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# **DEDICATION**

To my dad, Jerry Sontheimer, who introduced me to life and taught me that there is no such word as can't. His story is part of my own.

# Wolfe's Lady

## Lee Ann Sontheimer Murphy

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## **Chapter One**

Her classroom was on the top floor of the aged brick building, tucked into the farthest corner of a dead-end hallway. Stella, with hands on her hips, surveyed the room with its vintage high ceilings and predicted it would be roasting hot in warm weather, freezing in cold. The shopworn desks were antiques and when she picked up the teacher's edition of the textbook, she shook her head. The publication date was the year of her birth.

This was very different from the suburban high school where she graduated in the top twenty of her class, light years away from the modern, sprawling state university campus where she earned her teacher's degree. The small town high school that served the entire county looked like a museum and she wondered for a moment just why she had accepted the job. Something about this small town, a typical farmer's market Missouri town that drew from the surrounding rural area, appealed to her. Riverville, on the edge of the Ozark Mountains, offered hills to climb and some spectacular scenery. Stella also liked the traditional town square with a courthouse in the center and businesses ringing each of four sides. Once it would have been the central hub of town but now most of the newer shops were located out on the highway on the edge of town.

In the older section where both the downtown Square and the high school sat, the terrain stretched out flat toward the river to the north and east. Above the Square, however, the Ozark foothills climbed like stairs with gradual incline to reach summits that looked down on the small town. On those hills, from the 1960's onward, the more affluent members of the community, the bankers, lawyers, and local doctors, built their newer homes on those peaks and she wondered if that reflected their social views as well. She thought that it probably did, especially after learning that the neighborhoods on the hilltops were called Riverville Heights.

In the older part of town, where she would live and work, the buildings featured vintage architecture and went heavy toward brick. Even the courthouse, a multi-storied and many-towered edifice was built of brick. One thing that she noted was that flowers bloomed in profuse color, from flowerboxes in front of small businesses, some with neat striped awnings, and to well-tended beds in residential areas.

She could have accepted the position offered by an inner city high school or the charter school in the suburbs but some latent desire to experience a retro way of life propelled her to take this job. Riverville reminded her so much of the fictional Mayberry from the 1950's television program that she expected to hear the *Andy Griffith* theme whistled into her ears as she walked around the Square. Stella liked her postage stamp sized apartment, housed in a former hotel on the corner of the downtown Square, but the high school was different.

Maybe it was the Gothic look of the three-story brick edifice that resembled a castle more than a public school building. Something about the narrow corridors with vintage features—full length multi-paned glass doors on each classroom for example made her feel like she was starring in a cheap horror flick, not reporting for her first year of teaching.

The bland beige walls begged for decorations, like maps or posters, and Stella wondered if the administration would be angry if she painted them a vivid violet or a pumpkin orange. They probably would since the principal, a graying man two years from retirement, had given her a strict faculty dress code and a written list of rules.

"The appearance and conduct of our staff must be above reproach," he had told her, nodding for emphasis behind his huge desk. "I am sure you will agree."

Stella didn't but she had nodded anyway, tucking her feet with the mauve painted toenails further under the chair before Mr. Sanderson noticed her toes violated #15 of the dress code. Very few of her new professional garments qualified under the dress code someone grandfathered in from 1910.

She opened the drawers of the desk that sat in the center of the front of the classroom and frowned when she found the drawers full

with the last teacher's leavings. Ink pens, rubber bands, paper clips, bookmarks, two buckeyes, and more rubbish filled each drawer except the last of the three on the right, which stuck. It would not budge and already exasperated that she would have to clean out every drawer, she sighed and said aloud.

"This is going to be a mess!"

"Do you think so?"

Stella leaped backward three steps and almost crashed into the podium. The unexpected voice was definitely masculine, a low voice with the hint of a growl deep within the tone. She clasped her chest with one hand when she saw him standing in the doorway, a tall man with long brown hair caught back in a neat ponytail and a Van Dyke beard/goatee.

"Did I scare you?" he said, in a voice rich and thick as dark chocolate. "I apologize. I thought you might have heard me coming. I am Darien Wolfe, the mathematics teacher. My classroom is next door to yours."

She extended her hand.

"Hi, you did startle me a little. I'm Stella Raines, the new European history teacher."

Instead of shaking her hand, he lifted it to his lips and kissed it, his mouth warm against her skin, his moustache tickling her hand.

"I'm charmed," Darien Wolfe intoned, and she thought she caught a faint upper crust British note in his voice as well. "Stella is a lovely name, from the Latin word for star. Are your parents stargazers?"

"Yes, my parents adore the night sky," Stella said. "I'm very pleased to meet you." His manners were perfect and she must sound like she was born in a barn. She wondered, however, why his appearance seemed outside the strict dress code for faculty. As if he read her mind, he answered the unspoken question.

"If you're wondering, I am exempt from Sanderson's dress code," Darien said, with a smirking grin.

"Why?" If he could be exempt, then maybe she could work in those painted toenails. Stella was just curious, too.

He laughed, his chuckle deep and sonorous like a dog's bark.

"I am a graduate of Cambridge University and earned my doctorate at Harvard. I am an academic prize, a jewel in the

mathematics department crown so they look the other way to keep me in the school district. I insisted on it as a condition of employment."

She could not compete with that, not with her adequate state university teaching degree. If he graduated from Cambridge, it explained the faint British accent in his voice.

"I see," Stella said. "Are you English, then?"

His unusual eyes met hers, sparkling with amusement. She couldn't decide just what to call the color. They were brown but they had a yellow cast to them as well, strange but attractive. She decided that maybe topaz would best describe the shade.

"I was, once," Darien replied. "But it was a long time ago and I have spent far more time in the United States than in Europe. I am more Yank now than anything else. Where do you come from, Miss Raines?"

His formal manners impressed and irritated at the same time. Stella noted his skill at answering questions without revealing much information. He was English but he wasn't.

> "I'm from Overland Park, in the Kansas City metro region." "Ah, yes."

"Do you know KC?" His self-assurance came across as cocky, so when she guessed he wasn't that much older than she was, five years at most, which would put him a few notches below his thirtieth birthday.

"I've been there a few times."

She noticed that he avoided answering, again, as he continued, "Would you like to accompany me for a cup of tea? Or coffee, if you prefer?"

He intrigued her, she admitted, and he was gorgeous. If he also happened to be infuriating with his half-answers and his smug manner, it wasn't enough to cancel out his appeal. Until she gathered supplies and made a plan, there wasn't anything she could do to improve her classroom now so she nodded.

"Sure. Please, call me Stella."

Darien beamed. "Excellent, I know just the place."

Although she felt winded after a rapid dash down three flights of stairs, Darien breathed as easy as if seated at a desk. Stella hustled to keep up with his long stride as they walked the short block to the town square. He paused at a very ordinary looking doorway, marked only by a sign that read "The Basement." Her apartment, in the former hotel, was at the opposite end of the same block.

Darien held the door for her so she entered, blinking to adjust to the dimmer light and saw the narrow stairs that descended. She followed them and at the bottom, he again held the door so that she could walk into the small place. The single room was trendier than anything she had yet seen in Riverville with full bar and intimate booths lining all the walls. Muted lighting set a relaxing mood, with no more than backlighting at the bar with candles flickering on each table.

Darien directed her into a booth tucked almost beneath the stairs and Stella slid into the soft leather bench.

"Isn't this a lovely place?" he asked, with a genuine smile. "I find it both quaint and yet so 21<sup>st</sup> century."

"It's very nice," Stella said. She liked it, too, although the implied intimacy fired off her inner warning system. This was a place that you went on a date, not for casual coffee but maybe he chose it because it was near the school. Stella hoped so.

"It is and they serve tea, properly brewed. Do you like tea, I hope?"

"Yes, I like tea." She did, both hot and cold but she had a funny inkling that he wasn't talking iced tea.

"Do you have a favorite blend? They offer several varieties."

The choices would not include basic Lipton's tea bags, at least not to him, and although she considered teasing him about it, Stella didn't think that she knew him quite well enough so instead, remembering well how much her British born great-granny loathed tea bags in general, she summoned up two of her favorite blends.

"I like Earl Grey and Orange Pekoe."

He smiled again and she noticed that his eyeteeth were longer than most men's, giving his mouth an almost dog-like appearance that she found strange yet endearing.

"Stella, you have good taste. We shall drink Earl Grey. Do you prefer lemon or milk?"

"Lemon."

"Capital!" he said with a smile. "Milk would pollute a good Earl Grey."

Darien sounded so British, she thought with delight, loving that in him. It made him unique among the men she had dated and

she liked that, too. He might think he was more of a Yank now but his roots remained, just below the surface.

When the server, dressed in black slacks, white dress shirt, and a neat black tie, arrived Darien ordered Earl Grey. When the cups arrived, steaming, with a slice of lemon, Stella sipped hers, delighting in the full flavor. It was more refreshing on the late August day than she expected.

"Tell me about yourself," Darien said, gazing into her face with those mesmerizing topaz eyes. "Why would a city girl from Kansas City decide to come teach in a small, rural town with a single high school?"

She had wondered that often since coming to Riverville.

"I thought I would like the change of scenery," Stella said, "I guess I'm looking for a simpler life. What about you? Why would someone educated at Cambridge and Harvard want to teach in this small school?"

Darien stirred his cup of tea again and then put down the spoon before answering.

"I like my privacy and to live a quiet life away from prying eyes. I have lived in Riverville for six years now and although part of the small town reality is that everyone knows everyone else's business, I like the place. The rugged hills appeal to my wilder nature and my home is very private."

He sounded sincere. She continued, "Do you live in town?"

"My house is on the very edge of town, near the river. As I said, it is secluded and surrounded by gardens with old forests beyond that. The original owners planted all the old perennials and many trees, now aged. The setting offers both privacy and beauty, two things that I cherish. It is an older home and with your historical interest, I think you would like it. Now, in late summer, there are roses blooming everywhere and many other flowers. It reminds me of some of the old gardens at English country estates which is probably why I like it so much."

"Is it out near the river?" Stella asked. "Or does the river border your property?"

"No, to both questions. I prefer it that way, actually."

She adored water, liked swimming, boating, and fishing so his preference was foreign to her. "Why? Don't you like water?" He bit his lip before he answered. "No, I don't. I can't swim, you see, and so I have a phobia about rivers and such. As a child, I almost drowned once and it left me with a lifelong horror about water."

Fair enough, she thought. She hated spiders and even the smallest one scared her. Darien feared water. "We all have our little quirks. Tell me more about the gardens. I like flowers, too."

His smile banished his anxious expression. "Do you? I find their beauty to be manna for the soul. I miss the English gardens of my youth and so I strive to recreate something similar here. Some of the perennials were here when I bought the place and I planted others. I have some of the tallest hollyhocks I have ever seen. There are delicate lilies of the valley in the spring and lilac bushes both lavender and white. The fragrance from them is like the sweetest perfume. I also have added a few bird baths, some garden benches, and even a few classic style statues."

Stella imagined something like the walled garden from the children's classic, *The Secret Garden*, both lovely and mysterious. His description intrigued her so she asked,

"How much land goes with the house? Are we talking a large yard or a miniature estate?"

Darien tossed back his head to laugh.

"I would hardly call it an estate, my dear, but the house is large and rather picturesque. I have about five acres in all but just the acre surrounding the house itself is in gardens. The rest I prefer to keep as it is – a forest with many big trees and thickets. I like the woods very much, almost as much as I do my gardens and they serve their own purpose."

> The more she heard about it, the more curious she became. "I would like to see it, someday."

Over a second cup of tea, they chatted and she noted that his fingernails were quite long for a man's, well shaped, and almost sharp. Whatever Mr. Wolfe might be, she mused, he was quite a unique individual. His differences captivated her, though, and she listened as he talked about quantum theory of mathematics. Most of it was far above her comprehension; math had been a difficult subject that she struggled to master in both high school and college. When the topic switched to history, however, she was on firm ground. "So, Stella, tell me what your area of expertise is, what period," Darien said.

"I will be teaching European history," she said, warming to the subject with pleasure. "I will be teaching part one, roughly the Dark Ages through the Reformation, and part two, covering the Renaissance up until modern times. My personal area of study, however, centers on the Dark Ages – also known as the Middle Ages or medieval times. I did my thesis on superstitions and folk beliefs of that period. I always found the ancient legends about things like vampires and werewolves especially fascinating."

Darien almost dropped the cup onto the saucer as his narrow fingers fumbled. His air of cosmopolitan poise vanished and for a brief moment, he looked vulnerable, almost afraid.

"Werewolves?" he asked, in a voice higher than his usual tone. "You say you studied werewolves?"

Stella nodded. "I did, to some extent. I know it probably sounds more than a little strange but creatures of the night carry a fascination for me."

Darien's interest seemed almost frantic but she chalked it up to the oddity of her studies. After all, most university students did not write thesis papers titled "Beneath the Moon: Werewolf Legends of the Middle Ages".

"I wouldn't necessarily say I am an authority but I know more about them than the average history major would."

He stared at her with the oddest expression.

"And werewolves fascinate you?" he said, his voice still strained. "Why?"

"I'm not really sure," Stella replied, with honesty. "The idea of a seemingly average man shifting into some kind of creature has a terrible appeal. I don't know how to even explain it, really, but such power carries an almost seductive appeal and yet it would such a curse that the very idea is terrifying. But, such things don't really exist, do they?"

"You have an interesting perspective."," his composure was back as if the awkward moment never happened although she noticed he didn't answer her question. "It is late. Shall I walk you to your car? I presume it must still be at school. " "Thank you but I live just down the block. I can walk. I walked over to the school today, too," Stella said, gathering up her purse. "Thank you for the tea. I enjoyed it."

"You are most welcome, dear lady. Allow me to walk you home."

For just a second, she wondered if he mocked her or if he spoke in all seriousness. After deliberation, she decided it must be the latter. His manners smacked of the Victorian Age and no one had ever called her "dear lady" in her life. Coming from anyone else, she might have been offended but somehow, delivered in his crisp British way, she found it somewhat endearing. Nor had anyone asked to walk her home since the third grade but Stella, somehow flattered, agreed.

"Thank you, I would like that."

Out in the bright August sunshine, they sauntered down the sidewalk, peering into the shop windows that they passed. At a local photograph shop, they admired the bridal couples, the new babies, and the family portraits. Catching a glimpse of their reflection in the display window, Stella noticed that they made an attractive pair, Darien with his dark hair and topaz eyes, she with her light ash blonde hair and blue eyes. Fair and dark, they contrasted but in a way that worked.

"Look," she said to call attention to their reflected image. "We make a striking pair, don't we?"

Darien beamed. "We do, indeed."

They paused in tandem to admire their contrast and then Darien focused on a display of vintage jewelry in the shop window.

"Those are exquisite," he exclaimed. "Look at the fine workmanship and the attention to detail in each piece. Most modern jewelry is so bland, so without life compared to these."

They were pretty, Stella thought, but pricey.

"I like that one." She pointed to a beautiful black cameo surrounded by half pearls.

He leaned forward to see the exact piece and nodded.

"You have excellent taste, Stella. It's the best of the lot, by far."

At the corner, the old hotel stood four stories tall. Like the jewelry, it was vintage, a throwback to an earlier era. Made of solid brick with granite trim, the thick walls were sturdy.

"We're here," Stella said, extending her hand to shake. "Thank you for walking with me."

Darien Wolfe accepted her hand and held it in his. His palm against hers was very warm and he moved so close that she could inhale his very masculine, musky aroma.

"A gentleman sees a lady to her door," he said, his voice deepening into a sensual level. He tucked her hand into his arm and escorted her into the lobby.

They crossed the wide, ornate lobby to the antique elevator and stepped into the car. His proximity excited her but she felt anxious. No matter how attractive Darien Wolfe might be, he was almost a stranger and they would be working in the same hallway. That strict conduct code hadn't mentioned whether or not staff members could date but Stella couldn't help but think that they would frown on it if not forbid.

At her floor, Darien insisted on walking the length of the corridor to her apartment door. Stella inserted the key and opened it.

"I am home." Her voice was a little too breathless and high pitched. "Thank you."

He leaned against the open door frame, lithe and appealing.

"Oh, no need to thank me, Stella, but if you must, you can show your appreciation with one kiss."

He moved fast, she thought, and without guile. Because she found him very attractive, Stella nodded and faced him.

"All right, then, one kiss."

Darien stepped forward until a scant half inch separated them and with slow precision, he leaned down and put his mouth on hers. From the moment his lips touched hers, Stella was lost. The warmth of his mouth ignited a sweet fire that spread through her body, delicious as honey, heady as wine. Her body sang with delight and her mouth responded to his greed by wanting more, by taking what he gave and returning it.

The space between them vanished and he put his arms around her, drawing her so close that she could feel the beat of his heart. He kissed her until she could not breathe, until she thought she might faint from the dizzy delight. By the time, he released her, her mouth felt swollen and her body weak, pliant like modeling clay. If he had wanted, he could have taken her and she would have been powerless to stop him. They both knew that, standing close, his topaz eyes hypnotizing hers.

"Stella, Stella, Stella," Darien said. "You enchant me and I look forward to seeing you again."

Before she could open her mouth to say good-bye, he turned and with a graceful tread moved away, gone into the mouth of the elevator before she could call out. She stared after him, touched unbelieving fingers to her mouth, and then went into her apartment. In a daze, she put down her purse and walked to the front windows, leaning to see if she might see him when he exited the building.

### **Chapter Two**

On the first day of school, a Monday, Stella pulled her good navy blazer and skirt from the closet and donned them over a white, lace-trimmed blouse. She then put on panty hose and slid her feet into her best black pumps with three-inch heels. Stella wanted to look professional and did, although she expected she would be roasting by noon. Tempted to change into khakis and a polo shirt, she almost did but changed her mind at the last moment. She would wear her best for her first official day in the classroom.

Stella regretted that choice as soon as she stepped into her classroom. Although the school was air-conditioned, heat rose to the third floor and all but negated it. Her classroom felt more like a sauna and she stripped off her blazer before the students began arriving. Just as the bell rang, Darien stuck his head in the door, dressed in neat dark slacks, a button down white on white dress shirt, and a red tie. He looked competent and also very attractive.

"Good morning, Stella. You look lovely for your first day."

"Thank you. I didn't expect it to be this hot, though." He grinned, showing those long eyeteeth. "Wait until

November; then it will be cool. Here they come!"

A babble of voices filled the hallway punctuated by slamming locker doors and many feet stomping. Stray giggles rang out above the other noise and when the whirlwind began to settle, twenty students burst into her classroom and careened into seats just as the tardy bell rang.

"Good morning, class," Stella announced, standing in front of the desk. "I am Miss Raines."

Forty eyes stared back at her, the stranger from another place. Stella realized that most of the students would have grown up together, that their families would know each other for three generations back, and that here, she was the outlander. After a few moments of silent stares, noise emerged from twenty mouths. At first, there were a few snickers, and some whispers that crackled through the room with speed. Then, the noise erupted in earnest as some asked questions, others giggled, and some snapped bubble gum in rhythm. Their cacophony of sound hit unbearable levels as they chattered, discussed, and even cussed. She tried to field the questions but they came at her, too fast to sort, let alone answer as they came. "Why did Mrs. Brennan retire? I wanted to take history because my brother said she was easy."

"Where do you come from?"

"How old are you? Have you ever taught before?"

"Class, please." She strove to sound teacher-ly but felt that she fell short of the mark. "I came from the Kansas City area and as far as I know, Mrs. Brennan retired to enjoy her grandchildren more. The rest is really none of your concern. Let me hand out the class syllabus and go over the basic classroom rules."

"Aw, gee, Miss Raines, it's just the first day." A freckle faced boy in the front row protested. "Let's get more acquainted."

"Yeah, let's get to know each other," another student chimed in and the noise rose again, spiraling beyond her control.

With her hands on her hips, Stella struggled to call them down but her loudest voice vanished under the torrent of sound. *Great*, she thought, *the first class decides to try out the new teacher and I have no control over them.* Any minute, Mr. Sanderson would be here and her teaching career would be over before it began.

"Please, class, quiet down!" Stella shouted but nothing changed. Exasperated, angry, and almost ready to cry, she stomped her foot and searched for something to say. Two boys began playing catch with a baseball one of them must have smuggled in their backpack while a girl, whose spaghetti string top failed to meet the student dress code standard, rubbed her sandaled feet against a boy's cowboy boot.

The classroom door burst open and slammed back hard against the wall, with such force Stella feared it might crack the glass. She expected to see Mr. Sanderson, irate and red-faced, but it was Darien who stood there, arms folded across his chest with a stern expression on his face. His topaz eyes burned like kindled fire and when he opened his mouth, he roared.

"Enough of this nonsense, class! You will be silent and you will sit down. Mr. Brown and Mr. Egan, please hand me the baseball. Thank you. Miss Garcia, you must report to Mr. Sanderson because your garments fail to meet the moral standards set for dress in this school. I expect every single one of you to show Miss Raines complete courtesy and your full attention. Should my presence again be required, each one of you will serve Saturday detention until Christmas. Is that understood?" By the time he uttered the last three words, the noise died, faded away, and silence reigned. It was so quiet by the time Darien stopped that Stella could hear the clock on the wall tick and the voice of another teacher lecturing down the hallway. Darien bowed to her, from the waist in a courtly fashion and faced her. He grinned, turning away so no one else could see his expression.

"Carry on, Miss Raines," he said as he retreated.

After that, the class was a model of manners and decorum. Stella passed out the syllabus she had slaved over, checked out textbooks to each student, and made her first efforts to match names to faces. By the end of the hour, she was calm and assumed the control she lost so early.

When lunchtime arrived, Stella sighed with relief and pulled out the chair to sit down at the desk for the first time all morning. Her feet ached and she slipped off the pretty shoes. She pulled her simple lunch bag from the bottom drawer of the now organized, neat desk. She opened her simple sandwich and debated if she wanted to go down to the teachers' room to buy bottle of iced tea just as Darien strolled into the room, as always, confident and lithe.

"Dear Stella, please put away that plebian food and come with me. No need to hide that concoction that some call tea from me but please leave it here. I have a lovely dinner waiting for us in my classroom."

Plebian? She wasn't sure if she should be insulted; her simple lunch must be beneath his standards. Even so, she was curious enough to follow him into his classroom. Every desk was in linear order and the top of his desk was empty save for two plates and a platter of food. Sliced roast beef, thin shaved turkey breast, pastrami slices, assorted cheeses, black olives, green grapes, and strawberries lay in an artistic, appetizing fashion. Stella gaped at the food, delighted with the array.

"Darien, it looks delicious! Where is the bread?"

He laughed and then put a mock frown on his face.

"Surely you would not pollute such fine meats with bread, Stella. There will be no sandwich making here. I prefer meats and the occasional cheese to grains. I thrive on protein."

Maybe he was on the famous no-carb diet, she thought, although she had never seen a man who seemed not to need a diet more than him. Darien was well made, lean and yet muscular. "Thank you," Stella said, as she selected a few slices of meat, some olives, and cheese. The meats were tender, delicious, and just right for the hot, humid day. "It's a pleasant lunch; all that could make it any better would be champagne."

Darien grinned. "And we would have that, my lady, if we could but alas, Mr. Sanderson has a policy against alcoholic beverages on school property. How did your morning go after I settled your first class?

"It went very well, actually. I think the word spread that I have your protection."

His eyes raked over her, with something like hunger as he nodded.

"You do, my dear Stella, in more ways than you know."

She would have asked him what he meant but the bell rang and she had to hurry back to her classroom for three more classes. Her planning period was the last hour of the day and she looked forward to it with zeal. Still, she had to face the next class first. With a sigh, she sat down at her desk to find the lesson plan she had prepared. But Stella forgot all about lessons when she saw the gift box on her desk.

It was small, wrapped in silver paper with a bright red bow. Intrigued, Stella picked it up and gave it a slight shake. Hoping that it wasn't a prank gift with a live frog inside, she opened it with careful fingers and found the beautiful cameo she had admired in the shop window.

Here in her classroom, the pearls shimmered against the black onyx behind the cameo and she touched it, amazed. No one could have given it to her but Darien but she could not quite figure out how he had placed it on her desk without her notice. With delight, she pinned it onto her blouse and met the next class with a new authority. It was as if the pin provided her with courage and confidence, because Darien gave it to her. She felt cherished, something she had never known with a man before.

When that last period began, she put her classroom to rights, straightening desks and picking up stray papers. She wanted to thank Darien but she could tell he had class—she could hear his splendid voice down the hallway. So she waited and after the mad rush of students out the doors ended, she walked down to his classroom. He sat at his desk, writing, and did not look up until she spoke. "Darien, I wanted to thank you for the cameo. It is lovely but you shouldn't have. I'm sure it cost a great deal."

He came to his feet with one swift motion and beamed.

"No, no, no. You are most welcome, Stella. It is far too beautiful to languish in a shop window. Do you have plans for this evening? No? Then might I invite you over to see my behemoth of a house?"

Stella could not say no. She wanted to see his house although it was strange he called it a behemoth. That made it sound like it was alive.

"I would love to see your house. I need to change, though. These shoes are killing my poor feet."

He moved closer, standing so near that she swore she could feel the heat of his body radiating against her skin. His proximity titillated her and she took another step forward so that they stood so close that if she raised her hand, her fingers would brush against him. Darien's eyes met hers and she felt some invisible electrical charge pass between them. He moved and his hand rested against hers, skin-to-skin, warm against it.

"Of course you can change. If you like, I will even banish the bad shoes forever." Come with me and I'll drive you by your apartment." As he spoke, he shifted position so near now that his body heat radiated out toward her in waves. That made her want actual contact.

Stella shifted just enough that their bodies touched, shoulder to hip. His warmth on contact filled her with a rush of desire but she struggled to remain focused on their polite exchange despite their growing physical flirtation.

"You don't have to do that."

Darien Wolfe leaned toward her, his lips scant millimeters from hers.

"I want to do it." His breath, sweet smelling, wafted against her cheek and Stella thought he hinted at far more than giving her a ride home.

"Let's go, then," Stella said, stepping back before she drowned with desire or yielded to temptation.

"I'm delighted!" he said, crooking his arm for her to grasp so she did, hoping that Mr. Sanderson might be gone for the day. He wasn't. When they sauntered past the principal's office, Mr. Sanderson exited and almost bumped into them. His eyes scanned them, top to bottom, and he grunted his disapproval but said nothing.

In the parking lot, she tried to guess which of the remaining vehicles might belong to Darien. Stella rejected the pickup truck, the Volkswagen Beetle, and the fire engine red Camaro. That left a vintage sleek black Packard, a silver Corvette, a well-worn, high mileage Chevy, and an El Camino. It had to be the Packard or the Corvette so she was not surprised when he led her to the Packard.

"What do you think of my automobile?" he asked, with a sideways grin.

"I like it. What year is it?"

He opened the door for her. "This is a 1939 Packard. Everything is restored to the original quality."

After a brief stop, when she dashed upstairs to change into black denim jeans and a bright scarlet blouse, to slide her aching feet into a pair of huaraches, they headed toward Darien's home in the Packard.

It was a classic car and a class ride, smooth as sailing on a calm sea. The seats were leather and everything screamed luxury. The well-tuned engine was almost silent as they drove to the far edge of town, then down a long lane lined on either side by beautiful evergreens. At the end of the drive, Darien pulled up before a huge square house with a native stone chimney on one end. She recognized it immediately as being from the American Craftsman movement, the once popular style that downsized the Victorian Queen Anne to a large but comfortable family home. In recent years, such homes, bungalows and the larger so-called cottages, found a new fan base in urban couples and anyone who appreciated vintage anything. Stella liked their unique touches, so different from the suburban ranch style home where she grew up, where every home on the block was virtually the same.

"That's a Craftsman home!" Stella gasped with appreciation. "Oh, Darien, it's wonderful. I love Craftsman homes. They are such a perfect shift from the larger Victorian styles like the Queen Anne down to a more friendly but still large size. I don't suppose at the time it was built that anyone realized how famous the whole Craftsman movement would became or how many people would seek them out more than a century later. They have so much more style than the later homes, the ones all built so much the same."

"I am honored that you like my humble house. It was built in 1906 and you are correct, my dear historian, it is indeed Craftsman although until now, I had no idea just what that meant. It boasts two fireplaces, a book-lined library, a carved walnut grand staircase, a full dining room, front and rear parlors, five bedrooms, a narrow back servant's stair, full basement, large attic, three full bathrooms and two half baths. It's far more space than I require but it was a bargain and besides, I like the setting."

For the first time, Stella realized that the house sat in the midst of thick woods, aged trees with broad trunks that isolated it from the road. Not one neighboring house was visible through the thickets and in addition, the lawn ran wild with forsythia bushes, rose of Sharon trees, evergreens, and even dogwoods. Flowers bloomed everywhere, some in neat, tended beds but others rampant across the lawn. Most were old-fashioned flowers, storybook blossoms like hollyhocks, roses, lilies, and more. The sheer wild beauty of the scene caught her breath for a few moments, and then she turned to Darien with honest enthusiasm.

"This is absolutely lovely, Darien. It is like something out of a storybook or fairy tale. It reminds me of Sleeping Beauty's castle when the prince found it, a jewel tucked away in a verdant wood."

Darien offered her his hand, chuckling with pleasure as they mounted the broad stone steps to the wide covered porch that ran the front of the house. There, too, clematis and moonflower vines climbed trellises, adding to the air of privacy.

"You approve; that's very good," he said. "Let's see what you think of the interior."

He threw open the heavy carved door and let her walk ahead into a huge room with many windows. To her right, a carved staircase ascended, as graceful as an Edwardian lady waltzing would. A chandelier with multiple prisms sparkled from the very center of the ceiling. Each doorway that led from the room – into a dining room, a hallway, and the library – each had dark walnut trim. Even the furnishings, crushed velvet crimson sofas and chairs, added to the air of mystique and yesteryear.

"Darien, this is amazing. This room is stunning."

"No. You, my dear, are stunning," he said. Darien stood beside her and then turned her to face him. Stella's heart pounded faster as he bent and kissed her, unhurried, his lips burning against hers, warm and soft as melted candle wax. Her body kindled at his caress and she leaned against him, letting the fever that spread over her body consume her. Stella felt his powerful body surge against hers, masculine and vital. His passion, his desire was a living thing between them. When he released her, she almost fell, her legs weak but he caught her.

"Stella, dear heart, you are a delight. Come have a drink with me in the library before I lose my head. Will champagne do?"

Her mouth refused to work so she nodded, trailing in his wake into the library, tucked behind the foot of the stairs. This too was a marvelous room, cozy with a granite fireplace, each block carved with intricate designs, and the walls lined with books. Most appeared to be antique volumes but among them Stella recognized a few more modern works. A small bar stood opposite the hearth and after he pointed her to the black leather loveseat, he brought out two fragile flutes and filled them with Dom Perignon. Darien handed her a flute and raised his glass to touch hers with a soft, ringing sound.

"To what the future and the stars may hold," he intoned in a voice as serious as a prayer, soft as a blessing.

"To the future," Stella repeated and sipped.

The sweet, crisp wine was a good vintage and her surprise was evident as the smooth taste burst into her mouth.

"This is 1975 v Dom Perignon," Darien said. "It is one of the best modern vintages available. Will it do?"

"It's awesome," Stella said, draining her glass. The wine must have gone to her head, she thought, for without hesitation, she mimicked a child's British accent and quoted Oliver Twist, "Please, sir, may I have some more?"

Darien's face shifted, his lips twitched and his eyes rolled until he burst out laughing. He sat down on the loveseat, wiped tears of mirth from his eyes, and drank his champagne.

"You are the most remarkable woman I have met in years," Darien said, shaking his head. "Stella, I find myself quite smitten with you. Dare I hope that it might be reciprocated?"

She made a quick translation of his old school language and replied in her own vernacular,

"I think you're totally hot, Darien, so yes." Champagne evaporated her polite façade so that she said what she felt, without restraint or embarrassment. The sweet, sparkling wine swept through her veins like liquid wildfire and she could feel not just the heat but the giddy spin it always gave her head. He tossed back his head and chortled with such gusto it almost became a howl.

"Good. Then let me pour you another glass and we shall see where the evening takes us."

"Let's do that," Stella said, surprising herself with her boldness. She was not usually so outgoing, so outspoken, or so easily aroused but Darien and champagne brought out her latent qualities.

They ended up in the garden, finishing off the Dom Perignon and talking until the longer shadows of dusk fell. With so many tall trees and vegetation, the night seemed to move in on fleeter feet and there were no street lamps or yard lights to mar the darkness. A soft breeze rippled across Stella's bare arms and she shivered.

"It's getting cooler."

"It is," he agreed and rose from the black wrought iron bench with grace. "Shall we go inside or would you prefer that I deliver you home? The night is young but your wish is my service."

"Could we stay outside and watch the stars come out?" Stella asked. She loved the stars, perhaps because of her name, chosen by her star-gazing parents in honor of their favorite hobby. "The moon isn't quite full but it's waxing enough that the moonlight should be very pretty. Doesn't all of this look spectacular by moonlight?"

A strange expression flitted across Darien's face, a look of dismay, she thought, or something more. Whatever it was, it vanished in seconds, leaving her to doubt that he had ever looked anything but serene.

"Yes, my little patch of woods and gardens is quite lovely by night," Darien said. "We have drunk but we have not eaten. Are you hungry, my star?"

No one until Darien ever made her name into an endearing nickname but after a moment's reflection, she liked it.

She had not even thought about food but now that he asked, she was ravenous.

"Yes, I am."

He extended his hand to her and she took it, allowing him to lift her from the bench.

"I can offer food. Come inside; we can come back out after we eat."

"Anything is fine."

They ate a late light supper of pastrami, cheese, and prosciutto. Again, Darien ate nothing but meat and a small amount of cheese but Stella didn't really mind. If he had eccentric tastes in eating, his other qualities more than compensated. After the meal, they returned outside, settling onto the bench and watched the first stars appear. The blooming flowers gave off a rich, intoxicating aroma. With his arm around her shoulders, Stella was content but very aware of his male proximity. When he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, she shivered with delight and the anticipation of the way his kisses sent fire through her veins. Every nerve in her body tingled with the sweetness of desire and throbbed with fiery heat that swept through her body like wildfire. He took a single finger and ran it from her mouth, down along her throat, to the valley between her breasts. Without the bra that she normally wore in place, he touched skin without any barriers with his first effort, his hand snug between her breasts, as she savored the feel of his touch against her bare, sensitive flesh. That fine touch was so sensual that she trembled and when he reached deeper inside her blouse, his hand warm against her tummy as he reached over mere inches to caress her nipple with gentle fingers that knew very well what they did, she quivered so much that he laughed. Her taut nipple ached for more and so did she.

"I take that as approval," he whispered to her, his voice as soft and sibilant as the night wind that ruffled her hair.

"Yes," her voice came out as almost a moan.

"Then do you like this?"

Darien took her mouth with force, devoured her lips with hunger and passion. His strength as he kissed her amazed her as his muscles strained against her with such power that she felt caught by a force of nature, carried away by the floodwaters or shaken by an earthquake. Such raw energy drew her in, like a moth dancing around a light in darkness. Stella could not say no, could never deny such intense dominance nor did she want to do anything but yield.

He slid her arms from the sleeves of her blouse and then pulled it over her head in one motion. Stella smoldered with his touch and felt so hot that she thought her skin might ignite. When Darien put his dark head, his long hair trailing against her skin, and kissed her breasts with reverence, she thought she might die from wanting him.

As the crescendo began to build within, he reached to undo her jeans even as she struggled to kick them away but just as the denim reached her knees, a shrill, raucous sound shattered the mood and the night. The insistent noise echoed off the trees and rang in her ears, almost painful. Darien's hands paused on her skin, and then stopped.

"I must apologize, sweet Stella, but I must answer that."

That noise, that deafening interruption was nothing more than the telephone, Stella thought, and shook her head with disappointment as she pulled up her jeans and reached for her other garments. By the time, Darien returned, with two fresh flutes of champagne in his hands, she had dressed and her desire had ebbed away into the shadows.

"I am so sorry," he said, offering her a flute in mute apology. "That was Sanderson..."

Stella felt caught, like a teenager making out in the back of a car, embarrassed that their principal called during such a passionate moment.

"What did he want?" Her voice sounded as petulant as a spoiled child.

"He is having a department meeting in the morning." Darien said. I have to be there at the beastly hour of seven."

The mood of moments earlier had vanished, the romance trumped by both telephone and duty.

"I really should go," Stella said as she drained her flute in a single gulp. The rush of alcohol made her dizzy for a moment and she swayed as she stood. Darien rose to steady her, his hands feverish on her arms. "It must be late."

She thought he might argue with her and beg her to stay. If he did, she was more than willing, but instead he nodded.

"Very well, as you wish. I shall deliver you home."

On the brief ride back to her apartment, they said little but as before, he insisted on walking her into the building and to her door. She had almost decided he was perturbed at her hasty exit but after she unlocked her door and turned to him, Darien seized and kissed her. His lips scorched her and his hands moved over her body at will, hot and insistent. Her head whirled and she clung to him as the one steady object in a world of chaos. Her body answered his call, caught his unholy flame, and blazed with it. He could have taken her at any moment and she could not have denied him but he pulled away, leaving her lips swollen but not sated.

"Whatever we have, this attraction, this desire, will not be forsworn," Darien softly growled.

"Good night, Stella, my shining star."

"Good night." Her whisper vanished in his departure, lost in the whirl of his body and the sound of his feet retreating down the hallway.

## **Chapter Three**

Stella almost overslept on Tuesday, waking late from a dream about Darien, and hurried to dress for school. Today, she did not try for formal or professional, just comfortable in a multi-colored patterned skirt and a matching solid color blouse. She had no time to curl or style her hair so she twisted it up on top of her head and hurried to the high school, arriving less than five minutes before the first bell rang.

As she passed Darien's classroom, Mr. Sanderson was deep in conversation with him so she waved and went to her room. Several students were already in place but they greeted her with polite smiles and the day began well. By noon, however, she was eager to see Darien and wondered if he had brought lunch for them both. Stella hoped that he had; since she overslept, she had not taken time to make a sandwich. When the bell announced lunch and her fourth hour students charged from the room, she lingered in her room. After a few minutes when Darien did not appear, she walked down to his classroom.

> "Mr. Wolfe?" she called, in case any students remained. "Miss Raines."

He was behind her and she whirled, restraining an urge to throw herself into his arms. When he smiled, resistance was even harder.

"Would you like to join me for lunch, my dear?"

Her mood sparkled like the champagne they drank.

"I would love that, Darien."

He stood at the door and bowed. "Then come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly."

His quotation of the age-old children's poem, *The Spider and The Fly*, delighted her. Stella remembered it from a well-worn book of poems her mother used to read to her at bedtime. The delicious hint of seduction titillated her.

"Will I come out again?" She quipped from the same May Howitt poem.

Darien grinned. "That is entirely up to you, dear star."

As he closed the door for privacy, Stella saw that a table at the rear of the room transformed into a dining table complete with a cloth, china, and silver. Darien pulled out a chair and she slid into it, delighted. Her plate held a thick roast beef and Swiss cheese sandwich on a French bread bun while his had sliced beef and cheese.

"I brought a sandwich for you, Stella. Just because I prefer not to eat bread is no reason why you should do without."

"Thank you." She bit into the sandwich; it was delicious.

The lunch break passed too fast but as she left and he put away the fancy tablecloth, Darien told her,

"We'll do this the rest of the week but next week I have lunchroom duty and you, my dear, will have it the following week. We must enjoy while we can, Stella-star."

She nodded, wondering if his words had the double meaning that she thought they did.

After school, she lingered but Darien did not come and his classroom was empty. With head down and feet dragging, she left the building to walk back to her apartment. After the romantic evening beneath the stars, fueled by both desire and champagne, Stella didn't want to go home and stare at the walls in her small space but she had no alternatives. New to Riverville, she knew almost no one and so she had no place to go, nothing to do. She did not even have his phone number.

That inspired her to call information but there was no listing for "Darien Wolfe" and a quick internet search turned up nothing. Maybe the fun flirtation was over before it truly began, she thought, with such disappointment that she might cry. She picked up the paperback novel she had been reading but she could not stay focused on the story. Idle, she picked up the remote control and flipped channels but found nothing of interest. Although she wasn't hungry, she decided she might open a can of soup and just as she started for the single strip of cabinets that were "the kitchen," someone rapped at the door.

With a quick tug to make sure her clothing was all in place, Stella smoothed down her hair and licked her lips. There was no peephole so she opened the door and found Darien, holding a giant bouquet of roses in one hand, a pizza box in the other. Dumbfounded, she stared at him.

"Good evening, Stella. I had errands to run after school but I finished them. I thought you might like to see me."

His unanticipated visit was a surprise but she welcomed it.

"I did, I do... Come in, Darien. I wasn't expecting you."

He entered into her home for the first time and in the small space, he seemed even taller. His topaz eyes scanned the room until he saw the coffee table in front of the battered, rump sprung couch and then he put the pizza box on it. He thrust the roses, at least two dozen, scarlet and fragrant flowers, into her arms.

"These are for you, my star. Do you have a vase?"

Stella did not; she moved in with no more than the barest housekeeping necessities and a vase had not been something she expected to need.

"I don't."

He grinned, revealing those long eyeteeth again and she realized that they reminded her of a wolf. The resemblance didn't stop there; his dark hair, his lean face, and his easy gait all reminded her of a wolf. Even his eyes glowed with an animal like glint. Stella found that fascinating and far from repulsive.

"Ah. I thought not. Wait just one moment."

He exited into the hallway and returned with a crystal vase. Stella eyes widened; it was Waterford Crystal and if she was right, it was Lismore, one of Waterford's oldest designs. Her greatgrandmother had owned a similar vase.

"Darien, it is magnificent! That's Waterford, isn't it?"

"You know your crystal." He seemed quite pleased about that.

Stella arranged the roses in the vase and placed it on the lamp table near the window.

"Thank you for both the roses and the vase. You didn't need to bring me flowers."

His eyes brightened.

"That is just why I did – because I wanted to bring you

flowers. I also brought you dinner. You do, I suppose, like pizza?" What red-blooded American girl didn't? she thought.

"I love pizza. What kind is it?"

Darien did not reply but opened the box to reveal a large meat lovers pizza. Ham, beef, pork, sausage, and pepperoni sprinkled with cheese covered the top of the disc. The aroma that rose toward her nose was heavenly.

"I thought pizza would satisfy both your tastes and mine," Darien said, lifting out a slice. "I chose meat because I crave protein but with a thin crust so that you could have your grains. Do you have plates, my dear?" "Yes, of course." Stella rushed to the cabinet to bring out a pair of plates, plastic Melmac ones. She wondered if she had not, if he had a stash of fine china waiting in the hallway as well.

"Excellent. Shall we eat?"

"Yes, please."

She paced herself, hungry now that he was here, so that she would not devour the delicious pizza. Darien ate with gusto and speed, tearing into piece after piece of the Italian pie. He ate neat but so fast that she could not contemplate how he could consume it so much. He ate at about a three to one – three pieces for each slice she had– ratio. Stella was full and when she picked up the box for the trash, she said,

"I don't know where you put all that pizza. I hope you don't get a stomachache."

He laughed and patted his flat abdomen.

"Have no fear, Stella. I eat anything I like without repercussions, gastric or otherwise."

If she ate as he had, she would be fat, Stella thought, with rueful amusement. Darien, however, was lean but muscular.

"You must have good metabolism," she said, expecting him to laugh but instead, his face sobered and for a split second, he looked very sad.

'You might call it that," Darien said. "But, no matter. Would you like to take a stroll? There is a delightful park a few blocks away."

Full of pizza, Stella hated to get up but she nodded. If they stayed here, they would be kissing in minutes and although she enjoyed that very much, she wanted to know more about Darien before they became lovers, which seemed imminent.

"All right, let's go," Stella said.

The late August evening was warm but not humid so the walk was pleasant. They strolled, hand in hand, along the Square and then down a narrow street that led to a park. Although tiny, it was very picturesque with a natural spring bubbling over some native rock, multiple flowerbeds, a permanent outdoor stage, and a striking Grecian pool complete with columns.

The spring cascaded down a bluff into a small pond. Enchanted by the sight, Stella paused and would have traveled over the footbridge that spanned the pool but Darien halted. When she turned to question why, his eyes stared at the falling water as if it were toxic and he turned away with a slight shudder. She remembered, now, his fear of water, but seeing it made it seem more real.

She spied a path that wound up to the top of the bluff. There would be a spectacular view of the town from there so she snatched his hand,

"Come on, let's go up to the top of the bluff so we could look out over Riverville."

Darien inhaled a long breath and then sighed. "Dear Stella, I can't."

"Why can't you? We would be high above the water and I don't think it's deep enough to drown anyone."

He looked more than a little embarrassed. "I fear heights too." With their hands linked, Stella could feel his racing pulse.

"Then we won't do that." She kept her voice light and began walking away from the waterfall. "Let's just stroll through the park and enjoy it."

He nodded with relief. "That's a lovely suggestion."

Children splashed in the adjacent wading pool and others swung high from the playground equipment in one corner. Other couples loitered in the twilight. In the park, tucked into a narrow valley, dark arrived with speed.

"Hey, Mr. Wolfe, what's up?" A teen perched on a skateboard yelled as he whizzed past them on the sidewalk with speed.

Darien waved but didn't bother to answer; if he had, the student would have been gone before he heard anything. Stella realized that it was quite likely that some of the teens, boys and girls, who walked the paths or read on benches or strolled, like them, hand in hand, were her students too.

"I guess we should avoid PDA here," she murmured to Darien. "No public display of affection."

He paused in mid-stride, beside a blooming bed of fragrant flowers.

"I think I should tell you, Stella, that I have a rebellious nature, and that when told not to do something, I often do it."

Feeling like flirting, she said, "Do you?"

With a grin that could outshine the sun, Darien put his arms about her in a cocoon and proceeded to kiss her, his lips engulfing her mouth with desire as thick as honey, sweet as sugar, hot as cayenne. He had no care for the public place or the people who saw and Stella thought that in the small park, in this little town, that they all did. Most would know them as high school teachers; many would even know their names. They shouldn't, she thought, but his lips were too succulent to resist and so she feasted on his kiss.. That kiss fired his passion and hers but Darien had no inhibitions. His hands caressed her, even daring to stray beneath her blouse. Although it felt wonderful, Stella stopped him, self-conscious of too many curious eyes. He, however, seemed to lack any restraint and to even enjoy more than a little exhibition. She admired that but still, this wasn't the time or place for it. If she didn't say no, she thought he would continue without restraint until they coupled in the park.

"Darien, we can't here. People are watching us."

He stopped, with an exaggerated sigh. "It's your call, Stella. I truly don't mind."

For a moment, his passion almost swayed her and she might have yielded if one of her students had not passed by on skates,

"Hi, Miss Raines!"

"Hello," she called with what she hoped was cheerful nonchalance. Then she focused on Darien. "I do mind but we can go somewhere else where I don't."

After that, they walked with their arms encircling the other, all the way back to her apartment. Darien's hands strayed over her body as they walked, secretive, but sensual and by the time that they entered her building, Stella smoldered. Once they were inside, he kicked shut the door and then his mouth, denied since the park, took hers, and she gave back the same fire until they were both consumed. He fueled his kisses with hunger and she fed him but greedy, he wanted more and set out to take it. Even as she yielded, she resisted the idea that he would be master and she fought for equality, railed against domination with every atom of her soul. She would come to him equal, giving and taking, but never surrendering both body and soul. He had to learn that to dominate, he would also have to yield so that they could reach that sweet release as one and Stella set out to teach him.

On this night, she did not want sweet lovemaking or tentative caresses – she craved battle and ached for a rousing confrontation that would yield, in the end, to greater pleasure. Release hard fought to

gain would be wilder and richer, would sate them both with the deliciousness of the act. The rising physical tension between them sang with electricity and power like live high voltage wires and she knew that the climax would explode both their worlds in burst of sensation that might threaten their very sanity. Stella wanted that and so she struggled to bring it about with every weapon she could muster.

With a slow hand, she untucked his shirt from his pants and unbuttoned her own, fingers trembling with anticipation, a greedy need for more. As she made that first overture, she kicked away her shoes and faced him, eager and fierce.

Still standing, he stripped her shirt from her, loosened her trousers so that she could step out of them even while her hands, talons now, tore the shirt from his body, buttons scattering across the worn carpet. Her fingers undid his trousers, pulled them from him before he knew what she did and discarded them. Naked, they came together in a blinding collision of lust and desire, passion heighted into a powerful need for release. Stella clawed at his back with her nails and he moaned with pleasure as her nails raked away skin. He bent his head and suckled the skin of her breast, leaving love marks that would linger long after this night. She bit his shoulder, claiming it with her mouth and then wrapped her legs around him, holding him in place. Darien's hands owned her, fondled every bit of her, reaching even into her innermost folds and places. His fingers searched for her pleasure and found it, manipulating her into wordless but vocal joy as he took what he sought with abandon, without permission.

In retaliation, Stella took his nipple into her mouth, her lips hard as it grew firm. She nibbled, teeth wicked and fierce as she evoked his shudders of pleasure, something she enjoyed very much even as he used his mouth to rake her throat with such harsh kisses that she had no doubt he would leave love marks. The exquisite delight of his mouth against her skin smacked more of attack than caress but she had no complaints, delivering her own assault with mouth and nails without any restraint. Then, with increasing need, Stella reached to touch his manhood . Her hands were not gentle but sought with force to take what she wanted but his physical response indicated that he liked it quite well. His stick was hard beneath her fingers and her own sex yearned for it, wet and waiting. Darien grasped her with both hands, rough and without finesse, and lifted her, still standing, until she leaned against the door and he entered her with force, invaded her body with his manhood. He ravished her, the rhythm of their lovemaking wild and wicked. He drove into her, again and again, and she cried out, overcome with spiraling delight as her body danced with ecstasy deeper than she thought she could bear. They climbed the pinnacle of release together and when they came, it was with a shuddering crash that rocketed through them both like an impact.

His power filled her, packed her full to overflowing and her secret spots exploded in pleasure. Stella's vision dimmed as she rode the wave of pleasure, which she gave into without remorse or restraint. Her own cries mingled with his and at that final moment, that climax of perfection, he called her name,

"Stella! My star!"

Darien convulsed against her so hard that they almost lost their balance and fell to the floor. They clung to each other, skin feverish warm and soaked with perspiration, until they could move. They made it to the couch before they collapsed into a heap, hands still seeking, mouths still meeting and it was a long time before either had breathe to speak.

Stella found her voice first.

"Darien, that was amazing, electric, stupendous..."

Her voice trailed off as she ran out of words to describe the firestorm that they had just kindled and survived. With very gentle fingers, Darien cupped her face between his hands and in the softest voice she had yet heard from him, he whispered,

"Darling Stella, that was magnificent. You are a woman without equal, my star."

They cuddled in easy silence until he stirred.

"Don't go."

"I must, Stella-star," Darien said, "Don't worry. We have a connection now, one I cannot deny."

Her few sexual experiences had been nothing compared to that feast of uninhibited passion and Stella, sated and filled with an inner joy she had never known, whispered the words that had been embroidered across her heart.

"Darien, I love you."

Darien, in the act of pulling on his now buttonless shirt, stopped as if she had shot an arrow through his chest. He stiffened and she saw it, wishing now she could take back the sweet words, suddenly thinking that this had been nothing more than good sex to him.

"Stella," he said her name with such sadness that she wanted to weep. She steeled herself. This would be the part where he would say that she was beautiful, wonderful, but that he could not get involved. He would say that he was not ready for a commitment and that they could still be friends. If anything kindled between them, well, they might enjoy friendly sex. Her love life during her college years lacked stability and after several abrupt break-ups, she had all but given up on romance. Until now, every time she offered a man her heart, he had stomped it into a thousand broken pieces. Stella had heard it all the exit lines before and she turned her face away from him so he would not see the tears that formed, then dropped like tiny diamonds onto her bare shoulder.

"Yes?"

"You are my lady, and I love you. Yet, Stella, there are things about me that I am afraid to tell you. Will you be patient with me, dear star of my heart?"

If he had not said he loved her, his words would have been unbearable. As miserable as she had been happy moments before, Stella nodded. Whatever his secret, she thought, it could not be insurmountable but she wished he would tell her now.

"I will, Darien, but you can tell me now."

His topaz eyes darkened as he shook his head back and forth. "I am a coward and I cannot. Stella, forgive me, but I must

go."

He dressed in silence as she gathered her own scattered garments and opened the door. With sudden abandon, he shut it and crossed the room, kissing her again with the same powerful fire.

"I do love you, my Stella."

Then he did leave, closing the door behind him with a short, soft click leaving her alone with the scent of the roses he brought, tears shimmering in the dark.

## **Chapter Four**

So, he had a secret; Stella got that and she wanted to know what it could be. Whatever it was, she felt confident that they could discuss it and then put it away. He was not married, he could not be gay, but there were other possibilities, too many. Possibilities haunted her as she moved through the remainder of that first week of school. Maybe Darien had a love child, she thought, on Wednesday between fifth and sixth class periods. Theories, some wild, some possible, floated through her brain like confetti in a ticker tape parade. When she asked him to tell her, over their next lunch period, Darien shook his head.

"I will tell you, my Stella-star, but I don't want to talk about it now."

More than a little piqued, she sighed.

"So, when will you tell me?"

His topaz eyes darkened almost to onyx as he looked across the table at her, face sad.

"I will tell you next week, after the full moon."

"Why then?" She wondered just what the full moon could have to do with his secret. Bits of folklore she learned in her studies niggled but she could not focus to think about them now.

Darien shook his head.

"It doesn't matter now. I don't even want to think about it."

Stella started to protest and then didn't. She could wait and anyway, the weekend was coming. They could spend long days together, maybe the nights as well.

Or, so she thought, right up until Friday.

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Although they had not made specific plans, when school let out on Friday, Stella was confident that Darien had planned something romantic but when she met him in the hallway, he seemed distant and distracted.

"Darien, would you like to do something tonight?" Stella asked, confident that he would. After all, they loved each other and no matter what his secret might be, she knew it would be nothing she could not handle. She had visions of a romantic dinner at an old inn she had heard about but he shook his head before she could tell him about it. "Stella, my star, tonight is impossible. I can't see you at all this weekend, not until Monday."

His tone was mild, even contrite, but the words stung like gravel tossed against a window with force. Her hurt feelings gave her courage to fight back.

"Why? Why do I have to wait until Monday?"

Darien's sad eyes pierced her heart.

"Star-of-my-heart, you must. I will tell you then, if I can."

"Have I offended you?"

He looked shocked. "Of course you have not, Stella."

"Did I do something gross or gauche?"

"You did nothing of the kind."

"I don't understand." She did not. To her, his behavior was incomprehensible. "Are you ill?"

Darien looked as if he could be, his eyes were dull and his face paler than normal. He acted restless and strange. Her question hit him like a shot and he rubbed a hand over his face.

"I don't feel well, that is true. I never do, really, when the moon is full. Stella, please. I promise that I will see you Monday, maybe even Sunday evening after the full moon wanes. Right now, though, I must go, my dear."

He would have gone then but she could not let him go without saying something more.

"Wait, Darien."

He had turned as if to go but now hesitated, face turned toward her with his eyes veiled and haunted.

"What is it?" he sighed, his impatience to be gone evident in his hurry and in his constant nervous movements, the twitch of his feet and the twisting of his fingers.

"I don't like secrets." *There,* she thought, she said it and it was out. She loathed secrets because holding back important information derailed her last relationship and had damaged others in the past. Alex, her ex-boyfriend, who kept both an addiction to alcohol and his second lover from her eroded any desire to keep secrets, large or small. Secrets, she thought, had an eerie way of growing until they became too massive to hide any longer and then exploded, shattering worlds and hearts.

"Dearest Stella, neither do I but for now, this one must remain." He sounded weary but she pressed him anyway. "Why?"

He exhaled with force, enough that she thought she might have succeeded in making him angry too.

"If I could say, it would not need to be a secret and I shall tell you, all of it, very soon but I can't now. Please try to understand"

Simple for him to say but not easy to do, Stella thought.

"I can't," she said with honesty. "And I won't. Do you love me?"

His topaz eyes kindled brighter with ire. "Yes, I do. This has nothing to do with whether or not I love you - "

She interrupted him, "It has everything to do with it, Darien. People who love one another trust each other and they don't keep secrets. If we are going to have any kind of relationship at all, everything has to be open between us, no dark secrets and nothing held back."

"Stella." He spoke her name in such a sad voice that her anger faded a fraction. "I do love you and I believe that you love me. I agree with all of that, but - "

She squelched an urge to stamp her foot with outrage. "But you still don't plan to tell me why I can't see you this weekend, do you?"

Darien looked down at her, his expression unreadable.

"I will but not now. Let that be enough."

Stella shook her head. "I can't. I have to have trust and that means no secrets. Don't go like this, Darien."

He sighed. "I must, my darling star."

He pushed past her, without a touch or a kiss. Stella stood in the empty hallway, listening as his rapid footfalls descended the stairs, heartsick and afraid.

What, she wondered, remembering his earlier remark, did the full moon have to do with anything?

There must be a significance, Stella thought, and searched her mental library to remember all the folklore and superstitions about the full moon. This was her area of expertise so if there was a link, she should be able to make the connection. There were all the old beliefs about moon madness, the ancient idea that staring at the moon too long could cause insanity. Even today, law enforcement officers and medical personnel often claimed that aberrant behavior skyrocketed when the moon was full so there might be something to the theory. Lunatic came from the root word luna that meant moon. But Darien wasn't crazy, although he did act odd. She thought about the Wild Hunt, age-old folk lore from all across Europe, where the dead or the damned hunted souls for the Devil beneath a full moon but rejected it. That did not fit, either.

Another memory emerged, this one not from her studies or her thesis but from an old movie, black and white, the 1940's classic, *The Wolf Man,* where an old gypsy tells the main character, who was bitten by a wolf that, "Even a man who is pure in heart and says his prayers by night can become a wolf when the wolfsbane blooms and the moon is shining bright."

All the arcane beliefs she once studied made her nervous now and Stella stopped herself. This was silly. Darien wasn't a lunatic. The moon's power controlled ocean tides and when to plant crops for those that believed it but it couldn't explain Darien's strange actions.

More anxious than before, Stella resolved to forget about it, to not think about him or his strange behavior. Always persnickety about who she would date, she knew how to spend Friday night alone and so she vowed she would just go home, watch banal television or read a book. Maybe she would even take a hot bath – she would do anything to keep her mind off Darien and away from the foolish notions she dredged up that related to the full moon.

Come Monday, she thought, he would have some explaining to do.

## **Chapter Five**

Uneasy, even a little angry, Stella did not go home after all. She did not want to inhale the aroma of the roses Darien brought just days before or remember how close, in every way, they had been. She drove her car, first time all week, out to the edge of town where the fast food restaurants, chain discount, and convenience stores lined the highway business loop and bought a salad. She had little appetite and picked at the greens, eating less than half. After that, she drove around, ending up at the little park Darien had shown her.

On a park bench near the spring, she shivered when the evening wind turned chill but watched the evening sky darken from a pale blue to a rich black. The first stars peeked out, twinkling above and when the moon rose, it was full and magnificent. The huge orb swelled large and seemed to dominate the sky as it came up and Stella wondered again, why Darien said he would tell her his problem or secret after the full moon.

That full moon revived all the old superstitions she thought she had rejected earlier. Although she still did not believe any of them could apply to Darien, she wanted to know what his hang up with the full moon could be. She didn't want to wait until Monday or listen to some cryptic excuse. Stella steeled herself to go confront him now and ask for the truth. If their love was to endure, he could not keep secrets and she thought she had made that very clear. He would tell her now, tonight, or not at all. Stella marched from the park with the fervor of a warrior queen bent on battle, driving the few blocks to Darien's house with focus. She wanted to surprise him, give him no warning to prepare for her arrival so she parked on the edge of the road and walked up the drive.

By then, it was full dark but with the rising moon, she could see quite well. As she approached the house, a strange sound caught her attention, an odd sobbing sound that moaned too. It reminded her of wind under the eaves of a house and she wrote it off as nothing.

When she entered the private, overgrown front lawn, she paused in the shadows when she saw Darien. He sat on the grass, hugging himself as if he might be in great physical pain, rocking back and forth. The sound she heard came from his lips and she started forward to help him. He must be ill, she thought, but another sound, this one terrible, made her stop.

The loud cracking noise was like popping knuckles but far louder, the creak of bones grating. As she stared at Darien, his limbs twitched and then, to her disbelief, appeared to grow, elongating as she watched. His face contorted in agony and then his features changed, as his face grew longer, his jaw stretching out into a muzzle. Stella struggled to assimilate what she saw, but the reality of what was happening did not sink in until she saw the fur that exploded over his skin, moving like a dark fungus over his every inch. Darien, taller than before, limbs longer and stronger, came to his feet, put back his head, and howled at the moon. She hunkered down in the shadows, afraid and sick to her soul as the awful truth ripped her heart apart. Disbelief warred against the reality of what she saw but even though she shut her eyes and willed the sight to vanish, to be some freak of her imagination, when she opened them nothing changed. The wolf, werewolf, whatever it was, remained. His howls sent frigid frissons down her back and she feared this creature, this thing that shifted from the man she loved into this wild beast. Every scrap of dark folk belief she knew about werewolves and shapeshifters rose in her mind, haunted her like ghosts. Darien, the man she loved, was a werewolf; a creature of legend and late night movies that she didn't even believe existed until now. Reconciling this nightmare beast with Darien seemed difficult and terror, rank and harsh, gripped her as she remained hidden, watching with horror.

As the reality sunk into her consciousness, her lungs refused to pump air and she could not breathe. Panic compressed her chest and twisted her stomach into a pretzel like knot with such pain that she bent double, still unable to catch a breath. Such black panic seized her, body and spirit, that she thought certain for several moments that the shock would kill her, that she would die from this awful knowledge. Until now, Darien appeared to be ideal for her, matched to her in a way that no other man ever came within light years of touching, but this dark revelation threatened to destroy that and take Stella down with it. In moments, his transformation wiped away her lifelong belief systems, confirmed what she thought to be mere folklore, and threatened her foundations. If she had not been so afraid, so paralyzed with dread that she could not think with any coherence, she would have screamed, screeched loud so that she could vent her anguished agony that everything was not what it had seemed. If she could survive, if any scrap of what she thought she

had with Darien could continue, she had to find something to hold fast but there seemed to be nothing solid that she could grasp.

She bit hard on her lip so that she would not cry out or scream, watching as he howled again and then bounded off into the forest, vanishing among the trees. If he sensed her, even smelled her, she wondered what he would do, if he would attack with the sharp claws or sharper teeth. The very idea made her want to shriek as loudly as he howled. If she did that, however, she might descend into a dark madness where she might be lost forever. When Darien, if she still could call him that after what she witnessed, could no longer be seen or heard, she realized that, with effort, she could breathe again but that nothing would ever be the same as it was before.

Stella wept then, head in her hands, but when her tears ended, she walked up to the porch and into Darien's house to wait for his return. The long hours stretched ahead, intolerable, but she curled up on the leather sofa in the library and remembered every tiny clue that pointed to this harsh reality. Despite her studies, even the cryptic hints he tossed her direction, there was no way she could have envisioned this. No woman could, she thought, still dazed and in denial. She endured the end of relationships before but never because her significant other became a creature of legend beneath the full moon.

As the hours passed, however, she realized one thing, the one that mattered most of all, unexplainable but undeniable. She loved Darien anyway.

## **Chapter Six**

Morning light filtered through the windows when she woke, disoriented and groggy. Then the memory of what she saw plunged over her consciousness like a cement block and she rose, searching the house until she found Darien. He lay on the long couch in the living room, restored to his human form, asleep and snoring. His dirty bare feet looked bruised and cut; blood seeped from some of the small wounds. Darien's arms weren't much better, scratched, and scraped. His long hair was matted; pieces of leaves, bits of grass, and bark tangled through it. His hands appeared to be swollen and they, too, had marks of struggle, blisters, and abrasions.

Tenderness surged in Stella as she cataloged his many minor injuries and although she wanted him to sleep, she had to do something for him. She decided she would wash his battered feet and so she drew a basin of warm water, added a little antiseptic soap, and found a clean washcloth. With very gentle, easy movements, she washed his feet but he woke, despite her efforts not to disturb him.

He blinked at her, and then rubbed his face hard with both hands.

"Stella?"

"Yes, it's me."

"What are you doing, my star?"

"I am washing your feet. After that, I will clean your other injuries and I will comb all the muck from your hair. How do you feel?"

Darien pondered that, stared at her with bleary, bloodshot eyes and sighed.

"I feel as terrible as I look. So, you know?"

"I know that you are a werewolf, yes." She kept her voice calm and quiet despite her inner turmoil.

He sat up, swinging his legs out of her reach and groaned.

"I will not deny what you know to be true," Darien said. "But, how did you find out??"

Stella dropped the sodden washcloth into the basin and met his gaze.

"I saw you change last night under the full moon."

He shut his eyes and the expression on his face was as bleak as an icy winter night.

"That must have been rather frightening," he said, after a long silence. "I am sorry you had to witness that. I did intend to tell you, Stella."

"I know." He should have done it sooner, she thought, before she found out in such a shocking way. Despite her love, fear remained whenever she thought of him in full wolf form but she tried to hide it, knowing that it would hurt him to know she felt afraid.

"So, what do you think now that you have learned my secret? Will you run away, my Stella-star?"

He expected that she would; Stella saw that in his face, harsh and ravaged.

She collected her breath to answer without wavering, "I won't leave. I do love you, Darien, werewolf or not. It scares me, though, and it will take time for me to get adjusted to the idea. Until last night, I thought you were a man, human like me. Now I know that you aren't but I have to figure out just how to wrap my brain around that. I think that I can and like I said, I love you but this is hard for me."

That conclusion, reached in the dark lonesome hours of the long night, came after an inner struggle. Reconciling what she knew of Darien, the man, and the beast she saw transform staggered her soul but she found that, within the werewolf, the man remained. On that small and shaky foundation, she pondered the deepest hidden rooms of her heart to find that despite his affliction, she still found him, as a man, to be handsome, charming, sexy, and so much more. Only after sifting through her shattered soul had she realized that she could and did love Darien and that she would not leave him. Her hope was that love would carry enough strength so that they could endure until she could accept his status quo, in all facets. Beyond the horror, past her fear, Stella realized for the very first time in her life how very powerful love in its most basic form could be.

He made no sound as he listened to her response but she watched the tears collect in his topaz eyes before they spilled down his cheeks like a heavy rain. She ached for him, felt his pain in herself but she struggled with this reality. If he still loved her too, then she could deal with it but at the moment, but she wasn't sure quite how she would.

"Stella, you are all I could hope for and more. I never thought I would hear a woman say those sweet words to me ever again and mean them. You do, don't you?" "Of course I do."

Darien patted the sofa beside him. "But you're both worried and afraid. I see it in your eyes. Come sit with me. I have much that I must tell you."

"I am worried and I told you that I'm scared," she said, struggling to conquer both emotions without success. "The more you tell me, the more maybe I can understand."

He nodded. "First, do you know how old I am?" Stella thought for a moment.

"Are you twenty-eight?"

He laughed sadly. "I am one hundred and ninety years of age if you count from my actual birthday, April 11, 1830 in a little English village, Eckington. I am, for all purposes, however, twentyseven for all eternity. Not that it matters, really, but I've been in America since just after the Civil War."

"How did you become a werewolf anyway?" she questioned. If she could ever understand and try to accept this, she had to know. "Did it just happen or were you bitten by another werewolf or just a wolf or what?"

"Ah, that," Darien said, voice steady. "I was out walking on an April evening near the village. I was on my way to visit a young lady who had impressed me with her charms. Just as I passed Dickon's Woods, a wolf sprang out of the shadows and attacked me. I fought it, thinking at that time it was indeed a mere wolf and it bit me on the shoulder. I slashed at its face with a small knife I wore on my belt. Then I rushed home and let my mother tend the wound. Everyone, including me, worried that it might fester. After all, wild animal bites can and this was long before a cure for rabies existed. I healed, though, in good time and thought that everything would be just fine."

"Was it?" Somehow she didn't think it could have been.

"Well, no. After my wound healed the first odd thing I noticed was that a neighbor had cuts on his face just where I cut the wolf."

She had to sort that out for a moment. "So one of your neighbors was a werewolf?"

Darien sighed. "He was, although I didn't know it. I wondered why Henry Browne would have cuts on his face in the

same place. That seemed very strange but I didn't think about it much."

"When did you know you were a werewolf?" Saying that word didn't get any easier for her.

"When the full moon came around, I transformed for the first time. I had felt ill but then when I began changing, I thought I was dying but I did not, just began an unending misery that has lasted more than a hundred years."

Stella wondered about the young lady he had been on his way to visit and even more about the neighbor so she asked about both, one question at a time.

"Who was she?"

Darien laughed. "Her name was Isabella but I've long forgotten any other details."

"Then what about your neighbor? Did you ever talk to him about what happened?"

With a wry smile, he leaned over and kissed her. "You are a woman of many questions. Yes, I did. I confronted Henry shortly after my first transformation and he admitted that he attacked me. He swore he thought I was a passing traveler, which I never quite believed. You see, he had some interest in Isabella too. He also claimed that if he had not recognized me, I would have been dinner. He said he stopped when he knew me but I have my doubts."

"Didn't you hate him for what he did to you?" Stella asked, conscious that if none of it had happened, that she would not even know Darien, that he would long ago have been buried in an English churchyard.

Darien pondered the question. "I wouldn't say that I hated him but I did consider trying out the silver bullet theory to see if it worked. I didn't like the man before the attack so of course I liked him even less after he made me what I am."

"You thought about killing him?" That surprised her more than she thought it would.

"It was a brief thought. I told him how little I thought of him as either a man or werewolf. Despite that, Henry suggested that we run together, in wolf form, which I would not do. I didn't want to be his wolf friend. I did not trust him, then or now, just another small reason why I left England. I imagine Henry remains there, miserable as ever." "Why did you leave England?" she wondered aloud. "And is your name really Wolfe?"

He laughed but without much mirth. "I left for many reasons including to get away from Henry but the main one was that I could not fool my family forever. I knew that when the years passed and I didn't age, they would notice and there would be no valid explanation. They had remarked on it by the time I left, many times, and that was only a few years after I became what I am. I left to avoid contact with Henry who would not leave me alone. And yes, love, my true surname is Wolfe. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes." Her voice came out as no more than a whisper. "So, you will be twenty-seven forever?"

Darien nodded. "Unless my circumstances ever change, yes, I shall."

She was twenty-three so he was either four years older or seven generations her senior. Her mind could not compute that for a moment and Darien, seeing her consternation, said,

"Werewolves are immortal, my dear. And though I love you, my Stella, more than any woman I have ever known or wanted, we must part."

That sank into her brain. "No, we cannot! I won't!"

"Think about it, my sweet star. For now, we are of an age and generation. In twenty years, will people think you are my mother, will they not, my lady? I fear that they will. Moreover, in forty, will you enjoy passing as my grandmother? That is unthinkable. I cannot bear to watch you age, to see that lovely hair turn gray, that smooth skin wrinkle while I remain the same. There is no future for us together and that grieves me. You are my perfect soul mate."

If she could deal with his disability, the fact that he was a werewolf under the full moon, she could handle a little aging issue.

"I don't mind."

Darien sighed. "You will in time. I know it all too well from my own life. In my early years in America, I met and loved a young lady. I thought then that we could adjust to it all but it didn't work that way. After time passed, just a few short years, she could not bear the fact that she would age and I would not. So she left me, saying goodbye in a letter, telling me all that she couldn't say to my face."

Jealousy squirmed like a snake in her belly, another turbulent emotion added to the already volatile mix.

"What was her name?" It didn't matter but Stella had to know.

"Anna," Darien said, in a flat voice. "You have no need to be jealous. Although I loved her at the time, what I felt for her was but a patch of what I feel for you. Watching her, however, draw away from me in slow steps, a little more each year, hurt. When we met, we were both twenty-seven. Five years later, I still was – I always will be – the same but she had aged in little ways. She noted it and it would have become more obvious as time passed so we parted."

"Oh."

Darien continued. "Beyond the age difference, there is more. How long will you enjoy dreading the full moon each month, waiting for the horrible night to arrive?"

Instead of answering the question, she asked another,

"Do you change just when the moon is full?"

"Yes. It is an excruciating process and afterward, although I seldom remember any of what I did as a wolf, I am exhausted and ill. Transforming leaves me feeling as if I have influenza."

"I'm sorry, Darien. What can I do to make you feel better?"

He shook his head from side to side. "Nothing, darling. Just leave me in my misery."

"No." That was one thing Stella could not do. There must be another option, she thought, and searched for some scrap of folklore that might provide some way to reconcile their impossible situation. "You know that I studied folklore and superstitions during the Dark Ages. Aren't there ways to reverse your condition or a cure? I seem to remember some old tales and methods. Did you ever try any of them?"

He raised his arm to put around her shoulders, wincing as he did.

"There are stories but I doubt any of them are valid. I tried a few of the simple ones, fasting and kneeling in prayer for days. That offers nothing but slow starvation. That almost killed me in 1860. I returned home, weak and suffering from malnutrition. Another time, soon after I became a werewolf, I asked my brother for his help and we tried something else you may have heard about. He spoke my baptismal name aloud three times and then he struck me on the forehead with the butt of a knife. Nothing happened except that I got a beastly headache. If he had hit me much harder, I might have suffered a concussion." "What about rolling in the dew where the wolfsbane grows?" Stella asked. It sounded more than a little lame and much too simple but it was one of the ideas she dredged up from Medieval folklore.

Darien gave her a rueful smile that didn't reach his eyes. "That one does not work, either, my dear. I caught a chill from the damp and cold morning air. I am immortal but I can get sick and I did."

"Isn't there anything else?" Stella asked. Something from the pages of an old book, so fragile that she had to study it in the library reference room, came to mind. "I remember reading that if a werewolf that has never tasted human blood plunges into free flowing water on the eve of the full moon, he can become human again. Did you ever try that?"

"No, not since that would involve facing both my phobias." Darien said. "I would be afraid to try and if it failed anyway, I would be very disappointed."

Although he sounded hopeless, Stella found a tiny sparkle of hope. If there were a way, then they could find it. Love might be the power that prevailed and if it meant they could find a happy ending to this story, she could help him face his fears.

"It could be worth a try, Darien."

"Stella, leave it alone, please." His voice thickened with fear and something more.

"I can't do that. It might be the one way that we could be together. Please, Darien."

His reluctance suggested more than fear at stake and she wondered. As she reviewed the requirements for that method, she realized she had no idea if he drank blood or killed in wolf form. Nausea twisted her stomach but she had to frame the question and know the answer, no matter what it might be.

"I cannot visualize that you would do such things, Darien, but I will ask – do you drink human blood or kill when you are in wolf form?"

His topaz eyes, golden in the morning sunshine, widened until they dominated his face and his frown vanished, the corners of his mouth twitching as if he wanted to smile.

"Your faith in me, Stella, is gratifying and it is correct. I have not nor do I ever wish to drink blood or eat human flesh. I would never do to another person what Henry did to me, not attack or bite or taste. He intended to kill, something I just will not and would not do. I manage with protein as you have observed. If I kill as a wolf, it has never been either other humans or wolves. I don't know if I kill at all but I don't think that I do. If I did, the knowledge of mutilated bodies, human or animal in the area would be common and there are none."

Joy renewed as she decided it was possible.

"Then you can do it!"

"Stella—"

"That is, if you want to. Do you?"

He seized her hand in his bruised, battered ones.

"I do more than anything."

"Then why not try?"

His grin was wry and his laugh mocking.

"You know the two reasons why—I cannot swim and I am terrified of heights."

Stella's grin was bright.

"You can face your fears one time, can't you? Then we can be together."

Darien closed his eyes, his breathing ragged and his hand in hers trembling.

"There is another thing and it's not one that I want to do. Your love would be vital if the cure were to work but something more would be needed— your blood."

"My blood?" Her voice soared to soprano level. "What do you mean? If I have to die for it to work, then I'll try to remember some other way."

His eyes blazed. "I would never accept your life in sacrifice for any reason and that is not what legends require. I would have to cut your finger or some other part of your dear body to get a few drops of blood to purify the water."

Until she drew breath, Stella didn't realize she had not been breathing. A few drops of blood from a small cut seemed little and she had no doubt she could do that. A quick search of all the lore she learned yielded a faint memory of such a ceremony.

"That's fine. I don't mind, Darien. I will do that for you."

He stared at her with those topaz eyes for a long moment and then shut them, as if in prayer or searching his soul.

After several minutes passed, he opened his eyes and met her gaze.

"I can try for you, Stella. If it fails, then you will know how much I love you."

"What happens if it fails?"

He quirked one eyebrow at her. "If the attempt fails, then the one sure cure might work."

"What is it?"

"Death. If I become mortal long enough to drown, I would call it either a final cure or simple failure. So, it is possible that I could become human again only to drown. Will you take the chance?"

Stella gulped. If that happened, she would want to die too but it wouldn't because she could not bear it.

"If you will, I will. So, when are we going to do this?"

"It must be done on the evening before the full moon; that is the sole way to determine if the effort succeeds."

"We do it next month."

"If that is what you wish, we shall, my darling Stella."

He sealed the promise with a kiss, one that scorched all the way to her toes. That combustion fueled to an inferno as Stella, hands gentle as if he were fragile, made love to his damaged body until they both forgot all pain and all obstacles.

## **Chapter Seven**

The next full moon, the full Harvest Moon in late September, would rise on a Sunday evening. In that month, Stella helped Darien find a place that would work for their attempt. She also made an effort to teach him to swim or failing that, to at least get over his fear of water and heights. First, she coaxed him to climb to the top of the bluffs at the park in town and though his knees trembled, he made it to the top with her where he managed to look over the view below without total panic. Then they climbed, at her insistence, out onto the roof of the high school which he managed with great difficulty. After that, she drove him out to one of the few remaining forestry fire towers, an old wooden structure that stretched high into the sky. Rangers once used the towers to watch for fires but they hadn't been used in decades. She hoped to talk Darien into mounting all the steps to the top but he would go no further than the first three flights. Even that height made him pale and perspire. Stella doubted he would ever banish his fear of heights but she hoped that her efforts tempered it.

After heights, she addressed his inability to swim. She tried to coax him into some adult swimming lessons at the local health club but he refused. However, after heavy persuasion, he did get into the pool with her. She taught him how to hold his breath under water and tried to give him pointers on staying afloat. In their pool sessions, his fear threatened to bloom into a full-blown panic attack but she thought that a little preparation was better than none at all. At least, by the time that the full moon was almost at hand, he could put his face down into the water without flinching.

Just five days before full moon, as the orb waxed, they discovered the perfect location. Grand Falls, the state's largest natural and free flowing waterfall, was about fifteen miles north of Riverville. In an isolated location, the falls descended twenty-five feet when the river ran high.

Although Grand Falls and the river below attracted swimmers, anglers, picnickers, and nature lovers, they both thought that on a Sunday evening, the visitors would be few.

"Are you ready to do this?" Stella asked, as they sat outside in the late afternoon, admiring the remaining blooms in his garden and the first hints of autumn color in the foliage. Darien, relaxed in a dark blue shirt, unbuttoned at his throat and jeans, grinned.

"I am as ready as I can be. I look forward to a successful outcome but—"

"But what?" she asked, his fear spreading to her like an epidemic.

"I hope that I don't die. If I survive the fall, the water at the bottom is dangerous with strong undercurrents."

She stroked the back of his hand. "I won't let you drown."

Stella would not; she had a plan. Just before he jumped, she would dial 911 on her cell phone, summoning help to fish him from the rolling waters before he could get into trouble.

"I shall count on that. Shall we go, then?"

At Grand Falls, the sheer beauty of the falls filled her with awe each time she saw them. Rugged rock formations lined the riverbank on this side and made walking more difficult. There was just one other vehicle, a beat-up old pickup truck, when they arrived and as they walked along the rocks, hand in hand, the driver left. They were alone in the wild place and so, without discussing it, they made their way with care up the rocks toward the falls. On the bank, Darien turned and gathered her into his arms. He held her so close that she could feel his rapid heartbeat and the fine quiver that shot through his body.

"You're really scared."

His mouth moved against her hair, speaking into her ear.

"I am, Stella. This will be the most difficult thing I have ever done."

She snuggled against him, hoping her embrace would give both comfort and courage.

"Will it be harder than becoming a werewolf?"

"Yes." Darien said, without any doubt at all. "That was difficult enough and I had no idea what would happen. With my fears, jumping into the water will be harder. The hardest of all, though, is now, Stella."

He pulled out a knife and the blade caught the remaining light so that it shimmered between them. She held out her hand to him, palm up and waited. As they had discussed and decided, he slashed the knife across her open palm so that a cut, about two inches long, opened. Although it stung, Stella held her hand over the water and let the blood drip from her cut into the water.

"Let my love and my blood restore you," she said.

Then she staunched the blood and let him stick a large adhesive bandage over it. He brushed it, light as a breath, with his lips.

"I will be waiting for you, Darien," Stella said. "Help will be on the way and will be here by the time you hit the water."

He eyed the rushing waters and shivered. The noise of the falls was very loud.

"It is time, then. I will do it or die, my lady. Kiss me."

Stella pulled him closer, her hands clutching his shirt and brought the full force of her lips against his, pouring all the love that she could muster into his body by that conduit. He responded, his body answering her call and returning it in kind, pouring powerful emotion and potent desire into her veins until she felt almost drunk with love. Every atom in her body craved more, ached for full release, but Darien pulled away.

"If I survive, we shall have world enough and time for that later. Stella, I love you."

Without another word or look, Darien removed his shoes and waded into the water. He gasped when he entered the cool river then continued out, walking with care and some apparent difficulty. Stella watched him, even as she dug her cell phone from her jeans pocket and punched in 911.

"911. What is your emergency?" A bland, professional voice answered the distress call.

"My boyfriend just fell into the river at Grand Falls and I think he's going over! He can't swim! Can you please send help?" Stella cried, the panic real, not feigned.

As she watched, the current knocked Darien from his feet and propelled him toward the falls with speed. He struggled to stand, reaching a half-crouch when he realized he was at the brink. With arms spread wide, he shouted,

"Geronimo!"

He leaped or fell over the brink, plummeting down over the high falls as she watched, one hand clutching her throat with fear. Stella then ran as fast as she could over the rocks, hurrying to the bottom of the falls to see if he surfaced in the choppy waters. In the distance, over the noise of the falls, she could hear the approaching wail of sirens. His sleek, dark head surfaced for a moment and she cupped her hands together to yell.

"Darien! Hang on! They're coming!"

If he heard her voice, he did not respond but floundered, then vanishing beneath the waters again. Two minutes, long, awful spans of time, later, the paramedics rushed up with stretchers and gear.

"He's out there!" Stella screamed. "Help him, please help him!"

Everything happened quickly after that and she could never remember just how they pulled Darien from the waters. When they did, however, she was there, pushing through the emergency workers and a few bystanders who had arrived on the heels of the ambulance. Darien lay on his back on the rocks, his chest not moving, and Stella fell to her knees at his side.

"Do something!"

His skin had a bluish cast and he lay with such stillness that she was very afraid. Stella wringed her hands together, anxious, and worried as the ambulance crew performed CPR. When Darien gasped and began to cough, she began to cry but she put her face down beside his.

"Darien. Darien."

He choked and spewed water but his lips moved in the shape of her name, Stella.

Within seconds, he was on a gurney with an oxygen mask over his face. His color was returning but when they asked if she wanted to come along, she climbed into the back of the ambulance without hesitation.

"Is he going to be all right?" she asked, through her tears.

"He should be if he didn't break his neck or suffer a spinal cord injury," one of the EMT's told her. "We got to him quick; he should be fine."

Darien stirred and when she touched his hand, his fingers curled around hers. Then he reached with his other hand to lift the oxygen mask so that he could talk.

"Don't leave me, Stella-star."

"I won't," she promised, voice calm even as she noticed that dusk fell around them. Soon they would know beyond any doubt if their attempt worked. If it didn't, the emergency responders were in for a shock.

Above them, the first stars sparkled in the sky as the moon rose, full and huge. Soon, it would be evident whether or not their attempt was successful.

His topaz eyes glittered as he asked another question, "Am I changing?"

She stretched out his hand but it looked the same, looked at his jaw but it had not elongated, and his legs had not lengthened.

"No, you're fine."

He coughed again and shook his head.

"Fine might not be the word I would choose at this moment." At the hospital, he spent five hours in the emergency room

cubicle until a doctor pronounced him fit to leave, after verifying that his blood oxygen levels were normal. It was a quarter to midnight when they walked outside. Thousands of stars sparkled in the sky but the brightness that bathed everything in a silver glow came from the full moon. The moonlight felt magical and it turned the average night into a mysterious and beautiful thing.

Darien stopped and stared up at the moon. He stretched out his hands and looked at them with a smile. Then he rubbed fingers over his face and grinned.

"Stella, I do believe that it worked. I am cured."

She kissed his face with tiny butterfly kisses, first his forehead, then his cheeks, nose, and last of all his mouth. Her hungry lips devoured his, tasting and reassuring that he was well.

"You are," she said, pausing for air. "Your car is still at Grand Falls so I don't know how we will get to either your place or mine."

He drew her close. "Is that an invitation, dear Stella, to a mortal and ordinary man?"

"It is, for tonight and for the rest of your life, Darien. You will never be ordinary, not to me."

Darien stroked her hair and smiled.

"I thought that the man was traditionally the one who asked that all important question."

"What question?"

"I think you know the one."

She touched his lips with her finger.

"I can guess but first I need to know a couple of things."

He smiled at her, his hand straying to capture her fingers with his own.

"If one of them is how we will get to your place or mine, I suggest that we walk. Your apartment is just a few blocks away."

"Are you up to walking?" she asked.

"I am—even as a mortal and ordinary man."

"Let me see if you are." Stella said, with a grin and kissed him again, her lips as savage now as they had been gentle. He responded with heated ardor so strong she expected smoke to puff from his ears. His hands caressed her body, arousing delight each place he touched. "You seem capable enough to me, mortal."

He chuckled and then she asked, serious now.

"Do you mind, though? You've exchanged immortality for me."

Darien's smile outshone the full moon.

"Immortality has its disadvantages and they outweigh by far any advantages. I really can't think of any at the moment but mortality has some perks."

"Does it?" She had to wonder if he wouldn't mind giving up living forever to grow old and die with her. "Tell me one."

"Now I—we—can enjoy the home I've made here for decades to come. Otherwise, as you know, I would have had to move on to another location within a few years and this house, in its near perfect setting, is without doubt the favorite home I have ever known."

She liked that. "Is there another?"

He grinned. "I can celebrate my birthday again. It's been a very long time, Stella, and I look forward to the occasion."

She adored the idea and even though his birthday loomed months distant, she could envision the perfect cake with twenty-eight lit candles. "You can celebrate it with me."

"I like that," he said with sincerity.

"So you have no regrets? Living forever is supposed to be something that some people want."

"I would rather have a happy, mortal life with you than all the years of lonely immortality, Stella my star."

"Then we will."

"And we shall, Wolfe's lady." Darien said. "We shall."

"So ask me that question."

"Will you, dear Stella, my darling star, marry me?"

"I thought you were never going to ask but yes, Darien, I will marry you."

He laughed, and then sealed her answer with a slow, sweet kiss.

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On the night of the winter solstice, a night of a great full moon, shining silver above the first snowfall of the season, Stella let Darien carry her over the threshold of his delightful house as his bride. With every curtain open, each shade raised high, they let the lunar light pour into their bedroom, reveling in the light that had so long been his curse but now was a blessing.

As they came together as man and wife, their passion soared to new summits as each touch, every caress, consumed them both in pleasant fire. Their lovemaking sang between them, new music that carried them to the stars and back, transformed and enhanced. In harmony and in love, they began a new life, together.

The End