

VAMPIRES REALM

F E HEATON

WINTER'S KISS

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Cover by Felicity Heaton

Winter's Kiss

The tales of the mansion near Nika's remote Russian village say that its lord drinks blood to live and that the guards are dead men walking, but that doesn't stop Nika from falling for one of them—a man who seemingly hasn't changed in twenty years, a man she wishes would be hers. One snowy spring night, her world and his collide when she is attacked by wolves and he rides in on a black horse to rescue her. But her knight in shining armour is far from saintly. He is a vampire, and she is becoming a werewolf, and love between such species is forbidden—the penalty death.

Winter is a commander of the Validus, the most powerful vampire bloodline in Europe. Faithful to his family and his lord since his turning one thousand years ago, he follows the law to the letter and places duty above all else, but his resolve is about to be tested in the most painful way and his world shaken beyond salvation. The girl he watched grow into a woman, a woman who has stolen his heart, is now a werewolf and his dream of making her his has been shattered. Only vengeance can be his now or the Law Keepers will hunt him down and kill both him and Nika.

But Winter's plan to take Nika home to her family only leads to her witnessing the destruction of her village and the death of her father at the hands of the werewolf trying to claim her, and Winter finds that he can't leave her. His heart demands that he protects Nika from the werewolf, Willem, by killing him and that he finds her a new home, somewhere she will be safe without him, for he must even protect her from himself. But Nika tempts him more than he can bear and it isn't long before he finds himself treading the knife's edge between upholding the law and succumbing to desire.

Nika does everything in her power to convince Winter to stay with her, to go against the laws and risk death, but in the end will she have done enough? When they reach the last bastion of the werewolves, will Winter leave her with her kin? Will the nights they spend together change his heart and his mind, or will she spend eternity dreaming of Winter's kiss?

Chapter 1

A scream rent the still night air.

Winter raised his head. The brush in his right hand paused against his horse's sleek black flank. He frowned, calculating the distance from where he stood in the stable courtyard to the person who had shrieked. The human female voice could carry for miles on nights as calm as tonight. If she screamed again, he would be able to pinpoint her location to within one hundred metres.

A Watchman of the Validus bloodline, Winter had spent years honing his skills in tracking, hunting and killing to the highest echelon of perfection. They gave him the ability to ascertain that whoever the victim was, she was over three miles away.

He returned to his work, lovingly stroking the huge beast's glossy coat and murmuring soothing words to him. It had been too long since he'd had the chance to ride. The rotation of duties within the household and Hyperion's plan to spread their empire wider across Europe had left him with longer shifts at the gate. It was an honour to protect his lord, but long nights spent braced against the freezing winds that scathed the landscape in this part of Russia were tiring and left him little time before dawn to ride. His eyes closed. Honour wasn't the only good thing to come of standing guard from sunset to sunrise.

He saw her more often.

An image of her flashed across Winter's mind. Pale blonde hair hanging in waves down her back. Sparkling green eyes that glittered under the moonlight. A

cherub's rosy lips that promised sweet kisses and an imp's smile that spoke of mischief. That image had branded itself on his mind the first night he had seen her as an adult. Every night that she passed and looked at him out of the corner of her eye, she burned her face a little deeper into his heart.

His horse kicked impatiently at the floor, scratching the scattered hay away from the dirt and leaving a long groove.

Winter patted Midnight tenderly on the neck and placed the brush down. Gathering the large black saddle, he positioned it on the horse's high back and let his thoughts wander while he buckled the straps.

They instantly roamed back to her. Many years had passed since Winter had first seen her. She had been a little girl then. Now she had become a beautiful woman. Perhaps soon she would find the courage to speak to him for longer. She had stopped a few times, always singling him out even though his black armour covered him from head to toe, leaving only the section across his eyes exposed. She had spoken to him tonight, asking him why he wore armour and guarded the mansion. He hadn't answered her. He had no place talking to humans when he was on duty.

There had been a beautiful lack of fear about her. Not even the sight of the naginata that he and the other Watchman held bothered her. Perhaps one day he could turn her. He cursed under his breath and tightened the last strap on the saddle. Those were not thoughts that he should be entertaining. His loyalty was to his lord and his bloodline first and foremost. He had a debt to repay. Once he felt as though he was worthy of asking his lord

for permission to court the girl, he would, but until then he had a duty to do.

And that duty came first.

No matter what his feelings for her were.

A ride would clear his head.

A wolf howl sliced through the night.

Winter tensed and instinctively brushed his long heavy black cloak aside and reached for the sword hanging at his side. His fingers closed around the hilt as he calculated the distance to the howl.

Three miles.

Was the wolf after the woman?

Another scream shattered the returning silence. This time, it was a word.

“Niet!”

Winter's eyes shot wide, an emotion rushing into his heart that he hadn't felt in long years. Fear. The girl. He would know her voice anywhere.

With the preternatural speed and grace of his kind, Winter mounted the horse and bolted straight for the stable entrance. Midnight thundered forward, hooves pounding the dirt in a sure confident gallop. The gates barely had time to open as they approached. Winter tucked into the horse, bringing his feet up behind him along with the stirrups. The half-open wrought iron gates brushed his knees as they raced through, almost knocking the guards over.

Someone shouted something abusive in his direction.

He didn't have time to slow down. The moment they had turned onto the road, he urged Midnight on, lowering his feet again but leaning forwards against its neck. It stretched forwards too, mimicking his move and galloping harder as though it had sensed his desperation.

The bottom of Winter's chest armour dug into his hips as he rode. His long cloak streamed out behind him. The light flurry of snow became bitter darts of ice that cut into his eyes, forcing him to squint. He changed, his eyes turning purple to reveal his bloodline as his senses sharpened. The thundering hooves of his horse were the only sound in an otherwise still world. Winter snapped the reins. Midnight snorted and galloped faster, heading directly for the woods with no sign of slowing.

Winter willed the woman to make another noise, or the wolves to break their silence. He needed to get a fix on their location but it wasn't only that driving him to beg the woman to shout or scream. He needed to know that she was still alive.

He hunkered down against his horse's neck when they entered the thick forest of pines. Snow exploded from the branches as they crashed through them, heedless of the pain it caused them both. His armour would protect him from the whip-like branches of the trees, and his horse, Midnight, would go wherever he bid him to, regardless of whether it hurt.

A branch hit Winter directly across the black leather and metal mask covering his nose and mouth. It smacked the armour against his nose and forced a flinch from him as pain shot out in warm waves across his skull. He

turned Midnight to his right and towards a more open area of forest. While the pain didn't bother him, it would dampen his senses and he needed those as sharp as possible.

He pulled Midnight to a halt in a clearing and scanned the darkness, stretching out with his senses and searching for her. The wintry weather hadn't managed to penetrate the dense trees and the ground was clear of snow, leaving him without a visible trail to follow. He breathed deep, catching a faint hint of her scent on the breeze. She had been here. He cursed. Where was she now?

Was she dead?

Had the wolves killed her already?

That thought made a dull ache settle in his chest. Winter refused to believe it. He wouldn't believe it until he saw her body for himself. Another deep breath caught a stronger scent. A growl rumbled up through his chest.

Not wolves.

Werewolves.

His eyes narrowed into dark slits between his black helmet and facemask. He stared into the distance as one hand left the reins and closed around the hilt of his sword. Blood would spill tonight. Not only because werewolves had dared to enter Validus territory. If they had killed her, no, if they had even touched her, they would die by his hand.

A distant scream reached his ears.

He pulled on Midnight's reins.

Midnight reared onto his hind legs, whinnied and then broke into a gallop. Winter sneered behind his facemask, his blood calling for violence.

* * * *

Nika walked the quiet winding path through the woods, wishing she had chosen to wear her thicker coat. Thick fake fur lined the long black coat she wore and it would have been warm enough under normal circumstances in late spring, but tonight was bitterly cold and the icy wind was searching, discovering cracks and places it could sneak into the coat and chill her to the bone. It was strange to have such wintry weather this side of spring. When she had left, the weather had been pleasant enough, and the snow had melted. Now it had come back with a vengeance. She had hoped the weather would be warm and sunny by the time she had returned from the city.

She folded her arms across her chest, trying to keep a little heat in. Her coat and dress reached the floor, both grazing the leaf litter and twigs that covered the path. The wind found its way into there too and blew upwards, snaking around her legs and sending her shivering. Her honey hair blew across her face as she turned and she clawed it away, thankful she'd had the good sense to take two long strands from beside her temples and plait them before tying them at the back of her head. It kept the bulk of her hair in place but left the long strands from that point downwards to dance in the breeze.

At least the snow couldn't make it through the trees.

Nika hummed quietly to herself while she walked, thinking about how nice it would be to arrive home and sit down in front of the fire. The thought of that warm blaze made the cold feel distant. She wasn't far from the village now. Soon she would be safe in her family's home, out of the frigid night and bleak woods. It felt like months rather than weeks since she had gone away to St. Petersburg. A smile touched her lips when she recalled walking past the mansion. He had been on guard duty again, silent and sentinel outside the gate with another man. She knew it was him. Those beautiful dark eyes had spoken to her as they always did, telling her words that her heart loved to listen to. He never looked at her, but there was always a strange emotion in his eyes when she stopped in front of him. The cold emptiness that used to fill them disappeared, leaving what her heart interpreted as warmth behind.

She didn't know who he was, or even what he looked like beneath his armour, but she knew one thing. She wanted no other man in this world.

Her heart lightened as memories of him came back, always protecting the gates of the large mansion. On the few occasions that she had plucked up the courage to speak to him, he had never uttered a word back at her. He hadn't even spoken tonight when she had mentioned the tales about the man he guarded. Terrible tales they were. Stories of demons and death, of bloodshed and violence. Her whole village whispered of them. They were right in a way. There was something different about the men there. In all the years that she had passed those gates, that man had never changed. Not when she was a child and not now that she was an adult. It was the same man. He hadn't aged one year in the twenty she had seen him. She was sure of it.

Through the trees, pinpricks of light flickered in the darkness. The village. She doubled her pace, thinking only of the warm fire and seeing her father again.

A howl sliced the night in two.

Nika froze to the spot, ears pricked and heart thundering.

Perhaps it had been the wind.

Low growls made her head snap around. Seven large dark shapes slinked out of the shadows. Their fur spiked in a line down their backs, wriggling like a snake when they shook themselves and growled at her. They stepped onto the path between her and the village. These were no ordinary wolves. She remembered them from her childhood. They had killed half of the village.

The one in front lowered its head and stared at her with bright amber eyes that promised a painful death. It snarled to reveal huge canines.

Nika screamed.

Before it could attack, she turned, dropped her bag and ran. She grabbed the front of her coat and skirt, lifting them so she could sprint unhindered, and headed through the woods in the direction of the mansion.

It wasn't long before her legs were beginning to tire. Their muscles strained under the pressure of running over the uneven ground and seized up as the fear broke into her mind, sending panicked thoughts pounding through her skull.

She was going to die.

The voice at the back of her mind told her to give up, but she wouldn't. She wasn't ready to die. It was something that happened to someone else, not to her or the people she loved. If she could make it to the mansion, she would be safe. The men there would fend off the wolves. The man would protect her.

Nika shrieked again as she tripped on a branch hidden beneath the frozen leaf litter and hit the ground hard. She immediately scrambled to her feet and ran blindly into the forest, desperate to escape the wolves. Behind her came their thundering feet and heavy panting. They were closing in.

In the blink of an eye, it was over. The full weight of one of the wolves hit her in the back, sending her tumbling to the floor. Another howled. She turned and wrestled the wolf off her, scrambling across the dirt away from it. One of them grabbed her ankle, the thick leather of her boot the only thing protecting the delicate joint. It growled. Nika screwed her eyes shut and brought her hands up in front of her face as the others leapt at her.

"Niet!"

Nika kicked the wolf off her ankle, eliciting a whimper from it, and pushed against the others. Breaking free, she got to her feet and ran again. Moonlight broke through a gap in the trees some distance ahead of her, illuminating a small shack.

Her heart willed her to make it there. It was her only chance.

She screamed again when one of the wolves snapped at her, trying to grab her arm. She punched it across the face and kept running, desperate to survive.

A thundering sound joined the cacophony of wolf growls and snarls and her rough breathing. Nika looked ahead of her to see the shack and then a large black horse with rider. She reached out to him, a silent plea for him to help her, and then fell when the wolves pounced on her. Pain erupted in her leg. Her heart missed beats as claws and teeth tore through her clothes.

Her last hope left her when she found herself face to face with the largest wolf. Hot breath washed her face, stealing her own. She sent a prayer to God and stared into the wolf's yellow eyes, into the eyes of death.

The thundering hooves stopped. Above her the horse's legs appeared, kicking out as the huge black beast whinnied and snorted. The wolves scattered, leaving her pressed into the dirt and frozen leaf litter, petrified and in too much pain to move.

The horse snorted again as it came down onto all four feet beside her and the rider appeared in her tear-blurred view.

"Hand," he said in a muffled Russian voice and extended his towards her.

Nika feebly raised hers towards him. She wanted to take hold of that black gloved hand and escape this nightmare. He shook his impatiently. She struggled to move faster, weak from the white-hot pain burning inside every inch of her body. He bent forward on the saddle, caught her hand, and pulled her up into the air as though she weighed nothing. He settled her on the saddle in front of him. Pain shot up her leg and lanced her stomach. It stole her senses, filling them until she knew nothing but the warm pulsing throb. She was

vaguely aware of his arm against her back and his hand on her waist, and the wolves closing in.

He turned the horse. Nika gritted her teeth and leaned into him. Each step of the horse's gallop jostled her on the saddle. The pain was unbearable, wracking her to the depths of her bones with each movement, but the alternative made her cling to consciousness and life. The wolves growled, closer now. The horse suddenly stopped and the man lowered her to the ground. Her legs buckled beneath her. He caught her before she could collapse and held her close to his hard chest.

"Run!" he said and she hazily wondered if he was talking to her. She didn't think that she could run. The pain in her leg was too intense, blinding. The horse whinnied. Was he talking to it?

Her heart beat faster, each pulse sending stabbing needles sweeping around her body. Darkness encroached at the edges of her mind, sending her thoughts fuzzy and her body numb. The man carried her into somewhere and set her down on something soft but lumpy. The sound of wood scraping and heavy objects slamming made her open her eyes. She frowned, vaguely aware that they were in the small shack she had seen and that he was barricading the door.

A wolf howl sounded just outside.

She flinched in pain when she curled up, the wounds on her body stinging. Her left leg burned as though it was on fire. She couldn't move it. She left it lying limp in front of her. The man looked at her and then around the small hut.

“Do not be frightened,” he said, as though those four words could erase all her fear.

It crushed her chest and stole her breath. She struggled to suck in air, panic closing her throat and pain making the slightest thing too hard. Her leg was wet. She could feel the steady slide of blood down her arms. Oh God. She was going to die.

Her panic only increased when the dreadful sound of claws against wood filled the small shack. Snarls came in under the door and growls made her skin crawl. She tried to back away but the sound surrounded her, leaving her nowhere to go. The man stood at the door, his tall figure a black shadow in the low light. He didn't move. He stood sentinel with his hand on the hilt of the sword at his side.

The blade of which gleamed when he began to draw it.

The wolves scabbled faster at the door and walls, as though they were trying to dig their way through. Nika reached out to the man, numb and petrified. He stepped towards the door and her heart slammed against her chest.

The two small windows on either side of the door exploded, showering her and the man in glass. The wolves leapt high, paws scrambling for purchase on the windowsill. They disappeared again only to attempt another go at getting into the building.

The man fully drew his sword.

She extended her hand further towards him. “You can't fight. There's too many!”

A terrible scream made them both jump. She had never heard such a horrifying and inhuman sound. A chill swept over her back and down her arms. The scream came again amidst a discordant symphony of growls and snarls. She closed her eyes and used the last of her strength to cover her ears, not wanting to hear the horse as it died.

Dreadful silence fell.

Chapter 2

Nika tried to breathe slowly but found it impossible now. If she didn't breathe quickly, she was sure she would pass out. She clung to consciousness but slumped back onto the bed, no longer strong enough to hold herself in a sitting position. The pain reached her neck and crept upwards to her head, making her skin flushed and hot.

"Gone?" she whispered, in too much pain to ask the whole question.

The man turned and nodded.

"For now at least," he said in perfect Russian, his voice still muffled by the mask across the lower half of his face.

She knew it was him. When he had saved her, she had seen his eyes.

He moved across the room to her, sliding the sword back into its sheath. She idly watched him, too weak to do anything else. It was a fight just to stay awake. He removed his facemask and helmet and placed them on the end of the bed. She wished it were lighter in the room so she could see his face. She had always wondered what he looked like, had painted a picture of him in her imagination from his eyes alone. She wanted to see him before she died.

Drawing his long cloak back over his shoulders, he looked around the room. She looked too, dazed. What was he searching for? Was he worried the wolves would come back? They had eaten now. Surely, they would leave them alone. Her leg ached when she tried to move

and a new wave of nausea passed over her. She closed her eyes to fight it and when she opened them again, the man held a small glass lamp. He dug his hand into his pocket and then a tiny flicker of gold punctured the darkness. The lamp blazed into life when he lit the wick and then closed the glass door. He walked to the head of the bed. She stared up at him while he placed the lamp down.

He was far younger than she had expected, but just as handsome. His dark gaze roamed over her, a concerned frown marrying his black eyebrows. Tied at the nape of his neck, his long fine black hair caressed his broad black-clad shoulders. As he bent over, threads of his hair slipped down and grazed his throat. The warm light from the lamp made a scar on his neck stand out and she found herself staring.

“I need to take a look at you,” he said and, before even waiting for her to agree, began opening her long black coat. He peeled the two parts aside and helped her sit so he could remove it. The room was freezing without the warmth of her coat and she shivered. The man’s fingers moved carefully over her arms, his gaze intent on their work. He frowned harder whenever he found a cut and inspected it closely before moving on to the next. Her eyes widened when he shifted his attention to her legs and pulled the skirt of her dress up. She wanted to protest but didn’t have the energy to spare.

Collapsing back into the bed, Nika closed her eyes against the pain when he touched her leg and she sucked in a sharp breath.

“What is your name?” he said, voice low and deep, caressing her ears in a way that made her want to relax and fall asleep.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. He stood over her, face half in shadow. The side that she could see made her breathless. The soft lamplight highlighted the subtle line of his cheekbones and the defined curve of his jaw. It played on the tempting fullness of his lips and danced in his eyes.

Something in those eyes made his tone feel cold and distant. His gaze flickered to her legs. She knew it was bad, could feel the wounds on them through the numbing heat of pain. His black gloves shone with her blood. She was losing too much to remain conscious for long. It was only a matter of time now before she passed out. Would he stay with her? Would she wake up if she embraced the darkness?

"Am I going to die?" she whispered, slow and between breaths.

He frowned at her. "No."

He sounded so sure that she almost believed him.

She wanted to thank him but couldn't find her voice as a new wave of pain rolled through her. If he hadn't shown up, the wolves would have killed her and eaten her, as they had eaten his horse. How was she supposed to pay him back for that? She would never be able to afford such a fine animal. She laughed internally at herself for thinking about such ridiculous things while she balanced on the knife's edge between life and death. Soon, it wouldn't matter that she couldn't afford to buy him a new horse. Soon, she would be dead and his loss would have been in vain.

"Your name?" he said, more demanding this time.

"Nika," she pushed out the word.

"Nika, my name is Winter," he said and she looked up at him, struggling to focus on his face so she could remember it and his name. It was an unusual name. What kind of person was called Winter? "I need you to listen to me. This will hurt, but we must set your leg."

She swallowed. More pain? Couldn't he just let her die? She was on the brink of passing out as it was and then she would be in blissful dark silence for the rest of eternity. No, he had said that she wouldn't die and it had sounded like a promise. If he believed that she would live, there was a chance that she would. If she survived, she didn't want her leg to be set wrong. The doctors would want to break it again to reset it.

Nika nodded.

He removed his thick cloak and placed it at the foot of the bed. Beneath it was the chest armour she had caught glimpses of a few times. Black and shaped like muscles, it made him appear strangely naked. He tugged two black leather straps free of his cloak and handed one to her. She stared blankly at it.

"Bite down on it." There was incredible command behind those words. He placed it into her mouth when she didn't move and she pushed it with her tongue until it was comfortable against her teeth.

Closing her eyes so she couldn't see the pain coming, Nika bit down hard on the leather strap.

* * * *

Winter waited a moment, studying her. She was in phenomenal pain but it would ease once he had braced her leg. He held her lower leg on either side of the break and listened to her heartbeat. The moment it became steady, he snapped the bone of her left leg carefully into position. She whimpered and then fell silent.

He grabbed the other strap and tore a section off the skirt of her dress. Looking around, he tried to find a suitable splint. He spotted the pieces of wood that had fallen away when the wolves had broken the windows. Adding two of them to his group of makeshift medical supplies, he frowned down at her leg. He needed to clean it. The skin was broken in several places but he couldn't tell whether they were teeth or claw marks.

Glancing at Nika, Winter realised that she had passed out. He blinked slowly. The sweet fragrance of her blood made it hard to concentrate. It called to him, stirring a deep desire to taste her and take her, to make her his. He closed his eyes, lowered his head while turning it a fraction away from her, and exhaled. He didn't need to breathe and she was unconscious so there was no need to keep up the pretence. If he didn't breathe, he might just be able to fix her wounds without surrendering to his hunger.

He removed his gloves and laid them down on top of his cloak. A distant howl reminded him that they weren't alone. He frowned when he thought about Midnight. He'd had to make a choice. It had been Midnight's life or theirs. He wouldn't have been able to outride the wolves in the thick forest.

They were no ordinary wolves.

He was fortunate that the moon was strong tonight, strong enough to sway the wolves and control them to a degree. If it had been a normal moon, they might have changed on him and he would have had to fight them. Winter closed his eyes, listening to the call of the night and the moon. Tonight she spoke words of hunger and violence, beckoned him to surrender to his true nature just as the wolves had surrendered to theirs. He denied her request and brought his focus back to Nika. She needed him. He had to do all he could to save her. She deserved that from him at least.

Nika moaned, mumbling something unintelligible that he ignored. Looking out of the window, Winter checked the clearing outside. His senses had placed the wolves at a distance of at least a mile. He would have time. He unblocked the door, retrieved his helmet, and then walked out into the small open area in front of the wooden shack. The snow had fallen thickly here where the trees were sparse. Using his helmet as a bowl, he scooped up some of the fresh undisturbed snow off to the side of the shack and then walked back inside.

With the door barricaded again, he set about cleaning Nika's wounds. He tore another piece of her skirt and placed it on the bed beside her. The bitter cold meant the snow in his helmet showed no sign of melting. He held it over the oil lamp, feeling the rising heat against his hand. Frowning, he checked Nika by touching her cheek with the back of his hand. She was freezing. He hadn't even thought about how easily the chilly night air would drain the heat from her skin. It had been centuries since he'd had to care for humans or had anything to do with them.

Placing his helmet carefully at the end of the bed, he ensured that it wouldn't tip over and spill the cool water it now held. Satisfied that it was secure, he picked up Nika's thick winter coat and placed it over the top half of her body. He pulled the skirt of her dress down over her unbroken leg. Her feet were still exposed. He removed his gloves from their position on top of his cloak and unfolded the heavy material, laying it over her. The cloak swamped her small frame. His gaze fell to the gold cross that dangled around her neck. She had always worn it since she had been a small girl and he had always wished to ask her about it, about whether she believed in the god it represented or whether she just liked the look of it. Many women these days did. A cross was no longer a holy relic. He didn't mind that. If there was no faith behind it, it wouldn't hurt him. His eyes slid across to her neck and then he dragged his gaze away. Now wasn't the time to be contemplating her blood.

Winter pulled the cloak up close around her face, covering her neck and trying to keep as much of her warm as possible.

When he touched her cheek this time, he felt a little more warmth.

Taking his makeshift bowl of water and the thin strip of skirt that he had torn from her dress, he bathed her leg. The thick tights she wore hindered his progress and he again had to stop. He removed her boots and then her tights, fighting an urge to look at her underwear while he was down there. When her legs were clear, he covered her again and continued with his work. He cleaned her leg, careful not to disturb the bone, and then used the other section of skirt as a bandage. When he had half wrapped her leg, he placed the two pieces of

wood down either side of her calf and then continued to bandage it. He tied the bandage off and then took up the leather straps he had removed from his cloak and fastened them around her leg as tightly as possible. It would have to do for now. His medical experience was limited. If he broke a bone, he normally snapped it back into place and it would heal quickly, causing him little pain.

Winter covered her leg and carefully worked his way around her body, cleaning each wound he found and taking in the mess the wolves had made of her. If he had arrived any later, he might have lost her. He stared at her legs. He still might lose her. If they were bite marks and he hadn't cleaned out all of the saliva, she would become like her attackers. The thought of that turned his stomach. Black anger darkened his heart.

A birdsong drifted in through the broken windows, heralding the coming dawn. The melody didn't soothe him in the slightest. He stared at Nika's leg with vengeance in mind. The wolves would pay either way. They would pay for killing Midnight. They would pay for hurting Nika.

They would pay for taking what was his.

The sunrise drove the call of the night from his mind and lured him to sleep. He checked Nika over one last time, battling his need to rest, and then went to the darkest corner he could find. Winter removed his sword, leaned against the wall, and used his senses to pinpoint the sunrise. Assured that the corner would be safe from the sun, he settled down. He tried to stay awake and alert, in case the wolves came back, but it was impossible. Taking hold of his sword, he held it close to his chest in both hands, telling himself that if the wolves came, he

would sense them and wake. He leaned back into the corner of the walls behind him, his head resting against them, and looked at Nika.

His eyelids dropped and then opened again, dropped and opened.

Each time they did, he looked at Nika, checking her.

Sleep finally claimed him.

He had done all he could for her.

Now it was a matter of waiting.

Chapter 3

Nika stopped in front of the mansion, a short distance from the place where she knew she would find him. She took a deep breath. There was no reason to be nervous. She had walked past him countless times. In the winter, every morning and evening had seen her walk past him when she had been on her way to or from school. Tonight was nothing special. She had been away from the area for a few weeks and she'd had a few drinks before leaving work so her tongue was a little loose and her bravado was up, but that didn't mean that she was going to do anything. She would walk calmly by and steal a glance, the same as she always did, as though she had never been away.

And he wouldn't look at her, just as he never did.

The weather was bitter and inhospitable, the wind stealing all the heat from her cheeks and leaving them numb. Light snow whipped around and stung her face. She pulled the collar of her black winter coat up and tugged the sleeves down over her gloves, trying to eliminate any gaps where the wind could sneak in. The full moon shone behind the clouds, almost visible through their thin fluffy bodies. She had seen it a while back as it had been rising, fat and deep orange. She had taken a moment to stop on the narrow country road and watch it. It was a long walk from the nearest train stop to her village, but never once had she thought about calling her father for a lift. She liked the walk. She liked to pass the mansion without hearing her father's terrifying tales of its occupants.

She liked to see the man.

Stamping her feet to get some life back into them, Nika sniffled and sighed. Her breath turned to white fog and drifted away. She started walking again, ready for her glimpse of the man and eager to get home where it would be warm.

The men slowly came into view. There were two of them as usual. Her heart skipped a beat and pounded a little harder. Would one of them be her man?

She was going to walk straight past and just sneak a glance at him, but some part of her had a different idea. When she had passed him and seen his beautiful dark eyes, she ground to a halt. He hadn't looked at her again. She frowned, turned on her heel, and walked back to him. Standing opposite him, she stared up at his face. Neither man moved. They stood frozen to the spot, the tall blade-tipped staffs held resolutely at their sides and the large black wrought iron gate standing behind them.

He blinked. When his eyes opened, he still had them fixed on a spot in the distance over her head.

"What's your name?" she said. The remaining trace of alcohol in her veins made her brave.

Nothing.

The wind howled through the gate and she frowned when it battered her coat and dress, but didn't move the guards' thick midnight black cloaks at all. Their black chest armour was visible on the side they held the weapon. She had never seen anything like it. It fascinated her. Moulded to mimic muscles, it would have been a fine body if it were real flesh and blood. The kind of male body that she had seen in magazines.

"Do you do this every night?" She tried again.

Nothing.

"Can you even speak?"

Nothing.

"Are you blind? Is that why you don't look at me?" She waved her hand in front of his face.

There wasn't the slightest reaction. He didn't even blink.

Losing her patience, she huffed and frowned at him.

"The history of our village is written and in the books it's said that a man moved here centuries ago, a man with purple eyes and a penchant for bloody murder, and that he's lived here ever since. The tale goes that he feasts on the blood of virgins to keep himself young and that those who serve him are dead men walking."

No reaction.

Nika stood there a moment longer, wondering what she could possibly say that would draw a reaction from him. He faltered in her vision, distorting along with the other guard and the mansion behind them. The steady drumming in her chest became a staccato rhythm and her eyes widened while she watched the whole world shift before her eyes.

One moment the guard stood before her and the next a different man. This one sent a chill tumbling down her spine and spreading to her fingertips. His rough-hewn features gave him an air of brutality. Dishevelled black wiry hair tufted up, streaked with silver by his temples, drawing her gaze to his slightly pointed ears. A thick

scar cut across one cheek, tugging the corner of his lips into it. It looked as though someone had sliced through his mouth to his ear.

She looked away from it, disturbed by the sight, and found her gaze meeting his. Hard, penetrating amber irises held hers. Their dark wide pupils made her tremble with the promises of violence and pain that they held.

Nika knew those eyes.

The wind blew, sweeping her hair from her face and making the plush grey fur collar of his coat dance. He smiled at her, revealing sharp teeth that made her gasp in recognition.

Before she could even think it, he twisted and growled, fur chasing over his skin as it stretched to fit new bones. She wanted to look away but found that she couldn't. She could only stare in horror and sick fascination as he transformed into a wolf before her eyes.

Suddenly, six wolves were with him and she was in the forest. Nika turned in a heartbeat, running away from them before they could reach her again. Again? She hazily remembered that she had done this before. She had already run away from these wolves. In the distance, the shack appeared. She had run there. The guard had saved her. Her leg had been broken.

It exploded in pain as she remembered and a red haze covered the world. It quickly faded to black. Unable to run any longer, she started to fall.

Nika's eyes snapped open and she stared at the sloped wooden ceiling. Her heart hammered against her chest, her breathing fast and panicked. She slowed it down,

drawing careful even breaths. It was hard to figure out what was real and what had been just a dream. Her leg ached. The wolves had been real. Her head rolled to one side and she stared at the man sleeping in the corner of the shack. So was the guard.

Who was the other man?

She rubbed her face and sat up, grimacing when her whole body protested. A thick black blanket covered her. No, not a blanket. The man's cloak. She moved it aside and saw her own coat beneath it. He had covered her to keep her warm. She glanced at him again. The air in the room was icy at best. He would be freezing.

A frown marred her fair eyebrows when she saw her left leg. He had bound it with what looked like part of her dress, some wood and some leather straps. It hurt, a dull throbbing pain, but nowhere near as badly as it had done last night. She looked at the windows. She couldn't tell what time of day it was now. The light was golden, that of either morning or evening. What had happened to the night?

Panic lanced through her.

Her father.

He would be worried sick by now. She should have returned to the village hours ago. What if he came out looking for her and the wolves attacked him too? She tried to move and a wave of nausea crashed over her, sending her mind spinning and her skin burning. She pressed her hand to her head, feeling the heat of it and the damp layer of sweat. Was she infected? When she had been a child, the wolves had attacked the village and many had fallen sick from their wounds. The doctors

had said it was blood poisoning and had sent the people away. She held herself, wrapping her arms across her chest. Did she have blood poisoning?

Nika jumped when the man in the corner stirred. Winter. She vaguely remembered him saying that was his name. Winter looked at her with dark eyes that she couldn't read. There was no emotion in them. In all the times that she had seen him and looked into them, they had always been unreadable, but she knew there were feelings inside him. She could feel them.

He stood, crossed the small room to her, and inspected her leg and her cuts. His eyes grew darker. He frowned.

"I feared it would be this way," he said in a heavy voice laden with the emotions finally surfacing in his eyes—anguish and despair. She wished those hadn't been the first feelings that he had shown her.

"What way?" The sudden appearance of his feelings made her panic. Blood poisoning. It had to be.

He moved towards her, his face expressionless even when his eyes shone with what looked like fear.

She closed her eyes when his palm pressed against her forehead, cool and refreshing. His touch sent waves of relaxing calm through her and she leaned back against the headboard of the bed, her whole body humming softly.

"Did any of the wolves bite you?"

Those words chased away the calm and brought fear crashing back. Her eyes shot wide and she stared at the

opposite wall, her thoughts running a million miles an hour through what had happened last night.

"The big one, with the black fur and grey mane," she said and looked up at Winter. "I remember it from when I was small. The wolves came to the village one harsh winter. My father protected me."

Winter was silent. His expression turned grim, sending fear into her heart.

"If it bit me, am I sickening—will I die? I've seen others die from a fever like this." Her eyes searched his, heart holding onto the hope that he would tell her she would be fine. If he told her, she would believe him. He had said she wouldn't die last night and she hadn't. Perhaps if he told her that she would get better, she would.

He shook his head.

"No..." He sat beside her on the bed and removed his hand from her forehead. He placed his other one against her cheek. It was so cold that her eyes slipped half-shut again as she savoured the cooling effect that it had on her body. "You will not die. You will heal and you will grow stronger than you have ever been."

Her eyes opened again.

"How?" She looked at her leg and concentrated. "I'm healing. I can feel it. The pain is almost gone, but the fever... what's happening to me?"

A look that spoke of discomfort crossed his face and he stood, walking to the end of the bed and then turning to face her, as though he needed the distance. She willed

him back to her. Whenever he was close, she felt safe and as though nothing could hurt her.

"You are becoming like them," he said in a near whisper. He had to be joking. People didn't become wolves. His gaze met hers. His eyes held nothing but honesty. Waves of panic rocked her, one after the other, each stronger than the last. They tightened her chest until it became hard to breathe. "Within the next few days, your transformation will be complete."

"I'm becoming a wolf?" Her voice was a high squeak of hysteria. "What crazy idea is that? You can't become a wolf from being bitten by one!"

"They are not wolves," he said, emotionless.

"They're not?" She laughed but stopped when his face remained serious and it became even more difficult to breathe. She had to do something to dispel this growing fear inside her. He couldn't be telling her the truth. "Next you'll be telling me that you're not human and we're not in a shack in the woods."

He took a step towards her, hesitated, and then curled his hands into fists. When he spoke, his voice was one of pain and anger.

"I am not human, Nika, and neither are you... not anymore. Rest. You will be weak until you are healed."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was she still dreaming? Was she delirious?

"Rest? You tell me that I'm not human and neither are you, and then you tell me to rest?"

He just stared at her.

“There is nothing we can do. You cannot move until your leg is healed and even then it is dangerous to move you before your transformation is complete.”

That word made her sick. Transformation. He kept saying it as though it was really happening. She was becoming a wolf. How was that possible? People really didn't turn into wolves when one bit them. She frowned at her leg. Winter had said that the wolves hadn't really been wolves. Had the man in her dream become the wolf?

This was insane. She had to get out of here and away from this craziness. If she did, then maybe she would be fine.

“I can't stay here. My father will be worried and the wolves might return. This shack won't hold... and you're clearly as demented as the man in the mansion you protect!”

He said nothing. He stood still a moment and then walked to the window and stared out of it. The broken glass let the frigid air in. How could he stand the cold? Her gaze fell to his armour. The back of it was as detailed as the front, shaped like black muscles and intricately decorated with silver lines. His thick black shirt and that armour couldn't be keeping him warm. His hands had been freezing.

“What kind of lunatic do you protect that demands you wear such an outfit? It's the twenty-first century and you're wearing armour.”

He whirled to face her, expression dark and deadly, eyes black as midnight. "My lord is none of your business. You would do well to keep your questions away from him."

Nika leaned back into the bed in an attempt to avoid the cutting edge of his tone and the violent darkness in his eyes. She hadn't meant to provoke him, or perhaps she had. Her father would be worried about her and everything that Winter said seemed impossible.

When she opened her mouth to speak, his eyes narrowed, silencing her.

"You must stay here," he said, his tone still rough. He looked at the window again and then back at her. This time when he spoke, his voice was softer and full of feeling. "If the wolves return, which is likely since their leader will now see you as his, then I will protect you. He is no match for me, but with the others, I will be at a disadvantage. I am not demented, and I was not lying to you when I said that I am not human, and neither are you. I see no point in this conversation. You cannot change what happened..."

Nika winced when her leg hurt and curled up, drawing her one good leg to her chest and holding it. His words had started out so nice, but the cruel brutal edge they had gained made her heart ache. For a moment, she had thought that he was kind to want to protect her. Why had he spoiled it by reminding her about the wolf bite and her supposed new inhuman status?

Surprise claimed her when Winter sat beside her on the bed. He sighed. Was he upset about something other than what she had said about his master and her insistence about going home? She sighed along with him, wishing she understood what was happening. He

stared down at his lap. He really was handsome, and very pale. Perhaps his position kept him away from the sunlight, or maybe the black clothing and his dark hair was the reason his skin appeared milky.

It suddenly sunk in.

It was an utterly ridiculous thought that made an impossible amount of sense.

"I'm a werewolf, aren't I?" she said, still looking at him, studying his face for a reaction to her words.

He nodded. Not a flicker of feeling crossed his face. Anyone else would have laughed at her suggestion. Then again, anyone else would have insisted that she was human and just had a case of blood poisoning, not that she was turning into something else.

"Are you one too?"

A shake of his head this time.

"Something else?" she said, wondering what he could be.

He nodded again.

"What?" Nika had to ask. Winter had said that he wasn't human. If he proved that, perhaps she would be able to start believing that she was becoming a werewolf.

His gaze slid across to meet hers. Her eyes widened when the colour of his irises gradually changed from deep blue to a rich purple. He straightened, turned his head to face her, and slowly smiled. His lips parted to reveal sharp pointed teeth. When he grinned fully, she realised that they were his canines. Fangs.

Her heart thumped erratically against her chest. Fear pounded down on her. Her instincts told her to run but she kept still instead, standing her ground in the only way she could. This man had saved her. He had offered to protect her when the wolves returned, regardless of how outnumbered he would be. He wasn't going to harm her.

She swallowed when his gaze raked over her, slow and assessing, somewhere between an animal eyeing its prey and an amorous man eyeing a potential bedmate.

His eyelids dropped, hiding his stunning purple irises, and he inhaled, slow and deep, as though savouring the smell of something.

"You still smell of blood... the temptation..."

Her, apparently. He liked the smell of her blood. Blood, fangs, pale skin, never aging. She should have spotted it before. A vampire. That meant that she was definitely becoming a werewolf. Or was she still trapped in that dream?

His eyes opened and he stared straight into hers. His gaze slid down to her neck and then moved across, narrowing with contempt. Was it her gold cross that made him look that way? In the movies, vampires hated crosses. Perhaps it was true.

She removed her hand from her arm and looked down at her palm. Crimson stained it. She held her hand out for him to see and trembled when he took hold of it, his skin cool against hers and his touch gentle. With wide eyes, she watched him, unable to move as he leaned towards her. He closed his eyes, dipped his head, and licked the blood from her palm.

Her heart rocketed when he drew her hand closer to him, forcing her to lean forwards, and then opened the slit in the arm of her dress with his other hand. His tongue swept across the cut and then his mouth closed around it. He gave a shallow suck, as though removing poison from a snakebite, but she didn't feel the sting of the wound as it reopened. The pleasure from such a sensual caress drove it to the back of her mind along with the dull ache in her leg. He licked the wound again, sending desire spiralling through her.

When he pulled back and released her hand, she felt bereft and cold. She looked at him and his eyes opened, meeting hers. They were blue again.

He blinked slowly.

"Is your lord a vampire too?" If he were, it would explain the story about him being centuries old.

Winter spat onto the floor.

Nika looked at the dark red wet mark on the dusty wood.

Her blood.

"We all are," he said in a distant voice and wiped his lips.

Nika frowned, trying to ignore the fact that he hadn't swallowed her blood. For some reason, it offended her.

"The village tales are true then. Fell creatures roam our land and they have the form of man," she said in a false light tone and then frowned again at the dark patch of blood on the floor by Winter's booted feet.

"How is your leg?" he said with a glance at it.

"Fine," she snapped, unable to help herself. He had spat out her blood not seconds after saying he wanted it. "I thought you were tempted by my blood?"

His eyebrows knitted together and he stared pensively at the floor. "I am, but it tastes... it is tainted. The werewolf's saliva is changing you and the process is not yet finished. When it is—"

"I'll be like them."

Winter nodded and kept his face bent towards the floor. "I came as fast as I could."

Nika studied his face, surprised by his words and wanting to see if there was truth behind them. He had? There was such pain in his eyes, and regret. He looked vulnerable as he sat with his hands in his lap, his head bent and his profile to her. Something about the air of hurt around him made her want to reach out and cover his hand with hers, to reassure him that what had happened wasn't his fault. His shoulders heaved in a sigh.

"They killed your horse," she whispered, feeling ridiculous and cruel for mentioning it when his eyes closed in visible pain.

When they reopened, he was looking at her. He straightened and turned to face her, their eyes meeting. Tears filled hers as she thought about everything that had happened. Her life was over. She was becoming a werewolf and a vampire had rescued her. It was all too much and none of it made sense even though she knew that it was true.

She kept waiting to wake up from the nightmare. She kept waiting for Winter to tell her that it was a joke and that none of it was real. He was only joking. He wasn't a vampire. She wasn't turning into some kind of hellhound. Her stomach roiled and flipped, burning with acid and her tumultuous feelings. A longing to bury her head in her hands and cry until she was sick filled her but she denied it. She didn't want to be weak. Not in front of Winter. She wanted to smile even though she was falling apart inside. The way he looked pained her, brought out her fear and shattered what little strength she had managed to retain. She wished she could smile for him, could alleviate all that sorrow in his beautiful blue eyes, but she wasn't strong enough. A tear tracked down her cheek, another quickly following it. She let them come, let them quietly slip one after another, not sobbing, just surrendering to her feelings and the weakness that filled every inch of her, right down to her heart and soul.

Winter gave her another pained look and brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheek.

Her lips parted and a tear rolled down her cheek to her jaw.

Instinct made her lean into his touch and draw comfort from it.

He broke the silence with words that made her heart ache.

"I am only sorry I could not save either of you."

Chapter 4

Winter stared out of the window, half-aware of the falling night and the call it sent to his heart, and half-aware of the young woman lying on the bed behind him. He had covered her again when she had settled down and drifted away into a quiet thoughtfulness. She hadn't protested when he had placed her coat and his cloak back over her or said a word since he had confessed his bitter disappointment at not being able to protect either her or his horse. He had hoped that none of the wolves had bitten her but her admission that the largest wolf had sunk his teeth into her had shattered it. She was lost to him, destined to follow a new master, one that could return at any moment to claim her.

His eyes scanned the darkening forest.

Would he let the man take her? Every inch of him revolted against the idea of letting another touch her, especially one as lowly as a werewolf. He reminded himself that she was a werewolf too now. The man that had bitten her had snatched her from him, taken her out of his reach irrevocably. It would be best for him to part ways with her as soon as possible and never think of her again. What had once been a sweet dream was now a tortured nightmare. She would never be his. The law forbade it.

Nika stirred behind him, soft breathy moans speaking of pain. Winter could sense her fear like a knife in his own heart. Her signature spoke clearly of suffering. A darker instinct told him to kill her, to drain the piteous creature of its life and leave the body here to rot. That thought twisted inside him like a poisonous snake, hissing words

of violence and release, of taking her life and then taking vengeance on those that had shattered his elusive dream of turning her. He closed his eyes against them and the vision of bloodshed they evoked.

The night called to him. It whispered words that floated in on the chill breeze creeping through the broken window. They soothed his black heart and drew him back from the brink. He was partly to blame here. If he had reached her sooner, he could have protected her and she would have been his. If he had turned her all those months ago, none of this could have happened. She would have been his child, his lover, safe in his arms and free of such a terrifying future. If only he had been braver and had found the courage to ask his lord for permission. Hyperion would have said yes. His lord wouldn't have seen his need to have this woman as any sign of ingratitude or disloyalty towards his bloodline.

It was too late now though.

What little chance he'd had with her was gone, slipped through his fingers like the sands of time. He couldn't change what had happened. He would have to live with his mistake. As would Nika.

When she had realised what she was becoming, he had seen in her eyes that it petrified her. She didn't want to become a werewolf. He didn't want that for her either. He wanted her as a vampire.

Although there was nothing he could do to change what had happened, there was something he could do for her. He could protect her. The werewolf that had bitten her would be coming to claim her. He owed it to her to get her away from the area and free her as much as he could. Whatever it took, he would do it. He would kill the

man and slay his entire pack in order to gain her freedom.

Winter opened his eyes and stared out into the night. He breathed deep, drawing air into his seldom-used lungs in an effort to calm down. It had been centuries since he had felt the need to breathe. Something about Nika made him breathless and desperate for air.

The cool night air froze his lungs and sent waves of tranquillity washing through him.

“Winter?” Nika’s voice was a bare whisper. Fear laced it. Was she frightened of disturbing him?

“Yes?” He kept his eyes fixed on the darkness outside the shack, senses focussed on the woods in case anyone dared approach them. He wasn’t sure whether the werewolves would return so soon or whether they would wait for her transformation to be complete before attempting to claim her.

If they claimed her at all.

Instinct told him they would.

When the wolves had attacked her, Nika would have been close to the village. This didn’t strike him as a random attack. There would have been easier targets in the woods around the village and that area was outside the Validus land. They had dared to attack someone within his bloodline’s territory, knowing full well that there would be a price to pay for such an act. They had specifically wanted her and they hadn’t cared about the consequences. For some reason, she was important enough for them to risk everything.

"I have to get back to the village."

He frowned and turned his head to the side so he could see her out of the corner of his eye. The shack was dark, making her nothing but a shadowy shape on the bed. He slid into his vampire guise and everything brightened until he could see her clearly.

"That is not possible," he said in a low voice in case someone was listening to them. He couldn't sense anyone within the vicinity, but werewolves could hear over great distances, much like his species.

"My father will be worried." Her voice cracked and he sensed the tense emotions behind it. Her father wasn't the only one worried. She was too. "What if he tries to find me and they attack him too?"

"That is not likely." Winter turned fully to face her.

She frowned in the darkness. "Why not? They attacked me and they killed your horse. They're hungry and it's still like winter out there. Surely, they'll eat again if they see the opportunity. My father could be that opportunity if he's out there trying to find me!"

Winter sighed and leaned back against the wall behind him. How could he break this to her without shattering her already fragile mind and hold on reality?

"They will not attack your father," he said in a calm and measured tone, weighing each word carefully. "They did not kill my horse for food... and they were not out to kill you."

Nika shifted on the bed, leaning forwards, her eyes searching for him in the darkness. Clearly, her

transformation was yet to affect her senses. He had never witnessed a human's change into a werewolf before. How long would it take her to become one? It could be days. They couldn't stay here that long. They would have to move soon. It was too risky to remain where the werewolves could easily find them and he needed to get back to the mansion.

"What do you mean?" she said in a quiet voice, distant and trembling.

"I believe they may have specifically targeted you. The attack does not seem random. There has not been a new werewolf in these parts for over a decade."

Her shoulders slumped. "They wanted me? Why?"

"I do not know." Winter moved across the room to her and sat down at the end of the bed, keeping his distance. Staring at the window, he tried to think of a way to explain his feelings on the matter and his suspicion that they had chosen her for turning. There had to be a way of telling her without panicking her or making things worse.

He reminded himself that things were only going to get worse. Once he had taken her away from the area, he would have to part ways with her. No matter how harsh it seemed, it was best for them both. He had to sever ties with her before his resolve failed and he was tempted to give in to the feelings burning deep within. She would find someone else to teach her how to be a werewolf. He couldn't.

A voice at the back of his mind called him a bastard for planning to leave her all alone in this new world that she had entered.

A mirthless smile touched his lips. Whether it made him a bastard or not, it was his only choice. He couldn't do anything for her now. Being with her would only tempt him into surrendering to his lingering feelings for her, and that way only led to more pain for them both. The laws were against them and the punishment severe. Remaining with Nika would only expose her to more danger, and he didn't want that for her. He didn't want her to fall into the hands of his lord or the Law Keepers, and if she remained with him, it would happen. They would both die.

"How is your leg?" He nodded towards it. She looked down, her golden hair falling across her face and brushing her soft pale cheek. Her eyes were dark in the low light when she looked up at him through the strands of her hair.

"I don't think it's broken anymore," she whispered and uncovered it.

His gaze followed her fingers as they skimmed up the length of the brace he had fixed around her shin. The image of her doing that to her bare leg flashed into his mind and he turned away and stood swiftly, shutting out the vision and becoming emotionless again.

In control.

He rounded the bed and carefully removed the layers of the brace to reveal her leg. She sucked in a breath when he touched it and he snatched his hand back, his eyes meeting hers in apology.

"Your hands are cold," she said with an apologetic smile of her own. "It didn't hurt. Honest."

With a frown, he rubbed his hands against his thighs to warm his palms and then inspected her leg. She was right. The bone had healed, but the skin around the break was still red raw and swollen. It would be another day before it fully healed.

"Your other wounds?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Healed."

Silence, thick and heavy.

Winter frowned down at her leg, cold stealing through him. This wasn't good. Perhaps it wasn't that her senses hadn't altered yet but rather that she didn't know how to use them, or hadn't noticed that they had changed. Her ability to heal had certainly altered, and he suspected that her senses had too.

"What does it mean?" she said and touched her leg.

"Your transformation is progressing faster than I expected," he whispered and didn't give her a chance to ask the question he could sense coming. "The one who bit you may have had strong blood and lineage."

He glanced at the window and extended his senses outwards into the surrounding forest. If he was right about the reason behind her fast transformation then the alpha male of the pack that had attacked her was old. It would take at least until tomorrow evening for Nika's leg to heal fully. They might not have another day before the werewolves returned for her.

Colliding thoughts filled his mind, his heart torn between keeping her away from the werewolf who had turned her and handing her over to him. He snarled at the thought

of the man having what should have been his. It was enough that this man had taken her from him. He wouldn't let him claim her for his own. He didn't care that the man had turned her. The man still had no right to touch her and he never would.

Winter had to get her away, make her go somewhere that she would be safe. The city. He stared into the night through the broken window. No, she wouldn't listen to him. Even if he took her to the city, she would still come back. There had to be a way to make her leave this area, for her sake and his. He smiled when it came to him.

"Do you think you can walk?" he said.

She stared up at him with raised eyebrows. "Perhaps. Why?"

"We must leave this place."

"But you said we couldn't go back to the village."

He picked up his cloak and reattached the leather straps before placing it around his shoulders and fastening it. Nika moved to the edge of the bed and grimaced when she slowly bent her legs. They were probably stiff from lying down for over a day.

"We must. We cannot wait any longer." Winter pulled his gloves on and then picked up his helmet. It was dry inside now but smelt of her blood and the strange scent of snow. He tucked it under his arm and extended his hand to her, offering to help her stand. She would need support if she was going to make it to the village. The bone in her leg had healed, but he had no doubt it was going to hurt her to walk on it for a few more days yet.

"Why not?" she said, ignoring his hand.

He took hold of her arm and pulled her onto her feet, his patience snapping. The quicker they reached the village, the faster he could be back at the mansion, away from her.

"The men who attacked you will be coming back for you. They will know from my clothing and my horse's livery that I am a Validus. If they have sense, they will attack during the day when I will be unable to defend you because of the sun."

Her green eyes widened. "Vampires really can't go out in the sun?"

He shook his head. He had forgotten that the only things she knew about his species had come from the speculation in films and books, some of which was wrong.

"The village is a long walk from here. Are you certain you are able to make it that far?"

Nika placed her hand over his where it held her arm and nodded. "I don't have much choice. I don't want those men to take me from... the village and my family."

Winter didn't like that pause. For a brief moment, her look had softened, her lips tilting into the barest hint of a smile as she had looked at him. That look hadn't spoken of a desire to return to her family. It had screamed of a desire to remain with him. He removed his hand from her arm and crossed the room, needing the space. The sooner they were at the village, the better. If she showed signs of slowing, he would carry her on his back. He needed to get her to safety and then get back to the

mansion. His gaze roamed back to her, studying her as she busied herself with her long coat, slowly fastening each button. His heart ached to look at her and know that she could never be his.

Vengeance would be though. Her father would be able to convince her to flee to the city and not return. When he knew that she was safely on her way to the city, he would return to the mansion and inform his lord of the werewolf attack within their territory. He would seek permission to return to the woods and kill every single werewolf in the alpha's pack.

If he couldn't have Nika, then no one would.

He picked up his sword from the corner of the room and fastened the belt around his waist. His hand rested on the hilt as he looked at Nika. Her clothing was in tatters, shredded by the teeth and claws of the werewolves. Her eyes still held fear—fear of what had happened, fear of what she would become.

His eyes narrowed and his fingers closed around his sword.

They would pay for what they had done.

Chapter 5

Nika bit back the pain and hobbled onwards, willing herself to make it to the village. Winter kept pace beside her. Occasionally, she felt his eyes on her, intent and focussed. Some instinct made her defences go up and told her to flee. Would it always be that way now? Would she never be able to spend time around Winter without feeling as though he was going to attack her and she had to protect herself? Were vampires and werewolves enemies?

Her leg ached and she was tempted to stop and rub it, but the last time she had done that, Winter had told her to keep moving. She glanced around at the darkness, struggling to make out the trees and the way to the village. Winter didn't seem to be having any problem. Could he see in the dark? His confident step and the fact he hadn't walked into anything yet said he could. She had bumped into several trees so far and more branches than she could count had attacked her. She could just about see a dark shape where Winter walked a few feet from her. When she had fully changed, would she be able to see in the dark too?

Another branch smacked her square in the face.

Nika flinched and hobbled towards Winter. He started to turn to face her.

"Keep moving. I'll follow you," she said and he paused a moment before continuing to walk.

Being behind him made her feel vulnerable but it stopped her from walking into things. She kept close, so

she could almost make out more than just his form in the cloudy night.

The image of him sitting on the bed near her flashed across her eyes. His handsome young face belied what he truly was. The moment he had changed, irises turning iridescent purple and canines sharpening, she had realised that her life would never be the same. In fact, so much in her life suddenly felt like a lie but made more sense at the same time. Winter had never changed in all the years that she had seen him. All those years when she had been growing up, he had been the same man he was now. How old was he? Was everything she knew about vampires true or was it all a lie?

Were there others like him out there in the world besides those at the mansion?

Others like her besides the pack that had attacked her?

The questions crowded her mind and made it ache. It throbbed as hard as her leg.

She took a deep breath to steel herself against the pain and then frowned when she realised something.

"I can smell things," Nika whispered, afraid to raise her voice in case Winter berated her for speaking and giving away their location. He had done that earlier too.

Something told her that he was in a hurry, and that it wasn't just the threat of the werewolves attacking that made him rush her.

Instead of a reprimand, he looked over his shoulder at her and softly said, "What things?"

A smile threatened to touch her lips. It felt as though he was encouraging her to try out the new sense that she had discovered.

She took another long deep breath and exhaled slowly. It was amazing. Every scent that had once only been an undertone was now clear and crisp.

The breeze brought delicate scents of the pines and the snow, a warm smell that she liked. She smiled when she smelled something else—the fragrant scent of a wood fire that must have been carried all the way from the village.

“I can smell the trees and the snow, and the village.”

It was incredible. She took another breath, unable to satisfy her desire to explore this exciting change. The night was full of fascinating scents.

“Your senses are altering and will become extremely sensitive,” Winter whispered, his tone flat and matter of fact. “All of them would have changed when your transformation is complete.”

That word, transformation, sent a chill to her heart. For a blissful moment, she had forgotten that her change into a werewolf was the reason her sense of smell had become stronger. A werewolf. The thought of that made her tremble and fear reclaimed her. She shook her head against the memory of the wolves that had attacked her—larger than a normal wolf, savage in their appearance and holding death in their eyes. She didn't want to become that. Her throat closed. Her breathing shortened as panic set in. Her hand pressed into her chest and she gasped at air, unable to control her fear.

The world felt suddenly distant.

“What is wrong?” Winter’s voice reached her ears, holding a note of concern this time. He moved back to her and she closed her eyes when his hand rested against her shoulder, holding it.

Her panic subsided when she looked up at him. A break in the clouds lightened the world and made it possible for her to see his face. She relaxed as her eyes met his and savoured the calming feel of his touch. She didn’t know what to say to him. Everything was overwhelming. Had he gone through a transformation like this? Did he know what she felt like inside—torn in two, frightened of herself and the future, wishing she would wake up?

His hand left her shoulder and he turned away. The sound of his footsteps compressing the snow amongst the sparse trees was like cotton wool being torn. She focussed on each step. Each one took him a little further away from her.

“Nothing,” Nika said, forcing the word out, and continued walking, resolved now to face her future because there was nothing she could do to change it.

Her gaze fixed on Winter’s back and a new chill filled her heart.

When had he decided to leave her?

She stumbled on something and collapsed to her knees in the snow.

Winter was by her side in an instant, kneeling on the frozen ground beside her. His left hand was against her back, his other holding her arm.

"Are you all right?"

Her eyes met his in the darkness and she stared into them, more confused than ever by this sudden display of concern. His soft expression gradually melted away, leaving the emotionless look she had seen too many times on his face. She didn't dare move the whole time his demeanour was changing back, hiding the beautiful anxiety that had lit her heart with warmth and stealing away the man that made her feel safe, leaving her feeling more alone than she had ever done.

When he leaned back to rest on his heels, she removed his hand from her arm.

"I'm fine," she said and his other hand left her. A frown marred his black eyebrows. Her gaze fell to the floor, avoiding his. He could scrutinise her all he wanted. She wasn't going to let on that she had figured him out.

The fear of the wolves attacking during the day wasn't the only reason he was taking her back to the village.

After tonight, she would never see him again.

"Here," he said and stood, offering his gloved hand to her. "Let me help."

Nika frowned at his hand and struggled to her feet without his assistance. If he was going to leave her as she suspected, she had to fend for herself and learn to deal with what had happened to her. It was best that she stopped relying on him. She had never needed a man to look after her before and she didn't need one now.

His hand curled into a fist and he drew it back to him, holding it close to his chest. His eyes bore into her, making her uncomfortable. When she straightened up and put weight on her leg, it ached and throbbed, searing her with pain. She gritted her teeth against it, reached out to the nearest tree, and pressed her hand into the wide trunk for support.

“Rest a while,” Winter said, as though she needed his permission.

Now that she knew why he was rushing her back to the village, she didn't really feel like killing herself with pain to move faster than she could manage. From here on, she was going to take things at her own pace. She frowned and pouted when she leaned her back against the tree.

“What else can you sense?” Winter asked from the darkness.

A part of her wished he would come closer so she could see him again. She didn't like not being able to see where he was. It made her feel alone and vulnerable even though she could feel him, sense his presence in some strange new way. She cursed herself for relying on him to make her feel safe.

The clouds parted again and the world brightened to varying shades of dark blue and purples. Her eyes sought Winter. He stepped out of the shadows and came to stand a few feet in front of her. He held his helmet under one arm. His other hand rested on the hilt of his sword. The breeze tousled his hair but his long black cloak didn't move. There was an almost eerie quality to the way it hung motionless, unaffected by even the stronger gusts.

His expression had softened again to reveal feelings she longed to understand and his eyes spoke of conflict that she felt echoed inside her. Was he confused too? What did he have to be confused about?

Closing her eyes, she concentrated and inhaled slowly through her nose.

"I can smell the wood fires in the village. It reminds me of home," she said with a smile, thinking about how nice it would be to warm up in front of the fire and rid herself of this permanent chill.

"What can you hear?" Winter's voice was quiet and gentle, comforting. It chased away her fear of trying and the sense that she would be stupid to think that she could hear things she couldn't before. If Winter believed that the change had heightened her hearing, then it had.

Nika listened to the sounds of the night. When she focussed, everything became louder, until she could hear the rustling of small animals beneath the snow and the swaying of distant trees.

Her eyes opened and she looked at Winter, her anger with him forgotten as she tried out her new senses.

"Well?" he said with a questioning look.

She closed her eyes again and tried to find something in the night that would be exciting to report.

Her heart leapt into her throat.

Her head snapped up and she stared wide-eyed at Winter.

Icy fingers of fear penetrated her soul.

“Screams.”

He turned instantly and looked past her. His eyes were as wide as hers were.

He closed his fingers around the hilt of his sword. “The village.”

Nika rounded the tree and moved as fast as she could, hobbling towards home. She made it a few pain-filled steps before Winter grabbed her. She struggled against him, convinced that he would try to stop her from going to the village. Her fight left her when he moved in front of her, pulled her arms around his neck and hooked his hands under her knees. He lifted her, giving her a piggyback.

The protest that had been rising to her lips fled when he began moving through the trees at a dizzying pace, each long stride carrying them a distance beyond humanly possible. He held her tight, but not as tight as she held him. Her arms locked around his neck and she pressed into him, heart racing with the fear that he was going to drop her. Trees whizzed past and her eyes grew wider by the second, reflecting her surprise and awe at how fast he could move. When she had finished her transformation, would she be able to move like this? Was this trait shared by both species, or did only vampires have this ability?

A red glow appeared on the horizon through the trees and her panic returned, obliterating her curiosity about Winter.

Fire.

Had the fire that she had smelt actually been the scent of her village burning to the ground? Her hearing filled with the sound of screams. She leaned forwards into Winter, desperate for him to move faster. Her father. She had to see her father. He had to be alive. If he were gone, she would be all alone in the world when Winter left her.

They hit the track that led to the village and Winter sprinted down the gentle slope towards it. Thick black smoke choked her lungs and made her cough. Winter seemed unaffected. She frowned when she realised that he wasn't breathing. She really hoped that wouldn't happen to her. The thought of not breathing was frightening.

Dark shadows danced among the flames in the distance. People were alive. Relief filled her but it was short lived when another scream sliced the dense air, cutting into her heart.

"Father," she whispered and looked at Winter. "Please, hurry."

"I am moving as fast as I can," he muttered and held her legs tighter as his eyes narrowed, his focus on the village.

She knew that she was asking too much of him but she had to go faster. She had to see her father, needed to know that he was alive and safe. They entered the village and Winter slowed down.

"Which way?" he said with a frown.

Nika squinted and blinked as the smoke made her eyes water. Every building that bordered the main square was

on fire. The flames had already eaten through the several of the smaller houses near the entrance to the village, and as she stared, the tiled roof of the bakery collapsed, sending sparks shooting upwards in the darkness. The windows exploded, showering the square with glass. Everywhere was burning. Even the wooden roof and pulley system of the well in the centre of the cobbled square was on fire. The entire village had gone up in flames.

Nika looked around, trying to find a sign of life amongst the chaos, someone who might be able to call for help. The village was remote though, isolated in the woods. The chance of any of the emergency services making it here in time were so slim they probably wouldn't even bother leaving their bases.

Her heart tightened with fear and sorrow as she watched her old life burn. The village was everything she had known, a precious place in her heart. It was always filled with the same families, all of which could trace their ancestors back through the generations that had lived in the village. Her own family had lived here for over four centuries. It was a small village of people who worked the land, and of those who created things from the crops they produced—butchers, bakers and other basic supplies. Why would someone do this to her village? There was no reason for this to have happened. The weather was wet. It couldn't have been an accident. Even the old wooden church was on fire and that stood apart from the other buildings.

What had happened?

She looked at Winter and found he was staring at the burning buildings, his eyes reflecting the bright flames. His face was a mask of shock and he was breathing fast

gasping breaths. She could feel him trembling beneath her. Something was wrong. She pushed his shoulders, trying to rouse him, but nothing happened. He continued to stare at the village, his eyes growing wider by the second and his breathing faster. She could sense something deep inside her. Panic. The fact that he was frightened only increased her fear.

Her arms tightened around him and he jerked his head towards her. Her eyes met his and the weight of confusion and surprise in them said that whatever he had been thinking, experiencing, he hadn't been seeing the village. He had been miles away. His body stopped trembling and the feelings in his eyes cleared, leaving only his usual determined look behind.

What had happened to him in those short moments? What had he been seeing that had shaken him so much? It wasn't the sight of her village burning that had upset him. It was something else and she wanted to know. She wanted to know what pain he held in his past that could leave him so rattled and shaken.

Winter walked on a few steps and then stopped. He looked down.

"Be on your guard. This was no accident."

Eight words that stole her voice and made her forget her curiosity about Winter's reaction to the fire. She pulled herself up and looked over his shoulder at the ground. Lying at his feet was a woman her age. The baker's daughter. They had grown up together. Nika swallowed. She was dead, but the fire hadn't taken her life. Across her chest were three long grooves, deep enough to expose bone. Her torso was soaked in blood. Someone had killed her.

“Which way is your home?”

Winter's voice roused her and she blindly looked at him, stunned into numbness. Her gaze shifted to the square they were standing in. She had been so focussed on the buildings that she hadn't noticed it before. There were dead bodies everywhere. They were drenched with blood, their clothes torn and their faces contorted in horror and pain. She baulked when the scent of blood filled her senses and hid her face against Winter's back. If she didn't see it, perhaps it wouldn't be real.

Everyone was dead.

Another scream made her heart leap into her throat.

Not everyone.

She pointed towards her home and Winter ran, dodging the flames and the bodies. Her house came into view as they passed into the area of the village behind the square. Her breath left her.

The small single storey wooden house was untouched.

It stood perfect amongst the ruin.

Winter tensed. Nika followed suit when she saw what he had. Shadowy shapes disappeared into the darkness beyond the flames. Had they seen them? She prayed that they hadn't. Whoever had done this had been strong and numerous. Winter couldn't fight the people responsible for this butchery alone.

Who would do such a thing? Why had they attacked her village?

Her gaze roamed back to her house. Something moved on the small front garden. She grasped Winter's shoulders when she realised that it was her father. Pushing away from Winter, she forced him to drop her and ran as fast as she could over to her house. The small rickety wooden gate gave as she pushed it and clattered onto the path. She stumbled over it, intent on getting to her father.

"Father!" Nika reached out to him, tears blinding her. Her leg gave and she hit the floor hard. Undeterred, she crawled over the ash-covered snow to him where he lay on the ground. She swallowed her desire to be sick when she saw the blood covering his face and the long gashes in his clothes, and grabbed him, pulling him into her arms and cradling his upper body. "Father?"

Her father's age-worn face was still and peaceful, his body limp in her arms. Short breaths escaped his parted lips, each one a little further apart, stealing her hope in pieces.

"Father?" she whispered and touched his face. It was cold. Tears rolled off her cheeks and dotted his face, cutting through the blood and ash.

Winter stopped beside her. She looked up at him, her eyebrows furrowed as she longed for him to say something to make this all better. Maybe if Winter told her that her father wouldn't die, then he wouldn't.

"Who did this?" she said with a glance around the village. Everything she had known was gone. All her memories erased in one violent malicious act. Why?

"The werewolves," Winter said without a trace of emotion. Her gaze came back to him.

“If the werewolves did this then maybe my father will—”

A shake of Winter's head stole her voice.

He knelt beside her and touched her cheek. Her eyelids dropped and she leaned into his palm, seeking comfort and an end to the pain tearing her apart inside. An end to this terrible nightmare.

“Why won't they?” she whispered, the thought of losing everything making her numb. If her father became like her then she wouldn't be alone. It would be less painful when Winter left.

Nika shifted against his palm and looked up at him. There was anguish in his dark eyes. For her? Because of her suffering? She could easily fool herself into believing that.

“They did not bite them.”

Nika looked down at her father and the claw marks scoring his flesh. Winter was right. There were no bite marks. The shapes she had seen hadn't been those of wolves. They had been men. Why had they done this? Wasn't it enough that they had taken her life? She slumped, so tired and weary. She wanted to give up, to let the flames consume her as they had consumed her world. She didn't have the strength to go on, couldn't imagine what other horrors awaited her.

Her heart leapt when her father's eyelids rose with effort to reveal green eyes that matched her own. His bloodied lips opened and closed soundlessly several times, showing his crimson stained teeth, and he grabbed her coat and weakly pulled her towards him.

"What's wrong?" she whispered, holding him gently, desperate to hear what he was trying to say.

His gaze shifted to Winter and then back again. He said something that she couldn't make out and she leaned in closer, straining to hear. His fingers tightened around her coat collar and he stiffened as a shadow of pain crossed his face, his eyes screwing shut.

"Father!" Nika rocked him a little when his eyes didn't open again.

With what looked like considerable effort, her father opened his eyes and gazed up at her, his hand still gripping her fiercely.

"Willem... the pact..." he said in a broken whisper. Nika brought her ear right down to his mouth so she could hear him. "Your hand... to protect the village. Willem... pact broken... because... him."

His gaze slid to Winter.

She didn't understand. A pact and someone called Willem. Broken because of Winter?

"Winter?" she said and looked up at him. He shrugged, looking as confused as she felt. She turned back to her father. "What pact? Why Winter?"

The thought that her father had died because of Winter made her heart sting and anger flood her. If Winter had been responsible for the attack on her village, she didn't know what she was going to do. When she thought about her friends that had died tonight, she wanted to fight him, wanted to make him pay and take revenge for their lost lives. For her father's lost life.

Her father shook his head an inch to the right and back again. He coughed and a small red line of blood crept from the corner of his mouth. Nika carefully wiped it away, smiling down at him through her tears. She stroked his cheek to comfort him.

"Not Winter?" she said, a strange sense of relief filling her.

Winter knelt on the other side of her father.

"But why attack the village?" Nika fought hard to control the colliding emotions inside her—anger, sorrow, rage, fear, confusion. They all fought for control within her. With the smell of burning flesh in her nostrils and the sight of her father slipping away, she knew it wouldn't be long before anger won and rage was victorious.

She frowned when her father's hand moved from her coat collar to her cheek. It was so cold. She placed her free hand over it and held it against her face, hoping he could feel her and she could warm him. She tried to tell herself that he would be all right but she knew that she was losing him. Tears streaked her cheeks, hot lines that froze in the cold air, and blurred her vision.

"You," he whispered.

Nika blinked, not understanding. Her? It couldn't be her. She couldn't be responsible for all this death. She hadn't done anything wrong, hadn't provoked their attack on her last night and this one on her village tonight. The thought turned her blood to ice. She trembled.

"Me?" she whispered as quiet as he had, the chill of being to blame for all this death stealing her voice. It couldn't be true. She shook head slowly, unable to

believe it. She hadn't provoked the werewolves. She hadn't. They had attacked her, made her like them. It didn't make sense. Why was she to blame for all this death and suffering?

"The pact." He coughed again and she held him a little tighter until the fit had passed. His breathing was rough and laboured, each wheeze crushing her chest with fear. "Your hand... to protect village. Pact broken... vampire... kept you... from him."

She didn't understand. Her eyes immediately sought Winter's and she silently pleaded him to have an answer, to make the confusion go away and help her understand what had happened at the village. The last of her strength was rapidly leaving her. She didn't want this. She didn't want her father to die. She didn't want to be alone in this terrifying world.

Winter frowned heavily and looked down at her father. He removed the glove from his left hand and pressed his fingers against her father's neck. Something dawned on Nika when she saw the colour of Winter's eyes and the way they reflected like mirrors as the firelight shone on them.

"Bite him!" She dropped her father's hand and grabbed Winter's, clutching it tight. Her fingers clawed at it, pulled. Winter looked at her, expression emotionless, not budging an inch as she yanked on his hand. "Please. Bite him. If you change him, he doesn't have to die. We can find out what happened here. We can save him. Please? Don't let him die. Don't let my father die!"

His purple eyes bore into hers and she squeezed his hand so tight that she was afraid that she would hurt him. Desperation consumed her, fierce and powerful,

controlling her actions. She pulled on Winter's hand with all her might, tugging him towards her father, as though she could force him to turn him. Could he turn her father?

Winter shook his head.

"I cannot," he said with the slightest note of regret in his voice.

"You can't or you won't?" Nika snapped back at him, convinced that he was choosing to let her father die. Tears tumbled down her cheeks as she stared at Winter, contempt filling her at the thought that he was going to sit there and do nothing when he could save the man that meant the world to her. "You won't... I don't believe—"

"Nika," her father whispered and her attention was immediately with him. His eyes were dull and glassy as he looked at her. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" She released Winter's hand and took hold of her father's again. Sniffing back her tears, she managed another smile for him. "What's there to be sorry for? You're not going anywhere. I won't let you."

He smiled. "I'm sorry... I should've told... you about pact. Wanted to. Willem forced... everyone silent." He drew a long slow breath that spoke of pain and closed his eyes. A tear slid down his temple from the corner of his eye. "Made me call you back... from city... so he could... have you. Sorry... I gave you... promised you... to him."

Nika stared wide-eyed in horror as it all sunk in and her father slumped in her arms, limp and cold. She

swallowed reflexively, not seeing her father's pale face, but seeing all the times that she had passed in the village. They had always treated her differently since the wolf attack when she was a child. Everyone had been so kind to her since then. They had looked after her, each family treating her as though she was one of their children. Was this the reason why?

Her father had promised her to a werewolf in order to protect the village?

A cold chill settled in her bones and her skin turned to gooseflesh. She closed her eyes against the knowledge of what her father had done and the price the village had paid. Her father's pact with this Willem had only delayed their deaths. Her father's betrayal had left her feeling more alone than ever.

Grabbing his shoulders, Nika shook him, angry and confused by everything. "I don't understand. Why?"

His still face mocked her.

She shook him hard, tears blurring her vision and stealing her breath. "Why? Why! How could you do that to me? Didn't you love me? You gave me away like an animal. You never told me. Why? Tell me why!"

Sobs wracked her. She bent over her father's body, still shaking him, trembling so badly and so weak that it was hard to hold him.

"Why?" She shook him again and then stopped when Winter touched her shoulder.

His un-gloved hand claimed hers, his skin cold against her.

Her eyes met his. "Why?"

"I do not have an answer." There was regret in his eyes again, anguish that she didn't understand. She didn't understand anything anymore. He cast his gaze down, away from her, as though he didn't want to look at her. "He cannot answer you either. He is dead, Nika. It is too late for anger. We must leave."

She glared at Winter, focussing all of her anger on him.

"Why didn't you change him for me?"

"That was not the answer. He wanted to die."

She couldn't believe those words. "Why? Why would he want to die?"

Winter stood and towered over her, menacing in the warm firelight, more frightening than he had ever been in the darkness. His dark eyes shimmered whenever the light caught them, focussed intently on her.

"Nobody wants to die, Winter!"

He frowned. "Sometimes, they do. We must leave."

Sometimes they do? Nika looked hard at him, wondering if he had been one of those times. From what she had learnt of vampires from movies and books, humans had to die to become them. He had died once. Had he chosen to die and had awoken as a vampire? Was he speaking of himself or someone else?

She looked down at her father. Had he wanted to die? Why would he want to? Why would anyone?

Laying her father's body down on the snowy ground, she stared at him a moment longer, mulling over the questions in her head and growing slowly aware of how cold it was. Her knees were damp where they pressed into the dirt and her bones felt cold enough to snap in two should the slightest breeze blow.

Looking up at Winter, she tried to figure him out and understand why he believed her father had wanted to die. The strange look was back in Winter's eyes as he watched the fire, the warm light on his face. Her new senses told her that he was on edge and, in her heart, she knew that it wasn't just the wolves that had rattled him. There was something else. There was so much pain in his eyes, pain that had she had seen in the square too. Why had the fire upset him and why had he wanted to die?

She opened her mouth to speak but he beat her to it.

"It was his penance, Nika. He chose death in order to pay for what he had done in giving away his daughter to a demon."

Those words were a harsh reality check for her. Winter was right. Her father had given her away in order to protect the village. He had hidden her future from her, weaving dreams in her mind of education and a good job in the city. Why? Why had he lied to her all those times that she had sought comfort from him and the promise of a better life? He had known all along that the man, Willem, would come back for her and her life would be over.

It was over.

Not only had she become a demon, but the one person she trusted implicitly had betrayed her and soon the only other person she felt she could grow to trust was going to leave too. Soon she would be alone.

No, not alone.

Willem would come. She closed her eyes against the thought, not wanting to picture her future as a werewolf and a slave to the man who had bitten her. Opening her eyes, she looked at Winter. If only he had bitten her. She would have willingly given herself to him. If she had realised what he was before all this had happened she would have begged him to change her, to make her like him. Perhaps that was hindsight speaking, a desire to escape her new life and world. A beautiful fantasy.

"We must leave," Winter said, voice low and caressing her ears. He extended a hand to her and, for the first time in what seemed like hours, she listened to what he was saying.

We.

Not her or him, but them, together.

They had to leave.

A howl cut through the sound of the wood in the houses splintering under the intense heat of flames. Instinct made her tense and she turned to face the direction it had come from. Another joined it. The first sounded again, sending a chill down her spine. Willem.

Winter's fingers flexed, drawing her back to them. With an anxious expression, his gaze darted around their surroundings. She could sense a difference in him as

though it was a physical change. Her senses spoke of power and strength, of a man who could kill her with one blow. They told her to flee. Instead, she placed her hand into his and allowed him to help her to her feet.

Her leg hurt. Before she could form a protest, Winter had pulled her to him and turned his back. She blushed at the thought of riding his back again and then told herself not to be so ridiculous, not when she longed to be close to him. His presence made her feel safe. His strength radiated through her. Her new instincts labelled him a threat while her heart clung to the belief that, should anything happen, he would protect her as he had tried to the night that she had been bitten.

She hauled herself up onto his back and sighed as she settled against him. It wasn't quite the hug she needed, but the feel of his hands holding her legs and his body against hers was comforting nonetheless. The only thing in the world that was more comforting was the thought that he might have changed his mind. He might not leave her after all.

"Hold on," he whispered and she looped her arms around his neck, closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his back.

She didn't care where he took her. If it was away from here and he was there, she would be happy. If Winter remained with her, she could bear the weight of the attack on the village and what her father had done. She could face her uncertain future and this strange new world when he was by her side.

He started to run, leaving behind the village and the smell of fire.

Nika whispered goodbye to her old life and tightened her hold on Winter, embracing her new one.

Chapter 6

Winter slowed when he reached the perimeter of the Validus territory. He breathed deep of the clean forest air, desperate to clear his senses of the smell of burning flesh and the memory of fire. His hands still trembled slightly, a bare tremor that no one but him would notice, a sign that he still hadn't fully conquered the intense fear and pain that had seized him back at the village. The screams, the smell, the flames, it had almost been too much for him. He hadn't felt so unsettled in centuries and he knew that it was affecting his judgement. It had to be or he wouldn't have brought Nika here, to a place where she would be in more danger than ever.

Only her voice had brought him back from the nightmare of his past.

Now they both had to face the nightmare of her future. The destruction of the village and the death of her father had taken its toll on her. She had been quiet since they had fled the scene but her heart hadn't slowed. She was so close to him that he could sense her crushing fear and hurt as though it was his own. Those emotions only increased his desire to protect her. They had brought him to a dangerous decision, one that might prove to be both of their downfalls.

He walked tentatively over the invisible threshold of his bloodline's territory and felt a pull inside. Fear. In all his years, he hadn't forgotten the human emotions that had once ruled him. They had dulled during his lifetime as a vampire, but had never fully disappeared, and now they were playing havoc with him. The first night he had seen

Nika as a grown woman, his feelings had returned full force, so potent that he had wondered if he felt emotions even keener as a vampire than he had ever done as a human. He moved his hands against the underside of her thighs, absorbing her warmth through his gloves and cursing the soft feel of her body. Her breath tickled his neck, stirring the fine hairs and luring him into closing his eyes so he would feel everything more intensely.

She murmured something about her leg and him putting her down. He couldn't allow her to walk now. One set of footsteps on someone's senses was better than two.

Nika pushed against him but he held her tighter, unwilling to let her down and to lose the feel of her against him. She sniffed and he could smell the tears drying on her cheeks. On their way here, she had cried now and then, always stifling her sobs in a clear effort to hide them. It was impossible to conceal them from him. Even though she was putting on a brave face, he could see through it to her underlying fear and fatigue. Since the attack in the wood, she had been under constant assault. First the attack itself and then the revelation that she was becoming a creature of darkness, and then she had figured out that he was going to leave her. He had seen it in her eyes when she had and her demeanour towards him had changed abruptly. And then the village. He closed his eyes against the onslaught of tangled memories, a twisted vision of what had happened all those years ago and tonight. Dragging himself back to her, he realised that everything was against her. Now, she had no one in this world and that thought only made him want to stay with her. For a split second, he found the strength in his heart to turn his back on his kin and continue to love her, ignoring the danger. Only for a split second.

The trees began to thin and the mansion walls appeared out of the darkness. The sight of them brought reality back. He was a Validus. The gift that his family had given him centuries ago was one so precious he could not lightly turn his back on them for any reason, not even for love. He still owed them so much and he feared that his debt would never be repaid. The fire had been a sign. It had been a reminder to him that his lord and his bloodline came first.

Pale stone and delicate black wrought iron marked the barrier around his family's home. Three hundred metres to his left was the west gate. The main gate stood over four hundred metres to his right, around the corner that he could see one hundred metres away. Guards patrolled the grounds in pairs. He would need to time it so he avoided them all.

His gaze tracked to the mansion itself. In a way, it reminded him of the palaces in St. Petersburg, the nearest city. The elegant facade was the same as theirs but coloured in ochre and white, lined with many tall rectangular sash windows. The gardens were expansive and beautiful. Night blooming jasmine and roses adorned the intricate mazes of box hedge and the alcoves and arch-covered walkways. His lord had always ensured that the mansion maintained its regal appearance, one suitable for such as their bloodline.

Winter took a deep breath and asked himself if he was really going to do this. To take Nika into the Validus mansion was insane. It would be a miracle if they managed to make it to his apartment without being noticed, and then they would have to make it back out again. He could leave her out in the woods near one of the gates, somewhere that no one would notice her. If

he did that, he would be able to walk through the gates and explain to those on duty that werewolves had attacked him and that Midnight was dead.

Nika shifted against him, her scent filling his nostrils—blood mixed with werewolf.

There was an undeniable flaw in his plan. If he strode back into the mansion grounds claiming that werewolves had attacked him, the Watchmen would smell Nika's scent all over him. Since he was their commander, they would see any attack on him as a personal affront. There was a chance that while he was inside gathering weapons and other necessities they would search for the werewolf responsible by using the scent. They could track Nika and kill her before he could return.

Or Willem could find her.

Willem, as Nika's father had called him, would know from his uniform that he was a Validus and would return to the mansion. Winter looked around them at the woods skirting the mansion walls. What if Willem was already here waiting? Right now, the werewolf could be watching and waiting for him to part company with Nika. He couldn't risk her by leaving her out here.

But the alternative?

If he took her into the mansion grounds and someone caught them, he would have to fight his kin or let them take her from him. He growled on instinct at the thought of anyone else touching her and gritted his teeth. His fangs elongated and his claws grew, ready for a fight even when there was none. Winter closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It filled his lungs with the scent of Nika and the intoxicating smell of her rich blood. She

had fully turned. It had to be the reason behind the change in its scent. It was no longer tainted.

Now it called to him stronger than ever, a siren song that was becoming irresistible. He couldn't leave her out here to fend for herself. He couldn't take her into the mansion either. The thought of having to fight his own kin—men he knew—for the sake of a werewolf made his stomach turn and chest tighten. He was a commander, a man they all respected. He respected himself because of the esteem he received from his fellow Watchmen. Duty and honour were the banners flying in his heart. Loyalty to the Validus bloodline and his lord were his reasons for living.

But Nika was in his heart too, had carved a niche out for herself that grew with every passing minute spent in her company. He feared that soon his heart would be irrevocably hers and his resolve would weaken to the extent that he surrendered to his feelings. It was pointless though. Sense and feeling waged war inside him, his heart split in two, torn between his bloodline and Nika. It pained him to think that he would go against the lord who had saved him, a man who he owed a great debt to, but also pained him to think that he would leave Nika and never see her again.

He needed to take her somewhere that she would be safe and to do so, he needed weapons and time to think without the threat of attack. He would take Nika into the mansion and then leave with her. If anyone stood in their way, he would deal with them.

His jaw clenched. What was he thinking?

To take a werewolf into the mansion was despicable enough. To consider defending her should he meet

another Validus was beyond contemptible. If caught, he would willingly surrender her and himself to his lord and beg forgiveness for his weakness. He would ask his lord to take pity on Nika. He had no other choice. His heart demanded that he protect Nika, regardless of the pain it caused him to do so and the misery of knowing that she could never be his. He couldn't cross that line and be with her now. He feared the law, as any vampire did, but knew in his heart that the law alone wouldn't stop him from being with her. The fact that she was a werewolf hadn't stopped him from loving her. It was what the Law Keepers would do to her if they caught them. He feared the law for her sake. His desire to protect her was so strong that he couldn't be with her for that reason, couldn't live with himself if something happened to her. He had already failed to protect her once. He wouldn't fail this again.

He would help Nika, would have his vengeance and kill Willem, and would return to his family.

It was the only way to keep her safe.

His only way of protecting her was to part ways with her.

Even if it broke his heart.

He only wished he knew how to help her, and where to take her. His knowledge of werewolves was limited to tracking and killing them. He didn't know anything about how the transformation process would affect Nika. Her senses had already changed and her body's ability to heal had become similar to his. How much more she would change, he didn't know. He didn't know what would happen to her when she saw a full moon or whether it would even affect her yet. He had heard mixed tales about what happened after a werewolf had

gone through the transformation in regards to changing into their animal form. Some stories said that instinct controlled the first change. It happened without the consent of the werewolf's mind and senses. Others he had heard had said that it took werewolves a full month before their body had gone through the intricate changes that were required as preparation for transformation into their demonic guise.

"What are we waiting for?" Nika whispered in his ear, her voice soft and feminine, adding to the lure of her blood.

"Quiet. Not a word until I say, understand?"

He felt her nod.

Would Nika change soon? Would he know what to do when she did? The first time his eyes, teeth and claws had changed it had hurt right down to the marrow of his bones. She had to change form completely into a beast. He had watched werewolves change and it had looked painful. Would she be strong enough to go through that? He wished he knew how to help her. Leaving her was no longer an option and regardless of what his better judgement said, he couldn't let Willem have her, not even for a short while.

He needed to find another way to help her through her change. He would help her and then he could return to his family. His heart ached at that thought but he shut his feelings away. It had to be this way. It had to be.

With a single leap, Winter cleared the perimeter wall of the mansion and sprinted across the wide expanse of snow-covered grass, heading for the house. Nika clung to him, her body warm and tempting against his back.

He held onto her, afraid that she would fall and would hurt herself again. He couldn't risk moving slower. When they reached the relative safety of his quarters, he would allow her a little freedom while he gathered his things and tried to figure out where to take her. Years ago, he had heard a werewolf mention a secret home for werewolves, a place where they were free of vampire rule. Would the werewolves at the compound know of such a place? They could go and ask. His heart revolted against the idea. He couldn't, wouldn't take Nika anywhere near the compound. He didn't want her to see the things that could happen to her if she was caught, because he would never let them happen. He would protect her.

The moment they entered the building through the servants' entrance, Nika tensed against him and hunched up. His senses spoke of her fear. It was probably overwhelming for a newly turned werewolf to enter a place full of strong vampires. None of the residents of the mansion were under three hundred years old. All could easily kill her. What if they caught him and Nika and tried to hurt her? His eyes switched as he readied for a fight. The reaction surprised him as much as his one in the woods had. He wanted to protect her even from his kin. He couldn't. If they were caught, he would order the men to take him and Nika to Lord Hyperion and to leave her untouched. He was certain that he could convince his lord to take pity on her.

Nika shifted against his back. The sound of her heart racing was almost too much to bear. It made his teeth itch and his hunger rise. He fought the temptation to release one of her legs and touch her hands to reassure her. She would feel safer soon enough.

Winter dashed down the corridor, swift and silent, and mounted the steps to the first floor and then the second. A brief pause in the stairwell and scan of the area with his senses revealed that they weren't alone. He leaned back into the shadows and fixed his senses on the two moving signatures at the end of the hall. Both powerful. Older than him. He wouldn't stand a chance against them in a fight. He waited, halting his breathing and hoping Nika would have the good sense to remain quiet. She did. Her soft breath against his neck turned shallow and she went as stiff as a board against him. The two signatures moved away and he tried to picture where they were. When they became indistinct, Winter moved out of the shadows and sped towards his room.

Reaching his door, he pulled Nika down from his back, held her close to his chest with one hand and opened the door with the other. He bundled her inside, closing and locking the door in one swift action behind them. Darkness engulfed them and he slid into his vampire guise so he could see. She leaned into him when he set her down on her feet, his arm still around her, crushing her against his armour.

He looked down into her wide green eyes and pressed his finger against her lips, motioning for her to remain quiet. She nodded again. His senses reached out. There was no one on this floor. Everyone was out. He sniffed and frowned at the strong smell of werewolf. Lowering his head, he smelled her clothing. It wasn't just her scent. Her clothing carried the scent of those who had attacked her.

Nika gasped when he tore her coat from her followed by her dress. Her arms raced to cover her underwear, one

folding across her breasts while her other hand covered her knickers.

Winter almost mentioned that he wasn't the kind of man that would look without permission but then he remembered how close he had been back in the shack. The temptation to sneak a peek at her underwear when he had been tending to her had been so strong that he had almost given in. He bundled her clothes up into his arms and placed a hand on her shoulder, turning her around. His gaze slipped to the gentle slope of her back and her bottom. She would never know that he was looking at her. A werewolf couldn't see in the dark as well as a vampire could.

"I can feel you staring," she whispered, so quiet that he wondered at first whether he had imagined it.

Her hand found his where it lay on her shoulder.

"I don't like the dark. Can you turn the light on?"

"I will guide you to the shower and then turn it on. It is best that you clean yourself. There is a risk that others will be able to smell you." He wasn't worried about someone getting wind of her scent. The werewolves in the compound sometimes guarded the house. Their scent would provide cover for hers. The one that had him pushing her towards the shower was Willem's. It spoke of strength and age, and the werewolves at the compound had neither of those.

She stumbled and his hand snapped out to catch her arm, fingers closing around her soft warm flesh and stopping her from falling.

"I can't see in the dark." Her voice was still a whisper, as though she feared someone hearing her.

"You can speak here. Not many venture onto this floor during the night and your voice would not rouse suspicion."

She stopped and looked over her shoulder at him, as though she could see him in the dark. "My scent would though."

"Not your scent. Willem's. I can smell him on you."

A faint smile teased her lips, as though she was thinking something that amused her, and he felt as though she was looking straight through him down to his soul.

"Shower. I will find you something to wear." He turned the bathroom light on, threw her ruined clothes into the corner, and pushed her into the room before she had a chance to say what he could see coming.

It wasn't jealousy making him force her to rid herself of Willem's scent. It was common sense and a desire to protect them both. Jealousy had nothing to do with it.

The voice at the back of his mind asked why he felt like punching something whenever he smelt Willem on her then, why he wanted to fly into a blind rage and track Willem down so he could kill him with his bare hands?

Winter shut the bathroom door and closed his eyes when he heard the shower switch on and water began to bounce off something. The desire to reach out with his senses was too great to resist. He leaned against the door and focussed on Nika. He could pinpoint her where she stood in the bath under the jet of the shower, could

follow each movement she made. Contentment filled her as the hot water warmed her body but other emotions surfaced. Fear and pain, confusion and doubt. He pressed his hand against the door when he heard her sob and smelt the salt in her tears.

Dragging himself away, he turned the bedroom light on and set to the task of finding her something to wear. He only had his clothes to offer. He couldn't risk leaving his room to find some feminine clothing. When he had a pair of black trousers and a black shirt laid out on the bed for her, he went back to his cupboards and opened the set of doors beside his wardrobe. Gleaming blades greeted him like old friends, reassuring and comforting in this hour of need.

Winter took down a holster for blades and strapped it on over his chest and back armour. The straps sat snug over his shoulders, keeping the circle of leather against his back. He slid five knives into the slots on the right side and then another five into the slots on the left. It felt good to have more weaponry at his disposal. The throwing knives had a good weight and were perfect for slowing down werewolves and other creatures at a distance. With six werewolves accompanying Willem, he would need distance weapons to give himself a chance. He could use the knives to dispatch the weaker and slower werewolves, leaving the strong for hand-to-hand combat. He didn't want to waste time fighting weaklings.

He picked up a dagger and attached the sheath for it to his belt. His gaze flicked to the twin of the dagger he had chosen. As he focussed back on Nika in the shower, he found himself reaching out for it before he had even thought about giving it to her. She would need a weapon if she were to defend herself. The sheath for it would

easily attach to the belt he would have to lend her for the trousers.

The shower stopped. Winter turned on the lamp on his bedside table, turned off the main light, and stared at his room. Uncertainty filled him. He didn't know when he would be here again or what future awaited him once he had killed Willem and freed Nika. He wasn't even sure if his lord would allow him to return to the mansion. If the Law Keepers discovered that he had fled with a werewolf whom he harboured feelings for, they would sentence him to death for breaking the covenant. Even if he didn't intend to act on his feelings, he was still breaking the law. If asked, he wouldn't be able to deny that he wanted her. Her change into a werewolf hadn't altered his feelings.

He still hungered for her.

The bathroom door clicked open.

"Winter?" Nika whispered, evidently still too afraid to speak at normal volume.

"What is the matter?" he said, turning away from his room to look at her.

She took his breath away. Her honey blonde hair hung in wet ringlets that stroked her cheeks and caressed her bare shoulders. A black towel hid her soft pale body, a dazzling contrast. His gaze skimmed over her, taking in the shape of her and stopping when he reached her legs. The one she had broken still bore a red mark where the bone was healing. It marred her otherwise perfect skin, a reminder of her ordeal.

Taking the shirt with him, he walked across the room to her. She smiled when he placed the oversized black shirt around her shoulders and covered her. His gaze fell to her throat and he noticed that she had removed her cross. He glanced down to see it in her hand, spinning as it dangled from the chain.

"I'm scared," she said, her eyes reflecting all that fear, enormous and soulful, tempting him into holding her and whispering sweet words of reassurance.

He smiled, hoping it would be enough to calm her, and drew the shirt closed across her chest. "There is nothing to fear. We shall leave this place soon."

"And go where?"

Winter wished he knew. The thought of taking her to the compound made a strange uneasiness settle in his chest. He pressed his hand against it and rubbed the spot over his heart, hoping to soothe the dull ache. There had to be a way of discovering where the werewolves hid their bastion.

"We cannot remain here." He moved back across the room to the bed, sensing her following him, her footsteps almost silent on the extensive black and red Chinese rug that covered most of the floor, leaving only a thin border of dark wooden floorboards around the edges.

"Why not?" she said and sat down on the end of his double bed.

The black towel she wore melted into the black sheets. She removed the shirt from her shoulders and placed it down beside her. When she leaned back, her slender

pale hands were a stark contrast to the bedclothes. His gaze traversed the length of her arms, following the line of them up to her shoulders. His stomach turned and growled when his gaze reached the smooth, sublime column of her throat. Her hair had fallen away, revealing the slope of it, covered with dewdrops of moisture that clung in the most enticing way to her skin. An urge to chase them with his tongue filled him, commanding him to go to her and slowly lick her throat until he had caught every drop. It led onto a desire to lean into her then, to ease his teeth into her neck and draw on her warm blood, to take her completely and in ways that he had only seen in fantasies of her.

“Why can't we stay here?”

He stared at her, shocked out of his thoughts by hearing her say such a thing and seeing a desire to stay in his room in her eyes. It was fear talking. Bringing her here had scared her. Now that she was safely here, she didn't want to leave. She feared someone catching her. It was a foolish way to feel. She was safer back out there in the woods. Safer from his family and from him.

Here in his room, he couldn't help but feel safe, and it was leading to thoughts he shouldn't be entertaining. There was no future for them. The Law Keepers were inescapable. The quicker he resigned himself to the fact that soon they would part ways and would never see each other again, the better. He couldn't do this to her. He couldn't do this to himself.

Grabbing the trousers that he had laid out on the bed, he tossed them at her. She frowned when they landed across her lap.

“Get dressed.” He paced around the bed to the two tall windows on the other side of the room.

The open curtains revealed the cloudy world outside. In the distance, he could see the glow of the village where it continued to burn. He drew the curtain slightly, not wanting Nika to see it and become upset again. It had been hard enough to see her so upset at the village with her father. It had been almost impossible to resist her request to turn the old man and save his life. He laughed internally at himself. Save his life? Instinct had told him that her father had been welcoming death in that moment. Turning him would have condemned him to live on, facing an eternity of regret. That wasn't the life to give to someone, no matter how sweet and desperate the one requesting it was.

He glanced at Nika to see her carefully pulling on the trousers and slipping the cross into her pocket and then looked back out the window again to give her some privacy. The snowy grounds of the mansion stretched far in front of him. Footprints criss-crossed the open ground, always two sets side by side. The only ones that weren't regular and following the boundary of the grounds were his. They cut across the other sets at an angle. He should have considered what an obvious mark he would leave. In a family bound by rules, and who prided themselves on regularity and loyalty, his footsteps across the snow would look highly suspicious. If luck were with him, any Watchman who saw them would merely think one of the younger vampires had caused them, excited at the prospect of hunting and eager to reach the woods.

“I'm tired,” Nika whispered on a sigh and he looked at her.

She buttoned the black shirt over her chest and stared down at the rug. He could sense the fatigue she spoke of, a tiredness that ebbed and flowed across the room from her, reminding him that he had snatched little sleep the day before and that her body was still healing. They would need to find her food and perhaps somewhere they could rest, but right now she could have neither. They had to leave. It wasn't safe here.

He walked across the room and took hold of her arm. Her attempt to resist him by leaning backwards failed, as though she was strong enough to fight him, and he pulled her onto her feet. There was a definite pout about her expression.

"There is no time for rest," he said and undid her belt. He could feel her eyes boring into his face and her heartbeat accelerated. The warm subtle scent of arousal clouded the air around him. He quirked an eyebrow at her reaction to his touch and steeled himself. No matter how much she wanted it, he couldn't change his mind and surrender to her. He slid the dagger onto the belt and pushed it back through the loops before fastening it again. He wouldn't give in. "We must leave now."

Nika's heartbeat slowed when he walked away. Silence filled the room and then he sensed an abrupt change in her emotions. A strange sense of intent replaced the fear and desire. Curiosity? It was impossible for him to pinpoint exact emotions when they were subtle ones like jealousy, curiosity and confusion. The ones that provoked a strong reaction like arousal, anger, happiness, were easiest to discern from her scent, her blood and her body.

"Where are we going?"

Winter felt her step up close behind her and sensed her intent to touch his back. He turned to face her and took a step backwards, out of her reach. Her gaze lingered on his waist, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. The knives had caught her attention.

"You're dressed for war and you won't tell me where we're going. Why should I leave here?"

"Because it is not safe. Your fear is making you believe it is when in reality we are in the lion's den. We must leave. I do not know where we shall go, but everything will be fine."

Her expression softened, green eyes lighting up. His senses spoke of happiness and calm. Was it because he had told her that everything would be fine? He didn't know if it would be, but it had felt like the right thing to say. He could protect her from any who came after her, within limits. He could not fight his kin. He could not fight his lord. If either of those came after him, they were doomed. He would have to give Nika up to them.

"Why are you doing this?"

Those sparkling green eyes met his and he stared into them, searching for the courage to voice the words that he wanted to say.

Closing his eyes so he didn't have to see her reaction and torture himself with what might have been, he lowered his head and whispered, "You were not the only one who looked each time you passed by."

He didn't wait for her to speak. Turning on his heel, he went to the door and unlocked it. He took down a cloak from the hooks on the wall near the door and handed it

to Nika when she came to stand beside him. It was freezing out and they had little time to find shelter before dawn. They needed to leave the mansion though. As much as his instinct was telling him to remain here for the day and his body ached for sleep in a comfortable bed, he couldn't risk it. When the dawn came, the other commanders would return to their rooms and would smell Nika.

"Speak not a word, understand?" Winter said and she nodded.

A sweep with his senses revealed they were still alone on this floor. He opened the door, waited for Nika to pass through and then stepped out into the hall. Closing the door, he checked his surroundings again. Nothing. Nika made a small squeaking noise when he grabbed her around the waist and ran down the hall with her slung over his shoulder. He moved her into his arms when they reached the stairwell and she wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms looping around his neck. Emotions and sense warred in his head. His body ached to feel hers pressing into it, enjoyed the way her soft body felt against his side. Her breasts were touching his chest, only his armour stopping him from feeling them. His sense said to move her to his back again where he couldn't feel her, but he couldn't risk her cutting herself on the knives he carried. He had no choice but to hold her this way. If she cut herself, every Validus in the mansion would smell her within seconds.

Reaching the servants' floor, he turned right down a dark corridor and headed for the stables. Voices echoed down the hall ahead of him and he ducked into a room, holding Nika close. He quietly closed the door and listened. Footsteps were heading towards them. Slipping

into his vampire guise, he assessed the pitch-black room. It was storage. They were unlikely to come in here.

Nika's breath against his face was warm and sweet. Her hands trembled against his neck and her heartbeat spoke of fear again. He cursed himself and held her closer, one hand against her backside while the other pressed into her upper back. Her eyes were wide and searching the darkness. How much could she see? Her vision was better than a human's, but without changing into her wolf guise, she wouldn't be able to see in the way he could.

The people passed and he tracked them with his senses, waiting until they were a good distance away before leaving the safety of the room. He ran along the corridor, Nika clinging to him, and skidded to a halt the moment his feet hit the icy dirt of the stable courtyard. It pained him to be here. He'd had several horses in his lifetime, but none like Midnight.

Nika moved against him, bringing him out of his thoughts. They needed a fast horse. One leaving the grounds would be less conspicuous than two.

Winter carried Nika into the main stable block and set her down on the hay-strewn floor between the two rows of stalls. A quick glance at her revealed that she was calm. He set about finding them a horse. His senses locked on Nika as he gathered a saddle and bridle. She remained close to him, her blood speaking of fear. Strange how she had felt so safe in his room. Strange how he had felt so safe. As though a room could protect them. It would keep them safe from the werewolves, but not from his family.

Nika tensed.

Winter turned on a pinhead to face the person standing a few metres behind her and then instantly moved to defend her from the shadowy figure standing in the entrance to the stable block. His arm came out to block the man's path to her. She moved behind him.

"Ah, the woodman's daughter," a familiar warm deep voice echoed around the room.

Winter tensed too. He caught Nika's arm where she stood behind him and guided her closer. The man moved closer too. Winter stood firm. Nika clung to his arm, trembling. Or was that him?

He stared into Hyperion's eyes as his lord came to stand not two metres from him.

"You have grown into your beauty," Hyperion said to Nika, eyes flashing hungrily as he smiled.

Winter growled and Hyperion turned a frown on him briefly before looking back at Nika.

"I have not seen you since you were small and promised to the wolves."

Another growl escaped Winter's lips and he stepped forwards, intent on protecting Nika, even if it was from his lord. Everything he had thought before disappeared when faced with this threat to Nika. He would protect her from his family. He wouldn't surrender her to his lord. He wouldn't surrender her to anyone.

"And what do you do in the stables, Winter?" Hyperion turned to him, purple eyes searching his, handsome face marred by darkness. His lord wasn't amused.

"I came for a horse, nothing more, my lord." Winter bowed his head and closed his eyes, hoping that if he acted as expected, his lord's patience and understanding would return. In a fight, Winter didn't stand a chance against Hyperion. Hyperion was three times his age and ten times stronger.

"A horse, the woodman's daughter and the scent of old blood," Hyperion said. Winter stiffened. He had made Nika clean herself and change, but had forgotten that her blood stained his gloves and clothes. "A blind man could see that something is happening here, Winter. Explain yourself. You already have a horse to call your own, but you are stealing another?"

The lack of anger in those words surprised Winter and he found the courage to look up into his lord's eyes. They held no anger either. His lord was no fool. He would know that Nika was a werewolf now, but he hadn't mentioned it. Why? It was too much to hope that Hyperion was going to let them go. No matter what indiscretions his past held, Hyperion didn't tolerate his Watchmen breaking the law. At least, that was what he said. He had never needed to prove himself before now.

"My horse is dead," Winter said and braved a step towards Hyperion. Nika remained close behind him, fiercely gripping his arm and peering around it. At least she had sense enough to know that Hyperion was a threat to her. "The werewolves attacked in Validus territory. Nika is not safe."

"I am sorry, Winter. I know how you favoured the steed... but I cannot possibly let you leave here with this girl. Willem will destroy her family."

Nika stepped out from behind him, her hand on the dagger at her waist. She glared at Hyperion. Perhaps she didn't have sense after all.

"Willem. The beast that bit me and murdered my entire village?" Her words held an edge as sharp as the blade grasped in her hand.

"I thought there was an air of wet dog about the stables." Hyperion smiled at her and then turned it on Winter. His look became thoughtful. "Should we send her to the compound?"

Winter pushed Nika back behind him and growled, his claws extending.

"You should know that you are breaking the law." Hyperion's eyes darkened and Winter sensed his anger rising.

He was a fool to anger his lord, but he couldn't let them take Nika to the compound. She wasn't strong enough. It would be the end of her.

"I know as well as you do. My lord is no stranger to the laws." Winter took hold of Nika's arm again and gripped it tightly, silently commanding her to remain behind him this time.

Pain surfaced in Hyperion's eyes brief seconds before he lowered his gaze to the floor of the stables. He frowned and whispered, "Sakura."

Winter hated himself for mentioning something that hurt his lord. He had done it on instinct, an immediate reaction to the thought that he was breaking the law. If he was, then he was following his lord's well-trodden path.

"Take Demeter," Hyperion said and Winter's eyes shot wide.

"But my lord, Demeter is your horse."

"She is, and there is no faster horse to be had in these stables. Return her to me. I have business to attend to, but I expect you back before the eastern party arrives." Hyperion turned away and walked to the stable entrance. He paused, the strange half-light of the approaching dawn shadowing his features and adding to the solemn look in his eyes. "It is too late to travel this morning. Rest here the day. I will order this area out of bounds. Tomorrow night, leave as the sun sets and take your little wolf girl to the last stronghold of her kin, on the borders of St. Petersburg, north of the city."

With that, he was gone.

Winter stared at the empty doorway, his claws easing away and his body relaxing inch by inch.

"Your lord?" Nika whispered, still clinging to his arm.

"Yes," Winter said, staring after Hyperion.

Light began to chase away the darkness. With a sigh, Winter guided Nika into the empty stall beside Demeter's. He waited for Nika to settle down on the straw and then stared at the large black mare. His lord was lending him his own horse to assist his escape from

the mansion and speed him on his way to the bastion of Nika's kin. It was more than he had expected, far more. It had shown Hyperion's faith in him more clearly than the day he'd had the title of commander bestowed on him. His lord believed in him, trusted him, and liked him enough to cover for him even when he was breaking the law. Winter smiled and settled down in the opposite corner to Nika, closest to Demeter's stall. The night faded and sleep beckoned him.

Nika moved across the stall and curled up close to him, her cloak covering her. He glanced at her neck.

"Your necklace is gone," he murmured and she touched her throat.

"I thought perhaps you found it offensive." She lowered her hand to her trouser pocket. "I still have it. It doesn't seem to bother me so I thought I'd keep it. My parents gave it to me when I was a child. Come to think of it, it was after the wolves had attacked. Maybe my father and mother had wanted to protect me from them."

"Perhaps," Winter said and stifled a yawn. He was glad that she had found something to restore her love for her father. What he had done was unforgivable but he had paid the price for it and Winter was sure that he had suffered all these years knowing what he had done for the sake of the village. Maybe the dreams of a better life he had woven for Nika had been more than that. Maybe they had been her father's hope shining through, his wish that she would escape the wolves and be free to live that dream.

Closing his eyes, Winter released his breath and let sleep come to claim him. A smile still touched his lips.

Hyperion had given him a reason to return, a purpose and a direction. Without him asking, his lord had given him everything that he needed. Now he knew where to take Nika.

Now he could help her.

Now he felt he could return once this was all over.

With his lord's consent, he wasn't breaking any law by taking Nika to her kin.

Now he just had to resist breaking the law that forbade a relationship between species.

Nika moved against him and wrapped her arms around one of his. The warmth of her and the smell of her blood were alluring, intoxicating. He breathed deep, taking the scent down into his lungs and holding it there. His fangs itched for her blood.

It was becoming harder with each passing second.

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About the Author:

Felicity Heaton is a romance author writing as both Felicity Heaton and F E Heaton. She is passionate about penning paranormal tales full of vampires, witches, werewolves, angels and shape-shifters, and has been interested in all things preternatural and fantastical since she was just a child. Her other passion is science-fiction and she likes nothing more than to immerse herself in a whole new universe and the amazing species therein. She used to while away days at school and college dreaming of vampires, werewolves and witches, or being lost in space, and used to while away evenings watching movies about them or reading gothic horror stories, science-fiction and romances.

Having tried her hand at various romance genres, it was only natural for her to turn her focus back to the paranormal, fantasy and science-fiction worlds she enjoys so much. She loves to write seductive, sexy and strong vampires, werewolves, witches, angels and alien species. The worlds she often dreams up for them are vicious, dark and dangerous, reflecting aspects of the heroines and heroes, but her characters also love deeply, laugh, cry and feel every emotion as keenly as anyone does. She makes no excuses for the darkness surrounding them, especially the paranormal creatures, and says that this is their world. She's just honoured to write down their adventures.

To see her other novels, visit: <http://www.felicityheaton.co.uk>

To read more about the Vampires Realm series, visit:
<http://www.vampiresrealm.com>

If you have enjoyed this story, please take a moment to contact the author at author@felicityheaton.co.uk or to post a review of the book online

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Other stories in the Vampires Realm series:

Prophecy: Child of Light [book 1]

A girl unlike any other girl, a vampire unlike any other vampire, Prophecy lives life in the dark until the night she breaks the rules. Leaving the family mansion to hunt for the first time, she encounters Valentine, a vampire from her family's enemy and a man who will change her life forever.

Suddenly at the centre of a prophecy, she is kidnapped by Valentine, the man who should have been her executioner, and forced to run with him in order to save herself. Required to work together, the tension between them builds as a dark evil threatens to destroy the world, their families and the Law Keepers attempt hunt them down, and Prophecy discovers that her feelings for Valentine control her new found power.

When the truth about her is revealed, will Prophecy be strong enough? Will they discover a way to save the world from Hell? And will they finally see past the hatred bred into them by their families and surrender to their love?

The first of the Vampires Realm novels being written by five star author F E Heaton, *Prophecy: Child of Light*, is part one in an epic tale of love and war that is sure to capture your heart and leave you craving more.

Prophecy: Caelestis & Aurorea [book 2]

The final battle draws closer. Prophecy's world becomes darker and more dangerous, pushing her to the limit and testing her strength and her heart, almost breaking her. Old friends turn their backs, leaving her to fight with the help of an unlikely ally and forcing her to call on the devastatingly seductive and powerful Lord Hyperion for assistance.

Struggling to rescue Valentine from the malicious hands of her blood brother, Arkalus and the lord of Aurorea, Kalinor, Prophecy discovers just how powerful she is and how far people will go to stop her from fulfilling her destiny. Lives are lost, battles are won, and the scroll foretelling the prophecy is finally completed, but nothing can prepare them for what lies ahead.

When her visions show her the path that must be taken, will Prophecy be able to do what is necessary? Are Prophecy and Valentine ready to command the power they'd never thought would be theirs? And are they strong enough to fight the evil of their true enemy?

Following on from *Prophecy: Child of Light*, the tension rises and love grows in *Prophecy: Caelestis & Aurorea*, a thrilling second part to this story that draws you into a dark, dangerous world of vampires, magic and the war to end all wars.

Prophecy: Dark Moon Rising [book 3]

An enemy with unimaginable power and bloodlines with centuries of hatred bred into them, two things that threaten to tear Prophecy and Valentine apart as they fight for their lives and their future together. Their vain attempt to join their houses into one army drains the last of their strength, leaving them more vulnerable than they've ever been. The tension escalates between the bloodlines, and, more dangerously, between Valentine, Prophecy and Venturi.

As everything crumbles around them, defeat seems inevitable. In one decisive move, their enemy turns the tables against them, taking what is most important to Prophecy and leaving her to fear that the terrifying visions she's been having are coming true. An enemy becomes a friend, guiding her in her time of need, and a friend becomes an enemy. Death, destruction and danger surround her, but the help of an old ally brings her the army she needs and the dark moon brings her the power to fight the legions of Hell.

When the time comes, will Prophecy be able to do what's necessary or will the sacrifice she must make be too painful to go through with? Does she have the strength to stop Hell from being unleashed into the world and save the ones she loves at the same time?

The dramatic conclusion to the *Prophecy* story, *Prophecy: Dark Moon Rising* is a gripping tale of love and war that will take hold of you, set your heart racing and not let you go until the very last page.

Seventh Circle

Dark, sensual and fast-paced, *Seventh Circle* is a story of forbidden love so strong that it will save the world.

Born with strange powers similar to a vampire's, Lilith has spent her life hunting demons for Section Seven. Now, on the very same night that she watches a vampire kill her best friend, she's faced with her worst nightmare.

A client who is not only attractive, but a vampire.

Lincoln, a powerful pure blood vampire, has a problem. The prophecy he's caught up in is coming to pass and his only chance of survival is relying on those he hates most—vampire hunters. It has been foretold that one will save him, a female hunter, and when he meets her, the attraction he feels is both instantaneous and forbidden.

Their mutual attraction becomes difficult to deny as they work to unravel the mystery of a contract between Lincoln's lord and the Devil. The barriers around their hearts fall, but is there only pain ahead of them? With Lincoln's life on the line, can Lilith find the strength to protect him and embrace a side of herself that she wished didn't exist? Can Lincoln overcome his fear in order to save Lilith even if it means parting from her forever? What price will they pay to be together?