

SERENDIPITY

Warrior Series

Volume 2.5

by:

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Book Description

Marta went to work for the Deveraux family when she was just a kid. Her mother was their housekeeper before her. She grew up idolizing the handsome lawyer, who was also best friends with her boss, Luke Deveraux. Once she reached adulthood her childhood crush turned into a full blown unrequited love affair. She tried dating other men, but they never quite compared to the sexy, gentle man she secretly wanted. Marta and Jake share a comfortable friendship, but she desperately wants more. Is she brave enough to let him see her true feelings? And if she does, will he shatter her heart or give them a chance?

Jake Wilder is nine hundred and twenty three years old. He never married and is sure he never will. The only woman he has ever loved is a human. In the beginning, Jake avoided a relationship with Marta out of respect for his friend, Luke Deveraux. Marta was Luke and Marlina's employee and trusted friend. Since she reached adulthood, he hasn't so much as looked at another woman. He's tired and lonely, but knows a relationship with Marta will only end in heartache. But, with his best friend gone he is finding it harder and harder to resist the temptation.

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First Edition, First Impression

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Dedication:

*To my amazing friends,
Thank you for your support*

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Chapter One

Jake stood by the large window, staring into the darkness. He was looking outside, but he didn't really see the amazing view or the vibrant city lights. He glanced back at his desk. He should be writing his brief. But Jake couldn't concentrate on Bob's coin collection. He was focused on something else. Something that had occupied his mind all day. Something that had occupied his mind all week. Well if he was honest, it was the same thing that had occupied his mind for years. And that something was Marta Benson.

He tried to remember when exactly he had fallen in love with the beautiful, amazing woman. It seemed like a lifetime ago. At first, he'd resisted her out of respect for his best friend. Then, out of self-preservation. Jake was a warrior. He wouldn't live forever, but he would live several millennia and he was currently nine hundred twenty three years old. Marta was human. A relationship with her would only end in heartache. Probably for both of them. He wouldn't do that to her. He couldn't. He loved her more than life itself. Which is why he had always avoided spending too much time with the lovely temptress. Oh, he knew she didn't torture him on purpose. In fact, he was sure she didn't know the effect she had on him at all. That was the only thing saving them both. If Marta ever showed an interest in him, he wasn't sure he could resist.

For the hundredth time, he thought back to the conversation he'd had with Thomas nearly a month ago. Initially he had been livid. The idea of Dimitri ordering all the warriors to move into the Deveraux home had infuriated him. Marta practically lived at that mansion. Imagining his woman spending hours, day after day with five single, vibrant, randy men nearly pushed him over the edge. In fact, he missed half of what Thomas was saying until the boy grew impatient and snapped him back to reality. Then the man he loved like his own son had said those magic words. "I need your help." Thomas was worried about the strain cooking and cleaning up after all the warriors would have on Marta. He considered banning her from the house but knew that would only hurt her feelings. Thomas wanted Jake to step in. He needed an excuse to keep Marta occupied and he practically begged Jake to find a way to keep her busy until he could come up with another plan.

Of course Jake had agreed. At first it had been easy, coming up with tasks that required her help. Just over a week ago, he'd run out of excuses. That's when he took that fatal step, he'd cancelled his own maid service and lied. Of course Marta felt sorry for him and immediately stepped in to help. The results were bitter sweet. He loved coming home to a fresh cooked meal and a lovely woman ready to greet him after a hard day at the office. But that was the problem. He loved coming home to the wonderful woman. How was he going to live without her again? As hard as he tried to keep his distance, he couldn't. Marta treated him like a longtime friend. Which he was, of course. They had known each other for years, he had been a shoulder to cry on when Marlena had been assassinated. Then again, when Luke was murdered by vampires. That

night Alex had fought in the alley had almost pushed Marta to her breaking point. She could not withstand another loss, Jake knew that. He also knew, with the war that was raging against the vampires, she might have to.

Marta was also there for him when he needed her most. Luke had been his best friend all his life. He was like a brother, Jake's only family. The loss had nearly killed him. Marta's friendship and support had been the only thing that kept Jake sane the past few months. Now, here she was spending more and more time at his place. Taking care of him, in a way that only Marta could. Trying to keep the friendly distance he'd honed over the years was driving him insane.

Once again he looked at the pile of paperwork waiting for him on his desk. He really needed to get that brief finished. Jake closed his eyes and took one deep, calming breath. The sooner he completed the job, the sooner he could get home to Marta. And there it was again, that feeling that his soul was being ripped in two. He knew the instant he walked through his door two very strong emotions would envelop him. One being utter frustration. Wanting a woman with all his heart and soul and not being able to have her, actually caused him physical pain. Then there was the other emotion, equally as powerful. He knew the instant he closed down the office for the night, his heart would start pumping faster in anticipation. His spirit would soar and his hands would sweat. Once he got behind the wheel he'd find himself driving just a little too fast, desperate to get back to the woman he loved. That feeling of desperate anticipation would remain until he stepped through the door. Marta would be right there to greet him, the way she had been every day for the past week. In that moment, the instant he laid eyes on her, all would be right in his world. Until he remembered it wasn't real, that their time together was only temporary. That's when the frustration and sorrow would battle with the calming peace she always brought to his soul. He growled out loud and plopped into his chair. Thinking about his dilemma was not going to help a thing and he knew it. Somehow he'd survive the pain, he didn't have a choice.

Jake only lasted five minutes. He couldn't think, he couldn't concentrate and he definitely could not prepare an important brief that would impact the rest of Bob's natural life in this condition. He had to get out of here. He had to get home to Marta.

He was still thinking of the lovely woman waiting for him at home and wondering what delicacy she had conjured for dinner when he stepped from the elevator and headed for his car. He ignored the clanging of a pop can as it skidded across the concrete floor. But he couldn't ignore the three vampires waiting around the corner. They smiled when they saw him approach. Clearly believing Jake was a simple human, working late. Boy were they in for a surprise. Jake just hoped he was up for the challenge.

Jake hooked the leather briefcase over his head and secured it behind him. He didn't want the thing to get in his way. Then he casually reached into the side pocket and pulled out his dagger. The three vampires moved into position, spreading out to catch what they believed was an unsuspecting businessman rushing to his car. The middle vamp was impatient and charged first.

The other two cursed and tried to move behind Jake. He couldn't allow that. He plunged his knife deep in the first vamps chest, then spun around using his momentum to kick the second vamps legs out from under him. The vampire went down hard, but he wouldn't be down for long. Jake ducked just in time, avoiding a large pipe to the head. He pivoted and plunged his dagger into the third vamp. Dust settled around him but he didn't have time to enjoy the victory. He needed to find the missing vampire. The second vampire was no longer on the ground. He had regained his composure and scurried away. Now he was nowhere to be seen. Jake could handle one vampire, he wasn't worried about that. But he did need to find the control box and remove the security tapes before the night guards stumbled onto them.

It didn't take long to achieve his first objective. The remaining vampire was almost as impatient as the first one had been. He moved behind car after car, assuming he was hidden behind the vehicles. The guy didn't realize he could easily be seen through the rear window. When the vamp made his move, Jake was beyond ready for him. The vampire crouched low, using the side of the vehicle for cover, then he charged. Jake waited patiently, then at the last minute he twisted around and shoved his dagger through the vampire's heart. Not that the thing actually had one. Dust settled at Jake's feet then swirled and blew onto the sidewalk as a gust of wind swept it away. Jake took a deep breath and checked himself for injuries. Marta would not be happy if he came home injured. When he was sure he didn't have even the smallest of scratches, Jake went in search of the video feed. Nobody could see what happened in this garage tonight. It was going to make him late for dinner, but that couldn't be helped.

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Marta smiled as she closed the oven door. She made one of Jake's favorite meals tonight. She couldn't help herself. The only way this arrangement could be any better is if he allowed her to stay in one of his guest rooms instead of returning home every night. Somehow with each passing day, her small apartment became more like a cell than a home. A lonely, empty hole that she'd never escape. Knowing she would return to Jake's wonderful home in the morning was the only thing that got her through the desperate nights. Oh, she knew this was all going to end. It wouldn't take long for Thomas and the rest of the warriors to revolt and put an end to Dimitri's living arrangements. In the meantime, she planned to savor every moment she had.

She would never tell Thomas or Jake she knew this was all some grand plan to keep her occupied. That might ruin everything. It did annoy her, just a little, that those two men thought they could manipulate her to protect her. Really, the idea that she needed protection from the warriors was ridiculous. She had handle bigger jobs than that over the years and survived. But confronting them would mean risking this time she had with Jake, and she would never take that risk.

She found herself thinking more and more about her conversation with Alex that night at the cabin. Especially lately. Alex truly believed Marta had a chance with Jake. No, more than that, Alex believed Jake was in love with Marta. Marta wanted that to be the case, she loved Jake more than words could express. But she just didn't see it, no matter how hard she looked. This past week had been heaven. When she climbed into bed each night she found herself fantasizing about a life with Jake Wilder, forever. But exposing the feelings she had for the man, feelings she'd kept hidden for most of her life, terrified her. What if he laughed at her? What if he thought she was just a silly middle aged woman and it changed everything? She would rather have Jake as a friend than not have him in her life at all. And if Alex was wrong, if Jake didn't find her attractive, knowing how she felt would make him run. She knew him well enough to be certain of that. He would run far away and avoid her at all cost. No, she could never take that risk. This time she had, this wonderful enchanting opportunity, would just have to be enough. She would make his favorite meals, clean his house, do his laundry and pretend. Then when it was time to return to Thomas, at least she would have those memories to get her through the lonely nights.

Sometimes Marta wished she hadn't loved Jake all her life. Which she had. When she was a child, he had intrigued her. Jake had been like a favorite uncle when he stopped by to visit Luke. Her mother was horrified at her behavior, but Marta couldn't resist him even then. No amount of punishment would keep her away when the funny, gentle man came to visit. When she reached adolescence, she developed her first crush. Sure, she had dated in high school because that was expected. But no boy could ever measure up to Jake Wilder. As time moved on and she became an adult, her childhood crush became a full blown love affair. Of course it was unrequited love, but that didn't matter. The first time she'd been with a man had been a disaster. The entire time, she had wished it was Jake. He would have been more gentle, more loving, just more. It had taken her years to give another man a chance, which wasn't that much better. After that, she'd stopped dating all together. Silly, she knew. But it just never seemed worth the effort. The only man she wanted was the man she couldn't have.

Marta shook off the gloomy thoughts and returned to the dining area. She began to hum her favorite tune as she carefully spread the ivory table cloth over Jake's antique mahogany table. She loved everything about this room from the elegant table to the china cabinet, to the delicate china displayed inside. She would never use that elegant setting for such an informal meal, but it was fun to daydream about it. Marta folded napkins, placed the vase full of fresh flowers in the center for decoration and carefully selected each fork, spoon and knife. She wanted this meal to be perfect. Okay, so she was playing house with a man she would never truly have. Was that really so bad? As long as Jake didn't realize what she was doing, she could make some wonderful memories that would last her a lifetime. Then, when it was time to go back, time to face her own reality, she could survive. Everything would return to normal, she and Jake would remain friends, Thomas wouldn't have to worry about housework or meals and she would sit in her lonely apartment and remember how wonderful she had it, if only for a few weeks. That would just have to be enough.

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Marta was relaxing in the study, trying to concentrate on her new book when she finally heard Jake's car. He was later than usual tonight. Butterflies began swarming in her stomach and her pulse quickened. It was always like this, the anticipation she felt each night as she waited for Jake to step through the door was exhilarating and depressing. What she wouldn't give for that man to step inside, pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless. But she knew that was never going to happen. Marta smiled, that didn't mean she couldn't imagine it though. She walked into the kitchen just as he was entering the house.

Jake stepped through the door and smiled. There she was. His own personal ray of sunlight. Seeing her standing there made him forget all his frustrations. It had taken longer than he thought it would to find the stupid control box. Once he did, he found the system empty. Someone forgot to replace the old disks when they switched them out. It irritated him, knowing how incompetent the guards were in his building, but he was also relieved. No difficult questions to answer in the morning. No investigation into everyone who worked late. The whole ordeal was behind him now. His thoughts returned to the beautiful woman standing in his kitchen. His entire body relaxed when Marta flashed him that soft, sexy smile of hers. What he wouldn't do to have just one night with her. One night where he could push her against the wall and ravish that sexy mouth of hers. Jake cleared his throat and took a step forward. He gently pressed his lips to Marta's forehead. "Something smells wonderful." He said huskily. "Sorry I'm late." He had to get out of the room or she was going to know what she did to him. "Do I have time to change out of this suit?" He asked, trying to sound casual and wondering if he'd accomplished the task.

"Sure." Marta answered hoping Jake didn't know how flushed her cheeks had become over such a simple kiss. Tiny currents of electricity were running through her entire body, originating at her forehead. "It's all ready. You go change while I set everything out. It will just take me a minute."

"Then I'll hurry." Jake said as he swept passed her and disappeared down the hall.

Marta let out the sigh she'd been holding in. If only things could be different. But she wouldn't go there tonight. Tonight they were going to have a wonderful evening together. She'd rented a movie, that new release that was getting so much hype, and hoped Jake would be up for a relaxing evening with a good friend. She just had to keep reminding herself of that. They were friends, nothing more. She could live with that. She had to.

Jake slipped on a fresh polo shirt and headed for the door. He paused to inhale Marta's sweet smell. It was everywhere, even here in his bedroom. Her delicious smell caused thoughts of having her here flood his mind, and not the platonic kind. He ran his hand through his hair and wondered once again how he was going to survive. Survive the evening without touching her,

survive the lifetime he would have to endure once she was no longer here, in his home day after day, night after night. He wished Luke were still alive. His friend knew how Jake felt and called him a fool but he was always a good listener. Once Luke knew Jake was in love with his housekeeper, his friend was constantly pushing him to act on the attraction. Luke understood Jake's hesitation. His friend had married a human after all. But that had been different. Thomas's mother hadn't taken to their world, not at all. In fact, she despised it. But Marta was different. She had known what they were from a very young age. She was fine with it. No, she was more than fine. She accepted them and loved them anyway. In her own special way, Marta had become essential to all the warriors, not just Luke and Thomas, or Jake of course, but she had nurtured each and every warrior, current and past, in her own special way. The kids currently on the squad loved her and respected her. She just had that way about her. Which is why he never could have allowed her to care for all of them at the mansion. He was sure at least one of them would realize what a catch she was and he'd lose her, forever. Not that he had her, but if Marta hooked up with another warrior, things would change between them. There was just no way around that. And if Jake couldn't have her the way he wanted, he was desperate to make their friendship remained unchanged.

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Dinner was wonderful, just as it always was. Marta loved hearing about Jake's day and all the frustrations and silly requests he received from clients. Oh, he would never betray a confidence. He took the oath of attorney seriously, but the way he relayed the events of the day was hilarious. Marta knew not many people saw that side of Jake. The warriors respected him and usually just saw the serious and talented lawyer. His clients certainly never saw the fun loving, silly side of the man. Now that Luke was gone, Marta wondered if anyone besides her truly knew what a wonderful, amazing, good-humored man Jake Wilder really was. A part of her hoped not. It made her feel special to be one of the few people that Jake let loose with. One of the only people he felt comfortable enough with that he could be himself. And the same was true for her. Jake saw a side of her that she never, ever showed anyone else. Knowing they had that connection warmed her heart. It also reaffirmed her conviction to never ever do anything to change this.

"I rented a movie this afternoon." Marta said, hoping she sounded casual and friendly. "You think you're up to it?"

Jake paused, then set the dishes he'd been carrying into the sink. "Uh, sure." He said hesitantly. How was he going to control himself for two whole hours while they lounged on the couch and watched a movie? He knew Marta, she would be right there the way she always was. Resting her head on his shoulder in that innocent, friendly way she had. Completely oblivious to the fact she was torturing him in a sweet, tempting way that left him wanting more. He glanced

her way and knew he would never say no to her. No matter the personal cost, he would never do anything to dampen her lovely spirit. “Let me just load these into the dishwasher then I’ll be in.”

“Isn’t that my job?” Marta asked, grinning. Jake was always thoughtful that way. “I mean I believe that is the reason you have me here, right? I’m supposed to clean up until you can replace that woman that up and quit on you without notice?”

Jake felt a tinge of guilt but pushed it aside. Okay, so he’d lied to Marta about what really happened. It was the only solution he could come up with at the time. And he knew if he had it all to do over again, he’d make the same choice. “You cooked.” He paused to flash her his most grateful smile. “And what a meal it was. As always, you amaze me and you spoil me. I know you remembered that was my favorite meal. You never forget anything. Thank you. It was a difficult day but you always know just how to make it all better somehow.”

Marta was mesmerized. Jake had the most wonderful smile. Of course she spoiled him. She’d like to spoil him for the rest of his life. “You’re welcome.” Was all she could come up with. Lame, but she knew if she continued she’d give herself away. “If you insist on doing the dishes, I’ll go set up the movie. See you in the den, don’t make me wait too long I might start without you.” Then she was gone.

Jake let out the breath he was holding. He wouldn’t let his frustration rule him. He was going to finish the dishes, then sit next to Marta and enjoy holding her all night. Who cares what movie she rented? He wouldn’t be able to concentrate anyway. The only thing he was going to think about was the precious woman sitting next to him. That would just have to be enough.

Jake stepped into the room and smiled. Marta had already started the show and was laughing at some sneak peek running before the main feature. “I can’t believe you started without me.” He said lightly as he lowered himself onto the couch next to her. Marta immediately shifted and cuddled in next to him, just the way she always did. Jake wrapped an arm around her waist and settled in for an amazing, frustrating evening at home.

* * * *

Jake had been wrong. He enjoyed the show. When it was over, he glanced down and realized Marta had fallen asleep. He watched her for a while trying to decide what to do. No way was he going to let her drive like this. Even if he woke her, she’d be too drowsy to drive safely. Not to mention the danger she might face out in the dark, alone. He would never let Marta drive home this late at night. His thoughts returned to his fight with the three vampires at the garage. If that had been Marta returning home to her parking garage...he couldn’t even go there. The thought was too painful to imagine. He watched her for several minutes as she dozed peacefully in his arms. She reminded him of sleeping beauty, so delicate and soft and lovely. He fumbled around

until he found the remote and silently clicked off the television and the player, making what might turn out to be a rash decision. Marta would stay the night. But where should he take her? His bed? A guest room? Definitely his room. It was the most comfortable room in the house. He could move to a guest room for the evening. He wouldn't sleep anyway. He knew he was going to be in agony all night, knowing his Marta was sleeping soundly in his bed without him.

Jake stood, cradling Marta in his arms as he carefully carried her up the stairs and down the long hallway. He kicked the door open with his foot and moved to his bed. Now came the tricky part. With one hand he cradled Marta against his chest as he slid the covers aside. Once he settled her on the bed, he considered. Should he let her sleep in her jeans or remove them? What he wouldn't give to remove them, and more. But that was too much. He definitely did not have that much control. Jake slid the covers over Marta's body and turned to stand. He was surprised when she reached out and grasped his arm. She was obviously only half awake when she softly whispered, "Stay."

Jake inhaled, now what? Marta slid to the center of the bed and removed the blanket, clearly waiting for him to join her. Jake sighed then stripped off his clothes and slid on a pair of sweats. He climbed into the bed next to Marta and held her close. He wasn't going to sleep a wink tonight, but one of his longtime dreams would come true. He'd just cherish that and deal with everything else in the morning. Jake held Marta tight and brushed the hair from her face. She let out a soft moan then rolled over and burrowed her tiny, soft body closer against his hard chest. Jake pressed his lips to hers in a soft, gentle kiss. The next few hours would be heaven, and hell but Jake wouldn't trade them for anything in the world. He began softly running his hand up and down Marta's back, hoping his touch would relax her even more.

Marta's eyes flew open the instant she realized where she was. She was in Jake's bed, pressed against his hard sexy body and he was gently rubbing her back in comfort. Did he know what he was doing? Did this mean anything or was he just being friendly? Should she get up and drive home? No way! This had been Jake's idea and wrong or right, she wasn't going anywhere. Marta moved a little closer and inhaled sharply when she felt the hard bulge press against her stomach. What did that mean? Was it possible Alex had been right and Jake was attracted to her? If so, they had wasted so much time. Marta had a decision to make. Was she going to be a coward all her life or was she going to act on this new discovery? Before she could decide, Jake leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. Marta froze. Her heart was beating a mile a minute and she was more terrified than she'd ever been in her entire life.

Jake felt guilty but he couldn't stop himself. He'd craved Marta for years. Every time he woke after an erotic dream about the woman, he'd wondered what it would be like to have her here, in his bed, lying next to him all night. Now that his biggest desire had become a reality he just couldn't keep his hands, or his lips, off her. "Beautiful, precious Marta." Jake whispered. "If only there was a way. If only you could be mine." He once again pressed his lips to Marta's

temple. Then he closed his eyes and held her just a little tighter. He was so lost in his own thoughts, he didn't notice Marta's tears.

Chapter Two

Marta woke late the next morning. It had taken her a long time to finally fall asleep. She couldn't believe what had happened. She couldn't believe what she heard. Jake did love her, too. Alex was right. But then why? Why didn't he act on his feelings? Was he holding back for the same reason she was? Out of fear of rejection? But Jake was so confident, so self-assured. That couldn't be it. Then why? And what did he mean by if only there was a way? And where was he anyway? She clearly remembered Jake slipping out of bed early that morning. He was being so careful not to wake her, she decided not to ruin it for him. Marta smiled. Her little deception had paid off. Jake slid from the bed and undressed right in front of her eyes. Well her slightly cracked, so he would never know, eyes anyway. And oh man, did Jake have a body! It was all she could do not to open her eyes wide and stare. The show had been entirely too short. Once Jake threw his clothes in the hamper, he silently moved into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. But not before Marta noticed the morning evidence of his attraction.

If she'd had any doubts last night, this morning had settled them. Alex was right. Or was she? Having a natural male reaction to a woman did not mean the man was in love. But Alex had been so sure of herself. She was adamant that Jake loved Marta as much as she loved him. In light of everything that had happened the night before, Marta couldn't ignore the evidence. So now what? What did she do with this new knowledge? There was one thing she knew for sure, if she didn't act on it, she would always regret it. Marta considered. What would Alex do? That wasn't much help. Alex always faced a problem head on. That wasn't Marta's style. No, Marta was more subtle than that. She smiled as a plan began to form. Maybe it was time for a little seduction. One that would make Jake Wilder lose control. She knew him well enough to know he would never make the first move. But what if she did, would Jake be able to resist? Marta hoped not. She allowed herself a moment to remember his words and his gentle touch. That was enough to give her the courage she needed to put her plan in motion.

* * * *

Jake was just finishing up in his home office when he heard Marta coming down the stairs. He wasn't nearly as tired as he thought he'd be this morning. Holding Marta had relaxed him somehow. He'd gone to sleep frustrated and woke up horny but he'd slept like a baby next to his woman. Just one more thing he was going to miss when she went back to working for Thomas. He glanced up when she walked in then sucked in a breath and shifted uncomfortably. Marta was

stunning this morning. She was wearing a low cut blouse and shorts that showed off her sexy legs. Jake had always been a leg man and Marta's bare legs nearly sent him over the edge.

"Morning." She said, smiling. "I found these in the back of your closet and didn't think you'd mind me borrowing them." She frowned. "Unless they belong to a new girlfriend or something." Marta knew Jake didn't have a girlfriend. She did wonder where the clothes came from and why he had them, but the moment she saw them she knew it was fate.

"Uh, what?" Jake asked, forcing himself to concentrate on what Marta was saying. He frowned. "Girlfriend? Of course not, don't be ridiculous Marta. You know I haven't dated anyone in years."

Marta moved to the side of the desk. "Did I keep you from work last night?" She was serious now, she didn't want to get in the way of Jake doing his job.

"What?" Jake said, forcing his eyes away from Marta's legs and onto her face. Of course, that didn't help. The instant he saw those tiny sweet lips he wanted to kiss her silly.

"Did my movie night keep you from working?" Marta asked, inwardly smiling. She'd never seen Jake like this before and she was enjoying it. Now that she thought about it, Jake had never seen her in shorts before. She rarely wore them and never at work. Now that she knew how much seeing her bare legs impacted him, she'd have to do it more often.

Jake shook his head and forced his mind to concentrate. What was Marta asking him? He was acting like an idiot. Work. She was asking him about work. "Uh, no." He finally said. "You didn't keep me from anything. I woke up early and thought I'd get a jump on the day."

"Okay, good." Marta said, trying to decide what to do next. "Um, do you want breakfast?" She glanced at the clock. "Well, I guess it would be brunch now. Sorry I slept in kind of late."

Jake frowned when his stomach growled. He'd skipped breakfast completely. After his shower he needed something, anything to get his mind off the woman lying so innocent and cozy in his bed.

Marta laughed. "I'll take that as a yes." She frowned when Jake stood. "No, you work. I'll take care of it. Does an omelet sound okay? I bought a fresh ham yesterday."

"Marta." Jake began but was cut off immediately.

"I insist." Marta said happily. "I'm starving and obviously so are you. It's why I'm here, Jake. Let me take care of you. Why don't we eat in here? I'll just be a minute. You finish up whatever I interrupted and I'll be back with hot omelets and fresh coffee." With that she was gone.

Jake inhaled and leaned back in his chair, smiling. That had been interesting. Then he frowned. Had Marta said she found those clothes in the back of his closet? He didn't remember

putting them in there. And he hadn't been exaggerating. He hadn't dated anyone for years. So where had those clothes come from? Had Alex left them here? That had to be the case, Alex must have put them there the last time she spent the night. But that was almost two years ago, and Marta and Alex were nowhere near the same size. Which meant the clothes must belong to someone else. Unless...had Alex planted a skimpy outfit in his house hoping Marta would spend the night and need a change of clothes. Jake smiled, instantly knowing that sneaky kid was behind this. It was the only thing that made sense. He should be mad, but at the moment he felt like he owed the girl a huge thank you. Wow, he knew Marta was beautiful, but now he knew she was downright sexy. How was he ever going to get that image out of his mind?

Marta returned twenty minutes later with two steaming plates of food. Jake stood to help her, but Marta immediately shook her head. Jake watched in fascination as Marta moved to the coffee table and leaned over. She gently placed each item on the wood surface then stood. Jake wondered if he was actually drooling. The sight of that luscious back side leaning over the table almost made him lose the tiny thread of self-control he was so desperately holding onto like a lifeline. The woman stood and smiled, spreading her arms wide. "Come on, dig in while it's still hot." Then she gently sat on the edge of the couch and waited. Jake was doomed.

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Marta used her napkin to wipe her lips then turned to look at Jake. He had a tiny dab of tabasco sauce on the corner of his mouth. She started to raise the napkin, planning to wipe Jake's face then stopped. She had a better idea. She reached out and gently wiped away the sauce with her forefinger. She only paused a minute before raising her finger to her mouth and sucking gently. The tangy, spicy taste only made her heart race faster which was already going a mile a minute. She had never acted this way in her life. Knowing Jake could reject her, only made her nerves speed into overdrive but she wouldn't back down now. She removed her finger and reached out to wipe away the remaining liquid from Jake's lips.

Jake was mesmerized. Did Marta have any idea what she was doing to his libido? Probably not. He watched in fascination as she wiped sauce from his mouth then seductively sucked the liquid from her finger. That had been torture enough, but when she reached out and gently wiped more sauce from his lips he couldn't stop himself. When she raised her finger to her lips, he took her hand in his. Then leaned forward and brought her finger to his mouth, gently sucking on the tip then sliding his tongue down until her entire finger was securely inside. When Marta didn't pull away, Jake slowly, gently slid her finger from his lips never breaking eye contact. He had to know if he was scaring her.

Marta's entire body was tingling. That simple act had felt so sensual, so intimate. Any residual doubts she'd had were gone now. Jake wanted her. Maybe as much as she wanted him. Once her finger was free from his mouth Marta reached out and gently slid her hand through Jake's

hair. She knew she should go slow, but really hadn't she waited long enough? Once her hand was behind his neck she leaned in and pressed her mouth to his. Then she waited. The next move would have to come from him.

Jake froze when Marta slid her fingers through his hair. Her touch was electrifying and he was confused. What exactly was she doing? Marta had always seemed so innocent, did she know what her actions were doing to him? Did she understand that at this very moment she was seducing him? Did she realize how powerful she was right now? What was he supposed to do? If he pushed her away, he would hurt her feelings. But if he didn't, he was going to do something that he could never take back. When Marta's lips connected with his, he was lost. She was so gentle and sweet, but he needed more. Jake pulled her onto his lap, his hand moved to the back of her neck and he devoured her. It still wasn't enough. His tongue moved over her lips until she opened for him and Jake was lost. There was no turning back even if he'd wanted to, which he didn't.

Entirely too soon, Marta shifted and straightened breaking their connection. She lowered her head to Jake's shoulder and closed her eyes. "We should have done that years ago." She finally whispered. "Why didn't we Jake?"

Jake wrapped his arms around Marta and held on for dear life. He couldn't have released her if it meant the difference between living and dying. "I don't know." He finally admitted. "I guess because our lives are so different. All this time I thought it was wrong to act on my feelings for you. I thought I was protecting you but now, I think maybe I was wrong. Your life is so short already, it feels like we've wasted too much of it." The minutes ticked by, both of them lost in their own thoughts. Finally Jake pushed Marta forward so he could look her in the eyes. "Marta," he whispered. "I love you." He took a deep breath then continued. "I have loved you for so long. Please tell me we don't have to go back to the way things were. Please tell me I don't have to pretend any longer. I don't think I could bear it."

Marta stood and held out her hand. "Jake Wilder, there's not a lot I know right now, but I know one thing for certain. There is no way either of us could return to the way things were before."

Jake took her hand and stood. "Where are we going?" He asked lifting Marta's hand to kiss her palm.

"I think it's about time we got to know each other, the way both of us have wanted to for far too long." Marta glanced at Jake then continued. "I have a confession to make."

"Okay," Jake said leading Marta up the stairs. "Go ahead."

"I was awake this morning." She paused and smiled. "I watched you walk proudly across the room, naked, before you disappeared into the bathroom."

“Really?” Jake said, smiling. “And did you like what you saw?” He hoped she said yes. He was starting to get a little self-conscious about that open display. He never would have done it if he’d thought for one moment Marta was awake. Once inside he’d had to take a long cold shower to calm himself down. That in itself was a little embarrassing.

“No.” Marta said, trying to keep a straight face.

Jake’s heart sank.

“I loved it.” She laughed. “But you ducked out way too soon. I want a better look this time.” Marta ran her hand down Jake’s chest. “You are so perfect, I want to see more.”

Jake laughed. “Marta my dear, you can look as long as you like on one condition.”

“What?” Marta asked, nervous now.

“It goes both ways. I feel like I’ve been dreaming about you forever. I want to see you now, every beautiful inch of you.” They had reached the bedroom and Jake stepped inside, closing the door behind them. “Do we have a deal?”

“I don’t know.” Marta said, more than a little afraid now. “I mean you’re perfect and I’m...well, I’m forty three.”

“And perfect.” Jake said as he gently pulled her shirt from the waistband of her shorts. “And I’m going to enjoy every minute of this.”

Chapter Three

Hours later the two of them were still cuddled close on Jake's bed. He was running his fingers through Marta's hair. "You have no idea how many times I wanted to do this."

"Well, you're a guy." Marta laughed. "You want it all the time."

"Not that." Jake said grinning. "This." He said tucking a stray hair behind her ear.

"I love you too, Jake." Marta said softly. "I think I always have." She sobered. "You never did say where those clothes came from."

"That's because I don't know." Jake said honestly. "I haven't so much as looked at another woman since I realized I was in love with you. That was so many years ago I've lost track. If I had to guess I'd say Alex put them in my closet to instigate this." He waved his hand between them. "She's a very clever girl, that one."

Marta laughed and realized Jake was probably right. "So, what do we do now?" She asked wondering how they were going to progress.

"Well," Jake said slowly. "If you're game, I'd like to take you somewhere. Out of town. On vacation. I want to get away from here. I want to have you all to myself if only for a few days."

"Is that possible?" Marta asked. "I mean with everything that is going on with the vampires can you just take a trip?"

"That wouldn't be possible for Dimitri, or even Thomas but I'm not out fighting any longer." Not on purpose anyway, Jake thought as he remembered his battle in the parking garage. "If they need me, it will be for legal stuff. I can do that from anywhere. Please Marta, say we can escape. Let's go to the Caribbean somewhere, maybe St. Lucia. I've heard that's a wonderful, romantic getaway. I think it's exactly what the two of us need. Say the word and we can leave in the morning."

"I don't know." Marta began but stopped. Why not? Thomas didn't need her, he'd pushed her away while the other warriors were living with him. Alex had Dimitri and Jake was right, anything pressing could be done over the phone. "Okay, let's go." She said enthusiastically. "I'll need to go home and pack, but let's do it." She knew she'd made the right decision when she saw Jake's smile. "We've lost enough time. We deserve this, don't we?"

"I think so." Jake said pulling Marta close. "I don't want you to cook tonight. Let's order Chinese."

“Okay.” Marta agreed. She was so happy right now Jake could have said let’s hit the deli naked and she probably would have said yes.

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Marta was enchanted the instant the plane hit the runway. St. Lucia was beautiful and romantic. Everywhere you looked there were couples clearly in love. A car was waiting for them near the runway. The instant they stepped from the jet, a man led them to a beige Cadillac while a second man loaded their luggage in the trunk. Marta watched in awe as they traveled smoothly over paved roadways. She couldn’t believe how luscious and green everything was here. Except the flowers, they were the most vibrant colored plants she’d seen in her entire life. Her heart nearly flew out of her chest when the car came to a stop and she realized they’d be staying on the beach. The cottage was perfect. Not too big, not too small. Just a quaint, little getaway near the bluest water she’d ever seen.

The instant the car drove away, Jake swept her off her feet and carried her into the cottage. “I’ve been waiting hours for this.” He growled impatiently as he dropped her on the bed. Marta laughed and knew she would never be happier than she was right now.

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Jake watched Marta as she delicately tackled her meal. They had been here just over a week now. The most amazing, memorable week of his life. He loved to watch her. He loved everything about her. He loved her and he wanted to make every moment of her life perfect. He sobered. How was he going to survive when she was gone? Oh sure, he’d spent almost a millennia alone but that was before. Now that he knew what it was like to be happy, how would he ever be able to live without her? For the first time, he truly understood what Luke had gone through. His friend nearly went insane when he lost Marlana. Jake knew it would be no different for him. Only, he wouldn’t have Luke to help him through.

“You’re frowning.” Marta observed. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Jake said taking Marta’s hand. “I was just wondering something, that’s all.”

“Something about us?” She asked, knowing exactly what had changed Jake’s mood. He was thinking about her lifespan, just like she was. Just like she had done so many times over the past few days. He was realizing she only had a few years left and he had forever. He would never

admit it, but she knew Jake. Probably better than he knew himself. She was worried about him. Once she was gone, he'd be all alone. She hated knowing that. She hated thinking about the future. A future Jake would have to deal with alone. He'd been there for her when Marlana had died. She'd been there for him when Luke died. Who was going to be there for Jake when she passed away? Marta couldn't think of anyone.

"I'm always thinking of us, but no. Not really." Jake smiled. "I know I'm doing this all wrong, but Marta Benson will you marry me? Right here, on this island, will you make me the happiest man alive and be my bride? We can fill out the paperwork tomorrow and get married two days from now."

Marta was shocked. Sure she'd hoped at some point they would get married but that was way down the road. Once they figured this whole thing out. Once they were back in New York with Alex and Thomas by her side.

"Never mind." Jake said, reading Marta's panic. He knew it was a long shot. He'd just have to be happy with what he had.

"Wait." Marta said, pressing her palm to Jake's cheek until he looked up at her. "Why?"

"Why?" Jake asked, incredulously. "That's easy, because I love you."

"But why here? Why now?" She pressed.

Jake took a deep breath. That was a good question. He looked out over the water and wondered if he could explain it. "I know it seems like I'm rushing things, Marta. Believe me, I know. But I just feel like we've waited so long. We've already wasted too much time. I want to start my life with you. I want every second of every minute of every day I can have with you."

"Because I'm human." Marta said softly. "Because we both know it's not enough. Because one day, too soon I am going to grow old and die and you are going to be left without me. Alone, with nobody to help you deal with the loss."

"I'll manage." Jake said brushing off Marta's concern.

"Will you?" She asked, not so sure of that.

"Of course." Jake said impatiently. "Forget I asked." He dropped his napkin on the table and stood. "You ready?"

Marta stood but didn't budge. "Can we take a walk on the beach?"

Jake took Marta's hand. "Of course." Didn't she know he would give her anything? All she needed to do was ask.

The two of them walked hand in hand across the empty stretch of beach. Marta's sandals got stuck in the sand so she removed them and walked bare foot. The soft granules cushioned each step as they continued in silence. Way too soon they were back at their cottage. Marta paused. "Can we sit out here for a while? I'm not ready to go inside. The weather is so perfect and I was hoping you would just hold me, out here while the sun sets before we settle in for the night."

Jake found a large log and lowered himself to the ground. He pressed his back against the rough surface and pulled Marta down with him, situating her between his legs so her back could rest against his chest.

"It's nice out here." She finally whispered. She knew she'd hurt Jake's feelings when she hadn't jumped at the offer of marriage. But this was too important. The more she thought of Jake alone in the world, without her, the more desperate she became. "Jake, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"You can talk to me about anything." He said moving her hair away so he could kiss her neck.

"I know there is a procedure that some warriors use to change their human partner into a warrior." She began.

"No way." Jake said resting his forehead against the back of Marta's head, inhaling the smell of her hair. He started to panic just thinking about the risk she was asking him to take. If anything went wrong he could never live with himself.

"I know it's dangerous." Marta continued. "Marlena told me all about it. In fact, I had to comfort her, more than once, when the transition didn't go as well as planned."

"Marta, please don't ask this of me." Jake pled. "You know I would do anything in my power to give you the world. Please don't ask me to risk your life this way. I love you too much. I could never live with myself if I lost you that way."

"But we both know I could lose you, too." Marta said, turning to face Jake. "The risk is the same for both of us. I know what I'm asking. I know the risk. And believe me, I'm not being naïve about this."

"Why are you doing this?" Jake finally asked. "Why Marta? Why can't we just enjoy each other for the time we have?"

Marta knew she was upsetting Jake and she wished it wasn't necessary. "Because it's not enough, for either of us." She finally told him. "Jake do you understand what you are asking of me? You are asking me to live with the fact that sooner rather than later I am going to die and leave you alone. You are asking me to suffer each and every day knowing I have to leave you and there is nothing I can do about it. You are asking me to silently accept that when I'm gone you

are going to be all alone, for century's maybe millennia. You want to give me the world, but you're asking me to settle for a few days. It's not fair to either of us."

"Marta." Jake tried again. "You have to be reasonable about this. What you're asking of me, it's too dangerous. I finally got you, after all these years and you want me to risk losing you forever. For me, that's not fair."

"I understand where you are coming from Jake, I really do. I'm just asking you to consider my point of view as well." She paused, she had to get this right or he would never agree. "If the tables were turned, if I was the one that would live forever and you would die in a few short years how would you feel about that?"

"Like I needed to cherish every moment we had together. Like I should never, ever do anything to risk the short time we did have together." Jake said immediately.

"Nice try, but I'm not buying it." Marta said just as quickly. "If you knew that once you were gone, once our time together was over that I would suffer wouldn't you do anything in your power to extend that time? Wouldn't you risk anything to make sure that my happiness didn't only last the next twenty or even forty years? If you knew there was something you could do that would ensure my happiness forever, wouldn't you risk anything to make that happen? Because that is what I would do for you, Jake. I would do anything, risk anything to know that I didn't have to leave you. I can't bear the thought of being apart and leaving you all alone like that. Is that what you want for me, to spend the rest of my short life dreading each new day because it brings me closer to the end?"

"Marta." Jake said, knowing he was losing this argument. And he was losing because Marta made sense. If the tables were turned, he would be unhappy. He would stress over leaving her, hate each new day because it did bring them closer to the end. An end he would have absolutely no control over. But could he risk everything? What if he lost her now, not later? Could he ever live with the consequences?

Marta turned and knelt before Jake, she placed both hands to the side of his face, studying him for several seconds before she leaned in and kissed him gently. "You know what I want. You know why. You know I'm not being stupid or reckless, I'm just asking you to do what I truly believe is the right thing for us. The decision is yours." She kissed him again. "I won't bring this up again. Let me know when you've decided. In the meantime, my answer is yes. I think I would like to fill out the paperwork tomorrow. Jake Wilder, I Marta Benson would love to be your wife."

Jake wrapped his arms around Marta and pulled her back to the ground. "I love you baby. I love you so much I can't think straight." He was straddling her thighs, his hands resting on either side of her head. Jake leaned down and gently kissed each eye, then her nose and finally her lips. Then he stood and lifted her into his arms. As he carried her to their cottage, he knew what he had to do. Marta had convinced him, nothing would ever be right between them if he didn't take

this chance. But he wouldn't be reckless about it. If they were going to go through the transition, they needed Tianna. She was the only one he would trust with something this important. Tianna had nursed more warriors through the transition than anyone else in history. He and Marta would hash out the details tomorrow. Tonight he was going to spend the night showing this wonderful woman just how deeply she was loved.

Chapter Four

“I know what I’m asking Tianna, but I need an answer.” Jake said growing more and more impatient by the second.

“Drake is going to freak.” She reiterated. “I can’t just pick up and leave and not tell my husband where I’m going. You ask too much, Jake.”

“You can tell him what you are doing, just not where.” Jake said, taking another deep breath. “I would never ask you to sneak out like a thief in the night. But I will not tell you where you are going if you can’t make this promise.”

“Why all the secrecy?” Tianna asked, truly not understanding their motives.

“If you tell Drake, he may let it slip to the other council members. Orin will tell Breena, Breena will confide in Ariel and Ariel will run to Alex. Then Thomas and Dimitri will know, then all the warriors and before you know it the island will be swarming with family and friends. That’s not what I want, it’s not what Marta wants. We know what we are doing, Tianna. It’s better this way. Especially if something goes wrong. We don’t want everyone we love sitting around waiting for days to see if we live or die. We are both strong, chances are good for us. We need to do this our way. We need to go through the transition alone, it’s the only way for us. If you can’t do it, I’ll have to find someone else. I don’t like that option, there’s no one I trust to handle this but you.”

Tianna sighed. “Okay.” She said reluctantly. Breaking the news to Drake was not going to be pleasant. “But I don’t want to know where I’m going. Drake is going to insist on knowing. If I don’t know, I don’t have to lie and I don’t have to break my promise to you. Just tell me how to pack and leave it at that. I’ll pick my ticket up at the airport.”

“No ticket.” Jake said, relieved. “You will be taking my jet. Pack for warm weather and bring a bathing suit. You’re going to want one.”

“Great Jake, just great.” Tianna said sarcastically. “You are going to owe me for this one. Because if I return with a nice tan, I am going to owe Drake for years. You do know what this will mean?”

“What?” Jake asked, trying not to smile. He knew exactly what it was going to mean. Drake would finally be allowed to take that fishing trip to Alaska with the boys he’d been wanting for years.

“Don’t play dumb.” Tianna said irritably. “You know exactly what it means. And when Drake gets back from that stupid Alaska trip you are going to give us an all-expense paid vacation to the destination of my choice.”

“It’s a deal and I’ll throw in transportation.” Jake said immediately. “How soon can you leave?”

“Give me a day to talk to Drake and pack. I can probably head out by noon tomorrow.” Tianna said without hesitation. Drake wouldn’t stop her. He liked Jake as much as she did. If he’d finally found a mate, they would both do anything they could to help it along.

“Thanks Tianna.” Jake said sincerely. “I know I owe you for this. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Sure you can.” She said with a smile. “I just haven’t decided how much I’m going to make you pay. Should I go to Florida or Aruba? Decisions, decisions. I think I’ll wait until it’s all over to decide. Oh, being a lawyer, you will make sure my trip is added to your will, right? Dead or alive you are going to give me this trip.”

Jake laughed. “I’ll fax something over by the end of the day. Write down this number, it’s to my assistant. If you get delayed, let her know. She can get word to the pilot. Thank you again for this and I’ll be at the airport to meet you tomorrow. Goodbye for now.”

“See you tomorrow, Jake. And I hope you know what you’re doing. Oh, I’m going to call this number and give your assistant a list of things you are going to need. If you can’t get them at your secret destination, have her send them with me.”

“It’s done.” Jake said confidently. Once he hung up he turned to Marta. “We’re all set. You still have time to change your mind.”

“I’m sure about this Jake.” She said soberly. “But I was hoping we’d have today to spend some time together. There’s a scooter rental just up the road. Do you think you’re up for a ride?”

Jake moved to Marta’s side. He too wanted the day to enjoy each other. “I’m up for anything you want to do.” He pulled her against his chest and kissed the top of her head. “I’m terrified Marta. I can’t lose you. I’m not sure I’ll survive if this doesn’t work out.”

Marta wrapped her arms around Jake’s neck. “I feel the same.” She whispered. “We both know it could be me that survives and you that doesn’t. I promise to fight with everything I have if you do the same.”

Jake rested his forehead against hers. “I promise.”

“Good, now let’s get out of here before we both break down.”

Jake and Marta spent the day exploring the island, hiking, snorkeling and relaxing in each other's arms. When it was time for dinner, they were ready to retire to their private beach. "Let's stop and get take out." Marta suggested. "I don't want to spend our last night in public. I want you all to myself."

Jake's stomach clenched. He hated this. He hated the worry, he hated the knot that had formed in his stomach that was growing with each passing minute. He hated that Marta just referred to this as their last night. He took her hand and led her to a nearby bench. "Marta, we don't have to do this. I know you just slipped and will say you didn't mean it that way, but I also know it's on your mind as much as it is mine. This doesn't have to be our last night. We don't have to take this risk."

"Yes we do, Jake." She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "For all the reasons we've talked about. We do have to do this. We deserve it. And yes, I'm worried. I know everything could go terribly wrong and one of us might not make it through. There is also a chance neither one of us will. Although for me, I'd prefer that. If you don't make it, I don't want to live forever without you. But it's the only way. You know that. I know that. And I happen to think we are both strong enough and stubborn enough to survive." They sat there silently holding each other for a very long time before Jake spoke.

"If this works, if we both survive I promise you I will give you the world. I'm going to love you and pamper you and make you the happiest woman that ever existed." He smiled and wiped the single tear away from her eye.

"I'm already the happiest woman that ever existed, Jake." Marta said softly. "And you don't have to give me the world. All I want is you."

"I was going to wait until we got through this to ask, but I think this might be the right time to discuss it." He said hesitantly.

"What?" She asked, alarmed at his seriousness.

"Well, I know your dream has always been to open up a bakery. You've talked about that since you were ten. I'd like you to think about retiring as housekeeper for the Deveraux's. If you'll let me, I want to buy you the perfect building where you can bake cakes and pies and whatever your heart desires. I want to make all your dreams come true, Marta. Will you let me give you this? As a wedding gift?"

Marta glanced down at the enormous wedding ring Jake had so proudly placed on her finger the previous morning at their ceremony. Their wedding had been small and intimate and perfect. "Don't you think this was enough?"

“Not even close.” Jake said, laughing. “I’ve lived almost a thousand years my dear. Money is just a tool. I have more than we could ever use. That ring, it’s only the beginning. I plan to shower you with diamonds and pearls and a big, grand building to open a bakery.”

“How about you just shower me with love?” Marta said smiling. “That’s all I really need.” She considered. “But yes, I think it is time for me to retire. I will always love those kids and will think of them as mine until the day I die, but they don’t need me anymore. Not in the way they used to. Alex has Dimitri and Thomas has the business and all the warriors. Most nights Thomas doesn’t even come home before he goes out hunting. The kids have their own lives these days. It’s a little depressing actually.”

“You will always be needed, just in a different way.” Jake corrected, relieved she agreed so readily. “And I need you now.” He added feeling more than a little vulnerable.

“Yes, you do.” Marta agreed, standing. “And right now, you need me to decide what we will have for dinner. Then you need me to take you home and show you just how much I need you too.”

Jake stood and the two of them headed home, each one determined to give the other a night they would never forget.

* * * *

“I’m glad we decided to do this here.” Marta said as they sat in the beige Cadillac waiting for Tianna’s plane to arrive.

Jake looked at her, confused. “What?”

“The transition, silly.” Marta said, laughing.

“Oh.” Jake said, still confused.

“This place is magical.” Marta said softly. “It’s like our own island paradise. It just seems appropriate that it all begins in the same place.”

“All begins?” Jake asked, not understanding.

“Yes.” She said, smiling at the man she loved. “Our life together. Our wedding, our transition, us. This is where we came to explore our love, to get to know each other as a couple. It’s where our married life began. It just feels right somehow. Like all of it should happen in this beautiful island setting. Like it’s some kind of good luck omen or something. I’m just glad we decided to do it here is all I’m saying.”

Jake kissed Marta softly. “I can’t say that I’m glad we are doing it at all.”

“Jake.” Marta said, hoping they were not going to have this discussion again.

“I know.” Jake agreed. “It’s necessary. I’m just saying, I can’t pretend like I’m glad. But I agree with you. St. Lucia does feel magical somehow. Maybe because I’m here with you. You feel like magic to me, Marta. A special kind of magic that I never imagined for myself. I hope you never forget that. You are my life, now and forever. No matter what happens over the next several days, it was always you. I waited my whole life for you. Nobody else has mattered, not like this. I finally understand where Luke was coming from. You have no idea how sappy that man could be. I marveled at the change Marlena made in him but I get it now. Thanks to you, I get it.”

Marta rested her head on Jake’s shoulder. She had doubted her decision so many times over the last couple days. But deep down in her soul, she truly believed they were both going to make it and all the stress and the worry would end in triumph. She was sure they would have a long, happy life together. That belief was the only thing holding her sanity intact. If she allowed herself to consider any other possibility, she would literally go insane.

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Tianna exited the plane and smiled. “Well, at least you brought me to paradise.” She immediately hugged Jake then Marta. She didn’t know Marta well, but she had always liked her. “So, you two ready for this?” She asked, sobering. “It’s not going to be a walk in the park, or should I say on the beach.”

“We’re ready.” Marta said before Jake could express his doubts. “We have everything you requested. The only thing we couldn’t swing was the IV stand and the extra blood.”

“We brought that.” Tianna said, glancing at the man who had just entered the plane. “Is he okay in there? The cooler isn’t hidden or anything.”

“He’s fine.” Jake assured her. “Let me get you settled in the car and then I’ll deal with the cooler and the stand.”

The women walked silently to the car. Once inside Tianna turned to face Marta. “Tell me you’re sure about this.”

“I’m sure.” Marta said with more confidence than she felt at the moment.

“I mean really sure.” Tianna pressed. “I know you are aware of the risk, in theory anyway. But this isn’t pleasant. It’s painful and dangerous and so very risky. For you of course, but also for Jake. He’s over nine hundred years old. I don’t know of anyone that has waited that long to attempt a change.”

Marta paled. “Do you mean Jake is more at risk than I am? But I thought...” She paused. “I mean, Marlana told me the warrior is also at risk, but I thought it was usually the human that didn’t make it.”

“The risk is the same for both of you.” Tianna corrected. “The people Marlana knew; Bastian’s mother, the woman Haitian tried to turn, and that couple that lived just outside New York. I forget their names. Anyway, those were all humans that died. Well in the last example they both died. But that’s not reality Marta. Jake is at risk. Just as much, if not more than you are. He’s a dear friend to both myself and Drake. We just want to make sure you guys have really thought this out. There are so many people that will be devastated if you don’t make it. Alex and Thomas to begin with. Both of you are like family to them. They’ve already lost both their parents. I can’t even imagine what it will do to them if they lost either one of you, or worse both of you.”

Marta sat silently, considering. She knew the kids would be devastated if they lost either her or Jake but what was the alternative? The scenario she and Jake had talked about? Her waiting each day to get older and die. Living a life knowing in just a few years she would be dead and Jake would be lost? They just couldn’t live like that and the longer they waited, the more dangerous it would be for both of them. She was just about to explain that to Tianna when Jake climbed in and motioned for the driver to proceed.

“What are you two discussing?” He finally asked. “It’s like a morgue in here.” He studied Tianna, then Marta. “What did you tell her?” He demanded glaring at Tianna.

“Nothing.” Marta said, sliding her hand into his. “She was just reminding me of the risk involved in what we are doing. She wanted to make sure we had considered everything.”

“Meaning?” He asked, still glaring at Tianna.

“Meaning, I wanted to know if Marta realized the risk she was putting you through.” Tianna said defiantly.

“Me?” Jake said, brushing that off as insignificant. “Marta is the one I’m worried about. I feel terribly guilty for risking her life this way.”

“Okay, sure.” Tianna agreed. “There is risk involved for Marta. I mean if she were twenty and healthy I’d feel a lot better. But Jake you are over nine hundred years old. I don’t think this has ever been done before. What if your body can’t handle it?”

“My body is fine.” He said annoyed now. “I’m a warrior, I’m as fit as I was when I was twenty. This conversation is ridiculous.”

Nobody said another word. The three of them traveled in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Consumed by their own worries and concerns. The instant the car came to a stop Marta was out the door. She needed some time alone. She needed to think. She heard Jake calling

to her, but she didn't stop. She knew he might join her, but for now, she wanted a minute to walk along the shoreline and consider everything Tianna had said. Jake told her Tianna had seen more people through the transition than anyone else alive. That meant she was as close as they could get to an expert. If she was worried about Jake, maybe this was a bad idea. Marta wasn't surprised when she felt Jake's arms circle her waist and pull her to an abrupt stop. He gently turned her so she was facing him but didn't speak until Marta looked him in the eye. The instant she did, a damn broke and she began to cry. She couldn't help it. Her emotions had grown so big she couldn't keep them in any longer.

"Shhh." Jake soothed as he rubbed her back. "Tianna is being an alarmist."

"But what if she's right?" Marta asked, wiping her face and looking at Jake. "What if you die? It will be all my fault."

Jake narrowed his eyes at Marta. "All this time you were so adamant about this because you believed I wasn't really at risk, didn't you? You thought that if anyone didn't make it through, it would be you."

Marta cringed, Jake was right and she couldn't deny it.

"And that was okay with you? Do you have any idea how devastated I would be if I lost you? Do you have any idea what it would be like for me? Then on top of the unbearable loss, I'd have to go back to New York and tell everyone that loves you why you were dead. But I guess that's okay, because you're not the one breaking the news."

"But I might have to." Marta corrected. "Tianna said there is more risk to you than there is to me. You said she's the expert here. If that's what she believes, I'm the one that will lose you. I'm the one that will have to find a way to live without you. I'm the one that will have to go back to New York and inform your friends. I'll have to tell them you are dead because of me."

"Just say the word and we won't do it." Jake said with a shrug. "But just remember, you are the one that convinced me this was the right thing to do. You are the one that helped me to understand it's the only way for us. And there is one more thing. The longer we wait, the more risk we will both be in. If you change your mind now, you can't go back. Five years, ten years from now is nothing to me but to you and your body, it's a lifetime. I won't change my mind about that Marta. If you don't want to do this now, I understand. But...And I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think it would be the wrong decision. For all those reasons you gave me when I was opposed to this. For all the reasons you used to convince me this was right for us. It's still right for us. I don't like that you were willing to risk your life, but now that you know mine is on the line you want to back out. But if I can agree to risk you this way, you should be able to risk me as well."

Marta leaned into Jake and considered. He was right of course. Nothing had changed. All the reasons they had decided to do this in the first place were still valid. Knowing she could lose Jake didn't change any of the facts. And if they both survived, they would have an eternity to enjoy the love they had finally found. Well that they had finally had the courage to explore. "Okay." She said, taking a deep breath. "Okay. We go through with it. But if you die on me Jake so help me, I'm going to...well I don't know what I'll do. Just don't die."

Jake smiled. "I have the same request my dear." He lifted her chin with his forefinger and pressed his lips to hers. They would get through this. They had to. It was the only option and maybe this little island paradise would bring them the magic they would need. He could hope, couldn't he? Jake took Marta's hand and led her back to the cottage. When he walked in he saw Tianna already had everything ready.

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" He said with a smile.

Tianna studied the couple for a long time before she spoke. "I can feel the love you have for each other all the way over here. That kind of love can move mountains. I'm worried about both of you. It terrifies me each and every time I help someone through this, but I also know there's no stopping it. If we don't do this today, you will both regret it and I will be back. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next week. But within oh...six months tops. We will be right back here, or at your house in New York or somewhere else. It might as well be here."

"I agree." Jake said moving to sit on the side of the bed. He held out his arm and waited while Tianna hooked up the line.

Marta moved to sit next to Jake. "What do I do?" She asked, never having witnessed this before.

"Wait until I have Jake all hooked up, then lie down next to him and I'll take care of you. The process is quick. What I mean is once we get started the transition begins almost instantly. I'd like to tie you both to the bed before I release the valves if that's okay." Tianna asked, looking to Jake for agreement.

"You have to tie us to the bed?" Marta asked, becoming more and more frantic by the minute.

"Don't worry." Jake soothed. "It's so we don't move. The process can be painful. Tianna just wants to make sure we don't jerk or move too quickly and pull the lines out. I'll be right here with you the entire time." He pressed a soft kiss to Marta's lips then moved to stretch out on the bed. "Now it's your turn." He said motioning for Marta to stretch out next to him.

Marta took a deep breath then climbed onto the bed. The instant she pressed her head to the pillow, Jake took her hand in his. "Relax." He whispered in her ear. "It will make it easier for Tianna to insert the line."

Marta turned her head and looked into Jake's eyes. The love and tenderness she saw there, made her entire body relax. This was the right thing to do, she still felt that deep within her soul. She would just hang onto that belief until the process was over. She could handle anything if the end result was being with Jake.

Jake knew the instant Tianna opened the valve. Marta's eyes closed and she gripped his hand with so much force he wondered if she was going to break it. He whispered in her ear, trying to sooth her but within seconds he too was in pain. The instant Marta's blood entered his body, he knew there was a problem. Jake knew that a certain type of human blood wasn't compatible with a warriors, he'd heard the rumors for centuries. But he hadn't considered the possibility. All his worries about Marta shifted. If he was right, he was the one that wouldn't make it through this alive. Would Marta be okay? Who would take care of her? His back bowed and he let out a deep moan.

Marta heard Jake's moan and knew he was in terrible pain. "What's wrong with him?" She demanded of Tianna. "Is that normal?"

Tianna frowned. "No." She said, instantly moving to Jake's side. "Jake, talk to me."

Jake settled back and gritted his teeth. "I don't think we're compatible." He finally admitted.

Tianna's eyes widened and she rushed to the cooler. If Jake was right she needed to slow down the process.

"What does he mean?" Marta asked, in shock. "Of course we're compatible." Pain shot through Marta's body so intense that she could barely breathe. "Jake, we are compatible. I promise, nothing has changed." A tear ran down her cheek. Had Jake changed his mind? Had he finally realized he could have someone so much better? "Please just give me a chance. I know I can make you happy."

Jake wanted to assure Marta she was wrong. He hadn't changed his mind, but the pain was so intense he couldn't speak. He clamped his teeth together and locked his jaw so he wouldn't scream out in pain. He'd already hurt the woman he loved, there was no way he was going to scare her.

Marta gripped Jake's hand, pleading for him to give her a sign, any sign that he still loved her. She sat up in shock when Tianna closed the valves allowing her blood to flow into Jake. "No!" She said, panicked now. Was that Tianna's cue to stop the process so Jake could escape? "Jake, honey." Marta tried one last time. "I know it's painful but we can get through this. I love you, I know we can be compatible."

Tianna finally understood what Marta was saying. She moved to the side of the bed and checked the IV then turned to the human. "It's your blood, not you honey."

“What?” Marta said, confused. “My blood?”

“I’m going to slow this down. Both of you hold on, I’ve got this.” Tianna reached over and closed the valve completely on Marta’s line so Jake’s blood stopped flowing into her. Tianna moved back to the IV, watching and waiting. She’d brought more than enough blood with her to handle this. She was just thankful she’d followed her instincts and insisted on O positive. Bastian’s tech thought she was crazy, but Tianna knew what she was doing. That particular type of blood was easier for a warrior to turn than any of the others. And if Jake and Marta were going to survive this, they needed every advantage they could get.

“What are you doing?” Marta asked. Jake’s face was still contorted but she no longer felt pain.

“I’ve stopped the transfer of blood between your systems.” Tianna admitted.

“But why?” Marta asked, still worried.

“Because we are going to do this a different way.” She said flatly. “There have always been rumors that a certain type of human blood was toxic to a warrior. Bastian confirmed that to a point with tests when he opened his lab. We should have tested your blood before we started. If I’d known you were AB negative we would have taken precautions from the start.”

Realization finally hit Marta. Their blood wasn’t compatible and once again she started to panic. “I have no idea what type of blood I have. I’ve never had a reason to be tested.” She reached up and ran her hand over Jake’s face. “So what do we do now?”

“Now we improvise.” Tianna said solemnly.

“I don’t understand.” Marta said, never taking her eyes off Jake.

“I’m pushing blood into Jake’s system. Good blood that he can turn into warrior blood. Once he’s back to normal, we’ll open the valve back up.” She smiled when Marta began shaking her head vehemently. “We open the valve, but at a much slower pace. And the entire time, I’m going to continue to pump good blood into Jake’s system. I need to dilute your blood to help his body turn it. You’re going to have to trust me, Marta. I have done this before.”

Marta turned to face Tianna. “This? You mean you have overseen a process when the human’s blood was toxic to the warrior? And they survived?”

“Yes to all of that.” Tianna nodded. “It’s just a little more difficult and it takes a little longer. I promise Marta, I know what I’m doing. I am going to do my best to get both of you through this alive. Unfortunately, it’s going to be very painful for both of you.” Tianna didn’t tell Marta she had also been through this when both participants died. In fact, of all the times this had occurred only one couple had lived. Marta didn’t need to know that and Tianna was determined to prevent

a fatal outcome. She was just glad she'd agreed to come. If anyone else had been here, they wouldn't have known what to do and neither Marta nor Jake would have had a chance.

* * * *

Marta woke in a panic. Where was she? And was Jake okay? She sat up, expecting to be dizzy or nauseous or something. But she was fine. She was better than fine. She felt wonderful. It was still dark outside, well she assumed it was since her room was pitch black. Marta reached over and flipped on a lamp. Then she climbed from the bed and moved to stand in front of the mirror. Her hands flew to her face when she saw her reflection. It was a miracle, she couldn't believe the transformation. She still looked like Marta, but a younger more vibrant Marta. She looked thirty five, not forty three. And those extra twenty pounds she'd been meaning to lose, gone. She was glad they had done this now, if they had waited the two of them couldn't have stayed in New York. It would have been necessary to move to a whole different city. But where was Jake? The panic began to take over again. She had to know if Jake had made it.

Marta took half a second to glance down and see that she was decent then she rushed out of the room. Once in the hall, she had to orient herself. Okay, she was in the spare bedroom and the master was just a few feet to the left. Marta ran. Once she reached the door, she flung it open and burst inside. Jake was lying motionless on the bed. Tianna was sitting in a chair, staring out the window. "Is he okay?" Marta asked, anxious.

"I think he will be." Tianna said, not taking her eyes from the window.

"Tianna." Marta screamed. "Is Jake going to live?"

Tianna shifted and locked eyes with Marta. "I don't know." She finally said, honestly. "I expected him to wake up before now. His body doesn't seem to be healing and when I tried to introduce more blood it only seemed to make things worse."

Marta was frantic, Jake had to survive. She would not live without him. "What about my blood?" Marta finally asked. "I mean, you said his blood was turning my blood into warrior blood, right? So now that I have warrior blood wouldn't that help Jake? He wouldn't have to turn it, right?"

Tianna considered. It might work. Technically Marta's blood was Jake's blood. But Marta was still recovering. "Let's give it a try." She finally said standing to retrieve a needle and vile. When she reached Marta's side, the woman was frowning.

"Why can't you just hook me back up the way we were before?" Marta asked.

"Because I'm not taking that much." She said simply.

“But I think you should.” Marta said, hiding her arm behind her back. “Just listen to me. Why can’t we take advantage of the process? I mean, hook us back up so my blood flows into Jake and his blood flows into me. We both survived the hard part. Let my body help heal his body. If the blood is still toxic I can help take some of the bad blood away.”

“But what if it doesn’t work? What if it sets back your healing too much?” Tianna questioned out loud. What Marta said made sense. If the bad blood was flowing through both of them, both of their bodies would be fighting to change it, to convert bad blood into good blood. It was just a theory, but it might actually work.

“I’ll take that risk.” Marta said immediately, moving to lie down next to Jake. “Tianna, do this for me. I love him. More than life itself. I need him to survive. If I can help him, please let me.”

Tianna only hesitated a moment. Then she moved to the bed and began setting up the system. Marta seemed fine and Jake wasn’t thrashing around anymore. With any luck, the added boost would be just the thing that would get him back on his feet. “Okay, here goes.” She said opening both valves then moving back to her chair. She wasn’t going anywhere now. The beach looked enticing, she’d considered taking an evening walk. But until both her patients were better she wasn’t going anywhere.

Marta clenched her hands and gritted her teeth at the pain. It wasn’t unbearable like the pain had been during the initial transition but the new blood felt like it was burning. It was hard to describe, but almost like someone had caught her veins on fire. But only in her leg. It flowed through her thigh and into her torso, then the pain stopped. She figured by the time it got to her ribs, her blood had turned it into good blood. She could handle this. Especially when she realized Jake must be feeling the fire throughout his entire body. Maybe that was why he’d shut down so completely. His body just couldn’t handle the pain any longer.

* * * *

Marta woke up and panicked. She couldn’t move. Was she paralyzed? Then she realized it was the gorgeous man wrapped around her body that was preventing her movement. She shifted and turned trying to get more comfortable. When she looked up, she found herself looking into the most beautiful brown eyes she’d ever seen. Jake pulled Marta closer and the strangest feeling overtook her. It was a love so intense it took her breath away. “Oh, Jake.” She finally whispered. “I was so worried about you.”

“I know.” Jake said, moving to sit against the head board as he pulled Marta into his lap. “I can’t believe we did it.” Love and happiness engulfed them both. The intense feelings were almost too overwhelming.

“Jake.” Marta said, concerned. She wasn’t sure what was happening to her.

“We talked about this baby.” He said, pressing his lips to hers. “Remember, I can feel what you’re feeling. You feel what I’m feeling. It’s a little intense right now but we’ll get used to it.”

“Wow.” Marta said holding on to Jake even tighter. “I forgot about that. It is intense. But nice. I mean, wow. You really do love me as much as I love you.”

Jake laughed. “You doubted me?”

“Maybe a little.” Marta admitted. “I mean why would you? I know why I love you. How could I not love the most perfect, kind, loving, caring man in the world? But why would you love me? I’m just a housekeeper.”

Jake frowned. “You’re not a housekeeper anymore. You are a business woman. And never doubt my love for you baby. I don’t care what you do for a living. I don’t care if you do nothing. You are the most beautiful, amazing woman I have ever met. And now you’re all mine.” He lifted her left hand and kissed her ring finger. “In every way possible.”

“Where’s Tianna?” Marta asked, wondering when they could be alone again.

“She checked into the cottage next door.” Jake said in understanding. He wanted Marta too.

“What? Why?” Marta asked. She never would have asked Tianna to leave.

Jake pressed his lips against Marta’s and smiled. “Because we’re newlyweds and she wanted to give us our privacy.” He bit Marta’s bottom lip then pulled away. “Anyway, she only wanted to wait until you woke up. Then she’s returning to New York. She misses her husband.”

“Well, I can understand that I guess.” Marta said with a smile. “So there’s no possible way we could be interrupted?”

“Not even the slightest possibility.” Jake answered just before he maneuvered Marta underneath his body. “Oh, man.” He whispered, “This is going to be amazing.” And it was.

* * * *

“I can’t believe you are leaving so soon.” Marta said as she hugged Tianna. “We can never repay you for all you’ve done.”

“Sure you can.” Tianna disagreed. “Jake’s going to pay for Drake and me to come back here. I think I want the same cottage you two are staying at. It has good karma. It’s so beautiful and peaceful with the wonderful sunsets and the private beach. I can’t wait!”

Marta laughed. “You just say the word and it’s done.”

Tianna turned to Jake. “Take care old man.” She said laughing when he hugged her so hard he lifted her off her feet.

“I owe you.” Jake said sincerely. “Let me know when you want your vacation and I’ll make it happen. Oh, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention the little complication when you get home. Our families are going to be worried enough when they realize what we did. They don’t need to know the details. And if there is ever anything I can do for you, just let me know.”

Tianna understood and agreed. Jake was happier than she had ever seen him, that’s all that mattered to her. “Just the trip, that’s payment enough. I’d even let you off the hook for that, but I don’t think I’d get Drake to spend this kind of money any other way. And I want a couple weeks on that beach. So, you’re footing the bill and then we’re even and you will never mention this whole ordeal again.”

Jake pressed a kiss to Tianna’s forehead. “Tell Drake he’s an idiot. The man’s irrationally cheap and needs to have his head examined. He’s lucky to have a wife like you, he should cherish that and spend some of his pagan coin to make you happy.”

“I’ll let you tell him.” Tianna said smiling, then she turned and ran up the stairs, closing the door behind her. Helping couples through the transition always made her appreciate Drake and the love they had for each other. Her man might be cheap, but she missed him terribly.

Jake and Marta watched as the large jet taxied across the runway then soared into the air and disappeared. Jake wrapped his arms around his wife. “I’ll always take you anywhere you want to go.” He whispered into her ear. “You just say the word and we’re there.”

Marta laughed.

“I mean it, sweetheart.” Jake said, turning Marta so he could look her in the eye. “I promised to give you the world and I meant it. If life ever gets too hectic or I get busy and you feel neglected, I want to know. We’ll hop a plane immediately and head off to some paradise island where we can make things right again.”

“Can we stay here, for just a little while longer?” Marta asked hesitantly. They had already been here two weeks. But she just couldn’t leave yet. She needed some time with her new husband. She wanted their honeymoon. She wanted to enjoy a little piece of paradise before they returned to the busy city and the pressures of war.

“The cottage is ours for another week.” Jake said, understanding Marta’s request. He’d heard about this shared feelings thing, but he had no idea just how powerful it really was. He wouldn’t need Marta to tell him when she needed an escape. He’d know. And each and every time he did,

they would fly off and find another secluded spot where they could make new memories that would last a lifetime.

Marta smiled as they walked back to the car. “Then, Mr. Wilder, you have a week to make all my dreams come true.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Wilder. My pleasure.”

THE END

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