



I'D ALWAYS WELCOMED WAR, BUT IN BATTLE

my passion rose unbidden.

The bear's roar filled my ears. Its hot breath assaulted my nostrils, fueling my bloodlust. Behind me I could hear the boy's ragged gasp. The desperate sound made my nails dig into the earth. I snarled at the larger predator again, daring it to try to get past me.

What the hell am I doing?

I risked a glance at the boy and my pulse raced. His right hand pressed against the gashes in his thigh. Blood surged between his fingers, darkening his jeans until they looked streaked by black paint. Slashes in his shirt barely covered the red lacerations that marred his chest. A growl rose in my throat.

I crouched low, muscles tensed, ready to strike. The grizzly rose onto its hind legs. I held my ground.

Calla!

Bryn's cry sounded in my mind. A lithe brown wolf darted from the forest and tore into the bear's unguarded flank. The grizzly turned, landing on all fours. Spit flew from its mouth as it searched for the unseen attacker. But Bryn, lightning fast, dodged the bear's lunge. With each swipe of the grizzly's trunk-thick arms, she avoided its reach, always moving a split second faster than the bear. She seized her advantage, inflicting another taunting bite. When the bear's back

was turned, I leapt forward and ripped a chunk from its heel. The bear swung around to face me, its eyes rolling, filled with pain.

Bryn and I slunk along the ground, circling the huge animal. The bear's blood made my mouth hot. My body tensed. We continued our ever-tightening dance. The bear's eyes tracked us. I could smell its doubt, its rising fear. I let out a short, harsh bark and flashed my fangs. The grizzly snorted as it turned away and lumbered into the forest.

I raised my muzzle and howled in triumph. A moan brought me back to earth. The hiker stared at us, eyes wide. Curiosity pulled me toward him. I'd betrayed my masters, broken their laws. All for him.

Why?

My head dropped low and I tested the air. The hiker's blood streamed over his skin and onto the ground, the sharp, coppery odor creating an intoxicating fog in my conscience. I fought the temptation to taste it.

Calla? Bryn's alarm pulled my gaze from the fallen hiker.

Get out of here. I bared my teeth at the smaller wolf. She dropped low and bellied along the ground toward me. Then she raised her muzzle and licked the underside of my jaw.

What are you going to do? her blue eyes asked me.

She looked terrified. I wondered if she thought I'd kill the boy for my own pleasure. Guilt and shame trickled through my veins.

Bryn, you can't be here. Go. Now.

She whined but slunk away, slipping beneath the cover of pine trees.

I stalked toward the hiker. My ears flicked back and forth. He struggled for breath, pain and terror filling his face. Deep gashes remained where the grizzly's claws had torn at his thigh and chest. Blood still flowed from the wounds. I knew it wouldn't stop. I growled, frustrated by the fragility of his human body.

He was a boy who looked about my age: seventeen, maybe

eighteen. Brown hair with a slight shimmer of gold fell in a mess around his face. Sweat had caked strands of it to his forehead and cheeks. He was lean, strong—someone who could find his way around a mountain, as he clearly had. This part of the territory was only accessible through a steep, unwelcoming trail.

The scent of fear covered him, taunting my predatory instincts, but beneath it lay something else—the smell of spring, of nascent leaves and thawing earth. A scent full of hope. Possibility. Subtle and tempting.

I took another step toward him. I knew what I wanted to do, but it would mean a second, much-greater violation of the Keepers' Laws. He tried to move back but gasped in pain and collapsed onto his elbows. My eyes moved over his face. His chiseled jaw and high cheekbones twisted in agony. Even writhing he was beautiful, muscles clenching and unclenching, revealing his strength, his body's fight against its impending collapse, rendering his torture sublime. Desire to help him consumed me.

I can't watch him die.

I shifted forms before I realized I'd made the decision. The boy's eyes widened when the white wolf who'd been eyeing him was no longer an animal, but a girl with the wolf's golden eyes and platinum blond hair. I walked to his side and dropped to my knees. His entire body shook. I began to reach for him but hesitated, surprised to feel my own limbs trembling. I'd never been so afraid.

A rasping breath pulled me out of my thoughts.

"Who are you?" The boy stared at me. His eyes were the color of winter moss, a delicate shade that hovered between green and gray. I was caught there for a moment. Lost in the questions that pushed through his pain and into his gaze.

I raised the soft flesh of my inner forearm to my mouth. Willing my canines to sharpen, I bit down hard and waited until my own blood touched my tongue. Then I extended my arm toward him.

“Drink. It’s the only thing that can save you.” My voice was low but firm.

The trembling in his limbs grew more pronounced. He shook his head.

“You have to,” I growled, showing him canines still razor sharp from opening the wound in my arm. I hoped the memory of my wolf form would terrorize him into submission. But the look on his face wasn’t one of horror. The boy’s eyes were full of wonder. I blinked at him and fought to remain still. Blood ran along my arm, falling in crimson drops onto the leaf-lined soil.

His eyes snapped shut as he grimaced from a surge of renewed pain. I pressed my bleeding forearm against his parted lips. His touch was electric, searing my skin, racing through my blood. I bit back a gasp, full of wonder and fear at the alien sensations that rolled through my limbs.

He flinched, but my other arm whipped around his back, holding him still while my blood flowed into his mouth. Grasping him, pulling him close only made my blood run hotter.

I could tell he wanted to resist, but he had no strength left. A smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. Even if my own body was reacting unpredictably, I knew I could control his. I shivered when his hands came up to grasp my arm, pressing into my skin. The hiker’s breath came easily now. Slow, steady.

An ache deep within me made my fingers tremble. I wanted to run them over his skin. To skim the healing wounds and learn the contours of his muscles.

I bit my lip, fighting temptation. *Come on, Cal, you know better. This isn’t like you.*

I pulled my arm from his grasp. A whimper of disappointment emerged from the boy’s throat. I didn’t know how to grapple with my own sense of loss now that I wasn’t touching him. *Find your strength, use the wolf. That’s who you are.*

With a warning growl I shook my head, ripping a length of fabric from the hiker's torn shirt to bind up my own wound. His moss-colored eyes followed my every movement.

I scrambled to my feet and was startled when he mimicked the action, faltering only slightly. I frowned and took two steps back. He watched my retreat, then looked down at his ripped clothing. His fingers gingerly picked at the shreds of his shirt. When his eyes lifted to meet mine, I was hit with an unexpected swell of dizziness. His lips parted. I couldn't stop looking at them. Full, curving with interest, lacking the terror I'd expected. Too many questions flickered in his gaze.

I have to get out of here. "You'll be fine. Get off the mountain. Don't come near this place again," I said, turning away.

A shock sparked through my body when the boy gripped my shoulder. He looked surprised but not at all afraid. That wasn't good. Heat flared along my skin where his fingers held me fast. I waited a moment too long, watching him, memorizing his features before I snarled and shrugged off his hand.

"Wait—" he said, and took another step toward me.

What if I could wait, putting my life on hold in this moment? What if I stole a little more time and caught a taste of what had been so long forbidden? Would it be so wrong? I would never see this stranger again. What harm could come from lingering here, from holding still and learning whether he would try to touch me the way I wanted to him to?

His scent told me my thoughts weren't far off the mark, his skin snapping with adrenaline and the musk that belied desire. I'd let this encounter last much too long, stepped well beyond the line of safe conduct. With regret nipping at me, I balled my fist. My eyes moved up and down his body, assessing, remembering the feeling of his lips on my skin. He smiled hesitantly.

Enough.

I caught him across the jaw with a single blow. He dropped to the ground and didn't move again. I bent down and gathered the boy in my arms, slinging his backpack over my shoulder. The scent of green meadows and dew-kissed tree limbs flowed around me, flooding me with that strange ache that coiled low in my body, a physical reminder of my brush with treachery. Twilight shadows stretched farther up the mountain, but I'd have him at the base by dusk.

A lone, battered pickup was parked near the rippling waterway that marked the boundary of the sacred site. Black signs with bright orange lettering were posted along the creek bank:

NO TRESPASSING. PRIVATE PROPERTY.

The Ford Ranger was unlocked. I flung open the door, almost pulling it from the rust-bitten vehicle. I draped the boy's limp form across the driver's seat. His head slumped forward and I caught the stark outline of a tattoo on the back of his neck. A dark, bizarrely inked cross.

A trespasser and trend hound. Thank God I found something not to like about him.

I hurled his pack onto the passenger seat and slammed the door. The truck's steel frame groaned. Still trembling with frustration, I shifted into wolf form and darted back into the forest. His scent clung to me, blurring my sense of purpose. I sniffed the air and cringed, a new scent bringing my treachery into stark relief.

I know you're here. A snarl traveled with my thought.

Are you okay? Bryn's plaintive question only made fear bite harder into my trembling muscles. In the next moment she ran beside me.

I told you to leave. I bared my teeth but couldn't deny my sudden relief at her presence.

I could never abandon you. Bryn kept pace easily. *And you know I'll never betray you.*

I picked up speed, darting through the deepening shadows of the forest. I abandoned my attempt to outrun fear, shifted forms, and

stumbled forward until I found the solid pressure of a tree trunk. The scratch of the bark on my skin failed to repel the gnat-like nerves that swarmed in my head.

“Why did you save him?” she asked. “Humans mean nothing to us.”

I kept my arms around the tree but turned my cheek to the side so I could look at Bryn. No longer in her wolf form, the short, wiry girl’s hands rested on her hips. Her eyes narrowed as she waited for an answer.

I blinked, but I couldn’t halt the burning sensation. A pair of tears, hot and unwanted, slid down my cheeks.

Bryn’s eyes widened. I never cried. Not when anyone could witness it.

I turned my face away, but I could sense her watching me silently, without judgment. I had no answers for Bryn. Or for myself.