



The hot sequel to
**MATTERS OF
THE BLOOD**
Fall 2008 from
Juno Books

BLOOD BARGAIN

MARIA LIMA

"Keep this author on your watchlist. She'll be going places and fast. *Matters of the Blood* is everything a paranormal novel should be." —*Bookfetish*

Praise for the first Keira Kelly Novel
Matters of the Blood

“Keira Kelly is a complicated woman. Sensitive, a bit lazy, a woman who wears jeans and boots in her native Texas but has also spent substantial time clubbing in London, Keira has been given one mission by her supernatural family; to guard and direct her sad-sack human cousin. To her chagrin, Keira fails in that mission, and the consequences of that failure form a book that is full of more interesting surprises than a candy store.”

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of the award winning Southern Vampire series

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“Funny, sexy, mysterious, and lots of fun to read.”

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“Keep this author on your watch list. She’ll be going places and fast . . . All in all, this is one of the best titles that I have read in a long time. It’s a classy, teasing tale riddled with intrigue and paranormal bliss.”

—*BookFetish*

“With an emphasis on mystery, Maria Lima weaves a brilliant tale of supernatural power, revenge, and the excitement of newfound love.”

—*Darque Reviews*

“Lima is a natural storyteller and this book was a pleasure to read from the first page to the last. She has such a knack for writing characters that I swear I could hear their voices talking in a Texas drawl while I read. Get to your bookstore and demand this book!”

—*CrimeSpree Magazine*

“*Matters of the Blood* is a great page turner from first-time novelist Maria Lima. Her characters are believable and likeable (or dislikeable in some cases). Their interaction is lifelike and often grin-worthy.”

—*The Bookshelf Reviews*

“An excellent book, readable and gripping with varied characters, an interesting plot, and a great setting in small-town Texas. The narrator’s voice has an interesting blend of emotion and humor, and she makes some great side comments throughout the story. This book is the first of a series, and I look forward very much to the future episodes.” (5 Stars)

—*Curled Up With a Good Book*

MATTERS OF THE BLOOD BY MARIA LIMA

THE FIRST KEIRA KELLY NOVEL

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**BLOOD
BARGAIN**

MARIA LIMA



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Dear Reader,

Juno Books published Maria Lima's debut novel, *Matters of the Blood*, in 2007 in a trade paperback edition. It was so good we are publishing it again as a mass market paperback! (It will be available in September 2008.) Readers will get a chance to catch up if they missed it the first time or get a new copy to match its sequel—*Blood Bargain*.

We are offering you a “sneak peek” at *Blood Bargain* with this “sampler” and, as with *Matters of the Blood* before it, we think you will fall in love (or loathe, if appropriate) the supernatural and human residents of Rio Seco, Texas.

Blood Bargain has it all, starting with Keira Kelly, a strong, smart, funny heroine with paranormal powers, and other great characters (including a vampire lover, a true-blue Latina best friend, and Keira's 1200-year-old shapechanging Viking brother). There's a mystery or two to solve, dangers to overcome, plenty of supernatural goings-on, a page-turning plot . . . and a lot of 'tude.

Maria Lima gets the Texas Hill Country locale dead-on because she grew up in the Lone Star State (where her parents still live). Her Spanish is immaculate because she was born in Matanzas, Cuba. Maria started making up stories as far back as she can remember and began writing them down as soon as she could make marks with a crayon. She received a degree in journalism from the University of Texas and joined the corporate world cranking out marketing copy, feature stories, and book reviews. The fiction muse kept calling and in the spring of 2005, was finally fed as Maria's first published short story, “The Butler Didn't Do It,” was published in *Chesapeake Crimes I* and garnered an Agatha Award nomination.

Maria now spends most of her days working as a Senior Web Project Manager in the DC area. Most of her evenings and weekends are spent writing more about Keira and her world.

Visit Maria's Web site at www.thelima.com and drop by the Juno Books Web site (www.juno-books.com), too!

Look for *Blood Bargain* in bookstores everywhere in November 2008.

Paula Guran
Editor, Juno Books

SMALL TOWNS ARE LIKE GLACIERS. Moving slowly in their majestic beauty, ideas, mores, thoughts frozen in the ice—pretty to look at.

Occasionally, you see things happen, slight changes, tiny cracks in the ice, drips melting away piecemeal as Johnny Rodriguez takes a job in Austin and moves himself, his wife, the kids, mom and Aunt Betty out of the homestead. SueEllen Parker leaves her husband of fifteen years to live in quietly proud defiance with her best friend of even more years, Mary Rose Messing.

But overall, life continues as it was, these small ripples hardly changing the face of the ice. Until suddenly, one day, that which you thought was immutable, fixed in stone, carved into eternal ice sheers away, large chunks tearing away with a shriek, crashing and splintering into a million knife-edged shards.

If you're lucky, you're watching this from a safe distance, through binoculars of emotional dampeners. If you're not, you could be closer than you think, the looking glass of your life falsely making items closer than they appear, allowing one or more of those jagged shards to pierce your complacency.

One can even compare small towns to onions . . . you know, layers. As far as I knew, there weren't any ogres in Rio Seco, Texas . . . just maybe a few demons. Some of them were even the psychological kind.

Whether or not that's a good thing remains to be seen . . .

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOUND was more than a thought, less than a whisper.

Here . . . come . . . here . . .

I don't know how, but I heard the insistence behind the words and I knew they were meant for me.

Sis . . . sis . . . sis . . .

The sound faded, even less distinct than before. I strained to hear more.

Sisssss . . .

The last hissing sibilant was drowned out by the sound of a door shutting upstairs. I heard a shuffle of movement then muffled steps descending the thickly-carpeted staircase.

"Tucker?" My own voice sounded overloud to my ears.

Adam appeared at the bottom of the bedroom stairs holding two open bottles of wine in his left hand, each suspended by the neck. His right hand cradled two wine stems, each two-thirds filled, the red liquid gleaming in the low light.

He was dressed in his usual casual elegance—black silk dress shirt, sleeves rolled back to reveal

muscular forearms, collar open to show a small V of pale skin at the neck, shirt tucked into finely-woven custom-tailored black slacks. His feet were bare, owing to his habit of removing his shoes at the front door. Adam told me once he liked to feel the textures of the carpets, the fine grain of the hardwood floors, the cool of the tiles as he walked. Occasionally, he'd spend entire nights free of footwear, even outdoors.

He paused on the final step, giving me a small nod and a smile, lifting both hands. "I'm sorry I'm a bit later than I intended," he said, stepping down. "Did you—"

He slipped, stumbled a little, holding his elbows out as he tried to regain balance without spilling the wine. He seemed to waver a moment, then stilled and sank slowly to his knees, sitting back on his heels, arms held carefully in front, keeping the bottles and glasses level.

"Adam!" I scrambled towards him. I'd been reading in bed the past couple of hours, having decided since he was working late, I'd skip my usual meal at the Inn's restaurant, have a snack at the house and just curl up with a good book. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Keira. Seem to have slipped on the last step." With the liquid grace endemic to vampires and other non-humans, he rose to his feet, still holding bottles and glasses. There was no evidence of spillage, except for a single blood-red drop of wine sliding down the side of one glass. We both watched its slow progression as it followed the curve, went down the stem, then slid across the pale skin of the back of his wrist.

Adam caught my gaze and, without a word, extended his wrist to me, the dark drop of clear red poised, shimmering on the pulse point against the outline of blue veins beneath. I reached to cup his hand, two fingers extended underneath the offered wrist, holding it steady.

I held Adam's gaze as I bent my head, inhaling the wine's bouquet, deep notes of darkest red-purple woven through with hints of smoky oak and cedar. The scent of Adam's skin lay beneath, soft spice and coolness, with a hint of nutmeg and—

Something else.

My nostrils flared. Mingled with the wine, underneath the liquid—blood. Not Adam's, not the living rich scent of life, but concentrated, a heavier weight of *ironmetalcopper* infusing the liquid. The aroma of Adam's own blood lurked under this, just beneath his skin, pulsing, heat growing as I drew closer. My own pulse quickened as the scent reached the back of my throat.

This wasn't my wine that spilled, but his. Wine laced with blood extracts. Animal blood, not human, drawn from living donors, the procedure inflicting no more pain than a veterinarian's blood test.

Inhaling the rich fragrance, I closed my eyes, confused, not certain of his intent.

"Are you sure?" I whispered, opening my eyes to look up at Adam, watching his face.

He held my gaze, expression frozen in a neutrality held by the strongest of wills. A test then? A challenge? What was he doing?

An eternal heartbeat, two, then the briefest hint of a nod as a word I barely heard escaped his lips. “Yes.”

I closed my eyes again, letting myself get lost in the heady scent, then licked the crimson globule from his wrist.

The taste expanded in my mouth, stronger than a single drop should be, dark red *oakironblood* flavor exploding, catching me off guard. I swallowed and straightened, opening my eyes to look at Adam.

“Not what you were expecting?” He’d dropped tight neutrality for a composed amusement, any hint of emotion still hidden behind the mask.

“Not,” I answered, stepping back, letting go his wrist and taking the correct glass from his hand. I had to force myself to imitate his dispassionate detachment. We obviously weren’t going where I thought we were with his little display of whatever it was.

I took a sip of my own wine, to mask my confusion. The once heady Torre di Pietra petite Syrah, a favorite, now tasted flat, less real by comparison. I’d never tasted the special blood-laced wine before.

Ever since I’d moved in, our nightly wine had become a ritual; Adam would either return from his office up at the Inn with a couple of bottles, one for each of us, or—if Adam had elected to stay in and work from home that night—one of the Inn’s waitstaff would deliver the wine. The ritual never varied. The bottles would already be decorked and ready to pour. Adam would pour a glass for me, then

one for himself. We'd clink a wordless toast then enjoy, usually sipping in silence.

I'd come to think that Adam drinking his blood wine with me was his way of letting me in, letting me be a part of his life, part of the private side of Adam Walker.

"So what was that in aid of?" I asked, finally gaining enough control to speak.

Adam set the wine bottles down on a small table, then took a sip from his own glass before he spoke. "A thought," he said. "Simply that." He sipped again. "You called out for Tucker?"

Avoiding the subject, Adam Walker? I thought. So that's the way he's playing this. A thought, indeed. More like a whim which turned out to be less whimsical than he'd expected.

"I did," I answered. "Before I heard you upstairs, I was reading and I thought I heard a voice calling me. It said 'come here', then I heard it say 'sis'. Tucker wasn't here, was he?"

"He was not."

"I don't think I dozed off," I said, "but maybe . . . no, I'm pretty sure I was awake. Maybe I should call Tucker and see if something's wrong."

Adam's hand on my forearm stopped me. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why?"

"I don't think your brother would appreciate the interruption."

"I'm sorry, what?"

Adam's expression, accompanied by the raising of his right eyebrow, could only be called a smirk.

“Interr—what? You *know*? How could you possibly know?” My mind zoomed to a place I didn’t particularly want to go—to where my brother and his lover were doing things I wish Adam and I were doing. Except Adam and I hadn’t been doing *anything* in that area for more days than I cared to count, which is one of the reasons I’d been so confused about the whole spilled wine thing.

“Niko is tied to me by blood and bond,” he answered. “When you called Tucker’s name, I instinctively—“

“Holy crap, you can read Niko’s mind?”

He laughed. “No, not exactly. I can sense many things, strong emotion being the . . . shall we say, loudest. I don’t think either Tucker or Niko would welcome your phone call.”

“Huh.”

Chalk that up to Vampire Lesson #694. I’d only been with Adam for a few months. Some days, I felt as if I knew everything there was to know about him; evidently, this wasn’t one of those days.

Of course, learning about each other was par for our particular course. When Adam found out last year that I was as supernatural as he was—more so, actually, because I’d been born that way—he’d been as interested in my abilities as I was in his. Problem was, I wasn’t sure what those abilities were quite yet. Like a child entering adolescence, I was beginning my own Change, moving into what would eventually be my nature: weather witch, healer, shapeshifter, necromancer. Odds were, since my father and all

six of my elder brothers were shifters, I'd be joining them, but that wasn't a given. My own experience remained completely out of the realm of the usual. Six months ago, I started having visions and feeling the power surges that heralded Changing—some twenty years ahead of schedule. My omniscient double-great-granny and matriarch of our clan figured it out long before I did and sent my brother to watch over me. So far, my body failed to follow any sort of normal pattern. By now, I should be Changed. But, six months after onset, I still experienced the odd surge of power at random times, but nothing much more. No wonder I was hearing things.

“Okay, well, I guess I was just dreaming then,” I said. “I sincerely doubt my brother is calling for me when he's . . . busy.”

“I'm quite sure of that.” Adam smiled and took another sip of his wine as he walked toward the bed. He picked up a copy of this week's edition of the *Hill Country News* from the nightstand, set the wine down and, as he started reading the paper, unbuttoned and shrugged off his shirt, then climbed onto the bed—the picture of domestic bliss—still reading.

“Hey,” I said, walking to the bed, setting my own glass on the other nightstand. I crawled across the mattress, settling in at his side. “The night's not all that old yet and I've still got a few hours before I need to meet with the realtor guy about the mortuary sale.”

“The estate agent, yes. He sold it quickly, didn't he?” he said absently.

“Well, now that Marty’s dead and my family’s moved, no one really wanted to deal with it. I just let the realtor do what he thought was best. It’s not like the family needs a funeral home. I sign the final paperwork, around eight A.M. or so. Evidently realtors don’t work at night.”

Adam nodded, still intent on something he was reading. I had no idea what it could be since most stories in the small town weekly were along the lines of what the week’s school menu items would be and discussing area bond voting issues and what not.

“So you want to?” I snuggled closer to Adam. Hey, it didn’t hurt to try. I wasn’t sure why the recent lack, but I thought it was time to end the dry spell and, from his action earlier, maybe he’d thought about it, too.

Adam looked at me over the newsprint, folded it carefully, took a pen and circled something before placing both on the bedside table on his side of the bed. “His side” . . . when had we chosen sides?

Six months ago, this thing between us was all “What the heck are you doing in my very obscure little redneck corner of the world”? Now, evidently, we had sides—both of the bed and philosophically. We’d agreed to disagree on whether he should hunt for his blood fix—especially since I mostly sided with his second-in-command, Niko. I held the opinion that hunting was fine as long as you ate what you killed and in Adam’s case, and most of the vampires at the Wild Moon, they didn’t even need to kill their prey: local fauna, carefully managed by Niko in his

role as wildlife manager. Vampires may not need human blood, but they did need blood to survive. Adam refused to hunt, but continued to subsist on the blood extract-laden wine, which I thought was a poor substitute. We managed to sublimate our difference of opinion most of the time. Tonight had been a bit fraught already, so I figured a little closeness couldn't hurt.

"What did you circle there? In the paper? You seemed so interested."

"Nothing . . . well, perhaps something," he corrected himself.

I made an attempt to emulate the slightly sardonic raised eyebrow that came so naturally to him. I failed miserably and probably looked somewhat demented. My eyebrows had never learned independent movement.

"It's a ranch," Adam said.

"Excuse me, a what?"

I sat up from my semi-recline and reached over him to snag the paper with my fingertips. I had a long reach, but it was a very big bed.

"Actually, it's an advertisement for a ranch for sale. I wish to buy it."

Again I tried for the raised brow. Again I failed.

"Ha, funny. You own a ranch—well, more of a fancy haven for vampires to hang out. You thinking of going native? Working cattle, riding horses?"

Now that was a picture indeed. Adam Walker, undead king of the local vampire tribe, long black hair, green eyes, and pale skin, all decked out in faded

jeans, Lucchese boots, western shirt and . . . oh my everloving overactive imagination . . . *chaps*. Jesus. I seriously needed either a cold shower or a hot vampire. Ten guesses as to which I preferred and the first nine don't even come close to counting.

I tossed the newspaper to the side and ran my hand up Adam's leg, the fine weave of his trousers smooth to my touch. I dropped my head to his shoulder, tasting his skin as I murmured, "What say we talk about ranch ads later? Let's spend the next couple of hours doing something a hell of a lot more interesting."

My shoulder kiss turned into a neck nuzzle. I moved my hand further up his thigh, across his bare belly and up his chest. Under my touch, his skin was cool at first, his natural temperature heating up as the energy between us built. I wasn't sure if this was magick or something else. It didn't matter.

We'd only started having sex a couple of months ago. I'd been willing to go for it right away. My initial reluctance when I knew him in England had been due only to the fact I'd thought he was human. When I discovered differently, I was ready to act on the attraction.

But Adam was old-fashioned. He'd wanted to woo me, to court me. So, for four months following Adam's arrival in Rio Seco and my cousin Marty's brutal murder, Adam played the suitor.

He'd started with traditional standards, a single rose, elegant dinners at fine restaurants in Austin or San Antonio and then, bit by bit upped the stakes, no pun intended. I'd enjoyed every decadent minute of it.

By week six of the sweet onslaught, I'd been ready to lay down an ultimatum to get laid, but then he pulled out all the stops and handed me an envelope with tickets . . . tickets to a three week holiday in a remote vampire encampment at the Arctic Circle during the height of polar night. We'd spent the greater part of the time in bed . . . not sleeping.

When we got back to Rio Seco, I hadn't even bothered to go back to my own house. I'd taken all my luggage and went straight to the Wild Moon Ranch and Adam's place. When I asked for closet space, he'd looked at me, seemed about to ask a question, but then shrugged, smiled, and bowed to the inevitable. I'd been there ever since.

The sex was great, the company even better. Adam would spend a few hours a night doing ranch and other vampire business. I'd amuse myself, something I'd already managed to do for two long years babysitting cousin Marty. Compared to that, this was cake . . . with sprinkles on it.

I smiled against Adam's skin, remembering how hard he'd worked, how earnest he'd been to make a good impression. He was definitely different from any of my previous liaisons.

My neck nuzzle turned into a kiss, deep, intense and oh, yes, most definitely a prelude to much, much more. I slid over, moving on top of Adam, letting my hands, my body, show him just how much he'd come to mean to me. How much I wanted . . .

Our skin heated with the contact, the energy growing, building, generated by two supernatural people

letting down all their walls. Adam reciprocated, his hands skimming my sides, wrapping around my back, his legs twining with mine. Yes.

I needed more—more skin, less clothing. I sat up with a moan, hands scrambling to take off my T-shirt. Adam's hands tangled with mine as he pushed my hands to the side, grabbed the neck of the cotton tee and ripped it down the middle, pushing the pieces off me. We were both sitting up now, my legs wrapped around his hips, only the thin cotton of my panties and his trousers keeping us apart.

I bent my head to his, losing myself in another kiss, taking, demanding, needing to connect. I threw my head back as the heat rose, gasping with the need to breathe.

A low growl issued from Adam's throat as he bent his head, lips to my neck, mouthing, nuzzling, tasting, then nipping a little, teasing me.

"Yes." I arched in pleasure as I hissed the word, palming the back of his head and pressing it to me.

His lips moved against my skin as he licked me again. I felt a sudden scrape, then a sharp pressure/pain.

Finally, I thought. *Finally*.

Adam's fingers dug into my back, slid into fists as a huge shudder gripped his body. He froze then, every muscle stone. He didn't pull away, didn't continue.

I kept silent, waiting. I knew what he'd nearly done.

After a moment . . . an eternity . . . during which the only sound in the room was our mutual harsh

breathing, Adam lifted his hands from my back, placed them on my biceps with a gentle stroke. His head dropped to his chest with a huge exhalation.

“What?” I whispered. There had been a word buried in his sigh.

I pulled away a little, brought my hands up to cradle his face.

“Adam, what?”

With a visible effort, he dropped his hands to his thighs, shuddered again and with a deep intake and release of breath forcibly relaxed.

“No.” The word hung out there, bald and blunt.

I blinked, not sure I understood.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

Adam slid back and off the bed, moving about three feet away. His erection was still visible through the thin fabric.

I scrambled to join him, to confront him. I was sure we looked a sight, both of us half naked, still flushed with arousal, except mine was quickly turning to anger. Damn it all, I was going to get to the bottom of this. He could not just keep ignoring me.

As I opened my mouth to speak, the not-so-dulcet tones of my mobile phone rang.

CHAPTER TWO

ALONG WITH THE ROLE of vampire lover I'd also assumed the job of occasional Renfield . . . well, maybe not Renfield, but definitely the daytime representative of a nocturnal (duh) vampire. I didn't procure babies, young virgins, or goats, not even blood—just paperwork and legal dealings.

Dealing with humans was part of my resume in the supernatural family business. And, although I preferred night to day, I could deal with it. It had never been a problem before, but then it had never interrupted too-long-delayed whoopie, either.

And now, a supposedly brief appointment had stretched into the middle of the afternoon. I was not a happy Renfield.

It was Adam's not-so-bright idea I should be here, losing sleep and listening to an extremely annoying real estate broker. Adam was looking to acquire the last bit of ranch land adjacent to the Wild Moon that wasn't nature preserve.

In fact, it was also Adam's *way* short of brilliant idea to have given my mobile phone number to the brokerage. It was Kevin, the annoying real estate

guy representing the ranch sale, who'd called and interrupted Adam's and my not-sex. Adam thought he was making things convenient for me—you know, I had an appointment already to sign paperwork regarding the mortuary sale, why not spend a little more time and conveniently take care of this business, too? Except *my* real estate guy didn't handle ranches. He also did *not* have my private mobile number. I was picky about that sort of thing.

Adam had meant to talk to me about the ranch, but I'd distracted him. Or so he said. Whatever. It wasn't as if I was the only one in that bed.

After a confusing phone call with Kevin, then an explanation from Adam about rezoning and a referendum and developers and other things I didn't want to talk about right then, I'd given up on finding out why buying ranches was more important than great sex and agreed to meet with the agent. It was close to seven A.M. by then, so I took a shower and let Adam go to sleep while I'd tried to get ready for the day ahead.

In the interests of keeping it all in the family, I'd risked interrupting *things* and dragged my brother out of his own comfy bed and from the side of his own vampire lover so he could join in my frustration and sleeplessness. He *totally* owed me. If my great-great-granny could send him here to be my babysitter, then Tucker got to be dragged along on the less fun errands, too.

It wasn't as if I knew anything about ranch land, other than what I'd gleaned over the years living in

Rio Seco. Adam had thought (probably rightly) that purchasing this land site unseen (so to speak) was likely to attract attention. So, here we were, Tucker and I, listening to the very unnecessary spiel from a guy who seemed to think my face was somewhere in the middle of my chest. My brother was all too amused.

“It’s about five hundred acres all told, got a nice creek running through the middle of it.” Kevin Barton gestured, his hands pointing past the smallish house on the left. “The creek’s a couple hundred yards back there, past the foreman’s house and the bunkhouse. Lots of oaks, most of it’s unimproved, but the main house is really nice. And your friend is in luck, property’s priced to move quick.”

I tried to listen as I shaded my eyes from the afternoon sun. Early morning had crawled into mid-afternoon as our original appointment with the broker got delayed. Kevin had called my mobile before Tucker and I had been even halfway to the ranch property and asked to postpone the meeting until two. After some choice words, I’d agreed and Tucker and I had made a detour and spent the next couple of hours getting some power-napping in at my house, a place I hadn’t been to in a while.

At least I wasn’t completely sleep-deprived, but I was definitely in need of some caffeine. We’d overslept a little and hadn’t had time to stop by Bea’s café for more than a single to-go mug. As a result, my mood was less than agreeable. All I really wanted to do was to get this farce over with and go back to the ranch to catch some shut eye.

It was only late March, but the beginnings of the Texas heat was already making its presence known. Daytime temps were running in the eighties with a hint of ninety hovering just over the horizon. This was the part of the year I hated most. Summer not-so-lite. This part of Texas really didn't have much spring. In fact, in my opinion, we only had two seasons: summer and not-quite-summer. Occasionally, we'd get winter . . . about a day's worth in mid-January.

I'd slathered on some SPF 50 before I'd left the house; tan was something alien to me. All my life, I'd mostly stayed out of the sun since my skin—inherited from my faery mother—was only a shade darker than Adam's and had a terrible tendency to burn.

Geared up in jeans and a light long-sleeved cotton shirt over a tank top, I was ready for bear . . . or ranch buying. A black gimme cap I'd appropriated from my late cousin's funeral home topped off my attire and helped shade my face. Hard to avoid sun at the peak of mid-afternoon, though. Even the expensive shades weren't helping much.

"Okay if I take a look around?" Tucker straightened up from his lean against the porch railing of the main house. The place was really nice, small, but well built, obviously cared for over the years. Not that it mattered. Adam wasn't planning on living here after all. Just buying the place as a precautionary measure. The vampires had been at the Wild Moon since this past October and had managed to keep a low profile. Wasn't too hard, around here, mostly folks kept to themselves.

Kevin shrugged. "Be my guest," he said. "Just stay out of the way of the corral. Hear Pete's breaking a new horse. He gets pretty cranky with strangers around."

"Pete?" I turned back to Kevin, who was standing in the shade of a giant live oak.

"The foreman," he answered. "Been working for the judge for awhile now."

"Judge?" Tucker asked.

"Judge J. D. Pursell," answered the broker. "County judge. He's retiring at the end of the month and Bitsy's none too fond of the ranching life."

"There's a person named Bitsy?" *Jeez*, I hope she's twelve, and his daughter, I thought, because *really*.

Kevin chuckled. "Elizabeth's her given name," he said. "His wife. Hear she's of the trophy persuasion." His hands started to move, cupped upwards. He seemed to think better of it and aborted the motion. Great. I'd already spent close to an hour with this guy ogling my own breasts and now I had to listen to him describe Bitsy, with all the attending male chauvinist hand gestures. So Bitsy, evidently, was not so much twelve as twenty-something, tanned, most likely with frosted hair, frosted pink and highly unnatural nails, and a penchant for lunch and tennis bracelets. Figures. I didn't know this judge, but there were too many like him around. I'd bet anything that he had a former Mrs. Judge and mother of his children somewhere around.

"I imagine she prefers San Antonio or Austin," I said aloud. "This place a little too remote?"

“Got that ’bout right,” Kevin said. “They’ve got a new place up in one of those McMansion subdivisions outside of San Antonio.” He leaned in a little, dropping his voice, although there was no one around to hear. “I heard through the grapevine that Ms. Bitsy is buying all new furniture for the new house and that’s why the quick sell on this one. Kind of surprised me, though. Judge P’s old man bought this place dirt cheap during the Depression and it’s been in the family ever since. Guess now that it’s just the two of them, though . . .”

He let his voice trail off as if to intimate there was more to the story. I got the feeling I was supposed to huddle closer and join in the gossip. Not likely. I’d already had enough of Kevin Barton and I was not about to put my breasts in closer proximity to him. I was pretty sure Kevin had his own version of Bitsy at home. Not that I was in favor of the ’til death do us part type of marriage, necessarily. Marriage for life wasn’t exactly a model in my family. Couldn’t really be when life was just short of immortality. I just hated the good ol’ boy penchant for dumping the first wife without much warning to marry a younger version. Their first (and sometimes second) marriages never ended well. A lot of times, the original wife and kids suffered from financial hardships, while the second Mrs. Good Ol’ Boy raked it in, unlike the more rational arrangements of my own family.

“Their new place is nice,” Kevin added in a more normal tone of voice as he realized I wasn’t going to play the gossip game. “Three acres per house

minimum and private tennis courts, pools, and a really amazing golf course.”

Sounds like the last place I'd ever want to be, but these types of developments had become too damned pervasive for my tastes. Too much of that going on up Highway 281 and further, places that were once sprawling ranch land cut up for urban sprawl, every year, getting closer to Rio Seco. Come to think of it, that's probably what Adam meant about the rezoning. The state conservation area couldn't be touched, but the Pursell place was an outlet mall and subdivision waiting to happen. Yeah, we were pretty far out from the madding crowd, but the folks in San Marcos, Katy, and Allen had thought that, too, and now all those locations had ginormous temples to the retail gods.

“Kevin, you hear anything about any commercial rezoning up around here?” I asked. If anyone would know, he would. He would, of course, have an eye out for new sales possibilities.

He nodded. “There's been talk in town meetings. This is a pretty good crossroads once some of the towns get a little bigger. Could be a prime location for a developer. Nothing's come of it yet, though. Judge P said he was fixin' to sell the place, but not to some developer. They've all been arguing the zoning for a couple of months now. Coupl'a real loud mouths thinking to bring in tourist money. Don't think it'll come to a decision on the zoning until Judge P retires next month. He's a pretty big influence on the rest of them.”

“He's there in his capacity as judge?” I asked, confused. Texas politics wasn't my strong suit—hell,

most times, politics in this state were incomprehensible to even those whose job it was—but I was pretty sure a county judge had no official place in a town meeting.

“Nah,” Kevin answered. “He’s there as a private citizen. Thing is, once he retires, some folks gonna start seeing him as a weekend landowner, since he doesn’t live here anymore.”

“Yeah, I see that,” I said. “Thanks. I guess if he sells the place, then it’s all moot.”

Kevin shrugged. “Depends. Your friend wanting to move here or just use as an investment?”

“Neither.” I wondered how much Adam had told Kevin in yesterday evening’s discussion which I hadn’t been privy to. “He owns the adjacent land and just wants to avoid exactly what we were just talking about.”

“Kay then, guess we should get on with it, so we can get to the point where you want to sign the papers.” Kevin grinned and motioned with his hand as if it was all settled. Nice realtor’s trick, that, but totally unnecessary.

“What happens to Pete?” Tucker crouched down near Kevin, idly picking up a stick and making circles in the dirt.

“Happens?”

“When the ranch is sold,” I said, understanding where my brother was headed with his question. “What happens to the current staff?”

Kevin snorted a laugh. “Staff? Ain’t no one here but Pete and a few, you know . . .” He made a hand gesture that could mean anything from “shoo fly” to “around the world”.

“Know what?”

He looked around a bit and dropped his voice into the same almost conspiratorial tone he’d used before. “I imagine there are a coupl’a hands, you know, of the exchange variety.” He gave us a wink with a bit of a smirk.

I wasn’t sure what he was getting at, but all it was missing was the “nudge, nudge” to make the look even more disgusting. “Since Pete’s foreman, guess he’ll be looking for a new job.”

“I imagine that would make him a wee bit cranky.” Tucker stood from his crouch in one swift movement, startling Kevin, who took a step back.

Kevin grimaced, his jaw setting as he stared at my imposing six-foot-four Viking brother. I knew Tucker was doing this on purpose. For all his amusement at my expense, he obviously liked Kevin Barton about as much as I did, and it wasn’t beyond him to use his height and presence as an advantage. I didn’t think Kevin was aware of it, but I could see the machismo percolating.

“Imagine so,” Kevin said, leaving the shade, moving away from Tucker. He took my arm as he approached, leading me away from the front of the house, toward the other buildings, some fifty yards to the right on a small rise. We’d parked his over-expensive yuppie truck in the muddy drive near the corral. I’d offered to drive, since my Land Rover Defender was meant for this kind of terrain, but Kevin insisted on showing off his new toy. Whatever. I’d left the Rover in the parking lot of the café and

he'd be the one scraping mud off a fancy paint job and from the overdone interior . . . or at least paying someone else to do it.

Tucker stayed where he was, his face showing no emotion, no feeling. I shot him a glance full of meaning. He grimaced back at me, then threw me an engaging grin.

"I'll go look around," he said to no one in particular. Good. My brother was always able to read me fairly well. "Look around" meant scope out the place as only a 1200-year-old shapeshifter could. Not that I expected anything out of the ordinary, but I'd heard stories of ranch hands doing some creative growing of less-than-legal herbs on these weekend-only type properties. Absentee owners often meant a very lucrative side business for underpaid hands. Not that I really minded, but the last thing either side needed was a delay in the sale due to the discovery of an illegal activity. If Tucker found anything, we could always come back under cover of darkness and take care of it.

"You do that." I tossed the words over my shoulder, and turned my attention back to Kevin.

"So, what about the hands?" I asked as we walked.

"They go back." Kevin stepped in front of me, stopping to open the door to what was obviously a bunkhouse.

"Back?" I stepped through into the dark interior. It was slightly cooler than it was outside, but not by much. I could tell this building would quickly turn

into a roasting oven during the summer months. No sign of air conditioning either. Just a couple of ratty old ceiling fans up high. Place looked clean, though, just run down . . . pretty much the opposite of the precisely kept main house. I was betting the foreman's place was nicer than this, too.

A row of steel-framed bunks lined either side of the concrete-floored building, small windows broke the monotony of the wooden wall about every ten feet. It looked very much like an army barracks. Not that I'd ever actually been in one, just seen what Hollywood thought they looked like.

I suppose it wasn't too bad of a place for a ranch hand to live. Most of these guys were probably single, drifters; the last of a dying breed. Places like Texas, Colorado, Wyoming still had cowboys—men who preferred life among livestock, drifting from place to place in search of whatever.

Soft voices in the distance filtered through the hum of the cicadas. I realized I could hear the men at the corral. Cowboys, yeah, but here, they mostly spoke a broken mixture of Spanish and English, as if under-educated in both languages. Spanglish: common language of most Hill Country ranches.

“What did you mean by ‘back’?” I asked again.

“You know,” he said, moving forward to join me. “Back across.” He made a swimming motion with his arms.

“They're wetbacks?”

One meaty hand patted me on the shoulder, as the other came up to his lips. “Shush. Exchange

students.” His eyes twinkled as he emphasized the euphemism that I suddenly understood. *Students*—more like severely underpaid and under-appreciated labor.

“Once the contract is signed and the place is deeded over, Judge’ll make sure they get back. Or go work on another place if someone needs ’em.”

I shrugged away from his touch. Yeah, I knew this went on in various places, ranches nearby, even. But I’d always thought it was something only done by the good ol’ boys trying to buck the system. Not by respectable pillars of the community. I should have known, I suppose, should have at least guessed. The ratio of money and power to poverty and hunger never really changed. The powerful would always overshadow the needy—here, or in the bowels of the Welsh mountains where I was a child. Only the venue changed.

“Jesus, Kevin,” I exclaimed. “He’s a county judge. How the—”

Sounds of shouting interrupted. Kevin and I exchanged glances and ran outside.

CHAPTER THREE

TWO COWBOYS were holding back a third man just outside the horse corral. The man wasn't struggling, just standing there, a lost look on his face. As we approached, another man split from the group and came toward us.

"Hey," he said, nodding once to Kevin. He looked over at me with that stereotypical I'm-a-guy-and-you-have-tits appraising look—the one that started at said tits, traveled down to the hip region and then finally, as if dragged there through mud, to my face. Great, another one.

A sardonic smile crossed the weathered features as if giving his seal of approval. He wasn't old, probably close to my own age—maybe thirty-seven, thirty-eight (except he looked it and I didn't)—just looked as if he'd done this all his life, clothes cowboy rough, dirt-smearred and broken in—the real McCoy. Since he looked about as Mexican as my brother, I figured this was probably the foreman, Pete. The other three men were definitely Latino.

I returned Pete's stare, letting just a little of my don't-mess-with-me-I-could-be-a-predator peek through. Not

enough to really frighten, but just enough to make most men a little uneasy. Pete didn't disappoint. He shifted his stance, ever so subtly turning towards Kevin.

"What's going on, Pete?" Kevin asked. I could tell he was trying to keep it low key. After all, I was a hot prospect. If this ranch sold for the asking price, he'd be making a hefty commission. He'd listed the place, so he wouldn't have to split it with anyone else. Six percent of half a million translated to a whole lot of six-packs and Las Vegas weekends.

Pete shrugged, stepped back a ways and spit into the dirt. He tucked one hand into a back pocket and dug up a battered can of Skoal. He pulled out a hefty pinch and stuffed it into his mouth before answering. I wasn't sure if this was a calculated move, or just habit.

"Ain't nothin'. Just a couple of the boys gettin' a bit antsy." He didn't look either of us in the eye when he spoke.

"About what?" I asked.

Pete's gaze rose and met mine again. "Nothin' that need concern y'all. I'll handle it."

Kevin looked at me, then back at Pete. "Fine. We'll go on, then. Keira?"

Kevin's hand was out, motioning forward, as if to direct me. I wasn't about to go that easily. Something didn't sit right with me. The man they were holding back looked tired, run down. Not that the other two men were spic and span, on the contrary, they'd obviously been working hard. Sweat stains on their shirts, dirt and mud streaked jeans spoke of the manual labor

they did all day. Thing was, the little guy's shirt was nearly threadbare, his jeans were cheap imitations of the other men's Levis and Wranglers. His face, though mostly unlined, was weathered and tired looking and didn't have the telltale hat line the others had. He couldn't be older than his early thirties, but his eyes looked a great deal older.

"Who is that man?" I stepped forward, intending to walk the few yards to the group. The two men hadn't let up their grip on the smaller one.

Pete spit out another disgusting brown glob. This one landed far too close to my shoes for comfort. I was glad I had boots on.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean nothin'. Y'all don't need to worry 'bout this guy. He's just some spick trespasser. Judge P don't like no strangers on his property."

A defiant glare met my own curious gaze.

"Okay, fine," I said, ignoring the pejorative. "I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it. Why all the hubbub?"

Pete shrugged. "Workin' a new horse. Didn't want her to spook."

I could buy this, except there wasn't a horse around, and though I couldn't be sure from this distance, the hoof marks inside the corral weren't fresh. In fact, I couldn't smell horse at all. If they'd been working a new horse, it hadn't been anytime today.

Kevin tried again. "Look, I've seen enough here. Why don't we go on back into town. We can go over the paperwork—"

“Yo, sis, ’sup?” Tucker sauntered into view from behind the horse barn. His easy gait belied the question I could see in his eyes.

“Apparently, a trespasser,” I said, keeping my gaze on Pete’s face. His expression didn’t change, nor did his posture, but I saw a muscle in his cheek twitch just once. I’d never met the man before a few minutes ago, but that was standard male-speak for “I’m tense.”

“Huh.” My brother closed the distance, stooping over on the way and picking up a loose stick. “That happen often around here?” He asked, looking first at Pete and then at Kevin, who was standing as far away from us as he could without actually leaving. The broker was decidedly uncomfortable. He technically represented the Judge in this sale, but he also needed to play the congenial realtor with me, make sure that I was happy.

Tucker’s stance was open, relaxed; his hands played with the stick as if he were bored. I knew better.

“Good question, bro,” I said and moved closer to him. “My friend wants a place with privacy,” I addressed Kevin. “If trespassers are common, well . . .” I let my voice trail off and watched Kevin’s face blanch, then turn red.

“I’m sure—”

“Ain’t had any before.”

Pete’s declaration overrode Kevin’s hesitant answer.

“Ah.” I moved a little closer to the small group of cowboys. By this time, the other hands had left the

barn and joined the party. Two other men joined the first two. None of them spoke a word. “Then how come this guy came here? After all, this isn’t exactly the information highway. This piece of land is about as far from anywhere in this county that you’re likely to get. Far as I know, there’s not really anything that this is between. And he sure as hell doesn’t look like an advance scout for a mall developer.”

“Between?” I’d obviously confused Kevin.

“You know, between here and there . . . or there and here. Whatever. This isn’t a likely property for anyone traveling through to cross.” I was right. The reason I was here was because it was the only place between the highway crossings and the Wild Moon. Shit.

I shot a glance at Tucker, who’d picked up on my unspoken thought.

He stepped closer to the group of men, towering over them. He topped me by six inches and the tallest of the men by at least a foot. They each were compact, sinewy tough cowboys, of the type that roamed Central and South Texas when this was Mexican land.

“Were you looking for the Wild Moon?” My brother asked the captive man.

“*Perdoneme,*” the soft voice barely registered at first. “*No comprendo, señor. No hablo Ingles.*”

Oh, bloody fucking hell. My Spanish was of the “una cerveza, por favor” and “La plume de ma tante” kind, semi-remembered lessons in Spanish and French mixed in with the everyday colloquialisms common in Central Texas. I couldn’t actually speak

the language. I didn't think Tucker was any better at it than I was.

"Who can help translate?" I asked, looking around at the men. The ground suddenly became a great deal more fascinating than any of us, because to a man, including Pete, they dropped their gazes and stared intently dirtward.

"Kevin?"

"Sorry," he said with a shrug. "I can barely order a beer." As he spoke, his hand suddenly came up and started groping at the phone on his hip. He murmured an excuse and stepped aside to answer it.

"Perdoname, senorita, senor, busco a mi hermano." The small man tried to step forward, but was blocked by one of the others.

"*Callate!*" The cowboy hissed at the trespasser, then tipped his hat toward me. "Sorry, ma'am. He don't—"

"I'll handle this." Pete glared at the cowboy, who immediately looked back at the ground.

Okay, I'd had enough of this posturing. "I'm thinking that you and your boys need to take this gentleman—" I started to talk, intending to tell the foreman just what I thought.

"Hey, Keira, sorry to interrupt, but I have to get back." Kevin's voice held apology, if not a little relief. I knew this whole exchange was killing him inside. The last thing a broker wants is some sort of dustup at a property he's showing. Especially with a jerk like Pete.

"What is it?" I kept my eye on the cowboys in the corral, their hands still on the small man's shoulder.

None of them were moving, just standing, waiting for some decision to be made.

“Got a double 911-star page from the Sheriff’s office. All hands to report. Seems we got some missing kids.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I turned to Kevin, who shrugged.

“I’m a volunteer fire fighter. Part of the job. Guess they’re mounting a search.”

Huh, that wasn’t good. I nodded at Kevin, then shot a glance at Tucker who was staring at the men, as if trying to memorize their faces.

“Okay, fine, let’s go. Pete, what are you going to do with this gentleman?”

Pete scowled at me, obviously not wanting to answer. Tucker glared back at him, his silence saying more than I was willing to say out loud. After all, even if I thought Tucker and I could take all those guys, I wasn’t about to advertise our special nature—not to these clowns and especially not to Kevin.

“We’ll take him outside the judge’s property.” Pete spat out the words.

“Not good enough,” my brother growled.

“Where the hell d’you want me to take him, then? Give him a free ride back to Me-hee-co?” Pete spat again, this time, spewing out a brown globule of chewing tobacco. He was obviously angry, but not daring enough to stand up to Tucker.

“A humane person would take him into town and drop him at the café . . . or even up to the bus stop up at the main town crossroads,” Tucker answered, his voice as neutral Switzerland.

“We’ll take Mr. Trespass into town,” I said, striding forward. “That’ll get him out of your hair.” And answer a few questions for me, too, while we were at it.

Pete grabbed my arm as I stepped past him. “You can’t do that.”

“Why the hell not?” I yanked my arm out of his grip, impatient with all this crap.

“Yeah,” Tucker said. “Why the hell not?” He’d softened his voice even more. A small part of me wanted to see the asshole foreman stand up to Tucker and to see my brother go all hellhound on him.

The sane part of me just wanted us to get out of there with that poor scared man. Whatever he wanted, we could figure it out, see if we could get it for him, make sure he had some money and bus fare to take him home. Then I’d make sure Adam not only fired Pete’s ass, but I’d talk to the local landowners to make sure he didn’t get another job anywhere around here. Whatever the trespasser had done, I was sure that it didn’t warrant this kind of treatment. I figured Pete probably treated most of the hands, exchange or not, pretty badly.

“He . . . we’ll . . . I’m foreman here, and I’m supposed to take care of this stuff.” Pete straightened his spine at the last, a bantam rooster facing the wolf in the henhouse. I almost laughed as that description skipped through my brain.

“And you just did.” Tucker side-stepped Pete and put his hand on the trespasser’s shoulder. “*Como se llama?*” He smiled at the small man.

“Ignacio Robles.” The man smiled tentatively at Tucker, then lost the smile as he caught sight of Pete’s

face. The foreman's mouth was set in a grim line, jaw muscles jumping as if to an inner drumbeat.

"Señor Robles," I said, "would you like to come with us?" I gestured as I spoke, trying to convey my meaning, pointing to him, to me and Tucker, to the parked truck.

The small man's face was confused at first and I repeated my gestures.

A smile broke over his face. "*Si, si, señorita, muchas gracias.*"

"Great, then. Let's get Mr. Robles back to town, shall we?" I stepped to the other side of the man in question, flanking him. "Kevin?"

Kevin looked at us, then at Pete, then at the group of cowboys. I could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

"Shit, man, get your keys and let's go." Tucker dropped his hand from Robles' shoulder and strode forward. Kevin fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the keys, following my brother. I was close behind, keeping one hand on Mr. Robles' back and one swinging loose. I didn't expect any of the other men to do anything, but I wanted to be sure I was ready if they did.

"Back at Bea's okay . . . to get your car?" Kevin asked as he put the truck in gear. "I need to check in with Carlton."

"Perfect," I said. If there was one person in town I could trust to translate, it was my best friend and café owner, Beatriz Ruiz. We'd known each other for most of our lives. Despite everything, she still put up with me.

Ignacio Robles looked like a harmless man, but we'd know soon enough if he had any business with the Wild Moon—valid or in.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE VOICE—
“ . . . *here . . . come . . . here . . .* ”

“Yo, sis.” My brother’s voice boomed inside the truck. “We’re here.”

“What? Sorry.” I’d started out of my daydream and rubbed my eyes.

Tucker popped open the back door and slid out, motioning for Robles to follow him. I was a little slower on the uptake.

“Did you hear—no, never mind,” I said to Tucker. “I’m just tired.” I’d heard that whispering again, same as earlier in the morning. I shook my head to clear the fog. I was tired from a great deal of things other than a lack of sleep, but I hadn’t yet been able to talk to Tucker about any of it. We’d ridden into town together, but I’d wanted to wait until after the property visit to discuss what was bothering me. Now, it would be later rather than sooner. First I needed to deal with Mr. Robles.

“Thanks, Kevin,” I said, automatically opening the door.

“Yeah, sure.” He tugged at his shirt collar and turned a little in the seat. “Y’all sure you . . .” He

motioned to the parking lot, where Tucker and Ignacio Robles stood waiting for me.

“Yeah, we’ll be fine. If he’s not a mass murderer or evil terrorist, I’ll make sure he gets a square meal and a ride to somewhere less isolated.” I cracked a smile. Kevin didn’t smile back.

“He’s probably illegal.” Kevin stated a bald fact. “You okay with that?”

“Well, he still has to eat,” I said. “I’m not going to pass judgment on him. Besides, my problem was never with the workers.” Just with the landowners that paid them a pittance then hanged them up to dry when their usefulness was over.

“Okay, your call,” he said. “So about the ranch? I’ll fax you over a contract, if you like. We’ve got the number, right? I kind of need to . . .” He waved over towards the Sheriff’s office, just a few doors down from Bea’s and already a buzzing hive of activity. At least five pickups and a couple of SUVs were parked along the walkway that joined the various storefronts. A dozen people were mingling outside, roadie cups of coffee or soda in one hand, cell phones in the other.

“The place is fine, I’m sure my friend will want to make an offer.” Unless of course, there was something going on there that wasn’t immediately evident. “We’ll be in touch. And, Kevin?”

“Yeah?”

I nodded towards the gathering crowd. “You all need help, we’ll be inside the café, ’kay?”

He smiled and nodded back. “Yeah, I’ll let Carlton know. Could be just a false alarm. You know kids.”

I smiled back. But I didn't actually "know kids."

Kids in my clan were expected to take off and do stupid stuff . . . taught them valuable lessons, my dad would say. Yeah, well. I doubted that lessons like how to stalk deer, gather weather, or hide from humans when you shifted were on the agenda for whoever these kids were. It was probably nothing. I hoped.

I slid out of the truck, shut the door and waved as Kevin strode over to join the group.

It was still broad daylight. By my reckoning, it was about four-thirty in the afternoon. The sun was still way too high in the sky and the temperature too close to summer for my tastes. I wanted to be indoors, in the cool rock-walled underground bedroom, sleeping next to Adam, despite our argument. Instead, I'd agreed to go visit this ranch in the middle of my night and stirred up who knew what in the process. I was hoping that Ignacio Robles was nothing more than one of hundreds of illegal workers who swam the Rio Grande and hoofed their way hundreds of miles north to find work at the local ranches and that the kids were just off doing stupid kid things.

"HEY, *M'HIIJA*, what's up? I rarely see you around here during the day anymore."

Bea came out of the back of the restaurant, grinning and wiping her hands on a dishtowel. She knew exactly why I'd stopped hanging out at the café. Good thing we were best friends, or I could take what she'd said the wrong way. That was one

of the reasons we *were* still friends, she knew that my not being around didn't mean I hated her. We'd been friends since she'd taken pity on the new kid in school.

"For that matter, I don't see you around either." She poked a finger at my brother, who laughed.

"You, Ms. Ruiz, are a tease," I said as Tucker laughed.

"You see all that commotion outside?" She gestured with the dishtowel as another pickup came roaring into the parking lot.

"Yeah," I said. "I heard there were missing kids?"

"Not so much kids as teenagers. Four of them," she said. "The Wentz twins, Brittany Martinez and Jimmy Stahl. Frances Wentz says Missy and Matthew went out three-wheeling early this morning and didn't show back up at home for lunch."

"Seems awfully quick calling a bunch of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds missing," I said. "At least, to call in a search party, anyway. It's spring break, isn't it? Don't they wait twenty-four hours or something? Maybe the kids just took off somewhere to party."

Bea shrugged. "No idea. I don't know exactly what's up. I heard somebody saying something about a phone call. Maybe one of them got hurt or something."

"Could be," I said.

"So who's this?" Bea motioned to Ignacio, who stood next to Tucker. "Another stray?" Bea's tone echoed the curiosity in her face. She'd gotten used to my bringing visiting cousins in to the café, just not

so much since my branch of the clan had scarpered to British Columbia. We hadn't gotten many familial visitors over the last couple of years. "This one doesn't look like your typical family member."

"He's not," I said, motioning for Ignacio to take a seat at the nearest table. Not that there was a lack of table space. At this time of day, the place was barren of anyone but Bea.

It was a smallish place, cozy, comfortable and homey. Two round tables that could seat up to six sat to the left of the green Formica cash wrap. To the right, four booths lined the floor-to-ceiling windows. The door to the kitchen was directly behind the cash register. A giant pot of coffee steamed aromatically on a small table behind the counter, complementing the glass case full of homemade goodies, from *pasteles* made from her grandmother's family recipes, to an assortment of pies that Bea bought from Mrs. Tschirhart, a local Alsatian widow who loved to bake.

"So . . ." Bea gave me a sidelong glance as she poured sugar from a large jar into one of the tabletop containers.

"So, I'm guessing you want to know who he is." I walked over to the coffeepot, still not exactly sure how to explain the whole afternoon.

"You're guessing right." Bea wiped the sugar dispenser and set it down on the table. I heard the thump from where I was standing.

"Have a seat, *m'hija*," I said, brushing by her as I seated myself, passing a mug of coffee to Ignacio. The

small man was just sitting there, watching the two of us, saying nothing. So far, it was fairly likely that he'd not understood word one. A good thing, come to think of it, because not too flattering so far. *Stray* was the word for him, but I'd hate to tell him that.

"Damn, the coffee smells great. What is it?" Tucker grinned at Bea, all but batting his eyelashes.

"New blend," Bea said, answering Tucker. "Hill Country. A little pecan, a little chocolate, some cinnamon. Here, forget the mug by mug thing. I'll bring us a pot." She eyed Robles cautiously, but busied herself for a few minutes gathering coffeepot and cups. Tucker mimed drinking to Robles, he nodded, then mimed back a hand-washing gesture. Tucker smiled and pointed to the dark green sign with the standard white stick figures. The door to both washrooms was located directly beneath the sign, just to the left of the cash wrap.

"*Con permiso*," Robles said in a quiet voice and headed into the men's room.

"Okay, now what the hell is going on?" Bea demanded as she placed the full tray on the table.

I helped myself to a mug before I replied. "Heaven." I took a deep gulp and let the aroma surround me.

There is nothing better than excellent coffee in the company of friends and family. Not that I couldn't get coffee at the ranch, I usually wasn't much in the mood. I preferred coffee at Bea's, hanging out in a booth with her, yakking. Ranch awakenings were usually about sex and cuddling and prepping

for the night with Adam. I didn't mind, not in the least, but I did miss this. I used to come into the café every day around three for coffee, conversation, and breakfast tacos. Now, three o'clock was the prime of my sleep time. That's what I got for hanging out with vampires.

Bea let me soak in the flavor for only a moment. "I repeat. What are you two up to?"

I took another drink and put the mug on the table and looked at my brother who just relaxed back into his chair and grinned a little.

"Keira, please, you're a creature of habit. Suddenly, you and your brother show back up here at four-thirty in the afternoon with some *mojado*?"

"How do you know he's a wetback?" I asked, genuinely curious.

She shrugged and stirred more cream into her nearly white coffee. "It shows. Live here long enough. Live with enough family from Mexico, you can tell."

"I sort of rescued him." I stirred half-and-half into my mug of coffee, lightening it up some. Bea's eyebrows rose as she sipped from her own mug, her gaze cutting over to Tucker, then back to me.

"Rescued, as in . . ." She left it wide open.

"As in, Tucker and I went over to the Pursell ranch today to check it out. Said he was trespassing. There was sort of a fight and this poor guy was in the middle of it. They wanted to kick him out."

"Pursell?" Bea's voice suddenly got several decibels quieter. "You mean Judge Pursell's place, over by the

county highway crossroads?" She took a large gulp from her mug and stared down at the tabletop. Okay, red alert time. This quiet tone wasn't like her.

"Yeah, Adam's looking to buy it. It's on the market." I reached over and grasped her wrist. "Bea, what is it? What's wrong?"

She shook her head, her fingers gripping the sides of the coffee mug. "It's . . . shit." A moment passed, then she looked up at me. "Who else was involved?"

"Involved?"

"In the fight."

I shrugged, still wondering what had upset her so much. I knew she'd never laid eyes on Ignacio Torres before a few minutes ago, just as I hadn't before the incident at the ranch. "Some of the hands were holding him, trying to force him off the property."

Her shoulders relaxed a little. "Just the hands?"

"Actually," I said, "there was the jerk of a foreman, Pete something. He was a royal pain."

"Pete Garza?"

"No clue," I said. "Why, do you know him?"

"I might." Her answer was quieter than her original question. She dropped her gaze again, staring into her coffee cup as if to read the non-existent grounds. This was not good.

"I guess he could be a Garza," I continued. "I thought he was a gringo by the accent and the whole 'I'm better than you' tude, but around here, who knows."

"Yeah, that sounds like him. *Guero*, fairish hair, chews?"

“You know him?” I was puzzled. Bea and I had been friends for about thirty years. I’d never heard her talk about Pete Garza. Even when I was away in England, we exchanged e-mails constantly.

“If it’s who I’m thinking about, he’s bad news, Keira. As in, really bad.”

“Okay, Lucy, you seriously got to ‘splain this one’.” I joked with a fake Ricky Ricardo accent, trying to nudge her out of her evident mood. Hell, I didn’t even know what kind of mood it was. If I didn’t know her better, I’d have said she was frightened.

“Damn, I just don’t know how to tell you this.”

I looked over at Ignacio, who’d just emerged through the men’s room door and stood watching us with interest. Whatever Bea had to say, I’d bet she didn’t want to say it in front of a stranger, no matter if he didn’t understand the language. I exchanged glances with Tucker. He took the hint.

“Hey, look, why don’t I take Ignacio to the kitchen? I’m sure he’s hungry. Tia Petra can look after him, okay?” Tucker smiled at us both. He knew Bea well enough to know it was time for him to clear out, too.

I squeezed Bea’s shoulder as she looked up at me, a small smile crossing her face as she nodded to Tucker. “Sure. Sounds like a plan.”

After a quick exchange with Bea, Ignacio followed Tucker into the kitchen to be overfed by Tia Petra. I could hear the elderly woman’s voice through the swingin door. Something about “*pobrecito*” and “enchiladas.” No doubt, Tio Richard was cooking up a batch of his special enchiladas and lucky Ignacio was

going to share in the bounty. Richard never cooked them for the restaurant, just for family. According to Tio Richard, Tucker was practically a son.

“So,” I said as the door stopped its swing. Bea’s face was still full of an emotion I couldn’t place. “You going to clue me in here, Nancy Drew, or leave me in the dark?”

A sigh escaped her. “It’s not that easy, *chica*,” she said. “I know I should have told you long ago, but . . .” A tear escaped and trickled down her cheek.

“Shit, Bea, what is it?” I handed her a paper napkin.

“About four years ago, when you were still in England, something happened. I never told anyone. Not even my aunt and uncle. Not even Sheriff Larson.”

Oh fuck. This was way beyond not good. This was ranging into really *really* bad . . . because by *Sheriff Larson*, she meant Carlton’s dad. I could see her not wanting to share personal stuff with someone we all went to high school with, but Sheriff Larson had been a father figure to all of us, upholding the law with a sense of humor and kindness behind the steel. In fact, since Bea’s own dad and mom had died some years back, he’d been a fixture at the café, stopping in just before closing and staying until she locked up. Carlton himself took over that role after his dad died. People tended to look out for Bea, myself included.

“This guy started hanging out here, at the café. This was just after I’d broken up with Emilio and I was pretty stupid.”

“Yeah, I remember,” I said, smiling at the memory. Emilio had been nice, but not so much into girls. He’d tried dating Bea, just to please his mother. When Mama Rojas died, he came out with a bang . . . so to speak. He moved to San Antonio and got a job as headliner at The Bonham, a well-known drag club. He did a fabulous Judy Garland. Bea hadn’t been crushed as much as disappointed and a little peeved at herself. They’d been friends for years, but she’d never been good with the gaydar.

“I’m guessing the guy was this Pete character?”

She nodded. “Yeah, stupid.”

“Stupid how?”

“I started going out with him. He was fun, flattered me, paid a lot of attention to me. He really liked me. After Emilio, it was just a relief to go out with a macho kind of guy. Really, it was just for fun.

“After a while, though, it was more possession than attention. One night, my nephew Noe and his buddies came over to the café to hang out. Damn, I think they were all of fourteen, fifteen years old. One of the older guys teased me, like they do. Pete came in and saw Chip grabbing me around the waist giving me air kisses. I’d just baked some extra cookies for them, you see.” The tears flowed freely now. I kept silent, letting her get it out.

“Pete got angry, slapped Chip and told them to stop fucking with his girl. You know me, I got mad right back and yelled at him. The place was full that night, one of our special barbecue nights, I think. Next thing I know, he dragged me outside and

started screaming about ‘how things looked’ and ‘my woman’ and all sorts of Neanderthal things.

“I screamed at him and told him to go jump in the fucking lake . . .” She smiled a little through the tears. “Or something like that. I really don’t remember. In any case, I told him it was over and he could go date some Pleasantville Stepford Wife because I wasn’t interested.”

Bea sighed and blew her nose.

I waited for the rest of the story. I knew there was more. A screaming match with a boyfriend would never reduce her to tears. Never.

She stood up, walked over to the windows and lowered the blinds on the picture window to the right of the café door. Her hands trembled as she stood there, staring at nothing, the white cord wrapped around her index finger. I had to strain to hear her next words.

“I was sound asleep. I don’t really know what time it was. After midnight, I guess. Barbecue nights usually end late. I heard something. Thought it was Tia Petra. You know how she gets after eating barbecue and *borracho* beans.” Bea made a strange sound. It could have been a laugh, but I doubted it.

“Next thing I know, someone was on top of me, straddling me. I tried to scream, but his hand was over my mouth and nose. I couldn’t breathe. All I could do was struggle a little. He had me with his weight.

“I tried everything,” she said in a whisper. “Everything. I’ve been to all those self-defense classes. All I could think of was that I didn’t want

to wake Tia Petra. I didn't want him to hurt her, too. And Tio Richard's so deaf, I knew he wouldn't hear anything."

"It was Pete?"

"Yeah."

Bea came back to the table and sank into the chair. "He didn't rape me. He didn't really hurt me, not really. He just—" She turned away from me. "All I could hear was his breathing . . . then the click. He shoved a gun into my neck and whispered something . . . I don't know what. For four years, I've been trying to figure out what he said, but I can't."

This was worse than I imagined. I got up and walked around behind her, leaned down to give her an awkward hug.

"The only reason I'm still alive today is because of my aunt." Bea grasped my hands and pulled them around her, tightening the hug. "The noise I heard was Petra on her way to the bathroom. My bedroom door was open and she heard him in there. She got Richard and they both came in screaming and yelling. Richard had a rifle. I don't know why Pete didn't fire the gun. I think they startled him."

"Holy shit, babe, and all this time, he's been working at the Pursell ranch?"

She nodded. "He was working there when we met and he never left. He doesn't come in here anymore. Never really saw him again after that night."

"But you didn't tell anyone?"

"I know, I know," she said. "I should have pressed charges. I should have told someone. But Tia and Tio

wanted to keep it quiet. They were scared he'd come back. For months afterwards, Tio would go to sleep in the recliner in the front room, with his rifle across his lap."

Bea turned in her chair and looked me in the eye. "I'm so sorry I never told you. I felt so stupid to let myself get involved with that freak. And I knew you'd just come tearing back here to do something just as stupid."

I pulled out of the hug and stood up. "Damn right, I would have," I said. "No one gets away with messing with my best friend."

"Please, Keira, it happened a long time ago. Don't bring it up. I don't want him to know I told you."

"You're still scared of him."

"A little. Like I said, he doesn't come around here at all, and I don't want to give him any reason to."

I didn't like it, but I conceded her point. I just wouldn't tell her that I'd share this information with Tucker. He'd figure out a way to keep an eye on Pete Gringo Garza.

"So what are you going to do with Ignacio?"

"Figure out why the hell he was trespassing at the Pursell place." I didn't mention to her what Tucker and I were both afraid of . . . that it had something to do with the Wild Moon. She just didn't need that.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN TUCKER came back out from the kitchen, he shot me a “what the fuck” look, meaning Bea. I answered back with a silent “later.”

He joined us at the small table and Bea poured him a cup of coffee, not looking up to meet his eyes.

“So, did Ignacio spill the beans?” I asked.

Tucker nodded and gulped his coffee. “Yeah, he’s coming out to explain to Bea. Tia Petra is one damned fine investigator, but I thought Bea should hear this.” He looked at me with another one of his brotherly gazes. I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to watch as Ignacio explained. Tia Petra might be great when it comes to asking questions, but my family was a hell of a lot better at hearing the unsaid.

The kitchen door swung open again and Ignacio came out, a plate of pastries in one hand, his hat in the other. I smiled at him and motioned him to a chair. He smiled back and put the plate of sweets in the middle of the table.

“*Para todos,*” he said, quietly. *For everyone.* No doubt Tia Petra figured we could use the sugar and carbs.

Bea leaned forward and patted him on the back as she began to talk to him in a quiet, steady voice. I took the opportunity to study Ignacio. He was small and wiry, probably no more than five-foot-four and he'd obviously seen a hard life. His skin was leathered by sun, brown in the way that only constant exposure would make it, a life spent outdoors. His threadbare, much-mended cowboy shirt had once been clean and neat. His jeans were worn almost through at the knees and seams. A battered cowboy hat sat on his head, covering hair that wasn't yet gray. He couldn't be more than thirty, yet the weariness in his expression showed many years of hardship.

Whatever story he was telling Bea, I was sure it wasn't a pretty one. I understood one or two words in the rapid exchange, one of them being "*hermano*" again. As he spoke, his quiet face became animated, agitated. His dark eyes welled with unshed tears at one point, his hands rubbing them away before they could fall, but he never once shifted his gaze from Bea. Whatever he was saying, it was truth as he knew it.

"*Momento, por favor,*" Bea said with a pat to Ignacio's hand. She turned away from him to face me and Tucker. "I'm going to send him back to Tia Petra. He wants to help out with the dishes, in exchange for the food."

I nodded and smiled at the man, trying to look sympathetic. I hated not knowing the language, not being able to express my concern directly. Mental note: learn to speak better Spanish. It was stupid to

be this ignorant here in Texas. I could excuse myself with the rationale that I'd spent years learning other things, like martial arts, how to cast spells, how to help people die . . . but none of it was even remotely useful in this type of situation.

Neither Tucker nor I said anything while Bea escorted Robles to the back. I heard her explaining to her aunt, then more rapid words to Robles. Shortly, she was back at the table, pouring herself more coffee.

"Well?" I asked.

"It sucks," Bea said, "That's the extent of it."

"Sucks?" Tucker chimed in, reaching over for the pot to refill his own mug.

"He's looking for his little brother, Alejandro—Alex—at the Pursell ranch. Alex was working there for the past eighteen months. All of a sudden, poof, no Alex."

"Poof? As in he disappeared? And how 'little'—a kid?"

"'Poof' as in he used to send money to the family every month. And 'little' as in he's twenty-three."

Not a kid then. For a moment I'd wondered if Alex's disappearance had anything to do with those missing kids. Probably not, though. Highly unlikely that a twenty-three year old illegal ranch worker would be hanging around a bunch of high school kids.

Bea continued, "Three months ago, the money stopped. Ignacio works on a ranch about twenty miles outside Piedras Negras. He gets to town a

couple of times a month to pick up the money from Alex, but nothing's come in since before the end of the year. He tried calling a couple of times from his wife's cousin's phone, but no one at the Pursell place would tell him anything."

"His brother's been missing since December?" Definitely had no connection to the missing teenagers then.

Bea grimaced. "That's what he said. He said he got through to someone who kept saying Alex left. That Alex wasn't there anymore. Then they'd hang up. Thing is, Ignacio doesn't have any transportation at home, he has to walk into town every time he tries to call. He's even sent two telegrams at his own expense. But he got nowhere."

"Then he came here?"

"Yeah. He crossed over, then hitchhiked here. Took him a week. When he finally got to the Pursell place, they kept throwing him off the property. No one will talk to him."

"He's sure his brother worked there?"

"He's sure," Bea said. "I did ask him that. He said that Alex told him the name of his boss, just in case anyone needed to contact him in an emergency."

"Has he gone to the sheriff?" Tucker asked.

"You don't go to the law when you swim the river," Bea said with a grim laugh. "Carlton would have to turn Ignacio in to La Migra."

"Shit." She had a point.

"Look, Bea," I said. "I don't really want to get in the middle of this if I can avoid it. I don't want

Adam and company involved, and these days, I'm part of the 'and company.' I just hate the fact that Ignacio can't find his brother. Tell you what, let me run by Carlton's office, see if he'll talk to me and run this by him as a hypothetical. It won't take long. I can scoot over there while you all wait here. Even if Ignacio gets sent back to Mexico, I'm sure Carlton will help. Maybe his brother just went to work at another ranch?"

Or maybe, he took off to find more work and for whatever reason, ended up dead somewhere in the middle of somewhere where no one will ever find him. There's a lot of empty land still left in the Hill Country. More often than not, acres and acres of properties owned by the weekend landowners were never actually seen by human eyes. Those types tended to leave the metaphorical back forty to nature.

Bea frowned and shrugged. "Maybe," she said. "It's just that I don't think Carlton'll want to stir up that hornet's nest. Besides, he's got those missing kids to worry about."

"Nest?"

"You know these good ol' boys hate anyone poking around their land," Bea said. "Carlton's up for re-election this year. You know how it is."

"No, I don't," I said, pushing my chair back. "Carlton Larson isn't the type to put some damned election above the law. There's a missing person and he'll help find him. I know Carlton. And so much the better, he's already got search crews going out, maybe they can keep an eye out for Alex."

“You *knew* him, sister mine.” Tucker’s trademark grin flashed across his face for a moment. “Past tense. He wasn’t Sheriff then. It changes you.”

I stood up. “Like you know. You coming with me, bro? We can swing by Carlton’s office then go back to the ranch.”

“We need to do something with . . .” Tucker inclined his head in the direction of the kitchen.

Well, fuck me. I was all fired up about justice and finding the man’s brother, or at least what happened to him, and forgot about the man himself. “Shit,” I said. “I need to find him a place to stay. We can’t very well take him with us.”

Tucker laughed. “Yeah, that’s a good one, sis. Let’s take the illegal alien to the vampire ranch.”

I slumped back into my chair. What the hell were we going to do? Rio Seco was miles away from any hostelry. The closest place was a small bed and breakfast about fifteen miles to the east. I’d happily pay to put him there, but the place was run by a snotty southern belle with delusions of Scarlett-hood. She simply couldn’t abide working folk. She catered primarily to people with more money than sense, overcharging her guests for the privilege of staying in a claustrophobic ten-by-twelve bedroom decorated like a doll’s house version of Tara. She’d never take Ignacio.

“There’s always your place, babe,” Tucker said. “It’s empty . . . more or less. You still out there, Bea?”

She nodded. “On occasion. When it gets too crowded at my place.”

“There you have it, bro, no go on that,” I said. “Besides, even if Bea weren’t hanging out there, that doesn’t mean I want someone I don’t know staying there by himself. Damn it. Maybe I’ll just have to move back to the house for a while. I suppose Ignacio could stay in one of the guest rooms and Bea could use the other.” I eyed my brother. “Or you could.”

“Could what?”

“Move back to my house until Ignacio gets settled and finds his brother.”

The look on Tucker’s face was priceless. “I don’t think so.”

Bea laughed. “The two of you are so predictable.”

Two pairs of eyes turned to look at her as two pairs of arms crossed. I almost laughed myself when I realized Tucker and I were clones of each other at that moment. These apples did not fall far from our family tree.

“You should hear yourselves. It’s really pathetic.”

Crap. She was right. I was being selfish and so was Tucker. Here this poor man can’t find his brother and we’re bickering about leaving our respective lovers for a few days.

“All right . . .” I started to say.

“Never mind, *m’hija*.” Bea waved her hands, motioning for me to stop. “Don’t get all sacrificial lamb on me. It doesn’t make sense for him to go to your place, anyway. He speaks about as much English as you do Spanish. I’ll take him to my place. He can bunk in the guestroom above the garage. It’s

not fancy, but it's clean and none of my cousins are here now, so he'll have some privacy. Besides, Tio Richard already offered."

I threw a paper napkin at her. "Bitch." I grinned. "You just started that to see what we'd do."

"Yeah," she grinned back. "I love messing with you two."

"So let's go tell Ignacio the news," Tucker said. "We'll leave him in your capable hands and give you a call later."

"Sounds like a plan, bro," I agreed. "Thanks a million, *m'hija*. I owe you . . . and I'll do my best to convince Carlton."

"Anytime, *chica*." Bea stood up and grabbed the now empty coffeepot. "Here, help me carry these things into the kitchen and I'll tell Ignacio what you're going to do."

The small man listened solemnly as Bea explained the situation to him. When she stopped speaking, he turned to Tucker, then to me, tears forming in his dark brown eyes.

"*Gracias*," he said, his voice breaking. "*Gracias a dios. Señor, Señora, eren angeles. Con el ayude de Dios, encuentran a mi hermano.*"

I looked at Bea who translated his words.

Oh great. He called us angels . . . and hoped that with God's help, we'd find his brother. *Angels* we most certainly weren't. Far from it. In fact, in his church, we were precisely the opposite.

We hope you've enjoyed this special "sneak peak" at Maria Lima's **Blood Bargain!** You'll be able to find the book in bookstores everywhere in November 2008.

Maria's first novel starring Kiera Kelly, **Matters of the Blood** will also be available in mass market paperback. Look for it in September 2008.

