

Moonflowers

By Lenka Vodicka

Introduction

Flora lived in Idylwild, a town soaked in moonlight even on the sunniest days. She did not know about the darkness shaping her life.

She thought her town was like all the other small towns tucked between the mountains and the sea. She thought her town was pristine rural American glory, with 5 streets intersecting in the downtown, two shopping developments on the highway, street festivals to lure tourists, and families that had claimed the land for generations. She thought Idylwild was boring.

Little did she know.

Every once in awhile, she felt like maybe the adults were all in on some secret she was not allowed to share. But she shook that off as normal. Doesn't every teenager feel like an outsider?

She shoved her things under the bed. Because maybe, just maybe, monsters lived underneath. She was too old to really believe in such nonsense. She was fifteen. Still, she shoved stuff under there. Just in case. Every night she slept with the closet door wide open. So nothing could sneak in and hide.

Nothing would, of course. Nothing ever happened in Idylwild. Even knowing that, she couldn't quite make the nightmares go away.

If only she knew . . .

Werewolves kissed her goodnight.

Her parents were the Alpha pair of the most powerful pack of werewolves on the west coast. They led with absolute authority. Anthony and Helen were not questioned by their followers though they questioned themselves constantly.

Helen heated up water for chamomile tea at midnight to help her sleep. She reached behind the sugar cereal boxes that Flora loved and Anthony loathed, searching with her fingers for a secret bottle.

The ghosts lingered so close in the darkened kitchen. She poured an inch or two (or three) of the rich amber liquid into the bottom of her tea cup.

She played with fire. But she was alone here. And she would only do this while the water warmed for tea. She wasn't hurting anyone. Anymore.

Sharp heat flamed inside her as she swallowed. She barely grimaced at the strong liquor. The Wolf stretched under her skin. She loved this small moment the most, even more than the tranquil aftershock calm. The Wolf's teeth chinked inside her own and she felt so close, so close to being whole for that space of heartbeats before the rational returned and the Wolf yawned. Slumbered again.

She had quit for awhile, after the birth of her first daughter. Her wolf daughter. Her daughter of prophecy. Except werewolves have no prophecies. Their past and future are gloomy and quiet, hidden in secret books in locked rooms.

Her first daughter defied all that. Her first daughter was a creature of spun moonlight with glacier blue eyes that saw the full moon in a clear blue sky. Most people would call her a monster. A monster among monsters. For werewolf mothers stop changing throughout pregnancy. Werewolf children are born entirely normal, with a few finding the Wolf in adolescence.

Helen could not believe that first Moon, when the Wolf rose up strong as ever, despite the two lines on the pregnancy test. And Helen went right on changing all nine months. Did the little one change within her? She did not know. She did not dare ask.

Helen woke one morning after the full moon cradling an infant who may as well have dropped from the sky, whose tiny eyes held the massive vision of endless space. Helen could not remember the birth of her daughter. A True Wolf. Anya. Who embraced the Wolf before her first breath.

Helen had quit the late night visits for tea, then. She quit for years, long enough for sweet normal Flora to be born. Flora who lived in blissful ignorance . . .

Flora last saw her sister 13 years ago.

Anya would have understood why Helen enjoyed this grisly rendezvous.

Helen must stop thinking about Anya in the past. Anya is very alive. Anthony talked to her only yesterday.

Anthony made arrangements. He bought a plane ticket. The floods have washed away most of Anya's village. The countryside was ravaged by overflowing rivers. Relief workers were everywhere. With the full moon a few days away, she couldn't stay. The others in her pack found sanctuary with other packs. Anya is special. She cannot go just anywhere.

She must come home. And Anthony was glad. He has missed her. He stood in front of the windows in his study, looking out over the stately tree trunks, the gathering moonlight slicing through the darkness. He felt afresh the choices of so many years ago. Anya's wild ways threatened their new little daughter, Flora.

They could not manage both girls. Not with Anya's temper tantrums. Not with protecting Flora's future.

If anyone had asked him all those years ago when Anya could not coexist with her sister, he would have saved Anya. Anya was a rare jewel. Anyone could raise Flora.

No one asked.

Even though Anthony was leader of his pack, he could not be trusted. No werewolf could be trusted, really. Werewolves were torn, driven by terrible instincts and longing. Werewolves could be entirely invested in their community, only to turn self destructive one day. Their particular madness was a combination of a brain flooded with too many chemicals and a soul filled with too many questions. Werewolves needed help.

Perhaps long ago an innocent youth fell in love with a werewolf. He cherished her. He started an organization sworn to protect their children, a group of people who were not werewolves yet living with the werewolves, who could protect them from all enemies, even themselves. They became the Guardians, a companion to the packs.

Kyle helped the werewolves in Idylwild. He lived next door to Anthony and Helen, which is to say that he lived down the dirt road connecting their homes. He was an old friend from high school days, before either Anthony or Helen had found the Wolf. He knew them well, knew everyone in the pack. He knew them better than they knew themselves sometimes. So tonight he, like Helen, he sat in the dark with a drink. He dreaded the moment that plane landed with Anya inside. He remembered all too well why she left. Who she hurt . . .

He sat in front of his new computer in his dilapidated trailer that had started to lean on one side. The ground was going soft. Not much, only enough to make him trip if he wasn't paying attention, to notice that he drink rested a tilt. But not enough for him to do anything to fix it. He doesn't take much care of his trailer. Or himself.

The computer, shiny new amidst the cracking plastics of the trailer, wasn't his idea. The computer was part of his job. He typed. The screen filled the trailer with ashen light. The mysterious directors who organize werewolves worldwide typed back.

Kyle was not a werewolf. He was Idylwild's sheriff. Being sheriff didn't mean he would know anything about the werewolves in his town. No, he knew them more intimately than through his job. No one got instant keys into their kingdom. The price was high for an invitation into their dark lands. He knew. He paid.

He was not alone. He guarded the werewolves, guarded them from themselves. And guarded them from those renegades who wanted werewolf blood- the hunters. Whether motivated by the belief in evil or the thrill of the chase, Hunters sought out werewolves with merciless intentions. They wouldn't touch the packs as a rule. Packs were protected by their small communities; using positions they held as judges, reporters, and police to prosecute hunters into obscurity. Kyle had met a few, passing through town. They recognize him somehow and promise that they're just passing through. No one dares mess with the packs, yet. But has he heard of any monsters gone off the deep end? Any werewolves out wandering alone and endangering all of mankind?

Usually, no.

Today, maybe.

He never liked Anya, even when she was a creepy little girl with two neat white braids. Her underwater blue eyes held him so that he was sea-glass polished smooth and he looked away but he could still feel her staring at him and into him. Her impending visit filled him with anxious dread. He doesn't look forward to seeing her again. Not with Flora and Moonwater being teenagers. Now with Moonwater breaking every rule and curfew that Kyle sets. Not knowing his son. Not at all.

Moonwater was not a werewolf. Moonwater knew nothing about werewolves. And Kyle planned to keep it that way. Moonwater was all that Kyle had left, really.

As if Moonwater cared about that. Moonwater sat on the beach cliff that night. He stared out over the slippery sea. Coral was hanging out with him and she lay on the sharp meadow grasses, tired enough not to care when they left. Her eyes closed in dreamy sleep. Moonwater pulled a weed apart between his fingers. Gathering moonlight flickered on the black sea. Moonwater could be calm here, for a moment or two. He didn't feel as though he ran, ran and ran from something he could not name. Coral shifted.

Moonwater returned to his truck parked nearby. He wouldn't take her home yet but he didn't want her mad, either. He pulled one of Flora's sweaters out from behind the seat. Flora's things collected right along with his. She lived next door, which is to say down the road since no one saw other houses in their part of town. Everyone lived in their own private forest. Their private forest when they were kids, the only kids within walking distance, building forts with fallen branches, drinking fairy wine from acorn caps. He would marry her, back in the day, back when they were young.

He held the sweater close to his face for a moment, just a moment, breathing in her spices, her scent of autumn leaves bright and playful. He waited just long enough, before he could wonder why they had never kissed before, why she sat so far on the other side of the cab when other girls were so eager to scoot over to him.

Just long enough.

He tucked the sweater around Coral's shoulders and she stirred, pulling the fabric up under her chin. He sat beside her. Touched her hair spread out over the grasses. Put his hands in his jacket pockets.

Waves thundered against the cliffs.

Over that far away sea, Anya looked down from her airplane window. The airplane felt so small above huge deep waters. Her gaze returned to the sky. The moon shone a beacon in the sky. The moon was her shelter, her safe harbor across the world.

She was coming home.

Chapter 1

Kyle crawled to the cliff edge. Weeds rustled around his ears. He could see the bonfire down on the beach. A crowd of teenagers sat around a raging fire, passing bottles wrapped in paper bags. Someone played a drum. Kyle leaned on his elbows. He cracked a sunflower seed between his teeth and spat out the shell. The wind blew bits back onto his shoulder. He lifted binoculars, focusing on each face around the fire.

“Do you have to be so loud?” Anthony asked, scooting up beside Kyle.

Kyle shrugged, fishing another seed out of his pocket. He could see her, the icy sway of her hair and the flash of blue eyes as she laughed. “You sure she’s okay down there?” he asked.

“It’s temporary and you know it,” Anthony answered. He gazed down at the fire with his own pair of binoculars. “She’ll be gone soon. Don’t worry.”

Kyle worried. The floods hadn’t been her fault. She needed her family for shelter until the village could be rebuilt. She couldn’t stay just anywhere, after all. This was the safest place for her. Still, she made Kyle nervous. Seeing her down there so close to his son made his skin tighten up over his bones. He had to do something.

“Hunters,” Anthony hissed beside him. “How’d they get here so soon?”

“I have a clean shot,” Nolan said, leveling the rifle towards the bonfire.

“Not now, fool,” Jake said, his voice idle. He crouched in the weeds, picking a foxglove apart with his fingers as he gazed at the small figures below them. “Not with so many witnesses.”

“So what?”

“We want her dead. Without landing us in prison.”

Nolan held his sights on her forehead for a moment longer, savoring the closeness of her death. But Jake was right. These kids could get up the cliff fast. And the gunshot might not scare them all away. Who knew how many of her kind were down there?

“Tomorrow,” Jake muttered. “She’ll die tomorrow.”

On the beach, Flora stabbed her marshmallow with a sharpened stick. The white flesh yielded under her fingers. She held the stick out over the fire, a safe distance from the flames.

Her sister laughed, at once familiar and unknown. Flora frowned. This was only the third or fourth time she could ever remember meeting her sister. Anya lived in the Czech Republic somewhere, going to specialists about a disease Flora couldn’t remember. Mom and Dad had talked about nerves.

Anya was a little creepy. Her skin was white from the cold climate, and something had made her hair gray. Thick white hair ruffled over her shoulders with the breeze. Flora didn’t even think the gray hair was possible. Anya was only 19, after all. She had lively blue eyes and full lips. The boys all noticed her when they first approached the fire, but they drifted away after a few minutes. Anya held onto their words, staring into their eyes for a moment too long, speaking with a gentle accent that had her sounding important. She made everyone nervous.

Everyone except Moonwater. He sat close to her, making sure that she was entertained and comfortable. Even now, he handed her his bottle and she took a long drink. Flora sighed. Mom and Dad said Anya would stay a little while, but that would be too long. She shoved the marshmallow close to the seething orange coals. The snowy candy smoked, then lit up in bright blue and yellow flames. Licking along, they turned the marshmallow black. Goey paste leaked, hissing, onto the embers. The fragile charcoal skin crumbled and the whole thing fell. Flora sat back, watching the end of her stick smolder.

“Funny way to make a s’more,” River commented. He sat down on the sand beside Flora. Flora had known River her entire life, which was usual for everyone growing up in Idylwild.

Flora smiled without any humor. “Yeah, well.”

“She’s interesting, your sister. You must be glad to have her around again.” River stared at Anya, at her movie star smile.

“Sure.” Flora shrugged. She could hear the bitter tone in her voice.

“You don’t have to like her, you know,” River said.

Flora glanced up. River’s eyes were sincere. “She’s my sister.”

“You hardly know her.”

“You’re right. I have more nightmares than memories of her.” Flora lay her marshmallow stick up on the coals. The wood smoked.

“Nightmares?”

Flora watched the stick ignite, remembering waking up many times over the years disoriented in her own room. “Yeah. She hides under the bed or in the closet. She attacks me. It’s probably subconscious guilt, you know, that I’m healthy when she’s sick. The mind does funny things.”

River nodded.

Flora pulled the burning stick out of the fire and plunged its tip into the sand. The sunset tinted Anya’s skin with warmth. Once the sun set, though, the cold beauty would return, remote like the land where she lived. “She’d see me. And she’d laugh. Then she’d change into a wolf and kill me.”

Anthony and Kyle had watched the Hunters from the trees. One of them had a gun pointed down at the beach for awhile, which almost made Anthony storm out of the woods and start a fight. Kyle convinced him to wait. “They can’t be that stupid,” Kyle whispered. “Too many witnesses.”

Luckily he was right. The man lowered the gun and both of them sat, watching, as the sun set over the ocean in a blaze of red and orange. Kyle crouched beside a redwood tree, smelling the damp earth and sweet bark. He wished he could see the beach himself, but they couldn’t risk losing sight of these two. As much as Anya scared him, Kyle would protect her. And he didn’t want these Hunters to feel safe. He cracked another sunflower seed between his teeth.

Finally, when dusky twilight had settled over the woods and trees had become vague shadows in the darkness, the Hunters moved. They crept back into the woods. Kyle and Anthony followed them. Anthony moved effortlessly. Kyle knew these woods since childhood so he had little trouble in the dark. The Hunters, though, kept stumbling over roots, cursing each time. “Where’s that path?” one said in a rough voice. They were smart enough not to go after her on the beach, but still stupid, Kyle thought. Anthony hooted like an owl and Kyle followed his friend.

They passed the Hunters, reaching the picnic grounds parking lot a few minutes early. The teenagers had all parked up here. Kyle recognized most of the cars; especially Moonwater’s beaten up orange truck. He should have made Moonwater stay home, he thought. Except Moonwater would sneak out, anyway. Moonwater didn’t respect rules.

A lone streetlight hummed in the night. Bugs bumped up against the bulb. Anthony touched a Suburban’s bumper. The paint was clean and the license plates were out of state. Kyle smiled. These mistakes meant the hunters were amateurs. They didn’t stand a chance.

Anthony and Kyle stood in the truck’s shadow as the Hunters strode into the parking lot. The white light bleached their skin, made their eyes hollow and dark. Kyle stepped in front of the truck. “You have a permit for that?” he asked, pointing at the high caliber rifle.

“You some kind of cop?” he asked.

“The sheriff.” Kyle flipped open his badge. “I’d like to see a permit. This is a wildlife sanctuary, not to mention public lands, and hunting of any kind is punishable by law.”

The men glared.

River winced when Flora mentioned the wolf. “You don’t think she can really do that, do you?” he asked.

Flora laughed. “Of course not. Dreams aren’t real, River.”

River didn’t look so sure. “Right. Still, Flora, I’d trust your instincts.”

“Why?” She looked at him. She had never really noticed him before. He was a casual friend without a lot of depth or meaning. But the way he spoke to her now was intense.

“They’re usually right, that’s why.”

“You think she’s dangerous?”

“I didn’t say that.” He stood up like the conversation overwhelmed him. “I didn’t say that.” He stepped away. “Look, uh, I’m going to take a walk. I’ll see you, okay?” And he walked into the twilight. Flora sat for a moment, tracing designs in the sand with her stick. Anya laughed again. She touched Moonwater’s arm.

Flora stood and ran to catch up with River.

Kyle leaned against the hood of his patrol car. The suspects sat in the back seat, their cold eyes staring vacantly out the window. They were playing the dumb game, acting like tourists who didn’t know anything. “There isn’t that much we can do,” Kyle explained to Anthony. “I can hold them for a few hours, fine them and try to scare some sense into them. But there isn’t much else. They haven’t done anything illegal.”

“Yet.” Anthony paced a few feet in front of Kyle. “They’ll kill her if we let them go. You know who they’re after. How’d they get here so fast?”

Kyle smashed a sunflower seed between his teeth and spat the shell on the pavement. “Word travels. This town is no secret to them. It’s only because we run everything that they don’t try to kill all of you.” Kyle felt a twinge of guilt as Anthony paused. The differences between them were often overlooked. Kyle sighed. “She’s a prize. They’ll risk a lot to bring her down.”

“We have to get her out of here.”

“I agree.”

“Let’s haul them in and hold them for as long as we can. I’ll give Helen a call so she can make arrangements for Anya.”

Kyle nodded. “I know you wanted to spend some time with your daughter, Anthony, but you’re doing the right thing.” Kyle opened the driver’s side door. “Okay, boys,” he said in a light voice. “Time for a little ride.”

He sat down and pulled his keys out of his pocket. “Hey, Anthony,” he called out the door. “Are you going to follow me to the station?”

Anthony didn’t answer. He stood still like stone, staring into the inky woods.

“Anthony?”

Anthony took a step, then another. He ran across the parking lot and towards the trail leading to the beach. Kyle got out of the car. “Anthony!” he yelled.

In the back seat, the men started laughing. “Better take our rifle,” one said. “You have a wild animal loose.”

“Shut up,” Kyle muttered. But he picked up their rifle from the passenger seat.

He strained to hear something unusual, something that would have caught Anthony’s attention. All he heard was the humming lamp and a faint breeze through the branches. The night

had enveloped everything and sparkling stars lit up the sky above. Kyle took a step away from the car. With one foot, he kicked the car door shut behind him. He sprinted towards the trail. What was going on?

A howl shredded the quiet. Unearthly music filled the air, at once triumphant and full of grief. It hung for a moment, fading. Kyle's blood froze. The howl was very close by.

River had taken off, running down the beach like it was some cross-country race. Flora figured she'd talk to him later. She wandered down by the water for a while, collecting bits of broken shells and stashing them in her pockets. The roar of waves calmed her down, made the whole trouble with her sister feel small and passing. Like waves, this would roll back out to sea and life would return to normal.

In Idylwild, normal meant hanging out with lifelong friends, tramping through the thick pine forests to remote places, building bonfires and driving fast in four wheel drive trucks over muddy roads. It meant going to school. It meant drinking cups of coffee all night in Lyon's Restaurant. It meant video games and camping, the endless sagas of tired friendships and reoccurring love affairs. Idylwild was a small town on the rugged coast of Northern California. The pine trees and rocky coastline were attractive for tourists, but boring to the teenagers who had grown up there. The town had strong environmental roots, luring idealistic people who named children inspirational ideas like Flora, Moonwater, Coral and Sequoia. It was easy to tell who had been born in Idylwild and who had moved there. The natives all had strange names, a secret club they never knew they'd signed into.

Flora sat down on the sand, watching the moonlight catch in the ocean's froth, turning the waves lacey. She would like to be a mermaid, she thought, swim out there into the liquid darkness,

feel the cool embrace of water caress her skin. She would enjoy that. She was tired of being a fish out of water.

She smiled.

It would be over, soon enough. Anya would leave. She could relax. And after awhile, it seemed possible. She stood up, stretching to the glittering stars above. She was overreacting, that was all, letting the emotions of the dreams get too close to reality.

She walked back to the fire, where the bright light illuminated her friends. River had returned. He poked at the logs with Flora's marshmallow stick. "There you are," he said as she arrived. "Where's Moonwater and Anya?"

Flora rolled her eyes. "They're gone?"

"Aren't they with you?" A hint of panic crept into his voice. Flora didn't like it.

"No. Why?"

"Hey, Sequoia, have you seen Anya?" River asked desperately.

"What do you care?" Flora demanded.

"Not since she drank some of Cedar's tequila. She took off with Moonwater a little bit ago." Sequoia smiled, drinking from his own mysterious bottle.

"You gave her tequila?" River said, grabbing Cedar's arm. Flora had never seen River act this way, so angry and aggressive.

"Chill out." Cedar yanked his arm out of River's grasp. "She liked it."

"You idiot," River said.

"Who put you in charge?" Cedar took a step forward and the two squared off. River was going to hit him, Flora realized and she stepped between them just as River swung back for the punch.

Then she heard the howl.

The ghostly noise settled into their bones, their blood, and their nightmares. They stared into the night, trying to break apart the shadows as they edged closer to the fire. It was a dog. It had to be a dog, but the depth of emotion in the sound was too intense for any canine. No one spoke, even after it faded into silence. The fire crackled and the music blared as loud as ever, but it was all too quiet.

“Stay here,” River muttered. “No one leave this fire.”

And they stood, mute, as he ducked into the darkness. No one challenged his suggestion. No one wanted to find whatever made that sickening song.

“Moonwater,” Flora whispered. And she ran after River.

This was wrong, all wrong, Kyle thought as he stumbled down the steep trail leading to the beach. He slowed down. Killing himself by tripping over the cliff wouldn't help anyone. Anthony must have found her by now, but he didn't trust Anthony to take care of the situation. His friend had some great moments, but he was her father and connected to her in a way that made him vulnerable.

Kyle wouldn't be vulnerable. There were too many kids down there. His son was down there. He would show no mercy.

He heard a scuffle farther down the trail and he leaned back against the rock. He aimed the rifle right at the bend in the path. His fingers flexed on the trigger. He had to stay calm.

He unclipped his flashlight quietly from his belt. Just when he saw movement, he flicked on the strong beam and leveled it in the animal's eyes.

But it was just one of the kids, River. He was pale and he threw up one hand to cover the blinding light. “Who's there?” he asked in a meek voice.

“It’s me, River.” Kyle lowered the flashlight, flicking it off again so no one else would see them.

“Sheriff?”

“Yeah. Get everyone out of here, River. Now.”

River nodded.

“Come on,” Kyle ordered, brushing past him and continuing down the path. The trail evened out and they approached the fire. For once, the kids looked glad to see him. “Hey, Mr. Jansen,” Cedar said, the relief strong in his voice.

Kyle glanced around the circle. “Where’s Moonwater?”

Coral shrugged. “He disappeared a little while ago,” she said.

“With that weird girl,” Sequoia added.

“Did you hear that animal?” Mike asked. “Must be some rabid dog, right?”

“Yeah, right,” Kyle answered, but he wasn’t aware of his own voice. He fought the panic boiling up under his skin. “Wrap up the party,” he ordered. “Go home.”

For once, no one argued. He strode away from the fire before any of them could see the terror in his eyes. He’d find Moonwater, he told himself. Moonwater would be all right. He’d find his son. All right.

“River?” Flora called in a soft voice. She’d lost her sense of direction. The fire was far behind her and waves crashed to her left. The beach, though, was a maze of shadows, strewn with chunks of washed up logs and fallen boulders. To make matters worse, a thick fog blew in off the ocean, covering the stars and muffling sounds. She should go back, she thought. “Moonwater?”

She heard a cat; a thin mewling of sound that had to be some kitten lost down here, hiding under a log. But it wasn't a log at all. She ran, sliding to her knees on the sand. "Moonwater?" she said, touching his shoulder. He groaned and his leg shifted slightly.

"Answer me," she insisted. He'd passed out here, gotten so drunk he'd decided to go swimming and fell asleep. That was why his shoulder was damp. She touched his cool skin and noticed the stains on her fingers, how she left trails on his hand. Water wouldn't do that.

"Moonwater?" She was more desperate this time, straining to see him better, gripping both of his shoulders and shaking him. "Wake up!"

He turned his head towards her. In the faint moonlight, she saw the deathly white pallor of his face and dark smears of blood, speckled with sand. "Flora?" he said in a weak voice. "Help me."

Chapter 2

The last car sped away. Nolan and Jake sat up. They had ducked down when the kids ran up off the trail, talking in loud voices and yelling about meeting up at Lyon's Restaurant. The kids jumped into cars and roared off towards the main road.

The humming lamp kept attracting bugs. But the rest of the night was quiet again. Fog curled up off the trail.

Nolan shifted his weight, trying to sit comfortably while handcuffed. That crazy sheriff had run off with the rifle, abandoning Nolan and Jake in the back seat of his beat up patrol car. He had kicked the door closed, but, still, they were handcuffed in here while a monster ran amok outside. She could break through these windows easily. Nolan looked around for some way to escape. Wire mesh kept them from climbing up front. "We're dead." Nolan knew this with cold certainty. He could feel her outside, her chill eyes focusing on the car, her nose picking up the scent of helpless meat. He should have pulled the trigger when he had the chance.

Beside him, Jake closed his eyes. "Relax," he said. "We're probably safer in here anyway."

"Are you kidding me? We're trapped. Defenseless."

Jake smiled that calm older brother smile that meant he found Nolan amusing. "Not exactly." He pulled his hands from behind his back, one dangling a handcuff and the other one free. "Hick cops," Jake commented. "She may as well be dead already."

The sand dragged at Kyle's feet. He plodded down the beach, sweeping his flashlight over the sand. The fog had settled in thick, so the beam of light caught narrow visions of driftwood and piles of dead seaweed. Kyle no longer cared if she saw him. He kept one hand on the rifle's trigger.

She had the advantage of strength and heightened senses, but he had the gun. And he didn't need a silver bullet to injure her.

"Moonwater!" he called. "Moonwater!"

He strained to hear a noise over the crashing waves. His own voice was small in the fog.

"Moonwater! Answer me!"

Flora heard something. "Help!" she yelled. "Over here!"

A hand clamped over her mouth and she was pushed off balance, falling onto the sand. She kicked at her assailant and heard a sharp moan. "Stop," Moonwater whispered. His hand dropped from her mouth and he breathed deeply for a moment, closing his eyes against the pain. "He can't find me," he said, his voice dry and barely audible. "Not like this."

"You're hurt," Flora answered. "He'll help."

Moonwater shook his head. He held onto his shoulder and grimaced. "I'll live. But he'd smell alcohol. Please. Don't let him find us."

Flora wanted to see Moonwater's eyes. Some terrible truth lay under his words, a sense of deep waters that she couldn't understand. He wasn't lying. But he also wasn't being honest.

Kyle called again, closer this time.

Moonwater sat up; a wave of hurt washing over his face. He grimaced like he might fall back on the sand, then breathed again, getting control. "We have to hide," he said.

"You need a hospital," Flora insisted.

"No," he hissed. The strength in his voice surprised Flora. She sat back.

"I mean, please," Moonwater whispered. "Please trust me."

Flora stood up. She took one of his hands and helped him get to his feet. He clutched his stomach and wobbled. She wrapped her arm around his waist to steady him. He leaned on her and

Flora struggled not to collapse. They headed for the cliffs. The fog embraced everything in a cloak of gray smoke. Kyle's voice echoed over the beach. Out of the corner of her eye, Flora saw a flash of light.

"Hurry," Moonwater demanded. He pushed towards the cliffs although Flora thought he would keel over unconscious any moment.

The light swept closer.

Moonwater pulled Flora into a shadow by a chunk of fallen rock. Behind the rock, though, a narrow chasm split through the cliff. A creek trickled over the sand towards the welcoming ocean. Moonwater stumbled, but kept going into the darkness which would hide them, but could also hide other things. Like whatever had made that awful howl.

"Slow down," Flora whispered, slipping on a wet rock.

"Moonwater!" Kyle's voice was right behind them.

Kyle pointed the flashlight towards the cliffs. He heard something. All he could see was a jagged gorge and a thin creek winding over the sand. The fog was a blanket and the flashlight was starting to reflect back at him. He wished he could see better, hear more.

Where was Anthony, anyway? Kyle pulled his digital telephone out of his jacket pocket. The numbers glowed in the darkness.

"Hello?" Helen picked up the telephone on the second ring. She had a calming effect on Kyle, reminding him the whole world wasn't a deserted beach with a monster in the shadows.

"Yeah, hi, Helen. Is Anthony around?"

"Sure, Kyle." She handed the telephone over. Kyle heard low voices, a chair scraping on tile.

"Yeah?" Anthony asked.

“What are you doing?” Kyle said, barely keeping a level voice.

“I got hungry.”

“We have this going on and you’re hungry?”

“You better come over,” Anthony answered. The telephone clicked off and Kyle stared out into the murky fog. His son was out here somewhere. He couldn’t just leave. But then again, all of this searching in the dark wasn’t bringing Kyle any closer to a solution. He needed Anthony’s keen eyes and ears.

Kyle panned the light across the beach one more time. “Moonwater!”

Flora huddled behind a rock. Beside her, Moonwater leaned against the cliff wall. His lips pinched together and his eyes were closed as he concentrated on ignoring the pain. He held Flora’s hand, his fingers strong around hers. This kept her from running to Kyle for help. “Please,” he whispered.

Flora wasn’t sure. He was probably in shock, possibly delirious. But the focus in his voice and the desperation in his touch had her listening to him. For their entire lives, they had depended on one another for adventures, companionship and strength. She didn’t know how to betray him.

She shook her head as the light pierced the gloom near their hiding place. Moonwater sat down, sliding down the cliff wall until he could lean his head back and rest. Their escape had drained his energy. But he kept the grip on Flora’s hand. “Don’t let go,” he whispered.

“I won’t,” Flora promised. Not ever.

Moonwater shuddered. His face went slack. Flora kneeled beside him and shook his shoulder. “Wake up,” she whispered intently. His fingers relaxed around hers. “Moonwater?”

He didn’t respond. She’d done the worst possible thing. Hoping to protect him, she’d hurt him even more. She ran out of the chasm.

“Kyle!” she yelled. But the fog swallowed the noise. The waves roared a hollow symphony in the night. “Kyle!”

He’d gone. She crept back to Moonwater, more careful this time. He lay like some doll against the rock, not caring about the damp sand or cool air. The creek trickled past his feet, curling around his boots like they were stones. Flora sat beside him. She straightened out his head so it wouldn’t lean at such an unnatural angle. She picked up his hand. It was so heavy and lifeless. “It’ll be all right,” she whispered. “It’ll be all right.”

She leaned against him, lay her cheek up against his warm jacket. She could hear him breathing, feel the gentle rise and fall of his chest. The air smelled of mist and rotting seaweed, the tang of ocean life and dying. The shells that Flora shoved in her pocket earlier poked into her but she didn’t care. She listened to Moonwater’s breathing, matching her own to his. It was such a beautiful thing, really, and she’d never noticed. Each breath was taken for granted, like waves on the shore, that another would rise to take the old one’s place. It was a chain of endless rhythm, playing to the beating of his heart.

She never thought it could end. They could end.

The hunters sat on the hood of Kyle’s patrol car. They glanced up as he walked out of the woods.

“This how you treat tourists?” The big one growled. His voice was guttural and deep. His flinty eyes fixed on Kyle.

Kyle shrugged. He’d forgotten all about them. Hunters were all the same, talking big because they shot people in their sleep, covering up the murders with phony suicide notes. Once they tagged a werewolf, rules no longer mattered. The human was inconsequential as long as the wolf died. And if the victim identified other werewolves before he died, all the better. It didn’t

matter if it took torture to learn more names. Werewolves were animals, after all. And evil ones at that.

Kyle had studied their methods just in case any showed up in Idylwild. His research repulsed him.

“Consider yourselves lucky I don’t take you in for evading arrest.”

The big guy shrugged. “We couldn’t help that rock those kids threw through the window. Damn near killed us, too.”

“I bet.” Kyle knew they’d kicked out the window. He dropped the rifle in the car through the broken window. He hadn’t tightened one of their cuffs properly and the smaller one, the one who seemed more aware of the situation, had gotten loose.

“Doesn’t matter,” that one said. His voice was softer, less intent on intimidation. “You’ve got bigger problems than us. She’s tasted blood, hasn’t she? Human blood? I bet she liked it.”

“Shut up.” Kyle pulled out the keys and the big guy turned around so he could get the cuffs unlocked.

“Don’t you worry,” he said. “We’ll take care of her.”

Kyle pushed him up against the hood of the car. These two were more trouble in a messy situation. Their arrogance made Kyle’s blood heat up. “Wrong,” he said, “you’re leaving town. Tonight. Got that?”

The guy didn’t answer. He glared.

The other one yawned. “Sure thing, boss,” he said in an amiable voice.

“For good,” Kyle added.

“Whatever you say.” The other one jumped off the hood, holding out the dangling handcuff to get unlocked. “Right, Nolan?”

Nolan nodded, grimacing as Kyle roughly unlocked the handcuffs. Kyle stepped back. Nolan stood and glared at Kyle. “Sure thing.” The voice was bitter. “Boss.” He sneered.

Kyle unlocked the other one’s cuff. They didn’t mention the rifle. They both stepped toward the shiny new Suburban. The small one beeped a car alarm, which no one in Idylwild used. He opened the driver’s door, then turned to smile at Kyle. “Say, boss,” he commented. “How’s that kid? He liked her down there. Looked like he might see some action. What do you think it’s like, kissing a wolf?”

“Get out,” Kyle growled, his voice full of knives. The pair laughed. Nolan howled a weak imitation of a wolf. They peeled out, letting smoke from their burning tires drift past Kyle’s face.

Kyle jumped in his car, tempted to pull them over for reckless driving, slap them with a ticket. He even flicked the lights on above his car as he pulled out of the parking lot. The red and blue danced through the forest. He gunned after the hunters. At the turnoff, though, he paused.

He leaned over the steering wheel, calming the storm under his skin. He wouldn’t let them win.

Flora pulled Moonwater’s black leather jacket off one sleeve at a time. He was oblivious, in a stupor she refused to call a coma. One arm of the jacket had been torn and dented with something sharp. She poked her finger through a hole in the leather. It had to be a sharp knife, she thought. She pushed up one sleeve of his long sleeve shirt. The material was sticky with blood and she forced her stomach to stop clenching up at the feel of syrup on her hands. Moonwater’s arm was bruised and scratched, mostly around his wrist where the jacket couldn’t protect him. But none of the cuts were very deep. Where was all of the blood coming from?

She tried lifting him enough to get the shirt off, but he was too heavy. She couldn’t balance him and get the shirt off all at once. She shoved the hem up around his neck. His skin was so pale,

covered with dark streaks of blood. Moonwater never worked out, but he was active. He'd grown something like four inches over the past year, giving him lanky limbs and a skinny physique.

She pulled off her sweater and tee shirt, putting the sweater back on. She didn't want to risk infecting him with bacteria from the creek, so she wiped up the blood with her dry shirt. There. By his shoulder, four ragged slashes tore through his skin. Looking closer, she could see the nasty depth of the wounds. Whatever attacked him had done serious damage. He could have a cut artery.

The weird thing was the cuts weren't bleeding anymore. She bundled up her shirt and pressed it on the wounds to stop bleeding, but they didn't even need it. The blood had already clotted. Flora sat back.

"What happened to you?" she whispered.

She heard something behind her. She turned just in time to see an animal duck behind a rock. She stepped closer.

It growled.

Chapter 3

Flora picked up a rock. She stood in front of Moonwater, weighing it in her palm. “Good dog,” she whispered in a soothing voice. “Go home now.” She had learned at a young age how to deal with dogs. Many people in Idylwild got their dogs from families in front of grocery stores or the shelter. They brought the puppies home to help guard remote houses. The dogs had little training and could be very unpredictable. Flora knew it was best to keep some distance.

She tossed the rock. Maybe she could distract the dog.

The growling ceased. Whatever it was snuffled at the rock she’d thrown. “Go home,” she said again. She picked up another rock. “Go on, get out of here.” She threw it farther down the beach. A medium sized dog jumped into the open, chasing after the stone she threw. Sure enough, it was a mutt without a collar. It disappeared into the fog. That could have been the guilty animal, but it seemed lost more than dangerous. Half-wild dogs were common around Idylwild.

She kneeled beside Moonwater again. She brushed his hair back from his forehead. His silence unnerved her. The fog covered the moon. Shadows hid his face. She didn’t need her eyes, though, to see him. He was part of her. She knew all of his stories. Their parents were neighbors, meaning he lived in the closest house a few minutes down their dirt road. No other kids lived within walking distance. As children, they depended on one another for entertainment. They planned to get married, then, with the simple understanding of destiny. They never formally broke up. The world got bigger than their forest sanctuary and all of the answers found new questions. Girls had crushes on Moonwater and he loved being the center of attention. His charm and humor won him many admirers. Flora resented him for that, how easily he gave them illusions. She refused to play along, preferring the reality of friendship to the superficial relationships he kept

falling into. She figured he'd grow up one day and maybe then they could recapture the connection they had as children. But she wasn't holding her breath.

And now it could be all over. They could have wasted all this time. She sat beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. She'd explained their friendship so many times to so many people who couldn't understand how they could be so close and yet not involved. He was like a brother to her, she sometimes said. They knew one another so well that there weren't any surprises. He was family. He was her best friend. And he would live. He had to live. Please.

Jake pulled into their parking spot at the Outside Inn. The rustic cottage rooms were all dark. A few beat up cars sat in the lot, but they looked like they belonged to permanent residents. Autumn wasn't tourist season.

The spot next to them was occupied, though, by a sleek BMW, the silver paint glimmering in the faint moonlight. Nolan stepped out onto the pavement, wondering how this city slick car had ended up out here in the middle of nowhere. He noticed a shadowy figure sitting inside the car. The shadow moved.

Nolan cursed under his breath, wishing he had some kind of gun on him. He'd thought this town would be easy going, soft from all their years without any hunters being around. But it was dangerous around here.

Jake leaned over the hood, aiming a revolver at the car. "Step away, kid," Jake whispered. "I've got him covered."

Of course, Jake thought of everything. Nolan leaned back against the side of their truck as the car door opened. Nolan was surprised to see a woman step beside him. She had fabulous long legs and a short skirt, shining blonde hair and sharp red fingernails. She smiled sweetly at the gun.

“You boys ought to be careful,” she said, her voice dark and full of honey. “This town doesn’t like outlaws.”

“What do you know about it?” Jake asked.

“Not much. Just that you have a friend in the area. He wants to meet you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Your shared interests intrigue him.”

“So what?”

“So you get to come with me.”

Nolan glanced at Jake but Jake kept staring at the woman. She smiled invitingly. “If you really want her blood, you’ll work with him on this,” she whispered. “Trust me.”

Kyle strode into the kitchen, slamming the swinging door with his palm. Helen smiled warmly next to the stove. She sipped a cup of tea. Anthony glanced up from the breakfast table. He kept cutting a piece off of the thick steak in front of him. The steak was so rare that blood seeped onto the plate. River was the only one who reacted to Kyle. He put down his own steak knife, concern in his eyes.

Kyle breathed deeply; summoning his years of police experience to keep him detached from the frustration simmering under his skin. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked Anthony.

Anthony speared his meat with a sharp fork. It seemed to be tough choice, eat the meat or answer the question. “Don’t get all worked up,” Anthony said, waving the fork in Kyle’s direction.

“I got hungry.” He shoved the steak in his mouth and chewed forcefully.

River had lost his appetite. He stared at Kyle with mute apprehension.

“Hungry?” Kyle asked in disbelief. “Lives are in danger and you’re hungry?”

“We’re close to the Moonwater,” Helen commented as if that explained everything. Helen was a trim woman in her forties. She radiated a vitality characteristic of her kind, an energy that kept her looking young. She managed to avoid the depression that was equally prevalent among werewolves. Her pale blue eyes glimmered with humor, masking the steel will and sinister energies in her blood.

“Don’t overreact,” Anthony warned, already sawing at his meat again. “But we smelled blood.”

Kyle shook his head in disbelief. This was supposed to reassure him? How could they be so casual about the disaster unfolding around them? He knew these people like family, had grown up in Idylwild with Anthony and Helen. But sometimes they were complete strangers.

“It could have been anything,” Anthony explained. “Some mountain lion’s kill or a coyote’s catch. Anything.”

“I never found Moonwater.”

A cold silence filled the room. Maybe they finally understood.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Helen said.

But a terrified light came into River’s eyes. He looked physically ill as he sat back.

Anthony cut his steak methodically, shaking his head. “He’s somewhere. Your boy is always in some kind of trouble. He just left early.”

“His truck was in the parking lot when I left.”

Anthony shrugged. “So he got a ride.”

“Has Flora called?” Kyle asked. “She would know something like that.”

Helen frowned. “Haven’t you talked to her?”

Kyle admired their absolute denial. He wanted to join their sense of security, their belief in happy endings. But River kept avoiding his eyes. The kid was hiding something. He was about to get in big trouble and he hoped no one would notice.

“What is it?” Surprising calm washed through Kyle. This kid had answers.

“I tried to stop her,” River insisted. “Please believe me.”

Helen placed her teacup on the counter and smiled. She walked over to River. Resting one hand on his shoulder, she spoke in a soothing voice. “We know you did, River. It’s all okay.” The beauty of the Pack was in her open acceptance of River’s deepest secrets. The bonds of the pack went deeper than family. They went into the roots of every member’s soul.

River crumbled, blinking rapidly to avoid tears. “She, uh, drank alcohol. I didn’t notice until it was too late.”

Helen’s hand on his shoulder tightened. Anthony stopped cutting his steak. He put the knife and fork down.

Kyle stepped closer to River. “You let her drink?” Alcohol was like mixing fire and gasoline when it came to werewolves. The Wolf drew strength from intoxication.

River stared at his hands. “Some of the others did. While I was . . . I wasn’t paying attention, I guess, and Moonwater, I mean, someone offered her something. I didn’t know. Honest.”

“You were supposed to watch her,” Anthony growled.

“I did! I tried. But I couldn’t look suspicious. I couldn’t baby-sit her. You didn’t say anything about her being psychotic. I thought she knew better.”

Anthony’s chill glare could wilt flowers. River shrank back against his chair. Helen let go of River’s shoulder and stared vacantly out of the window. “She did Change,” she whispered, reality settling into her.

Kyle shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Of course she Changed. “She attacked Moonwater,” he whispered. Voicing his fear made his gut clench. River’s skin turned ashen and Helen crossed her arms.

“We don’t know that,” Anthony said.

“We know what it means if she did,” Kyle answered. He could feel walls building in the room, chasms opening between their feet and his anger made him want to push these people as far away from him as he could. Despite his attachment, they were monsters.

“You wouldn’t.” Anthony stood up.

“It’s my son she attacked. You bet I would.”

“That’s personal, Kyle. It isn’t allowed.”

“The rules are clear, Tony. She hurts someone and she dies. There’s no room for interpretation.”

“You won’t kill her,” Tony said, his face set in a stern expression.

“She’s different, Kyle. You know that. The rules change for her.” Helen faced him, anguish in her eyes.

“Like hell they do.” Kyle glared. “I’m going to find my son. He needs my help.”

“You don’t know that. And what if you see Anya first? You may act irrationally, being this angry. Promise you won’t hurt her,” Helen pleaded. Even now, she saw her daughter with compassion.

“I can’t do that, Helen.” Kyle turned. He felt chasms split the floor into tiny pieces under his feet. He stood so far away from them, now. He understood their roles again, how Guardians and Werewolves had to maintain the highest level of respect for the packs and for the world. At any moment, friendships and love could be sacrificed. Kyle waded through the betrayal he left behind, thinking how easy it was to forget, to relax, and to think that the Wolf was only a small part of their

lives. When it commanded everything. They needed reminding sometimes. “Come to think of it,” he said, pushing the door open. “I didn’t notice Flora at the fire, either.”

The house could have been in some architecture magazine, one of those articles about modern life and rustic charm coming together in absolute harmony. But it was stuck so far away from a real road that photographers would have a hard time finding the place even if they looked for it. The fabulous wealth was wasted on pine trees and deer.

She pulled in beside a Landrover and beat up truck. She smiled at her passengers as she cut the engine. “Well?” she asked.

Jake shrugged. “This your place?”

She laughed delicately. “Oh, no. I’m visiting. Just like you.” She opened her door.

Nolan stepped out of the car. Though the driveway was packed dirt, which must have been a nightmare in the wet winter season, the parking area had been paved. Nolan watched her spiked heels, black on black pavement. No, mud didn’t belong out here. But whoever lived here also didn’t want people noticing him. Paved roads drew attention in this town.

The air smelled sweet and damp. Hulking pine trees crowded the house. Their immense black trunks stood like sentries in the night. The surrounding area had careful landscaping, embedded lights shining up the tree trunks and through ferns. A stonework path led up to the front door. The whole thing was surreal, really, like some twisted amusement park attraction. Nolan stepped over a small footbridge. A pleasant creek wound along the path, gurgling over polished river rocks. Someone had spent a lot of time setting this all up. It could almost be relaxing, some crazy retreat for rich people.

Two German shepherds appeared from behind a tree, growling deep in their chests and barring sharp teeth. Nolan paused.

“You sure we belong here?” he asked.

Her heels clicked on the pavement. “Sugar and Candy?” she crooned, striding up to the menacing dogs. “Be nice.” She scratched behind their ears, red fingernails bright against their black fur. “Don’t scare the men, now.”

The dogs transformed into happy puppies, pushing up against her and wagging long tails.

“She can pet me like that anytime,” Jake whispered, brushing past Nolan. He walked right up to her. “My, what big teeth they have,” he commented to the woman, his voice playful.

She smiled. “Indeed.”

Flora sat up when Moonwater moved. She’d been resting beside him, almost asleep but too anxious to relax. She kept remembering yesterday and the simplicity of life before Anya stepped off that plane. Everything had been so obvious and fragile.

Moonwater groaned, stretching his hands over his head. He winced and opened his eyes. “I feel awful,” he muttered. His voice was rough and dry.

“You’re going to a hospital,” Flora insisted. He’d understand, now that he’d sobered up, how important it was to listen to her. “Those cuts are deep.”

He blinked, confused for a moment. Comprehension washed into his eyes. He touched his shoulder, scrambled to his feet and walked to the beach, limping slightly. The fog blurred him and waves crashed on the shore. Flora stood, following him onto the sand. She touched his shoulder. He wouldn’t look at her.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I’m dead anyway.”

“What are you talking about? You’ll be fine. Even if that dog was rabid, you can get shots. But we have to go now.”

He laughed, crouching and running his fingers through the sand. “Flora, you have to believe me. You saw what she did.”

“Who?”

“Your sister.”

Flora shook her head. He was still in shock or something. “Moonwater, those cuts are deep. She would need a knife and I can’t imagine her doing that.”

“Maybe she wouldn’t need a knife.”

“You’re kidding, right? Those injuries are serious. She couldn’t do that with bare hands.”

Moonwater stood, grinning. His eyes had a serious light. “I wasn’t sure if you knew. You could have been in on it.” His voice dropped low and he stared into Flora’s eyes as if some truth lurked deep in her gaze. “She is family, after all.”

“I hardly know her.”

He nodded. “True. They must have sent her away. They couldn’t end her suffering.”

Flora grabbed his shoulders and stared at him with the same intensity he used on her. He was barely there at all, really. He was full of anger and distraction and some terrible grief.

“Moonwater, help me out,” she said gently.

He blinked. Tears welled in his dark brown eyes. “She did this.” His voice was so soft, thick like the fog surrounding them. “She had been drinking and got weird, left the fire. I followed her because I didn’t want her getting lost or anything out here. She stood on the beach. She closed her eyes and opened her palms up to the sky and I thought she was praying or something so I kept quiet. The fog was rolling in but the moonlight touched her, turned her into something else. I couldn’t move because even as she was terrifying, she was also beautiful. She howled. And then she saw me. She was gorgeous, Flora, long legs and white fur like some wolf on TV except she was bigger. And real. I just wanted to touch her, Flora. Just once.”

Flora stepped back, the weight of the story pressing into her skin. This was all wrong. He'd made some mistake, hallucinated or something. But she had cleaned his wounds. She heard that unearthly howl. She had nightmares of these exact images. She had to believe him.

"Flora, I don't expect you to help me kill her. She is your sister."

"I hardly know her."

"But I will make you promise me something." Now he held onto her shoulders, forcing her to look in his eyes. "Please. You have to promise that you'll help me."

"Of course," she whispered. "Anything, Moonwater. You know that."

"You'll have to kill me."

She shook her head.

"Please, Flora, you have to save me. I don't want this monster. I can feel myself changing already. It's like a shadow inside, creeping under my skin, growing roots in my bones. We've seen all of the movies, Flora. We know how this ends." He took Flora's hand. "I don't want to hurt anyone," he said.

She couldn't argue. Waves of emotion roared in her ears. Her blood felt like poison in her veins and she could explode at any moment. She blinked back tears, feeling the ending so close now, the last page right in her hands. "You're too late," she whispered.

Moonwater hugged her. "I'll kill her," she whispered. "I will kill her." The shared loss softened with his touch, his smell of leather and dust, sea salt and vague spices. Flora breathed all the way into her toes, leaning into him.

Moonwater's embrace tightened as if somehow he could hold onto the moment.

[Click here to email Lenka for further chapters or information about publishing *Moonwater*.](#)

Thanks for reading!