all this. And we don't want to cause a lot of bloodshed if we can help it. We aren't prepared for a full-scale confrontation."

"Then we need to get word to the doc that we need his help. We have to get this chip removed and fast."

Trey nodded. "Let me make a call. I'll see what we can arrange. But then we have get back to the Falls. The council will want a report. Then they'll decide what's the next course of action to clear the town of PIA. Thank God they aren't able to detect the location of the Falls." Trey pulled out his cell phone and walked away to make his call.

Donovan walked around the vehicle and joined them. "Let's see if we can get that collar removed."

Petra cringed away from him. Carson's hand on her shoulder tightened. "It's all right. He's not going to hurt you."

She looked up at Donovan. He had a sheepish look on his face.

"Hey, look, how was I to know you were one of the good girls? If you're my brother's mate I'll never hurt you, Petra. You have my word on that. Everything I've done is to protect my family. And now you'll be part it. Will you let me help you?"

She looked at him for a long moment. She probably would have acted the same way he did if Jamie had been in trouble. She nodded and then lifted her hair so he could gain access to the collar. Within ten seconds he had it removed and had tossed it into the backseat. He then got in behind the wheel of the SUV. Trey got in on the passenger side.

Carson hustled her into the backseat of the vehicle. Donovan grinned in the mirror. "Where to, bro?"

"What did you find out, Trey? What did Doc Hanstrom say?"

"Doc says to go to his house—he'll meet us there. He knows what we need him to do, and he'll bring what he needs to get it done."

Donovan nodded. "We're there," he said as he slammed his foot on the gas.

"Dammit, Donovan, I'd like us to get there in one piece if you don't mind."

He turned back to Petra. "It will be all right. We'll get that chip removed and then get you to Vampyre Falls. They'll never find you there." He couldn't help himself and he leaned forward to kiss her.

It was probably a mistake because the minute his lips touched hers, he knew it wouldn't end there. He had come so close to losing her. Already the animal heat was building inside him. His throbbing cock pressed against the front of his pants. He felt her response as she arched against him, curling her arms around his neck and drawing him closer.

He inhaled her scent as he slid his hands beneath the shirt, along her thighs, up over her rounded hips to press her closer. He'd tried to tamp down his desire for her as they fought for their lives, but now he had to have her. Needed to be inside her once again before another moment passed. He pressed her back onto the seat and rose over her. One hand slid down her spine to cup her bottom. God, he needed this woman. He needed her spirit, her passion. Her love.

The music on the car radio suddenly got louder. Carson glanced up and caught Donovan's eyes in the mirror. Carson saw understanding in his expression, then Donovan turned his attention to the road.

Carson turned back to Petra. Right now nothing mattered but reestablishing their connection. It didn't matter that his pack brothers were in the front seat. Nothing mattered but being inside her. The primal heat must be assuaged and he knew his pack brothers understood the driving passion.

"Please," she said. He felt her heat washing over him. The fragrant scent of her arousal permeated the air as she slid her thighs open, urging him on and he buried himself between them, rubbing his heavy erection against her pussy. "Yes," she said. "Like that, but more."

He had taken her so roughly the night before. The animal heat claiming them both so completely. He didn't want it to be that way this time. He unbuttoned the shirt, and peeling it back he exposed her beautiful body to him. His marks stood vivid against her creamy skin.

"You can't hurt me," she said. "I wanted what we did last night as much as you. And again by the stream. But I need you again. I have to feel you inside me now. I don't think I can wait any longer. I almost lost you."

The adrenaline of the last few hours surged through him again as he slipped the shirt from her shoulders. He was almost thankful it was the only thing she wore. If it hadn't been for the reason why it was necessary, which made him angry once again. The guard would never do that to another para. Another clean-up job for the council. Carson unzipped the black trousers he wore and shoved them down his legs. His cock was heavy with the rush of blood, engorged and aching.

He pressed his body to hers, felt her wetness, the sleek female heat of her vagina. He rubbed his prick between her folds, dipped the plum knob into her juices and then slid easily inside her tight channel.

"I thought I'd never see you again," she whispered against his neck as she curved her legs around his hips. "I thought one night was all we would ever have." She arched upward sucking his cock to the root inside her snug, wet cunt.

"I would have found you. No matter what, I would have come for you," he said.

At this moment he needed this woman as much as he needed to breathe—maybe more so. "Carson," she cried out as he began to thrust inside her. He grabbed her wrists, unwound her arms from around his neck and pressed them against the door as he powered inside her sweet, seductive heat. His hands stroked up and down her silky flesh and he kissed the faint red lines left by the collar.

He licked his way around her neck, found her rapid pulse and sucked at the accelerated flutter, tasting the essence of the woman. He burned her taste into his soul.

"I won't lose you," he said, feeling the climax beginning to build inside him. "You're my mate and we will not be separated again. You belong with me."

He felt her peak, the spasms gripping and releasing him in undulating waves as her searing fire spilled over him. His own climax followed quickly. He cupped her breasts, kneading and stroking the firm, engorged flesh. His thumbs brushed over her distended nipples and she shuddered beneath him.

"Carson, oh, God, Carson."

He swept her up in his arms, bracing her against him. He marveled at the woman in his arms. He didn't know how it had happened, what twist of fate had brought her to him, but he had claimed her as his and there would be no going back.

Gently, he pulled from inside her and gathered her onto his lap, pressing her head close against his shoulder. He picked up the shirt, carefully slipped it back onto her shoulders, and buttoned it. He kissed her mouth, her eyelids, down the silky column of her throat and stroked her silky

hair. He couldn't stop touching her. He needed the feel of her, to know she was real.

"She told me terrible things, Carson," she murmured against his throat, her lips brushing against his skin. "I didn't know. I didn't realize. The things I did to try to gain her approval. I shut my eyes to the monster she truly is. How could I have done that? How could I have not seen what she was? She murdered my brother. Oh, God, the things she did."

She turned her head into his shoulder and he heard her soft sobs, felt the dampness of her tears. He stroked her hair, trying to soothe her, but somehow he knew it wouldn't be enough.

His gaze met his brother's in the rearview mirror.

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CHAPTER 13

Petra felt him inside her, pressing, stroking, expanding. She loved the feel of him. In the weeks since he'd brought her to Vampyre Falls, she had wanted nothing more than to be with him. She loved him with a depth that went beyond measure. Unreasoning and wild and forever. Carson was spooned around her, his heat completely enveloping her. It was all she could think of, being here with him like this. The past was nothing compared to this moment.

His fingertips stroked over her breasts, down across her ribs, roamed over the curve of her hip. Until finally his thick fingers delved between her pussy lips. She shuddered as his fingers glanced across her clit, at first light as a feather, circling and then pressing. His touch healed her, renewed her, and she needed him again and again.

He lifted her leg to drape it over his strong, muscular thigh. He nibbled at her neck as he pumped in and out of her wet pussy.

She felt the unusual animal heat. So new to her, it built inside her, stoked hot by Carson's scent, his hands and his body as he thrust inside her, the momentum building to the moment when she would crash against the primal lust and splinter into a million pieces.

And then she was flying fast and high and hard. Running like the wolf, driven, heart powerful and pounding as she leaped the chasm and clawed for the other side.

She heard his growl, now so familiar and dear to her. Felt him surge inside her, pumping his seed into her womb. She arched back and encircled his neck, his lips hot against her neck, his hand possessively cupped around her aching breasts as they flew so high, ran so far, until finally they returned to reality.

As he withdrew his softening prick from inside her wet cunt, she felt the usual ache of parting which had now become such a part of her. So little time and yet it was as though the ache for him had always been with her. Unceasing. Relentless.

She rolled onto her back to gaze up at him. She stroked his face, watching as the pale light coming in through the window encompassed him.

"I'm glad we're not vampires," she said as she whispered her fingers along the line of his shadowed jaw.

He dipped forward to feather kisses along the column of her neck. "Why?"

She moaned as his tongue licked a path along her pulsing artery. "I like looking at you as the sun comes up."

She heard him chuckle. "Most of the vampires here can move around in daylight."

"Well then, I'm glad you don't suck blood."

He looked down at her, his expression unreadable. "I've sucked my share. But, no, I wouldn't like to make it a daily requirement to my diet." He was silent for a long time and then he pulled her closer. "Tell me about Rolland."

It was unexpected. She'd tried to put her ex-fiancé out of her mind. "How did you know?" she asked him quietly.

"He was one of the men who captured me. He took a certain delight in telling me you were engaged."

She knew now she should have told Carson about him. But how could she? When she didn't even understand her actions herself. And she had wanted to put all of it out of her mind.

"I'm sorry." She turned away from him. She couldn't look at Carson and talk about Rolland at the same time. "I didn't want you to know. When I saw what he did to those shifters I was horrified. But it was more." She turned back to look at Carson. His eyes were focused on her. Waiting.

God, he was beautiful. Even in human form he had the dark, hungry look of the wolf. A bad boy that sent her pulses racing every time she even thought about him.

"I never loved him. I never knew what the word truly meant until I met you. I can't explain it. I let things go too far with him to please my mother." She laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "My mother ... what a joke. Everything was a lie. Everything. I've been so blind, so terribly blind, Carson. I failed to see what was right in front of my face. And I lost my brother because of it," she finished softly. "I miss him so much."

Carson gathered her close. "I'm sorry. It's all right, you don't have to talk about it anymore. I just don't want there to be secrets between us. There's no need. I hope you'll learn that you can trust me."

"I know." Would he be so forgiving if he knew the whole truth? There were still secrets, weren't there? Things she was terrified to tell him. Things about her. And Sybilla.

She looked up at him and was about to say something when she saw his gaze drift down her body and the heat flared once again. He brought a hand up and with his index finger he traced the vivid scar that ran the length of her chest.

She turned her head away, afraid of what she might reveal. It was too soon. She couldn't bring herself to utter the final horror of what the PIA had made of her. She shrank from telling. How could she find the words to expose the truth? Would he want her then? And she knew when she finally saw the disgust in his eyes her heart would break. It might have been Sybilla's heart that made Petra yield to Carson in the beginning, but it was Petra who loved him and would lose him when she finally divulged the final secret buried in her soul.

His finger beneath her chin, he tilted her head toward him. He swooped down to possess her mouth, driving his tongue deep inside, taking her breath away. She tasted him, consumed his breath, and yielded to his passion. She couldn't help but arch up pressing her body against his, pushing painful reminders to the back of her mind. Not now. Not yet.

She curled her arms around his neck and melded her body to his. Her days were numbered here in this place where she finally felt she belonged, and she would cling to every moment, holding each second as close to her heart as possible. It would be all she had left when it was finally ripped from her. When they all realized what she had become.

Carson moved down her body. He kissed the scar just above her right breast, where the chip had been removed. His

mouth roved at an angle, his tongue tracing the longer scar, sliding downward, and then back up moving across the valley between her breasts to linger at a distended nipple, sucking it deep into his mouth.

Oh, God, she loved the feel of his mouth on her body. But his hands weren't idle either. His fingers stroked across her skin, burning her like the kiss of scorching sun, leaving a trail of heat in their wake.

The animal heat began to smolder and burn again. She had come to recognize its effect, knowing that when it consumed her there was no resisting it. Nor did she want to. His mouth, his hands, his wild scent mingled with her own erupted in a scorching blaze inside her. She felt the wolf rise from within, claiming her as she lifted up and shoved Carson back onto the bed. Teeth bared, eyes blazing, she mounted him and consumed his cock into the burning heat of her aroused pussy.

Her nails dug into the muscles of his powerful chest as she lifted up and dropped back down, riding him, taking him deep inside, undulating her hips and feeling the sweet ache of his penetration.

She made it a long and slow ride, enjoying the feel of him as she drove him higher, feeling him expand inside her channel. Sweat dripped from their bodies, the scent of their sex permeating the room. She inhaled deeply, savoring the aroma, feeling it wend throughout her body.

Ever since arriving in Vampyre Falls it seemed her senses were magnified, maybe because of all the paraspecies that resided here. Or maybe it was simply the aura of the

mountain itself. She swayed over her lover, feeling the passionate vibrations run rampant through her. She could hear his heartbeat, strong and steady, pumping powerfully in his chest. She heard sounds from outside the house, the lapping of the water, surging waves breaking against the banks of Vampyre Lake, and the undulating power of the falls. A murmur of voices from the main floor of the house, footsteps on the stairs leading to the second floor. The scent of wolf and man.

And then Carson was bathing her womb with his climax. She felt each pulse of his cock, exerted pressure to milk every drop from his prick. He cried out, his hands gripped her hips, locking her in place. Her own hands roamed over the expanse of his chest, sifting through the silky texture of hair that arrowed down his abdomen, back over the very male terrain to tease a dusky nipple, then continued to lick her way north.

Carson dropped forward to enclose one of her nipples with his mouth, teasing the bud with his teeth, and Petra shuddered with pleasure.

She felt the thick sensitivity of her clitoris and, as Carson suckled at her breast, she stroked her fingers across the engorged flesh, shattering as a powerful orgasm claimed her.

But the heat wouldn't let her go ... she wanted more. She recognized the scent emanating from the hallway just outside the bedroom door.

A knock at the door and then it slowly swung open. "Hey, lazybones, we're supposed to—" The sound was stifled, but the intruder didn't retreat.

She looked up to meet the curious eyes of Carson's pack brother. She saw aroused interest in his eyes as he gazed at her. There was no room for embarrassment, not in this family.

Petra felt the surge of the animal heat. The scent of Donovan wedged its way through her. Carefully, she allowed Carson's softening penis to slip from inside her and she slid off the bed, her attention now focused on the man in the doorway.

She strolled toward him, her hips swaying, cream drenching her thighs, uncaring of her nakedness, of the scent of sex saturating the atmosphere of the room. Of Carson's scent still embedded deeply within her body. Donovan's animal magnetism called to her and she could not resist. It had been building over the last few weeks. Their scents clung to her making her hungry, aching for the deeper connection. The ingrained instinct to mate with these brothers, the desire for intimate bonding with this magnetic wolf pack.

Carson had told her this would happen, but she'd thought she would be able to resist the earthy attraction. Apparently, she'd underestimated the strength of the animal heat. She didn't know what had come over her, but suddenly she needed this man, too. Donovan's dark gaze slid past her to the man spread out on the rumpled bed behind her.

"She's caught in the heat. It's getting stronger as we draw closer to the full moon." She heard Carson say.

She saw Donovan nod and then his gaze moved back to her. His expression was one of passionate hunger as he inhaled her scent and his eyes traveled over her naked body.

She was drenched in sexual fire, burning from inside, driven to offer her body to him, to quench the frenzied blaze in his lust. Lifting a hand, she brought it to her breast and circled a lazy finger around her nipple. The one that still glistened from Carson's attentions. She cupped her breast and offered it to Donovan. No words were needed between them.

He dipped his head and seized the nipple with his mouth, and she sighed with pleasure. She arched up and one of her hands rose as though of its own accord to curl around his neck, bringing him closer. She felt his mouth open wider as he sucked more of her flesh inside, then he released her breast only to fasten his lips to her mouth. There was no meekness to the kiss. It was hot and drenching. Even as the lust of moments ago with Carson began to evaporate, it was now fueled again as Donovan's questing tongue buried itself inside her mouth.

Her other hand dropped down to enclose his stiff erection, feeling the surging heat through the thick material of his jeans.

"So big, Donovan. And ready for me. I need you now."

And then she felt Carson behind her, his naked body melded to hers. The two men sandwiched her between them, there in the open doorway. Carson rubbed against her back, cupped her buttocks, plumping and separating. She felt his cock pressing into the crease between her cheeks. He rubbed up and down, a hand curled around her hip as his fingers found her throbbing clit.

"It's all right, Petra," Carson said softly as he stroked over her clit. She released Donovan's huge erection from his pants.

It was Carson who lifted her, and Petra who positioned Donovan's cock at her opening.

He slipped inside so easily, so completely. Her legs curved around his waist, her eyelids fluttered closed as he pumped into her, spreading her. Her head dropped back, cushioned against Carson's shoulder as she rode out the storm of passion made so fierce by the heat of these two men.

She felt Carson's teeth clamp onto her neck as she rode the pinnacle to her orgasm. Donovan groaned as he climaxed, his hands brushed against Carson's, both of them stroking her body, as they pressed her between them. And then suddenly she felt as though she were falling, the world whirling around her.

"Carson," she cried out, as a black curtain seemed to drop over her.

She felt herself being lifted, Donovan's softening penis slipping from inside her, and then she was weightless.

"She'll sleep now. I think the heat has played itself out. For now." She heard Carson's words but wasn't quite certain she understood what they meant. She only knew she felt replete and boneless, unable to even lift a finger. And then she felt the warmth of a blanket, cocooning her within its soothing heat. And beyond that she sank into a dreamless sleep.

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CHAPTER 14

Carson sat at the kitchen table sipping a cup of coffee. His brothers sat to either side of him. Rainna placed a comforting hand on his shoulder as she set a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him.

"She'll be fine, Carson. It takes a while to get used to the effects of the ... the animal lust. I'm thinking she's going to have a worse time of it than I did. At least while I'm pregnant I don't feel it as strongly. And I'm human, not wolf."

She moved around the table to take the fourth chair. Trey rose to help her ease into it. Carson knew it was difficult for her to manage in these later months. And although they were all tied as one family, it was Trey who was her mate, and he took great care of her, particularly during these vulnerable months for his woman.

They all knew that times were still dangerous. And Sybilla and Kyle were never far from any of their thoughts. Protection of their females was paramount to any other considerations in their lives. And the birth of Rainna's child would most certainly notch up the security within their pack. The vulnerability of the child scared them all, knowing that with even added vigilance it might not be enough.

"Yeah, she's part wolf. We have yet to figure that one out." Carson turned to look at Donovan. "Any word yet on those files?"

"Not yet. It's not easy to get what we're asking for. Especially right now."

"Is there word from the council on what action is being taken regarding the Thorntons? We gave them the report last week. With the information that Petra provided, they should have been able to make some sort of inroads in gaining access to the New York facility."

"It's just not that easy," Trey said. "Once they figured out that both you and Petra escaped, they tightened security, changed some of the procedures. It's amazing we've gotten as far as we have. But we now have two of the collars that they use to control our species. Our people will dissect them and maybe we can at least discover a way to defuse them and stop the torture they impose."

Donovan shook his head. "They'll find something else to take its place. We have to take down the agency."

"They're not stupid. They're too spread out and too deeply ingrained and protected by the government. The spread of fear, control of the news ... they've got too firm a grip on society and they're using it to their advantage."

"Still, we have to get our people out. We've got to protect them somehow." All Carson could remember was the look on Petra's face when he opened the back of that truck. Like a caged animal. My God, he'd never forgive them for what they had done to his woman, to his family. Neither he nor his brothers had ever been caged. None of them had been incarcerated in one of the PIA facilities and he thanked God for that.

He reached up to touch his neck. The collar was the closest he'd come and that had been more than enough.

"Petra's not going to understand what happened this morning." Carson rose from his chair. "I want to be with her when she wakes up. Apparently this wolf thing didn't actually start for her until she came here, to Silver Creek."

"Well, I can relate to that," said Rainna. "It obviously has something to do with coming into close contact with one of you. Even for me, and I'm not a shifter, the animal heat affects me. There can't be any rhyme or reason to that."

"True," Carson acknowledged.

"I think there are things she's not telling us," Trey said. "We can't help her if she isn't honest. Has she talked about that meeting with her mother?"

"Deborah Thornton isn't her mother," Carson almost snarled the words. "No mother—adoptive or not—would treat Petra the way she did."

"But did Petra tell you what happened after she was taken away?"

Carson sighed. "No. Not yet. She's told the council everything they wanted to know. She hasn't balked at any of their questions. But Deborah pretty much kept her segregated from the actual goings-on in the PIA and the experimentation at the institute. On the personal situation with Deborah, however, she's closed up. We need to give her time." He looked carefully at each of them and lowered his voice. "I think whatever happened that day was pretty traumatic for her. She needs time to know us, to realize she's safe here and that we're not like the people who used her so badly. The mating—it took place too soon. It took us both by surprise, but you know what happens when the heat ignites.

There's just no stopping it. Primal instinct takes over. I don't think she understands her own feelings, let alone whether she can put her faith in us to protect her. I wish that weren't the case, but it is."

"Does she know about Sybilla?"

"I don't know. We haven't discussed Sybilla or Kyle to any great extent."

"Men." Rainna snorted. "You expect Petra to bare her soul to you and you don't come clean with her. Carson, you have to explain to her about Kyle and Sybilla. How can you possibly hope to get her to trust you? I expect she knows as well as any of us that a wolf mates for life. But I'm not certain she understands the dynamics of that in relation to this pack. From what she's said, she's been entrusted with all the historical data maintained by the foundation concerning the various paraspecies. From what I understand they kept her isolated from the actual present-day research they do. But she's going to probably have some sense about the mating habits. Do you really think she's going to believe that she means anything to you? If she knows you've already mated once?"

Carson had to admit he hadn't really considered that aspect of it. At least not recently.

It was true that after Sybilla's death he had thought it was his fate never to find another woman to love. He would have been content in helping to care for his brothers' mates and seeing to the welfare of the pack. This new woman in his life was a surprise. It was a gift he was so afraid of losing.

"You're right. I need to talk to her. It's just not easy to—"

"I know," Rainna said softly. "But your future and Petra's happiness could depend on you being just as honest and open as you want her to be. It might just open the door for her to trust you and reveal what she's keeping secret."

"It just needs to be the right time. Things have been in such a turmoil up until now. I just want to wait for things to settle a bit."

"The full moon will be upon us sooner than you think," Trey said. "It will be time for the mating ritual. The formal bonding must take place during the full moon to have the greatest impact. The longer you wait, the more vulnerable we are. You know that. And our females must be protected to the fullest. If she doesn't trust you, she won't give herself freely to the bond. It could leave her vulnerable and breach our pack security. We must remain solid, Carson. Don't wait too long."

Carson understood what his brother was saying. Although the bonding with his brothers had already begun, it wouldn't be enough to maintain the protection that they required. The sacred ritual must be performed as the code of their ancestors demanded. He had to find a way to tell her the truth of his past and of his love for Sybilla. But he had to be certain she understood that he considered Petra to be a part of his future.

"I'll find a time. A way. I just hope I can make her understand." He only wished he understood the hows and whys of it himself. Something about Petra called to the very soul inside him, and that had only happened with one other woman. It should have only been possible with one woman. If

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only he could understand how Petra could have claimed that very same part of him that Sybilla had once held.

Was he fighting his responses to Petra because of guilt in not protecting Sybilla? Was he holding some part of himself back because he felt it was a betrayal to the woman he had once loved so passionately? He had to find out the answers before his indecision destroyed them all.

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CHAPTER 15

Petra felt as though she were sitting on the edge of a time bomb about to explode. Carson had tried to explain to her about what happened two days before with the intimacy involving Donovan, but she still wasn't certain she understood the whole animal heat thing peculiar to this strain of werewolves.

But heat it was, and something she was having difficulty controlling. It seemed that every time she looked at one of the brothers her juices accumulated and her nipples hardened, becoming more sensitized. Carson was the one she loved with her whole heart, but there was just something about Donovan and Trey that called to her in a different, very basic way.

"It's all right, you know." Petra turned around to see Rainna standing behind her on the porch.

"Excuse me?"

"It's all right to need them all." She walked across the porch to sit in a chair, easing down into it. "I have to say, I will be happy when this baby is born." She smiled up at Petra, then she waved to the chair opposite. "Sit and talk with me. I know this has been a difficult time for you and we really haven't had a chance to chat—just the two of us. Those men just hover around all the time, don't they?"

Rainna had a way about her of making everyone feel at ease. She also was a woman with healing abilities and maybe that was part of her own mystique. She had been a nurse and

now apprenticed with the Falls healer, Morganna Starlight. Petra had yet to meet the others in the town. She had met the members of the town council who had approved her residency in Vampyre Falls, and answered their questions about what she knew concerning the PIA and the Harden Institute. But she still hadn't had the opportunity to meet many of the others residents.

"The animal heat," Rainna was saying. "It's not something you can control. It's a natural state, from what I'm told. But by bonding with the females of the pack, it welds the brothers together, making them stronger. In their minds, their strength means our protection. I don't know exactly how it works, but that's the gist of it. The heat helps to secure the whole pack."

"But aren't you jealous, knowing that I'm attracted to your ... mate?"

Rainna looked her straight in the eyes. "And you'll fuck him when the time is right. It's instinct and there's nothing either one of us can do about it. Not if we love our men and want to keep them as safe as possible. It's the nature of the beast, so to speak. I love Trey too much not to accept the frenzy of the heat. And I'll do anything that's required to ensure Trey's protection. Do you understand?"

Petra felt the hot color travel up her neck to flood her face. "Uhhmm." Talking about it embarrassed her, but she knew she'd do the same for Carson without hesitation.

Rainna laughed. Petra could only stare at her. Rainna seemed so honest. Petra saw no evidence of jealousy or deceit in her expression.

"In this family you might as well be up front about the dynamics of our relationship. This isn't a human family as you and I are familiar with. Believe me, I know, it's hard to understand about the way things are up here. So very different from ... well ... down there. And from purebred wolves for that matter. They're shifters with a whole different code to their species. And the dynamics are changing because I'm no longer the only female in this ... pack. Actually, it will be sort of nice having some of that attention shift to you. They're so darn protective. Sometimes it's tough having three males breathing down your neck all the time. Maybe it's the pregnancy, I don't know." She leaned forward and reached out to cover one of Petra's hands. "But I like you, Petra. I'm so pleased Carson has found a mate. For so long, none of us thought that would happen, and I have to say we feared for his sanity sometimes."

Petra knew about Sybilla, but how could she tell them that and not tell them the rest of what Deborah had revealed to her? And she still wasn't ready to do that. "I don't understand any of what's happened to me. Carson takes me out to the mountains almost every night, encouraging me to shift and run with him. He wants me to get used to the way things are now, but it's so hard. Everything I knew is changed. I never harbored the hatred that my—that Deborah held for paraspecies. I didn't have it in me. At least Jamie understood."

"Jamie?"

Petra smiled. The one good thing that had come out of her life with the Thorntons. Yet, even that they had destroyed.

"Jamie was my brother. My adoptive brother. He died in a cave-in." She looked at Rainna and the pain of Deborah's words tore at her heart. "He was murdered by the PIA. Deborah knew he loved spelunking and sent him to that cave deliberately intent on killing him. And how she succeeded." Petra blinked rapidly to keep the tears from falling. She could not allow herself to give in to the remembered horror of the revelations of that last meeting with Deborah.

"I'm sorry, Petra. I can't imagine how hard it has all been for you. How did you find out he was murdered?"

"Deborah took great pleasure in telling me about it on the day she ... captured me." Petra took a shuddering breath. "Could we not talk about this anymore? It hurts too much. At least for now."

Rainna straightened in her chair. "Of course. I didn't mean to bring up such painful memories."

"It seems that all of my past is a painful memory anymore."

"Then let's talk about something more elemental. Our family."

That sounded nice. Petra had never really felt a part of a family before ... she'd always been on the outside looking in. She certainly found she was developing a strange closeness with this family ... and part of her own nature that she was trying to learn to embrace.

"The next full moon is very close and the brothers will want to bond with you at that time. There is a ritual that must take place in order to secure our family. And you will be the center of that bonding. It will bring protection and security

and it is a ritual that must be adhered to. Believe me, it is not at all unpleasant. It will seal the bond."

"You mean sex?"

"I mean mating. In the most primal sense. Don't think that anything you do with our men will distress me. I know I have Treynor's love as his mate and his commitment in our relationship. But in this family there is more, and you will become a part of that."

"You have Treynor's love. It must be wonderful to be so certain of his commitment to you."

Rainna tilted her head and studied Petra. "You're not certain of Carson."

"How can I be? Everything has happened so fast."

"Do you love him?"

Petra looked at her. There could be no lies between Rainna and herself. If this family was to maintain its strength, she had to be honest. This was one truth she could reveal without causing pain to these people. "Yes, I love him. But things aren't that simple."

"Have you been honest with him?"

And there was the crux of the problem. She'd been as honest as she dared be. He might care for her, but did he love her? Enough to be confronted with the terrible secrets she now carried? She wished she did trust enough in their relationship to reveal the horrors. But she was afraid—terrified of being destroyed by the one person she had come to love so deeply. And she just wasn't ready to see her love ripped apart.

Vampyre Falls: Heartbreak
by Adrianna Dane

But even Petra knew that time was running out. Eventually she would have to reveal the truth and pay the price.

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CHAPTER 16

When Carson sauntered into the kitchen several days later, Donovan and Trey were already seated at the table. Both had their heads bent over a sheaf of papers. Carson poured himself a cup of coffee.

"What do you have there?" he asked as he sat down at the table.

Donovan looked at him and Carson felt a cold chill run up his spine. "What is it?"

"You're not going to like it. I'm still trying to understand all the medical terminology."

He shuffled through the sheaf and pulled out a sheet of paper. "We need to have Rainna look this stuff over before we leap to any conclusions."

"What exactly is it that you're looking at?" But Carson had an inkling that he knew exactly what it was. "Tell me."

Donovan was silent for a long time before he spoke. "All right. It's the file from New York."

"Concerning Petra."

Donovan nodded. "Yeah, but there's a damn sight more in here than we ever expected, if I'm right."

"Let me see it."

Quickly Donovan shuffled all the papers into a pile and stuffed them back into a yellow envelope. He looked at Trey and something unspoken passed between them.

"Dammit, what aren't you telling me?" His brothers shouldn't be keeping secrets from him. Especially not ones

concerning his mate. Whatever it was, he had a right to know.

"We need Rainna to look at this first. We don't want you going off half-cocked and misinterpreting what's here."

"Then where the hell is Rainna?" He grabbed for the file, but Donovan jumped from his chair and backed out of reach.

"Not yet, bro. You're not getting your hands on this until we have a better understanding of what's in here."

"And Rainna's sleeping in late," Trey said. "The baby has taken a toll on her and she's exhausted."

Carson shot up from the table and launched himself at Donovan, ripping the file out of his hands. "I'm not waiting. There's something you don't want me to know and I'm damned if you're going to keep it from me. What is it? Is Petra sick?"

"Dammit, Carson, wait for Rainna."

He pulled the sheaf of papers from the envelope and spread them out on the table. As he studied them, words popped out at him. "Sybilla," "she-wolf," "transplant," "experiment." It was when he got to the part about Petra's "operation" that he lost it. He swept his hand over the table, sending papers flying in every direction.

"Oh, goddammit. No. They used Sybilla's—" Oh, dammit, he couldn't finish the thought. Rage swept through him like a torrential flood, drowning him in pain. "They hurt her, tortured her, and destroyed her. And I wasn't there to save her. If I'd been there..."

Trey placed a hand on his shoulder. "You need to calm down, Carson. Think about this rationally."

Carson whipped around to glare at him. "You want me to be rational? Do you have any idea what I'm mated with now? Her life was stolen from my mate. The wolf in her—it's not real, it doesn't belong to her."

"Stop it, Carson, you're not thinking clearly. None of us know the whole story. We need Rainna to decipher it for us before we decide anything."

"Decide?" Carson raged. They had no idea how badly he wanted to rip something apart with his bare hands. His skin rippled with the need to shift, to hunt, to shred something. To destroy. All he could picture in his mind was his Sybilla, lying dead and bloodied on an operating table, her chest torn open by those monsters who called themselves human.

Damn them all to hell for what they had done. "Someone will pay," he said between clenched teeth. And suddenly he knew what Petra had been keeping from him all these weeks.

Oh yes, she knew exactly what he'd do if he ever found out the truth. "Petra." He looked at his brothers. "All this time, she knew, dammit."

Donovan strode across the kitchen and grabbed Carson's arm as he sprang up from his chair, knocking the chair onto its side. Trey grabbed his other arm.

"You don't have all the facts yet, Carson. You can't go to her like this. She's your mate."

"My mate," he roared. "My mate is dead. Damn you all." He tried to tear free of the hold they had on him, but his brothers held firm, forcing him down onto the floor.

"What's going on here?" Rainna stood in the doorway, looking sleepy and ruffled, a blue housecoat wrapped around her swollen form.

It was Trey who answered her. "Petra's file arrived. Carson saw it before we could get you to translate what it all means. He's gone crazy."

"Carson?" It was Petra's soft voice, filled with concern, coming from behind Rainna, peeking around her shoulder.

Carson zeroed in on her, his whole body filled with rage and anguish. "You," he sneered. "You're the reason she's dead. You took what belonged to her and they're using you to get the rest of us. If it weren't for Sybilla, that part of her you stole, I never would have mated you, and you know it. Damn you for your deception. I should have let them take you back where you belonged."

He saw her reel back, her expression paled, her eyes went wide and dark. He saw her stumble, then right herself.

"Y-you don't understand. I-I didn't mean ... I didn't know." She whirled away and he heard the hitch in her voice, but he had no pity for her. Not now. The mortal wound he'd thought healed by the passing years had been ripped wide open and his heart was left raw and bleeding.

"You're lying!" he yelled, struggling to break free of his brothers' grip. "You're that devil's spawn, if not by blood, by creation."

"No, no." Petra pivoted away and then she was gone. He heard the front door open and then slam closed.

It was Rainna who dashed to the window. Then she whirled around to face the men, anger in every line of her body.

"She's shifted and she's headed down the mountain. Damn all of you. Do you have any idea what you've done to her? She's not to blame for any of this. She's as much a victim of those bastards as anyone. You wanted her to trust you. My God, what have you done?" She turned on Carson. "Damn you. You were supposed to protect her. You wanted her to tell you everything. You wanted her to be honest. Is this what her honesty would have gotten her?"

Now there were tears streaming down her face. Rainna stalked to the table and lowered herself into a chair. "Give me those damn papers and let me see exactly what they say. One of you has to go after her. Somebody has to protect her from herself right now. Who knows what she might do."

She dashed angrily at the tears wetting her face. "Damn you," she said under her breath. "Men."

"I'll find her," Trey said. He met Rainna's gaze. He walked across the room to kiss her on the forehead.

Carson watched as Rainna reached for Trey's hand and brought it to her lips. "Be careful. Her heart has been ravaged and she's in shock. She may end up in territory that's very dangerous, not just to her, but you as well. Take care."

She turned to glare at Carson. "But I don't trust either of these two to help her now. Donovan, you should have brought me the file instead of trying to stumble around with something you don't understand."

Her fierce glare turned on Carson. "And you. My God, you were supposed to love her. I can forgive you for some of it, but not the way you shredded her up and spit her out. She

didn't deserve your wrath. She wasn't the one who did this to your mate and your pack brother."

She turned back to Trey. "Go after her before something terrible happens to her. Something we all will have to live to regret."

The red haze of rage was slowly lifting and Carson was appalled at the anger he'd directed at Petra. Rainna's common sense broke through his wall of pain and then he remembered the ravaged look on Petra's face.

He dropped his head into his hands. My God, what had he done?

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CHAPTER 17

Petra ran for all she was worth. Her wolf form gave her speed and endurance. Panic and pain filled her. She had no idea where she was going to go or what she was going to do, but she had to get away from Vampyre Falls before Carson totally crushed her.

She'd thought she had found a place where she belonged, where she fit, but it had been nothing more than a dream, gone like morning mist with the searing heat of daylight. Maybe she would remain in her wolf form. People hurt too much and she wanted to be done with them.

Hours later she slowed her pace, trotting over fallen branches, weaving her way through lush ferns. It had started to rain but the dense forest allowed only the sporadic droplets to reach her. Suddenly she was so tired, not just from her extended run to escape from the Falls, but because her heart was weary inside.

Her heart. If she'd been in her human form she would have laughed at that statement. It wasn't her heart was it? It belonged to a woman, a shifter, who should have lived a long, full life, safe within the arms of her mate. It was too painful to think about.

Petra again took off at a run, trying to outdistance the hurt, and the memories. Love that had been thrown back in her face.

And then she stepped down and a whole new world of hurt washed over her, dropping her to the ground. Her howl of

pain echoed through the forest. She'd walked right into a steel trap that now crushed her leg.

She should have known it was there. Carson had trained her to watch for danger, to sense it, and she had ignored everything she had learned. The agony of her leg trapped by the steel threaded through her. She tried everything she could to get her leg out of the old spring trap, to no avail. An open wound developed from all her efforts and blood began to ooze from the wound. She was only making it worse with her struggles.

There was no hope for it. In order to remove her leg from the trap she was going to have to shift back to human form and pray that the damage during the shift wouldn't make things worse. Although old, the mechanism held fast, and if she didn't transform she would die anyway. By the looks of it, some trapper from long ago had buried it there and it was unlikely there would be anyone coming to check on it. She knew there was no one to help her but herself. Not anymore.

Looking back, maybe she should have taken the chance and confided in Carson, trusted him with what she knew. But what had happened was exactly what she'd thought would occur. She felt the shift to human form as her legs thickened and straightened. She screamed with agonizing pain as the steel trap bit deeper into her flesh.

She tried to catch her breath as the transformation became complete. Oh, God, she wasn't certain she would have the strength to separate the steel jaws. Since the operation her strength had increased, but the run had weakened her. She lay back on the ground and closed her

eyes, pain undulated through her. It was too much. She had fought so hard just to end up ... here.

"Petra, you have to try."

Her eyelids flew open and she looked around. She narrowed her gaze to try to focus on the vague image of a man standing about fifty feet away. "Who are you?"

He stepped into the sunlight and she breathed in sharply as the form seemed to solidify. "J-Jamie?"

"You have to remove the trap, Petra. I know you can do it."

"But you're dead, you can't be here."

"I'm here because you needed me, sis. You need me to remind you that you have to fight. You remember the cave. I remember it. You held my hand all through those hours until help arrived. You talked to me, fought for me. Now you need to fight for yourself."

She remembered the cave, and though the rock from the collapsed ceiling crushed her chest, she had managed to find Jamie's hand and clutched it tightly. It had been warm at first, but gradually, as the hours dragged by, it had turned cold and stiff. She had known he was dead, but she couldn't let go. She wouldn't let go. They'd had to pry her hand free.

Tears dripped down her face. "But you died anyway. Oh, Jamie, I don't think I can fight anymore. There's nothing left."

"You're so wrong, Petra. There's so much to fight for. But first you have to get that steel deathtrap off your leg. Do it for me."

Petra dragged herself up. It hurt so much. There was every chance she could lose her foot, especially if she didn't

get help soon. And that was pretty unlikely. Even if she got free, she wasn't going to be able to walk out of the forest to find help.

"Do it, Petra. You didn't give up in the cave and I won't let you give up now. I can't help you ... you have to do this yourself."

She dragged herself upright. The world spun and she closed her eyes for a moment taking deep breaths.

"Concentrate, Petra. Draw from inside. You're stronger than you think you are."

Jamie had always believed in her. When the chill of the Thorntons surrounded them both, Jamie's love had always kept her warm, reminding her that there was good in the world. She looked down at the trap imprisoning her. The metal bar was buried in her lower calf. If it had been any farther down her leg it might have snapped her ankle bone. She could only hope the leg wasn't broken. The evil that men did to prove their superiority over the animal race ... they had to be stopped. Somehow.

She reached down to grip the two parts of the steel trap. As Jamie said, she pulled on a source of power inside her. She wouldn't have thought she had any left, but soon she felt it surging through her. She focused it into her arms, her hands and then she began to pry the jaws apart.

She felt the metal give and slowly ease away from the oozing flesh. Blood pooled in the deep wound as she lifted her leg from the trap. Once clear, she released the trap and dropped back onto the ground.

"That's my girl. I knew you could do it."

"I don't know what good it will do. I can't walk on it. I've nothing to bind it. And I know I'm a long way from any town."

A strange look came into his eyes. He gazed past her, seemed to listen, then nodded. He turned back to Petra. *"You only need to hold on for a little longer, sis. Someone is coming."*

She tried to rise, but found she'd used the last of her strength and dropped back down, closing her eyes. She licked her dry lips.

"Who? How do you know someone's coming?"

"There's someone I want you to meet, Petra. It's important. She's here with me now." Again, he looked past her. *"Come out. It's time you two met. The two of you have much in common."*

Petra opened her eyes and turned her head to see a woman walk out of the shadow of the trees. Her eyes opened wider and she shot upward. "Who are you?"

She reached for Jamie's hand, but discovered there was no substance to it. She turned to look at him. "Oh, Jamie." The words caught on a sob. "Am I hallucinating?"

"This place is special, Petra. And you have a desperate need for us right now. I can't let you give up." He pointed to the woman. *"There are things Sybilla wants to share with you. Things you need to know. I promised to bring her to you so you could hear what she has to say."*

The woman knelt next to Petra. Her smile was gentle. *"He doesn't understand, but he will Petra. He never took time to mourn. He kept all the rage and sorrow locked inside."*

Petra knew of whom she spoke. "You mean Carson. He hates me now."

Sybilla shook her head. *"No, he doesn't. He feels helpless, and he struck out from his pain, not just at what happened to me, but for what you have suffered as well. And for Kyle, too. He wasn't there and he rages at himself for not protecting those he loved."*

"He won't ever be able to look at me again without seeing you and what my ... mother ... did to you."

"She did it to us, Petra. She would have killed you, too, if she hadn't needed you. You are here for a reason. You becoming a part of this pack, of my family is not chance. It is your destiny. I know you love them, and you love Carson most of all."

"He doesn't want my love. He doesn't want any part of me."

"But he does. And when he comes to terms with what he did in driving you away, he will hate himself for letting it happen. It will be you who needs to be strong and forgive him. Because he needs you, more than you can possibly know."

Petra shook her head. "I can't go back there."

"Once they really understand what happened, they will ask your forgiveness, Petra. I hope you will be able to give it to them. You will give Carson the love he should have had all along. He's an alpha, but so filled with emotion. It's why he never went out to form his own pack. That emotion makes him the most passionate man a woman could want, but he knows it is a weakness as well. Being ruled by his emotions

could get him, as well those who follow him, killed. Trey on the other hand, is the level-headed one, a born leader. It's why they manage so well together."

She paused and then chuckled. *"And Donovan. Donovan is the free spirit. He always made me laugh. He's the one to remind us when to lighten up and remember to play. He is the most easy going of the fo—I mean three of them."* Petra saw the sadness in her expression as Sybilla remembered Kyle was no longer alive. *"Each so different. Together they are strong, torn apart they will be destroyed. It is for you to strengthen that bond and heal what has been broken."*

"We have to go," Jamie said. "We can't stay any longer."

"No." Petra cried. "Not yet. Don't leave me yet. There's so much more I want to know."

"Trey is coming and he will get you home safely," Sybilla said. "My family needs you, Petra. And although part of me resides inside you, it is you they need more than just a shadow of me. That is something only you can give."

She turned to Jamie. *"I've been so lonely since you left. Don't go yet."*

"Our time is limited, sweetie. I'm glad to have had this chance to tell you I love you and I'm so proud of you. This place that you've come to will nurture and honor your gifts the way they should be. You will thrive among them, if you give it a chance." His image began to waver. *"Goodbye, Petra."*

"No. Don't go." But both of them vanished as though they had never been there. And Petra wasn't certain she hadn't been hallucinating when it came right down to it.

She heard the rustle of leaves off in the other direction and then she saw an animal. A large wolf, his eyes glittering. He stopped and as Petra watched, he shifted to human form.

"Trey nor," she whispered. It hadn't all been a hallucination. They had been real, and so was he.

He strode forward and knelt next to her. His gaze settled on her wounded leg. "What happened?"

"A wolf trap. I stepped right into it."

"You removed it yourself?"

"Yes. But I don't think I can walk."

He looked at her and she saw the concern in his eyes. "You must be in a lot of pain. We'll move as quickly as possible, but I doubt we'll make it back to the Falls tonight without shifting into wolf form. And I don't think you should walk on that leg any farther than you have to." He scooped her up into his arms. And immediately she felt warm and safe once more, no longer alone.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against Trey's shoulder. "Rainna sent you didn't she?"

"No, I offered to come, but Rainna sends her love."

"But not Carson." She tried not to think about the look on his face and his last words to her before she bolted out of the house.

"Petra, he loves you. But what happened to Sybilla and then seeing those files ... I hope you'll give him a chance to apologize when we get back."

"I'm tired, Trey. So tired."

"I know. You've been through a lot these last weeks. We'll get it all sorted out when we get back. I'll try to get us as far

as I can tonight. I don't have anything right now to help with the pain. The problems of traveling in wolf form. But there may be some herbs to help along the way. I'll get you home, Petra."

He turned in what she assumed was the direction of Vampyre Falls and began to jog through the forest. Petra sighed, feeling safe in his arms. Thank God for the superior strength of werewolves. The pain in her leg was a throbbing reminder of the traps that could lay in wait in the forest.

"Be careful, Trey. The world is so dangerous."

"I know, babe, believe me I know."

"Goodbye, Jamie, I love you," she whispered against Trey's hard chest.

"What did you say?" Trey asked.

Her arms curled tighter around Trey's neck. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

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CHAPTER 18

Carson paced the floor of the living room, waiting for Rainna to appear. He'd been forbidden by both Rainna and Donovan to try to track down Trey and Petra. After the way he'd raged at Petra, he could find no good argument, and was forced to listen to what they had to say.

Once again he'd let his emotions get the better of him. Fool that he was. He'd struck out at the one person who hadn't deserved to feel the sharp edge of his anger. She was probably right in not trusting him. He didn't deserve her trust. He hadn't protected her from the one thing that had cut her to pieces. Himself.

The front door opened and closed, and he walked into the hallway. Donovan had a large stack of papers and several books in his arms. Rainna had dark circles beneath her eyes and she looked exhausted. It had been twenty-four hours since Trey had left and still they had no word. Carson knew Trey's absence took a toll on Rainna. And this was all his fault.

"Let's go into the living room," she said. "I think I have some answers. I want you to know the whole of it before Trey gets back with Petra. There are things you need to understand—so you can at least grovel intelligently."

Leave it to Rainna to twist the knife. "Thanks," he said, an edge to his tone, and then he felt ashamed. She was right. He was in the wrong and it was up to him to make things right with Petra.

"Where did you go?" She and Donovan had been out for most of the day. When she sat on the couch, Carson dragged a footstool over and lifted her feet onto it. Then he removed her shoes and began to rub her swollen feet. "You can't do this, Rainna. Trey will kill me if anything happens to you or the baby. All of this is my fault."

She gave him a tired smile. "I'm fine. It's just getting closer. Mmmm. That feels really good. You've got nice hands, Carson."

He looked at Rainna and grinned. Pregnancy had made her even more beautiful, if that were possible. She was a good mate for his brother. And she was a strong enough woman to keep them all in line.

Donovan set the pile of documents on the couch next to her. "I'll go fix us something to eat."

"That would be wonderful. You men are going to spoil me."

Donovan knew just as well as Carson did that Trey would not take it well if Rainna was in poor condition when he returned. It was in all their best interests that she be happy and flourish. They were all looking forward to the birth of her baby.

Donovan brought in a tray with glasses of lemonade and sandwiches. Carson stood and moved to a chair. He wasn't the least bit hungry, and he tried to be patient as Rainna ate. Her plate and glass finally empty, she looked at Carson.

"First of all, Petra was drawn to us by more than Sybilla's heart and blood. Her destiny is here with us. All the operation did was fuel what was already inside Petra. It sort of jump-started her DNA."

"What do you mean?" Carson was perplexed.

She turned to the pile of books resting next to her and pulled out several sheets of paper. "That file Donovan managed to get us with all his sweet talking contained a wealth of information on both Petra and Sybilla. Blood types, DNA strains, brain scans, the works. It also provided a certain amount of history on Rainna, like her family ancestry. At least to a certain point." She stopped and looked at Carson.

"Well, what did you find?"

"I asked Morganna to go down to meet with one of the specialists in the Sheriff's Department in Silver Creek so I could find out if he agreed with my interpretation. They are on our side, you know." She looked pointedly at Donovan. "Since none of you will let me go down to Silver Creek right now, that was the only way to confirm what I surmised from the information. And it turns out I was right about my interpretation. There is a strain of wolf in Petra's DNA that was there before the operation. Before she was transfused with Sybilla's blood. The odd thing is that there were certain matches that seemed to stand out that identified her ancestry as matching your own. Thank God she was blood typed before the operation so there was something to compare Sybilla's blood results with."

"What does all this mean?"

"Boiling it down, Petra's ancestors had to have come from the same village that yours did. Her wolf blood isn't as strong; in fact, it was quite diluted which is probably why she never exhibited shifting abilities before the operation. And which probably saved her life. But after the operation, well,

I'm guessing a series of things occurred which finally kicked in her wolf DNA. I would say probably her heightened stress levels were certainly a factor as well."

"She was werewolf before all of this?" Carson was having a difficult time wrapping his mind around what Rainna was telling him.

Rainna nodded. "Just as with your own ancestry and the way you all gravitated together through the call of your blood. Petra was called here also, although she may not realize it. Things happen that we can't possibly understand. Sometimes they make sense, sometimes they don't. But everything I've discovered is supported by the information I've found in this file. Petra is a part of this pack. No matter what happens, that's a fact supported by the data."

"You still won't let me go after them." Now more than ever he needed to find Petra. He had to try to explain. Yet he wondered if anything he could say would take away the pain he'd caused her.

"There's no need. They'll be home tonight."

"How do you know?"

She smiled. "Let's just say I know." Rainna might be human, but once mated to the pack, Carson noticed she had developed a certain link with her mate, a unique line of communication that only existed between true matches. He'd had a strong link with Sybilla. But with Petra he'd just began to develop a connection—until this had happened. The ritual could enhance the link. Trust had to come first before the ritual could have any effect. At this rate that might never happen.

Suddenly they heard the front door open and Carson sprang up from his chair. They were home. Trey burst through the entry way and into the living room, carrying an unconscious Petra in his arms.

"My God, what happened?" Carson saw the anxiety expressed in Rainna's eyes.

"She was caught in a wolf trap," Trey said. "She needs help. Donovan, go for Morganna. She's burning up with fever. I think an infection may have set in."

Carson helped Rainna to stand. "Get her upstairs," Rainna said. She turned to Carson. "I need hot water and a clean cloth. We need to clean the wound. I need to see how bad it is." She walked across the room to Trey and laid a hand on Petra's forehead. The woman in Trey's arms moaned, but didn't awaken. Rainna's glance shifted to Petra's leg, which appeared to be swollen twice its normal size. "Hurry, get her upstairs. We need to get this tended to immediately."

Donovan flew out the door as soon as Rainna told him what she needed. She looked meaningfully at Carson. "Water and clean cloths. Meet us upstairs. Hurry. We have to be ready before Morganna gets here."

Carson ran toward the kitchen to get the supplies. He had to believe Petra would be all right. He couldn't lose her. Words he wanted to take back filled his head. The shattered look in her eyes when he'd flayed her with his thoughtless anger.

He gripped the side of the sink, pain thrashing through him. Then a steadying hand gripped his shoulder.

"She's going to be all right. Between Morganna and Rainna's healing abilities, she'll be fine. She's a strong woman. She won't give up."

If only he could believe that he hadn't destroyed the heart in her. He looked his brother straight in the eyes. "If she dies I'm the one who's killed her." And then the tears that he'd been unable to shed when Sybilla and Kyle were killed fell like a dam had burst inside him. His heart was shattering for the hurt he'd caused Petra, a woman he'd come to love even before he'd met her. Why is it a man only recognized a precious gift after it had been taken from him?

"Go upstairs, I'll take care of this. Tell Rainna I'll bring it up as soon as it's ready. You should be with Petra and give her your strength. She's not going to die."

Carson only wished he could be so certain of that. He wished he had the power to turn back time, to take back the terrible words he had spoken. Quickly he made his way toward the stairs and then vaulted up the last few steps when he heard Petra's piercing scream of pain.

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CHAPTER 19

The first thing Petra realized when she awoke was the heat of the body wrapped around her and the fact that the pain in her leg had lessened. It was now more of a dull ache. The second thing she realized was that she was wearing a nightgown and lying in a soft bed.

She recognized the scent of the man whose arms were wrapped around her. Carefully, she turned onto her back and stared around the room. The angle of the light coming from the window told her it was early morning, but she wondered how long she'd been here. She also realized she was back in Carson's bedroom. Trey had obviously made it home with little help from her.

She had vague memories of the return trip, carried in Trey's arms. She thought she remembered a night spent inside a cave ... in his protective embrace. But she'd been too far gone by then to be afraid of the darkened recesses. She remembered Trey trying to cool down her fever when they stopped next to a stream. At one point he must have left, because he came back with clothing for them to wear and a bandage for her leg. But beyond that, there was nothing until she awoke just now.

She knew she should be angry, but somehow she didn't have the strength to send Carson away. Not just yet.

His arms tightened around her. "Petra, I'm sorry. There's no excuse for what I did and what I said."

"How can I know that it won't happen again, Carson? That you won't look at me and think about what happened to Sybilla? That you'll make me the scapegoat for the loss of her?"

"I don't know that I can ever make right what I did. Coming so close to losing you is something I never want to experience again." There was a pause, but his arms pressed her closer.

She could feel his hot breath against her ear. "I love you, Petra. I know you won't believe that, but it's true."

She wanted to believe him. She wanted it to be true, but she was afraid to trust her emotions. "How can I know it's not just the parts of Sybilla that are inside me that you love and I'm just a shell for the woman who was your mate, a mate you think you can have back through me? I'm not Sybilla, Carson."

She felt his deep sigh. "I was drawn to you before I ever met you, Petra. Remember we had information about you. I knew your routines; I memorized the color of your eyes and your hair. I even know that your favorite drink is raspberry iced tea with a twist of lemon. I memorized everything I could about you without really understanding why I did it. I tried to ignore the arousal I experienced when I saw your picture. But I stole one of them from the file and it's been with me ever since."

Finally, he'd surprised her and she turned her head to look at him. His dark eyes blazed down at her. Hungry eyes, and a look on his face that told her he had experienced just as much pain in his life as she had. This was a man who felt

things deeply. Sybilla was right, he was ruled by emotion. Deep, passionate emotion. Was she willing to take the chance? That's what it came down to.

"You have my picture?"

He reached down to the side of the bed and yanked his wallet out of his pants pocket. He opened it and pulled out a photograph and handed it to her.

He really did have the photo. She looked up at him.

"When you came running across that field, trying to escape from the Dalwin brothers, I knew. I didn't know how, or why, but when you ran straight into my arms I knew you belonged there. It wasn't Sybilla's scent I responded to—it was yours. It wasn't Sybilla's body I craved—it was Petra Thornton's.

He shifted in the bed and towered over her, gazing down at her with his hungry, black eyes. "Maybe someday I can make you believe what I'm telling you, because it's the truth. I never thought I'd find love again after Sybilla was murdered. But I did and I don't want to lose you. I need you, Petra, more than you can imagine. I need you in order to breathe, just as much as I need the heart in my chest to beat. You are my heart and I promise you I will never hurt you again. And I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make up for what I did."

Looking at him, she couldn't not believe he meant every word. There was still a lot about herself and these brothers that she didn't understand. But she did love this man and his family.

She cupped his face and drew him down, claiming his lips. She inhaled his scent and felt the familiar heat pervade her entire body, consumed by the fire of his passion.

"Make love to me, Carson. I need to feel you inside me."

The heat roared through her, fueled by his male scent, lit by the blazing need for her mate to possess her.

He lifted the nightgown over her head and tossed it to the floor. His hands gently stroked her as though she was made of priceless Venetian glass. His warm hands cupped her breasts and teased her nipples. But it was almost as though he was afraid to touch her.

"I'm not going to break." She needed all of his passion, not this restraint that he was using.

"You've been ill, I don't want to hurt you."

She wound her arms around his neck. "Believe me, you won't hurt me." She spread her legs and arched her pelvis, feeling the brush of his erection against her opening. "Now, Carson, now."

He wasted no time and entered her quickly. She heard the familiar rumble in his chest. And then he was moving powerfully inside her, in and out, over and over again. She met each of his thrusts, rose up to nip at his throat, tasting his flesh, savoring his blood.

She would find a way to forgive his painful words. She would find a way to trust him. Maybe if she had dared to trust him to begin with and told him the truth about that last encounter with Deborah, some of this could have been averted. In the end they needed to trust each other.

She felt herself rising toward the pinnacle once again. That place of passion only this wolfman could take her to. Her nails dug into his back, dragged downward to cup his ass. And then she felt him pulse inside her, spilling his seed into her womb. She pressed her lips to his, claiming the groan that escaped from his throat, swallowing it, and then driving her tongue deep inside searching and tasting.

One of his hands wedged between their bodies, a finger stroking across her engorged clit and she burst apart, climaxing. The beat of her heart increased ... she heard it, felt it, and somewhere inside she knew that Sybilla's spirit was with her, urging Petra to take every bit of pleasure that life had to offer, because sometimes it was so fleeting.

She wrapped her arms around Carson. Her fingers traced the furrows she'd left on his back, and she dipped into the lifeblood of her savage lover.

I'll take care of him. She spoke to Sybilla's spirit.

I know. It was a whisper of sound inside her head. And then the sense of Sybilla lingering inside her was gone. And it was just her and Carson wrapped in each other's arms.

Protecting and nurturing each other.

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CHAPTER 20

Petra was nervous. This was the night of the full moon when passions and the animal heat would be at its peak. The time when she would mate with the brothers beneath the light of the full moon.

Tonight she committed herself to this family and they would commit to her. The ritual would seal the family circle and make it stronger.

"Try to relax, Petra, everything will be fine." Petra looked across the table at Rainna, who had an amazingly serene look on her face.

"I still can't believe you accept this."

Rainna smiled. "It took me a long time to understand the needs of this family—of these men. I expect it will actually take you less time to come to terms with it because you share the wolf blood. I had to recognize that I was becoming part of what is essentially a non-human family and the code and morals are distinctly different from humans. Much of the relationship is based on survival and basic instinct. Of course, the animal heat that accompanies the revelation is something to be dealt with as well. Being completely human, I wouldn't have thought I would be affected so acutely."

"It's strange how Mother Nature instills species with different, yet similar, passions, isn't it? And yet our unique chemistry somehow bonds us in some way to our fate." Rainna had related carefully to Petra what she had discovered in the extensive file that had been sent to them from New

York. Destiny certainly was a strange thing. And from the story Carson told her about the history of their blood, it was nothing like how she'd imagined a werewolf was created.

"Do you really believe this Cerberus myth? About how his blood somehow got into the town well and the werewolf curse was passed through the tainted water?"

Rainna shrugged. "Who's to know? There are many things in life that can't be completely explained. We take a lot in life on faith, don't you think? There are still so many people who are afraid of what they can't explain. That fear of the unknown, the unexplainable is what's made the need for sanctuaries such as Vampyre Falls so vital."

"No one has discovered this place yet. I'm surprised about that."

"It's because of the powerful magic of its inhabitants. There is a wide circle of protection surrounding the Falls that keeps us all safe from discovery. And in the smaller sense, why this ancient ritual of the Cerberus werewolves to secure the pack is so important. You may not comprehend it all right now, but I think in time you will come to understand."

Rainna looked at the clock on the wall and then stood up. "It's time, Petra. I'll take you to the meeting place."

Petra rose from the table. "Are you sure?"

"It's an honor to do so. Besides, the baby's not due for another four weeks. I'm pleased to have you in the family, Petra. Please don't doubt that. Trey has been a little concerned as well." She smiled. "It took me the better part of the night last night to assure him all was well."

That did make Petra laugh, because she had a good idea what form that assurance took. And Rainna's words helped to put Petra at ease.

"Ahh, that explains why you slept in so late this morning." Rainna laughed. "Well, yes, that and the baby."

"You have a very calming way about you, Rainna. I don't think I've ever met anyone quite like you before."

Rainna circled an arm around Petra's waist and hugged her. "Maybe I'm here for a reason, too, don't you think? Come on, let's go, they'll be waiting."

The moon was full and bright when they stepped outside. Rainna closed the door and then they proceeded toward the meeting place. As they drew closer, Petra felt the animal heat begin to surge and she caught the familiar scent of the males. Most of the time she could control it or she'd probably have spent a great deal of her time begging Carson, or if he wasn't available, one of his brothers, to fuck her. It was something she didn't understand, but for tonight she had to simply accept what was to be.

"Let it carry you, Petra. They'll keep you safe."

Somehow she knew it was true. She saw them in the distance, three wolves, silvered by the moonlight and waiting for her. As Rainna and Petra neared the pack, all three turned to the black sky and howled at the moon. It was a mating call, drawing her to them. The heat surged and burned inside her. Her pussy juices coated her thighs and her nipples screwed tightly.

Rainna halted and turned to Petra. She helped her remove her dress, then Petra stood naked, bathed only in moonlight.

"I was bonded by them here. It is a magical place." She turned and smiled. "This is as far as I go. I won't stay. This is a sacred bonding moment for the four of you. But I'll be waiting when you return. Never forget that you are loved by all of us, Petra. And we shall all protect each other."

Rainna leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then stepped away. "Go, they're waiting for you."

Petra turned and walked toward where the wolves waited, pulled across the clearing by a need far beyond her understanding as her primal nature took over. As she approached, first Carson shifted to human form and went to meet her. He kissed her and linked his hand with hers, drawing her to the others.

One of the wolves licked her leg and whined as she stepped between the furry bodies.

Carson took her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers. His warm hands followed the curve of her spine, traveled over the fullness of her rear. She closed her eyes and leaned into him, curling her arms around his neck, pressing her breasts to his strong chest.

Her senses, sharpened by the animal heat, could hear his heart beating in his chest. Then the echo of two more. More hands stroked her body, and she realized his brothers had now shifted to human form. They closed in around her.

"Petra." Her name chanted over and over and she gave herself to them and to the night.

They blended together as one. Carson moved to the side and Trey took his place. Naked and strong, she felt Trey's cock rising up, hot, silky flesh pressing against her dripping

mound. Hands slipped between her legs from behind, teasing her clit, spreading her lips and then Trey was buried inside her cunt.

Petra moaned as the pleasurable sensations spilled through her. She felt his hands at her hips, lifting her, and she wound her legs around his hips. She turned her head to the side and Carson's mouth possessed her. As he drove his tongue between her lips, he cupped her face.

Donovan behind her, separating her cheeks. Something cool and wet, like a gel spread around her anus, slick fingers entered her puckered opening, spreading her.

Wild need surged through her, driving her as she rode Trey's cock, pulling him deeper, squeezing and releasing his throbbing member as he thrust inside her slick channel.

Carson dropped forward and his teeth clamped onto a hardened nipple, tugging and sucking it into his mouth, razing his teeth across the flesh, sending her soaring out into the night.

She felt Donovan's fingers invading her ass, tunneling deep, widening her, preparing her to accept him inside that narrow place. It was Carson's fingers that found her clit, teasing and driving her into a wild frenzy. She heard the whimpers and growls emanating from her throat, joined by the sounds of her feral lovers. And then Donovan's cock was at her entrance, pressing inward, opening her, impaling her between the wolfmen that would love and protect her always.

"Carson," she cried out as Donovan's cock locked inside her.

"I'm here, love. I'll always be here." His finger circled her clit.

Trey moved inside her, in and out, again and again. Petra raised her arms to the sky, as though to embrace the moon, giving herself over to these men who were her lovers, her protectors.

She arched her back, threw her head back, and howled the mating call. As each pulse of climax mingled and soared, her voice was joined by three deeper voices in a song as old as time as new as first love, as all encompassing as the arms which held and protected her.

Each of them took her, loved her, cherished her and she accepted them all into her body without restraint.

"I love you, Carson. I love you," she cried over and over again.

And when the passionate hunger had been appeased, they shifted to their wolf forms, Petra at the heart as they loped off as one unit, forever bound together.

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Epilogue

Four months later

Carson sat on the couch with Petra nestled against his chest. A possessive hand cupped her warm breast and he kneaded lightly as they watched Trey and Rainna with little Kyle.

Rainna was breast-feeding the infant and Trey held them close as he watched his mate with their child. They had decided to name the baby after their lost pack brother; all had agreed it was a fitting name.

Rainna looked across at Petra and smiled. It was strange how the two women had connected so quickly. And their family was so much stronger for it. Thinking of Kyle, Petra had decided there were some things better left unsaid. Some revelations just hurt too much. The monstrous thing that Deborah had done to Kyle was best left buried.

"How's the work going, Petra? Are you getting used to working in the catacombs?"

Carson had been surprised that Petra had accepted the position of documentation director considering where the document vaults were located.

Petra laughed. "It took a bit of getting used to, and the first few weeks, I wasn't certain I could do it. But somehow I've been able to get past my anxiety. Of course, I was determined not to let my fear get the best of me." She stroked Carson's jaw and then kissed him. "I think you all have given me strength to overcome the past. And once I

start working on the documents, my surroundings seem to disappear. At least until I come up for air. The catacombs I can handle. It's when the vampires stop by to check on things that it gets a little dicey. Now they make me nervous."

They all laughed.

"You've come a long way, Petra," Rainna said as she lifted little Kyle away from her breast and shifted him to her shoulder. It was Trey who patted his back lightly.

Carson wondered if he would make as good a father figure as Trey did. It was a weighty responsibility siring a child.

Rainna moved to stand and adjusted the front of her sapphire robe as she shifted Kyle to her other shoulder. "He's out like a light. I'm going to take him upstairs and put him down. He's been so good at sleeping through the night. Good night everyone."

"I'll join you shortly," Trey said.

Rainna turned back to smile at him. "I'll be waiting."

Nothing subtle about this family, that was certain. Petra looked at Carson and he saw the heat reflected in her eyes. He had to wonder if they'd even make it upstairs before the animal heat flared up. God, but he loved her warmth and her passion.

Suddenly, Donovan burst through the door, excitement glittering from his eyes. "You'll never guess what news just reached us."

Trey rose from his chair. "What's happened?"

"The facility in New York has been breached. The paras have been freed and"—he shot a look at Petra—"and the Thorntons are dead."

Carson pulled Petra close, concerned for how this news might affect her. He could tell little from her expression. "How did they die?" Carson finally asked.

"There was an explosion. But it was the fire that got Deborah. Apparently she was down in one of the experimental labs below ground and was trapped there. What they're saying is that they couldn't get her to leave without her research notes. It ended up killing her. George Thornton was in his office and it was the blast that took him out."

Carson looked at Petra. "Are you all right, love?"

"It's strange how fate turns the tables, isn't it? Deborah caused my brother's death in a cave-in. And in the end her death occurred underground." She turned and looked at Carson. "I don't know what I feel right now. I think I'm numb. It's an odd feeling."

"So it's begun," Trey said.

Donovan nodded. "It's begun. I don't know where it will go or how long it will take, but the tides are going to turn. The government will have to listen to us eventually."

"Hold me, Carson, just hold me," Petra said.

Carson enclosed her in the protection of his arms. Heartbreak littered both their lives, but feeling the powerful, steady beat of her heart, he knew their combined passion and love would keep them strong. He was so thankful fate had brought her into his life. And he would keep her safe, whatever it took.

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Adrianna Dane

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

Writing as Tess Maynard, her first published short story appeared in the ezine, *The Whispering Forest*, in January of 2004. Writing as Adrianna Dane, where adding sensual heat to romance is her motto, *Esmerelda's Secret* was her first foray into the erotic romance genre.

Having traveled and lived from the East Coast to the West Coast, Theresa receives inspiration for her stories from a variety of sources, including music and poetry, and her tastes are eclectic.

For more information about current projects, visit Theresa's websites at:

www.tessmaynard.com or www.adriannadane.com

* * * *

Don't miss Vampyre Falls: Morganna's Sacrifice, by Adrianna Dane,

available at AmberHeat.com!

Vampyre Falls: Heartbreak
by Adrianna Dane

Morganna's lover, Keelan Moonhunter, a seductive dark elf, disappeared from their province in the Faerie Realm years ago without a word. She assumed he'd simply grown weary of her and sought his pleasures elsewhere. To help her deal with the heartbreak, Morganna pacted with the goblin alchemist, Syril Grimstarker, for a potion that would mask all the pain—at least for a time. Little did she know, however, exactly what evil secrets Syril held.

Until the night her long-lost lover, Keelan, saves her from the sadistic hands of the vampire Romulus. Now, Keelan's a vampire with tortured memories and living in a place called Vampyre Falls. He whisks her away to the human world to protect her, and there, she meets the mysterious vampire, Daffyd Angelus, who once saved Keelan's life. Morganna senses deeper ties between Daffyd and the dark elf she still loved. And Keelan reveals why he disappeared so long ago.

The only hope for any future together could hinge on sacrifices Morganna will be asked to make in order to remain in Vampyre Falls. Is her love strong enough to turn her back on everything she has known to stay with the one man she knows is her soulmate? Even if he is a vampire?

* * * *

Don't miss *The Wolfe Proxy*, by T.D. KcKinney & Terry Wylis,

available at AmberAllure.com!

Ruthless CEO Quinton Wolfe sets off every alarm on sculptor Max Bowman's warning system. No way is that

playboy getting near Max's sister, the newest shareholder in Wolfe's multinational corporation. No matter Quint's charming smile and sexy form, Max won't let his kid sister get taken in by that Lothario. Even if it means Max cuts a deal with Big Bad Wolfe himself.

And what a deal! Max becomes Quint's play toy. Good thing Max enjoys it. He'll just play the game until he can turn the tables on the CEO. Or that's the plan. But somehow, even knowing the CEO is a ruthless snake at the core, Max still lets Quint worm his way right into Max's heart.

Cutting Quint out of his life is the best thing Max can do. So why does it feel like Max might never be able to breathe again? It doesn't help that Quint's every bit as heartbroken and miserable. So maybe Max's view of Quint was skewed by the media. But can he separate the ruthless CEO from the gentle, caring man who loves him? And can he trust either one?

* * * *

Don't miss *Dressed For Dying* by Janet Quinn,

available at AmberQuill.com!

In 1892, reporter Sean Madigan is pitted against the New York police when he's assigned his first high-profile murder story, the slaying of the wealthy Marshal Haversham, clothing industry mogul and sweatshop owner. While Sean hunts for the killer in order to prove his worth to his newspaper editor, the madman goes on a violent spree, burning down

Haversham's warehouses and sweatshops and killing young women who work within them. Each victim is found dressed in a fancy ball gown that was secretly made within the sweatshops themselves.

When Madigan's sweetheart, Bridget, becomes the killer's next target, Sean determines he will find the man and his connection to the ball gowns. But the murderer has other designs, and it soon becomes a race against time and the police to discover the fiend's identity before he silences Sean or Bridget ... permanently...

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