



Moonlit Watcher

Crystal-Rain Love

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MOONLIT WATCHER
28 Days of Heart Series
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Foreword

“Nothing’s better than a healthy heart, which helps women endure the ailments of life—physical or romantic—and come out on top of it all. This anthology, with stories by some of the most talented romance writers in the market, will benefit hearts everywhere. It’s not often you can contribute to a worthy cause, one that may well affect you in your lifetime, and at the same time assure yourself of some excellent entertainment. Have a good time, and let your heart be your guide.”

Charlaine Harris

Chapter One

Fate was a twisted bitch. Derek Kingston hid behind the trees, staring down at the small house sitting just outside the forest. He would put his hands in his pockets, but the fabric of his black pants was stretched to capacity over the erection he got any time he so much as thought of the woman inside the walls of the little, pale yellow house. The human woman.

What a sick joke. Two months ago he'd been one of a pair of Weres selected by Rong, the pack leader, to fight over mating rights to Rong's sister, Ming. Then Rong had been killed, by none other than his sister's soul mate, Jason. Now Jason was pack leader and Ming bore his mark. To touch her brought an instant death sentence from the rest of the pack.

Derek had come too close to having the voracious beauty only to have her snatched away. He didn't love her, and they weren't soul mates, but she was the exact type of wolf he desired. She was strong, brave, and sexy as hell. He knew she would have been one hell of a good screw.

Unlike the human woman fate had been dangling in front of him since that night. He didn't know her name, or where she came from, but she'd been in the house since Rong was killed. Blond with sparkling blue eyes and pink, full lips, her body was long and lithe, the result of her dancing. He often padded closer to her home in wolf form so he could watch her, and what she did more than anything was dance. Ballet. She was a

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dainty little ballerina. What the hell was fate thinking when it decided she would be his soul mate?

He'd tried to deny it for the first month, but he couldn't stop his thoughts from drifting to her every hour of the day, dreaming of her every time he slept...following the pull toward her every night the moon rose. During the last full moon phase he'd done the unthinkable and passed on the opportunity to have sex with another Were. Felicia was a hot little Were he'd had numerous times before, but he couldn't go through with it. It was as if he had been neutered. Sure, the mere thought of the human woman hardened him to painful degree, but the thought of sex with another woman, even a Were, and he couldn't get it up. It was damned emasculating.

He called upon the magic inside and shifted into his wolf form so he could pad down to the back patio. The night was cool and still. He reached the patio and lay down, watching the woman through her sliding glass door.

As usual, she wore a fitted tank top and little black knit shorts. Her back to him, she raised one leg to rest her ankle on the wooden *barre* attached to the living room wall and bent forward at the waist. She had the agility of a feline, a fact that turned Derek on despite not caring for cats.

He felt the pull to shift shape and go to her as a human, wrap his arms around her waist and mount her from behind, but he held back. Regardless if she was his soul mate, he couldn't cross that line. She was human, and way too fragile looking for his tastes.

Some werewolves spent their whole lives fighting against their nature, keeping their beasts at bay. Not Derek. He loved to hunt and prowl. Fighting was a thrill he welcomed, and when it came to the opposite sex he wanted a woman who was as wild in the sack as he was. This delicate flower wouldn't survive a night with him.

Something whizzed over his head and a flower pot exploded. Derek jerked to his paws and turned, hunkering

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down so he wasn't such an easy target. Someone was hunting him.

Behind him he heard the woman's feet racing across the floor, headed for the door. He'd brought hunters to her doorstep. It was his duty to keep her from getting hurt by his stupidity. The pack had known hunters were in the area, it was that time of year, and yet he'd foolishly left the cover of the trees to drool over the woman in the open.

Two men approached quickly, guns pointed. Another bullet whizzed by, barely missing his shoulder as the glass door started to slide open.

"Stay in your house, lady," one of the hunters yelled. "There's a wolf on your patio!"

"Leave him alone!" she yelled back. "He's not hurting anyone."

Derek's ears perked at her defense. Most humans automatically feared wolves, and Weres especially. They were much larger than real wolves, and their eyes had a tendency to glow red. Derek allowed his to do so as the hunters neared close enough to see.

"Holy shit!" The heavy one stopped in his tracks, but the thin one didn't hesitate. He raised the rifle at the same moment Derek leaped. A shot rang out as he sank his teeth into the man's shoulder and tore flesh.

He jumped off the man as his body hit the ground and turned to make sure the woman hadn't been hit by the stray bullet. Derek had just whipped his head around when another bullet ripped into his side, burning a trail through his body. He fell to the ground, immobilized by the pain. Far too much pain for a normal bullet.

"No!" The woman's voice shook with anger and fear as she barreled down the steps to where he lay.

"Lady, that's a wild bea—"

"You're the beast! Get out of here!"

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Derek struggled to see what was going on, but his vision was blurred. It looked like the woman had one of the men's guns pointed at them, forcing them away from her home. They argued as they left but he couldn't make out the words. Silver was in his body. The heavier man had silver bullets. The man knew what Derek was, which meant he and his entire pack were in danger. He had to warn them. He had to move. He had to... He had to get the silver out before he died.

"Oh, you poor baby." The woman hovered over him, whispering soothing sounds.

Quit baby-talking me, woman, and get this bullet out.

"Oh my... Wait. No. I'm hearing things."

Derek froze as he realized she'd heard his thoughts. He'd forgotten soul mates had the ability to do that, even before they took the vow. He might not want the woman as his eternal mate, but he could use their connection to save his life.

Get the bullet out. It will kill me. Get it out. Hurry!

"Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh." She made some more panicked noises and ran off.

Great. My soul mate's a wuss. What else did I expect from a ballerina?

Derek struggled to get to his feet. As pack leader, Jason would feel his pain and track him. If he met him halfway he might get help before it was too late.

"Don't move!" The ballerina bounded down the steps and gently pushed him to the ground. "This is going to hurt, sweetie. Please be a good boy and don't snap at me."

White-hot pain burst through his side and he realized she'd gotten a knife to cut the bullet out of his side. Unfortunately she'd chosen a silver knife. He opened his mouth to scream and a howl emerged.

"I'm so sorry." By the trembling in her voice he could imagine how badly her hand shook. She was going to kill him trying to save his life, but there wasn't anything he could do.

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Until his body was free of silver he couldn't shift shape and heal.

The pain in his side lessened and he felt the silver being tugged free. Blinking in and out, unable to keep anything in focus, he quit trying and concentrated on the silver. Once it cleared his skin his natural survival instinct kicked in and his body shifted shape. The ballerina's cry of shock was the last sound he heard before falling into unconsciousness in his human form.

Chapter Two

“Holy crap on toast.” Juliana Van Alder managed to get the two-ton, six-footer’s feet into the bed and heaved in a breath. She stretched her arms, loosening the tightness from lugging him into her house.

She peered down at him on the bed. He was a handsome man, tall and well built with chocolate brown skin, black hair cut so close to his head it appeared as more of a shadow, and thick black lashes. He was every girl’s dirty fantasy, with black pants wrapped around a lean waist and powerful thighs, and a matching T-shirt stretched over sculpted pectorals.

He was perfect, except he was a dog. Not a dog in the way most men were dogs, but an honest to goodness dog. “Actually, he’s a werewolf,” she murmured to herself and let out a nervous laugh. She’d blinked at least a hundred times after he’d changed from a wolf to man, but every time she opened her eyes he was still there. The flowerpot on her patio was still broken and the hunter’s gun still at her side. The black wolf’s voice still lingered in her mind. True, he didn’t lose his clothes after shifting shape, which went against the lore she’d heard, but she’d seen enough to know what he was. It had all been real. She’d saved a werewolf.

He moaned and she jumped. Juliana let out another nervous laugh and wrung her hands. If he wanted to hurt her, he could have done it any time over the past several weeks. She’d seen the big black wolf lurking outside her patio doors, watching her, and paid it no mind. It wasn’t prowling around or drooling over her. He just sat there, watching her, and he seemed so lonely doing it. Her heart went out to the big

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creature. That was why she hadn't hesitated to intervene when she'd heard the pot break and saw what was happening outside.

Frowning, she studied the steady rise and fall of the man's chest. His wound had healed when he shifted into human form, not a drop of blood on him, but he was still unconscious, which worried her. She laughed bitterly. What would her parents think if they knew she'd just brought this man into her home? Mr. and Mrs. Van Alder would have fussed more over her bringing a black man inside her home than a werewolf. He could hide his werewolf side. He couldn't hide the fact he wasn't part of New York's crusty, white, spoiled elite.

Leaning forward, she reached down to lay her hand on his forehead and check for a temperature. Did werewolves get fever? His head was hotter than she would have liked to have found it. Guilt gnawed at her. She'd cut him with a silver knife in order to get the bullet out of him. "Idiot," she chastised herself, and felt the base of his neck. He was warm there as well.

She thought of going into the bathroom and wetting a rag to lay across his forehead, but couldn't pull her hand away from all that muscled perfection. Sitting beside him on the bed she allowed her hand to travel over his pecs, reveling in the feel of cotton stretched over hard muscle.

His hand snared her wrist and she was flipped onto her back, the man pinning her to the bed with his larger body. She gasped, but didn't speak, lost in the predatory gleam of his dark brown eyes.

"Where am I?" His deep voice came out as a growl. It sent chills down Juliana's spine and she struggled not to let him see the effect.

"You're in my home, in my bedroom." She lightly pulled on her hand and found he wouldn't let go. "You were shot outside."

"I remember being shot." His dark eyes narrowed. "Who is here helping you?"

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“No one is here with me.”

“Don’t lie to me, woman.” His eyes glowed red for a second before he brought them back under control. “I did not walk in here.”

“I dragged you inside.” She licked her lips, nervous but not scared. She still didn’t think he’d hurt her, but he was clearly agitated. “I didn’t want to leave you out there in case the hunters came back.”

His eyes widened but for only a brief moment before a veil seemed to fall over them, hiding any emotion he might feel. “You are very strong for such a small woman.” He lowered his head and sniffed along her neck. It was all Juliana could do not to moan. “I do not smell fear on you.”

“I’m not afraid of you.” She met his gaze as he raised his head to stare down at her, letting his eyes bleed back to that red color. He was doing it to intimidate her, but she didn’t understand why. Loneliness seemed to spill from his pores, but he acted as if he wished to chase her away.

“You saw what I am.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry.” His eyes changed back to brown and she saw the confusion in them. “If I’d known you were a...” geez, it sounded crazy saying it out loud, “a werewolf, I wouldn’t have used a silver knife to get the bullet out. I’m sorry if I hurt you further.”

He blinked, and the confusion turned into raw anger as he smashed his mouth down onto hers. Juliana gasped, the involuntary action opening her to his invasion. His tongue broke through and he tasted every inch of her mouth, greedily and without softness. He was testing her, she realized with clarity. He wanted to frighten her, to send her running. Well, she wouldn’t do it. Juliana kissed him back, felt it the moment he figured out what she was doing, and reveled in the fact she’d turned the tables on him, surprising him with her boldness.

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She broke free from his grasp and dug her fingers into his shoulders, holding him tight against her as she raised her pelvis, grinding against him. He moaned against her mouth, enjoying what she was doing. Encouraged by his response, she trailed her fingers down his broad back, and slid them into the back of his waistband.

He abruptly ended the kiss, raising himself onto his elbows to stare down at her. His eyes were red again, but she sensed no danger there. They seemed hungry this time. She knew with certainty the werewolf wanted to devour her, would bet her right leg on it, and she'd gladly allow him to do it.

He turned his head quickly and muttered a curse as he rose to his knees and left the bed. "They're here."

"Who's here?" Juliana quickly scrambled off the bed, her heart revving inside her chest. "The hunters are back?"

"No. Not the hunters." Without another word, or so much as a backward glance, he strode forward, leaving the bedroom to travel the short length of the hall. Juliana followed behind him as he walked into the main room, which was divided into a living area and an open kitchen.

Standing outside the sliding glass doors, on her patio, were three large men. Juliana grabbed the werewolf's elbow. "Who are they? What do they want?"

The werewolf glared down at her hand on his arm as if it offended him, so she withdrew it. She didn't understand him. He clearly desired her, had been watching her for weeks, but he didn't seem to want her closeness despite the scorching kiss they'd just shared. "They are my pack," he said as he walked over to the door and slid it open.

The men walked into her home uninvited. The man in front was a tall Caucasian with short blond hair and green eyes that seemed to study everything at once. He exuded power and moved with an air of authority. The men on either side of him screamed of bodyguards and were similar to the werewolf she'd saved in height and build. They both had medium length

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dark hair and eyes, the differences between them being one was Hispanic and the other appeared to be Asian mixed with something else she couldn't place. None of them smiled.

"I felt your panic," the blond said. "What happened, Derek?"

"I did not panic," Derek scoffed at the notion. "I was shot. You felt my pain and the distress signal I involuntarily sent out as I weakened from the silver."

"I smelled the silver outside." The blond sniffed, then narrowed his eyes as he gazed into the open kitchen. "However, there is quite a bit of silver inside as well."

Juliana followed his gaze and noted he was studying the wood block on her kitchen counter that contained a variety of pure silver knives. "Only the best for the Van Alders," her mother liked to say. One of the knives was in the sink, probably still stained with Derek's blood.

She felt heat boring into the side of her face and turned to find the blond man glaring at her. "Who is the woman?" he asked, but his tone asked, "What does she know and where will we hide the body after killing her?"

Derek studied the angelic beauty who'd saved his life. She might not fear him—strange as that was—but the widening of her eyes clearly showed she feared Jason and his enforcers. She swallowed hard under the pack leader's scrutiny and he had to clench his hands at his sides to keep from reaching out to her. He wanted to soothe her, which was alarming to say the least. He'd never wanted to soothe another living being, especially not a human. There was no further proof needed that fate had thrown her in his path. Dammit.

"Derek." Jason's bark snagged his attention.

"This woman removed the bullet from me."

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Jason's eyebrow arched at that revelation before he returned his attention to the woman. "So you were shot while..."

Derek obliged with a frustrated sigh. "I was in wolf form and could not shift. She dug out the bullet and brought me inside after I shifted back."

"Who are you?" Jason asked the woman, stepping closer to her.

Derek balled up his fist but stood still, watching the exchange. He wouldn't challenge the pack leader unless he had to.

"My name's Juliana Van Alder," she answered in a trembling voice.

Juliana. Derek let the name roll through his mind. It fit, very prim and proper. Perfect for a ballerina. Wrong for him.

Jason tilted his head to the side, studying her. "I notice you have pure silver knives. Why?"

Juliana's brow creased with her frown. "They were a gift from my mother. Wh—" Her pretty blue eyes widened. "I didn't deliberately hurt Derek. If I'd known what he was, I would have never used a silver knife to remove the bullet."

"So you know the effect silver has on our kind? You've studied us?" The pack leader's eyes were narrow with suspicion.

"Well, no, I never thought werewolves were real, but you'd have to have been living under a rock not to know that part of the lore."

"You don't seem very surprised for a human who's just discovered werewolves exist," Jason countered.

Juliana straightened her back and stared him in the eye. "I suppose you'd prefer me to pee my pants and throw a fit?"

Jason's eyes registered surprise before he grinned, turning back toward Derek. "Who shot you?"

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“Two hunters,” Derek answered. “I don’t know if they both had silver bullets. At first they just seemed to be shooting at me because they thought...” Heat suffused Derek’s neck, creeping toward his face.

“They thought what?”

“They thought I was trying to get into the house to attack the woman.” He met Jason’s gaze, preferring the pack leader’s curious look over whatever he might see in Juliana’s eyes. “They shot at me, and I was hit. This woman came to my aid and ran them off.”

Jason nodded, then turned his attention back to Juliana. “I am indebted to you for protecting my pack mate. However, the hunters may return for you. Do you have somewhere safe you can go?”

Juliana’s face paled. “No. I won’t leave here.”

Derek forced himself to hold back a grin, impressed with her courage.

“Derek.” Jason tilted his head toward the patio and walked outside with his enforcers. Derek followed behind.

“This is a serious situation,” the pack leader advised as he turned to face him.

“The woman is no danger to our kind,” Derek responded. “She had the opportunity to allow me to die. Even after I shifted, she cared for me.”

“The hunters could return. If they had silver bullets, they most likely knew we were here. The pack must leave.”

Derek nodded, though the thought of leaving twisted his stomach. Leaving the North Carolina woods would mean leaving Juliana. “There were only two men. Were-Hunters usually travel in larger groups, and...” He walked over to the smashed flowerpot and sniffed. Nothing. Peering closer, he searched the surrounding area until he located the bullet first fired at him. “One of the men had regular bullets. I don’t think this was an intentional attack.”

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“So, what, one man just happened to have silver bullets?” Jason arched an eyebrow at him.

“He could have been superstitious. This is the week of the full moon.” Derek was grabbing at straws, but he didn’t want to leave Juliana behind just yet. Even if he didn’t want her to be his mate.

Jason sighed and looked inside the house to observe Juliana. “This woman seems a little too accepting of what she witnessed tonight,” he commented. “Most humans wouldn’t react so well.”

“You reacted well to it when you met Ming.”

“Yes, because we were soul mates.” He looked at Derek pointedly. “Why were you hanging around this woman’s home in wolf form?”

Derek met Jason’s stare but refrained from answering. What fate had planned for him wasn’t anyone’s business, not even his pack.

“Mercury, Rico.” Jason captured the attention of his enforcers. “The woman will need protection in case the hunters come back. Mercury, stay with her in the house. Rico, guard—”

“I will protect the woman,” Derek said, noticing the way Mercury’s amber eyes gleamed as they fell upon Juliana’s tempting figure. Pack mate be damned, he’d rip the man limb from limb if he entertained the thought of touching her.

Jason studied him. “You’ve made it well known how you dislike humans.”

“I stated I’d never mate with a human woman,” he clarified. “You make me sound like a racist. No harm will come to her in my care.”

“Mercury and Rico will guard the perimeter then.” Jason gestured with his head for the two enforcers to take up their positions patrolling the area. “There are no cops here. I assume anyone within hearing range of the shots would attribute them to normal hunting?”

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“There were silencers on the rifles.” Derek frowned, recalling the weapons. “They were some sort of modified rifles, the barrels larger than normal.”

“Modified for werewolf hunting, possibly?” Jason balled his fists up. “I’ll post guards at different points in the forest and order the rest of the pack to stay in their homes, far away from harm. If the hunters do come back for us, we’ll know our location is no longer safe.”

“We’ll leave North Carolina.”

“Yes.” Jason’s eyes softened. “She could come with us.”

“Why would the human come with us?” The question came out as a growl.

“Come on, Derek. You’ve been missing out on pack activities the last two moon cycles, now you’ve been shot outside the woman’s house. She just happens to have a big glass sliding door you can watch her through.” Jason shook his head. “Fate has a way of toying with a person. Whether you prefer human or not—”

“I am not mating with her, regardless what fate has in mind.” Screw her senseless, maybe, but he wasn’t keeping her.

Jason chuckled. “You’re staying inside with her, all alone, and it’s the week of the full moon. You don’t really have a choice if she’s the one. Stay in touch and be careful,” he called over his shoulder as he stepped down from the patio and shifted into his wolf form, running into the woods in a blur of silvery gray.

Derek walked back into the house and locked the sliding door behind him. When he looked at Juliana, he found her standing in the middle of the room, peering outside. Her beautiful face was marred with a frown of confusion. “What is it?”

“If you’re werewolves, why aren’t you naked when you change from wolf to man?”

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“Those are movie werewolves,” Derek answered, allowing a lascivious grin to spread across his mouth as he stepped closer. “Do you want me naked?”

His breath stilled in surprise as she reached out to trail her delicate fingertips down his torso. “It’d definitely be a sight worth seeing.”

All the blood in Derek’s body raced toward his shaft, pushing it out against the fabric of his pants. Juliana’s cheeks bloomed a rosy pink when she noticed. The eyes that rose to meet his were dilated and filled with yearning. When she traced her little pink tongue over her full bottom lip, he nearly burst through his zipper.

Allowing her fingers to graze just below his belt buckle, she asked, “Is all that for me?”

Chapter Three

Derek's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. Juliana fought off the urge to lick it, simultaneously wondering where the bold question had come from. She normally wasn't so forward, but there was something about the man that made her want to throw all sense of decency out the window.

Derek stepped forward, closing the distance between them. So close, his aura of raw masculinity rushed over her, stealing her breath. The man was a living, breathing fantasy. Shivers ran the length of Juliana's spine as he bent down to run his nose along her collarbone. "Little ballerinas shouldn't tempt big, bad wolves," he warned, his voice a husky whisper in her ear before he pushed away and walked past her, his footsteps falling harshly against the floor.

Blinking, Juliana turned to watch him as he crossed over to the kitchen area, putting space between them. His pupils were dilated, his breathing heavier, and his jaw clenched as tightly as his fisted hands. He desired her as badly as she desired him. So why was he fighting it? And if he was fighting it so hard, why was he still here?

"You appear to be in good physical shape," she commented, allowing her gaze to rove over the length of him. He was in damn good physical shape. She gave her head a shake to clear it of all the naughty little thoughts looking at him provoked. "Why didn't you leave with your...pack mates?"

A flash of something that seemed a lot like disappointment crossed over his eyes and Juliana wondered if she'd hurt his ego by questioning why he was still there. "I

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brought hunters to your door. It is my duty to see that you are not harmed because of my being here tonight.”

“Why were you here tonight? And the other nights?” He looked away and Juliana grinned, amused that despite his chocolate complexion, he could still blush. “You’ve been watching me for a while now.” The realization sent another shiver through her system. She supposed if any other man had done such a thing, she would have felt stalked, but the thought of Derek watching her dance night after night strangely turned her on.

“Maybe I’m a fan of the arts,” he answered with a shrug.

A daring idea crept into Juliana’s mind. “Well, if that’s the case, maybe you can help me.”

His dark eyes snapped to hers. “Help you what?”

“I need a partner to practice some of the moves.”

He swallowed again. “You don’t have a dance partner to practice with in a dance studio?”

“No.” The answer came out snappish and Juliana winced. It wasn’t Derek’s fault she’d ended up feeling like a prisoner to her talent and had to escape it all. No, she had a feeling Derek was nothing like the stuffy aristocratic Van Alders or the dancers she’d worked with in the theater. He seemed so wild and uninhibited, absolutely carefree. That, and the loneliness she’d sensed from him during his earlier visits, drew her to him, and overrode any fear a woman would normally have if faced with a man who could turn into an animal at will. “I’m not currently in any productions, but I still like to keep my skills sharp. Can you help me, please?”

“I’m not a dancer,” he advised, his voice low and rough.

“I don’t need another dancer, I just need a man.” Her heart revved with the confession. She needed a man, all right. Her body was tingling in places it hadn’t tingled in what felt like decades, just looking at the tall, sexy beast before her. She sensed his hesitancy, felt the refusal coming, and poked him where it hurt. “Unless the big, bad wolf is a fraidy cat.”

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Dark eyes flickering red, he strode forward, stopping before the *barre* attached to the mirrored wall. "What do you need me to do?"

"Dance with me," she whispered softly, easing into his arms. His body instantly tensed. "Relax, wolfie. I won't bite."

"I might," he said as she ran her hands up his chest, and heat pooled in her core at the thought. She'd always been straight-laced, but secretly had entertained wild fantasies that she knew would mortify her oh-so-proper family. Derek seemed like just the kind of man she could indulge in those fantasies with.

Gripping onto his shoulders, she hoisted herself up, wrapping her legs around his waist. "Hold on to me," she ordered. His large hands wrapped around her waist, the slight trembling in them indicating he wasn't doing much better than her in controlling his hunger.

"What is this move called?" His voice came out strained.

"Whatever you want it to be called." Juliana grinned lasciviously and pushed out her small breasts, ramming them right into his face before stretching her arms over her head. With her thighs gripping Derek's waist, she stretched out her legs and leaned back, confident his hands around her waist would hold her steady. She leaned back until she was completely spread eagle with her thighs clenched around him, locking her in place. The sharp intake of breath coming from Derek let her know he was turned on. Bolder than she'd ever felt in her life, she held the pose, but brought her hands to the bottom of her top. Slowly, she ran them up her torso, lingering over her breasts before raising her upper body.

Face to face with Derek, she took in the hungry eyes and clenched jaw. Then, before she lost her nerve, she freed herself of the tank top, leaving herself bare from the waist up. "You're a werewolf and a stranger, Derek, but I want you." She held his face in her hands and ground her core against him, feeling the evidence of his arousal. "Dance with me. You know all the moves."

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With a growl, Derek grabbed a fistful of the long hair at her nape and tugged her head back. Her back arched and he fastened his mouth onto a nipple, savagely pulling the rigid peak into his mouth. A spark of electricity jolted through Juliana's body from the contact and she cried out.

With a frustrated growl, Derek lowered her and backed away. "I'm too rough for you."

Realizing he'd misunderstood her cry, Juliana grabbed his arm and tugged him back to her. "If that was rough, then I definitely like it rough." His mouth parted to say something, no doubt a refusal, so she quickly kissed him, sliding her tongue into his mouth to block any reason he could think of to stop from coming out. He tasted of sin and freedom.

The rumble of pleasure coming from his throat spurred Juliana on and she broke the kiss to pull his T-shirt over his head. The masterpiece revealed looked like it had been carved out of hard marble, but covered in soft satin. She delighted in the contrast as she ran her fingers over the pecs and down the ridges of his six-pack. Derek didn't seem to breathe as she unsnapped his pants and lowered the zipper, struggling for a moment to get it over his erection. Once the task was completed, she blinked at what she'd exposed. He might be a wolf, but the man was hung like a horse.

Before she could recover from the shock of his sheer size, he ripped her shorts right off her body, her lace panties with them. Juliana gasped, looking at the scrap of material he dropped to the floor. It became clear to her she was about to have sex with a man she didn't know, a man who wasn't really a man, but a supernatural being. A man who could probably eat her alive if he chose to.

He must have sensed her hesitation because he tipped her chin up with a finger, forcing her to meet his dark gaze. "I do not make sweet love," he advised, voice strained with desire. "I have passionate, hard sex, but even that I do not have unless I am with a willing partner."

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Juliana swallowed, her knees weak from his bold admission. Most men would sweet talk, make promises, and drown her in flattery. Derek let his eyes give her all the compliments she needed and didn't lie about his intentions. He probably would never see her after the night was through, and would likely not remember her name, but he hungered for her now, and it was a raw hunger she craved.

She'd had the rich college graduates vying for her hand in marriage so they could become part of the Van Alder family, and the men looking for someone beautiful to adorn their arm. They smothered her in flowers, bathed her in sweet nothings. She was tired of sweet. Sweet was fake, part of a ploy. What Derek wanted to do was real, as real and natural as it came.

"I'm willing."

Derek raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as he kicked off his shoes and stepped out of the pants pooled around his ankles. His gaze slowly rolled over her body, leaving a trail of heat along the intimate places it touched. Juliana fought not to cover herself with her hands under his scrutiny.

"You appear bashful." Derek met her gaze. "You have been with men before?"

"Yes."

A flash of something dangerous flickered through his eyes and then his mouth crashed down upon hers, stealing the air from her lungs as he grabbed her hips and picked her up. She inhaled sharply as she realized she was poised over his shaft. "What about con—"

"Werewolves do not catch or spread disease, and if we breed I will take care of what is mine."

Juliana started to protest but before the words came, she was sliding down the long length of his erection. Standing, tilted slightly backward so his upper back lightly rested on the mirrored wall, Derek moved her up and down, and she gasped at the realization they were having sex standing up. It was like nothing she'd ever done before.

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Derek lifted and brought her down with ease, his panting the only sign of exertion. A tingle started at the point their bodies connected and spread through Juliana until she thought she'd scream. Gasping for air, she latched onto the reflection in the mirror. As if watching from outside her body, she saw herself bobbing up and down on Derek as he stood, the muscles in his hard body strained. He bent his head forward and drew a nipple into his mouth. The tingle inside her body grew as his tongue and teeth played with the bud, and when he bit down she lost it, screaming as her body exploded.

Then she was standing, her hands wrapped around the *barre*. Her knees gave, but Derek's strong arm wrapped around her waist, keeping her standing. "I've wanted to do this every night I've watched you dance," he said against her ear as he mounted her from behind and rammed his body into hers. Juliana tightened her grip on the *barre* as he pounded away inside her, each thrust bringing her closer to yet another explosive climax.

"Look at me," he ordered and she met his gaze in the mirror. "Watch me take you to where no other man has ever, could ever, take you."

There was a possessiveness in his voice, a sense of ownership in his eyes that revved Juliana's heart. The hands that cupped her breasts were powerful enough to crush bone, but he touched her with a controlled roughness designed to bring only pleasure, not pain. She didn't want those hands to leave her, those eyes to look away from her.

"Your body was designed for me," he said before another mind-blowing orgasm hit her and he growled his release, the sound challenging the ferocity of a lion's roar.

He pulled out of her and her knees instantly gave. Before she could sink to the floor, she was swept up into Derek's muscular arms. Without a word he carried her into her bedroom and laid her on her bed. Leaning over her, he brushed a strand of hair away from her brow and studied her. His eyes were soft as his gaze rove over her face. She knew she was

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breathing heavy and hoped she didn't look a fright, struggling for air like a guppy out of its tank.

"Did I hurt you in any way?"

His eyes were filled with too much concern for a man who just had hard sex. Hope flared to life in Juliana's chest as she realized a one-night stand with this man wouldn't be enough. "You didn't hurt me at all, Derek. In fact, that was the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced."

He lowered his head and brushed his lips against hers, gently caressing them. It was a sweet and gentle kiss from a man who claimed to be anything but. Juliana started to comment on it, but as he raised up, his eyes quickly hardened.

Abruptly, he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him before letting out a growl of rage.

Chapter Four

Derek stormed through the living area to retrieve his pants, growling the entire way. He pulled them on with more force than necessary while replaying what had just happened through his mind. The damn human had seduced him. *His mate*. He shuddered, damning himself for being so stupid. Letting the little head do the negotiation, he'd thought he could screw her one good time and get her out of his system, end of story. Had the big head—the one with a functioning brain—been doing the thinking, he'd have never given in to temptation. He would have realized one taste of her wouldn't ever be enough. Now, for as long as he lived, he would crave the damn woman.

You might as well give in and give her the moon vow.

Derek tensed, cursing the errant thought. So what if he ached for the woman, heart, body, and soul? He'd worked too hard building the walls that protected him from pain and sorrow. Juliana would soften him, as evidenced by the way he'd carried her to bed, kissed her softly. It had hit him then that he cared about the human. The thought of causing her pain actually caused him pain, and they hadn't even exchanged the vow. What would he be reduced to if they did?

"Derek?"

She stood in the doorway of her bedroom, her lean body wrapped in a silk robe that did nothing to hide her curves. Swallowing hard, he reminded himself that exchanging a moon vow with her couldn't happen. "What?"

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She jerked slightly at the harsh tone of his response, and guilt gnawed at his conscience. “You’re angry with me.”

Unable to think of a reply to that observation, Derek turned away and picked up his shirt. Concentrating on pulling it over his head, he tried to ignore the scent of her. She smelled of soft, flowery perfume and sex. She smelled of him. The knowledge of why she now bore his scent had him hardening, ready for round two. Dammit.

“I deserve to know why you’re mad.”

“On what grounds?” Derek turned toward her, his arms folded in front of him, his eyes—he was sure—red. A moon vow hadn’t even been exchanged and the woman was already acting like a nagging wife. It was time he set her straight on one thing: Derek Kingston was not a wolf who would be tamed. “I brought hunters to your door, so it is my duty to protect you. That is all I owe to you, lady. A quick fuck doesn’t grant you access to my psyche, and it damn sure doesn’t make you anything more than just a piece of ass.”

Juliana’s mouth dropped open in shock. Her eyes instantly watered, but she didn’t shed a tear. Closing her mouth, she pinned him with a lethal glare and turned on her heel, stomping back into the bedroom.

Derek wrestled with his conscience while he heard her slamming drawers. Part of him wanted to walk in there, take her in his arms, and apologize before kissing her senseless, but the part of him he’d conditioned for protection warned him away. The closer he got to her, the more likely he was to give her a moon vow. Once he did that, she’d have control over him and he simply could not allow that.

She stomped out of the bedroom and into the small bathroom with a small bundle of clothes in her hand, and slammed the door behind her. A moment later, the sound of the shower taunted Derek with images of her naked under the spray.

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You could be in there with her if you hadn't purposely hurt her feelings.

He told his inner voice to go fuck itself and glanced around, looking for something to do to take his mind off the tempting images crowding his head. There wasn't a television in the room, and he didn't want to chance the stereo. His luck, the first song would be *Freak Me*.

He walked over to the bookshelf in the corner of the room and perused the books shelved there. There were books on ballet—no surprise there—as well as other dancing styles filling one whole shelf. The shelf above it held a variety of nonfiction hardcovers. Native American folklore, urban myths, shamanism, cryptozoology, and psychic studies made up the bulk of the selections. The third shelf held a few books about wolves, and a book of dream interpretation. The other books lining the shelves had something or another to do with cultures around the world. Derek frowned, pulling out one of the cryptozoology books. He noticed the chapter on werewolves was dog-eared.

Arrogant son of a bitch. In his case, the slam was probably literal. Juliana scrubbed her body with a pink loofah, working the grainy magnolia and honey scented exfoliating wash into her skin. She hoped it washed off every last trace of evidence she'd allowed the jerk inside her body.

What was I thinking?

Groaning at her stupidity, Juliana hung the loofah from the shower hook and grabbed the sweet smelling shampoo. She already knew the answer to the question. She hadn't been thinking. She'd been *feeling*, feeling way too much for a stranger. A stranger with four legs and a tail. Goodness.

As she washed and conditioned her long hair, she recalled the snatches of dreams she'd had since her last birthday. A big, black wolf, so lonely and shy despite its formidable appearance. She'd been drawn to the beast and even while

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awake thought of its too-human eyes, so full of longing. She'd been a little stunned the first time she'd seen what looked like the same wolf watching her through her glass door, but then a sense of contentment had come over her. It was as if the pull she'd felt to leave the stage and hide away in the little house outside the North Carolina woods had led her to the wolf for a purpose, and the dreams she'd had of the wolf—and the gorgeous man—were some sort of sign. If not for those dreams, she probably would have fainted the moment she saw Derek shift.

"Maybe that would have been a better reaction," she muttered as she stepped out of the shower and dried off. If she'd been afraid of him, she would have never had sex with him, shared a beautiful act that he'd thrown right back in her face. She shuddered as she recalled how paltry he'd made what they'd done seem. It had felt like a slap in the face, especially after how sweet he'd been...

Juliana stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. The corner of her mouth turned up into a grin. Derek wasn't as unaffected as he wanted her to believe. He did care for her, so much he was afraid. The sly wolf had purposely offended her to push her away. Why?

She thought back to the dreams, the sadness in his eyes. The longing she'd felt from him as he lay outside her door. Derek wasn't the untouchable wolf he pretended to be. Someone had hurt him once before, and he was terrified of someone hurting him again. Her grin transitioning to a full smile, Juliana straightened her shoulders and grabbed the doorknob. She'd always enjoyed a challenge, and Derek was a prize worth fighting for.

Head held high, she stepped out into the hallway and sauntered into the living area, stopping when she spotted Derek relaxing in the lounge chair next to her bookshelf, one of her cryptozoology books in his hands. His attention was so riveted to the book, he didn't seem to notice her.

"Good book?"

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He glanced up and froze. His lips parted as his eyes slowly roamed over her naked body, the heat emanating from the reddish orbs leaving a trail of warmth over her skin. His Adam's apple bobbed on a hard swallow, but still he didn't speak.

Juliana struggled not to laugh—or pump her fist in the air in victory—as she moved forward and retrieved the book, aware her breasts dangled before him as she picked it up. He'd had it opened to the section on werewolves. “Studying up on your history?”

He blinked and the dazed look of lust in his eyes simmered before twisting into something accusatory. “Were you studying up on my history?”

Uneasy under his glare, Juliana returned the book to the shelf and shrugged. “Until tonight I really wasn't sure if werewolves were real, or just...” She allowed herself to trail off, unsure how to explain the thoughts she'd had in the past year.

“You've dreamed of me, haven't you?”

Now it was her turn to stare open-mouthed.

“Dammit.” Derek leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his gaze focused on the floorboards. “Get dressed.”

Juliana blinked, coming out of her surprise just in time to realize what was happening. “Look at me, Derek.”

“Juliana, get dressed now.”

Her name coming from his mouth weakened her knees. The fear that she would never hear her name on his lips after this night seized her heart. “Look. At. Me.”

“Dammit, Juliana, go get dr—”

She gripped his shoulders and pushed him back in the chair, promptly straddling his lap. His eyes widened in shock and his mouth opened, no doubt to order her off, as his hands gripped her waist, ready to push her away.

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Juliana swooped in before he could get a word out, sealing his mouth with her own, pressing her tongue deep inside to muffle his refusal. She pressed harder against him as his hands pushed at her waist. A heartbeat later, his hands quit pushing. He pulled her closer, groaning as her core rubbed over his hard length. Juliana smiled against his soft lips, reveling in the taste of victory. "Take me to bed, Derek."

Without objection, he stood with her legs wrapped around his waist and carried her into the bedroom. Juliana gasped as she was dropped onto the bed, but before she could say a word, Derek unzipped his pants and climbed on top of her. "Damn you," he growled before thrusting into her.

Wet and ready, Juliana felt no pain as he pounded in and out of her, but she found it difficult to breathe as his speed increased, growing more rough. The bed rocked, the mattress creaking under the assault, and Juliana dug her nails into Derek's shoulders, wrapping her legs around his to keep from being pushed right out of the bed. Derek rose to his knees and grabbed her legs, raising her pelvis off the bed as he rammed into her harder. Wave after wave of pleasure washed over her until a scream of pleasure tore from her throat. Derek growled, falling over her in a heap.

Juliana concentrated on her breathing, bringing it back under control as she stroked Derek's back underneath his T-shirt. His breathing was as labored as hers. "That was—"

"A mistake." Derek rolled off her and sat up.

Juliana sat up next to him, her heart in her throat. Anger simmered inside, but she fought to keep it out of her tone. She knew he wanted her, could feel it with every fiber of her being. "How can you say that? You know about my dreams, which means you have them too, doesn't it?"

He looked away.

"Derek, you want me. You know you want me, and I want you. So what if it's crazy? You're a werewolf. I know. I understand. I accept it." She stroked his back, bit her lip when

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she felt him tense under her hand. “This is supposed to be. I dreamed of you, quit my run in a Broadway performance to travel here, following this signal you seemed to be emitting. It’s like we were meant to m—”

“We were! We’re soul mates,” Derek snapped, pushing her hand away to stand up. He yanked up his pants and tugged the zipper up. “This is the week of the full moon and at some point the moon is going to draw a vow out of us, and we’ll be mated for life.”

Juliana blinked, not understanding what vow he was speaking of, or why he seemed so upset about it. “Are you talking about a marriage vow?”

“Something like that.” He closed his eyes and shook his head as he ran a hand over his short hair.

“Why are you mad, then, if we’re soul mates?”

“Because I don’t want it,” he snapped, his eyes glowing red as they fixed on her. “I don’t want you.”

Chapter Five

“Derek!” Juliana tightened the sash on her robe as she stomped into the living room to find the werewolf staring past the sliding door, studying the night sky beyond. “Turn around.”

“I’m not arguing with you, woman.” He turned his head to leer at her, but didn’t turn his body around. “Nor am I falling for another of your ploys.”

Juliana fisted her hands on her hips and felt the frown lines forming between her brows. “What ploys?”

“You’re not going to rile me up to get me in the bed again.”

Juliana’s jaw dropped. Never in her life had she made an unwanted advance on a man, and despite whatever Derek said, he did want her. “That’s absurd. I suppose next you’ll say I raped you?”

Narrowing his eyes, Derek turned fully and moved a few steps so he could lean against the wall, his thumbs hooked into his front pockets. “Look, despite whatever dreams we’ve had of each other, whatever is happening between us, I have no intention of giving you a moon vow. I’ll fight the moon with every ounce of strength I have.”

Juliana didn’t bother asking what exactly a moon vow was, or how one could fight something that sounded so mystical. Instead, she went to the heart of the matter. “Why do you say you don’t want me when your every action proves differently?”

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Derek growled, tightening his hands into fists as he walked over to the chair and sank into it. “Just let it drop, woman.”

“No.” Straightening her shoulders, she raised her chin defiantly. “You brought hunters to my house, put me in danger, and have insulted me repeatedly. You at least owe me a reason as to why.”

His eyes blazed fire, his mouth parted—to verbally rip her to shreds, no doubt—but just as quickly closed. “I guess I do.”

“Huh?” Juliana blinked. “Did you just concede?”

Derek’s lips twitched at the corners as he shook his head. “It’s hard to believe I thought you a fragile, delicate little mouse.”

Juliana smiled, sure she’d received a compliment. “Don’t change the subject now. You owe me an explanation.”

With a heavy exhale, he leaned back against the chair, resting his head along the back of it. “If we get too close emotionally, the moon will pull a vow out of us. It’s a kind of magical binding that will mate us together for life.”

“I gathered that.” Juliana sat on the floor, folding her legs Indian style. She made sure the robe covered her adequately. If Derek was in the mood to actually answer her questions, she wanted to keep him focused on doing just that. “What I don’t understand is why you don’t want it. If we are truly soul mates, as you say, shouldn’t we want to be with each other?”

Derek looked at her pointedly. “If we exchange the vow, you’ll become a werewolf too.”

Juliana frowned as she studied Derek’s expression. His lips were compressed into a stern line, his eyes deadly serious. From the look on his face, being a werewolf was a bad thing. Yet he’d seemed at ease with being one before. She supposed he could think the idea of becoming what he was could be a horrifying thought for her, and she was sure most humans would have freaked out at the thought. Strangely, she didn’t.

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She glanced at the bookshelf which held several books about wolves, cryptids, and numerous cultures. Other than dancing, which itself was a cultural thing, she'd always been interested in what she viewed as other worlds. And she loved wolves. Always had. Returning her gaze to Derek, she realized why. Her whole life had been spent preparing for this man. Her soul mate. "And?"

His eyes widened, then he blinked twice. "And? Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I suppose it makes sense if I'm supposed to be your soul mate, I should be what you are."

"Juliana..." He scrubbed a large hand down his face and looked up at the ceiling as if asking heaven for answers. "You're a ballerina, not a fighter."

"So, because I'm a dancer, I can't be a werewolf?"

He looked at her, his gaze roving over her face, searching for clues as he shook his head. "You said you left a Broadway production. Broadway, Juliana. Do you really want to leave that world to come run around in the woods with my pack?"

Juliana laughed, enjoying the look of complete confusion the action made on Derek's face. "I couldn't help but notice your clothes are designer, your shoes Italian leather. You don't get money for such things by roaming around in the forest all day and night. And you're not always a wolf."

Derek glanced down at his pants. "Your point?"

"You have a job, a life outside your wolf form." She tilted her head and studied him. "What is your profession, Derek? I hardly see you sitting behind a desk."

"I'm a contractor," he muttered, "here in North Carolina. I'm not on a stage in New York performing in front of hundreds of people every night, people who could inadvertently discover what I truly am."

"You're concerned for my safety living as a werewolf in New York?" Juliana grinned. "Have you ever been to New

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York? There are taxi drivers there far weirder than werewolves. I'd blend in just fine."

Derek's mouth twitched, but he quickly regained his composure. "I'm serious."

"Yeah, too serious." Juliana sighed. "If you recall, I told you I left Broadway. Left as in 'Goodbye stage'."

"Why?" Derek's frown matched the concern in his eyes. "You love to dance."

"That's right. I love to dance." Juliana sighed. "I hate to perform, though. I hate to have my passion twisted into something commercial and..." She shrugged. "It's hard to explain. I just know that dancing here in this little house far away from my family and the stage is so much more fulfilling than anything I've experienced in the spotlight these past few years."

"Your family pushes you to do productions you don't want to be part of?"

"They always have." She laughed, the sound small and devoid of joy. "You aren't the only person who looks at me and only sees a ballerina. I love to dance, but it doesn't define me. I could walk away from the stage forever and not shed a tear." She met his gaze. "I just want to be free."

"Like a wolf."

"Why not?"

Derek pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "No. No, Juliana, no. There are other ways to be free. Just stay off the stage, don't go back to New York. You don't have to become a wolf."

"You seem to enjoy being one."

"I love my wolf spirit," he said, shifting his gaze back to her. "But I've always been a fighter. It's instinctive in me, and I'm damn good. What happened tonight...I've never been shot before. Had I not been so focused on you, it would have never happened."

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Anger surged through Juliana's chest. "You're blaming me for you getting shot? That's what this is all about?"

"No!" Derek growled, bunching his fists up. "You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me."

"If I exchange the moon vow with you, you'll be bound to me forever. And if I lose you..." He ground his teeth together hard enough for the indentation to show in his cheek. "I can't go through that kind of pain again."

Juliana's heart constricted in her chest and she quickly crawled over to Derek, sitting at his feet. She grasped his hands in her smaller ones. "Who did you lose?"

"My mother and my sister." He sniffed twice as his eyes grew watery. "They were such good women. My sister...she was so timid for a wolf. And my mother, she could fight, but she was so petite."

"What happened?" Juliana stroked his hands with her thumbs, gently squeezing them to offer support.

"Hunters. Hunters tortured and killed them just because they could shift into wolves." He sniffed again, his eyes dark and feral. "At the time I was an enforcer for the previous pack leader. It was my duty to guard him during the attack. I wasn't there for them and they died horribly."

Juliana blinked against tears threatening to fall. She had to swallow hard before she could speak. "It's not your fault, Derek."

"Even if that's true, it doesn't bring them back. It doesn't take the images of their dead, mutilated bodies out of my head." A silent tear traveled the length of his face. "And if I exchange a moon vow with you and you die, I'll feel it on a level that will surely drive me mad. I can't do it."

"I'm stronger than I look, Derek." She grabbed his face and forced him to look her in the eye. "Don't throw away a chance on much deserved happiness out of fear." She kissed him, tasting the salt of her own tears mixing with his.

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His hands grappled at her robe, pulling her closer to him, returning her kiss with the same urgent need that had overcome them twice before. Then she felt herself falling backward. Derek stepped over her as she landed on her rump, and marched onto the patio where he threw his head back and let out an earth-shattering howl filled with a mixture of sorrow and rage.

Juliana watched as within seconds a large brown wolf arrived and shifted into the Hispanic man she'd seen earlier with Derek's pack leader. Then Derek shifted into his wolf form and took off into the woods.

He left her without a goodbye.

"Well, look who came back with his tail tucked between his legs."

Derek looked up to see Felicia, the sexy redhead he'd bedded more times than he could count, sauntering over. She wore skintight jeans and a white ribbed tank top that clearly showed her lack of a bra. There once was a time the sight would have Derek hard in a second. Not now, and he feared, not ever again. He shifted uncomfortably on the step he'd been sitting on the past hour as she knelt in front of him. Suddenly the thought of her hands touching him caused a cramping sensation in his abdomen.

"I heard you found your soul mate." She grinned as she traced circles up his thigh. The grin turned into a wicked smile when Derek's hand clamped around her wrist and removed her offending touch. "Why don't you just go back to her? The moon is going to rip a vow out of you anyway."

"Go away, Felicia." Derek shoved the pretty but mischievous she-wolf away and rose from his perch on his back porch steps to walk past her.

"You're being stupid, Derek."

"Whether that's true or not, it's none of your concern." He glanced at her for a moment, then went back to staring at the

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moon. He'd left Juliana just before dawn, but her face hadn't left his mind for one second since. He'd run away like a scared child, left Rico to protect her if the hunters came back—with stern orders to not even think about thinking about her in any way sexual.

“Of course it's my concern. We're pack, and our pack is dying out.”

Derek scratched his head, tired from lack of sleep and too much going on in his head. He didn't need this argument right now. Especially when he knew it was one he'd lose.

In recent months the pack had noticed something very disturbing. Soul mates produced offspring far more frequently than wolves who just had sex with each other for the pleasure of it, or tried to intentionally breed with partners the moon didn't assign to them. The previous pack leader had even passed a breeding law, forcing wolves to breed amongst themselves whether they wanted to or not, and it hadn't produced many offspring. There weren't many wolves in the pack who'd exchanged moon vows, and the pack was hurting for it. They needed to multiply or face dying off. For him to meet his soul mate and not exchange a moon vow would be an act of betrayal to his pack.

Derek shook his head, disgusted by his own fear, furious with his predicament. He knew the only reason Jason didn't have him under guard was because the pack leader thought one couldn't beat the moon vow. Derek was determined to prove him wrong. He would excommunicate himself from the pack, even if he had to live with the void in his soul forever, and run as far from Juliana as he could. With enough distance constantly kept between them, he would beat the moon vow. Even if his pack—his family—hated him for it.

“Derek. You love her. Just give in.”

He shook his head, turned to tell her he was leaving, but the words died on his lips as he felt a jolt of rage-coated fear like nothing he'd ever felt before. Juliana was in danger.

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Juliana tugged the sheets off her bed, determined to wash Derek's scent out of them. Amazingly, she'd been able to cry herself to sleep after he'd left. Not surprisingly, she'd dreamed of him the whole time. She imagined she always would. After all, she'd dreamed of him before they'd met. Now that she knew his scent and taste, how could she ever stop thinking of the man? Disgusted, she tossed the sheets onto the floor and reached for the pillows, ready to rid them of the cases.

He'd left her. No goodbye. No promise of return. Just left.

Rico had stuck his head in the door to introduce himself and explain he'd be watching over her in case the men who'd shot Derek weren't just random hunters who happened to have silver bullets. She'd told him to go away, to tell Derek to watch over her, but he'd crossed his muscular arms over his tree-trunk chest and told her there wasn't a chance in hell of that happening. So she'd stomped into her bedroom, slammed the door and promptly cried herself to sleep.

She'd always believed in the concept of soul mates, but she hadn't been prepared for meeting hers. Who would have thought finding a soul mate could hurt so much? The worst part was she couldn't even be mad at him. He'd lost his mother and his sister in an attack, an attack he feared she would be a victim of if she exchanged a vow with him and became a werewolf. Only a heartless, self-absorbed person would be mad at him. All she could do was hurt for him, and hope he allowed himself to love again.

The sound of shattering glass captured Juliana's attention. She whipped her head toward her closed door and heard shouting and growling coming from her living room, then a sharp yelp followed by a howl of pain. Heart in throat, she ran out of her bedroom and came to a halt as she saw Rico lying on the floor in his wolf form, a puddle of blood leaking over the floorboards. The same hunter who'd shot Derek earlier stood

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over Rico, his rifle pointed at the wolf's trembling body as he looked at her with eyes begging for help.

Another man, this one blond, tall, and thin, pointed a smaller gun at her. His eyes were dark, unmerciful. The eyes of a killer. "You know, Bob, I don't think this lady was an unfortunate victim caught up in a werewolf attack at all. I think she's a wolf-whore."

Chapter Six

Derek raced from his backyard, through the woods, and into the clearing leading to Juliana's house as fast as he could push his wolf form. The entire time he begged The White Wolf, the mystical wolf mother who guarded over all the wolf packs, to forgive him his idiotic notion of fighting the pull of the moon and save the woman he loved.

He'd never leave her. He'd give her the moon vow. He'd give her anything. He'd marry her in a human wedding ceremony if she wanted. He'd do anything just as long as he could make love to her again. Not hard sex. He would hold her, cherish her, love her long and gentle. *Please, White Wolf, please protect her.*

He heard a scream as he reached the steps and knew he would have screamed himself in human form. Instead he howled in rage as he bounded up the steps and raced over the deck to leap through the large hole in the shattered glass door.

He skidded to a stop, blinking as he took in the scene before him. The heavy man who'd shot him earlier lay unconscious on the floor. Rico lay bleeding in wolf form, obviously shot with silver, and Juliana...

"Well, look who came back," she said through tightly gritted teeth as she stood with her foot in a blond man's back. His arm was twisted behind him, held tightly in her grasp. There was a loud pop and the man screamed. The same scream Derek had heard as he'd neared the house. "You just going to stare at me or help? Rico's bleeding out."

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Derek shook his head to snap himself out of his stupor and called upon his human form. His surprise could be dealt with later. His pack mate was in trouble. “Can you hold that man while I dig the bullet out of Rico?”

“No need.” She let go and the man fell forward, crying out in pain. “Broke both his legs and arms.”

Derek’s jaw dropped as he studied the man’s crippled limbs. She had broken all of them. His little ballerina. What the hell?

“I guess I’ll get the bullet out of Rico.”

“No.” Derek shook his head again, unsure he’d ever be able to wrap his mind around what he was seeing. “I’ll do it. Some pack mates will be here soon to help us clean this up. Jason will feel Rico’s pain.”

As if on cue, howls sounded in the distance.

“It’s a damn good thing your neighbors didn’t call the police.” Jason shook his head. “I’m sure the hunters did some good screaming while you beat them to a pulp.”

Juliana grinned as the pack leader laughed. She couldn’t help the smugness, knowing she’d blown his—not to mention Derek’s—perception of her to pieces. “Yeah, I guess having neighbors who just don’t bother to concern themselves with what goes on in other people’s homes can be a good thing. What will you do with them?” She nodded her head in the direction of the woods where Jason’s bodyguards had taken the hunters.

“We’ll take care of them.” His eyes grew dark, far darker than green eyes should grow, before flashing red for a second.

Juliana swallowed hard, knowing the men were probably already dead.

“I’ve set up guards around the perimeter, plenty enough that there’s no way in hell anyone else is getting in this house. They’ll stay until you get what you need and leave.” He

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stepped forward so he could invade her space. “And I’ll drag both of you out of here myself if you’re not out of here within the next hour.” He fixed her with a hard stare, then stepped through the shattered glass door, shifting into wolf form before running toward the woods.

Juliana took a deep breath and turned toward Derek, who’d just finished scrubbing up the last of the blood from the floor. He carried the bucket of soapy water and sponges to the sink and made quick work of cleaning them out. “Clean up many scenes like this?”

He turned off the taps and dried his hands on a dishtowel before turning toward her, his hip resting against the sink. His eyes were sad, haunted. “It comes with being a wolf.”

Juliana wracked her brain for something to say, something to take away his pain, but could come up with nothing more than, “I’m sorry you lost your mother and sister so horribly.”

“So am I.” He closed his eyes. “I’m more sorry I almost lost you because I was a coward.”

Juliana’s heart kicked in her chest. “You are?”

“I love you, Juliana.” He opened his eyes again and they were coated with raw emotion. “I couldn’t have gone on if I’d lost you without you knowing that. If those men...” He frowned. “How in the hell did you beat the shit out of them like that?”

Juliana laughed out loud, amused by the wide eyed look of astonishment on his face. “Didn’t you notice the books on Japanese and other Asian cultures?”

“Yeah...” The frown lines marring his forehead deepened.

“Well, I just love my foreign cultures, and martial arts is really big in some of them. Actually, there are lots of non-Asian cultures who also have some pretty impressive combat techniques.”

Derek blinked, then laughed. “You really are more than just a ballerina, aren’t you?”

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She nodded, sobering. "I can handle myself, Derek. You don't have to worry about me."

"I'll never stop worrying about you." He walked across the kitchen area until he stood before her, and cupped her jaw in his hand. "But I won't run away from you, or what I feel for you ever again."

A strange tingling started at Juliana's toes and quickly traveled up her body. "What—"

"It's time." Derek smiled as a beam of moonlight shone through the doorway, brighter than any beam of light Juliana had seen before. "Juliana, I give you freely my heart and soul for your keeping, to hold in your hands from this night forward."

Juliana's eyes watered as she realized this must be the vow. The tingling sensation in her body grew hot as words came from nowhere and poured from her mouth. "Derek, I take your heart and soul into my body, and in turn, gift you with my love, my breath, my very being."

Derek's eyes grew wet. "I promise to live each moment only for you, and to cherish each second of your existence."

"I promise to live only for you, and to die without your existence."

Derek took both her hands in his. "I choose you, Juliana, as the bearer of my children, and the owner of my heart."

"I choose you, Derek, as the father of my children, and the keeper of my soul."

"By the light of the moon, I become one with you, Juliana."

"By the light of the moon, I become one with you, Derek."

Scorching hot pain blazed across Juliana's right palm and she jerked her hands out of Derek's, noticing him do the same thing. A crescent shape glowed in her palm. "What is this?"

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Derek held her hand to his mouth and kissed the half moon shape, his cool lips soothing the burn. “The mark of the moon. We’ve exchanged the moon vow and will be joined as one for eternity.”

Juliana smiled, her heart full of joy, and kissed the man she loved. “So what happens now?”

“Now, we pack up what you need and move you in to my house for the night. The whole pack will be leaving the area for good soon, though. We can’t risk more hunters coming.” The joy in his eyes fled. “Juliana, you might be better off not seeing your family much. If they find out—”

She placed a finger over his lips and grinned. “Don’t you worry. I’ve spent my whole adult life dodging my parents and keeping secrets from them. Besides,” she added, “Mr. and Mrs. Van Alder will probably promptly die of shock when they find out their daughter has married a black man who wears T-shirts instead of tuxedos, and isn’t a member of one of New York’s finest families.”

He groaned. “I’m in for a lot of fun, aren’t I?”

“Oh, yes.” She laughed. “No matter how they react, it doesn’t matter. You’re my soul mate. My life is with you.”

“And mine with you.” He kissed her forehead and pulled her close, resting his jaw on top of her head as she snuggled against his chest.

“Derek?”

“Hmm?”

She shivered, a tiny sliver of fear creeping in. “Do you have to bite me now?”

“The moon vow changes you into a werewolf, but you have to wait until the next full moon to shift shape the first time.” He chuckled, then dropped his voice to a low, sexy tone. “But I can bite you anytime you want.”

“Well, Jason did give us an hour. I think there’s some time left before he comes to drag us out of here.”

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A howl sounded from the deck and they turned their heads to see a gorgeous white wolf standing there. It blinked an amethyst colored eye and ran away, disappearing before it reached the cover of the forest.

Juliana gasped. "What was that?"

"The White Wolf," Derek answered, smiling from ear to ear. "She has given us a blessing of love and happiness."

He gazed down at her, his eyes blazing red with desire. "I've never truly made love to a woman, but I'll go as slow and gentle as you like. I'll do whatever you ask."

"Just love me, Derek." She kissed him long and hard, grinning against his mouth as she realized the man may try to go slow and gentle, but it just wasn't in him. And she wouldn't have it any other way.

About the Author

Crystal-Rain Love is a romantic suspense, paranormal romance, and contemporary romance author. She lives in Kentucky with her three children and a variety of pets, big and small. When not writing, she can be found reading, watching *Supernatural*, or spending time with her family.

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