

 HARLEQUIN®

nocturne™ **BITES**

A woman with dark hair and red nails is embracing a shirtless man from behind. In the background, a large, glowing green wolf's face with blue eyes is visible against a dark, misty forest setting.

COURAGE OF  
THE WOLF

Bonnie Vanak

A decorative border at the bottom of the cover featuring intricate, swirling patterns in shades of green and black.

# Courage of the Wolf

Bonnie Vanak



Werewolf Sabrina Kelly longs to put her family's brutal slaying by a demon behind her. Finding her destined mate might bring her solace...though in her heart, she knows she only wants her long-time friend Michael Anderson. Instinct tells Sabrina he desires her as strongly as she craves him, yet still he pushes her away....

As an immortal Justice Guardian, Michael has vowed to protect Sabrina...and deny his hunger for her. It's his duty to make Sabrina find the courage to challenge the demon once and for all—though it may cost him the only woman he could ever love.

# Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

# Chapter 1

Just another day in a tropical paradise filled with demons.

Right.

If only it was just a typical day and not the very one he'd been dreading.

Ambling backwards on the roadside, Michael Anderson scanned Florida's Alligator Alley for a silver Lexus. As always, Sabrina Kelly was late. The Draicon werewolf would be late for her own funeral.

The thought sobered him.

Minutes later, Michael pushed a hand through his long, ragged hair as Sabrina's car pulled off the road. He breathed in her scent of fresh lavender as the Draicon werewolf hurried toward him. Dressed in a pink sweater set and a floral skirt, she looked like spring. Cut razor straight, her black hair swung just below her jawline. Wide, sea-green eyes shone with intelligence.

When she threw herself into his arms, he hugged back, feeling a lump rise in his throat. The vision came to him again. Blood. Death. Sorrow.

Michael set her back down on her feet. As much as he wanted to use his powers as an Immortal Justice Guardian to direct destiny, he could not. Punishment would be severe if he broke Guardian laws. He'd already broken a big one to buy Sabrina time.

Years ago, when he was still a Draicon werewolf, he'd made a promise to keep her safe. The burning need to protect her had never stopped. It wasn't love, but a fierce admiration of her strong spirit and honoring the deep friendship they'd shared in the past.

"Why did you want me to pick you up on this road? Forget how to dematerialize?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I like walking. And I thought it would be nice to ride with you in the Lexus to your grandparents' anniversary party."

"You knew I was taking the Lexus and not the Expedition? Oh, of course, you know everything." She shook her head. "Even what type of underwear I have on."

"I don't know everything."

When she turned, he flicked his fingers. A microburst of air sent the fabric swirling upward.

"White lace," he noted with a grin. "Very nice."

"Michael!" she scolded him with a smile.

A faint blush raced across her cheeks. It was like watching the sun chase away the night. Enchanted, he watched her moisten her pink lips. What would her petal-soft mouth feel like beneath his as he took her, hard and fast?

He swallowed hard at the startling, sexual thought. Sabrina was off-limits.

He was a Phoenix, an Immortal Justice Guardian who'd died and been reborn to his powers. Michael patrolled the earth, doling out justice and destroying predators of

paranormal creatures. He'd succeeded at his job until a year ago, when the Hellfire demon Ambrosis slaughtered Sabrina's parents and five siblings as Sabrina tried to save them. Her family had been heading to visit her grandparents when the demon attacked them as they took a brief respite from driving.

If he could, he'd die to keep her safe. But he couldn't die again. Sabrina had to face her own demon. Guardian laws demanded he must not interfere.

"Let's go," he muttered.

The sun sinking toward the horizon warned they were running out of time.

Inside the car, his senses drank in her scent as if he were still a Draicon werewolf. Trees, palms and scrub brush passed in a blur as the car sped toward Florida's west coast.

"Michael, you're the only friend who still bothers with me. Thank you," Sabrina told him.

"I'm not just your friend, Brie. I've watched over you since I became a Justice Guardian. You've shut yourself off from the world."

She blinked hard. "If not for you, I'd never have done this. I can't bear the memories."

White showed on her knuckles as her fingers tightened on the steering wheel. "All I can recall is fighting. Pain, and then nothing. Nothing except waking up to see my family was dead."

"You still don't remember what happened to you?"

"It's a blur, except I have the scar to remind me. I have nightmares about Ambrosis, and this voice keeps telling me I must have the courage to face him again. But ever since I lost my family, I'm terrified of something else happening."

Michael looked away. "You should pay attention to your dreams. Often, they contain messages."

She inhaled deeply. "Dreams are just dreams. Let's not talk about it. It's hard enough for me to drive on this road again. I haven't been this way since Ambrosis killed my family."

A fist of guilt slammed into his guts. He stared out the passenger's side window.

*I'm sorry, Brie, but I must do this. It's my duty as a Justice Guardian.*

Familiar landmarks appeared on the roadside. Sabrina's hands shook. "This is the place. If I'd never insisted on Dad stopping so we could hunt in the swamp, they'd still be alive. I'm going to speed up...."

"Pull over," he told her.

"Here?"

"Now."

Blood drained from her face, but she steered the Lexus onto the narrow shoulder.

"Stay here," he ordered, hating her fear, smelling it like burnt wood.

He got out. Clouds the color of lead hung low in the gathering dusk. He breathed in the fertile scent of dank earth. The task before him lay on his wide shoulders like twin weights. A haunting loneliness gripped him.

He hated this part of the job.

In the canal paralleling the Alley, an alligator swam by in silence, its eyes peeking

through the dark brown water in cool indifference.

Michael vaulted over the chain link fence, and walked a path through cypress and pine trees until he reached a tree island surrounded by shallow swamp water. At the northwest side, he touched the earth where a great battle had been raged. Sorrow squeezed his insides.

From his backpack, he withdrew a single white gardenia, the blossom fresh and preserved by magick. He laid it on the ground where the blood of Sabrina's family had been spilled.

A mocking crow cackled overhead. Michael fisted his hands as he walked to a small pool. No animals ever drank from this vile water—the home of Ambrosis. Michael had imprisoned him here after the battle that claimed Sabrina's family.

Hellfire demons were attracted to paranormal beings possessing enormous integrity, strength and courage. They siphoned off those qualities for energy then killed the victim.

Beneath his palm, the dark water rippled. His immortal senses “saw” Ambrosis. With his index finger, Michael traced a sacred pattern in the muck below the shallow water. The ground vibrated.

An eerie, haunting scream rent the air. Disturbed by the sound, a great blue heron resting in a nearby cypress tree flew off.

The face of Sabrina's nightmares appeared in the pool. Nasty laughter echoed through the swamp. The demon vanished below the water.

It was done, consequences be as they may. His duty as a Guardian was fulfilled.

“Forgive me, Brie,” Michael whispered.

He stood, dusting off his hands on his jeans. Shouldering his pack, he headed toward Sabrina's car, but not before the earth gave a mighty shudder and the demon's triumphant roar echoed through the silent clearing.

## Chapter 2

Ribbons of violet and rose laced the skies over the tranquil Gulf of Mexico. Palm branches fluttered in the cooling breeze. On the sand, a man drove a tractor, picking up turquoise umbrellas and chair cushions. She'd been here a full day, yet could not relax in the serene tropical atmosphere.

Sabrina braced her hands on the hotel railing and stared down at the Tiki Bar three stories below. Her grandparents' gray-haired pack mingled with each other, clinking glasses as they watched the sunset.

Her grandparents waved up at her. Intense feelings rushed through her as she waved back. Losing her family had left her cold and empty, as dead as those she'd lost. But when she'd emerged from her car, her grandparents engulfed her in hugs and kisses, reminding Sabrina that she was still loved. She hadn't seen them since losing her family. Nathan and Martha were the only family she had left and she would never allow anything to happen to them.

Michael stood in the circle's center. A hank of dark brown hair hung over his forehead. He wore a blue-and-red Hawaiian shirt, navy shorts and nothing on his feet. His long, leanly muscled body was tall, filled with enormous strength and his face had a hard edge about it, contrasting with a mouth almost too sensual for a man.

When he was still a Draicon werewolf, Michael's eyes had been brown. After he became a Justice Guardian, his eyes burned a silvery blue, hinting at his enormous powers.

Sabrina's hands trembled. Flutters in her belly intensified into something deeper. *Okay, you're smitten with a guy who's not only immortal, but can kill everyone here by blinking.*

She'd been friends with Michael all her life, ever since he was a Draicon werewolf farming the land next to her pack's. His sunny smile and boyish charm masked his quiet strength and fierce loyalty. But her girlish crush on him was useless. Sabrina had resigned herself to adoring friendship.

Shortly after her eighteenth birthday, Michael died while fighting a demon that tried to kill her. He was reborn as a Phoenix, a Justice Guardian.

Sabrina rubbed her clammy palms, stepped back into the room. She closed the sliders and shivered. Ever since her family's death, it seemed like she could never get warm enough.

She went downstairs.

Approaching Michael, she spotted the red-and-blue phoenix mark on his throat. Clutching a sword in its claws, the bird rose from a bed of ashes. The symbol of a Justice Guardian.

Sabrina accepted the imported beer Nathan handed her. The beer tasted like cold, wet ashes. Ever since surviving Ambrosis' attack, food and her favorite beverage held

no appeal. She shivered again.

Her grandfather swirled his scotch and soda. “Brie, we’re celebrating life, enjoy yourself. Liven up!”

Martha kissed her cheek. “I’m so glad you’re with us, honey. It’s a miracle you’re here. How about running with us later?”

“I don’t feel like shifting, Grandma,” she said. “The last time I did, my family died. They died despite the fact...”

She didn’t finish, knowing her words would accuse the Phoenix standing next to her. The Gray Wolves looked troubled, as if she’d dropped a bomb into the middle of their merriment.

Michael gently clasped her wrist. The contact was electrical, making her shiver with pleasure this time. He led her to the lee of a sturdy palm. Beyond the gently sloping beach, the sun descended into green Gulf waters. Pregnant with rain, purple clouds scudded across the distant horizon.

“Brie, tell me what you want to know. I’ve only been waiting nearly a year for you to ask.”

Silence draped the air between them. Finally, she summoned her courage.

“You’ve saved thousands of lives. Why couldn’t you save my family?”

He glanced away. “I tried, but Tristan locked me in a cell. I knew what would happen, but my mentor said I could not interfere with destiny.”

She blinked away hot tears. “I thought you forgot about me.”

The silver blazed in his blue eyes with fierce intensity. “Understand this. I’d never forget about you.”

“I wish I had died that day. At least I’d have been with my family.”

The beer bottle flew out of his hand as he hugged her in a grip that sucked away her breath. Michael set her back, his expression grim. “I sense your fear, Brie. What’s wrong?”

“I had a hallucination yesterday about Ambrosis. This voice kept telling me I had to fight him like I had before or something horrible will happen. I feel like I’m losing my damn mind. It took everything I had to risk coming here, but I didn’t want to disappoint Nathan and Martha.”

“Maybe it’s a warning.”

Sabrina lifted her troubled gaze to his. “I can’t face Ambrosis again, Michael. He killed my whole family because I insisted on hunting through his territory.”

“You didn’t know it was his territory,” he said gently. “Hellfire demons attack for the pure joy of killing innocents. You fought him with everything you had.”

“And now I’m terrified of him. What if he kills someone else I love?”

She glanced at Nathan and Martha. “All I have left are the Gray Wolves. They can’t fight back, they’re elderly and not strong enough.”

Michael’s jaw tightened. Not a good sign.

“You did lock Ambrosis away, right?”

“The demon will only arise when I release him,” he agreed.

“Good. I’d die if anything happened to my grandparents and I don’t have the strength to fight anymore.”

“You have enormous inner strength, Brie.” He cupped her cheek. “I believe in you and I always will.”

The contact between them felt sizzling and intense. Sabrina put her palm on his chest. Feeling the heavy muscles there, the silky hairs springy to her touch. She slid her fingers across his firm chin, the dimple clefting it, up to the soft texture of his lower lip.

Tracing his mouth, she murmured, “You deserve someone to take care of you, Michael. Don’t you ever get tired of saving the world?”

He quivered beneath her touch, studying her with hot intensity. As she reached up on tiptoes to kiss him, Michael stepped back. For a minute his eyes mirrored her own longing. Then they shuttered.

“Don’t, Sabrina,” he said quietly. “We can’t do this.”

Humiliated, she turned her head. Why couldn’t she ever stop reaching out for him? “Sorry to bother you,” she muttered.

“Brie, you never bother me.”

Two hands settled gently on her shoulders, turning her back to him. “I just don’t want to hurt you. I’d do anything to keep you from being hurt.”

Kissing him and finding out he didn’t feel the same sexual attraction would hurt, she admitted. She’d already lost far too much. Emotional distance was necessary. He was an immortal who could break her heart. If only she’d found her destined mate, she’d have someone to help her regain her life.

“I suppose I should go back to finding my destined mate. I’ve even slept with a few Draicon just to see if they were the one.” Sabrina intended her bold confession to serve as a jab for Michael’s rejection.

She heard Michael let out a low hiss in response and then raised her chin.

“I don’t sleep around. That’s not me. But sometimes I get so lonely....” Damn. She hated saying this, hated the thin, trembling tone of her voice.

“You’re never alone, Sabrina.”

His reassurance nearly broke her. She shoved the beer at him. “I’m going for a swim.”

She felt his gaze burn through her sweater as she headed upstairs to change.

Minutes later, she stood at the diving board. The tangerine bikini was old and she wished she’d bought a one-piece. Slashed across her belly was the angry pink scar left by Ambrosis when he’d tried to gut her.

Sabrina went to dive.

The pool went dark red as it filled with blood.

She pitched in headfirst. Coldness and death washed over her. Sabrina kicked upward, her eyes tightly shut. She broke the surface. Treading water, she opened her eyes.

The bodies of her parents, brothers, sisters floated in the viscous liquid.

A high scream tore from her throat. Then the images disappeared, replaced by children laughing and splashing in the clear blue water. Sabrina blinked.

*I’m going crazy.*

She flailed her arms again, saw Michael looking at her.

*Help me,* she mouthed silently, before submerging into the depths.

## Chapter 3

After surviving a vicious attack by a Hellfire demon, Sabrina was drowning in eight feet of water and struggled to break the surface for air.

She felt strong arms grasp and haul her upward. And then surfaced with a series of violent coughs. Air sluiced through her lungs in biting gasps.

Michael towed her to the edge, climbed out and hoisted her from the pool as if she weighed no more than cotton candy. Her grandparents hurried over.

Sabrina couldn't stop shaking. Michael held her, smoothing back her hair as Martha wrapped a towel around her. "Easy," he murmured. "It's okay now."

Nathan's eyes went wide. When he saw she was all right, his shoulders sagged with obvious relief. "Honey, I thought I taught you better than that when I gave you swimming lessons. I hate the idea of losing you again...it kills me."

"The pool...I saw bodies. My family," she whispered.

Michael gave her a long, thoughtful look. "What do you remember about their deaths and your attack?"

The familiar red haze fogged her brain. Cold seeped into bones. "I can't remember!"

He wrapped the towel tight around her. "Let's get you warm."

Sabrina leaned against him as he guided her up the stairs. In her room, he turned on the shower and gestured her toward the bathroom. But when her knees sagged, he undressed her and gripped her shoulders gently.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

She couldn't allow herself to be weak. "I can do this. Thanks."

A breath hissed out of him as he glanced at her naked body. Michael muttered a low curse and left.

The hot shower chased away the icy chill penetrating her bones. When she emerged, clean clothing sat on the counter.

After dressing, she found Michael on her sofa. Sabrina sat beside him.

"I can't go on like this. I feel as if I'm coming apart. These hallucinations are more frequent."

"Have you considered they're not hallucinations, but something else? A manifestation of the past?"

"Or the future? I'm not a precog. I wish I were that strong."

"You are. You battled a Hellfire demon with only werewolf magick, except you forgot the details."

"Meaning I have lost my mind?" She gave a brittle laugh. "I don't know where I belong anymore or if any of this is real."

His gaze was steady as he regarded her. "You're here now, with me. This is real."

The promise of sensual pleasure shone in his eyes. Reading his expression,

Sabrina moistened her mouth. Instinct told her Michael wanted her as badly as she wanted him. Maybe they could be more than friends.

*Go with your gut.*

When he bent his head toward her, she leaned close. Warmth poured through her. Every cell tingled with awareness and anticipation. He was going to kiss her, finally. She closed her eyes, waiting with breathless eagerness.

And felt him pull away.

For years she'd fantasized about his kiss. Now she sensed his hunger, felt her own, yet he still pushed her away.

"Michael, what's the deal? You keep acting like you want to kiss me. Why can't you kiss me? This is so unfair."

"I'm a Phoenix, assigned to watch over you. We're forbidden from sexual intimacy with our charges." His voice went husky with desire. "If I were still Draicon, you'd be naked in my bed right now."

So her instinct *was* right. He did feel attraction for her. For the first time, she felt hope. Sabrina pressed her palm against his muscled chest. "So is this rule the only reason you avoid kissing me?"

"That and the fact that I'm an immortal and my desires run strong. You might not be able to take exactly what I want to do with you."

At the hint of dark passion in his voice, the space between her legs became swollen with need. "I want you, Michael, I've always wanted you. Even before you became a Guardian, I thought we could have something between us. This is so frustrating."

Silver flashed in his eyes as if his powers surged. "I'm sorry, Brie. I forgot myself. Around you, I have the tendency to lose control. I want..."

She touched his mouth. "Want what?"

He stood up, every muscle rigid. "Wanting and having are two separate things."

She watched him pace to the doorway, his hand on the knob. "Good night, Brie. Get some sleep...and try to remember what happened when you fought Ambrosis. It's more important than you realize."

Before she could puzzle over his words, Michael vanished.

Sabrina tossed and turned all night, giving up the fight to sleep as dawn broke. After showering, she took her coffee onto the balcony. A warm wind blew off the Gulf, sending lacy whitecaps tossing their heads. The sky was a sharp, clear blue.

Sitting on the sand with his back against a tall palm tree, Michael watched the waves. He looked like an ancient god observing some solemn rite, with his legs crossed, his eyes closed and palms open to the sky.

Something was wrong. The air felt thick with a menace she'd felt before.

Sabrina went inside and dumped her coffee. The feeling of unease flowered. She ran downstairs to her grandparents' door and banged hard.

No one answered.

Panic bloomed hot and sharp in her stomach. She raced to the office. A smiling girl in a tropical print shirt was tapping on the computer.

"Can I have the key to Room 103, please? My grandparents aren't answering, and

I'm afraid something happened."

The girl tapped a few keys, frowned. "There isn't anyone registered in room 103."

Now the panic tasted like hot gunmetal. Sabrina swallowed. "That's ridiculous. Your computer is malfunctioning."

"Our system is fine," the clerk insisted. She gave Sabrina a level look.

As if Sabrina were nuts.

Michael must have answers. He stood up as she approached, brushing sand off his long legs.

"Something really weird is going on," she burst out. "The front desk has no record of Nathan's registration."

"Nathan's not here, Brie."

Her heart thudded violently. Ignoring him, she ran to the glass sliders of her grandparents' room. Sabrina fisted her shaking hands. Something foul and dangerous tainted the air. She gave a violent tug at the door and it slid open.

"Brie, listen to me..."

Sabrina ran inside.

The room had a small kitchenette and separate sitting area with a large-screen television and a king-sized bed. No sign of occupancy, but the stench of sulfur and decay made her gag. Sabrina clapped a hand over her mouth. Hair rose on the nape of her neck as she saw a small white card on the bed.

Her knees went weak as she read the card: *If you want your grandparents to live, come to the Sand Dollar swamp at midnight and summon me for the Demon Challenge. Otherwise, they'll die slowly and painfully, just as your parents did.*

The card spilled out of her opened fingers as she stared at the signature.  
*Ambrosis.*

## Chapter 4

Sabrina had until midnight to face her worst nightmare. A tight fist of fear knotted her stomach. She stared at Michael entering the room. “You took care of Ambrosis.”

“Let’s go back to your room. The stench is too strong in here.”

Michael was too calm, as if he knew something. When they reached her room, he pointed to the couch. “Sit, Brie. We must talk.”

A fleeting thought came to her. “You set him free! Michael, oh God, how could you?”

“I had no choice.” Layering through his solemn voice was a hint of anguish. “It was my Guardian duty to release Ambrosis.”

“He killed my family. And now he’ll kill my grandparents.” Guilt and fury collided together like waves crashing onto the beach. “You bastard, how could you do this? How can you hurt me like this?”

Michael closed his eyes. “I had to, Brie. Listen to me...”

Sabrina set her jaw like granite. “The hell with you. Rules can be broken and you choose to follow them instead of helping me.”

Silver blazed in his blue eyes as he opened them. Michael pointed to the couch and said in a dark voice, “Sit down.”

A little afraid of his power, she sat. He joined her, gathering her hands into his. When she tried to jerk away, he clasped her hands tight.

“I’d never do anything to hurt you, Brie. Trust me. Your grandparents are safe for now. They’re at the condo where I’m staying with members of their pack. I transported them there and shielded them with magick before Ambrosis could track them here. However, even my powers can’t protect them after midnight, when the Demon Challenge you issued takes precedence. If you don’t summon him, Ambrosis will find and kill them.”

Her heart thudded a staccato beat as she stared at his somber expression. “I don’t understand. What Demon Challenge? This is crazy, I’d never do such a thing!”

Michael rubbed his thumbs over hers in a calming gesture. His touch felt like a soothing massage, erasing her tension. It was deliberate, she realized.

“A year ago, when Ambrosis attacked, you issued a Demon Challenge by saying, ‘I’d spend eternity trying to destroy you, just give me the chance.’”

Horror stole over her. “Those are the words you said once when you were Draicon. You’re telling me I did the same thing?”

“Yes. Once you issue a Demon Challenge, you paralyze the demon, allowing a Guardian to trap him. You have a full year to reorganize your life. After that, the Guardian appointed as your mentor must release the trapped demon. If you don’t summon the demon to fight him again, he is free to capture and try to kill anyone he chooses.” Michael’s jaw tightened. “Meaning, he can choose anyone you care about.”

“I don’t remember any of this!”

“After you challenged Ambrosis, you blocked that memory. I tried everything, stirring your memories through dreams and even hallucinations. I told you the truth once, but you blocked that out as well. Nothing worked. Your terror paralyzed you, Brie. You’ve had a year to face your fear and prepare to confront Ambrosis, but that time has run out.”

The red curtain always fogging her memories lifted slightly, allowing her a peek at the past. Sabrina blinked away tears at the vision of herself standing before Ambrosis.

Abruptly the curtain dropped, replaced by pain spiking her temples. “I had a year...and I spent it not seeing my grandparents, not living, just cowering?”

Michael looked away.

“I’m a damn coward.”

“You suffered an enormous trauma. You had the courage to issue a Demon Challenge. Few do that, Brie. You can find your courage once more,” he insisted.

“Maybe Ambrosis is bluffing. He wouldn’t want my grandparents, they’re old and he could barely siphon anything from them. Maybe they won’t die.”

His expression darkened. “I’ve had visions of your grandparents dying just as your parents and your brothers and sisters did, a future that can only be changed by your actions.”

Her stomach felt like someone had stuffed it with ground glass. She wrenched away from his comforting grip. “This can’t be, how can this happen to me? Why would I issue a Demon Challenge, knowing the consequences? You told me what happened to you!”

“Because you have so much inner courage, you risked everything to defeat Ambrosis and have the chance to fight him again. You had the enormous strength to stand up to him, Brie.”

“I can’t do it again, I just can’t.”

“You will.” A slight smile touched his mouth. “And this time, kick his ass straight back to hell.”

“No, Michael. This is hell.” Sabrina studied her slim hands, doubting they could be used to fight a powerful entity. “If I don’t fight him, my grandparents will die.”

“Find the courage you displayed once. I know you still have it.” He ran his thumbs over her clenched fists. “That which does kill us makes us stronger. When I summoned Icktyts, I’d spent a year in absolute rage because I felt cheated. The demon stripped me of my life and finding my destined mate. The anger consumed me. I had to overcome my fury to take him on again.”

“And look what happened. You died! Fighting such a powerful demon is suicide.”

Releasing her hands, Michael stood and paced to the sliding glass doors. “You do know why a Hellfire demon targeted you, Brie? Ambrosis wanted your bravery. When he wiped out your family, he sucked away it away, leaving you a ghost of yourself.”

His frank dismissal outraged her. She bounded off the couch. “I’m not weak.”

He smiled. “I know. Now go prove it. Conquer what you fear most.”

Sabrina uncurled her hands, trying to see herself fighting Ambrosis to save her grandparents. Fear squeezed her throat as if someone tightened a noose around it.

“The first step is shifting into wolf. Try it,” Michael told her.

She hadn’t shifted in a year. She closed her eyes, summoning the power. Clothing

melted away as her bones lengthened, her body became wolf.

Senses flooded her as she lifted her muzzle and smelled Michael's delicious scent of leather and pine. Her hearing was sharper, her body ached to break free and run.

Baring her teeth, she growled. Michael studied her.

Suddenly he vanished. In his place was an eight-foot-tall demon with gray skin. Silver claws sprouted from its long, spindly fingers. The demon advanced.

Sabrina ran into the corner.

Ambrosis vanished, replaced by her beloved Michael. Ashamed, she shifted back, clothed herself with a hand wave. Her skin went clammy and cold. Sabrina rubbed her shaking arms.

"I can't do this," she burst out. "Not as a wolf or in human form."

His gaze was level. "If you want your grandparents to live, you must."

## Chapter 5

Fighting in a humid Florida swamp was not how she envisioned her beach weekend.

Sabrina shifted into wolf form to get a better sense of the surroundings. Thick brown mud sucked at her paws as she slogged through the dank water. Sharpened senses picked out old guano from nesting wood storks, heard small animals darting into the undergrowth. She smelled rain dampening the distant air.

Suddenly a new, disturbing scent surfaced. This scent tasted sharp and metallic. The smell of her own fear.

Her tail went down. She turned, baring her teeth and growling, when the Hellfire demon burst from between two cypress palms.

Terror seized her. Animal instinct overrode human control. All she could think about was running from danger. Sabrina darted for a fallen tree, digging frantically for a hiding place.

“Oh Brie.”

Michael shifted back into his true form. Once again, he’d turned into a replica of Ambrosia as a test. Shame filled her.

Sabrina shifted back, rubbed her arms. Even her thick sweater and jeans could not provide enough body heat.

“Concentrate, Brie. If you can’t fight him as wolf, then you must use all the strength of your human self. Find an open area where he can’t corner you. Take the advantage when you summon him.”

Dusky shadows began to drape the grayish Spanish moss dripping from the cypress tree branches. Pink streaked the overhead sky. Sunset. She had less than six hours to find her bravado again.

“I haven’t mustered the courage for a year to summon this demon, so what makes you think I can do it now?”

“Because you must.”

“Thanks a lot. You’re some help, telling me to pick a position. Why can’t you help me?”

Anger simmered in his eyes. “I’m trying to, within the parameters of my limitations.”

“You’re an immortal Justice Guardian. I guess your limitations are pretty big.”

Earth around her exploded in a shower of dust. Tree branches overhead burst into flame. A cold wind blew out of nowhere, combing through his long, dark hair.

Just as quickly, the fury died. Sabrina studied him calmly as the flames went out and the wind diminished.

“That was impressive. Not the powers. I know all about those. I’m talking about the emotion.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes. “You said that to provoke me.”

“Because you’re such a serene voice of reason. I’ve never seen you angry. You were almost human.” Sabrina released a breath. “I need you on my side, Michael, not as an impartial android. I’m so scared I feel ready to jump out of my skin. I need you to be with me emotionally because no one else understands what I’m going through.”

Anger evaporated from his expression. He strode over to her, seized her hands in his. “Trust me, Brie. To fight Ambrosis, you have to work past the fear, past the animalistic instinct to run and hide from danger. You have to take all your love and all your rage at the idea of him hurting your loved ones and bring it up, and give him all you’ve got. It’s the only way to survive this.”

“Love isn’t a weapon.”

“It’s the best one you have.”

His obvious concern loaned her strength. She squeezed his hands. “I won’t forget.”

“I’ll be with you all the way, as much as I’m permitted, Brie. That’s a promise. I won’t abandon you. No matter what.”

Judging from his solemn look, she knew it was a promise he would keep.

Tree frogs cheeped from the ghostly sentinels of pine and cypress. The dank smell of muck and water mixed with the fresh scent of rain riding the wind. Hugging her knees, Sabrina sat in a small clearing on a tree island.

Floating on the nearby water, water ferns sheltered a shy turtle. Silvery light from the nearly full moon dappled the foliage. In the shadows, she sensed Michael nearby.

He could not help her. She had to do it on her own.

She lifted her gaze to the black sky, judging the time from the moon’s position. Almost midnight. Her stomach flip-flopped.

Had to do this. Never again would another life be lost because she failed. Sabrina touched a protruding root. Tears burned her eyes as she remembered her mother and father laughing, her brothers and sisters bounding through the forest eager to explore. Their voices forever gone.

*I’ll never see them again. But at least I can make sure Ambrosis never again hurts someone I love.*

She stood, brushing off pine needles from her jeans. Her hands trembled as she lifted them skyward. Summoning a demon was easy.

Dealing with him afterward was the tough part.

Her hands fell to her side as she remembered the Hellfire demon tearing into her family, the screams and the horror. Sabrina’s ears buzzed as her stomach turned.

Nausea took over. She turned and clutched the sturdy tree as her knees buckled.

*You can do this.*

Michael’s voice spoke in a reassuring tone inside her mind. Startled, she swiped at the air as if batting cobwebs.

Sabrina lifted clammy palms to call forth the demon.

Again, they fell to her side.

*Please don’t ask this of me, I can’t take this, I can’t...*

Images surfaced; her grandparents, alone and scared, their faces etched with terror. They did not deserve Ambrosis’s wrath.

All she had to do was summon the demon. She was clever and could hide, unlike last time.

*You will not hide. You have the strength to defeat him, Brie.*

Michael was communicating telepathically. He was a Guardian with such powers. Still, this thought was more like a soothing brush against her mind. As if he melded his strength and spirit with hers, bonding with her metaphysically.

She went still as an impossible thought surfaced. There was only one way to tell if it was true.

“Michael,” she called out softly into the darkness. “Please, come here a minute.”

He materialized before her. Silvery blue eyes glowed in the night.

Sabrina grabbed him by the lapels of his leather jacket, pulled him forward and kissed him.

Electrical shock zinged through her. They gasped at the powerful contact. Then Michael wove his fingers through her hair and tilted her head back.

He deepened the kiss. Sabrina moaned beneath the subtle movement of his mouth. He thrust his tongue past her parted lips. She drank in his taste, his scent. Awareness, sorrow and joy filled her as her ears buzzed.

*Oh Michael...*

Sabrina’s throat closed with tears as he released her.

“Did you feel it?” She hugged him, needing his touch, needing him. “Don’t you know what’s happening between us? Can’t you feel what we are to each other, feel it in your heart? Why didn’t you tell me we share this special connection?”

A frown dented his brow as he eased out of her grip. “There’s nothing happening between us. I’m forbidden from physical contact with you. You shouldn’t have done that.”

She searched his confused expression, the immortal Phoenix looking flustered for the first time since she’d known him. Hope died in her heart.

A lump lodged in her throat. Even now, he couldn’t feel the same for her as she felt for him.

It didn’t matter. She had to summon all her energy for Ambrosis. Sabrina’s resolve returned.

A warm thought brushed against her mind. *I’ll always be with you, Brie. Always. I wish I could offer you more...*

The thought trailed off, but she felt a desperate longing beneath it, as if he struggled to say what she had felt.

Then the Phoenix vanished. Sabrina steeled her spine. *I can do this.*

Sabrina raised her hands and spoke in a trembling voice, “Ambrosis, I summon you forth!”

Nothing.

She tried again, this time motioning with her hands. “Ambrosis, Hellfire demon whom I challenged one year ago, I summon you forth!”

Tree frogs continued their noisy song. Sabrina stared at her surroundings in frank astonishment. A heavy silence draped the swamp.

She did her part. But Ambrosis had failed to show himself. Did it mean Nathan and Martha were safe? But Michael said only her actions could save them. She had to summon the demon. Yet he refused to show his face.

Maybe that was part of Ambrosis' plan. The loophole in the demon summoning thing. Anger began to build up as she imagined her cheerful grandparents facing the demon, unable to fight back. It wasn't fair. Sabrina fisted her hands and yelled.

"Sheesh, Ambrosis, you must be deaf. I mean, how loud do I have to speak and how much hand-waving is involved here? If there's an Official Demon Request form I failed to fill out in triplicate, then tell me. Or do you want me to deliver it on a silver platter, then forget it because I don't touch silver and I think you're just an ugly gray, hairy..."

A loud roar reverberated through the stillness. It sent icy shivers down her spine.

"Wuss," she finished on a whisper.

Rising from the murky water surrounding the tree island was a fleshy shape. The shape took form.

From a crouching position, the demon raised himself up on spindly legs. The backbone was a protrusion of knobby bone. Mottled gray flesh covered his sunken frame. Twisted pale green lips sneered at her, displaying rows of jagged, pointed teeth. Two gray membranous wings crawling with spiders grew from his back, fanning the air with the stench of burning sulfur. Yellow phlegm dripped from his eyes.

Ambrosis.

Filled with false bravado, she faced her nightmare. "Didn't recognize you at first, but I sure smelled you coming. You look pretty stressed. The year's sure aged you, demon. All those wrinkles...maybe you should consider Botox or a day at the spa?"

Michael's amused chuckle echoed in her mind.

Encouraged, she faced the demon. "Like the wings, but the accessories, hate to tell you, they need to go. Arachnids are so last year."

The demon snarled at her. Shock immobilized her as his body began to shimmer. He shifted into a much more familiar, endearing form.

"Dad?" she whispered.

"Hello, daughter. Why did you let me die?"

Laughter screamed through the swamp as the demon with her father's mouth, her father's face, her father's damn white Oxford shirt, advanced toward her.

She could not move, think or speak. Tears wet her cheeks. She forced herself to analyze the situation.

*Think, think, look at the hands, remember demons can't fully mimic others, they have to retain some part of their physical selves.*

She glanced downward. Instead of her father's fingers, she saw silver claws the size of a grizzly bear's. Ambrosis hissed and raised a hand.

Sabrina screamed. She wanted to shift into the more powerful wolf, but couldn't remember the process. It was as if someone immobilized her powers. Fogged her brain.

She turned and ran, and tripped over an exposed root. Sabrina rolled over to see Ambrosis in demon form. Small blue horns on the front and back of his head turned into rotating razor blades. He grinned, exposing a set of whirling, pointed teeth.

Her heart hammered violently, her ears clogged. She barely comprehended the buzz saw headed for her.

Forcing her canines to emerge while still in human form, Sabrina dove for the ground and bit the demon's ankle. Spiders from its wings cascaded over her, sinking