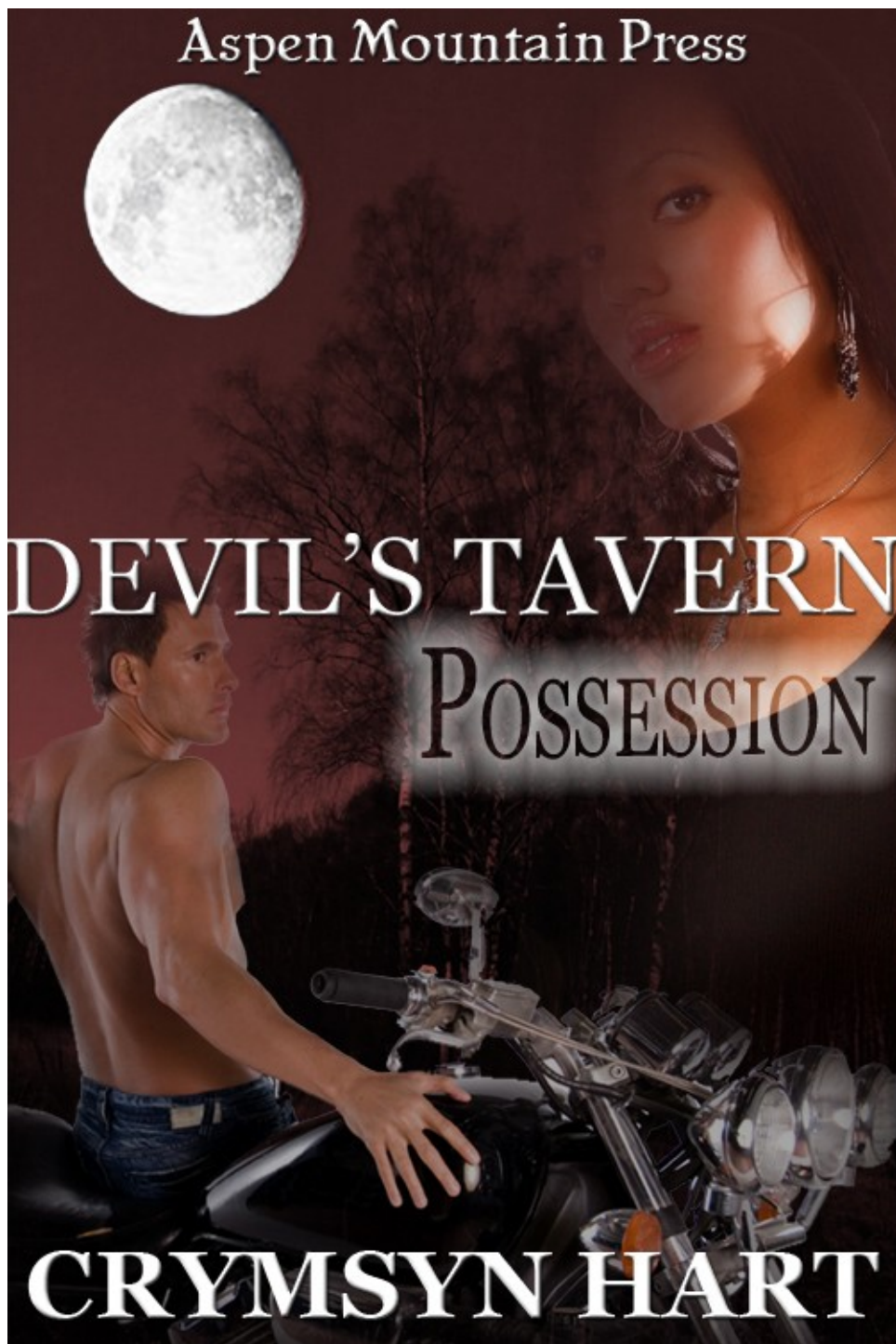


Aspen Mountain Press



DEVIL'S TAVERN POSSESSION

CRYMSYN HART



Crymsyn Hart

Devil's Tavern: Possession
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Chapter One

Riding down the highway with the wind blasting against his face, Bruno was right at home on the back of his bike. The open road was a sure fire remedy to solve any of his ills. It had been that way for years now. The rumble of the motor filled his ears and vibration between his legs made him feel right at home. The echo of the Harley bouncing off the canyon walls only expanded the sense of freedom that imbued him. *Everyone should be able to experience the world this way. This is what true living is all about.* The moon hung low in the sky, but the sun would soon be up to chase it away. He would rather be under the moon than the hot sun, but he was riding as if the devil was behind him urging the bike to get him home. The landscape around him seemed barren, but he knew that life teemed in the wilderness along with the sand and cacti. Even in the low light, he could make out the beauty of the arid landscape. He pressed down on the gas pedal while the single headlight of the bike caught the large brown wings of a golden eagle settling on top of one of the saguaro cacti.

What a miracle God has created. The image of the bird gave him a renewed sense of hope that he was doing the right thing. He'd been on the road for two weeks heading toward home, deep in the Colorado Mountains. His one prayer was that he'd be in his family lands before the next full moon. It had been several years since he'd been to the compound. This time he hoped he could reconcile with his brother in some way. He was tired of being run off pack land after only a week or two of rest. His brother might have been an asshole, but he was family. No matter if they were both alpha wolves, it was time they put their differences behind them. It was all he could wish for. He loved carrying his message around the country, but the urge to settle down with the woman he held close to his heart was overwhelming.

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His leather jacket flapped in the wind. It was a gift from his girl some ten years ago. It was beaten up in some places, but he kept it up faithfully. The thickness of it had saved his life a time or two stopping a blade from penetrating too deep. It had conformed to his broad chest and whenever he held it to his cheek he thought of her soft caress. The inner pocket held a piece of her hair, so whenever he needed to he could breathe in her wonderful scent. That perfume would instantly put him back in her arms. The breeze wound through his black hair, tied back in a ponytail, trying to pull the tendrils loose from the elastics that held it. The only belongings he possessed were the satchels on the backseat, his Bible, and some clothes in his saddle bags. For a long time all he needed were the clothes on his back, his bike and a prayer. Now the urge to go home and settle down was the major force driving him. *I know God will understand if I take a break from his word. Besides, He's the one who has given me the signs to head home. If not, then I wouldn't be here. There has to be a place in His plan for me to be happy.*

He had crisscrossed the United States for years going wherever the Lord had sent him. It was his calling to help others. His last congregation was the largest ever. Over twenty. He felt so blessed to preach to them even when they showed signs of not heeding his words. He would have stayed with them except he began having the dreams which urged him to return home. At first he didn't heed the visions thinking them only nightmares, but then they grew stronger. They showed him that his home was burning and none of his loved ones remained. The thought terrified him and spurred him home. He hoped the flames were a metaphor and that when he arrived he would be able to reintegrate with the pack. If he could manage that, he knew his mother would be happy. The hurt in her eyes, whenever he left, cut him to the bone.

Bruno's bandana slipped down around his neck. He glanced in his side mirrors and smiled at his reflection. A handsome wolf with gray eyes stared back at him. However, he couldn't marvel at himself because red and blue lights flashed behind him. He sighed and pulled over. *This is all I need. I thought I lost the last one two states ago. I don't need for my journey to be slowed anymore. I have to get home. I have to be sure they're all right. They may have ousted me, but I still love them.* He straightened his bandana and turned off

the engine. His muscles were stiff from riding so long. He settled his feet on the ground and closed his eyes for a brief second, sending his mind heavenward to calm his nerves.

"License and registration please."

He glanced at the cop and fished his wallet from the inner pocket of his jacket. His fingers briefly brushed Serena's lock of hair. He handed the items to the officer. "Was I speeding?"

The cop gazed at him over the top of his sunglasses. There was a golden glow to his eyes. He blinked and then Bruno saw the reflection of the cresting sun in the lenses. The officer glanced at his license. "No, you weren't speeding. I pulled you over because your blinker was out." The officer paused tapping his ticket book against his leg. Bruno wasn't sure what he was doing. "You mind if I ask you a question? You wouldn't happen to know anything about a murder would you? A bike similar to yours was seen leaving the scene of a gruesome crime a couple of days ago."

Ice cold fear swept over him. The one commandment he disobeyed was killing. No matter how much he tried to suppress that part of his nature, the wolf emerged and overwhelmed his human instinct to preserve life. It was part of his temperament so he knew that God forgave him. That didn't stop the guilt from weighing on his soul. "No, officer. I've been traveling from Alabama and heading back home. It's a shame to hear such horrible news. Life is a precious commodity. I'll keep the family of the victims in my prayers."

"That's true. You might want to stay out of Nevada. There's some devilish business afoot unless you take pleasure in that sort of thing. Good luck on getting home to your family." He winked and handed Bruno back his license.

He studied the cop. His nametag read Angel. The officer's hand touched his palm and a zing ran through him. Bruno caught his breath and his eyes widened. The cop slid his glasses back on and walked back to his car. Bruno glanced behind him and thought he saw a halo around the officer, but then the sun hit the cop's shoulder. He scratched his head, slid the bandana over his face, gunned the engine, and wasn't sure what to think about the encounter. He shook it off and let the feeling of the engine help

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him ease back into the groove. Bruno cracked his knuckles and placed his fingers around the grips of the handlebars. That enabled him to focus and settle his mind on home. The smell of his mother's home cooking lingered in his nose and made his mouth water. He could already taste the apple pie.

Besides the meals and the warmth of his mother's arms, Serena popped into his mind. Skin the color of the moonless sky and dark emerald eyes. His cock throbbed at the thought of her. By pack law because he was an outsider, he wasn't allowed to be with her. That never mattered to him or her. She defied that one law and met him every time he rolled into the pack lands. He also wanted to visit the old coot, Neb, who had first introduced him to his current path. *Maybe he'll be able to help me interpret my dreams. Maybe they're my unconscious fears of what I think will happen if the pack accepts me back. I can't think of the other alternative.* The thought of not feeling her soft touch again hardened his heart. Not having that angel in his life would leave a huge hole in his soul.

While balancing his bike with one hand, he pushed his sunglasses onto his nose with the other. The dim light was beginning to bother him. Moonlight was sure better to see in. His stomach grumbled. There was a diner a few miles down the highway where the cook made the best burgers. He always got his with everything and two sides of onion rings. After breakfast, he'd stop in and worship at a small tabernacle he'd been to in the past and say a small prayer of thanks for not getting a ticket. Then he would be on his way and hopefully by nightfall getting some great tail.

Chapter Two

Serena glanced at the moon again. For once when, she looked at the round orb, it wasn't burning. The red haze covering it had finally vanished. She bit her lip and hoped it was a sign the evil had left the compound. The sense of it still lingered in the air, but the heavy blanket of foulness had eased. The night around her was silent. Too quiet for her own good. Her heartbeat was one of the few things letting her know she was alive. If not for her heartbeat, she would have thought she might be dead too. *Why did this happen to us? Why did it come here? What did the pack do to deserve this fate? The little ones were innocent. Why was I spared?* Tears lined her eyes when she thought about her pack. She shook her head and forced the images that haunted her nightmares away. They would continue to haunt her forever, but she had to stay strong. She had to be on her guard because it might come back to torment her once more.

When the screams stopped, the only sounds she heard were the taunting whispers telling her she was all alone. No one was coming for her. It told her she was the last one of her kind. The rest of her pack, even the outcasts, weren't going to rescue her. And if she managed to escape the compound, it would find her. All she had to do was give in and it would leave her alone. One simple word. Even a gesture was all she needed and then it would take all of her pain away, the way that it had before. No matter how many times the evil got under her skin and tempted her, she wasn't going to agree to its wishes. She thought the dreams were awful, but sensing its dark presence pressing around her was worse. Even more was the knowledge that she was completely alone. All those she had loved, hated, and dealt with were gone.

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She stood atop the hill and gazed down at the compound below. The half moon shed enough light to show off the ghost town. The urge to explore, to see if anyone had survived, tugged on her soul, but once she left the protection of the circle the demon would come for her. *I can do this. It's not going to drive me crazy. Someone out there has to be alive. I'm not the only one who survived. I know it.* She reached along the threads, she shared with the wolves, trying to sense anything, but the links with her pack were all lifeless. *Nothing has that kind of power, to annihilate a whole pack. What could do that? What is this thing stalking me? What kind of demon has enough power to incinerate over a hundred souls?*

Clouds settled over the moon making the night darker and colder than any she had imagined. The evil presence had retreated for now. She lifted her voice to the night and howled from the loneliness wrapped around her heart. All her life she'd been on the fringes of the pack, with the others looking upon her as if she were a freak. She'd been called worse over the years but that always changed when someone needed her. Serena might have lived on the outskirts of the compound, but when it came to her healing ability, she became a valuable asset to the pack. Too priceless, she was never allowed to leave. No matter how much she tried to fight the edict, it had been ground into her since birth, she had to listen to the pack hierarchy no matter how much she chafed under the weight of the law. The only rule she ever broke was to see Bruno and she would continue to defy it no matter how many warnings she received.

Terrance, the pack leader, had decreed she was not allowed to leave pack land. She was not to dabble with outsiders or outcasts which included his brother. When Serena thought of Bruno, her soul held hope he was still alive, but she wasn't sure. Terrance had chased after her for years to be his mate, but she spurned him at every turn. How could she be with a man who spoke against his brother and her before the pack and then, in secret, would fall to his knees before her and tell her they were perfect for each other? She was powerful and so was he. Together they would make wonderful pups. She wanted no one except Bruno. Serena knew why Bruno had been expelled from the pack. Terrance didn't want him challenging him for the leadership of the pack,

since they were both alphas. Once Bruno had been ejected from the pack, all ties to him had been severed, so she could no longer locate him with her mind, and Terrance knew this hurt her. Most of the pack were not able to do this, she was unique. She wasn't a beta female, a second among the sheep, but an alpha like Terrance and Bruno. The pack leader had the same abilities. It was one thing which made him stronger and more powerful than the other wolves. As an alpha, she had the right to choose whomever she wanted as a mate. Although Terrance made her life a living hell after Bruno left, the only saving grace she had was Estelle, the brothers' mother, who always treated her kindly. Estelle had known the yoke Terrance put on her limiting her to pack lands and keeping everyone from her. Now, they were all dead, nothing was holding her back.

Bruno, I don't know if you're dead or alive. It wants you. I don't know why. It won't tell me. It just torments me with words and the dreams. I wish I could sleep and blot out the horrible images it's been showing me. I tried to warn them. They wouldn't listen. My heart tells me you're alive. Please be alive.

Bruno and she had played together when they were pups. His brother had bullied both of them. Serena knew she cared for Bruno the first time he didn't baulk when she used her healing ability on him. They had been running and playing down by the lake. He'd jumped in and hit a patch of jagged rocks. He landed on them at the wrong angle breaking his leg and slashing it to the bone. Somehow, he had gotten himself out of the water, but he was losing a lot of blood by the time he dragged himself to land. Because they were still pups, they didn't heal the way adults did. Their wounds mended human slow until they hit puberty. She had placed her hands on him and let the warmth of her gift flow through her. While she had touched him, she could see where his injuries were. The skin beneath her fingers had begun to knit together along with the bone. After he was completely mended, he had placed a kiss on her cheek leaving her with a soft spot in her heart for him. From that moment on, she had set her mind on being with Bruno.

They had never spoken of the incident growing up. When they got older, they were inseparable. She had plans on mating with him, but being who she was, even

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being an alpha female her views weren't counted. It only got worse when Terrance realized how attractive she'd become as she grew older. Being first born, he was used to getting everything he wanted. When she denied him, he said her strangeness was a liability. Her only saving grace was she could heal the most grievous wounds, even those inflicted with silver. Bruno had stuck up for her, but because he was second born, his protests went unheeded. Estelle had tried to reason with Terrance and his father, who was leader at the time, but neither of them listened. Terrance's father was an ass and his first born son followed right in his footsteps. He had called her out in front of the pack to prove she was one of them. When she couldn't perform, the pack stoned her and called her a pariah, but they didn't banish her. Her punishment was to live within the pack, but to be on the outside looking in, an eternity of living hell.

She shook her head. Just like what happened within the compound, the past couldn't be changed. The yells and the pain of the pack lingered in her mind and soul. The echoes had scarred her. She couldn't leave the caverns. The monster wasn't able to venture across the threshold of the mouth of the caves because they were considered holy land. Many of the pack had still left offerings to the ancient wolves who were said to have emerged from the caves long ago. She needed more supplies, but didn't dare make a run for it until dawn. During the day the demon was less active. It didn't seem to be afraid of the sun, but within the light it appeared to be less powerful.

I'd never ridicule you, Serena. I only want you to tell me the truth. Won't you tell me the truth? If you do, I can bring them back. I can bring them all back for you. You don't have to be alone. I can make the pain stop. I can give you anything you desire.

Its foul voice echoed in the shadows of the wood. Mist crept along the forest floor clinging to the tree trunks like a fungus. Dark forms darted from tree to tree in all different directions. The first time she saw them, she assumed it might have been some of the pack members. Even when the rays of the moon hit the shadows, she couldn't make out any features. They came nearer, collecting into one dark mass the closer it got. She stepped to the line and waited for the demon by the barrier. It stayed on the outskirts and didn't venture any closer. Anytime she focused on the shape for more

than a few seconds it wavered, then vanished, and reappeared a few trees over. It was making her dizzy the longer she looked at it.

You're all alone now. You can't stay in the caves forever. Some day you'll have to come down and face me. Don't you want to face me? You should know who I am. Think back. Don't you know me? You and I were so very close once upon a time. It's a shame we can't be close again. I know you recognize me. Think back to your earliest days when you were sweet and innocent. Such wonderful times we had.

"Leave me alone!" she screamed.

It chuckled. The evil of the being wrapped around her. It was trying to influence her to give in, but she was strong. It would not win. Its words sunk in and fear crept through her soul. She couldn't help but shiver. The night had suddenly grown colder. The hope she desperately tried to hold onto was being leached away.

How can I leave you alone when you're the most important thing to me? You're the missing piece of the puzzle. Don't you remember how close we were when you were younger? I miss the softness of your skin. That pretty smile. Everyone adored you as a child and then you had your accident. Then you became the freak of the wolves. Poor little Serena can't even change to make the others happy.

"Shut up!" She covered her ears with her hands and sank to her knees. For days now, the demon had been mocking her and bringing up the past. She tried not to relive the memories tumbling over the barriers of her mind. She was a child playing deep in the woods. Something shiny caught her attention. She had chased after it and found herself deeper in the woods than she had ever ventured before. Far away from her parents and the rest of the pack. It was there the demon took advantage of her. It had asked her if she had wanted someone to play with. She had said yes and that was the last thing she remembered clearly for a long time. The demon had pulled her away from her parents and locked her inside of her mind leaving her all alone. It was hell, just the way it was now.

She was isolated, alone in the world, and this being was not going to let up on tormenting her. Her resolve was wavering. She wasn't sure how long she could keep

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going. There had to be someone alive. If there wasn't, then she was the last of their great pack. If that were the case, then this thing was going to haunt her for years to come. It would keep her in the hell she was in no matter where she ran to.

No, I can't give up. I've made it this far. I have to have faith. She bit her lip and wiped the tears from her cheeks. It wasn't going to get the best of her. Bruno had to be alive. Her love had to be alive. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and focused on the moon's energy. After a moment, the cool silvery light filled her entire being. It touched upon her inner wolf and resolve washed over her. This communion was the one thing keeping her sane. It was there for her the way it always had been in the past. The knowing Bruno was alive and he was coming for her made her heart soar. *He'll be here soon. I just know it. I have to survive just a few more nights. He'll know something happened to us. He has to know.*

Chapter Three

Whizzing down the highway, his thoughts drifted back to Serena. The image of her dark chocolate skin pulled a growl from his chest. She smelled of deep woods and open air, the epitome of the wild wolf. She was the one thing that brought him to sin every time he saw her. The sound of her voice drove the Word of God from his mind until all he could remember was his name if he was lucky. Her dark silky hair was one aspect she took pride in about herself. Her green eyes could peer deep into his soul and make him face all of his inner demons. She had the knowledge to read him at a glance and know what troubled him. Her body was perfect for him. It had been too long since they had been together. All he wanted was to hold her against him, stroke her hair, and feel her sweet body pressed upon his. She was a strong woman who had dealt with a lot of ridicule over the years because his brother was an asshole. Just because Serena had spurned Terrance, he had pulled down pack law against her., Not to mention, half of the pack treated her as an outcast because of her unique abilities. She didn't deserve to be dealt with that way. If he had been in control, things would have been very different.

Bruno licked his lips tasting the grit of the road. He had been riding straight through since he stopped at the small tabernacle to pray. He had stayed at the tiny church only for a few minutes, but it had given him a renewed spiritual drive to press on home. It had helped to quiet his mind and purge some of the terror he had stored up because of the dreams he had been having. Seeing the fires all over the compound in his thoughts was devastating. He couldn't imagine the pack going out that way. It was natural for humans to be scared of fire. Werewolves were doubly afraid because fire

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spoke to their deep instincts concerning them being both animals and humans. He prayed his mother and even his prick of a brother had escaped. In his dreams even the pups hadn't survived. He tried not to think about it. Instead, he let his mind drift to Serena, her beautiful breasts and her lips that kissed him so passionately and made every inch of him shiver.

He heard the squealing of brakes and it snapped him back to reality. The car in front of him stopped short. He swerved quickly to avoid its rear bumper. *Gotta stop daydreaming about her. The last time I got caught up in our times together, I nearly lost my way. God, the previous time I was home, Serena and I were sneaking around even more than usual. She had said that Terrance had put an even stricter eye on her. I assumed the only ones who knew about us were mother and my fuck up brother. Terrance won't let up with her. He might forbid her from seeing me and leaving pack land, but that doesn't mean he can stop us. One way or another she's going to be my mate. This time I'm not going without her. Mother tried to tell me that she knew I was going on with Serena and she approved of the match. I remember the times when we were younger and we'd play together. I loved her the first moment I saw her and more still when she had healed me after that time at the lake. Even as pups, Terrance was always trying to take her from me. Damnit! We're both alphas. It just happened that he was born first and became a prick just like our father. I should've stayed that first time and challenged him for leadership. He gripped the handlebars tighter thinking of all the times he'd backed down to his brother and father all because it was law to obey the leader of the pack. I never challenged him because I wasn't ready. Now that I'm officially an outcast if he doesn't let me have Serena for my mate, then I'll challenge him for leadership. I won't bow down and bend to the will of the pack. Serena is my mate. It is destined to be so. I love her and she loves me. My brother can kiss my ass if he thinks any differently.*

Bruno focused on the road ahead. It helped to clear away his anger. If he was going to face his brother for leadership, then he had to remain strong and clear headed. Breathing in the cool air as he climbed higher helped him to remember the beauty around him. The spine of the mountains grew closer the longer he rode. At first they were dark, small peaks in the distance. Now they were full breasts of land with snow

capped nipples enticing God to look down from heaven and caress the curves. *If only God could enjoy the earthly pleasures the way man can.* Instead of the mountains, he envisioned Serena's voluptuous breasts and found himself drooling. *I've been away far too long.* He smiled and thought about the last time he was home. He had munched on three or four campers who had wandered into pack territory. He knew it was wrong to kill, but it was his nature. No matter how much he prayed for God to take away the bloodlust, it never left him. Before he had left the compound, he begged Serena to come with him, but she had refused. She couldn't leave the pack because she was their healer and she wasn't sure what would happen if she did try to leave. Terrance had threatened if she ever left that she would be mentally separated from them. Even being an alpha she wasn't sure if she could survive without being connected to the pack. They might have shunned her and only accepted her help because she was a healer, but it was all she had known. *I will rescue you from the sheltered life you've led my love.*

Verdant trees lined both sides of the highway showing the lush environment he was in. The air grew crisper the higher he climbed, but his leather jacket and chaps kept out the chill. Another half an hour and he'd be there. The musky scent of the pack was already on the breeze. Unseen sentinels prowled the crags above the road so he knew his presence was being relayed to the pack leader. The one thing which always brought him pride was knowing his pack was the largest west of the Mississippi River and the second biggest in the United States. It spread the entire length of the Rockies touching the fringes of Nevada, but mainly they were concentrated in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah. Once upon a time, the pack had spread from coast to coast, but there had been some infighting and there started to be different genetic traits among the packs so they had split. Now there were four large packs across the country and even spreading into Mexico. There were others all across the world, but he had only interacted with the ones in the states. Whenever he met other wolves on his journey, they treated him fairly, but never invited him back to join their packs. He was okay with that. They probably sensed he was a lone wolf. It only saddened him that he wasn't accepted with the rest of his family.

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Bruno gunned the engine and turned left down an overgrown, potholed road and wove the bike through the maze of saplings, gravel, and uprooted trees. Dark mounds of earth were piled along the way from where trees were ripped from the ground. It pained him to see the ancient trees unearthed. They had been his playground as a child. The limbs had been his hiding place from his father when he went into a rage and decided to try and beat him. He and Serena would run and hide. *What's been going on here? Terrence would never let anything happen to the pack. He might be a bastard, but he cares about the wolves. He cares about them because he loves the power trip. He's always kept up appearances. It was a sign of respect to the other packs who would make pilgrimages to the caves here. Now this avenue of trees has been destroyed. What happened?* Once he reached the outskirts of the pack compound, he shut the engine off and walked the bike the rest of the way. Silence surrounded him. *Odd. Why aren't the wolves coming to greet me or warn me to get the hell off their land? Normally there are a few who think they can stand up to me. Terrance's inner circle usually comes and tries to bully me off the compound, but I've shown them in the past. If anything did happen to them, I wouldn't care if they went. Not that I wish any harm on any of them since that's not God's way. But the gang was a bunch of pricks.* He parked his bike behind a large tree, took off his helmet, and set it on the bike. He listened with his attuned senses for a growl of warning or a heartbeat, but there was nothing.

He got to the first cabin and found the door open. "Hello?"

He poked his head inside. All smelled okay, just a little stale with dust on the lamps and the sofa. Everything was in its place, but it was too perfect. *Lord, let my people be all right.* Bruno left the cabin and made his way further into the compound. There was no sign of life. No aroma of cooking meat. No birds. No animals in the underbrush. No noise whatsoever to signal there was life around him. *They wouldn't just abandon this place. It's been the center of pack life for over two centuries ever since our ancestors emerged from the caves. Even among the Native Americans there have been wolves here.*

"Terrance?" He called into the forest. Bruno peered into the trees and thought that he saw movement. Racing toward the flickering shadows, he heard a door slam behind

him. He spun around and saw the door to the main lodge swing close on its hinges. The main house was where his mother and brother lived. He darted over, stopped before he got to the door, and listened. The door shut softly on its hinges. No other sound came from inside the house. Still he sensed something behind him. He spun around and saw nothing.

“Mother?”

He waited, listening for the familiar response, but none came. Closing his eyes, he stretched out his senses hoping to find something. A body. Remains. Some sign of the pack. Anything besides the nothingness which greeted him now. After a moment of emptiness, he opened his eyes. He slumped onto the couch and a cloud of gray dust billowed upward. He glanced around. The residue was on everything. *This isn't right. Mom always cleaned. Dad would've had her pelt if she didn't keep up this place. Terrance was almost as bad.* His earliest memories were of her dusting. Growing up, his father had performed the white glove test at the house once a week. There was only one time his mother hadn't pass. She had sported welts for almost a week from the silver studded belt his father had beaten her with. Even with their advanced healing, the wounds were a reminder to her, never to disobey his father again. He never understood why she put up with his shit, but she had always said he loved her. He assumed it was the same with Serena. It was the only life she knew. Terrance had killed their father fifteen years ago only to prove that he could take on the pack when his father wouldn't hand over the leadership. Neither of them missed the old bastard. That was the only thing he and his brother had in common. If their father wasn't beating Terrance, he was after Bruno. Only Bruno knew how to hide better and run faster.

He got up and went into the kitchen. All the ingredients his mother would use to bake a pie had been laid out. He brushed his fingers over the kitchen table and rubbed them together. He brought them to his nose and then licked them. Immediately Bruno spit when he tasted the slick aftertaste.

“My God, what evil has befallen the place? Jesus, have mercy on their poor souls.” *Mother, what's happened to you?* The flavor of human flesh lingered on his tongue.

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He got up, stumbled outside, and noted the powder was everywhere and on everything. The grass was not a shade of green, but gray. The lower branches of the trees were the same. He hadn't noticed it before because he had been so focused on getting home. At that moment, he knew something horrible had befallen the entire pack. *The dreams were real.* The suffering that he had sensed and the evil in them were genuine. *How come I didn't see it? Why didn't I get here faster?* Stunned, he slid down the trunk of the nearest tree and peered up at the moon and patch of stars in the lonely sky.

Whatever evil did this, I will avenge thee. God. Serena. Not Serena. Not the children. Mother. The faces of the innocents and his loved ones danced before his eyes. Fury and loneliness gripped his insides and twisted them together. Everyone he had ever known was obliterated. He had always been a loner, but now he was truly riding solo. A single tear slid down his cheek. Emotions fused inside his throat and came out in a mournful howl that split the desolate night. *I will avenge you. I swear it as God is my witness. You all will be avenged!*

Chapter Four

Serena lifted her head. She heard a voice out in the woods. *It's just my imagination or that demon trying to get to me again.* She heard the cry again and realized it was a howl. The bay echoed through the trees and bounced into the caves. *That isn't a wild wolf, but it's also not human. Oh, please be Bruno.* A lump of emotion rose in her throat. She pressed her nails into the meat of her palm not daring to let her hope get the better of her. Before she knew it, she had stepped away from the fire. She took a few steps toward the mouth of the cave and stared longingly into the darkness. The howl that split the sky was filled with so much sorrow it shredded her soul. *I have to be strong. If only it's one of the pack, but I bet it's that thing trying to trick me again. I won't let it get the best of me. I won't listen to it.*

She gritted her teeth against the despair that overwhelmed her. Running her hand through her shoulder length hair, she felt the grit and dirt among the strands. She hadn't left the cave in almost a week and was in desperate need of a shower. She always prided herself for being clean and keeping up her hair. It was one of the things Bruno loved. Even though she was an outcast, she made sure that she was dressed and always had a good attitude. She didn't need any of the pack to start any more rumors or have them lash out. Now the only thing lashing out at her was the evil who hovered outside the cave. Supplies were what she needed. Water she was okay with because there was a fresh water spring deep in the cave. She had only darted out of the protection of the caves twice. Both times she had done a mad dash for food and on her last go around, she'd been able to make it back to her cabin and grab her silver dagger for protection

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along with a few cans of food before she felt the lingering evil getting stronger. Then she had raced back to the cave not sure what the demon's plans were for her if it caught her off the sacred ground. She glanced at the knife on the ground. One of the other anomalies she had was, unlike the rest of her kind, she wasn't allergic to silver. Evil disliked the metal. That was one reason so many humans assumed her kind to be wicked. Along with their inner craving for human meat that was ingrained in all of them. It was the price they had to bear for sharing the duality of mortal and wolf. Some fought the hunger all their lives. Others, like Bruno, killed when the urge was too strong. She wondered if he had ever come to really accept the deaths he had caused. She knew senseless killing weighed on his consciousness.

Many times while they were growing up, he would blackout and he wouldn't remember what he had done until much later. It was then he would seek shelter in her arms. The first time he'd done it after he transformed into the wolf he had come to her still covered in blood and confessed that he had killed, but he never wanted the blood lust. He had prayed for the burden to be lifted from his soul. She assumed it was one of the reasons he found such solace in his beliefs. No matter what, she never blamed him for being what he was. Seeing him fight so hard against their nature only made her love him all the more. Terrance, on the other hand, reveled in the kill. It consumed him and when he hunted he was lost to the beast. Not long after he assumed the position of pack leader, he declared open season on all mortals who stepped foot onto pack land. Many of the wolves were in favor of the law change. Under Terrance's father, they were told to blend in with humans and hunt with discretion. The kill would be shared among the pack, but Terrance headed a killing squad which ran all over the territory until they were murdering people at least once a month and hiding any remains that weren't being devoured. She never joined in the feasting.

She glanced up at the luminous diamonds sprinkled across the darkness hoping to find some comfort in them. Dark clouds were rolling in to blot out the moon and the stars. A chill ran along her arm and then through her entire body. The atmosphere felt different. The distant howl came again. *That sound can't be from the demon. It has to be*

from one of the pack. Something so foul can't fake that forlorn cry. It's like someone's soul has been ripped from their chest. She grabbed the knife and caressed the handle. It was the only weapon she had and she was normally dead on with her aim. If it was the demon, she would have one shot to wound it. *I have to take the chance and see if it's one of the pack that escaped the demon's wrath. Maybe it's another human even.* She couldn't stand being alone for the rest of her days, in the caves or in the graveyard below, with all the restless spirits of her pack lingering where they died. Their souls had to be put to rest. The demon had to be sent back to hell.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her voice to the sky and howled back. Counting the heart beats between the responses, she got a reply. She waited another moment and cried again. She clutched the hilt of the dagger and stepped outside of the protective barrier of the caves. Once she did, she felt vulnerable. She'd never felt that way before all of this started. She didn't know how to fight something that was pure evil. The only holy man she knew was Bruno. Whoever was below had to get her out of there. Her eyes searched the darkness for the demon, but none of the shadows seemed out of place. Maybe it was lying low and drawing her out so it could begin to torment her again. Or maybe it was using one of the pack to lure her out.

The first time it had come to her was in the guise of a black wolf. It was in a dream coming through the mist from the lake. It had glowing red eyes. She didn't pay it any mind then, but the dreams kept coming. When she woke from the first dream in a cold sweat, something about it gave her a sense of foreboding. She had pushed it off, but then the dream came again. This time the demon began to speak to her. She couldn't understand it at first until it began to come to her every night. Serena shivered when she thought about the demands the evil one was making. However, there had been other dreams she had that were of a man. He wasn't evil and he was trying to caution her about the danger. Those dreams she enjoyed because they were peaceful.

She advised Terrance about both of the dreams, but he didn't believe her. It was only after she swore to mate with him that he even considered her warnings. Serena shivered when she thought about her promise to Terrance. It would haunt her for the

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rest of her years, but it was the only thing she could do. She was powerless, without Terrance backing her, to save the pack. It weighed on her soul. She wasn't sure how Bruno would take the news, but he had to understand. If they were all dead, then she would be absolved of her promise. She would have to find out. She hadn't even thought about it until the hope that Bruno was alive surfaced in her. *I'll have to face my decisions no matter what. He'll have to understand. And if Terrance is dead...Well it doesn't matter anymore.*

The howl came again. *I know it's him. It has to be him.* She grasped the knife and took a deep breath. She headed into the woods toward the compound. Each step she took made her heart thump harder while she faced her fear. The hair rose on the back of her neck and all over her body. The night was growing colder the more she stayed out in it. It was the work of the demon. The once peaceful compound she had grown up in was now tainted with evil. The demon's influence was all around and she wasn't sure if anything could cleanse the land. Twigs were breaking below her and grass was being trampled under heavy boots. Whoever was approaching wasn't making it a point to be quiet. She lifted her nose and sniffed the air. There was a slight breeze, but the one coming towards her was down wind. A moment of uncertainty made her dive behind a tree while she waited to see who was coming toward her. Serena pressed her back against the bark. *Please let it be Bruno. Oh my love, I don't know what I'd do if you were truly gone.*

She squeezed her eyes shut. So many times in the past week she had prayed it would be Bruno coming to rescue her. Then every time she would get her expectations up, the demon would make those hard fought for hopes crash down around her. It would remind her she was all alone and the pack was dead. It would tease her standing off in the distance. It had even impersonated Bruno. Serena understood that it wanted her vulnerable so she would bow down to it and let the evil fiend do whatever it wanted to her, but she wasn't going to give it the satisfaction. She gripped the knife harder. Tears stung her eyes from the determination she was feeling. *I will face my fear. No matter who or what is coming up the path. I will face whatever it is. This evil is not going to*

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drive me from my lands. I'm tired of being afraid. I will not succumb. It will not break me. It might have taken me over when I was younger, but I am not a child. I will not listen to its lies.

She wiped her eyes and drew in a deep breath. A sense of calm descended over her. Whatever was approaching she was going to confront it and not be scared. She had been frightened too long of the evil terrorizing her. Now she was going to take back the control and be the wolf she knew she was.

Chapter Five

He had no idea how long he sat lamenting, waiting, praying for someone in the pack to answer him. The guiding voice, which had dutifully led him away from the pack, was not answering him. His being wasn't filled with the ultimate peace it normally was when he prayed. *Why aren't you answering me when I need you most?* It was the wonderful voice that helped him tame the dark beast inside of him. It was the rapture he latched onto when the hunger for human blood came upon him. He stopped having blackouts and killing when he transformed into wolf form. Now, he could control his urges unless they were around the full moon and then he had no choice but to kill. Every life he took was a stain on his soul. Their faces haunted him when he slept. He tried to push past the guilt he felt from the killing, but he knew it was God's way of letting him know he had to do penance for his sin of killing. The dreams weren't all the time, but when they did come, they left him sleepless for a night or two. It was only in Serena's arms that the horrible images were driven away. He hoped she was okay. He hadn't had a chance to go to the outskirts of the compound and search her cabin. Bruno wasn't sure if he wanted to know what he'd find there. If she hadn't escaped the ravages the rest of the pack had suffered, he wasn't sure what his existence was going to be like. She was one of the reasons he had survived being alone. His expectation of seeing her every time he came home gave him hope to keep going and keep preaching. The other was his faith. The love he shared with Serena and his faith ran neck and neck.

A howl echoed in the distance. *Am I really hearing that?* The sound died down. He lifted his voice to the cloudy night and answered it. He got up and wiped the pine

needles from his chaps. When the answer came back, he set off in a dead run. When the sound died down, he stopped. He had to be sure he was heading in the right direction because the sound was bouncing around the compound. He caught a faint scent, tracked the trail deeper into the woods, and up into the mountains along a path he hadn't been on in ages. He howled again. The answer was closer now. He raced on and prayed. Up ahead, he stopped when he heard the thunder of another heartbeat near the entrance of a cave.

A whimper sounded in the night. He turned in the direction of the sound. A shadow raced between two trees. He wasn't sure if it was a trick of the dying light or not. The evil he sensed in the atmosphere was playing tricks on his senses. "Show yourself."

A dark figure stepped out from behind a tree. He growled for a moment. The air grew thicker. He sniffed the breeze and curled his nose at the overpowering unwashed smell that assailed him. In the dim light, he saw a dirt caked figure with hair covering its face and torn clothes. He approached the person sensing the fear around them. She shrunk back and stuck out her arm warding him off. He glimpsed a flash of silver in the moonlight. If it was real silver then it could kill him. There was only one person brave enough to handle any kind of silver among the pack, but he had to be sure.

"Stay back, demon!"

"Demon!" *Why would she think I'm a demon? Doesn't she know it's me?* He advanced holding his arms out, showing her he was not armed. "I'm no demon. You know me, Serena."

"Stay back I said. I don't know you. You could be a trick. It's tried to trick me before."

"What happened? Where is the rest of the pack? Serena, it's me Bruno. I'm not a trick. I'm here, baby. Come on, put the knife down. Look I can prove it to you."

"How?"

He smiled. "Remember when we were kids, you healed my leg after I landed on the rocks. Or the time that you healed me because I was cut with a silver blade? Or how

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about this?" He reached into his inner pocket and drew out the small sachet that held her hair. "You gave this to me so you would always be close to my heart. It's really me."

The blade wavered in the moonlight. He took the opportunity, darted forward and plucked the knife away. He threw it aside and grabbed her wrists. She snarled. "You're not real. You're just playing mind games again. I won't tell you anything. I won't listen to you. Bruno is dead. I don't know how you did it, but he's dead."

"I'm very real and I'm not a demon," he growled. He peered into her eyes and saw that it really was his love underneath the muck. "Serena. Come on, baby. You know it's me. I didn't want to hope, but it's you." He released her wrists and ran a finger over her lips and smiled.

"Bruno! Is that really you?" Two large tears rolled down her cheeks. Serena threw herself against him and wrapped her arms around him. She snuggled her head against his shoulder trying, it seemed, to become a part of him.

He placed a hand on her back hardly believing the woman he loved was covered in mud and ready to attack him. A current of compassion took hold of him. He wiped the tears from her cheeks leaving smears of dirt on her beautiful face. *God, thank you for not letting her be taken. Thank you for letting her be alive. I don't know what I would've done without her. She's my only rock besides you. And since you're not answering me right now, I guess I have to go with her. What happened to have you suffering so? What evil thing befouled this land and destroyed our people?* "Yes, it's really me. Come now, will you tell me where everyone is?"

Serena flashed him a smile. She had calmed a bit, but she still wasn't completely herself. He leaned in to kiss her, but she pulled back. "It's not safe to talk out here, but it can't come into the caves.

She grabbed her discarded knife and took off running back toward the caverns. Bruno traipsed up the slope behind Serena, wracking his brain for what was going on. She'd always been faster than he was, had been ever since they were kids. At the mouth of the cave, he noticed various religious symbols etched into the ground and along the stone mouth of the grotto. To the sides were vases of flowers, empty plates, and even

effigies of wolves. Candle stubs lined the dirt. Other slim tapers burned to various lengths protected from the breeze by the overhang. The tales of the pack said that the first wolf had walked from the cave on two legs. From there the two most powerful wolves joined together and then formed the wolf packs. The greatest ones had split into the four packs they had today. Glancing back at Serena, he saw the true state of her clothing now in the firelight. He examined the interior of the cave. Cast off wrappers of power bars, discarded cans of soup, and jugs of water were neatly placed in one corner of the cave. *She's been here for a while. How long has this demon been tormenting her? What has it been doing to her?*

She sat on a log. He sat on a rock next to a small fire she began to feed. It perked up a little. He leaned forward taking in the heady aroma of the smoke. His stomach rumbled, but he pushed his hunger down and tried to assess the situation. "Serena, what happened with the rest of the pack? Can you tell me in here?"

His stomach grumbled again. She smiled and reached behind her. He was surprised when she threw him a can and he caught it. Looked like dinner was a can of beans. He focused on his nails and sharpened them into claws. He punched one into the top of the can. Scooping them out with his fingers, he slurped some down. It was the best cold baked beans he'd ever had. Serena giggled watching him eat. When he was done, he waited for her to start talking. "Thank you."

"Hope you enjoyed it because it was the last of the food I have here. I can't believe you're here. I've prayed for you to be okay. I couldn't be sure. It lurks in the woods trying to get me to talk to it. The demon tries to wear me down. It's even impersonated you. It's been driving me crazy staying up here and not being able to see if anyone was alive. I can't hear anyone so I assume they're all dead. I'm glad you're here, even though I know you never should have come back."

"Why?"

"Because he wants you. I think he's wanted you all along. That's what he said in some of my dreams."

"Who wants me?"

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"The demon. He started whispering to me in my nightmares, at first trying to seduce me. Initially, I thought I was dreaming about you, but then I sensed the evil around him. Then he was a wolf in the mist. He told me he needs a wolf who the divine word speaks through. I knew at once you were the one he was talking about. I-I even went to Terrance and told him about the dreams. He didn't believe me. He said I'd finally lost it living so far away from the others and being alone all the time. I asked him what it would take for him to acknowledge me. He told me I would have to be his mate and then he would take it under consideration. I didn't know what else to do." She stopped and stared into the fire. Bruno heard the disgust in her voice. His heart tightened with the news she had offered to mate with his brother.

"I went to Estelle. She believed me. She was always good like that. We both went to him, but he called his own mother a liar. He threatened to make me a true outcast and cut my ties with the pack. It didn't matter that I had offered myself to him. You know how important it is for me to be close to others to heal them. He didn't even blink when I brought it up again. He laughed in my face. So I stopped trying. I came up here to get away from it and prayed the evil would go away or that your brother would listen to me. But the demon found me here too." She broke down sobbing.

He rested his hand on her knee. *Whatever has done this, I swear by all that's holy I'm going to destroy it. And this time Serena is going to come with me when I leave no matter what she swore to my brother.* "You'll be okay. I won't let anything happen to you. Now what happened with the rest of our people?"

She shook her head and peered into the fire. Her eyes grew distant staring at something only she could see. A low growl rolled over her lips. "First, it was just little things to disrupt pack life. The pack leader called me a traitor to my own people, a misfit. They began throwing stones at me again just as they had when I was a child. I escaped back into the hills. The demon said he could make it all better. All I had to do was tell him where you were. He even said he could give me the gift of transformation, but I knew he was lying. If I didn't tell him or if the others didn't tell him, then he'd start destroying the pack. Finally, your brother believed me because he saw the demon.

He suddenly remembered I had given myself to him and sworn to be his mate. He said if I agreed to be his bride in front of everyone, then I could bring the pack to the caves."

"Did you mate with him?" Bruno didn't want to believe what he was hearing. The woman he loved had become his brother's wife. He understood why she had done it for the good of the pack, but it cut him to the quick. "Did you allow him to mark you?"

"What does it matter? By pack law, because I said yes, I'm his."

Bruno shook his head. He didn't know what to say. She was correct, by pack law, she was his brother's wife. However, if even his brother was gone, then the oath which bound her was broken. Everything she had promised Terrance was moot.

"I-I'm sorry, Bruno. I began to gather the little ones, but the demon reappeared and demanded to know where you were. None of us knew. I begged the thing to let me take the children, but it was too late. The demon snapped his fingers. I saw pillars of flame down in the compound. I felt the pain coursing through me. I screamed and rushed for the children hoping I could get to them, but there was nothing I could do. The flames began to pop up all over the compound. I felt all of them die. I stumbled toward the caves while I waited for the fires to claim me too, but I remained. By the time their shared agony passed, they were all gone. It's been playing mind games with me ever since. When I saw you, I thought you were the demon come to harass me again. At first I thought your howls were part of its plan to get me to leave the protection of the cave. I'm so sorry, Bruno."

He rubbed her back slowly feeling the tremors racking her body. She'd never been this discombobulated. Bruno knew she acted in the best interest of everyone living here. It was what any decent pack member would have done. He doubted his brother would have. "Listen to me, Serena. You did what you had to do in the moment. You were thinking about the pack which anyone would have done. I don't blame you. Now that he's dead you don't have to stay here. Every promise you made to him is finished. You can come with me. You are no longer ruled by the laws of the pack. Where do you suppose the demon went?"

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She withdrew from him and studied his face. He prayed she would go with him. "I don't know where it is. Now that you're here, I know he'll be back. God, it's so good to see you. I've been up here all alone now for a week. I would love to go with you. It's all I've wanted for a long time. I only stayed because I needed to help the pack. There's nothing left for me here now because they're all dead."

The news was bitter sweet. His heart expanded knowing she was going to go with him. *Still why would the unholy fiend be scouring the Earth for me? What evil does this damned creature want with my soul? My family's gone. I'll never see them again. At least not in this lifetime. If it wanted to inflict any harm on me then it was successful. It's already torn out part of my heart.* He balled his fists together keeping a grip on his anger. His muscles rippled. The need to change forms raged through him, but he retained his control. If his fury got the better of him, he could become a danger to Serena. He glanced at her and saw the strong woman he longed for barely holding onto the shreds of her sanity as a result of the trauma she had endured. He couldn't imagine seeing anyone burst into flames, especially the children. He pulled her into his arms. She began to relax and settle against him, but then she pulled away.

"I-I'm a mess. How can you stand to be so close to me? I stink."

"You smell wonderful. The past is dead now. You can make a clean start."

She chuckled. Her deep-throated timber stirred his desire. This was the woman he remembered. "You always were a horrible liar."

"The Lord does not let any falsehoods pass my lips."

"Hmm?" She arched an eyebrow at him.

Before he could respond, she gave him a sly smile and then took off through the trees. He was after her tail in a second. Serena possessed the speed, the stealth, and the strength of a wolf even if she couldn't switch her shape. Her anomaly was the real reason she had been shunned by the rest of the pack. They feared it would rub off on them. Terrance used her inability to shift forms against her. Her one saving grace was that she was a healer and that was a rare commodity among any wolf pack. Her trail led to the edge of the lake several miles from the cave where they had swam as youngsters.

Serena's clothes were littered along the ground. When he gazed into the smooth water, all he saw was her head bobbing below the surface. His inner wolf rumbled while he began stripping. A carnal urge took control of him and he left his clothes beside hers. It had been eons since he'd gone into the water to cleanse himself and be baptized. He slipped into the water, a few feet from shore, and marveled at the beauty of the scenery. The moon above filled his soul with warm light and bathed Serena in its brilliance. The mountains surrounded them on all sides and the stars twinkled above them. *Such wonder and magnificence. How could evil find this place? How could it defile such a wondrous landscape?* He prayed that during these precious moments they had together, the demon would leave them be. They both needed to have this time.

He bowed his head. "Dear Lord, purge my soul of any impurities. Keep evil and harm away from those I cherish. Embrace the souls of my departed family and welcome them into Heaven. Help me find the bastard who did all of this. In Your name, they all shall be avenged. Help me to see the light and not fall into the grips of the demon. Help me —"

Serena placed her hand on his shoulder. He stopped mid-prayer. In the moonlight, her ebony skin glistened because she was clean. Her teeth flashed white and her dark eyes glowed with desire. "What are you doing?"

"Declaring revenge on the foul creature who has taken our family from us and proclaiming my thanks for all the beauty which surrounds me."

Her smile widened. She launched herself at him and dunked him under the water. Bruno came up spitting, but with her arms around his neck. The pull of her lips was irresistible. He touched her mouth and then pulled away, jumping when her leg wrapped around his waist bringing her warm slit against his cock. The sudden coming together of their bodies made him kiss her again. She tasted of pine and earth. With her lips working on his, he forgot every vow he'd uttered to God, just like he had every other time when Serena kissed him. She was all that mattered. His soul was hers and he would sin again and again with her. She was his wolfen angel and tonight she would lift him up. It didn't matter if she'd bound herself to his brother. Terrance was dead and

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any laws that had been in place to keep them apart were dead too.

He slid his hands over the globes of her breasts teasing the nipples. She groaned and slipped her tongue into his mouth so he could savor her even more. Their tongues intertwined while he clutched her breasts. Her nipples hardened against his palm as her hands clutched his ass. Serena gave him sloppy kisses along his jaw line and neck. When she licked his Adam's apple, he quivered. His eyes rolled back when her fingers closed upon his shaft in the cool water. The frigidness of her hand on his cock and her kisses almost made him blow his load, but he struggled for control. Her breasts pressed against his chest. He ran his fingers along her nether lips. He wiggled them slightly until she giggled.

"I think a fish must have my kitty. He'd better be careful or the pussy might bite."

He nuzzled her ear. "Is that a promise?"

"It's more than that." She draped her other leg around his waist and brought her warm pussy within centimeters of him. He slowly slid his fingers over her slit. She lay back in the water clutching him with her legs. Her arms trailed over the lake's surface while he dipped a finger deep inside her quim. The water splashed from her suddenly sinking under, but he found no resistance when he put another digit in her and then another. Her pussy clenched around his fingers perfectly. Bruno clutched the mounds of her ass and began pumping his fingers into her nice and slow. Moans escaped her throat which were slowly losing their human tone. After a few moments, she was thrashing so much he was having a hard time keeping his grip on her.

"No more... Bruno. Stop."

"As you wish, my love." He withdrew his fingers, dove under the water swimming underneath her, and a little further out into the lake. Holding his breath, he enjoyed the dark waters from underneath and seeing the movement of her shapely legs. He swam toward her and snuck up behind her. Grateful for air, he drew in a long breath and grabbed her around the waist. She tried to get away, but he held her fast. His dick poked into the cleft of her ass. He felt the goose bumps along her flesh which

was exposed to the cold air. He nipped her shoulder careful not to break the skin.

"Harder," she whispered.

"I thought you wanted me to stop." He bit down a little harder, sucking her skin between his teeth and gnawing on it. At that moment, he wanted to claim her for his mate, leaving his mark upon her throat, but he didn't want to push her.

"I lied."

"You know that lying is a sin."

"So is fornicating outside of your marriage bed."

"Now, you're talking my language." This time he broke the skin. Her hot blood settled on his tongue and slid down his throat making him even harder. The blood awoke the beast in him. He picked her up by her arms and slid his cock deep inside her tight depths.

"Oh, God!" he cried. "You feel so good, baby."

The water splashed around them trying to cool the heat. This was his Heaven. He grasped her waist. Serena entwined her fingers with his and he screamed. He pumped into her a few times, each time knowing he was never going to let her go. Her breathing was erratic. Her muscles were trembling from the orgasm building inside of her.

"Oh, Bruno!" She cried out when her pussy clenched around his cock.

He came a moment later and they stayed bonded together cradled by the water and their love.

* * * *

He and Serena lay on the shore after their lovemaking with the gentle breeze drying their skin. She dozed in the warmth of their combined bodies. He watched the clouds drifting across the moon trying to piece together the annihilation of the pack. Fog began rolling in from the slopes, creeping across the lake and onto the land. This had happened many a time when he was a child. The haze would come down from the mountains and settle on the lake. Sometimes it would slither down into the compound, but it always burned off in the morning. Now the vapor was only a few feet from them.

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He paid it no mind until he heard a low snarl within the haze. After the growl, a pair of eyes peered at him through the mist. He knew those eyes. He slipped out of Serena's grasp and stood up slowly. He put his hands out before him and walked toward the beast. A large white wolf with a patch of black stood before him. Only one member of the pack had similar markings.

"Brother, is that really you?"

The wolf stepped forward and the air rippled. By the second step, the wolf was walking upright. By the third step, he was a man with a wolf's head. By the fourth, he was completely human. Terrance stood before him, the leader of the pack and his older brother. It was years since he had seen him last. He was broader and more muscled if that were possible. His brown hair was starting to gray and on his chest were scars where he had battled. A large red birthmark marred his abdomen which made for the brown spot he had in wolf form. He was missing one fang where Bruno had knocked it out when they had wrestled as pups. The brawling was an everyday occurrence so he couldn't remember on which occasion it had happened. Their father had encouraged their fighting. Bruno shivered thinking about their past. The one thing which hadn't changed about his brother was the pissed off expression he wore.

"Well, well look what the demon dragged home. I heard about the *animal* mutilations in Coco Penn. Such a shame all those people were killed by a rabid dog. Don't you think?"

A pang of remorse raced through Bruno when he thought about his congregation. One of the deacons had discovered his secret and told the others. *I never wanted them to get hurt. They were good people.* They had come to confront him about what they had seen the month before, but it was the full moon. If it was any other time of the month, he would have been able to channel the beast. He had tried to stop his transformation, but it was too late. The moon was rising and the power had captured him. The guilt of that event overwhelmed him. He would not let it drag him down. There were other things to worry about now.

"I was sent out a wolf among the sheep to make them understand the blessed

word. The wolf has to dine on the sheep once in a while. It can't be helped even if the sheep discover the wolf among them."

"Now, you're home hoping Mom will forgive you and give you leave to go out and kill again. Or is it that you wish to take my mate from me now? You know she can't leave by pack law."

He gritted his teeth against his brother's words. Terrance was trying to provoke him into a fight, but he wouldn't let his brother get the best of him. He drew in a deep breath and eased his grip on the wolf. He wouldn't rise to the occasion. "Brother, there's no one else here but the three of us. No one cares who I ate. I have changed since our youth. I have control over the wolf now. Unlike you, who indulges in the beast, feeding it the flesh of those whom you catch. Mother never approved of your hunting. You got away with it because father gave you whatever you wanted. Please, brother. I didn't come back here to fight you. I was hoping we could make up. We are family and family has to stick together. It is good to see you, but can you tell me how you weren't decimated along with the rest of the pack? Why did the demon spare you? Serena said she saw everyone go up in flames."

Terrance sniffed the air. "What you should be asking is why was the bitch spared? Why was she the one the demon was targeting? Did you know she begged me to be my mate? I knew she'd wanted it all along. Guess that does something to you knowing that you were only her boy toy. You haven't changed. You didn't come back here to reconcile. You came back here to take Serena away with you. I know you've wanted the bitch since we were children."

Bruno drew in short breaths through his nose and bit his tongue. "Why don't we focus on what happened to our mother and other members of the pack? Is it true we are the only ones left?"

"It's true. Mother was the last to die. Did you know mother was against the idea of my mating? She said Serena was too good for me, that Serena should be your mate. That woman didn't know what she was talking about. It's about time Serena came here and paid her respects to our deceased family."

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Bruno glanced over and saw Serena staring at the two of them. Her eyes were wide because of seeing Terrance. He could only imagine what was going through her mind. Knowing his brother was alive complicated matters. The oath Serena had made to his brother was still viable. *It doesn't matter what he says or what she swore to in the heat of the moment. I've come this far. No one else is going to have her. She will be my mate.*

"She's nothing to you. You only accepted her because she begged you to get the pack to safety. You took advantage of her. It was done under false pretenses. Besides, the mating was never consummated and I didn't see your bite on her. By pack law, she's my mate. We have been together more than once and she already bears my mark. Serena has the right to choose whoever she wishes. She's an alpha the same as we are."

Terrance chuckled. "Brother, don't you think it's time to settle this once and for all? You've been on my case for years always snapping at my heels. Why don't we end this? Winner gets Serena body and soul."

Bruno growled. He didn't appreciate his brother's attitude. He was a dick, but something seemed to be a little off about him. Still, he couldn't stop once he had been challenged. The wolf in him growled. It wanted a fight and he was going to give into the beast. "Bring it on!"

Chapter Six

Serena stared at the brothers. *Terrance is alive. How is that possible?* She had felt him die. The links she had shared with him and the rest of the pack were completely dead. Yet, there he was, standing in the moonlight, naked as the day he was born. Everything she hated about him came rushing back. He was a brute and she had promised herself to him after all these years only to save the pack. Now she would be stuck in a loveless mating. She would have to listen to him. Now they were going to fight over her and the leadership of the wolves. Her soul longed to go with Bruno. He was the only one she loved.

"Come and stand by my side, Serena!" Terrance bellowed.

She bit her lip and glanced between the two of them. After a second of hesitation, she stood and walked toward him duty bound to go with him. Bruno stepped between them and blocked her path. Seeing him naked and standing before her was breathtaking. His body had a few scars from whatever fights he had been in. The places where he had touched her flared to life. Their lovemaking was burned into her mind and body. She would remember it for all the centuries she would live. No matter what happened. No matter how much Terrance would make her submit to him. It was their duty to rebuild the pack, but in her heart, she was always going to be Bruno's mate.

"You have to move, Bruno."

"You can't go with him. I'm not going to *let* you go with him. This is going to end here and now. What I said is true. We might not have said it, but you and I are mated together in our hearts. You bear my mark. You're my mate." The hurt in Bruno's eyes

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raked her soul. She knew how he felt. It was apparent that he would die for her.

"I don't have a choice. I gave him my word. He might not have marked me nor had a formal ceremony, but by pack law he's my mate. I can't deny that. You know it's true. By pack law, I can't mate you because you're an outcast. Even though they treated me like one, they never formally blocked me from pack life. I'm sorry." She wrapped her arm around his neck and pressed her body against him. He was warm and she felt his rock solid muscles bunched and ready to spring at his brother. She pressed her lips against his cheek. "Please don't make this any harder on me than it already is. Whatever happens, I'll always love you. Run from this place so the demon doesn't get you. I can't stand to think of anything happening to you. If I know you're alive, I'll endure." She captured his lips in a quick kiss and then released him.

Tears burned her eyes, but she had to go with Terrance. Centuries of pack law and tradition weighed on her shoulders. She didn't have a choice even if she was an alpha. It was so much easier when Terrance was dead, but now he was alive. It seemed her soul was dead already. *Whenever I lay with him, I'll see Bruno. Right now we have to think about repopulating the pack.* Bruno tried to grab hold of her, but she skirted out of his reach and took her place by the pack leader's side.

Bruno growled. "Break your bonds with Serena. Let me take her with me and we'll leave this place. Why should we fight now when the entire pack is gone? Terrance, if you want to do what's best for the pack, then let us go."

His brother laughed. Serena knew that Terrance was only tormenting Bruno to get back at him. "This isn't about pack leadership. This is about you and me. I've been waiting a long time for you and me to go at it. The bitch is only the icing on the cake. Of course, we don't have to fight and you'll be considered the coward I know you are."

"She is not a bitch. And I'm not a coward."

"Both of you stop this! Bruno, please just go." She pleaded with him. She had seen Terrance fight and knew he was ruthless. He would kill Bruno and then push it over the edge and then take out his anger on her because she had sided with him.

A sharp sting went across her face. Her head was jarred to the side. The taste of

blood filled her mouth. She let out a small growl and swiped at Terrance. He moved out of the way of her sharp nails. Before she could react again, Bruno lunged forward and pushed Terrance to the ground.

"You will *not* hurt her. Your days of hurting her are over. You'll never lift a hand against her again."

Her heart swelled seeing the evidence he cared about her so much. She backed away a couple of steps feeling the rising heat of battle building inside of her. She knew better than to get involved because both of the men were bigger than she was and she would only get hurt if she put herself in the middle of their fray. Terrance threw Bruno off of him. Her love let out a grunt of pain when he landed hard against a tree. Pine needles showered down around him.

"I will do whatever I want to her. Right now she is *my* property. Come on. Let's get this over with, brother. I challenge you." Terrance growled and motioned Bruno to come at him.

Serena watched the two of them knowing there was nothing she could do. Once the challenge had been issued it had to be seen through to the death. Dread filled her soul. She didn't want to watch the coming battle, but it was like a train wreck. She couldn't look away. She had to keep her eyes on the fight to see what would happen. Bruno leapt at the pack leader. In mid-leap he slipped his skin and became a wolf. Terrance batted him away easily, but not before one of Bruno's claws caught his stomach. She had never see him morph his shape so quickly before. She realized then how much more in touch he was with his wolf than he had been in the past. *Please win, love. Please don't let me be at your brother's mercy.* She dodged out of the way when the fur began to fly. Bruno stood before his brother, hackles raised, and teeth bared. In wolf form, he came up to her waist. She would love to run her hands through his fur and feel how soft it was. Sometimes he had let her do it when they were alone together. She smiled when Bruno advanced slowly. With each step he took, he seemed to grow before her eyes.

The pack leader shook his head and chuckled. He stepped to the side when

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Bruno jumped at him again. Bruno circled Terrance making sure not to turn his back to his brother.

"Brother, you have no idea what is in store for you." In a blur, Terrance transformed and went straight for Bruno's throat. He dodged the sharp teeth and snapped back at the other wolf. His fur was inky against the darkness. Blood splattered across her face and Terrance yelped, but he didn't give up. He was bigger than his brother and had more experience fighting. She cringed when the pack leader's jaws wrapped around Bruno's hind leg and snapped it. He wailed and fell.

The sounds of battle are ever so calming, don't you agree?

She gazed around the darkness and saw the demon's inky form staring at her. Its red eyes were beacons to the underworld. It was enjoying the battle. Not paying it any attention, she raced to Bruno's side and laid her hands on his leg. He gazed at her with his amber eyes and licked her hand. Before she could work much of her healing skill on him, Terrance head butted her. She flew backwards into a large tree and had the wind knocked out of her. She shook her head and scrambled to gather her wits and go back to help Bruno. Before she could get to her feet, Terrance stood above his brother with a smug wolf smile. Opening his jaws wide he was about to tear out Bruno's throat, when Bruno sprung up and fastened his jaws around his brother's throat first.

Terrance twisted and turned in his grasp, but Bruno wasn't letting go. He wrung his neck a few times and then the pack leader went limp. Serena was amazed. Bruno poked his brother with his nose and then whimpered. After a moment he shuffled toward her. While he did, he began to change back. By the time he came into her arms, he was barely limping.

"You did it!" She pressed against him hard not wanting to let him go. She ran her hands over his flesh searching for wounds to heal, but she couldn't find any. He was intact and now nothing was going to stand in their way. Once they left pack land, they would be together forever.

He ran his finger down her cheek. "I did. God forgive me for killing my own brother, but now you are free. You can make your own choices. You don't have to

worry about anyone calling you a freak ever again. You are no longer bound by pack law."

She hugged him harder, but over his shoulder she saw the white wolf rise. "Bruno." *That can't be. What in the world is going on?* He let her go and turned.

Terrance's eyes glowed red. His wolfish grin doubled in size and had more sharp teeth. His form shifted with the snaps and pops of breaking bones into that of a man. Serena was horrified at what she saw. *It isn't possible.*

"That's not my brother."

"Very good." A garbled voice came from Terrance's lips.

"What can we do?" Serena asked.

"Don't move until I tell you to run back to the cave."

Serena nodded. The demon had taken possession of Terrance's body. Its evil was gritty over her skin and rubbed her in all the wrong places. She shivered and waited to see what was going to happen next. The demon had wanted an audience with Bruno. Now he was going to get it.

Chapter Seven

The taste of his brother's blood was still fresh in his mouth. He ran his tongue over his lips and cleaned away the stains. He realized now there was a distinct taste to it. He spit out the rest of the blood and flesh. He hadn't wanted to kill his brother, but Terrance had given him no alternative. Bruno pushed the guilt away, knowing the outcome of the fight had given him Serena. He wanted to ask her formally to be his mate. He wanted to bind her to him just in case something happened again, but the demon had taken possession of his brother's body. Serena had said the demon wanted him. Now it was time to face the evil.

Bruno drew in a big breath and flexed his fingers. Serena retreated a few steps. He felt the strength of his faith flare to life. For years, he had been preaching against evil and believed in all that he spoke. Now, he knew he was being tested. "Dear Lord, fill me with your Divine light for I am thy servant. Give me the strength to face this demon and free my brother's soul from its grasp."

"Your pitiful God can't help you. No one can help you." His brother's voice deepened.

The lake sparkled in the moonlight behind him and gave him an idea. He held out his hands and approached his possessed brother. "All right, demon. You have me here. You've destroyed my pack to get my attention. You've killed all of my family and tormented the woman I love. Now what do you want with me?"

The demon's eyes narrowed. "Just like that? You're going to do what I say." It seemed flabbergasted that he wasn't going to challenge it to more of a fight. He

assumed the evil fiend was used to forcing his will on others.

Bruno stood with his back to the lake. He smiled. Only a few more steps and he'd be touching the cool water. "I didn't say I was surrendering to you. I just said I wanted to know what you had to say. You've gone to such great lengths to find me. Of course not great enough so you could find me while I was on the road. You've nearly driven my love insane and possessed my brother. Only a great force could have killed such a powerful pack as mine. It's obvious you have the upper hand. You wanted an audience, so here I am. I shall listen to whatever offer you have." He took a step back.

The smug demon smiled. "This is very true. You were impossible to locate away from your pack. I've been searching for you for months. I'd get a small glimpse of you through one of your less devoted followers and then you'd be gone again. The blinding light from above shields you from me. Blasted thing, faith. I finally realized, once I had a small feel of you, that you were from the same pack where I had taken advantage of a small girl child some years ago. Fancy to think you and she were lovers. That gave me an idea. I'm glad you're coming around to my way of thinking."

The demon moved toward Bruno and he withdrew another couple of steps. The coolness of the water radiated against his heels. *Come on just a few more steps. I can't believe I'm actually having this conversation. I have to make it believe me for Serena's sake. He can't do anything to me, but he can hurt her. What does he mean about possessing Serena? Why didn't she ever tell me about it?* He shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a reasonable wolf. I know when I've met my match. Evil fiend or not."

The demon spread his arms wide. "That I am. Darker and more perverse than you can ever imagine. I've done so many terrible things, and yet they have been so wonderful. Humans don't understand what true evil is when they see it. In the past they drove my kind out. Now, we are symptoms of mental illness. It's sad really. The last girl I possessed was such a sweet little thing. She wasn't more than six. I inhabited her for four years before her parents finally exhausted their means and called in an exorcist. He was a good one. Of course I wasn't going down without a fight. However, they didn't know my true power. I toyed with one of their crew, but they banished me

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from her too." The demon stopped and glanced at Serena. "I have a thing for little girls. Don't you remember our wonderful times together when you were sweet and innocent?"

Serena whimpered. Bruno glanced at her and saw her shivering. *Demons lie. He's taunting her to get to me. I must be strong. I won't let it break my faith. There are no cracks in my armor.* He gritted his teeth and slipped further back. The ball of his heel touched the water. He let the demon's comments about the possessions slide. It didn't do any good to get into a pissing contest with the evil hell spawn. "So why go to all this trouble to get my attention? Why not reanimate the corpses of my congregation instead of my brother? I'm sure some of them had a black enough heart for a soul or two to end up in the pit, no matter how hard I tried to save them."

"Way too easy. Besides you inspired me with that lovely skirmish between you and your brother. The hatred and fury your brother harbored towards you were delicious. I could have stayed in him for a long time feeding off his anger and he never would have known I was even there. You were complete opposites. He had plotted your death for a long time. So many different ways he imagined killing you. Each one worse than the one before. You..."

Bruno tuned the demon out and stepped into the water until his feet were completely submerged. He glanced at Serena, who watched them with a questioning gaze. He sensed her trepidation and his heart went out to her. Taking a deep breath, he opened his heart and the demon's words passed over his head. *Dear Lord, bless this water with your Glory and Holiness so that I might use it against this demonic foe. Make it a sure fire weapon to drive him out. Amen.* A small breeze caressed his naked body. A deep shiver ran along his spine and a sense of peace descended over him. He gave her a small smile.

"...are one of the key pieces I need to complete my ritual to release..." the demon babbled. It had a mischievous gleam in its eyes.

Bruno kept his eyes trained on the demon. He scooped up a handful of water. He brought the water to his lips and drank. It was cooler than it had been when he was making love with Serena. It had a clean feeling to it. *Thank you, Lord.* He pretended to take up another mouthful when he flung it at his brother. The demon didn't react at

first. Then it covered its face, fell to the ground, and began to convulse. Steam rose off him where the droplets touched. The demon began to scream. Bruno half expected him to burst into flame. For good measure he grabbed another handful of water and threw it on the demon. His howls intensified.

“Run, Serena!” Bruno darted by the fallen being and headed toward the cave. They only had a few seconds head start so he hoped it was enough. Serena matched his stride. They pushed through brush and jumped over downed logs, legs pumping. He hadn’t run so fast since his father had chased him through the compound for knocking out his brother’s fang. His father had wanted to kill him. During their run, he sensed the evil building around them. Behind them the demon’s enraged screams echoed in the woods. The thundering of falling trees sounded behind them, getting closer. He felt the dark entity’s hot breath touching the back of his neck. *God get us to safety and protect her with your mighty hand. She is all that matters to me now.* He tried not to look back and give the demon any strength. In order to vanquish the evil, he needed to know the demon’s name. At the moment, he didn’t know how he was going to do it. *I’ll find a way to drive it back to the Underworld. And if I can’t there’s only one man I know who can.*

Either way, I have to be sure my brother isn’t still inside his corpse. I don’t wish possession on anyone. Terrance might have been a major league dick, but he doesn’t deserve a demon living inside of him. I can’t have his soul in jeopardy. It’s my duty to free him. They sped through the forest until they came to the cave. He rushed over the protective barrier and glanced back for his love. Serena wasn’t behind him. He didn’t know when she had fallen behind. He scanned the terrain and saw she was on the ground. Pure panic painted her features. She reached out for him. The fog which preceded the demon’s presence was only a few feet behind her. Bruno darted over the line and grabbed her just before the tendrils of vapor wrapped around her foot. He scooped her up in his arms and jumped back onto the holy ground of the cave. He set her down on the ground closer to the light of the glowing coals of the fire. He scanned the darkness peering into the vast woods watching for the demon. He couldn’t see it yet, but he knew it was out there. The haze began to swoop in fast and then banked at the barrier of the hallowed ground and

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rolled upward. Serena whimpered and wrapped her arms around him. Her presence helped to calm him. He held her closer and stared at the mist surrounding the mouth of the cave. The demon's face appeared in the smog. The skin had melted where the holy water had touched it. His brother's face was now torn and burned showing muscles in some places and bone in others. The teeth marks where he had torn out Terrance's throat were visible now. A sense of dread settled in his soul. Staring at the effigy which had once been his brother, he knew Terrance no longer remained in his flesh. What was before him was completely the demon.

"You think you can fool me, wolf?"

"I have and I can, demon. God always prevails over Lucifer. He showed that with the lake. He's given me His strength so that I can defeat you. He has made me one of His disciples. Light always triumphs over the dark."

"You can't defeat me! Nothing can."

Bruno didn't flinch at the cold wind which was stirring up to surround him. Serena buried her head in his shoulder. The demon's power couldn't touch them while they were on sacred ground. Bruno was true in his beliefs. Nothing was going to shake him now. He knew the Lord watched over him no matter if he was a werewolf or man.

"Make it go away," she whispered.

"I'll try, baby. Demons are pesky creatures. This one is powerful." He kissed her ebony cheek. She huddled closer to him.

"Is the little bitch scared of the big bad demon? You should be because I'll inhabit your flesh once more after this is all over. You won't be able to keep me out." The demon made a kissy face toward her and then laughed.

The wind grew stronger and its face disappeared. The fog increased around them. A great pressure pushed on the barrier which was protecting them. Bruno's determination strengthened. He released Serena, whose hot body tried to mold itself to him, and stepped closer to the barrier. Her deep heady scent almost diverted his focus, but he ignored it and drew on the resolve deep inside of him. He closed his eyes and cleared his mind.

He brought his hands together and began to pray. "Almighty Father, help us drive the hell spawn from our sight and from my brother's soul. Help us banish the fiend from this holy place. You've helped me once before. Now I need your help again."

Immediately a crack of thunder split the cloudy sky. Cool rain began to fall around them. He lifted his face to the heavens and let the water wash over him. Once it touched him, he felt the same cool peace he had when he was praying. When he was traversing the land and sharing the word with his congregations. It was a perfect moment. It almost made him forget the demon was there.

After a few seconds, the tranquility was broken by a piercing shriek. The fog cleared. The sky darkened more and the rain began to pelt their naked skin. Wind blew hard enough the branches started creaking from the force. The more it blew the less suffocating the atmosphere was. Another wail tore through the air and then it died down. During the shriek, he saw the welted body of his brother twitching where the rain fell on his flesh. He stepped toward the body, but Serena grabbed his arm.

"Don't. It's a trick."

He smiled. "It'll be okay. I have to be sure."

He gave her arm a small squeeze and crept over to the body. He knelt down and felt Terrance's neck. There was no pulse and the corpse was cold. He sent a silent prayer up to Heaven for his brother's soul and hoped he now ran free with the rest of the pack. Bruno shook his head and stared at the gray clouds. The wind was dying down, but the rain wasn't letting up. They had to get out of the compound and figure out a way to drive the demon back to hell. The only way he knew was to find out its name. The only person he trusted to do the job was miles from here. They had to hurry before the evil entity came back. First he had to get his clothes, get his bike, and Serena's things. They had to make a break for it while the rain was still coming down. A flash of lightning lit the sky. When it did, he thought he saw the shadows of angels' wings.

"Is he dead?" Serena called.

He walked back to her. "He's dead, but the demon isn't gone. Listen, we have to get out of here. I know a place. It's a sacred place to our people and someone there can

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help us. It'll buy us some time before the demon comes looking for us again. First, I need my clothes and then we have to get back to my bike. My guess is we have until the rain stops. Can you run back to the compound, grab your things, some food, and money, whatever you can carry and then meet me at my bike?"

"What about you? Where's your bike?"

"I'll be fine. My wallet and my keys are in my jeans. My bike is in the middle of the compound by the large oak tree. Wait for me. I'll be there in five minutes." He looped his hand around her waist and pulled her into him. Their lips met in a hurried and desperate kiss. He didn't know when the rain would cease and he wasn't about to lose her. Not after everything that had transpired this night. He released Serena. It took everything in him to let her go.

"Five minutes," she repeated.

He nodded. She bolted in the direction of the camp. After she left, he grabbed a water jug from the cave and then ran back to the lake. The stench of fresh earth stung his nose. Uprooted and torn apart trees were the markers which led him down to the lake where the demon had forged his way toward them. The air felt gritty against his skin. Breathing it in left a sour taste on the back of his tongue. The demon was not gone, but out of a body. The rain was keeping him at bay and confined somewhere. Bruno assumed he was watching them. He saw his jeans and chaps and slipped those on the best he could since they were in tatters. The rest of his things and Serena's weren't useful at all. They were in shreds. He patted the pockets and thankfully his keys and wallet were still intact. He dipped the jug into the lake and filled it with the water he had blessed.

He clutched the jug to his chest because he had a feeling they would need it on their journey. From there, he ran to the compound. Ignoring the ash, he went into his brother's cabin and found his things. He re-dressed in better clothes and grabbed a knapsack he saw on the floor. He took that and began stuffing clothes into it. He knocked out a blanket from the wardrobe and saw a stack of papers along with an ancient book. It was the laws and the traditions of the pack. *One day the pack will be great*

and whole again. I swear it. He ran his hands over the old leather remembering the times his father had let him look through the book. The pages were very brittle. It had been passed down from one pack leader to the next leader. He wanted to take it, but there wasn't any room.

He shut the door and rummaged through his brother's things until he came to Terrance's stash of money and a small pewter flask. *Same old Terrance. Always hiding things in your underwear drawer.* He flipped through the wad and saw it was several hundred dollars. It would last them for a while. He poured out the alcohol in the carafe and also filled it with holy water. Then he stuffed everything into the bag and slung it onto his shoulder. He ran out of the cabin and clutched the key to the bike. Serena had clothes, another bag and was waiting anxiously by the bike. The rain had slowed a bit, but it was still coming down. He gave Serena a helmet and mounted the motorcycle. The back tire sagged under the weight of the extra passenger. She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed him hard. He gunned the engine. A deep slice of love wound through his soul so profound it took his breath away. They were better off together. There had to be a reason why it wanted him. Whatever it was, he would not let its evil plans influence him.

He carefully wove his way down the broken road until he hit the open highway. His destination was a holy site where his father had taken him to learn about pack heritage. There was one wise man at the site he hoped had survived the demon's massacre. They were a three hour drive away, but the map was burned into his mind like words on an ancient scroll. Bruno focused on the journey because at the end of it was their salvation.

Chapter Eight

Serena hugged Bruno to her close. She smelled his deep musk and let the scent tickle her nose while the wind whipped around them. The weight of the evil surrounding the compound weighed on her shoulders. The imprint the demon had made on her soul still haunted her mind. She thought she had buried her memories from her childhood, but the foul creature had dredged up her past. She had been a child when she had been possessed. The images were blurry. She remembered being lured into the dark forest by something promising to play with her. Then bits and pieces of going after her parents, nearly being feral, came back to haunt her. The possession had lasted two years before she'd been freed from the darkness. When she looked in the mirror, the next day, after her freedom had been restored to her, standing before her was a girl she barely knew. During her time of possession, she hadn't known Bruno. It wasn't until she was eight and was integrating back into the pack that she was introduced to him and they started to play together. She later found out from her family that they had kept her away from the rest of the pack, in case the demon decided to jump to another child, especially the pack leader's children. It was bad enough they were considered to be on the fringe of the pack because of her mother's healing gift. Her abilities weren't even as strong as Serena's. It was enough for the others in the pack to fear her because they didn't understand her particular ability. Even if they accepted her mother, or came to her if there was a medical problem they couldn't fix with their strange, fast metabolism, her family was still kept at arm's length.

Healing was an unusual gift which was not commonly found in the bloodlines of

the wolf packs. It was a talent she had inherited from a long dead relative who was Native American and had integrated with the packs. This talent showed up once in a while in her heritage, carried down through the female line. She wasn't sure if the possession had enhanced her ability to heal or not, but she did know it was the main cause of why she couldn't shift. Bruno had known a little bit about her ancestry and her healing powers. But she had never talked openly about her possession. She didn't think anyone would easily accept that she had been possessed. She had never felt comfortable enough to discuss it with anyone else. Now they were running from the demon, she wasn't sure what it was going to do. She was plagued by the fear of the unknown. Bruno was taking her someplace safe, she never doubted him for a moment. It eased her soul. She snuggled against him even more as the bike accelerated.

She giggled and let the wind pull it from her lips. As they wound around the road leading them out of the compound and toward the highway, she was finally feeling at peace. Her existence had been mixed up with the pack since she was born. It ran through her blood. It was part of who she was even if she was considered an outcast. She was still wolf and thought of the good of the others. It had been inborn the way it was with all wolves. The newfound sense of freedom she felt was invigorating. Wherever they were going, she knew it was better than the life she was leaving behind in the compound. She was free to go wherever she wanted. This knowledge was a little frightening. Serena had daydreamed of leaving the compound, but now she was really doing it.

What am I going to do now? What will this independence bring? Bruno and I are the only ones left of our great pack. When this demon is defeated, what will we do then? We have the vastness of this country to travel if we want and the endless time being wolves affords us to do it in. Having a long life span is one of the reasons why we broke away and formed our own pack. Our forefathers were strong and hearty. Now, with the knowledge our pack has been wiped out, the other packs will come and claim the territory for their own. Just thinking about it roused her anger. Defend the territory. Kill all those who tried to encroach. They had fought tooth and claw hundreds of years ago to carve out a place in the wilderness. She shook

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her head listening to the roar of the engine. *I don't have to worry about it now. Preserving the compound for our pack is all in the past. I am free to go wherever I want. Nothing binds me. No one binds me. I am free for the first time in my life to be myself.*

She inhaled his sweet scent and stared at the high rock walls which were on either side of the highway. She could still smell the faint scents of the pack on the wind. They were still in pack territory. As the bike took them further from the compound, she knew this was the right thing to do. Her soul had known all along that Bruno would come and rescue her. Now, the only thing weighing on her mind was the guilt she felt because she hadn't been able to save her people. The dreams which weren't from the demon had been a warning, but she wasn't sure of the source from which they had come. The man in them had told her to run from the compound, but she hadn't listened. She assumed the source of these visions was a divine one. Her faith in the hereafter had always given her solace. Her whole life she had believed in evil because it had been a part of her, but she also believed in the good of the above. She had to believe. It was the only thing which kept her going during the time the demon was tormenting her. Hearing the screams of the children had nearly driven her mad. They still lingered in her thoughts. She might not be able to ever drive them from her, but at least she would be able to recall all of their faces and carry their memories until the day she died. They would be remembered. At that thought, a sense of revenge awoke in her. She would do anything to see the demon sent back to hell. She wasn't sure how she could accomplish it, but whatever help she could give Bruno she would. Her pack would not have died in vain.

The scenery was changing. They were out of the rocky crags and the scent of the pack was long behind them. A weight lifted off her shoulders. One she hadn't realized had been there for a long time. Terrance was finally gone. Her word with him dissolved. She would only have to worry about what Bruno wanted. She assumed he wanted her to be his mate, but hearing him say it for the first time when he had confronted Terrance made her heart sing. He had joked about it in the past, but he was always driven away from the pack before they could go to Terrance or his mother even

and proclaim their love before the pack. Now he didn't have to run from his past or his urges any longer. He had tamed the wolf inside of him. She had always embraced hers.

She might not have been able to transform and run with the others, but there were aspects of her wolf which had broken through and she was able to embrace. Her heart was grateful because of her inner wolf. She wasn't completely human as some of the members had called her. They never truly understood what she was, anymore than she was able to understand. Hybrid or wolf or something in between, what was she? This only added to the fear the wolves felt towards her. If they didn't understand it, they feared it. All except Bruno. It didn't matter to him what she was. He loved her, body and soul. She had known that all along. Nothing could break the bond they had. They were now the only two left. Both alphas and together they would reshape the pack once the evil was put down for good. Whatever their future held after this, she knew it would be great and filled with wondrous things.

Chapter Nine

Near dawn, the clouds cleared away and the rain let up. Bruno had turned off the main highway two hours into their journey. Serena stayed close to him, hugging him as she hadn't been able to for a long time. He enjoyed having her body molded to his. It made the ride more enjoyable knowing she was with him. After so many years of yearning for her to break away from the pack and accompany him on his journeys, now it was a reality. They were together and nothing was going to take him away from her again. No one, not Terrance or any of the others could challenge him for pack leadership or wound her any longer.

The first road they traveled on wound higher and higher into the mountains. Once upon a time, it had been an old logging road. But once the logging had stopped and whispers of the land being haunted by some horrible beasts got out, all visitors had stopped coming. He had never encountered anything supernatural on the road, although a sense of foreboding did accompany him whenever he traveled the old path. The echo of his bike zooming down the road, seemed out of place in the midst of the serenity of the trees. Normally, he would ride his motorcycle just so far and then take the rest of the way on foot. It gave him time to reflect on the world around him, but today he wanted to get to Neb's as soon as he could. He didn't think the demon was completely gone and he wasn't sure how long it would take for him to find them. Either way, he wanted to get to holy ground. Neb, the elder and his mentor, would be able to help them. He had been invaluable in the past and he hoped that would be the case again.

Finally, they came to the end of the road. He parked his bike and hid it under a small copse of trees to conceal the motorcycle. It took a moment for his legs to stop shaking from the vibration of the bike. Gripping the gas tank so hard with his thighs, caused them to ache. His mind had been on the demon, but now he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath drinking in the environment around him. The canopy overhead twittered with singing birds. The drips of rain falling from the leaves to the ground resonated in the lush surroundings. The scent of the animals in the forest called to the wolf inside of him. He wanted to rejoice in the life teeming around him. He wanted to run with the animals. He wanted to make love to Serena again. The heat of her body consumed all of his senses. Knowing she was also an alpha, he wondered if he and Serena could forge a mental bond the way other alphas did with the rest of their pack. Since their pack was dead and it was only the two of them, it would be nice to be connected to someone again. At least then he would never be alone. Stretching out his mind to embrace the bond they already had between them, he grasped a hold of it feeling her mind flaming against his thoughts at the same time. A bright beacon in the darkness, Bruno knew it would forever guide him home.

Serena.

Where are we? She questioned.

Opening his eyes, he laughed. Serena hadn't even realized he'd said her name mentally. He opened his mouth to speak, as he took her helmet, but he tilted his head and placed his lips against hers. She returned the kiss and ran her tongue along his bottom lip. He placed the helmet on the seat and slid his fingers over her ebony cheeks feeling the smoothness of her flesh. A contented growl left his throat. He deepened his kiss and ran his tongue along her bottom teeth feeling the sharpness of them. He rested his thumbs on the underside of her jaw and tilted her face up just a little more to get the full effect of her plump lips. What an experience, being able to kiss her when he wanted to, he loved it.

If you keep this up, we won't make it to wherever it is you want us to go.

He grumbled and pulled away. *I know.* He stared deep into her eyes and watched

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the understanding coming into her gaze.

"You talked to me with your mind! You...we haven't been able to do it for a long time, not since before they banished you. How is it possible?" She shook out her dark hair. He reached out and rubbed a strand of it between his fingers. It was softer than the one he had lost in the pocket of his leather jacket. The demon had shredded his prized possession. He didn't need it now though because he had Serena and they were going to be together.

"We're the only two left. The old pack is dead and so are the bonds that used to lash us all together. It'd only be fair to assume that we can form new connections. It's the way we can start a new life together. And now you're here with me. I hope you don't mind. I can't think about you not being close to me again."

She kissed him quickly on the cheek. "I don't mind at all. It's nice to be able to sense you again. Now where are we going?"

"We're headed to a safe place. We have to walk a little distance. I can't take the bike any further up the mountain. The terrain is too rough for the tires, we'll be safer on foot. It's a little bit of a hike, but we need to get there as soon as we can."

"Aren't you worried that someone is going to steal the motorcycle? You love that thing."

Bruno smiled. "I've never seen another soul this far up in the mountains. No one that I know of besides Neb knows about this old logging road. Besides, any hiker who does happen to wander this far would most likely freak and run away. There are old tales about the road being haunted. So haunted, the loggers stopped using it and the route was shut down altogether. That was almost a hundred years ago. So we don't have to worry about any wayward ghosts. If we happen to find any, it would be someone who was killed during the logging times. Besides Neb began spreading the rumor back in the day. It was a long time ago. Come on."

He secured the knapsack, removed his saddle bags and slung them over his shoulder, and offered her his hand. She wound her fingers through his. Their warmth felt good. It reminded him he wasn't alone in his fight against the fiend. They were now

linked on a deeper level than they had been in a long time. Feeling her mind fluttering against his was what he had missed in the long days he had been away from the pack. Since Terrance had taken away his connections to the others, he hadn't been sure if he would be alone for all time. Now, God had given him Serena to be at his side. They were going to be together forever. Of course he hadn't asked her to be his mate, not formally even though he had said it to Terrance, but he knew he was going to. He wanted to wait until after the fiend was destroyed. Serena flashed him a ravishing smile as they began walking deeper into the lush forest to climb up the mountain.

The longer they went up the path, the less of a trail there was. He knew the way by heart, but Serena was struggling due to the brambles, but was managing to keep up. He never really understood how Neb had built his house up in the middle of nowhere, but then again he probably had it built when the logging road was operating. Originally he had a cabin lower down the mountain which was easier to get to, but he had relocated a few years ago to the higher cabin. He'd never explained to Bruno why he made the move.

Forty-five minutes later, Bruno inhaled and smelled the faint aroma of smoke. All around them life was swarming now that the sun was up. The air was fresh without the taint of evil on it and the heaviness didn't sit on his tongue. He was glad they were away from the compound. He let his guard down a little and listened to the roar of a tumbling waterfall he heard in a nearby clearing. The birds were chirping and the forest was alive. A fox was not too far away, mating in his den. In the distance, he saw a beat up cabin which seemed to be thrown together from stone and wood. He had to look twice to make it out. The cabin blended so well with the surroundings it seemed to be one with the mountain. He felt at peace. He gripped Serena's hand and brought it to his lips. She smiled before they started walking. They were only a few steps into the clearing when a man stepped out before them. Serena gasped. Bruno grinned. The man before them radiated knowledge. He didn't look older than sixty. His frame was still muscled and his green eyes were alight with wisdom. He had a grizzled beard and wore nothing more than an old tattered pair of khaki shorts. He had a gnarled and

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twisted walking stick in his hand decorated with feathers and the claws and teeth of many wolves.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

Bruno dropped his bags and stepped forward with open arms. "Neb, it's me. Bruno. Don't you remember? Come on, you old coot."

The man squinted and growled. "Bruno's dead. He died with the rest of the pack." He stepped forward and sniffed him. His nose wrinkled. "You don't smell like a demon. Maybe it's you after all. You have to prove it to me though."

Bruno laughed. "Come on, old man. You know it's me. Who else would know that you hide up here at this old place? You would have been better suited at your old cave further down the mountain. But no, you had to move up closer to the cloud bank and make my job harder to get you. You know my bike can't make it up that overgrown path you call a road. Suddenly, you decided you had to be up here to commune with nature and you didn't even leave me any clues. I had to find your ass on my own. It took me six hours to get your scent."

A small smile touched the man's lips. "Who's the woman? She smells like pack. Can't be too sure though. Not in these days. If she's yours, I'm surprised someone so beautiful would be hitching her fate to yours."

"I'm Serena, Old One. I'm part of the pack and I would hitch my fate to Bruno's any day."

"Ahh, yes. I remember who you are. It's been a long time since I've seen you, child. You probably don't remember me. My but you've grown and become a fine looking woman. Why have you come with him? If I remember correctly, Bruno, I never told you to bring anyone else with you when you decided to come and visit me."

"I didn't have a choice. The entire pack, expect for us, has been murdered. There's a demon after me. We need your help. We have to send this evil back to hell before it finds us. I wasn't going to leave Serena behind even if you objected," Bruno admitted.

Neb rubbed his beard and then motioned them forward. "Come on then. Only

you would get wound up in something like this.”

Bruno retrieved his bags and slung them over his shoulders. They followed Neb through the clearing and into the cabin. Once he stepped onto the porch he noticed several of the boards had recently been replaced. Along the wall were a few cords of wood, enough more than likely, to fuel the small stove for a couple of years. Once inside, Bruno noticed the black potbellied stove in one corner, a couple of rickety chairs and a tattered rug on the floor. The rug was woven together from rags, Bruno noticed there were a few burns in it. He chuckled at the rug his mentor had kept all this time. The rug Bruno had made ages ago. He dropped his stuff by the door. Serena was close behind him.

Neb pointed to the closed door. “You two take the bedroom. I have no need for it anymore. Bathroom has running water, but nothing hot. Same with the kitchen. Serena, why don’t you look in the fridge and see if you can cook us some breakfast? I’m sure you’re both hungry from your long walk up the mountain. There’s plenty of food. I made a trip to the store not too long ago. Bruno and I have to talk.”

Bruno opened his mouth to tell Serena she didn’t have to cook, but the old man shot him a hard glare. He knew better than to go against what Neb said. *Man, she’s really going to let me have it when we’re done with this. I hope she doesn’t mind that she had to cook.* He shrugged and gave his beloved a small smile.

“No problem. I know my way around the kitchen. You’ll pay for it later.” She returned the smile and then went to the refrigerator.

The man led Bruno out the door. He glanced behind him and watched Serena load up her arms with food. *I wonder if he knew we were coming. I wouldn’t put it past him. Old coot. He always seems to know more than he lets on. He was the one who originally warned me I would be banned from the pack.*

“Run with me, son. Human form isn’t natural for me these days. I only don my mortal skin when I sense something important is happening. I dreamed about you days ago, but I wasn’t sure if you had survived. An angel visited me and told me to get ready for you.” He slipped out of his shorts, dropped them on the porch, and transformed

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with a precision Bruno had to admire.

Bruno also stripped and let the energy of the woods fill every pore. He stretched his muscles and his joints cracked. He was happy to be back in his natural form. With fur and claws the world came alive for him. He separated his claws and dug them deep into the earth. What scents he couldn't detect when he was a human now filled his nose. He inhaled and smelled the faint stench of rotten eggs along with the heady scent of Serena. He nosed his clothes and cringed at the sulfuric aroma. He sniffed his paws and also smelled the evil taint on him. He had to be cleansed.

Ready? Neb asked.

Bruno glanced up at him, surprised when he could hear him in his thoughts. The elder wolf had never asked him to run with him before in wolf form. Whenever they met, they remained in human form. Neb let him run in wolf form whenever he wished, but he never communicated with him mentally. He'd always known his mentor was an alpha, but it never occurred to him Neb had telepathic abilities which would allow him to communicate with the rest of the pack if he wanted. He barked a response and began trotting after the old tan colored wolf. Neb led him deeper into the woods moving faster than Bruno thought possible for the old timer. He found it hard to keep up. They wove through the forest going higher and higher into the mountain until they came to a small opening in the trees. He paused at the precipice to look down at the meadow and gaze into the crystal clear water of the hidden grotto. The air was crisp and fresh. The high mountain walls surrounded them on three sides. The sun caught vapor from the waterfall creating rainbows all around them. For a moment, he was lost in paradise. Then he heard something and the moment was broken.

Across the small pool, a deer appeared from the thicket. Its musky odor ignited his hunger. It dipped its head to the water and drank deeply. Inhaling again, he tuned into the soft pounding of the creature's heartbeat. It was gentle, yet still a reminder that the beast inside of him craved sustenance. He licked his lips, already tasting the salty, warm blood sliding down his throat and took a step toward it. The rich meat would taste good in his belly, but Neb's warning growl brought him back before the wolf

completely consumed his mind.

No hunting here. This is a holy place. Now go wash yourself clean of the evil attached to you.

Bruno eyed him once more and yipped. When he bounded down the steep slope to the pool, the deer caught his scent, and took off back into the woods. Standing at the pool, he could see the fish and the rocks at the very bottom. He breathed the clean scent of the water. The coppery scent reminded him of pennies. He gazed into the pond and caught his reflection. It had been a while since he had gazed upon his wolf likeness. He pulled his lips back revealing his sharp teeth in a wolfen smile. Then without a second thought, he dove deep into the water until he was submerged. He closed his eyes and felt the air bubbles tickling the sides of his nose. The water was cool over his fur. He bobbed for a moment and relaxed. The ache to have Serena with him and experience the serenity of the place overwhelmed him. He dove into the water one more time because once his business was handled, the sooner he could be in her arms again. Being in the water, his spirit was uplifted and cleansed. His very soul was lighter. Coming up out of the water, he shook himself off.

Happy? Bruno asked.

Completely. Now tell me what the demon has revealed to you.

They walked around the grotto up to the top of the hill. Bruno recounted his tale and let the warmth of the sun dry him. Neb growled at the parts about Terrance's possession and Serena being alone in the cave. He told him everything including his strange dreams and the unnatural encounter he had with the police officer when he was heading home. He even told him about how he was able to connect with Serena.

Neb got up and paced around the clearing. *I've not had the same dreams, but during my meditations, I've had visions of a demon wolf running across pack land. I didn't want to believe it at first, but the more I asked the old ones, the more they reminded me of the tales of yore. Before the great packs split into the four different tribes, we were all one. Your ancestors told of dark spirits in the wood. These spirits want nothing more than to find their way back into this life. They are jealous of the two forms we bear because they no longer have any form. Now*

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this one has escaped the shadow planes and has found a way to create havoc across the land. The ancient ones told me this dark one is after a holy man. At first I thought it was me, but I was tested ages ago, long before you were born. This is your trial now, your faith. The gods wish you to face the darkness and see if the goodness in your soul is pure, Neb told him.

What test? What am I supposed to do? How can I be pure with this beast inside of me who takes lives? I have learned to control the urges when I am in human form, but during the full moon I am still prone to the hunger. I carry the guilt of my kills with me all of the time.

I do not know the path you will walk. My visions have not revealed this to me. You do not believe you are evil so therefore you are not. The acts you have committed might be conceived as evil because of the blood you have shed, but the wolf is not an evil creature. It acts on instinct. If you, like many others, are killing on instinct, then it is not evil. It is the man behind the beast who can make you evil. There is only one way to find out what the demon truly wants.

Bruno contemplated what Neb had said. He hadn't thought about it from the angle of a test for him. It was true. The wolf was an animal who yearned to survive and to live, it had to kill. In nature, a regular wolf had to eat. He was only following his instincts. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what Neb's plan was. *And how do we find out what the demon wants?*

We must invite the demon in.

That's crazy. I won't open myself or Serena to possession. Demons are hard to fight, but exorcisms sometimes don't rid the person of the evil spirits. I can't risk it. I've heard some horror stories. I can't risk what it did with Terrance or the demon doing the same to Serena. I don't know how to trap the unholy creature. So what good is it going to do us if we can't contain it?

I wasn't suggesting that you invite the demon to take possession of you or your mate. I know a ritual to call dark spirits and how to trap them. Besides, Serena can't be possessed again. She bears a brand on her flesh which won't allow it.

Bruno was stunned at the tidbit of information. He hadn't known, before being confronted by the demon, that Serena had ever been possessed. When they had met she was just a child of eight. He remembered she had been withdrawn at first, but she opened up to him eventually. She had never spoken about either the brand or her

possession to him. The only personal information they had shared was about her heritage and her healing powers. *I wonder why she never told me about it? I'm sure it's not something she would want to share with everyone. It must have been a horrifying ordeal to go through. What did the demon do to her? I wonder if the brand is what keeps her from shedding her human form? Or maybe it was something the demon did when it was inside of her. Anything is possible.*

What happens if we invite the demon in and he gets into one of us? He asked Neb.

We will take precautions, but if something happens we will deal with the circumstances as they present themselves. The world must be rid of this fiend before it can carry out its evil plan. Now go back to your mate. I am sure she's waiting for you. I'll stay out here and meditate for a while on how to conduct the ceremony. The gods will give me their answer in good time.

Bruno got up and stretched. *You know she's not my mate.*

If that's what you want to tell yourself to make yourself happy.

Bruno nipped at Neb's hocks and bounded away before the wolf could catch him. *My mate. I wish she was my mate. She's all I've wanted since the first moment I saw her. We are the only ones left so it makes sense. I only hope she wants me the same way. If not, then the road ahead will be forever lonely.*

Chapter Ten

Serena stood by the stove pushing the last of the sausages around with the fork she held. The aroma of the cooked food made her stomach growl. The fruit of her labors was spread out on the table before her. When Neb had suggested she make breakfast, her first instinct was to snap at him, but because he was an Elder in the pack she wasn't able to say no to him. Besides, she could see he wanted to be alone with Bruno. She spent the time cooking and actually relaxing. She loved to cook and it soothed her nerves. She speared one of the sausages and began nibbling on it.

The spicy texture hit the back of her tongue and made her smile. She loved zesty food. Growing up, her mother taught her how to cook. After she was free of the demon, she spent most of the day with her. At first she hadn't been ready to interact with the other children in the pack. Later, when she was more herself, they shunned her, all except Bruno. So, during the lonely time of adjusting, her mother would show Serena how to cook the recipes passed down through the generations in her mother's family. Her mother was descended from the Native Americans who had first integrated with the pack. Her father had been bitten by a wolf when he was a child in the Northern States. He became a lone wolf, until he found her mother and was accepted by the pack. Unfortunately, her parents had died when she was a teenager during a horrible hunting accident as Terrance put it. However, she'd always felt as though he had gotten rid of them so he could make his move to take her for himself. She grinned. Well his plan hadn't work. It had brought her closer to Bruno and his mother. Estelle was a good woman, who took her under her wing and even shared recipes with her for some of

Bruno's favorites. There were times, when the two of them were alone, Estelle would talk as though Serena was already part of the family. Because of her actions, Serena had always figured Bruno's mother assumed she was going to be his mate.

If he wants me to be his mate, why hasn't he asked me yet? I know he wants it. I know I want it. Maybe he just isn't ready. Maybe he wants to wait to get this evil behind us. Whatever the reason, I know he loves me. He showed the strength of his love when he confronted Terrance. I'll go with him to the ends of the earth now that I'm free of the pack. Now we can both be happy.

She took another bite of her sausage and turned off the burner. She plated the rest of the meat and added it to the spread on the table. Looking at it made her mouth water. *If they don't get back here soon, I'm going to eat this all by myself.* She readjusted a plate when the backdoor burst open. The sudden whoosh brought the scent of the forest into the kitchen. Bruno stood in the door with a wild look in his eye. He was completely naked showing off all his hardened muscles. A bolt of desire shot through her just seeing him standing there. A low growl rumbled in his throat. She smiled. "Well come on in stranger. Breakfast is about ready. Unless of course you've already had your own sausage." She took another bite of hers.

Bruno walked, picked her up, and lifted her off the ground spinning her in a circle. She let out a small gleeful noise until he put her down. Serena wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. He licked her lips.

"I think I like your sausage better." He pressed his lips against hers and slid his fingers over her back feeling every bump in her spine until he came to the round mounds of her ass. She shivered from the sudden contact feeling the bulge of his erection pressing into her stomach. He clutched her ass and lifted her. The sudden embrace drew a squeal from her lips. She wrapped her legs around his waist to keep from falling. He kissed her harder with a hunger she'd never felt in him before.

"What... are... you ... doing?" she asked in between his kisses.

Bruno bit her lip lightly. "Taking you into the bedroom to make love to you. Unless you have an objection." He nuzzled her neck while backing up toward the door. He fumbled for the doorknob. He licked her throat and nipped at her exposed shoulder.

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Serena threw her head back, enjoying the small bits of pain from his teeth. She yearned for him to mark her completely, but she wasn't going to push him. The more he kissed her, the more her desire stirred. "No, but what about —"

He plunged his tongue into her ear and kissed along her jaw line. "Don't worry about Neb. He's gone for a while. I think he had an idea we might be engaged."

"Are you sure about that?"

Bruno licked the hollow of her throat. He finally got the door open and got them into the room. Serena closed the door behind her with a small nudge from her elbow. Bruno dropped her on the bed. The mattress creaked and the bed groaned from the added weight. Before she could get herself situated, he pulled her shirt from her jeans. She was about to fight him, but decided against it. She wasn't sure what would happen if she broke the moment. He ran his hands over her breasts cupping them for a moment. At the slight contact, her nipples began to harden. His eyes brightened. She saw the wolf in his nature and loved that he had embraced it. He slid his nails through her bra straps and broke them easily. He threw the remnants of the fabric to the floor.

"I hope you're going to buy me a new one of those. I didn't bring anymore with me."

He smiled showing her his wicked teeth. "I'll buy you whatever you want as long as I get to have these." He ran his thumb over the ridges of her areola. Serena shivered and wiggled on the bed trying to get closer to him. She took his cock and held the firm shaft in her hands. She ran her fingers along the bulging vein. A small howl left his lips.

"Only if I get to have this."

He didn't answer her at first. She kept his gaze just until she bent down and flicked her tongue across the spongy head of his dick. She slid her fingers along the inside of his thighs feeling the warmth of his body. His musk made her light headed. The wolf was in his nature. Whatever he and Neb had discussed hadn't driven away the beast inside of him. Normally, he kept the wolf at bay when he was around her. Even with his best efforts, there were times the beast escaped and he would apologize.

She surmised he didn't want to harm her in any way or he didn't want to make her feel less of a wolf because she couldn't shift.

"You can have it anytime you want, baby."

"Good to know." She slid her hands over his abdomen then ran along the edges of his hipbones. Laughter rumbled in his chest. He pulled away from her lips and smiled. Serena felt the muscles roll along his legs. He shut his eyes. Her fingers fit into the indentations of his muscles. She licked his cock one more time feeling how taut he had become trying to hold onto his control. He growled at her when she began kissing his stomach. Bruno let out a breath when she bit him lightly tasting the salt on his skin.

"Why don't you let the beast out? You've done it before." She kissed her way up his stomach, flicking her tongue along the scars which lined his torso from the fights he'd gotten into over the years. The one which sliced across his left ab was six inches long and had been done with a silver blade. It had nicked his lung and as the pack healer she had healed the wound for him. Terrance was responsible for the mark, having stabbed Bruno during the last fight before he'd driven Bruno out of the pack.

"What if I don't want to let it out? It's not fair to you."

She pressed her mouth against his and snaked her tongue between his lips. Their tongues touched and tangled together. He released her breasts and dragged his nails down her back. His hands trailed along her lower back and over the brand she'd had since she was a child. She barely remembered getting it. It had always been part of her. In the past, he had never given it much thought. *Neb must have told him about it.* Her parents had told her it was the only way they could get the demon out of her was to brand her with a holy symbol after the exorcism because it wouldn't give up its hold on her that easily. She didn't remember the pain of being branded. Barely anything besides the darkness and the pain she'd suffered during her possession. She remembered the teasing of the demon constantly telling her how he was going to kill her parents if she didn't tell him what he wanted to know. She never gave in, even though it scared the hell out of her. That she did remember.

She moaned with the sudden bolt of passion moving through her. He kissed her

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throat again. Deep inside of her, her own wolf stirred. It did at certain times, but mostly when her guard was down or she was truly aroused. She never had to fight with her inner beast because, over the years, she had completely integrated with it. She assumed it had happened during her possession. The wolf had awakened and blocked her from the majority of the evil the demon had inflicted upon her. Now the wolf was stirring in pleasure from Bruno's touch. He drew in a breath when she looked at him.

"Anything the matter?"

"Your eyes are golden. I've never seen that before. You been keeping something from me. You sure you can't change? Only full wolves can do that."

She laughed. "I have my secrets, and no, I can't change, but my inner wolf is still there. She wasn't driven from me when I was possessed. We have joined together and most of the time I forget we are separate. I guess she wants you to notice her."

"I can deal with that. You're both beautiful." He bit down on her collarbone and licked his way across her breasts. Bruno's hands trailed down her sides and returned the favor of tickling her. She squirmed in his grasp and growled. Every little touch he gave her, she loved. When he came to her thighs, he opened them wider and toyed with her zipper, pulling it down slowly.

"I might not be able to shift, but there are parts of the wolf that emerge. And every girl has her secrets." Serena grabbed his hands and pushed them away. She teased the zipper down on her pants making him drool. She pushed him back, stood up, and shimmed out of her jeans. She dropped them to the floor and sat back down on the bed exposing her pussy. Bruno licked his lips and knelt between her legs. Once his tongue touched her folds, a shivers ran all along her spine. Her fists curled into the sheets on the bed. She squealed and shifted when he ran his tongue along her nether lips until he settled on her sensitive bud. A growl slipped from her lips. He groaned. She had never growled for him before. Knowing the passion he was raising in her, she assumed the wolf wanted to claim him for her mate. The muscles in her legs clenched. The yearning running through her was beginning to overrun her brain. The tantalizing caresses from her lover were driving her crazy. He was teasing her on purpose.

"Stop messing around and fuck me, Bruno."

"I love it when you're direct."

He rose up and slid into her throbbing sheath. At once the ecstasy moving through her doubled in its intensity, causing the beast inside of her to rise up. It wanted to express itself. Her inner wolf wanted him for a mate too. Never had the urge been so strong, as it was now, as it ran through her. She could smell the musk on his skin, while her heartbeat thundered in her ears. He drove into her harder and harder, seeming to make them one flesh. Bruno was panting, drawing her closer until he was buried deep inside of her. This was how it always was when they were together. They were totally lost in one another, they were nothing more than two entities merging. She tried to reach out along the bond they shared, but once she touched his mind, all she experienced was his pleasure and the awesomeness of his body.

Her legs gripped his waist hard with her toes cutting into his flesh. The pain only made their lovemaking even more wonderful. Each stroke brought her higher. Serena was breathing hard. Her muscles clasped his cock. The wolf inside of her pushed along her mind and the confines of her body. She wanted to split her skin and run under the stars. Bruno licked her neck and worked his way to her nipple. She shivered under him and moaned. She kissed him back and when he pumped into her one more time and exploded she came as well. He collapsed on top of her while he tried to catch his breath.

"That was a great way to say you enjoy my cooking."

"I haven't eaten anything yet," he murmured.

She giggled. "Oh really?" She bit him lightly on the shoulder. "You know what I mean."

Bruno rolled over and propped himself up on his elbow to gaze at her. He moved a piece of her dark hair from her face. "I do."

Using her fingers, she was tracing circles all over his chest. "What happens now? With the demon I mean?"

"We're going to summon him, trap him, and learn what his plan is."

Her eyes widened. She couldn't think of Bruno being possessed. Not after all she

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had seen at the compound and what had happened to her. "You can't open yourself up for possession. You didn't see what it did. You didn't hear the screams. It can't be safe. You don't know what it's like."

"Neb knows what he's doing. I trust him."

"I trust both of you, but it's the demon I'm worried about."

He gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "Don't worry about it, love. I'm sure everything will go smoothly. You have to remember we have God on our side."

She sighed. Hearing they wanted to contact the demon, she tried to stifle the fear swelling in her breast. It took her breath away. She hugged her lover harder and laid her head on his chest to listen to his heartbeat. It drummed in her ears and gave her solace. It reminded her he was with her and he always would be. Listening to his breathing, she was lulled into a deep sleep.

Serena opened her eyes and saw she was sitting on the porch. The moon hung in the sky. She rushed inside and didn't see Bruno anywhere. A grip of panic clutched her when she didn't see him. *Where are you? Where did you go?*

Back outside, she heard a low growl in the woods. After a moment, a tan wolf came out from the edge of the forest. Staring at the animal, it seemed familiar. She took a step forward and so did it. She wasn't scared of the wolf only intrigued. She fell to her knees before the beast and held out her hands. The wolf walked to her and she was able to pat it. Once she touched its fur, she realized this was her wolf. Serena had never seen her wolf before in any dream. She wondered why it was appearing before her now.

Because we have never wanted anything as much as we want Bruno. I care for him the same as you.

She was taken aback. "I never doubted you wanting him as much as I do. I'm just surprised to see you."

We have been through much over the years. And now the demon is back again. It won't stop until it has what it wants. We must trust Bruno and Neb will send it back to hell. This place is a holy site and the demon can't come here. I like this place better than the compound. The air is clean. The darkness is crisp. We can hunt here without the taint of evil.

“Yes, it is nice here. I would love to stay, but I don’t know what will happen when they face the demon. Hopefully when this is all over, Bruno will make his announcement formal and he will want to mate us. It would be nice to have children. What do you say?”

The wolf yipped in agreement. *I want to have a family. To have others around who are loving and kind. To know our children can grow up in a pack. Of course, the other packs might not accept us considering what happened to our pack.*

She shook her head. “That doesn’t matter, our pack never really accepted us anyway. I can take being with Bruno all my life. He doesn’t care that we can’t transform. Still it would be nice. I would love to be able to hunt with him and experience exactly what it is he does when he hunts.”

The wolf before her barked her agreement. Serena ran her hands through the russet fur and stared into her gold eyes. It was nice to put a face to the beast who had been inside of her for so many years. Knowing this part of herself had shielded her from the evil the demon inflicted on her made her all the more grateful for having the magnificent creature on her side.

“Thank you for being there for me for all these years. I don’t think I could have survived without you.”

The wolf backed out of her grasp and licked her face. *What are sisters for? We will keep the pack alive and pass on the knowledge to our children. They will know where they came from. They will know the truth behind all of this evil. They will know the history of the pack. We will have many pups and they will run free.*

Serena nodded. “Yes, we will.” She began to say something else, when she felt the shift in the environment. The atmosphere grew heavy. The smell of smoke came to her on the breeze. Underneath the heady aroma was the stench of sulfur. She reached along the connection she shared with Bruno and felt his strength flow into her. She sensed his hope and his faith. This might be a dream, but they were still linked together. A sense of joy filled her. Her faith in Bruno and Neb was strong. If anyone could drive the demon from this place, it would be them. Neb had driven the demon from her when

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she'd been a child. Now, he would help Bruno purge the evil once and for all. She couldn't have another possessed by it.

She took a deep breath and let the silvery light of the moon flow into her. The coolness filled her being. She sent her strength to Bruno. He was awake. She wasn't sure how she knew it, but he was. He was waiting for her to awaken. She sent her love down the channel and then pulled away from the link. The wolf barked and she focused back on the forest. When she did, she pushed off the scent of sulfur and focused on the life around her. All of a sudden, she sensed another presence in the woods. It wasn't evil, but pure. She stared into the shadows. A bright orb fluttered closer to her. Anticipation ran up her spine. Whatever was invading her dream was not the demon. It seemed even more familiar. The wolf jumped up and barked like a happy puppy. Serena drew in a sharp breath wondering what this could be. It wasn't a firefly nor was it a ball of gas randomly floating around. The ball of light stopped a few inches from her and expanded into the form of a person.

The halo around the man scrunched together until his shape came into focus. Before her stood a man with red hair and pale skin. He was dressed in black jeans and a black shirt. His eyes flashed in the moonlight. Seconds passed before either of them moved. Her gaze darted to the wolf who went over to him and jumped up on his shoulders giving him a long sloppy kiss. He scratched the wolf's head and then gazed at her. She studied him and tried to fathom who or what he was. She nearly jumped from her skin when he walked toward her and stopped only a few inches from her. A sense of serenity washed over her and she knew everything was going to be okay.

"Hello, Serena."

"Hi-hi."

"Don't be afraid of me." He held out his hand, palm up.

"I'm not." Her head said she should have been afraid, but her inner sense told her she could trust this being. Looking upon him now, she realized she had seen him before in some of her other dreams. She took his hand and they both got up. His skin was warm.

"That's good. Do you know what I am?"

"My guess is an angel." The words spilled from her lips before she could even think about it. The idea was not very strange to her. If there were demons, then there had to be angels.

"Yes."

With his answer, fear gripped her. Her thoughts raced to that of her lover. "Is Bruno going to die when they face the demon? Is that why you're here?"

"No, but I'm here related to the situation. You've seen me before in your dreams. I know you tried to warn your pack. You have no reason to carry the guilt around with you. I wanted to visit you so you would know you're not alone. You have beings who are looking out for you. You've always had guardians looking out for you. I know it may not seem that way, but it's true."

Tears came to her eyes. It was true she did carry the guilt of the pack on her shoulders. With those words it seemed a weight lifted off her soul. "Why are you here now? Why didn't you tell me this before in my other dreams?"

He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. She sensed his presence deep in the pit of her soul. It was a tickling sensation. "I wanted to see how much harm the demon had done to you. It could have been worse. Your inner wolf shielded you from many of the demon's torments. I wasn't able to tell you before, because you weren't ready. Now you are. You're uniqueness has kept you apart from the others in your pack. Do you want to be like the others?"

Serena had wanted to run on all fours for a long time, but she'd resigned herself to her fate. "If it was never meant to be, then so be it. I have come to terms with my existence." She smiled at the wolf who bounded off, back into the forest.

He kissed the side of her cheek and she got all light headed. "Maybe, one day in the future, it will be. Just wait. Hang in there, wolf girl." He pulled away and then was gone.

Serena smiled and felt at peace for the first time in a long time. She knew then no matter what happened things were going to be okay.

Chapter Eleven

Bruno thought back on the day while he waited for Neb. He hadn't seen Neb since the day before at the grotto and he was getting worried that maybe the old coot had run away or something had happened to him. *I know he didn't run away on me. He's probably setting up or just taking his sweet time. Old coot.* He had tried to enjoy the day and the beginning of the night with Serena. He had showed her the sacred grotto and told her its history. The Native American's thought the ancient gods of their people had given life to the wolves at that place. This was the birthplace of the wolf and the cave was where the first werewolf had been born. Though her laughter and smiles had helped to ease his heart for a little while, his mind had still been on the demon summoning.

The tension in the air had risen. The moon was near full when he had sat on the front porch with Serena drinking a beer she'd found in the refrigerator. Neither of them had said anything to one another for almost an hour. She had sat with her head on his shoulder and her warmth gave him comfort. *Lord, protect us in our hour of need. Watch over Serena if this all goes bad. Help us decipher the demon's plan and then drive it back to Hell.*

"You ready, boy?"

Bruno peered into the night and made out Neb's silhouetted form against the backdrop of the forest. Serena had stood up and began to walk with him toward the tree line. "No. Stay here. I don't want you anywhere near this."

Serena put her hands on her hips. "I can take care of myself you know."

He had cupped her face between his hands. "I know you can, but I don't want

my mate put in any danger. Please let me and Neb do this. This is my test. You've already been through the fire and come out whole. Now it's my turn."

Serena nodded and kissed him lightly on the lips. She gave him a small smile and then ran back into the house. He waited a moment and she came out with his backpack. "You might need this. Mate hmm? We'll talk about it when you get back. I've already been mated once, to your brother, I hope this time it's better."

He gazed into the open pack and saw the holy water. "Thanks. Yes, mate. At least you want to *talk* about it. And I'm nothing like my brother. I didn't want to say anything formal until this was over. But you know it's always you I've wanted." He gave her a wide grin.

"Good to know. I figured you might have some woman stashed away in another part of the country the way you travel. And if you're anything like your brother, I might have to skin you."

"The moon won't wait for you. Come on!" Neb called.

Bruno walked into the woods. Neb set a fast pace and took off ahead of him. He followed easily. They came to the top of the grotto where there was a circle carved into the ground and overlaid with salt. A small fire blazed outside of the circle. Neb stood beside the circle. Bruno put his knapsack down.

"What's in the bag?"

"Something we may need. So what's your plan?"

"We summon him into the circle. The salt will keep him contained. Then I will pray for the gods to grant us their favor. I'll pray for the old ones to look down upon us and help send this evil back to the abyss before it can progress with its evil plan."

"I don't know about the gods, or the old ones, but I know God will look down upon us and give us his favor. Especially in this holy place. He has granted me his gift and I know it will be enough. We will vanquish this evil so we can get on with our lives. It will not do anymore harm to anyone."

"Humph. Let's hope you're right. I don't want this bugger getting loose."

Bruno smiled at the ancient wolf and patted him on the back. "Let's get this done

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then. I want to get back to Serena. I know there's still a lot of food left over from breakfast. She sure can cook. I was wondering when we were done, if you could mate us."

"Yes, she can cook. It would be my pleasure to mate the two of you, but before you get back there, Bruno, you must be cleansed. Kneel."

Bruno knelt before the ancient shaman. He took in a deep breath. He closed his eyes and thought about everything that had happened to him. Everything he had been through had molded him for his moment. All of his beliefs were for this. He bowed his head and felt water trickle over his head. With each drop, his spirit felt lighter.

"Ancient wolves and gods of old, bless this wolf with your power and grace. Give him the strength to overcome the dark spirits of the wood and the demonic realms. Bless him with your wisdom. Lend us your strength to drive the demon back to the pit."

A cool breeze kicked up and caressed him. Clarity and a peace of mind descended over him. A sense of serenity filled him. When he opened his eyes, he was ready. Neb had a golden glow around him which Bruno knew had been given to him by God. They might have believed the universe was ruled by different deities, but in his heart he knew what he and the old man believed in was the same. An all powerful being who ruled over all of them. Together they would fight the demon. Together they had the strength of all the packs behind them.

He rose up slowly and Neb nodded. The fire crackled. He studied the dark wood. "From the pits of darkness, I summon you. From the bloody jaws of the ancient beasts, I call you here. Come to this circle. I demand that you make yourself known! Demon, come!"

A strong gust of wind blasted inside the circle forming a small tornado to swirl inside of it. The fire blazed higher. The temperature plummeted around them. The cyclone bounced around the confines of the barrier. Finally it slowed and the swirling vapor coalesced into a dark form. It had glowing red eyes, elongated limbs, a humanoid shape, with only slits for a nose and mouth. Its skin was black, but he couldn't make out

any defined features. It pointed at both of them. Bruno recognized the same sense of evil he'd felt at the compound. This was the same demon.

"You dare demand my presence. You should be bowing down and kissing my feet. Do you really think you can contain me? This measly circle won't hold me. You don't have enough power for that."

"You will not address him, demon. *We* are the ones who will command *you*. Now answer our questions!"

The demon laughed. A dark hissing sound echoed through the forest. The demon bowed. "Your wish is my command."

"Why have you hunted me?"

"We've already been over this. I need you to help me. Bring your bitch with you. I don't care. But come and I shall answer all of the questions you've ever had. I know more than what your God will ever tell you."

"Why did you kill the pack?" Bruno asked.

"I needed to have some fun while I waited for you to show up. Tormenting your woman was worth it. So was taking over your brother. He was fun. "

"Bring back the pack and then I'll send you back to hell," Bruno snapped. He wanted to lunge at it. The wolf was getting the better of him.

"Great gods of old. Cleanse this place of this wickedness. Return the demonic spawn back to the hellfire it belongs in. By the ancient powers of this place, I cast you out demon!" Neb chanted.

The demon chuckled. "Do you really think this puny circle of salt is going to stop me?"

The wind stirred again and the fire dimmed. Debris from the forest floor blew up and hit Bruno in the face. He quickly covered his eyes. A large flash illuminated the darkness. When he opened them, the circle was empty and the salt was gone. The stench of sulfur filled the air. Neb was on the ground. He dashed over to the old man. He stirred when Bruno knelt by his side. When he opened his eyes, there was a red tinge to them. He grabbed Bruno's arm.

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"Watch your back. It has plans for you," Neb whispered.

"What plans?"

Neb's face morphed into that of a half wolf/half human and snapped at Bruno. "You'll never find that out." The demon was inside of him.

It had escaped the circle and possessed the ancient wolf. He backed away from Neb and crept toward his knapsack. The old man stood up slowly and cracked his knuckles. It took a moment to orient itself in its body, slowly moving Neb's limbs. Bruno grabbed the bottle of holy water he'd carried from the lake and began unscrewing the top. He didn't take his eyes off his mentor. "So you've got me all to yourself now. What are you doing to do?"

The demon sniggered but then screamed. He fell to the ground and clutched his face. He switched back to a human form. "Do it now."

Bruno threw the water on Neb. The ancient wolf shrieked. Steam rose around him, but it wasn't like his brother. Darkness solidified and poured out of Neb's body coming out of his pores, mouth, and nose. The rest of the water he threw at the dark form. Neb rose up using his walking stick. A great gust blew up and fought the dark form back into the circle. Bruno stood on the other side of the circle and raised his hands.

"Dear Lord, look down upon me and drive this darkness away. Force it out of our sight and send it back to hell."

Without another word, a beam of silvery light shot down onto the circle. A ghastly wail filled his ears. A bolt of lightning hit the center of the circle. When the smoke cleared, Neb fell to his knees. Bruno ran over and clutched the ancient wolf.

"Don't worry about me. My time has run. I saw the demon's plan. You must stop it before it raises its master."

"His master?" *It must be Lucifer.*

Neb nodded. "It needs you and three others for the ritual. Each creature is unique. It's following an old prophecy. The events here won't keep it entombed for long. It's weak now. It'll be upset when it digs its way out." He drew in a ragged breath.

Bruno saw the light leaving his eyes.

"Where will it take place?"

"Nevada. A place called the Devil's Tavern. Be careful...God be with..." Neb took his last breath and then stopped breathing. His mentor slumped in his arms. Bruno gently closed his friend's eyes.

"May your soul fly on the wings of angels with the speed of our pack. Rest my friend. Thank you for all of your wisdom." Bruno picked up Neb and brought him to the grotto. He waded out into the water and laid his friend on the surface. After a moment, his body sank into the watery depths.

Bruno made his way back to the camp weighing what Neb had told him. He had to find the demon and stop Lucifer from rising. There were three other characters who also had a piece in the ceremony. If that were true, then he would have to find the others. *If they've all had encounters they might be headed to Nevada. I have to stop this.*

Back at the cabin, Serena waited. He could feel her anticipation from the bond they shared. She wanted nothing more than to make him safe. He wanted to start their life together. When he got there, she rushed into his arms. He pulled her to his body. She smelled so good and being with her washed away the unclean feeling he had from dealing with the demon. Being with her gave him hope.

"What happened? Where's Neb?"

"He didn't make it. The demon escaped the circle and possessed him, but he fought it. He gave his life so we could know the demon's plan. For now, God sent the demon back to hell. However, it will rise again."

"Is the demon that strong?"

Bruno nodded. "He is. He's planning a ritual. I have to stop it."

"No. We have to stop it."

"I can't have you involved in this. I can't let you—"

She kissed him lightly and then put a finger to his lips. "You can't tell me no. I'm coming with you. We're in this together from now on. You wanted me for a mate, remember? Besides, I can't be away from your hot body. Just seeing you makes me

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want to scream.”

Bruno licked her finger. “Well, we do have a little time before we have to go.”

Serena smiled seductively. She ran her hands over his crotch. His cock stirred and drove the thoughts of the demon from his mind. Everything in him was trained on her. He uttered a low growl. She had won for the moment, and when the time came she would be at his side. They were bound together now. She had accepted his proposal to mate. Now all that was left was to mark her. And the best way to do that was making love to her and hearing her cry out his name. He kissed her hard and couldn't wait to hear her howl join with his.

To be continued...