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THE WINDIGO

A CEDARVILLE NOVELLA

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*The Windigo*

The Windigo  
A Cedarville Novella  
By  
Cynthia Carole

*Cynthia Carole*

*For my sister, Andrea, who is sometimes lost and sometimes found.*

## CHAPTER ONE

Arlene huffed out a breath as she stepped out onto the steel balcony, a twenty-foot drop beneath her boots. The wind buffeted her gold-blond ponytail, and cooled the sweat gathered at her temples. The long, feather earrings she wore whipped and danced in the moving air, tickling her neck. What a day! Her spirits soared with the wind.

She gazed westward from her perch on the Forestry's fire lookout tower, and the vista of rolling, dark green foothills beckoned. If only she were a hawk, she could open her wings and soar out over western Washington, perhaps fly straight to the Pacific Ocean. She squinted, trying to see the grey blur of distant water, but it was too far. To the north, Mt. Baker gleamed in its white tattered coat, and to the south she could see Mt. Rainer, the massive volcano misty and majestic, clouds crowning the upper slopes. And all the way between these two giants, the Cascades jutted up into the blue sky.

She turned her back on the glories of the mountainside to get a better look at the beauty of mankind. Through the open doorway she could see Peter sitting beside the radio counter. He had his feet up and crossed, his long legs stretched, and his smooth tan-gold skin exposed by the open throat of his khaki shirt and rolled sleeves. The muscles on his forearms were smooth bulges of impressive strength. A simple band captured his long, black hair, the length of which fell beyond his shoulder blades. But it was his eyes that startled. The pale blue, the color of arctic ice or the underside of a glacier, glowed. His ethnicity was hard to place, varied elements of the exotic—high cheekbones, a long nose, rounded lips—blended together into masculine perfection. Though she had never seen him in town, she expected that he turned heads wherever he went. He was that beautiful. She sighed. And she didn't stand a chance.

She wandered inside, the tower room no bigger than her bedroom at home, and sat on a metal stool. He watched her with his strange eyes, an unreadable half-smile on his lips.

He never flirted or asked her to come back, but somehow she knew he liked seeing her. She couldn't quite pinpoint how she understood this, but the feeling was enough. And hey, a gorgeous man sitting alone for days on end seemed like a terrible waste.

To think, just two months ago she hadn't even known he existed. What had made her want to hike up this particular Forestry trail, she wasn't sure. Fate? Karma? She shook her head. Since that first meeting though, when she had found him here in his splendid solitude, she had hiked up nearly every weekend—drawn like a moth to a candle.

*Sure to get burned too*, she thought.

“So, what teas did you bring?” he asked, interrupting her musing silence.

Her knapsack sat rumpled on the floor by her feet, so she picked it up. “Peppermint, of course, and chamomile with a touch of lavender and ginseng.”

White teeth flashed in his tan face as he smiled, and her heart fluttered.

“And did you make them yourself?” he inquired.

Warmth grew on her cheeks, and she glanced down. “Yes. Though my sister's compounds are stronger.” Everything Isabel did was better, but that didn't make Arlene jealous. She accepted it. Isabel couldn't help who she was.

“But I don't know your sister. I know you.” His pale eyes watched her and she thought maybe, at last, something might be happening. Her lips parted, and she breathed out slowly, like one might do if approached by a deer in the woods. No sudden moves. She lost him though. He blinked, seeming to realize he was staring, and turned to gaze out the window, face unreadable. Distant. Why couldn't she reach him? Why did he always pull away?

She stood up and fussed with his hotplate to keep her disappointment from being too obvious. It wasn't like she was desperate or anything. She wasn't that little girl standing by herself on the playground while the other girls laughed at her. Not anymore. It was just that she knew he liked her—so why did he close down whenever they started to click?

The kettle sloshed when she shook the handle, so she set it on the hotplate and found the battered teapot he kept on the shelf. Not for the first time she wondered how often he left the tower. He had a cabin below, a small hut, really, that belonged to the Forest Service, but she had never found him in it, nor been invited inside. An intense sexual longing filled her at the thought, and her cheeks flamed despite herself.

She wasn't really this person, was she? The dry spell between boyfriends had lingered this time, but still. She just wasn't the kind of girl to look at a man and see his sexual potential. But Peter...for some reason she could see him naked and above her, his smooth muscles flexing as he...

"So Peter," she interrupted her own thoughts, her voice a tad shaky. "Had any excitement lately?" She didn't look at him, but dug through her sack. The fresh perfume of the lavender and peppermint enlivened the air.

"It's been a quiet summer." His voice was lyrical with a hint of an accent. "Some campers down at Rustle Creek reported seeing a large bear, and of course we've had our usual complaints about wolves howling in the night. I think we get more wolf reports here than they do at Yellowstone."

She pressed her lips together to smother a laugh. "At least they don't kill the livestock."

"True." His tone held amusement as well, and she glanced at him, wondering if he knew the town's secret. Well, one of Cedarville's secrets—there were plenty to go around.

The kettle began to whistle and steam. She poured the hot water carefully, filling the pot. The fragrance of herbs permeated the tower despite the open door and the constant mountain breeze.

She let the tea steep and turned back to face him. How to draw him out? Usually it wasn't so hard to get men to talk about themselves. "So Peter," she started. "You told me your mother was Native American, but you never told which tribe. Is it one of the local ones?"

His face closed up. Not in any one obvious way, it was just something that happened whenever she asked him a personal question. He could chat about fires and trees and wildlife until the day ended, but if she tried to get too close...it was like a door closed somewhere behind his eyes and the light went out. He never even lost his pleasant smile, but the chill grew noticeable. "My mother's tribe is gone now. They were tiny to begin with." He glanced at her and shrugged.

"And your father? You said he was French-Canadian." She handed him his mug.

"Hmmm." He smelled the tea.

She raised an eyebrow at him. Couldn't he do better than that?

"And what of your parents?" he asked, cool eyes peering into hers. "I know of your sister but you have never mentioned your mother or father."

She shrugged. "They live in Arizona. Sun City. My mom loves the lifestyle down there, and my dad plays a lot of golf. He's in some kind of senior league. I go down and see them a couple times a year." She tried to make it all sound pleasant and normal. The reasons behind her parents

signing over the house, moving south, and then forbidding her sister from ever visiting them were too complicated to get into. Plus, she would have to tell him about the cats—and he would either think she was crazy, or he would believe her, and either way, he would never want to see her again.

He put his mug down and stood up. And up. She always forgot just how tall he was. For a moment he looked like an Indian brave in a movie, stoic and exotic, his golden skin glowing and his black hair blowing back in a burst of wind. Her heart beat faster as she watched him. She longed to kiss him so bad her lips ached.

*I am such a fool.* Why couldn't she just accept that for whatever reason, he just wasn't going to pursue her? She had given him a thousand chances to flirt, and he never took a single one.

"Thank you for coming up here and visiting me, Arlene," he said at last as he approached her, and loomed over her.

She tilted her head to look at him. Waiting. Still hopeful. Was he going to say more? Would he finally ask her to dinner? The word "yes" formed on her lips.

His pale eyes stared into hers. They were such a strange color. Despite the warm summer air, they reminded her of a winter storm. Frost. *Yes!* Her mouth wanted to say. She leaned forward, lips ready.

"I think you should head back now," he said.

"Ye...what?" She blinked.

His lips twitched. "I don't want you on the trails when dusk comes. There's that giant bear wandering around. And wolves."

"Like one of them would bite me. I'd give them a good whack on the nose and Creed would have their hide."

"Creed?"

She forced a smile. She was rattling off at the mouth about stuff she shouldn't divulge. Other people's secrets. "The Sheriff." She shrugged in embarrassment. "I work for him. I do dispatch and paperwork." All her visits to Peter and he had never even asked after her job. This really was hopeless. And yet, staring into his shimmery eyes, it was as if he knew her. As if he knew everything about her. She swayed a bit closer. He smelled good too. Like man and sun.

"So, you think the Sheriff will protect you from wolves?"

She grinned. "Well, if a wolf ate me, he would have its head on a platter. That part I'm sure of. I'm pretty good at my job."



He frowned, and a strange intensity stilled his face almost to granite. His eyes burned cold fire. “And are you and this Creed together?” he whispered and she could have sworn a cold breeze blew over her arms. She shivered.

“No. He’s engaged. She’s a nice girl. She was a teacher in California.”

He stepped back from her, shaking his head as if to clear it, and the room warmed. When he looked back at her, his face was mild and friendly. The mercurial switching of his moods made her dizzy. Had he been jealous? She stifled the burst of wild hope. Why would he be jealous?

“Thanks again for the tea.” He slid her knapsack over her shoulder, his fingers brushing her bare skin exposed by her tank top.

Before she knew it she was climbing down the metal stairs, her boots loud on the grated steel. He followed her down, and when she glanced at him, his brow furrowed. Thoughtful.

At the base of the tower, she forced a happy smile, though she couldn’t help but feel kicked out and rejected. But like any glutton for punishment, she pressed for more. “So, should I come next weekend? I can bring chocolate chip cookies.”

He stood in front of her, a wall of man and muscle. His eyes roamed over her face as if this was the last time he planned to see her. “No. Don’t come back.” His voice resonated deep and held a level of command that she had never heard from him before.

She stared. He had to say more. Was he secretly married or something? She didn’t see the wedding band. Silence thickened the air between them. The pain clenching her heart became hard to ignore, but she tried. Her smile slipped from her face.

“Really?” she said quietly. “Not ever?”

“Don’t come back, Arlene. I...I have things I have to do. I’m very busy and you’re a distraction.”

A distraction? Her cheeks reddened. God, she was such a fool.

She opened her mouth but couldn’t think of any good reply. Tears came instead, adding to her humiliation. “Okay. Have it your way.”

His stoic frown seemed to crack and sympathy filled his eyes—but before he could say anything more, she turned and ran. She knew she would feel stupid for days, but she couldn’t take his pity. She jogged down the trail, flying over the stone steps and stumbling a bit until a growth of young pines hid the tower from sight. She gasped and caught her breath. She cursed the tears streaking down her cheeks. Silly girl. He was a bastard, and she told herself firmly that she didn’t care.

She glanced up the trail, half-expecting that he would follow her. He hadn't.

Taking a deep breath, she marched toward home. Stupid Peter. Well, it wasn't like he was her boyfriend or anything. This wasn't misery she felt, only rejection. And the ache in her chest? Not heartbreak, that was for sure.

When she reached another slope, she ran again, the wind whipping at her ponytail and earrings, more tears stinging her eyes. Half-blinded, she let her forward momentum pull her faster and faster, until it seemed like she wasn't running but flying.

Her foot missed a step. She fell over the edge of the trail and hit the rocks and brush. The slope slammed into her. The sharp, hot taste of blood filled her mouth. Sliding and rolling, the world went by too fast to make sense of it. Sky. Granite. Tufts of grass. All passed before her eyes. Her head thumped stone. Her arms flailed. She tried to grab onto the loose dirt, but the earth kept slipping through her hands. The plants tore at the roots, and she fell further and faster. A rock hit her jaw and fireworks burst in front of her eyes. Then relief. She had stopped rolling. A warm darkness consumed her and she gave herself to it, glad to be free from the pain.

## CHAPTER TWO

Peter watched her run away, her blond hair shining like a gold pennant, and he wanted to catch her, twirl her around, and beg her forgiveness. And kiss her senseless. *Don't forget that part.* He clenched his jaw, the muscle twitching and jumping, and his hands curled into fists.

Another part of him fought to spring after her, because that was the difference between prey and predators. The second she jogged off down the hill he had to clasp his arms around himself to keep from pursuing her, his instincts riled, and the roaring of bloodlust ripping through his veins. He used all his self-control to turn his back on her. This was exactly why he needed her gone. He had been a fool to encourage her as much as he had.

A vision of her standing on the balcony of the lookout tower came to him, her feather earrings dancing on the breeze and her smile lighting up her face.

She was so lovely—one of the most stunning women he had seen in his long life, with her sparkly blue eyes, her full lips and slightly tilted nose. Yet for all her beauty, she seemed unaware of the effect she had on men. She was awkward as she tried to flirt with him, and he found her charming. It had been a century since he had been charmed.

He stomped toward his small, rustic cabin by the side of the tower. He told himself he had done the right thing, though the tears that had sprung to her eyes burned him. She had brought him nothing but kindness and company, and he had rebuffed her with cold rejection. Cold. Well, that was certainly the word for it. But then, that was his nature.

Weeds grew about his front step, yellow dandelions bright in the sunlight, their puffs of seeds going up like smoke into the air as he stomped toward his door. He liked the wild things and their aggressive natures. Let Mother Earth take back her little corners. He reached for the knob but paused. The woods abounded with the birdsong and the quiet whisper of the breeze through the cedars, but he heard something else, the crunch of a step on the carpet of pine needles.

A musky scent tickled his nose.

Bear. She lumbered around the corner of his cabin, her huge feet sinking into the soft, crumbly earth of the meadow. The wildflowers crushed at her passage. Her massive shoulders rippled beneath the heavy layers of golden brown fur.

She stared at him with the gold-glowing eyes of a shapeshifter.

"I told you to leave," he said.

In a blur of motion and a swirl of magic, she shifted. It was like two shapes inhabited one space, one huge and on all fours, and the other slight and standing upright. Bones stretched beneath her skin as one form shrunk down into the other, fur disappeared, snout tightened. Then the strange double image solidified into one.

As a woman, she had brown-gold hair, the same color as the bear, and it fell in erratic and tangled waves down to her hips. Bits of pine needles and scraps of moss adorned the snarled tresses. She stood otherwise naked, though smears of dried mud marked her tan skin.

She rubbed a hand up her flat belly and over one of her large, ponderous breasts. A slow smile pulled at her pouty lips. Dirt marked her cheek, but her teeth gleamed white. "Pierre," she said in perfect, if slightly formal, French. "Mon cher. You have sent your pet scampering away. For good?"

He wrinkled his nose. Her feral scent had not changed when she shifted shape. "I told you to leave my territory." He had told her that months ago, and still she lingered.

"But why? You never explain. Is it this girl?" She sauntered toward him, cupping her breast, her eyes hooded. "I want your gift, mon cher. I am aging. I feel time settling on me, tugging at my bones, and whispering away my beauty. Soon I will be only a hag. Do you want to see that? Is that what you want?"

He stared at her. "You are already a monster, Cecile. A killer. And if you don't leave soon, you will be hunted. This territory is protected."

"Hunted?" She laughed. "You don't mean those silly wolves down in the valley, do you?" She stepped closer, her musk enveloping him, burning his nose. Repulsion turned his stomach but he didn't flee, didn't even step back. If he showed weakness she'd pounce on him, and he didn't want to kill her, though his blood sang at the idea.

A chill ran up his spine and spread like fingers over his back. He had sworn never to kill again. He clutched his oath to his heart like an invisible shield. Still, his breath chilled the air around them. The balmy summer breeze became brisk.

She must have seen him struggling, for she took hold of his hand in her strong grip—far stronger than any human’s—and put his fingers between her legs, rubbing his hand there on the soft curls and her wet cleft. “Give me what I want, and I will take care of those wolves myself. We will hunt together. You are tired of being alone, no? Of not living as you were meant to live?” Her smile was toothy, and her eyes glittered.

He jerked his hand free. “I am happy as I am.”

She laughed, long and mocking. “You are a bundle of joy, yes! But Pierre, you have eternal life! Demon blood. Why not share with me?”

“I don’t know that I have eternal life.”

“You do not age.” She stepped even closer, pressing her nipples against his chest. He could feel them poking him through his shirt.

“I will never give you what you want, Cecile.” He pushed her back and anger flared in her expression, her lip curling.

“I wonder how your discipline will hold when you smell fresh meat.”

He turned away, glancing over his shoulder as he reached his doorknob. “Cecile. Leave this territory. There are more monsters here than just wolves. Be gone by morning, or I will send them after you.”

She shook her head. “I am so disappointed in you. We should be partners. We should be lovers.” She smiled back at him, her dark eyes like chips of obsidian. He saw something red caught in her teeth. A piece of flesh.

He went inside and slammed the door.

\* \* \* \*

Arlene blinked up at the sun. Her mouth tasted funny—salty and sharp—and her back hurt. Where was she? She could see the entire valley below her. For a moment, she was lost in the view. The rolling hills to the west were grey with the distance. The sun hung low, the sky gilding toward orange and fuchsia. *How strange. I thought it was closer to noon.* She frowned. Shivered. She was cold and lying on a slab of granite.

Pain made her moan and blink the tears from her eyes. She raised her head. Her shorts were torn, her tank top splotched with blood. Along her legs, scratches and dark bruises marked her in ugly violet and deep purple. Staring, she tried to remember.

She had fallen. Lord. The stone at her back sloped but not enough to send her plunging down to the valley. But ten more feet, and she would have slipped over the uneven edge. As she stirred, a stone dislodged and rolled down, disappearing over the rim. Hands braced, she sat up, feeling for broken bones. Though her head hurt like someone had used it for a drum solo, she didn't think anything was broken. She had heard enough chatter from the police radio to know the basic EMT questions. Her toes wiggled in her boots, and her vision wasn't blurred. She sucked in a breath of air. No "s. o. b." otherwise known as shortness of breath. No "perf" to her lungs. She wasn't going to die because of her stupid accident. Okay.

The wind blew over the warmed stone and tugged at her escaped hair, fallen free from the band at her neck. Her body trembled, and her teeth clattered. She could see the sunburn on her arms and feel it on the tight soreness of her face and neck. But she was alive. Thank God. How close had she come to tumbling over the edge? Only ten feet. She shook her head. What a stupid thing!

A glance upward orientated her to where the trail should be, and she crawled in that direction, hands and boots bracing on the loose shale. Every part of her body ached. The scratches tore open, dripping blood onto the rock that glowed crimson in the late golden light. She caught her lip between her teeth, and tears blurred her vision. She murmured a prayer, trying to be grateful. At least she was alive.

There it was. The trail. With a soft sob of relief, she pulled herself up and sat for a second, letting the cool breeze dry the sweat and tears from her face. The walk home loomed like an impossible obstacle. Just contemplating it made her long to curl up and cry. Back to Peter's cabin? She might be able to make that—and whether he wanted her or not, she knew he would help her. A forestry road wound up the backside of the foothill, and he could call up her sister...or maybe one of the sheriff deputies. Stan owed her a favor or two. Her sister would flip out if she saw her in this condition. Perhaps it would be better to get cleaned up before going home.

Okay. So that was the plan. She sighed in resignation and slowly stood, wincing at the pain.

A large, hulking shape emerged from the pines at the bend in the trail.

She froze. A bear. A monstrous bear. She had never seen one so big. It watched her with strangely knowing gold eyes. The head swayed from side to side. The enormous creature seemed to take up the whole of the trail. Teeth gleamed yellow in the open mouth, and drool dripped from the red line of gums. Arlene sucked in a ragged breath, her heart sprinting fast, her pain forgotten. Her

body wanted to run, but she tried to remember every bear story she had ever been told. Hadn't she heard that outrunning a bear was a mistake?

Hadn't someone told her once that a bear could run thirty miles per hour?

The eyes watched her, and as the teeth bared, it seemed like the terrible creature smiled.

She took a hesitant step back.

The bear charged. It was like having a boulder tear from the hill and start rolling toward her. The animal gained speed with each step. She couldn't move. The beast's head swung from side to side, the awkward gait building momentum to become fluid and elegant. It roared, the horrifying sound echoing against the stone canyons of the mountains and right into her bones.

Arlene ran. Once more she was fleeing down the trail, taking the rocky steps with a flying leap, but sticking to the trail meant certain death. She flung herself up the stone and grass slope, grabbing at the small pines and hauling herself over the boulders. Another roar shook her. She cried out loud and scrambled. Her hands slipped on the loose earth, and the grass ripped out as she gripped it, but her feet kept going, and suddenly she was up. She stumbled forward, and pushed past young pines and into a meadow. The verdant grass glowed and wild lupine gathered in blue clumps, and she ran through them, panting and crying. Had it followed her? Had she made it?

As she turned back to see, a thousand pounds of fur and muscle hit her. Claws dug into her back and the soft, moist earth of the meadow smashed into her face. She tasted the loam as it filled her mouth. She screamed as the claws tore into her, shredding her flesh.

The bear roared above her and she was rolled over, the sun, grass, and sky flashing before her, and then the monster's mouth. She tried to raise her hands to protect her face, but one arm didn't move and the other came up bloody. She sucked in a gurgling wet breath. Then lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Peter heard the roar of the bear. Shit. What was she doing now?

He sat his book down and gazed out the window. Should he go? Or was this some kind of trap?

She roared again and he found himself standing. That was a challenge. Cecile was hunting—and he had a feeling it wasn't the quick brown trout from the stream.

He burst out of his cabin and cut through the forest to reach the trail. As he ran, he became aware of the fluttering heartbeats of the squirrels in the trees, the fast pulse of blood in the birds, the crunch of decay beneath his feet. The world became more focused and clear, like a near-sighted man donning glasses. He welcomed the chill this time as it spread out from his spine. His muscles stretched. The pigment in his skin faded, and his senses sharpened.

The trees blurred as he ran faster, and he dodged around them easily, leaping the cluttered deadfalls and then jumping the stream without hesitation. The bear's musky scent now filled his nose, and the smell of flesh. Blood. His hunger grew sharper, nearly painful. His gut churned with need.

He staggered out the last few steps and stopped as he reached the meadow. Pushing through the screen of trees, he caught sight of Cecile in bear form. The sharp perfume of blood hung so strong here that he swayed on his feet. A glance down at his forearms told him that he was still changing—that couldn't be helped right now. His flesh blanched to purest white, became transparent and icy cold. Around his feet the ground froze despite the August heat. Frost sparkled on the crushed grass like diamond dust.

Cecile stood over the girl, her maw bloody and her fur dripping thick and viscous crimson. Her black eyes flashed panic, and she turned, lumbering away.

"Cecile," he whispered her name. The words came out long and hoarse, like the sound of bare branches rubbing together in the winter wind. The frost at his feet spread outward, crinkling and cracking over the grass and flowers, leeching all color beneath a silvery onslaught. "Cecile..." he said again, drawing her name out as his kind did. It was the call of death. She froze. She had no choice.

He shook his head, struggling between self and instincts. He wasn't there to kill her. He had sworn an oath. But she had to be stopped.

Human blood churned his stomach with hunger. He could hear the faint, weak heartbeats.

The girl on the ground still lived, at least for now, and though he had to fight through the gnawing pain of his hunger, he knelt at her side and caressed back the tangled, wet strands of her pale hair.

Shock gripped him. Arlene. Sweet Arlene. He had thought she would be long gone by now. It hadn't even occurred to him.

He could see her muscle tissue through the tears in her skin, and her rib bones gleamed white in the bloody mess that was once her chest. Ropes of her intestines glowed in muted rainbow



colors. She sucked in a wet breath, blood leaking out from the corner of her mouth. Her eyes widened on him in wonder though, as if seeing an angel instead of a demon.

“Don’t speak,” he said to her as her lips moved.

“Silver angel,” she said softly, more blood bubbling up and running down the side of her mouth.

He glanced up at Cecile, but she had broken free from his spell—something no human could have done—and was gone from his eyesight. He could still hear her, crashing away through the trees, and he knew he could pursue her, but then Arlene would die alone.

*And this is my fault.*

What had Cecile been thinking? That he would smell flesh and lose his mind—and she would be there with him, ready to join in his madness. It wasn’t such a bad plan. He shook his head to keep memories of his father and brother at bay. Not now. He wouldn’t think of them now.

As the sun slipped behind the row of trees to the west, the meadow fell into shadow, and his power grew. But healing was not his gift. He was a predator and nothing more. He stared down into Arlene’s face and watched as she struggled for another breath. She was failing. Her eyes stayed on his though. Wide and blue and innocent. He remembered all the times this summer she had come into his tower with her happy smile, her awkward flirting, her sudden laughter. How she had lit up his life these last two months!

Was he going to watch her die? He knew he should. But the agony that clenched him at that thought was far greater even than his hunger. He caressed her cheek. “Arlene,” he said her name, the wind carrying the raspy chill of his voice, sending the sound through the trees like a murmur from the mountains. “I can save you. But you will pay a price. A terrible price. And if there is a Heaven, it awaits you now. Should I let you die, or should I save you?”

Even the words were hard to say. Part of him, a strong part, didn’t want to give her a choice. How could he watch that light leave her eyes?

Her lips moved. “Help...me...”

Sucking in the warm air he breathed out arctic chill, frost coating Arlene’s thick fan of lashes. The meadow glittered with cold, the trees hung with ice, and Arlene’s blood froze to the ground. Her heart faltered.

Could he do it? He only had moments to decide. Her breathing stopped.

He yanked out his knife and cut into his flesh.

## CHAPTER THREE

Arlene lingered somewhere between. She was neither awake nor asleep, and the world was a hazy blur. Was she dying? If so, it wasn't so bad. The pain had receded, like the ocean being pulled back by the tides, leaving bare rock and sand behind. That was what she felt like—exposed and stripped.

Memories bubbled up into that stretch of emptiness. *Five years old and standing by the swings while the other children took turns. Her mother's goodnight song involving Jesus and an old rugged cross. The smell of her father's cologne...*

The bear.

She moaned, surprised that she even made a sound. It reverberated in her ears.

No. She didn't want to remember the bear. The claws had dug into her belly, and the jaws had risen from her flesh, the pointed teeth gleaming crimson. No. Isabel. She clung to the thought of her sister. Isabel had violet eyes and high arched eyebrows. She was small, but a powerhouse. Not a woman taken lightly by anyone. At least not more than once. This thought made Arlene smile. Isabel had always been her defender.

If only she had been with her on the trail. No bear would have dared to take on the Witch of Cedarville.

Arlene turned her face to one side. *Isabel. My beautiful sister.* She was going to die from a stupid bear attack. God. Poor Isabel. She would be furious.

Light moved past her eyes. Silver shining illumination streaked through the dark tunnels of her vision. Was he back? The angel that had come to her side?

She didn't want to die alone. Her mouth was full of blood, but she tried to call to him anyway. *Don't leave me alone!*

She fought for breath, but it wouldn't come. Liquid warmth filled her throat. Pale spots danced in the darkness before her eyes.

And then cold fingers pushed into her mouth and something was shoved into the back of her throat. She tried to shake her head, tried to be free of this last assault.

Hands worked on her neck and she choked on the cold thing. It stuck like a block of ice. Her body struggled, though she knew she was dying. The world darkened to nothing. But in the darkness, a tidal wave of anguish hit her. It swelled out from her belly and then through every nerve of her body.

\* \* \* \*

Peter watched her flesh heal. Her bones disappeared as her skin and muscles knitted together, and within moments, her wounds were gone without a scar. Her body lay nearly naked and exposed.

He tore his eyes away. Her clothing lay about her in tatters, bloody and reeking. He stripped her of the crimson-soaked, shredded pieces and lifted her in his arms, uncaring about the blood that still clung to her. Her cream-colored skin grew piebald with shifting patches of silver-white. The transformation was upon her. She trembled, and her eyes rolled back beneath her lids as she seized. He frowned, clutching her closer. Blood dripped out of the corner of her mouth, mixing with what was already drying there.

Her eyes flew open and widened. In the pupils he saw gleams of silver and gold. Gold?

One of her pale hands pushed against his chest, and he held her tighter.

All of sudden she shoved. He flew backwards, losing his hold. She fell, and twisted like a gymnast, landing in a crouch. Her hair fell in wet, crimson swathes in front of her blood-smeared face.

He shook his head, sitting up. What was happening? This was not how he remembered his own transformation, nor his brother's.

He still felt the mark on his chest where she had shoved him. She was strong... Great Spirit, she was strong. The twilight glowed about them with grey light while the shadows darkened beneath the trees, and her skin changed, seeming to blend with the grey light.

She lifted her head as he took a step closer. Gold glittered in her eyes.

Whatever was happening to her, he had to help her. Guilt and grief gnawed at him. He shoved them aside. This was not the time to wallow around in self-pity.

“Arlene,” he whispered her name, pushing his power into the single word. The summons wrapped around her, took hold of her aura. Her stare grew blank, and her face slackened.

A memory of his own first calling roused in the back of his mind. *Names whispered on the winter wind, calling them out of their cabin. The black sky, the bare branches, the snow flying...* He shuddered with these memories, as he hadn’t done in a long time.

Light came back to Arlene’s eyes. She threw off the hold he had on her mind with a snarl and ran. She leapt into the young trees, and disappeared into the twilight.

He chased after her, following her wild heartbeat more than her fleeting shadow. That fast pattering aroused his hunger, and his instincts quickened, his nails lengthening on his hands until they were black claws. He ignored them. She was so fast!

Rage chewed at him, roiled in his gut. Cecile! She had forced this upon them. And for what? Because she wanted his power over death? Shapeshifters aged, slower than the general population of humans, but still, they were not immortal. So, was it only vanity that motivated her? A fear of growing old?

The sputtering heartbeat drew him on through the woods even as he turned his head in circles wondering about the werebear’s motivations. He wanted to sit down and think, but he had no time. Whatever Arlene was, he could not let her flee in madness and wake alone. *If she woke.*

Arlene stayed ahead of him. Her pale figure darted like a light calling to him, a will o’ wisp that he must follow.

His thoughts circled back to Cecile. When she had first entered his territory, he had thought little about it. Creatures came and went. So a werebear was wandering through, it was hardly something to grow excited about. She seemed more the local werewolf pack’s problem than his.

But Cecile had honed in on him—and she had known what he was. That was unusual nowadays. His kind were near extinct. Though there had never been many.

*But here I’ve made one more or have I? Please, Great Spirit, let me control her through her madness.*

As he burst out into another mountain meadow, he saw her pale and lovely in the center of the grass. The sky was now grey-blue and the world was drenched in gloom, but she stood out, her pale skin no longer blended with the dusk. It glowed like snow at midnight. She turned in circles with her slim arms held outward. He could see that somehow she had lost the dried blood of her near-death. Her body gleamed in perfection, though her hair still hung limp to the back of her head. Starlight glittered in her eyes.

She was so beautiful he caught his breath.

Her cry shattered the quiet of the forest. Her body shuddered, and the glow surrounding her spread itself out, growing larger. Shifting smears of white pulsed, twirling, sparkling. When the radiant aura solidified, he swallowed back his shock.

The spectral bear that surrounded her was immense. Far bigger than Cecile, and the monster was white, the same glowing white as arctic snow.

*A fucking polar bear.* He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But she herself hadn't changed form. Instead, it was a spirit animal, twenty feet high on its back legs. He could see the outline of the silhouetted trees through its massive, shaggy shoulders.

He found himself frozen as he watched her. Wonder and awe gripped him, a strange thing after his two centuries of life.

Arlene seemed unaware. She was still lost in her own madness. Unseeing and unhearing, she moved this way and that, the bear shimmering over her, swiveling its head in time with hers. The light of the spirit illuminated the meadow with silver brilliance, as if a second moon had risen. And the girl inside looked so small, and yet not... afraid. The expression on her face was closer to rapture.

He took a further step into clearing. Whatever she had become it was at least partly his fault. He could see the grass around her turn white with frost. She was not wholly bear or completely his kind. Had Cecile known? Was this what she dreamed for?

"The problem here is that she wasn't yet a *garou*," Cecile said, her voice tentative. "I hope. For that is not the transformation I had thought it would be."

She stood not far from him in human form, her long hair matted and her sharp, but lovely, face twisted with disgust. "That is not a useful bear, I think." Her black eyes shifted to him. Her heartbeat was steady but fast.

He held out a hand, as if he were offering to dance with her, and she raised a dark eyebrow and stared back at him with defiance.

"Cecile," he whispered her name and caught her will like a man grabbing an apple off a tree. He closed his fist. In one stride, he had the other hand around her neck.

He squeezed. Could he kill her? He wanted to. He saw again the great bear tearing Arlene's flesh. He shoved her against the trunk of a tree. The bark cracked, and needles rained down around them. Her neck was rock hard, but he could feel the life in it. If she had been human he would have already killed her. Her pulse danced beneath his grip, and she struggled to draw breath, just as Arlene had.

His blood boiled with the need to rip her apart, and then...to do what? Eat flesh? Would he give up all his oaths?

Cecile's eyes closed. One of her hands struggled past his power, and gripped his arm with her draining strength.

He threw her to the ground.

"Run, Cecile. Run away! And don't come back if you value your life. You can see how easily I caught you."

She sucked in one breath after another, and in the meadow, the bear roared.

They both looked toward Arlene. She was charging them. The meadow froze where her feet landed, the blades of grass turning white and shattering, the ground cracking and popping as frost spread. The bear ran on all fours, while Arlene ran inside its phantasm form. Her eyes shone like blue and gold beacons.

Cecile tried to stand, but Arlene was there. She lifted the other woman with her two hands, one buried in her hair and the other on her leg. The bear roared again, the call reverberating against the stone canyons of the mountains. A wave of cold air washed over Peter, and it was redolent with magic. Frost suddenly clung to his lashes and stuck to his clothing.

Arlene tossed Cecile, and the other woman sailed for twenty feet before crashing down in the center of the meadow.

Cecile was up and running immediately. Arlene made some inarticulate sound and gave chase, but she fell within a few steps, her head banging on the ground and hips rocking. She was seizing. The silver glow of the bear winked out, and the night plunged dark around them.

He knelt beside her and put her head on his lap. When she lay like the dead, he pressed his cheek to her mouth. "Come on," he whispered. "Breathe."

She didn't. Her heart faltered.

"Arlene," he commanded, his voice reaching out and wrapping about her. "Breathe."

For too long, there was nothing. And then, at last, a tiny warmth escaped her lips. His relief choked him. Her heart began a normal, strong rhythm. The finest sound he had ever heard.

Scooping her up in his arms, he carried her back to his cabin.. Her skin was warm though, and so soft. Her face, now relaxed of its madness and tension, was the one he remembered. The forest fractured the starlight, and patterns of silver and black crossed her pale skin as he walked, feet nearly silent on the carpet of pine needles. He watched her compulsively, unable to move his eyes.

In his small cabin, he placed her on the cot. The lamp turned on with a switch, illuminating the small, orderly room and kitchenette with an electric glow. Yanking up the threadbare comforter, he covered her slim, nude body.

In the gold glow of the manmade light, she appeared vulnerable and human. He could see no trace of the supernatural about her.

He knelt by the side of the bed and took up her hand. "I'm so sorry," he said softly.

"Peter?" she whispered in a hoarse voice. Her eyes opened, and they were once more the color of the summer sky. "What happened? I feel so strange." Her voice sounded distant and drifting, as if she were medicated or half-asleep.

How could he answer her? He had no idea what was happening to her. "It's all right," he lied. "You're going to be fine." He pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

"Peter?" she moaned. Her body arched. "I feel so peculiar, and I had such dreams—"

"I know," he said to comfort her. He caressed her hair back from her face. "But rest now."

She pushed the blanket to one side and sat up. "It was a bear!" She crossed her arms and started to rock back and forth. "A bear. It was on the trail."

"Yes." He moved to sit beside her and put a hand on her back. He tried not to think about how smooth her skin was, or how the small muscles moved beneath his fingers. He didn't know how to comfort her. His own experience of changing had been so different. Well, of course, there had been the terrible violence that followed—but that had come later. The nightmare of the massacre of his mother's village...his brother slouched nearby eating something that had once been small and human.

Bile burned his throat at that memory. No. It wouldn't be that way for Arlene. He wouldn't allow it.

She crawled onto his lap, curling up in his arms and pressing her face to his neck. "My body is odd," she murmured. "Cold and yet hot, too. Peter, was there a bear? I remember...I saw my blood and skin and oh, God, my guts. I think I saw my guts." Sobs shook her and he held her tightly.

"It's over. It's all over, sweetheart. Don't think about it." *Such meaningless words.* He knew from experience she would think about it for uncounted years. How could she not?

She stared into his face. He tried to ignore the feel of her naked bottom on his thighs, of how her breasts touched his shirt. The fact that he was getting aroused when she was in such a state disgusted him.

“But it happened,” she said, eyes wide. “Didn’t it? So, why am I here? Why am I alive?” She glanced down at her flawless skin. “No. Look at me. I don’t have a single scratch. Am I going crazy?”

“No.” He didn’t know how to tell her, or even what to tell her. She was something new, something he hadn’t seen before. He thought of the spectral bear and put his hands on her shoulders. “Arlene, the bear that attacked you was a shifter. Like your werewolves in the valley.”

She blinked. Her mouth opened slightly, and then closed. She stood up and grabbed the blanket, draping it across her shoulders. Her movements were quick and graceful, and perhaps more fluid than they had once been. Was that a gold gleam in her blue eyes? He frowned, watching her. Six steps took her from his living space to the kitchenette and then back. The two-person table in his kitchen area was under the window, and his reading chair was near the cot to one side. Otherwise there was little furniture to trip her up, and she stalked back and forth while clutching the blanket to her chest.

“I know I’m different. I feel different. Am I changing into a bear?” Her voice squeaked on the last word, her blue eyes widening.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Arlene, there’s more to tell you—”

“I don’t want to hear it right now.” She strode toward him. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I’m so...confused. And hot. And cold.” She threw aside the blanket and stared at him as if he were prey. Hunger tightened her expression. Before he could stand, she was on him, and though he was prepared to throw her aside, she only pressed her face to his neck. She breathed in his scent. Her legs straddled him, gripping his hips and her arms—her inhumanly strong arms—held his shoulders.

Her musky scent aroused him, and his cock stiffened in his pants as her blue-gold eyes became hooded. Her thick lashes fanned her cheeks, and her full lips parted, pink tongue darting out to lick at the corners. She huffed out a breath she had been holding.

“Peter. Please. I think I’m going to explode if I don’t have you.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Arlene was shocked by her own bold and shameless behavior. But the need to touch flesh to flesh, to feel Peter moving against her was compulsive—it was how she had always imagined drug addiction would be like. She pressed closer, the warm skin of his neck calling to her. Rubbing her cheek against the bare skin at his collar, she inhaled his scent. The power of that masculine perfume sent a shockwave down between her breasts, over her clenched stomach and right to the spot between her legs. God, she wanted him.

He moved, and she felt his arousal bulging beneath his pants. She tightened her grip on him with her legs. The roughness of his pants against her sensitive skin made a small moan escape her lips. She wanted to rub on him, squirm on his lap and run her teeth down the skin of his neck. Such crazy, slutty thoughts brought heat to her cheeks, but a wildness in her blood exalted...laughed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to gather up the shreds of her self-control. “I don’t know what’s come over me.” But her mouth curved in a feral smile. “I just want to eat you up.” She laughed. “Am I insane? Have I gone mad?”

Peter put a large, calloused hand underneath her bare bottom and stood up. She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders. “Arlene, there’s nothing you should apologize for,” he said with kindness in his pale-blue eyes. His black hair fell in soft waves around her arms, like a curtain of silk. It was something she would have thought of as feminine, but there was nothing womanly about Peter. His exotic face was lined with tension, and his soft lips were so close to hers, she nearly kissed them without thinking.

He stood there, hands on her taut flesh, and seemed to be lost as well. A muscle jumped in his cheek, and his eyes grew lustful. His breath caressed her face as he leaned closer. He was going to kiss her. She almost cried in relief.

But he didn’t. He took a deep breath instead. “I’m not going to take advantage of you, Arlene.”

“Why the hell not?” She gripped him harder.

He shook his head and carried her into the bathroom. After setting her down on the rug by the bath, he untangled her limbs without much help from her. She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, watching him as he plugged the tub and turned on the water. Steam rose almost immediately. The undulating waves curled and drifted up into the invisible air currents. "I should be dead," she said, half-dreaming. Was she dead? But if this was Heaven than why was there a spider making a web behind the toilet and a dead fly underneath the sink? Peter wasn't that great a housekeeper. The thought made her want to laugh.

*Perhaps, I'm hysterical.*

Why wasn't Peter making love to her?

She wrinkled her nose.

Peter turned off the water and lifted her again as if she were a child. He put her in the tub, and she made a weak protest as the warm water enveloped her. Why was she letting him treat her like she was two? But the hot water soothed aches she didn't even know she felt. She watched her pale skin turn pink in the heat.

When Peter began to wash her hair, his hands were gentle. He leaned in close, and she nearly purred like a cat with tuna. God, he had wonderful hands. The shampoo, a rosemary and mint mix washed her in scent. She closed her eyes. His strong fingers caressed her scalp, working back then forward.

"Peter?" she asked, her thoughts drifting with the steam. Was the thumping sound she heard his heartbeat? Had it always been so loud?

"Arlene," he answered in his deep, resonating voice. God, she loved his voice. She thought maybe that was the first thing she had been attracted to.

"Are you a shifter too?"

He was something. Otherwise how had he scared off the bear? He knew about Creed and the werewolves in the valley. How had he known that? She frowned as she opened her eyes and gazed at him.

"Ready to rinse," he said and poured a plastic pitcher of water over her head.

"So, are you a bear too?" she asked, rubbing the water from her eyes.

He shook his head. "I'm something else." He lifted up a sponge and began to slowly rub it over her body. It brushed the tips of her breasts and then down her flat stomach.

"What are you?" she asked softly, watching the movements of the sponge as he drew it down one of her legs.

He was silent for so long, she nearly asked again. At last, he spoke as he began on the other foot. “Have you heard the legend of the windigo? It’s usually referred to as Native American myth.”

“Windigo?” She sounded out the strange word. “Maybe. Something about a ghost in the woods that eats people?” She remembered some television show or book where the creature was the boogeyman.

“That’s close. It varies. Usually, it’s said to be a monster that calls to humans when they’re hiking or camping. They come to its voice and find a monstrous creature with foul breath and a long tongue. It lives on human flesh.”

She stared at him, feeling cold. Chilled. She remembered her dream of the silver angel. “Are you—”

“My father was a French fur trapper, and my mother was part of local tribe that lived north of here. This land was only called the Northwest Territory then. It was mostly wilderness from California to Alaska, with scattered tribes and villages along the coast.”

“Are you saying that you were born...before Washington became a state?” She crossed her arms and stared at him. It wasn’t like she hadn’t met supernaturals before...but she had thought only vampires and demons were immortal.

He met her gaze with his chill blue eyes. “I’m saying I was born about thirty years after Lewis and Clark made their famous trek. My father was an explorer—though he wrote no books and never returned from his travels to tell his tales.” He gave a sad smile. “After living with my mother’s tribe for a year, he built a cabin for himself further into the wilderness. He was a solitary man, but he wanted to provide a home for his wife and children. Soon, he had two boys and a good business trapping and trading with the local tribes.”

“You had a brother?” she asked and saw the bleak grief enter his expression. The pain in his eyes hurt her. Her arms longed to hold him, comfort him. But for what? She didn’t know.

Her stomach rumbled instead.

A smile came to his too-serious face. “We had better feed you. Come on.” He reached to help her out, but she shook her head.

“I want to hear your story, Peter. Please.”

“Arlene, you don’t understand. You had better eat, or the madness might come back.” Against her protests he picked her up out of the tub, sloshing water on the floor and over his shirt. The chill invigorated her. She suddenly was full of energy, and she wiggled out of his arms to stand

on her own two feet. He handed her a towel, but she didn't take it. She was too busy staring at the way his wet shirt clung to his muscled chest.

A different kind of hunger stirred once more.

He wrapped the towel around her and began to dry her off, not meeting her eyes. She let him. The vigorous movement of the terry cloth over her naked skin felt wonderful. He knelt to dry her legs, running the towel up her thighs and nearly to her small patch of curls at the junction.

Need uncoiled from her belly like a warm, hot snake. This was not like the bashful, half-embarrassed lusts she had felt before. This one filled her, brought a haze to her eyes, made her mouth water like a starving man sitting down to a feast. When he stood up, he didn't meet her eyes. "I'll get you a steak..." he began.

She blocked his escape though, moving to the doorway faster than she would have thought possible. "I need something else first," she said in a low, growly voice.

"Arlene, this isn't you. It's the transformation in your blood."

She grabbed hold of his belt and undid the buckle before he could finish his sentence.

"Peter..." she said his name. She felt a strange thrust with the word, and it was as if she was pushing his name out from herself and wrapping it around him. "Stand still," she commanded and surprisingly, he did.

Kneeling in front of him, she undid his zipper and slowly pulled his pants down over his slender hips and then down his rock-hard thighs. The bulge in his cotton briefs made a tent of black fabric.

And that part of him was as large and powerful as the rest of him.

The musky scent of man sent a throbbing ache between her thighs. She glanced up at his face and found him staring down at her, his lips parted. His dark hair fell around his shoulders and down his back, and she wanted to grab it up and kiss him hard—but that would come. First, she had to convince him that this was what they both wanted.

She pulled down his shorts, exposing his upright shaft. It bobbed toward his flat, hairless stomach.

Her gaze traveled up to his and she found his eyes growing pale, the blue seeming to drain away from the pupils. Shimmery light reflected back at her.

Her tongue darted out and licked the tip of his shaft. Her hunger and need craved more, like a banshee screaming inside her, and so she gripped her hands onto his hips and slid her mouth up

his long penis. The taste of him filled her, and when he reached the back of her throat she was only halfway down the velvet-wrapped steel.

She slid back instinctively and then forward again, her mouth stretching to take him. Her tongue wrapped around and worked the sides and under the tip. With each slide, she took him deeper, until she passed the back of her throat. He moaned, his hard butt flexing beneath her hands and his hips jutting forward, pushing himself deeper into her. She wanted more. Rocking on her knees she took as much as she could, tasting the salty precum.

His hands grabbed her shoulders, nails digging into her flesh. She jerked back at the sudden pain. His fingers now had black claws on the tips, curved and pointed. “No,” he said, his voice slamming into her. She closed her eyes as the force of it washed over her.

It was like standing naked in front of a winter storm. He shook her, and when she looked at him, his pupils were nearly white, and streaks of silver glowed from his hair. His skin glittered as if made of ice, and his natural tan had faded away. Her mouth opened in shock and some sense finally entered her head.

Tears filled her eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Was that pity in his eyes?

He pulled up his pants and knelt in front of her. A chill filled the room, and frost grew on the tub, crackling along the porcelain rim. As she breathed out, a huff of steam emerged, and she wrapped her arms around herself—not from the cold, for it didn’t bother her—but out of shame. What the hell had she been thinking? Had she really been forcing herself on him?

He took hold of her shoulders once more, but this time gently, the tips of his claws—*claws!*—made small pinpricks on her skin. His beautiful face tightened with sympathy and also something else. Guilt? What did he have to be guilty about?

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Peter,” she cried. Sobs slipped out her throat and shook her.

“It’s not your fault. The hungers come—we are all victims to them at first.” His hand moved to cup her face. How could he be so gentle with her after what she had done?

But his strange, pale eyes gazed into hers, catching and holding her when she wanted to look away.

“I did this. At least partly. You were dying. So I...I changed you the way I was changed. Only, I didn’t know the lycanthropy would be in you as well. But you’re not both, Arlene. You’re something else entirely. I don’t know what you are.”

A hiccupping laugh escaped her. “Oh, great. I’m a freak even among freaks.” Her laugh turned back into crying, and he pulled her onto his lap. His skin was ice cold, but it felt so good on her flushed body. She pressed her face into his neck, and he held her while she cried.

Soon the smell of him began to drive her need. As she felt the first tug of it, she pulled away. She crawled off of him, and staggering, climbed to her bare feet.

“Let me cook for you,” he said with kindness. “Meat is what you need, and a lot of it.” His smile looked a bit forced, and his teeth gleamed. They were bigger than she remembered, longer and sharper.

Meat. Thinking about eating sent a wave of dizziness through her. As he moved closer, she smacked his hand away. “Don’t touch me,” she stepped back into the kitchenette. She kept backing up, and he followed. Why was he following her? She shook back her wet hair. Her thoughts drifted—a cobweb caught her attention, then the lingering smell of bacon from a pan on the stove, and what was that? A moth fluttering around the lamp?

“Arlene?” His voice brought her back to him.

She had the strangest longing to bite into his shoulder. Her stomach rumbled. Feeling cascaded through her, a fierce wild desire to attack him, claw him, fuck him, eat him—all these impulses and more pummeled through her. She sobbed. She couldn’t fight it.

“I’m sorry, Peter! I’m sorry.” She dug both hands into her hair.

He reached for her, and she ran.

She burst out of the cabin. For a few steps, despair and fear filled her.

But her body moved so smoothly, and the night air seemed to embrace her. She wanted to run forever. She leapt over the bushes and dashed wild into the forest. The mountains called to her—the high, rocky places where the snow lingered and the air would be thin. That’s what she needed, to get close to the sky.

As she ran, a silvery bear appeared beside her, but she wasn’t afraid. She laughed with joy.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Peter brushed past the brambles and stalked back toward his cabin even as dawn's light drenched the sky in rose and violet. The steep slopes of the mountains to the east shimmered with gold, coronas of light glowing off the highest peaks. He cursed himself for losing Arlene at the snowline. It had been over a century since he had lost something he tracked—not since, well, not since the last time he had hunted one of his kind.

Something by his door caught his attention. Could it be? The lump beneath one of his old coats had a cascade of golden hair and the breath he held slowly hissed out between his lips.

Her head was cocked sideways against the door, and soft illumination fell gently over the contours of her face.

He crouched. Pinesap marked one soft cheek, and at the corner of her mouth was dried blood. Her heartbeat thumped loud like a metronome in his skull. Leaning closer, he rubbed his thumb at her mouth and brought some of the flakey crimson stain to his nose.

Well, at least she had found some food. He thought it was elk, but bloodstains alone were always a bit unclear.

The sound of tires churning gravel brought him instantly to his feet. A Jeep, and it was a mile or so distant. The werewolf Sheriff, he guessed. How a werewolf got elected Sheriff of their small, under populated county year after year was mystery Peter had little interest in solving. All he knew was that he and Creed had a mutual respect and a truce that worked between them. Peter didn't care what happened in the valley, and Creed rarely hiked up into the Forestry lands.

But what would Sheriff Creed say to seeing Arlene asleep on Peter's step, naked and bruised, blood on her lips? Arlene worked for him—she was one of his dispatchers. She might not be a werewolf, but the Sheriff would definitely consider her under his protection.

Probably nothing good. He lifted Arlene in his arms and carried her inside to his cot. Her skin was cool but not cold. When he stroked her cheek, her eyelids fluttered but didn't open. She was exhausted. Poor thing. He remembered his first hunger with a shudder.

Outside, the Jeep pulled up, motor rumbling in the quiet of his mountainside. He tucked in his shirt and went out to greet the visitors. Two. He could smell the wolf right away, but the other one was human.

The sun had yet to crest the mountains, but the sky glowed blue with all of summer's promise, and the tips of the peaks shone in warm daylight. Peter paused as he stepped out, eyeing the other man with caution.

Creed jumped out of his Jeep with the agility and strength of something not-quite human. He was in uniform, and the gold star mutely glowed from his khaki shirt, the Glock on his belt superfluous. The mirror shades he wore had to be sold in some official police catalogue, but they did a fine job of hiding the man's eyes. Peter crossed his arms and waited, refusing to be intimidated.

Then the passenger got out. Arlene's sister Isabel. She could be no one else. The same golden hair and small features graced her face, though Isabel's eyes were darker, more violet. She gazed at him with concern and worry, her brow furrowed. "Where is she?" she demanded before Creed or Peter could speak.

The Sheriff glanced back at her and waved his hand. "Isabel..."

"My sister is here. I know she is." She glanced up at the tower and then back to the small cabin.

"She's sleeping inside," Peter answered as she stalked towards him. He could feel the magic on her. She bristled with power—it enveloped her aura like shimmery rainbow light, flashing with lightning sparks.

He only noticed as she reached him that shadows ringed her eyes, and she wore plaid pajama pants beneath a long, blue nightshirt. On her feet were beach sandals. Her blonde hair hung in a heavy braid down her back while wisps of hair fluttered about her face and neck.

Creed moved to stand between them. Brave man. "Isabel. Please. You brought us here. Let me do the talking—"

Her implacable gaze passed over both of them. "Go ahead. I'm going in to check on my sister." She stepped around Peter and stomped into his cabin.

Creed pulled off his glasses and gazed at Peter with amber eyes. "Why do I smell blood? And bear?"

"Why do I smell wolf?" Peter said back, unable to help himself.

Creed raised an eyebrow. His lips thinned. "Look, Peter. You said you were harmless. That you didn't...kill. That's why we let you stay in our territory. But you had better not play any games



with me. Is Arlene okay? Tell me straight, right now.” He couldn’t help but rile at this comment. Let him stay? He had lived in this part of the world for two centuries longer than Creed had been alive. He closed his hands into fists and took a deep breath.

He met Creed’s gaze. “She’ll be all right. Eventually.”

Isabel came to the doorway, a hand on her stomach, her face pale. She stared at Peter, and the muscles clenched in her shoulders. Her heart jolted faster with fury. She ran at him. He let her. What was he going to do? Have her chase him around the yard?

She hit him with both fists. “What the hell did you do to her?”

“She’s alive. I saved her life,” he answered, holding still and allowing her to beat him. She was about as strong as a mosquito anyway.

Creed on the other hand was a different matter. He grabbed Peter by the shirtfront and threw him at the Jeep, where he dented the front fender before falling to the ground. The Sheriff’s eyes glowed, and his teeth showed with a chest-deep growl. His canines grew pointed.

“You better talk fast, Iceman.”

\* \* \* \*

Arlene awoke to the sound of voices—an argument. She tossed aside the blankets that covered her and sat up, surprised somehow that she could. But she felt well, strong even.

The small cabin confused her for a few minutes as she tried to recall where she was—not home, definitely. Her gaze fell on a Forest Service shirt that lay tossed to the floor. Peter’s.

What dreams she had suffered! Bears and snow and...Peter. But a different Peter. Peter with silver-white hair, skin as white as ice, and eyes that were pale crystals of shifting shadows. She shook her head. God, she felt fuzzy, and her mouth tasted terrible.

She blinked in the morning light, listening to voices outside. The door was open, and she could see a slice of meadow and a near horizon of young pines. The breeze that entered the cabin smelled of cedar and rock, pine needles and dew-coated grass. And exhaust from a car, and the rubber of tires, and someone’s after-shave—and her sister. Her heart fluttered. Could she really smell all those things? It had to be her imagination.

“I’m taking her home!” a familiar voice said from outside. Isabel. Her sister. Oh Lord! She sounded pissed off. Well, it was morning, and Arlene had left yesterday only for a day hike into the mountains.

Yesterday? She hoped it was yesterday.

*Raking claws tore into her guts and a muzzle rose above her with long strands of bloody drool falling from the inch long teeth.*

She swallowed back her bile. Her body was unmarked. Since she was naked, that was an easy inspection. Naked. And on Peter's bed.

She grabbed up a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. Tentatively, she made her way across the wooden floor—just a few steps, and to the doorway.

"You can't! It's far too dangerous. Haven't you heard a word I've said?" Peter towered over Isabel's slight form, leaning over her and glaring. His black hair was tied back, but messy, and he looked tired. His blue eyes were bruised from lack of sleep. He had missed a button on his shirt and his feet were bare. For some reason, Arlene blushed when she saw him. Her dreams had been strangely sexual. And Peter wrapped in a pair of loose pants was something to behold. He had the longest legs, and the muscles in his thighs and butt would have made many a movie star drool.

Her cheeks burned, but she shook these thoughts away. Dreams were dreams. She had no reason to be embarrassed by them. But why was she naked? Naked and in Peter's bed? She supposed she could have an excellent reason to be embarrassed, but she couldn't remember!

She swallowed back the thousand demanding questions she had and stared at the two people arguing in front of her. Isabel pointed a finger at Peter's chest, her indigo eyes smoldering with rage. "I'm taking her back with me. She's my sister, and I can handle it. I don't trust you. Not for one minute."

Creed stood nearby, and Arlene swallowed. God, did Isabel *have* to get her boss involved? What if she lost her job? He leaned on the fender of his Jeep and watched the other two argue. For some reason there was a rather large dent beside him.

Peter poked a finger at Isabel. "You're mad. You don't have any idea what you're talking about. Something's going on with her that you can't even understand, little witch."

"And you do? You yourself said that you don't know when she's going to wake up or in what state? Looks to me like you're the one guessing."

"Isabel," Arlene interrupted.

Her sister ran to Arlene's side. "Oh! Sweetie! Are you okay? Should you be up?" She tucked a strand of Arlene's hair behind her ear, just as she had done so many times before. Memories flashed through Arlene; her first day of school, the day Jeremy Evans took her lunch and threw it on the roof of the school, the night of prom when her date didn't show up... Isabel was in all of those

memories, tucking back Arlene's hair and telling her that everything was going to be all right. Always and forever, her sister had been there for her.

"I can't remember." She sat on the front step, clutching the blanket closed, aware that she smelled bad—like old blood and stale sweat. Her mouth still tasted foul. Tears came to her eyes.

"What happened?"

Isabel kept her arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Why don't we get you cleaned up first and then we'll talk about it—"

"Just tell me. I've had such bad dreams..." And some good ones. Or potentially good. Had Peter really run his hands over her naked body? She bit her lip. Suddenly, she had a vision of herself kneeling on the floor in front of him.

"You were attacked by a bear, but not just a bear. A shifted bear." A line formed between Isabel's eyebrows. Her violet eyes stared intently into Arlene's. They had never lied to each other, not in all their lives, and Arlene could always trust that her sister would give her the straight story. But this? A shifted bear?

"Peter says that she's been haunting his territory for the last two months, but that you are the first she's attacked." Isabel gave him a glare over her shoulder.

"A werebear." The dream-memory came back to her then. Claws. Teeth. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. When she could breathe again, she stared at her sister.

"I healed. Does that mean I've turned into one too?" *Am I going to turn into a bear? Have I already?*

"I... I don't know." Isabel gave a forced smile. "But we'll figure it out. Everything will be okay."

"I think... I think Peter saved my life." An image came to her of Peter stroking her skin. She blushed. This was so frustrating. What was true? And what was dream?

Isabel pursed her lips. "He says he did."

"Isabel?"

"Yes? Are you ready to go home now?"

Arlene pulled the blanket closer. "I need to wash up and use the bathroom. And get some clothes."

"Okay. Do you want me to come with you?" Isabel seemed unable to let go of Arlene's shoulder.

Gently, Arlene set her arm down. "No. Give me a minute, Izzy. I need a minute to myself."

In the bathroom, she closed the door.

Staring at the tub, she remembered Peter giving her a bath. She shivered at the warmth that coiled in her lower belly. Had she really let him do that? And he had talked to her about something...a word stuck in her head. Windigo. Was that what he was?

All this time she had been visiting him, she had never suspected that he wasn't human. But then why should she? She might work for a werewolf, but that didn't make her an expert.

*He saved my life.* She looked at her face in the mirror. Her eyes seemed paler somehow, different. She shivered but pushed those thoughts aside. She was too tired to deal with it now.

A quick search of the medicine cabinet revealed a toothbrush still in its packaging and a bar of soap. She brushed her teeth, spitting out pink water again and again until finally her mouth felt clean. Why there was so much blood in her mouth? Her stomach rolled with nausea. Hadn't she had a dream where she was eating something hot and bloody? *Just a dream*, she told herself. But she remembered chewing, and her teeth hitting bone.

Bile burned her throat.

A few minutes of deep breathing settled her stomach.

She turned on the shower and got cleaned up, trying hard not to think.

When she emerged sometime later—long enough to steam up the little bathroom—she found a large t-shirt and some sweatpants on the sink. Peter's. They were huge on her, but the elastic waist on the sweats kept them on her hips. She swam in the t-shirt, but hugged it around herself anyway.

Isabel and Peter stood outside, waiting for her. Her sister's brow was still furrowed, her lips tight, and Peter's shoulders hunched. The tension was palpable.

He met her eyes. "Please, Arlene. Stay here for a few days. We need to figure this out together."

"She's coming home." Isabel shot him a hostile look.

Arlene nodded. "I'm going home." It wasn't just Isabel, though she had listened to her older sister all her life, she longed to be in her own room, in her own clothes. She felt strange, disconnected and floating, and she wanted her things to ground her. "I need to go, Peter. But I want to thank you for saving me." However he had done it.

She went to him and gazed up into his exotically beautiful face. "You should stay," he said, one hand cupping her shoulder. That warmth tingled her skin and sent a pulse of lust straight down her spine to her lower belly. God, even now, she wanted to lean forward and snuggle against him.

“Why?” she said softly. A small fantasy of him declaring his love for her and kissing her passionately on the lips played before her eyes. Pure fantasy. But was his other hand moving? It rose halfway up but then fell back to his side.

“You might be danger to others,” he finally said.

She blinked. “But not you?” *Not even your heart?*

His glacier-blue eyes looked impossibly distant. “No.”

“We’ll take precautions,” Isabel replied for her, taking Arlene’s arm.

As her sister tugged her toward the Jeep, Arlene glanced back at him. “Thank you, Peter. Thank you for saving my life.”

He stared after her, looking like he wanted to say something but that the words were bunched up behind his lips. She watched him until the Jeep pulled away, rumbling down the gravel road, the forest closing in around them.

## CHAPTER SIX

The sunlight penetrated the screen of trees and fell over the road in stripes of yellow-gold as Creed's Jeep raced down the side of the mountain. Arlene clutched the door as the vehicle hit a pothole and shook and shuddered like a beast. Constant, swirling wind from the open sides lifted her wet hair and sent damp strands winding about her neck.

"I don't trust that Peter," Isabel declared from behind her, yelling into the moving air.

Arlene snorted. "He saved my life! How ungrateful do you get, Izzy?" She looked over her shoulder at her sister.

Isabel rolled her eyes. "I'm grateful, but what the hell is he? Creed? Do you know? His aura is strange..."

The Sheriff shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his mirror glasses hiding his expression. "Look, we let him stay because...well, because he was here first, to be honest, and he's sworn he's harmless. Even the vamps agree." His badge winked in the passing light, and Arlene saw his lips press together. The smell of him burned her nose—aftershave, shampoo, deodorant soap, and something else, a wild, animal odor that she had never noticed before.

The woods, too, were filled with smells, and they hit her as they drove; the pungent acidic perfume of the cedar, the warm, rich scent of decaying wood, the dusty stink that rose from the churned gravel.

She frowned.

"What's a windigo?" she asked into the tight silence that had descended into the Jeep. The word had been buzzing around her head ever since they had started driving. A memory came too, of Peter sliding a sponge over her wet skin, around her shoulder, down her arm, brushing the soft mound of her breast.

Isabel gripped her arm tight, and leaned closer, her violet eyes huge. "Windigo! Did he say that? Creed? Is it true?"

Creed shrugged his broad shoulders, appearing uncomfortable. “He said he was harmless, and we’ve never had any trouble from him.”

“He’s a demon! One of the Lost. Are you insane? Look what he’s done to my sister?” Isabel stared at Arlene with a look she imagined she would have got if she had suddenly announced she was dying of cancer.

“I’m fine. He saved my life!” Arlene pulled Isabel’s fingers from her arm. They left pale prints on her summer-kissed skin.

Isabel sucked in a breath. “He changed you. Now I know what I’m seeing in your aura. Demon flesh... Oh God!” Tears filled her eyes. “Oh, Sweetie. No. We’ll figure something out. This can’t be permanent.” That little line formed between Isabel’s eyebrows that meant she was about to do battle.

*He changed me?* A memory came of a silver angel bending over her, his skin sparkling like it was sprayed with diamond dust. Peter?

“Izzy—” Arlene began but a buzz came over Creed’s radio interrupting them. Margy’s voice asked for him to respond.

Creed picked up the handheld. “Unit One responding. What’s up?”

Margy’s voice came back rough with static. “10-42D at Lakewater camp. Multiple. Stan is on scene. It’s bad, Creed.”

Shock hit Arlene, and there had been so many shocks today, she felt pummeled. “Dead bodies?”

Creed held the mike for a moment, and his mirror-covered glasses seemed to point at her before turning back toward the road. “My ETA is about 15 minutes. Call Dr. Jarvis,” he said in his most professionally cool voice.

“10-4. Be advised. Stan says...he thinks maybe bear.”

“Unit One out,” he said in reply, putting the handheld back on its cradle.

As the radio fell silent, Creed hit the main road out of Cedarville, whipping the Jeep around and switching on his lights. Above them, red and blue flashers began to circle, and the siren wailed so loud, Arlene had to put her hands over her ears.

*Dead bodies. Bear.* Panic gnawed at her, and fear, and disgust. It couldn’t have been her. Right? She clenched her teeth down hard.

As Creed turned onto Starflower Road, she knew he was taking her home on the way to the State Park. The tension in her belly should have eased. The last thing she needed this morning was

to go to a crime scene. Dream-images came, bloody ones, and she remembered the crimson stain she had spat from her mouth as she brushed her teeth.

Was she capable? Or had it been the werebear? Or maybe it was something else...perhaps a real bear attack or a mountain lion. In Cedarville? Who was she kidding?

She wrapped her arms around her torso, hugging Peter's t-shirt to her skin. His smell clung to the fabric.

Creed pulled up by their driveway, switching off his siren.

"Rest. I'll be around later. Deanna's inside, and Margy will be by when Rick takes over her shift."

"Creed—" Arlene started. She wanted to throw up. She longed to cry. What the hell was happening? Could she have killed...?

Creed held up his hand.

"I don't know what happened. Like I said, I'll come by later. Stay inside the house and rest. Everything will be okay." He gave her a look that said it all. He was an alpha werewolf, used to taking charge and responsibility. His big body nearly rippled with tension, and if he squeezed the steering wheel any harder, she figured he'd dent the metal.

Isabel gripped her arm. "Come on, sweetie. Let's get inside."

As she and Isabel began to walk away from the Jeep, Isabel let go of her and walked back.

She leaned close to Creed and whispered. "My sister *did not* kill those people."

"Isabel—" Creed started.

She raised a finger. "No."

Arlene swallowed. Would her sister be so adamant if she really didn't have any doubt?

Isabel took her arm, and together they walked toward the white farm house. Arlene shivered as she climbed the steps onto the porch. The old farmhouse, built before the First World War, creaked as if in greeting. The lavender and herbs planted in the front beds buzzed with bees and filled the air with the thick perfume of summer's end.

She turned, one hand on the railing, and watched as Creed drove away, lights flashing dully in the sunlight and the Jeep's tires crunching on the gravel. Her gaze wandered to the herb gardens that covered the front of their lot. She loved those neat rows of marjoram, lavender, and rosemary. She felt overwhelmed by the beauty of the echinacea, the tall, pink flowers straining upward toward the flawless blue sky. Tears came to her eyes.

Within minutes, she was sobbing.



Isabel hugged her, smelling of rose-scented shampoo. “You did nothing wrong. Whatever happened, you didn’t do it,” she whispered into Arlene’s hair.

“How do you know?”

Before her sister could answer, the door opened and Deanna, Creed’s mate, hurried out to them. Her dark hair fell around her shoulders in waves, and her small body radiated energy and tension. “Arlene! We were so worried.” The wolf smell clung to her as well, and Arlene wrinkled her nose. God, she had never noticed that musky scent before. Deanna paused, as if she too smelled something, and her eyes lit with an amber glow. “What happened?”

“I’ll fill you in, but let’s get Arlene to bed.” Isabel turned, keeping Arlene’s arm around her shoulders and headed into the cool interior of the house. Wood floors gleamed mutely in the filtered light that fell through the blinds covering the windows, and the gentle odors of dried herbs and flowers mingled with the perfume scents of her sister’s candles and homemade soaps. Everything was familiar, and yet, everything was different. She stared at the home she had left yesterday morning, at the mail on the side table, at the couch she had picked up at a garage sale, at the computer in the corner where she did the accounts for Isabel’s business. All familiar. All different.

*Because I’m different*, she thought, biting her lip.

Deanna reached to help her on the other side, her engagement ring sparkling, and Arlene moved away. She gently shook off her sister as well. “I just need to be alone. Please.” More tears pressed behind her eyes but she was tired of crying. Tired of feeling weak and confused. “I’m going to go lie down.”

“Good!” Isabel said, but her enthusiasm sounded faked, and hurt filled her eyes. “Go lay down, Sweetie.”

Arlene paused on the first step, wondering if she should say something—even a simple thank you—but when she glanced back at her sister and Deanna, who both gazed after her with such worry, she found the words missing. She shook her head and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Her body felt bruised and battered. Her spirits sunk down below her feet, maybe all the way through the center of the earth. Maybe all the way to China.

Her room was quiet and neat. Cream colored walls soothed her, and the white coverlet over the bed called to her. Collapsing backwards, she lay with her eyes closed and concentrated on her breathing, taking one slow inhale at a time. Peter’s scent overwhelmed her on the borrowed clothes she wore, so she dragged herself up once more and changed. Her own t-shirt and a pair of sleeping

shorts fit fine, and they brought no memories. That's what she wanted. She lay back down and wondered if she had ever been so tired in her whole life.

"Maybe it was just a senseless attack," Isabel's voice came up the stairs, even though her sister must have been speaking in a normal tone. "Maybe Arlene was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." She heard the floorboards creak as Isabel and Deanna moved to sit down. Shit! Was the weirdness never going to end? She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and wondered if she would go mad now. Wasn't that an old Edgar Allen Poe story, about the man who could hear too much?

"You know better," Deanna said softly. "In our world, it's dangerous to make assumptions. But tell me what happened, she smells...odd. Like bear. And demon."

"Demon! That would be Peter. Windigo. One of the Lost," Isabel said, her voice resonating with her scorn. "She had talked about him...but how could I have suspected? Why the hell is he here, living among humans?"

"The Lost?"

"The demons that live here, on the mortal plane. Permanently. They have severed their ties to the Firelords. They wander and owe no allegiance. He...contaminated her. I can see the demonic influence..." Her voice broke and she began to cry. "My sister! I need my books! That's what I need." Isabel stomped from the family room to her library.

Arlene picked up the pillow and wrapped it around her head. She didn't want to hear any more. Her sister's pain was a burden she just couldn't take. Oh, Isabel! She wanted to shake her. She always assumed the worst. Demon? Was that what Peter was? She thought of her last sight of him. His black hair loose, his brown-gold face tight with concern. The tension eased from her shoulders as exhaustion took hold of her, and she sunk down into strange dreams.

She awoke slowly. Shadows filled her room, and she knew the day must be waning. And it was hot. Lord, was it hot. She sat up and ran a hand through her hair, which she expected to find dripping with sweat, but instead found dry. When she lowered her fingers, her heart stuttered in her chest, fear coiled around it.

Her flesh glowed white. Her nails were black and curved, and her veins stood out in blue lines. She slammed her hand down on the bed, as if to force the circulation, and she broke through something hard on the coverlet. Like a layer of glass. It cracked over the surface and shimmered in the half-light. Ice. She had been lying on a bed of ice. She tumbled off the side in surprise, landing

on her bottom on the floor. Frost grew on the window. It spread over the walls and coated the top of the dresser, crackling and popping as it went.

She jumped from the bed—a scream lodged at the back of her throat—her only thought to flee. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and knew she was no longer human.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Peter watched the house from the patch of forest growing at the back. With his face to the evening breeze, he thought he stood a good chance of going undetected by the alpha's mate. He had seen her moving in the kitchen, talking to Arlene's sister, the windows of the house growing brighter as the sun faded to the west. Twilight came and covered the land in a grey veil, and the woods grew shadowed and secretive. Rabbits grazed at the edge of the lawn, and he ignored their scattered movements, just as he disregarded the coyote prowling the woods behind him. Their living heartbeats were part of the music of life around him.

He waited with infinite patience. It was his nature to be unwearied, to stand still for long periods of time—weeks, months, even decades—unless hunger and the need to kill stirred in him. The demon blood that pumped in his veins was like ice water...

Blinking, he realized that he felt something. Regret. A long time had passed since he had reveled in that emotion. Had he done the right thing?

But the thought of allowing Arlene to die remained unbearable. *Millions die*, he scolded himself. *Why save her?* She was beautiful, sure. She was kind. And so were others. What was it about her that held his attention so? Made it impossible for him to consider her death. He thought of her smile as she stepped hesitantly into his lookout tower, the wind blowing back her gold hair and tugging at those long feather earrings she liked to wear. A part of him had eased at the sight of her, some unremembered pain lessoned, some hole in his heart filled. As she moved about, chattering and making tea, he had felt...at home.

*Strange.*

But what would he do if the madness caught her and didn't let her go? *Like Timothy. Will you be able to kill the woman you can't bear to see die?* He shook his head. He wouldn't let that happen to her. He'd be there for her. Guide her.

Something moved in the woods behind him. He listened. No heartbeat. Only one thing came so silently, and yet moved no blood. The vampire approached him out of the velvety grey gloaming, emerging from the shadows as if they parted like a curtain to reveal him.

He had his hands in the pockets of his worn, black jeans and wore a faded rock concert t-shirt that said: *Music for the Masses*.

"Hello, Henri," Peter said calmly. "Has your Mistress ordered my death?" He wondered which of them would win in a fight. The vampire had killed demons before and had been adept at it for many centuries. But Peter wasn't some insane monster lost in bloodlust.

Henri waved a pale hand, his eyes unfathomable in his still face. For a dead man, he could look quite animated, nearly human, but right now he wasn't trying to pretend. He strolled silently across the forest floor, his black boots leaving no prints on the fallen pine needles. His wheat-blond hair glowed mutely in the shadowy light.

"My Mistress is not involved. Yet," the vampire said this carefully, without much inflection, but Peter knew what he was trying to say. No one wanted the Mistress of Seattle involved in this. Or anywhere near Cedarville.

Henri peered at the house, his eyes glittering oddly in the twilight. "Two hikers were killed by the lake. Brothers. I smelled bear at the crime scene. So did Creed. He's tracking it now with his pack."

Peter tightened his jaw. "It had to be Cecile." Of course, it did. Arlene wouldn't...not in any state. But then he would have said the same thing of his younger brother. Timothy had been a gentle boy, only fifteen when the creature called them into the woods. *Great Spirit! No. Not Arlene*. He narrowed his eyes at Henri. "Cecile is a killer. Look what she did to Arlene."

"Well, I didn't see what she did to Arlene, but I'll take your word for it." Henri shrugged. "Still, this was panicked. A feeding frenzy. If you know what I mean. Something like a newborn vamp would do."

Peter stood straighter, the chill in his veins growing. "It wasn't her."

"And if it was? You know the rules. No human deaths. I am the local enforcer—"

Peter glowered at him, his hands growing claws and a chill gathering in the air around them. Henri met his eyes and stood his ground. He looked small and young, like a thin man in his mid-twenties of no particular height and no great strength. But only a fool would have underestimated him. His fathomless eyes watched Peter as if he were a child's science experiment. Curious, but not afraid.

“You would kill her.” Peter stated this as fact.

“Unhappily, of course. But I would.” He held up a narrow-fingered hand, and his too-still face animated with a sympathetic frown. “Look, let’s see how this pans out.”

“If you come after her, you’ll be coming after me as well.” Peter could hear the power growing in his voice, edging past his tenuous control. It didn’t seem to affect the vampire though.

Henri stared unblinking at Peter and then gave a firm nod. “Very well. Good to know.” He stepped back into the shadows, fading from view. His voice came out of the gloom though, one more time. “Keep an eye on her, Peter. I’m off to follow the trail, and I hope it doesn’t lead me back here.”

Peter turned back to the watch the farmhouse. The windows shone gold out into the grey-violet yard and he could see Margy, the silver-haired werewolf, moving about the kitchen. Deanna stood nearby and they were talking. Isabel wasn’t in sight, but he could hear her heartbeat in the house. Towards the front, he guessed. Upstairs, Arlene’s heart sped up. She was awake...and scared.

A tickle climbed his spine.

She was using her powers—probably by accident. His gaze sharpened as one of the windows of the upper floor turned white. Indoor frost. He ran forward, his skin draining of color. He jumped as he reached the house and landed easily on the sloped roof over the porch with a quiet thump. He ran toward the window.

\* \* \* \*

Arlene wanted her sister. Fear shook her body—and the room swirled around her. Ice coated everything and yet she wasn’t cold. That’s when she heard the heartbeats downstairs. Three. What she wanted from them, she didn’t know. It was like no need she had felt in her short life. Strange sensations rattled her as her body ached oddly, and when she held up her hands to see her arms, her skin shone pure white, like moonlight, and sparkled, as if dipped in diamond dust. Her fingers looked longer too, stretched out and strange. Her nails curved black and sharp. Claws.

She glanced into the mirror again and saw the strange, white woman with glowing silver eyes and platinum hair. Her eyes were too big, too reflective, like mirrors inside her skull, and her teeth appeared longer, sharper. A scream built up behind her throat, but she swallowed it down.

It was as if she had suffered hypothermia, and yet she felt strong. She went to her bed and lifted it. The entire thing came up as if it weighed nothing. On impulse she threw it, and the mattress

crashed into the wall, the noise startling her. She whirled around as she heard the heartbeats move downstairs. Her sister was coming. Oh, thank God! She wanted to see Isabel. Her sister would know what to do.

“Arlene? Are you all right?” Isabel called as she came up the stairs.

“Isabel,” she whispered, drawing out the name, her voice sounding strange to her ears. It was breathy and chilled, like winter wind blowing through bare branches. “Isabel,” she called again.

Her sister opened the door and wandered in, but she wasn’t herself. She appeared in a daze, her eyes wide and fixed, her mouth slack. She stopped in the center of the room, not seeming to see the mattresses leaning against the far wall, blocking the window, or the bed frame fallen empty to the floor. The ice and chill brought goose bumps to her arms, but her face didn’t register the cold, nor her arms cross or her teeth chatter. She stood as if in a dream, her violet eyes empty of expression or thought.

“Isabel,” Arlene said in despair. “Wake up!”

She took a few steps to her sister’s side and gripped her arms. The flesh was so warm. It filled her with a different need. Hunger like she had never felt rippled through her. Her sister’s heartbeat called to her. Her stomach churned with pain. God, she had to eat. The soft skin in her hands tempted her.

She would rip open her sister and tear her to bits. Horror climbed her throat with poking, painful stabs, and her hands opened. “Run,” she whispered to Isabel. “Oh, God, run.”

Glass breaking barely distracted her. She gritted her teeth, but they didn’t grind or fit together. They cut into her lips. Blood, her own blood, ran cold down her chin. Isabel staggered back, eyes still empty, and began to flee. Some instinct rose in Arlene that she couldn’t control. She jumped forward and grabbed her sister around the neck.

“Arlene,” a voice called to her. A rival. That was her first thought, and she crouched with inhuman speed, the room whirling about her as she focused on the invader. Isabel came to the floor with her, still held by the neck. Her sister choked and began to weakly struggle.

The figure had burst through the window, flattening the mattress and landing on top of it in a crouch. He unfurled his long, near-naked body, white-silver hair blowing about his muscular form. Only his pants clung to him, barely covering the pale, hairless skin descending off his flat belly. His chest rippled with muscles, and a different kind of hunger filled her. She wanted to mate. The feral impulse of it was nearly as strong as her hunger.

“Let her go,” he said, and his power washed over her.

His eyes gazed at her with only the hint of blue in the shining field of white.

Peter. She remembered. Her two parts battled inside her, the memory of before and a pure, wild instinct. That instinct told her to rend and tear, to call to the other two heartbeats who even now started to walk up the stairs, and to eat them all. To tear into their flesh and bury her face into their hot blood and soft meat. Sickened, she let her sister go and crawled away, across the room. She had to get away.

Isabel seemed to shake herself, like a sleepwalker waking. Then she gripped the amulet at her neck and backed up. She frantically whispered a spell of protection, calling forth the earth spirits that guarded this land and the house. Arlene knew what they were; she even knew the spell, though it had never worked for her. She had never even seen the spirits her sister insisted lived all around them, but they rose now before her eyes. They were sparks of light—yellow, sunny light—and they danced and sparkled in front of Isabel like a shimmering wall between her and the rest of the room.

Deanna and Margy came to the door, Margy blurring as she shifted to wolf form. At one time that might have amazed Arlene, but she had seen enough wonder for the day. She clenched her elongated hands into her lap and concentrated on breathing. With each exhale the room grew colder. Their flesh grew warmer. The hunger burned inside her, painful and roiling. She cried with it, dry sobs shaking her changed body.

“What did you do to her?” Isabel asked, her voice resonating with fear. “What the hell is going on?”

“To save her life I had to...change her.”

“You gave her your demon flesh!” Isabel yelled. “I know what you are, and you’ve given it to her.” The spirits flew agitated around Isabel, beating their wings and growing brighter. Deanna moved beside her, unaware of them, her dark hair covered now with frost and her body shaking with cold. She crouched though, ready to defend Isabel. A deep, menacing growl rippled out of her throat. Her eyes flashed gold.

The mirror cracked from the cold, and frost grew around the doorway. Margy howled, sitting back on her haunches. She called to the pack. More would come now. Arlene cried, and the tears froze on her white skin. More! She wanted them all to come. Her hunger demanded more and more.

“Take me out of here,” she said to Peter, slowly, forcing each word out.

Isabel stepped closer. “No! Stay. I don’t care what you are! I can help you.”



She banished the spirits with a wave of her hand and went to Arlene's side, kneeling down. She put her skin so close, and the warmth called. The pulse beat at her neck and down to her chest where the heart pumped fast. It seemed to Arlene that she could hear the blood whooshing through the muscle. She wanted to taste it. She turned her face away. "Get me out of here!" she yelled through grinding, too-sharp teeth. Her own blood filled her mouth, and it was cold. Like ice-water.

Peter picked her up, despite the growling of the werewolves. Isabel didn't fight him though. She sat back on her heels, staring after Arlene. Whatever she had heard in Arlene's tone had seemed to convince her. "Come back then, when you can..." she murmured, tears filling her eyes. She turned to Peter. "Can she come back? Have you taken my sister from me?"

"We'll see."

"Isabel! Are you going to let him take her?" Deanna cried, voice breaking in the cold. "What the hell is he?"

Arlene wrapped her arms around Peter's bare chest. She pressed her face against the cold skin of his shoulder and found comfort in the solid strength of him. It was as if the sea pulled at her, and he was all she had to hold onto.

"One of the Lost," Isabel answered, her voice filled with grief.

Arlene felt herself slipping away. Peter became less solid, and her thoughts jumbled, growing confused. She wanted to eat. She wanted to fuck. She needed to kill and chew skin, bones, and blood.

Arms held her but living things were close. Their hearts raced. Blood pumped in their veins, crying for her. What held her were like bands of steel. She fought and suddenly they were falling—no, he was jumping and they landed on grass. She could smell the little living things beneath the earth, moles, worms, and a garter snake sleeping in the cool evening.

She needed to eat. She would have eaten a mole. Or the snake. But then the bear roared and she knew what she wanted.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Peter jogged into the night-shrouded forest with Arlene cradled in his arms. The warm August air wrapped itself around him, and the ferns and brambles brushed at his legs as he moved deeper into the strip of wild land. He paused as he smelled Cecile. She was close. The thick musky scent drifted on the gentle breeze, and he stared into the deeper shadows beneath the trees. How close was she?

Arlene stirred, her eyes widening as she caught the scent. Behind them, two heartbeats came frantically across the yard. Werewolves. He turned to see the alpha's mate and the older wolf—Margy—running toward him. They were both changed and beautiful in the bestial shapes. He heard the echoing howl of the rest of the pack, and he knew he didn't have much time.

He set Arlene gently down on her feet but held her shoulders. She was more than beautiful in this state. Her hair shone silver-white, like the moonlight given life and form, her eyes mirror bright and shining. Still he could see the human woman she had been. Her black, curved nails dug into his arms. "Peter..." she forced out. The muscles at her neck flexed and rippled. "Don't let me kill them. Please. Oh, God, Peter...the hunger..."

"I know," he said. "I know. But I need you to run with me. Can you stay with me? Concentrate on that. We need to run."

The two female wolves approached now, growling, their eyes glowing gold. They wouldn't attack, he knew, they were just there to hold them in place so the alpha could arrive and decide what to do with them. Peter didn't have time to wait for Creed.

He was about to pull Arlene with him when Cecile lumbered out of the brush, stomping down blackberry brambles and shaking off the thorny branches. The huge bear launched itself at them, gathering speed and roaring. Her teeth flashed white in the moonlight.

Peter sucked in a breath to try and stop her, but the two wolves threw themselves between Arlene and the bear. They leaped high, the small female clinging to the huge bear's back and trying to grip her by the neck. The older one stood in front and danced forward, snapping and growling.

The bear roared, the sound echoing through the woods.

Peter tugged at Arlene. "Now. We run now."

Holding her hand, he fled east, letting the demon blood in his veins pump cold energy into his limbs. At first, Arlene stumbled beside him, struggling to keep up, but soon she flew along at his side. With just their hands touching, they raced through the forest, leaping logs and jumping streams. A strange, unknown feeling filled him. Was it joy? He wasn't sure, but despite all that had happened he found himself grinning. Arlene was with him, keeping up and laughing wildly. They ran like they knew each bump in the land, each deadfall, each moss-covered boulder. The smells of wolf and bear were left behind and all that called to Peter now was to get to the high places, to show Arlene the wonders of what she had become.

And of course, she needed food.

They were already a few thousand feet up into the mountains, when they startled the stag. He froze the magnificent creature with a word and broke the warm neck with a single twist of his hand. He felt that familiar moment of sadness as the life disappeared from those beautiful dark eyes. Arlene stood nearby, shaking with hunger. He was amazed by her self-control until he saw the horrible agony that filled her. He ripped open the neck and when the hot blood fell to the ground, he saw her self-control disappear. The demon rose in her eyes and something else too—the bear. He could see it as a pale shadow around her and in the gold shimmers that streaked through her silvery-bright eyes. She landed on the animal and ate the meat raw.

When her hunger was sated, he led her to a stream where they both washed. The cold water would have chilled a human despite the warm night, but she seemed to relish it. She crawled into the rushing water, and lay on the exposed stones, letting the cool current cover her and splash around her shoulders. Her eyes were more human now, her face softened and familiar. The moonlight lit her skin and t-shirt she wore clung to her breasts, her nipples dark and pointed beneath the thin fabric.

She shook her head. "I can't believe I did that."

He tore his gaze from her breasts, surprised by her amused tone.

"I don't even like my steak raw."

He gave a soft laugh, shocked by the power of his relief. He knew the madness wasn't gone forever, but to see her come back to him... He hadn't even known how scared he was.

*Oh, Timothy, if only I had known how to save you too.*

He reached out and touched her chin—he knew it was a bad idea, with his own lust rising in him like a flood pushing against a dam, but her smooth skin begged for his fingers, and his hand moved before he could resist. He cupped her face. “It *will* get better. I promise.”

A frown turned her lips, and she tilted her cheek against his hand, rubbing against the rough pads of his fingers. “You don’t think I killed those hikers, do you? Please say I didn’t.” The shadow of doubt that crossed her face tore at his heart.

“Of course, you didn’t,” he said with force. “Listen to me. You didn’t. I would have smelled human blood on you the next morning.”

She stared at him. “Could I have? Could I have done that?”

“You didn’t.”

“But I don’t remember...”

He saw the despair gathering behind her eyes, and he couldn’t bear it. He pulled her forward and kissed her sweet lips. She tasted of deer and...honey. He took her mouth and held her with his hands cupped around her face. The dam broke and his own hunger washed over him in a rampaging torrent. He gave in and pulled her wet body from the stream, cradling her on his lap while his mouth plundered hers. He pushed his tongue against her teeth, and then into the warm nectar of her open lips, darting forward and then back. Her hands dug into his hair, and tugged him closer.

Around them the breeze whispered through the pines and the stream babbled over the rocks, and far away there came the howling of wolves. Peter felt Arlene press against him, the nipples beneath her wet t-shirt begging to be caressed and her bottom wiggling on his lap. He wanted to throw her down right there on the pine needles and moss and have her—do what part of him had wanted to do from the moment he had met her.

But that wasn’t how he wanted their first time to be. She needed more than just a fuck on the ground. She deserved more.

He broke their kiss, and her small cry of disappointment made him smile. “Not here, sweetheart. Let me show you something first...”

“Silly boy. I want you now. How long are you going to tease me?” She grabbed his ears and pulled him down once more to kiss her, her sleek little tongue darting into his parted lips and causing a firestorm down his belly and into his crotch.

“No.” Centuries of self-control gave him the strength to gently push her back. He didn’t let go completely though; he held her arms and drew her up. “First, we run. Run with me, Arlene. Let me show you that there is more to our transformation than the need to eat flesh. Come.”

He pulled her along with him and soon she sprinted at his side, up through the trees, over boulders, and glacier-cold streams. She laughed as they leapt a crevice, and then scrambled right behind him up the side of an old rock fall. Her lithe body was even more agile than his, and soon she was leaping from stone to stone ahead of him.

The moon had set and the stars were fading when they reached the high, alpine meadows of the upper slopes. Under the violet-tinged sky they walked lightly over the soft grass, the blue lupine brushing their legs and the patches of Indian paintbrush glowing pink in the dawn's first blush. She turned to smile at him, her hair dry now and flowing gold over her shoulders and her eyes the same color as the wild lupine.

"I love it up here. Why does the air feel so good?"

"The thinner the air the better for us," he answered, enjoying her wonder. "Keep going. I have a place I want to show you."

She nodded and brushed her fingers over the flowers. "Have you ever considered living in Nepal? I feel wonderful up here..."

He laughed. "Actually yes. I probably could make a good living as a mountain climber, guiding rich men up the slopes. But I...I guess I like the Cascades. These mountains are where I was born, and I feel at home here."

She rushed back to him and took his arm, smiling, her eyes sparkling. "Where are we going, Peter? Tell me. You could just make love to me here, in the meadow. What could be better than that?" She pressed against him, her breasts soft and her lips parted.

"Next time," he said softly and reached up to touch a finger to her nose.

"I'm going to hold you to that," she said, a sudden seriousness passing over her features. Then she grinned and released him. "Race you..."

And she ran.

He gave a startled laugh and chased after her.

## CHAPTER NINE

Arlene caught her breath at the beauty of the high vale. She paused in her steps, and breath-stealing awe replaced the exhilaration of her race up the mountain. The lake pooled in the steep hollow, and the still water reflected with mirror perfection the juts of granite that thrust up into the dawn-pink sky. A massive cliff of white took up the eastern edge—a glacier caught between the peaks and from a cave in the ice, a stream meandered down through tumbled stones and emerald grass.

“It’s beautiful,” she cried as the cold, high wind tugged at her hair and brought tears to her eyes.

Cecile and werewolves seemed distant from her, as if they were all part of some other world. It was as if she and Peter had come to a new land, one just for them.

Peter caught her hand in his. He smiled, his eyes pale and frosty silver, and her heart thumped in her chest. Ah! He was beautiful, and a tickle of lust stirred below her belly button.

They skirted around the lake, and she found the thin air soothing. She sucked in each breath and felt more alive and alert than she had since...well, since ever. She couldn’t think of a time, even when she was wholly human, that her body had responded so well, moved so gracefully. She had the energy of three cups of triple-shot lattes, without the caffeine jitters.

*But I’m part demon now. What about my soul?*

Her feet stumbled, and Peter glanced back at her. Turning her face to the wind, she searched inside, trying to find a hole—something missing. Could one feel their soul?

Fish darted in the rock shadows near the shore of the lake, and she followed them with her gaze. Wonder and love for the world still filled her, and it was those feelings that she had always associated with her faith.

Though perhaps a bit of hunger stirred as well. She moved her hand to her belly and looked over at Peter. He watched her with raised eyebrows, but was silent and patient. She took up his hand again and nodded. “Let’s go.”

Whatever the state of her soul, she would deal with it as she got used to her new self.

Only one dark thought bothered her. What if she had been the one to kill those hikers?

She squeezed Peter's hand. He believed her innocent, and she would trust him. For now.

The soft grass that grew to the shore of the lake cushioned her bare feet, and she could feel the soil beneath, the loam of the earth—the tiny life forms living there sending up pulses through her soles. Wind whipped down out of the crevices of the glacier, bringing with it the perfume of ice and minerals, of thin air and rocky pinnacles. She let it wrap its cold hands around her face like a lover and tug at her torn t-shirt and loose shorts.

Peter's hair lifted like a streaming, black banner, and her eyes devoured the muscles that moved on his bare back and how his khaki pants clung to his narrow hips.

The ice cave loomed in front of them, tall enough for Peter to walk in without ducking. As the cold walls enclosed them, the trickling of the water over the stones grew louder and the air grew still. Blue and silver light filled the tunnel, threading through with sparkling shimmers and diamond glitter. A few more steps and the walls opened up to a huge cavern inside the ice. *Cave was the wrong word, this was a cathedral.*

Arlene's feet stopped, and her mouth opened but no words came. She had never seen any place more stunning.

The light fell through the high, buttressed ceiling, and danced over the ice columns and palisades with silvery reflections and gleaming rainbow sparkles that bedazzled her eyes. It was huge...palatial...and when Peter looked back at her, she saw pride and joy. "You built this place," she said, her voice in that whisper one saved for the sacred.

"I did," he answered and put his arm around her. "Come further." He guided her along, up a ramp of ice and over a narrow, delicate bridge.

"It's like Superman's secret hideout," she said, her lips easing into a smile.

He glanced over at her. "Really? Superman, huh? Well, I do wish I could fly. Imagine how the air feels at thirty thousand feet..."

They stopped at the exact center of the cavern, and beam of light shone on his long, black hair and gold-tan face. He tugged her against him, and she snuggled there, pressing her breasts against his hard chest. He gazed down at her, tall and stately. Need and hunger uncoiled inside her in a warm glow. She reached up and slid her fingers over his sculpted cheeks and up into his hair. The long, black silk filled her hands and fell sensuously down her wrists and forearms.

He gazed at her with hooded eyes, a silvery sheen now ringing his pupils. "I want you, Arlene." His voice resonated deep and velvety.

She exhaled, trembling, as if she was seventeen again and experiencing her first time. Of course, this was much better.

"I want you, too." Heat came to her cheeks, but she met his eyes. Could she read his face? His expression seemed tender, soft. She wanted to memorize this moment. It was for them alone, and nothing else in the world existed.

His hand moved to her shoulder and caught up the fabric of her damp and torn t-shirt. The pads of his fingers were hard and rough and made her tingle where they touched her. He slid his hand beneath the shirt and over her shoulder, tugging gently and pulling downward. A slight rip, and her shoulder and breast were exposed. Still moving, his hand caressed down her arm, and it took with it the tatters of her t-shirt, until her chest was completely exposed. She was left in her loose sleeping shorts and panties.

She thought he would rip them away as well, but instead his hands moved up her bare back and over her shoulder blades. He pulled her closer and dipped his head down to kiss the skin covering her collarbone. Light, gentle kisses moved up her neck, and his tongue darted out to taste her. She tilted her head and felt the pulse beat hard in her neck. Between her legs, an ache began that made her push her hips against him.

He stepped back. The muscles on his chest were a sculptor's dream, rippled and tight, the skin gleaming golden and hairless.

She stopped him when he reached for his pants. "Let me," she said softly. She pressed her small hands against his chest and ran them down, over the bumpy ripples of his stomach. She leaned forward, surprised by her own boldness, and licked one of his nipples. His hands tightened on her shoulders, and she grinned playfully up at him. His pupils now danced with silver light. She ran her tongue down his chest, kissing and sucking as she lowered herself to her knees.

The stained pants he wore had to go. She could smell the deer blood on them, and despite how this heightened her hunger, she wanted him bare and exposed. With no difficulty, she ripped open his pants and freed him from the confines of the khaki cotton. His boxers, soft and black, went down as well, and she ran her hands down his legs, feeling every muscle jump beneath her firm massage.

"Arlene, you are going to drive me mad..." he muttered, and she smiled up at him.

"That's the plan." She let her gaze fall on his upright staff. Good grief!



“Are you sure that will fit inside me?” she asked, widening her eyes in mock distress. He laughed.

“Don’t worry.” He lifted her up and kissed her again, their naked flesh rubbing against each other. She wrapped her legs around him, and he carried her a few steps to a curved ledge with filigree rising behind it. He laid her down on the hard ice, and she wiggled her bottom as he stood between her legs. Was he going to take her now? She was more than ready.

But he wasn’t done yet with foreplay. He knelt down and began by kissing the inside of her calf. He ran his tongue on the taut skin behind her knee, and she jerked as sensation jolted up her leg. Her eyes closed as he traveled up to her thigh, nibbling as he went, running the edge of his teeth along her sensitive skin.

Then he was kissing her on her most sensitive spot, and she couldn’t think, she could only feel. Her hips bucked against him, and his hands gripped her to hold her steady. His tongue dove into her cleft and played with the hard nub of her clit. She nearly screamed with passion.

At last though, he rose above her, looming like a great shadow. A curtain of his black hair fell to one side, tickling her shoulder. He nuzzled her breast and took her nipple in his mouth, his tongue dancing over it as she shuddered and wiggled beneath him. She could feel the head of his staff pressing against her, but he didn’t penetrate. Not yet. She took his erection in her hand and began to pull on it, the flesh like velvet-coated steel in her fingers. He growled and possessed her lips in a kiss that was no longer gentle or soft. Now he consumed her. His tongue didn’t ask for entry—it stormed the gates and went deep into her mouth.

One of his hands moved between her legs and his long fingers explored her opening. He slid one finger inside her tight sheath, and she gasped against his kiss. Another finger nudged the opening, and then both set up a rhythm that dove deep into her body.

He pressed down on her now, heavy and dominating. She clutched her hands into his hair and pulled him down even more, taking his kiss and demanding with her own. She wrapped her legs around him as his fingers pulled free, and at last, his massive staff slid inside her. She stretched around it, and almost panicked. He filled her to capacity and yet there was more of him. He pushed further and further and she moaned, but there was no pain. Her body slipped around his like a tight glove.

When she thought she could take no more, he pushed that last inch, and she groaned.

“I wanted to do this from the moment I saw you,” he said as he stilled. She had to catch her breath. She had never felt so stretched and yet so satisfied.

She shook her head. “I didn’t think you wanted me...”

He chuckled deep in his throat. “What do you think now?” He began to move, and she clenched her inner muscles, making his eyes lose their focus. He inhaled sharply and drove deep. She could hear the wet sound of lovemaking as her body accepted his. Thrusting into her, he pressed his mouth against hers once more, and now neither of them was gentle. He possessed her, claiming her with every inch of his massive body. His tongue filled her mouth while his cock filled her sheath.

It seemed to go on forever. He pushed into her again and again, deeper and deeper, and she climbed towers of pleasure. The hard ice at her back should have hurt her, but it didn’t. Instead, she relished the burn of the cold and the shining blue-silver ceiling overhead. She tightened her legs, riding the waves of his lovemaking, the pounding thrusts that took her to pinnacles she had never dreamed existed.

And then, at last, she peaked. She cried out, her voice echoing against the ceiling of glacier ice.

Pleasure washed over her, shuddering and powerful. She never came like this. Lights twirled before her eyes, and her entire body clenched in waves.

He pumped inside her, pushing deep, and she could feel the release of his seed. Had she ever felt such a thing before? A cold gush of ice into her womb...and yet it wasn’t uncomfortable or unnatural.

She relished it.

## CHAPTER TEN

Arlene snuggled up against Peter, contentment washing over her in waves.

He rolled over, pulling her with him, until she lay on top of him while his arms held her tight. Their silence lingered soft and sweet around them, like a blanket, and his hand caressed down her back. When he finally spoke, his voice rumbled beneath the ear she had pressed to his chest.

“You see, it isn’t all bad to be what we are.”

She raised her head to peer at his beautiful, exotic face. How distant he had always seemed, but not now. “Are we really demons?” She hadn’t wanted to ask that question, but it slipped out. Talk about a mood-breaker. She winced afterwards but didn’t take it back. She had questions, and he had answers. Didn’t she deserve to know just what the heck she was now?

He sat up, shifting her to his lap and still holding her tight. His expression grew less relaxed, and she saw the tension in his jaw. “We can be demonic. It is said that the first windigo was a human who ate the flesh of a snow demon.”

“How did it happen to you?” she asked quietly, unsure if he would tell her. His arms tightened for a moment but then he sighed.

“I was a man grown, but I was visiting my father and younger brother. My mother had passed on to the spirit land—and my father was lost without her. She had been the strength of our family. He wandered, hunting and trapping, and my brother talked non-stop about traveling east, back to Quebec, to find his paternal grandparents and relatives. He thought he could be a white man and wanted to see their villages.” He gave a sad smile and shook his head. His eyes though, when he glanced at her, were haunted. She took his hand off her stomach and held it tight between her own.

“Don’t tell me if this hurts you—” He was such a strong man—it was hard to see the pain in his expression.

“No, I should. This is something you should hear.” His fingers closed around hers, but his eyes drifted up, toward the ceiling.

“My brother and I were in the cabin, and it was deep winter. My father was overdue by a week—he had gone to check his traps. We had not yet worried over him though, but that night, we heard him calling from the woods. He called us by name. I remember it was snowing, and the isolated snowflakes drifted out of the sky like the first few scouts exploring a new land.”

He shuddered. “When we came upon them, the creature stood behind my father. He was like nothing I had seen—tall and stretched out with bones like hard angles, and a skull with sunken eyes. Just the glitter of silver emerged from those black sockets.”

“Was it...the same as us?”

“Older and more pure-blooded, I think. The more demon flesh that is consumed the more power one gets. This one had taken more than a bite. He had consumed his maker in full... “ His lips pressed tight together and he gave a small shake. “That is another gruesome tale for a different time.”

She thought maybe she could skip that one.

“My father controlled us with our names, and fed us his own flesh. I remember how red his blood was. The older one just watched, muttering to itself. We were to be its tribe, you see. It wanted a family of sorts.” His eyes met her briefly. “Of course, it was mad.”

She longed to comfort him, but didn’t have the words. Her jaw tightened, and her throat barely swallowed.

“At first, we were all lost to hunger, and we ate from the bounty of the wilderness. There was a great deal of bounty in those days—elk, wolf, bear, cougar—we ate them all and our new power thrilled us. We became like wild things, naked and feral, sleeping in rocky caves and drinking from streams. I don’t know how much time passed, but eventually my father and brother killed a hunter from one of the valley tribes. They ate him.” His voice fell. “I managed to hold myself back. But I wanted to join them. I wanted... The call of blood was so strong and the older one, he laughed. He said we were ready.”

“No!”

“Yes. He wanted us to clean out the villages from the mountains to the sea. He wanted nothing left of humans. I argued, but they ignored me. The day they went forward, they used their combined power to hold me back. I struggled... I fought for hours. At last, I broke their hold and I ran after them...”

He covered his face with his hands. “Too late,” came his voice, low and brutal with remembered grief. “The first village my father had led them to was my mother’s. My aunts. My

cousins. I came too late to save any of them. My brother..." He shook his head, and lifted his hands. Tears welled in his eyes. They froze as they leaked and sparkled like diamonds.

"What did you do?" she whispered, her heart in her throat. What anguish he must have felt. She couldn't imagine. And yet, she had almost killed her beloved sister. Would she have then gone on into Cedarville? She knew how powerfully the madness had gripped her.

He rested his head back against the filigree ice. "I hunted them down. I vowed to destroy all three of them, before they could kill any more humans. I wasn't quite successful. Two more villages were wiped out, but eventually I...I stopped them. I had to murder my father and brother. I had no choice."

She buried her head against his chest and held him so tight she feared she might break him. "I'm so sorry. So sorry, Peter! What a horrible story."

"I'm sorry to tell it. I should have waited—"

"No. I'm glad you told me." Though part of her wasn't glad. Her imagination filled in the details he left out. To have to kill his own brother! Tears blurred her eyes. "But what about the old one?"

He sighed. "That took longer. We hunted each other for years...decades. At least during that time he held off from his plans of genocide. Instead, I kept him busy. We tracked each other north and played cat and mouse games all the way to the wastelands of the endless snow. At last, I caught him after killing a herd of elk—he must have eaten ten. He was at his lowest ebb of power, belly distended, a pool of blood around him on the ice. And he was tired. Tired of living, I think."

The silence settled between them, and she let that stillness take away the last echo of his terrible words. Then she shook herself like a dog shedding water and climbed to her feet. "Come on," she offered her hand. "Come swimming with me."

He raised his eyebrows. "Swimming?"

She gave him a quick kiss on the mouth. "Please. Let's not think anymore this morning. Plenty of time for that later, and my head needs a break."

He nodded, some of the shadows of grief leaving his expression.

"Last one in is a rotten egg!" She gave him another quick kiss before turning on her heel and running. She heard him chase her, a laugh bursting from his surprised mouth.

Through the tunnel and out into the bright morning sunlight she raced, and then down the stream bed, hopping over the rocks until she splashed into the pristine pool of glacier melt.

After a few steps, the shelf of stone dropped away, and deep cobalt darkness opened up beneath her feet. She turned in the water as Peter walked in after her, and when he reached the deep rift, he dove with barely a ripple. The sun shone on the water with dancing gold reflections, and it was hard to see where the rock, sky, and lake met and which was which. Arlene laughed in pure joy and wonder. What an amazing day she was having—and to think, only hours before she had been lost in despair.

He tugged on her foot and she startled. “Why you!” She dove after him, surprised at how well she swam now. Her body cut through the cold water like a seal’s, and she chased the flickering deep shadows, wild brown trout fleeing her pursuit of Peter.

They played in the water, diving and meeting up to kiss and fondle, until the sun had moved in the sky and the shadows began to grow longer with the afternoon. At last, Peter pulled her to shore, caught in his arms, and they lay together under the bright blast of sunlight that warmed the rocks.

Peter lay beside her on his side, watching her with his eyes as dark and deep as the center of the lake. One of his hands rested on her ribcage, her skin aware and tingling beneath the pads of his tan fingers. She gazed into his eyes and smiled.

He leaned down and kissed her lightly, as soft as a butterfly. “When did I start needing you so much?”

She ran her hand down his sloped cheek in answer.

His gaze traveled across her naked body, and he moved his head down to lick at her breast. A jolt shot through her, and her lower body ached with a sudden, hot need. His teeth grazed her, and he took the nipple into his mouth. Time stood still for her. All she could think of was what his tongue was doing and the heightened sensations shaking her body.

“Peter!” Her need resonated in her voice.

He only chuckled deep in his throat and continued to torture her. His hand squeezed the other breast, fondling and rubbing, his thumb passing back and forth over the tight, little nub at the top. She nearly screamed.

Her hand went between his legs. Ah, two could play at this game. His staff was up and proud, and her hand slid around the thick head and moved down the base.

He nipped her lightly and moved on top of her, his muscles bulging and his biceps standing out and rippling. She opened her legs and dug her hands into his still-damp hair.

A cold wind stirred up the lake, and the water lapped at the edges. She relished the feel of the air moving across her naked body just before Peter plunged into her. He pushed to the hilt, filling her and making her gasp out loud.

He made love to her relentlessly, pushing into her until she was lost in a haze of passion. She gave herself to the climax, and it shook her all the way through her flesh and bones. Her moan of pleasure echoed over the vale.

When he came, she again felt that cold rush inside her womb, and his body shuddered above her, until he rolled over, pulling her on top. He lay with his eyes closed and she snuggled into him, curling her legs together and holding him tight.

She must have drifted asleep, and the dreams that came were sensual and vague.

A loud sound awoke her. Rock clatter. A grunt. She opened her eyes to find that twilight had engulfed the vale in a grey shroud. Something moved beside her, and a massive rock—the size of a bowling ball—hit Peter on the forehead.

Arlene shoved the rock aside and moved over him with lightning speed. He lay still though, blood oozing out from a dent in his head...it didn't look like anything a human would survive, but she told her racing heart that he wasn't human. She looked up and into Cecile's bright, golden eyes. The other woman laughed.

“Just let me have a bite, Baby Bear. It won't hurt him. Well, not much.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Arlene jumped to her bare feet, standing over Peter. Her blood rushed cold in her veins, and she found that she liked the charge of energy. Her skin tingled, and the colorless dusk filled with light and texture.

“Bitch. You won’t touch him while I’m alive,” she said. “Now back away, before you find out what you created.” Her lips curled upward, and she flexed her fingers.

Were her words an empty threat? She hoped not. Peter lay like the dead at her feet.

Cecile’s lip protruded into a pout, her lean, naked body shifting and her stance lowering. She shook back her brown-gold hair, and her eyes gleamed unnaturally. “Is that any way to talk to Mama Bear?” Her teeth sharpened between her red lips. “Are we to fight then?” she said in her heavy French accent. “I had so hoped us girls could get along.”

Taking a deep breath, Arlene sucked in the chill of the glacier-fed lake, the cold of the deep stone, the ice that still lingered on the slopes...and the glacier too. Its ancient ice fed her with a slow, but huge power, creeping up her heels to her knees. She nearly gasped from the influx and lost her fixed gaze on Cecile. What was she doing? She didn’t have a clue, but the power built anyway, growing, tingling to her fingertips. Sparks of white danced at the tips of her nails.

Cecile threw back her head and screamed—a sound of rage and pain. Bones moved, grew, flesh sprouted hair and her mass shifted up and up. She cried out but the wail warped into a deep, echoing growl, and within moments, a grizzly bear stood in her place, six feet of massive muscle and shaggy hair.

Something stirred in Arlene. Heat poured out of her heart, despite the chill that had overtaken her limbs. Around her, a silver aura formed, and it roared. No, she roared. The world doubled before her eyes. She could see Cecile’s bear from two positions, one at her eye level, and the other from seven feet up. She raised massive, shaggy white paws, each holding curved black nails longer than her human fingers.

*I’m a bear too?*



Cecile roared her challenge, the terrible sound echoing against the slopes of granite. Arlene, still caught in her strange double vision, snarled. She raced the few steps to Cecile, and yet, still stood over Peter. How was this possible? The bear, which was also her, was immense with silver-white fur bathed in its own radiance.

She felt Cecile's inch long claws dig into her side and her jaws snapping at her shoulder. Terrible growls reverberated off the rock. Hunger and madness rose in her once more, like a fog filling her head.

She closed her human eyes, and now wholly rode inside the bear. Her claws shone black and massive and she outweighed Cecile by two hundred pounds. But she wasn't an experienced fighter, and she found herself wrestling with instincts she neither understood nor knew how to control. The two animals fell from each other and Cecile began to circle. If a bear could smile, that was what she was doing.

\* \* \* \*

Peter awoke to a blinding headache and deep, echoing growls. He rolled over, holding his skull and found himself beside Arlene. But she didn't move. She stood as still as concrete, her eyes closed and her body stiff. He rose, staggering a bit, and saw the bears—one huge and silver, the other smaller, but only in comparison, and brown-gold. The moonlight lit both with silver highlights, and their eyes flashed. They fought viciously, rending claws and huge teeth gleaming and snapping at one another. Crimson streaked down the white bear's side.

He summoned the cold, his blood cooling, slowing, his heart stuttering with the change and the color leaching from his skin.

"No, Peter. Not yet," a voice said from beside him.

For one moment, it seemed he was alone, but then he wasn't. Henri stood beside him, as still as marble and seeming as lifeless. He still wore the black t-shirt and his hands were tucked into the front pockets of his jeans. A silver ring gleamed from his thumb.

Peter shook his head. "I have to help her."

"Let her find her power." Henri's face animated enough for a ghostly smile that didn't reach his pale eyes. "Or do you mean to keep her a baby forever, clinging to you for self-preservation?"

"So, you no longer think she killed those hikers?"

Henri shrugged. "I need to get closer to know for sure. One of them did. I can smell the musky scent in the air...but let us give Arlene the chance to avenge her human death. That's something that not all of us—who are different—are allowed."

Something in his tone bespoke of ancient and yet familiar sorrow. But Peter didn't have the time or the inclination to worry over one of the undead. His gaze riveted on the two bears, and Arlene's immobile white form. Her usually gold hair blew in the wind with a platinum glow, her skin shone with frost, and out from her feet the ground froze. The grass crackled and the lakeshore grew opaque with ice. Light danced around her like an aura. The bear roared, charging.

Cecile dodged the onslaught and threw herself at the side of her bigger opponent. The two humongous beasts rolled on the ground. Peter's gut twisted. He couldn't just stand by and watch her fighting for her life. Power surged through him even as Henri caught his arm. He didn't care. He couldn't let anything happen to Arlene.

"Get out of my way, Corpse. I won't let that bitch hurt her."

"Give her a chance," Henri murmured. "She's learning."

The brown bear caught hold of the white by the neck, and blood sprayed the rocks. Peter snarled and raised his arms, skin as white as ice and nails as black as midnight. Winter and death rose in him; the coldest storm, the longest night, the breath of arctic wind. He would bring these things and more down on Cecile.

But Arlene snapped her human arms together first, and the world turned white with the blast of ice that roared out of her and pummeled the two bears. The white bear threw the grizzly to one side and brought a massive paw down on its head, pinning it. She roared in triumph up at the sky. Snow whirled about the vale despite the cloudless night, and the wind howled through the crags and crevices as if in echo to her cry.

Beneath her paw, Cecile shrunk. Smaller and smaller while the white bear grew diaphanous—more spirit than flesh. Until the vision disappeared, blown away like mist, leaving only torn ground and black, frozen blood sprayed on the rocks.

Arlene made a sound that echoed with victory. It wasn't human.

Peter stared, and he saw the madness in her eyes. She ran at the slumped, broken form of Cecile.

The hunger was on her.

He jumped after her. He had to catch her before she ate human flesh. Even Cecile's. One taste, and he knew the madness would never leave her. Like his brother.

She flung herself at Cecile, and he tackled her, their bodies rolling away over the sharp stones. She hissed and fought him. He struggled to keep hold of her slick, little body. God, she was fierce.

“No! You can’t. Arlene, come back to me. Arlene!”

She whipped her head from side to side, growling and crying. Her eyes held no reason. No sanity.

He held her as tightly as he could. If he slipped...

Would he be able to stop her? Could he kill her as he had killed his brother?

No! If he did nothing else for all of his long life, he prayed to keep his hold on her. Nothing else mattered. It would be the same as allowing her to die. He thought of that bright smile she had given him in the cave just hours ago, and he held her for all he was worth.

Then she was free. Somehow she slipped from his arms, and his fingers missed his grab for her leg.

She fell on her knees by Cecile, and he knew he would never reach her in time.

The vampire moved, but even he would be too late.

Arlene’s mouth opened, exposing a row of long, sharp canines...

And suddenly she threw herself back. She crawled away, sobbing.

Peter lifted her into his arms, relief bringing tears to his eyes that froze on his cheeks.

He kissed her face, her eyelids, and her trembling lips. He had thought everything lost, and yet somehow she had found the strength.

For how long he sat holding her, he didn’t know, but at last Cecile moved, curling into a ball.

Henri picked his way across the ice-covered rocks until he reached her. Peter hated the pity that welled in his heart. He wanted her to be dead, if only so that he would never have to worry over her again. But...he had vowed to never kill. The vampire stood over the vanquished shifter. At last, he raised his pale face to the moon. The snow clung to his black shirt. “I will take her to Seattle.” He crouched and lifted some of the long, tangled strands of hair, sniffing. “And here is the musk I followed. I don’t think she intended to kill those hikers. They startled her sleeping place...” He spoke more to himself than to Peter.

Despite his pity, Peter clenched his jaw. “You mean she will live. Will she become part of your Mistress’s menagerie?” The thought sickened him for many reasons.

Henri gave a bleak smile. “I doubt it. The penalty for killing humans is death. At least, if one does not have permission.” Henri’s expression became somewhat ironic. He shrugged. “I expect you

will not hear from the shifter again. But if I were you, Peter, I would stay away from Seattle for a time. My Mistress is not yet interested in you—but that could change, and I would not recommend her...her acquaintance. Take that as a friendly warning. All right?”

Peter nodded, well warned. He held Arlene tighter to his chest. “Do you need help?”

“No.” Henri lifted Cecile like she weighed nothing and threw her over one shoulder. Her long hair streamed down his back. He faded, disappearing from even Peter’s keen sight.

“Is it over?” Arlene asked against his shoulder.

He peered into her drawn face and nodded. “I think so, my love. I think so.”

## EPILOGUE

Arlene picked up her suitcase and took one last look around her bedroom. She had grown up in this house, come of age here, even helped pay the mortgage after her parents moved to Sun City. She had never thought of anywhere else as home.

The white curtains, the coverlet, and same old vanity—all were remnants of her childhood. Why hadn't she ever changed them? Ah, well, now everything was different. For one thing, the bed was broken. She shook her head. Well, she hardly needed it now.

"Are you sure about this?" Isabel asked from the doorway, her eyes misty and red-rimmed. She sniffed. "I never thought you'd give up everything to be with a man."

Arlene laughed. "Good grief! I'm not even human anymore, Izzy. I can't stay here. I need to be high—where the air is thin. You can't imagine how it feels. And yes, I would give up everything for him. He'd give up everything for me. That's the way it's supposed to be. Right?"

Isabel rolled her eyes. "Ridiculous. I love you, Arlene. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll see you soon. Peter is going to take me on a tour of Alaska. I'm going to see the top of Mt. McKinley."

"And you'll be back for Creed and Deanna's wedding," Isabel asked, smiling despite her tears. "I'll see you in October."

"Of course. I'm a bridesmaid, aren't I?" She lifted her bag—still amazed at her own strength—and went and hugged her sister with her free arm. "Please don't cry anymore, Izzy. I'll see you in the fall."

"And you love him? He'll take care of you?" Isabel gripped her arm and peered anxiously into her face.

"I love him, and I'll take care of him too." She kissed her sister on the cheek.

"Don't be lonely, Sis. Find someone. Go out more. There's more to life than making candles and soaps."

"Says my sister, the werebear windigo." Isabel wiped at her cheeks. "Take care!"

“I will,” she answered before hurrying down the stairs and out the front door. The warm late summer air enfolded around her and the sun streamed through the maples and pines that surrounded the yard.

Peter waited on the gravel driveway, his long, black hair neatly tied back from his face and his lean body clad in jeans and a dark tank that exposed his swoon-worthy muscles. He wore black shades and flashed a white grin. “I still don’t know why you need the suitcase. Who needs clothes?”

She laughed. “Two words, Baby. Lace panties.”

He kissed her hard on the mouth, taking her breath away and sending her pulse racing. “Okay, I can live with the suitcase. My beautiful girl. My love,” he said as he pulled back. He gazed down at her, and she smiled.

“My love,” she repeated. “I like the sound of that.”

“Then I’ll be sure to say it often.” His face grew serious, his eyes silver-gleaming and shot with light. “I love you, Arlene.”

Her heart filled with a happiness she had never known. Tears of joy came to her eyes as she pressed her lips to his. “And I love you, Peter. I love you.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I wrote my first story when I was in the fourth grade—it involved talking animals, a dark forest, and of course, romance. A hundred and fifty handwritten pages later, I knew I was in love with telling stories.

When I'm not chasing after my three kids, walking my dog, or being condescended to by our cat (who believes he is feline royalty), I am chasing after my muses. They always involve strong men and women finding love and passion against the odds. Whether they are ruthless warriors or noble vampires, runaway princesses or powerful witches—I hope my characters resonate with my readers and bring them a well-deserved escape. One thing you can count on, I will always provide a happy ending.

Find out my latest book news at [www.CynthiaCarole.com](http://www.CynthiaCarole.com)

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