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Dedication

To my cousins, Rochelle Lemke and Rose Smith. Thank you for growing up with me. Let's agree to never grow old, only wise together.

Protector Mine

Ashlynn Monroe

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Chapter One

Bright sun burned Larissa's eyes as she helped her father and two older sisters with rock picking. It seemed as if her dad always picked the hottest day of the spring for the odious task, and every year she wondered where all the rocks came from. Acres of uneven, dirty countryside lay before them, and they had to remove all the rocks laying in the field so the spring planting could begin.

Both of her sisters had left home to go away to college, but they returned at her father's insistence for the wretched rock removal tradition. She would be leaving in the fall for college herself. Taking time off to decide what she wanted to do for the rest of her life had only prolonged the inevitable. She would have to leave the peace and tranquility of her family's home and move into the dorms as her sisters had. They had scrambled away quickly, but not Larissa.

Something about the dark woods had always drawn her. It called to her very soul. As rattlesnakes and other wildlife were abundant in the hills, her parents had never allowed the girls to just run and explore the potentially dangerous area alone. For Larissa, the call had been so strong she had frequently disobeyed her parents; the longing to go into the cool shadows of the trees felt irresistible. Dark shadows and thick undergrowth had never deterred her. She always felt safe there, and as of yet, she had never seen a rattlesnake.

Once in awhile, she was sure she had caught a glimpse of something larger moving through the brush, but she could never run fast enough to catch up to it. Fearlessly, she had pursued the movement, unconcerned it might be dangerous. On several occasions, she would just wander for hours looking for something intangible. Her sisters thought she was deranged and her parents had tried every punishment they could think of, but she kept going.

There was something about this place that went beyond childhood home and hearth. This place was in her blood. Generations of her family had lived on the land. Larissa always felt very earthy and sometimes she thought she could feel something watching her, protecting her. The feeling was probably the reason she had rejected going off to college so far. It was foolish, but Larissa always felt an overwhelming sense of acceptance when she was near the shadows of the trees. The thought of leaving that behind was daunting. Thinking about living away from that feeling of security scared her, and she could not imagine waking up and not seeing the tree line when she looked out her window.

When Larissa had voiced her feelings to her siblings, they had laughed at her. Both of her sisters were afraid of the shadows and lonely darkness behind the tree line and both of them claimed it was haunted. She did not believe in ghosts, but she knew there was something mystical, special, about the place. She was the youngest and they usually thought her dramatic personality was over the top, but when it came to the woods, she knew that it freaked her family out something fierce.

College would be a big change, but she was looking forward to pursuing her interest in photography. She was good at capturing the essence of nature or people. She wanted her inspiration immortalized in the pictures she took. She planned to major in photography, and become a nature photographer.

Crunching, rumbling tires over the gravel field road brought the group's attention away from the dreaded chore. Yes, it did appear that Paxton London was driving toward them, but he could have any number of reasons for coming, most likely to speak to her father. Hanna, Larissa's eldest sister, made a kissing noise at her while Belicia made an "oooh" sound. Larissa rolled her eyes at their feigned immaturity. She felt overcome with mortification when her father joined in by subtly humming the wedding march. How did she deserve such a horrible, mean-spirited family?

Larissa desperately hoped he wasn't coming to see her. Paxton was sweet, ethical and had the rural grit that made them a well-matched pair, but she didn't feel a connection. Larissa was young and inexperienced, but a spark was a spark...or lack thereof. Paxton was her friend. They understood each other because of having similar childhoods and growing up in the same community with the same

values. She knew he was a good man, but he was not a man she wanted forever tied to as his bride.

Hanna was the same age as he was and Larissa knew her sister had always harbored a secret crush on him. When Hanna looked at Pax there was a softness to her eyes. Anytime she talked about him the little hitch in her voice made her feelings perfectly clear. Larissa was in tune to other people's emotions, especial those of her sisters. She hoped one day Paxton would see it and turn his attention where it would be more appreciated.

Her family toned down the teasing as Paxton shut off the engine and stepped out of the truck's cab. He walked over to the group, and she noticed right away he seemed a bit awkward. Normal Pax had a confident gait, but he seemed hesitant as he approached. Larissa noticed that he looked like he might be flushed. It was a bit puzzling because he had known her family his whole life. She had no idea why he'd suddenly be uneasy with any of them.

Larissa decided to ignore Pax's visit and started to pick rocks again. The sooner she finished, the sooner she could find some shade, and the lemonade she wanted to quench her thirst.

Distracted, she only half listened to the conversation until her name made her perk up. Then she heard it again. What was Paxton discussing with her dad? She desperately hoped he was not ratting her out for getting too drunk at the party he had thrown the previous weekend.

He probably wanted to rent more fields and was trying to kiss up. She plopped her bucket down and went over to where her sisters' stood in the field unabashedly listening to the conversation. When she approached, they both looked like they wanted to say something but couldn't. Larissa laughed to herself and knew this would be a day she would mark on the calendar. Belicia holding back, wow. However, when she heard what Paxton said she could feel her own cheeks heating.

Angry beyond words, she pushed past her sisters and stepped between her father and Paxton. She left her fury explode as she yelled at him. "How dare you, Paxton! I can't believe that you would come up here and ask for me like I was livestock you wanted to buy. If you want to go out with me, ask *me*. It is the freaking twenty-first century, not the Middle Ages. Go home, Pax and if you want to go out with

me, call me. My dad can say yes or he can say no, but it's what *I* say that matters." She panted with fury.

She'd always hated the old fashioned approach the farm families had to dating. She also hated that as the youngest everyone treated her like a mindless infant. A long, low howl not far off in the distance made the group jump. It didn't sound like a coyote. Paxton took a step back and reached into the cab of his truck. Her father looked around nervously. There hadn't been wolves in the area for centuries. However, reports always surfaced of some crackpot claiming to see a wolf or a pack of wolves; no one ever found any of them. Paxton quickly pulled his gun from his truck and loaded it, looking at her father.

"You want me to go take a look? If it's a coyote, I'd be glad to go take care of it."

Her father shrugged. "If you want to go you can, but if it's not a coyote, don't you dare shoot it. I don't need the DNR on my ass."

Paxton gave a firm nod and they watched him trudge toward the wood line. When he was far enough away not to hear, Belicia exploded. "Oh em gee. I so cannot believe that you did that. He's cute, and you're single. Why would you yell at a hottie who asked you out? I know it was stupid, really stupid he was so formal and asked Dad if he could take you out. Nevertheless, it seems like a total sign of adorable respect. Or maybe he just wants to get into your pants." She continued, "How are you not running after him and apologizing?"

Their father walked past them and grumbled. "I am going to pretend I did not hear the pants comment. How do you know what that boy wants? Wait. Oh please, don't tell me. Talk to your mother."

Larissa exchanged a look with her sister, and she tried not to laugh. Larissa had plenty of chances to have some backseat fun, but something always stopped her from having sex. Larissa was saving herself, but she didn't know why.

Both of her sisters hadn't felt the need to wait, and she hated to admit, had reputations. Unfortunately, just sharing the family name caused her to slap more hands than she cared to remember.

She glanced up just as Paxton entered the woods, and was consumed by the lush darkness of the wildness. She hoped whatever had made that noise would run away. She felt a nervous discomfort seeing him go into her woods with a gun. For some reason, she was

not a bit concerned for Pax, but she felt like she should protect her special place. It really made no sense, and she did her best to ignore the odd feelings and worries.

Dante watched the man walk through his woods. He had felt Larissa's anger toward the man, which gave him an irrational need to rip the stranger's throat out. Dante could hardly blame the bastard—even covered in dirt and sweat, the girl radiated a natural, sweet beauty that made him regretful of his position as her guardian. If he had been a regular man like the one a few feet away with the gun, he would have been falling at her feet, too. He also felt the disappointment and embarrassment the other man felt. He knew he'd sensed him around before and this one had irritated him in the past with his hidden feelings for Larissa. Today, he radiated his lust completely unchecked. This man wanted her, and it made Dante furious that he could never have her. He wasn't human. Guardians didn't show themselves to their charges. Even holding her was out of the question.

Reining in his uncontrolled thoughts, he reminded himself she was only his charge and nothing else. His job was to keep her alive and stay under her radar, undetected. The connection between them was stronger than what he'd learned was normal. Was it his early transference of the guardian that made him feel more than he should for her? His passion for her was frightening, and he knew it jeopardized his existence. If the counsel found out how much he desired her, he'd be sent away. Guardians did not fuck those under their protection. If the council knew how he felt, they'd consider his feelings dangerous to the order of the rules.

Dante suddenly felt the pain of long suppressed memories. His father's pain. A vampire had attacked and his father was losing. Family telepathy told him clearly that his mother and sister were already there, fighting for their lives. Feeling an echo of terrible pain, he realized his father's leg had been broken. The wound was as good as a death warrant for a wolf.

He was almost to where his father fought to save the ten-yearold farmer's daughter who was surely asleep in the house, unaware that her life was in danger. Dante ran down the hill. He saw the bloodsucker throw his sister and her pain radiated through his body. His mother pounced on the vampire. To Dante's horror, his connection to her ended as the vampire broke her neck. His father's agonized howl tore through him. Summer regained consciousness and launched herself at the vampire. Her teeth bit into its arm, but it grabbed her and he felt the pain of the vampire venom as it bit her repeatedly on her flank.

Trying to transform into his wolf form frustrated Dante. He couldn't do it. He preferred his human form and had even been born as a human infant, not a cub as was usual. His mother blamed it on the family gossip that a human great grandmother existed in his father's family line. Helplessly, he watched his family struggle. Summer, his sister, managed to wriggle free despite her injuries. He heard his father pleading with Summer to run, to save herself. She obeyed and glanced at him as she ran past him, limping with the damage she'd suffered.

His father growled, taking his final stand against the vampire. Dante could feel his desperation to protect his charge and his own children. The creature grabbed Raphael, its claws digging into his back, all but grabbing his spine. Dante felt the intense agony that blinded his father. With a quick snap the monster broke him. His father's last seconds literally imprinted on his memory. As he died he saw the maniacal grin of his murderer.

Howling with grief, the change finally came over him. As he transformed into the wolf, Dante felt something else. Suddenly he was filled with the guardian. A warm deep communion with the universe expanded his consciousness. He felt connected to something much larger than himself. An understanding far beyond his years rushed his mind, overwhelming him for a moment. He was only fifteen, but somehow the guardian spirit chose him. It felt so intense he was brought to his knees. Dante recovered and stood.

He had a vampire to kill. Instinctually, he knew the creatures' weaknesses and how to attack. Following those instincts, his rage soon brought the creature down, dead.

He knew his feelings for her went farther than desire—he'd grown to love her. She had such a sweet and open heart. Caring for everyone around her and ignoring her own needs was something she did without hesitation, and it galled him each and every time a friend, or one of her obnoxious siblings, took advantage of her sweet nature.

It amazed him how she knew they were doing it but never minded, happy to help them out anytime they asked.

Larissa scanned the wood line with longingly in her eyes. She stared into the trees and hiked more often than not these days. Dante felt her longing to find the completion of their phantom connection. He would have to physically restrain himself from going to her. Each day it seemed harder and harder to fulfill his duty. When his parents had died and his sister disappeared, he'd been left alone. He could not just leave his charge unprotected and vanish, but he also didn't want to stay alone in the woods for the rest of his life.

Thinking about that time in his life was hard but the memories rushed in nonetheless.

After he'd killed the vampire that had killed his parents and disposed of it, he returned to the den with his parent's remains. They were still in their wolf forms they'd died in. He had expected to find Summer, but the search was futile. He found himself alone with his grief and new responsibility.

When his father didn't give his annual report, they sent his uncle to check on them. When his uncle found him alone and had heard of the tragedy, he had gone back and told the council about what had happened. Inside each wolf was a spirit, a guardian that created the bond and gave the wolf the ability to sense vampires, especially vampires who wanted to infect their charge. They had all been shocked that the guardian had chosen to inhabit him at such a young age.

They had sent his uncle back to teach him. For ten years, his uncle had lived with him, taught, and guided him. Dante loved the man, and he respected his knowledge. His sister's disappearance was still a mystery, but having his uncle with him had kept him sane. Without his mentor, he'd have been alone. When his uncle had left the previous year after Dante had completed his training, the man had promised him he would send visitors and potential mates his way.

Dante knew his uncle suspected the unnaturally strong connection between himself and Larissa, but he had never demanded an explanation. His uncle had told him on many occasions the amount of time he spent as a human was odd, but he also never asked for a reason. His easy understanding fostered Dante's respect for the man.

His uncle had once been a guardian, but he had lost his charge to a vampire. Imagining losing Larissa to a vampire was unbearable, and he had no idea how his uncle had survived it. He would rather die fighting than live with the knowledge she'd been infected because of his shortcomings.

Watching this man hunting made it even harder not to tear into him, because Dante knew he hunted for him. His knowledge that Larissa felt a friendly, non-sexual friendship for the man was all that spared his life. Killing the man would have caused her pain, and he would feel every moment of Larissa's agony intensely, so he let the man leave his woods alive. He was unaware of how close to death he walked.

It appeared to him that Larissa had been angry, but more than anything, she was scared when the man had spoken of his interest in her to her father. Did she not want her father involved in her relationships or was it something more? Dante hated the idea that someday she'd fall in love. He'd know the moment it happened, and he wondered if he'd survive it. He felt their bond tug in a way that was wrong. Somehow, either he had projected his ever-growing desire and love for her, or she had a very sensitive psychic ability. Larissa seemed just as helpless as he was to pull away from the bond. He knew it influenced the course of her life, making her make decisions she would have otherwise not made. It was wrong to continue as her guardian.

Guilt over his influence made him resist thinking about what he wanted. Ignoring his longing, he focused on her safety and not her happiness. He tried not to think about how badly he wanted them to know each other. If she just wasn't so damn beautiful, it would have been easier for him

From Dante's vantage point, he could see her well with his keen sight. A soft breeze rippled her long, strawberry blonde hair, and it hung in shining waves down her back. It was pulled off her face with a clip, but the thickness of it caused much of it to escape. Only Larissa had eyes the color of summer green grass that held just a tint of amber, unique like the woman to whom they belonged. Her slight figure was curvy where it counted, and she had an earthiness no longer in fashion yet it suited her well. Her cute pixie-like nose was sprinkled with freckles, and her skin was already sun-kissed even though it was only spring. He watched her performing her task. He

could feel her camaraderie with her family, and it made him long for his own lost loved ones.

He was a protector. His soul housed a guardian, and for him there was nothing else but his duty. Yet, in his heart he longed for more, he longed for Larissa. Dante longed for her in the way a man longs for a woman, not as the wolf or the guardian. He wanted her. He cared about her. He was an idiot. Dante berated himself even as the peace of knowing she was close by and safe filled him.

Looking at the world with passionate curiosity, Larissa only saw the happiness in life. Her sharp mind was never satisfied until she understood the people in her life and the world she lived in. She was selfless and giving to a fault. Loving her from afar was the easiest thing he had ever done and also the most foolish.

All guardians could call the counsel to them. When his uncle had come to teach him what he needed to know, it was one of the first things he had learned. His father had died far too soon, and so he had only just begun to lay the foundation of his education for a future as a protector.

Whenever her parents talked to her about her future, he could feel how much it upset her because of their bond. Every emotion and sensation was a ghostly echo in his mind, body, and soul. He wanted to her be happy, but his unhappiness was somehow carrying over to her and she sensed his longing. Because her pull to him was so strong, it was time he took the high road and removed himself as protector. His feelings clouded his judgment. It was time he admitted to being unfit to protect her. Experience and knowledge made them wise leaders. He knew it was time to confess his feelings and let the council leadership decide what would be best for Larissa, because there was a threat to her—him.

Watching the humans finish their work and leave together in the pickup of the man who wanted to hunt him, he felt her absence manifest as a physical pain. He'd been watching as a wolf. In his wolf body, the pain was only slightly lessened. He turned and loped away deeper into the woods. The darkness of the thick forest enveloped him. Always the darkness.

Dante decided to call to his uncle. He lived in the were community, and he would know how to reach the council. He had established familial telepathy from years of training and living with his mentor, but he did not use it except to check up on any information about Summer.

Dante felt in his heart his sister was not dead, and he hoped she would eventually surface. Calling out to his uncle, he projected the urgency of his need. *Nothing*. His uncle was not ignoring him or blocking him, the connection was just gone. There could only be one explanation, and it tore at his heart. He felt crippling pain at the thought of his uncle, his mentor, dead. A howl of agony escaped him as he was consumed by more intense pain and confusion.

After the trauma of Paxton's formal request to date her, and the long day of picking rocks, Larissa was mentally and physically exhausted. She took a quick shower. Her sisters pounded the door and demanded their turn the entire time as the antiquated farm house only had one bathroom. Once finished and dressed, she poured herself a glass of lemonade, and proceeded to swing softly on the porch swing, enjoying the slight breeze. Returning to the house with her empty glass, she went to wash it as her mother's strict housekeeping standards demanded.

She sighed with contentment at the thought of completing her final chore of the day. Just as she finished washing the glass, a sudden intense feeling of distress gripped her so strongly she couldn't breathe. Falling from her hand, the glass shattered on the floor, and her mother turned to face her..

Mia, her mother, rushed over to her and helped her sit down on a nearby kitchen chair. She urged Larissa to take deep breaths. Larissa suddenly felt cold, a clammy sensation consuming her whole. Something was wrong. She felt sorrow, the same as if she had just lost someone she loved, but everyone was fine. It made no sense. Her mother's soft voice cut through the haze of nonsensical emotion.

"What's wrong, Larissa?"

"I don't know, mom. I just feel sick, okay?"

"I've seen this before. I'm going to kill your father for using you girls like field hands," her mother exclaimed. "You have heat stroke. Honey, I want you to go lay down on the couch. I'll get something to cool you down."

She'd experienced the feeling before, just not as strong. It left her unable to argue because an explanation of what she was feeling seemed required. She was barely able to speak. Instead, she did as her mother asked and rested. Laying on the ancient piece of furniture, she looked up at the ceiling and tried to sort out her random feelings. What had caused her to feel the strong painful stab of grief? Why was this happening to her? Lately, at least since she had enrolled in college, she had felt such intensity, as if her emotions were no longer her own. It was terrifying.

Larissa had to get these feelings under control. She desperately wanted to understand why it was happening. She'd always had thoughts that didn't belong to her. It felt more intense lately. She loved her family and the home she had grown up in, but it was no reason for her to react like this. Was she mentally ill? Should she tell her mother the truth so she could get proper help and treatment? She was sure something influenced her because what she felt wasn't in the realm of normal. She wondered if maybe she had a strange allergy or had eaten something that caused her to have delusions? Endless possibilities clouded her mind and after awhile, she was just frustrated with herself. There had to be a reason this was happening to her and no one else in her family.

Enduring her mother's endless attention, she realized how lucky she was to have a loving family, even if it was a bit suffocating at times. She would pull herself out of her funk for them, if nothing else. There had to be an explanation and she vowed she would find it as soon as possible.

Chapter Two

Dante tried to call to any were-creature who would hear him. He could loosely connect with other werewolves, even if they were not blood family, but he had only done it a few times. He reached out with his mind, but nothing. It startled him how empty he felt. No one responded. He became ill as an unimaginable stark loneliness settled over him. All of his life, he had always been isolated, but he always knew he could reach others like him. Now he found himself alone.

What was he going to do if he was the last one? Should he stay and protect Larissa? Or should he go to the nearest werewolf community, a hundred miles to the south and investigate? It was a dilemma. Dante loved Larissa and he just couldn't leave her when perhaps there was no real problem. Lacking much prior experience, he knew the issue could very well be him and nothing else. If he left her unprotected and she was attacked, he might lose her over a silly suspicion.

Consumed with his thoughts, he almost did not hear the call to him. It was faint, but he suddenly felt one of his kind trying to reach him. The sensation of another whispering in his consciousness gave him hope. He happily responded and opened himself to the communication. It was short and alarming.

Hide, stay safe, they are killing us and taking our charges! Don't search out again!

There was no mistaking the dire certainty of the words or the panicked warning they carried. If he left Larissa to find out more, he'd put her in terrible danger. What could he do?

Nothing that his uncle or father ever told him had prepared him to make this type of a decision. However, he had learned one important thing—protect and guard at all costs.

Dante looked down over the farmhouse as twilight crept through the woods throwing long shadows into the meadow. He watched the light of her bedroom window come on. She was getting ready for bed. He felt her restless agitation, and he was the cause of it.

Stifling his guilt, he tried to think peaceful thoughts and sent his feeling of security toward her. Feeling her calm a bit, he knew they felt equally drawn to each other. This thing between them was far too intense, far too consuming, but for the time being, it looked as if he was just going to have to work on ignoring their attraction and sort out the danger it posed without any back up or relief. She was stuck with him. For better or worse, he was relieved he wouldn't have to leave her. Deep down, he knew if the guardian was pulled away from him the feelings he had for Larissa would still be there. The intensity of his feelings echoed off of her, and it made him ill to think she might be experiencing the same sorrow, fear and worry. Causing her pain was the last thing he wanted to do.

Sighing, Dante cleared his mind and meditated, filling his senses with the woods, searching for danger. He found none. He let the peace of that knowledge fill him, and he radiated it down to Larissa. He knew she lay down, safe, truly beginning to regain her composure. He did all he could to hold back his thoughts of worry for his kind. Love and concern for his people had to come second to looking out for Larissa.

And if he was honest with himself, everything was second to loving her.

After a good night's sleep, Larissa felt like herself again. She got up, dressed in her chore clothes, and went downstairs. Her sisters were leaving to go back to school that morning, and they were enjoying a smorgasbord of breakfast their mother had created in their honor. She watched as the overworked woman brought yet another huge stack of pancakes to the table. She saw her mother had put her precious maple syrup she made each fall onto the table. Deciding her sisters needed help to consume it all, she happily bounced over to her usual seat and started to pile pancakes onto her plate, then she grabbed the wonderful real maple syrup. All three women turned to look at her with apprehention written on their faces. She stopped midpour and set the syrup down.

She wondered what faux pas she was committing now? She looked down and thought, *yep*, *fully dressed*, *and I brushed my teeth*, *so I can't have anything in them*. Running her hand over her hair, she wondered if she had somehow messed it up in the ten minutes since she had combed it. They just kept staring at her as if she had grown a parasitic twin or suddenly had a mustache. Larissa couldn't take anymore.

"What is wrong with all of you? Geez, have I put on weight, and you are going to have a pancake intervention? Am I breaking a

new rule no one told me about? Did I wake up with a uni-brow? Please, for the love, tell me what the deal is?"

Clearing her throat, her mother looked nervous and twittered something about not enough eggs, and she all but ran out of the kitchen. Curious and perplexing to say the least, Larissa could not understand her behavior. She looked at her sisters, scowling. Finally, Belicia spoke up—Larissa was not surprised since she was the only one with courage.

"Do you remember anything at all about last night?"
Raising her eyebrow at the odd question and tone in her sister's voice, she answered. "No, should I remember something?"

"Like yes, you totally should," Belicia exclaimed. "You don't remember howling at the moon and Dad having to pull you back from the window? How in hell can you not remember scaring all of us to death? You were possessed. Your eyes rolled back in your head and you tried to bite me. You actually snapped your teeth at me. Did you get rabies or something from one of your walks in the woods?"

Larissa had no idea what to say. The accusations her sister made were ridiculous, and they sounded like something out of a horror movie. She would never howl at the moon, biting her sister maybe, but moon howling, no.

When they were kids, they would tell her awful things to see if she would believe them, and she remembered them each getting a sound paddling for it on more than one occasion. Why would her mother be in on it? Her mom hated fibs and pranks. She would never have wanted them to be nasty to her right before they left for the next few months. Looking into her sisters' concerned and curious faces, she realized that, yes, she must have been acting like a crazy woman. Her other sister, Hanna, would never look at her with such a scowl if everything was fine. If easy breezy Hanna was worried, she really wasn't herself.

Why would she have done those things? Larissa's hand shook as she moved her plate back, and suddenly, the cakes no longer looked appetizing. She stood up and hurried to the bathroom where she threw up. When she finished, her mother stood in the doorway with a washcloth. She helped Larissa up and ushered her to the living room to lie down on the couch.

"How long have you been doing the drugs, Lari? Your father and I love you, and if you have a problem, we'll help you, sweetheart. I worried about this with your sisters, but not you. I don't know what son of a bitch has been selling you those things, but you have to stop taking them. I'm going up to your room to search," her mother exclaimed. "When I find them, I'm flushing them."

She had never seen her mother's face so red, and she actually snorted a laugh, unable to help herself.

"Mom, you know I am *not* doing drugs. When do I go anywhere to do drugs? You see me all day. I do a ton of chores, like I have time to do drugs," she stressed. "Those cows don't milk themselves."

Looking defeated, her mother mumbled. "Maybe your father can get you to confess. I did my best with you girls. Maybe I was too easy on you. Maybe I should have kept a better eye on you? I am so sorry I let you down."

Huffing out her frustration, she lay back on the couch looking up at the water spot on the ceiling. What could she say to explain a behavior she didn't remember or understand? Closing her eyes, she tried not to cry. After awhile, she heard her sisters enter the room and when she peeked, they were peering over the side of the couch at her. No one spoke for about a minute, then with her usual flair for the frankness they all knew and loved, Belicia opened her mouth.

"Do you need us to stay home awhile longer? You're, like, not going to go on some high rampage and kill our parents are you? I'll totally be pissed if you do that. What is the deal? Is it a guy or something? Are you bummed about not leaving yet? Because you can leave this boring place any time, Lari. You don't have to smoke, snort or shoot up or whatever for excitement any more, sis. You can leave with us, and we can take you to rehab in the city or something."

That was the last straw. Larissa sat up, horrified and angry. She was the last person on earth who would do the things they accused her of doing. Just knowing they had all jumped to that conclusion broke her heart. She had always been the good girl. It felt as if they were reflecting their own inadequacies onto her, and she was done. She had no control of whatever was happening. How could they not see something was wrong? She felt as if someone needed her here. However, she did not know what they looked like or where they lived, or even a name. Why was everything so muddled?

She put her head between her knees, breathing deeply. It didn't help. After awhile they just left her alone again, and she heard them whispering in the kitchen. Occasionally, she heard words like *hospital*, *psychiatric*, and it freaked her out. She probably needed it, but she wouldn't go without a fight. If they made her leave, she would die. She needed this place. There was something here that fed her soul.

Chapter Three

Waiting until everyone was distracted with her sisters leaving, she rushed off for the woods. If she stayed, they would be keeping their eyes on her, and she would never have the chance to follow her hunch. There had to be something calling to her and feeding her crazy obsession here. A very real, albeit mysterious, force called her to find it. There was no way that she wasn't going to discover what was making her crazy.

Rushing through the raspberry bushes behind the house, using them to obscure the view her family had of her, Larissa ran to the woods. She willingly accepted all the pokes and tears at her skin and clothing, because it meant she would be able to get where she wanted to go. There was an old tool shed where her father kept his lawn mower and toolbox, and she jumped from the bushes to the back of the shed, hoping no one had seen her. The hill leading to the woods was a clear view because the corn hadn't grown yet. She tried to stay as low as she could, rushing up the long steep hill as fast as her legs would go. She had to make it.

If they saw her, they would follow her and it would all be ruined. Whatever she searched for would not show itself if her family intruded. Feeling a selfish need to keep whatever or whomever she sought to herself, she continued to run. Larissa had never felt such a reckless, insane desperation than she did now, and it took her breath away with its intensity. She was possessed with the need to find whatever was calling to her before it was too late. If they took her away, she feared she would be truly lost.

Fighting her tears, she ran wildly into the woods. Thick brambles and vines tried to stop her, but she navigated them, as if she belonged there. It only registered with her mind for a moment that she moved with detachment, as if some other force was in charge of her legs. Her heart knew where she was going and Larissa followed it, blindly consumed with the need for answers, consumed with her longing for the unknown force compelling her forward.

Hot tears finally fell freely as she felt the ecstasy of a completion she could not describe. Bitter and wet, the trail of her emotions streaked off her face as she bound over fallen logs and through bushes. A little natural spring bubbled quietly, and she stopped. Larissa had been coming into these woods since she was a little girl. How had she never seen the spring?

A cluster of honeysuckle caught her attention, and she reached down to pick them. This was the hidden place that called to her. She sat down on a moss covered log and smelled the flower. It was delicate and seemed to symbolize the importance of this place. Tired, a sad sigh escaped her lungs, and she leaned down to tie her work boots. It amazed her that she had not killed herself in her desperate flight here. She made it, now what?

"You really need to be more careful."

Startled by the deep timber of the masculine voice, she all but toppled over the log. Whirling around, Larissa faced the speaker.

Handsome did not describe him. He was pure testosterone and a sculptor could not have created a finer example of what a man's body should look like. This man looked like he lived at the gym or had spent a good portion of his life active. His face had a strong jaw, it bespoke leadership, and his large amber eyes were the most unique color she'd ever seen. His hair was a shaggy mixture of black, brown and gray, as if he had an eccentric stylist. She had never seen graying hair on such a young man. His tan body was fluid in its grace as he moved toward her.

Larissa took a step back, and she felt a scream building in her throat.

No hunter gallivanted around the woods without his gun or his shirt. She noticed, to her surprise, he wore no shoes. He must have steel soles on his feet not to feel the pinecones and other debris.

"You shouldn't be here. We shouldn't be here together."

She felt mesmerized by the oddly beautiful tone of his voice.

Was it wrong to be turned on just from hearing a man speak?

Larissa felt her cheeks darken at the sudden hot look in his eyes. It made her wonder if her face was giving away her thoughts of how deliciously sexy he looked.

Her tongue flicked out to wet her lips, and she could have sworn she heard him moan. Feeling her adrenaline surge, she glanced around to see if he was alone. She saw no one else and none of her family knew where she was. This strange man, hunk-a-licious as he might be, could be a serial killer or rapist for all she knew. He definitely looked out of place. Did the mother ship just drop him off?

Taking a step back from him, her breath came out in little pants, and she saw the odd play of emotion in his amber eyes. Those eyes seemed to know her, intimately, and she stood frozen in place, unable to break the contact, unable to move away from him. His gravity dragged her in with a powerful need. Larissa felt the elusive longing subside.

Was this the source that had been pulling her into the woods? What was he? Why was he here? Questions rolled around in her brain until she felt a headache begin. A startling wave of dizziness hit her and, in a moment, darkness covered her eyes, her limbs became noodles, and she collapsed.

Catching her falling body in his arms, Dante was at a loss. This had definitely not been covered in Guardian 101. He felt torn between clutching her to his chest and never letting her go or running from her as fast as his legs could carry him. What was he going to do? He had felt every moment of her emotions. When she had somehow managed to cross the barrier his family had laid out against discovery, Dante had been amazed. Was it his need for her that had given her the power to cross into the guardian's sacred space?

She had a soft, pale oval face with a small pert nose, covered in freckles. Dante cradled her slack and unconscious body—she dangled helplessly in his arms like a rag doll. He was too afraid to touch her; afraid he might never be able to stop. Talking to her had broken every rule he had ever been taught. Council or not, he knew right from wrong. No matter how right he felt now, this was so wrong for *her*. Could he tell her of the danger she was in each day just living and breathing? Could he know his words had condemned her to a lifetime of looking over her shoulder? Would her happy-go-lucky heart bleed to death at the knowledge she was a target living on borrowed time? Would she be safer knowing of the danger or would the knowledge scar her permanently?

He had no way of contacting help without leaving Larissa. The closest were community was at least a hundred miles away. It would be especially difficult without a car or a bus ticket. He had never driven a car, and so, even if he had one to take, it would do him little

good. It seemed like far too much to risk for the slight chance werecat guardians would give a damn what happening with the wolf community.

Dante missed having a pack, especially at that moment. The various were communities were separated since the feud of 1947. Dante knew someone needed to reunite them.

He carefully and gently adjusted Larissa in his arms. He had no idea how to handle an unconscious human. Her smaller, weaker body was easy to pick up, and he decided to stop thinking about what he couldn't change.

When she had realized the bond between them, he had felt her entire essence ease, as if she had been holding her breath waiting for him, and had finally been able to let it go. Maybe this bond was different, and she needed him as he needed her.

He was her guardian, her protector. If she was hurting because of this deep connection between them, and he ignored her pain, was that not as bad as abandoning her to the vampires?

She had felt his pain the previous night. Unconsciously, in her sleep, she had called out for him. He had felt her turmoil and the turmoil of her family as they tried to figure out why she seemed to have gone off the deep end. Dante could not let her continue on as she was, or she was going to literally drive herself crazy. He would not be able to protect her if they locked her up somewhere.

Her face looked young and peaceful, and the urge to kiss her overwhelmed him. Feeling like the lowest jackal, he kept his lips to himself. What kind of a man or guardian would he be if he accosted her while she was helpless to resist him? Angry with himself, he carried her through the woods until they arrived back at his den. He was going to have a damn hard time explaining things when she came to, and his throat suddenly felt dry as a nervous fluttering began in his stomach. Confident alpha male that he was did not stop him from reeling with this new and unpleasant sensation. He had never felt the need to explain himself before, and he found he didn't enjoy it.

A grin spread across his face as he recalled her earlier thoughts. His little beauty thought he was attractive and the knowledge alone made his nervous condition entirely worthwhile. He had not been able to hide his response to her when she felt such desire for him. In his entire life, the realization she felt more than just a pull towards him had been the greatest moment of elation he had ever

experienced. Knowing her feelings made it all the more necessary for him to find a replacement. Yet at a time of such instability, how could he entrust her to another?

When the guardian controlled him, he recognized it. These feelings were one hundred percent his own and made them all the more dangerous. Letting his personal lust, or love, or whatever the crazy jumble of emotions could be called that ruled his actions was the worst thing he could do. He was not human and she deserved so much more than he could offer her. How could he even entertain himself as a suitable lover?

He was a guardian born and bred for one single purpose, and it simply was to keep her safe. If he needed to get laid, he had better find himself a nice were-girl and settle down. Perhaps home and hearth was the cure for his affliction? Just thinking of taking a bride made him cringe. Worse, far worse, when he thought about it, Larissa's face kept floating around in his deluded mind.

Dante watched her still form and began to worry. Was it normal for a human to be unconscious this long? Her hair splayed out across the large stone where she lay. She looked like a princess under a spell lying so still and beautifully fragile in such a dark and rugged place. He had no idea where the sudden poetic idea had come from and shook his head to dispel the image. What made her so different, special? Her ability to connect with him was unique and intense on a very unnatural level.

What did she want? Had she really run madly through the woods to find him? Why did the guardian seem so restless with her near? Dante felt helpless—a prisoner of his unchecked emotions.

Closing his eyes, he let go of a long exasperated breath. He had to take her home, but selfishly, he was unable to let her go. He just absorbed the moment of seeing her there. He wanted to hear the soft cascade of her voice, and see her lovely eyes again before he gave her back to her world. He would have to increase the strength of the boundary so this would be the first and last time he saw her in his home.

Feeling his cock twitch in response to the sensual image of her body lying in front of him, Dante moaned. He was disgusted with himself that he could desire her when she was so helpless. Still he was unable to keep his eyes from lingering on her body and his hands to himself. Reaching out, he carefully moved a stray lock of her long

hair away from her face and the motion caused her to finally wake from her fairytale slumber.

When she stirred, he held his breath. Larissa sat up with a gasp, she looked up at him in alarm and scooted herself back against the wall of the cave as far away from him as she could get. Only wanting to calm her, he reached out, and she let loose a blood-curdling shriek, and slapped his hand away. She leapt away from him and began to run for all she was worth.

Should he let her go? *Could* he let her go? If she didn't understand who he was, and told her family about his presence, it could make it hard to protect her. Sighing, he knew that she would certainly misunderstand his actions, but he felt that he had no choice as he began to pursue her as fast as he could.

Running from the strange man, she felt the unexplainable urge to let him catch up to her. She really must be losing it. This guy lived alone in the wilderness. He obviously had issues. He might even be a violent criminal. Larissa realized he was gaining on her, her fear doubled, and her suspicions about his nefarious intentions seemed confirmed. Suppressing a scream, she ran until her foot tangled in some undergrowth on the ground. As she fell, she was both relieved and terrified when he caught her. She looked into his haunted, amber brown eyes, and felt lost. It was as if something inside of her, in her very soul, recognized him and trusted him.

Yet her mind screamed for her to run.

He righted her on her feet, and they stood staring at each other only an arm's length apart. Should she run again? Larissa knew that she wouldn't even if common sense said she should.

Sitting down on a log she looked up at him, and he seemed unsure for a moment before he joined her. Looking straight ahead, neither of them spoke for several minutes. The silence stretched uncomfortably forward with no end in sight. Larissa broke the tension first.

"What are you doing out here? How long have you been living in my woods?"

Her words seemed to amuse him and her annoyance toward him grew. Scowling, she felt a thrill in her blood when his eyes roamed her body with a possessiveness that left her shivering. He studied her lips as if he were contemplating the best way to kiss her. He answered her question in his deep, delicious voice. "I've always been here, Larissa."

"How do you know my name?"

"I've been protecting you for a very long time."

Her mind struggled with his words. "Protecting me from what?"

"Nightwalkers." When she frowned, he clarified, "You'd call them vampires. They want you to be like them."

"Why?" She couldn't make her question a complete thought. Larissa felt overwhelmed. Unable to think, to breathe, she was suffocating on the intensity between them.

"Because it's my job. Your blood makes you changeable. Vampires can't breed, but they can add to their ranks by changing someone like you. I'll die before that happens, Larissa."

She believed him. What more could she say? He left her feeling breathless and entranced.

Whoa... Now she felt like running again. Fearfully, she tried not to focus on the insanity of what he had just said. What did she need protection from besides mad hermits in the woods? What did he mean by a long time? A week, a month, or a year? Why had he chosen her woods, why had he chosen her? She noticed how his eyes searched her face. It was as if he could read her turbulent thoughts. Larissa saw his uncertainty, and the honesty of what he had told her. This man believed himself and something deep within her soul called to her to believe in him also. Was she as crazy as he seemed?

Panting with little fearful breaths and trying to get enough air into her restricted lungs, she was on the verge of tears, maybe the verge of insanity. Her body suddenly ached to be close to him. He smelled primitive and her response to his masculinity was immediate and powerful. Sweat began to form on her brow, and she choked on her sudden desire mingled with fear. Why did this strange man make her feel such powerful need?

In her entire life, she had never felt like this. She felt hot, wet heat pool within her. She bit her lip. His eyes dilated as she moaned and she knew that the sound was not lost on him. She felt such a deep and intense focus on him, and it made her aware of every small nuisance and subtle change within him. There was a primal lust inside of her screaming for life, for control. She was the wild thing in her heart, and her soul cried out for this stranger in the woods, this rugged

man with his long, shaggy hair with its exotic color. Her heart pounded and her hands itched with the urge just to touch him. She'd never felt like this before. Her soul recognized she belonged to him. He belonged to her, and she was ready to stake her claim.

Moving forward without thought or conscious control, her body moved like it was a puppet on strings, stilted and without her typical grace, but her heart told her she was doing the right thing. She needed him, but she didn't even know his name.

It frightened her that knowing him didn't matter to her. She felt herself growing hotter and wetter as she gently touched his face. Her fingers lightly skimmed the rough stubble gracing his surprisingly soft skin, and she saw the need and longing in his exotically beautiful eyes. No one had ever looked at her like she was so important, so amazing. She felt his wonder and his love. How was it possible? It was like she had a view into his mind and soul and only the truth of their magical connection existed. When she saw the raw need in his eyes something twisted in her heart, and she knew that she would not run.

She pressed her lips to his chin. He bent down just enough so that their lips connected. It was gentle at first, testing, trusting. Then he pulled her against him, and it took the air from her lungs. Whimpering with joy and need, she returned his fervor with a desperation that was entirely her own. His rough hands caressed her cheek, and the moment of wonder brought the prickling of tears to her eyes.

"What have you done to me?" Her voice sounded breathless.

"I would never hurt you. I haven't done anything to you, Larissa."

"What is this?"

"This is chemistry."

Standing there in the middle of a wild place with a complete, albeit sexy, stranger wasn't a safe thing to do. She wanted him, wanted sex, for the first time in her life. She embraced the lust. No, this wasn't exactly where she imagined losing her virginity. It gave her pause that she was giving something away so easily she had so carefully guarded. Yet it felt as if this gift had always been his, and she had just been keeping it safe for him. She pulled her shirt off and let it fall to the ground. He wore no shirt and when their skin touched, an electric current traveled through him and into her. She gasped and

her back arched involuntarily. He kissed her throat and she shivered, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him close.

His hands awkwardly battled with her bra, and he grunted with triumph as the bit of fabric joined her t-shirt on the damp ground. His calloused palms skimmed over her nipples, and she cried out with the sound of her need. Larissa's cheek pressed against his chest, and she felt enveloped in his primitive pheromones. His masculine growl made her smile softly against the hard wall of his chest. A sound, calling voices somewhere far away, registered in her mind. Her family was looking for her. She didn't care; she was where she belonged, where she wanted to be. His chest began to heave, and his primal desperation against her belly was evident. He knew they were looking too.

When he swept her into his arms, she did not protest, her trust was complete. She reveled in the foreign knowledge that made no sense and yet seemed to answer all the mysteries of the universe in the same moment. Mushy and useless, she let her brain turn off and let her heart take over. Nothing made sense and she loved every moment of it. He moved through the growing darkness with her, and she clung to him, content to go anywhere he chose to take her. Closing her eyes against the blurring trees and leaves, it only nibbled at her mind that he moved with inhuman speed.

His voice sounded gruff and raw. Larissa wondered if he felt the pain of her leaving as horribly as she did. He spoke, and she clung tighter to him. "I have waited a lifetime for you."

Her searchers were far from her mind as she found herself back in his dank wilderness dwelling. She had no idea what to say to his intense statement.

After a moment, she found her voice and spoke. "I think I've always been looking for you, too."

Chapter Four

"I've found something!" The stillness broke with the sharp, worried cry of Carlin Reed. Mia hurried to her husband.

Mia, Larissa's mother, chocked back a sob when she saw what it was. Her daughter's shirt and, more horrifying, her bra, lay on the ground. Larissa would never go running through the woods without a shirt on. What could have happened to her? Bending down, her father pointed out a second set of footprints. They were large and heavy—a man. The couple exchanged a worried look before Carlin spoke grimly.

"Someone has Larissa. I'll keep looking. You go into town and get some help. If he's still here, we might have a chance to save her. I am not leaving without her." He turned on his flashlight to chase the evening shadows away and cocked his rifle.

"Carlin, I won't leave you out here alone," she exclaimed. "What if he's armed?"

"That is all the more reason for you to hurry and get help. I intend to see our girl again. I'll be careful, but Larissa could be hurt or worse right now. Every second you waste arguing with me could be her last. Go woman!"

His words made Mia turn woodenly in her terror as she began to stumble away. Her legs shook and her body trembled. Larissa was special and the thought of her being raped or killed sent cold dread knifing through her heart. Sobbing, she went as quickly as she could for help, with one backward glance she saw the intensity on her husband's face. In twenty-seven years of marriage, she had never seen him look like that and she knew if he found the man he was going to kill.

Larissa found herself back on the slab of smooth rock, looking up into Dante's eyes. So much pain stared back and it broke her heart to see it. A compulsion to comfort and heal took over, and she began to nibble soft kisses all over his ruggedly handsome face. Something dark was inside of him, but it didn't frighten her. She could feel him

holding back whatever it was, trying to keep his desperation at bay. Knowing at any moment he could unleash a frantic desire only made it that much more exciting, and Larissa could not contain her need to urge the darkness out of him. She played a dangerous game, and her innocence reveled in the possible danger.

Excitement burned in her veins, and she hissed and arched her back as he drew his kiss roughly against her neck suckling the sensitive skin almost to the point of pain. Sighing with the erotic and foreign sensation, she felt only a moment of resistance, when he began to remove her jeans and panties. Feeling the cold stone against her ass brought the reality of where they were headed into her mind, but she quickly quieted her inner fears.

She was naked in the dank cold, and the sensation made her tingle with renewed awareness. Her desire heightened, and she saw him looking at her pale naked form as if she were a masterpiece of the finest art or some kind of priceless treasure. Beating frantically in her chest, her heart felt like it would jump out of her body. Needing his warmth closer, she reached for him. His beautiful face was strained with need. The look touched her as her own need clawed and begged for her to be with him.

Growling a passionate, almost inhuman sound that was rage and desire all mixed up, he quickly removed his pants. When his erect cock sprang forth, she bit her lip to keep a gasp to herself and so her inexperience wouldn't be so obvious. He hesitated, as if he knew her feelings. Larissa sighed as he nuzzled her neck, just under her ear, making her shudder. His whisper caused her to shiver with desire.

"If you don't want this, you'd better tell me now because I don't know if I'll be able to control it later."

Her frantic response surprised her, as she didn't even have to think about the decision.

"Please, oh please, don't stop!"

His groan was a sound of excruciating surrender as his lips found hers again, and Larissa clung to him helplessly in her untried passion.

His fingers had found the hot, ready junction between her thighs and when he rubbed her clitoris in a slow circle, building up her pleasure, her hips bucked on their own accord. Her gasp was lost against the kiss, and the sound he made in the back of his throat made his approval of her response clear. He continued with what he was doing until she was panting and her small whisper gave him pause.

"Oh, I can't take it anymore. It's just so...good. Please make it stop." Her pleasure became an unbearable agony, and she could think of nothing but making it ease.

When he moved, she was worried he was not going to make her need go away.

Then he loomed above her, all strength, man, and desire. With quick pressure, he pushed inside of her. Pain made her hips buck and she tried to escape for a moment. This was definitely not what she expected. It had been so wonderful, and now it was terrible.

He stilled and his eyes caught hers and held them. He could see her pain and her fear as the color of her beautiful eyes darkened, her brow furrowed. He knew Larissa could feel how much her emotions tore at him. Her pain had become his, and he could see regret and strange determination in her eyes. It was an odd connection.

Without moving inside of her, he supported his weight completely on one arm and with his other, he began to caress her clitoris to create the delirious sensation inside of her again. His emotions fed hers. Excitement built to the point leaving her on the precipice of something more. Her hips started to move.. He fought for control as she felt his hunger.. Dante threw his head back and let out a hungry groan.

When he began to pump inside of her, she matched his rhythm. She moved in harmony with him, knowing exactly what he wanted. Squeezing her eyes tightly, she cried out. Sparks broke before his eyes and a pleasure as intense as wildfire burst through his body. When his iron restraint finally snapped, he moaned and looked at her with a reverence that made her blush.

He rolled back onto the stone, taking her with him so she was on top of his warm, firm body, holding her against the chill. A grin lit her face as she hid against his chest, muffling a laugh. He felt her joyful contentment, and he knew it was more than a memorable, first sexual experience that inspired her humor. He could not contain his curiosity.

"Larissa, what is it?"

"I don't know your name. But I know so much more about you it seems to transcend something as simple as a name."

He let go of a chuckle and introduced himself, finally.

"Dante, my name is Dante."

"Dante... it's not what I expected. Dante what?"

"Just Dante. I'm a guardian. It's the only name I need."

Pondering his unusual words, she fell silent thinking about it. What did he guard? People, trees, or possibly her? Why was he here? She knew he spoke the truth, somehow she trusted him.

In the distance, she could hear someone calling her. She realized it was her father. Larissa blushed. Dante held her more tightly and spoke with quiet resolve.

"He won't be able to find you here. This place is not for your kind. I honestly don't know how you had the ability to come, but I can assure you that no one will find you here."

His words sent a thrill of terror and contentment thundering in her blood. What was he? It was all so insane, but somehow felt right. Her head ached from the confusion and questions.

Absently, she wondered about her fallen clothing. Had her father found it? He would be so worried. How could she explain Dante to her family? After what they had shared, could she just walk away and forget him? He was what she sought, it was clear to her now, why she'd always felt so drawn to the woods. Her longing for this place had always been for him. Her heart knew it even as her mind tried to reject the idea as a romanticized reaction to sex.

Day had turned into evening. Long shadows stole the remaining sunlight, bathing them in darkness. Shivering, she snuggled closer to his warmth, and she heard him curse under his breath. Looking into his face, the concern was evident in his dark expression. Before she could question him, he spoke with his brandy and silk voice, renewing her heat quickly.

Her desire surprised her. He was obviously not out of her system. "Damn it, Larissa, I should never have let myself get so caught up that I left your clothing behind. Now you're cold and your family will worry. I have to take you home, honey. I really hate that I have to take you home." Longing and bitter regret hung heavy on his words.

Larissa did not want to leave him for fear the unbearable longing would return as soon as he was out of sight. She clung to him far more possessively than she should have. He didn't seem to mind. There was a fire pit not far away. With a practiced hand, he struck a match against the rock and lit it without letting her go. She began to feel foolish for her desperate hold on him.

Larissa kissed his neck. She felt him shudder. Dante became gasoline to the fires of desire, and soon she burned, wanting him inside of her again. Groaning, he held back from her a moment and turned her face to meet his eyes. When he spoke, she saw the unchecked passion and with the odd bond, she could feel what each word cost him.

"I have to take you home. I want to keep you with me, always, but I can't, Larissa. I have broken so many rules today I'm most certainly damned, but you are so worth damnation, honey. So, very worth it."

When he claimed her lips, she moaned against his mouth, longing to feel the exquisite pleasure again, but she knew he wouldn't let his control falter this time. With a sigh, she closed her eyes and just let his scent, his taste, and the feel of his arms wrapped around her, sink into her mind. She never wanted to forget the moment.

He broke her meditation when he whispered gruffly, "I want you too, so much. You will never know how bad this hurts, but I have to take you home. You aren't mine to keep. You belong to a different world. I want you to forget me, forget this place. I'm not going to let you come back to me. I need to protect you, even if it's from me." As he captured her lips, she tried to make him forget his declaration. She pushed all of her feelings into the kiss, begging him to change his mind.

How could he banish her? Didn't he know she didn't want protecting from the quality of the passion they had just shared? Her heart pounded with fear and need. He held her tightly, and when he picked her up, she refused to open her eyes, she refused to watch him give her back to her world. Now that she had been to heaven, how could she be content to return to earth?

Tears rolled unchecked down her face, and she whispered brokenly against him. "Dante, don't send me away. I need you. I have been looking for you, always, how can you do this? Was this nothing but sex to you?"

"This was never and will never just be sex to me. I am risking both of our lives. I can't be this selfish. You mean far too much to me for that. You are my entire reason to breathe, Larissa. Don't you understand your life is of more value than anything else in the world? You are not mine to keep, but I'm yours."

His words didn't satisfy her. Anger rose, and she risked a look in his eyes. When she spoke, she knew he could hear her hurt and betrayal tore at her soul.

"If you send me away, I'll come back. I've never felt like this before. Don't make me hurt again."

He growled and stopped himself from taking her home. She felt his resolve waver, and his uncertainty growing in strength. Desperately, she kissed his mouth, hoping to tilt the scales in her favor.

With energy akin to anger, he brought her closer to the fire, rubbing her bare pale flesh to warm it, nothing more. Looking into her face, his decision was made. She deserved no less than the truth. She needed to understand the dangerous game they were playing. With all his heart, he wanted her to know his rejection was not about her. It was about who he was. He let out the heavy breath he held, and pulled some of her soft hair off her face and looked into her big, beautiful eyes.

"Larissa, please, let me do what is best for us. I'm a guardian. Inside of me is a spirit that guards against something worse than death. A small percentage of humans, only those from some of the oldest and strongest bloodlines, like yours, have blood that can be diseased. I don't want to scare you, but if I ever fail ... I want you to know the danger so you can protect yourself and be on guard. Old blood sings to vampires. They want to transform you, into one of them. If a vampire bites you, their saliva will change you, and there is no medicine or magic on this earth that can stop it. It's the ultimate allergy, a living death. Promise me you'll keep a line of salt by all of the doors and windows. It will keep them out."

"Salt, you've got your movie monsters wrong. I think you mean garlic."

He tried not to feel hurt by her disbelief and her sarcasm. It was a lot to process. She was right. It was not a well-known fact. Hollywood and books had changed the perception of the vampire, and

the vampires had proactively made sure humans knew none of their true weaknesses. Dante wished it had been so easy for the werewolves to hide who they were. Unfortunately, the whole silver bullet rumor was true. Silver would kill him like a poison. He was glad the full moon thing was bogus; it had probably become popularized because ancient man could see best under a full moon. He spoke patiently with earnest, and his gaze never broke from hers.

"Larissa, if I am insane, I am insane. A little salt won't hurt, but if I'm right, no salt might kill you."

His deep voice and conviction made her eyes widen, and he could see her acceptance of what he had said.

"Well, I guess this is one time salt might be good for my health. All right, I'll do it, but only if you promise not to shut me out. It is only fair to give me a choice in this. I want you, Dante."

She spoke the truth, and it made his heart swell painfully, as well as other parts of his anatomy. He wanted her, too. God, help him... He would never be able to let her go. If the council returned tomorrow and told him to leave her, they would have to kill him. He would never entrust her life to another. He felt the guardian snarl its agreement. Knowing the guardian would refuse to leave him and let another be responsible for her gave him a sense of relief to know it was his ally in this decision. Dante picked her up and carried her through the darkness.

He couldn't guess what she would say when she returned half-naked, but he knew Larissa would be able to come up with something. Their connection would be there for her so she would not feel alone. At the very edge of the woods, he set her on her feet. She looked into his eyes. Feeling the keen edge of her sadness was only a reflection of his own, and he knew every step she took away would be a weight on his heart. With only the briefest, lightest of kisses, his lips brushed hers. She wanted to deepen the kiss; he felt it through the connection. Pulling back was the hardest thing he'd ever done, all he wanted was to keep her by his side.

Looking into her beautiful green eyes, trying to convince himself as much as her, he spoke softly, "You have to go, Larissa. I promise that I'll not close the boundary. Promise me that you believe me about the danger. Sun won't kill a vampire, but it hurts them. Your greatest danger is at night. Please be careful!"

She nodded her agreement. "How can I say no? I've never trusted anyone like I trust you. I should totally think you're crazy, but I completely believe you."

He could tell she'd promise anything if she could find him again from the look on her face. It made him grin. Kissing her again, one last time, he was gone before she could blink. He was able to watch from a distance and see she returned safely. The connection between them was alive and growing. It made him realize the wisdom of the council. It was not a good thing to feel so consumed with another. It was too late—the damage was now done. He knew in that moment, they were lost.

Chapter Five

Larissa ducked into the barn and grabbed a jacket from a hook before she went into the house. When she saw the sheriff, Paxton, her parents, and several random neighbors, she was relieved she'd grabbed the coat. What a moment of trauma and drama this was going to be for her! Her panicked eyes searched the faces of the assembled audience, and the looks she received ranged from relief to worry to anger. Her mother rushed up to her immediately and enveloped her in a loving embrace. She demanded no explanation or reason. It was clear she was just glad her daughter returned safely. Her father looked worried.

"Lari, did someone take you? Was there a man in the woods with you?"

Her expression must have given too much away because Paxton jumped up, grabbed his rifle, and headed for the door. The sheriff stopped him quickly.

Recovering from her shock, she began to weave her lie. "I fell."

Her father looked less than convinced, holding up her shirt and bra. "For God's sake Lari, we were preparing to have dogs searching the woods for you. You scared us to death and all you can say is that you fell?"

After swallowing the lump in her throat, she continued but the warm glow of Dante's love seemed to give her some buoyancy, so she proceeded with more conviction.

"A bat came out of nowhere and flew down my shirt, and its yucky little claw got snagged on my bra. I freaked out and threw my clothes off. I ran without looking. I just wanted it to go away. I don't know how long I ran, but at some point, I fell. I must have passed out because when I woke up, it was dark I ended up near the old homestead, you know, the abandoned cabin. I crawled up to the porch, and I blacked out again. When I woke up a little later, I realized what had happened, and I climbed up the hill and went to look for my clothes, but they were gone. I'm sorry I scared everyone."

She saw the sheriff gratefully and quickly accepted her story. It was obvious he had no interest in a full-scale manhunt. Paxton looked relieved. Her mother looked skeptical and her father obviously

didn't believe her at all. After a few hugs and well wishes, the neighbors and sheriff left, but Paxton stayed behind. Larissa figured he wanted to talk to her, alone. Somewhere on the edges of her consciousness, she could feel the darkness in Dante roaring at Pax with a fearsome anger. It was both terrifying and comforting. He led her out into the darkness.

She stood alone with him, and she pulled the oversized jacket more closely around herself. He looked at her with sad eyes and she knew he wanted the love she'd already given away. Larissa felt a slight sadness and pity for him. If he felt anything remotely like what she felt for Dante, he would be hurting when she rejected him. Closing her eyes, she hoped he would not bring up dating again.

When he spoke, his voice was warm and held more emotion than she had expected. "I was worried when your mother came into town and brought word that they thought you were taken by a stranger."

Larissa cringed. Surely, she would be a hot topic for gossip and in a small town meant, everyone would know about her "disappearance" already.

Paxton continued. "I think you should go to a hospital. I'll drive you if you like. Your dad and I searched by the cabin. We never saw you. What really happened, Larissa? You can trust me."

"Nothing more than I said, Pax. If I need a doctor, my mom or dad will be able to get me there, but right now, I'm just tired. Let it go, okay?"

Before she knew what was coming Paxton surrounded her in his arms and held her. She struggled for a moment, and Dante's darkness filled her, threatening to bring him to rash action. Larissa tried to calm him and assured him she had her friend under control.

"Pax, let me go. I just want to go rest." She tried to pull away.

Before she got completely out of his embrace, he shoved the hair off her neck, the oversized coat had loosened around her during the unreciprocated embrace, and she felt him almost roughly inspecting her neck.

"Is that a hickey? Lari, was there a man?" His tone was ominous. Larissa suspected his anger laid with her as much as any mysterious stranger in the woods.

"I do not have a hickey! Get your mind out of the gutter and get the hell away from me." She readjusted the jacket's collar and pushed past him.

Grabbing her arm more roughly than what she thought was entirely necessary, he turned her around to face him. A small trickle of fear hit her when she saw his dark expression and that was all it took for Dante to lose his tenuous control. She felt the darkness take him, and something changed. Their link shifted, and it was suddenly jumbled and confused, as if he had no control of his mind any longer. Larissa was frightened. No matter how deeply connected she was to him, he was a stranger, and she had no idea what he was capable of.

Paxton took her by the shoulders and gave her a quick hard shake, making her teeth rattle. Larissa cried out softly.

"Stop, Paxton, stop it!"

He stopped shaking her and before she even realized his intentions, he kissed her. It was nothing like Dante's kiss, Pax lacked the passionate confidence. His mouth didn't even stir her desire for a moment. She tried to push him away. She felt Dante's mind clearly just for a moment, and then it was gone. Only rage was left and she felt a moment of sorrow at the loss of their connection. She felt his physical pain, and it frightened her. Between being accosted by Pax and her confusion over Dante, she was an utter mess.

Suddenly, a loud, low growl came out of nowhere, and she fell backwards. Sprawled on the gravel drive, she sat up, dazed. Her coat was a lost cause, and she ignored that it was hanging open, mortal fear trumping modesty at the moment. A large, deadly looking wolf stood between her and Paxton, growling. She scooted back from terror, and it looked at her for a moment, but the moment was just long enough. Dante. How could this creature be Dante?

She felt ill. Fighting her lightheadedness, she noticed Paxton moved in a practiced and smooth motion. He had his gun on a sling over his shoulder. He'd been using the gun since he was a boy. Whitehot, stark terror made her pant with fear, and Larissa pushed herself up and off the ground. Awkwardly, she let her stumbling body stop just in front of the wolf.

Pax barked, "Get out of the way, Larissa! That thing will kill you!"

He tried to move around her, but she followed the gun with her eyes and her body. This was Dante and no matter how betrayed, grossed out, and just plain creeped out she was, there was no way she was going to let Pax hurt or kill him.

"No, Pax. Get in your truck now. If you get out of here, we will both be safe and no one will die. Go!"

She was sure Pax saw the desperation in her eyes. The wolf just stood looking at him. Pax saw the wolf only wanted him. Boldly, he took several long strides back and got into the truck. He turned the engine on, and Dante growled fiercely. For a long moment, Paxton just stared at her like she was a stranger, like she had hurt him, and then he gunned the engine and drove off, making her cough from the dust. She shielded her face from the angry rocks his sharp turn had thrown her way. Turning to look at the wolf, at Dante, he was gone. Blood rushed through her temples, and the air left her lungs in a rush. Darkness claimed her, and she never felt the ground as her body crumpled onto the dirt.

Chapter Six

When Larissa opened her eyes, she was laying on the living room sofa. Her mother sat down beside her, holding her hand, and her father paced. Trying to sit up, Larissa felt her mother push her back down to rest. A long night shirt had been slipped over her head at some point, so she felt better to finally not be so horribly exposed, especially in her poor father's presence. Her head spun. It had all been so horrible. Had it all been a nightmare? When her father stopped pacing and looked at her, his face told her it was no nightmare. He swooped down beside her; his voice was strained when he spoke.

"I always knew that it would be one of my girls, Lari, but I hoped that it wasn't going to be you. I should have told you, girls. I just hoped it wouldn't be an issue, and you'd never need to know about any of it. So, I never said anything. Your mother knows, and she told me to talk to you when you started going off into the woods so much. I'm sorry, Lari."

Her muddled mind fought to make sense of her father's strange words. His apology made no sense. His words made no sense. What was he talking about anyway? He must have seen her confusion because he rushed on with his explanation.

"Larissa, you have to tell us about the woods. Did a vampire attack you? Have you been bitten? I saw your neck. Something attacked you. Please just admit it."

She was embarrassed. How could she explain? A man who had left the marks in a moment of passion. It had been so much to accept for her, and yet she did accept it as well as each new and surprising fact. Sighing, she decided she had fulfilled her surprise quota for a lifetime. Her eyes sought out her father's. She had to explain it all very carefully. Her father loved her best as his baby. If she told him exactly what she had been doing in the woods with Dante, he'd make himself a fur coat.

"Mom, Dad, I...I did meet someone in the woods, but he is not a vampire. He is my protector...He is a wolf and a man; we have a connection. The link, it's why I went crazy the other night. I'm not on drugs but I've changed. I'm sorry, but how could I have explained it when I just figured it all out myself?" Her father's eyes blazed. Stupidity was not something he could be accused of and seeing the mark on her neck, the burned graze on her check from Dante's stubbled face, and her shirtless return, all must have added up in his mind. Larissa knew her father well and could see the conclusion in his eyes, it all equaled wolf hunt!

Laying a soft hand on his arm, her mother spoke softly to her husband.

"Carlin, please just breathe. She is alive and she's not a vampire. Whatever happened in the woods today, I believe it was not against her will, right, Lari?"

She nodded. Her father did not look pacified, but she noticed a softening around his mouth as his grimace began to fade. When her father spoke to her, she heard his disapproval, he was no fool.

"If I go out there and talk to him, will he kill me? Will he even talk?"

"Honestly, I don't know, but I think he would if he knows you don't have a gun and don't plan to act like a crazy father. Why do you want to talk to him?"

"If he really is here to protect you, I'd rather he be closer. Also, I'd rather not have you running off into the woods to neck in the trees." He visibly shuddered after saying the words, and after hearing him say them, Larissa cringed a bit as well.

What could she say in response? A strange moment passed between them. He gazed at her, no doubt, with new eyes that she was no longer a child but a twenty-one-year-old adult. His shoulders seemed to sag a moment, and her mother lovingly rubbed his back upon seeing he had finally come to realize a truth she had known for a long time. Their children had grown-up.

Softly, her mother spoke, bridging the gap and helping with the decision of what to do with all that had been revealed.

"I think having your father talk to him is an excellent idea. I also think since we know what he's about, there is no reason to have him hiding in the woods. Carlin, you have to be sure you can speak to ...what is his name, dear?"

"Dante."

"Can you speak to Dante nicely? There is no reason for you to go all big daddy and make him feel unwelcome. Whatever is going on with our daughter, I think we need to support it, and if she wants to be with this wolf-man thing, we have to understand it." Ending in a choked sob, her mother tried to hide how upset the situation made her.

"Now look, you've gone and made your mother cry!" Carlin snapped at his daughter.

No matter what she did or who she was, her mother loved her, but having a werewolf for her daughter's new boyfriend was probably asking a bit much. Larissa could see how taxing it was on her mother's tolerance.

Leaning forward she placed a kiss on her cheek, and her mother patted her hand but her eyes still looked haunted. Guilt over how traumatized she was made Larissa look away. Her father was not as understanding, and when he got his boots and a flashlight, Larissa bit her lip. She sent a warning and a plea to Dante. What would he do? Would they all be one big happy family? It was just too much.

As soon as her father left, she looked at her mother, and her laugh bubbled to the surface. She could either laugh or cry at such a surreal moment, so she chose to laugh.

Larissa hugged her mother fiercely and spoke to her honestly. "I just feel like no matter what he is, or why he is what he is in this life, I need him, mom. I think I love him."

"How long have you been seeing him?" Larissa did not miss her mother's alarm, probably afraid of having puppies instead of grandchildren.

That thought made her stop cold. Could she have gotten pregnant with some supernatural child? She didn't even know if she wanted children and she wasn't sure if having were-children was even possible. Her mother must have noticed her sudden turn in emotion because she spoke sharply and with worry.

"Larissa, is there something else that you need to tell me? I'll understand no matter what it is." Her tone was not convincing and Larissa wondered if it were possible for unconditional love to become conditional.

"Mom, I had sex, just once, with Dante. I didn't know he was a wolf. I just...I'm so confused."

Her mother sighed and when she spoke, there was a passing of the torch, and suddenly they were two women, not just mother and daughter. "Larissa, I don't know what to tell you about wolf-men, but men are complicated creatures. Does he deserve you?" "Yes." Simple but poignant, her answer seemed to satisfy her mother, and Larissa knew Dante's thoughts clear. He was a man again, and her father wanted to talk. He was torn and unsure what he should do about it.

Nervously, Larissa felt all of the vicissitudes of Dante's emotions. She suspected he was shielding her from the worst of it. It was late, but she was too worried to sleep, as was her mother as they sat at the kitchen table playing cards half-heartedly. Every now and again, one or both of them would glance at the door. After awhile her mother's yawns turned to soft snores; she had fallen asleep and her cards scattered to the floor. Larissa picked them up, realizing she would have won the hand. She smiled.

At that moment, her dad walked in the house. She put her finger to her lips as he looked down at her mother and grinned. For his age, he stayed fit from all his hard work. He easily picked up his wife and took her to their bedroom.

Larissa cleaned up the playing cards and their cans of soda. Returning, her father looked down at her, and she saw the resignation in his eyes.

"He stays in the barn. If anyone asks, he's a hired hand with nowhere else to go. No, you will not be going out to visit him alone in the dark. I'm still pissed off at him—not you. I won't have your reputation ruined! He is not good for you. He knows it, too. Just go to bed. Everything will be brighter in the morning. Just don't tell your sisters what he is. God knows, it will be hard enough to keep them from rubbing up against him like cats in heat."

Her father's words shocked Larissa, and she suddenly realized her dad knew far more about his girls than he let on, and it made her chuckle.

Before he turned to leave, she could have sworn she saw him grin, obviously pleased that he had shocked her. He went to his room, and she could hear his heavy footfalls moving away. Tired, but feeling like things would be all right, she looked out the window to where she knew Dante was, and she knew he was thinking of her.

She went up the stairs and took a quick shower before crawling into bed. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was sound asleep.

Chapter Seven

To Larissa's surprise, it became almost normal to have Dante around the farm. He did help her father out, and the men had established a strange truce. Dante kept his hands off Larissa, and Carlin did not chop off said hands.

Her mother tried to fatten him up. She was not overly impressed he tended only to eat meat, and she was unable to tempt him with her famous apple pie or chocolate cake. Larissa thought it was good for the woman finally to encounter one being that did not fall prey to the bakery gods for her award winning creations. That was the only thing about him that her mother didn't like.

Unfortunately, the list was a bit longer for her father and there was no end to the arguments between the men, truce or not, it seemed disagreeing was their only agreement. She was frustrated. Her mother was amused. Her father was annoyed, and Dante was a little harder to read.

Her connection to him was strong, but he was hiding something. He was worried about more than upsetting Carlin, or offending Mia. Worried about Larissa, but glad to be close to her, she knew he felt the same agony that they had no time alone, but there was something that went deeper, and he wasn't telling her. His keeping a secret really frightened her. What could be worse than finding out vampires wanted to bite her and the guy she'd had sex with was a shape shifter?

Carlin was repairing a piece of equipment. Dante handed him tools. She was amused when her father suddenly went off on an educational tangent, and before long he had taught Dante far more than was required for the simple repair.

While she did her chores, she kept peeking out at what was happening. She noticed her mother was doing the same thing from the kitchen window. Snickering, she realized her father had been waiting for years to pass on his vast knowledge, but none of his daughters had ever had any interest in learning from him. The light in his eyes told her he was truly enjoying teaching Dante about the machine. He seemed to be following along well, and she could see he was focused and interested in what he was learning. If she had known her father

would like him, if she had known they'd bond over broken equipment, she'd have broken something herself sooner.

It was early in the day when they received a surprise visit. Paxton got out of his truck with several other men. They walked up to her father and Dante, who were busy with the repair. Carlin looked up and addressed Paxton.

"Morning Pax, who are your friends and what'd you need?" His voice was cautious.

"Mr. Reed, that *thing* that came out of your woods needs to be killed. It's dangerous. These boys specialize in killing those types of *thing*."

"What types of *thing* would that be son? I think you got frightened by a little coyote. Sadly, for you, it wasn't even the biggest one I've ever seen. It was late, and I'd had a bad day. It happens. You boys can look, but don't go killing any protected species on my property. I don't want DNR trying to take my guns or giving me a fine. Go on, have a go. I'll keep Lari out of the woods today, but I want you boys off my property by nightfall. I don't want any of my family or animals getting shot, so be careful and only shoot what you know you should shoot."

Paxton was eyeing Dante with curiosity.

"Who's he?"

Carlin put his tool down and leaned his arm casually against the machinery. When he answered his voice was casual, but there was no mistaking his meaning.

"This here is my hired help, Dante. He's doing a great job 'round here, and I'm damn glad I hired him on. Next time you got a question for him, ask him, not me."

Paxton waved his entourage in the direction of the pickup.

They were were-hunters, and Dante hated the smell of them with a passion he couldn't contain. He had barely suppressed his growl when he had seen them. They had to act as if they had nothing to hide. Even without his presence in the woods for them to find, it still made him nervous to watch them driving toward his sanctuary. He preferred to be a man, but once in a while the animal wanted out. He would have to keep the wolf caged until this blew over. Yes, it had been foolish to show his wolf over a kiss. However, he had felt

Larissa's distaste and fear, and she had already been distressed, so the guardian was on edge. It had not taken much to bring the wolf out of him. Where had Paxton found were-hunters? How was he so sure about what he had seen?

Feeling Larissa sense his worry, he sent her the impression everything would be fine. She knew he was not comfortable with the newcomers. He was surprised her father would have been defensive on his behalf. Paxton did not like him just because he was male and living near Larissa. However, knowing the man still desired her and was not ready to give up made Dante growl with jealous anger. He hated the thought the man felt he had a right to lay claim to her.

Carlin looked at him and handed him a wrench.

"Get the blood out of your eyes, kid. They won't find anything, and it'll blow over. Paxton's like his dad, a dog with a bone. Don't worry, eventually everyone will think he just overreacted to some typical wildlife, and it'll be fine. Now, about my daughter, listen up boy. I'm pleased you've been respecting my household, and I've kept a tight leash on you two." He chuckled at his little joke before he continued, "I see how you both look at each other, and Lari told me she canceled her classes for the fall. So, I'm guessing you being here might have a bit to do with that. I'll give the two of you Sunday afternoon to see each other, but I want you to keep your paws off my little girl." Again, he chuckled.

Dante rolled his eyes, and both men laughed companionably. The men noticed the women looking out the window with disbelief on their faces. Returning to their project, the men ignored the curious women, and it was apparent something had changed.

On Sunday, Larissa pushed Dante's large body into her small car and drove off towards the field. When Larissa arrived in the middle of the flat open field, Dante looked confused, and it made her laugh. She spoke in her most tutorial voice.

"You are going to learn to drive a car. It's a practical skill, and I've seen how you look at the truck. I am going to teach you how to be a great driver, just like me."

Dante snorted and she looked offended.

"Isn't there some kind of general complaint that men have about women drivers? I'm not going to be driving like a girl after this?"

"You should be so lucky as to have my mad skills when we finish. Here is your first lesson. Parking."

She got up on her knees and swung her leg over his. Running her fingers through his thick hair, she captured his, and she felt his arms pull her tightly to him. Dante moaned and she felt his erection pressing against her thigh. Her lips never left his while her hands worked at tugging his belt undone and getting his cock freed. They were both panting from the weeks of sexual frustration. It pulled them to an immediate frenzy.

Dante's large hands went under her shirt and rubbed against the soft skin of her back. Then after a couple of tries, she felt him loosen her bra. His hands moved to tenderly cup the heavy orbs, and his thumbs massaged her nipples in small circles of pleasure. She arched her back and bumped her head.

"Ouch!" They both laughed, and Dante slid his seat back to give them more room.

Larissa unbuttoned his shirt and looked at his passion-heavy eyes when she whispered softly, "When I put this skirt on this morning, I thought about this moment. I have wanted to feel you inside of me again. I've missed you, Dante."

He moaned when he found the hot wet junction between her legs. She clung to him as he took one of her nipples in his mouth and drew on it, making her cry out with exquisite pleasure. He kept rubbing her clit with his thumb as his long index finger began to fuck her and she cried out his name. She was as ready as he was.

She whispered to him. "Recline the back rest."

She felt his hard cock resting just in the right position to enter her and with intense sexual skills she didn't know she possessed, she had him inside of her. He hissed, and she cried out. Slowly, she began to ride him. She increased her speed as she slid on his cock until she felt blinded by the pleasure, and she grabbed onto the door handle of the car to stay up right, as the pleasure was so intense she felt her muscles give out as she came. She was a jellyfish after what they had shared. As the realization dawned on her he'd not come yet, and she looked at him, worried.

"We were lucky last time. I don't want you to regret this. I love you too damn much to cause you pain or trouble with your family."

Touched beyond words and amazed with his self-control she leaned down, and took his face in her hands, and her whispered words shattered his control and resolve. "No matter what happens, I would never regret a moment of being with you. I love you, Dante. Come for me," she demanded.

Dante threw his head back and came inside of her with a roar.

When they had adjusted their clothing to its original state, Larissa taught him what control did what and how to turn, stop, and reverse. He seemed delighted, and she had a wonderful time giving him the gift of a new skill.

When her father came poking around with the poor excuse of fence repair, she was glad they had their clothes on. Carlin seemed amused with the lesson, and he soon continued on, looking pleased. She was glad he'd no idea about the parking part of the lesson. Dante drove them back home and a few times Larissa was nervous and checked to make sure her seatbelt was secure. Her fear only amused him, and by the time they had reached home, he was doing a good job of keeping the car where it belonged. When they got out, she handed him a booklet wrapped in a bow, and he looked at her with a raised brow.

"The State rules. When you're ready, we'll get you a permit, then a license."

He grinned and she smiled back, the jovial mood continued through supper, until her father told them what he had heard about Paxton.

"I'd stay out of the woods, Dante. Pax and his group with guns have been hunting all the neighboring farms. I caught one of them on our property. I think they're using the other farms to get into our woods. I don't think they're ready to give up. I heard talk they think they've found something big. Dante, I think they've found your den. I think for everyone's safety you'd better stay away from the woods."

Dante nodded. He knew Carlin was right, and it irked him there was nothing he could do about it. He would not kill unless he was doing it to protect Larissa.

Feeling her response to his thoughts, he smiled at her reassuringly. He was a born predator, but she did not see that side of him. It surprised him to feel her shock. It also made him feel more

human than he had ever felt. He was close enough to her to wrap his arm around her shoulders, and he gave her a tender squeeze. The gesture was not lost on her family, and he was surprised they didn't demand he unhand her.

Feeling a sense of belonging for the first time in a long time gave him pause, and he marveled at all the wonder this sweet woman brought to his life. She accepted him even with his unusual abilities.

Chapter Eight

Later that night when Dante knew the entire Reed family was sleeping, he felt a disturbance, the energy of something dark and evil. Feeling like a caged animal pacing in the barn, he gave up trying to sleep and went outside to watch for danger, as his worry gave him no quarter.

Circling the perimeter of the house, Dante watched and listened. Carefully, he redrew the salt lines around the doors and window frames, and he checked the locks again, just to be sure. Something was coming, and he felt the guardian roaring inside of him.

He was Larissa's only protection. Had he made a mistake by staying here? At times, he still considered taking Larissa with him and going out to investigate what was happening with his kind. He knew there had to be were-allies out there somewhere.

Since he had no idea of what kind of danger he faced and might be thrusting her into, he had stayed in the cozy little domestic peace they'd been enjoying. Well...it had been nice while it lasted, but as he felt the danger looming, he knew his peace was over.

Something was out there and wanted to take Larissa from him. It wanted vengeance. He had lived a solitary life. He had no idea how he could have an enemy who wanted to enact some type of revenge against him. As hard as he tried, he could think of no one that could make the list, except Paxton, but the man was not a paranormal creature, at least he hadn't been one at their last meeting. The feeling that he got was far darker and malevolent. Dante debated waking Larissa and her family, but what could he really say to them? *Run for your life? I have a bad feeling?*

He felt Larissa's peace and knew she dreamed of him. It filled him with a sense of peace, even as he worried. There was no way in heaven or hell he was going to let her be hurt. Looking at where he stood, he remembered his father had died on the very same spot he stood trying to protect her. Dante faced the same danger, but he was alone. The Calvary no longer existed. If it was too much, they all would die

He felt his skin prickle, the guardian growled and wanted him to shift. He resisted. If the hunters were watching and there was no actual danger, he would be borrowing trouble.

It was a horrible feeling. Every day of his life, he had known someday he might face death for duty. If he had to die, he could think of no better cause than preserving the life of the woman he loved.

Larissa was everything to him. Without her, he would be the emptiest of shells, a ghost wolf as his uncle had been; maybe worse because he had truly experienced the beauty of what he was fighting to hold on to. He knew what made his charge special, and he would rather die than lose her.

Just thinking of how she felt in his arms made him all the fiercer to protect her. His wolf was starting to come out, and he had almost no choice. His guardian was like a wild thing in a cage shaking the bars.. Blindly intense pain brought him to his knees. Too late? He remembered his connection to Larissa, he knew her every action and with his special hearing, he heard her scream and felt her sit up, shaking in her bed. He fought it, but he didn't know how long he could hold onto Dante, the man.

Somewhere in his head, he recognized Larissa came out into the danger to see what had happened to him. She called out his name.

His mind tried to call out to her to stay behind the salt, to stay behind the locked door, but it was too late. He heard her soft slippers rustling in the dirt. She had broken the salt line. She had just canceled out the only protection she had.

Knowing how hideous he must look, mid transformation, he tried to turn away from her. Despite her shock at seeing him trapped inside of the beast, she pushed her distaste away because of her deep love for him. His heart burst with his love for her at moment—she was amazing.

Getting down in the dirt beside where he lay in torment, she took his face in her hands and kissed his deformed lips. Her wet tears fell on his skin, and he growled low in his throat because she was in pain. He knew she could feel his physical suffering. Without the strength to block her, he had no choice but to share with her his pain and his transformation. No human had endured this.He groaned and feared for Larissa. Would the pain of his transformation kill her? Using what was left of his human mind, he spoke.

"Go inside, I can't hold it back. The wolf is coming. Redraw the salt, lock the door."

"I love you, Dante."

His human mind heard her last words before the agony became too much for her, and she screamed with the unbearable pain.

He let the wolf go. His bond with her had grown, and he had never considered before how the transformation would affect her. In vain, he tried to shield her from the pain, but it was too late. Her mother had her now, and he was comforted in the knowledge. They both cried out as the wolf emerged, and then she was still. Even with the wolf's mind she was far too still and pale for his comfort.

She was not able to deliver his warning, and her parent's had no idea they were in danger. He looked at them and whined, unable to communicate the danger. Then, it was too late.

A bullet whizzed past him, and he saw the ground near his paw erupt with dirt as it impacted. Another came dangerously close to hitting Larissa and her mother. Using his large body to provide them cover, Dante did not feel the pain of the bullet that pierced his side, but he felt the slick wetness of the blood.

Mia and Carlin half-carried and half-dragged their daughter behind the only available cover. Another bullet hit Dante and he yelped. In that moment, he realized he'd been hit twice with silver bullets, but as the attack continued his only concern was for Larissa.

Larissa still had not woken. Dante was terrified her paleness signified her death. Dante looked at Larissa and guilt tore at him. He nudged her with his muzzle and wondered if his transformation might have killed her. Bullets pinged off the metal of the large dumpster they'd managed to get behind.

Carlin spoke, "Those shots came from the woods. It was Pax or his hunters. Little bastard is gonna pay for this shit! Just like his old man. Can't handle rejection. I can't believe he'd have risked killing us just to get Dante. I doubt it was Pax who fired the shots that almost hit Larissa. I'm thinking the little snot nose shit is not alone up there. He'd never pull the trigger if he thought he'd hit Lari. He must still have the other hunters with him."

Unable to maintain the wolf any longer, Dante transformed as the silver bullets were polluting his blood, killing him. He became a man again, slowly and painfully. Each moment he thought of what damage his weakness might be causing the woman he loved, and it only intensified his agony. His ears rang as he gave a sharp, hoarse cry, and his human hand went to his injured side. Blood gushed from his wound, and he knew he was in grave peril.

He hissed from the discomfort. "I'm dying. They used silver. We have to get the bullets out, now!"

The two men exchanged a silent moment of understanding, what needed to be done was clear to both of them. Mia was confused until she saw what her husband pulled out of the pocket of his sleep pants. He had brought the car keys, instinctually, and on his keys was a multipurpose tool that would make any boy scout proud. Taking the tool out, Carlin pulled up on the pliers' attachment. Looking at the injured man, he spoke evenly.

"Are you sure about this? I could make it worse, push it deeper. I'm no doctor."

Dante nodded.

Mia gasped and grabbed her husband's arm.

When she spoke, her voice shook. "Carlin, what about infection? You might get the silver out just so he can die slowly later?"

Dante groaned. When he spoke, his voice was taunt and dry with his agony.

"If they don't come out of there won't be a later, Mia."

Mia turned away, unable to watch the parody of a surgery. Dante heard the choked cry.

Carlin used his knee to press Dante firmly to the ground. He spoke between gritted teeth, "Don't move, boy. I'll do this quick."

Dante closed his eyes, unable to watch. He screamed as Carlin's pliers touched the ragged, bleeding wound.

Sweat beaded on Carlin's brow. He had grown to care about Dante, as family. The boy's scream filled him with agony, and he wished he could cover his own ears. He was relieved when he pulled back, and he had the first bullet. Dante looked like he was barely able to stay conscious. Carlin took a deep breath before he began again. He wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible for both of them.

"You all right, boy? Ready?"

Dante nodded half-heartedly. It had taken all of his self-control to stay still for the barbaric procedure.

When Carlin began with the final wound, Dante's scream was weaker, he'd lost far more blood than his body could quickly replenish. A human would've already died. Carlin was quicker with the second. It was not as deep. Dante panted, and he could not keep his eyes open. With the silver out he knew he would live, but the fire still raged through his blood with blinding pain. Vaguely, he wondered if Larissa had felt the agony, and the thought was a knife in his heart.

"Give me your robe, Mia, quick!"

Gasping, Dante spoke in short bursts. "Not...over yet...more...dan...ger....coming...vampires coming...Larissa!"

The older couple exchanged a look of unity in the face of their own apocalypse. Mia held her daughter even more tightly.

Dante spoke again, he felt the danger coming. "I will cover you...get to...house...salt...fix it...vamp....vampires...a lot of...vampires coming!"

"Dante, you can't get yourself killed! Look at her. If you die, she dies. I know it. She'll never come back to us if we lose you. We have to think of something else, something where we all survive."

For a moment, she was quiet and then her quick, high-pitched utterance got their attention. "Hey, what about the barn? We have a bunch of salt licks for the cows in there? We could all get there if we stay away from the fence. He'd never be able to get a clean shot at us."

Carlin kissed his wife's cheek. "Give me Lari, and you help Dante. We can make it, but I want you and Dante to go first. Even with Lari, I'll be faster than the two of you. Keep right and the bastard up there will never get a shot off!"

Mia helped the large, young man to a crouching position. She hated to leave the safety behind the dumpster, but she knew that if they didn't get out of the open they were all dead anyway. Dante was just an injured young man now, and Lari was totally helpless. Their only viable option was making a run to the relative safety of the barn. Moving swiftly they heard the shots but the buildings and trees protected them. Mia rested with Dante behind the chicken coop, and a bullet sent the sleeping chickens into a wild frenzy of squawking.

Carlin soon joined them and he gave his wife his most reassuring smile and murmured that it would be all right.

Mia and Dante had just entered the barn when they heard a shrill scream echoing through the woods. It was a man's scream. Something had gotten one of the shooters and then just as quickly, the scream abruptly ended.

The shooter was most likely dead. Mia looked out the door for her husband and daughter, terrified for their safety. She was relieved when she saw them coming toward the barn. As soon as they were inside, she slammed the door and wedged a board down in the metal brackets that served as the rudimentary lock. Leaning against the door, Mia sighed with premature relief. Carlin still held Larissa and Dante had regained some of his color. When he spoke, his voice sounded stronger.

"We need to secure a location where we can take a stand and defend our position." Pain was obvious in Dante's voice, but so was determination.

Carlin quickly spoke. "Grab all the salt licks that you can carry and follow me."

Mia and Dante each grabbed the heavy blocks. Dante had three, but Mia could only handle one. Carlin went into the milk house, where the pumped milk was stored for pick up, and he lay his daughter down on the clean, albeit wet, concrete floor.

Grabbing a shovel from the large supply room adjacent to the milk house, he began to smash the salt blocks apart. Dante took another shovel and began to help. Mia knelt down next to her daughter, tucked empty burlap sacks under her, and covered her with some in an attempt to keep her warm.

Chapter Nine

More screams and gunfire pierced the night. In the distance, strangely inhuman calls of the vampires voiced their triumph. The men worked more furiously. Dante was slower than usual but considering that he had just experienced two near fatal bullet wounds, he was recovering at a highly abnormal rate. Mia left Larissa just long enough to help sprinkle the pulverized chunks of salt by the windows and doors—they even sprinkled it near the large drains and the supply room door, just in case.

Feeling as secure as they could with the knowledge that their backs were to the wall, it seemed the group was holding a collective breath. Screams and shrieks approached, announcing the vampires had arrived. It was clear the monsters knew right where they were. Dante growled in a voice caught between beast and man. Groaning, he shook and began to sweat.

Mia clung tightly to Larissa, and when the girl gave a sudden jerk, Mia uttered a startled but happy cry. Larissa opened her big, beautiful eyes. She immediately looked for Dante. Their eyes locked for a moment of the deepest understanding.

Then she whispered in a dry cracked voice. "It's all right, Dante. I'll be able to handle it. I feel different now, ready, as if my body understands how to handle what you have to do. I won't die."

Mia gasped and begged. "You're hurt, Dante. You're not ready to fight vampires. Let's just wait it out and see if we can hold them off until morning. They'll leave by dawn, right?"

"Morning light will hurt the vampires, not kill them, Mia. I don't know if they will give up at dawn or just try to fool us into thinking they did."

Whimpering softly, already his face showed signs of deformity, and the hair had grown on his head. Larissa watched more hair sprout thickly on his arms right before her eyes. With her mother's help, she sat up. Then, with pain, she slowly stood up and moved to Dante. His eyes were haunted due to her suffering.

She refused to shrink away from the sight of his transformation, rather she gently stroked his face. "Go ahead and transform. I promise not to fade out again. I know holding off the full

transformation is hurting you and draining your strength. I love you, and I trust you. Now you have to trust me."

Dante moaned from the pain and let go. In moments, he was the wolf. As if sensing he was there, the vampires stopped the screaming, and became quiet. The abrupt absence of sound hurt Larissa's ears worse than the vampire screams had. When she began to shiver, Dante was beside her, trying to give her courage and warmth. A moment later, the vampires began to scream again. This time they were close enough to rake their claws over the metal exterior of the milk house.

Mia and Larissa clung to each other in the middle of the room and Carlin stood next to the wolf with a shovel ready to behead any vampire within his reach.

A soft, feminine voice wavered into the room as clearly as if she were with them.

"I have defeated the council. I have killed many wolves. I have been waiting for today for many years." A woman's voice continued to call out, "Do you remember me, brother?"

Dante howled.. Larissa was confused. Was this vampire Dante's sister?

He was unable to hold the wolf, and he was soon naked, shivering, and human on the milk house floor. He looked like someone had sucker punched him.

"Dante, do you remember me? Are you afraid of me, brother? You should be afraid."

"This is a trick. I don't know where my sister is, but she is a werewolf. She can't become a vampire!"

High, girly laughter filled the room, and it was more terrible than the screams.

"You and Dad liked to run around as men and eat cooked meat. I never knew until you failed me that I, too, had inherited a bit of a flaw. It's true our grandmother was human. She was from a human line with the ancient blood, like the girl you protect. Did you ever wonder why a protector is never supposed to know his charge? Did you ever think, 'Gee wouldn't it make more sense if he was there every day in the house with the family?', like you are now? There is a good reason, brother. I am that reason. I am what the councils have feared for generations. When I killed them, I could see the ancient

guardian's in their eyes. I could see the horror as the guardian's realized what I am. I am a wolf with the blood defect. Remember that day? The day our family died? The vampire felt pulled in our direction from so far away because of Larissa and because of me. He felt the draw of two powerful lines. If you had transformed sooner, we could have killed the vampire. I would be alive and so would Mom and Dad. You were selfish and always had to pretend you were human.

"I felt it right away, the change in me. In a day, I grew into a woman, you can imagine the pain a growth spurt like that causes. I felt the urge to destroy you. Before I had completely become what I am now and the vampire inside had taken me, I left. I left to protect you from what I was becoming. You let this happen to me. Dante, you are my older brother, if you hadn't always been running around as a human you'd have been ready when our family needed you. I'll never forgive you, but I was still were enough then not to kill you. I was alone and afraid and hungry when I killed for the first time. I traveled at night, searching. A vampire found me and brought me into the clan. I am no longer a lowly clan follower. I am the clan leader, and my clan has been destroying our enemies. You are one of the last wolves. Some are in hiding but we have killed so many.

"I have come now for you and for your charge. I am going to make you watch me turn her, and then I am going to have her kill you. I've been watching and you have been a very naughty boy. You and your charge will make another flawed wolf baby that will have to live in fear of vampires all of its life. Killing you will be doing your cubs a favor!"

Larissa was on the floor holding Dante as his deranged sister spoke. She was a grown woman, but her mind was broken by the monster inside of her. It was a terrible fate. Larissa understood her bitterness, but she could not understand how she could blame it all on Dante. Larissa felt his survivor's guilt, he accepted his sister's hate and hated himself too. Tears choked her as she tried to surround him with her love and comfort.

"Send out your charge, and I will make sure she doesn't suffer. I will be kind as I take her human life and give her a new one. This is your only chance to take this offer. If I have to come and get her, it will hurt. I will make sure she stays human long enough to

watch her parents die, as I had to once endure. It hurts more that way."

Dante shuddered.. Larissa felt the wolf in him gaining strength with his rising anger.

"Summer, fight me for her. I was shot by silver tonight. You have the advantage. Fight me for Larissa. If I win, your vampire clan leaves, and you never return. If you win, I'll be dead."

It was quiet for a moment, and then she responded in a giddy, delighted, child-like voice. "Oh fun, I would love a good wrestle just like when we were cubs, only this time my teeth are a bit sharper."

Larissa hugged him to her and whispered fervently. "You don't have to do this."

He took her face in his palm and rubbed his thumb over her cheek as he gazed deeply and passionately into her eyes.

"Yes, I do. I would die for you, Larissa. I just hope it won't be tonight."

He quickly transformed into the wolf and went to the door, waiting.

Larissa opened the door and in the background, Mia sobbed brokenly.

Bursting into the open where the vampires stood, Dante was careful not to disturb the salt and give them a way inside.

Quickly, the three humans shut themselves back inside of the milk house unable to risk the danger of watching the wolf they had all come to care for risk his life to save them. Larissa sobbed into her mother's arms as she sent Dante all of her strength. If he died, the vampires would never have time to make her one of them because her life twined with Dante's on a level beyond telepathy. The thread of their souls had somehow become woven together with an unbreakable thread.

When she had been unconscious, something had changed. Now the connection seemed to twine around her heart, uniting them so deeply his life and hers were one. The wheel of fate had spun and their destinies were the same. She did not tell her mother, not wanting to cause her more fear.

Dante felt Larissa's distress and she felt every moment of his pain. She would feel his death? Could anyone survive that? It was not a matter of wanting to win. He had to win. Summer was lost to him,

dead in a way more terrible than finding her bones would have been. He did not want to kill his sister, but looking at her human adult face twisted with rage, Dante knew the girl who had been his friend and sister was gone.

What stood in front of him was an insult to his sister's memory; a parody of who she had been and what she had been destined to become.

His wolf eyes watched the vampire transform into an adult wolf, larger than any he had ever seen. Her eyes glowed with a red menacing light. When she threw back her head to howl, Dante saw the huge, dagger like fangs protruding from her mouth. She had not lied about her bite. Sending his last thoughts of love to Larissa, he stood his ground as the large beast launched herself at him.

Losing his footing, he slid back with the force of the blow. She was strong and heavy. Snarling, the were-vampire snapped at him. Dante was quick, even with his injury. He barely managed to avoid having her bite down on him. Her clan watched the fight. Some looked engaged and other's bored, obviously more interested in getting permission to go after the humans. He noticed blood on their clothing and the hunters, possibly Paxton, had once had blood flowing in their veins keeping them alive.

Summer's wolf had certainly been as transformed by the vampirism as her human self had been. He no longer had familial telepathy with her. In a moment, he realized she truly was not family, but an executioner who wanted to take his life and with it, Larissa's. Sadly, tonight one of them would die. Summer launched another attack, she'd been holding back the first time, testing him. Her momentum sent him completely off his feet, and he slid painfully into the milk house wall.

Shaking his head, he stood painfully. Dirt had gotten into his nearly healed bullet wound, and it burned when he moved. Growling low in her throat she looked at him with hatred, and Dante could see how she was anticipating her attack. Sadly, it was time to treat her like a vampire and go for the spine at the base of her head.

Snarling, her large body was on his and Dante felt the fangs sink into his uninjured side, sucking at his blood. He yelped, snarled and snapped and struggled, but he could not dislodge the ravenous beast. He was dying. He had let his parents and sister down, and now he was letting Larissa and her family down. The failure weighed on his heart as his strength continued to ebb.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a gunshot registered, and then he felt the wolf release him. Falling back, he did not take time to question what had happened nor did he risk a look in the direction the bullet had come from. Summer whined and a second bullet hit her again. She yelped with her agony. He knew it had to be silver, but how?

Not able to take the luxury to think about it, Dante launched himself at her and with one powerful bite his strong jaws severed her spine from her head. Instantly, she lost her hold on the wolf, and she was just a dying woman. His eyes watered and the tears ran down his muzzle, even the wolf could not watch his sister die without pain.

She reached up and took hold of his fur, tugging him down. He had no idea what she was trying to do, but weakly she looked into his eyes and spoke in the voice he remembered.

"Thank you, Dante."

She laid back, her eyes staring sightlessly at the moon. The vampire was dead. His sister, the wolf, whatever she was, was dead, too. Dante's wolf howled in agony. Larissa screamed from the pain he felt, and it brought Dante back to the realization they were still in danger and Larissa was still bound to him.

He was hurt, but he whirled around. He saw most of the vampires had fled with their dead leader, but five of them remained. With deliberate and slow progress, they walked in a line toward the open milk house door. A bloody and torn Paxton stood in the doorway, wobbling, holding his gun. Miraculously, he had survived the vampires.

He must have decided that werewolves were the lesser of the two evils because he had the gun trained on the approaching vamps, not Dante. Larissa supported Paxton as well as she could. He took a shot and hit one of the vamps in the chest. It fell but did not die. He fumbled awkwardly as he tried to reload the gun. Carlin went to help him, but he pushed the man away weakly. Either revenge or guilt was pushing him to use his last moments of life to fight against the vampires.

Dante attacked the vampire. With a quick angry toss of his head, he beheaded the monster. The other four never even paused for their fallen comrade. Paxton shot another. It fell, jerking and

sputtering with the damage the bullet inflicted. Dante dispatched another one as easily.

The remaining three vampires suddenly charged, and Dante knew why. Paxton's foot had broken the line of salt. The vampires could now enter, and Larissa fell back with Paxton. Carlin jumped in front of his daughter and her friend, and swung his shovel. It was sharp from daily use, and with one good blow, he took the female vampire's head off.

Both of the remaining vampires had all their focus on Larissa. Injured, but ready to fight, Dante leapt into the building and tackled the larger of the two vampires. Paxton tried to shoot the other, but he was out of bullets.

In a last heroic move, he lunged at the vampire, but the creature was far stronger and Paxton never stood a chance. He was thrown across the room, and died in a crumpled broken heap on the concrete.

Larissa cried out as the monster loomed above her. Mia ran to her daughter and used the only weapon she had—a hunk of salt. Quickly, she drew a circle around them, and to her relief, the vampire hissed in agony as it tried to reach them. Every time it grabbed for them, it was not able to break the circle. It was getting angry and while distracted by anger, it didn't see what Carlin was doing.

"Get down!" Carlin screamed at his wife and daughter. They immediately complied without question, dropping to the ground.

His shovel swiftly removed the vampire's head.

The humans turned and saw he still fought, weak but determined, with the remaining vampires. Carlin jumped in order to help, but the vampire turned on him and sank its fangs into his leg. Screaming, he hit the creature repeatedly with the shovel, but it would not let go. Grabbing handfuls of salt, Mia and Larissa began to pelt the monster with the substance, and he smoked and hissed in agony, letting go of Carlin.

Larissa's father fell, unable to stand on the leg. Writhing, the vampire bite was like a poisonous snakebite, and he screamed with the pain as the venom in the creature's saliva mixed with his blood, poisoning him as it moved through his system. Dante managed to remove the creature's head. He finally let go of the wolf, and Dante lost his hold on the transformation and lay exhausted in a naked, damaged, bloody heap on the floor.

Mia ran to her agonized husband, and Larissa ran to her injured protector. Dante spoke in harsh pants.

"Vampire...bite is worse...than rattlesnake bites...have to suck out the...bad blood...Not Larissa...Me or Mia!"

Mia immediately jumped into action and began to suck the bitter blood out of her husband's leg and spat it on the floor away from her daughter.

Larissa helped Dante stand. He gratefully put on the coat she had found in the supply room. They went to the older couple and watched as Mia managed to suck the last of the tainted blood out of her husband. He was unconscious, but alive. Dante spoke with a little more strength.

"He needs to sleep...rest will finish clearing the poison...finally over."

Looking around and seeing Paxton's body, the dead vampires, and all the blood and carnage, Mia spoke in a tried and worried voice. "In another two hours, the milk truck driver will be here to hook up the hoses and pump the milk out of the tank. I can safely say this milk is now tainted; vampires and werewolves in the milk house really aren't sanitary. I'm going to call and tell them we found antibiotics in the milk, and that we're draining the tank. I hate to lose the money, but I don't know how we would explain this to the driver."

Larissa and Dante looked at each other and laughed. Leave it to the practical Mia to think about the milk schedule and sanitation after barely surviving werewolf hunters and vampires.

Dante limped behind as Larissa and Mia half-carried and half-dragged Carlin into the house. Everyone was dirty and bloody and Mia grumbled about the floors, bringing a twitter of nervous and anxious laughter out of Larissa. They left Carlin on the couch and then went back out to the milk house to begin the process of covering up the battlefield.

Larissa cried when she saw Paxton's body. In the delirious confusion, she must have almost forgotten her long time friend had given his life for hers.

Dante carried the man's battered corpse outside, and he began to stack the dead like firewood. Mia gagged and vomited on the grass. Larissa spoke and her distress was evident in her voice, but Dante also felt it in his own heart, too.

"What are we going to tell Paxton's dad?"

"Nothing. Paxton is going to join the hunter's in the woods and the vampire bodies. Werewolves have been disposing of vampires and their victims for centuries. They'll never be found. We'd never be able to explain this. I hate we can't give him the hero's tribute he deserves. But ceremony and tribute won't bring him back. Keeping the secret of how he died was for the best."

As Dante said the words, he knew his actions would haunt Larissa for the rest of her life. It broke his heart, but they had no other option.

Dante took all the bodies away, and he never told them what he had done with them. Larissa felt it was for the best. He'd blocked her somehow, and she was grateful.

With the morning sun, they still had work. However, by midmorning they were able to stand back and see no evidence of the horrors of the previous night.

"Larissa, how are you holding up?"

Turning at the sound of Dante's concerned voice she gave him a strained and tried smile. "I'll be all right. It's my dad I'm worried about."

"Carlin is a strong man. He'll be okay." She heard the respect he had for her father in his words and tried not to smile. The men had come a long way from hating each other.

"Are you okay?"

"Honestly, knowing what happened to my sister has given me closure. My heart aches for her. I feel like I failed her."

"You were so young. There isn't anything you could've done."

"I'll always wonder..." His voice trailed off, and she could see his eyes looked lost. If it had been one of her sisters, she'd have felt the same way. She hugged him. Somehow she knew it was enough, had to be enough. In that moment, she felt his healing slowly begin. They continued with the clean up, lost in thought.

Any passerby would see that all the cows had been milked, just another day on the farm. Mia had ran in every thirty minutes to check on Carlin, but he had still not woken. She was terrified the vampire had damaged him permanently. Dante assured her he would not become a vampire, and his body just needed rest to fight out the rest of the vampire's poison.

When the man finally opened his eyes, his wife lovingly fell on him, kissing him and declaring her love. Larissa and Dante quickly left the room to give them some privacy, and not to see the parental public display of affection.

Everything was going to be all right.

Epilogue

Standing at the kitchen window of the farmhouse she had grown up in, Larissa saw the truck rolling up the driveway. Her husband jumped out of the cab. Dante drove at every opportunity, and he helped her mother out. They started to bring in their purchases.

Dante carried two large grocery bags while Mia carried a large cake. Smiling, Larissa looked back at the kitchen table where Celia colored on her favorite coloring book. Larissa patted her large abdomen. Her second child was due any day, but she was glad the baby was not going to crash the party. Celia looked up as the kitchen door opened and shouted.

"Grandma! Cake! Daddy!"

Dante walked over to his wife and kissed her before he rubbed her very pregnant belly. When they had first married, shortly after the terrible battle against the vampires, he had insisted on getting a vasectomy. The thought of bringing kids into the world, hunted by vampires or outcasts because they were shifters, worried him.

He loved his wife, but the thought of giving her a family had terrified him. Her children would always be in danger and his children would always be shifters. Those offspring would always be different and live in fear.

Larissa had been angry and hurt. After many long, angry conversations, he admitted she was right. Ultimately, causing him to change his mind on the particular point. Dante's children would always be wolves, regardless of their mother, so if they chose to end their lines, they would end. Nevertheless, if they choose to live and love...

They could live as normal of a life as possible under the circumstances. The couple would just accept life as it came loving, living, and trusting everything would be all right.

Larissa and her mother began to get everything ready for Celia's big party. Many of their neighbors and friends were coming to celebrate. As far as any of them knew, Dante was just a hired man who had fallen for the boss' daughter and was getting a happily ever after. Paxton's disappearance was still a source of community pain. Larissa was beginning to accept Paxton had made his choice, and, body or no body, his family would always feel the loss. She accepted

it was a secret they had to keep. Who else would believe vampires had killed him?

Carlin came limping into the kitchen. His leg had never been the same after the vampire bite. Part of the muscle in his leg had to be removed to save the limb. The doctors were stumped as to why a healthy man suddenly had necrosis of his calf muscle, but it was one of those things the family had just left as a mystery. Overall, they had been lucky their losses had not been far worse.

Dante put his arm around his wife and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. It still amazed him that Larissa was his, and he did not have to hide their love away.

Summer had truly killed the council, but with her dead, the surviving wolves and other were-creatures had been able to come out of hiding. Dante had broken the rules, but there was no longer leadership in place to enforce them.

The were-community could not go on without leaders forever, so he had started a new council consisted of regular weres and guardian-weres. They had started to look at the rules they had been living by for centuries and made some updates.

One of the first things that they changed was the policy of never speaking to a charge. Dante had seen for himself how important it was for the charge to understand the danger and how, without the charges cooperation, winning might be impossible. The new council had eliminated the ban on were-charge marriages and had brought many couples out of the lives of secrets they had been living.

It was discovered the bond he shared with Larissa was not exclusive to them, and it helped to know just how many children of were-parents had the blood the vampires sought.

All of these changes had strengthened what was left of the were-community and Dante strove to make the future safer for children like his through his leadership.

Kissing his wife until it became interrupted when Celia tugged at his pant leg, he looked down at his daughter, and she held up a picture she had colored. She pointed at the picture and said, "Me".

Looking at what it was he and his wife exchanged glances. Celia had colored a wolf from her little red riding-hood coloring book. He picked his daughter up, and Larissa kissed her on the cheek. Dante's heart was full of love for his two special women, and he smiled as he felt the baby kick inside of his wife. Their telepathy had actually increased after Celia had been born. Dante even felt a connection to his unborn child. Larissa had never spoken of it, but he knew she felt it, too.

They would be having a boy in just a few days, and his wife was trying to keep the baby's gender a surprise, so he never let her know that he knew. He had more experience with the familial telepathy, and it irritated Larissa that he could block things she couldn't. But the familial telepathy did have definite benefits.

Sex was great. They anticipated each other's needs instantly. The intense and loving telepathy between them was a blessing. There was never a need for words because they knew exactly what the other wanted and what they felt. It was an amazing experience, and the pleasure was enhanced for it. Sex was almost a spiritual activity for them.

Larissa must have caught her husband's train of thought, and he saw her raise her eyebrow. He smiled, knowing that he would remind her later that a great bout of sex might stimulate labor and save her another day's backache. She knew exactly what he was thinking as he projected it to her loud and clear. She rolled her eyes.

Other husbands might be able to say they had sympathetic labor pains, but for Dante it was true. He felt his wife's pain and discomfort. Each time she felt the horrible cramps of contractions he'd experience a ghostly echo of her pain.

"I love you, Dante."

"I know, I love you, too. Thank you for going through another pregnancy to give us another child to love." She took their daughter from him to get her dressed in her new party dress. As he watched them leave the room, he felt a moment of contentment.

Loving Larissa was the smartest thing that he'd ever done.

The End



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