

Lost

A Paranormal Romance

By

Lori Devoti

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Look for these other stories from Lori Devoti in 2010:



Lured (from Nocturne Bites, downloadable short story)

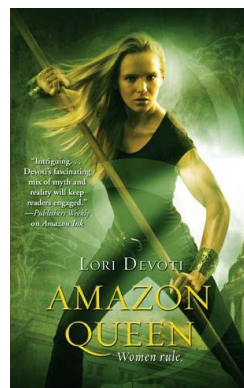
Theo Malone was an alpha, not a lone rogue who needed to fight to claim a female as his own. Still, something about Annie Cartwell called to him. Unclaimed and unaware that she had been turned into a werewolf, she was vulnerable to other wolves...and irresistibly attractive to Theo. His wolf had never reacted so strongly to a woman before—and Annie's new inner wolf had the same hunger for him. His scent made her feel safe, his touch soothed her...and the thought of Theo awoke fantasies of being claimed by him like she's never had before.

But while they both longed to fully give in to their desire, Theo and Annie must struggle to control these new feelings. For someone set up Annie as bait, and no wolf was safe until he was caught....



The Hellhound King (February 2010, a novel from Silhouette Nocturne)

All Raf Dolg wanted was revenge. Marina Adal—part witch, part elf princess—had betrayed him once, condemning the handsome hellhound to an elfin dungeon. But once the lithe and seductive Marina is in his hands, Raf realizes that the long-haired beauty is also a victim of betrayal—a pawn in the plans of a cruel elf lord and of the destiny tying her to the throne of Alfheim. Together they face the treachery that nearly tore them apart as well as their own divided souls. Bound by their love, the two outcasts must band together if their passion is to stand a chance...



Amazon Queen (May, 2010, urban fantasy novel from Pocket Juno Books)

Amazon queen Zery Kostovska has never questioned tribe traditions. After all, these rules have kept the tribe strong for millennia and enabled them to live undetected, even in modern-day America. Zery is tough, fair, commanding—the perfect Amazon leader.

At least, she was. A new high priestess with a penchant for secrecy and technology is threatening Zery's rule. Plus, with the discovery of the Amazon sons, males with the same skills as their female counterparts, even Zery can't deny that the tribe must change. But how? Some want to cooperate with the sons. Others believe brutal new leadership is needed—and are willing to kill to make it happen.

Once, Zery's word was law. Now, she had no idea who to trust, especially with one powerful Amazon son making her question all her instincts. For Zery, tribe comes first, but the battle drawing near is unlike any she's faced before...and losing might cost her both the tribe and her life.

Also coming in July 2010 from Silhouette Nocturne,

Zombie Moon

www.loridevoti.com

Chapter One

Rachel Daniels grabbed at the darkness. Shards of stone cut into her fingers then fell into the void beneath her. Seconds passed before the bits landed with a light clatter, telling her she had climbed too far to consider returning the way she had come.

She tightened her fingers around the rock under her hand. Her chest was flat against the stone-faced cliff; blood oozed from her wounds. One false move and she would fall like that shard, roll and break until she lay lifeless on the ground below.

Her eyelids screwed shut and tears leaked from her eyes.

Now was not the time to panic, not the time to think about what she had left behind.

In the distance, or maybe only in her mind, she heard the noises again — metal screeching. Metal like a car being torn apart.

Another screech followed. This one from some animal or creature.

A shiver shot through her, but guilt did too.

She should go back. Her friends were still there, and Nancy at least was alive...or had been.

Rachel sucked in a breath and tried to regain control of her rampaging mind.

When she'd started up the cliff, it had seemed her only option, but now she realized what folly the choice had been. Up or down? Her foot slid back the way she had come. Her body slid too. One foot, two. She had lost control.

Panicked, she clawed at the stone. Her foot hit a root or plant that somehow managed to grow out of the hard cliffside. Her heart hammered against her chest. She muttered to herself, told herself not to panic, that leaving had been the right choice.

Nancy had told her to call for help, but there was no cell signal near the car. When Rachel had run into the wall, she'd known she would have to climb to higher ground. However, in the dark she hadn't been able to see that the climb would be this steep or long.

And now she was committed. No easy way up or down.

She clung to the cliff's face, reality settling over her. Her heart slowed and her emotions calmed.

The noises...they weren't real. They were simply the product of her stressed mind, egged on by her friends' stories of the deserted canyon and the monster that lived here.

Urban myths, fireside stories to scare Girl Scouts...nothing more.

But the accident...that wasn't her imagination and neither was the fact that her friends needed her to find someone, call someone, to help them.

It was up to her. She had to keep climbing. The cliff had to end somewhere. *It had to.*

oOo

Wind tore at Cameron Renault's hair. He lifted his chin and breathed in the biting breeze; the scent of vampire gone mad came with it.

Dorian was near.

Cameron lifted his lips and bared his teeth.

Damn Dorian for playing with danger, for coming to this cursed place one too many times.

Behind Cameron, over the cliff's side, stones rattled.

He stilled, stopped even the habitual pretense of breath. His body quiet, he focused every sense on the source of the noise.

Another rattle, followed by a wheezing gasp.

Cameron's attention sharpened, and his instincts jumped forward. A new sound surfaced, the pounding of a human heart pumping blood sweet and thick through a body he couldn't see.

His eyes dilated, and he could feel his body shift from casual if annoyed observer to hunter. Heat wafted toward him, escaping that still hidden fragile human form. His tongue darted from his mouth, flicked over one of the razor sharp canines that alone in the woods he hadn't bothered to conceal.

Prey was near.

He took a step forward.

A hand, pale in the darkness, appeared over the cliff's edge. It was small and delicate, each bone clearly visible as it grasped blindly, searching for some hold.

Saliva filled his mouth. He could taste....

He tensed and clamped down on the thought.

This place, the tales weren't all false. There was something about it, something that brought out the animal in the most docile of creatures. Brought out the monster in those already teetering on the brink.

But Cameron wasn't teetering; he had never allowed himself to. And, unlike his brother, he hadn't been to the canyon before. If an accumulation of visits was what had turned Dorian, Cameron was safe, from that at least.

He pulled his foot back and turned. Whoever was on the underside of the overhang, whatever their story, it wasn't Cameron's concern.

A feminine voice cried out. Despite himself, Cameron's gaze shot back to the hand. It scrabbled over the ground, then with another cry it slipped from view.

With a curse, Cameron propelled himself forward. He flung his body to the ground and grabbed. His fingers wrapped around an arm: small, soft and warm. Desire and hunger shot through him. He loosened his grip, enough the arm began to slip through his hold. The woman attached to it cried again, and as if ordered, his fingers snapped tight this time grasping a finely boned wrist.

He lay there, his white sweatshirt soaking in moisture from the snowy ground, the weight of the woman pulling on his shoulder as she hung from his grip, swinging ever so slightly like a pendulum.

If he'd had a heart, one that worked, it would have pounded like the woman's, but lacking that only his mind pulsed with thoughts...he should let her drop, she wasn't his problem — at least not until he pulled her up to the ground beside him.

He should let her go...

"Hello?" The voice was soft and unsure...afraid...and it pricked at Cameron like a thorn.

He dropped his face to the ground and groaned.

"Are you...can you...?" The words were only a whisper now, as if she was afraid to hear his answer. "If you could manage to swing me just a little I think I can regain —."

Not waiting to hear her plan or to rethink what he was about to do, Cameron jerked his arm up and in the same motion, surged to his knees. The woman's body shot upward too. He caught a flash of pale skin and fear-filled eyes. Then he dropped her.

She fell onto the ground before him — half of her anyway, her legs still dangled off the cliff's edge.

As she lay, her arms outstretched, hugging the ground, he shoved himself to a stand and turned to walk away.

"Wait."

The word hooked into him and held him in place.

"My friends. We had an accident. I left to find help, but something — ." She bit off her own words as if afraid to speak them.

Cameron turned back. "But what?"

Scrambling to pull her body the rest of the way onto solid ground, she didn't answer. When she finally looked up, she shook her head.

"Nothing. There was an accident. That's all."

She was lying.

She rolled onto her side, further from the drop off and patted the pockets of her loose fitting jeans. Finally, she pulled out a cell phone studded with rhinestones. The glow of the tiny screen illuminated high cheekbones and bowed lips. She was pretty, pampered little girl pretty.

She punched in numbers and held the phone to her ear. With a curse, she shook the cell and stabbed at the keypad again.

The phone still cupped in her palm, she lowered her hand. "It doesn't work. There's no service. I climbed up that...and there's still no service."

Cameron shoved his hands into his pockets and turned away.

"Wait."

This time he didn't.

"Wait!" Her voice cracked as she scuttled to a stand.

He pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his hair and lengthened his stride. She'd said there had been an accident, that her friends were still there.

Humans wounded, probably bleeding. Perfect bait for the monster his brother was becoming.

"Wait!" A hand grabbed the back of his shirt. The material tightened over his chest.

He spun. Air hissed from between his teeth.

She took a step back.

She should have run, would have if she could have seen him in the darkness. His fangs were fully visible and his eyes shone with hunger. He'd been hunting his brother for days. He was tired and angry. Close to his own breaking point.

"My phone doesn't work. Can you take me to get help?"

"No." He waited, both to make sure his control was back in place and that she understood his response. When she didn't move, he continued walking.

Behind him, footsteps sounded. Even on fresh snow and soft earth the human couldn't conceal her movements.

He growled and stopped again.

"You can't leave me here. You can't leave them here." Her voice was stronger, but with false bravery. She was scared, terrified. Little did she know both emotions were dangerous, almost as alluring as fresh blood to his kind. He sniffed, realized the last clung to her too. She'd cut herself somehow, either in her wreck or her trip up the cliffside.

Another reason to leave her behind.

"I'll follow you," she added.

With a muted growl, he weighed his choices. He could kill her. He could make her stay behind and believe it was her idea. Or he could take her with him.

Slowly, he pivoted. "How far?"

He couldn't smell other humans and if they were close and wounded, he should have been able to.

Something in his stance must have alerted her. Her feet shuffled backward.

"How far?" he repeated.

"I don't know. Not too far..." She glanced toward the cliff that she had just scaled. "At least....it's down there, somewhere."

He strode to the edge and stared into the darkness, pulled in another breath, searching for a scent of his brother or her hurt and bleeding friends.

Nothing.

He sighed.

“We can’t go down that way, can we?” She stood six feet away, afraid of him or the edge. If she was smart, both.

“No, you can’t.” *At least not alive.* Even in the pitch darkness, he could see her, not as well as when she had opened her phone, but well enough. She was small with fair skin and hair streaked with pink. Her clothes weren’t that different from his own — jeans, V-necked tee covered by a zip-up-the-front hoodie, but her outfit was just that, a well-planned ensemble designed to cling in key places, to reveal curves without screaming for attention. Expensive too if he had to guess. Or it had been before her trip up the cliff. Now her knees were caked in mud and her sweatshirt hung off one shoulder, torn at the seam.

She opened her phone again and directed its glow toward him. He didn’t move. Let her stare at him. He was under control now, nothing she saw would give away what he was. Still his hand slipped into his pocket and the dental caps tucked inside. When she turned off the phone, he took advantage of her momentary blindness to slip them onto his canines.

With that he realized he had made a decision. He couldn’t leave her here alone. Not unless he wanted her to become bait in his hunt for his brother.

And for whatever reason, he didn’t.

His tongue flicking over his cap-covered canine, he strode past her. Let’s get going. If we arrive before midnight, maybe there will be something to save.”

Chapter Two

Maybe there will be something to save...

The words echoed through Rachel's head as she followed the enigmatic man. She had thought he was going to refuse to help her.

Who did that? Who turned away from someone in such obvious need?

She stumbled over a root or a rock, something solid and unyielding that lay in their path. The man didn't pause. She could hear him striding steady and sure down the steep hillside ahead of her like he was part goat.

A shiver wracked her body. She felt hot and cold at the same time. She wanted to lie down and go to sleep, but she couldn't. The man would leave her behind, leave her here, alone.

She didn't want to be alone. Being with him, unsure though he made her feel, was better than being alone.

Concentrating she picked up one foot and place it in front of the other. Her body swayed to the side. She stumbled again, but righted herself.

It was dark here. Darker than dark.

She giggled. That made no sense. Nothing that had happened made sense. She'd scaled a stone and clay wall like some superhero, clawed her way to the top to find what she thought was a sexy angel dressed in white. Only he wasn't an angel. He'd told her no and now if she wasn't careful, didn't hurry, he was going to leave her behind.

That would be bad, very bad.

She took another step, felt her toe catch, felt her body tumble forward. Impact would be next...maybe she was dreaming, but if she was she wouldn't hit. If she did, it meant she would die.

oOo

Cameron heard the human hit the ground. He walked four more steps before something resembling a conscience brought him to a halt. "Damn it."

He returned to her side. She lay on the ground her eyes open, but her body completely still. When he kneeled beside her, her eyelids fluttered. "Am I dead?" she asked.

He gritted his teeth. He didn't need this. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, more to himself than to her. She was young and fragile, had no business being anywhere near this canyon. But if she was stupid enough to venture here, she deserved whatever happened to her.

Despite the callous thought, he slipped one arm under her legs and pulled her toward his chest. He'd already decided he couldn't leave her behind. If she couldn't walk, he would have to carry her.

Her hand fluttered against his chest, like a butterfly afraid to land. "Are you an angel?" she asked.

At her grazing touch, his body tensed. Her hair smelled of vanilla. She smelled of cinnamon. She was like some delicate sugar-rolled delicacy he couldn't wait to nibble.

"There are no angels in these woods," he muttered.

"That's right. There are monsters here. Nancy told us."

She was muttering. He doubted she understood her own words, but what she or this Nancy had said was true. There were monsters here, and this little tidbit was being held by one.

Her cheek brushed against his chest. Then as if just realizing he was there, she leaned against him, rubbed that same cheek against the mud-stained material of his sweatshirt. "You smell...earthy," she murmured. "It's nice."

Before he could retort the reason for his apparently nice smell, she continued. "We came here on a dare — sorority hazing. I know I'm old for it, but that's why we did it, to prove to the freshman we were braver than they were."

"It was Nancy's idea. She knew all the stories, said if we could spend the night here the entire campus would know about it. But then — ."

Her lips clamped shut. Cameron looked down at her. "What?"

Her eyes were big, haunted. "Someone stepped out in front of our car. Nancy swerved, we went off the road, landed in a ditch. At least I thought it was a ditch, but when I got out, I couldn't find my way back to the road. I had no cell service and I couldn't see anything. It was black." She glanced around. "Like this."

It was always dark here. It was part of the place's curse, part of what made it so attractive to vampires who had lost their way. As the sun rose in the surrounding world, the canyon would change too, but it would never be lighter than earliest dawn elsewhere, never so bright that a vampire couldn't walk freely, hunt freely.

"I hit my head." Her hand went to her forehead. Cameron brushed blond and pink curls out of the way and found a lump with his fingertips.

"I left them," she said.

It was a confession.

"There were noises...sniffing and low growls. My hair stood up on my body; I had to get away. Nancy was awake, but she was trapped. She told me to leave. She did."

Her voice cracked. A kind person would have told her it was okay, that she had made the right choice, that her friends would be fine, better because she had gone for help.

But Cameron wasn't any kind of person and he didn't lie.

"Only Nancy was awake, and I couldn't carry them. I thought if I got higher I could call for help...save them. So, I started to climb." Her fingers scraped over the raised design of a hellhound that decorated his sweatshirt. She stared at the image of the giant dog with its teeth bared. He wondered if she was processing what she was seeing, realizing that the man she was confiding in, trusting to hold her so close, had much more in common with the beast of the underworld she stared at than the angel she had called him before.

"And you made it," he replied, the closest words to assurance he could give her.

"I made it," she whispered, but there was failure in her voice.

"It's all you could do," he murmured.

She was hurting. He ran his fingers through her curls again, brushed his thumb over the lump. "Have you lost consciousness?" he asked. If she had, if there was risk to her from her injuries, then what? He couldn't leave his hunt to take her to a doctor.

But she shook her head. "No, why?"

He smiled. She wasn't even aware of her own wounds; she was too caught up in worrying about her friends. She needed someone to worry about her.

He ran the backs of his fingers down her cheek. A bit of mud clung to her cheekbone. He swept it aside. Then he tipped her face up to his and stared into her eyes.

"Everything will be okay. You did the right thing." He willed her to believe him, to trust him.

Her teeth sank into her lower lip, a line formed between her brows.

"You did the right thing," he repeated.

She stared at him as if not understanding his words. He waited. The vampire talent for mesmerizing had never failed him, but the bump on her head, perhaps — .

Her lips parted; she expelled a breath. "I did the right thing. Everything will be okay." Her gaze flickered, then her eyelids lowered. Her face slipped to the side, so her cheek was nestled against his chest. Concern that she was losing consciousness caused him to stiffen, but as he moved, her eyes flew open.

She stared at him with the same intensity he had stared at her. "You'll make sure of it, won't you? You'll make sure everything is okay."

And without thinking, without pausing, he slowly...surely...nodded his head.

As she closed her eyes and sighed, he closed his too and wondered who was mesmerizing who.

oOo

Everything would be okay.

As she stumbled over the rough ground, the words echoed through Rachel's mind. Inexplicably, she believed them. She had since Cameron had held her against his chest.

Now he walked only inches from her side. Through sheer will she managed not to glance his direction.

Being near him made her feel alive and exhilarated.

Her body tingled with the kind of awareness you felt when walking beside a precipice, knowing that with each step you could trip and fall.

She stared at the ground, checking. It was solid here. The cliff's edge was far to their left now. They were weaving their way down the slope, heading to the bottom where the road and Nancy's car lay.

So, the feeling wasn't from the risk of a fall or even the wreck.

It was Cameron.

He strummed with energy. So much that when she had placed her hand on his chest she had expected to feel it vibrating against her palm. But she'd felt nothing unusual, only the raised design on his shirt.

And then as she looked into his eyes, she had begun to calm. His assurance that everything would be okay had wrapped around her like a warm blanket, encouraged her to relax and trust.

Deep in her thoughts, her toe again caught on a root or some other object not visible in the darkness. Her body catapulted forward. Cameron's arm looped around her waist and stopped her descent. She was pulled backwards, until her spine rested against his chest.

Another wave of peace settled over her. She rolled her head to the side. She felt as if she was sinking, like she was immersed in a tub of warm water.

Behind her, Cameron stiffened. Somewhere in her brain she knew his response should worry her, but luxuriating in the safety that came with his touch, she couldn't latch onto why.

Besides, he had done that a lot, stopped and studied things, as if he could hear or see something she couldn't. And anything bad had yet to happen.

She was growing used to his cautious behavior, had decided it was just his way.

Her fingers wandered to her cheek where earlier he had brushed away some bit of debris. His touch had been so gentle and reassuring she couldn't remember why she had doubted that he would help her.

Nancy would laugh when Rachel told her about him, chortle that "Miss this-can't-be-safe" had fallen into trusting a stranger so easily.

Nancy. Rachel tensed. She had forgotten why she was wandering through the dark, forgotten her friends pale and lifeless in the car.

A tremor took control of her frame. The need to retch doubled her over. She wrapped her arms around her body and took a step back.

Cameron had moved. He was standing two feet away.

Trembling with cold and the returned memories of the wreck, she straightened her body to a stand. The feeling of peace fled. Her hands shaking, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and slid open the cover. With the light glowing from her hand, she studied the man she had begun to trust.

He was tall and looked...strong. Not big and broad, although his shoulders were wide, just strong. It was how he stood, his feet braced as if prepared for attack, and how he walked. He moved a few steps to the side and then back...no, not moved, prowled, like a tiger in the night aware and confident, capable and willing...eager even...to face any adversary.

Another shiver shook her body, this one so violent she almost dropped her phone.

He stared at her as if surprised. Then he sighed.

“So, you came out of it.”

Not a question, a statement, one she wasn't sure was really meant for her. She didn't reply and she didn't put her phone away. She wanted to see him, needed to make sure the memory she had from her brief glance earlier was real.

He crossed the two feet between them, his hand outstretched. He was going to touch her. Something basic and primal told her to run, but her feet stayed firmly planted on the ground. She realized, despite whatever instinct or intuition warned, she wanted him to touch her.

His eyes were hard, like the tiger's or how she imagined the tiger's right before it pounced. She licked her lips and waited for whatever was to come.

Cameron's hand stopped short, hung in mid-air in front of her before slowly drifting back down to his side. With a curse, he turned away.

Confused, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Something had happened, but she had no idea what. She raised her phone again and directed its glow toward his turned back. Cameron shoved his fingers through his hair then in a flash of his white shirt he spun.

Her phone flew from her fingers.

The unending black of the canyon engulfed her.

Chapter Three

Damn the little human for making him think of her as someone to care for. Cameron pulled back his lips and hissed. Rachel didn't move.

He flicked his tongue over his canines and felt the caps he had slipped over them earlier.

"It isn't true, is it? Everything isn't going to be okay." Her words caused him to shrink, to think about what he was doing, what he was thinking of doing — attacking her.

He pushed his thumb against one cap. It would be so simple to pull them off. She wouldn't see him in the dark, wouldn't suspect, and even if she did, he could mesmerize her again. She would walk into his arms, stand there mindlessly as he fed...devoured.

Hunger surged inside him.

Devour. He would devour her. He should. She was a human, nothing more. He was a vampire, a predator...*the* predator. None were stronger. His satisfaction, her demise, it was how things were meant to be.

He pinched the cap between his fingers, pulled it free and then repeated the process on the other side.

"You shouldn't have lied to me." The words were soft. "I can face the truth...I'll have to." Her hand tugged at his sleeve.

He spun, his canines fully exposed.

She stepped into his arms and angled her head to look up at him.

Her neck was pale and smooth. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon hit him anew. Flashes of warm kitchens and mothers welcoming their children home from school raced through his mind. He'd had no such comforts, no one to soothe his hurts. Just a father who thought hurts built strong vampires and stronger sons.

"You know something, don't you? You're looking for something. What is it? Some animal? Have there been attacks?" She moved her hands to his shirt and bunched the material in her fists.

"Attacks. Yes...probably." He was distracted by the sight of her neck, by the blood he knew pulsed beneath the skin, but he also couldn't imagine Dorian had been roaming the canyon as long as he had and gone without attacking something, or someone.

"My friends...do you think?"

The emotion in her voice pulled him out of his fog. He stroked his fingers down her face then her neck. "Everything — ."

She slapped his hand away. "Don't. Don't lie to me." She twirled to the side, tried to break away, but he grabbed her by the arm and jerked her back against him.

Her heart thumped in her chest, making him aware again of the blood that coursed through her veins. Hunger returned, but this time he had no urge to devour her, at least not as he had before.

"Just a taste," he murmured. Then his fingers lost in her hair, he bent his head and dragged his fangs over her skin.

She clutched his shirt again. Her head tilted back and her spine stiffened.

He expected her to fight him or faint, but she did neither. She waited as if she was as encompassed by the feel of his teeth pricking her skin as he was by the scent and feel of her in his arms.

He paused, waiting again for her to object. She rose onto her toes and pushed his fangs into her neck.

Blood dribbled into his mouth. It tasted like she smelled, of vanilla and warmth, of comfort and love. She, he knew, had never been the child standing out in the cold looking in on that scene in the kitchen. She had been in the center of the room, dipping cookies in milk and feeling loved.

He should have hated her for it, but it only made her unexpected acceptance of him all the sweeter.

He plunged his fangs into her vein.

o0o

Pain shot through Rachel's neck, like two needles jamming into her flesh. She jerked and a cry exploded from her lips. Then Cameron's tongue lapped at her skin and the pain was gone, was replaced by need....the need to be near him, to cling to him.

She wriggled her body to get closer. Her breasts brushed his chest. Desire wrapped around her core and squeezed until her knees collapsed and only Cameron's hold on her kept her from falling.

"What...?" This was no simple kiss. She knew that, but what she was thinking...that Cameron was biting her and she was enjoying it...that was impossible.

His mouth was pressed to her neck. She slid her hands up his chest and held on, willed him to keep doing whatever he was doing, not to stop, not to give her a chance to come out of this spell. Pleasure swelled inside her. Her eyes drifted closed and she moaned. In the recesses of her mind the knowledge that she shouldn't be doing this, that she should be hurrying to her friends' aide instead, flickered, but she couldn't make herself pull away.

She sighed and gave up the fight. Cameron murmured something against her neck. His breath was warm. His tongue lapped at her skin slowly, almost reverently, like she was an exotic ice cream that he wanted to savor. His hands

stroked her sides, moved to the undersides of her breasts. She arched her back and rubbed her sex against his thigh.

She was lost. The world was dark. It was as if nothing existed outside of the circle of Cameron's arms and she wouldn't have had it any other way.

In the distance something roared. The eerie unearthly sound sliced through the cocoon of desire that had formed around Rachel. Her eyes flew open and her hands dropped from Cameron's neck.

She glanced at the man who held her, immediately unsure whether to step away or move closer. What she had been doing...what she had been feeling... Shame warred with fear. What was happening to her?

There was another roar, this one louder...angry.

Cameron stared over her head out into the darkness.

Shaking, she pressed her cheek against him. He pulled her closer, until her face was so tight against his chest she could hardly breathe.

Then he growled. The sound was almost as unnatural as the roar that had caused it.

Pinpricks of unease danced over her skin. She tried to step away, but Cameron's arm was like iron holding her in place.

"Dorian..." The name was a whisper.

She licked her lips and glanced to the side, but there was nothing to see, nothing but darkness. This Dorian could have been standing inches away and she wouldn't have known it.

"What are you doing, Dorian? How far gone are you?"

"Cameron?" Her voice was shaking. She hated that, wished she could make her words come out strong, but any pretense of strength had disappeared long before.

He didn't answer her. He pushed her behind him instead.

Afraid he would step away and leave her alone in the darkness, she clutched at the back of his shirt.

He inhaled and for a second said nothing. Then he reached behind and found her hand. "We have to go."

Rachel's knees locked, but Cameron didn't slow his steps. He jerked her along behind him.

And with nowhere else to go, no will to stay alone in the darkness, Rachel followed.

oOo

Dorian was close.

As Cameron pulled Rachel down the weed and snow-dotted slope he heard his brother moving, sniffing, hunting.

Hunting Rachel's friends he guessed.

He stopped and pulled her close, so he could whisper in her ear. "Does this look familiar?" he asked.

She blinked. "It looks like everything looks...black."

He bit back a curse. He'd forgotten she was mortal, couldn't see through the canyon's cursed perpetual night.

"Smell then, or feel. Does anything seem familiar?" he asked.

Uncertainty was written on her face, but she turned and stilled, seemed to be studying her surroundings with the senses she did have. When she spoke there was hope in voice. "Water. I heard water, like a stream, when I got out of the car."

A stream. Cameron closed his eyes and listened. The sound of water tinkling over rocks sounded to his left. He grabbed Rachel's hand and kept going, faster this time.

He had little hope her friends were alive, had little hope he would reach his brother before he made the change from vampire to lost soul either, but he wasn't ready to give up on either.

He cared about both. Not just his original mission, saving Dorian, he cared about saving Rachel's friends too. He cared about saving her friends because he cared about Rachel.

The realization shook him.

Vampires didn't care about humans. Vampires didn't even care about other vampires, not like humans cared about their own kind. Cameron's need to find his brother was driven more by duty than love, or that is what he had told himself.

A hundred feet further and they found the car. It was lying on its side in the deepest part of a ravine. Ruts from the tires formed a line from the wreck to the road, easily within Cameron's preternatural view.

The dark, the shock of the wreck and the curse. The combination must have confused Rachel and sent her to the canyon's clay and rock walls instead of returning to the road.

He stepped into the ruts, Rachel by his side.

Her fingers tightened on his arm. Then without warning she broke from his hold and raced inside the ruts, toward the smashed car. He ran after her, caught her by the arm and hissed into her ear. "Don't run. Whatever you do. Don't run."

If Dorian was here, if he had made the shift, running would activate his instincts. He could be on Rachel, destroy her before Cameron even sensed his brother was in the area.

"But they're...." She gestured in the direction of the broken and dented car.

Cameron wrapped his fingers around her wrist and guided her fingers to a loop on his jeans. "Stay beside me. Don't let go unless I tell you to."

The windshield and driver's side window of the compact car were missing as was the roof and anyone who had been inside.

"How many of you were there?" Cameron asked, his voice grim. There was blood on the seats. It was dried now, but the scent still curled around him. If Dorian had been here when it was fresh...it would have called to him like warm

cookies would a starving child. In his near monster state, there was little hope Dorian could have just walked past this scene, and based on the condition Rachel had said her friends had been in when she left, there was less hope they got up and walked away on their own.

Rachel's fingers dug into his back. "Why? What can you see?" She stepped to the side. With a warning hiss, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

"I can't see. I still can't see." Her voice was breaking. She was breaking.

Her body trembled against his, and her teeth clattered as if she was coated with ice. Cameron hadn't considered until now how the canyon's curse might affect humans. But it was obvious from Rachel's reaction that it did.

He needed to get her out of here.

She held out her hands and before he could stop her, she had touched the jagged metal where the roof of the vehicle had been sheared away.

"Ow."

He smelled the blood instantly. He jerked her back.

"What...?"

He slipped her finger into his mouth. On the hillside, he had been stupid. He had given into the pounding need to taste her, but he'd been smart too. He had carefully sealed her wound before releasing her from his arms.

Now, standing next to the evidence that his brother had slipped to the other side he didn't need the sweet scent of her blood calling to him or Dorian.

And her blood was sweet. Despite the disturbing discovery Cameron had just made, desire swelled inside him. His canines, which he hadn't bothered to cover since their bite on the slope, ached.

His fingers tightened around her wrist...over the veins that lay so close to the surface there. He swirled his tongue over the gash in her finger, willing his saliva to close the wound even as his mind filled with images of sinking his fangs into the thin blue lines he knew ran just below her skin.

"It...oh," A sigh, little more than a puff of air, left her lips.

He moved his attention to her wrist, allowed himself one simple kiss, before forcing himself to lower her hand.

She pulled her arm toward her body until her wrist was pressed against her breasts. After blowing out a breath, she asked, "What is it? What do you see? Why can't I see?"

She dug in her pocket as if searching for her missing phone.

He placed his hand on her arm. "Nothing. I see nothing. Your friends aren't in the car."

Her eyes darted from side to side in her face. "They aren't...." A sigh left her body. "That's good, right? Someone found them and took them away. An ambulance or police." She shook her head and pressed her palm to her forehead. "I should have just waited. They say that's the best thing to do."

Cameron didn't know who "they" were, but he had no doubt Rachel leaving had one-hundred-percent been her best choice, the choice that had kept her alive. And now, he had to make another choice to *keep* her alive.

"I'll walk you to the road," he said, grabbing her by the elbow and directing her back into the tire ruts.

She went with him willingly, almost cheerfully. As they walked, the dark turned to murky gray. He slipped his hand into his pocket and pushed the caps back onto his teeth. He glanced at her as he did. In the growing light, he could see her more clearly...see the gloss of her hair and the tiny bits of dried plants and dirt that clung to her clothing.

By the time they reached the road, the shadowy curse of the canyon felt a lifetime away.

It was early dawn, the sun had yet to rise, but Cameron could feel its threat looming.

He had to leave, and soon. He forced his fingers to loosen their hold on her arm and took a step back.

She turned instantly. "They aren't here. No one is here."

He kept his voice calm and reassuring, pulled one more time on his vampire talents. "They've left. Someone picked them up and someone will find you too. You'll be fine. Just follow the road, back the way you came."

She glanced to the left, the direction he guessed their car would have been coming from. "It's a long way to town."

"Not too long. You'll be fine." He gave her a nudge.

Her eyes glazing over, she stared at him for a second. Then slowly, as if her feet had doubled in weight, she took a stumbling step forward.

The sky around them was lighter now. Cameron moved back until he was off the road, back within the realm of the canyon's curse.

Rachel glanced over her shoulder but he knew standing where he was, she couldn't see him. He was shielded by the curse, engulfed in another world, one in which she didn't belong. Clinging to that thought, he turned and forced his body into a jog. Rachel was back in her world. Time for him to give up impossible childlike daydreams and return to his.

Chapter Four

Rachel stumbled forward. The first signs of sun colored the horizon a dusky rose. Sometime in the night rain had fallen. The road curled around the hill, black and shiny. The world was quiet and peaceful.

She wanted to walk, and to keep walking. Everything would be okay if she kept walking.

Her foot sent something clattering off into the weeds. She stared after the sound. A shiny silver disc winked at her from just beyond the road.

A hubcap. She frowned.

An ache began right between her eyes. She pressed her thumb to the spot. She couldn't remember where she was going...or even where she had been.

Her gaze drifted back to the hubcap.

Flashy and expensive looking, like the ones on Nancy's car.

The atmosphere seemed to shift, like a blind had been lifted. The road wasn't quiet and peaceful. It was deserted and alone.

The temperature dropped too. Rachel shoved her hands into the pockets of her hoodie and hunched her shoulders against the sudden cold.

What the hell was she doing? Where did she think she was going? No phone. Deserted road. It could be days before someone came across her.

Except...if Nancy and the others had been rescued, they'd realize she was missing. They'd send someone back for her.

Hope flickered. She took another step, but something made her stop, an awareness. She glanced over her shoulder.

Cameron stood just off the road, watching her. *He'd come back.*

Relief thick and hot washed over her. She lifted her hand to wave him forward, but he was gone...disappeared.

The ache returned between her eyes.

She was imagining things, wanting things and creating them in her mind.

She looked back at the highway.

The winding road led to town and safety, led to a world where everything would be okay.

Cameron disappeared, the memory of the vehicle and her friends' broken bodies disappeared. All that existed was the road and the knowledge that she should be walking down it.

She passed the hubcap. It shone on her like a beacon as she shuffled by. Her foot landed on a skid mark that bisected the road. She stared down.

Something stirred in the brush.

Slowly, she looked up and stared into the face of a monster.

She opened her mouth and screamed.

o0o

Cameron didn't hear Rachel's scream; he felt it, like stake piercing his heart. Panic wrapped around his body and jerked him around.

His feet flew across the ground he had just traveled. His nostrils flared as he ran and his fangs grew heavy.

His body preparing for attack.

As he raced to the spot where he had left Rachel, he cursed. The sun was up. He couldn't go to her, not without being fried.

Then as his feet slowed, he realized what that meant. If Cameron couldn't get to her, neither could Dorian. She was safe from his brother.

He stopped a few feet from the end of the cursed ground.

Rachel stood with her back to him in the middle of the road. She was staring directly into the rising sun, to the east. Cameron couldn't follow her line of vision, couldn't bring his sun sensitive eyes to stare that directly into the light.

Her hands hung fisted at her sides and her legs trembled. She was frozen, like a rabbit cornered by a fox. She was prey, and she had seen a predator...Dorian.

She took a step forward.

"Rachel!" Cameron yelled.

She took another step, jerky and unnatural her body being powered by someone else's will.

Damn his brother. Wherever he stood hidden in the shadows, he was mesmerizing her, calling her to him.

Cameron gritted his teeth and fought back, put every bit of energy he had into yanking Rachel's mind free.

Her foot rose, then hung in mid-air. Cameron had no way of knowing what Dorian was showing Rachel to make her head his direction, but he knew he couldn't let his brother win. He had to offer her more.

But what?

He started with the normal...feelings of sexual hunger, feelings only he could satisfy. It was the standard lure when mesmerizing a human for feeding. But as he made promises in Rachel's mind, showed her images of his fingers dancing over her skin, her breasts brushing against his chest, her body contracting around his, something shifted. The promises weren't empty, weren't just a well-practiced exercise to get what he wanted...they were real, desperately real.

If his brother won, if Rachel walked toward him, chose him and the destruction that would come with him over Cameron...

Cameron closed his eyes briefly against the pain the possibility brought with it.

Then he turned back to Rachel. She had lowered her foot, but barely. She seemed torn and confused.

Risking the continually rising sun, he stared at her and this time instead of making promises he'd made a thousand times before, he let her into his mind...into his heart. He showed her the cold reality of his life, the lack of warmth he'd grown to expect. Showed her that little boy staring through that frost-covered window, and then he showed her herself, as he saw her...young, alive, trusting and afraid for her friends. Showed her the hunger he felt, not for her blood or body, but for her, for someone who would have those feelings for him.

Her foot finished its descent to the ground, and in one smooth movement she turned to face him.

"Cameron?"

She'd seen him. Truly seen him for the very first time and she didn't run.

"What...?" She glanced over her shoulder, to where she had been staring when he approached, to where his brother no doubt still lurked. "I saw..." A shiver moved her. She grabbed herself in a hug and squeezed. Then glancing back at Cameron, she took a step toward him.

"Stop." He held up his hand. "Run, Rachel. Into the sun. Just run."

Across the sunny patch where she stood, hidden in the cursed darkness, something roared.

Dorian.

"Run," he yelled again. Then he followed his own advice and charged back deeper into the cursed canyon.

oOo

Into the sun... Cameron's words echoed through Rachel's mind. She turned and blinked at the bright light that seemed to stream down from one open point in the clouds.

Cameron wanted her to run...away from him.

But what he'd shown her, the hurt, the hope... How could she run away from that?

She pivoted and plunged into the darkness. Ran as Cameron had told her, but not away from him...toward him.

The sound of something growling and thrashing ahead of her caused her to pause. "Cameron?" The noise didn't stop. If anything, it grew louder and more frantic. "Cameron?"

Silence. Even the thrashing stopped.

"Cameron?" She took a blind step forward. Her foot slipped on the grass. She fell and rolled downward, kept rolling until her hip smacked into something hard and cold.

The car. Nancy's car.

In a rush of emotion and pain, everything came back to her. The wreck, Cameron's lips on her neck, finding the empty vehicle, believing if she left everything would become okay, and finally the monster...wild eyes in a death-pale face, jagged teeth jutting from his jaws and a face...like Cameron's too much like Cameron's.

She dropped her hands to the ground beside her and tried to shove herself up, but her fingers didn't find the earth. They found an arm, cold and lifeless. Again, she screamed.

Chapter Five

Rachel's scream vibrated against the metal of the car, telling Cameron exactly where she was and what she had found.

Her friend, one of them. For some reason, Dorian had been dragging the body behind him, scrambling over the frozen ground frenzied and intent on escape.

"Dorian," he whispered.

His brother was gone, not physically, but lost to the curse. Cameron had seen the hollowness of his eyes and the bent-over posture of his body. He had turned. There was no hope for him, but there was still hope for Rachel, if Cameron could get to her first.

He raced toward the car.

Rachel lay curled on her side on the ground. Two feet away lay the lifeless body of her friend. "Rachel," he called, hoping to convince her to come to him, or at least not to panic and run again.

"She's dead. You told me it would be okay, that they would be okay," she muttered.

He had. He'd lied, but in his lifelong list of sins this one was so tiny. "You will be okay," he replied, opening his mind again, using his powers one more time to convince her to trust him.

She raised her head. Her face was damp; her hair was mussed. She looked drained and ready to give up, and suddenly the lie didn't seem so tiny.

He had given her hope when there was none, made the reality of losing her friend all that much harder to take.

Dropping his act, he took a step toward her.

A body dropped from the sky onto the ground beside her. Dorian, his clothes in tatters and his long hair twisted into ungroomed ropes and snarls, landed in a crouch. He grabbed Rachel from behind, the fingers from one hand digging into her cheek and jaw, the other hand wrapped around her waist. He leaned over her, his mouth open.

"No!" Cameron threw himself toward his brother and hit him in the gut. Dorian flew backwards; they both flew backwards, knocking into the forgotten car.

"Let me have her, brother. She can save me...blood fresh and sweet. You know it's the only cure." Dorian clawed at Cameron's back. His nails tore through the thick sweatshirt, shredded Cameron's skin.

"Run, Rachel! Run!" Cameron yelled, but with little hope the petite human would...could heed his urging.

Dorian reeked of blood. He'd been feeding on her friends.

Enraged, Cameron wrapped his fingers around his brother's neck and squeezed. "How many? How many did you kill? How many more do you think it will take?"

Dorian stared back at him with wild eyes. "Kill? Killing risks discovery. Vampires must take precautions. Renaults must take precautions. Cover their tracks." He glanced at the body he had been dragging behind him.

Cameron's stomach clenched. He was quoting their father's words, his orders to hide their indiscretions.

A horrid sick feeling clamped onto Cameron and wouldn't let go.

"Dorian, why did you come here so many times?"

"Cover their tracks," Dorian repeated.

And with his reply, Cameron knew the answer, knew hidden somewhere in this canyon were bodies, one for each of his brother's visits, but the deaths, he knew, hadn't been Dorian's work they had been their father's.

"Damn you, Dorian. Damn you for listening to him. What am I to do now?"

Dorian opened his mouth, bearing his fangs and making the pungent smell of fresh blood on his breath undeniable.

Cameron had no choice. He pulled up the leg of his jeans and grabbed the sharpened metal rod he had kept hidden in his boot.

"You're...he's...." Rachel's voice came from over his shoulder. Disbelief, disgust, fear. He was used to all three, but somehow he'd hoped to avoid hearing them in Rachel's voice or seeing them on her face.

His attention wavered and his brother lunged. Dorian shot forward, knocking the metal rod from Cameron's hand and reaching for Rachel.

"No!" Cameron spun and grabbed Rachel in a hug. He jerked her to the ground. Behind them, feet moving, Dorian landed.

In the second it took Cameron to regain his feet, Dorian had scuttled back into the woods and disappeared.

Failure landed heavy on Cameron's shoulders. He picked up the metal rod and shoved it back into its hiding place in his boot. He would have to follow him, and he would have to kill him, but as long as it was daylight outside the cursed canyon Dorian couldn't escape. Cameron had a little time, enough to get Rachel back on the road.

"This isn't a joke, or a nightmare." Rachel sat with her knees bent and her forehead pressed against them.

"No. It isn't." There was nothing else to say. She knew the truth now. She would never see her world the same.

"I'm sorry. Your friends...I came here to get him, to stop him. I was too late."
She didn't move.

"You'll have to come with me. I'll have to get you out." The canyon was still dark to her. If he left her alone, she'd get confused and lost again. But this time he knew he wouldn't have to use his powers to convince her to run into the sun, to run away from him.

She lifted her face and glanced toward the car. "I can't come back, can I? No one can come back here. It's...."

"Cursed. Just like the stories say," he finished.

With a last unsure glance around her, she stood and held out one hand. "I have to see it first. I have to or I'll never really accept any of this." Her voice was strained, like she was barely holding on to her sanity. Not sure what to do, Cameron did nothing.

She shook her hand. "Take me to the car. I have to see."

She was only a few steps away. In seconds, she was kneeling next to it, next to her friend. She placed her hand on her friend's arm. "Who is it?" she asked, but low as if she didn't expect an answer.

Still, he replied. "Her hair is short, like yours."

She nodded. "Karen." Then she paused and looked up at him. "The car has lights."

"Do you...?"

He could see her friend laying broken beside her, had seen the same friend being dragged lifeless by his brother over the frozen hill. He couldn't see how Rachel having such an image in her mind would help her any.

"The car —."

He leaned past her and flipped on the car's dome lights. Then after a second of hesitation, he pulled on the headlights too.

"Karen."

Giving Rachel a few moments to mourn her friend, Cameron circled the car. Twenty feet away, he found a second body. This one with blond hair that reached to her shoulders.

He stared down at it, thinking of the waste, of how much this cursed canyon had taken from all of them. He turned to find Rachel on her feet and facing his direction.

"I can carry them to the road. Give their families some closure." He stared down at the body again. Blood stained the snow around her, but her neck was smooth and unblemished. He kneeled and ran his hand over her face.

Vampires knew death and he knew this girl had been dead for hours, probably as soon as the car had hit.

Without speaking, he strode back to the vehicle and the first body, the one Dorian had been dragging. Like the second, there was no sign that she had been bitten, much less killed by a vampire.

"He didn't kill them. He was taking them out of the canyon."

“Nancy isn’t here.” Her hands shoved into her pockets and her shoulders hunched, Rachel stared with shock-widened eyes. “She was here when I left. She’s who I tried to get free. Who told me to go.”

“She was alive.” The hope that the Dorian Cameron knew wasn’t completely gone sputtered and died.

“I think she might still be...” Rachel held out her hand, clasped in her fingers was a scarf. “It’s Nancy’s.” She swallowed. “There’s blood on it, but there’s also those.” She pointed to the side, to an area directly in the light of the headlamps. Two pairs of footprints wandered through the snow. “They aren’t mine,” she added.

One set was deeper than the other, as if one person was larger or helping to bear the weight of the second.

“But if she’s alive, who found her? And why didn’t they go to the road?” Rachel’s eyes asked Cameron for an answer, but he didn’t have one to give, not one she would want to hear.

He looked away.

“Your brother. You think he took her.” Her voice was dead. She’d been through too much and was past processing anything more.

Cameron was too. He closed the space between them and pulled her into his arms. It was an insane thing to do. She had no reason to accept him, no reason to do anything but scream and run from him, but he needed her touch, hoped she needed his too.

For a second, she resisted; her body stayed stiff. He stroked her hair and inhaled her scent, prepared himself to be pushed away. It was the expected thing for her to do...the smart thing. He wouldn’t stop her, wouldn’t force her to accept his comfort.

Then with a giant exhale of breath, she collapsed against him.

He stood holding her. The lights from the car dimmed, then died, but he didn’t move, didn’t dare to.

Finally, she looked up. “What do we do now?”

He shook his head. He still had a brother to find and kill.

“Do you have to stay here?” she asked.

“No.” But he should. He shouldn’t let Dorian get too far away. Couldn’t risk him escaping the canyon come night.

“Will you walk me to the top? And find me again later?”

She needed closure too, needed to know what had happened to her third friend. “I’ll find her, and I’ll let you know. I won’t lie to you.”

“That’s good. I need that, but...” She rose on her toes and balled her fists into his shirt to pull him closer. “You’ll find me again later too. Just me, for me. You’ll do that.”

Find her, for her. She didn’t want to run from him; she wanted to know him — outside of here, in the world where he had never really belonged.

He took in the uncertainty in her eyes and the tiny worry lines that seemed to have formed in the few hours since they had met.

He had never wanted anything more.

“Yes. I will find my brother and I’ll find your friend and then I will find you *for you.*”

She smiled, a sad twist of her lips, but still a smile. “Then somehow everything’s going to be okay.”

And as he lead her up the hill and watched her step into the sunshine where he couldn’t go...he knew she was right. Somehow everything would be okay.