

Black Rose

Sandra Jones
MIDNIGHT
Cravings

Midnight Cravings
by Sandra Jones

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Stephon was out of breath from running. His sides heaved as he pulled air into his empty lungs. The chase always tortured him, made him half-crazy until he overexerted himself to the point of injury, illness, or death.

"Zander!" He coughed. Nausea rolled over him.

His brother was out of sight. The others bayed in the darkness, not far behind.

The sky rumbled overhead and a flash of lightning illuminated the stretch of terrain ahead. He didn't need any help to see, however. His lupine sense of sight and hearing was keenly attuned to his quarry. And what he couldn't see or hear, he could smell. His stomach squeezed with hunger. The coppery-sweet aroma of fresh blood drew him like no other force.

Another burst of lighting came and went and then he spotted her. Curled beside the lake, her pale naked body formed the shape of an egg with her long legs tucked in and her arms draped protectively around herself. When he reached her side, he noted the dirt smeared all over her skin—an ill-placed effort to cover the scent. She wept, face hidden under long dirty hair.

"Matia mou," he heard his voice say. My eyes.

Her face tilted.

He meant to reach for her but instead he struck out. His human hand turned into a paw, fingers tipped with claws. Man no more.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Midnight Cravings

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

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Dedication

For Scott.

Thanks for all the moonlit nights—past and future.

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Chapter One

"You have no clothes, Audrey."

"Then I guess, I'll just have to go naked for a week."

"What will you wear when you leave your villa?

Goatskins?" Her friend and photographer, Rosalind Waterhouse, lowered her green-rimmed reading glasses to glare.

Audrey Channing burst into laughter and sloshed wine on the table. "Ooops!" She quickly caught the spill, sopping it with her napkin, just as it was about to dribble into Ros's lap. She grinned. "Hey, maybe we could catch the shepherd with the goats we passed on the way in. He ought to be in the village by now."

Ros closed the menu she'd been studying, and shook her head. "We're in Greece, your luggage is in Chicago and all you can do is laugh about it. I don't get you, girlfriend."

Audrey patted her hand. "Everything will be fine. I have my carry-on, cell phone, passport, and money. And we found the villas." If the mouth-watering aroma of meat on a grill was any indication, the restaurant would be fine, too. Worse comes to worst, she could always borrow a few outfits from Ros, who was only a couple of sizes bigger, and cinch them with a belt.

"I don't know how you can be so damned enthusiastic. Ian is screwing you and you know it." She pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

If anyone had a right to negativity in the world of journalism, Audrey supposed Ros deserved the honor. After all, Ros had been a top shutterbug in the eighties—an award winning photographer. Then her husband, a war correspondent, died in crossfire in the Gulf War, and ever since she'd bounced from partner to partner, unable to work with any writer for long.

Audrey knew exactly how she felt. Which was why she'd asked her editor to let the forty-something Ros fill her ex-fiance's shoes—when he'd taken another job behind the camera at a rival magazine.

Ros leaned back in her chair and exhaled a puff of smoke. "When Ian told you he was sending you to Greece, he didn't bother to tell you that you'd be stuck on a mountainside in the middle of nowhere, did he?"

A waiter approached with another bottle of wine. They hadn't requested it. Audrey glanced over her shoulder. Two elderly men sat at a table in the corner—deep in conversation.

Who ordered it? She didn't know the language to ask. After her questioning glance at Ros, all she got in response was a shrug.

"Ian never really said where we'd be staying." However, her boss and longtime friend *could've* corrected her when she'd babbled on about how much fun it would be to swim in the Mediterranean and visit all the hot nightclubs on the islands. "Besides we should be prepared for anything. It's part of the job." Her head spun slightly, thanks to her empty stomach.

"Oh, puh-leez, Katie Couric—gimmie a break. Why are you so damned optimistic?" Ros smashed her cigarette in a glass ashtray.

Audrey smiled and picked up her stylus to make a note in her PDA. *Constantina Restaurant and Bar beside Villas Della Luna. Quiet. Locals only. Very nice red wine.*

The waiter returned with a cutting board loaded with cheeses.

"At least they have good service, eh?" Ros nodded thanks to the waiter and snagged a bite. "Excellent cheese."

Someone was ordering the stuff. Audrey couldn't see behind Ros. She took another look at the bar. The bartender was older than their waiter, who must've been pushing seventy. He set two beer bottles on the bar, but he had no customers that Audrey could see.

"So like I was saying, you got screwed on this assignment. I can't imagine anyone wanting to vacation here. Are you sure Ian's not out for revenge or something?"

"Revenge?"

"Or a grudge maybe. You know, since you dumped Paul and he went off to work for *Conde Nast*."

She put down her stylus. "I didn't dump Paul. He broke off our engagement—not me. Ian knows all about it, and he doesn't blame us. It wasn't my fault." She took a square of hard cheese, sniffed it, and popped it in her mouth. *Salty, pungent...mmmmm—Kefalograviera.*

Ros pushed the menu toward her. "Anything worth eating in there?"

The menu was in Greek, naturally. "I can't read it. Sorry." Audrey knew French, some Italian, and was fluent in Spanish, but nothing else. "I should've packed my pocket translator in my carry-on." It was the first and last time she'd ever make that mistake.

As Audrey opened the menu, Ros continued to grumble about their destination, Arcadia. Remote and hilly, with both forests and plains, wild and rugged. The last place either of them expected or wanted.

What Audrey wanted was hot sex and a good time. And to forget.

She wouldn't hold her breath for any of her wishes in this lonely place.

"What the hell?" Ros murmured.

Audrey broke her concentration from the incomprehensible Greek alphabet in the restaurant menu. The waiter again. This time he had a tray full of covered dishes. A boy followed him, carrying another cumbersome tray. His gaze darted shyly from Audrey when she looked up.

The pair hurriedly set plates of steaming food on the table, and the waiter gestured to eat.

"Uh, thank you. Thanks." Ros beamed and the two bustled away to the kitchen. "Write that down in your notes, girly."

Audrey shook her head. "They know who we are."

"Those two? No way."

"Somebody told them. Happens all the time. I just can't figure out who our benefactor is."

She hadn't flashed any ID or anything else showing she wrote travel reviews for *OutOnALimb.com*. As soon as the taxi

driver had pulled away, they'd checked in at the villas' office where they had reservations.

Audrey selected a salad loaded with olives and grabbed her fork. "Someone at corporate must've slipped up when they booked the trip. Then somebody from the villa probably told the whole village to expect us, as small as this place is."

"Maybe the restaurant treats every customer like this. The waiter's a sweet old man."

"The two men in the corner have had empty glasses since we came in here." Audrey took a bite of her salad and savored the flavors of feta and tart balsamic vinaigrette.

"Ooh! Don't look now, but I'm starting to share your enthusiasm." Ros straightened in her chair and stared steadily over Audrey's shoulder.

"Why?"

Audrey looked behind her as two men walked into the restaurant. Both handsome, one with straight sandy hair and the other curly brown. They each wore polo shirts and jeans that displayed toned physiques and tan arms. The fairer one met her gaze briefly and smiled at his companion on their way to pick up beers at the bar. They settled at a table in the back.

"Nice." Ros idly dabbed at the meat on her plate with a fork as she stared at the pair.

"Too young." She guessed early twenties.

"You want a more experienced guy?" Ros chuckled. "I'll take 'em any age. As long as they have stamina."

Audrey laughed and made another note. *Excellent salad dressing.* "How's the lamb?"

"Delicious." Ros frowned with a bite in midair. "How d'ya know it's lamb?"

"The aroma." She made another note, *Lamb is delicious...*

"You must also try the goat." A male voice floated to their table. "It's a local favorite."

Ros's fork clattered on her plate, and Audrey's stylus fell from her fingers.

"Is the wine to your liking?" The man slid out of a shadowy booth behind Ros. He towered over their table.

Audrey's face heated. He must've heard their entire conversation. How did she miss him?

"It's great, honey." Ros removed her reading glasses and discreetly shoved them in her bag.

Audrey took in the way he was dressed. White linen shirt, sleeves rolled back to show off sun-kissed skin and a gold Bvlgari watch with a leather band—probably worth more than her car back home in Chicago. Tan expensive-looking dress slacks and his shoes—Italian, she'd bet her paycheck on it—which was probably what they cost.

He lifted a hand to sweep his black hair off his brow and winked at her. "And you? You like the wine?"

This guy was her culprit. Probably the owner or the owner's son. She judged him to be closer to her age, maybe thirty.

Bingo.

"Decent." She hit the power button on her PDA. "Goat, you say? No thanks. I'm a-a vegetarian." She wrinkled her nose distastefully—though she actually *liked* goat. Presumptuous men always brought out her bitchier side.

Ros looked askance at her and tightened her lips. Audrey braced herself for a kick under the table for her fib, but the older woman cleared her throat and cast a big smile at the gorgeous Greek. "If the goat is better than the lamb, I'll try it. Your English is great, mister. We don't know a bit of the language."

"So I heard. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop." He flashed a coy grin Audrey's way and ducked his head. "I spent a year in the United States and two years in England at university. The kitchen has sent you a dish of everything on the menu. I hope you'll find something to your liking. Even if it's merely vegetables."

Audrey raised her glass to her lips and studied the man's expression. Was he pulling her leg? "Is business always this slow, Mister...?" She took a bite of asparagus, tender yet crisp. Perfect.

"Diakos. Stephon Diakos." He shook his head. "It's early. The *plateia* outside fills at dusk when everyone quits working. Then they come inside to eat and drink." His gaze lingered on her face, until she felt her cheeks light up with fire a second time.

"Have a seat, Mr. Diakos. It's so nice to have a local to talk to, isn't it, Audrey?" Ros lifted her eyebrows meaningfully.

"I'm going to ask the bartender for a real drink."

"Please. Allow me, Miss—"

"Rosalind Waterhouse. And my friend is Audrey Channing. I'd like a scotch on the rocks."

He rose with a slight bow and left. Two more young men entered the bar—both stunningly good-looking.

Ros shook her head. "My God, they just keep coming. I can't believe how this hole in the wall is just crawling with men."

"Must be a football team or something." The newcomers joined the others.

They were loud and boisterous, hailing the bartender while he poured Ros's drink.

Audrey's shin exploded with pain. "Ouch. You kicked me! What was that for?"

"Why are you being so rude to this Diakos guy?"

"I'm not! Anyway, he's the one who's been sending all this food and wine, I guarantee it." She finished her vegetables and eyed the roast lamb. Her mouth watered longingly. "I'm starting to wish I hadn't lied about being a vegetarian."

Ros laughed. "Serves you right." She leaned forward, then whispered, "Forget the food. What about the guy? He's hot for you. And you said you were looking to get laid this trip. He's perfect."

"I don't know." She wished she hadn't spoken her plans aloud, at least not to Ros. She glanced over her shoulders, praying no one else was listening. The woman would never leave her alone now. Could she have casual sex with a stranger? She'd never been reckless before.

"Are you worried it's too soon after your fiancé? He really tore your heart up, didn't he? You poor thing."

Anger poured into Audrey. "No! It's not about Paul. Not—"

Ros gestured for her to zip it. Diakos was coming back with her drink. One of the younger men crossed his path and

spoke to him, touching his arm. Diakos shrugged off the man with a chilly look.

When he returned, he took the seat Ros offered. "Here you are, Rosalind."

"Thanks, Stephon. So what's there to do around Christanochoroi for two fun-loving girls?"

He fell silent and Audrey took the opportunity to admire his face. He had a cleft chin beneath a five o'clock shadow. When his stunning, dark-blue eyes glanced up, a jolt of electricity shot through her.

"Sorry, ladies. Christanochoroi is my home but there's not much here. You would both like it so much better on the coast."

Audrey's gaze collided with Ros's, whose mouth hung open. "Perhaps I'm mistaken, Mr. Diakos."

"Stephon."

"*Steff-on*," Audrey repeated, "but aren't you the one who sent all this food? Isn't this *your* restaurant?"

"The Constantina?" Mirth sparkled in his eyes. "No. But yes, I did ask my father to bring these dishes for you. Your waiter, he is my father. I own the Villas Della Luna."

Audrey winked at her friend. Right, as usual.

Stephon's father cleaned a nearby table. His narrowed gaze lingered on his son as he made angry swipes with his towel. Audrey wondered what he could've done to incur such a hard look. She gave a mental shrug. *Probably just concerned about the Constantina's review.*

"Why would you recommend we go to the coast, Stephon? Surely that's not a good approach for business."

"You mistake me again, Audrey." He leaned near her shoulder so she could feel the heat of his breath. He purred, "I would take you there myself if I could. It's great for business if you visit one of my hotels. I own six."

"Six!" Ros chortled.

"Ne. Yes. One at Astros, at Athens, Santorini, Tolo, Ios, and on Crete. All with views of the sea. Very nice. You must visit. My father stays here, because it is the home of our ancestors. Nothing more."

Diakos, Diakos. Why didn't she know the name? Who was this guy? He had to be wealthy. Unless he was lying. He wouldn't be the first local to try to pull the wool over her eyes—pretending to be someone important when he wasn't. How did she know if he even owned the Della Luna? His father was their waiter, for Pete's sake. She'd never been dumb enough to believe a line like that—owning six hotels! Get real! But he was wearing Bvlgari...

Ros cackled. "See, girlfriend. I told you we got gypped. Might as well do like Stephon says and head for the beach."

Stephon's father offered to refill her glass. Audrey nodded. The older man's mouth made a grim line as he glared at his son.

It didn't make any sense that Stephon would want them to leave, unless he was ashamed of the place. If he was, she felt compelled to find out why.

"Nah, Ros. We've paid for a week in the Villas Della Luna. Maybe Stephon could tell us what to see first."

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"It would be my pleasure, Audrey. But I'll do better than that. Allow me to be your escort. I am all yours for the week—if you'll have me."

Oh, that wouldn't do at all. How could she provide an unbiased opinion in her travelogue with the hunky hotelier as her personal guide?

Ros thrust her hand across the table. "Permission granted. You hear that, girly? Stephon says he's yours."

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Chapter Two

"More wine?" Stephon filled Audrey's glass.

The young woman's eyes glittered from the alcohol, but she wasn't drunk. She regarded him with a shrewd gaze. Too worldly for her age. She would be hard to fool—hard to send away.

But at least he could give her plenty to write in that PDA of hers. Perhaps her review of his villas would be so bad no one who read it would ever want to step foot in the village.

"I realize you both work for *Out on a Limb*."

"I told you!" Audrey gushed at Ros, who burst into laughter. "How did you find out?"

He folded his hands on the table. "When your company paid for your rooms, they used a corporate credit card. Are Rosalind and Audrey your real names?"

"Yeah." Audrey took another deep drink.

"Good. I like *Audrey*. It reminds me of the actress."

"*Hepburn*? I was named for her. My mom was a fan." She tucked her hair behind one ear.

Chestnut hair, beautiful in the bar's candlelight. The others would think so as well. Stephon glanced behind him. Yannis was staring. Achilleo, too. Soon the whole pack would arrive. *Ravenous beasts—hungry for something fresh...*

But he was first.

He turned back to Audrey. "*Roman Holiday* is my favorite Hepburn movie, but you are more beautiful than she." He laid a hand on her relaxed arm, tentatively at first. She didn't

move away. Instead her gaze flicked to his and then away as a slow stain crept up her neck. He stroked his palm along her arm, slowly, gently, feeling the heat rise on her youthful skin. "Wine?"

She shook her head. "I've had enough to float back to the villa."

"Well, I think I'm going to turn in." Rosalind stood and stretched. "It's getting dark outside and I have jetlag. I'll see you two—"

Stephon rose. "Wait. I will walk you there—both of you. I fear our village is full of thieves after dark."

"Thieves? This place?" Audrey arched an eyebrow.

"I'll be all right. You and Audrey stay."

He shook his head, firmly. "I insist. Please."

Rosalind shrugged. "You heard the gentleman."

Stephon tucked the wine bottle under his arm as she stood.

The stares of the pack burned with hatred as they headed out the door. Thwarted this time. But the next...

The *plateia* swarmed with villagers at night. Stephon steered them past the crowd so quickly, Audrey could only regret what she was missing. The village square had been cordoned off with a merry string of tiny electric lights hung high above. An elderly man played the violin, as a woman danced in the center, and the onlookers smoked, drank, and laughed. Maybe tomorrow night she and Ros would join the fun.

As they approached the row of villas, Stephon pointed out the many repairs that needed to be made: a path that needed

gravel, motion-detector lights that didn't always work, tree roots in the footpath making for hazardous trips, and a parking lot that needed lighting. The man was either a safety freak or a perfectionist.

"Keep inside your villa until sunrise and be sure to lock your doors. We don't have alarms—we have so few visitors."

While he talked, his hand drifted across Audrey's back—light as a feather. His accent, honey smooth, made her stomach flutter.

Too much wine.

No, she couldn't blame the booze. The guy made her drool, long before she'd felt a real buzz.

"Ah, this is my villa." Ros paused outside her door. "Thank you for the personal escort, Stephon. I'll see you both tomorrow." With a wink, she unlocked her place and disappeared inside.

Audrey chewed her lip. Now they were alone. While she sauntered along, trying to spend as much time with the man as she could, his stride was purposeful—almost hurried. Maybe he was hoping to be invited inside. *Was that his presumption or just arrogance on her part?*

At her threshold, she faced him. The motion detector above the door kicked on, while she admired the triangle of tan skin at the opening of his shirt. A trace of his cologne—spicy and woody with a touch of citrus—drifted off his flesh.

He grinned and held out the bottle he'd been carrying. "I so much enjoyed your company tonight, Audrey. You seem like a very interesting woman...and beautiful, too."

"Thank you." She took the bottle. "There's plenty of wine left, and it's too early for me to sleep. Would you, um, like to come inside and have another glass?"

An expression of surprise crossed his features and then quickly vanished. He glanced over his shoulder. "Ne. I would like that. Very much."

Inside, Stephon turned on the lights, knowing exactly where the switches were located.

I wonder how many times he's done this before.

She shrugged off the thought and retrieved two glasses. They sat side by side on the sofa. The heady masculine scent of his cologne catalyzed her sense of expectation. She poured while Stephon lowered the light of the lamp beside them.

Once he took his glass, Stephon leveled a serious gaze at her. "Do you have a boyfriend in the States?"

"No. I had a fiance. We just broke up. He was also my photographer until just a few weeks ago. I haven't dated anyone since." The implications of the intimacy they were about to share finally dawned on her. She took a long sip of wine hoping it would numb her lingering doubts.

"I see." He took her glass and then set his and hers on the coffee table. "I could be your rebound if you would like."

His face lowered over hers. All she could see were his stormy blue eyes, and then his lashes closed over them. His lips touched hers, soft as petals. She put her arms around him and felt his solid body moving over her as his kiss deepened. When she opened her mouth, his tongue slid inside, filling her with warmth and wetness. His kiss was to die for! Their tongues harmonized magically in the way they

danced together. The wine sweetened his taste and breath, making her dizzy.

He jerked back suddenly. His face pale—expression pained.

"What is it?"

He raked a hand through his hair, and his eyes darkened as he studied her, as if weighing his options. His chest rose and fell on heavy breaths. Then his expression cleared and the moment passed. "Nothing. It's nothing, Audrey."

He kissed her lips softly, more tentatively than before. She was lying on the couch before she knew it with Stephon leaning over her. His arms at her sides, he braced his weight on his palms. The sofa was big, but they would have more room somewhere else.

She eased up on her elbows. "You're uncomfortable. The bed—"

"No," he murmured, "I'm fine. I want you here—now."

Stephon sketched her cheekbone and jaw with his fingertips, then her collarbone, while his gaze bore into hers. Something in his expression and lingering touch made her feel revered, as if she was the only one who could fill his needs. *Crazy*. The absurdity made her swallow a giggle. But, damn, just for tonight she could pretend it was true.

Where her shirt opened, he touched her with his mouth, sliding his kisses along her skin. The stubble of his chin burned a torrid path, bringing far more pleasure than pain. His tongue, hot and moist, salved the minor discomfort. Air wafted across her stomach when he lifted her shirt, and his fingers fanned over her exposed skin. He cupped her breast and took her lips again. She wrapped her arms around him,

dragging him closer, kissing him fiercely, desiring his tongue deep inside her, but he suddenly pulled away, breaking the kiss.

Audrey touched her mouth. Her lips throbbed from her greediness, and she flushed with shame. *What was he? A man or an addiction? Better than the expensive chocolates she craved each Valentine's Day*

Stephon kept her in his embrace and pulled her shirt the rest of the way off. She shivered with renewed delight. His gaze devoured her breasts, molded with precision in her newest Victoria's Secret bra. He buried his face between her curves and nuzzled her soft flesh.

She threaded her fingers in his silky dark hair and smiled, liberated. For too long, she'd considered one night stands a man's pastime. No more. As long as she kept her heart out of the mix, everything would be wonderful.

He raised his head and worked on his shirt. Audrey helped him unfasten the last few buttons and eased it off his shoulders. She was rewarded with a broad span of gorgeous golden skin and a tight torso. A thin line of black hair began below his abdomen and disappeared under his waistband.

Hands on her shoulders, Stephon guided her to lie down. Wordlessly, he caressed her skin and bent to kiss her shoulder. He eased the strap of her bra down until her breast was fully exposed and slanted his mouth across her nipple. She arched as he sucked her inside him, and he laved her with his tongue until she groaned. His palm glided down the valley of her stomach into her pants. After Audrey unfastened the button and zipper, his searching fingers swept under the

elastic of her panties and into her hot cleft. She gasped with delight.

When she reached for his belt buckle, he backed away. "No. I do not have protection." Then he lowered a kiss to her shoulder.

Audrey felt the hard muscles of his back beneath her fingertips. *Wow. That was unexpected. A stud like Stephon surely kept one or two condoms in his wallet for occasions like this.*

"I'm on the Pill."

"It doesn't matter." His words whispered across her skin, and he pulled her other bra strap down.

There was no time to consider what he'd meant by that. Dark sensations took control of her when he exposed her other nipple and moved to cover it with his mouth. His fingers slid between her parted thighs into the wetness waiting for him. Her knees rose around him, her core seeking the pressure of his hand, so eager for the rhythmic stroke he provided. Back and forth, with confident expertise, he touched and touched. His lips left her damp nipple to press a trail of kisses up to her neck. His teeth lightly chafed her skin, and his breath beat against her throat, ragged and excited. As the pressure built between her legs, she longed for him to fill her with more than his fingers.

He seemed to know exactly what sensation each caress provided. Anticipating her reactions, her pleasure, he gave and took—withdrawing when she knew she would surely die.

Finally, he brought her to the edge, and she clenched hard around him, shattering.

She sagged into the sofa, concentrating on the euphoria of her throbbing core. Stephon smiled and laid his head on her shoulder.

"That was," she licked her lips, inhaled, and tried to speak, "I—"

He kissed her neck. "As you said, it's still early."

He scooped her off the sofa, and she stifled a surprised squeak. He carried her up the stairs to the loft where the bed awaited.

She took her eyes off him to glance at the condition of her bedroom.

After checking in that afternoon, she'd dumped her carry-on onto the bed. The entire contents spread from one end of the bed to the other. He made an amused sound in his throat and put her on her feet.

"I'm sorry. I'm a slob." At least the shadows hid most of the mess.

He grinned and shook his head. "No matter."

Grasping the white cover, he yanked the whole conglomeration aside and sat in front of her.

Audrey put a hand on her hip. "Don't you want to undress?"

A lazy smile curved on his face. "I want to undress you."

Her stomach dipped like a teenager's. At his gesture, she moved between his legs. He reached around to unfasten her bra, fingers floating across her hardened nipples as he drew the lingerie away from her body. Next, he tugged her pants the rest of the way off, leaving her standing in nothing but her panties.

His hands slid around her, into her underwear, cupping her buttocks. Pulling her closer, he pressed a hot kiss to her stomach and swished the tip of his tongue into her navel. His hands kneaded her, and his lips moved lower and lower between her hips until the panties fell down her legs to her feet.

Stephon drew her to the bed beside him. With aching care, he pushed the hair off her shoulders, looking her over from head to toe with eyes that smoldered from unrequited desire.

"*Matia mou*," he mumbled in Greek. He caught his lower lip between his teeth.

She didn't understand. "What?"

"Nothing. Lie down." Reclining beside her, he softly kissed her cheek and ear.

"Stephon."

"*Ne?*"

"It's been a long time since I've been with anyone else. Anyone but my fiancée."

Admitting *that* hadn't been part of her plan. Her plan had been to find a willing lover on this trip and act as if she screwed whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted. But something about this particular Adonis—perhaps the seriousness of his eyes or the time he spent bringing her pleasure—made her want to be honest.

He grew still. "It has been a long time for me as well." His lips curved. "*Eisai asteri*. You are so beautiful, Audrey."

He eased over her and pressed kisses in a languorous zigzag down her breasts, ribs, stomach, and finally to the

apex of her hips. His splayed hands parted her thighs, and his head moved lower.

"Oh my!" She clutched his shoulders. His muscles bunched as he gripped her.

For hours, he played with her—taking her all the way to the brink and beyond—before withdrawing. Always withdrawing from her, never taking for himself. At times, his body shook with need, but he pushed her hands away when she wanted to aid him. Eventually tiring, she fell asleep with Stephon still touching and kissing...

Stephon was out of breath from running. His sides heaved as he pulled air into his empty lungs. The chase always tortured him, made him half-crazy until he overexerted himself to the point of injury, illness, or death

"Zander!" He coughed. Nausea rolled over him.

His brother was out of sight. The others bayed in the darkness, not far behind.

The sky rumbled overhead and a flash of lightning illuminated the stretch of terrain ahead. He didn't need any help to see, however. His lupine sense of sight and hearing was keenly attuned to his quarry. And what he couldn't see or hear, he could smell. His stomach squeezed with hunger. The coppery-sweet aroma of fresh blood drew him like no other force

Another burst of lighting came and went and then he spotted her. Curled beside the lake, her pale naked body formed the shape of an egg with her long legs tucked in and her arms draped protectively around herself. When he reached her side, he noted the dirt smeared all over her

Midnight Cravings
by Sandra Jones

skin—an ill-placed effort to cover the scent. She wept, face hidden under long dirty hair.

"Matia mou," he heard his voice say. My eyes.

Her face tilted

He meant to reach for her but instead he struck out. His human hand turned into a paw, fingers tipped with claws.

Man no more.

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Chapter Three

"Youuuu, my brown-eyed girl."

Audrey cracked her eyes open to see only a veil of hair. Somewhere Van Morrison was singing.

Idiot. You downloaded that ringtone into your cell last Saturday

She sat up and pushed the hair out of her eyes, yawning. Daylight spilled through a window. The song continued. She scanned the bedside table. Nope. The music was closer. In the bed? She glanced down.

Naked? Why was she naked?

Then her memory came crashing back. A glance beside her confirmed it. She'd brought a strange man into her villa, and he was still in bed with her.

Stephon Diakos, if that was his real name, slept peacefully on his stomach—naked from the waist up, lying on top of the covers.

In daylight and fully asleep, he was still magnificent with all his tan male skin.

The music started again. Her cell phone was beneath him!

She tugged at the sheet, gently, so she wouldn't disturb him. Then harder when she realized the phone was growing louder and he wasn't rousing. At last she freed the corner of the cover and along with it tumbled out a cache of her things, credit cards, a small makeup case, tampons, and her Smartphone.

"Hello?" she whispered.

"All right, girlfriend. Spill it. How did our Arcadian friend perform last night?"

Ros. Audrey cringed. She should've checked the caller ID first. And the receiver was so loud!

She covered the mouthpiece. "Can't say right now."

"Holy shit. He's still there, isn't he? You bitch!" Ros cackled on the other end. "I hate you. Must be nice being twenty eight with a body like yours."

"Whatever. Right now my body feels like crap. So does my head."

She leaned over Stephon. He had a small tattoo on the back of one shoulder blade. A crescent moon. She traced it with her fingertip and found his skin warm and smooth. He exhaled and his left hand spread out against the pillow. No wedding band or tan line where one had been. Thank God. Why hadn't she thought to look for one before now?

Idiot.

"I'll bet you're sore in some interesting places today."

"Go to hell. Why are you calling so early?" she adjusted the sheet around her to hide her nakedness.

Stephon's head turned toward her, and his eyes opened. He gave a sleepy smile and blinked slowly.

"I'm in the *plateia* with a table full of food. And I didn't order a thing. The boy from the restaurant brought it out here as soon as I sat down. I have some sort of biscotti and fruit, tea, honey, and coffee. A whole pot of coffee, girly. Wake your plaything up and get out here."

"Okay." She pushed the red button before Ros could say another word. Looking into Stephon's humor-lit face, she

feared he'd heard the entire conversation. "I suppose you eavesdropped again?"

Stephon rolled over and grinned. "Not on purpose. Last night I had a bad dream, but now I awake with an angel." He pushed himself up on his elbows. "And now for breakfast."

"Yes."

Audrey waited, holding her sheet demurely over her chest. The man didn't move, simply watched her and smiled.

"Aren't you going to get up?"

"I'm waiting for you to get dressed."

Audrey gasped, remembering. "I don't have any clothes."

"Yes. I know." His laughter followed her quick exit to the bathroom.

"I see you found something to wear." Ros laughed, leaning halfway across the table. "Hurry, tell me how it went, while he's occupied."

Since Audrey had nothing clean, she'd had to wear the same pants again, but Stephon had brought her one of his shirts. The soft white fabric enveloped her as she sat in the morning sun of the village square and basked in the warm aromatic scent of its owner.

Her lover had seemed pleased to offer his clothing—a vast difference from her ex, who was always concerned she might ruin his favorite t-shirt or wrinkle his slacks when she cuddled him. Stephon went out of his way to care for her needs first.

Hmmm...even an independent girl like herself liked a little pampering once in a while.

"You sent him into the restaurant on purpose, didn't you?"

Ros wiggled her eyebrows. "Don't get snooty with me. He offered to bring me some eggs and bacon. I didn't ask for it. And it's not my fault you told him you're a vegetarian, dummy."

"Well, you don't have to keep rubbing it in my face. I'm starving, and Stephon's threatening to be with us *all week!*" Audrey rubbed her empty stomach.

Ros's lips puckered with censure. "Don't tell me you don't want him around. He's adorable. You ought to fess up and tell him you were only kidding about not eating meat."

"I know." And yes, he was adorable...and caring and handsome and sexy.

Ros pulled her camera out of an empty chair and took a picture of Audrey.

"Shouldn't you be taking pictures of the *plateia*?"

She shrugged. "I just wanted you to see the smile on your face. Did you even know you were smiling just now?"

No, she didn't. She took a bite of biscotti and washed it down with black coffee.

"So how many times did you and Zorba...you know?"

Audrey threw the other half of the biscotti at Ros's head, but the older woman ducked. The hard cookie smacked a passing man in the chest.

He stopped and faced their table. "*Signomi.*"

Audrey blinked. *Another Arcadian hottie?* He bore a striking resemblance to Stephon. Same black hair but shoulder-length, same chin, though this man had green eyes. And he was younger, possibly twenty or twenty-one, wearing a gray t-shirt and worn-out jeans.

"Sorry. I'm sorry." She waved.

"American?"

"Yes." They answered in unison. Underneath the table, Ros thumped her knee excitedly.

The man smiled and casually braced his hands on the back of the empty chair. "Were you trying to get my attention? Or do you not like the food?"

"It was an accident. I was aiming at my friend." Audrey explained. She looked back at the restaurant. What was keeping Stephon?

His eyes narrowed. "I saw you last night leaving the Constantina, *ne?*" When she nodded, he asked, "Why did you not join everyone in the *plateia*? If you are visiting the village, the square is where everything happens."

"We would have, honey, but I'm too old to stay out late. Now Audrey on the other hand—"

She interrupted, "Maybe you could recommend more things to see here."

The corner of his lips curved. "As a matter of fact, I have a small business, leading hikers through the mountains. I take campers, backpackers, hunters, and sightseers."

"Wow." Ros's gaze devoured the man. "Sounds like a workout to me. But I'll bet it keeps you in shape, huh?"

"There is no better place to view the stars at night." He winked.

Audrey rubbed her arms. She'd written articles on ecotourism before, and she enjoyed hiking. But after Stephon's warnings, she didn't want to venture around the

area after dark. Not that she was afraid. She wasn't. Stephon had just been so adamant about safety.

Their new acquaintance dragged out the empty chair to join them, but a shadow crossed the table, interrupting him.

Stephon circled, setting a plate before Rosalind. "Zander."

The younger man backed up.

The two spoke briefly in Greek. They didn't appear to be on friendly terms, but they definitely knew each other.

The younger man stalked off without a word or a backward look. Stephon took a seat.

Ros picked up her fork. "Thank you, honey. Who was that?"

"My brother." His mouth was set in a grim line.

Audrey reached for the coffee carafe. "He was just telling us about his guide service. That must make a good business partnership. You provide lodging and he provides recreation."

He grunted and straightened the silverware beside his plate. A few minutes earlier, his appetite had been insatiable and his mood light. Not anymore.

"He's immature and reckless. Not reliable." His gaze drifted from the table, and he grew quiet. Then he seemed to collect himself, straightening to address them. "Well, ladies. Are you sure you don't want to go to the beach? You could stay at Tolo tonight on the sea. It's very beautiful. My treat."

Audrey shook her head.

Ros slumped in her chair.

Stephon smiled. "As you wish. If you should change your mind, you have only to ask. I could even fly you there. My plane is in Athens, but I would call my pilot back."

Audrey declined again. *His plane?* The Villas Della Luna were elegant and the village charming, but they didn't seem to fit Stephon, the worldly hotelier. *Odd that his family would want to remain here*

"Well, then," he sighed, "shall we go to Megalopoli? It's just a short drive, and Audrey needs clothes."

Megalopoli was no Athens, but Audrey was able to purchase a few outfits. The mountain air was much cooler than she'd expected anyway. She selected two hand-knit sweaters and knit pants, a sexy sweater-dress, jeans, shoes, and a few shirts. Stephon insisted on paying for everything.

While Ros snapped pictures of the town, she and Stephon stepped into a small drugstore. He went looking for the chocolate Ros had requested. As soon as he was out of sight, Audrey purchased a pack of condoms at the counter and hid them in her purse. Hopefully, she'd need them later. A smile spread on her lips as he returned to her side. He rested a hand at the curve of her lower back as he paid for the candy.

Stephon pointed out places of interest as they drove back, but Ros's camera jammed after their first photo stop. He had been attempting to take a picture of the two of them when he noticed the shutter wasn't opening. Luckily, good photographers always carry back-ups, but Ros was still miffed.

While riding in Stephon's Fiat, Audrey's cell phone went off again. She ignored Ros's snicker in the back seat, as she checked the ID and quickly answered.

"Hello, Paul. What do you want?"

"What kind of greeting is that?"

The kind people use when they don't want to talk to their backstabbing exes. "I'm kind of busy this week."

"Ah, you're on a job. Good for you. That's why I'm calling, to give you a tip on a job for *Travel and Leisure*. In St. Lucia. I would take it but I'm committed."

"Thanks but no thanks." She wasn't any good at listening to two conversations at once, but she caught Ros telling Stephon about her former fiancé. She cringed inwardly and returned to her own conversation. "I'm in Greece and then Ian's sending me to Norway in three weeks." She watched Stephon from the corner of her eye.

"Thought I'd ask. But if you're committed, too..."

To her career and her editor, yes. She was firmly committed. But Paul's words held a double entendre. The reason why he'd broken up with her, he'd claimed, was because she wasn't committed. Oh, she was monogamous. But whenever he asked her to set a date for their wedding, she hedged. A lifetime together seemed like a prison sentence. One day at a time was much easier, less heartbreaking if things went awry.

"So where are you in Greece?"

"Arcadia." She waited for laughter on the other end or stunned confusion.

Instead, she got neither. Paul made a low whistle. She'd come to hate the sound, but she used to love it. "Lucky you. The mountains. I bet it's beautiful there."

Audrey gazed at the stoic land spread along the highway outside their vehicle. "It's quiet. I'm not really sure why Ian wanted to feature it."

"Really? God, Audrey. When are you gonna learn to start doing your homework?" She heard him scanning radio stations on his end. "Arcadia is the home of Pan—you know the half-goat guy from mythology—and the birthplace of the Olympics. But hell, if you're doing a piece on that part of the world and want to draw some travel readers, you gotta at least mention the werewolves."

"Werewolves?"

"Remember when we went to Transylvania and did the article on Dracula's hangouts? Well, you could do this piece the same way. I'm sure that's what Ian had in mind when he sent you there. What the hell else are you gonna do?"

His question triggered a memory of last night.

Stephon teasing her skin with little flicks of his tongue, from the arches of her feet all the way to her lips and quivering clit.

Audrey directed the car's air vent toward her face and risked a glance at her driver. He watched her with a slight frown, but his gaze returned to the road.

She cleared her throat. "Well, I hadn't heard about that. So Arcadia has werewolf legends?"

"Damn, Aud. Arcadia is where werewolves got their start. Zeus got pissed off at some Greek king and turned him into a werewolf or something like that. There was a curse on one of the mountains. The people who became werewolves couldn't kill humans no matter how bad they wanted or else they'd stay werewolves. At least I think that's how the myth goes." The music on his end cut off. "Well, I'm home. Tammy's

waiting for me. Have fun climbing mountains and tell Ros I said hi." He hung up.

Audrey swore under her breath and then remembered she wasn't alone in the vehicle. She'd wanted to at least mention to Paul that she was having fun without him. Or maybe drop a hint or two that she was seeing another man. But no such luck. She put the phone in her purse.

"Is your ex checking up on you?" Ros asked, leaning between the seats.

"I guess."

"Jerk." She dropped back. "He got over you, now he ought to let you get over him."

"I *am* over him." Audrey's gaze climbed Stephon's forearm to his strong face. His eyes were dark and thoughtful as he drove. He could pull over right then and take her in the car, and she wouldn't care. Well, maybe, if Ros wasn't in the backseat. She wet her lips. Time for a subject change, anything to get her thoughts off sex. "Do you know about the werewolf legend?"

"Some." Stephon slid her an unreadable look, and his gaze dropped to her mouth.

Oh yeah, he wanted more. That knowledge went a long way towards soothing her wounded ego. She smiled. "Well, are you going to tell us? There's a lot of tourist money in legends and the occult. Think of haunted hotels. Think of New Orleans. Vampire and voodoo tourism are huge there."

Stephon grasped her hand and drew it to rest on his thigh. "Yes, but in that city there are places for visitors to go, actual sites to tour. Here, there is little of the ancients left. Some

broken architecture, mostly just landscape. I point at a field and say, this is where something really important supposedly happened. Now is that what your readers are looking for?" His voice was edgy, impatient.

Audrey studied him. "It wasn't you who called our office asking to do the article was it?"

"No." His jaw tightened.

"Do you think maybe your brother wanted us to do a story on the village?"

Stephon stared straight ahead but said nothing. She'd known resort owners who preferred to keep their locations private, out of respect for their wealthy clientele. But Christanochori and the Villas Della Luna were not those kinds of places.

He played with her fingers for a moment and murmured, "Zander doesn't include me in his plans." He exhaled a rush of breath. "If you really want, I could show you these places." He lifted her hand to his mouth, kissed her knuckles, and traced her skin with satin lips. His roguish smile made her insides tighten.

"Please, Stephon. Would you?"

"First we go back and eat. Then change. You must wear your hiking gear."

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Chapter Four

Stephon crouched behind a hedge at the base of the stone archway outside Audrey's villa. With any luck, the overgrown shrubbery would serve as camouflage.

During his late lunch with the women, two of the pack had loomed near—attempting to provoke Stephon to either fight or stake his claim. It was becoming increasingly obvious that Zander wanted to take over. To become the alpha of the pack.

Instinct told him, his brother wouldn't be far away from the villas. Any unclaimed woman was prey for the alpha male. He had to know his brother's intentions. Every minute the women were in the village, the danger escalated.

A shuffling noise jerked him reflexively to the right. He tightened against the wall, seeking the shade. A soccer ball rolled along the gravel. He sighed. It was only his little brother Theo, practicing his dribbling. Stephon waited until Theo disappeared down the path before returning to his vantage point.

He cursed himself for staying away too many days.

The moon maddened him. Christanochori burrowed under his skin like a syringe loaded with drugs—addictive yet lethal. No matter how far he traveled these past nine years, he was always drawn home for each full moon. And the longer he stayed, the harder it became to resist the temptation...

To his left, feet crunched over the gravel. A long shadow stretched over the path.

"Stephon?" Zander called. "You're kidding yourself. Even the weakest member of the pack, blindfolded in a room of a hundred, can discern the scent of a familiar beast."

He abandoned his hiding place and met Zander in front of Audrey's door. "Stay away from the women, brother. You might think you want publicity, but I promise it will be the death of us all."

Zander's lips pulled back from his teeth. "Publicity?" He rubbed his chin mockingly. "Only you would've imagined I wanted advertising."

"I know you brought them here. If you didn't want to bring new visitors to Christanochori, then why else?"

Zander walked backward, circling him. "Maybe I would like a mate. You can't expect the whole pack to be celibate like you. Alphas *a/ways* mate."

His brother stepped onto the veranda—Stephon blocked Audrey's door.

"Move aside. I'd like to visit the delectable Miss Channing." He licked his lips.

Stephon slammed his fists against Zander's chest, forcing him to the graveled path. "Not on your life."

Zander's face hardened. "Brother, she's still fair game. You've not dipped your quill in that ink pot yet. If you had, I would've smelled her on you."

Zander reached for him, but Stephon punched him under the chin. His brother's head popped back, and he stumbled away.

"Oh my God! What's going on?" Audrey's cry of alarm caught Stephon off guard. By the time he whirled around, Zander rebounded—coming at him with a steely closed hand.

"Stephon!"

He sank to one knee and teetered unsteadily. Audrey went to help him, but he immediately staggered to his feet.

"Not...on... your... life!" Stephon swore at his brother through gritted teeth.

Zander Diakos dodged him, jogging backward. He grinned. *"Signomi."*

"What the hell are you doing?" She latched onto Stephon's arm, preventing him from pursuing his brother. Stephon wiped blood from his upper lip with his sleeve, and gave Zander a murderous stare.

Zander called, "Excuse us, Miss Channing. We are brothers. We fight." He shrugged and turned around. He kept walking the path toward the village square, chuckling to himself.

"Good grief." When he was out of sight, Audrey exhaled and released Stephon's arm. He could stand on his own. He was perfectly capable of taking care of himself without her fawning over him, she told herself. But one look at the mar on his handsome face made her stomach flip-flop. "You're hurt."

He touched his bloodied lip and grimaced. "Just my nose, but I don't think he broke it."

"There's more blood. Come inside. We can clean it."

She opened her door. Eyes narrowed, Stephon glanced down the path warily. She grabbed his hand and drew him inside.

"What was that all about?" She led him to the kitchen where she wet a towel.

Stephon relaxed against the sink, eyes dark and stormy, while she leaned against him, dabbing away blood at the bottom of his nose.

"My brother is a reckless idiot," he growled.

She doubted Stephon lost many fights. If she hadn't interrupted them, Zander would've probably been the one bleeding.

"You know," she said, re-dampening the towel, hoping to ease Stephon's sullen mood, "I was an only child. My parents say I nearly killed them. I had a writer's curiosity. Guess I was a tomboy, always getting in trouble. I can't imagine what they would've done if they'd had two boys."

"There are three of us. Zander, Theo, and myself. My youngest brother works for my father. He is ten." Stephon's hand closed over hers—ending her ministrations. She dropped the towel in the sink.

"Thank you. Are you ready for our hike?"

"Yes, if you still want to go."

"Call Rosalind."

Taking out her phone, she backed away. His steady gaze lit a smoldering path in her belly.

She spoke to her friend and hung up. "Ros says she thinks she can fix her camera. She said for us to go ahead, and she'll get some shots tomorrow maybe."

"Will she meet us for dinner?" A frown wrinkled his brow.

"I guess." She slid her hand behind his waist and teased, "What is this concern about Ros? Do you have a thing for her? Because if you do—"

Stephon cut her off, laughing softly. "No. But I like to see you jealous."

She made a playful jab at his shoulder, but he caught her fist and drew against her. His mouth cut off her remark, sealing her lips with a kiss. Instantly pliant, she melted against the length of his body. His lips played against hers, his tongue teasing the corners of her mouth but cruelly never entering. His body felt so perfect and solid, warm and inviting.

They were back in the bedroom in an instant, sightseeing forgotten, and Audrey didn't care a bit about reminding him.

She did a striptease for him, unbuttoning and dropping his shirt, then wriggling out of her pants—never breaking eye contact. His hungry gaze followed her every move.

While she waited for him, naked, on the bed, Stephon removed his clothing. When it came to stripping, he showed no inhibitions and eagerly discarded his shirt, smiling at her obvious pleasure. But he left his pants on, bending over her for a kiss.

Audrey planted her hands on his chest, stopping him. "The pants, too."

His eyes widened for an instant, and then he shook his head with a playful smile. "Another time." He brought her arms around his waist and eased her back on the bed.

She turned from his lips when he tried to kiss her, showing him two could play the *tease* game. Besides, another of his kisses would erase her lucidity. "Please, Stephon. I want to see you."

He studied her for a moment and finally gave a solemn nod. Standing, he unbuckled his belt and unfastened his pants. His erection strained hard against his trunks. Satisfaction seeped from her pores, delighted she'd given him such a response. She stretched across the bed on her side and struck a provocative pose. His gaze steamed, and she noted the heavy rise and fall of his chest.

"All of you," she commanded. Ordering the sexy Greek emboldened her.

A tiny line appeared between his brows, but he set his lips in grim compliance. His hands slid under the elastic waistband, and he dropped the trunks. His rich burnished skin went on and on with glowing sleek muscles. Against a cushion of black hair, his bulky member hung suspended and then thickened under her gaze. He stepped away from his clothing and reached for her, but she rolled away.

Audrey grinned. "Hang on." She could hardly breathe herself, and her voice came out husky. "I've got just the thing."

She removed the pack of condoms from her nightstand. Before she could roll over, she felt Stephon's body pressing into hers as he climbed over her on the bed. His erection teased first her calves, knees and then nudged the back of her thighs. Her body shivered, and slick moisture formed between her legs. "Stephon," she begged.

His mouth touched her back and then her shoulders. He straddled her and pushed her hair from her neck.

"Stephon, please." Audrey felt his teeth graze her skin, and her back arched in primal response. She panted, "I bought these for us."

She passed the pack behind her and felt him take the condoms from her fingers. His lips continued to nibble her neck beneath her hair.

"Don't I make you feel good, *matia mou*?" His hot breath whispered over her skin.

"Ohhhhh, yes," she said, gasping as his fingers slipped between her parted legs. "Put it on."

"No," he told her in a hush voice and claimed an earlobe with his teeth.

She laughed. "This can't be...healthy." She panted, "You've got to...need to...."

His fingers worked against her, strumming invisible chords in melodies he alone knew. She wriggled against his touch, seeking each exciting stroke.

"Your buttocks are so perfect, sweet Audrey." His body pressed into her, heavy but intoxicating. His strong thighs pinned her on each side. "And your breasts, mustn't forget your beautiful breasts." He kissed her shoulder blade and then slid his free hand under her to cup one breast.

"Please, Stephon," she rose against him on all fours. Condom or no, she needed him inside her. Shaking, she clasped her hand around his member and guided him toward her.

"Hhhhh." He sucked wind through his mouth and pushed away from her.

Audrey rolled over, still lying between his knees, but Stephon sat back. His chest heaved, struggling for air or equilibrium, or both. His eyes opened and closed.

She touched his hand, bracing the mattress under her. "Don't you want me?"

His lips parted with surprise. "My God, Audrey." He chuckled as if he found her question absurd. "More than anything."

"Then why won't you be with me?" She moved a strand of hair out of her eyes and caught a whiff of his cologne on her skin.

"It's important that I don't."

Her stomach sank. "Is something the matter...with you?"

The corner of his lips twisted. "No. Not in the way that you mean. I am waiting until the time is right."

Audrey sighed with relief. She pushed up on her elbows. "Are you a virgin?"

"No." He grinned and ducked his head. "It's just been many years. I was twenty-two the last time I slept with a woman."

She was gaping. Catching herself, she snapped her mouth closed. "That's a long time. So you're holding out for someone special or...or for something in particular?"

He lay beside her and drew her hand to his heart. "I am waiting for one woman. A woman who will take me as I am and want no other." His eyes searched hers. "Because I will want no other after her."

"Lucky girl." Audrey bit her lip. The envious complaint simply slipped out.

Belonging to Stephon for life? Yeah, a woman would be nuts to turn that down. *Funny, I didn't think the same about Paul.* She traced his mouth with her fingertip, and he kissed it. "I've been told I'll never be able to make that kind of promise."

His steady gaze held hers, and for a moment she forgot to breathe.

"Do you believe that?"

She swallowed past a lump in her throat. "I don't know. Maybe I did once. But I don't think I could make any man happy enough for a lifetime."

What would it be like to be Stephon's girlfriend? His wife? To have such a warm, compassionate lover? She would have to give up her job—which she loved. Or he would have to travel with her. She would only make him miserable—eventually—unless she bent to his wishes. Could a compromise ever be possible?

"I believe you could. But only when you're ready." Smile lines crinkled at the corners of his eyes. "Now where was I?"

He eased up over her, eyeing her mouth, but she wasn't willing to let the subject drop. He'd been too accommodating, too gracious, and she yearned to discover his secret desires. What made him squirm with need, to cry out and demand what he must have?

With feather-light fingers, she traced the length of his velvety cock where bulging veins crisscrossed his skin. She kissed his jaw, listening to his shallow breathing. "In the

meantime," she whispered and flicked her tongue across his closed lips, "I can help you with this."

When her hand wrapped around his engorged shaft, he gave a soft moan. Gradually, he leaned back. She watched his eyes flicker with awareness first, then glaze as she stroked him. He relaxed, regarding her through hooded lids.

Given his fantastic body, she could see why so many ancients had chosen to worship the Greek form. She braced a hand on his lean hip and lowered herself over him. Under her close watch, the smooth pink end of his shaft beaded with moisture. Impulsively, she swirled her tongue up the cleft of his cock and caught the drop.

Stephon's responding gasp flooded her with power.

"Audrey."

His hoarse warning only served to spur her actions, increasing the need for supreme authority over him. She took him inside her mouth and felt him buck beneath her. He pushed her back and held her at a distance. His hands shook, and his brow glistened with perspiration.

"Wait," he croaked. His jaw flexed, and he closed his eyes. Bracing himself. "Okay. Now, Audrey."

His body swayed ever so slightly as if courage alone held him up. Self-sacrifice. As if being inside her mouth would be the end of him! But it wouldn't. She wouldn't allow that.

She covered him with her mouth.

He sighed unevenly. She licked and sucked, loving his tremors of pleasure. When she glanced up at him, his eyes were closed and his mouth was open in sheer erotic ecstasy. A vein stood out against his neck. He squirmed beneath her,

his hands floating involuntarily from her hair, to her arms, to her hips.

He murmured a string of words in Greek. *Damn, if she only knew the language!* But she recognized the urgency in his tone. She lifted her head and laid kisses up his abdomen.

When she looked into his eyes, she saw something wild and dangerous. An electric current of excitement zipped through her. He gathered her up in his arms with a growl and turned her back to him. He put both his hands between her legs and spread her sensitive lips. She felt the warm heat of his mouth against the nape of her neck, the insistent nips of his teeth.

"More." His voice was more order than plea, the demand she'd sought.

Bracing her weight against the top of his thighs, she grabbed his cock and copied the rhythm he'd begun against her wet clit. His long finger thrust inside her, again and again, working up a frenzied need, until she clenched around him and cried with release. He followed, erupting against her buttocks.

They collapsed on the bed, Stephon holding her and kissing places where he'd bitten.

His tender kisses lingered as Audrey floated in and out of sleep.

In the morning, Audrey called Ros but didn't get an answer. After she and Stephon showered and dressed, they headed out for breakfast. But first they stopped at Ros's villa.

She refrained from knocking on her friend's door when she saw the photographer's red silk scarf. She grinned, sifting the

soft silk fringe of the fabric through her fingers. "I think this means our friend has company."

Stephon touched the scarf and frowned. "She's invited someone into her villa?"

Audrey placed her hands on his shoulders, smiling. "She's an adult. I'm sure she didn't want to feel left out, after I invited you into *my* place."

His worried brow remained. "Do you have any idea who's in there?" He slipped from her arms and went to peek around the corner of the building.

"No. Knowing Ros, it could be anybody." Audrey shrugged. "What are you looking for?"

He returned to the front door. "You should check on her. Knock on the door."

Was he joking? "No way. Let her have some fun. She's a widow. Trust me, if she isn't answering her phone, she's having a great time. This is normal for her." She took his hand. "Let's go eat."

Stephon refused to budge, his gaze locked on the door as if trying to see through it.

"C'mon. It's fine."

Ignoring her, he pounded a fist against the door. No one answered.

"She won't hear you from the bedroom. She's probably had too much to drink anyway. Look, either you come eat with me and go hiking," she planted her hands on her hips, "or I'm going without you and hire Zander. You decide."

He glanced between her and the door, face stony in indecision. Then he shoved his hands in his back pockets and followed her, head down.

The more she got to know her new lover, the more she realized what she didn't know about him. Or didn't understand. He reminded her of some medieval knight, pledged to his own chivalric code.

However, a code vowing abstinence was a code they would both do better without—in her opinion. But she couldn't help but adore him. Ever since she'd met the hotelier, her curiosity had bubbled over. Maybe she'd already lost her professional objectivity.

Whomever Stephon chose to pledge his undying faithfulness to for all eternity—she hoped the woman appreciated him.

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Chapter Five

His father wouldn't look him in the eye.

"You're dead to me unless you can stop it." The memory of his words remained crisp and clear after nine years, and his father's vow held true. Since the beginning of the curse, the old man rarely spoke to him.

He wanted Stephon to finish them off. To put a bullet in each cursed hide. Conversations with his father always ended with his request to destroy the others. It was his sire's fervent wish, being too humanly vulnerable to accomplish the feat on his own—and unable to kill his own sons. Until the day came when the pack was no more, his father would remain distant.

Theo served them breakfast, while his father stayed inside the Constantina. Stephon left Audrey alone only long enough to question Theo about Rosalind. Had he seen her and her new lover the night before? Or that morning? But all Theo could do was shake his head, eyes darting everywhere.

Maybe he'd begun to wish him dead him, too.

They were in for a two-day trek. The origin of the werewolf curse was a lake, high in the mountains. With daypacks loaded with bottled water, apples, granola bars, a tarp, and a blanket, they drove out as far as the road would take them and parked their car.

Getting Audrey away from the village was a good idea, Stephon told himself, but he regretted not bringing her friend. If he'd followed his instincts and dragged the photographer

out of the house, he would've had a lot of explaining to do, especially if she had been in no danger. It was a tough decision. Should he alarm the women and explain the situation? Or leave things to chance? If Rosalind followed his advice and remained alone in her villa after dark, all would be well. However, if she didn't...

During the hours they spent walking, Stephon showed Audrey the places where he used to meet with his friends, the field where they'd played football and pretended they were competing for the World Cup, the hippodrome where he'd ridden horses, and finally the river where he used to fish.

In return, he learned a lot about her. An incredibly fascinating woman, not only was she an award-winning travel correspondent, but she also wrote articles on food and wine. Her parents were missionaries, so she'd never known a time in her life when she wasn't traveling to or from somewhere. She resided in Chicago, but rarely stayed there. Active and athletic, in college she'd learned archery and occasionally competed in tournaments where she sometimes beat male competitors. More than anything, she longed to prove herself independent and successful without her longtime partner and former fiance.

Stephon could've told her she'd already arrived at that goal.

A good trooper, she didn't complain about the distance they'd traveled, but he noted the signs of fatigue in her pace as dusk settled. They'd followed the river and its valley to the base of the mountain. There they would find sanctuary on the soft banks of the lake.

But his biggest trial of the day had yet to commence. He'd brought Audrey here, away from the danger of the pack, but had he brought her to an even greater threat? The lure dominated all his thoughts after dark, sheer torture. It would take every ounce of his effort to resist the combined temptation of this lady, the moon, the lake, and the curse.

"This is where we'll rest for the night."

Audrey scanned the panoramic valley stretching beyond the crystal blue lake. Her pack slid off her shoulder to drop at her feet. Stephon sat at the base of a lone tree, watching her.

"This place is incredible." The orange sun hid behind a mountain, on the other side of the lake, as night encroached. Already, she found visibility more difficult. The water of the lake lapped near her feet from the gentle breeze across its reflective surface. Awestruck, she grinned. "I'm starting to see where all the myths come from."

"This whole landscape is associated with dozens of tales. We're surrounded by former temples." Stephon pointed across the water, "To the west, there's one dedicated to Pan, Athena, and Aphrodite. To the north, a sanctuary to Zeus and a temple to Demeter. On this very mountain, archeologists uncovered a sacrificial altar to Zeus last year." He bent a knee and rested his arm across it.

"It's absolutely stunning." Audrey removed her shoes and socks. "Ros has to get some shots of this place."

Raw, red blisters wrapped around her heels where her new shoes had rubbed during their hike. Drawn by the soothing promise of the relief, she stuck her toes in the lake. The icy water pricked her. Gasping she quickly withdrew.

Stephon laughed and walked up behind her. "The water comes not only from the river, but also from springs which flow up from a system of caves. Cold, isn't it?"

She gave him the evil eye. "You could've warned me."

"Would my warning have stopped you?" Sobering, his voice lowered an octave.

"No," she conceded, smiling. A bubble of happiness floated inside her. "I don't care. My feet are killing me. Wanna go swimming?"

"In this freezing water?" His brow skewered.

She laughed. "You sissy! You've got the most beautiful swimming hole in the world right here in your backyard. Have you ever even swam here?"

His gaze grew distant, staring across the water. "A time or two, when I was younger."

"Well, come on." She pulled off her tee shirt, followed by her jeans, dropping them in a pile on a flat rock.

As she straightened, Stephon's proprietary gaze warmed her. "I suppose I wouldn't mind getting wet if you don't." He lifted his shirt over his head.

"That's the spirit."

She lifted her hair and gave him her back to unfasten her bra, which he did. His warm palms cupped her unbound breasts, and he kissed her shoulders before she pulled away.

Audrey dropped her panties and watched Stephon draw his long legs out of his jeans and trunks. She tiptoed into the water beside him. While she welcomed the immediate cool respite on her blisters, the rest of her went instantly numb. In the water up to her hips, she eased forward an inch at a time,

delaying the first impact of ice water on her sensitive stomach. In a show of bravado, Stephon plunged under and re-emerged in front of her. She admired the way the water streamed off his dark muscles as he pushed his hair out of his eyes.

"Wooo! I hope you're happy now," he groused, making an exaggerated shiver. A sly grin spread on his lips. He pulled her to his body, encircling her with his arms.

"Immen-n-s-s-sely." Her teeth chattered. "T-tell me about this lake. Are there any m-m-myths attached to it?"

"My, aren't you the professional," he lifted a hand to cup her cheek, "interviewing me, even as you turn into a Popsicle. Yes, according to the stories, Pan chased a nymph here. And Artemis hunted stags on the shore. There's a mountain not far from here where Zeus supposedly turned a king into a werewolf and here at this body of water, his followers continued to perpetuate the legend."

"How? What's their story?" She rubbed a drop of water from his smooth forehead before it could fall into his eyes.

"The followers, a clan, worshipped Zeus and brought sacrifices to this lake—people. As the legend went, the sacrificial humans were told to swim across the lake," he paused and swallowed hard, "and when they reached the other side they became as wolves."

"Ah," she nodded. "And then had to stay that way if they ate human flesh?" She recalled what Paul had told her.

Stephon nodded. "They resisted temptation for a period of years until the curse lifted."

He suddenly bent, picked her up in his arms, and proceeded to carry her out.

"Oh my g-g-g-god!" The air, warm earlier, made contact with her wet skin, chilling her to the bone. "Put me back in the water, Stephon!" She wrapped her arms around his neck and kicked her feet.

"No. It's time to get dry."

"I'd rather s-s-stay in the water."

"Sissy."

He spread out the tarp and blanket under the tree while she stood trembling uncontrollably. Then he led her to lie down and stretched out beside her.

Audrey felt Stephon positioning himself, so that his skin touched hers as much as possible, and then he drew the blanket over them.

"I guess it wasn't such a good idea, after all."

He kissed her cheek. "You'll be warm soon. I promise." His hand chaffed her hip and thigh, coaxing the return of her blood flow.

She snuggled her bottom against his resting sex and felt him stir. She smiled, pleased with herself. "There's a full moon tonight."

In front of their pallet, the white beam spilled across the lake, merging with the last rosy glow of dusk.

"Almost," the word danced across her skin. "Tomorrow."

He rose above her, watching with hunger in his eyes. Audrey rolled onto her back. Stephon's expression, though filled with passion, was also riddled with uncertainty. The

sodden locks of his hair fell forward, tickling her cheek, so she tucked them behind his ear.

"Audrey?" He pressed his lips to hers briefly and then took a deep breath. "You and Rosalind must leave tomorrow. I called my pilot. My plane will be in the village by tomorrow night."

"What?" She frowned. "I told you we're staying. We're not done yet."

Suddenly, faced with the thought of separating from him permanently, her chest felt robbed of breath. Paul had never made her feel this way. She'd enjoyed their short separations from each other. But parting with Stephon...

He shook his head. "I can't allow you to stay here any longer, my heart."

"*You can't allow,*" she repeated. "I wasn't aware you were in charge of me. I have the week booked, Stephon. What's wrong? Do you not like my company anymore?" Her hardened voice broke, and she closed her eyes over tears.

After spending time with Stephon, the most compassionate man she'd ever known, her old life was empty and cold.

"Audrey." He took her hand and placed it on his chest. "Do I feel as if I don't like your company? Honestly?" He drew her hand further down his taut body, until she made contact with his male flesh, now thick again and bobbing with desire.

Trying to understand him made her head hurt. "Then what's the matter? Why have you been trying to send me away? Maybe," she tried to swallow past her dry throat, "you don't care about me as much I care about you. When I leave

Greece, I'm going back to Chicago, but I'd love to travel to your other hotels first. I'd like it if you went with me."

Her independence was a small sacrifice when she'd be gaining so much...so *very* much.

"Really?" His gaze searched her eyes, thumbs softly rubbing her cheekbones.

"Yes." She smiled, blinking away the tears. "Hell, I'd like it if you came on my next assignment with me. If you could. And maybe the next. We could travel together...for as long as you liked." She bit her lip. Hope burned within that he would agree.

"For as long as I liked? You know what I would ask of you. That may be a very, very long time, Audrey." He grew still, watching her.

Did she dare believe he was saying what she thought he was saying? That he wanted her in his life, permanently? A rush of emotion filled her. "I'm not arguing. Do I *feel* as if I don't love your company?"

His eyes brightened. She pulled his hand to rest between her legs, where she was warm and ready with liquid that awaited his touch.

His mouth swept down, slashing against her lips, in a kiss that beckoned a starving beast above a slaughtered lamb. With his finger inside her, he stroked her with his thumb until she writhed up, seeking him.

He eased over her body and settled between her thighs. When he took her mouth again, this time his lips were gentler, nipping against her lips but *never* deepening the kiss. Her tongue teased his teeth, but as always, he held back.

Why? She wanted to demand the answer. Did he think her a bad kisser? Or himself? Being unable to kiss him only made her want to more. Still, his actions demonstrated his raw urgency. His need equaled hers. She could feel his heartbeat pounding above her breasts. With his head back, he impaled her, pushing deep into her core. He plunged into her rhythmically, body shuddering. His hand cupped her bottom and pulled her against him.

"Oh, Stephon!" she gasped. Her heart fluttered madly. In spite of his superhuman restraint and commitment, he wanted to be with her. *Yes!*

"Audrey," he panted, face flushed. "It's been so long, and you feel so *perfect*."

He filled her in a way that no other man had before, and knowing he'd chosen her—*her!*—over any other woman, made her all the more aroused. Her flesh tightened around him in a marvelous aching necessity, hurtling them toward combustion.

She came apart with a cry that echoed across the lake. Stephon quaked with her name on his lips, arching his back as he spilled deep inside her. His seed pumped, satisfying her primitive yearning.

Stephon pulled her against him, cradling her round buttocks against his groin and thighs, still slick with sex. His kisses sought to stave the cool air from her soft shoulders. Soon they would both be dry, warm, and content.

She'd said she *loved* his company.

He nuzzled her velvety earlobe and kissed her behind her ear. She smiled and snuggled closer.

Ever since meeting Audrey, he'd known he must mate with her and make her his and his alone. His soul demanded it.

No turning back now. He'd failed at protecting her from the curse he carried, but now his burden was hers. She had no idea her new lover bore such a dark fate—and kept even darker company. But he'd face Satan himself before he'd fail to protect her from his enemies.

He murmured in Audrey's ear, sharing all his secrets and dark forbidden truths. Spoken in his tongue, she would be spared the horrible knowledge that night. But tomorrow he'd have to tell her for real. She could still choose her own fate.

Although he'd chosen Audrey above all women—for the rest of eternity—she had no such fetters or obligations.

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Chapter Six

On the morning of the full moon, Christanochori became a village of empty streets, lifeless buildings, and an eerie silence that made a man desperate for companionship. Stephon had long wearied of the sight. For infinity it seemed he'd walked the village alone, an outsider, closed off from the people he loved. Seeing the abandoned bicycles and cars outside houses shuttered tight against the outside, forced a familiar nausea in his gut.

After parking his Fiat between the restaurant and the Della Luna office, he opened the door for Audrey.

"Geez. Place shuts down on a Wednesday, huh?" Audrey squeezed his hand and indicated the Constantina. The windows were literally nailed shut.

Stephon slammed the door, leaving their packs in the car for later. He avoided Audrey's questioning gaze. What could he say? Showing her what he was would be far more convincing than anything he could verbalize.

"Let's go check on Ros."

That was exactly what he'd intended to do, so he followed Audrey.

"Guess it's safe to knock now," Audrey chirped, lifting her shoulder with a grin. The scarf was gone. She rapped on the door and waited. No answer. "Hmmm. I'll call her. She might be taking some shots of the village."

Stephon moved restlessly on the veranda while Audrey held her phone to her ear. Sweat broke on his neck and forehead. He pulled at the neck of his t-shirt for air.

The day was warm, but not abnormally so. His palms were clammy. He flexed his hands, staring at them. Something was wrong. Goosebumps ran up his forearms. He sniffed and identified the cause of this change in his equilibrium.

Blood.

Audrey stuck her phone back in her jeans' pocket and regarded Stephon, who'd squatted beside the doormat. His eyes were fixed on the ground as if it held the fate of the world.

"What is it? Did your maid miss something? Give it a rest, Stephon." Audrey laughed. He was the biggest perfectionist! She leaned over his shoulder. A tiny brownish dot marred the pristine stone tile. "Ugh. That looks like—"

"Damn. I am an idiot!" Stephon rose abruptly and pounded a fist against Ros's door. "Rosalind! Are you in there?"

Audrey raised her voice over his racket and said, "Even if it is blood, that doesn't mean anything."

He tried the doorknob and apparently found it locked. "It means everything!" he snapped. He backed away to the path and flexed his shoulder.

Her stomach dropped. He was going to try to bust the door in. "Wait! Go get the key. You have it."

"No time." He rushed for the door panel, shouldering against the wood. A splintering sound responded, but it didn't come open. He winced and rubbed his shoulder. "No bolt. I'll get it this time."

"Stephon, you'll hurt yourself." He gave her a look, face closed and eyes haunted. She hugged herself against a feeling of helplessness. "Tell me what's the matter."

He gave a single shake of his head and stepped off the veranda again. Audrey barely had a chance to get out of the way before he barreled into the door again. This time the doorframe shattered on the inside. Stephon shook himself off and reached inside the opening to unlock the door. When he pushed through, Audrey marveled at the thickness of the door.

"My God, Stephon, you could've broken your shoulder," she chastised, but her heart was slamming in her chest. What was bothering him?

But he didn't wait to talk, calling out for Ros. Audrey followed in his wake, as he hurried through the undisturbed white furnishings of the living room and up the spiral stairs to the master bedroom. Circling so quickly, Audrey's head spun, but she tried to keep up. Her pulse fluttered frantically in her neck.

"*Skata!*" Stephon's bellow echoed from above. "Shit!"

He blocked the way. Audrey touched his stiff back, panic rolling over her. "What?"

He turned and wrapped his arms around her. "Don't, my heart."

She returned his hug, confused by the gesture. His hands rubbed her back soothingly, but his breathing was ragged, heartbeat erratic. Something was terribly, terribly, wrong. She pushed free and climbed a step higher into the bedroom.

On the bed lay an enormous crimson stain. Like a spent candle in a surreal painting, the wide stain melted over the side of the white bedclothes onto the floor, ending in a trail of splattered drops.

Her mouth dropped open in a silent scream, cold horror clutching her lungs. Vaguely, she felt hands on her shoulders, pulling her back against the solidity of a chest. Stephon. She turned in his arms and clutched him, hugging him in the same way he'd held her before...before....

"Oh, Stephon!" she sobbed. "Where's Ros? What's happened here?"

"Come. We've got to get out of here."

Her legs went rubbery, but he somehow helped her down the stairs. They didn't stop until they were out of the villa and halfway to hers. Stephon drew her into a tight embrace. Her body froze with revulsion. *Oh, God, no!*

She felt numb. Shock, she realized dimly. "We have to call for help. We need the police. We need—"

"I'm sorry, Audrey. I'm so sorry." His fingers threaded in her hair, caressing her shuddering body.

Then she succumbed to the pain rising in her chest. *Ros! It couldn't be!*

After crying against his shoulder for several minutes, she eased back to look into his face. His eyes were strange, gone nearly neon blue as he studied her.

She tried to understand what had happened. "Whoever that...came from, they're dead, aren't they? A person can't live after losing that much blood."

He didn't answer, merely turned his head.

"We've got to find Ros! Call the police! Maybe it wasn't her." She pulled away, but Stephon refused to let go.

"No. She's gone. It was her."

"How can you be sure?" Audrey watched as his expression shuttered. "Wait. Did you know she was in danger? Is that why you didn't want to leave her?" Her stomach tightened.

He nodded, closing his eyes. "I didn't think they would do anything so soon. Not when I thought they wanted me to—" he broke off and moved away from her.

"What are you not telling me? This is Ros we're talking about. My *friend*!" She wiped at a tear on her cheek. "Tell me everything, Stephon."

He glanced around, instantly alert. "Not out here."

Audrey glanced around the villas. In the afternoon Arcadian sun, they looked bright and cheery, but she chose to follow Stephon's lead. Whoever was responsible for the horrible scene next door might be lurking outside.

Inside her villa, Stephon locked and bolted the door while Audrey poured them both a scotch. Her hands shook as she sloshed liquor in the glasses, but it failed to take her thoughts off the blood and Ros.

He downed his glass in one swig. His moody gaze swung to her. "Are you ready for answers?"

"Tell me. What's going on?" She drained her glass, taking little comfort in the burning amber liquid.

He sighed. "Remember the legend I told you last night. The one about the clan who brought sacrifices to the lake?"

Audrey scowled. "Stephon, be serious. I don't want to talk myths right now. We've got to hurry and call the cops. Ros could be—"

"Dead. She *is* dead," he interrupted. "Some of the clan's descendants still live in villages around here. The legends are oral traditions from millenniums ago. But as a youth, we—my friends and I—thought it a lark to test the legend. Several of us, including my older brother Zander, went—"

"Older?" she scoffed. "He's younger than you. You're teasing me, damnit!" Outraged, she knocked their empty glasses aside.

He caught her hands and held them, steadying her. "We went to the lake, boasting that we could out-swim each other. The legend says that if a man swims across the lake, on the other side he becomes a wolf. We were competitors in football. We were athletes. We each took turns swimming across. Zander, Achilleo, Yannis...and me. Finally Stavros, who nearly drowned. I swam back out to bring him the rest of the way across. We were laughing, proud of ourselves. Full of ego. We returned to our homes. Then a few weeks later, the hunger began. We started craving meat. First rare steaks and freshly slaughtered goat. Then we wanted fresher meat, still. It was a sickness, growing worse and worse. Stavros broke first. He killed his elderly mother. Sucked the blood from her body. Then Achilleo, then—"

"Hold up. Are you telling me you became werewolves on the night of a full moon?" Audrey clamped her eyes shut. He was insane.

"No. We can become a wolf at will at any time. But on the night of a full moon, it's compulsory. We're drawn to the lake each full moon, drawn by the curse to stalk and kill."

She covered her ears with her hands. His crazy words tore at her heart, and tears filled her eyes. This man she'd come to care about ...to *love*...stood before her now, telling her about werewolves and curses. Had he lost his mind? Had she?

Stephon's gentle hands tugged at her wrists. His eyes implored her until she gave in, allowing him to finish.

"This is my ninth year, Audrey. I've never eaten human flesh or killed anyone. I'm almost free of the curse! Zander wants to control the pack. He'll do anything. To him, I'm the alpha, the stronger male for resisting the urge to kill, and he wants me to submit to him. I think he brought you and Rosalind here to tempt me. Alphas take another alpha, a female, to be their mate. In his mind, you would be my weakness." He hung his head, "I thought...I thought he'd intended for me to kill one or both of you if you were here during the full moon. I never expected him, or any of them, to kill Rosalind."

"You think Zander...and his friends...killed Ros?" Audrey stepped backward involuntarily. Her shaking hand bumped the bottle of scotch. She covered her mouth with her trembling fingers. *He must be crazy. God, no! First Ros, now this?* "So you have this urge to kill, too?"

Her hand curled around the neck of the bottle. *Did he have something to do with Ros? With her death? Had he agreed to take her away so his crazy friends could slaughter Ros?*

His eyes closed wearily. "Yes. It's strongest on the night of the full moon," he opened his eyes and reached for one of the fallen glasses, "but I can resist. Tonight is my last night. For the others, though, it's too late. They're damned. They yielded to temptation. Only silver can kill them now."

In one smooth motion, she lifted the heavy bottle and swung it at his head. Stephon cried out on impact, and she dropped the bottle to shatter at their feet.

While he stood dazed and holding his head, she bolted from the house into the street. She screamed for help, tears running down her cheeks.

Sweet Jesus! Where could she go?

As soon as she came to the Constantina, she darted to the entrance and pounded on the door. "Open up. Someone's just killed a woman!"

Through the closed curtain, a silhouette moved inside.

"Please let me in! Oh, please!" She tried the door, but it was locked—as she knew it would be.

The corner of the curtain peeled back, and the waiter's face appeared behind the glass. Stephon's father. Her heart leapt.

"Let me in," she told him. "I need to talk to you about Stephon. My friend is missing. I think someone's killed her!"

The old man stared at her through weary brown eyes, not understanding, but she caught the profound sadness in his gaze. He knew. A shiver ran through her. Though he couldn't speak English, he knew what was going on. He hung his head and released the curtain—his shadow disappeared.

"No!" she wailed and pounded on the door.

Audrey ran into the deserted plateia. Everyone was gone, just like Twilight Zone. *What if...?*

No! She wouldn't believe it possible.

She pulled her phone out and tried to remember the GSM number for directory assistance in Greece. She tried the first number that came to mind. *Wrong!* Then another. It was the wrong number, too. *Damn!* She could call Ian or Paul, since she had both their numbers, but finding sanctuary should be her first priority. In the open square, Stephon would spot her for certain.

Behind the Constantina there stood a fenced dumpster area. She ran for it, opened the latch, and ducked inside. The wooden fence kept people from seeing in, but it also kept her from seeing out. She sat beside the closed door to think.

She tapped her forehead with her phone. *C'mon, c'mon. What to do?* Calling Paul or Ian was useless. They wouldn't get help to her in time. The village was in the middle of nowhere. Someone in town would surely help her.

Just then, the latch on the door clicked. She hadn't heard anyone coming! Nowhere to go, she braced herself for a fight. The door swung open, and Theo looked down at her through big blue eyes.

Audrey laughed and teared up anew. She whispered, "Theo. Oh, thank God!" She rose and grabbed his shoulders. "I know you don't understand, but I need your help."

The boy's gaze shifted to her hands on him. She released him immediately and clamped her palms together in a gesture he might recognize. Mercy.

"Help me, Theo." The boy's expression registered no comprehension. He simply stared at her hands as if mesmerized. "Theo?" She reached for him.

He looked into her face, and Audrey noted his eyes had changed, turning from dull blue to neon—just like Stephon's sapphire irises minutes earlier. She backed up, her heart in her throat.

The boy's lips pulled back from his teeth, baring razor-sharp canines.

She lunged for the door, just as it opened, and fell into Stephon's arms. He pushed her behind him and faced his little brother.

A low sound rumbled in his chest, which Audrey recognized as a growl. The very non-human noise made her skin prickle with chill bumps. Keeping one hand clamped around her wrist like a manacle, Stephon urged her out the door. His snarls kept the boy at bay long enough for them to escape.

Outside, Stephon guided her off the path through a small grove of ash trees. "My villa is safe for now."

Audrey caught the glow of his eerie blue eyes. Her legs froze and she stopped, glancing around with uncertainty. His brother, that *thing*, had almost attacked her. And he might've killed Ros. If Theo was a werewolf and so was Stephon, how could she know she was safe with either of them?

Stephon braced a hand on a tree, touching his temple where she'd hit him. "If you don't trust me, go to the church." He grimaced, pointing. "No one will come after you on holy ground, not even me, but I cannot protect you there, either."

Movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention. Theo ran out of the trash corral and rounded behind the Constantina. In spite of everything, her heart ached for Stephon.

"Your brother—he's—"

He shook his head, pain etched on his features. "It's Zander's doings, I'm certain. Theo wasn't like us when I left three weeks ago. They must've made him swim the lake. He's only ten years old!" Frustrated, he punched the air and swore under his breath.

Audrey hesitated—torn between running and staying with the man she feared and loved.

"Don't waste any time. Zander's made his first move," Stephon told her. "You could take my keys; drive the Fiat as far as the gas will take you. Or go to the church and wait until my plane arrives. Just do it. Make your choice and go now."

Her fortitude crumbled, and her eyes spilled over with tears. "I'll go with you."

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Chapter Seven

Safely locked inside Stephon's villa, they sat in the living room to talk. Horror, along with a million questions rattled in Audrey's head. He took a seat on the couch beside her and closed his eyes, letting his head fall back against the cushions. Long fingers rubbed at the knot forming on his temple.

She closed the distance between them and tentatively touched his hand resting on his thigh. "Are you okay?"

"I will be. My pain and wounds heal quickly, quicker than mortals. That's why Zander looks so much younger than me. I've aged. He hasn't. Since the pack has tasted human blood, they're immortal. At first, I was too, but as the end of the curse draws closer, my powers have weakened." The corner of his mouth quirked in irony. "I'm not as impervious to pain as I once was."

Looking back, his attempts to protect her had been obvious, and she'd never realized the scope of Stephon's determination to keep her safe—even from himself. It embarrassed her to think how shallow her thoughts had been before, how trivial. Especially when compared to Stephon's.

"I'm sorry I hit you. I'm sorry I didn't believe." Her voice cracked.

Worse than being saddled with her, he now had the added worry about Theo. It ripped her apart inside, seeing his reaction to his brother's metamorphosis. If only she'd stayed with Stephon...

He framed her face in his hands. "I'm not surprised in the least that you defended yourself. Why do you think I chose you? You're strong and good-hearted. An alpha for an alpha."

Audrey smiled as he kissed her forehead, relieved he wasn't angry with her. Her hands flattened against his chest. She loved the safe, solid feel of him. He brought sanity back.

"So after tonight you'll be human and no longer a werewolf?"

"Yes. I'll have to swim across the lake one final time to break the curse."

"Won't that make you vulnerable to Zander and the rest of the pack?"

"Completely vulnerable. My father assembled a bag years ago, filled with the things I would need to kill the others and protect myself if the pack comes after me. I refused to use it—to take the lives of the others. Father hates me for my incapability." His jaw tightened and his gaze dropped.

"How can your father expect you to do this? To Zander, his own son?"

"My brother's been dead to him since he made his first kill. I'm Father's last hope. Especially now for Theo's sake."

Unless Theo has already tasted human blood. She prayed he hadn't.

"The bag contains a gun, silver bullets. I cannot touch it as a werewolf. I keep it upstairs. Tonight I'll leave the bag beside the lake."

His hand trailed down her arm, and he lowered his voice, "If anything happens to me before my plane arrives, I want you to—"

Audrey touched his lips, silencing him. "You don't expect me to get on the plane without you, do you?"

His gaze flicked from her mouth to her eyes. "I don't want you in danger."

"What happened to our plans? You're supposed to leave here with me." She gripped his shoulders, emphatic.

"When I made love to you last night, as the alpha male to the pack, I committed myself to you for life, but you're not as I am. You're not *were*. You have a choice."

He was wrong. Parting with Stephon would surely kill her. She caressed his cheek, loving the way his black stubble felt against her thumb. "And you'll be human, Stephon, no longer bound by the rules of the curse or the pack. You would be free to leave me, if you wanted." She turned her gaze away, not wanting to see him consider the option.

She felt his fingers on her chin, slowly turning her to face him. His eyes glittered. "I'll come for you, my heart, if you'll still have me. My pilot will take you to my house on Crete. Curse or no curse, I won't leave you."

Shortly after noon, the sound of Stephon's plane overhead woke them from a short rest in each other's arms. He took her to her villa and Ros's to collect their things. She didn't want to revisit the place where Ros had lost her life, but the photographer had family. They would want her things—purse, glasses, cameras. Her heart ached which each item she placed in her bag—reliving memories, of the time she'd spent working with her friend.

Carrying the bag, she stayed close at Stephon's side while he escorted her to the airstrip where the plane had landed in a field of red poppies.

They approached the twin-engine plane while the engines were still running, and the pilot gave Stephon a friendly nod from inside the cockpit. The wind lifted the ends of Audrey's hair. Stephon had his keys and bag in hand, ready to make the trek back to the lake. His back and shoulders pinched, she could tell he was past anxious to answer the call of the curse. Still, he gathered her in his arms as soon as she deposited her things inside the door of the plane.

"I'm sorry you had to be involved in all this." He spoke in her ear.

She squeezed him tighter. "I don't regret finding you, Stephon."

His mouth turned to cover hers. He pressed warm kisses on her lips. If only she could burrow under his skin and stay with him.

After a long moment, Audrey began to hope he would change his mind and come with her, but she knew he could no more do that than he could sprout wings and fly. And allowing her to stay with him wasn't an option he'd given her, either.

He finally released her and backed away. "Good-bye, *matia mou*."

Her good-bye came out as croak. She forced a brave smile through her tears and climbed inside the plane.

The pilot introduced himself as she settled inside. She heard him talking as if in a bottle—separated and distant from

all things outside her body, head, and heart. She pressed her forehead against the glass window, as they lifted into the air, and watched Stephon walk away.

The plane began its slow ascent, climbing high above the poppy field and further out across the local pastures and the road. Everything below blurred in her vision, obscured by her tears.

Dear God, how could she leave him? And would he live to join her after tonight?

After a few minutes of quiet, the pilot attempted to converse with her again. "Crete's beautiful. Have you ever been there?" he asked over his shoulder in a thick Greek accent.

"No," she managed to answer, wiping the tears from her face.

"Mr. Diakos said you're staying with him at his house on the beach, is that correct?"

Audrey imagined the long cold wait ahead of her in an unfamiliar house—a house filled with things that would remind her of Stephon.

"No." She balled her hands in fists. "No. There's a lake near Christanochori. Do you know the one?"

"Ne. In the mountains? With crystal blue water."

"Yes! Take me there."

"I'm sorry, Miss. My orders were to—"

"Screw your orders!" She glanced around. Surely there was a parachute somewhere.

"Take me to the lake or I'll bail out."

But she didn't have to. The plane veered left.

Midnight Cravings
by Sandra Jones

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Chapter Eight

Breathing hard through his nose and mouth, Stephon paused to rest in the woods and bent double over his knees. A startled owl took flight from its roost above his head, its wings stirring a breeze, gliding low. He knew the towering pines by heart, having visited the lake so many times in his life—and much more often these past nine years. He licked his dry lips. There was water in his daypack, but he dared not open it yet. The silver bullets inside the bag wouldn't kill him unless they broke his skin, but even close proximity to the metal seemed to heat his blood. How he'd managed to endure Audrey's silver fillings he didn't know. He smiled at the memory of their magical time together and knew it was more than the dental amalgam making him burn inside and out.

Almost there. His heartbeat sped up as he acknowledged the scent of the lake and it spurred him to hurry. Fleet footed, he dodged obstacles in his path with lupine instinct. Soon, freedom and then...Audrey. Tonight he paid heed to every familiar smell he encountered. A part of him longed to believe it was because he was in love, making him experience everything through new eyes and sense of smell. But along with the curse, he'd inherited acute senses that were highly attuned to his surroundings. Honing in on his destination under a full moon, the ability amplified because along the way he'd caught the scent of several rabbits, squirrels, and recently, two does and a fawn.

God, he hungered! *Should've eaten and gained strength for the hike and swim.*

He inhaled again. New scents made his nostrils quiver. The pack was near. He noted fear ...on Stavros and...*Theo*. The poor kid was probably scared out of his mind. Adrenalin, however, not fright, exuded from the skin of Zander, Achilleo, and Yannis. He'd anticipated them coming, but he'd hoped to beat them to the lake.

The shirt on his back stretched tight against his shoulders, scratchy and hot. Time to rid himself of his burdens and prepare for a confrontation. One last metamorphoses, he prayed, and hopefully never again. He was still the alpha of the pack—dammit—and he would make them well aware of it.

He tossed the daypack behind a fallen tree and kept moving as he pulled his shirt over his head. He heard the cotton rip against his growing deltoids just before it came free. That was the exact reason his father had packed a change of clothes, just in case.

In a full run now, he knew the pack was closer—within earshot. He smelled their human sweat and testosterone, so they hadn't transformed yet. Though what they were waiting for, he couldn't be certain.

There was another scent in the air. The aroma made his stomach contract and rumble, his loins harden, and his heart quicken. A human was near the lake, and of a certainty, she was female.

God, no.

His other half—Audrey.

He burst from the woods at the same lakeshore he and Audrey had shared the night before, but this time, his beloved wasn't alone. She sat hugging her knees to her chest, surrounded by the pack, her body huddled in helplessness. But when her eyes met his, he saw the spark of determination within her. That spark he'd come to recognize and love these past few days.

His mate wasn't granting them victory yet.

Audrey tried to keep still, but she wanted to jump up and dance. Stephon had arrived and would help her! But their battle was just beginning. Luckily, Zander hadn't thought her worthy of taking time to tie up, so her hands and feet were free. The pack had caught her in the woods and led her to the same tree where she and Stephon had spent the night. Bait for him, she supposed.

Stephon's long body appeared even longer in the moonlight. Shirtless, his chest glistened. Fur broke across his torso and up his neck. His sideburns and unshaven beard thickened slightly as she watched. Half wild beast, his upper body doubled in mass, eyes and teeth flashing, but Audrey knew nothing more beautiful to behold.

"Ah, and here's my brother!" Zander clasped his hands together with exaggerated enthusiasm, stalking away from the others encircling her to face Stephon. "Look who's come to visit. Your mate, Miss Channing."

Achilleo chuckled and reached for her—probably to pull her up—but Stephon's bone-chilling snarl forced him to back down and step away.

All four young men were gorgeous. She'd learned their names during her hour of captivity by listening to their conversation, though they'd rarely spoken a word to her. Stavros, the one whom Stephon had saved from drowning was short with narrow shoulders and wild auburn hair. He reminded her of a troll doll, but his handsome face rivaled that of his company. Achilleo had campaigned to gang rape her during their wait, but Zander held him off. She'd soon realized his motives weren't gallant, however. According to Zander, she stank of Stephon's bed and therefore wasn't a fit mate. Yannis boasted the best pecs and abs of the bunch, but his lack of self-control was obvious. Drool dripped off his canines as he watched her every move.

Zander circled Stephon. "It appears you haven't informed your mate that our sense of smell is more powerful than any other creature's on earth. For a time while we stalked her, with your odor on her skin, we thought she was you." Zander laughed, throwing her an amused glance over his shoulder.

Audrey gave him a go-to-hell glare. "Are you going to kill me, or what? Did you make Ros suffer and wait, too, before you killed her?"

Zander prowled back and forth between her and Stephon, smiling wickedly. "Ros," he said, smacking his lips, "tangy but not very sweet. Actually, she and I got along fairly well yesterday while she was still breathing. But the others were starving. They'd been craving you for days, and of course, you were off-limits. So what could I do? I had to throw them something."

Her stomach roiled, and she bent over her knees. Blood pounded in her forehead, forcing an ache that threatened to split her head apart. In pain and outrage, she seethed, "You bastard! I don't see why the village doesn't just exterminate all of you!"

"Because they can't, Audrey." Stephon moved to her side, helping her to her feet. He whispered in her ear, "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, fighting tears and wrapped an arm around her nauseous stomach.

He squeezed her hand and explained, "The legends are our heritage in Christanochori. A way of life. No one believes the curse can be broken. Once a life has been sacrificed—in our case, five, now *six* lives—fate rests in the victim's hands. All the villagers can do is to protect themselves, and they live with us, amongst us...all the time *hating us*."

"Stephon," Zander's cool green gaze grew malevolent under his lowered brows, "it's time you chose sides. I know you didn't come here to hunt like the rest of us. Tell your *were-brethren* your intentions—to abandon the pack."

Stephon's lips pulled back in an angry grin. "I'm not as weak as you'd expected, Zander. You thought you could flaunt these ladies under my nose, bringing streams of unwitting tourists to the area to tempt me, didn't you? But it didn't work." He leaned close to Audrey's neck and pressed his mouth to her skin in a show of strength and willpower. Kissing her, his hot breath burned against her flesh. Audrey sensed the tension in his body, heard his uneven breathing. She knew he wasn't as resistant to his craving as he

pretended. He lifted their linked hands to the sky. "Instead of damning myself like the rest of you, I found my equal."

Audrey lifted her chin and met Zander's stare. Her spirits swelled. Stephon was right. She felt complete, indomitable. What had she to fear no matter where she went? She was strong.

"Your equal? This cowering bitch?" Zander scoffed, upper lip curling. "And I didn't bring the ladies here for you. I brought them here for our brother, Theo."

Stephon swung around, seeking the boy. Theo stood apart from the others, hugging himself. His round eyes looked into each face.

Stephon swore and spoke to Theo in Greek, his voice urgent.

Theo shook his head.

Audrey prayed he hadn't been a part of Ros's murder. For Stephon's sake, as well as the boy's.

"Why include him in this? He was innocent!" Stephon let go of Audrey's hand and stalked toward Zander, clenching his fists.

"One more added to the pack. Why not? There'll be plenty of people coming here once you're dead and the authorities come to search for the women. We'll feast for months, years."

"That's too obvious. You'll be caught." Stephon spoke to the group. "I kept you alive all these years. Even after you each killed humans against my orders. It was I who kept people from coming to our village, from staying at my villas. I did it to protect all of you!"

"Lie!" Achilleo shouted. "You did it to protect the humans."

"Ne!" Yannis and Stavros echoed in agreement with Achilleo. "You never cared about us."

Achilleo spun away from the others, maddened and growling. As Audrey watched, his blond hair went white, and his body bent at an angle, as if in agonizing pain. Howling his anguish, he dropped to his knees. His face elongated, forming a snout, and his entire body spread with fur, silky long and colorless. With a final yip, he dug his hands into the earth and fingers became claws, hands paws. He slid out of his pants as a wolf and shook his body free of his shirt.

Transformation complete, Achilleo charged Stephon.

Zander cut him off, stepping into his path. "Down! Get back. You'll only attack when I order you to."

Achilleo halted and kicked his hind paws in the dirt.

"You're not our leader," Yannis snarled, planting hands on his hips with a black scowl.

"Not yet. But when Stephon swims across this lake, who will you come to for guidance? Who will be your leader then?"

Yannis averted his eyes. Achilleo growled, but his plume of a tail fell between his back haunches submissively.

"Remember my instructions. Control yourselves!" Zander moved to Audrey's side, while the rest of the men and Achilleo surrounded Stephon, cutting him off from her. "First, we must see to Theo."

Zander swung his flattened hand through the air so quickly, Audrey had no time to move before the strike. The impact of his hand against her mouth split her lip against her teeth. She stumbled backward but didn't fall. Her tongue

touched the wound, and she tasted the rusty sweet flavor of her blood.

A crackling growl behind her told her what was about to happen but it was too late. Theo pounced on her, throwing her to the ground. Half-boy and half-demon, he snapped razor-sharp teeth at her face as she held him off. Restrained by the others, Stephon called her name, but she didn't dare take her eyes off the scrambling boy on top of her.

"Theo, no!" she yelled.

His strength was far mightier than normal for a boy his age and size. Audrey feared her stamina wouldn't hold out long, as she wedged her arms between them and held him back by the collarbone. With fingers digging into her, his gaze locked on her mouth in savage intensity. She turned her face to avoid the nipping teeth moving closer and closer. Sticky hot breath bore down on her, while a drop of saliva fell from the corner of his mouth to roll down her neck.

A wolf yelped in the fracas going on beside her.

"Bite him, Audrey. Bite him, hard!" Stephon called.

He'd never been wrong before. As desperate as she was, powerless and without a weapon to defend herself, the primal thought had crossed her mind. She leaned forward and clamped her teeth down into skin, muscle, and bone. Gripping him with all her might, she tore at his flesh until he yapped and broke loose.

Audrey sat up, wiping moisture from her mouth—consisting of the boy's blood—mixed with her own. Theo, now fully subdued, fell back on his ass and cradled his arm. His mouth trembled, his eyes welled with tears, and Audrey saw

the cause of his pain. From her bite marks, steam rose out of his broken skin, and boiling, bubbling blood trickled from the wound down his limp hand.

"Keo! Keo! He cried. Audrey knew without a translator the boy was on fire from the inside out. *What the hell?*

She touched her teeth. Her fillings! They must've contained silver, and Stephon somehow knew. Their kisses! Of course. The way he'd always avoided kissing her mouth intimately.

She scrambled for her bag, her nurturing instinct ruling over survival. She could pour her bottled water over the boy's wound and maybe wash the poisonous metal away before it was too late. The *were*-pack had left her bag at the edge of the woods. Maybe there was something in there she could use against them.

She ran as fast as she could, hearing the sounds of the brawling men behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Stephon catch Stavros in his arms and hurl him at Achilleo. Zander was beginning to change, as well. His gleaming green eyes met hers. He charged her, running on all fours. She picked up her bag and ran into the woods.

"Stephon!" she screamed, ducking behind a large pine.

When she heard Zander approaching, she swung her bag hard, knocking him in the face. Before he had time to think, she darted to her left, zigzagging like a gazelle from an attacking predator.

"*Skata!*" he roared. "*Bitch!*"

"Run, Audrey," Stephon yelled, not far behind.

She kept going, but didn't want to leave him. His pilot was back at the airstrip in the village, waiting for them both, but she wouldn't board the plane without him. A tall, thick tree lay in her path. She hurdled over it and dropped down behind its mass, hoping to hide from Zander's view.

Snarls broke out, and she peered over the log to see both men, Zander and Stephon, changing form. Zander finished his transformation, becoming a gray wolf, while Stephon's fur went pitch black. Before Stephon completed the process, Zander attacked, sinking teeth into Stephon's side.

Audrey closed her eyes against the scene. There was nothing she could do. The others would be after her soon. But she refused to be the cowering bitch Zander claimed she was. She opened her bag and dug through its contents. She assessed each item for its possible use as a weapon. Her PDA would do little, though the stylus was nice and pointy. But it wasn't silver, and as far as she knew the precious metal was the only thing that did any lasting damage. There were water bottles, her passport, makeup, toiletries. All worthless. And Ros's things were about the same, with the exception of her cameras, a digital and the one with the broken shutter, along with a handful of film canisters.

Wait. Audrey grasped one of the containers of exposed film. She remembered Paul used silver nitrate to develop his film, so Ros would, as well. Trembling fingers popped the cap off the canister and pulled out the film in a long snakelike strand. It probably contained silver, but she could hardly make Zander or any of the others eat it. How could she get film into their bloodstream? Giving up, she dropped the film

on the ground and glanced around for another weapon. Instead, however, she noticed something she hadn't seen before—a daypack lying half-hidden beneath the tree branches of the fallen log.

She grabbed the bag, hearing the tussling men growing closer. The baying of the others caught her ear. She'd be discovered soon.

Inside the bag, she found water bottles, clothes, and—*thank you, God*—a revolver and bullets. Stephon must've hid his pack there when he'd heard the *were-pack*. She fumbled with the bullets. She'd never loaded a gun before in her life. She needed at least four bullets to kill the others. One, two, three, and—a beast lunged at her, knocking away the fourth bullet from her hand to fall somewhere in the weeds. The white wolf growled at her, crouching down as if making ready to pounce on her again. Without taking her eyes off Achilleo, she swung the cylinder closed and lifted her arms just as he made his move.

The blast was immediate and accurate. Achilleo dropped in front of her with a red, oozing wound on his chest. The blood dribbled out, boiling and steamy hot.

There was no time to waste. Stavros and Yannis closed the distance. She drew the hammer back on the revolver. Yannis leapt for her, she aimed and pulled the trigger. The bullet struck him in the head, and he fell in front of Stavros, tripping him. Stavros snarled at the body, and Audrey climbed up on the log. As Stavros stupidly turned on his fallen comrade, Audrey fired a bullet into his side. He fell atop Yannis, front and hind legs kicking air.

Before she could see what had become of Stephon, Zander tackled her. Blood dripped from his canine mouth, bearing down over her. She prayed it wasn't Stephon's, but how else would he have gotten free? *Dear God, no! Not Stephon!* Zander's teeth caught her shirt and ripped her collar, exposing her skin. Desperate, she hammered his head with the empty revolver, still holding him off her with her arm. His claws pinned her, puncturing her flesh savagely. The blows she inflicted did nothing to stop or slow him. Zander as a wolf had much more power than the young boy. She clamped her eyes shut, turning her face from the monstrous descending teeth.

Suddenly she felt air and the weight of the beast lifted. Opening her eyes, she heard the raging snarls of Stephon as he tore into Zander from behind.

Zander circled back, embracing his brother in a death grip of teeth and claws. The two rolled on the ground, kicking and biting each other. Immortal, they could fight one another until eternity, but Zander had the advantage. He'd killed humans, gaining hellish power for the rest of time, but Stephon hadn't. Aging like a human, he was in good shape, but not like Zander. Perhaps he wasn't even immortal anymore; his haunches glistened with blood from deep gashes. Audrey sat up and looked around for something, anything. The first thing she saw was the discarded film. She grabbed the strip, winding one end on each hand and ran for Zander, who'd pinned Stephon underneath him. Audrey looped the film over his head and across his neck and pulled. Straddling the beast, she put all her weight into garroting the film against his

throat. The strip sliced her palms as he struggled, cutting into her like a knife through cake.

But the scalding-hot blood sliding down her arms wasn't her own. Zander made terrible gurgling noises, and his struggles gradually subsided. Stephon slid out from beneath him, and Audrey released his limp body. He was dead.

As Stephon slinked away a few feet, shaking out his limbs and composing himself, Audrey peeled away the film embedded in her bloody palms. The cuts stung like hell, but relief flooded her. She picked up one of the waters that had fallen from the bags during the tussle and went to Stephon.

Stretching his body long, Stephon's fur thinned, retracting into his skin, and his arms and legs lengthened to their natural human form. In minutes he was himself again. Although scratched, bleeding, bitten, and bruised, he was standing in one glorious piece.

His worried gaze found her and his face relaxed. "Audrey."

She jumped into his arms and held him tight until her palpitating heart subsided. He kissed her forehead and sighed, tension leaving his shoulders beneath her fingertips. "Thank God," he murmured.

"Theo," she reminded him gently.

Stephon nodded. They walked around the dead members of the pack and exited the woods. Theo was sitting where she'd left him. A miserable wreck, he'd curled into himself and rocked back and forth.

Stephon stopped at the sight.

"Are you all right?" Audrey touched Stephon's arm, not daring to move any closer to his brother who might still pose

a threat to her. She told him gently, "You can tend Theo's wound. Wash it out. He'll be okay."

"Yes. It's just that..." Stephon paused, threading his fingers through his hair, eyes still affixed on Theo, "I dreamt of the full moon a few nights ago. There was a pale figure by the lake sitting exactly like he is now. Only I thought it was you. In my dream I said '*matia mou.*' My eyes."

The boy looked up, watching them through haunted, scared blue eyes.

Audrey leaned into Stephon, hugging him. She handed him the bottle of water. "They are your eyes. Theo has the same eyes as you, Stephon."

Hours later, after the final swim in the ancient waters of the lake, Stephon felt alive and refreshed in his clean clothes. Even the long hike to the village was invigorating.

Audrey waved at Philip, his pilot, behind the controls of the plane as they approached the airstrip. Stephon's father was home with Theo, who was a little shaken but resting.

The sons' reunion with their father had been bittersweet—welcoming the return of one son while another took his place, cursed. And the third son...

The village would take care of the pack. It was their responsibility, their portion of the curse and legacy. The bodies of the evil *were* would be burned on a pyre beside the lake.

Audrey mounted the steps to the plane and Stephon followed. They tossed their bags in a seat, greeted Philip, and watched as the door closed, leaving all the evil behind.

He refused to think on the past horrors of the pack. The sun was rising over the field, and the plane's engines ruffled the bright red poppies stretching for the first rays of light. It seemed odd to him to be leaving his home without the weight in his chest that had always accompanied him before.

"You'll need to come back, won't you?"

Stephon turned at Audrey's question. Her beautiful brown eyes were wide and searching. "Yes, to help Theo when he fights the cravings. And the lake...it might call me." His stomach tightened.

Audrey squeezed his hand. "But it's Theo and your father who'll need you most. Your brother has nine long years ahead of him."

Stephon stared at their linked fingers, her fingers so dainty and soft, his so dark and rough. He'd wrapped her injured palms in thick strips of cotton from his shirt. "Audrey, I would love for you to be waiting for me when I return. I love you, and you're what keeps me sane. But I can't ask you to revisit the village. With Rosalind's disappearance, there'll be questions, an investigation. One of these days someone else may try to cross the lake. I feel responsible—"

She touched his chin and lifted his face to look at her. Her eyes lit with happy tears. "Whenever you come back here, take me with you. Traveling is what I do for a living, remember?"

"Really?" His heart lifted with hope.

"Yes. There's no place I'd rather be than with the man I love."

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About the author...

Sandra was born and raised in Arkansas. For as long as she can remember, she's been reading romance novels. Her passion for page-turners often led to books being confiscated at school.

To appease her love of reading, she worked as a bookseller until she earned a master's degree in library science. She is married with two teenage sons and three pampered cats. When not reading or writing, she loves to travel, go shopping, and attend the occasional Renaissance faire. Huzzah!

Other books by Sandra:

Wish For The Moon

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