



## ALLURE OF THE BEAST

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# ALLURE OF THE BEAST

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BY

MARGARET L. CARTER

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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ALLURE OF THE BEAST  
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Copyright © 2009 by Margaret L. Carter  
ISBN 978-1-60272-617-8  
Cover Art © 2009 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# CHAPTER 1

Green eyes glinted among the trees. From the edge of the woods, Raoul watched the beast lurking in the shadows. His animal vision had no trouble spotting the auburn she-wolf by the light of the half-full moon. Having tracked her many times before, he knew her routine. She regularly visited this park near her home, where the patch of tame forest gave her space to run. She believed she'd found a safe way to live with her double nature. He hated knowing he'd have to shatter that illusion.

When she turned her head in his direction, he froze. He watched her glance from side to side and sniff the air. Did she sense his nearness? In all the times he'd shadowed her, in both her wolf and woman forms, he'd never confronted her face-to-face. Tonight he would have to take that step. He quivered with

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eagerness for that meeting.

He abandoned caution and sprinted toward the she-wolf. As he had feared, she broke into a run as soon as she sighted him. His longer legs closed the distance in seconds. With a torturous wrench, he forced his body into human form.

The female halted, clearly stunned by his change.

“Erin, wait!” he called.

She paused, tremulous with uncertainty, her lips curled in a silent snarl.

He raised his hands, palms out. “Don’t run from me. I know what you are.”

A ridge of hair stood up along her spine. His nostrils flared at her clean, wild scent, a blend of curiosity and fear, flavored with hints of citrus and cinnamon. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. “I’m a friend of your father.”

Now she snarled aloud. He couldn’t blame her if she bristled at any mention of the man who’d sired her.

Another pace brought Raoul within arm’s reach of her. He stretched out a hand. Saliva gleamed on her bared fangs. Though he longed to touch her and rub her thick fur, he decided indulging that desire wouldn’t be worth the risk of her sinking those teeth into his flesh. He lowered his arm to his side. The touching he craved would have to come later, if at all.

“I have bad news. Your father is dead.”

\* \* \*

Erin silently raged at the bad luck that had let the strange wolf catch her off guard. The breeze had blown his oddly familiar scent away from her until the last second. Even in a human body, he

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smelled like no other man she'd ever met. Leaf-loam, salt, and spices that reminded her of hot mulled cider, seasoned with a tang of animal musk. To her annoyance, she wanted to inhale deeper and savor that scent. Unwelcome passion sizzled in her veins. On top of that disturbingly erotic excitement, a turbulent mix of anger and fear made her lightheaded.

So he knew her father. If she'd had the ability to speak at that moment, she'd have retorted, "Why should I care?"

If this man who towered over her on his long legs was her father's friend, that fact didn't give her any reason to trust him. Just the opposite, if anything. Too bad he smelled delicious enough to lick like an ice-cream cone and looked equally intriguing. Apparently in his thirties, he had curly, black hair trimmed to just below his ears. His thick eyebrows, dark and diabolically slanted, met over the bridge of his nose, though a little thinner there. She'd never met anyone else who shared that oddity with her.

When he spoke again, she struggled to listen more closely. His accent hinted at a New England origin. "I have bad news. Your father is dead."

She growled, a sound that segued into a whine before she could swallow it. She hardly knew the man who'd left her mother right after Erin's birth. Yet a lump of sadness congealed in her chest. Now she'd never have another chance to rage at him and demand why he'd left her with so little guidance in handling her wild nature. Dead? How?

"I've got a lot to tell you, and this isn't the place. Meet me at your house as soon as you can get there."

She bristled at the casual order. He knew where she lived?

As if he guessed her unspoken question, he said, "Don't worry, I know where it is."



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Before he finished answering, she caught on. He was the wolf whose baying she'd heard while she prowled by night, whose scent had drifted to her on the wind. How long had he been stalking her?

His lean body loomed over her, poised as if to pounce. She couldn't stop her eyes from wandering down the front of his torso to his partial erection. Torn between indignation and alarm, she turned and raced toward home.

\* \* \*

Raoul waited until Erin had fled out of sight and hearing range before he trotted back to the parking lot. Her vehement rejection would have amused him if it weren't for his body's response. His mouth watered at the female musk that still lingered in his nose. She couldn't hide her reaction from one of her own kind. Against her will, the gleam in her hazel eyes answered his craving.

He hungered to taste her skin in her human form and stroke her shoulder-length, auburn hair. He yearned to lope beside her in lupine shape and clamp his jaws on the nape of her neck while he thrust into her.

Both as woman and as wolf, she stirred his appetite. Her werewolf genes obviously dominated, so she would make a fit partner for him. Not that he had any hope of taking her as his mate. A quick, hot coupling would have to satisfy the urge she roused. Raoul was in no position to bond with anyone.

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Shaking off the harrowing memories, Raoul started the car and drove to Erin's townhouse, a block from the edge of the park.

## CHAPTER 2

Erin's pulse quickened when the doorbell rang. The moment she pulled the door ajar, she caught the man's scent. When she let him into the foyer, she felt his gaze roam over her as if visualizing her naked body under the shorts and blouse she'd put on.

She heard him inhale. Was he savoring her fragrance? She couldn't ignore his masculine aroma, either. After he left, she would have to air out the house for hours to stop his essence from flooding her senses. She had to struggle for breath before inviting him into the living room.

"You're not only nervous, you're turned on, aren't you?" His fingers skimmed over her hair.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Warmth flushed her cheeks.

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“Liar,” he breathed. “You’re burning up.” He touched the curve of her jaw. “The same way I am.”

Erin shied away from his hand. “Don’t be ridiculous. That’s just an aftereffect of the transformation.” She sat in an armchair to leave the couch for him. That way, he couldn’t touch her again. “What happened to my father? I saw him about a month ago. The usual duty meeting.”

She swallowed, tasting the acid of her perennial resentment. Twice a year they met for lunch and stilted conversations that always evaded the questions haunting her. True, he hadn’t abandoned her in infancy by his own choice. Her mother had demanded that he leave, for fear he would go berserk and hurt the new baby. In Erin’s view, that fact didn’t excuse the way he’d stayed aloof from her after she’d grown up.

“For about a week after that, he left a ton of messages on my phone. I ignored them.” She rubbed her eyes. “How did he die?”

“Dirk, the current pack leader, killed him.”

“Pack? There are more of you?” Encountering this man doubled the number of werewolves she’d met.

“Well, yeah. Did you think you and your dad were unique mutations? I’m Raoul Girard, by the way.”

“How did you know my father?”

“Kevin Balfour was my closest friend. I owe him my life.” The shift in Raoul’s scent and voice projected sorrow.

“Your life? Literally?”

“He saved me when the rest of my pack got slaughtered. I was only nine years old.”

“What happened to them?”

“Two men, brothers, murdered them all. They’d lost their sister to a renegade, a teenager from our pack who’d gone feral.”

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Her throat constricted. She swallowed a surge of nausea. “So some werewolves kill people?”

“It’s rare,” he said. “Sane lycanthropes don’t hunt human prey. But learning control takes time, and some never master it. That boy hadn’t been able to handle the transition when he started changing. He went out of his mind.”

She flushed with sudden anger. “My father left me to face that alone? Knowing what could happen?”

“But he didn’t leave you completely alone, did he? He came back to help when you needed it. You have control now.”

She folded her arms. “Mostly by my own efforts.” Despite her lingering anger at Kevin, she couldn’t help being curious about his past. “How did my father happen to save you?”

“He was visiting to discuss a mating alliance. My father was our alpha, the pack leader. Kevin was the son of his pack’s alpha. He was about twenty then, ready for mating, and he and my sister hit it off. I idolized Kevin, couldn’t wait to have him for a brother-in-law. By pure luck, we were out hiking in the woods the afternoon those two men invaded my pack’s lair.”

“Lair?” Erin shook her head. “You make them sound like a bunch of animals.”

“We’re half animal. Get used to it.”

She flinched at his harsh retort, then glared at him to show he couldn’t intimidate her.

“My pack’s home was a Christmas tree farm in Maine, with acres of woods between us and the nearest town. So when the killers showed up, there was no way to call for help in time, even if my folks had wanted to.”

“Didn’t they turn into wolves and fight?”

“Sure, though it’s harder to change in the daytime. But a dozen

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animals against two men with rifles? They inflicted some damage before they died, but they still died.”

The grief and anger in his voice and eyes made her own eyes mist up. “What about you and my father?” she asked softly.

Raoul gazed across the room as if staring into the past. “We heard the gunshots when we got near the house. And the screams—my mother and sister howling in pain. Kevin ordered me to hide in the bushes and stay put. I could see the front door from there. He changed. The two men came charging out, and he caught them by surprise. Tore out the first one’s throat instantly. The other took a shot at Kevin and missed.” He drew a deep, ragged breath. “I’d never transformed before. I was too young. But I knew some girls started as early as nine. So I tried. Didn’t know how, but I concentrated and prayed to every god and goddess I’d ever heard of.”

“Nothing happened?”

He shook his head. “Except I disobeyed Kevin and rushed into the open, trying to help him. The man aimed at me.”

She gasped. “A nine-year-old boy?”

“I guess he thought of me as just one more wolf cub. Kevin jumped in front of me and took the bullet in the shoulder. He knocked the guy down and killed him.”

Erin squelched her irrational impulse to close the space between them and offer a comforting touch. She’d just met this man. “I had no idea my father was a hero.”

“He saved more than my life. He made sure I didn’t get eaten up by guilt.”

“Guilt? What in the world for? Living when your family died?”

“Because I wasn’t there to fight with them. Because I couldn’t change into a wolf and do my part to defend our home.”

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“That’s ridiculous! You were just a kid.”

He said with an obviously forced smile, “Yeah, I know. But knowing doesn’t change feelings, especially for a kid. Kevin became a foster brother to me, adopted me into his pack. He and his father, Donald, your granddad, were good to me. They helped me move on, showed me how to live in the outside world. Thanks to your father, I don’t hate all non-lycanthropes just because two of them murdered my family.”

“Yeah, he obviously didn’t hate them,” she said, “since he married one.”

“That happened right around the time I started changing, when I was twelve. Your dad kept in touch with me even after his father threw him out for falling in love with your mother.”

“He was disowned for marrying a human female?” Erin shook her head, baffled. “I don’t get that.”

“The alpha male needs a true mate, and only another werewolf can form a mating bond.”

“Which means what?”

“It’s a physical attachment, maybe even psychic. The attraction between true mates is a biological allure only two werewolves can feel. They share a link that binds them for life.”

“So Mom wasn’t good enough for the pack.” She drew a deep breath and braced herself. “That doesn’t explain why the current pack leader killed my father.”

“To keep the alpha position. With Kevin gone, Dirk, your father’s cousin, was the closest survivor of their bloodline. Your grandfather, who was a stubborn son of a bitch, literally, rejected your dad and chose Dirk as the heir, mainly because Dirk agreed a hundred percent with the ‘humans are inferior’ philosophy. Even if anyone else had an equal right to the position, they’d have been

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afraid to challenge him.”

“Are you saying he killed my father in some kind of trial by combat?”

“So he claimed.” The sour taint in Raoul’s scent showed what he thought of that claim. “There were no witnesses. When Kevin went home for his father’s funeral, Dirk pretended to welcome him as a long-lost friend, but Kevin sensed what was really going on. He saw what kind of leader Dirk was shaping up to be and decided it was his duty to challenge him. Dirk’s story is that he had to kill Kevin in self-defense. That smelled all wrong.”

“How so?”

“Aside from totally out of character for your father?” Raoul said with a wry smile. “Because fights for dominance usually end in surrender, not death. Dirk claimed Kevin ambushed him without a fair challenge. Sounds more like something Dirk would do himself. I suspect he murdered your father when he was down.”

She gritted her teeth against the temptation to feel either grief or indignation over her father’s death. She hardly knew him, by his own choice. “If Dirk lied, somebody besides you should suspect it.”

“Maybe they do, but all the other pack members are too intimidated to question his version.”

“What about you?”

She smelled Raoul’s anger and frustration. “As far as your grandfather was concerned, I’m not a real member of the pack. After he exiled Kevin, the old man barely tolerated me. I don’t have standing to challenge.”

“You’re a lone wolf like my father was?” Again she felt an unwilling twinge of compassion for him.

“Not quite. I visit the pack now and then, even though I’ve got



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a home of my own.”

“The word *pack* makes me think of wild animals. I imagine them living in a cave with fur, fangs, and claws, gorging on bloody meat.” She remembered the terror that had choked her the first time she’d fallen asleep outside in wolf form and awakened hours later, still a beast. For a shattering moment she’d been afraid she couldn’t remember how to become human again.

“Hardly,” he said with a dry laugh. “Spending too much time shifted can be dangerous. Werewolves who surrender to that temptation gradually lose the ability to think in words or even remember their human lives while they’re in animal shape.”

Just what she’d always feared. “I’d rather live in a cardboard box and beg for loose change.”

“Oh, but it tempts all of us.” His voice dropped to a seductive whisper. “Haven’t you felt the call of the night? The cry of the wind? The urge to keep running under the moon forever, free of all your human burdens?” The words felt like that very wind howling at her back.

Erin folded her arms tighter, like armor across her chest, and shook her head.

His grin turned feral. “Wouldn’t you like to run with another wolf? We could hunt together, share a kill, devour the flesh of our prey. I’d love to race at your side, howl at the moon with you, and lick the blood of the kill from your lips.”

She could almost smell and taste that blood, tangy and steaming. The beast coiled in the pit of her stomach, demanding satisfaction. Flesh, blood, the scent and flavor of Raoul’s mouth. The hairs on her arms prickled, and her skin itched with fur eager to erupt. Heat pooled between her legs. Her breathing quickened, and her face flushed. She hated the way her body betrayed itself to

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him.

“Forget that!” What she meant as a shout of rejection emerged as a breathy whisper.

“You want to,” Raoul crooned. “The gleam in your eyes proves it. So does your scent. Run with me.”

What was she thinking? A surge of anger quenched the lust. “In your dreams.”

“Haven’t you dreamed of exactly this? Of meeting your own kind? Not being alone anymore?”

Not dreams, nightmares. Over and over, sleep forced her to relive her first change. She curled on the floor of her bedroom, clutching her stomach, trying to scream but managing only a whimper. Her skin stung as if a thousand fire ants were biting her. A bolt of electricity shot through her. She convulsed in a spasm of mingled pain and pleasure. Fur spread over her arms. She watched her hands and feet shrink to paws. Her vision faded to pastel, while smells turned as vivid as colors.

She prowled the night until her jaws snapped shut on a rabbit’s neck. Blood gushed into her mouth. Ignoring the clumps of hair, she gulped down the animal’s flesh and crunched its bones. When nothing was left except mangled scraps, she licked her jowls.

The rabbit’s body vanished. Instead, the mutilated corpse of a small boy lay on the grass under her paws. A howl burst from her mouth.

She always woke shivering at that point.

*That didn’t happen. It never happened.*

She had never hunted a human being. Only small animals—rabbits, squirrels, opossums. Nor had she ever torn out a man’s throat during sex, another recurring nightmare. But the fear of losing control, waking to find human blood on her claws, haunted

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her.

She banished those phantoms to the back of her mind. “No, thanks, I’d rather be human.”

“Kevin knew that. He had minimal contact with you partly because he thought you wanted it that way. The other reason, more important, was to keep Dirk from knowing you exist. That’s why Kevin asked me to watch over you for him.”

A hiss escaped from her. “How long have you been stalking me?”

He raised his hands as if to ward off her anger. “Protecting, not stalking. I’ve been watching you from a distance ever since you first transformed.”

“Why?” She glowered at him. “Why is it so important the pack leader doesn’t know about me?”

“Dirk would consider you a potential threat, as Donald’s granddaughter.”

She would have laughed at the idea if not for Raoul’s grim expression. “Even if I wanted to overthrow him as alpha, which is the craziest idea I’ve heard tonight, could I? Can a female lead the pack?”

“Not directly, but if there’s no male of the direct bloodline, the mate of a female heir can become leader. If he proves his worth, of course.”

“So? I don’t have a mate.”

“That could change.” Raoul’s eyes raked her up and down. “Dirk wouldn’t take the risk of ignoring you. That’s why your father tried to contact you before the challenge. Not only to say good-bye in case he didn’t survive, but to warn you about Dirk.”

Guilt hit her like a punch to the stomach. She hugged herself tighter, rejecting the emotion.

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Raoul strode to her side and put an arm around her shoulder. She shrugged him off. "Okay, you don't want comfort. That's not the main point of this visit, anyway." He paced the room as he talked. "I've had contact with a few pack members in the three weeks since your father died. The alpha is supposed to guide the clan like a father. Dirk acts more like a dictator. He bullies them, even hurts them if they don't fall into line. He doesn't deserve to lead."

Erin shifted in place, her eyes following him. "You're telling me this, why?"

"The alpha bloodline owns an amulet passed down through the centuries. It links the leader to the pack. Only a worthy heir can awaken it."

"You're saying it's magic?"

He acknowledged her skepticism with a wry smile. "You change into a wolf, and you can't accept the idea of magic? I've seen it blaze with energy when your grandfather wore it. Dirk doesn't wear the amulet, because he knows it won't work for him. He's got it hidden somewhere. We need to find it and use it to discredit him in front of the pack."

"We?" She clenched her fists until the nails dug into her palms. "I don't want a thing to do with the pack."

"Believe me, after helping Kevin protect you all these years, the last thing I want is to drag you into the big bad wolf's lair. But you're the only one who can do this. As a direct descendant of the last alpha, you should feel a link to the amulet. You can lead me to it." He sat on the arm of her chair and clasped her hand.

Sweat dampened her palms. She tugged her hand free. "Why should I help you overthrow this Dirk guy?"

"Listen to me. He's turning into a monster." Raoul gripped her

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shoulders so tightly she winced. A tinge of desperation crept into his voice. "I've heard about worse than physical abuse. When people won't cooperate, he's drugged them with wolfsbane potions. Those concoctions have useful purposes, but Dirk's been forcing them on people as punishment."

"I thought wolfsbane was just in the movies."

"By itself, it's a deadly poison. Our healer blends it with other ingredients to produce different elixirs, either to force the shift into wolf shape or lock a person into human form. They're mostly administered to teenagers who have trouble controlling the change."

"Wait a minute." Her pulse quickened with hope. "Are you saying there's a potion that would keep me from changing into a wolf?"

He blinked in obvious surprise. "You'd want that?"

"Darn right I would." No more fear of losing her humanity to the beast. She might even be able to have a relationship with a man. *If I wanted some other man besides this one.* She slapped the thought down the instant it popped up.

"I can't imagine wanting to suppress half of your true self."

She steeled herself against the sadness in his voice. "Well, nobody's asking you to. For a supply of that potion, I'll track down your magic amulet."

"It will probably awaken for you. What then?"

"Whether it does or not, I don't want it. I'll give it to you for safekeeping."

"I can't use it." His scent turned bitter. "I don't come from the right bloodline."

"Then hang onto it until you find a worthy heir. There have to be other relatives besides Dirk, even if they're more distant. When

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do we do this?"

He cupped her chin and stared into her eyes. "They'll gather for the Midsummer Eve hunt tomorrow night. Bringing you along would give us both an excuse to show up—if you pose as my mate. I'll pretend I just you want to share the celebration, and with luck, Dirk won't suspect you're Kevin's daughter. That is, if we can keep him from recognizing you as your father's kin by your scent."

Shivering at his touch, she said, "You've got to be kidding."

"That's the only way I can risk exposing you to the pack."

## CHAPTER 3

For a second she considered dropping the whole idea and ordering him to leave. She couldn't resist the promise of a cure for her condition, though. "What's involved in posing as your mate?"

"We have to cover up your scent with mine. By mingling our scents, which would be natural and expected if we're mated, we can disguise your natural aroma enough to mask the traces of Kevin in you."

"Wait a minute!" Her fingers involuntarily curled into claws. "Your solution to my smelling like my father is to make me smell like you instead?"

"It goes both ways," he said with a wry smile. "I'd smell like you, too."

Heat coiled in her lower abdomen at the thought of his hands,

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and more, on her body. “How’s that going to work?”

“True mates seal their bond with their teeth. In wolf shape, they bite each other and share token sips of blood.”

“Blood?” For an instant she could almost taste the metallic tang in her mouth.

“That’s why your mother could never have been Kevin’s true mate in the eyes of the pack. Only wolves can perform that bonding ritual.”

“You’re planning to bite me that way?” Her pulse raced.

He shook his head. “That act creates a physical and psychic union. It’s for life.”

“If we aren’t going to share blood, what do we have to do?”

He pulled her to her feet and curved one arm around her waist to draw her close. The pressure of a hard ridge against her abdomen sparked an unsettling tingle in her nerves. “Let me demonstrate.” He sniffed her hair. “To mingle our scents, we have to touch, rub, taste.” His tongue flickered over her ear.

She shoved him away, although unwilling excitement simmered in her blood along with anger. “Where do we have to go for this midsummer celebration, and when do we leave?”

He smiled at her show of resistance. “The pack’s lair is in central Virginia on the edge of the Shenandoah Mountains, and we want to arrive as close as we can to the start of the hunt. I thought we’d leave tomorrow afternoon so we’d get there at nightfall.”

She stood up. “Fine. In that case, you should go home so we can both get plenty of rest before we face the pack.”

He clasped her shoulders and nuzzled her hair again. “It won’t be easy to rest, thinking about how you taste.”

She flinched away from him.

With a low chuckle, he said, “If you tense up like that



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whenever I put my hands on you, nobody will believe for a second that we're mated." He walked out, leaving her flushed and shaken.

After he'd gone, Erin showered in a vain attempt to scrub away all traces of him. She lay awake too long, unwillingly recalling his touch and smell. When sleep finally engulfed her, the familiar nightmares flooded in with it. She woke up clammy with sweat.

Sometimes she wondered whether other people could sense her abnormality. Her one sexual encounter had ended in disaster. Seconds after the climax, the urge to change had exploded in her blood and nerves. Screaming, she'd fled from the bedroom just in time to escape before fur sprouted, teeth sharpened to fangs, and fingers curled into claws. The next day, it hadn't surprised her that the man had acted more relieved than disappointed when she'd broken up with him. She even scented traces of fear in her mother whenever they spent time together after nightfall. The thought of Raoul's invitation to run with him brought a bitter smile to Erin's lips. She didn't belong with anyone.

\* \* \*

When Raoul arrived the next afternoon, he greeted Erin with, "We're taking a hell of a risk. You have to do exactly what I tell you."

"If I've gotten away with acting like a normal human being all these years, I can act like a werewolf for one night," she said as she let him in. "I'm ready to hit the road. You can explain whatever I need to know on the way."

He bared his teeth in a predatory smile. "Remember, we have to exchange our scents before we go, so we'll be prepared to meet Dirk and the rest of the pack."

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“All right, let’s do it.” Her spine rigid, she clenched her fists at her sides.

“We won’t get very far with you standing there like a statue.” Taking her hand, Raoul brushed the downy hairs in the center of the palm, another sign of her freakish nature.

She still flushed with remembered shame at how she’d struggled to hide that sprinkle of hair when it had sprouted in her early teens. Her mother had almost fainted at first sight of that unmistakable sign of lycanthropy. Now, at Raoul’s caress, Erin’s skin prickled with excitement. Tightening her fingers around his, she touched his palm. The growth there felt thicker than hers but still silken rather than coarse.

He closed his eyes with a sigh. “Good start.” He leaned close to inhale her scent. Erin shivered at the rustle of his breath. Stroking her head, he wove his fingers through her hair.

He rubbed his cheek against hers. Without thinking, she parted her lips and turned toward him. His tongue traced her jawline and circled her mouth. He gave her a fleeting kiss before roaming along the curve of her other cheek to suck on her earlobe.

With a sound between a gasp and a giggle, she cupped the back of his head to explore the thick pelt of his hair. Her insides quivered with need. She had to keep reminding herself that this touching was only a ploy, not foreplay, much less true intimacy.

“You have to lick me, too,” he said, his breath tickling her ear. “Share body fluids.”

She snorted. “Don’t get any wild ideas.”

“But wild is exactly how we have to act, to make this work.” He unfastened the top two buttons of his shirt. “Since we can’t share blood, and you probably won’t let me mount you—will you?”

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“Not a chance.” She tried to forget he could scent the excitement that flooded her when he invoked that image.

“Then lick me.” With one hand on the back of her head, he guided her mouth to the hollow of his throat.

Closing her eyes, she touched the tip of her tongue to his skin. She tasted salt and felt the pulse throbbing in his neck. His fingers tightened, tangling in her hair. Her tongue traced the knotted cords of muscle at either side of his throat.

“Yes.” The word escaped from him in a prolonged hiss. He shifted restlessly. Heat radiated from him.

“If we were true mates,” he said, his voice husky with the passion she could smell on him, “I’d do so much more, as man and wolf. In wolf shape I’d claim you by sinking my teeth into you here.” He stepped sideways and bent over her to brush the nape of her neck. “Like this.”

Sweeping her hair aside, he bit her on that spot. A shock zinged down her spine to trigger a flood of liquid warmth. “I can smell your desire.”

“What I desire doesn’t matter.” Her insides churned. Her skin tingled with the urge to release her animal self and plunge into the change. Instead, she snatched up the overnight bag she’d left on the floor with her purse. “This mate thing is only a disguise.” Letting it become anything more would bind her to her beast side as much as the amulet would. “Let’s get out of here.”

She found the interior of his van redolent of a marshy aroma. When she mentioned the odor, he said, “I spend a lot of time in the wetlands on the Eastern Shore. I like being alone with plenty of space to prowl.”

She understood his wish to stay away from people. A lifestyle like his might have tempted her, if she hadn’t detested the thought

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of conceding that much to her animal nature. After tonight, with the potion he'd described, she wouldn't have to worry about that again.

\* \* \*

After a final pit stop in a small town with hazy, blue mountains on the horizon, night had fallen by the time they reached the pack's headquarters. Raoul drove up a winding, narrow lane through the woods. "This is your family's private road. They bought this property over two hundred years ago."

"Not exactly my family. They disowned my father, which means me, too." Nevertheless, she couldn't help scanning the scenery with more than idle interest.

Soon they pulled up to a rambling, two-story house with a gabled roof and a wraparound front porch. As she stepped out of the van, her pulse raced, and her palms turned clammy. She knew the strange werewolves she was about to meet would smell her nervousness.

She followed Raoul onto the porch. When he rang the bell, a tall woman with a cap of iron-gray hair and thick, gray eyebrows opened the door. He draped his left arm around Erin's shoulders. "Hello, Marcia. I'd like you to meet my mate, Erin. Marcia is our midwife and healer."

The older woman's eyes flickered to Erin, then back to Raoul. "It's an honor to meet Raoul's consort." The warmth in her voice reassured Erin.

"We've come for the Midsummer Eve celebration," Raoul said as they entered the foyer together. "I thought this would be a good time to introduce Erin to our pack's customs." He turned his head

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to nip her earlobe, startling her into a blush.

"We're just about to begin," Marcia said. "I'll find robes for you. When you're ready, meet us out front."

She led them into a living room with a fireplace, braided rugs, and colonial-style furniture.

"Robes?" Erin whispered after Marcia had left the room.

He grinned. "To make it easy to strip for the change, we wear loose clothes with no underwear. Would you rather start out completely naked?"

Blushing again, she pulled away from him and pretended to study the figurines on the mantel until Marcia reappeared with two earth-colored, cotton robes. In the downstairs half-bath, they took turns changing into the garments. "As soon as the pack gets too wrapped up in the hunt to notice us," Raoul whispered to Erin on the way out, "we'll double back here and find the amulet."

Outside, they joined a couple dozen people in similar robes at the foot of the porch steps. They all trooped around back, where a broad stretch of lawn separated the house and its outbuildings from the woods. As they walked, several people nudged and sniffed Erin. At the first touch, she flinched. Raoul clasped her hand and gave her a sidelong look of reassurance.

A tall man, broad-chested but not muscle-bound, with black hair curling to his shoulders, strode up to them. "Raoul. I thought that was you I heard." He wore his robe loosely fastened to reveal thick, dark chest hair. He paced directly to Erin and stared down at her. "Who's this?" His bushy eyebrows formed a single black line over his green eyes.

"Hello, Dirk. May I present Erin, my mate?" Raoul's arm tightened around her shoulders. "Erin, this is Dirk MacEwen, leader of our pack."

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Dirk flashed a smile that resembled a baring of teeth more than a genuine pleasantry. His gaze crawled over Erin's skin. Mindful of the risk of letting him too near her in wolf shape, she cooperated when Raoul guided her to a spot as far from the pack leader as practical.

She and Raoul followed the rest of the pack to a small clearing about half a mile into the woods. Pine needles and fallen leaves felt cool under Erin's bare feet. A light breeze softened the summer night's humidity. On the way, a lanky man with straw-colored hair sidled up to Raoul and Erin. He smelled nervous, and she noticed a fading bruise on his cheek. "I'm surprised you've got the guts to show up," he whispered to Raoul, with a glance toward Dirk across the clearing.

"I have as much right as anybody," Raoul said. "Erin, meet Jason, Dirk's beta wolf. We used to be friends."

Jason returned Raoul's glare and trotted ahead to take his place next to the leader.

The people formed a rough circle with Dirk and Jason in the center. Under the scent of human flesh, animal musk tinged the atmosphere, as if the pack had already started the transition from men and women to beasts. With strangers jostling her on either side, Erin felt hemmed in, half suffocated. Raoul pressed her shoulder in a gesture of reassurance.

Dirk stripped off his robe and tossed it aside. His phallus jutted out, clearly visible to Erin's night vision. Raising both arms, he intoned, "Let us invoke our mistress, great Hecate, to bless this hunt."

While the other pack members undressed in the moonlight, Raoul also peeled off his robe. He put an arm around Erin, who stood frozen with embarrassment.

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“What are you waiting for?” he murmured into her hair. “Want some help?” His fingertips skimmed the tops of her breasts.

Shivering, she muttered, “I’ll do it.” Bracing herself, she stripped as fast as her trembling fingers allowed, before she could lose her nerve. In the warm air, her skin flushed as if with fever. The aromas of the forest and the scents of the other werewolves seemed to seep into her pores as well as her nose.

She couldn’t help running her gaze down Raoul’s torso to the apex of his thighs. His penis rose half erect. Her nipples and the bud between her legs tingled. Already her skin prickled with hairs trying to erupt. He returned her stare with a feral grin. His open admiration gave her an unexpected frisson of pleasure. Although still human, she smelled his arousal and knew he recognized hers. Without thinking, she skimmed her palms over her chest and stomach. When she realized what she was doing, a fresh surge of embarrassment spread a blush over her entire body. The excitement that possessed her, though, almost overruled the self-consciousness.

She half expected some elaborate ritual. Instead, Dirk simply chanted, “Lord Fenris, father of us all, infuse us with your savage power. Lady of the night, bathe us in your transforming rays.” His voice sounded deeper than it had a few minutes earlier. It reverberated under her breastbone like the bass tones of an organ.

Instead of chanting a verbal response, the pack members emitted an eerie cry in unison. Halfway between a human wail and a lupine howl, it echoed around the clearing and thrummed through her veins. Ebony fur spread over Dirk’s naked body. He dropped to all fours and convulsed with his rapid morphing from man to beast. Within seconds, a huge, black wolf stood in his place.

His change signaled the rest of the pack to surrender to the

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transformation. Electricity sizzled around Erin as she watched human bodies melt into canine form. Their eyes no longer gleamed faintly but glowed like live coals. Their scent altered from almost human to entirely animal. The pungent odors of the wolves' bodies and their excitement enveloped her.

Fur swept over her like flame consuming a dry branch. She fell to the ground and yielded herself to the ecstatic moment. As always, the change shuddered through her like a climax. She lay on her belly, her forelegs stretched in front of her, her tail lashing with eagerness to spring up and run.

When the red mist cleared from her sight, she found another sable-pelted wolf beside her. Raoul. Everything looked brighter and clearer by the light of the waxing moon, now that she had the night vision of a beast. Sharp smells flooded her nose. She flared her nostrils and quivered with eagerness to run. The same urge emanated from all the rest of the pack.

Dirk slowly circled in place. A tremor shuddered through Erin. His eyes glowed an eldritch green. He threw back his head and howled. One by one, each wolf answered, until the whole pack keened in chorus. The same sound wailed from Erin's throat with no conscious will of her own.

Dirk trotted to each one in turn, his teeth bared, and fainted a snap of his jaws at each of them. Each one cringed in submission. Erin smelled fear mixed with their excitement.

He howled again, and again the others answered. Erin quivered with the thrill of the sound and the urge to race through the night. Dirk rushed into the woods, baying like a hound on a trail. The other wolves streamed after him.

Erin sprinted alongside Raoul at the rear of the pack. Her tongue lolled out, tasting the air. Flaring her nostrils, she picked up



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the scents of rabbits, opossums, and raccoons. A light wind sifted through her fur and tickled her ears. She heard the chirping and buzzing of insects, the rustle of small animals scurrying out of the predators' paths. As the pack fanned out, she caught shadowy glimpses of the other wolves circling behind trees and slipping through tangles of saplings and bushes.

Instead of keeping pace with them, Raoul nudged her off to the side. He sprang at her and grazed her flank with his teeth. She dodged him, darting between the trees. He bayed, urging her to run.

Her legs carried her in a headlong charge through the woods. The ground seemed to fly beneath her paws while the wind lashed her open mouth. She burned with longing, but not for raw flesh. When she started to tire, she slowed to a trot, but the burst of energy hadn't quenched the craving in her vitals. She fell to the ground and rolled in the leaves, whining with need. Nothing she could do for herself would ease the burning.

He tumbled with her and licked her muzzle. A frightening desire hit her to roll on her back in submission to him, or maybe to the craving that flooded her body. Trembling with excitement, she leaped up. He laid his head across her shoulders, a gesture she recognized as a demand for surrender. She sidled away. He sniffed her all over, his hot breath sending thrills through her nerves. She couldn't help stretching her front legs before her and bowing with her tail raised. She burned inside and out.

Raoul circled her, panting, his tail lashing. The now familiar crimson mist enveloped him. He morphed into his human form.

He stood over her, still breathing harshly. He had a rampant erection. The scent of his arousal made her head spin. "Gods, I want you so much I can't stand it." He ran his hand down her back

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from head to tail. Sensation rippled through her in the wake of his touch. “I don’t think you’re ready to mate as a wolf yet. Change now. Please.”

## CHAPTER 4

She doubled over and released the hold on her beast shape. Ecstasy that verged on pain convulsed her. She crouched naked on the ground, her arms wrapped around her bent knees. She gazed up at Raoul. Although as a woman she didn't have an animal's night vision, she could see clearly enough to appreciate his tall, lean body.

He knelt in front of her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. He nipped her ear and grazed along her jawline. "I've wanted you ever since the first minute I touched you. Don't deny you feel the same way."

"I feel it." She could hardly breathe enough to force out the words. "That doesn't mean we should."

"Forget *should*. This is Midsummer Eve. Anything goes."

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He kissed her throat right above the pulse point. She could hear his heartbeat and feel her own pounding against her ribs and throbbing under his lips. His mouth roamed over her neck and shoulders, then up to her lips. She cast aside her doubts and welcomed the flicker of his tongue, the swirl of his hands over her back and shoulders and the outer curves of her breasts. She dug her nails into his back and hugged him tighter, eager to feel the pressure of his chest against her taut nipples.

Burying his face in her hair, he muttered, "If Dirk gets anywhere near you, I'll kill him. This is more than an act. You're mine."

She felt she ought to resent the possessive tone. Instead, fierce joy swept over her and set her on fire. She took the offensive now, licking and biting until their lips joined again. Devouring him with her teeth as well as her tongue, she tasted droplets of his blood. The flavor made her dizzy with longing.

He reclined on the earth and drew her down beside him. Lying side by side, they explored each other's bodies with hands and mouths. Every nerve ending sparked to life at the slightest brush of his fingers or tongue. A deep ache pervaded her breasts and the hollow between her thighs. His taut muscles, trembling with the effort of restraint, and his hard shaft thrusting against her confirmed what his scent revealed, that he felt a need as desperate as hers. He eased her onto her back and braced himself above her.

"You smell delicious. So wet." He gasped and skimmed her moist folds.

She squeezed her legs together to trap his hand where she needed his touch. With both hands, he forced her thighs apart while he lapped her erect nipples one after the other. She writhed with impatience. His tongue flickered down the center of her body,

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sending ripples of delight through her. When it reached the tight bud at her core, she let out a soft cry.

“Taste delicious, too,” he growled. His tongue dipped into her channel and swirled around the swollen tip. She arched her hips in a wordless demand for more. She closed her eyes, shutting out all sensation except his scent and touch. The rapid lashing of his tongue drove her higher and higher, clutching at a peak just out of reach, until her whole body tightened and released in soaring fulfillment.

His head rested on her mound, his tongue gently laving her, while the convulsions died away. She dimly noticed leaves and loose dirt under her bare back, but she didn’t care. She wanted more of Raoul. Her heart still pounded in unison with his. The musk of his arousal made her head spin, and she reveled in the pressure of his shaft as he worked his way up her body.

A fresh surge of wet heat flooded her as his tongue strummed her nipples again. “Please,” she whispered. “Inside me.”

He rubbed the tip of his cock over her mound. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

The teasing edge in his voice made her want to scream. She dug her nails into his shoulders. “You know it.”

“Good, because I can’t wait another second.” To her surprise, he sat up, rocking back on his heels, and pulled her upright. He drew her onto his lap, her legs straddling his.

She didn’t need any further cue. Impaling herself on his erection, she keened in pleasure as he filled her. She rocked back and forth, every movement sending sharp jolts of excitement through the hypersensitive spot where she longed for relief. The tension built until she felt ready to burst. A second climax shuddered through her. She tasted blood again. When the

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aftershocks faded, she realized she'd bitten his shoulder.

Licking the teeth marks, she started to murmur an apology. Raoul cut her off by grasping her chin and guiding her lips to his. He fed on her mouth while his hips flexed to thrust deep inside her. She couldn't breathe. Her chest ached, but she hardly noticed alongside the all-consuming pleasure of his cock stroking in and out of her channel. Her inner muscles clenched around him. His teeth clamped onto her shoulder. Thrusting to the hilt, he tightened his arms around her and convulsed through his own climax. With a half-animal scream, she joined him.

She trembled in his arms until the delirium faded and her heartbeat slowed.

Still lodged inside her, he stroked her hair and back until she calmed. "Do you feel it now?" he whispered.

"Feel what?"

"The joy of your beast. The intoxication of yielding to your true nature."

"Intoxication is right. It's like being drunk. I wasn't thinking."

He laughed softly. "Thinking belongs to our human side. You do too much of it."

Suddenly, she realized that she'd consummated her passion for him without one second of worry about hurting him. There'd been no danger of rending him to shreds with her wolf's claws and fangs. Although her blood simmered with eagerness to change and run again, she had no fear that she would attack Raoul when she transformed. Yet she couldn't ignore her human side. Reluctantly, she withdrew from him and stood. They'd had sex without a thought of protection. Where had her usual caution gone?

"You're having second thoughts already, aren't you?" he said with a rueful smile.

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“How can you tell?”

“I can feel you cooling off.” He reached up to pluck a leaf from her hair. “After this, I think of you as my true mate.”

“Wait a minute. This was just an impulse of the moment.”

“Come on, Erin.” He loomed over her, making her quiver with renewed excitement. “Don’t lie to yourself. I felt more than that, and so did you.”

“Okay, I don’t deny I’m attracted to you. But I wouldn’t hold you or myself to anything we do or say here. You even said Midsummer Eve isn’t a normal night.”

He shook his head. “I know what I feel. The sun rising tomorrow won’t change that.” He leaned over and kissed the spot where he’d bitten her shoulder. “But right now we have to find what we came for and leave before somebody comes looking for us.” Scarlet energy crackled around him, and he flowed into beast shape.

\* \* \*

The electricity of the change zapped along Raoul’s nerves and flashed between him and Erin like bolts of lightning. Odors instantly became more pungent. His mouth watered at the musk emanating from her. She fell to her knees and transformed. His own blood echoed the thrill of transformation that shuddered through her. She lay on the ground, panting, her eyes shining with pleasure. Sensing her astonishment at her own joy in this moment, he felt a rush of tenderness like a summer breeze. His body was still taut with lust for her, but he wanted more than a simple joining of flesh.

When he licked her muzzle, she returned the caress. He rested

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his head on her shoulders. Accepting that token of possession, she leaned against him. Her warmth enveloped him like a cloak. He luxuriated in their closeness and yearned for her to feel the same.

Hunger for her burned in him. Though he couldn't mate with her in this form yet, he could do something else he craved almost as strongly. He'd seen Dirk's eyes on her, smelled the alpha male's lust, and barely restrained himself from lashing out. Raoul couldn't resist the urge to mark her as his own. Giving her no warning, he sank his fangs into the scruff of her neck. The piquant flavor of her blood made him lightheaded. She yelped in surprise. He frisked around her, his tail wagging, and crouched in front of her with his head bowed. Did she understand what he wanted?

Yes. She bit him on the nape of the neck, just as he'd done to her. The nip of her teeth set his pulse racing. She licked the spot she'd pierced and sprang away to trot in a circle around him.

A surge of passion flooded him, not entirely his own. Her desire merged with his like two rivers rushing to the sea. If only they could race through the night, soaring on the tide of that passion, until the sun rose. Instead, they had to find the amulet and depose the pack leader. Then Erin would claim her reward, the potion that would bury her wolf nature deep within her, and they would never share this joy again.

\* \* \*

Need poured over Erin and swamped her fears. A mental caress twined around her. That sensation didn't arise from inside herself. Raoul's emotions were blending with hers. She felt his yearning to possess her, his determination to guard her from anyone or anything that might harm her.



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*Oh, no, what have I done?*

Too late, she remembered what he'd told her about the mating bond. Sharing blood in wolf form sealed it. They had tasted each other's blood in both their animal and human bodies. She'd opened herself to him in a way she'd never intended. Had she truly forgotten the meaning of that exchange? Or, on an unconscious level, had she wanted the bond?

Her throat tightened with the sudden realization that when they faced Dirk, Raoul might end up dead like her father. She might not get time to decide about affirming or rejecting the bond. She broke into a run, wishing she could outrace the intimacy they'd shared.

Minutes later, they reached the house. They both shifted back to human form. She noticed each change became easier than the last.

Before they could take another step, Jason, in human form, stalked out of the woods. Freezing, Erin clutched Raoul's hand.

"You here to stop us?" Raoul asked. "Then bring it on."

Jason shook his head. "I'm here to warn you that Dirk noticed you'd left the hunt. He'll probably track you down soon, so whatever you're doing, you'd better hurry. Like you said, we used to be friends. I won't help you, but I won't get in your way."

"That bruise on your face," Raoul said. "Dirk did that, didn't he?"

Jason flushed, emitting odors of shame and anger. "I accused him of lying about Kevin's death. He stuck to his story, but it didn't sound too damn convincing anymore, especially when he did this."

After scanning his face, Raoul acknowledged the statement with a curt nod. He led Erin into the house and up a staircase to one side of the foyer. "Dirk probably keeps the amulet in his

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bedroom or office. We'll start there."

They hurried to the end of the corridor on the second floor. Erin recognized Dirk's scent even before they walked into the master bedroom with disheveled sheets on a king-sized bed.

Raoul said, "Open your mind. If the amulet is here, you should feel it."

Still clasping his hand, she closed her eyes and mentally rummaged through the room for some intangible essence. She felt nothing but suffocating anxiety at the reek of Dirk's smell on the furniture and clothes.

After a minute or two, she opened her eyes and shook her head.

"The office is the next room over. We'll try that," he said.

She was losing faith in the whole quest. Why had she believed she could invoke some mystical connection with a supposedly magic piece of jewelry? Without objecting, though, she let Raoul guide her into the adjacent room.

It looked like any other home office—bookshelves, desk, swivel chair, file cabinets, computer, printer. Dirk's scent clung to the surfaces here, too. Yet it didn't disturb her so much in this room, because as soon as she stepped inside, she sensed another aroma. No, not exactly that, but an aura of light and heat that she felt inside her head rather than with sight or touch. The aura drew her like a magnet to the desk.

She pointed at the center drawer. "It's here."

Raoul tugged at the drawer and found it locked. Without a second's hesitation, he grabbed a heavy-duty stapler and bashed the lock. After four blows, he wrenched the drawer out of the desk. Among the contents that spilled on the floor, Erin spotted a small, velvet pouch.

Urged by an eagerness she didn't understand, she snatched it

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up and opened the drawstring. A necklace fell into her hand, a heavy chain with a bronze pendant shaped like a crescent moon. A pale blue stone like an opal adorned the center of it.

"That's it," Raoul whispered. He ran a fingertip over the gem. "Put it on."

The moment she slipped the chain over her head, the gem glowed with heat against her skin. She gasped at the rush of warmth that flooded her veins. The stone shimmered with a rainbow of colors. The night swirled around her like a living creature that embraced her as its kin.

"See, you've awakened the magic." Awe permeated Raoul's voice.

"You should take care of it." Yet she caught herself clutching the amulet with a strange reluctance to give it up.

"If you insist, I'll take it after you've shown it to the pack, so they'll reject Dirk."

"And the potion you promised me?"

"Afterward," he said. "But right now we have to get away from here. We'll come back in the morning, when we can face him in front of the whole pack. Then he won't be able to get away with murdering you like your father."

They hurried downstairs, where Raoul collected their clothes from the bathroom. Before they got as far as the driveway, though, Erin heard footfalls and breathing. Dirk, also in his human body, loomed into view.

"Erin, run!" Raoul dropped the bundle he carried and lunged, morphing into wolf shape in the midst of his leap.

## CHAPTER 5

Instead of meeting Raoul's charge, the pack leader dashed toward Erin. She scrambled to her feet. Before she could run, Dirk grabbed her by the arm.

He jerked her to him, her back jammed against his torso, and wrapped his other hand around her throat. His fingernails dug into her skin. His rank breath and the thrust of his erection against her rear turned her stomach.

Raoul stopped short, his eyes glowing. His fury and fear washed over her like a tide that threatened to drown her.

Dirk laughed. "You see, I don't even need fangs and claws. I'm more powerful than you either way."

Raoul flowed into human shape and stood upright. "Some power. You show it by abusing the wolves you're supposed to

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protect.”

“You’d like me to be as weak as you are.” He squeezed Erin’s neck until she gasped, then relaxed his grip. His nails still dented her flesh, though. “So Kevin had a cub. You think I didn’t suspect who you were the minute I sniffed you? The amulet just proves it.” The rasp of his breath grated on her ears. He said to Raoul, “I’m taking your bitch. If you leave quietly, you get to live.”

Raoul emitted a shriek of rage, more animal than human despite the body he wore. His anger echoed like a gong inside her skull.

“Stop!” she cried. In the momentary silence that fell, she said to Dirk, “You can’t want me for a mate. I’m a half-breed.”

“A lot of the other pack members don’t share my values,” he said. “To them, the important thing is that you’re Donald Balfour’s granddaughter. Mating with you will confirm me as alpha. Especially since you’re wearing this.” He fingered the necklace.

She strained against his grip. He tightened his arm around her middle until her ribs ached. “If you cooperate like a good little bitch, I’ll let you stay human most of the time.” She heard a sly grin in Dirk’s tone. “If not, I’ll feed you a wolfsbane potion to trap you in your animal body. So you’d better keep quiet.”

She sensed a ripple of horror coursing through Raoul and seeping into her own heart like ice water. “You can’t do that,” she whispered.

Jason stepped out of the shadows and took a couple of long strides toward them. “Damn it, if you’d treat a female that way, Raoul must be right about you. You murdered Kevin.” He lunged at Dirk, and his nails slashed at the pack leader’s neck. Dirk had to let go of Erin to fight back.

She squirmed out of his abruptly loosened hold. Meanwhile,

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Raoul attacked low and tackled Dirk around the knees. All three men fell in a heap of flailing limbs and a cacophony of growls. Raoul clutched Dirk's neck. He shouldered Jason aside and pinned Dirk to the ground with his knees on his enemy's chest.

"Stay out of my way," Raoul snarled at Jason. "Kevin was like a brother to me. This is my fight."

Jason heaved himself upright, his fingers spasmodically clenching, and stepped back.

Raoul called to Erin over his shoulder, "Get out of here. Take my car and go."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Damn it, can't you do what you're told?" He turned for a second to look at her. His eyes impaled her with frustrated rage.

In that second, Dirk's nails lashed at his unprotected throat. Roaring, Raoul hit back. He'd lost his hold on the other man, though. Dirk knocked him off balance and struck him hard on the temple. The shock of the blow hammered through Erin.

The two men flailed on the ground, trading punches, claw swipes, and bites. Neither one could afford the seconds of concentration needed to change into beast form. Erin's vision grayed from the pain she shared with Raoul. She thought of shifting into her wolf shape and attacking Dirk, but the fighters moved so fast she feared she would end up distracting Raoul instead of helping.

To her horror, Dirk pinned Raoul beneath his body, banging his skull against the ground with a force that made Erin's ears ring.

She fell, as the final blow seemed to slam into her own head. *I'm sharing his sensations.* She folded her knees under her and levered herself up with her forearms.

When the pain's echoes faded, a terrifying blankness took their

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place. Sheer emptiness occupied the space where Raoul's emotions had hovered at the edges of her mind.

For an instant she felt as if she clung to the rim of a bottomless pit. *Oh, God, please, he can't be dead!* She scrambled toward his inert body on her hands and knees. Blood seeped from the back of his head. In the moonlight, she saw his chest rise and fall with wheezing breaths.

Springing to her feet, she whirled upon Dirk with nails and teeth ready to rip into him. He caught her arms before she could inflict a single scratch.

"Shut up. Forget about him." He dragged her away, writhing and kicking, while tears of humiliation and rage burned her eyes. "Consider yourself lucky I didn't kill him. If you don't settle down, I might."

She went limp and let him haul her across the grass toward the largest of the outbuildings.

\* \* \*

Raoul's skull pounded with a dull ache. Somebody was calling his name. He blinked. A hand placed a wet cloth on his forehead. A face swam into focus above him. Jason, now dressed.

Where was Erin? Raoul mentally groped for her. He sensed her anger mingled with barely leashed panic. Memory hit him like a fresh blow to the head. "Got to find Erin," he muttered, his voice hoarse. "Dirk has her." He started to lever himself up by his elbows.

"Take it easy," Jason said. He pressed on Raoul's shoulder to restrain him.

Raoul noticed the lacerations he'd suffered in the fight had

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already stopped bleeding. Damn, how long had he lain there in a stupor? He mumbled the question aloud.

“Only a few minutes. Dirk’s got Erin barricaded in the main storage shack with him.”

Raoul’s heart reverberated with echoes of her fear. Again he tried to sit up, and this time Jason didn’t stop him. He struggled to his feet. “What are you still doing here, anyway? What happened to not getting involved?”

Jason’s eyes glowed with suppressed anger. “That was before Dirk admitted he murdered Kevin. I want to see you give that bastard what he deserves.”

Raoul couldn’t help smirking, though the muscle contractions hurt his scalp. “You have an amazing level of confidence in me all of a sudden.”

“If anybody can stand up to him, it’s you.”

Raoul didn’t know whether to feel grateful for Jason’s support or resentful that it had taken his former friend so long to see the light. He settled for, “Better late than never, I guess. But I’m challenging Dirk on my own. Don’t even think of helping.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t have any excuse to claim we ganged up on him.”

Erin’s desperation roared in Raoul’s head like a hurricane-force wind. A crimson mist swam before his eyes. Teeth bared and hands aching to transform into claws, he charged toward the cry of his mate’s need.

\* \* \*

Dirk slammed the door of the cluttered, one-room building, and his eyes raked up and down Erin’s body. “Have you decided to be



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reasonable?”

“If you mean not making an idiot of myself trying to fight you, sure. If you mean agreeing to mate with you, forget it.” She scanned the shack by the moonlight leaking through the single window. Smells of dust and mildew tickled her nose. Aside from a fireplace at one end and a sink with an old-fashioned pump, the room held only stacks of boxes and a few pieces of broken furniture.

He shook his head in mock pity. “You’re just letting yourself in for unnecessary trouble. You’re staying in here until you cooperate, so you might as well get it over with.”

He grasped her shoulders, growling, and roughly nuzzled her neck. Her stomach churned at his breath on her skin. “You smell like Raoul. I’ll fix that soon enough. When you’re in heat, I’ll be the only one to take you.”

Feeling suffocated, she dug her nails into his forearms and tried to squirm out of his grip. Her heart pounded with revulsion and terror at the snuffling noises he made as he burrowed into the V between her breasts. If he decided to rape her, she wouldn’t have a hope of fighting him off.

He shoved her onto the floor with a bone-jarring thud, his erection prodding her stomach. He panted, his eyes glowing. “Change.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He pushed himself up, looming over her. “Transform into your true shape. Our first mating will be in our wolf bodies.”

## CHAPTER 6

“You’re out of your mind if you think that’s going to happen.”

When she tried to slip from under him, he slapped her across the cheek. Tears welled in her eyes. “You want it, don’t you? I know you get hot every time you change. Haven’t you wondered how it would feel to have another wolf mount you?”

The bolt of lightning that flashed through her at that image astonished her. It wasn’t Dirk’s animal form she visualized above her, though, but Raoul’s.

Grinning, Dirk said, “You smell like you’re in heat right now.”

“I won’t do it,” she said. “You’ll have to kill me first, which wouldn’t do you much good, would it?”

“Oh, it won’t go that far. If you don’t behave, I’ll feed you the wolfsbane potion, and then you won’t have a choice about

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transforming.”

Ice trickled down her spine. She said with a show of defiance, despite the frantic racing of her pulse, “Do you really believe you can cage me forever? Sooner or later, I’ll get away.”

He laughed. “Not if I keep you on heavy doses so you can’t become human. Paws can’t open doors. I’ll take you as many times as I want, until I get you pregnant. After I’ve fathered cubs on you, my position will be solid.”

Her stomach clenched. “You will have to kill me first.”

“The more you resist, the less time I’ll let you spend in skin instead of fur. And the longer you’re a wolf, the harder time you’ll have remembering how to change back.”

A wave of nausea rolled over her. Exactly what she feared most, losing her true self.

She suppressed the impulse to spit at him. “Are you forgetting about Raoul?”

“I doubt he wants me dead bad enough to throw away your life to get to me.” He ran a hand over her hair, smiling when she cringed. “Too bad your cubs won’t be pureblooded, but you seem to have enough wolf traits to cancel out the taint.” Seizing her wrist, he hauled her to her feet. “Are you ready to become a wolf for me?”

She shook her head, her stomach cramping with fear.

“Then you get the wolfsbane.” Keeping his eyes fixed on hers, he stretched out an arm to get a coil of rope from a nearby shelf. With his other hand, he clamped her wrists together.

When he looped the rope around them, she kicked at him, lashed out with both hands, and clawed his face and arms. Her head reeled with the scent of blood and his fury. But her desperation had no chance against his strength. Seconds later, her

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hands were bound in front of her with the rope's other end tethered to the pump at the sink.

With her arms awkwardly stretched, her hands already growing numb from lack of circulation, a strange warmth flowed into her mind. Behind her eyelids shone a glow like a hearth-fire in a gloomy cave. Her heartbeat accelerated. She felt a phantom hand soothing her, as if her fur bristled and the calming touch stroked it smooth. *Raoul?*

Yes, he'd regained consciousness. A dull ache emanated from him, but he didn't seem badly hurt. She felt his fear for her, his urgent need to wrap her in his embrace.

From just outside, he shouted, "You can't keep your fangs at Erin's throat forever. Come out and face me."

Jason's voice added, "You heard him. You want me telling the pack what a coward you are?"

Dirk ground his teeth in a feral grimace. "Damn, I should have killed them both when I had the chance." He dashed out, not bothering to close the door.

Jason said, "I'm here to bear witness to fair combat." After that, she didn't hear any words, only snarls.

Jerking her arms against the rope, she whimpered at the ache in her shoulders. She had to get loose and see what was happening. She considered biting through the fibers. One try convinced her of the hopeless bluntness of her human teeth.

*What if I weren't human?*

She'd have a better chance of freeing herself with animal jaws. Turning her consciousness inward, she invoked the change. Her muscles wrenched, and the crimson mist clouded her eyes. When it cleared, she lay in an awkward contortion. Curling on her back as a wolf with her forelegs above her head hurt more than lying in the

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same position as a woman. Twisting around, she ended up on her side with the rope in reach of her canine teeth.

She could still hear snarling and panting from outside. The combat had begun. Her head buzzed with impatience to rush to Raoul's side.

When she prepared to gnaw herself loose, she realized her paws were more slender than her human hands. Instead of trying to bite the strands, she used her jaws to hold the rope taut. With a single jerk, she pulled her left forepaw through the loop. In a frenzy of terror for Raoul, she freed the other leg. Yelping in pain, she licked her front paws to restore circulation.

As soon as she could stand, she rushed outside. Two dark-furred wolves tumbled in the dirt, growls of rage erupting from them. She sensed Raoul's heart leap with exultation when he glimpsed her running free. Almost instantly, the red haze of fury clouded his mind again. Jason, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, stood a few yards away. Erin sprinted to a spot within arm's length of the combatants. She crouched, her fur bristling and tail quivering, eager for a chance to charge at Dirk and help Raoul rip him to shreds.

A hand grabbed the ruff at the nape of her neck. She whirled around with a snarl. Jason stood above her.

"Don't do it," he said. "I told Dirk I'm here to guarantee a fair fight, and I meant it. If you help Raoul, there will always be some doubt about whether he deserved to win."

A growl rumbled in her chest. She couldn't bear to see Raoul hurt. She had to make sure he was safe.

"He wouldn't thank you for it," Jason said.

She grudgingly accepted the argument, although her nerves thrummed with eagerness to join the fight. She smelled blood, both

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Dirk's and Raoul's. She burned with her mate's outrage at the way Dirk had tried to violate her.

*Mate?*

For the first time, she spontaneously thought of him that way. The bond between them meant more than a trick or a formality, more than the aftermath of one moment's erotic madness. Whether or not they shared a future, they were truly mated.

Every slash of Dirk's teeth or claws that wounded Raoul ripped into her, too. She trembled under Jason's hand, wild with yearning to stop her mate's suffering. As she felt him weakening from the repeated assaults, fear for him stabbed her like shards of ice. Every drop of blood he lost seemed to bleed from her, as well. Terror convulsed him, too, but for the danger of losing her, not the risk to his own life.

Abruptly the turmoil before her eyes froze. Above the two wolves' panting, she heard an inarticulate noise of horror from Jason. Raoul lay belly up with Dirk's teeth at his neck. With what little strength he had left, Raoul's forelegs strained against the other wolf's chest. Closing her eyes to blot out the tableau, she felt Raoul's anguish, both emotional and physical, flood her mind.

*Get up, she silently pleaded. Fight!*

Fog enveloped his mind. She felt him slipping into darkness. A howl of despair burst from her. He couldn't pass out again. If he did, he'd be dead the next minute. She didn't think about what she did next. The instinctive urge to save her mate and crush the enemy swept her along.

She groped along the connection between them until she reached the core of Raoul's being. She poured herself, her passion and yearning, her terror of losing him, down that conduit. She willed the heat of that passion to warm his muscles and melt away

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the chill that threatened to paralyze him. With all her strength, she projected it into him. Like electricity sizzling through a network of power lines, her energy sparked his nerves to life. She felt him enfolding her in a phantom embrace and drinking in the vitality she offered.

With a roar of defiance, he raked the claws of both forelegs down Dirk's chest and abdomen. The alpha male howled in pain. Opening her eyes, she saw blood streaming from his belly. Raoul heaved himself to his feet and lunged at the enemy, knocking him to the ground. Before the other wolf could catch his breath and scramble upright, Raoul bit into his throat. Dirk struggled to resist, striking with all four limbs and snapping his jaws. Raoul's fangs clamped down harder. A single shake of his head ripped open the other male's throat.

A surge of weakness washed over Erin. Tasting blood and fur, she collapsed onto the ground. Her consciousness rushed back into her own skull. When her vision cleared, she saw Dirk with his neck and torso mangled, clearly dead. The transformation rippled over him, leaving a naked human corpse.

Raoul lay on his side nearby, his flanks quivering with agonized breaths. The scent of his blood stung Erin's nose. She forced her exhausted body through the change. Heedless of her nudity, she rushed over and knelt beside him to take his head into her lap. Scarlet mist swirled around him, and she found herself embracing a man instead of a wolf.

"I felt you inside my head," he whispered. He reached up to brush her cheek with his fingers.

She realized she couldn't have merged with him that way in her human form. Only her lupine instincts had dissolved her inhibitions and made that union possible. "Shh. Don't use up

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energy talking,” she said. Tears made his image shimmer before her eyes.

He fumbled for her hand where it lay on his chest. “See, I won you in combat. You are my true mate.”

“Don’t you dare die on me. I love you.”

“Not dying,” he muttered in a barely audible voice. “Not after you said that. It’s a bona fide miracle.” His affectionate amusement filtered to her through his pain.

Her head swam at the sight of the bleeding gashes on his chest.

“It’s superficial,” he said. “I’ll be okay.”

“He’s right,” Jason said. “He’s not in danger, and we heal fast.”

“We have to go back to the house,” Raoul said. Draping an arm around Jason’s shoulder, he started to haul himself upright.

“You can’t walk,” Erin said.

“I can walk far enough. I have to face the pack.”

Jason helped him to his feet. “Yeah, the longer we wait, the more explaining we’ll have to do.”

Raoul squeezed Jason’s shoulder. “Not that I think the pack will welcome me with open arms, but I have to do this.”

“Sure they will,” Jason said. “They’re fed up with Dirk.”

“You’re an optimist.” Claspings Erin’s hand, Raoul said, “Much as I love the way you look right now, you might not want the rest of the pack to see you in that condition.”

She blushed at the realization of her nakedness.

Jason said, “Here, wear this.” He peeled off his size extra-large T-shirt.

When she put it on, it covered her just to the bottom of her hips. She smelled Raoul’s blood and sweat, and her legs quivered as she shared the strain walking caused him.

Just as they reached the house, the pack members streamed out



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of the woods with Marcia in the lead, all in human form. Erin's breath caught in her chest. Would they attack? No way could she and Jason fight off this mob.

"What's going on?" Marcia asked. Her eyes widened as they shifted to the amulet glowing on Erin's chest. "Where's Dirk?"

"Dead," Jason said. "Raoul defeated him as a wolf in one-on-one combat. He would've killed Raoul."

"You swear to that?" Tension radiated from the woman. The other people clustering around her stood poised as if to charge or flee.

"I do," Jason said. "He tried to steal Raoul's mate. He deserves what he got."

A few people sniffed the air as if to judge his honesty by scent. "I believe you," the older woman said. Shedding the robe she wore, she stood naked.

Erin clenched her fists and braced herself to change. If the pack turned on Raoul, she'd fight with him to the death.

Marcia's body melted into wolf shape. Amid a shimmering scarlet cloud, the others copied her. Instead of attacking, she bowed, tucking her muzzle between her outstretched forelegs. All the other wolves did the same.

## CHAPTER 7

The hair prickled at the nape of Erin's neck. The red mist swirled toward her and enveloped her like an ethereal cloak. The radiance of the pack's collective emotion flooded her brain. Her breath caught in her throat. She clutched the amulet, which glowed hot in her palm.

Raoul took most of his weight off Jason and Erin's shoulders and straightened up.

"Still think I'm an optimist?" Jason muttered.

Taking a careful step forward, Raoul extended his hand to the gray she-wolf. She licked his fingers, lay on the ground, and rolled over to expose her belly. As if choreographed, her pack mates duplicated the gesture. Erin scented their anxiety.

"Get up." Raoul's gruff tone masked the strain Erin felt in him.

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“Nobody’s going to get hurt if I have any say in it.”

The gray wolf flowed back into woman shape. Slipping on her robe, she said, “As the amulet bearer’s consort, will you assume your place as alpha of the pack?”

“If that’s what they want.” He reached behind him for Erin’s hand. She twined her fingers through his and stepped up beside him. His amazement at their homage reverberated inside her head.

Jason shrugged. “We’d sure as hell rather have you than Dirk.” He looked more relaxed now, even standing a bit straighter than before. The atmosphere felt as if Dirk’s death had broken an evil spell.

Raoul said with a grim smile, “There’s been too much ruling by threats and violence. I’ll treat the pack fairly if they do the same to me.”

Jason let out a relieved sigh. “Great. If you’d turned down the leadership, I don’t know who could fill the gap. You’re not only Kevin’s foster brother, you’re mated to his daughter.”

Erin and Raoul exchanged uneasy glances. They hadn’t discussed whether their almost accidental mating would become permanent. Did the yearning she felt from him mean he wanted her that way? The feeling was all tangled up with his apprehension about taking over the pack. The reminder of Dirk’s insistence on mating with her for that very purpose turned her stomach sour. Yet she couldn’t believe Raoul’s desire for her sprang from that motive.

“You shouldn’t be standing here,” Marcia said to him. “You’re wounded.” She walked briskly toward the house. “Come upstairs and let me treat you. We’ll talk more after you’ve rested.” The other wolves scattered into the forest.

To Erin’s surprise, Raoul made it to a bedroom without leaning

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on her, though he did stagger a few times. Marcia handed over their clothes, retrieved from the front walk. Erin pulled on her denim shorts and helped Raoul into bed.

While she sat beside him holding his hand, Marcia bandaged his chest and anointed the lesser injuries with antiseptic cream. After dosing him with an herbal tea, she left them alone.

He guided Erin's hand to his lips and kissed each of her fingers in turn. "I couldn't have done it without you. I'm just sorry I put you in danger in the first place."

She rubbed tears from her eyes. "Don't talk like that. I made my own choices."

"I'll understand if you can't accept me as your mate if I'm pack leader. The last thing you wanted was to get involved in that lifestyle, right?"

The sadness in his voice made her feel hollow. She needed their bond to fill that newfound empty space. How could she bear it if he wanted her gone? "Don't worry about that now." She clasped his hand to her breast.

He slipped an arm around her waist. "Will you share the bed with me? I need your warmth." He lay back on the pillow.

She stretched out on her side next to him and pulled the sheet over them both. "I won't hurt you?"

His hand skimmed down her back, drawing her close. "It would hurt more not being able to touch you."

He kissed her lightly on the cheek. A flutter of pleasure danced along her nerves. With a sigh, she laid her head on his shoulder, resting a hand on his upper chest with care not to touch the bandaged wound. If only they could lie here forever instead of rising to confront the future.

He cuddled her against him, while his free hand stroked up and

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down her spine. A delicious tingle coursed through her. But she couldn't evade the crucial point any longer. "Dirk claimed being mated to me would solidify his position as alpha male. One reason they're ready to follow you is because of me."

"I hope you don't think that's the reason I want you?"

Shaking her head, she pressed her fingers to his lips. "Of course not. But you are going to take over the pack, right?"

His lips brushed the top of her head. "I accepted their submission. That amounts to a vow, and I want to keep it."

"I know." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "They need you."

"Maybe so, but I need you even more." His arm tightened around her. "If you don't want to belong to the pack, I can understand. I can even accept it if you still want to drink that elixir and never take wolf form again. After this experience, I couldn't blame you. And if that's how you feel, I'll live in the outside world with you."

Her chest tightened. She could barely find the breath to ask, "What are you saying?"

"That I love you too much to risk losing you, even if I have to leave the pack again."

"Love?" she echoed.

"Ever since I first started watching over you, I think, even if I didn't recognize the feeling. Then, when Dirk—well, feeling you in danger tore me apart." He lightly kissed her cheek again. His breath on her skin sent warmth like molten honey trickling along her nerves. "I know you want me as much as I want you. But is that all you feel?"

A sigh quivered through her. "No. When I thought Dirk was killing you, I couldn't stand the thought of losing you either."

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That's when I realized I loved you. I just didn't want to admit it."

"Why?"

"Because our mating happened almost by accident. Because I thought it was only instinct. But it wasn't."

"Then you're ready to call yourself my mate?"

"Oh, yes. You're my true mate, forever." Wolves, she'd heard somewhere, joined for life.

He ran his hand down her arm and along her hip. "What about the pack?"

She sensed the tension thrumming under the words and what a sacrifice renouncing his hard-won position would be for him. "I wouldn't take you away from your duty to them. It wouldn't be fair. Actually, I don't feel the same way I did when we first got here." Sometime during the night, her revulsion toward her werewolf side had evaporated. "With Dirk gone, the pack doesn't seem so bad at all. Without my wolf nature, I couldn't have bonded with you. We wouldn't belong to each other the way we do now. I wouldn't have wanted to miss that."

"Worth the ordeal?"

"Mmm." She nibbled his neck. He growled deep in his chest and captured her mouth with his. Joy, both his and hers, bubbled like champagne in her blood.

"I can't wait to run with you again, mate with you under the moon." He nipped and licked her throat, while he cupped one breast and swirled his palm over the nipple that peaked at his touch. "After we've made love in a real bed, of course. I can't decide which I'm craving more."

She arched her back, inviting his hand to roam over her breasts. She couldn't resist rubbing her bare leg against his. Need blazed within both of them, so that she couldn't separate his hunger from

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her own. While she sensed his desire building, she also felt him wince at the strain on his chest wound.

“Later,” she whispered, reluctantly easing away from the firm embrace he tried to draw her into. “You keep saying you heal fast. I’m counting on it.”

When she lay back in the curve of his arm, her insides melting with languid desire, he said, “Leading the pack together with you is more than I’d ever have dared hope for. That role doesn’t mean you have to give up your mundane life completely. Lots of pack members have outside lives.”

“How am I going to explain all this to Mom? She hates the whole idea of werewolves.” Though Erin groaned with exaggerated dismay, her mock horror masked a genuine worry. Would her mother disown her for choosing this life?

Raoul said with a gentle nibble on her ear, “Maybe we can change her mind.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you, at that. After all, you changed mine.” She pressed her lips to his to savor the rapture of her mate’s love spreading through her veins and twining around her heart.

## MARGARET L. CARTER

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of fantasy and the supernatural, particularly vampires. She received degrees in English from the College of William and Mary, the University of Hawaii, and the University of California, with her dissertation published as *Specter or Delusion? The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction*. Her other works include *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, *The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography*, and *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien*. She is also the author of a werewolf novel, *Shadow Of The Beast*, and three vampire novels, *Dark Changeling* (2000 Eppie Award winner in *horror*), *Sealed In Blood*, and *Crimson Dreams*, along with a fantasy novel, *Wild Sorceress*, co-written by her husband Les Carter. Two other Amber Quill books, *Hearts Desires* and *Dark Embraces* (an anthology of vampire, horror, and dark fantasy tales) and *From The Dark Places* (a horror novel) were released in 2003. Margaret and Les have four sons and several grandchildren. For fans of “Vamp Tales,” please do not hesitate to visit her website, [www.margaretlcarter.com](http://www.margaretlcarter.com).

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