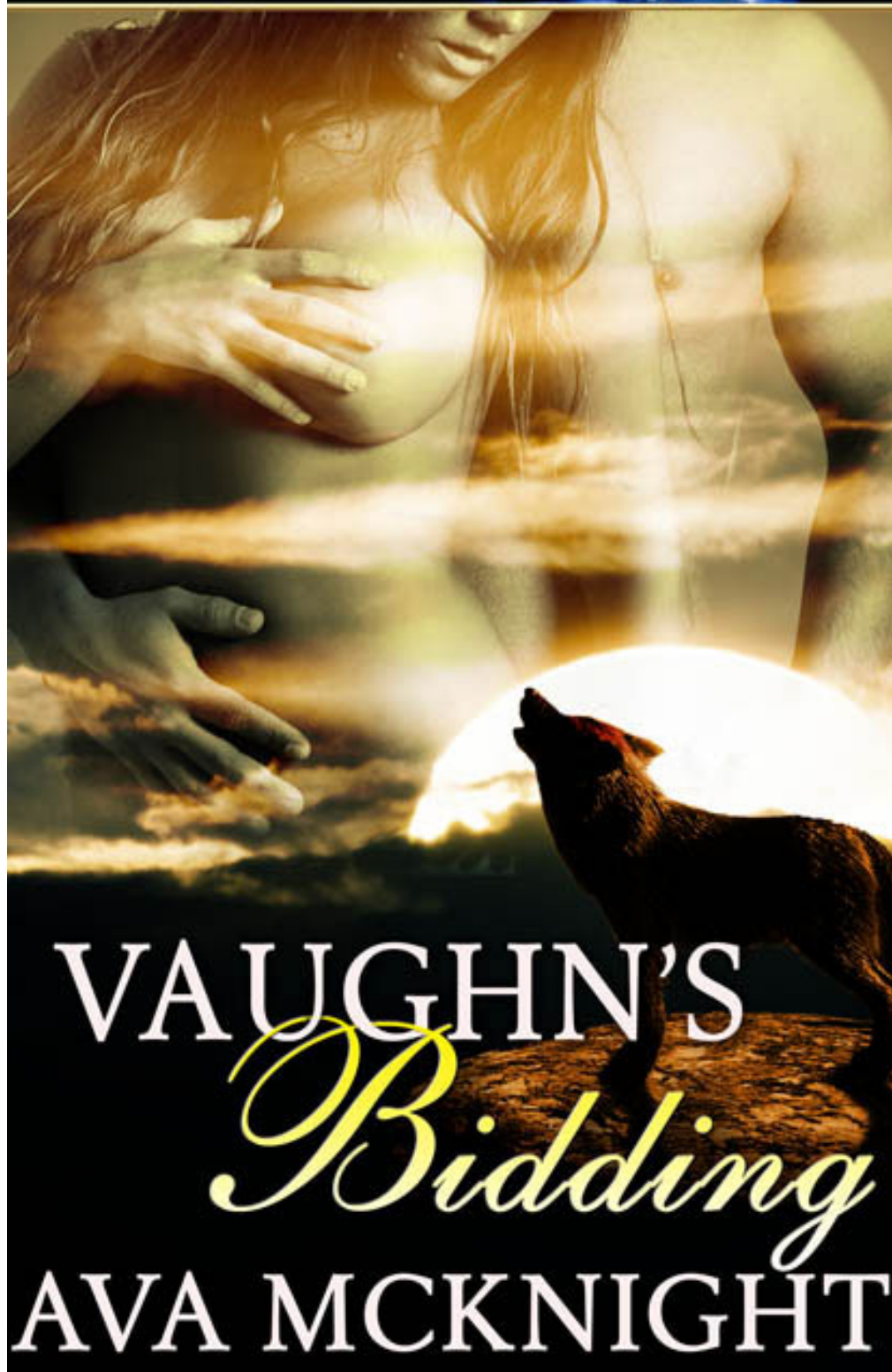


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



VAUGHN'S  
*Bidding*  
AVA MCKNIGHT

## Vaughn's Bidding

Ava McKnight

Zora has lived the past thirteen years in an anesthetized state. She logs long hours at work and takes sleeping pills at night, helping her to keep insanity at bay and the howling of wolves from her dreams. But memories of her family, slaughtered by a pack in Montana, haunt her. One night, her troubled dreams are interrupted by a man who urges Zora to return home—and finds an erotically stirring way in which to entice her to do his bidding.

Vaughn is a vampire. He's read Zora's thoughts for years, making his desire for her nearly unbearable, especially when she begins to fantasize about him. Vaughn responds in reality, but can his mind-blowing orgasms help Zora call forth the mystical power buried within her? Will their lust be a distraction or will it help them defeat the pack?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Vaughn's Bidding

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# ***VAUGHN'S BIDDING***

**Ava McKnight**

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Thanks, as always, to my fantastic editor, Briana St. James. I truly value our working relationship!

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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IRS: Internal Revenue Service, Department of the Treasury Agency of the United States Government

Walmart: Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.

## Chapter One

*Wolf Creek Pass.* The words flitted through Zora Valent's subconscious mind, wresting her from the deep sleep she'd happily succumbed to around two a.m.

*Come home, Zora.*

Groggy and still half-asleep, she batted away long, copper-colored curls that had worked their way free of her ponytail, while also vainly trying to swat away the unfamiliar male voice that filled her head.

Reluctant to let go of the sleeping-pill-induced fog that kept her in a peaceful state, she snuggled under the thick covers, pulling them up around her shoulders. The deeper her sleep, the less haunted she was by glowing amber eyes and menacing howls.

No wolves in New York City, she thought. Which was why she'd moved here eight years ago.

*Zora. Come to me...*

The voice was low and sensual. Provocative. It made her wish that when she rolled over, she'd find a warm, naked body lying beside her. One ready, willing and able to satisfy her. A man who wouldn't ask her inane questions about her life and her job, or want to talk about her past.

No talking, she thought. Especially about Wolf Creek Pass. Just fucking – that was mindless and distracting and...it'd feel good to have a hard cock sliding in and out of her body. She longed to feel the weight of a man on her, settled between her parted legs. Wanted to feel his hands on her breasts, squeezing. His fingers on her nipples, teasing. His mouth on her skin, tasting.

Zora groaned. So did the voice inside her head.

Tempted by the erotic thoughts running rampant through her mind, she shifted under the down comforter to face the opposite side of the bed. Cracking one eye open, she stared into the darkness. She didn't need to flip a light switch to know the space beside her was empty. Not exactly a news flash. There hadn't been a man in her bed in years.

She closed her eye, wanting to resume her blissful slumber. It was easier to get through the days—and the nights—when she wasn't thinking about sex or men. The reason she logged more hours at work than anyone else at her company. The more she worked, the less she thought about all the other things missing in her life.

Clearing her head of tonight's errant thoughts, she tried to drift back to sleep.

No such luck.

*Return to Wolf Creek Pass, Zora.*

"No," she grumbled. "Never."

*You must. You're the only one who can protect your people.*

"My people?" she scoffed in her sleepy tone.

*Yes. You must protect your people from those who draw evil blood from the keeper of the night.*

"Oh puh-leaze."

She had no idea what the loon inside her head was talking about. Clearly the pills were making her hallucinate, making her imagine there was a man trying to lure her back home with his sexy voice. She'd taken more than her usual dosage of prescription meds tonight, because sleep had been so elusive. And this was the effect an overdose had on her... A voice that tormented her with thoughts of the past while stirring sexual desires she'd long since buried.

Shouldn't the pills have done the direct opposite and zonked her out cold?

A bit alarmed about her delusional state, she vaguely wondered if she needed her stomach pumped. Perhaps she ought to give 9-1-1 a jingle...

*Come home, Zora. Come to me.*

“Didn’t hear me the first couple times, huh?”

*Zora.*

The voice was more insistent, albeit still deep and intimate. Enticing, even. Unfortunately, the sensual tone reminded her it’d been forever since a man had whispered in her ear. Said her name in such an alluring way. Though this one wasn’t whispering in her ear. He was talking from inside her head.

She groaned again. “Yeah, right,” she muttered into the darkness.

She must still be asleep, dreaming that she was slowly coming out of the deep slumber. Dreaming about a sexy male voice that would be attached to an equally sexy male body. It was her dream, after all.

She relaxed a little as she latched onto this new rationale. No need to entertain a 9-1-1 operator with the crazy tale of a mental stalker. She’d just play along with the voice. Let him talk ‘til he gave up and went away.

*I’m not going away.*

Clearly her subconscious mind didn’t want to let her off the hook, either, for it began to drum up an erotic scenario to go along with the prodding happening inside her head.

Zora sighed. The last thing she needed was to allow her mind to indulge in a wicked fantasy. But she involuntarily conjured a fantastic image of the gorgeous man taunting her, unable to resist the temptation he offered. Her dream lover was tall, dark and mysterious, with hands that were large and strong. More than capable of taking her places she hadn’t gone in years.

“Okay,” she murmured, giving in to the fantasy as she envisioned them both naked in the big bed. His hands were on her body, palming her breasts and squeezing roughly before the pads of his thumbs rubbed her nipples tight. Warm lips on her neck teased her, heightening her arousal. A tongue on her skin, then teeth gently nipping, sent jolts



of electricity straight to her pussy. Her inner muscles clenched at the sudden throbbing within her. A foreign sensation that felt positively heavenly.

“Oh yeah. I can definitely play along. Talk to me all you want.”

In Zora's mind, one of his large hands moved down her body until his fingers slid over her slick folds, gently caressing her.

“Exactly what I need,” she muttered, no longer caring whether she was asleep or not.

She kept her eyes shut and her mind closed off to all other thoughts as her own hand eased behind the band of her cotton, bikini-cut panties. She caressed her labia the way the stranger did in her unexpected fantasy. He zeroed in on her clit in her mind. She did it in reality, starting with a slow, circular motion that made her pulse hitch up a notch or two.

“Oh yes.” Zora moaned. “Just like that.”

Zora. His voice sounded strained.

She ignored what he'd originally said he'd wanted from her—for her to return home. Instead, she slipped further into the fantasy, imagining him kissing her deeply, passionately. The way Zora had never been kissed before. All the while, he quickened the pace between her legs, using the pads of two fingers on and around her clit to increase the pressure, cover more territory. Stimulating her cunt with the arousing effects of the feverish tempo.

“Fuck me with your fingers,” she whispered, her voice as strained as his. “I want to feel them inside me.”

Her imaginary lover obliged, pushing two fingers deep into her wet pussy, stroking quickly. His long fingers reached that precious G-spot and worked it expertly. Zora shoved the heavy covers off her body with her free hand, releasing herself from the constraints of the bedding tucked around her. The cool air on her flushed skin was blissfully welcome. She cupped her breast, squeezing it roughly, though it was *him* who pleased her.

"More." She moaned, the sound filling the quiet room. "I want more."

*Zora, this is hardly the time.*

"I beg to differ." She could feel the orgasm build. It'd been so long since she'd been with a man—almost as long since she'd gotten herself off. The desire had left her long ago, but it was back in spades tonight. Surprisingly, she welcomed the intimate sensations coursing through every inch of her sexually neglected body.

"Fuck me," she said. "I want to feel your cock inside me." God, how she wanted that! More than she'd known, because she hadn't thought about sex in so very long. But he'd awakened her passion and now she wanted everything he had to give her.

In her mind, she imagined stroking his thick shaft until it was hard and ready to pleasure her. All the while, his fingers inside her made her hotter. Wetter. Her pussy throbbed with need and she knew he was the only one who could satisfy her.

"Please," she pleaded.

He groaned. Low and dark and full of desire. For her.

She could hear his heavy breathing. Could picture him clearly in her mind, driving her wild with his mouth on her hot skin and his fingers deep in her cunt, pumping in and out until she was almost there.

"Fuck me," she said again, half begging, half demanding.

*Zora, for God's sake.* He was as turned on as she was. She could hear it in his voice.

"Just do it." She felt the pressure inside her as the stroking quickened and the fingers pressed more firmly against her sensitive erogenous zone. The heel of his hand rubbed her clit so there wasn't a spot between her legs that didn't receive the much-needed attention.

"Oh yes," she groaned as the first ripple of excitement danced through her.

He finally caved. Withdrawing his fingers from her, he thrust his cock into her tight pussy, stretching and filling it.

Zora cried out. Just imagining how wonderful he'd feel inside her was enough to push her right to the edge.

She could practically feel the heat from his body, hear ragged breaths falling from his lips. As though the idea of fucking her excited him as much as it did her.

*Please stop thinking like this,* he pleaded. *You're torturing me.*

"Make me come," she commanded. "Now."

*Zora...* Another low groan that made her pulse jump.

Her fantasy was so vivid in her mind it was difficult to believe it was all a figment of her imagination. As she pictured in her mind's eye the two of them fucking, him hammering into her as she writhed on the bed and begged for more, her hand between her legs worked her feverishly. Her orgasm was within reach.

"Say it again," she whispered on a sharp breath of air. "My name. Say it again when you make me come."

*This isn't why I'm here.* Though there was no hint of retreat or regret in his tone.

"Just one more time," she urged.

He obliged once again. *Zora.*

"Oh finally," she gasped. "Yes!" Her climax was a powerful one, stealing her breath and all coherent thought for the brief seconds it lasted. Her back bowed off the bed and little white orbs of light burst behind her eyelids, which she squeezed even tighter.

"Oh God, yes," she said, her voice raspy from her exertion. Her body dropped back onto the soft mattress and she opened her eyes, staring up at the ceiling, still breathing hard. Her insides sizzled like someone had lit a sparkler in her stomach and the sparks were flying in every direction, keeping her supercharged and vibrantly alive.

Yes, she was totally awake now. Weirded out by the stranger in her head, but deliriously happy the sexy voice had urged her to orgasm.

"That was so good." She whispered the words to herself. "It's never been that good before."

Withdrawing her fingers from her dripping cunt, she sighed contentedly and reached for a tissue on the bedside table. Then she snuggled under the covers again, prepared to fall back into a deep sleep, now that the sizzling sensation within her had ebbed a bit after that wonderful release. Her body felt warm and molten. Cozy and sated.

"Thank you," she murmured to her imaginary lover. "Precisely what I needed."

*Glad to be of service.* His tone was still lusty, yet there was a hint of exasperation. *Now that we've gotten that out of the way... Come home, Zora.*

"Oh for the love of God," she grumbled. "I'm never going back. Now shut up and leave me alone."

Didn't he know how incredibly difficult it was for her to shut down her mind and slip into blissful darkness? She craved it, knew it was close at hand now that her body was so relaxed and the endorphins were keeping at bay the horrific sights and sounds that usually plagued her mind when she was alone.

*Zora. He sounded pissed. We don't have time for this. Wake up! Get on a plane and come home! Now!*

"Who the hell *are* you?" she shouted. Her voice filled her empty bedroom. No answer came and Zora knew why. She was alone. As always.

Irritated, she shoved off the covers and swung her long legs over the side of the bed. She sat there for a moment, trying to collect her thoughts. Her gaze fell on the telephone on the nightstand and she was back to contemplating 9-1-1. Should she really call? Had she snapped again?

No, no. She refused to go there. Refused to let insanity win again.

*Wolf Creek Pass, Zora. It's time to come home.*

He said those long lost words again and, in doing so, evoked a slew of memories that flashed in her head too quickly to process all at once. Zora pressed her fingertips to

her temples as though that would slow the mental images filling her mind or abate the sudden throbbing inside her head.

Keeper of the night, he'd said earlier. She remembered now those words from her childhood. Her father had used that term. Was the voice in her head talking about the moon? If so, what the hell did it have to do with Wolf Creek Pass? Or her?

*Damn, she thought. It really is happening.*

She was losing her mind again.

*You're not losing your mind,* the voice tried to assure her.

"Yeah, right. Sane women have male voices inside their heads all the time. Commanding them to do things they don't want to do. Should I start practicing my temporary insanity plea now?"

*You're being melodramatic.*

"That's because you're freaking the hell out of me."

He sighed. As though keeping up a conversation with her tried his patience. Well, good. He deserved it. She was certainly frustrated. Especially since he was killing her post-orgasm euphoria.

"I'm kinda tired and totally wiggled out," she said. "Can you come back some other time?"

He chuckled. *You think I'm not real.*

"I *know* you're not real. I'm actually still asleep. That's why I'm not in a padded room right now."

*You're not asleep.*

"Right. Because you're keeping me awake. Now go away."

*I need you, Zora. And you need me.*

Those words were difficult to brush off. She had needed him. Tonight. Without even knowing it, until he'd stirred her long-suppressed passion.

Scrubbing a hand down her face and then rubbing the back of her neck, she contemplated all that he'd said so far. Some mysterious voice inside her head wanted her to return to her birthplace. A small Montana town she hadn't visited since she'd left eight years ago. A place she never intended to see again.

Her parents and younger brother had been buried in Wolf Creek Pass, on the eve of her thirteenth birthday. From that day on, Zora's life had been anything but sane...or pleasant. Was this just one more part of the haunting process?

The nightmares had never stopped. That was why she needed the sleeping pills. Memories of her family drifted through her subconscious mind late at night. The first five years had been the worst. But by the time she'd turned eighteen, Zora had managed to slip into a sort of anesthetized existence that she'd maintained over the years.

The pills helped. So too did the endless hours of work she performed, crunching numbers, her mind focused on IRS tax laws, deductions and loopholes. Her boss and her clients loved her at tax time. She was the only one in the office who'd work from seven in the morning 'til eleven at night, month after month after month.

In the off-season, she worked large corporate accounts. Whatever it took to keep her mind off the past.

Knowing she wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, Zora stood and stretched. She shuffled across the hardwood floor, her slippers making a soft, sweeping sound on the hardwood floor. In the living room, she flipped the light on and knelt before the small trunk under the window. She worked the lock on the box and opened the dust-covered lid. Reaching inside, she rummaged through the tangible evidence that proved her family had once existed. Dad's favorite flannel shirt. Mom's white-and-pink checkered apron. Zach's small softball mitt. She bypassed them all and pulled out the photo album.

Flipping through the pages, her fingers trembled as the images assaulted her eyes and mind. The gruesome remains of her family. Her father, sprawled along the

shoreline of the lake, a large portion of his throat torn away. Her mother, throat still intact, had bled to death from the deep scratches that ran from her delicate collarbone to her rib cage. And Zach...

Zora could barely bring herself to look at the photos of his mutilated body. Not only had he been mauled, his throat had also been torn out. As though the creature that had attacked him wanted to make sure he was good and dead. No chance of survival.

Zora's stomach churned. She'd stolen these photos from the sheriff's office. She hadn't wanted anyone else to see them, hadn't wanted the press to get their hands on them. This was not how she wanted her family to be remembered.

A large tear crested the rim of her eye and slid slowly down her cheek. The fat drop curled under her chin, then fell from her face, landing on one of the photos of little Zach. He would have turned eight that year.

Zora closed the album and returned it to the trunk. Her throat felt raw and tight. Her heart hurt. Why the hell would she ever return to Wolf Creek Pass? Why would anyone ever ask her to?

*Because you know there's more to the deaths. A reason behind them.*

"Shut up," she snapped as more tears flowed down her cheeks.

*Come home, Zora. Find the answers you seek.*

She pulled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her knees. She stared at the trunk as the sun rose and night turned into day. She stared at the trunk as her chest tightened and her stomach cramped from the grief she'd never fully escaped. She stared at the trunk while the voice inside her head continued to urge her into action.

Making her think she really had gone crazy. All over again.

Finally, when there was no hope of escaping the past or the voice, she stood. Zora reached for the phone and did the only thing she could do to stop the insanity.

She booked a flight to Montana.

## **Chapter Two**

She walked to the end of the old, rickety dock, which swayed under her weight. A fresh layer of snow crunched beneath her booted feet. She stared out at the vast lake, the edges not yet frozen over from the winter cold. The setting sun cast glimmering rays of gold and crimson over the rippled surface, winking like brilliant diamonds, holding her spellbound as the sun sank behind the snow-capped mountains to the west.

Though the reflection on the lake was beautiful, she'd always hated the water. Feared it, really. She couldn't say why. Nightmares of drowning had plagued her childhood, long before her family had died along the sandy shoreline.

When the captivating spectacle before her dimmed, Zora's eyes lifted to the early evening sky. The intense colors abated. The imprint of the moon, still chalky white against the dark blue canvas above her, was nearly full.

Two more days before the Wolf Moon would illuminate the sky.

Zora continued to watch as the large orb began to glow a soft, pale yellow. The night sky turned black, and still she watched, until the golden globe lit the inky darkness surrounding her.

In the distance she heard the low bay of the wolves. They weren't far away and she could feel the restlessness that echoed in their cries.

The time is now, he'd said. The voice that had filled her head, compelling her to return to Wolf Creek Pass when, deep in her heart, it was the last place on earth she wanted to be.

He was right, though. Despite not knowing anything about the changes brewing, Zora sensed a cosmic shift on the rise. Something dangerous drifted on the night air, chilling her to the bone.



She pulled her suede jacket tighter around her body. Her fingers felt like icicles on the ends of her hands, despite her thick gloves. She felt frozen to the core, but not from the crisp, mid-January weather.

She spared one last glance at the choppy water before turning away. She left the dock and climbed the low-sloping hill that led to the enormous house her family had lived in all those years ago. Her feet left deep imprints in the snow. Reaching the steps of the back porch, she was just about to ascend them. Her hand stilled on the railing. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Zora was not alone.

The shadows shifted in the dense patch of trees west of the house. A flash of amber caught her eye. A low snarl reverberated inside her. Zora's heart rate accelerated. Her fingers gripped the railing, squeezing it tight. She dared not move. More shifting of shadows told her he was not a lone wolf. He had friends. Zora swallowed hard.

Why the hell had she come here? To join her family, six feet under?

Paralyzed by fear, she stood as still as possible, waiting until there were no more moving shadows. Eventually, the dark night was undisturbed by the vicious predators that had filled the forest. They were gone.

Zora breathed a low sigh of relief, but her fear lingered.

She placed a booted foot on the bottom step, but again froze in place. She turned her head to the eastern corner of the house.

"Who are you?" she asked in an unsteady voice.

Though shrouded in darkness, she sensed a presence only a few feet from her. The tall willow tree that shaded the back porch kept the light of the moon from touching his face.

"The one who summoned you." His deep, sensual voice filled the quiet night. It was the same voice she'd heard in her dream. The one she'd masturbated to. He was the

man who'd brought her so much pleasure when she'd climaxed as he'd whispered her name.

He stepped out of the darkness into the full light of the moon. Zora's breath caught. He was even more gorgeous in real life, with thick, obsidian-colored hair that gleamed dark and shiny in the golden light that bathed him.

His handsome face—almost too devastating for words—was perfectly sculpted, with high cheekbones and deep-set eyes that glowed a peculiar silvery-violet color. Totally unnatural and yet completely hypnotic. His thick neck gave way to broad shoulders and a wide chest. He wore a sleek black leather jacket with a black dress shirt beneath it, the buttons of which were undone just enough to reveal the smooth skin on his chest and the full swells of his strong pectoral muscles. His jeans and boots were also black. Zora had never seen a man so breathtaking.

Not even in her dream had he been this beautiful.

She blinked, wondering if he was an illusion. A supernatural phantasm manifested in her mind because...

She sighed. "We're back to this, I see." She mumbled the words more to herself than to him.

"I told you, you're not insane."

She smiled, despite her anxiety. "Somehow, coming from you, that's not exactly a comforting or even believable sentiment."

He stepped closer to her, his large, commanding presence intimidating. She sensed his strength, his power. Not an evil power, per se, but something dark and ominous nonetheless. Something beyond her comprehension.

Warning signals went off in her head, causing Zora to retreat slowly up the stairs, walking backward so her eyes remained locked with his. Keeping her from being put at a disadvantage. When she reached the landing, she backed toward the door that led to the kitchen. He pursued her with slow, measured steps. The steps of a predator. He

stalked her now in reality, as diligently as he had in her mind. Coming closer, bearing down on her.

Zora twisted the knob at the back door behind her. It was locked.

*Fuck!* She'd forgotten she'd come round to the back of the house earlier by way of the side yard.

Panic rose inside her, but Zora didn't give into it. She reached for the tall potted tree next to the door. Her Aunt Mia rented the house to summer vacationers and she'd kept the place in tiptop shape. Zora had discovered she'd added new patio furniture recently, including the six-foot artificial tree. With a flick of her wrist, Zora sent the bushy foliage in the general direction of her stalker. She leaped over the overturned ceramic pot and darted toward the steps.

Only caught off guard for a moment, the stalker's thick arm shot out and grabbed her around the waist.

Zora let out a shriek of terror as he hoisted her off the ground. Her backside pressed to his front and he held her in a death grip, her feet dangling a good foot above the wood floor. Survival instincts kicked in. Her short nails dug into the hands clasped at her belly, the heels of her boots connected with his shins. She struggled in his arms, which tightened around her.

"Stop fighting me."

"Right," Zora said through clenched teeth. "'Cause I really wanna become a rape statistic."

He released her instantly. Her feet hit the porch and she stumbled forward. She caught the tall pillar on one side of the steps and wrapped her arms around it to steady herself.

"I'm not a rapist," he said in an indignant tone, as though she'd offended him. "I'm a vampire."

Zora's head whipped around. "Like that's a whole lot better?" She stared at him, wide-eyed, her heart in her throat, which made it difficult to speak. "Vampires don't exist."

He gave her a hard look, clearly not amused by her. "How do you think I reached you telepathically?"

She didn't even want to think about *that* one. She let go of the pillar and crossed her arms over her chest. Her body trembled, but she pretended not to notice. She hitched her chin up a notch and gave him a challenging look. "I don't believe in vampires."

As if that would banish him from her mind and her sight.

"Yes, you do," he said with supreme confidence. "You know we exist."

He continued to look deep into her eyes, as though looking straight into her soul. His gaze was an intimate one. It was as though he knew her, knew all her feminine secrets...

*I do.*

"Knock it off," was the best she could manage. She felt breathless and tingly. Heat flooded her veins, chasing away her shivers. He held her under some sort of spell that made her think of naked limbs entwined and body parts joined. He made her think of urgent lovemaking, the kind two people engaged in when they were so attracted to each other, so sexually charged by the other it seemed they couldn't get enough of each other.

He groaned. "Okay, thoughts like that are no help at all here."

Her teeth ground together for a moment before she said, "Then stay the hell out of my head."

He took a moment, as though to compose himself and his own thoughts. Then he said, "You know about the wolves too."

The shivers returned full force. Her teeth even chattered. He spoke so dispassionately about the creatures of the night. Was she the only one terrified of them?

"They know you're here." He took a step toward her. "They know I summoned you."

"To throw me to them?"

"No." He closed the gap between them. "To save you from them."

Zora let out a strangled laugh. Her panic had morphed into extreme fear somewhere along the way. Yet she seemed incapable of moving from this spot on the porch. Her feet were rooted to the ground, unwilling to carry her away from here...away from *him*.

"Yeah, that makes sense. The closer I am to them, the easier it is for you to protect me from them. Now why didn't I think of that?"

He smirked at her. A look that was sexy and playful on his handsome face, though she knew that wasn't his intent.

"Seriously," she said, trying to maintain a brave front. "What do you want?"

Her heart thumped so erratically it was a wonder she didn't go into cardiac arrest. Unfortunately, she couldn't discern if it was fear or arousal that had the adrenaline pumping.

"To help you defeat the alpha. You're the only one who can do that, but I can keep the rest of the pack from killing you in the process."

"This keeps getting better and better." Zora's throat closed up, making it difficult to pull in a full breath. "No offense, but I prefer the fantasy version of you. No mention of wolves."

"Zora." The way he said her name aloud was just as alluring as when he'd whispered it in her head and made her come.

Her heart stammered.

Good grief. She'd actually gotten off dreaming about this man. This...*vampire*!

"No," she mumbled to herself. "I don't believe in vampires."

He sighed, as though aggravated with her for not believing him. "Look," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She didn't allow herself to buy into that one, either.

"I'm not a danger to you, Zora. I'm not crazy. I'm not a rapist or an axe murderer. I'm a —"

"Vampire." She glared at him, afraid if she blinked, he'd make a deadly move. "So you said."

"Would you like me to prove it? Show you what I'm capable of doing?"

Zora knew her luck had just run out. Her feet suddenly moved of their own accord. She dodged his outstretched hand and flew down the steps. She raced around the corner of the house, along the side yard and up the steps of the front porch. She yanked the door open, then slammed it behind her, locking the deadbolt and shoving the back of a chair under the knob for good measure. She turned on all the lights as she made her way through the house, breathing heavily from the physical exertion and her fear. She climbed the stairs to the second floor and checked the door to the balcony in the master suite, pushing a chair against it as well.

Satisfied the sexy, yet delusional, man on her back porch was not getting into her house without breaking down the doors — *he wouldn't do that, would he?* — she dropped into a chair in the bedroom she'd once occupied and tried to reconcile everything that had happened over the past twenty-four hours or so.

Yes, she did believe in vampires. And werewolves. She couldn't say when she'd come to believe in them. Long before her family had been slaughtered. Something innate and instinctual had told her not to doubt their existence. She'd known from childhood that the human residents of Wolf Creek Pass were not alone. Weren't safe from the nocturnal predators.

Thinking of the fear she'd lived with as a child, she pushed herself out of the chair. On wobbly legs, she crossed to the tall dresser set against the far wall. She opened the bottom drawer and ran a hand along the back. Her fingers tangled with a familiar satin

ribbon. She pulled out the pendant she'd left there when she'd finally moved away from this place eight years ago. She hadn't needed it in the city, yet she hadn't had the heart to throw it away. She was surprised none of the visitors over the years had discovered it and taken it.

Zora plopped down on the hardwood floor and smoothed her thumb over the etching on the silver coin—a mountain range with the moon rising above it. A small citrine stone served as the full moon. The Wolf Moon, her aunt had told her when she'd given Zora the pendant, days before her thirteenth birthday. Mia had pressed the medallion into Zora's palm and told her to wear it whenever she went outside. Which hadn't happened for a long time once she'd been committed. Mia had told Zora the keeper of the night would protect her if she protected it. She hadn't understood her aunt's words. Most people in town claimed Mia was just as crazy as Zora had become after her family's deaths.

Yet, she'd felt infinitely safer after Mia had given her the pendant. Had kept it with her when the state had finally institutionalized her. Another part of her past she wished to leave behind her. But the vampire seemed to be doing everything in his power to haul her back to the days of emotional agony and sheer lunacy.

Zora held the medallion to her neck now and secured the small clasp on the wide, black satin ribbon. The coin rested in the hollow of her throat. A familiar calm settled over her.

But only for a moment.

The sound of the rafters shaking overhead disturbed her tranquility. Zora sprang to her feet and left the room. The noise came from the attic. She opened the door and flipped on the light—a single bulb that emitted a soft glow at the top of the stairs. She climbed the winding steps that led to the small, empty space her mother had once used as a sewing room. A strange sound echoed all around her. Sharp cries and the distinct fluttering of...wings. The panes of the windows began to vibrate. The shutters were closed but the latches rattled, threatening to work loose of their fastenings.

Zora covered her ears as the noise increased. She could feel the attic shake. The rafters creaked. Her eyes were fixed on the window in front of her. She crossed the room and stood before it. Curiosity got the best of her. Zora couldn't stop herself from reaching out and flicking the metal hook on the latch with the tip of her finger. The shutters flew open. Zora screamed. She stumbled backward and landed on her backside in the center of the empty room.

Her eyes grew wide. Dozens of bats flew past the window, illuminated by the light of the moon. One latched onto the window frame and hung upside down, as though mocking her, its ugly face contorted and taunting. Zora screamed again. The high-pitched cries of the nocturnal creatures grew louder. The fluttering of their wings filled her ears. The hooks on the other windows vibrated free of their fastenings and the shutters flew open. Now hundreds of bats circled the attic.

Zora couldn't move, could barely even breathe.

"Command them to leave."

She let out a startled cry, practically jumping out of her skin at the deep voice that came from behind her. Zora scrambled to her feet and faced the vampire. "Did you bring them here?"

"Yes. I commanded them to come, but you can command them to leave."

"Why are you doing this to me?" she cried.

The vampire crossed the room. He gripped Zora's upper arms, his strong fingers pressing into her biceps. His unnatural silvery-violet eyes dropped to her throat. He stared at the medallion for a moment before returning his gaze to her face. "You have the power to send them away."

The corners of Zora's mouth quivered. "No."

"Yes," he insisted. "You just have to believe in yourself. You have the power to command nature and its elements, Zora. To help you restore order. All you have to do is call forth the power."



"From where?" she shrieked. "A galaxy far, far away?"

His jaw clenched. "From within you, Zora. Can't you feel it?"

All Zora could feel at the moment was the urge to toss the two tacos she'd had for lunch. "I don't have any powers."

He scowled at her. Without a word, he spun her around, forcing her to face the windows and the eerie, creepy vision before her. The number of bats continued to multiply. Slivers of moonlight barely penetrated the thick black cloud that whirled past the glass.

"Tell them to leave." His deep voice sent an erotic thrill chasing up her spine, making her clit tingle the way it had when she'd fantasized about him touching her, fucking her. That night, she'd practically felt his hands on her body, his cock in her pussy. It had all felt so real and she'd loved every minute of it. Had experienced true pleasure for the first time in her life.

And just thinking about it now, recalling all the fiery sensations he'd evoked, made her dizzy with desire all over again.

Oh God. How could she be aroused when she was in the middle of this horrific nightmare?

Zora shook her head, trying to banish thoughts of the vampire's hands and eyes and cock from her mind.

"Command them," he whispered in her ear. "Zora..." He said her name in the low, sensual timbre he'd used to make her climax. The tone of voice that had shimmied through her, making her want to give herself to him. And not just in a dream.

Zora's stomach fluttered. Her cunt ached with need. Fulfillment via fantasy was no longer enough. Her body was starved for attention and he was the only one who could satisfy her.

Making her a bit off her rocker, she reminded herself. He was a vampire, for fuck's sake!

"Do it," he urged.

Her eyelids grew heavy and dipped. "Go away."

Oddly, that sentiment was not directed toward the vampire.

"Louder," he said, seducing her with his voice. "Command them from the depths of your soul."

"Go away," she repeated. Her words barely registered over the screeching of the bats, the fluttering of their wings and the rattling of the window panes.

His hands moved from her shoulders to her waist. He held her tightly, pulling her back against him so their bodies touched. Her soft curves melded to his hard muscles. When his hands moved over her stomach and up her rib cage, her eyes closed. With just the simplest of touches, he entranced her, making her forget her convictions and everything she didn't want to believe in.

Imagine what he could persuade her to do if he stripped her bare and fucked her hard.

"If that's what it takes," he muttered into her ear.

Christ. She had to remember he could read her thoughts.

"Command the bats, Zora," he said in an insistent tone, as though he were trying to get her to regain her focus. But the rigid length of his erection against her backside told her she wasn't the only one who lost control of her body when they were together. In a dream or in reality.

Pulling in a deep breath, then letting it out slowly, she said, "Go away."

Her voice was a bit louder this time.

"That's it," he said, his lips grazing the shell of her ear. He seemed to latch onto what drove her, because his hands cupped her breasts through the thin material of the blouse she wore. A rough squeeze resulted in a sharp stab of desire and need deep in her cunt.

Something stirred within her, building fast. Passion, yes. But it was more than that. A fiery sensation flared in her stomach and seeped outward, upward, downward. Until liquid fire burned in her veins.

"Let go, Zora."

One of his hands slid down her body to the apex of her legs. His fingers pressed into her mound, stroking her pussy lips as though her jeans didn't exist. His mouth was on her neck, his tongue teasing her skin, his teeth nipping lightly. Exactly as she'd imagined the other night. The hand still cupping her breast shifted and slipped inside the opening of her shirt, making a button pop off. He pushed aside the lacy cup of her bra and toyed with her already hard nipple, rolling it between his finger and thumb, then gently pinching the tight peak.

"You want me inside you?"

"Yes." To hell with the thin strand of sanity she clung to and the fact that he was a vampire and believed she had some bizarre mystical powers. She wanted him. Plain and simple. Even more than the other night, because this was real, not a dream.

"You want me to thrust my hard cock into you from behind while I rub your clit with my fingers?"

She gasped.

"You want me to fuck you hard, don't you, Zora?"

His breath on her skin and his lips grazing her neck overwhelmed her senses. As did his erotic words.

A sharp moan escaped her open mouth.

The fingers stroking her through her jeans pressed more firmly against her. The material covering her didn't matter. She could feel his heat through her clothing. She wanted to feel his skin on hers, feel the pads of his fingers massaging her swollen pussy lips and stroking her clit. She wanted his fingers to dip into her cunt and fuck her until she came. Then she wanted his cock inside her.

"Make the bats go away, Zora. And I'll give you what you want."

She slid a hand between them and stroked his erection through his dark jeans. He groaned. "Do it, Zora. So I can bury my cock inside you and make you come."

"I want that," she said. "So much."

"Then do what *I* want."

His hand between her legs rubbed a little faster, with more intensity, more pressure. She was sure the crotch of her jeans was damp. Her pussy was probably so slick, he'd slide right into her. He'd thrust deep, pull out, thrust again.

Oh God, she wanted that!

Zora was breathless and in desperate need of him. He rolled and pinched her nipple again and she felt the climax well within her, along with a peculiar force she couldn't describe.

A breeze swept through the attic, though not a single window in the room had been opened. The breeze grew into a gust of wind that whipped all around her, sending her long curls flying in every direction. She heard a roar of thunder in the distance and the crackle of lightning. Above the clamor of the bats, she heard the wolves. Their hungry howling filled her ears, reverberating deep inside her.

"Go away," Zora said. The noise around her worked toward a crescendo, an almost deafening pitch. The sexy vampire stroked her harder, faster. She wanted to feel his fingers on her bare skin, pushing deep into her pussy.

"Soon," he whispered in her ear.

Her release was almost in her grasp. She felt the pressure build. As he tugged on her nipple, making it ache to be in his mouth, flicked quickly by his tongue, his fingers between her legs pressed even more forcefully into her mound.

Suddenly, his hand moved and he tore at the button on her jeans, ripping apart the zipper. Before she caught her next breath, his hand was inside her panties, his fingers stroking her bare flesh.

"Oh God!" Her knees threatened to buckle.

"I told you I'd give you everything you want. Just make the bats go away." He pushed two fingers into her throbbing cunt and Zora lost all control.

Her orgasm hit hard and fast. Her eyes sprang open. And from her mouth came a roaring demand. "GO AWAY!"

In an instant, the flock veered away from the attic and scattered with the wind, lost in the night sky. The room went still. Deathly quiet.

Zora's heart hammered in her chest as it rose and fell with a quick pace, as though she'd just run a marathon. She stared at the windows. The mountain range in the distance, which had been blocked by the bats, was now visible. The stars and the moon winked and shimmered above it, as though applauding her effort.

Zora touched the medallion at her throat. The metal felt warm and satiny. The vampire withdrew his fingers from her body and her blouse.

She turned to face him. "What in God's name just happened?"

"You had an orgasm." A slow grin spread over his very tempting mouth.

"Yeah, I figured that much out on my own. I mean with the bats."

His eyes searched hers for a moment. She had a little trouble focusing on him because of the orgasmic sensations still racing through her body. Finally, he said, "I told you, Zora. You're the one."

"The one *what*?"

He left her to close the shutters, securing the latches. Then he took her hand in his as he passed by and led her down the stairwell, her clothes hanging loose because he'd all but destroyed the fastenings. His fingers twined with hers and Zora felt a peculiar sense of security. Something she hadn't experienced in thirteen years. She followed him to the first floor, down the long corridor to the kitchen. She sank into a chair at the table. He sat across from her.

"First," he said, "keep the doors and windows shut at night."

"The windows...? Oh hell." She'd left the living room windows open when she'd gone down to the lake. She'd wanted to air out the room, since it had been a few months since anyone had been here. "Is that how you got in?"

He nodded. "Although it wouldn't have stopped me if they'd been closed."

"But closing them will deter the wolves?"

"It'll dim your scent. Make them less crazed by it. We need them to follow through with their preparations, not camp out on your front porch, waiting for the right moment to attack."

"Okay this is just..." She shoved her hands through her hair, pushing the strands away from her face. "So bizarre."

"Try to keep up."

She glared at him. "Your arrogance can be very infuriating." He didn't look the least bit contrite. "What is your name?"

"Vaughn Lariat."

"And how long have you been a...vampire?"

"Two hundred and forty-seven years."

Zora felt the room tilt. She wasn't seriously sitting here at the kitchen table engaged in polite conversation with a vampire, was she?

*Yes, Zora.*

Her eyes widened. "How do you do that?"

"My psi powers," he explained. "Telepathy. I've been inside your head for a very long time."

She stared at him, dumbfounded, unable to form coherent thoughts. Zora stood and crossed to the long kitchen counter. She searched the whitewashed cupboards above it. They were stocked with non-perishables...there had to be some chamomile tea here somewhere. She desperately needed something to calm her frayed nerves. Suddenly,

his large hands were on her shoulders and Zora stilled. She hadn't even heard him approach.

"Zora," he said as he turned her to face him. "There's not much time. The Wolf Moon rises in two days. The pack that slaughtered your family will draw evil blood from the moon, unless you stop them."

"I have no idea what that means," she told him.

Vaughn's piercing eyes locked with hers. "There's a council that keeps the balance between good and evil amongst the demons of the night. In two days' time, that power will shift. Evil will prevail, Zora, if you don't stop it from happening. Innocent humans—*your people*—will die."

"I can't even conceive of what you're saying. What demons? What council? I've never heard of a council that maintains the balance of good and evil. Vaughn," she said in a compelling voice, "I have no idea what happened upstairs tonight. If it was me or you who commanded the bats to leave. None of this makes sense to me."

"You know it was you, Zora. You felt it deep in your soul." His hands dropped from her shoulders. He let out a soft sigh as he raked his long fingers through his thick hair. His gaze drifted back to Zora. "You should sleep. You'll need your strength."

"I won't need physical strength when they send me back to the loony bin." She moved past him, traveled down the long hallway and climbed the stairs. Entering her room, she felt his presence though he made absolutely no sound behind her. He moved like he floated on air, not making the slightest shuffle of feet or rustle of clothes.

Zora crossed to the bed and unzipped the bag she'd dropped there earlier. Pulling out her sleeping pills, she started to unscrew the top, but his large hand covered hers.

"Not tonight." He gazed down at her and she ground her teeth. "You don't need these anymore. They dull your senses. You need to be perfectly in tune with your surroundings, totally aware of the danger around you."

"Said the spider to the fly," she barely managed to say.

His nearness and his touch did crazy things to her insides. She should fear him, she told herself. It didn't make any sense to be hanging out with a vampire, chatting about things she knew absolutely nothing about. Nor did it make sense that she knew she'd continue to fantasize about him, now that she knew what he looked like in reality, knew what his hands felt like on her body. Smooth and cool. The temperature of his skin was an arousing complement to the heat that coursed through her as she flushed with excitement and fear and adrenaline.

Jesus. How on earth could she be responding sexually to him? He was a fucking vampire!

And yet...that strange sensation of liquid fire flowing through her veins returned as he continued to stare at her. The dull throbbing in her cunt reminded her of how wet he made her. The other night had been but a fantasy in her mind, yet it'd been so vivid and spectacular, it had almost been as real as tonight.

*I wanted it to be real too.*

She gasped as his voice filled her head.

Snatching her hand away, Zora stepped out of his reach, holding fast to her pills.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

His eyes rolled. "Haven't we already established it was me in your head the other night? And it was me you were thinking about while you were touching yourself. It made me crazy not to be the one to make you come. Not in reality."

Her breath caught. His features had softened as he spoke. Turning more sensual as a heated look warmed his eyes and facial expression.

"Zora." He stared deep into her eyes. "I wanted you just as much. Not just then, but tonight too. I want you still."

"No." She barely got the word out. "This is all just... A figment of my imagination."

She wasn't really here in Wolf Creek Pass, in her childhood home. The past twenty-four hours or so hadn't really happened. Because somewhere along the way, she truly



had snapped again. She must have blocked out this latest trip to the mental institution. She wondered who'd committed her this time. Maybe her landlord had found her talking to herself and had called someone. Maybe the psych techs had drugged her up again and now she was just...imagining things. Having a hellish, yet erotic, adventure in her mind.

Tears stung her eyes. She'd never be free of the insanity. It had closed in on her when she was a kid. Her thirteenth birthday had been spent in a room with padding on the walls. There'd been nothing in that room but a bed with restraints that held her still when all she wanted to do was bang her head against a wall until she was unconscious. Or dead. Like her family.

Her first visitor had been Mia, who'd given her the necklace. Then there'd been a nurse who'd pumped her full of drugs until she couldn't think straight or see clearly or scream too loudly. After that...years had slipped by.

"You suffered." His voice was low and full of empathy. Obviously, he could read her thoughts as easily as he could project his voice into them.

Zora nodded. "When they finally deemed me capable of existing without inflicting bodily harm to myself or others, because I was too doped up to be a threat, they gave me my own room. No restraints on the bed and no door on the hinges. I sat on the end of the bed and stared out at the people in the hallway as they passed by. I let the nurses read to me. Nibbled at food when someone was watching me. I did what they asked, and in turn, they kept me..."

*Sufficiently sedated.*

"Yes," she whispered. She closed her eyes, but tears seeped out of the corners. She shook her head slowly as she remembered the fog she'd slipped into. It was shameful to admit she'd welcomed the numbness and hazy state that kept horrific sounds and images at bay.

"They let me pretend it never happened. As long as I followed their rules and didn't act too scary, they thought I was getting better."

"You did get better," Vaughn said.

Zora opened her eyes and sank onto the edge of the bed. "In some ways, yes. I mean, you inevitably face facts. After five years, it was impossible to deny my family was dead. It was how they died that I had to...suppress."

Vaughn was quiet. An interesting change of pace. So Zora continued on. "I know things. Things I don't understand and don't want to think about. So I don't."

He knelt beside her on one knee. "You have to think about them now. I'm sorry it's so difficult, but you have to reach into the far recesses of your mind and remember all the things you tucked back there."

She shook her head. "Why would I do that? It would only lead to more insanity. A place I'm afraid I won't come back from." Her eyes squeezed shut again as she attempted to hold back the tears. Though a few drops seeped out of the corners. "I don't do crazy anymore."

Maybe if she said that enough times, it'd be true.

"Zora." He shifted so that he sat on the bed next to her. The way he said her name urged her to travel a path she was wholly unwilling to go.

"Look. You want me to say I believe in vampires and werewolves, right?" Her eyes fluttered open and she turned her head to stare at him. "Okay, I do. I can't lie about it. I've always believed. But that's the most you're going to get out of me. I'm not staying here. I'm flying home tomorrow and I'm going to completely forget about this place. All over again. And you..."

She gave him a pleading look as more tears streamed down her flushed cheeks. "You're going to let me go and then stay the hell out of my head."

"I can't do that." He had the good grace to look contrite. "I'm sorry, Zora. I can't let you go. And I can't get out of your head until we're done."

"With what?" she asked, her breathing shallow. Whether from the subject matter or the way he stared so intently at her, she didn't know. Those oddly colored eyes of his were mesmerizing and too beautiful to look away from.

"With what you were meant to do. Kill the alpha."

"Oh fuck." She groaned, breaking the spell. "Not that again."

"Zora, you have a destiny. Somewhere deep inside, you know what it is. You just have to accept your fate and then we can work together to save this town."

She wanted to laugh, but knew that would lead to hysterics. And everyone knew where hysterics led when one had a history of mental illness.

"Look," she said again as she stood. "Post-traumatic stress disorder is a pretty freaky thing. I managed to kick it. There's no way in hell I'm going back to that dark place. Why I even came here today is completely beyond my comprehension. I let you talk me into it and I'm not even sure why." She threw her hands up in the air, though one still clutched the bottle of sleeping pills. "Maybe curiosity got the best of me or I thought the only way to get you to shut up was to come here. Well, here I am. And now I'm leaving."

Vaughn sighed. "You'll regret it if you do."

"Guilt trips don't work on me. The threat of a straitjacket does. I prefer to not be put in one, thank you very much."

"Jesus, Zora! Do you really think I want to push you over the edge? I couldn't stand it the first time!"

Her hands fell to her side. The bottle dropped to the floor. "What did you say?" She stared at him, incredulous.

His jaw clenched and a tormented look flashed in his pale irises. "I told you earlier that I've been in your head for a very long time. I don't know how or why. We're connected on a level I don't fully understand. I've always been able to read your thoughts, even halfway across the country. But when you were in the hospital —"

"You mean the psych ward."

He ignored her more accurate terminology and continued on. "It was hell for me to hear all the suicidal and pained thoughts in your head. But it was even worse after the nurses clouded your mind with pills. I couldn't reach you and that was just as agonizing for me. You blocked out everything, including me."

"Well, I beg your pardon for shutting you out," she huffed. "I'd had no idea you were there in the first place. And while we're on the subject, what right do you have invading my private thoughts?"

He grinned at her, the torment going by way of the bats circling the attic. "I told you. We're connected on a level I can't explain. But sometimes, it's extremely entertaining."

Her face flushed. She felt the heat ignite in her cheeks and she wanted to turn away. But that would be cowardly and she needed to stand her ground. "You have absolutely no right—"

"I know. But I can't help it." He reached for her hand.

Zora's breath caught. Her eyes searched his. She'd be lying if she said she didn't feel the bond between them, even though it was new and too inconceivable to process. The hows and whys and whats were all a jumbled mess inside her increasingly confused mind. But when he tugged at her hand, she let him pull her toward him.

The way he placed that hand over his left pectoral muscle... The way she waited for a heartbeat she never felt... The way he stared down at her, willing her to believe in him and listen to what he had to say, to be brave and strong along with him...

All of these things made her own heart nearly stop beating because of the way she froze in place. Staring up at him. Wanting...*him*.

Not exactly a sentiment that helped her plight. Not a sentiment that would keep her out of the psych ward.

Yet, he was reaching out to her and she was responding to him. A vampire who needed *her* help. One who wanted to help her stay sane in return. And maybe reclaim some of what she'd lost along the way, like her passion. She saw it in his intense gaze. Felt it in the way he so carefully touched her, carefully treated her. He might prod to the point of annoyance, but when she looked deep into his eyes, she saw a silent plea. A need for her to accept the connection he talked about.

"This doesn't make sense," she admitted, her voice a mere whisper.

"I know. But that doesn't change anything."

She closed her eyes, tried to latch onto something reasonable in her mind. "I really can't lose it again," she told him. "They won't let me out this time."

He leaned close to her, so their upper bodies touched. His head bent to hers and she felt his lips against her temple. "You're not going back there, Zora. I won't let you. Nor would I let anyone take you away. You're not crazy. You're...special."

She laughed. A sharp, hollow sound. "That's code for the old term 'touched', you know?"

"No. It's not. It's not code at all. It's the truth. You are a very unique person and I want you to discover who that person is. I need you to do this, Zora. For you, for me, for everyone in this town."

Her eyes snapped open. Stepping away from the large body and the strong hands and the intoxicating scent—all of which drove her wild to the point of distraction—she stared up at him. "You're a vampire. What the hell do you care about a bunch of humans?"

And why hadn't she thought about this before?

Damn! He was so good at hypnotizing her with his dangerous looks and sexy smiles that she hadn't even thought about his part in this supposed save-the-town equation.

"Are you afraid the werewolves are going to deplete your human blood supply?"

He rolled his eyes again. An expression that actually looked sexy on him. Like he found her amusing. "I don't drink human blood from the source. And typically, not at all."

"Sure." Her gaze dropped to her hand, the one he'd held to his chest. She lifted her arm and turned it to expose the wrist. "This isn't what you really want?"

Now he looked pissed. His features pulled taut, making him appear even edgier. More dangerous. "If I wanted to suck you dry, Zora, I would have done it a long time ago. And saved myself some of this tediousness." He stepped around her. "You really think I enjoy being subjected to some of the thoughts in your head? Especially the ones that manifested themselves in your mind the other night? My hands on your breasts, my fingers in your pussy. Whispering your name over and over until you came. Jesus."

He turned away, let out a low snarl.

Zora stared at his wide back. His head dropped and he shook it as his fists clenched at his sides. "You have no idea what it's like. I've wanted you since you emerged from your psych-ward-induced haze. But I can't have you, Zora."

This caused a sharp pain in her chest. A weird constricting that felt too close to someone wrapping a hand around her heart and squeezing it tight. Conversely, the throbbing she'd been experiencing lately deep in her cunt returned full force.

"I thought we made a deal in the attic."

He glanced at her over his broad shoulder. "I gave you what you wanted."

She shook her head. "No. What I wanted was all of you. And you know it."

"That would just complicate things."

"I don't know what to make of you," she said. "I don't understand what you really want from me."

He turned back to her. "Just stay the night," he said in a clipped tone. "We'll talk again tomorrow. I'll watch the house and you'll be safe. Just...get some sleep." He bent down and scooped up her bottle of sleeping pills. "But not with these."

"I won't be able to sleep without them." Panic rose within her. It was late and there was no way she'd find a pharmacy open at this hour. Not even for over-the-counter pills. Wolf Creek Pass didn't have a twenty-four-hour Walmart.

"I need you lucid."

"I need to not see horrific images of my family slaughtered by your stupid wolves!"

"Zora." His voice was low and soothing. "You don't need these anymore. They make you forget who you really are."

She could have screamed. It was right there on her tongue. She wanted to open her mouth and let out all her frustration and fear. But she pressed her lips together, clamping her mouth shut. Again, terrified of what might come with hysterics.

Vaughn headed toward the door. "You're never alone, Zora. I'm always with you. And now that you're here, I can protect you."

Somehow, that wasn't the comforting thought he'd intended it to be.

## Chapter Three

*The power is within you, Zora.*

"That's what you keep saying," she muttered in the dark.

*Stop being a smart ass.*

"Bring me my pills and you won't have to listen to me anymore."

No.

Zora yawned. She was exhausted, but had only managed to drift in and out of a restless sleep. She had no idea what time it was. The sun had yet to rise so she stayed in bed. Vaughn had told her he was patrolling the perimeter of the house. His voice invaded her thoughts from time to time, when he apparently realized she was awake. Oddly, she was becoming accustomed to conversing with him in this manner.

The voice inside her head remained silent for a lengthy period, making her wonder if Vaughn had finally tired of trying to convince her she had mystical powers. Capable of commanding the elements, he'd said. Nature, in all its forms.

"Am I a witch?" she asked, knowing he was still there, inside her head.

No. The man didn't give up *that* easily. *You're...a rare breed, Zora. The descendent of an ancient tribe that worshiped the moon. The tribe protected the council. Because of that, they were granted special powers by the council—the ability to summon the elements, draw strength from them. Especially the moon.*

"What about the wolves?" she asked. "The pack that..." Her voice trailed off, but the thought lingered in her head. She didn't have to speak the words, didn't have to mention her murdered family members. She knew Vaughn would read her mind.

*They're dangerous, Zora. Shape-shifters you can't command like the bats.*

"Humans capable of transforming themselves into wolves when the moon is full?"



Yes.

Her father had told her the story, long ago. She'd thought it was a tall tale when she was a child. He hadn't revealed the full extent of the ugly truth back then, had merely wanted her to know they were real. The wolves had proven the gruesome reality of their existence all on their own.

*This particular pack doesn't require a full moon to make the transition, though. They can do it nightly, if they choose. Prowl the woods and prey on unsuspecting campers, hikers, fishermen...*

Zora's eyes drifted open. She stared into the darkness surrounding her. "Like my father."

*Branson is the leader. He was once a trusted member of the council. But his greed and ambition turned him into a traitor. He's extremely dangerous, Zora.*

"He was here tonight?" The wolf she'd seen in the forest.

Yes.

"What did he want?"

*To see if you'd come.*

Zora let his words linger in her mind a moment.

*Yes, Zora.*

"Yes, what?"

*He's hunting you.*

The thought had formed in her mind before she'd realized it. She wasn't sure what caused the sudden violent shiver that racked her body – the reality of being hunted by a vicious pack of wolves that had mutilated her family – or Vaughn's ability to read her thoughts before they were even fully formed.

Meaning there was nothing she could keep from him.

*More the bane of my existence than yours.*

"How do you figure?"

*Because when you're thinking about me, I want to turn those thoughts into reality.*

"You had your chance tonight," she reminded him.

He sighed. *It's best if I don't know what it feels like to be inside you.*

"Give it a chance before you knock it," she mumbled, offended.

He chuckled. *What I mean is... I can't focus on what needs to be done if I'm constantly recalling how wet and tight you are. How... Ah Christ.*

She grinned triumphantly. "You do want me."

Yes, Zora.

"Explain to me how I sent the bats away. You knew how to make me do it, but I'm still confused."

*Your passion is what makes you so powerful. Tonight, you summoned the elements and commanded nature when my hands were on your body. Your attraction to me – your arousal – intensified your ability to call forth your powers.*

"My passion makes me powerful." A peculiar sentiment, given that Zora had never considered herself a passionate person. In fact, until the other night, when she'd conjured the image of Vaughn and had used that vision and his voice to awaken her desire, she'd been numb. Physically as much as emotionally. Sexual attraction had ceased to exist years ago. She was twenty-six years old and had only slept with two men, both one-night stands. There'd been little satisfaction from either encounter, so she'd simply given up on dating and sex.

Yet when Vaughn had first invaded her mind, her body had been on fire with nothing more than the thought of him and his voice. Tonight, his hands on her body and his fingers in her pussy had triggered something deep within her. A force more powerful than her orgasm, she knew. Even if it didn't make sense to her and she still couldn't wrap her mind around what Vaughn was telling her and what she'd felt earlier, she had to admit something inside her had changed. The more aroused she'd become the more...powerful...she'd felt. Making her capable of sending the bats away.

Making her wonder what she'd be capable of if he ever got around to fucking her.

Vaughn groaned. *You're like a dog with a bone, Zora.*

"And you're not? You've been hounding me incessantly for days."

*Just doing whatever I have to in order to get you to cooperate.*

"I can think of an effective means of persuasion. Come inside the house. Come into the bedroom. Come inside *me*."

Her body responded to his voice as easily this evening as it had the other night. And now that she knew what it felt like to have his hands on her body, to have his fingers inside her, to feel his hard muscles and strong arms surrounding her, Zora wanted him even more.

*You haven't had these kinds of thoughts in years. And back then, they weren't this potent.*

"That's because I didn't know you existed back then. Now that I do..." She let out a low sigh of longing. "Vaughn, I've never felt so sexually charged. It just keeps building inside me, and it's frustrating the hell out of me that you won't do anything about it."

*You've had two orgasms in two days, Zora. What more do you want?*

She rolled her eyes in the dark. "You already know the answer to that." Hell, she had half a mind to strip down and find him outside. But the wolves would pick up her scent and they might do more than just stalk her.

*Good girl.*

"Fuck you," she said as she shoved the heavy covers off her body. Just thinking about getting naked with Vaughn made her insides ignite. It was cold in the house, but Zora was burning up. She pulled the sweatshirt she wore over her head and tossed it on the floor. The cool air felt good on her flushed skin. Dressed in a pair of yoga pants and the satin cami she wore under the sweatshirt, she felt more comfortable. Less confined and certainly less singed to the core of her being.

"What happens tomorrow when the sun comes up?" she asked as she settled back against the plump pillows. "How can you protect me if sunlight fries you?"

*It won't be sunny tomorrow. Or the day of the full moon.*

"So you can be outside in the daytime as long as it's cloudy?"

Yes.

"What's it like being a vampire?"

*Some days are better than others.*

"You're a shitty conversationalist, Vaughn."

*You should be sleeping, Zora.*

"Give me back my pills."

"I promise you won't need them anymore."

"Yeah, right," she muttered. She could see she wouldn't be winning this game anytime soon.

Pulling the covers up around her shoulders, she closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep. Thankfully, Vaughn stopped talking and let her shut down her mind.

But he hummed to her. A soft, comforting sound that filled her head and gave her something soothing to focus on so that she didn't think of all the terrifying things that haunted her mind.

An unfamiliar feeling of peace seeped through her, making her relax. She snuggled further under the covers, enveloping herself in a cozy cocoon. Vaughn continued to hum softly.

Finally, Zora slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Zora, you've come home!"

She smiled at her aunt as she walked through the door of Mia's small country store. Her aunt was an attractive, petite woman with long, straight blonde hair and warm brown eyes. She spread her arms wide in welcome as Zora entered the store.

"I knew you'd come," Mia said as she stepped from behind the bulky, wooden counter as Zora reached it. "I've missed you."

A lump of emotion lodged in Zora's throat so she couldn't speak. She returned the tight hug her aunt embraced her in as she fought back tears. She'd missed Mia, had begged her on a number of occasions to leave Wolf Creek Pass and come live with her in the city. But Mia was stubborn and insisted Montana was the only home she'd ever know.

"Come," Mia said after releasing Zora. She took Zora's hand and led her to the back room. "I'm so glad you've spoken with Vaughn."

"You know Vaughn Lariat?"

"Who don't I know in Wolf Creek Pass? I've lived here my whole life and it's a small town." She whistled under her breath. "Filled with some interesting characters, that's for damn sure. Some good, some —"

"Evil."

"Yes." Mia stopped. She turned to Zora and skimmed a finger over the medallion she wore. "I'm so glad you found this. I was worried it was lost forever. You left town without it."

"I couldn't part with it. I just didn't think I'd need it in Manhattan."

"Well, you're going to need it here."

"What, exactly, is going on?" She still couldn't fit all the pieces together. Why was she here? How was a vampire capable of penetrating her thoughts, even from halfway across the country? Why was he battling wolves in order to save humans?

Mia waved a hand in the air. "We'll get to that later. Time is of the essence, my dear." She headed toward a large metal locker standing against the far wall. The cabinet was covered in a thick layer of dust. Obviously, it hadn't been opened in years. Mia retrieved a ring of keys from her pocket and selected one. She finessed it into the lock, then opened the double doors.

Zora gasped at the arsenal displayed before her. "What the *hell*?" She stared, wide-eyed, at her petite, unassuming aunt. "What are you doing with all of these?"

"Good, you're both here."

Zora's knees went weak at the mere sound of Vaughn's deep, sensual voice. His sexy tone alone was enough to make her thighs go up in flames and her insides burn with desire.

*Don't start, Zora.*

"You deserve to be tortured."

Mia shot her a confused look. Vaughn merely chuckled.

He joined the women in front of the cabinet. Zora watched him as he inspected the bounty for a moment, then reached for the black duffle bag stashed on the top shelf. He set it on the floor and began selecting weapons. Vaughn filled the bag as Zora's mind continued to reel.

"I stocked up after the last attack," Mia explained. The pain that flickered in her eyes told Zora she was referring to the attack on her family. "Vaughn told me what was necessary to keep the peace in town. Luckily, we haven't had any trouble from the pack. Until now."

Vaughn reached for a weapon at the bottom of the cabinet. He looked up at Zora. "Crossbow. Watch carefully." He demonstrated how to use the weapon, then handed it over.

Zora eyed her aunt. "Maybe you can better explain...?"

"I know this is all happening quickly, dear. Branson's plans to overthrow the council were only recently discovered. He must do it during the full moon. This will be one of the most powerful Wolf Moons in history, and he can draw additional strength from it."

"How?"

"I'll take care of the pack," Vaughn said, ignoring her question and frustrating Zora. Nothing new there. "But only you can defeat Branson."

Her throat tightened and her pulse quickened. "Why is that?"

"You alone possess the power to do it." He gave her a steady look. "You're the only remaining descendent of the tribe that protected the council."

"How's that possible? Mia's still alive. Isn't she a descendant of the tribe?"

"No," Mia said. Taking Zora's hand, she led her over to the chair behind the desk and urged her to sit with a slight inclining of her head.

"You know about all of this. Please tell me," Zora pleaded.

"We don't have time for this," Vaughn interrupted.

"She should know as much as possible," Mia countered. "Because what we're asking her to do...what she was born to do...can't be accomplished if she doesn't understand who she is."

Zora's head felt close to exploding. "Enough of the mystery. Just give it to me straight." And let the chips fall where they may. What other choice was there? She'd either survive this nightmare, be killed by a pack of vicious wolves or get sent back to the padded room.

*Let's shoot for the first one, huh?*

She rolled her eyes at Vaughn, then turned her full attention on her aunt, who pulled up a chair beside her.

"The truth is," Mia said, "you were adopted."

"What? That's cra—" Oh she did *not* want to utter that word! "That's impossible."

"I'm sorry to break it to you like this. In fact, I wish I didn't have to tell you at all. My sister and her husband found you on the shoreline when you were just a toddler. You'd fallen into the lake, but a strong tide brought you in. It was a miracle you survived."

Zora suddenly understood her fear of the water.

While she tried to process this, Vaughn spoke. "Your birth parents were only visiting Wolf Creek Pass when they were attacked and killed by Branson's pack."

Her gaze snapped to him. "How do you know that?"

His grin was a tight one, belying anguish he tried to mask. "Been around for a while, remember?"

She spared a glance at Mia, who nodded. So she knew Vaughn was a vampire. Wow. That put an odd spin on things. Opened a whole new can of worms, actually, with myriad questions Zora now had for Mia. Which obviously would have to wait.

"The authorities couldn't track down any living relatives to come get you," Mia said. "So when my sister and her husband came forward, wanting to adopt you, the social workers deemed it a better alternative to making you a ward of the state and putting you into the foster care system."

"Branson knew nothing of the adoption," Vaughn picked up the story. "Didn't even know you existed is my guess. And since your new family wanted to keep the adoption a secret from you, no one discussed it in town. I'm sure most people even forgot that you weren't a Valent by blood."

"As best as we can figure out," Mia said, "when Branson started plotting his takeover of the council years ago, he must have sensed the power building inside your house. He just wasn't sure of its source."

"Likely he thought it came from your father, possibly your brother."

"Zach?" Her stomach churned. The familiar rise of bile in her throat at the thought of the little boy she'd adored...who'd looked up to her...who she hadn't protected...made her instantly search for a trash bin. Fearing she was about to toss the breakfast Vaughn had left waiting for her when she awoke.

Swooping in and grabbing the metal can, he placed it at her feet. She didn't miss Mia's curious expression. Obviously she didn't know the connection Zora shared with Vaughn.



What, then? Mia thought he'd called Zora on the telephone and convinced her to come home?

Shaking her head, she tried to focus on the discussion at hand. "What happened to my family? The Valents," she clarified.

"Well," Vaughn said. "Branson suspected your father was the leader or a powerful member of a tribe that protected the moon from those who try to draw evil blood from it—an old custom Branson had mastered. It's basically a sacrificial ritual that helps demons gain power and strength. They get it from the full moons. For a pack of werewolves, obviously the Wolf Moon is the one they're going to capture the most power from."

"So he killed my family? Why not me?"

Mia stood and walked away. Vaughn had to continue the story. "Your mother was just a victim of circumstance. Wrong place at the wrong time. It was your father and brother the pack wanted to kill."

This brought on the heaving full force. Zora reached for the trash bin, but Vaughn was lightning-quick, holding it in front of her as she emptied the contents of her stomach into the round receptacle.

When there was nothing left to expel, she sat back in her chair, tears stinging her eyes. The back of one hand covered her mouth. Mia returned with a glass of water and a wet cloth. She dabbed at Zora's forehead and temple as Zora drank the water. Then she took the damp cloth from her aunt and pressed it to her mouth.

Partly because it was soothing. Partly because it helped to hold back the scream welling in her throat.

"This is a lot to take in," Vaughn said in a comforting voice. He set the trash can aside and sank to a knee next to her. "I'm sorry."

She nodded, silently accepting his apology because she knew if she opened her mouth, the scream would escape.

He took her free hand between his two large ones and gave it a gentle squeeze. Mia backed out of the room. When they were alone, he said, "There's so much more you need to know. And not a lot of time to tell you. I need you to focus, Zora. To understand how important you are in bringing down the pack."

One hand lifted and he brushed away a strand of copper curls that had fallen across her forehead and was caught in her eyelashes. He smoothed back the thick mass of hair and then grazed her cheek with the pad of his forefinger. A light, gentle touch that made her shiver. Her eyelids dipped as his longing gaze held her spellbound. He wanted her. And not just for purposes of fighting Branson's pack.

"It's true," he said. "For so long it's been true."

She tamped down the scream on her tongue, pushing it down inside her. She lowered the cloth that had covered her mouth and said, "Why didn't you make your presence known earlier?"

He shook his head as a tormented look crossed his devastatingly handsome face. "I didn't want you to ever know about me. I didn't want you to ever come back here." He looked ill at knowing what she was going through. "I wouldn't have reached out to you the other night if it wasn't a last resort. I tried to come up with another solution, tried to find a way to deal with this problem myself. But if you'd ever found out...if I hadn't have been able to succeed on my own and the people you know—including your aunt—suffered because of it, you never would have forgiven me. I wouldn't have forgiven myself."

"This is a lot to process," she whispered, a fresh batch of tears stinging her eyes.

"I know. And I keep thinking that if I can just force you into seeing the light, you'll accept everything we're saying and understand what you have to do. Embrace the power within you so you can help defeat the pack."

She closed her eyes and tried to determine if there was some long-lost feeling or unexplored knowledge that lingered within her, within her grasp. She knew there were

truths she'd forgotten for the sake of regaining her sanity. If she were to reach for them, would the lunacy return?

*I'll do whatever I can to keep you sane. To keep you grounded. I swear it on my eternity.*

She fought back more tears. He thought she was strong enough to handle this. So too did Mia.

*You're the one who has to believe it, Zora.*

She nodded her head. "I just don't know how."

Vaughn's hand slid around the back of her head. He coaxed her toward him, until their lips were almost touching. "I feel the greatest power in you when you're completely uninhibited." He spoke to her in a quiet voice now. As though knowing it was easier to accept him as a real person, rather than a figment of her imagination who spoke inside her head. "It doesn't happen often, but when you let go of everything holding you back physically and emotionally, I feel you tap into something deep within you, Zora."

She forced herself to keep her gaze locked with his. She wouldn't be a coward and turn away, despite her embarrassment over his words...and the reality of them. He knew all her darkest secrets. Knew all her desires.

"That first night together," he said, still holding her head close to his, "was something I'd fantasized about the past several years. Since you were released from the hospital. You immediately started to repress every emotion you had, including the sexual ones, and I wanted to tell you to stop. To convince you not to do it."

"Because passion is connected to whatever power you think it is that I possess?"

"Yes. But also because...I didn't want you to be numb inside."

"It's better that way."

"No, it's not. It's not who you are."

"You don't know who I am."

His eyes dropped to her mouth. "Yes, I do."

He leaned that last breath toward her and his lips brushed hers. Lightly at first, but that first intimate contact seemed to spark something powerful within them both. Zora's mouth opened just as his tongue plunged inside, tangling with hers. He held her to him with the hand on the back of her head. His other hand, which still clasped hers in her lap, raised to his chest, pressing her palm against his skin at the opening of his burgundy, button-down shirt.

The contact was as electrifying as his kiss. His skin was cool and smooth. The muscles beneath her hand pulled taut, as though her touch aroused him.

*It does.*

Zora broke the kiss, tearing her mouth away. "Vaughn." She wanted him. Even more than the past few nights. Her craving went far beyond that, actually. She *needed* him. How could he possibly deny her when he clearly felt the same way?

He was on his feet in a heartbeat, hauling her up and out of the chair. "I'm just trying to keep things from getting out of control," he said in answer to her mental query.

"Too late."

His jaw clenched. Zora's mind reeled. Her body ached for him. Every single inch of her burned for his touch.

"Zora," his arms slid around her waist, holding her steady and close to him. "I need you to focus on what needs to be done."

"I know." What they were involved with was dangerous on so many levels. Zora was not fool enough to discount the deadly situation she'd found herself in by returning to Wolf Creek Pass.

"If you're scared..." he said as he stared down at her.

She nodded. "I am."

"Know that I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"You can't guarantee that." As much as she wished otherwise, she was not deluded enough to think one sexy vampire could keep her safe from a pack of rabid wolves.

"I will protect you," he insisted.

She stared up at him, the fear twisting through her body until she trembled in his arms. "You said yourself you can't defeat the leader."

"He won't be able to complete the sacrifice without the pack. I *can* defeat them."

"What's he planning to sacrifice?"

Vaughn's jaw tightened again. "Not what. Who."

Zora's stomach plummeted. "*Who* is he planning to sacrifice?"

The torment in Vaughn's eyes was painful to see...and agonizing to accept. "You."

Zora felt the room tilt again. Would've needed that trash bin if there was anything left to heave. Vaughn's arms tightened around her. His head dipped and he whispered in her ear, "But he won't be able to. We won't let him."

"We." There was little more than a small measure of comfort in that word. She trusted that Vaughn had the strength to fight wolves. But her? Not so much...

"You have to believe in yourself. In your strength and your power."

"If it was fear instead of passion that made me powerful, we wouldn't have any trouble. I've got that in spades."

"Zora." His lips pressed to her temple. Then he said, "You can't give into that fear. You need to embrace your survival instincts."

She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. "Yeah, those."

"Think about it. You've been through so much. Your family was murdered. You were institutionalized. You left the only home you ever knew and moved to New York City. Hell," he said as he eased her away from him and stared deep into her eyes, "if that's not a testament to your survival instincts, I don't know what is."

She smiled at him. He was placating her, trying to make her feel better. She appreciated the effort. "Are you sure I'm *the one*?"

One hand left her waist and reached up to caress her cheek. "In more ways than you can imagine."

Zora's heart skipped a beat. "If I do this...if I take on Branson and win..." She kept her gaze locked with his. "If we both survive... Will you —"

*Yes. Oh hell yes.*

She smiled again as her heart soared. "You'll make love to me?" He'd latched onto her thought before it'd fully formed, but she wanted to be very clear about her intentions. And wanted to hear him answer the verbal question, not an unspoken thought in her head.

"Yes, Zora," he said as he bent his head to hers and kissed her. Long and deep. His kiss conveyed his desire, his need, his commitment to keep his promise. When he pulled away, he said, "I will make love to you. All night long."

Her teeth clamped down on her lower lip as excitement shot through her. Vaughn grinned. She said, "Now you're learning the power of persuasion. Keep it up." She stepped out of his embrace and moved past him. "I can save humanity and get fucked by the hottest vampire in existence. That's incentive I can work with."

"You're a quirky little thing," he muttered.

She laughed, despite the fact that she was still scared shitless at what lay ahead for her. But Vaughn's kisses—and the anticipation of *finally* getting what she wanted—made her a little lighter of heart. And if he was so convinced she had the potential to save this town, Zora would do her best to prove him right. If for no other reason than to protect her aunt.

She picked up the crossbow and tested it without an arrow, so she was accustomed to setting it up and was familiar with the trigger and how to reach it easily and use the right amount of pressure to release it. Vaughn finished packing the bag of weaponry as Mia returned to the back room.

He turned to her and said, "Go home. Lock the doors. Stay there until this is done. They don't know you're not a blood relative or one of the tribal members. Branson may come after you if he feels you pose a threat to him or his plan to overthrow the council."

Mia nodded in understanding. She took Zora's hands in her own. "You can do this. You *must* do this."

The pressure she felt and the fear of the unknown returned, but Zora remained focused on what needed to be done to protect Mia. And the town. "I'll do whatever I can. I promise."

"Good girl." Mia gave her a kiss on both cheeks then said, "We'll catch up when this is all over."

Mia returned to the store to lock up. Vaughn zipped the duffle bag and hefted it over his shoulder. He took Zora's hand and led her out the back door.

Zora stepped outside and instantly pulled up short. She gasped. A tall, dark-haired man with deep-set amber eyes stood in wait, as though he'd known they were about to come through the door. The sinister look in his eyes told her exactly who he was.

Branson.

Zora felt the tension rise in Vaughn.

*Keep walking.*

She did as he instructed, sidestepping Branson. Five men stood in the back parking lot, surrounding her rented Jeep. Vaughn led her to the vehicle and held the passenger door open for her. She climbed in and watched, the anxiety rising inside her, as Vaughn stashed the duffle bag in the back and then slid into the driver's seat. Zora handed over the keys without a word. He started the Jeep and shifted into gear. The pack inched closer. She glanced over her shoulder and found Branson staring at the medallion she wore. His eyes lifted and she was instantly chilled by his hard, amber gaze.

*Look straight ahead. Bury your fear. Don't let him feed off it and use it to his advantage.*

Tearing her gaze from Branson's, she did as Vaughn instructed. He eased the vehicle forward. The pack circled, closing in on them. He stepped on the accelerator, shifting into second as he sped out of the driveway, the Jeep shimmying as the tires spun on the snow-packed road. Zora spared a glance in the side mirror. The pack and their leader stood together, watching the retreating vehicle with menacing looks on their faces that chilled her to the bone all over again.

Good Lord. What had she gotten herself into?



## Chapter Four

Zora couldn't stop shaking. Her hands trembled, her insides quaked. She paced before the roaring fire Vaughn had built in the tall fireplace in the living room. He gripped her shoulders, holding her still as he looked deep into her eyes, the way he'd done earlier in Mia's shop.

"Breathe," he said.

"I'm trying."

Vaughn's jaw clenched. "Branson saw your fear. You have to learn to keep it from him, Zora. He'll use it against you."

"You're out of your vampire mind if you think I can take on that man. Wolf. Whatever."

To hell with Vaughn's incentive. She'd stood toe-to-toe with evil in Mia's back parking lot and she'd been terrified. There was no way she could defeat Branson.

"He didn't know all those years ago that the power building in this house was coming from you. Women in the tribe didn't possess the kind of power the men did. That's why you're a rare breed. He killed your father and your brother because he assumed they were the threat to him and his pack. Now he knows he was wrong. He knows you're the one capable of bringing him down."

"Oh yeah," she said as her body continued to tremble. "I'm a huge threat. He's got a lot to fear when it comes to me."

"He does," Vaughn said with conviction. "And he knows it. But he also knows he can use *your* fear against you."

"So why don't we just call it a draw and I'll go back home."

"You are home, Zora."

"No." She shook her head. "This will never be my home again."

Vaughn stared at her a moment, then said, "After we destroy the pack, you won't have to return to city. You won't need all those damn pills you take. You won't need to work sixteen-hour days to keep your mind occupied."

"Easy for you to say."

"No, it's not." He gripped her upper arms a little tighter. "It's not easy being in your head."

"I never invited you in, so don't blame me."

"Zora." His hands dropped to his sides and he let out what sounded to be a long-suffering sigh. After pinching the bridge of his nose with a finger and thumb, he said, "If I could block you out the way you did me when you were in the hospital, I would."

She eyed him curiously. Because the look in his eyes suggested otherwise. "Really?"

"Okay, no. That's a lie." He raked a hand through his hair. "I've been connected to you for far too long. For those five years you were institutionalized, I nearly went mad too. I couldn't reach you. I couldn't hear you. I couldn't...help you."

Zora moved away from him. She sank onto the sofa in front of the fireplace and said, "Oh my God. I *did* hear you."

Vaughn's dark brows knitted together. "What are you talking about?"

"Toward the end of my little...stint. When I was less doped up and a little more coherent..." She reached for a memory long suppressed. "I didn't hear a voice—certainly not yours—but I felt a nudge. The idea to move to Manhattan wasn't mine. I'd never considered it. Ever. But the morning they released me...I woke up and decided to move to New York. Just like that."

His jaw worked as he watched her pull forth the memory. "At first, Mia had tried to get me out of the hospital. She wanted to care for me. But I was still a minor with no blood relatives. The doctors and social workers fought her and so did I. Because I didn't want the constant reminders of what had happened here. When I was better, I had to

leave town. I had my father's life insurance money to live off while I went to school. I chose NYU. There was no way I could come back to this house. *You* were the one who told me where to go."

"They couldn't find you in Manhattan. They'd never pick up your scent, even if they'd tried." Vaughn turned his back on her and stared at the fire, his large hands planted on his hips.

Zora let out a low breath. "You've been protecting me all this time."

"And now I'm putting you in the line of fire." His voice was tight, his shoulders bunched.

"You have no choice." She knew it now. Though she was wholly terrified of Branson and his pack of vicious wolves, she'd realized this morning when she'd seen the alpha that this truly was her destiny. Which was what had scared the shit out of her on the drive home.

Now, there was no escaping the truth. No way to turn her back on the inevitable. Whether she won or loss this battle, she had to fight it.

*I don't want anything to happen to you. I'll do everything I can to protect you.*

Vaughn's words in her head were comforting.

"I know." She stood and closed the gap between them. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she said, "You have to make me stronger. More powerful. So I can defeat him."

Vaughn turned in her loose embrace. His head dipped and his warm lips swept over hers. A soft, fleeting touch that left Zora aching for more.

"Vaughn." She whispered his name as her body melded to his. Her eyes closed.

His strong arms eased around her waist, holding her close to him. His lips moved over her jaw, down her neck. Zora's head fell back on her shoulders. She felt the scrape of his fangs on her delicate skin and it sent a shudder of excitement rippling through

her. She didn't bother wondering if he'd bite her. Given the deliciously erotic sensations he evoked, she wouldn't fight him.

Which gave her an idea. "What if you made me a vampire? Wouldn't I be stronger?"

He shook his head, dropped another kiss on her neck. "It might weaken or somehow alter the power you already have. Besides, it'd be days before you were back on your feet, after the venom spread through your body and transformed you. We don't have that kind of time."

"Too bad," she mused. "I'd feel much more confident if I were immortal."

"Immortality doesn't guarantee anything when it comes to werewolves. They can destroy me just as easily as they can kill you."

Not exactly comforting news. "This sounds hopeless."

"It's not hopeless." He stopped nibbling on her neck and looked deep into her eyes. "I have faith in you."

She smiled, despite the tension suddenly holding her in a death grip. "I don't want to let you down." Though she knew the consequences of failing were more dire than that.

Vaughn nodded. His fingers brushed a wayward curl off her face and tucked it behind her ear.

Zora's gaze dropped to his mouth. "Kiss me. Like you did in Mia's store. Like you can't quite get enough of me."

He groaned. "I can't get enough of you."

Her fingers curled around one thick upper arm. The other hand lifted to his hair and plowed through the silky strands. Vaughn's lips swept over hers, teasing her and making her long for more.

"This could get *very* out of control," he warned.

"I'm counting on it."

His arms tightened around her waist, crushing her body to his. Vaughn kissed her again, stealing her breath and her heart.

Passion exploded between them, making them both desperate to deepen the kiss. Their tongues tangled and fire blazed through Zora, crackling with heat that rivaled the flames in the hearth. Her entire being surged to life with just one kiss.

Their bodies were pressed together and she felt his erection against her belly. She vaguely wondered about protection. She didn't have any condoms.

"I can't get you pregnant," he said as he broke the kiss and went back to work on her throat, his lips and tongue caressing her skin before he sucked gently on it. Causing that now-familiar pang of desire deep in her pussy.

"Guess we don't have to worry about STDs, either," she said. "I have a clean bill of health and you're a vampire."

She was about to make love with a vampire. Funny how that sentiment didn't faze her in the least. In fact, she couldn't imagine Vaughn being a mere mortal. He was too virile, too sexy. Too larger-than-life to be just a man.

She felt his lips curve against her skin. "Virile, huh?"

Zora laughed softly. "And sexy. Don't forget that part."

She wiggled in his embrace until he loosened his grip on her. Then Zora reached for the opening of his shirt and pulled the material apart, making the buttons pop off.

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

"I couldn't resist." She pulled the hem from his black dress pants and shoved the shirt off his broad shoulders until it dropped to the floor. Her palms splayed across his wide chest and she let out a low sigh of appreciation. "God, you are so magnificent."

Vaughn kissed her again. Just as reckless and hot as before. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she pressed her chest against his, though what she really wanted was to feel her bare breasts against his smooth skin.

He immediately obliged. Working the buttons on her cable-knit sweater, he had her topless in mere seconds, discarding her bra along with her sweater. His hands roamed her back as her breasts flattened against his chest, the rise and fall from his heavy breathing causing her nipples to pucker tight.

With her first moan of pleasure came the rain—large drops that pelted the glass panes in the living room.

As Vaughn deepened the kiss, drawing out her passion, the rain turned to a torrent that caused the water to sluice down the long length of the windows. Thunder roared in the distance, echoing all around them. The crackle of lightning filled the air and reverberated deep inside her. Zora felt a peculiar sensation within her, as though she were connecting with the elements.

Vaughn's mouth left hers and trailed down the long length of her throat, over her collarbone to the tops of her breasts. His lips brushed over the inner swell of one, then his tongue laved at a tight nipple. Zora let out a soft cry of need and desire.

The howling of wolves penetrated the passion-induced fog that filled her head, but Vaughn's touch distracted her from the call of Branson's pack.

He pulled her down to the thick rug sprawled before the fireplace, easing her onto her back. Vaughn's lips and tongue devoured her as he licked and sucked her nipples, then moved further down her body. He quickly removed the rest of her clothing and then spread her legs wide, opening her to him.

"Vaughn," she whispered. Desire consumed her, making her restless. But Zora didn't know how to express her needs. All she knew was that her insides burned for him. An unbearable void opened deep in her soul that only Vaughn could fill. "Please," she urged. "Make love to me."

Vaughn growled, low and deep.

His mouth teased her skin, inching its way slowly up her inner thigh. Zora's breath caught when his mouth covered her. She'd only ever imagined how this might feel, never having experienced anything so erotic in her life.

His fingers rubbed her labia before he spread her outer lips and his tongue flicked over her swollen clit. The fire he'd ignited with his kiss now roared through her body. Her fingers twined in his hair as she held his head to her pussy, loving the way his mouth felt on her. As he alternately flicked and sucked her clit, driving her absolutely wild, he slid a long finger deep into her wet cunt.

"Oh God." Her back arched. Her eyes closed. She felt a whirlwind of emotions unleashed inside her, just as the wind began to whip through the trees outside.

Vaughn stroked her a little faster, with more force, as his mouth continued to pleasure her. When he pushed a second finger into her pussy, Zora cried out, her orgasm hitting hard and fast.

His mouth continued to make love to her, keeping Zora flying high. She felt a convergence inside her that was impossible to explain, but she knew it had something to do with the power evoked by her passion. Her skin tingled and her insides snapped and popped like livewires. She felt energized to the core of her being as the high voltage ran rampant through her body.

Zora's fingers shifted from Vaughn's hair to his shoulders. She gave a gentle shove and he rolled onto his back, bringing her with him.

"That was amazing," she told him. "Now it's my turn."

He let out a low groan as she went to work on the silver belt buckle at his waist. Together, they stripped him down, and then Zora moved between his legs. Her fingers wrapped around his thick shaft and excitement shot through her at the way he responded. His hips bucked and a sharp hiss escaped his parted lips. Zora licked her lips in anticipation as her hand pumped his hard cock. His skin was smooth and supple, and the rigidity of the organ it covered was a fascinating contradiction. She'd never held a cock in her hand and she found the experience empowering.

Lowering her head, she licked the tip. Vaughn's hands gripped her shoulders. She settled more comfortably between his legs and dragged her tongue and lips up the length of him, then back down to the base.

"Careful, Zora."

She grinned up at him. "I think we're long past that." Her head dipped again and she took his cock deep in her mouth, evoking a sharp growl that sounded primal and downright carnal.

Zora had never pleased a man with her mouth before, but the way Vaughn responded to her spurred her on, convinced her she was doing something right. She experimented with a variety of paces, slow at first, and then faster as her head bobbed up and down. His grip on her shoulders tightened, but Zora barely felt the pressure. She sucked him hard and Vaughn bucked beneath her.

"Jesus, Zora." He didn't stop her, though, so she continued to lick and suck, turning herself on as much as she did him.

One of his large hands left her shoulder and slid between them to cup her breast. He squeezed it roughly and then toyed with the already hard nipple, sparking a sharp stab of arousal in her cunt.

She lifted her head and said, "I want you inside me, Vaughn."

"I've waited so long for you." The torment flickered in his beautiful silvery-violet eyes, mixing with his desire.

She let him pull her to him, with his hands wrapped around her upper arms. She straddled him and felt the tip of his cock slide along her slick folds.

"If I'd known," she said as she pressed her palms to his chest. "I would have waited for you."

"In a way, I'm glad you didn't." He held his shaft in his hand and rubbed the head along her pussy lips, then against her clit, making her wetter. "I would have hurt you."

She remembered her first time. Her one-night stand had been impatient and drunk. She'd been too embarrassed to tell him she was a virgin. He hadn't bothered with foreplay and she'd been dry and not the least bit ready for him. When he'd fucked her, it'd been painful.



"You wouldn't have done that to me. It would have been different. Better."

"I wanted to kill him," Vaughn said in a voice raw with emotion.

"It was so long ago. Forget about it." She shifted above him so that the tip of his cock pressed against her opening. "Doesn't matter. Nothing matters, except this."

She pushed her hips down, taking him inside her body.

Vaughn groaned. "Jesus, you're tight."

"But so ready for you."

His hands gripped her hips and he guided her into an easy rhythm as she opened up for him, sliding further down onto his thick shaft. He filled her cunt and it felt amazing. Like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

"It's never been like this," she told him.

He sat up, his arms wrapping around her waist. The change in position pushed him deeper inside her, made her feel as though his cock had swelled within her. She gasped at the way he stretched her, at how wonderful it felt.

"It should always be like this," he told her.

"If I'd known," she repeated, "I wouldn't have bothered with the others."

"If I'd known..." His jaw clenched briefly before he said, "I would have made you aware of my presence years ago."

"I wish you had."

He shook his head. "It was never my intention to disrupt your life. I didn't have a choice, though."

Her arms encircled his neck and her hips rocked back and forth. "I don't blame you for making me come here."

"I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to you."

Her lips brushed over his. "You won't let anything happen to me." And she believed that.

He kissed her again. Softly at first, but nothing ever stayed controlled between them. As his kiss heated up, so too did his lovemaking. He rolled her onto her back, while he was still inside her. The weight of him on her felt heavenly. She spread her legs wider to accommodate him between them. As his kiss deepened, he thrust into her. Zora held him tightly to her, wrapping her legs around his hips as he fucked her.

Tearing her mouth from his, she gasped for air as his forceful strokes pushed her toward another climax. She felt the sensations build inside her as his cock pumped in and out of her cunt, hitting all the right spots.

"Oh yes," she whispered as his tongue curled around her nipple before he sucked it into his mouth. Everything he did to her felt perfect and right. She forgot about the storm outside. Forgot about the fight brewing, which she would be a key participant in. All that mattered at the moment was the way Vaughn loved her. The way he took her to dizzying new heights, so that she could barely breathe.

"You feel so good," he told her, his eyes blazing with an inner fire that matched hers.

"Fuck me harder," she said. "I want more."

His teeth ground together. "Zora."

"Please." Her hips lifted to meet his thrusts, forcing him into a faster pace.

"Damn it, Zora. Don't make me lose control."

"Oh God, Vaughn. *Please* lose control."

Vaughn's thick cock pumped rapidly in and out of her. Zora's pulse raged in her head. She wrapped one arm around his neck. The fingers of the other hand twined in his lush hair again. His mouth devoured her throat as he thrust harder, deeper. Zora moved with him, loving the feeling of him inside her, filling her completely with his large cock. Her inner walls stretched around him, accommodating him, though it was a snug fit.

"You're so wet, Zora," he groaned. "So tight."

He fucked her a little harder. A little faster. Zora's mind clouded. Her eyes closed, her heart rate accelerated. She'd never known anything so erotic, so sensual. She wanted the exquisite sensations to go on and on. To last forever. Conversely, she wanted Vaughn to reach his own climax. She wanted to feel him convulse and shudder inside her, wanted to feel his hot come flood her pussy.

*Yes, Zora. Yes.*

Her thoughts and desires seemed to push him over the edge. Suddenly, he was thrusting deep inside her. A low, guttural sound seemed to rise up from the depths of his soul and erupt all around them as he came. His cock pulsed inside her, his come filling her. It was more than Zora could take. Her scream mingled with his growl as she came with him, harder than before.

Her fingernails dug into his flesh as she held him to her, riding the endless waves of desire. The pleasure went on and on, filling every lonely, destitute hole within her, seeping deep into her soul.

She had no idea how long it took for the sensations to ebb. A short eternity, at least. She clung to them for as long as possible. Clung to Vaughn, loving the sound of his rapid breathing. Loving the feeling of his body joined with hers. Loving his bare skin against hers. His was cool, hers was hot and flushed.

Eventually, Vaughn rolled onto his back and pulled her to him. Wrapped in his strong embrace and the blanket he hauled off the end of the sofa, Zora felt safe and protected. For the first time since her family had been murdered by Branson and his pack, Zora felt whole.

The storm outside calmed.

"Will it always rain when you fuck me?"

His head rolled from side to side. "You'll learn to control the elements and the way they respond to your passion. You kept the wind outside the house this time."

Zora was quiet a moment. Then she propped herself up on an elbow and stared at him. "We're ahead of schedule on the incentive we agreed to. Cart before the horse kind of thing. Not that I'm complaining."

"Finally."

She smirked at him. Then turned serious. "Vaughn, if we win this battle, then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I don't have to say it."

He grinned at her. "You really think I'll be able to let you go after this?"

Satisfied with his answer, she snuggled back against him, contently tucked under his arm with her head on his chest. "Good to know."

"More incentive?"

"Oh yeah. Because I've got a dozen new ideas of how I want you to make love to me."

"I know. And you're going to have to learn to keep those thoughts out of your head when we're in public. Otherwise, I'm going to be hard all damn day long. And believe me, I *will* do something about it."

She giggled. "That's not a promise I can make."

"Zora."

"Go to sleep, Vaughn. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

The fire crackled and kept the room warm, despite Vaughn's cool body next to her. She closed her eyes and drew lazy circles on his rigid abdomen, wanting so much to slide her hand under the blanket and stroke his cock until he was thick and erect and in need of her.

"Go to sleep, Zora."

She smiled. "I can't help it."

"Try."

"Why don't you just make love to me again and *then* we'll call it a night."

She reached for him and found he was already hard.

He groaned. "You really expected the opposite after the thoughts that flashed through your mind earlier? You on all fours and me fucking you from behind."

"And having multiple orgasms," she said. "I didn't think about that."

"But you're thinking about it now."

"I'm ready for you, Vaughn."

He flipped her onto her back with no effort at all. He kissed her hard, making her hotter. Wetter.

When he broke the kiss, he said, "I'm just doing this to strengthen your power."

"If that's what you want me to believe..."

He chuckled. Then he shifted above her and rolled her onto her stomach. His large hands covered her ass and he spread the cheeks. Zora came up on her knees and forearms and stared at him over her shoulder as she thrust her backside into the air. Vaughn's fingers rubbed her labia, sliding forward and then back. He dipped two fingers inside her and used her moisture to massage her clit. Slowly at first. But as Zora's breathing picked up, so did Vaughn's pace. He pushed the two fingers inside her wet cunt and stroked her quickly.

"That feels so good. It'd be better if you were inside me, though."

"Patience."

"Not a virtue I can commit to when it comes to you."

He grinned at her, though it was tight with his own need. His eyes flashed with desire that matched her own. "Come for me."

She felt the sensations well within her. Felt the fire rage.

"Come all over my fingers."

He worked her harder, faster. Zora ignored the storm starting up again outside, concentrating solely on the way Vaughn made her feel. Within seconds, she climaxed, calling out his name.

Before she'd caught her breath, his cock thrust into her. He gripped her waist and held her steady as he hammered into her. Exactly what she wanted. Exactly the way she'd imagined it in her mind.

There was no hesitancy on his part this time. He knew she could take what he gave her. And still want more.

"Zora." His voice was low and strained. "Stop thinking about this."

"Impossible not to." She still watched him over her shoulder. She reached behind her and pulled at a cheek, trying to widen herself for him. On her knees, she gave him ample access to her cunt, but she still wanted more.

"I'll give you more," he said, his tone dark and sensual. One hand on her waist swept forward and he rubbed her clit with quick, firm strokes as he fucked her.

"Oh God!" It was more than Zora could take. She came again.

"Careful what you wish for, sweetheart."

Her palms pressed into the hardwood floor and she rested her forehead on the back of one hand as he continued to pleasure her. "Don't stop," she whispered as his forceful thrusts made her breasts sway and her legs quiver. "Keeping fucking me." She closed her eyes, savoring the sensations that continued to build within her. "Keep fucking my pussy."

A low grunt came from behind her. She knew he was close to coming. She squeezed him tight, using her inner muscles to milk his cock.

"Jesus, Zora." He fucked her even harder. "I'm about to come."

"Surprisingly, so am I." More contracting of her slick walls and he exploded inside her, causing Zora to come again. "Vaughn!"

His cock seemed to pulse and surge inside her as he continued to derive pleasure from her body. Zora held him tight, keeping him inside her as he shuddered. His harsh breaths filled the room, mingling with the sound of the rain against the window panes.

When he finally withdrew from her, Zora felt sated, but knew it wouldn't last because she was already thinking of how he'd fuck her next time. If there was a next time.

He didn't respond to that latter thought as it formed in her head and that made her a little uneasy. She curled up with him again after using the restroom and they lay in front of the fire, neither one speaking. She feared what tomorrow would bring, but Vaughn lessened that fear as he hummed to her again, making her forget her need for the sleeping pills. She closed her eyes and drifted into the kind of dreamless, all-consuming sleep that had eluded her for thirteen years.

## Chapter Five

The Wolf Moon was on the rise.

Zora stood at the window in the living room, staring at the inky sky, feeling the power from the moon stir that mysterious sensation deep inside her. Her fingers gripped the medallion at her neck. The citrine glowed bright. She could see it wink and sparkle in the reflection cast against the glass pane before her.

Branson and his pack were deep in the woods. Earlier in the day, Zora and Vaughn had scoured the forest until Vaughn had picked up the pack's scent. They'd found the ritual site, though the pack was nowhere to be seen. Snow had been shoveled away from a flat clearing shrouded by tall pines and a large circle had been etched into the hard ground. Vaughn had explained that on the night of the Wolf Moon, Branson would light a fire within the circle and concoct a brew so potent it would fill the forest with its acrid scent. As the steam from the potion rose toward the sky, Branson and his pack would take on their nocturnal forms. The wolves would howl at the moon, drawing upon its dark power, growing ever stronger as they drew blood from the keeper of the night.

But the *piece de resistance* would come if they ended Zora's life, thereby leaving no one to protect the moon. They would gain Zora's power. If that happened, then after tonight, Branson would be strong enough to take on the council. The pack would slaughter the weak and replace them as the prevailing deities.

"How do you know all of this?" she asked Vaughn when he entered the room and stood behind her, staring out at the dark night along with her.

Vaughn's eyes clouded in the reflective surface of the window pane. "My brother was a council member. A century ago, he knew of the growing threat Branson posed and he discovered a way to end the pack's rise in ranks. Unfortunately, the tribe was all



but wiped out by then. Only the descendents remained, and none of them fully understood the charge their ancestors had willingly committed themselves to. The council feared Branson was already too powerful to defeat, so there was no one to help my brother when he tried to bring the pack down."

"Oh, Vaughn," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

His jaw tightened. "He didn't wait for me to return from Europe to help him. He thought he had the power to stop Branson on his own." Vaughn shook his head. "The pack killed him."

She turned to him. Saw the pain on his face as though his brother had been murdered just yesterday. She knew how agonizing that was to endure. The deaths of her family were still fresh wounds for Zora.

"Maybe that's why we're connected," he said. "I want vengeance and justice as much as you do."

She nodded. His tortured soul mirrored her own. "We'll avenge him, Vaughn. And my family. The council will be safe. I promise."

For if they failed... The balance within the council would shift and evil would reign. The creatures of the night would take over. No innocent would be spared. The humans in town would be slaughtered.

Zora thought of her aunt. Vaughn had assured her Mia would be safe. The pack would be focused on their task tonight – and on keeping their enemies at bay.

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I suppose." She could feel the power and strength she possessed pulsing to life inside her. She only hoped she could figure out how to use it to her advantage. She still wasn't sure what she was capable of, how she could command nature to help her. Nor was she sure she could draw upon her power when she needed it the most. There wouldn't be time for Vaughn to help her call it up once they started for the woods.

"Maybe a kiss for the road?" she joked humorlessly.

Vaughn grinned at her. "Don't be afraid, Zora. You're stronger than them."

"Right."

His finger lifted her chin so she looked up at him. "Zora, you're powerful. Don't doubt that for a moment. Don't take the medallion off until Branson is weak, crippled. It evokes the power you need to defeat him. When the stone glows red, press the medallion to his chest. It will draw the power from Branson and immobilize him. Once he's paralyzed, an arrow to the heart will end his life."

"You're sure?"

He nodded. "Only you can do this, Zora."

She prayed he was right.

\* \* \* \* \*

The high-pitched cries of Branson's pack sent chills racing through Zora as she and Vaughn trudged through the snow to the clearing they'd spotted earlier. She knew the pack would be on guard, anticipating an attack. A surprise ambush would be impossible—the wolves would catch her scent long before she reached them. Drawing the wolves away from the circle was paramount, for it would end the ritual. But thus far, the pack remained within it, not seeking out Zora or Vaughn.

They crested the hill that hovered above the clearing. The tall trees, the branches of which were heavy with snow, made it difficult to see the pack. An unpleasant aroma permeated the forest, nearly gagging Zora. Vaughn didn't seem to notice. The ritual was underway, as the mysterious potion Branson brewed wafted skyward.

*Keep your eye on Branson.*

Vaughn's voice steadied her. She nodded in concurrence. Then he was gone. She hadn't even caught a flash of him as he'd disappeared into the dark night with extraordinary speed and agility.

Alone in the dark, Zora felt fear wend its way through her body. With stealthy moves she didn't know she possessed, she made her way closer to the clearing. She spotted Branson through the trees, howling at the moon. He was much larger than the other wolves. His obsidian coat was shiny and luxurious. He was a beautiful beast.

A beautiful, deadly, murderous beast.

Zora's fingers tightened around the crossbow she held. Four short but sharp arrows were sheathed in the thigh holsters Vaughn had fashioned for her. Two were mounted on each of her outer legs. The weapons gave her a small measure of comfort.

As she crept closer, Zora heard the change in the wolves' cries. Their howling turned into vicious snarls. They knew she was close. Zora froze in place as she caught a silvery-violet glow, just seconds before a dark figure leapt from a thick branch overhead and landed within the circle, spike in hand.

Vaughn.

"Oh God," she whispered. "Please be careful."

Zora barely had time to draw a breath before he attacked one of Branson's pack. The spike he held in one hand drove deep into the heart of the wolf. The creature let out a near-deafening cry. Vaughn twisted the sharp weapon and the animal collapsed to the ground, dead. One down, four to go, not including Branson. The pack fanned out and circled Vaughn. Zora's heart jumped into her throat. What the hell was she supposed to do?

*Watch Branson.*

Her eyes never left the pack leader. One of the wolves lunged toward Vaughn, all four legs lifting off the ground as it flew toward its prey. Vaughn held up a powerful forearm in defense, taking on the beast rather than sidestepping it. They tumbled to the ground, the wolf on top of Vaughn. Zora screamed, drawing the wolves' attention to her. Branson's amber eyes glowed and he let out a low snarl. Vaughn and the other beast rolled together. She heard the eerie sound of skin tearing, heard Vaughn's grunts and the wolf's growls.

Suddenly, Vaughn used his vampire strength to fling the beast across the circle. Its large body hit a tree trunk and the wolf slumped to the ground. But he was still breathing. The rest of the pack attacked in unison, save for Branson. He charged Zora, who had managed to load the crossbow with her shaky fingers. She took aim, but didn't hit Branson.

The arrow connected with the side of one of the wolves Vaughn wrestled. Vaughn used the reprieve to free himself.

*Zora!*

Her attention returned to Branson. The large wolf slammed into her, knocking her to the ground. The crossbow flew from her hand, landing out of her reach. Zora scrambled to her feet, despite the pain that racked her body. Branson circled her, his menacing gaze making her insides quake.

How was she to defeat him? He was too large, too strong, too fast...

The beast inched toward her.

Panic rose within Zora. So too did her power. Clouds shifted overhead, shrouding the full moon as though in a protective manner. Plump snowflakes began to fall. Owls and coyotes and other animals stirred within the forest. A sudden loud rustle made Zora believe they had all just fled the immediate area.

A distressed cry escaped her lips.

She may be able to command the elements, but she sure as hell didn't know how to control them—or bring them to her aid.

She spared a glance at Vaughn. The fourth wolf regained consciousness and joined the attack. Zora watched in hopeless horror as Vaughn went down, the four large beasts covering his body so she couldn't see if Vaughn held them off...or if they'd already claimed his throat.

"Vaughn!" she cried out. No answer. Not even telepathically.

Tears stung Zora's eyes. She had no chance to swipe them away as Branson suddenly lunged at her, toppling her. Survival instincts kicked in and Zora fought back with superhuman strength she'd never experienced before. She groped for a foreleg and was surprised to hear the bones snap as she gave it a quick twist. Branson let out a high-pitched cry as he rolled off her. He continued to circle her like the vicious predator he was, though he limped noticeably. His snarl deepened, as though she'd really pissed him off. Zora glanced back toward the circle. The wolves were gone. She couldn't see Vaughn in the darkness because he blended in with his black hair, jeans and leather coat. Damn it.

"Where are you?" she demanded.

No answer came from Vaughn.

Branson lunged toward her again, but Zora was quick on her feet. She charged through the forest, as though the ankle-deep snow didn't even exist. She heard Branson behind her. She could outrun him, considering his injury. But where the hell was she supposed to go?

Then she remembered that drawing him away from the circle to end the ritual had been her strategy. And she'd succeeded. So too had Vaughn. Though she had no idea at what cost.

Was he dead?

Zora feared the worst.

She kept running, though, knowing if Vaughn died, it wouldn't be in vain. She would do all she could to stop Branson.

She broke through the forest and ran along the shoreline. Fat snowflakes fell all around her. Pain lanced through her body from Branson's attack, but the mysterious energy she possessed propelled her forward. She reached her property, feeling more secure knowing the lay of the land here in a way she hadn't back in the forest. How she'd managed to find her way was a mystery to her.

Light from the Wolf Moon filtered through the clouds and softly lit the night sky. Zora sprinted across the backyard, only to draw up short when she came face to face with two of Branson's pack. There was no sign of the other two. Or Vaughn. Although a strip of black leather hung from the mouth of one of the wolves.

Zora's heart sank.

Her breath formed before her face as the air rushed from her lungs and mouth. She didn't have to turn to know Branson had caught up to her.

Zora backed slowly toward the lake. The wolves inched closer to her, stalking her. Branson's limp was more severe, yet he continued to advance on her, leading the pack. She couldn't escape. She had to fight them.

She had three remaining arrows, one for each wolf.

*Just focus on Branson.*

"Vaughn!" He'd appeared out of the thick patch of trees to the west and crept up on the wolves. The pack turned its attention on him, but Branson inched closer to her.

Zora reached the dock. She had nowhere to go. Branson had trapped her.

She withdrew an arrow from its sheath just as Branson attacked. He knocked her onto the dock and it swayed precariously under their weight, the old wood creaking beneath them. Zora cried out as sharp claws swiped at her leg. Blood flowed from the gash and seeped onto the dock. Zora kicked at Branson with her good leg, connecting with his bad one. The wolf let out a loud cry.

Then she caught the flash of red reflected in his eyes.

The medallion!

The gem glowed brightly and Zora reached for it, tearing it from her neck just as Branson advanced on her again. He pounced on her, knocking the wind from her body. She heard something pop. A bone. One of hers, though she wasn't sure which one—her entire body ached.

She gasped for air. The wolf bore down on her, his head close to hers. He bared his teeth as he snarled low and deep. He went for her throat. Zora countered the move with her forearms, but in doing so, lost her grip on the medallion. She fought Branson, using her inner strength and power to throw him from her body, sending him skidding across the dock. His claws dug into the edges of the wooden planks as his long body dangled from the pier.

Zora got unsteadily to her feet. She couldn't put much weight on her damaged leg, so she shifted to her good one and used the lame one to attack Branson. Letting out a loud cry as pain shot through her body, Zora's booted foot connected with Branson's jaw. The wolf lost its hold on the planks and fell into the lake.

Zora turned away, searching frantically for the medallion. She peered over the opposite edge of the dock, catching the crimson glow in the water.

No!

She'd have to dive in to get it. The thought made her panic. Zora was terrified of the water. Before she could contemplate a strategy, she felt the dock sway as Branson leaped onto it. In the next instant, he had hold of her ankle, his teeth gripping her tightly, breaking through the material of her hiking boot to pierce her skin.

Zora cried out in agony. She kicked at the beast, but he didn't relinquish his death grip. Zora threw her spike at him. The sharp point penetrated the wolf's hide between his shoulders and Branson instantly released her. Zora dove over the side of the dock without a second thought. The freezing cold water stole her breath. Fear rose within her, but her fingers twined with the ribbon anyway.

When she surfaced, she held the medallion in her hand.

"Vaughn!" He was on the dock, much closer to the shore than Branson. The wolf paced the pier, wheezing and whimpering, but not conceding the fight.

Zora coughed and sputtered as the choppy water splashed in her face. "I can't swim!" She went under. The freezing cold water pierced her insides like a thousand knives. But Zora kicked her way back to the surface. "Vaughn!"

He dove in. Vaughn swam to Zora and wrapped his arms around her as she gagged on the water she pulled in. "Head up," he said as he swam. When his feet touched the bottom, he worked his way toward the shore with her in tow.

Zora's teeth chattered. She felt frozen to the core. The medallion slipped from her trembling fingers. Branson chose that moment to attack. His body sailed through the air and connected with Vaughn's. All three of them hit the icy shore. Vaughn fought him off as Zora scrambled for the medallion. Vaughn had the injured wolf on his back, one knee pressed to the beast's throat.

Branson thrashed and snarled and bared his teeth. A sudden bright flash of moonlight penetrated the clouds, momentarily blinding Zora. Branson let out a strangled cry.

"Now, Zora!" Vaughn yelled.

She pressed the medallion to the wolf's chest. The stone glowed so brightly, Zora had to close to her eyes. A burst of color flashed behind her lids, then dimmed.

"The arrow," Vaughn urged.

Zora opened her eyes. She unsheathed the last spike and drove it deep into the wolf's heart. Branson had already gone still from the medallion. The last breath left his body.

Zora fell away from the wolf, her entire body shaking. Vaughn's arms eased around her as he pulled her to him. She wasn't the only one bleeding.

"I thought you were dead."

"Undead. I'm a vampire."

"So you keep saying." Her teeth chattered. "Can you help me inside?"

Vaughn got to his feet. He lifted Zora into his arms and carried her to the house. They passed the two slain wolves in her backyard and she looked away.

Once inside, Vaughn laid her on the sofa. His eyes scanned her body, landing on the vicious claw marks on her leg.



"I have to take care of these," he said as he covered her with a thick blanket. He stood and turned to leave her, to retrieve medical supplies from the kitchen, she presumed.

Zora grabbed his hand. "Wait," she said in a weak voice. "Don't leave me."

He knelt beside her and clasped her hand between his two large ones. His heat felt wonderful against her icy skin. She shivered and her body trembled. Every inch of her ached, but all she could think about was the fear she'd felt when she'd thought the pack had killed Vaughn.

"I'm all right," he said in a soft, soothing tone. He smoothed back the wet strands of hair that clung to her forehead, cheeks and neck. "You don't have to worry about me, Zora. I'm not going anywhere. Nothing's going to happen to me."

Her mouth quivered and tears stung her eyes. "I don't know how I'd survive it, Vaughn. After my family died..." She choked back a sob as tears streamed down her already damp cheeks. "I just...stopped feeling. I can't return to that dark place, Vaughn. Not after you've brought me back to life. I don't want to lose this feeling. I don't want to lose you. Ever."

He smiled softly at her. "You won't, Zora. I promise."

"I want to be with you," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the crackling of the fire Vaughn had built before they'd left the house earlier in the evening. "*Forever.*"

Vaughn's jaw clenched for a brief moment. Then he swept his fingers over her cheek. Staring deep into her eyes, he asked, "Are you sure?"

She nodded, no longer able to speak because of the lump of emotion that had welled in her throat.

Vaughn's soft grin returned. "I want you with me too, Zora. Forever."

He leaned over her and his sharp fangs grazed the sensitive skin on her neck, inciting a riot of erotic sensations within her. "The pain will worsen before you get

better. The venom will sting. Worse than that, actually. It'll burn like hell. But it will also heal you."

"Do it."

A moment later, Vaughn's fangs sank deep into her throat.

Passion, desire and love welled inside her, making her cry out in sheer ecstasy. She felt Vaughn's power mingle with hers, and the overwhelming sensations flooded her veins until, finally, they overpowered her and left her gasping for air.

His mouth left her neck. "You belong to me now, Zora."

"Yes," she whispered in a weak voice. The pain from her wounds and the vampire venom was excruciating. But she focused on what the final outcome would be. "I do belong to you, Vaughn. Forever."

## **Epilogue**

*Six months later*

The wedding was a simple, traditional one. The wedding night was not.

*Careful, Zora.* Vaughn's deep timbre echoed in her head, though he was nowhere in sight.

*This is hardly the way I intended to spend our first night as man and wife.* Her retort was also a mental one. Conversing telepathically with Vaughn was a convenient method of communicating when they were hunting wolves.

*You didn't seem to mind how I prepared you for this evening's fight.*

She grinned at his words, despite the tense situation they were currently embroiled in. A new alpha had come to Wolf Creek Pass to start his own pack, now that Branson no longer controlled this part of Montana. Vaughn and Zora had both agreed to stay in town after defeating Branson, and protect the residents from shape-shifting wolves. They'd take down any pack that tried to settle in the area. Eventually, word would get out that Wolf Creek Pass was a wolf-free zone.

She hoped that would happen sooner, rather than later. Hunting wolves was not her idea of a hot Saturday night date with her new husband. Although, Vaughn was right about the earlier portion of their evening. Following the ceremony and a lovely reception at Mia's, Zora and Vaughn had returned to their own home—the Valents' former residence. Vaughn had decided taking on the pack tonight would give him and Zora the advantage of a surprise attack, since the pack wouldn't expect them out and about on their wedding night. And he'd done everything he could to get her "in the mood" for the hunt.

Vaughn had made love to her, helping Zora to conjure that mystical power within her. He'd been so diligent, in fact, an internal fire still burned bright at the thought of

how he'd helped her to call forth her ability to command nature's elements. Vaughn's creativity knew no bounds.

*Stay focused*, he whispered in her head.

Though his statement was a stern one, it was followed by a soft chuckle at her wayward thoughts.

*I'm trying. But it's almost impossible not to think about –*

*Zora! Christ, the last thing I need is a hard-on because you're thinking about how I fucked you earlier. We are in the middle of a life-and-death situation here. In case you've forgotten.*

She sighed. *Hardly.*

Vaughn had been right about the pack not suspecting an attack. They had easily ambushed the wolves minutes ago, separating the alpha from the rest. Vaughn had followed the three that had fled, and Zora had focused on the leader, whose hasty retreat had caused her to lose sight of him.

Now, she crept through the woods, searching for him. Her booted feet occasionally snapped twigs and made her wince from the soft noise that seemed to be magnified tenfold because it was so damn quiet in this dense forest. It helped that she was shrouded by shadows now that the clouds overhead had eclipsed the moon. Her doing, since she was better at controlling nature's elements than she'd been six months ago when they'd taken on Branson and his pack. A little thunder might help to cover the sound of her footsteps, but the rumble would also mask her stalker's approach.

She could sense the alpha wolf's presence. The new wolf was close by – mere yards, she guessed, considering the soft crunch of dried leaves and pine needles that echoed around her. Helpful signals. When the attack came, Zora was prepared.

The wolf's pace quickened, and Zora could sense his nearness and hear his heavy breathing. At the exact moment the clouds parted to reveal the crescent-shaped moon – and illuminate the area in which she stood – he leaped toward her, his large body sailing through the air, determined to knock her to the ground.

But Zora was a vampire. Stronger and more powerful than ever before. The wolf's body connected with hers and he may as well have crashed into a brick wall. Her body absorbed the blow, her feet remaining firmly planted. Though her teeth seemed to rattle from the onslaught, she managed to stay upright. The wolf, however, bounced off her like a rubber ball. His body collapsed to the ground as he let out a shrill cry, which was answered by the howling of his pack.

Only two returned calls, she noted – meaning one of the wolves was already dead.

Zora! Vaughn's voice filled her head again.

*I'm okay. A little shaken to the core, but still standing.*

Unfortunately, it didn't take more than a few seconds for the alpha to recover. He was on all four legs again and growling menacingly at her.

"I've dealt with your kind before," she told him as she reached for a spike, strapped to her right thigh. She could feel the medallion around her neck warm as the power rose within her and the moment to strike quickly approached.

As the wolf circled her, seemingly debating his plan of attack, anticipation welled within her. Fear mingled with that apprehension, mostly because she knew shape-shifting wolves were capable of killing vampires. But she had the upper hand with her skewed genetic composition – that peculiar power that gave her an advantage over her enemies.

When the wolf leapt toward her again, Zora took a swipe at his body with the spike. He was an agile creature, though, and dodged her attack. Zora's arm swung downward as she missed her target completely. The lightning-quick motion couldn't be stopped, and her hand slammed into her own thigh, the spike driving deep.

Zora let out a pained cry as her legs nearly buckled beneath her. But anger quickly replace her fear and agony. She yanked the spike from her thigh and tossed it to the ground. As the fury grew within her, the weather changed dramatically. Heavy raindrops fell from the cloudy sky. The moon glowed even brighter. The wind picked up, sweeping through the forest like a twister that continued to gain strength. In the

distance, she heard the sharp, agonized cry of another wolf. Vaughn's voice in her head confirmed his victory over another pack member.

*One left, he told her.*

*Same here. But not for long.*

The alpha advanced on her again, no doubt hoping to use her injury and pain against her. As the wolf made another attempt to take her down, Zora summoned a more powerful blast of wind that tore limbs from the pine trees surrounding her. Several of them struck the wolf, and the massive blows slowed his pace. Giving Zora just enough time to retrieve a long, thick branch from the ground. The wolf lunged toward her again and Zora lifted her new weapon and aimed for the wolf's heart. The inertia of his body propelling toward her and the strength she put behind her assault caused the jagged end of the tree limb to pierce the wolf's chest and plunge deep into his body. It burst through his back, spearing him.

This time, his growl was one of pain, anguish and defeat. It was not answered, telling Zora that Vaughn had succeeded in eliminating the remaining wolf in the pack.

The alpha dropped to the ground, whimpering and gasping for air. He was nowhere near as strong or resilient as Branson had been. It took no more than a few seconds for the remaining breaths to escape his body. He lay in the middle of the forest, lanced through the chest. With the mess created by the gusting winds, it looked like a natural accident. As though a limb had simply been ripped from a tree by the gale force and he'd been impaled by it.

When Vaughn appeared by her side, he said, "Nice going, babe." He glanced up at the sky, the rain pelting his face. "Some storm we're having."

She laughed. "I'm sure I've baffled every meteorologist within a fifty-mile radius."

Zora inhaled deeply, held the breath for a few seconds, then expelled it, thereby releasing the elements from her control. The wind died instantly. The rain stopped. The clouds scattered.

Vaughn eyed the destruction she'd caused and said, "You're your own natural disaster."

"Whatever it takes," she told him with a smile.

He grabbed her around the waist and their wet bodies pressed together. "How about a hot shower and a proper wedding night, Alpha Slayer?"

"There's nothing 'proper' about what you do to me, Vaughn."

He grinned at her. "Fine. Let's get naked and fuck like two vampires who can't get enough of each other."

"Now you're talking."

They were home within minutes. Neither had the patience for careful removal of clothing. Buttons popped and soaked garments began to pile up on the hardwood floor. Vaughn backed her up against their large bed, but she protested.

"I definitely want a shower first," she told him. "Need to wash away some blood."

He pulled away from her, for the first time noticing her wound. "Jesus," he said on a half-growl.

"It's healing fast. Don't worry about it. I'm just a little sticky."

Vaughn's features darkened. "Good thing he's dead or I'd try my hand at him."

She smiled and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "You're strong, but alphas aren't your forte."

"That's some ego you're getting," he said with a laugh, the tension in his body visibly easing.

"Let's hope other packs are getting our message loud and clear—and that they stay away. I'm not really into this wolf-slaying business."

"But you're damn good at it," he told her.

She eyed him closely. "What are you thinking? We should hang a shingle? Help other towns with their shape-shifter infestations?"

His dark brows lifted. "Not a bad idea."

"Oh Vaughn!" She groaned. "I don't want to be a full-time slayer. I just want to be your wife."

"You're great at being both." He scooped her up in his strong arms and carried her into the bathroom. Setting her on her feet, he stepped into the shower and cranked on the warm water. Over his shoulder, he added, "It is a unique profession, you know. Gotta be better than crunching numbers."

Funny he should mention her past occupation. Preparing tax returns now seemed like such a ridiculously mundane task, she couldn't imagine going back to it. But she wouldn't give into Vaughn easily.

With what was surely a wicked grin, she said, "Guess you'll have to convince me it's the right thing to do."

He eyed her naked body from head to toe as he grinned at her. "Oh that shouldn't be a problem."

Excitement shimmied through her. The way he looked at her, as though he were imagining a dozen different ways to fuck her and make her come, made her nipples tighten and her cunt ache.

*Mmm, he said in her mind. Now you're talking.*

Zora stepped into the shower with him. Her leg was sore from the spike she'd accidentally driven into it, but the sting barely registered in her mind. She suspected the wound would be fully healed in a day or so. Just one of the many things she liked about being a vampire. The other was her resiliency. She didn't want Vaughn to treat her with kid gloves. Especially when he fucked her. And now that she wasn't a fragile human...

He chuckled as he mentally followed her thought process. "I promise *not* to be gentle." To prove his point, he wrapped an arm around her and hauled her up against his hard body.

And it was hard—every glorious inch. He had a body she'd never tire of, not for the rest of her eternity. As his cock pressed against her belly, desire shot through her,



making her wiggle in his embrace until he loosened his grip on her so she could sink to her knees and take his steel erection into her mouth.

The warm water from the shower sluiced down her body, and seemed to wash away the soreness she'd incurred from her encounter with the alpha wolf. Her muscles relaxed and she focused solely on pleasuring her new husband.

Her tongue slid along his shaft, from the base to the tip, causing his hips to buck. She teased the underside of his helmet before flicking her tongue across the top of the large bulb. When she drew him into her mouth, Vaughn's hands gathered up her wet mass of hair and lifted it off her shoulders, away from her face. She sucked him hard and he let out a sharp breath.

"That'll get you in trouble, for sure," he said in a strained voice.

Zora licked him again, then smiled up at him. "Promises, promises."

She wrapped her fingers around his shaft and gave his thick cock a couple of quick pumps before she took him deep in her mouth again. Her lips stretched over the width of him and her head bobbed up and down as she worked him a little faster, causing him to grunt and tighten his grip on her. She didn't mind if he came, because he'd recover quickly. At the same time...

"Hard to fuck you when you're on your knees," he said, reading her thoughts.

She released him from her mouth and stood. "I was more than willing to finish the job."

He grinned at her, though it was a tight one, belying his need for her. "I'd rather be inside you."

"Oh...well," she said on a soft sigh. "If you insist."

They quickly washed, soaping each other and then rinsing their bodies. Vaughn handed her a towel and they stepped out of the shower. A moment later, he had her in his arms again and he carried her into the bedroom.

Rather than depositing her on the large bed in the center of the room, he set her on her feet in the corner, in front of the oversized armchair.

"Sit," he demanded.

She smiled as she did his bidding. "I love when you get forceful."

"Then you're in for a treat," he said with a wink.

Zora's stomach fluttered.

How was he going to take her tonight? With her perched on the edge of the chair, her legs spread wide? Or with her bent over the back of the chair so he could fuck her from behind? Maybe with her sitting on his lap, riding him hard?

He leaned down to where she sat and kissed her. An erotically stirring kiss that was long and slow, yet hot and demanding. When he pulled away, he whispered, "All of the above."

She squirmed in the chair. "Really? You're going to fuck me in every way I just thought about?"

"Mm-hmm," he said as he remained bent over her, dropping light kisses on her cheek and forehead. "And if you want more, I'll give you more."

She moaned. "Something tells me this will be the longest wedding night in the history of wedding nights."

"It might last a few weeks."

Her stomach tumbled again. "Lucky me I don't need much sleep anymore."

"Lucky *us*," he amended.

"Oh yes. Lucky *us*."

She reached for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him close to her. He eased down to his knees and situated his torso between her parted legs. He kissed her again, conveying not just his love, but his intense desire for her. She felt it to the core of her being. Reveled in the warmth that mingled with the raw sensuality he exuded.

When he came up for air, the expression on his handsome face was deathly serious. "When I said 'til death do us part, I meant every word."

She smiled softly. "So did I."

"That's a really long time," he reminded her.

She nodded. "I know. And I like it."

He grinned. "Just checking."

"Now that we've cleared that up," she said with a wink of her own, "shut up and fuck me."

He laughed heartily. Then he kissed her again. His mouth on hers was warm and enticing. Inciting a riot of sensations within her. She held him close to her, pressing her bare breasts to his hard chest, loving the feeling of his skin against hers. His hands roamed her body, one of them sliding between them to cup a breast. He squeezed it roughly, sending a jolt of electricity straight to her cunt. His finger and thumb captured her hard nipple and rolled and pinched it, making her hotter. When his mouth pulled away from hers, his head dipped and his tongue swirled around the other nipple, doubling her pleasure.

Zora's head fell back on her shoulders, causing her wet hair to spill down her back. The cool strands felt good against her suddenly flushed skin. Vaughn drew the tight peak of her breast into his mouth and sucked hard, his teeth lightly scraping the sensitive nub. Zora moaned. Her fingers wove through his damp hair and she kept his head at her breasts, enjoying the attention he paid them. She felt the tension building deep in her pussy, knew she was wet for Vaughn. She wanted him inside her, but his mouth and hands on her breasts was heavenly.

He eventually moved on, though, slipping his hands under her ass and cupping her cheeks. He pulled her toward him, so she was sitting on the very edge of the large chair. Her fingers were still tangled with strands of his hair when his head lowered and his tongue swept over her sensitive pussy lips. Zora gasped at the delicious sensations that rippled through her at his erotic touch.

“Vaughn.” She whispered his name as she leaned back in the chair and spread her legs wider.

His mouth settled over her, his lips warm against hers, his tongue stroking her labia before teasing her clit. Zora’s hips lifted off the cushion and she pressed herself more firmly against Vaughn’s mouth as he licked her lips and suckled her clit. Liquid heat oozed through her veins, warming her insides and making her hot and restless.

As though he knew the exhilaration and need that coursed through her, his hands shifted from her ass to the backs of her thighs. He lifted them up, draping them over the arms of the big chair. Opening her further to him.

Zora watched as his head dipped again. His mouth was on her once more, and he worked her aggressively until she was just about to come. She felt the tension escalate, but forced it back, wanting to savor it. Her eyelids fluttered closed and her head rested against the plump cushion behind her. His mouth on her felt incredible. The pace was just right. The pressure was perfect. Everything he did to her edged her closer and closer to that magnificent drop-off.

When he pushed a long finger deep into her cunt, she couldn’t hold back. She let out a small cry as her climax crested. He didn’t give her a moment to catch her breath. He plunged a second finger into her pussy and worked her feverishly as his tongue flicked over and around her clit. The sensitive knot tightened to an almost unbearable degree, tingling and throbbing until she felt the various sensations he evoked converge and explode once again.

“Vaughn!” She screamed his name. Her voice was sharp and full of need. The second orgasm he sparked was a powerful one, and she rode its strong current. But even before it began to ebb, Zora wanted more. So much more. “Fuck me,” she said as her eyes snapped open.

“Not yet,” he answered on a sharp breath, only sparing a quick glance up at her. He went back to work on her pussy, licking and stroking, until she was close to coming again.

"Vaughn," she said, both loving and hating the anticipating of having him inside her. His mouth on her clit and labia, his fingers stroking her quickly, made her want him to stay right where he was while she enjoyed every second of pleasure he gave her.

Conversely, she'd reached the point where she needed to feel his hard cock inside her. Wanted him to fuck her hard, until they both came.

Understanding precisely what she wanted, Vaughn's fingers withdrew from her body. He stood and grabbed one of her hands, hauling her out of the chair.

"You really should learn to keep your thoughts to yourself," he said with a wicked grin.

"But you reading my mind saves so much time. We get right to the good stuff." She kissed him as his arms wrapped around her waist.

When he dragged his mouth from hers, he said, "Yes, but I can't quite prioritize your desires. Exactly how do you want me to fuck you?"

He was toying with her. She could see it in the shimmer of his silvery-violet eyes.

"Now who has the out-of-control ego?" she asked.

Vaughn chuckled. "Just trying to give you exactly what you want."

"Oh you know what I want." Her naked body rubbed against his. "I want you. Plain and simple. Every way imaginable."

He groaned. "So whatever I say goes?"

She scoffed at him. "Let's not get too high and mighty here."

"But you might like it," he whispered in her ear.

Zora's insides ignited. "Fine," she conceded with a deliriously happy sigh. "Do as you please. But if you don't make —"

"Oh I'll make you come," he assured her with a cocky grin.

Her body melded to his. She loved how her breasts settled perfectly below the hard ledge of his pectoral muscles. The way their bellies meshed and their legs nearly twined together.

"God, I want you in the worst way," she couldn't help but say. Just being this near to him made her crave his touch, his cock inside her, his sexy words pushing her to the edge... "Vaughn," she said as she stepped away from him.

He eyed her with curiosity and lust in his yes. "Yes?"

"I want—"

"I know, Zora." He grinned at her. So sweet and sexy and...sinful.

Her teeth clamped down on her bottom lip as a wicked thrill chased down her spine. Of course he knew what she wanted. She kept nothing from him, and he didn't have the good grace to stay out of her head. Not that she minded. It was so much easier this way. Better yet, he never denied whatever idea or desire popped into her head.

Who was she to complain about that?

"Good rationalization," he murmured before he planted his hands on her hips and gave her a half spin, so her back was to him.

He whisked away the strands of hair clinging to her neck and pressed his mouth to the side of her throat. He wrapped his arms around her waist as his lips and tongue brushed over her skin. His teeth gently nipped her flesh. Zora practically melted in his strong embrace. His hard cock nestled between the cleft of her ass, making her widen her stance to better accommodate the thick shaft. One of the hands around her waist slid down her belly to her pussy. Vaughn continued to nuzzle and nip her throat as his fingers went back to work on her clit, rubbing it in a slow, circular motion at first. Building her desire again. Inching her right back to that beautiful precipice that would inevitably lead to another fantastic freefall.

A little mood enhancer was in order, she thought, so she summoned the rain again. The pelting of fat drops on the window panes was in perfect sync with the erratic throbbing between her legs. The flash of lightning briefly illuminated the bedroom, more electric and vibrant than mere candles. She smiled at the sensual atmosphere she'd created.

"Quite pleased with yourself," Vaughn whispered in her ear.

"Mm-hmm." She leaned forward, over the chair, and gripped the back of it with both hands. Placing a foot on the seat cushion, she lifted her ass in the air, offering it to Vaughn.

He groaned. "Oh how you tease me."

"I want you inside me. *Now*."

"So demanding," he said with a soft *tsking* noise. "Is this how an eternity of marriage is going to be?"

"Yes," she said over her shoulder.

Vaughn grinned. "I can live with that."

He shifted his hands so they held her at her waist, then he thrust his cock into her wet pussy. Zora let out a small cry of pleasure that was quickly followed by low moans and soft whimpering as Vaughn pulled out of her, then plunged back in, driving deep.

"Yes," she muttered contentedly. "Just like that..."

He thrust into her again, quickening his pace until he was fucking her hard. His grip on her waist tightened as he held her steady against his fervent lovemaking. The sound of his flesh slapping against hers mingled with the storm outside. His deep groans occasionally covered her sharp rasps of breath.

His cock slid easily in and out of her wet cunt, but his strokes were long and forceful. Her breasts swayed from the vigorous fucking and her nipples and clit tingled, in need of attention.

Zora pulled one hand from the top of the chair and palmed a breast, pinching and tugging at the nipple, heightening her arousal. Vaughn released one side of her waist and reached around the front of her. His hand slid between her parted legs and he rubbed her clit as feverishly as he fucked her.

"Oh God." She gasped. "That is so good."

He fucked her even harder, faster, until she had to grip the top of the chair again and hold on tight. Her soft whimpers became impassioned cries that conveyed her excitement as much as they begged for more.

Vaughn did not disappoint. He hammered into her, seemingly giving her everything he had. Thankfully, the chair was a heavy piece, placed in the far corner so it didn't shoot across the room at the jarring created by their heated lovemaking.

As her climax built, she dropped her forehead against the top of one hand and concentrated solely on the feeling of Vaughn's cock inside her pussy. Her inner walls clenched tight, squeezing him and making him grunt with pleasure. He filled her so completely that every time he pulled back, almost withdrawing from her, she felt a sense of loss. But only for a brief moment, because then he rammed back into her and she cried out from the beautiful sensation, the intense feelings and emotions he incited.

"I'm so close," she whispered. It was the perpetual battle she engaged in when he fucked her. The desire to hang onto the exquisite sensations, to revel in them until she absolutely had to give into them, and the longing to feel an explosive orgasm. Drawn-out gratification versus immediate gratification. That had become the bane of her existence. Hold out or give in.

"I can keep fucking you, you know?" he said between groans. "Not like it's a one-shot deal."

He'd been in tune with her thoughts again. "I don't want you to think I'm greedy, or anything."

His laugh was a short, sharp one that didn't interrupt his rhythm. "As if making you come is such a hardship on me."

She grinned, though he couldn't see it because her head was still resting against her hand. Her eyes closed. She continued to savor every glorious sensation coursing through her. But it all ballooned rapidly, too fast for her to control it. She called out his name as she came and squeezed him tighter than before, causing him to thrust deep into her.



"Oh God, yes," she said on a harsh breath. "Keep fucking me."

She loved how he felt inside her. So hard and wide and unyielding. He didn't let up, not for a second. Until he changed positions, that was.

He pulled out of her and she let out a soft whimper of protest.

Vaughn wrapped an arm around her and she straightened. He quickly spun around, with her in tow, and plopped onto the plump cushion, bring Zora with him. She straddled his powerful thighs, her back to him. Easing onto his lap, she sank onto his thick shaft, taking him all the way inside her body in one fell swoop. He groaned as she sheathed him, and gripped her hips, guiding her into a rocking motion that had them both panting heavily within seconds.

Zora flattened her palms against the tops of his thick thighs to brace herself. She lifted slightly off his lap, then came back down on his cock. Hard. Excitement shot through her and her nipples tightened even more.

"You like that, hmm?" Vaughn mused.

"I like everything we do."

He groaned, then said, "Fuck me, Zora."

She glanced at him over her shoulder, finding a tense, yet sexy, look on his handsome face. She grinned at him, feeling sexy herself. Because of him.

Starting up her own rhythm, she rocked her hips, then rolled them. She ground her ass against his pelvis, then rose off him a bit before coming back down, filling her cunt with his stiff cock. Deciding she liked that motion the best, she bounced lightly on his lap. His hands shifted to her waist and he kept her steady as she moved up and down his shaft, as though she were on springs.

The pleasure the position brought was immediate and all-consuming.

She moaned. "This feels incredible." She came within minutes. But she wanted more.

"My turn," Vaughn whispered in her ear.

He eased her back against him as he partially sprawled out in the enormous chair, her upper body resting against his. He used his hips and ass to thrust up into her while she continued to straddle his thighs. His hands cupped her breasts and toyed with the nipples as he fucked her. Zora's eyelids fluttered closed and her teeth clamped down on her lower lip, holding back the scream that threatened to tear from her mouth. He fucked her hard and fast, his cock pistoning in and out of her.

"Oh God, Vaughn. That's so good."

He increased the tempo, his thrusts so quick and sharp, she knew she'd come again in a matter of seconds. But she held it back, loving the feeling of the tension building inside her.

One of his hands slid down her body and he covered her clit with the pads of two fingers, working the swollen nub and the sensitive area around it. His ministrations in and out of her body intensified the sexual bliss consuming her. She felt that balloon inside her swell again. She was filled with euphoria and ecstasy. Drowning in a sea of erotic sensations that were just too beautiful and sensual to let go of.

"Don't stop, please," she begged. "Fuck me harder."

He did. The vampire strength and agility he possessed made his movements quick and steady. She was capable of absorbing blow after blow, while still wanting more. Vaughn didn't let up. He massaged her clit with equal fervor, as his cock thrust up into her, time and time again.

"So good," she mumbled. Her thoughts had all turned erotic. The only thing that registered in her mind was how wonderful Vaughn felt inside her. How much she loved and needed him. How hard he fucked her, until she was so close to coming again.

"Do it," he whispered in her ear, his voice tight and strained from his exertion and lust. "I want you to come, Zora. I want to hear you scream my name and squeeze me tight. Come all over my cock, Zora. Do it. Now!"

It was impossible not to.

"Vaugh!" Everything inside her lit up like a Christmas tree and it was electric. Her orgasm hit hard and fast, stealing her breath and causing little golden orbs of light to flash behind her closed eyelids. Her pussy contracted around his erection, clenching tight, milking it as Vaughn continued to fuck her, seeking his own release. "Oh God," she muttered as her clit burned with a sizzling sensation and her nipples puckered into little knots of nerves, which added to her intense pleasure.

She felt jostled to the core of her being from his rigorous thrusting, but didn't want it to end.

"Sorry, babe. It's about to..." He thrust deep one last time and exploded inside her, filling her cunt with his hot seed. "Oh Christ!" he called out as he came.

Zora continued to squeeze him tight, her inner walls holding him captive as he convulsed inside her. His pelvis jerked upward, pushing him further inside her as he seemed to glean every ounce of pleasure she had to offer.

She rocked her hips in time with the thrusting he kept up, though his movements were much slower. He derived as much enjoyment from her body as she did his. His arms wrapped around her waist and he held her to him, her back pressed to his hard chest.

He engulfed her in his tight embrace and murmured in her ear, "You feel so good. So warm and tight and wet."

"Found a little cave to camp out in, huh?" she whispered back.

He chuckled. "You know how much I like making love to you."

"As much as I like you making love to me."

They remained sprawled in the big chair, each of them trying to get their breathing back to normal. Zora's body tingled with a curious mixture of continued arousal and blissful release.

"Give me a few minutes to rest," Vaughn said.

She laughed. "I didn't say anything."

"You're thinking it."

She grinned. Her eyes were still closed, and she enjoyed the sound of his low voice in her ear. "I've told you. It's impossible *not* to think about it. You're addictive."

"So are you."

"Guess this vampire thing is working out pretty well for us."

"Got off to a shaky start," he reminded her. "Took a while for you to come around."

"Oh I don't know," she said as her hands clasped his wrists and she tightened his embrace around her waist. "I think I was hooked the first time I heard your voice inside my head."

She felt his body tense around her. "I was afraid you'd think you were going crazy again."

"I did think that. But...you helped to keep me sane."

"You are sane, Zora. Maybe you always were. You just got a little lost along the way. Not surprising, all things considered."

She was quiet a moment. She recalled how hard she'd worked to suppress the memories of her family, to pretend the past didn't exist. But she could accept the pain and the hell she'd lived through, now that she better understood what had happened all those years ago. And having vindicated her family and Vaughn's brother...that helped to heal the wounds too. So did Vaughn's love. His eternal devotion to her. His passion and his strength and his honesty had their own healing effects.

Zora never would have believed she could feel whole again after her family's deaths. She'd never believed she could be normal again. Of course, that was now a relative term because she was a vampire with mystical powers. A wolf slayer. An immortal. But still. She was a wife and a niece too. A compassionate being who wanted to save humans from demons.

This thought made her sit up, causing Vaughn's arms to loosen around her waist. Staring at him over her shoulder, she said, "Maybe you're right. Maybe we should hang

a shingle. There are shape-shifters to keep in line or eliminate, and we're good at it. Getting better each time."

Vaughn grinned at her. "Be a shame to waste such talent."

She laughed. "Here we go with that massive ego again!"

He chuckled along with her. Then said, "I'm game. I just want you to be careful."

"Ditto."

"Deal."

Then he lifted her off his lap, whisked her up into his arms again and carried her to the bed.

"How's the leg?" he asked as he set her gently on the mattress.

"Forgot all about it." She spared a glance at the wound. It was already healing over, the skin regenerating quickly. "Hmm, would you look at that? Didn't take nearly as long as I thought it would."

"Don't get cocky," he said as he crawled into bed beside her. "It'd really piss me off if you seriously hurt yourself."

"Well, we wouldn't want that."

He pulled her into his arms and she snuggled against his body, resting her head on his shoulder. She considered closing her eyes and drifting off. It'd been one hellaciously long day. A wonderful one, what with the wedding and the amazing lovemaking. Not to mention the defeat of the alpha wolf, which, she had to admit, provided a bit of its own rush.

"You really want to sleep?" Vaughn asked.

Zora giggled. She slid a hand under the covers they'd settled beneath and felt his erection. "So soon?"

"Told you I just needed a few minutes."

"Well, in that case..." She climbed on top of him, straddling his lap once more. Only this time she faced him. She leaned over him and kissed him deeply as she

lowered herself onto his hard cock. She broke the kiss to tell him, "I love how you feel inside me."

"I love being inside you." Vaughn wrapped his arms around her waist and moved inside her with a slow, sexy rhythm. "I love you, in general."

She smiled against his neck as they moved together. "I love you too. Forever."

"Yeah," he said as he picked up the pace, giving her everything she always wanted. "Forever."

## About the Author

Multi-published and award-winning author Ava McKnight's love of romantic fiction began as a teenager. She holds degrees in General Studies and Communications and has worked on newspapers as an editor and reporter. Most recently, she worked in PR, writing speeches and Congressional testimonies.

Ava is a member of Romance Writers of America and one of its Phoenix chapters, Desert Rose. She has served as a Board member, Newsletter Director, National Contest Chairperson and Arbitration Co-Chair. She is also published in romantic fiction as Calista Fox.

Ava welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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